



**THE BRIDGE BROTHERS**  
RANCH OF WEST HOPE  
South Dakota

*A Sweet Day*  
for the  
*Cowboy*



**WILLOW WHITE**

# A Sweet Day for the Cowboy

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# Chapter 1

Jenna was elbow deep in paperwork when her phone rang. She glanced at it only to make sure it wasn't the day care calling—and it was.

“Hi, Mrs. Bender.” She wasn't a *missus*, but okay. “I'm calling to make sure you saw the emergency alert on our app?”

A prickling sensation ran across the back of Jenna's neck. “No, what is it?”

“We've had an outbreak of HFMD, and we need parents to come pick up their kids right away.”

The prickling intensified. “HFMD?” Her hand hovered over her keyboard, ready to Google it.

“Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease.”

She exhaled. Not great news, but no one was dying. “You're shutting the daycare down?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“For how long?” She glanced at her calendar. She had a meeting in thirty minutes. She barely had time to scoot across town and pick Emmylou up, and then what was she going to do with her?

“Not sure yet.” The woman sounded impatient. “Probably a few days at least.”

Jenna's chest grew tight. Her father was going to have a fit. But there was no one else to call. Little Emmylou had no aunts or uncles, only one parent, and only one grandparent. And there was no way that Jenna's father was going to run this little errand. No. Jenna was going to have to do it herself, and then she was going to have to hide her daughter from her own grandfather. “I'll be right there.”

She was out the door before she ended the call. She lowered her voice to tell Sheila that she'd be right back.

Sheila assessed her with cool eyes. “Mr. Denver will be here any minute.”



Not any minute. She had at least twenty. “Yes, I know. I’ll be right back.” She scooted out the door before Sheila could ask any more questions.

Jenna worked hard to like Sheila, but she had never succeeded. Sheila liked to call herself the office administrator, but Jenna’s father called her the secretary. Whatever her official job title was, she was the only help for all three lawyers in the office.

Jenna’s father, Frank, had hired two associate lawyers: Crystal and Jenna. The same age, they possessed similar experience and smarts. Frank had intentionally created a competitive environment for the two of them, not so much to get the best performance out of them as to entertain himself. Being his daughter should have given Jenna an edge, but it hadn’t.

Sheila had, in the past, pledged her loyalty to Jenna, but Jenna knew that Sheila had also pledged it to Crystal.

Jenna could throw Sheila—spinnny chair and all—farther than she trusted her, and if Frank ever retired and handed Jenna the reins, the first thing she would do? Get rid of Sheila.

And if Crystal hadn’t quit in a huff by then, Jenna would fire her too.

Jenna pulled out onto Route 34 and gunned the engine only to slam on the brakes seconds later. What on earth? How was there a traffic jam in West Hope, South Dakota? In the middle of a weekday afternoon? Were cars lined up to catch a glimpse of the famous Zion Denver rolling into town? Jenna almost laughed aloud at her silent joke.

She edged her car out of line in order to see more than the back of the truck ahead of her. Ten cars were stopped in front of her, and in front of them, the road was clogged with cattle. She rested her head on her steering wheel and took a deep breath. Yes, this was South Dakota, but this was a main road through the middle of town. Why was there a herd of black Angus between her and her daughter? “Please, God, get the cows out of the road.” This was not the first time she’d prayed

this prayer. “Get me to Emmylou before they lock her outside, and get me back to the office in time for Zion.”

She picked her head up and looked at the clock. There was no way all three of those things could happen.

A horse rode by her on the right so close that it almost brushed against her car. It was moving swiftly, but she still got a good look at the man on its back. She couldn't see his face, yet she still assumed he was a looker. They usually were.

She pulled her eyes off his receding image. She didn't need to go daydreaming about a cowboy of her own. That's how she'd ended up a single mom.

Besides, she didn't have time for a cowboy. She had a career to build and a little girl to raise. Her hands were more than full.



## Chapter 2

The receptionist had a pile of stuff for Denver to sign, so he'd been at the law office for ten minutes before he realized that his lawyer wasn't even there.

"She's out?" he repeated. "Is she coming back?"

The woman who had introduced herself as Sheila gave him a coy shrug that made him cringe.

"Where did she go?" It wasn't really his business, but he wanted to make sure that she was, in fact, coming back.

Sheila sighed and waved her hand lazily. "She had to run to the day care."

Denver sighed. That was a good reason. He checked his phone to make sure that he didn't have any messages from the lawyer-mom.

"We have other attorneys, you know. Do you want me to see if one of them is available?"

Something about the way she said it made Denver feel defensive of this woman he hadn't yet met. "No, I'm in no hurry. Happy to wait." He dropped his eyes to his phone again to signal that he didn't want to talk anymore.

Surprisingly, Sheila took the hint, and the office was quiet for the next ten minutes.

Then he heard a little girl's voice outside.

He looked at Sheila, who was rolling her eyes. "She's back."

He jumped up to open the door, and a woman flew through it with toddler in tow. She spun toward Denver and offered her free hand. He shook it as her purse strap slid off her shoulder and onto their joined hands. An apple with a tiny bite out of it flew out of her bag and rolled under Sheila's desk. He bit back a laugh.

"Sorry!" the harried mom-lawyer cried, hurriedly adjusting the purse. She made no move to deal with the apple. Had she

seen it? Or maybe she was playing it cool in hopes that he hadn't seen it. Either way, he couldn't look for the apple because he couldn't rip his eyes off his new lawyer.

This woman was gorgeous.

Denver Bridge was no stranger to beautiful women. He worked alongside them every day. On the set, he had pretended to be in love with scores of them. He'd even dated a few of them in real life, but he hadn't expected to find a woman like this in West Hope, South Dakota. And she was a *lawyer* to boot. A lawyer who was apologizing profusely.

"Quite all right," he managed to say. He caught Sheila smirking and moved his body to block her from Jenna's view. He lowered his voice. "I'm in no hurry."

"Great." She stared at him. For a second he hoped his looks were dazzling her in return, but then he realized that she was probably wondering why he'd started whispering. Or she was thinking about the apple. Finally, she said, "Thank you. I appreciate your patience. Please, come on in." She half-dragged the little girl into her office and then deposited her in the corner of the room, where a plush pillow already waited for her. From depths unseen Jenna smoothly produced paper and crayons, which the child dutifully accepted—but then she simply held them in her hands while she stared at the tall stranger in the room.

Denver caught Jenna staring at his Stetson and in a rare moment of self-consciousness, took it off.

"Sorry," she said, her cheeks flushing. "I thought you only wore one on TV."

Her words sent a small thrill coursing through him. "You watch the show?"

She chuckled dryly. "Uh, no. Sorry."

*Oh.* Denver had never been embarrassed of his work, and he wasn't going to start now, no matter how snobby this beautiful woman was.

"But I have seen the commercials." She motioned to an empty chair. "Please, make yourself comfortable."

They sat at the same time, and she stole a glance at her daughter. He took this opportunity to check out her left hand and was pleased to find it ringless.

“She’s adorable,” he said.

“Thank you.” She sounded suspicious. She folded her hands in her lap. “So, tell me how I can help.”

He had given someone—someone he now believed had been Sheila—some details when he’d made the appointment, but he couldn’t remember how much he’d shared, so he started from the top. “It’s about my family’s estate. My father has been gone for a year now. The court appointed my brother Tucker as administrator of the estate, and he’s just sitting on his hands—”

“And what do you wish he were doing?” She glanced sideways at her daughter.

Her question caught him off guard. First, she’d interrupted him. And second, that hadn’t seemed a very lawyer-like question.

“I want the matter settled. That’s why I wanted to hire you. To help me ... get the matter ... done.” He wished he could come up with a better word than *settled* or *done*—neither of those was quite right—but he was drawing a blank.

“Your mother predeceased your father?”

He nodded, his jaw tight. It hadn’t been fair, but yes, that’s how it had gone down.

She opened a folder and started scribbling on lined paper inside. “And you said there was no will?”

“Correct.”

“And is anyone claiming to know what your parents’ wishes were for the estate?”

He chuckled bitterly. “I wish we knew what our mother’s wishes were, but we don’t care what our father wanted.”

She nodded, not unsympathetically. “And you said your oldest brother is working the ranch?”

Denver sighed. “He’s certainly trying, yes, but I don’t think it’s a game he can win.”

“Because he’s incapable?”

“Because it’s impossible to win at ranching these days, and he’s going it alone without any capital.”

She studied him.

“What? You think I should provide the capital?”

She shook her head slowly. “I said no such thing.”

He stared at her. No, she hadn’t said it, but had she *thought* it? Or was that his guilty conscience talking? “Look, my brothers and I ... we’re not close. Gunner isn’t even my biological brother. My parents adopted him when they thought they couldn’t have children.”

She looked down at her papers and raised an eyebrow. “And then they went on to have five of them?”

“Right. So my father always treated Gunner the worst, treated him like an ox that he kept around solely for heavy pulling, and I can’t help but wonder if Gunner resents us for it.” Denver made himself stop talking. He’d said too much. “I’m not here for therapy. I’m not asking you to fix the family. I need to know what my options are for the land.”

“Because you want to sell it.”

“Because I want to be done with it.” She was judging him again. He could feel it. “It’s not about the money.”

Clearly, she wasn’t convinced. “Then what’s it about?”

How could he make her understand? “I want to be free of it. Free of my family. Free of this town. Free of all of it.”

“You don’t live here. Why do you have to be here at all?”

How could he explain it to her when he didn’t really understand it himself? “Gunner is working himself into the dirt. For nothing. I don’t know why Tucker is letting him do that, but it’s foolish. Gunner needs to be set free from this obligation. And my brother Ryker could use the money. It’s

just so simple. Sell the land, divide it evenly, and we all move on with our lives.”

She waited a beat before saying, “It sounds like you do care about these brothers.”

“Of course I do. I don’t hate them. They’re not bad people. We just don’t get along. And I thought you should know that because this could get ... contentious.”

She raised an eyebrow as she studied the paper in front of her. “I’m an attorney. Contentious is sort of what I do.”





## Chapter 3

Jenna couldn't quite figure out the man seated across from her. He definitely didn't seem as evil as she'd imagined. She had to keep reminding herself: *he's an actor*. Of course he wouldn't come into her office and act like a baked potato.

She was also a bit startled that he looked so ... well, *good*. Sure, he looked good on the TV screen, but she'd figured that was mostly tricks of the light, the skill of the makeup artist, the magic of CGI. But no, it was none of those things—this man looked just as good sitting in her office as he did on her TV screen. And yes, she had lied a little. Despite what she'd told him, she *had* watched a bit of his show, purely out of curiosity. It wasn't her cup of tea for sure, but he was a hometown boy, and she'd wondered what his show was like.

But she hadn't watched for long. His character was insufferable. A ladies' man. A player. A silver-tongued snake. "So, how do you think I can be of help?" She still wasn't sure what he wanted her to do. The estate already had an administrator.

"I am meeting with my brothers tomorrow. I was hoping you might go to that meeting."

She raised an eyebrow. Was he planning to use her as a threat? "This consultation is complementary, but—" She glanced at the clock.

"Oh!" he interrupted. "I will pay you for every second. None of us have any idea what to do here, though Tucker seems to think he does. I thought it would be good to have a professional there to answer questions."

She didn't believe him.

"What?" he asked.

"Are you planning to sue? Or are you planning to use me as a visual threat to scare them into thinking that you're going to sue?"

“I am not as manipulative as you seem to think, but yes, if we can’t figure this out, it might come to that. But I hope that it doesn’t.”

“And why is that?” She doubted that kindness was his primary motivation.

“Because I told you, I just want this to be over. I don’t want to drag it out.”

“And if one of them wanted to buy you out? What would you say to that?”

He looked disappointed when he said, “None of them can afford that.”

She wasn’t so sure. She knew about Tucker Bridge’s thriving outfitting business. Everyone in town did. “What if they sold some of the land, enough to buy you out?”

It seemed he hadn’t thought of that. He nodded slowly. “That could work.”

She didn’t understand. Obviously, this man was motivated by money, but he played a major character on a hit television show. And he’d had that role for years. How much money did one man need? Then she remembered her father and bit her lip. Some men were never satisfied.

“If you don’t want to come to the meeting, just say so. In fact, if you want me to find another lawyer, I can do that too.”

Maybe that wasn’t such a bad idea. She had plenty of work. Maybe she didn’t need to deal with this man and his drama.

Her office phone beeped, and she answered it.

“Your father would like to see you,” Sheila said.

“Now? I’m in a meeting.”

“That’s why he wants to see you.”

Jenna hung up the phone and forced a smile. “I’m sorry. Will you excuse me for just a moment?” She stood, trying to look dignified. Her father berated her for not being professional enough and then he pulled things like this.

She passed Sheila without acknowledging her and went straight into her father's giant office.

"Zion Denver?" he yelled. "When were you going to tell me about this?"

She took a breath. "It's only a consultation."

"I think I should be the one to help him. Show him to my office." It was a command. He was the lord, and she was his serf.

Though she hadn't wanted to work with the TV star in the first place, this stung. But it wasn't the first time her father had pulled a stunt like this, and it wouldn't be the last. He usually pilfered the good clients, the interesting ones, the ones who would get his name in print or bring in the big bucks, and he gave her the boring, the mundane, the unpleasant.

Only once she was back in the hallway did she imagine her father in his white suit in the old Bridge house with those six men. Fine. Let him have this. It would probably be punishment enough.



## Chapter 4

**A**s soon as her mother went out of sight, the little girl started crying for her.

“Hey there,” Denver said, leaning forward. “She’ll be right back.”

This did not help. In fact, it seemed to upset her more. He needed to distract her. She was still holding the crayons as if she wasn’t quite sure what they were for. He got up and went to her slowly, coming in from the side so she didn’t feel attacked. He didn’t have much experience with kids, but he knew what made him uncomfortable, so he tried not to do those things. He sat beside her. “Can I see your crayons?”

She gave him a look, and the suspicion in her eyes so resembled her mother’s that he laughed.

Though she couldn’t possibly have known what he was laughing about, she smiled, and her grip on the crayons relaxed a little.

“I won’t take your box, I promise. But will you let me peek inside?”

She looked down at the box in her hands, skepticism all over her face.

Slowly he reached one hand over and wiggled the top of the box open. Then he gave a dramatic gasp. “Is that blue? Blue is my favorite!”

She giggled and opened the box wider. She pulled the blue crayon out, causing others to spill out with it. Then she grabbed the purple one and handed it to him.

He made a disgusted face. “What are you doing, you silly goose? That’s not blue!”

She giggled. “Silly goo,” she tried to repeat.

“That’s right. You’re a silly goo. Now, can I please have the blue crayon?”

She stared at the crayons, her little face taut with concentration. He was tempted to show her which one was the blue one, but he wanted her to have the victory. Nevertheless, he was about to give up and grab it when she handed it to him.

“Yeah! That’s the blue one! I love blue.”

“Yay!” she cheered, shooting one little fist into the air as her mother walked back into her office.

The first thing on her face was alarm, which he tried not to resent, telling himself that she didn’t know him and was right to be protective of her child. But still, he hadn’t done anything wrong. In fact, he’d distracted the girl from her sadness, an accomplishment he was fairly proud of.

“Mr. Denver,” she started.

“Just Denver,” he said, and she blinked, looking surprised. “Or Mr. Bridge if you prefer.”

Now she looked confused.

“Did you think I had a different last name than my brothers?”

“I hadn’t given it a lot of thought, but yes, I suppose I did assume that. Since that’s what I was told.”

He stretched out his legs and leaned against the wall. The kid was trying to take her purple crayon back. He held onto it to make her work for it. “Early in my career the powers that be decided that Denver Bridge wasn’t a good name for an actor.”

She frowned. “Why’s that?”

He gave her a few seconds to figure it out, bracing for the laugh that would come. When she kept frowning, he said, “My name sort of sounds likes, you know, *a bridge in Denver*.”

“Oh.” Understanding registered on her face, but she still didn’t laugh.

This made him like her more.

She frowned. “And your parents named you Denver without thinking about that?”

He sighed. “My mom really liked Colorado. We’re lucky I don’t have a brother named Aspen Bridge. Anyway, my first agent named me Zion Denver.” He let go of the crayon. “I hated it then, and I don’t like it much better now, but the checks cash.”

“And that’s all that matters,” she said with a hint of snark.

*Rude.* “Please don’t make me out to be some kind of greedy villain. Yes, I do my job because they pay me. Why else would I do it?”

She took a big breath, and his heart softened toward her. He didn’t know what was going on with her, but whatever it was, she obviously wasn’t enjoying it.

“Mr. Bridge, I apologize. I’m afraid that I’m confusing your character with you, and that’s silly.”

That struck him as weird for a person who didn’t watch his show.

“The truth is, my father, Frank Bender, is the most experienced lawyer here. He could probably serve you best, and he would love to help.” She pivoted to give Denver an escape path. “I can show you to his office.”

Denver didn’t move. He would let her kick him out, but he wasn’t going to let her pawn him off on her father. *I can find my own second choice, thank you very much.*

She motioned to the door again, as if he’d missed her first cue.

He looked at the little girl, sad that he’d never learned her name. “Sorry, cutie pie. I’ve got to go.” He stood up. “Thank you for your time, Ms. Bender. I can show myself out.”

Her confusion was evident. “My father would like to see you.” She said this as if he were about to diss a king.

“That’s all right. I’ll figure this out on my own.” He started out the door, and she grabbed his forearm. He looked down in surprise and what he saw in her eyes surprised him even more: fear.



He stepped backward, away from the door and then gently kicked it shut. “What happens to you if I don’t go see your father?” As he spoke, her hand darted away.

“Nothing!” She faked a smile, but she was a terrible actress.

He tried to convey his seriousness. “I know you don’t know me yet, but ma’am, if you’re in trouble here, I can help.”

She let out a high-pitched peal. “Trouble?” She stepped back from him. “No trouble! He’s my boss. We all want what’s best for our clients, and him representing you is prob— It *is* what’s best for you. But I’m not in any trouble.” She laughed again, and it was entirely unconvincing.

As Denver tried to think of a way to get to the truth, the door opened, and in stepped a tall man in a white suit with the white hair to match.

“Mr. Denver!” his voice boomed as he extended a hand. “Great to meet you! I’m a big fan!” This man was a much better actor than his daughter, but he still wasn’t very good.

Denver accepted his handshake. “Always grateful to meet a fan of the show. I always like to ask, what’s your favorite episode?”

The smile faltered for less than a second. Denver’s hunch was correct. This blowhard wasn’t a fan at all. “Oh, not so much a fan of the show as of you, sir.”

More nonsense. *Cheyenne* was the only show Denver had ever been cast in. Unless this guy had been a big fan of that mayonnaise commercial Denver had done eight years ago, Frank Bender was lying through his suspiciously white teeth.

“Come on back. I’ll show you the *nice* office.” Frank let out a jolly laugh, and Denver sensed he was indirectly insulting his daughter’s office, which didn’t make much sense. If he was the boss, hadn’t he assigned her this office?

“With all due respect, sir, I’d rather work with Jenna.”

Frank blinked in surprise. “That’s kind of you, but I have more experience with this sort of thing.”

This sort of thing? People often came to him when they had five brothers who wanted to cling to land they couldn't use?

“Still ...”

“Still is right!” Frank said with excess mirth.

That hadn't made any sense. Was he trying to manipulate with confusion?

“I want to make sure you get the best my office has to offer!”

Jenna was looking at the kid, so Denver looked too. She was up on her knees now, mostly facing the wall. She still clutched his favorite crayon in her tiny fist. “Emmylou,” Jenna asked, “where are the rest of your crayons?”

As Jenna asked the question, Frank let out a startled yelp, drawing Denver's eyes away from the missing crayons. It seemed the senior lawyer had only just noticed that his granddaughter was in the room. “What's she doing here?”

Jenna ignored him. She stood over her daughter now, searching the area with her eyes.

Instantly, Denver knew where the crayons were. “Check the baseboard.”

Jenna groaned and bent to look.

Emmylou pivoted toward him, wobbled a little as she shot the crayon-clutching fist in the air, and then flashed him a slightly drooly smile as she cried, “Blue, silly goo!”

He laughed brightly. “Yes, it's blue, you silly goo!”

Emmylou laughed as Jenna squatted to stick her fingers into the baseboard.

“Jenna is obviously busy,” Frank said. “Come with me.” It wasn't an invitation this time. It was an order.

He considered going with the flow. It would be easier. But he didn't want to. This man was a bully. “I would like to work with Jenna. If that's not all right with you, I can find another firm.”

That caught Frank by surprise, and he stood there unblinking for a moment before his face slid into a knowing look. He gave his daughter a leer and then Denver a crooked smile. “Oh, I see.” Denver didn’t like what he was implying, but he didn’t argue. He wanted the man to leave the room so he could get on with his life.

Finally, Frank pivoted toward the door. “Let Sheila know if you need anything.” He winked, and Denver’s stomach turned. “You two kids have fun, then.”

Denver waited for the door to click shut and then looked at Jenna. “Nice guy.”

She was straining to reach the crayons.

“Leave them there,” he said. “Come back tomorrow with salad tongs.”

She looked surprised and then impressed. He was annoyed that of all his accomplishments in life, it was the suggestion of salad-tong-improv that had impressed her. Slowly, she withdrew her hand. “Good idea.” She stood and smoothed out her clothes as she looked down at the toddler. “Don’t put any more crayons in there. Crayons go in the box.”

The way she said it suggested she’d said it a million times before. Was that why the girl had been so reluctant to take the crayons out of the box in the first place?

Jenna looked at the door, as if she were processing that Frank was really gone.

“That’s not why,” Denver said.

“I’m sorry?”

“What he was implying, it wasn’t my reasoning. I mean, obviously you’re a beautiful woman, but I don’t choose my attorneys based on how physically attractive they are.”

“Why, then?” Beneath her meticulous foundation, her cheeks flushed. “I mean, why did you insist on working with me?”

He didn’t want to offend her, but he didn’t want to blow smoke either. “It really wasn’t about you. I just didn’t like

him.”

She barked out a laugh. “What? Everybody likes him. That’s sort of his shtick.”

He shrugged. “Sorry. He’s an actor, and nothing against actors, but I spend enough time with them.”

Her jaw fell open while he spoke.

“What?”

“I’m just surprised. Most people don’t notice.”

A pang of guilt stabbed him. “Sorry. I shouldn’t badmouth him. I forgot for a second that he was your father. Was thinking of him more like an overbearing boss.”

She chuckled. “He is ninety-nine percent boss ...”

“And one percent dad?” he said when she didn’t finish.

She chuckled dryly, but she didn’t answer him. She slid behind her desk. “Let’s make a plan, Mr. Bridge.”



## Chapter 5

Jenna was a ball of nerves on her way out to the Bridge property. This was weird. She'd never been hired to attend a family meeting before. Essentially, Zion Denver—or Denver Bridge, rather—was paying her to do nothing. And she was okay with that. But it was still going to be awkward.

Other than what she'd heard about Tucker Bridge's outfitting business, she didn't know much about the Bridge brothers, and the not knowing made her uneasy. Even nice people didn't appreciate it when a lawyer showed up, and she had no reason to believe these were nice people.

*Though you didn't think Denver could possibly be nice, a voice in her head argued, and he's wonderful.*

*He seems wonderful because he's acting,* she argued with herself. After thirty years under her father's thumb, she should know better than to fall for an act.

She pulled up the Bridges' long driveway, her stomach doing somersaults. But then she saw Denver waiting outside for her, and her nerves settled completely and instantly. The peace that came from seeing him rattled her in a different way.

She parked the car and got out before putting her suit coat back on. She checked her reflection in her window and then turned to flash her most professional smile at her client. He smiled back, sending her stomach into flutters that didn't make sense. To avoid his gaze, her eyes drifted up to look at the house behind him. This was her first time seeing it, but it had obviously fallen into disrepair. She scanned the property. The land looked better than the house, but the barn was on its last legs. The place needed some work.

Denver opened the door for her, and she stepped into the cool, dim interior. "Nice to see you," Denver said quietly, and she instinctively searched his words for fraud but didn't find any. "Did your day care open back up?"

She shook her head. "She's with a friend from church." Why had she included the *from church* part? Why hadn't she

just said *a friend*? With a sinking feeling, she realized that she'd been trying to make sure that Denver didn't think she was a bad mom. Now she was annoyed with herself for caring about what he thought. She had to cut that out.

Jenna stepped into the small living room, and one of the brothers groaned. He looked familiar. She thought maybe she'd seen him in court.

“What?” another brother said.

The groaner said, “That’s Jenna Bender. She’s a lawyer.”

The room fell quiet.

“I only brought her to answer questions. None of us know anything about probate. She’s not the enemy. I’m not the enemy. Let’s not start off on this note.”

No one said anything, so Jenna looked at Denver. “Maybe some more introductions? It seems I’ve already been introduced.”

Denver nodded, his jaw tight. He held his arm out and pointed at the closest brother. “That’s Colton.” His arm slid to a man standing nearby. “Tucker.” He pointed at the groaner. “That’s Kash.” Kash Bridge. That rang a bell. Yes, she had seen him in court. Maybe more than once.

Denver pointed to the tall man in the corner. “And that’s Gunner.”

The man who lived on and worked the ranch. He wasn’t looking at her unkindly, but still she felt like a trespasser.

“It’s good to meet you all.” Wait, she only counted five. “We’re missing someone.”

“Ryker’s not here,” Tucker said, sounding defensive.

“But he votes to sell,” Denver said, “if it comes to that.”

“Is that what this is, now?” Tucker said. “A democracy?” He pointed his chin at her. “Does she get a vote?”

“Don’t be stupid. I told you, she’s just here to answer questions.”

“I don’t have any questions,” Tucker said.

Denver let out a long breath and sat on the end of the sofa. Tucker found a chair, leaving her and Gunner the only ones still standing.

“I’ll get you a chair.” Gunner ducked into the next room, and Denver jumped up to follow him.

Denver was the one who returned with an old straight back wooden chair, and Gunner followed, looking annoyed. “Go ahead and take the couch,” Denver said. “I’ll sit here.” He set the chair down beside the end of the couch, which made it only slightly less weird that she was now sharing the couch with Kash.

For a moment no one spoke. Tucker stared at Gunner as if waiting for him to start. When he didn’t, Tucker asked, “Do you mind?” Gunner swept his hand in invitation, and Tucker looked at Denver. “I don’t understand what your hurry is. You have plenty of money. Can’t you give Gunner some more time to see if he can make this work?”

Denver looked at Gunner. “Is that what you want?”

All eyes were on him, and his cheeks grew red. “This isn’t my ranch.”

“But it is,” Tucker said. “You’re the one working it.”

“Kash helps sometimes,” Gunner said.

Denver’s expression suggested this was a stretch. “I’m not trying to take anything away from you, Gunner. I would never do that, but you’re fighting a losing battle here. It’s hard for any ranch to make a go of it these days, and you just don’t have the capital.”

“I can help with that,” Tucker cut in.

“Really?” Denver said. “Are you going to hire a whole staff? Are you going to buy the cattle? Fix the barn? Run the water? There is so much to do, and we are so far behind.” He turned back to Gunner. “Why would you want to try? Why would you do that to yourself? You can take your share of the



sale and start over. Live somewhere nice. Get an easier job, try something new.”

“We don’t have to have a giant operation to turn a profit,” Tucker said. “Gunner sold a lot of cattle this year. He did well.”

