



A TWISTED
WILLOW
NOVEL

BETH'S ABSOLUTION

MARIA SECOY

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Maria Secoy



All Write Well

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Also By Maria

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To read more about life hiking along the Appalachian Trail, be sure to check out Maria's On-Trail Love Adventures:

Alongside Lucy and Standing by
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Available through Amazon & KU or purchase a signed
paperback through my author website
<https://www.mariasecoywriter.com/home>

Dedicated to my husband, Bryan.

I say, "I want to hike the AT," and he buys me a sleeping bag.

I say, "Let's quit our jobs and move to the mountains," and he starts looking for housing.

It doesn't matter if we're packing trees full of fireworks or driving 5000 miles to camp our way through a bunch of state parks, my husband is up for all the adventures!

His heart and courage are huge. His drama is small. His love is strong and steady.

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CHAPTER 1

Beth

Some people will tell you that home is where the heart is. Others suggest it's more about the people you're with. To Beth, home was a giant pile of bullshit assholes who wanted a woman to serve them. But then, Beth's home was an apartment a few blocks from the clubhouse of an outlaw motorcycle club. Their headquarters was where she spent most of her time though. Even as an adult, her job was to tend the bar there for all the club members.

"Your dad's here," Cameron said as he downed his shot and motioned toward the door with his eyes.

"Shit," Beth muttered under her breath as she squeezed the liquor bottle in her hand. This was not what she fucking needed right now. It was early afternoon, but the biker club was already shifting from daytime drudgery to evening activity. Ledgers were updated and stored, errands were wrapping up, and plans for the night were made over early drinks.

She turned slowly and watched her father stride across the room with her brother hot on his heels. The whole club went quiet as everyone turned and nodded, showing their respect for Phil Harper, her father. He'd been the president of this outlaw motorcycle club since before she was born. Apparently, it was the announcement of her mother's pregnancy that made him decide it was time to remove their previous leader. Rumor had

it, her dad made a road trip through their entire territory to spread pieces of the body up and down the eastern seaboard as his way of announcing his new leadership.

Matt, her older brother and the vice president, might be the only person she disliked more than her father. At least she respected her father's intelligence and leadership. Her brother was just plain stupid, but he'd take a bullet for the great Phil Harper—if there were anyone watching. If no one else was around, Beth gave it even odds that Matt would be the one pulling the trigger. She doubted he was smart enough to understand the true value of loyalty.

Beth poured another drink for Jake. He was playing possum and hoping everyone important forgot he was sitting there. For every leader, a strong crew needed loyal followers, and Jake fit the bill perfectly. Unfortunately, outlaw bikers were not known for treating people like him well.

As soon as Jake nodded his thanks, Beth stepped back to return the bottle of Jack to the self. Along the way, she noticed her dad was wearing a suit instead of his usual jeans, T-shirt, and leather cut. Her eyes rolled back in her head of their own accord. Phil must be playing the role of legit, presentable businessman today. It was something he did on occasion to keep the locals from bothering them too much.

“Hey, Prez,” Cameron said as Phil stepped up to the bar beside him.

“Cameron,” Phil answered before shifting his gaze to Beth. “Beth, I heard you had a visitor last night.”

Fuck. This is exactly why Beth was hoping to avoid seeing him today. “Yeah, some pig tried to ask me about recent trips and travels.”

He leaned across the bar toward her. “And did you discuss the matter with him?”

The fact that Phil questioned her loyalty while Matt stood beside him and smirked made her wish for a way to pull out the shotgun from under the ice bin and go nuts on the entire place—or at least on her blood relations.

“Of course!” Beth pasted on the fakest smile she could muster and flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I told him all about the warehouse in Goochland and how it was just full of goodies.” Beth’s hip was sticking out so far from the rest of her body that she thought it could break apart at any moment, but if Phil thought she would sell out the club, who was she to deny him.

“You’re such a sassy little shit. Someday, somebody’s going to make you an old lady and teach you how to act right.” Dad was determined to find a biker strong enough to tame Beth, bring her to heel, and force her to sign a marriage license.

Beth would rather learn to eat glass and go run away with the circus. She was careful to turn away from Phil and make eye contact with Cameron before rolling her eyes and asking with dripping sarcasm, “Can I get you a drink, Dad?”

“Not now. I’ve got real work to do. I just wanted to be clear about one thing.” Phil waited for Beth to turn back toward him. Once he had her full attention, he raised his voice loud

enough for everyone in the clubhouse to hear him. “If I hear so much as a rumor about anyone breathing anything more than oinking noises in the directions of any pigs, they will end up being the last sounds your living body ever makes.”

He never broke eye contact with Beth, but every biker in the place nodded their agreement. Some even mumbled polite, “Yes, sirs.”

Then he and Matt gave Beth one last glare before they both continued through the club and down the hall to Phil’s office.

“Have a great afternoon, Prez,” Cameron said, but he didn’t get a response.

“Pull your head out of your ass,” Matt snarled at Beth as he stuck close to their dad’s coattails.

“Shit,” she whispered under her breath as Jake smacked his glass down on the bar top. It pulled her attention to him, so he offered Beth a polite smile before pointing at his glass to indicate he’d like another.

“Just coke this time,” he said softly once she was close enough. “I get the feeling this is not going to be a day I want to be stumbling drunk.”

“You going home to Sarah?” Beth asked him, referring to his wife. He’d been trying to make dinner at home a priority, even if he had club business that required his attention later that night.

Jake’s face cracked into a giant grin. “Hell, yeah!” He tipped his glass of soda in her direction as a salute. Once he’d taken a

sip, he added, “You should try finding yourself a good man, Beth. Getting laid regularly does wonderful things for a person’s disposition. It wouldn’t be a bad thing for you to settle down. Maybe don’t follow your dad’s advice and become an old lady, but meeting someone legit and going clean could be good for you.”

Just then, Matt came back out from Phil’s office and looked around with his phone in his hand. “Craig, we’ve gotta go. Business calls.” But he didn’t move toward the front door. Matt’s eyes continued to scan the bar before landing on Cameron. “We need backup. Cameron, you’re with us.”

Beth watched the color drain from Cameron’s face before he nodded, finished his drink, and stood up from his barstool.

Son of a bitch. Beth had been fighting hard to keep Cameron out of the worst of the club’s shit. Yeah, he was a fully patched member, so she couldn’t keep him out of all of it, but she tried to at least keep him away from the deals with buyers. Letting him go with Craig and Matt would be like dropping a lamb into a den full of hangry wolves. Those two assholes would sacrifice Cameron in a heartbeat.

Thinking fast, she shuffled over to Jake and leaned close to him to ask, “Could you watch the bar for a while?”

He studied her face for a minute but eventually agreed. “Yeah, but you gotta be careful. Sarah likes you.” As he stepped around the end of the bar and passed behind her to take her place, Beth felt him slide a gun into the back of her waistband. She had been wondering if Sarah was enough to

push Jake to step back from the dirtier business of the club. Choosing to tend bar while arming Beth to go watch Cameron's back pretty much confirmed that thinking. But honestly, good for him. Beth couldn't help thinking the whole club would be better off focusing more on legit business and less on running guns.

Then her phone pinged as Cameron connected his GPS location to the device. It wouldn't perfectly update in real time, but it would ping every five to ten minutes. It was enough that she didn't need to worry about following the three of them. Beth could just move in the same general direction and end up at the same place they did.

When a club girl dropped off a very tiny Cameron at the clubhouse with a note saying the baby's father should deal with it, Beth had been the one to take him under her wing. Phil had taken one look at the baby and announced that it didn't matter who the father was, the club would be raising the tot. Luckily for Cameron, by the time he was five, he was a miniature version of Craig. Beth wasn't sure if they'd ever done a blood test, but with their distinctively rich, bronze skin and almond-shaped eyes, it would be tough to argue that their matching, unique blend of Native American Indian and Asian features was a coincidence.

She grabbed her purse and headed outside. She and Cameron might have both grown up, but they were still closer than most siblings. He'd been the one to help her with maintenance on her F150 when she'd refused to let anyone who disrespected her to touch the thing. That decree had ruled out the majority

of club members, and they'd taken to viewing her work on it as an entertaining pastime. Cameron was a strong enough mechanic to quietly help her out without making her look or feel like an idiot. That was the thing with the two of them; they always watched each other's backs. Plus, the hard work had paid off. Her truck might be ten years old and have a hundred thousand miles on it, but when she turned the ignition, it didn't even hesitate.

Just as she pulled out of the parking lot and had to decide which way to turn, her phone pinged with an update on Cameron's location. She turned left to go toward the dot.

Eventually, Cameron's GPS pinged twice in a row at the same location. It was an old warehouse, right along the river at the edge of the city. Beth certainly didn't know all of the club's usual exchange places, but she knew this was not one of them. They usually met further away from the city, not closer to it.

Beth did a lap and had no trouble spotting the three bikes. It didn't look like the buyer had arrived yet, so she found an out-of-the-way place to park, pulled her rifle from her trunk, and climbed a ladder up the side of the building to perch up on the roof. Cameron was the only club member who knew about her rifle, and even he didn't know how often she practiced with it. Sure, she loved the shotgun her dad gave her, and Jake's pistol was much appreciated, but Beth had long-ago decided she needed some specialized skills. It was way back before she even hit puberty. The guys in the club had never acted untoward with her, but she wasn't naive enough to believe that

would always hold true. She might have a pussy, but that didn't mean she'd rely on it as her only asset.

Beth got settled in a position where she could see the guys below her, and less than a minute later, a car drove in at an angle that she knew would blind her guys with the bright headlights—even through the daylight of this cloudy afternoon.

Sure enough, Matt and Craig both raised their hands to shield their eyes. Cameron had positioned himself off to the side and against the building, so he wasn't in the direct beam of light. Beth wasn't sure if it was him being smart or Matt accidentally giving him good directions, but either way, it was a relief to see.

The driver's door flew open with the engine still running, and Mike from the Russian crew that operated downtown stepped out of the car. What the fuck was he doing here? The club had never sold them guns before. They mostly ran casinos and pimped girls.

“You have my sample?” Mike asked while keeping his body behind the car door. He wasn't stupid. There was zero chance of Craig or Matt getting a shot at him. With the door, it would be hard for Cameron to get anywhere near him either. Thankfully, Beth's position offered a height advantage his car door and bright lights couldn't compensate for.

Craig pulled his backpack off his shoulder and opened it before walking toward Mike.

“Stop right there,” Mike demanded. “Throw the sample to me. You come any closer, and the product will be tainted by your blood and brains.”

Both of Mike’s arms were resting on the doorframe, making it look like he was unarmed. Beth looked at his car more closely and spotted a passenger with a pistol resting on the rolled down window of his, or her, side of the car. She was betting none of the guys could see it.

Craig pulled a small baggie from the backpack and tossed it to Mike. “Here. It’s good shit, as promised.”

She wasn’t close enough to clearly see what was in the bag, but it didn’t take a rocket scientist to make an educated guess. The Deadly Coyotes Motorcycle Club had never dealt drugs before. They’d had plenty of chances too, but that was one line Phil didn’t want to cross. It was part of why Beth respected him as her father, and this was further reason not to respect her brother. She couldn’t help wondering if Phil was aware of Matt’s actions. She was pretty confident he had no clue about the current drug deal, but did he know how much Matt was betraying him and the rest of the club?

“Looks good,” Mike said. He reached back into the car to grab a duffle bag. “You understand I have a gun on you, yes?” Mike confirmed.

“Yeah, and I’ve got one on you, so I think we’re good.” Craig jerked his head back toward where Cameron was standing.

Then Craig and Mike strode toward each other and swapped bags. Beth watched Matt pull a gun from the back of his waistband at the same time a third guy stepped out of the back of Mike's car and rested the muzzle of a rifle on the top of the now-open rear door.

Mike and Craig both froze.

"I need to count it," Craig said.

"And I need to check the full contents of the bag," Mike agreed.

They both nodded and shifted their focus to their respective bags while Matt and the backseat guy kept their guns leveled on the two men making the exchange. After a few minutes, both appeared to be satisfied. Mike climbed back into his car, both driver's side doors slammed shut, and the vehicle pulled away.

"I fucking hate trying to ride with a duffle. Why couldn't you specify they had to put the money in a backpack?" Craig grumbled.

"We just made more than a hundred grand. I'll carry the damned duffle," Matt sneered at his friend. But instead of getting on his bike, Matt headed straight for Cameron while Craig casually pulled out his gun and waited.

No! Matt was almost directly under Beth. She was not prepared to shoot straight down like that. She could if she had to, but it wasn't ideal. Especially since he had Craig backing

him up. They wouldn't really kill a member of their own club, would they?

“What just happened, Cameron?” Matt asked.

“Uh.” Cameron was shaking so badly that Beth could see it from clear up on the roof of the building.

Matt shoved Cameron's chest, so he slammed back into the side of the building. “I asked you what you saw here tonight,” he demanded again.

“Nothing. I don't know. I mean,” Cameron's voice was higher pitched than usual.

“That's right. You saw nothing. The three of us went for a ride to check out a new warehouse site, but it was no good. That's it. Understood?” Matt snarled.

Cameron looked relieved to have a story to follow. “Yeah, of course. It was a nice ride, but the possible option for a new warehouse sucked, so we just enjoyed cruising.”

Matt turned back toward Craig and the bikes. “Told you he could handle it.”

All three guys climbed back on the rides and roared away.

Beth rolled onto her back and spent five minutes brining her heart back into a normal rhythm and trying to figure out what the fuck was happening with her club.

By the time she got back to the club, Jake's earlier prophesy had come true. Her father was swinging at Craig like a beast while swearing at him for dragging Matt away to check out a new warehouse the club didn't need.

"We do need a new place, old man!" Matt screamed at Phil. "The cops will find the place in Goochland eventually."

"Not here!" Phil snarled. "Both of you come with me. We're going to talk about this in the privacy of my office." And away the three of them went. They failed to notice Beth following in behind them. Or maybe they just assumed she was heading for her place behind the bar.

Either way, she was able to stand outside the office door, listening to her father and brother argue. "Matt, we have to move the inventory out of that warehouse."

"Do you realize how risky it would be to move everything? We need to stand our ground and defend it, not tuck tail, run away, and hide like a bunch of fucking pussies." Matt's voice rose and faded in a steady pattern that Beth knew meant he was pacing.

"Don't you raise your voice to me!"

Beth didn't need x-ray vision to know her father would be foaming at the mouth and shaking his finger in Matt's face. Where Matt shouted, Phil snarled. A year ago, she would have said her father was the bigger threat without question, but now? Things were changing.

“And how would you have us stand our ground? Are you suggesting we all go stand around the warehouse, holding a bunch of guns? Or maybe you mean we should set up cameras to watch the feds find our shit while providing them a feed to follow right back here to us.” Phil’s voice had gotten so quiet that Beth had to concentrate to hear him.

“We need to upgrade our security. Hell, our neighbors have cameras on their front porches. The fact that our supply just sits in an old barn in the middle of a field is bullshit.”

Whatever her father responded with was so soft that she couldn’t make it out even with her ear pressed to the door. Which is exactly the position she was in when a deep voice rumbled from behind her so abruptly that she felt her heart skip a beat before restarting at a more rapid rate.

“Don’t you know it’s impolite to eavesdrop?” he chided Beth.

“Cameron, I didn’t know you were behind me.” She tried to slow her racing heart.

He chuckled before agreeing with her. “Yeah, I guessed that by the way you leaped five feet in the air. What are they arguing about now?”

Beth straightened up and crossed her arms over her chest. “Sure, fuss at me about eavesdropping, but then expect me to spill my secrets. That makes total sense.”

Cameron’s hand wrapped around the back of his neck as he pulled and rubbed the muscles there. He darted a quick look

around to ensure no one else was sneaking up on them before leaning close to Beth and asking again, “Does Phil know about the drug deal earlier?”

“No. Matt’s still alive—at least for now. Have you heard anything about the warehouse out in Goochland?” Beth asked him.

“There’s been talk about moving the stuff there. Matt’s forever arguing about security risks, but after this afternoon, I’m thinking he just wants storage closer to the city for his side deals.” Cameron gave Beth a side-eye.

“The club hasn’t voted on that,” Beth pointed out.

“That didn’t stop him today, and he took me and Craig with him.”

She could see Cameron’s point. “Do you really think he’d turn against the club?”

“No, but I think he’d sell out your father in a heartbeat. It would let him take over.” Cameron raised a sad eyebrow at her.

Beth hated to admit it, but Matt was great at pulling unpredictable bullshit. Point in case, earlier today. Speaking of which, if Matt was pulling Cameron into his crap, he’d likely be setting Beth up too. She wouldn’t be as high of a priority, but enough club members liked her and Cameron that Matt would need to knock them both down with Phil if he wanted to take over.

“Yeah, okay. So we need to space from the club; the club needs a new place to stash stuff; Matt and my dad can’t agree on anything.” Beth pulled at her eyebrows as she thought. Cameron was always warning her that thinking would leave her bald, but Beth swore it helped connect extra neurons to supercharge her thinking.

“Uh-huh.”

Beth’s inner lightbulb clicked on. “We move the inventory.”

“What?!” Cameron never jumped on board with Beth’s plans right away. She was used to having to explain her logic and show him why her schemes were the most reasonable option. What he didn’t know was how much talking through all of it with him helped her solidify what she would do.

“Okay, so we start by offering to move the stuff. Or at least go with it to a new location and babysit it. Yeah, it makes more sense to have the club move everything, but then you and I can keep an eye on it. I can rent a place, so it’s not directly connected to the club. Plus, it will look less suspicious to have me watching the place. That will appeal to my dad and brother while giving me some distance from here.”

“Yeah, but it will also be the perfect setup for you to take the fall if things go south.” Cameron crossed his arms over his chest and glared at her.

“I can hold my own. Besides, having control over the storage area might be enough to thwart Matt’s plans anyway. He’s not exactly the sharpest tool in the shed.”

Cameron sighed with resignation. He always agreed with her in the end. It was a big part of what made their friendship work. “So, do you have a plan to get Phil and Matt to agree to all this?”

Beth put her hands on her hips and smirked at him.

“You’re going to cry, aren’t you?” Cameron’s deadpan question showed just how well he knew her. Tears were the fastest and easiest way to get her father to agree to whatever she wanted.

“Of course. But I’ll already have the perfect place picked out and ready to show them. I’ll point out that the outbuildings would be great for storing extra parts or bikes or whatever when someone needs to lay low. He should see the opportunity and jump on it.”

“And what about your brother?”

Beth sighed. Then she shrugged. “We’ll figure that part out.”

Cameron rolled his eyes again but agreed to go along with it. “How long do you need me to stall them in the office while you find a property?”

Beth released her signature Cheshire smile. Everyone knew it meant she was up to no good. Occasionally, a club member would try and fuck with her, thinking that it was a teasing grin. Of course, that hadn’t happened since she’d shot the last guy in the foot—with his own gun.

“You’ve already found the place, haven’t you?” Cameron asked.

She just nodded at him and stepped back into the hall to return to the office.

“Shit,” Cameron swore under his breath, but she could hear his footsteps following behind her.

“Hey, Dad?” Beth asked in her sweetest voice as she stepped into the office without knocking.

“Fucking knock!” Matt shouted at her.

It was exactly the reaction Beth had been hoping for because it gave her an excuse to burst into tears while sobbing about how she never got any time away for a vacation or anything.

“Beth, just go to the beach or whatever.” Phil might be a violent criminal gang leader, but when he bothered to pay attention to his daughter, he generally did whatever made her happy. Or at least, he did whatever made her fade into the background most quickly. Over the years, Beth had learned how to use it to her advantage.

“I think I’m more of a mountain person. I was thinking hiking would be good for me.” Beth sniffled before pulling up her phone and showing him the property she’d been eyeing for months. It was fifty acres in Rockhurst County with a main house and three smaller cabins. “The club could use the property too, I’m sure. You could send the guys out anytime they needed to lay low, and we could put it in my name, so it wasn’t connected to anything. Plus, those buildings would make great storage.”

She didn't like announcing all of this in front of her brother. If he really was trying to move storage closer to the city, he'd hate this idea. It took everything much further west. Unfortunately, there was no way around it for now. Maybe she could get her father alone to discuss moving the inventory and point out that moving it away from the city was the smart play? One thing at a time, she reminded herself.

Phil had his thinking face on with his brows furrowed and his chin pinched between his thumb and forefinger.

"Dad, you can't really be considering this." Matt was pissed.

"This could be a way to solve two problems at once. Look at those outbuildings, Matt. There's plenty of space. And she's right about it not being connected to us if she's the one who purchases it." Then he turned back to Beth. "Where did you say it's located?"

"Rockhurst County." She had to remind herself to snifle and look upset instead of expressing the glee she felt.

"That's right along Route 56, so it would be convenient," her father added before looking at her more closely. "I don't like the idea of you being there alone."

"Which is why Cameron would be my roommate." She watched Phil's eyes dart back and forth between the two of them. Beth was pretty sure some part of him believed Cameron would be the one she'd marry, but there was a less than zero chance of that ever happening. He was like her kid brother. In fairness, he'd had a small melt-down at age twelve and tried to kiss her, but that had sealed things. Both of them

had been so grossed out that they'd gone through an entire bottle of mouthwash and hadn't been able to make eye contact for a week.

Beth's gaze shifted to Matt when she noticed he was glaring daggers at Cameron. Maybe she could use that in her favor. Matt had brought Cameron in on the deal earlier today, so maybe he could be convinced that Cameron would make the perfect guard for the rest of his stash.

"Matt, I know there's a lot of this you don't like, but I also know you can trust Cameron." She couldn't let him know she was aware of what had gone down earlier. "Just the other day, I heard you say something about giving him more responsibility or something." She'd heard no such thing, but hopefully it would be enough to satisfy him without making him think about earlier.

"I think this is the way to go. Let's call a meeting and vote on it, shall we?" Phil slapped his son on the back, and Beth held her breath waiting to hear how Matt would react.

"Yeah okay, Dad. I think this could work."

Thank goodness!

It didn't take long for the guys to gather enough members to hold a vote, and Beth could tell by the look on Cameron's face it had gone exactly how they'd hoped. As soon as he stepped away from the other club members, she walked up and asked him, "So, when should we start moving the inventory to Twisted Willow?"

That was when Cameron's face took on a whole new shade of color and alerted Beth things might have gone well, but there was at least one kink in the plan.

Phil must have heard her question, because he answered before Cameron could. "Beth, send me the address. The truck will deliver everything on Sunday. I expect you'll have everything prepared and ready."

"That's six days from now." How the hell was Beth supposed to purchase the property and get it set up that fast?

"And this is your chance to prove you can handle it. Besides, you'll have Cameron to help."

Crap. Beth had spoken to the realtor about the property once, and it was ready for immediate occupancy, but there was still a lot of paperwork to do. She couldn't back down from this though.

"I'll need twenty percent for the down payment. I can mortgage the rest," she said.

"Of course. Anty's getting the money together for you now." Then Phil walked over to the bar and knocked on the surface. Apparently, Beth was still expected to pour for them while making all these arrangements. Jake had made a beeline for the exit the second the vote had ended. Beth was glad to see him going home to Sarah, even if he'd likely missed dinner. Then again, it was late enough now, he'd probably be home for the night.

It was several hours later and closer to dawn than dusk when Beth finally managed to escape. Sadly, she wouldn't be heading home to sleep. She glanced down at her phone and reconsidered. There might be enough time for a couple of hours of sleep before she could get ahold of the realtor.

As the door to the clubhouse shut behind her, Cameron stepped out of the shadows and walked over to Beth. "Thanks for having my back for that surprise adventure earlier." The sneer as he said it made it clear he was still pissed.

It took her a second to think all the way back to the drug deal she'd overseen, but once she did, she waved off his thanks. "Of course. I found a comfortable spot on the roof that gave me a great view, right up until Matt walked directly toward you. Aiming straight down is not ideal." Cameron might have been only five years younger than Beth, but she'd been the one taking care of him since his mother dropped him off at the door to the clubhouse.

He ducked his head at her lecturing tone. "I didn't expect the threat to come from Matt or Craig," he confessed softly.

She couldn't be mad at him for that. Hell, she hadn't expected it either. "Yeah, I know. You just gotta be careful," she said instead.

"Hey, I sent you my location."

"You're right. You did." Beth reached up, way up, and ruffled his hair. It had been a decade since he'd outgrown her but given her short five-foot-three stature, that wasn't saying a whole lot. His six-foot-two adult height forced her onto tiptoe

to reach his hair, but he kept it shaggy enough to be worth tousling.

Cameron rolled his eyes and shook his head as they both headed for Beth's truck. "Everything okay tonight? No one needed to be shot?"

Beth smiled at his teasing but appreciated the sincerity behind his question. As the people who'd raised her, club members were the closest thing she'd ever known to home and family. She wasn't sure if that made her want to kill them more or less. Family wasn't supposed to drunkenly grope you, right? Then again, she knew there were some seriously messed up families on this Earth, which was exactly why she thought the entire concept was bullshit. If this was what home meant, she completely understood those who chose to run away from it. She probably would have if she didn't have Cameron.

Beth's mom had overdosed when Beth was still in diapers. She always believed it was part of why Phil kept the club out of drugs, and she knew it was why he was so happy to take in Cameron when his mom didn't want him and claimed he was the fruit of a member. Phil was a violent, evil asshole, but he hated that his kids had spent two days in an apartment with a dead woman and no one to feed them.

"You have big plans for tomorrow?" Cameron asked.

"Uh, no. I'm hoping to snag a few hours' sleep before calling the realtor and figuring out how to buy a property in less than a week." Beth sighed. How could she feel so young and so old all at the same time?

“You okay?” Cameron must have picked up on her melancholy.

“Aren’t twenty-somethings supposed to have a more interesting life than this?” she asked.

“Uh Beth, less than twelve hours ago, you aimed a rifle at a bunch of guys making a drug deal. How much more interesting do you want life to get?” Cameron looked at her like she was stupid, and Beth understood his point.

It just felt like none of that excitement was hers. It was the club’s excitement, just like she worked at the club’s bar and lived in an apartment owned by the club. Hell, her father even expected her to marry a member of the club.

“Heard,” was all she said to Cameron. It was their shorthand for noting they understood all the layers of what the other person was saying.

Cameron wanted her away from the club almost as much as she did. Buying this property in her name might be their chance to make it happen.

“Drive safe, Beth.” Cameron shut the car door for her as she turned the key in the ignition.

CHAPTER 2

Doug

Doug had been working his ass off all week long. There were always drugs in rural communities like his, but the opioid epidemic had hit Twisted Willow hard and didn't appear to be letting up anytime soon. There had been another overdose this week. Mac, one of Doug's deputies, had pulled out Narcan and revived the guy, but the whole situation felt like trying to kill fleas a single bug at a time. Addressing overdoses after they happened would never solve the problem – especially when they didn't have the Narcan necessary to revive them. Doug knew there were things the community could do to reduce drug use. He also knew of programs to reduce overdoses, and if his entire department could be equipped with Narcan, he figured they could cut their death rate in half.

Unfortunately, the county supervisors weren't on board with any of it. The Narcan Mac had used that day had been the last free sample Doug had been able to get his hands on. He'd begged, borrowed, and offered his soul in exchange for as many doses as he could get, but they were all designed to be trials that led to the department purchasing a supply. When the supervisors had seen the line item in his budget last year, they'd rejected the entire thing and passed their own version of the budget that gave them oversight and approval over every category and line. His officers had new, fully loaded vehicles but couldn't revive an overdose. He wondered if it would be

different if there were a doctor on the board instead of the owner of a car dealership.

“You look beat, man,” Mac said to him as he strolled into his office. “Are you off this weekend? If not, maybe you should be.”

“Fuck you. It’s been a long week.” Doug had hired Mac only a few months ago, but his Army experience had him rising to the best deputy in the department faster than Doug could have dreamed. He’d heard the guy had a temper, but Mac proved over and over that he could and would control it to calm situations. They’d become friends.

Mac’s voice shifted to a more serious tone. “Are you really working this weekend?”

“No,” Doug admitted. “I know I need a break.”

“You should get laid or go fishing or do something to let off some steam and relax.”

“Maybe tomorrow. Tonight, I’m going to walk in my front door, shower off the day, and collapse into bed.”

“Fair enough. I’m planning to take Cora out to Colton’s tomorrow night if you want to join us,” Mac offered.

Doug just raised his eyebrow. He wasn’t sure hanging around the local bar with half the town was exactly how he wanted to spend his Saturday night. “I’ll think about it.”

“Yeah, that means no. Just go out long enough to eat dinner. It’s always good for you to show your civilian face in town,

you know?” Mac was hitting below the belt. Doug would do a lot for the good of his community.

“Fine.” He’d need to eat anyway. It wouldn’t hurt to have someone else cook for him.

Later that night, Doug wasn’t feeling any more excited about socializing, but he was hungry, and his kitchen was empty. He really needed to do some grocery shopping. For now, Mac would get his wish though. Doug would go out for dinner. He’d rather do it tonight when he could sit by himself and be anti-social instead of being the third wheel on Mac and Cora’s date night anyway. It had been too long since he’d joined everyone as a regular person. Maintaining those casual relationships made his job much easier. Huh, did that mean he could consider tonight’s dinner a work thing? How sad was that. Okay, he could do this. He didn’t need to go nuts, but maybe swapping the sweaty T-shirt he’d been wearing all day while working in the yard would be a good idea. As he pulled it over his head, he inhaled and realized he needed a shower, too.

That was how he ended up arriving at Colton’s later than he’d planned and dressed better than he had since sometime before his recent memories. They served dinner until eight o’clock, so he had plenty of time to order, but the lights were already dimmed, and the music had been turned up.

It was just as he finished eating that the stranger walked in.

She had long dark hair that poured down her back like the ocean at midnight. She was lean but had curves in the best

places and captured Doug's full attention even though she was wearing jeans and a plain green T-shirt. Rachael stepped over to collect his empty plate, so he took the opportunity to ask who the new woman was. He knew Stephanie was more likely to be caught up on the local gossip, but after their break-up, she avoided him as much as possible, which was just fine with Doug. With a little luck, maybe Stephanie had shared details with Rachael.

“No idea. Never seen her before. Though I heard some lady bought the old Sampson place. Maybe that's her.” Rachael didn't appear interested in digging into other people's business. It made her a good person, but it would also force Doug to get more creative to learn more.

Then again, he was the sheriff. It was part of his job to keep up with people in town. With that thought, he waved the woman over. “If you'd be willing to join me, I've got an empty seat,” he offered. The place was busy enough, she'd have to wait for something else to open up.

Still, she looked around to confirm that for herself before sitting across from him. “Are you sure I'm not intruding?” she asked.

“Nope. Not at all. You familiar with small-town life?”

“Can't say that I am, though I'm hoping to get familiar with it.”

“Does that mean the rumors about you buying the Sampson place down off Route 56 are true?”

“Uh. If you’re referring to the place with a trailer and a few cabins, then yes.” Her eyes sparkled when she smiled as she spoke, and she was sitting on her hands. It made Doug wonder if she usually waved them about while talking and was trying to stifle the urge, or if it was just nerves that had her hiding them away.

“That would be it. It’s nice to meet you. I’m Doug.” He had no idea why he didn’t introduce himself as Sheriff Riley. That was his standard intro, but then, he was usually in uniform, too. Maybe this was a good night to play civilian and take a break from being the sheriff.

“Beth. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Doug.” She extended her hand to shake with him. “So, is the food here any good?”

“As long as you like it greasy and fried, it’s excellent,” he assured her. “Though you’ll want to order quick. The kitchen closes in about 30 minutes, but Greg gets twitchy and sometimes starts shutting it down early.”

“Good to know. What do you recommend?”

“The chicken fried steak is excellent.”

She gave him a blank stare. Did she not like that? Was she a vegetarian? He knew lots of city people had specific preferences about their food. Out here, people ate animals they hunted, mushrooms they foraged, and vegetables they grew. Doug didn’t know how to ask for more information without looking like a stupid redneck.

Thankfully, Beth broke the awkward silence. “I, uh, I can’t say I’ve ever heard of chicken fried steak before. Is it chicken or steak?” she asked.

