

Vanessa's **GUARDIAN**

A NEVER TOO LATE FOR LOVE ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

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VANESSA'S GUARDIAN

Never Too Late For Love 1-1

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VANESSA'S GUARDIAN: NEVER TOO LATE FOR LOVE

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Chapter 1

Falling into the Atlantic Ocean was not the way Vanessa Hamilton had envisioned starting her first vacation in five years.

But here she went, and it all seemed to be happening in slow motion.

Really, it made sense. Life had always had a way of lifting her up before dropping her on her face. At this point, who was she to question the way of things?

Closing her eyes, she braced herself for impact and clutched her suitcase's handle. *Please, just keep my books dry.*

Yeah, that was not going to happen.

Suddenly, a thick arm wrapped around her, stopping her downward trajectory. Vanessa gasped and opened her eyes. The crystal-blue water danced straight below her, but she was no longer falling into it. Someone had caught her.

And was holding her as if she weighed nothing at all.

Next thing she knew, her feet were back on the plank, and she was looking up into the richest brown eyes she'd ever seen.

“You okay?” A rich, deep voice matched the eyes.

Vanessa struggled to speak. “Yes. Th—thank you.”

The man nodded. “You’re welcome.”

She knew she ought to say something else, but she couldn't stop staring at him. It made sense now that he'd moved her so easily.

She wasn't a lightweight. *Petite* had never been a word used to describe her. Then, as she'd moved into her late forties and the dreaded menopause hit, it had become more and more difficult to keep weight off—despite doing the same workout regimen she'd done for years.

But this man stood well over six feet, dominating the narrow plank between the boat and the dock. Muscles bulged from beneath his shirt. Not in a show-off sort of way, but in a way that suggested physical labor was part of his daily routine.

His face was as hard as his body—nothing soft about it. He didn't look like he smiled very often. He appeared to be in his early fifties, a few streaks of gray accenting his otherwise brown hair.

"You going to stand there all day, lady?" One of the men from the boat shot her a surly look. "Get out of the way."

The plank was the only exit from the boat, and she was blocking it. Her rescuer had grabbed her from the dock side.

Her savior's arm was still around her as he growled, "Watch it, Harris."

The younger man shut up.

"Um." Vanessa nodded at the dock. "I think I can make it."

"Let's not take any chances." He picked her up once more, suitcase and all, walked the few steps on the plank and deposited her on the dock.

The rest of the boat's passengers, all men, filed past them, starting with Harris. The last one, who looked like he was still in college, smirked.

Vanessa's face burned. It was the men's fault she'd almost fallen into the water. They had shifted the tiny boat right as she was exiting, and she wasn't entirely sure that had been an accident.

The whole boat ride to the island, they'd sat across from her, whispering and leering her way. Nothing overt that she could call them out on, but just enough to try to make her feel a little uncomfortable.

But Vanessa had been working as a real estate executive long enough to refuse to give them any attention. She was used to not being part of the good-old-boys club. She'd sat in her little spot near the back and kept quiet.

Her flight had been delayed, and she'd missed the boat out to Heartbreak Key with the other tourists. So, she'd had to catch a ride with the fishermen.

She turned her attention back to the man who had saved her. He still had his arm anchoring her. "I think I can make it from here."

He withdrew his arm from around her waist. Immediately, she missed the touch.

"Thanks for keeping me dry. That would've been a poor start to my first vacation in years."

He smiled in a way that made him look almost boyish. It was an odd contrast against his rugged features. In another life, he might have been handsome, but the slightly crooked nose and scar on his neck suggested a past good looks didn't fit into.

How many times had he broken his nose? And how had he gotten that scar?

"Who's with you?" The man looked back at the boat.

"No one." She adjusted one of her heels, which had nearly slipped off when she'd started to fall.

He looked back at her with squinted eyes. "You came here all alone?"

"Yes."

"I think you might have booked the wrong trip."

Her stomach fell. "What do you mean?"

“Sorry.” He shook his head. “It’s just that Heartbreak Key isn’t normally a place women come alone. There are all these other islands in the Florida Keys. We have no internet or cell phone service here, you know.”

“I know. It’s why I came.”

Everyone else had exited the small dock, and the two of them were left standing there alone. The man kept looking at her, as if he were trying to figure her out from simply studying her face.

“I’m looking to be unavailable,” she explained. “Doc said it would be good for me.”

Actually, it was more like he said she needed to take a break from her high-stress job before the stress killed her. Her real estate firm could run itself for a few weeks while she was here.

“Unavailable is definitely a star selling point of Heartbreak Key. I hope you won’t be too unavailable.”

Vanessa bit the inside of her lip. Was he flirting with her?

She was so rusty when it came to flirting, it was hard to tell.

“Hoss!” A man on the other end of the dock lifted an arm. “I got that fuel hose for you!”

The man—*Hoss*—glanced over his shoulder. “Coming. Hang on a sec!”

He turned back to Vanessa. He hadn’t moved back since setting her down the second time, and they were so close she could smell the sea on him.

Her lower belly squirmed.

As if just realizing how close he was, he cleared his throat and stepped away. “I’ll take your suitcase to the hotel lobby for you.”

“You don’t need to do that.” She reached for the handle, but he had already snatched it up.

“I want to.” His gaze dropped to her feet. “You don’t have on the right shoes for tromping around the island hauling luggage.”

It hadn’t occurred to her to wear anything but heels. As a Realtor, she always needed to look her best, and they were her shoe of choice.

“But you don’t know where I’m staying.”

He turned around and walked backward down the dock. “There’s only one place to stay on Heartbreak Key. The Swimming Pig Bungalows. I’ll put it in the lobby.”

“Oh.” Yes, that was where she was staying. She couldn’t help but smile. “Thank you.”

It was nice having someone act like a gentleman with her. Typically, people assumed she would take care of everything herself. Usually because she could. And did. She handled things.

And doing that had gotten her divorced, alone, with a body that was struggling to keep up with what she demanded of it, and high blood pressure.

But this man, with those eyes, was offering to carry her suitcase for her. He turned to leave, but suddenly, she didn’t want to let him go.

“The suitcase is heavy. Sorry.”

He nodded. “Thing weighs more than you.”

No way in hell that was the truth, but she still smiled. “I brought a bunch of books. They used to be how I relaxed and escaped. I haven’t had time to read for years, so I thought I would dive back into the habit while I was here. I probably should’ve got an e-reader or something.”

To her surprise, he nodded in appreciation. “The feel of a paperback in your hands is much better than reading off a screen. The books are well worth the weight.”

“Wow. I don’t think many people would feel that way. Especially not someone having to lug the suitcase around.”

“Anybody super big on technology wouldn’t be very interested in Heartbreak Key. I hope you enjoy your time here.”

With another polite nod, he turned and walked toward the shore. She had to bite back her disappointment. He hadn’t asked for her name or indicated that he hoped to see her around the small island.

But she wasn’t here for romance. That ship had sailed a long time ago. She was happy with her own company, and that would be good enough. Hoss, with his brown eyes and warrioressque face, wasn’t part of her plans.

Even if his strong arm around her, lifting her to safety, would be something she dreamed about for a long time.

Chapter 2

“What happened to your lovely teal suitcase?”

Hoss McKinney jumped from the dock onto his trawler then was tempted to jump back off again at the words.

Cameron Burton was one of Hoss’s oldest friends. They’d served together in the Navy SEALS for years and had saved each other’s lives more times than either of them kept track of.

That didn’t mean the man wasn’t sometimes the biggest pain in the ass. “Shut up.”

Cameron grinned from the deck of Hoss’s fishing boat. “What? I was just wondering where you got it, so maybe I could get a set too. Perhaps in pink.”

Hoss scowled at him. “Just because you’re a couple years younger than me doesn’t mean I can’t throw your ass off this boat. Literally.”

Cameron chuckled and used a rag to wipe grease from his hands. “All right, man. Sorry.” Cameron lifted his now-clean hands in surrender. “It’s just, I don’t see you talking to people much. It looked good on you.”

Hoss raised the Bimini to get some shade going. “I was just helping out a tourist. Not a big thing.”

“She’s pretty.”

Hoss found himself gritting his teeth at the words.

Vanessa Hamilton—the name he knew from glancing at the luggage tag on the book-filled suitcase—was more than merely *pretty*. Flowers were pretty. Princesses were pretty.

Vanessa was striking.

The first thing he'd noticed about her, despite her near fall into the water, was how she held herself. Mature. Confident. Her soft blond hair and deep hazel eyes just added to the appeal.

She was so much more than pretty, even about to topple into the water.

And as ridiculous as it sounded, he didn't like the idea of anyone, even his closest friend, calling Vanessa pretty. Hoss didn't want anyone else to realize how attractive Vanessa Hamilton from Charlotte, North Carolina, was.

But Cameron was right. Hoss didn't interact with people much, especially strangers. The conversation on the dock had been the longest he'd had in weeks.

And yet he hadn't been uncomfortable. Wouldn't have minded talking to her for longer.

Cameron leaned against the gunwale. "She was looking at you too."

The memory of the woman's big hazel eyes made Hoss heat up. Some of her hair had brushed against his arm. Long and blond, it felt like silk.

He imagined she felt like silk all over.

He grunted, not giving Cameron a reply.

"You going to meet up with her?" Cameron pressed.
"There's plenty of time. How long is she here for?"

Hoss shook his head. "Dunno. I didn't ask. Plus, I'm heading out once you have the fuel line fixed."

"About that..."

"What?" Shit. This didn't sound good.

“It’s not just the fuel line, and I can’t do the full repair here. I need some parts. I’ll have to take it with me to the mainland. Bring it back in a few days.”

“You sure?”

Cameron gave him a look. “Am I sure? Who’s the mechanic here? Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Damn it.” Hoss rubbed his eyes.

“What’s the big deal? You technically live on this island... even if you’re hardly here. Take a few days off. Fish will still be there once I get your engine fixed. Why don’t you people for a few days?”

Hoss looked over his boat. It had been his source of refuge for years. Unlike Cameron, Hoss preferred to be alone. He’d been a loner his whole life, and he’d just become gruffer as he’d gotten older.

He was fifty-one years old, had been out of the Navy for five years. Being alone suited him. He had scars—mental and physical—he didn’t necessarily want to subject other people to.

Being alone was easier.

When Hoss’s bank account had grown, thanks to some well-timed investments, buying property on Heartbreak Key had seemed like a good idea. Especially since it was in a low-population area. His cabin was on the south side of the island. But Cameron was right; Hoss didn’t stay there as often as he should. Sometimes he slept on the boat even when he was docked here.

The cabin just reminded him that he was alone. He was alive, unlike some of the people he’d served with and lost, but alone. A home wasn’t meant for someone as alone as Hoss.

Someone who was never going to heal.

Cameron tossed the rag down and started fiddling with the trawler’s motor. “That tropical storm has taken a turn for the worse. It’s headed this way. Not like you can go out fishing anyway.”

“I don’t need to fish.”

He only needed to be on the move. Stay in one spot too long, and things caught up to a man.

Specifically, demons.

Only a lobster delivery to the tiny grocery and single restaurant and bar had brought him to the dock that afternoon. That, and the fuel line issue.

Cameron straightened up. “I know how hard it can get for you, Hoss.”

His voice was softer, and Hoss couldn’t look at him. Instead, he stared at his knuckles, scraped and callused from working the nets.

“It fucked us all up,” Cameron said. “But you more than anyone else.”

Hoss cleared his throat. He appreciated Cameron, but this wasn’t something he wanted to talk about. Talking didn’t change anything.

After reading his face, Cameron seemed to understand. “Help me haul this motor over.”

They carried the motor to Cameron’s boat, where Cameron jumped behind the helm.

Hoss wiped sweat from his forehead. “Anything else you need help with?”

“Naw. You go have a drink. I bet your lady is at the Salty Beast. Nowhere else to go.”

“Very funny.” He folded his arms. “She’s not my lady.”

Cameron lifted an eyebrow. “Right. You don’t have a lady. Maybe that’s your problem.”

Hoss shook his head. Cameron didn’t get it. And not that Hoss faulted him for it. He didn’t need the kind of space from people like Hoss did.

“Maybe my problem is old friends who won’t mind their own business.”

Cameron laughed, unoffended. “What can I say? A teal suitcase just brings out the romantic in me.”

“Get out of here, asshole.” He shook Cameron’s hand. “Be safe.”

“You too, brother. See you in a couple days at the earliest.” Cameron started his motor.

Hoss waved his hand in goodbye and watched the boat putter away from the island.

Turning on his heel, he looked at the beach. Just past the first line of trees sat a half dozen rental bungalows. They were decades old and most in need of repair; it was a miracle if half of them were full at any given time. The old couple who ran the place only did it out of habit at this point.

But that’s where Vanessa Hamilton and her teal suitcase full of books would be. The tropical storm wasn’t scheduled to hit them directly, but they’d be getting a lot of rain, so those books would probably come in handy.

His gaze moved farther over until it fell on the Salty Beast. A staple of the island, the restaurant and bar had been built a good eighty years earlier. While some modifications had been made over the years, the same old weathered boards still held the place together.

Hoss stared at it a long time. A real good long time.

It was one of the very few public places to eat on the island.

Vanessa would be there.

Hoss stood for a while, deep in thought. His boat wasn’t going anywhere. Not today.

“Aw, fuck it.”

He stomped in the direction of the bar.

Chapter 3

The sun was just starting to set as Hoss stepped into the bar and restaurant. Half the seats were full of locals drinking beers and cracking crab legs, their lively chatter filling up the room.

In a corner, the local band, Surf Connection, set up.

Behind them and to both sides, photographs of Heartbreak Key over the decades filled the walls, each picture with a story.

Marriages. Births. Hurricanes survived.

The island wasn't a well-known one, but it was beloved by the people who lived there. Hoss included, even if he didn't show his face at the Salty Beast much.

He stopped in the doorway. One drink. Just one drink, then he would go home.

He was not here to see Vanessa.

He took a step toward the end of the bar. Even though he didn't come in much, he always sat in the same spot. That was the way it was at the Salty Beast. Everyone had their seat.

Hoss froze. Someone was perched on his stool.

And not just any someone. Vanessa.

Evidently, he was going to see Vanessa whether he wanted to or not. His throat tightened at the same time his chest expanded. He felt pulled toward the stool, while simultaneously wanting to turn and walk out the door.

As if feeling his gaze on her, she turned around. When she recognized him, her face lit up.

Hoss couldn't help but feel satisfied. So she was happy to see him.

Vanessa gave a small wave. He nodded at her but then stalked to the other end of the bar, ignoring her disappointed look. He wasn't here to chat. Just to have a drink.

Sitting down, he avoided everyone's eyes.

"Hi." A perky redhead appeared on the other side of the bar.

"Where's Francis?" The owner of the Salty Beast manned the bar nearly every night.

"He's out tonight." The redhead nervously rubbed her palms against her black apron. "I'm Jasmine. I'm new."

Hoss nodded. "I'll take that." He pointed at his preferred whiskey bottle. "On the rocks."

"Sure. Right away."

Hoss stole a glance at the other end of the bar. Vanessa had her nose buried in a book. She'd changed into a sundress and flat shoes, which was good. Much better than her heels from earlier today.

Taking advantage of her face being down, he stared a little longer. It was hard to tell exactly how old she was. In her mid-forties, maybe. She looked good, her body soft and curvy in all the right places.

What was she reading? He liked books—mostly Westerns and horror—but if she were to recommend something, he would check it out.

He shook his head. He wasn't here to talk to her.

One drink. Then he was going home. All the way to his cabin.

The new waitress emerged from the kitchen, plates of fried food in her arms. She distributed them to a group of men in the middle of the bar, her face red and flustered.

“Oh! I forgot one. Be right back!” She scurried back into the kitchen.

Hoss leaned back. Maybe he ought to go ahead and leave. It was nearly full dark. He could go for a run on his treadmill. Maybe cook up some of that lobster he’d picked up today.

Was Vanessa having any dinner? He liked the thought of her savoring something he’d caught with his own hands.

Desire of the kind he hadn’t felt in years stirred in him.

“Here you go.” Jasmine deposited a pink cocktail in front of him.

