



KING
CREEK
COWBOYS



COUNTRY
Mist

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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KING CREEK COWBOYS

BOOK 6

CHEYENNE MCCRAY



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Tyson Donovan knocked back the last of the whiskey in his glass, then lowered it to the high top with a *thunk*. He let his gaze drift around the casino rooftop bar littered with women wearing sequins and diamonds, mixed with men not nearly dressed as well.

The laid-back Arizona style at parties ranged from suits to jeans for men, depending on the event. Tyson was in the latter category. Western dress shirt, a new pair of Wranglers, a nice pair of boots, and a black Stetson, and he was good to go.

A tour company had thrown this shindig to go along with the three-day country music festival being held in Phoenix. Major country stars headlined the event, including Kade Fields and Jessie London.

Tyson looked up from his drink as Henry Goldman returned to the table, his hazel eyes bright with enjoyment. Tyson knew the old man loved a good party.

“Let’s get you another whiskey.” Henry signaled to the closest server, who swept in to take their order before slipping back into the crowd.

The beefy elderly cowboy turned jerky tycoon focused on Tyson. “I’m glad you made it tonight, son. You did me a favor

when you helped me fulfill that big order, and I want to show you my appreciation.”

Tyson gave a nod. “Thanks for the invite.” Crowds and fancy events weren’t his thing, but his longtime friend had been determined to get him here.

“I want you to meet my nephew.” Henry moved his whiskey glass aside. “He has a penthouse suite and is throwing a little shindig tonight. Some kind of celebration.”

Tyson held back a sigh. Last thing he wanted was another party. He’d be glad when he returned to his ranch, where he could kick back in his socked feet in front of his TV with his dogs and a beer. “Looking forward to meeting your nephew.” He nodded to the far corner of the lounge. “I’ve got to hit the head.”

He made his way through the chattering and laughing crowd, past people who used an overabundance of cologne and perfume that clogged his senses, and into the restroom. When the door fell shut behind him, the quiet was a welcome break.

The door swung open as he relieved himself in one of the urinals that lined one wall. From his peripheral vision, he saw two men stumble through. Due to his years as a Military Police Officer in the service, Tyson always remained aware of his surroundings and anyone infringing on them.

It was an unsaid rule that men didn’t make eye contact when standing at the urinals, but that didn’t mean Tyson wasn’t conscious of who might be next to him.

“I’ve got dibs on that blonde babe.” A tall, redheaded man undid his zipper. “She’ll be on my mattress ‘til dawn.”

The other man snorted as he joined the first. “I bet I can get her in bed before you can.”

The redhead laughed. “Hey, we can even both share her tonight.”

“She won’t know what hit her.” The second man chuckled.

Tyson zipped up and turned away, disgusted. He hated the idea of any woman being taken advantage of—if he saw who the men were talking about, he could step in and warn her.

From the time he was a kid, he’d always felt the need to protect others. It came from not being able to protect his mom from her sickness. He hadn’t been able to help her, but he could help others.

He washed and dried his hands, shoved open the door, and left the restroom. He returned to the table where Henry waited with their drinks. Tyson took his seat, and the whiskey Henry handed him.

“I invited you tonight for more than just a thank you.” Henry set his drink on the tabletop. “I’ve got something important I want to discuss with you.”

Tyson studied the man who’d taken on a serious expression. “Shoot.”

“I’m eighty-five, and it’s time I retire.” Henry tapped his thick fingers on the tabletop. “I’ve been considering who could take over my company and maintain the quality and integrity of my product and reputation.”

Tyson braced his forearms on the table as Henry spoke. “You are the best at what you do, no doubt about it.”

Henry focused on Tyson. “I want to sell Dutchman’s Gold Jerky to you.”

Well, that came out of nowhere. Tyson settled back in his chair. “Henry, I’m honored you’d consider me to take over your mantle.” He shook his head. “But I’m a rancher and not interested in owning another business.”

Henry leaned forward, an intent look on his usually jovial features. “I’m dead serious, son. I know you’re the man who can take my company to the next level. You’re a fine, successful businessman, you’re well-respected, you’ve got a good head on your shoulders, and you’ve got integrity. You’ve got everything it takes to succeed.”

Tyson gripped his glass, the cold chilling his fingers. Before he could decline again, Henry said, “You don’t have to give me an answer now. Best you think on it.”

After a moment, Tyson gave a slow nod. “All right. I’m not changing my mind, but I’ll give it some consideration.”

“That’s all I ask.” Henry grinned. “For now.”

Tyson caught sight of the two men from the restroom and narrowed his gaze. They were crowding a cute blonde in a little black dress near one of the high-tops, but she didn’t seem bothered and was smiling.

He gritted his teeth. The woman looked familiar—it was Haylee McLeod.

Tyson stood abruptly and pushed back his chair. “Pardon me a moment, Henry. I’ll be right back.”

His attention was laser-focused as he pushed his way through the crowd. He set his jaw and had to fight to keep from clenching his hands into fists when he stopped beside the trio.

The redhead caught sight of Tyson glowering at them. “What do you want?”

Tyson kept his tone low and controlled. “I want you and your friend to leave the lady alone.”

Haylee’s jaw dropped, her eyes widening.

“Beat it.” The redhead waved him away. “We were here first.”

At that, Haylee’s gaze shot to the redhead.

Tyson did ball his hands into fists, then. “Let’s take this outside right now.”

“You can’t take us both on,” the second man said.

Tyson gave him a cold smile. “Try me.”

“Stop it right this minute.” Haylee put her hands on her hips and glared from Tyson to each of the other two men. “All of you get lost. I don’t want anything to do with any of you.”

The redhead and his friend scowled at Tyson before disappearing into the crowd.

Tyson didn’t move, and Haylee whirled on him, her brown eyes sparking fire.

“Who do you think you are?” She removed a hand from her hip and put her finger in his face. “What right do you have butting into my business?”

He remained grim. “Those men had none too good intentions.”

Color rose to her face. “I have five older brothers, Tyson Donovan, and I don’t need another. I can take care of myself.”

She spun away from him and marched toward the bar. He watched her as she joined a brunette and kept her back to him. He could practically see the smoke curling from her ears.

Damn, she was beautiful. He'd never noticed just how gorgeous until this very moment.

“What’s going on, son?” Henry’s firm voice came from behind him, and Tyson turned to face him. “What’s got Haylee so upset?”

Tyson blew out his breath and explained what he’d overheard. “When I saw them with Haylee, I couldn’t just stand by and do nothing.”

Henry slapped him on the shoulder. “You did the right thing, young man. One day, she’ll see that.”

Tyson looked in the direction where Haylee had last been, but she was gone now. He looked back at Henry. “Maybe.”

“Lord knows you never can tell with women.” The old man smiled. “Come on, now. I’ll introduce you to my nephew.”

HAYLEE WAS SO TICKED at Tyson that her ears still burned. Who did he think he was? As if she wasn’t capable of taking care of herself.

“You’ll love him.” Jen chattered as they walked through the casino’s upper-tier bar, and Haylee shot her friend a look, thinking she meant Tyson.

Oh, she meant Kade Fields. Haylee hitched up the evening bag strap of gold links on her shoulder, then pushed open the glass doors leading out to the elevator’s bank. “I’ve heard he’s a nice guy.”

Jen’s brown waves bounced as she nodded while they walked to the elevator to the penthouse and other upper-floor suites. “Down-to-earth country boy.”

“It’s always nice to be told things like that.” Haylee punched the button. “I hate to hear when stars are jerks.”

Jen used a card that allowed her to select the penthouse, and then the elevator began moving.

Haylee glanced at her friend, who, at five-ten, stood at least five inches taller. “How did you meet him?”

“An old college friend introduced us.” The elevator car stopped at the penthouse suite floor and opened into a large foyer where an enormous vase of fresh flowers graced a circular table.

A doorman stood at the entrance, and Jen showed him her ID. He checked his electronic device and let them into the suite.

It was beautiful. Mostly creams and taupes with vases of flowers everywhere.

About fifteen or so people mingled, and Haylee was surprised at the laid-back vibe in the suite, far different than the party they had just come from.

“There he is.” Jen guided her over to the easily recognizable country music superstar.

Haylee tried not to look at him like a starstruck teenager when they reached him. She was a little starstruck, so it wasn’t easy.

“How are you, Jen?” Kade enveloped her in a hug. “It’s darn good to see you.”

He turned to Haylee and held out his hand. “I’m Kade Fields.”

“Haylee McLeod.” She liked his firm grip. He was so incredibly good-looking, with brown hair and blue eyes. “I

hope you don't mind me crashing your party."

He grinned. "The more the merrier." He glanced over her shoulder. "I'll introduce you both to my uncle."

Jen and Haylee turned to face the entrance. Haylee tried not to scowl when she saw Tyson standing next to Henry Goldman. The elderly man was a close friend of her family's.

Kade strode toward the men. "Meet my Uncle Henry." He, in turn, introduced Haylee and Jen.

"I'm well acquainted with this young lady." Henry smiled kindly at Haylee.

She kissed his cheek. "Hello, Henry,"

Henry greeted Jen then introduced Tyson to Kade.

After introductions, Kade said, "The party's winding down. I know you just got here, but I'm starving. Would anyone care to have dinner with me and Uncle Henry in the Atrium Restaurant?"

"I wish I could, but I'm going out for a bite with my boyfriend." Jen looked apologetic. "Haylee's free. I'm sure she'd love to go." She turned to Henry. "Would you mind taking her home?"

"Of course, I'll take good care of the young lady." Henry gave her a nod and a smile.

Haylee could have kicked Jen. Instead, she smiled and said, "Thank you, Henry." She turned to the country music star. "I'd love to go to dinner with you, Kade."

"How about you, Tyson?" Kade asked.

Say no, say no, say no, Haylee pleaded in her mind.

“Mighty kind of you to ask.” Tyson gave a nod. “I’d be delighted.”

Mentally, Haylee groaned but thought she did a great job of smiling on the outside. She intended to enjoy herself despite Tyson’s presence.

Jen hugged Haylee, blew kisses at everyone, and sailed out of the suite.

Kade took Haylee’s arm and escorted her from the penthouse to the restaurant, Henry and Tyson walking behind them. Once they were shown to their table, Kade seated her, and she found herself between him and Tyson. Both were exceedingly handsome men, but for some darn reason, she was more aware of Tyson next to her than Kade. But she did her best to focus on the entertainer.

Kade was enjoyable to talk with, down-to-earth and personable. She figured everyone wanted to know about his life as a superstar, so she asked him if he had a dog and where he grew up. Kade answered her questions and asked some of his own. He included Tyson in the conversation, as well as Henry.

Haylee enjoyed herself at dinner despite Tyson being there. By night’s end, though, she wasn’t quite as ticked at him as earlier. She could never stay too mad for long. Still, she’d be glad to see the last of him, at least for now. She’d be bound to run into him in a town as small as King Creek.

As they left the restaurant, Henry took a call and walked away for a few moments. When he returned, he wore a serious expression. “My sister up in Prescott has hurt her leg, and I’ve got to go check on things for her.” He looked to Tyson. “Mind taking Haylee home?”

Haylee did groan this time, but fortunately, Tyson was speaking, so she didn't think any of the men had heard her.

"Not a problem." Tyson turned his intense blue gaze on her, and the corner of his mouth curved into a devastatingly sensual smile that made her shiver despite everything. "I'd be happy to," he added in his deep, sexy voice.

Haylee swallowed and concentrated on her irritation with the man. She did not want to be in a car with him for a whole hour. She did understand Henry's situation, but it didn't make her like it any better.

They said goodbye to Kade outside the elevators, and he gave Haylee a hug and a kiss on the cheek. He was a good man, a real good man.

Henry and Tyson talked in the elevator on the way down, and Haylee tuned them out, her mind on her showing at the Scottsdale art gallery tomorrow evening. She had so much to do to prepare.

The doorman held open the tall brass and glass doors as they walked out of the casino into the October Phoenix night. Haylee shifted her purse strap on her shoulder then rubbed her bare arms with her palms. It was barely in the low sixties, but she'd forgotten to bring a light sweater, and the breeze felt cool on her flesh.

Henry gave his ticket to the valet, who took off to retrieve his truck.

"I'm parked in the south lot." Tyson inclined his head in that direction. "Thanks for inviting me out tonight."

"My pleasure." Henry smiled and gave a nod. "Be thinking about my proposal."

Tyson shook his head but returned Henry's smile. "I'll let you know."

Haylee hugged Henry and kissed his cheek before she fell into step beside Tyson and headed toward the lot where he'd parked his vehicle.

And to what might be a very long drive home.

Haylee and Tyson walked in silence, then he looked down at her and smiled. “You’re none too pleased about being handed off to me.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Should I be?”

He gave a grin so sexy it made her catch her breath. “I’ll get you straight home.”

Tyson escorted her to the passenger side of a Ford king-cab truck that looked indigo in the parking lot’s lights. His touch seared her elbow as he assisted her in climbing into the vehicle. She didn’t take offense at his assumption—she’d grown up with cowboys, and they tended to be a gentlemanly lot.

He strode around the front of the vehicle, and she shivered in the cab that had grown cold during the evening. She put her purse in her lap and rubbed her arms again as he climbed in and shut the door behind him.

“Cold?” He inserted the key in the ignition and started the vehicle, the big motor coming to life. “I can turn on the heater.”

“Just a touch.” She put on her seatbelt. “It won’t take much.” He switched on the heater, and she leaned against the

cool leather. “I haven’t gotten used to the change in weather.”

He put the truck into gear and drove the truck through the lot. “You’re not wearing enough to keep from catching a chill.”

“You sound like my mom,” she murmured.

He chuckled. “First, I acted like your brothers, and now I’m like your mom. I might as well be family.”

She shifted in her seat and studied him. “Why did you come in out of the blue and start a fight with those men? We were just talking.”

He glanced from the road and gave her a pointed look. “I seem to remember being told they were there first. That sounds like they thought you were doing more than talking.”

Heat burned under her skin at the memory. God, that had pissed her off. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

Tyson blew out his breath and stared at the road as he guided the vehicle onto the freeway and into the middle lane. He glanced at her before looking ahead again. “When I was in the restroom, those two asses made a bet on who’d get a certain blonde into bed first, and then they’d share her.” He glanced at her. “Then I saw them with you.”

Haylee’s cheeks flushed hot. “I would have handled them just fine and sent them packing. I didn’t need you jumping in and playing hero.”

“What if they got you alone before you found out what they had in mind?” Tyson pushed harder. “They could have taken advantage of you.”

She narrowed her gaze at him. “They would never have gotten that far. I’m not naïve, and I’m not stupid. I’m a strong,

capable, intelligent woman who wants to be treated as such.”

“Point taken.” He changed lanes and looked at her. “For the record, I believe you’re every one of those things.”

She pushed her long hair over her shoulder. “In the future, remember that.”

“There’s a future?” His voice held a note of teasing.

She rolled her eyes. “No.”

He flashed her a devilish grin. “Never say never.”

That grin did crazy things to her insides, making her stomach feel like it had flipped upside down. Whoa. She’d seen Tyson around plenty but never had an actual conversation with him.

Might as well change the subject and steer things to safer grounds. “Were you at the concert today?”

He shook his head. “Henry invited me for drinks and to meet his nephew, and I took him up on the offer, but he didn’t tell me who his nephew is.”

She tilted her head. “Would that have made a difference?”

“Nah.” He got into the fast lane and passed a slower vehicle. “I was just surprised. Kade Fields is a big name.”

“Couldn’t be a nicer man.” Haylee smiled. “I enjoyed talking with him.”

Tyson gave a nod. “The evening wasn’t so bad.”

She laughed. “Did you think it would be?”

He gave her a quick smile. “Let’s just say that parties aren’t my thing.”

“They are mine.” She lifted her hair away from her neck and let it fall over her shoulders. “I’m an event planner. That’s why I was here tonight—I planned an earlier concert party. I was only at the later one to meet Jen for a drink, and she said she wanted to introduce me to someone before we went home. That someone turned out to be the one and only Kade Fields.”

Tyson looked amused. “A little star-struck?”

Haylee held her hand to her chest. “Be still my heart.” She shifted in her seat to watch Tyson. He had such strong features—high cheekbones, a square jaw, and a cleft in his chin. He had the qualities of a big-time movie star with his looks.

She slowly blew out her breath. “What did you think of Kade?”

“I was impressed.” He glanced at her before looking back at the road. “I expected him to talk about country music and being on the road, but he didn’t. He sounded like a regular ol’ cowboy.”

“I noticed that, too.” Haylee watched Tyson’s big hands on the steering wheel and had the brief flash of an image of his hands on her body instead. *Where is this coming from?* “I had a feeling the last thing he wanted to talk about was being a star.”

Tyson put on the blinker before the exit that led to King Creek. “I don’t remember seeing you around town as much as I used to.”

He’d noticed? She inhaled, then let out her breath. “I’m in the Phoenix area so much now, thanks to how fast my event planning business has grown, that I’m not around a lot during the day anymore.”

Tyson took the exit. “You must enjoy it.”

“I like working with most clients and love the creative aspects.” She glanced at the reflective markers outside the window before looking back to him. “But my true passion is painting.”

He gave her an amused look. “I’m assuming you don’t mean houses.”

“Only if they’re the subject matter.” She rested one arm on the console between them. “I love to paint desert landscapes in acrylics.”

“I’d like to see your work sometime.” He turned onto Main Street. “Where do you live?”

“I live with my sisters on Oak.” She gave him the address, and they sat in silence as he took the streets to hers. “There it is. The one with the bicycle mailbox.”

He pulled up in front of her sage-green cottage-style home and parked the vehicle. She put her purse strap on her shoulder, and he held up his hand. “Wait right there.”

She would have rolled her eyes as he jogged around the front of the vehicle, but she was used to it. He helped her out of the truck, and his grip felt warm and comfortable as she stepped onto the sidewalk. He closed the door behind her.

She tilted her head back to look up at him. “I appreciate the ride.”

“Anytime.” He studied her with a long, thoughtful look as if deciding whether or not to kiss her.

Whoa there, girl. It was just a ride. He probably had no such thoughts.

Or had he?

Haylee stepped back and smiled. “Thank you.” She turned, and her heels clicked loudly in the quiet night as she hurried up the walkway then up the creaking wood steps to her home. No doubt he was watching her to make sure she made it through the door safe and sound.

The screen door screeched as she opened it. She made quick work of the lock and looked back over her shoulder at Tyson. He was still there, watching her, leaning back against the truck, his hands in his front pockets.

A shiver went through her, and butterflies fluttered within.

She raised her hand in a farewell, then entered the house. She closed the door, rested her back against it, and held her hand to her heart.

What the hell just happened?

Her irritation with him all night turned into a strong attraction after the ride.

“If I hadn’t seen you leave with Jen, I would have thought you just came home from a date.” Leann’s sunny voice startled Haylee into dropping her purse. It hit the tile floor with a muted *thunk*.

Haylee scooped it up. “Tyson Donovan just gave me a ride home since Jen left early.”

“Oh, really?” Leeann took her by the arm and led her to the living room couch. “Sit and tell all.”

“Did I hear the name Tyson Donovan?” In her Snoopy PJs, Jill strolled through the archway that led into the kitchen. “God, what a man.”

“Ditto.” Leeann, wearing a robe and bunny slippers, plopped into an armchair. “Go on. Sit, Haylee.”

Jill perched on the arm of the chair Leeann had settled into, and Haylee dropped onto the couch and fell against the cushions.

“Not much to tell.” She set her purse beside her on the pillow. “First thing he did was tick me off, and I told him where he could shove it.”

Leeann’s jaw dropped, and Jill laughed. “I wanna hear this story.”

Haylee didn’t leave anything out. She shrugged. “Maybe I was too hard on him.”

Jill grinned. “Cowboy to the rescue. I think that was rather heroic of him.”

Leeann nodded her agreement. “I know you can take care of yourself, but we’re talking two men. I’m glad he stepped in.”

“You’re probably right.” Haylee sighed as her thoughts turned to the man himself. “Tyson is a lot hotter than I’ve ever noticed before.”

“How could you not have noticed?” Leeann fanned herself. “You were pretty young when he hung out with Bear and Brady in high school.”

“I was such a tomboy that I wasn’t interested in boys yet.” She grinned. “I’m a late bloomer.”

“Better late than never.” Jill pushed locks of her long, wavy dark hair aside and moved over to the couch, where Haylee sat. “Thing is, what are you going to do about it?”

“No clue.” Haylee sighed. “I’ve never had to chase a guy before.”

The memory of Danny Ames flashed through her mind, giving her pause. She hadn't wanted to date anyone since his death just over a year ago. Was she even ready yet?

"I know what." Leeann straightened in her seat, her words knocking Haylee out of her thoughts. "How about the fall barn dance at the Woodson's next Saturday? You could ask him to do that."

Haylee had that swooping sensation inside again as she considered dating again. "What if he's already going with someone? A cowboy that hot has a girl in every stable."

Leeann snorted with laughter, her golden whiskey-brown eyes dancing. "That's a lot of women."

"Seriously." Jill, an accountant pre-layoff, wore her practical, focused expression. "What'll it hurt?"

Leeann nodded. "Worst he can do is tell you in that sexy, deep voice of his that he's got other commitments."

"Or laugh." Haylee couldn't help but grin at the thought of asking a gorgeous alpha cowboy out on a date. "But I'll enjoy listening to the sound of it."

"There's our girl." Leeann put her bunny slippers up on the coffee table. "I bet he's still up. Why don't you call him now?"

"Yes." Jill grabbed the purse off the pillow, opened it, and held it out to Haylee. "Get your phone and call."

She bit her lower lip. "I'm having second thoughts."

"Come on." Jill put the purse closer to Haylee.

Haylee took it and looked down. Her phone stared back. She glanced from Jill to Leeann. "I don't have his phone number."

“Oh, Lord.” Leeann drew her phone out of her robe pocket and touched the screen. “Hold on.” She raised the phone to her ear, and there was a moment’s pause. “Brady? Hey, I need Tyson Donovan’s phone number. Why? Haylee’s going to ask him out on a date. Text it to me now, please, brother dear.”

Haylee’s face burned hot, and she slid down the couch. She was never going to hear the end of this from her brothers.

Leeann disconnected the call and appeared to be pleased with herself.

“Why did you do that?” Haylee’s voice sounded strangled from the desire to laugh and moan.

“Gotta do this before you lose your nerve.” Leeann’s phone dinged, and she looked at her messages. “Forwarding to you.”

Haylee’s phone made the sound of birds chirping as the message came in. She closed her eyes. “I’m not looking.”

“I’ll do it.”

Haylee’s eyes snapped open as she felt her sister reach into her purse and snatch her phone. “Wait—no.”

Jill held it up to Haylee’s face before she could stop her and unlocked the phone with facial recognition.

Haylee made a grab for it, but Jill jumped up and danced away. “There’s the message...and...dial.” She held out the phone to Haylee.

Her gut bottomed out as she brought it to her ear and heard the ringtone. Maybe he wouldn’t answer.

“Donovan here.” There was that incredibly sexy voice.

“Uh.” She took a breath. “This is Haylee.”

A pause. “You’re not in bed yet.”

She gripped the phone tighter. “Did I wake you?”

“Nah.” Now, he sounded amused. “What’s up?”

“Do it,” Leann whispered.

Jill mouthed, “Ask him.”

Haylee turned her back on her sisters. “Are you going to the Woodsons’ barn dance next Saturday?”

“Hadn’t made up my mind about it one way or another.” He paused. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

She closed her eyes as fire burned her face. “Yep.”

He gave a low chuckle. “And I thought you had damned me to hell.”

She held her hand to her stomach. “The jury’s still out on that.”

“Tell you what, Haylee.” His voice dropped an octave, and he said her name in a way that weakened her knees. “I’ll pick you up at seven-thirty that night.”

She swallowed. “I’ll be ready.” She moved the phone from her ear and pressed the off icon.

Haylee faced her sisters and put her hands to her mouth.

“Well?” they both demanded.

She lowered her hands. “He’s picking me up at 7:30.”

The girls squealed, and Haylee found herself in a group hug. They tumbled to the floor, laughing and giggling.

When Haylee had caught her breath, she sat up straight. “I can’t believe I just asked Tyson Donovan out on a date.”

“You’re going to have a fantastic time.” Leeann sat back on the floor, her legs straight out and bracing herself with her hands.

Jill wrapped her arms around her knees as she settled next to Leeann. “You’ll have to tell us everything.”

Haylee grinned and shook her head. “A girl’s gotta have some secrets.”

“Not from her sisters.” Leeann’s eyes sparkled. “Neither one of us is seeing anyone. We need to know all so we can live vicariously through you.”

“No promises.” Haylee smiled from one sister to the other. “Who knows, this might be a terrible idea.”

Leeann smirked. “Or it could be the best idea ever.”

Haylee gripped a glass of champagne as she moved through the crowd in the Scottsdale art gallery. To her relief, the showing had a good turnout, and it wasn't just her family dropping in to give their support.

"The artist's work is lovely." A woman pointed to an acrylic of prickly pear cacti, purple fruit on each of its pads. "That would look wonderful in my office."

"It would fit in perfectly." The man standing next to her nodded. "I'll let the gallerist know."

Haylee moved away before the couple could catch her eavesdropping.

"I understand you're the artist." A lovely lady with long dark hair and model-fine features stepped beside her.

Haylee came to a halt and smiled. "I am."

"I adore your art." She spoke with a slight Spanish accent as she scanned the paintings on the easels and those on a wall. "I wish I could buy a dozen."

"Thank you." Haylee laughed. "I appreciate the compliment."

“You deserve it.” The woman pointed to a painting of a saguaro with blooms on each arm and silhouettes of two more cacti in the background. “I’ll take that one.”

“I appreciate your interest in my art. Let me find the gallerist for you.” Haylee scanned the room then inclined her head toward the corner, where she saw the gallerist chatting with the couple who had expressed interest in the prickly pear painting. “Mrs. Rhodes can help you with your purchase. I can take you to her.”

“I’ve got this.” The young woman waved her away. “I know you’re busy. A lot of people showed up tonight, so I’m sure you’re in high demand.”

Haylee gave her another smile. “Thank you.”

Haylee was surprised to find that several of her original works had sold in just the first hour. She adjusted her white embroidered peasant blouse, brushed her palms down her broomstick skirt, and straightened her spine. Another couple of hours to go.

“This one is my favorite.” A familiar, deep, masculine voice had her spinning around, and she came face-to-face with Tyson.

Heat flushed through her from head to toe—embarrassment from having asked him out last night and pleasure in seeing him there.

“Hi.” She wanted to press her palms to her hot cheeks as she looked up into his amused yet sensual blue eyes. “How did you know I had a showing tonight?”

“Henry.” Tyson nodded in the direction of the front of the gallery. “He’s talking with the gallerist now.”

“I’m surprised you came.” Her throat felt dry as she spoke.

“Why not?” His smile grew more sensual. “I’m interested.”

“Ah—” In her or her art?

“Both.” He held her gaze as he answered her unspoken question. “Your art is brilliant, and you shine just as brightly.”

Her cheeks hadn’t cooled down and were probably bright red. “Thank you.”

He gestured to an easel with a painting of a palo verde near an old barbed-wire fence with weathered wood posts, the landscape dotted with dry yellow grass and creosote bushes. “I’d like that one for my study—it would fit right in with my Remingtons.”

She raised her brows. “You have more than one?”

“I’ve got a couple.” He gave a nod. “I enjoy western art.”

He tilted his head toward the gallerist who had just walked around a display wall. “Join me while I tell her which one I’d like to take home.”

Again, a long look told her the painting wasn’t the only thing he’d like to take home.

She fell into step behind him, her broomstick skirt flowing around her ankles.

Haylee struggled to think of something to say. Her mind had turned to mush with the man so close to her.

“I saw Brady and his wife Abby as they were leaving.” Tyson kept his stride short so Haylee didn’t have to work to keep up. “Did many of your family members come?”

She nodded. “Enough to make it look like the entire town of Scottsdale turned out tonight.”

Tyson grinned. “Your family encompasses half of the town of King Creek.”

Haylee laughed and slipped her hands into the pockets of her skirt. “Just about.”

The gallerist was speaking to a guest, and Tyson drew Haylee aside. He looked down at her from his six-four height, and she had to tilt her head back to meet his eyes. “Thank you for asking me out. But I’ll let you know one thing—if you hadn’t asked me last night, I would have been calling you today, and I wouldn’t have taken no for an answer.”

She caught her breath. “You would have?”

“Yep.” He touched her forearm in a barely-there caress that sent a shiver through her. “I know something good when I see it, and Haylee McLeod, you are special.” He slid his hand down to hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I noticed you long ago. I didn’t know how to get your attention.”

A flutter went through her abdomen then she thought about last night and gave him a wry smile. “So, that’s why you chased off those men.”

He grinned. “Not by a long shot, but if it got your attention, I’d say lucky me.”

She shook her head. “Just don’t do it again, okay?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you telling me that if we’re dating, I can’t chase off a couple of asses who have bad intentions when it comes to you?”

“We haven’t even gone on one date.” Haylee bit her lower lip. “But if it turns into something more, then that’s fair. As long as you’re not the jealous type.”

He gave a slight shake of his head. "I'm not. But I am protective of those I care about."

He captivated her with his gorgeous eyes, the spark in them heating her to her core. It was a long moment before she could look away. She glanced at the gallerist, who stood before a small podium, writing in her book.

Haylee swallowed and turned back to him. "Mrs. Rhodes is free."

Tyson didn't take his gaze off her. "I guess I should allow you to get back to potential clients. Not that I want to let you out of my sight."

At that moment, she didn't want to let him out of her sight. Instead of voicing that thought, she nodded. "I should be mingling." She offered him a smile. "I'm looking forward to Saturday night."

"That makes two of us." He winked and walked toward the gallerist with long strides.

That sexy wink made her belly quiver. This was all too crazy and probably too quick, but what the hell? She had been interested in Tyson before but was now downright anxious for their first date.

He looked back and caught her still staring at him. Her flesh heated, and she forced herself to turn away and head for the nearest group of people gathered in front of a couple of her paintings.

After a while, she relaxed and enjoyed chatting with guests. She wanted to look for Tyson, but she kept herself focused on those who tried to talk with her about her work.

At one point, she noticed the painting of the palo verde was no longer on its easel, and her insides warmed at the

thought that Tyson liked her paintings. She didn't think he was the type to spend that kind of cash to impress a woman. No, he wasn't the kind of man who tried to impress. He didn't even have to attempt—he just did.

At closing time, the last of the guests had left, and Mrs. Rhodes had locked the front door. Haylee looked from one empty easel to another.

“Your first showing was a brilliant success.” Mrs. Rhodes stepped beside Haylee. “Well done, love.”

“I can't believe how well it went.” Haylee made a sweeping gesture. “I didn't expect so many of my paintings to go.”

The older woman moved toward the back of the gallery, and Haylee joined her. “I can officially say, ‘I told you so.’”

Haylee laughed. “One time when I don't mind being told that.” She retrieved her cardigan and her purse. “It's been a long day, and I'm going to sleep well.”

Mrs. Rhodes walked Haylee to the front, unlocked the door, and pushed it open, letting the cool night breeze in. “I'll walk you to your car, Haylee.”

“I can escort her.” Tyson's low drawl had Haylee spinning around.

She held her hand to her chest. “You startled me.”

“Sorry, hon.” Tyson moved his sensual gaze away from her. He looked at Mrs. Rhodes and touched the brim of his hat. “Evening, ma'am.”

“It looks like Haylee is in good hands.” The older woman smiled, looking completely charmed by Tyson. “You both have a good night, and be careful driving back to King Creek.”

“We will,” Tyson said before Haylee could utter a word.

Mrs. Rhodes stepped back, and the lock clicked into place.

Haylee turned her attention to Tyson. “What are you doing here?”

He gave her an amused look. “I’d think that would be obvious. I wanted to catch you before you left for home.” He looked along the street. “Where are you parked?”

She gestured to her fire-engine-red 4 x 4 truck with a camper shell, parked a short distance away. “Pretty close for you to have waited just to walk me to it.”

He slid his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket. “How’d you like to join me at the Prickly Pear?” He inclined his head in the direction of the upscale bar. “I’ll buy you a drink.”

Haylee looked up at him. “Have you started already?”

Tyson shook his head. “One glass of champagne at the gallery.”

She wanted to spend time with him more than she cared to admit. “It’s been a couple of hours since I had a glass of champagne. I guess it can’t hurt to have a drink.”

He smiled, and she caught a glint of pleasure in his eyes in the streetlight. She stepped beside him, and he touched the small of her back, sending a shiver through her.

She glanced up at him. “Have you been waiting out here all this time?”

“Henry and I stood outside and talked a bit.” Tyson shrugged. “He left not ten minutes ago.”

She smiled, pleased Tyson had waited for her.

He settled his palm at the curve of her waist. “It looked like the event was a success.”

“It was.” She gave a happy sigh. “Perhaps one day I can paint full-time. I could leave event planning and focus on my art.”

They reached the steps to the Prickly Pear, and he smiled at her. “I’m sure you’ll be even more of a success.”

Haylee stopped beside him. “I’d still like to do something part-time on the side to interact with people and not just inanimate objects, but I’m not sure what. But it will take a while before I can afford sell my business, and I still have a name and reputation to build in the art world.”

“Sounds like a great idea.” He guided her up the steps to the front door and grasped the heavy wood and glass door handle. “Do you like prickly pear margaritas? Those are their specialty.”

She laughed. “Of course.”

Smells of bar food, beer, and margaritas flowed over her as she walked in. It was loud inside for a Saturday night, but not so much that they couldn’t hear each other talk. The hostess showed them to a table for two in the corner, away from the long mahogany and mirrored bar.

Tyson pulled out her chair and seated her before taking his own, close to her. The server swept in, took their drink order, and retreated into the crowded bar.

“Are you hungry?” Tyson picked up one of the menus the server had left behind and held it out. “You worked hard tonight.”

Haylee took the menu from him. “I wouldn’t call that work, but I am famished. I didn’t have dinner, and lunch was

long ago.”

Her pulse slowed from the rapid pace it had been beating from being so close to Tyson. She looked over the selection, which wasn't more than a fancy take on bar food.

She closed the menu and set it on the table in front of her and watched him as he perused his own. God, he was so good-looking. His hair was so dark it looked black in the low lighting, and his eyes were the kind of blue almost startling in intensity. He was handsome in a rugged, solid way, with square-cut features and a cleft in his chin.

Tyson glanced up from his menu and caught her staring at him. She had to force herself not to look away in embarrassment.

He set down his menu, his gaze never leaving her face. His firm lips curved into a sexy grin. “What’s on your mind, Haylee?”

The way he said her name, a low and sensual caress, melted her into a puddle of goo.

She shrugged, affecting casualness. “Not much.”