Doug couldn’t hold back his laughter. He hadn’t really thought about it, but she was right. It was a terribly named dish. “It’s not really either,” he confessed. “Sometimes, it’s even pork or veal.”

She smiled and laughed with him, and a whole cloud of mosquitos took flight inside his gut, buzzing around in circles and tickling him from the inside out.

“You should try it. They usually make it out of thin cuts of beef here. Occasionally, they use pork instead, but tonight it’s beef. I had it myself, and it was excellent.”

“Oh, you already ate?” Beth asked him.

“Yeah,” Doug suddenly realized just how awkward the whole situation was. “Um, I guess I can get out of your way if you want the table to yourself.”

“You’ve still got most of your pint left. I’m sure not going to run you off after you were nice enough to offer me a table before dinner service ends.”

Rachael chose that moment to wander over and ask what Beth wanted to drink while letting her know she’d need to order fast if she wanted dinner.

“I’ll have the chicken fried steak.” Beth winked at Doug before continuing, “and whatever beer he’s drinking.” The

wink was more than he'd expected, and he almost spit his mouthful of beer across the table. But he didn't.

“Vienna Lager and chicken fried steak coming right up. You okay with mashed potatoes and green beans?” Rachael asked.

“Sure. Sounds good,” Beth agreed. Once Rachael left them, Beth turned back to Doug and asked, “Are you sure you don't mind me eating in front of you? I'm sure I can steal a spot at the bar or something.”

“No, no. I'd rather you stay here. For one thing, Stephanie's tending the bar tonight, and she's the biggest gossip in town. She'll pump you for information all night long, and then she'll announce all your business in the local paper. For another, well, I guess the company is kind of nice.”

“You don't get out much?” Beth asked.

“I work a lot. It's nice to not work this evening and just be me. Sometimes I wonder if I even remember who I am when I'm not working.”

“I get that.”

“So where are you moving here from?” Doug wanted to steer the conversation away from his job.

“Oh, I was in the Richmond area.”

“What brings you out this direction?”

“Uh, I'm just looking for some peace and quiet. A change of scenery if you will.”

He lifted his glass expecting her to spend some time responding, but he barely managed to swallow during her short answer. Beth had returned to sitting on her hands and was looking down at her lap. She didn't want to talk about why she was moving here. Doug thought back to when Mac's girlfriend, Cora, had shown up here, trying to escape her abusive ex. Was this something like that? Did he need to brace himself for another asshole showing up and looking to cause trouble? Fuck, why couldn't he just have one night where he wasn't trying to keep everyone he cared about safe?

“Okay, so neither of us is in the mood to discuss anything of any consequence. Let's talk nonsense.” He would have one normal night if it killed him. Mac had been right. Doug was teetering on the brink of burnout, and a real night off was exactly what he needed. Plus his response had made Beth smile, which was a massive win in and of itself.

“And just what kind of nonsense do you have in mind?” she asked.

“Let's start with our most awkward teenage moment. Really get crazy right from the start,” he suggested.

“Oh, no! If that's what you're looking for, you'll need to answer first.”

Doug debated. He didn't want to make himself look like a fool, but Beth had laughed while asking him to go first. He glanced around the bar and realized he had the perfect story. It was one everyone knew, so Beth would likely hear it from

someone eventually anyway. He might as well be the one to tell her about it.

“Fair enough. So, when I was in high school, I was on the football team.”

“That does not surprise me.”

“Don’t interrupt.”

“Sorry.” Beth mimed zipping her lips shut.

“Anyway, the high school has a big storage room for all our gear. The doors aren’t on spring-loaded hinges, so you have to close them. Otherwise, they will just stay open. We’d open them when practice started and leave them open until we were done with everything. Coach would come behind us and close them after everyone left.”

“Okay.”

Doug paused to let Rachael deliver Beth’s beer and assure her that the food would be out momentarily. When she pointed at his almost empty glass, he decided it would be nice to have another to sip on while he chatted with Beth.

“I’ll be right back with another beer for you. Are you planning to go wild on us tonight?” Rachael asked him.

“Ha, no. I’m just enjoying an evening off.”

“Well, you certainly deserve it. Ben was just telling me how grateful his whole family is for you and Mac this week.”

“It’s my job.” Doug was relieved when Rachael walked away instead of trying to continue the conversation.

“She’s gone now,” Beth pointed out. “You can tell me all about how you ended up locked in the closet, now.”

“What? How did you know?” Was this woman a mind reader?

“Uh, there’s only one reason a person offers to tell a funny story and then spends five minutes describing a closet.” Beth laughed as she pointed out the obvious conclusion. “I just want to know how long you were stuck in there, who found you, and how embarrassing it was when someone finally let you out.”

Doug mock-glared at her. “Well, that takes the wind out of my sails.”

“Oh don’t be a grump. Tell me what happened, and then I’ll tell you about the time I got my hair caught in my locker and was forced to get an exceptionally awful haircut.”

“I suppose that’s fair,” he agreed.

They both nodded at Rachael as she delivered Doug’s beer and Beth’s plate. “Can I get you two anything else?” she asked.

“No, we’re good. Thank you. Doug was just about to finish telling me about the time he got stuck in the football closet,” Beth smirked at Doug.

“Oh, that’s a good story,” Rachael agreed. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“I’ll eat while you talk, yeah?” Beth was not shy or timid.

“Fine.” Doug felt the odd pull in his cheeks and realized he was smiling while he said it. He’d almost forgotten what it felt like to just relax and enjoy himself. He proceeded to tell her all about one of the nerdiest kids hearing his pounding and thinking it was a ghost. He’d run through the halls screaming about the school being haunted until everyone, and Doug did mean every single one of the three hundred fifty students and forty faculty at the school, ended up in the gym, watching him be released from his confinement. Unfortunately, no one had considered that Doug had been stuck in there all night with no access to a bathroom.

At that point, Beth had to set her food aside to avoid choking. She was laughing so hard that tears were streaming down her face. As embarrassing as the story was, Doug loved seeing the light sparkle through the moisture on Beth’s face.

When she finally caught her breath and was able to speak, she gasped out, “Oh, you were right. That was so much better than anything I could have conjured up or predicted. How did you ever recover from that?”

Thank goodness for that question. It was a point of pride Doug never left out. “The next night was a home game against one of our biggest rivals. I didn’t care that much about football, so I usually treated it like a game and just had fun. But that night, I wanted more. I needed to overshadow the closet debacle, so I went all out. I played harder than I’ve ever played in my life. Not only did we win the game, but I scored the winning touchdown. It was enough for people to laugh about the closet while still being respectful.”

“Thank goodness you’re athletic.” The way Beth’s eyes roamed over Doug’s body as she said it gave him goosebumps. What would her skin feel like against his? He wouldn’t have to be careful or gentle with her. She could obviously hold her own. He started to envision wrestling for control as they stripped naked but shook himself before the vision could fully form.

He refocused on her and prompted, “Your turn. Please expand on the haircut.”

“Well, it’s not nearly as good as your story, but I’ve always worn my hair long. So, when I leaned against my locker as the person next to me opened theirs, it got caught in the hinges. The guy, because of course the person opening the locker beside me was one of the hottest guys at school, looked horrified and tried to untangle it. Hair doesn’t work like that though. The more he tried to pull it loose, the more entangled it became. By the time a teacher noticed, my head was pulled tight to the locker.”

“Oh no.”

“Yeah, they got an administrator to see if they had any ideas. Oh, and the teacher’s entire class had followed her out to the hall to see what was happening. Then the administrator had to go get the school nurse, who didn’t have any bright ideas either. Eventually everyone agreed—they’d have to cut me free.”

“Tell me it wasn’t up against your scalp.” Doug tried to picture the beauty before him with her hair trimmed to a

military buzz cut. It didn't sit right with him.

“Oh yeah. All the way to the skin, but only in the one spot.”

Maybe it had been the back of her head, so the rest of her hair could cover it. “Where?” Doug asked with bated breath.

“Right here.” Beth pointed to her temple before confirming Doug's fear. “There was no way to hide it.”

“What did you do?” Doug asked.

“I got a ‘cute’ pixie cut with a chunk missing.” Beth rolled her eyes and used her hands to make air quotes around the word cute. “I refused to let anyone take my picture for almost a year. To this day, there are no pictures of most of my ninth-grade year of high school.”

“Oh no! It was your freshmen year?” Doug couldn't imagine having that follow him all through school. His had happened during the fall of his senior year, and that had been bad enough.

“Yep. Though I get the feeling we went to very different high schools. My graduating class had seven hundred kids in it, so I was pretty anonymous.”

Doug swallowed his beer wrong and had to cough to clear it before he could respond. “Seven hundred? How is that possible? That's massive.”

“That's how it is in the city.”

“Damn. There were eighty-seven kids in my graduating class, and we were a big group.”

“Wow. What was that like?”

By the time Doug finished his beer, it had gotten warm. He and Beth had been too busy swapping stories for him to drink steadily. He had laughed more than he had in a very long time, and when she tucked her hair behind her ear and gave him a sly grin, the tightness in his jeans reminded him how long it had been since he'd enjoyed a full night with a woman.

When Rachael raised a skeptical eyebrow and asked if they wanted another round, Beth surprised Doug by declining before he could.

“I'm good. I'm hoping this guy will offer to take me home.”

Rachael chuckled before both women turned to look at Doug.

“I might not always be the sharpest tool in the shed, but I'm not dumb enough to say no to that. My place or yours?” he asked.

“Yours, please. Mine's a disaster right now.”

“That's right. You just moved into the Sampson place, didn't you?” Rachael asked.

Before Beth could answer, Doug pulled out his wallet and redirected the conversation. “Yep, and she can tell you all about it later, but right now, you should go run my card.” Then he shoved his credit card toward Rachael.

She smiled at them and darted away.

“You don’t have to buy my dinner, you know.” Beth looked every bit the modern, successful woman. Doug was sure that paying for her own meals was normal for her, but he wanted to do better than that.

“I know. I’m choosing to because I want to do something nice for you to show that I care and am a decent guy.”

“I’ve slept with lots of guys who aren’t decent.” Beth looked down, and Doug thought he saw a flush bloom on her cheeks. Was she embarrassed?

“Which is all the more reason for me to buy your dinner, so I stand out in your memory as special. Besides, just because a person can always take care of themselves doesn’t mean they should have to.”

“In what ways do you plan to take care of me tonight? Aside from buying my dinner, I mean.”

“Hmm, I bet your muscles are sore from moving, so I should probably start with a massage.” Doug was enjoying flirting. Every woman he’d dated and slept with had known him long enough to have witnessed his emergence from that football closet. It was nice to meet someone new.

Beth sighed sincerely and confessed, “A massage would be amazing. I do expect an orgasm at some point, but the past week has been,” she paused to think before simply finishing, “a lot?”

Doug got the feeling it had been more than just moving, but he wasn’t going to press. He was too fixated on her blatant

request for an orgasm.

By the time Rachael returned with his card and the slip to sign, he was already standing up. He scribbled his name on the page, told her to do the math to give herself twenty percent, and shoved the black tray and pen back into her hands. Then he extended his hand to Beth. “Let’s go. Do you want to ride with me, or follow me in your own car? I can bring you back here in the morning.”

Beth grinned at him. “I love that you just assume I’ll spend the night.”

“Uh, yeah. Massage, orgasms, sleep. All of them together.” Doug was so enthralled by the turn his night had taken that he couldn’t even form complete sentences anymore.

“Alright, but I’ll follow you in my truck. I like to have my own vehicle handy.”

“Fair enough.” Doug could respect a person’s need to control their own exit. Hell, he wouldn’t stay at a woman’s house without his vehicle there anyway. Then he remembered the other reason it was good she would follow in her truck. He’d completely forgotten he’d ridden his bike tonight. It wasn’t often he got to climb on his Yamaha. The bike was far from impressive and not fun with a second person.

“Are you changing your mind?” Beth asked him.

“What? No!”

“You just got a weird look on your face.”

“Oh, um, I forgot I’ve got my bike with me tonight.” Doug toed at the gravel of the parking lot.

“Like, a bicycle that you pedal?” Beth asked.

That jerked Doug’s head up. “No. No one should be riding a bicycle on these roads, especially at night. There are tons of logging trucks here, and none of them believe in speed limits. Hell, half of them don’t check their breaks or do regular maintenance either.”

“Okay.” Beth gave him a goofy look. He hadn’t meant to blurt out so much about it, but he’d responded to a scene after a bike met a logging truck. It had inspired months of nightmares. “I’ll be sure not to take my 10-speed out on the roads around here.” Her voice was light. She was trying to make a joke of it. Thank goodness he hadn’t ruined everything.

“I’ve got an old Yamaha. It’s kind of crappy, but I traded a lawn mower for it, so…”

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with riding a Yamaha, though you’re right about not wanting both of us on there. They’re terrible for two people. The stability goes all wonky no matter how well both riders work together. Plus, I did not know it was possible to make a bitch seat that uncomfortable. It’s like torture.”

“So you know motorcycles?”

Beth’s eyes went wide. Shit. Doug needed to get things back on track. “Never mind,” he tried.

“Sorry, I just—”

“Nope. No need for apologies. Just follow me. We’ll start with a massage and go from there.”

“So long as go from there means give Beth orgasms, I’m all for it.”

Whew. Crisis averted. “Yep, that’s exactly what that means. Which truck is yours?”

Beth pointed to the truck that was just a few spots down from Doug’s bike. “That white F150.”

It was as generic as a country truck could get. In fact, glancing around the parking lot, Doug could see at least three others just like it right here. “Okay, I’ll try to keep an eye on you, but let me give you my address just in case. Uh, who’s your carrier?” If she said T-Mobile or any of the little services, he’d need to give her written directions and keep a close eye on her. GPS only worked when phones had a signal, at least to start the journey, and out here that was limited to a few carriers.

“I’ve got service here,” she assured him.

“Good.” He smiled at her and rattled off his address.

“Oh wow. This says it’s 25 minutes away. Is that right?” she asked.

“Yep. Everything is spread out here, and most of the trip to my place is on back roads with no lines. Is that okay?” He could drive her truck for her and come get his bike later.

“Yeah, I’m good with that. I’m just not used to it. I kind of like it though. The thought of being hidden away from all the chaos, I mean.”

“That’s exactly what drew me to my cabin. It’s further from main roads than a lot of options, but it gives me more peace and quiet.”

“I look forward to seeing it. Lead the way.”

Doug couldn’t bring himself to just walk away from her though. It didn’t feel right. He stepped closer to her and asked, “Can I kiss you first?”

Beth grinned and stepped forward, so her chest was pressed against him. Then she lifted up on her toes and brushed her lips against his.

It was like the Fourth of July was being celebrated inside Doug’s chest. He wrapped his arms around her waist to pull her even closer and shifted from the chaste and gentle kiss to a deeper more possessive claiming of her mouth. Maybe he should have waited until they were at his place before kissing her. Then again, this wasn’t an experience he ever wanted to wait for. He regretted having lived the first thirty years of his life without it.

Doug forced himself to pull back. He wanted to rip her shirt off. He wanted to rip his own shirt off. Naked. He really wanted them both naked. But that needed to happen at home. He did not like the idea of anyone else seeing Beth.

“We need to go,” he shoved out through his swirling thoughts.

“Yeah. Go. Inside. To your place, I mean.”

Huh, it was nice to know the kiss had affected Beth, too.

“Get in your truck. Follow me. We’ll go slow and be safe. Watch for deer.” Doug forced his hands to peel away from her waist. Her gorgeous, soft, voluptuous waist. No. They needed to go home. Then he could see her waist without clothing.

Doug forced himself to walk over to his bike and climb on. He crossed his fingers there wouldn’t be any deer while keeping at least half his focus on the rearview mirror to ensure Beth was still behind him, and when they turned up the gravel road to his home, his core burbled with a giddiness too intense to attribute to the rumble of the engine beneath him.

CHAPTER 3

Beth

Beth had no idea what she was doing, but maybe that was part of the allure. It was the first time she'd been truly free to do her own thing without a member of the club *looking out for her*. She snorted as she followed the single taillight down the dark country road. Maybe the club had started off trying to do what was best for her, but they'd long ago swooped beyond that mark into obnoxious, stalker-spy territory. She was a grown woman. And that's how Doug had treated her. He'd appeared slightly surprised by her forthright request for sex, but then he'd also suggested she eat something called chicken fried steak. Clearly, there were some cultural differences. That knowledge, along with his bike being a Yamaha and not a Harley, was how she'd reassured herself when she realized that she'd come all the way out here only to end up going home with the one motorcycle owner in the bar on her very first night in town.

As she pulled her truck up in front of his cabin, she checked her phone and was relieved to see she had a signal still. She'd need it to find her way back to her own house, and she needed to be there pretty early. She had no idea when the club would be delivering their inventory, but Cameron had promised to message her when they got close. That was the only reason Beth was on her own tonight, even Phil wanted everyone focused on moving their stuff.

It was why Beth needed to take full advantage of tonight, too. Who the hell knew what chaos would come tomorrow. Best to enjoy the sexy man striding up to her truck door while she could.

Doug even opened it for her. “You okay? Did you change your mind about coming inside?” he asked.

“No,” she laughed. “Sorry. I was just taking a minute to appreciate the evening.” Then she gave him what she hoped was a flirtatious look. “The view is rather nice, too.”

He stepped close enough to touch her and rubbed a hand up and down her thigh. “I bet the view is even better with less clothing.” Then his face twisted up like he’d just eaten a lemon. “Oh, that was awful.”

“Yeah.” At least she didn’t have to break it to him or suffer through boosting his ego after having said such a horrendous line. “I can genuinely say I don’t think I’ve ever heard that particular expression before.”

Doug pulled his hand back and stepped out of the way to give her room to get out of the truck. “True confession?” He looked up at her with his chin tilted down and his hands stuffed in his pockets. She nodded for him to go ahead. “I do believe you’re the first woman I’ve brought home who hasn’t known me most of my life.”

“Seriously?”

Doug shrugged. “I’ve lived here pretty much my whole life. I commuted to college. I’ve traveled some, but I don’t meet

too many outsiders.”

Before she could respond, he turned and headed toward the front porch.

Beth rushed to catch up with him. “Hey,” she called out.

“Yeah?” he turned back to her as he unlocked the door.

“I may be from the city, but this is my first night without...” She wasn’t sure how to finish what she was trying to say. “My dad’s a bit overprotective and always has my brother or somebody keeping an eye on me.” It was the best she could offer, and it seemed to be enough.

He smiled at her under the porch light. “Come on in. I’ll grab a beer for each of us, and we’ll go from there.”

“By starting with a massage, right?” Beth was relieved they’d relaxed back into their easier banter. “I didn’t follow some strange man deep into the woods only to not get a massage.” She raised her eyebrows at him as she closed the front door behind herself.

Doug laughed. “Absolutely.”

Beth followed him into the kitchen where he pulled out two bottles of Vienna Lager, popped the first cap, and offered her the beer.

“I really do like being out in the woods like this,” Beth confided as she gazed out the kitchen window into the dark forest. “There are more stars than I ever imagined were possible to see.”

“Have you seen the Milky Way yet?”

“I’m assuming you don’t mean the candy bar.” She grinned at him. But seriously, he couldn’t be talking about the galaxy. Was that really something a person could see while standing outside?

Thankfully, Doug laughed as he explained, “No. This is one of several parts of the country with limited light pollution. It means that, on especially clear nights, we can see the galaxy streaking across the sky.”

“Wow.” Beth was dumbfounded by that.

“It makes you feel kind of small, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, but I want to see it sometime.”

“Then you’ll have to come back over so I can show you. It’s too overcast tonight. Besides, I do believe you were rather eager to get that massage. Should we take our beers with us to the bedroom where you can get comfortable while I grab some oil?”

“Yes, please.” A regular man who would show her what it was like to be with someone who didn’t just expect her to sleep with him was exactly what she wanted. Of course, she fully intended to sleep with Doug, because orgasms are never bad things, but getting a massage first made the whole night feel luxurious.

“This way.” Doug led them down a hall to his bedroom door, but he pointed to the other door first. “That’s my home office

and gym. This is my bedroom. The bathroom has doors that open to the hallway and to the bedroom itself.”

“Sounds genius.”

“It works. Go hop on the bed and get comfortable on your back. I know most people give massages with the person laying on their stomach, but I find reaching under them means their body weight provides the perfect pressure. Plus I want to be able to see your face.” He winked at her. A full-on, no-hesitation wink!

Beth grabbed the back of the neck of her shirt with one hand and ripped it up and over her head, only to find Doug staring at her with wide, surprised eyes. “Uh, was I not supposed to take my shirt off?”

He blinked a few times before answering, “No. I mean, yes. It’s good to take your shirt off. I mean, you look good with your shirt off. I—oh, for fuck’s sake.” Doug scrubbed a hand down his face before taking a deep breath and saying, “I’m not used to women being as comfortable with this as you are.”

“Oh. Should I not be comfortable with this?” Beth was starting to wonder if their cultural differences had less to do with city versus country and more to do with the way she was basically raised by a motorcycle club.

Before she could freak out about it anymore though, her phone pinged. She might be physically distant from her father and the club, but she couldn’t ignore their messages. Luckily, it was just Cameron checking on her since he was back with the club and getting ready to drive the inventory out in the

morning. She sent him a quick thumbs up and switched her phone to vibrate before looking up to see that Doug had stepped out of the room. Beth took the opportunity to set her beer on the side table and take a seat on the bed. He'd told her to get comfortable laying on her back, but he hadn't said anything about taking her bra off or leaving it on. After his reaction to her pulling her shirt off, she decided to leave it on for now. Was he thinking she did this kind of thing all the time? Is that what he'd meant when he said he wasn't used to women being comfortable with this situation? She scooted up the bed so she was leaning against the headboard. It felt weird to lay flat on her back and stare at the ceiling while waiting for him to return. What was she supposed to do with her hands? She folded them in her lap, but it felt awkward with nothing to rest her elbows on. She tried tucking them behind her head, but that felt forced and overly posed. Eventually, she grabbed her beer bottle and clutched it with both hands just in time for Doug to walk back into the room.

“Set your beer on the side table, and wiggle down so you're lying flat.” He stopped talking and set the bottle of oil on his dresser to pull his own shirt over his head. The move revealed his glorious abs for Beth to ogle.

She checked her chin for drool.

“I'm glad you like what you see.” Doug was confident like this, and it was hot as hell.

“Yeah, it's an even better view than the stars.”

“My view is rather nice also, though it’s obscured by a pesky undergarment.” He was teasing her again. Thank goodness she hadn’t totally messed this up. “If you’re comfortable with it, you can pull your bra off and unbutton your jeans, so I have more room to work.”

“Should I pull my jeans off?” she asked. She wasn’t sure why he’d just want her to unbutton them. She let her gaze roam down his body until she got to his bare feet sticking out of the bottom of his jeans. She’d never seen a guy walking around barefoot. In the club, everyone had to wear shoes unless they were in their own room. Even when she’d gone to one of the guy’s houses, they just always had their shoes on. Beth never would have guessed that a man’s feet could turn her on, but damn. The combination of bare chest, jeans, and bare feet was a powerful aphrodisiac. Then Doug unbuttoned the top button of his jeans. He left the zipper up though. Beth’s brain short-circuited.

“Beth?” Doug pulled her attention back up to his face.

“Fuck, I think I understand the unbutton the jeans thing!”

He chuckled but explained in a tone that made it clear he was repeating himself. “I’d like room to work on your lower back and around your waist, so unbuttoning your pants will give me the space to do that. I’d love for you to pull your pants off, but you need to know it will seriously shorten the duration of your massage. I’m not sure how long I’ll be able to resist moving on to massaging your more private bits if you’re

wearing nothing but your panties.” He licked his lips after he finished speaking.

Beth did the only thing she could think of. She leaped up from the bed, yanked down her pants and underwear, and threw herself back down, lying flat on her back before declaring, “I’m ready. Massage all of my bits, please.”

She must not have been very graceful, based on the way Doug laughed aloud while tossing his head back. But he soothed her embarrassment when he returned his focus to her and declared, “You are the kind of woman I’ve always dreamed about but never believed existed in real life.”

Then he poured oil on his hands, rubbed them together, and strode toward her.

He’d been right to warn her that the massage portion wouldn’t last long, but Beth loved the feeling of his hands kneading along her back. It wasn’t relaxing though. She was sure it could have been, but with her naked and him almost naked, the sexual tension just kept building. When he shifted his focus to her hips and then her thighs, she started to squirm to try and move her center under the motion of his fingers. He wouldn’t allow it though.

“Patience is a virtue,” he said.

“I’m not very virtuous.” Beth just wanted to feel him all over her. In fact, if he could just drop his pants and climb on the bed with her, that would be fantastic.

His rumble of throaty laughter suggested that wasn't how this would go. "If you get too desperate, talk to me, but I'd like to let us both enjoy the climb before we tumble over the edge."

What? Beth pulled her elbows back under her shoulders to prop herself up so she could look at him. "What the fuck does that mean? Enjoy the climb? I'm naked. You're hot. We should have sex now."

When Doug climbed up on the bed and slung one leg over her hips so he was straddling her, she thought she was finally going to get what she really wanted.

She was wrong.

Doug placed his hands on her clavicle and danced his fingers across her shoulder muscles while pushing down gently to encourage her to lay back again.

She let herself collapse back onto the pillow but couldn't hold back from saying, "I'm confused."

"That's tragic. Will you trust me tonight?"

Beth narrowed her eyes at him. "That depends. What do you plan to do with that trust?"

"Fair question. I'd like to massage you until you're so relaxed you feel like goo. Then I want to tease you and play with you until you're desperate to cum. Just when you're writhing uncontrollably with want, I'll slide on a condom and slide into you until you scream. I want to say I won't cum, because that's not where my plan ends, but with you..." Doug

shook his head. “Hopefully, I’ll be able to hold onto my sanity through your first climax. Then we can slow the pace so that you feel every centimeter of me gliding through your folds. My real goal is to ensure you peak a second time before I let loose and thrust into you for my own pleasure.”

“I think I made a puddle on the bed.” Seriously, Beth had never heard anything so sexy before in her life. She could feel her juices pooling between her legs.

“Good. That’s exactly how turned on I want you. We’ll change the sheets before we sleep. Now, will you trust me? At least for tonight?”

Usually, Beth hated the smirking arrogance of an overly confident asshole, but, somehow, she knew Doug’s confidence was warranted. Hell, if he could deliver even half of what he just described, it would be the best night of her life. “Yeah. Show me what you’ve got.”

He smiled at her challenge and set to work rubbing her back, shoulders, neck, ribs, butt, thighs, and calves. He even kneaded his thumb along the bottom of her feet and massaged her arms and hands. Eventually, it was enough for Beth’s arousal to shift to a deeper relaxation.

That was when she felt his fingers strumming her clit like a guitar, and damn did he know how to play. He followed through on every promise he’d made to her, and he was right. The climax she achieved when he finally slid deep inside her was more intense than anything she’d experienced before. He’d held perfectly still until her aftershocks subsided while

alternating between praising her beauty and expelling obscenities as he fought to stave off his own release. It hadn't taken more than a few minutes for him to drive her right back to the brink though, and she enjoyed her second orgasm just as his face twisted up and his rhythm faltered. Then he rolled to the side as he collapsed down to the bed with his arms and legs still wrapped around her.

They swapped gentle kisses and compliments for the bliss they both experienced until Beth couldn't stand the sticky feeling anymore. "I really need to pee. And I might need a shower." Between the sweat, massage oil, and other bodily fluids, she was a mess.

"Ha, that sounds good to me. Would you rather I join you in the shower or change the sheets while you're in there?" Doug asked.

No man had offered to shower with Beth before. She thought it sounded odd, but given the way Doug's massage had turned out, maybe odd was good. Or would it be weird?

"You're thinking way too hard about that question. I'm going to join you in the shower, and then we can change the sheets together. If that's not okay with you, just say no. I'll always respect that."

Beth thought about the way his hands had stroked over her skin during the massage. She added soap and water to that mental image, and any thoughts of declining his offer vanished. "Okay," she agreed.

Doug climbed out of bed before offering her a hand. He did prove to be just as attentive under a spray of hot water as he was in bed, though he disappointed her by keeping them both focused on the task of getting her clean. As they stood on opposite sides of the bed, both naked, and pulled clean sheets over the mattress, Beth blurted out some of the thoughts swirling through her mind. “This feels different. I’ve never done anything like this before, and I mean that in a good way, but I don’t know if this is normal for you, or if it’s just new.”

“Breathe, Beth,” Doug reminded her.

He was smiling when she looked up at him.

His voice was softer as he responded to her thoughts. “This feels different to me, too. I don’t know what it means, but it’s far from normal. I don’t want to stress over it though. Let’s just enjoy it and see what happens.”

Beth wasn’t sure how she’d expected him to respond, but there was nothing he said that she could argue about. Instead, she climbed into bed beside him, wiggled her ass against his groin as he wrapped his arms tight around her, and drifted off to sleep.

She woke to a buzzing noise. Her phone was lit up in the semi-dark room, and it was dancing across the side table. The curtains blocked most of the light, but Beth could tell the sun was already above the horizon. The man beside her slept on with gentle snuffles that weren’t aggressive enough to be called snoring. She grabbed her phone and answered the

second she saw Cameron's number. Had she slept through his message? Was the club already at her house?

"Yeah?" she whispered as she climbed out of bed, collected her discarded clothing, and snuck out of the room. Her underwear was missing in action, but if the guys were waiting for her, that would be the least of her concerns. She was not looking forward to explaining where she was coming from at six in the morning.

"We've got a problem," Cameron said.

Fuck! "I'm on my way home. I'll get there as fast as I can, but I need you to cover for me."

"What? Why aren't you at home? What the hell are you talking about?" Cameron had dropped his volume to a whisper and was hissing through the phone.

"The club isn't already at my place?" Beth asked.

"No, we're stuck on the side of the road about thirty minutes away. I was about to send you a voice message when my tire blew—like all the way shredded."

"Oh shit! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, we were on a back road, and I wasn't going too fast. I was able to control the slide. My left leg and arm are shredded, but nothing that won't heal in a week or so. But, like I was saying, we've got a problem."

"Okay." Obviously, Cameron was talking about more than his bike needing a new tire. What else could be going wrong?

How bad was it? Beth swapped the hand holding her phone so she could shove her arms into the sleeves of her shirt.

“They loaded up more drugs with the guns. Craig and Matt and I loaded it up, so I don’t think anyone else realizes, but there will be drugs stored at your new place.” Cameron huffed.

“We knew that was a potential issue,” Beth reminded him. “We’ll have to just deal with it for now. At least it gets them further from the city, so it’ll be harder for him to sell it.”

“Beth, they weren’t making a normal deal the other night. A hundred thousand dollars is not a street deal for users. Matt and Craig are running that shit up through our territory. That means they probably have deals already set up and are just handling the delivery for other parties.”

“Son of a bitch. Okay.” Think, Beth! She hadn’t thought that through, but they could figure this out. “First, let’s get everyone out to my place. Do they have a way to bring your bike?”

“Nope. That’s the official reason for my call. I need you to bring the truck to come get me and my ride.”

Beth was fully dressed now. She needed to pee, but she could do that on the side of the road while they loaded Cameron’s bike. This would also cover the fact she hadn’t slept at her own place last night. Her keys were on the table by the front door, so she grabbed them and headed out. Getting her underwear back from Doug might be a great excuse to see him again. Just thinking about it made her smile. “Send me a pin with your location. I’m leaving now,” she told Cameron.

“Why do you sound happy about this?” Cameron asked.

“I’m not, but I did have a gloriously wonderful night last night, which we can argue about sharing later. What’s everyone else’s plan? Are they all waiting with you?”

Now that she was outside, Beth clicked on speakerphone so she could pull up her GPS and set directions to take her to the pin notification Cameron had sent.

Cameron sighed. “That’s being debated now. Matt wants everyone to go ahead and leave me with Jake to help load my bike. Hang on. The foot-stomping stopped, so I think a decision’s been made.”