He started to tell her this wasn’t what he’d ordered, but she was already at the drink station, spilling a pitcher of tea. One of the waitresses gave her a pitying look then grabbed some dish towels.

Hoss did a quick take of the bar. No one else was waiting for a drink. However, sure enough, Vanessa had a whiskey on the rocks sitting in front of her.

She also had her arm raised in an attempt to get the waitress’s attention.

Hoss stared. She hadn’t figured out their drinks had been switched. It wouldn’t take much for him to explain the situation.

But it would mean talking to her. Probably not a good idea.

Then again, he’d already talked to her once and couldn’t stop thinking about it. Her hazel eyes and gentle voice had been intoxicating. Damn it if he didn’t want more, despite his rustiness when it came to conversing with anyone much beyond Cameron.

Snatching up the pink cocktail, he made his way to the far end of the bar. She was still looking in the opposite direction, trying to get the new waitress’s attention.

With every step he took closer, he hoped this wasn’t a terrible idea. Yeah, he’d like to talk to her again. But also, he’d like everything to stay as close to his normal routine as possible.

Which included him enjoying his drink alone, not socializing, and keeping everything simple and uncluttered.

Vanessa turned in his direction just as he was reaching her. Those hazel eyes stared out at him through long, thick lashes. “Hello again.”

There was nothing simple and uncluttered about this woman.

“I think our drinks were switched.” He set the cocktail on the bar.

A delicate laugh spilled from her mouth. “Thank God. I honestly wasn’t sure what to do with...whatever type of drink this is.”

“Whiskey on the rocks.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised by that at all. Mine is a Cosmo.”

He took his whiskey and lifted it in cheers without saying anything. He’d never been very good at this talking thing.

“Would you like to sit?” She gestured at the empty stool next to her.

He reminded himself that he’d spent decades of his life fighting some of the worst enemies of the United States. He could handle one conversation with an educated, friendly woman.

He cleared his throat. “Sure. But you should know that’s my seat you’re in.”

“Your seat, huh?” She pretended to give it some thought. “You could fight me for it, I suppose.”

She was feisty, then. Hoss actually smiled. He liked it.

He liked it a lot more than he wanted to.

“No way. I have a feeling you fight dirty.” He took the proffered stool.

“What makes you say that?”

“No offense, but you don’t look very strong. And when someone doesn’t rely on brute strength, they tend to pull tricks

outta their bag.”

“No offense taken.” She sipped her cocktail. “And if you’re suggesting I’m not above kneeing someone in the balls should the situation call for it...you’re probably right.”

He chuckled.

“I’m Vanessa.” She turned to face him more fully.

“I know.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Is the island that small that everyone knows the names of all the tourists that come to stay?”

“Not quite that small. I saw it on your luggage tag earlier today.”

“Oh. Thanks again for your help. I definitely would’ve struggled getting that suitcase up from the dock.”

She smiled at him, turning more fully toward his stool. The sundress she wore was flowy at the bottom, but the top hugged her breasts. He forced his gaze to stay on her face, not wanting to leer.

“I’m—”

“Hoss.”

He blinked. “Now, I’m surprised.” Which didn’t happen very often. “Not many people know me by that name.”

She shrugged one shoulder. “I heard that guy call to you at the docks.”

“Cameron. He’s kind of Heartbreak Key’s resident mechanic and a good friend of mine.”

“So, he lives here?”

“Not many people live here.” He sipped his whiskey. “Last population count put the island at a couple hundred. Cameron lives on Big Pine, but he’s here a few times a week as one of the island’s only mechanics.”

“And why did you say not many people know you by Hoss?” She tossed some hair over her shoulder, and he was

momentarily distracted. It looked soft, and he found himself wanting to touch it.

Which...hell, he'd be spouting sonnets next.

He swallowed against the rising heat in his chest. "It's my nickname."

Vanessa smiled slowly. "And what's your real name?"

"Jonathan."

"Jonathan." She tested it out. "Not bad. But if I'm being honest, I like Hoss better."

"Then keep using it." His voice was barely above a growl. He could hardly recognize it.

What was it about this woman that had him acting completely opposite of his normal behavior? With anybody else, he would've already returned to the empty seat on the other side of the bar. Instead, she was like some damned magnetic field drawing him in.

Her eyes widened, and she sucked in a sharp little breath, like she could feel whatever was between them too. Without him even making the decision, he leaned his body toward hers.

"And why is your nickname Hoss?" She lifted her chin and studied him.

He rubbed the back of his head. "It's a play on an old nickname my Navy buddies gave me...Wild Hog."

She raised one delicate eyebrow. "Ah."

He gave her a half grin. "I had quite the temper when I first went into the Navy. Got into more than one fight. Tended to go hog-wild when I was provoked. SEAL training eventually taught me enough self-control to rein in my temper, but by then, the name had stuck. Wild Hog became Hoss."

"Navy SEAL, huh?"

He nodded. "Got out of the Navy about five years ago and decided to try my luck at fishing."

She took a sip of her drink. “One type of sea life to another.”

Behind Hoss, the band struck their first chord. A mournful tune started.

Vanessa swayed to the music, her foot kicking to keep the time. “It’s such a sad song.”

“It’s about the two lovers who gave this island their name.”

“Yeah?”

He nodded. “About a hundred years ago, a young couple came here to elope. Their parents had forbidden them from marrying.”

Vanessa stopped swaying. “I’m almost scared to ask why it’s called Heartbreak Key.”

“A hurricane ended their lives before they could tie the knot.”

Vanessa’s jaw dropped. “That’s awful.”

Seeing how empathetic she was to people she didn’t know—hell, people who had lived a century earlier—pulled at something deep in Hoss. A string he didn’t even know he had.

“Please don’t tell me that was a harbinger.” She set her drink down and sighed. “And that all love stories on this island have been cursed.”

He cocked his head. “You seem worried.”

She chuckled ruefully. “It would be par for the course for me to end up in such a place. Especially with a storm making its way in.”

Now, he was really interested. “Are you here escaping from something?”

Her smile was weak. “Not a man, if that’s what you’re asking. I haven’t had one of those in...” She pressed her lips together and blushed. “Um, never mind.”

He wanted to pursue that line of thought. He really did. It had been...*a long time* for him too, so he could understand.

“If not a man, what are you escaping?”

“I guess it is a man, if I’m honest.”

Hoss couldn’t believe the disappointment that flooded his system so rapidly. “I see.”

She smiled. “But not a romantic entanglement. My doctor. I’m here because he said I needed to reset my system by taking a break from my real estate company in North Carolina. Go completely off grid and relax.”

“Heartbreak Key is definitely off the grid, so I do hope that helps.”

She took another sip of her drink. “I think it will.”

The song switched to another tune, slow but not quite as sad. Before he could talk himself out of it, Hoss offered his hand.

“Dance with me?”

Her eyes sparkled. “I would love to.”

Vanessa slid her palm across his hand, and he loved the way it fit in his. Loved the feel of her skin on his own.

As crazy as it sounded in his own mind, touching her felt right. Like...coming home.

Nuts. He knew it was nuts.

Closing his fingers around hers, he drew her to the dance floor. A few other couples were already swaying and twirling around.

Hoss spun Vanessa, and she flew back into his arms with a laugh.

“This band is good. I like them.”

He grinned. “I hope so. They’re the only one on the island.”

He drew Vanessa closer into his arms, where she leaned her face back to gaze at him. They just looked at each other.

This was dangerous. Getting close to people was risky.

But it felt like he had no choice here. He was only along for the ride. He wasn't sure he could pull away now even if he wanted to. And he didn't want to.

Sliding one hand down her shoulder, he let it rest in the small of her back. Vanessa edged a little closer, her body heat wrapping around him.

Hoss swallowed hard, his hands humming with electricity.

Vanessa smiled softly. "You've really made my vacation so far."

"Oh yeah?" he whispered. "How's that?"

"You saved me twice. Once from falling into the ocean and once from drinking straight liquor."

Hoss threw his head back in laughter. "Not a whiskey girl, huh?"

She swayed, her hips coming a little closer to his. Their faces were only inches away, the smell of her fruity shampoo filling the air.

She smelled so damn good. She had to taste good too.

Hoss's mouth watered.

Suddenly, the lights flickered and went out.

Vanessa tensed in his arms. "Um. That can't be good."

He rubbed a reassuring hand across her back. "It happens all the time here."

In fact, the band just kept on playing. With their acoustic equipment, the lack of electricity didn't bother them at all.

A few people laughed and left the floor, but Hoss kept dancing. Vanessa fell back into the rhythm, her body flush against his.

His hand found its way from her back to her neck, then to her face. Vanessa sucked in a little breath that made him shudder with pleasure.

Feeling his way through the dark, Hoss dragged his thumb across her lips. She parted her mouth, opening to him.

He pressed his lips to hers. Softly at first, but soft wasn't what either of them wanted. They both shifted closer.

A groan started deep in Hoss's chest. Despite his attempts to keep it in check, it rumbled from his throat.

"God, Vanessa."

"Yes, Hoss." She wrapped her arms behind his neck, pulling him closer.

He threaded his fingers into her hair and tilted her head to the side so he could have better access to her sweet mouth. He could taste the tartness of her drink on her tongue and wanted more.

But the lights flickered a few times and then came back on. Everyone clapped, but Hoss gritted his teeth as he and Vanessa stepped back from each other.

Vanessa pressed her fingers to her lips. "I should go." She took another step back.

"I hope you don't think I was out of line."

"No, no. Not at all. But I'm tired from the trip, and...I need to unpack."

He bit back a protest. "I can walk you to your bungalow."

"No, thank you." Her smile was slow, but it seemed genuine. "Thank you, Hoss. This has been a great night."

With that, she left him awestruck on the dance floor.

Chapter 4

Heartbreak Key was heaven.

Vanessa knew the forecast would be calling for rain soon due to the tropical storm, but this morning, the sunrise had been the most gorgeous one she'd ever seen. Pinks and oranges and yellows reflecting off the turquoise waters...

She'd made coffee in her bungalow and taken it down to the beach to watch Mother Nature do her stuff.

This was what Dr. Atwell had meant when he told her to slow down and enjoy the moment. For the first time, Vanessa could actually admit he was right. She did need to slow down, even though she wasn't a slow down type of person.

She hadn't been for the fifteen years since her divorce, and she definitely hadn't been for the past twelve years she'd been the owner of her own business.

But this island was exactly what she needed to help her blood pressure lower for a while and reset. Heartbreak Key had gorgeous sunrises, sea turtles, wood storks, and even deer.

Oh, and it had Hoss.

At the thought of him, Vanessa smiled. She'd been walking around the island most of the day, exploring and taking pictures. Though she hadn't seen Hoss yet, he'd been pretty constantly on her mind.

Ambling down a dirt road, she kicked a pebble. She hadn't wanted to leave the Salty Beast last night after their kiss, but

she had needed to.

She wasn't a kid on spring break—the opposite. She couldn't just dive into bed with someone she didn't know. No matter how strong and helpful and sexily gruff he was.

Still, several times today, she had regretted the decision to leave. Or rather, her body had regretted it. When Hoss touched her, it was like he brought her back to life. Every cell in her body was infused with energy.

She wanted to feel that way again.

Could she? God, how long had it been since anyone had touched her like she was a *woman*?

So yeah, she was hoping she might run into Hoss again today. Although, so far, no such luck.

Something scurried in the bushes, and she lifted her phone. A Mediterranean gecko paused in the sand and eyed her.

“Oh wow.” Vanessa crouched next to him. “Aren’t you a beauty?”

She snapped a few shots of him before he scurried off.

She probably ought to forget Hoss. Despite the island’s name, romance wasn’t the reason she was here. She should finish her vacation in a couple weeks, soak in as much R&R as she could, then head back to her life. Maybe she’d try swiping right on whatever guy showed up on her dating apps next. Give one of them a shot.

But they’d all fall short compared to Hoss, she already knew it. She thought of how easily he’d kept her from falling into the water. How tall and muscular he’d felt on the dance floor.

And that kiss... She touched her lips. She wasn’t sure she was ever going to forget that kiss. Or his taste, with just a hint of mint and the salt of the sea.

“I just don’t like it,” a man’s voice said.

Vanessa turned around with a frown. She’d been walking for a while and was at the part of the island where the houses

were spaced quite a distance apart, shrubbery and trees blocking them from one another. A few of the structures couldn't even be called houses—maybe cabins, some just abandoned shacks.

In the driveway across from her, a ratty tarp covered a canoe. The cabin farther behind it had a busted window and a porch full of holes in the screen. Not exactly the most glamorous side of the island.

"It's not right." The man sounded agitated.

Vanessa took a step toward the driveway. Was someone in trouble?

Lowering her phone, she stepped around the canoe.

"Deal with it," another man growled.

At the corner of the house, she stopped and peeked into the backyard. Two men stood on a back porch, colorful stuffed animals all around them.

Vanessa twisted her lips. Okay, weird that two adult guys were surrounded by toys, but to each their own. She turned to go back the way she'd come, at which point she got a closer look at one of the men.

Wait. She knew these guys.

They had been on the boat with her yesterday. Not the college guy, or Harris, the one who'd been driving, but she definitely recognized them.

"It's for kids." The first man, who was scrawny and sun-weathered, rubbed his face. "We shouldn't be giving this to kids."

The other man, beefy and bald, growled at him. "It ain't like the kids are doing the drugs themselves, is it? Though, if they're willing to pay, I wouldn't say no."

He chuckled, but the other man just made a face.

Vanessa's breath caught in her chest. *Drugs?* What was going on here?

“You and your fucking morals.” The beefy man tossed a stuffed flamingo at the other one. “Now, get to work.”

The scrawny man grumbled some more as he reached into a black plastic bag. From out of the bag, he pulled a small white brick wrapped in plastic. With a knife, he ripped open the flamingo, removed some stuffing, and put the white brick into the flamingo’s belly.

Vanessa leaned back. Her hands were shaking, and every instinct she had told her to turn around and hightail it out of there.

These men were stashing drugs in *children’s* toys.

The police needed to know this. But she needed to get some proof first.

Raising her phone, she hit the record button. The police would have to believe her if she had evidence.

Sneaking back to the house’s corner, she raised the phone to film what the men were doing. She kept her body hidden in the trees, surveying what was happening on the porch through the phone’s screen. They ripped open various stuffed animals—bears, monkeys, dolphins—and inserted drugs into their bellies before sewing them back up, bickering with each other the whole time.

Was that cocaine? She wasn’t an expert on drugs, but it wasn’t medical marijuana these men were dealing with.

She adjusted the phone to get a better angle on the activity. All of a sudden, the bald man looked up and right into the camera.

Vanessa froze.

“Hey!” the man shouted. He jumped off the porch.

Vanessa’s heart stopped. She yanked back her phone, turned, and ran. She didn’t know if they’d actually seen her or if they would recognize her if they had, but she wasn’t waiting around to find out.

“Get back here, bitch!” the man yelled.

She ran faster, wishing she'd taken her time at the gym more seriously. She was too slow. Her legs felt like lead.

She didn't make the mistake of turning back to look at the men. She kept running like her life depended on it.

Because maybe it did. Who knew what the men would do to her if they caught her?

Vanessa pumped her arms, her breath coming out labored. Adrenaline fueling her, she ran across the street and straight through a break in the trees. Her foot caught on a log, and she stumbled but didn't fall.

If she fell, it was over.

"Hey!" one of the men called. "We just want to talk!"

Yeah, right.

Vanessa steadied herself then resumed running. She zigged left, taking advantage of some foliage for cover. She didn't know where she was going, only that she couldn't stop moving.

All she could hear was her own breathing as she stretched her legs as far as they would go, jumping over a rock and darting around a tree.

She didn't hear anyone behind her anymore, but she didn't dare look back. She ran and ran, her vision tunneling, everything on the edges going black.

She was running out of steam, unable to keep pushing her body like this anymore.

The trees began to thin out, and a road emerged ahead. Vanessa burst into the street, right in front of a car. The driver honked, but Vanessa kept going, running down Heartbreak Key's main street toward town.

A woman swept a shop's doorway, and a cat rubbed against a white picket fence. Two cars slowly rolled down the street. Everything seemed normal here.

She glanced over her shoulder. The men were nowhere to be seen.

But that didn't mean they weren't close.