“Define *a lot*,” Denver said with attitude. “I’m sure you worked your butt off, Gunner. But there are easier ways to earn a living. If ranching were easy, everyone would be doing it.”

“Just give us one more year,” Tucker said.

“Why? What are you hoping to get out of this?”

Tucker’s jaw clenched. “Nothing. I’m trying to help Gunner.”

“*I’m* trying to help Gunner! Can’t you see that?”

“He wants to hunt on the land,” Kash said.

Tucker’s eyes fell.

Denver chuckled. “Oh, is *that* it?”

Tucker shook his head. “There is plenty of land to hunt on in South Dakota.”

“Yeah,” Kash said. “That’s it.”

“That’s not it!” Tucker snapped. “Look, I’m the administrator, and I say we wait one more year.”

Denver looked at Jenna expectantly, but no one had asked a question. “Does he have that right?” Denver asked.

Right this minute? Yes, he did. “Is there a majority agreement in either direction?” she asked.

Tucker scowled.

“Three against three,” Kash said. “I say sell.”

“You just want to party away your inheritance,” Tucker said. “Your vote shouldn’t count unless you’re sober when you cast it.”

“Last time I checked, this is America, and drunk people get to vote.” Kash laughed. “And so what? What’s it to you what I do with it?”

An animal brushed against Jenna’s bare knee. Part of her brain registered that the hair felt short and smooth for a dog, but she was too busy trying to keep up with the brothers to chase that thought. Then something cool and hard pressed into her thigh, and she looked down to see a long, curved horn denting her flesh. She let out a startled shriek, and the creature’s eyes grew so wide it didn’t look natural.

Then the goat flopped over onto its side and lay still.

“Did I kill it?” she cried.

“No, no,” Denver said quickly, laying a calming hand on Jenna’s back. “It’s a stupid fainting goat.”

“General!” Gunner scolded. He reached down and scooped the creepy looking creature up like a sleeping child. “You’re not supposed to be in the house.” Why was he talking to it if it was unconscious? He started carrying it toward the kitchen doorway.

As if the frightful thing could read her mind, it picked its head up, craned its neck around, pointed those freaky eyeballs right at Jenna, and let out a blood curdling blat.

She almost shrieked again. “What was *that*?”

“A fainting goat,” Denver said again, withdrawing his hand.

“No, I know that. You already said that. I mean, what was that awful *noise*? It was so ...” She didn’t know how to describe it. “Loud and needy and so ... terrible.” The sound really couldn’t be translated into words.

A screen door banged shut, and Gunner came back into the living room. “Sorry. She gets curious.”

Jenna leaned forward to look into the kitchen. If that thing was coming back, she wanted advance warning. But she couldn’t see the back door. “You call your goat *General*?”

“It’s short for General Lee,” Kash said, laughing and shaking his head.

“Anyway,” Colton said, “I vote to support Gunner. Let’s give it one more year.”

“Another year to fall into disrepair,” Denver said.

“Another year for property values to go up,” Tucker retorted.

“Inflation isn’t profit,” Denver spat.

Tucker came to his feet. “Oh, why don’t you go back to Hollywood.” His face grew redder with each word. “You waltz in here and act like you even deserve a vote. We haven’t seen you in *years*. You might as well be—”

“Enough!” Colton stood too. “This isn’t accomplishing anything.”

Kash laughed bitterly. “Why would we all want to co-own anything when we all hate each other? Let’s just sell this and get through it. Ryker’s on our side.” He looked at Colton. “With that money, you could open your own gym.”

For the first time, Jenna noticed that Colton was a rather large man, one who did look tempted by this logic, but he looked at Gunner, and the temptation fell off his face. “Gunner is the oldest. He’s worked here his whole life. I say it’s up to him.”

“He’s worked here his whole life because he’s had no choice,” Kash said. “Don’t you want to be set free, man?”

No one answered the question, and after a painful silence, Tucker asked her, “So if we can’t agree, can Hollywood take us to court?”

She nodded, her spine straight. “That is one option, yes.”

“And if he did, would he win?”

She didn’t think that he would, and she had told Denver as much. Not without dragging Gunner through the mud. “That would depend on a lot of factors.”

Those words sank in.

“You said one option,” Colton said. “Does that mean there are other options?”

She nodded and looked at Gunner. “You could buy them out.”

Gunner did not seem surprised. Clearly, this was not the first time he’d heard the idea.

“He can’t afford that,” Tucker said softly. “*We* can’t afford that.” He looked at Colton, silently asking a question, and Colton slowly shook his head. Tucker turned to Denver. “So is that what’s going to happen? You going to sue us, Hollywood?”

Denver ground his teeth. “Stop calling me that.”

Tucker’s eyes widened suddenly, and he looked at Colton. “Hey! We don’t have to buy them all out. We only need to make Hollywood happy. Let’s buy *him* out.”

Colton frowned. “Unless you’re richer than I think you are, I doubt we can even afford that.”

“Hey!” Kash cried. “No! I want out of this thing too!”

“Yeah, but you’re not going to sue us,” Tucker said.

“You want to bet on that?”

Tucker squared himself to Kash, who didn’t flinch. “Are you serious, you spoiled little brat?”

Kash laughed. “Spoiled? Oh, please tell me who has ever spoiled me.”

“You’ve spoiled yourself.” Tucker was getting red again.

Colton stood and stepped between them. “Maybe we should call this meeting adjourned.”

“We haven’t settled anything yet,” Denver said.

“I know,” Colton said and exhaled dramatically. He looked at Denver. “Do what you have to do, Den. Go ahead and sue us. Let the chips fall.”

“What?” Tucker cried.

Colton shrugged. “The way I see it, if he knew that he could win, he would already have filed the papers.”

“Are you nuts?” Tucker said. “Gunner can’t afford a lawyer to fight her, and I don’t want to sink money into a lawyer if I’m going to try to buy him out.”

“Stay here and fight, then,” Colton said. “I’m going home.” He put his Stetson on and headed for the door.

No one spoke until the door had closed behind him.

“You should go,” Tucker said. “You and your lawyer.”

Denver hesitated but then stood and faced Gunner. “I’m not trying to take advantage of you. I’m not trying to cheat you out of anything. I really think selling would be the best option for everyone.”

Gunner nodded but didn’t say anything.

Denver looked at her. “Are you ready?”

Of course she was ready. She started for the door, and Denver put his hand to the small of her back, sending a tingle up her spine even through the blazer and blouse.

She went down the front steps, and a veritable herd of goats came running around the corner of the house. She managed not to shriek this time. “What’s with all the *goats*?”

“I have no idea,” Denver muttered. “They’re new. I think.” He tried to shoo them away, and they effectively ignored him.

She looked up to see a stubby goat standing on the hood of her car. She stopped in her tracks. “Why is there a fat goat standing on top of my car?”

“Shh. Goats can hear you, you know.”

She looked up at him incredulously. “Are you serious? You think I just hurt her feelings? Denver didn’t answer her, but she still felt she needed to defend herself. “What, is she pregnant? She looks like she’s about to deliver about ten kids.”

Denver chuckled. “She’s a he, and no, he’s not pregnant.” Denver looked at the approaching herd. “It looks like none of these goats are exactly starving.” Denver started toward her

car again. She wasn't quite ready to approach the thing, especially if she *had* hurt his feelings.

The chubby goat opened its snout and let out an obnoxious blat. This one wasn't quite as hair-raising. This guy was an alto. The General was a soprano with a head cold.

From behind them, someone called, "Boss! Flash! Daisy! Cooter!" and the approaching herd turned around. The fat alto started panicking and stomping on the hood of her car as if it couldn't figure out how to get down.

Denver picked it up and set it gently on the ground. It took off running. From behind, it looked like it was carrying two giant water balloons under its skin. It was kind of cute, and she accidentally laughed.

Denver gave her a knowing look, which she ignored, and then he opened her car door for her.

She turned to face him. "Fine. Maybe goats can be cute. But they're still freaky looking." Part of her knew these things couldn't both be true. She started to slide into the car but then had a thought. "Is Gunner always that quiet?" Hearing him shout to his goats made her wonder if his silence had been for her benefit.

"I don't really know him anymore."

"That's sad." She searched his eyes for some sadness. Shouldn't he be sad that he didn't know his brothers?

"Please don't judge me." He turned and looked back at the house. "This wasn't a happy place to grow up. We were all very different people. Our father was really hard on Gunner, and then I came along, and I was the miracle baby, and he was even harder on Gunner. I grew up with so much guilt because I didn't know how to make that stop. And then the other brothers came along, and things were always so competitive for us. Dad would praise the winners and shame the losers and then the winners would feel guilty for winning. Have you ever felt guilty simply for doing a good job?"

She was not about to answer that. "I'm sorry you had to deal with that."

“It’s okay. It worked out for me, really. I lost myself in stories and movies, forged dad’s signature on the permission slip and joined the drama club at school. He didn’t find out for more than a year, but then Kash tattled, and I thought Dad was going to kill me. If Gunner hadn’t stuck up for me, that might’ve been the end of me.”

“What did he have against drama club?”

Denver dropped his voice an octave to imitate his father. “Drama club is for sissies!” He chuckled bitterly. “Maybe so, but it was how I dealt with it all.” He looked back at the house as Kash came down the front steps. “Some of us have dealt in less healthy ways.”

“Most of them seem to be doing okay.”

“Sure. Gunner escaped into the farm work, into the animals, and Tucker ran into the woods, hiding from the world among plants and animals. That guy knows the Latin names for mushrooms, for crying out loud.”

This history was fascinating. “And the others?”

“Kash started partying and chasing girls when he was about thirteen. He stole Colton’s girlfriend at one point. And Colton and Ryker, well, they were the jocks. Superstar athletes, and they hated each other for it because our father would compare their stats.” He shook his head, staring off into the distance. “I’m telling you, it wasn’t fun. We were a weird family.” He let out a canned laugh.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “For all of it. Let’s see if they can buy you out, okay?”

He nodded. “Okay. Let’s see what happens.”





## Chapter 6

For three days Denver had been trying to come up with an excuse to go pay Jenna Bender a visit, but he had nothing. Tucker had told him that he was coming up with a buyout offer, so Denver had thought about updating Jenna with that detail, but he wasn't sure she'd care. If he didn't need her services, then none of this had anything to do with her.

But he couldn't stop thinking about her, and he wanted to ask her out on a date. He was pretty sure he could out-romance any of the men she'd dated around West Hope. They were a bunch of rubes. But he couldn't just walk into her office and ask her out. That would be too much like harassment. She was a professional. He had been her client. Might have to be her client again if Tucker didn't come through.

So he hadn't done anything, and without a woman to get to know or a family conflict to resolve, there was really no reason to hang around West Hope.

It was time for him to go home. Despite these idiots calling him Hollywood, he actually lived in New Mexico because that's where his hit show was filmed. But he never argued with any of them because he had a feeling they'd find a way to make fun of that too.

Monday morning found him packing up his single suitcase and leaving his suite at the nicest hotel in West Hope. He clamped his hat down on his head so it wouldn't blow off in his convertible and then rolled his suitcase out into the lobby. The woman behind the counter was new and asked him for his autograph, which he cordially gave.

Then he was on his way south. At least it was a pretty day for a drive. His GPS told him to take I-90, but he opted for the westerly route so he could have more mountain views.

He stopped in Deadwood for some Starbucks, where an older woman scolded him for cheating on his girlfriend. He tried to explain to her that it had been his character who had done the cheating, and that he didn't write the show, all while

the barista looked on with amusement, but the woman seemed to think he could have stopped it.

Maybe there had been actors in the past with that kind of power in the writers' room, but he wasn't one of them. He gave the barista a huge tip and a wink and then stepped out onto the sidewalk, looking up and down the street, foolishly hoping Jenna would just appear there for some reason. A little disgusted with himself, he climbed into his car before anyone else could recognize him.

He'd just crossed the Wyoming border when his phone rang. Tucker. Hoping to hear that Tucker had got the finances sorted, Denver clicked the button on the steering wheel and said hello. Tucker hesitated. "Are you in the car?"

"I am."

"Headed back to Hollywood, Hollywood?"

Denver ground his teeth together. "What's going on?"

"You might want to turn around. We've gotten an offer from the Bannons, and honestly, I'm not sure what to do now."

That was weird. Tucker wasn't the type to admit being unsure of anything. "What's the offer?"

"Buy the whole ranch. He's offering way above market value."

"So take the offer!" What was the problem?

"We all have to agree to sell. Bannon rules." He said this last part with a bit of annoyance, as if the Bannons were too righteous to bear.

"Who's the hold up?" Then he guessed, "Gunner?"

"No, actually. Colton."

"What? Why?" Colton was an idiot. With that kind of money he could open the best fitness center in town. "What's his reasoning?"

"He thinks we're pressuring Gunner. Thinks he knows what Gunner wants better than Gunner does."

Denver bit his lip. He'd been doing the same thing. But for good reason. Gunner never told anyone what he wanted. Denver wasn't sure if Gunner knew what Gunner wanted.

"I don't know if I want to accept the offer. I mean, it wouldn't make any of us rich ..."

Everyone had a different definition of rich. Tucker had done okay for himself, so it wouldn't seem like that much of a windfall, but he thought it might seem like a lot more to the other brothers. Colton still rented a run-down house in an ugly part of town, and Kash was practically homeless. This was by choice, but still.

"But it sure would be simple. It would be done. It would be fast. And I think that part of Gunner's problem is worrying about what the neighbors think. He doesn't want to sell it and have someone turn it into a housing development—or worse. But we know the Bannons wouldn't do that."

"That's probably why they're offering. To keep anyone else from doing that. It's not like they need more land."

"No, they sure don't."

Slowly and quietly, over the generations, the Bannons had been buying up most of the town. They'd even bought land in bordering towns. They were unassuming, but they had built an empire.

"Did Callum come talk to you?" Denver asked. Callum was the oldest Bannon brother, and he was in charge, though all the Bannon siblings had their fingers in the operation, and their mother was still alive and very much kicking.

"He brought a letter to Gunner. I guess they had a long talk."

"About what?"

"I don't really know, but apparently Callum told him that if he didn't want to sell, Callum would donate some money to help with his goat rescue."

"Goat rescue?" Denver cried. "I knew he had a lot of goats, but it's a rescue?"

“Well, not officially, but ... it’s a long story. Look, you want to help me convince Colton or what?”

Denver groaned. “Yep. I’ll turn around.”



## Chapter 7

Jenna's phone beeped, and Sheila told her that Zion Denver was there to see her. Jenna's heart cartwheeled, which caught her completely by surprise. "Send him in." As she let go of the button, her eyes darted around for a surface to check her reflection in, but as soon as she realized she was doing it, she made herself stop. What was wrong with her? Just because the guy was an actor didn't mean she had to act like a ninny.

She stood to greet him and didn't have to force the smile. She was honestly delighted to see him, a reaction she didn't understand. Did she like this guy? If so, she had to cut that out ASAP. But when he shook her hand, it was like she'd taken a muscle relaxer. Her arm went all gooey, and then the feeling spread all the way to her toes. She dropped her hand and prayed for control of her faculties as she returned to her chair.

Denver sat, and she was grateful because she'd forgotten to offer him a seat. She forced herself to look him in the eye. Why was she so nervous? *Get control of yourself, Jenna! You're a professional, for crying out loud.* "How can I help you, Mr. Bridge?"

He furrowed his brow. "Denver, please. Sorry to stop by without an appointment, but I was hoping you might have time for an impromptu meeting with the Bridge brothers."

She raised an eyebrow. "Has there been a development?"

He nodded. "There has. It seems we've gotten an offer from the Bannons, and Tucker might be changing his mind."

She should have seen that coming. Of course the Bannons would be interested, but it hadn't occurred to her that they'd make an offer before the place was on the market. "They must have heard some scuttlebutt that you all were thinking about selling? I mean, they waited a year."

He shrugged. "Maybe. There are no secrets in a small town. Or maybe they just waited a year out of decency. I mean, that's what I did. I gave Gunner a year before I started pushing. It felt crass to rush things."

This struck her as thoughtful, but there was a detached look in Denver's eyes, as if he were talking about someone else's family, someone else's father.

"Anyway, Tucker's on the fence, but Colton is still opposed to selling, so I'm headed over there. No pressure. I'm sure you're busy, but if you wanted to go out there just in case, then I would love to have you." He gave her a dazzling smile, and she had to look away. She wished he'd taken off his cowboy hat. It was very distracting.

She did have a lot of work to do, but she also didn't mind taking a drive out there and watching the show. She didn't see how she could be of any practical help, but if he was going to pay her, then she could go. "Can you promise to keep the goats off me?"

"Not at all, but I will do my best."

She laughed. "Okay. Deal." She stood and grabbed her purse. "I'll meet you there."

"Would you like to carpool? I have a convertible. It's a nice day."

Of course he had a convertible. As she wondered what this would do to her hair, her mouth let out a peppy "Sure!" that confused her.

He jumped up. "Great."

Because she didn't have anything else to say, and because she felt nervous like she was on a date or something, she asked, "Do you know anything about the offer? Is it a good one?" She expected that it was, given what she knew about the Bannons, which wasn't a lot. She didn't know any of them personally, though she had enjoyed a crush on Patrick in junior high, but then her father had shipped her off to boarding school, so she had lost track of Patrick as well as everyone else in this town.

"Tucker didn't give me any numbers, but he told me the offer was better than what we'd likely get from someone else."

"You said Tucker's on the fence. What about Gunner?"

“I think he’s willing to sell.” He opened her car door, and she briefly admired the car. It was an Audi, expensive but not ostentatious. He wasn’t driving around in a Ferrari.

“Nice car,” she said.

“Thank you. I like the sunshine.”

This admission surprised her a little. “Maybe you’ve got a little real cowboy in you. I thought you only played one on TV.”

He laughed. “I have no desire to work with cattle, but yes, I do enjoy being outside.” The leather squeaked as he sank into the driver’s seat. “That’s one of the reasons I love the role of Jack Black.”

She laughed. That was such a ridiculous name.

He looked at her quickly, and she felt bad for laughing.

“Sorry. I’m not laughing at you. Just that your name sounds like a Las Vegas villain.”

“It’s not *my* name, and trust me, I know. Anyway, playing a rancher lets me work outside ... without getting too close to the cattle.”

She hadn’t seen much of the show. “Don’t you have to work with the cattle for the show?”

“Not really. I mean, the story suggests that I know how to do that stuff, but I don’t actually have to do any of it. I spend most of my time on camera bossing other people around and pursuing women.” He gave her a pointed look. “I’m not really like that, by the way.”

She was touched that he cared what she thought of him. “Like what? You don’t boss people around or you don’t chase women?”

He chuckled. “Honestly, neither. I live a pretty simple life.”

She didn’t believe that for a second.

“I go to work, and then I relax. Rinse and repeat.”



“Sounds lonely.”

“Not really. I have lots of imaginary friends.”

She laughed. “What?”

“I read a lot, watch a lot of movies. I mean, I have nothing against real people, but it’s so much easier to hang out with my fictional friends.”

She turned to look at him, and the wind blew her hair into her eyes. She pulled it away, wishing she’d worn a bun.

“You have lovely—” He stopped talking abruptly.

“Lovely what?”

“Sorry. I was going to compliment your hair, but then I realized that might be creepy. I wasn’t trying to be creepy, I promise.”

“Thank you, and no, I don’t think you’re creepy.” In a hurry to change the subject away from her hair, she said, “So you just go home to your house and read books? Isn’t that a waste of living in Los Angeles? I pictured you out clubbing and eating fine foods.” She actually hadn’t pictured anything about his private life, but now that she thought about it, that’s what she was imagining.

“Hardly. For starters, I live in Albuquerque.”

“Really? That’s pretty cool. I’ve never been to New Mexico.”

“You should go. It’s a magical place.”

“So magical that you don’t have friends outside of work?” That sounded more critical aloud than it had in her head, and she hurried to change the subject. “What about church?”

“What about it?”

“Do you have one? Church is a good way to force yourself to expose yourself to other people.”

“No church.”

She looked at him again. “You said that with emphasis.”

“I’m not a churchy kind of guy.”

“Why not?” She was getting more and more curious.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s not that I don’t believe in God. I do. My mother tried to raise me right. But I ... I don’t know.”

She wanted to keep interrogating him, but she couldn’t think of a way to do so without being obnoxious. So she focused on the scenery whizzing by. She’d seen it a million times, but it seemed more beautiful from a convertible.



## Chapter 8

It was taking all the willpower Denver could muster not to stare at the woman in the passenger seat. Jenna was such a beauty. He'd known this when he'd invited her to carpool, but he hadn't realized how much more fetching she was going to be in his car with the wind whipping through her hair.

He was really grateful she hadn't worn her hair up that day. What a stroke of providence that was.

"How is Emmylou?"

Her face lit up. "Good. She's great. She never got sick, and the day care is open again."

"She seems like a great kid."

"She is."

Was it weird to ask about Emmylou's father? Probably. But he really wanted to know. He tried to think of a delicate way to bring it up, but he ran out of time.

He was sad to pull into the old driveway. He tried to psych himself up by reminding himself that he was going to get this thing resolved today, but his heart was still sad that he had to get out of the car.

Jenna got out before he could open her door for her. He scanned the yard. "No goats in sight." Colton's truck was there. So was Tucker's. No sign of Ryker or Kash. This didn't surprise him. He didn't know if Ryker ever went anywhere, and Kash had made his wishes known already.

She went up the steps slowly as if she were waiting for a goat to jump out from behind one of the empty plant pots. He waited for her and then opened the door.

When they stepped inside, Kash was there. "Did you walk?" Denver asked, and Kash gave him a dirty look.

"I live here."

He did? Since when?

Tucker sensed Denver's confusion. "Kash crashes here often. And wherever Kash crashes, he calls home."

"Where's your truck?" Denver would guess repossession, but he wasn't sure it was worth enough to warrant it.

"My girlfriend took it to work."

Denver looked at Gunner. "You put up with Kash *and* a girlfriend?"

Gunner shrugged. "It's not my house."

"Like the word *home*," Tucker said, "Kash uses the word *girlfriend* pretty loosely."

"Can we get this over with?" Kash said. "I hate all of you."

Beside Denver, Jenna flinched. "He's kidding." Mostly, he thought.

"Yeah." Kash smiled at Jenna. "I'm kidding." His words contained a hint of sarcasm. "I don't hate Gunner." His eyes slid to Denver's face. "Can you do anything without a lawyer? What, do you have the hots for her?"

Denver's cheeks grew hot, and he hoped they weren't red. He didn't embarrass easily, but Kash had managed it.

"Again, I thought there might be legal questions."

"There are no legal questions," Kash said. "There is only convince Colton to sell and then figure out how much we can get out of the Bannons."

"Enough of that," Tucker snapped. "We're not going to ask for more money. I told you that already."

"We would be stupid not to," Kash said. "They are billionaires, and they want the place. They'd pay more than they're offering."

"Exactly," Tucker said. "They're billionaires. They don't need this land, and they won't be stupid about buying it. Callum Bannon is the shrewdest businessman I've ever known."

This proclamation was high praise coming from Tucker, and Denver was surprised. He looked at Colton. “First things first. Why don’t you want to take this offer?”

Colton leaned against a wall, though there were plenty of seats. He folded his arms across his broad chest. “This offer doesn’t change anything for me. This is Gunner’s home. He wants to live here. I don’t want to take it away from him.”

Denver sighed. This argument was starting to feel redundant. “I’m on Gunner’s side too. I don’t see why sending him off with a flush bank account wouldn’t be a better option, and I don’t know why we’re all treating him like he can’t speak for himself.” He looked at Gunner, but he didn’t say anything, which was not helpful.

“What about the goats?” Colton said.

“What about them? Do they really need a hundred acres each? I mean, how many goats are there?” No one answered his question, which made him think there were enough goats that no one had an accurate head count. This alarmed him slightly. He looked at Gunner. “Man, you’ve got to tell us what you want. We’re chasing our tails here.”

It took him a long time to answer. “Whatever you guys want. I don’t care.”

“You have to care,” Denver said, “because we’re tripping over each other to do what you want, and we don’t know what that is.”

“Maybe he really doesn’t know,” Jenna said softly, and everyone looked at her, surprised she had spoken. “Sorry. I know it’s not my place, but I know that sometimes, we truly don’t know what we want. He’s got years of habit, grief, and probably a healthy fear of the unknown all weighing on him.” She snapped her mouth shut.

Denver looked at Gunner, expecting him to be irritated, but he actually looked thoughtful.

“When I say I don’t know, I mean that I don’t know. And for the thousandth time, it’s not my land.”

Colton sighed and dropped his arms. “The way I see it, nothing has changed here. The Bannons making an offer doesn’t change things. We were asking whether we wanted to sell or not. If we decide to sell, we know we will have no trouble finding a buyer. So having a buyer approach us doesn’t change much.”

He stopped as if the talking had tired him out.

“It has changed, though,” Denver said. “The Bannons won’t ruin the land. It will stay locally owned. And it’s a generous offer.”

“Not generous enough,” Kash mumbled. “Hey! Maybe we could throw in the goats and see if their offer goes up?”

Jenna bit back a laugh.

“Don’t encourage him,” Denver mumbled. He felt bad for dragging Jenna out here again. He had thought this meeting would be more productive. “Is there anything we can do legally to force Colton’s hand?” he asked, mostly so that she would feel like her presence had some purpose other than companionship for him.

“Callum said that we have to agree or there’s no offer,” Gunner said.

“If someone were unfit to manage his inheritance, we would have a case, but you are obviously all fit.” Her eyes drifted to Kash as if she weren’t quite sure about that one. “Have you considered dividing the property?” Jenna asked.

Everyone stared at her.

“You could give Gunner the house and some acreage and sell the rest off?”

Gunner shook his head. “It’s not a ranch without the land.”

“You could keep enough for some cattle,” she said. “Or goats. Or whatever you want to do.”

Gunner shook his head. “It’s not a ranch without the land.”

This made no sense, but goodness was he adamant. At least he finally had an opinion.

“Maybe you should think about that,” Denver said to Gunner. “It’s not a bad idea.”

“If it was a good idea,” Gunner said, “you would have thought of it sooner.”

“You would have plenty of land for the cattle you’ve got,” Tucker said. “Think about the break you’d get on the property tax.”

Gunner shook his head, his jaw tight. What was going through his head?

“Dad beat it into our heads that the land was everything,” Colton said softly. “Have you all forgotten?”

Yes, Denver sort of had forgotten. But now that Colton mentioned it, he could vaguely remember something like that. But that was the ramblings of an old timer. It probably hadn’t made much sense then. It sure didn’t now.

“Without the acreage, this part of the property is worthless,” Gunner said. “Don’t stick me with something worthless.”

*Whoa.* That caught Denver off guard, and it looked like Tucker and Colton were surprised too.

“We’re not trying to stick you with anything,” Tucker said. “I thought we’d made that clear.”

“Clear as mud,” Gunner said, his face getting red. “I’m done discussing this. Sell it. Keep it. I don’t care. Do whatever you want.” He went into the kitchen, and a second later, the screen door slammed shut.

“Nice work,” Kash said.

“Oh, will you please shut up?” Tucker said. “If you want to have a say, start living like a grownup.”

“Well, since you said please,” Kash said. “And you’re one to talk. What? I should be more like you? A workaholic who never does anything fun? When’s the last time you talked to a woman, Tuck?”