Beth used the opportunity to focus on getting down the driveway and closer to some bigger roads. Doug’s place really was closer to Siberia than civilization. She’d just returned to a paved road when Cameron came back on the line.

“Okay, by some miracle, there was a compromise. Matt and Craig are going ahead with the truck while everyone else stays with me.”

“It’s just the one truck?” Beth knew the original plan had been three, but no one liked how much attention that would draw. There’d been talk about getting a full semi, and she’d checked there was enough access to the property to bring it through.

“Yeah, we were able to get a full trailer. Craig’s brother, Darren, is driving for us.” Cameron paused for a minute before

his voice came through more softly. “You get what this means, right?”

“Yeah, Matt and Craig will unload the drugs and lock them up tight before the rest of the guys can arrive.” Her brother was an idiot, but Craig wasn’t. He was intelligent, ruthless, and just stupid enough to make quick decisions when opportunities arose. It made him a great sergeant at arms and a terrible human.

“How are the rest of the guys feeling about the situation?”

Cameron sighed deeply. “A lot of them want to join Matt and Craig. I don’t think they get what’s happening, but with the newest patches joining us, the loyalty between Phil and Matt is split almost fifty-fifty. Phil’s still got power of appointment and advancement, and he’s leveraging that, but I don’t know how long it will last.”

“Heard. You’ll officially be living on the property with me?”

“Yeah. A couple other guys will be staying for a few days also. I imagine we’ll have guys coming and going all the time.”

“As much as I don’t love that, I’d be surprised if you’d said anything else. Any idea who’s staying?”

“Don’t know yet. That was left open, but Phil told us four guys were to stay for now.”

Beth harumphed. She needed to be careful about who got to stick around. She’d have to think about the best way to make it

unfold to her advantage. “I’ll have ideas by the time I get there.”

“I expect nothing less. We’re on the right side of the road just after a sharp left turn. See you soon.”

“Yep.” Beth hung up, set her phone in the console where she could still see directions, and chewed on her lip as she considered her options.

CHAPTER 4

DOUG

Doug was disappointed to wake up alone, but he wasn't surprised. He was hoping Beth had left her number or a note or something. Sure, he could track her down, and he would, but it would be nicer if she volunteered the information. He frowned and sat up in bed. Would a city girl think it was weird if he just showed up at her place? He grabbed his phone from his bedside table. Of course, there was no text from Beth. She didn't have his number, but there was a message from Judy.

Without work calling, Doug wasn't sure what he'd have done with his time. His deputies were good, but he liked to oversee things himself. Like any other day, he got up, put on a clean uniform, and headed toward the station. Judy called him a second time before he could make it to town though.

"I figured I'd save you some driving and send you straight out on the road," she said when he answered.

"What's going on, Judy?"

"There's a whole mess of bikers at the northern pull-off out on 250, but none of them are the regular kind. Grant called in hollering about them wearing Deadly Coyote vests. He seemed fully convinced they're a bad crew to have in the neighborhood. He said one of them crashed. I asked if I should send an ambulance, but he said there was no way he was stopping to find out. Then he told me to call you to deal with

it.” Judy’s thick country accent made her sound far dumber than she was.

Doug had learned to dial his back or turn it up depending on who he was speaking with, but that wasn’t one of Judy’s talents. She had the best judgment when it came to handling local reports though. On the surface, Grant hadn’t reported much, but based on the way Judy was calling Dough for a second time and sending him straight to the scene, Grant’s voice or mannerisms or something had set off her alarm bells.

“And are you sending an ambulance to meet me?” he asked.

“Nope, seems to me it’s smarter to have Randy and Erica meet you there. You’ll get there ahead of them, but they shouldn’t be far behind. Take your time and make sure you’re ready.” That was Judy-speak for get your gun out and delay until backup arrives if possible.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You report in and let me know when you arrive on scene, Sheriff.”

“Yes, ma’am.” When he’d first been elected, he’d tried arguing with her. He’d tried getting her to set and follow some kind of standardized procedures. But after she’d sent well-armed backup to what appeared to be a simple house fire but turned out to be full of addicts too out-of-their mind to evacuate peacefully, he’d let it go. Her gut or intuition or whatever it was hadn’t steered them wrong, and it had saved more than a few lives.

As Doug rounded the bend just before the pull-off, he had to wonder. There was no one there. He called Judy back.

“Keep going,” she said. “You’ll catch up to ‘em, though you’ll be further from your backup. You got your vest on?”

“I’ll put it on when I need to,” Doug assured her. Damn vest got hotter than a kiln in pottery class, but he was smart enough to wear it when he knew the situation called for it.

Not a full minute after disconnecting the call, he spotted an old pick-up with a motorcycle in the bed. He’d bet dollars to donuts that was the bike that had wrecked, and luck was on his side. One of the taillights was busted, so he had cause to pull them over.

Doug flipped on his lights and braced for a chase, but the truck veered to the right and came to a stop on a wide section of the shoulder. He plugged the license plate into his computer and grabbed his vest from the passenger seat. While the computer did its thing, he pulled his on over his black sheriff’s T-shirt. The truck was clean. It was registered to a Cameron Ingram.

He stepped out of his car, adjusted his baseball cap, and approached the driver. The window was already down, and he was relieved to see the drivers’ hands on the steering wheel. He was less relieved to recognize the body and face attached to those hands.

He held his shit together long enough to see the passenger wasn’t openly armed. Stopping someone he knew was as common as breathing, but he hadn’t expected to pull over the

woman who'd just left his bed. Add in the man sitting beside her, and Doug was not thrilled with the situation. Just as he was trying to remind himself to be professional, the sun glinted off the motorcycle in the bed of the truck.

“Do you know why I pulled you over?” Doug knew he sounded like a dick, but he couldn't stop it. Hell, it was a miracle he was holding it together enough not to yank them both out of the car and drag them back to the station for questioning.

He refused to make eye contact with Beth, but he heard her gasp as she realized who was pulling them over. She stifled it fast though and schooled her face. “Uh, no officer.”

Doug was betting she didn't want her boyfriend or husband or whoever the hell that was sitting beside her to know she'd fucked around with him the night before. That was fine. Doug could deal with that. He was the damned sheriff of this county.

“You've got a busted taillight. Can I see both your IDs and the registration for the vehicle, please?” He might not be able to bring himself to look at Beth, but he wasn't about to take his eyes off the guy beside her. That shithead looked like a grade A asshole. Of course, the bike in the back was a pretty good clue.

“You need both our IDs?” Beth asked.

“Yes, ma'am.” The word might be the same as what he said to Judy, but the tone was completely different.

Her passenger gave her a funny look and elbowed her in the side as he pulled out his wallet.

Doug took both IDs and the registration back to his car. Usually, he'd just give a warning for a busted light. When he pulled them over, his intention had been to ask a bunch of questions and see what he could learn about the Deadly Coyotes and why they were in his county. Now, he wasn't sure what he wanted. The second ID confirmed that Cameron was a passenger in his own truck, but Doug would love to have a good reason to yank him out of the vehicle and kick the shit out of him.

Then again, he wouldn't mind putting Beth in handcuffs and dragging her back to his place. He'd love to spend the whole day teaching her something—he just wasn't sure what. He could teach her how a real man would treat her. He could teach her how much better he was than the child sitting next to her. Thinking of which, Doug looked more closely at their licenses. He and Beth hadn't swapped ages last night, but he'd pegged her as late twenties. Her ID confirmed that. But Cameron's birthday was a bigger surprise. Sure, the kid looked young, but Doug didn't expect Beth to actually be with a guy five years younger than her. Granted, he was seven years older than her, but that felt different.

Doug sighed. The hypocrisy of his last thought was enough to make him wonder if he needed to start adopting some of Mac's anger management techniques.

Fuck it.

They both had clean records, and it was good he learned just how off-limits she was before he got in any deeper with her. He'd give them a warning, tell Judy it was a false alarm, and go hide in the woods for the rest of the day. He could clean out his barn or weed a flowerbed or some shit.

He climbed back out of his SUV and strode back up to the truck with all of the confidence he could muster.

“Beth, Cameron,” he greeted them. “I’m gonna let you go with a warning for now, but you need to get that light fixed immediately. If you’re passing through, I suggest you keep going. If you’re planning to stick around, you should know that I won’t tolerate motorcycle club bullshit in my county.” He made eye contact with Cameron. Doug still couldn’t bring himself to look directly at Beth.

“Yes, sir,” Cameron bobbed his head in agreement. “We really aren’t looking for trouble. Honestly, we’re looking for a place to—”

Beth slammed her elbow into her passenger’s ribs so hard that he grunted and doubled over.

“We’ll keep our noses clean,” Beth said in a flat voice devoid of any emotion.

“Yeah, you do that. Have a nice day, now.” Doug was so fucking done with this stop. He should have just stayed in bed.

He sat in his car to finish up the report on the stop and call Judy back. Randy and Erica pulled up shortly after the truck pulled away. Doug told them it was just a busted taillight. He

didn't mention the bike in the bed or who had been in the vehicle. He should have, but he didn't. Maybe he didn't want to make a bigger deal of it, or maybe he didn't want to get his deputies worked up for nothing. Doug wasn't sure what excuse he was going to use, but he just couldn't bring himself to tell anyone about the whole mess.

It wasn't until he was pulling back up in front of his house that he recognized his real feelings about the situation, but when it hit him, it landed like a barrel full of bricks dropping from the top of a ten-story building. Doug felt stupid. Stupid for having brought Beth home last night. Stupid for having thought they had a real connection. Stupid for not having asked her more questions. Just plain stupid. And Doug hated that feeling more than anything.

CHAPTER 5

Beth

Beth had lost her damned mind. No way in hell someone storing illegal goods for a motorcycle club should be standing outside the sheriff's office like a peeping tom. She hadn't planned to come here, but after seeing the sexy, attentive, funny man who'd given her both the best massage and the best orgasms of her life in a sheriff's polo shirt... Well, when she decided she needed to find her way into whatever semblance of a *town* there was out here, heading for the sheriff's department was the first thing to pop into her head. That was just logic, right? Her night with Doug was unlike anything she'd ever experience before, but she could leave it at that. Beth was going to keep telling herself that until she believed it, too.

But as she peered through the front office window to the hallway beyond and watched a human shadow move through the office, she knew it was a lie. Doug was the opposite of every other man in her life, and in many ways that also made him her ultimate fantasy. She knew how pathetic that was, but now that she knew who he was, she couldn't justify seeing him again for real. Not only would the club kick her ass, but Doug deserved better too. He was one of the good guys. He still had her underwear though. She shouldn't feel a tingle of satisfaction at that thought, should she? That was probably messed up. She had no business corrupting an officer of the law.

She might want to do better than becoming the old lady of an outlaw, but there was a lot of ground to cover between that and married to a sheriff. Not that she was thinking about marriage.

But massages and orgasms were kind of like marriage. Well, not really, but enough that she shouldn't go there with him. She should let him wear his white armor and stay in her own lane. Or at least remain on her own road. Trying to build a relationship with the leader of the local law enforcement was likely to go as well as trying to build a homemade rocket to launch herself into outer space. Any moments of hope would soon explode into flames, leaving nothing but charred bits and pieces.

It won't stop her from watching him though. Creepy stalker totally fit the outlaw lifestyle she was used to. She looked around and saw that the café across the street and down just a bit was open. They didn't have outdoor seating, but if she picked a seat by the big front window, she'd be able to stalk the sheriff while enjoying a cup of coffee.

Thank goodness it turned out to be good coffee. The place even had cheese Danishes. Beth couldn't remember the last time she'd had one, but she loved them. This café could become a regular spot for her.

Just as she was thinking how lovely it would be to start every day with a mocha and Danish, she saw Doug stride out of the sheriff's department. The view for this morning ritual might even be worth the increased pant sizes required to accommodate the habit. Then Doug turned left toward the

café, giving her a clear view of his department polo shirt pulled tight around his biceps, and she decided she'd switch to black coffee and only treat herself to a Danish once a week.

Memories of their night together consumed her mind. No way would she give up the ability to keep up with him in the bedroom. There wasn't a cheese Danish on Earth worth sacrificing that. Beth couldn't help imagining what it would be like to spend the morning with him instead of sneaking out of his house. Did he sit on the front porch to drink his coffee?

Her daydream of watching the morning fog with Doug was interrupted by the tinkling of the door chimes and the barista hollering, "Morning, Sheriff Riley. Good to see you today, Deputy Mac."

"Good morning, Liv." The rumble of Doug's voice reminded Beth of the noises he'd made in bed.

"You meet our newest resident?" Liz asked the two officers.

Beth tensed up as both men turned to look at her. The one she didn't know, who must be Deputy Mac, smiled. But Doug's jaw clenched, and his lips pulled down to a grimace.

"Just what do you think you're doing here?" Doug hissed as he stormed toward Beth. His eyes burned with fire.

Years with the MC made her hard to intimidate though. She picked up her coffee cup to cover the nerves she felt inside, pasted on her flirtiest smile, and nodded at him. "I'm enjoying my morning coffee and a delightful Danish," she said.

“Doug, man, you want to clue me in here?” Deputy Mac asked without taking his eyes from Beth.

“She’s connected to the Deadly Coyotes.” Doug was snarling, and his jaw jutted forward like he needed someone to hold him back from attacking.

A huge part of Beth wanted to shrink away in shame. She didn’t want him to hate her. But that shouldn’t be her first thought, should it? She shouldn’t want to be associated with the club. That had always been the source of her shame, so why was it suddenly so personally about him?

“I was just helping out a friend who got a flat,” she said calmly. But Beth couldn’t maintain eye contact. She dropped her gaze to her Danish, which suddenly looked much less appealing.

“Oh fuck. You slept with her, didn’t you?” the deputy accused her sheriff. Her sheriff? What the hell? Nope. Just no. That was not how this was.

Beth was curious about Doug’s response though.

For the first time since realizing she was there, he looked away from her and over to his deputy. “Get me a coffee with yours and find a table. I’ll be back in a minute.” Then his focus turned back to Beth. “You can bring your coffee and breakfast and come with me.”

“I don’t take orders that don’t come with a warrant, Sheriff.” Beth filled his title with sarcasm and disdain she didn’t really

feel. Hell, she'd rather enjoyed following his orders in the bedroom, but she sure as shit wasn't going to admit that now.

“Now,” he commanded in a voice wound as tight as a bowstring.

Beth was careful to look directly at him before rolling her eyes. Then she stood from her seat, looked at the deputy, and gave her own command. “Watch my stuff. I'll be back to finish my breakfast.” Then she turned her back to both men and strode out the door of the café.

The second she was outside, she realized she had no idea which way to turn or where to go next. She did not want to have this conversation, whatever it may be, directly in front of the café window. Before she had to make a guess, she felt Doug's presence behind her. His fingertips brushed her right elbow for just a second as he quietly, but gruffly, directed her. “Go right and around the side of the building.”

She did so without comment. As much as she wanted to challenge everything he had to say, there was a huge part of Beth that wanted to collapse into his arms and just relax. She'd never realized how exhausting it was to always be on—showing her strengths and hiding her weaknesses—until she's spent a night completely relaxed and just able to be herself.

“Was there any truth in anything you said the other night?” Doug asked as soon as they were around the corner.

“Every fucking word, which is likely more than you can say, Sheriff.”

“There’s a big, damned difference between me being off-duty and you hiding your criminal enterprises. If you think, for one second, that sleeping with you makes me hesitate to come after you with the full force of the law, you’re about to find out just how wrong you are. Your little plan to cozy up to me is backfiring. See, now I know exactly where you live and what your weaknesses are.” Doug’s finger was pointed in her face, and his entire upper body was looming over her.

His scent wrapped around her like a forcefield that shielded her from everything else in the world. She wasn’t sure if it was his deodorant or cologne, but Beth had to remind herself that he was angry with her. This was not happy time.

Even though she knew it hadn’t been what he was doing, she threw out her own accusation. “So you weren’t undercover, trying to cozy up to the girl you see as the weak link to the DCs?”

“I didn’t know the beautiful woman sitting across from me was connected to them, or I’d have never invited you back to my house.” Doug ripped his hands from his hips and threw his arms in the air before letting them collapse by his sides.

“But you’d have still had dinner and spent the night with me? Just not at your place?” This was not the direction Beth should be taking this conversation, but she couldn’t help herself.

“Absolutely not.” Then he blinked, and the sharp angles of his face shifted to something softer. “I don’t mean I regret it or didn’t enjoy it, but we shouldn’t have done it.”

Both of his hands moved back up to scrub his face.

Beth took a step closer to him without meaning to. Her mouth opened of its own accord. “The president’s my father,” she confessed softly.

The silence that followed was terrifying. Beth wanted to curl up and hide. She wanted to suck the words back into her head. What was she thinking?

“This is so fucked,” Doug whispered back without lifting his hands from his eyes.

“So what now?” Beth asked. Rationally, she knew he couldn’t arrest her just because of who her father was, but there was a part of Beth that could feel his desire to snap cuffs around her wrists and shackle her to...something. She stared at where his eyes were hidden behind his hands and tried to picture it. No matter how she bent or twisted her brain, she could only see him carefully placing the cool metal bracelet on her wrist before affixing her to the bed so he could please her.

She was pulled from her daydream when Doug’s hands dropped back to his hips. Though he kept his stance relaxed. “How bad would it be if I ever had to search your place?”

“You know I can’t answer that.” Her earlier vision of being cuffed naked to a bed was replaced with a cinderblock room with barred windows and full of nasty, snarling female versions of the worst guys she knew. Why did he have to be this way? Why did the club always have to be involved in every part of her life? Son of a bitch, she was never going to be free, was she? “I’m going to finish my breakfast and head

out. I'll be sure to get my taillight fixed." She hitched her thumb over her shoulder to indicate back in the direction of the café.

"Beth," Doug called after her.

"Yeah?"

"You aren't carrying." He'd been checking out her body enough to know there was no gun on her.

"Yeah. Unlike you, my daily life doesn't include violence or guns." She knew it was a low blow, but Beth hated that people assumed things about her just because of who her father was. Doug didn't call after her again, and she didn't look back.

When she walked back into the café, the other deputy was sitting at her table.

"Are you kicking me out?" she asked him. If he said yes, she'd just leave. She was done fighting for this morning. There'd be plenty more opportunities to argue when she returned to her place. Cameron was staying with her, and Matt and Craig had messaged her that they'd be by this afternoon to check on everything. Antsy and Jake had stayed Saturday and Sunday nights, but they both headed home this morning. Once they'd seen how rural the place was, everyone had felt more confident about leaving Cameron and Beth to guard the inventory.

"Nope. I was just watching your stuff like you asked. I'm Mac, by the way." He held out his hand to shake.

She squinted at him skeptically until he took his hand back and asked, “Is Doug coming back in?”

Beth looked up at the door, but she didn’t see her sheriff. “I don’t know.” She’d thought he would be right behind her.

“Well, if he’s feeling as emotionally beat-up as you look, he’s probably going back to his office to lick his wounds. The good news is that this extra coffee can now be yours in exchange for just one thing.” Mac grinned at her.

Beth didn’t trust him. It wasn’t his size, though he was huge. She’d learned long ago that a sweet smile was a million times more dangerous than a big muscle. It was a smile like that which resulted in the loss of her virginity. “What thing?”

“Have you ever touched, done, cut, or dealt drugs?”

It wasn’t a question Beth was expecting. “No,” she answered emphatically before remembering laying on that roof and watching her brother make a massive drug deal. “Well, no, but the one time a friend got sucked into a deal, and I had to watch his back. But no one knew I was there, and I would never get involved in that shit.” Then she remembered how likely it was there were drugs hidden on her property right now. She winced internally but didn’t amend her answer further.

Mac hummed thoughtfully but pushed the extra coffee toward her. “Doug’s a good guy, but he’s exceptionally touchy when it comes to drugs. Maybe you should steer clear.”

“Yeah, we’ll see.” Beth agreed with him, but she also couldn’t imagine never seeing Doug again. How had a one-

night stand turned into such a disaster?

With that, Mac picked up his own coffee cup and started to say goodbye, but Beth interrupted him. “You really aren’t going to take Doug’s coffee to him?”

“Nope. I will not be rewarding his drama.” Then Mac waved to Liz and headed out the door and back toward the sheriff’s station.

Beth sighed. Her Danish was cold and gross-looking now. It would probably still be delicious if her tastebuds hadn’t been turned to stone. She finished her mocha and dropped that cup and her uneaten treat into the trashcan.

“Could I get a to-go lid for this cup?” she asked Liz.

“Sure thing. Sheriff Riley and Deputy Mac like to leave off the lids, so it cools faster. They come in here at the exact same time almost every single morning.” Then Liz handed Beth the lid and winked at her.

Part of Beth wanted to think Liz had the potential to become a friend, but she knew the reality was more likely to be that the morning had been more entertaining than most, and Liz liked the drama.

“Good to know, and nice to meet you,” Beth responded.

“Will I be seeing you again tomorrow?” Liz asked shamelessly.

Beth sighed. “I honestly don’t know.”

“Fair enough. Though, if you’re looking for work, I’m trying to expand my hours, but it means hiring a part-timer. Let me know if you’d be interested.”

It had to be a small-town thing. Beth had never just been offered a job like that before in her life. What if she was a criminal? Hell, she kind of was a criminal. What was Liz thinking? She realized Liz was watching her and waiting for a response, though Beth had no idea what she was supposed to say. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.” That was reasonable, right?

Liz’s grin suggested she’d nailed it. “Have a nice day, Beth. Oh, and welcome to Twisted Willow.” Liz was way too fucking chipper for this early in the morning.

CHAPTER 6

Doug

Doug was shaking as he stood in the parking lot of Colton's, staring at the white pick-up truck. It was almost identical to the other five, white F150s in the lot, but he knew this one was different. It had a shiny, brand-new taillight. It wasn't exactly the right light for the truck, so it didn't match the other taillight. Add in how clean and unscratched the light was compared to the rest of the truck, and Doug would bet his left nut it hadn't been on this truck for more than a day or two. Plus, he was pretty sure that license plate number looked familiar.

He didn't know what he was doing back here. Sure, he came into Colton's occasionally for dinner, but it was never more than once a week. Now, it was only Tuesday, and he'd just been here on Friday. He hadn't even planned to come here. He'd been driving by when he'd seen the truck with the new taillight, and his department vehicle just whipped a U-turn and turned into the lot.

What the hell was he thinking? Maybe this connection he felt to Beth was only because of the limited time he'd know her. Maybe he needed to spend more time with her to discover her weird habits and quirks that would annoy the shit out of him. Then again, her father was the president of an outlaw motorcycle club. That should be a deal-breaker for him.

So why was he walking into Colton's and scanning the tables and bar to try and spot her?

Before he could find her, his eyes connected with his deputy Mac, who was with his girlfriend, Cora. They were sitting side by side in the booth, which made it highly likely someone was sitting across from him. Knowing his town the way he did, that someone was his own ex-fiancé, Gloria. She probably had her husband, Collin, sitting beside her, too.

Doug was legitimately unsure if small communities were a blessing or a curse. He'd massively fucked up with Gloria and cheated on her, but he hadn't been able to tuck tail and hide away afterward. That wasn't an option in a small place like this. Instead, he'd had to prove to her and everyone else in town that he was growing, changing, and trying to be a better person. He and Gloria had buried the hatchet. Doug knew he'd never be Collin's favorite person, but they'd learned to respect each other—especially after Doug had helped with Cora's nasty ex. Collin and Mac had been friends for their entire adult lives, so when Mac announced he was joining Doug in the sheriff's office, Collin had become almost friendly.

Of course, Cora spotted him and waved him over, so Doug headed their way. "Hey, Sheriff," Cora greeted him.

Gloria was quieter as she asked, "How's it going, Doug?"

"I'm good, thanks." He was never sure what to say in these situations.

Collin chimed in though. "Mac says the department is good aside from budget nonsense, though he keeps assuring me that

is not your fault.”

“It’s the damn board of supervisors.” Mac picked up the conversation. “They can’t prioritize to save their lives—literally. You ask for emergency rescue equipment, and they give you a brand-new car. How the hell is that supposed to help?”

“It does let you get places safer and faster,” Cora pointed out. It was nice to see her coming out of her shell. Plus, the way Mac grumbled in response, but with a giant grin on his face, was comical. Puppy love was adorable. Doug was seriously happy for both couples. Everyone deserved to find someone to share their life with.

“You coming in for dinner?” Collin asked, pulling Doug from his thoughts.

“Weren’t you just here this past weekend?” Mac’s sly grin said this was a trap, so Doug just glared at him. Unfortunately, his deputy didn’t stop there. “Are you here looking to reconnect with someone, maybe?”

“No. I’m getting my dinner to go.” Doug was going to leave it there. He should leave it there. “And fuck you, asshole. Sorry, ladies.” He just couldn’t stop the words from falling out of his mouth.

“Did you meet someone?” Gloria asked him. She always had been perceptive. It was part of why what he did was so shitty. He’d made her doubt herself for a while there. Doug might not run through town shouting about it, but he was glad Collin had found her. He brought back the happiness and confidence in

Gloria. No one should have the power to take that away from another person.

That didn't mean he had the first clue how to answer her question though. He settled for a simple, if stupid, "I don't know. I need to get going. Enjoy your dinner." Then Doug turned and headed back toward the door. He could heat up a frozen pizza at home.

It was as he turned around that he spotted Beth. She and Cameron were sitting across from each other but leaned in and huddled together in the booth right behind Gloria and Mac. They were whispering back and forth about something.

"Liz said Cameron and Beth are roommates," Gloria offered unhelpfully. She must have seen Doug's abrupt stop when he noticed them.

He turned and glared at her.

"It didn't sound like there's anything more than friendship between them," Gloria added with a raised eyebrow. Was she encouraging him to... What? Date Beth? Keep sleeping with her?

"Doesn't matter," he grumbled. It was true too. There was no reason to debate what, if anything, he should do with Beth. She was affiliated with a bunch of outlaws, and knowing the property she'd bought, he was willing to bet she was storing stuff for them. Thinking about it gave him a headache.

Just then, Cameron looked up from his conversation with Beth and caught Doug's eye. He looked surprised to see the

man standing there in his sheriff's polo and black cargo pants. It was enough to catch Beth's attention. She had to squirm around in the booth to look behind her and see him, but when she did, he watched her face flash joy, sadness, regret, and anger all in less than the blink of an eye. At least he wasn't the only one of them fucked up by their connection. That was the only way he could think of it, too. It felt like there was a connection like a live wire tethering his heart to hers. Crap, that was painfully sappy.

“You settling in okay?” With Doug's friends in the neighboring booth, he wasn't more than five feet away from her. There was no way he could avoid asking how she was doing. Something deep inside him demanded to know she was okay.

Beth just stared at him.

After a second of silence, Cameron jumped in. “She's good. I finally convinced her to take the nicer bedroom. I don't need much space, and who knows how long I'll even be staying with her.”

Doug was slow to process what Cameron was telling him, but as his brain caught up with everything, he decided Cameron might not be such a bad guy after all. Sure he was still just a kid, but he had the wherewithal to subtly let Doug know Beth was single—or at least Cameron wasn't involved with her. “Good. You're Cameron, right?”

“Yeah, though meeting at a traffic stop probably isn't the best introduction.”

“That’s true, but I’m glad you—” Fuck! He was about to say he was glad Cameron wasn’t sleeping with his woman, but that wasn’t right. In fact, there was a hell of a lot wrong with that thought.

“Beth pretty much raised me.” Again, Cameron saved Doug from the awkwardness.

“So, what? We’re just making nice with police now?” Beth finally spoke up, but it was firmly directed at the person sitting across from her. “Don’t you remember what Phil said less than two weeks ago?”

Cameron shifted his focus to Beth and furrowed his brow. “This is different.”

“Yeah, how do you know?” Beth challenged.

“Were you trying to use me on Friday?” Doug blurted out the burning question he couldn’t seem to find an answer to.

Beth studied his face before answering, “No. I had no idea who you were.”

“You had no idea what my job was,” Doug corrected her. “I am more than just my job.”

“So what were you doing Friday?” Beth asked.

Doug had to admit that turnabout was fair play. For some reason, it was important to him to earn her trust though. Instead of just answering her, he called over his shoulder, “Hey Mac.”

“Yeah, Boss?”

“Will you tell Beth about the conversation we had last Friday before leaving the station?”

“You mean the one where I told you to take off the damn uniform, emerge from your home, and just be a human?”

Doug couldn't stop himself from smiling. “That would be the one,” he confirmed.

Then Mac took it a step further by leaning out around the booth and adding, “Oh and Beth? I told him to try and get laid, too. He was grumpy enough that people were starting to think I might be the happy one of the two of us.”

“We're good now, Mac. Thanks.” Doug did not need his deputy spilling anything else.

“It's nice to know you weren't trying to hide it.” Beth's face was still pulled down, and she wasn't making eye contact with him. Doug had hoped the sincerity would lighten her view of him. At the very least, he expected Mac's recounting of their conversation to make her smile.

Unsure of what else to say, Doug stated the obvious, “It sounds like neither of us had ulterior motives.”

“It doesn't change anything though.” Beth's tone was flat. There was nothing to hint at what she was referring to.

“What do you mean?” Doug wasn't sure what it could or should change.

Cameron chimed in again, “She means that you're still the sheriff, and she's still associated with me.”

“Oh.” Now Doug could feel his own face dip. He wanted to ask her out on a real date. Doug wanted to go bowling with her and take Beth to a mini-golf course. Was his job so powerful it would stop that. Then Doug looked back at Cameron and the leather MC cut he was wearing even now. He had to admit Cameron was right.

Doug shifted his gaze to Beth. She offered him a smile that didn't touch her eyes when she saw realization cross his face. “It was really nice to meet you,” she offered. The way she blushed as she said it led Doug to believe she was referring to a lot more than just sharing a booth in the bar.

“Yeah.” He fished his card out of a pocket of his cargo pants. “Uh, here's my card.” How was he going to do this? How fucked up was it that she didn't have his number? “It's got my number on it.” He always kept some cards in two different pockets. The ones in his shirt pocket were just plain Sheriff Doug Riley business cards. The ones in his pants pocket had his personal cell number on the back. He didn't like giving that number out to everyone, but inevitably when he did need to give it out, there wouldn't be a working pen within ten miles.

Beth raised an eyebrow at him. “Like, 9-1-1?” Now he got to see her smirking, arrogant smile that felt like a challenge only he could meet.

“Well see, around here 9-1-1 isn't always the best choice. Most people call my office, but I put my direct number on the back of that card for you. This way you don't have to wait

until you're certain it's a full-blown emergency before calling me for help." Doug watched all the teasing arrogance fall from her face.

"Yeah, of course. If I need help, I'll give you a call." Beth shoved the card in her back pocket.

That wasn't what Doug had meant. He was hoping she'd call him when she was bored, or got her hair stuck in a locker, or just needed a friend, but that wasn't what he'd said. He'd given her a professional card, with a professional line about non-emergency support. Damn.

"You should probably be on your way, Sheriff," Cameron encouraged him.

Mac and Collin's table had fallen silent.

"Yeah, I should get going." He waved to both tables. "Have a good night. Make sure all y'all have drivers who are sober."

Collin and Mac both lifted hands to flip him off. Gloria leaned across Collin's lap and stuck her head out. "Don't worry. They're letting Cora and I do the drinking tonight!"

At least someone would have fun tonight.

"This'll be my only beer. I'll make sure Beth gets home safe," Cameron assured him. Why did that make Doug want to punch the biker in the face? He tried not to look too homicidal as he nodded his appreciation and turned toward the door. Based on the grunt that came from behind him, at least one person hadn't been fooled by his attempt at a calm façade.

CHAPTER 7

Beth

Despite Cameron's assurances that he'd keep an eye on her and drive them both home, Beth couldn't relax enough to enjoy more than two drinks. She'd never liked feeling drunk. Spend most of your life in a motorcycle club house, and a girl learns early in life to stay alert and able to react. Even still, she usually enjoyed a nice buzz, but tonight each sip made her feel more like a sad sack trying to drown her sorrows.

They'd left shortly after finishing their dinner, though Cameron had been the one behind the wheel, heading back to their place.

"We're going to have to come up with something. You know that, right?" he asked her as they pulled into her parking spot.