Relief swept through her as the server set a prickly pear margarita in front of her and a foam-laden glass of Guinness in front of Tyson.

Haylee ordered a black and bleu hamburger with bleu cheese and sautéed onions, and she picked truffle fries for her side. Tyson ordered a cowboy cheeseburger with steak fries and bacon-wrapped dates filled with cream cheese.

When their server had left, Haylee looked at him with amusement. “You must have missed dinner, too, if you plan on eating a half-pound cheeseburger.”

“I guess I was thinking about you and not dinner before I got here.” He grinned. “And when I saw you at the gallery, I knew I had to get you to go to dinner with me.”

Heat filled her chest. “You did a good job of warming me up.”

He looked at her over his glass, a glint of amusement in his eyes. “Everything’s going according to plan.”

Haylee knew he was teasing her. She laughed then sipped her margarita, the sweet and sour drink flowing over her tongue, and tasted the salt on the rim. Like regular margaritas, she preferred salt rather than sugar on the rim of the prickly pear version.

She kept her hand on the thick stem when she set her glass down. Condensation dampened her fingers, and the scent of the beverage lingered in the air.

“I heard you went into the service after high school.” She leaned back in her chair. “Which branch of the military? What did you do?”

Tyson set down his beer. “I was an MP in the Army for a couple of years before I decided it was time I came home where I belong and dig my heels into ranching.”

“I understand you’ve developed a successful ranch over the years.” She put both her hands on the table at the base of her margarita glass. “It hasn’t been that long since you were in the service?”

He kept his gaze on hers as he reached out and put one of his large hands over her smaller one and gripped it. “Long enough.”

She swallowed. “I hope it doesn’t sound like I’m prying.”

“Nope.” He turned her hand over so that their palms touched. “I like that you’re interested in me.”

“I am.” She surprised herself with her own honesty. “I’m glad you said yes.”

He smiled in a way that made her toes curl. “You certainly made it easy on me.”

Haylee linked her fingers with his. “You went to school with Bear and Brady. I bet you three got into all kinds of trouble.”

Tyson laughed and squeezed her hand. “My daddy about tanned my hide more than a couple of times thanks to what you might call our little adventures.”

“Oh, really?” She cocked her head. “I’m dying to hear about them.”

“Well, there was the one time we climbed the town’s water tower and painted our high school mascot on it.” Tyson grinned. “I thought I did a pretty damned good job on the bull, and your brothers painted our senior class motto above it.”

Her eyes widened. “You were the ones? I remember seeing that bull on my way to King Creek Middle School from the ranch, wondering who’d done it. You’re talented.”

“I always thought you were a cute kid.” He smiled. “Then holy hell, did you grow up to be one gorgeous woman.”

A flush crept up her neck to her face. “Thank you.” She cleared her throat. “I was such a tomboy I didn’t notice guys until high school. By then, you were long gone.”

“I was.” He gave a nod. “But we’re here now, and I like that just fine.”

The server arrived with their food, and Haylee reluctantly withdrew her hand from Tyson's. She loved the strength and the warmth in his touch.

Haylee's stomach rumbled as she breathed in the delicious smells of burgers and fries. She ate a fry, enjoying the taste of the truffle oil, salt, and pepper on the potato. Tyson took a big bite out of his cowboy burger while she cut her black and bleu in half. He chewed, looking thoughtful, as she bit into hers, and she wondered what he was thinking.

They ate quietly for a few minutes with just background laughter, the clink of glasses and dinnerware filling what would have been comfortable silence. Considering they had both missed dinner, it wasn't a surprise they were focused on their meals for the moment.

"You've asked me questions." He set down his beer glass. "My turn."

She finished chewing and swallowing. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

She grinned. "My life has not been exciting to date. You'd be bored."

"Never." He picked up a steak fry. "I understand you went to Arizona State. What did you major in?"

"Business with a minor in non-profits, and I took art classes." She held her half a burger. "My degree has helped me with my event planning business, especially the events for non-profits. I want to explore that aspect of my education, but the opportunity hasn't arisen yet. The art classes allowed me to further explore that part of my interests."

She took a bite as he nodded. “What’s it like being the youngest of eight?”

Haylee chewed and swallowed. “Oh, my God, it’s nuts. My five brothers were over-protective, and my sisters and I squabbled constantly. Thank goodness Leeann, Jill, and I became good friends over the years, and we can cohabitate without wanting to kill each other. My brothers are still watching out for me, but they’re all great guys.” She cocked her head. “You have two older brothers, don’t you?”

He swallowed the beer he had just taken a drink of and set the glass on the table. “Yep. They were hell growing up with, but things are better between us now. I felt I had to live up to them in school and sports—to me, they had it all.” He gave a self-deprecating smile. “I was scrawny growing up and more into books than sports.”

Her eyes widened. “You, scrawny and bookish?”

He grinned. “Up until high school, when I grew into my hands and feet. I still enjoyed school, but I also developed an aptitude for basketball and an interest in girls. My grades suffered from that change in my life.”

Tyson made a satisfied sound after eating his entire burger and most of his fries. “I needed that.”

Haylee had finished half of her black and bleu, which was plenty since it had been so big. She wiped her fingers on her napkin and smiled at him. “Me, too. I didn’t realize how hungry I was until our server placed it in front of me.”

“Dessert?” he asked.

“This was more than enough for me.” She smiled at him. “I’ve enjoyed the time with you. Thank you for asking me.”

“Entirely my pleasure.” He gave her a sexy smile before knocking back the last of his beer and thumping the glass on the table. “It’s getting late. I’ll follow you home.”

“I’m fine, Tyson.” She rested her hand on his. “I don’t need you to follow me.”

He laced his fingers with hers. “It’s my nature, and it has nothing to do with how capable you are. I’m just cautious, and I watch out for those I care about, and I care about you.”

“I get that.” She gave him a long look. “I’m an independent woman, and I need to know that you won’t feel like you have to watch out for me all the time.”

He squeezed her hand. “I’ll do my best.” He signaled for the server, who brought the check. Tyson immediately took it and fished out his wallet. One thing Haylee knew was to not get into it with a cowboy about who intended to pay the check—she’d always lose.

When everything was settled, he escorted her outside, his hand resting lightly on her waist. He took her hand as they walked down the stairs and kept a slow and leisurely pace while they headed for her truck.

They stood beside the driver’s side door, and she looked up into his eyes. He had moved so close, almost pinning her against her vehicle, but she didn’t mind. She liked his body so near her own.

He held her gaze for a long moment and stroked strands of her hair away from her face. “I think we can consider this our first date. Don’t you?”

Shivers skittered through her body at the intensity of his expression. “Yes.” The word came out in a whisper.

His voice grew lower and more vibrant. “I’d like to kiss you, Haylee.”

Fluttering filled her belly. Instead of answering, she raised on her toes and brushed her lips over his.

Tyson slid his fingers into her hair and drew her close, their bodies pressed together, his hands at her waist. He took her mouth in a challenging, possessive kiss that stole her breath.

He tasted of beer and his masculine flavor, and despite just having left the bar, he smelled of country air and sun-warmed flesh. He moved his mouth over hers, teasing, tempting, then taking all he could, all she would give him. He kept his hands at her waist, and she was grateful he wasn’t taking liberties so soon in their relationship.

When he finally drew back and raised his head, she wasn’t sure she could catch her breath. She stared up into his half-shuttered, beautiful eyes.

“I’d better get home.” The words came out in a whisper, and she raised her voice enough that she was sure he could hear her. “I’ll see you Saturday.”

“Can’t wait.” He let her step back out of his strong embrace.

She unlocked her truck with the fob. He opened the door and helped her up and into the cab.

“I know better than to comment on a big truck and a petite woman,” he said in a teasing tone. “So, I’ll just let you get home.”

Haylee laughed. “I’ve never been called petite, but yeah, you should refrain from teasing me about my truck. I love ol’ Red.”

Tyson rested his palm on her thigh. “As long as he gets you home safe.”

She touched his cheek in a brief caress before leaning in and lightly kissing him. “Good night.”

“Good night.” He waited until she put her seatbelt on before he shut the door.

He stepped back and watched as she turned over the big engine, which roared to life. She backed into the street, waved to him, then headed off. She glanced in the rearview mirror and saw he still watched her as she drove away. She took a right at the corner and couldn’t see him any longer.

Haylee blew out a long breath. Were things progressing too quickly? Her boyfriend had lost his life doing something he believed in, but the pain from the loss tightened her chest.

But she knew in her heart that she should move forward. She would never forget Danny, but it was time to open herself up to dating and the possibility of love again.

Tyson brought his truck to a stop in front of the brightly painted bicycle mailbox at the home where Haylee lived with her sisters. She'd been on his mind all week, and he was damned glad it was Saturday so he could spend time with her again. She was intelligent, fun, talented, and genuine. He'd never known another woman like her, and he sure as hell wanted to get to know her better.

The fact that she was the baby sister to a couple of his best buddies only made him hesitate a little. The fact it might piss them off had crossed his mind, but there was no going back as far as he was concerned. He didn't have a mind to, anyway.

He had called her Wednesday because he wanted to hear her voice and talk with her. It had been late by the time he'd had a chance to get a hold of her, and they hadn't spent long on the phone. She'd had a packed week, and his hadn't been much better.

He climbed out of his truck into the night, lit only by a single streetlight on their block. He snugged his black felt Stetson on his head and locked the truck doors with the fob before heading up the stone path toward the porch.

The lacy curtains at the big picture window were closed, but a yellow glow from inside illuminated them. He saw

movement behind the curtains as he strode up the walkway. He reached the stairs to the porch bathed by a single bulb. He took the steps two at a time, and the door opened before he could knock.

“Hi, Tyson.” Jill pushed the screen door open, squeaking with the motion, and smiled at him. She was beautiful, but to him Haylee shone the most brilliantly out of the sisters. “Haylee will be right out.”

He stepped into a living room that was bright with light from two lamps on the end tables. “How’re you doing, Jill?”

She closed the door behind him and slid her hands into her front pockets. “Currently looking for employment. I got laid off from the accounting firm I was with for six years, and there’s not much available in King Creek for my field.”

“Something’s bound to turn up.” Tyson offered her an encouraging smile. “If I hear of anything in accounting, I’ll let you know.”

“Have a seat.” She took an armchair and gestured to a recliner. “To tell the truth, I’ve been thinking of changing fields. Accounting isn’t exciting, and I’m ready for something new.”

He settled into the recliner, which creaked beneath his weight. “Any ideas of what you’d like to do?”

She flashed him a grin. “Sure, but you can’t make any money at amateur scuba diving.” She waved that away. “Seriously, I’m considering using my business degree to open a florist shop in King Creek. I’ve saved and invested well, and along with a business loan, I could make it happen.”

“I’ll be a loyal customer.” He glanced in the direction of the hallway before looking back to Jill. “Do you know what

kinds of flowers Haylee likes?”

Jill shrugged. “I’d say anything bright or unusual.”

“Hello, Tyson.” Leeann swept into the room, pushing up her sleeves. Like Jill, she was dark-haired and beautiful. “Haylee dropped her earring, so she’s currently using a flashlight and looking under the bed.” She came to a stop in front of him. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Nah.” He shook his head. “I’m fine.”

Haylee came out of the hallway, her long denim skirt swirling around her red leather boots. Her smile brightened their living room like the sun coming from behind the clouds. “Sorry to keep you waiting.” She touched one of the diamond and sapphire earrings she wore. “These were a gift from Mom and Dad, so when I dropped one, I freaked a little and had to search for it.”

“Not a problem.” Tyson got to his feet when she entered the room. He almost couldn’t tear his gaze from her. She was so damned gorgeous. He gestured from Jill to Leeann. “Your sisters kept me company and told me all about you.”

Haylee looked alarmed. “I hope not all.”

“He’s teasing you.” Jill’s dimples deepened. “I told him about my idea for a florist shop, and he promised to become a customer.”

“You have our whole family and Tyson.” Haylee grinned at her sister. “What more do you need for incentive?”

“Jill’s got the brains and the talent.” Leeann nodded. “We’ve been telling her to go for it, and we almost have her convinced to go down to the bank and take out a business loan.”

Jill held up both hands in a “whoa” motion. “I’m almost there. It’s just such a big step.”

“Take a leap of faith, sis.” Haylee stood beside Jill’s armchair. “You can do it.”

“Yep.” Leeann nodded. “How can you fail? You’re a McLeod.”

“True.” Jill sighed. “Every sibling in our family has done well. Four brothers are successful ranchers, the fifth is a vet with his own practice, and Haylee has her event planning business.” She inclined her head to her middle sister. “Leeann is great at her job as an imaging tech at the county hospital. On top of that, she’s written the first book in a series and has an agent. She’ll be the family’s next success story.”

Leeann looked a little embarrassed. “It’s a long jump from a writer to a published author, and one who can do it full-time without a side job.”

“Yes, you can do it.” Haylee smiled her encouragement. “We’ve read your book, and you have talent, dear sister.”

“Yep.” Jill nodded emphatically.

Leeann smiled. “You all love me, so what I do doesn’t matter. You’ll love it, too.”

“Absolutely.” Haylee turned to Tyson. “I made sour cream chicken enchiladas for the potluck. Hold on while I go get them.”

“Need any help?” he asked.

She gave a shake of her head. “I’ll be right back.”

A few moments later, she carried in a huge casserole dish, and the delicious smells of the enchiladas made his stomach growl. “I’m ready if you are, Tyson.”

“Good and ready.” He took the casserole pan from her and moved to the front door. He touched the brim of his western hat to Jill and Leeann. “Night, ladies. I’ll get her home safely.”

“Before the stroke of midnight.” Jill rose. “Or she’ll turn into a pumpkin.”

He moved his gaze from Jill to Haylee, who was laughing. “Now that would be interesting but inconvenient. I don’t think you’d fit inside my truck cab.”

Leeann snorted with laughter, and Jill smirked. “Off you go.”

Tyson held the door open for Haylee and closed it behind him when she stood on the porch beneath the light, waiting.

“You look so handsome.” Her long blonde hair swayed around her shoulders as she tipped her head back to meet his gaze, her brown eyes sparkling. “I’ll be with the best-looking cowboy at the barn dance.”

He settled his hand at the curve of her waist and brushed his mouth over her soft lips. He wanted to kiss her more thoroughly, but there would be time later. She smelled so good, a delicate floral scent that reminded him of honeysuckle.

She smiled up at him. “I’m ready when you are.”

He guided her down the porch steps and escorted her along the pathway. “I’ve been looking forward to tonight since you asked me out. Hell, I’ve been looking forward to our first date since that night at the casino before you even asked me.”

“You invited me on our first date, after all.” Haylee allowed him to help her into his truck in the near darkness. “It’s our second date now.”

“And I’m glad for it.” He closed the door then strode around the front to the driver’s side. He opened the rear door of the king cab, set the enchiladas on the seat, and tossed his Stetson next to it. Once that was done, he climbed into the driver’s seat, shut the door, and shoved the key in the ignition.

She clicked her seatbelt into place as the motor turned over. “Let’s go, cowboy.”

The drive to the Woodsons’ ranch, not far from the base of the Superstition Mountains, was a good fifteen miles out of town but wasn’t more than ten minutes south of Tyson’s place, the Big T.

“I take it you’ve been to the annual barn dance at the Woodsons’ ranch.” He glanced at her then back to the dirt road they traversed, the headlights bouncing as the truck jolted in the ruts. “I’ve been a few times, but it’s been a while.”

“Every year since my middle school days.” She nodded. “I don’t remember seeing you the last few years.”

He shook his head. “Not since high school.”

“Why not?” She looked intrigued. “It’s one of the best social events of the year.”

“I’ve never been serious enough about a woman to want to take her.” He shrugged. “It’s the kind of thing where everyone talks about who you’re with and debates on whether or not it’ll last.”

She nodded, a thoughtful expression on her face. “I guess they’ll be doing that with us tonight.”

He met her gaze and smiled. “And I don’t give a damn what they decide to speculate on when it comes to you. I’m betting on us.”

She cocked her head. “What makes you so sure?”

He turned onto the road that led to the Woodsons’. “I know something special when I see it, Haylee.”

GOD, but she loved how he said her name, a purr and a caress. She found herself hoping he was right, that things would move forward between them.

“I feel that way, too,” she said softly. “Whatever it is between us is special.”

He smiled, sexy and sinful all in one. “I’m glad you agree.”

She loved looking at him. Tonight, he wore a black Stetson and a cream-colored western shirt, well-polished black boots, and Wranglers that molded his ass perfectly—she couldn’t see that part right now, but she had sure noticed when she’d first seen him tonight.

They rounded a bend in the road, opening into a large area where his truck’s headlights reflected off the dozens of parked cars.

Beyond the cars stood the big red barn with white trim. The double doors were wide open, the inside bright with a yellow glow illuminating the guests.

Outside the barn, floodlights made it easy to see the barbeque grills, plus big tables laden with food for the potluck. Picnic tables were scattered in front of the barn—many benches already occupied.

Haylee waited as Tyson strode to her door then helped her down from the vehicle, which was a big step to the ground. She could have done it herself, but, well, cowboys. They were

a stubborn lot, and it was best to pick your battles. But she had to admit she enjoyed the attention from Tyson—as long as he didn't go too far and become overprotective or territorial or go caveman on her.

He retrieved the casserole pan, and despite the size of it, he carried it with ease one-handed, while keeping his other palm at her waist as they walked. Smells of mesquite wood smoke, BBQ ribs, and grilled burgers met them long before they got close.

She was both nervous and excited about tonight. She hadn't brought someone she cared enough about to want her family's approval since Danny. It shouldn't matter what they thought, but she hoped they would accept Tyson.

What was she thinking? She was a grown woman, not a teenager.

They reached a buffet table that had room for the casserole dish. Haylee took off the foil covering it and adjusted the spatula she'd brought for everyone to use to serve themselves.

Tyson rested his hand on her shoulder, and she looked at him. "If your enchiladas disappear before I get any, I'd like to request a whole pan-full just for me."

She grinned. "If you provide a half-gallon of chocolate bunny tracks ice cream, it's a deal."

He looked amused. "Deal."

"Haylee." A familiar voice called out her name, and she turned to see her sister-in-law, Marlee, approaching with Colt at her side. Haylee's brother carried their fifteen-month-old daughter, Charlotte.

"Hey, Marlee." Haylee hugged her and drew back. "Do you know Tyson?"

Marlee looked to Tyson. “I’ve seen you around, but we haven’t met.”

Tyson touched the brim of his hat. “It’s a pleasure, Marlee.” He inclined his head toward Colt. “Now, your husband is another story.” He turned to Colt. “You have a beautiful wife and daughter.”

Marlee laughed. “Haylee, I like him.”

Colt shifted his daughter in his arms and smiled. “Yes, sir, that’s a fact.” He glanced from Tyson to Haylee and grinned. “I heard something about you asking Tyson out tonight.”

Haylee’s cheeks burned. Tyson stepped in and put his arm around Haylee’s shoulders. “You can’t believe everything you hear.” He looked down at her and smiled. “I asked her out for our first date last weekend.”

“I dunno about this.” Colt put on a mock, serious face. “She is our baby sister, and you’ll have to go through an extensive application and vetting process.”

“Oh, for goodness’s sake.” Haylee shook her head then looked up at Tyson. “Are you going to ask me to dance, or what?”

Tyson touched the brim of his hat and nodded to Marlee before slipping his arm around Haylee’s waist and drawing her into the crowded barn. It could have been a dominant and possessive move, and Haylee wondered if it was that or him just guiding her to the dance floor.

They stood together to the side, waiting for a new tune to start. Tyson nodded and greeted people he knew, as did Haylee. It looked like the entire town of King Creek had turned out for the event.

A country waltz started, and Tyson swung her onto the floor. She laughed and followed his lead.

“You’re a great dancer.” She smiled. “You haven’t stepped on my toes once.”

“The night is still young.” He gave her a teasing smile. “I hope you wore hard-toed boots.”

“Ha.” She felt lost in his gaze as he looked at her. “I think you’re the one who’d better be watching out.”

A lively tune had them laughing as they two-stepped around the dance floor. When they finished dancing to the third song, Haylee begged for mercy.

Perspiration dotted her forehead as they moved away from the floor. “I need a moment to catch my breath.”

One of Haylee’s favorite Kade Field songs started—a slow one. She turned to tell Tyson that she’d changed her mind, but Clint Taylor, a brief mistake she’d made, stepped between them. “I’ll take this dance.”

Her eyes narrowed at the possessiveness in Clint’s tone.

“Haylee’s card is full.” Tyson spoke in a firm voice and moved to her side before she could tell Clint what he could do with himself and where.

Before she or Clint could respond, Tyson drew her onto the dance floor. He brought her into his embrace. “I saw the look on your face, and it was clear that you weren’t interested, so I stepped in. I hope you don’t mind.”

Haylee let out her breath in a slow exhale. “This is one time I don’t.” She rested her head against his shoulder. “Let’s not talk about him.”

“All I’m interested in is you.” He held her as they swayed to the slow song, and she listened to Kade Fields’ voice. It was hard to believe she’d just met the singer a week ago and even harder to believe she was now in the arms of a man she could easily fall head over heels for.

She felt secure in his embrace and filled her lungs with his earthy and so very male scent.

He nuzzled her hair, causing a shiver to trail her spine. “You feel so good against me, Haylee. How did it take me this long to get you into my arms?”

She tipped her head back and met his gaze that held both desire and caring. “All I can say is it’s about time.”

Tyson captured her mouth in a kiss that surprised her and stole her breath. He moved his lips over hers slowly, deliberately, and she fell into the moment, her mind spinning as if she would lose control.

He tasted as good as he smelled, and she absorbed it all with her senses, the fire in her insides magnifying. Lord, she’d have to slow down or find herself in his bed much too fast. The way he made her feel was like nothing, *nothing* she’d ever experienced. All the men before Tyson were mere boys compared to him.

His breathing was ragged as he moved his lips to her ear and echoed her thoughts. “We’ve got to slow down, Haylee. I want you like crazy, and I don’t think things should move that fast between us.”

“What are you saying?” She drew away, her heart beating faster. “You want to step away?”

“I don’t mean that.” His eyes burned with blue fire. “I wanted to let you know that I’m holding on by a thread, and I

need a rope.”

She put her hand against his warm cheek. “We’ll move slowly. We both want that, although I have to admit that’s not easy for me to say. But that’s what we’re going to do.”

He pressed his forehead to hers. “Good. We’re on the same page.”

She smiled and settled her head against his shoulder again.

The song ended but blended into another slow dance, and they continued swaying in each other’s arms. When that tune ended, they left the dance floor, hand-in-hand, and went outside.

A breeze cooled the perspiration on Haylee’s brow, and she lifted her hair so that the air could dry the dampness on her neck.

Wood smoke rose from the BBQ grill, along with the smells of the ribs, burgers, and hotdogs.

“I’m starving.” Tyson took her hand and led her to the buffet tables, where delicious scents of casseroles and side dishes filled the air. “Where are those enchiladas?”

They found the empty pan, and he groaned before a smile curved the corner of his mouth as he looked at her. “My house next Saturday, about eleven—you bring the enchiladas, and I’ll have bunny tracks waiting for you.”

“Deal.” Her belly flipped. She wondered if being alone with Tyson in his home was a good idea—it might make things a little more complicated when it came to avoiding going too far, too fast.

She had faith that Tyson would never push her into anything she wasn’t ready for. The thing was, she might be

ready for something more to develop between them sooner rather than later.

Don't worry, she told herself. Have faith it'll happen when it's supposed to.

Haylee put her hand on his arm. "In the meantime, let's find something to eat."

Tyson retrieved two paper plates, plastic ware, and napkins and gave one of the plates to her. He took a burger, a hotdog, and a few ribs before adding baked beans, potato salad, deviled eggs, macaroni salad, and a green corn tamale to his plate. Haylee was hungry, but not that hungry. She went for ribs, beans, and a small amount of a couple of sides, and she was good to go. On her way by the supply table, she added a few more napkins for their inventory because the ribs looked messy.

He scanned the picnic tables for a place for them to sit. She gestured to one on the left. "There's Brady and Abby, and Bear and Rae."

Tyson looked pleased to see her brothers, his old buddies from high school. He waited for Haylee to slide onto the bench seat and set his plate and their sporks and knives on the table.

Tyson greeted everyone and touched the brim of his hat as he said hello to the ladies. Haylee wasn't surprised that Tyson had met Rae and Abby since he and her brothers still got together from time to time.

He looked at Haylee. "I'll grab some punch. Do you want the batch with rum or without?"

She smiled. "With."

Tyson headed for the beverage table, and Brady leaned in. "I think we need to take Tyson aside and put the fear of God

into him when it comes to our baby sister.”

Haylee looked at him in horror. “No way. Just don’t even go there.”

Bear shook his head. “Think we can trust him?”

Brady looked like he was giving the question some serious thought. “We’ll keep tabs on him.”

“Just stop.” Haylee rolled her eyes and shifted her gaze to one of her sisters-in-law. “Where’s my little Jeremiah, Rae?” Haylee adored the two-year-old. “Did you leave him with a sitter?”

Rae nodded. “He’s got a cold—he picked it up from daycare.”

“Poor little guy. I hope he gets over it soon.” Haylee turned to Abby. “Are you through with morning sickness yet?”

“Finally.” Abby put her hand on her abdomen. “He’s a busy little guy with all the kicking and hiccupping he does.”

“Hiccups are the funniest.” Rae laughed. “Jeremiah got them all the time.”

Haylee listened to her sisters-in-law compare pregnancy stories, and she hoped that one day she could join in with her own. She hadn’t thought much about having kids, probably because she’d never met a man who made her want any. But Tyson might.

A big presence slid into the seat next to her. Tyson handed her a paper cup filled with red liquid. “Rum punch special delivery.”

“Thank you.” She sipped her drink, the cool liquid running down her throat before the rum warmed her empty stomach. She placed the cup on the table and dug into the baked beans.

“You’re a great dancer.” She picked up a rib. “Where did you learn?”

“My mom taught me.” He shrugged. “She had me out on the dance floor by age four. My brothers got out of it, but I didn’t mind. I enjoyed the time with her.”

Haylee caught a hint of sadness when he mentioned his mom, but she didn’t want to pry. Maybe that was something he’d open up about another time.

She ate some of her ribs—the sauce was both sweet and spicy. She wiped her fingers with a napkin when she finished.

“Are your brothers coming tonight?” She cocked her head. “I’ve seen them around town but never met them.”

“No idea.” He shrugged. “We’re going to our dad’s place for his birthday, so I could introduce you to them then.”

“I don’t want to intrude.” Haylee picked up her spork and slid it into the beans. “Sounds like a family affair.”

Tyson chuckled. “Believe me, you’ll be welcome. My dad’s an old codger who still likes to flirt with the ladies.”

Haylee shook her head, amused at Tyson’s description.

Hair prickled at her nape—she felt like she was being watched. She looked up to see Clint Taylor staring at her from the entryway to the barn, his brows narrowed.

She turned away and clenched her spork so hard she was afraid it would snap, so she relaxed her hand. She didn’t like how he glared at her, which pissed her off.

Haylee didn’t look in that direction again and instead put it aside and enjoyed chatting with Tyson, her brothers, and sisters-in-law.

Tyson asked her to dance, so after they threw away their trash, he swept her onto the floor again.

The evening was one of the best she remembered having. He was a cowboy gentleman and treated her like a treasure.

When they left the barn dance, she was still exhilarated.

The corner of Tyson's mouth curved. "You look like you could dance another dozen two steps."

"I had a fantastic time." She smiled at him. "Thanks for saying 'yes.'"

He looked at her, a smile on his lips. "There was never a question."

A truck's engine roared, and headlights came on, blinding them. Haylee shaded her eyes with her hand.

The vehicle tore around the parking lot, a couple of "yeehahs" and "let's go, boys" yelled over the sound of the motor. The truck shot in their direction, and Tyson held Haylee back so the truck could pass.

Old Bill Harland staggered into view. To Haylee's horror, he stumbled right in front of the oncoming truck.

Haylee screamed. Tyson pushed her back, out of the way, and charged toward Bill. The truck bore down on the men.

Tyson shoved the older man across the road, then dove to the ground behind him. Tyson landed on his shoulder in the dirt, just out of reach of the vehicle's tires.

Blood thundering in her ears, Haylee shot her gaze toward the truck. Two men were sitting on the sides of the truck bed, beers in their hands. One of the men looked like Clint Taylor. She didn't know the other man and hadn't seen who was driving.

The truck careened through the lot and shot out onto the road.

Heart still pounding like mad, she rushed over to where Tyson helped the older man to his feet.

“Are you okay, Bill?” Tyson rested his hand on the man’s shoulder. “I hope I didn’t hurt you.”

“Young man,” Bill started in a shaky and slurred voice, a waft of beer following his words. “You—you just saved my life. Thank you, son.”

“Let’s get you to the party.” Tyson guided the man back toward the barn dance. “You’ve had too much to drink. Do you have someone who can give you a ride?”

The man argued that he was fine, but Tyson walked him to a group of older men who were friends of Bill’s. Tyson stood and talked with the men while Haylee waited a few feet away. She still shook, her knees trembling.

Tyson had come close to being killed. He had saved Bill’s life, but at the same time, he could have lost his own.

Haylee couldn’t catch her breath. She was hyperventilating. Seeing Tyson putting his life on the line brought back old memories that came crashing down on her.

One night, during a three-alarm fire, Danny had gone into a burning building to save the lives of others. He got two women out of the house, but the ceiling collapsed on him just as he returned to ensure no one else was inside.

The fire department captain showed up on her doorstep late that night to tell her Danny hadn’t made it.

Haylee had collapsed into the captain’s arms, and that night haunted her even now.

She had lost Danny.

And now she could have lost Tyson before their relationship had even had a chance to grow.

Haylee held her hand to her chest, trying to slow her breathing as Tyson talked with the men. He slapped one man on the shoulder, and she could hear Tyson telling them thanks for getting Bill home.

He turned to her, frowned, and hurried over.

“What’s wrong?” He put his arm around her shoulders. “Are you all right, hon?”

She sucked in her breath, trying to calm herself down, but her voice trembled. “You could have been killed.”

He brought her into his arms and held her close. “Everything’s fine. Bill’s okay, and I’m okay.”

She nodded against his chest, and tears prickled at the back of her eyes, threatening to come forth.

When she drew back, she inhaled then let out a slow exhale. “I’ll be all right.” She tried to keep the tremble out of her words.

He took her hand, and they started toward the lot. “Let me get you home.”

When they reached his truck, he helped her into the vehicle. He brushed his mouth over hers before drawing away and closing the door.

The kiss relaxed her and helped to take away what horrors she’d felt.

“I want you to tell me about it one day,” he said quietly. “Whatever it was that triggered that amount of fear in you.”

She shot her gaze to him. “How did you know?”

He glanced from the road to her. “I saw the same expression when I was in the service. I know how people look when they’ve lost someone, and the memory has returned to haunt them.”

She nodded slowly. “Okay. One day.”

The drive home went by quickly, and Haylee started to wind down. By the time they reached her home and he walked her to her front porch, she was ready to crash. She unlocked the door and opened it before turning to him.

“You’re looking sleepy now.” He hooked his finger under her chin. “Sweet dreams.”

She rose on her tiptoes and kissed him.

He cupped the back of her head and settled his other hand at her waist as he deepened the kiss. She felt lightheaded by the time he drew back.

She put her hand to his cheek. “Good night, cowboy.”

“Good night, hon.” He kissed her forehead before she stepped inside.

She let the screen fall shut, but she watched Tyson through the mesh. He headed down the stairs and along the sidewalk to his truck. He glanced back with a long, lingering expression. He touched the brim of his hat in a goodbye gesture before climbing into his truck and driving away.

She let out her breath in a slow exhale as she closed the door. Her sisters weren’t there to drill her, so they were probably out with friends. Leeann had mentioned the Abbotts were home from their trip back East and that she and Jill might meet up with them for a drink at Mickey’s Bar and Grill.

Now that she'd had a chance to pull herself together, she could turn her thoughts back to better things. Tyson wasn't Danny. He was a cowboy and wouldn't always put his life on the line helping others.

A smile touched her lips as she thought about her night with Tyson before the near accident. She had a feeling that tonight she would dream of a tall cowboy in a black Stetson.

“Happy feet.” Haylee glanced at the nail tech giving her a deluxe pedicure before looking to her sisters, who were in spa seats to her right, enjoying similar treatments. “They always feel so good after a couple of hours here.”

“Same.” Leeann sighed with pleasure as a tech massaged her calves. “It’s wonderful after spending the last week on my feet.”

“The time in the spa chair goes too fast.” Jill’s tech finished giving her an apricot scrub. “We need to do this much more often.”

Haylee looked out the spa’s big picture window and watched pedestrians passing by. She wished she could see Tyson today instead of waiting until Saturday.

“Spill everything about your date at the barn dance.” Leeann drew her attention back. “I’ve been waiting on pins and needles to find out.”

“Ditto.” Jill nodded. “Everything.”

Haylee grinned. “Like I told you, a girl’s gotta have some secrets.”

“Nah.” Leeann shrugged. “You’re too open and honest to hold anything back from us, so get it over with.”

Haylee settled back in her seat and closed her eyes, picturing Tyson and how good he looked last night. “You saw the sexy man for yourselves, so you know things were off to a good start.” She sighed as the tech massaged her feet. “He is such a gentleman and aware of everything, including my feelings about some things. Clint Taylor tried to butt in on a dance, and Tyson got rid of him.”

“Go, Tyson.” Jill leaned forward so she could see Haylee. “Clint is such a loser.” She settled back in her seat. “And do I ever know losers—I just don’t recognize them right away.”

“If you’re talking about Carl, I’m glad you figured it out and got rid of him.” Leeann pushed her dark hair behind her ears. “Same for Clint, Haylee.”

Haylee rested her head on the pillow attached to the spa chair that doubled as a massager. She pressed the button for a back treatment, and the chair started vibrating. “I should have listened to Brady. When I asked him, he told me what he thought about Clint, but I chose not to listen.”

“Sometimes our brothers do know better.” Leeann smiled. “Just don’t tell them I said that.”

“They won’t hear anything from me.” Haylee raised both hands. “They all are so damned protective of us. I think they’ve chased off some good guys over the years, not just the bad.”

Leeann shook her head. “What guy wants to face a five-brother firing squad?”

“You successfully got us sidetracked.” Jill pointed her finger at Haylee. “Tell us more.”

“Tyson is a wonderful dancer and an even better kisser.” Haylee smiled dreamily before coming back to reality. “We

ran into three of our brothers and their wives, and I got some teasing over asking Tyson out.”

Jill laughed, and Leeann grinned. “That was pretty cute and awesome.”