It was Tucker's turn to look embarrassed, and Jenna shifted uncomfortably beside Denver. He felt bad that he hadn't offered her a seat.

"Are we officially at an impasse?" Denver said. "Because if so, I should get Jenna out of here."

"Yeah, I think we're at an impasse," Colton said, "although I don't know why you can't talk like a normal person."

"That's how they talk in Hollywood," Tucker said.

Jenna gave him a look that said, *Why don't you tell them?* and he subtly shook his head.

"Okay then. I'll take that as my cue." Denver turned toward the door.

"Wait," Tucker said. "I mean. I guess we don't have to discuss it right now. I know she's probably charging you by the minute, but what about the Bannons' second offer?"

"What second offer?" Colton asked, sounding annoyed.

"Yeah, what second offer?" Kash echoed.

Tucker gave Denver a dire look, suggesting that he didn't want to bring it up. "Callum told Gunner that if he wanted to start an official goat rescue, the Bannons would help with financing."

Kash laughed so suddenly and so loudly that Denver wondered if he'd hurt himself.

Colton didn't even flinch. "What does Gunner think of that offer?"

Tucker shrugged. "I don't know."

The room fell quiet for a minute.

"Is there really that much need for a goat rescue in western South Dakota?" Kash said. "Don't people eat goats?"

"No," Tucker said, sounding tired, "people do not eat scrawny old dairy goats."

Kash looked around the room in wonder. "Are we seriously thinking about this? Of all the possible directions to

go?”

“We’re trying to think about what’s best for Gunner,” Colton said. “If the goats make him happy ...”

“Do they make him happy?” Denver asked. This felt hard to believe.

“I don’t know,” Colton admitted. He sounded tired.

“No offense to Gunner,” Kash said, “but why are his wishes more important than the rest of ours?”

Denver and Tucker exchanged a look. Kash was too young to remember how hard it had been for Gunner. “Because he’s the one who’s been working this place,” Denver said, “and I don’t mean for the last year. I mean for his whole life. Even when our father was still young and healthy enough to do the work, he didn’t do much of it. Gunner did. Our father should have left a will, and he should have left this place to Gunner. I don’t even care at this point about my share. I just want this to be over, so I don’t ever have to think about it again.”

“Easy for you to say,” Kash said. “You’ve got plenty of money.”

“You could have money too,” Tucker said, “if you didn’t party it all away.”

“Don’t pretend that you know me,” Kash said. “Fine then. We open a goat rescue, and Gunner becomes the town freak out here living with his thousand elderly goats.” He shook his head, acting horrified. “Man, do you guys even hear yourselves? You do know Gunner is single, right? I guess we want him to stay that way?”

“Not everyone is as obsessed with women as you are,” Tucker spat.

Kash laughed snidely. “You certainly aren’t.”

“He’s got a point,” Colton said, and it took Denver a second to know which point he meant. “If we really want what’s best for Gunner, then that would be for him to find a woman to love and be loved by.”

They fell into an uncomfortable silence. “I’m not sure that’s something we can do for him,” Denver said. Had they all gone mad? It wasn’t his job to find Gunner a woman.

“I know that we can’t *do* it for him,” Colton said, sounding annoyed, “but encouraging him to hunker down here would not help that cause.”

“Okay,” Denver said slowly. “Then let’s sell. Yes, it will be hard for him to leave here, but he will survive it, and he’ll be better off soon enough.”

Slowly, Colton nodded. “Okay. Let’s sell.”

“Finally!” Kash cried. “Thank you!”

“Someone should tell Gunner,” Colton said.

“You go ahead. I’ve got to get Jenna back to the office. I don’t want to speak for her, but I’m guessing she’s had enough crazy for the day.”



## Chapter 9

Jenna got back into the Audi feeling uneasy. This might be the last time she was ever going to see Denver, and she wanted to help him.

Once he'd gotten on the road, she took the leap. "I'm officially off the clock now."

He gave her a quizzical look. "You don't have to be."

"I want to be because I want to be unprofessional for a minute."

"Okay." He sounded oddly overexcited at the idea.

"I know that it's none of my business, so just tell me if you don't want to talk about it."

"Go ahead. I'm an open book."

She doubted that, but she pushed on. "I get that your father created an unhealthy environment for you guys as kids. Believe me, I can relate to that. But he's gone." She looked at him to gauge his reaction to her words but got momentarily distracted by how handsome he was in profile.

After a moment, he looked at her and broke the spell.

"You guys don't have to fight anymore," she continued. "You have an opportunity to mend fences. You don't actually hate each other. I've seen strands of affection and loyalty running through this mess, and I think that with just a little work, you could get rid of the other parts of the mess, and then those strands would have room to grow." She stopped talking, a little proud of her eloquence. She wished she could do that well with closing arguments.

"I don't have time to work on that."

"You just told me that you spend all your time with pretend people. This is your family."

His jaw clenched, and she wondered if she'd pushed too hard. "I said I spend all my *free* time with pretend people. Don't forget that I work eighty hours a week."

“Not all year you don’t.”

He had no comeback for that.

“Like I said, it’s none of my business. but they don’t seem like bad people. Maybe it would be good for all of you to try to rebuild.”

“You can’t rebuild something that was never built in the first place.” He exhaled slowly. “You’re right that they’re not bad people, but I think if I spent any more time with them, relations would only get worse.”

She didn’t believe it. “What about Kash? He’s a good-looking guy. He just needs some direction. Don’t you have some connections? Getting him a gig or two might give him some confidence.”

“You think Kash is good looking?”

That was the part he was stuck on? “You all are. It’s a weird family.” She thought of Ryker then, of how he probably wasn’t handsome anymore, but she didn’t correct herself.

“I do have connections, but I’m not risking my reputation on Kash. He’s an idiot. I would never vouch for him, and I don’t know how he’s fooled you, but that guy is not lacking in the confidence department.”

“Okay.” She started to let go. “It was just a thought. It’s just sad to think that you’re going to sell and then completely lose touch with your brothers. That land is the only thing holding you together.”

Denver’s phone rang, and he answered it so quickly that she suspected he was glad for the interruption. It was Tucker, calling to say that Gunner had changed his mind.

Denver tapped the brake pedal, canceling cruise control. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I wish I was,” Tucker said over the Bluetooth. “He said that we told him to make up his mind, and he has. He doesn’t want to move.”

*Well, there,* Jeanna thought. *Good for him.* She wasn’t exactly cheering for Gunner in this conflict, but she was glad

he'd figured out what he wanted. She hoped it wasn't a decision he'd arrived at just to spite his brothers.

"I told him that we'd finally agreed," Tucker said, "and that's when he said no. I wonder if he got a little freaked out by the idea of moving."

Denver thanked him and hung up.

"It would be a big change, for sure," Jenna said.

"Maybe. But I don't think Gunner would make any decision out of fear. He's a lot of things, but he's not a coward."

"Maybe he doesn't know that he's making the decision out of fear. Have you guys always treated him like this?"

"Like what?"

"So protective of him. Like you guys are in this big conflict, but you're all putting his needs ahead of your own."

Denver took a big breath. "I think it's because of what this specific conflict is. We know what that ranch means to him. But also, he was the one who was home with Dad in the end. He watched the man die. I can't imagine what that was like. Our father wasn't pleasant when he felt well. I hate to think what he was like when he was in pain and facing the end. I did hire a nurse, but she wasn't there every second."

"That was kind of you."

"Maybe, but it only partially assuaged my guilt. For the most part, I pretended it wasn't happening. I wanted nothing to do with it. None of us did. So it fell on Gunner." Denver shook his head in disgust. "He spent his whole life being our father's least favorite. I'm hoping that changed by the end, but I doubt it."

Jenna didn't know what to say to that.

Denver sighed. "So. I guess we're not selling, and I officially give up. You know what?" He looked at her quickly. "Can I just give my share to Gunner?"

"Really?"

“Yeah. Then I would be rid of it.”

The idea struck her as excessively generous. Just how wealthy was this guy? And she had grossly misjudged his character. If he was a jerk, he wouldn't be willing to do *that*, wealthy or not.





## Chapter 10

**I***f you're going to do it at all, you'd better do it now.* Denver and Jenna were almost back to her office. He was running out of time. Why was he so nervous? He opened his mouth to pop the question but then snapped it shut again. He should wait until they were at the office because if he asked her now, and it got awkward, he didn't want her to be trapped in his car with him.

He didn't know if this was wise or if he was just procrastinating, but he decided to wait.

So by the time he pulled into the small parking lot of her office building, his stomach was a tangle of nerves.

He waited for her to get out of the car. "Jenna."

She looked at him expectantly, and he nearly staggered backward.

Had she gotten more beautiful since she'd gotten into the car? *Get it together, man. You're embarrassing your gender.* To keep his hands busy more than to be polite, he took off his hat. His hair flopped down onto his forehead as her eyebrows went up. Now he had to do it, or she'd think he was about to deliver condolences. He took a big breath. This was insane. He delivered lines all the time. Why was this one so hard? "Can I buy you dinner tonight?"

She blinked, obviously surprised. "Oh, uh ..." She recovered quickly, and her professional demeanor returned. "That is a generous offer, but I'm afraid that would be too much like a date, and—"

"It would be very much like a date. I'm asking you out on a date."

She wasn't expecting the interruption, and it occurred to him too late that she might have been trying to help him save face.

A woman slammed her truck door and stood there staring at them.

“Hi, Darcy,” Jenna said. “Go ahead up. I’ll be right there.” She stared at the pavement while the woman walked by. “Sorry,” she whispered without looking up. “That’s my next client.” Finally, the door to the office building closed, and Jenna lifted her eyes to meet his. “I am so flattered, Denver. Really, I am, but I simply can’t date a client. It’s a matter of ethics.”

He wasn’t her client anymore, but he didn’t want to badger her. If she wasn’t interested, then she wasn’t interested. He put his hat back on and tipped his brim toward her. “Fair enough. It’s been a pleasure being your client, Miss Bender.”

She winced, but he wasn’t sure why. Did she not like being called Miss Bender? Had she not been expecting him to be so polite? He opted to let it go. He gave her a smile that he hoped would make her regret her decision and then he turned to his car.

Only once he’d started the engine did he notice she’d left her sunglasses. He hesitated. Again he worried about making her feel harassed and wondered if he should text her rather than chase after her. But he didn’t want to make her come all the way back to the parking lot. She’d had another appointment to get to. Maybe he could mail them to her. No, that was silly. They were good sunglasses. She’d probably be missing them. He took another deep breath, grabbed the glasses, and got out of the car again. He would just leave them with Sheila. Get in and out of there as fast as he could. Partly because he didn’t want to make Jenna feel uncomfortable but mostly because he didn’t want to have to deal with Sheila for long.

He ignored the elevator and opted for the stairs instead, knowing they would be faster, his long legs taking them two at a time.

When he opened the fire door to the second floor, he immediately heard his name.

He froze, his ears searching the empty hallway.

Jenna laughed. “It’s not that big a deal.”

“Not that big a deal?” the other voice cried, much louder than Jenna. Denver realized the voices were coming through an air vent. He felt guilty for eavesdropping, but the guilt didn’t stop him. He held his breath. “He’s a movie star!” the other voice said. Probably the client. She sounded far too happy to be Sheila.

Jenna laughed again. “He’s not a movie star. He stars in one cheesy show.”

Cheesy? *Cheyenne* wasn’t cheesy! Okay, maybe it was, a little, but it was still a rude thing to say.

“Oh, whatever. TV is bigger than the movies now anyway.”

“Let’s talk about your divorce.”

“Let’s not! Zion is gorgeous! Haven’t you been on TikTok? There are like a zillion videos of his face. Women everywhere are swooning over him.”

Denver tried not to let that puff him up. He’d just been rejected in a West Hope parking lot.

“Yes, he’s gorgeous,” Jenna said, and he let the puffing happen, “but it doesn’t matter.”

*Because he’s my client,* Denver expected to hear.

“Because he’s a liar.”

*What?* He’d never lied to her! It had been a long time since he’d lied to anyone.

“He’s an actor, a good one, so he lies for a living. I would never be able to trust a thing he said.”

Heat took over Denver’s body, and he flung open the law office’s door intending to storm right past Sheila, but Sheila wasn’t there, and Jenna’s office door stood wide open. Her eyes widened when she saw him, and she looked incredibly guilty. If he hadn’t just heard her slam him, he would have thought she’d done something really bad in the last five minutes, stolen a popsicle from a child on crutches or robbed someone’s napping grandma. He held up the sunglasses, and her face registered understanding.

The woman in the client chair craned her neck around, saw him, and leapt up. “It’s you!”

Yes, she’d just seen him five minutes ago. It was still him.

He wasn’t sure where to put the glasses, and Jenna wasn’t moving. He held his chin up and strode into the office, the guilt on Jenna’s face giving him his own rush of guilt. Maybe he was being too sensitive. No, she’d just lied to him and then called him a liar. He set the glasses down on the desk. “Only one of us just told a lie, Miss Bender. Say hi to Emmylou for me.” He tipped his hat and left her sitting there with her guilt.



# Chapter 11

Jenna knew that she needed to apologize to Denver, but she couldn't get a plan together. She wanted to do it in person, face to face, but where was Denver? If he'd already headed back to New Mexico, she was sunk. She wasn't going to follow him into the desert. Being a big TikTok heartthrob and all, he probably already had enough stalkers. But if he was still in West Hope, where was he? She had no idea where he was staying.

Should she call him and ask him where he was? That was so awkward and weird that she couldn't bring herself to do it.

Three times, she'd started an email to him:

*Hey, Denver, could we get some coffee? I just need to talk to you for a minute...* But that had been too much like asking him out, and as bad as she felt, she still didn't want to go out with him.

*Hey Denver, I'm assuming you're staying at a hotel in town. Could we meet in the lobby for just a minute?* No way. That sounded scandalous.

And her personal favorite, *Hey Denver, I was thinking about adopting a goat ...*

She had deleted each of these emails before she'd finished writing them, and the more time that went by, the harder it got to make herself reach out. Maybe she should let it go. Denver Bridge had a great life. It's not like he was holed up somewhere crying because she'd hurt his feelings. He'd likely forgotten she existed by now.

So she worked to forget him in return.

But she hadn't made much progress when Sheila told her that her next appointment was with one Gunner Bridge.

Jenna almost fell out of her chair.

When she'd gathered her wits, she asked Sheila what the consultation was regarding.

The land.

Again? Jenna glanced at the calendar on her desk. It had been more than three weeks since she'd last talked to a Bridge brother. She assumed the matter had been settled.

She asked Sheila for more details, but Sheila didn't have any. "He called and asked for an appointment to speak to you. I asked him what he needed help with, and he said, *the land*. That's all I know."

Jenna thanked her out of habit and pressed the button on her phone. Then she tried to get some work done, but she couldn't stop wondering what Gunner wanted.

Finally, eleven o'clock rolled around, and she stood to look out the window. Had she ever known what Gunner drove? If she had, she couldn't remember now, but nothing in the parking lot looked like it would belong to a man like him. She stood there for a moment, waiting and watching, and then was about to give up when a rumbling pickup pulled into the lot, its bed freighted with bags of grain. She didn't have to see the driver to know who it was. She stepped back from the window, paced in her office for a bit, and then went to meet him in the hallway. The least she could do was protect him from Sheila.

When the elevator door slid open, she was genuinely happy to see the man, and she smiled brightly. "Right this way, Mr. Bridge." He followed her, and she picked up speed as they neared Sheila, zipping right past her open mouth. Jenna swiftly closed the door behind Gunner. She offered him a seat and then settled in behind her desk.

His eyes fell to her picture of Emmylou. He looked sad.

"What can I help you with, Mr. Bridge?"

"Gunner."

"Gunner. What do you need?"

He took a deep breath. "I'm sure you've heard about Kash."

She hesitated, scanning recent data in her brain. "I'm not sure that I have."



“He’s got himself into some trouble. Again. And I’m afraid it’s more serious this time.”

“Okay ...”

“And he tried to get a ... what do you call it, a free lawyer?”

“A public defender?”

His nod was almost imperceptible. “The court told him that he didn’t qualify because he owns so much land.” He looked at her expectantly.

She wasn’t sure what to make of all this. “Are you thinking of selling now that he needs to hire a lawyer?” She certainly hoped not. Then, before he could answer, she added, “What has he been charged with?”

“First degree robbery.”

Her breath caught. Oh no. A sharp ache gripped her heart. For Kash. For Gunner. And most of all, for Denver.

“I don’t think I could get it sold fast enough to get him the money? But I could pay you when I do.”

“Gunner, I’m not a criminal attorney.”

“You’re the attorney we’ve got.”

She’d been to his house twice, rudely offended his brother, and now she was the family attorney?

“He didn’t do it,” he added.

She took a deep breath. She could feel the man’s pain from across the desk. “Tell me what happened.”

“He was passed out in the passenger seat of some guy’s car. The guy wasn’t local. When Kash woke up, the cops were there. The clerk at the store said that Kash was one of the ones who robbed the place.”

“And he wasn’t?”

Gunner shook his head slowly.

“No offense, Gunner. We always want to see the best in the people we love, but maybe Kash—”

“Kash wouldn’t lie to me. And he’s not even trying to get out of it. He’s acting like he deserves it because he was dumb enough to be there. But being dumb and drunk in the wrong guy’s car shouldn’t mean prison time.”

“Was Kash armed?”

“No, but the clerk said he was. But the cops didn’t find any gun other than the one on the driver.”

She sighed and handed him a notepad. “Tell you what. Leave me your number, and I’ll look into it. See what I can find out. But no promises, okay?”

He nodded, scribbled down some numbers, and then thanked her.

“I haven’t done anything yet.”

He stood and tipped his hat. “Sure you have.”



## Chapter 12

Kash was confused when a corrections officer told him that his lawyer was there to see him. He didn't have a lawyer, and he knew that no one loved him enough to hire one for him. Maybe the court had decided to give him a public defender after all. This didn't seem likely, but it was the only theory he could come up with.

He squinted as he walked down the brightly lit hallway. He'd had a pounding headache for two days now. Or maybe it had been three.

Despite the pain behind his eyes, he nearly laughed when he saw Jenna Bender sitting behind the small table. She stood to shake his hand.

"What are you doing here?" he asked as the door clicked shut behind him.

"You're welcome." She sat back down and motioned to the chair.

He sat. "Who's paying you?"

"No one's paying me. Now tell me everything you know." She picked up her pen and waited.

He didn't know anything. "I don't remember anything." Usually, blackouts didn't embarrass him. This was not one of those times.

Annoyance flickered across her face. He couldn't blame her. "What is the last thing you do remember?"

He closed his eyes and tried to think past the pain. "I was at a party ... there were a ton of people there." He opened his eyes. "Sorry." That was all he had.

"And what's the next thing you remember after that?"

This part was easier. "Blue lights. A deputy knocking on the window. I was in some dude's car. I rolled down the window, and they shouted at me to show them my hands." That's when he'd gotten scared, but he didn't tell her that part.

He didn't get scared often, but that had scared him. "And then I was in cuffs and in a different car, and I was so confused."

"So you could have robbed the store, or helped to rob the store and not remember it?"

His cell—and its forced sobriety—had given him plenty of time to consider this. "I don't think so." He looked up at her. "Booze doesn't make you do something that's not already in you, you know? And I've done a lot of stupid stuff, but I've never been violent." He leaned back in his chair. "I'm not a violent man. I'm not cruel." This felt like the only thing he had to cling to right now.

She nodded, seeming to believe him. Whether or not this helped his case, it was a comfort. "Okay. Where was the party?"

He told her. "I don't remember the apartment number."

"And do you know Lance Hayford?"

"Not really."

"But you were in his car." She said this as if it didn't make sense. So she didn't know much about partying, did she?

"Yeah. I was in his car."

She nodded. "And while you were in his car, he used a firearm to rob a convenience store. He got less than two hundred dollars."

Kash balled up his fist and brought it to his forehead. Why had he gotten into that jerk's car? Why had he been partying with these people at all? He was so stupid. He deserved whatever he was going to get. He dropped his fist, and it made a *clunk* sound on the table. "You don't have to do this."

"I know," she said softly.

He studied her. Why was she doing this? Was there something going on with her and Denver? That didn't make much sense. She was a good-looking woman and all, but she was a lawyer in West Hope. Denver lived in *Hollywood*. So, no, Kash decided, they probably didn't have something going on. So then why on earth was she helping him? "If you are

going to help me, know that I'll find a way to pay you." And he wouldn't do it by forcing his brother to sell any land. "Eventually."

"Let's cross that bridge when we get there, okay?" She looked down at her notepad. "Your bail is set pretty high. Are you doing okay in here?"

"I guess?" He wasn't sure what she meant.

"You're safe? You can hang on a few more days?"

"A few more days?" He almost laughed. "My hearing isn't for another week."

"I know, but I'm going to try to prevent us from getting that far." She sighed and leaned back in her chair. "You're in a bit of a bind, Kash, and I'm willing to do my best, but I should tell you that I'm not a criminal attorney. I have no experience with defending people like you."

"People like me?" What did that mean?

"People charged with a crime."

Oh. Yeah. He was a person like that, wasn't he? That was going to take some getting used to. He'd had no problem identifying as a troublemaker. But a criminal? That was an entirely different thing, and the thought made him feel nauseous. "So what are you saying, that I should fire you?" He really didn't want to do that.

"No, I just don't want to mislead you. If you want me to help, I'll help. If you'd rather go it alone or try to hire someone with more experience, then you can do that. I could recommend a few people, but I have no idea if they're available or willing or if—"

"I think you're the lawyer for me, Ms. Bender." He didn't have any idea how to go it alone, and he didn't have two pennies to his name. I guess you're officially the Bridge Family lawyer."

"Yeah. I keep hearing that."



## Chapter 13

It was filming season again, so Denver was back to working sixteen-hour days, six days a week. Normally he didn't mind the fast pace and the long hours. He liked acting out the story, getting lost in it, but he had a new co-star this season, and she was driving him nuts.

The character was okay: Priscilla Zealand, the rich bratty socialite who had moved to Cheyenne to supervise her father's oil business. It was a ridiculous premise, but the character was rather charming, and he enjoyed her.

The actor who played Priscilla was the problem. Bethany Cartwright was a pain in his butt. He'd been in show business for more than a decade, but he wasn't sure he'd ever seen a prima donna like this one. She was constantly complaining, constantly barking orders, and he was constantly amazed that people were putting up with it.

Her first day, when he hadn't yet figured out that she was a pill, he had tried to give her some friendly advice. "We have a lot of character turnover on this show. Average life expectancy in fictional Cheyenne is only about thirty. You might want to tone it down a notch."

She'd glared at him. "I'll be fine, thank you very much."

He'd surrendered her then, accepting that she would be written off before the finale.

He still believed that, but right now that finale felt far away. It didn't help that Bethany looked a little like Jenna. He had been working hard to forget about the pretty lawyer, so the two women sharing a lot of traits was making that difficult. He tried not to look at Bethany more than he had to, which made their first romantic scene difficult.

When the director said cut, she slapped him on the chest hard enough to sting. "What is wrong with you? Aren't you supposed to be smooth and suave? You're as stiff as a board."



“I’m having trouble believing that Jack Black would be interested in a woman as bratty as you.” This wasn’t true. Jack would be all over it.

She raised an eyebrow. “You meant to say as bratty as my character, right?”

Without answering her, he walked off to find coffee. It was going to be a long night.

He found some coffee and sat down for a minute. He pulled out his phone to find two more messages from Tucker. Now that they had decided to keep the ranch and fill it with goats, Tucker was all about Denver handing over his share to Gunner. Then Gunner would own one third of the ranch, and Tucker could take a step back. He was tired of running the show, apparently. He had a lot of other shows to run, and the fall hunting season was fast approaching.

“I told you I would do it and I will,” he texted. “I’m a little busy here.”

Tucker answered immediately. “No doubt you’re busy. I know you’re a big movie star. You don’t have to keep reminding me.”

Denver rolled his eyes. “I’ll take care of it.” He looked up at the set to see if they were getting ready to fire things up again, and saw nothing to indicate that was the case so he opened his email app and shot Jenna off a quick message: *Can you draw up a new deed and make an appointment for us to come sign?* He was about to proofread, but an intern hollered his name, so he rushed the send so that the message wouldn’t spend eternity forgotten in his draft folder.

He hid his phone in his pocket and headed back to work.

Bethany sneered at him as he approached.

“My goodness you’re beautiful when you smile like that,” he said, making sure his tone was as sarcastic as possible.

She snapped her face away from him, and her hair followed in a shiny wave that made him remember how Jenna’s hair had looked in the convertible. He wanted to kick himself. Why was he pining after a woman who didn’t want

him? Maybe he needed to distract himself with someone who did want to go out with him. Maybe he was going to have to go to one of those painful parties his coworkers loved so much.



## Chapter 14

Jenna stared at the email, trying not to be offended. Why was it so short? Why so rude? Denver had made it sound as if he'd already asked her to do this ten times, but he sure hadn't. This was the first she'd heard about it since he had first mentioned giving his portion of the ranch away, and that had been so long ago, and he'd said it off the cuff. She'd had no reason to believe he was really going to do it.

And she had never agreed to draw up the new deed for him. Sure, that was more in her wheelhouse than defending a first degree robbery charge but still, she didn't like being bossed around, especially by a man she didn't really know from a thousand miles away.

She started to write back, felt guilty about her sassy tone and held down the delete button. She tried again, failed again, and deleted some more. Good grief, what a waste of her time this was. Finally, she wrote, *When would you like to come in?* Before she could second guess herself yet again, she hit send, a little proud of herself for being just as short as he had been.

Only once she went back to working on Kash's case did she realize it was a little strange that Denver hadn't mentioned Kash. A small thank you for representing his brother would have been appropriate. Did he not know? She opened a new email and wrote *P.S.* in the subject line. *You know about Kash, right?*

Though she kept her email app open and kept refreshing her inbox, the minutes ticked by without a reply, and she took that to mean that he did in fact know about Kash and that he didn't care.

When she had first met Denver, she'd assumed that he was a slimy con man. Then she'd gotten to know him and thought he was pretty great. Maybe the truth lay somewhere between those two extremes. Maybe he was just an ordinary guy. Nothing so nefarious as a con man, but still kind of a jerk.

But as the evening wore on, she couldn't quite convince herself that Denver Bridge wasn't awesome. She didn't know why he had sent a rude email, and she didn't know why he didn't care about Kash, but she couldn't believe that he was a bad guy. She couldn't have been *that* wrong about him, could she?

Jenna tossed and turned for most of the night, and when she got a text at quarter past five the next morning, she was wide awake.

"No, what happened to Kash?"

She sat up. He really didn't know? How did he not know?

"I think it's going to be okay," she wrote and sent. "But he's been charged with robbery." She hit send again and then started typing a third message, but his chime interrupted her.

"WHAT?" he wrote in all caps.

"I don't think he did it, and I'm working with the DA to get the charges dropped." She waited, watching the three little dots blinking, which meant that he was writing, except that no text ever came, and the dots just kept on blinking. This was going to be one really long message. But then the dots disappeared altogether. He'd given up on whatever he was writing or thinking about writing. Her curiosity was painful.

"Are you filming right now?" she sent. She wanted to keep chatting with him.

"Right this second? No."

She scowled. Maybe she *didn't* want to keep chatting with him. "That's not what I meant."

He sent a laughing emoji. "I know. I was just playing. And yes, we're filming."

"How are you going to get here to sign a deed?"

