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LAST

RIDE

TAMING THE STALLION - BOOK FOUR

CAROLINA MAC

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To: E. R. Waterbury

The older I got, the faster I was. There are old bikers and there are bold bikers, but there are no old, bold bikers.

— Evel Knievel —

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Chapter One

Sunday, November 4th.

Pecan Valley, Texas.

My new life was waiting for me in Texas, and I wanted it so bad I was willing to give up all my remaining time on earth for one more month as Dale Burden.

I'd spent the past couple of months in Montana thinking I could start over in a place where nobody knew me and not a single person knew or cared what a fucking mess I'd made of my life.

Wrong.

I was completely wrong about that idea working in my favor. I was born in Texas and moving to Montana was worse than moving to Alaska. At least in Alaska, I was flying. Something I loved to do. Crashing wasn't factored in, but then, not everything in life is.

One disastrous idea after the other and I was seriously doubting my decision-making abilities.

The only good thing that had come out of the Montana experience—well, three things—Tammy Traynor had come into my life during a domestic abuse case and now she was like my daughter—Outlaw had come into my possession, and I had grown extremely fond of my horse—and Billy Johnson had been introduced to me and now he was one of my closest friends.

The rest of Montana was forgettable.

When Tammy and I stopped for dinner in Lubbock, we were both tired of driving and staring at the white line ahead of us.

That would have been the ideal time to stop for the night, but we were only a few hours away from our destination.

“Do you want to get a motel room or keep going?” I asked her.

“I can sleep in the truck, but you can’t, Dale. It’s not my decision. Can you keep awake much longer?” Tammy showed me her concerned face. “You look so tired.”

“Yeah, I’m beat but I want to get where I’m going. We’re so close.”

“I think you should sleep for a while,” said Tammy.

“You’re probably right.” I was so fuckin tired of driving, but it was only a few hundred more miles. “I’m gonna keep going.”

Tammy shrugged. “I’ll watch you and say something if you start to fall asleep.”

“Okay. You can be my watch dog.” I pointed to Max and Sarge in the back seat. “They don’t care if I fall asleep.”

Tammy laughed.

Almost three hours later, I was dead in the water and had fallen asleep at the wheel twice. To keep myself awake, I pulled my cell out of the cup holder and called Cutter.

“Hey, Dale. Me and Lukas are sitting on the porch waiting for y’all. How much longer?”

“I think I’m almost there. Tell me how to get there from route 67.”

“Turn left at Concho River Road and go four miles. You’re here when you see a mailbox with red writing that says Barnes and Company.”

“Got it. Five minutes and I’ll be there.” I let out a breath, my brain so tired I honestly didn’t know if I could stay awake five more minutes.

I made the turn and smiled when I saw the freshly painted mailbox at the side of the road—Barnes and Company. Cutter had a sense of humor.

Driving down the long, dusty laneway lined on both sides with waist-high weeds, I could see a light on in the old farmhouse and two guys sitting on the porch. My new home—at least for a while.

Giving them a wave, I drove past the house heading for the barn. I had to get Outlaw out of the trailer before he went nuts and kicked his way out with his powerful hooves.

I watched in the rearview as the boys came running after me. The dogs spotted Lukas and put up a ruckus barking and yipping. They wanted out of the truck, so they could lick him to death.

Lukas and Cutter stood side by side and watched me circle around and back the trailer up next to the barn. Nice big barn. Huge for one horse. Have to think on getting a horse for Tammy.

She'd need something to do when she was at home. She could be with me most of the time, but not every minute when the club got going. I'd never take her to a club meeting and put her in the middle of thirty or forty hardened bikers.

With all the noise the dogs were making, Tammy was forced to open her eyes. "Why are the dogs barking?"

"They can see Lukas."

"They know him?"

"Uh huh." I shoved the gearshift into *park* and shut off the engine. My old truck would be glad of a rest.

"How long was I sleeping?"

"Long time." I jumped out of the truck and Lukas was right there to give me a hug. He was limping badly, and I wasn't sure why. I hoped it wasn't something from the plane crash—that would be on me. One more thing to add to the list of damage I'd done to people I loved.

Tammy walked around the truck and stood next to me, and I introduced her to the boys. “This is Tammy Traynor, my ward. She’ll be living with us. I want y’all to protect her and treat her like your little sister.”

Lukas and Cutter both stared at Tammy in amazement. I hadn’t mentioned her, and they weren’t expecting me to have a teenage girl with me.

Cutter grinned. He was about the same age as me. Thirty-five or so. Big guy with a beard and lots of muscle and tats. Excellent with a blade.

Lukas was a Donovan. He looked like the rest of them, but his hair was a darker shade of blond than Tommy’s and mine.

“Hi, Tammy,” said Cutter. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too. I’m so happy to be in Texas with Dale.”

“Attagirl. Let’s see if we can get the stallion into his stall without him killing us all.”

“He a wild one?” asked Cutter.

“Can be testy—if things ain’t going his way.”

“He can be nice too,” said Tammy. “Most of the time he has a sweet nature.”

“To you,” I added. “He’s sweet to you.”

I opened the back doors of the trailer and went inside. I squeezed past Outlaw’s sleek body and fumbled around in the dark as I freed him from the restraints holding him in place.

I grabbed hold of his bridle and stroked his nose to keep him calm. “We’re here, boy. You can back up and get out of here.”

He stood his ground and didn’t move a muscle.

“Outlaw. Come on out of there,” said Tammy. The big quarter horse nickered when he heard her voice and backed up as nice as pie. I led him around a bit, letting him feel his legs and get a breath of fresh air—air that wasn’t below zero.

He seemed unscathed and amazingly calm after his long confinement.

Cutter opened the barn door and held it for me. “Beautiful horse, boss.”

“This is Outlaw. Let’s see if he likes his new stall. Tomorrow we’ll start on his corral.”

“Got any carrots?” asked Tammy. “Outlaw loves carrots and we ain’t got any left from the trip.”

Lukas shook his head. “I don’t think Cutter bought carrots.”

“I’ll get some tomorrow,” said Tammy.

“You help with the driving, Tammy?” asked Cutter.

“I ain’t old enough to drive, but I know how. Billy let me drive the tractor and plow snow, so I got in lots of practice. I’ll get my license as soon as I have my birthday.”

“When are you sixteen, little girl?”

“Pretty soon. I think it’s on the weekend.”

“Be time to party then, won’t it?” Cutter chuckled.

Tammy laughed. “Never had me a birthday party.”

I listened to that conversation and made a mental note to have a party and a cake for Tammy’s sixteenth birthday on Saturday.

Cutter had Outlaw’s stall ready for him with lots of fresh straw for bedding laid in and spread around nice and even. I checked the water and fed him some extra oats. There was hay already in the manger and the stall was a lot bigger than the one he’d been used to in Montana.

I stroked his velvety nose while he ate. “You’re good for the night, boy.”

“Your stall is bigger,” said Tammy. She patted his nose and then kissed him. He pushed up against her and nuzzled into her. “See you in the morning.”

“You tired?” I asked her.

“A bit. But I slept in the truck. I’m okay.”

“Let’s get your stuff inside and you can go to bed. I want to have a beer with the boys and unwind a bit.”

“We’ll help you unload, Dale,” said Lukas.

“Take the bike out last. I got everything else packed in around it to keep it from moving. Didn’t want to scratch the fuckin paint.”

“Yep,” said Cutter. “Lukas told me you got new paint not long ago, and it was fuckin awesome.”

“We got enough beds for all of us?” I asked as we carried stuff into the house and plunked it down in the kitchen. “How are we fixed for furniture?”

Cutter laughed. “Not too good. Kind of waiting on you for that. Not much in the furniture budget.”

“No worries. I got it covered.”

“You sell the ranch?” asked Lukas.

“In a way, but I didn’t get a down payment. I sold it to Billy without money down. It’ll take him years to pay it off, but he’s working something out to send me more money. We can manage with what I’ve got coming in.”

Not telling them about the money Uncle Carson left me. Better if they don’t know.

A tour of the house and one thing was clear—I needed to do a lot of work to make the old place livable, or else pay somebody else to do it. I’d rather do it myself.

The boys showed me what they’d done so far, and it wasn’t much. Lukas was sleeping on a cot in one of the bedrooms—not another stick of furniture in the room. Old floral wallpaper on all the walls upstairs.

Cutter had a single bed and dresser in his room. My room, or what was supposed to be my room had a double bed with an uncomfortable looking mattress and a blanket thrown over it.

Neither one of them knew Tammy was coming, so there was no place for her to sleep. I couldn’t fault them for that.

There was a broken-down sofa in the huge empty room next to the kitchen that was probably the living room. That sofa would be on the truck my first trip to the dump, but for tonight, I'd sleep on it and give Tammy the bed that was supposed to be mine.

Tomorrow was a new day, and we'd get shit done right.

"Tam, get your stuff and you take this room for tonight. We'll sort it all out tomorrow."

"Where are you gonna sleep, Dale?"

"Downstairs on the sofa. It's only for half a night, don't worry about me."

"There's another bedroom on the main floor, or I guess it could be an office," said Lukas. "We could fix it up for the girl."

I need her closer to me than that if Tibor comes.

"We'll organize the sleeping arrangements tomorrow. For tonight, we're beat, and we can sleep anywhere. My bad for not telling y'all I adopted a little girl."

While Tammy was upstairs unpacking her things, I sat on the porch with Cutter and Lukas, and we drank a few cold beers.

"How'd you get that girl, boss?" asked Cutter.

"Long, sad story and I'll tell y'all some time, but she belongs to us now and she's ours to protect. She's no trouble and she works hard and tries harder."

Cutter frowned. "Should she be living with guys like us, boss? I mean, with getting the club going and all the stuff we're going to be doing?"

"The guy I took her from was about thirty-something. He beat on her all the time. When I found her, he'd almost beat her to death. A fuckin menace and I put him away for a long time. I don't know how long he'd had her or where he stole her from, and it seems like she don't know either. She can barely remember anything in her past. Maybe Tibor beat it out

of her. She's had no life so far. She's only fifteen, for chrissakes, and we're the best chance she's got."

"Jesus," said Lukas. "I guess we're her family."

I reached over and gave Lukas a fist bump.

Chapter Two

Monday, November 5th.

Pecan Valley.

My back was killing me when I woke up on the sofa—the one the former tenant had abandoned with good reason. That piece of junk had seen its last day...or night many years before I tried to sleep on it.

It would soon be on its way to the dump with a lot of other crap I'd seen lying around since I arrived.

I might be heading to the dark side, but it wasn't going to be the *dark and dirty* side. You could bet on that. I was more into clean clothes and clean sheets to let that happen to me.

My nose told me somebody was cooking bacon in the kitchen and chances were good there would be coffee too. I hauled my tired ass off the sofa and headed for the source.

The living room and dining room—a room with no furniture—were connected by a wide archway, and the dining room led into the kitchen. The rooms in the old place were large and the ceilings high. Tall, curtainless windows in each room let in a lot of light.

I walked into the kitchen and Tammy was dressed in a pair of her new jeans and wearing one of her new Harley t-shirts. She looked so small and cute. A little Harley Barbie if there was such a thing.

While she talked to Lukas, she kept an eye on the stove. Lukas was carrying on an animated conversation with Tammy, which was unusual because he was as introverted as they come. He rarely spoke a word to anyone but me.

“Hey, Dale,” said Tammy. “Need coffee?”

“Sure do. Food too. Tons of shit to do today. Did you start a list, Tammy?”

“Yep. Got one on the go. I can add a lot more to it, if you thought of other things.”

I sat down at the table, and she handed me her list. “Let me see what you’ve got so far.”

Tammy put a cup of coffee in front of me and pointed at it. “Not enough mugs. There’s a lot of kitchen stuff we could use, just looking through the cupboards and there isn’t much here.”

“I just brought the bare necessities with me,” said Cutter. “I didn’t know how much stuff the boss was bringing with him from Montana.”

“Right,” said Tammy. “We left a lot of our kitchen stuff for Billy.”

“You take care of that list,” I said to Tammy. “Also, you’re in charge of towels and sheets and kitchen towels, blankets. We brought some of that with us but figure out what we need more of. We’re not going to live like we’re fuckin destitute.”

“Okay,” said Tammy.

“I’ll do big furniture,” I said, “and Lukas and I will stake out the corral and take measurements. We’ll order the lumber while we’re in San Angelo today.”

“We going to check out the clubhouse locations today?” asked Cutter.

“Right after breakfast. We’ll get going as soon as we have complete lists and the corral measurements. Y’all can fill me in on what kind of rent money the owners of the buildings are looking for.”

“Sure,” said Cutter. “I wrote down the details for each one of the locations.”

“Do you and Lukas have one location y’all like better than the others?” I asked.

Cutter nodded. “That don’t mean it’s gonna be your favorite too, boss.”

“No, but both of you know what we’re looking for. I’m sure y’all won’t be too far off the mark.”

Tammy put food on the table and the conversation came to an end while the boys ate their breakfast.

“You’re a good cook, Tammy,” said Cutter.

“Thanks. Been cooking steady since I was ten.” She laughed. “Wasn’t so good when I first started.”

Is that how old she was when Tibor stole her?

San Angelo.

Right after breakfast, Lukas and I staked out a spot for the corral next to the barn and measured it. We allowed for the gate, and I wrote it all down and drew myself a little diagram. I figured out how many fence posts we’d need and wrote that down too.

Cutter was anxious for me to see the places he and Lukas had sourced for our clubhouse. What I didn’t want, was a run-down dump that I’d spend more time fixing up than taking care of business.

What I envisioned was a place that would hold together for a couple of years at least with just basic maintenance. Might find a place like that and might not.

We all piled into my truck, and I was hyped to get my new life started. A glance across the console at Tammy and she was smiling too. We were both hyped to be in Texas starting over.

Westwood Village. San Angelo.

Right in the city, the first possibility Cutter had picked out was a former body shop. Solid cinderblock construction. Double overhead doors at the front. Big plate glass window looking into what had been the office—that glass would have to be replaced with something less breakable.

I parked the truck, and we walked around the outside of the building and checked out the back. Cutter showed me the parking area and I nodded.

“What do you think, Lukas? How many bikes would line up in this space?”

“Twenty-five or thirty, I guess.”

“Yeah, I think so too. Not quite enough parking space but the building looks fine.”

“For the first year,” said Cutter, “we might not have more than twenty members.”

“Could be true, but I have something in mind that might bring members in faster than that.”

Cutter shook his head. “There should be plenty of parking here, Dale. I can’t see us getting off the ground so fuckin fast.”

“Maybe yes. Let’s go see the next place.”

Nasworthy Area. San Angelo.

As we drove to the next location, Cutter brought me up to speed, “This second one is a bit of a mess, but there’s lots of paved parking and the building could be made into what we want. Just have to get past the way it looks—like first glance ain’t so good.”

I laughed. “Thanks for the warning. I’m ready for it. I know anything in the Nasworthy area of the city ain’t gonna be a castle.”

“This is it here,” said Cutter. “Turn in and take a look but don’t go too close, there’s glass all over the parking lot.”

I parked on the road, and we walked the rest of the way trying not to step on the glass.

“Assholes busted all the windows out when the stores closed and the owner had to come and board the place up,” said Cutter. “The glass from all those store windows is strewn all over the parking lot.”

“So, this was once a strip mall,” I said. “Looks like it might have held seven stores.” I looked up and there was a second story with two or three apartments above. “Uh huh.” The building itself was brick and solid looking.

“What do you think, boss?” asked Cutter.

“The location is perfect. Couldn’t get any better and that’s important. Can we get a look inside?”

“If you like this one, I’ll call the guy to come and let us in.”

I nodded and continued to look around. Tammy walked beside me and didn’t say anything. “Parking lot huge and paved. On the highway with not many neighbors around to bitch about the noise of the bikes. Two good points.”

“Plus, the perfect location,” said Tammy. “You said that was important.”

Lukas pointed. “Take the windows right out of the last two units and install overhead doors instead. Put in our own repair shop. Legit income and handy bike shop for the members.”

“Yep. Great idea. And the rest of the interior we could reno to suit us. Meeting room. Storage room. Weight room. Like that.”

“I see what you’re thinking,” said Cutter.

“How much was the rent on this one? Shouldn’t be too much for a disaster like this.”

“I think this is the one that ain’t for rent because the owner doesn’t want to fix it up for a tenant. He wants to get rid of it.”

“The building isn’t worth much to him in the state it’s in. He’s only selling the property.” I glanced at Cutter as he finished up his phone call. “The guy coming?”

“Yep, he’s coming but he won’t be here for an hour.”

“Okay. Let’s see the last one on your list and come back here afterwards,” I said. “We should be able to do that in an hour.”

Riverside. San Angelo.

The third possibility was in an automotive mall and didn’t need much work at all. It was an end unit that had been a muffler shop in its former life.

Three overhead doors at the front, and the building was plenty big. “How much rent for this one, Cutter?”

“Eight hundred a month plus utilities.”

“I like it. The only problem I see would be too much traffic and a lot of exposure we might not want. Vehicles and people coming to all the other businesses during the day. Other than that, not much work to do at all.”

“This one is my pick,” said Lukas. “Mostly because it’s all ready to go.”

“We’ll think about it, and I agree, it’s in the best shape of the three. Only the high visibility that’s bothering me. I think we passed a lumber yard on the way over here. Let’s go back and order the wood, then catch the other location.”

Nasworthy Area. San Angelo.

We ordered the lumber and they promised to deliver it to us the following morning. Then we drove back to the mall disaster to meet the agent.

It was a large property in a big and wide-open area and had a lot of potential, but only if I could afford it. I needed startup money for a lot of different things, and I couldn’t spend a lot on the clubhouse itself. It would be best to rent for now.

When we got back, the agent was parked there waiting for us. He jumped out of his car with a cigarette in his mouth and said, “I thought you weren’t going to show.”

“We were at the lumberyard. Sorry, it took a little longer than I thought.” I stuck my hand out. “I’m Dale Burden.”

He paused for a second like he recognized my name and then said, “I’m Chris Towns from ReMax. Nice to meet you, Dale.”

“Can we have a look inside? If it’s totally destroyed, I don’t want the work of it.”

“After the windows were smashed and a few things were taken from the original stores, the owner had it boarded up and

there hasn't been much damage since then. Nothing for the gangers to steal."

"How much to rent the whole thing?" I asked.

"Are you going to open up the stores?"

"No. I won't be operating a business. Personal use only. How much?"

"The client wants to sell it more than rent it. He's ready to take any reasonable offer."

"What would be a reasonable offer for a dump like this? The only value I see is the property and it's about an acre or two of land on the highway. What's that worth these days?"

Chris, the agent, looked around, "It's about an acre and three-quarters or so."

"What's the asking price?" I asked again. He was hesitating to tell me, so I knew it wasn't going to be realistic.

"He wants a hundred thousand."

I laughed. "We're done talking. Let's go, boys."

"Let me talk to him and see if he'll cut you a deal or if he'll consider renting it if it's not going to cost him money to fix it up."

"I'll pay him five hundred a month and we do the cleanup. That's my best offer. If he wants to sell it for a hundred K, he'll have to find another sucker."

"I'll let him know," said Chris.

"You can get in touch with Cutter. I've got a lot of shopping to do." I winked at Tammy, and she smiled.

"I have other locations I can show you," hollered Chris as he walked to his car.

"Sure. I can look at others. I want the perfect place. Call me or Cutter."

"A hundred K for that disaster?" asked Lukas. "The owner must be nuts."

“I think so too. That’s why it isn’t sold. If the guy is a legitimate businessman, he’ll adjust his price to recoup his losses.”

“You think the real estate guy will come back with a better deal?” asked Cutter.

“Yeah, I do. I bet we’re the only people who have shown any interest in that mess. A good agent won’t want to let us off the hook.”

“Yep,” said Cutter. “You could be right.”

Furniture Mart. Downtown San Angelo.

At the furniture store, I bought Tammy and me decent beds and good mattresses. For the living room, we picked out a sectional sofa, matching chairs, and a flat screen TV. The appliances in the old house were still working and we could replace them later if we had to. We might not stay there more than a couple of years.

Our furniture was scheduled to be delivered before the end of the day. I told the salesperson I needed to sleep in that bed tonight and that made her laugh.

When it was time to pay, I put the whole works on a card, and I’d pay it off at the end of the month. That’s when the money from Uncle Carson’s investments were gonna hit my bank account. It would work out.

Gretchen’s Barbe-Que-Pit.

By the time we finished picking out the furniture, it was way past lunch, and we were all starving. Without asking anybody’s opinion, I pulled into a barbeque place and parked. Nobody objected so we went inside and got a table.

I ordered a pitcher of Miller and one of Lone Star, and a Coke for Tammy. She had her eyes on the special written on a freestanding chalkboard.

“Do you want that, Tam?”

“Ain’t never had pulled pork, so I don’t know.”

“It’s good,” said Lukas. “Annie makes it in the slow cooker and it’s fuckin good.”

I felt a pang of jealousy every time Lukas talked about Annie, but I had nobody to blame but myself. I was at the root of all my own troubles. Through my own selfishness, I’d done damage to every one of the people I loved.

The server returned with our drink order, and we had a little talk about the rental possibilities.

“If we could get the strip mall for five hundred a month, that would be a gift and it would give us a place to start. I’m not keen to buy a place right off because I’m gonna need my capital for other stuff. I don’t want all my money tied up in the building.”

“Makes sense,” said Cutter. “You have to have a budget. The club will have to have one too.”

“Which one did you like, Tammy?” I asked her.

“Don’t know. Never been in a bikers’ clubhouse. So, I don’t know what it would be like.”

“You got no marker,” said Cutter with a smile.

I could tell both Lukas and Cutter liked Tammy. She seemed to like them too.

“I reno’d a warehouse in Houston when I took over the Black Breed and we had it pretty nice in there. You don’t want a place where you’re going to spend a lot of your own personal time to be a fuckin dump.”

“Right,” said Cutter.

I chugged down my first beer. “Only my opinion.”

“Having benefits like a decent clubhouse creates more member loyalty,” said Cutter. “Lots of guys join clubs because they don’t have families and they’re looking for a family feel and a place to hang out and call their own.”

I nodded. “Exactly. The more they like the clubhouse, the more loyalty we’ll get from our members.”

We ordered food and took an hour to relax and knock back a few beers. Being back in Texas felt so familiar and right to me, it was like I never left.

Tammy had never been out of the state of Montana, so it was up to me to make sure she was adapting. I didn't want all the new things she was experiencing to overwhelm her. There was a lot coming at her all at once.

“You okay, Tam?”

She smiled. “I'm good. I like the food here.”

“Lots of good food in Texas,” said Lukas. “I gained weight when I was living at Coulter-Ross. Too many second helpings of Annie's cooking.”

Hearing Lukas talk about living at the ranch set my head spinning. Dizziness and spells of being disoriented were symptoms I sometimes experienced. While I was living in Montana, I had been fairly symptom free.

Farm Boy Market. San Angelo.

When we left the restaurant with our bellies full, Tammy wanted to shop for everything on her grocery list. I picked out the closest market and let her get started. Sticking to what she had written down, she pushed the cart through the aisles and was finished quickly.

I tossed in a big bag of dog food and another box of biscuits and a couple of rawhide chews—the large ones. I added three cases of Miller, a case of bottled water and a case of Coke, and paid for all of it at the checkout.

“Can you think of anything else while we're here, Tammy?”

“Nope. I got everything on the list. I'm good to go.”

San Angelo Rent-All.

The rental place was the last stop before we headed back to the ranch. I picked up a gas-powered post hole digger. It would

make the job quick and easy. I'd used one to dig the holes for the corral Shawna and I made in Montana, and it saved a lot of blisters.

Lukas loaded it into the back of my truck, and we were all set. We'd have the holes dug and ready for the posts before the load of lumber arrived.

Barnes & Company Ranch. Pecan Valley.

After our trip to town, the boys were hyped to get home and get started on the corral.

Lukas grabbed a beer, whipped his shirt off and started digging the holes. He wanted to get them all done before the sun went down.

He'd never said a damned thing to me about his leg, but he had a bad limp and I wondered if it would bother him riding his Harley.

Did he get the leg injury from the plane crash? Was it my fault the kid couldn't walk right?

I wasn't in a huge rush to get the holes dug, but I let Lukas roll with it. He refused to let me take a turn and help him, so I just watched him work.

Cutter helped Tammy carry the big load of groceries into the house and she put the food all away, but not before she cleaned out the cupboards and the fridge while she was at it.

She lined the old cupboards with shelf paper she'd bought at the market. All clean and fresh before she opened the box of new dishes and put them on the shelves.

While Lukas was busy digging the holes at a maniacal pace, I went into the barn and took Outlaw out of his stall.

"You can watch while we build your corral," I said to him while I tied his reins to a tree branch.

He nickered and pawed the ground and seemed happy to be outside. "I'm going to get Tammy a horse, so you'll have company."

“Can Tammy ride a horse?” asked Cutter.

I shrugged. “She never mentioned it and I never asked her. I don’t think she’s been near any horses except Outlaw. She does like him a lot and he likes her.”

The dogs went on a big run and were gone for about half an hour. I had no idea where they went, but I was pretty sure there were no grizzly bears in the immediate vicinity. Max should be fairly safe.

Cutter and I sat down on the porch, and he wanted to know how we were going to get members to join a brand-new club.

“I don’t see how we’re gonna do it, Dale. There are a couple of clubs in the San Angelo area already and I think it’s gonna be fuckin tough for us to start from scratch. Gonna take a helluva long time for us to get where we want to be. Members ain’t gonna come flocking to us and turf is going to be hard for a new club to get hold of.”

“Yep, there are a lot of things to take into consideration,” I said, “but I don’t think it’s going to be as hard as you think to get going.”

“If we have a club with no territory and no source of income, how are we going to get guys to join us?” Cutter frowned. “The members want to get paid and we’ve got to offer something to guarantee their income.”

“Only one way to bring them here until we get going,” I said.

“I can’t wait to hear how we’re gonna do it, boss.”

“I have a guy in the information business,” I said, “and he’s going to put the word out in all the major cities in Texas.”

Cutter chuckled. “And what is the word gonna say? Magic words that are gonna make guys come flocking to the Devil’s Right Hand?”

“I haven’t written up the exact message yet,” I said, “and maybe you could help me with the wording, but it’s going to be like, *who’s got the balls to join Dale Burden’s new club?*”

He's only letting in the best of the best. Chances are you won't make it."

Cutter smiled. "I can see where that message would appeal to a lot of bikers...especially if they were thinking of a change. A lot of them might be afraid to leave their present club and make the break."

"We don't want those guys anyway", I said. "What we have to be ready for are the bounty hunters. We have to sort them out when they arrive and eliminate them right off the bat. Some guys are going to ride straight here and try to drag me off to collect the money on my head."

"Yeah, now we're talking." Cutter patted the knife in the sheath on his belt. "The guys who come to grab you and collect the bounty will be mixed in with the guys who want to ride with Dale Burden. We have to sort them out fast or you might be a goner."

"Drawing the bounty hunters in is one of the main reasons I'm doing this," I said. "I'm sick and tired of being hunted, and I want it to stop."

We'd been sitting there for a few minutes when the truck from the furniture mart rolled in. That occupied the next two hours. Unloading the truck, hauling beds upstairs and getting them set up.

The delivery guys set up the sofa and the chairs in the living room, but they didn't offer to hang the flat screen. We were on our own for that.

"Don't think there's any cable way out here," said Cutter. "We might need a satellite."

"You figure it out, Cutter. The boys will want to see games and I'm putting TV reception into your capable hands."

"Fuck that. You and Lukas will be blaming me if we can't get the Rangers and the Cowboys games."

I laughed. "That's absolutely correct. It's all on you."

"I'm gonna find out if there's cable running down the road out front. If there is, we've got no worries. I can hook us into

that line, and nobody will be the wiser.”

“We gonna steal our TV reception?”

“Damned right we are.”

Chapter Three

Tuesday, November 6th.

Barnes & Company Ranch. Pecan Valley.

Tammy was excited to be cooking in her new skillet. It had a non-stick coating, and it would keep her from burning the eggs like she sometimes did. Tibor hated when she burned his breakfast and always made her pay for being so stupid.

Thanks to Dale, Tibor was in jail in Montana, and he couldn't hurt her anymore.

Tammy set the table with the dishes she'd picked out at the store, and she was all smiles while she made breakfast.

"You don't have to cook every day, Tam," I said. "We can take turns with you."

"I'm okay, Dale. I like cooking and I'm loving the new skillet. Want to try the new brand of coffee we bought?"

"Sure do."

Lukas made two trips to the porch looking for the lumber truck before we even ate breakfast. "I want those fuckin posts. If I don't get them cemented in, they won't be set by tomorrow morning."

"Is that important, Lukas?" asked Tammy.

"Yep." He sighed and plopped down at the table.

"Then I hope they get here soon," she said.

I was in the barn cleaning out Outlaw's stall when I heard the lumber truck roll in. Lukas was out the door so fast he made me laugh.

I had called Kamps right after breakfast and given him the message to send out to his guys in the streets of Houston, Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio.

The message would have gone out between nine and ten and hit the streets shortly afterwards. I was anxious to see how many hours it took for the first guy to arrive at the ranch. Be interesting to see who came first—the bounty hunters or the guys genuinely interested in riding with me in my new club.

The lumber was unloaded and neatly stacked on a tarp—Lukas didn't want the wood collecting any dampness from the ground. Good idea, but I never thought of it. My thoughts had been a bit jumbled since I got to Texas, and I wasn't sure why. Maybe just excitement.

Lukas kept forging ahead and hardly left me anything to do. He started mixing the first batch of cement in an old wheelbarrow he found in the barn.

I held the posts in position for him while he poured the cement, and by noon we had them all set in place. Each post was leveled and propped up so they couldn't move as the cement hardened.

Tammy was outside all morning with Outlaw, walking him around holding his reins, then she walked over to me and said she wanted to try riding him.

“As soon as I'm done with the posts, I can saddle him for you, Tammy. I'm nervous about it, though. He's strong willed and a bit wild and he might try to throw you off.”

“I don't want a saddle, Dale. I think I can ride him without one.”

Hearing her say that made my heart pound.

“No, I don't think so, little girl. He's a powerful horse and he's got a lot of speed in him. I'm afraid you'll get hurt, and more so if you don't have a saddle horn to hang onto.”

“Will you let me try?”

“You can sit on him bareback if I hold the reins and walk around with him a bit first. I want to see what he’s doing to do with you on his back.”

“Okay. A test run. I’ll go for that.”

I motioned Cutter over to where Tammy and I were standing with Outlaw. “Hold his head steady while I lift her up.”

“She should have a saddle,” said Cutter. “Nothing to hang onto but the reins and his mane.”

“I’m doing a test to see if he wants me to ride him,” said Tammy. “I think he does.”

“Jeeze,” said Cutter. “I’d think twice about doing that, Tammy.”

I lifted her up and she straddled Outlaw with a big smile on her face. He stood perfectly still and that was a first. When I took him for a ride, he was all antsy and excited and prancing all over the place.

“Okay, sit tight and I’ll lead you around the yard and see what happens.”

Tammy giggled. “This is the most exciting thing I’ve ever done.”

Outlaw walked along quietly, and he was perfectly behaved while I had hold of the reins. The look on Tammy’s face was priceless. Her first pony ride, but on a wild stallion.

“Okay, he’s being good, Dale,” said Tammy. “Give me the reins and let me try on my own.”

Afraid of what was going to happen, I sucked in a gulp of oxygen. “You’re gonna give me an infarction, girl. If he runs off with you, I’ll be miles behind if you need help.”

She held her hand out for the reins and I reluctantly relinquished them. “Please go slow.”

She nodded and tugged gently on the reins to turn Outlaw towards the lane that led to the back of the property.

“Giddy up, Outlaw,” she said, and he took off at a pretty quick pace down the lane. Max and Sarge were on Outlaw’s heels, just like they always were when I went for a ride.

“Jesus, Dale,” said Cutter. “I don’t know about that. She’s never ridden a horse before and Outlaw ain’t a starter horse for a girl that small. He’s a stallion, for chrissakes. He ain’t fixed.”

“Didn’t I say that?” My heart was pounding in my chest as Outlaw disappeared into the trees with Tammy on his back. “I’ve got to get her a horse of her own and it won’t be a goddammed stallion.”

I stomped into the house, grabbed a beer out of the fridge in the kitchen, sat on the porch steps and called Annie.