“Tyson told them he asked me out for our first date, which was technically true since he took me to the Prickly Pear in Scottsdale after my gallery showing.” Haylee wiggled her toes as she waited for the tech to open the bottle and paint fire-engine red nail polish on them. “It was sweet of him to say so. I was a little embarrassed, but Tyson said he’d planned to ask me out anyway.”

“Anything else happen that we should know of?” Jill sounded hopeful.

“Nothing more than we had a great time.” She watched the tech painting her big toe before looking at her sisters. “The enchiladas were all gone by the time we got to the buffet table after dancing, so he invited me to his place this coming Saturday—I bring the enchiladas, and he’ll get chocolate bunny tracks.”

“Oh man, I *am* living vicariously through you.” Leeann shook her head, her hair falling forward from behind her ears. “I haven’t found an available man who interests me. The good ones are taken.”

“I’m with you.” Jill sighed. “The sexiest cowboys are in committed relationships or married.”

Leeann groaned. “Maybe we should go outside of King Creek.”

“Carl was an out-of-towner, and look where that got me.” Jill looked disgusted. “And Clint just moved here not that long ago.”

“Because his daddy did.” Haylee grimaced. “If there was ever a daddy’s boy, that’s Clint, and he gets away with everything he can.” Her grimace turned into a scowl. “Three months of my life, wasted.”

“Better than an entire year—plus.” Jill’s scowl was probably worse than Haylee’s. “How could I have not known what a cheater he is?”

“Don’t feel bad, Jill. Some people are good at pretending to be a decent human being when they’re garbage.” Leeann shifted in her seat. “Carl did a great job faking it.”

“Forget the bastard.” Jill waved it all away. “I’m done ever talking about him, so his name is now vanquished from conversation. Deal?”

“I wish I had a margarita, and I’d drink to it.” Haylee smiled. “Let’s not talk about Clint, either. We’ll call them the ‘unmentionables.’”

“Hear, hear.” Jill laughed. “Perfect.”

Grinning, Haylee looked out the picture window. Across the street, she saw one of the unmentionables, and he was looking in her direction. Her smile vanished. Could he see through the spa window?

At least Jill didn’t have to worry about running into Carl in their small town. Clint, on the other hand, she saw often when she was out and about. He worked for his dad in the feed store but was hanging out all over town more than in his daddy’s business.

She cut her attention away from the street, back to her sisters, who were chatting about their brothers and sisters-in-law.

“Everyone’s had babies or pregnant.” Leeann sighed. “I’d never really thought about having children. I assumed I would someday. And now I’m nearing thirty, and I hear my biological clock ticking.”

“I’m right there with you, sister,” Jill said.

“When I was young, I was such a tomboy and didn’t get into Barbies or baby dolls.” Haylee thought about those long-ago days. “Motherhood was something I never considered.” She shrugged. “Now, I don’t know—I guess it will depend on the future.”

“Tyson is definite daddy material.” Leeann cocked her head. “I can just see him rocking a baby to sleep in his big, strong arms.”

Haylee shook her head even as she saw the image so clearly in her. Tyson would look so sexy and masculine with a baby in his arms, and she knew he’d be a great father.

“Too soon to start thinking about things like that.” Haylee saw that the tech was done with her pedicure. She wiggled her toes again. “I now have extremely happy feet.”

And right now, a very happy heart.

“I AM CONSIDERING YOUR PROPOSAL, HENRY.” Tyson leaned back in his desk chair behind his antique oak desk with one of his two border collies, Freya, curled up next to his chair. “I’d like to get a good deal of information from you before I take that step.”

“I knew you would, my boy.” Goldman sounded pleased. “Our lawyers can get together to review Dutchman’s Gold’s books and hammer out a deal.”

Tyson shook his head. He was seriously considering going into the jerky business, but there were a lot of steps between here and there.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.” Tyson tapped a pen on the calendar pad on his desktop. “I need to know what I’d be getting into before I make an offer if I do.”

“I want my company in good hands, son,” Henry said. “I’m willing to sell it to you for a price no one else could get. I’ve got all the cash I need—I want to make sure my pride and joy is taken care of.”

Tyson almost said, “It will be,” but cut himself off before he could. He had to make a sound business decision. He didn’t want to end up in debt, biting off more than he could chew. He had a more than successful ranch, solid investments, and money in the bank. He’d done better than even he had dreamed.

Adding a small-batch regional beef jerky business could be an excellent investment. But first, he had to make sure he ticked off all the necessary boxes.

“Give your lawyer my number, and I’ll put her in touch with mine, and we’ll go from there. I want you to feel good about owning my company—which will be yours,” Henry said. “Ask as many questions as you need to.”

Tyson’s chair squeaked as he leaned forward. “I’ll call her in the morning, then we’ll see.”

“Glad we’ll be doing business together, my boy.” Henry chuckled. “Not that I had a doubt.”

Tyson tossed his pen on the desktop and didn’t bother to try to correct Henry’s assumption again. “I’ll call you when I get some numbers back.”

The older man signed off, and Tyson pulled up the contacts app on his phone and found his lawyer's information. He got lucky, and she could take his call, even though it was late. He went over everything he needed to know about Dutchman's Gold that he could think of. More questions were bound to pop up.

Zoey, his other border collie, rested her head on her paws and looked at him with soulful eyes from where she lay by the fireplace.

"Not quite dinnertime yet," he told his girls. "Got one more thing to do."

Now that his calls to Goldman and his attorney were taken care of, he turned his thoughts to Haylee. She'd been so damned beautiful Saturday night. Hell, she was always gorgeous, but something about her that evening set his world on fire.

He wanted her so badly that his jaw ached from clenching his teeth hard enough to break a tooth. Her body would be supple and soft beneath his, but she would be wild in his arms. He didn't want to tame her, but he did want her to know that one day, she would be his. Yeah, he'd made up his mind—Haylee was the woman for him, and he wouldn't let her go. He'd have to be careful he didn't go "caveman" on her, or that would push her away.

Last night, he hadn't called her—he didn't want to call too often, just enough for her to know how interested he was in her.

But one night without talking with her was enough. He located her number, which he considered putting on speed dial. They'd barely started dating, and he wanted to put her as number one on the list. Damn, but he had it bad.

Like he told her—he knew something special when he saw it.

He pressed her number, put the phone on speaker, and listened to the ringtone.

“Hi, Tyson.” The way she said his name made him want her all the more. She sounded breathless.

He leaned back in his office chair. “Are you in the middle of something, hon?”

“Just got home from meeting with a client in Phoenix.” She sounded happy to hear from him. “I’m yours now.”

He imagined the pretty flush in her cheeks as she added in a hurry, “I mean—well, you know what I mean.”

“Do I?” The words came out in a low rumble as he teased her. “I’ll take you any day.”

“I’m looking forward to Saturday.” She had clearly changed the subject to avoid more embarrassment. “I bought all the ingredients for the enchiladas.”

“I can’t wait for them.” He smiled to himself. Her being close again was what he couldn’t wait for, but he’d take the meal along with her. “I’ll have the ice cream waiting.”

“You spoke the magic words.” She gave a pleased sigh.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” And he would—anything to please his woman.

There he went again—was he going caveman? How he felt about Haylee was worse than Goldman being so sure Tyson would buy his company. Not that he could compare the two.

But he was positive about Haylee—was he setting himself up for disappointment?

No, not at all.

He leaned back in his chair and put his boots on his desk. “How was your day?”

“Not bad.” She groaned. “I did a lunchtime event for a women’s organization, and my feet are aching. I could use another foot massage.”

“I’d be happy to oblige.” Tyson smiled. “Would you like me to come over?”

“That would be woouoonderful.” She laughed. “But I’m sure you’ve had a long day, too. I think I’ll go to bed early—tomorrow, I have another busy day on my calendar.” She paused only long enough to take a breath. “How about you? Anything interesting come up?”

“Not much different than a normal day,” he said. “Had to free a steer from barbed wire in the north pasture, then repair the fence line and the usual ranch duties and chores. Nothing out of the norm.”

“Do you have dogs?” she asked. “Any other pets?”

“Two border collies, Zoey and Freya.” He glanced down. “Freya’s asleep under my desk, and Zoey is sacked out in front of the fireplace. I don’t have a fire here, but it’s her favorite spot.”

“Can’t wait to meet them.” She had a smile in her voice. “I adore dogs. One of these days, when I have a home of my own, I want to adopt one from a shelter.”

“How long have you lived with your sisters?”

“Gosh, about five months now,” Haylee said. “When Jill lost her job, she needed a place to stay between career jumps. Leeann’s roommate moved out, so she had to find a new one

or somewhere else to live, and I was tired of living in a one-bedroom apartment. We found this home, which is perfect for the three of us. The elderly woman who rented the house to us is a family friend and gave us a reasonable rate, so that's a plus."

They talked a little longer before he heard Haylee yawn. "I'm so sorry." She laughed. "That came out of nowhere."

"I'll let you get your dinner and head to bed." He looked at Zoey, who had popped to her feet at the word "dinner," and wiggled her butt. "My girls need to be fed, and I'm beat."

"Thanks for calling." She spoke softly. "Goodnight, Tyson."

"Sweet dreams, Haylee." He pocketed his phone and thought about this coming Saturday.

It couldn't get here fast enough.

Just before 11:00 a.m., Haylee's truck bounced as she hit the only ruts on the dirt road leading to Tyson's. For the most part, it was a pretty good road that had been graded.

The smell of the sour cream chicken enchiladas filled the cab, making her hungry. She hoped Tyson enjoyed them.

She rounded a bend, and his home spread out before her. It was a beautiful, long ranch-style house with brilliant fuchsia bougainvillea and hibiscus bushes in front. This part of Arizona didn't have freezing temps until sometime in the winter, so the red hibiscus blooms were bright and many.

Two Border collies rounded the house, barking. Haylee pulled her truck next to Tyson's. He followed the dogs, a smile on his handsome face, and her stomach quivered at the sight of him. He was so tall, sexy, and good-looking that she couldn't help staring at his broad shoulders and muscular physique and the way his jeans molded to his thighs. Damn, there was nothing like a hot cowboy in a Stetson, Wranglers, and boots.

She opened the door, unable to help the broad smile on her face. Tyson was there before she could get out, and he took her hand and helped her down.

The moment she stood before him, he drew her into a tight embrace and kissed her long and hard. She matched his hunger, and her head spun when he pulled away. “Couldn’t wait to kiss you.”

“What a hello.” She gripped his rock-hard biceps to steady herself. “I think I’ll come here more often, just for that.”

He held her gaze, and a shiver trailed her spine. “Any day, hon.”

The way he looked at her took her breath away. She inhaled deeply then let it out slowly. “The enchiladas are on the back floorboard, groceries on the seat.”

Haylee turned to greet the border collies as Tyson closed the driver’s door. She crouched in front of them and put her hand out for each to sniff. “Hello, girls. Which one of you is Zoey, and who is Freya?”

“The gal on your left is Zoey. Freya’s the smaller of the two.” Tyson opened the backdoor of her club cab and retrieved the grocery bag and foil-covered casserole pan as she petted the pair.

“You’re such beautiful girls.” They didn’t have tails, and their butts wiggled in excitement as she spoke to them. “I bet you two are great ranch dogs.”

“They are.” Tyson closed the backdoor. “Come on in.”

“I made the enchiladas last night, so they need to be reheated.” Haylee walked beside him toward the house as the dogs walked beside them. “Funny thing is they taste even better the next day.”

“You mean I have to wait?” He looked down at her. “Dunno if I can.”

Haylee laughed. “You can show me around while they heat up. It takes about thirty minutes.”

Tyson’s hands were full, so Haylee opened his home’s front door and entered his extensive living room. The dogs didn’t come in, instead trotting off toward the barn.

She took in the room and its vaulted ceilings with exposed rough-hewn beams and skylights. Heavy dark-stained oak furniture with tan-colored leather couches occupied much of the room. Southwestern rugs were scattered on the floor, and desert art hung on the walls.

A giant TV and entertainment center were in the far corner, in front of the couches, armchairs, and a recliner. The recliner showed wear, as though it was used frequently, but everything else looked like it could have come straight out of a furniture store.

“This is beautiful.” She closed the door behind him. “I have a feeling you don’t entertain much.”

“You’re my first guest in a long while. I’m not much for regular gatherings.” He gave a nod in the direction of a large archway. “Kitchen’s through there.”

“You might have to get used to gatherings with my family.” She followed him into the spacious kitchen with vaulted ceilings and a series of small high windows above larger ones, which let in a lot of sunlight. The room had leather-textured granite countertops and stainless-steel appliances. “That is if you’d like to join me sometime.”

He set the groceries and casserole pan on a large island and looked at her. “For you, I’d be happy to.”

Warmth filled her, and she smiled. “I have to warn you that we’re talking parents, grandparents, eight children, five

spouses, and lots of little ones running around.”

Tyson groaned and looked up at the ceiling. “Like my mama used to say, Heaven help me.” He shook his head then met her gaze. “I appreciate the warning.”

She laughed. “I’ll turn on the oven.” She set it for the right temperature and slid in the pan before starting a timer on her phone, not waiting for the oven to preheat. “I’ll lose track and forget it’s there without a timer.”

He indicated the grocery bag on the counter. “What do you have in here?”

“Salad fixins.” She drew out a bag of pre-made salad, a container of baby tomatoes, an orange bell pepper, and two bottles of dressing. “I cheat so I don’t have to cut up lettuce and shred carrots.”

“We’re of the same mind.” He looked at the dressing. “Blue cheese and ranch—I’ll take the ranch.” He put the bottles and the bag of salad in the fridge. “Do you like to cook?”

Haylee shrugged. “No, I can’t say cooking is one of my favorite things. I do like baking sometimes, though.”

“I guess it’s a good thing I don’t mind eating from a can.” He flashed a grin, then tipped his head toward the kitchen door. “Come on out.”

She joined him as they walked to the barn, and his dogs scampered around them. The low of cattle came from the left, and she saw he had Herefords. There were three corrals, plus one for the horses. Large desert willows, mesquite, ash trees, and palo verdes shaded parts of the property.

“These trees are big, so they’ve been here for a while.” She looked up at him as they walked. “You must have acquired the

property from someone else.”

“When I came home from the service, old man Callahan passed away, and his kids put the place up for sale,” Tyson said. “I took out a business loan, bought it, and invested in cattle and horses.”

“Do you have ranch hands?”

He gave a nod. “They’re off on weekends.”

A whinny came from the corral attached to the barn as a horse stepped out of the shadows. “You have a gorgeous bay mare.” She met his gaze again. “I’d like to meet her.”

“That’s Jess.”

They went to the corral, and Haylee climbed on the lower rung of the fence and called to the horse. “Come see me, sweet girl.”

The mare bobbed her head and walked up to Haylee, looking at her with bright, intelligent, inquisitive eyes. Jess’ tail swished as Haylee stroked her forehead to her soft, velvety muzzle. “I’m sorry I don’t have a treat for you. Next time.” The mare’s ears twitched, and she stamped her hind foot.

Tyson chuckled. “She loves her treats. She’ll hold you to it.”

Another horse came out of the barn then trotted to them, and she admired its dappled gray coat with black points. “Your blue roan is gorgeous, too.”

“This is Jasper.” Tyson patted the gelding’s neck when he reached them. “I work the ranch with him—he’s a damn fine horse.” He nodded to the mare. “Jess has spirit to her, but I’m sure you can handle her if you want to go for a ride sometime.”

“I can handle just about anything but busting broncs.” Haylee smiled. “I’ve been on horseback since I could walk. I’d love to ride with you.”

Tyson reached out and brushed hair from her cheek. “You are the most amazing woman.”

Heat rushed from Haylee’s belly to the place where his fingers skimmed her face. She didn’t know what to say except “Thank you.”

He slid his fingers through her hair to her shoulder. “Let’s go to the barn. Your timer’s bound to go off soon.”

She jumped off the rail and landed beside him. “Lead on.”

Zoey and Freya bounded ahead as Tyson shortened his stride for her. She was average height for a woman, but his legs were so long. He had to be a good six-three.

The barn’s weathered exterior was gray, the paint worn away. “One thing I haven’t done is paint the barn since I bought the place,” he said as they walked through the big double doors into the cool recesses. “It’s next on my list.”

“What color?” She stepped onto the hay-strew dirt floor. “Barn-red?”

He shrugged one big shoulder. “Possibly. I’m considering a blue-gray shade, too, with white trim.”

“That would look good if it’s more blue than gray.” She looked around the interior. Haybales were stacked five high on a wood floor to the right. Overhead was a loft, but she couldn’t see what he kept there. Straight ahead was a path between stalls on the left and a room on the right, which turned out to be the tack room.

Ancient, rusted farming and ranching tools that were at least a century old hung from the walls throughout the barn.

Just as she peeked into the tack room, her alarm went off. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and dismissed it on the screen before tucking her cell away again. “Are you ready to eat?”

“I’m hungry enough to eat the whole pan.” He hooked his thumbs in his pockets as they walked back. “You might have to fight me for a piece.”

“That’s a big pan.” She patted his taut belly through his T-shirt. “You might lose these great abs.”

He caught her hand, brought her knuckles to his mouth, and kissed them. She shivered from the brush of his lips against her skin. He linked his fingers with hers and led her back to the house.

The Border collies busied themselves by one of the corrals, enthusiastically sniffing the yellow grass and stones.

“Looks like the girls might be trying to get hold of a lizard,” Tyson said. “They’ve only caught one once that I know of.”

“Go, lizard.” Haylee smiled. She loved the feel of his big hand holding hers. It felt comfortable, like they’d done it a thousand times before.

Once in the kitchen, Tyson grabbed potholders from a drawer by the stove. Heat rolled out of the oven when he opened the door, and the enchiladas sizzled. He set the pan on the stove, and Haylee pulled off the foil. Goopy cheese stuck to part of the covering, and the sauce bubbled.

“It needs to cool about ten minutes.” She retrieved the salad bag out of the fridge. “Where is a cutting board and a

knife?”

“I need to contribute somehow.” He got the items out of a drawer and a cabinet. “I’ll cut up the pepper.”

Haylee sat on a swivel stool in front of the island. “What’s your idea of a home-cooked meal?”

He looked at her with amusement. “Are we talking about what I fix for myself or what I’d like?”

She watched as his long fingers wrapped around the knife handle, and he cut the pepper in half. “Tell me first what you make for yourself.”

“For the ranch hands, we have pinto beans, cornbread, fried chicken, and other stuff that’s easy to make.” He shrugged. “For myself, fried Spam sandwiches, boxed mac and cheese, and TV dinners are good enough.”

Haylee stared at him, half-horrified, half-amused. “And I thought I was awful about cooking. I’ll throw together casseroles and real mac and cheese, spaghetti, and other things that don’t require a lot of talent.”

“Sounds like heaven to me.” He finished cutting up the pepper and got a big bowl for the salad. “When Callahan’s kids sold me this place, they left me his well-stocked kitchen or my cabinets would be bare of things like bowls and cooking utensils. Apparently, the old man was quite the cook.”

“Good thing, or we’d be eating out of the salad bag with our fingers.” Haylee smiled. “Where are your plates?”

“I’ll grab those, and you can get the forks.” He pointed to a drawer.

Haylee retrieved them, tore off a couple of paper towels, and folded them for napkins while Tyson got the salad

dressings and a pitcher of iced tea. He poured two tall glasses of tea.

They loaded their plates and sat close to each other at his dining table. Haylee wasn't shy about eating her fill in front of a man. It was silly how some of her friends would only eat salads on dates, and she had told them that. They had just laughed, and Haylee had shaken her head.

During dinner, they talked about people they knew in common and shared things about their friends. Tyson's best friends were her brothers, Brady and Bear, but he did have a beer at Mickey's Bar and Grill with a couple of other guys on occasion.

"I have a pretty good circle of friends, but I'm closest with my sisters." She slid her fork into more of the enchiladas. "We fought a lot when we were young, but no more than normal from what I've seen. Once we got out of high school and did some growing up, we became closer as sisters and good friends as well."

Tyson looked thoughtful. "My brothers stuck together, and I was always on the outside, being several years younger. We never grew beyond that and see each other at my dad's or around town." He met Haylee's gaze. "I've never known anything different, so I haven't felt like I've missed anything."

She cocked her head to the side. "What was it like for you growing up?"

"I hero-worshipped my older brothers, but they chased me off when I tried to hang around those two. Dad spent more time with them, and I always felt like I was living in their shadow." He shrugged. "I was closer to my mom, but she passed away when I was in my teens."

Haylee put her hand over his. “I’m sorry. You must miss her terribly.”

“I do.” Tyson turned his hand over and linked his fingers through hers. “I know she would have liked you.”

Haylee squeezed his fingers. “I wish I could have met her.”

He smiled then released her fingers to pick up his fork. “Henry Goldman is fond of you.”

“I’ve known him since I was a kid.” Haylee wrapped her fingers around her glass. “How about you?”

“I’ve provided cattle for Henry’s jerky products.” Tyson stabbed a tomato with his fork. “He’s selling his company, and I’m considering buying it.”

“You’ll become a jerky tycoon.” Haylee laughed. “That could be a great investment.”

He nodded. “I’ve got my lawyers looking into his company’s financials. If I’m happy with what they come back with, I might go forward with the purchase.”

Haylee sipped her tea and set the glass down on the table. “It’s a great product. I love the seasonings on his spicy version. How big is his business—is it nationwide?”

Tyson shook his head. “It’s a regional small-batch company that specializes in providing products for wholesale outlets.”

“Does he have beef suppliers other than you?” she asked.

“Henry’s ranch provides most of the beef,” Tyson said. “As part of the buyout, I would take over his ranch. I’m concerned about stretching myself too thin. I don’t want to bite off more than I can chew.”

“I get that.” Haylee tipped her head to the side. “I have a competitor who offered a good price to take over her business. I decided not to because I have other goals for the future.”

“Your art.” Tyson studied her. “You have the talent needed to be successful at it full-time.”

“Thank you.” She smiled. “It’s been a lifelong dream. After the successful showing at the gallery in Scottsdale, I feel like the ability to focus on painting is closer to being within reach.”

“It’ll happen.” He spoke as if it was as good as done.

“Henry must have named his company after the Lost Dutchman Mine legend,” Haylee said.

Tyson looked amused. “Are you familiar with his slogan, ‘You can’t find gold in the mountains, but you can find it in every bite?’”

“No.” Haylee laughed. “Can you imagine finding the Dutchman’s gold in the Superstition Mountains?”

“A hell of a lot of people have tried since the late 1800s,” Tyson said. “Have you heard the legend of the lost gold in the Huachuca Mountains in southeastern Arizona?”

Haylee shook her head. “How did that one go?”

“In the 1940s, an Army private named Jones was out for a walk with a buddy and fell thirty feet into a manmade chamber. He later returned to the same location, found gold bars in a tunnel, broke off a piece, and sold it to an assayer in Mexico.”

“Interesting,” Haylee said. “What happened after that?”

“According to reports, Jones didn’t return for the gold until years later.” Tyson looked thoughtful as he recalled the story.

“When he finally did, he got permission from the Army to dig for the gold and was even provided with some heavy equipment, but they didn’t find the cache. He tried again and again over the years, but no luck. Others have tried to find it, but the most that’s been located with some electronic gear is a shaft and caves filled with silt.”

“Where did the gold come from to begin with?” she asked.

“Some say it was stolen from Mexico, and others believe it was brought here by Spaniards in the 1800s.”

Haylee’s adventurous spirit had her palms itching. “Wouldn’t it be a kick to go looking for the gold?”

The corner of Tyson’s mouth tipped. “Would you like to make a weekend of it? I’ve hiked in the Huachuca Mountains and stayed at a nice little bed-and-breakfast in Ramsey Canyon.”

“Oooh.” Haylee loved spontaneous activities, and this would be something new. “That sounds like a fun way to spend a weekend.”

“Let’s do it.” Tyson drew his phone from his back pocket and looked at his calendar. “I’m free in a couple of weeks. We can go down on Saturday morning and return Sunday evening.” He gave her the date and met her gaze. “Say the word, and I’ll make a reservation at the B & B.”

“Hold on.” Haylee consulted her phone. “Yep. That date works for me.”

“I’ll reserve two rooms.” Tyson smiled at her. “And I’ll take care of the details.”

“Great.” A stir of excitement tickled her insides. She loved that he didn’t assume they would be sleeping together. That

could change, but it was good he was reserving two rooms for now. “We can go over our plans when the date is closer.”

He pushed his seat back, stood, and gathered their now empty plates. “What do you say to some dessert if you’re not too full?”

“There’s always room.” Haylee got to her feet. “The more, the better.”

They washed dishes, cleaned up, and put leftovers in a plastic container. Haylee had insisted on leaving the rest of the pan of enchiladas for Tyson. “Fewer Spam sandwiches if you have something decent to eat in your fridge.”

“You don’t have to offer twice.” He reached into the freezer and brought out the container of ice cream while Haylee grabbed two bowls and spoons.

She wasn’t bashful of filling up her bowl, either. “This is why I use my treadmill regularly. I need to burn off what I eat to indulge often.”

“A woman with a plan.” He returned the now lighter ice cream container to the freezer.

“Yep.” She carried their bowls to the table and settled into her chair.

The treat made her sigh with bliss. “Keep buying this for me, and I’ll be on your doorstep plenty.”

“Deal.” Tyson seemed to be enjoying his as well. “I’ve got to do a few afternoon chores. How about a movie after that?”

Haylee smiled. “You’re on.”

TYSON WRAPPED up his afternoon chores with Haylee pitching in. She was enthusiastic and fun, and he enjoyed her company more than he could have imagined. He'd dated plenty but couldn't remember ever wanting to be around a woman as much as he wanted to be with Haylee.

Tyson had popcorn on hand and used the popper left behind by his home's former owner. They made a big batch and filled a large silver mixing bowl to share. He grabbed a couple of beers, and she carried the bowl to the living room.

Zoey and Freya trotted ahead and plopped down on their beds in front of the fireplace.

"Do you like westerns?" Tyson sat beside her on the couch, set the beers on the coffee table, and reached for the remote. "There's one out in the theaters recently that I haven't seen—it's an action thriller." He named the movie. "We can rent it unless there's something you'd like better."

"I've been wanting to see that one, too." Haylee settled back against the couch. "It's supposed to be a good movie."

Tyson found the flick on a streaming service and paid for the rental before easing closer to Haylee so that their upper arms touched.

He found it hard to concentrate on the film with her so near. He figured he could always watch it again later when he wasn't so distracted by Haylee's scent and the heat of her body next to his.

They shared the popcorn from the bowl on her lap and drank the beer. He wanted to set it all aside, pull her into his arms, and kiss every part of her body from head to toe.

Not a good idea, not yet.

The popcorn vanished by mid-movie, and he set the empty bowl on the coffee table before draping his arm over her shoulders. He drew her closer, and she rested her head on his chest.

His heart beat faster, and he wondered if she could hear it. He stroked her upper arm, and his breathing elevated. His cock hardened, and he ground his teeth in an effort to control himself, but he couldn't help his body's reaction to holding her tightly to him.

She seemed comfortable where she was and rested one palm on his jean-clad thigh. The heat of her hand burned through the tough cotton to his skin. Could she sense what she was doing to him? Was her breathing a little more strained than it had been before?

When the credits rolled up the screen, she tilted her head so that their gazes met and held.

"It was a good movie." Her words came out low and throaty. "My favorite part was cuddling next to you."

"Funny." He brushed his thumb over her upper arm. "That's mine, too."

Her throat worked, and she shifted in his embrace so that her face was close to his. Her lips parted, but he took her mouth with his before she could utter a word.

Her soft moans sent a thrill straight to his groin. He deepened the kiss, tasting popcorn and beer on her tongue.

He drew her on top of him so that her thighs straddled his hips and her body pressed against his cock.

A rumble rose in his throat as she kissed him back, matching the heat in his own. His body was on fire, and he thought he would explode when she rocked her hips.

“Damn, Haylee,” he said when she broke the kiss, her mouth still close to his. “Do you have any idea what you do to me?”

Her lips curved into a sensual smile, and she shifted her hips to rub against him. “I think I do.”

With a low growl, he gathered her into his arms, twisted so that she ended up on her back, and held himself between her thighs. “Don’t play with fire.”

Her brown eyes smoldered as she looked up at him. “What if I don’t mind getting burned?”

He kissed her long and hard until he wasn’t sure what was up or down. He wanted more, so much more. But it was too soon to go any farther.

This time, he broke the kiss and settled back on his knees, still between her thighs. “Hell, woman. You tempt me to the point I can barely control myself.”

“Me, too.” Her eyes were dark with desire. “If we don’t stop, I’m afraid we’ll go too far.”

He blew out his breath and gave a slow nod. “You’re right.” He shifted and brought her up and into his arms, kissing her again.

Tyson drew back, breathing heavily, and he moved her to the couch. They stared at each other, their eyes locked.

“I’d better get home.” Her words sounded strained. “I had a wonderful time.”

“Yeah, me too.” He brushed strands of hair behind her ear. “I’ll walk you to your truck.”

She arranged her blouse when she was on her feet again. She retrieved her keys, wallet, and phone from the kitchen.

They walked hand-in-hand to her vehicle.

He kissed her again under the moonlight, then forced himself to back away. "I'll call you Monday."

She climbed into her truck and buzzed down the window. She started the vehicle, blew him a kiss, then backed up and took off.

He watched until the red of her taillights disappeared around the bend, and he stood there a while longer.

He felt like he'd been blindsided. Haylee McLeod had entered his life like a storm and had captured his soul so fast it made his head spin.

Yeah, he'd fallen hard. Now, he had to figure out exactly what to do about it.

Haylee climbed out of her truck and slammed the door shut before walking to the sidewalk in front of Maisey's Treasures, the town's only consignment shop. Haylee would be meeting in a little while with Helen Lang for a few last-minute changes she wanted to make for tomorrow's event. Haylee sighed. Helen was prone to doing things on the fly, which made things challenging.

Tacos sounded good for lunch, so she headed toward the little hole-in-the-wall Mexican eatery on the other side of the hardware store.

"Haylee." A man's voice from behind her made her groan. She turned to face Clint Taylor, who jogged across the street toward her.

She pasted on a smile as he reached her. "Hi, Clint."

He grinned at her as if they'd never stopped dating. "Hi, darlin'."

She worked to keep her tone friendly but firm. "We're not dating anymore, Clint, so drop the darlin'."

"About that." He shoved his hands in his front pockets. "I think we should start seeing each other again."

Haylee wanted to roll her eyes but kept them focused on Clint. “We agreed to be friends, and I want to leave it at that.”

He shook his head. “I never agreed to that.”

She put her hands on her hips, exasperated. “Clint, that’s what I want, so let’s not do this.”

“Give me another chance.” Now, he reverted to begging. “We were good together.”

She held back a sigh, struggling not to recite a litany of reasons why they were not good together. “I’m seeing someone else.”

His expression turned dark. “It’s that asshole, Tyson Donovan. You were with him at the barn dance.”

She clenched her teeth before speaking. “He’s a good guy.” She relaxed her jaw, frustrated with herself for feeling like she had to defend Tyson. “I’ve got to go, Clint.”

He scowled. “Haylee—”

“I’ve got to go.” She cut him off and turned her back on him. She kept her pace normal even though she wanted to rush away from him.

She cast a look over her shoulder to make sure he wasn’t following her. Thankfully, he was staring toward the Arizona Savings Bank instead, an angry look on his ordinarily attractive features. The expression made him look ugly, and she wondered what she’d ever seen in him.

She faced forward, relieved his attention wasn’t on her anymore. When she reached Ricardo’s, she felt calmer and back to her usual good spirits.

A tall form ahead caught her attention, and she smiled and called, “Tyson.”

He rotated away from the window he'd been looking in, and his lips curved into a sexy grin. He started toward her, and they met in front of Ricardo's.

"Fancy meeting you here, hon." He rested his palm on her upper arm. "How do you feel about public displays of affection?"

Haylee laughed. "A kiss wouldn't hurt a thing."

"I'm glad to hear it." Tyson stepped in and cupped the back of her head before giving her a sweet kiss that sent tingles throughout her body. He raised his head, his gaze lingering on her, and she couldn't take her eyes from his. "Have you had lunch?"

She managed to pull herself together and tipped her head in the direction of the small Mexican restaurant. "I'm hungry for tacos."

"That makes two of us." He settled his fingertips at the small of her back, heat traveling from his fingers and through her shirt as they walked to Ricardo's. Tyson held the door open for her, and they moved to the counter.

Ricardo peered out of the back room. "Ah, two of my favorite people."

"I'm ready for some of the best food in the southwest." Haylee leaned against the counter.

The older man came toward them. He was short, about the same as her five-five, with a thick mustache and stout figure. "You have come to the right place, Señorita Haylee." He turned his attention to Tyson. "Buenas días, Señor Tyson."

Tyson gave the man a nod. "Good to see you, Ricardo."

The owner looked at Haylee. “Your usual two tacos? Shredded beef?”

She smiled. “Yes, and a medium drink.”

The man addressed her companion. “And you?”

“The same,” Tyson said. “But make it three and a large drink.”

Ricardo set two empty paper cups on the counter for them to fill at the soda dispenser.

Haylee pulled her wallet from her purse, but Tyson raised his hand. “I’m paying.”

Her body tensed. “I can pay my share.”

“I know you can.” Tyson spoke quietly and firmly. “But I was raised right by my mama.” He held her gaze. “Please.”

Haylee forced herself to relax. She’d been raised in a family of cowboys who were just as stubborn about the man always paying, and she knew she’d be wasting her breath. So instead of arguing, she said, “Thank you, Tyson.”

“It’s my pleasure.” He paid, then nodded toward the small metal tables with plastic chairs after Ricardo said he’d bring out the food when it was ready.

The door opened, bringing with it a cool October breeze, and the man turned his attention to the next customers.

After filling their cups with ice and drinks, Haylee sat, and Tyson seated himself across the table from her. She cocked her head. “What brings you into town?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “I need to go to the bank to make a deposit. After that, I’ve got to get a sack of horse feed and place an order to be delivered.”

“I’m meeting a client after lunch.” She shook her head. “Helen is notorious for last-minute changes, and tomorrow’s event is no different.”

Ricardo delivered their tacos, then returned to the front counter to take the next person’s order.

Tyson picked up a taco. “I’d like to go to one of your events to check it out and give you a hand.”

He crunched a large bite, and she raised an eyebrow. “You’d be bored silly.”

Tyson chewed, swallowed, and washed it down with a drink of soda. “Try me.”

She laughed. “All right. I can always use an extra pair of hands. You’ll be sorry you made the offer—I’ll run you ragged.”

He flashed her a grin. “I can use the exercise.”

She let her gaze drift over the expanse of his chest, shoulders, and biceps. “I’d say you get plenty.”

He looked amused. “You’re making me feel like a sex object looking at me like that.”

She snorted with laughter. “I bet all women give you the once or twice over.”