"I was hoping you'd let me sign on a Sunday."

Really? He was expecting her to work on a Sunday? That was rich.

“Don’t worry, I was planning on offering you weekend pay.” She was half-charmed, half-insulted. She was an attorney. She didn’t need his *weekend pay*. “What Sunday were you thinking?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it, but under the circumstances, maybe I should come this weekend.”

Her heart leapt. She quickly opened her calendar app to make sure she and Emmylou didn’t have other plans. Oh shoot. It was Vacation Bible School week, and there was a big play during the Sunday service followed by a cookout afterward.

“Could it be Sunday evening?” She hit send.

“Of course. Have a good day.”

“Wait.” She hit send. “Are you contacting the other brothers, or am I? They’ll all need to be there.”

“Would you mind?”

She didn’t mind, but she didn’t want to be taken advantage of either.

“I’d be grateful.”

She sighed and typed. “Sure.”

“Thank you very much. I mean that. I appreciate you. See you Sunday.”

She stared at his words. He appreciated her? So then he’d probably forgiven her for her little white lie? Either way, she should still apologize for it.



## Chapter 15

When Denver had decided to make a quick day trip to West Hope, he'd forgotten how complicated and inconvenient travel could be in the rural American West.

If he'd been trying to zip between two points on the East Coast, he would catch a Saturday afternoon flight, spend the night at his destination, take care of business, and then fly home the next night.

That was not going to happen west of the Missouri. Though getting from Albuquerque to Rapid City was easy enough, getting back to Albuquerque was another matter.

He emailed his boss, asking if he could have Monday off. His phone rang almost immediately. "Are you kidding?"

Denver sighed. "I am not. I really need to get home. Family stuff."

"You have a family?"

Denver chose not to respond to that. "Could you at least push my scenes to late Monday?"

There was a long silence. "Fine. Take Monday, but tell no one that you're taking it. I had to move some stuff around anyway. But I mean it. Mum's the word. And be there at the crack of dawn on Tuesday."

"You got it. Thanks, boss."



AT FIVE ON SUNDAY MORNING, Denver was waiting at the gate in Albuquerque, and by seven he was pressed back into his seat as the plane climbed into the air. Then after a short layover in the mile-high city for which he was named, Denver was South Dakota bound again. He usually got a sick feeling in his stomach when he was headed home, but it wasn't happening this time. He wasn't sure why.



In fact, there was a bit of a bounce in his step when he touched down in Rapid, but that bounce quickly deflated when he was informed that they had no rental car for him.

He quickly produced a receipt and showed it to the young chap behind the counter who didn't care nearly enough about Denver's plight. The kid looked at his computer screen. "Oh, I can see that you reserved it. We just don't have any cars."

Denver growled. "How is that possible? You had it yesterday when I reserved it, but now you don't?"

"Yeah, I don't know, man."

Denver didn't have time for this. He pushed himself away from the counter before he said something he regretted, and he dialed Tucker.

Tucker did not answer.

Denver found a bench, sat, and then thought better of it and went outside. He found a cement bench near the road and settled in, the sunshine cheering him a little. Was he going to have to take an Uber in South Dakota? Did they even have Ubers in South Dakota? He'd probably be better off trying to find a tractor for hire. He dialed Gunner, who didn't answer either. This did not surprise Denver. He dialed Colton. No answer. Was this some kind of conspiracy? He didn't want to bother Ryker, knowing a drive to Rapid was too much for someone who didn't leave the house. And Kash wouldn't be much help.

He opened his Uber app. He was encouraged to see the Rapid airport listed as a pickup spot. He requested a ride and then watched the spinning wheel spin, trying to be patient.

His patience was not rewarded. There were no Ubers available. He tried to think. Who else could he call? He was nearly an hour from West Hope. He hadn't spoken to anyone in his hometown in years. He couldn't call one of them up now and ask for a ride.

*You know what you have to do*, said an annoying voice in his head.

Denver dialed her number. She whispered her *hello*. Why was she whispering?

“Hi. This is Denver. Hey, I know this is a big ask, but I’m sort of stranded at the airport.”

“I hear that a lot,” she whispered.

She did? Did she have lots of men calling her from the Rapid airport? “They don’t have any rental cars, even though I reserved one.” He didn’t want her to think that he didn’t know how to travel, that he had come unprepared.

“I hear that a lot too. Sit tight. I’ll send Sheila.”

He managed not to gasp, but just barely.

Jenna giggled, sounding far too pleased with herself. “I’m just kidding, but let me think. Church just started, and Emmylou is ... you know what? Let me make sure my friend is willing to watch her, and then I might have just enough time to scoot over. Hang on.”

There was a rustling, and then he heard a piano. He’d called her during church. What an oaf. He waited, his knee bouncing up and down.

“Okay, I’ll be right there.”

He thanked her, taking care not to speak too loudly, and ended the call. Now what was he going to do? He scrolled through social media for a few minutes but quickly got annoyed with all the bickering, so he opted to stare at the trickling traffic instead. He watched scene after scene of people connecting with loved ones: a man making a fool of himself with how excited he was to see a beautiful woman; a mom literally jumping for joy at the sight of her teenage daughter, and though Denver was sure that the teen was trying to hide her own excitement, she was mostly failing; an older couple clapping when a little boy came into view, a grandson, Denver presumed, and the harried mom staggering outside after the boy, scolding him for getting too far ahead.

With each scene, Denver sank deeper into an aching loneliness. This was unusual. He didn’t ever feel lonely. He truly was an introvert. He truly was comfortable being by

himself, living alone, doing life alone, but sitting still doing nothing but watching humankind love one another was not making him feel good about the state of things.

He tried to shake the ache out of his head, reminding himself of how great his life was. All of his dreams had come true. He was one of the lucky few who had managed to get out of the one-horse town of West Hope, and then he'd made it big in TV land to boot. What more could a guy ask for? He silently scolded himself for not being content.

But he hadn't quite managed to fully cheer himself up when Jenna pulled into view. He jumped up and went to her car before she could get out, noticing a small hoof-shaped dent on the hood of her car and then quickly looking away in case she didn't know it was there. He didn't need to call attention to it.

"No luggage?" she asked when he opened the door.

He let his small carry-on drop into his lap. "No. I'm only here overnight."

"Just came to sign on the dotted line?" There was something in her tone, but he wasn't quite sure what it was. Criticism, maybe? But while he was contemplating, she said, "If you're in a hurry, then I should apologize before I run out of time." She took a deep breath, looked over her shoulder, and eased the car out into the road. Then she kept her face pointed straight ahead as she said, "I really regret lying to you. I'm sorry."

With everything that had happened since, it took him a second to realize what she was talking about. Then, when he remembered, it brought a familiar ache to his chest. "Don't worry about it. It's water under the bridge." He didn't want to think about it. He definitely didn't want to talk about it. "And it's not that I'm in a hurry. We are in a really heavy filming schedule right now. It was a big favor that they let me come at all, and I need to get back and do my job. So, I'm going to sign on the dotted line, see Kash, and then get back on the plane."

She gave him a sharp look. “I don’t think you’ll be able to see Kash on a Sunday. And I’m not sure you’ll be able to get in tomorrow morning either. It’s not a simple process. He has to put your name on the visitation list, and then someone will contact—”

It took Denver’s brain a few seconds to catch up, but when it had, he interrupted her to say, “He’s still in jail?”

She didn’t answer him.

“Why didn’t anyone tell me? I could have bailed him out!”

“I don’t know.”

“How long has he been sitting in jail?”

She briefly laid a hand on his knee as if to comfort him. He glanced down at her manicured nails, and she pulled her hand away. “It’s okay. I’ve talked to him. He’s fine. And maybe it’ll be good for him. He’s been forced to sober up, and now he can think clearly.” A few seconds passed. “For a little while at least.”

He groaned.

“You don’t like coming home, do you?”

“This isn’t my home,” he grumbled and then felt bad. “Sorry. It’s not your fault. You do me this huge favor picking me up and then I’m grumpy. I don’t mean to be. There are just a lot of bad memories here.”

“I understand that. I have bad memories here too, but I have worked to overwrite them with new memories.”

He wasn’t sure what she meant. “I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“I never said it was simple, but it’s possible. Take this example. When I was little, I fell off the swing at the playground at the Baptist Church. My father screamed at me. I mean really screamed, sent other kids running away. He was so mad. And you know why? Because I had embarrassed him. My arm hurt so bad, but I didn’t dare to tell him because I didn’t want to embarrass him further. The next day I finally

had to tell him why I couldn't stop crying, and he took me to the ER. My arm was fractured.”

Denver's breath caught. Wasn't that child abuse?

“The point is, I have taken Emmylou to that playground over and over and over again. So now when I go there, all I feel is joy. Sure, that yucky stuff happened back then, but it's back then. What matters is what's happening now.” She shrugged. “I know that your family business is none of my business, but I really like you guys. I think you're good people, and I wish that I could see you guys growing together instead of apart. Maybe, with only a little effort, the six of you could overwrite some of the yuckiness of back then.”

He noticed she was speeding. “Sorry to make you miss church.”

“You should be,” she said and laughed. “It's VBS week, and there's this huge production today.”

This made him feel awful. And she'd left that to go pick him up?

“Don't get a big head. Emmylou is so little that she doesn't do anything but stand in a pack of toddlers and pretend to sing. At one point she was supposed to have a pair of those rattling eggs, but she kept hiding them, so they took them away from her.”

“Can't blame her there. We teach kids to hide eggs on Easter.”

She glanced at him. “Maybe you should be the defense attorney. Anyway, the service was going to be long, and I'm not heartbroken to miss it.”

He glanced at the speedometer. “Yet you're in a hurry to get back.” Or maybe she always drove like Jessi Combs.

“Yeah, there's a big cookout after. My friend did not agree to watch Emmylou through that.”

He sighed, puffing out his cheeks with air. “I truly am sorry to complicate your Sunday. I know this isn't really in your job description.”

“A lawyer’s job description is different in South Dakota.”

He chuckled. “I’ll bet.”

They were quiet for a minute, and he tried not to let on that her speed was making him a little nervous.

“Anyway, back to you and your brothers.”

Great. He thought he’d distracted her with the speed and church talk.

“You don’t seem like a player, Mr. Zion Denver.”

What? That had come out of left field. And what did that have to do with his brothers? “Uh ... thanks, I guess?”

She laughed as she yanked the car into the left lane to pass a sports car.

Denver tightened his grip on his arm rest and reminded himself to breathe.

“I mean, I used to think you were a player because that’s the only version of you that I’d met.”

“I only play a player on TV, and I thought you didn’t watch the show.” What on earth was she getting at?

“Okay, maybe I’ve seen a few clips. You’re on TikTok. Anyway, the point is, you seem like a nice man. And nice men settle down eventually. They meet nice women, fall in love, buy nice houses, and have nice children.”

The more she talked, the less sense she made.

“My point is, won’t you want your wife and children to know their uncles?”

*Oh.* So that’s where she was going. “I’m not sure how much my future nice wife will enjoy her uncle Kash.”

Jenna laughed. “Sorry, misplaced modifier or something. You know what I meant. Family matters.”

“Is that why you force yourself to work for your father?”

Her spine straightened, but she didn’t answer. He couldn’t read her expression, but she didn’t look happy.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend ...” His voice trailed off. He wasn’t sure how to finish that sentence.

“You didn’t offend me, and no, I force myself to work with my father because I want to take over his firm.” She didn’t sound confident.

“Is that going to happen?”

She hesitated. “I have no idea.”

“Are you a good lawyer?”

She looked at him sharply. “What do you mean?”

“I get the impression that you’re a good lawyer. So if you’re a good lawyer, can’t you start your own firm?”

“I mean, it’s possible, but he has such an established presence in West Hope. In the whole county. In this half of the state, really. The name Bender means something.”

This was all news to him. He’d never heard of the guy. “That may be true, but I still think you could establish a reputation of your own in a short amount of time.” *And it would probably be a better reputation*, he didn’t add.

She cut her eyes toward him. “You really don’t like him.”

“I wasn’t a fan to begin with. Then I learned that he hollered at a little girl for breaking her arm.”

She sighed. “Maybe I shouldn’t have told you that.”

“No harm done. I don’t plan on ever having anything to do with the man.” And he didn’t think she should either, but he kept that to himself.

They were quiet for a while, and when she exited the highway, he was relieved to be alive. “Do you need me to drop you somewhere or can you go to the cookout? I’m sure it’s started by now.”

“Sure. Whatever you need.”

She drove the pedal to the floor.

He realized how hungry he was. “Am I supposed to bring my own food?”

“Yes, but don’t worry. I brought something.”

She pulled into a busy parking lot, and he glanced up at the church. “I thought you said the Baptist church.”

She turned off the engine and unbuckled so fast that her seatbelt clanked off the window. “I did. But that’s my dad’s church. I needed a different church.” She opened the door and sprang out of the car, and he had to hurry to keep up.





## Chapter 16

Jenna searched the buzzing crowd for her daughter's face, trying to fight back the panic welling in her throat. *Your daughter is still here, safe and sound*, she told herself. Everyone here knew everyone else here, and everyone looked out for one another. But Jenna wasn't going to relax until she had her little Emmylou back in her arms.

Her eyes met her friend's, who looked annoyed, pointed at the bouncy house, and then eyed Denver suspiciously. Oh yeah, Jenna had sort of forgotten that Denver was still there. She glanced at him over her shoulder, was mildly amused at how uncomfortable he looked, and then waved a thank you to her friend. She was going to owe her.

Jenna started toward the bouncy house, and Denver fell into step beside her.

Little Natalie Grindor came running toward them with wide eyes. "Emmylou is crying!" She stopped and pointed at the bouncy house.

Jenna picked up speed. A herd of children were running around the bouncy house, which was flailing around like a giant windsock. A sign on the front of the fake castle provided only two rules: no more than five kids at a time; and all kids must be supervised by an adult.

From the way the giant balloon was jerking to and fro, there were way more than five kids in there, and if there was an adult in charge, then he or she was inside the bouncy house stirring up the crowd. A dirty boy squirted out through the opening.

"Michael, is Emmylou in there?"

Michael had to be at least seven and was shaped like a middle linebacker. Little Emmylou was not big enough to be in there with giants like him.

Michael ignored her. She bent to peer into the hole, but all she saw were legs. She straightened and looked at Michael. "Is

Emmylou in there?”

Michael ran away.

Something bumped into her hand, and she looked down to see that Denver was handing her his cowboy hat. She took it, though she didn't understand why he was giving it to her. She was still trying to figure that out when he stuck his forearms and head into the hole.

Oh, how sweet. He was looking for Emmylou. But then Denver started wiggling into the hole like a giant eel trying to thread a needle. What on earth? As his boots disappeared into the fray, the house continued to jerk around. She heard some screaming, and then a little girl popped out, ran to her, and tattled that there was a big man in the bouncy castle. Jenna couldn't remember her name, but she knew who she belonged to. She was a Tantor.

“Yeah,” Jenna said, “what's he doing?”

The tiny Tantor crossed her arms in front of her and jutted out her chin. “He's talking to Emmylou.”

Jenna squatted down. “Is Emmylou okay?”

The girl's eyes widened. “I don't know.” She dropped her arms, curling one hand into a fist and then pointing the other hand at the castle. “You should make the man leave! My mom said there were no grownups allowed!”

It was a convenient rule for a parent who didn't want to go into the bouncy house. Jenna straightened and sighed. She liked children, but she didn't like this little Tantor much. Not right now.

Two boys came out of the hole at the same time like a two-headed monster.

“Is the grownup still in there?” Little Tantor asked, as if there was a back door he could have escaped through. Although, for all Jenna knew, maybe there was.

Both boys nodded and ran off.

She looked up at the bouncy house to see the soles of two cowboy boots in the opening. They were the most beautiful

boot bottoms she'd ever seen, and she knew they belonged to a beautiful man who only played a player on TV.

She held her breath as the rest of him came into view, and then her heart swelled as she saw her little girl wrapped tight in his arms. Emmylou was rubbing the back of one dirty hand against her eye, but when she saw her mother, she reached both arms out so suddenly that she would have launched herself if Denver hadn't had such a good grip.

Jenna took Emmylou into her arms, dangling Denver's hat from her fingertips. He took it, clamped it onto his head, and flashed her the most intoxicating smile she'd ever beheld.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

He nodded, still grinning. "She got trapped in the corner, couldn't get her feet back under her is all." He rubbed Emmylou's back. "It happens to the best of us, cutie pie."

"Is she hurt?" Jenna ran a hand over her daughter.

"I don't think so. The kids were giving her some space, so I don't think she got stepped on or anything."

Jenna let out a small growl. "But they weren't helping her up, either."

"No, they sure weren't." He looked back at the crazy castle. "There are way too many kids in there."

"Mama, I hungry." Emmylou sniffed.

"Okay, honey. Let's get you some food."

"I want mac an chee."

Denver laughed and rubbed his hands together. "Oh goodie. Mac an chee is my favorite."



## Chapter 17

Denver wasn't sure whether he'd ever been to a church cookout before. If he had, it hadn't left much of an impression.

He followed Jenna and Emmylou through the food line, telling his stomach to calm down when it told him to take a little of everything. It all looked so good. And while they were late to the party, and some of the dishes were close to empty, a bustling crew of women kept replacing empty dishes with full ones.

"Which one is yours?"

Jenna pointed with her chin. "The green pudding stuff."

He laughed. "Is that what it's officially called?"

"No, I think it's officially called pistachio fluff salad."

He snickered. "Salad?"

She gave him a dirty look as her hands were busy wrestling a cookie away from Emmylou. For a second, he worried Jenna was going to put the cookie back on the platter, but then she absentmindedly dropped it onto her own plate. "I didn't name the dish. I just threw four ingredients into a bowl."

He skipped over her in the line to get to the neon green salad. "Um, there are three fluffy green *salads*."

She looked up, and Emmylou sneaked a cookie onto her plate. "The one in the middle," Jenna said.

He filled half his plate with the fluffy green stuff and then waited for them to catch up.

When she reached him, she looked at his plate, which held only orange pasta and neon green Cool Whip. "You officially have the palate of a five-year-old."

He laughed. She might have a point, but he wasn't going to admit it. "What? I like my mac an *chee*. I already told you that."

Emmylou gave him a toothy grin, and he returned the smile with a wink.

Jenna rolled her eyes. “I love it when you two gang up on me. Let’s go find a seat.” She steered her daughter’s shoulders around and toward two long rows of folding white tables.

They found a seat, and he offered to go get them drinks. She looked relieved.

“What would you like?”

“I’m pretty sure our only choice is weak lemonade, but surprise me.”

He spun to locate the drink station, and his eyes landed on a large orange beverage dispenser. It had a giant black G in the middle for Gatorade with a lightning bolt through it, but someone had taken a black marker and, after the big G, had written, *OD loves you*.

By the time he reached the only beverage option other than hot coffee, three women had converged on him. If they could even be considered old enough to be women. He wasn’t sure. They were all giggling, and one of them asked for an autograph. Yet they held nothing to sign.

“Of course. Let me get these drinks delivered and then I would be happy to. Do you have a pen?”

The question surprised them. One of them chirped, “I’ll find one!”

“And do you have something for me to sign?”

Sometimes women asked him to sign their actual skin, but he didn’t think that he was in danger of that at a church picnic.

“We’ll find that too!”

He filled three small cups with tepid yellow liquid. It didn’t take long because the cups weren’t much bigger than shot glasses. He picked them all up, spun, and made his way through the crowd.

Jenna raised an eyebrow. “Making friends, I see.”

“It comes with the territory. I don’t mind. If people didn’t love the show, I wouldn’t have a job. I’ll be right back.” He headed back toward the cooler that Gatorade and God shared, and they soon joined him. One handed him a thick permanent black marker, and another one tried to hand him a Bible.

He did not take it. He looked up at her. “I don’t understand.”

“You can sign it!”

He didn’t want to embarrass her, but he really wasn’t comfortable signing a Bible. “I think we can come up with something better than that.” Or at least something a little less sacrilegious.

One of the girls shoved her phone at him. “Sign my phone!”

“Isn’t there any paper around here?”

“Great idea!” She turned and ran, leaving the other two to wait.

He stood there awkwardly in their small triangle, trying to give off pleasant vibes when what he really wanted to do was get back to Jenna and Emmylou.

“I love the show,” one of them said. “I’ve watched it like a hundred times.”

He hoped that didn’t mean that she’d watched the whole thing through a hundred times. “Thank you.”

“You’re a great character, but Casey is my favorite.”

“I hear that a lot.”

She giggled as if he had said something quite clever and then she kept giggling until her friend returned.

As he gratefully signed the wrinkled piece of mustard-yellow construction paper, he became aware that a line was forming behind this threesome.

He looked past the line at Jenna who looked amused at the predicament that he’d suddenly found himself in.



He was never going to get to try that fluffy green stuff or the mac an chee.



## Chapter 18

“Gunner’s here,” Jenna said as she pulled into the law office’s parking lot. He slid out of his truck and gave Denver a stalwart nod. Jenna set Emmylou down so she could unlock the door, and then she held it open while everyone stepped inside.

She led them to the conference room, which was far bigger than her office. Emmylou jumped into a chair and started to spin. Jenna started to correct her, but then Denver joined her by spinning in his own chair, and she didn’t have the energy to scold two of them.

“Make yourself comfortable. I will go get the paperwork.” On her way to the office, she heard a weird noise. It hadn’t seemed to come from the conference room, but she convinced herself that it had. There was no one else here on a Sunday.

When she rejoined Gunner and Denver, she was surprised it was still just the two of them. “Where is everyone?”

“Tucker went to pick up Ryker,” Gunner said. “And Kash isn’t coming.”

“I will be getting his signature tomorrow morning,” Jenna said.

Denver looked up quickly. “You’re going to see Kash tomorrow?”

Maybe she shouldn’t have said that in front of him. “I am. Just to get his signature on this.”

“Can I tag along?”

“Not really. They’ll let his lawyer in, but he needs to put you on the approval list for visitors.”

“I know. You told me that, but can’t you bring a friend?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I cannot bring a *friend*. It’s a *jail*.”

He dropped it, but she had a feeling the conversation wasn’t over. She looked at Gunner. “Any news about Colton?”

“I’m right here,” came a voice from the hallway, and Colton breezed through the doorway. “I’m sorry that I’m late.”

“No harm done. We are still waiting on Tucker and Ryker,” she said.

Colton looked surprised. “Did Ryker say that he would come?”

She had no idea. She hadn’t heard otherwise. She looked at Denver. “Why wouldn’t he?”

Denver looked uncomfortable and shrugged. “Haven’t seen him in a while, but I guess the scars are pretty bad.”

“In a while?” Colton repeated. “You mean that you haven’t seen him since the fire? You didn’t go visit him in the hospital, and you haven’t checked on him since? Is that what you mean by *in a while*?”

Denver looked properly shamed, and Jenna didn’t know what to do about it.

She was grateful when Colton stopped talking and sat down.

But then Colton looked at her and explained, “Ryker doesn’t go anywhere. He doesn’t like to be seen.”

“But surely the people who know him know what the scars came from,” she said, trying to tread carefully. “He’s a hero.”

“He does not feel like a hero, I can assure you,” Colton said. And then he almost mumbled, “People died.”

She knew that. She also knew that a lot of people hadn’t died. Thanks to the courage of men who chose to fight fires.

Denver studied his hands as Emmylou tried to get his chair spinning again. Jenna moved to pry Emmylou’s little fingers off his armrest. “Thank you all for being so understanding about me having my daughter here. I don’t usually work on Sundays.”

“Speaking of work,” Gunner said, “can you help me get the paperwork sorted to make the goat rescue a non-profit?”

She nodded readily. “So you’re really going to do it?”

Gunner shrugged. “Deedee Bannon has sort of talked me into it. I mean, it’s happening either way, so might as well make it official so people like her can help.”

Jenna glanced at the doorway to make sure Tucker and Ryker weren’t on their way through it before turning back to Gunner. “How did you ever get started with that? Why goats?”

Colton groaned. “It’s a long story.”

Gunner gave him a stern look. “No, it’s not.” He looked at her. “The goats just sort of started showing up.” He shrugged. “So I just started feeding them.”

That made sense. The look on Colton’s face suggested that there was more to it, but she did not press.

A bang sounded in the hallway.

Everyone looked toward the door.

“Is that Tucker?” Colton asked.

“I don’t think so.” It had come from the wrong direction.

As she was wondering whether she should leave the room to investigate, she heard an obnoxious giggle, and her stomach turned.

That was Crystal.

And if Crystal was there on a Sunday, she probably wasn’t alone. Jenna hurried out into the hallway to try to stop them from embarrassing her.

Crystal let out an unnecessary shriek when she saw Jenna, and Jenna’s father froze in his tracks. It was a Sunday, so he was dressed down. He wore a loose-fitting baby blue polo shirt and white tennis shoes, but he still had on his white dress pants. He looked absolutely ridiculous.

“What are you doing here?” He boomed, and part of her shrank back.

She worked to keep her voice even as she said, “I work here.”

“On a Sunday?”

She eyed Crystal, who looked smug when she should have looked guilty. “You’re here on a Sunday.”

Behind Jenna, Emmylou let out a playful screech. Maybe she’d gotten Denver spinning again.

“The baby is here again?” Frank said, and Crystal’s smugness deepened.

“She’s not a baby anymore, and yes, she’s here. It’s a Sunday.”

One of the brothers coughed, and Jenna winced. Now she was going to be in trouble.

“You have a man in here?” he yelled. The hypocrisy was so rich. The fact that her father didn’t know that he was being a hypocrite made it unbearable.

“Not a man. Clients.”

“So you’ve got the baby here with clients.” Her father looked over her shoulder. “Oh.” His face relaxed. “It’s you. That makes sense.”

She turned to see that Denver had stepped into the hallway. “No, it’s not only me, and I really wish you would stop accusing me of disrespecting Jenna.”

Her father’s eyes widened in surprise, and his lips started flapping before words came out. “I didn’t accuse you of anything.” Then his eyes narrowed. “What is this about? What are you working on, Jenna?”

“I tried to tell you,” Crystal said. “She’s trying to defend that criminal Bridge pro bono.”

“Pro bono?” he boomed. “We don’t work pro bono in this office.”

Jenna tried to explain that she was going to be paid for her services, but he didn’t give her a chance. He stormed into the conference room.

She followed, though she didn’t know what to say to make this madness stop. She was deeply embarrassed.

“Which one of these are you defending?”

“None of them,” Jenna tried. “This has nothing to do with the criminal case.”

“Then what are you doing here?” This time his voice boomed so loud, it seemed the room shook.

Denver stepped between her and her father. “You need to lower your voice.” There was something severe in his voice, something she hadn’t heard before.

Her father stepped closer to Denver. “I don’t care who you are in Hollywood. This is my office, and you need to back up, son.”

“I don’t live in Hollywood.”

Colton blinked in surprise.

Denver took a small step closer. They were practically nose to nose. “What is the matter with you? She’s your daughter. Don’t you know that family matters? The end will come for you just like it always does for everyone and all you will have is your daughter and your granddaughter. But if you don’t shape up, you’re not going to have anything at all.”

“Did you just threaten me?”

Denver chuckled lightly. “Don’t be ridiculous, and stop trying to intimidate me. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

Frank looked as if he’d been slapped. He stood there, still, for so long that she wondered if she should say something, but finally he found some composure. He took a step back and hissed, “Get out of my building.”

“Dad, this is my client.”