“Hey, Travis, how are things in Montana?”

“I made the break, Annie-girl. Left Billy with the ranch and moved back home—close to home. I rented a place in Pecan Valley—just outside of San Angelo—for the time being.”

“Wow, that’s news I didn’t expect to hear. I thought you were getting settled into life in Montana.”

“With winter setting in up there, I couldn’t do it.”

“Huh. A quick turnaround, Travis. Impulsive decisions are one of your signs. Are you doing okay with your other issues?”

“Pretty good. Still have nightmares and sleeping issues sometimes, but not bad.”

“You changed your mind pretty quickly about Montana and it makes me wonder.”

After all the time I’d lived with Annie, she was good at reading what was going on with me—even before I knew it was happening.

I changed the subject. “Umm... Lukas is here with me. He rode his bike back from California and we’re working on a project together.”

“More news I didn’t expect to hear. How’s his leg?”

“He has a bad limp but never mentioned the leg. Is the injury from the plane crash?”

“Yes. He suffered a lot of damage to his leg in the crash. He needs physio on it. What else?”

Lukas has a permanently damaged leg because of me.

I could hardly live with myself, all the shit I’d done to the people I loved. I sucked in a breath and tried to sound coherent. “I called because I need a horse.”

“You have a horse and a beautiful one. Do you want to sell Outlaw to me and get a more mellow ride? I said I’d take him in a minute.”

“No. I want a more mellow ride for a little girl.”

“What little girl? Is this more news I’m not expecting to hear?”

“Yes. You haven’t met her yet.... she’s from an abuse case in Montana...Annie-girl. I took a girl to live with me and brought her to Texas. She’s fifteen and needs protection from... a guy... who used to... *own* her.”

“*Own* her? That’s pretty harsh, Travis.”

“I hate the term, but that’s what it was. She was his property. The horse is for Tammy.”

“Wow, you are full of surprises, Travis.”

“One other thing, Annie-girl.”

“Can’t wait to hear it.”

“I’m going by Dale now. I’ve gone back to being Dale Burden.”

Silence on the other end of the phone.

“That could be so dangerous for you, Travis. Being Dale Burden was dangerous in the past and will be again.”

“I’m ready to deal with it now.”

“Are you sure you’re okay, Travis? There seems to be a lot going on in your head at the same time. This isn’t like you. I know the signs and you’re worrying me.”

“Honest, Annie-girl, I know exactly what I’m doing. Things came clear to me in Montana, and this is the route I have to take to get my life straightened out.”

“If you say so. For your own safety, I want to believe you’ve got things in hand.”

“Believe it. I’m okay, girl.”

“Okay. I’ll send you a nice quiet mare with lovely markings. I’m thinking of one I have ready to go that would be a perfect match for Outlaw. I think you’ll like her.”

“I trust you to pick out the perfect horse, Annie-girl. You have years of experience in your chosen field.”

“Monroe can deliver her, or do you want me to deliver her myself?”

“Whatever you’re comfortable with. I’d love to see you and show you the run-down farm I’m renting, but if you can’t spare the time, send Monroe or Teddy.”

“Seeing your new situation and your new ward might be more than I can resist. I’m going to the barn right now to tell the boys which one I’m picking out for Tammy.”

“Something else I want to tell you, Annie-girl. One more thing that you might be interested in. I think this will interest you far more than anything I’ve told you so far.”

“Wow, there’s more? I’m still digesting all the other news. What else?”

“Her name is Tammy Traynor, Annie. You might want to talk to her.”

“Holy hell, Travis. You are trying to make me crazy with one phone call, aren’t you?”

“Call when you’re leaving the ranch. I’ll be worried about you towing a horse trailer on the interstate.”

“I’m all over this.”

I ended the call and walked down the porch steps with my heart pounding. Talking to Annie always did that to me. Since

the first day I met her, she was the only one who could take my breath away.

From the porch, I headed for the corral, and from the driveway I could see Outlaw coming up the lane. He was galloping and Tammy was leaning forward, hanging on to his neck with both of her arms and she was laughing.

Thank baby Jesus she's still on his back.

When she got to the barn and pulled up on the reins, I ran towards her and grabbed Outlaw's bridle. I held him steady while Tammy slid off.

"That was the most fun I ever had in my life." She hugged Outlaw and said, "I'm going to give him a carrot for being so nice to me."

"I'm glad he was showing you his nice and gentle side," I said.

Cutter nodded. "Yeah, me too."

"Honestly, I didn't know he had a gentle side."

Cutter chuckled.

I led Outlaw into the barn and put him in his stall to show Tammy how to cool him out. "After a big run, it's a good idea to add electrolytes to his water. Horses sweat a lot and the electrolytes help him return to a normal body temperature a bit quicker."

"I saw you wipe him down in our barn in Montana," said Tammy.

"Give him a good rubdown to get rid of all his sweat, and then you can brush him just to make him feel good."

Outlaw stood still in his stall drinking water while Tammy rubbed him down. He was so gentle with her it was like he knew she might get hurt if he acted like he did with me.

"After he drinks his water and gets cool, can he come outside again for a while?"

"Sure. When you bring him out, make sure he's tied tight to the tree branch. Another couple of days and he'll be running

around in his corral, and he won't have to be tied up at all."

Tammy grinned. "He's going to like that a lot. He loves to run fast."

"He'll be happy in the corral. He loved the one in Montana until it got buried in snow. Then he had to stand in his stall for days on end and I knew he hated it. Texas will be a better home for him."

"I think so too," said Tammy. "It's cool here, but it's not cold. I love the weather here."

"You and me both. In the past, I don't think I was as grateful as I should have been for Texas weather."

"I never knew there was different weather," said Tammy.

Sometimes she said things that caused me to stop taking everything I knew for granted.

Cutter made hot dogs for us on an old grill he found at the back of the house. He cleaned it up with a wire brush and found a bag of charcoal under the back porch.

When the dogs were ready and smelling of charcoal, we took a break on the porch. We had to haul chairs out of the kitchen to have something to sit on.

"We need porch chairs, Tammy. Start a new list."

"I can make a couple of benches," said Lukas, squirting a lot of ketchup onto his hot dog. "There might be some leftover wood from the corral fence."

"Not enough," I said. "If you want to make a couple of benches, we can go into town and pick up the wood. You've got carpenter skills I didn't know you had."

"I learned from Bull at the ranch. He's good with a hammer and a circular saw." Lukas smiled.

Picturing him at the ranch with Annie made me sweat and I tried to shake it off. Maybe Annie was right, and I was in trouble.

My cell rang and it was Chris Towns, the agent from ReMax in San Angelo.

“Mister Burden, getting back to you on the rental of the strip mall, the owner would like seven-fifty per month with you taking care of cleaning up the property.”

“Okay, seven-fifty is a price I can think about.”

“While you’re considering that location, I came up with another one you might like. I want to show it to you when you have the time.”

“How much is the rent?” I asked.

“I think it’s more in your price range. Six hundred a month, plus utilities.”

“Sounds promising. We can take a look at it tomorrow morning. I’m busy in the afternoon. Where should we meet you?”

The agent gave me directions and I wrote it all down in my cop notebook that I wasn’t using for law enforcement anymore. “I’ve got it all down. How about ten in the morning?”

“I’ll see you then.”

Lukas was listening to me make the appointment and was quick to say, “I ain’t going. I’ll be building the corral.”

“Do you have the tools you need?” I asked.

“You got a circular saw, Dale?”

“I brought all of my tools with me from Montana because Cutter said this place needed work. The power tools should be in the back of my truck.”

Lukas and I were in the load bed of the truck digging out the tools when a biker rode in the lane. He was riding solo, and I figured he was the first to respond to the invitation Kamps had put on the street.

I jumped out of the truck in case he was one of the bounty hunters that would be sure to show up for the money. I patted the Sig in my holster to be certain I was ready, but the guy

jumped off his ride and set the stand. He had no visible weapon.

He came towards me with a big smile on his face and an outstretched hand. “Dale Burden, I’m a huge fan of yours since the Houston days and I want to be a part of your new club.”

I shook his hand. Solid calloused grip and I could tell he worked a labor job on the side. “Where’d you ride from, buddy?”

“Lubbock. Name’s Jesse James.” He chuckled. “My mama named me Irwin, but everybody calls me Jesse.”

“Nice to meet you, Jesse James. I’ve only been here a couple of days and we’re just getting set up. Still on the lookout for a suitable clubhouse in the city.

I turned and introduced Cutter. “Cutter is VP, and over there is Lukas. He’s out of the Eights in Austin. Tammy, my little girl, is in the house.”

“Didn’t know you had kids, Dale. Don’t think I ever heard that.”

“Tammy is my ward and my responsibility. We all have to watch out for her. She’s under my protection.”

“Okay.”

Jesse James was a big guy with long brown hair pulled back and tied with a blue bandana. He was wearing a leather cut and I hadn’t seen the back of it.

“You leaving a club behind?”

“Yeah, the Lubbock Leviathans. You probably never heard of them. I had to cut out when this opportunity came along. I heard the call from somebody outside the club and I didn’t mention it to none of the other members. Just packed up my shit and hit the road—that fast.”

“You know there’s a bounty on me?”

“Everybody knows that, Dale. I ain’t here to collect the bounty. I just want in your club.”

“Others will come for the bounty. That’s why I put the call out there. No choice, Jesse. I’ll have to kill them all when they come.”

“Yeah, you’ll have to do that, Dale. You told them where you are and that’s like an open invite to come get you. That’s why you need guys like me.”

“Exactly right. Got to get rid of the threat some way. Might as well face it head on.”

“I hear ya. Good way to do it, Dale.”

“Come on in and meet Tammy and I’ll get us a beer to welcome you to the Devil’s Right Hand. I haven’t sourced out a leather place to make the cuts yet, but it’s on my list of shit that has to get done.”

“Devil’s Right Hand.” Jesse smiled. “Love that name. We got a logo?”

“The Hand,” I said, “for short. Figure the back of the cut will have a hand with a face of the devil in the middle—something like that. Haven’t got the artwork figured out yet.”

“Sounds cool,” said Jesse.

I handed him a Miller and took a can for myself. Tammy was peeling potatoes at the sink. “This is Jesse James, Tam. He came from Lubbock to join us.”

She turned and smiled. “Hi, Jesse. You an outlaw like me and Dale?”

“I sure am.” He laughed.

“One thing this club ain’t gonna do,” I said, “is drugs. We’re gonna lean more to the military, tougher side of things. No crackheads that can’t find their own ass in a hand-to-hand fight.”

“We gonna have a trainer, boss?”

“Yeah, as soon as we got our first twelve—the core group—I’m gonna bring a trainer here for a couple of weeks and we’re gonna have our own boot camp.”

Jesse grinned. “Can’t wait for that to happen.”

It took Tammy a couple of hours to make dinner and I decided then and there to get her a helper. I'd ask Annie tomorrow when she came. She'd know who to call.

I hadn't said a word about the horse. It was going to be a surprise for Tammy's sixteenth birthday on the weekend. I was hoping Annie could stay long enough to help me with that. A little party and a cake and we could provide Tammy with a good memory. I was betting she didn't have many of those.

The day had gone well and when it was time to cash it in after a few beers, I needed a spot for Jesse to crash. Tammy got him a blanket and a pillow, and he took the new sofa in the living room for the night. Made me wish I had the big bunkhouse from the Montanan ranch here in Texas.

Can Lukas build a bunkhouse? I have to have enough members close to me in case the bounty hunters come in a group and not solo.

Chapter Four

Wednesday, November 7th.

Barnes & Company Ranch. Pecan Valley.

Jesse James came rambling into the barn humming a little country tune while I was feeding Outlaw.

“Need a hand, boss?”

“Yeah, I do, Jesse. I’ve got a horse coming for Tammy’s birthday and this barn ain’t been used in months. When I got here, Cutter had the one stall ready for Outlaw and that’s all we’ve got done so far.”

“Want me to get this next stall in working order? Right up my alley. Been a ranch hand most of my life.”

“How old are you, Jesse?”

“Twenty-four.”

“A bit younger than Lukas.”

“He your kin?”

“Not blood, but he’s a Donovan and they are family to me.”

Jesse glanced around as he took his shirt off. Big build—all muscle and tats. “This is a huge barn, boss. Got a lot of potential.”

“What do you see happening in here, Jesse?” He was in the next stall, and I could hear him scraping the shovel down to the concrete.

“Let me think on it, but this barn could be a dandy income source for the club.”

“We definitely need that. I’m open to any suggestions you might have.”

When Jesse and I came into the house for breakfast, Tammy whispered to me, “I like Jesse James.”

I winked at her. “Me too.”

Old Post Road. San Angelo.

Right after breakfast we left for San Angelo to see the property Chris Towns, the ReMax agent had lined up for us. As we left, Lukas gave us a wave and stayed behind to work on the corral. He was a lot happier not having to deal with people.

I drove my truck, Tammy sat in the back with Jesse and Cutter rode in the shotgun seat. “You bring your list, Tammy?”

“Yep. I put it in my purse right next to my gun.”

“Attagirl.”

“That’s a nice leather Harley purse you got there, Tammy,” said Jesse. He rubbed a finger over the logo.

“Dale wanted me to get this one because it has this.” Tammy stuck her hand in the opening and pulled her Sig out. It’s called *outside access*. I never knew some purses had that, did you?”

“Nope. Never in my life did I know women had those kinds of purses. Makes you stop and think, don’t it?”

Tammy laughed.

“You don’t need a holster if you’ve got that fancy purse,” said Jesse.

“Dale got me a waist holster anyways for when I ain’t toting my big Harley purse with me.”

“He’s looking out for you.”

“I wear my holster at home on the ranch so I’m ready when them bounty guys come. Soon as one of them shows up on our ranch, he’s gonna be dead.”

“Yep. I agree with that, Tammy. If a bounty hunter comes to haul Dale off for the money, he will end up dead.”

When we got to the rental property at the edge of the city, I pulled in behind the ReMax SUV and parked.

“We here, Dale?” asked Tammy.

“This is it. Fourth one we’ve looked at that might be an okay spot for a clubhouse.”

“Nice here on the water,” said Jesse. “Y’all got a boat?”

“Nope. But it looks like we’ve got ourselves a dock. Cutter, check out the property lines and see how much parking space we’re got here.”

Cutter glanced around and then paced it off. “Couple acres, maybe a bit more.”

“Three acres,” said Chris Towns. “The cottage itself could use a bit of work, but overall, it’s in good shape. Go ahead and take a look inside. I unlocked it for y’all.”

Tammy went inside and the rest of us followed her.

One big room—no furniture. A sink and cupboards along one wall. No appliances.

“I’m not sure it’s big enough for a large meeting table, boss,” said Cutter. “Even if we got the table in, there would be no room for a couple dozen chairs.”

“Two tiny bedrooms and a bathroom at the back,” I said. “There’s nothing wrong with it—for a cottage on a lake—but it’s too small for what we want.”

Cutter nodded. “Yep. Way too small.”

Heading back to the truck I asked Tammy which one she liked best out of the four we’d seen. “Which one would you pick?”

“I’d pick the busted-up mall, Dale. More work, but a big parking lot—all paved—once you got the glass off it. Inside you could do like Lukas said and put the bike shop in the one end and make the rest of the space into the clubhouse. Big meeting room, gym, and kitchen and such.”

“Okay.”

Cutter was nodding his head too.

I walked over to Chris while he was getting into his truck. “Tell your client I’ll take his shit mall for seven per month and we’ll do all the cleanup ourselves. Write up the lease and call

me when I can sign it. I'll bring you a check and pick up the keys."

Towns smiled. "I believe the price was seven-fifty per month."

"And I believe I said seven hundred. We both know I'm doing him a huge favor."

He nodded. "I believe you are, Mister Burden, and I'll make it happen."

"Tell him if it works out well, I'll consider taking it off his hands."

"I'll tell him. Thanks."

That was one job off the list. We'd soon have ourselves a clubhouse for the Devil's Right Hand.

Wine and Spirits. Sunset. San Angelo.

My next stop was a package store. Annie was on her way to deliver the horse and she only drank Coors. While she was visiting, we'd be drinking some and doing a bit of celebrating, and I wanted to be prepared. "I'm going inside to load up. We're expecting company."

"Who's coming, Dale?" asked Tammy.

"It's a surprise. She drinks Coors so I figure we'd better stock up. She's a crack shot, so we'd better not piss her off."

Jesse laughed. "Guess you'd better get her brand, boss."

When I came out, Cutter and Jesse loaded the cases into the back of the truck. "Looks like party time, boss," said Jesse.

"Yep. We're gonna celebrate the start of the new club with the woman who will help make it happen."

"Can't wait to meet her," said Cutter.

"Is she gonna like me, Dale?" Tammy sounded nervous.

"She is gonna like you more than you can possibly imagine, Tammy."

“Why would she? She don’t even know me.”

“I can’t tell you the reason. Not yet, but it’s a good one and you’ll like it. It’s another surprise.”

“Am I gonna cry when I find out the surprise, Dale?”

“Possibly. Yep, I think you might cry, but not sad crying.”

“Is there happy crying?” Tammy sounded doubtful on that one.

“Yeah, there is.”

We piled into the truck, and I said, “Who’s starving besides Tammy?” I laughed. “I’m always feeding this girl.”

Mom and Pop Burger. San Angelo.

We had a quick lunch of burgers and fries and got a take-out order for Lukas.

“I hope this stays hot until we get home,” said Tammy.

“If it cools off, we can nuke it,” I said.

“How, Dale? We didn’t bring our microwave.”

“Shit. How could I forget that? I’m always nuking fucking coffee, and now I left my fuckin microwave in Montana.”

“Too much for you to think about,” said Tammy. “Don’t fret about it. We can get another one.”

Home Depot. San Angelo.

I parked out front and turned off the engine. “Okay, guys and girl, from this store I need the gate hardware for Lukas for the corral. Jesse, you probably can figure out what he needs, latch, hinges, and all that. I prefer black. You go get that.”

“Yep. I’ve fixed a few gates, boss.”

“Cutter, you go order the lumber for the benches Lukas wants to make for the porch and tell the lumber guys we’ll wait for it.”

“Yep, can do.”

“Me and Tammy will buy the microwave and we’ll meet y’all at the checkout.”

Once we had the big microwave box balanced across the top of our cart, I thought we were done shopping. “Let’s go to the checkout.”

“I need to grab a broom and dustpan, Dale.”

“Okay, make it fast.”

She chose the broom and dustpan she liked and after she found that, she saw the vacuum cleaners and said we needed one of those to suck up all the mouse poop and get the old house clean.

We were ready to go again when I saw the folding cots and decided they would be handy for unexpected guys who came to join us, and I bought three of them.

We were lucky to get out of that store alive and with a dollar left to our name.

I pulled around to the lumber pickup door and the boys loaded the wood for Lukas.

“That’s enough goddammed shopping for today. I need to go home and have a beer.”

“Jesus, boss, look at all the shit you bought,” said Jesse. “The fuckin load bed is full.”

“Just like when we left Montana,” said Tammy. “But we’re never going back there.”

Montana is Tibor country. Tammy can’t risk it.

Barnes & Company. Pecan Valley.

It was mid-afternoon when the big red Ram with duallies on the back pulled into the laneway towing the matching Coulter-Ross horse trailer.

Cutter and I were sitting on the porch steps drinking a couple of cold ones while Tammy and Jesse were helping Lukas with the corral.

Outlaw was tied to the tree next to the barn, but he didn't seem to mind being tied up. He liked being outside better than standing in the barn.

The dogs were sprawled out on the porch taking a nap but as soon as they heard the sound of Annie's truck, they were wide awake and running to greet her.

They had lived on her ranch enough times when I was...out of commission...and wasn't able to care for them, that they knew the sound of all of her trucks.

Tommy parked near the barn door and shut the engine down. He jumped out of the truck and ran straight to the corral and hugged his brother.

Tammy ran towards me like she always did when there were strangers. "Is this the company?" she whispered.

"Yep, that guy is Tommy Donovan, Lukas's brother, and this lady is Annie, my part-time wife."

Cutter chuckled at the part-time designation.

"Hi, Tammy," said Annie, "It's so nice to meet you." She put her hand over her face and started to cry. "I'm sorry, I can't help it. You look so much like your father."

"You knew my father?" Tammy was holding her breath and holding onto my arm.

Annie was sobbing. "I was married to your father, and I don't think he knew anything about you at all." Annie reached out and pulled Tammy into a hug.

I hugged both of them and Annie managed to stop crying. "I'm okay now. That was a bit of a shock to my old heart. Give me a minute and I'll introduce you to Bonnie Grace."

"Need a hand?"

I followed Annie to the back of the trailer and unlocked the double doors. "Didn't mean to upset you like that, Annie-girl."

"Not your fault, Dale. I'm thrilled to meet her."

Annie went into the trailer and freed the horse from her restraints. She backed the mare out of the trailer with practiced

ease, like the pro horsewoman she was.

“Back up, girl. That’s it. You’re almost out.”

Bonnie Grace was a gorgeous Appaloosa. Blue roan was her base color, the same as Outlaw, with a black mane and tail.

“I tried to match her to Outlaw as close as I could, sugar, in case you wanted to breed her.” Annie handed me the reins.

“She’s gorgeous, Annie. Thank you so much.” I turned and handed the reins to Tammy who was watching wide-eyed without saying a word. “Here you go, Tammy. Happy Birthday.”

“You got me a horse, Dale?”

I smiled at her. “Want me to lift you up?”

“She doesn’t know me.”

“Why don’t you take her for a walk down the lane and back?” asked Annie. “Talk to her so she knows the sound of your voice.”

“Okay. Thank you for bringing her in your beautiful truck and your beautiful red trailer. Are you like my... stepmom?”

“Yes, I am. Jackson Traynor was my husband, Tammy. Can we talk more about that later?”

Tammy nodded, then she turned and walked down the lane with Bonnie Grace trotting along behind her.

“She’s so beautiful, Dale. I want to hear all about how you found her.”

“Later. It’s not a happy story. Let’s have a beer.”

“I could use a beer. I’m a bit shaky.”

Annie walked over to the partly finished corral and said hello to Lukas, then I introduced her to Jesse James and Cutter.

“I like your old farmhouse,” she said. “Places like this have so much character.”

“This is a rental, but it gives us the space we need for now. I don’t want to live in the city.”

“You wouldn’t want to after having a thousand acres in Montana.” Annie followed me into the kitchen and glanced at the stove. “This work?”

“So far it does.” I grabbed two cold beers out of the fridge, and we sat down at the kitchen table. “How long can you stay?”

“Overnight.”

I shook my head. “No. I need you to stay until Sunday at least. Tammy’s sixteenth birthday is on Saturday, and she’s never had a birthday. I need a hand to pull something like that off.”

“That’s important. Tommy won’t care if we stay longer. He wanted to come and see Lukas. He’s been missing his brother.”

“We don’t have a helluva lot of furniture, but I’ve only been here a few days. I’ll get to it.”

“Chet told me about the word on the street. Are you sure you’re going about this the right way? If they come in bunches, it could turn out badly.”

“I’m gathering myself a posse to eliminate the bounty hunters when they come. That’s my intention anyway.”

“And so far you have Lukas, Cutter and Jesse?”

“So far, unless I get a big influx in the next few hours.” I laughed.

Tommy came in for a beer and helped himself. “Nice old farm, Travis...I mean Dale. Sorry, Annie told me, and I already forgot. Where’d you get that little girl?”

“Found her beat up in a trailer in northern Montana.”

“Sure is pretty. How old is she?”

“I was just talking to Annie about that very thing, Tommy. She’s gonna be sixteen on Saturday and y’all are gonna stay and help me give her a little party.”

Tommy smiled. “I’m good with that. I might want to get real drunk with my brother.”

“Yeah, I figured you might, that’s why I bought extra beer.”

The day wound down and Annie showed Tammy how to make stew and biscuits. The oven on the old stove worked and dinner turned out great.

After dinner Annie and I, Tammy and Jesse James went to the barn to take care of the horses. I wanted Annie to show Tammy what Bonnie Grace was used to eating.

Jesse had the stall clean and ready for the new mare with lots of straw laid down and spread around.

“Jesse got a stall ready for your horse Tammy,” I said.

“Thanks, Jesse. That was real nice of you.”

“No problem. I’m used to working on a ranch and I’m happy doing something I know how to do.”

After Annie showed Tammy the way she liked to feed the horse, she said, “I hope I can remember that, Mama.”

“I wrote it down and you can look at the note until you get it memorized.”

Tammy’s face lit up. “Oh, thanks. I don’t want to make a mistake.”

“You won’t make a mistake. I can tell that you’re going to take good care of your horse.”

There was a rumble outside and my head cranked around when I heard it.

“Two Harleys,” said Annie. “One Screaming Eagle.” She ran out the door pulling her Beretta out of her waist holster with me right behind her.

I turned and hollered, “Jesse, keep Tammy in the barn for now.”

“Got it boss.”

It was dark outside with the only light coming from the bulb on the porch. Two bikers were straddling their rides and hollering for me.

“We come to see Dale Burden.”

“I’m right here. Get off your bikes and throw down your weapons.”

“Like hell we’re gonna do that. We come to join your new club.”

“Expect me to believe that with a bounty on my head?” I could see Tommy and Lukas on the porch with Cutter. They were to the left of the riders; Annie and I were facing them.

Both of them set their kickstands and got off their bikes at the same time. They were wearing cuts, but no chance of seeing them in the dark and finding out what club they were with.

They started to move and came strolling towards Annie and me. They were both smiling and pretending they were friendly and had come in peace to join the club.

I knew different just by the way they talked and the fear and tension floating around in the air. It was a cop thing and Annie would feel it too. She’d killed enough bad guys to recognize the turbulent air that surrounded them.

The taller one pulled his gun and started to say something, and he only got the first word out before his head exploded.

The other one hollered and pulled an automatic weapon out of the sling on the side of his bike, but he was too slow. He was already dead.

“Where we gonna put our Boot Hill, Dale?” asked Annie.

I shrugged. “Let’s have a beer and think about it.”

“Yeah, killing bounty hunters makes me thirsty,” said Annie. “Now I gotta clean my gun.”

I laughed as I pulled her into my arms and gave her a hug.

We walked up onto the porch and Cutter said, “You didn’t even draw your weapon, boss.”

“Why would I? Annie was right beside me.”

“You must have a lot of faith in your wife, boss.”

“Damned right I do.”

“Where do you want them buried?” asked Lukas.

“We’ll pick a spot at daylight. That’ll be soon enough. Come on. We’ll have a few beers to celebrate Annie-girl coming to join us.”

Chapter Five

Thursday, November 8th.

Barnes & Company Ranch.

Waking up with Annie in my bed was the best feeling I could ever have. I'd missed her so much and knowing it was my own fault that we were no longer together didn't make it any better.

She sat up and glanced around the room. "You going for a minimalist look here, Dale? I think you've got it nailed. At the very least, you need a dresser with a mirror over it and the same for Tammy. She's got nowhere to put her clothes."

"Give me another week and I'll have more furniture. With you in my bed, I don't want to talk about dressers or mirrors." I pulled her back under the covers.

Tammy and I ran down the porch steps heading for the barn for chores and right in front of us were those dead bikers lying on the driveway with flies buzzing all around them.

Tammy made a face. "We should pick a place to bury those guys, Dale. They look gross lying there and they might start to stink pretty soon."

"They stink good enough already," I said. "I wonder how many graves we'll have to dig before we're through."

"Twenty or thirty," said Tammy. "That's a lot of digging with a shovel."

"Sure is. I can feel the blisters on my hands already. Might be better to rent a backhoe. Yep, I think that's a good idea. Either Jesse or Cutter probably know how to operate one."

"Billy could do it," said Tammy. "He can plow snow with a tractor."

"You're right. Billy could run a digger. Are you missing him?"

"A bit. I liked him living with us. He was fun."

“Yeah, he’s a good guy.”

When we came back to the house for breakfast, I asked Jesse James the question on my mind. “Run a backhoe, Jesse?”

“Sure, boss.” He grinned. “We getting one soon?”

“Let’s rent one for the coming week and see how much use we get out of it.”

“Save a lot of digging by hand,” said Cutter, “and I’m all for that.”

“For now, after we have breakfast, bring me the wallets of those two guys. I want to see where they came from and if we can expect more from that club.”

“Yeah,” said Cutter. “Be good to know if that entire club is after you, wouldn’t it?”

“Uh huh. For now, take their bodies behind the barn and put a tarp over them. Jesse, you move their rides into the barn so they’re not so noticeable.”

“Yep,” said Jesse. “That won’t take but a couple of minutes.”

“Tommy and Cutter can go into the city and rent us a backhoe.”

“How we gonna get it back here?” asked Tommy.

“The rental place will have to deliver it,” I said. “We don’t have a flat bed.”

After Tammy and Annie cleaned up after breakfast, they took the horses for a bareback ride down the lane. Annie could ride any horse, saddle, or no saddle. She had serious skills.

When they came back, they tied Bonnie Grace and Outlaw to the part of the corral fence that was finished and cooled them down.

The two horses looked so beautiful standing next to each other it made my heart beat faster.

“You need a big trough for the corral,” said Annie. “The horses are going to need water.”

“Damn it. I’ve got so much going on, I forgot to buy the water trough.”

“I’ll do it,” said Annie. “Tammy and I are going to the feed store anyway. I want her to try some saddles.”

“Girl trip?” I asked.

“Girls only,” said Annie.

“I guess Tammy will be safe with you.”

“You guess?”

“Wrong word. I don’t have to guess.”

“Mama is fast with her gun,” said Tammy.

“Yep, she has a lot of amazing skills, little girl. You can learn a ton of things from Annie-girl.”

“She already taught me to make stew, Dale. And those biscuits you like too.”

I chuckled. “I love warm biscuits with my eggs in the morning.”

Annie didn’t want to tow the horse trailer into town, and she was struggling with the hitch when Jesse jumped in to help her. He had the trailer unhooked in a couple of minutes.

“You girls need a hand with what y’all are buying?”

“We do,” said Annie. “This is going to be a heavy-duty shopping trip and we can use you, Jesse. Want to come?”

“I thought it was girls only,” I said, and Annie winked at me.

Jesse glanced at me, and I gave him the nod to go with them. For sure, they couldn’t possibly lift the horse trough. Tammy’s new saddle would be heavy too. Best if Jesse went with them and provided some muscle.

Annie-girl can watch out for Tammy as well as I can, but it makes me nervous when she's out of my sight.

San Angelo Co-op and Farm Supply.

On the drive north to the city Annie asked Tammy what her mother's name was. "I don't know what your situation was with your mother, Tammy, and I certainly don't want to upset you, but do you remember her name?"

"Won't upset me because I don't remember much about her. It wasn't like I knew her or nothing like that. She left me with a neighbor when I was three or four and she never came back. That kind of hurt my feelings because she didn't want me. I think her name was Rhonda."

"Uh huh. I know who she was. What I don't know, is how you ended up in Montana. You were probably born in Scarborough. That's in Canada—a part of Toronto—That's where I was born too, and where I met your father, Jackson Traynor."

"And then you married him?"

"Yes, I did. I loved Jackson so much."

Tammy smiled. "I'm glad somebody loved my dad. I guess my mother didn't love him if she left him and then left me. She didn't want to be a family with us."

Annie glanced in the rearview and Jesse looked like he was about to shed a tear.

"How you got to Montana and how it worked out isn't the important part," said Annie. "Dale found you in Montana and he's taking care of you now. That's the end result and what counts."

"Right," said Tammy. "That's the good part. Dale was the sheriff and he found me in Tibor's trailer when my neighbor called him. He is the best thing that ever happened in my life."

"I'm so glad he found you, Tammy. To know a child of Jackson's is a dream come true for me."

“Dale told me he used to live on your ranch with you where the horses are.”

“He did. Dale and I have a long history.”

“You met him after my father died, right?”

“A long time after. Yes.”

Annie parked in front of the store and killed the engine. “Let’s go in and see what we need for Bonnie Grace.”

“How did she get such a pretty name?” asked Tammy.

“I name all of the foals born on Coulter-Ross ranch myself and the names usually have meaning to me. My best mare is a horse called Blue Bonnie. So, when your little filly was born, I called her Bonnie after her mother and added the name of my mother too. Her name is Grace.”

“Oh, that’s a nice story.”

In the back seat, Jesse was listening, and he nodded his head. “Beautiful horse and a beautiful name.”

Annie hopped out and motioned to Jesse. “Come on, Jesse. You’re part of this shopping team.”