Vanessa ducked into the tiny grocery store and hid in the first aisle. The girl at the checkout raised an eyebrow.

Her breathing staccato, Vanessa stared at her phone. She had escaped the men. And she had evidence.

She needed to get to the police.

Smoothing her hair, Vanessa approached the checkout counter. Her hands were still shaking, and sweat was pouring out of every gland in her body.

The young clerk was staring at Vanessa with wide eyes. Vanessa tried to give her a smile, but she knew she had to look like a crazy person.

"Hi." Vanessa cleared her throat. "Um, can you tell me where the police department is? There's a police department here, right?"

God, please let there be a police department.

The girl popped her gum. "Yeah, the sheriff's office is right over there." She pointed at the window, toward a small building just down the block.

Vanessa exhaled in relief. Her knees trembled, the adrenaline wearing off. She needed to keep going for a little while longer, though. At least until she got the info to the sheriff.

"Thank you." Vanessa pushed the door open and checked the street.

No sign of the men.

Had they given up on finding her? Perhaps, fearful of being arrested, left the island?

Vanessa crossed the street and scurried into a building with a sign that read "Sheriff's Office."

"Hello there." A round-faced woman greeted her from behind a desk. "How can I help you?"

“Hi.” Vanessa checked over her shoulder. The men wouldn’t follow her in here. Right?

“Is the... Is the sheriff here?” Vanessa approached the counter. “It’s important. Really important.”

The woman’s face transformed as she picked up on the unspoken danger. “Yes, hon. Have a seat. I’ll give him a call.”

“Thanks.” She dropped into one of the straight-backed chairs against the wall.

The second her butt hit the thin padding, she lost all strength. She wouldn’t have been able to run another yard if she tried.

The receptionist spoke into her desk phone. “There’s someone here to see you. She says it’s important.”

One of several doors along the far wall opened, and a portly man with ruddy cheeks emerged. Though he wasn’t in uniform, a badge gleamed on his button-up shirt.

“How can I help you?”

Vanessa stood. “Can we talk in private?”

He exchanged a quick look with the receptionist. “Sure thing. Come on back.”

In his office, he gestured for her to take a seat. Vanessa did so gratefully.

“My name is Vanessa Hamilton.” Her voice cracked at the end.

“Ms. Hamilton. I’m Sheriff Dupree. What can I do for you?” He squinted. “If you don’t mind me asking, you all right? You look like you just been through it.”

“Yes, yes, I have been through it. But I’m okay.” She let out a deep breath, trying to settle herself. “I’m staying here on the island. I was exploring, walking around, and stumbled on two men at a house. They were—they were hiding what looked like cocaine in stuffed animals.”

The sheriff’s eyes sharpened. “Where was this?”

“I don’t have an address. It was an abandoned house on the south side of the island.”

“Can you describe these men?”

She pulled up the video and handed over her phone. “I can do better than that. I recorded them with my phone.”

The sheriff watched the video in silence. When it was over, he huffed and handed the phone back. “Well, I’ll be. This isn’t good at all.”

“No.” She swallowed.

“This island is a family place.” He slammed his fist into his opposite hand. “I’m not going to let them get away with this.”

She let out another sigh. He believed her and was going to handle it. That was what was important.

“At the end of the video...” He cocked his head at her. “They saw you.”

“And they chased me, yes.”

“Where are they now?”

“I don’t know.” She wrapped her arms around herself. Now that her sweat was drying, she felt sticky and gross. Shaky. “I lost them somewhere in the woods.”

“You look like you could use some water.”

“Yes, please.”

He poured some water from a cooler and handed over the paper cup.

“Thank you.” Vanessa downed the whole cup.

“More?” The sheriff took a seat behind his desk.

“No, thanks.” She eyed him. “What are you going to do?”

He leaned back in his seat. “I’m going to take care of this. That’s what I’m going to do. No one runs drugs on my island.”

She nodded.

He leaned forward. “I’m going to need to keep your phone as evidence.”

Vanessa hesitated. Even though she didn’t get any reception or internet on the island, she was loath to give it up. It had all her vacation photos so far, plus other ones from Charlotte. Not to mention, once she did get back to real life, she was going to need it. It was almost an extension of her body.

Her answer was slow to come. “I really need my phone. Is there a way we can make a copy of the video so that you can have it?”

For a second, he looked as if he might argue, but he finally nodded. “Yes, that’s a good idea. We’ll still need the original eventually, but that doesn’t need to be right now.”

He took out his own phone and recorded a copy of her video. Low-tech, but at least he had the footage. Once he was done, he planted his palms on the desk and pushed himself to standing.

“Where are you staying? The bungalows, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll escort you back to your bungalow so you can get some rest.”

“Thank you.” She was still shaken up, but it was nice to know the men wouldn’t be able to jump her on her way out of the sheriff’s office.

The sheriff paused in the doorway. “You did a real brave thing today. Thank you. You should be proud of yourself.”

“It seemed like the right thing to do.”

Definitely didn’t help her blood pressure, though. Dr. Atwell would not approve. Between Hoss and the men with the drugs, this whole island was full of surprises.

Here was hoping there were no more to be had.

Chapter 5

A gentle breeze wafted through the cracked window. Lying on her back in bed, Vanessa stared at the ceiling.

Wow, what a day.

She'd been exhausted upon arriving at her bungalow, but now, she couldn't sleep a wink. The day kept playing on repeat in her head. The men. The stuffed animals.

The running.

Her lungs were still burning a little, and her legs were going to need days to recover.

The sheriff had to have arrested them already. Unless they had fled the island. Either way, it was a relief not to have that be her problem anymore.

Now she could hopefully have the relaxing vacation the doctor had ordered.

As soon as she closed her eyes, Hoss's face filled her mind. Or maybe if she was going to have some stress, it could be the *good* kind.

She had thought about looking for him earlier, maybe going down to the Salty Beast for a drink. Each time she started to put on her shoes, though, her insecurities had kicked in.

Heartbreak Key wasn't big with college-aged vacationers since there was no cell phone reception and no Wi-Fi anywhere on the island. But the neighboring islands hadn't

embraced the lack of connectivity trend, and they had plenty of pretty young things spending their holidays there.

Vanessa wasn't stupid. She had seen the way other women at the Salty Beast looked at Hoss. He may feel a little old for the spring break crowd on the other islands, but she was pretty sure the girls in those places would be more than happy to spend some time with a sexy, gruff warrior like him.

In their bikinis.

Vanessa very definitely did not own a bikini. Somehow flabby arms and a pudgy midsection didn't go well with skimpy pieces of fabric. She was past that stage in her life by nearly twenty years.

Rolling over onto her side, she stared at the dark window. A light pitter-patter of rain had begun.

Oh well. She hadn't come here to meet a man, so she wasn't going to worry about Hoss—and competing with lines of bikini clad co-eds—anymore. And now that the drug fiasco was over, she could finally relax.

She was just drifting off to sleep to the gentle sound of light rain when she heard a sound right outside her window. A stick breaking. Her eyes popped open.

“Shh.” The voice came from in the yard, way too close to the window. Her chest constricted. Someone was outside the cabin.

All the bungalows had a significant amount of space between them. Who would be this close?

She held her breath, straining to listen.

The sound of a door handle jiggling came from across the room. Vanessa's heart leaped into her throat. Someone was trying to get into the bungalow!

Tossing off the covers, she jumped from the bed. Her phone. Where was her phone?

She grabbed it from the nightstand and started to dial 9-1-1...but then remembered there was no cell service on this

island. Damn it. There was a landline in the main lobby, but that wasn't going to help her much here.

Crack! The unmistakable sound of someone trying to force their way through the front door filled the little cabin.

"Come on out, girlie," a man's voice said. "We just want to talk."

A shiver went down Vanessa's spine. She recognized that voice. It was the bald man from the drugs.

Had they gotten away from the sheriff when he'd gone to arrest them? Hidden, then come after her? A cold feeling swept across Vanessa. It didn't matter what had happened. They were here now and would be inside her cabin any second.

With her phone still in her hand, she grabbed the sneakers sitting by her bed and yanked them on. The door to the bedroom jiggled.

"Open up!" A fist pounded on the door.

It wasn't going to take much for them to knock down that door. Vanessa rushed into the bathroom, shutting and locking the door behind her. There was a window in here she could climb out. With trembling hands, she yanked open the window and pushed out the screen.

She climbed up onto the bathtub and used it to hoist herself the rest of the way through the opening. She wiggled through, falling headfirst out the other side, catching herself with her arms on the packed earth. Within a second, she was up and running into the trees.

Again. Here she was, running for her life *again*.

This time, escaping on foot into the woods was harder. It was dark and rainy, and she couldn't see more than a few yards ahead.

But that didn't stop her. She bolted between shrubbery and darted around a tree.

She just had to make it a little farther into the woods, to a spot where it was too dark for anyone to find her.

“Through the window!” one of the men shouted. “She went through the window!”

Vanessa sucked in a strangled breath. If she could still hear the men, she wasn’t nearly far enough away.

Something rustled behind her, and the next thing she knew, an arm circled her waist.

She started to scream, but a big palm clapped over her mouth, muffling the noise. She froze for a second before panic set in, and then she started thrashing around—not that it did any good. The man dragged her backward.

“It’s me. Vanessa, it’s Hoss. It’s okay.”

Hoss? She went still. They were behind a cluster of saw palmetto, the moonlight barely illuminating his face. He let go of her as she stopped fighting.

“What are you doing here?” she whispered.

He pressed a finger to his lips.

She tried her best to calm her breathing, worried that the men would hear it. Footsteps approached. “I saw her go this way.”

Hoss crouched down, pulling her with him. Vanessa bit her lip. What if they found her and Hoss?

She’d escaped from them once. She wasn’t so naive as to believe that was a guarantee the second time around.

The sounds of the men got even closer.

She wanted to explain to Hoss what was going on but couldn’t. He needed to know that the men were dangerous. Drug runners. That they were almost definitely armed.

She’d wanted to see him again, but not as the last thing either of them ever saw.



Hoss crouched on the balls of his feet, ready to do whatever was necessary. Vanessa was a tense ball of fear crouched next to him.

He almost wanted the men to find them. It would be a good excuse to pummel the living hell out of them. It was only the fact that Vanessa was here and they were probably armed that stopped him from making a move against them right now.

He wouldn't take a chance on her getting hurt.

Thanks to insomnia, he'd been taking one of his ritualistic walks around the island. He hadn't planned on passing by the bungalows.

Well, he didn't think he'd planned to. Yet, he had. And then, he'd done a double take when he saw Vanessa wiggling out of a small window. When he'd heard the two men, it hadn't taken long to figure out Vanessa was in trouble.

He pulled her against his chest as the two men came closer. "I swear I saw her go this way."

She curled her fingers into his shirt, clearly terrified. He didn't blame her.

"Like you saw her head for the road the last time?"

Last time? Had they been after her earlier? What the hell was going on?

The other man's voice rose. "Hey, it's not my fault she's fast for an old lady."

Vanessa stiffed, but Hoss just rolled his eyes at the insult. Vanessa was definitely not *old*.

"We've got to find her before she wakes the whole island. Come on. Let's get out of here."

Hoss shifted his weight, trying to see between the palmetto leaves. All he could make out were legs.

"What about the woman?" the other man asked.

"That bitch has to come out sooner or later." He snorted. "And where's she gonna go? We're on a fucking island."

The men shuffled off, but Hoss didn't move. He kept his arm around her, making sure she didn't go anywhere either. The supposed retreat could just be a trick in order to get her to come out.

Vanessa remained crouched beside him. A breeze slipped through the brush, and the scent of her shampoo kissed his face.

Strawberries and vanilla.

Fuck. Even in the middle of a life-and-death situation, he was hot and bothered for her.

The light rain increased, turning into a proper downpour and washing away the scent. Good. He needed to focus.

He kept an arm around Vanessa in case she panicked. She wasn't used to these kinds of situations. Many people, strong in other areas, would fall apart under circumstances like these. Civilians weren't trained in how navigate this terrain.

But Vanessa didn't say a word. She stayed right where she was, waiting for a cue from him on what to do.

Hoss waited a long time without moving. If the men were smart, they would wait too, but most people would not have the patience to stay there in the rain when the area seemed empty. Hoss finally stood slowly and looked around the dark woods. His eyes had adjusted, and he could see the outlines of trees and saw palmettos.

No men. But that didn't mean they weren't still out there somewhere.

Holding one finger to his lips, he signaled with the other hand for Vanessa to follow him. They walked in the opposite direction from her bungalow, stepping lightly but moving fast.

Hoss didn't need a trail. He knew Heartbreak Key well enough to navigate without one. He didn't speak until they were out of the woods and back into town, walking down the side of a residential street.

He turned to her, brushing a wet strand of hair out of her face. She was pale and shivering—her lovely features pinched

and stressed.

“Did those men hurt you?”

“No. I went out a window when they started trying to come in the door.”

He slowly reached his hands out and ran them down her shoulders and arms. Vanessa gave off a little shiver.

Rage built in Hoss’s chest. What had those men been planning? He could only think of one thing they would want, breaking down a single woman’s door.

It made him want to strangle them with his bare hands.

He left his hands on her shoulders, his fingers thrumming with the need to be touching her skin. “I’m so sorry this happened. Heartbreak Key has crime like anywhere. But two men breaking in to the bungalow of a woman staying alone? That’s a new low.”

“They weren’t after me. At least, not like that.” Vanessa’s throat rolled with a swallow. “I knew them.”

He blinked at her. “From where?”

“They were on the boat with me. And then earlier this afternoon, I saw them at this abandoned cabin on the other side of the island. They were shoving bricks of drugs into stuffed animals.”

“Shit.” Drugs? Since when was Heartbreak Key a haven for drug dealers?

She stepped back from him and pulled out her phone. “Look.” She played a video of two men doing exactly what she’d said. It was a bit shaky, but the action in it was unmistakable. The two men crouched on a porch, tearing fluff from stuffed animals and replacing it with bricks of cocaine.

He swallowed a curse. This wasn’t good. Not good at all.

“Why were you outside my bungalow?” Vanessa frowned.

“I don’t sleep well a lot of nights. A walk around the island usually helps. I wasn’t actually near your bungalow until I saw

someone coming out a window and went to investigate. Heard the commotion.”

She shivered. “I’m glad you happened by. I’m not sure what would’ve happened if you hadn’t been there.”

He couldn’t help himself; he pulled her in for a hug. Even under these circumstances, it felt good having her against him. “Somehow, I think you would’ve managed.”

“Maybe. I hope so.”

Hoss reluctantly let her go and glanced both ways down the street. “We need to keep moving.” He took her hand and walked at a near jog. “We need to get all this information to the sheriff.”

“I already did, this afternoon. Showed him the footage and everything. He said he would arrest them, but I guess they hid or something.”

Hoss’s stomach tightened. The people who lived on this island full time like Sheriff Dupree knew the ins and outs of Heartbreak Key. If the sheriff hadn’t arrested those two bozos yet, then something was wrong.

The thought of the sheriff lying dead in his office came to mind. Hoss shook it off. He shouldn’t jump to conclusions.

“We’ll go there now.” He tightened his hold on Vanessa’s hand. “The sheriff will be gone for the night, but one of the deputies is always on night shift.”

Vanessa didn’t say anything.

He glanced at her. “I’m sorry this happened to you.”

She shook her head. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not.” He squeezed her hand.

They were quiet the rest of the walk into town. Hoss made sure to keep them away from streetlights, to stick to the shadows. When they turned onto the main street, he felt a surge of relief.

The sheriff’s department would handle this the appropriate way.

If it were up to Hoss, he would have handled it in a specifically inappropriate way. By knocking teeth out first and basically everything else later.

How dare these losers hide drugs in *children's toys* on his island? And scare an innocent woman in the process.

Thinking about it made his blood boil all over again. He hadn't recognized the two men on the video, but he was going to make sure they stayed the hell away from Vanessa.

"Hoss." Vanessa tugged at his hand.

They'd reached the sheriff's office and could see in the window. A light shone in one of the back rooms, where Deputy Hoffman sat at his desk.

"Good." Hoss pointed. "See Deputy—"

"No." She tugged harder, panic in her voice. "It's them."