Beth had been lost in thought about sexy sheriff muscles and a rumbling, growly voice shouting her name. She had no idea what Cameron was referring to.

Her blank look must have said it all because Cameron put the truck in park, took one look at Beth, and burst into laughter.

"Hey, don't make fun. I have no idea what in the hell you're talking about."

"That's what's funny. You are sooo into that sheriff."

“It was one night,” she grumped. She wished it had been more than that, but it was done.

“Beth,” Cameron sighed like he wasn’t sure what to say or how to say it. “I think he’d be good for you.”

“What? Have you lost your fucking mind? I can’t date the sheriff. There’s a cabin full of guns and drugs right over there.” She pointed to the cabin they’d deemed their storage facility. Eventually, it would be full of trap doors, hidey-holes, and super-reinforced rooms, but for now, it was just like all the other cabins.

“That’s exactly what I was talking about when I started the conversation. We need to come up with something to do about the drugs. The guns are,” Cameron chewed on his lip as he thought. Beth might pluck out all her own eyebrows, but Cameron’s lip was forever covered in scabs when he was stressed. “Well, the guns are not good, but they’re not as bad as the drugs?”

Then it was Beth’s turn to sigh. “I know what you mean, but what do we do? We can’t just flush them down the toilet.” She couldn’t stop a chuckle from burbling up her throat as she pictured her and Cameron covered in drugs as they tried to flush many pounds of them down the commode. Then she tried to imagine what the plumber would say when they inevitably had to call in backup to unclog the pipes.

“I don’t get your humor, Beth. But you’re right about not being able to flush them. Could we give them back?”

“You’re joking right? Let’s continue this conversation inside. I might need another drink after all.”

As they both hopped down from the truck and toward the only multi-bedroom house on the property, Beth tried to understand where Cameron’s mind was going.

Even after they’d both settled comfortably onto the couch, she couldn’t wrap her head around it.

“Hear me out,” Cameron started. Beth knew from experience that meant he was about to suggest something completely insane that would be highly likely to get both of them killed.

“Go ahead,” she agreed reluctantly.

“We have a shit ton of drugs. Phil doesn’t know the club is dealing drugs, right?”

“Right. That conversation in his office made it pretty clear.”

“Okay, so if we were to drive the drugs back to the city and give them to the Russians, those guys return them to suppliers or pass them on or whatever for their own profits, right?” Sometimes Beth forgot just how young and naive Cameron was.

“Not likely. Cameron, criminals don’t tend to have strong ethics, nor do they respect honesty. And—” Beth did not want to say this next part aloud. “The only people who’d run that many drugs up the entire coast through a massive network like this would be a cartel or some kind of offshoot related to a cartel.”

Cameron thought about it for a minute. “Matt let it slip that he and Craig had gone down to Atlanta a couple weeks ago. I bet that’s where they picked them up. Maybe we could take the drugs back down there.”

Beth knew all of Cameron’s facial expressions well enough to know even he didn’t believe that was a real option, so she just looked at him.

“Fine,” he admitted. “What brilliant ideas do you have?”

No way was Beth going to admit to wallowing in her thoughts about not having anything. Instead, she started listing what they knew. “Okay, so let’s think it through. Matt and Craig broke with the Coyotes when they agreed to run the drugs, right?”

“Oh yeah.”

“It would be a good idea not to involve the cartel or the Russians if possible. We’re always better off to handle things ourselves.”

This time Cameron’s response was much more wary and held zero enthusiasm. “Uh-huh.” His eyes tracked her as Beth stood up to start pacing around the room. She crossed her arms over her chest and stuffed her hands into her armpits in an attempt to leave her eyebrows alone.

Cameron tried again. “Could we convince Craig and Matt to move them? Just get them off this property. Maybe we help them believe the drugs aren’t safe here or something?”

Beth had to admit it wasn't a terrible plan. In fact, maybe they could move the drugs themselves and tell Matt and Craig they'd gone missing as a way to prove how unsafe it was for them to store the drugs here. When she suggested it though, Cameron tossed a grenade smack into the center of her idea.

“They'd kill you. Like in a heartbeat. The second you or I said that the drugs were gone or missing or whatever, we'd be dead. Maybe Matt couldn't kill you since you're his sister, but Craig wouldn't even blink. He'd shoot and move on.”

“Argh,” Beth hated this. Why were there drugs on her property? Why did her family sell guns? Why couldn't she live in a normal house with a normal family like a normal person? She'd be able to get massages and orgasms from the sheriff all the time then.

Beth took a deep breath to recenter herself. This didn't need to be complicated, right? What did she want? How could she make it happen? Start there and solve one problem at a time. “I want the drugs off this property. That's really all I give a shit about.”

“I need you to not die. Could we maybe add that to the list?” Cameron asked.

“Fine. Drugs off the property, and both of us alive. It's a simple objective. Do we care if Matt and/or Craig end up dead?” Beth asked.

Cameron tilted his head to the side and squinted at her. “He's your brother. Do you care?”

Beth didn't even have to think about. "No. He might have played the same genetic lottery as me, but his machine was a scam that stole money and gave nothing in return. You're my real brother."

"Awww, excuse me while I cry a river of sappy tears." Cameron's sarcasm was exactly what she'd expected, but it didn't lessen the truth of the statement, and they both knew it.

"Do you care about keeping in good standing with the club?" she asked. If Cameron was going to ask her if she cared if her brother died, she'd ask him if he cared about losing his patch.

"I mean, not really. I'd prefer not to be completely thrown to the wolves, but—"

Beth could see the smoldering embers as his brain fired up, so she gave him time to think.

"At the end of everything, I want you and I to still be good. You're the closest thing I've got to family. Otherwise, I don't care."

"You think your standing with the club and your patch impact us? I think we've spent the last twenty years proving that our relationship is deeper than that." The flush of Cameron's cheeks and his refusal to make eye contact with her was all the answer she needed. "Cameron, you are my best friend. You are my brother way more than Matt. You and I are family. Hell, most of the time, you feel like my only family. There's nothing you could do to fuck that up. You and I will always be family."

His shoulders dropped, but it took a minute before he responded. When he did, it was to set them back on track. “I know that. I do. Sometimes I just need to hear you say it in a way that I know you mean it?” He looked guilty for not trusting her the first time she’d said he was like her brother.

Beth waited until their eyes were locked, and she knew his full attention was focused on her. “Heard.” Then she placed her palm over his heart. “You are my brother.”

He nodded but took a beat before speaking again. “Okay, we can burn down the world, so long as the drugs leave the property, and you and I stay good.”

Then Beth remembered Doug’s smile when he realized she had no idea what chicken fried steak was. “Doug has to be okay too,” she added to their list.

“I knew you were falling for him,” Cameron gloated.

“I am not. But he’s a good guy. We shouldn’t screw him over.”

“And...” Cameron wasn’t going to let her off easy.

“And he gives great massages?” she tried.

“Ha ha, but fine. I’ll let it go for now. Back to the drugs. We can’t sell them, destroy them, or lose them. What else does that leave?”

“Plant them.”

“What?”

Beth wasn't sure how to answer that. She didn't know what she'd meant. It just popped into her head and out through her mouth. Sell, destroy, lose, plant. What did she mean by it?

“Are you suggesting we plant the drugs somewhere intentionally to make someone else look like the asshole?” Cameron expanded on his request for clarification.

That sounded like a viable plan to Beth, and she really hadn't been thinking about anything specific. “Yeah, we should do that,” she agreed.

“Okay. Who takes the fall?” Cameron leaned back on the couch and crossed his ankle on his knee. He knew she was bluffing.

Beth plopped her ass down on the old, ratty carpet. “I don't know. Could we make it look like Craig?”

“No, he's supposed to have the drugs.” Cameron was right, and they both knew it.

“Well crap. Are there any other club members who need to be pruned from the bush?”

“No.” Loyalty was one of Cameron's biggest strengths. Beth loved that about him, but right now it was frustrating. It would be so much easier if there was someone obvious to frame for stealing the drugs.

“Maybe there's a local around here?” Beth was grasping at straws, and she knew it.

Cameron just looked at her, so she kept thinking.

“Okay. Different option. If this is such a pain to solve, why not let my father figure it out? What would happen if Phil found out about the drugs?” she asked.

“Um.” Cameron’s brow furrowed as he considered. “I guess, technically, Matt and Craig would be kicked out of the MC and stripped for doing business that wasn’t voted on.”

“We could work with that.” Beth didn’t love the idea, but it was the best one they’d come up with so far.

“Except it doesn’t solve the problem. Remember all the drugs in the cabin? Where, in your plan, do they go away?”

“We’d send them off with Craig and Matt. They could do their thing or whatever, but they wouldn’t be affiliated with the club anymore.” Beth had a feeling the next thing Cameron said would make her feel naïve and stupid, but she couldn’t stop it from happening.

“Do you really think Phil will send the drugs out into the world with Matt and Craig?” he asked.

“Maybe,” she tried.

“Would he even go through with kicking them out? I mean Matt’s his son.” And those were the words that lit up Beth’s lightbulb.

“That’s it, Cameron!”

“What? What’s it?”

“Matt’s my brother. Phil won’t send him to his death. We can use that to convince Phil to strip them but let them keep the

drugs so the cartel or the Russians or whoever don't kill them." It could totally work, but Phil couldn't know any of it was coming from her and Cameron. That would be the tricky part.

"This is a terrible idea, Beth. Like, way worse than your usual terrible ideas."

As much as it pained her to admit it, Beth had to agree. "You have a better one?" she asked.

"Fucking damnit. How the hell does this happen to us?" Cameron swore softly.

"Heard," was Beth's only response.

After they both spent a few minutes accepting their plight, Beth got them each a drink and moved back to the couch.

"We need to be really careful about how we set Phil up to find the drugs." Beth needed to say it aloud. Cameron already knew it, but that would be the weakest part of their plan.

"Yeah, maybe let's shelve that until tomorrow, huh?" Cameron suggested.

"TV?" They'd started the process. The details could wait.

"MASH?" For a long time, when Cameron was really little, they'd had only an old TV with a built-in VCR and a complete box set of the entire MASH series. Beth remembered one of the club members giving her the used TV as a gift. She'd found the tapes in a corner of an abandoned closet. They hadn't had cable, so it was MASH or snow with occasional flickers of local news. Not only could both of them recite

every line of every episode, but it had turned into a symbol of their childhood. Things had been pretty fucked up for both of them, but when they hung out in Beth's room and watched MASH, they could pretend they were normal. Of course, it didn't last once Cameron was old enough to realize zero of his friends thought MASH was cool, but it was still a comforting memory from their childhood.

“Heard.”

The only time either of them spoke for the rest of the evening was to join Radar in asking for a Purple Kneehigh or to make fun of Hot Lips for being dumb enough to love Major Burns.

CHAPTER 8

Doug

“Morning, Liz,” Doug called as soon as the bells stopped chiming to announce his arrival.

“Good morning, Sheriff. I’m running a touch behind this morning, but I’ll have coffee for you in a minute. Are you taking a box over to the office?”

“Is it Thursday?” Doug was a man of routine. He brought pastries into the office every Thursday. It helped everyone stay positive as they got ready for the stupidity that came with weekends, and despite Judy glaring at him and offering a half-hearted lecture about sugar, she would spend the day offering the treats to anyone who came by. It made her happy, and that made the whole office happy.

“I’m gonna need about fifteen minutes. Do you want coffee while you wait?” Liz asked.

Doug could see her in the kitchen, pulling trays out of one oven and putting different trays in a different oven. No way would he interrupt her and make her come all the way up front just to pour him a cup of coffee. “Nah, I don’t mind waiting. Do your thing.”

“Alright. It won’t take long,” she hollered before letting out a soft string of swear words.

“You okay back there?” Doug asked.

“Stupid oven’s thermometer is busted, so my banana muffins didn’t turn out. It’ll be fine. I’ve been putting only small batches of stuff in there because I know about the issue. Normally I check the thermometer and adjust things manually, but I forgot this morning.”

“You need anything, just yell for me.”

“Yep.”

In the silence that followed, Doug felt the presence of another person before he saw the man tucked into the corner of the back booth. He wasn’t wearing his cut, and his hair was messier than it had been at Colton’s, but Doug still recognized Cameron.

“Morning,” he offered.

“Sheriff,” Cameron’s response was guarded. It was different from the light-hearted, jovial mood he’d faced at the bar and far darker than the defiant delinquent attitude he’d gotten when he’d pulled Beth over.

Doug believed that being nosy was part of his job, so he wasn’t inclined to ignore shifts like this.

Instead, he sat down across from Cameron and stared at him.

“What? Do you need something?” Cameron barked at him.

“I don’t know yet. Is Beth okay?” Why he was asking about her instead of the guy in front of him, Doug wasn’t sure.

Despite being completely accidental, the sideways approach worked. Cameron uncurled just a bit and relaxed a few

notches.

“She’s fine for now.”

Those last two words made Doug want to leap from the table, hunt his woman down, and stuff her under the covers of his bed where she’d be safe.

“You’re falling for her, too.” Cameron’s simple statement threw Doug for a loop more than anything any criminal had ever said to him before.

Then he caught the full meaning of the statement. “You think she’s falling for me?”

It was enough to make Cameron laugh. It wasn’t joyous and didn’t include a smile, but he relaxed even more. “Yeah, Sheriff. She’s into you. Maybe don’t be an asshole to her?” The glare that came with Cameron’s words made Doug think this young man was incredibly protective of the woman he viewed as a big sister.

“I try to keep my asshole in my shorts,” he replied. “Besides, why don’t we focus more on what’s bugging you today.”

“Nothing you need to worry about.”

“Normally, I’d respect that and leave it. But you just said Beth has feelings for me, and as you noticed, I’ve got some feelings of my own. Knowing you two live in the same house means your trouble is likely to ricochet around and eventually hit her, which makes it my business.”

Cameron tilted his head and chewed on his lip. “It’s your business because of her, but not because you’re the sheriff?”

he finally asked.

Doug thought back through what he'd said. Cameron was right. That was exactly how he'd worded it, but that wasn't what he'd really meant. "I am the sheriff. So yeah, that also makes it my business."

Doug fought with everything he had to school his face and hide his inner panic. He had no idea what he'd meant by saying that Beth's business was his. He should have focused on his job. That was what made it his business. Was Cameron right? Was Doug falling for Beth? Could he after just one night together? That was crazy. That's not how love worked, right?

"Oh boy, Sheriff. Looks like you've got your own shit to sort through." Well fuck. Cameron had clearly seen a large portion of Doug's face. He usually had a great poker face, but even Mac had called him out for thinking dirty thoughts the other day. He'd guessed it was Beth who Doug was thinking about too.

"Let's refocus for now. What going on?"

"As I said, it's nothing you need to worry about." Cameron's voice was firm. He'd not be giving way on this.

"Fine. I just need to know one thing," Doug let a lot slide in this county. He picked which battles were worth fighting. It was how he kept his sanity, and the key to his re-election.

"What's that?" Cameron asked.

“You can hear the full story from anyone in town, but my sister died of a drug overdose. That means my tolerance there is nil.” At the last second, Doug decided to rephrase his question as a warning statement. “If you are storing any drugs anywhere on that property, I will not turn a blind eye. I’m not saying I condone anything illegal. I’m just letting you know that I take drugs in my county very personally.”

All of Cameron’s relaxation disappeared. He curled back into himself. Doug was in the middle of standing up to return to the counter when he heard Cameron’s whisper, “Yeah, Beth and I both feel the same way.”

Before Doug could figure out how to respond to that or what follow-up questions to ask, the bells above the door chimed again, and the woman herself walked through the door. Her dark brown hair was swirling from the wind, and Beth’s arms were full of her phone, a notebook, some very messy papers that looked to be folded in unnatural ways, and a handful of pens. It was just enough to keep her focused on her juggling act, so she didn’t notice Doug staring at her.

He hated how stressed and frenzied she looked, but he had no idea what to do about it. Odds were good that the issue was something illegal. He wanted to help her with it, but he also didn’t. Or maybe he couldn’t because of his job?

The pens slipped from her fingers and scattered across the floor like a game of pick-up sticks, and that was the moment Liz stepped out from the kitchen.

“Good morning, Beth,” she called.

“Morning, Liz.”

Doug noticed the deep inhale and tensed up muscles that marked the second she spotted him, and he hated it.

“Ready for me to get your order together now?” Liz asked him. She was oblivious to Beth’s tension. “Any special requests this week?”

Doug had no idea what to do with Beth, but he did know she liked coffee. In his world, a good cup could fix a lot of things. So, he turned to Liz and amended his order. “Will you actually add Beth’s coffee to mine and make hers first?”

Liz grinned at him and leaned across the counter to whisper, “She does look like she needs it this morning.” Then she winked at him and started pulling shots of espresso.

By the time Doug turned around, Cameron was already helping Beth pick up the pens and move everything to the booth he’d been sitting in. As they dumped everything onto the table, Doug saw one of the oddly folded papers partially unfold itself. It wasn’t enough for him to see the whole thing, but he didn’t need to. He was intimately familiar with that particular map of the National Forest. Beth’s property was tucked into an edge of it.

“Will you take this to Beth?” Liz prompted him as she passed over the cup of coffee.

“Yeah.” It would give him an excuse to get a better look at the map and ask a few questions, too. The National Forest wasn’t really his jurisdiction, but considering the majority of

illegal stills out there were owned by people from his community, he and the forest service worked closely together on a regular basis. Collin was always saying one of his favorite things about moving from the FBI to the forest service was the true collaboration between agencies. The forest service didn't have enough personnel to decline support, and too many calls to the sheriff's department were a result of things happening on national forest land for them to ignore the overlap.

Was Beth taking a page out of the local's book and using the forest to hide illegal goods and activity?

Doug was careful to find a clear spot of table to set Beth's coffee on before asking, "What's the map for?"

"Oh, um, hiking?" Beth tried.

Even Cameron snickered.

Doug raised an eyebrow. "You know the other night when we ran into each other at Colton's?"

"Yeah," Beth agreed.

"You've met my deputy Mac before. But I don't think you know the other guy sitting at that table. That was Collin. When Collin met Gloria, he decided to leave the FBI and work with the forest department instead." Doug watched Beth's face as he spoke, but she kept it completely blank. Maybe she could be a poker player after all.

"It's a big forest, Sheriff," Cameron pointed out.

“And I’ve been living here my entire life. That’s more than thirty years of navigating by landmarks and investigating every cave.” Doug was still looking at Beth.

Beth pursed her lips before responding, “So if you needed to make something disappear, you’d know where to stash it?”

That was not at all what Doug expected to hear.

“I think maybe I should join you two for coffee and get the whole story,” he suggested.

“No.” Cameron’s voice was a deeper rumble than Doug had heard before. “Beth, do not be this stupid. He is wearing his damned uniform. Let the man go to work and do his job.”

Beth’s eyes darted between Doug and Cameron.

What would he do if she confided in him? Would he arrest her? How bad was it? He didn’t know, and the thought of being asked to choose between her and his job made him want to hurl. There was a part of him that was relieved to hear Beth agree with Cameron.

“Yeah, I appreciate it, but Cameron’s right, Doug. You should head over to the station.”

Doug pictured Beth inserted into some of the scenes he’d been called to take charge of. He couldn’t let that happen to her.

He leaned down close to her and asked, “Do you still have my card?”

She rolled her eyes but admitted, “Yeah, I tucked it into the back of my phone case.”

“Good. That’s my personal cell number on the back, and I will always answer your call. It doesn’t matter what time it is or how small the issue seems. Even if you’re just bored and want to say hi. Call me; text me; doesn’t matter.”

Beth thought about it for a second. “What if it’s,” she considered her word choice, “messy?”

“We’ll figure it out. Just promise you’ll let me know if there’s anything you need.” Doug didn’t know how he’d figure it out, but he would deal with that when the time came. Based on the map and conversation thus far, the time would come. It might even be sooner than any of them were ready for. Doug should give Collin a heads-up. Maybe he could keep a closer eye on the area.

“Okay,” Beth agreed, but she hadn’t said the words. She hadn’t promised Doug, and it reminded him of the way his sister used to agree without really agreeing to stop doing drugs. He couldn’t have this end the same way.

“Beth,” he prompted. They were staring into each other’s eyes with enough focus that the world around them disappeared. In that moment, Doug was more man than Sheriff and more lover than law enforcer.

“Yes. I promise I’ll reach out if we need help.” Her serious tone shifted to teasing as she added, “Do you want an update every time I leave home, too?”

“Actually, I’d love that, but mostly because I’d like to hear from you.” Then Doug admitted the truth that made his feeling for Beth different from anything he’d experienced before.

“Knowing what you’re doing and where you are and how you are would always make my day, Beth.” Usually, he hated clingy women who didn’t have a life of their own, but constant updates from Beth about nonsense like what plants she harvested from her garden each day sounded like a dream.

“We’ll see, Sheriff. Thanks for the coffee.” She gave him a sly grin.

Doug headed back to the counter to collect his own cup along with the box of treats for the station. As he signed the receipt for Liz, she whispered, “I’ll keep an eye on them.”

He couldn’t help raising his brows and refusing to let go of the receipt until she explained more. Did Liz think Beth and Cameron were bad people?

“I’ll text you when she leaves and let you know if I overhear anything you should be aware of. It’s nice to see you interested in someone who can hold their own with you.”

Doug still didn’t know what the hell Liz meant, but he had a feeling it was the best he was going to get. “Yeah, thanks, I think?”

“No problem, Sheriff.” Liz’s serious expression made Doug wonder what she knew about the community that he was missing.

He took one last look at Beth huddled over the map before letting the café door close behind him as he headed toward work.

CHAPTER 9

Beth

Beth wasn't sure how they were going to make this work, but they didn't really have any other options. They'd agreed the forest would be a good place to stash the drugs. They just needed to find exactly the right place. All of that felt doable. It was figuring out how to ensure Craig and Matt didn't blame them that felt like it might take a miracle.

“How many of the guys have been to the property now?” Beth asked.

Cameron thought for a minute. Then he flipped open a notebook and started laying out the dates and who had been there. “There were eleven of us here on Saturday when we delivered everything, and Anty and Logan were here until Monday.” Cameron added all of the names to his list.

Beth picked up from there. “Matt and Craig came out Monday night. I can't imagine they wouldn't check on their stash.”

Cameron drew a line beside the Tuesday entry in his notes. “They'll know the drugs were moved sometime after they left on Tuesday.”

Beth looked at Cameron. “There haven't been many people out here since then.”

“Yeah, Jake was here, but I'm not okay framing him,” Cameron agreed.

“No shit. Not to mention if there are only three or four possibilities, it’s too easy for the club to condemn someone, and more likely it could accidentally be one of us.”

“You mean me,” Cameron clarified. “It would be me they condemn, because Phil wouldn’t accept it was his daughter.”

Beth wanted to argue with that, but she knew Cameron was right.

“We need a big gathering. We need the whole club milling around the place,” she thought aloud.

“That would be convenient.”

“Let’s throw a bar-b-que,” she suggested.

Cameron tapped the end of the pen on the table as he considered. Just when Beth was starting to squirm with impatience, he agreed.

“We could do it tomorrow night. Invite everyone. Let them see the new property and enjoy a bonfire.” As he said it, Cameron’s eyes lit up.

Beth might hate that he’d gotten sucked into the outlaw side of the club, but she knew how much the family aspect of it meant to him. For a kid who’d been abandoned by his mom, the Deadly Coyotes meant love and home, even if they forced him into helping with drug deals and threatened him with guns.

No one would ever suggest life wasn’t fucked up.

“That gives us today and tomorrow to get shit set up. We need food, chairs, firewood, charcoal, and a couple tables, and we don’t have the usual sweet butts to help set it all up,” Beth pointed out. She hated that term, but it was what everyone called the women associated with the club. Most of the Deadly Coyotes’ sweet butts were strippers, but one of them had some big success on Only Fans. The club gave the women a safe place to stay and provided security in exchange for a sizable cut of their earnings and access to, well, whatever services the club members might need them for. Keeping her distance from that mess was one of Beth’s top reasons for insisting on having an apartment away from the clubhouse.

After a moment’s thought, Cameron reassured her, “It shouldn’t be a problem, but we’ll need to sneak out the drugs and hide them early Saturday morning while everyone’s passed out, so we should figure out that hiding place first. Then we can make a shopping list and head to the store. That should give us enough time at home to set everything up, right?”

Beth was sappily happy to hear Cameron call the new property home. It was the kind of thing she’d always wanted for him.

“Yeah, Cameron. That’s perfect. Why don’t you text the guys while I take a look at the map.” Beth couldn’t stop a grin from splitting across her face.

Cameron nodded at her and started tapping away at his phone while she tried to figure out how to read the map.

By the time Cameron looked back up, Beth had spun the giant sheet of paper around more times than most rotisserie chickens spun around. She was convinced it was hopeless. There was nothing on the map to tell her where anything was. She needed mall or adventure park-style maps with big red arrows saying *You are Here!*

“Don’t rip it,” Cameron scolded her.

“What does it matter? This piece of shit is worthless. It doesn’t tell us anything!”

“Want some help?” Liz called from behind the counter where she was wiping down her coffee machine and all the counters.

“No.” Beth knew she was being obstinate and pouting, but damned if she was going to let a barista make her look stupid for not understanding how to read a map.

“Ignore her,” Cameron corrected. “We’re good with road maps, subway maps, and stuff like that, but these forest maps just look green with random lines everywhere.”

Liz chuckled. “Yeah, topo maps are a unique kind of beast. I’m only familiar with them because my grandfather spent several years consoling himself about his lack of grandsons by trying to teach me to hunt.”

“You hunt?” Cameron asked her.

“Uh, no,” Liz said with her nose scrunched up. “He shifted to teaching me wilderness skills after the fifth time I cried when he tried to get me to shoot anything alive, cute, and

furry.” As she spoke, Liz walked out from around the counter and over to their booth. “Can I see the map?” she asked before touching anything.

“Sure,” Cameron was quick to shove the paper in her direction.

Beth glared at both of them. This did not feel like a smart idea. “I don’t think we need any outside help.” She tried wagging her eyebrows and shooting ocular daggers at Cameron to get him to understand, but it was a lost cause. He was much too busy looking at Liz to catch any of Beth’s hints.

She continued to glare but sipped her coffee while Liz spun the map around and looked at it from different angles. Finally, she settled it in one position and looked up at Beth.

“Cameron said you know how to read road maps, right?”

“Yeah.” How stupid did Liz think she was?

“Okay, so trying to figure out which way is “up” on a topo map is tough. But if you look closely, you’ll find text along the edges. If you turn it so that’s the right way for you to read it, you’ll have a good starting point that usually points North away from you.”

Beth jutted out her chin defiantly, but Liz just smiled at her and waited. Eventually, Beth sighed but followed Liz’s instructions. Once she’d turned things that way, she realized she could read a decent portion of the words on the map. The problem was that there were very few words compared to the kinds of maps Beth was used to working with, and most of

them said random things like Little North Mountain. Unlike well-marked streets, Beth had a feeling there was no big, green sign labeling the mountain in real life. How the hell was she supposed to tell Little North Mountain from The Priest? And who in the hell thought it was a good idea to name a mountain The Priest in the first place?

She looked up at Liz but refused to voice her questions.

“What’s the road around here that you know the best? Like a major one that you always drive on to get to your place. One that has lots of signs on it,” Liz prompted her.

“56.” It was the first road that came to mind for Beth. It was stupid and windy and long as shit, but it went everywhere.

“Great,” Liz approved. “See if you can find that on the map.”

Beth looked down again. She scanned all over but eventually found a line labeled Route 56 on the right-hand side of the map. She pointed to it and looked back up at Liz.

“You’ve got this. Just follow that road across the map until you hit another road or marker you recognize.”

That sounded easy, but when Beth hit the opposite side of the map without recognizing anything, her doubts came back full force. She glared at Liz again.

“Hm, it’s probably easier for a local, but you’ll get it. Look here.” Then Liz pointed out the road that she and Cameron would turn down to get to her place.

Beth was trying to picture the bends in the road to get her bearings when the door chimes jingled, and the largest man Beth had ever seen walked in, though he might have looked big only because of how muscular he was and how much hair he had. His beard alone was long enough to braid. It didn't look like he'd had a haircut anytime recently either.

Liz choked back a gasp beside her before shrieking, "You're three days late, you big dummy! Where the hell have you been?" She stepped away from Cameron and Beth and headed back to the counter.

"Big tree came down. It took me some time to clear it." For how big the guy was, his voice was practically a whisper. Beth could barely hear him.

"Well, you should let somebody know when stuff like that happens," Liz chastised. "Let me get your stuff together, and then I'll make your coffee. Those two need a hiding spot in the woods for some packages. Can you show them a good place no one else knows about?"

That last bit had Beth wishing she carried a gun. What had Liz overheard? Cameron had turned white and was looking at Beth with wide, questioning eyes. He needed her to figure out how to handle this.

The big, hairy guy just grunted and ambled over to them. "Where's your place?" he asked.

Cameron must have been paying closer attention when Liz pointed it out, because his finger landed on it almost

immediately. Beth wasn't so sure letting this guy know where they lived was the smartest idea.

“Huh.” The guy thought for a second. Then he pointed to a spot on the map just on the other side of 56 from the turnoff to Beth's place. “There's a trail here. Go up about half a mile. You'll see a faint animal trail turning east. Go up that hill. Just before the bare boulders, you'll see a rock as tall, flat, and vertical as a wall on your left. Circle around behind it. There's a small cave. It's not big enough for a person, but it's good for a cache. Just check for snakes before sticking your hand in.”

Then the guy turned and walked away, over to the counter. He adjusted the front of his pants while staring at Liz's back as she picked treats to put in a box for him. After handing the box to the man, she pulled out a real plate and ceramic mug and disappeared into the back. The man did not ask for a total or offer to pay, but he did take his box and go sit in the booth directly across from the doorway to the café's kitchen.

When Liz reemerged, the plate contained one of the biggest bear claws Beth had ever seen. Then Liz poured black coffee into the mug and carried both the plate and mug over to the booth where the man was sitting. Beth couldn't see into the booth, but she could hear the soft murmur of a conversation, though Liz remained standing beside the table.

“Well, that was interesting,” Beth commented to Cameron.

“Yeah.” His mouth was turned down, and Beth mentally berated herself for being so oblivious.

“You had a thing for her, didn't you?” she asked.

“What? No. I mean, she’s obviously taken. We should finish up and go check out that trail he pointed out.” Cameron wasn’t making eye contact as he spoke.

“You’ll find your person when the time is right,” Beth tried to console her best friend.

He wasn’t having it though. “Whatever. I’m going to finish my coffee, and then we’re leaving.”

“What about planning the bar-b-que?” Beth reminded him.

“Fine.” Cameron pulled out his phone and tapped away for a bit. Then he looked up at Beth expectantly just in time for her phone to ding.

He’d sent her a list that said thirty-six burgers, thirty-six buns, a lot of beer, a gallon of potato salad, a gallon of coleslaw, a gallon of macaroni salad, a lot of chips, paper plates, plastic forks, and a lot of cookies.

He smirked at Beth as he announced, “There’s your list. You shop, and I’ll handle the grill.”

“No, that means you won’t do shit, because you and I both know Jake will take over the grill the minute he arrives. He won’t let you anywhere near it. How about you shop, and I’ll go check out the trail and find the hiding spot.”

“Fine. It’s a good thing I like you.”

“Oh you love me, and you know it. Besides, I let you stay at my house for free,” Beth pointed out.

“You mean the house the Coyotes bought,” Cameron corrected.

“Ugh, don’t remind me. Can’t I just pretend it’s mine?”

“Like you pretend that truck is yours?” Cameron asked. But when he saw Beth was only partially teasing, he relented the way she knew he would. “I mean, it is listed in your name,” he conceded.

“See, that’s a better way of looking at it.”

Cameron just shook his head at her, swallowed the last of his coffee, and stood up from the table. “Don’t get eaten by a bear,” he said before walking out of the café.

Beth took a few more minutes to study the map. Now that she had a basic orientation of where she was and where at least one main road was, the whole thing made a lot more sense. The circles and swirls with numbers like 2400 and 3800 still confused her, but she wasn’t sure they mattered.