He grinned as he caught up.

“I’ve never been here before,” said Tammy.

“Me neither, but it’s a farm store and we’ll find what we need.” They went inside and Annie looked around to get the lay of the land. “Jesse can go pick out a watering trough while we check out the saddles.”

“I need a stable broom too, ma’am. I got me some work to do in the barn.”

“Call me *Annie*, and get whatever you need, Jesse. Dale doesn’t have much to work with at that old place and he seems to be...”

“Be what, Mama?” Tammy looked worried.

“I was going to say disorganized... but... he’ll get there.”

Annie led the way to the tack section and showed Tammy the saddles they had on display. “You can try these out and see

which one fits you the best.”

“Okay.” She stared at the saddles and hesitated.

“Climb up there and sit on each one until you find one that fits you the best.”

“Will I know when it’s the right one?”

“Uh huh. It will feel comfortable and just right.”

After trying three different ones, Tammy settled on her perfect saddle and picked out a pink and gray plaid horse blanket for Bonnie Grace. “I never believed I’d have a horse of my own, Mama.” Her dark eyes were full of tears.

Annie reached out and hugged her. “You look so much like your father it makes me weak in my knees.”

“Do you have pictures of him?”

“Sure do. Bike pictures of us in the Red Rock Canyon, and wedding pictures in Vegas. I’ll show them to you when you come to visit me at my ranch, and I’ll have copies made for you to keep.”

Carrying a broom in his hand, Jesse caught up with them and said his shopping was done.

“We’re almost finished too. Can you lug this saddle to the front checkout for us?”

“Sure.” He handed Tammy his broom and chuckled. “If Tammy carries my broom.”

Annie wandered around a bit more and bought a few more things for Bonnie Grace. A horse grooming kit and electrolytes for her water. She wanted Tammy to have everything she needed to take proper care of her horse.

Then Annie chose a cowboy hat for Tammy and plopped it on her head. They were both laughing at the checkout.

Jesse lugged the saddle out to the truck while Tammy carried the stable broom. A couple of guys from the shipping department loaded the water trough into the load bed of the truck at the loading dock. That done, they were ready to roll on to their next stop.

Sunset Market. San Angelo.

Annie took over the shopping after finding out that Dale had very few staples in his pantry, and more and more men to feed. She was used to feeding all the cowboys on her ranch and knew the dishes they liked the best and the recipes that would feed a dozen hungry men at one time.

Dale had mentioned to her about getting help for Tammy in the kitchen and Annie had agreed it was a good idea. There was a lot of pressure coming down on a sixteen-year-old girl just learning to cook. Tammy would have to come up with three meals a day for an ever-increasing number of bikers.

Annie bought basics in bulk quantities. Flour and potatoes, rice and pasta, and explained to Tammy why she was buying large quantities of the things she was putting in the cart.

She bought jars of marinara sauce, pounds and pounds of lean hamburger and a lot of chicken. Things that could easily be turned into simple meals.

In the dry goods section of the store, she encouraged Tammy to pick out mats for in front of the sink and stove, and one for the doorway. They bought oven mitts and potholders and a plethora of utensils.

“We don’t have enough chairs for all the bikers coming,” said Tammy.

“Folding chairs,” said Annie. “We’ll buy a dozen of them, and they can be stacked away when y’all are not using them.”

“That’s a good idea,” said Tammy.

As they headed for the checkout, Annie stopped at the community bulletin board and took three different numbers for domestic help. She’d give them to Dale and let him interview the women.

Jesse pushed the cart to the big red Ram and began loading all the goods into the back of the truck. “Is this what they call power shopping?” He laughed.

“Yep, it is,” said Annie. “And so easy to do.”

On the drive back to the ranch, Tammy asked about Tommy. “How old is Tommy, Mama?”

“He’s twenty-one now. He’s a Texas Ranger.”

“Tommy is a cop?” asked Jesse. “Never would’ve guessed it. Looks like a high school kid.”

“He’s a cop, and a good one too.”

“He’s cute, ain’t he?” said Tammy.

“Sure is,” said Annie. “You like him?”

Tammy shrugged. “Not sure. He ain’t said nothing to me yet. Only been talking to his brother mostly, since he got here.”

“Tommy has been missing Lukas a lot.”

“Dale too,” said Tammy. “Dale thinks of Lukas as his family. He told me that.”

“Dale watched out for Tommy’s older brothers when they lived close to him—not far from here—down near Pecan Creek. Then Rob and Perry took care of Dale when he was hurt a couple of times. Those boys took care of Max and Sarge too, when Dale couldn’t do it. All of the Donovan boys are family to Dale, and to me too. I adopted two of them.”

“Where’s Rob and Perry now?” asked Tammy. “Do they still live near here?”

“No. Sadly they got in with a bad gang and they’re both dead.”

“That’s a sad story. Dale must have been upset about that.”

“He was. Extremely upset. He’s not over it.”

Barnes & Company Ranch. Pecan Valley.

Tommy and Cutter were the first to come back from town. They’d been able to rent a backhoe by the week and it was going to be delivered the following day.

“That’s good news, but I want these bodies in the ground temporarily. Just dig a couple of shallow graves way back

along the fence line, and we'll bury them properly when the digger comes. I'm not taking any chances on some animal coming and dragging them off where they'll be discovered."

"Yeah," said Cutter. "We'll get that done right away. No chances."

Cutter backed his truck up to where the bodies were sprawled in the dirt on the laneway, and the two of us lifted the corpses and tossed them into the load bed.

He and Tommy rounded up shovels and drove towards the back of the property to find the right spot.

That job had just gotten underway, and I was helping Lukas finish building the corral gate when two gangers rode in the lane. "Lukas, we'd better see about these guys before we hang the gate."

"Do they look friendly? I can't tell from here."

"Can't say for sure but they ain't pointing guns at us."

The two of us walked from the corral at the side of the barn to meet the two bikers. They hadn't taken a stance and I didn't pick up any vibes or tension from them. Two friendly guys out for a ride? Maybe. Maybe not.

"Hey, Dale." One of them grinned. "Never thought I'd get to meet you in person, much less get to ride with you."

I moved a little closer. "Where you guys from?"

"River Rats out of Marble Falls. Wasn't too long a ride for us out here."

They both had strong builds, a few tats and weren't too grungy looking.

"You guys got names? You know who I am, and this is Lukas Weaver."

"I'm Ted Archer, and this is Burt Denton."

Lukas nodded his head meaning they looked okay to him. Cutter would know better when he came back from the grave digging detail. He'd always been a reliable judge of character when we'd been in the Breed together.

With more and more bikers coming, the problem was sleeping arrangements. I should've thought it out a bit better and been prepared with a bunkhouse built and furnished before I put the word out there. Hindsight wasn't any damned good at all.

“Park your bikes over there and we'll have a beer on the porch and talk.” I shook hands with both of the new guys and got us all beer from the fridge in the kitchen.

While I was grabbing the cans of beer, I noticed the jar full of money sitting on the counter and I shoved it into the cupboard. I had checked the wallets of the bounty hunters and they were Grady Markham and Sonny Crane. Both of them members of the B-team, San Angelo chapter.

Impossible to know if they were on their own or scouts for that club and the rest would be down on me any minute. That was the chance I was taking by putting the word out there. Second thoughts? Maybe.

One of the dead B-team guys had two hundred bucks and the other had five hundred in his wallet. I put the money into a jar for beer and everybody knew about it. Not a secret, but not for dipping into either.

When he was putting the bikes into the barn, Jesse had emptied the saddlebags and the guys from the B-team were carrying a lot of drugs. Heroin, meth, and dozens of vials of opiates. Not much coke.

I came up with a spot in the barn to keep the drugs and didn't share it with anyone but Jesse. Pretty sure he wasn't a user. Neither was Lukas after his twin brother OD'd.

Annie returned from San Angelo next with her truck loaded. She had the horse trough and a saddle for Tammy and a bunch of other stuff. She backed the truck up close to the corral and parked it there.

She and Tammy and Jesse jumped out and I introduced them to Ted and Burt.

“Nice to meet y’all,” said Annie. “Come on Tammy, let’s put the groceries away. We’ve got meat in some of those bags, and we need to get it into the fridge.”

“I’ll help you, Annie,” said Tommy. “Looks like you bought a lot of stuff.”

“Lot of people to feed,” said Tammy.

Tommy laughed. “Two more now.”

We had just finished hanging the gate. Burt and Ted had pitched in and held the weight of the gate while Lukas and I screwed the hinges in place.

The corral was basically finished except for the water supply, and the trough had arrived. There were lots of strong guys to unload the trough from the truck and they had it in place in a few minutes.

“Where are we running the water line from, boss?” asked Lukas.

“Has to come from a source in the barn, so dig around and find the closest spot to exit the pipe through the wall.”

“Yep,” said Lukas.

Jesse took his new broom into the barn and cleared a big section for the incoming Harleys. We’d soon be running a secondhand shop.

The day was soon gone and after the horses were fed and put into clean stalls, Annie and Tammy put dinner on the table. I didn’t realize they’d bought a bunch of folding chairs, but we needed them, and they came in handy now that there were six of us, plus Annie and Tammy.

We had spaghetti and garlic bread for dinner and the boys complimented the girls on their cooking. That was when Annie remembered the numbers of the housekeepers she’d taken from the bulletin board at the market. She dug them out

of her jacket pocket and gave them to me. “These women are looking for jobs as cooks and housekeepers.”

“Fantastic. Saves me going through an agency. I’ll call these ladies tomorrow.”

We were having a smoke on the porch after dinner and getting to know the two new guys from Marble Falls a little bit. They were young and enthusiastic and seemed okay to me. I wasn’t getting any threatening vibes from them at all.

It was dark, but not pitch dark. The pole light next to the barn needed a new bulb and Cutter hadn’t gotten around to replacing it yet, so the only light was from the bulb beside the front door of the house. An old yellow bulb swarming with moths and insects.

I heard the unmistakable Harley rumble coming our way along the county road, and it was loud. Sounded like more than one rider.

“Riders coming.” Lukas got to his feet and so did Tommy.

“How can you tell if they want to join the club or if they came here for the bounty?” asked Ted.

“Can’t tell until they get close enough,” I said. “The bounty hunters have a feel to them.” I laughed. “Almost like a scent.”

“Jesus,” said Burt. “You got balls putting the word out and kind of inviting them to come and get you, Dale.”

“Not sure it was a great idea,” mumbled Cutter.

“Me neither,” said Lukas.

“I want them to come and keep coming until it wears off. I’m fuckin sick of waiting for it to happen, and I want it to be over.”

“If enough of them end up dead,” said Cutter, “they might stop coming. There’s that way of looking at it.”

I pulled out my Sig and as soon as Max and Sarge saw the gun in my hand, they pushed in close to me, snarling at the noise of the Harleys coming in the lane.

The three bikers set their stands and got off their rides. I started out friendly. “Hey, guys, you ride a long way?”

“All the way from Houston.”

“Which club y’all from?” I asked.

“Take a guess, Dale.”

“You guys aren’t here to join the Hand?”

“Sure as hell not,” said one of them.

“We’re here to collect the money for your captured ass,” said another one.

I could feel the tension rise within me as I took a drag on my cigarette. Max and Sarge were growling loudly, sensing the hostility coming from the three bikers standing before us. I took a step forward, positioning myself between the bikers and the rest of my crew.

“Let me make something clear to you boys,” I said, my voice low and menacing. “I’m not going down without a fight. And if you think you can collect the bounty on my head, you’re going to have to come through me first.”

The three men laughed, clearly underestimating the situation. “You’re outnumbered, Dale. It’s three against one. And we’re not afraid to get our hands dirty.”

I didn’t back down. This is what I’d been waiting for. I could feel my blood churning as I glared at them. Suddenly, Max and Sarge broke out of their stance, barking furiously as they charged towards the bikers. The sound of snarls and growls filled the air.

The dogs were my protection, but I called them off before they attacked the bikers. Letting my dogs fight this battle wasn’t something I wanted to do.

The kitchen door behind me was standing open and Cutter and Jesse came charging out. “Get in the house and stay there, Dale,” said Cutter. “We’ve got this.”

“You gonna let your boys fight your battles for you, Dale?” One of the Houston boys laughed. “That sounds like

something you'd do.”

“We heard that all the shit people say about how you can fight ain't true. We wanted to come and check it out for ourselves.”

I used to be better before I broke every fuckin bone in my body in the plane crash.

Tommy picked up his shotgun from the floor of the porch and pointed it at the riders. “Get on your rides and get out of here or we'll be burying your asses tomorrow.”

“That's a joke,” one of them snarled.

I took a couple of steps closer to the guys and they still hadn't drawn their weapons, but they had definitely taken a stance. All three of them were ready to go.

They want to test me before they chain me up.

Annie would've seen them and put my guys in motion. There was some shuffling of movement going on behind me. We had been working ops together for so long, I could anticipate how she would handle the situation.

She'd call guys in off the porch and send them out the back door to circle around the house and come at the riders from both sides. The three guys standing on the driveway would soon be caught in the middle of a crossfire.

“You guys don't have long to live,” I hollered. “Better get on your rides and hit the highway.”

They laughed and one said, “We ain't leaving here without you, Dale.”

“Throw down your weapons,” hollered Ted from the shadows to their left.

“Do it now, boys.” That voice came from their right and when they turned their heads to look, I charged down the steps, tackled the closest guy and took him into the dirt.

Ted and Burt holstered their weapons as they ran out of the shadows and tackled the other two.

I pinned my guy to the ground with my knee on his chest and my hand around his throat. He struggled beneath me, but he couldn't break free from my grip. The other two were fighting back against Ted and Burt, but they were no match for my guys.

"You're gonna regret coming here," I growled at the biker beneath me.

He spat in my face, and my anger boiled over. I punched him hard across the jaw, feeling the satisfying crunch of bone as his head snapped back.

Cutter ran down off the porch with Tommy and Lukas, and Jesse was right behind them. Everybody was into it, and we had us a good old free-for-all.

All three bikers were armed with knives and guns, and they weren't in a hurry to give up their weapons. The rider I had tackled was tough and brutally strong. He would've made a damned good ally, but he wanted me for the bounty. I had no choice but to exterminate him.

After an exhausting fight—six on three—the odds in our favor—the three riders from Houston were pretty beat up.

Cutter had a nice slice in his arm, and he was in pain and wildly pissed off that he'd got cut. His anger prompted him to lose control and with a ferocious growl, he cut the throats of the three guys lying in the dirt.

That was that.

Three more for the backhoe tomorrow.

The boys dragged the bodies behind the barn, covered them with a tarp and made sure it was secure with rocks all around to keep predators out until we could bury them properly.

While the boys took care of the corpses, Annie took Cutter into the kitchen, cleaned up the gash in his arm and bandaged him up.

"You could use a couple of stitches," she said. "I can run you into town to a clinic if you want."

Cutter shook his head. “Nope. I’ll heal up. Happened lots of times before.” He patted the snugly wrapped arm and took it in stride.

“Your call, Cutter. Might disfigure the ink on that arm.”

He winked at Annie. “Add more character.”

“Yep. You can look at it that way.” She smiled as she shoved Advil and water across the table to him.

The rest of us had bumps and bruises and we’d be black and blue the next day, but no serious injuries. Cutter got the worst of it.

After the scrap was over and done with, we took time for a few beers before calling it a night.

When it was time to sleep, I set up two of the new cots in the back bedroom on the main floor for Ted and Burt. Jesse hauled a cot upstairs and set it up in the room Cutter was using and bunked in with him.

For the time being, nobody would have to sleep on the new sofa, and I was glad of that. That sofa was the one Tammy picked out and it had cost me a pile. We didn’t need one that nice, but I wanted her to be happy.

With more bikers joining us, we definitely needed more pillows and blankets, but I’d take care of that the next day.

Tommy shared the double bed with his brother in Lukas’s room, Annie was with me, and Tammy had her own room.

Once we got all of that sorted out, everybody crashed.

Busy day.

Chapter Six

Friday, November 9th.

Barnes & Company Ranch. Pecan Valley.

Tammy and I were in the barn feeding the horses when we heard a big noise on the driveway. Tammy squealed and cringed a little thinking it was more bikers coming to kidnap me for the bounty.

“Doesn’t sound like bikes to me, girl. Sounds more like a big rig pulling a flatbed. Might be the digger we ordered.”

Tammy ran to the door and peeked out. “Yep, a huge, long truck with a tractor thing tied on.”

“Good.” I winked at her. “We need that digger, little girl. We’ve got bodies to bury.”

Tammy made a face. “Bury them on the property next door, Dale. There’s no house on that land.”

“There’s a thought.”

I ran out and Jesse and Cutter were already on the job helping the driver with the ramp. They were almost ready to unload the backhoe.

“Thanks for delivering it first thing,” I said. “Appreciate it.”

“No problem. Y’all need a quick lesson on how to operate it?”

“Show, Jesse.” I pointed to him. “He’s had some experience, but give him a refresher.”

“Sure. No problem.”

I signed for the delivery and the driver took Jesse, sat him in the backhoe and went over the controls with him. From the porch I could see Jesse nodding his head, then he started it up and worked the bucket a couple of times. He knew what he was doing. That made one of us.

We were finishing breakfast when the ReMax agent called and said he had the lease agreement drawn up and ready to sign and he needed a check for first and last months' rent before he could give me the keys.

"Sure, Chris. I can meet you this morning. Give me a time and I'll bring you a check."

"Can you make it by ten? I've got another appointment at eleven."

"I think so. See you then."

Jesse and Cutter went off with the backhoe to take care of the grave digging with Ted and Burt. Lukas opted to stay behind and start on the porch benches while Tommy, Tammy, Annie, and I drove into town.

We'd talked about Lukas building a bunkhouse, but Annie said it would take too long to build, and we had to accommodate the bikers that were arriving daily. She suggested a prefab structure as being the way to go. I'd have to do some research into that, and I wasn't the best on the computer.

Made me think my plan wasn't too well thought out.

Nasworthy. San Angelo.

ReMax agent Chris Towns was sitting in his SUV waiting for us at the dysfunctional strip mall. As I parked on the road, I waited for Annie's reaction when she saw the place and the mess it was in. Initially, I had wanted to rent a place with little or no work involved, but this place was the opposite of that.

"Wow, this property spells work with a capital 'W'," she said sweetly.

"So much broken glass," said Tammy. "Be careful where you're walking, Mama."

"I will, sweetheart. I've got one bad leg already." Annie reached out and took Tammy's hand.

Chris jumped out of his vehicle when he saw me parking the truck and gave us a wave. "Good morning, everyone. Glad

y'all could make it."

He led the way across the sea of glass to the building, unlocked the back door and let us in the rear entrance. The interior smelled of must and dust and something else equally unpleasant.

"How long has this building been sitting like this?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," said Towns. "A few years. I've only had the listing for six months."

If it had been a liability to the owner for several years, he should be open to any offer to recoup his losses.

Tommy and the girls looked around while I took care of business and pulled out my checkbook.

"A lot of potential," said Annie. "You've got the space to do anything you want with the interior."

"Lukas wants to turn the last two stores into our own bike shop," I said.

"Makes sense to do that," said Tommy. "Income for the club and convenient for your new guys. The members will be hanging around anyway. You might as well have their bike business."

"How many members are you planning to let in?" asked Annie. "Small and tight would be the way to go."

I nodded. "Originally, I thought fifty, but that's too many to control. I'm revising that figure daily."

"You mentioned training them," said Annie.

"It's not going to be a typical bike club, Annie-girl, but you probably figured that out already."

"Only an impression you gave me, sugar. I have no idea what your ultimate purpose is."

"Do you think Mick would come down here and train them in small groups when I was ready?" I asked.

"He might if you asked him nicely. He does enjoy the training and the war games. Night fighting is his specialty and

he excels at it.”

As we finished the tour of the building and left the property, Annie said, “Turning that mall into a clubhouse will take a lot of work and a lot of money. I hope you have lots of capital and a steady income source.”

“Enough to get a decent start on the club. Let’s put it that way.”

“Don’t bankrupt yourself, sugar,” said Annie. “If this club idea doesn’t work out for you, you won’t have anything left to go in a different direction.”

“I’ve considered that,” I said.

“Have you?”

Annie gave me a look and it wasn’t encouraging. She ran one of the hugest corporations in the country and it made me wonder if I should have let her in on the planning before I started this venture.

Walgreens. San Angelo.

We stopped at Walgreens for medical supplies. Cutter was hurt and needed clean bandages daily, and I had no proper first aid supplies at the ranch. With more bikers coming our way, it was best to be prepared for more injuries. Couldn’t be avoided.

I went to that section of the store and bought rubbing alcohol, gauze pads, gauze bandages in rolls, antiseptic cream, and medical tape. I added several bottles of extra-strength pain killers. Everything they had for first aid, I bought some of it to have on hand—just in case things got rough and there were more casualties in the days ahead.

While Dale bought the first aid supplies, Annie and Tammy went down different aisles of the store. Annie showed Tammy the healthier shampoos and conditioners for her long hair and pointed out a great brush to get the tangles out.

She showed her which makeup to buy to match her coloring, and pointed out the nail polish that didn’t chip.

Tammy was excited to have girly things she'd never had before and deliberated on the nail polish colors for several minutes.

“You can't go wrong with a pink, a peach, and a neutral for starters,” said Annie. “With those colors, you can match anything you happen to be wearing.”

Tammy picked out her three bottles, then leaned closer to whisper to Annie to ask about feminine products.

Annie nodded and stocked up on those for Tammy too. The girl was living in a house full of men.

When they got to the checkout where Tommy and Dale were waiting, they had a cartful. Annie put Tammy's shopping on her Amex card and the checkout lady bagged all of it.

San Angelo Bakery.

Next stop was a bakery where Annie let Tammy pick out a cake for her birthday. They stood in front of the glass display case and stared at the plethora of decorated cakes until Tammy decided.

“They all look so pretty with the swirls and the little flowers n'all, but I like chocolate the best.”

“Me too,” said Annie. She turned to the lady behind the counter who was waiting for their decision, “We'll take the chocolate cake with chocolate icing.” Annie pointed at the size she wanted. “That big flat. How many does it serve?”

“Should serve about twenty-four people,” said the baker.

“Great. Some of the guys will eat more than one piece.” Annie picked up candles and balloons and paid for all of it. “Big cake box to hold on your lap on the way home, Tammy.”

“I'll keep it safe. Never had me a birthday cake before.”

Annie gave her a hug. “We're going to have a great party. It's going to be fun.”

“I'm so excited, I won't be able to sleep tonight.”

Barnes & Company Ranch. Pecan Valley.

When we got back home from San Angelo, there were two new riders hovering, smoking, and watching Lukas make the benches.

“More men are here,” said Tammy. Her hand trembled a little and she shoved it into the pocket of her jacket.

“I’ll find out who the hell they are.” Always protective of his older brother, Tommy jumped out of the truck and hurried over to the spot where Lukas was sawing boards.

“Friend or foe?” Annie whispered her question to me and I rolled my eyes in response.

“No idea. Guess we’ll find out soon enough. You girls take your stuff into the house and stay there until I’m sure about them.”

“Come on, Tammy,” said Annie. “We’ll put the cake in the fridge until tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait to take a bite out of that chocolate icing,” said Tammy, and then she laughed.

After seeing the girls safely into the house, I sauntered over to talk to the new arrivals. Tommy had positioned himself close to Lukas and neither one of them were wearing friendly smiles.

“Hey, guys. Where did y’all ride from?” I asked.

“Long ride,” said the one. He tossed his butt to the ground and stamped on it, then pulled a joint out of his shirt pocket and lit it up.

“Got names?” I asked. “I’m being friendly, but I don’t have to be. Y’all are on my property and in about ten seconds your asses could be lying in the fuckin ditch.”

The other guy grinned. “We’re just a bit nervous about meeting the great Dale Burden. You know how it is.”

“No, I don’t. You know who I am and now y’all know where I live. That puts y’all one up on me. Tell me your names

and where y'all came from."

The shorter one of the two with dirty blond hair twitching out from under his red bandana spoke up. "I'm Justin Crenshaw from San Antone and this here is Randy Bates."

"Okay, that's better." I stuck out my hand and shook both of theirs. Not friendly vibes, but maybe they were telling the truth about wanting to join and being a bit apprehensive. So hard to be sure of the truth with distrust on both sides.

I glanced at Tommy for his take on these guys and he was shaking his head a little. Not trusting them too much, Tommy would be watching them.

Jesse showed up a few minutes later driving the backhoe up the lane. Cutter was riding on the side and Ted and Burt were jogging along behind.

"Cutter, in the house." I pointed. "Annie has stuff from the drug store to fix your arm proper."

He nodded. "Okay, thanks."

Not saying much of anything, the new guys stuck around and asked questions about the club. I wasn't telling them anything right off because they didn't seem trustworthy or sincere to me. The jury was out on them.

Tommy was definitely on guard. He didn't want them around. Max and Sarge were growly and snarly. Unsettled and pacing, they kept looking at me for a command or a hand signal. The dogs were the best judge of character. They picked up on things that no human could.

The new riders stayed for dinner at Annie's invitation. She was being polite. The way the guys from San Antonio looked at Tammy wasn't polite in any way, and I decided then and there I didn't want them in the club—even if they hadn't come for the bounty.

They hung around after dinner having a look around and sizing things up and I figured they'd make their move on me

after some of my guys went to bed. Better odds for them.

When midnight rolled around, the girls were tired and it was time to make my decision. “Nice meeting you guys, but I don’t think this is the right club for y’all. Better be on your way. Motel only a mile down the highway if you need a place to stay. We’re full up here at the ranch.”

“Bet there’s room in Tammy’s bed,” said Randy with a little chuckle.

That remark clicked Jesse’s switch and he was on Randy in an instant. Jesse took him to the dirt and pounded the crap out of him.

His buddy Justin tried to dive in to help Randy, but Tommy was there and flattened him with a single punch. Those guys were not as tough as they would like the world to believe.

After the little dustup, we set them on their rides and pointed them at the road. Whether they’d be back for a second try at me, there was no telling. I’d deal with it when it happened. No use worrying about it.

When we could no longer hear the rumble, I mounted the porch steps. “Come on. One beer and we’re done for today.”

Tommy wiped a streak of dirt off his face and nodded. “Yeah, I’m done for now.”

Chapter Seven

Saturday, November 10th.

Tammy's Sweet Sixteen.

Barnes & Company Ranch. Pecan Valley.

Tammy's birthday excitement overflowed at breakfast. She was all smiles and definitely presented a more grown-up look this morning. Her new shampoo and conditioner had done marvelous things with her long dark hair, her eyes sparkled with anticipation, and her lashes were long and full.

Annie smiled at her as they made breakfast together. "You look so pretty this morning. Happy birthday."

"Thank you, Mama."

The men ate quickly and left the house to get to work on whatever tasks were assigned to them.

After Annie and Tammy cleaned up the dishes and Tammy swept the worn linoleum floor with her new broom, they went to the barn.

Before going for a morning ride, Annie wanted to give Tammy another lesson on saddling Bonnie Grace. Annie was leaving for home the following morning and she wanted to be sure Tammy had everything down pat.

Annie let Tammy do everything by herself while she stood close by to answer any questions. Step by step, Tammy saddled her horse with love, and she didn't forget anything.

When she finished, Annie gave her a big hug and praised her. "You are such a fast learner. It took me longer than that to learn to saddle Target properly."

They rode together down the back lane and when they passed the freshly dug earth near the back fence, Tammy said, "I feel bad we had to kill those guys, Mama."

"Death is always depressing, honey, but you have to remember, those men came to take Dale away for the bounty

money on his head. Once they got the money from the club that put the bounty up, Dale would be tortured and killed by the men who wanted him. That's the reason those bikers rode all the way out here."

"Yeah, I guess in the end it was self-defense for sure. No way we could let them take Dale."

While the girls were riding, I thought about the bodies at the back of the property piling up, and wondered if buying this old farm was the better way to go. Own the land, maintain privacy and take no chances.

"Cutter, do you have the number for the agent you rented this place from?"

"Sure. It's in my cell. Do you need him?"

"A little concerned about the bodies, and especially if there will be more coming. I was thinking it might be better if we owned this fifty acres."

Cutter grinned. "Yeah, there's a thought. Be a lot safer for you without a landlord if we've got more and more bounty hunters coming in."

"Can you recall what the asking price was at the time you rented it?"

"No. But I can call and find out."

"Yeah, do that and see how little of a down payment we can get away with. We need our funds for a lot of other stuff."

"I'll take care of it."

Lukas gave me a holler from under the oak tree—the shady spot he'd chosen to work on the benches. "Got one done. Come and look at it, Dale."

I sauntered over and the bench looked nice and sturdy. About four feet long and smelled like new wood. "Looks great. Two of those will save us buying a whole whack of chairs and they'll take up less room."

"What about paint?"

“Do they need to be painted? Looks pretty good just like that.”

“Unprotected wood,” said Lukas. “It will look like that for a short time, but then the wood will weather and go black. We need paint or a stain. You can choose either one.”

“I’ll pick up something while I’m in the city. I’m leaving now to start the cleanup on the clubhouse.”

“I’ll stay here and build the second bench,” said Lukas. “You decided yet on the bunkhouse?”

“Still deciding. Cost is going to be a big factor.”

“Be easiest to put partitions up in the upstairs of the barn,” said Jesse. “Put in a bathroom with a shower and you’re good to go. Would cut the cost down a lot.”

I smiled at Jesse James. He was a thinker. “You and Lukas make a list of what y’all need to make that happen. That’ll save us thousands of dollars and we’re going to need that money to reno the clubhouse.”

Jesse grinned. “I’ll start the cleanup in the loft right away, boss. Gonna be a great project.”

Lukas nodded. “That’s a good solution. Lots of space and the upstairs of the barn ain’t doing much. There’s only a dozen bales of hay and straw up there. Nothing else.”

Jesse said, “We can move the hay and straw storage to the main floor of the barn. I’ll clean up a spot for it and lay down a tarp to keep the bales nice and dry. Nothing in the bottom of the barn but the horses and Harleys.”

“Yep,” I said. “Get the space divided up and I’ll order four sets of bunks. We can install a bathroom with a shower in short order and we’ve got our own barracks.”

I gave Jesse and Lukas fist bumps. “You guys are brilliant.”

Nasworthy. San Angelo.

With the others busy with their jobs at the ranch, I took Cutter, Ted, and Burt with me to work on the clubhouse. The biggest

problem was the glass scattered all over the parking lot. We couldn't get any trucks close to the building for deliveries. No dumpster drop off—something we needed from day one—no lumber deliveries. No truck could pull in to unload until the parking lot was swept clean.

Ted was handy on his phone, and it didn't take him long to come up with a company that would clean the parking lot up—for a price.

An hour later, the company sent a guy to look at the mess and give us an estimate. The price was more than I wanted to pay for a cleanup, but I had no choice. Time was a factor, and it would take me and my guys days to sweep up all that glass.

I bit the bullet and hired them on the spot. The good part was, they could start right away. I sensed they were anxious for their money and wanted to get going on the job. I could've been their only customer.

While that was going on, Cutter worked with Burt on the bike shop idea. They began knocking out the wall between the first and second store units. With the men all working their butts off, I drove to the closest Sherwin-Williams dealer and bought a gallon of paint for Lukas.

The clerk showed me all the color choices and I pointed at one of the blue ones. It appealed to me for some reason, and I went with it. She mixed the gallon, told me how much I owed, and I was on my way.

I returned to the clubhouse, left the paint in the truck, and worked with the boys until it was time to go back to the ranch for Tammy's party.

We couldn't be late because Annie was making a special dinner and it was her last night at my place. We'd been getting along perfectly during her visit and I wanted it to stay that way. When she went home to her ranch, I wanted to be on the best of terms with her. A place we hadn't been for a long while.

Barnes & Company Ranch, Pecan Valley.

The boys and I were pretty tired after working at the clubhouse all day, but when we walked into the house and the big farmhouse kitchen was decorated with balloons and streamers for Tammy's party, we got our second wind.

"Wow, looks like party time in here."

Annie was so much better at stuff like that than I would've been. I wanted Tammy to have a fun birthday party, but wasn't quite sure how to pull it off.

The oven was on and the aroma of something baking filled the air. I realized we had worked through lunch, and I was starving. The other guys would be hungry too.

The boys cleaned up and had time for a beer before we sat down to Annie's lasagna. Nothing better. She was a fantastic cook.