He shook his head. “I’m not the jealous type, but I’d rather not think about other men checking you out.”

“I don’t mind if *you* do.” She gave him a flirtatious smile. “Anytime.”

He laughed. “You might regret that offer.”

They finished their meals, the banter flirtatious and fun.

He braced his arms on the tabletop. “How would you like to go to Apple Amy’s for their fall festival this Saturday? We can get lost in the corn maze and pick out a pumpkin when we find our way out.”

“I’ve never tried their maze.” Haylee smiled. “I’ve always been afraid I’d get lost and have to be rescued.”

“I’ve got a good sense of direction.” He gave her a sexy grin. “But if we can’t figure a way out, at least we’ll be together.”

“True.” She laughed at the thought of it. “I think they have hayrides and other fun things, too.” She considered her weekend. “I’ve got an event on Saturday, but I’m free Sunday.”

He put his hand over hers, and she loved how he enveloped her, not just his hand on hers but his very presence. “How about I pick you up at 2:30?”

“That’ll work.” She stood with him, and he gathered their trash. “I’ll have time to do my laundry and a few chores beforehand.”

They walked to the entrance, and Tyson tossed the trash in the bin. When they stood on the sidewalk, he smiled down at her. “What time and where is the event tomorrow?”

She eyed him. “You’re serious?”

“Yep.” He nodded.

“All right.” She gave him the relevant information. “I’ll be there early to unload and set up. If you can make it, I’ll start at four.” *She glanced at her phone. “I’ve got to run, or I’m going to be late for my meeting with Helen.”

“Then I won’t hold you any longer.” He brushed his lips over hers in a soft caress before he raised his head and looked into her eyes. “I’ll see you then.”

Haylee smiled then reluctantly parted from him before she took off down the sidewalk to Helen’s office at her insurance agency. She couldn’t help herself—she glanced over her shoulder, saw him watching her, and gave him a little wave. She had to fight to keep from looking back yet again.

Yeah, she had it so very bad.

TYSON COULDN’T GET ENOUGH of looking at Haylee—she had the cutest ass and a great figure. He loved watching her as she walked away from him. Damn, but he loved everything about her.

More than anything, he loved the person she was within. She was lovely inside and out.

When she had disappeared into the insurance agency, he jogged across the street to Arizona Savings Bank. He stopped in front of the revolving door. A man came out and bumped into him hard enough to make him take a step back.

Tyson narrowed his gaze and looked into the glaring face of Clint Taylor. “Stay the fuck out of my way,” Clint said in a hard voice before he strode away.

What the hell? Tyson shook off the encounter and headed through the revolving door and into the bank.

The tellers and managers were the same women who had worked there when he was in middle school. They’d all been in their early twenties at the time, and he could swear the six of them hadn’t aged a day since then. They’d made it through

three or four bank changes as they were sold and bought out and survived it all.

“Hey, Michelle.” Tyson reached the first available teller. “How are the grandkids?”

“Precious as ever.” Michelle gave him a mischievous smile. “I can spoil them, send them home, and let them terrorize their parents.”

Tyson grinned as she took his deposit, which was from his most recent sale to an elderly buyer who was old-school and insisted on paying with a handwritten check. He trusted the man, and his checks always cleared, so Tyson didn’t have a problem with it.

They chatted a bit as he made the deposit. “Would you like me to write the amount in your checking account on your deposit slip?” Michelle asked.

“No, I’ve got it.” He knew every dollar he made and spent. And soon, he might be making a hell of a big purchase if he did buy out Goldman.

He mentally shook his head at the thought of Haylee teasing him about becoming a jerky tycoon.

Michelle smiled. “See you next time.”

“You bet.” Tyson gave her a nod before he strode into the revolving door, which spit him out onto the sidewalk.

It reminded him of his literal run-in with Clint Taylor. He had a feeling the man had purposely slammed into him. Then he remembered that Taylor had tried to cut in with Haylee at the barn dance, and Tyson had all but told him Haylee was his for the night. She had dated Taylor and broke up with him in the past, but it was clear the man wanted her back.

Well, he sure as hell wasn't getting her. She belonged to Tyson now, and he was never letting her go.

He let out a harsh breath. Haylee wouldn't take too kindly to Tyson's thoughts about her, the caveman part of him forcing itself through. He'd keep those thoughts to himself.

As he headed back to his truck, his cell rang. He pulled it out of his pocket and checked the screen. Goldman.

He brought the phone to his ear. "Donovan here."

"Tyson, my boy." Goldman sounded like his usual cheerful, enthusiastic self. "The lawyers have looked the books over frontward and backward, and they'll have a report to you by the end of the week."

"Looking forward to taking a look at them." Tyson gripped the phone as he reached the parking lot where he'd left his truck. He beeped the doors open with the remote. "I'll call you when I've had a chance to go through it."

He ended the call with Goldman and climbed into his truck. He started the vehicle, his mind full between his ranch, the potential purchase of the jerky company—and Haylee most of all.

Tyson was glad to have the time with her tomorrow, even though he knew she'd be busy as hell. She was never far from his thoughts, and he looked forward to every minute with her.

Ah, hell. He needed to get his head back on straight sooner rather than later.

Haylee hadn't doubted Tyson's word, but it was still a surprise to see him waiting for her at two p.m. at the town's one and only park, where the event was to be held in just a couple of hours.

Her throat grew tight at the sight of him leaning up against his truck with his arms folded across his broad chest, his Stetson low on his brow, shading his eyes from the bright sunlight. He pushed his hat up with one finger, letting her see the intense blue of his gaze and the way he seemed to be drinking her in. A slow smile curved his lips, causing a thrill to shoot through her.

"You're here." She smiled.

He moved away from the vehicle. "Ready and waiting for your instructions."

Haylee unlocked the camper shell window on the bed of her truck. "I have plenty for you to carry to set next to the gazebo by the pond." She raised the window, unlocked the tailgate, and lowered it. She stepped aside and gestured to the boxes inside. "Take them away."

"Your wish is my command." Tyson took her into his arms and kissed her in a way that made her feel as if forever with

him was possible.

He raised his head and gave her a sexy smile before grabbing the biggest box filled with centerpieces. He carried it over the rise to where the tables would soon be set up.

Lips tingling and a smile on her face, Haylee picked up a medium-sized box of small gifts that would be given to each guest.

The party rental truck pulled into the lot, and she waited for it to come to a stop. She shifted the box and propped it on her hip while waiting for John Burnham, the owner of KC Rentals, to climb out.

He carried a clipboard and smiled as he strolled to her. “Heya, Haylee.”

“Hope your day’s going well, John.” She handed the box to Tyson as he returned. He nodded and greeted John before carrying the box away.

She took the clipboard and scanned the list of items. “Five rounds, two oblongs, forty chairs, and an arbor.” She signed it and handed the clipboard back to John. “By the pond.”

For a moment, Haylee watched John and his son start to convey the items to the vast, flat area near the duck pond.

The grass was still green in this part of Arizona in late October, and the sun shone from a cloudless sky, the temperature hovering just under ninety degrees. The fall-winter rains wouldn’t start until late November. Haylee tipped her head back, relieved but not surprised to see not a wisp of white marring the cerulean blue.

When all the boxes were next to the gazebo, Tyson came to Haylee. “What next?”

She pushed hair behind her ears. “I need you to pick up the swans from Jerry Mack’s farm.”

Tyson raised an eyebrow. “Swans?”

“Helen insisted on them for her daughter’s bridal shower.” Haylee shrugged. “Thinks they’re romantic.”

His lips twitched. “You don’t?”

She smiled at his obvious amusement. “Just go get them.”

He saluted. “You’ve got it.” A quick kiss and he was on his way.

Haylee spent the next half hour adorning the arbor with roses, lace, and tulle, along with her creations, then putting tablecloths and centerpieces on all the rounds. She enjoyed creating and was known for the exceptional decorations she designed.

When Tyson returned, he carried a big plastic dog kennel over the rise, his brow furrowed. He set it down. “Jerry Mack’s 4-H kid had the kennel ready when I got there, and I loaded it up. But now I’m not so sure what we have here are swans.”

A round of loud honking emanated from the crate, and Haylee stared at it. “That doesn’t sound like a swan’s honk. Did he give me geese?”

She crouched in front of the gate and peered in. “Holy crap, they are geese.” She stood, braced her hands on her hips, and looked at Tyson. “I confirmed with him this morning, and he said he’d send over the swans. Damn.”

He pushed his fingers through his hair. “The boys told me he had to run to Phoenix about an hour ago.”

Haylee bit her lower lip and looked around her. Everything had been going smoothly until now. If Jerry was already an hour out, there would be no time for him to turn around and get the swans here on time.

She rolled her shoulders. “There’s nothing we can do about it now and the guests will be arriving soon. We’ll have to put the geese aside until Jerry Mack can have someone pick them up.”

“I’ll give him a call.” Tyson drew his phone out of his pocket. “In the meantime, I’ll put the kennel on the other side of the gazebo for now.”

“Thank you.” She saw Helen walking along the path over the rise.

She strode up to Helen, a slender sixtyish woman with silver hair and an elegant bearing. Haylee smiled at her. “Everything is almost ready.”

“It looks lovely.” Helen swept her gaze around the area and came to rest on the pond. She turned to Haylee. “Where are the swans?”

Haylee winced internally. “There was a mistake, and Mack’s sent geese instead of swans.”

Helen’s eyebrows shot up. “I promised Paige swans.”

“I’m so sorry, Helen.” Haylee tried her best to use a soothing tone that she often had to use with the woman. “Somehow, there was a mix-up, and all we have are geese.”

Helen’s mouth tightened into a thin line. “Then put them in the pond. They’ll have to do.”

Haylee shook her head. “That wouldn’t be a good idea. Geese are too unpredictable.”

“Just do it.” Helen cut her off in an imperious tone. “My daughter is about to arrive.”

“It’s a safety issue.” Haylee had to get her to understand.

Helen turned her back on Haylee. “Get them on the water and do it *now*.”

Haylee took a calming breath as Helen walked away. Did the woman know anything about geese?

Apparently not.

What was that saying about the customer always being right? *So* not true.

Haylee met Tyson coming around from behind the gazebo. “Change in plans.” She grimaced. “Helen wants the geese on the water.” She shook her head at Tyson’s doubtful look. “She gave the order, make that a demand, and with Helen, there’s nothing I can do about it without her going ballistic.”

He picked up the kennel and carried it toward the pond. “You’re sure?”

She joined him and groaned. “It’s going to be a disaster.”

He reached the water’s edge. “I hope you’re wrong.”

She watched him open the gate. The geese waddled out of the crate, honking and flapping their wings. She crossed her fingers and kept her distance from the fowl. “I hope I’m wrong, too.”

When she was far enough away, Haylee turned her back on them and hurried around the tables, making adjustments, ensuring everything was as perfect as possible.

Splashing came from the direction of the pond, and then relative quiet. She looked in that direction and saw the geese

placidly floating—they seemed to be enjoying the water, so maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

Women, ranging from young adults to elderly ladies, started showing up. In King Creek, all folks loved a good party.

Haylee greeted the guests—she knew almost everyone there. Tyson stayed out of sight, likely because it was a female-only gathering. He'd been a big help, and having him there had been fun.

The afternoon passed with everything going perfectly and everyone seeming to have a good time. The bride-to-be beamed her thousand-watt smile from her chair beneath the arbor as she opened her gifts. Everyone stood around Paige, watching as she was gifted items from custom slippers, to his and her luggage tags, a gold sequin tote, bride robe, satin pajamas, makeup bag—and more risqué items like a sexy negligee, edible panties, and a kinky couple's game.

Loud honking and splashing came from the pond, and a lump jumped into Haylee's throat. She shot her gaze toward the sound—

And to her horror, the geese charged toward Helen.

They came up from behind her, necks outstretched, making hissing sounds and honking.

Haylee bolted toward the woman. "Helen, watch out!"

Helen looked up.

The geese reached her, and one nipped her backside.

Helen gave a blood-curdling shriek.

Eyes wild, she whirled around and started beating back the geese with her purse. "Get out of here! Go away!"

The geese stretched their wings and thrust out their chests as they looked for their next victims with their backs to them.

Haylee stormed into the geese. “Get back.” She waved her hands and chased them away from the guests. Geese were cowards—they chose victims who weren’t looking and didn’t know they were coming.

Tyson had the crate ready. “I’ll take care of them.” He inclined his head toward two young boys sitting at the foot of the gazebo, looking thoroughly like they’d had the riot act read to them. “These young men will help since they threw rocks at the geese and stirred them up.”

“Bradley and Joel.” Haylee put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes. “Your mamas will be so disappointed in you.”

“Don’t tell them, please.” Bradley’s horrified gaze pleaded with her. “Mom’ll kill me.”

Joel nodded, his head bouncing like a bobblehead doll. “Please, Miss Haylee.”

Haylee pointed to the loud waterfowl. “Gather those geese and get them back in the crate. Then we’ll see.”

The boys took off for the honking creatures. Haylee blew out her breath and looked at Tyson. “Thank you.”

He winked, sending a shiver through her, and she swallowed. Damn, but the man was hot.

Haylee gathered herself and returned to the melee left behind.

Helen looked like she had steam rolling out of her ears as she stomped toward Haylee, brows narrowed. “My daughter’s

party is ruined. All because you brought those—those—damned beasts.”

Haylee’s eyes widened, and she struggled to contain the retort she wanted to make. “I’m sorry, Helen. I don’t know what happened with the order for swans. I confirmed this morning and Jerry said he was sending over swans.”

Helen stood ramrod straight and lifted her chin. “I want a full refund.”

Haylee stared at her for a moment, unable to comprehend what Helen had just said.

“I mean it.” Helen narrowed her gaze. “You owe me a refund.”

Haylee struggled to control her emotions. This whole disaster was going to cost her thousands, all because she’d let Helen steamroll her.

She inhaled deeply and let it out slowly. “Helen, I have a party to finish. We can schedule an appointment to review today’s details later in the week.”

Afraid to let her emotions show on her expression, Haylee stepped around Helen and returned to the guests, who were milling around and chatting excitedly.

The back of her neck burned, and her scalp itched. Her reputation could take a hit from this whole mess. She took in a restorative breath and shook it off. She had a job and a bride who deserved a fabulous party no matter what the end result might be.

Haylee acted as the hostess, ensuring everyone was okay and asking if they needed anything.

She seated Paige again beneath the arbor and gathered the ladies back around the bride-to-be, who only had a few more gifts to open. In moments, the ladies exploded into giggles when Paige opened a box containing a giant twenty-inch cherry-red penis. Face as crimson as the dildo, she hurried to stuff it back in the box.

From the corner of her eye, Haylee saw the horrified look on Helen's equally flaming face.

After unwrapping the last of the presents, the bride handed out her gifts to her guests, thick glittering pens with giant glass "diamonds" on top.

The breeze caught Haylee's hair as she watched and blew it across her eyes. She brushed it away with her fingers and looked toward the gazebo. Tyson sat on the bottom step, and he was watching her.

She smiled and waved at him, and he raised his hand in acknowledgment. Heart beating a little faster, she turned away and said goodbye to the guests as they departed.

Helen seemed to be keeping her distance, which was fine by Haylee. She couldn't deal with it all at this moment.

When the last guest had left, Haylee started cleaning up. Decorations lay scattered across the ground, and bits of garbage dotted the grass.

"I'm here to serve." Tyson's voice was like a low purr to Haylee's senses.

She turned around with a smile. "I've got plenty for you to do."

"Fire away."

She nodded toward the ground. “Please pick up the trash and toss it. Then you can help me pack up the decorations. John Burnham should be here soon to get the tables, chairs, and the arbor.”

Tyson’s gaze met hers as he rested his hand on her shoulder. It felt heavy and warm through her blouse. “Has anyone told you lately how wonderful you are?”

She looked at him in surprise, then pretended suspicion. “Are you trying to get on my good side?”

He kissed her lightly on the lips, then smiled at her. “You just looked like you needed to hear it.” He let his hand slide away then turned to start his job.

She watched him, his words sinking in. Did it show on her face how she felt about what Helen had said to her? Did it bother her even more than she realized?

“Haylee.” Helen’s harsh voice came from behind her.

She slowly turned and tried for a neutral expression. “What can I do for you, Helen?”

Helen’s throat worked, and she lifted her chin. “I have been thinking about it and was unjust in telling you I wanted a refund. It was not your fault the goose bit me.”

A whoosh of relief made Haylee’s muscles relax, and she smiled. “You were under a lot of pressure as the mother of the bride. Your daughter looked radiant today.”

“She did, didn’t she?” Helen beamed. “The gifts were all so lovely—” She broke off, her cheeks going pink, and she cleared her throat. “Most of them.”

Haylee couldn’t help but laugh. “Yes, most of them were.”

“I’ll let you get back to it.” Helen nodded toward the decorations Haylee had been taking off the arbor.

Haylee smiled and returned to her work.

A little while later, Tyson came back. “You look happier.”

“Let’s just say a little stress was just lifted.” She turned her grin on him. “What happened with the geese and the Cooper and Evans boys?”

“Got the geese to Jerry Mack’s.” Tyson shrugged. “As for the boys, got them to promise to shovel manure for a week on the ranch in penance. I’ll pay them at the end of the week, but they don’t know that now.”

Haylee laughed. “Way to use that cowboy brain.”

He looked at her with amusement. “What are you doing this evening?”

She groaned. “I have been so wound up working on this event that I need to decompress. After leftover spaghetti, I’m going to put on my most comfortable pajamas and fuzzy slippers, pour a big glass of wine, fill a huge bowl with my favorite ice cream, and eat it in bed while bingeing Netflix.”

Tyson chuckled and shook his head. “I can’t beat that. I’ll go home and have a beer and Spam sandwiches.”

Haylee made a face. “Yuck.”

He grinned. “Don’t knock it ‘til you try it.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” She put the last decoration into the box. “I don’t foresee Spam on my menu.”

Tyson picked up the box and started for her truck. “Never say never.”

Haylee shook her head. “Not as long as I can cook up a casserole or get take-out.”

He laughed and helped her finish wrapping things up. When her truck was loaded, he closed the tailgate and the door of the camper shell.

They walked to the driver’s side door together, and she tipped her head to meet his gaze. “Thank you. You’ve been a huge help today.”

“You’re welcome.” He sifted his fingers through strands of her hair. “I’m looking forward to Sunday and the fall festival.”

She smiled. “I am, too.”

He lowered his head, and she sighed into his kiss. The weariness from the day vanished for a moment with the movement of his lips, the taste of him, the feel of him. She breathed him in and clenched her hands in his shirt, wanting more.

When he broke the kiss, she struggled to catch her breath. His eyes had changed to a smoky blue, and she felt lost. It took a moment for her to find her words.

She spoke softly. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Haylee.” With a soft, tingling movement, he brushed his lips against hers before raising his head and smiling.

She managed to gather herself together and stepped out of his embrace. She climbed into her truck and started it. When she put it into reverse, he stood by his truck, watching her. She pulled forward, smiled, and waved, then took off.

When she looked in the rearview mirror, he was still watching her, and then he was too far to see anymore.

She liked that he watched her as she left. She liked that he kept thinking about her.

How far would things go between them? She wasn't sure, but she was willing to find out.

Haylee sat at Tyson's side as he drove his truck through the entrance to Apple Amy's Sunday afternoon. The sky was a bright, clear blue, the sun shining down on the crowd as people walked from one fall festival event to another.

Tyson parked and hurried around to open Haylee's door and help her out of the truck. He took her hand in his big one as they walked toward the main area, where the information booth sat. She glanced up at the big, good-looking man and smiled to herself.

Colorful pendants fluttered in the breeze, draped from ropes throughout the area. Balloons tied in bunches and secured in front of each building bobbed as they floated in the air. Bright orange pumpkins were arranged in front of and around bales of yellow straw near the entrance.

Haylee drew in smells of candy apples, cider, roasted almonds, and freshly baked treats. "Before we go home, I want to buy one of their famous pies."

"I intend to get a few." He looked down at her. "A whole one for me and a couple for the men." His mouth quirked. "I don't intend to share mine."

She batted her eyelashes. "Not even with little ol' me?"

He chuckled. "I'll consider it."

They reached a water basin perched on a pedestal, where a young man bobbed for apples. He came up, one between his teeth and water running in rivulets down his face and into the collar of his shirt.

Haylee applauded with the other onlookers, and this time, a teenage girl moved to the basin.

"Have you ever bobbed for apples?" She looked up at Tyson. "I used to be pretty good at it, but it's been ages."

He shrugged. "Never tried."

She gripped his hand and drew him toward the line. "Here's your chance."

He gave her a good-natured look and took his place, two behind the teenage girl. The line went down fairly quickly, and Tyson handed Haylee his hat and took his place in front of the basin.

"Hands behind your back." Haylee grinned. "Now go."

Tyson tried for one of the dozen or so apples in the basin. The crowd cheered him on. By the time he'd bit into one, his face and hair were wet, and water rolled into his collar. The crowd cheered, and Tyson raised his fruit like a prize fighter's trophy.

Haylee laughed and hugged him, water dripping into her hair.

"Your turn," he said before biting into his apple and crunching it.

"Nah." She shook her head. "It was fun just watching you." She grabbed his hand and tugged him along, past a pumpkin-guts treasure hunt for the kids that was going on next

to a pin-the-tail-on-the-pumpkin event for the youngest of the festivalgoers.

They reached the small bowling alley and watched a young woman put her fingers into three holes in a bowling ball-sized pumpkin and rolled it straight for a set of pins with scarecrows taped to the front. She completely missed them, and her “bowling ball” rolled into the gutter.

Haylee took a turn and missed her first throw but got a strike on her second. Tyson knocked down all but one pin but missed the spare on the next roll.

After wiping pumpkin goo from their fingers with hand wipes, they moved on to the next booth, face painting, with the proceeds going to the children’s hospital. Haylee’s sister-in-law, Marlee, was decorating their six-and-a-half-year-old twin nieces, Emily’s and Olivia’s, faces.

“Come get your face painted.” Emily jogged out and took Haylee’s hand. “Marlee’s so good at it.”

“Sounds like fun.” Haylee smiled and left Tyson behind. She plopped down on the straw bale in front of Marlee. “Heya.”

“Ooh, you’re letting me get my hands on you?” Marlee gave her a devilish look. “I could paint your face green and give you warts.”

“I’ll settle for lacy butterflies.” Haylee laughed. “Not too much.”

Tyson looked amused and settled onto a bale to watch. “Give her the works.”

“Don’t listen to him.” Haylee smirked. “Make me pretty.”

“As if you need that.” Marlee focused on Haylee’s face, using several different colors of paint. When she finished, Emily and Olivia gave enthusiastic shouts and giggles of approval as she handed Haylee a mirror.

Haylee looked at her reflection—Marlee had painted butterflies and flowers along the sides of her face and onto her cheeks. It looked pretty, and how she did it emphasized Haylee’s eyes.

She started digging in her pocket for cash to donate to the children’s hospital, but Tyson said, “I’ve got this,” and dropped a twenty into the jar of bills and coins.

They said goodbye to Marlee and the girls and walked on to where a pie-eating contest was in full swing. Tyson and Haylee cheered on her brother, Justin, who was the first to get to his second pie within the allotted time. Pie filling covered his mouth while crumbs and more filling stained the white bib at his throat.

“Justin has always been a huge pie fan, from peach to pecan to lemon meringue.” Haylee glanced at Tyson. “His wife, Miranda, spoils him rotten by baking pies frequently.”

She turned back to the contest to see a teenage boy she didn’t know catch up with Justin, and now they were neck and neck. Just as the timer went off, Justin managed to eat the last bite, and the mayor declared him the winner.

After congratulating Justin, Haylee and Tyson moved past the petting zoo to a pumpkin latte bar, where Tyson purchased two lattes and two pumpkin scones. They chatted, ate, and drank as they enjoyed the rest of the festival.

When they came to a pumpkin throwing contest, where contestants threw the squash like shotputs, Haylee moved

closer to the sidelines. “This looks like fun.”

Tyson handed his almost-empty latte cup to Haylee and rolled up his sleeves. “I’m gonna give it a try.”

Haylee laughed and watched as he took his place in line. When he reached the front, he selected a pumpkin and stood in the shotput ring. He moved forward and put his body into the throw, barely keeping inside the ring as he released his squash.

She held her breath as she watched it sail in an arc and splat on the ground a foot from the farthest shattered orange mess on the dirt.

Haylee handed him his drink when he returned to her side, and she gave him a quick hug. They stood and watched the remaining shotput throws. She held her breath again as the last person’s throw sailed high through the air, then landed a few inches behind Tyson’s.

She cheered and jumped up and down, almost dropping her remaining latte. “What did you win?”

“Looks like a gift card for Apple Amy pies.” Tyson smiled. “I’ll take that in a heartbeat.”

He accepted his award and slid the card into his wallet. “Are you ready for the corn maze?”

“You betcha.” She handed him her empty cup to throw into a nearby garbage barrel with his.

Tyson took Haylee’s hand and led her away from the festival grounds to the cornfield and the entrance to the maze. No one was in line, so they were sent into the midst of the corn.

“Oh, wow.” Haylee looked around them as they rounded the first corner of the maze. The corn grew ten to twelve feet

tall, and she felt lost already.

They came to a junction. “This way.” Tyson tugged her to the right. They walked around another corner, came to a dead end, and retraced their steps.

It seemed like they’d walked around for an hour, but it was probably only about fifteen minutes when Haylee stopped Tyson. “I think we’re going to have to send smoke signals.”

He looked up at the position of the sun in the sky. “I’m sure we’re almost there.”

She shook her head. “That’s what you said last time.”

He grinned and led her on. A few minutes later, they walked out of the maze. “What did I tell you?”

“You got lucky.” Still, she smiled and accepted a treat bag one of the attendants offered her.

“Great job,” the young woman said. “There’s candy in the bag, and you’ll find some Apple Amy coupons, too.”

“I love coupons.” Haylee peered into her bag. “Oooh, chocolate caramels and candy corn.”

Tyson popped some candy corn into his mouth and looked at the sky. “It’ll be dusk soon.” He turned to Haylee. “What do you say to a hayride after we pick out our pumpkins and put them in the truck?”

She unstuck her jaws from the caramel she’d just chewed. “I’m game. I haven’t been on a hayride since I was a kid.”

He chewed more candy corn as they headed back to the pumpkin-picking area. “Supposed to be a harvest moon tonight.”

“Perfect.” Haylee breathed in the scents of candy and caramel apples as they came to a display stand.

“Which would you prefer?” Tyson guided her up to the display. “Candy or caramel?”

“I haven’t had a caramel one in forever.” She gestured toward a medium-sized version covered in nuts and milk chocolate, drizzled with white chocolate. “That one looks amazing.”

He bought it along with a candy apple for himself and two bottles of pumpkin spice beer. They ate their treat and drank the beer as they went toward Apple Amy’s store. When they finished eating and drinking, they tossed the sticks and beer bottles then went inside to buy some pies.

Now carrying pies and their bags of candy, they wandered over to the pumpkin-picking area. Haylee chose a tall, medium-sized one, picturing the crazy face she’d carve into it. Tyson’s was medium and round.

“I’ll carry these if you can manage the bags of pies,” he said.

She took his bag. “I’ve got ’em.”

“Have you made pumpkin pies?” he asked as they carried their loot to his truck.

She nodded. “One of my favorite versions is a deep-dish pumpkin mousse. I’m not bad at pies—some of them. I make a pretty good lemon merengue, too.”

“You did say you liked to bake.” He unlocked his truck as they reached it. “I’m willing to be your taste tester.”

“You are formally offered the position.” She waited as he loaded the squash and candy bags. He took the pie boxes from

her and put them onto the back seat.

It was almost dark when they made their way to the hayride starting point, and lights were ablaze around Apple Amy's in the not-so-far distance.

Three couples and a few teenagers waited for the next hay wagon as it approached with the clop of horse hooves and jingle of the reins.

Two beautiful roan horses drew the wagon to a stop. Tyson helped Haylee up, swung himself into the back, and settled beside her in the straw. The driver waited for everyone to load up, and then the wagon lurched forward and jolted into motion.

"I left my sweater in your truck." The desert cooled off quickly when the sun went down, and Haylee's skin had chilled.

"Maybe this will help." Tyson rested his arm around her shoulders and drew her close, and she leaned into his body heat.

"It does." She wriggled against him and looked at the harvest moon on the horizon. "The moon looks so big."

"It's beautiful." He squeezed her to him, and she felt warm within and cared for in his embrace. "You are even more so. I haven't been able to take my eyes off you all day."

She tipped her head back to meet his gaze. "You're sweet."

"Nothing sweet about me." He moved his lips close to her ear. "Nothing at all."

She shivered at his nearness and the warmth of his breath on her skin. "I'll be the judge of that," she said lightly, but her

words came out low and throaty, indicating how much he affected her.

She rested her head against his chest and listened to the sound of his heartbeat, the teenagers' laughter, and the other couples' murmurs. It had grown dark save for the yellow-orange light of the harvest moon.

It felt cozy and intimate despite the others as if it were just the two of them. Tyson nuzzled her hair, and she let out a shaky breath. She tipped her face and looked into his gaze as he raised his head.

He moved his lips to hers, kissing her softly as they rocked in motion with the movement of the hay wagon. The straw felt itchy through her clothing, but it was a minor discomfort compared to the way Tyson made her feel with the intensity of his kiss.

He kissed her so long and sweet, and she tasted candy apple and the pumpkin-spiced beer on his tongue. It pleasantly combined with his masculine flavor.

Heat pooled in her abdomen as he kissed her. The low murmur of voices seemed more distant as Tyson moved his lips over her.

He slid his fingers over her belly, resting it beneath her breasts. She wanted him to move his hand up farther, to cup the weight of one.

He shifted against her, his big body hiding hers so that no one could see a thing, then moved his hand exactly where she wanted it. She sucked in her breath as he traced her nipple with his thumb, sending shards of desire through her.

She moaned into his mouth and wriggled beneath him, silently begging for more. He obliged and moved his hand to

her other breast, teasing the nipple with brushes of his thumb, then pinching and pulling it between his thumb and forefinger.

The desire to beg him for more was so strong that she had to fight to hold it back. For one, it was the wrong place. For another, she didn't want him to think she wanted to return to his ranch instead of her own home. It would be so tempting.

“We need to stop.” He let out a low groan and placed his forehead against hers. “I’m sorry.” His words came out low and almost harsh. “I shouldn’t have touched you like that.”

“I wanted it.” She had to struggle to get her breath back. “But you’re right, we shouldn’t go any further tonight.”

He kissed her forehead and shifted her in his lap so that her head rested against his chest as their bodies rocked with the motion of the hay wagon.

It seemed too soon when the conveyance pulled up before a roaring bonfire. Tyson jumped down from the wagon then helped Haylee out. They went closer to the fire, which heated her blood and chased away the chill.

When she was warmer, they enjoyed hotdogs they purchased at the small stand, then complementary s’mores handed to them. When they finished the treat, Tyson rested his arm around her shoulders and guided her toward the parking lot.

She rested her head against his shoulder as they walked. “I had a great time, Tyson.”

He kissed the top of her head. “I did, too. Thanks for coming with me.”

When they reached his truck, he helped her in, then jogged to the driver’s side and jumped in. He turned over the big

engine, and in moments they were headed back into King Creek.

“This was such a great day.” She smiled at him as he drove. “We did so much, and I had such fun.”

“That makes two of us.” He glanced from the road to her and back. The amber glow of the dashboard lights illuminated his features, making his cheekbones and chin look even stronger.

They didn’t talk much on the way back. It had been a long day, and they’d packed in a lot of activities.

Once they reached her home, he walked her to the front door. She unlocked the door and turned the knob. “Would you like to come in? I think Jill and Leeann are out.”

“I’d better be going.” Tyson drew her into his arms. Her eyes widened as he brought her flush against him, and she felt his desire pressed into her flesh. “My control around you is paper thin.”

Haylee shivered, needing him even more than she had earlier. But they both had to be smart about this. She let out her breath slowly, then raised herself on tiptoes and brushed her lips over his. “Goodnight, Tyson. Thank you for a wonderful day.”

“Not so fast.” He drew her into his arms and kissed her long and slow until her mind spun and she felt dizzy.

“Goodnight, hon.” His breath warmed her lips as she clung to him to steady herself. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

She stepped back. “Goodnight, Tyson.” Her legs felt shaky as she slipped into her home. She gave him one last long look and closed the door.

A moment passed before she heard his boot steps on her front porch stairs, and then down the walkway. His truck door slammed shut shortly after, and the motor came to life. Gradually, the sound faded into the night.

It was then she realized she'd been holding her breath. She inhaled deeply, then let it out and started for her bedroom. Tonight had been too soon to take things further, but next time...the next time they were together might not be.

In another two weeks, they would be headed for a B&B in southeastern Arizona, and she had a feeling they wouldn't be sleeping in separate rooms.

She smiled as she entered her bedroom and closed the door behind her. Tyson Donovan was a hell of a man, and right now, she considered herself one lucky woman.

Tyson leaned back in his chair and watched the front entrance of Mickey's Bar and Grill, waiting for Haylee to walk through. He'd called her late in the afternoon and mentioned he was going to Mickey's for a burger and a beer, and she'd said she'd love to join him.

It was early Wednesday evening, and there wasn't a live band, but country music played loud from speakers in the rafters. He tapped his toe to a Kade Fields tune.

Haylee walked through the doorway like sunshine filling the room. Her blonde hair lay about her shoulders, and her smile knocked the breath from him.

Their gazes met, and she waved and started toward him. He took in her smooth, fluid movements, the gentle sway of her hips, and the curve of her kissable lips.

"Hey, Tyson." She reached him, and he stood. "Sorry, I'm a little late."

"You never have to apologize." He kissed her, and her lips tingled from the gentle kiss. He helped her out of her jacket, then waited for her to take her seat before he resumed sitting in his own.

She glanced at the empty table. "You haven't started yet."

“I’m in no hurry.” He shrugged. “Besides, a gentleman always waits for a lady.”

Haylee rolled her eyes. “Save me from cowboy gentlemen.” Then she looked at him, a sparkle in her eyes. “Truth be told, most women secretly love it.”

Tyson couldn’t help smiling whenever he was around her. “Glad to hear it.” He pushed a folded paper menu toward her. “I’m having the cowboy burger with steak fries and a beer.”

“Sounds perfect.” She didn’t look at the menu. “I’ll take the cowgirl burger with sweet potato fries.”

He caught sight of a server and flagged her down. “Reba, we’re ready to order.”

“Terrific.” The redhead smiled at him—she flirted with him shamelessly whenever he was in the bar and alone. “What’ll you have?”

Tyson told her and ordered a domestic on tap while Haylee said she’d like a craft beer. Reba collected the menu and whisked them away to the kitchen to place their orders.