She was just about to attempt to fold it up again and head out when Liz stopped by to check on her. “Need any more help with the map?”

“Uh, I think I’m okay. The big numbers with the swirls are confusing, but I get the gist of it.”

Liz’s look of incredulity made Beth want to curl under the table to hide, but she refrained. Instead, she listened as Liz stuttered an explanation about those lines telling the elevation and being important to understand to know how hard the hike would be.

It still didn't mean much to Beth, but she wasn't about to ask again. She thanked Liz for the help and headed out.

Beth parked along the side of the road where she could see a small opening in the brush. It was narrow, and there were lots of branches hanging over the path, but the big guy had been right about there being a trail here.

Beth tucked her phone in her back pocket and headed out into the woods. At first, she felt like she was intruding somewhere she wasn't welcome. Were people really allowed to just walk around like this? Then she decided that was a stupid thought, and she could walk anywhere she damned well pleased.

As she started to sweat and was forced to stop periodically to dig gnats from her eyes, she couldn't help but wonder why anyone considered this fun. When she looked down at her phone and realized only ten minutes had passed, Beth seriously considered giving up and turning back. But they needed a spot to stash stuff, and if the woodsy, nature, Paul Bunyan-guy had said this was a good place, who was she to argue.

She kept trudging along and eventually made it to the fork where she thought she could see the animal trail the guy had been talking about. She wasn't sure if that was east or not, but it was the only thing she'd spotted that looked even close to

being a trail. It also went uphill, just like he said, so Beth figured it was probably the right place.

Within a minute, Beth was gasping for air and clinging to saplings as she hauled herself up the hill. Hill my ass, I'm climbing a fucking mountain. She swore with every step. She should have brought water. And better shoes. And maybe hired a sherpa. Why was it so damned hot even in the shade?

Beth kept looking up with the hope of seeing the rock wall, but all she could see was more mountain to climb. Add in the way the trail disappeared in places, and she was starting to worry she might end up lost.

Finally, she reached a rock that was perfect for sitting on. She needed to breathe and think. Mentally, she noted the rock was on her right and reminded herself that her truck was downhill and the cave or whatever was allegedly uphill. As she pushed her lungs to find a normal pattern and tried to slow her heart rate while wiping the sweat from her face, she scanned the forest around her. When she wasn't trying not to die, she could see the appeal. It smelled nice, and the chirping birds sounded cool. Then she spotted a momma deer and two smaller babies. Beth watched as they grazed.

Eventually, she decided she needed to move. Looking around had made her realize just how close to being lost she was. If it weren't for the crazy steep incline, she'd have no way of telling which way led back to her car. The trail she was following was so faint, it was more implied than cleared. Beth

was pretty sure she could make it back to the main trail from here, but it wasn't a sure thing.

Don't be stupid, Beth. She could come back and find the spot later and bring water with her, or maybe find a place in her own back yard. Beth admitted to herself that she was not prepared for this level of a hike. It was time to call it and turn back.

That decided, Beth headed back downhill but soon lost her footing and slid on her ass a few yards. She stood up, brushed herself off, and was relieved to confirm she wasn't hurt. Unfortunately, it had been just enough to through her off track from the animal trail, and no matter how hard she looked, she couldn't spot it again from this angle.

She'd either need to keep going downhill and hope she ran into the main trail or wander around laterally hoping to spot the animal trail. Neither seemed like a great option, but downhill felt safer than wandering sideways and getting herself even more lost.

Tears were just starting to build behind her eyes when she caught a glimpse of a bright orange vest several yards directly in front of her. She swallowed the lump in her throat and picked up her pace. "Hey!" she yelled.

The figure turned toward her and yelled back, "Beth, thank God!"

She knew that voice. That was the same voice that yelled her name in ecstasy last week. It was Doug. That was when her relief gave way to aggravation. She was about to be fucking

rescued from scouting a place to hide drugs by the damned sheriff. How shitty was that? Beth couldn't think of a much worse way to screw up, but then she was close enough to him for him to pass a bottle of water to her. The cool liquid coating her throat was enough for her brain to pause the freakout long enough to focus on some much-needed hydration. When had water started to taste so amazing?

Doug just crossed his arms and stared at her while she drank.

"Thanks," she gasped when the worst of her thirst was quenched.

"Why are you out here without any supplies?" he asked without any further greeting.

"Uh, I thought it was just going to be a quick walk. The guy said something about half a mile."

"Yeah, half a mile to the animal trail, but then it's another mile of really tough terrain that goes almost straight up. Liz said you had a topo map but didn't know how to read it." He looked at her expectantly.

"I figured it out. It's not that complicated. I just needed help getting my bearings to get started."

"So, you were aware of how steep the hike would be?" Doug challenged her.

"No, but I've never been out here before. How could I know what to expect?"

Doug's eyes widened. Then he uncrossed his arms and demanded, "Give me your map."

“It’s in my truck.”

He pulled back his outstretched hand and used it to pinch the bridge of his nose.

“Look, I’m sorry I got lost and you had to come find me or whatever.” She could feel the tears coming back. How had she screwed up a simple hike so badly? She shouldn’t have been so stupid. Beth knew she’d do better next time, but she’d turned around when she needed to this time, and how was she supposed to know things until she learned them? More than anything, Beth hated looking so incompetent in front of Doug. She wanted him to see her differently than all the guys in the club did. They knew she was stupid and always needed their help. Coming to Twisted Willow was supposed to be her chance to prove them wrong and show everyone she was an adult who could handle her shit.

“Beth.” Sometime while she was wallowing, Doug had stepped closer to her. He rubbed his hands up, and down the tops of her arms. “You found me,” he corrected her. “You weren’t stupid at all and turning around was smart. You will do better next time, and I’m happy to teach you how to read a topo map. It’s something everyone has to learn. No one just magically knows all on their own.”

Well fuck. Had she been speaking aloud that whole time? She looked up at him as the first tear escaped her eyelid to explore her cheek.

Doug reached up a hand and used his thumb to brush it away. Then he turned her around so her back was to him.

“Look,” he said.

It took her a minute of peering through the woods to see what he was trying to draw her attention to, but when she did, her sense of relief was almost overwhelming.

“You didn’t really need me at all,” Doug said. “You recognized a bad situation, turned around, and took care of it yourself. Sure, you’d have been a little thirstier if I hadn’t come along, but you’d have made it.”

Beth knew he was right. Without spotting him, she’d have hit the main trail in this same spot, and so long as she’d looked closely, she’d have spotted the road and the flickers of her white truck through the forest. Her slide must have taken her toward the road, so when she trudged her way down, she ended up closer to her truck than the intersection with the animal trail.

“Yeah,” was all she said though.

“Let’s go then. Cameron is looking for you.”

“What? Cameron called you?” Shit. Shit. Shit. What had gone so wrong that Cameron was calling the sheriff to come look for her?

“He said there was a problem he needed your help with, but you weren’t answering your phone. He knew you were probably out in the woods, but he had started to worry already because of how long you’d been gone,” Doug explained.

“I was barely gone long enough for him to finish the shopping and get home,” Beth pointed out.

“He, uh, said the problem was a big one.” Then Doug added, “And he sounded kind of panicky.”

Beth thought Doug might be reluctant to admit that, but she wasn't sure why. She continued to think about it as they walked in silence back to the cars. By the time they could see the road, she thought she had an idea, so she asked him, “If he sounded panicked, how come you came looking for me?” Shouldn't the sheriff have gone to help the panicked man with the problem.

Doug turned beet red, and Beth knew she was onto something with the question.

“I, uh, I didn't want to stumble into anything, uh.” He didn't seem to know how to finish the sentence, so he just waved his hand and continued, “I thought it would be better to find you and let you handle whatever it is.”

“Thanks,” Beth said as they stepped onto the gravel shoulder where his sheriff's SUV was parked behind her pickup.

Before she could step away, Doug grabbed her arm and spun her back toward him. “When he said you weren't answering, Beth—” Doug shook his head. “I'm really glad you're okay.” He brushed his thumb across her cheek again. “Will you please call me sometime? I know it can't work between us, and I know you shouldn't call me, but I'd like it if you did, or maybe just text me?”

He was rambling. It was cute. Beth smiled despite whatever impending doom Cameron had found out about and lifted onto her tiptoes. “Can I kiss you just one more time?” she asked.

His hand moved from her cheek around to the back of her neck as he pulled her close enough for their lips to dance.

“This is a terrible idea,” Doug whispered against her lips.

Beth pulled back. He was right. “I need to go find out what’s going on with Cameron.”

“Yeah. Stay safe though, please? At least message me or something.”

Beth couldn’t resist stretching up for one more peck as she agreed. Then she climbed into her truck and headed home.

The second she pulled up the driveway, she spotted the problem. Both Craig and Matt’s bikes were parked in the clearing. Cameron must have heard her pull up because he came out to greet her before she’d even closed the truck door behind her.

“Guess what?” he asked with false cheer. “Matt and Craig are just going to stay the night and help with set-up tomorrow.”

So much for removing the drugs from the property and hiding them somewhere else. At least she didn’t need to go for another hike. This was going to be a damned disaster. Beth shoved it all down and smiled back at Cameron. “Great” was all she could say.

CHAPTER 10

Doug

While most people celebrated Fridays as the end of their workweek, Doug saw it as an ominous start to the weekend. There was a much lower risk of getting punched in the face while breaking up a bar fight on a Tuesday, and most of the local wackos slept through Monday. Weekends were the worst. Hell, even on Sundays, the good Christians of the county were known to let a bake sale dispute dissolve into hair-pulling, slap fights that required he or his deputies intervene. He'd gotten the last weekend off, so the next three would be spent responding to whatever shenanigans his constituents could come up with.

Doug's favorite and least favorite weekend had been when Gary and the Piepers were arguing over rights to a pasture their families had shared for generations, which wasn't owned by either of them but was leased from the Smiths. Gary had gotten so mad that he'd opened the Pieper's goat pen before dawn on Sunday. Unfortunately, Donna Pieper had taken advantage of the dry July heat to use her clothesline instead of her electric dryer. By the time she'd gone out to collect the family's clothes to get everyone ready for church, the goats had turned her best dress into a mini skirt.

Not only had Doug and several other officers spent most of the day chasing goats around in the July heat, but while they'd been doing that, Stan had hiked up and over the ridge to

Gary's property where he'd tried to let the cows loose. When the lazy beasts weren't interested in running amok, Stan had called Gary out to witness as he threatened to execute one of the cows if Gary didn't admit to letting loose the goats and agree to let the Piepers have full rights to the pasture.

By the end of the day, Doug had two men in lock-up; the Smiths had decided not to let anyone lease their land anymore; and the entire sheriff's department was in desperate need of a shower. Judy had been forced to order them all new uniform pants, too. The only upside was that it had been enough to convince everyone to make the switch to cargo pants as the standard uniform official. They were just so much more practical than the stupid, old polyester khakis.

Doug didn't usually mind the business of the weekends, though he hated when it came with nasty car accidents. Usually, it kept him busy. Tonight, he couldn't focus on the job though. Beth had texted him that morning to say everything at her place was fine. Apparently, they had visitors show up a day early, but Beth assured him everything was okay.

He hated to admit it, but Doug wanted nothing more than to rip his uniform off and go see her for himself. Screw the job and the law. If those bikers were doing stupid shit that had the potential to hurt Beth in any way, he'd bury them himself. At least Mac was with him all this weekend. They'd ended up on the same weekend rotation after Travis had swapped weekends off with Mac last month.

“Still haven’t figured out how a sheriff can date an outlaw, huh?” Mac asked as he flopped into the chair across from Doug’s desk.

“How would you have any idea what I’m thinking about? I could be trying to figure out how to get us more Narcan for all you know.”

Mac laughed at him before explaining, “Nope, when you’re thinking about Narcan and the budget, you purse your lips up like a fish. When you’re thinking about Beth, your brows furrow in thought, but your lips still smile.”

“So what, you just sit around all day staring at my facial expressions?” Doug grouched. “Maybe I need to give you more work to do.”

“Oh no! I’m good, thanks. I was going to invite you to bend my ear, but not if you’re going to be a prickly bastard.” Mac stood back up.

“Wait, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be an ass.” Doug usually tried his damndest not to take his challenges out on his people. He believed that good leaders provided a layer of insulation between the stupid bureaucrats and the hard-working team members.

Before Mac could sit back down, Judy hollered across the office, “Doug! Grant Smith just called in some odd shades of funky-smelling smoke coming from the old Simpson place. That’s where the new girl’s living with her boyfriend, right?”

Son of a bitch. Doug needed to muzzle his office manager. She was great, but she wasn't always aware of her volume, and trying to explain the meaning of the word confidential to her was like trying to teach algebra to a kindergartener. She'd get super excited by the bits she recognized while completely misunderstanding the big picture.

"Cameron's not her boyfriend," Mac called back.

It said a lot that Doug's initial reaction was to thank Mac for clearing up the misconception. Then he shook his head. Fucking hell. Sometimes Doug thought he was as bad as the rest of the town.

"I'll go check it out," Doug agreed as he stood up and grabbed his keys. Mac stood up too. "I'll be fine on my own." Doug did not need Mac watching him go all googly-eyed over Beth. Not that Doug was gah-gah over the woman in the first place.

"Strange smoke means something strange is burning. That's pretty much a guarantee the people involved are either angry, drunk, or both. I'm going with you, and we're going to have Randy and Erica nearby as backup." There was no hint of question in Mac's voice.

"You do know I'm the boss here, right? It was me who got elected sheriff." Doug sometimes wondered if he needed to be more authoritarian.

"Oh, I'm well aware, and I like working for you. Which is why I'll be going on this call with you. I want to make sure you're alive to get reelected so I can continue to work for you.

I'd rather clean out my ears with a razor blade than have to deal with the county supervisors the way you do."

Mac had a point. Those meetings were the one thing that could make Doug regret all his life choices.

"Let's go. I'll have Judy let Randy and Erica know to follow us and sit nearby," Doug agreed.

They hadn't even turned off 56 toward Beth's place when they spotted the smoke. Mac rolled down his window and inhaled. It was thick and reddish brown. The acrid scent was like soured plastic. It was the smell of drugs, and both men knew it.

Mac rolled his window back up and asked, "How do you want to handle this? We can't just pull up and walk in on them."

"Yeah, I'm thinking." Doug pulled over to the side of the road and dug out his phone. He texted Beth: *Smoke was reported. On my way. Approach suggestions?*

Then he waited.

Mac was cautious as he pointed out, "Doug, you gotta calm down. You're low-key growling right now."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. I totally get it. I feel the same way about Cora, but you're gonna need to control it for us to deal with this."

Just then, Doug's phone dinged with a response: *FUBAR. Come quiet. Big loud will make it worse. Im okay.*

I need more info.

In-fighting btw Dad & Bro. Club is w Dad. Should B good.

C U in 20. We'll be on foot.

He got a thumbs up in return and tucked his phone away before pulling back onto the road and explaining the situation to Mac. "I'm going to park at Grant's place. It's a short hike over the ridge to Beth's. We'll go in on foot and see what's happening before we intervene."

"That'll bring us in toward her front door though. Should we swing wide and come down from the back?" Mac asked.

"No. Beth said her brother and father are fighting. That means it's likely them burning the drugs, and her fire pit is out back. We'll be better off coming in from the front."

"Yes, Boss."

As soon as he'd parked and sent a message to Grant that he was leaving his vehicle there, both deputies went around to the back of the SUV and grabbed their packs. They added a flashbang, some tear gas, bottles of water, and their med packs. Then they strapped on their body armor and slung their long rifles over their shoulders before heading for the woods.

Grant didn't even live on the same road as Beth. But in Appalachia, understanding the arial view was often more important than understanding the roads. Google Maps would say the two places were twenty minutes apart, but so long as one was willing to bushwhack through the forest, there was only about half a mile separating the two properties. The hike

wasn't smooth, flat, or easy, but Mac and Doug were both in good shape. Hiking with a full pack while wearing body armor was part of their regular training for exactly this reason, though it was more often that they ended up using the training to search for lost tourists.

As soon as they were close enough to see the house, they stopped, drank water, and pulled out their binoculars to get a better look at the situation. Sure enough, the smoke was coming from behind the house.

“Do you see anyone out front?” Mac asked.

“No. All movement's around back. I think we're good to move closer, but I want to text Beth again first.” He sent her a message asking: *Update?*

No weapons yet. All ppl around fire.

Doug showed Mac the response. “Let's go,” he said.

Both men hightailed it across the open front yard to slide along the shaded side of the house. It was late enough into the fall for the sun to be low in the sky even at six in the evening. While Doug wasn't crazy about dealing with stuff like this after dark, the long shadows made it easier for Mac and him to disappear. They huddled together just out of view of everyone in the backyard, though everyone's attention was completely focused on the man standing by the fire and screaming about betraying trust and breaking with the club.

“Do you have any idea what you've done, old man?” a younger guy screamed back. “You've lost your fucking mind.

You aren't fit to be in charge anymore. I used to think you were just old and set it your ways. Maybe you didn't understand the value of a dollar in today's world. But now? You just burned up six figures worth of drugs."

Doug watched the younger guy reach for the gun in his shoulder holster, but another man stepped in before it cleared.

"Woah, Matt. Let's talk this through with him first."

So the younger guy was Beth's brother. Doug had already assumed the older guy was Phil, Beth's father, but it was nice to have that confirmed as well.

Phil snarled the next words so softly Doug couldn't make them out, but they had clearly been directed at whoever had interceded between him and his son. The man was wearing the club's Sargent at Arms patch, so he was one of the highest-ranking club members.

Thankfully, that guy's answer was loud, clear, and made it obvious he was Matt's partner in stupidity. "Do you not understand that we, as in the whole club, have an agreement with the cartel? The cartel! These are no low-life scumbags. They are a well-established organization. Do you honestly think there is any way to get out of this? They won't just be coming for us, Prez. They're coming for the whole club now."

Murmurs broke out amongst everyone watching the scene unfold.

Phil raised his voice for everyone to hear. "This is exactly why I've always said we needed to stay out of drugs. Running

guns is a business opportunity. Running drugs is a death sentence for everyone involved. The club didn't vote on this; the club didn't agree to this; the club, and our families, will not be held accountable for this. You will!" Phil's voice boomed with the proclamation, and the rest of the club cheered.

"Well, at least the anti-drug guy is holding everyone together?" Mac whispered.

Doug looked at him. "Yay for no more drugs, but that doesn't magically clear up all the issues."

There was another roar from the group by the bonfire. Doug looked back just in time to see patches get ripped from Matt's and the Sargent at Arm's cuts before the vests were pulled off the men completely. That was when the beating started.

"We need to step in, Boss," Mac hissed.

"There's two of us, and a lot of them. What exactly do you expect us to do, arrest all of them? Right now, the better of the two sides is winning. Maybe let's give them this one and come back and clean up the rest of the mess later. They'll all live for us to arrest them later."

Doug didn't like it, but he'd seen enough situations like this to know that when the brawl was between family, there was no law above them. Besides, none of them had any weapons out. These guys were armed but choosing to use only their fists. This was an old-fashioned beatdown. It didn't guarantee everyone would survive, but if he and Mac pulled out guns, Doug was more than certain the night would end with several

dead bodies. Even worse was his inability to ensure Beth wouldn't be one of them. She was right there in the middle of everything.

Mac stood huffing and puffing behind Doug, but he didn't argue again to go in. Even his grumbling settled down as he saw the truth behind Doug's assertion that everyone would live. It took a few minutes, but eventually the group backed up to reveal two men curled up on the ground. Once they were certain the beating had stopped, both men rose unsteadily to their feet. The one who wasn't Beth's brother spat a mouthful of blood into the grass.

Everyone's attention turned back to Phil. "Matthew Harper and Craig Faulkner, you have acted on behalf of the club without a club vote or agreement. You have endangered our finances, our families, and our very lives. You have dishonored yourselves and are no longer worthy of this brotherhood. You are both hereby excommunicated from the Deadly Coyotes. You have one week to remove or black out all tattoos and destroy or turn in any other insignia you have that represents this club."

Everyone in the clearing watched as Phil picked up the cuts from the ground, shook them off, and handed them to another member. Then he turned back and said in a softer but still firm voice, "I'm sorry to lose my son, but you have brought this on yourself. We'll be spreading the news far and wide that the two of you are responsible for the loss of the drugs. I always knew you were weak, but my own weakness convinced me to

keep trying to raise you to be a leader when you clearly are not.”

“Fuck you,” Matt swore flatly. Then he turned to Craig. “You still have friends in Cali?”

“Yeah, they can help us out,” Craig snarled through his clenched jaw.

“Let’s go then.” Matt turned toward the house. Both he and Craig were headed straight for the shadows where Doug and Mac were standing.

“We’re about to be spotted,” Mac pointed out helpfully.

“Yeah, no shit. It’s probably a good time for us to step in anyway.”

“So now we arrest them all?” Mac asked. “Weren’t you just the one saying this was not the time?”

Doug thought about it. They could run for the tree line and disappear into the forest. No one would ever know they were there—including Beth. He could do that. But then he thought about what it would be like to see your father disown and order a beating for your brother. Doug couldn’t leave without talking to Beth. That didn’t mean Mac was wrong though. This was not the time to be trying to arrest anyone. “No, let’s say we just arrived and heard nothing. I don’t want to try sorting anything out or arresting anyone while Beth’s in the middle of it all.” He looked over to see a shit-eating grin on Mac’s face.

“Oh shut your face. Wipe that stupid smile off your face. You’d be doing the exact same thing if it were Cora.”

“I’m not saying I wouldn’t.” Mac agreed.

They both pulled their sidearms while keeping their rifles slung across their backs. Doug kept his gun aimed at the ground while stepping away from the side of the house.

He shifted his face into the calm and steady façade he thought of as his Sheriff Riley demeanor and announced, “Gentlemen, this doesn’t need to go bad. We’re just here because someone called in the smoke, and it’s our job to make sure everyone’s okay.”

Doug was grateful to feel Mac at his back as everyone in the clearing pulled their own weapons. There were more than a dozen firearms directed his way.

“How about we all put our guns away. I’m well-aware this is private property, and I don’t feel like doing the paperwork to get a warrant. So long as I can confirm that everyone’s okay and no one needs any help, I’ll be on my way. Then y’all will be free to return to your bar-b-que.”

Doug held his breath, waiting for Phil to give the signal. The pinched look in the man’s eyes revealed this evening hadn’t been as easy on him as he tried to make it appear. Doug had a feeling his salt and pepper beard would be mostly gray before it was done. They had to all know this was just the beginning. It took a minute, but Phil nodded his approval, and everyone put their guns away.

Then Beth stepped out from behind Cameron and demanded, “What do you think you’re doing on my property?” Her tone and the glare in her eyes made him think she didn’t want the club to know they were familiar with each other. Which was smart, when he really considered it.

“I’m just doing my job, ma’am. I need to know you’re okay.”

She flung her arms out. “Yeah, see. I’m fine. We’re all okay, and you shouldn’t be here.” Her words and actions felt like a performance. Doug was happy to play along, but he also needed to know his real Beth was okay before he could leave. He could see how stressed she was, and the thought of walking away and leaving her like this was more than he could bear.

Doug stalked closer to her and watched the fear and stress in her eyes contradict the confidence of her body language. Her performance was completely for the benefit of the club. If they found out she’d been messaging him, they’d kill her. They might kick out those who betrayed them, but a rat would be put to death every single time. It was the first time Doug realized just how dangerous Beth’s situation was.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement, but before he could react, he heard Mac handle it. “Back off and let him talk to her.”

“He has thirty seconds. Then you two need to leave,” Phil growled in response.

“Doug?” Mac was telling him to hurry.

He leaned in close to Beth's ear and whispered, "I expect to see you at my place before dawn, or I'll be back, loaded for bear, and ready to take down every fucking one of your so-called family." He pulled back enough to look into her eyes but kept his voice too soft for anyone else to hear. "I will come find you and ensure your safety—whatever the cost. Do you understand me?"

Beth made careful eye contact with him and blinked once, hard enough that her whole head bobbed her agreement. Then she flapped her arms and shouted, "We had sex one time! I get that I'm a great lay, but you need to back off."

Doug bit the inside of his cheek to stifle his smile. "Fine. You don't want any more of this, I'll leave you alone, but you're missing out on an opportunity every woman in this county wants." He stayed aware of the muzzle of his gun while making an obscene gesture at his crotch that he'd seen some of the high school kids make in the parking lot during Friday night football games.

It was enough to make the outlaws laugh. Hopefully, it would be enough to make them forget all about checking Beth's phone. Then again, it might not matter. Doug had a feeling she'd not only deleted the messages, but somehow, she'd arrange them to look innocent even if they were found. She was good like that.

"Let's go, Mac." Doug reminded himself to snarl at his deputy rather than allow his chipper pride in Beth to show through.

As soon as they'd disappeared into the woods, Mac asked, "What the hell was that? And do not try to feed me bullshit. There were several things that just happened that were not as they appeared. I know you did not just break up with Beth. I might not know her yet, but I do know you. You're a jackass on occasion, but I've never heard you speak to any woman like that—let alone a woman I know you care about. I'm guessing there are a few important details that I missed."

"Yep," Doug agreed before spending the entire hike back to their vehicle explaining his and Beth's whispered conversation and reminding him about the text messages she'd sent them.

"You know they'll kill her if they find out, right?" Mac confirmed.

"Yes, which is exactly why I'm going to drop you at the station and go straight home to pace while waiting for her to arrive."

"That sounds about right. You'll text me updates?"

Doug looked at Mac and saw genuine, sympathetic fear on the man's face. He needed to remember Mac had once lost Cora and worried she was dead. He knew exactly the kind of terror Doug was feeling right then. "Yeah, I'll text you."

They were silent on the drive back to the station, though Doug could hear Mac working to slow his breathing and keep himself calm. When they backed into the parking spot reserved for the sheriff, he turned to Mac. "Thanks for being a good friend."

“You’re not a bad guy, Doug. No matter how much Collin likes to give you shit.” It was enough to break the tension. “If I don’t hear from you, I’ll be driving out to your place myself,” he promised Doug.

“I’ll be sure to send updates.”

Then Mac hopped out of the SUV and walked into the station while Doug pulled out of his parking spot and headed for home.

CHAPTER 11

Beth

Beth watched her brother disappear from her life. She expected to feel a sense of loss, but there was nothing. Maybe it would hit her later, or maybe she truly didn't care about Matt.

None of the last twenty-four hours had gone as she and Cameron had planned. Once Matt and Craig had shown up, Cameron had been expected to do stuff with them while Beth was expected to do everything to prepare for the bar-b-que. She'd managed to order them around enough to get some help, and Cameron had apologized at every opportunity. But none of that made it any less stressful.

By the time the rest of the club arrived on Saturday, Beth had given up any hope of trying to do anything with the drugs. She'd just been trying to survive the day. Of course, that was when Phil had wandered into the storage cabin when no one was paying attention and found the drugs for himself. She and Cameron had both be flabbergasted that Craig hadn't done anything to hide them, but apparently, he'd left that to Matt. Being the resident idiot, Matt had just tossed a blanket over the pile of packages on the bed.

Shockingly, that hadn't fooled Phil. Beth hadn't even realized what was going on until Phil was throwing the last package into the fire. She'd been too busy cleaning up trash and keeping snacks supplies full. It wasn't until she looked up

and noticed everyone was outside, giving Phil their full attention, that she caught on. Luckily, the scene hadn't been any worse than it was.

Now, Beth was mostly upset about Doug. She wanted to follow him back to his place immediately. Disappearing under his covers sounded amazing. She wanted his breath between her legs, his hands massaging her flesh, and his body pulsing inside her. Breathe, she reminded herself. Get rid of Phil first. Then she could go to Doug's.

Beth hated watching Doug and Mac walk away, but she stood strong. Once they were gone, Phil's focus shifted back to the rest of the club. "We need to shut this place down. The cartel and the whoevers receiving the drugs will want to see it for themselves. We're moving everything back to Goochland. We can show them that warehouse too. They'll see for themselves we've got nothing but guns. If we have to, we can share a few as a show of good faith. Beth, Cameron, your mountain vacation is over. It's time to come home."

Beth looked at Cameron, who raised his eyebrows in question. Would this be the moment she spoke up for herself and broke away from her father? She tilted her head and watched Cameron nod in response. If she did, he'd stay with her. She could live with that.

"I'm not going anywhere," Beth announced.

"Excuse me?" her father started to argue.

"No, I mean it. This is my home now. I'm staying here."

“You’ll be killed. I’m not leaving my daughter here. You’re coming back home where you belong.”

“No.”

“Beth—”

“Dad, Phil, I’m an adult now, and I want something different for my life. I’m staying here,” Beth crossed her arms over her chest. She might be quivering like a scared kitten on the inside, but if nothing else, her time in the clubhouse had taught her to hide that fear behind a steel mask of determination.

Phil squinted at her. “And just how do you expect to support yourself out here?”

“Liz is looking for help at the café.”

“Fine. I’m assuming Cameron was interested in staying with you anyway, so we’ll go ahead and make him your official guard.” Phil turned his attention to Cameron. “You’ll keep your patch; you’ll keep my daughter safe; and you’ll be of help whenever we need you.” Nothing he said was a question.

Beth knew Cameron wanted all the way out almost as bad as she did, but maybe now wasn’t the best time to complete the break? She was relieved when Cameron just nodded his agreement with a blank look on his face.

Phil scrubbed his hands down his face. “This is a fucking mess.”

Beth took the opportunity to slide into the house through the back door. There would be questions from club members about what they’d do if the cartel refused to accept what Phil

told them. She knew there were enough club members interested in the money that came with running drugs for Phil to have to deal with that as well. She didn't want any part of it. She didn't want to worry about the Coyotes tearing themselves apart or being mowed down by men much worse than them.

She grabbed her backpack out of her closet and started tossing in a change of clothes and her toiletries. If everyone was still staying at her place, she'd have to find an excuse to get away. Her truck was too loud for sneaking to be an option, but once she was gone, maybe they'd forget about her. That was probably wishful thinking. Maybe the better option was to walk out the door and drive away without saying a word to any of the club members. Did she really owe them anything?

Beth flopped onto her bed. She did owe them. She hated it, but those outlaws had given her food and shelter. They'd bought her clothes and made sure she was enrolled in school. She would walk away without a word, but that would be taking the easy way out instead acting like the mature adult she was trying to be.

The guys might be assholes and outlaws and gropey, but they'd raised her. They were her family. These were the guys who taught her how to tie her shoes and ride a bicycle. She couldn't stop the smile that came with her memory of them teaching her how to throw a punch when she came home from second grade, complaining that Benny Martin had pinched her and then laughed when she cried. She owed them more than just disappearing without a word.

“What’s so funny?” Cameron asked from the doorway of her room.

“I hate that I feel a sense of obligation to the DC.”

“That’s not a thought that would make a normal person chuckle. You know that, right?” He crossed one foot over his other ankle and leaned his weight against his shoulder on the doorframe.

“It started with remembering when Sticky and Mel were teaching me to fight,” she confessed.

“Weren’t you like eight?”

“Yep. You were still in diapers, though it was about the time we started letting you run around naked for potty training.”

“I hate that you know that about it. That’s gross.” Cameron grimaced.

“I just remember my knuckles were all bruised and scraped up, and changing you was nastier than usual. I didn’t want to get your shit in my cuts, so I was asking the guys to change you more often. In hindsight, that might have been what really triggered the push to get you out of diapers.”

“We did not have normal childhoods.”

Beth looked over at the man who was more her family than anyone else in the world. “What’s normal?” She’d met a lot of normal kids in school, but the second you scraped below the surface, the veneer popped off to reveal a mess as unique as each kid. She and Cameron just hadn’t had the polished façade to cover their crazy.

“Heard,” Cameron answered. “The guys are finishing packing up the truck now. They’re going to drive it back tonight. Hopefully, it’ll be less conspicuous, plus it’ll give Craig and Matt less time to let anyone else know what’s going on.”

“Are they really moving it back to Goochland?”