She and Tammy made a big Caesar salad and several pans of toasted garlic bread, thickly coated with cheese. Most of the guys at the table weren't used to eating anything half as good as what Annie could make.

As the guys dug in, they weren't shy with their compliments. "This is fantastic, Annie," said Tommy. "Your lasagna is the best."

"Thanks, sugar."

Tammy sat in the place of honor at the head of the table looking so cute. I took a picture of her and sent it to Billy in Montana.

After the main course, Annie brought the chocolate cake out with sixteen candles burning brightly. She set the cake down in front of Tammy and tears streamed down her face.

"Look at my beautiful cake." Tammy's hand went to her heart, and I almost shed a tear.

When we sang *happy birthday* to her, she completely lost it and sobbed for a couple of minutes into her party napkin.

"Thank you everybody for my best birthday ever in my life."

After the coffee and cake, the boys were in party mode. We left the table, and I fixed a cooler with ice and beer and took it out onto the porch.

The girls had a lot to clean up, and I lost track of Annie temporarily. Me and the boys were on the porch knocking back quite a few cold ones and having a great time.

I happened to glance over at the corral, and I caught a glimpse of Annie standing at the fence talking to Lukas. Seemed to me like a private conversation with both of them wearing serious looks. The two of them together—alone—was the last thing I wanted—or could tolerate.

At that moment, something inside me snapped and I lost control of my mind. With no thought to what I was doing, I ran towards the corral yelling at the two of them.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Annie-girl? You leave that kid alone. He’s messed up enough without you fuckin up his head.”

“Shut up, Travis,” snapped Annie. “Lukas and I are only talking. You’re way out of line.”

“I ain’t out of line. I’m right on target. I know you better than you think I do, and I’ve got lots of proof that you like ‘em young.”

Annie turned and smacked me right across the face. “You shut your mean mouth, Travis Bristol.”

I grabbed her wrists and gave her a shake. “Don’t you call me Travis no more. I’m Dale Burden and this is my new life.”

“Let go of her, Dale,” yelled Lukas. He rounded the fence and came running towards me.

To get free of me, Annie booted me in the nuts and gave me another whack across the head with her fist when I bent down to grab my junk.

“I’m going home. Lukas, would you help me hook up my trailer? I’m leaving right now.”

Tommy came running from the porch when he saw what was happening. “I’ll do it.” Waving his fist, he shouted at me,

“Don’t you say nothing else to her. Hear me?”

I laughed in his face. “As if you can take me, Tommy Donovan.”

Tommy drove his fist into my gut and doubled me right over. The kid was so fuckin strong I could barely get my breath. Before I could retaliate, he’d run off to hook up the horse trailer.

Annie ran to the house, and I ran after her. No way I was letting her go back home. She was mine. Now and forever.

Annie ran into the house crying and ran upstairs to get her stuff out of Travis’s room.

Tammy was right behind Annie, sobbing and saying, “I don’t know why Dale is yelling at you, Mama. I never heard him lose his temper and yell like that before.”

“The reason doesn’t matter. I have to leave. I’m not sticking around for any more of his abuse. I’ve been taking it for years, and I’m done.”

“I don’t want you to go. I love having a mother. I never had one.”

“You can come with me if you want to, but Travis won’t like it. I know you and Travis are attached to each other.”

“I don’t think I can leave him, Mama. I love him a lot and he saved me from Tibor.”

“That’s fine, sweetheart. I understand. You can come and visit me anytime.”

Annie ran outside with her bag and Tommy was already behind the wheel of the Coulter-Ross truck with the trailer hooked on.

She tossed her bag into the back of the truck and hopped into the passenger seat. “Travis is having an episode and I’m not hanging around for the fallout.”

“What the hell is wrong with him?” Tommy put the truck in gear and began rolling out the driveway. The big Ram only

went a few feet and Tommy had to stop because of a black pickup coming towards him. “Who the fuck is that blocking the laneway?”

The pickup parked right in front of Annie’s truck and four guys spilled out.

Tammy let out a blood-curdling scream from the porch, “Tibor. No. Don’t let him take me.” She ran into the house and slammed the door.

Annie jumped out of the truck and went after her. She skirted around the men and ran up the porch steps. As she passed by Travis, he made a grab for her. She swatted him across the head and pushed him out of her way.

“Get away from me, Travis.”

He was drunk and in the middle of one of his PTSD episodes.

Annie hit me in the head, and I was furious at her, but I had more to worry about. Tibor Garrison had come all the way from Montana to get Tammy and somehow, he’d found our farm.

I turned my anger on Tibor, the maniac with the knife, and charged down the steps to nail him. I knocked him over backwards and we both rolled in the dirt trying to kill each other.

Tibor’s three buddies were on me like maggots on a corpse and every one of them was flashing a blade.

Ted and Burt jumped in to help me and I needed the help for sure. Cutter was no good with his arm out of commission.

Lukas and Jesse came running from under the oak tree and joined the fight. They each took a guy but weren’t prepared for what a maniacal fighter Tibor was. He was powerfully strong and deadly with a blade and I had the scars on my arm to prove it.

The one thing that made him ten times more dangerous than the men with him—Tibor was insane.

Annie yelled out the front door trying to make herself heard over the noise of the fight on the driveway. “Tommy, load Bonny Grace and Tammy’s tack. Do it fast.”

Annie took Tammy’s hand, and they ran back to her room. “You can’t stay here. That man knows where you live.”

Tammy frantically gathered up her clothes and the new things Annie had bought her. They threw all of Tammy’s belongings into a pillowcase.

“Take me with you, Mama. I’m so scared of Tibor.”

“Come on. We’re leaving.” Annie grabbed hold of Tammy’s hand and they ran down the stairs and out the back door.

By the time they skirted around the house to the truck, Tommy had the horse loaded and was slamming the trailer doors shut.

He jumped behind the wheel and started the engine while Annie pushed a hysterical Tammy into the back seat. She tossed the pillowcase in beside Tammy and jumped into the front.

“That fuckin truck is in my way,” hollered Tommy.

“Go around it,” said Annie. “I think you can squeeze through between the truck and the tree.”

“Don’t think so, but I’ll try.”

“Don’t scratch my paint,” said Annie.

The driver’s side mirror hit the tree and broke off with a crunch. “Oh, fuck,” said Tommy. “Sorry about that.”

“Keep going. We can replace the mirror. We’ve got to get Tammy away from here.”

I turned my head when I saw Annie’s truck heading down the lane and I knew in that instant my life was over. The second I

broke my concentration holding off Tibor, he plunged his knife into my side then jumped up laughing.

Tibor boasted to Tammy that no jail could ever hold him, and I never believed that for a minute.

I should have.

My guys took out Tibor's three buddies and they were lying dead in the driveway. Tibor had run to his truck after he stabbed me, and he was long gone after Tammy.

I was stabbed pretty deep and bleeding a lot, and Burt and Jesse were sliced up pretty good too.

Three more bodies on the driveway to get rid of, but they would have to wait. First aid first.

We bandaged each other up best we could and had a few beers and a few shots of tequila to dull the pain. I sat on the porch steps drunk and disoriented and my brain stalled out. I couldn't figure out what to do next.

Tommy was born and raised just south of where Travis had rented the farm and he knew the county roads. He took several short cuts across back roads to get them to route 87 and on their way back to Austin.

Tammy screamed and cried in the back seat of the truck, and Annie crawled over the console and held Tammy in her arms until she got her settled.

"He's supposed to be in jail for a long time. That's what Dale told me was going to happen and I believed him. I didn't think Tibor could come for me no more. I believed Dale. I believed him."

"It's okay now," said Annie. "We're far away from Tibor and you're safe with me and Tommy. We'll be home in a few hours, and you can forget all about Tibor."

"My cake, Mama. My cake. I had to leave my cake," she sobbed. "My first ever birthday cake, and I had to leave it in the fridge."

“Know what? Tomorrow I’m going to have Riley bake you another chocolate cake and we’ll have another party with my kids. They love cake and parties.”

“I like cake,” mumbled Tommy as he drove like a wild man.

A hundred miles down the road, Annie and Tommy changed drivers. Annie drove while Tommy slept in the passenger seat, and once Tammy stopped crying from fright, she fell asleep in the back seat. They weren’t stopping. They were going all the way home to Coulter-Ross.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Tammy was sound asleep when they got to the ranch. She had cried herself into exhaustion and had no tears left.

Annie and Tommy were both wiped from the long trip, but they had to unload the horse before they could sleep.

Mick heard the truck and trailer pull in through the gate, and he was out of bed and out the door of the garage to see why Annie was coming home in the middle of the night.

His long hair hanging in his face, Mick peered at her with sleepy dark eyes, “Why you here now, Annie?”

“Emergency, sweetheart. I’ll tell you all about it in the morning. Help Tommy unload Bonnie Grace while I get Tammy into bed.”

“Who’s Tammy?”

“My stepdaughter. You’ll meet her in the morning.”

While the boys looked after the horse, Annie opened the back door of the truck and woke Tammy up. “Come on, honey. We’re home and we’re going to bed.”

Tammy sat up and took Annie’s hand. “Is this your ranch, Mama?”

“Yes, you’ll be safe here. I have good security.”

Annie grabbed the pillow case with Tammy's stuff in it and took her into the house. "You can sleep here in my room for the rest of tonight."

"Tibor can't find me here, can he, Mama?"

"I have men watching the gate. You're safe." She made Tammy comfortable on the sofa near the fireplace in her room, then got ready for bed herself.

Tommy came in from the barn, stripped down to his boxers, and laid on Annie's bed to watch out for the girls.

Annie was almost asleep when her cell rang. She grabbed it quick before it woke Tommy up and whispered a response, "What do you want, Travis?"

He shouted and yelled and cursed at her and she was too tired to listen to his tirade.

"Shut up, Travis."

She ended the call and went to sleep.

Chapter Eight

Sunday, November 11th.

Barnes & Company Ranch. Pecan Valley.

I woke up in considerable pain and my hand went to the knife wound in my side. The bandage felt damp and on further inspection—when I was able to sit up—I found that the gash in my side had bled through the gauze and tape, and a lot of blood had oozed onto the sheets.

The top sheet was stuck to my skin and the other gunk, and I wasn't prepared to rip it off the wound without some thought beforehand. It was going to hurt like hell when I did it.

Trying to remember what had happened the night before was difficult. My brain was all fuzzy and mixed with the sounds and the flashes of the war. I had a hard time sorting out what was then and what was here and now. My eyes burned from the sand, and I tried to spit it out of my mouth.

I had a hazy memory of seeing Annie's truck going out the laneway and she wasn't in my bed, so I figured she had gone home. My fault, but I couldn't remember exactly why. Maybe when I remembered the truth of what happened, I'd be wishing I hadn't recalled it.

A pattern from the past.

Considerable time was spent getting the sheet unstuck from the hole in my side before I could get out of bed.

Dragging myself downstairs I saw Cutter had coffee on and was sitting at the kitchen table drinking it. He didn't say a word to me, so I must have pissed him off too.

What the hell did I do?

"Where's Tammy?" I leaned on the counter and filled a clean mug with a shaking hand. A bit of hot coffee splashed on my arm and on the counter.

Yep. Not too steady this morning.

“Annie took her home to her ranch to keep her safe,” said Cutter without looking me in the eye. He was fuming about something.

“She can’t fuckin take her without asking me first.” My face felt hot, and I wanted to break something real bad.

“I could tell you were gonna say Tammy was yours, Dale,” snapped Cutter, “but she don’t belong to you. Annie is her stepmom.”

“So what? Tammy is in my care. Annie can’t just take her away because she feels like it.”

Cutter shrugged. “Annie thought it was best under the circumstances and I had to agree with her. The girl wasn’t safe here no longer. The dude with the blade knows where she is.”

“Yeah, Tibor knows. How he found his way here from Montana is a fuckin mystery. Billy wouldn’t have told him. I guess you’re right. She’s safer with Annie. That’s makes more sense to me now that I’ve got it straightened out in my head.”

“Jesse went home to Lubbock,” said Cutter. “After last night, he’s opting out. Ted and Burt are out too.”

“Where’s Lukas?”

“Don’t know.”

“Everybody quit the club?”

“The club we don’t have, Dale?” He stared into his coffee.

“I’d better feed Outlaw.”

I trudged to the barn and fed my horse. It broke my heart to see the empty stall next to Outlaw where Bonnie Grace had been. I could tell Outlaw was liking the mare a lot and now she was gone after only a couple of days.

While he was eating his oats, I sat down on a bale of straw wondering what the hell I’d said and done the night before. I sent Annie a text.

“I’m so sorry. I had a bad night.”

I waited and got no reply.

She wasn't going to answer me. I'd have to go to La Grange. I couldn't even remember why I wanted to be Dale Burden. Why in hell would I want to go back to that life and invite trouble? I couldn't figure it out.

Something was wrong with me. I needed to be back in the VA hospital. Dammit. I thought I was so much better.

When I went back to the house, Cutter was sitting at the kitchen table eating chocolate cake. A great big slab on a plate in front of him.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

He shrugged and wasn't talking to me. I poured myself a coffee refill and took it out to the porch. I sat on the new bench Lukas had made. His truck was gone.

Who's still here?

I took stock of the vehicles on the property and there were two. My truck and Cutter's truck. That was it.

There were three guys lying dead on my laneway and I'd have to do something about that right away. They couldn't stay there and rot.

Cutter sauntered out of the house with a coffee in his hand and I asked, “Any idea what I did last night? I can't remember much of it.”

“You completely lost it and all the guys who wanted to join the new club got scared of having you as their leader. They're all gone. You also did a lot of damage to the beautiful lady in your life. She was extremely upset after you yelled several... accusations at her.”

“Jesus. I can't recall any of it. Where's Tammy? Is she mad at me too?”

Cutter's eyes widened. “We talked about this a few minutes ago, boss. Before you went to the barn, we talked about Annie taking Tammy with her to her own ranch keep her safe.”

“I don’t remember you saying that.”

“The crazy guy knows where she lives,” said Cutter. “Tammy can’t stay here while that guy is still out there looking for her.”

“Was Garrison here?”

Cutter pointed. “Those are his guys. Garrison—if that’s what his name is—jumped into his truck and left after Annie took off in her truck with Tommy and Tammy.”

“Where are the rest of my guys?”

“All gone. I think your plan for a new club is pretty much on hold.”

“Jesus, I don’t remember any of it.”

“You’ve got a pretty good reminder there, boss.” Cutter pointed to the spreading bloodstain on my shirt.

“Guess my bandage ain’t holding.”

“You need stitches.”

“I’ve been worse.”

Cutter smiled. “How bad is the PTSD?”

“Can be worse than bad,” I mumbled.

“If that’s what happened last night, I think you need to get treatment.”

“Had lots of treatments already.”

“You need more. That was a bad spell, and I don’t think it’s over. You can’t remember anything at all. More bad shit might be coming your way.”

“If Tibor is after Tammy, I have to track him down and kill him.”

“Better wait until you get your side sewn up,” said Cutter. “Losing blood like that saps your strength.”

“I’m okay.”

Next thing I knew, Cutter was loading me into his truck and taking me somewhere. Did I black out? Couldn't remember a thing.

"Did I pass out?" I asked Cutter as he drove. I didn't know where we were going.

"You need a doctor, boss. You ain't doing good."

I clamped a hand over the hole in my side where the blood was coming out at a pretty steady rate. The bandage wasn't holding me together, and trying to stop the flow with my hand didn't help a bit.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Tammy woke up in a huge room with light pouring in through two doors that went out to a pretty patio. Beyond the stone patio were only trees. She didn't know what kind of trees they were, but the smell of the woods was drifting into the room.

One of the doors was open and she looked out to see Tommy sitting at the glass table smoking. Tammy stepped outside and sat down in the chair next to him.

"I didn't know where I was when I woke up and I was kind of scared." She pushed her long hair back out of her face.

"You don't have to be scared here on the ranch," said Tommy. "There's a high fence all around and security guards watching the monitors. Nobody can get in without Mag and his guys seeing them."

"Even though I hear you saying those words Tommy, my hands are still shaky."

"Yeah, I get it. You had yourself a damned good scare. And Travis losing his mind at the same time didn't help none."

"Where's Mama?"

"She's in the kitchen. Do you want coffee?"

"I'd like a cup of something hot. I'm a bit...uneasy."

"Come on. I'll show you."

“Where did you sleep?”

He smiled. “I slept in the truck on the way back here, and then I laid beside Annie on her bed, but I didn’t sleep too much.”

“You must be tired then. Where’s Bonnie Grace?”

“In the corral with some of Annie’s horses. You don’t need to worry about her. The horse guys will take care of her.”

“Mama has horse guys?”

“Yep. You’ll meet them at breakfast. Come on. Let’s get a coffee and you can get a feel for the house and where you are. It’s a big house.”

“Mama’s room is pretty, ain’t it?” Tammy looked down at the Mexican tiles under her feet.

“Yep. Sure is. She’ll get you your own room, but she wanted you with her last night in case you woke up and were scared.”

Tammy brushed a tear away. “My Mama is so nice, and I didn’t even know I had her. I bet my Daddy loved her a lot.”

“I bet he did too. You got lucky, girl. Annie is the best mother you could possibly have.”

“Do you have a good mama, Tommy?”

“Sure don’t.”

“Is Annie like your mama too?”

“Sure ain’t.”

Tommy brought Tammy to the kitchen and sat her on a stool at the island. He showed her where the coffee maker was and filled a mug for her. He set the cream in front of her and smiled. “There you go.”

“I bet you’re still tired,” said Annie. She and Riley were making biscuit dough and pancake batter for breakfast.

“Not too tired, Mama. Do you think Tibor is coming here to get me?”

“Nope. If he does happen to come, I’ll eliminate him. He can’t get into the compound. I’ll show you the security setup after breakfast. In the meantime, you’ve got Tommy right beside you. Nothing is going to happen to you.”

“You’re right, Mama. I’m being a baby.”

“No, you’re not. It’s fear. You thought you were safe with Travis but somehow Tibor managed to get out of jail. I’ll have the court system in Montana checked to see how that could happen.”

Moments later, Davey, Jacks, Lucy, and Willow came into the kitchen and stopped and stared when they saw Tammy.

“Hey, guys, this is Tammy Traynor. She’s going to stay with us for a while. She brought her horse with her too.”

Lucy smiled. “Hi, Tammy. I’m Lucy. This is Jackson and Davey, and that little girl over there with the doll is Willow.”

“Wow, I didn’t know I had so many kids in my family,” said Tammy.

Annie smiled. “Sit at the table and I’ll get y’all juice and cereal.”

“I’m right here.” Sara was hurrying down the hallway. “I’ll get their breakfast for them.”

“Thanks, Sara. Our family is growing bigger all the time. This is Tammy.”

Sara smiled. “Hi, Tammy. Nice to meet you.”

San Angelo Hospital.

Cutter sat in the waiting room while Dale was being sewn up. When the doctor came to speak to him, he mentioned Dale’s condition.

“Your patient is Major Travis Bristol, an ex-marine who suffers from PTSD. I believe he should be transferred to the VA hospital in Austin. He has family close to Austin who could take responsibility for him.”

The doctor nodded. “He does seem disoriented and he’s obviously having problems with his memory. I can arrange to have him transferred to Austin, but it probably won’t happen until tomorrow. I’ll put the wheels in motion.”

“Thanks, Doctor.”

After that was taken care of, Cutter went into Dale’s room to see him for a minute. “Hey, Dale. How are you doing? Feeling better?”

No response. Dale just stared at him as if he were a stranger.

Cutter went back to the waiting area and called Annie using the number he got from Dale’s cell phone.

“Coulter-Ross, Annie speaking.”

“Annie, this is Cutter. I called to tell you a couple of things. Please don’t hang up on me.”

“I’m not mad at you, Cutter. Tell me what’s going on. How bad is he?”

“Bad. Physically he’s okay for now. His side has been stitched up and he’s lying in a hospital bed, but it’s the other. He don’t know who I am.”

“Oh, no.”

“His doctor is sending him to the VA hospital in Austin tomorrow. Don’t know what time.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Annie.

“I’m going back home to Houston for now. Nothing else I can do under the circumstances. Might take months of treatment to get Dale back on track.”

“What about the dogs and Outlaw?”

“That’s one of the reasons I’m calling. I can tow the horse to your ranch and drop off the dogs at the same time if you’re willing to take them.”

“Of course, I’ll be happy to take care of them. After Travis gets to Austin, I’ll make inquiries and monitor his progress.”

“I’ve never seen him like he is now, so it was kind of a shock to me and totally unexpected.”

“He’s had extended periods of treatments before, at least twice that I know of.”

“He definitely needs more sessions,” said Cutter.

“Bring him some clothes too, if it’s not too much trouble. He won’t have anything to wear home from the hospital when he does get released.”

“Yeah, I can pack a bag for him.”

“When you get to the ranch tomorrow, you can stop for a break and have a beer with me.”

“Sure. Thanks for understanding.”

“I do understand, Cutter. I’ve lived with Travis off and on for many years, through both the good and bad times.”

Annie gave Cutter directions to the ranch and when the call ended, she went outside and found Tammy by the corral.

“Cutter called, Tammy.”

“Is Dale okay?” She teared up. “I’m so worried about him.”

“Travis is in the hospital in San Angelo. He was injured in the fight, and he needed a few stitches, but he’s okay.”

“Did Tibor cut him again? Tibor always has a knife and he cut Dale so bad the last time. All those stitches down his arm.” She started to cry.

“I’m not sure how Travis got hurt, but he’s all fixed up now.”

“Can I talk to him on the phone?” Tammy asked.

“Not yet. There’s something else.”

“Is it worse than the stitches?”

“In a way, it is worse.”

“Like how?”

“Travis has PTSD and he’ll be in the hospital in Austin for a while receiving treatments. When he’s a little better, I’ll take

you to visit him.”

“Is Austin far away?”

“Only an hour.”

“Come on, Tammy,” hollered Jackson. “Saddle your horse.

Annie hugged Tammy. “Stop worrying about Travis and go ride your horse. Have fun with the kids.”

San Angelo Hospital.

I woke up groggy with a thick bandage covering a large portion of my side. I had a needle in the back of my hand, and I was attached to a couple of machines. Not too much pain, but I had no clue where I was—hospital—definitely a hospital somewhere.

Nurses came in and out of my room every once in a while, and took my blood pressure. I wondered what the hell was wrong with me, but nobody bothered to tell me, and I didn't ask.

A guy with a beard came in and talked to me, but I didn't know who he was. He thought I should know him, but I didn't.

Better to mind my own business and get out of here as soon as I can.

Chapter Nine

Monday November 12th.

Motel Six. Austin.

Tibor Garrison sat alone in his room at the motel smoking a number. He'd seen the name of the horse ranch on the side of the red truck. One quick glance was all he got but he hadn't forgotten it. The shiny red truck with duallies on the back, and the black-haired woman who stole Tammy away from him.

He had to get Tammy back, and when he did, he planned to kill the woman who stole her—whoever the bitch was.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Her second day at the ranch Tammy felt a little better and not quite so tense about being in a strange place. She talked more to the kids, and they were friendly to her, especially Lucy.

Tammy did her chores in the big horse barn when the other kids did theirs. The cowboys who worked in the barn were nice to her and showed her where to get the oats and the hay for Bonnie Grace.

The other kids had to muck out the stalls of their horses and Tammy had to clean out Bonnie Grace's stall on her own. She wanted to do her own chores and be like the other kids. The harder she worked, the more she began to feel like part of the family.

The kids showed her things and explained how things worked on Mama's ranch. Davey showed her all the bikes in the huge bike garage where he worked with a guy named Mick.

Tammy played in the nursery with Willow. They played with her dollhouse and all the little people that lived in the cute house. Willow had lots of toys and Tammy tried to remember if she'd had toys growing up. She couldn't remember any.

Annie took time to look for the pictures of Jackson Traynor. They were in a box that Annie kept in the back of her closet. When she found the pictures, she called Tammy into her room, and they sat at the table near the window and looked at them one by one.

Tammy stared at each photo and could barely believe the young guy in the pictures was her father. A biker with long dark hair and a lot of tattoos. Some of the pictures showed him sitting on his Harley. Other ones were with Annie and her turquoise bike. They looked so happy.

“I finally know what my dad looked like,” said Tammy. “I think I look like my dad.”

Annie smiled. “You look so much like Jackson; it warms my heart every time I look at you.”

“How old was I when my dad married you, Mama?”

“When Jackson married me, he knew nothing about you. I’m sure of it. He never knew he had a child. He wasn’t that kind of a person—much more responsible than that.”

“That makes me feel better to know he didn’t abandon me on purpose.”

“Jackson never would have done that. He must have been with your mother, Rhonda, before I met George Ross. So that would’ve been about seventeen years ago.”

Tammy listened and nodded.

“So, at the time when Jackson and I got married in Vegas, you would’ve been about two or three years old.”

“Huh. I had parents all along that I didn’t know about.”

“And we didn’t know about you either. If your mother hadn’t given you Jackson’s name on your birth certificate, Travis never would’ve made the connection and we wouldn’t have found each other.”

Tammy smiled. “Then I’m glad my name is Traynor.”

“Me too.” Annie hugged her. “And I’m happy that you’re here now.”

“What happened to my dad?”

Annie’s heart beat faster. She knew the question would be coming but she wasn’t ready for it. “Can we save that question for another day, sweetheart? I have a real hard time talking about that.”

“I can wait. I can tell it makes you sad to talk about my dad.”

San Angelo Hospital.

I was half asleep when a guy dressed in blue scrubs pushed a gurney up next to my bed. He moved the IV pole out of the way, and he rolled me onto the stretcher with a practiced hand.

“Where am I going?”

“You’re being transferred to the VA hospital, buddy.”

“How far is it?”

“I’m guessing it’s about a four-and-a-half-hour drive from here to Austin.”

“Where’s here?”

“San Angelo Hospital.”

“Okay.” I listened to what the orderly told me, but I was none the wiser. I didn’t have a clue where I was or why. My mind was like a mess of scrambled eggs.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

It was around two thirty in the afternoon when Cutter pulled through the gate towing Outlaw in his trailer. Both dogs were in the cab of the truck, and they started barking and pawing the door when they saw Annie.

Cutter backed the trailer up between the barn and the corral and parked there. He hopped out and Tammy ran to give him a hug. He grinned when he saw her running towards him.

“How are you doing here at the big horse ranch, little girl?”

“I’m happy to be with my Mama. She said I can go see Travis when he’s a little better.”

“Yeah, he didn’t know me when I tried to talk to him yesterday. Be better if you waited a while.”

“What about all his plans for the club?” asked Tammy. “What about the mall we’re renting? Dale already paid for the first month.”

“I’m not sure what’s going to happen with that rental,” said Cutter. “I think a big part of that plan was in his mind because of his illness,” said Cutter. “He wasn’t thinking straight.”

Tammy frowned. “Like... he was thinking kind of crazy stuff? Is that what you mean, Cutter?”

“I’m afraid so, Tammy. He had plans that just couldn’t be realized no matter how badly he wanted them to work out.”

Tammy teared up. “I feel so bad for him. He wanted to be Dale Burden again. I never knew why. I didn’t even know who Dale Burden was.”

“In the biker world, Dale Burden is a legend and I’m sure Annie can explain it to you better than me.”

After Outlaw was unloaded and placed in the corral, Cutter sat on the porch with Annie and had a beer with her. They were talking about the VA hospital when Lukas showed up at the gate on his Harley.

Jose let him in, and Lukas parked near the garage. He limped along the flagstone path and grinned as he climbed the three steps onto the porch.

“Hey, Cutter, you beat me here. Where’s the boss?”

“Being transferred to the VA hospital in Austin. Best thing for him. He’s got a lot of issues.”

“I’ll get you a beer, Lukas,” said Annie.

“I’ll get it. Sit tight.”

“Lukas, you’re here.” Tammy came running from the corral. “Outlaw is here too.”

Max and Sarge pushed in close to Annie and she hugged both of them. “My dogs are home too, Tammy. They used to live here on the ranch with me, and I missed them so much.”

Lukas returned to the porch with a Lone Star in his hand and sat down next to Annie. “Feels like home,” he said.

Annie reached over and patted his knee.

VA Central Texas Health Care

Unable to go to the therapist’s office, the doctor assigned to me had to come to my room. The medical doctor who checked the stitches in my side told me I’d be receiving psychiatric care from a doctor named Alderson.

It was a miracle I could remember the name.

A woman wearing a white lab coat breezed into my room with a big smile on her face. “How are you doing today, Major Bristol?”

“Not worth a shit, ma’am. But thanks for asking.”

“I’m the therapist who’s been assigned to you, Major Bristol. My name is Doctor Alderson.”

I nodded; a bit surprised because I’d been expecting a male doctor.

“You and I will be talking for a couple of hours every day. As soon as you can get out of bed, you can come to my office.”

“Okay, sure. I’ve got nothing better to do anyway.”

“How’s the memory today, Major? Do you remember who you are today?”

“Nope.”

“Do you mind if I call you *Travis* while we’re having our little talks?”

“Fine with me, ma’am. You look kind of familiar to me.”

She smiled. “I do? Who do I remind you of?”

“I can’t think of who, but seeing your face doesn’t give me a good feeling.”

“Do I remind you of someone you find threatening?”

“I’m not sure of anything.”

“Okay. That’s a start. You married, Travis?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What’s your wife’s name?”

“Umm... you got me there.” I laughed. “I think I should know the answer to that question.”

“You’ll think of her name soon, Travis. I’m going to start you on a couple of medications that are going to help you out considerably with getting your memory back.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m here to help you, Travis. If you feel distressed or anxious, I want you to tell your nurse and I’ll come right away. Will you do that?”

“Sure.”

Motel Six. Austin.

Tibor punched the address of the horse ranch into the GPS in his truck. He started the engine and followed the directions heading east out of Austin, and then southeast on route seventy-one.

He didn’t have a clue where he was going. Texas was a state he’d never been to before and he wasn’t all that fond of it so far.

“Doesn’t matter where you try to hide from me, Tammy. I’ll find you.”

The map lady told him he had reached his destination when he came to the big sign on the side of the highway announcing Coulter-Ross Appaloosas.

“That’s where you are, Tammy. You stay right there, and I’ll be back to get you after dark.”

Lakeland, Florida.

Sitting at the patio table at the side of trailer, Betty Frost concentrated on applying the topcoat on her red nails. She held them up to the hot Florida sun and blew on them to make them dry faster.

Charlie got up off his lounge chair and shuffled into the trailer to get another beer.

“Bring me one too,” Betty called after him.

“Get your own, Betts. I ain’t your servant.”

“Hey, I do plenty for you, Charlie Franks. I cook and clean and keep you happy in bed.”

He came back with two beers and put a can of Bud on the glass table in front of Betty. “You don’t do enough to make up for the money you’re costing me. When I invited you to spend the night, it wasn’t an invitation to move in here and never leave.”

He sat down and popped the top on his can.

“If you didn’t want me here, you would’ve asked me to leave long before now,” snapped Betty. “I never once heard you say those words, Charlie Brown.”

“How long have you been here wearing out your welcome?” Charlie asked. “Been so long, I can’t rightly remember.”

“Watch your mouth, Charlie. I know too much about you and your shady deals. You don’t want me for an enemy.” Betty’s cell rang on the table beside the nail polish bottle and she stared at the screen.

VA Central Texas Health Care

She picked up the phone realizing it had to be connected to her son. “Betty Frost speaking.”

“Mrs. Frost, this is Sharon Baker calling from the administration office at the VA hospital in Austin, Texas.”

“Is this about my son, Travis?”

“Yes, ma’am. Just a notification call to let you know Major Bristol has been admitted to our facility. He’ll be staying with us for a while.”

“Thank you for letting me know. Is my son sick?”

“He’s physically injured and suffering from a PTSD episode as well.”

“I’ll try to get to Texas to see him as soon as I can.” She set the phone down and resumed blowing on her nails.

“Who was that?” asked Charlie.

“My meal ticket, Charlie. My son is back in the VA hospital. I’m going to Texas to visit him and see how bad off he is. If he’s right out of it like he has been a couple of times, I may be able to get power of attorney.” Betty smiled and showed off her false teeth. “This is the quirk of Fate I’ve been waiting for. I’ll be on easy street when I get that piece of paper in my hand.”

“Why do you want power of attorney? Your kid have money?”

“My brother had a ton of money when he died, and Carson left all of it to Travis.”

“Uh huh. Texas,” said Charlie. “It’s a stretch, Betts. I don’t think your wreck of a Ford will make it to Texas. It’s stalling out regular.”