Haylee leaned forward, both arms braced on the tabletop. “You mentioned a meeting with Henry Goldman on the phone last night. How did it go?”

“After looking over the books and going over the report by my attorneys, I think it would be a sound investment. So, I told him I wanted to hear his asking price.”

She leaned forward, closer to him. “And?”

He loved the enthusiasm in her expression. “It was far lower than I expected and what my firm’s estimation of value was. He’s been telling me he wants someone he trusts to take

over his legacy and would give me a price he wouldn't offer anyone else. It was a damned good one."

She beamed at him. "So, you're going to become a jerky tycoon."

He chuckled. "If all goes well, I'll own a jerky company. Don't know about the tycoon part."

"You'll do well." Haylee leaned back as Reba arrived with the beer and set one in front of each of them.

When the server left, Haylee sipped from her beverage while Tyson knocked back a good swallow or two.

She set her glass on the tabletop. "I imagine yours and Henry's attorneys will hammer out the contract."

He gave a nod. "Goldman's in a hurry to retire, so I think it'll happen sooner rather than later."

"You mentioned Dutchman's Gold is a regional small-batch company." She cocked her head. "It's not available everywhere that I've seen."

Tyson shook his head. "He provides the product mostly to wholesale warehouses, which in turn sells to small retailers and their members."

She looked like she was considering the information he'd given her. "Do you think you'll go bigger with the company? Maybe go national?"

He blew out his breath. "Hell, if I know. I'm in no rush to grow it bigger. I might like to keep it as is, but there's a huge market for jerky, and Dutchman's Gold is the best, in my estimation."

Haylee smiled. "It sure is my favorite. And now you'll become my favorite jerky man."

Tyson laughed. "I'm not so sure about that title."

Reba arrived with their burgers and fries, a squeeze bottle of ketchup, and silverware rolled up in paper napkins. She swept away, and both Haylee and Tyson dug in.

"Oh, my God." Haylee dabbed her mouth with her napkin. "Mickey makes the best burgers in Arizona."

Tyson chased his large bite down with beer, then thumped the mug on the table. "It hits the spot."

They enjoyed their meals, Haylee eating every bit of her burger and sweet potato fries and Tyson clearing his plate.

After they finished eating and their table was cleared, Haylee sat back in her seat. "I'm ready to go home and climb into bed. It's been a long day."

"I'm beat." Tyson finished off his beer and set it on the tabletop. "I'll walk you out to your truck."

He put enough cash on the table to pay their tab and a generous tip, then helped Haylee into her jacket and slipped on his own. He escorted Haylee out of the bar, but they couldn't get very far without running into someone either knew and saying good night before moving on.

When they finally walked out onto the broad porch, the air was cool and crisp, and the stars twinkled brightly in the sky. He stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets as they walked down the steps onto the gravel and toward their parked vehicles in the dimly lit parking lot.

A woman screamed, and Tyson came to a hard stop, hair rising at his nape. His protective instincts kicked into gear, and he clenched Haylee's arm, halting her with him.

To his right, a loud crash jerked Tyson's attention in that direction, and he saw a woman standing several feet away from a man who slammed a bat into the sideview mirror of a beat-up old Chevy. "You bitch," he shouted in a drunken slur and hit the truck again, crunching the fender in a loud, metallic sound.

"Stop it," the woman shrieked. "I should never have married you, bastard."

"This is what I'm going to do to you, whore." The drunk staggered and took another swing at the truck, putting a big dent in the passenger door. "Let's see if you can sleep with another man then. No man's gonna look at you with a broken face."

The back of Tyson's neck burned, and his gut grew tight. He'd heard enough. "Wait here," he said to Haylee.

"No." Her eyes widened, and she grabbed his arm. "Don't get into the middle of a domestic dispute. I'm calling the sheriff's department, and they can handle it."

"I can't let him hurt her." Tyson disentangled himself from Haylee's grasp and strode toward the man and woman.

"Damn it, Tyson," Haylee shouted after him. "Get back here."

"This is going to be your head." The drunk crumpled a fender with his next hit, the threat making Tyson's skin prickle with heat. The man put power into his swing, and Tyson would be damned if he would let this man hurt his wife.

The man staggered up to the woman who screamed obscenities at him, moonlight glinting off the teardrops rolling down her cheeks.

Tyson ran behind the drunk, who dropped the bat and raised his fist to punch the woman. Tyson grabbed the man's fist, stopping it from connecting with the woman's face.

"What the fuck?" The asshole jerked his hand away from Tyson and whirled around.

"Keep your hands off her," Tyson said in a dead serious tone.

"Mind your own fucking business." A cloud of alcohol filled the space between them before the man drove his fist toward Tyson's jaw.

Tyson caught the drunk's wrist and held it tightly. "Settle down and act like a man."

"I'll show you who's the man around here," the drunk slurred, jammed his hand into his pocket and pulled out a gun.

A chill crawled down Tyson's spine as he released the drunk's wrist and raised his hands. He thought he heard Haylee scream.

"Leave him alone," the woman shrieked even louder. "Leave my husband alone!"

Tyson barely heard the woman through the blood rushing in his ears as he stared down the pistol's barrel. The man hadn't put his finger on the trigger, not yet. Tyson kept his hands raised and spoke slowly and clearly. "Put the gun away."

"Leave my husband alone!" The woman repeated the cry over and over. She came up beside Tyson and shoved him. She was stronger than he would have expected, and he took a step to the side to catch himself.

Sirens sounded, coming up fast.

The man still pointed his gun in Tyson's face, and Tyson kept his hands up in clear view of the drunk. "Put the gun down." He kept his tone even. "You don't want to shoot someone and end up in prison."

"I'll teach you to poke your nose into other people's business." The gun wavered as the man struggled to keep his arm steady. His finger twitched and started to move to the trigger.

Tyson stepped in, snatched the gun from the man, twisted his arm behind his back, and took him facedown to the ground.

The woman screamed obscenities and started beating on Tyson's back. It didn't hurt, but it was annoying as hell.

The man shouted equally vulgar words and struggled in Tyson's grip.

Sheriff's department SUVs rounded the corner, tires squealing. Gravel crunched as they pulled into the lot, and then they cut their sirens. Tyson set the gun by his knee, where it would be in easy grasp if the woman charged for it, but he wouldn't be holding it when the deputies came on the scene.

The next half hour was spent sorting things out. Tyson knew several members of the sheriff's department, so he didn't have a problem explaining what had happened. But he was told next time to leave it to the professionals.

The drunk remained belligerent, shouting that he would kill Tyson for interfering, and the woman screaming that everything was Tyson's fault.

When the deputies let him go after questioning, Tyson strode back to where Haylee stood. She had her arms crossed over her chest, and she looked pissed as hell.

She lowered her arms and balled her hands into fists when he stood before her. Her voice came out low and hard. “That was the stupidest damned thing you could have done. You should have waited for the sheriff’s deputies. That idiot could have killed you.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and blew out his breath. He lowered his hand and looked at Haylee. “I couldn’t just let the man punch his wife.”

“The moment you heard the woman say she shouldn’t have married him, you should have known to leave it to the deputies.” Haylee’s eyes glinted with anger. “Domestic situations are some of the most dangerous. As you saw, some women don’t want to be rescued. Or at least she’s not ready yet to make that stand. But regardless, this was something you should never have stepped into.”

He studied her. “Why are you so angry?”

“Are you that dense? I care about you and don’t want to see you hurt or killed by doing something as stupid as getting into the middle of a domestic dispute.” She raised her hands. “Putting yourself into dangerous situations can also put other people at risk. What if he had turned the gun on his wife?”

Tyson closed his eyes, drew a deep breath, and let it out slowly. He opened them again. “The man was about to hit his wife with a bat.”

“He could have killed you.” Haylee lowered her arms, and to his surprise, it looked like she might cry. “I need to get home and get some rest. I have a long day tomorrow.”

Tyson forced himself to stop from taking her into his arms. They fell into step on the way to her truck. When they reached the driver’s side door, she unlocked it and turned to him, but

didn't say anything. She usually had such a clear open expression, but right now he couldn't read her.

He decided he was all in, so he cupped the sides of her face and looked into her eyes. "You okay?"

"Yes." The word came out in a whisper.

He wasn't sure exactly where he stood at this moment. "Can I kiss you?"

It was like the tense moments fell away. Her shoulders relaxed, and the lines on her forehead disappeared. "Yes." The word came out low and soft.

He smiled and brushed his mouth over hers. She leaned into him, her body melding with his. He kissed her until he couldn't think straight.

When he came up for air, he studied her and the glitter of her eyes in the moonlight. "Goodnight, Haylee."

"Goodnight." She reached up and kissed him before stepping away and climbing into her truck.

He shut the door behind her, waited until she had left the parking lot, and drove away into the night.

Tonight, he hadn't truly felt fear. He'd been in a lot of dangerous situations during his military career, and this hadn't seemed any worse until he'd had a gun in his face.

Even then, he wasn't sure he would have done anything differently. He had to try, didn't he? He prevented the man from hitting his wife, even if the asshole pulled a gun on him. At least she hadn't been beaten up.

But what would the bastard do to her when they were alone? Would he take what happened tonight out on her?

A hot, heavy weight filled Tyson's gut like molten lead. It was his nature to help, but had he hurt her instead?

All he wanted to do was help when he could. He hadn't been able to help his mom, so he had to help others whenever it was in his power to do so.

His thoughts turned to the night he had pushed Old Bill out of the way of the truck the night of the barn dance. The look on Haylee's face at the thought of him being killed—it wasn't that she didn't think he should have saved the man's life. It was because she'd lost someone in some terrible way. And tonight, when she felt he could have been killed—had it brought back more bad memories? What had happened to make her feel that way?

Thoughts of the scene with the man and his wife stuck in his mind like a burr that he couldn't dislodge. He turned away from the road, headed to his truck, hit the remote, and climbed in.

The drive seemed longer than usual, so he had plenty of time to work everything over in his mind.

Tyson grimaced. Haylee was making him look at things differently. He wanted her, his heart needed her—hopefully she'd give him the chance to show they were meant to be together.

The early November morning of their gold-hunting trip dawned cloudy and cool. Haylee gripped the picnic basket in one fist as she jogged down the front steps of her home, her backpack bouncing against her the entire way. She was glad she had packed extra clothes to layer with for the Huachuca Mountains—it was sure to be much chillier up there.

Tyson met her halfway, a seductive grin curving his lips. “Ready for adventure?”

“Absolutely.” She tipped her face up when she reached him, and her long braid crept over her shoulder to cascade down her back.

He lowered his head, and his lips met hers in a long, lingering kiss. Warmth filled her, spreading throughout her body, to her fingers and toes. When he drew away, she sighed and met his gaze. For a long moment, they looked into each other’s eyes, and he smiled.

“I’ve been looking forward to this getaway with you, hon.” Tyson’s fingers brushed her shoulders and arm as he stripped her of her backpack and the picnic basket.

“I’m excited about our trip.” She still felt breathless from his kiss. “I’ve been looking forward to it.”

He stowed both on the back seat of his king cab, next to his gear, before turning back to her. “It’ll be great to get away with you.”

“Yes.” She nodded. “Roughing it would have been fun, too.” She waited for him to open the passenger side door. “But the B & B will at least have a hot shower.”

“At least.” He shut her door when she had settled in, rounded the truck, and got in on his side. He started the vehicle and pulled away from the curb.

Haylee’s stomach flipped as he drove down the street, and they headed out of town.

She cleared her throat. “I’ve been thinking.”

He glanced away from the road and raised an eyebrow. “Should I be worried?”

She couldn’t help but laugh, although it caused her belly to somersault again. “Is it too late to cancel one of the rooms at the B & B?”

He turned his head again and his eyes met hers. “Nope.” He smiled and shifted his gaze back to the road. “Are you sure?”

She nodded even though he was focused on driving and not looking at her. “I’m positive.”

They’d dated for a month now, and she’d never felt more confident that this was what she wanted. She’d wanted and needed him since the beginning, and she was sure he felt the same way.

It was quiet between them for a few moments, slightly awkward. She was sure he’d be able to hear the nervousness in her voice when she jumped into restarting their conversation.

“How cool do you think it will be in the mountains?” She wondered if she sounded lame, asking about the weather.

“Sierra Vista is in the low seventies this time of year.” He guided the truck onto the I-10 freeway. “I’d wager it’ll be in the fifties up in the mountains.”

“I’m glad I brought a sweater to wear under my jacket.” She looked out the window at the desert scenery as they left King Creek behind, and the freeway cut through the barren portion of the reservation. “I’ve lived in Arizona my entire life, but I’ve never been anywhere in Cochise County.”

“It’s a nice area.” Tyson set the speed at eighty. The limit was seventy-five on I-10, but most traffic sped well over that. “I’ve been a few times. Tombstone and Bisbee are great places to visit, and I’ve hiked most of the mountains in the county.”

“I’ve wanted to visit both towns.” She looked at him. “Think we’ll have enough time to go to Tombstone this trip?”

He glanced at her and smiled. “We’ll make time.”

“Awesome.” She looked out at the gray skies. “I wonder if we’ll get some early November rain there.”

“We just might.” He peered out the window. “When it’s cool here, it’s even more so in that county.”

“Let’s say we find gold in the mountains, and it’s a lot.” She settled back in her seat. “What would you do with ten million?”

He was quiet for a moment. “I’d start a rescue ranch and take in horses that are no longer wanted, abandoned, abused, or those the owner could no longer care for.”

She raised her brows in surprise. “That’s wonderful. It’s not something most cowboys would think of.”

Tyson shrugged. “Starting the nonprofit was my mom’s dream, but she passed away from cancer before she could do it. I want to make her wishes a reality to honor her.” He looked thoughtful. “Even without the ten million, I intend to make it happen.”

“I minored in nonprofits at the university and work with them in my event planning business.” Haylee shifted in her seat. “I’d be happy to help you get it started.”

He cut his gaze from the road. “I’ll take you up on that.”

Warmth filled her insides at the thought of the two of them remaining together. Time would tell, but right now, things were looking good.

“Your turn.” He dragged her away from her thoughts. “What would you do with ten million?”

“I’d sell my event planning business and paint full-time.” She smiled. “A very happy thought.”

He put on the blinker to get in the left lane to pass a car. “You have the talent to make it a full-time career as it is.”

“Thank you.” She leaned her head back against the headrest. “I’d explore other avenues of art as well. I love all forms.”

He drove past the car then put on his right blinker to get back into the other lane. “Like what?”

“I enjoy playing with multi-media on canvas and clay sculptures.” She tilted her head to the side as she imagined being able to do more of the things she enjoyed. “Even though I wouldn’t have my event planning business, I’d like to create ice sculptures for big events, just for fun.”

“Have you ever done one?” Tyson asked.

“Not yet.” Haylee shook her head. “But one day, I’ll learn how. It wouldn’t be something I’d want to do full-time, not like painting. That’s my first and main love.” She smiled. “I make tiny paintings that I sell on Etsy, mostly for fun, but it’s a nice little supplement to my income.”

He passed a semi, then a truck with a wide load. “How did you get started in event planning?”

“In 4-H, I made centerpieces and provided them for family events.” She tucked an errant strand from her braid behind her ear. “I became known for them, then an event planner hired me to make centerpieces, and she let me have free rein. I had a lot of fun doing it. When I graduated from college, and she retired, I took over her business, built it up, and started going valley-wide. I marketed myself and made presentations to companies. That’s how I met Henry Goldman.”

“What about employees?” he asked. “I saw how much work you do.”

“I used to have a couple, but both graduated from college and moved on in their careers.” She shrugged. “I dialed things back and just accepted events I can handle myself. I hire 4-H kids to help with any jobs that tax my limits.” She sighed. “Financially, I’m getting closer to my dream of painting full-time, but my soul *needs* to be able to take up my paintbrush more often. I can’t if I’m too busy to get in any time for my art.”

He gave a nod. “Makes sense.”

THE TIME PASSED QUICKLY and comfortably as Tyson and Haylee drove the rest of the way to their destination. They went through Sierra Vista, the biggest town in the county, and

headed south to the Huachucas. From the foot of the mountains, they could see Mexico.

Tyson drove up the canyon, the truck jostling along the rough road. The land gave way from low desert to high, and soon they entered forest lands of pine and oak peppered with creosote bushes.

Haylee's throwing him a curve—that she wanted to share his room—had his mind on things other than gold hunting.

He glanced at her as he drove up the road. She looked so damn cute with her long braid that fell down her back and the sparkle of excitement in her gorgeous brown eyes.

She flashed a grin at him. “Wouldn't it be crazy if we found gold?”

“You never know.” He smiled back at her. “We're here.”

Tyson pulled off the road into a parking area amid tall pines and oaks, threw the truck into the park, and killed the engine. After he helped Haylee out of the truck, he hauled the picnic basket out from the backseat, along with an old quilt he'd brought along for the occasion.

“It's so pretty here.” Her gaze drifted across the scenery as they walked along a narrow path that led deeper into the forest.

The sunlight filtered through the leaves, casting a golden glow on everything around them. The air was filled with the sweet scent of pine and birds chirping around them.

But Haylee was the most beautiful thing in the whole damn forest.

They located a great spot for their picnic, and Tyson spread out the quilt and set the basket on it. Haylee knelt next to it

and started unloading the contents. She rested on her haunches and took in the beauty of their surroundings.

The sun filtered through the canopy above, casting dappled shadows on the forest floor. The breeze ruffled leaves and pine branches. She always thought that wind through pine trees sounded like a river might be nearby, but where they were, the river was a good five to ten miles away.

She tipped her head back and breathed deeply. “There’s nothing like the smell of a forest.”

“There’s nothing like you,” he said, and she smiled at him.

He pulled a couple of beer bottles from the basket and grabbed the church key he’d seen at the bottom. He popped the tops, and they clinked their bottles together. He took a long pull from his own, the refreshing liquid quenching his thirst.

She sat cross-legged on the old quilt and bit into her sandwich.

“Great roast beef.” He shifted and dug into a bag of chips and crunched a couple. “You know how to pack a picnic basket.”

“You have my grandma to thank for that.” Haylee bit into a pickle spear. She chewed and swallowed. “She loved to gather all her grandkids together and go on picnics. I think it was her favorite thing to do with us.”

Tyson wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. “My mom and I would go on outings, just the two of us, into the Superstitions.”

He leaned back against a tree trunk, one leg out, and his arm settled on his opposite bent knee. He took another swig of his beer and gestured with the bottle toward the trail. “What do you say to heading down that trail to go gold hunting after we

pack up and put everything into the truck? I'll grab the metal detector."

Haylee took a sip from her bottle and nodded. "The trail looks promising." A shaft of light made her hair look like spun gold.

She set her empty bottle into the picnic basket. "Since I was young, I've always loved treasure hunting." An amused quirk of her lips turned into a grin. "When I was a little girl, Bear and Brady would hide my toy horses around the ranch. They told me I had to search for treasure. Those times, I wasn't too keen on hunting."

Tyson chuckled, started packing up what was left of their picnic, and deposited it into the basket with her bottle. She got to her feet as he did, and he folded the quilt.

He carried the basket and quilt as they returned to the truck. He set the things on the back seat before retrieving the gold detector he'd rented for the weekend and a camping shovel. After he locked the truck up again, they started back down the trail on their gold hunt.

LEAVES CRUNCHED beneath Haylee's and Tyson's shoes as they headed down the path through the forest. He wore a small forest green backpack with a camping shovel and a few odds and ends.

"How long do you think this path has been here?" She spoke out loud, not expecting Tyson to know the answer. "How many people have walked this trail?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "Could be centuries. Could be hundreds of people from Native Americans to

Mexicans to Spaniards to prospectors.”

A sense of what it might have been like long ago washed over her. How different had the bushes beside the trail been? What kinds of birds had lived in the trees?

She looked up at the towering trees, shafts of sunlight blinking through the branches. The dense foliage caught at her shirt, and she pushed it away. Her soul felt lighter than it had been in ages.

Her pulse rate picked up at the thought of what might lay at the end of their rainbow. Would they truly find gold? More than anything that was wishful thinking, but the time she spent with Tyson was wonderful.

They chatted about what he'd planned for the day and any number of other things. During the occasional pauses, the only sounds were birds or small animals skittering in the brush and the leaves rustling as they pushed aside low-hanging branches.

Yeah, they probably wouldn't find anything, but she enjoyed just being with him on their little adventure.

After a good thirty minutes, Tyson inclined his head to a gap in the trees. “Let's go this way.” Through the arch of bowed branches, a lesser-traveled track was visible.

She followed him, the detector giving no indication that anything was on their route.

She pushed branches from a creosote bush out of her face. “Do you think we'll find anything?”

He shrugged as he swept the detector from side to side but cast her a quick grin over his shoulder. “Who knows? But we're having fun trying.”

The gold detector beeped, and he came to an immediate stop. He turned his attention back to the device, which had stopped beeping. He backed up, and it beeped again. He moved away from the path a couple of feet until the detector beeped with excitement as he held it poised over a patch of moss at the base of a large rock.

Her heart skipped a beat. The gold detector was beeping like crazy, so there had to be gold, right? They were closer to their goal—well, close to something.

Tyson bent down, set the detector aside, and slung his backpack onto the ground. Haylee knelt nearby and braced her palms on the leaves and pine needles as sat on her haunches to watch.

He pulled the small camping shovel out of his backpack and used it to pry aside the moss, which clung to a smaller rock at the foot of the larger one. He moved it aside, then started digging.

He dug about a foot down when his shovel thumped and clanged on something hard. He placed the shovel beside him and knelt next to the hole. He brushed aside the dark earth with his palms.

Haylee watched as he uncovered a small, rusted metal box covered in rich soil. As Tyson revealed it more, she saw it had dark leather straps and rusted buckles. He raised it from the ground and set it beside him.

“The buckles are too corroded to release the leather if I try to unbuckle them.” Tyson dug a pocketknife out of his jeans and carefully cut the straps.

Haylee picked up a leather tie that had fallen to the ground. It felt rough and worn across her palm.

“Now to get this lid open.” He took his time and pried until it popped up. Outside, the box had suffered from the years buried in the moist earth, but the inside was dry.

Tyson raised the lid higher and revealed a stack of tintype photographs and a deteriorating folded piece of paper and scraps.

He handed the tintypes to Haylee. “Those aren’t the only treasure.”

She leaned closer and saw a dark brown leather pouch secured with a drawstring. “Do you think the gold is in there?”

“It’s light.” He hefted the bag in his palm. “No pieces of eight in this pirate chest.”

“Let’s see what’s inside.” She dropped beside him, the freshly turned earth soft beneath her knees.

“Hold out your palm.” He tipped the pouch above her outstretched hand.

A small gold nugget and multiple flecks of the same glittering hue tumbled onto her palm, and her pulse quickened. “Is it all real? Real gold?”

He picked up the nugget and raised it to the light, bleeding through the tree canopy above. “I do believe it is.”

“We actually found gold.” She shifted and sat cross-legged beside him. “I just thought it would be fun to look, but I didn’t think we’d find any.”

“You and me both.” He flashed her a smile. “I think we might have an ounce, maybe a little more. That’s at least a couple thousand.”

She grinned. “That’s a very nice night out.”

Tyson looked amused as he dropped the nugget and flakes back into the pouch and set it at the bottom of the box. “That’s a whole week.”

“We’ll find something to do with it.” She patted the ground beside her. “Let’s take a look at our other treasure.”

He settled beside her, both with their backs against the rock close to the hole. It wasn’t the most comfortable, but it didn’t matter right then.

Haylee looked at the top tintype photograph of a young woman that was as clear as if someone had just taken it. “I learned about tintypes in a photography course at ASU. Photographers used thin metal sheets for the images and could produce them fast enough to hand to customers at a carnival or studio.” She looked up. “That’s the quick and easy version of the process.”

She ran a finger along the side of the image. “I wonder if this was the girlfriend or wife of the man who buried this box.” She glanced at Tyson. “Considering men did most of the prospecting back then, I think it’s safe to assume it was a man.”

“It’s amazing how clear tintypes are.” Tyson took the top image from her, revealing a second image with the same woman and a man. The couple sat stiffly together, yet Haylee recognized that these were two people in love.

Three children posed in the image on the third and last tintype. “These must be their kids.” Haylee held the metal photograph in her hands. “I wish I knew more of his story.”

“This looks like a letter—the year at the top is 1899.” Tyson carefully unfolded the century-old paper, but pieces of

the edges fell away. “The writing is so faint, but I think it’s addressed to someone named Warren and signed by Sylvia.”

The letter was so challenging to read that they had to fill in assumptions-based gaps.

Warren had come to Bisbee during the copper mining boom, leaving Sylvia and the kids behind in St. Louis. He had intended to make enough money for them to move out West.

From what they gathered, Warren must have found the nugget and flakes of gold while he worked in the copper mine and secreted it away to save for their family. It would have given their family a good start in Arizona.

“There were small amounts of gold in the mines as well as copper.” Tyson looked up from the letter. “This much would have been an absolute fortune in those days.”

“He must have buried it here.” Haylee frowned. “I wonder what happened and why he was this far from Bisbee. And why he never reclaimed it.”

Tyson shrugged one big shoulder. “It’s not likely we’ll ever know.” He folded the letter, tiny pieces drifting down from the edges, and set it on the tintypes in the box. When he closed the lid, more damp earth fell away from the corroded surface.

He peered up at the sky through the trees. “It won’t be long till it’s dark. We’d best be getting to the B & B before we go out to dinner.”

Haylee took the box from him and got to her feet while he stood and gathered the shovel and gold detector. The box’s surface felt rough from the corrosion of over one hundred years in the earth.

They chatted about the letter and photos on the way back to the truck, the love story seeming more important than the gold.

Haylee hugged the box to her chest, getting rust and dirt all over her T-shirt. “Maybe Warren had more gold that he took with him to St. Louis to get his family, and he left this box behind to retrieve when they got back to Arizona.”

“He could have forgotten where he buried the box.” Tyson lifted a branch for her to pass through.

“I like to think Warren had enough gold left to start a good life for him and his family somewhere out here. Maybe they were able to acquire a homestead.”

Tyson cast a smile over his shoulder. “That’s a good thought.”

She nodded. “It makes sense that he wouldn’t have taken it all to St. Louis. If he’d been robbed, he would have lost everything.”

They reached the truck and loaded up the gold detector. Tyson gave Haylee a small blanket to wrap the box in, and they tucked it away on the floorboard of the back seat of the king cab.

The sun had sunk lower in the sky, and shadows had grown deep in the forest. He drove the truck down the rutted road, and she shivered in anticipation. They were getting closer to being alone, spending the night together in the B & B. Was she as ready as she’d thought she was this morning?

Haylee fidgeted with the fringe on one sleeve of her suede jacket as Tyson escorted her from the truck. They'd stopped at the B & B long enough to change clothes and for Haylee to put on some makeup. She'd done both in the bathroom, not ready yet to dress in front of Tyson.

The restaurant had an old-West facade with a sign across the top that read "Becky's BBQ." Rails to hitch horses lined the front porch.

He held open the door for her, and they stepped into the large, airy room filled to the brim with cowboys and other guests deep into ribs and brisket sandwiches. The cheerful chatter was interspersed with laughter.

Tyson and Haylee stopped at the hostess stand and waited to be seated. Aromas of wood smoke and meat hung in the air in the dimly lit interior.

The rustic decor included old, rusted farm tools hanging from the walls and wagon wheel light fixtures dangling from the ceiling. Picnic-style tables covered with red and white checked cloths and bench seating filled the small restaurant.

A wooden bar with high-backed stools was at the center of the back wall. A large brick fireplace took up the far corner to

the right.

The room was comfortably warm, and Tyson helped Haylee remove her jacket. He draped it over his arm as the hostess approached them.

The round-faced middle-aged woman with plump cheeks and a sweet smile reached the stand. “Welcome. My name is Becky, and this is my restaurant.” She eyed Tyson. “You’ve been here before. I never forget a face.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Tyson touched the brim of his hat. “It’s good to be back. It’s a nice place you have here.”

“I know it is.” She grinned, swiped a couple of laminated menus off the stand and two paper napkin-wrapped sets of silverware, and escorted them to a table near the fireplace.

They seated themselves on the bench seats, and she slapped the menus on the table and set the rolls of silverware in front of each of them. “Will you have an Arizona craft beer, or would you prefer sun tea?”

Haylee smiled at the pleasant woman. “I’ll take the beer.”

Tyson set his Stetson and Haylee’s jacket aside. “Make that two.”

The owner flashed them a smile. “Figure out what you want, and I’ll be back in two shakes with your drinks and to take your order.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Tyson nodded, and Haylee smiled as she transferred her jacket to the bench next to her and set her small purse on top of it.

“I like her.” Haylee took the menu Tyson offered her and scanned the dinner specials. “I haven’t had pork ribs in a

while. That sounds delicious, along with coleslaw and corn on the cob.”

“I’ll take the brisket plate with cowboy beans and steak fries.” Tyson set his menu aside.

Haylee did the same. “That was easy.”

She met his warm gaze as the light from the fireplace’s dancing flames flickered in his eyes. He was so handsome, and she wondered again why she hadn’t paid more attention to him sooner. Maybe it was because he was her brothers’ best friend.

“Today was so much fun.” She unwrapped the silverware and set it aside. “I can’t believe what we found.”

“It’s best not to say what we did find out loud.” Tyson’s lips tipped into a grin. “Wouldn’t want to start a gold rush.”

“I’m excited about the love letter and tintypes. They’re precious.” Haylee leaned forward, her arms folded on the tabletop. “It’s amazing they’ve been there for so long. Over 120 years in that metal box.”

She leaned back as Becky reappeared with a couple of bottles of local craft beer and thumped them on the table in front of Tyson and Haylee. She stood back. “Let me know what you’d like. Don’t be shy.”

Haylee gave her order for ribs and the sides, and Tyson placed his for the brisket. Becky didn’t write it down. She just gave a nod. “It’ll be up in no time.”

Haylee enjoyed the cozy atmosphere as they talked and waited for their meals.

“What do you say to a drive tonight?” Tyson slid his hand around his beer bottle. “I know of a nice location to see the stars—no better place.”

“I’d love to.” Her heart flipped at the thought of what lay in their future after that.

Soon, Becky swooped in with the platter of ribs for Haylee and Tyson’s meal and a small metal bucket for the rib bones. The owner pulled a thick bundle of paper napkins out of her apron pocket and a couple of wet wipes and plopped them on the table by Haylee’s plate.

After Becky left, Haylee looked at Tyson, who eyed her with amusement. “Looks like she thinks you’re gonna be messier than a two-year-old.”

Haylee laughed. “You’d think she knows me or something.” She bit into the tender meat on one rib and moaned. She chewed and swallowed. “I love the mesquite wood-smoked flavor. These must be the best ribs I’ve ever had.” She lowered her voice. “Just don’t tell my brothers. They’re all competitive when it comes to barbequing.”

Tyson washed down his bite of brisket with his beer. “They’re not hearing anything from me.”

When they finished their meals, a young man bussed the table. Becky came up behind him and rattled off the dessert specials. Haylee was torn between bread pudding and a warm peach cobbler topped with vanilla ice cream. They opted for sharing a piece of cobbler with two scoops on top.

“I want to lick the plate.” Haylee sighed and placed her hand on her abdomen when not a crumb was left of the cobbler. “This was the most delicious meal a girl could ask for.”

“You’ve done me proud.” Becky appeared, scooped up the empty dessert plate and forks, and slapped down the check. “No rush.”

She turned away and made her way through the restaurant. Haylee turned to Tyson. “That woman is a dynamo.”

Tyson laughed and placed a stack of bills on the table. “You ready to go?”

Haylee gathered her coat and purse as Becky returned, took the cash, and left Tyson with the receipt.

Moments later, they stepped out into the cool night air. The door to the restaurant fell shut behind them, cutting off the chatter and laughter. Haylee shivered, and Tyson helped her into her jacket, then aided her into the passenger’s side of his truck before making his way to the driver’s side and climbing in.

Once they reached the mountains, Tyson guided the vehicle into the canyon. As they drove up a winding road, it was too dark to see anything but the moon and stars.

Fifteen minutes later, Tyson guided the truck onto a dirt road that was a little more than a path. The truck jostled her as it bounced along the ruts, and she clung to the “oh, shit” handle above the door.

They reached a secluded clearing, and Tyson stopped the truck and killed the engine. He strode to Haylee’s side and helped her out of the truck. They walked toward the edge of a ridge, and Haylee caught her breath at the amazing view. The town’s lights lay like a glittering blanket across the valley.

“It’s so pretty.” She looked up at Tyson, whose eyes looked dark in the night yet glinted from the moonlight.

He grasped her hand. “Let’s get that picnic blanket.” He retrieved it from the backseat and placed it in a clearing. She knelt on the blanket beside him, and they both laid back and stared up in amazement.

The Milky Way cut a broad swathe across the inky blackness, and a shooting star flared before vanishing from sight.

“I’ve never seen a lovelier night sky.” Her words came out in a breathy sigh. “In King Creek, the stars are lovely, but with Phoenix not that far away, they’re never so bright as this.”

Tyson stroked strands of her hair, then tucked it behind her ear. “You are more lovely than the stars.”

Heat warmed her as she took in his handsome features illuminated beneath the moonlight. She couldn’t think of a thing to say.

He brushed her lips with his, and her mind swam as he kissed her. He drew her close, pushed his fingers into her hair, and cupped the back of her head. It was a slow kiss that left her wanting more.

Tyson rested his forehead against hers. He spoke in a low voice, rough with passion. “What do you want, Haylee?”

Warmth crept through her body, and her breasts felt heavy with need. “I think you know.”

He slid his hand from her hair and over her hip, then drew her body tight to his so she felt the hard ridge of flesh between them. “I want to hear it from you. Say it.”

Haylee’s face grew impossibly hotter even as her breasts grew heavy and her nipples tightened. She had never told a man she wanted him, but God, did she want Tyson.

She moved closer, darted her tongue along his lower lip, and let out a soft sigh. She tilted her head back so that she could meet his eyes. “I want you, Tyson. I *need* you.”

The corner of his mouth tipped into a devastatingly sexy smile. “Let’s get back to the B & B.”

Her throat tightened, and she nodded. “Yes.”

Tyson eased up, got to his feet, and held out his hand. She took it, and he drew her up so that she stood, looking into his eyes. He kissed her hard, so intensely that she moaned with need.

He broke the kiss, and her chest rose and fell with her rough breathing. His sounded just as harsh. The hunger in his eyes made her knees weaken. Only his palm resting on the small of her back kept her grounded and standing.

She didn’t want to wait—she wanted to tear off his shirt and feel the hardness of his flesh beneath her palms.

Haylee forced herself to calm down. He squeezed her hand before releasing it and scooping up the picnic blanket. This time, he didn’t stop to fold it—just rolled it up and threw it on the backseat. He helped her into the truck, then jogged to his side and climbed in.