“Not anymore.” Again with the hissing. She didn’t think she’d ever heard him hiss before.

“Mr. Bridge ...” She tried to make her voice strong. “Would you please take a seat?” She did not know how Denver would respond to that request, but he quickly sat beside Emmylou, who looked scared. Jenna looked at Crystal. “If you two would excuse me, we have work to do here.” She started to swing the door shut, though they were still on the wrong side of it. Crystal slipped out through the opening, but

Frank stood there glaring at her. This was unusual. She didn't usually stand up to him, but Denver had emboldened her.

"Come on, Frank ..." Crystal stuck her hand back into the room and waved it around like a teenager in a high school hallway. Unbelievably, Frank took it and let himself be led out of the conference room.

Jenna shut the door and then hurried to Emmylou and scooped her up, mostly to comfort her daughter, but also to receive the comfort that came from holding her child. She hugged Emmylou tight and ran her hand down over her soft hair. "It's okay, honey. Grownups disagree sometimes." Emmylou relaxed in her arms, and Jenna slid her back into the chair. Denver reached over and ruffled her hair.

Colton caught Jenna's eye. "I'm so sorry. It must be rough to deal with that."

She nodded, trying to keep her composure. "Thank you. Now about Tucker and Ryker. At what point do we give up?"

The conference door opened, and Tucker stepped inside. "I'm sorry. I couldn't get Ryker to come."

"Did he ever say he was going to come?" Colton asked.

"I don't know. I thought he did," Tucker said, "but maybe I misunderstood. Anyway, can I run the deed out to him to sign after we're done?"

"It's not that simple," Jenna said. "I would have to go with you, and we would need a notary."

Denver scanned the room. "Who's the notary now?"

"Sheila lives nearby. I was going to call her as soon as we were ready to sign, but I'm not excited about asking her to ride out to Ryker's house." She didn't even know where that was.

"You're off the hook, Tucker," Denver said, and then to Jenna, "I'll take you out. I'll even invite Sheila along. I can probably be more persuasive than you."

"Uh ... I don't think he's going to let Sheila in," Tucker said as if they were all slow. "I don't think he's going to let



anyone in.” He looked at Jenna. “There’s got to be a way around this for people with ... certain issues.”

They froze there in their circle, each lost in thought.

Gunner broke the silence. “Let’s just drop it.”

Everyone looked up at him. “What?” Denver said. He looked horrified. He’d flown a thousand miles for this.

“I appreciate you being willing to give me your share, but I’m not sure I want it. You don’t have to do anything, Denver. You can still be on the paper. I won’t expect anything out of you. But let’s leave it the way it is. The six of us own it.”

“But I don’t want to own it.”

Gunner gave him a grave look. “If someone were paying you for your share, then I could understand, but you being in such a hurry to get rid of something for nothing? I got to say, that doesn’t feel good.”

“What do you mean?”

Gunner looked down at the stack of papers Jenna had set on the table. “If that deed is the only thing tying you to this family, then maybe we shouldn’t make it so easy for you to untie yourself.”



## Chapter 19

Denver woke up early on Monday morning, got himself ready for his day, packed up his bag, and then sat in the uncomfortable motel chair, staring at his phone, wondering when it was no longer too early to call Jenna.

She had acted weird the night before, and he felt so bad for wasting her time, drawing up a deed and setting up a meeting on a Sunday for nothing. Of course he was going to pay her, but still, her time was worth more than money. He had apologized the night before, and she'd told him not to worry about it, but still. Figuring that she probably wanted to be done with the Bridge brothers altogether, he had told her that he would find another ride back to the airport. He had no idea if one of his brothers would help him out, but he was willing to try.

But she had insisted that she would take him.

Now he wondered if she still planned on meeting with Kash. She didn't need to anymore, right?

It was seven o'clock. Though she was probably up getting Emmylou ready for day care, it was probably still too early to call.

He considered going to the jail himself and trying to charm his way in. He'd used his charm on similar missions, but he'd never tried to get into a *jail*.

His knee bounced up and down, shaking the whole chair. He couldn't just sit here; he was going to go nuts.

His phone chimed, and he sat up so suddenly that he knocked it on the floor. He lunged for it and opened the message to see it was from Jenna. "I'm so sorry. I forgot what time you need to be at the airport."

This was his chance. He dialed her number.

She answered with suspicion in her voice. He tried to laugh it off. "Sorry to answer your text with a phone call. I

know you're busy." He could hear Emmylou in the background. "Hi, cutie pie! Are you still going to see Kash?"

"Did you just call me cutie pie, or did you ask my toddler if she's going to jail?"

Her quip flummoxed him.

"Just kidding. Yes, I'm still going to meet with him. I don't want to leave him hanging."

"I don't want to annoy you, Jenna. I really don't. You've explained to me why I can't go with you, and I get that, but man, this might be my only shot. I really wish I could change your mind."

"Your time isn't as limited as you think. He's not going to prison. I'm getting him out."

"I know, but ..."

"Oh, right. You're saying that this is time sensitive because of your schedule? Not because of his. You want to see him and ease your conscience before you go back to your big-time life?"

Good grief. "Have you been hanging out with Tucker?"

She let out a short staccato laugh. "Sorry. I haven't had much coffee yet. I'm not going to smuggle you into the jail. Now what time do you need to be at the airport?"

"Eleven. But you wouldn't be smuggling. I was the one changing the deed, right? It would make sense for me to be there when he signs."

She hesitated. "But we're not changing the deed."

"I know, and I'm not asking you to do anything untoward. But I could go with you to tell him that the deal is off, that I'm officially going into the goat rescue business."

She hesitated again.

"If anyone gives you any trouble, I'll bow out."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"I don't know. You should."

“Maybe. Let me think about it. I’ll get Emmylou to day care, and then I’ll pick you up. But you might end up sitting in the jail parking lot.”

He nearly cheered with joy. He said goodbye, went to the lobby to find some coffee, and then waited outside.

It turned into a long wait, but that was okay. By the time he climbed into her car, he was ready to sit down again. He snapped his seatbelt into place. “Thanks for this.”

An upbeat song played from her phone through her car speakers. “Don’t thank me yet.” She looked at him. “Are you pushing this so much because you think you have to walk your talk?”

“What?”

“You told my father that family matters. So now do you feel pressured to mend things with Kash?”

Wow, that made him feel exposed. “You were the first one to say that family matters, remember? I didn’t know that I was going to say that to your father. It just popped out. I was so angry. I can’t believe the way he treats you. So yeah, I guess maybe you’ve convinced me that family does matter. Though it’s hard to imagine what that looks like for the Bridge brothers. We’re at each other’s throats for a reason. My brothers aren’t exactly saints.”

She chuckled. “And you are?”

“No, definitely not. A saint wouldn’t have sent you on this wild goose chase.”

“I told you that it’s okay.”

“I know. You’ve been very gracious, but I still feel bad. I just can’t believe we’ve ended up right back where we started.”

“First of all, I’ve been well paid for this wild goose chase, and second, we’re not back where we started. We’ve figured out what Gunner wants, and now he’s starting a goat rescue. We have some direction.”

Denver shook his head. He couldn't believe this was happening. "Well, just so you know, I'm relenting. I will be a one-sixth owner of a goat farm. I'll stop trying to take my name off that stupid property."

"Good for you. And besides, if it weren't for the wild goose chase, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to help Kash."

He was surprised to hear her call it an opportunity. "Do you really think you can get the charges dropped?"

"It's not official yet, but I'm ninety-nine percent sure. The assistant DA has been quite reasonable. The only evidence they had was the testimony of the clerk, and I got him to admit that he had smoked a joint less than an hour before the incident."

"Are you serious?"

"I'm afraid so. So he's not exactly a reliable witness, and though he's still sticking to his story, he sounds far from confident when he does. I think we're going to end up with a nice long probation with some community service, and I hope that he takes this for the warning that it is. We might not be so lucky next time."

Denver noted her use of the word *we* and thought it was funny that she really had become the official Bridge family lawyer. He hoped that Kash would not make her regret that.

The upbeat song gave way to an even peppier one. "What is this, your happy playlist?"

"It's my Monday playlist, so yes, maybe I do try to psyche myself up for the week." She reached to turn the volume knob. "This is one of my favorites."

Denver didn't recognize it. "What is it?"

"It's called, 'It's a Good Day for a Good Day.'"

Denver chuckled. "That's pretty profound."

"It is, isn't it? I mean look around." She swung her arm at the scenery around them. "The sun is shining. It's the most

beautiful place on earth. It is a very good day for me to have myself a good day.”

He chuckled. “It is beautiful,” he admitted. And it seemed more beautiful seeing it with her. “But I’m not sure it’s the *most* beautiful. I can think of a few other contenders. You should see New Mexico at sunset.”

“Maybe someday.”

He looked at her. Really? Would she consider visiting? He turned his eyes back to the road before she could catch him gawking. It was a good song, but he didn’t think he was going to have a good day. First, he wasn’t very excited about hanging out at the county jail. He wasn’t excited about trying to have a heart-to-heart with a brother who infuriated him. And most of all, he wasn’t excited about flying away from Jenna again.

He would do his best to have a good day, but it didn’t seem likely.

“You don’t like the song.”

Was that a question or an accusation? “I do, but I was thinking that this feels more like a bittersweet day than a good day. I mean, I hope *you* have a good one, but as for me ...”

“Bittersweet? What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, exactly. Just feels that way. The scenery is sweet. You’re sweet. And it is sweet to be going home. But there’s also a layer of bitterness. Maybe because I’m leaving West Hope again.”

“Ever since I met you, all you’ve been trying to do is leave West Hope.”

“You’re right. Maybe things have changed a little since then.”

“Maybe. But you should drop the bitter.” She reached over and squeezed his hand. “Have yourself a sweet day, Denver Bridge.”





## Chapter 20

Jenna had relented and told Denver he could try to go into the jail with her. And as he'd predicted, he had no trouble charming the female corrections officer behind the fake glass window.

Jenna was both amused and annoyed. In a whisper, the woman in uniform asked him for his autograph, which he graciously provided while Jenna stood there awkwardly.

Eventually, they were moved to a small drab room to wait for Kash.

"This is pretty awful," Denver said, taking in the room.

"I don't think it's supposed to be pleasant."

"No, I guess not." He paused. "You see it on TV, and it looks grungy and depressing, but being here in real life, I can actually feel the ..."

"The grunginess and depression?" Jenna offered.

He chuckled dryly. "Yes, I suppose that says it all."

A corrections officer brought Kash in and gave Denver a long, suspicious look, but he didn't ask him what he was doing there. He asked Jenna if she was all set, and she gave him a nod, so he left Kash in her care. Kash didn't look so good. He had lost weight, and he looked tired.

"Are you feeling okay?"

"Still kickin'." He tried to smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. He looked at Denver. "What are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you too."

Kash stopped trying to smile. "What is he doing here?" he asked Jenna.

"Here's the situation," Jenna said. "The deal is off. Gunner has decided he doesn't want Denver's portion of the land."

Kash threw himself back in his chair. "Oh, for crying out loud! I am never going to unload it then."

Maybe that was a good thing, for now. A sudden influx of cash might be a little too tempting for a man in recovery.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Kash said, “and you’re wrong. I don’t want to party the money away. If I’m going to actually try to be an adult who doesn’t get thrown in jail, I should probably have a place to live of my own and get a real job. That stuff costs money.”

She wasn’t sure getting a job cost money, but she didn’t argue. “Good for you.”

“I can help with that,” Denver said, surprising both of them.

Kash let out a bewildered laugh. “What?”

Denver drew in a sharp breath. “Being around all of you guys, and you having such a close call has really made me think about things.” He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “I know we’re never going to be the Brady Bunch, but maybe we could do better than we’re doing. You’re my brother, and if you’re really going to try to help yourself, then of course I’ll help you too.”

“I don’t want your charity, Hollywood.”

Denver leaned back, not seeming surprised. “Fair enough. The offer stands if you change your mind.”

Denver might not have been surprised with Kash’s reaction, but Jenna was. What was this kid thinking? She couldn’t read his mind, but he was sure glaring at his older brother. She needed to change the subject. “Anyway, so I didn’t need to come see you today, but I didn’t want to leave you hanging. I knew you were expecting me, so I wanted to at least tell you what was happening.”

Kash nodded as his glare faded. “I appreciate that. Lotta guys in here complaining about lawyers not showing up when they say they will.”

“I hear a lot of attorneys juggle a lot of cases at once.”

“I was glad to hear that she was still coming,” Denver said, “because I wanted to tag along. I’ve got to get back to filming,

but I wanted to see you before I left.”

Kash furrowed his brow. “What angle are you playing, man?”

“No angle, I promise. I know you haven’t had an easy life, Kash. None of us have. But life can get better. I’m living proof.”

“Your life proves nothing to me.” He turned to Jenna. “Are we done here?”

She didn’t want to be. This had not gone at all like she thought it would. Maybe she’d been expecting more of a Brady Bunch vibe. Maybe she was a naive fool.

“Kash, I’m sorry,” Denver said.

Kash’s expression softened. He’d been about to get up, but now he settled back in his chair. But he still didn’t look at his brother. He seemed to be focusing on the wall behind Denver, somewhere above his head.

“I’m sorry for not being a part of your life. I’ve got a lot of painful memories here, and I just tried to get away from them. I haven’t been a very good brother.”

“Isn’t it ironic that the best brother we have isn’t even really our brother?” Kash said.

“He doesn’t have any of Dad’s DNA swimming around inside of him causing havoc.”

This made Kash smile a little.

Denver continued, “And he’s as much a brother as any of us.”

Kash’s small smile twisted back into a sneer. “I know. I was just trying to make a point. I may be in jail right now, but you’re not exactly my role model for ethics.”

Denver scowled. “What does that mean?”

“It means that I don’t even know you, so don’t come in here and lecture me like you’re some sort of saint.” Kash stood up and looked at the door. “Thanks for coming in, Jenna. I’ve got to get going. I’ve got a lot to do today.”



## Chapter 21

Denver fell into the car, suddenly exhausted. “I’m sorry,” he said when Jenna gracefully slid behind the wheel. “I never should have asked you to do that.”

“Well, now you know. Now you won’t go home thinking that you missed some great opportunity to bond with him.”

Denver wanted to keep talking to her, but he had nothing to say, and he fell into a grumpy silence.

“But you know what? I think it was worth your while.”

Had she been in the same room as him?

“You extended an olive branch. You did what you could do, and your offer to help was very generous. Whether he allows you into his life is now on him, but you’ve done something about it.” She glanced at him. “I’m impressed.”

“Weren’t you the one who told me to do something about it?”

“Yes, but I knew then that I was asking you to do something hard, and I am impressed that you did.”

The Good-Day-for-a-Good-Day song started playing again, and Denver winced. This wasn’t a good day or a sweet day. Only bitter. Like a mouthful of dandelions.

“Sorry. The playlist is on shuffle. Do you want me to skip it?”

He knew it was one of her favorites. “No way.” He reached out to turn it up, and she giggled.

“We’re a few minutes ahead of schedule. Do you need me to stop anywhere before the airport?”

He glanced at the clock. “I think I’m okay. Thank you.” He could get another coffee once he found his gate. He almost laughed at the thought. Like it was going to be hard to find his gate at the Rapid City Airport. “We do have a little bit of wiggle room, but I don’t want to chance being late.”

She blew out a puff of air. “It’s so ridiculous that you need to be there two hours early at an airport this small.”

“Maybe, but it sure would be embarrassing to miss my flight because I’m stuck in the world’s shortest TSA line.”

She laughed again. “I doubt it’s the world’s shortest. Wyoming has airports, right?”

“I have no idea. Does anyone ever go to Wyoming?”

She looked at him. “Are you serious?”

“What?”

“Okay, Mr. *Cheyenne*.”

Oh yeah. He laughed. “Just because I play a character who lives in Cheyenne doesn’t mean I’ve actually been there.”

“Well, you should. You know, for research.”

“Yes, I suppose I should.” He wanted to ask her to go with him. They could explore Wyoming’s biggest city together. But he didn’t. She obviously wasn’t interested in him romantically. He needed to let this go. Get back home and get on the social scene. His introverted self wouldn’t enjoy that, but it would be distracting.

“Why is your show based in Cheyenne?”

“Because no one’s been there, so no one watching will notice we’re filming in the New Mexico desert.”

She laughed. “I admire the fact that you can be funny even when you’re having a bad day.”

Between the music and the conversation, he wasn’t sure he was having a bad day. It certainly wasn’t good, but was it bad? Could any day be bad with Jenna around? “I don’t know why the creators chose Cheyenne. I suppose people still find the Wild West romantic, even if it’s set in present day, and even if the story is completely unrealistic.”

“Is the *Cheyenne* story really that wild?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, it is. You should watch it.”

“Yeah. Maybe I should.”

Was she actually considering it? He was still analyzing that question when she pulled onto Airport Road. His heart sank. It was time to say goodbye to Jenna Bender. For real this time. Even if he was destined to own one-sixth of a goat rescue, he still had no reason to come visit it.

She pulled up beside the curb, and he panicked. Should he say goodbye now, or was she getting out of the car? If he said goodbye while they were still in the car, and she had planned to get out of the car, then she would think that he didn't want her to get out of the car. And he did. He wanted her to get out of the car and get on the plane with him, but that wasn't going to happen.

*She's not turning off the engine.* Okay, so she wasn't going to get out of the car. He opened his mouth, hoping something charming would come out, but then she opened the car door. *Okay, she is getting out.* This was exhausting. She came around the car and surprised him by wrapping her arms around him. He returned her embrace and held her there, wanting to freeze the moment.

She pulled back a little to look up at him, and he became aware of how close his lips were to hers. Closer than they'd ever been. Closer than they were ever going to be again.

She was talking, and he forced himself to focus on her words, but he only caught the last few. "... wrong about you." Oh no. What had her first words been? He couldn't ask her to repeat herself. It's not like he hadn't heard her. He was only inches away from her.

Only inches.

And it was so tempting to close that gap.

She was staring at him expectantly. He had no idea what she'd said. He had no idea what to say. He really only had one choice. He pulled her closer and gently pressed his lips to hers, knowing full well that she probably wouldn't return the kiss but wanting to give her the sweetest kiss she'd ever had.

But he'd been wrong. Her arms tightened around him, and she tilted her sweet face to give him better access to her full

lips. He kissed her like his life depended on it and would have kept kissing her until he died of old age, but someone honked their car horn.

He jumped and pulled away, assuming that the honker was honking at them and not wanting to get the most beautiful woman in the world run over. But the honker was waving at a dog in the middle of the road.

Jenna laughed softly and leaned into his chest. “Only in South Dakota is there a dog clogging up the drop off lane.”

“We’re lucky it’s not cattle.”

She laughed again, and then looked up at him, her eyes sparkling. “That was some kiss, cowboy.”

“Thank you, but you know I’m not a real cowboy.”

“Yeah.” She sighed wistfully and straightened up, pulling away a little. The spell was broken. “You only play one on TV.” She let go of him and stepped back. “Our timing really stinks, doesn’t it?”

He didn’t know about that. He was willing to rearrange time for her. “Yeah, I guess it does.”

She took another step back, and he felt his joy slipping away. “No regrets, though. I’m really glad to have known you, Zion Denver Bridge.” She smiled playfully.

“You as well, Jenna Bender.” He adjusted the shoulder strap on his carry-on. “Say goodbye to Emmylou for me, okay?”

Something flickered in her eyes, then—something not playful—but it was only a flicker and then it was gone. “Take care of yourself, Denver. I’ll see you on the flat screen.” She turned then, her hair bouncing after her, and he turned too. He couldn’t bear to watch her drive away. He needed to focus on moving his feet. It was time to get back to his life. His very good life that he had worked very hard to create.





## Chapter 22

Jenna tucked her sleeping daughter in and then tiptoed out of her room. She plopped down in front of the TV and pressed “continue watching” on Season Two of *Cheyenne*.

She’d been marathoning the melodramatic show since Denver had flown south a week ago, and she would never admit it to anyone, but she was *enthralled*. The writing was all over the place, the plot holes were big enough to drive a Mack Truck through, and the scenarios were completely unrealistic, but she couldn’t remember watching a more entertaining show.

One thing the show had going for it—likely the only thing other than the gorgeous sweeping landscapes—was the acting. And it wasn’t only Denver. She was no expert, but all the actors seemed top notch.

Jack Black was not a good man, and he was so glaringly different from Denver that she was now impressed by his acting chops on top of everything else.

She sighed. She needed to stop thinking about this man, and about *that kiss*, and watching this show wasn’t going to make that happen any faster. But stopping watching was not an option.

Why had he kissed her like that? She’d gone over and over it, and she couldn’t figure it out. That kiss had been so full of emotion, so tender, so sincere—she’d never been kissed like that. Not that she’d kissed a lot of men, and she hadn’t kissed anyone since Emmylou had been born. She shuddered. The man who’d given her Emmylou had *certainly* never kissed her like that.

Did Denver actually *like* her? Like for real? Or had that just been a goodbye kiss? Did TV stars just run around kissing people like that? She really didn’t know. It didn’t make sense. She would think that he *must* like her if he’d kissed her like that, but there was no way that he could want a future with her. He was a big star, and he lived a thousand miles away. Plus, he’d done nothing to indicate that he thought of her in that

way. Sure, he'd asked her out when they'd first met, but that could have been out of sheer boredom, and that was a long time ago.

And now he was gone. He'd left her without saying anything to suggest that he ever wanted to see her again.

So he must not want to.

She wanted to keep in touch with him, but she wouldn't try. She would honor what he wanted. She'd had some fun with a famous, handsome, pretend cowboy, and now it was time to get on with her life—

—which she would do just as soon as she finished all nine seasons of *Cheyenne*. And then continue watching the current season. Okay, fine, she would keep being a Zion Denver fan until the show was canceled.

But that was all. A fan. Not really a friend. Certainly not a girlfriend.

And like a proper fan, when the commercials came on, she typed his name into the search bar on her phone and started scrolling. Seeing him like this, *not* in character, made the whole thing hurt worse, and she was just about to put the phone down, when one particular picture caught her eye. She clicked on it and then gasped at the headline: "Party Boy Zion Denver Goes Too Far."

The article had yesterday's date on it. Her stomach cramped.

The photograph showed him in shorts and a t-shirt, splayed out on a pool chair, surrounded by beautiful women in bikinis. She might have been able to stomach this—he was a star, and it was summer in the desert—but one woman in a particularly skimpy bikini was actually on his lap and pressing her lips to his.

Against her better judgment, she zoomed in for a better look, which brought an ounce of cold comfort. His eyes were open, and he almost looked annoyed, but still, he was sitting there buried in mostly naked bodies, and the article's title promised doom. She scanned the poorly written tripe. Co-star

Bethany Cartwright had told this “reporter” that Zion Denver had sexually harassed her on set. She was demanding that the studio write him off the show, or she was going to leave.

Jenna didn't even know who Bethany Cartwright was. She wasn't far enough into the show yet.

She felt sick. She put her phone to sleep and turned the TV off. She was a fool, pining after somebody like that. She should have listened to her instincts. Her first assumptions had been spot on.

Denver Bridge was a creep.



## Chapter 23

The set was unusually quiet when Denver walked into work. He stopped and scanned the studio trying to figure out what was going on. Not everyone was there yet, but those who were there were staring at him. A few of the women looked disgusted. A few of the men looked amused. His stomach sank. Whatever was going on, he was afraid it involved him. His costar John, who played his heartthrob brother Casey, headed toward him. “I can tell by the look on your face that you don’t know.”

“Know what?”

John glanced up at all the looky-loos. “Let’s step outside.”

Whatever this was, Denver didn’t want to run and hide from it, but he also really wanted to know what was going on, so he followed John outside. It was still early, but the sun was high enough to warm his face. He expected it would get a lot hotter before the day was through. Denver stopped once they cleared the doorway, but John kept walking. “How far do we have to go?”

John went another ten steps and then stopped and pivoted. “It’s Bethany. She has accused you of sexual harassment.”

Denver barked out a laugh. “Are you serious? Accused me to who?”

“To anyone who will listen. The rumor is that she started a few days ago but hasn’t been able to get anyone to pay her any attention.”

“Good. I guess my reputation speaks for itself.”

John nodded. “We can hope so.” He bit his lip and stared off at the horizon. “Mr. Hermit goes to one pool party and then this happens.”

“First of all, I’m not a hermit. But you’re right. I knew I shouldn’t have gone to that thing.” Another of their costars had drunk way too much and then forced a kiss on him. It had been awkward ever since, and he regretted ever leaving his

house. No fictional friend had ever forced a drunken kiss on him ever. “So why is everyone staring at me this morning if this whole thing started a few days ago?”

“I don’t think anyone knew about it until last night. She posted a bunch of stuff on social media, and a few of the gossip websites got hold of it.”

Denver groaned. “You can’t be serious.”

“Sorry, man. The producers can’t ignore it now. I mean, I’m sure they’re going to find in your favor, but they have to react because she’s made such a big splash.”

Denver had never liked the woman. Now he really didn’t like her.

“Any idea what brought this on?” John asked.

“Yeah, I might have given her some lip about what a brat she is. I was only trying to keep her from getting fired. I was trying to help. Also, I wanted her to be less annoying. Obviously, I failed.”

John laughed and kicked at the dirt. “Never offer free advice man. It will always come back and bite you.”

Denver chuckled humorlessly. “Ain’t that the truth. So now what do I do?” He didn’t expect John to know, but he sure didn’t have any ideas.

“I don’t think you need to do anything. Keep your head down and keep working like you always do. I’m sure they’ll come talk to you when they’re ready. And I’m also sure that nothing will come of this. I just thought you might want to know why everyone was staring. And when I saw your deer in the headlights look, I knew you were clueless.”

“Usually I prefer being clueless.” He would’ve preferred not knowing about this now if he could get away with it. “I’ll be right in. I’m going to call my lawyer.”

John laughed. “You already have a lawyer?”

“Not really. She’s a lawyer, and she probably can’t help with this, but she gives great advice.”

Denver waited for John to get all the way inside before dialing Jenna's number. It rang and rang, but she didn't pick up. He tried the office number, but Sheila told him that Jenna was unavailable. He texted Jenna. "Can you call me when you get a chance, please?" He stared at the phone for a minute, hoping she'd answer immediately, but his phone stayed silent.





## Chapter 24

Tucker Bridge looked at his phone and groaned when he saw that it was Deedee Bannon calling again. There was a time when Tucker would have been pretty excited to have the beautiful billionaire calling him around the clock, but she had gone and gotten married, which made her phone calls significantly less exciting.

How had he gotten roped into this? This was supposed to be Gunner's thing, but Gunner didn't answer the phone at all, so Deedee had taken to calling the next best thing because at least Tucker answered *once* in a while. The trouble was that he knew what she wanted, and he knew that he couldn't deliver.

Deedee Bannon was more excited about this new goat rescue than Gunner himself. It was her idea to have a grand opening, and Gunner had absolutely freaked out. He did not want people traipsing around his property judging him and poking at his goats. It had taken some effort, but Tucker had convinced Deedee that a public goat rescue was a bad idea, so she and Gunner had reached a compromise. They were going to rent the town park for a kickoff fundraiser for the New Bridge Brothers' Ranch Goat Rescue—which was the worst name ever invented, and Tucker was still trying to come up with something better.

One of the Bannons' wranglers would load up Gunner's best-behaved goats and bring them to town for a little petting zoo. The idea made Tucker's skin crawl, but Gunner had okayed it.