“We’ll drive it as far as we can,” said Betty. “If it conks out, we’ll take a bus the rest of the way to Austin.”

“I’m gonna pass, Betts.”

“What? This is the chance we’ve been waiting for, you old fool.”

“Hard to tell who’s the fool here, Betty. I’m too old to be riding a bus to Texas. Your foolish get-rich-quick plans never work out and I’m sick of you hanging around my trailer anyway. I think I’ll stay right here, enjoy the peace and quiet after you’re gone, and I’ll spend some time fishing.”

“Fine with me. Your loss.”

“What exactly am I losing, Betty? Fifty percent of nothing?”

Betty ignored Charlie. She stood up and gathered up her nail polish bottles. “I’d better start packing.”

“You leaving right away?” asked Charlie.

“Why not? Nothing for me here. You just said so.”

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Ever since she left Travis at his farm in Pecan Valley, Annie had the feeling that the crazy guy who was after Tammy was coming for her.

She had voiced her concerns to Oliver Magnusson, head of security for the ranch, and he’d put his crew on full alert. Day shift and night shift were all watching for Tibor Garrison.

He had seen the Coulter-Ross truck at Travis’s place and if he was as obsessed with Tammy as Travis said he was, he would show up looking for her.

Tammy was sleeping in the guest room directly across the hall from Annie’s own room. She was a sweet girl and Jackson Traynor’s flesh and blood.

For Annie to have any part of Jackson was a miracle she was not prepared to give up easily.

When the dogs barked at three a.m., Annie woke immediately. Her sawed-off shotgun was at the ready lying on the oak table not far from her bed.

She jumped up, pulled on the sweatsuit she’d left on a chair near the bed, grabbed the gun off the table and ran to the front door.

Standing in the dark on the front porch, she could see a black truck stopped at the gate. The driver was out of the truck and was coming through the side gate.

Why wasn't Drew stopping him? Was he dead? No time to find out.

Sticking to the shadows cast by the house, Annie ran towards Tibor. He didn't notice her as he quickly moved between the house and the garage heading for the back.

Annie rounded the porch and called his name.

"Tibor, flat on the ground. Hands behind your back."

He laughed. "Not a chance." He turned towards her with a gun in his hand and Annie didn't waste a moment.

Blam. Blam.

At close range, Annie unloaded two rounds of double aught buckshot into Tibor's chest and head.

Hearing shots, Mick came bursting out the side door of the garage, his gun in his hand. Argus and Rambo were right behind him, barking and snarling.

The outside security light on the side of the garage was triggered by Mick's movement. It came on and lit up the space between the garage and the house.

Tibor's bloody corpse lay motionless on the grass bathed in a pool of light.

"You got him," said a sleepy Mick.

Annie called the sheriff, happy that he was her father-in-law and not a stranger. A lot fewer questions would be asked.

Mick stood shivering in his boxers looking down at the body. "Who the hell is that?"

"The guy who's after Tammy."

"Not after her no more," said Mick.

"I'm going to put a pot of coffee on," said Annie. "Rafe will be here soon. Go check on Drew and see if he's okay."

Annie had barely got to the kitchen when Mick came running in. "Drew ain't doing good, Annie. He got himself stabbed and he needs an ambulance."

“Shit, I wondered why he let Tibor walk in through the side gate.” As she ran after Mick, Annie called for an ambulance and finished up the call as they got to the gate house.

“How bad is he hurt?”

“Stabbed,” was all Mick said. “Seen some blood.”

“Move Tibor’s truck and leave the gate open for the ambulance and for Rafe. You do that and I’ll see if I can help Drew.”

There was nothing in the gate house she could use to staunch the bleeding in Drew’s side. Annie ran back to the kitchen, grabbed a tea towel and ran back.

Out of breath as she squeezed into the small guard house, she knelt beside Drew. He’d slumped down in his chair and was almost sliding onto the floor.

Annie straightened him out as best she could so she could press down with the towel on the knife wound.

Drew, the night guard had been stabbed in the gut by Tibor Garrison to put him out of action. Drew’s eyes were open and seemed to be conscious.

“You okay, sugar?”

His shirt was soaked through with blood, and he didn’t answer her.

Drew was half in and half out of his chair. Moaning and thrashing around, he kept grabbing for his side and pushing her away.

“Stay still, Drew. Let me help you. I’m trying to stop the bleeding.”

He groaned and squirmed, trying to get away from the pain, making it difficult for Annie to hold the towel in place.

“I know it hurts when I press on it. Please let me do it.”

She fought against Drew and pressed the kitchen towel down on the wound until the ambulance came from Giddings Hospital.

Right behind the ambulance was Sheriff Rafe Cumberland, who'd probably been in bed sleeping when she called.

The gatehouse was too small for the paramedics to help Drew. They lifted him out of his chair, placed him on a stretcher and tended to him in the ambulance where they had room to work.

"How bad is it?" asked Annie.

"Deep. He needs stitches."

As soon as Drew was on his way to the hospital, Annie walked Rafe over to the grassy patch between the house and the garage and pointed at the body.

"His name is Tibor Garrison and he's supposed to be doing a long stretch in a prison in Montana," said Annie.

Rafe pulled out his phone and ran Garrison through the police database. "Yep, I've got him. He's a wanted fugitive. He escaped from the state prison in Deer Lodge, Montana."

"Yep, that's him."

"Why did he show up in Texas on your ranch, Annie? Seems like a helluva long way for him to run. Canada would have been a better choice."

"He's after a young girl I have in my protection. Obsessed with her. Stole her when she was about ten. She's sixteen now and he thinks he owns her."

"That's disgusting," said Rafe. "Something I won't be telling your mother. We'll straighten this out in the morning. For now, I'll have to take your gun."

"Sure." Annie handed her sawed-off to Rafe. Her father-in-law was a big guy about two hundred and fifty pounds, auburn hair going to gray. Retirement age but not ready to give it up. He'd been the county sheriff for years and the locals didn't want him to quit. They depended on him.

Looking older and more tired than Annie remembered, Doctor Scanlon, the county medical examiner, showed up a few minutes later to examine the body. Once he was finished

with the on-site examination, he bagged Tibor Garrison with Rafe's help and took the corpse with him to the morgue.

Rafe stayed long enough to have a coffee with Annie and get her statement for his report. Then he went home. Annie went back to bed.

Chapter Ten

Tuesday, November 13th.

Rest Area. Pensacola. Florida.

Betty jumped and let out a little screech when somebody knocked on the window right next to her head. Forgetting she was sleeping in her car, she tried to open her eyes wide enough to see where she was and why she was so close to a window.

Sitting up straighter and becoming more awake, she noticed the uniform and figured it out. She was sleeping in her car and a cop was at the window. She lowered the window to hear what he was saying.

“Wake up, ma’am. You can’t sleep here. Didn’t you see the sign?”

Using her pathetic voice, Betty laid it on thick. “I guess I was too tired to see the sign, officer. Sorry. I’ll get going. Is it all right with you if I use the washroom first?”

“Sure. Where you headed, ma’am?”

Betty switched to her best fake-friendly voice, “Austin, Texas, officer. I’m going to see my son. He’s in the VA hospital there. I had no money for a motel, so I tried to drive straight through. Guess I didn’t make it, did I?”

She gave a little fake laugh when what she really wanted to do was kick the asshole trooper in the nuts and give him black and blue balls to remember her by.

“Austin is a long drive, ma’am.”

“I’ll be there by tomorrow night.”

“It’s already tomorrow, ma’am.” He almost smiled. “You’ll be there by tonight.”

“Yeah, I guess I will be if my car holds together.”

“Have a safe trip, ma’am.”

Still half asleep, Betty trudged up the path to the brick building housing the washrooms. She went into the ladies' and used the facilities. Middle of the night the place was stone cold empty.

She splashed cold water on her face and dried off with a scratchy brown paper towel. One look in the mirror at her hair and she shook her head. Hopeless. Worry about her looks later.

Tired and cranky, she lit up a smoke as she slowly walked back to her old Ford Focus. That car had been repaired more than a dozen times at the garage near Charlie's house, but Betty hoped she could get one more day out of it before it died. Would the old girl get her to Texas?

Hope you're going to start and keep going for me.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

After breakfast was over and the cowboys went to work, and there was no one left in the kitchen but Riley, Annie sat Tammy down at the harvest table to tell her about Tibor.

“Just sit for a minute before you go outside, Tammy. I need to tell you something.”

“What? Is it about Travis? Did he die? You have a serious look on your face, Mama.”

“Nothing to do with Travis. Good news and bad.”

“Tell me the bad news first,” said Tammy. “Then the good news will cheer me up.”

“Okay, the bad news is this: Tibor showed up at the gate in the middle of the night.”

Tammy sucked in a breath, clamped a hand over her mouth so she didn't scream, and tears filled her eyes.

“Don't cry.” Annie took her hand. “He's not worth crying over. The good news is—not that it's good to kill a person—but I did shoot Tibor and he's dead. He is now in the county morgue, and he can never come after you again.”

“Wow. Tibor came to get me, and you were shooting at him, and I didn’t even wake up?” Tammy’s glassy eyes were wide.

“No, you didn’t wake up.” Annie laughed. “There were sirens and cops and an ambulance too, and you and the kids slept through all of it.”

“If Tibor was dead, Mama, who was the ambulance for?”

“My guard on the gate. His name is Drew and Tibor stabbed him.”

“He’s not going to die, is he? If he died it would be my fault.”

“Drew has stitches in his side and he will be in the hospital for a few days, but he’s not going to die.”

“Good.” Tammy let out the breath she was holding. “Can we go see Travis? I just got used to calling him Dale and now he’s back to Travis again.”

“He’s so mixed up, Tammy. Let me call the hospital and inquire. Hang on for a minute.”

Annie called the number for the VA hospital in Austin and was told Travis wasn’t allowed any visitors for a few more days.

“I’ll call tomorrow. Thank you.” She turned to Tammy and said, “Not yet. A few more days.”

“Long as he ain’t dead, I can wait.”

“He’s not dead,” said Annie. “They are trying to straighten out his head and it’s best if we don’t go and interrupt what they’re doing.”

“I want Travis to be fixed,” said Tammy.

“I’d like that to happen too,” said Annie.

VA Central Texas Health Care. Austin.

“Good morning, Travis, I’m Doctor Alderson. Do you remember me from yesterday?”

“Yep, I do, and I’m taking that as a positive sign for whatever the hell is wrong with me.”

She smiled. “I’m taking that as a positive sign as well.” She pulled the guest chair closer to the bed and sat down.

I examined her. Blonde hair, blue eyes. Average looking. Street clothes. Black pants and a blue shirt. No lab coat. Maybe she wasn’t a real doctor.

“You’ve had two doses of your new medication and it should start working soon. I’ve used those particular drugs in several cases like yours with excellent results. The pills will help you a lot with your memory and with sorting out your thoughts. I’m sure of it.”

“Good. I think there are things I should be doing and instead I’m lying here.”

“Can we talk a bit about your family?”

“I don’t recall having any family.”

“Hospital administration has been in touch with your mother in Florida. Does your mother ring any bells?”

“I don’t have a mother. Never did.”

“Everyone has a mother, Travis. You don’t remember yours? Betty Frost. She lives in Florida.”

“I’m finished talking for today, Doc.” I turned away from the average looking doctor and focused on the wall. “Got nothing to say.”

“It’s obvious you don’t want to talk about the mother you claim not to remember, Travis.”

“Claim? Is that the word you’re using?” I shouted at the doctor while I tried to sit up. She was getting on my nerves, and I couldn’t take any more of it.

“I want out of this fucking bed,” I hollered, and the doc jumped out of the chair to put some space between the two of us.

The goddamned needle in my right hand ripped through my skin when I pulled against it, and pain shot through me. I

grabbed hold of the fucking thing and yanked it right out of my hand.

A beeper sounded and a nurse came running into the room along with the guy in the blue scrubs. He tried to hold me down while the nurse took a look at the damage I'd done to my hand.

Reflex action took over and I smacked the orderly a good one in the face to knock him out of my way. "Nobody holds me down. I'm getting out of this fucking bed," I hollered. "Not staying in this fuckin hospital another fuckin minute."

Another nurse came hurrying towards me and stuck me with a big syringe. She pushed the plunger and that was all she wrote.

Nap time.

Mobile, Alabama.

Driving along the interstate, Betty had almost reached Mobile when her car started slowing down. At first, she thought she'd run out of gas, but the gauge said she had almost half a tank. It wasn't a shortage of gas.

Using some encouraging curse words, the little Ford went a little farther, then seemed to lose all of its power. It was dying on the interstate with her behind the wheel.

The highway was busy, and she had to get out of the way of the traffic behind her, or they would plow right into her. She cranked the wheel, and it was hard to steer without any juice.

Betty coasted over to the shoulder and the old Ford stopped dead. She shoved the shifter into *park* and let out a groan. Her old baby wasn't going one mile farther.

"Damn it. Damn it." She got out of the car and looked around at her options. She didn't have many that were appealing or that she could afford.

Ahead in the distance she could see a sign for a truck stop. That might be her best bet for catching a ride to Austin.

"Pretty long walk to the truck stop," she mumbled.

She took her suitcase out of the trunk and made sure she removed everything of value from the car. She locked up and shoved the keys into her purse.

It turned out to be a helluva long walk to the truck stop. Much farther than it looked from a mile down the road. By the time Betty got there, she was exhausted and had blisters on her heels from the cheap wedge sandals she was wearing.

Inside the restaurant, she used the facilities, washed her face, and applied fresh makeup. She had to look her best if she had any hope of talking a truck driver into taking her all the way to Texas.

Her *best* these past couple of years wasn't anywhere close to how good she'd looked when she was in her prime. Those were the days when men were all over her and she could get pretty much anything she wanted just using her pretty face and her body.

Glory days.

She sighed and tried not to think of the chances she'd let slip through her fingers. Too depressing to dwell on what could have been.

Her stomach rumbled from hunger but she had no money to waste on food. She was saving the last forty bucks she had for an absolute emergency.

Pulling her suitcase along behind her, Betty left the restaurant and moved into the parking lot where the big rigs were lined up in long rows. Exhaust fumes and the smell of grease and rubber filled the air around the eighteen-wheelers.

She began approaching the truckers who were resting or sleeping or talking to other drivers. Any of the trucks with drivers inside, she tapped on the windows and asked if they were going to Austin with a load. All of them took one look at her and turned her down flat.

Feeling discouraged, Betty came across one old guy in his late sixties. Gray hair and a matching moustache, the old fart was smoking behind the wheel of his truck, radio playing a country station and the driver's door hanging open.

Betty stopped beside the truck and looked up at him. “You wouldn’t be going to Austin, would you?”

“Might be. You looking for a lift?”

“I need to get to Austin real bad. Family emergency.”

He chuckled as he looked down at her. “You run away from an old folks home, lady? Are they after you?” He laughed harder thinking he was funny.

“I’m not as old as you think, buster.” Betty shoved her ample chest forward. “I can still give you a good time.”

The old trucker laughed again. “I’m pretty sure your good times are over, old girl. Why don’t you take a fuckin bus?”

“No money for a bus, and don’t call me old. You’re older than I’ll ever be, buster. My name is Betty.”

“Get in, Betty. You can show me what you’ve got in the sleeper, and if you’re any good—can’t see it happening—then I might consider taking you with me to Austin.”

Betty climbed into the passenger seat, hauling her suitcase in after her. The old guy pointed at the entrance to the sleeper and the two of them moved back there.

The bed was unmade, and the sheets and pillowcases were filthy with sweat and grime. The air in the sleeping compartment was rancid. The old guy’s dirty clothes were piled in a corner. Wet dogs smelled better.

“What’s your name?” asked Betty as she unzipped the old guy’s dirty khaki pants.

“You can call me Joe. That’ll do for now.”

“Okay, Joe. Hang on. You are in for the time of your life.”

He laughed. “It will take a lot more than you to convince me of that, Betty.”

VA Central Texas Health Care. Austin.

When I woke up later—couldn’t say how much later because I had no way of knowing how long I was knocked out from the

fuckin tranq needle—Doctor Alderson was sitting in a chair next to the bed staring at me.

“What? I had my talk for today. I can remember that much. I don’t want to talk to you anymore.”

“During our talk, you got very upset, Travis, and you did some damage to the stitches in your side and to your hand. Repair work had to be done and now I’m here to make sure you’re okay. That’s all I’m doing.”

“I’m okay. Why wouldn’t I be? And why wouldn’t my regular nurse be watching me instead of you if I had medical issues? You’re my shrink.”

Doctor Alderson had her eyes glued on me as she ignored my remarks. “You haven’t eaten anything today, Travis. I had the kitchen bring you a tray.”

“Not hungry, Doc.”

The doctor got to her feet and pushed the mobile table towards me. “Could you eat some soup and a sandwich?”

I shrugged thinking maybe I was hungry after my long drug-induced nap. “Maybe. What I’d really like is a cold beer.”

“Sorry, I can’t offer you that.”

“If I eat this sandwich, will you go away and leave me alone?”

She smiled and I had to admit she was prettier than I originally thought. Maybe I was losing my mind.

“Now you’re trying to bribe me into leaving your room?”

I shrugged. “Only if it works. What’s your first name? Now that you’re calling me Travis, I’m not calling you Doctor Alderson anymore.”

“Victoria. You can call me Victoria.”

“Okay. We’re on a first-name basis. We’re making progress.”

The smile vanished from her face, and I figured she had more issues than I did.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

The kids were in bed and Annie sat on the porch with Lukas. They had a coffee together and talked. He was having a hard time dealing with Travis coming unglued the way he had at the farm.

Lukas confided that Travis had helped him a lot during their time together at Travis's old place in Pecan Creek, and then in Alaska. Lukas Donovan—his adopted name was Weaver—was emotionally attached to Travis and had committed to a life with *Dale* in the new bike club he was starting. With all of that snatched away by Travis's latest episode, Lucas was at a loss.

“Starting an MC takes years,” said Annie. “Travis wasn't thinking clearly, and wanting to be Dale Burden again is tantamount to committing suicide. That's what it was all about. Travis has a death wish.”

“No,” said Lukas. “I don't believe that. He seemed to be okay and real happy to see me,” said Lukas. “Then when you came with Tommy, he started getting all... kind of crazy and saying weird stuff. I didn't know what the hell was wrong with him.”

“When he gets like that it's usually because he's out of medication and hasn't bothered going to refill his prescription. It's happened more than once.”

“I didn't see him taking any pills,” said Lukas. “That could have been it. Do you think they can straighten him out in the hospital?”

“Yes, they can. They know what they're doing at the VA hospital, and he'll get good care. We'll be able to go see him in a few days.”

“I feel bad for Tammy,” said Lukas. “She kind of clings to Travis thinking he will keep her safe.”

“She’ll be better now that Tibor is dead,” said Annie. “The constant fear of him coming to get her will taper off with time.”

Chapter Eleven

Wednesday, November 14th.

Stop 10. Houston.

Betty fell asleep in Joe's dirty bed after they had sex—if you could call it that. She figured when Joe bought the truck or got it secondhand, it came with a set of sheets and Joe had never changed them. Not once. The bed was disgusting. The buildup of grime on the sheets made her skin crawl.

Lucky for her, the old guy was only good for one round of half-hearted sex. When he was done, he climbed out of the sleeper and left her by herself. Betty was grateful for that mercy.

She dozed off and when she woke up a couple of hours later, she could feel the truck rolling along underneath her. She groped around for her clothes, put them on and climbed out of the sweaty sleeper.

She made her way up front to the passenger seat dying for a cigarette. Joe had his eyes on the road and paid no attention to her as she got comfortable in the leather seat.

“Where are we?”

“Crossing through Louisiana on I-10. We'll be in Houston in a few more hours.”

“Got a smoke, Joe?”

“Nope. I don't smoke. It's bad for your lungs.”

“Yeah, I heard that.” Betty reached for the radio to get a better station and Joe gave her hand a swat.

“Don't touch my station.”

“Sorry. Are you always this miserable after sex?”

He didn't answer and she gave up trying to be friendly. She didn't want to be his friend or anybody else's. She was piss-poor at it anyway.

Stop-10. Houston. Texas.

Slouched down uncomfortably in the passenger seat of Joe's truck, Betty slept away the miles and woke up much later when the gears ground down. She opened her eyes as they pulled into another truck haven. Stop-10 in Houston.

"I need gas and the bathroom," mumbled Joe.

"Yeah, the bathroom is a good idea."

Joe found a place to park in a long row of rigs and shut the engine down.

Betty left her suitcase in the truck, grabbed her purse, and headed for the building next to the restaurant that housed the truckers' store, showers, overnight accommodation and washrooms.

After rolling around in the sleeper with the old man, Betty was a mess and she'd picked up the stink of Joe from the truck. Her hair was frizzy and flying all over and her brush was in her suitcase. Not much she could do about it but straighten it with her hand.

Betty cleaned herself up in the ladies' room as best she could and stared at herself in the mirror. The glaring overhead lights didn't flatter her in any way, and she turned away with a sigh.

From the line of vending machines in the hallway outside the washrooms, she bought a Hershey bar and a Coke. That would be enough to tide her over until she got to Austin. Money was tight for the time being.

There was no sign of Joe near the men's room, so she walked back to the parking lot eating her candy bar and carrying her Coke to drink later.

She tried to remember where they had parked in the rows and rows of eighteen wheelers, and she couldn't find Joe's truck. Dark blue cab if she remembered correctly. What did the writing say on the front doors? She couldn't recall the name of his company.

Betty walked up and down the rows of parked rigs twice before realizing Joe's truck was gone.

"Damn that old piece of shit, he's gone, and he took all my clothes with him."

Tired and worn out, Betty walked around in the dark looking for another truck with a driver sitting in it.

Trudging along between the rows of rigs, she caught sight of a driver buying drugs from a dealer. She'd been in enough truck stops to recognize a deal going down.

Didn't matter to her. She was no cop. Without hesitation, Betty waltzed right up to the trucker and stood in front of him. "Can you give me a ride to Austin?"

She could smell booze on the driver with the big beer belly when she got close to him. The guy was drunk and obviously a druggie and odds were good he might not be a safe driver.

With a sneer on his face, the trucker stared at her like she was a bug to be stepped on. "If I give you a ride, what are you gonna give me, granny?"

"I'm not your granny, but I'll give you what you want and probably more than you can handle if you take me to Austin."

"Get in the truck, Granny Fanny." He laughed loud thinking he was hilarious.

VA Central Texas Health Care. Austin.

Daylight filtered into my room and forced me to open my eyes. I lay there wondering why I couldn't remember much of anything and why my life had gone for such a shit. How long would it take the pills to work so I could get out of here?

A nurse came into the room and took my blood pressure. She took the cuff off and smiled at me. "You doing better today, Major?"

"Yeah, I'm a lot better. When can I get this needle out of my hand?" My right hand was sore as hell after I yanked the needle out and they had to punch a new hole to put it back in.

“As soon as your doctor gives me the okay, I can take it out. If you don’t eat, he’ll leave the IV in longer because you’re not getting any nourishment. Just a heads up for you, sir.”

“Okay. Good to know. I guess I’d better eat my breakfast when it gets here. What’s your name?”

“Connie.”

“Thanks, Connie. Can I get up for the bathroom?”

“If you can manage it. Do you need an orderly to help you?”

“Don’t think so.”

I pissed by myself since I was three years old.

“You need to be careful of your stitches. You experienced some bleeding yesterday in the wounded area of your side.”

“I’ll be careful. I promise.”

Connie lowered the side of the bed, and I struggled a little trying to sit up. That’s when my side hurt like hell—sitting up and bending the area the stitches were in.

I rested for a minute, took a couple of breaths, and then got my feet on the floor. A little bit of bother with the fuckin pole when I started to walk, but I made it to the bathroom and back.

It felt good to be out of bed and walking around.

When I got back to my bed, I had to admit I was short of breath. Winded from walking a few feet. Not as strong as I thought I was.

I lay back and a few things drifted into my head like Doctor Alderson said they would. Bit by bit. This morning I actually remembered I had a horse, and I could picture him in my head. Blue roan coat and I was pretty sure he was a quarter horse. I’d tell her about it when she came for her visit and maybe she’d give me points for the effort. Had to get out of here somehow.

Now that I was mobile, maybe I’d go to her office to talk to her today and she’d realize I was ready to leave.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Annie had a coffee with Lukas at the island in the kitchen before anyone but Riley was up.

“Does Travis have parents we should be calling?” asked Lukas.

“Betty Frost lives in Florida and as far as I know, she’s still there,” said Annie. “Travis despises his mother and stays far away from her.”

“Why’s that?” asked Lukas.

“She’s not a nice person. I’ve met her in the past and the only time she bothers with Travis is when she wants money from him.”

“What about his daddy?”

“Dead as far as I know,” said Annie. “Travis told me once he never knew his father. He said his mother scared his father off when he was a little kid, and he couldn’t remember his daddy at all.”

“His father was a guy with the last name *Bristol*?” asked Lukas.

“I guess so. I can ask Chet to check into his father if you think it’s important for Travis.”

“If his father ain’t dead, we should find him, Annie. Just in case we need him for... like an emergency.”

“I hope we don’t have another emergency for Travis. I believe his father is dead because he told me he inherited the house in Pecan Creek from his dad, but that information isn’t for sure. I’ll call Chet after breakfast and set him on a search for John Doe Bristol.”

Lukas grinned.

Tammy walked into the kitchen and hopped up onto the stool next to Lukas. “Do you think we can see Travis today, Mama?”

“I’ll call the hospital around nine o’clock and see what they say. That okay?”

Tammy nodded. “I’m so worried that he don’t know who I am no more.”

“He might not know you or any of us until he gets straightened out, but as soon as he’s himself again, he’ll remember you,” said Annie. “He’ll remember all of us. We’re his family.”

Wayne’s Truck World. Austin.

“Here we are in Austin, Betty. You owe me one more fuck to pay for your ride.”

“I realize that. I never go back on a deal.”

“Is that so?” Tim laughed. He was a fat, ugly trucker with a scraggly beard and a multitude of bad habits. All the time he drove the interstate, he smoked weed, drank whisky out of a flask, and popped little white pills.

He parked the truck at the end of a row in the Wayne’s World parking lot and hooked a thumb over his shoulder at the sleeper.

Betty was tired and didn’t feel like making good on the deal, but she had no choice. During round one, Tim had already proved he was a rough guy, and he could hurt her without too much trouble and no remorse whatsoever.

She crawled into Tim’s stinky sleeper for the second time and let Tim do whatever he wanted to her. She tuned him out—she’d learned over the years that was the best way to go.

Tuning him out didn’t work so well this time. Her being unresponsive pissed Tim off—a lot.

“You ain’t giving me my money’s worth, granny.” Tim slapped her across the face a few times and then punched her hard in the gut to help her focus.

“Ow. Stop that.” Betty fought back with a vengeance, and the harder she struggled against him, the rougher Tim got.

Her nose was bleeding, bile roared up into her throat and she could hardly keep from puking. Betty had had enough and decided to play rough herself.

She rammed her bare heel as hard as she could into Tim's nutsack and while he howled and rolled around on the bed, she grabbed her clothes and climbed right out of the truck.

Half hidden by the open truck door, Betty pulled her clothes on as quickly as she could. Then she grabbed her purse and left.

Escaping from the truck stop, Betty limped to the corner of the street and sat in the bus shelter to catch her breath. While she sat on the bench, she tried to fix her hair and her makeup. She couldn't remember feeling or looking worse.

Using the ten bucks she'd filched out of Tim's wallet when he was sleeping, she jumped on the first bus that came along, sat down near the front, and stared out the window at the City of Austin.

Saint Margaret's Shelter. Downtown Austin.

Peering out the bus window at the unfamiliar city streets, Betty happened to see a homeless shelter as they rolled through the downtown area.

At the next stop, she got off the bus and began the long walk back to the shelter.

She got there just in time for a free breakfast. The coffee was hot and exactly what she needed. She lined up at the counter of the open kitchen and was given scrambled eggs and fried potatoes and a slice of toast. Better than nothing and she was hungry enough to eat almost anything.

Sitting at a long table with a lot of other starving people, Betty asked if anybody knew where the VA hospital was.

"It's on Metropolis Drive," said a lady farther down the table. "You can get a bus that will take you there. Been there lots of times."

"Thanks," said Betty. "I've got to go see my son."

Nobody cared and nobody bothered talking to her.

VA Central Texas Health Care. Austin.

Betty had to ask the bus driver how to navigate her way through the city to the hospital by bus, and he was happy to help her. A nice guy, and lately they'd been few and far between.

Following the first driver's instructions, she took two different buses and finally got to the hospital.

She asked at the reception desk for Travis Bristol and the nurse looked him up on the computer. "I'm afraid Major Bristol is still in his orientation mode, ma'am. No visitors for one more day."

"I'm his mother," Betty argued. "Can't you make an exception? I came all the way from Florida to see him."

"It's not up to me, ma'am. I'm just reading you what it says here on his file. Not even family members are allowed until tomorrow. I'm so sorry."

So tired from her long trip, Betty collapsed into one of the armchairs in the lobby and fell asleep. She woke up an hour later and tried to figure out what she would do and where she could go until the following day.

Her forty bucks was almost gone. No way she could afford a motel room. She'd have to go back to the shelter and sleep there overnight. No other choice.

She didn't know a single person in the City of Austin she could stay with or who would lend her a few bucks.

Betty's thoughts wandered to Danny Bristol, but she hadn't heard from him since the day he'd walked out and left her with a two-year-old kid to raise on her own. He was probably dead by now, so no use wasting brain time on him.

Upstairs on the fourth floor of the hospital, Doctor Alderson sat next to Travis's bed and quizzed him on the things he was

beginning to remember.

“When I woke up this morning, I remembered I had a horse.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You have a horse?”

“I do, and I know that for sure.”

“Can you tell me his name?”

“Umm... can’t think of his name, but I can picture what he looks like.”

“His name will come to you, just like the memory of the horse did.”

“I’ve been trying to think of his name and it’s making me mad because it’s something I know so well.”

“Don’t stress about it. It will come easily when the time is right.”

“Yeah, I wish that time was now. I want to get out of here and get back to what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“And what is that, Travis? What is it that you feel so compelled to get back to?”

“Wish I knew, Doc. It’s driving me a bit crazy.” I laughed. “That’s why I’m here, right? Because I’m nuts. Or temporarily nuts.”

“No. you are not nuts, Travis. You have an illness. You are not insane.”

Saint Margaret’s Shelter. Downtown Austin.

After a long walk in shoes that Betty wanted to fire into the closest dumpster, she finally got back to the homeless shelter.

She could see the volunteers buzzing around in the open kitchen and smell the food they were cooking for dinner. Her stomach growled and Betty realized how hungry she was.

Homeless people were starting to filter into the facility and Betty wanted to make sure she got a bed for the night before they were all claimed.

Wandering into the room where the cots were, she saw several of them with personal items on top. People marking their beds for later.

She used the shoes she hated. Took them off and tossed them onto an empty cot. The bed next to hers had some clothes lying on it and Betty eyed a jacket that didn't look too bad. All her clothes were in old Joe's truck, and she'd never get them back.

The weather was chilly in the middle of November, and she'd been walking around in a short-sleeved blouse. It was time to get herself a sweater or jacket or she'd be coming down with fucking pneumonia.

A glance around to see if anyone was watching and when the coast was clear, she picked up the jacket and tried it on. It fit pretty well, and she was zipping it up when the owner returned and hollered at her.

“Hey, get that jacket off. It's mine.”

With an angry growl, the short, pudgy woman attacked her—more like tackled her. Betty fell to the floor and tried to push the woman off her, but she had no energy left to fight.

The woman punched her and kicked her and would've killed her if one of the shelter workers hadn't shown up and intervened. The man pulled the woman off and held her at arm's length while she shouted curses at Betty.

“What's this all about?” He planted himself between Betty and the owner of the jacket.

“This bitch stole my jacket.”

“Is that true?” asked the man in a sympathetic voice.

“Yeah. I put it on because I was cold,” said Betty. Then she told a lie. “But I wasn't going to keep it. I was just warming up.”

“Maybe you should give it back,” he said. “There are boxes of used clothing in the storage room you can look through. You might find a jacket or sweater there.”

Betty took the jacket off and gave it back to the woman.
“Here you go.”

“Are you going to say *sorry*?” the woman asked her.