“No. Cooler heads prevailed. A couple guys already left to scout a place Jake knows about. Hey, what did the sheriff whisper to you?”

Beth sat up to look at him straight on. “He wants me to come out to his place tonight.”

“To sleep over?” Cameron didn’t include his normal smirk. Instead, he looked genuinely worried.

Beth considered her answer. Truthfully, she didn’t know what Doug wanted from her. But she was hoping to stay. Sleeping next to him made the MC feel far away and less real. His bed felt warm and safe. It was how she always imagined home was supposed to feel. She wouldn’t force herself into a place she wasn’t welcome though. Her bag would remain hidden in the back seat of her truck until he made it clear he wanted her to spend the night.

“Beth?” Cameron’s voice was soft, but it was clear he wasn’t letting this go, and if his fate was now tied to hers, he had the right to the most honest answer she could give.

“I don’t know.” She looked Cameron straight in the eye. “I’ll stay if he invites me.”

“He’ll invite you.” The response was flat.

“Yeah?”

“I saw the way he looked at you, Beth. I don’t think anyone else noticed. Well, maybe Jake. That sheriff wants you to be his.”

“I’m not an object to own. I thought you, at least, understood that.” Beth could feel her blood pressure rising.

“I do. My question is, does he?”

Well, crap. Cameron was probably making a reasonable point. “I hope so.” It was all she could say.

“I’m here as your backup. No matter what the situation is. Call me if you need me.” Chin down, eyebrows up, Cameron was asking her to make a promise. He’d had the same look the first time she’d told him she would cover his business with her rifle. She’d been following him and covering his meets for more than a month. But that time the location hadn’t allowed her to be there without him knowing, she’d told him, not asked, and explained she’d been doing it for a few weeks. He’d made her promise to run like hell at the first sign of trouble.

Beth didn’t mind making him the promise back then, and she didn’t mind it now. It was part of how she knew his love for her, while familial, was real. “Yeah, Cameron. I promise. The same goes for you, too, you know. If you see or hear any signs of anything, you get the fuck out and call me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Now Cameron’s teasing grin broke out across his face. He knew she despised being referred to as ma’am.

“Whatever,” she rolled her eyes at him and slung her pack over her shoulder.

“Hey, for real, you good with me putting in some cameras and shit? A guy in town was telling me about these trail cams that blend into the woods so no one notices them, but they pick up motion and take pics of it. He was saying a lot of people around here use them on the property to keep tabs on wildlife, trespassers, and shit like that.”

Cameron was making this his home. When Beth had told her dad she was staying, she’d worried that Cameron would come to resent her for it. He’d never been interested in small towns or hiking. He loved the hustle and bustle of the city. When he talked about getting away from DCs, his daydreams always included an apartment in the city so he could walk everywhere he wanted to go. She didn’t want him to end up somewhere he didn’t want to be out of the same loyalty that had kept him with the club for so long already. The fact that he was talking to locals and setting up long-term security eased that concern. It made her think he might be choosing Twisted Willow for himself in addition to his loyalty to her.

“I think that’s a great idea, Cameron.”

“Alright. Go have fun with your sheriff. I would make a comment about a man in uniform, but I’m not sure his cargo pants and T-shirt count. Oh, but text me if you’re staying the night. Otherwise, I’ll worry.”

“Will do. Have a good night, Cameron.” Then Beth headed over to Doug’s place.

As she pulled her truck in beside his department SUV, her headlights illuminated him sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch, but he didn’t get up.

She opened her door and climbed down without saying a word. She wasn’t sure what to say.

“I really would have come to get you.” Doug sounded thoughtful. He’d leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, but he still hadn’t come to greet her. “I’d have fucked my job and my commitment to this community to protect you.”

Beth wasn’t sure what to say to that. Her instincts took over, and she responded with the same sass she always leaned into when she was feeling vulnerable. “I’d rather you fucked me.”

Doug’s responded huff didn’t hold any amusement. He didn’t move and didn’t speak any more.

Beth left her truck door open. She wasn’t sure what was happening, but it made her uneasy. She was wishing she’d backed her truck in. “What are we doing, Doug?” she asked from beside her vehicle.

“You know I’ve slept with most of the women in this area—at least the ones close to my age, anyway.”

Beth’s hackles were popping up to full attention one neck hair at a time. “What’s your point?” Her tone was less kind

than usual, and she had to consciously unclench her fingers from around the edge of her truck door.

“Does that make you jealous?” Doug asked her.

“I don’t see what it matters. Unless you don’t think I have the capacity to separate feelings from actions?”

“Damn it!” Doug roared as he stood to his full height. Then he stomped down the porch steps until he was toe to toe with her. Despite the darkness, Beth could clearly see his eyes. Hell, he’d dipped his chin so his face was close enough that she could probably stick out her tongue and lick him.

Despite the large authority looming over her, she didn’t flinch. He was still in uniform, but that didn’t matter to Beth. Doug was the same man no matter where he was, who he was talking to, or what he was wearing. It was a big part of what she loved about him.

He kept his hands fisted at his sides as he seethed at her, “I want you to be jealous. I want you fighting the urge to fuck me in front of the courthouse to claim me as your own for all to see, because that’s exactly how I feel about you. Seeing you in the middle of all those men tonight—” He shook his head subtly and closed his eyes for a slow blink. When he opened them again, he shifted his hands to her neck and dug his fingers into the base of her skull. His thumbs notched under her jawbone to tilt her head up and keep her fully focused on him. “I want to kill everyone who’s ever looked at you. I want to wrap you in my clothes, tuck you into my bed, cover you in my cum, and tattoo my name on your forehead.”

“Everything you do to me, I get to do to you,” Beth said simply.

“Good,” Doug growled with a smile.

“I won’t be an owned possession or a kept woman.” As hot as it was to know how thoroughly he wanted to possess her, she’d come to Twisted Willow to find her freedom. There were zero chances in hell she’d give that up for anyone—no matter how good he was at giving her orgasms.

“Don’t want a timid doormat. I want to pour gasoline on your flame and watch you tear through this town with your determination. I have no idea what you’ll do, but I have a feeling nothing and no one you touch will ever be the same again. I know I’m not.”

“I don’t know what I want to do with my life,” Beth confessed.

“You don’t have to. I say that I want you to claim me because you already own me. I meant it when I said I’d come for you no matter the consequences. You have as long as you need to figure out your future. I just want to be a part of it.”

“Things are going to get ugly when people find out the drugs are gone.”

“My sister OD-ed six years ago. I found her—” Doug stopped without finishing his thought. He leaned his forehead against Beth’s.

She’d known a little of Doug’s history, but obviously it had a bigger impact on him than she’d imagined. “Tell me about

her?” she asked.

“Tomorrow,” Doug leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. “Right now, we should go in, shower, and check each other for injuries.”

“Injuries, huh?” Beth asked.

“Yeah, scratches, bumps, and bruises can hide in the most unexpected places. We wouldn’t want them to go untreated.”

Beth rubbed her nose against Doug’s as she laughed softly. “As long as the treatment ends with orgasms, I’m on board.”

“Oh, so we’ve upgraded from expecting one orgasm to demanding multiple now, huh?”

“Hey, you shouldn’t set a bar higher than you’re willing to meet regularly.”

“Where’s your bag?” Doug asked as he stepped back from her.

“Backseat.” She nodded toward the still-open truck door.

“I’ll grab it. You go get the hot water running.”

Beth headed for his front door with what she could only imagine was the silliest of grins on her face. Doug hadn’t invited her to stay at all. It felt just as natural to him as it did to her. He was in this just as deep as she was.

By the time the water was running hot, Doug was standing behind her with his hands at her waist. “Arms up,” he rumbled as he pulled her shirt up and over her head.

Doug ran his hands over every inch of Beth's skin as he undressed her, but he wouldn't let her return the special treatment. When she'd asked, he just growled, "You can have a turn later. I need to see for myself that you're okay."

Two weeks ago, Beth would have sworn she'd respond to that kind of bossiness with a swift kick to the guy's crotch, but coming from Doug, it didn't feel overbearing. He never asked her to change. Hell, he never even told her no. He agreed to give her as many orgasms as she wanted. He was happy to stand beside her for as long as it took to decide what she wanted to do when she finally got away from the club. The way he touched her so reverently made her feel loved and treasured in a way she never had before.

It helped that his deep growly voice went straight to her pussy, too.

Doug nudged her toward the shower before stripping off his own clothes faster than The Flash could run. As soon as he climbed in behind her, he turned her to put her back under the spray and shielded her eyes as he wet her hair. Doug lathered his own shampoo and massaged it into her scalp with a firm tenderness that had her moaning.

Only after he inspected and cleaned every inch of her did he hand her the body wash and allow her the same exploration.

By the time she was sliding her soapy fist up and down his dick, Doug was trembling. "Stop," he demanded as he grabbed her hand and pulled it away. "We're moving this to the bed where we can take our time."

“Do you always insist on slow and careful sex?” Beth asked.

Doug looked down at her with pupils blown. “If you think this is going to be careful, you’re in for a surprise, but I do plan to take my time.” He stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel to rub Beth dry. As he did, he assured her, “There will come a time when I step in behind you, remove any barriers, and drive into you fast and aggressive, but it won’t be on a night when I spent the evening terrified that I might lose you. I’m saving fast and aggressive for when I know we’re both on the same page about just how important it is to me that you return to my bed alive and well. Before I can let loose like that, I need to know that you understand a quick orgasm before carrying on with your life doesn’t mean a quick relationship that you can walk away from.”

Beth was stunned into silently staring at him as Doug dried off himself using the same towel he’d used on her. When she recovered her wits, she asked, “Aren’t you supposed to be more modern and civilized than that?”

Doug chuckled and laced his fingers through hers to lead them both back into his bedroom as he explained, “I’m modern enough to ask permission first. I’m civilized enough to wait until I’m sure our relationship is solid enough that you’ll feel comfortable with me doing that. But, Beth, never doubt that I fantasize about making love to you at every speed, from every angle, and in every room of this house.”

Beth furrowed her brow at him. “I feel like there’s a lot of assumptions about us being together long enough to get there

and still living in this house and, and, well, and lots of other assumptions.”

Doug had started nipping his way from her earlobe down to her collarbone. It made her thoughts swirl like leaves on a windy fall day.

“Those are all goals of mine. Do you take issue with any of them?” he asked while nuzzling the indentation at the top of her breastbone.

Beth shoved his lips and tongue away from her skin long enough to think. His physical affection was too distracting for this talk. Was he trying to trick her into agreeing to something? “You already know I expect you to give me orgasms, so what’s the game?” she asked. He couldn’t really mean what he was saying, at least not in the altruistic way he made it sound.

Doug stepped back just far enough that she became very aware that the two of them were standing in his bedroom, facing each other, completely naked. He placed one hand on her hip and the other on her jaw so his thumb could caress her cheek. For a minute he just looked at her. Then he spoke. “Beth, what do you want this to be? Am I a fling? Is this just a quick fuck for you?” His voice held no judgement, and he wasn’t pushing for a quick answer.

So Beth took her time to consider. She pictured going back to pouring drinks in the clubhouse. She imagined working with Liz at the bakery. Beth even closed her eyes to mentally drive home to see where her vision had her parking. When she opened her eyes, there was only one future that felt real to her.

“This is important to me. I don’t know what that means exactly. My life hasn’t been full of great examples of healthy, long-term relationships, but when my dad started yelling and burning—” She stopped herself just before accidentally confessing to having drugs on her property. Damn. She really did need to remember this man was the local sheriff, even if his naked cock was pointing at her with excitement. “—stuff, what I wanted more than anything was to come back here with you.”

“Then let me take you to bed and give you the many, slow orgasms you deserve.” With that, Doug’s expression shifted to that of mischievous glee. “Now get on the bed on your hands and knees.”

Beth decided to let go of everything else and enjoy the moment, so she did exactly as he asked. She was rewarded with a single finger stroking down her spine before teeth nipped along the junction where her ass shifted to thigh. It was more sensitive than she’d imagined. Shivers coursed through her, and by the time Doug finally swiped his tongue through her juices, she was rocking back and forth and begging for more. Again, he honored his promise and didn’t find his own release until she’d peaked at least three times, though he claimed she shouted out a fourth. By the time they both collapsed, face-down on the bed with half his body blanketing her, Beth was too blissed out to be picky about details like trying to count to four.

Somehow, Doug managed to rouse himself enough to grab a warm washcloth and clean them up enough so their earlier

shower wasn't completely wasted. When he climbed back into bed next to her, Beth was so happy to rest her ear against his chest that she could feel tears trying to build behind her eyes. This wasn't a time to cry though, so she focused on breathing slowly and deeply to calm her emotions.

It didn't fool Doug though. The arm under her reached around and stroked her back as he asked, "Penny for your thoughts?"

"I'm fine." No way was Beth going to blurt out her post-orgasms' nonsense.

Doug sighed but didn't let it go. "I'm glad you're fine, but I'd still like to know what you're thinking."

"It's stupid—"

Doug sat up abruptly and pulled her up with him. As he slid back to lean against the headboard, he pulled her fully on top of him. Beth could work with him and end up straddling his lap or go limp and wind up with her face flopping by his now-limp dick. She pulled her knee up and held onto his shoulders to end up in his lap, facing him.

"Nothing you think is stupid. Now will you please talk to me so I don't have to lay here imagining horrible things?"

When Doug put it like that, she could see how it would make a person nuts to have someone they just screwed thinking loud thoughts without being willing to share them. "Fine. I was thinking about how relaxed I was and how comfortable your bed and chest are, and I was enjoying the thump of your heart,

and it made me emotional, but I don't really know why other than that I never expected anything other than being some club members ol' lady or, best case, maybe spending my whole life single and not having to deal with someone." She was completely deflated by the time she'd spurted it all out.

Doug wrapped his arms around her, kissed her forehead, and said, "Thank you."

"That's it? I word vomit crazy shit all over you, and thank you is all you have to say about it?"

Doug was grinning at her like it was Christmas morning. It made her want to slug him.

"I was laying here terrified that you were realizing that you're too strong and independent to put up with a bossy, overbearing ass like me. Then I was debating if I could stop myself from being as bossy as I naturally am if it was what I needed to do to keep you, but I just couldn't figure out how that would work."

"I kind of like that you're bossy and overbearing as long as you understand that I'll only listen when I want to," Beth countered.

"That's one of the things I love most about you."

Beth replayed what he said in her mind. Did he really mean that he loved her? Would it be stupid to ask?

Doug rubbed a thumb across her furrowed brows. "I don't know where this will all end up, Beth. I do know how I feel about you though."

She couldn't help the relief that he hadn't said it outright. It was too much, too fast. She couldn't go there, at least not yet, but she could offer him some reassurance. "I feel the same way," she said.

He smiled at her and wiggled down the bed until they were both lying down again with her on top of him. Then he glided his hands up and down the bare skin of her back and ass until she was mewling like a pampered house cat. Doug hooked his hands behind her knees to pull them toward his hips, so she was straddling him again. Then he guided himself back into her and encouraged her to ride him and take her pleasure as he stroked her clit.

CHAPTER 12

Doug

“Good morning, Judy,” Doug greeted his office manager almost a week later.

“Your chipper attitude is starting to concern me.” She frowned at him.

Instead of playing into her drama, he handed her the box of treats he’d picked up from the café on his way in, but that didn’t appease her either.

Judy’s eyebrows furrowed further, and she didn’t open the box before moving it to the counter behind her desk. “You bought pastries yesterday.”

“Are you seriously accusing me of being too happy?” Doug asked.

“Yes. I am. Sheriff, we’ve had just as many overdoses this week as usual, but since we’ve run out of Narcan, two people have passed away. Last time I checked, that throws you into a rampaging tizzy.”

“A rampaging tizzy, huh? What exactly does that look like?” he asked.

“It looks like you frowning while stomping through here like an obese hippo and barking orders at everyone you meet to put a stop to the drugs in your community.” The way she deepened her voice to mimic him made Doug want to laugh gleefully, but he had a feeling that might freak her out even more.

As it was, her face was starting to take on the same expression his grandmother used to get before shoving a thermometer down his throat and demanding his mother take him to be poked and prodded by a doctor. That thought was enough for him to shiver and school his facial expression.

“See,” Judy said. “Now you look more like yourself. I’ve got a bulletin here from the state patrol that looks like it might have been passed along from the DEA. Something about a cartel heading this way.” She handed him a stack of stapled papers.

Doug had a feeling he knew what it would be the minute she said cartel. He was hoping this wouldn’t happen, but he’d also known that hope was unrealistic. As he looked deeper into the pages, he saw they’d met up with some Russians in Richmond. That group was believed to be involved in human trafficking and purchased a steady supply of drugs for their girls.

Doug might be a rural county sheriff, but he could read between the lines well enough to understand what was happening. It looked like the DEA was trying to use the cartel members spending time with the Russians as an excuse to move in and bust some of the cartel guys. It was much easier to prove someone was running a whore house than it was to prove high-volume drug distribution. Once the DEA had people in custody, they could try turning the girls to share intel about the Russians. Then they could offer deals to the Russians in exchange for their cooperation going after the cartel.

As he kept reading, Doug saw the DEA had lost their opportunity when the cartel had quickly walked away from the Russians and gone to chat with a local gang. Collin had shared enough stories about the gangs in Richmond for Doug to know busting anyone for anything meaningful there would be challenging at best. It was the last few lines of the memo that caused a glitch in Doug's brain though.

Several CIs have heard about a motorcycle club stealing from the cartel. Their reports include discussions about arranging transportation and a group of people to go handle business in Rockhurst County.

Well, shit. Doug knew exactly what they were referring to, but how the hell did they learn about the location here? He and Beth had discussed it ad nauseum, and then they'd discussed it some more with Cameron. Matt and Craig had dealt with the Russians before Beth told them about this property. The inventory had been moved between deals. Cameron was pretty sure the rest of the supply was supposed to move up I-81 with smaller deals and drops along the way. He'd overheard Matt asking Craig if he thought they could expand into Washington, D.C. Cameron couldn't remember the exact response from Craig, but it had been something along the lines of telling Matt that he was a fucking idiot and reminding him that their major drops in Raleigh, Charlotte, and Richmond, combined with their smaller drops along the highway, were plenty for them to deal with.

"Mac," Doug yelled across the office. "I need you in my office. Deputy Willis, I want you and Erica in separate

vehicles but both patrolling the northern county line coming down Route 11. Tag-team it. Pull over every dark SUV you can.” Then he turned to Judy and growled, “When did this come in?”

He clenched his teeth and fought the urge to snarl when she smiled back at him. “Ah,” she sighed. “It’s good to know you’re still with us, Sheriff. I was starting to worry that woman had stolen your balls along with your heart.”

“Excuse me!” Doug felt Mac pull back on his elbow and realized he was leaning over Judy’s desk in a less than friendly way.

“Don’t worry,” Judy blew him off. “The bulletin came in about thirty minutes ago, and I already called in Randy to help out today. I also put the bug in a few board members ears that they should be ready to approve some overtime this month because you’re doing such a good job being vigilant about running troublemakers like the Deadly Coyotes out of town.” She gave him a self-satisfied grin. “Oh, but you might want to ask Cameron to leave his cut at home for a while. There’s no need to flash his affiliation around when some members of the community might not understand that this is his chance to step away and start fresh.”

Doug turned to Mac, who was biting his lip to prevent a full smile from breaking out. “What the hell is happening here?” Doug asked him.

“Well, you’re all giddy in love, and that’s weird, but now that there’s an imminent threat that you have the power to do

something about, you're acting more like yourself." Mac paused to think for a second, "I think Judy, here, finds it reassuring."

Judy's head was nodding in agreement as Mac spoke.

Doug looked around the office but couldn't come up with anything to say. He needed to talk to Mac, make a plan, warn Beth, and follow up with all his deputies to keep them on high alert.

"Come on," he grumbled over his shoulder as he headed for his office.

Mac didn't bother collapsing into a chair like he usually would. He stood behind it and asked, "What are we tackling first?"

Doug rubbed his face and pulled out his phone. Beth had been sleeping at his place all week. She would go back to spend the day with Cameron, but, even then, the two of them were mostly discussing what they wanted to do with their lives as they stepped away from the club. Or at least, that's what Beth said they were doing. Doug had a feeling there might be some other stuff involved, but he wasn't sure he wanted to ask too many questions. If there were loose ends that Cameron, in particular, needed to tie up, the less Doug knew about it, the better. He did know that Beth had gone to the shooting range several times throughout the week. She'd asked him where the nearest one was and then had him clarify what types of rifles and ammunition were allowed there.

He looked up at Mac. Doug needed to warn Beth and Cameron about what was coming, but that wasn't exactly in line with his job as the sheriff. He didn't want to drag Mac into that. "I'm thinking about taking the rest of the day off to handle some personal business," he told his deputy. "I'm thinking you should be in charge."

"No way in hell are you laying this shit on me, Asshole!" Mac exploded. He shifted from leaning his weight on the back of a chair to stepping around to loom directly over Doug's desk. When he was so close that Doug could smell the coffee on his breath, Mac continued in a quieter voice that was even more threatening, "You and I will be spending the day together. On the clock or off the clock does not fucking matter, but if you think you will leave me to deal with official shit while you go take care of the people you care about, you have lost your goddamned mind. We both know you need to talk to Beth. And probably her roommate, Cameron?" Mac paused long enough for Doug to nod, confirming he'd gotten the name right. "Cameron should be involved in this discussion as well. We'll need to come up with a plan to deal with what's heading this way, because we all know that traffic stops won't do anything more than give us a small advance notice when trouble arrives."

"Mac, there's a good chance I'm going to have to choose between my job and Beth."

"Duh. We've all known that since the day I saw your reaction to her in the café, Dumbass. Why do you think Judy's already been talking to board members? Do you honestly think

there is anyone here who doesn't have your back one hundred percent?" Mac was looking at him like he was stupid.

"Mac, I love your loyalty, but most of these people know every stupid thing I've done throughout my entire life." Doug was specifically thinking about how horribly he'd behaved while dating Gloria, but he wasn't blind to the millions of other terrible decisions he'd made in his life.

Mac glared at him. "Fine." Then he yelled across the station, "Who here would quit today to help out Doug without their badge or official association?" Mac's gaze didn't stray from Doug's, but the entire office went silent as everyone gave the two men their full attention.

It was Travis Willis who looked around and responded for all of them. "All of us. Sheriff Riley's ability to put common sense ahead of stupid policies is exactly why most of us are here. As for stupid past choices? Well, I don't think any of us have any room to judge. Throwing stones through glass houses, or whatever."

Doug looked around to see everyone nodding in agreement. Huh. He looked back at Mac. "Fine. Do we do this with badges or without?" Mac would understand the possible repercussions of taking less-than-legal action while acting as the law.

"With." Mac answered. Then he added, "We should call Collin, too."

Doug raised his eyebrows at Mac, so Mac explained, "He's dealt with shit like this before, and we're going to need all the

help with can get.”

Doug nodded before turning back to everyone still staring at him. “This is volunteer duty. I’ve got your back if you’ve got mine, but no one is obligated.”

“No one’s leaving, Sheriff,” Travis replied for all of them.

“Alright then. Willis, take Erica and head out to Route 11, like I said.”

“Yes, sir.” Erica was grinning as she responded. Then she grabbed Travis by the elbow. “Let’s go check our weapons and load up.”

If Doug was going to do this, and apparently he was, he needed to be smart about it. “Mac, I’m going to head to Beth’s. Having an extra vehicle might be nice, so I want you to follow me after you give Collin a call. Could you ask him to meet us at Cameron’s place?”

“Messaging him now,” Mac agreed while tapping away on his phone. “I’ll be five minutes behind you.

Doug grunted at him, grabbed his keys, and headed toward his vehicle.

The first thing he noticed when he pulled up to the house was the lack of Beth’s truck. Cameron stepped onto the front porch with a mug of coffee in his hand, but Beth wasn’t with him. If Cameron was calm enough to be sipping coffee on the porch, he and Beth had no idea anything was coming, Doug reminded himself. It did not mean that he was too late.

He barely managed to throw his SUV into park before leaping out and yelling across the yard, “Where is she? Where’s Beth?”

Cameron set his mug down and pulled a gun from the back of his pants. He kept it pointed at the ground as he asked, “What’s happened?” Then his eyes darted around the property.

“Nothing yet, but State Troopers put out a memo alerting us there are at least four guys likely to be heading this way soon: two cartel and two Russians. They probably have a lot more with them, but those four are high enough in their organizations for the DEA to be tracking their movements.” Doug did not have time for this. He needed to find Beth. He needed to get her somewhere safe. He glared at Cameron and asked again, “Now, where, the fuck, is Beth?”

Doug tried to picture the way she lay sprawled out naked in his bed that morning. The sun had just started slanting in through the window, casting glitters of sunbeams through her dark hair. Doug’s fingers had danced across the smooth, creamy skin of her bare back as the sheet pooled around her barely covered hips. She’d hummed when he bent down and kissed her goodbye before heading into town. He would see a similar sight tomorrow morning, next week, and next year. He wasn’t too late. Doug just needed to find out where she was, and it would be okay.

“She just texted me she was on her way here.” Then he frowned at Doug. “Are you aware that she does not like to function prior to eight? It’s one of her core personality traits.”

He'd tried waking her once. Her grunt had been paired with a swift kick to his jaw that he did not care to repeat. That experience had been enough for him to accept her sleeping until she decided to get up as a fact of his new life. It wasn't her slow start to the morning that surprised him. It was looking down at his watch to see it was barely nine. Doug could have sworn most of the day had passed instead of barely two hours since he left her in his bed. He forced himself to take a deep breath.

Doug looked up to see Cameron walking toward him. The younger man was about four inches shorter than Doug, but he didn't flinch as he stared up at him and asked, "Which side of this thing are you on?"

Doug wanted to remind Cameron he was the sheriff, but that wouldn't be a complete answer. It would be true, but it wasn't that simple. "I'm on Beth's side," he offered instead.

"She shouldn't be involved with the club. It's not her scene and runs counter to who she is as a person," Cameron said in a way that made Doug think this was something he'd thought about a lot.

"I agree." He couldn't hide his trepidation. Beth had told him about raising Cameron. Doug couldn't imagine her ever walking away from him. He wouldn't ask her to choose, but if Cameron was going to stick with the club, things would be even more complicated than they already were.

But Cameron just nodded at him and said, "Glad we're on the same side. I should show you some stuff." Then he walked

off toward one of the cabins.

Doug wasn't sure what else to do but follow, so he did. He wasn't sure what he expected Cameron to show him, but it wasn't a room full of monitoring equipment. "Uh, Cameron?" he asked.

"The club's low tech. Phil's never been big on computers, doesn't trust the internet, and prefers to keep us out of trouble by sticking with paper that can be burned. When we moved in here, I was hoping to put in some upgrades, but he and the rest of the club shot me down. I think some of the others would have agreed except for the cost. Phil has always used that as an easy point against going digital."

Doug was staring at three large monitors, two tower computers, and a laptop. If this was the club sticking with old school, he might need to go back to the community college and take some more technology classes because he was clearly missing something. Cameron must have noticed his incredulity.

"Beth isn't the only one who sticks with the club out of convenience more than true alliance." Then he tilted his head side to side like he was only disagreeing with himself. "They did raise us, so they are more a home and family to us than anything else we've ever known. But Beth isn't the only one to grow up and want to leave the nest, so to speak. Well, it's a little more complicated than that."

They did not have time for this. "I get it. You want out, too." Doug needed Cameron to stay focused.

“Right. Anyway, this stuff’s all mine. That guy who lives over the mountain that way,” Cameron gestured to the ridge along the front side of the property.”

“You mean Grant Smith?” Doug checked.

“Yeah, him. He stopped by one day last week and was nosing around. Luckily, none of the guys were here, but he told me about trail cams and how he uses them on his property. I don’t think he saw exactly what we had stashed here at the time—”

Doug shook his head to stop that trail of conversation. He knew what Cameron was talking about, but if no one came right out and told him, he could chalk it up to just being a suspicion. “Nope. Stop.”

“No, no. It’s fine. You could search this whole place now.” Cameron grinned with pride.

“Really?” Doug asked.

“Well, mostly. I kind of feel like if you searched anyone’s place you could probably find something that was a technical issue of some kind, but there’s nothing here that would be any different from anywhere else.”

“Okay, so Grant told you about trail cams.” As much as he wanted to pepper the guy with a thousand questions, this was not the time.

“Yeah, so Beth always taught me to be smart with my money, and if you don’t have vices, the club made it easy to save up. After talking to Grant, I decided to put my funds to

good use and set up pretty much the whole property with cameras. At first, I was just checking them on my laptop, but after you and your deputy—”

“Mac,” Doug supplied. He wanted to be sure Cameron saw his friends as people who mattered, and putting a name to them was the first step.

Cameron smiled at him. “Right. When you and Mac popped up unexpectedly during the bonfire last weekend, I decided more would be better.” Then Cameron’s brow furrowed, and his voice lost the excited quality he’d had thus far. “Plus, I’m not sure what, or who, we might need to be alert for, so it seemed prudent to add some strong security that only I knew about.”

“That does sound wise. Is that what I’m looking at?”

Cameron’s excitement returned, “Yep. There are cameras and motion sensors covering the entire property line. It’s why I wasn’t surprised to see you pull up.” Just then, one of the screens flashed a red border around one of the six feeds it was displaying. The other five just showed gray screens, but the one that lit up gave them a clear view of Beth’s truck turning into the driveway.

She still had ground to cover to get to the house, but she was on the property. Doug breathed a sigh of relief he didn’t realize he’d been holding in.

“I’m glad you care about her so much,” Cameron said softly. “She deserves that.”

Doug might not fully understand Beth and Cameron's relationship, but each time he heard them speak about one another, he got a stronger sense of a family-like connection and commitment. "Yeah, but we should stay focused. Those images aren't normal trail cam footage." Doug could almost make out the license plate on Beth's truck. Normal trail cams offered grainy images that were lucky to be clear enough for you to tell the difference between a squirrel and a baby raccoon.

"Of course, and you're right. After seeing the shit quality that comes from trail cams, I went back to Mr. Smith and asked more questions."

Doug thought it was kind of cute that Cameron called Grant Mr. Smith. Then again, Grant was in his early sixties, so Doug supposed it was the respectful way for a young twenty-something to address the man he was asking to teach him things.

"He pointed out that the cameras in trail cams suck because the real value is in the durability of their housing, so I got some better-quality cameras designed for security and surveillance and built my own housing for them. Between the cameras and the motion sensors, we have at least three minutes notice before anyone can approach the house."

As if on cue, Doug heard Beth's truck pull up to the gravel parking area and stop. Just as they turned to go back outside to greet her, Cameron's phone dinged. He glared at it before turning it toward Doug and asking, "You know this vehicle?"

It was Collin's truck. Cameron was very understanding when Doug explained that Mac would be joining them and providing support, but mentioning Collin's background with the FBI didn't go over as well.

"Uh, I'm not sure that bringing in the FBI is a great idea," Cameron grumbled sarcastically.

Luckily for Doug, Beth had joined the conversation by then. "He's not FBI anymore, Cameron." She turned to Doug for confirmation. "Isn't he a forest guide or something now?"

Doug stifled his laugh. If Collin heard Beth refer to him as a guide, he'd shit himself. Doug would love to see that, but this wasn't the time. Before the man could park and accidentally overhear the comment, he corrected her. "He's a forest ranger. That means he's technically a branch of law enforcement responsible for overseeing the forest, trails, and parks. The big advantage is that he knows the woods around here even better than I do because he spends every day hiking through them."

By then, Collin was stepping out of his truck. He wasn't the only one though. The passenger side opened up, and Gloria hopped out with her favorite short-barrel shotgun. Well, crap. Doug wasn't sure what to do with that. On the one hand, Gloria was lethal with that damn thing. On the other hand, Gloria didn't have the healthy fear God instilled in most goats. Adding her to the mix could give them a huge advantage, or it could be the spark that set off a fight they weren't prepared for. Having Gloria and her shotgun around were sort of like playing hot potato with a live grenade. Then again, Mac

seemed to think she was logical, calm, and collected. Maybe Collin had tempered her chaos?

