

Multi-Series Bestselling Author

JO GRAFFORD

Heart Lake

**MOUNTAIN
OFFIRE**



MOUNTAIN OF FIRE

Heart Lake, Book #10

JO GRAFFORD



CONTENTS

[Get A Free Book!](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter 1: Singles Party Invitation](#)

[Chapter 2: Hard Decisions](#)

[Chapter 3: Hostile Customer](#)

[Chapter 4: Vandalized](#)

[Chapter 5: His Anti-Valentine](#)

[Chapter 6: Unexpected Proposal](#)

[Chapter 7: A Bitter Complaint](#)

[Chapter 8: Vote of Confidence](#)

[Chapter 9: Bouquets and Bodyguards](#)

[Chapter 10: Past and Present Collide](#)

[Chapter 11: Loud Silence](#)

[Chapter 12: If a Tree Falls](#)

[Chapter 13: Sweet Promises](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Sneak Preview: Night of Mercy](#)

[Join Cuppa Jo Readers!](#)

[Get A Free Book!](#)

[Sneak Preview: Damaged Hero](#)

[Sneak Preview: Mr. Not Right for Her](#)

[Sneak Preview: The Plus One Rescue](#)

[Also by Jo Grafford](#)

[About Jo](#)

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CHAPTER 1: SINGLES PARTY
INVITATION

“**W**e’re here, sweetie, and everything is going to be okay. I promise.” Ella Clearwater twisted around in the front seat to check on her six-year-old son. He was still pale from his seizure. Unfortunately, she still had no idea what had caused it.

“I’m fine, Mom.” Jacob unbuckled his seat belt, and slid out of his booster seat. His dark gaze eagerly took in their surroundings.

They were in the gravel parking lot of the clinic on the Comanche reservation, about a quarter mile down the road from her brothers’ auto body shop in Heart Lake, Texas. Chief Lighthorse had led them there in his shiny black Land Rover.

The one-story adobe building had been added on to several times, and a white portable unit of some sort was parked next to it. The rambling structure was tucked so snugly into the foothills of the mountains that she’d have probably never found it on her own. Pines, cedars, and spruces were blocking the sun, casting long, thin shadows across the parking lot.

“I know you are, baby. But we’re going to let the doctor have a quick peek at you, anyway. Just to be safe.” For the bazillionth time in the past two years, Ella wished her husband were still alive. It was exhausting being the single parent of a six-year-old who was allergic to so many things — everything from bee venom to peanuts to strawberries. As soon as her health insurance benefits kicked in at her new job, she was

going to schedule a long-overdue appointment for him with an allergist.

“You’re the only one who’s worried, Mom.”

She struggled to hold back a bittersweet chuckle. “When did you become such a smart-aleck?” Though he was small for his age, he was older than his years on the inside.

He shrugged unconcernedly. “Maybe it was something I ate?”

He sounded so much like his father that she burst out laughing. “Such a chip off the old block!” He was growing up way too fast.

He impatiently rattled the passenger door handle of her silver Volvo, reminding her that he wasn’t going anywhere until she deactivated the child lock feature. It hadn’t come standard on the older model sedan. She had her in-laws to thank for the upgrade. It was the one nice thing they’d done for her after Jack died. It had been downhill from there. They were barely on speaking terms now.

“Careful, kiddo.” She pushed open her door and stepped into the parking lot to open his door.

“You should let me unlock my own door,” he complained, hopping to the ground. “I’m not a baby anymore.”

“Is that so, Jacob Michael Clearwater?” As a blast of mountain wind careened over them, she shivered, wrapping her arms around her quilted lilac jacket.

“Yes, ma’am.” He raised his stubborn little jaw at her. It was squared off at the end like his father’s had been and clenched with impatience.

“Then where’s your coat, mister?” She gave him a mildly scolding mom look.

“In the car.”

“How about you put it on?”

“But I’m not cold!” He gave a bounce of impatience. “You had the heater turned up all the way. I was roasting back

there.” He jammed one small thumb in the direction of the backseat.

“Then your sweat is about to turn into icicles,” she warned, reaching around him to snatch up the red winter coat he’d discarded on the floorboard. “Arms up! In they go,” she ordered, holding up his jacket. “Otherwise those child locks are gonna remain on until you’re thirty.”

“Mooooom!” Jacob’s dark eyebrows rose incredulously beneath his navy NFL ball cap. The Cowboys’ star logo was emblazoned across the front of it. He didn’t know the first thing about football, but some classmate back in South Dakota had informed him he had to become a Cowboys fan when he moved to Texas. “I’ll be as old as Santa Claus by then with a long, white beard and—”

“Nice try, short stack, but thirty isn’t that old,” a husky baritone interrupted.

Another shiver worked its way down Ella’s spine. This time, it wasn’t from the cold. It was from the way Chief Lighthorse’s voice seemed to resonate straight through her. He sounded confident and reassuring in a take-charge manner that made her miss her husband all over again. She wasn’t sure why. He looked nothing like the street-racing mechanic Jack had been.

Jacob hastily finished jamming his arms inside his coat, but he twisted away from Ella before she could zip it up. “We’re gonna be old and gray by the time we make it inside,” he informed the tribal chief in a long-suffering voice, “‘cause my mom always has to comb my hair first, tuck in my shirt, then give me a spit bath—”

“Just for that, I’m keeping the child locks on until you’re forty.” Because Ella knew it would irritate him even more, she threw her arms around Jacob’s middle, bear hug style, and swung him in the direction of the clinic entrance. It was also a good excuse to tear her gaze away from the chief’s dark good looks.

He was four or five inches taller than her, with hard bronze features and sooty hair that hung well past his shoulders.

Unlike their ancestors, however, he wasn't in buckskins. His tall, lean frame was encased in a charcoal pinstripe suit from the poshest clothing boutique in Heart Lake. She knew it for a fact, since she was the seamstress who'd altered the hem of his trousers.

Jacob giggled and wrestled out of her arms. "You only treat me like this because I'm small for my age," he grouched.

Sadness twanged inside her chest at the realization he was all too aware of that fact. He'd been born nearly six weeks prematurely and had been working hard to catch up to the size of his peers ever since.

"You have an answer for everything, don't you, kid?" Giving him another squeeze hug, she hustled him the remaining short distance to the covered portico in front of the double glass doors.

He tipped his head back to send a cocky smile up at her. "It's because I pay attention in school."

Their tall escort reached around them to open the door. Humor infused his dark gaze as it met hers.

"I know what you're thinking," she muttered as she herded her son past him into the building.

"Somehow I doubt it." His admiring expression made her temperature spike several degrees, instantly halting her shivers.

"I'm well aware of how awful my parenting skills are." She hastily finger-combed Jacob's hair as they approached a rustic wooden check-in booth. She didn't want to even think about how wind-blown her own hair must be. It was pulled back into a ponytail, which helped some, but there were a few stray strands blocking her vision. She hastily blew them out of her eyes.

"See what I mean, sir?" Her smart-mouthed son pointed knowingly at his hair that she was still straightening.

An aging Native woman was the only other person in the waiting room. She was watching them curiously over the top of her magazine.

Wayne nodded at her.

She nodded back somberly, then ducked back behind her magazine.

He glanced down at Jacob. “You made it inside before your next birthday. Pretty sure that means you lost your argument with your mom.”

“Good point, sir.” Looking blissfully unconcerned about that fact, Jacob shrugged back out of his coat and handed it to his mother. “Time to thaw out our sweat-cicles,” he announced, flapping his arms like a bird.

A blush warmed Ella’s face as her son’s comment made Chief Lighthorse’s gaze return to her. “Please don’t ask, Chief.” She shot him a rueful look.

“Wayne,” he corrected.

“Are you sure?” she asked nervously. She immediately regretted the question, knowing it made her sound every bit like the frazzled, threadbare, emotionally wiped out single mom that she was.

“Very sure.” He winked at her. “I can show you my birth certificate if you require proof.”

She blushed harder. “I was only trying to show proper respect for your position.”

“Thanks, but most folks really do call me—”

“Wayne!” A short, curvy woman in blue scrubs sang out his name as she stepped around the corner. The silver stethoscope draped around her neck dangled against one of her blonde braids. “I thought I heard voices out here. Sorry we’re a little short-handed today, but what’s new?” Her gaze flitted curiously over Ella and settled on Jacob. “Hey there, kiddo!”

“Hi!” Jacob beamed a smile at her. He loved adult attention and could be quite a conversationalist. “I’m Jacob.” He pointed proudly at Ella. “And this is my—”

“Hold that thought, sugar.” She held up a finger with a red-and-white striped fingernail. “I’ll be back in two snaps to visit with y’all. Come on, Winnie. I’ve got an exam room ready for

you.” She beckoned at the woman with the magazine, inviting her into the patient hallway.

Jacob snickered as they disappeared around the corner. “I like the doctor. She’s nice.” He snapped his fingers twice while staring at the check-in desk, as if expecting her to magically reappear.

Wayne remained standing beside the check-in desk, looking every inch like a tribal chief with his arms folded and legs slightly spread. “Like I said, most folks call me Wayne.”

Ella met his probing gaze. “Your P.A. isn’t what I expected.”

“Meaning she’s not Comanche?”

“Yes.”

He unfolded his arms. “It’s one of the reasons my tribal council is currently disgruntled with me.”

“Only one of the reasons, huh?” Ella caught her lower lip between her teeth, amazed that an important guy like him would confide something like that in an outsider like her.

“In the end, they approved my hiring decision. It’s not easy finding providers willing to serve on the rez.”

She swallowed uncertainly, trying to think of something interesting or clever to say in return. “It sounds like you were wise to hold your ground on the issue.”

“Assuming I don’t lose my job over it, among other things.”

“Such us?” Though it wasn’t any of her business, she sincerely hoped he didn’t plan to leave her dangling like that.

“How much time I spend helping run my family’s rodeo company.”

Her eyes widened in amazement. “You clearly lead a more exciting life than I do.”

“Not from what I’ve seen so far.” Though he didn’t crack a smile, he managed to sound both amused and admiring at the same time.

She assumed he was talking about Jacob's medical emergency on the side of the road earlier.

His dark gaze roved back to her son. "It can't be easy being a single parent."

How did you know I was—oh, right! Jacob had more or less spilled his life story to Wayne after he'd pressed the EpiPen into his leg.

"He's a handful," she agreed, smiling at the way Jacob was still snapping his fingers. From the look on his face, he no longer believed the P.A. would return in two snaps. She inwardly debated whether he was old enough to understand the definition of a hyperbole.

"According to my mother, parenting isn't for wimps." The way he was looking at her made awareness zing between them.

She shifted from one foot to the other. "She sounds like a very wise lady."

His dark brows rose a fraction. "She's full of one-liners alright. According to her, some of them are as worthless as gum on a boot heel."

"Oh, wow! I take it, she's a southern belle?" *How interesting!*

"Yes. She was raised off the rez. It's a long story. I'll introduce you sometime. Not sure when. Now that Dad is retired, they go on a lot of cruises."

She blinked, realizing that the Whitakers must be wealthy, something else that probably didn't go over very well with his tribal council. Most Native American reservations were plagued with poverty.

"So, um...what did your dad do before he retired?"

"He was chief before me."

"Did he just hand the job down to you, then?" She wasn't sure how that stuff worked, since she'd never before held an official membership card to any tribe.

“Not exactly.” Before he could explain further, the P.A. returned.

Her elderly patient was clutching a bottle of pills. She solemnly paid for her visit, painstakingly counting out the dollar bills, then left the building without a single word or smile. She did a good amount of staring at Ella and Jacob, however, on her slow amble across the waiting room.

“Hello, Jacob!” The P.A. moved around the counter to squat down in front of him. “I’m Primrose, like the flower, but most people just call me Prim.”

“Hello, Dr. Prim. I’ve never met anyone with red-and-white striped fingernails before.” Jacob held out a hand in a chivalrous gesture.

Ella’s heart fluttered with motherly pride over his good manners — so much so that she didn’t have the heart to correct the title he’d bestowed upon Prim. She was probably the closest thing the rez had to a doctor, anyway.

“There’s a first time for everything, kid.” Prim shook his hand. “How are you feeling? Better, I hope?”

He frowned thoughtfully at her. “How’d you know I’m the one who came to see you?”

“You don’t miss much. I like that.” She wagged a finger at him. “So, here’s the thing. Our friend, Wayne, over there,” she angled her head at the tribal chief, who was still standing beside the check-in booth, “texted me to let me know you were on your way.”

“Oh.” Jacob cocked his head critically at the tribal chief. “I hope you weren’t texting and driving, sir. My mom says it’s unsafe. She gets very mad at other drivers when they’re doing it.”

“Your mom is right.” Laughter peeled out of Prim. “Texting and driving is a big no-no.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially. “I’m gonna let you in on a little secret.” She cupped a hand over her mouth and spoke in a stage whisper. “Our chief of police hands out tickets like candy to distracted drivers. Most folks on the rez wouldn’t dare try it.”

“Good.” Jacob’s frown evaporated. “My mom won’t hafta ___”

“You still haven’t told me how you feel, kiddo.” Prim produced a pencil light and shone it in his eyes, probably to distract him.

“Better.” He gave an impatient bounce. “The only reason I’m here is because my mom likes to worry about me.”

Prim smiled sympathetically. “Moms are good at that.” She stood and waved for him and Ella to follow her. “Bet she’ll stop worrying if you let me take your temperature and give you a quick exam.” She winked at him. “Just to prove you’re feeling as good as you say you are.”

“Let’s do it!” He trotted behind her like an energetic little puppy. Gazing at the collection of framed horse paintings on the wall, he announced, “I want to be a doctor like you someday.”

“Cool!” Prim glanced laughingly down at him. “If you don’t mind me asking, why do you want to be a doctor?”

“To help kids like me so their moms can stop worrying so much.”

“That’s a good reason.”

Smiling at their conversation, Ella paused at the entrance of the hallway, watching as the P.A. walked her son down to the triage station. There was one thing she needed to take care of before joining them.

She turned impulsively to the handsome tribal chief. “Thank you for bringing us here. I’m going to find a way to repay you.”

“There’s no need. Like I mentioned out on the highway, I’m in your brothers’ debt.”

“And now I’m in yours.” Apparently, her brothers had been charitable while servicing the cars of a few tribal members. However, she’d never been one to ride on their coattails.

“If you insist.” He didn’t look too concerned about collecting from her.

“I do.” She was poor, but she didn’t like the idea of being beholden to anyone.

“Fine. I own a closet full of suits, which means there’s always something to alter or mend.”

“I can do that.” She latched on to his offer, hoping he’d throw enough work her way to cover the cost of their visit to the clinic.

He drew his cell phone from the pocket of his trousers and handed it to her. “I’ll need a way to reach you.”

She paused a beat before accepting his phone. It was the smoothest way any guy had ever asked for her phone number before. Technically, he hadn’t asked. He was just assuming she’d give it to him. She could politely refuse, of course, telling him to bring his alterations by the boutique.

But no. That wouldn’t work. It would look like she was cutting her new boss, Chanel Remington, out of the percentage that was due to her boutique. As Ella started typing her contact information into his phone, she was careful to clarify her expectations. “Just make sure you’re only having me do things you wouldn’t normally have done at Modello’s.”

“No problem.” He looked pleased by her request.

She finished typing and handed his phone back. It sort of took her breath away to realize she’d just given her number to a tribal chief. A chief! A single and crazy good-looking one, at that.

Don’t go there.

She mentally reminded herself she wasn’t in the market for a boyfriend. And even if she was, the man standing in front of her was so out of her league that it was laughable. She yanked her thoughts back to safer ground.

Jacob is my whole world. It was something most single guys would never understand. No way was she going to toss her precious son from one babysitter to the next, just so she

could carve out some semblance of a social life. She loved being his mother and didn't want to miss out on a single minute of his amazing childhood.

Silence settled between them as Wayne slid his cell phone back into his pocket. He still didn't act like he was in any hurry to leave, which she found surprising. Then again, he might only be lingering to make sure her son was going to be okay.

"I think Jacob is good to go now." She smiled shyly at him. "I don't want to keep you from anything important." She could only imagine how jam-packed his schedule was.

The warmth in his gaze faded into steely determination. "Nothing is more important than making sure my people are taken care of."

Your people? She shot him a look of surprise. "I'm not a member of any tribe, Wayne." It was probably something she should've disclosed up front. She hoped that didn't make him regret helping her.

He snorted. "You're Comanche, aren't you?"

"Half Comanche. My mother was...well, not Comanche." She stopped herself in the nick of time from admitting that her mother had actually been a Remington, born and raised by the snootiest founding family of Heart Lake. She'd been disowned the day she'd eloped to South Dakota with a dirt-poor mechanic. It was a can of worms Ella hadn't come to town with any intention of reopening. It was possible that the Remingtons weren't even aware of her existence.

"Was?" Wayne repeated carefully.

"My parents are gone." They'd worked themselves into early graves. "It's just me and my brothers now. And Jacob, of course." There was no point in mentioning her in-laws. They'd stopped speaking to her the moment she informed them she was moving to Texas. She took no joy in the fact that she'd taken their only grandchild out of state. However, she and Jacob were in desperate need of a fresh start. South Dakota

held nothing but sad memories for them. He was still so young. He deserved better than that.

Her in-laws would forgive her someday.

I hope.

Wayne was silent for a moment. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks.” A giggle from Jacob made Ella glance in his direction. Seeing her son smile was so much better than absorbing the pity that was probably stamped all over Wayne Whitaker’s face.

“Just to be clear, your tribal membership—”

“Or lack thereof,” she reminded sharply.

“Doesn’t make you any less my people,” he informed her smoothly. “We share a proud heritage, whether or not you ever step foot on the rez again.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “I’m sure I’ll be back since I’m in your debt.” How else was she going to pick up and deliver his mending?

“We traded favors, Ella. That’s it.”

She knew it was more than that, but she didn’t see any point in arguing about it.

“All done,” Prim announced exuberantly. She gave Jacob a hand while he hopped down from the triage chair.

Ella considered it a good sign that the lovely P.A. hadn’t seen any need to escort him back to an exam room.

“All of his vitals are good,” Prim added as she walked him back to Ella. She winked down at him. “The only thing I found was a bit of orneriness, but that’s a common condition in children. Nothing much to worry about.”

“Ornery.” Jacob repeated with a grin. “That’s what my Uncle Jasper calls me over the phone.” He proceeded to explain to Prim that he had not one, not two, but three uncles — all of whom had names that began with the letter J. “That’s what the J stands for in the Triple J Auto Body Shop,” he finished on an exultant note. Though he usually only got to see

his uncles during the holidays, he never tired of bragging about how many of them he had.

“Oh, my goodness!” Prim’s expression lit with interest. “I just realized you’re talking about Jace and Jalen Countryman.”

“And Jasper,” Jacob reminded quickly.

Prim nodded in bemusement. “I don’t see as much of him.”

“That’s because he races monster trucks.” Jacob’s eyes glowed with pride as he launched into a lengthy description of his favorite uncle’s exploits.

Prim continued to nod and make occasional one-syllable comments. However, Jacob didn’t require much in the way of encouragement to keep talking. He was very capable of making noise when he was the only person in the room.

“Hey!” Ella finally had to interrupt him mid-sentence. “I need to thank Dr. Prim for taking care of you, which means you need to take a deep breath.”

He obediently filled his lungs and puffed out his cheeks like a chipmunk.

“Over there.” Ella pointed toward the window. “I want you to go count how many mountains you see, then come back and tell me.”

“Ha! That’s not hard. I can count to a hundred.” At her warning look, he jogged over to do as he was told.

“There.” Ella chuckled, returning her attention to Prim. “I bought us about a thirty-second break. You’re welcome.”

Prim joined in her laughter. “Guess I better talk fast. Here’s an extra EpiPen to take with you.” She didn’t look Ella’s way as she held it out. She was too busy shaking a finger at Wayne. “You are a hard man to pin down. I’ve been trying to catch up with you all week.”

Ella silently pocketed the EpiPen, feeling like Prim had pulled a fast one on her. There was no way she was refusing the EpiPen, though. They were expensive, and she never knew the next time her son would need one.

“Why? Is everything okay?” Frowning at Prim, Wayne lowered his voice. “I didn’t see hide or hair of Chayton Dunraven the whole time we’ve been here today.”

“He called in sick. Again.” Prim’s voice was tight with disapproval. “I swear if his daddy wasn’t on the tribal council, I’d be begging you to fire his lazy hide and replace him.” Her expression relaxed into a smile once again. “But that’s not why I’ve been hoping to run into you. Here’s the deal. I’m throwing an Anti-Valentine’s Day Party at my place, and I want you to come.”

Ella idly wondered why Prim hadn’t just texted him about the party. Unless, of course, she didn’t have Wayne’s number. *Which I now do.* She could only draw one conclusion from that. They weren’t dating. It didn’t rule out the possibility that Prim had hopes in his direction, though.

“Okay. I’ll bite.” Wayne studied her in fascination. “What’s an Anti-Valentine’s Day party?”

She spread her hands. “For singles, of course. Instead of moping Valentine’s Day away over our failure to find true love, we get to mope about it together over a potluck dinner and some games. The party starts at six-thirty. Feel free to stay as long as you want.”

He raised one eyebrow at her. “Group moping, eh? That’s a new one for me.”

“I’m kidding.” She lightly swatted his shoulder. “We’re gonna have a blast, though. I was able to reserve the community room at my apartment. You should come. Oh, and you’re welcome to invite a friend. The more, the merrier.” She eyed Ella speculatively. “I don’t see a wedding ring on this one.”

“Oh, um...I’m widowed, actually. Not sure that counts as single.” Ella reached inside the neckline of her sweatshirt and produced her gold wedding band. She was wearing it like a pendant on a simple gold chain. “I had five amazing years with Jacob’s father before we lost him.” The fact that he’d been killed in an off-roading accident was yet another reason

she'd decided to move to Texas. Jace and Jalen were hoping she could talk Jasper into retiring from monster truck racing.

"Yep, that qualifies as single," Prim assured matter-of-factly. "I'm sorry for your loss, though. Not trying to make light of that." She shot a concerned look in Jacob's direction. "I'm sure it's been hard on your son, too."

He'd long since stopped counting mountains. Now he was huffing on the glass and drawing in the fog he created.

"Thanks. We're getting through it." As Ella pulled a travel pack of wet wipes from her coat pocket, she avoided meeting Wayne's eye, afraid of the pity she'd find there. "Thanks for the invitation to your party. I'll talk to my brothers about babysitting."

"Perfect. Number, please!" Prim waved a cell phone in a floral case at her. "And quit worrying about the window. I'll wipe it down later."

For the second time in the space of a few minutes, Ella gave out her phone number. This time, she didn't hesitate. She had a feeling she and Prim were going to become good friends. "If I can make it, what do you want me to bring?" She handed back the phone.

"Anything you want." Prim did a little jig of excitement. "It's a potluck. Surprise us."

After two straight years of mourning, the thought of attending a party felt like a breath of fresh air to Ella. "I want to come. Just have to make sure one of my brothers is available to hang out with Jacob."

"If not, just bring him with you."

"No way!" Ella's eyes widened in surprise, though she was fairly sure Prim was only kidding.

"Oh, come on! He'll be the life of the party." Prim snickered.

"That's what I'm afraid of." Ella smiled affectionately in his direction. "Seriously, though. We moved into town to

spend more time with family. His uncles will jump at the chance of a playdate.”

“Lucky them.” Prim sounded a tad envious. “Feel free to add me to your list of babysitters. I love kids.”

“Be careful what you offer,” Ella teased, though she had no intention of cashing in on Prim’s offer. For one thing, she couldn’t afford babysitters. Plus, her various jobs and his school kept her away from him long enough. She jealously guarded what little mother-son time they could scrape up on evenings, weekends, and holidays.

“I know what I’m getting into. We’ve met. Remember?” Prim joked back.

The front doors opened, and a patient in a wheelchair rolled into the room.

“A-a-a-and I’m back to work.” Prim’s smile grew wistful. “I wish we had more time to visit, which we *will* if you make it to my party.”

“Okay. You talked me into it!” The odds of Ella’s brothers being available were excellent. Though they dated some, none of them were married, and she knew for a fact that Jace was between relationships.

“Woohoo,” Prim crowed as she faced the newest arrivals.

“Don’t forget to text me your address,” Ella called after her, since she hadn’t gotten Prim’s number in return yet.

Prim waved a hand to acknowledge the request as she started checking in the patient.

To Ella’s surprise and mild discomfort, Wayne walked with her to the window to collect Jacob.

She already had her packet of wet wipes open. There was no way she was leaving a slobbery mess at the front of the clinic for Prim to clean up.

“Sorry.” She gave Wayne a wry look. “Little boys can be pretty gross.”

“It’s a gift.” Before she realized what he was up to, he’d swiped the package of wet wipes from her. Pulling out two, he reached around Jacob to stuff one in his hand. “Time to clean up, short stack.”

Jacob pointed at his artwork. “I made some more mountains,” he announced gleefully.

“I can see that.” Wayne stooped to bring his head level with her son’s head. “If you line up your tallest mountain with your mom’s car outside, you’ll be looking in the direction of one very special mountain.”

“What’s so special about it?” Jacob wiggled from side to side as he scanned the distant line of mountains to locate the one in question.

“The way the sun sets behind it every evening makes it look like the tip of the mountain is on fire.”

“Neat!” Jacob sounded suitably impressed.

“I’m convinced it’s the eighth wonder of the world.” Wayne glanced over his shoulder at Ella. “You should talk your mom into coming back to see it some evening.”

Jacob gasped in delight. “Can we, Mom?”

“Um...sure,” she answered vaguely. Up to this point in the conversation, she’d been telling herself not to read anything into Wayne Whitaker’s attention, but now she wasn’t so sure. Was he flirting with her? It was starting to feel like it.

He held her gaze for an extended moment before turning around to help her son clean off the window.

Jacob groaned in mock pain as his artwork disappeared — loudly enough for Ella to shush him. “How will I ever find the mountain of fire now?” he protested.

“I’ll show you,” Wayne promised, though he was no longer looking at Jacob. His dark gaze silently probed Ella’s.

It felt like he was silently asking her a question.

She wished she knew what it was. To keep the conversation going, she asked, “Have you decided if you’re

going to the Anti-Valentine's Day Party?"

"I don't normally do parties." He hurried ahead of her to the Volvo. He waited until she unlocked it before opening the doors for her and Jacob.

His answer brought on a ripple of disappointment. "Because of your position?"

"That and, unlike your son, I'm definitely *not* the life of the party."

She wished she had the courage to tell him that she liked him exactly the way he was. A woman in her humble shoes would take a tall, dark knight in a black Land Rover any day over a flirty jokester.

Theoretically, of course, since she wasn't looking for a guy to date.

She took a seat behind the wheel, trying not to be too disappointed over the fact he would not be in attendance at Prim's Anti-Valentine's Day party.

She tipped her head back against the seat to meet his gaze again. "You don't smile much, do you?" He hadn't smiled once the entire time they'd been together today.

"Smiling is not in my job description."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "It makes it harder to tell when a person is joking." Which she was pretty sure he was.

The knowing glint was back in his eyes. "Like I said, I'm not much of a party animal."

"You should come, anyway," she urged impulsively. "I'm pretty rusty at partying myself." She let out a rueful sigh. "Okay, that's a massive understatement. I almost never go to parties." Poor single moms didn't have the time or the luxury of doing much socializing.

"Fine. I'll be there."

His sudden capitulation made her heart skip a beat. "Seriously?"

“On one condition.” He propped his elbow on her car window and leaned closer. “I’m only staying if you show up. I refuse to be the only non-party animal there.”

“Deal.” She gave him a tremulous smile. It almost felt like he was asking her on a date. They’d be surrounded by other people at Prim’s place, but still.

He shut her door and rapped lightly on the top of her car with both hands before stepping back.

As she backed from her parking spot and drove away, her heart raced with anticipation about seeing him again.



CHAPTER 2: HARD DECISIONS

WAYNE

Valentine's Day

Wayne rolled out of bed, unable to believe he'd allowed ten days to go by without so much as texting Ella.

Nice going, Chief.

She'd been constantly on his mind, though. Not that she had any way of knowing that from his radio silence. He was a fool for not following up with her sooner. As sweet and attractive a woman as she was, the other single guys in town were going to notice her, too. If he wanted to remain on her radar, he was going to have to step up his game.

Unfortunately, putting out fires on the rez had required every spare moment of his time lately. The old-timers on the tribal council were fighting hard against the younger members, who were negotiating to open a Saturday morning market. It was a senseless argument, since there was literally no downside to hosting the market. Native American artisans and craftsmen had been begging for one for years. It would allow them to gather in a single place on the reservation to display their wares to the public — handmade jewelry, baskets, pottery, blankets and rugs, flowers and herbs, beef and bison jerky, hand-dipped candles, and so on. The list was endless.

He had no doubt that customers would flock from the surrounding towns and communities to purchase the handmade Comanche goods, putting much-needed income into their pockets. However, the old-timers were complaining that it

would bring too much noise and traffic to the rez. And too many non-Native Americans.

Wayne's gut told him that what they were really objecting to was change. It was going to take a miracle to convince them of the merits of opening a market before it came to a vote in a couple of weeks.

In the meantime, he had a high school to help run.

My day job.

It had been paying his bills for the past six years. He'd been an assistant high school principal before he'd been a tribal chief — something else the old-timers had been griping about ever since they'd voted him in. They were demanding his immediate resignation from Heart Lake High. As far as they were concerned, he'd given the school more than enough time to find his replacement.

Tough decisions ahead.

What the old-timers didn't see was that his position at the high school was the most valuable connection the rez had with the neighboring town of Heart Lake.

A thought struck Wayne that made him pause beside his king-sized bed while buttoning his white dress shirt.

I could use my resignation from the school as a bargaining chip.

He had no idea where the idea had come from, only that it might prove to be the perfect solution to a lot of things — his desperate need for a more humane schedule, for one thing. If he played his cards right, the council might even lay off his back a little about his family's rodeo business.

All he needed to do was type up a resignation letter and promise to turn it in *after* they agreed to support the Saturday morning market initiative. Longing for someone to soundboard the idea off of, he moved to his nightstand to unplug his cell phone from its charger. Once upon a time, his first thought would've been to call his best friend, Aiyanna. Not any more, though. She was married now.

His next thought was to call Ella Clearwater. Though she'd made it clear to him that she was *just a seamstress*, he'd watched her interact with both her son and Prim. She'd impressed him as an incredible person with an incredibly kind heart who possessed excellent people skills.

As he scrolled through his address book to her name, he wondered what she would think if he called her out of the blue. Maybe it would be better to talk to her in person. He mentally ran over his appointments for the day. A few minutes from now, Head Principal Hope Hawling would host an hour-long administrative staff meeting in her office. Immediately afterward, he had two follow-up appointments with students concerning discipline issues. His schedule was wide open during lunch.

He could easily squeeze in a visit to Modello's, then grab a sandwich at a drive-through on the way back to school. Unless Ella happened to take off for lunch at the same time, in which case he'd miss her altogether.

Bummer!

There was only one way to make sure that didn't happen. He needed to call her first.

After a moment of deliberation, he tapped a few buttons to add her to his speed dial list. He didn't believe in stuff like love at first sight, and he'd long since stopped believing in fairytales. However, his first encounter with Ella Clearwater had stirred feelings in him that didn't seem to be going away anytime soon.

I should ask her out.

He had no idea if she'd say yes. He was several years older than her — thirty-one years to her twenty-five years. Yeah, he'd asked around about her and her brothers and discovered she was the youngest of the siblings. He'd also learned that her husband had been killed in an off-roading accident. It sounded like the guy had been a bit of a thrill seeker. Wayne wasn't sure if that would count in his favor or be a point against his quieter, more serious temperament.

Only one way to find out.

He mashed the speed dial button for Ella.

She picked up on the second ring. “Hey, Wayne!” Her voice was a little breathless, like she’d had to dash for the phone or something. “Is everything alright?”

It is now. It was so good hearing her voice that he closed his eyes and allowed the soothing sweetness of it to wash over him. It was nice that she’d asked if he was alright. Really nice.

“It’s been a busy few weeks.” He wasn’t one to talk about his feelings, but there was something about her that made him want to open up a little more than usual. “I feel bad that I haven’t called you sooner. I wanted to.”

“Oh?” There was a nervous hitch to her voice that made him worry he might’ve opened up a little too much too soon.

He hastily changed the subject. “Popped a button off of one of my blazers yesterday.”

“Oh, the horror!” Her musical chuckle surrounded him like a gentle caress.

“And two more off of a pair of dress shirts last week,” he added ruefully. “It’s because I like to roll up my sleeves.”

“Sounds like you’re hard on your clothes, Vice Principal Lighthorse.” Though she was clearly teasing him, her voice held both empathy and warmth.

“Ah. You found out about my other job.” He was pleased to hear she’d been asking around about him, too.

“Turns out the boutique is a hotbed for gossip.” Another breathy chuckle peeled out of her.

“I could’ve told you that.” He wasn’t the least bit surprised to hear it. “Your boss and her mother have an iron in every fire in town.”

“Chanel insists that being in the know is necessary for her new position on the city council.”

“I’m sure it helps that Stella knows everybody in town who’s anybody.” The mother-daughter team was a lethal

combination when it came to information gathering. Since they were friends of his, Wayne had tapped into that fountain a few times for tribal business.

“Back to you, though.” Ella cheerfully steered the conversation back to him. He could hear the whirr of a sewing machine in the background, telling him she was visiting with him while she worked. “How in the world do you wear so many hats, Wayne? Those are some pretty big jobs you’re juggling. I can’t even imagine what it’s like dealing with high schoolers.”

“It’s a challenge, but I enjoy working with kids.” He hoped she didn’t miss the unspoken message he was trying to send her.

“You’re really good with them, too. The way you calmed Jacob down after his seizure...” Her voice grew thready at the memory. She gently cleared her throat. “Sorry to get emotional all over again, but my son is my whole world.”

“I can tell the two of you are close. He’s a great kid.”

“A little mouthy, but yes.” She chuckled again.

Silence settled between them for a moment.

“I wouldn’t mind running something past you over lunch today.” As an afterthought, he added. “If you’re free to take off, that is.”

“I’m not. I’m so sorry. It’s Valentine’s Day, remember? We’re hosting a fashion show in the boutique today. It starts at the crack of noon. We’re serving food and everything.”

Right. He remembered hearing something about that during his last visit there. “It’s an all-hands-on-deck sort of thing, eh?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Chanel and Stella have been so great to me.”

“Sounds like your job description is evolving.” It had to be if Chanel and Stella desired her presence at the fashion show.

“I think you’re right. We’ll see. I hate leaving you hanging, though.” Her voice grew hesitant. “Any chance you’ll give me

a raincheck on that lunch outing?”

Her question made his heart soar. “Of course.”

“So, um...whatever you needed to run past me, is it something you can share over the phone?”

“I’d rather do it in person.” He was suddenly dying to see her again. “If I drop by the fashion show, any chance you’ll be able to chat for a minute or two?”

“Absolutely! We have sandwiches and finger foods, so bring your appetite.”

“Will do.”

“Great! I’ll see you soon.”

“Can’t wait.” He heard someone call her name in the background as he disconnected the line.

Because of how long he’d talked to Ella, he was running a few minutes late to his administrative staff meeting at the high school. He’d driven as fast as he could without speeding to get there.

“There you are!” Hope Hawling glanced up from her computer, swiveling her chair in his direction as he walked into her office.

“Sorry I’m late.” It appeared they’d been waiting for him before getting started. A trio of chairs were fanned out in front of Hope’s desk.

Laura, the office secretary, half rose from her chair on the far left, waving a stack of papers at him.

When he motioned for her to remain seated, a dimple appeared in her chin. He strode over to her to accept the papers and claim the last open seat between her and Decker Kingston. Deck was the co-owner of Lonestar Security. He and his partner, Hope’s husband, held a contract with the district to handle security at all the schools.

He waggled his sandy blonde eyebrows at Wayne. “Nice of you to join us, Chief. Any chance your tardiness was caused by a detour to the donut shop?”

“Nope. I think I saw some donuts in the teacher’s lounge, though.” Wayne was pretty sure he’d caught a glimpse of them during his trek from the parking lot to the main office.

“Four dozen of them, minus the ones that have already been eaten,” Laura informed them cheerfully. “Plus, we’re catering a Mexican buffet for lunch. Happy Valentine’s Day, y’all.”

Intercepting Decker’s smirk at Wayne, she hastened to add, “I know not everyone has a sweetheart, but Hope and I thought it was a great opportunity to show some staff appreciation.”

Normally, a conversation like this would make Wayne feel his single state all the more. Not today, though. A quick glance at his watch told him he’d be seeing Ella again in exactly three hours and forty-seven minutes. The time couldn’t go by fast enough for him.

Deck elbowed him playfully. “You got somewhere else to be, bro?”

“Always.” Wayne settled back in his chair, trying not to think too hard about all the demands on his schedule. Otherwise, the weight of his many responsibilities might become too heavy.

Hope eyed them sharply as she leaned forward on her desk. She was the epitome of class and good taste in a navy business suit, pale blue silk shirt, and a pearl choker. Her red-gold hair was piled high on her head. “I received a letter this morning from the tribal council,” she announced without preamble.

Wayne’s head jerked in her direction. “Again, eh?” The council’s demands for his resignation from the high school had been coming at more frequent intervals lately. The last one had arrived less than a week earlier.

She slid a piece of paper across her desk toward him. “As usual, they’re demanding your resignation.”

Wayne scanned the letter, irritated to see that the most prominent signature belonged to Cherokee Dunraven,

Chayton's father. Chayton was the lazy medical assistant at the clinic that Prim was itching to see the last of. As the most outspoken member of the tribal council, Cherokee wasn't a pleasant fellow to work with. He griped about everything from the recent change in post office hours to the direction the sun set on the tribe's community center. No joke. Wayne was convinced the guy woke up every morning just to spend another day complaining.

"We know you have a lot on your shoulders, Wayne," Hope sighed.

"So do you." He was grateful for the patience she'd demonstrated so far in dealing with his disgruntled councilmen. "I know I need to resign. I've known it for a while."

She nodded, smiling sadly. "We sure do appreciate you sticking around as long as you have." She'd told him dozens of times already how much she hated to see him go.

"What she said." Deck lightly punched his shoulder. "It's not gonna be the same around here without you, bro."

To Wayne's amazement, Laura dabbed at the corners of her eyes, nodding vehemently. Her show of emotion touched him deeply.

"I'm going to miss you as well," he assured. "Why else do you think I've been dragging my heels about leaving?"

"Not for the cheap coffee, that's for sure." Deck grimaced. "No offense, Laura. I know you have to watch costs."

She chuckled damply. "Yeah, and the current economy isn't helping. The cost of coffee and creamer has nearly doubled since last year."

Wayne honestly wasn't sure what Deck was griping about. He thought the coffee tasted fine. He had no opinion about the creamers since he drank his coffee black.

"What's the status of your search for my replacement?" Wayne returned his gaze to Hope. No matter how many letters his cranky councilmen drafted, he wasn't going to leave the high school before they secured proper coverage. They'd been

too good to him and too good to his people, allowing the teens on the rez to attend Heart Lake High until their storm-damaged high school could be rebuilt.