“Nope. I’m not saying *sorry*. I’m going to lie down on my bed and sleep.”

“Make her say *sorry*.” The woman whined to the shelter volunteer.

He turned to Betty. “It would be nice if you apologized for taking her jacket.”

Betty lay down on the cot and faced the wall.

Chapter Twelve

Thursday, November 15th.

VA Central Texas Health Care. Austin.

A nurse came into my room to give me my meds and I was freaking out about something and couldn't put my finger on it. Something important I had to do right away, and I couldn't remember what it was. The feeling of urgency was driving me nuts.

On the flip side, I was getting a few other memories back. I could picture my horse in my head—a nice clear picture of a blue roan quarter horse—a corral and a barn and an old ranch house. More recollections than the day before, but I was shaky and unsure.

“Take your medication, Major Bristol. I can't leave until you do.”

“Yeah, sure. The pills are working a little.”

She smiled. “I'm glad they're helping you.”

That nurse left and a few minutes later Doctor Alderson came hurrying in. “What's bothering you this morning, Travis?”

“I'm not sure, but I can feel something creeping up on me, Doc.”

“Do you feel up to having visitors today?”

I shrugged. “Guess so. Who would come to see me? I don't know anybody.”

“Sometimes when you have visitors, people who know you—even if you don't recognize them—it helps to trigger your memory.”

“Okay, I'm willing to give it a shot. Will you be in the room when these strangers come to visit me?”

“Yes, I'll be here. I want to see how you react to each one of them. That way, I can help you get back on track.”

“I thought the pills were going to do that.”

“Pills plus me.” She smiled. “A combined effort to get you on your feet again and out of the hospital.”

“Sure, Doc, I want to get better because I’m pretty sure I have things to do, and I’m getting behind just lying around in this bed.”

“A few more days on the medication, and you might remember exactly what those pressing things are, Travis.”

“I hope you’re right, Doc. I’m feeling pretty messed up right now.”

“It will get better, Travis. I promise.”

I wanted to believe her, but it was best not to blindly trust anyone. That was something I hadn’t forgotten.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Annie called the hospital right after breakfast and found out that Travis was allowed to have visitors between two and four in the afternoon.

She smiled at Tammy. “We can see him this afternoon. He’s allowed to have visitors. We’ll leave here at one and drive into Austin.”

Tammy smiled a wide smile. “I’m so excited we’re going to see him. It seems like we were at the farm such a long time ago.”

“It’s only been a few days, but a lot happened in a short space of time,” said Annie.

“He must be better if he can have visitors,” said Lukas.

Annie cautioned Tammy. “A little better doesn’t mean he’s going to know us, and you have to prepare yourself for that possibility. I don’t want you to cry if he doesn’t recognize us. You crying in his hospital room will be upsetting for Travis and it won’t be helpful to him at all.”

“I won’t cry, Mama. I promise.”

Saint Margaret's Shelter. Downtown Austin.

Betty slept in a narrow cot in the room with a lot of other homeless people, but she didn't care. She wasn't sleeping in the street like she'd done many times before. The shelter was warm, and they provided food and bathrooms.

Dinner the night before had been decent and the hunger cramps in her gut had eased away. She'd stay for the free breakfast and then walk to the second bus stop. She had saved enough money to ride the second bus that would take her to the hospital.

Once she saw Travis and put the wheels in motion to give her power of attorney, she'd have enough money to last the rest of her life. She'd get a place of her own on the beach in Florida and laugh in Charlie's face.

This is all going to be worth it.

It was her money anyway. Her brother, Carson, should have left her all his money in his will, but they'd never gotten along too well growing up. To get back at her for some of the unflattering things she'd said to him, he'd left everything to Travis.

That error would soon be corrected. Betty smiled just thinking about it.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

All morning long, Tammy kept checking the time. She was so excited for the trip to Austin to see Travis, she couldn't sit still.

Annie was busy in her office working on pressing matters for Powell Corp. Running a huge corporation in conjunction with her son, Blaine, there were crucial decisions to be made every day of the year.

One wrong choice and it could cost her family millions of dollars. Annie had a lot more on her mind than Travis Bristol and no matter what she did to maintain their relationship, he

could—and probably would—turn on her in an instant and break her heart all over again.

Shortly after twelve, Riley served lunch and Tammy barely ate a bite.

“Aren’t you hungry?” asked Annie.

“I’m so nervous, I can barely swallow, Mama.”

“It would be best if you calmed down a little bit, Tammy. You have to prepare yourself and be ready. He might stare at you and not have a clue who you are, but it’s only temporary. Just for today. Tomorrow his memory might be back, and he’ll be the same as ever. Remember that and don’t let it break your heart.”

“It’s only temporary,” repeated Tammy. “I’ll try to remember that.”

“Why don’t you go to the hospital thinking he’s not going to know you and then if he does, it will be a nice surprise?”

“Okay, Mama. I’ll try to calm down some.”

VA Central Texas Health Care. Austin.

I had a quiet morning and dozed off a few times in between visits from the nurses. Doctor Alderson told me visitors were coming after lunch so I was kind of eager for the lunch trays to be delivered so I could get on with it.

After the nurse named Connie told me I’d never get the IV needle removed if I didn’t eat, I’d been making a better effort.

Who the hell would be coming? I didn’t know anybody in Austin. That’s where the hospital was. I knew that much. Doctor Alderson was good about answering all my questions.

I ate the soup and the salad they brought me, and I was still starving. The dessert was a little bowl of tapioca pudding which I hated. I passed on the pudding and drank the lukewarm coffee.

Shortly after two o’clock, Doctor Alderson came into my room, and she had three people with her. As they walked

through the door, I looked hard at them and didn't recognize even one of them.

Doc smiled at me and said, "This is Annie, Tammy and Lukas, Travis. They've been waiting to see you."

Sitting up a little straighter at the expense of my stitches, I was at a loss. Thinking hard didn't help at all. I just didn't know who they were.

The woman with the long black hair was beautiful and I wracked my brain trying to think who she was. Annie who? I didn't come up with a single memory. I had to make an effort to seem sincere in case these people were important to me in some way.

"Hey, y'all. Thanks for coming to see me. My memory ain't working too good right now. Sorry about that."

The little girl looked like she was going to cry, and I felt bad about it, but I was sure I'd never seen her before, so what could I say?

The guy named Lukas moved closer to my bed and said, "We're taking good care of Outlaw at the ranch. You don't need to worry about him, Travis. The dogs are good too. They love the ranch."

"I know I have a horse," I said. "Do y'all have him?"

"We have him in the corral at my ranch, Travis," said the girl with the black hair.

"Thanks for that. I don't know when I'll be getting out of here."

"A few weeks," said Doctor Alderson. "It won't be too long."

Since I didn't know them and had nothing to say, they didn't stay too long. I relaxed a little when they left.

Doctor Alderson closed the door after they were gone and moved the guest chair closer to my bed. She sat down, ready for one of our little talks.

“Your family is looking after your horse, Travis. Does that put your mind at ease a little?”

“Guess it does. I remembered I had a horse, but I didn’t get as far as worrying where he might be.”

“The young man, Lukas, said the horse’s name was Outlaw.”

“Yep, that’s his name.”

“Do you remember the horse’s name now that you heard it, Travis?”

“Nope.”

“I feel that was a productive visit,” said the doc.

“Productive how? I didn’t know them and now I made them feel bad. I could see it in their faces. That little girl was next thing to crying. How can that be productive?”

“You’ve seen the people important to you in person, and it may help you to remember them more quickly. That’s how I’m looking at it.”

“Why do they think they know me? Am I allowed to ask that?”

“Annie said she was your wife. The young girl, Tammy, is your foster daughter and Lukas is your best friend.”

“My wife? No. I’m sure I don’t have a wife. I can’t deal with that right now.”

“Get some rest. The pills might make you sleepy.”

Tammy teared up in the elevator and Annie gave her a hug. “Don’t cry, honey. That’s only our first visit.”

“I know what you said, Mama, about him not knowing us, but it felt so weird when Travis looked at us like we were strangers.”

“We were strangers to him,” said Lukas. “He don’t know us from a hole in the ground.”

They stepped out of the elevator and were crossing the lobby when Annie saw a bedraggled old woman coming in through the front entrance. Dyed red hair streaked with gray. A face riddled with lines and wrinkles from smoking and hard living. No jacket and she was limping.

Annie stopped for a moment and stared.

“What, Mama? Do you know her?”

“I think that’s Travis’s mother.”

“He told me he didn’t have a mother,” said Lukas.

“I think he disowned her,” said Annie. “Why is she here?”

“Maybe the hospital called her,” said Lukas.

“That must be it,” said Annie. “Let’s go home. We can come back in a couple of days and see if Travis has improved.”

“I feel like I should stay with him,” said Tammy. “He’s all by himself here with a bunch of strangers.”

“This is the place that can make him better,” said Annie. “Probably the only place.”

“I’m sorry I cried in the elevator, Mama. I promised I wouldn’t.”

“It’s okay, honey.” Annie squeezed her hand. “Honestly, I felt like crying myself.”

Doctor Alderson was sitting next to my bed when somebody knocked on the door. “Another visitor?” She seemed as surprised as I was.

“I doubt it,” I said. “How many people could possibly know I was in this hospital?”

The doctor went to the door to see who was knocking, and she stepped out into the corridor for a minute. When the door opened again, the doctor was wearing a big smile on her face.

“Guess what, Travis, your mother came all the way from Florida to see you.”

Click. One click, flash of light and the noise of the IED's exploding at the side of the road. I snapped. No time to think about it or stop what was coming next.

One thought in my head—to defend myself against the enemy.

I jumped off the bed, tore the IV out of my hand and ran straight at the ugly old woman. Knocking her to the floor, I grabbed her neck with both hands and squeezed as hard as I could.

Doctor Alderson was yelling out words, but I wasn't listening to her or hearing. I was concentrating on the job I had to do and getting it done. The old hag's face was blue, and I was nearly finished with her.

I didn't see the Doc do it, but I felt the prick of the needle going into my upper arm.

Blackness took over and I was out.

“Get this woman downstairs to emergency,” said Doctor Alderson to one of the orderlies who had come running into the room. “She may have damage to her larynx. Orderly, help me get the major back into his bed.”

With expediency, Betty Frost was loaded onto a gurney and rushed down to the main floor to the emergency department.

Doctor Alderson stayed behind with Major Bristol.

Betty Frost was examined in the emergency room, then sent for an x-ray of her neck. When there was no damage evident except for bruising, she was released.

She had no bill to pay because her injuries were caused by one of the patients under hospital care. The hospital administration was apologetic.

Betty wanted to call Charlie in Florida and have him come and get her, but for the time being she was unable to talk on her phone—or talk... period.

Absolutely nothing she could do but go back to the shelter. Before she did that, she rested for an hour in the hospital lobby.

Travis tried to kill me. Could I have him charged and take his money that way? I need to talk to a lawyer.

I woke up when the sedative wore off and Doctor Alderson was sitting in the guest chair staring at me. “What? Do you have to watch me sleeping?”

“No. I wanted to be here when you woke up.”

“Why?”

“Do you remember attacking that woman who came to see you, Travis?”

“The pretty one with the black hair?”

“No, the older lady with red hair.”

“Never saw anybody like that. Only three people came to see me, and I didn’t know them.”

“Okay. You didn’t see the older woman.”

“Honest.”

“I believe you, Travis.”

Betty Frost left the hospital and began trudging along the sidewalk towards the homeless shelter. She had no money and nowhere else to go.

When she recovered her voice, she’d call Charlie. He needed to come to Austin and cough up enough money for a lawyer. She needed a legal power of attorney to get the money from her son. Travis was in no condition to dispute the fact that he was unable to handle his own affairs.

“It should be easy to get control of Carson’s money. It’s just going to take a little longer than I thought.”

I hated lying to my doctor because she was so nice and was trying so fuckin hard to help me, but now that my mother had found me—the one person I recognized since I'd been in the fuckin hospital—I had to get out of here before she came back.

She wants Uncle Carson's money, and she thinks if I'm sick, she'll be able to get it. I know her and how she thinks. I'll kill her before she gets her filthy hands on his hard-earned money. It's the least I can do for him.

As soon as the night nurse took my blood pressure for the last time and said goodnight to me, I slipped out of bed and made my way to the closet to get my clothes.

Dirty and blood smeared when I took them out of the bag, they were all I had. It was hard to get dressed tangling with an IV needle stuck in the back of my hand, but I didn't want to take it out too soon. As soon as I did that, the machine would start beeping and the nurses would come running.

The boxers and jeans weren't too much trouble, but for the shirt and jacket, I was going to need my hand and arm free from the pole.

I'd saved an orange from my supper tray, hoping that would sub for my hand. If it didn't, then I'd have to run like hell when the beeping started.

Sitting in the guest chair, I pulled my boots on and shoved my wallet and phone into the pockets of the dirty jeans.

Ready to pull the needle, I held my breath, yanked it out and quickly rammed the point into the orange.

Wait for it...

No beeping. I shrugged into my blood-soaked t-shirt that reeked pretty bad, grabbed my jacket and peeked out the door to see how many nurses were patrolling the halls.

Only one lady behind the desk at the nurses' station. The lights were dimmed for the night and staff was skeletal.

Not knowing which way to the stairs or the elevator, I crept out of the room and stuck close to the wall, the shadows giving me a bit of cover.

Footsteps approached from behind, and I ducked into a linen supply room until the coast was clear. To my left I could see the elevators. One sprint across the corridor and I was there.

I pressed the button to go down and waited. With hardly anyone working and using the elevators, they were slow to respond.

Someone else was coming my way and I had to move along. As I hurried to my left, I saw the sign at the end of the hall for the stairs.

One sprint and I was there, slipping into the stairwell.

My heart thumped in my chest as I ran down three or four flights and came out on the ground floor. Out of shape and out of breath, I had to stop and inhale gulps of oxygen a few times before I was ready to go again.

From the stairwell exit, it was only a short walk to the main entrance of the hospital. I walked outside and a gust of nippy November wind reminded me how thin my jacket was.

I know it's November because every morning Doctor Alderson tells me the date to keep me straight.

Traffic buzzed by on the street in front of the hospital and reminded me that I needed a cab to take me to a motel. When I formulated my escape plan, I hadn't thought of where I would go when I got out. Pretty short-sighted but my fuckin head was a mess. I was lucky to get this far.

I strolled down the sidewalk towards the corner while I kept an eye out for a cab. Loitering near the bus shelter, I watched until finally one came along. I stepped closer to the curb and waved him down.

He stopped and I climbed into the back. As I relaxed into the seat, fatigue flooded over me. I'd used up my last drop of energy.

"Where are we going, sir?"

"Umm... how about a hotel on the east end of the city?"

"Sure thing. Any particular one?"

“Nope.”

“There’s a Budget Inn on route 290.”

“Sure. Sounds great. I can stay there.”

When we reached the Budget Inn, the cabbie dropped me off and I tipped him. I’d sleep at this hotel, regain some of my strength, and decide my next move in the morning.

Chapter Thirteen

Friday, November 16th.

Budget Inn. East Austin.

I woke up and took the pills I'd stolen from the cart when the medication nurse wasn't looking. I had enough in my pocket for the next few days and I needed them. I wanted my memory back.

Sitting on the side of the bed, I glanced through my wallet and saw that I had multiple credit cards and a couple hundred bucks. The night before, I'd put the room on a card thinking by the time they discovered I was gone from the hospital and started looking for me, I'd be gone from here too.

I needed wheels and a destination, and I had neither one. My memory had to work better than this for me to get out of the mess I was in.

At least my mother can't find me here. Why is she the only person I can remember?

Saint Margaret's Homeless Shelter. Downtown Austin.

Betty saw a few familiar faces as she walked into the dining area for breakfast. This morning there were a lot of single mothers feeding small kids and she felt no sympathy for them at all.

Those brats better not get in my way.

She talked to no one at the table as she ate watery scrambled eggs, a piece of toast and drank the coffee the kitchen provided.

When she was finished, she made sure she had her few belongings as she left the shelter to look for a lawyer. She needed to find one who would do the work first and get paid later when she got the money from Travis.

There must be one fucking lawyer out there who would trust me enough to do the paperwork without getting paid in advance. Has to be.

Her phone was fully charged thanks to electricity at the shelter. She needed to make the call to Charlie but was dreading it because he could be so mean. He would yell at her for sure and she'd yell right back at him, and then he'd hang up on her. Happened all the time.

Betty jumped when her phone rang, and she smiled thinking maybe Charlie had changed his mind and was coming to help her.

“This is Doctor Alderson, Mrs. Frost.”

Betty used her fake sweet voice. “Is my son okay? I realize how sick he is, Doctor. He would never try to hurt me if he was himself.”

“That was unfortunate, but that’s not why I’m calling.”

“Something else?” Betty did her best to sound like she was concerned.

“I’m afraid I have disturbing news, Mrs. Frost. Major Bristol left the hospital on his own last night, and he’s missing. Would you have any idea where he might have gone?”

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t know any of his friends in Austin. That’s very upsetting news. I was hoping to see him again this week when he was feeling... more like himself.”

“Have you recovered from the... unsettling incident with your son?”

Betty’s hand went to her throat. “Yes, I’m fine. Travis didn’t recognize me, that’s all it was.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” said the doctor. “He didn’t know who you were.”

The call ended and Betty did something she hadn’t done in years—she started to cry.

I need that money so bad.

Her plan had gone to hell, and Carson's money had slipped through her fingers. Travis was gone and so was any chance of getting her hands on his money.

Still sobbing, she sat down in a bus shelter and called Charlie in Florida. "Charlie, honey, it's me. I really need your help."

"Nope. You left here, Betty, and that was the last straw for me. I'm far better off without you around. We're finished."

She thought she could hear somebody talking in the background. Was it the TV or was somebody else in Charlie's trailer? Did he have a new girlfriend already?

"Probably that bitch Donna Jenkins."

Betty stared at the blank screen and that was the end of Charlie. She was completely on her own.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Annie was busy mixing biscuit batter for breakfast when Doctor Alderson called and gave her the news.

"I'm afraid Travis decided to leave us late last night, Mrs. Powell. He's missing from the hospital. Would you have any idea where he might go?"

"No, I don't know, but it's not totally unexpected," said Annie. "Travis is an expert in covert ops and if he felt threatened, getting out of a hospital would be nothing to him."

"I've read his military record," said the doctor. "But only the files that were cleared for me to work with. There were volumes I didn't have access to, and that worried me."

"If he contacts me, I'll call you," said Annie. "He won't come back to the hospital, that much I can tell you. He's got a plan in mind, or he wouldn't have left."

"Thank you." The doctor sounded disappointed.

When Tammy and Lukas came to the kitchen for breakfast, Annie relayed the news. "Travis's doctor from the VA hospital called. He's gone and they are looking for him."

Tammy started to cry. “Oh, no. What if he’s hungry or gets hurt even worse? Who will take care of him?”

Annie held up a hand to Tammy so Lukas could speak.

“Where could he go on foot?” asked Lukas. “I’ll drive into Austin and look for him.”

“Can I come with you, Lukas?” asked a tearful Tammy. “I want to look for him too.”

“I guess you can come.” He didn’t look happy at the prospect. “I’ll start near the hospital and drive around the streets from there.”

“That sounds like a plan,” said Annie. “Take a truck in case y’all find him. Your bike won’t be any good. You’ll need somewhere to put Travis if you happen to come across him.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” said Lukas.

“Eat breakfast first,” said Annie. “It’s almost ready and then y’all can go.”

“I don’t think I can eat, Mama.”

“Yes, you can, Tammy. Dry your eyes and eat your breakfast. Travis is not helpless. He’s a trained fighter who’s worked a lot of black ops. Stop worrying about him getting hurt.”

“He’s wounded, Mama. He might need help.”

“Believe this one thing, Tammy. Travis is a survivor and when he remembers us, he’ll come back here to the ranch to get his dogs and his horse. That’s what he’ll come for—not because he cared that we were worried out of our minds about him and crying our eyes out.”

“I understand,” said Tammy.

“No, honey. You don’t.”

The look Lukas gave Annie said that he didn’t understand either.

Budget Inn. East Austin.

I woke up in a comfortable hotel bed feeling a helluva lot better than I had in the hospital. I remembered to take the medications before I sacked out and again when I woke up.

More than food or anything else, I needed to stabilize my thinking and clear up the problems in my head. Not having rational thoughts—that was the shit that would get me killed.

Before getting up, I spent a few minutes lying on my back, staring at the ceiling and waiting to see if any new memories had entered my brain overnight.

One new picture was in my head, and I could see it was a warehouse in need of repair. No idea where it was, but it was near water, and I knew for absolutely certain that warehouse was in Houston.

When I made my first attempt at getting out of bed, my side gave me trouble. The unhealed stitches had oozed a little during the night. The blood and other stuff that leaked out had dried and was stuck to my skin.

From all the walking and running I'd done getting away from the fuckin hospital, my side had stiffened up and was sore as hell on a Sunday.

I lay back down and inhaled a few breaths before trying again. A hot shower might fix me up. I wasn't in the hospital any longer, so I could take all the time I wanted cleaning myself up.

During time spent in the ensuite bathroom, I made a mental list of everything I'd left behind at the farm—yep, I vaguely remembered the farm. I needed shaving stuff, deodorant, a toothbrush and toothpaste, shampoo and a hairbrush.

To keep the wound in my side clean and bandaged, I would need antiseptic cream, gauze pads, gauze in a large roll and tape. Lots of medical tape.

My clothes were disgusting but I had to wear them this morning. No choice there. I'd replace them as soon as I could.

My first stop when I left the hotel would be Walmart or Target. A store where I could get everything I needed, all at

once. Chances of me being noticed in a store like Walmart were slim.

When I was dressed, I called down to the front desk and ordered a rental vehicle. I specified a Jeep, and they added the rental to my credit card.

While I waited for the wheels to arrive, I ate in the breakfast room with the other hotel guests, and I drank my share of coffee.

By the time the rental Jeep arrived and I checked out with the keys in my hand, I was filled with a new sense of freedom and I wasn't feeling too bad at all.

Metropolis Road. Austin.

It took Lukas an hour to drive into the city with a tearful Tammy riding shotgun. He was an introvert without many social skills, and he had no idea what to say to her.

Starting close to the hospital, he turned onto one of the side streets and started his search from there.

Driving slowly along the residential streets that surrounded the hospital, both he and Tammy watched for any sign of Travis on foot.

Lukas drove up and down every street in the hospital area twice and there was no sign of him. A couple of men walking dogs, but hardly anyone on the sidewalks.

Lukas had a thought and voiced it, "What if he came out of the hospital and took a taxi?"

"Then he wouldn't be around here no more," said Tammy. "He wouldn't be walking around these streets."

"No, he'd be long gone," said Lukas. "And we'd have better luck calling the cab companies and asking them if they picked up a fare last night in front of the hospital."

"Do you know how to do that, Lukas?"

"No, but Kamps knows how. We'll go to his place and ask him to help us."

“You know him?” asked Tammy.

“Sort of. He works for Annie.”

“Okay. Let’s go ask him to help us. Is it far?”

“Nope. West end of the city. I’ve been there and I know where his townhouse is.”

“You know your way around Austin, Lukas?”

“Umm...pretty much. I rode with the Eights since I was sixteen. I know the hoods and who controls what turf. Like that.”

“But now you’re not a biker?”

“I’m not with a club anymore. My life is different now. Annie and Travis helped me a lot to change my life and I owe both of them.”

“Me too,” said Tammy. She smiled across the console at Lukas. “They helped both of us. We’re the same.”

“Sort of,” mumbled Lukas.

Walmart. Route 290. East Austin.

Behind the wheel of a Jeep Wrangler, I drove out of the hotel parking lot, and it felt pretty damned good to be on my own. I had to go east and that was the direction I was focused on.

Heading out route 290, I spotted a huge mall with a Walmart right in the center.

I parked the Jeep as close as I could to the store and took my time walking to the entrance. No need to hurry and the more I tried to rush my movements, the more pain I was in.

Take it easy. Nobody will know you in this store.

I grabbed a cart and strolled around looking for what I needed. The items on my mental list were in the drug store section. I found everything easily, then pushed the cart to the men’s section and added two pairs of jeans, two shirts, boxers and socks.

Heading to the checkout, I grabbed a Rangers' ball cap, shades, smokes and a burner phone.

After paying for all of it, I carried my bags into the men's room and changed my clothes. The new stuff smelled a lot better than the clothes I was wearing.

I rolled my bloody clothes into a ball and tossed them into the trash.

Feeling a lot less grubby, I walked back to the Jeep with my large bag of purchases. Before getting into the vehicle, I did a three-sixty to make sure nobody was watching me. All clear.

It hurt my side to sit folded in half behind the wheel of the Jeep, but I had little choice in the matter. I had to sit like that in order to go anywhere.

Suck it up.

I turned the key to start the engine and my cell rang. I jumped about a foot and sucked in a big gulp of oxygen at the same time.

Who the hell would call me?

VA hospital showed on the screen.

"Nope. Not answering that one." I declined the call and decided to only use the new burner phone from then on.

I put the Jeep in *drive*, and I was on my way.

Old West Austin.

Kamps' roomie, Roy Goddard, opened the door and let Lukas and Tammy into the townhouse that Annie provided and maintained for Chet and Roy.

During several attempts on Annie's life, Chet had been with her, and he'd taken more than one bullet for her. Because of the severe injuries caused by the bullet wounds, he could no longer stand in a dark alley all night long working as a drug dealer and a snitch—his former professions.

Annie had set up an online information service and Chet ran it exceptionally well. Using the contacts he had established all over the country when he was working on his own, he was adept at unearthing and channeling information.

“Hey, Lukas. Haven’t seen you in a while.” Kamps didn’t get up from his desk to greet them because walking and standing caused him a great deal of pain and discomfort.

“Hey, Kamps. You doing okay?”

“Sure. I’m always okay.” He turned to look at Tammy. “This must be Tammy Traynor.”

“You know me?” She sounded surprised.

He grinned and flashed his gold incisor. “Me and Annie talk every day. She told me about you.” He pointed at chairs, and they sat down near his desk.

Kamps turned his bald head and hollered in the direction of the kitchen, “Roy, get these people coffee.”

“Sure, Chet. Only take me a minute.”

“Did Annie talk to you about Travis lately?” asked Lukas.

“Uh huh. We talked yesterday. He’s in the VA hospital here in Austin, right?”

“He took off out of there last night,” said Lukas. “We drove around the hospital area looking for him and didn’t see any sign of him. Then I was wondering if he walked out to the street and took a cab. If that’s what he did, maybe we could find him that way—like through a cab company.”

“Travis is missing? Annie didn’t mention that to me yet.” He checked the time on his phone. “So, what you need is a driver who picked up a fare in front of the VA hospital last night. A time would help, and picking him up isn’t the thing. What you really want to know is where the driver took him.”

“That’s right,” said Lukas. “If I knew that, I’d be one step closer to finding him.”

“I’ll find the driver who picked him up—if there was one,” said Kamps. “Makes more sense than him walking anywhere

if he's just out of the hospital. Stabbed in the side, right? Yeah, I knew that. Make walking or running a bitch. Gimme your cell number."

As they got back into the truck Tammy asked, "Do you think that Kamps guy can find the taxi driver?"

"For sure," said Lukas. "The guy is amazing at what he does. That's why Annie pays him to work for her."

"Why does Mama need to know stuff, Lukas?"

"Umm... she likes to know what's going on. That's all it is."

"Maybe I should know more stuff too. If I knew more stuff like Mama does, I'd be smarter, right?"

"Not necessarily smarter. More well informed."

"Right," said Tammy. "I'd be well informed."

Lukas smiled.

Pablo's Mexican Restaurant. East Austin.

I spotted a Mexican restaurant not far from the mall where I spent the morning doing my power shopping. My stomach was growling telling me I was close to starvation, so I pulled in and parked the Jeep.

Nearly noon, the place was busy, and I'd been there long enough to drink a couple of beers and order food from the menu. The waitress had just brought me my enchiladas when a guy walked in the door and gave me a wave.

He looked familiar, but I couldn't think of his name.

He plunked down in the booth across from me. "Hey, Travis, I didn't know you were back in Austin."

"Yep, I'm here. I forgot your name."

"Tommy. How could you forget my name? You just saw me a day ago out at your farm."

"Sorry about that." I took a bite of my enchilada, and it was too hot to eat. "Would you know where my horse is?"

“Yeah, your horse is at Coulter-Ross, Travis. Tammy is there too.”

“Thanks.” The guy, Tommy, finished his beer and he left. I still didn’t know who the hell he was.

Friend or foe? I couldn’t trust anybody. Best for me.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Annie was working in her office when Tommy called.

“Hey, sugar. You okay?”

“Yeah, all good. Something weird just happened.”

“Weird?”

“Yeah, I stopped into Pablo’s for a beer for lunch, and Travis was in there eating. I was kind of surprised to see him in Austin.”

“I guess you would be. He was sent from the general hospital in San Angelo to the VA hospital here in Austin. He skipped out of the hospital on his own and his doctor is looking for him.”

“Sorry, I didn’t know he was missing. He looked okay but he didn’t seem to know who I was. He asked about his horse.”

“And you told him his horse was here?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Good. Maybe he’ll remember and come to the ranch. Tammy is pretty upset that he’s missing.”

“If I happen to see him again, I’ll grab him for you, Annie.”

“Thanks for the call, sugar.”

Ross Harley-Davidson. East Austin.

I left the Mexican restaurant and headed east. From the highway I saw the towering sign above the Harley store. Without giving much thought to why, I pulled in and parked the Jeep.

Inside, the store smelled like leather and new bikes and everything Harley. Why I was so drawn to this store, I wasn't sure, but it felt good to wander around and look at the bikes and the merchandise.

Why does this store feel so familiar?

I spent some time roaming through the rows of shiny, new rides, then a big guy with long brown hair walked up to me and said, "Hey, Travis. Long time." He stuck out his hand and I shook it.

"Yeah, I guess it has been a long time."

Who is this guy?

My brain tried to produce his name and couldn't do it.

"I was thinking about buying a bike."

The guy smiled at me and said, "Friends and family discount for you."

"Oh, yeah?" That made me smile and I pointed at the one I had my eye on. "How much for this one?"

He quoted me a price and I sat on the bike to make sure I liked the feel of it. "Yeah, feels good. Nice seat. Bars feel about right. I'll take it. While y'all get it ready for the road, I'll try on some jackets."

"Sure, it will take me a while to get this baby pre-delivered for you, Travis."

"Take your time. I've got shopping to do." I strolled through the clothing section of the big store and stopped when I came to the leather jackets. A whole rack of them hanging neatly on hangers. Different styles and sizes. Hard to pick because they were all so fuckin nice.

I tried on close to a dozen before I found one that felt perfect. I took it off and folded it, then tried on gloves. I picked up a couple of bandanas to tie my hair out of the way while I was riding. I grabbed two t-shirts I liked and took all of it to the front counter.

The clerk smiled at me when my card easily held the grand total. “I gave you the family discount, Travis.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“No problem. You haven’t been in for a while.”

“Guess I haven’t been.”

“Mack is in the back working on your bike.” She pointed. “You can go right through that door.”

“Thanks for your help.” I wandered out the door she had pointed at, and it took me into the big three-bay garage at the back of the building.

A couple of the guys working on the bike looked so much alike they could’ve been twins.

“Almost got her ready for you, Travis. You need a new bike?”

“I think I do.”

“Sure.” He looked puzzled. “Heard about the paint job you got on your old bike. I’d like to see how the dogs turned out. Lukas said it was solid.”

“Turned out nice,” I said, so he wouldn’t know I didn’t have a fuckin clue what he was talking about. All the guys in this store seemed to know me.

I must’ve been here before.

I leaned on the workbench until they finished with the bike, then I slipped the jacket on and packed the rest of the stuff I’d bought into the saddlebags.

The boys started the big Harley up and made sure it was running smooth and sounding perfect, then they gave me the keys.

“Thanks a lot, guys. Appreciate y’all getting it ready for me right away. Y’all must have other work waiting.”

I rode it through the open overhead door, through the back parking lot and out to the highway. When I hit the main road, I squeezed the gas and let the pipes rumble.

The wind hit me in the face, and I felt finally free again. Best feeling in the world.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Annie was in the kitchen getting a refill on her coffee when Chet Kamps called.

“Hey, sugar pop.”

“Hi, Beauty. Got some stuff to tell you about Travis.” He explained about Lukas coming to see him and asking about the taxi drivers.