She pulled him closer so he had her same point of view, and he saw two more men in the room. One lean and the other beefy and bald—the two men from her video.

"It's them." Vanessa's voice caught in her throat.

Hoss stared, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. Trying to explain it away.

But he couldn't. Not when Deputy Hoffman stood and shook the bald man's hand. Not when the door opened and Sheriff Dupree walked into the room.

Vanessa made a sputtering noise. "The sheriff knows what they look like. I showed him the video. Why isn't he arresting them?"

Hoss pinched the bridge of his nose. Fuck.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He looked at Vanessa, and he saw her face fall. They didn't need to explain it to each other; it was already way too clear. Sheriff Dupree was in on this, and so was his deputy.

Heartbreak Key's sheriff's department was working with drug runners. They'd probably set up a damn safe haven for

them on this island.

Hoss's fingers curled into fists. Had the sheriff sent the men to Vanessa's bungalow? If so, they'd probably only had one plan in mind—eliminating her completely.

Hoss had only spoken to the sheriff a few times in passing. Hell, he hardly talked to anyone. But the man had a decent reputation from what Hoss understood.

Evidently, he was fooling a lot of people.

Before Hoss could even think about it, his hand was back in Vanessa's and they were moving. "Come on. We've got to go. We can't stay here."

"Where are we going?"

He couldn't return her to the bungalow. The sheriff and the other men would find her in no time and finish the job they had gone there to start.

Hoss pulled Vanessa into the darkness of the woods and dropped her hand. There was no pretty way to put it.

"Those men want to kill you. And that includes the sheriff. Who knows how long he's been letting drugs pass through here." Hoss ground his teeth. "You're a witness to their crimes. My guess is that they'll do everything in their power to make sure you don't leave this island."

A long moment passed. Vanessa let out a shaky breath. "I can't believe this."

"I know. I'm sorry." He was filled with the urge to wrap her in his arms again, but now wasn't the time.

But God, how he wished that they were back at the Salty Beast, dancing and laughing about mixed-up drinks. That this had never happened to her.

But that wasn't an option. So instead, he was going to do whatever he had to do to keep Vanessa safe. He'd be right by her side.

She needed a protector. And he was damned well signing up for the job.

“I’ll leave the island.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “First boat out in the morning.”

If only it were that simple. Hoss scrubbed his face. “They’ll be waiting for you to grab the first boat off in the morning, if it’s even running. Normally, I’d take you off the island myself right now, but my boat’s shot until Cameron comes back with the parts needed to fix the engine.”

“When will that be?” Her voice was thin. Afraid.

“A couple of days. Maybe three.”

“You can’t ask someone for their boat, can you?”

He chewed that over. “The next problem is the storm.” He lifted his face to the breeze. Another sprinkle of rain had started. They would have to leave right then if they were to beat the storm, and where would he get a boat?

After what he’d seen in the sheriff’s office, he didn’t know who to trust. Anyone on the island could be working with the drug runners.

Screw it.

Stepping closer to Vanessa, he hooked a finger under her chin and lifted her face. He heard her breath catch in her throat. Even though he couldn’t make out her features clearly in the darkness of the woods, he could feel her staring at him.

“I’ll keep you safe and get you off the island. Okay?”

“Yes.” Her voice was a whisper.

He nodded. “Good.”

He grabbed her hand and started walking again. They needed to get out of here before Dupree and his merry gang of drug dealers started sweeping the town for her.

“Where are we going?”

“My place.”

Chapter 6

Hoss hadn't brought a woman to his house since...

Ever.

Hell, he hardly came here himself. As he unlocked the front door, he hesitated for a second. Was this really what he wanted to do? Letting her in here felt like he was letting her into his life. Or at least a part he didn't regularly open to other people.

But right away, he knew the answer. Yeah, he was letting her in. He couldn't walk away from her now even if he wanted to.

And he very definitely didn't want to.

As she stepped into his living room, he studied her. She was still wet and shivering—her hazel eyes big and face pale. Her body was coming down from the adrenaline the chase had provided.

“It’s nice.” Vanessa wrapped her arms around herself and shivered.

“Hold on.” Hoss locked the door and set the security system. He honestly hadn't thought he would ever really need the system when he'd installed it, but now was glad he had it. “I'll get you towels and some clean clothes.”

The rain had picked up on the walk back to his place. They'd cut through the woods, both to save time and evade notice, but they'd still gotten soaked.

After grabbing a handful of towels from the hall closet, he stopped in his bedroom and surveyed his dresser. His clothes would be giant on Vanessa, but they were all he had available. He picked out a sweater and the smallest pair of gym shorts he could find.

Vanessa still stood in the middle of the living room, her damp hair stuck to her face and neck. Her pajama top clung to her skin, and he had to force himself not to let his gaze drop.

Eyes up, asshole. Last thing Vanessa needed was someone leering at her.

“Here, this should help with the cold.” He draped the biggest towel around her shoulders.

“Thank you.” She wrapped the towel more firmly around herself. “You should go change. You’re just as wet.”

Hoss shrugged. Half his training for the SEALs had been in conditions a hell of a lot more uncomfortable than this.

“The bathroom is right down the hall.” He pointed. “Or you can change in my room.”

“Thank you.” She took the clothes from him and walked into the bathroom.

Hoss blew out a breath and went around the house, double-checking the window and door locks, and searching for any signs someone had attempted to get inside the house.

He wasn’t surprised when he didn’t find anything. Although this house wasn’t a deliberate secret, he didn’t tend to tell people anything about himself. So even locals didn’t know he owned it. Most of them assumed he lived on his boat full time.

He walked down the hall and opened the door to his security room.

Having security of this level was overkill on Heartbreak Key, but Hoss hadn’t cared. Which was why, when he’d bought the small house five years earlier, he’d immediately outfitted the second bedroom with a feed from cameras positioned around his property, as well as emergency supplies.

Uncle Sam had taught Hoss how to be prepared. He took that skill seriously, even though he hadn't expected to use it on this sleepy little island.

The land he owned was small, not more than an acre. The trees surrounding it provided a nice amount of privacy, but they also gave bad guys more than a few dark spaces to hide.

Taking a seat at his desk, Hoss studied the live feed. It was still dark, morning a few hours away. Shrubbery thrashed in the wind, an ominous sign of the storm to come.

Contacting the Coast Guard or the sheriff's department on the next island over seemed the most obvious thing to do. But the radio wasn't secure. If Dupree and his cronies heard Hoss calling for help, they would descend on his house in a matter of minutes. Right now, Hoss's best bet—*Vanessa's* best bet—was in Dupree and the others not knowing Hoss was involved at all.

Adjusting his radio, he leaned in close and pressed the push-to-talk button.

"Cam Man, this is Wild Hog."

Hoss's radio call sign wasn't a big secret either, but nobody on the island who might be listening would find it unusual that Hoss was talking to Cameron. They spoke almost daily.

Wild Hog had been his nickname because of his temper. Although he'd had that under control for years, he might be drawing on it again when it came to keeping Vanessa safe. The thought of those men hurting her sent a rage through him that made his early Navy temper seem like tiptoeing through a field of flowers.

Nothing was going to happen to her on his watch.

The radio crackled. "Wild Hog, this is Cam Man. Talk to me, buddy."

Hoss wished he could ask for Cameron's assistance straight out. But it was a safe bet to assume Sheriff Dupree or the men he was working with were listening in on communications.

“We got an ETA on that engine? I’m thinking I’d like to get out of here before the storm hits.”

“Everything okay?”

“You know me. I’d just like to get somewhere where there’re more people if I’m going to have a hurricane party. This island’s feeling too small.”

Cameron would understand something was wrong. He wouldn’t know what, but he’d know it was *something*.

Cameron paused for a long minute, and Hoss knew the other man had caught on. Never in the history of *ever* had Hoss said he wanted to be around more people on purpose.

“Right. You want people. I read you loud and clear.” Cameron made it apparent he knew something fishy was happening. “Unfortunately, I don’t think I’m going to make it back to Heartbreak for a couple days. Storm is moving in faster than predicted.”

Hoss glanced again at the property’s live feed. The rain was now pouring down.

“Roger that. I just have a package I need to get off the island as soon as I can. Something I’ll need to hand-deliver. I’ll need to carry it in my teal suitcase.”

“Your—” Cameron cut himself off. “Right. Suitcase. Okay, yeah.”

Cameron was obviously trying to put it together. At least he now knew it involved Vanessa.

“Let me know when you can get here, so I can get the package delivered.”

“Roger that.” Cameron didn’t release the PTT button. “Be careful, Hoss.”

“You too.”

Cameron was probably dying to know exactly what the danger was, but without a secure channel, they couldn’t go into any more detail.

“Wow.”

Hoss turned at the soft voice behind him. Vanessa stood in the doorway, her hair dry and the sleeves of his sweater rolled up.

“Feel better?” He stood from his desk.

“Yes, thank you.” She gripped the doorframe. “I didn’t mean to disturb you. I can go.”

“It’s fine.” He flexed his hands, not knowing what to say or do. All he knew was that he didn’t want her to turn and walk from the room.

She’d rolled up the shorts up too, so they wouldn’t fall from her waist, and they revealed smooth, supple legs.

He had to swallow back how good it felt to see her wearing his clothes. He liked that way more than he could admit. This woman turned him into someone he could hardly recognize.

“This room is amazing.” She stepped closer to the screens. “That’s outside the house?”

“Yes.” His throat felt tight. “When I built this place, I probably overfortified.”

“Occupational hazard from your SEAL days?”

“Exactly. But now, I’m glad I have it.”

Vanessa bent forward to study a screen, some of her hair falling from behind her ear. The sweater’s neck drooped, revealing the slightest hint of cleavage.

Stuffing down a groan, Hoss looked away. “I was on the radio with my friend Cameron. He can’t pick us up until after the tropical storm has passed.”

Vanessa straightened, her brow knitted. “That could be a couple of days.”

“We’ll be safe here. They’re not looking for me. Only you. They don’t know of any connection between us.”

She folded her arms, comforting herself. “Yes. That’s true.”

A pang hit Hoss's chest. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and hold her close until all this shit went away.

"Thank you for all your help," she whispered. "You're going beyond what most people would do."

He waved his hand in dismissal.

"No." She stepped closer to him. "You're risking yourself for me. You're risking your life, and you don't even know me."

He looked down into her hazel eyes, so full of appreciation, and didn't even try to stop the swell of pride. He'd do damn near anything to keep that look in her eyes.

And she was right; he didn't really know her. But it sure as hell felt like he did.

He folded his arms to stop himself from touching her. "You don't crack under pressure, do you?"

She blinked, surprised at the question. "What? Why do you say that?"

"Most people would have broken down earlier when we were being chased. Some would've panicked so much, they wouldn't even have had the presence of mind to get out of the bungalow."

She shrugged. "Maybe this sounds odd, but it's probably because of my job."

"Oh yeah?"

"I run a realty company. It's nonstop pressure—making decisions all day long." She chuckled ruefully. "That's actually why I'm here. My doctor said I should take a break before I work myself to death. Get away from stress."

"Oh man. This situation is certainly not taking away stress." He gestured for her to sit in the chair at his desk. He leaned against the doorframe.

She blew out a breath. "That's definitely true. This vacation has not gone how I'd envisioned. Which sucks since it's my first real getaway since..."

“Since what?”

“Really, since ever.” She curled one of her legs up under the sweater. “I was married before, but that didn’t work out. Been divorced now for fifteen years.”

“Any kids?”

“No. I married my college sweetheart, but neither of us really wanted kids. I thought my career would be enough for me.”

“But it’s not?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t regret not having kids, but now that I’m getting older, I’m wishing I had someone that was just mine, you know?”

Hoss nodded. “Yeah. I’m not very much of a people person, but I can understand that.”

“Were you ever married?”

“No. My SEAL team was my family.”

“Was? Past tense?”

He scrubbed a hand through his hair. “We lost part of the team not long before I got out. Mission gone wrong. It’s been hard.”

“Part of the reason you’re such a loner?”

“Yeah.” And not something he wanted to talk about. “You need to rest.” He nodded in the direction of his bedroom. “You can have my bed. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Actually, I feel really wired.” She pushed her fingers through her hair, and silky stands fell against her back.

“Hungry?”

“Not really. Thank you.”

“Coffee? Tea?”

Her lips twisted into a sweet smile. “Hoss. You don’t have to entertain me like I’m a guest you invited over.”

“I know you want something. You must.”

He hadn't meant for the words to come out suggestively, but once he said them, they hung in the air between them.

Vanessa inhaled sharply, her pupils widening. Yes, she did want something.

Just like he did.

Chapter 7

One thing his Navy SEAL training had taught Hoss was a heightened awareness of what was going on around him. He didn't need that training to feel the heat between Vanessa and himself. It had been there from the beginning, but now, he could feel it damn near sparking in the air around them.

The hungry beast Hoss had been trying to keep at bay since the moment he'd set eyes on Vanessa reared its head. It wanted one thing and one thing only.

Her. In his bed.

He took a small step toward her in his chair, not wanting to intrude in her space if she didn't want it, but also not able to keep his distance.

"Anything." His voice came from his chest. "Anything you want."

Her tongue darted out to lick her bottom lip. He wanted to capture it between his teeth.

"Hoss," she breathed, reaching out a hand to him.

It was all the confirmation he needed. Seizing her wrist, he pulled her up and drew her the rest of the way to him. She crashed against his chest, and he closed his mouth on hers.

Their touch was hungry. Desperate. The gentle exploration that had been in their first kiss was nowhere to be found.

He knew part of this feeling was residual adrenaline from earlier, but he didn't care. He wrapped his arms around her,

holding her tight. Outside, the world was a shitshow, but here in this small room, everything was perfect.

Vanessa moaned and pushed forward, her hips gently grinding against him. Hoss growled in response, his palm finding the top of her ass.

Still, he held back, not wanting to push too far. Wanting to give her freedom to stop or change her mind.

But stopping didn't seem to be anywhere in Vanessa's plans. She twisted his damp shirt in her hands and kissed him harder.

He broke off the kiss. "Sorry. I haven't changed out of my wet clothes."

Her breath came out in a quick exhale. "Why don't you take them off completely?"

Their eyes locked, he did as requested and tossed the shirt to the floor. Vanessa's breath caught as she took in his bare torso. He knew the scar that ran along his chest and up his neck was jarring.

She trailed her fingers along it. "You're lucky to be alive."

He nodded. "A big part of my team wasn't so lucky. Sometimes it's hard to be one of the few who survived."

She kissed along the marred flesh. "I'm glad you were. I know it has to be hard, but I'm so thankful you survived."

She meant it. He could feel the compassion flowing from her. And for the first time, he was nothing but thankful too.

He threaded his fingers into her hair and pulled her back. As much as he wanted her lips on his skin, he wanted his on *hers* more.

Dropping down to his knees in front of her, he smoothed his palms over her belly and hips. Pushing up the sweater, he found a sweet sliver of skin and kissed it softly.

Vanessa gripped his shoulders, and she went stiff.

Immediately, Hoss pulled back and stood. "What is it? We can stop."

“No, it’s... I...” Her eyes wouldn’t meet his. “I’m not... I think I might not be what you’re used to.”

He blinked. “You’re definitely not what I’m used to.”

Her face fell. “Right. So, maybe this is a bad idea. I’m not some young, skinny—”

“Vanessa.” He caught her face and turned it to his. “You’re not what I’m used to because I’ve never had someone as captivating as you in my life. You glow like there’s a whole sun inside you. Hasn’t anyone ever told you that?”

She stared at him for a long moment, as if she were trying to decide whether to believe him. “No.”

“Then that’s because they’re blind.” He slipped his hands behind her ears to cradle her head. “And that’s lucky for me, because now I get to be here with you.”

“Just... I don’t want you to be disappointed. I’m nearly fifty. I’m okay with my body, but things might be a little saggy. Not nearly as perky as they once were.”

He smiled. “I’ll take real over perky any day.”

She raised an eyebrow like she didn’t quite believe him.

“How about you give me a chance to show you?”

Her gaze raked across his face. “I’d like that.”

“Good.” He wouldn’t let her down because he wasn’t lying.

Yes, Vanessa was in her forties, and he understood everything may be a little jigglier or more wrinkled than when she was in her twenties. But he hadn’t been lying when he said he’d prefer real, even if it wasn’t perfect.