Hope drummed her fingers on her desk, clicking the tips of her French manicured nails against the wood. “I had that interview last month with the guy serving his final year of an iron-clad contract in Washington. I have another interview this afternoon.”

“Anyone promising?” Hope stirred in Wayne’s chest.

“Yes, I think so. He doesn’t have as much experience, but I like his resume. If you want to take a look at it, here it is.” She produced another stack of papers and handed them out to their huddle. “I’ll need ‘em back. For all the reasons you can imagine, we don’t want any of this leaking to the public before we’re ready to make an official announcement.”

Unfortunately, Wayne couldn’t make any such promises. “Actually, I’d like to use my resignation as a bargaining chip for another piece of tribal council business.”

Her blue gaze grew speculative. “How soon?”

“Two weeks.”

She drew a deep breath and sat back in her chair. “No pressure, huh?”

He silently pleaded with her to see it from his point of view. “If there was any other way...” He hated that it was coming down to this and hoped she didn’t see it as a betrayal of her trust.

“No apologies necessary.” Her lips flat-lined. “You’ve stayed a year longer than any of us expected you to. We couldn’t possibly ask you for more time without being selfish.”

“I can keep my resignation date fluid,” he offered. “Within reason, of course.” Once he played his bargaining chip, his days at the high school would be numbered.

“Yes, please.” She eagerly pounced on the offer. “It’s already February.” She glanced at the calendar hanging on the

wall. “If you can stall the council until the end of March, I would be eternally grateful. Worst-case scenario, we’ll be down an administrator until the end of the school year, and we’ll survive.” She squared her slender shoulders.

Wayne didn’t look too closely at the resume she’d passed to him. He trusted Hope and her team to choose the best candidate for the job. The school superintendent, an aging cowboy that everyone highly respected, would get to weigh in on the decision, too.

Hope ended their meeting early, and Wayne headed back to his office to prepare for his first discipline appointment. It was with a ninth grader and his father. The teen was currently suspended for fighting, but he was begging to return a day early in order to take a test that the instructor would otherwise give him a failing score on.

It was an easy decision, one Wayne had made the moment he’d read the parent’s request in writing. He stood to shake the guy’s hand as he was ushered by Laura into the room.

“Good morning, Mr. Carter. I appreciate receiving your letter. I also appreciate you taking off work this morning to meet with me about your concerns.”

Mr. Carter was a farmer with dusty boots and a slouched leather Stetson that he removed before taking the seat Wayne waved him into. His expression grew anxious as Wayne took a seat across from him. “I hope this appointment means you’re considering our request.”

“Already did, and my decision is made.” Wayne turned his head to give the teen in question a thorough once over. DJ Carter was standing beside his father’s chair, fidgeting with one of the belt loops on his jeans.

Wayne saw no point in making him more comfortable by offering him a chair. Part of the discipline process involved letting students wallow a little in the consequences of their actions. “DJ, if I let you return a day early, I want to see an A on that test.”

“Yes, sir.” The kid’s eyes grew watery.

“And I don’t want to see you back in my office for the rest of the school year.” He let the kid feel the full blast of the warning look in his eyes before continuing. “As I’m sure you’ve figured out, we have a zero tolerance policy for fighting.”

“Yes, sir. I—”

Wayne held up a hand to silence him. “I know there are two sides to every story. That’s why we suspended the other kid, too, even though you threw the first punch.” Wayne had been a teenager once, and growing up on the poverty-stricken rez had been no cake walk. He was working night and day to change that, though. To improve the quality of life for his people, Lord willing.

“The next time you’re tempted to throw a punch,” he paused for the dramatic effect, “don’t. Unless you’re in a life or death situation, you have better options. Talk to a teacher or a principal. Or your coach. Or a school counselor. Or even a member of our security team.”

“Yes, sir.” DJ’s cheeks flamed with embarrassment.

“And if there’s anything still needing to be resolved between you and the other kid, who will also be allowed to return a day early, the same list of options apply with one exception. Because of who the other guy is, I’ll need to recuse myself from any further intervention to avoid a conflict of interest.”

“We understand.” As Mr. Carter stood, the look he gave his son was hard to read. He opened his mouth to say something, then shut it as he extended a hand to Wayne.

Wayne shook it. “Is there something else, Mr. Carter?”

The farmer wrinkled his forehead at him. “You were fair, Principal Lighthorse. Everyone said you wouldn’t be, but you were.”

Wayne could easily guess what he meant. “Because the other kid lives on the rez?” His name was Cheveyo, though he preferred to be called Chevy. He was a punk who was skilled at inciting violence and allowing others to take the fall for it.

In this instance, though, he'd fought back, giving Wayne full license to suspend him. It had also given Deck a reason to bench him from the junior varsity football team, which he co-coached. Since he was Cherokee Dunraven's nephew, they'd probably be getting an earful from him about it, but rules were rules. The high school staff had followed them to a T.

"Yeah." Mr. Carter looked a little shamefaced at the admission.

"One school. One set of rules," Wayne assured firmly. "Now go study for your test, DJ." He held out his hand to the teen.

After a short hesitation, he shook it. "I really appreciate you letting me come back, sir."

"I appreciate the fact that you cared enough about your test to want to come back."

"You're a good man, Principal Lighthorse." Mr. Carter clapped his hat back on his head. "We won't forget this."

Wayne watched them leave his office, pleased that the appointment had gone so well. He'd already discreetly shared his concerns about Chevy with Hope and Deck. They'd promised to keep an eye on the situation.

Laura rang his line a few minutes later to let him know that Chevy's dad had cancelled their appointment.

Wayne was disappointed but not surprised. "Did they reschedule it?"

"No, so I went ahead and told his dad about your decision to allow him to return a day early."

"And?"

"He hung up on me."

"Just document the call and put it in his file."

"Already done."

"Thanks, Laura." He ended their call, knowing this wouldn't be the last he'd hear about the situation from the Dunravens.

The cancelled appointment had freed an extra hour in his schedule, and he knew exactly how he wanted to spend it. Rolling his sleeves down and buttoning the cuffs, he reached for the suit jacket he'd tossed over the back of his chair. Standing and shrugging it on, he strode from his office, flipping the light switch off on his way out the door.

He slowed his steps as he passed Laura's desk. "Hold my calls until after lunch, please. I can be reached on my cell if it's urgent."

"You betcha," she called after him.

He made a beeline for his Land Rover, not making eye contact with anyone on his way to the parking lot. All too often, his hallway appearances blossomed into more work.

It was warmer today than yesterday, hinting that spring was right around the corner. He was ready. Though a lot of folks loved the autumn season and the holidays that followed, his favorite time of year was spring. Watching the trees sprout their leaves and the flowers unfurl their blooms never failed to fill him with hope.

It was a time of new beginnings, and this spring would be no exception. The door to his first career would be closing, while the door to his next chapter as the chief of his tribe swung wider.



There was no parking available in front of the red-brick clothing boutique when he arrived. Customers were strolling from both directions on the sidewalk leading to Modello's.

He drove around the back of the store and found an open parking spot. It was one of the three spots they reserved for their employees. He pulled into it and braked, knowing he might have to move his vehicle at any time. There was a chance, though, that Chanel and Stella had carpooled for the day to leave extra room in the parking lot for fashion show attendees. At least, he hoped that was the case.

Since he was a friend of the family as well as a customer, he let himself in through the back door, tickled to discover it wasn't locked. Striding past the rear offices, he nearly collided with a woman exiting one of them.

"Wayne!" It was Ella. She gave a little gasp of surprise as his hands came down on her shoulders to steady her. To his surprise, they were bare. "You're early."

"Wow!" His eyes felt like they were popping out of his head at the sight of her in a strapless red gown. "You look amazing." The silky fabric was longer in the back and shorter in the front, revealing the gold heels her feet were strapped into. He knew he was staring as he lowered his hands back to his sides, but he couldn't help it. She was so beautiful. The last time he'd seen her, her long, chestnut hair had been pulled back into a ponytail. This time, it was waving over one shoulder.

"Thanks." She wrinkled her nose at him in a way he found adorable. "Chanel and Stella sort of sprang this on me at the last minute. We're all dressed in red today. I feel like Cinderella."

He gave up trying not to stare and simply allowed himself to drink her in. "You're a lot prettier than Cinderella." He'd personally never been into blondes, preferring the richer hair and skin tones of his tribe. His fingers itched to reach out and trace Ella's high, proud cheekbones.

"Yes, she is!" Chanel's voice rang with conviction as she sailed down the hallway in their direction. Her gown was a striking statement in red lace and tulle. "I'm willing to bet my bottom dollar we'll be selling a bunch more copies of the prom dress Ella is wearing today. I can't believe she made it this far in life without landing a modeling contract."

Wayne couldn't agree more. "You're wearing prom dresses, eh?"

"We couldn't resist since prom is right around the corner." Chanel's hair was pulled back in a sleek bun. No stray tendrils. Dark eye makeup. Blood-red lipstick. She was walking perfection, which was ironic considering her secret romance

with Decker Kingston. Few people knew about her clandestine relationship with the square-jawed security firm co-owner. The only reason Wayne knew about it was because he'd attended the same leadership conference a few weeks ago, where the two of them had finally settled their many differences. They'd more than found the common ground the mayor thought they needed to serve on the city council together. They'd fallen in love.

“Smart.” Wayne thought the red gown Ella was wearing looked like it was made for her. He hoped she got to keep it after the fashion show.

“I’ll ah...” Chanel’s gaze was calculating as it swept over Wayne and back to Ella, “leave you to entertain our VIP guest while I go check on the caterers. They’re about finished setting up.”

Ella’s long, dark eyelashes fluttered against her cheeks, momentarily hiding her striking blue-gray eyes. “Are you sure you don’t need me up front?”

“We will. Eventually.” Chanel languidly waved away her offer. “Right now, I want you to give my favorite Comanche chief your undivided attention. He’s one of our best customers, so keep him happy until I return.”

Wayne watched her sail back up the hallway. Then he eagerly returned his attention to Ella. “If you don’t wear that dress to the party tonight, you might see a grown man cry.”



CHAPTER 3: HOSTILE CUSTOMER

ELLA

“**N**ot a chance! This dress doesn’t belong to me.” Ella swallowed a nervous chuckle, not wanting to sound like a giggly school girl. It was hard, though, when she was around Wayne Whitaker. The guy had a way of making her feel downright giddy.

It didn’t help that his dark gaze was glinting with pure male admiration.

“Too bad.” He sounded genuinely disappointed.

“No, it’s a good thing. Really.” Her face grew warm. With any luck, the dim lighting in the hallway would hide her blush. “Jacob would manage to dribble mustard or ketchup on it. Guaranteed.”

“Eh, a little extra seasoning never hurt anybody.” Wayne slid his hands into the pockets of his trousers. He was wearing an all-black suit today that further enhanced his sooty hair and swarthy complexion. Unlike her, he looked comfortable being dressed up, probably since his job at the high school required business wear.

She delicately cleared her throat. “On the phone, you mentioned wanting to run something past me?”

“I do.” He angled his head at the office door that was propped open behind her, making his long hair slide to one side. “Mind if we step out of the hallway?”

“Um, sure.” It was hard, but she forced her gaze away from his blue-black mane of hair. She adored the way he

proudly displayed his Comanche heritage. He looked every inch the chief that he was.

Since the office directly behind them belonged to Chanel, Ella beckoned him to follow her a little further down the hallway into the next room. It was filled with alteration equipment — sewing machines, commercial sized spools of thread, fabric rulers, fabric pins, and a square platform for customers to stand on. There were two more platforms by the dressing rooms inside the boutique.

Wayne surveyed the room with interest. “So this is where all the magic happens at Modello’s.”

She spun in a full circle, trying to see the space through his eyes. “The showroom floor makes our clothing look great *to* our customers. This room makes our product lines look great *on* our customers.”

“Very well stated.” He rocked back on his heels. “I can probably swing by your place tomorrow evening to drop off that mending I told you about.”

“Works for me.” She sort of hated the necessity of telling him where she lived, but there was no way around it. “Jacob and I are staying in the apartment over the Triple J Auto Body Shop.” She bit her lower lip and added, “Just until we have the chance to find a place of our own.” *And save up for the security deposit.*

His expression was impossible to read. “Would any particular time work better for you? I don’t want to interrupt your family time.”

She appreciated how considerate he was being. “No, not really. Just make it after five o’clock. That’s when we usually get home.”

“When do you eat dinner?”

“There’s no telling.” She raised and lowered her shoulders. “We don’t keep a strict schedule.” If that made her a bad mother, so be it.

“Me, either.” There was no censure in his voice. “Hate to say it, but most of the time I eat on the go.”

“Do you want to join us for dinner?” The question slipped out before she realized what she’d done.

As he searched her features, she added, “No guarantees on what we’ll be having. It could be spaghetti, or it could be grilled cheese sandwiches.” The heater vent overhead kicked on, blowing a strand of hair into her eyes. “It sort of depends on...” Her voice dwindled when he reached out to brush the errant strand away from her face.

“Sounds good to me. Even though you don’t keep a strict schedule, I reckon you don’t need me showing up at the crack of five for dinner?” He took his time tucking her hair behind her ear before lowering his hand.

“How does six o’clock sound?” She wished her voice wasn’t so thin and breathy. Plus, she was blushing again, something he wouldn’t miss beneath the brighter lighting in her workroom.

“It sounds perfect. I’ll bring dessert.”

Her blood pressure shot up a few degrees while she debated whether to turn down his kind offer. She almost always refused offers of food. It wasn’t worth the risk of aggravating Jacob’s allergies.

“Anything you or the little prince don’t care for?” he pressed.

“We-e-ell, he’s allergic to a lot of stuff.”

“Like?”

Do you really want to know? As usual, Wayne’s expression was hard to read, so she plunged resignedly into the details. “It needs to be gluten-free. No peanuts or strawberries. That means you have to read the package and make sure they don’t bake it with any utensils that have touched peanuts or peanut oil. He’s also deathly allergic to bee stings.” She added in a rush, “Not that you were planning on bringing anything that contains bee venom.” She scanned the hard angles and planes of his face to gauge his reaction to her words. “Bet you regret offering to bring dessert.”

“Not at all.”

“I seriously won’t be offended if you don’t have time to deal with my kid’s dietary issues.”

“I really don’t mind.” He raised his eyebrows questioningly at her. “How do gluten-free chocolate brownies sound?”

“If you pull that off, you’ll have a friend for life in Jacob.” Her insides melted over the effort he was going to on their behalf. He’d have to either special purchase the brownies at a bakery or bake them himself. Stuff like that usually didn’t come standard on store shelves.

“Your son strikes me as a friend worth having, Ella.”

Her heart finished melting in a puddle of gratitude at his feet. “Thank you for saying that.”

“I mean it.”

Woooooow! She had to make a conscious effort to steady her breathing. “Sorry for the long conversational detour into my son’s allergies.” She hadn’t meant to take up so much of his time talking about it.

“Why are you sorry?”

“Because you still haven’t had the chance to run that thing past me that you wanted to.”

He nodded gravely. “I’m about to resign from my position as Vice Principal of Heart Lake High. It’s not public information yet, so I’d appreciate you keeping it to yourself for now.”

“Oh, no!” It didn’t sound like the kind of decision anyone would make lightly. “Is everything okay?” As soon as the words left her mouth, she wanted to kick herself for asking something so dumb. Clearly, things weren’t okay if he was resigning.

“Yes. My resignation has been a long time coming.”

“Why’s that?”

“It’s what the tribal council wants.” He waved a hand. “More of my time and attention.”

“That’s understandable, I guess.” She wasn’t sure what he wanted her to say.

“It is. I knew when I became chief that it would eventually become a full-time job. Actually, it’s been a full-time job since day one. The council has been pressuring me for months to resign from Heart Lake High, and I’m finally ready to give them what they want. I’ve been running on fumes lately.”

Her heart went out to him. “So this is a good thing, right?” She still wasn’t sure what part of this he’d felt the need to run past her.

“It’s necessary.” He slid his hands loosely back into his pockets. “And bittersweet. I’ll miss being a principal.”

“What exactly were you hoping I would weigh in on?” She didn’t want to come across as pushy, but Chanel and Stella could call her to the front of the store at any moment.

“The timing. I’d like to use my resignation as a bargaining chip to push a separate and unrelated issue through the council.”

“Clever.” She felt a little dizzy over the fact that he was asking for her input on, well, anything involving the tribal council.

“I hope so. We have two weeks until a very important vote takes place. It’s something that could make or break the financial wellbeing of a lot of tribe members.”

“You have my undivided attention, Chief.” She unconsciously took a step closer, frowning thoughtfully up at him.

His lips twitched. “I thought you agreed to call me Wayne.”

“I’ll get back to that in a minute,” she promised with a chuckle. “You want to discuss an important issue, so this is my serious face.” She carefully schooled her expression.

“I don’t know how else to put it, so I’m going to be flat out honest with you. I think the council voted me in as chief in the

hopes I would continue the policies my father instituted while he was chief.”

“Have you?”

“Not entirely. I’m not him, and times have changed.” He looked troubled. “We need to do a better job on the rez of keeping up with the times. I’m tired of seeing our people left behind, Ella.”

“You’ll get no arguments from me about that.” She was entranced by the inside peek he was giving her into the challenges of leading the tribe.

“Unfortunately, the old-timers on the council balk at every hint of change.”

“I’m beginning to see the problem.”

“Even when it’s the only sensible solution. At the moment, they’re rabidly boycotting the proposition to open a Saturday morning market on the rez.”

“Why?” She blinked at him, knowing how many craftsmen there were in most Native American communities. “The market sounds truly wonderful! I would totally shop there myself.”

“So would I. Unfortunately, all the old-timers want to talk about is how much noise and traffic it’ll bring through our gates.”

“And shoppers. And money,” she declared with alacrity.

“Which our families desperately need.”

The passion they shared on the topic was electrifying. They stared at each other for a moment, both breathing irregularly.

“Here’s the clincher, Ella.” He gazed deeply into her eyes. “I’d like to make my resignation from the high school hinge on the council’s agreement to vote for the market. I know it’s a little underhanded, but it might just do the trick. What do you think?”

“Do it!” She didn’t need to think long or hard about it. She was convinced that he was on the right side of the issue.

“Playing hardball with them could backfire, of course,” he mused. “We have one pretty tough customer on the council. He doesn’t hesitate to complain and stir things up.”

Only one troublemaker? It didn’t sound like an insurmountable obstacle to her. “If it’s the best chance you have to turn the vote around, I say you should go for it.”

His expression brightened at her words. “Alright then, Ella. I’m going for it.”

Really? Her insides fluttered at the realization that she’d actually influenced his decision on something important. Her womanly instincts, though, told her he could still use a little more reassuring.

“Some situations call for tough love, Wayne. If I’ve learned anything from being a mother, it’s that. Not only are you doing what’s *right* for your people, you’re doing what’s *best* for them. I have a sneaking suspicion they know it, too. Way down deep.” She pressed a hand against her midsection for emphasis.

His dark gaze followed her movements. “That’s something I hadn’t considered.”

She mentally scrambled to come up with an example that would make her point more clear. “Sometimes Jacob pushes his boundaries just to see what I’ll do. I think it’s possible that the old-timers on your council might be doing the same thing. Like testing your leadership skills before they allow you to navigate them through all those changes you think are necessary. I guess what I’m trying to say is that it might be easier to win their vote than you think.”

He reached out to touch her hand. “Thanks for letting me use you as a soundboard.”

“Any time, Chief...er, Wayne,” she amended with a faint smile.

As their gazes locked for a heart-pounding moment, his bronze face swayed closer to hers.

“Ready to put your game face on, darling?” Chanel’s voice in the doorway startled Ella, making her take a wobbly step back from Wayne.

“I’m ready.” She was having trouble tearing her gaze away from his. Trying to inject a casual note into her voice, she asked, “Do you want to come grab a plate of food before you take off?”

“I do. Thank you.” He stepped to her side to place his hand on the small of her back. “You lead. I’ll follow.”

Chanel’s red-painted lips settled into a startled O as they strolled past her. “I need to grab something from my office,” she called after them. “I’ll catch up in a sec.”

To Ella’s disappointment, Wayne wrapped a sandwich in a napkin and turned to leave.

“Not staying for the fashion show, huh?”

“What are you talking about? I got to be here for the best part.” He gave her dress another sweeping glance of approval.

“It’s super sweet of you to say that.” She felt like she was drowning in all of his dark-eyed admiration.

“I’d stay if I could. Believe me. But duty calls.”

Someone Ella had never seen before crouched down in front of them with her cell phone held out. “Say cheese!”

Before Ella could react, the woman had snapped their picture.

“You’re the cutest couple,” she gushed before turning away and disappearing into the small crowd of customers.

Ella gave Wayne a wide-eyed look. “Sorry about that.”

He winked at her again. “See you at the party in a couple of hours.”

She nodded, feeling a little dazed. “See you.” She fluttered a wave at him as he backed away from her.

The fashion show began a few minutes later. Chanel had arranged for a group of students from a nearby college town to

serve as the models on their makeshift runway. Most of them were fashion majors. They unveiled the boutique's spring line of clothing to the oohs and ahs of their rapt audience.

Ella remained by the dressing room doors, opening them for the models in their pre-agreed-upon sequence. Since a lot of their customers were working women, the show lasted only about thirty-five minutes. It gave those who wanted to make purchases plenty of time to do so afterward.

Ella took her place behind one of the two cash registers to make the lines go faster. A dark-haired woman in tight black jeans and a metallic gold crop top approached her line. She looked Comanche.

She slapped a black silk blouse on the countertop. "You must be new in town. We haven't met." Her voice sounded accusing.

"I'm Ella, the boutique's seamstress." Ella pointed at her name tag, not feeling inspired to volunteer any more information than that.

"The red gown you're wearing says you're more than a seamstress."

Though taken aback by the woman's attitude, Ella calmly continued to ring up her purchase. "Today is an all-hands-on-deck kind of event."

The woman slid a credit card in her direction. "I paid the late fee, so this card had better work."

Ella wasn't touching that issue. "Do you work here in town?" She scanned the card and was enormously relieved to see the charge come back as approved.

"Nope. I'm a Dunraven. We only work on the rez."

"I see." *Dunraven*. Ella committed the name to memory, fully intending to ask Wayne about the woman later on.

"So, are you going to apply for membership to our tribe or what?"

Ella hadn't yet decided and didn't think it was anyone's business to ask. However, she decided to humor the woman.

“I’ve never been a member of any tribe. I’m not sure what the rules are.”

“Are you Comanche?”

“Half Comanche.”

“Then you qualify. I’m surprised Wayne didn’t tell you that already.”

Unsure how to respond to that, Ella carefully folded the black blouse and placed it in a white-on-white striped bag with handles. The name of the boutique was embossed in silver letters across the front of it.

“You and he seemed pretty cozy earlier.” The woman accepted the bag Ella handed her, but didn’t seem in too big of a hurry to exit the line.

Ella shrugged off-handedly. “He was just checking on my son. We bumped into each other a few days ago on the side of the road—”

“Old news,” the woman interrupted testily. “Listen, I had to park out back.” She managed to make it sound like Ella’s fault. “Hope you don’t mind if I leave through the rear exit.”

Though Chanel preferred not to have customers in the office area, Ella didn’t think it was worth arguing over. “Sure. No problem. I can walk you out if you’d like.” She glanced around them, trying to catch Chanel’s eye to let her know she needed to leave her line for a minute.

“No need for that. I know the way.” The woman spun away from the checkout counter and stalked toward the rear of the store.

Chanel was nowhere in sight, so Ella gave up looking for her. She was just glad the hostile young woman was leaving. It felt like she’d been trying to pick a fight. She had to force it from her mind as she faced the next customer. Thanks to her mother-in-law, she had a little experience in dealing with toxic people. It was usually best to just let stuff roll off her back.

They stayed so busy at the boutique for the rest of the afternoon that closing time crept up on Ella sooner than she

expected.

“It’s Valentine’s Day,” Chanel trilled as she finally locked the front door and turned the *Open* sign to *Closed*. “That means we’re getting out of here. The caterers did a great job cleaning up the food. We can finish straightening up everything else in the morning.”

“If you’re sure...” Ella didn’t mind scooting out of there pretty quickly. It would give her more time to get ready for the Anti-Valentine’s party.

“I’m sure,” Chanel flitted around the room, straightening things here and there.

“I’ll just change out of this dress.” Ella moved toward the nearest dressing room.

“Bag it up, and take it with you,” Chanel ordered cheerfully.

Ella spun around in shock. “What did you say?”

“The dress is yours, sweetie. The shoes, too. Consider them my thanks for all the extra work you put into the fashion show.”

Ella’s jaw fell open. “You’re kidding!” She’d read the price tag. The dress was worth a small fortune.

“The perks of working in a boutique, baby.” Chanel started counting down the cash register, singing happily beneath her breath.

“I c-can’t,” Ella stuttered.

Chanel stopped singing, but she didn’t look up. “You can. Boss’s orders. Don’t argue with me. You won’t win.”

“Ain’t that the truth?” Her mother snorted out a laugh from the other side of the room. She was using her finger to evenly space out the dresses hanging on one of the round racks.

“It was an honor to raise me, and you know it,” Chanel shot back.

“It was something alright.” Stella gave Ella a comical look of dismay. She was an older version of her daughter, though

the blonde shade of her hair probably came from a bottle these days. “She’s right about winning every argument. You might as well save your breath and end the war early.”

Giving her a dazed nod, Ella walked speechlessly to the dressing room. She stared at herself in the mirror, shaking her head at her reflection. The red gown was too gorgeous for words. She couldn’t believe it was hers. Every time she saw it hanging in her closet at home, she would remember the way Wayne had looked at her in it.

Her hands felt a little trembly as she unzipped it and stepped out of it. After she was back in her jeans and sweater, she had to return to the front of the store to bag up the dress.

“Are you sure you’re sure about this?” she asked Chanel in a pleading voice. Her boss was still counting the cash drawer.

“Girl, you’re the best business decision I’ve ever made.” Chanel’s smile held no regrets. She waved impatiently at the rack holding the dress bags. “Hurry up and get out of here. You’ve got a kid who’s probably dying to show off all the Valentines he got from the cute girls at school today.”

Ella burst out laughing. “You aren’t wrong. He’s a heartthrob with the ladies.”

“I’m not surprised.” Chanel smiled. “I’ve seen his picture on your desk. He’s gonna slay hearts someday.”

“He’s already slain mine.” Ella sniffed. “That’s why he’s so rotten.”

“I can’t wait to meet him.” Chanel sounded unexpectedly wistful.

Ella didn’t know much about her boss, but she did know one thing. A tough-looking guy named Decker Kingston had shown up at the boutique on a few occasions. They’d disappeared together inside Chanel’s office, and every time they’d reappeared, she’d looked...kissed.

“Thank you so much for the dress.” Ella felt a little uncomfortable about walking out of the store with something so valuable hanging over her arm.

“You earned it.” Chanel bent her head dismissively over the cash register.

After an awkward pause, Ella forced her feet to start moving toward the door.

The moment she stepped outside, she paused in dismay. The right rear tire on her Volvo was as flat as a pancake. The hubcap was resting on the ground.

“Oh, no!” She numbly reached for her cell phone and dialed her oldest brother.

Jace picked up right away. “Hey, sis!”

“I’ve got some bad news,” she sighed.

“How bad?” His voice grew sharp.

“Flat tire.”

“Are you still at work?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes flat with the truck and trailer. Five if I speed.”

“Please don’t speed.” It was doubtful he’d arrive in ten minutes, even if he didn’t speed.

“Want me to pick up Motor Mouth on the way?”

“Yes, please.” Though there was nothing funny about her flat tire, she couldn’t help smiling at her brother’s nickname for Jacob. “Please assure me you don’t call him that to his face.” The kid had more than enough insults and pithy comebacks stored in his memory. He didn’t need three uncles adding to that list.

“No can do. Just for the record, my famous one-liners have helped me steal the title of his favorite uncle from Jasper.”

“I did not need to hear that,” she groaned. “There shouldn’t be any rewards for bad behavior.”

“You do you, Mama Bear. I’ll do me.”

“He’s already rotten,” she protested. “He doesn’t need any encouragement.”

“Thank you for admitting he was spoiled rotten to begin with. That’s on you, sis.”

“Not helping,” she sighed.

“Wasn’t trying to,” he retorted cheerfully. “Oh, wait! Yes, I am. Aren’t I the guy who’s about to tow your butt home?”

“It’s not cool to rub it in.” She scowled at the phone even though he couldn’t see her face.

“But so satisfying,” he chortled. “I’m so glad to have you back in town to pick on. Jasper’s never around, and Jalen just ignores me.”

“Survival instincts,” she noted dryly. “He’d have never made it this far without them.”

“Hey, I’m getting another call. Gotta go. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” He hung up before she could answer.

Unlocking the car, she hung the lovely dress on the coat hook above the back seat. Then she squatted down beside her flat tire to take a closer look at it. *Uh-oh!* She stared in dismay at the slash through the rubber. She’d not accidentally run over a nail or merely sprung a leak. Someone had vandalized her car.

The back door of the boutique opened. Chanel and her mother stepped outside, chattering a mile per minute. Their conversation stuttered to a halt as their gazes landed on her.

“Looks like you have a flat.” Stella sounded sympathetic. “Did you call a tow truck?”

Ella shook her head. “My brother, Jace, is on his way with a truck and trailer.”

“Oh, right.” Stella slapped a hand to her forehead. “You have connections.”

Chanel, who’d been silently eyeing Ella, demanded, “What’s wrong?”

“My tire was slashed.” She swayed a little as she stood.

Chanel stalked in her direction and stooped to examine the tire. She looked furious when she straightened. “Nothing like

this has ever happened here at the boutique.” She raised her cell phone to her ear.

“Please don’t call the police,” Ella gasped.

Chanel gave her an odd look. “Why not?”

“I don’t know. I just...” She shrugged helplessly, knowing the police would be full of questions she couldn’t answer. Though the Dunraven woman had acted pretty hostile earlier, Ella had no reason to believe she would do something like this.

Chanel mashed a button on her phone and spun away to speak into the receiver. “Deck? Hey! It’s me. We’ve got a problem here at the boutique.” She quickly described Ella’s slashed tire. “Yes, that would be great. Of course, I’ll wait here with her! What kind of person do you think I—?” She abruptly paused. “Not funny, jerk.” She paused again. “Yes, I still love you. Not sure why, though.” Whatever he said in return made her blush.

She was chuckling when she hung up. “Feel free to pretend like you heard absolutely none of that.”

Ella tried to look innocent. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Liar!”

Sensing her boss wanted to clear the air about things, Ella hesitantly asked, “Are you and he—?”

“Yes. We’re keeping our relationship quiet, though, since we serve on the city council together.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” Ella’s brain felt like it was spinning with information.

“So is yours. You and Wayne Whitaker, huh?”

The rapid change in the direction of their conversation made Ella draw a sharp breath. “Emotional whiplash,” she murmured.

“She’s good at that, too.” Stella threw her hands into the air. “I doubt it came up during your interview, but it should

have.”

“It’s in the fine writing on her employment agreement,” Chanel returned loftily.

Ella smiled weakly as she listened to their banter. It didn’t halt until Decker Kingston arrived. After giving Chanel a quick, hard kiss, he carefully examined the damage to Ella’s tire. His expression was as dark as a thundercloud as he took pictures of it from several angles. “I’ll let the sheriff know about this,” he assured her boss as he stood. She’d been hovering over him the whole time he’d been taking pictures.

“Please do.” She sounded anxious. “Nothing like this has ever happened before at my shop, and I’d prefer it not to happen again.”

Decker ambled to Ella’s side as Jace rumbled into the parking lot and circled around to get his trailer in position. “Any idea who might have done this?”

“Nothing I can prove.” All she had were her suspicions.

“Tell me anyway.”

She spread her hands. “One of the customers was hostile toward me earlier. Then she insisted on leaving through the back door.”

His tanned forehead wrinkled in speculation. “Did you get a name?”

“Only a last name. Dunraven.”

He snorted and exchanged a knowing glance with Chanel.

“That would be Cheyenne.” Her red-painted lips tightened. “She attended the fashion show and left with a blouse as black as her heart.”

Cheyenne Dunraven. Ella rolled the name around in her head a few times, wondering what she’d done to offend the woman. The only thing that came to mind was jealousy. Cheyenne had seen her with Wayne and didn’t seem too happy about it. Maybe she harbored hopes in his direction. The romantic kind.

“Her uncle sits on the tribal council, and he’s bad news, too.” Chanel’s mouth twisted bitterly. “And her brother is a lazy, no good piece of—”

“Chanel,” her mother admonished, shaking her head in warning as Jace leaped down from his truck. It boasted a custom paint job in black and a striking shade of green.

“It’s true.” Chanel lowered her voice as Jace reached back into the truck to lift Jacob down.

He ran joyfully to Ella and threw his arms around her. “Mom! I gotta bunch of Valentine’s today!”

She hugged him back. “That’s awesome! I can’t wait to see them.”

On their drive back to the Triple J Auto Body Shop, the cab of the truck was filled with non-stop chatter from Jacob. He dug into his brown bag of Valentine cards. Dragging them out one by one, he showed them off to her. Since it was Jacob, most of them came with a long-winded story.

The laugh lines at the corners of Jace’s eyes crinkled as he caught Ella’s gaze at a stoplight. “I think my name for my nephew is pretty accurate.”

Jacob paused his monologue long enough to explain, “He calls me Motor Mouth.”

“I wish he wouldn’t.” Ella shook her head in admonishment at her brother.

He grinned unabashedly at her. He was a broad-shouldered Comanche with hair that dragged his collar. Though the shop he ran with their brothers did well, no one would ever guess it from the frayed jeans he wore or the grease stains spattering his shirt. Not for the first time since her arrival into town, Ella wondered why he was still single. Maybe he just hadn’t met *the one*.

When Jacob finally fell silent, her brother jumped into the conversational gap. “I’ll have your tire fixed in time for the party.”

Ella's mouth gaped. She'd all but forgotten about the Anti-Valentine's Day party.

"If you're thinking about backing out of going, you can forget it," her brother said flatly. "You're going."

She gave him a withering look. "Why do you care?"

"You're new in town. You need friends."

"I'm twenty-five, Jace. I think I'm old enough to make my own decisions."

"I'll allow that, so long as you decide to go to the party."

Though she stuck her tongue out at him and faced the window, she was secretly glad he was insisting she attend the party. Despite how emotionally wiped out she felt, she was still looking forward to seeing Wayne again.

Unless she'd totally misread things between them earlier, he'd wanted to kiss her. He might've done so if Chanel hadn't interrupted them.

She hoped she wasn't being disloyal to her late husband by wondering what it would have felt like if he'd succeeded.



CHAPTER 4: VANDALIZED

WAYNE

After showering and changing into jeans, Wayne still had an hour before he needed to leave for the party. He strode to the office adjoining the master bedroom to take a seat at his desk. Opening his laptop, he typed the first draft of his resignation letter. He'd have his sister, Dyoni, proofread it tomorrow. She was the newest member of his tribal council, raised in Dallas by their mother after she and their father separated, which gave her the insight of an outsider. It was an insight he'd quickly come to rely on. She was also a P.I., so she had a good eye for details.

The house was quiet as he typed — too quiet now that his father had reunited with their mother and moved to her Heart Lake condo on the waterfront. Birch and Claire Whitaker insisted their seven-year separation was necessary to keep Dyoni safe from a deranged half-sister that neither Wayne nor Dyoni knew existed until recently. Pyre was in jail now. Or institutionalized for her pyromania. Since his parents didn't like to talk about it, he wasn't entirely clear on the details.

Regardless of his parents' reasons for living apart for so long, it had left its mark on him. He'd grown quieter and more serious, two attributes that people were quick to claim made him a better leader. What they didn't understand was that he'd also grown into someone who found it difficult to trust others.

He didn't date much. For years, folks had just assumed he'd eventually marry his childhood bestie, Aiyanna. However, she'd fallen in love with someone else before he'd

gotten around to asking her out. Her subsequent marriage to their newest deputy on the rez, Marco Perez, had left Wayne feeling more alone than ever.

Until Ella Clearwater had shown up in town.

He liked her. A lot. It was too soon to over-analyze his feelings for her, but he sensed that their paths had crossed for a reason. He was really looking forward to seeing her again at the party this evening.

He closed his laptop and stood, missing the sounds of the ranch where he lived on the weekends. It was located higher in the mountains, amidst the hoot of owls and the distant howl of coyotes.

Here in his Monday through Friday house, all he could hear outside was the rev of motorcycle and car motors, along with the mumble of voices from occasional passers-by. Years ago, his father had caved to the tribal council's pressure to reside in town during the week among their people — to live as one of them.

In some ways, Wayne agreed with their reasoning. In other ways, he didn't. As a chief, he lived and moved among his people all day long all year round. It would be nice to escape into the mountains every evening for a few hours of solace — among the Mustangs he raised and the crops he grew. It was bittersweet having to leave his personal paradise in the hands of a few trusted ranch hands during the week. However, no one had said being a chief would be easy.

Moving to the window, he gazed out at the long row of the homes stretching down the street. The many recent repairs and renovations they'd undergone were the one thing he'd fought for that the tribal council wholeheartedly approved of. The homes were in better shape now than they'd been before the tornados that had done so much damage to them.

He couldn't wait to give Ella the grand tour of the many improvements he'd overseen on the rez, maybe on the day she joined his tribe. It was something he hoped to talk her into, assuming she didn't have a reason for not joining in the past. A bad experience or something.

Whether she joined or not, he was glad she hadn't known he was a tribal chief during their initial encounter. She'd gotten to see the real him first, the man behind the title.

His phone buzzed with an incoming text. He was half tempted to ignore it, not wanting to get caught up in tribal business on Valentine's Day. Or Anti-Valentine's Day, in his case.

When his phone buzzed a second time, however, he dug it from his pocket. Unfortunately, tribal chiefs were never off duty. His people's needs came first, even if it called for skipping the party.

He was pleasantly surprised to discover the texts were from Ella.

I'm running a little late, but I'll be at the party.

He grimaced at her message, hoping everything was alright with her and Jacob. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to ask. *Everything okay?*

Her response filled him with concern. *One of my tires got slashed today.*

He hastily typed back. *Where are you now?*

It took her a couple of minutes to respond. *Jace towed me back to the Triple J.*

Questions flooded his mind about who had vandalized her car and why. His biggest worry, however, was seeing for himself that she was okay. And the best way to make sure of that was to stop by the auto body shop on his way to the party. Better yet, he would offer her a ride.

Stay put, he typed. I'm on my way.

She sent him a smiley face.

Her brothers' shop was only about a quarter mile outside the gates of the rez, so he made it there in no time.

Since the shop was closed for the evening, the garage doors to the auto bays were shut. However, Wayne could see a

light through the windows over one of the bays. Someone was still working, probably fixing Ella's tire.

He exited his SUV and strode to the entrance of the shop. Though there wasn't a light on in the front office area, he knocked anyway. When no one appeared to let him in, he knocked on the garage door with the lights on behind it.

"Be right there," a man called.