The only one excited about this at all was Deedee. The goats certainly didn't care. Shane Bannon and some friends were going to provide live music, she would provide games and activities for the kids, and she would allow merchants to set up tents to peddle their wares as long as they pledged a percentage of their profit back to the rescue.

The phone stopped ringing. Oh good, she'd given up.

Deedee was of the mind that Denver should be part of the fundraiser. She thought he would be a big draw and that he could sign autographs all day while people gave money to the goats.

Tucker had explained to her that this was not going to work. Leaving out the part that Denver was kind of an arrogant jerk, Tucker instead explained that Denver was in his busy filming season and that he lived in New Mexico. He was not going to be able to come spend the day in West Hope signing autographs for people he grew up with.

His phone rang again. Fine! He answered it. "What?"

"Having a bad day?" Deedee asked but then didn't let him answer. "I did it!"

"You did what?"

"Denver is coming."

What? How had she managed that?

"The tough part is, I've already sent the press releases and posted all the posters."

Tucker didn't know what to say. "Then I guess he'll be a pleasant surprise when people show up for some other reason."

"I guess so. I wanted to let you know so that you didn't keep harassing him."

Tucker had not harassed him. Tucker hadn't asked him at all. "I will not harass him."

"Good. See you this weekend."

"How did you get him to come?"

"I asked."

"What?" There had to be more to it than that.

"I don't think that he was very excited about the shaking hands and signing autographs part, but he wanted to support his brothers. Oh, and he's bringing some *Cheyenne* memorabilia to auction off!"

“Like what?”

“I’m not really sure. I don’t watch the show, but I guess there’s a hat that a favorite character wears? There are some clothes, and he said something about a signed photo, but I didn’t quite catch if he was the one who was going to sign it or if it was coming with all the cast’s signatures. Either way, it’s a good thing, I think. Okay, I have to go, but thanks for all your help, and I just wanted you to have all my updates. I’ll see you soon.”

A small dose of grief pricked his chest when she thanked him for *all* his help. He hadn’t done anything except complain. She had done most of the work, and Gunner had done the rest. But now Tucker had to go to this thing. He couldn’t have Denver be the only other brother who showed up. Tucker was grown up enough to know that this wasn’t a competition, but he still couldn’t let Denver win.



## Chapter 25

“Come on honey,” Jenna called. “It’s time to go!”  
“Come on honey,” Jenna called. “It’s time to go!”  
Emmylou came skipping out of her room. “Go see the goats?”

Jenna laughed at her excitement. “Yes. Let’s go see the goats.” She had explained that there would be games, ice cream, and face painting, but Emmylou was fixated on the goats. Jenna was not. She didn’t plan on getting anywhere near any of them.

She herded Emmylou out to the car and got her buckled in.

“Can I pet a goat?”

“We’ll see.”

Emmylou’s face fell.

Jenna sighed. “You will probably be able to pat a goat.” She shut the door thinking, *If we can find one without giant horns.*

It was a short drive across town, and it was only a few minutes after ten, so Jenna was surprised when she had trouble finding parking. Well, there was plenty of parking, but she would have to walk a bit. All the spots close to the park were taken. When she scooped her daughter out of her car seat, Emmylou was trembling with anticipation. Jenna kept a tight grip on her hand as they walked toward the park lest she squirt free and take off running. Jenna heard music and laughter, but she couldn’t hear any bloodcurdling goat screams yet. *Give it time*, she thought. As they grew closer, she scanned the crowd for a familiar face, found Tucker, and headed that way, but Emmylou yanked on her hand. “Mama, look!”

Jenna looked and couldn’t help but smile. A large pen held a bunch of baby goats. Emmylou pulled with all her might. Jenna relented and let herself be dragged toward the circle of horns and hooves. Children surrounded the circular fence, poking their hands through it or reaching over it and petting the willing recipients of their affection.

Still holding onto Emmylou's hand, Jenna stopped beside a woman who looked familiar. "Is that safe? I mean, they won't bite, right?"

"Oh heavens no. I mean they could, but they don't even have any top teeth."

"Seriously?" As if the creatures could get any freakier.

She laughed at Jenna's surprise. "Well, not in the front anyway. They have some in back, but the kids would have to stick their hands awfully far into their mouths. Without doing that, I think the worst that could happen is a little pinch, and a kid probably won't let that happen twice."

Even a "little pinch" was more than Jenna was willing to let Emmylou endure.

"The only thing you have to watch out for is their horns, and I don't think they would use them purposefully to harm a child, but who knows? I have no idea where any of these goats came from."

Jenna's eyes fell on one particularly large and curly set of horns. "How can baby goats have horns that big already?"

"Oh, these aren't babies. They're just little."

"Really? They're *very* little!"

"Yeah. I heard that the Bridges have bigger goats back at the ranch, but that these guys were easier to transport."

As Jenna scanned the area for Gunner, her eyes landed on a second smaller fence circle with only two goats in it. Her eyes locked with the terrifying eyes of one of them. That goat recognized her. "General Lee," Jenna mumbled.

"I'm sorry?" the woman said.

Jenna shook her head. "Sorry. Just thinking aloud."

Emmylou was still pulling. "Mama, please!"

"Really, it's okay. She can pet them safely."

"Do you have goats?" Jenna asked, wondering how the woman was such a goat expert.

“I don’t, but my daughter went through a goat herding phase. After her archery phase and before her bird watching phase.”

Jenna let go of Emmylou’s hand and followed her to the closest goat. Emmylou stuck one finger through the fence, but as soon as she made contact, she yanked it back as if surprised that she’d successfully touched the goat. Jenna couldn’t help but laugh. “It’s okay, honey. He likes it.” Then, fearing she was misgendering yet another goat, she took a closer look. “I mean *she* likes it.” Emmylou was looking up at her expectantly, so Jenna had to demonstrate that it was okay to pat the goat whether she wanted to or not. She reached over the fence and ran her hand down the back of the goat’s neck surprised at how soft the hair was. “See? It’s okay to touch her. Go ahead.”

“I thought you didn’t like goats,” a familiar voice said from behind.

Jenna’s skin broke out in chills as if a cold wind had just blown over her. She spun around to make sure she had heard what she thought she’d heard, and the sight of Denver Bridge’s big blue eyes was enough to warm her from head to toe. “I don’t.” She pulled her hand in.

His smile drifted a little. “Careful. They grow on you.”

She stared at him, reminding herself of that picture, reminding herself that he was a player, a fraud, a liar.

“I tried calling,” he said softly.

She didn’t know what to say. She couldn’t just start hollering at him because she’d been duped. That was more her fault than his. “I’ve been busy.”

He nodded. “I can believe that. You’re a good lawyer. Good lawyers are in high demand.”

She tried not to enjoy his praise, but it was hard. She didn’t receive praise often.

Two women approached, giggling, and asked him to autograph their hats. He obliged, and Jenna managed not to roll her eyes.



When they'd gone giggling on their merry way, he turned back to her. "Did you hear about what happened?"

"I don't know," she said thoughtfully. "Have I?"

"I have no idea." He laughed. "That's why I asked."

She shook her head, irritated. "I'm sorry, I have no idea what you're talking about. Did I hear about what, Denver?"

His eyes darkened. "Have I done something to offend you?" When she didn't answer immediately, he stepped closer. "Look, if it's about that kiss, I'm sorry."

She took a step back directly into the goat fence, lost her balance, and started to topple over backwards. *Oh please no*, she thought as she went, *I'm going to die by tiny goat horn impalement*. Something that felt an awful lot like a goat horn jabbed her right shoulder and then a deafening *blat* sounded in her left ear. *This is how I go out. Murdered by full-grown baby goats*. But then Denver had his arms around her. He stopped her downward trajectory and then gently helped her stand on her own two feet. Then he stood there with his hands on her hips in case she decided to try self-destructing again.

People nearby applauded as if the whole thing had been some street performance. Jenna thought she might die of embarrassment. Denver still wasn't letting go of her, and it felt too good to be in his arms. But then she remembered how many other women had been in his arms and she pushed him away.

"Are you okay?" His concern sounded sincere.

It was real work to believe that it wasn't. "Yeah, I'm good." She brushed her shirt and skirt off, though she didn't see anything on them. "Just embarrassed."

He was studying her. "Jenna, are you mad about the kiss?"

She looked down at Emmylou to make sure she hadn't heard and then glared at Denver. "Would you keep your voice down?"

"Sorry. Look, Jenna, what's going on?" He sounded less gentle now. He was getting angry. Good.

“Nothing’s going on. Thank you from saving me from getting stabbed by tiny goat horns.” She turned around hoping he would go away, and without invitation tears sprang to her eyes.

He stepped alongside her. “Jenna, just talk to me. What is it?”

She didn’t answer and then he said knowingly, “Oh.”

What did he think he had just figured out?



## Chapter 26

Denver studied Jenna's face. She was clearly angry. She must have heard about Bethany's bogus complaint, and she must not have heard the most important part: that it had been retracted.

"So I guess you heard about the sexual harassment complaint."

She avoided his gaze.

"Did you hear that she took it back?"

The news startled her. "Really?"

"You don't have to act so surprised."

"No ..." She looked confused. "Why would she say it only to take it back?"

"Because literally everyone came to my defense. I've never been alone with her, and everyone told the truth, that I never did the things she said I did."

Jenna looked relieved—but still a little confused. "That's really good news, Denver. I'm glad."

"That's why I called you. I mean, when I first heard about her complaint, I was a little worried, so I called you for advice. Not that I didn't want to call before, but this gave me the excuse I needed."

She stared at him, her eyes wide. "You didn't need an excuse."

"I did, though." How could he explain this to her? "I like you, Jenna, but I live in New Mexico, so I was trying to make a clean break of it. I was trying *not* to call because I was trying not to miss you. But then, well, once I had a reason to call, my resolve grew pretty weak." He looked around. "Lately West Hope just has a way of pulling me back in."

"Why are you here now?" She sounded a bit breathless.

“Deedee Bannon called me, and sometimes I have trouble saying no.” He gave her a brief sideways glance. “And I probably subconsciously wanted to see you, even if I was consciously trying to stay away.” He shrugged. “The official reason is that I am here to support Gunner. And the goats. But mostly, Gunner.”

She didn’t laugh. She didn’t do anything. She felt cold and distant. The warmth with which she had kissed him back was totally gone. If she’d ever been interested in him, if she’d ever had feelings for him, they were gone now.

He reached down and tussled Emmylou’s hair. “Do you like the goats, cutie pie?”

Emmylou nodded, but she looked shy.

Denver had an idea, but he didn’t want to get in trouble with Deedee. He scanned the area to make sure no one would catch him and then said to Jenna, “Can you bring Emmylou over there behind the ice cream truck? I’ll meet you there in a minute.”

Jenna’s brow furrowed.

“I promise it will be worth it.”

“Okay,” Jenna said, but she didn’t sound excited.

He watched them walk away and then hurried to the two bigger goats being ignored in favor of the Nigerian dwarfs. He scooped up General Lee under one arm and started toward the ice cream truck, but General’s buddy started screaming in his wake.

Of course. Though the goat was less than fifty yards from a herd, he didn’t want to be left alone. Denver turned, trotted back, and scooped up the other goat as well. The second goat swung his head in excitement, and Denver barely dodged a concussion. He speed-walked toward the ice cream truck with only a few people giving him strange looks. General Lee had been heavy enough, but having a goat under each arm was proving to be very uncomfortable, so he was relieved to reach the ice cream truck. He spun around the back and plopped the goats down on the grass. General Lee promptly screeched and

flopped over sideways. Jenna gasped, and Emmylou giggled. He reached down and gave General a vigorous rub. “Don’t worry. She’ll wake up in a minute. In the meantime, come here. You could pet this little guy.”

The stupid goat backed away from Emmylou’s approaching hand. Denver groaned. This wasn’t going the way he’d planned. He should have known better than to plan anything that involved goats. “Okay Emmylou, I’m going to level with you.” He looked down at General Lee, still lying motionless in the grass. “I was going to bring this one because she’s the nicest one, but then her buddy here got sad, so I brought him too. But if you’ll just stick with me here for second, General Lee will wake up.” If not, he was in hot water for traumatizing a toddler with a dead fainting goat.

“What’s his name?” Emmylou pointed at the wether still backing away.

“I have no idea, but I bet it has something to do with *The Dukes of Hazzard*.”

It was clear that she had no idea what that meant.

“I suppose we could call him Rosco.” For now, anyway. Denver was certain that Gunner already had a Rosco.

General Lee lifted her head and looked at Emmylou, who giggled and fell to her knees in the grass. She reached a tentative hand out.

“Go ahead. She loves to be petted.” He took Emmylou’s little hand and ran her fingers across General’s stomach, which was swollen with fresh grass from the park. Emmylou giggled again. He took his hand away, and she kept petting General Lee’s stomach, mumbling something Denver couldn’t understand. General Lee stuck her nose out and nuzzled into Emmylou’s knee. Finally. Fast friends. He stood up.

“When did you become such a goat whisperer?”

He chuckled. “Oh hardly. I just know this one is friendly. If I was in charge of the universe, I would have put Emmylou in with all the Nigerian dwarfs, but then every other kid here

would've wanted to climb in as well. So, I figured, if I couldn't give her to the goats, I'd give a goat to her."

"Please. Don't give her any ideas."

He studied her. "Why are you mad at me, Jenna?"

"I'm not mad at you."

He wasn't going to beg, but he'd give it one last try. "I fly out in the morning. It would be really kind of you to tell me what's going on, so I don't have to use my imagination."

She didn't say anything for a long time, and he had about given up on a response when she cleared her throat. "It's stupid," she muttered.

"If it has upset you, then it's not stupid. Please don't dismiss your feelings like that."

She looked up sharply as if his words had surprised her. Then just as quickly she dropped her eyes to study the grass by her toes. "I saw a photo. It's not a big deal. You're a movie star or whatever, so obviously you party with beautiful women, but I felt a little special after that kiss and then when I saw the picture, I realized that I wasn't all that special after all." Her voice cracked, and she paused for a few seconds. "Like I said, no big deal. I'll get over it."

"What picture?"

She started to describe the photo, and he stopped her before she finished. He remembered the moment in painful detail, but he hadn't realized it had been captured on film. He groaned. "You want to know something funny?"

Her eyes were wet, and it was all he could do not take her into his arms. She turned her face away from him. "Sure." Though it was only one syllable, it vibrated with emotion.

"The only reason I went to that stupid pool party was to distract myself from thinking about you."

Her face snapped back toward his, and her eyes searched him as if she was trying to be a human lie detector.

“It’s true. I like you, Jenna. I thought I’d made that clear. But I did have to get back to my life, and I didn’t want to spend all my time crying about you, so I forced myself to go to this awful party, and yes they were making a big deal of the fact that I was there because I never go to those things and then that woman did surprise me with a sloppy drunk kiss, and it was an embarrassing awful moment of my life. Maybe the picture made it look like I was having great fun, but I assure you that I was not.”

Doubt flickered through her eyes.

He took a step away. He was tiring of having to prove himself to this woman over and over. “Jenna, I have never lied to you. When are you going to trust me?”

She didn’t answer.

“I’m not your father.”

The tears fell then, and she swiftly slapped them away with the back of her hand. Again he wanted to hold her, but he held back. “I know you’re not,” she said, her voice low and thick. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“You’re forgiven. But the next time you’re mad at me? Please yell at me or something so I can defend myself. Don’t just give me the silent treatment.”

She lifted her eyebrows but didn’t look at him. “Next time? You know ...” She sniffed. “The more time we spend together, the more we act like this thing has some future ...” She lifted her eyes to his. “But it doesn’t. I live in West Hope. You live in New Mexico. And it’s not just the miles. You live in a whole different world. Why are we doing this to ourselves?”

He shrugged. “I say let’s try it.” He hadn’t planned to say that, but the words popped out so easily, he wondered why he hadn’t said them a long time ago. He should have said them immediately after that kiss.

The intensity of her gaze made him nervous, and he looked away. “Are you serious?”



Emmylou had lain down and wrapped her arm around General's neck. They were now gazing into each other's eyes.

"Yes. Let's try it. People do long distance relationships all the time. But we should probably start with a date. Who knows? Maybe if you went on a date with me, you'd find out that you don't really like me." He didn't think this would happen, but he wanted to give her a chance to opt out.

She laughed, her eyes still shiny with tears. "I very much doubt that will be the case."

"Okay, well, I asked you on a date a long time ago, and you said no because you thought that I was some sort of con man. So let's try this again. Jenna Bender, I promise that I am not a con man. Would you go on a date with me tonight?"

She stared at him for a moment. "I have to find a sitter."

He shrugged. "Or you can bring Emmylou. I like her almost as much as I like you."

Jenna laughed and stepped closer to him. "Okay, sure. Let's go out on a date, Hollywood."

For some reason, the nickname didn't annoy him when she said it.



## Chapter 27

Gunner wordlessly followed Deedee Bannon toward the ice cream truck.

She spun and waved at him to hurry up. He didn't feel a need to hustle. While he'd initially been alarmed to see two of his goats were missing, once Deedee had told him that she'd seen Denver take them, he'd stopped worrying. Denver kidnapping two goats was weird, but the goats would probably survive it.

But Deedee was still waiting, so he picked up his pace a little.

He came around the corner of the ice cream truck to see the lawyer's little girl lying on the ground, using General's neck for a pillow.

"Where's the other one?" Deedee cried.

Gunner found him instantly and pointed. "Eating the bushes."

"Oh no!" Deedee ran toward the wether currently mowing down on the forsythia.

For a second, he didn't understand her alarm, but then he realized that she'd probably promised the West Hope city council that the goats wouldn't eat the park. He went to help Deedee wrangle Cletus, who was doing a great job of evading her attempts to snatch his horn. She looked grateful when she saw him coming. "Sorry, I don't have much practice catching goats."

"Me neither," he admitted. "I usually just shake the grain bucket."

She laughed and stepped out of the way. He pulled Cletus back toward General and then tried to leave him there, but he followed right on Gunner's heels. He swatted at the goats behind. "Cletus, git!"

"Cletus," Denver muttered, shaking his head. "So close."

Denver kept getting weirder and weirder.

“I don’t know if we’ve met?” Deedee offered Jenna a handshake.

“Jenna Bender.”

Deedee repeated the name. “Why does that sound familiar?”

“Bender Law Office?”

Deedee visibly winced. “Oh, is Frank your father?” She kept her tone polite, but it was obvious that she wasn’t a fan.

Jenna nodded. “I’m afraid so.”

Everyone fell quiet. “Sorry I borrowed your goats, man.”

“You could’ve warned me.”

“Yeah. Sorry. All I could think about was impressing Jenna here.”

“Really?” she said playfully. “I thought you were trying to impress my daughter.”

“That too.”

Good grief, were Denver and Jenna becoming a thing? “I think Cletus is going to follow me. Bring General back when you’re done with her, okay?”

“Okay, but I think Emmylou will want to keep her.”

“Please, stop,” Jenna said. Her voice was stern, but her eyes were twinkling.

“They are all up for adoption,” Deedee said brightly.

If the little girl managed to convince her mother, Gunner hoped they would pick a goat other than General Lee. She was one of his favorites. For some reason, the more a goat misbehaved, the more Gunner liked it.

Gunner started to walk away.

“And don’t let them eat any more ornamental shrubs,” Deedee added. Then she caught up with him. “I can tell you’re not having fun,” she said.

He wasn't really a fun kind of guy. He wasn't sure he knew how to have fun.

“We don't have to do any more fundraisers if you don't want to. This was mostly about raising awareness for you.” She squeezed his arm. “It'll just be you and the goats if that's the way you want it.” She veered off then to go reunite with her husband.

Just him and the goats. Sure. That sounded good.



## Chapter 28

Jenna returned from dropping Emmylou off with a somewhat reluctant babysitter and started getting ready for her big date. She could practically feel the adrenaline coursing through her veins, but she wasn't nervous. Why wasn't she nervous? Shouldn't she be?

She was about to go out on a date for the first time in a *long* time, for the first time since Mr. Rodeo, and she'd never even gone on a real date with him. More like she'd sat around and laughed at his jokes while he drank with his friends.

Gross. She shuddered at the memories. Looking back it felt like she was looking at a different person. *No regrets*, she reminded herself. If she hadn't made such terrible decisions back then, she wouldn't have Emmylou.

She went back to picking out her outfit. She had no idea where Denver was taking her, but he'd told her to dress comfortably, which didn't come naturally to her, but she would do her best. She rarely left the house in comfortable clothes, and she was looking forward to it. She chose a bright blue blouse and some dark blue jeans. She put on fresh makeup and then started curling her hair. As she waited for the curls to set, she studied her reflection in the mirror. Not bad, she thought. Not bad for a woman who's had a kid and lives in a constant state of fight or flight.

She decided that she needed to snazz it up a little. After she finished her hair, she added a chunky multi-colored necklace. There. That made her look like more fun. It also made her earrings look too small, so she traded in her usual gold studs for some sparkly chandeliers.

Nope, those were too much. She was about to switch back to the studs when someone knocked.

She froze, waiting for the nerves to hit, but they didn't. This was so weird. Why was she feeling so zen all of a sudden? She never felt zen.

She grabbed her purse and opened the door.

Denver stood there, hat in hand, his eyes wide. “Wow, you look gorgeous!”

Her cheeks warmed at the unexpected praise. “Thank you?” she said, unable to keep the surprise out of her voice.

“What? You don’t believe me?”

She didn’t know what to say, so she stepped outside, pulling the door shut behind her. As she did so, she accidentally brushed against the back of his hand, sending an unexpected, and possibly unwarranted, chill dancing through her body. Oh boy. If this didn’t work out, she would look back on this date as a very bad idea.

She knew then, in that moment on her front porch, that her heart was past the point of no return. Either Denver was going to make her the happiest woman on the planet, or he was going to smash her heart into smithereens.

He gently took her elbow, and she looked up at him. “I’m serious.” His voice was low and had a new texture to it. “I’ve only seen you in serious lawyer clothes. But ... well, let’s just say that blue jeans become you.”

Good grief he was a charmer. Old doubts started to bubble up at all the attention. *If it’s flattering, it can’t be real*, a haunting voice reminded her.

She silently told that voice to go pound sand.

This man wasn’t a liar. She’d been wrong. It was safe to trust him.

“You managed to get a rental car this time?”

He grinned. “I sure did. I pulled some strings.”

She waited for him to get behind the wheel before asking, “What strings did you pull?”

He laughed. “I reserved online, just like last time.” He glanced at her jeans again. She’d had no idea that denim could have such an effect on a man. “You took your daughter to the park today in a pencil skirt.”

“Yes. I sure did.”



He wagged his eyebrows at her.

“I am Gunner’s lawyer. It didn’t even occur to me to dress down for that.”

“Well, I’m glad you dressed down for me. I’m honored.”

“Uh, you told me to.”

He waved his hand as he said in a ridiculously dramatic voice, “I had no idea the power my words wield.”

She laughed. “Maybe you’ve been miscast. Maybe you’re meant to be a Shakespearean actor.”

His voice dropped back to normal. “Hardly. I would embarrass the heck out of myself.”

“So, where are we going?” She realized she was excited.

“Deadwood.”

She waited for more information. “Could you be more specific?”

“Sure. We are going to a community theater production in Outlaw Square.”

“Outlaw Square? I thought they just had concerts.”

“Don’t be so skeptical. And I have no idea. I’ve never been there. I just Googled fun events near me, and a play popped up.”

“Sounds like providence.”

He glanced at her.

“What?” she said. “Are you going to tell me that you don’t believe in providence?”

“No.” He cleared his throat. “The more time I spend around you, the more I believe in it.”

Her breath caught.

“Sorry. Was that too much too soon?”

She tried to breathe. “No, I don’t think so.”

He pretended to mop his brow with the back of his hand, and she laughed again. She had to stop laughing so much, so easily. He was going to think she was part hyena. She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself.

“So, what’s the play?”

“No idea.”

She laughed. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. The Deadwood site just said community theater, and when I went to the theater’s website, it was under construction. But I figured it can’t be too offensive if they’re having it out in the open.”

“Have you ever even been to Deadwood?”

He looked at her sharply. “It’s been a while. Why?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. I’m just thinking the play might not be PG.”

“PG-13 would be okay. I packed a picnic. It only just occurred to me now to ask you if you have any food allergies. You’re not a vegan or anything?”

She couldn’t help but laugh. “You said the word *vegan*, but your tone suggested you were thinking of something much worse.” She dropped her voice to try to sound manly. “You’re not a serial killer are you?”

He laughed so gleefully that her heart took flight. “No, I’ve got nothing against vegans, but I sure couldn’t do it. I could give up steak easily enough, but not cheese. No way. I would die.”

She laughed and looked in the back seat. He had a literal basket. It looked brand new. “Is that what you brought, a basket full of cheese?”

“Yes. I also brought crackers and fancy little salami slices, and grapes ...” He stopped talking to watch her laugh. “What? What’s so funny about my menu?”

“Nothing,” she managed. “I just didn’t know salami could be fancy.”

“Well, yeah, if the circles are small enough.”

This set her off again, and actual tears came to her eyes. Oh no. She tried to get a grip. Her eye makeup was never going to survive the night.



## Chapter 29

Denver had known that he would enjoy this date, but he had no idea that it would be as great as this, and they hadn't even gotten to Deadwood yet. He kept battling back his swelling excitement. This was only the beginning, he kept reminding himself. He shouldn't be falling too fast, or he might not be able to get back up again.

He reached the edge of Deadwood and kept going.

"Uh, you just missed the turn to the park. And the parking garage, for that matter."

"Yeah, I have to make one quick stop. I haven't gotten the dessert yet." He weaved through town, starting and stopping. There was more traffic than he'd expected. "Wow, Deadwood is the place to be."

"In the summer, yeah. Not so much the rest of the year. And you don't want to try to drive through here during the rally."

No, he probably didn't. He met a truck with Washington plates and then a minivan with Maine plates. "What on earth? Who would drive here all the way from Maine?"

Jenna swiveled to watch the minivan pass them.

"Maybe they don't have airports in Maine," he said.

"If they have an airport in Rapid City, they have one in Maine. And that minivan was stuffed full of children. She probably didn't want to pay for a dozen plane tickets."

"Good point." He pulled into the parking lot.

"Chubby Chipmuck," Jenna read aloud. She sounded alarmed.

"I haven't been here, but a reliable source recommended it."

"What reliable source?"

He opened the door and jumped out. “Google. Be right back.” She was laughing when he shut the door, and he tried not to let it go to his head. He’d already called ahead, so it was a quick pick up and soon he was headed back to the car with a big box. She took it from his hands. “May I?” He thought she was asking permission to take a peek.

She opened the box and gasped. “An embarrassment of riches!” She pulled out a yellow truffle, held it up in front of her face to admire it, and then popped it into her mouth. She looked at him, her eyes dancing. “Always eat dessert first,” she said, her mouth full.

One of her cheeks was puffed out with the truffle, giving him a better understanding of the name Chubby Chipmunk.

Wow. Jenna Bender was a lot more fun when she wasn’t lawyering.

He pulled out and headed back the way they’d come.

“This is a lot of dessert, Denver.”

“I know. I wanted you to have some leftovers for Emmylou.”

She closed the box. “Thank you, but Emmylou is happy with a Tootsie Roll. If you send me home with these, I’ll be hiding them in my closet.”