He had a feeling it would be perfect to him.

He kissed her again, twisting his fingers in her hair.

This time, she reciprocated to a new degree, her body melding against his. Hoss slid one of his hands down to cup her ass, and she moaned against his tongue.

“Hoss.” His name left her lips in a murmur.

“What?” He nibbled her earlobe.

She didn’t respond, so he kept going. Dragging his lips from her ear, he kissed a path along her jaw and down her neck. She dropped her head back, losing herself in his touch.

Grabbing her by the hips, he lifted her off the floor. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and he carried her from the security room down the hall to his bedroom.

The bedroom was softly lit by a lamp in the corner, providing just enough light to see the way to the bed. He laid her gently on the mattress then began a journey from her lips down her body, removing clothes as he went. This time, she didn’t stop him.

Which was good, because he definitely didn’t want to stop. He just wanted to get closer.

Hooking his fingers into the waistband of her shorts, Hoss tugged them down her thighs. She was laid out naked before him.

“You’re so damned beautiful,” he whispered. “Don’t let anyone ever tell you differently.”

He began working his way down her body, using his hands, his lips, any possible way he could to be closer to her.

Her breathing picked up as he took one of her breasts into his mouth, teasing the hardened nipple with his lips.

Saggy. He’d never heard anything more categorically false in his whole life. Nothing about this woman was saggy.

He gave equal attention to the other breast, loving how she tugged at his hair and whispered his name.

God, he could listen to her say that until the end of time.

He picked up the pace, licking and sucking everywhere—breasts, belly, thighs, her sweet core. Vanessa lay splayed across the bed, her cheeks flushed and her chest rising with each quick breath. Her pink nipples were taut, her lips swollen.

Hands down, she was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

“What?” she asked.

Would she believe it if he told her?

He shook his head slowly. “I’m damn lucky, that’s what.”

She bit into a smile.

Standing, he shucked his pants and boxers. He was almost painfully hard, throbbing with need for the woman spread out before him.

Keeping his gaze on her, he opened the drawer by his bed and pulled out a condom, silently thanking Cameron for this year’s annoying but useful birthday gift. His hands shook, and he almost couldn’t get the damn thing on fast enough.

Climbing onto the bed, he crawled his way up Vanessa’s body and settled against her. Her body trembled, calling out to him with need.

A rush of heat swept through Hoss, and he was overcome by the urge to claim and possess her. To make her his. To hear her scream his name. To give her everything she needed. To keep her safe.

Capturing her mouth with his, he kissed her slowly as he pushed inside her. Vanessa gasped with pleasure, and he sank even farther in.

Her walls clung to his girth, and he buried himself to the hilt. Vanessa grabbed his shoulders, her nails digging into his flesh.

Hoss thrust his tongue into her mouth, a preview of what was to come. She responded eagerly, wrapping her legs around his waist and trying to pull him even deeper into her.

Slowly, he pumped in and out. He would take his time, savor every movement, every taste.

That was the advantage of both their ages. This wasn’t a race, wasn’t a sprint. He knew how to take his time, draw out the pleasure for both of them.

Vanessa writhed against him, their bodies falling into a synchronized rhythm. Catching her bottom lip between his

teeth, he slowly tugged until it popped from his mouth.

Her eyes were locked on his, the hazel flashing even in the low lighting. She was fucking gorgeous.

What he'd done to deserve her, he didn't know. He sure as hell wouldn't waste the gift, though.

He kept the rhythm slow, changing the angle to build the need in both of them. It was only when he could feel her clutching at him, doing whatever she could to try to get the release she needed that he finally picked up the pace.

Scooping his arms under her knees, he spread her legs farther up and open, then pummeled fast and hard. Vanessa let out a shriek, and soon her breathy moans were filling the room.

"Hoss," she cried. "Please, Hoss, now."

"There it is." He breathed into her ear. "That's what I need to hear."

Her pussy clamped down hard on his shaft, and she came violently, a shaking mess of limbs and sweat-slicked hair. Hoss let go and lost himself. He jackhammered into her, each thrust making her his.

Her cries climbed again, and he could feel his own orgasm building, the kind that nothing could stop.

She bit into his shoulder as she came again, and the primal act sent Hoss over the edge. A grunt shot from his throat as pleasure whipped through him.

Pumping a few more times, he dropped his face into the crook of her neck and breathed her in. Rain and sweat and the sweet smell of Vanessa.

He could spend the rest of his life surrounded by her scent.

She turned her face to his, and he kissed her tenderly. For a few moments, they stayed intertwined, breathing together and listening to the rain.

Hoss smoothed his palm along the curve of her breast and down her waist. "You're a dream."

“Yeah?” She sounded sleepy, hazy.

Hoss lifted onto an elbow to get a better look. Her eyelashes were fluttering. She was drifting off to sleep.

He gently kissed the tip of her nose. “You sleep. I’ll take care of everything.”

That was a promise.

Chapter 8

Vanessa woke up delightfully sore in places she'd wondered whether would ever see use again.

But the bed was empty.

Immediately, her insecurities assailed her. Hoss had seemed like he was enjoying their lovemaking as much as she did, but maybe she'd mistook his enthusiasm.

Each time.

No, she wasn't going to let her imagination spin out of control. The things Hoss had said to her, *done* to her... She couldn't doubt he'd been just as caught up in what was happening between them as she'd been.

She slipped his sweater back over her head and went to look for him.

She found him growling and cursing at the contents of his pantry.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

He spun slowly, and she had to force herself not to stare at his naked chest. He was fifty-one, three years older than her, but obviously working outside on his fishing boat all the time kept him in top shape. Guys twenty years younger than him probably hit the gym six times a week to get a body like Hoss's.

He ran a hand through his short, cropped hair. “I’m a little pissed at the lack of food options in this place.”

“Don’t do much grocery shopping?”

“No, but it’s not really that. I don’t stay here at the house very often. A lot of times, it’s easier to sleep on the boat.”

“Oh, because of long hours working?”

He shrugged. “Sometimes. But honestly, most of the time it’s because this place just feels empty.” He grabbed a box and a can. “Want some tuna on crackers? I probably have a little relish I can mix with it. Old throwback from my Navy days.”

“Sure.” She sat down on the stool at the small kitchen island. “You know, I’ve worked as a Realtor for a lot of years, and it’s not unusual for someone to feel a little displaced in a new house. Especially after a big life change like leaving behind your military career.”

He opened the can of tuna, drained it, and mixed in the relish. “Yeah, I’m sure that’s a little bit of my situation. But...”

He trailed off before opening a package of crackers and sliding them toward her. He put a little spoon in the bowl with the tuna.

“But what?”

He reached up and touched the scar running along his shoulder and up his neck. “Like I said earlier, sometimes it’s hard to be a survivor. Being in this great house on a fantastic little island sometimes feels totally unfair when so many of my teammates died.”

“You feel like you’re haunted by your friends’ ghosts.”

He scooped a bit of the mixture onto a cracker and handed it to her. “Yes. It’s like they’re in here with me sometimes.”

She took a bite. Not bad at all. “And you don’t want to get rid of them because then they would really be gone. And you get used to having them around.”

“Yeah.” He took a bite of his own cracker. “It’s weird, isn’t it?”

She ate another cracker. “I don’t necessarily think so. I’ve been divorced now for nearly fifteen years, but when Jared

first left, it was like the house was just so quiet without him, you know? I think I would've taken him back simply because it was easier, even though it wouldn't have been right.”

“How long were you guys married?”

“Almost twelve years. We were college sweethearts.”

“He cheat on you or something?”

Thinking about Jared wasn’t nearly as hard as it had once been. “Really it was just more that we grew apart. We probably stayed married five years past what we should’ve just because we both were too stubborn to leave. But nah, there was no real bad guy or anything.”

Hoss ate another bite of cracker. “Anybody important since?”

“A few casual, but nothing serious. As a matter of fact, lately I’d—” She slammed her mouth shut. Was she really about to share that?

“What?”

She shoved another cracker into her mouth. “Nothing.” She held her hand up in front of her face so she could say the words. “It’s too embarrassing.”

He gently pushed her hand down. “I’ve been inside you, Vanessa. I don’t think you need to be embarrassed.”

Heat pinked her cheeks. He was right, of course. “Argh. I just haven’t really been trying to date lately because I was sort of wondering if all my lady parts would work right anymore.”

He smiled and walked over to grab them each a beer from the fridge. She wasn’t surprised to see that had made the cut even when groceries hadn’t.

“I can assure you, all your parts—and very definitely the lady ones—work perfectly fine. But I hope you’ll give me a chance to show you that again tonight.” He glanced at his watch. “Well, this morning.”

“What time is it?”

“Already nearly seven. It just looks dark because of the storm.”

It was still battering the house outside.

“How about you?” she asked as they continued to eat.
“Ever married?”

“Only to the Navy. I was engaged once, but she decided a military wife’s life wasn’t for her.”

“And no one significant since you got out?”

He shook his head. “No. Not even many flings. Nobody but my friend Cameron has even spent time inside this house. You’re the only woman who’s ever been here.”

Vanessa could feel her eyes getting big. “Wow. I’m honored.”

“I like having you here. Like seeing you in my shirt.” He took a sip of his beer. “Like seeing you out of it even more.”

She studied her crackers and tuna. “You don’t have to say things like that. I know this isn’t anything serious.”

He put a finger under her chin, forcing her to meet his eyes. “But it’s not *not* serious either. Neither of us are people who jump into things like this haphazardly, right?”

She couldn’t deny that she’d never felt this way before. It was a little frightening how strong her feelings for this man were. But that didn’t mean she expected him to feel the same. Or for this to turn into something permanent.

“Yeah, but...”

“I know, it’s scary. I’m not going to lie, it’s scary as hell for me too. But I don’t want us to shut this down just because of that. I want us to give it a chance.”

“I-I’d like that too.”

“We’ll wait out this storm, get you to safety, then, if you’ll let me, I’d like to take you on a proper date. You deserve to be courted, Vanessa Hamilton, real estate mogul, defeater of drug runners, and sexiest person I’ve had in my bed in...ever.”

Vanessa couldn't hold in her smile. "That sounds wonderful."

He took her hand and began leading her back out of the kitchen. "First, brushing our teeth to eliminate all trace of tuna, then I'd like to take you up against that giant window in my bedroom."

She swallowed and nodded. He turned her so she was walking in front of him and he could whisper in her ear. "You're going to put your hands against that glass and watch the storm rage while I take you from behind."

She could only nod again, unable to get any words out.

"That window was an extravagance in this house that I wasn't sure why I wanted, I just knew I did." He pushed up against her as they walked, and he slid his hand under the sweater to cup her breast. She let out a little gasp she couldn't hold back as his fingers pinched her nipple just enough to feel exactly right. "Now I know why I wanted it. It was here, waiting for you. Every time I look out that window after tonight, I'm going to be thinking of you."

By the time they got to the bedroom, his talented fingers had wreaked havoc on her body—teasing both breasts before sliding down her belly and inside her. She could barely walk the final few steps as she moaned his name.

"I love hearing my name on those lips." He steered her to the bathroom and continued to play with her body as she brushed her teeth. By the time she was finished, she could barely hold her own weight. He brushed his own teeth then led her to the window.

He peeled the sweater over her head then turned and pressed her full naked body up against it. She let out a deep moan at the feel of the cold glass against her. He ran his hands down her back and cupped her ass, before pulling her hips back from the window.

She heard him slip on a condom then felt him molded against her back.

“You’re going to keep your hands against that glass and watch the storm. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Her hips sank back against him of their own accord.

“Yes, that’s good. I like that.” He squeezed her ass again. “You’re so damned sexy, Vanessa. So fucking beautiful.”

He slowly worked his way inside her, and she pressed hard against the glass, breaths coming out in a hiss.

This man. She’d never felt this way her whole life. Didn’t even know it was possible to feel this way.

Every thrust brought her higher and higher until she didn’t know which storm raged more fiercely, the one outside or the one gathering in her heart.

Chapter 9

It was the absence of rain that woke Vanessa from a nap.

For a little over two days, it had just been her and Hoss and the storm. Two days of nothing short of amazing.

The man was attentive both in and out of bed, even with the lack of food options.

Throwing off the blankets, she went to the window and pushed the curtain aside. Late afternoon light made her eyes hurt so much that she had to look away.

“Good nap?”

The deep, smooth voice made her heart flip. God, she was like a teenager around this man.

Turning away from the window, she found Hoss standing in the doorway, a tray in his hands. “I found some oatmeal that was edible—dinner of champions. And, of course, more coffee.”

“You’ve been feeding me pretty impressively, given how little you had here. If we keep this up, you’re going to make me fat.”

He waggled his eyebrows. “You’re the last thing from fat. But if you’re truly concerned about it, I have a number of suggestions for burning calories.”

She grinned at him. “Any of them ways we’ve been trying for the past couple of days?”

“Maybe. I say, if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

Sex between them certainly hadn’t been broke. “I guess give me all the oatmeal, then.”

He grinned, and it almost took her breath away. Hoss’s smile softened his face. He was still obviously a warrior, but his smile—a real, relaxed one that reached all the way to his eyes—changed nearly everything about his appearance.

He set the tray on the bedside table and slipped his arms around her. “The storm is over. That means we can finally get you out of here.”

“What about you? If the sheriff is in on this, won’t it be unsafe for you?”

“No. There’s no reason for Dupree to think I’m involved in any way. But you better believe I’m going to make sure all of them go down.” Hoss drew circles on her back. “I’ve been trying to contact Cameron so I can let him know what’s going on, but I haven’t heard anything yet.”

She stiffened. “Is that bad? Do you think...”

“Right now, I think any lack of communication has been because of the storm and that Cameron knows we can’t speak privately over the radio. Now that the storm is over, he’ll be here soon.”

There was a loud knock on the front door. Vanessa and Hoss exchanged a look, but she didn’t even have time to respond before he was pulling her out of the bedroom.

“Stay in here.” He hustled her into his room with the monitors. “Don’t open the door, and don’t leave this room until I come for you, no matter what.”

“Hoss—”

But he was already shutting the door.

She retreated to the security cameras. The feed in the middle showed the front porch, where Sheriff Dupree stood, his hands on his belt.

Vanessa's breath caught in her throat. What the hell was he doing here? Hoss had said no one would connect her to him.

A sick feeling climbed up her chest. Had the sheriff brought the other men with him? Was this some sort of trap?

She searched the other video feeds. Though she didn't see anyone else, she wasn't convinced that the drug runners or the deputy from the office weren't out there, lying in wait in the trees.

She watched on the screen as Hoss opened the front door. She couldn't see him from this angle, only the sheriff.

"Sheriff. How are you doing?"

"I been better, son. I been better. Listen, have you seen that blond woman who came in a few days ago? Vanessa Hamilton?"

There was a pause. "No, I haven't. Is she in trouble?"

"Do you mind if I come in? We can talk about it." Sheriff Dupree leaned so he could try to look over Hoss's shoulder.

Hoss didn't budge. "Now's not really a good time. I've been too much of slob during the storm. House isn't presentable for company."

The sheriff's eyes narrowed, but he didn't push it. "You were dancing with her at the Salty Beast. The regulars say you two were getting pretty familiar."

Vanessa curled her hands into fists. What if the sheriff attacked Hoss? He had told her to stay put, but she wasn't going to sit here and do nothing, watching him get hurt because of her.

"I wish I could tell you I've seen her since then, but I haven't. Not that I haven't wanted to. I'm afraid I might have come on too strong, scared her off. You know how it is. She seemed to be making herself scarce, and then with the storm, I just hunkered down."

The sheriff mumbled something that Vanessa didn't pick up. "...these women... Well, I don't know how best to break it

to you, so I'mma come right out and say it. I think she's into drugs. I've got an APB out for her."

Hoss whistled. "Drugs? You sure? She seemed pretty straitlaced to me."

A moment of quiet stretched between the men. Vanessa's anxiety ratcheted up. She looked around the room, searching for something that could be used as a weapon.

The sheriff would probably shoot her before she got halfway to him. What if she went out a window and snuck up behind him? But how useful would she actually be? A few kickboxing classes were the closest she'd come to learning self-defense.