Moments later, the shop door opened.

Jace's broad shoulders filled the doorway. Though there was no denying his Comanche heritage, his hair was a lighter brown than most full-blooded Native Americans. Like his sister, his eyes were grayish-blue instead of brown.

"Hey, Chief." Jace rubbed a cleaning cloth over the silver wrench he was holding. "Everything okay with the ol' Land Rover?"

Wayne saw no reason to beat around the bush. "I heard one of Ella's tires got slashed today. What's going on?"

Shaking back his shoulder-length hair, Jace waved him into the shop. As they walked toward the auto bay, he shared what he knew. "There's no security cameras in the parking lot, so it's anyone's guess who did it." He stepped up to Ella's Volvo, which was raised in the air, and tightened one of the bolts on her right rear hubcap.

"But?" Wayne sensed there was more to the story.

"Cheyenne Dunraven paid a visit to the boutique today. Sounds like she was pretty cranky with my sister. Not sure why. They never met before today."

Just hearing the name made Wayne's jaw tighten. "The Dunravens are cranky with everyone." *Especially me.*

Jace nodded and tightened down another bolt. "Not that it's any of my business, but is there something going on between you and Cheyenne?"

The question caught Wayne off guard. "Ouch! I wasn't aware you thought so poorly of me." He wondered what had given the guy that idea.

“Sorry. It’s just that my sister got the impression that Cheyenne objected to seeing her with you.”

“Ah.” It was one of the most annoying things about being a tribal chief. He couldn’t sneeze without someone having an opinion about it. The day he’d stepped into his position, he’d lost most of his privacy.

“Were you?” Jace gave him a curious sideways look.

“Was I what?”

“With my sister today?”

It was a loaded question. They both know it. “Yes. I enjoy spending time with her.”

Jace ducked beneath the car to check something. His voice came back muffled. “Didn’t you two just meet?”

“Yes.”

“She told me about Jacob’s seizure. Thanks for pulling over to help them out.” Jace reappeared, shaking his head. “That kid fought his way into this world six weeks early, and he’s been fighting to stay in it ever since.”

“I’m glad I was there to help.” Wayne didn’t want to think about how things might have turned out without him being there to administer the EpiPen shot. “My P.A. sent her home with a new EpiPen.”

“Yeah. She told me that, too. Really appreciate it.” Jace shot him a look of gratitude. “That stuff is expensive, and she’s not exactly rolling in dough.”

“No problem.” Wayne decided now was as good a time as any to put it in a plug for tribal membership. “Have you guys given any thought to joining the Comanche Nation?”

“Yep.” Jace returned his wrench to the back wall, which was lined with tools hanging from hooks.

“Any particular reason you decided not to join?”

“Yep.”

He sure wasn't making this easy. "Any reason you care to tell me?"

"Nope."

Their conversation was going nowhere fast, so Wayne laid his next card on the table. "Ella and Jacob would have access to our clinic. That's the biggest reason I'm asking."

Jace turned back around to face him. "Maybe you should take that up with her."

"I intend to, if that's alright with you."

Her brother shrugged. "Why wouldn't it be?"

Wayne was growing tired of dancing around the elephant in the room. "I want to date her. Hope that's not going to be a problem, either."

Surprise stained Jace Countryman's features. "Nope."

His one-word answers were kind of exasperating. However, this one Wayne liked. "Thanks. May I see her now?"

Jace jammed a thumb in the direction of a set of stairs at the back of the shop. "She's upstairs."

Wayne strode to the stairs and jogged up them. There was a narrow landing at the top and a gray metal door without windows.

He gave it a triple knock.

It swung open, and Ella stood on the other side. She smiled shyly at him. "Come in."

He stepped across the threshold. "You look amazing." She was no longer in the stunning red dress, but she still managed to make his heart pound in the hot pink sweater she was wearing this evening. It was oversized, slipping off one shoulder to reveal the strap of a matching tank top beneath it. Like him, she was in blue jeans. Unlike him, she was wearing white sneakers. He'd sprung for a pair of black cowboy boots to go with the black button-up shirt tucked into his jeans.

"Thanks." She fluttered a hand at him. "You look nice, too."

“Thanks. I don’t get to dress casual very often.” It was nice to know she approved of what he was wearing.

He glanced curiously around them. They were standing in a tiny living room that was barely big enough for the brown leather sofa pushed against the wall. It was facing a black entertainment center with a TV mounted over it. The lack of picture frames and throw pillows earmarked the room as one hundred percent man cave.

She moved around him to shut the door. “Is that by choice, or do you have to wear suits on the rez, as well?”

He spread his hands. “Since several of the elder councilmen think I’m too young for the job, I do everything I can to show them I’m taking the role seriously.”

“You do take it seriously, and it shows, suit or no suit.” She waved him toward the sofa. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“As kind as your offer is, I didn’t come here to have you wait hand and foot on me. I came to make sure you were okay.”

“I am.” She rubbed her hands up and down her arms. “A little shook up about what happened earlier, but I’ll get over it.”

“Did you report it to the police?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t, but Decker Kingston said he would. Chanel called him, and he came over to take pictures of it and...” she searched his face.

“It’s okay. I know they’re together.” He wasn’t surprised that she’d figured it out, too, since she worked so closely with Chanel.

“How’d you find out?”

“Deck and I are friends. Plus, I attended the leadership conference where they fell in love. Before that, they didn’t get along too well.” He was willing to bet that was something she didn’t know.

“Really?” She searched his face as if trying to determine if he was serious.

“They were at each other’s throats like two angry dogs.” He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “From what I understand, the mayor sent them to the leadership conference for the express purpose of settling their differences. She didn’t enjoy their constant spitting and snarling during her city council meetings.”

A chuckle slid out of Ella. “Looks like she got what she wanted.”

“And then some.” He was downright envious of what Deck and Chanel had between them. He glanced around the room again. “Where’s Jacob?”

She pointed at the doorway leading into the next room. “In the kitchen. Can’t you hear him?”

Wayne paused to listen. Sure enough, he could hear the kid chatting up a storm with someone. Every once in a while, a male voice droned a short answer.

“He’s with Jalen,” she explained. “Want to go say hi?”

“Sure.” He followed her into the cozy kitchen.

Jacob was seated at a round table with four chairs. His back was to Ella and Wayne. His uncle was seated across from him, playing a game of Connect Four with him.

“You cheated!” Jalen flicked a humorous glance at his sister and nodded at her guest. He had on a baseball cap turned backwards over his shoulder-length hair.

“Did not!” Jacob fisted his hands indignantly on the table.

“Then why’d you look so guilty after I got back from making my sandwich?”

“Because I ate one of your chips while you were gone.”

“Is that all?” Jalen looked ready to laugh.

“I might have taken a drink of your tea.”

“And?”

“Fished out an ice cube, too.” With a shamefaced look, Jacob ducked his head. “I’m hot.”

“And?”

“Took a second chip after that.”

“We could do this all evening,” Ella interrupted with a chuckle, “but I have someone who’d like to say hi to my son.

Jacob’s dark head spun around. “Chief Wayne!” He scrambled to get down from his chair and nearly knocked it over in the process. He spun their way to throw his arms around Wayne’s legs.

Wayne ruffled his hair affectionately. “Hey, kid!”

“I didn’t know you were coming to see me!”

“Actually, I came to see your mom.”

“Oh.” Jacob took a step back, glancing mischievously over his shoulder. “I’m beating Uncle Jalen in Connect Four.”

“Don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched,” his uncle warned.

“He’s just saying that because he knows he’s losing,” Jacob jeered.

“Manners,” his mother reminded.

Jacob looked taken aback. “He’s mean to me all the time, and you never holler at him!”

“He’s only teasing.” As Ella kissed the top of his head, she shot her brother a dirty look. “Grow up,” she hissed.

Jalen waved his hand lazily at her. “Don’t you have a party to go to?”

“She does.” Wayne caught her gaze, silently asking her if she was ready to leave.

“Can I go, too?” Jacob demanded.

“Not this time, short stack.” Wayne pointed at the table. “You have a game to win, kiddo. I only came inside to offer your mama a lift if she’d like.”

Relief swept Ella's face. "Oh, wow! Thanks!" She glanced at the clock on the stove. "If we leave now, we might still have a shot at making it on time."

"That's the plan." He couldn't wait to have her all to himself for a few minutes on the drive there.

"Why can't I go?" Jacob's face twisted into a boyish pout.

Ella stooped down in front of him. "Because we moved into town so you could get to know your uncles better. Jalen is ordering your favorite cheese pizza with extra cheese for dinner."

His face brightened, and she gave him a gentle nudge toward the table.

"It's really sweet of you to stop by." She grabbed her purse and faced Wayne again.

He liked the way the movement made her ponytail swing against her shoulder. "Already told you I have no interest in going to an Anti-Valentine's Day party without a fellow non-reveler."

She tugged the crossbody purse around her, settling it against her hip. It was a leather clutch with a layer of fringe on the bottom. He suspected it was Comanche made.

"He's not much of a party animal," she announced to Jalen with a chuckle.

"Neither are you." He grinned at her. "Glad you're going out. Don't hurry back. I've got this." He held up a red checker and plopped it into the game board. "Check mate, home boy!"

"What?" Jacob, who'd been lingering uncertainly in the middle of the room, flew back to the table. "That's not possible! This isn't chess." He leaned forward on the table with both hands to peer at the Connect Four board. "B'sides, that's only three in a row. You haven't won yet." He reached for a black checker from his own stack.

Jalen screwed his face into an exaggerated expression of puzzlement. "Guess you'd better re-explain the rules to me, kiddo."

Taking a deep breath, Jacob adopted a superior look.

Ella reached for Wayne's arm. "Time to make our getaway," she hissed. She tugged him out of the kitchen and across the living room. She paused at the door leading down to the garage and lowered her hand, blushing.

"What's wrong?" Wayne reached around her for the door handle.

She gave a self-deprecatory laugh. "Sorry, I got a little carried away. I bet tribal chiefs aren't used to being towed around like that."

"I'm off duty. I'm just a regular guy right now." One who'd very much enjoyed the feel of her hand on his arm.

"Somehow, I doubt the off duty part." Her smile was full of empathy. "Not with a job like yours."

"True." He settled his hand on her lower back. "But I'm counting on you to help me forget that until the next crisis I get paged for."

"I'll do my best." She stepped ahead of him from the room and moved quickly down the stairs. "I really, really appreciate you stopping by to pick me up."

"So do I." Jace was waiting for them at the base of the stairs, tapping a screwdriver against his hand. "Takes the pressure off of me to get your car back up and running."

"Thanks for everything." Ella stepped up to him to press a kiss to his cheek. "I owe you more than I can ever repay. You and Jalen both."

"Apparently, you haven't seen our pile of mending. If you hadn't shown up when you did, we might be running around in nothing but socks before long." He slung an arm around her shoulders and gave her a quick squeeze.

She hurriedly ducked out of his embrace. "I don't need grease stains on this sweater, thank you very much."

"Women!" Jace threw up his hands for Wayne's benefit. "Can't please 'em no matter what you do."

Wayne thrust out a hand as he passed him. "I'm gonna give it a cowboy try," he joked.

Jace leaned closer as they shook hands. "Don't let her out of your sight," he muttered, casting a furtive look at the Volvo. "That wasn't an accident."

"I intend to." Wayne made no effort to hide the steel in his voice.

They nodded at each other before parting ways.

Ella was waiting for him by the door leading outside. "What was that all about?" She glanced back at her brother.

"He's worried about you." Wayne hustled her outside. "So am I."

She made a face at him as they walked side-by-side to his Land Rover. "Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. For all we know, it was a random act of vandalism."

"So you didn't have a stalker back in South Dakota who might've followed you here?" He opened the passenger door for her.

"Not that I'm aware of. I've lived a pretty quiet life since..." As she reached for her seatbelt, she broke off whatever she'd started to say.

He paused before shutting her door. "Since what?"

She blew out a resigned breath. "Start driving, and I'll tell you." She waited until he pulled onto the highway before speaking again. "My husband, Jack, did a little racing on the side."

"As in stock car racing?" Wayne prodded.

"No. Street racing. Anything he and his friends could get their hands on and juice up. Cars, ATVs, monster trucks, you name it."

"You don't sound as if you approve." He didn't blame her. A hobby like that tended to attract some rowdy crowds.

"It was dangerous." She looked as if the memory pained her. "But he did it for the money, so I put up with it. I

shouldn't have, though. Not after Jacob was born."

Wayne wasn't so sure that speaking up would've done any good. Lots of men worked extra side jobs to provide for their families. Few chose the route of street racing. It took a certain brand of thrill seeker to do that. However, he doubted his opinion would bring any comfort to the widow in his passenger seat.

She darted a few glances in his direction. "Aren't you going to say something?"

He had plenty to say, but he chose his words carefully. "From what I've seen so far, Jacob has an incredible mother raising him. He also has several doting uncles. That's more than a lot of kids get." Bitterness crept into his voice.

She gave him a curious look. "Did you, um, have a happy childhood?"

"I did. Right up until my mom left us. It was just Dad and me during my teen and college years."

"Oh, Wayne! I'm so sorry!"

"She came back a few months ago, and they got remarried." He didn't want to make his mother sound worse than she was.

"I'm glad to hear it, but she still missed out on a lot." Ella sounded aghast. "It's time she'll never get back. I couldn't do that to my son. Not in a million years."

Wayne reached across the console for her hand. "Jacob is so fortunate to have a mother like you."

When Ella's fingers closed around his, it was the most wonderful feeling he'd experienced in a long time.

"Thank you." Her voice was tremulous.

"For what?" He laced his fingers through hers.

"For making me feel like things are going to be okay, I guess." She seemed to be searching for the right words. "I've spent the past two years worried about my son's health. Worried about his education. Worried about raising him so far

away from my brothers. Worried about not being able to provide all the things he deserves. Most of all, I've worried about my ability to do it alone."

"You're welcome." He rested their joined hands on the console between them. "I should probably thank you as well."

"You're kidding!" She chuckled. "Because you've done all the giving so far in this, er..."

"Relationship?" he supplied.

"Is that what this is?" she inquired softly.

"I think we're heading in that direction. Don't you?"

She was silent for a moment. "To be honest, Wayne, I didn't come to Texas looking for a relationship."

He was hoping to change her mind about that, but he didn't want to scare her away by saying too much too soon. At the moment, he was taking heart in the fact that she hadn't yet pulled her hand away from his. "Sometimes the best things in life come when we're not even looking for them. Or so I've heard."

"Sounds like a fairytale. I stopped believing in them a long time ago," she admitted wryly.

"Me, too." He rubbed his thumb across her wrist. "You're making me want to believe in them again, though."

"Oh, Wayne!" There was a world of wistfulness in her voice. "Just don't get your hopes up too high in my direction, okay?"

It was a little late for that. He locked gazes with her, hiding nothing in his eyes.

"I had a good marriage," she continued in a soft voice. "I loved Jack. I really did. I'm not sure anyone gets a second shot at something like that." She bit her lower lip. "I'm not sure if it's even possible to feel like that again...for someone else."

He heard what she was saying, but he was more than willing to take his chances with her. She was simply worth it.

“I’m glad you had a good marriage, Ella.” He didn’t begrudge her that. “But that doesn’t mean you have to spend the rest of your life alone.”

She let her lower lip go. “Maybe not, but it’s taken me two years to get to the point where I could step out of the house like this.”

“I’m a patient man, Ella.”

As he pulled into the parking lot of Prim’s apartment complex, it was easy to see where the party was taking place. The community room was on the first level. Strands of red lights outlined the windows.

There were no close parking spots left, so he backed into one that butted up against the road.

On their walk to the building, he purposely slowed his steps.

She glanced up at him in surprise. “Are you tired?”

“Nope.”

“Then why are we walking so slow?”

“You said you wanted to take things slow.”

She stared at him for a moment, then burst into laughter.

“For a guy who doesn’t smile much, you’re pretty hilarious.”

“I aim to please.”

“Well, I don’t want to go this slow. Come on!” She grabbed his hand and pulled on it.

“You sure you’re ready to pick up the pace?” he teased.

“Just a little.” She was still laughing as they jogged hand-in-hand toward the entrance.

He didn’t care if he looked a little less like a chief while doing so. He hadn’t felt this lighthearted in a very long time.



CHAPTER 5: HIS ANTI-
VALENTINE

ELLA

As they stepped inside the party room, the scent of chocolate enveloped them. Ella's gaze zeroed in on the enormous fondue fountain in the center of the food table. Warm milk chocolate spewed decadently over the sides of it. Red lights strobed from a disco ball on the ceiling, while soft pop music played in the background.

A bunch of people she didn't know cast curious glances in their direction. A few of them waved. Wayne nodded back as if he knew them.

"Wow! Prim really went all out!" She didn't know what the protocols were for a tribal chief while he was dating, so she was thrilled he didn't mind being seen with her in public. This definitely felt like a date.

Wayne kept her hand clasped in his as he drew her farther into the room. "All to impress a bunch of anti-valentines." He bent his head closer to speak in her ear. "Which I'm no longer sure we qualify as."

Her heart raced as she tipped her head against his shoulder. "What are you saying, Wayne Whitaker?" She was pretty sure she knew, but the woman in her wanted to hear him say it.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Ella." His lips brushed against her temple as he spoke, making her shiver.

"Cold?" he asked quickly.

"No. Just...happy." She couldn't believe this was actually happening. "And a little nervous." Maybe it was only a dream.

Maybe she'd dozed off while taking a bath. Maybe she'd wake up soon and find herself right back in the apartment over the Triple J Auto Body Shop.

"I wouldn't mind focusing on the happy part." Wayne's voice was warm and husky against her ear.

The music transitioned to something faster with a stronger beat. He used their joined hands to twirl her into a dance.

"You can dance," she declared breathlessly, as he caught her lightly against his chest.

"I can do lots of things, Ella Clearwater. Stick around long enough, and you'll see for yourself."

He stepped back to take a few more dance steps. She loved the way he moved. It wasn't jazz, swing, or hip-hop. It was something entirely his own style, something that hinted of his rich Comanche heritage.

She sashayed back in his direction, not sure she was demonstrating any technique at all. She simply liked to move. Nearly every time she and Jacob heard music, they started to jive. It usually ended in a dog pile of silliness.

Tonight was different. The way Wayne was looking at her made her feel special as a woman. Wanted. Needed. Appreciated.

She might not have a college education, but her instincts told her that being with her was making him happy, too. She wasn't sure why. She was simply accepting it.

Without warning, he squatted down on the floor and twirled in a break-dance move that had the guests around them cheering him on.

She dissolved into laughter, clapping along with them.

The music ended, and he rejoined her at the edge of the dance floor. Slinging an arm around her shoulders, he nodded to their audience to acknowledge the cheers. Then he brushed a kiss against her cheek.

"Like I said, stick around, and you'll learn all kinds of things about me."

Prim appeared in front of them in a filmy black sweater tucked into a pair of sassy red jeans. She had matching red cowgirl boots pulled over them, and her hair was unbraided and crimped to perfection.

“Nice moves, Chief!” She shot him an admiring look. Then her gaze settled on their joined hands. “I don’t think you two understand the gist of an Anti-Valentine’s Day party.” However, her grin told them she wasn’t offended.

“We’re new at this.” Wayne’s voice was light and playful.

“Clearly.” Her eyes glowed with envy as she raised her voice to address everyone in the room. “Our first game of the night is charades.” Her gaze grew wicked. “And as punishment for looking like two completely adorable lovebirds, Chief Lighthorse and Ella Clearwater are going to start us off.”

Ella wanted to sink through the floor at all the speculative looks in their direction. Someone must’ve snapped a picture of them. Ella didn’t see who it was, only the quick flash of a camera light that accompanied it. It felt bold and intrusive, making her wonder if coming to the party had been such a good idea, after all.

Prim positioned herself between Wayne and Ella, wrapping a hand around their arms as she led them to the front of the room. “No speaking allowed, or props of any sort. You’ll be strictly relying on your pantomime skills. Are you ready to hear the challenge?”

“As ready as I’m gonna be.” Ella made a face at her.

Wayne waved at her to continue. Ella couldn’t tell from his expression if he was looking forward to the game or not.

Prim lowered her voice. “You’ve got to propose to her on a boat in the middle of a storm-tossed ocean. We’ll accept any reasonable answer that involves a marriage proposal on a boat.” She raised her voice for the rest of the room to hear. “I’m giving them one minute to come up with their game plan.” She mashed a few buttons on her watch. “And gooooo!”

Wayne stepped around her to confer with Ella. As he spoke in her ear, he rested a hand casually on her waist. "I'm going to take a knee in front of you while holding my arms out for balance. You do the same while I hold up an imaginary ring."

She tipped her face up to his, not realizing how close it would bring their lips. "Like a surfer maybe?"

"Yes. Exactly like that." Their gazes locked for a breath-stealing moment.

"Wayne," she murmured.

"Times up!" Prim pointed at them with both hands. "You're on! You have exactly one minute to do your thing, which means..." she swiftly divided the room in half, "everyone on the right side of the room," she waved her hand in a sweeping circle to include them, "has one minute to guess what you're up to. If y'all don't succeed, the other side of the room has thirty seconds to figure it out. If no one guesses correctly, then the challenge is dead and we move on to the next one."

She held up her watch and mashed a few more buttons. "On your mark. Get set. Gooooo!"

Ella assumed her position in front of Wayne, holding her arms out at her sides for balance.

"Hurricane!" Someone in the audience shouted the word. "Storm! Tornado!"

"Water! Surfing!" Other people joined in the guessing.

Ella pointed excitedly at the person who claimed she was surfing. She rocked back and forth and took a step toward Wayne, trying to make it look like she was having a hard time staying on her feet.

He did the same as he slowly bent to one knee in front of her. Then he pretended to open a small box, which he held up in front of her.

Ella tried to clasp her hands in front of her, gasping in surprise. Then her hands flew back out, as if to catch her balance again.

“Proposing marriage while surfing,” one man chortled.

Ella waved at him to keep guessing.

“Proposing marriage on water skis,” he corrected.

She waved at him to keep trying while pointing at the floor. She stomped her feet a few times to let him know she was standing on something solid.

“A boat,” a woman hollered.

The man glanced her way, nodding. “Uh...proposing marriage on a boat during a storm!”

“Close enough!” Ella cried, jumping up and down, pointing at him.

The right side of the room cheered loudly.

“Try to top that!” The man stood and jeered at the other side of the room.

“Aw, she started you off with an easy one!” The other side of the room booed his words.

“Ding! Ding! Ding!” Prim pointed at her watch. “Time’s up. Nice acting, you two.” She smiled broadly at Ella and Wayne. “I’m tempted to kick you out of the party right this second for looking more like Valentines than Anti-Valentines, but...”

“Hey! You issued the challenge,” Wayne teased. “We just lived up to our part of it.” He hooked an arm around Ella’s waist and hitched her closer. “Pretty convincingly, I might add.”

Ella nodded at him, chuckling. “We make a surprisingly good team.”

He nudged her toward the food table. “We’d better grab some dinner before she decides to make good on her threat.”

While the game continued behind them, he selected a thin pretzel stick while she snagged an expensive-looking wafer. They faced the enormous chocolate fondue fountain together.

“This is amazing.” She shook her head at the opulence of their surroundings. Prim sure hadn’t cut corners on the food. There were two large charcuterie trays, one on either side of the fondue fountain. They were weighed down with meats, cheeses, olives, pickles, and crackers.

“It is. Time to dig in.” Wayne dipped his pretzel and cupped a white napkin beneath it while he held it up to her mouth.

She took a bite, reveling in the mix of sweet and salty flavors. “Mmm. Thanks. Okay, your turn.” To repay the favor, she dipped her wafer in the chocolate and reached for a napkin to catch any drips as she held it up to his mouth. He was several inches taller than her, so she had to stretch on her tiptoes.

He lightly cupped her hands in his to finish guiding the wafer to his mouth. Whether he intended to or not, his lips grazed her fingertips as he took a bite.

He chewed and swallowed. “Not bad.”

“Not bad?” She pretended to pout. “Does that mean it’s good or only so-so?”

He winked at her. “I should probably try another bite to be sure.”

He was flirting outrageously with her. It was as if he was publicly staking his claim on her or something.

She wasn’t sure what to think about what was happening between them. It was the first time she’d felt anything for any guy since Jack died. She liked the feeling, though. Wayne was such a great guy. Mature. Classy. Powerful. Being with him was both exciting and a little scary. In a good way, though.

At one point in the evening, he received a phone call and stepped away to take it. Prim sidled up to Ella in the interim. “Hey, you!” She bumped Ella playfully with her hip. “Please assure me you’re having fun.”

“I am. Thank you for inviting me.” Ella smiled gratefully at her. “It was so kind of you to include me.”

“Ha!” Prim shot a laughing look in Wayne’s direction. “I’m not sure he would’ve even come tonight if you hadn’t made it.” He was standing by the front windows, facing the street.

As if sensing they were discussing him, he turned their way and nodded at them.

“What makes you say that?” Ella truly wanted to know.

“Uh...try all the other invitations the single ladies and gents in town have extended to him. He’s never once taken us up on any of them. No rock climbing. No kayaking. No hiking or picnicking. He’s pretty much always been a loner until now.”

Ella frowned at her new friend. “You mean he doesn’t date much?”

“That’s exactly what I mean.” Prim reached for an olive and popped it into her mouth. She washed it down with a mouthful of sparkling fruit water. “He was pretty tight with a childhood friend all through high school. A lot of folks thought they’d make a match of it, but she married someone else. Guess it wasn’t meant to be.”

Ella bit her lower lip thoughtfully. “Maybe he’s one of those guys who’s married to his job.”

“Or maybe he was just waiting for the right person to come along.” Prim waggled her eyebrows suggestively at Ella.

“I’m not exactly in the market for a relationship,” she assured hastily. At least, she hadn’t been before this evening. She wasn’t sure how she felt about things at the moment. Her head was a big snarl of feelings at the moment, too many different ones to name. It was probably going to take the rest of the night to sort them out.

“I hope he changes your mind.” Prim sobered and stepped closer to murmur, “I’m really glad to see the other rumors floating around aren’t true.”

“What rumors?” Though Ella wasn’t fond of gossip, the question sort of slipped out.

“About him and Cheyenne Dunraven being in a relationship. One they’ve been keeping secret due to his position as Chief and her uncle’s seat on the tribal council.”

Ella stared at her. “Those are some pretty specific details.”

“I know, right?” Prim shook her head grimly, making her blonde crimped hair shiver against her shoulders. “I’m just glad they’re not true.”

Ella was, too. If Cheyenne had any designs on Wayne, though, it was no wonder she’d been so hostile in the boutique earlier. Ella also couldn’t shake the feeling that the rumors were related somehow to her slashed tire. Even if Cheyenne had nothing personally to do with the vandalism, someone close to her probably did. Someone who might object to Chief Lighthouse dating anyone besides Cheyenne. Someone who might be watching them at the party right now.

Feeling a prickling sensation on the back of her neck, she glanced furtively around them. However, all she could see were people visiting, dancing, and eating. Though people glanced their way now and then, no one seemed to be paying her or Prim any undue attention.

Wayne returned his phone to his pocket and strode their way. “You were right.” He took Ella’s elbow and pulled her a few feet away from Prim. “Chiefs are never off duty. Something has come up that requires my attention. If you want to stay at the party, I can come back to get you later.”

“No way!” She gave him an incredulous look. “We agreed to do this together. If you go, I go.”

He touched her cheek, looking as close to smiling as she’d ever seen him. “Where have you been all my life, Ella Clearwater?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Mending holes and altering trousers, mostly. Yours included.”

He bent his head over hers. “In case you’re wondering, I’m a big fan of your work.”

“I’m not sure why,” she declared breathlessly as his head descended over hers. “I’m just a—”

“Don’t say just a seamstress like it’s not worth much,” he pleaded quietly. His fingers caressed her chin. “This may come as a surprise to you, but you happen to be the loveliest, kindest, most caring woman I’ve ever met. Someone I look forward to getting to know better. Someone I wouldn’t mind kissing right now.”

“Not here!” She was mortified by the thought.

His breath came out in a huff of amazement. “That wasn’t a hard no.”

“Wayne!” The way he was drinking her in with his eyes made her mouth turn dry and her head feel dizzy. “Let’s get out of here. Please?”

He released her chin and reached for her hand. Closing his long fingers around hers, he backed with her toward the door.

To her bemusement, he broke into a few dance steps. “Come on,” he urged, motioning for her to join him. “Party’s not over until we step outside.”

Laughing helplessly, she danced with him toward the exit.

When they reached the passenger side of his Land Rover, he didn’t immediately open the door. Instead, he spun her around and pressed her shoulder blades against it. “Last chance to back out of that kiss I warned you about.”

“Are you sure about this, Wayne?” She latched onto his gaze and held it like a lifeline to keep her from drowning in so many sensations.

“Very sure, Ella. You?”

“I want to know what it feels like to kiss you,” she confessed softly, not sure if it was wise. Anyone from the party could walk outside right now and see them like this. He had to know that. The sun was just starting to set. They were bathed in its rosy beams.

“I want to know what it feels like, too.” He dipped his head closer to hers, nipping gently at her lower lip, then her upper lip, savoring the moment. He wasn’t even touching her

with his hands. They remained propped against the Land Rover on either side of her head.

For a man who didn't date much, she soon discovered that kissing was another one of his long list of skills.

A breathy sound eased out of her as she allowed him to take her deeper beneath his spell. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he deepened their kiss, twining her fingers in his long, silky mane of hair.

Wayne broke off the kiss before she was ready. Tipping his forehead against hers, he informed her huskily, "And now we know."

She sighed against his mouth, wanting more. "What have we done, Wayne?"

"We kissed."

"You know what I mean." She twisted her fingers deeper in his hair. "We probably can't go back to what we were before."

"Do you want to?" He raised his head to probe her gaze.

"I don't know what I want."

"At least you're not running." Humor glinted deep in his eyes.

"Pretty sure my legs aren't working right now." Her chuckle was shaky.

"I'd be lying if I said I was sorry about that." His expression was one of pure male satisfaction.

"So cocky," she taunted breathlessly.

"So into you," he corrected. "I haven't been able to get you out of my mind since the moment we met."

"Me, either. I keep telling myself I'm being ridiculous and unrealistic. Seriously, Wayne." She begged him with her eyes to understand. "Between what you do and what I do, we might as well live worlds apart."

He reached up to smooth a strand of hair back from her cheek. “You do realize there’s no law against a tribal chief dating a seamstress?”

“There’s not?” Since she’d never belonged to a tribe, she had no idea what the rules were.

“Nope.” He leaned in to nuzzle the side of her mouth. “You look surprised.”

“I am,” she admitted.

“Glad I could clear that up for you.”

Her heart lurched at his words. “You don’t think your family and friends will be disappointed?”

“Not at all!” He sounded so emphatic that the heavy feeling in her heart lifted. “Most of them will be glad to hear I’m finally dating someone. My state of singleness has been a mark against me with the tribal council.”

“So, we’re dating now?” Emotion clogged her throat.

“I’d like to, Ella, if you’re willing. If you need more time before we take things to the next level, I understand. Just tell me what you want.”

His humbleness made her want to laugh and cry at the same time. He was truly priceless.

“Tell me what you’re thinking.” His arms came around her. Shifting their positions around, he leaned back against the Land Rover, cradling her in his arms.

“I didn’t come to town looking for anything like this.” She needed him to understand that.

“So you’ve said.”

“But I won’t deny there’s something between us.”

“Thank you.” His voice was low and husky in her ear.

“And as much as I’d like to see where this might go, I have a son to consider.” Her insides trembled at the thought of him experiencing any more heartache. He’d been through enough.

“You think I don’t know that?” Wayne’s arms tightened around her. “I think Jacob is a great kid. I would never do anything to hurt him. Or you.”

“I know.” Her breath snagged with emotion. “But you wouldn’t be just dating me, Wayne. You’d kind of be dating both of us.”

“Fine with me.” He lightly kissed his way down the side of her face.

“Are you sure?” She hoped he wasn’t just saying that to be nice.

“How about we visit the park across from the lake tomorrow?” he suggested quietly. “Right after work. Just the three of us. I’ll bring a soccer ball and some sandwiches from Subway.”

“I would really like that.” It sounded perfect, actually. “And so would he.”

“Then it’s a date.” Wayne sealed his mouth over hers again, continuing his gentle siege on her concerns about his willingness to date both her and her son.

For a moment, she was able to forget about the hostile niece of his hotheaded councilman, her angry in-laws, and her mother’s estranged family, who didn’t yet know she was in town. It was so nice to have someone in her life again to care for her. She felt safe in Wayne’s arms. Cherished. Hopeful about the future.

He smelled nice, too.

As he reluctantly lifted his head, she felt obligated to remind him of his duties, since she was the person who’d been distracting him from them. “What about that thing you said you needed to take care of?”

“I decided it can wait.”

“I don’t want to keep you from anything important, Wayne.”

“This is important.” He pressed his check to hers. “You’re important.”

Her heart gave a crazy little flip-flop at the realization that he meant it. “Do you want me to go with you?”

“That would be nice.”

“Okay. Tell me what’s going on and if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“The oldest member of our tribe passed away this evening.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.” Her heart went out to him. “Were you close?”

“No, but he was a good man. I’m going to pay my respects to his family.”

The breath eased out of her. “It’s been a tough night for some folks, huh?” She wondered if it made him feel guilty about attending the party.

“That’s true of every night, I’m afraid.” He straightened. “I’d like to show you something on our way there.” He cast an assessing look up at the heavens. “I think there’s still time.”

He didn’t say much on their drive to the reservation. A Comanche with a round, cheerful face greeted them at the gate. “What’s up, Chief?” He peered inside the SUV. Curiosity burned in his dark gaze as he nodded at Ella.

“Just got word of Blackwater’s passing.”

“Yeah. That’s tough, isn’t it?” The man sobered.

“In case you haven’t met, this is my girlfriend, Ella Clearwater.” Wayne sent a warm look in her direction. “Ella, this is Deputy Paco Saloso. Great guy. We’re fortunate to have him on the force.”

Her lips parted in amazement at the introduction. *I’m officially dating Wayne Whitaker. A tribal chief!*

Paco looked as surprised as she felt. “Nice to meet you, Ella.”

“Nice to meet you, too.” She gave him a tremulous smile.

“Sorry to dash.” Wayne pointed at the road ahead of them.

“Right.” Paco slapped the side of the vehicle. “Give my regards to Blackwater’s family.”

“I will.” Wayne hit the gas pedal.

Instead of driving to a residential area, as Ella expected, he turned onto a side road that led straight into the mountains.

“Does the family live this far out?” She peered out the window, absorbing the view of the evergreens and the ever steepening landscape.

He made another turn, and the craggy rock walls around them grew closer. They drove through a mountain pass.

“No. We’re taking a quick detour so I can show you something.”

The terrain opened up again on the other side of the pass. Wayne pulled to the shoulder and braked. “This should work.” Opening his door, he hurried around the front of the vehicle to open hers.

She joined him on the curb. “What an incredible view!” She shaded her eyes from the brilliant glow of the setting sun. For miles, the foothills and trees were bathed in its rosy light. “It that why you brought me here?”

“Yes.” He gently turned her shoulders, pointing. “Straight ahead is the tallest peak on the rez.”

She caught her breath at the sight of the sun dipping behind it. The glowing ball blasted its rays around it, making it look like the tippy top of it was on fire.

“A mountain on fire,” she breathed, “just like you said.”

They were standing so close that his breath grazed her cheek. “Don’t tell Jacob you saw it without him. He’ll be jealous.”

“Yes, he would.” It warmed her heart to know that he was thinking about her son at a moment like this. It was beginning to sound like he was very much up to the task of dating a single mom.

“Still glad your first time was with me.” Wayne’s arms came around her from behind. “It can be our secret.”

“I’d like that.” As he clasped his hands around her middle, she rested her hands atop them, content to simply be with him. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

“Thank you for coming.” He caressed her chin, then tipped her face up to find her lips again.

It was a long time before they returned to his Land Rover. She found her cell phone lying on the passenger seat. It must have slipped out of the back pocket of her jeans while she was sitting there.

A long series of texts were waiting for her, along with several missed phone calls.

“Oh, my goodness! It’s my brothers.” She snatched up her phone. “They’ve been trying to reach me.” Mashing the speed dial button for Jace, she waited anxiously while it rang.

It took several rings for him to pick up. “There you are,” he exclaimed. “I’ve been trying to reach you.”

“Why? What’s going on?” The sound of sirens in the background made her heart pound sickeningly. “Is that an emergency vehicle?”

“Yes! A firetruck and two cop cars. Didn’t you read my texts?” He sounded winded.

“No, I—”

“Someone tossed a fire bomb at the shop.”

“Oh, no!” Her legs grew so weak that she had to lean forward on the seat to hold herself up. “Are you okay? Is Jacob—?”

“He’s fine,” Jace interrupted tersely. “We’re all fine. I’m sorry about interrupting your one night out, but I figured you’d want to know.”

“I’m coming home right now.” She’d head straight there if she had to call a cab.

“I said we were fine, Ella.” Jace’s voice was firm. “There’s not much damage to the shop. Nothing a little patching and painting can’t fix. Just thought you should know what’s going on.”

“I do.”

“Now get back to enjoying your party.”

“Not a chance!” She disconnected the line.

“Is Jacob alright?” Wayne assisted her into her seat.

“Jace says yes, but my mommy senses are tingling in the opposite direction.” Her hands shook as she buckled her seatbelt. “Someone threw a fire bomb at the Triple J. He swore there wasn’t much damage, but...” She stopped to drag in a choking breath.

Instead of answering, Wayne sprinted around the Land Rover to leap behind the wheel. He revved the motor and took off down the mountain.

She shot him a worried look. “What about Mr. Blackwater?”

“He’s already gone, Ella. You and your brothers are still here.”

“If you want to drop me off at the gate, I can call a cab.”

“Not happening.” His voice was flat. “I promised Jace I wouldn’t let you out of my sight, and I’m a man of my word.”

“You promised him what?” Her voice rose on a note of indignation.

“Hey, your family has been attacked twice in the same day. For all I know, this is my fault.”

She shook her head, feeling the dribble of helpless tears on her cheeks. “I can’t imagine why!” She hated that their lovely evening had turned into such a nightmare.

“My family lives in the crosshairs, Ella. It comes with the job. We’re just so used to it that I hadn’t considered the possibility that you might be targeted because of your association with me. I am truly sorry.”

He sounded so remorseful that she reached for his hand. “Please stop apologizing. You’ve been nothing but kind to me and my family.” She was relieved when his fingers moved against hers, curling around them.

“Of course, I’m apologizing!” He sounded incensed. “You had your tire slashed earlier and now a bomb thrown at the place you and Jacob live. If you don’t have any known enemies, this is on me.”

“Maybe not.” Her brain raced over the possibilities.

“If you know something that can shed light on what’s happening...” He cast a harried look at her as they careened through the mountain pass.

“My mother was a Remington.” The words burst from her. She probably should’ve cushioned the blow with a few remarks leading up to it. However, it had been a long night, and her nerves were shot.

“What?”