The drive seemed to take forever as she darted her gaze in his direction before looking out into the darkness. He grasped her hand, enveloping it in its warmth as they rested on the center console.

Even though it seemed to take so long, probably less than twenty minutes passed from the time they climbed into the truck and when they reached the B & B.

He parked in one of the four spots in front and killed the engine. He took her hand again and kissed her knuckles before releasing her and climbing out.

He’d made his way around the truck and helped her out in no time. Her legs felt wobbly, and she held tightly to his hand

as they walked up the path. She gripped her purse tightly in her opposite hand, nearly dropping it in her desire to be with him.

The night had cooled significantly, and warmth washed over her as he opened the front door.

The foyer was quiet, just a lone small chandelier above them. He gripped her hand as they walked to the staircase on the right and headed up. A narrow rug covered the stairs, muffling their footsteps.

When they reached the landing, Tyson led her to the left. On the right were two rooms, and theirs was one of three on the opposite side of the stairs.

Tyson stopped in front of the room and pulled an old-fashioned brass key from his pocket. He slid it into the keyhole, jiggled it, and the lock clicked.

The knob squeaked as he let them into the room and switched on the light. An old-fashioned lamp illuminated the room with a soft glow. He locked up behind them and tossed the key, which clattered on a small antique table beside the door.

Tingles spread throughout Haylee. He drew her into his arms, and she looped her hands behind his neck.

Tyson smiled gently. “Any second thoughts?”

She shook her head, feeling suddenly mute.

He hooked one finger under her chin. “Tell me.”

Her throat worked, and she had to force herself to speak. Even then, her words came out rough with need. “I’m positive—absolutely positive I want to be with you.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear.” He lowered his mouth and nipped her bottom lip in a way that was so sensual it caused her to gasp.

Tyson took advantage when she sighed and slid his tongue into her mouth. He kissed her long and slow, and he tasted of beer and peach cobbler. He smelled intensely male and of leather and a starlit night.

Haylee responded to his kiss with such fierceness that he groaned and drew her tightly into his arms and pressed his cock to her belly. He returned her kiss with equal passion, sucking on her bottom lip before he released her.

She dropped her purse as he pushed her jacket over her shoulders, and she let the suede fall to the floor.

Tyson scooped her into his embrace, and she let out a squeak of surprise. He carried her to the bed covered in a patchwork quilt and gently set her down. He toed off his boots and set them to the side as he kept his eyes on hers.

Haylee’s pulse rate rocketed as he knelt and took one of her shoes in his hand. He pulled the laces on the leather shoe and tossed it aside before pulling off her ankle sock. He did the same with her other shoe and sock.

He pushed himself between her thighs. He reached for the top button of her blouse, his knuckles brushing her throat as he unbuttoned it.

“I want to rip your shirt open and let all the buttons pop off.” He gave her a dark, intense look. “It’s all I can do to take my time.”

“If this wasn’t my favorite shirt, I might let you.” Her voice trembled even as she smiled.

He paused to give her a soft kiss, then worked on her buttons. She was starting to wish she'd told him to let loose and rip them all off when he finally got to the bottom button and set it free.

“You're amazing.” He stared at her breasts and brushed her fabric-covered nipple with his thumb. “In every way.”

He met her gaze, pushed the blouse over her shoulders, and helped her out of it. He didn't pause, and before she even realized what he was about to do, he had unhooked her bra.

Her nipples tightened to hard peaks as it fell away from her breasts. Removing her bra and tossing it aside, he cupped her full breasts in his big hands.

He lowered his head and captured her nipple in his warm mouth and sucked.

Haylee cried at the feel of him sucking her nipple. She hadn't expected it to feel so incredible. It made her feel wild and crazy like she wanted to ride him like a bronc and do it now.

Her breathing came in soft pants as he took his time, his attention lingering on one breast before moving to the other. He raised his head and brushed his lips over hers.

Haylee couldn't take it any longer. She reached for him and started working on unfastening his western shirt. He allowed her to take control and moved back when she slid to her knees to reach the bottom button.

She pushed his shirt over his shoulders, revealing his hard shoulders and muscular chest. She slid her fingers over one of his flat male nipples, and he sucked in his breath.

In a smooth motion, he brought them both to stand. He let his shirt drop, unfastened her jeans, and lowered the zipper. He

pushed the jeans over her hips, along with her panties. They dropped to her bare feet, and she kicked them aside.

He let his gaze drift over her nakedness from head to toe. “Beautiful.”

To cover her embarrassment, she reached for his large Western belt buckle and unfastened it. He pulled it out of its loops, and she watched the play of his chest muscles.

“I want to see you, Tyson.” She grasped the front of his jeans and had to work at undoing the top button of his Wranglers, but finally managed.

She pushed his jeans down and planned to drop to her knees to get a better look and a taste, but he caught her by her shoulders. He removed his jeans and boxer briefs and slid his palms to her waist.

He caused her to let out another squeak of surprise as he picked her up and laid her on the quilt. She looked at him as he climbed onto the bed and knelt between her thighs.

She waited for him to take her, but he moved down instead, sliding his big shoulders between her thighs. She held her breath as he lowered his mouth to her center and blew on her clit.

A cry escaped her, and she wriggled beneath him. He swooped down and ran his tongue from the entrance to her core up to her clit. She wanted to shriek from the sheer pleasure he’d given her, but at the last moment remembered where she was and fought to control herself.

He licked her slick flesh and sucked her clit, causing her to squirm beneath the onslaught of intense pleasure.

Her mind whirled, and she could hardly process a thought as she gave herself up to the heat and desire and rapture.

Haylee's thighs began to vibrate, and she cried out as her orgasm slammed into her. Tyson rose and captured her mouth with his, shutting off the cry, but he drew out the exquisite moment with his fingers now that his mouth was occupied with hers.

She whimpered as she clung to the high. She was barely aware of the sound of a wrapper tearing as she started to come down.

Tyson pressed his hips between her thighs and thrust his cock deep inside her. She started to cry out again, but he clamped his palm over her mouth.

He whispered in her ear. "Do I need to gag you, or are you going to behave, hon?"

She moaned behind his hand, and he moved it away and thrust hard again. She managed to bite back a scream and dug her nails into his ass as he fucked her hard. He reached deep inside her, filling her.

Her mind started whirling, and she headed to the precipice once again.

"Come on, baby." He slammed his hips hard against hers. "Let's do it again."

She couldn't catch her breath, couldn't think, and then she shot over the peak as her second orgasm exploded inside her.

Tyson clamped his hand over her mouth again as he thrust in and out. Then he pressed his hips hard against hers, a low, guttural sound coming out, and she knew he had to fight against his shout.

He moved in and out a few more times, then stopped, his groin pressed tightly to hers.

His gaze held hers, and he moved his hand away. Her breathing came hard and fast, and droplets of sweat rolled from his brow to land on her chest.

He let out a long groan. “Dear God, Haylee. What the hell did you just do to me?”

“Me?” The word came out in a squeak, and his amused gaze met hers. She managed to get the next words out in a more normal voice. “Tyson, that was—oh, my God, that was insanely amazing.”

He grinned and ditched the condom. He rolled onto his side and tucked her into his arms, her head beneath his chin.

“Whatever am I going to do with you?” he murmured, then laughed softly. “Make that I know exactly what I’m going to do with you.”

She felt sleepy and lethargic and barely managed to say, “What?”

“Keep you,” he said right before she drifted off to sleep.

Haylee finished making coffee from the in-room coffeemaker. She offered a mug to Tyson with a smile. She had such a sweet smile that lit up his world. “Here you go.”

He gave her a soft kiss, then took the mug she offered him, his fingers brushing hers. “Thanks, hon.”

Tyson opened the French doors that led to the small balcony. He caught the wildflower scent of her shampoo as he held the door open, and she swept past him, her slippers pattering on the stonework.

She set the mug on the small ironwork table and settled onto her seat, adjusting her robe, a sexy candy apple-red like the lipstick she’d worn last night. The silky robe clung to her curves and the generous swells of her breasts.

Steam rose from his mug as he sat in the other chair, which creaked as he settled in it. He managed to tear his gaze away from her to take in the scenery.

An extraordinary mountain view spread out before them. Early morning fall mist crawled up the canyon, clinging low to the ground and hugging the mountaintop.

“It’s so beautiful here.” She blew on her coffee then sipped it. She lowered her mug, her hands wrapped around the toffee-

brown stoneware. Her chest rose and fell as she inhaled deeply. “It smells wonderful.” Her voice had a musical quality that resonated with him.

He breathed in the scents of fall and pine trees. He turned to look at Haylee, her blonde hair tousled and tumbling over her shoulders. “You smell even better.”

She flashed him a smile. “So, the plan is Tombstone today?”

“Yep.” He sipped from his coffee. “Whenever we’re packed and ready to go, we’ll grab something for breakfast, then head to ‘the town too tough to die.’”

Silence fell between them as they took in the beauty. Birds twittered, and the sound of brush rustling told him something larger moved through the forest. A cottontail hopped out of the greenery and continued below the balcony, where they couldn’t see it any longer.

“I had a wonderful time yesterday.” She turned her gaze on him. “Last night was special.”

He gave a slow nod. “It was, hon. Very special.”

They enjoyed their coffee and the morning for a while longer. He drained his mug first. When she finished hers, she shivered. “I’m chilled. I’m not used to the cool weather yet.”

“It doesn’t help that you’re wearing silk instead of terry cloth.”

She laughed and gave him a wicked grin. “But terry cloth isn’t nearly as enticing.”

He grinned. “On you, anything is sexy.”

She got up from her chair, and he saw the goosebumps on her arms. “I’m hungry.”

He was hungry for her, but he kept that to himself.

They returned to the room, and Tyson showered. Haylee took a quick shower, dried her hair, and put on a bit of makeup that Tyson didn't think she needed, but she looked as incredible as ever.

When they were ready, they headed back to the truck, him helping her into the passenger side before going to his own and starting the vehicle.

Tyson and Haylee grabbed a quick breakfast at a drive-thru, planning to have something more substantial in Tombstone for lunch.

A sense of excitement built inside Haylee on their way along the scenic backroad to the Wild West town. "I've grown up hearing about Tombstone, but even with it in the same state, I've never managed to make it here before."

"I went years ago, back in high school," Tyson said. "I wonder if it's changed much."

She glanced from the grassy rolling lands filled with mesquite trees and cholla cacti and looked at Tyson as he drove. "I've grown up with cowboys, but I've always had a fascination with those who lived back in the 1800s."

He gave a nod, still focused on the road ahead. "Old Westerns were the best when it came to movie watching when I was growing up."

"I still like the spaghetti Westerns." She spotted part of the town ahead. "Looks like we're here."

Tyson guided the truck past Old West storefronts and down a street between small businesses and a park. They reached a designated parking area, and he found a spot on the dirt lot.

A few minutes later, they walked hand-in-hand to Allen Street, the town's historic main street. Worn wooden storefronts lined the streets, with tourists walking along the wooden walkways.

The air was still as a horse-drawn wagon trundled down Tombstone's main street. The cowboy driver whistled at his horses to hurry them along, their hooves clopping along the dirt road.

Two gunfighters stepped away from the crowd of people in period clothing and drew their guns simultaneously. Only one remained standing after the shots stopped ringing out. Smoke curled from the barrel of the gun of the cowboy still on his feet.

Haylee looked at Tyson and grinned. "I feel like I'm in that old movie, *Tombstone*."

He smiled and met her gaze. "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

Hand in hand, they made their way further down the street lined with countless shops. Leather goods, western hats, pottery, antiques, vintage clothing, and Western art—all interspersed with souvenirs.

They changed direction and went inside one of the ancient hotels to watch a show about the Wild West.

After leaving the hotel, she squeezed Tyson's hand. "This is all like being in a movie."

A sign advertising a ghost tour caught her eye. "We could go on a tour this evening."

Tyson looked in the direction she pointed and read the sign. "That sounds like fun."

“I’ve never been on a ghost tour.” Haylee stepped beside him on the creaking wooden walk as they passed in front of a store with turquoise jewelry, cowboy hat pins, and bolo ties. “I can’t wait.”

They spotted Big Nose Kate’s Saloon, which appeared to be straight out of a bygone era. Haylee had to blink until her eyes adjusted to the dimness as the aromas of tobacco, beer, and bar food greeted them. Along the right side was an impressive bar, the bottles of alcohol glinting beneath the lights. A bucking bull-riding machine was trying to unseat a cowboy, and men and women played at poker tables nearby.

On the left, an older man dressed in an old-fashioned vest played the banjo. Further back, a woman in a boa and saloon girl costume sat at a piano while having her picture taken beside a tall man wearing a duster and western hat.

Directly in front of them was a spiraling staircase that descended to what the sign proclaimed as “the Shaft.”

The hostess, dressed like a saloon girl, escorted Tyson and Haylee to a table near the piano. They ordered mugs of beer and perused the menus before a server, also dressed as a saloon girl, came to take their orders. They both chose burgers with steak fries.

As they waited for their food, they linked their fingers on the tabletop and talked about their gold hunting trip and Warren’s treasure box.

“I wonder if he ever came to Tombstone.” Her gaze drifted around the saloon. “For all we know, he could have sat on one of those barstools and had a glass of whisky at the bar.”

Tyson squeezed her fingers in his. “He just may have had a drink or two here.”

Their drinks arrived, and they drew apart and enjoyed the music and atmosphere. They plowed through the tasty food when it arrived, both hungry. By the time they exited the saloon, Haylee was pleasantly sated.

Tyson took her hand and led her to a photography studio across the street. The window featured images of men and women wearing Old West garb.

He looked down at Haylee. “How about we get our pictures taken?”

“I’m in.” Haylee beamed and followed him inside the studio. The photographer happened to have an available appointment that had been canceled earlier.

“I want to be a saloon girl,” Haylee stated when asked by the photographer.

Tyson opted for gambler’s duds, and they changed in separate rooms. When she came out, she slinked up to him, taking in his get-up. He looked striking, dressed all in black with a black felt hat and a belt bearing a revolver with a pearl-handled grip.

“Hiya, handsome.” Haylee put her hand on her hip and batted her eyelashes. “Can I buy you a drink?”

Tyson looked so damned sexy, dressed all in black with a black gambler’s hat. He had a black gun belt slung at his hips and a revolver with a pearl-handled grip.

The corners of his mouth lifted into a sexy grin. “Hello, beautiful. I’ll take you up on that offer.”

The photographer, wearing an old-fashioned shirt that puffed at the wrists, a striped vest, and a black armband, ushered them to an old upright piano.

He draped a red feather boa over Haylee's shoulders and gave her a small bag with a dollar sign motif. She kicked off her shoes and perched atop its closed lid. She adjusted her skirt to reveal a good deal of skin on one thigh.

The photographer had Tyson lean his hip against the piano, arms crossed, with his revolver resting on one bicep.

Haylee giggled while Tyson smirked before composing himself for the photo and putting on a severe expression.

The photographer got behind what appeared to be an old-fashioned camera from the 1800s, but likely contained modern technology.

In a few minutes, they were done. They examined the photos of themselves—one option was sepia, while the other was in color. After selecting a package with sepia-toned pictures, it took only a few moments for the printouts to be ready and for Haylee and Tyson to pay before they left.

“Let's go to the OK Corral,” Haylee said as they left the photographer's studio. “I want to see where the Clantons and Earp brothers fought it out.”

He nodded. “Afterward, we can get the truck and drive to the Boothill Cemetery.”

They arrived at the OK Corral then stood in the same spot where that legendary gunfight had occurred so many years ago. The thrill of the reenactment made her skin tingle.

After traveling to and viewing Boothill Cemetery and walking amongst its old tombstones, they drove to the parking lot near the courthouse.

Tyson glanced at the blazing sunset as they made their way from the lot. “Time for our ghost tours.”

“I’m ready.” She grinned.

The old courthouse had a clock tower, and tickets were sold inside. Tyson purchased two for the courthouse tour and a separate pair for the ghost adventure they planned to go on later.

Their courthouse guide took them throughout the building, and they soon learned about famous town marshals and some of the lawless men who had been housed in the century-old building.

Haylee and Tyson enjoyed themselves so much by the time they finished exploring the courthouse that she was eager to participate in the upcoming ghost tour. They returned to Allen Street, where the courthouse desk clerk had told them to meet up.

Haylee leaned into Tyson as they neared the meeting site. Standing before them was a man in clothing from the 1800s, their probable guide for the evening. He had a pointy gray beard and mustache that ended with twirled tips.

After everyone quieted, he began talking about the area’s more gruesome history.

“Follow me.” The guide turned away. He paused and glanced over his shoulder. “Don’t get left behind—you might never find your way back.”

Tyson grasped Haylee’s hand and leaned close. “Don’t worry, I won’t let you get lost.”

Haylee smiled up at him. “I’m not letting go of you.”

After hearing the guide, a few of the five people standing before him snickered while others murmured to each other before falling in behind their guide. One of the women gave a

nervous giggle and said in a loud whisper to her partner, “I’ve heard this tour is spooky as hell.”

“You may end up regretting your decision to come here.” The guide’s voice quavered in the night. “We may see and hear things beyond imagination.”

As they walked, he pointed out old buildings that had been abandoned for decades and related stories about murders, mysterious deaths, and other strange happenings.

Haylee could almost swear she heard ghostly whispers at one point when the guide was going through his routine.

They walked along a deserted street close to a saloon, and Haylee shivered as an eerie feeling came out of nowhere and slithered over her skin. It was as if a presence was hovering nearby. A chill rolled down her spine.

A glowing orb appeared in front of them.

The guide made a startled sound and stepped back as the glow grew brighter until it took shape—a young woman in an old-fashioned dress floated in front of them and pointed her finger at the guide. “It was you.”

The guide took another step back, and his voice trembled. “You’ve got it all wrong.”

The phantom of the woman flickered and shimmered in the air, and her face grew darker. “You will pay for what you have done.”

The ghost screamed an eerie, drawn-out, shuddering wail.

She vanished, leaving behind a deafening silence.

The others in the group started speculating about the image and how real it looked.

“The ghost *was* real.” A woman with long dark hair and large black eyes spoke emphatically. “I’m a sensitive—she is here because she was murdered in this alleyway. She seeks vengeance that can never be granted.”

Haylee leaned into Tyson, and he settled his arm around her shoulders and squeezed her to him. Their gazes met.

“Ready to go?” he murmured in her ear.

“I’ve had enough of ghosts.” She shivered as they walked away and kept her voice low. “Even if that woman was merely an actress.”

“I hear you, honey.” He kept her close as they walked through the dark streets back to the truck parked near the courthouse.

Once they returned to the truck and headed home to King Creek, Tyson linked his fingers with Haylee’s on the console. “Did you enjoy the day as much as I did?”

She turned to look at him and studied his strong features in the amber glow of the dashboard lights. “I’ve had such a terrific time with you this entire weekend, Tyson. Thank you.”

He flashed her a quick smile and turned back to the highway. “You made our time together wonderful.”

She leaned back against the seat. “It’s a long way home.”

“Only three hours, give or take.” He cast her a glance. “I don’t mind the extra time with you.”

“True, there’s that.” She smiled. “This has been the best weekend ever.”

“Yep.” He gave a nod. “But you know what, hon? I think things can only get better between us.”

Haylee studied him. At that moment, with perfect crystal clarity, she knew the truth.

She was truly, absolutely, madly in love with Tyson.

Rain pounded the roof of Haylee's truck as she drove through town, her windshield wipers furiously going back and forth, back and forth. The water came down so thick it was like milk and sounded like a drumbeat on her truck cab.

She'd picked a hell of a day to go to the bank.

She smiled. The rain could come down even harder, and she wouldn't mind. Happiness welled inside her as she thought about the amazing weekend she and Tyson had just shared.

The gold hunting trip where they'd found the prospector's ancient tintypes and letter, the night at the BBQ place and laying under the stars. Their day in Tombstone had been filled with shootouts, shopping, getting their pictures taken, and a ghostly evening.

Heat rushed over her as she thought of the best thing of all—making love with Tyson.

What filled her with warmth and wonder was that she was in love. She loved Tyson Donovan.

Did he feel the same way? He cared for her, she knew that much. It might take time for him to fall in love with her. She could wait.

Haylee pulled her truck into Arizona Savings Bank's paved lot, the rain so hard she could barely see the lines to make sure she parked straight.

Damn it, she'd forgotten to put an umbrella in the truck. She hurried out of the vehicle and locked the door with the fob as she jogged to the bank entrance. Icy rain soaked her hair and clothing almost instantly. The rain smelled of water and life, and she caught the scent of earth from the mud beneath her feet.

She reached the revolving door, pushed through it, and stepped onto the bank lobby's marble tile. Water dripped into a pool around her feet, and she winced at the mess she was making.

Lank, wet hair hung around her cheeks, and she pushed it away from her face. She tasted the rain on her lips.

Behind her, chill air flooded the lobby, along with the sound of the downpour and the sweet scent of the rain. She glanced over her shoulder and smiled at the sight of Tyson coming through the revolving door, water dripping off his western hat, and she faced him.

His firm lips curved into a grin. "Fancy meeting you here, hon." He swept her into his arms, rain-drenched and all, and kissed her firmly.

She laughed as they parted. "You'd think we hadn't just seen each other last night." He'd dropped her off close to midnight when they'd returned from Tombstone.

He leaned in, his lips close to her ear, his tone rough like gravel in a box. "I can't get enough of you."

His lips met hers again, and she felt swept away in the rush of emotion and desire.

He pulled away and smiled down at her. “Either we stop or take this back to my ranch?”

She blinked, her mind muddled. “What?”

“Probably not a good idea in a bank lobby,” he said with sexy grin.

Heat crept up her neck. “I think you have a point.”

They walked past the blood-red upholstered chairs to the teller’s window. The teller, Helen, whom Haylee had known since she was a kid, cashed Haylee’s check, counted out the bills, and slid it to her with a smile.

Haylee took deep, even breaths to try to cool down, yet her body remained heated, and she wished she was alone with Tyson. Their time this weekend hadn’t been nearly enough.

Haylee stepped away as Tyson took his turn with the teller, and she caught the smell of the bank’s industrial cleaners. She looked out the big picture window as she waited for him. A van had pulled up in front of the bank’s door, and she heard the sound of the vehicle’s door sliding open.

“All done here.” A big hand rested on her shoulder, and she looked up at Tyson and smiled as air rushed in again from the revolving door, chilling her skin.

“I’m ready.” She tipped her head to the side. “What do you say to—”

“Everyone down on the floor,” a male voice shouted behind them.

Her heart jumped into her throat as Tyson took her to the floor, his arm draped protectively over her.

Haylee’s mind stuttered, not fully able to process what was happening. A bank robbery? Here?

Footsteps echoed on the marble, and her pulse throbbed faster. Tyson held her tighter, and she knew at that moment that he would put himself in danger to protect her. Icy cold spread over her skin at that thought.

A man stepped in front of them, a gun pointed at her head. Haylee swallowed hard and shuddered as she took in his menacing frame. He was stout and muscular, and the stocking over his face couldn't disguise his thick beard. His jeans were rumpled and dirty.

Haylee stiffened—she'd never been so scared in her life. She didn't know what any of these men were capable of, but if they were willing to risk anything for this heist, they might be okay with murder, too.

He waved the gun in their faces, and she smelled his bad body odor as he shouted like a snarling wolf. "Get over there and put your backs against the wall."

Tyson took Haylee by her arm and led her to the wall. Her knees buckled from fear, Tyson barely keeping her from falling. He helped her sit and settled next to her. He focused on the three men robbing the bank with a hard glint in his eyes.

Haylee watched in horror, and her stomach cramped as the robber ordered the other man and three women against the wall.

A second robber, who wasn't as burly as the first, marched the three tellers into the lobby and pushed them against the wall, yelling at them to sit down.

He turned back to the first robber and spoke in a strange tone, like he was trying to disguise his voice. "He's got the manager opening the safe."

The first robber told the second one, “Tie them up. We’re going to get into the safe.”

The second robber gave a nod, and an odd feeling passed through Haylee as the man reached them. Something about how he moved, and his solid, athletic build seemed familiar. Even with the stocking over his face, she was certain she knew him, but she wasn’t sure of exactly who he was.

He tossed a pair of zip ties to Haylee, and she caught them before they could hit her in the face. He spoke deeper, like he was trying even harder to keep them from knowing who he was.

The robber gestured to Tyson with his gun. “Cuff him and then yourself.”

The moment he’d spoken again, even though he’d tried to keep her from recognizing him, she knew exactly who it was—Clint Taylor.

She wasn’t sure if she should be afraid or just pissed. On the one hand, she didn’t think he was the murdering type, but on the other, he might want to shoot Tyson out of jealousy and kill her to keep his identity a secret.

“Hurry up,” Clint said in an angry but still disguised tone. “I’ll kill you both if you don’t do what I say.” Even from where she sat, she caught his reek of stale cigarettes and beer that made her want to gag. He must have spent the night drinking and smoking.

In the past, Haylee had wondered what she’d ever seen in Clint. Now, she had no idea how she had missed an element of the man willing to do something so vile.

She turned to Tyson, her hands shaking from adrenaline. Her body was cold from her soaked clothing as well as fear.

Tyson mouthed, "It will be okay."

In that instant, she knew what he was really saying. "I *will* make everything okay."

Fear iced her veins, and she could taste the fear on her tongue. She shook her head. "No," she whispered. He would play hero again and might get himself killed.

"Hurry up." Clint prodded her backside with his boot and pressed the barrel of his gun to the back of her head.

Haylee froze at the feel of the cold steel, and a shiver ran through her.

She bound Tyson's wrists as tight as she could to keep him from doing something stupid, then turned her back to the wall again and put her wrists out for Clint to bind.

She sat and glared up at Clint as he cuffed her, biting her tongue to keep from saying anything and revealing she knew who he was.

Clint moved on to the following four people and the three tellers, his boots hitting the floor with dull thuds, zip ties hanging out of his back pocket.

He pulled out some and tossed them to one of the women and had her bind the others. One woman whimpered, and the man begged for their lives.

Clint growled low in his throat and stood menacingly over them, his back to Haylee and Tyson. "Shut the hell up."

In the background, Haylee heard the other two robbers shouting at each other, their voices muffled, like they came from a different room.

Haylee turned to Tyson, and to her horror, he held his hands at his abdomen, jerked his wrists apart, and snapped the

zip tie.

A flash of the night when she had been told of Danny's death flashed through her mind. God, she couldn't lose Tyson to danger like she'd lost Danny.

She shook her head violently and mouthed, "No. Don't."

He looked away and eased to his feet.

TYSON CLENCHED HIS JAW, scenarios running through his mind. Adrenaline pumped through his veins as he crept slowly and moved behind the robber who had been holding them at gunpoint. He was close enough to smell the stink of the man's sweat, sour like a wet dog kept in a car.

With a lunge, Tyson tackled the bastard and drove him to the floor.

The man's chin struck the marble hard, stunning him, and the handgun fell out of his grasp. The weapon clattered on the tile and spun away.

Gripping the robber's collar, Tyson jerked the man around and slammed his fist into his jaw.

The robber went slack and dropped. His head bounced on the marble floor that reflected the fluorescent lights of the ceiling. Tyson jerked a zip tie from the man's back pocket and quickly bound his wrists. The robber's skin was slick with sweat.

Tyson turned to the other hostages and put his finger to his lips, meeting their gazes, including Haylee. The man and the women, still looking terrified, nodded.

Haylee's gaze reflected anger and fear. He knew she was upset with him for risking his life, but he couldn't sit back and do nothing. He had to protect her.

He retrieved the robber's gun, the grip rough and warm from being held by the robber. He raised the bar between the teller area and the door to the back room.

Tyson eased around the doorframe, just enough to see the open vault to the left and the manager bound hand and foot on the floor on the right. Her eyes widened when she saw Tyson, but he put his fingers to his lips again, and she nodded.

The robbers were in the vault, talking to each other. "Hurry up," one of the men growled. "The police will be here soon."

Tyson moved into the room, the air smelling of dust and lingering coffee. He kept his back against the wall, easing his way to the massive safe door.

With all his strength, he flung himself at the heavy door. He slammed it shut with a solid *thunk* and spun the dial. He glanced at the manager, who went slack with relief. He used his pocketknife to cut her bonds, then slid the knife back into his pocket.

Police sirens were deafening outside, and tires squealed as they skidded in the street.

With the manager walking wobbly beside him, Tyson returned to the lobby. He set the handgun onto a teller's window so that he wouldn't be holding a weapon when the police charged in.

Tyson returned to Haylee, sat beside her, and pulled out his pocketknife.

She held out her wrists for him to cut her ties, her face bright pink. Both relief at seeing him alive, followed by anger,

flared in her eyes. “Were you out of your mind? What happened?”

Sweat rolled down the back of his neck as adrenaline still flowed inside him, and he sliced through her zip tie. “They’re safely shut in the vault.”

She sagged against the wall and blew out her breath. “Thank God.” Then she narrowed her gaze. “You could have gotten killed. Hell, you could have gotten any one of us killed.”

He studied her expression, which told him how upset she was. “Everything’s fine, Haylee. Let me cut everyone’s ties.”

She snapped her teeth shut and looked at her hands. He moved to each person, sliced through their bonds, and slid his knife into his pocket.

As the last person’s ties were cut, the police rushed through the glass doors to the sides of the revolving door on the floor, still wet from the rain dripping off their clothing.

The officers shouted for everyone to raise their hands, guns drawn. Tyson put his hands up, the others following his lead.

The place was filled with the sound of crackling radios and shouts from police as they surveyed the scene.

A lieutenant named George Valdez spotted then beckoned to Tyson. He’d gone to school with George, and he lowered his hands and got to his feet to meet his old friend in the middle of the lobby.

Tyson spelled out all the details, and Lieutenant Valdez told three of his officers to check the vault and that the two suspects secured inside were armed.

As Valdez walked away to process the scene, the weight of the events of the last few minutes washed over him. Haylee thought he had acted recklessly, but he'd been an MP in the service, so he had training. He couldn't sit back and do nothing while people's lives were in danger.

An officer marched the robber that Tyson had decked toward the front door. The man's stocking had been removed from his head. Recognition stunned Tyson. Clint Taylor bowed his head as he shuffled past.

Tyson's gut tightened when he spotted Haylee in the lobby, where the hostages were being processed. She could have been killed, and he would never have forgiven himself for letting her get hurt.

Had she recognized Taylor? Was that why she hadn't seemed more concerned about her safety?

The police officers came out of the back, leading the two robbers away in handcuffs, the stockings removed from their heads. He recognized one of the men who had been in the back of the truck that had almost mowed down the older man in the parking lot at the barn dance. Taylor had gotten caught up with some real bad guys.

As the commotion died, Tyson hurried toward Haylee, dodging officers and equipment. She still sat on the floor, her drying hair falling across her cheeks, her eyes brimming with emotions he couldn't identify.

He crouched in front of her. "I know you think I should have stayed back and waited it out." He added quietly, "I couldn't do that. I couldn't let them hurt you."

"You probably saved all our lives, so we owe you our thanks." Tears rolled down her cheeks as she spoke. "But you

could have been killed.”

Her throat worked and she went on before he could say anything. “I can’t be with someone who plays hero and puts his life at risk.” Her eyes now looked distant, like he had already lost her. “No, not again. Never again.”

“Haylee, wait.” His gut clenched as she got to her feet. She ignored the hand he offered her.

She brushed off the seat of her jeans, giving him one last sad look through her tears. “Goodbye, Tyson.”

He touched her arm. “Please, wait.”

She hesitated, not looking back at him. “Never again,” she said quietly, then walked away.

He stared after her, feeling helpless. How had it all gone so terribly wrong?

Haylee's eyes burned as she walked away from Tyson. She gripped her hands at her sides as she fought to hold back more tears. Her mouth had gone dry.

The disorder around the bank lobby didn't compare to the tumult that churned inside of her. How could Tyson take such chances with his life? What made him so reckless that he could have gotten himself killed?

Was that thrill what drove him? She shook her head, her thoughts rattling around her skull. Being honest with herself, she knew he did it out of a sense of right and wrong and genuinely caring about her and others.

But he could have been killed. That made it three times that he'd put himself in danger—two times where he'd ended up at the wrong end of a gun. How many more times would he do the same? Her heart couldn't take it if he got killed.

Like Danny. He had risked his life to save others, and he had died because of it.

An image of Tyson on the floor came to her, blood pooling around his body. Even though it hadn't happened that way, the mere thought of him lying there, lifeless, made her stomach churn.

Haylee shouldered her way through the crowd and walked toward Officer Henry Benson, a longtime friend of the family, who had been the one to interview her.

She tried to pull herself together, wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands before she stopped in front of him.

He turned and gave her a gentle smile. “How’re you holding up, Haylee?”

She swallowed back the lump that had been lodged in her throat. “I’m just glad everyone is okay.”

Benson scratched the top of his head. “Tyson’s quick thinking and actions ended the situation without anyone getting hurt.”

Yes, that was true, and she knew it. But the stubborn thought in her head was that Tyson could have gotten himself killed by his actions.

Benson said, “His training as a Military Police Officer in the service made the difference.”

She tried for a smile but knew she failed miserably. “Am I free to go?” All she wanted was to be alone, to be far away from everything about this whole ordeal.

He patted her shoulder. “Go home and take it easy, Haylee.”

She nodded and headed for the revolving glass doors and saw that there was no longer a downpour. As she stepped outside, she breathed in the cool, rain-washed air, trying to calm herself.

Was she being unreasonable? Maybe. But she couldn’t help feeling like her world had come crashing down—the

thought of losing Tyson, of losing the man she had let inside her heart, scared her more than anything.

Instead of going to her truck, she headed to the park across and down the street from the bank. She needed to be alone with her thoughts.

Wind gusted in her face, blowing the long strands around her cheeks. Her shoes hit the sidewalk with soft pats, and one heel squeaked. The earlier surge of adrenaline had dissipated, and she was coming down from it.

A dog barked in the distance as Haylee reached the park and walked over the still-green grass. It wouldn't go brown until later in the fall, and then it would be seeded with winter grass that would keep it looking nice until the spring when the lawn came back from bleaker days.

What would her life be like without Tyson being in it? Her chest ached with the feeling of loneliness that slid through her.

She passed by a stand of trees and heard the leaves rustle in the wind. The sun peeked between the rain clouds and through the tree leaves, its light dappling the muddy ground.

Her pulse throbbed rapidly in her veins. She shuffled to the park bench and plopped down. The cold metal bit her skin through her jeans, and she hugged her arms around her.

The fresh air brought the scent of fall, and she caught the scent of wood burning in hearths from the chimneys of nearby homes. The breeze chilled her, and she regretted not having a jacket.