Finally, the sheriff answered Hoss. "Well, if you see her, you be sure to let me know straightaway, all right? She's not the type of woman you want to get involved with."

"Yes, sir."

Even after Hoss closed the front door, the sheriff lingered on the porch a moment longer, looking at the house almost as if he knew Vanessa was in there.

A shiver ran down her back. *Just leave already.*

Finally, he walked off the porch.

Sighing in relief, Vanessa stepped away from the door. A few seconds later, it opened, and Hoss stepped inside. "You okay?"

"I heard your conversation with the sheriff on the monitor. Do you think he suspects anything?"

"We're about to find out."

Hoss sat and flipped on a large computer screen, and with a few clicks of his hand on the keyboard, a dozen images from all over his property flipped on. He pulled Vanessa down onto his lap, and they watched to see if anyone would show up on the footage.

"Did you deliberately design this house to look plain on the outside?" she asked him.

“Yes. I didn’t want to draw any attention.”

He’d definitely done a great job limiting the curb appeal of this place. But the inside was pretty damned delightful, and Vanessa had certainly been in enough houses to know.

It was an utter shame for no one to be living in this house full time. Hoss had obviously put a lot of thought into security —as proven by everything surrounding them here in his separate security room. But he’d also given plenty of consideration to other areas of the house.

The bathroom was high-end, tiled with a large soaking tub and a shower with multiple jet heads. The kitchen had expensive appliances and beautiful cabinetry. The living room and bedrooms had windows that not only provided a place for wonderful sex, but gorgeous views of the Atlantic.

“Any sign of trouble?” she asked.

“Not yet. But Dupree is still walking around, so something’s up.” He tightened his hand on her hip. “You’re distracted. What are you thinking about?”

“Actually, about this house and how great it is. You made smart choices in your upgrades.”

His eyes went back to the monitors, but he smiled. “Thank you.”

“It’s a shame you don’t spend more time here.”

“Yeah. I’ve been thinking about it, and I’m going to try.”

She smiled and reached up to cup his strong jaw. “That makes me happy. Your friends wouldn’t want you to avoid this place because of them.”

He turned his head and kissed the inside of her palm. “You’re right. Plus, there are plenty of great new memories I have here now.”

“I’d like for us to make even more once it’s safe.”

“Me too.” His eyes hardened as he looked back at the screen. “But that’s going to have to wait.”

Dupree was meeting with the deputy and the two drug runners right there on Hoss's property.

“What do you think they’re talking about?”

Hoss shut down the rest of the cameras, zooming in on the camera that showed the men. There was no audio, but it allowed for a clearer picture. The men were gesturing toward the house.

“I think they’re coming in, and it’s time for us to get out of here.”

Chapter 10

Both Hoss and Vanessa were already pulling on their clothes and shoes when Cameron's voice came in over the radio.

"Come in, Wild Hog."

Shit.

"Finish getting dressed," Hoss said to Vanessa. "I'm sure Dupree and his gang are listening. I'll try to use Cameron to stop whatever they have planned."

And he was pretty damned certain their plan was to storm the house and see if Vanessa was really here. And if they found her, Hoss had no doubt neither of them would make it out alive. Dupree would just make up whatever story he wanted to about their deaths.

Hoss flew across the room. He couldn't get his finger on the push-to-talk button fast enough. "This is Wild Hog."

The radio crackled. "It's good to hear your voice, buddy."

"You too. Big storm."

"Yeah, how's everything going over there with the storm... and stuff?"

Hoss forced out a laugh. "You know. It's given me an excuse to hang out at my house for the last two days. You know how I like to spend as much time here as possible."

Cameron knew the exact opposite was true. "Um, right."

“Hey man, also... Just so you know, Sheriff Dupree came by here. He was looking for that lady—Vanessa something—who arrived just before the storm hit.”

Cameron was silent for a moment. Hoss knew his friend had to be confused. “Is that so?”

“Yeah, she isn’t here, of course. I haven’t seen her since dancing with her at the Salty Beast. Just be careful if you see her—evidently, she’s into drug running or something.”

“Wow. I, uh, wouldn’t have thought that.”

“Yeah, I guess you can’t ever really tell about a person. At least that’s how Dupree made it seem.”

Another beat of silence from Cameron. “That’s certainly true, brother. I’ll be on high alert.”

“Good.”

Cameron probably didn’t know who Hoss was trying to say the bad guy was, Vanessa or Dupree. But the important thing was that he knew something was up.

“I have that engine for you. I’ll be docking in less than two hours. Maybe sooner. I’ll put it in right away.”

Two hours.

“Copy that, but no hurry. I’m not going out today.” That was completely for Dupree’s benefit—hopefully to keep their search away from the dock. “But go ahead and put it in.”

“Roger that. Over and out.”

Hoss put down the radio and turned to find Vanessa had come back into the security room.

“They were definitely listening,” she told him.

Damn, he didn’t know if it was possible for him to be more attracted to her than he was right now. She wasn’t wandering around the house, wringing her hands, wondering what to do. She’d come in here to watch his back.

He kissed the top of her head. “Thank you for keeping an eye out here.”

“Were you able to get a message to Cameron?”

“Enough that he knows something is going on, though he isn’t exactly sure what. But I served with Cameron for a long time—I trust his instincts.”

Hoss watched the screen as he spoke. It looked like his plan had worked in convincing Dupree that Vanessa wasn’t there. Two men were staying behind to watch the house, but the other two were leaving.

She pointed at the screen. “That’s good, right?”

“Looks like they’re not planning to storm the house anymore—that’s definitely good. They’re dividing to try to find you. And us sneaking out around two people will be easier than trying to get around four.”

“Where are we going?”

“To the docks. Cameron will be there soon with my repaired engine, and I’m going to get you off this island. From there, we’ll get *real* law enforcement involved and take these bastards down.”

“You’ll come with me? I don’t want to take a chance on _____”

He reached over and kissed her. “I’m not letting you out of my sight. Not until I know you’re safe.”

He wasn’t sure he’d even be able to let her go then either.

“What’s the plan?” she whispered, leaning against him.

“I’m going to turn on the television and crack a window slightly so they can hear it just barely. That will hopefully reassure them that it’s me just hanging out inside the house.”

“How will we get around them outside?”

Once again, Hoss was thankful for the security upgrades he’d had built into the house.

“Most houses have two or sometimes three entrances and exits. This place has six. We’ll make it around them.”

They finished getting dressed. Vanessa was wearing her capri-length pajama bottoms, but he gave her one of his black t-shirts to pull on. It would help blend in more in the darkness. When she tied a little knot at her waist so it didn't swallow her, he almost gave a little growl.

Damn he liked seeing this woman in his clothes. In his house. And while he definitely didn't like that she was in danger, he liked being able to protect her both with his skills and with this house he'd built.

He'd known he was going overboard with security at the time, but now he wondered if his dead buddies hadn't been helping him—getting him to build the house that would be needed for this very situation with Vanessa.

They had his back even though they weren't with him anymore.

It changed every bit of his thinking about this place.

"Thanks, brothers," he whispered, too softly for Vanessa to hear him. Although he didn't have any doubt she would understand if he told her what he was thinking.

Once they were ready, Hoss set the television in the living room to a football game. The curtains were closed, so the men couldn't see in, but he cracked the window. Sound would carry. The thought that a lone man was watching a football game in the comfort of his own house would be very believable.

He took one more look at the footage from his property. The two men had split up. One of the two men Vanessa had caught on film was watching the front door. Dupree's deputy was roving. He was the one they'd need to be careful of.

"Ready?" Hoss asked Vanessa.

She nodded. "Which door are we going out—front or back?"

"Neither."

He walked with her back into the security room and pulled a latch, opening a hidden room behind a false wall. The room

was small, built half as a safe room and half as a storm shelter. But it also contained a short tunnel that led to the detached work shed on the side of the house.

He turned to find Vanessa grinning. “This place gets more and more amazing.”

He led her through the tunnel then out the shed’s door, making sure they both stayed low once they got outside. Darkness has fallen, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t be spotted.

“Stay as close to me as possible,” he whispered into her ear. She nodded.

He could feel Vanessa’s hand fisted into the back of his shirt as he led them silently toward the back side of his property. If he were by himself, he might have gone for more speed than stealth, but that wasn’t the best plan for the two of them.

He stopped and kept them still a couple of times as the roving deputy came somewhat near. Hoss wrapped his arm around Vanessa, keeping her pinned against a tree. He wasn’t surprised when she kept her wits about her.

God, he would take someone like her—more mature, focused, intelligent—over even a supermodel half her age.

He pulled her closer, keeping himself between her and the danger as they heard voices.

“What the hell are you doing back here, Stevens?” the deputy asked. “You’re supposed to be watching the front door.”

“McKinney is watching the football game, for Christ’s sake. You heard him on the radio—he hasn’t seen the woman since the storm hit. Both of us being here is doing nothing but keeping us from really finding her.”

“Dupree has a plan, and he’s not convinced she’s not inside the house.”

“Dupree isn’t the one caught on video stuffing drugs into toys,” Stevens growled. “It’s my and Waldrop’s asses on the

line, not his.”

“Well, if you and Waldrop hadn’t been stupid enough to get caught, we wouldn’t be in this position. Now we’re going to have to kill the woman and maybe McKinney too.”

Vanessa stiffened against him but stayed silent. Hoss wasn’t surprised that the plan was to take them out completely—it was the only way to make sure they didn’t talk.

Still, hearing someone say they were actively trying to kill you was always disconcerting, even with his extensive military background.

“Yeah?” the deputy responded. “What if they walked out the front door while you’re back here talking to me?”

“We both know they wouldn’t go out the front door.”

“Just get the fuck where you’re supposed to be and wait for word from Dupree. If he finds the woman and we can keep McKinney out of this entirely, then it’ll be much less complicated.”

“I don’t like it,” Stevens muttered. “We need to just break in to the house and deal with this.”

“Making Vanessa Hamilton disappear won’t be hard and probably won’t even lead to many questions. It’ll be easy to spin that she decided a vacation where she couldn’t be connected to the rest of the world wasn’t for her. But Hoss has friends here, even if he doesn’t talk much. So we wait to hear from Dupree, then make our move.”

“Fine.” Stevens stormed off, presumably back to his lookout by the front door.

Hoss thought of taking out both the men himself. He’d brought his Glock, but honestly, he wouldn’t even need it. He knew a dozen ways to kill both men with his bare hands.

But if Dupree decided to check in with them and they didn’t respond, he would know immediately that Hoss was helping Vanessa. The first place he’d go was to the docks. He might even take out Cameron to stop him from helping.

Stealth was their best option. Make sure others knew about the footage, knew about Dupree and the deputy, then take them down.

Make sure Vanessa was far away and safe first.

He waited until the deputy was gone, the night sounds resuming around them, then led her toward town and the docks. The football game wouldn't fool them forever.

He needed to get Vanessa off this island.

Chapter 11

Crouched behind a tree, Vanessa held her breath and studied the docks. A few lampposts lit up the boats, and a cat walked along the edge of the water.

She licked her dry lips and kept a grip on Hoss's hand. They'd been silent the entire trip into town to make sure the deputy didn't hear them.

The deputy who was willing to kill them, as were Dupree and the two drug runners she'd caught on video.

There was no sign of anyone on the docks, but just because she didn't see anyone didn't mean they weren't out there.

Hoss squeezed her hand. "There's Cameron's boat. At the far end, next to my trawler."

She had to squint to see the boats, they were so far away from the lampposts' shine. "Okay."

"We'll stick to the shadows. Stay low. No matter what happens, get on the boat. Keep going."

"Do you expect trouble?"

"If I were Dupree, I would be watching these docks pretty closely. It's the only real way on or off the island. What I'm betting on is that he won't take a chance on trying to take us out publicly as we make a run for it. That would be too hard to explain."

"Take us out, like...shoot us?"

“Yeah. So, we’re going to run.”

She swallowed hard and started to protest again, but his lips pressing against hers silenced her. She leaned into the kiss, desperate for it.

Please God, don’t let this be our last kiss.

Too soon, he tore his mouth from hers. “It’s time. We need to go now. Straight for my boat.”

She nodded, her throat too full of lumps for speaking.

Hoss gestured for her to follow, and they crept through the trees until they were at the dark end of the docks. Bending on one knee, he surveyed the area.

Hoss held up two fingers and gestured for them to go. They took off at a run, keeping as low as possible. Vanessa’s eyes stayed fixed on Hoss’s boat. One foot in front of the other.

She waited for the gunshot and the pain. Waited to seize up and hit the ground. Waited for all her hope to be stolen away.

But it didn’t happen. They reached the boat, where they dropped to their knees on its deck.

Hoss squeezed her shoulder. “You okay?”

She surprised herself by letting out a shaky laugh. “Yeah. I can’t say the same for my blood pressure, though. My doctor will be giving me an earful next checkup.”

Something moved over Hoss’s shoulder, and Vanessa froze. At the far end of the boat, a figure emerged from the shadows. Vanessa opened her mouth to warn Hoss, but he was already reaching out his hand.

“Cameron.” He shook the man’s hand. “Good to see you.”

Cameron clapped him on the back. “The motor is all ready to go.”

“Cameron, this is Vanessa.”

He nodded at her. “It’s great to meet you, I think. I wasn’t sure if you were to be trusted or not.” Cameron turned back to

Hoss. “You want to tell me exactly what the hell is going on now that we don’t have to talk in code?”

Hoss exhaled hotly. “Sheriff Dupree is running drugs on Heartbreak Key. He’s got multiple men working for him, including the deputy and at least two others. Vanessa got a video of them in action, and they’re after her.”

Cameron’s eyes widened. “Holy shit.”

“Yep. I need to get her the hell out of dodge and get actual law enforcement here to help out.”

Cameron nodded. “Roger that. Let’s get you off this island.”

“Thank you.” It was amazing that Hoss had helped her so much, and now Cameron was helping too? It was more than she would’ve hoped for. “I know you have no reason to trust me.”

“No offense, but it’s not you I trust. It’s the man next to you who has earned my trust more than once. If he says we help you, then that’s what we do.”

The brotherhood between the two of them was almost tangible. No wonder it had hurt Hoss so much to lose the rest of his team. It had been like losing family.

“Thank you anyway.”

“My pleasure.” He turned to Hoss. “I’ll start my engine same time as you start yours, then I’ll move to the north end of the dock. Make it look like I’m just getting a better spot. The noise should cover your exit.”

Hoss shook Cameron’s hand again. “I owe you one, buddy. Be careful.”

“I will. And I’ll run interference for you if I see Dupree or hear of anyone asking about you. Maybe I can mention seeing Vanessa at the north side of the island. It’ll at least send them in the wrong direction.”

“Thanks, brother.”

Cameron stepped off the boat. “Now, go. I’ll start my engine in exactly five minutes.”

Cameron disappeared onto the dock. Hoss led her to the back of his boat. He squeezed her shoulder. “You stay down. In just another few minutes, we’ll be safe.”

She did as he said, crouching against the side of the boat while he went behind the helm. Water slapped the boat, and even in the dock, it rocked side to side.

The storm might have passed, but the water was choppy.

How many miles till the next safe island? She tried to remember, but she hadn’t been paying attention to that when coming to Heartbreak Key. Her mind had been consumed with all the frozen margaritas she would drink and which cozy mystery she would read next.

To their right, an engine pattered to life. Hoss didn’t skip a beat. He turned on his own engine, which blended into the sound of Cameron’s.

Unlike Cameron’s boat, though, Hoss kept all the lights on his off. They were a ghost ship, hopefully unnoticeable in the night.

Slowly, Hoss eased his boat away from the dock. They passed by Cameron, who didn’t so much as acknowledge their existence. Heartbreak Key’s dock remained quiet. Even the cat was long gone.

They were going to make it. Dupree could keep looking for her on the island, but she wouldn’t be there.

Hoss kept his lights off as the island got smaller behind them. It wasn’t until Heartbreak Key was a distant sight that he turned them on.

Vanessa stood, relief rushing through her. “We did it!”

She ran into his chest, and he wrapped an arm around her tightly. With his lips against the top of her head, everything felt right in the world.

Hoss kissed her cheek. “I’ll feel better once we get to the mainland and you can get that footage into the right hands.”