“They disowned her the day she eloped with my father. There’s been zero communication between them and us since then. I’m not sure they even know about my brothers and me.” She waved her free hand helplessly. “But what if they found out I’m in town? What if they’re just now hearing about a great-grandson they didn’t even know existed—”

“I’m not buying it,” he interrupted tersely. “Your brothers have been in town for a good six or seven years. If anyone had a problem with that, you’d have known about it already.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. My brothers inherited the property their shop sits on from our mother. That’s the only reason they moved to Heart Lake. And they’re the only reason I followed them here. My relationship with my in-laws isn’t the best, and I wanted Jacob to be raised around family — real family. People who love him.”

More tears gushed down her cheeks.

He squeezed her fingers. “I think the Remingtons are too classy to do something like this. Their biggest beef is with the Hawling clan on the south side of town. Not the Comanches.”

“They disowned my mom,” she reminded.

“I hear you, but they might’ve done that just because the guy she ran off with was poor. And uneducated. The Remingtons might be a little hung up on image and social standing, but that’s no crime.”

“Well, it feels like my family is being targeted. If not by them, then by who?” she cried.

“I don’t know.” His voice was grim. “But I intend to find out.”



CHAPTER 6: UNEXPECTED
PROPOSAL

WAYNE

As Wayne drove up to the Triple J Auto Body Shop, the haze of smoke in the beam of his headlights wasn't nearly as bad as he feared it would be. The firemen were rolling their hoses back into their truck. That was a good sign.

Though it was growing darker outside by the minute, he could still make out single marks on the east corner of the building. Or maybe they were smoke stains. It was hard to tell from this angle.

He parked on the other side of the road, far enough back to be out of the way of the emergency vehicles, and turned on his caution lights. Then he hurried around the hood of the Land Rover to assist Ella to the pavement.

He gently cupped her shoulders. "Deep breaths, Ella. We're going to get to the bottom of this. I promise." So help him, if someone was targeting her family simply because he was dating her, they were going to pay. He'd personally see to it that they were punished to the full extent of the law. The Comanche reservation fell under federal jurisdiction, so he had resources at his fingertips that the Heart Lake Police Department did not. In a somewhat quirky turn of events, he also had a retired FBI agent serving as a deputy on the rez.

Jace jogged up to them as they neared the shop. "Everything's under control. Fire is out, and Jalen has Motor Mouth in bed." He angled his head at the at second-story apartment. "There's no damage up there. Maybe the smell of smoke, but that's it."

Wheeler Remington swaggered their way. “Hey!” He eyed Ella with interest as he leaned in to clap Wayne on the back. The deputy was one hundred percent cowboy — from the Stetson mashed over his auburn hair to his slightly bowed legs from the amount of time he spent in the saddle. Riding broncs was his side hustle. Not because he needed the money. He simply enjoyed the thrills.

“This is Wheeler, my brother-in-law.” Wayne gestured at the guy for Ella’s sake. “He’s another one of those blasted Remingtons,” he added, hoping to insert a lighter note into the heaviness of the evening. Her tear-stained face was twisting his insides every which way but right. “Wheeler, this is my girlfriend, Ella Clearwater.” Despite the chaos around them, it made his chest swell with pride to call her that. He’d been alone for so long.

And now I’m not.

He watched a glint of admiration form in Wheeler’s assessing gaze. He’d always been a connoisseur of sorts when it came to women, a bit of a playboy before he’d met and married Dyoni. It was clear that Ella’s beauty wasn’t lost on him.

Wayne instinctively hooked an arm around Ella’s waist and drew her against his side as they faced the deputy together. “Any suspects?”

“Not yet, bro. It was a drive-by incident. The evidence will be sent off to a forensics lab. They’ll scour it for fingerprints and other stuff. Plus, they’ll track the materials used to assemble the bomb, that sort of thing. We’ll get to the bottom of this. Guaranteed.” He adopted a comical expression. “Otherwise, Dyoni will have my scalp.”

When Wayne’s face didn’t change, Wheeler smirked. “Sorry if that was insensitive.”

“You want to hear something insensitive?” Wayne gave him a hard look. “After my sister scalps you, she’ll pry off your fingernails one-by-one, then your toe nails. Then she’ll tie you to a tree next to the biggest fire ant hill in the state of Texas and walk away without looking back.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty insensitive.” Wheeler barked out a laugh. “I’ll be sure to stay on her good side.”

Wayne felt Ella’s shoulders tremble. Glancing down in concern, he found her convulsed in silent mirth. “That was pretty savage, Chief.”

He hugged her closer, pressing his lips to the top of her head. “Well, I’m feeling pretty savage right now.” Someone had taken not one but two cheap shots at the woman he was quickly growing to care for.

Wheeler wrapped up his questioning and left the cleanup to the detectives on the scene. Jace and Ella were released to head inside after being assured there’d be extra patrols in their part of town for the next few weeks.

“Guess that’ll be you on patrol tonight, eh?” Wayne caught Wheeler’s eye.

“Yep. I’ve got your six, Chief.” Moonlight glinted eerily off the badge pinned to his shirt. “At least, off the rez I do.”

His words were a sobering reminder that the Triple J Auto Body Shop practically straddled the two adjoining jurisdictions. While Ella hurried upstairs to check on her son, Wayne angled his head at Wheeler to step aside with him. They strolled a few feet away from the taped off area.

“Off the record, what are you thinking?” Wayne shoved his hands in his pockets.

“It depends.” Wheeler cocked his head at him. “How long have you been dating Ella?”

“I only officially asked her out today.”

“But...?”

Wayne shook his head. “We met about a week and a half ago. Her son was having a seizure, so she flagged me down. I pulled off the road to help out. Afterward, I talked her into following me to the clinic on the rez. That’s about it.”

Wheeler pulled out his cell phone and pulled up a photograph. He waved the phone at Wayne. “Where does this fall into the mix?”

Wayne found himself staring at a photo of him and Ella from earlier in the day. It was right before the fashion show began. She was wearing the stunning red dress, and he was standing beside her with his hand resting on her back. It wasn't an intimate pose, per se, but it wasn't casual, either. The way he was looking at her was probably the most remarkable thing about the photo.

“Dude, are you in love with her?”

Wayne glanced up from the photo. “Like I said, we just met.”

“That's not what I asked.”

No. It wasn't. “Obviously, I care for her.” He scowled at Wayne. “That's why I'm dating her.”

Wheeler nodded grimly. “Anyone you can think of who might object to that?”

Wayne's gaze narrowed in thought. “Anyone who might object to us being together? Sure.” Everything he said or did was picked endlessly apart on social media. It sort of came with the territory. “Anyone who'd slash tires or throw bombs because of it? No.” The Dunravens were outspoken about a lot of things, but they'd never been involved in anything violent that he was aware of.

“Fair enough. Who were you referring to when you said someone might object to you being together?”

Wayne shrugged. “Apparently, there's some rumor making its rounds about a secret relationship between Cheyenne Dunraven and me. I'm not sure who started it or why.”

“I'll do some digging,” the deputy promised, tapping something into his notepad app. “Anything else?” He glanced up from his phone.

“I just found out that Ella's mother was a Remington. Not sure where she fit into the stalwart family tree. All I know is that her parents disowned her the day she eloped with her Comanche sweetheart.”

Wheeler gave a dry chuckle. “That would be Corella and Jonty Remington. I’d bet my boots on it. Don’t know much about the situation, only that they have a daughter they no longer speak to. According to my mother, no one is allowed to so much as whisper her name at the country club.”

“Corella, eh?” Wayne was no stranger to family politics, so he wasn’t about to start judging. “Sounds like Ella might’ve been named after her.” If that were true, it might mean Ella’s mother hadn’t stopped loving her family, even after they’d disowned her.

“Who knows?” Wheeler shook his head. “It’s a crying shame Darcy’s family cut her off like that. All for the sin of falling in love with the wrong guy.”

“Or the right guy.” It sounded like a love match to Wayne, since Darcy and her husband had gone on to raise four children together.

“Yeah, that’s probably closer to the truth. All that aside, I don’t think a slashed tire or fire bomb sound like the handiwork of a Remington,” Wheeler mused. “Disowning their own loved ones? Yeah. Holding their heads so high they drown in a rainstorm? Hoh, yeah! But that’s about the extent of their meanness,” he concluded.

“My thoughts exactly.” It brought Wayne’s fears full circle. “Looks like this may be on me.”

“Unfortunately.” Wheeler’s mouth twisted sourly. “So, what are you gonna do about it?”

“Everything I can to keep Ella and her son safe.”

“Yep, you’re in love with her alright.” Wheeler’s lopsided grin was full of gloating.

“We just met.”

“So you keep saying. But there’s this thing called love-at-first-sight, dude.”

“I don’t believe in stuff like that.” Wayne wasn’t overly thrilled about being called *dude*, either.

“Like it or not, it’s written all over your face in that picture I showed you.” Wheeler turned off his phone and pocketed it. “I’ll let you know if I find out anything new, and I’d appreciate you doing the same.”

Wayne nodded. “You can count on it.” He wanted these bozos caught as soon as possible. “You’ll have my full cooperation and the full cooperation of our deputies on the rez, if it comes to that.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t.” Wheeler tipped his hat and turned on his heel.

Wayne strode to the entrance of the auto body shop and raised his hand. The door opened before he could knock.

Jace appeared and waved him inside. “You and the deputy were huddled pretty tight out there. Any new developments?”

“Not yet.” Wayne stepped across the threshold. “He’s my brother-in-law, in case you weren’t aware.”

“No, I was not.” Looking surprised, Jace locked the door and motioned for Wayne to follow him into the garage. “My brothers and I keep our heads down, fixing cars and staying out of everyone else’s business.”

“Smart policy.” Wayne wished more people would follow it. “Wheeler promised they’d be running extra patrols around your shop.”

“Glad to hear it.” Jace glanced toward the stairs. “And you can rest assured someone will be staying here at all times with Ella and Jacob. No way are we leaving her alone after this!”

“She’ll appreciate that.” Wayne wished there was more he could do to help out. “How bad is the damage?”

“Not too bad. We’ll fix it ourselves.” Jace sounded dismissive.

“You’re not going to file an insurance claim?” Wayne hoped it didn’t mean they’d let their policy lapse or something.

“And raise our premiums over something this minor? Nah. It was a bad throw. Most of the blast missed the building.”

Jace shook his head. “All it’s gonna take is a little touch-up work on that end of the shop.”

The thought crossed Wayne’s mind that the bomb thrower might’ve missed on purpose. What if it was only intended as a warning?

“Mind if I head upstairs to check on Ella?” He couldn’t stand the thought of taking off without saying goodbye.

“Not at all.” Jace waved him toward the stairs. “I’m gonna stay down here a little longer to make sure the place is buttoned down for the night. I’ve been meaning to mount more security cameras and reckon now is as good a time as any.”

“Want some help?”

“Thanks, but no thanks.” Her brother shook his head. “Jalen already offered. When you head upstairs, maybe you can let him know I’m ready to get started?”

“Absolutely.” Wayne moved toward the stairs, but paused before mounting them. “If this is happening because of me, I’m going to make it right.”

Jace didn’t answer. Then again, Wayne didn’t expect him to. Her brother heard him, though. That was all that mattered. He jogged upstairs to knock on the door to Ella’s apartment.

“I’ll be right there,” she called.

He hoped the time it took her to open the door meant she was checking the peep hole to see who it was first.

She tugged him inside and bolted the door behind him.

They faced each other in strained silence. She was the first to break it.

“I’m so sorry for everything that’s happened,” she breathed. “I—”

“Just stop.” He held out his arms to her. She stepped into them, allowing him to draw her closer. “None of this is your fault, and you know it.” He pressed his lips to the top of her head. “Your brothers and I will keep you and Jacob safe, you hear?”

“I’m not your problem, Wayne.” Her voice was muffled against his shirt.

“Really? Because I seem to remember you agreeing to be my girl earlier.” He nuzzled the top of her head again.

“I don’t want our relationship to be one more problem you have to deal with,” she protested, curling her hands against his shoulders. “You don’t need that on you, Wayne.”

“What I need is you,” he assured flatly.

“Wayne, I—”

“I mean it, Ella. I know we just started dating, but I’m all-in on this relationship.” It no longer mattered to him how little time they’d known each other. Their paths had crossed for a reason, and he wasn’t about to abandon her. He hadn’t gotten to where he was by tucking his tail and running when things got tough.

“Okay.” She drew a deep breath and leaned a little away from him to scan his face. “But if you change your mind—”

He silenced her with a kiss. “Not happening,” he muttered.

“Oo, gross!” Jacob made a choking sound on the other side of the room. “Did you just kiss my mom?”

With a gasp of alarm, Ella whirled out of Wayne’s arms. “Baby, what are you doing out of bed?”

“Will you read me a story?” he begged, neatly dodging the question. “Uncle Jalen said there was too much going on to do it.”

“I thought you were asleep.” She worriedly crouched down in front of him.

“I tried, but my room smells like smoke, and I can still hear the sirens in my head.” There was a whine to Jacob’s voice that sounded contrived to Wayne. Plus, there was a sly glint in the kid’s gaze. He was milking the situation. Wayne was sure of it.

“Oh, good grief!” Ella’s tone told him she’d come to the same conclusion.

“How about I read him the story?” he offered.

“Oh, please, please, please! Can he, Mom?” Jacob jumped up and down in his teddy bear PJs for emphasis. “I promise I’ll go right to sleep.”

Wayne wasn’t sure how anyone could make such a promise, but he saw no point in challenging the dubious logic of a six-year-old.

Ella pulled him aside. “What about Blackwater’s family?”

“I’ll head over there right after I finish reading to Jacob.” Wayne playfully drew an X over his chest. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

She drew a bracing breath. “Fine. You win. Even though it feels like my son is one-upping me again, I’m going to say yes.”

“Wooohooooo!” Jacob squealed so loudly that his mother winced.

She leaned closer to Wayne. “Just for the record, I’m only doing this because I’m not in any rip-roaring hurry to say goodbye to you.”

Neither was he. He made sure their fingers brushed as he left her to follow Jacob down the hallway. His bedroom was a narrow space with a couch on one side of the room and a weight lifting station on the other side. There was a pull-up bar dangling from the ceiling and a sit-up bar mounted to the door.

Wayne was a little surprised that Ella’s brothers had left so much workout gear in the room with her son. Then again, most of it was probably too heavy for him to lift.

Someone had tucked a flat sheet around the couch cushions and piled a few extra blankets and pillows on top of it. Jacob took a flying leap and landed in the center of it all, bouncing one of the pillows to the floor.

He produced a book so quickly that Wayne was left wondering if he’d conjured it out of thin air. “This one,” he announced eagerly.

Assessing the size and weight of it, Wayne quickly determined it was no ordinary children's book. "It's about a Magic Treehouse." He thumbed through the pages and discovered it was divided into chapters. Lots of them. Probably a good hour or two of reading.

"It is." Jacob gave a few more happy bounces on the sofa. "The kids in the story find some books up in a treehouse that take them anywhere they wanna go. Icebergs, pyramids, even caves," he added in a spooky voice.

"Tell you what, Jake." Wayne hoped the kid didn't mind him using the shortened version of his name. "I'll make a deal with you. Are you ready to hear it?"

"Yes, sir!" Jacob listened raptly as Wayne laid out the terms.

"This book is longer than your mom is going to let you stay up for, so how about we agree on a couple of chapters tonight? Then I'll come back and read the next few chapters another night." Tomorrow, he hoped.

"Would you really do that?" Jacob's dark eyes glowed with wonder. "Come back to read some more to me?"

"Yep." Feeling like he'd won, Wayne took a seat on the floor and leaned back against the couch. Opening the book, he started to read. As he neared the end of the first chapter, he heard a gentle snore behind his head.

Jacob had finally fallen asleep.

Wayne finished the last few paragraphs, so he could find out what happened next. It was a surprisingly entertaining story. He couldn't wait to find out what happened next, but he'd be sure to backtrack to the spot where Jacob had fallen asleep.

As he closed the book, movement in the doorway alerted him to the fact that he was no longer alone with Jacob.

Ella leaned against the doorframe and watched him curl forward to his feet. Wayne turned around to tuck the Magic Treehouse book beneath Jacob's arm. He lightly ruffled the kid's hair before turning back to his mother.

Jacob mumbled something in his sleep and burrowed deeper into the blankets.

Wayne moved stealthily toward the door. Only after Ella silently shut it behind them did he start speaking.

“A six-year-old who’s into chapter books, eh? Just when you think you’ve seen it all.” He studied her in the dim light filtering from the kitchen.

“He’s spent a lot of time sick at home,” she sighed. “Books are his best friends.”

It tugged Wayne’s heart to hear her words. It tugged his heart even more to hear the worry behind them. She’d probably missed a good deal of work on behalf of her son, which had undoubtedly made their financial situation even worse.

“Does he read?” Wayne was anxious to learn more about Jacob.

“Very well for a kid his age.” She toyed with a button on his shirt. “He could’ve easily read that book to you. He’s read it so many times he could probably do it from memory.”

He covered her hand with his. “I told him I’d come back to read the next few chapters to him. Would tomorrow night be okay?”

“Of course! It would mean the world to him. In case you can’t tell, he’s completely wallowing in all of the extra attention from you and my brothers.” She cocked her head and added, “He was old enough when his dad passed to miss him.”

Wayne quickly did the math. “He was four, right?”

“Yes. Jack was gone a lot due to all the side jobs he took on. But when he was home, he spent every second he could with Jacob. The kid totally idolized him.”

“Every second, huh?” It almost sounded like Jack had neglected his wife.

“I think he blamed himself for Jacob being born premature. I delivered him one night while Jack was out racing,” she explained wryly.

He squeezed her hand. “Alone?”

She nodded. “My in-laws were being difficult, as usual. They didn’t believe I was in labor, and I couldn’t afford an ambulance, so I drove myself to the hospital.”

“Are you serious?” Horror filled Wayne’s chest. He couldn’t imagine what she’d gone through. How scared and worried she’d been.

“Unfortunately. But I was young and dramatic. That’s where Jacob gets it from.” She gave a self-deprecatory laugh at the memory. “Nobody took me very seriously back then.”

“You were all of what? Nineteen?” In his opinion, being a teenager completely justified acting young and dramatic.

“Yes. I was a very young mama.”

“Still are,” he reminded her tenderly.

“As the old saying goes, you’re only as old as you feel,” she declared in a lighter voice. “I’ve decided I’m never going to grow up. Kids have more fun.”

“True. For one thing, you get to read Magic Treehouse books.”

“And beat your uncles in Connect Four.”

“And look cute and steal your heart.”

“Yeah, he’s good at that.” She smiled sweetly at Wayne.

It was in that moment he realized he wanted more from Ella. More than dating and being her boyfriend. More than a chapter of a bedtime story with her son now and then. He definitely wanted more than seeing her once every ten days or so due to the demands of his job.

“I have a proposition to make to you,” he said slowly.

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Okay.”

“Are we alone?” He glanced toward the kitchen, wondering if Jalen was still present.

“Yes. Jalen went to help Jace mount some more security cameras.”

“Then let’s talk in the living room.”

“You look serious. Is everything okay?” she asked as he led her down the hallway.

“I always look serious.”

“I know, but...”

“Do you mind taking a seat?” He gestured at the sofa.

“Sure.” She plopped down on the nearest cushion and watched, mesmerized, as he took a knee in front of her.

He took her hand. “I want to marry you, Ella. I want to give you and your son my name and my protection.” After mulling it over in his mind for the past hour, he was convinced it was the only way he was going to be able to keep her safe.

“Wayne,” she choked, gripping his hand.

“I know you’re not in love me.” He studied their joined hands. “But I think we could have a good life together. You’re everything I’ve ever dreamed of finding in a wife, Ella.”

“You’re not in love with me, either.” Her voice was shaky.

“My brother-in-law claims otherwise.”

“Wheeler?” Her eyes widened in amazement.

“Yes.”

“How would he know?” She shook her head helplessly. “Tonight is the first time I’ve ever laid eyes on him.”

“There’s a picture floating around the internet. One of me looking at you in that red dress you were wearing earlier.”

“So?” She looked more confused than ever.

“Everyone is saying I look like I’m in love with you.”

“Are you?” Her voice dropped to a whisper.

“I could be.” Given enough time, he was convinced he could fall in love with her. He was decently sure he’d already started the falling part.

Her breathing turned shallow. “Let me get this straight. You’re proposing marriage to me, because you *might* fall in

love with me someday?”

“And you might fall in love with me.” He was determined to do everything he could to increase the likelihood of that outcome.

“Are you listening to yourself, Wayne? Because this is completely crazy!”

“Is that why you’re still holding my hand, Ella?” If it was really all that crazy, wouldn’t she be running?

“I don’t know what to say.” She sounded flabbergasted.

It was better than hearing a no. “It’s the perfect solution to everything both of us are facing,” he pointed out. “You want a father for Jacob, a safe place to raise him, and financial security. I can give you all of those things. On the flip side, I need a wife to help me lead our tribe. As a side perk, being married to you will improve my image in the eyes of the old-timers on the council.”

“Wayne.” She swayed closer to him. “This is completely insane.”

“But in a good way, don’t you think?”

“I, er...”

“Say yes, Ella,” he pleaded.

“I want to, which is just as crazy as you asking me to say it. What is wrong with us?”

“Nothing. It wouldn’t be the first time a couple entered into a marriage of convenience.” He tried to appeal to her sense of reason. “Even in the Bible, they did it. Have you ever read about Ruth and Boaz?”

“He was her kinsman redeemer,” she murmured in a dazed voice. “Like a distant cousin or something. We don’t share that connection.”

“I beg to differ. You’re a Comanche widow. I’m a Comanche chief.”

She made a sound that could’ve passed as either a laugh or a sob. He wasn’t sure which. “I wonder what my brothers

would say to this.”

He could help her with that. “Jace gave me permission to date you.”

“You asked him?” Her eyes widened.

“I did.”

“Did you ask him if you could marry me?”

“Not yet, but something tells me he won’t object.”

“He won’t. He thinks the world of you.” She reached up to trace the outline of his jaw.

Wayne closed his eyes, leaning into her touch.

“Yes. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but yes.”

His eyelids snapped open. “How soon?” If his ears were working properly, she’d just agreed to marry him.

“I don’t know. When were you thinking?”

“As soon as possible. It’ll only take three business days to secure a marriage license.”

“Three days!” A sound of distress escaped her, even though she had to know he was kidding. “I’m not sure I can get a wedding dress that soon.”

“Then wear that red one again.”

Her gaze grew dreamy. “Did I tell you that Chanel gave it to me?”

“No, but I’m not surprised. It looked like it was made for you.” He figured it was proof that Chanel’s prediction had come true — that Ella’s modeling had sold a lot of dresses for the boutique.

As she fell silent, he caressed her fingers. “It’ll take longer than three days to secure your membership to the Comanche Nation.” It was an indefinite process that could take months. However, he unashamedly intended to use his family’s connections to move things along more quickly.

“Is it a requirement for marrying you?”

“Only if we want the tribal council to accept our marriage.”

“Otherwise they might vote you out, huh?” There was a mischievous note in her voice.

“Something like that.”

Too many emotions to name glowed in her gaze. “My family never joined since my mother didn’t qualify for membership.” She caught her lower lip between her teeth. “But I always wondered what it would feel like to...belong.”

There was a world of loneliness in her comment that he understood all too well — for entirely different reasons, of course. She spoke from the perspective of an outsider. In his case, it was simply lonely at the top.

She was silent for a moment. “If we’re really going through with this, Wayne, I have one very big, non-negotiable request to make.”

“I’m intrigued.” He cradled her hand between his, preparing to work out a compromise they could both live with.

“You have to be present when we break the news to Jacob about us. It’s the only right way to do this,” she concluded breathlessly.

Relief flooded him at the reasonable nature of her request. He raised her hand to his lips. “I would be honored.”



CHAPTER 7: A BITTER
COMPLAINT

CORELLA

The next morning

It took a while for Corella Remington to park her Rolls-Royce Phantom in front of the Heart Lake Police Department. They desperately needed to repaint the lines in their parking lot. It would be even better if they'd paint the lines farther apart. Folks at her age required extra room for all the paraphernalia they had to drag through life — walkers, wheelchairs, scooters, and canes.

Her current cross to bear was a walker. She hated the thing. The only reason she tolerated it was because it allowed her to remain standing.

She might be eighty-two, but she still did everything she wanted.

Some of the young whippersnappers in her family were actually making noises about taking away her car keys. She couldn't wait to see them try. They'd soon learn they'd be prying them from her cold lifeless hands someday, and not a moment before.

She was proud of the fact that she could still drive at her age. She was equally proud of the car her husband had given her on their golden anniversary. Only eighteen of this exact model had been manufactured. The wine red roadster was priceless in every sense of the word.

She didn't care how many people considered it to be an ostentatious show of the Remingtons' wealth. Nor did she care

that it took her a full five minutes to maneuver her walker out of the passenger floorboard to station it outside the driver's door. Or that it took another five minutes for her to stand behind it, tuck the strap of her Prada purse over her shoulder, and lock the car behind her.

By the time she made it to the entrance of the police department, a prickle of sweat was forming beneath her pearl choker, and her feet were killing her. She fully intended to pen a complaint to the manufacturer the moment she got home. And maybe file a lawsuit against the medical center. They were supposed to be therapeutic shoes, for pity's sake! Her doctor had prescribed them for her, then sent her to a special wing of the medical center to have them custom fitted to her twisted, arthritic feet.

Growing old was for the birds! She wouldn't wish this on anyone. Oh, wait! On second thought, there were actually a few people in town she wouldn't mind making as miserable as she was.

And a few people out of town.

Well, maybe not any longer. She was fairly certain they were all dead now.

A familiar stab of heartache ripped through her gaunt frame, making her halt on the sidewalk in front of the police station. She hunched over her walker and gripped the handles for dear life until the feeling passed.

The front door of the building flew open, and the sheriff stepped out. Gil Remington stomped with energy in her direction. Though she'd never once told him, she'd always admired his grit and determination. Most folks these days didn't have enough of either quality. A man in his mid to late fifties, he feared nothing or nobody. He coolly and calmly administered the law without prejudice, something she was counting on him doing again after she said her piece.

"Corella Remington!" His tone was scolding as he made his way to her. "Why in the blazes are you gallivanting around town on your own?"

She drew herself up as tall as she could, which wasn't her full height from her tennis playing days. That was an impossible task for an old lady clinging to a walker. By her best estimate, she was only able to raise her former five-foot, six-inch frame to about five feet, three inches.

"I came to file a complaint," she stated in the firmest voice she could muster. It sounded more like the wheeze of an old woman out of breath, but she gave herself a few points for the effort.

"Of course, you did." The sheriff didn't sound even remotely surprised, which irritated her more than it should have. There was a day when folks had feared her. Now they mostly treated her with pity or disdain, which was worse than the blasted therapeutic shoes that were currently pinching her feet.

"It's a serious complaint." The tremor in her voice became more pronounced. "It's about my granddaughter."

Gil drew a heavy breath. Then he leaned forward to grip the front of her walker, bringing them eye-to-eye. "How dare you come here and say one word about that poor woman! Correct me if I'm wrong, but you've refused to so much as acknowledge her existence for the past twenty-five years."

Corella raised her chin, another difficult task at her age, but she managed.

He made a long-suffering sound. "You do realize if you can't state her name aloud, then there's little point in taking your statement?"

"Ella Clearwater." She gritted the words out. "That's her name. Now get something to write on." It infuriated her not to see so much as an ink pen sticking out of the breast pocket of his freshly pressed shirt.

He continued to grip her walker and glare at her. "So help me, Corella, if you've come to cause trouble for her and her kid, I'll toss you behind bars myself, walker and all, and throw away the key." He glanced piteously down at the infernal

contraption she was clinging to, clearly despising it as much as she did.

It took a moment for the full import of his words to sink in. “What son? Are you trying to tell me that my granddaughter has a child?” A wave of dizziness shook her. Or maybe it was embarrassment. Why on earth was this the first time she was hearing about the existence of a great-grandchild?

“His name is Jacob. He’s in the first grade.” Gil Remington straightened and lifted his Stetson, running his hand through his hair.

It was a thick head of hair for a man his age, with only a hint of frost at his temples. He had a good strong back on him, too, and still wore his jeans like an honest-to-Pete cowboy. Corella was willing to bet all the ladies in town were still going gaga over him. Not that he was one to notice stuff like that. He’d never had eyes for any woman besides his wife. Corella had it on good account that the pitiful creature was busy dying of cancer, not that Gil would ever admit to such a thing. He was way too proud to accept anyone’s pity, least of all hers. His wife’s failing health was probably the real reason behind the rumors that he was close to retirement, though. She’d bet her bottom dollar on that particular rumor.

However, she had more important fish to fry at the moment.

“Jacob.” She repeated her great-grandson’s name, hating the way her voice grew hoarse from her allergies. “It’s a good name. One worthy of a Remington.” *Oh, for the love of Mike!* She mentally added the eyeglass company to her growing list of places to sue when she got home. Apparently, her prescription sunglasses had stopped working. The sun was glaring so brightly through the useless lenses that it was making her eyes tear up.

“He’s not a Remington,” Gil reminded dryly. He returned his hat to his head. “He’s a Clearwater, the same as his father, who I understand is no longer with us.”

“Mercy,” Corella muttered, hating to admit it was the first she was hearing about the death of her granddaughter’s

husband, as well. Clearly, it was time to fire all her sources and start over with new ones. “It’s no wonder so much trouble has befallen the child since her arrival in town. What with no husband to protect her and my great-grandson!”

Gil reached into his pocket and produced a clean white handkerchief. He held it out to her.

“What’s that for?” She eyed it disdainfully.

“To dry your eyes.” He studied her dispassionately.

“I never cry.” She managed to draw herself up another quarter inch, which took every last ounce of her strength. “It’s just my fool allergies acting up again.”

“If you say so, Corella.” Sounding woefully unconvinced, he stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket. He produced some sort of electronic device next and held it in front of him. “Okay. Start talking, and I’ll take your statement.”

She eyed the electronic doohickey with suspicion. “Where’s your pen and paper?”

“This is an electronic pad.” He waved it at her. She wished she had the energy to snatch it from his hands and box his ears with it. “I’ll type your answers into it.”

She cleared her throat, wishing he had a good old-fashioned pen or pencil in hand. What if the Russians hacked into his foolish device and wiped the information clean? Then what?

Gil didn’t so much as bat an eye. She got the distinct impression that if she didn’t start talking soon, he’d walk away and leave her out there to roast in the sun.

She noisily cleared her throat. “Several reliable sources are telling me that someone slashed the front left tire of my granddaughter’s Mercedes yesterday. I demand to know what’s being done to catch the fellow!” She pounded a fist on her walker for emphasis.

“Not sure how reliable your sources are.” Gil Remington’s lips twitched.

“Why’s that?” His mocking tone infuriated her. She was sick and tired of folks not taking her seriously.

“Because Ella drives a silver Volvo, and her left rear tire was the one that was slashed.”

She glared at him. “I don’t care if it’s the spare tire in the trunk of her Weiner mobile. I want to know what the authorities are doing about it!”

“Everything we can.” He lowered his electronic tablet to his side. “We pulled a partial fingerprint off the hubcap, which may or may not have belonged to the perp. Either way, it wasn’t in the system.”

“What about security cameras?”

He shook his head. “There aren’t any in the rear parking lot of the boutique.”

“Why not?” she demanded shrilly.

“I’m not sure, but the owner is having them installed right away. If anything like this happens again—”

“If you do your job, it won’t,” she cut in icily.

He ignored the interruption. “We also have a forensics team examining the components of the fire bomb,” he informed her sternly. “Or what’s left of it after the explosion.”

Corella stared at him, open-mouthed. He was right about one thing. Her sources were slipping, probably because their eyes and ears were as old as hers.

He watched her changing expression in disgust. “I’m referring to the drive-by bombing of the Triple J Auto Body Shop, which you clearly know nothing about.” He made a shooing motion at her. “Go home, Corella. You’ve weaseled all the information out of me I’m willing to release about an ongoing investigation. You’re gonna have to let the law run its course, same as everyone else.”

“Over my dead body,” she snarled. “There has to be something I can do to help.” She had wealth and connections that most people only dreamed about.

He spread his hands. “Your money can’t buy justice, Corella. Just let me do my job.”

Fearing he was right, she stared at him, silently begging him to throw her a bone.

He drew a breath and let it out slowly. “Would you like me to drive you home?”

“Touch my car, and you’ll die.” She gave him a withering look.

“Are you threatening an officer?” He looked ready to bend over double, laughing.

“I’m just stating facts, Gil.” Clinging to what little dignity she had left, she turned her back on him. It was a dang shame that the maneuver took a full minute.

It also took her twice as long to climb back into her car as it had taken to climb out of it. Her energy was quickly fading. However, her trip to the station was worth the discomfort. All in all, it had been a productive morning.

I have a great-grandson.

Only after Corella was alone in her car did she let the tears run unchecked down her face.

My first great-grandchild.

She couldn’t wait to lay eyes on him and see for herself if Gil Remington was telling the truth and nothing but the truth about such an unexpected miracle.



CHAPTER 8: VOTE OF
CONFIDENCE

WAYNE

Two weeks later

Wayne paced the living room in his Monday through Friday house. He was taking half a day off from the high school, which had allowed him to leave during lunch.

For the first time, he was glad that the tribal council had insisted he remain in one of the largest ranch-style homes on the rez after his father moved out. He'd offered to relocate to a smaller house, but they'd pitched a fit, claiming he needed to live in a home worthy of a tribal chief.

Soon he'd have a family to share the four-bedroom, three-bathroom home in town with. A bride who was half Comanche and a stepson who was three-quarters Comanche.

And any other children you bless us with, Lord.

He planned to officially notify the tribal council of his engagement to Ella Clearwater today. In less than an hour, he would face them with his resignation letter in hand. The only thing missing from it was the exact date of his last day serving as the Vice Principal of Heart Lake High School.

His cell phone rang. He mechanically lifted it to his ear. "Chief Lighthorse speaking."

"Hey, Wayne. It's Hope." There was a note of suppressed excitement in her voice. "I know you took the afternoon off for your super important meeting, and that you're probably in the

middle of getting ready for it, but..." She paused to catch her breath.

"What can I do for you, Hope?" She was still his boss — for a few more weeks, at least. He was more than happy to help her tie up any loose ends to ensure the transition process for his replacement went as smoothly as possible.

"I'll get to that in a sec, but first..." A happy chuckle escaped her. "Are you sitting down?"

"No."

"I'm not sure why I even asked, since it's you. Anyhow, I just finished securing a start date for our new vice principal."

His shoulders relaxed. "He accepted the job." It was an answer to prayer for both of them. *One more hurdle crossed. Many more to go before I sleep.*

"I knew he would. I had a good feeling about him during his interview," she gushed. "Bottom line is our new vice principal is available to start two weeks from today. It's only a matter of typing up the document and getting him to sign it."

Wayne could hear the underlying question before she asked it. "That's good news, Hope. I'm happy for you and for the future of Heart Lake High."

"As much as I appreciate you saying that..." Her voice changed. "Listen, this is entirely off the record." He pictured her sitting forward in her chair and leaning her forearms on her desk the way she always did when she was hammering home a point. "It's just me and you on a non-recorded line. Two friends with an enormous amount of professional respect for each other." She let out a long, weary sigh. "Are you sure about what you're doing?"

When he didn't immediately respond, she plunged onward, "Because I haven't had your replacement sign a single form yet." She sighed again. "What I'm trying to say is, it's not too late to change your mind."

There were so many things he could say right now that it was hard to pick just one. However, their working relationship

was such that he could go for the brutal truth without fear of repercussions.

“I’ll know in a few hours if I still have a job as a tribal chief.”

“I can certainly hold the job that long for you.”

“I’m not asking you to. I’m just giving you the facts.” Because she deserved no less. It wasn’t as if he needed the money. He still had his family’s rodeo business to run.

“I know. But if there’s even the slightest chance of keeping you on board, you’re my first choice. Always.”

“Thank you for saying that.” However, they both knew this was goodbye.

“Gosh, Wayne! If you were sitting in my office right now, you’d have a much better idea of how hard this is for me.” She sounded close to weeping.

He was glad he wasn’t there to witness her tears. It wasn’t something he would’ve enjoyed. “I’m going to miss working with you, too, Hope.” Not only did he consider her and her husband to be dear friends, his work at the high school had formed a valuable connection between his people and the citizens of Heart Lake.

“I couldn’t have done this without you, Wayne.” Hope’s voice cracked. She’d returned to her hometown at a crucial time in Heart Lake history — only weeks after the south side of town had been devastated by tornadoes. Under her leadership, they’d united two rival high schools under one roof.

“Sure, you would have.” He couldn’t believe she was claiming otherwise. “The school board would’ve never hired you if you weren’t up to the task. If I’ve learned anything during our tenure together, it’s that you’re a lot tougher than you look.” She was a tall, slender blonde in heels who didn’t look very tough at all. However, the opposite was true.

“Thanks.” She sniffed. “I’ll say it a different way. It would’ve been monumentally harder to accomplish everything we did without you. We’ve been an incredible team.”

“We still can be.” He imagined he was going to need friends like her more than ever in the coming days.

“Just a sec.” He could hear the muffled sound of her blowing her nose in the background. Then she was back. “I get it. Your people need you on the rez. Desperately. I honestly don’t blame them for snatching you up and hogging you all to themselves. Like I said during our last meeting, we all saw this coming.”

“I’m just grateful that you understand.” He paced in front of the living room window.

“You know I do,” she assured.

They’d discussed his concerns many times behind closed doors — how his tribe remained a good year or more behind the neighboring towns on their recovery efforts from the storm. It took a lot longer for federal funds to trickle all the way down to a single tribe on a single reservation. There was just so much politics involved. So much red tape.

“We wouldn’t be where we are on the rez without the help of friends like you.” It was the perfect time to remind her of that. Several churches, clubs, and businesses in Heart Lake had spearheaded holiday fundraisers to bring much-needed relief their way. Right before Christmas, they’d also brought a small army of volunteers onto the rez to handle the most urgent repairs.

“Anything Josh and I can do anytime,” Hope promised. “Just say the word.”

“Right back atcha.” He’d always have her back, too.

“Thank you.” She cleared her throat.

He recognized the sound of her switching gears.

“When you picked up the phone, you asked what you could do for me. Well, here’s my answer, Wayne. I need you to attend a dinner at the Heart Lake Country Club this evening. No questions asked. Seven o’clock. You’re welcome to bring a plus one.”

He mentally ran over his schedule for the day. His meeting with the tribal council would begin at two o'clock sharp. There was no stated end time to it. "So long as my council meeting is finished by then, I'll be there. I'll invite Ella."

"Perfect." Hope's voice softened. "Seeing you together is like watching the Cinderella story live."

Except the woman becoming his princess was Comanche. "I'll see you at seven, Hope."

"See you then." She ended their call.

Wayne glanced at his watch. It was time to go.

In the days leading up to the tribal council meeting, he'd debated wearing the traditional feathers, beads, and buckskins. This morning, however, he'd settled on one of the many business suits in his closet, a dark gray pinstripe one with a simple white button-up shirt. This was the real him — a high school principal, rodeo owner, and newly installed Comanche chief. There was no point in pretending he was anything else.