"Is this seat taken?" The low male voice she recognized at once startled her, and she looked up to see Tyson looking down at her, his face etched with concern.

Haylee caught her breath, at a loss for words. Her blood rushed in her veins from him being so close again. She'd thought she'd have time to pull herself together before seeing him again.

He eased onto the bench beside her, not waiting for an invitation. His scent, warm, earthy, and masculine, swept over her.

She tasted the coolness of the air as she tried to keep her voice steady. "You followed me."

He gave a slow nod. "I need to talk with you. I couldn't let you leave, upset and hurting."

"Why do you think I feel that way?" Haylee stiffened. "You make a habit of putting yourself in danger, just like you did the night you got in the middle of that couple's fight. You could have been killed then, and you could have been killed in the bank. My heart can't take that kind of stress."

Tyson raised his hand as if to reach for her, then thought better of it and rested his palm on the bench seat between them, his expression serious. "When I was a boy, and my mom died from cancer, I made a promise to help others because I hadn't been able to help her." He sighed. "So, I feel a tremendous sense of duty and the desire to protect others, especially those I care about. That includes you more than anyone else in the world."

Her chest seized at his words, the pain of his mother's death and the depth of his concern for her clear in his voice.

She spread her hands on her lap, staring at the pink polish on her nails. "You scare me, Tyson."

"Tell me what happened," he said quietly. "What happened that makes all of this worse for you?"

The night she'd learned of her boyfriend's death came rushing back to her, and her words trembled. "His name was Danny. He was a Phoenix firefighter I met at an event I put on in that city. We dated for several months, and I cared for him—I was starting to fall for him hard." A tear rolled down her cheek. "One night, he died in a fire while rescuing people trapped in the house."

For a moment, there was silence between them. "I'm sorry," Tyson said quietly. "That must have been difficult to get through."

She shrugged, but it wasn't casual.

"I don't know how to reassure you." He brushed the teardrop away with his thumb, the movement tickling her skin. "I'll do everything I can to never put myself in a dangerous situation. But it comes down to this: if you're in danger, nothing can stop me from doing everything I can to save you. I hope you can understand that."

She remained quiet, processing his words. If they ended up together, would she be like a policeman's wife, afraid he wouldn't come home to her one night?

No, how could she even think this was close to being the same? These were the kinds of instances that were normally rare and not things that were likely to happen frequently. Being a firefighter is different—one could end up putting his or her life on the line every time they went to work.

He rested his arm on the bench behind her. "I care too much about you to risk losing you." He lowered his voice and spoke more quietly. "Now that I've expressed how I feel about protecting you tell me what you want me to do."

She met his gaze as tears brimmed in her eyes. “Losing you would be more than I could bear.” Her voice felt rough as she fought not to cry. “You are—” She fought to compose herself. “You are more important to me than I could ever have imagined.”

He leaned in closer, resting his forehead on hers. “I love you, Haylee. I’ll do everything I can not to jeopardize my life, I promise.”

She bit her lower lip, and a tear rolled down her face.

Tyson raised his head and looked into her eyes again. He brushed away the tear with his thumb, his callused skin rough against her cheek. “I know you’re a strong, independent, and capable woman, and I respect that. At the same time, I’ll keep you safe if I ever feel you’re in danger. I love you too much to tell you otherwise.”

His words turned over and over in her mind. The one thing that stood out was that he had just told her he loved her, not once but twice.

More tears tracked Haylee’s face as she looked into his eyes. “I love you with everything I have, Tyson. I can’t help it.” She swallowed hard as his features started to shift from concern to surprise. “I understand better now that you’ve shared all that with me. I’m just—I’m just afraid.”

“Aw, hon.” He gathered her into his arms and held her securely in his embrace. “You are my treasure, more precious to me than anything.”

Despite her sense of independence and insistence that she was a strong woman, it still felt good to feel protected and loved as she did at that moment.

Haylee shifted in Tyson's arms and tipped her face up to his. He brought his mouth to hers and kissed her so sweet it took her breath away. She responded with soft kisses of her own.

She snuggled up to him, the top of her head tucked beneath his chin, the side of her face against his chest. His heart pounded beneath her ear, and she felt it beat in time with her own.

He hugged her tight for a long moment, but then she started shivering against him despite the warmth of his embrace.

"Come on, let me get you out of the wind and cold." He shifted her so that he could stand and draw her up beside him. He smiled down at her. "Where would you like to go? To the diner for something warm to eat?"

She shook her head and gave him a little grin. "Let's go have Spam sandwiches at your place."

He laughed and wrapped one arm around her, and they walked back to the bank, where they'd left their parked vehicles.

AFTER CLEANING up from their dinner of Spam sandwiches and beer, Freya and Zoey curled up on the beds by the hat rack.

Tyson took Haylee by the hand and led her to the hall. She'd only ever been in the kitchen and the living room. She felt a twinge of excitement as he led her along a short hallway, the floor the same patterned tile as the parts of the house she'd seen.

They passed a study on the right, sunlight spilling in through partially opened blinds. The glow highlighted dark oak bookshelves lining the walls and a large old-fashioned oak desk that looked like an antique, with a brass reading lamp on its surface. Two sturdy chairs sat in front of the desk.

Her belly fluttered as they reached a door at the end of the hallway. Tyson looked down at her, then opened the door.

Haylee walked ahead of him into what was the master bedroom. It had vaulted ceilings like the parts of the house she'd seen. A massive king-sized bed of rough-hewn wood crouched in the center of the room, a colorful patchwork quilt covering the mattress, with ample pillows covered in deep red shams against the headboard.

Matching nightstands sat on either side of the bed. A tall dresser of the same rough wood was against one wall, and an antique trunk at the base of the bed's footboard. The painting he had purchased at the gallery the night of her showing was mounted on the wall opposite the door.

It was a masculine room without much decor, but she liked it. She turned to look up at him, and he smiled.

He caught her face in his warm, callused hands. "You are the most important thing in my life, and I never want to let you go."

"I feel the same way." Her heart felt near to bursting. "I love you so much, Tyson."

He lowered his head and brought his mouth to hers. His lips were firm but gentle as he kissed her slowly and luxuriously.

He slid his tongue into her mouth, tasting beer and warm masculinity. His scent filled her lungs, and she drank more of

it in, more of him in.

She let out a blissful sigh at the wondrous kiss as she melted into his arms. He pushed his fingers into her hair and pressed his mouth more firmly against hers.

The passion burning between them flared even hotter. She ran her tongue along his lower lip, and he groaned with pleasure and need.

What they'd been through earlier intensified her desire for him. She could have lost him, and the fact that she was in his arms right now was a blessing.

Tyson eased his hands out of her hair, sliding his palms over her shoulders and down to her hips. He grasped her buttocks and pressed their bodies tightly together.

She sucked in her breath at the feel of his erection, a hard ridge against her flesh. Their kisses grew more frenzied, fueled by their emotions, and she felt like she'd gone up in flames.

Her breasts felt heavy, and the ache between her thighs made her squirm to have him inside her. She thought she might burst from the depth of her need for him.

She broke the kiss and met his heavy-lidded gaze. "Boots, off."

He looked slightly amused at her bossy tone but sat on the edge of his mattress and toed off his boots.

With her eyes on his, she eased onto her knees, between his thighs, until she was at the level of his belt buckle. She reached for it, pulled the buckle back, then waited for him to slide the leather belt from the loops. He dropped it, and the buckle hit the tile with a clatter.

Fumbling a little, she grasped the metal button of his Wranglers and managed to release it. She slowly dragged down his zipper, then pushed the tough cloth over his hips and knees so that his jeans dropped to his ankles, leaving him in a pair of black boxer briefs.

She grasped the surprisingly silky fabric with her fingers, pulled it over his hips, and shoved it to the floor with his jeans.

His erection thrust out, but she ignored it, peeled off his socks one at a time, and tossed them over her shoulder.

She then wrapped her fingers around his hardness and brought her mouth to the head.

Haylee flicked her tongue against the softness pressed to her lips, and Tyson speared his fingers into her hair and cupped the back of her head.

She kept her eyes fixed on his as she sucked. A loud groan burst from his lips. "Damn, Haylee. Just, damn."

His words made her smile around his cock, and she sucked him even harder. He moved his hips in time with her as she bobbed her head, her mouth sliding up and down his shaft.

She loved making him feel this way, loved the silky hardness of him in her mouth, loved the taste of his skin.

His fingers clenched tighter in her hair, but she didn't mind the pressure against her scalp. She liked the thought of him losing control. It made her feel powerful to know the control was hers.

She grasped the globes of his ass and felt them tighten in her hands.

"Oh, shit, Haylee." He bit out the words. "I'm going to come."

She sucked harder and dug her nails into his hard flesh.

He shouted as he came, hard. He pressed his groin tight to her, and she tasted his fluid, swallowing it all.

She watched the rapid rise of his chest and saw the sweat rolling down the sides of his face.

When he relaxed, coming back to himself, he looked down at her. She grinned up at him. “Good thing there aren’t any nearby neighbors.”

“I think you’re right.” He gave a low laugh, grasped her upper arms, and stood. He dragged her up his sweat-slicked chest to her feet.

“You have far too many clothes on.” He grasped the hem of her blouse, pulled it over her head, and ditched it.

Her long hair fell down her back, tickling her skin. He reached around her and made short work of her bra, flinging it aside in the same direction the blouse had flown.

With a smoldering smile, he grasped her waist, and she squealed with surprise and laughter as he swept her off her feet and tossed her onto the bed.

She giggled, and he proceeded to relieve her of her shoes and socks before he hurried to strip off her jeans and panties.

The man was in a hurry, and so was she. She wanted him inside her, and she wanted him now.

Haylee lay naked on the bed, smiling up at him as he slid on a condom.

He looked down at her with hunger in his brilliant blue eyes.

She crooked her finger at him. “Come here, big boy.”

With a feral sound, he moved between her thighs, his eyes blazing with need. He grasped his erection and placed it against the entrance to her core.

His ferocity was contagious. She raised her hips. “Now, Tyson. Don’t make me wait.”

He thrust his cock deep, and she cried out at the feel of his thickness and fullness. He moved in and out, his breathing hard, droplets of sweat from his hair landing on her chest.

Her thoughts seemed to spin out of control as she charged closer to an orgasm. Closer, closer yet.

Tyson hooked his arms beneath her knees, driving even deeper.

She screamed as she hit her climax, her body vibrating, her core clamping down on his cock.

He thrust a few more times then shouted even louder than before.

Chest rising and falling like a racehorse, he pulled out and ditched the condom. He drew her into his arms and held her close.

“I love you, Haylee.” He sounded sated and exhausted.

She smiled, feeling herself drift away. “I love you.”

Haylee sat in front of her latest painting in the room she used as an art studio in the home she shared with her sisters. She loved the scent of paint and wet canvas that filled the small room.

She dabbed at the canvas with her paintbrush, putting the last bit of shading on a cholla cactus. The sky was the vivid blue of a sunny Arizona afternoon, the ground a reddish-brown, with the majestic Huachuca Mountains in the distance.

“There. I think that’s it.” She set the brush on the palette and studied the work of art critically. “Not bad.” She had spent time on the nuances all morning and was finally satisfied with the result.

A knock on the door caught her attention, and she called over her shoulder, “Come on in.”

She kept her gaze on the painting, searching for anything that might need touching up. No work of art was perfect, and that was part of the beauty of it.

Large arms wrapped around her shoulders, and she felt the warmth of Tyson’s embrace and breathed in his scent of soap, shampoo, and man. “Hello, gorgeous,” he murmured.

“I’m glad you’re here.” She turned on her stool and tipped her head back for a kiss, and he made good on it. “I’m finished, and it’s ready to go to the gallery.”

Eleven months had passed since her first showing, and it had been almost nine months since the bank robbery.

He smiled down at her. “I’m kidnapping you to celebrate.”

She laughed. “Is it kidnapping if I’m a willing participant?”

“You have paint on your nose.” He grinned as he studied her face. “And on your cheek.”

“I’m sure I have it everywhere.” She slid off the stool, and he stepped back as she removed her pink smock, decorated with colorful paint smears. “It would be all over my clothes if I didn’t use this thing.”

They walked toward the door, and she hung the smock on a brass hook near the frame. “Where are we going?”

“My place.” He followed her down the hall and to her bedroom. “I’ve got takeout from Ricardo’s in the truck in an insulated bag.”

“Yum.” She shooed him back from the door. “Give me fifteen minutes to take a quick shower and make myself presentable.”

“I can’t watch?” He gave her a look so sexy that it sent a warm flush through her from head to toe.

“Stop that.” She waved him out of the room. “Go on now.”

He grinned and closed the door behind him as she shook her head. She stripped out of her old T-shirt, worn jeans and

lingerie, and hurried to get ready. She didn't want the Mexican food to get cold.

Half an hour later, they were in his truck, pulling up to his ranch. Freya and Zoey bounded to the vehicle, their butts wiggling with excitement.

They made short work of the takeout. Haylee hadn't eaten much since she'd been so absorbed in her work, so she ate her tacos with ravenous enthusiasm.

After cleaning up their meal, he took her by the hand. "I've got to show you something."

She always enjoyed his big, firm grip, and she walked at his side across to the opposite end of the house that she'd only seen once when he'd taken her on a tour months ago. Three guest rooms were in that part of the big house, and there hadn't been any reason for her to go there since.

They reached the hallway with the bedrooms, and he escorted her to the last room on the left. He opened the door, stepped back, and held it open for her.

She stepped past him, and her jaw dropped. Skylights that hadn't been there before let in the sunshine. A series of smaller windows had been added above a large picture window that looked out upon a desert garden filled with a variety of cacti and desert plants.

In the center of the room was a finely crafted easel with a blank canvas and an equally beautiful wooden stool. Beside the easel was a table for supplies needed while painting and another stool. Along the back wall was a structure like a wooden bookcase with cubbyholes for more supplies.

She turned to him, unable to believe the incredible room. "It's amazing and wonderful."

“And it’s all yours.” He grinned. “Have a seat.”

She moved into the room, across the floor with its eighteen-inch tiles, smelling fresh paint and wood. She perched on the stool in front of the easel and canvas. “How did you do all of this?”

He took the other stool, moved it closer to her, and sat on it. “I’ve been working on it for you for months, a little at a time.”

She looked at him in amazement. “By yourself?”

He shrugged. “I grew up helping my dad build and make things ourselves, so I have prior experience.”

She shook her head, having difficulty comprehending what he’d done for her and an even harder time finding words to express how much she appreciated it.

He held her gaze. “You can paint full-time here.”

She smiled. “I wish. I still need to make money.”

“I have a proposition for you.” He placed his palms on his thighs. “Now that I have the jerky business going, I’m ready to get my horse rescue ranch up and going.”

“That’s wonderful.” She cocked her head. “So, what’s the proposition?”

“You have a minor in nonprofits and experience working with those kinds of organizations.” He smiled. “I’d like you to run the horse rescue ranch nonprofit. You could do that part-time and paint to your heart’s content the rest of the time.”

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

He nodded. “So, what do you say?”

She climbed off the stool and flung herself at him. “I’ll take the job.”

“Glad to hear it, hon.” He wrapped her in his large embrace and held her to him. He kissed the top of her head. “I have another proposition.” She stepped back, and he got to his feet.

“What else could you possibly have to surprise me with now?” She looked around her at the perfect room and turned toward him. “I still can’t believe—”

Haylee’s words stuck in her throat. Tyson was on one knee, holding an open small jeweler’s box. Nestled in brown velvet was what must have been a two-carat diamond ring on a simple gold band.

“Will you marry me, Haylee?” He looked at her with solemn eyes as she stared at him. “You will make this cowboy the happiest man on earth.”

She dropped to her knees before him, ignoring the hard tile. She threw herself at him and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Yes! Oh, my God, *yes*.”

He gathered her close and hugged her. He leaned back, and she tipped her face up to his. “Thank you for saying yes. I love you more than anything on God’s green earth.”

She smiled. “My love matches yours. I can’t imagine anything better than you being my husband and me being your wife.”

He kissed her deeply, and she fell into it, so happy she could burst with it all. The studio was incredible, running his nonprofit a wonderful thing, but best of all, he would be hers forever.

HAYLEE LEANED back in Tyson's embrace on the deck of the riverboat as it cruised along France's River Seine. A soft breeze blew strands of hair around her face and brushed her cheeks with a feathery caress.

Along the Seine, the riverboat slid past green shores crowded with trees and bushes, with homes peering through here and there and occasional towns with a small dock. The river went through several locks and continued on to flow into the English Channel.

"It's so gorgeous here." She breathed deeply of the cool air. "It's so different from Arizona. The desert has its own beauty, but this is incredible."

Tyson rested his chin on the top of her head. "It is beautiful, hon."

The cruise had been Tyson's wedding gift—two weeks starting in London, then the bullet train to Paris, where they boarded the riverboat. Now, they were halfway through the trip along the Seine, and at the end of the cruise, they would head back to Paris.

"I love the swans." She watched a pair of wild swans swimming in a small alcove. The lovely white creatures inhabited the banks along the green waters from outside Paris to the river's end in Normandy.

Tyson gave a soft laugh. "You wouldn't have ended up with geese at a bridal shower if they were wild back home."

She grinned at the memory. "I can still picture one of the little monsters nipping Helen's bottom."

The boat had left Paris earlier in the week, and they'd made stops at medieval towns and tiny jewels of places to visit.

And art—she was submersed in art everywhere. They had started at the British Museum in London, then in Paris the Louvre and the Musée d’Orsay before the cruise. She had reveled in more art than she’d been exposed to her entire life.

Haylee turned her attention to her surroundings. The captain had begun docking the boat.

“We’ve reached Giverny.” Haylee turned in Tyson’s arms to face him. “It won’t be long until we visit Claude Monet’s home, gardens, and art studio.”

She thought about yesterday when the riverboat had stopped at Auvers-sur-Oise, a picturesque village where Vincent Van Gogh spent the last couple of months of his life.

“I still can’t believe that yesterday we stood in so many places Van Gogh had painted and the room where he’d lived.”

Tyson nodded. “It was great seeing his painting of that room back at the museum in Paris.”

“It’s fascinating they haven’t rented the room since his death.” Haylee thought about the ivy-covered gravesite where he was buried. “It was an interesting story of how his beloved brother, Theodore, was interred next to him.”

“And now for Monet.” Tyson took her hand. “Let’s get downstairs and get ready to go.”

As Haylee and Tyson rode in the tour bus with other Spirit passengers to Monet’s home, she could hardly contain herself. He squeezed her hand as she looked from the window to him. His sexy grin made her feel warm all over.

“I’m so excited to visit the places special to Monet.” She smiled. “I never dreamed I’d do so many things I’d only read

or heard about before. This is the most amazing trip. Thank you.”

He kissed her softly and drew back. “I’m happy you’re enjoying yourself. I love doing all these things with you.”

“How could I not enjoy myself?” Haylee leaned her head against Tyson’s shoulder, feeling content and loved. She couldn’t believe how lucky she was to have found a man like him who cherished, loved, and appreciated her.

And how lucky she was to experience everything she’d done so far with Tyson. She had thought of traveling to Europe but wasn’t sure she’d ever get the opportunity to. Experiencing art and culture in this way was incredible.

She looked out the window as the bus slowed and pulled up to Monet’s Giverny estate. Lush gardens filled with brilliant flowers, arching vine-covered walkways, and willow trees were near the entrance. “Oh, my God. This is amazing.”

They left the bus with their group, following their guide. Haylee looked around her—there was so much to see. Tyson took pictures for her so that she could spend the time enjoying every bit of the experience.

They followed the crowd and their guide and soon entered the most beautiful gardens Haylee had ever seen. The guide told them that Monet had designed the gardens and had everything planted once he made enough money with his art.

“There is so much greenery and beauty.” Haylee looked up at Tyson then back to everything around her. They walked along a pathway filled with bright, vibrant, colorful flowers around a waterway.

A small bamboo island was distanced from the rest of the garden because it was an invasive species. Their guide told

them that Monet had wanted to enjoy the bamboo but hadn't wanted it to take over his garden.

The gardens continued with lovely trees, flowers, and greenery surrounding them. They came upon a pond covered with lily pads and their pink flowers.

Haylee let out her breath. "To think, he painted this very pond in some of his famous paintings." She smiled and gestured ahead. "There's the bridge Monet made famous in his artwork."

He nodded in that direction. "Stand over there, and I'll take your picture in front of the bridge's entrance." He was always taking pictures of her.

She did as he said and struck a couple of poses, then went to him and took his hand. "Come on." She led him past a tree that arched over the entryway to the bridge, covered with wisteria vines.

She looked at him and smiled when they reached the bridge's center. He brought her into his arms and kissed her.

He drew back, and she sighed and smiled. "Selfie."

He grinned, and they took several selfies with flowers and the lily pond behind them.

"Excuse me." They turned to a young woman who was smiling at them. "Would you like me to photograph you two on the bridge?"

"Yes, please." Haylee beamed at her. "Thank you."

Tyson handed over his cell phone, with the camera already cued up. The woman walked down the path until she reached a point where she could photograph them on the bridge, Tyson's arm around Haylee's shoulders.

The young woman returned and gave Tyson back his phone.

“We appreciate this so much,” Haylee said and thanked her again.

They continued through the gardens and took a few more selfies, as they’d been doing the entire trip. They’d have plenty to look back on when they returned to King Creek.

Later, the guide took them into Monet’s colossal art studio, which Haylee fell in love with. “This makes me itch to get back to my art in the studio you created for me. I feel so inspired by Monet’s works throughout this place.” Just thinking about him painting in this very room was breathtaking.

Haylee turned in the center of the room, taking in the colorful artwork that covered the walls from floor to ceiling. How could she help but feel inspired by the space? “All the masterpieces Monet created in this place—it’s unbelievable to be here.”

She grew quiet as she took everything in.

Tyson stood beside her and rested his arm around her shoulders. “I have a feeling you could spend hours in this place.”

She tipped her head to look into his eyes. “I’m just amazed by all this color and beauty.”

He took her hand and kissed the back of it. “Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?”

She smiled and kissed him. She took a step back—*to think I just kissed my husband in Monet’s art studio.*

Next, they toured Monet's home. It was lovely. The guide told them the artist hadn't liked his own artwork hung in his rooms. Instead, he had Japanese woodblock prints covering his walls.

"I find it interesting that Monet liked to have such a fluid look to his place," she said as they walked through his bedroom. In some of his rooms, the furniture was painted the same colors as the walls. One room was painted light blue with a darker blue trim, including a glass-front bookcase.

His dining room was enormous, with yellow-painted walls and furnishings, including a china cabinet and a table and chairs. The kitchen was painted blue with copper pans hanging along one side.

When they left the home, Haylee was so full of excitement that she could barely contain herself. "If we had time, I'd go back and see it all again. I wish I could sit there and paint everything."

Their guide ended the tour in the streets of Giverny, where she turned everyone loose.

Haylee and Tyson held hands as they headed for Giverny's church, where Monet and his family attended services. On the way, they passed cafés, shops, and galleries.

"Too bad we don't have time to have coffee in one of these cafés." Tyson squeezed her hand. "That's the only thing about being on a tour—it doesn't seem like there's enough time to do everything."

She nodded. "That's so true."

Haylee adored the quaint town. "Just think, Monet and his family walked this street."

It wasn't long before they went to the church and traveled to the graveyard behind it to search for Monet's gravesite.

Claude Monet and his family members had been buried in a big plot topped with a large, white marble cross. "How appropriate." Haylee looked over the plot. "All of this greenery and flowers covering the gravesite."

Haylee and Tyson held hands at the foot of the burial plot. "I wish I had a bouquet to leave." She tipped her head back to meet his gaze. "A kind of thank you to one of my favorite artists of all time."

He brushed his lips over hers. "Just being here is a thank you."

They walked back through the street of Giverny, from the church to where their bus waited.

It amazed her that Tyson understood how important art was to her, and he had taken her to the homes of two of her favorite artists. She meant enough to him that he was willing to spend days of this European vacation on some of the things that brought her joy.

When they had returned to the riverboat, they got a couple of glasses of wine from the lounge and carried them to the upper deck, where they stood next to the railing, looking out at the river and swans swimming nearby.

"It's been a gorgeous day." Haylee tipped her head back and looked into the blue sky before looking at Tyson again. "It's amazing we haven't had rain all day."

He nodded. "It has been beautiful weather. I'm sure we'll see more rain for the rest of the trip."

Haylee leaned back against the rail and met his gaze. "I love you, Tyson Donovan."

He took her glass from her and set it and his own on a nearby table, then brought her into his arms. “I adore and love you, Haylee Donovan.” He grinned. “I love saying that. It reminds me that you’re mine, forever.”

“And ever.” She slid her hands up his shoulders and linked her hands behind his neck. “How do I thank you for all these wonderful experiences?”

“You said ‘yes’ to being my wife.” He drew her close to him. “That’s all I’ll ever need.”

Tyson lowered his head, his mouth covering hers, and all she could think was how much she loved this man and how lucky she was to have him.

EXCERPT: AMAZED BY YOU

“Well, hell.” Jayson McBride raised his Stetson, pushed his fingers through his hair, and plopped his hat back onto his head as he stared at the spectacle that had invaded his ranch. “Never making a bet like this again. Might never make another bet of any kind.”

Jack flashed a grin and nodded in the direction of the intruders in front of Jayson’s barn. “Maybe we’ll meet one of those models with their asses damn near showing.”

Jayson rested his arms on the top rail of the corral. He glared at his fraternal twin who should have sympathized. “Those ladies are at least fifteen years younger than us. I need that like I need a hole in my head.”

Truth was, Jack hadn’t dated in a few years, since his wife had passed, and likely wasn’t interested in young models. But Jack did like giving Jayson a hard time.

“Options.” Jack said before adding, “Monty did say the fashion designer herself is a looker and right in your ballpark.”

Just hearing Monty Tinsman’s name caused Jayson to scowl again. “He also said the woman is a witch in high heels.” Jayson sighed. Another part of this ordeal to deal with. “She’s supposed to be here tomorrow.” He glanced at Jack.

“Why don’t you show her around?” He wasn’t hopeful, but he gave it a shot.

“Sorry, but I think I’ll be busy.” Jack didn’t look the least bit sorry. “I’m sure you’ll handle her just fine.”

Jayson glanced down at Thor, who sat on his haunches. “What about you? Maybe you could keep her company.”

The Border Collie tilted his head and stared up, his intelligent eyes seeming to say, “Don’t look at me, buddy.”

Jayson shook his head and stared up at the cloudless Arizona sky. He glanced toward the conglomeration of vans, makeup artists, wardrobe stylists, hairstylists, and set designers. Then there was all the camera equipment the photographer and fashion designer had deemed necessary for the shoot, and who knew what else.

Not to forget a meal wagon—the smells of dried-out pizza and overcooked corn dogs actually overpowered the odor of manure. Yeah, that was some nasty crap in that wagon.

At least nine models were supposed to be in and out of the commercial shoot in less than a week’s timeframe. At least that was what Monty said, and Jayson wasn’t sure he could trust the man after this. Nine models and four days to a week of shooting, print and film, for a new clothing line.

Great.

He hoped his ranch would still be in one piece when they all finally cleared out.

He looked up at the clear sky again and wondered if it would stay that way. In central Arizona, during monsoon season, a storm could sweep in before they knew what was happening. Rain was a blessing for a state experiencing a long

drought. This was one time Jayson prayed rain would hold off this week so that this circus would be out of town in a hurry.

“Here comes your favorite person.” Amusement rode Jack’s words. “He’s looking mighty proud of himself.”

Bring in the clowns.

Monty Tinsman ambled toward them, his belly bouncing as he walked. The muscles in Jayson’s shoulders knotted.

Thor let out a low rumble. He hadn’t liked Monty from the moment the man stepped onto the Flying F.

Jayson should have listened.

The owner of a decent spread at the foot of the Bradshaw Mountains in Prescott, Monty was a part-time Arizona resident who headed to upstate New York in the summer. Apparently, he’d told the designer of a clothing line he’d do her a favor, and she could use Monty’s ranch to do the shoot.

A poker night, a few beers, and a damned glorious bet. Now, the whole mess was in Jayson’s front yard.

Monty reached Jayson and Jack, and the bastard grinned. His over-the-top thousand dollar Stetson, two thousand dollar Tony Lama boots, movie star-white teeth, and tanning bed tan didn’t make him look any more like a cowboy than Jayson looked like one of those slick movie stars. Monty seemed to be a good guy, though, unless you counted sticking Jayson with this mess.

“I’m surprised you’d show your face around here.” Jack grasped Monty’s hand. “Good to see you, Mont.”

Jayson grumbled under his breath, “It’s far too soon.”

Monty laughed. “I figured there’d be no problem with the magazine switching locations to your ranch, Jayson.” He

appraised their surroundings. “I’ve got a nice piece of property, but yours puts mine to shame.”

“I had a full house, ace high.” Jayson shook his head. “And you beat me with a royal flush.”

“That was some bet.” Jack nodded. “Don’t feel bad, bro. With your hand, I’d have been all over betting a shoot on the ranch against that prize bull of his.”

Monty chuckled.

Jayson wanted a do-over.

But what was done was done. His younger sister Bailey’s voice rang in his mind with one of her favorite sayings, “*Suck it up, Buttercup.*”

Where’d she get that crap from anyway?

Jayson shook his head. One of the worst things was a sore loser, and he didn’t intend to start down that path. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t give a little payback if the opportune time arose.

“I’ve got work to do.” Jayson put his hand on Monty’s big shoulder. “By the way, I hear paybacks are a bitch.”

Jack snorted. “I’d watch your back if I were you, Mont.”

Thor gave a throaty growl, as if in agreement.

Monty laughed, then took a look at Jayson’s expression. His laugh weakened and faded away. “I know you’re not serious—” His throat worked.

Jack chuckled. “I would take Jayson’s word on this one.” Still grinning, he added, “I best be on my way too. My horses aren’t going to ride themselves.”

He nodded his goodbye to Monty and flashed a quick grin at Jayson before taking off.

Jayson slapped his hand on Monty's shoulder. "See you around, Mont."

The man nodded. "Sooner or later."

"Unfortunately it's likely sooner." Jayson headed toward the barn with Thor at his heels, and held back a heavy sigh as he worked his way through the crowd.

All this for a damned clothing line?

"No, no, no, *no*," shouted Trevor, the photographer who was no wider than a sheet of paper. As thin as he was, it was a wonder he could hold his monster of a camera.

Trevor braced the camera on his knee and snapped his fingers at the model in front of him.

In the background, several cowhands gawked. Jayson needed to pay them a visit since they seemed to be distracted by a slip of a woman in a skimpy outfit, instead of doing what he paid them to do.

Trevor snapped until he caught the model's attention. "Mina, pay attention. I don't want to see you staring at any cowboy asses. Leave that to me."

The young woman smirked and struck some kind of pose Jayson imagined was supposed to be sexy. The blonde wore skin-tight jeans on her Coke bottle hips and a crazy-ass top that bared her belly. This was what was popular now? Jayson knew nothing about fashion and could care less.

Jayson preferred strong women, and the country girls he knew kicked ass and took names. They did not look like they

just walked out of a Scottsdale boutique on their way to a spa treatment.

A lot of the country girls around these parts cleaned up real well and were sexy as hell. All without worrying if they were going to break a nail while rounding up cattle.

That fashion designer hell on heels, who'd be arriving tomorrow, ought to be interesting. No doubt, she'd be one of those women who screamed at the sight of a horsefly and couldn't figure out what to do with a horse if her life depended on it. He wondered what she'd do if she was told she had to shovel shit for a week to do her damned photoshoot here.

Yeah, that might be fun to see.

Thor stayed close and they dodged a hairstylist and a man from the food wagon before ducking into the cool recesses of the barn. Jayson blinked a few times as his eyes grew used to the dim light.

He'd owned the Flying F since he was in his late twenties. Back then he and his buddies thought it sounded flat out hilarious to name the ranch "I don't give a Flying Fuck," only shortened to "the Flying F."

Shiloh snorted from one corner of the barn. The pregnant mare made the sound in a way that told Jayson the horse was concerned about the commotion going on outside.

"It's okay, girl." Jayson reached Shiloh and stroked the brindle mare's nose. "Sorry about that damned mess out there. I'm going fix it, but it looks like I need to talk with the gal running the show tomorrow." He traced the star on her forehead with his fingertips. "But if it's too much for you now, I'll take you over to Justice's place, where it'll just be you and a few of your equine pals."

Shiloh whickered.

“Yes, I mean it.” Jayson nodded. “I don’t want you upset, girl.

She snorted and bobbed her head.

“Deal.” He patted her neck. He normally would have taken her for a ride. But she was so close to foaling, he wouldn’t ride her hard like he needed right now.

Jayson moved to Starlight’s stall. The chestnut jerked her head up and down. The mare was high strung to begin with, and the noise outside the barn wasn’t helping anything.

“Why don’t you, Thor, and I escape this madhouse and go for a ride?” Jayson slid his fingers down her neck.

Thor barked.

Starlight snorted and bobbed her head again in sharp movements. Yeah, she was going to be one hell of a ride today.

“Well, then. Let’s do it.” He glanced where his cowhands were too busy staring at the model. “But first I need to have a talk with some of my men who aren’t doing what they should be.”

It wasn’t like them, but they had work to do. With the size of his operation, too much needed to be done to stand around doing nothing but looking at a nearly naked woman.

After Jayson gave his men a good talking to, and they were back to work, he returned to the barn.

The Border collie stayed close to Starlight as Jayson grabbed a bridle, a horse blanket and his saddle. When he’d saddled up the mare, he checked her over to make sure she was ready to go in every sense of the word. He grasped her

bridle and led her out the rear entrance of the barn, the opposite direction of the insanity that was currently his ranch.

“OH, CRAP.” Celine Northland knelt on one knee to gather the many pages from a stack of scattered papers. They’d slid out of the handbag she’d just dropped in the middle of the ramp leading from the airplane to a place she’d rather not be. “Just one more fantastic thing to add to this absolutely perfect day.”

Not.

Passengers squeezed by to either side of her. Not one person stopped to help her retrieve the sheets of paper.

A child tore by and trampled one of the signature pages of a document she needed to sign and return to Monty, her CFO. The girl left a perfect imprint of a small and very dirty shoe where Celine was supposed to sign.

“Aaaand thank you very much.” Heat crept up Celine’s neck as she looked over her shoulder. “Where the hell are your parents, anyway?” she muttered under her breath.

A young woman holding a naked doll hurried up the ramp. The woman’s hair was slipping from a French braid and red sauce stained her white shirt. She zipped past Celine and trampled another one of Celine’s pages. “Chloe!”

Celine groaned. Question answered.

Kids.

A sheltered only child—of parents who were each only children—Celine had grown up with a series of private tutors and nannies. Celine hadn’t often been around kids her age, or kids of any age for that matter. She wouldn’t know what to do with one of the little monsters if it landed in her lap.