“Emmylou doesn’t go in your closet?”

“She does, but I’ll put them on the top shelf.”

“I won’t tell her. And next time I’ll bring Tootsie Rolls too.” His breath caught. Had it been presumptuous to suggest there would be a next time? Their first time had only just started.

“Good idea. And she prefers Tootsie *Pops*, actually. But only the brown ones. The other ones have unhealthy dyes in them.” If he’d been presumptuous, she didn’t sound offended.

“You can buy a bag of only brown Tootsie Pops?”

“Not that I know of. I just buy the normal bag and pick out the brown ones.”

“Wow ...” He wasn’t quite sure what to say to that.

She shrugged. “She really likes Tootsie Pops.”

The Deadwood parking garage was packed. Good grief, what was going on? It was a good thing that the rental company hadn’t offered him a full-size sedan because he had to wedge his car between a ton truck and a wall.

He turned off the engine and then panicked. He looked at Jenna. “Do you have room to get out?” He was really close to the ton truck.

“Are you calling me chubby?”

He laughed. “Not at all. You’re perfect, but I don’t know how to park. I wish I had my convertible. We could just leap out like Bo and Duke. The characters, I mean, not the goats.” She didn’t laugh. He put his finger on the start button. “I can do better than this.”

“No, don’t.” She pushed his arm down. “I can get out.” She opened the door slowly so as not to ding the truck.

The door only opened about six inches. She shook her head. “If only I hadn’t quit those contortionist lessons.”

For a fraction of a second, he took her seriously and then realized she was joking and felt foolish, grateful that he hadn’t announced his foolishness aloud.

She closed the door and looked past him. “Let me try your side.”

He looked through his window at the wall, for the first time worrying if *he* was going to be able to get out of the car. This was the worst moment of his life. “This is stupid. Let me move the car.”

“And go where? The garage is full. We can do this. Where’s your sense of adventure?” She playfully pushed his shoulder. “Get out of the car!”

Fine. Now that he’d been challenged, he would escape this car if it meant busting out the windshield. He slowly opened his door and then paused to evaluate. He thought he could do it. He swung his legs out and then slowly started to unfold

them. When he realized what a close up view she was getting of his butt, he panicked and straightened quickly, accidentally banging the car door into the cement wall.

“Smooth,” Jenna said behind him.

Nope, he’d been wrong before. *This* was the worst moment of his life. “That’s enough from the peanut gallery.” He side-shuffled to freedom, knowing this was the least masculine movement he’d ever executed, and once he’d played an elf in a school play. They’d made him cartwheel across the stage, and one of his pointy ears had fallen off.

Oh no. He had a new problem. “Uh, Jenna?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t get out yet.”

“Are you planning to leave me here?”

“No. Uh ...” He opened the trunk and looked for a way to fold the back seat down. Of course, he couldn’t see one. “Do you see a way to get into the trunk from where you are?”

“You want me to get into the trunk?”

What? “No!”

She giggled, and he realized that she was messing with him.

“Don’t get into the trunk. Just see if you can access the trunk.”

The car shook as she climbed over the front seat. He averted his eyes in case she felt self-conscious but was then too scared to miss something, so he started watching again.

She deftly flopped one half of the seat down. “Okay, I’m in! Now what?”

Wow, she had made that seem easy. She was a problem solver. “Thank you. Can you push the picnic basket into the trunk?” Before he’d finished the question, she was already doing it. Then she slid the chocolates to him as well.



“Awesome, thank you.” He bent to grab his shiny new picnic basket and his two bag chairs and then realized how awkward it was going to be to carry all three of these things. Oh well, he certainly wasn’t going to ask Jenna to help.

He heard a door click shut while he still had his head in his trunk. Had she already gotten out? He stood up quickly to check and whacked his head on the trunk lid. It didn’t hurt, but her giggle did.

He ducked, pulled away from the car, and stood, straightening his hat. “How did you get out so fast?”

“I was a green belt contortionist before I quit.”

Again, she’d almost gotten him.

She took the basket out of his hands.

“Careful.” The large box of chocolates was balanced precariously on top.

“Don’t worry. I never drop chocolate.” She started walking. “Come on. There’s a mystery play waiting for us.”



## Chapter 30

There were a *lot* of people in Deadwood. Jenna and Denver weaved through the crowd, making their way toward Outlaw Square. “I guess this mystery play of yours is a good one,” Jenna said.

“Even bad plays are still entertaining,” Denver said.

“Seriously?”

He looked sheepish. “I don’t know. I feel a connection to the actors when they’re right there in front of me. They’re not doing it just for me, of course, but it sort of feels like they are.”

He had to stop talking, or she was going to propose right then and there.

“I see a spot!” He pointed toward the stage.

She looked. “Are you sure?” The place was wall-to-wall lawn chairs.

But he was already walking, so she followed.

“Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me.” He stepped over legs, around purses, and almost whacked a senior lady with the hard end of his bag chair.

Jenna tried to look sympathetic and mouthed, “Sorry.” While she was looking back, he stopped so suddenly that she smashed the picnic basket into him. They were dead center with only one row of chairs in front of them. But they were standing in the polite buffer that the two parties on either side of them had created. One of those parties was glaring at them now.

She stood on her tiptoes to get closer to his ear. “Uh, I don’t think we’re going to fit here.”

He didn’t say anything, but he was taking one of the chairs out of the bag. Oh boy. Staying in her exact spot, Jenna shuffled around to look at the party behind her to see if they had enemies on both sides.

But the woman closest to her whispered, “Is that Zion Denver?”

A weird pride came over Jenna. She nodded. The woman elbowed the man beside her. “That’s Zion Denver! It’s Jack Black!” Now everyone was staring. Oh boy. “Here.” The stood up, picking up her chair by its handles so that her butt was still in it. She bumped into her companion. “Move over, Russell. It’s Jack Black.”

Russell looked entirely unimpressed, but he obeyed, which transformed their six square feet of fake grass into ten. Denver flashed her a dazzling smile and tipped his hat. Russell grumbled something that Jenna didn’t make out, and the Jack Black fan elbowed him so hard that he yelped and grabbed his abdomen.

Denver was shaking her chair out of its bag, and Jenna suddenly felt silly for holding a picnic basket. None of the other patrons had brought a picnic. Denver motioned for her to sit, and because she couldn’t escape, she sat, giving the *Cheyenne* fan beside her a timid smile.

She leaned closer. “Are you from Hollywood too?”

“Uh, no. West Hope.” Her training told her to give the woman a business card, but she hadn’t brought any.

“Oh, that’s right. That’s Zion’s hometown, isn’t it?”

Jenna nodded and then looked up at Denver, who was looking down at his unfolded chair like it was a math test.

She quickly saw the problem. The man beside Denver was not nearly as excited to be in the presence of the great Jack Black as Jenna’s neighbor was. Denver’s chair was touching his, and the man was glaring, challenging Denver to infiltrate his space.

Jenna reached over and pulled his chair closer to hers, though there wasn’t room to do so. Denver shot her a look of gratitude before carefully sitting. Their armrests overlapped now, but that was okay with her. She didn’t mind being close to him.

He pulled the basket from her lap to his and pulled out a glass container, which he opened to reveal an assortment of cheeses. Despite the close quarters, her mouth watered. He then produced a bag of salami circles, which she snatched out of his hand. “Oh ... *fancy*.”

He laughed and handed her a sleeve of crackers and a small plastic plate that looked like crystal. “Fancy indeed.”

She was busy making herself tiny salami sandwiches when he pulled two champagne flutes out of the basket. “What is that thing,” she muttered, “a magician’s hat?”

He laughed as he poured her a bubbling glass of sparkling grape juice.

They ate in a comfortable silence, and she tried not to eat too much or too fast. She was hungry, and it tasted good, but she didn’t want him to think she was a salami fiend.

She checked the time, wondering why the play hadn’t started yet.

“Seems they’re running late,” Denver whispered.

Good. She didn’t want this night to end anytime soon. He took her plate and tucked it back into the basket. Then he offered her another glass of bubbly, which she declined because she couldn’t imagine extricating herself from this crowd in the middle of the play to find a restroom.

He looked disappointed, but he didn’t argue. She pointed to the box of chocolates, which cheered him up. He smiled and handed it over. She flipped the box open and quickly picked out a mystery chocolate. In her peripheral, she saw the *Cheyenne* fan eying the box, and she held it out to her. The unfettered joy on her face suggested the box was full of one-hundred-dollar bills.

She quietly thanked Jenna and then took two chocolates. Jenna assumed one was for Russell and then bit back a laugh when the woman held it in her lap as she slowly enjoyed the first one.

A man stepped out onto the stage and welcomed them to Outlaw Square for Whitewood Creek Community Theater’s

debut performance of *The Life of Tammy Wynette*. Jenna stole a glance at Denver, who looked embarrassed.

While the play had turned out to be an amusing choice, she didn't want him to be embarrassed, so she looped her arm through his and grabbed his hand. It was a bold move for her, but something had her feeling emboldened. "I love Tammy Wynette," she said, which was a small exaggeration. She could only name one Tammy Wynette song, and she'd never liked it because she'd never known a man worth standing by.

But things were changing.



## Chapter 31

**T**he *Life of Tammy Wynette*? Denver couldn't believe his luck. What a strange production to bring a woman to on a first date, especially when he had no reason to think she even liked country music.

But then Jenna hugged his arm and took his hand, and he thought he might die from joy. He didn't believe her for a single second when she whispered that she was a First Lady fan, but he let it slide. He interlocked his fingers with hers and gently squeezed her hand. She laid her head on his shoulder, and his heart grew warm as the faint scent of lilies enveloped him.

He tried to focus on the stage, and mostly managed, though the beautiful woman on his arm was a constant distraction. It helped that the play was ten times better than he'd expected. It didn't really matter that he was indifferent about the country legend and her music; the story stood on its own, and it was a good one. He hadn't realized that it was a musical and was pleasantly surprised when a young Tammy broke out in song. She had talent, and the audience let her know just how fantastic she was with a prolonged applause that stalled the show.

The play was funny, making both Jenna and him laugh out loud several times, and when Tammy finally kissed the local playing George Jones for the first time, it brought a tear to Denver's eye.

When the play was over, as was often the case with him, he wanted to go back to the beginning and watch it all again. He didn't like to admit it to anyone, but more than once he'd gone to a show on opening night and then gone again once or twice before the show finished its run.

When the Deadwood crowd began to disperse, Jenna still had hold of his arm, and he didn't want to move. He considered what would happen if he didn't, if they just kept sitting there. Would the sheriff eventually come roust them



out? Or could they sit there and watch the sun come up over the back of the stage?

“No need to hurry,” she said quietly. “I bet that parking garage is going to be slammed.”

“Good point.” He smiled down at her, but she was still staring at the stage. “What did you think of the show?”

“I thought it was very romantic.”

Really? He hadn't thought it was romantic at all until the very end, but he'd been taught in acting classes that you really had to stick the ending because that's what people remembered. Maybe that was true. “Not to sound all *hoity-toity*, but the acting was way better than I expected.

She snickered. “I can't believe you just said *hoity-toity*.”

He laughed at himself. “Sorry. Sometimes I talk like an old lady, I guess.”

“No, don't be sorry. I love the way you make me laugh.”

Her words seemed to stop time. No, she hadn't said that she loved him. Not even close. But just hearing her use the word love did something to him on what felt like a cellular level. He wondered how much this date was going to change his life because it was definitely going to change it.

“So how did you get away from *Cheyenne* for a whole day to come to a fundraiser?”

“Well, I'm not supposed to tell you, but seeing how you don't watch the show, let's just say that hypothetically there might be a few episodes where the story is really focusing on a few other characters.”

“I see, and you're not one of them?”

He didn't answer her. He'd already said too much.

“And I have a confession,” she said.

“Oh?” Was she going to admit she wasn't really a Tammy Wynette fan?

“Yeah.” She sucked in some air and leaned away from him a little.

Oh no.

“I started watching the show.”

He was stunned. “You did?”

“I did.”

He was afraid to ask, but it would be so weird not to. “And what did you think?”

“I think you are a very talented actor.”

He waited for her to say more. “That’s it?”

She squirmed in her chair. “I’m an intelligent woman.” She looked around. “I don’t really want to admit how much I liked it.”

He didn’t know whether to be offended, so he chose not to be. “I won’t tell a soul.”

She looked up at him, and being that close to her eyes made him a bit dizzy. “It’s sort of like pork rinds.”

He tried to connect the dots and failed. “I’m sorry?”

“I want to be thought of as a sophisticated lady. An intelligent, educated woman. So I don’t tell people how much I enjoy pork rinds. I just consume them, and enjoy them, in private.”

“I wish I’d known. I would’ve brought pork rinds instead of fancy salami.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Don’t you dare use my confession against me.”

He chuckled and let himself relax, trying to savor the moment. There were only a few people left on the fake grass now, and one of them was picking up trash. They were going to have to move soon, and he didn’t want to. “Hey, did you just compare me to pork rinds?”

“Not *you*, silly goose. *Cheyenne*.”

He knew what she meant. “I think we’d better get up. And don’t you mean silly *goo*?”



## Chapter 32

Carrying two bag chairs and a half-empty picnic basket, Jenna and Denver stepped out onto Main Street. He hadn't actually said that they were leaving, but he seemed to be making a beeline for the parking garage, so Jenna assumed that was the plan.

But once he'd tucked everything into the trunk, he faced her. "I know you're not much of a drinker, but do you want to go hang out somewhere for a while? We might be able to find some live music."

She wanted to say yes, but part of her heart was back with Emmylou. Still, she didn't want him to think for a second that she didn't want to spend more time with him.

"No pressure," he said when she didn't answer right away.

"I would like that, but I'm worried about Emmylou. My friend wasn't exactly excited about babysitting."

"Oh, okay," he said quickly. "Let's get you home." He turned away. "Let me pull the car out so you can get in like a normal person."

She was grateful for that offer because she was pretty sure that her waist had grown a few inches since she'd wiggled out of the car. She'd chased a lot of cheese with a lot of chocolate. She grabbed his elbow before he could get away. "Hang on. Let me call and check first?"

He nodded, seeming encouraged by that idea.

She called her friend, who sounded exhausted. Uh-oh. "How's it going?"

"Okay. Where are you?"

"Deadwood."

"Deadwood?" she cried as if Jenna had told her they were calling from the moon. "Why are you in Deadwood?"

She sighed. "I just wanted to check in, see how Emmylou is doing. See how *you* are doing."

She heard banging in the background and hoped Emmylou wasn't throwing saucepans.

"You know I have two kids of my own, right?"

She sighed. This wasn't going to work. "I know."

"So it's not Emmylou that's the problem. But she's the reason my kids are acting like little snots."

"Okay. I'll be there in a bit." She started to hang up.

"No, no. I was only venting. I need to get my kids to bed, and things will get better. You haven't been out in forever, and I think you should marry this guy, so you do your thing. We'll manage back here."

Jenna wanted to ask why she thought Denver was marriage material, but she could ask her later, when Denver wasn't in earshot. "Are you sure?"

"No, so hang up before I change my mind." She laughed, and it sounded a little maniacal. "I promise you that Emmylou is safe. I won't let my kids turn her to the dark side."

"Okay. Thank you. I owe you one."

"Yes, you absolutely do."

Jenna hung up, and Denver waggled his eyebrows at her. "Are we good for a nightcap?"

"A quick one, yeah."

He hooked his arm through hers and then started strutting toward the exit. She had no idea why he was acting like a fool, but it was funny, so she went along with it.

"So where are we going?" he asked.

"I have no idea," she admitted. "I thought you were leading."

"I'm usually more of a supporting actor, but sure. Do you want a classy place with crystal chandeliers or a classic place with sawdust on the floor?"

"I'm not sure we're going to find chandeliers in Deadwood."

He looked at her in mock horror. “Are you challenging me?” He tapped the side of his nose. “I have a magnet for chandeliers.”

“In your nose?”

He nodded. “Where else would I keep a chandelier magnet?”

This man was ridiculous, and she was there for it. “I thought Kash was supposed to be the funny one.” His entire demeanor changed, and her heart sank. *Open mouth, insert foot.* “I’m sorry.”

“No, no, don’t be sorry.” He put his arm around her and pulled her into him as he kept walking. It made her own walking harder, but it was worth it. “It just made me sad to think of him, is all. But yes, he is probably funnier than me. Maybe. Sometimes. I don’t know. It’s been a while since I’ve talked to him without arguing.”

They exited the garage, and he walked with purpose, so she went with the flow, figuring he was probably pretending to follow his imaginary magnet. They stepped through the front doors of the grand historic Franklin Hotel, and Denver abruptly stopped walking. She nearly tripped over her own feet. She held onto him to keep from going butt over teakettle, fully aware that anyone watching would think that she was inebriated. When she’d steadied herself, she saw he was pointing at the ceiling. She looked up. “Oh, yep. Good job.”

Crystal chandeliers. The man really new how to deliver.





## Chapter 33

Denver had led his date to a second story outdoor corner table, so that they could look out over the bustling Main Street of Deadwood. It wasn't exactly the Las Vegas Strip—or even Albuquerque's Nob Hill—but it held its own charm. He didn't want to live there, but he was glad he was visiting. Besides, he wasn't really watching the street anyway. He was watching Jenna watch the street.

“How is your drink?” he asked.

She'd asked for the fanciest fruitiest drink they could manage without alcohol. The server was a little taken aback by this request, so to validate the request, he'd ordered the same. Now he was stuck forcing a liquid cough drop through a straw. He wanted to make sure she was enjoying it.

“It's delicious,” she said and took another haul.

Good. He could tough it out then.

As he was admiring the way the soft yellow light fell on her hair, she abruptly turned in her chair to face him. “What are we going to do, Denver?”

“You mean, next?” He'd figured this was the evening's grand finale.

“No, I mean ... well, yes. But not next tonight. Next tomorrow.” She was tying the napkin into a knot, so he assumed she was nervous and was eager to interpret her question so he could make it easier on her—but it still took him a minute.

“Oh.” *Oh.* “Uh ... that's a great question.” Now he was dealing with some nerves of his own. “I say, let's try it. I'll get back here when I can, and you can come to Albuquerque when you can.” There was pain on her face. He reached across the table and put his hand over hers. “Hey, couples have conquered far more difficult circumstances than these.” He gently ran his thumb over hers. “Oops, is it too soon to use the word couple?”

She quickly shook her head. “No, it’s a good word.” She laughed and sniffed. “You’re right. I’m being dramatic. I just ... I’m carrying some baggage into this.”

He squeezed her hand again, wishing he could magically make her feel how much he didn’t care about baggage. “I can’t imagine anyone not having some baggage in this day and age, and hey, we can take things as slowly as we need to.”

“Okay.” Her voice came out as a squeak.

He slid his chair around the table so he could put his arm around her. Then he kissed her on the head. “You can tell me about it if you want to, but you don’t have to.”

“I probably should, since Emmylou is a big part of this equation.”

*Oh.* He’d been so busy either trying to forget Jenna or letting himself fall for her, he hadn’t given much thought to who Emmylou’s father might be. “She sure is.”

Jenna leaned back in her chair and sighed. “By the way, since the day I met you, I have absolutely loved how good you are with her. It totally confused me how you could be such a jerk and be so good with her, so then I convinced myself you were faking it, but deep down, I knew that she would know if you were faking it.”

He didn’t know what to say, so he shut up.

“My father has been playing head games with me since the day I was born.” She laughed cynically. “Maybe even before that. He probably started while I was in the womb. Anyway, I’ve never trusted my instincts, but I really thought I could trust Emmylou’s.”

It was hard for him to imagine a two-year-old having much for instincts, but he trusted that Jenna knew her daughter.

“So a few years ago, my father hired another lawyer for the firm. I knew that he did it just to torture me, and it worked. I was so hurt and so angry. I have tied myself into knots trying to please him my whole life, and then he goes and hires another woman my age just so that I couldn’t be confident that he was going to let me take over the business. Not that I would

have been anyway, but once Crystal showed up, I lost any shred of confidence I had. Anyway, sorry, that was an unnecessary detail. You don't need to know about Crystal. The point is, I was so angry, and I just wanted to rebel. I didn't know that's what was happening at the time, of course. At the time, I thought I was in love." She shuddered. "With a *rodeo* guy."

Oh boy.

"It was fast and furious. He was horrible to me, but I was crazy about him. How messed up is that?" She looked up at him then, and the lights reflected off her wet eyes. "Do you want me to keep going? Or do you want to run for the hills?" She laughed, but he could feel her pain.

"I want to know everything about you," he said softly.

She nodded, looking incredulous. "Okay. Here goes." She started torturing her napkin again. "So I was stupid, and I got pregnant, and he ran off with the rodeo, and I haven't heard from him since. And that's fine. I don't need his help, and he probably wouldn't be good for Emmylou. The point is, you show up all handsome and suave and successful, and I thought you were an actor like my father and a cowboy like my daughter's father, and I just really feared you." She looked up again, and her voice softened when she said, "I'm sorry."

He cupped her face with one hand and leaned in to kiss her tears away. "You have nothing to be sorry for." Then he pressed his lips to hers for a brief tender kiss, desperately trying to make her feel how much he didn't care about baggage, and how much he did care about *her*.



## Chapter 34

Jenna couldn't believe how well Denver was taking all this. She was completely unloading on him—something she'd had *no* intention of doing tonight, hovering over the busy Deadwood Main Street—and he was just taking it all in stride, as if women had breakdowns in front of him all the time.

“And so tomorrow you fly back to Albuquerque.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“And I'm done accusing you of being a jerk, I promise. I was wrong about you. But this feels an awful lot like you leaving me behind.”

For a second, he looked frustrated, but then it was gone, making her wonder if she'd imagined it. “Jenna, I'm not leaving you. And if you want me to quit *Cheyenne*, I would certainly consider it. I'm sure some of the writers are more than ready to kill me off, but—”

“Stop!” she cried, and the couple at the nearby table stopped talking and stared. She leaned closer to him. “You are *not* quitting your job. That's insane.”

“Oh good. Because I really don't want to move back here.”

“I know. And I really can't move to New Mexico. So that's why I don't see how we can move forward.”

He leaned back, studying her. “And remind me why you can't move to New Mexico?” When she didn't immediately answer, he added, “Because if it's the ranch, I can find another lawyer for the goats.”

She giggled so suddenly that it hurt her throat. She swallowed hard, suddenly exhausted. “No, it's not the goats. I don't even like the goats. I'm glad Gunner is rescuing them, but they still freak me out. Anyway, you know why. I have a successful firm to inherit.”

Denver slapped the table, making her jump and everything on the table rattle. Their neighbors stared again. “Tell that firm

to go take a long walk off a short pier!”

Realizing her jaw had dropped open, she consciously shut it.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to raise my voice, but Jenna! Come on!” He squared his chair to hers and took both her hands into his. His eyes were so full of passion they looked like they were on fire. “Please hear me, you beautiful, brilliant woman.”

Her cheeks got warm. “I’m listening.” In fact, she’d never been listening so intently ever.

“You don’t need that firm. And you don’t even really want it. Have you earned it? Yeah, maybe, but I think you’ve earned much more. We reap what we sow, right? Do you really want to be tied to a business that will be reaping all the nasty seeds Frank has sown over the last thirty years? Do you want Emmylou anywhere near that?”

Her tired brain fought to keep up. “Are you telling me to move to New Mexico?”

He sat up straight and scooted his chair even closer. Now their knees were touching. “No, I’m not telling you to do anything. And I never will, unless there’s a bus coming, and I yell, ‘Look out!’”

She smiled through her tears. Under other circumstances, she would have laughed, but she didn’t have the energy.

“I am only telling you that you are not bound to that place. You can move anywhere you want to move. You can practice law anywhere you want to. Or you don’t have to practice law at all. You can be a barista or a skateboarder or a lion trainer, literally anything you want. You don’t have to please that man who does nothing but take you for granted. You don’t owe him anything.”

Most of these ideas she’d heard before or realized herself before, but hearing them all together was incredibly powerful. It literally took her breath away.

She didn’t have to be a lawyer? She had some serious thinking to do.

She leaned over their knees, put her hands on either side of his face, and went in for a kiss, only a little worried about wetting his face with her tears. If she didn't kiss him right then, she thought it might kill her. She pulled away and leaned her forehead on his. "I am emotionally exhausted, and I've been this way for as long as I can remember. I need to be alone, to pray, to process some of this, but Denver, thank you." She worked to make that last part sound as sincere as possible. He had no idea how much he'd just helped her, how much of her he'd just set free.

"You're welcome." He ran a hand over her hair.

"Can you take me home? I need to get my daughter."

"Absolutely."

She stood on shaky legs, and he held her arm as if he didn't ever want to ever let go.

"Oh, and one more thing?" she said.

"Name it."

"Can I come visit you in Albuquerque?"

"Only if you bring Emmylou."





## Chapter 35

Denver had never been so motivated to make someone fall in love with the American southwest. He was determined to show these two girls the time of their lives.

It had been two weeks since he'd left Jenna in South Dakota, but they'd talked almost every night, and he could hear it through the phone: she was changing.

She sounded lighter and happier each time they spoke, and as excited as he was about the prospect of her moving to New Mexico, he didn't want to push for that agenda. If that's not what she truly wanted, then he didn't want it either. All he wanted was for her and Emmylou to be happy. To be healthy. To be free.

He really, really hoped that could all happen with him, but if it couldn't, he still wanted it to happen.

He arrived at the airport shortly after noon. He was too excited to wait in the parking lot, so he parked and went inside to hang out by baggage claim. And there she was, carrying Emmylou with one arm and wheeling a bag behind her with the other. He hurried to help her, but when she saw him, she dropped the luggage handle and jumped to hug him. Laughing, he caught them both, managing to only stagger a little.

He let her hug him for as long as she wanted, and when she let go, he was glad her carry on hadn't been stolen. He bent to pick it up and then tousled Emmylou's hair. "You've grown!"

"I grow!" she said with a toothy smile.

He gave Jenna a light kiss on the lips. He didn't say it, but there was no denying that Jenna looked younger than he'd ever seen her. And somehow, even more beautiful. She was glowing.

He led them to baggage claim. "How was your flight?"

"Amazing," she said wistfully. He'd flown them first class, so he was glad to hear it.

Emmylou pointed at the ceiling. “We were high in the sky.”

He laughed. He hadn’t realized how much he’d missed her.

Jenna must have spotted her suitcase because she headed toward the conveyor belt. She beat him there and grabbed it, but then he took it from her. It was so heavy that it was hard to steer. “Are you sure this didn’t exceed the fifty-pound limit?”

She shrugged. “They didn’t charge me extra, so I guess not.”

“Do you want me to bring the car around, or do you want to walk? It’s not far.”

“Let’s walk.”

He couldn’t take his eyes off her. She was more alive than he’d ever seen her, and he hadn’t even seen her in the New Mexico sunshine yet. She stepped out into said sunshine and immediately shielded her eyes. He chuckled. “Welcome to the desert.”

“Thanks. I guess I see why they call it a sunport.”

Emmylou let out a little cry and buried her eyes in her mother’s neck.

“Don’t worry, cutie pie, you’ll get used to it.” He took the liberty of taking Jenna’s hand into his own. “Sort of.” Then he led them to the parking garage. They both seemed grateful when they hit the shade. He helped them into his car. “Do you want me to put the top down?”

She smiled brilliantly. “I thought you’d never ask.”