He headed for the Land Rover he'd left parked at the curb. Taking his place behind the wheel, he tossed his blazer across the passenger seat. Before he started the motor, he rolled up his shirt sleeves. This was how he preferred to go to work. As usual, his dark mane of hair was down. Never in his life had he attempted to conceal his Comanche heritage.

He was convinced he was the right chief for the job, exactly the kind of leader his tribe needed right now. He knew how to balance the old and the new, the past and the present. If only he could convince them of that during the upcoming meeting!

It took only a handful of minutes to reach the heart of the downtown area of the reservation. A wide, two-line highway snaked its way through the rows of Comanche-owned businesses. Several were housed inside metal buildings with metal roofs. A few were adobe. There was a smattering of grocery stores, various gift and resale shops, a post office, and a century-old church with a cross mounted to the roof instead of a steeple.

Right smack in the middle of downtown was the nerve center of the tribe. The ancient red stone two-story was flanked by elegant stone columns and several pairs of arched, mission-style windows.

Wayne parked in his reserved spot by the front entrance. Leaving his blazer on the passenger seat, he grabbed the folder containing his resignation letter and headed inside.

“There you are!” Dyoni was waiting for him in the entry foyer. Like him, his sister was wearing a business suit. Power red, in her case, with her long mocha hair swinging behind her blazer.

“Where have you been?” she hissed. Her creamy bronze features were scrunched with worry. “The meeting begins in five minutes!”

He’d been praying, talking to Hope, and praying some more. However, there was no time to go into all of that.

“I was preparing.” He kissed her cheek and moved past her into the council chamber. It was a wide, curricular room with a platform and podium on one end. In the center of the room was a fire pit where their ancestors had burned incense. Flanking the rounded outer walls were a series of tiered wooden benches, built amphitheater style. The councilmen and women were swiftly assembling on them.

Wayne remained standing in the shadows along the wall beside the platform

The meeting was called to order, and he was summoned to the podium.

“Good afternoon.” He pressed his right hand to his heart as he faced the top echelon leaders of their community. “We’ve been in discussions for months over the topic of hosting a Saturday morning market. You know where I stand on the issue. You also know how important it is to the craftsmen who are asking for our vote on the initiative today.”

He ignored the murmurs his words generated and pressed onward. “You’ve seen the projections for vendors, customers, traffic flow, and profitability. What you haven’t seen before

today is my resignation from Heart Lake High School.” He waved the white envelope in the air that contained the letter.

The room grew abruptly silent. “I’m prepared to submit my two-week notice immediately following today’s meeting. I’m preparing to commit to serving our people full-time, something I wasn’t at liberty to do as your interim chief. Before I submit this letter to my colleagues at the school district, however,” he set it down on the podium in front of him, “I’m asking for your commitment in return.”

He allowed the room to fall into silence once again before continuing. “While never turning our backs on our beliefs, traditions, and culture, I need this council to agree to walk hand-in-hand with me as we fight poverty, illiteracy, alcohol addiction, the usage of controlled substances, vandalism, domestic abuse, and gang violence. I need us to walk hand-in-hand toward a better tomorrow for our people. We need to renovate more homes and businesses. We need to create more jobs, more opportunities for small business owners, more education for our children and adults, more community events to celebrate our God-given heritage, and more unity. We’ll always have our differences, discussions, and votes. But we can’t lose sight of the fact that we’re on the same team. We can’t stop moving in the same direction.”

He paused to allow his words to sink in, deliberately turning his gaze to Cherokee Dunraven. He could practically see the malice rolling off the middle-aged councilman. Wayne didn’t care if his words stung. It was time for him to lay aside his pettiness and get back to working together.

“Before casting your votes on the market initiative today,” he continued in slow, succinct tones, “I’d like to call for a vote of confidence in my leadership.” His words were met with a collective gasp. “Or your lack of confidence, whichever it turns out to be. If I’m not the person you want for this job going forward, now is the time to make your voices heard.”

He met his sister’s gaze next, pleased by the mix of worry, pride, and adoration he read there. Neither she, nor anyone else present, had been privy to his plan to call for such a vote.

He stepped to the side of the podium to allow one of the elders to lead the room in the requested vote.

“This is highly unorthodox,” the elder intoned. His expression was unreadable. “But it breaks no rules, so we’ll allow it. Are there any questions before we begin?”

Wayne’s heart sank, knowing that the tide of sentiment in his favor could quickly turn if Cherokee Dunraven was allowed to unleash his venom on the room. However, he’d prayed about that, too, before his arrival at today’s meeting. If the tribal council would prefer to listen to a man like Dunraven, perhaps they didn’t deserve the blood, sweat, and tears that Wayne was prepared to give them in the coming days, months, and years.

As Cherokee leaped to his feet, the elder at the podium laid out the ground rules in an impassive voice. “One question per council member. Our chief will have a chance to respond. Each council member will have one minute for a rebuttal. Then they must take a seat. Our chief can choose whether or not he wishes to respond to the rebuttal.”

Wayne studied the elder councilman with interest. It was the first time any of the old-timers had attempted to limit Cherokee’s endless ranting.

Cherokee started to speak before the elder was finished. “Is it true you’re engaged to marry a seamstress from Heart Lake, a woman who’s not a member of the Comanche Nation?” It was a loaded question, and everyone knew it, one that could potentially be used as grounds for Wayne’s dismissal.

He stepped up to the microphone. “Yes. I am engaged to Ella Clearwater. She has submitted her application for membership to the Comanche Nation. We are anticipating her acceptance any day now, after which we plan to exchange our wedding vows.”

Cherokee immediately launched into a diatribe about how Wayne was acting rashly by marrying a seamstress who’d bounced from job to job in South Dakota between long absences from work. How she and her invalid son had become

a tremendous financial burden on her in-laws after she'd become widowed. And how she'd ultimately taken their only grandson against their wishes across state lines to reside in the upper level of a greasy auto body shop. He seemed to relish pointing out that it belonged to her brothers, none of whom were members of the Comanche Nation.

Wayne watched the expressions of the council members change as their disgruntled comrade spoke. A number of them had not known about Wayne's engagement before today, but the warmth in their gazes told him they were pleased to hear about it. As he stepped back behind the podium, he took heart in the fact that he detected no censure in them about his decision to marry a poor Comanche woman. On the contrary, he suspected her Native American heritage counted in his favor.

"What Ella Clearwater lacks in wealth and education," he declared quietly, "she more than makes up for in kindness, generosity, humbleness, and integrity. She is a giver, not a taker. She listens more than she talks. She's a woman who puts the needs of others ahead of her own. There's no one else I'd rather have by my side as I serve our people." He waited a few beats before adding. "Ella's six-year-old son, Jacob, is a different story. He talks a mile per minute, maybe more. I haven't yet timed him. If you have a fish story, I guarantee you he has a bigger one." His words were met with a few grunts and titters of mirth. "Despite being born prematurely, and despite being deathly allergic to a number of foods and other substances, he's full of life and humor, a testament to the incredible parenting he's been privileged to have. Everyone who meets him walks away with a smile on their face."

As soon as he stepped away from the microphone, Cherokee Dunraven started to bluster again. However, he was shushed by several fellow council members. His latest round of griping had been heard and dismissed. The blackness of his glower told Wayne that he was all too aware he'd lost this round.

The council's vote of confidence passed overwhelmingly. There was only one dissenting vote, and everyone knew who it

was. It was an eye-opening moment for Wayne. It was then that he realized he'd allowed the loud and constant blustering of one man to sway him into believing the entire tribal council was more divided than they were.

The vote for the Saturday morning market also passed, but barely. It troubled Wayne to realize that he still hadn't won the old-timers support for the market. However, they clearly still wanted him as their chief. It was an interesting position to find himself in.

As he took the podium for the last time that day, he remembered Ella's words of wisdom.

...it's possible that the old-timers on your council might be...testing your leadership skills before they allow you to navigate them through all those changes you think are necessary.

He certainly hoped that was true as he bent his head to speak into the microphone again. "I want to thank everyone for their honesty. For our candid discussions today. For our culture that allows us to freely express our opinions to one other. You may be assured that I'm going to use every resource available to minimize your concerns about the market while maximizing its success. In closing, thank you for your vote of confidence. I will pray for the wisdom and strength to keep it. May God bless every one of you, and may God bless our Comanche Nation."

A respectful silence met his comments. Then a smatter of clapping worked its way around the room. Before long, everyone was standing and clapping. Well, almost everyone. One man didn't stand.

Wayne stepped around the podium to face those gathered with his hand on his heart. He remained there until the clapping died down.

The moment the meeting was adjourned, Cherokee Dunraven stalked from the room. Nearly everyone else lingered for refreshments and small talk.

Wayne received countless well wishes about his engagement to Ella. He promised to share the date of their wedding as soon as it was on the calendar.

A discreet glance at his watch told him he'd managed to keep the meeting under two hours — a new record. He gave himself a mental high-five. It helped that the elders had limited the amount of time Cherokee had the floor today.

With respect to the full evening he had planned, he purposely worked his way toward the exit, pausing to stop and greet as many councilmen as possible along the way.

Hawk Thunderman was waiting for him by the door. Though his tribe membership records listed his age as forty-nine, he looked a decade older. His long hair was completely white, and he walked with a cane, dragging a stiff knee. It was an injury from his Army days, something he'd never been all that interested in gabbing about. All Wayne knew was that he'd been an expert marksman. Infantry, maybe?

“Hawk.” Wayne said his name jovially as he held out a hand.

“Chief.” The man's expression brightened as he shook it. “That was quite a speech you gave today.” He had on a fringed buckskin jacket that hung nearly to his knees. The t-shirt he was wearing beneath it depicted an American flag waving in the breeze.

“What speech?” Wayne had deliberately kept his comments brief and on point. No one enjoyed listening to a rambler.

“In case you're wondering, I didn't vote for the Saturday morning market. I'm sorry.”

“There's no need to apologize.” Wayne was surprised Hawk felt the need to reveal his vote, since all the votes had been placed anonymously. “We respect the opinions on all sides of the issue.”

“I know you do. That's why you still have my vote of confidence.” His swarthy features were set in stoic lines, and

his hooked nose seemed to droop a little lower than usual. The bags under his eyes were a bit worrisome, too.

“How’s your bum knee?” Wayne glanced pointedly at his leg.

“It hurts, but that’s what pain killers are for.”

“Have you been to the clinic lately?” Wayne hoped the guy wasn’t having trouble getting an appointment. Prim stayed pretty booked up.

Hawk grimaced. “I’m a medicine man, remember?”

Wayne nodded gravely. They both knew it wasn’t an official title. Though he respected Native American culture and traditions, Hawk looked like he was in need of some plain old Tylenol or Motrin. He hoped the fellow wasn’t suffering through life on herbs and potions alone.

“I didn’t stop you to discuss my health.” Hawk leaned forward on his cane. “I just wanted you to know that Ella’s membership to the Comanche Nation will be forthcoming soon.”

“Thank you, sir.” Wayne inclined his head respectfully. Since the councilman didn’t elaborate, he could only assume the man meant he would reach out to his connections on Ella’s behalf.

Hawk was already shuffling his feet in the opposite direction.

Wayne headed for his office next. It was located on the second story of the council building. He tapped his speed dial button for Ella on his way up the stairs.

“Hi, Wayne!” Her musical voice washed over him, easing the tension in his shoulders. “How did your meeting go?”

“Very well. Thanks.”

“So, the market initiative passed?”

“Yes.” He stepped inside his office and closed the door.

“I’m so happy for you, Wayne. I think it bodes well for the future of the tribe. Don’t you?”

“It does.” He strode to the window to look out over the downtown area. “I have some other news.”

“Good or bad?”

“I’ll let you decide.”

“Okay. Lay it on me.”

“Hope called before the council meeting to let me know she’s hired my replacement. He can start as soon as two weeks from today.”

“Oh, wow! This is huge. Are you...?” Her concern on his behalf was touching.

“It’s an answer to prayer,” he assured. “One chapter of my life closing while an even better one opens, Lord willing.”

“We should celebrate tonight,” she suggested softly. “My treat. I’ll cook.”

“About that.” He shared Hope’s request about meeting for dinner at the Heart Lake Country Club.

“Or we could do that,” Ella chuckled. “What’s the dress code?”

“Business casual.” He knew her wardrobe was limited, but she would find a way to rise to the occasion. She always did. As soon as they were married, he intended to hand her his credit card and insist she go shopping.

“Wayne, I—oh, my goodness,” she exclaimed. “Hold on a sec. That’s the school calling.”

While he waited, he glanced at his watch again. It was past four-thirty, which seemed a little late in the day for an elementary school to still be in session. He said a prayer beneath his breath for Jacob, hoping the kid was okay.

When Ella returned to the line, she was sobbing so hard that she was barely coherent.

From what Wayne could gather, a stranger had been skulking outside the fence of the school playground — a masked man that several children claimed had been taking

pictures of Jacob. Instead of riding the bus home, Jacob was being detained until the school could finish sorting things out.

“I’ll meet you at the school.” Wayne took the back stairs to avoid running into more folks who might want to stop and chat. Then he jogged around the building to the parking lot in the front. Leaping into his Land Rover, he sped from the parking lot. On his way toward the gates, he drove a few miles per hour over the posted limit, hoping Police Chief Adriel Montana and his crew were in a good mood this afternoon.

Thankfully, no one stopped him. He hit the gas pedal a little harder after leaving the rez.

He pulled into the school parking lot right behind Ella. As she exited her Volvo, he could see that her face was damp. As she drew closer, he could tell her eyes were red-rimmed, as well.

“J-just when you think everything is finally going right,” she quavered.

He reached for her hand, and they hurried toward the front entrance of the school together. They had to pause at the glass doors and press a security button.

“Come in,” a woman offered in a kind voice.

The school secretary glanced up from her desk as they walked into the office.

“Where’s my son?” Ella choked.

“Safe in the school counselor’s office,” the secretary assured. “If you’ll please sign in, I’ll take you to him right away.” She gestured them toward the screen mounted to the check-in counter in front of her.

It was a touch-screen that required Ella to enter her telephone number. Her information popped up on the screen and spit out a name tag at a nearby printer. She pulled the back off the sticker and pressed the name tag over her heart.

Wayne typed in his number next, unsure if his information would be accessible from the elementary school. It was.

“You’re good to go, Mr. Whitaker.” The secretary stood and collected his name tag from the printer. She handed it to him. “Right this way, please.” She beckoned for them to follow her.

Instead of taking them to the counselors’ office as Wayne was expecting, she led them to the principal’s office.

A young bearded fellow stood as they stepped into the room. He walked around the front of his desk to greet them, his high forehead wrinkled with concern.

“I’m Lance Gordon.” He held out a hand.

“Ella Clearwater.” She shook it and glanced uncertainly back at Wayne.

He nodded reassuringly at her as he extended his hand to the man. “I’m her fiancé, Wayne Whitaker.”

Lance’s expression changed as he glanced at Wayne’s name tag. “Looks like you’re employed by the district.”

“I’m the vice principal at Heart Lake High.” *For a couple more weeks, anyway.*

“No wonder you look so familiar.” He ushered the two of them into chairs at a nearby conference table.

After they were seated, Principal Gordon clasped his hands on the table and leaned in Ella’s direction. “I’m very sorry about the playground incident. Please know that we take the safety of every child here very seriously. The authorities have been contacted, and an incident report has been filed.”

She nodded. “D-did they catch the guy taking the pictures?”

“Not yet, ma’am.”

Wayne frowned thoughtfully. “Did anyone happen to notice whether he got in a vehicle or simply took off on foot?”

Lance nodded. “According to the kids, he ran away. Then they heard the sound of a motor. One child said it might’ve been a motorcycle. No one got any eyeballs on it, though.”

Ella looked confused. “If the kids saw him, then why hasn’t he been arrested yet?”

“That’s the tricky part,” Principal Jordan sighed. “From what the police could gather, he must have been wearing a costume.”

“Must have?” Her voice came out as an incredulous squeak.

“Yes. One young witness was especially helpful in identifying the ears and snout of a coyote.”

“Let me guess,” Ella murmured faintly. “That young witness was my son?”

“Yes.” The principal studied her closely.

“Where is he, by the way?” She glanced worriedly around the room. “I was expecting to see him by now.”

“He’s on his way.” The principal reached for his phone, paged the school counselor, and told her they were ready for Jacob to be brought to his office. He sent an apologetic look to Ella as he ended the call. “I apologize for the delay. We just thought it would be less upsetting for your son if you and I had this conversation while he was out of the room.”

She nodded, still looking anxious.

“While we wait for Jacob to join us, I’ll say this.” He leaned in her direction, tapping a pen on his desk. “He seemed especially fond of coyotes. Is there a reason for that?”

Ella’s expression grew more strained. “Yes. It’s because my mother married a man from the Macawi tribe in South Dakota. Macawi means coyote.” She swallowed hard. “What scares me the most about this whole incident is that Jacob would never see a coyote as his enemy. He would view it more along the lines of a...I don’t know. A team mascot, maybe?”

“I agree. It’s disturbing.” The principal’s expression was hard to read. “I hope you’ll find comfort in the fact that we’re working with local law enforcement to step up security here at the school.” He launched into the details of their increased security measures.

While Wayne listened, coldness seeped into his chest at the realization that the predator's "costume" was that of an age-old Native American spirit animal. At the moment, he had nothing more than his own suspicions to go on. As badly as he didn't want it to be true, his gut was telling him that the mysterious photographer might be someone who lived on the rez.



CHAPTER 9: BOUQUETS AND BODYGUARDS

One month later

Ella smoothed a hand down the intricately beaded bodice of her borrowed wedding dress. The lovely strapless gown of ivory tapa cloth flowed to the floor and swept behind her in a fringed train. What made the gown even more beautiful in her eyes was the fact that it had been made by the women in their tribe for Dyoni's wedding. Afterward, it had been worn by the police chief's bride, Tiva, making Ella the third bride to exchange her wedding vows in it.

"I can't believe how well it fits you." Dyoni danced across the room to join her in front of the mirror. She was in a gauzy teal dress that made Ella think of ocean water. She'd never been to the coast, but it was on her bucket list of things to do with Jacob someday.

And Wayne.

The guy who was about to become her husband. A shiver of anticipation worked its way through her. Not once in the past month had she regretted saying yes to his marriage proposal. She was genuinely looking forward to being his bride — to putting her widowed status behind her and being a married woman again.

"Sorry about sticking you in a strapless gown in March." Dyoni cocked her head critically at the dress. "With only a month to pull off a wedding, though..." Her voice dwindled as she tweaked Ella's veil, settling it more firmly into place. "If it's any comfort, I don't see any goosebumps on your arms."

“I’m not cold,” Ella assured quickly. “Just...” She wasn’t sure how to adequately describe how she felt. All her emotions were intensified today. If she had to pull a single word out of the air, the only one she could think of was *more*. She was simply feeling *more*.

“Mother says she’s bringing a beaded jacket for you to wear to the car later.”

“Oh. Thanks!” It was the first Ella was hearing about the jacket. She’d worn her own coat to the church and didn’t see why a second coat was necessary. In the short time she’d known Claire Whitaker, however, she’d learned to nod and accept whatever help the woman offered. Wayne’s mother had some very strong opinions about his image as a tribal chief. Her southern belle mind contained a very long list of unwritten protocols that Ella despaired of ever living up to.

A knock sounded on the door. Seconds later, the very woman Ella was fretting about swept into the room. Her blue gown matched her daughter’s, and her glossy brunette hair was piled high — also like her daughter’s. She moved toward them, fluttering her hands expressively. “You look positively scrumptious in that dress, Ella!”

“Thank you,” Ella murmured.

Claire Whitaker joined them at the mirror, smelling like sunflowers. “Bless your heart! You must be freezing!”

Ella hastened to assure her. “No, I—”

“No worries.” Claire waved away her protest. “I have a beaded jacketed back at the lake house I already sent someone after. We were halfway to the church before I realized I’d left it at home, and there was no way I was asking my husband to turn back for it. Lord love him, but he drives slower than a herd of turtles.”

Ella chuckled at the mental image. “I wish you hadn’t gone to so much trouble. I truly am fine. The wood stove in the church is putting out some impressive heat.”

“It’s a small building. That’s why.” Claire fanned her face, making a few stray tendrils of hair swing against her cheeks.

“And it’s no trouble at all fetching the jacket.”

Maybe not for you, since you sent someone else after it. Ella refrained from pointing out the obvious.

“You’re going to look simply darling in it for the photographs outside.”

Ah. It dawned on Ella that her future mother-in-law must not approve of her wearing her lilac winter coat on her wedding day.

“It sounds lovely. Thank you.” Ella fingered the strand of pearls Wayne had gifted her the night before, wondering if there was anything else with her appearance that the woman didn’t approve of.

“You’re most welcome.” Claire eyed the pearls. “My son has very good tastes, doesn’t he?”

Since Ella was pretty sure the woman was referring to the pearls and not her future daughter-in-law, she simply smiled.

“Something old, something new.” Claire gave a tinkling laugh. “Between the dress and the pearls, we certainly have those things covered.”

Ella didn’t consider the dress to be all that old. Again, however, she bit her lip instead of stating it aloud.

“Something borrowed,” Claire drawled next. “We have that covered, and then some.”

Ella inwardly groaned. *If you’re trying to make me feel like a charity case, you’re succeeding.*

“Hmm. Something blue.” The woman studied her in speculation.

“My eyes,” Ella pointed at them.

“True.” Claire’s speculative look grew more pronounced. “Forgive me for bringing up business on your wedding day, but did our son ever get around to having you sign the paperwork concerning our rodeo business?”

Ella had no idea what she was talking about.

“Mother!” Dyoni’s voice was gently scolding. “Ella’s only job today is to be happy.”

For a moment, the outline of the two women in front of Ella grew fuzzy. She blinked to clear her vision. “Wayne went over some paperwork with me,” she offered in a thin voice. For the life of her, she couldn’t remember whether it involved their rodeo business. It was mostly the marriage license stuff, plus the initial paperwork surrounding Jacob’s adoption. His adoption was the first thing Wayne had asked about after proposing to her.

“And did you sign it?” Claire pressed.

“Of course.” She’d signed every piece of paper Wayne had placed in front of her.

“Good.” Claire sounded satisfied. “Our attorney said all that matters is that the prenuptial paperwork is in Wayne’s possession. Well, and that it’s dated before the wedding.”

Prenuptial paperwork? Ella couldn’t remember signing anything of the sort. *Did I?* The many details leading to their wedding day were starting to run together. She’d been constantly peppered with questions about flowers, cakes, and invitations, all while trying to learn her new job at the boutique. Not to mention juggling her constant fears for Jacob’s safety. Thankfully, there’d been no more concerning incidents at the playground and no more vandalism attempts on her car.

Just thinking about it, though, made her stress level rise. Without warning, she felt a stab of longing for her own sweet-tempered mother. If only Darcy Remington Countryman could’ve lived to see this day! She certainly wouldn’t have been hounding her only daughter about legal paperwork right before she walked down the aisle.

Ella closed her eyes, awash with bittersweet memories. Tears prickled the backs of her eyelids.

“Oh, dear!” Claire’s voice changed. “Dyoni, hon, scoot that chair over here from against the wall. I think Ella’s feeling faint.”

Ella heard the scrape of chair legs against the wooden floor. Then Claire gently guided her backwards into it.

The woman probably thought she was being helpful. However, Ella was fast running out of patience with her mildly condescending manner. Opening teary eyes, she announced, “I need a few moments. Alone, please.” *Before I completely break down and bawl my eyes out.*

“We understand,” Dyonis said firmly. With a worried glance at Ella, she ushered her mother from the room. “Text me if you need anything, okay?” she begged on her way out.

“Okay.” Ella only said it to be nice, though. The only person she had any interest in texting was the guy neither her future mother-in-law nor her future sister-in-law would approve of her texting.

His response was immediate. *I’ll be right there.*

The next time the door opened, Wayne stepped into the room.

Ella drank in the sight of him in his beige tuxedo. He was wearing a white silk vest beneath it. With his long hair falling past his shoulders, he embodied the perfect mix of old traditions and modern good taste.

“You’re so beautiful.” He moved across the room to crouch in front of her.

“I’m glad you think so,” she whispered shakily. As far as she was concerned, his opinion was the only one that mattered today. The adoration in his dark gaze brought her chaotic emotions back into balance.

“Talk to me, Ella.” He reached for her hands. “Are you having second thoughts?”

“No,” she lied.

He studied her intently. “Neither am I.”

“Are you sure?” The words burst piteously from her.

“Very sure.” His long fingers curled around hers. “What brought this on?”

“A few minutes ago, your mother mentioned prenuptial paperwork. She asked me if I signed it, and I honestly didn’t know. I basically told her that I signed everything you placed in front of me, and that seemed to satisfy her. But...did I?”

“No. Besides the application for our marriage license, the only thing I asked you to sign was my petition to adopt Jacob.”

Ella’s lashed fluttered damply against her cheeks. “She seemed to be under the impression that you and I had discussed your rodeo business. Was there some other paperwork I was supposed to fill out?”

His expression grew shuttered. “This is not a discussion I was hoping to have right now.”

“Wayne, if there’s anything you forgot to have me do—”

“There’s not,” he said firmly.

“What about the prenuptial paperwork your mother mentioned?”

“She asked our family attorney to draw it up. I chose not to present it to you.”

“Why?” She gripped his hands. “I am well aware this is only a marriage of convenience.” She wasn’t entirely sure what that meant, but it’s what they’d agreed to.

“Is that what you really want, Ella?”

She raised and lowered her shoulders. “To be honest, I only know of one way to be married, and that’s...all the way.”

“Then let’s go with that.” His voice was tender.

“So we’re ditching the convenience part of our marriage?” She still wasn’t a hundred percent sure what it meant. She should’ve googled it or something.

“I think we’re well past the in-name-only stuff, Ella. The way you kiss me tells me we have a shot at a real marriage.”

A nervous giggle escaped her. “The way *I* kiss *you*?” She pretended to recoil. “You haven’t exactly held anything back, mister.”

“Guilty as charged.” Looking amused, he stood and tugged her to her feet. “So, are we good?”

She nodded, eyes shining. “What are you going to tell your mother?”

“The truth.” The way he phrased the words made her suspect that he and his mother didn’t see eye-to-eye on everything. Like he’d said, though, it wasn’t a conversation for now.

Another knock sounded on the door.

“Yes,” she called softly.

The door cracked open a few inches. “It’s Jace. Are you decent?”

“If I wasn’t, that would be a problem. It’s about that time, isn’t it?”

“It is.” He pushed the door open wider and stopped short. “Holy smokes! What are you doing in here, Wayne?”

“My bride asked to see me.” Wayne drew a finger down Ella’s cheek, seeming unconcerned about the fact that they’d been caught together.

“Isn’t it bad luck to see her before the wedding?”

“I’m not superstitious.”

Jace grinned at his words. “Maybe not, but I think they’re expecting you down at the altar.” He glanced at his watch and added, “Right about now.”

“Then I’d better head that way.” Wayne reluctantly let her go and backed toward the door. “See you at the altar, Ella.”

Her tremulous smile followed him out the door.

Jace faced her as the door closed behind her groom. “Is everything okay between you two?” Thanks to Chanel, who’d insisted on outfitting the entire wedding party from Modello’s, he was wearing a tuxedo. Ella suspected it was the first time in his life he’d been in one. He looked uncomfortable in it.

“Yes.”

“Good, because I’d rather not bloody his nose on your wedding day.” Jace glanced at the closed door. “Any particular reason you needed to see him right before the wedding?”

“Would you believe me if I said it’s because we’re that much in love?”

He snorted. “I don’t know. Seems to me you’re tying the knot pretty quickly. It’s something I’ve been trying hard to stay out of.”

“I care for him, Jace, if that’s what you’re asking.” She peeked at her brother from beneath her eyelashes.

“I hope so, since you’re marrying the guy,” he exploded. “If that’s the only reason you were canoodling before the wedding, then I’ll drop the subject.”

“It’s not.” She sobered. “It’s because his mother was in here a few minutes ago, asking if I’d signed a prenuptial agreement.”

“What?” Jace’s expression darkened. “Did you?”

“That’s what I just finished asking Wayne.”

“You had to *ask*?” Jace looked astounded.

“In my defense, I’ve had a lot on my mind lately.”

Jace’s features twisted into a thunderous expression. “What did he say?”

“That his mom asked their family attorney to draw up the document, but he chose not to present it to me.”

“Good answer.” His scowl faded. “Man, Ella! That’s a lot to process right before walking down the aisle.”

“I agree.”

“I may never look at his mother the same way again.”

“That makes two of us.” She stepped closer to him, admiring how he looked in his tuxedo jacket and white silk shirt. “Wow, Jace! You look—”

“Like a complete idiot, I know,” he muttered, reaching for her hand and curling it around his arm.

“I couldn’t disagree more.” She squeezed his arm. “Thank you for agreeing to walk me down the aisle.”

“Sorry it couldn’t be Dad.” He patted her hand.

“Do you think he and Mom would’ve approved of Wayne?”

“I know they would have.” He sounded so matter-of-fact that the last of her fears fled. “Can’t say the same thing about your in-laws,” he growled as they strolled together toward the door.

“They don’t know me yet,” she said quickly. “Those things take time.” She and her groom were still getting to know each other, too.

He led her into the vestibule, and they took their places at the entrance to the sanctuary.

The opening chords of the wedding march were played by a small ensemble of flutes and stringed instruments.

“You ready?” Jace raised a single eyebrow at her.

She nodded.

He patiently guided her down the aisle, taking the small, measured steps they’d practiced together.

She purposely didn’t look in the direction of Wayne’s family. Instead, she focused on Jacob. He was standing in the front row next to his Uncle Jalen and Uncle Jasper. Her youngest brother had shown up in the middle of the night, claiming he wouldn’t have missed her wedding for the world. He’d sure gone down to the wire on his arrival time.

Jalen was wearing a beige suit like Jace. Jasper, on the other hand, had on a brown sports jacket over a pair of jeans. He hadn’t shown up in time to be outfitted by Modello’s, and he’d yet to give his siblings an explanation for the new scar riding his left cheekbone.

Regardless of the scar, she’d never before been so proud of her handsome brothers. Or her son, who looked ready to burst from excitement. He waved feverishly as she walked past him.

She blew a kiss to him. Then she faced her groom.

Wayne's dark gaze burned with adoration as Jace removed her hand from his arm and placed it on her groom's arm.

"Thank you." Wayne and her brother nodded at each other. Then Jace stepped back to join her other brothers and Jacob in the front row.

A Native American man with heavily lined features stepped behind the podium. He began the service with a prayer. Though he spoke in a sing-song voice, his words were in broken English, a detail she found supremely comforting.

The ceremony was brief but eloquent, a simple exchange of vows between the recitation of beloved scriptures and a few ancient words of Comanche wisdom.

A lone male singer crooned something in a minor tune as they walked up the aisle of the church together. Once they were in the vestibule, the promised beaded jacket was draped around Ella's shoulders from behind. She allowed Wayne to finish helping her into it before they stepped outside.

She didn't recognize the black Rolls Royce with tinted windows waiting for them in front of the church. When the driver hopped out to open one of the back passenger doors for them, she spied a holster beneath his unbuttoned suit jacket.

"This is Coop." Wayne gestured at the redheaded giant. "As in chicken coop, but without the chickens."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am." The broad-shouldered man nodded respectfully before shutting the door behind her.

She stared after him. "Is he—?"

"He's your new bodyguard, Mrs. Whitaker." Wayne tipped her chin in his direction as he settled more comfortably in the seat beside her. "A fellow named Buzz will be sticking to Jacob like a cocklebur."

"Bodyguards?" *Since when?*

"Yes. Bodyguards, babe. I'm not taking any chances with the safety of our family, certainly not on our wedding day."

Our family. She melted at the way he was looking at her. There was nothing else he could've said that would've made her feel more valued and cherished.

“Do my brothers know about this?”

“Jace does. He promised to fill the others in.”

“I take it he approved?”

“He did.” Wayne caressed her face with his long fingers, dipping his head closer to hers as their driver slid behind the wheel. “I apologize for not telling you about this sooner. I just didn't want to worry you.”

She leaned into his touch, grateful for his concerns. “Do you have a particular reason for stepping up security today?” Had something happened that he wasn't telling her?

“No. It just seemed like a wise thing to do on our wedding day and thereafter.” He brushed his hard mouth against hers. “Now that we're married, you're mine to worry about, Ella.” His voice was warm and husky against her lips. “All mine.”

“And you're all mine.” She smiled against his lips, liking the fact that she had someone in her life again to care for her and Jacob. Someone she trusted and respected. Someone she could depend on.

“Yes, I am.” He cupped her face as the vehicle rolled forward, deepening their kiss and leaving her with no doubt about the sincerity of his words.

It was a short drive to the beautiful red stone council building. She'd been presented before the tribal council during their last meeting. It was during a small ceremony to formally recognize her membership into the tribe. Their closest friends and family were gathering there again today for the wedding reception.

The sun was dipping over the horizon as they braked in front of the building. Coop hurried around to open their door again, and a crisp mountain breeze swirled into the vehicle.

Ella shivered, wishing she had on something besides Claire Whitaker's beaded jacket. It was more ornamental than

anything else, certainly not an effective barrier against the dropping temperature outside.

Wayne unbuttoned his tuxedo jacket and draped it around her shoulders. “Better?” His voice rumbled with affection against her earlobe.

“Yes, but now you’re the one freezing.”

“Far from it.” He reached up to loosen the knot of his tie. “I’m still wearing as many layers as you are.”

The council chamber had been transformed into a sparkling white paradise. Round tables draped in white linen cloths had been moved into the room. Clusters of white roses and candles served as centerpieces. Countless strands of tiny white lights glistened like stars from the ceiling.

Ella and Wayne were ushered to the head table on the platform. After a five-course dinner that lasted over an hour, gifts were passed around the table for them to open.

Jacob wiggled excitedly in his seat on the other side of her. “Can I open one?” he begged.

Smiling, Ella handed him a box now and then. He carefully unwrapped each one, tickled to death to be included in the festivities. One of them was from Dyoni and Wheeler.

Ella gasped as she drew out a solid gold pendant. It was pounded into the shape of a Mustang in full gallop. It looked very old and very valuable. On the back, four words were etched. *To my dearest Meg.*

“It belonged to one of our great-grandmothers,” Dyoni explained softly. “There are a lot more greats in front of her name. I’m not sure of the exact number. All I know is she lived around the time Heart Lake was founded and was married to a Comanche chief named Pecos.”

“Thank you! It’s the most wonderful gift.” Though Ella knew nothing about Chief Pecos, she turned the beautiful piece of jewelry over in her hands, amazed that Wayne’s sister had given them something so rare and precious.

Dyoni smiled archly at them from the other side of the table. “It only seemed right to have it back in the hands of a tribal chief and his bride.”

“Thank you again. It’s truly an amazing gift.”

From the shrewd look in Claire Whitaker’s eyes, Ella sensed that Dyoni’s gift didn’t entirely meet with her approval. “You might want to put it in a safe deposit box,” she suggested in a tight voice.

“Good idea.” Wayne’s voice was noncommittal.

Ella handed him the pendant so his mother could witness him placing it in his pocket. She seemed to relax a little after that.

The number of gift cards Ella and Wayne received was truly staggering. The very last gift they opened had a white envelope taped to it. Nothing was written on the outside of it.

Ella gently pulled open the flap and drew out the card. Her insides froze at what was written there.

Annul your marriage NOW before it’s too late!

The card fluttered from her nerveless fingers to the table.

Though Jacob reached for it, Wayne whisked it away from him. “Not yet, short stack.” He winked at the boy.

Wayne’s expression grew hard as he scanned the note. Bending his head closer to Ella’s, he announced, “We’re leaving. I’ll summon our driver.”

His mother’s red painted lips twisted into a pout. “You’re leaving so soon?” She glanced up at her husband, as if hoping he’d voice a protest.

Birch Whitaker didn’t seem to notice. He was too busy exchanging some sort of silent message with his son.

Coop entered the room with a tall, stocky, blonde fellow. Both were dressed in dark colors. Both were wired with ear pieces.

The blonde man marched straight to Jacob and held out a hand. “Hi. I’m Buzz.”

Jacob's eyes brightened with interest. "Like Buzz Lightyear?" he inquired hopefully.

"Yes, but I'm currently living in this galaxy." He gave her son a good-natured wink.

"It would be cooler to live on the moon," Jacob noted in such a morose tone that everyone around him chuckled.

Ella caught Cherokee Dunraven giving her a hard look as the bodyguards escorted them from the room. She and Wayne made a show of waving to everyone on their way out, trying to emphasize their status as blissful newlyweds.

She wasn't sure if she pulled off her end of it. Her throat was too choked with apprehension, and her heart was racing too rapidly. Fortunately, Jacob's antics served as a distraction. His celebrity-style waves sent a ripple of chuckles around the room.



CHAPTER 10: PAST AND
PRESENT COLLIDE

June

As spring blossomed into summer, Ella learned how to juggle her job at Modello's with her new responsibilities as the wife of a tribal leader. It wasn't easy. Rarely did a day go by without someone on the rez crabbing about her lack of commitment to their tribe.

She hesitated to bring up the topic with Wayne. For one thing, he already had enough to worry about. For another thing, she didn't want to sound like she was gunning to quit her job so he could support her for the rest of her life. She liked the fact that she was contributing to their household income, even if it meant occasionally running late to her husband's dinner meetings.

The tribal council held one on the last Monday of every month. It was more of a meet-and-mingle session than a business meeting, a time for spouses and other family members to get to know each other. Official business was rarely discussed.

Tonight was the third one Ella would be attending. A glance at her watch told her she was going to be a few minutes late. Again.

She texted Buzz. *Is there any chance you can drive Jacob to the Longhorn Grill?* It was the steakhouse located right inside the gates of the rez, where the dinner meetings were typically held.

His response was immediate. *No problem. We'll meet you there.*

The butterflies in her stomach quieted. She moved around the shop, straightening racks and putting away shoe boxes. Stella had taken the week off to visit the beach with some friends, and Chanel had a city council meeting this evening. That's why Ella was closing up the shop.

Well, two of the reasons, anyway. The biggest reason she'd volunteered to close up shop was because Aiyanna Perez owned and operated the Longhorn Grill. She'd been Wayne's bestie all through their high school years and beyond. Once upon a time, the tribe had anticipated her and Wayne tying the knot someday. Ella could only imagine their disappointment when he'd ended up married to a seamstress instead.

Technically, she was more than a seamstress these days. Yes, she still handled all the boutique's alterations, but she also helped run the store when they needed her to. Chanel gave her generous bonuses for the extra hours she put in.

A side perk of putting in a few extra minutes this evening was that Ella would have a really good excuse for running late to dinner. She wasn't looking forward to watching Aiyanna strut around the restaurant in her leather pants and crazy high heels. Ella thought she looked more like the biker babes that frequented her restaurant than the owner of the establishment. Not that her opinion on the topic mattered to anyone.