“I was home when Mac messaged me, and Gloria refused to be left behind,” Collin explained as his greeting.

Doug just shrugged. He had no words. Maybe he should have let Collin overhear the guide comment after all.

“You’re Gloria, right?” Beth asked.

“That’s me. We almost met at Colton’s last week.”

“Yeah. It’s nice to meet you for real. I’m Beth.” Then she turned to Doug. “And now I’m going to ask you what’s happening with all of this.”

Before Doug could answer, Cameron chimed in. “You were right about the cartel. They sent at least two guys to Richmond to meet up with the Russians and figured out what’s holding up the rest of the deliveries. The sheriff came out to warn us about four guys heading this way.”

“They probably have others with them, but I got confirmation only about the four,” Doug clarified.

“Okay, so why are Collin and Gloria here?” Beth asked. “No offense,” she added with a gesture toward Gloria.

How was this Doug’s life? When did he go from local redneck sheriff to man organizing a veritable army to protect a woman he’d fallen in love with? He shook the wonder from his head and offered what he could. “I don’t have a plan yet, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to let the cartel and a bunch of gang bangers run roughshod through my county. Mac should

be here any minute. I was thinking the three of us could figure out what to do about all this.”

Gloria huffed and rolled her eyes so intensely he could hear them swirl, but it was Beth who stepped up close to him and asked, “You mean you, Mac, and Collin, right?”

Doug knew it was a trap. He was certain this was a landmine, but he didn’t know how to avoid it, so he confirmed, “Yeah. Between the three of us and the deputies I have keeping an eye on the road, we should have enough warning to protect you. At the very least, we should be able to get you out of the way and keep you safe.”

Beth squinted her eyes and hummed at him. “What about Cameron?” she asked.

“We’ll protect him, too,” Doug assured her.

This time it was Cameron who scoffed. Doug frowned when Collin coughed to cover his own laughter. Unsure of what to do to fix whatever he’d clearly messed up, Doug stepped closer to Beth, rested his hands on her hips, and leaned down until their noses were almost touching. “Tell me what you want me to do, Beth.”

She sighed and ducked her head under his chin to thump it against his chest. Then she spoke into his chest. “I want you to include Cameron and I in the plans.” She turned her head toward Gloria before adding, “and Gloria too, if she wants.”

Every muscle in Doug’s body stiffened. “I won’t let you get hurt.”

“That’s not up to you. Besides, I’ve got some wicked skills with a long rifle.”

“She’s right about that,” Cameron confirmed. “Put her on a rooftop, and we won’t have to worry about sneak attacks.”

Before Doug could comment on the term sneak attacks or point out the differences between urban and rural settings, Mac pulled up in his own department-issued vehicle. Doug raised an eyebrow at Cameron. Had the camera failed to alert him to the new arrival?

“The camera’s good enough for me to see it was a sheriff’s SUV, so I figured he was with you,” Cameron replied to his unvoiced question.

This whole thing was turning into such a mess. Doug was a damned county sheriff, not a well-trained, special-ops expert. He was elected for fuck’s sake. What was he thinking? He couldn’t keep Beth safe. He didn’t have the first clue what to do about any of this mess. He shifted his hands around to the small of her back and pulled her tight against his chest. They could run away together. He’d take her anywhere she wanted to go.

“Doug. You okay?” Mac pulled him from his mental wanderings.

The look on Doug’s face must have clued in his deputy to his doubts because Mac took control of the situation. “I asked Judy a couple more questions before leaving the station. She’s reaching out to see if she can get us intel on a vehicle or vehicles heading our way, along with a more accurate

headcount. They'll have to pass through a few other counties, and state patrol is actively looking for them. They were last spotted in Richmond this morning. That means we've got at least a couple hours before they get here."

Doug watched Collin shift into what Doug could only think of as his I'm-a-serious-agent-and-will-shoot-you stance. Normally, he'd make fun of him for it, but today it gave Doug hope that these men could help him.

"It's your county," Collin rumbled with his arms crossed over his chest.

"And you have more experience with this kind of situation. What do I need to do to keep Beth safe?" he asked.

Collin looked surprised for a minute, but Gloria ruined it by elbowing him and teasing, "See, I told you he was in love with her."

"Stop poking me. Fine. You were right."

"Oh, you are so whipped," Mac said with a grin.

Collin gave him a flat look. "And I'm sure you're fine with me telling Cora you said that, right?"

Mac closed his mouth faster than Doug had ever seen before. He'd have to remember that trick.

Just then, Doug's phone buzzed. When he answered it, Judy informed him that the DEA had sent an update directly to the office. They had intel that a group would be heading their way sometime late that night. They were asking Doug to call them back about setting up some joint operations. Judy had told

them Rockhurst County could handle things themselves unless the DEA had hard evidence proving it was within their jurisdiction. They didn't, so the agent speaking with Judy reminded her how dangerous these guys were and suggested she have her boss call him immediately. "I figured you'd want the info, but there's no need for the DEA to come poking around themselves," Judy finished her report.

Thank goodness for Judy. Normally, Doug would love the help, but his first priority today was protecting Beth, not stopping drugs. He wasn't sure how or when that had shifted, but he'd deal with his existential crisis later. For now, involving outside agencies just felt like a way to increase the violence. He relayed everything to the people standing around him.

"We can set up caches with supplies," Doug suggested. "With Cameron's security in place, he'll have enough warning to make a run for it. In this terrain, he'll have the advantage."

"What about Beth?" Cameron asked.

"She'll be with me," Doug snarled. No way in hell was he was letting her out of his sight.

Collin cleared his throat.

"What?" As soon as he said it, Doug realized how aggressive his snarl had sounded. He rubbed his forehead. "Sorry. Share your thoughts." Then Beth pinched his rib, so he added, "Please."

Based on the way Mac was shaking his head, he'd caught Beth's action.

“Running won't solve the problem,” Collin pointed out. “For this community to be safe again, we need to eliminate the threat. Until then, they'll continue to be present and cause problems.”

“We can't kill them all,” Gloria scolded her husband.

“Not what I mean,” he clarified. “But we need more information. Why are they coming here? What do they want? What's their big goal? What's the immediate goal? And what's their biggest fear?”

Everyone turned to look at Cameron, whose eyes expanded to the size of dinner plates.

“Forget our badges for now, Cameron. Just tell us everything,” Doug encouraged.

He looked at Beth first, but once she nodded her approval, he spilled the entire story. The drugs, Matt and Craig's stupidity, Phil's anger and excommunication of the two men—Cameron explained all of it.

When Cameron's story reached their present moment, Collin looked at all of them and said, “This is a bigger problem than I think any of you realize.”

Without even noticing, Doug had stepped behind Beth and wrapped his arms around her as Cameron was speaking. Now, he tightened his hold even more. Running away with her might be their best option after all. Doug remembered Collin

mentioning a friend he knew up in Vermont. Maybe Doug and Beth could move up there?

“So, what do we do?” Mac asked.

Collin shook his head. “The cartel will want to be compensated for their lost goods at the very least. Unless or until they get their money and can restore their relationships with whomever the drugs were supposed to be delivered to, they’ll be looking for people to punish.”

It was hopeless. Doug could tell by the look on Collin’s face. There was no plan, and no way out.

Beth wiggled out of Doug’s arms and stepped to the side. Mac and Doug both opened their mouths, but before either could say a word, Cameron held up a hand to stop them.

“She’s got an idea,” he said. “Give her a minute for the thought to fully form.”

When they all stared at him, Cameron explained, “That’s her planning face. I can pretty much guarantee her idea will be dangerous, insane, and more outlandish than normal humans could conceive, but her plans usually end up working.” Then he frowned and added, “Except that one time when it exploded, but that’s when some of the guys started teaching her to shoot in exchange for her agreeing not to touch C-4 or conduct any more experiments to build her own bombs.”

Doug looked at the woman he’d fallen for with fresh eyes, but as the new information sank in, he decided it fit. Imagining her playing with explosives wasn’t a big stretch. Based on the

way Gloria was grinning, Beth had just earned herself a new best friend. As awkward as it was, Doug knew Beth would appreciate Gloria's loyalty and thirst for adventure. Though, he should probably build his friendship with Collin. If their wives were going to work together to cause chaos, they might need to work together to ensure everyone survived.

Holy shit, Doug just thought of Beth as his wife.

Before his panic could take hold, Beth spoke up.

"I think I have an idea," she said.

CHAPTER 13

Beth

“See?” Cameron gestured to all of them.

Beth rolled her eyes but shared her thoughts.

“Collin, you mentioned eliminating the threat, but it sounds like the only realistic way to do that is a settlement of some sort where they agree to leave us alone, right?”

“You’re talking about getting the cartel to agree to a settlement?” Mac asked.

Beth ignored him and continued once Collin nodded at her.

“Okay, so we need to invite them to a sit down. We need something to offer the gang to satisfy them, or we need a threat big enough for it to make more sense for the gang to go after Craig and Matt and leave us alone.”

“What do you have in mind?” Doug asked her.

“What if we threatened to arrest them?” she suggested.

Everyone just looked at her like she’d lost her mind. “Arrest them?” Mac asked.

“Yeah, like what if they were surrounded by police or whatever, but we said we’d let them go as long as no one ever brought drugs into the area again.” She was thinking about Doug’s sister and how much he’d been worried about everything and everyone that the community was losing to drugs.

Everyone was staring at her slack-jawed. It was Gloria who finally spoke up. “Uh, Beth, are you feeling okay? Last time I checked, that’s the opposite of what these guys do.” She gestured at her husband along with Mac and Doug.

“I get that it sounds nuts, but I think it could work.” Beth’s plan went a bit deeper than she was letting on, but it involved asking the man she loved to violate an oath he took very seriously. She wasn’t sure he’d go for it. Even if he did, she wasn’t sure the other members of the department would agree, and it would take everyone to make it work. She chewed on her lip and thought, but there was nothing else.

“We could put together some fake dope and make sure one package is real for them to sample,” Cameron suggested.

“That would last until they opened the other packages. Then they’d come back to us even more angry, less willing to talk, and with a better understanding of our layout and security.” She hated to burst his bubble, but that had been her first idea. Based on the way Collin was nodding along as she spoke, he saw the same flaw.

“Maybe we could find enough money to pay them back?” Mac asked.

“How much did they give Craig and Matt?” she countered by asking Cameron.

“Uh, about a hundred thousand.” The grimace on Cameron’s face told Beth she didn’t need to add insult to injury by pointing out the impossibility of coming up with that much cash. Cameron had already done the math. He knew it wasn’t a

real possibility. Mac's sigh proved he was on the same page, too.

They all turned back to Beth, but it was Collin who prompted her to share more details.

She inhaled deeply in preparation for what she was about to suggest. "These guys are used to an urban setting. They're good at dealing with gangs, but they don't have any experience with communities like this, right?"

Mac, Doug, and Gloria were scowling in confusion, but Collin's eyes were alight with glee. He saw where she was going with this. Cameron was giving her the same look of pride he always got once he moved beyond the insanity of whatever she might be suggesting.

From there, she outlined the rest of her thoughts. Collin suggested a few changes, and Mac pointed out their need for additional people and specific information about how many people they'd be up against, but those were details they could figure out.

"Cameron, will you call Jake and find out what the club knows? Maybe they can come out and lend a hand?" she asked.

He nodded and walked away from the group.

"I don't think they're the best people for what we need," Collin argued.

Beth opened her hands and gestured for Collin to make a better suggestion. He thought for a second before grinning like

the Grinch on Christmas Eve. “Doug, between you and Gloria, you think you could pull together a dozen or so hunters?”

Doug looked at his ex-girlfriend, and they both nodded. He answered, “Two from the Smiths, probably five of my deputies, though that would include Mac.”

“Are you counting Travis Willis in that?” Gloria asked.

“Yeah, why?”

“His sister, Payton, is the one who taught him to shoot. I guarantee she’ll be onboard. I can call the Forbes, too. I’m not sure if Sarah’s left for college, but they’ve got two or three good hunters.”

“You know the Fletchers?” Doug asked her.

“Oh, yeah, but I figured you’d be calling them.” Gloria tilted her head, prompting Doug to offer an explanation.

Ten years ago, Ethan Fletcher had been one of his best friends, but his brother Tyler was always getting into trouble. It had eventually driven a wedge between Ethan and Doug. “I arrested Tyler for violating his probation last week.” Doug shrugged.

“Oh.” Gloria thought for a minute.

“Uh, maybe we shouldn’t invite them to help us, since this plan isn’t totally above-board?” Beth didn’t want Doug to get into any more trouble than he was already risking.

But Doug just smiled and announced, “Tyler’s scheduled to appear before Judge Snyder next week.”

“Ha! That’s perfect,” Gloria hooted.

Beth felt like they were speaking a foreign language. Doug had told her all about his history with Gloria, and Beth wasn’t jealous. Okay, maybe she was a little bit jealous, but seeing Gloria and Collin together made it easy for her to squash those feelings until just now. Witnessing the connection Doug and Gloria shared that the rest of them didn’t was hard, but when Beth looked over and saw Collin’s glare as he stepped in close to Gloria and wrapped an arm around her waist, she realized she wasn’t the only one feeling a bit left out.

Beth didn’t even have to speak up. Collin was already growling, “The rest of us need to know and understand whatever it is you two are talking about.”

Gloria must have understood her husband’s jealousy, because she turned into him and gave him a passionate kiss, complete with tongue, before responding. “Judge Snyder is founder and president of the Rockhurst Ridge Hunt Club. He’s known to view hunting season dates as general guidelines when it comes to locals, though he loves to fine the shit out of tourists caught poaching during the off-season. There’s a good chance we can convince him that this could count as community service for Tyler. Plus Tyler, Ethan, and the judge would give us a solid twelve people. Though Doug’s right to point out that it will go over better coming from me rather than him. Judge Snyder is not Doug’s biggest fan.” Then she turned back toward Doug while holding onto Collin’s arms to keep them wrapped tightly around her. “I can call Ben, too. Everyone else is good with him when he’s armed.”

Beth had stepped close enough to Doug to feel his heat along the side of her arm, so he felt it when she turned to him to ask for more information. Before she could voice the question, he was answering her.

“Ben’s a ranger like Collin, but he prefers the company of men. That doesn’t always go over well around here, but he’s one of the best hunters in the area, and he is the best tracker. No one’s willing to invite him to join their hunt club, but if they need help with anything related to wild animals, he’s the first one they call.”

Beth shouldn’t have been surprised to learn that bigotry and discrimination were still alive and well in rural areas like this, but it caught her off guard. Her disapproval must have shown on her face.

“We’re getting better about it,” Doug defended. “The younger generations are pretty accepting. It’s the old timers that still get a bee in their bonnet.”

Beth couldn’t help snickering when her sexy sheriff used such a country turn of phrase. Part of her thought it was cute and sweet, but part of her needed a reminder that he was not as stupid as some of his expressions made him sound. She shook her head and decided to shelve those thoughts for now.

“Okay, so we’ll have the people we need, even if the MC doesn’t come through,” she said instead.

“That’s good,” Cameron chimed in as he rejoined them after clicking off his phone and shoving it into the back pocket of his jeans. “The club is not on board.” His lips were pinched

tight, and he was clenching his jaw so hard Beth wondered if he was about to break a molar.

“And,” Doug prompted.

“And nothing. They aren’t interested in helping out.” Cameron was practically snarling through his teeth.

“What did Jake say?” Beth asked in her I changed your diapers, so don’t you fucking lie to me voice.

Cameron sighed but explained, “The Russians aren’t interested in a fight, but apparently they referred the guys sent up from the cartel to THE13s.” Cameron was staring directly into Beth’s eyes as he spoke.

“As in MS-13?” Collin asked.

“No.” Beth could read Cameron’s face well enough to understand at least some of what he wasn’t saying aloud. “He’s talking about THE13s. They’re the club’s biggest guns client. They’re an offshoot of MS-13 and have been fighting hard to replace Mara Salvatrucha. After they consolidated with another small gang and became their own organization, the fight between MS-13 and THE13s was as even as you can get with street gangs.”

“Okay, why does that matter?” Mac asked.

Beth was trying to trace all the paths that came after that. There were a million of them, but they all ended at the same place, and it wasn’t a happy one.

Her time thinking meant Cameron responded before her. “Because of MS-13’s loose ties with the cartel, they were able

to hold off the THE13s. It was the cartel who armed MS-13.”

“Oh fuck.” Collin must have seen where this was going. “The cartel’s support of MS-13 is usually just based on convenience. If the cartel’s asking the THE13s for help to settle this matter, it means their alliance is shifting. There’s about to be a massive war in Richmond. I need to call some of my old contacts and give them a head’s up.”

“That’s great and all. I respect it, really.” Doug’s face did not show respect, but Beth appreciated he was attempting to sound like he wasn’t about to be a total dick. “But what does it have to do with us?”

Collin frowned.

Beth could tell Doug hadn’t made it that far down the train of logic. She helped him out. “Likely, it means a few bad things. One, if the THE13s are getting guns from the cartel, they aren’t getting them from the Coyotes.” She looked at Cameron.

He nodded and confirmed, “They’ve completely cut ties with the MC.”

“Two,” Beth continued, “THE13s know us and how we operate. They’ll be coming after us with our own guns and have likely been offered our inventory as spoils of war, so they’ve got lots of incentive. Three, we will have zero support from the club. They’re likely to be almost as pissed off as everyone else.”

“Worse.” Cameron scrubbed his forehead. “Phil’s trying to convince the club to say we went rogue with Matt and Craig. He wants to offer the MC’s support tracking all four of us down in exchange for peace between the Coyotes, THE13s, and the cartel. The Russians dipped out after making introductions between the THE13s and the cartel, but Phil’s trying to put together a meet before any more moves are made.”

Beth raised her eyebrows at Cameron. Phil, her father, was willing to work with a gang, a mafia family, and the cartel to come after her.

Cameron took her expression to be a logistical question about communication. “THE13s won’t take his calls, so Anty’s been talking to one of their lieutenants.”

“Your own Dad is coming after you?” Doug looked shocked.

Beth shouldn’t have been surprised. She knew who her father was. She’d lost any delusions of family love long ago, but somehow it still stung. Cameron was a fully patched member of the club. Phil turning his back on him went against the core of the Deadly Coyotes. That combined with her being his daughter should have been enough for him to want to see them live, but apparently not. Not only did her father not care about her, but Beth’s sperm donor was also willing to stand against her.

She didn’t realize her eyes had sprung a leak until Doug’s large, calloused hands cupped her face, wiped them away, and tilted her chin up toward him. “Phil is a stupid asshole, but you

aren't alone," he told her softly. "You have family here now, and you've always had Cameron. He's more your family than anyone I've seen before, though I'd like to earn the honor of one of your people if you'll let me." Beth saw him flinch. "Not that I'm asking to become a family yet. I don't want to pressure you. There's no rush. But that's kind of what I'm saying. You don't need to worry or rush or anything. I'll be here. I am here." His comforting reassurance was quickly dissolving into nonsense.

Beth decided to throw him a life preserver. She placed her own hands over his before shifting them around toward the back of her neck as she buried her face in his chest. He took the hint and massaged the base of her skull with his fingers as she confessed, "I'm not sure I know what the word family really means, but I like Twisted Willow. I like you, too. I don't know what the future will bring, but for now, here is good with you." In the midst of this mess, that was the best she could offer him.

Mac broke the emotional tension by asking Cameron, "So does that mean we have the Deadly Coyotes along with the cartel and a street gang all coming after us? Because we might need more than a dozen people for that."

"Nah," Gloria sounded gleeful. "We just need to change the location to control the flow of traffic better."

"Sometimes you terrify me," Collin said to his wife. "I'm really glad you're on our side."

"That's why you married me, right?" she flirted with him.

Collin just grunted.

“It’s not that bad. At least, not yet,” Cameron offered. “Anty and Logan are both standing with Jake in voting no to throwing us under the bus. Darren is going back and forth. If Phil presents it as a choice to send everyone after Matt and Craig or us, Darren’ll side with Phil to protect his brother. Jake’s trying to keep us lumped in with Matt and Craig to stop that, but he has to be careful not to push it too far, or Anty will vote with Phil.”

“Huh, even outlaws have to deal with politics,” Doug commented.

“Except Phil gave THE13s the address here when he was still trying to keep their business.” Cameron tossed a final grenade into their conversation. Well, Beth sure as shit hoped it was the final grenade. She wasn’t sure they could survive any more.

“So what does this mean for our plan?” Mac asked.

They all looked at each other before Doug spoke up. “Nothing.” His eyes connected with Collin’s for a nod of confirmation. Then he looked down at Beth. “Your plan is still good, but we may need more people.”

“I can make some other calls,” Gloria offered. “Ben might be able to call some people, too.”

“Cora’s friend, Maddie, can probably call some people. She might want in on the action, too.” Mac looked thoughtful as he

added, “But maybe don’t give Maddie a gun. That girl scares the shit out of me.”

“Oh, Cora will definitely want in on this!” Gloria shouted.

“No, she won’t.” Mac glared at her.

“You just said you were going to have her call Maddie, so it’s not like she won’t know what’s going on,” Gloria pointed out.

“Yeah, but Cora loves me. She prefers that I remain alive. When I point out how much easier that will be if I’m not constantly worried about her, she’ll happily stay out of the way where she’s safe.”

Beth hadn’t met Cora, but she wasn’t sure she trusted Mac’s confidence.

“We all need to prep.” Collin snagged everyone’s attention. “No official anything. No identifying insignia. We all need to be well-armed with backup ammo and our body armor, but we need to leave uniforms and patches behind.” He looked at Cameron as he said the last two words. “Our best chance is if no one stands out too much.”

“Right.” Doug picked up Collin’s serious tone. “We should recommend flannel shirts for everyone. I’ll bring all the spare vests the department has, and we’ll hand them out strategically.”

“I’ll grab extra firepower from the department and fill in everyone there. If we’re okay with the other deputies making

calls and extending invitations, we'll get some extra bodies, too," Mac suggested.

"Sounds good. The sun sets around seven, but dusk falls fast out here. Any idea when they're most likely to make their move?" Doug asked Cameron.

"Dusk is probably about right, though with streetlight, signs, and other ambient light, they may move sooner." Cameron was chewing on his lip between phrases.

"Let's have everyone meet here at three this afternoon," Doug suggested. "That will give us time to go over the plan, help people find positions, and ensure everything is set up." He turned to Mac. "When you head back to the station, be sure to fill Judy in, but also ask her to have Erica pull back and take up position at the speed trap on 56 just before the bridge. Tell her not to do anything but watch and alert us when they're close."

"Cameron and I will make food for everyone." Part of Beth felt like that was a stupid contribution to offer, but they were about to ask a bunch of strangers to spend several hours in the woods and possibly get shot at for them. Ensuring they weren't hungry while doing so was the least she could do.

"Hungry hunters have terrible decision-making skills," Doug agreed. "Be sure to include some stuff they can keep with them out in the woods, too."

"Alright. We're all off to make calls, collect weapons, and get ready, but we'll meet back here at three, right?" Mac confirmed.

Everyone nodded their agreement. Then Collin and Gloria hopped in their vehicle and drove away. Mac was right behind them, heading for the sheriff's department.

“I need to call on some people in person, and I need to stop by my place to change. Any chance you want to come with?” Doug asked Beth.

She wanted to stay right beside him almost more than anything, but that couldn't be her priority right now. If she wanted to spend the next ten, twenty, or fifty years beside him, she needed to focus on getting ready for tonight. Part of her shivered in terror at the realization that she wanted to spend decades with this man, but then she remembered his bumbling comments about wanting to be her family. Maybe they were both feeling the same way.

She rested her palms flat on his chest and lifted up onto her toes to rub her nose against his. “When this is done, I want you to handcuff the two of us together for at least a few days, but first we need to survive.” She kissed his lips but continued talking before either of them could get lost in their feelings. “I need to get food together and clean my rifle.”

“I won't put unforgiving metal bracelets on your wrists.” Doug's fingers danced across the flesh he was discussing. “But I have some leather ones lined with sheep's wool that would be comfortable while ensuring you can't go far from me.”

This time, Beth's shiver was caused by arousal instead of fear. “Be back by three, and don't forget your vest.” She

needed him to leave now, or she'd not let him go until she'd had her way with him.

Cameron's gagging noises reminded her they weren't alone. He immediately held up his hands in surrender though, and Beth realized Doug was glaring at him before she could even turn around.

"Three o'clock," she reminded Doug before giving him a last peck and shoving him toward his vehicle.

He sauntered away with a grin on his face as she turned back to Cameron. They needed to make a list and run to the store for food and snacks.

CHAPTER 14

Doug

His girlfriend had lost her fucking mind. Her *plan* was pure insanity. The further he drove away from her, the stronger he felt the pull to go back, toss her over his shoulder, and drive away somewhere to keep her safe.

Instead of doing that, he called Collin. As soon as the man answered, Doug demanded, “Do you really think this plan will work?”

Collin’s immediate sigh did not alleviate Doug’s doubts. “Doug, I get how scary this is. Believe me. When I realized who the real serial killer was but I couldn’t get to Gloria, I was ready to shit myself. But these women aren’t like us. They don’t understand fear the way we do. I don’t know Beth that well, but the glint in her eye when she shared her idea was the same look that Gloria gets.”

“This is not helping, and I’m not afraid,” Doug snarled. He needed the former FBI agent to give him better options, not insult his courage and tell him not to worry.

“What if it were Gloria’s plan?” Collin asked.

“What?” Why would it be Gloria’s plan? What was Collin trying to ask him? Doug squiggled his face with confusion. He didn’t have time for ridiculous puzzles and what-if nonsense.

“Doug, stop and think for a minute. Just ask yourself if it had been Gloria who thought up the plan, what would you say?”

Doug slowed down and considered what he was being asked. Doug imagined Gloria suggesting they fill the woods with well-armed hunters and bluff the cartel. It still sounded nuts, but he had to admit if Gloria had thought of it, he'd be thinking it would work.

“Why do I hate that it came from Beth?” he asked Collin.

“Because you love her. Any and every plan she will ever think up will terrify you. There's no logic when it comes to the women we love. All we see is the potential for them to get hurt or dead.”

“So why are you letting Gloria participate?” If Collin saw things the same way, he wouldn't let Gloria risk it, right?

“You've known her longer than I have. What would happen if I tried telling Gloria she couldn't or shouldn't do this?”

Doug had to laugh. He could picture Gloria carrying Collin's head over to the Johnson's place and asking the taxidermist if he'd be willing to stuff and mount a human trophy.

“We both know she'd kill me,” Collin answered for Doug. “I'm guessing you didn't tell Beth she couldn't do it, either.”

“Yeah, I wouldn't still be breathing.” Then he rethought his answer. Beth was very different from Gloria. Gloria would kill and stuff a man in a heartbeat, but not Beth. “That's not true,” he corrected. “Beth wouldn't kill me. She's not like that. She'd chain me naked to a bed and use me as her sex slave until she got bored. Then she'd sell me for a profit.” Yeah, that felt

more like how Beth would react. He could hear Collin sputtering through the phone.

“Uh, TMI. I don’t. I’m not sure. Maybe I don’t want to know? Anyway, I’ve gotta go. See you at three.” Collin hung up before Doug could even say goodbye.

Two minutes later, he was pulling up in front of his house when his phone rang. “Yeah?” Doug didn’t bother looking at who it was before answering. There was enough going on today for all calls to feel important.

“What did you say to my husband?” Gloria shrieked at him.

“Uh? Why?”

“He just asked me why I don’t want to use him as a sex slave. What the fuck? Stop calling him. I don’t want you two hanging out. It’s scary.” Then she hung up. Doug stared at the dark screen in his hand.

Maybe he should have called Mac instead of Collin?

Doug shook himself and ran inside to change into jeans, an undershirt, and a flannel. He grabbed his bullet-proof vest, his rifle, and his shotgun. Then he sat at his dining room table and started making calls.

Once he’d run out of people with working phones who were answering, he slung his weapons over his back, stashed his vest in the carry compartment of his bike, and went to talk to people in person. His community was a bit odd when it came to technology. Lots of the homes didn’t have any phone service; several places didn’t have electricity; and a few

families still didn't have running water. He was hard-pressed to name a single household without a gun and a trail cam though.

At each place he stopped, he stepped off his bike slowly, pulled off his helmet, and waited for someone to come out and greet him. These people knew him as the sheriff who pulled up with flashing lights and banged on their door with one hand on his gun. He couldn't approach them that way to ask this favor of them.

So he left himself open and showed his vulnerability. Any houses where he didn't feel like it was safe to do that, he took it as a sign that he shouldn't invite them to bring their weapons onto Beth's property.

It meant he ended up visiting only two properties in person, though they were far enough apart for it to take the entire morning.

By the time his stomach started to rumble for lunch, Doug had spoken with everyone he could think of who might be able to help them out that night. It was almost one o'clock, and he wanted nothing more than to curl up with his arms around Beth and take a nap before shit got crazy.

He turned his Yamaha toward her place and was relieved to see her truck already parked in the driveway. Beth stepped out on the porch to greet him while wiping her hands on a dish towel.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

“Good, I think.”

“You look tired.”

“Yeah.” Doug felt like he’d used all his words for the day. He climbed the front steps, wrapped his arms around Beth, shoved his face into her hair, and just inhaled the smell of his shampoo combined with her skin. “You smell good,” he mumbled as he started nipping at her ear.

“Take it upstairs and close the door,” Cameron hollered from inside. “Or better yet, go out to one of the cabins to get your freaky on. You’ll burn my virgin eyes!”

Doug could feel Beth’s laugh through his chest where he’d pulled her tight against him, but she wiggled loose enough to grab his hand and drag him back down the steps and over toward one of the cabins. “Come on. I feel like it’s been centuries since you made me cum,” she complained.

“I made you cum this morning. That was less than twelve hours ago,” Doug countered.

Beth squinted at him.

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t do it again. I’m just pointing out that I’m very good at giving you orgasms and never deny you. I don’t want anyone to start thinking I’m not doing my part here.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Beth assured him. “I’ll be sure everyone in town knows what a great job you do, and at the same time, I’ll make it very clear that I do not share well with others.”

They'd made it to the one-bedroom cabin closest to the house. Doug reached around Beth to push open the door for her as he agreed. "Good, because I'll tell everyone that you are as unavailable as they come. I'm claiming you as mine, and they need to understand that no one else is allowed to touch you."

"We don't have a ton of time," Beth pointed out as Doug lifted her shirt over her head.

"I don't expect this will take long. Is there a mirror here somewhere?"

"Yeah." Beth pointed to the dresser in the bedroom but yanked on Doug's shirt before he could move them in that direction.

"Perfect," he breathed as they stumbled into the room. He shoved her pants down around her ankles and turned her to the mirror hanging on the wall. "Hands on the dresser. Eyes on us," he growled as he unbuttoned his pants.

The week they'd spent practically living together had been enough for him to learn that he could hit her sweet spot dead on when he took her from behind. But today, with everything that was about to happen, he needed to see her face, too. He slid his fingers between her legs and was glad to see she was already prepared and turned on. He didn't have the patience for much foreplay, and she was right about them being short on time.

He kissed up her back before whispering in her ear. "I'd like this to be rough and fast, but I need to see your face the whole

time.”

“Okay,” she breathed back.

“Eyes stay open,” he encouraged.

She looked at him through the mirror and nodded. “Now, please.”

Beth was so polite when she wanted to cum. Doug loved it. She might be a powerful tornado of crazy energy the rest of the time, but when it was just the two of them, naked and making love, she handed over the reins to him without a second thought. He had a feeling it wasn't a trust she gave easily, so he was always careful to honor it.

He slid home in one steady stroke with a moan from deep in his soul. Then he caught her eyes in the mirror and checked in. “You okay?”

“Yes, please. More.” Beth was rutting her hips back against him, but he was holding her steady.

He didn't break their gaze as he pulled out and slid back in again. Doug watched her eyes start to roll back with pleasure, but he didn't want that. He needed their connection more than anything else. It wasn't about the physical contact. Sure, that was epic, but he needed more. Doug needed to know that Beth was with him. He needed this to reassure him that she was his, and she wouldn't let anything happen to her.