By the time he had removed the roof, Jenna had buckled Emmylou into the new car seat he’d bought just for the occasion. Once Jenna too was buckled up, he said, “It’s awesome to see you, but we have plenty of time, so there’s no rush or pressure. Do you want to go rest up a bit, or do you want to hit the ground running?”

She let out a nervous titter. “I want to hit the ground running, but I’m really out of my element here.”

“I know. That’s okay. I am very much in my element, and I’ve got you.” He started driving.

“You love it so much here. I guess it’s a good thing you ended up here. I mean, that was by chance, right? Or would you love LA just as much if you’d ended up there?”

“I don’t mind LA, but I really, *really* love it here.” He swept his hand in a gesture toward the landscape, which, admittedly, they did not have the best view of yet. “I mean, this is the land of enchantment.” He looked at her and winked. “So you’ll fit right in.”



## Chapter 36

Jenna had told Denver that he could create their itinerary. She didn't know enough about the area yet to know what she wanted to see, though she had told him that she loved Mexican food. He'd said, "If you love Mexican, you're really going to love *New* Mexican food." She didn't know the difference, but she hoped to figure it out before he popped a quiz.

"What is that on your license plates?"

"Chilis!" he chirped.

"You put chili peppers on your license plates?"

He gave her a sideways glance. "Sweetie, we put chilis on everything."

She giggled. This was a side of Denver she hadn't seen yet. He was home.

"Are you hungry?"

"I could eat."

"Hungry!" came from the back seat.

"Well, let's start with some chilis, then."

"Uh ... I don't know." She didn't want to start her adventure with heartburn.

He held up one hand. "No pressure. I'll take you somewhere where the chilis are optional." He squinted his eyes. "If I could only think of a place ... just kidding! I know just the place. The Church Street Cafe. It's in one of the oldest buildings in all of New Mexico. It's like dining inside a John Wayne movie."

This did not excite her, but she stayed mute.

"It was built in the early 1700s."

Okay, that was pretty cool. She tried to think of any building in South Dakota that old and couldn't.

“And it stayed a house until the early nineties, always belonging to the same family, passed down from generation to generation.”

“Just like the Bridge Brothers Ranch!”

He raised an eyebrow. “You mean the goat rescue?”

“It can be both a ranch and a goat rescue.”

“How’s Gunner doing?” he asked. “Have you talked to him?”

“I haven’t, which means that things must be going okay. Haven’t *you* talked to him?”

He gave her a guilty look. “I’ve been busy.” She opened her mouth to encourage him, but he didn’t let her. “I know, I know, I’ll call.”

She tipped her head back and closed her eyes, letting the wind take her hair and the sun spoil her face. She opened her eyes when he slowed to take the exit.

“This is Old Town, the oldest part of Albuquerque and one of the oldest settlements in the whole state.”

It was beautiful. It felt exotic but also safe and welcoming, and that sun—no wonder Denver was addicted to it.

She was surprised at how close he found parking, and soon she was stepping through a small doorway into a restaurant that smelled like heaven. It was much cooler inside, which relaxed her already tired body. She’d been sleeping better lately, but flying with Emmylou had taken a lot out of her. She tipped her head back to stretch her neck. “Why is the ceiling so high?”

“Not sure, but if I had to guess, it would be to keep it cooler in the summer.”

Someone asked them if they wanted to eat outside, and he deferred to her, which she appreciated, but she knew that he would want to eat in the sunshine, so she said yes. Soon they were seated on a small patio surrounded by eager, ambitious plant life.

“Uh, do you have snakes here?” Jenna asked.

He gave her a weird look. “My dear, have you *ever* watched a western?”

“Not really.”

“Okay, then just trust me when I tell you that Albuquerque is perfect.”

“So that was a yes to the snakes?”

He lifted his menu in front of his face and pretended not to hear her.

“What about spiders?”

He lowered the menu and peeked out over the top of it. All she could see were his eyes, and it was creepy. “I’ll protect you,” he said.

“Denver! I’m wearing open-toed shoes!” She realized after she said this that it sounded a bit nonsensical, but she was right on the edge of panic.

He lowered the menu and leaned closer to her. “I will protect your toes.”

“Okay, how common are these things that are going to try to kill me?”

“In Old Town, Albuquerque, not very common. And you’ve got poisonous snakes and spiders in South Dakota too.”

True. But not in any path that she ever traveled.

“What are you going to order?” he asked, obviously tired of talking about snakes.

She studied the menu. “Uh, there are chilis in everything.”

“Yes, but you can order something and ask them to hold the chilis.”

“No way. They’ll know I’m from away.”

“They already know that, honey.”

She would've been annoyed, but she liked it when he called her honey. "Okay, then now I don't know whether to get green or red chilis."

"Just go Christmas."

"I'm sorry?"

"Go Christmas. Get a little of both. That's what I do when I can't decide. It feels very festive."

"Is that what you're going to do now?"

He laid his menu down. "Only if you need me to do so for moral support."

"I do not. What are you going to order?"

"Green."

"Fair enough. Green for me too."

He smiled, and she could feel him liking her from across the table. She hadn't felt that from a man since high school, and back then they hadn't been men.

"What about Emmylou?" Denver asked.

"I'll share mine with her."

"Mac an chee!"

"No, Emmylou. They don't have mac an chee."

Emmylou looked disappointed, but she didn't argue.

Jenna tried to relax and enjoy the ambiance, which was hard to do when her eyes wanted to keep darting toward the leafy plants. She forced herself to keep her eyes up and noticed a gorgeous steeple a block or two over. "Is that church as old as this place?"

"Almost. Same century, and being a church, they kept better records, so they can prove how old it is. I don't remember the year, but it was the 1700s."

"Unreal." She wasn't a history buff, but this place was really cool.

"We can go there if you want."



“Really? They just let people walk in?”

“Sure, it’s a church.”

That had not been her experience with churches. “I would love to. Besides ...” She nudged his foot under the table. “Getting you into a church is on my to-do list.”

“No need. I can get myself into church. In fact, we can go this weekend if you’d like.”

“To that church?”

“If you want, but I’ve gone to one closer to my home the last two weeks, if you want me to go for a hat trick.”

“Really?”

He winked. “What can I say? Knowing you makes me want to be a better man.”

This made her incredibly excited. Of course she was happy that he was going to church, but also, her grandmother had told her, “If you want to get to know what a place is really like, attend a service at one of their churches.”



## Chapter 37

There was so much that Denver wanted to show Jenna about the city he loved, and he only had three days. He kept telling himself that there wasn't any pressure, that she could come back again and again, but he could still feel that pressure whether it existed or not.

They stepped into San Felipe de Neri Church, and Jenna gasped. "This is gorgeous!"

And it was. He'd lived here for a decade, and he'd never stepped foot in one of the area's biggest attractions.

She was reading from a plaque when she gasped again. "This church *was* established at the same time as that family lived here, but the original building collapsed." She looked at him. "Wow, can you picture it? Just a few families setting up a town, building their houses and starting a church. It's so cool."

"Maybe you missed your calling. As a historian."

She gave him a wry look. "Maybe."

Emmylou called to her mother, heard her voice echo, giggled in delight, and then yelled at the ceiling. Jenna rushed to scoop her up and shush her. "We have to be quiet here, sweetie." They took a seat in one of the pews. She sighed. "Now that I sat, I'm tired. I think I ate too much. Those servings were huge."

"They were indeed generous."

"If I lived here, I would get chubby."

"Not necessarily. Do you like hiking?"

"Not really. Especially not if there are snakes involved. Or spiders. Or hills."

He laughed, and a woman near the front of the church gave him a dirty look. He tried not to be offended by the fact that she hadn't glared at Emmylou's little outburst.

The threesome sat there quietly, soaking it all in until Jenna whispered, "I need to get moving, or I am really going

to fall asleep.”

He waited until they were back outside before asking if she wanted to call it quits for the day. She declined his offer, so they strolled around Old Town ducking in and out of shops. He bought her a turquoise bracelet he caught her eying and tried to buy her a matching ring, but she balked. This made him notice how she didn't wear any rings, which made him think about how good a few rings on a certain finger of hers would look. Then he felt silly for rushing things. *One thing at a time*, he told himself. First, convince her that she doesn't have to live in the town her father picked out, no matter how nice a town it was.

Emmylou's little legs were doing their best, but Denver quickly realized that a stroller was going to be his next purchase. He asked Emmylou if he could carry her, and she said yes, so he picked her up. She soon fell asleep with her head on his shoulder, and he took advantage to whisper to Jenna, “Would she like to go to a candy store?”

Emmylou jerked her little head up and slurred, “Candy?” before rubbing her eye open.

He laughed. “Let me rephrase that. Mom, can I take Emmylou to a candy store?”

“Oh sure, now I'm the bad guy if I say no. Okay, but you can pick out *one* treat, Emmy. Okay? One!”

He took them to La Choco, and Emmylou worked very hard to pick out more than one treat, but Denver toed the line. She settled on a candy necklace, and Jenna got excited about some chocolate-covered strawberries. Denver saw nothing after seeing the mint chocolate truffles and asked for a box of them.

“How are you so fit when you eat so much candy?” Jenna muttered.

He shrugged. “What can I say? I like sweet things.” Then he kissed her on her temple. This made her blush, which made him feel powerful. He doublechecked to make sure she didn't want anything else, and she told him she wouldn't need to eat

until Tuesday. He wasn't going to let that happen, of course. He had many more delicious chili-filled meals to introduce her to.

Finally, they were back in the car.

“Okay, I swear I’m having the time of my life, but I’m really exhausted. How weird would it be to take a nap and then set out again?” She turned to look at him. “I mean, I could blame it on Emmylou needing a nap, but that would be a lie because she’s going to take a power nap right now and then wake up raring to go.”

He glanced in his rearview mirror. “She’s already asleep.”

Jenna laughed.

“It makes perfect sense, actually. There’s something I wanted to show you tonight, so let’s go to my place, I’ll give you a tour, we take a break, and then we can set out again if you’re up for it.”

“Sounds perfect.” She took his hand. “Being around you feels like being on vacation. Does it always feel like that?”

Her words warmed him from head to toe. “I don’t know. Let’s find out.”

“Okay. Let’s.”

“Are you still comfortable staying at my place? The hotel offer still stands.” He had originally planned to get them a nice hotel, but she’d said she would be more comfortable with him.

“Definitely. Unless we get to your place, and I learn something really creepy about you.”

He laughed but then immediately started worrying about what she might find in his house that she’d consider creepy.



## Chapter 38

Jenna looked around in wonder. Denver Bridge's house was amazing. It wasn't a mansion, which she was sort of expecting, but it was open and airy and welcoming and smelled oddly refreshing. After a few minutes of trying to place the smell, she realized what it was: The house smelled like Denver.

He wheeled her suitcase down a hallway. "This is the biggest guest room. Make yourself at home." Then he opened the next door. "And Emmylou can sleep in here if she wants."

This was sweet, but Jenna had no doubt Emmylou would be rooming with her. "Thank you, Denver."

"You bet. I filled the pantry and fridge with things I thought you both might like, so help yourself anytime. And if you need anything, my room is down there." He pointed at a closed door.

"How long have you lived here?"

"Almost ten years."

"And why did you buy a three-bedroom house?" Had he been planning on a family way back then?

"I liked the pool."

She laughed. "You should show me the pool."

He stepped aside. "Right this way, my lady." He led the way but kept talking. "I've also got every streaming app known to man so feel free to watch whatever whenever." He led her outside to a sprawling cement pad with an oddly shaped pool in the middle. It had one of those little rock walls with the waterfall coming out of it.

She was pretty sure she'd never seen one of those in real life. "Man, I want to take my break out here."

"I don't blame you. I'll go get you a beverage."

She watched him go, wondering how she'd gotten so lucky. *It's not luck*, a sweet voice whispered in her head.

*You've been waiting for him all along.* She took a deep breath. This was so much better than she'd expected. She'd been scared of the big, different New Mexico, but it was an amazing place, and she hadn't even been here a whole day yet.

She got comfy in one of the chaise lounge chairs and then asked Emmylou to climb into the one beside her. Emmylou complied, probably because she was overwhelmed. Jenna closed her eyes and tried to relax while still listening to make sure her daughter didn't move.

Denver returned with a glass of ginger ale. She thanked him and took a swig. "So what's on the docket for tonight?"

"I can't tell you. It'll ruin the surprise."

"Oh boy. Is it something Emmylou can be a part of?"

"Of course."

They sat in a comfortable silence for a while until Emmylou asked to go for a swim. "Not right now, honey. I don't have the energy." She hadn't brought a swimsuit either, but she knew if she said that, Denver would run off and buy her one.

"I can take her," he offered.

She looked up at him, not sure how she felt about that.

"If you don't mind." He sensed her unease. "Or not." He sat back. "No worries."

She was being foolish. "Oh, it's okay. Go ahead. I just really don't want to go in, so if this is all some ploy ..."

"I don't do ploys." His tone had grown serious.

"Sorry, that's going to take some getting used to."

"I know." He reached over and squeezed her hand. "Does Emmylou have a swimsuit?"

"Sorry. Can she go in her clothes?"

"Of course she can! Let me go change and I'll be right back."



By the time he returned, Emmylou was champing at the bit.

“Come on, cutie pie, let’s do some splashing.” He offered her a hand, which she took.

It was amazing how comfortable Emmylou was with him, especially since she was never around any men ever, at least not up close and personal. She must really be able to sense that he liked her. Jenna wished that she could read people better. Maybe if she spent more time around these two, she would figure it out.

She watched them splash and play for nearly two hours. Emmylou’s movements grew slower and slower, like a toy running out of battery, but she was having so much fun, Jenna didn’t want to put an end to it. And if she were honest, she was having a lot of fun too. She couldn’t remember ever feeling so content, so peaceful, so safe being herself.

But eventually, Denver made the call. He pulled an exhausted, floppy kid out of the pool and laid her down beside her mother. “Are you hungry? I could whip something up for dinner.”

She laughed. “I told you. No food till Tuesday.”

He looked at Emmylou, who looked like she was in a coma. “What about her? Do you think she’s hungry?”

“I think she’d be better off napping right now.”

“Got it.” He checked his phone. “It’s almost time to go to the next thing if you’re up for it.”

She wasn’t, but she didn’t want to disappoint him. And she was a little curious as to what the surprise was. She peeled herself off her chaise, surprised that she felt a bit rested. She picked up her sleeping daughter and carried her to the suitcase. Denver offered to help, but she declined. He had earned a break.

It was like dressing a doll. Emmylou’s limbs flopped around like a puppet with loose strings, but eventually, Jenna had her in dry clothes and on her way to the car seat. Denver had changed into his third outfit of the day, somehow looking

more gorgeous each time. Jenna felt inadequate. She'd sat in the sun for too long and was rumpled and sweaty. Oh well, too late now. At least it was getting dark out.

Denver headed north, and she fought back a yawn. He must have sensed it. "Don't worry. This won't take long, and then we can get some sleep. And no pressure tomorrow. If you don't want to run from thing to thing, we can just relax."

She thought about it. "You know what? I wanted to see everything and do everything, to learn as much about this place, but it turns out I don't need to." She felt him stiffen beside her. "No, I mean that I know all I need to know. Denver, I love it here."

His face snapped toward her. "Really?"

"Really. Eyes on the road, cowboy."

He laughed.

"It's such a fun, beautiful place, and it just gives me a good feeling. It feels ... *free*."

"That's a great way to put it! You're right."

"I mean, not that West Hope isn't a free place. Of course it is—"

"Not necessarily for you, though."

She sighed. "Maybe. Or maybe I just love it here because you're here."

"Awww," he said playfully.

He parked the car, and she ripped her eyes away from him to look out the window—and gasped. "What is this?"

He chuckled. "Surprise!"

"No really, what *is* it?" The enormous lawn was speckled with hot air balloons, all full of air, all evenly spaced out across the giant park.

"Come on. I'll show you." He jumped out of the car and produced a blanket out of the trunk.

Emmylou woke up when Jenna pulled her out of the car seat. There were a lot of people milling about, mostly flowing closer to the balloons. The three of them joined the flow into the swelling crowd, and Denver found a spot to spread the blanket. She was grateful that he didn't force his way front and center this time.

They settled on the blanket, and she caught sight of her daughter's wide eyes. She got Denver's attention and pointed, and she could almost see his heart swell. "Yeah," he whispered, "I thought she might like this." One by one, fires were lit inside each balloon, lighting up the air around them. Some balloons were colorful, some featured art, some displayed business logos, but each one of them became a larger-than-life glowing orb.

"What *are* they?" Emmylou asked, sounding breathless.

Denver looked to Jenna for permission, which she gave. "They're called hot air balloons," he said, "and they fly up into the sky." Her eyes grew wider. "If it's all right with your mom, maybe we could go into the sky with one of them tomorrow."

"What?" Jenna cried.

He laughed. "If you want to. I have a sunrise trip reserved."

Unreal. This man wasn't a dream come true. He was *all* the dreams come true. She looked up into the starlit sky.

"I bet it feels pretty free up there," he said.

"I think you might be right. What else do you have on the schedule for tomorrow?"

He smiled mischievously. "You'll have to wait and see."

She leaned into him, and he put his arm around her. Emmylou stood up to get a better look at the balloons. Jenna could feel heat radiating off the closest one. She could also feel heat radiating off Denver. It was a comfortable heat, and she didn't want to leave it or let it leave her ever again. "Thank you for all this, Denver. You've given us quite a day."

"A good day, I hope."

“Very good.” She looked up at him. “How about you? Have you had a good day?”

“Oh yes,” he said quickly. “I’ve had the best day. It’s the sweetest day I’ve ever had.”

It took her a second to get the reference, but when she did, her heart swelled. “Oh good. And no bitterness?”

“Nope. Not even close.”

“Good. Because I’ve been thinking ...”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You said I don’t have to be a lawyer.”

“Right.”

“But the thing is, I like being a lawyer.”

“Oh. Okay.” He sounded disappointed.

“Sure, originally I did it to make my father happy, but I really do like it. I’m good at it, and it gives me a sense of accomplishment, a sense of worth, but I don’t have to be *his* kind of lawyer. I don’t have to spend my days pretending to believe people who are pretending to be hurt, and I don’t have to take all the boring cases he doesn’t want. I could use my skills to help people.” Saying it aloud made it even more alluring. “I don’t even know what that looks like yet, but if I got licensed here, I could just open myself up to cases and clients who really needed something. Does that make sense?”

He leaned in and kissed her softly on the lips. “That makes perfect sense. In fact, it sounds like providence to me.”

“Yeah?”

He nodded and then kissed her again. “Yeah.”

She put her head on his shoulder and stared out at the balloons. In the distance, yet another one came to life. This one was a brilliant green that made her think of willow leaf blue star. “So I’m going to give my notice. Crystal can have the dang thing.”

He laughed. “Good for you, honey.”

“Do you think you could help me find an apartment here in Albuquerque?”

“I know that I can.”

“Thank you, Denver.”

“No, Jenna. Thank you. You’ve changed my whole life, and to think I only came to you to scare my brothers.”

She laughed. “And to think that I thought you were only some cowboy player.”

“Nope. I do play one on TV. But in reality I’m just a guy in love with stories. And now just a guy in love with you.” He kissed her again. She would tell him later how in love with him she was. For now, she just wanted to kiss him back. She’d done enough talking for a while.



## Epilogue

Though everyone she'd encountered had welcomed her warmly, Jenna still felt out of her element on the set of *Cheyenne*. She'd now seen every episode, so she felt like she knew these people, even though she didn't. She knew their characters. It was confusing, and she was nervous to be here.

Emmylou, however, had no such qualms. She was dancing around the set like she was the belle of the ball. Ever since Denver had told her he could get her in as a background extra, Emmylou had been telling anyone who would listen that she was going to be a "moobie star." She'd told her new Sunday school teacher, her new landlord, and then the woman who'd rung up their groceries at Albertsons. Every one of them had received this news with grace, but Jenna still kept reminding Emmylou that she wasn't going to be a *star* of anything. Not yet, anyway.

Finally, it was time for Emmylou's scene, and Jenna was relieved when they placed her far in the background with a woman who would hold her hand. Jenna had been a little worried that Emmylou would demand front and center and get her two-year-old self fired from her first gig.

Sure enough, Emmylou watched the action instead of blending in with the background, but no one seemed to care. And when Emmylou came running back to her, she was quite pleased with the job she'd done. Jenna scooped her up and kissed her on her chubby cheek. "Good job, honey."

A soft hand landed on her shoulder. "You've got quite a little performer there," Denver said.

"Don't I know it."

Denver leaned down and kissed Jenna, which made her feel self-conscious with so many people around. "How are you doing?" he asked when he pulled away.

"Good. Feeling a little out of my element, but good."

“Glad to hear it. I’ve told everybody here to take good care of you, so don’t feel like you’re out of place at all. Actors have loved ones visit all the time.”

She liked being called a loved one.

“We’ve only got one more scene, and then I’m done for the day. Would you like to hang around?”

She nodded.

He pointed to some chairs. “You’re welcome to stand, or you can get comfy if you’d like.”

“Thanks, Denver.” She tugged Emmylou over to the chairs and settled in.

Emmylou asked what they were doing, and once Jenna explained, Emmylou sat and watched with great interest.

Halfway through the scene, Jack Black stomped into the action and started shouting at his current girlfriend. He cussed, and Emmylou gasped, putting a hand over her mouth. Then Jack Black hollered some more, threatening to do terrible things to this woman. Jenna felt Emmylou’s eyes on her and looked down.

Emmylou stood up so she could get closer to her mother’s ear. Then she put a hand on her shoulder and whispered, “Don’t worry, Mama. They are just pretending. It’s only a story.”

Jenna laughed and pulled her daughter onto her lap. “That’s right, honey. I guess it’s a good thing we get the real Denver, isn’t it?”

She nodded and leaned her head back into Jenna’s chest, which made Jenna’s heart warm.

Her heart had been warm a lot lately, and she had a feeling there was more to come.



[Tap to get Kash’s story.](#) (Or keep flipping for a sneak peek.)





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## Sneak Peek at Kash's story

The rapid *thunk thunk thunk* on the stairs scared Bella more than the final crash or the child's scream that followed. A scream meant that the kid was still alive.

Bella scooped up the eighteen-month-old and hurried to the bottom of the stairs.

*Oh no.* It was worse than she'd thought. Six-year-old Brayden had managed to dent the drywall at the bottom of the stairs. Bella's first thought was what she could put in front of that hole to hide it from his parents, but then she saw the blood.

She must have reacted to the sight because the intensity of Brayden's scream tripled.

"You're all right, Brayden," she said, believing that he was. She knew head wounds bled a lot. She just hoped he didn't need stitches. She did not have room in her clunker car for five kids, and she didn't have any car seats. She held her free hand out. "Come on, let's go to the kitchen and get a Band-Aid."

His eyes grew wide. "A Band-Aid won't do anything! I'm *bleeding!*" He carried the long *e* sound two seconds longer than necessary.

"That's what Band-Aids are for, hon." She shook her hand. "Come on."

Instead of getting up, he stretched his body out and rested his head on the bottom step. Then he screamed some more.

Bella sighed. "Okay. I'll go get the first aid kit. Don't move. I'll be right back." As she turned, she saw Brayden's impish little sister Izzy. "Come on down, Izzy, and don't touch your brother." Bella hurried to the den, where a Pack 'n Play

was set up. She gently lowered Kendra into her containment device. She bounced to her feet and started screaming. “I know, I know, I’ll be right back.” Normally Bella would have turned on a TV show to distract her, but she was hurrying.

She grabbed the first aid kit from the kitchen and rushed back to the stairs. Izzy was now straddling Brayden’s chest and bending over to get a good look at his wound, which put the ends of her long hair directly in the blood.

*Terrific.*

Bella gently tugged Izzy out of the way. “Can you go find Amelia, for me, Izzy? I might need her help.” Bella didn’t really think she’d need an eight-year-old’s help, but Izzy needed a job.

Her face puckered. “She’s in her room.”

“I know. Can you go get her for me?”

She stuck her chin out. “You told me to come *downstairs*.”

Bella took a breath. “I know. But now I’m asking you to go back up and get Amelia.”

Izzy stomped up the stairs, narrowly missing Brayden’s head.

“Okay, buddy, why don’t you sit up?”

“I can’t. It hurts too much.”

She took his shoulders and pulled him toward her.

“Ow!” he cried.

She opened the kit, put on the plastic gloves inside, found an alcohol swab, and started wiping away the blood to see what she was dealing with. She sighed with relief when she saw that it didn’t need stitches, and she couldn’t believe a wound that small had bled so much. Was the kid on warfarin?

Above her, Max started screaming. She’d put him down for a nap less than half an hour ago. What did he have to scream about? Then she heard Izzy giggle. *Oh*. So on her way to get Amelia, Izzy had opened Max’s closed bedroom door. Of course she had. Hoping Izzy hadn’t done worse than that,

Bella got the butterfly bandage in place and then covered it with a bigger bandage. “Okay buddy, you’re all set.”

“Shouldn’t I go to the doctor’s or something?”

“You don’t need to go to the doctor. But before you touch anything, let’s go wash your hands in the bathroom.” His hands were covered in blood, which she needed to get down the drain before he touched anything else. His parents had designed their entire house in white. White walls, white carpet, white furniture—even the pots and pans were white. It looked fantastic, but it was a constant source of stress for a nanny watching over five ill-behaved children.

She took Brayden’s hand and started toward the bathroom.

He yanked his hand away. “I’m not a baby.”

“Okay, then come to the bathroom like a big boy.”

He stopped and glared at her. Above them, Max kept screaming. She really hoped Izzy wasn’t performing another experiment on him, but she couldn’t go check until she got the blood off Brayden’s hands.

She picked Brayden up and started toward the bathroom. He started hitting her on the shoulder. It hurt, but she was more concerned about his blood. “Stop, stop.” She tried to grab his tiny right fist with her still-gloved hand, and he started hitting her with his left. “Stop, Brayden!”

“Don’t holler at me! You’re not my mom!”

The doorbell rang, and she froze. She turned to look at the door as if she would be able to see through it, which, of course, she couldn’t. Learning nothing, she opted to ignore it. She couldn’t put this kid down in the middle of this white hallway.

The doorbell rang three more times in quick succession. She groaned.

“You should get that,” Amelia said. “It could be important.” Amelia had materialized in the hallway in front of her. She was nowhere near her bedroom, where she was

supposed to be. Where had she been, and what had she been doing?

“Can you get that for me?”

“No,” Amelia said priggishly. “I’m not allowed to get the door.”

“You can this once. It’s an emergency. Brayden is bleeding.”

“Are you telling me to *disobey* my parents?”

“No, I’m asking you to help me just this once.”

Amelia’s eyes grew wide. “So you want me to get *kidnapped*? Is that what you want?”

Their visitor started pounding on the door.

*Fine.* Bella spun toward the door, carrying a blood-covered Brayden who was getting heavier with every second. She flung the door open. “What?”

The large woman on the front porch gasped, slapped herself in the chest, looked Bella up and down, and said, “Oh my!”

Bella wanted to roll her eyes and slam the door, but instead she put on her most saccharine smile and said, “How can I help you?”

“I just stopped to tell you that your cows are out.”

“What? We don’t have any cows.”

The large woman stepped out of the way to reveal three giant cattle in the front yard.

“Oh no.”

The woman tittered and waved. “Good luck, dear!”

Bella stood there staring at the front yard. *But the Oddises don’t have any cows.*



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