With a sigh, she ducked in front of the dressing room mirror to smooth her hands down the skirt of her double V-neck hankie dress. It was a gray-blue shade that matched the color of her eyes. The atypical hemline added a bit of fun to it and kept it from being too dressy.

It was a far cry from the jeans and t-shirts she used to wear. She credited the changes in her wardrobe to her tenure at Modello's. The place was wearing off on her. It was impossible to work around such beautiful clothing without acquiring a few items for her own collection.

Since Wayne shopped Modello's, she knew he didn't mind her spending some of her paycheck there. He certainly gave

her plenty of occasions to dress up. Like tonight. Besides, Chanel gave her such a steep discount on her purchases that it almost felt like stealing.

“You about ready to take off?” Coop was lounged against the wall beside the front picture window, staring out at the busy street.

“I’m getting there.” She stuck her tongue out at him. “It’s just like a guy to rush a woman when she’s getting ready.”

They’d become friends during the two months he’d worked for her, and trading verbal barbs was something they did often.

He held his wrist in the air and tapped his watch. “At the risk of getting my head lopped off, might I remind you that your tribal council dinner started five minutes ago, princess?”

She snickered at his persistence in calling her *princess*. He always said it in a tone of voice that was one part affection and two parts sarcasm. “Like most women, I’m well aware of when I’m running fashionably late. Are you married, Coop?”

His freckled features registered surprise. “Why the sudden interest in my love life?”

“It might only be a trick of the light, but I’m pretty sure I saw the indentation of a wedding band on your ring finger once or twice.” The fact that she’d noticed made her feel like Sherlock Holmes. She hoped he was impressed.

“You’re very perceptive.” He stuffed his left hand in the pocket of his black cargo pants.

“That’s not an answer.” She hurriedly straightened the last row of shoes. On a whim, she picked up a pair of gem encrusted heels. “Hmm.” Holding them against her dress, she made the snap decision to add one more purchase to her tab. The shoes went perfectly with the dress she had on, and her size was in stock. *In your face, Aiyanna Perez!* Wayne’s former almost-girlfriend would *not* be the only chick wearing stilettos this evening.

Ella kicked off her more sensible ballet flats and slid on the lovely sandals. Every time they caught the light, the gems

sparkled like diamonds. *New mission, sister. Don't break your neck in these tonight.*

“Don't tell me you're shopping over there!” Coop ran a hand through his hair in exasperation, sending the wavy red locks in all directions.

“Nope. I'm done shopping, and that's still not an answer to my question.” Taking one last look in the mirror, she fluffed her hair. Then she rubbed her lips together to spread the lip gloss she'd applied right after closing time.

“Yes, I was married.”

As in past tense? Ella shot Coop a look of pure empathy. She decided on the spot not to ask him anything else. “I'm sorry, Coop. Forget I asked. I was just being nosy to pass the time.”

“It's okay. She's still alive, in case you were bored enough to wonder about that.” His dry tone wasn't lost on her. “Just couldn't handle the trials and tribulation of being married to a Marine. We got deployed a lot,” he added when he saw the open-mouthed look she sent his way.

“A Marine, huh?”

“Semper fi, darling.”

She continued to cast curious glances at him as she locked the cash drawer and gathered her belongings.

“What? No follow-up questions?” he mocked, pushing away from the front window.

“It's impossible to tell when you're being serious,” she grumbled, pulling the strap of her purse over her shoulder. “That ring line looks pretty fresh, though. For all I know, you're pulling my leg.”

“True. Maybe I'm still married, and what I shared with you is just my cover story.” He fell into step beside her as they headed toward the rear exit.

“Whatever.” She rolled her eyes at him. “You've properly put me in my place, Coupe de Ville. No more asking questions out of boredom. I promise.” Since she was pretty sure Coop

wasn't his real name, she didn't hesitate to rename him whenever it suited her.

He smirked as he reached around her to open the door. "After me, princess." Like he always did, he stepped outside ahead of her to make sure it was safe for her to join him.

"You enjoy that way too much," she accused as he assisted her into the backseat of the armored Cadillac Escalade he'd driven her to work in. Sometimes it was a Lexus or a Rolls Royce. The company he worked for, Lonestar Security, had a whole fleet of armored vehicles in all shapes and models.

"Yep, and your husband pays me good money to do it." He settled behind the wheel, leering at her through the rearview mirror before he started the motor.

She pretended to yawn. "Are you still talking?"

He drove the SUV in a U-shaped curve to exit the parking lot. Before he could pull onto the road, however, an antique-looking roadster zipped into the parking lot.

The driver cut Coop off and rudely stopped directly in front of him, forcing him to jam on his brakes.

"Whoa!" Ella was thrown forward. Her hands came out to rest on the back of Coop's seat. "What is that thing?" Though she could name a decent number of cars, the exact model of the wine red vehicle in front of them wasn't ringing a bell. All she knew was that it looked old and stunning.

"A Rolls-Royce Phantom. Rare edition." Coop's voice was terse as they watched the driver's door of the Phantom open.

"How rare?" Ella stared in fascination as a tiny, white-haired lady struggled to exit the vehicle and prop herself up with a walker.

"Only a few of them were made. A dozen or so."

No wonder I couldn't place it. "Who is she?" Ella leaned closer to the windshield, trying to get a better look at the woman.

"Corella Remington." Coop's gaze flickered back to hers in the rearview mirror.

She grew still in her seat. “It’s her,” she whispered in disbelief. She’d never before laid eyes on the woman, though she’d heard more than her fill about her.

“Your grandmother, yes. I was briefed on the situation.”

“Briefed?” Ella made a choking sound that she tried to cover with a cough. “What exactly were you told?”

“That the woman currently scooting her walker toward our vehicle is your estranged grandmother. From everything I’ve been told, this ambush is a little unexpected.”

“No kidding! She’s never had anything to do with us. I wonder what she wants.” Ella experienced a small thrill of excitement at the possibility that the woman might actually want to meet her after all this time.

“You don’t have to find out if you don’t want to,” Coop informed her loftily. “At the rate she’s going, I can easily back up and drive around her.”

“No, that’s okay.” Ella didn’t have the heart to do something so cruel. “Why don’t you roll down your window and see what she wants?”

“Are you sure?” He gave her a hard look. “She could be armed.”

Ella’s eyes widened. “I’ll take my chances on the odds that your foot will be quicker on the gas pedal.”

“You’ll be later to your dinner meeting if we stop to chat,” he pointed out, as he rolled down the window.

“Not breaking my heart,” she retorted. “I hate meetings.”

The elderly woman was out of breath by the time she reached Coop’s window.

“Is my granddaughter in there?” she panted, bobbing her head this way and that to peer inside the car.

“It depends on who’s asking, ma’am.” Coop kept his voice professionally modulated.

“Oh, for pity’s sake!” The tiny woman glared at him. “If you don’t know who I am, I’m going to recommend your

immediate dismissal!”

“Duly noted, Mrs. Remington,” he responded in his most respectful voice.

Unless Ella was mistaken, the woman’s lips twitched. “Roll down my window, Coop.”

“If you insist, princess.” There was a long-suffering note in his voice as he complied.

Ella found herself staring at the one woman in the world she never expected to meet. “Hello, grandmother.” She lifted her chin, daring the woman to take her to task for acknowledging their relationship.

Corella Remington’s gaze grew glassy. “I hear you’ve gone and married a Comanche like your mother did.” She sniffled loudly, then glanced away. “Stupid allergies! They’re always acting up.” She was wearing a black-and-white herringbone blazer over a red blouse and a black pencil skirt. Everything about her appearance screamed that she came from money — from her carefully styled short curls, to her flawless makeup, to her heavily ringed fingers.

Ella’s mouth tightened. “Actually, Wayne Whitaker is the second Comanche I married.” She wasn’t sure how much the crotchety old woman knew about her life, so she quickly filled her in, not caring if she offended her. “I lost my first husband in a highway collision.”

“In a street race, according to my sources.” Corella’s blue gaze was as hard as marbles as it raked over her.

Apparently, the woman had done her homework, which begged another question. Why had she bothered?

Ella held her grandmother’s gaze squarely. “What do you want?”

“To meet my great-grandson before I die.” It was neither a request nor a demand, but something between the two.

Her attitude sparked Ella’s anger. “I wished for a grandmother while growing up. We don’t always get what we want.”

Her grandmother's throat trembled as she swallowed. "You do realize your mother eloped?"

Ella shrugged. "What's your point?"

"She dated a boy we didn't approve of, then ran off with him one night. It was a full month before we located her. During that time, we hired K-9 search and rescue teams to the tune of thousands of dollars. We even dragged the lake. We feared she was dead."

That was news to Ella. In all her mother's stories about her estranged parents, she'd left out the part about their month-long search for her. Assuming it was even true.

"Why didn't you approve of my father?" It was a fair question. She hoped she'd get an honest answer to it.

"Where do I begin?" Her grandmother gave her a harried look. "He didn't have a college education or a steady job. We didn't know much about him or his family. What little we did know was less than thrilling."

"Such as?" Ella pressed.

"He raced cars like your first husband and your brother, Jasper. It's a dangerous hobby that attracts dangerous people. It's not the life we wanted for our daughter. Now that you have a son of your own, I presume you understand what it's like to want what's best for your children?"

Ella was surprised to learn that the sour-faced woman standing in front of her knew about Jasper's unfortunate hobby. "Of course, I want what's best for Jacob. I've yet to decide if meeting you is what's best for him." She had no interest in having a crusty old relation turn her son's heart against his dearly departed grandparents.

"There's more to the story about what happened between us and our daughter." Corella Remington's voice trembled. "If you care to hear it." She held out an old-fashioned calling card. Her contact information was embossed on it in gold metallic letters.

"Thank you." Ella accepted the card. "I'll discuss your request with my husband."

“When may I expect to hear from you?”

Not caring for the imperious note in the older woman’s voice, Ella decided it was time to make it clear to Corella Remington that she would never be calling the shots in the lives of the Whitakers. Not now. Not ever.

“It won’t be this evening, so don’t bother chasing after us.”

“Fair enough.” Corella Remington gave an unexpected cackle. “Just do me a favor and call me before I cock up my toes.” Without waiting for a response, she slowly dragged her walker around to face her car. Then she began the laborious trip back to it.

Wayne called her on their drive to the rez. “Is everything okay?”

The concern in his voice made Ella’s heart race. “I’m fine,” she assured quickly. “We’re almost there. You’ll never guess who waylaid us in the parking lot of the boutique, though. Not in a million years, so I’m just going to tell you.” She paused dramatically. “My grandmother.”

There was a stretch of silence on the other end of the line. “You mean Corella Remington?” he asked carefully.

“Yes, and she drives a Rolls Royce Phantom that’s strangely reminiscent of Cruella de Vil’s car.”

“Actually, Cruella drove a Panther de Ville. It was produced by a British car maker.”

“I’m impressed, Chief Lighthouse.” Correction. She was completely blown away by his knowledge of cars.

“Figured that when you agreed to marry me,” he joked.

“You figured right,” she assured softly.

“If you’re still impressed, meet me in Marco’s office. I borrowed the key, because there’s something I want to show you.” Her husband paused before adding in a husky voice, “Alone.”

“We just reached the guard shack, so I’ll be there in two minutes.” Her heart raced erratically as she ended their call.

She held the phone against her cheek for a moment.

“Let me guess.” Coop’s voice wafted sarcastically from the front seat. “You just arranged a romantic tryst with a certain Comanche chief?”

Ella lowered her cell phone to her lap. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she retorted primly to hide her embarrassment. As much as she appreciated Coop’s protection, she hated the loss of her privacy.

“You’re an awful liar, Mrs. Whitaker. A future in law enforcement you have not!”

“Whatever.” She tossed her head, hoping her blush wasn’t that obvious in the dim interior of the SUV. “There’s something he needs to discuss with me in Marco’s office, so we’ll go through the kitchen entrance.”

“Yep. Very bad liar,” Coop scoffed as he pulled into the parking lot of the grill. As usual, there was a small crowd of motorcycles parked in one corner of the lot. The various coupes and sedans of the tribal council took up the entire front row against the building.

He drove around to the side entrance of the restaurant and idled his motor for a moment before turning off the ignition.

“You’re parking here?” Ella’s voice rose in surprise. They weren’t even in a real parking spot. It was the delivery lane to the restaurant.

He shrugged. “I doubt they’ll be receiving any deliveries this late.”

“True.” Since he hit the power unlock button, she pushed her door open at the same time he pushed his open.

“Ella, don’t!” His voice was harsh with warning as he leaped out of his seat to join her in the parking lot. “You know I’m supposed to clear the way first.”

“We’re on the rez,” she reminded cheerfully. “Home sweet home.”

“Just let me do my job, please.”

The roar of a motor filled their ears. As it grew closer, Ella turned her head, fully expecting to see a Harley Davidson Road King entering the parking lot.

It was a Harley alright, but it was already in the parking lot, and it was headed straight for her and Coop!

The rider had on a black helmet with a tinted face guard that was impossible to see beyond. He hunkered over his handlebars and laid on the gas.

“Ella!” Though Coop tried to shove her behind the car, there was no time. It happened too fast. At the last second, he threw his body over hers and sandwiched her against the side of the Escalade.

She heard Coop’s oomph of pain as the motorcycle popped a wheelie and made impact. The driver revved his motor against Coop’s back.

She heard someone screaming and realized it was her. Men shouted, and footsteps pounded across the pavement in their direction. The motorcycle roared off, and Coop fell writhing to the ground.

She spun around to crouch beside him. “Coop!” She called his name despairingly until a pair of bikers reached them and flipped her writhing bodyguard to his stomach. The sight of his back nearly made her throw up.

Their attacker had skidded his tire through Coop’s uniform, shredding it to pieces. Most of the rubber tread had landed on the bullet-proof vest beneath his shirt. The upper part of the tire, however, had managed to rub a bloody wound into the back of his neck. He had a hand fisted in his mouth to muffle his grunts of pain.

She numbly reached for her phone and dialed 911, knowing her brave protector had risked his life to save hers. Since she wasn’t wearing a bullet-proof vest, she would’ve been in worse shape than he was if their positions had been reversed. Far worse shape.

Her voice shook as she explained their emergency to the 911 operator. The woman promised to send a patrol car and an

ambulance.

Sirens sounded in the distance, alerting Ella to the fact that someone must have already called the police department on the rez. A white police cruiser skidded into the parking lot. Police Chief Adriel Montana leaped out of it. Leaving his door ajar, he sprinted in their direction.

Seconds later, Wayne's hands closed around Ella's shoulders. "Let's get you inside," he urged in a rough voice. He used his body to shield hers as he hustled her through the side entrance.

"The rider came out of nowhere." Ella knew she was babbling, but she couldn't seem to stop. "I heard him before I saw him. By the time I looked up, it was too late."

Wayne led her down a dim hallway, pulled her inside Marco's office, and kicked the steel door shut behind them. He bolted it for good measure.

"Ella," he said raggedly, drawing her into his arms and hugging her tightly.

She listened to the wild pounding of his heart against her cheek, grateful to be alive. Eventually, remorse overtook her. "I was so anxious to see you and Jacob again that I stepped out of the car too quickly," she confessed shakily. "If I had just let Coop do his job—"

"This isn't your fault, Ella. You know that." Wayne's voice was harsh with worry against her ear. "If you want to blame someone, blame me. You never had to live your life in the shadow of a bodyguard until you married me."

Hating the agony in his voice, she did the only thing she could think of to calm him down. She reached up to tug his head down to hers.

He'd never before kissed her so savagely. He drank her in with a desperation that both thrilled her and made her heart ache. He truly feared for her safety and truly blamed himself for putting her at risk.

"Didn't mean to maul you like that." He dragged his fevered mouth across her cheek and down her neck. "Just

don't know what I would do without you.”

She tangled her fingers in his hair, holding his face against her neck. “For one thing,” she declared breathlessly, “you'd be missing a lot more buttons from your shirt sleeves.”

The sound that came out of him was partly a groan and partly a laugh. “There's that.”

“Did you just laugh?” She drew back in amazement to get a better look at him.

“I don't know. Anything's possible when I'm with you.” He cupped her face, gazing at her through heavy-lidded eyes.

“I've never heard you laugh before. You don't smile much either.”

He traced the outline of her face. “I didn't feel like smiling much before I met you.”

She stretched to her tiptoes to touch her mouth to his. “You make me happy, too, Wayne.”

“How can you say that?” His scowl was back. “Your life has been upside-down ever since we started dating. I didn't see it then, but I do now.”

“Because it's true.” She kissed him again. “I get to come home to you every evening. A man who cares for me and my son. Someone committed to keeping us safe.”

His fingers tensed against her cheek. “You almost died tonight, Ella.”

“Without the bodyguard you hired to protect me, I might have.”

He shook his head at her. “I just wish there was something more I could do. Some place I could send you where you're guaranteed to be safe.”

“I'm exactly where I want to be right now, Wayne.” She meant it.

His shoulders relaxed as he fingered one of the narrow straps of fabric against her shoulder. “Nice dress.”

She smiled. "I'm glad you like it."

"I love it." His fingers moved across her shoulder and up the side of her neck. "And the woman in it."

She caught her breath. It was the first time he'd ever told her he loved her...in so many words.

Before she could answer, someone knocked loudly on the other side of the door.

Wayne straightened, dropping his hands protectively to her waist. "Who's there?"

"Marco. Sorry to interrupt, but the police chief needs to take Ella's statement."

"Be right there." Wayne nuzzled her ear, lowering his voice. "Are you ready for this, babe?"

"Are you?" She turned her head to capture his mouth in another lingering kiss.

"I'm getting there." His voice was still a little rough.

As they stepped into the hallway of Aiyanna's restaurant, it was the first time Ella could remember not being jealous of the woman and the years of friendship she'd shared with Wayne. There was no point in holding on to her jealousy when she was very, very sure her husband's thoughts were one hundred percent on her.

She caught him glancing appreciatively down at her shoes while she was giving her statement to the stony faced police chief. As it turned out, Adriel Montana took the law very seriously.

He sounded as if he was carrying the weight of the world on his wiry frame as he lowered his voice for her and her husband's ears alone. "The attacker could be one of our own. I'm sure you understand that." Like Wayne, he wore his black hair long and unbound.

They were standing in the hallway between the offices and the main dining room. Directly in front of them was the cash register. A few patrons lingered in the foyer beyond it after they'd paid.

Wayne's hand on Ella's waist grew heavier as he tugged her more snugly against him. "I've suspected something like that for a while. Been hoping I was wrong."

"Any idea who might be so dead set against your marriage to Ella?" Adriel eyed them in sympathy.

Wayne's jaw tightened. "No one comes to mind."

Ella wanted to speak up, but she wasn't sure if anyone was interested in hearing sheer speculation.

The police chief was silent as he watched her lips open and close again. "Ella, I'd like to ask you some of the same questions I've asked your husband."

"Anything I can do to help, sir." She waved a hand, urging him to continue.

His hard gaze softened. "Adriel," he corrected. "Just Adriel."

She smiled shyly at him. "Ask me anything, Adriel."

"When did the attacks start?"

"The evening my tire was slashed."

"Was it before or after you started dating Wayne?"

"Before, but..." She didn't know if he'd seen the photo of her and Wayne together on the day of the fashion show.

"According to Wayne, you'd already been seen together in public by then."

"That is correct." She was betting from the police chief's grim expression that he already knew about the photo. "Then there was the creepy photographer at my son's school playground." She shivered at the memory.

"That happened after you started dating Wayne, right?"

"Yes. Then we received a threatening note on our wedding day, and now this." She bit her lower lip. "Oh, and I heard a rumor that might not have anything to do with anything."

"What rumor?" Adriel's gaze narrowed.

“That Cheyenne Dunraven was secretly dating Wayne right before he and I started dating.”

“It never happened.” Her husband’s voice was coldly emphatic.

“Prim heard the rumor, too.” Ella stared into the distance as she recalled their conversation. “After meeting me, she said she was very glad to discover there was no truth to it.”

“Prim, the P.A. at the clinic?”

“Yes.”

Adriel exchanged a look with Wayne. “She works with Chayton Dunraven. Lucky her.”

“Not that anyone would ever accuse him of working,” Wayne noted dryly.

“No kidding.” Adriel lowered his voice even further. “Is there a reason why he’s kept his job for so long?”

“Out of my respect for his uncle.”

Adriel looked taken aback. “You respect Cherokee?”

“Well, the position he holds, anyway. I’m well aware he has no respect in return for my position.”

Adriel snorted. “I’m not exactly his favorite person, either.”

“Why’s that?” Wayne studied him curiously.

“Pretty sure I’ve arrested a number of his son’s buddies in the past couple of years. Everything from possession to being under the influence.”

That certainly put things in a different light. Ella glanced between the two men, wondering if they were coming to the same conclusion she was.

“Guess that would explain Chayton’s animosity toward me,” Wayne looked thoughtful, “but not toward my wife.”

Adriel propped his hands on his hips. “It wouldn’t be the first time someone took a pot shot at a man’s family to get back at him.”

“It’s possible.” Wayne didn’t sound too convinced.
“Anything is possible.”

Ella felt like they were still missing a piece of the puzzle.

At the moment, however, she had no idea what it was. What she did know was that she had a six-year-old to get bathed and dressed for bed, and Wayne had promised to read to him again.

In the midst of all the chaos surrounding them, things like bedtime stories were helping her keep her sanity. Plus, she might get to steal some more alone time with Wayne afterward.

And maybe he would tell her again that he loved her.



CHAPTER II: LOUD SILENCE

WAYNE

“**Y**ou don’t have to read to me tonight.” Instead of waiting in his bed like he usually did, Jacob was standing in the doorway of his bedroom.

“Don’t you want me to read to you?” Wayne eyed the kid’s damp hair. He smelled like shampoo, and his newest Magic Treehouse book was tucked beneath the arm of his striped pajamas. It was book thirty-something in the series. Wayne couldn’t remember the exact number.

“I do, but I know you prob’ly need to talk to my mom about Mr. Coop. Is he gonna be okay?” His young voice rose anxiously.

“Yes. We just got word that he’ll be released from the hospital in the morning. They’re only keeping him overnight for observation.” Unsure if Jake knew what that meant, Wayne tried to explain. “They’re ninety-nine percent sure he’s okay. They’re just playing it safe.” He was very glad to hear that his wife’s bodyguard was being allowed to return home so soon. He was taking it as a good sign.

“Will he still be guarding my mom?” Jacob’s eyes were wide with worry.

“Yes, but not tomorrow.” Wayne reached over to ruffle his hair. “It’s my turn to guard your mom. That’s why I’m taking off from work for a few days.” *More or less*. He’d be working from home during that time, never more than a phone call away from the members of the tribal council.

“Oh, good!” Jacob’s boyish features brightened. “That’ll make her really happy.”

“You think?” His stepson looked so cute standing there that Wayne couldn’t resist swooping him up in his arms and hauling him off to bed.

“Yep!” Jacob giggled in delight at the extra attention. “Next to me, you’re her favorite.”

“Good to know.” Sensing they were no longer alone, Wayne shot a sly look in the direction of the doorway as he tucked Jacob into bed.

Ella was standing there. She looked smoking hot in her new blue dress. Now that they were home, she’d kicked off her heels and was walking around barefoot.

Jacob followed Wayne’s gaze. “Why do you always look at my mom like that?”

“Like what?” Wayne was having a difficult time tearing his gaze from her.

“Like you think she’s pretty.”

That’s easy. “Because she *is* pretty, kiddo. Very, very, very pretty.” Wayne would’ve happily added another few dozen *verys*. However, three was enough to make his wife blush. He perched on the corner of Jacob’s twin bed and opened the book.

Jacob yawned loudly. “I’m too tired to read tonight.” His voice held a whiny quality that sounded out of character for him.

Since when? Wayne glanced over at him in disbelief. He’d been squirming and giggling like a hyena only moments earlier.

“Are you sure, hon?” Ella stepped farther into the room.

“Mmm-hmm,” her son muttered, rolling to his side.

“Here, let me check your temperature.” She moved to the side of his bed to press the back of her hand to his forehead. “You don’t feel feverish. That’s good.” She sounded relieved.

She tucked him in and tiptoed with Wayne to the hallway, silently pulling Jacob's bedroom door shut behind them. "I guess all the excitement this evening wore him out," she noted softly.

"Looks like." Wayne had a different theory, though, one in which a certain six-year-old was worried about the safety of his mother — so much so that he was willing to sacrifice a little book reading time in lieu of allowing his stepdad to commence his "guard" over her.

"You don't sound convinced."

He reached for her hand and strolled with her toward the master bedroom. For the past three months, he'd walked her there every evening. Then he'd continued his stroll to his office alone. Though they'd agreed to a real marriage, he'd been careful not to rush the intimate side of their relationship.

She glanced back at Jacob's room. "What if he's getting sick and doesn't have a fever yet?"

Wayne paused outside the master bedroom. "I think he's just worried about you." He raised her hand to his lips. "We all are."

With another furtive glance down the hallway toward Jacob's room, she tugged on Wayne's hand. "Let's take this conversation to the living room so we don't disturb him."

He was thrilled at the prospect of spending more time with her.

"Are you tired?" The curtains were pushed open in the living room, allowing the moonlight to pour in.

"No. You?"

She shook her head. "I don't think I'm going to be able to sleep tonight."

"Me, either." He sat on the window seat, settling against the pillows and tugging her down in front of him.

With a sigh, she leaned her head against his shoulder, propping her bare feet on the cushions in front of them.

He spooned his long limbs around her. “Jacob says I’m your favorite next to him.”

“He’s not wrong.” There was a smile in her voice that warmed his heart.

He hoped it meant she was falling for him as fast as he was falling for her. “I have a question for you.”

“Really? What is it?” She sounded a little breathless.

“Any chance you’d be willing to take off some time from work?”

He felt her go still. “Why?”

“Just until we can neutralize the danger surrounding you.”

She stirred restlessly in his embrace. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but there will always be danger surrounding what you do, Wayne. I knew it when I married you.”

“You did?” It was comforting to know she’d not been entirely blindsided by the pressures of being his wife. Even so, he hadn’t expected such a ruthless frontal attack on their marriage. Someone was determined to tear them apart.

“Yes.” She tipped her face up to smile reassuringly at him in the moonlight.

“My offer remains.” He reached up to caress her cheek, convinced beyond any doubt that he was never going to get tired of gazing at her. Never going to get tired of holding her. She was a gift from heaven. His personal miracle.

“I know it’s not easy being my wife. Feel free to take off work any time you want for as long as you want. Permanently, if you wish to be at home full-time with our family.” She could read whatever she wanted into that. He was ready to take their relationship to the next level. He longed to reach the point where they held nothing back from each other.

“Kiss me, Wayne,” she whispered.

He ever so gently touched his mouth to hers, reveling in her intake of breath. Every soft sound she made was like music to him. She’d always been so responsive, kissing him

back with an eagerness that matched his own. Tonight was no exception.

“I love you, Ella. I hope it’s not too soon to say that.”

She smiled against his lips. “You told me earlier, remember?”

“I was trying to, but we got interrupted.”

“Tell me again,” she sighed.

“I love you.” He traced the line of her cheek with his lips, then the curve of her chin. “I love everything about you. The way you mother Jacob. The way you’ve embraced your role as my bride and the first lady of our people. Most of all, I love the way you make me feel.” The level of loyalty and trust she’d placed in him stole his breath.

The one thing that would complete his happiness would be to hear her say the words back. He already knew that she cared for him. Deeply. But had her feelings had the chance to blossom into love yet? Would they ever reach that point? Or would the precious, most inner part of her always belong to someone else? The man she’d loved and lost?

“Wayne.” She touched his face. Time seemed to stand still as she gazed at him in the moonlight. He’d never before seen her so vulnerable. So exposed. “I—”

The phone in his pocket buzzed with an incoming call, making her bite her lower lip. The movement effectively cut off whatever else she’d been going to say. She curled forward into a sitting position to make it easier for him to reach his phone.

With a silent sigh, he lifted his phone to his ear, wanting to curse the caller’s ill timing.

“Chief?”

It was Cherokee Dunraven, of all people. He sounded out of breath. Wayne’s hand tightened around the phone. “What’s going on, councilman?”

“I, uh...just received a concerning email that I need to discuss with you.”

“Tonight?” Wayne glanced at his watch.

“Yes. Now!” The man sounded even more harried than usual. “Are you alone?”

“No. Give me a sec.” Lowering the phone, Wayne motioned for Ella to stay put. If she was willing to wait for him, he’d return as soon as he could to pick up where they’d left off.

She nodded in understanding, shooing him toward his office. *Go*. She mouthed the word affectionately.

He started to walk away, then stopped. Moving back to the window seat, he reached for her chin. Tipping her face up to his, he planted a quick, tender kiss on her, wanting her to feel his reluctance to leave her.

“Hurry back,” she whispered.

Dropping his hand from her face, he nodded and raised his phone back to his ear.

“Are you still there, Chief?” Dunraven’s voice had never before grated so heavily on Wayne’s nerves.

“I’m here.” His gut told him that whatever the man wanted at such a late hour wasn’t urgent. He was purposely abusing his calling privileges to interrupt Wayne’s family time.

He stepped inside his office and shut the door a little louder than necessary. “What’s going on?”

“Are you alone now?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve been receiving threats.”

Wayne’s instincts went on full alert. “What sort of threats?”

“At first, I didn’t think much about it. Like you, I get threats all the time.”

Why? Wayne grimaced at the man’s words. Yes, there was always the potential for threats in their line of work, but even he didn’t receive them *all the time*. “I’d like to think that the

threat my family is currently facing is more the exception than the rule.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right.” Dunraven was silent for a moment.

“Tell me about the threats,” Wayne prodded, hoping to speed their conversation along. He couldn’t imagine what Cherokee Dunraven had done to inspire threats. As far as Wayne knew, the man didn’t do much of anything other than rant and rave at their council meetings. He lived on social security and the sympathy of the women at church who occasionally delivered covered dishes to his house.

The councilman let out a gusty breath. “It all started with a few hang-up phone calls. Didn’t think much about them at first. Then—” He abruptly stopped.

Wayne heard a crashing sound in the distance. He gripped the phone. “Are you okay, Cherokee?”

There was no answer.

Another crash sounded. This time, it was closer. Much closer.

Wayne yanked open his office door. A swirl of cool mountain air greeted him.

What in the world? He sprinted for the living room. The front door was standing wide open.

His gaze landed on the empty window.

No!

He moved to the door to peer at the splintered frame. Their home had broken into.

“Ella!” He spun around, calling her name frantically. “Ella?”

Jacob’s bedroom door swung open. He appeared in the doorway, rubbing his eyes. A book was clutched beneath his arm.

“Is your mom in there?” Wayne moved the kid’s way, sweeping him up in his arms.

“N-no,” Jacob mumbled, yawning. “Where is she? Why were you yelling for her?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out, kid.” Shifting Jacob against his shoulder to free up one hand, Wayne dialed the guard shack.

Adriel picked up. “What’s going on, Chief?”

“Our front door just got kicked in, and...” He forced himself to lower his voice a notch so as not to alarm Jacob any more than necessary. The kid’s eyes were wide with alarm. “Ella seems to be missing.”

“I’m on my way.”

While he waited for Adriel to arrive, Wayne performed a rapid search of their home. It was a little cumbersome doing it with Jacob in his arms, but he wasn’t about to let the kid go. He quickly concluded that Ella wasn’t in the house.

He dialed Jace next. Skipping the small talk, he kept the details to the bare minimum. “Our home was broken into, and Ella is missing. The police are on their way.”

“So am I.” Jace’s voice grew harsh with suppressed fear. “What about my nephew?”

“He’s with me.”

“Don’t let him out of your sight,” Jace growled.

“I don’t plan to.” Wayne’s heart thudded with remorse at the realization he should’ve never let Ella out of his sight, either. If only he hadn’t taken that stupid call by the worst tribal councilman in the history of councilmen. Not that he should’ve had any reason to worry about his wife’s safety inside their locked home on the rez.

Adriel Montana arrived in record time amidst the wail of sirens and flashing lights. Despite how late it was, he was making no effort to move with stealth. As his sirens continued to blast the neighborhood, a crowd gathered around his car.

He conferred with Wayne on the front porch while examining the damage caused by the intruder. The swarthy

police chief abruptly straightened. “When and where did you last see your wife?”

Wayne led him inside to the window seat. “We were enjoying some quiet time. Just her and I.” Grief tightened his voice. Not once during their conversation, and the many kisses it was punctuated with, had he considered the possibility it might be the last time he would ever see her.

“Where was Jacob?”

At the mention of his name, Jacob buried his face against his stepdad’s shoulder, quavering, “I want my m-mom!”

Wayne hugged him closer. “We’re going to find her, kiddo.”

Jace burst into the living room moments later. He took one look at their gloomy huddle and reached for Jacob. The boy fell sobbing into his arms.

“Thank you for coming.” Wayne rested a hand briefly on Jace’s shoulder.

Jace listened white-faced while Wayne finished answering the police chief’s questions.

“Jake was in his room asleep. I received a phone call from Cherokee Dunraven.”

Adriel Montana’s head jerked, though he didn’t say anything.

Wayne shared everything he could remember about the moments leading up to Ella’s disappearance. “He asked to speak with me alone, so I left her in the living room and shut myself in my office.” He frowned at the memory. “I heard a crash on his end of the line before our front door got kicked in. I’m sorry.” He dragged in a ragged breath. “I should’ve mentioned that sooner. He might be in trouble, too.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” Adriel’s voice was dry.

“I called his name a few times, but he didn’t answer.”

“Did the phone go dead?”

“No. Actually, I’m not sure. Maybe I disconnected us by accident after the front door got kicked in.”

“One last question.” Adriel’s face was lined with gravity. “What was Ella wearing when...” He stopped and cleared his throat.

“A blue dress. V-neck. Narrow straps. There were some blue beads on the front of it.” Wayne’s voice grew hoarse. “She was barefoot.”

Without any further commentary, the police chief stomped out of the house and jogged down the porch steps. Wayne followed him with a dead feeling in his chest. He watched as his friend reached inside the open door of his patrol car. The siren abruptly stopped.

When Adriel straightened, he had a megaphone in his hand. He moved around the front of his car and climbed onto the bumper.

Raising the megaphone to his mouth, he announced in a grave voice, “Ella Whitaker is missing. Twenty-five years old. Long brown hair. Blue-gray eyes. Roughly five feet, three inches tall, give or take an inch. She’s the wife of our beloved chief, a fellow Comanche, your neighbor, and friend...”



Jace stood beside his brother-in-law on the front porch of his home, hating the way his shoulders seemed to sag a little more with each word the police chief spoke. Wayne Whitaker was a good man. He didn’t deserve this — any of it — and neither did Ella.

Jace wanted to yank the megaphone out of the lawman’s hands and snarl at the stoic faced Comanches in the crowd. How dare they stand there impassively while heaven only knew what was happening to the wife of their chief! Nobody had moved the whole time Adriel was speaking. Literally nobody. What was wrong with them?

He mechanically handed his whimpering nephew back to his stepfather. Wayne cuddled the boy close, promising him again that they would find his mother. It chilled Jace to realize that the man's eyes were saying something else entirely. He didn't believe he was ever going to see his wife again.

"Excuse me," he growled to no one in particular. "Gotta make a phone call." Jace stalked through the shattered front door of the house, anxious to put some distance between him and the sense of hopelessness pervading the crowd gathered in the front yard. He ended up in a spacious bedroom with a king-sized bed that hadn't been slept in. Probably the master bedroom.

Moving to the window for the added light, he turned on his phone and scrolled to the one number in his address book he swore he'd never call. He wasn't even sure why he'd saved it.

Jonty Remington, this is your chance to atone for your sins. He mashed the dial button. *Here goes nothing.*

The phone rang for a while, not all that surprising since it was nearly midnight and he was reaching out to a man in his eighties.

"Who is this?" The voice that answered was gravelly with sleep.

"One of your grandsons, Jace Countryman."

There was dead silence. When the man started speaking again, he no longer sounded sleepy. "Listening."

"My sister was taken from her home on the reservation this evening."

His grandfather made a wheezing sound in his ear. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"Something," Jace snarled. "Anything! Just don't do nothing. There's plenty of that going around already." Sure, the police chief cared. Jace could see it in his eyes, but the guy didn't have the staff to pull off a proper man hunt, and he knew it. Unless he could raise a group of volunteers, he and his tiny police force were dead in the water.

“Have you called Sheriff Remington?” His grandfather sounded impatient.

“What’s the point?” Jace shot back. “It happened on the rez. They don’t have any jurisdiction there.”

“What’s the police chief out there got to say about it?”

“He’s doing his best to put together a search and rescue team — blasting his sirens and yelling into a megaphone outside Ella and Wayne’s house. He managed to get some folks to come out and see what all the fuss was about, but they’re mostly standing around and gawking. I could be wrong, but I get the feeling that folks know more about my sister’s disappearance than they’re letting on. My gut says they’re keeping quiet because they’re...I don’t know...” He wasn’t sure what adjective applied to the situation.

“Scared?” Jonty Remington inquired in a low voice.

“Maybe. They’re hard to read. The whole situation is hard to read, but something is going on. Something bad. I can feel it.”

“Who’s on the phone?” a female voice demanded in the background. Jace’s heart sank. Though he’d never before met his grandmother, he was familiar with her formidable reputation. If she didn’t want her husband involved in this, she’d shut their conversation down.

Please, God. We need their help. Jace wasn’t much of a church goer, but he suddenly wished he was. He felt a little guilty asking for Divine favors when he couldn’t remember the last time he’d darkened the door of a church building.

He listened as Jonty explained to his wife what was going on. “Whoever has been after our granddaughter finally got her, Corella.”

Jace heard a low, guttural sound. It took him a moment to realize his grandmother was sobbing.

“And we have a grandson on the phone wanting to know what we’re going to do about it.”

There was a pause. Then she bellowed, “Everything we can, Jonty. Everything!”



CHAPTER 12: IF A TREE FALLS

WAYNE

The phone rang shrilly across the empty police department, shattering the silence.

Deputy Shep Whitaker reached for it. He was the lucky guy working the night shift this evening. Lifting the receiver to his ear, he calmly drawled, “Heart Lake Police Department.”

“Now you listen to me, young man, and you listen closely!” The woman on the other end of the line sounded very old and very upset. “My granddaughter, Ella Whitaker, has been taken from her home on that blasted Comanche reservation, and—”

“Who’s speaking?” Shep straightened in alarm. He hadn’t laid eyes on Ella and Wayne since their wedding. Not a big surprise, since he and his cousin weren’t close. They weren’t enemies or anything. It’s just that their paths had rarely crossed while growing up. They crossed even less now that his cousin was a tribal chief.

“Corella Remington, Ella’s grandmother.” The woman’s voice was as crisp as an autumn apple. “And since you don’t have jurisdiction on the rez, here’s what I need you to do.” In no uncertain terms, she ordered him to call everyone on the force out of their beds, have them pull their K-9 search and rescue dogs from their cages, and hightail it to the reservation. “No weapons. No badges. Just good old-fashioned volunteer work,” she concluded in a resigned voice.

“Yes, ma’am.” There was no point in reminding the woman she didn’t call the shots at the Heart Lake Police Department, since Shep intended to follow her orders to a T. She was right. In the absence of police jurisdiction, all he and his comrades could add to the search was elbow grease.