“I can’t thank you enough, Hoss. You’ve been my hero from the moment you saved me from falling face first into the ocean. Then just kept saving me after that.”

“It wasn’t only me. You saved yourself too. You showed true mettle. You didn’t lose courage, and you didn’t give up.”

She laced her fingers through his. “I guess it’s easy when you have something to live for.”

Her honesty surprised her, and she quickly looked down. Where had those words come from?

But Hoss gently lifted her face. His eyes blazed under the boat’s lights.

“It sure is.” His voice was deep and gravelly.

Vanessa’s knees went weak. Was he saying what she thought he was?

The last few days had been insane. More than once, she had thought her life was coming to an end. Each time, though, she had made it through. And each time, Hoss had been there.

To hold her up. Protect her. Encourage her.

She had no doubt the events on Heartbreak Key had changed her—she was definitely going to need a vacation to recover from her vacation.

But her time with Hoss had changed her even more. She wanted all this behind them so they could see if something could really and truly exist between them.

She wanted to tell him as much, but the words wouldn’t come. What if she was misreading him? The thought of being let down was almost too much to bear.

“Hoss...”

“Yes?” The word was little more than a growl, and Lord, did it turn her on.

She forced out the words. “I want to let you know that... you... You mean a lot to me... Not just because of what you did...”

She cleared her throat. Oh God. Was she really going to choke up now?

Hoss's eyes widened. She barely had time to process the change in his face before someone spoke behind her.

"Stay right where you are."

A chill went down Vanessa's spine. She turned slowly, her shoulder grazing Hoss's chest as she moved.

Sheriff Dupree stood on the boat's deck, the gun in his hand pointed right at them.

Chapter 12

“Put your hands up.” Sheriff Dupree jerked his chin at Hoss. “Don’t even try for your weapon. I’m sure you have one on you.”

“All right, Dupree. Let’s stay calm.” Hoss reached an arm around Vanessa and pulled her so she was behind him. There was no way in hell he was letting her stay between Dupree and himself—and their two weapons.

He had to keep Vanessa safe, and that meant keeping his cool and following orders until the right opportunity presented itself.

Damn it, why hadn’t he checked the cabin to see if anyone was down there?

“Toss your weapon over to me.” Dupree took a slight step closer but stayed out of range for Hoss to jump him. The man was smart. “Don’t try anything.”

Hoss slipped his Glock out of the holster and gently tossed it in Dupree’s direction. He wasn’t going to take a chance—not with a gun pointed toward Vanessa.

“I knew you would end up here.” Dupree used his foot to slide Hoss’s weapon closer to himself. “Figured it out as soon as I heard you talking to Cameron on the radio—something wasn’t right. Decided to take my chances and wait here for a while.”

Hoss was thankful Dupree hadn’t hurt Cameron while he was changing out the engine.

“Hoss, keep your hands on the helm where I can see them and keep us going straight out into open water.” He jerked his chin at Vanessa. “You keep your hands up.”

Hoss moved to the helm, bringing Vanessa with him. He placed both hands on the wheel while Vanessa raised hers.

“What do you want?” she asked him.

Dupree snorted. “I want you to stay out of my business. But it’s too late for that, isn’t it? If you’d just given me your damned phone back on the island, it never would have come to this.”

“You and your deputy are working with those guys,” she spat out.

“Very successfully too. Do you know how little law enforcement gets paid on these tiny islands? I had to offset my financial woes somehow.”

“By putting drugs in *children’s toys*? ”

“It’s not like we’re literally giving them to children. That’s the cover. And we’re not going to let you ruin what has been a very profitable operation. Unfortunately for you, that means I’m left with only one option.”

Hoss allowed the interaction between the two as he worked scenarios for getting the upper hand. All he needed was for the sheriff to look away or get distracted for a single moment.

“This is crazy.” Vanessa’s voice was loud, but it had a tremble to it. “You know you’ll be caught, right? There’s no way you can get away with this. People will come looking for us.”

Sheriff Dupree’s upper lip curled. “Here’s the thing. Heartbreak Key is a small place. You’re a tourist—they’re known to do crazy things. And Hoss here is a loner. People don’t trust loners.”

“They’ll still wonder what happened to us if we just disappear,” she argued.

Dupree pulled out what looked like another gun. “You won’t just disappear. It’ll be a tragic accident. Those

unfortunately occur sometimes. Do you know what the biggest danger is on a boat, Ms. Hamilton?"

Vanessa shook her head. Hoss already knew the answer and knew what Dupree was holding in his other hand.

"Tell her, Hoss."

"Fire," he responded, teeth gritted.

"Exactly. This is a flare gun." He held it up so Vanessa could see it more clearly. "It will replicate the damage a blown engine would make. Not out of the realm of possibility since Cameron just replaced this one. Works out perfectly."

He laughed and took a step closer. "I mean...works out perfectly for *me*. I'm sure you two don't see it the same way."

Vanessa glanced over at Hoss. He wished he could reassure her in some way. But even if he could communicate, he wasn't sure what he would say.

The odds were not in their favor.

"Won't that kill you too?" Vanessa asked Dupree.

"No, I'll be on Hoss's Halo. It won't take me long to get back to Heartbreak."

Vanessa turned to Hoss. "Halo?"

"My emergency blow-up life raft. It's in the box at his feet."

"Of course, I'll have to eliminate Cameron Burton too. I have no doubt you've told him everything." The man had the audacity to actually look sad. "Not what I wanted, but the money we've been making is too good to let some tourist and a couple drifters get in our way. Believe it or not, we're doing what's best for Heartbreak Key."

Hoss gripped the helm with white knuckles. "Running drugs isn't what's best for anywhere."

"We're keeping drugs off our island. Our sales are nowhere near here. We're making Heartbreak Key safer for everyone."

The bullshit of it all was that Dupree actually seemed to believe that. He'd convinced himself it was the truth.

Dupree pointed the gun at Vanessa. "If you wouldn't mind assisting me."

Hoss clenched his teeth. "Keep the weapon pointed at me, asshole."

"No, I don't think so. I think you're more likely to stay in line with my gun pointed at her. Ms. Hamilton is going to help me get the raft situated."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Why would I help you when I know you're going to kill us?"

"Your boyfriend will tell you. You do whatever you have to do to survive as long as possible. A bullet to the head ends any chance right away."

Bastard was right. "It's okay, sweetheart. Help him set up the raft."

The trawler rocked as a big wave hit it, and Vanessa struggled to stay on her feet. Dupree laughed. "Sea life's a bitch, isn't it? Storms make everything more difficult."

She righted herself and moved to the bow. He pushed the raft—which looked a little like a bright-yellow suitcase—toward her with his foot. "I think the instructions are pretty clear."

Vanessa crouched down and looked at the illustrated cartoons on the outside of the raft's bag. It was just a matter of tossing it in the water and yanking hard on the painter line that kept it attached to the ship. In less than five minutes, the small raft was inflated next to the boat in the ocean.

They were running out of time.

Hoss gripped the helm tighter. He'd known Sheriff Dupree for almost five years, and for the first time ever, he regretted not being friendlier with everyone on Heartbreak Key.

If he had talked more, paid more attention, maybe he would have seen some signs. Stopped the sheriff and the criminals he worked with before things went too far.

But he couldn't go back in time. The only thing he could do was take action here and now. Because he knew what Dupree's next step would be.

Sure enough, once Vanessa had set up the raft, Dupree grabbed a piece of rope and restrained her hands around one of the metal bars running the length of the vessel.

He didn't tie her too tight; Dupree wanted the rope to burn away when the boat blew or for fishes to eat away at it before her body was found.

They were definitely out of time. Dupree's next course of action would be to put the gun to Vanessa's head and force Hoss to restrain himself. It's what Hoss would do if the roles were reversed.

He needed to make his move *now*.

Vanessa let out a little shriek as a wave crashed against the ship, and Dupree stumbled backward.

Hoss didn't hesitate. He lunged, making a grab for the sheriff's gun. A bang filled the air, and Vanessa screamed.

Hoss went to grab the sheriff's wrist, but the gun had fallen onto the deck. The man ducked out of Hoss's reach and punched him in the gut.

Hoss bent over, surprised at the force of the punch. He recovered swiftly, though, grabbing the sheriff's arm and twisting it. The other man broke out of the hold, but Hoss got him with an uppercut to the jaw.

The sheriff dropped to the deck, unconscious from the punch.

“Vanessa!” Hoss whirled around. Without him at the helm to help combat the waves, the boat was being tossed all over the place. She was being thrown around, unable to steady herself because of her bound wrists.

“Look out!” she yelled.

Hoss felt the burn of the bullet like a hot poker in his side, at the same time as he heard the gunfire. He didn't allow

himself to hesitate or acknowledge the pain, knowing the next bullet would be coming for Vanessa.

He turned and dove back for Dupree. The older man wasn't expecting him to move so quickly despite being shot, and he wasn't ready. Hoss wrestled the gun from his hand, and it fell away from them both.

Hoss went to scramble for the gun, but he had to stop when Dupree pulled out the flare gun and pointed it right at him. A shot from that would kill a man at this range.

Hoss grabbed Dupree's wrists, the two of them rolling together, fighting for who would get control of the flare gun. Normally, taking Dupree out wouldn't have been a problem, but he was already weakening from his bullet wound.

Hoss fought past the pain. He made one final yank for the flare gun, pulling it around to the side, away from Vanessa.

It went off.

The stern of the ship immediately caught fire as the flare hit it. It wouldn't take long before the flames hit the gas tank and the ship exploded.

Dupree was punching at him now, and Hoss's strength was waning.

Shit. He couldn't let Vanessa die here.

“Hoss!” The gun had fallen toward Vanessa in the rough seas. She kicked it to him.

Once again, Hoss didn't hesitate. He grabbed the gun at his side, brought it up, and fired.

Dupree died with a look of surprise on his face.

Hoss forced himself up away from the man and stumbled over to Vanessa. They only had seconds left. He had to get her off this boat.

“You're shot. Are you okay?”

He didn't answer—focusing solely on getting her hands untied. His vision was starting to gray out on the edges. If he

passed out without getting her hands free, they were both going to die here.

Finally, the knot gave way. The smoke was growing. Just like the flames.

“We have to jump.” He grabbed Vanessa’s hand.

“What?” Her eyes went wide in alarm.

“Now!” They didn’t even have time to make it over to the other side of the ship, where the life raft was attached. He hauled her onto the gunwale, and they jumped into the dark water.

He gritted his teeth and kept a hold of her hand, swimming as hard as his damaged body would allow. A few seconds later, heat and light flashed behind them as the boat exploded.

Chapter 13

The blast from the boat explosion dragged both of them under the water.

Vanessa refused to let go of Hoss's hand. If she let go, they might not find each other again in the liquid darkness.

She couldn't tell which way the surface was. Hoss fortunately did, and she swam with all her might once she felt him pulling her in the correct direction.

They surfaced, both of them coughing and sputtering as they were bashed on all sides by waves.

"You okay?" Hoss said.

Shaking water from her eyes, she looked around. The boat had exploded. Pieces of it drifted in the water, some of them still on fire.

"Yes." She gulped for another breath and got a mouthful of water instead.

They needed to swim. Find something to cling on to. She could tell he was getting weaker.

How many times had he saved her over the past few days? Now it was time for her to do the same for him.

Planks of wood bobbed in the water, and they each grabbed hold of one. It was hard to get a grip, and every time Vanessa tried to get more of her body onto the plank, she slipped back off. It was like that damned *Titanic* movie, but at least the water wasn't that cold.

Hoss clung to his plank with both arms, and even in the dark, she could tell he wasn't doing well.

"Hoss?" Her voice shook.

He had been shot in the abdomen on the boat, but she hadn't been able to tell how bad it was.

Vanessa reached into her pajama pocket for the thing she'd stuck in there when Dupree wasn't looking. It had looked like some sort of tiny homing beacon. She'd stuffed it in with her phone.

Her phone was gone, but the beacon was still there.

"You need to go. Leave me..." Hoss struggled to keep his head up.

"Don't talk. You've lost a lot of blood." Her stomach twisted. With most of his body in the water, she couldn't get to the bullet wound to stanch the blood flow.

She kicked her legs until her plank was closer to him. A big swell pushed them up toward the sky then brought them crashing back down again.

"Hoss, I grabbed this when Dupree had me set up the raft." She pulled out the beacon so it was right in front of him. "Do you know what it is?"

"AIS MOB."

She had no idea what he was saying. "Hoss, I don't know what that means."

"Automatic identification system. Man over...overboard. Button side—GPS."

Thank God it was what she was hoping it was. She turned on every single button on the side. A light flashed on, blinding her for a second before she looked away, and a piercing sounded every thirty seconds.

She took the strap and wrapped it around Hoss's wrist in case they got separated. He was going to need help first.

"Someone will be here soon." She had no idea if that was true, but she prayed it was. "Stay with me, Hoss."

Hoss said something indiscernible.

“Hey, keep talking to me.” She squeezed his arm. “Don’t go to sleep.”

But his eyes were closing, and he seemed not to hear her.

“Hoss!” She slapped at his forearm multiple times. He finally made a pained noise then opened his eyes.

“Go without me.” His head lolled to the side.

“Not a chance in hell. Hang on a little longer.” She raised her voice, hoping the noise would keep him conscious. “It’s going to be okay. It’s going to be okay.”

She already felt like a broken record. One that didn’t even make sense. But she had to keep him going until help arrived. She had no idea how long that would be.

“Talk to me.” She reached out and grabbed his arm, doing her best to keep them together as more waves buffeted them.

“Talk...about what?”

“Tell me about what we’ll do when this is all over.”

Hoss chuckled. It was weak, but at least it was a laugh. “Vacation. Just you and me.”

“A vacation where?” She pulled him closer, wrapping her leg around him so they wouldn’t get separated.

“Somewhere cold. The mountains. I need a...break...from the islands. And help your blood pressure.”

Vanessa laughed, the tears sliding down her cheeks. “That sounds nice.”

He didn’t answer. His head had dropped forward again.

“Hoss!” She shook him. “Shit. Shit, shit, shit.”

“I’m...here.”

“Keep talking.”

A dark mass bobbed by. Vanessa stiffened. A shark?

The object bobbed closer, and she relaxed. Not a shark. It was a piece of debris from the boat.

No, not debris. A life jacket.

Releasing one hand from the plank, she grabbed the life jacket and pulled it over. She would put it on Hoss. If he were to slide off his plank, she wouldn't be able to haul him back onto it.

"Put this on." It took a while, but she finally got the life jacket on Hoss. He nearly slipped under the water twice, and each time, she had to use all her strength to keep him with her.

"Vanessa..." He clung to the plank with his cheek resting against the wood. "I..."

"Hoss, don't give up. Help is coming." She rested her cheek against his. It was so cold. Oh God, way too cold.

She talked as much as she could, telling him about her business, more about the health scare that had sent her down here, even her marriage. Out there on the dark water, with Hoss slowly dying and who knew what kind of dangers swimming underneath them, each second felt like an hour. He said less and less as she went on.

A light appeared in the distance. Vanessa had been praying so hard that someone would show up that at first, she thought she was dreaming it. But it was a boat coming their way.

She grabbed the whistle attached to the life jacket and started blowing for all she was worth, swinging the AIS light as high up in the air as she could.

A couple minutes later, the boat's horn sounded. She sobbed in relief. They'd been spotted!

Vanessa kept blowing as the boat came closer. It was big, with lots of lights. Was it a fishing boat? She didn't know, and she didn't care. She didn't even care if it was Dupree's friends coming to look for him, as long as they would get Hoss out of the water.

Finally, she could see the boat. Long and white, it had a red stripe on its hull. Black lettering spelled out "US Coast Guard."

Vanessa let out a cry of relief.

A voice came over a speaker. “This is the US Coast Guard. Can you hear us?”

Vanessa blew her whistle. “Hoss, it’s the Coast Guard.”

Hoss mumbled something in response.

From the side of the boat, a raft was lowered into the water. It felt like it took forever, but finally the raft and the several people on it reached the bobbing planks.

“He’s been shot.” Vanessa shook Hoss’s shoulder, but he didn’t wake up this time. “Please help him. Hurry.”