“Sure, honey bunny, that’s a good way to approach it. Lukas has a good head on his shoulders. What did you find out?”

“Took me a few calls, but the driver who picked Travis up took him to the Budget Inn out on Route 290.”

“Fantastic work, sugar. I’ll call the hotel.”

“Already called, Beauty. Travis checked out this morning.”

“I bet he’s not going back there either. Damn it. That was a good lead. We’re just a little bit behind him. Thanks for trying honey.”

Annie’s cell rang moments later, and Mack Sturgess was on the phone from the Harley store. “Hey, Mack, do you need me?”

“Something weird, boss.”

“I’m getting a lot of that today. Tell me what your weirdness is.”

“Travis came in and bought a bike and it was like he didn’t know me or the twins.”

“He didn’t know you, sugar. He’s supposed to be in the VA hospital getting treated for his PTSD and he skipped.”

“Oh, shit. I didn’t know.”

“That’s okay. Did he mention where he was headed?”

“I think he said something to Nevada about Houston. One other thing, Annie.”

“What else?”

“Umm... he left a Jeep here. Looks like a rental.”

“Damn it. He’s off and running and his head isn’t working right. I’ll take care of it, sugar. He doesn’t know what he’s doing from one minute to the next. Thanks for the call, Mack.”

Annie stared at her cell and said, “Aw, shit. Don’t go to Houston, Travis.”

“What, Mama? Did you find Travis?”

“Nope. Give me a minute, Tammy. I have to call Cutter. Then I’ll tell you what I found out.”

Houston.

With my memory as bad as it was, I had to depend on the highway signs to get me to Houston. It took a couple of hours on the new Harley, but it was a fun ride. If my side hadn’t been hurting so fuckin much, I would’ve enjoyed it a lot more.

Riding along the interstate through the city of Houston, and knowing I needed to get closer to the water, I took the off-ramp for Port Houston. I figured that would get me closer to where I needed to be.

I’ve got to find the warehouse in my memory.

Port Houston.

The Port Houston area seemed strangely familiar to me. Without knowing the reason why, I was drawn here by some magnetic force. Sounded crazy, even to me.

Cruising around the area filled with old warehouses that used to be connected to the shipping industry, I searched for the one particular building I’d pictured in my head.

After almost two hours of searching for the old red brick warehouse I needed to find and not finding it, the pain in my

side forced me to stop and rest.

I had to grab a motel room and lie down. Riding my new bike was the most fun, but my body hadn't been ready for a long trip.

Cruising the streets near the Gulf, I looked for a place to crash for a few hours.

After Annie's frantic call, Cutter left his trailer in Sugarland, hopped on his Harley and went to search for Travis. Cutter figured if Travis's memory was coming back—even his Dale Burden memories—he might be headed for the old Black Breed clubhouse.

Trouble with that was, there was a new gang in that building now. A miserable bunch of Aryans had taken over the property, and they didn't like strangers.

Cutter rode straight to the warehouse where he used to be a member of Dale's gang and looked around for a shiny new Harley—the one Annie had told him about.

She said Travis had forgotten about his bike at the farm and dropped into her Harley store and bought another one. She described the model he'd purchased—Fast Jonnie Road Glide.

“He shouldn't be out riding around alone,” mumbled Cutter. “And he sure as hell shouldn't be in Houston showing off a fancy new ride.”

Gulf Breezes Motel. Port Houston.

I checked into the first motel I found near the waterfront, and as soon as I entered my room, I kicked off my boots and stretched out on the bed to relieve the throbbing pain in my side.

I dozed off and must have slept for a few hours because the room was dark when I woke up. I struggled getting up off the bed, used the bathroom and took two more of my pain meds.

My stomach was growling again for more food. Were the pills making me hungry? I cleaned up a little and went out looking for a place nearby to eat and get a pitcher of beer.

Stevie's Barbeque. Port Houston.

I rode through a few streets in the area and found a bar with a lot of Harleys parked out front. I figured I'd blend in with the other bikers and have a few beers and maybe order a steak or a burger and a double order of fries.

The music was loud, and the bikers were even louder, hollering and yelling at each other. A popular hangout.

The bar was crowded, and I had to look around for a place to sit other than at the bar. A barstool wouldn't be the best for me with my side as sore as it was. A booth would be best, if I could find one.

Two guys happened to be leaving and I managed to slide into their booth as they headed for the door.

I ordered a pitcher of Miller and when the waitress brought it, she set it down along with a frosted glass and a coaster. Blondie stared at me for a minute like she was thinking hard on something, then she smiled and said, "Hey, Dale. Haven't seen you in here for a long time."

I didn't recognize her and didn't remember ever being there before, but I smiled anyway. "Nice to see you too." I ordered the barbeque special and went back to minding my own business.

The food was good, the meat tender, and after I paid the check, I headed out to the parking lot to go back to my motel.

The parking area behind the roadhouse was dark. Most of the bulbs high on the poles had been shot out. Probably so drug deals would go unnoticed.

I threw my leg over my bike, and they were on me. Yelling and hollering curses at me, two guys grabbed me from behind and dragged me off my ride.

They were waiting for me.

With my side putting me almost out of commission, one-on-one would've been all I could handle. Besides the two who hauled my ass off my bike, there must have been at least six more of the fuckers and they all seemed to know me.

Hollering out curses at Dale Burden as they punched and kicked me. I took it until the pain was more than a human could stand.

I blacked out and was grateful for the escape.

Chapter Fourteen

Saturday, November 17th.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Annie was in the barn with Tammy when Cutter called. “How did your search go, Cutter?”

“No luck finding him, but I heard a guy got beat up real bad at Stevie’s Barbeque. That’s the roadhouse where we used to hang when we were in the Breed. I’m surprised it’s still open. Been shut down a few times for various... violations.”

“Let me see what I can find out about a guy getting beat up and I’ll call you back.” Annie called Chet Kamps and relayed the story to him.

“I’ll call my guys on the street in Houston and find out what they’ve heard,” said Chet. “One of them might have been in that area. Let you know, Beauty.”

“Thanks, sugar.”

“What’s happening, Mama?” Tammy had listened to the conversation on Annie’s end. “I know it’s bad because you’re not saying anything and you’re not smiling.”

“Nothing to tell you... yet. Chet is talking to people in Houston and as soon as he separates the truth from rumors, then I’ll tell you everything I know. I’m not keeping anything from you, Tammy. I just don’t have any facts—not yet.”

Lukas listened to what Annie was telling Tammy and didn’t comment.

Annie left Tammy in the barn mucking out Bonnie Grace’s stall and motioned for Lukas to come outside with her.

“What did you hear, Annie?” asked Lukas. “I saw your face when you were talking to Kamps.”

“This may have nothing to do with Travis, but Cutter heard that some guy was beat up really bad at Stevie’s Barbeque.

That's the roadhouse where the Breed used to hang when Dale Burden was president."

"Why would Dale go there with a price on his head?"

"Because he's not in control of what he's doing," said Annie. "His mind is playing tricks on him."

"Where's the beat-up guy now?" asked Lukas.

"That's what I'm hoping Chet can find out."

"I should go to Houston," said Lukas. "At least I could go to that bar and ask some questions. Maybe find him that way."

"Not alone," said Annie. "As soon as we know something for sure, we'll be going together and taking Tommy and Farrell with us."

"Yeah, okay. That might be a better plan for not getting dead." Lukas and Annie walked together to the house and by the time they got to the kitchen, Chet had more information for them.

"One of my guys in Houston says some of the old Breed members have Travis—Dale Burden."

"Are the old members in another club now?"

"Not really. Same guys only they call themselves the New Breed. Not many of them. Twenty-five or thirty at the most."

"Can you get me info on where their clubhouse is, and names and addresses for the top three? I'll have to go to Houston."

"If you're going, Beauty, promise me you'll be careful, and you won't get hurt?"

"I promise. No more bullets for me." Annie laughed. "They slow me down too much."

While Annie was on the call to Chet, Tammy had come back from the barn, and she was listening to Annie's every word. "Are you going to Houston, Mama? I heard you say that. Do you know where Travis is?"

“No. I don’t know where he is. Not yet, but Lukas and I are going to look for him. I’m calling Tommy and Farrell to go with us too.”

“I want to come with you,” said Tammy. “I can help you look.”

“No. It’s not that kind of looking, Tammy. There’s nothing you can do to help us. You have to stay here where you’re safe.”

“I want to help you find Travis.”

“Absolutely not. I have calls to make and I have to pack a bag.”

Tammy cried as she followed Annie down the hall to her room, begging to go with her.

“Stop crying, Tammy, and listen to me. Bad men have Travis. Violent men like Tibor with knives and guns. I have to find Travis and to get him away from the men who have him. In order to accomplish that, there will be fighting and a lot of violence. I may have to kill people to get him back.”

“I can shoot a gun. Billy and Travis taught me how.”

Annie held up a hand and shook her head. “No more arguing, Tammy. I won’t have time to watch out for you and you will only be a hindrance. I do not want you in Houston and there is no way you can come with me. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Mama.” Tammy ran sobbing to her room.

Annie called Tommy and Farrell, described the urgency of the situation and said she’d be ready to leave by the time they got to the ranch.

Lukas loaded his go-bag and Annie’s into the back of the truck and he and Annie sat on the porch and drank a beer while they waited for Farrell and Tommy.

On the way to Houston, Annie filled the boys in on everything Cutter and Chet had found out so far.

“So, we don’t know that the guy who got beat up is Travis for sure?” asked Farrell.

“No. We have no way of getting a positive ID, but since he got the first report, another one of Chet’s guys said that the New Breed has Dale Burden. Two stories that add up to the same thing.”

“Sometimes one plus one equals three,” said Farrell. “Seen it happen dozens of times.”

Annie shrugged. “Chet is pretty sure the beat-up guy is Travis and he’s seldom wrong.”

“Okay,” said Farrell. “Good enough. We’ll go on the assumption that the new club has Travis and he’s in bad shape. We need to find the location where the club is holding him.”

“Yeah, we do,” said Lukas. “Sooner the better.”

Best Western Hotel. Port Houston.

Checking them into the Best Western Hotel in Port Houston, Annie asked for a suite so there would be enough beds for all of them together. That way, they’d have a headquarters close to the action.

While they settled into the suite and the boys used the bathroom, Annie sat at the table near the window and called Chet to see if he had any new information.

“I’ve got the addresses in and around Houston for the new guys running the club, Beauty. Write this stuff down.”

Annie used the pad and pen the hotel provided and jotted down the name of the top three in the New Breed MC and their home addresses too. The clubhouse was close to the waterfront, not far from where the old clubhouse had been.

I remember the night we took the Black Breed down and finally got Dale out of there.

The guys running the new club were Hawk Jenkins, president. Wally Simms was VP and Smokey Barletto was the enforcer. Annie read the names aloud to the boys.

“Let’s get dinner,” said Annie. “Then we’ll go hang out at the roadhouse and wait. When the Breed riders are at the bar, Tommy and Lukas will go to the clubhouse and make sure Travis isn’t there.”

“They wouldn’t keep him there,” said Farrell. “Too fuckin obvious, but we have to confirm before looking elsewhere.”

Lukas nodded.

“Once we know they aren’t holding him at their clubhouse, we’ll move on and eliminate the residences of the top three—one by one,” said Annie. “Somebody in the club or affiliated with the club has Travis. They’ll keep him alive while they wait for the bounty to be paid.”

“We need tags on the rides of the top three,” said Farrell. “I’ll pull up the registrations now that we’ve got their names.”

“Yep, sounds right,” said Tommy. “The top three will be keeping tabs on Travis until they get their million bucks. We can follow the trackers on their rides.”

After eating dinner in the restaurant attached to the hotel, they cleaned up and drove to the roadhouse to wait for the New Breed to show their faces.

Stevie’s Barbeque. Port Houston.

A dive roadhouse in a tough area of the city. A big red neon sign on the roof in the shape of a bull confirmed that it was Stevie’s Barbeque.

The interior remained the same as when the roadhouse was built in the sixties. Dark wood paneling, high-backed booths with scarred tables and a dance floor dented and scraped by thousands of pairs of boots.

Ambiance was non-existent but the clientele didn’t notice and didn’t care. Lighting was poor. Lit with low watt bulbs, coach house lanterns hung at intervals along the bare paneled walls. No art or memorabilia. Probably stolen long ago and never replaced.

It was Saturday night in Port Houston and the band was blasting out southern rock at a high decibel level. The dance floor was crowded with bikers and their girlfriends having themselves a good time.

Many pitchers of beer were consumed by Annie and her boys during the lengthy wait for the members of the New Breed to show up.

Annie was almost ready to give up and go back to the hotel when the bikers finally started filtering in the front and back doors. All of them heading for a table reserved for their club.

“Do you recognize anybody from the old club?” Farrell asked her.

“Nope, I don’t, and I’m surprised there are so many of the old members left. I was under the impression that the feds killed most of them in the final raid.”

Farrell raised an eyebrow. “The feds, Mom?”

She shrugged. “You know what I meant.”

Farrell shook his head and chuckled a little.

“Let’s have a look at the mug shots of the top three,” said Tommy. “I want to know what the guys we’re after look like.”

Farrell pulled up pictures of the top three in the New Breed and sent them to everybody’s phones. Then he looked up the bike registrations for those three and jotted the tag numbers down on a napkin. “As soon as they come in and get settled at their table, I’ll run out and tag their rides.”

“While you’re doing that,” said Annie, “Lukas and Tommy can go clear the clubhouse.”

“Yep,” said Tommy. “We’re all set.”

It was after one in the morning when the boss and his trusty followers came into the roadhouse to join the members who had arrived earlier and claimed their reserved spot.

“It’s time,” said Farrell. “You two go to the clubhouse. I’ll come out to the parking lot with y’all and tag the rides. Call if

you find him and come get us. Travis might have to go to the hospital, depending how bad he's beat up."

"Copy," said Tommy.

While her boys carried out the plan, Annie sat in the booth and watched Hawk, the current president, drink and smoke and party with his club.

Enjoy yourself, Hawk. You don't have much time left.

In the roadhouse parking lot, Farrell watched Tommy and Lukas take off for the clubhouse, then he pulled a penlight out of his pocket and started checking tags.

There were dozens of plates to look at before he found the three licenses he was looking for.

He tagged the three Harleys and when the job was done, he joined Annie in the roadhouse and waited to hear from Tommy and Lukas.

"He's not gonna be at the clubhouse," said Farrell.

"But we have to know for sure," said Annie.

New Breed Clubhouse. Port Houston.

Following the GPS directions, Tommy parked on the street when they reached the clubhouse. He and his brother Lukas ran around behind the frame building to see if there was a back way in.

The back door was locked but not for long. While Lukas watched his little brother, Tommy pulled out his pick set and had the door open in under a minute. He pushed it open cautiously listening for an alarm, and there wasn't a sound.

No alarm system.

Inside, there was one light on—a bare bulb covered in fly shit hanging from the ceiling. One guy guarding the drugs.

Meeting table and mismatched chairs. Not much other furniture. No luxuries. Looked like money was tight for the

New Breed. The bounty on Travis would set them up real good. A start-up gift from the biker gods.

Lying on a cot next to the wall, the biker on duty wasn't doing a very good job of protecting the clubs' property. He kept on snoring and never woke up when Lukas and Tommy walked by him. Probably drunk or high or both.

Just because the drugs were there for the taking and he was a cop, Tommy cleaned off all the shelves and took the whole works. He and Lukas hauled the drugs to the truck and stashed them in the gun safe in the back.

As soon as they finished up at the club and were rolling, Tommy called Annie. "He ain't at the clubhouse. Coming to get y'all."

Stevie's Barbeque. Port Houston.

Tommy and Lukas returned to the roadhouse and Annie had ordered coffee and sandwiches. It had been hours since they'd eaten, and the night might get longer before they were through.

Tommy grinned when he saw the food. A growing boy, he was always more than ready to eat.

Another hour passed before the boss, Hawk Jenkins, made his move to leave the bar.

"Time to go," whispered Annie. She paid the tab and followed the boys out to the truck.

"Do you think they've got Travis at the boss's house?" asked Lukas.

"No idea. We'll start at the top and work our way down."

Jenkins' Residence. Port Houston.

The current president, Hawk Jenkins, lived in a shabby rowhouse one street back from the wharf. Luckily, he rented the end unit with a vacant lot next door for parking. Might have been by design, but unlikely.

Farrell parked Annie's truck on the street, far enough down the block not to be noticed. From their point of view, they watched to see how many riders came home with the boss.

Jenkins pulled in and parked his ride, and one other rider pulled in behind him.

"Looks like number one and two are here," said Farrell. "I recognize their bikes."

"Okay," said Annie, "shall we go in and have a little talk to them?"

"Yep," said Tommy. "Let's do it."

Farrell and Tommy took the front door to the weathered old rowhouse while Annie and Lukas ran through the vacant lot and picked their way through piles of bike parts and garbage obscuring the path to the back door.

"Ready," Annie said into her mic when they were in position.

Farrell kicked in the front door, and it wasn't much of a challenge. Because of the close proximity to the Gulf and the wind off the water, the framing around the front door had started to rot. When Farrell gave the door a kick, it pulled away from the house easily. The door crashed forward, and Farrell stomped right over it on his way into the front room.

"Hey," hollered Simms, the VP. He raised the Blackout he was carrying, and Farrell shot him in the head.

The back door crashed open, and Annie and Lukas ran into the kitchen.

Hawk was nowhere to be found, but then a toilet flushed, and they knew right where he was. Farrell ran up the stairs to the second floor while the others scoured the house for Travis.

Standing in the narrow hallway outside the bathroom door, Farrell was ready to grab the president when Hawk came out. He grabbed Hawk by the throat, pushed him up against the wall and applied considerable pressure. "Where's Dale?"

“Ain’t telling you.” Hawk’s voice came out in a whispered gasp. Short on air.

Lukas pounded up the stairs and met Farrell and Hawk in the hallway. He plunged his knife into Hawk’s gut, pulled it out and shoved the tip into Hawk’s neck.

The knife pierced the skin on Hawk’s skinny neck and blood began to trickle. Lukas leaned in close to Hawk’s face. “Tell me where Dale is. Do it now or you fuckin die.”

“Smokey’s got him.” Hawk collapsed onto the floor.

“Let’s go,” said Farrell.

“Right behind you,” said Lukas. He paused long enough to slit Hawk’s throat and put him out of his misery.

Bartello Residence. Port Houston.

They piled into the truck and Annie punched Smokey Bartello’s address into the navigation system. “We should’ve started with the Sarge,” she said. “We wasted time. Time Travis might not have.”

“No way to know for sure,” said Tommy.

Didn’t take long to drive the three blocks to Bartello’s place. Rundown rancher with a yard full of crap guarded on all sides by high weeds turned brown.

Two shiny Harleys in the middle of it all.

“That’s the one Mack sold to Travis.” Annie recognized the one from her dealership.

“Let’s take him,” said Farrell. “Same as Hawk’s place—me and Tommy at the front, Annie and Lukas at the back.”

Farrell wasted no time smashing through the front door with Tommy. As soon as Lukas heard the crash, he came in from the back with Annie.

Bartello was already in bed. Last room at the end of the hall. “Take him out, Lukas,” said Farrell.

The place was small and didn't offer many places to hide a hostage. Annie opened the second bedroom door and found Travis lying on the floor, bound and gagged.

The room reeked of human waste but there wasn't much Travis could do about it. They'd tossed him into that room a couple of days before and had barely kept him alive. Barely breathing while they waited for their bounty money.

Dale Burden. A million cash. Alive.

Whoever put up the bounty money wanted to kill Dale personally. Annie was fairly certain she knew who it was. Many of the clubs that had tried to find Dale were under the impression that the bounty was good—living or dead—but it wasn't. She was one of the few people who knew.

Chet and I are the only ones who know who's putting up the cash.

"Cut the ties," said Annie, "and strip him down. I'll run water in the tub to clean him up. We can't take him to the hotel stinking like this."

Once Travis was cleaned up, they grabbed a shirt and a pair of jeans from Smokey Bartello's room and dressed him temporarily in borrowed clothes.

Annie tried to encourage Travis to drink water from a bottle, but he was too out of it to swallow.

"He needs to go to a hospital," said Tommy. "He's gonna die on us."

"Yeah, we'll stop by the hotel to collect our stuff," said Annie, "and then keep going. Travis can't stay here in Houston. They'll grab him out of any hospital we take him to. We'll drive back to La Grange and admit him to the hospital there. He'll be safer far away from Houston."

Farrell nodded. "Yep. Let's load his bike into the back of the truck. Then we're out of here."

"I want the bike back," said Annie. "One of the latest models that just came in."

Chapter Fifteen

Sunday, November 18th.

Fayette Memorial Hospital. La Grange.

The sun bravely struggled through a pewter cloud cover as Farrell parked in front of the door of the emergency department at Fayette Memorial.

Annie ran inside to round up an orderly and she found one in blue scrubs telling jokes to one of the nurses at the triage station.

“I need help with a patient,” said Annie. “He’s unconscious.”

The orderly grabbed a gurney and followed Annie as she ran outside to the truck. He jockeyed the stretcher into position and gave a nod before the boys lifted Travis out of the back seat. They gently lowered his battered body onto the stretcher and the orderly secured him.

“Thanks guys. I’ve got him.” With practiced skill, the guy turned the stretcher and wheeled it in through the double doors.

Annie went to the admin office and arranged to cover the medical costs while the boys went to the cafeteria for coffee and donuts.

After a preliminary examination, the doctor on duty found them in the waiting area. “Your friend suffered a bad beating, but the worst of it is the stab wound in his side. The stitches are torn, and I’ve had to redo the work. There’s rampant infection and that’s what’s causing the biggest problem. Until we get that cleaned up, he’ll be in the ICU for a few days.”

“Thanks, Doctor Timson,” said Annie. “We’ll come see him later in the day.”

He smiled. “Much later. Maybe this evening would be the best.”

“Noted,” said Annie. “We’ll give him all day to rest.”

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Annie slept for an hour when she got home from the hospital, then she was up again helping Riley make breakfast for the cowboys.

Strong coffee might keep her going for the morning, but without doubt, she would crash later and need a nap to get her through the rest of the day.

Tammy was quiet as she made her way into the kitchen. Annie smiled at her and gave her a hug. “Good news, honey. Well, fairly good.”

“Travis ain’t dead, is he, Mama?”

“No, but he is beaten badly and he’s in the hospital. I’ll take you to see him later in the afternoon or after supper. The doctor wants him to have time to rest before having any visitors.”

“Good,” said Tammy. “If he’s in a hospital, I can stop crying.”

“I wish you would,” said Annie. “Your eyes are red, and your face is all puffy. Crying is not helping Travis in any way, honey. He has to get better at his own speed.”

After breakfast, Annie sent the kids to the barn while she retreated to her office to make calls.

Cutter was first on the list.

“I hope you have good news for me, girl.”

“Pretty good. We found him at the Sarge’s house in Port Houston and brought him back here. He’s in the hospital in La Grange where I can keep an eye on him.”

“Long as he ain’t dead,” said Cutter.

“When I left him, he wasn’t conscious and might not be until later today. No idea about the state of his memory or any

of that stuff. Just the physical, and that's not great. He has infection in the stab wound."

"Let me know when he's awake, Annie, and I'll take a ride up there and pay him a visit."

"Sure, Cutter. I'll keep you in the loop."

Annie's second call was to Doctor Alderson at the VA hospital in Austin. "Mrs. Powell, I'm so glad you called. Any news on Major Bristol?"

"Yes. He's been found and he's in the hospital in La Grange. I'll give you Doctor Timson's number and you can communicate directly with him. I think that will be the easiest way for you to find out about his condition and keep tabs on the status of your patient."

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Powell. That's very thoughtful of you."

Saint Margaret's Shelter. Downtown Austin.

Betty ate breakfast at the shelter, and she figured it would be for the last time. There was no point in her hanging around Austin any longer now that Travis was gone.

She'd been trying to think of a way she could get back to Florida without any money. Hitching free rides was one thing, but it would take several days to get back to Lakeland and she'd have to eat during that time. Maybe not much, but a couple of times or she'd pass out.

Her plan to take Travis's money had fallen through, just like Charlie said it would and she dreaded going back to him. He wouldn't let her forget that he'd been right all along. And then there was the chance he wouldn't take her back at all. If that happened, at least she'd be in Florida where she had a few friends.

She walked outside to get some fresh air. Most of the people who frequented the shelter didn't have an opportunity to wash as often as they'd like, and they carried an odor with them that could be unpleasant.

To pass the time, Betty sat in the bus shelter at the corner and watched the traffic go by. Her cell rang and she was surprised to see the VA hospital calling her.

“Mrs. Frost, this is Doctor Alderson calling. Do you remember me? We met when you visited Travis at the VA hospital.”

“I remember,” said Betty.

How could I forget Travis trying to kill me?

“I’m calling to let you know that your son has been found and he’s in a hospital in La Grange.”

“Thank you for the call, Doctor Alderson. I’ll make a point to go there today and see him.”

Betty’s heart pounded with renewed hope. There might be another chance to get the power of attorney and get her hands on Carson’s money.

She ended the call wondering how she would get to the hospital if it was in another town. She didn’t even know where La Grange was. Texas was a big state.

Hyped up by the doctor’s call, she headed back to the shelter to ask questions.

Back inside the facility, Betty thought the best person to ask would be someone with their head on straight—like one of the cooks in the kitchen, or the administrator.

She stood at the counter where the food was served at mealtimes and asked a guy volunteer who cooked almost every day. She’d talked to him once before and knew his name was Dave.

“Hey, Dave, would you know how to get to La Grange?”

He left the dishes he was rinsing and walked across the kitchen to talk to her. “Sure, I can tell you that. La Grange is easy to find. You go southeast on route seventy-one and you’ll get to it.”

“How long will it take?”

“About an hour.”

“Okay, thanks a lot,” said Betty. “Could you draw me a little map of how to get to the highway I need?”

“Sure, I guess I could,” said Dave. “Give me a minute and I’ll round up a pen and some paper.”

“Thanks a lot, Dave.”

Fayette Memorial Hospital. La Grange.

I thought I heard people talking close to me and tried to open my eyes. Someone said, “Just rest, Mister Bristol. You don’t have to wake up yet.”

“Annie-girl,” I mumbled.

“Is it Mrs. Powell you want? She was here, and she’ll be back. You try to rest.”

“Annie. I need Annie.”

“I’ll call her for you, Mister Bristol.

I-35 Southbound. Austin.

Betty stood on the shoulder of the southbound lanes of the interstate hoping for a ride that would take her down to the interchange of route seventy-one.

That was the route Dave had drawn on the little map he’d made for her, and was her best hope of getting herself to La Grange to see what kind of shape Travis was in. The worse, the better, for her purposes.

Watching the traffic whiz by, Betty stood for a while, then she walked some. A couple of hours passed before anyone even slowed down for her.

Finally, when she’d almost given up hope, an older lady stopped and asked where she was going.

“I’m trying to get to highway seventy-one, so I can go to La Grange. My son is in the hospital there and I’m trying to get to him.”

“I can take you part of the way, dear,” said the lady. “If I didn’t have an appointment, I might consider driving you there, but I just can’t today.”

Betty smiled as she gratefully settled into the passenger seat. “Getting me closer will be wonderful. Thank you so much.”

She laid the gratitude on thick hoping the woman would offer her money or food. She’d take anything. To Betty Frost, life was one big con game.

Mill Antiques. La Grange.

Tammy was anxious to get to the hospital to see Travis and she was driving Annie a bit crazy. To stall Tammy for a while, Annie decided to drive down to La Grange and take Tammy and Lukas to the antique store before going to the hospital. That would put in some of the time they needed to wait as per Doctor Timson.

“It’s too soon to go to the hospital, so we’re going to stop off at the store first, and you can have a look around. The doctor said late afternoon or evening for a visit, and we’re too early.”

“Sorry, Mama.” Tammy looked like she might cry again, and Annie couldn’t take much more of it.

Grace was at the front counter and smiled when they came in. “Hi, Mom. Just stopped in to show Tammy the store and introduce her to you.”

“So nice to meet you, dear. Portia Anne has told me a lot about you.”

Annie smiled. “Mom always calls me by my given name, Portia. Anne is my middle name.”

“Portia is a beautiful name, Mama.”

“Look around the store, Tammy. Tell me what you like the best out of all the displays. I always like to know what attracts people.”

Lukas stood quietly by looking at the displays. “I’ve never been in your store before, Annie. You’ve got some beautiful stuff in here.”

“Thanks. Did you know Travis used to live in the apartment on the second floor? He lived above the store for a long time while he worked for Jesse in his PI business. That was a long time ago.”

“Is the apartment still empty?” asked Lukas.

“Umm... I have my reasons for not renting it. Are you looking for your own place?”

He shrugged. “With the plan for the new club down the drain, I don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing. I have to think long and hard and try to figure out my life.”

Annie winked at him. “While you’ve got time on your hands, you could always let me and Mick train you to be a cop, Lukas. You’d be a good one, and you could work with Tommy and Farrell.”

He laughed. “I don’t think being a cop is in my future. My leg ain’t good enough to run anybody down.”

Tammy came back and said, “I like the old pictures the best, Mama. The brown ones with the people dressed in olden-days clothes.”

“The sepia portraits,” said Annie. “They are nice, aren’t they?”

“I love this store, Mama. Do you think I could help Grace sometime?”

“Sure, you can. Mom always needs help, and she is your step-grandmother. Y’all should get to know each other better.”

They were walking toward the cash to speak to Grace when Annie’s cell rang. “Annie Powell.”

“Mrs. Powell, this is nurse Janine Day calling from Fayette Memorial. Mister Bristol is in distress and he’s asking for you. Would you be able to come to the hospital anytime soon?”

“I’ll be right there.”

Tammy's eyes widened. "Is Travis worse?"

"Not sure. That was a nurse calling. Travis is asking for me, so he must have remembered who I am. We'll get over there now."

Fayette Memorial Hospital. La Grange.

Annie left Lukas and a fussing and fidgeting Tammy in the waiting area while she followed the nurse into the intensive care unit to see Travis.

Groggy and half-awake, he was moaning and restless. His right hand with the IV in it had been taped to the bed rail so the needle didn't pull out and cause more damage.

"Mister Bristol," said the nurse, "Mrs. Powell is here to see you."

Travis didn't respond.

Annie sat down beside the bed and stroked the hand that was taped to the rail. "Can you hear me, Travis? I'm right here."

Without opening his eyes, Travis started rambling out words in a low mumble. "Annie, Annie. We can't stay here. Gotta move out. We can't stay here. Hurry, Annie, hurry. Get down out of the tree. I'll catch you. Jump down now. I've got you."

Annie leaned down and held Travis in her arms and while she held him, he seemed to calm down. "You're dreaming, Travis. It's only a dream. You're safe here. I'm right beside you."

He dozed off to sleep and the nurse thanked her for coming. The nurse allowed Lukas and Tammy to come into the unit for a couple of minutes to look at Travis, but all they could do was look. He wasn't awake.

Tammy walked out to the truck crying again.

"Give him some time, Tammy," said Lukas. "You crying and bawling your eyes out all the time ain't doing nothing for

him and I'm sick of it. Why don't you just stop acting like a baby and grow up a little?"

Tammy stared out the window and never said a word all the way back to the ranch. She didn't cry either.

Smithville. Route 71.

Betty had been hitchhiking all day long along route seventy-one trying to get to her destination in La Grange. She had no idea where she was when the trucker stopped and let her out in the town of Smithville.

"There you go, Betty." He smiled across the console at her. "This is as far as I can take you. I've got deliveries to make."

"Thanks so much for stopping for me." Betty offered him her best smile and it wasn't much. She had no money to offer him for the ride.

"I hope your son is okay when you get to the hospital."

"Yeah, me too," Betty lied.

Not really. If he's okay, I'll never get hold of his money.

Betty jumped down from the sidestep and almost twisted her ankle. The wedged shoes she was wearing were the worst, but she didn't have any others.

She stood on the shoulder of the road for a minute wondering which way to go. She'd never been to Smithville in her life, and everything looked strange to her.

Across the road from where she was standing was a gas station with a convenience store attached. She looked both ways, then hurried across the highway to the store.

Betty used the washroom and freshened up a little before returning to the front of the store and asking her question at the checkout.

"Is there a women's shelter in this town?"

"Sure is," said the young girl on cash. "It's called Sunrise. Do you want me to tell you how to get there?"