“Oh, and I need you to set up a tip line.” Though Corella made it sound like an afterthought, she named a reward that had his eyes bugging out.

“Are you sure about that, ma’am?” He carefully repeated the amount to her.

“You heard me,” she snapped. “Ten thousand dollars to every person who shares a viable tip. One hundred thousand dollars to anyone who brings her home alive and well.”

He scratched a quick note on the pad in front of him.

“Make sure everyone in Heart Lake hears about it, along with everyone living on the reservation.”

“Will do, ma’am.” Shep wasn’t sure how easy that would be, but he intended to do his best. He could certainly have the announcement on the local news channel within the hour. At this time of night, however, he couldn’t guarantee many folks would be awake watching TV.

“I’ll be calling every hour on the hour for an update.” As Corella Remington disconnected the line, Shep had no doubt she’d be true to her word.

He dialed the sheriff next, but didn’t get an answer. He was kind of glad they missed each other, since he hated bothering the guy. Though it wasn’t common knowledge, he was pretty sure the sheriff’s wife wasn’t doing too well health-wise. It was a shame. A real shame.

He dialed their second-in-charge next, Police Sergeant Luke Hawling. Everyone expected him to become the next sheriff after Gil Remington retired. Shep planned to vote for him, if for no other reason than to finally have someone besides a Remington in that office.

Luke’s voice was low and cautious as he picked up. “What’s going on, Shep?”

“A missing woman. Wayne Whitaker’s new wife, Ella. I couldn’t reach the sheriff, so I called you.”

Luke sighed, sounding like he was sitting up in bed. “I’m heading to another room. Give me a sec.” He was back on the line in no time. “Listen, as sorry as I am to hear about this, I’m not sure what we can do. Don’t the Whitakers live on the reservation?”

“Yeah. About that...” Shep repeated Corella Remington’s lengthy request as quickly and succinctly as he could.

Luke gave a bark of laughter. “She’s something else, isn’t she?”

“You can say that again.” Though Shep had yet to meet the woman in person, he already harbored a healthy amount of respect for her. And maybe a little fear.

“Sure, we can notify the news station, but not by way of an official APB, since it’s out of our jurisdiction.”

Shep tapped a fist against his desk. He’d been afraid Luke was going to say something like that. “But—”

“Just make the call, Shep, but don’t process it as an APB. I doubt anyone in Heart Lake would dare turn down a request from Corella Remington. A surprisingly altruistic one, at that. Not if they value their jobs.”

Shep knew what he meant. “I reckon she’s got the connections to get us all fired, eh?”

“And everyone we know fired, and all their cousins fired, and all their cousin’s cousins fired. I could go on, but you get the idea,” Luke said dryly.

Shep wasn’t entirely sure the police sergeant was joking, so he didn’t laugh. “Permission to activate our K-9 search and rescue squad?”

“On a strictly volunteer basis. As much as I hate to admit it, the old goat was right about that, too. No guns, no badges, and no official call to duty. Everyone who shows up does it out of the goodness of their hearts only. I’ll fiddle with the budget

and see if I can comp some paid time off for anyone willing to roll out of bed in the middle of the night.”

“Thank you, police sergeant.”

“I’ll get dressed and come in, too. Willow will probably want to join me if we can find someone to keep an eye on the kids.”

“Your wife is the best.” Shep was in awe of the woman — a legendary dirt bike champion, a former undercover police detective, plus a loving wife and mother.

“Yes, she is.” The pride in the police sergeant’s voice made Shep feel his single state all the more. The guy seriously thought the sun rose and set in Willow Hawling. He got the impression that Wayne felt the same way about Ella.

“Guess I better get back on the phone, police sergeant.”

“Appreciate what you’re doing, Shep.”

Since Luke didn’t hand out compliments very often, they were worth more in Shep’s book.

Within the hour, he had most of their team assembled inside the Heart Lake Police Department. Luke was there with Willow, and Wheeler was there with Dyoni. Her face was streaked with tears.

“I can’t believe my brother didn’t call me about this!” She twisted her hair in a ponytail. She and Wheeler looked like they’d thrown on their clothes and ran straight to his truck. “Every attempt to reach him goes straight to voicemail. He must be losing his mind.”

Shep handed her one of the cups of coffee he’d just finished brewing. “I’m sure he’ll be grateful to see you when we get there.” She was only Wayne’s half-sister. They’d been raised apart. He wasn’t sure if that had anything to do with Wayne’s failure to call her or not.

Dyoni accepted the cup of coffee from him, then nearly dropped it. “Oh, my lands,” she gasped. “He did reach out.” She stared aghast at her cell phone. “It’s on the tribal council’s thread. I don’t know how I missed it.” Regret stained her

voice. “He’s calling an emergency council meeting at four.” She scowled some more at her phone. “He’s holding it at the police station on the rez.”

Shep glanced at his watch. It was two hours from now. “We’ll get you there. No problem.” They’d be on site long before then.

“Thanks.” Her head remained bent over her phone as she read and re-read her brother’s messages.

Wheeler nimbly stepped to her side to steady her coffee cup and remove it from her grasp. He was the youngest deputy on the force. The auburn-haired cowboy was a bronc rider with a mile-wide attitude, but he always came through for them in a pinch. He always closed his cases, too. Though Shep often traded insults with him on the job, he secretly admired the guy’s single-minded determination. It looked like he was preparing to serve up another dose of it tonight.

Officer Lincoln Hudson straggled through the door next with his blonde Ken-doll hair in an uproarious state of bed-head. He had his faithful Golden Retriever, Glory, on a leash. She looked more awake than he did.

Wheeler took one look at him and snorted. “Please assure us your wife is out of town, dude.”

Linc grinned at him, “The fact that she is doesn’t mean—”

“Say no more.” Wheeler held up a hand. “I’m still busy trying to unsee...” He waved his hand in Linc’s general direction without looking at him. “...that.”

Shep held back a snicker. “Let’s lock and load the dogs and prepare to ship out.”

Luke was already leading a pair of German Shepherds up the stairs from the lower-level kennels. “Sorry to break the news to you, Shep, but we’ll need to maintain coverage here at the station.”

Shep’s heart sank, but it wasn’t like he could argue about being left behind since he was officially assigned to the night shift.

“May I do the honors?” Willow offered, glancing in sympathy at Shep. “I can tell every single one of you is itching to hit the road. Surely, you can deputize me or something?”

Shep didn't have all the details about her stint as a police detective. However, she definitely possessed the know-how for covering light and routine police work. He shot a hopeful look at his boss, whose gaze was locked on his wife.

As Shep watched them, he almost felt like he was intruding on something beautiful and precious. One of the most noteworthy things about Luke's marriage to Willow was that he no longer felt the need to hide the severely burned and scarred side of his face from the rest of the world. Her love had made him feel whole again — on the inside, at least. It was Shep's deepest, most heartfelt dream to meet a woman who made him feel like that someday.

“The sheriff can,” Luke finally conceded. “If he's willing to be on call, that should cover our backs legally.”

“I wasn't able to get ahold of him,” Shep reminded.

“That's because your name isn't Fran Beecher,” a cheery voice sang out. Their round dumpling of an office manager entered the room amidst a smattering of applause and cheers. Her salt-and-pepper hair was pulled back with clips, and her grandmotherly features were alight with excitement.

Shep carried her a steaming cup of coffee. “I owe you, Fran.” It would've killed him to be left behind. His cousin needed him right now, and he wanted to be there for him.

“I'll add it to your tab,” she breezed, taking a seat at her desk and flipping on her computer. In seconds, all the equipment on her desk was flashing to life.

Luke made the German Shepherds heel while he joined Shep and Fran at her desk. “Shep already called the news station.”

“And I placed a follow-up call.” Her smile faded into a look that was all business. “Corella and Jonty's offer of a reward is airing as we speak, along with an all citizens alert to flood the Comanche reservation with search and rescue

volunteers. I know we can't cover every inch of those mountains, no matter how many folks we round up, but we're sure going to try. Chief Lighthorse deserves no less from us."

"Agreed." Luke straightened. "Every minute counts in situations like these." He didn't need to finish the sentence. Everyone in the room knew how important the first twenty-four hours were after someone was reported missing.

"We'll stay on the phones," Willow assured. She was seated at Wheeler's desk. He was showing her where everything was located.

Locking his badge and gun in a drawer, he spun back to face his comrades and their K-9 dogs. "Let's do this!"

They did a quick accountability check for gear, then dispersed to their personal vehicles. To keep everything on a volunteer status, they wouldn't be driving any patrol cars to the rez.

Shep dialed Wayne to leave a voicemail. It only seemed right to let his cousin know they were on their way. He didn't expect him to pick up his call.



For the past two hours, Wayne's phone had been buzzing constantly with incoming calls and messages. Fortunately, he had help screening them. Adriel had him hooked up to a recording machine inside the small police station on the rez. Technically, Deputy Marco Perez had done all the fancy wiring. He was putting his skills as a former FBI agent to good use tonight.

If and when the all-important ransom request came through, they would be ready.

Wayne and Marco were alone in the building at the moment. Paco was busy manning the guard shack at the entrance gates to the rez, while Adriel was attempting to organize the trickle of volunteers arriving from Heart Lake. Apparently, someone was on the phone recruiting search and

rescue workers on their behalf. Probably Dyon. Wayne wouldn't put it past his sister to do something like that.

If he got a chance to talk to her before the tribal council met, he was going to tell her to skip the meeting. He'd prefer it if she didn't hear what he was going to say to them.

"You hanging in there, Chief?" Marco glanced up from the table of equipment and wires he was presiding over.

"If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" he asked quietly, not expecting an answer. It was a centuries-old question raised by philosophers.

"Please don't go there." Understanding reverberated in the deputy's voice.

"Too late." Wayne paced the room. "We both know my wife is out there somewhere. Probably calling for help. Maybe begging for mercy." Who was present to hear her cries? The fact that they didn't yet know who they were dealing with was about to drive him out of his mind.

"I know you feel trapped inside this room." Marco's bronze hands flew over the controls on the recording machine as he carefully weeded through another set of messages.

"Because I am." Wayne continued to pace. "I should be out there searching for her." He pointed vaguely toward the mountains.

"Not only do we need you here if the kidnappers reach out ___"

"When they reach out," Wayne interrupted angrily. "Not if." He wasn't putting his faith in a useless pile of *ifs*. He was banking solidly on *whens* tonight. He had to. He was trying not to even think about the alternatives.

Marco continued to fiddle with the machinery in front of him. "You're the only person the kidnappers will want to speak with. Their demands will sound next to impossible, and the window of time they'll give you to act on them will be narrow."

“There’s nothing I won’t do to get my wife back.” Wayne glared at the man, wondering what his point was.

“I know, and we’re gonna get her back, Wayne. Just hang on to that thought.” Marco ducked his head over the recording machine to listen to another call.

The phone continued to ring. Marco managed to pick Adriel out of the snarl of calls. “Got you on speaker phone. Fire away.”

“Turn on the TV,” Adriel ordered. “Local news channel.” He disconnected the line.

Marco reached for the remote control and pointed it at the screen against the wall. It flashed to life. A scrolling message at the bottom of the screen informed viewers that a \$10,000 reward was being offered to anyone who came forward with a viable tip concerning Ella Whitaker’s whereabouts. An additional \$100,000 was being offered to anyone who brought her home, alive and safe.

Marco whistled. “That’s a lot of money.”

Wayne agreed. He couldn’t fathom anyone raising so much capital in such a short period of time. Whoever had done it had his eternal gratitude.

Marco raised the remote and muted the news anchor’s voice and returned his attention to the recording machine. “Got a text message from your brother-in-law.”

“Which one?”

“Jace. Not sure what it means. Maybe you will.”

“What did he say?” Wayne’s chest tightened at the memory of his stepson’s tears from earlier. He hoped Jace had coaxed him into going back to sleep.

“You’re welcome. That’s it. Just *you’re welcome*.”

Wayne paused his pacing as the meaning of his brother-in-law’s message sank home. “He did this.” He waved at the scrolling message on the bottom of the television screen. “He stepped inside my house and made a phone call earlier. I’m betting he reached out to Corella and Jonty Remington.” He

couldn't think of anyone else in town who could afford to dangle around that kind of money.

"Oh, baby," Marco crowed suddenly. "Listen to this message." He hit the replay button on the recording machine.

Deputy Shep Whitaker's voice filled the room. "We're on our way to the rez, Wayne. The entire Heart Lake Police Department, minus the sheriff. No badges. No weapons. No patrol cars. It's just us and our dogs, ready to help bring Ella home."

Wayne was riveted by the message. *No badges. No weapons.* The selfless kindness behind his cousin's words bolstered his courage and faith. For the first time since his wife's disappearance, Wayne tasted genuine hope.

The dogs would help them cover a lot more ground a lot more quickly. The passing minutes no longer felt like a ticking time bomb.

Adriel called again. "The Heart Lake Police Department has arrived." Energy surged in his voice. "Strictly in a volunteer capacity. They understand they're off jurisdiction. And they brought their dog posse."

"That was fast!" Wayne leaned closer to the phone to address his chief of police.

"You don't sound surprised."

"Shep left a message, telling us they were on their way. We just finished listening to it. Then you called."

"It goes without saying, but I'll say it, anyway." Excitement reverberated in Adriel's voice. "This is a game changer, Chief."

"Lord willing." Wayne had learned to temper his hopes with reality. Until he laid eyes on his wife again, nothing was going to change what he had to say to his tribal council.

The councilmen and women trickled more slowly into the room than he would've liked. Something was wrong. He could sense the division in them. The discouragement. The defeat.

One member was notably absent. Wayne wasn't overly surprised to discover that Cherokee Dunraven was missing.

"Has anyone seen or heard from Cherokee?" he inquired before calling the meeting to order.

Dyoni and Hawk Thunderman solemnly shook their heads. The rest of the council members seemed to be avoiding his gaze.

Wayne waited until all eyes were on him. What he had to say would only work if he witnessed their reaction. Their expressions were so stoic that what he was looking for might only be a twitch, but he'd take a twitch of guilt over a dead wife all night long.

He met their gazes one by one, silently reminding them who their leader was — if it even mattered to them at this point. Someone sitting in front of him wanted him to resign. Someone in the room didn't care if they had to sacrifice Ella Whitaker to make it happen.

Normally, the quiet despair of the elders on the council would've moved him. Not tonight. He was convinced they knew something they weren't telling him, and he was about to call them out on it. Whatever had happened to Ella had happened on their watch, on their rez, and beneath their noses. It was time to hold everyone at the top accountable.

Every single one of us.

He was including himself in that equation.

"If my Comanche bride is not safely returned to me within the next twenty-four hours," he hardened his heart against the agony he saw leap into the gazes of his listeners, "I'll resign from my position as chief..." a few councilmen shook their heads in disbelief. Wayne silently crossed their names off the list he was tracking in his head. "After which I'll remove my rodeo from the reservation," he continued coldly, "terminate every employee, and start over elsewhere. It's your choice. This meeting is adjourned."

There'd been no twitches. Feeling like he'd failed, Wayne waved away the few council members who tried to detain him

for questions. “We’re in the middle of an active investigation for a missing person. Every second counts. I’m sure you understand.” He ushered them from the room.

Dyoni and Hawk were the last to leave. While Dyoni blinked back tears, Hawk slowly hitched his way to Wayne. He tapped his cane a few inches forward on the floor and dragged his bum knee after it. Cane tap. Leg drag. Cane tap. Leg drag. The relentless monotony of it made Wayne want to let out a war whoop of misery. If there’d been an enemy in sight, he would’ve gone after them barehanded. Right now. Last man standing wins.

“You did the right thing, son.” Hawk paused gravely in front of him.

I’m not your son. I’m your chief. In the past, Wayne had overlooked the small endearments the man had tossed his way, thinking he was simply being fatherly. Tonight was different. He was holding every councilman in question, and he’d yet to cross Hawk’s name off the list of possible suspects.

Come to think of it, he was the only councilman remaining on the list. Something shifted inside Wayne. Something dark and heavy. He eyed the man in front of him, mentally circling him with his fists raised.

“Thank you, Hawk. Your wise counsel means a lot to me.” At this very moment, it might mean that Wayne was staring into the eyes of the very man who’d engineered his wife’s kidnapping.

Hawk gave him the briefest of nods and slowly turned to leave the room. Wayne detained him with his voice. “My only fear is what will become of our people after I’m gone. Who, among those left standing, will be willing to accept the reins of leadership? Who will be the next chief?”

Though Hawk was half turned away, Wayne could still see one side of his face. And there it was — the twitch he’d been looking for.

You, Hawk? Why? The man had never given him a reason to believe he was anything but a loyal tribesman until now.

The councilman neither answered nor met his gaze. It seemed to Wayne that he tapped his cane and dragged his leg a little faster than usual.

The most maddening thing about their encounter was that there was nothing Wayne could do but watch him leave the building. Wayne's gut was screaming that the councilman was as guilty as sin. Unfortunately, he couldn't prove a thing.

Yet.

Dyoni moved across the room with her arms out. He enclosed her in his embrace. They clung tightly to each other.

"Never before have you sounded more like a chief," she choked. "I couldn't be prouder to have you as my brother."

Her words told him that she understood the accountability part of his speech. However, the silent interrogation part between him and Hawk Thunderman had been lost on her. Like everyone else, she saw him as a friend. For the next part of Wayne's plan to work, he needed folks to continue thinking of the man that way.

The fateful call from the kidnapers came only seconds later. The man on the other end was using some sort of voice distortion equipment. "You have one hour to resign from your position as tribal chief. Otherwise, you'll never see your wife again. Tick tock." The line went dead.

"One hour?" Wayne lunged for the table, slapping his hands down on it. "Did you get a location for the caller?"

Marco shook his head. "Sorry. The call didn't last long enough to triangulate it."

"Did you get anything?" Wayne's hopelessness from earlier returned as he received another head shake.

"I warned you that his demands would seem impossible," Marco reminded, "and that the window of time to deliver them would be narrow."

"Not this narrow!" A sense of defeat flooded Wayne's chest. He knew who was guilty, yet the guy was still going to win. "Just for the record, this isn't about saving my career. It's

about getting my wife back. If my enemies want my name tag, so be it.” He’d already offered to turn it in. The kidnapper’s demands felt eerily like a response to that offer. Probably because they were. Probably because he’d been sitting in the tribal council meeting.

“Let’s think about this.” Marco stood, ignoring the constant buzz of the phone for once. “What does the tribe gain from your resignation?”

Wayne shrugged. “Out with the new. Back in with the old, I guess. The old-timers have balked at every change I’ve tried to make.” Hawk Thunderman would certainly benefit from the tribe slipping back into their old superstitions and rituals. “They think I’m too young and too inexperienced. Until recently, they also thought I was too single. I’ve even been told I’m too successful.”

“Yet they gave you an overwhelming vote of confidence when you asked for it,” Dyonis reminded. “You got every vote except one.”

“Let me guess.” Marco eyed them shrewdly. “Cherokee Dunraven was the odd man out?”

Wayne nodded, fisting his hands at his sides at the realization that Hawk Thunderman had voted for him. Like a wolf in sheep’s clothing, he’d played along and pretended to show his support, but why?

“All roads seem to lead to Cherokee. I wish I knew why.” Marco bent over his laptop and started typing. “I probably should’ve been digging harder into his past all along.”

A knock sounded on the door. “I’ve got it.” Marco stopped typing. He stood and strode across the room with his weapon in hand.

Of all the people standing on the other side of the door, Wayne couldn’t have been more surprised to see DJ Carter and his father. DJ was one of the kids he’d suspended from school for fighting a few months ago.

The sandy-haired teenager stepped into the room. “We heard about your wife, sir, but we couldn’t get through to the

tip line. Just kept getting a busy signal, so we decided to come here. Actually, we went to the guard shack, but they sent us here.”

Marco shot Wayne a questioning look.

Wayne gave him a thumb’s up, indicating that the Carters could stay. “What was so important that you needed to tell me in the middle of the night?”

DJ glanced at his dad and received a nod of encouragement. “I wanted you to know the reason I punched Chevy Dunraven was because he tried to get my sister to smoke peyote with him.”

Wayne felt like he’d been socked in the gut. *Of course!* It all made sense now — both the *who* and now the *why*. “Is there anything else you can tell me about what happened that day? Like where Chevy got the peyote?” He had a sick feeling that he already knew.

“Not really.” DJ rolled his eyes. “All I know is that his family grows it somewhere in the mountains. Lots of it. They sell it all over town. Chevy sells it at the high school. Cheyenne sells it on the south side of town. Someone named Chayton sells it at the clinic here on the rez.”

The only name missing from the kid’s list was that of Hawk Thunderman. It filled Wayne with fury to know that the entire Dunraven family would be arrested, yet Hawk would remain free. A man so addicted to pain killers that he’d found a way to get a chokehold on an unlimited supply of them.

Marco produced a pen and a pad of paper. “Are you willing to put that in writing?”

DJ eyed the pad of paper stubbornly. “For \$10,000 I am. I’m not trying to be greedy, Principal Lighthorse, but these guys are dangerous. If they find out I’ve come forward, they’ll come after me and my family. We might have to move.”

Wayne reached for the pen, greatly moved that the Carter family was willing to take such a risk on his behalf. “You’ll get it before the end of the week if I have to pay it myself, something I will happily put in writing.” He might only be

cutting the body off the serpent, but it would still slow the serpent down.

After writing out his promise to pay, he handed the pad of paper to DJ. The teenager took a seat on the floor, crossed his legs in front of him, and started writing.

Marco dialed Adriel to give him the update.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” The police chief sounded furious. “No wonder everyone has been so afraid to speak up. Cherokee and his gang have probably been secretly terrorizing everyone around them.”

Wayne suddenly doubted that the warrants for the Dunravens would ever be put to use. Not with Hawk Thunderman running loose. All it would take was one phone call from him to tip off his cronies, and they’d be in the wind. The most horrifying question hanging in the air was where that left Ella.

She’d been missing for six hours already.

To Wayne, it felt like six years.



CHAPTER 13: SWEET PROMISES

SHEP

“You seem awfully familiar with these trails, deputy. I’m not sure why anyone thought you needed my help.”

“Maybe the police chief thought I looked lonely.” Shep Whitaker winked at the young woman who’d been assigned to accompany him on this segment of the search grid. She was short and curvy. Some people might’ve called her overweight, but he thought she looked absolutely perfect in her snug jeans and pink t-shirt. He’d never been a big fan of Barbie doll stringbeans.

“Are you?” She tossed one thick blonde braid over her shoulder.

“Am I what?” He wasn’t sure why he was flirting during something as serious as a manhunt. There was just something about the woman at his side that he was drawn to.

“Are you lonely, Shep?”

“Not anymore.” He stepped closer to her as they watched the German Shepherd run in circles, trying to pick up Ella’s scent. “I’m starting to feel like I’m at a disadvantage here.”

“Because I’m armed and you’re not?” She affectionately patted the gun in her sassy hip holster.

He nearly groaned out loud. It was the hottest thing he’d ever witnessed in his life. “I was going to say because you know my name, and I don’t know yours.”

“Primrose Midraven.”

He stared at her for a moment, wondering if she was having fun at his expense. “Seriously?”

“I’m not capable of saying my name without a smile, but yes.” She chuckled merrily. “My mom is a modern-day hippie and a big fan of Native culture. I have a bigger collection of turquoise jewelry than any other woman on the planet. Guaranteed.”

“Fair enough, Primrose.” Shep rolled the name over in his mouth. It suited her.

“All my boyfriends call me Prim, though.”

This time, he was sure she was laughing at him. “How many boyfriends are we talking about? Two? Ten? Fifty?”

“None at the moment.” She made a face at him. “Do you interrogate all of your search and rescue partners like this?”

“Only on days of the week that end in Y.”

“Fascinating.” She smiled mischievously at him. “Guess we’ve gotta pass the time somehow, right?”

“True.” He winked at her again. “It’s better than suffering in silence.”

“Then I’ll satisfy your curiosity just this once,” she offered magnanimously. “I’m currently between boyfriends. My job at the clinic doesn’t leave much time for dating.”

“Which clinic and what do you do there?” He shot off the questions rapid-fire in his best interrogation voice. At her surprised look, he grinned. “Just kidding. After you accused me of interrogating you, I thought I’d give you a taste of what it’s really like.”

“You’re a hoot, deputy. Because you’re so amusing, I’ll confess to being the P.A. at the clinic on the rez.” She smiled fondly as she shared that bit of information, sounding like she very much enjoyed her job. “Most of my patients there call me Dr. Prim. Or just plain doc, even though I’m not a physician.”

“Yeah, a lot of people don’t know the difference between a P.A. and a physician. To them, you’re all docs.” Shep imagined her higher-ups were simply glad to have a woman of her qualifications willing to serve at such a rural clinic.

“Even the ones that know the difference tend to call me that. I think it’s their way of showing respect. At least, that’s what I like to think.”

He gave her an admiring sideways glance. “Smart *and* pretty. My favorite combination.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “I bet you tell that to all the ladies.”

“Ha! I wish. But the only female in my life at the moment is the K-9 variety.”

“I’m not sure I believe that, but okay.” She turned her face away from him. “I was kind of hoping you’d spell out your status in the romance department. Married? Single? Looking, I hope?”

Though his heart pounded at her playful tone, he still opted to go for honesty. “I work a dangerous job for low pay. Oh, and I was on the night shift when I found out my cousin’s wife was missing. I’ll let you connect the inglorious dots of my nonexistent love life.” He had no idea why he was telling her all of this, but it felt kind of good to unload on a pretty stranger.

“Wait a sec!” She reached for his arm. “Are you telling me you’re related to Wayne Whitaker?”

“Thought I just did.” He hoped she was impressed.

“I’m so sorry.” Her expression grew agonized. “No wonder you’re wearing sad puppy dog eyes.”

It was touching that she’d noticed. “Thought I was doing a better job of hiding it. So much for my effort to be charming.”

“It’s okay to be worried. It means you care.”

“I do.” The German Shepherd stopped her circling and began snuffling along the ground. It looked like she’d picked up Ella’s scent.

“What’s going on?” Prim studied the dog with interest. “Does it mean she found something?”

Shep reached for Prim’s hand to silence her. “It means she’s picked up the scent,” he informed her quietly.

The dog broke into a run. Shep and his lovely partner had to jog to keep up with her.

“To answer your earlier question,” he informed her the next time they halted. “I spent the first twelve years of my life on the rez.” The dog started circling the ground again.

“Why’d you leave?” Prim asked in a hushed voice.

“My mother died, so my uncle finished raising me.”

“I’m so sorry!”

“Me, too, but I’m one of those guys who believes everything happens for a reason.” He glanced up at the moonlit ridge in front of them. “For instance, spending the first part of my life here is how I know there’s a small cavern ahead. It’s big enough to hold a woman, and it stretches far enough over the pass to make an unsuspecting captive think they’re trapped.” He raised his boot and got a foothold on a narrow inset. “Especially someone who was blindfolded or unconscious when they were hauled up there.” He was pretty sure he was onto something, since the dog was whining in agitation at the bottom of the ridge.

“You’re something else, deputy.” Prim sounded suitably impressed.

“Right back atcha, doc.” Shep reached for an outcropping of vines. He tugged them to make sure they would hold his weight. “Since you’re the one with the gun, how about you cover my six?”

“If I do, it’s going to cost you.” She sounded so stressed that he figured she was only joking to cover her apprehension.

“I’m a poor policeman, remember?” He got a new foothold and pushed himself higher. “The only thing I have in good supply are kisses.”

She cocked her gun. “Good, because I might require some mouth-to-mouth resuscitation if things go south over here.”

“You’re doing just fine.” He glanced over his shoulder at her for the sheer enjoyment of the view. “There’s nothing in the world sexier than a woman holding a gun.”

“I’ve never shot anything off the firing range,” she warned in a shaky voice.

“Then you’re in luck, because our target appears to be alone. No villains to neutralize.” Shep finished pulling himself up on the ledge. Then he gently reached for the woman lying on her side.

“You actually found her?” Prim squealed in excitement.

“Your confidence in my search and rescue skills is truly touching, doc,” he called down to her. “Go ahead and send up the flare.” He didn’t mind bringing a few more law enforcement officials running, just to be safe.

Ella Whitaker moaned as he untied her hands. “Wayne!” Her lashes fluttered against her cheeks.

His chest tightened in anger at seeing a bruise rising on her temple. The front of her blue dress was stained with grass and dirt.

“I’m Shep. Wayne’s cousin.” He gently ran his hands up and down her arms, testing them for broken bones. “Are you hurt?”

“I don’t think so.” She moaned again. “They drugged me with something pretty powerful, though. I’ve been seeing crazy stuff like mile-high inchworms and flying kittens.”

Wayne snickered at her lively descriptions. It was a good sign that her peyote trip hadn’t put a dent in her sense of humor.

“Can you hold on to me real tight while I climb back down the ridge?” He glanced over the edge as he tugged her into a sitting position.

“How far is it?” she asked weakly.

“Twenty or thirty feet.”

“I think so.”

She had spunk. He'd give her that. In the event she lost her grip on the way down, though, he made her hug him from the front. The trip took twice as long, but it was better than having her fall to the rocky ground below.

The moment his boots touched down, she sagged in his arms. He allowed her to slide to the ground.

“Don't move!” A male voice that Shep didn't recognize ordered them to lay down their weapons. “Turn around and face me with your arms up. Slowly!”

Wondering what had happened to Prim, Shep pivoted in the slowest circle of his life.

“I can deliver that CPR I promised,” he called out in the most cheerful voice he could summon, hoping Prim would take the hint. “Double the number of kisses,” he added. *Now's the time to use that gun off the range for the first time, darlin'.*

Nothing happened.

His heart sank as he finished turning around. He found himself facing a sullen-looking Comanche in medical scrubs. Youngish. No more than thirty. He looked like an escapee from an insane asylum. His dark hair was standing on end, and his eyes were bright with madness. Or peyote, which was more likely.

He lazily swung a pistol at Shep. “Who exactly are you planning on kissing?”

“Me, you lazy coward!” A shot sounded, and the man in scrubs dropped to the ground, clutching a knee.

Prim ran over to him and kicked him in the shins. “How dare you keep calling in sick and dumping all your work on me!” She drew her leg back to deliver another kick, but Shep held out an arm to stop her.

“Nice job, Prim, but I'll take it from here.”

The man at their feet went limp and closed his eyes.



“Red flare...found...shot fired...” Adriel’s voice crackled excitedly across his walkie talkie. He’d given up trying to reach Wayne and Marco by telephone more than an hour earlier. The lines were too busy to get through.

“What did he say?” Dyoni practically dragged Wayne over to the table where Marco was still seated.

Marco held the receiver to his mouth. “Can you repeat that?”

“...red flare went up in Deputy Shep Whitaker’s sector... one shot fired...stand by for more...”

Wayne yanked his phone off the table, not caring what was being recorded or not recorded at this point. He dialed his cousin and died a thousand deaths while waiting for the deputy to pick up.

He never did. Instead, a familiar female voice started speaking. “This is Deputy Shep Whitaker’s line. Who am I speaking to?”

“Prim?” Wayne gripped the phone tighter. “What’s going on? Where’s Shep?”

“Carrying your wife. That’s why I answered the phone for him.”

“You found her?” Wayne hardly dared to breathe. “Is she —?”

“She’s fine, Chief. Or she will be soon. I promise. They drugged her with peyote, but it’s already wearing off.”

They? His heart pounded with a mixture of exultation and concern. “Where are you now?”

“At the bottom of a cliff. Shep had to climb halfway up it to rescue Ella from some cavern. Hang on a sec. What?” She held the phone away from her mouth, and he heard muffled voices in the background. Then she was back. “Shep says

we're about half a click east of the Mountain of Fire, whatever that means."

Marco met Wayne's gaze and mouthed, *Back gate*.

Wayne nodded, knowing he was referring to the sealed off exit from the rez that they didn't use anymore. "Adriel said there was a shot fired. Was that in your sector?"

"Yes. I fired that shot." Her chuckle had a hysterical edge to it. "So much for all that do-no-harm doctor stuff, huh?"

"Depends on who you shot." He sincerely hoped it was Hawk Thunderman. "If it was in self-defense..."

"It was. I know it's no way to treat a coworker, but Chayton Dunraven waved his gun first and threatened to shoot an unarmed deputy. He was sky high on peyote and talking out of his head. Oh, and your wife was on the ground at his feet, so I couldn't just stand there and do nothing. I know I may be going straight to jail," she babbled, sounding close to tears, "but—"

"You're not going to jail, Prim." Wayne was honestly surprised they'd caught any of the Dunravens, but one arrest was better than none.

She stopped in mid-sob. "I'm not?"

"No. Just keep describing the terrain around you." His biggest concern now was getting them to safety. They would continue their pursuit of the Dunravens later. "Sounds like you're on the move, and we want to get help to you as soon as possible."

"Yeah, we're on the move. Shep said we were supposed to stay put after I sent up the flare, but we weren't sure who else might be out here with a gun. After Chayton passed out, he tied 'em up and left him under a bush, and—"

"You were smart to keep moving, Prim." he praised. "What can you see around you?"

"Rocks, hills, a big moon straight ahead."

Marco bent his head over the table, smirking.

“Oh, and there are some concrete barriers and an old gate. Kind of looks like the entrance into the rez, but abandoned. Yeah, it’s pretty creepy out here.”

Hope leaped into Wayne’s chest. “I know exactly where you are, Prim.”

“You do?” She sounded hopeful.

“Yes.” A plan was already taking shape in his head. “Tell Shep to head for those concrete barriers. If you can get inside the guard shack, lock yourselves in. It’s got bullet-proof glass.” The chains across the door had been vandalized by teenagers more times than the rez police could shake a stick at.

“Aye, aye, cap’n. I mean chief,” she corrected with a nervous giggle.

He handed his cell phone to Dyoni to keep tabs on Prim, Shep, and their precious burden while he hastily conferred with Marco.

“I’m going to get my wife,” he informed the deputy firmly. “I don’t care about the risks. You’re not talking me out of it this time.”

Marco pursed his lips. “Okay, but doesn’t the whole miraculous rescue strike you as a little too easy?”

It did, but Wayne wasn’t deterred. “I’m getting Ella out of there,” he repeated. “One way or the other.”

Nodding, Marco lifted his walkie talkie to page Adriel. “The chief insists he’s going to fetch his wife. Any chance we have an armored vehicle among our small army of volunteer rescue workers?”

“Sure do,” Adriel responded cheerfully. “I’ll send Deck Kingston your way with The Tank.”

“The Lonestar guys are here?” Dyoni dissolved into laughter. “What a circus!”

Wayne didn’t care what mayhem was breaking loose on the rez, so long as he had Ella safely back in his arms soon. He glared at Marco, wondering why the guy didn’t look happier

that Ella had been found. “If you’ve got something you want to say to me, Deputy...”

“I have plenty to say, Chief.” Marco spread his hands angrily. “There was a whole lot of stuff leading up to this. Think about it. Multiple counts of vandalism. Threats to both Ella and Jacob’s safety. A demand for your resignation. Are you forgetting about all that?”

“Not at all, but my wife has been found, and we have an eyewitness to start chipping away at a dangerous drug ring. What more do you want?”

“Answers.” Marco strode across the room to stand toe-to-toe with him. He wasn’t the tallest lawman in the world, but his icy gaze underscored his nerves of steel. “Why did the kidnapper demand your immediate resignation? What did he hope to gain from it? And why do you say we’re only chipping away here? What am I missing?”

Wayne had always subscribed to the live-to-fight-another-day theory. However, since they were waiting on an armored vehicle escort, he decided to humor the former federal agent. “Clearly, someone on the council wants my job.”

With a sound of disgust, his sister held the phone away from her ear. “I would’ve actively campaigned against Cherokee Dunraven if it ever came to that. Just saying. If he truly wanted a shot at replacing you, he should’ve been taking notes from someone like Hawk Thunderman.”

“Why’s that?”

She shrugged. “He’s a council member in good standing. Kind. Dependable. A good listener. And it doesn’t hurt that he’s an American hero.”

Her glowing endorsement of the man made Wayne’s chest hurt. It was a testament to just how good a job Hawk had done of hoodwinking everyone around him.

Marco arched his eyebrows at Wayne. “Got any other theories?”

“Not at the moment.” Wayne couldn’t afford to bring Dyoni into his confidence. Not until he figured out how far

Hawk had spread his poison, and how many more tribal members he might have in his employ. The longer the scoundrel went without knowing his cover was blown, the more time Wayne would have to set a trap for him. Hawk was patient. He would take the time to rebuild. Then he would coil for the next strike.

Wayne intended to be ready.

“Well, I have a theory,” Marco growled. “Care to hear it?”

Wayne gestured for him to continue. He’d pull Marco aside later and tell him everything he knew. Just not in front of Dyon.

“Cherokee Dunraven strikes me as a classic fall guy,” Marco informed him with a hard look. “He’s too loud, too argumentative, and too obvious to be the head of the serpent. He’s the idiot who gets arrested first, and all the naive good guys fold their hands and think they’ve won.”

“That’s certainly one way to look at it.” Wayne couldn’t tell if Marco had figured it all out yet, but he was certainly close.

“Oh, come on, Chief!” Marco looked incredulous. “Chayton Dunraven was strung out on peyote when Prim shot ‘em. No one at the top dips into their own product. That’s drug-lord-in-training 101 for you.”

Wayne wasn’t aware there were protocols for gangsters, but who was he to second-guess a former FBI agent? “So you’re saying our signed witness statement isn’t worth anywhere near the \$10,000 we paid to get it?”

“Not at all. The Dunravens belong behind bars. No doubt about that. All I’m saying is they’re not the droids you’re looking for, to borrow one of my favorite Star Wars quotes. Someone is pulling the Dunravens’ strings. When you figure out who that is, you’ll probably be looking at the guy...or gal,” he qualified, “who’s gunning for your job.”

Bingo! All Marco needed was a name. Wayne couldn’t wait to give it to him. They were going to have their work cut

out for them, though. Hawk Thunderman wasn't going to be an easy man to bring down.

He glanced over at Dyoni to see her reaction to Marco's theory. She was studying the former federal agent in fascination. "I like puzzles." Her expression suddenly changed.

She held Wayne's phone out to him. "Sounds like Ella is ready to talk to you."

He eagerly reached for it. "Ella!" He felt like weeping as he held the phone to his ear. Every cell in his body was aching to hear her voice.

"Wayne!" she cried joyfully.

"Are you okay? How do you feel?" All Prim said was that his wife had been dosed with peyote. She'd not mentioned any other injuries.

"I'm better now that Shep and Prim are here." Though she sounded glad to hear from him, her voice was a little slurred. "Please assure me they're really here, and I didn't dream them up like all the other crazy stuff that's been dancing before my eyes."

That was the peyote playing tricks inside her head. "They're real, Ella, and so am I. You're safe now. I'm coming to get you."

"How's Jacob?" She sounded anxious.

"He misses you. We're probably going to have to read him an entire Magic Treehouse book when you get back."

Her laugh ended on a sob. "I'd like that. So much!"

Decker Kingston burst into the station. Coop was on his heels.