The crew members hauled them into the raft. Hoss didn’t make so much as a peep, and Vanessa felt like she couldn’t get enough air. He had to be in severe pain. Why wasn’t he reacting?

“Was there anyone else on your boat?” One of the men draped a blanket over Vanessa’s shoulders, but she kept watching the other Coast Guard officers who were helping Hoss. “Ma’am?”

“Yes, there was one more person. Sheriff Dupree from Heartbreak Key. He tried to kill us. But he’s gone. The boat exploded. I don’t—I don’t know where he is.”

“We’ll scan the area for him. Right now, let’s get you on board.”

Vanessa squeezed Hoss’s hand. He was stretched on his back on the bottom of the raft, his face ghostly pale.

“Please,” she whispered to him. “Please stay with me, Hoss.”

On the ship’s deck, Hoss was moved to a stretcher. A medic cut his shirt, while others crowded around him. Vanessa stepped back, not wanting to get in the way.

“Hey.” Someone touched her shoulder. She turned around and found Cameron.

“How? What-what are you doing here?” Her tears started fresh again.

He squeezed her shoulder. “As soon as you two left, I radioed the Coast Guard and told them what happened. I told them you have evidence of the drug running. When we got the emergency AIS signal, I knew you must be in even more trouble.”

Vanessa’s shoulders dropped. “I don’t have the proof anymore. I lost my phone.”

“Don’t worry about that right now. What’s important at this moment is we get Hoss to a hospital.”

She glanced at the stretcher, where only Hoss’s legs were visible. “I can’t lose him.”

“You’re not going to lose him. Hoss is a tough bastard, and for the first time in a long time, he has a reason to live. He has you.”

His words surprised her. “How did you know how we felt about each other?”

“I saw the way Hoss looked at you. He’s never looked at someone like that. I’m not surprised the feeling is mutual. You two are lucky.”

She didn’t feel lucky. They had nearly died tonight.

And they still weren’t out of the woods. Not until Hoss was standing again, his hands in hers.

Chapter 14

“Hey, you. Take it easy.” Vanessa threw out an arm to stop Hoss from rushing up his house’s front steps.

“I am taking it easy.”

She rolled her eyes but couldn’t stop her smile. “Famous last words. The doctors said if you exert yourself—”

“I know.” He slipped his hand into hers, then brought it to his lips. “If I exert myself too much, too quickly, I’ll end up back in the operating room.”

Those were the words she’d been repeating for the last four days since he’d been released from the hospital.

The fact that he’d gotten out of the hospital at all was a miracle itself. Even though Dupree’s bullet hadn’t hit any vital organs, the blood loss had put Hoss in very dangerous territory. Another fifteen or twenty minutes in that ocean and it would’ve been too late for him. Even as it was, they’d had to medevac him from Key Largo to Miami to get him to the best trauma surgeons.

Vanessa didn’t let herself dwell on how close she’d come to losing him when she’d only just found him.

And she hadn’t been surprised to find out he didn’t like having to depend on other people. He’d been jonesing to leave the hospital from the second he woke up after surgery. The doctor had made him wait a few days, until they were certain he was completely out of the woods.

She'd slept in the recliner in his hospital room every night, only leaving for a shower at the nearby hotel when Cameron stopped by to visit him.

She and Cameron had both been relieved when Hoss had woken up and crankily demanded to go home. Vanessa had been doubly thankful when Hoss had agreed to let her use the rest of her vacation to stay with him and help care for him.

Using the passcode Hoss had given her, she unlocked his front door and led him into the house.

Everything was different now. The deputy and the men carrying out the drug running had been arrested.

As it turned out, the Drug Enforcement Agency had suspected cocaine was being channeled through that part of the Keys for a while. It wasn't until they received word of what had happened to Vanessa and Hoss that they zeroed in on Heartbreak Key.

At first, Vanessa had been distraught that she'd lost her phone—and proof of the drug smuggling. But she couldn't be too sad. It had gotten knocked out of her pocket when she'd stuffed in the automatic identification system beacon that had led Cameron and the Coast Guard to find them.

She'd take that over the proof any day.

But it turned out she hadn't needed it. A DEA agent had found Sheriff's Dupree copy. Evidently, he'd been keeping it in case he needed to double-cross his partners. They'd been arrested and had immediately flipped on the deputy working with them.

No more bad guys. Just her and Hoss.

She looked over to find he'd grabbed their bags from the porch. Shaking her head, she took them from his hands.

“Sit down.” She pointed at the couch.

“I'm fine. I just need to—”

“Sit.”

Hoss did as ordered, but his grin was devilish. “Yes, ma’am.”

Warmth rushed through her. “Are you trying to give me a hard time?”

He shrugged a shoulder. “Maybe. You’re cute when you glare at me. I’m kind of looking forward to our first fight now.”

She bit into her bottom lip to keep from smiling, but it was no use. She loved it. Loved to see him trusting her. Loved that he wanted her to be here with him.

“If you’re not going to take it easy for yourself, at least do it for me.”

He looked out the window. “It’s hard not being out there on the water.”

Her heart sank. “I know. I’m sorry about your trawler.”

He looked back at her with a grin. “That’s better. I thought you would call it a boat forever.”

“I won’t pretend your horrified look every time I did call it that wasn’t amusing.” She twisted her lips. “But really, I’m sorry about what happened.”

“I loved her, but she was only a trawler...a boat.” He chuckled. “I can get a new one. What’s important is that we’re all right.”

He already had his insurance claim started. That would cover getting a new boat, but it would take some time.

She squeezed his hand. “We’re more than all right, hopefully.”

His eyes were steady on hers. “Definitely more than all right.”

This man gave her more than the butterflies. He gave her the whole damned zoo.

“Are you hungry?” She walked in the direction of the kitchen. In preparation for their return, Cameron had taken on the task of stocking Hoss’s usually empty pantry.

“I sure am.”

She spun back around to face him. “What would you like?”

“You.” His voice was a low growl, and suddenly Vanessa forgot how to breathe.

“Hoss.” She tucked her hair behind her ear and swallowed. “Remember the whole *not exerting yourself* policy?”

“I just have to touch you.” He reached out a hand to her.

With that fire in his eyes, it was impossible to say no. Vanessa skirted around the coffee table and accepted his hand.

She was careful as she let him pull her onto his lap. Despite his injuries, he was still strong, but she couldn’t stand the thought of him doing any more damage to himself.

She threaded her fingers into his hair and looked into those deep brown eyes. She wasn’t the same person she’d been when she’d arrived on Heartbreak Key. She’d lived through the kind of danger and stress most people would never know, but that hadn’t been what had changed her the most.

It was Hoss.

Less than two weeks since she’d met him, but what they had together was real and pure. Something she thought would never happen at her age.

He kissed her gently. “I don’t like the thought of you leaving in just a few days. I don’t want you to go.”

“I don’t want to go either.”

He smoothed some hair away from her face. “But I know you need to. Your life is in Charlotte.”

“Correction. My *work* is in Charlotte.”

Her heart seemed more and more to be here on Heartbreak Key.

She wished she could stay longer, but her business needed her. Hoss would have Cameron stopping by daily to check in after she left, so at least he wouldn’t be alone.

“I want to come visit you.” Hoss squeezed her thighs. “As soon as I’m cleared to get on a flight.”

“I would love that.” A smile stretched across her face. There was so much she could show Hoss around town, although, honestly, she wouldn’t hate spending his whole visit between the sheets.

“Me too.” He ran his hands up her back. “I never said thank you.”

“For what?”

His face softened. “For saving my life.”

“You saved my life first.” She pulled him in for a kiss. “Consider it returning the favor.”

He wrapped his arms tightly around her. Close against his chest, nestled on his lap, she felt like nothing bad could ever get her again.

“It wasn’t a favor.” He brushed his lips against her cheek. “It’s my purpose. I believe that. I believe that my being here on this island, even keeping to myself all these years, was all to lead me to the place I needed to be for when you stepped off that boat a week ago.”

“Hoss...”

He leaned his forehead against hers. “I’m not trying to spout poetry here. But I believe everything in my whole life was guiding me to where I was supposed to be. Which is here with you. Crazy?”

She shook her head. “Not crazy at all. I feel the same.”

“I want you, Vanessa. I can’t believe I’m saying this, because I suck at being around people...”

She chuckled. “That’s what Cameron said.”

“But I want to be with you. Every minute. I don’t care if we have to do long-distance. I swear to you I will make it work.”

It felt like she was melting from the inside out, from the depths of her soul through every pore in her skin.

“Oh, Hoss.”

She went in for a kiss, but there was no need. He was already pulling her flush to him, his lips claiming hers.

There was no easing into the kiss, no testing the waters or warming up to the moment. Hoss kissed her like a man on fire, his tongue diving between her teeth.

She shifted so she was straddling him and grinned when he dug his fingers into her ass, and she rocked forward, her pelvis sliding against the bulge under his jeans.

Hoss groaned into her mouth, the sound guttural. Primal.

She ran her hands up his biceps, over his shoulders, and into his hair. Every part of him was smooth but strong. Exciting but secure. She could kiss him for the rest of her life.

Hoss’s hands traveled around her hips, and he found the buckle on her shorts. Undoing them, he slipped a hand into her underwear.

She gasped against his touch, burying her head into the crook of his neck. One brush of his fingers was all it took for her to come impossibly undone.

Hoss nipped her earlobe. “Will you get something out of my pocket?”

She laughed. “You trying to trick me into giving you a hand job?”

He grinned. “That’s not what I meant, but if you’re offering...”

She kissed him deeply. She wanted that and so much more. But also, it was too soon. He wasn’t going to stop, even for his own health’s sake. She needed to be the responsible one here.

Standing, she reached into his front pocket and pulled out a condom. She looked at it in surprise.

“How did you get this at the hospital?”

“Cameron brought it to me in that care package.”

“Oh my God.” Vanessa covered her hot face with a hand. Talk about embarrassing.

Hoss chuckled, taking it from her. “He’s a good friend.”

“A good friend whom I may never be able to look in the eye again.” She snatched the condom from him and put it on the table. “I promise you we’ll use this—and many others—soon. But until you’re more healed, is it okay for us to just be close to each other? Is that enough for you?”

His face gentled, and he cupped her cheeks. “More than enough. I don’t want this to end.”

She closed her hands over his wrists. “It doesn’t have to.”

They had forever. They had to work out the details and figure out what their forever would look like, but she had no doubt this was the man she’d be spending the rest of her life with.

Epilogue

Six months later

A knock on the open office door made Vanessa look up. Her assistant, Kelsey, stood there with a smile on her face.

“Yes?” Vanessa closed her laptop.

“You have a guest.” Kelsey smiled wider, and her voice dropped. “You never said he was so cute.”

Vanessa cocked her head. Who was she talking about?

The next thing she knew, Kelsey had retreated to the front desk, and Hoss had replaced her in the doorway. Vanessa gasped and rose to her feet.

“Hoss.” What was he doing here? “Hi.”

“Hi, yourself. I hope you’re happy to see me.”

Happy was an understatement. She met him halfway across the room, where she flung her arms around his neck. He lifted her clear off the floor, taking on her weight with no problem now that his wounds were completely healed.

The second he put her down, his lips were against hers. Mint and salt. That familiar and comforting taste.

“I can’t believe you’re here.” She laughed and cupped his jaw.

“I thought I would surprise you.” His forehead creased. “Is that all right?”

“It’s more than all right.” She was already rearranging her schedule in her mind as she walked over to close her office door. She had a few engagements that weekend, but everything but one house showing she could push back.

“I know you’re coming to visit next month, but I couldn’t wait.” He took a seat in one of the armchairs in front of her desk and drew her onto his lap.

“I’m glad you’re here.” This felt so right, being as close to him as possible.

The last six months had been hard. They’d made an effort to visit each other at least once a month, and they talked almost every day, even though Hoss had to get to remote internet hot spots for them to do so.

They wanted to spend more time together, but they’d both been busy, her with her business—and important changes she was making that she hadn’t shared with him yet—and him decking out his new trawler and restarting his fishing.

He ran his thumb along her lips. “I’m not just here for a regular visit.”

“O-kay.” Her chest constricted. Was something wrong?

Was this the point where her perfect fairy tale faded? Was Hoss about to tell her that long-distance didn’t work for him and they needed to break up?

Hoss’s throat rolled with a swallow. “I can’t do long-distance anymore.”

The whole world seemed to implode around her. Vanessa’s chest hurt in a way that had nothing to do with her health and everything to do with her heart breaking.

Hoss didn’t seem to notice she was dying inside. Or maybe he didn’t care. Why had he pulled her down onto his lap? She tried to stand, but his arm around her hips wouldn’t let her.

“I have trouble being around people.” He blew out a sigh. “But it’s different with you. I can’t *not* be with you every day.”

She blinked. *Wait. What?*

“You can’t?”

“No.” He gripped her thigh. “I love the Keys. I love fishing, even on the new trawler... Though, I can live without all of that. But I can’t live without you. I want to move here. If your life is here, then this is where I belong too.”

Vanessa exhaled, not even aware until then that she’d been holding her breath. “Oh, Hoss.”

“What do you say? If you’re not ready to move in together, I understand. I’ll get my own place, but I just want to be near you to see you every day. I love you, Vanessa. I love you too much to keep doing things the way we have.”

It wasn’t the first time he’d said the words, but they had so much more depth at this moment.

She bit her lip, tears welling in her eyes. “I don’t want you to get your own place. I want to live together.”

A grin split his face. “Good.”

She took his hand in hers. “But I also don’t want you to move here. I have a better idea.”

His eyes went wide. “What?”

“I probably should’ve told you earlier, but I wanted to make sure it was truly feasible before I said anything. I’ve been grooming one of my senior Realtors to become the office manager. That way, I won’t need to be here every week. I could open a branch in the Keys. Work there daily. Come here when I need to. No more long-distance.”

He threaded his fingers through hers, a new light entering his eyes. “Is that what you want?”

“To be with you is what I want more than anything.”

“And what about where you want to live? I don’t want to be anywhere you don’t like.”

“Hoss.” She chuckled. “I love Heartbreak Key. And I definitely love your house.”

Again, his smile stole her heart. “You do?”

“Yes.” She bumped her nose against his. “Almost as much as I love you.”

He growled in pleasure. “I can’t wait to have you there all the time.”

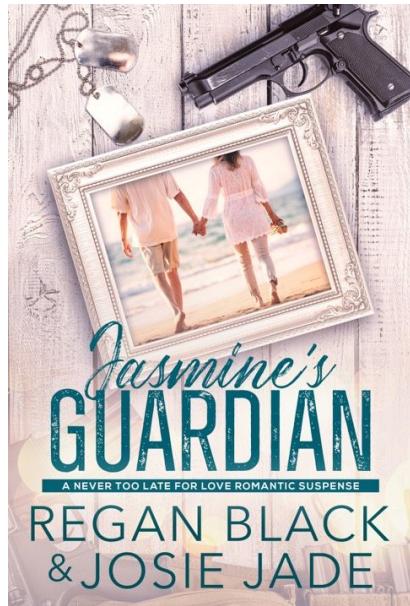
Hoss pressed his hand to the back of her neck, and they closed their eyes, breathing in and out together. Finally, after all this time, everything was falling into place.

She thought she’d been too late to ever find love.

She couldn’t have been more wrong.

...

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About Regan Black

As a USA Today bestselling author, Regan Black is fiercely committed to guiding readers through action-packed adventures to the best happily ever after endings so you can savor a fantastic escape from the daily grind.

If you are looking for a proven author who delivers a fast-paced, exciting paranormal, urban fantasy, or romantic suspense novel for your essential escape, you've come to the right place.

Raised in the Midwest and California, Regan and her family now live in the South Carolina Lowcountry.



About Josie Jade

Josie Jade is the pen name of an avid romantic suspense reader who had so many stories bubbling up inside her she had to write them!

Her passion is protective heroes and books about healing...broken men and women who find love—and themselves—again.

Two truths and a lie:

- Josie lives in the mountains of Montana with her husband and three dogs, and is out skiing as much as possible
- Josie loves chocolate of all kinds—from deep & dark to painfully sweet
- Josie worked for years as an elementary school teacher before finally becoming a full time author

Josie's books will always be about fighting danger and standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the family you've chosen and the people you love.

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