“Yes, please.”

The girl drew a little map and shoved it across the counter to Betty. “Nice people run the shelter. I had a friend who stayed there once.”

“Thanks for your help.”

Betty picked up the map and left the store. Tired and starving, she didn’t know how much longer she could last without food and sleep.

Sunrise Shelter. Smithville.

It was a long walk to get to the shelter, but she made it and arrived just before the kitchen served dinner. She badly needed food, a place to sleep and a bathroom to clean up in.

The smell of her own sweat and body odor followed her like a disgusting cloud reminiscent of a landfill site.

I hope this shelter has showers.

No clean clothes to change into, but her body could be clean underneath and that would help a little. She was wearing the same clothes she’d had on when she left Florida days before.

At dinner, Betty greedily ate all the food she was given and could’ve eaten more had it been available to her. She had to wonder when her next meal might come along. Breakfast couldn’t come soon enough, and after that, it was a tossup when she’d eat next.

The Smithville shelter was less crowded than the one she’d stayed at in Austin and Betty felt more at home here. The facility was smaller, and the people seemed more friendly. She’d get some sleep and continue her journey to La Grange the following day.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

“We need to have a little talk, Tammy. You are becoming way too upset over Travis’s condition and it is what it is. Nothing

you can fix or change.”

“I don’t mean to cry all the time, Mama, but Travis was so nice to me after he saved me from Tibor. He took me to his ranch and gave me a place to live in Montana.”

“All true, but you need to get a grip on yourself. If Travis is released from the hospital and comes here to recover, you will have to help me take care of him, and you can’t cry over him. He won’t like it one bit.”

“I will help, Mama. I won’t cry.”

“We have to work towards that possibility, and you have to stop crying over how bad you feel. All you’re doing is making yourself and everyone else around you miserable.”

Tammy nodded. “Lukas already told me to stop crying and I’m doing it. I don’t want him to be mad at me.”

“Good. That’s a start.”

“Do you think Travis will come here from the new hospital or will he have to go back to the Veterans’ hospital first?”

“That’s up to his doctors. Not up to us.”

Tammy smiled. “When he does come here, I’ll take care of him. I promise, Mama. No more crying.”

“Remember, Tammy, no matter where he ends up, Travis will have to go for treatments for a long time. He’s far from being well.”

Annie left Tammy in the great room to think about their talk while she went to the kitchen to get herself a beer.

She wandered out to the porch with a glass of Coors in her hand and Lukas motioned to her to sit down.

“I was thinking about that apartment, but I can’t rent a place of my own yet. I don’t have a job and don’t know where to get one.”

“Your plans with Travis and Cutter went down the drain, honey, and I feel bad for you. You thought you knew what your future looked like and then that was all snatched away.”

“I planned to work for Dale and make the new club a reality like he wanted but that’s all gone now that he’s sick. I’m kind of stuck.”

“Take a few days to sort it out. You know you can stay here as long as you want. I love having you here.” Annie smiled at him. “But talk to Tommy. He was the last guy who ever wanted to be a cop. He made the switch and he’s a great Texas Ranger. He’s fantastic at his job and I don’t think he regrets his decision too much.”

“I’ll talk to him about it, Annie, but I don’t think I could ever be a cop. Just isn’t in me.”

“It’s not like you’d be stuck in a uniform and confined to a stringent set of rules. It’s much different working for the agency.”

“Explain to me how the Agency works.” Lukas settled back into his chair to listen.

“First thing you need to know is, I am the Agency—Blaine and I. We run the Violent Crime Squad. I’ll tell you all about it.”

Fayette Memorial Hospital. La Grange.

When I woke up the next time, my hand and arm were taped to the bedrail. I wanted out of the bed and out of the hospital.

Doped up on drugs and only half aware of what I was doing, I fussed and struggled and made so much noise that an orderly came into the room and put me in restraints.

I tried to fight him off and that made matters worse.

That’s when I decided I had to get out. Nobody was going to hold me prisoner. Never again.

Chapter Sixteen

Monday, November 19th.

Sunrise Shelter. Smithville.

Betty slept in a room with several other women, but it didn't bother her. She was only there for one reason, and it was only for one night. She'd slept in worse places—lots of them. A bed was a bed, and these beds were cleaner than many others she'd spent the night in.

Before she headed down the highway to La Grange, she'd eat the free breakfast the shelter provided. The people running the shelter were exceptionally nice and Betty thanked them for letting her stay overnight.

Depending how fast she was able to hitch a ride when she got back to the highway, Betty figured her chances were good to make it to the hospital by noon. She'd see what kind of shape Travis was in and take it from there.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Like most mornings, Annie was in her office catching up when Doc Alderson called.

“Good morning, Mrs. Powell. I wonder if you have time to meet me at the hospital in La Grange this morning?”

“You're coming to see Travis?”

“I want to see him in person to get a better idea of what's happening and I'm also hoping to have an in-depth consultation with Doctor Timson. Thank you again for his number.”

“You're welcome, and I believe it's necessary for you to talk to Doctor Timson. Travis has suffered further physical injuries during his little side trip to Houston.”

“I'd like details on what happened to him in Houston if you're able to tell me, Mrs. Powell.”

“Umm... I wasn’t there when the beating took place, but I can tell you what I know.”

Only what I want you to know.

“What time should I meet you at the hospital?”

“Does eleven o’clock suit you?” asked the doctor.

“Eleven is fine. I’m looking forward to speaking with you about Travis.”

“You referred to yourself as his wife when you visited him in Austin, Mrs. Powell. Is that accurate?”

“Travis and I were never legally married, but over the years we have lived together on my ranch for long periods of time between...episodes.”

“Thank you. That helps me understand your relationship a little better. I guess you know him as well as anyone would.”

“I love Travis, Doctor, and I always will. There are some things we can’t change.”

“I understand completely.”

No, you don’t. You have no idea what Travis and I mean to each other.

After she ended the call, Annie looked for Lukas and told him they’d be leaving for the hospital at ten-thirty. “We’re meeting Doctor Alderson there. She’s coming from the VA hospital to get a read on Travis. She wants to see how he is and talk to him herself.”

“That’s a little progress, I guess,” said Lukas. “Get everyone on the same page and maybe together they can fix him.”

“Let’s hope they make that happen, honey.”

Fayette Memorial Hospital. La Grange.

I woke up after my latest dose of morphine wore off and I could barely see across the fuckin room. A different room.

One I'd never been in before. My memory was the shits, but I'd never seen the inside of this room. Sure of it.

The restraints were tight and confining and I wanted them removed. When the next nurse darkened the door of my room, I demanded to see the person who had ordered the restraints. I waited for her to go and find out who the culprit was, and she never came back. I got no results from my demands.

They're ignoring me.

About half an hour later I had a surprise visitor. Doctor Alderson walked into my room with a big smile on her face.

"Travis, so nice to see you again. You decided to leave the VA hospital on your own?"

"I might have. Can't remember doing it, Doc." I struggled against the restraints and said, "Can you get these things off me? I'm not going to hurt anybody."

"I'm having a meeting in a few minutes with Doctor Timson and I'll ask him about removing the restraints. I talked to your wife this morning, Travis, and she's joining me here. She's going to sit in on our meeting."

"Annie is coming?"

"You remember her now?"

"The pills are working, Doc. I'm remembering a lot more every day."

"Yes, she is coming." Doctor Alderson checked her watch. "She'll be here any minute."

"I need to see her. You can take the restraints off. I promise I won't do a thing."

Doctor Alderson smiled. "I'm not sure I can trust you, Travis."

"Don't matter if you trust me or not, Doc. I don't have to stay here. This is a free country. A country I fought for and gave up my fuckin sanity for. I'm not staying here in this fuckin hospital against my will."

“You need treatment, Travis. You need ongoing treatment to get your life back on track. I want you transferred back to the VA hospital in Austin, and I intend to talk to Doctor Timson about that very thing.”

“Discuss away, Doc. What about out-patient treatments? I had them before and that worked well for me. I never skipped any of them.” I smiled suddenly remembering Annie-girl driving me and making me go.

“Out-patient treatments are an option, but only if you commit to them and don’t miss any on purpose. I wouldn’t stand for that. If you missed even one, I would require you to be admitted back into the hospital where I could keep an eye on you.”

“Got it.”

The two doctors were sequestered in Doctor Timson’s office discussing Travis’s fate. Annie sat in on the meeting until she’d heard enough of their arguing. She excused herself from the meeting, walked out of the office and went to Travis’s room.

He was wide awake and looked at her with recognition in his eyes and a smile on his face. A huge improvement. “Annie-girl. I was waiting for you to come.”

Pulling the guest chair closer to the bed, she sat down and held his restrained hand. “I’m happy you know me today, Travis.”

“The drugs are working and I’m remembering more all the time.”

“Can you remember Tammy or Lukas?”

He wore a blank look. “I’m not sure of those names.”

“Don’t stress about it. Everything will come back to you in time.”

“My horse? How is my horse?”

“Outlaw is at my ranch and the boys are taking good care of him. Monroe is in love with him and wants to breed him to one of our mares.” Annie smiled. “We’d need your permission for that, of course.”

“I’m missing my horse.”

He hasn’t once mentioned the dogs.

Annie was still sitting with Travis and holding his hand when the two doctors entered the room. Neither one of them were smiling. They both appeared to be as stubborn as two medical mules and they were deadlocked on some issue.

Doctor Alderson spoke first. “Doctor Timson wants you to stay here a little longer, Travis. He requires a few more days for your new stitches to heal before he’s willing to release you and have you transferred back to the VA hospital in Austin.”

“Whatever. You going to take this crap off me so I can move around a little more?”

“Depends on you, Travis,” said Timson. “You have to control your anger and not take it out on the hospital staff. They are only doing their jobs and trying to help you recover.”

“I promise, Doc. I won’t hurt anybody.”

Annie stood up to leave, then she leaned down and kissed him. “I’ll come see you tomorrow. Try to behave while I’m gone.”

“I swear I will, Annie-girl.”

Before they left the hospital, Lukas and Tammy were allowed a couple of minutes with Travis. He didn’t know either one of them and they were disappointed.

Tammy brushed one stray tear away, but she didn’t cry. She couldn’t. Lukas was watching her.

Mill Antiques. La Grange.

Tammy was upset when Travis still didn’t know her and to get her mind on something else, Annie dropped her off at the antique store.

“Put her to work, Mom. Tammy needs to think about something other than how bad she feels about Travis being in the hospital.”

Grace smiled. “I’ve got a lot of unpacking for her to do, and a ton of glassware that needs to be washed. She’ll be busy.”

“I’ll send Lukas to pick you up in a couple of hours, Tammy. Be helpful to your gran.”

“I will, Mama. I want to help her.”

Fayette Memorial Hospital. La Grange.

Afternoon visiting hours were almost over by the time Betty finally arrived at the hospital. She’d picked up two short rides hitchhiking, and in between, she’d walked for miles along the shoulder of the highway trying to get from Smithville to La Grange.

At the information desk in the lobby, Betty inquired about Travis Bristol and was told that her son had been moved out of ICU and was now in a private room on the third floor.

“Thank you so much.” She gave the senior volunteer a fake smile and limped away looking for the elevators.

She stepped off the elevator when it reached the third floor, hoping that Travis was still unconscious. That would make it much easier for her to obtain power of attorney. A lawyer would think that was a completely natural thing for a mother to want.

Betty smiled reflecting on how close she was getting to the money she deserved. She’d always resented how successful her brother was and that resentment drove a wedge between them.

She went to the nurses’ station and asked for the room number for Travis Bristol. “I’m his mother, and I’ve come a long way to see him.”

“I’ll show you where he is, ma’am.” The nurse walked her down the corridor to Travis’s room. “Right in here.”

“Thank you,” said Betty. She offered a fake smile, turned and entered the room. Finally, she’d reached her destination and soon she’d be driving around in a Cadillac wearing designer clothes and telling the whole world—and especially Charlie—to fuck off.

Travis’s eyes were closed as she approached the bed. Before sitting down in the guest chair, she said, “Hello Travis, Mommy is here to visit you.”

I heard that smokey, croaky voice and my chest constricted. No air. Then I sucked in oxygen in a huge gulp and let out a roar. “No. You can’t be here.”

I thought I was dreaming, but when I opened my eyes, there was Betty standing right next to the bed.

I pushed the button for the nurse, and she came running into the room.

“Problem, Mister Bristol?”

“Get this woman out of my room,” I hollered. “She can’t be in here. Get her out.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but you’ll have to leave. You’re upsetting the patient.”

“I’m his mother and I’m not leaving. I have every right to be here.”

“Just for now, ma’am. I’d like you to leave the room and wait in the seating area down the corridor. Thank you.” The nurse hurried Betty out of the room.

In a matter of minutes, the nurse came back into my room and closed the door. “You didn’t want to see your mother, Mister Bristol?”

“We don’t talk—ever—and she’s only here to ask me for money. I don’t want her in my room.”

“Try to calm down. I’ll post a note at the nurses’ station not to let your mother in to see you.”

“Thank you.” I let out the breath I was holding.

How did she find me here? I have to leave.

Betty left the hospital with a smile on her face. “It’s going to be easier than I thought to separate Travis from his money. He has completely lost it. Any judge will agree that he’s nuts and give me power of attorney.

Walking down the street she wondered where she could spend the night. Did La Grange have a shelter where she could get a bed and some food? She’d have to ask and find out.

If there was a shelter, she’d stay there overnight and find a lawyer in the morning. Encouraged by Travis’s reaction to seeing her, Betty chuckled to herself. This was going to be a piece of cake.

After Betty left, Travis was convinced there was only one choice. He had to leave. Betty was tracking him for a reason and her reason was always the same. Money.

She must have a plan to get her hands on Uncle Carson’s money. Why else would she be here?

Travis knew his mother better than anyone and he’d kill her before he’d let her touch a penny of his uncle’s life savings.

Some of the drugs had worn off and his head was a little clearer. He could manage a rational thought now and then. He was still having trouble remembering who people were and how they fit into his life, but he had no trouble at all remembering every disgusting thing his mother had ever done to him.

I hate her for what she’s done to me.

Now that she knew where he was, he had to get out of this hospital and find someplace safe. Once he got his bearings and had transportation, he’d make sure Betty Frost got what was coming to her.

She was born evil, and she’ll die the same way.

Saint Agatha Shelter. La Grange.

Betty inquired at the first convenience store she came to after leaving the hospital and was told that the town had more than one shelter.

The man at the checkout counter gave her directions to the closest one, and by the time she walked there, it was almost dinner time.

She could smell food cooking as she went in the front door of an old elementary school that had been converted into a facility for the homeless.

Betty sat down at a long table next to others who were early for dinner and an old guy struck up a conversation with her. He seemed smart and in his right mind and kind of interesting.

They talked all through dinner and afterwards, he asked if she wanted to go for a walk to the river.

As sick of walking as she was, Betty could hardly resist the attention of a man—any man. It was her Achilles's heel. The bane of her existence. Men had gotten her into more jams than she cared to remember, and yet she rarely refused their attention.

Strolling along quiet residential streets from the shelter, they stood on the bridge overlooking the Colorado River, moonlight dancing across the water. The air was chilly and when Betty shivered, Jeffrey put an arm around her shoulders to keep her warm.

It had been a good day for Betty. She'd found Travis and was sure he would be found incompetent, and now she had a new friend and a possible lover. Could it get any better?

Fayette Memorial Hospital. La Grange.

When the nurse came around for the last time, she took my vital signs and removed the restraints so I could sleep. She left one night light on and turned to leave.

“Thanks for taking those off.”

“You never should have been restrained for that long, Mister Bristol. Unnecessary and cruel, in my opinion.”

“Yeah, mine too. Thanks again.”

I lay in the darkness staring at the ceiling for what I figured was two more hours. Should be close to midnight, and when the shifts changed, that’s when I would make my move.

From past experience, I was aware that a bell or an alert would go off somewhere when the IV came out of my hand. To avoid that happening, I planned to take the pole with me and leave the needle in until I was on the main floor of the hospital. Then I’d yank it out and make a run for it.

I’d already checked to make sure my clothes were in the closet. All I had to do was grab the bag, take them with me and get dressed as soon as I was clear of the hospital.

Yep, this was going to work out.

With the plan set in my head, I climbed out of the bed and rolled the pole across the room to the closet. I retrieved the bag holding my personal belongings and opened the door of my room to see what was cooking in the corridor.

Deadly quiet. Night lights only casting spooky shadows across the shiny tile floor.

I glanced around for the stairs or the elevator and saw the sign for the elevator. Not far to go as long as nobody was looking.

Silently, I rolled down the hallway to the elevator and pushed the button. If my luck held, the elevator would be empty when it came to pick me up.

I stood in the shadows holding my breath. The doors opened and the elevator *was* empty. Letting out the breath I was holding, I rolled in with my pole and hit the button to close the doors, then the second button to take me to the lobby.

When I reached the main floor and the doors opened, I walked out of the elevator without the IV pole. My hand was bleeding from jerking the needle out so quick, but a little pain

in my hand was a small price to pay for freedom. I'd endured a lot worse.

Right across the hall from the elevators I spotted washrooms—Men's next to ladies'. I lucked out and ducked into the men's and dressed as fast as I could in my filthy clothes.

Without the hospital gown, I wouldn't be so fuckin obvious. I'd look like a grungy guy who maybe did maintenance in the hospital. I left the washroom trying to maintain a normal pace, then I hurried across the lobby and out the front door.

I used to live in La Grange, but the way my memory was acting up, details were sketchy. There was one place I was sure of, and I knew the way without a single doubt in my battered brain. I even had a key to get in. I always kept it in my boot.

Chapter Seventeen

Tuesday, November 20th.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Annie's cell rang at four a.m. The head night nurse on duty at Fayette Memorial in La Grange was calling to tell her Travis was AWOL. She wasn't a bit surprised, and she also had no intention of getting up and waking up the rest of the household.

"You're a big boy, Travis, and you can take care of yourself. You'll call me when you're ready. I know you will."

Saint Agnes Shelter. La Grange.

Betty had a decent sleep at the shelter. She used the bathroom, then went to the dining area looking for the guy named Jeffrey. He wasn't anywhere around but she thought he might have gone for a walk already.

The night before he'd told her that walking on the river trails was the way he kept in shape. And he didn't look too bad for an old fart. He'd once been handsome and Betty figured he'd had his share of women.

He didn't show up for breakfast and she wondered about that but not for too long. She had business of her own to attend to. She'd used the phone book that was on the table in the sleeping area and written down the names and addresses of three different lawyers in La Grange.

That was her mission for today. Find a lawyer to do the paperwork. Once she had that piece of paper, all she needed was Travis's signature. She'd forge his signature if she had to. She'd done it before a couple of times when she'd emptied his bank accounts. Easy enough to do when he was fighting the war in the Middle East.

Coulter-Ross Ranch. La Grange.

Annie helped Riley with breakfast and when the kids came into the kitchen to eat, she didn't tell Tammy that Travis was missing from the hospital.

When Tammy went to the barn with the other kids to do her chores, Annie gave Lukas the news. "The hospital called around four in the morning and told me he was gone."

Lukas raised a dark eyebrow. "Should we go look for him?"

Annie shrugged. "If he doesn't want to be found, we'd be hard pressed to find him. We'll drive down and cruise around La Grange. Wouldn't hurt."

"Are we taking Tammy?"

"No. I'm not telling her anything until he turns up. It's better that way."

"What about Cutter?" asked Lukas.

"You call and tell Cutter to keep an eye out in Houston," said Annie, "but I don't think Travis will go back there. He's got too much of his memory back now to go there again."

"I'll give him a heads up just in case," said Lukas.

Annie was loading the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher when her cell rang in the pocket of her jeans. "Doctor Alderson?"

"Doctor Timson informed me that Travis has gone missing from Fayette Memorial, Mrs. Powell."

"Uh huh. I was just discussing that with Lukas."

"Would you have any idea where he might go?"

"None, but if Travis doesn't want to be found, we won't find him until he's ready. You can take that to the bank, Doctor. He's a black ops specialist and he won't leave a trail."

"I see. Travis is a lot more complicated than he led me to believe."

Annie laughed. "Did he give you that *explain it to me* look?"

“Yes, many times, and I was totally taken in.”

“I’ll call if I hear from him, Doctor. That’s all I can do.”

“Thank you.”

Mill Antiques. La Grange.

I was standing at the front window looking down on the common when I saw Annie’s Gladiator drive by. My heart skipped a beat thinking she’d figured out where I was and was coming up to the apartment.

Even if she did, she wouldn’t make me go back to the hospital. She loved me more than that—at least, I hoped she did.

If I was staying here until my wounds were healed, I’d need food and water. There was nothing in the fridge and hadn’t been for probably years.

Annie hasn’t rented this apartment since I left. It’s sitting here empty. Why? Is it because of me or because of Ray?

La Grange Business District.

The original stores that had supplied the needs of the citizens of La Grange a hundred years ago were built in a square around a grassy common still vigorously maintained by the town. A mecca for tourists and locals alike who needed a break from their shopping excursions.

The small park offered mature trees for shade, paths to cut through to the shops on the other side of the square, and lovely benches for reading or resting.

On her quest for legal representation to fraudulently bilk her son out of the money Carson Frost had left him, Betty Frost canvassed every lawyer’s office facing the town square.

Not one of them offered to work for free and Betty was sorely disappointed. She’d have to find another way to get

money to pay a lawyer. Drawing up a power of attorney was a simple thing and probably wouldn't cost too much.

Getting a job and saving the money so she could afford a lawyer never crossed her mind. Working to support herself was not something that had ever been in Betty Frost's wheelhouse. She had always lived off others. The definitive poster woman for freeloaders.

Tired of walking and in need of food and water, she sat down on one of the benches under an old oak shading the common. She closed her eyes and tried to come up with her next scheme.

Needing something to read to occupy his time when he wasn't sleeping, and not having anything at hand, Travis wandered over to the living room window that overlooked the street and the common beyond looking for a bookstore. He peered out the window at a gray November day and jumped back with a shout from the window.

He recoiled as if he'd been shot. His heart beating rapidly as he pulled the curtain back and peeked out again, he confirmed that Betty was sitting on one of the benches in the park. She was too close for comfort.

She's looking but she can't find me.

Travis smiled knowing he had the advantage. The second-floor apartment was like a fortress and would be easy to defend.

"You climb those stairs, Betty, and they'll be the last stairs you ever climb."

Saint Agnes Shelter. La Grange.

After striking out at every lawyers' office in town, Betty wandered through town and arrived back at the shelter in time for a free dinner.

Her legs ached and her feet were rubbed raw and bleeding from the cheap shoes, but her quest for money propelled her

forward.

The long metal table was almost full, and she didn't see any empty seats at first. Then down near the end she saw Jeffrey waving to her.

She smiled and walked towards him. He wasn't bad looking for an old guy and looked even better to her today. Guessing his age, Betty put him around fifty-six or seven. Younger than her by a wide margin.

"I saved you a seat." He grinned at her, and she got a good look at his teeth. They weren't his own.

"Thanks. It's more crowded today than yesterday." Betty sat down and started a conversation. "I looked for you at breakfast, but you weren't here."

"I needed an early start somewhere else. I don't come here too often. Just when I need to meet someone new."

"Couldn't you meet new people at a community center or someplace other than a homeless shelter?" asked Betty. "What kind of people are you looking for?"

He laughed. "Oh, you know, Betty. Interesting people like you. Who would've thought I'd meet a person like you here?"

"I wouldn't be here if I had someplace better to go," she mumbled.

"You sound a little down. How about a nice walk after dinner?"

"Sure. I'd like that. I enjoyed the walk we had last night."

Jeffrey pointed. "Time to line up for food. Let's go and get a good spot in line." He took Betty's hand and helped her up off her chair.

"You're a polite one." She smiled at him.

"I try, my dear. People trust you when you're polite."

They returned to the table with their plates of spaghetti and marinara sauce and a couple of slices of toast. It was enough to fill the gap until the next day.

Jeffrey was jovial all through dinner and Betty liked him. He was one of the most cheerful men in the entire shelter. Gave her cause to wonder about him.

Before she had a coffee with Jeffrey at the end of the meal, she had to go to the ladies' room. She came out of the stall and a bedraggled woman standing near the sink waved her over closer.

“Don't hang out with Jeffrey. He's dangerous.”

“Oh yeah? He doesn't seem too dangerous to me. I can take care of myself.”

“Heed my warning well, or you'll end up in hell like others who have gone before you.”

“Okay. Thanks for telling me.”

Betty left the restroom thinking the woman was a nutjob or a witch and she laughed.

Back at the table she sat down with Jeffrey and winked at him. “Did you miss me while I was gone?”

“More than you'll ever know, Betty.”

After coffee they played cards for an hour and then Jeffrey suggested a relaxing stroll along the banks of the Colorado. The river ran right through the middle of La Grange and was a highlight.

“It looks like another lovely moonlight night, Betty. Not too chilly out either.”

“I don't have a jacket. My clothes were stolen by an ugly old truck driver named Joe.”

Jeffrey laughed.

“You've got some good stories, Betty. A woman of the world. I guess that's why I like you so much.”

“I don't mind you too much either, Jeff. Can I call you Jeff or do you like Jeffrey better?”

He shrugged his broad shoulders. “Either or. My mother always called me Jeffrey. Never Jeff.”

When we get to the river, I'll ask him for a loan.

They left the shelter and strolled along the streets of La Grange until they got to the trailhead. There were three different paths to choose from but there didn't seem to be any other people around using the park area.

"No joggers," said Betty.

"Maybe they aren't as hardy as we are, my dear. We're from a different era where the population didn't baby themselves quite so much."

"You don't seem to be dependent on the system, Jeffrey. In fact, I find it hard to believe that you're homeless at all."

He laughed. "Is that right, Miss Betty? Aren't you the perceptive one?"

"If I'm right and you're only eating at the shelter for some kind of kick, what are you really all about?"

Jeffrey pulled her into a clump of bushes and tossed her onto the ground. "You asked, Betty, and now I'm going to give you the answer."

He smacked her hard across the face and made her squeal. "You're going to be a noisy one, are you? Just so happens I'm prepared for that."

Jeffrey pulled a roll of duct tape out of the pocket of his jacket and ripped a strip off.

"Let me up you fucking maniac."

Jeffrey laughed and taped her mouth shut.

"How did you know I liked feisty girls who fought me until..." he laughed... "until they can't fight anymore."

Betty twisted and struggled but with Jeffrey straddling her she couldn't get away from him. He was a big guy, possibly two hundred and fifty pounds and he easily proved how strong he was.

He took Betty's hands and pulled them up over her head and tied them at the wrists with a plastic tie. "There we go.

That will save you from thrashing around while I get you ready.”

Removing her clothes was a ritual of some sort and to Betty it seemed to take forever for the asshole to undress her.

Because of the tape over her mouth, calling for help wouldn't work. There was nothing she could do but lie on her back and wait for the inevitable.

She listened for the sound of dog walkers or joggers coming by, but there was nothing but the gurgling sound of the river a few feet away.

When Jeffrey deemed himself ready, he dropped his pants and raped her—several times. The old fart had stamina—or Viagra—one of the two.

Betty tried tuning him out as he did whatever he liked to her, but he was so aggressive he made it almost impossible for her not to struggle and fight against him.

When he'd finished with her sexually, he gathered up all her clothes and shoved them into a plastic bag. “You won't be needing these clothes any longer, Betty. I must say they are in need of washing.”

Betty kicked at him, and her wedgie sandal connected a good one on Jeffrey's left shin.

He retaliated with a fist to her belly, and she let out a groan muffled by the tape over her mouth.

“Come on, girl, no hard feelings.” He reached down and hauled a naked Betty to her feet.

“Time to take a little swim and clean up. The water this time of year must be a refreshing temperature.”

Betty shook her head and tried to struggle out of Jeffrey's grasp as he dragged her across the path to the bank of the river.

He continued pulling her along the bank until he came to a worn path that led down to the water. It was pitch dark, so he must have known exactly where that path was.

At that moment Betty realized much, much too late, that she'd played right into the hands of a serial killer.

He comes to the shelter to choose his victims.

When they reached the river, Jeffrey pushed Betty down on the mud, then he grabbed the tape and ripped it off her mouth.

Before she had a chance to scream, he had her by the back of the neck and forced her head under the water.

How long does it take to drown?

Betty never found out.

Ask Jeffrey. He kept track of each one of his victims.

Mill Antiques. La Grange.

After everyone was asleep at the ranch, Annie jumped into her truck and drove down to La Grange alone. She turned into the laneway that ran behind all the buildings in her business block and parked in the small area behind her store.

She climbed the outside staircase, set the bags of groceries down and let herself in with her key. She closed the back door and locked it, then tiptoed to the kitchen and set the groceries on the counter.

A couple of perishable things she put in the fridge, then she quietly slipped into the bedroom, removed her clothes and slid between the sheets. She cuddled up next to Travis's warm body.

Travis rolled over and pulled her into his arms.

“How did you know where I was, Annie-girl?”

“Where else would you be?”

Epilogue

Wednesday, November 21st.

Mill Antiques. La Grange.

Annie and Travis were drinking coffee at the small drop-leaf table in the kitchen when Rafe Cumberland called.

“Morning, Rafe,” said Annie. “What’s up?”

“A body was fished out of the Colorado under the bridge in La Grange.”

“Anybody I know?” asked Annie.

“I’m not sure you know her. Elizabeth Frost. She has a police record and I believe Travis is her next of kin.”

“That’s right. Betty Frost is his mother.”

“I have to do a notification and I don’t know how to get a hold of Travis.”

“He’s sitting across the table from me, Rafe. I can tell him for you.”

“Would you? Thanks.”

“Any details you can share?”

“Raped and then drowned,” said Rafe. “No suspects yet. I do have a couple of similars though. I can work with those.”

“Let Blaine know if you need a hand. We’ll be glad to help you catch her killer.”

“Who’s killer?” Travis asked when Annie ended the call.

“Your mother is dead, sugar. I don’t have a clue why she’d be in La Grange, but her body was found in the river. Raped and murdered.”

Travis made a face. “Raped? That’s hard to believe. What kind of sicko would want to rape Betty Frost?”

“No clue, honey. Anyway, I’m sorry for your loss.”

“I never had a mother so I can’t grieve for one.”

A couple of weeks passed and when Travis was ready, Annie took him back to the ranch to recover. Tammy fussed over him and made sure he had everything he needed. She was thrilled to take care of him.

Lukas drove him to all his out-patient sessions at the VA hospital in Austin, and little by little Travis came back to himself.

When Travis was well enough, he and Lukas went back to the farm in Pecan Valley and packed up everything they had left behind, and it was a truckful.

Driving the Harley flatbed, the twins, Nevada and Lucky, went with them and brought all the abandoned bikes back to Annie’s Harley dealership for resale.

Annie cancelled the lease on the strip mall in San Angelo and managed to get Travis’s last month of rent back for him.

Little by little as Travis went to his treatment sessions with Doctor Alderson, and took his medication, he got his memory back and he knew everybody again.

He decided to stay on the ranch with Annie because he belonged with her, and Tammy adapted well to having a stepmother and being part of a family.

Travis and Tammy saddled their horses often and rode around Annie’s ranch enjoying their time together.

Betty Frost’s killer was never found.

The case remains unsolved.

Author notes from Carolina:

I sincerely hope you enjoyed reading Last Ride, book four in Taming the Stallion series. This new series follows Travis Bristol as he struggles with PTSD and tries to reshape his life in Montana and Texas.

If you have a moment to leave a quick rating or review on [Amazon](#), I'd love to know what you thought about the book and I'm sure other readers would too.

The next book in the series is Stormy Ride, book five. Find it here on [Amazon](#).

If you'd like to know more about my other series drop by my [Facebook page](#).

To access my author page on Amazon and see all my books published to date, [click here](#).

Carolina Mac is the author of over a hundred and eighty-five books in fourteen different series. The Regulators, Quantrall PI, The Blackmore Agency, The Night Vipers, The Creed, The Agency: Young Guns, Paradise Park, Broken Spur, The Moonbeam Chronicles, and the Taming the Stallion series.

Also, four Novella series: Heaven's Gate, Midlife Magic, Suddenly Magic, and The Sabbats.

She's the co-author with her daughter JL Madore/Auburn Tempest of Misty's Magick and Mayhem series. Being translated into German. The first seven books available now.

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Note: For reading order: Quantrall books 14 & 15 follow Backwater – Book 15 in The Blackmore Agency Series.

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