“Eyes on me,” he commanded before pulling out and thrusting forward again.

Once he knew she was enjoying it while staying completely focused on his face in the mirror, he picked up the pace. Doug's rhythm was steady but quick and forceful. It didn't take long for Beth's breath to hitch and her hips to jerk. That was his cue to reach one hand around and tease her clit. He knew it would throw her off the precipice she was hanging from.

He wasn't sure Beth understood exactly what this meant to him or why he needed it so much, but she understood enough to let her pleasure tear through the room with a delightful shout of his name. That was enough to break his rhythm. Steady thrusts became frantic jerks as he slammed into her. As his orgasm tore through him, he locked his lips to the skin along the back of her neck where it met her shoulder. He sucked with the same force he felt pulling his seed from his dick before licking and kissing the spot that immediately turned into a hickey darker than anything he'd created since he'd left his teen years behind.

Doug wrapped his arms around her waist and nuzzled into her back as Beth rested her head on her arms on the dresser. For a few minutes there was silence aside from their slowing breaths.

Then Beth asked, "So I'm your Beth, huh?"

Oh shit. Is that what he'd yelled as he came? He started to pull back, but Beth stood up and grabbed his hands to keep them wrapped around her.

"I like it. Just so you know," she said.

He breathed a sigh of relief. “I, uh, didn’t really mean to shout that aloud.”

She grinned at him through the mirror. “I figured. Doesn’t mean I didn’t find it hot as hell.”

“I seem to recall you shouting my praises as well,” he pointed out.

“I give credit where credit is due.” Then Beth crinkled her nose and made an eww sound. “We need to get cleaned up. Gravity is not my friend right now.”

Doug chuckled but refastened his pants. He hadn’t even shoved them below his knees. “Give me a second to grab a towel for you. I don’t want you to trip.” Beth’s pants and underwear were still around her ankles.

When he returned to her, Beth stretched out her hand to take the towel from Doug, but he couldn’t hand it over. He didn’t want her cleaned up, dressed, and involved in whatever was going to end up happening that night.

“I don’t want you out there with us tonight,” he confessed without looking at her.

Beth snatched the towel from his grip to clean up while ignoring him. Then she pulled up her pants before turning to look at him.

Doug could feel his face heat with embarrassment over his vulnerability. If it were anyone else, he’d be fine with it. As Collin had pointed out, the plan itself wasn’t the problem. He braced himself for Beth to lose her shit. He couldn’t be terribly

upset about it. He knew he was crossing lines and had no right to tell her what to do or what not to do.

When she didn't start screaming, he looked up to find her studying him closely.

"Why?" she asked flatly.

He had not expected to get this far. He was prepared to protect his family jewels and evade attack or capture, but being asked to discuss it like reasonable people wasn't on his list of anticipated responses. Maybe the surprise was why he answered so openly. "I can't stop picturing you bleeding, shot, hit, hurt, or dead. I can practically feel the cold of your ash gray skin, and I can't. Beth, there would be no getting over that. I feel like I've been waiting my entire life for you to show up, and now that you're here..."

"What about you?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You think I don't feel the same way? Every morning I wake up in your bed and wonder if I'll ever see you again." Beth's eyes shimmered, and she shook her head like she was trying to dislodge her thoughts.

"Really?"

"Tuesday, I found your vest still hanging in the closet." She glared at him with more accusation in her eyes than Gloria had shown when she asked about him cheating on her.

It cut deep.

Doug nodded and thought for a second before asking, “How do we make this work?”

“We follow the plan, which has me safely tucked up on the roof watching your back, and you wear your fucking vest every damned day no matter how hot or scratchy or uncomfortable you may try to argue it is.”

When he didn’t respond fast enough, Beth added, “Mac is always wearing his.”

“You look at him that close?” Doug tried to tamp down the jealousy that surged through him.

“Yes and no. Once I realized you don’t wear yours, I started paying attention. I thought it was a me issue. Maybe it’s different out here. But the more I looked, the more I saw that everyone here is armed. At least half of them are usually drunk or high, and most of your deputies always wear their vest. Some wear it under their polo; some wear it on top of their department T-shirt; but almost all of them wear it.” Then she twisted the blade she’d inserted through his heart. “Except for you.”

“You really think a vest will save me?” he asked her.

She shrugged. “Maybe not, but at least I’ll know you’re trying to come home at the end of the day.”

Mac and Judy had been telling him he needed a life. They were always pushing him to find something more to do than just be the sheriff. Is this what they meant? Did he really deserve to have a reason to rush home after his shift was over?

He pulled the ponytail holder from Beth's hair. Most of it had already fallen loose, so the elastic was already drooping down by her shoulder. Once her long hair was free, he ran his fingers through it and tried to imagine what life would be like with her. Not the abstract sensation of having someone to share his life with, but the daily routine of mixing their laundry, making dinner together, and arguing over the remote. She'd want him to upgrade his internet speed now that fiber optic service was available. But it wouldn't be his internet speed anymore, would it? It would be their internet.

“What's your favorite dinner when you've had a bad day?” he asked her.

She frowned at him but answered, “Homemade chicken tenders with buttered egg noodles. I usually make broccoli with it.”

“Do you eat the broccoli?” He couldn't hold back his smile as he imagined the answer.

“Sometimes.”

“How much closet space do you need?” he asked.

Again, she indulged him with a curious look. “I don't own a single dress, but I do have a thousand graphic T-shirts. Most of them have foul language on them.” She paused before asking, “Why?”

“If I'm going to wear my vest every day, having all your graphic T-shirts in my closet would be a good reminder to grab it.”

Beth grinned up at him. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Then he decided he needed to make one thing very clear. “I don’t care how many dogs you decide we need to adopt, but I won’t have a damned cat inside our house.”

“What makes you think I’ll want to adopt a dog?” she asked him.

“I cannot name a single household in this area without at least one pet. Gloria’s dog is fine, but Cora’s kittens are vicious beasts with claws designed to shred human flesh. I won’t doze off every night while wondering if that’s going to be the night when they kill me in my sleep.”

Beth chuckled. “Okay. No cats. But you wear your vest every single day.”

“And if I do, I can come home to you in our home with your T-shirts in my closet?” Doug didn’t want her to forget her side of the deal.

“Yeah, that sounds fair.”

“And you don’t leave the roof tonight until everyone’s cleared out. No matter what happens, you stay there and stay safe.” Doug’s breath caught in his throat. None of this would mean anything if she got hurt tonight.

“If you get shot, I will blow the heads off of every mother fucker on the property and do what I please, but as long as you stay whole, I’ll stick to the plan.”

It wasn’t the full agreement Doug was looking for, but it would have to be enough. It made him wonder though. “How

good are you with the rifle? I know you've been out to the range."

"My distance isn't great, but if the target's close enough for me to ignore minute wind and temperature factors, I do alright."

Doug had a feeling she might be better than he was imagining and made a mental note to ask Cliff about it. He owned and ran the local gun range and would have watched Beth shoot.

CHAPTER 15

Beth

By three o'clock, there were more people on her property than Beth knew existed in the county, but what surprised her the most was the number of women. Who knew shooting firearms was such an equal opportunity hobby. Most people were wearing either flannel or camo, and the guys had been right about it giving everyone a bit of a uniform appearance. Once they headed for the woods, Beth couldn't tell who was who. Even Cameron had borrowed a flannel shirt from Doug.

Doug had attempted to put Collin in charge of giving directions and coordinating everyone, but it quickly became clear he was too much of an outsider for people to listen without asking a billion questions. So Doug had taken over. He assigned everyone a position, explained the plan, warned them of the risks, and went over their contingency plans for the most likely ways this would go wrong.

Everyone rehearsed the whole thing once, then relaxed to enjoy food and drinks. Beth and Cameron had thought about supplying beer as one of the beverage options, but she couldn't picture that being a great idea before handing a bunch of people loaded firearms. After the seventh person asked if she had anything stronger to drink, she wasn't sure if her decision had been right or wrong.

Then Doug grabbed everyone's attention and announced, "Anyone else who even thinks about adding alcohol of any kind to this adventure will be spending the night at the station instead of participating. Is that clear?"

At that, Beth felt confident her assessment of the situation was correct. They could all enjoy plenty of liquor and beer later—after the weapons were unloaded and put away.

By the time Erica finally called to say she'd just seen three dark SUVs headed their way, everyone had full bellies and was itching for something to happen. The sun was just starting to set, but the area under the trees was already dark enough to make details disappear.

Doug pulled Beth in close and kissed her the way she imagined old movie stars were kissed before reminding her to stay safe and pointing her up toward the roof of the house. Someone had brought over a harness thingy and explained it was a fall-arrest system used in deer stands. Doug had climbed up on the roof with her himself to attach it to the chimney and ensure she knew how to clip into it correctly.

Once she was settled, she scanned the area through the sight of her rifle and focused on her breathing. She identified Doug and Collin and Mac and Gloria. She made a mental map of the area with safe lines for her to shoot and mentally blocked off directions that could lead to her accidentally shooting someone from Twisted Willow.

"They're here!" Cameron yelled. He was tucked into the cabin with all the monitors. He would trigger some of the traps

they'd laid, if necessary, but everyone was hoping it wouldn't come to that.

Doug and several other guys were waiting to greet the SUVs as they pulled up to the house. He had his phone on speaker and connected to Beth's Bluetooth earpiece. It wasn't a perfect set-up, but it was enough for her to hear what was being said and listen for any clues Doug gave her about what he might need her to do.

While most of their plan was bluff and bluster, Beth's role was to add some real fear to the mix. Part of that would be delivered in the form of bullets, but she knew that wouldn't be enough. Most of the game would be mental, and that meant her acting on Doug's cues.

Four men piled out of the first vehicle but left all of the doors wide open. At the same time, three more people emerged from the last vehicle in the procession. They all had their weapons ready but weren't holding them up or aiming them, yet.

It was the 'yet' that had Beth's backside clenching tight. If anyone's muzzle drifted anywhere near Doug, she'd say the hell with their plan and start taking people down.

"Gentlemen," Doug boomed his greeting with his arms up and his hands open to show they were empty. "We understand you're owed in the form of inventory and monetary compensation."

This was the scariest moment. There was a fifty-fifty chance they wouldn't engage with Doug at all and just start shooting.

For their plan to work, there had to be discussion. It was why Doug was greeting them before they even made it out of the cars, and why he appeared unarmed despite having six guys standing behind him with their weapons pointed at the ground.

Before Beth could get too worked up, three more individuals stepped out of the middle vehicle. They were obviously armed but didn't have their weapons at the ready. Instead, they looked all around before one leaned back into the SUV for just a minute.

Only then did the final person climb out of the passenger side. He was dressed nicer than the rest, and when he lifted a hand, all of his men's hold on their firearms relaxed a fraction. Beth watched through her gunsight as he took a step closer to Doug.

"I see you know who we are and why we're here," the man said.

"I do, and I understand your need for compensation, but you won't find it in our town," Doug replied.

"Hm, and I'm just supposed to take your word for it?"

"No, I didn't expect you would. That's why I pulled together every member of the community over the age of eighteen to demonstrate why you won't find anything you're looking for around here." Doug and Collin had argued round and round about how to approach this part. It had been Cameron who finally told them both to shut up and do it this way. Since he was the only one who knew some of the members of THE13s, everyone agreed to follow his suggestion.

Beth had no idea if the leader was a gang member or someone up from the cartel, but it didn't matter. When he laughed at Doug, her finger shifted from the guard to the trigger.

"This I have to hear," he boomed. "These folks seem to think we'll believe this is everyone who lives around here, and that it's enough to scare us off." He was speaking to his people more than anyone else.

"I didn't say that," Doug clarified. "If you look closer, you'll see most of our people are tucked into the trees. See, the Deadly Coyotes did try to set up shop here, but we don't much like outsiders, and we really don't like people trying to run business through our county without sharing a cut with us."

Doug paused there to give them time to look closely into the trees. If everyone followed the plan, a few people would be waving at the newcomers while others were more discrete about their location.

"Those people you see waving at you?" Doug waited for the leader to refocus on him. "That's one out of every ten people in the woods."

It was actually more like one out of three, but everyone agreed the one to ten ratio sounded better and lined up with what people from the city would expect the population to be.

"They aren't all on the ground either," Doug added.

That was Beth's cue. They did have several people up in trees and deer stands, but none had a good angle to shoot from.

Beth's position on the roof gave her the perfect position to shoot down into the ground beside the gathering, making it very clear they had people up high. No one doubted there would be return fire, but the eaves of the house made it almost impossible for them to hit her. They would be able to see her location though. It was a strategic move to draw the return fire in a direction that wouldn't end with anyone being hurt. That was why Beth was the only person on the roof and the one who would fire the first shot. She'd thought Doug might burst a vein at the thought, but the logic of it won out over his protective instincts.

She took the shot and landed it ten feet to Doug's left, exactly as she'd told him she would.

Everyone who'd come from the three SUVs raised their weapons. Sure enough, one person did fire at her. Stay calm, Doug. You know they can't hit me. She tried to tell him telepathically. If he lost his shit now, this would not end well.

"Stop shooting at my people, or they'll shoot back. And these hunters don't miss," Doug snarled.

"Fine," the leader yelled while motioning for his guys to calm down. "I assume you have something to offer us?"

"Yes and no."

Beth hated they couldn't come up with anything better than this. There was no way it would be enough. These guys were hardcore. They were running drugs from Mexico all the way up the east coast. There was no way they'd accept Doug's terms. She ignored the guy who'd fired at her. If he hadn't hit

her then, there was no reason to believe he'd be able to a minute later. Instead, she set her sights on the guy who'd stepped out of the backseat of the third SUV. He was tucked in behind the open car door with his own rifle balanced where the door hinged to the vehicle. He would have the best position, aim, and range. Beth would take him out first and hope everyone else got taken down by the hunters.

"I'm listening," the leader offered while crossing his arms over his chest and jutting his chin out toward Doug.

"Your drugs and money high-tailed it out of this county less than twenty-four hours after arriving. A couple guys named Matt and Craig came through, but when we made it clear they weren't welcome, they kept moving. Some of their associates showed up a few days later asking about them. We explained the situation, same as we're explaining it to you. I don't know what y'all got going on, but we want no part of it and won't stand for it around here." Doug was letting his thick county accent bleed through more than Beth had heard from him before.

She made a mental note to ask him to speak that way again when they were both naked and not being shot at.

"Really?"

"Yeah. We got nothin' goin' on with any of y'all. The only thing we have to offer is peaceful passage back out of our county. But we will grant you that, so long as you go now and don't come back."

"And if we choose not to?" the leader asked.

“Well, we have our own way of settling disputes.”

Beth clicked her walkie-talkie button twice. That had been Payton’s cue. It turned out that she might have taught her brother, Travis, to shoot a gun, but her real specialty was with a bow and arrow. Who’d have thought a National Champion archer lived in Twisted Willow? Then again, prior to moving here, Beth hadn’t known there was such a thing as a national championship for archery.

Payton followed the plan and shot her arrow into the ground at the feet of one of the men standing toward the back of the SUVs.

“If you’ll have you man pull that out of the ground, you’ll see it’s got a practice tip.” Then Doug pulled a box from a cargo pocket of his pants. He moved slow and showed the leader what he was doing. “You ever seen a broadhead before?”

The leader waved a man to bring the arrow forward and join the conversation. “I’ve heard of them,” he said to Doug as the other guy approached and showed them both the blunt end of the arrow that was apparently called a practice tip.

Then Doug opened the box and showed them the crossed triangle-shaped blades of a broadhead. “May I?” he asked as he gestured for the gang banger to pass him the arrow.

The leader nodded his agreement and watched as Doug showed him the way the practice tip screwed off and could be replaced with the broadhead.

Doug explained as he went. “These are the tips used for hunting everything from deer to buffalo—not that there’s any buffalo around this area. See, with arrows, it’s not the impact that does the damage, but the way the razors slice through the flesh and open up the arteries. It doesn’t kill right away, but the animal will bleed to death before long and leave a nice trail of blood that’s easy to follow.

“Right.” The leader was trying not to look impressed, but Beth could tell the demonstration had made an impression. “So what? You’re threatening to kill us?”

“Well, now we don’t like to think of it that way.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you don’t. I’m guessing the po-po around here would frown on that.”

Holy fuck. This might work after all. That was the opening they’d all hoped would come. They hadn’t been counting on it, but the simple fact the guy was asking about it showed he was at least nervous. And this was the piece Doug was most excited to respond to.

“You’ve likely noticed we’re simple country folks in a small community. In fact, if you looked us up on a map, you probably saw we don’t have much in the way of a town or population or anything around here. Sure, there’s the town twenty miles or so up the road where you’ll find the library and sheriff’s office and whatnot. But out here, things don’t work the same way they do in the city.”

The leader tried to laugh, but it sounded forced. Or maybe that was just how it came through the phone and earbud, but

Beth wanted to believe the guy was secretly panicking on the inside. “Tell me then,” the leader asked, “what happens if someone calls 9-1-1?”

Beth couldn't see Doug's face because she was behind him, but she didn't need to see it to know he was grinning.

“Well, Judy's shift just ended, so you'd probably get Randy. I think he's the one on call tonight. But even then, he'd just call me.”

“You?”

“Like I said, we take care of ourselves out here.”

“So you're like the guy in charge?”

“I mean, I do answer to the county supervisors, but they're just behind me in the woods. Well, except for one of them who prefers his tree stand. And of course, we have the courts just like everywhere else in this great nation.” Then Doug increased his volume to scream loud enough for everyone to hear. “Judge Snyder, you want ta' wave at our guests?”

It turned out Judge Snyder was somewhere between the age of eighty and three hundred, but Doug and Gloria had been right about him loving to hunt and being happy to let Tyler count this evening as community service.

The leader started to look more concerned. That was Collin's cue to take it across the finish line.

He pulled out his FBI voice. “Before you even ask about other agencies, know I've got a nice long history with the FBI, and we've got some forest rangers and several other law

enforcement officers out here tonight. We chose to keep the state troopers and most of the deputies out on the road, but they are all aware of what's happening and just a radio call away. The locals wanted to give you a chance to leave peacefully without us calling the DEA. They were worried that would lead to ongoing disputes they would prefer not to be a part of. I know you have your own agenda, but, I have to say, they're making you a better offer than I've ever seen before."

The leader glared at Collin and then at Doug. Then he turned back to his people. Three of them gathered in close to him while the rest kept their weapons ready. After a quick discussion, the leader turned back around to address Doug. "Do any of your people know where our drugs or money are?"

"We have our own trouble with drugs and moonshine around here, but we don't allow any of it coming in from anywhere else. We sent Matt and Craig on their way. When the Deadly Coyotes came looking for them, there was talk about them being headed to California, but I don't know anything more than overheard rumors and that they weren't welcome to stay around here."

It was working. This was the best-case scenario. Beth swore to a higher power she didn't really believe in that she would do her best to be a positive member of the Twisted Willow community from now on.

Then the leader spoke again, "You haven't mentioned Beth or Cameron yet, but from what I hear, they're the people we really need to speak with."

CHAPTER 16

Doug

He thought they had it. He thought they were golden. Then the guy had to ask for Beth and Cameron by name.

It was time to move to plan B. Hopefully they could avoid plans C, D, and E since all of those were likely to result in some unwanted attention by outside agencies. They also carried an increased likelihood of needed body bags.

“I don’t know those names, but we’ve said our piece and tried to be respectful about it. Now it’s time for you to go.” Doug tried to sound calm as he spoke despite his inner panic. He clapped his hands and announced, “You’ve got sixty seconds before we take out the first car. Two vehicles will be crowded, but you can make it work. Once we’ve disabled your transportation, we’ll start aiming for your people.”

The clap had been Beth’s cue to start counting. They’d discussed having someone else make those first precision shots, but when Doug had casually asked Cliff how Beth was with a rifle, the man had just about cum in his pants from the excitement of describing her skill. He’d also shared that she’d been to the range for several hours each day, every single day. She wasn’t a fair shot. She was one of the best Cliff had ever seen. Since everyone was already aware there was someone in position on the roof, and no one had a good angle to fire back at her, she was the logical choice.

Mac had been keeping time as well, since Doug couldn't count and talk without making himself crazy. It meant he was the one to mark, "Thirty seconds to decide." Then he reminded them again, "Ten seconds."

He'd only made it down to two before a shot blasted into the radiator of the SUV closest to the house. Beth must have been counting fast.

The man Doug had been negotiating with released a string of swear words before issuing what Doug could only assume was a threat in Spanish.

"I don't know what that means, but we'll start counting again, shall we?" Doug clapped again. "Sixty seconds before you lose another ride."

The second clap was also the cue for everyone in the woods to become slightly more visible with their weapons aimed at their unwelcome guests. The guys standing around Doug shifted their positions. Some took a knee while others moved up onto the porch of the house. It opened up clear lines of fire.

"It's your call," Doug offered.

Then he watched and waited as the intruders looked around. One man approached the leader and leaned close to his ear to whisper something. Doug's best guess was that the guy was telling his leader not to be stupid because they were clearly outnumbered. If the guy was really smart, he'd also be pointing out the single access point. It didn't take a tactical genius to see how easily they could be surrounded. Hell, if the

guy had half a lick of sense, he'd be warning about how likely it was they were already completely surrounded.

Of course, they weren't. It was a tiny community, and Doug wouldn't invite just anyone to this particular party, but they did have Cameron's surveillance and a few people in position to induce a little extra fear.

The man nodded calmly at whatever the other guy whispered to him. Then he stepped forward again. It put him so close to Doug that he wouldn't have to move his feet for them to bump chests. Tactically, it was smart—ballsy as shit, but smart. Neither Beth, nor anyone behind, would be able to hit the man without hitting Doug as well.

Then he heard Mac say softly, "Fifteen seconds." He could hear the tension in his friend's voice. If Beth were counting fast, they didn't have long before she'd take the next shot.

Doug held up his hand to stop the count. Then he offered, "Shall I take an extra count of thirty to point out all the ways this will end badly for you?" He just needed Beth to give them a few more seconds. Hopefully.

The leader spoke softly enough for only Doug to hear, though he was hoping Beth had picked it up through the phone.

"I'm not so cavalier or so stupid to waste the lives of my men, but that doesn't mean we will go without recompense." Then he looked Doug in the eye.

Doug lowered his volume to match that of the man before him. “We ran the Deadly Coyotes out of town the same as we’re doing with you. We don’t tolerate any of that around here. We’re a tight-knit community. We protect our own and don’t much care for outsiders. Your issue is with the DC.” Then he watched the man’s face as he made a decision.

Mac was giving Doug silent hand signals showing they were back down to the final ten seconds again before the leader nodded and stepped back.

Doug held up his hand to pause the count again.

“If we ever hear about our drugs or money showing up in this area, we’ll be back,” the leader promised.

“If you ever come back, we won’t talk before we shoot,” Doug countered. He wanted to threaten even more, but if they were leaving, he needed to let it happen. That was the goal.

As the outsiders climbed into the two working SUVs, Doug asked one last question. “You want me to have this towed anywhere for you?” as he gestured at the disabled truck.

“Nah. We got more where that came from,” the guy answered with a smirk as he slid back into the passenger seat he’d emerged from. Once he was tucked inside, the three men who’d come from the same vehicle joined him. All seven other men piled into the last SUV in the line before both drivers executed neat J-turns and headed back toward the road.

Everyone held their breath until Cameron called out, “They’re clear!” Doug was glad to have someone watching the

cameras to ensure they vacated the property, but he wouldn't fully relax until he knew they were clear of the entire county. He called Erica and let her know they were headed her way. She'd follow them in her department vehicle until they crossed the county line.

Everyone hollered and cheered, and several people ran home to grab moonshine, whiskey, and their favorite beer to celebrate. Doug shouted at as many of them as he could that they needed to crash wherever they drank because he would not be kind to anyone caught behind the wheel while intoxicated. Many of them blew him off, but when Judge Snyder glared and pointed at them, several people started asking Cameron if they could crash in cabins and spare rooms. The judge turned and nodded at Doug.

The two men had very different ideas about how to do what was best for their people. Doug stood by his belief that the judge's views were from the past while he was trying to point the community toward the future. They did agree on some of the basics though. It was nice to see they could work together when necessary to ensure the well-being of their friends and families.

Then Doug scanned the crowd in search of Beth. Before he could locate her, his gaze stopped on Brandon Clark. Everyone in town joked that if you looked up Mountain Man in the dictionary, it would have a picture of Brandon. In all his life, Doug had only had cause to visit the man's homestead once. It was completely off the grid. He had some solar power with a

battery bank, but his plumbing (and Doug used that term loosely) was gravity fed from an above-ground cistern.

Most of the kids spoke of Brandon as if he were more legend than live human. It was rare to see him anywhere other than the local IGA grocery, Ace Hardware, or Liz's café. The one time Doug had gone up to pay the man a visit had been because Liz was worried about him. Apparently, he kept some kind of semi-regular schedule that she was aware of. When he didn't show up for longer than she could tolerate, she'd begged Doug to go check it out.

Brandon had been fine, and Doug had been annoyed. Staring at the man across the clearing and seeing him here, with the rest of the community, Doug felt his guilt over that day rise up again.

"I drove all the way up here because your girlfriend got her panties in a bunch. If you can't be bothered with basic communication, let her know she should come check on you her damned self." It had been gruff and harsh, but Brandon must have taken it to heart.

In the five years since, Doug had occasionally asked when he saw Liz looking worried, but she'd always assured him not to worry. She'd handle it.

Maybe now was the time for apologies? Doug headed toward the man. "Thanks for being here."

Brandon grunted at him and crossed his arms over his chest.

"I take it you stayed down by the road?" Doug asked.

“Didn’t want them circling back on ya.”

Doug chuckled. “You’re saying we really did have them surrounded?” he asked.

The mountain man just shrugged.

“I’m sorry I was a jerk the day I came up to your place.”

A nod was the only response he got.

Doug wasn’t sure how to fix it, but with the rest of his life falling into place, this felt like an opportunity he shouldn’t pass up. He pulled one of his cards from the pocket of his cargo pants. It was one with his personal cell written on the back.

“I don’t you know you’ve got a phone up there now or not, but if you ever need anything, know I’ll answer.”

Brandon took the card from him and shoved it into his own pocket without looking at it. “You’re good for them.” His stance had relaxed, and he looked around at all the people enjoying themselves.

Doug wasn’t sure exactly what Brandon meant, but maybe he was trying to say Doug was a good sheriff? That was what Doug was going to believe.

Before he could respond, the big man walked away and off into the woods toward the Smiths’ place. That must have been how he joined them without anyone realizing he was there.

Doug shook himself and returned to looking around for Beth. He found Cameron first, but when he followed the man’s

line of sight, he found the woman he was looking for.

Doug could tell Cameron was trying to ask Beth about something, but she wasn't paying any attention to him. She was fascinated by Payton's bow. Based on the people around Cameron, Doug could guess the man was trying to figure out how much space he had to invite guests to stay. At the very least, he figured the guy was wondering where Beth planned to settle for the night. Doug's gaze returned to Cameron's. "She'll be at my place," he volunteered.

"Just tonight?" Cameron asked.

Doug grinned and walked closer to him, so they weren't shouting across the yard. "I already promised her space in the closet for her graphic T-shirts."

Cameron met him halfway. "Good. She's got a lot of them. Did she warn you they pretty much all have bad words and rude gestures on them?"

"She did. I kind of like it."

Cameron nodded back at him. "Yeah, that sounds about right. I'm not sure if you two are a match made in heaven or a partnership from hell, but there's no doubt you're perfect for each other."

"She's certainly perfect for me," Doug agreed.

"And you understand that she's my family, right? If you hurt her, I'll come after you." It might have been the first time Doug could really see the hard outlaw behind Cameron's

friendly face, but Doug was okay with that. When it came to Beth, he'd never argue against someone watching out for her.

"I'd expect nothing less." Then he caught Beth's attention and asked if she was ready to go. He thought she might want to stay and socialize for a bit, but his adrenaline was wearing off. Doug wanted to feel her skin sliding against his before passing out with her tucked safely beside him.

She surprised him though. Instead of suggesting they stay, she echoed his feelings, "Yes, please. I am so ready to go home and curl up in bed with you."

He loved that she was already calling their place home, too.

EPILOGUE

Beth

The sky out here never ceased to amaze Beth. She loved watching sunsets and studying the stars. She'd even invested in some books to help her identify the different constellations and watch for planets to show up now and then.

This was her first morning catching a sunrise though. She was still naked, but she'd brought her favorite, big, fuzzy blanket out with her. The fall mornings were crisper than she'd expected. The fresh smell was one hundred percent worth it.

It was Doug's last day off. After he'd filled in the DEA and state troopers with a sanitized version of what happened, they'd come to collect the disabled SUV from the side of the road where it had ended up. Everyone had agreed it was best not to bring any attention to Cameron's place. Ethan Fletcher had even towed the SUV to a more appropriate location for free.

Once the paperwork was done and the dust had settled, Doug had come home and announced he was on vacation for the next week. Beth hadn't believed it at first, but he'd assured her that Mac was in charge and could handle anything that cropped up. Doug had also confessed that Mac and Judy had been bugging him about using some of his vacation time for, well, forever. They'd backed it up too. Doug's phone hadn't rung or buzzed even once during the entire week.

But this was their last morning before returning to the real world, and Doug had suggested they catch the sunrise. Beth had agreed under the condition that he bring her coffee, which was why she was sniffing the air while he filled their mugs.

Once he'd joined her and the sun had risen, he asked her the million-dollar question. "Any thoughts on what you want to do with your time? Colton's could probably use a bartender if you want to stick with that."

"Ha, no." Beth had no interest in tending a bar ever again. The thought of waitressing made her want to dump food on someone's head, too. Colton's would not be a good fit for her. She had been texting with Liz though. The café was pretty chill and right across from the sheriff's office, and Liz had offered to teach her some baking skills. Being a barista and working the front counter, which was what Liz really needed, felt close enough to bartending for Beth to be confident she could do it. And without alcohol involved, she imagined she'd like it too. It helped that the café was already her favorite place in town.

When she told Doug her plans, his first comment was, "Oh, that means you can deliver my coffee and pastries, right?"

"Not a chance," she argued.

"I mean, you seem to enjoy when I get bossy," he tried.

"I do enjoy your bossiness in the bedroom. Outside of it, I'm in charge." Beth wasn't willing to leave any room for confusion about that.

“So I can’t be bossy in the kitchen or on the couch?” Doug pushed.

The thought of him taking her from behind while she was bent over the kitchen counter was enough for her to adjust the boundary. “Good point. You can be in charge all the way to the front door.” Then she looked around and noted the front porch where they were currently sitting was beyond that point.

Doug must have noticed her appraisal. “We should let me be bossy across the whole property,” he tried to suggest.

“No, I think the front door is perfect,” Beth corrected. Then she held the blanket tightly around her as she stood up and moved in front of the man she’d fallen in love with. “You look cold. If I’m in charge out here, I should help you fix that,” she offered as she opened the blanket to flash him before climbing up to straddle his lap while wrapping the blanket back around both of them.

“You’re right,” Doug agreed. “You get to be in charge on the porch.”

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Despite all that these amazing people do, none of them are the key to my work as an author. That honor goes to you, Reader! YOU are the most valuable people for any author's career. **Thank you for reading Beth's Absolution!** I'd love it if you clicked on some Amazon stars to help others find this

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About the Author



Selfie of Maria along the Appalachian Trail near the fictional setting of Twisted Willow.

Maria lives in the woods and loves hiking, reading, and writing. Her first completed work was a play about her family's crazy holiday adventures. It was written in pencil on wide-ruled paper. Maria was 8. Since then, she's worked in restaurants, gone to college, taught middle school, published some stuff, written scary amounts of online content, and hiked sections of the Appalachian Trail.

When she can't go enjoy an adventure, she writes one down on paper. They usually involve the woods and hot, loving men who support strong women. She's lucky enough to be married to a man willing to cook dinner and care for the dogs when Maria gets too sucked into the story in her head to remember the world around her.

She has recently shifted to working alongside adult writers who want to share their stories but want support and guidance through the writing process. You can learn more about this work at her company website www.allwritewell.com