God, help me.

Celine snatched up the soiled papers Monty had scanned and emailed to her, but she hadn't had a chance to read yet. After she had gathered everything into her arms, she shoved the lot into a folder and stuffed it back into her Louis Vuitton tote with her laptop. She hitched it up on her shoulder, her purse on the other, and headed up the gangway.

Bright sunshine poured in through the massive windows. She'd never been to Arizona, but she'd heard the usual about Phoenix—you could fry an egg on the sidewalk or bake brownies on a dashboard. And she'd heard the constant refrain, "But it's a dry heat."

Celine didn't bother peering out the windows for more than a cursory glance. Airports weren't generally known for allowing passengers a view of much more than tarmac and the usual building clutter. Airports were such messy things.

She'd been in countless locations around the globe since she was old enough to travel without a nanny. She'd just about seen it all.

Her parents had never wanted to visit Arizona. Too hot, they'd said. If Celine moved to this state, she likely wouldn't see her parents unless she dropped in on them in their luxury Manhattan condo.

Not seeing her parents. Now there was a benefit to moving to a place like this.

She sighed. What she wouldn't give for parents who actually cared. Her heart ached and she had to push the thoughts and feelings aside.

Celine didn't pay much attention to her surroundings, too focused on making her way to baggage claim. Maybe she'd

lived in Manhattan for too long. Like every other New Yorker, she kept her eyes focused ahead and didn't meet a stranger's gaze.

Like the saying went, Things to do, places to go, people to see.

A breeze came in from the sliding glass doors as she passed them on the lower level, the wind shifting her long silk skirt around her legs. Her outfit was of her design. She wore low heels for comfort, but frequently wore higher heels. She was five-ten, but with three-inch heels she reached six-one, intimidating for most men below that height. But she wasn't going to stop wearing high heels just to make a man feel good about himself.

When she'd reached baggage claim, she tapped her foot as she waited for her luggage. The way her day had gone, her bags might have ended up in Pittsburgh.

Stay strong. Have hope.

Someday. Someday they'll be here.

She'd always figured if a person paid for first class then her luggage should be off the plane first. Never seemed to work out that way.

Of course, her two hard shell suitcases came up the conveyor belt last, but at least they'd made it to Phoenix with her. She secured her luggage and headed out to catch a cab.

The airport wasn't exceptionally busy, and within fifteen minutes she was on her way to the AAA Five Diamond Scottsdale Princess Resort in North Scottsdale. One of Celine's select few friends, Meredith, had told her she had to go to the Princess when she came to Scottsdale. Meredith knew fine resort living and knew it well.

The sunshine and the warmth didn't surprise Celine—she'd never been to Arizona, but she'd seen plenty of photographs. What did surprise her was just how much she liked the view. She'd thought the Phoenix desert would be far too barren for her tastes. But what she saw through the cab's windows, between the airport and the Princess, called to her in a way that mystified her.

Clear blue skies and an endless stretch of land that went on for miles, gave her an aching desire to explore this place, so different from any location she'd been before.

Breathing room. She had none of that in New York City. She couldn't begin to imagine what it would be like to live in a place with so much *space*.

And it *was* a dry heat. No humidity to cause her hair to go curly or melt her insanely expensive designer, supposedly un-meltable, makeup.

Bonus points for Arizona.

Celine tapped her fingers on her purse. She needed to focus on the commercial shoot and the print ads. She'd been doing her best to not think about what had become a complete headache. She had to go to a ranch tomorrow, for however long it took to get the commercial done. A ranch somewhere in the middle of nowhere.

And horses. I'll be near horses.

Her throat ached and she shoved the thought aside.

Why couldn't Rod have found a place in North Scottsdale instead of going for Monty's lame rustic ranch idea? From everything she'd read, Scottsdale was much more civilized than Prescott. But she'd only get to spend the one night here, and then off to the Arizona wilds—or so she imagined.

Celine leaned back in her seat and sighed. To top it off, the location had ended up being selected on a *bet*, and she'd heard the cowboy who owned the ranch was none too happy to have them. Well, she certainly wasn't happy about the situation, either.

She pictured the owner. What was his name? Something like Jack? Jerry? No, it was Jayson. Likely the man was an old, weatherworn cowboy with skin as tough as leather and wrinkles like sand dunes. Probably walked bow-legged on top of that.

At least Trevor, her photographer, loved the ranch. He had visited the original location and said this one was superb—far better with more opportunities for a great photoshoot and commercial.

The models had complained about the smell of cow manure until Trevor had threatened to take shots with the models shoveling shit. Celine smiled to herself. Apparently that had shut them up.

Damn, but she loved Trevor. He was a complete pain in the ass, but he was sharp, knowledgeable, artistic, and just flat out the best in the business. He was worth every damned penny she paid him. And yes, he had assured her, he did shit gold bricks with perfect edges.

She braced her elbow on the cab windowsill, put her head in her hand, and stared out without seeing.

Celine wasn't sure how she was going to do on the ranch. It had been a long time since she'd been close to horses. Her belly took a dive and the wine and cheese she'd had in first class curdled. It would soon come back up.

It had happened so long ago. How could the pain still be so deep? She should be over it now.

She should have forgiven herself, but she never had.

Do I deserve to be free of that guilt?

She didn't think she ever could be. Or if she even wanted to be free.

CELINE RECLINED on her hotel bed and idly stared into a glass of Chardonnay that reflected the bedside light. The stack of papers from Monty lay scattered on the comforter beside her. She'd been putting off looking at them.

No doubt, more money out than in.

She needed another drink.

Celine idly played with the soft material of her burnt sienna dress. She loved silk, and she loved the soft flowy outfit she had designed. One benefit of her career—she could create whatever she wanted to wear.

Her phone rang and she picked it up from the nightstand. *Monty* lit up the screen.

She sighed. Lately hearing from Monty meant more bad news than good. She wanted to answer with “*What now?*” but settled for, “Hi, Monty.”

“Bad news.” He sounded dead serious.

Then she did say, “What now?”

“I don't suppose you've listened to the news today?” he said.

She frowned. “No time. Why?”

He sounded genuinely agitated. “Big ransom malware attack all over the damned globe.”

Her brow furrowed. “Speak English.”

“A hacker syndicate sends out a ‘bug’ that takes over a company’s computer systems and encrypts all their data. They demand money to give you back control of your own computers. That’s why they call it ransomware.”

Her heart nearly stopped beating. “And you’re telling me this because...”

“You got hit with it, Celine,” he said. “Twenty thousand.”

She almost didn’t dare to ask. “Twenty thousand what?”

“Dollars,” Monty said. “They’ve ransomed every bit of computer access to your financial records as well as all of your designs. If we don’t pay them, they’ll delete everything.”

“No.” The word came out on a moan. “Don’t tell me that.”

“I’m sorry, kid.”

Celine banged the phone against her forehead. *Not now.*

Her head hurt when she brought the phone back to her ear. “What do you recommend?”

“You don’t have a choice,” he said. “But I’ll make sure you won’t ever get hit again. I’ll get you the best computer protection money can buy.”

“Okay.” She sighed. “Do it.”

“I’ll take care of everything,” Monty said.

Celine hung up. The Bearer of Bad News kept giving her more bad news all the time. She should have thought to ask what “the best computer protection money can buy” would cost her.

“This sucks,” she said and dropped the phone onto the mattress. Now she couldn’t decide if she should review the papers Monty had given her, to get the bad news out of the way all at once—or ignore them in favor of drinking more wine.

The wine won.

She took a long swallow. Screw sipping.

What about my bank accounts? Business and personal? She frowned. Could they have been attacked, too?

Celine slid her laptop out of the tote beside her on the bed, then booted it up. Maybe she wasn’t the most tech savvy person, but she could find her way around a computer pretty well.

First, she checked her personal and business bank accounts. Her business account looked a little low, but then she’d had to spend money for one thing after another—necessary expenses per Monty.

Next, she did a Google search for software that would protect personal computers from outside attack. Multiple links popped up and she chose the most promising. When that company proved useless, she made her way through three more before she found one that could potentially work.

She never mixed her personal accounts with her business accounts. Monty had said he would be happy to take care of both, but she had declined. She needed to have control of *something*.

When she finished, she shoved the laptop into her tote and sagged against the pillows again.

Hopefully she’d protected her personal accounts. But she was out the door already on the twenty thousand ransomed

from her business accounts.

This sucks.

Her mobile rang again.

“Go away,” she wailed.

She glared at the screen, then relaxed when she saw *Meredith*.

“It’s so good to hear your voice,” she said in way of answering.

“You hadn’t even heard it yet.”

“I don’t care,” Celine said. “You could just breathe and I’d be happy.”

Meredith laughed. “What’s going on? Homesick?”

Celine didn’t know what it was like to be homesick. She shook her head. “Long day, that’s all.”

Meredith knew about Celine’s business and about a lot of the people in it, but Celine never shared financial issues. She never talked *business* with friends.

Not that she had many friends. A handful, if that.

“Come home and let Rod, Trevor, and Monty handle this commercial thing.” Meredith’s voice pressed into Celine’s head, forcing her to pay attention.

Celine sipped from the glass. “Liquid courage,” some said. Celine simply considered it to be a fluid way to deal with crap or just plain forget.

Meredith’s voice tugged Celine to the present. “I saw a gorgeous new pair of earrings at Tiffany’s.”

“I have to stay.” She wanted to cry at the thought of all the money she had to pay out, not counting the ransomware blackmailing thing. Instead, she swallowed the rest of her drink, then raised her empty glass. “Apparently, I need more wine.”

Meredith groaned. “Celine, what’s going on?”

“I’m okay.” Celine had never had a female friend like Meredith. She had made her way into Celine’s life until she had to admit that Meredith was a special person, and one of the best things that had happened in her life. “This is my career and I need to take care of business.”

Meredith’s sigh was audible over the phone. “I suppose you’re right. I just worry about you.”

“I know.” Celine smiled. “You’re a wonderful friend and I love you for it.” She set her wine glass on the nightstand. “I’m tired and I’m going to get some sleep.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Meredith yawned. “I didn’t realize it’s so late. It’s nearly midnight here.”

Celine laughed. “You knew exactly what time it is. You just wanted to check on me.”

“Busted.” Meredith’s grin was clear in her voice. “Good night, Celine. I’ll talk with you tomorrow. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Celine’s smile lasted until she said, “Good night,” and disconnected the call.

She looked at the wall across the bed while she sipped wine. She really didn’t know if she’d be able to sleep.

Maybe she needed to start going to a shrink. Mother had always thought therapists and psychiatrists, and the best possible meds, were the answer to everything. Mother would

have been livid if she had known Celine spit out the meds they had forced her to take for so-called depression.

Celine had not been depressed. She'd been hurt, sad, in pain, and heartbroken...but mostly filled with devastating guilt. That didn't mean she needed drugs. Some people did, and that was okay. But she hadn't.

However, her mother had seen to it the psychiatrist prescribed some designer antidepressant that had cost a ridiculous amount every month.

And her mother's voice—it rang in her head, as if she was in the room, with her correcting, criticizing, ordering, demanding.

Take your medicine, Celine. It's for your own good.

Be calm and act like a lady.

Ladies do not cry.

Do what you're told or you will regret crossing me.

Don't wear that. You look fat in it.

A kindergartner could put on makeup better than that.

Celine gritted her teeth and closed her eyes. *Stop it. Stop the mom-voice before it really gets up to speed.* Her arm ached to throw her glass in the cold fireplace.

She took a deep, calming breath and let herself relax. She imagined tension leaving every part of her body.

In spite of brick walls she'd had to break through, she had started her own business from scratch and broke into a tough industry during a financial downturn. The success of her business had been amazing.

Now she needed to take amazing and boost it into incredible. She needed everyone's eyes on her designs. With a successful launch of her latest line, her designs would be in stores across the country.

She smiled. She'd worked her butt off to get here without using the checking account Mother and Father had set up for her when she was young. She had taken what money she had used for college and repaid every cent back into that account, including interest.

It had been so important to pay her way, create, and become successful on her own.

And that was exactly what she'd done.

Celine set the wine glass on the nightstand and sank into her pillows. Part of her need for success was to be able to donate to a cause that meant more to her than anything. A charity that brought Arabian horses and underprivileged teenagers together.

She didn't know a lot about kids, but she did remember what it was like to be a teenager, and how healing a relationship with a horse could be.

Her heart constricted as she thought about Sky. What an amazing horse she'd been. Her best friend, her confidant. And then she was gone...and it had been Celine's fault.

In the future, she wanted to own a ranch that used horses for therapy with teens. She wanted kids to experience what she had when Sky was alive. And she wanted them to learn from her mistake.

Celine didn't drift off for a long time. Eventually she slipped into a fitful sleep. She dreamt of Sky galloping in an

open field, before darkness fell. In the black of night, the only thing she saw was the word *Merf*, scratched into a wall.

Bright June sunlight nearly blinded Celine and she blinked, attempting to accustom herself to it and the heat as she climbed from the dim interior of the black Mercedes. She managed to get out with her Louis Vuitton handbag on one shoulder. In her opposite hand, she gripped the matching tote that held her laptop, along with the stack of papers from Monty.

She congratulated herself for staying on her feet after the harrowing ride. She shot a look at Charlie as he got out of the driver's seat. He'd nearly killed them sixteen different times in sixteen different ways.

"I'm going to murder Monty," she muttered under her breath. Bringing Charlie to something so important, something that would be launching her new line—Monty should be shot.

"Miss Celine." Charlie jogged around the front of the car. "What time do you want me to take you to the hotel in Prescott?"

Never.

"I've already made arrangements." She told him the lie while she held out her hand. "Keys."

Charlie looked disappointed and handed the set to her.

She gestured toward the set. “I’m sure they can use you someplace over there. Ask Rod.”

Go brighten someone else’s day.

Now Charlie was Rod’s problem. Considering Rod was the one who sent Charlie to get her at the hotel in Scottsdale, fair was fair. She’d kill Monty and set Charlie on Rod—there, two vultures taken out with one stone.

How Charlie had gotten her to the Flying F Ranch alive, she had no idea. He was a walking disaster, not to mention a driving nightmare. She was amazed he was able to pilot his drone without crashing into something.

Celine glanced up at the clear blue sky then squinted as she looked at the chaos of the shoot, which should have been more organized. The day was already growing hot, but from what she understood, it was quite a bit cooler in Prescott Valley than the Phoenix metropolitan area.

She took a moment to scan the country around her. Monty was right. The ranch and the surroundings were spectacular. She’d been told the ranch was at the base of the Bradshaw Mountains and the country was even prettier than what she’d seen on the ride from the airport to North Scottsdale. She had to agree.

The mountains surged upward, behind the ranch. It was an awe-inspiring mountain range that looked as if the Almighty had placed it in the desert. She’d have to get someone to show her the entire property.

It was all far too much to process without some coffee. Good coffee. She’d forgotten to take the premium Panama blend with her to the hotel, where they’d had a mediocre ground brand.

Lucky for her, she had an entire bag of the whole bean stashed in Monty's trailer. With her name on it.

"Thank the heavens." A woman on a mission, she strode straight to the silver Airstream trailer Monty had insisted on but rarely used. Charlie, his nephew, used it more than he did.

She avoided eye contact with anyone—she didn't want to risk being waylaid. As a New Yorker, it was second nature to ignore everything but her destination. She knocked on the Airstream's door, gave it two seconds, and jerked the door open. She tossed her handbag and tote onto a couch. The tote looked like it would slide off, but she glared at it and the thing stayed put.

Yes, I am officially a witch.

It took her all of thirty seconds to discover her coffee wasn't where she left it. The bag should have been in a far corner of the pantry, where she always kept extra for emergencies.

She began to plot murder.

Her plans grew more defined the longer she looked for it.

The door slammed open. She turned to face it and saw Charlie duck his head in.

If he had anything to do with it being gone—

Charlie got one look at her face and took a step back. "Didn't mean to bother you, Miss Celine. I'll just—"

"Stop." She held her hand up. "Do you know what happened to the Hacienda la Esmerelda coffee I had in here?" She pointed to the exact location. "The bag with *my* name on it?"

Charlie's throat worked. "The guys ran out of coffee. I didn't think you'd—"

She was certain a blood vessel would pop in her head.

"Charlie." She spoke in a slow, measured tone. "You had better get back to work right now."

She'd never seen him move so fast. He didn't even stop to close the door behind him.

Celine turned and put her fingertips to her forehead. *Just coffee. Just coffee*, she tried to tell herself.

Just one of the finest coffees in the world. Lifesaving coffee to everyone here.

A knock at door frame of the open trailer door. *Charlie?*

Celine turned and came to a hard stop. Words stuck in her throat.

One of the sexiest men she had seen in her life—and she'd seen a lot in her career—stood in the doorway. His eyes were shadowed by a western hat, but his firm lips and lightly stubbled jaw hinted at the man beneath. A T-shirt stretched from one amazing pectoral to the other, hugged shoulders to die for, and clung to tight abs and straight down to hips made to straddle. And those Wrangler jeans cowboys tended to wear out here in the Wild West.

Oh. My. God.

"What can I do for you?" Her voice came out harsher than it should have.

The man pushed up the brim of his hat with one finger and she got a good look at his ice blue eyes. She'd seen eyes like that on a male model once, and she'd thought she'd never seen

a more beautiful man. She wouldn't call this man beautiful. She'd call him a chili-hot cowboy stud.

She almost put her hand to her heart that thudded too hard and way too fast.

He didn't show any emotion as he appraised her. And that was exactly what he was doing—appraising her. “Did I catch you at a bad time, Ms. Northland?” His smooth voice would have stolen her breath if she hadn't already lost it.

No doubt, a cowboy here to find out what she needed for the shoot.

She straightened her stance. “Rod is handling anything to do with the set. I'm sure he can help you.” *Although I wish I could.*

“He sent me to see you.” The man stepped into the trailer without invitation. “I understand you run the show.”

Wow, wasn't often a man towered over her. With her height, she wasn't used to being around a man she had to look up to just to meet his eyes. With her two-inch heeled sandals, today she was six feet and he topped her by at least four inches.

Now, here was a man to snuggle up to.

She had to work to keep her composure. “Depends on what you need, Mr.?”

“Jayson McBride.” He took off his hat and held out his hand, even as he continued to eye her steadily. “Call me Jayson.”

So much for wizened old tough-as-nails cowboys.

Celine knew she should soften her stance and her tone, but she felt caught off guard, as if in a compromising situation.

She took his hand and shivered inwardly as a bolt of *something* shot through her. What the hell was that all about?

“How can I help you, Jayson?” She drew her hand from his. She’d intended to lighten her tone, but it came out as hard as concrete.

“You could help me a lot by packing up and leaving.” His tone was even, yet had an edge to it. “But since that is likely out of the question, I’d like you to choose a different part of the ranch.”

“The contract you signed gives us free rein. My staff determined this as the best place to start the shoot.” She shrugged. “We’ve got a lot invested in this.” She moved past him and out the door. “We’ll only be a week,” she said as she headed down the trailer steps, and came to a full stop.

A chestnut mare stood nearby, fully saddled, complete with a shotgun in a leather scabbard hanging on the side of the saddle. The mare had a spirited look in her intelligent gaze.

Celine hurried to turn around so that she wouldn’t have to look at the horse. Jayson had followed. A Border Collie now stood at his side, head cocked, looking at her with warm, intelligent eyes.

“Frankly, I don’t want you here at all,” Jayson said and her gaze shot to his. “The least your people can do is respect my property.”

Her jaw tightened. “If it wasn’t for your gambling habit, we wouldn’t be here.”

A shiver rolled through her as Jayson’s eyes turned hard and storm-dark. “I play poker with friends,” he said in a cutting tone. “Doesn’t mean I have a gambling problem. What

I do have a problem with is how your people have taken over and how they're doing it."

She pushed her long hair over her shoulder and placed her hands on her hips.

He continued, "They're in the way and have made everything a mess. They've toppled a corral, moved things around that I want to stay put, and are generally getting into things they shouldn't be. They leave gates open. Only stupid people leave gates open on a ranch."

A shadow passed over them and they looked up. Charlie's drone circled the trailers. Charlie leaned up against the rail of a corral as he used a controller to dictate the drone's movements.

She looked back at Jayson. His features had tightened even more. "That drone spooked my cattle and they trampled a fence. My men and I had to round them up and repair the fence line."

He narrowed his eyes. "Get that drone down," he said. "Or next time I see it I'll shoot it down and have the taxidermist mount it and put it on the wall next to Big Jimmy."

Heat prickled her skin. "You hunt?"

"I aim to start if I see that drone again." He set his jaw. "The damn thing spooked my cattle and upset my horses. I won't put up with that. I have a mare ready to foal who's getting real nervous."

The moment he'd said "horses," her skin chilled and she went still.

"I'll fix that for you." Celine broke through the icy shell that had temporarily immobilized her. She moved to the mare and rested her palm on the shotgun's stock. "May I?"

Jayson appeared to be taken aback. “All right.”

“Loaded?” she asked.

“Uh-huh,” he said slowly.

A quick few seconds and she held the shotgun, barrel pointed up. “Are your horses used to guns, especially her?” She nodded in the direction of the chestnut.

“They’re all gun-trained,” he said in his low cowboy drawl. “Including Starlight.”

“Good.” Celine turned and looked in the direction of the drone. She raised the recoil pad to her shoulder and sighted the drone. She waited until the thing was clear of humans and animals alike, then squeezed the trigger.

Boom.

The shot echoed throughout the foothills .

The drone exploded. What was left plummeted and slammed into the dirt.

Everything and everyone fell silent. She’d had it with Charlie and that damned thing.

“That was a \$5,000 drone,” Charlie wailed and started to come closer.

She narrowed her gaze.

Charlie stepped back.

Celine turned to Jayson. “What else can I do for you?”

He watched her as if for sudden movement. “You can get them to leave my things alone and to close the damn gates.”

She turned to the staff that gaped at her. “Next one to leave a gate open, or get into Mr. McBride’s belongings without

permission, will get an ass full of buckshot. You'll be picking it out for the next week." She glared at all of them. "Have I made myself clear?"

Rapid nods from everyone.

"Then get back to work." Celine turned back to Jayson. "Can you get a list to me of approved locations my people can use?"

His eyes seemed to say, Who are you and what have you done with the woman I just met? "I'll do that."

"Thank you." She rubbed her temples again, pressing against them with her thumb and forefinger. She handed the shotgun to him. "I'm sorry. I've had a rough couple of days." She shook her head. "And I am coffee deprived. It's dangerous to be around me until I have a few cups."

A moment of additional appraising, then the corner of Jayson's mouth quirked as he took the shotgun. "I've been known to cut off a few heads before a pot of good ol' cowboy coffee."

"Let's start over." She held out her hand. "Celine Northland. I'm the fashion designer for Celine Originals, and you know the rest."

He shifted the shotgun to his left. "I'm Jayson McBride. I own this hunk of Arizona." He took her hand and a charge went through her that caused her to catch her breath. "I'm certain I don't know the rest. But after that shooting demonstration, I'm sure there's a lot more to the story."

It took a moment for his remark to sink in. "It's nothing special." She smiled. "I imagine you have a few stories to tell." She tried to withdraw her hand, but he held it just a little bit longer.

“Why don’t you come on in for cinnamon rolls and coffee?” He nodded in the direction of the place she’d barely acknowledged when she arrived. “That is, if you can handle sludge that’ll grow hair on your chest.”

She breathed a sigh of relief when he finally released her hand. “Sludge?”

He flashed her a grin that would make a lesser woman’s knees weaken. “Just sayin’ I put more than twice the amount in the coffee pot than is called for. My sister, Bailey, says you can stand a spoon in it.”

Celine grimaced. “Sounds...like it would probably get me through this before anyone gets decapitated.” She glanced at the people scurrying around them. “No, decapitation is still a possibility.

Jayson grinned and shook his head as he slid the shotgun back into its scabbard. “Come on over.”

She pushed her hair over her shoulder. “Give me about fifteen minutes to take care of a couple of things and get my Xena sword.”

Jayson took the horse’s reins and gave Celine a questioning look.

She shook her head. “Never mind. I have to get coffee before my Hyde side returns.”

He gestured in front of them. “Ladies first.”

She walked past. “I always heard cowboys are notorious for being gentlemanly.”

“Notorious, huh?” He and the Border Collie fell into step with her as he led the chestnut mare. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Right now, it’s a good thing.” She glanced at him and found it refreshing to not be eye-to-eye to a man or looking down. She’d always liked a tall man, and Jayson qualified.

Not to mention he qualified for a whole lot more.

She almost groaned aloud. She’d better stop thinking this way or she’d need to have her head checked when she got back to New York.

Rod stood on the path in front of them as they walked around the trailer.

“She let you live?” Rod said to Jayson. “When Charlie told me about the coffee, I thought you were a goner for sure. And then when she got out that shotgun...”

“You’re half the reason I need so much coffee.” Celine narrowed her gaze at Rod. “Send Charlie to pick me up again, and they’ll be scraping you up off the ground.”

Rod made a poor attempt at looking concerned. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You’d better.” She turned to Jayson. “You’ve met Rod.”

“Yep.” Jayson gave a nod.

Celine said, “I’ll take care of the issue we spoke about and a couple of other things, and then meet you at the house.”

“I need to turn out Starlight, but that won’t take long,” Jayson said. “When you get to the house, come in through the back door. Everyone does, considering that’s where the coffee is.”

“Believe me, I’ll be there in no time.”

“I’ll have a mug waiting.” He turned and headed toward the barn, leading his mare beside him, the Border Collie at his

heels.

Celine pivoted and glared at Rod. “We have to get the operation away from Mr. McBride’s horses. Do it now.”

AFTER TAKING off her saddle and blanket, Jayson had turned Starlight loose in the corral since he intended to ride her later. He strode from the barn to his home.

He held back a grin and glanced down at Thor. “I’ve always had a weakness for strong women,” he said to the dog.

Celine Northland qualified. He didn’t think she was a witch, like Monty had said, but he could be wrong. He wouldn’t tolerate anyone who was abusive, whether man or woman.

When he’d knocked on the doorframe and she’d spun to face him, he thought her glare would singe his body. He could almost smell the scent of burnt hair.

He’d also thought he’d been in for a battle to get rid of that damned drone and get their operation away from his horses.

But the moment he’d said “horses,” she had turned on a dime. He wondered where she’d gotten that concern from.

And holy shit. He hadn’t known what to think when she’d asked to use his shotgun. But when she’d shot that drone out of the sky he’d been afraid he’d bust a gut laughing at the looks on her employees’ faces. It’d been all he could do to keep a straight face.

He stood back as Thor trotted in. Jayson let the screen bang shut behind him and left the kitchen door open. He hung his Stetson on the hat tree and breathed in the scents of coffee and cinnamon rolls. Couldn’t get much better than that.

When he was in the mood for cowboy coffee, he kept the coffee warm on the burner, which gave it an even stronger flavor. The cook had left a pan of homemade cinnamon rolls on the counter, covered in foil. His cousin's wife, Tess, had hired a fantastic cook for Jayson and his staff. Tess knew food and the way to a dozen men's stomachs, and she'd used her expertise to get him a great cook. Almost as good as Tess, which was saying a lot.

After he made sure Thor had water and dog food, Jayson looked in a cabinet and grabbed two of his biggest mugs and two plates. He loaded each plate with an Arizona-sized cinnamon roll and filled each mug with coffee. He had no doubt Celine would be in the kitchen before her coffee could cool.

The moment he set the mugs on the table, Celine opened the screen door and entered the kitchen. Thor sat on his haunches and watched her come in.

"Phew." Celine wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "I am not used to this heat."

"Welcome to Arizona." Jayson studied the dark-haired woman. "If a newcomer makes it through his or her first summer, then they stand a good chance of coming back."

"Right now, the only thing I care about are those smells." She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Her stomach growled loud enough for him to hear. "Coffee and cinnamon rolls," Celine said. "I have died and gone to heaven."

Jayson grinned. "Have a seat."

She opened her eyes. Before she could move to the table, Thor plopped his butt right in front of her path. She paused and looked down at him. Thor thumped his tail on the tile.

Jayson watched Thor, wondering what the dog was up to. He'd never behaved this way, and he'd never been overly friendly with anyone.

Celine hesitated. "Hi, boy." She glanced at Jayson. "May I pet him?"

He nodded.

She crouched to Thor's level. The dog ducked his head, allowing her to touch him. She slid her fingers through the Border Collie's silky black and white hair. "You're so soft." She didn't look up as she stroked him. "What's his name?"

Thor never invited anyone to pet him. Jayson wondered if the dog was getting soft. "Thor."

"What a nice boy." She scratched behind his ears. "And friendly."

"Not usually." Jayson had a hard time reconciling the normally cautious dog with the one now becoming buddy-buddy with the fashion designer. "Coffee is getting cold."

She stood then moved to the table in the alcove. She slipped onto a bench in front of a full mug and a filled plate.

Jayson grabbed paper napkins and joined her, mentally shaking his head at the dog now settled at Celine's feet. What did the dog know that he didn't?

Celine took a long drink of coffee and choked. "Jeez. You weren't kidding this *is* strong. I can already feel hair growing on my chest." She shook her head. "Thanks for the warning."

"My pleasure." He watched her take sip after sip of the coffee.

Celine was beautiful as hell with long almost black hair and eyes a dark seashell-brown. It was an unusual color, but

on her it was fantastic.

He drank from his own mug, mostly in gulps as opposed to sips. He got up and grabbed the pot and set it on a trivet at the center of the table, along with the pan of cinnamon rolls. One wasn't going to be enough, despite their size.

"Bless you." She sighed and pushed her mug forward. "I feel Mrs. Hyde going back into that little box inside. As long as I get my coffee, no one will get hurt."

"Noted." He poured another cup of his sister Bailey's idea of sludge. "I will keep it in mind in the future."

She smiled and it was like the sun breaking through clouds and shining on him.

"Now that I'm coffee-fied, I'm ready for a sugar rush." She pulled off a sticky piece of her roll. "I haven't had homemade cinnamon rolls since Cook Nancy." Celine's features seemed to relax more.

"Cook Nancy?" he asked.

She nodded. "One of many cooks who passed through my parents' kitchen. She was my favorite and lasted the longest. She somehow managed to put up with Mother *and* Father." Celine sighed. "But everyone has a breaking point."

He ate another bite of cinnamon roll then licked frosting from his fingers. "You like horses," he stated.

Celine went very still, like when he'd first mentioned his. A light rose tinged her cheeks.

She picked at her cinnamon roll and didn't look at him. "Who doesn't?"

Something was there. An old pain, an old regret. Now was not the time to push the topic. One day he would learn exactly

why she reacted the way she did when he mentioned horses. He would pick at the ice she'd coated herself with until he broke through.

He mentally shook his head. Why would he think she'd be around long enough for him to get that far?

“So, what’s this all about?” he asked. “Why are you here? Not because I lost a damned bet. What are you doing, and why do you need a ranch to begin with?”

Celine’s shoulders visibly relaxed. “As you know, I’m a fashion designer.” She waved her hand in the direction of the chaos outside. “We’re going all out with my new line. It’s pretty much do or die.”

Jayson nodded, letting her fill the gaps with her story.

“The last two lines were considered successful,” she said, but it clearly wasn’t enough. “They paid the bills and the reviews were fine, but not raving.”

She leaned forward, her cinnamon roll forgotten. “I need raving. I need phenomenal.”

“You think this will do it?” he asked.

“I feel good about it.” Celine’s expression grew more intent. “We used crowd funding to get people involved, so they would be invested in the line. The plan is to use that funding and support to blast out of the gates.”

She looked even more intense as she went on. “I have the financial backing from an investor, in addition to the crowd funding. We are going to tear the fashion world apart and insert ourselves big time.”

He nodded, enjoying the passion and fire in her eyes.

“Once we’re all wrapped up here,” she said, “we’ll be pushing our campaign in print, on TV, and using social media. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs—you name it, we’ll do it.”

“Admirable,” Jayson said and meant it. “I try to stay away from social media, but I have an employee who makes sure to keep us visible. I hear it’s a good way to get the word out.”

“Yes.” She laughed. “If we could, we’d even get into the video game market. Can you imagine a fashion game?”

He grinned. “Not even close.”

Her gaze drifted away, like she was seeing inside herself instead of the room she was physically in.

She returned her attention to Jayson. “We’re going to make this happen, and Celine Originals is going to be big.”

“I believe you.” He found himself caught up in her dream and her enthusiasm. “I have a feeling you can do anything you set your sights on.”

Celine smiled. “We use cutting edge digital tech and fantastic handcrafted traditional textiles. This line is going to blow everyone out of the water.”

“I’d like to see what you’re doing on my land.” He looked at her intently. “I’m interested in your venture.”

She studied him and nodded. “Sure, I’ll show you anything you’re interested in. But first you and Thor need to take me on a tour of your property.”

“Done,” he said. “When’s good for you?”

She looked out the kitchen window, sighed, and shook her head. “I need to find out what the hell is going on out there and make sure everything is under control.”

“Why don’t you have dinner here, and bring some photos and show me your designs?” He drew her attention back to him. “Tonight, if you don’t have anything going on.”

“No plans.” She smiled. “I’d enjoy having dinner with you. Will Monty join us?”

Jayson scowled. “He’s lucky to be alive. It’d be safer for him if he stayed away.”

“Make that double.” Celine grinned “I was ready to do him in after I made it through the ride with Charlie.” She went on, “I have an iPad and all of my designs are on it. I’ll bring that to dinner with me.”

“Sounds great,” Jason said. “Need any more coffee?”

Celine paused and tilted her coffee mug to peer inside. “Empty, but my indicator is on full again.” She glanced at her plate that had only a few crumbs left before meeting Jayson’s gaze again. “The rolls were amazing. Thank you for both.”

Jayson gathered the plates and mug as he stood. “Let me know when you’re ready to take that tour.”

“I’ll find you this afternoon and we can plan it.”

Thor came up beside Jayson and they watched her rise and leave the kitchen. Damn but she had a fantastic backside. Not to mention front side.

Jayson put the dishes in the sink before he grabbed his Stetson off the hat tree and headed out to get some work done, Thor at his heels. There was always something to do on the ranch.

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ABOUT CHEYENNE



Cheyenne McCray is an award-winning, *New York Times* and *USA Today* best-selling author who grew up on a ranch in southeastern Arizona and has written over one hundred published novels and novellas. Chey also writes cozy mysteries as **Debbie Ries**. She enjoys creating stories of suspense, love, and redemption with characters and worlds her readers can get lost in.

Chey and her husband live with their two Ragdoll cats, two corgis, and two poodle-mixes in southeastern Arizona. She enjoys going on long walks, traveling around the world, and searching for her next adventure and new ideas, as well as hand embroidering crazy quilts and listening to audiobooks.

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