"Coop!" Wayne held out a hand to him, astonished to see he'd been discharged from the medical center already. "What are you doing here?"

"Coming to finish the job, Chief." Coop was a little pale as he gripped Wayne's hand. "Let's bring your wife home, shall

we?”

“Thought you were in the hospital.” Wayne continued to survey him in amazement as he spoke into the phone. “Are you hearing this, babe? Coop’s here!”

“Is he okay?” she quickly asked.

“He’s on his feet making a lot of noise,” Wayne informed her in a teasing voice for Coop’s benefit. “I’m taking that as a yes that’s he’s alright.”

Coop grinned as he gestured at Decker. “The boss man sprang me out after the pretty doctor loaded me up with painkillers. Got her number, too.” He produced a slip of paper and waved it at nobody in particular.

“I heard that, too.” Ella made a scoffing sound. “Don’t believe him. It’s probably just another one of his cover stories. I have a theory that he’s secretly married.”

“You’re probably right.” Wayne held back a chuckle.

“You tell ‘em, princess.” Coop leaned closer to Wayne so he could speak into the cell phone. “Every new husband quickly learns his wife is always right. Tribal chiefs are no exception to that rule.”

Ella’s chuckle rang like music across the phone line and straight to Wayne’s heart. “See what I mean?” she demanded merrily. “He’s so married, Wayne.”

“I’m beginning to see what you’re saying.” He was relieved to hear her voice sounding less slurred. It was growing stronger by the minute, which meant the last of the peyote was wearing off.

“Ready to rock and roll, chief?” Decker produced an extra bullet-proof vest. “It’s probably a lot more exciting to hear your wife say it, but take off your shirt.”

Ella snickered in his ear. “I’m not even going to ask.”

“I’ll tell you later,” he promised, cradling his phone first with one hand then the other as his friend helped him into the vest.

“I can’t wait!” Ella’s voice was both humorous and caressing.

Moments later, he was herded through the rear door of The Tank. The tall, black beast of a vehicle very much lived up to its namesake, both inside and outside. He idly wondered what one of them cost, because he was seriously tempted to invest in one for his wife. After tonight’s harrowing events, he might never let her out of his sight again.

“Wayne?” Her voice was hesitant.

“What is it, babe?” He tipped his head back against the seat on one side of The Tank. The seat across from him was empty. Both Deck and Coop were sitting up front, scanning the terrain for any sign of danger.

“Because I was drugged, everything is running together in my head. I don’t know what’s real and what’s not. It’s a little terrifying.”

“We’ll sort it out together, babe.” The peyote drug was a powerful substance that caused hallucinatory visions. He could only imagine the things it had conjured up in her mind.

Or what horrors it might be masking, such as the details surrounding her abduction. Thanks to the drug, she might never remember with any clarity the faces or names of those who had taken her.

“They called me fish bait.”

He sat forward in his seat. “Who did?”

“A giant worm and some flying kittens. You can laugh if you want to.”

The fact that she’d been drugged didn’t inspire even the tiniest spark of humor in him. “What else do you remember?” The worm and kittens sounded like typical hallucinatory stuff. Maybe if he kept her talking, she’d remember something significant. Something that could be used against Hawk.

“A thunderbird, I think. I screamed when he took off his head.”

A thunderbird? Many Native Americans believed the thunderbird was a powerful spirit that helped irrigate and harvest crops. “What happened to him when he took off his head?”

“He had another face beneath it.”

His heart thumped a little harder. “Can you remember what the face looked like?”

“No. Only that his nose was very long and very curved.”

It was Hawk Thunderman. The fact that he’d been bold enough to show his face to her both surprised Wayne and filled him with horror. There were only two possible explanations. Either Hawk thought she was so strung out on peyote that she’d never be able to identify him. Or Hawk had not intended for her to live to tell the tale.

“Like the others, he kept calling me fish bait.”

Or bait. The final piece of the puzzle fell into place for Wayne. She’d been a target alright, just not the primary one.

I am.

The “ransom demand” for his resignation had simply been smoke and mirrors. His enemies didn’t need him to step down. They needed him to die. It was one of those classic create-the-war-to-introduce-your-own-deadly solution type of situations.

At this very moment, Hawk Thunderman thought his chief was playing right into his hands. The head of the serpent might’ve been separated from his body, but he was still baring his fangs to bite.

There would be no regrouping or rebuilding. Now was the time to fight back. Now might be their only chance.

He glanced toward the front of The Tank where Deck and Coop were quietly reviewing their game plan. “Ella, I need for you, Shep, and Prim to remain inside the guard shack, no matter what happens next.” If he could thank God for one thing right now, it was the fact that Hawk Thunderman’s bait was sitting safely behind bullet-proof glass. It was the man’s first mistake.

“We’re not going anywhere until you get here.” Ella sounded worried.

“We’re almost there,” he assured. “I don’t know how long it will take for me to get you out, though.” He debated how much to tell her. “There are...other things going on.”

“Uh, Wayne?” Her voice trembled. “Shep said to tell you he saw something glinting off the tallest mountain on the rez. A scope, he thinks. That’s the Mountain of Fire, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” A scope could only mean one thing. A sniper was lying in wait for his prey.

Me.

“Who’s out there, Wayne?”

He could only think of one man on the rez capable of making that shot. Everything he knew about the guy flashed through his mind. It wasn’t much, but it was enough.

Hawk Thunderman. Former military. Expert marksman.

He repeated his wife’s warning to Decker and Coop. “Ella’s starting to remember things,” he added. “A man with a mask who called her bait. And now Shep is reporting a glint of something on a distant mountain.”

Coop’s expression hardened knowingly. “Probably a sniper.”

“We have to call this in to Adriel,” Decker growled. “This will certainly slow down our rescue mission.” His irritation was palpable.

“I’ll make the call.” Wayne had already put Ella on hold and was dialing.

Adriel’s voice popped anxiously onto the line. “What’s your status, Chief?”

“New development.” Wayne described the glint of a scope on the Mountain of Fire. “You and I both know there’s only man on the rez who could make that shot.”

“Oh, Wayne!” Adriel groaned. He wasn’t speaking as a police chief. He was speaking as a friend, one who shared the

grief that was already rolling through Wayne's chest.

"Do what you have to do, Adriel." He didn't bother masking the emotion in his voice. He needed Adriel to know this wasn't easy for him, either. "I'll buy you as much time as I can."

"Roger that." The police chief's voice grew cold with resignation. "Over and out."

"We need to keep playing along." Wayne moved forward to crouch behind the two security guards as he laid out his plan. "Let's buy as much time as we can for Adriel and his team to get in place."

Fearing that Adriel might attempt to neutralize the threat alone, Wayne shot a text to Marco Perez. *Hawk Thunderman. Expert marksman. Fire Mountain. Help Adriel.*

Knowing he'd done all he could, Wayne said a quick prayer, leaving the rest in God's hands.

Decker drove slowly as they approached the guard shack, making an unnecessary circle as he backed the armored vehicle into position. Within seconds, The Tank was parked between the sniper and the guard shack. Ella, Shep, and Prim were truly safe now.

"A huge truck just pulled up!" Ella choked the moment he switched back to her line. "Please assure me that's you, Wayne." She'd been on hold for the last several minutes, allowing him to speak to Adriel and the Lonestar Security guys without interruption.

"It's us, babe." His longing to have her back in his arms grew excruciating. "I need to talk to Shep one more time before we make our move."

"Okay." She didn't sound too thrilled over the necessity of relinquishing the phone. "Here he is."

Wayne quickly explained their predicament. "Is there anything in the guard shack you could throw together to look like me?"

Shep snorted. "I'm not sure how to answer that without getting myself in trouble."

Wayne swallowed a chuckle. "A mop you can turn upside down? A jacket you can wrap around it?" If Adriel's team didn't arrive on Fire Mountain soon, they needed to make Hawk's assassination attempt look real.

"Actually, yes. There's a mop in the corner."

"We want the sniper shooting at that. Not any of us. Tell us when you're ready."

There was a rustling sound on the other end of the line and some muffled conversation between Shep and the two women with him. Then Shep was back. "Got my jacket wrapped around the mop. What next?"

"Hold it out a little as you run toward The Tank. Decker and Coop are going to have a pair of laser beams marking your path. Whatever you do, stay inside the laser beams. His bullets can't reach you there. Leave nothing but the head of the mop hanging out, you hear?" Wayne didn't want to give Hawk much to look at or much time to think.

Shoot first and ask questions later, sucker!

"Loud and clear." Shep's voice was grim. "We're ready."

Decker and Coop climbed into the rear of the vehicle and got into position with their laser beams.

Wayne caught Decker's eye and waited for him to nod. With his hand on the latch of the door, he started the countdown. "We're opening the door in the three, two, one."

He pushed the door open, and three figures sprinted their way from the shack. Shep waited until he was about halfway to The Tank before allowing the mop head to swing out a few inches.

A spray of bullets pinged into it. One of them grazed off the side of the tank.

"Drop it," Wayne instructed coolly.

Shep allowed it to fall from his hands.

Ella launched herself into Wayne's arms the moment the three of them reached The Tank's dark haven.

"I love you." She pressed her face against the side of his neck, breathing him in. "I wanted to tell you before, um... everything happened."

"I love you, too." It was Wayne's biggest dream come true to hear her say the words back. Hugging her tightly, he pulled her further inside the armored vehicle so Decker could shut the door.

"Don't ever let me go again," she begged.

"I won't," he promised huskily.

Adriel's call came through only moments later. He delivered the final message Wayne had been praying for.

"We got him, Chief."



EPILOGUE

August

It was opening day.

Wayne stood beneath the welcome canopy, arms folded, as he surveyed the long rows of tables, booths, and tents that stretched before him. The legs of the large blue canopy stretched over him were anchored down with sandbags in the parking lot outside the rodeo grounds — up near the stadium.

The entire tribal council was assembled beneath it with him. All but two, that is. Hawk's and Cherokee's arrests had left two holes in their ranks that no one seemed in a hurry to fill. Some holes took longer to heal than others.

“You did it, Wayne!” Dyoni stepped to his side to curl a hand around his arm. Like him, she was wearing the traditional buckskins and feathers of their people today. It wasn't something they did often, only for holidays and festivals. And the opening day of the Comanche Saturday Morning Market. It most definitely qualified as an event worth celebrating.

“We did it,” he corrected, glancing around them at the proud faces of their fellow councilmen. The despair on their faces was gone. In its place was cautious hope. Both the old-timers and the younger council members could feel the energy in the parking lot as the craftsmen laid out their wares.

“Dad!” Wayne’s heart nearly stopped beating at the sound of Jacob’s voice. It was the first time his stepson had ever called him by that title. He spun around and crouched low, holding out his arms to the boyish blur flying in his direction. Buzz’s hulking figure remained in the background, reminding the world with his presence not to tango with the Comanche head family. Wayne wasn’t ready to discontinue his contact with Lonestar Security. He might never be ready. He’d come too close to losing Ella.

Jacob slammed into his chest with the same energy he’d first slammed into Wayne’s heart on the side of the road nearly seven months earlier.

“Hey, son!” Wayne wasn’t sure if Jacob even realized what he’d said. He considered it all the better if the title had simply slipped out.

Jacob started babbling a mile per minute about some book booth he’d seen on his way to the tribal tent. “Do you think they sell Magic Treehouse books there? I’m up to forty-three. I need book forty-four next.”

Wayne gently rested his forehead against his son’s forehead. “I’ll talk to your mom about it. Don’t you have a birthday right around the corner?” Book forty-four sounded like the perfect gift. So did books forty-five through fifty. Wayne was very much looking forward to adding to Jacob’s collection. According to their family attorney, his adoption would be finalized soon. They might purchase a few more books to celebrate that occasion, too.

“Yes, sir! I wrote up a wish list.” Hugging him, Jacob wiggled away and ran up to his Aunt Dyoni next. “Will you come to my birthday?” he begged.

She picked him up and swung him around in a full circle. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world, kiddo!”

Wayne scanned the parking lot for Ella and found her moving much slower in his direction than Jacob had. She was smiling and chatting with her grandmother, Corella, who was scooting her walker along the pavement at the speed of a snail.

Coop was a few strides behind them, ever watchful, as he scanned the parking lot for anything concerning.

Wayne strode in their direction with a heart full of gratitude toward the aging woman at his Ella's side. After his wife's abduction, Corella and Jonty had put their mouths where their reward money was, and become an inseparable part of their family.

"Where'd she come from?" Reaching the two women, Wayne gestured at Corella in mock displeasure as he bent his head to plant a tender kiss on Ella. He slid his hand possessively over the jean-clad curve of her hip. In lieu of the rodeo taking place right after the market, she was already in her cowgirl gear. "You know better than to pick up hitchhikers," he reminded huskily as he nuzzled the edge of her mouth.

"She's unarmed, Chief. I checked." Ella reached up to cup his face with both hands, drawing his mouth back to hers. "She suckered me in with some sob story about wanting to buy a gift for her great-grandson at the market."

"Watch your step with her, babe." He could feel her smile against his lips. "I hear great-grandmothers are shiesty critters." He lifted his head to shoot a wicked look at Corella, who was surveying them in fascination. "The whole lot of them."

Her hearty cackle pealed over them as she hitched her walker in Jacob's direction. "I'll save my pithy comments for Jonty," she chortled as she shuffled away. "He'll be sorely disappointed. He's hoping I'll make you mad enough to scalp me, so he can marry a younger, nicer woman." She waved her gnarled hand in the air. "I refuse to give him the pleasure."



Ella's favorite part about every day was coming home — not to Wayne's Monday through Friday house in the main part of town, though. They rarely darkened the door of that horrid place anymore. It held too many terrifying memories for her.

She stood on the second-story balcony of their home in the foothills. This was their real home. The ranch lands rolled before her, dotted with evergreens. Mustangs grazed their grassy slopes. A pair of dogs ran barking through their midst. The sun shot its final rays of light over them, preparing to dip behind the mountain range.

The door opened and closed behind her. There were no noisy footfalls from her stealthy husband. Nothing but Wayne's arms sliding around her as he joined her at the railing.

"I missed you." She tipped her head back against his shoulder, loving the silky feel of his hair blowing against her cheek.

"I missed you, too."

She smiled as his hard mouth came down on hers. He'd only been gone a few minutes while he took a call from his new executive secretary. From now on, the woman would be fielding most of his calls, only allowing the most important messages through to him.

It meant they would have more time to enjoy moments like these. She reached up to caress the firm line of his jaw. "I thought the first market day went smoothly."

"It did." Wayne turned his face into her hand, kissing her palm.

"And the rodeo this evening." A chuckle slid out of her.

"What's so funny?"

"Jasper rode one of the bulls. He said if we make him quit racing monster trucks, that's what he's doing next."

"Doesn't feel like much of a win, does it?" Wayne kissed his way down her wrist.

"I wonder what it would take to make him understand how much his life is worth," she sighed.

"A wife," Wayne supplied, returning her hand to his cheek. He kissed her again, taking her deeper this time, plundering her mouth to prove his point. "You're everything to me, Ella."

He broke off the kiss to rest his chin on her shoulder, sliding his hand down her arm. Threading his fingers through hers, he lifted them to point.

“There it is.”

They watched together as the sun touched down. Like a torch, it lit the mountain with a fiery glow, as brilliant as the fire burning inside her for the man in her arms.

Her husband.

Her dearest friend.

The chief of her heart.



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SNEAK PREVIEW: NIGHT OF MERCY

D *on't kiss a friend. No workplace romance. Never date a cowboy. And whatever you do, don't fall for a guy in a uniform!*

Prim Midraven has been following her mother's dating advice for years. You should be able to trust a professional matchmaker, right? Which doesn't explain why Prim is still single and lonely.

When her best friend, Deputy Shep Whitaker, organizes a volunteer K-9 search and rescue team at the poverty-stricken reservation where she works, she ignores her mother's advice (for once) and signs up as his first volunteer. His *only* volunteer, as it turns out, which is why she can't simply quit on him after her better judgment kicks in. Sure, he checks every box on the list of things she's supposed to be avoiding in a relationship, but no biggie. They're both adults, and they're both professionals. What's the worst that can happen while working with him on a strictly volunteer basis for a few weeks?

Apparently, a few things she never considered — like getting caught in the crosshairs of a dangerous enemy together. Oh, and accidentally falling for her hunky friend in uniform. It's way past the point where her mother would advise her to cut her losses and run. So why is her heart telling her to stick around long enough to find out where this spark of attraction leads?



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SNEAK PREVIEW: DAMAGED HERO

“**W**hoa! That’s a rough-looking set of wheels.” Foster Kane glanced up from the horse he was brushing down to squint at the mangled red motorcycle his friend was wheeling into the barn. Unless he was mistaken, it was a Honda Valkyrie. Or what was left of it.

The windshield was splintered into thousands of spidery cracks, the front fender was dangling against the tire, and the exhaust pipe was dragging the ground. Fluffy white stuffing was spilling like a volcano from its torn black leather seat.

“The price was right. It’ll look better after I dust it off and fix it up a bit.” Crew Anderson shot Foster one of his devilish grins as he brought the bike to a halt and kicked the stand down. The moment he let go of the handlebars, the bike gave a tortured creak and started to topple over.

Crew grunted as he caught the heavy bike and lowered it to its side on the plank floor of the barn. Then he straightened, dusting his hands. His fingers were stained with motor oil, and there was a line of black grime beneath his fingernails. Shoving back a wave of dark brown hair, he managed to leave two grease marks on his tanned forehead that resembled a pair of dark horns.

“So, how much did you fork over for it?” Foster hoped the bike hadn’t set his former cell mate back too far. Neither of them were rolling in dough on their new ranch hand salaries, though their paychecks more than covered their bills and

necessities. The truth was, they were lucky to have any jobs at all, considering their respective rap sheets.

“Nothing,” Crew announced as he proudly surveyed his acquisition with the same blue-eyed intensity that made their lady friends swoon. “Some chick gave it to her boyfriend for his birthday. He totaled it the same night, and it ended up in the junkyard. They were gonna strip it for parts, but the guy who owns the place owed me a favor.” He shrugged. “I took it off his hands, and we called it even.”

Foster paused his brushing, making the gold and white stallion standing beside him snuffle in irritation. “If we’re talking about B.J.’s Salvage Yard, not sure he’s the kind of guy you want to be swapping favors with, bro.” Last he’d heard, B.J. had been chopping up stolen vehicles for the Red Bloods, a backwoods gang that was quickly becoming a problem throughout the Texas panhandle. It was just a rumor, of course, but Foster understood how quickly things could go south when one was hanging with the wrong crowd.

The few years he’d spent in the pen were entirely due to the fact he’d been at the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong folks. *Shoot!* He hadn’t even realized there were drugs in the car the night he’d gotten arrested. It was seven years ago, but he remembered every detail about their run-in with the law like it was yesterday. It had changed his life forever and not in a good way. He’d be spending the rest of his days making up for that mistake. Fortunately, he’d gotten hired to work at Anderson Ranch, which was run by a farmer named Brody Anderson, along with his chef sister and their respective spouses. Foster and the other hired hands privately referred to him as Saint Brody, because he was so much more than a boss. Thanks to his mentoring, Foster was finally starting to believe he had a real chance at getting back on his feet and earning an honest living. Brody was even trying to talk him into taking a few college classes on the side. Though Foster had never enjoyed cracking open a textbook, he was actually considering it. So was Crew, his disgruntled friend.

Crew’s expression hadn’t changed as he processed Foster’s warning. His shoulders had stiffened, though. “I don’t owe

anybody anything. Like I said, B.J. owed me. And now he doesn't."

"Good to hear." Crew's words were far from reassuring. The foreboding in Foster's gut only swirled faster. "If he ever gives you a hard time about anything, you let me know, okay? I got your back." B.J. was bad news. Everybody in town knew it. Everybody, apparently, except the young rebel standing over his newly acquired wreck of a motorcycle. At twenty-five, Foster was only two years older than Crew, but there were days Foster felt two decades older — in experience, at least.

"Wasn't born yesterday," his friend retorted in a tight voice. "I can handle B.J."

That's where he was wrong. The only way to handle B.J. was to stay away from him. No exceptions.

Feeling the tension rising between them, however, Foster decided to back off. He resumed his horse brushing, letting the subject go. For now. His gut told him there was more to the story. It was probably worth keeping an eye on Crew in the coming days, in the event he was about to land himself in some sort of trouble.

"While we're butting into each other's business..." Crew swaggered closer, his cowboy boots thumping against the wooden floorboards of the hallway stretching between the two rows of horse stalls.

Uh-oh. Foster watched him from the corner of his eye as he ran his brush down the horse's flank. *Here we go again.* He had no doubt that Crew was preparing to pester him again about going out on a double date with him and his latest gal pal. He was forever trying to set Foster up with some friend of a friend of a friend — girls who were fun, pretty, and looking for a guy who could show them a good time. Call him old and boring, but Foster had bigger fish to fry right now. For one thing, his older brother had been lying in a coma at the hospital for nearly a month. To make matters worse, his brother's wife, Shayley, was only a couple of weeks away from popping out their first baby. In short, Foster was needed

on the home front right now. He didn't have the time or emotional energy to carve out a social life.

The two-year-old stallion he was brushing gave a nicker of appreciation and tossed his white mane, reclaiming Foster's attention. His name was Rapture, and he was far from ready to retire to his stall. However, if Foster left him outside in the corral with the other horses, he'd jump the fence and take off in nothing flat. He was a born jumper — a spirited piece of work that Brody Anderson wasn't sure was going to be a good fit at the ranch. He pretty much only needed range riding horses for his cattle herding business and trail riding horses for the guests staying at the big red barn he'd converted into a B&B. He was already making noises about selling Rapture if his ranch staff couldn't train him to be more useful. It was yet another thing adding to Foster's stress level. He didn't mind tending to the horses' daily needs — feeding, exercising, grooming, and what not — but he was in no way qualified to train them.

“Boy, you got quiet all of a sudden,” Crew jeered. “Couldn't hardly get you to shut up a minute ago. Ain't as much fun when the spotlight falls on you, eh?”

Touché. Foster chuckled wryly. “Not so much.” He patted Rapture's neck. “What's the name of the girl you're going to bug me about this time? Anna Mae? Jenny Sue?”

“Nope.” Crew's voice was scoffing. “I'm tired of trying to set you up with nice girls, only to have you say no to every one of them. I'd rather talk about the elephant in the room, Shayley Neeson. Don't you think it's time to finally come clean about y'all's relationship?”

“There's nothing to come clean about.” Foster's insides went all tight and wary at the mention of her name. “She's my sister-in-law, for crying out loud,” he reminded sharply.

“In a manner of speaking,” Crew returned coolly. “Last time I checked, your brother never bothered to put a ring on her finger.”

Foster's defenses went into full bristle mode. “Be very careful what you say next, my friend.” He wasn't overly

thrilled about his brother's anti-government sentiments, certainly not when it came to thumbing his nose at every major legal institution. Like marriage. Foster was also well aware of the gossip churning about himself and Shayley, but there wasn't much he could do about it. Samson had assigned his younger brother the task of looking after his "wife" before he'd slipped into his coma. So that's what Foster had been doing and planned to keep doing until his watchdog services weren't needed any longer.

"You love her," Crew pointed out bluntly.

"Very much." Foster saw no point in denying it. A brother-in-law was allowed to care for his family. He refused to make eye contact with Crew, however, afraid of what his expression might give away. Instead, he busied himself putting the spirited stallion back into his stall. It was no easy task, with the way he was holding back and pawing at the ground.

Crew leaned over and swatted the stallion on his rump to get him moving again. With a whinny of sheer fury, Rapture reared up on his hind legs, cycling his front legs in the air.

"Whoa!" Foster leaped out of the way, while continuing to speak to the creature. "Easy there, Rapture. You're okay, boy. You're okay." It took another few minutes of soothing and cajoling to get him safely in his stall. The moment Foster latched the gate behind him, he rounded on Crew. "Probably best to let me handle this particular horse in the future. I know he's a handful, but he and I seem to have a connection."

"I concede to your greatness. The demon is all yours." Crew gave him a mocking bow. "And you might as well quit dodging the other subject, because I have a theory."

"Do tell," Foster growled.

"Actually, it's more than a theory, because I know what I'm about to say is true. Your feelings for Shayley are the reason you keep refusing to serve as my wing man, and that's a problem."

Foster pinned him with a hard stare. "Whatever my feelings are, they're my problem, not yours. I'll deal with

them.” His tone didn’t welcome more commentary, but Crew seemed to have a one-track mind today.

“You could ask her out.” His grin didn’t reach his striking sapphire eyes. “It’s not as if your brother has any plans to walk her down the aisle. Ever.”

Foster stared at him in amazement. “Not funny, dude. She’s not single or available, and you know it. She’s about to have Samson’s baby.” *My niece or nephew.*

“So, your brother knocked up his girlfriend. Whopty doo! It happens.”

“That’s enough, Crew.”

“I’m just pointing out the facts, bro. You’re in love with Shayley Neeson, and she’s not legally married. That makes her fair game.”

“It does not!” Foster roared. For a moment, all he could see was red. “I warned you, man.” Hunkering into a boxer’s stance, he lunged for his friend.

Crew was unexpectedly ready. His fists came up, and he easily sideswiped Foster’s first swing. “Be as mad at me as you want, bro, but this conversation was long overdue.”

“You have no right to say stuff like that,” Foster seethed, swinging again. This time, he grazed the edge of Crew’s jaw.

“You bet I do. I’m your best friend, remember?” Crew swung back, or pretended to. While Foster was batting away his fist, Crew hooked a leg around Foster’s legs and brought him tumbling to the floor. “You’ve been raring for a fight for days, so let’s have it.”

“Don’t put this on me.” Foster was still seeing red. “You picked this fight on purpose.” He managed to pull Crew to the floor beside him. They went rolling across the planks, fists flying at a much closer range.

“Only because you were too chill to throw the first punch,” Crew scoffed, wrestling with a fury that Foster didn’t realize he was capable of. “I know everyone calls me young and dumb behind my back, but I’m still the guy who had your back

in jail, the guy who got you medical help when you took a bullet a few weeks ago, and the same guy who gave you a place to crash when you had nowhere else to go. Now I'm serving as your personal punching bag while you...oomph!"

A sock in the gut finally shut him up.

"You don't know when to quit." Foster shoved him aside and stood, waffling between self-disgust at the way he'd just blown up at his best friend in the world and relief at the opportunity to let off some of the steam that had been boiling just beneath the surface for days.

"Neither do you." Crew swiped a thumb over the trickle of red beneath his lower lip. "That woman says jump, and you say how high. Every. Blasted. Time. That ain't in the job description of a brother-in-law."

"She's pregnant, and I'm all she's got." Foster glared at his friend, hating his insinuation that Shayley was taking advantage of him. She was a ray of freaking sunshine, seriously the best thing that had ever happened to him and Samson. There was nothing on heaven or earth he wouldn't do for her. If that was an inappropriate emotion to be feeling for his brother's wife, then so be it. Everyone knew Foster was a jailbird — damaged beyond repair, according to some. Acting inappropriately was kind of his specialty.

"Not true. She has her sister to look after her." Crew rolled to his feet to face him. An older sister named Shiloh Neeson. She'd come to work at Anderson Ranch a few months ago as a maid, picking up the slack on the days when Shayley was too exhausted to keep up with her normal workload.

"Yeah? Well, not too long ago, Shiloh was serving in the Marines. And now she's about to get married and go on the road with her celebrity singer husband." Foster jutted his chin defiantly. "That means Shayley is stuck with me, whether you approve of the arrangement or not. My responsibility. My problem."

"Honestly?" Crew sucked on his busted lower lip. "I really don't care. Not trying to be the moral police here. I just hate seeing you vamoose from the dating field altogether." He

rested his thumbs loosely in the belt loops of his faded jeans and rocked back on his boot heels. “So you got saddled with looking after a sister-in-law with a bun in the oven. Doesn’t mean you can’t still have a life of your own.”

That was the thing. Foster snorted, but didn’t respond. The truth was, he didn’t mind looking after Shayley — not even a little — for a few very specific reasons. For one thing, his older brother had come home from his latest military deployment severely messed up in the head. Long before he’d slipped into his coma, he hadn’t been in a good place, and he’d known it. That’s why he’d insisted that Foster step in and help look after his wife. Secondly, Crew was right about Foster being in love with his sister-in-law.

Falling for her was probably the stupidest thing he’d ever done, but he’d been powerless to stop himself. He was careful not to act on his feelings or cross any lines. Shayley never needed to know. She was head-over-heels in love with Samson, as she should be, and Foster was cool with that. He planned to be loyal to both his brother and her until the end of time. If that meant staying single, well, there were worse things in life than being single.

“Man!” Crew shook his head sadly as he studied Foster. “You have it pretty bad for her, don’t you?”

“Just let it go, Crew.” Foster’s voice held a warning note as he dusted off his plaid shirt and raised his Stetson to smooth back his sweaty hair. He was in sore need of a shower. He’d spent all morning giving trail rides to the B&B guests and all afternoon grooming the horses. The other two ranch hands, Nash and Zane Wilder, had been happy to leave the horses to Foster, so they could do what they enjoyed most — farming. They loved driving the big machinery across the fields of specially engineered hay and alfalfa that Brody insisted on feeding his award-winning cattle. Both were in the process of earning their pilot’s licenses, as well, so they could add crop dusting to their resumes.

Crew grimaced. “If I let it go, then who’s gonna stand in as my wing man?”

“How about Nash or Zane?”

“I could ask ‘em.” Crew didn’t look too thrilled about the prospect. “But you know how they are — as thick as thieves. You never see one without the other. With my luck, they’d both decide to come along, and I’d end up feeling like a third wheel on my own date.”

Foster was fast running out of ideas. “Maybe you don’t need a wing man anymore.” He grinned as a thought struck him. “Maybe it’s time for you to take off your training wheels and go on your first solo date with a girl.”

“Haha!” Crew grated between his teeth. “Or, maybe it’s time for you to man up, make a play for the woman you love, and bring her along on our next double date.”

Foster stared at him, aghast. “In case you’ve forgotten, Samson is in a hospital bed fighting for his life.” Only a complete scumbag would move in on another guy’s woman while he was down for the count like that. The fact that Foster found Crew’s suggestion at all tempting made him hate himself a little more than usual.

“I haven’t forgotten.” Crew’s mouth twisted. “But the doctors aren’t too optimistic about his recovery. You know that. You’re gonna have to start thinking about what comes next. You and Shayley both.”

Yes, I know. But Foster wasn’t ready to talk about it. He was probably never going to be ready. For the first time in his life, he wished he believed in prayer like Saint Brody. If he did, he’d be on his knees right now, begging for a miracle.

He didn’t want to even think about a future that didn’t have his older brother in it. Samson had pretty much raised him during their teen years, while their father slid further and further beneath the clutches of his various addictions — alcohol, pain killers, and anything else he could get his hands on to escape his grief. The guy hadn’t been able to hold a steady job since the loss of the boys’ mother to cancer more than a decade earlier.

The side door to the barn suddenly banged open, making both men glance up in surprise.

Foster found himself gazing at the object of their conversation. Shayley Neeson stood there, all sun-streaked blonde and wind-tousled as she searched the barn. Her blue-gray gaze settled on him and lit with joy. His heart gave an answering jolt of pleasure to see her looking so upbeat. All too often lately, her eyes had brimmed with despair, and no wonder. She'd been living in constant fear that Samson might not survive long enough to meet their new baby.

She moved in his direction, waving her cell phone excitedly in the air. The movement made her oversized pink and white shirt slide off one shoulder, revealing the strap of a matching pink tank top beneath it. Her belly swelled like a beach ball beneath her shirt, though her stone-washed denim leggings hugged a set of legs that were as slender as ever.

Foster frowned as it dawned on him how out of breath she was, like she'd been running.

"He's awake!" she gasped as she sauntered closer. She didn't so much as glance in Crew's direction. "The hospital just called. Samson is finally awake, and he's asking for us. Oh, Foster!" Her knees wobbled, making her stumble.

Ignoring the fact that they had an audience, Foster sped forward and grasped the underside of her elbows to steady her. However, she bypassed his half-hearted attempt to keep some distance between them and stepped into his more-than-willing embrace.

He cuddled her as close as her blooming belly would allow, hoping he didn't smell too much like horses and sweat. She didn't complain, or maybe she was just too distracted to. She melted against him, trembling.

"Who did you talk to?" A dazed brand of relief swept through him. Up until this very moment, he wasn't sure his brother would ever wake up again.

"A nurse, I think. She told me her name, but I can't remember it." Shayley's voice shook with emotion. "I should

have asked more questions, but I was too busy freaking out about him finally waking up.” There was an underlying thread of hysteria in her voice.

Foster cuddled her closer. It had always been this way between them — complete and undeniable trust laced with an intimacy he’d never allowed himself to examine too closely. It irritated him to no end to know that Crew was probably doing exactly that right now.

“It’s okay, Shay. I’ll drive us. You can ask all the questions you want when we get there.” He gently rubbed a hand in a circle across her lower back, instinctively soothing and massaging at the same time. The baby had dropped into position a few days ago, causing her untold amounts of discomfort. The doctor said it might mean she would deliver a few days earlier than her due date, which wasn’t for another three and a half weeks or so. A lump of hysteria crept up his own throat at the thought that any unexpected stress might be all it would take to throw her into early labor.

“What if he doesn’t remember—?” she quavered. “I mean, he’s been under for so long—”

“He’s awake. That’s all that matters,” Foster said firmly, though the same questions were racing through his head. What if Samson had suffered permanent brain damage? What if he didn’t recognize them? What if...

“Right.” She gulped in air as she raised her cheek from his shoulder.

He ducked his head to bring them eye-to-eye, needing some reassurance that she was going to be okay. “We’ll deal with whatever comes next. Together.”

“Okay.” She waved a hand at her face, drawing in shallow breaths. “Omigosh!” She abruptly lifted a hand to his face, stopping just shy of touching him. “What happened to your lip?”

Foster ran his tongue over his stinging lower lip, tasting the coppery tang of blood. He’d all but forgotten his tussle with Crew.

“Nothing. Musta bumped into something. Go grab your purse and a bottle of water. Then meet me out front.”

A smile wobbled at the edges of her mouth. “You sound more like him every day.” She was referring to the way Samson tended to order everyone around as if he was still in the Marines. Old military habits die hard.

“Thanks.” Foster felt his mouth twitch in an answering smile. He was ridiculously pleased by the comparison. Despite Samson’s recent decline, there was no one else in the world Foster admired more. For as long as he could remember, he’d looked up to the guy. He was an older brother, former Marine, and substitute dad — all wrapped into one.

Shayley drenched him with a smile of gratitude before spinning away. He watched her leave the barn, half-tempted to run after her and escort her inside to ensure she didn’t stumble again.

The jingle of a cold metal key ring slammed into his chest. He reached up and caught it on reflex.

“Unless you plan on hauling her to the medical center on the back of a horse,” Crew’s voice rang mockingly in his ears, “feel free to take my truck.” The lucky dog had recently been reunited with his long-lost father, Harley Anderson, who just happened to work at the same ranch. The fellow hadn’t hesitated to hand down his classic blue Chevy as a birthday gift. *Must be nice!*

“Thanks, man.” Foster forced himself to meet his friend’s curious gaze, fully expecting his censure over what had transpired between him and Shayley.

Instead, he found a curious brand of sympathy broiling just beneath the surface. “You’re gonna have to tell her how you feel about her,” Crew informed him quietly. “Eventually.”

“No.” Foster gripped the truck keys more tightly. “I don’t. It’s better this way. Trust me.”

“For who?” Crew demanded, scowling.

“For everyone.” He wished more than anything that his friend would change the subject once and for all.

“Even for you, huh?”

“I’m not important.”

“Not true.” Crew looked furious. “The fact that you believe that is just plain sad.”

Foster rolled his eyes. “Spare me the pep talk about self esteem. I’m a jailbird, bro.”

“So am I.”

“Then you should know where that puts us in the ol’ food chain.”

“We’re reformed jailbirds.” The devilish sparkle returned to Crew’s electric blue gaze. “That puts us a bit higher on the food chain.”

“If you say so.” Foster couldn’t have cared less.

Crew sobered. “I get it. Your self-worth is in the toilet right now, but that doesn’t change the fact that you’re important to Shayley.”

Foster winced, still not wanting to go there in his head. For his brother’s sake, he couldn’t go there. Not now. Not ever. “She’s important to me, too,” he muttered in a low voice. “That’s why things need to stay the way they are between us.” Clean. Pure. Uncomplicated by any hopeless declarations of love from her damaged brother-in-law.

“No way things will stay this way forever.” Crew’s mouth twisted in disapproval. “You care too much for her. You can’t put feelings like that in a box and keep ‘em there.”

“Didn’t ask for your opinion.” Foster edged toward the door, figuring that leaving the barn was probably the only way to end such a disastrous conversation.

Crew kept talking as if he hadn’t heard the last comment. “I wanted to hate her for what she’s done to you. I really did. I wanted to think the worst of her intentions, but seeing you together just now.” He shook his head, sighing gustily. “You’re her rock. You’ve always been her rock.”

Foster nodded. He could live with that. *Shoot!* He'd be anything Shayley Neeson wanted him to be for as long as she'd let him. He just needed her in his life. Period.



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SNEAK PREVIEW: MR. NOT RIGHT FOR HER

A *scarred cowboy determined to remain single and the klutzy new ranch hand who trips up his carefully laid plans.*

Asher Cassidy doesn't see himself getting hitched at a big church wedding anytime soon. Make that never. The freak fire that scarred one side of his face is a one-way ticket out of the dating game — something his interfering relatives don't seem to understand. Their endless matchmaking attempts keep him in a cranky mood.

He hires Bella Johnson as a ranch hand because she's so desperate for money that she'll have no choice but to put up with his grumpiness, the dirtiest chores, and whatever else he chooses to assign her. By some miracle, she even agrees to pose as his fake girlfriend at an upcoming hoedown, where his family plans to dangle him in front of yet more single ladies.

Sensing her new boss's gruff exterior is hiding a heart as broken as her own, Bella works extra hard to please him...or at least not get fired for her many mistakes while tackling her new job. Her biggest mistake of all turns out to be serving as his fake girlfriend. After tripping and falling into the cocky, sarcastic cowboy a half dozen or so times, she discovers that she enjoys being in his arms a little too much.

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Despite the center's no PDA rule, an instant attraction simmers between an expert search and rescue instructor and a broody firefighter during summer training.

Axel Hammerstone is lauded as a hometown hero when he returns from an overseas deployment with a Purple Heart and silver star. Nobody sees the inner scars of war he's still grappling with. As a tribute to the battle buddies who never made it home, he's determined to devote the rest of his career to search and rescue operations.

Kristi Kimiko is living her dream as an expert search and rescue instructor at the Texas Hotline Training Center. Unfortunately, it leaves her little time for dating. When the hunky Axel half-limps and half-swaggers into her renowned dog training course with his beautiful golden retriever, she is immediately drawn to him — and soon finds herself serving as his plus one at a family birthday celebration.

If she's learned anything in her line of work, where there's smoke, there's fire; and this particular firefighter has a way of making the sparks fly every time he looks in her direction!



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