



Not Good Enough

HERO

JO GRAFFORD

NOT GOOD ENOUGH HERO

Born In Texas: Hometown Heroes A-Z, Book #14

JO GRAFFORD



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ABOUT THIS SERIES



Born In Texas: Hometown Heroes A-Z is a sweet and inspirational series of standalone romance stories about small town, everyday heroes. Each title is full of faith and family, hope and love, and always ends in a happily-ever-after!

TITLES:

Accidental Hero
Best Friend Hero
Celebrity Hero
Damaged Hero
Enemies to Hero
Forbidden Hero
Guardian Hero
Hunk and Hero
Instantly Her Hero

Jilted Hero
Kissable Hero
Long Distance Hero
Mistaken Hero
Not Good Enough Hero
Opposites Attract Hero
Playboy Hero
Quiet & Shy Hero
Rockstar Hero
Second Chance Hero
Tortured Hero
Undercover Hero
Volunteer Hero
Workplace Hero
XOXO Hero
Yours Forever Hero
Zillionaire Hero

CHAPTER 1: NOBODY'S HERO

Saint



What has that crazy woman done this time?

The scent of fresh-baked cookies slammed into Saint the moment he stepped inside. As much as he loved homemade anything, there was one big problem with that. During the entire two months he'd lived in his studio apartment over the sprawling white horse barn at Anderson Ranch, he hadn't once turned on the oven.

As he strode into the sparsely furnished kitchenette, his gaze fell on the source of the mouth-watering scent — a big white box with red polka dots. It was perched on his countertop with a beam of light from the side window catching a corner of it. He gritted his teeth, knowing the big splashy box was exactly Jana Marlowe's style. So was the flamboyant red bow tying a small white envelope in place.

The bestselling romance author from Atlanta never did anything halfway. She was the queen of grand gestures. She also wasn't very good at taking no for an answer, because he'd made it clear he didn't need any gifts from her.

Yet here she was, forcing one on him. She'd probably bribed someone on the cleaning staff at the B&B, where she was staying next door. There was no way she could've otherwise spirited the cookies inside his locked apartment.

He ripped the white envelope off the ribbon without bothering to untie the bow fastening it in place. In one swift movement, he tore open the flap and yanked out the white monogrammed card it contained.

The words she'd written made her sound like a fairytale princess drooling over a knight in shining armor.

Thank you for saving my life. You're my hero. —Jana

He felt his face turn red, knowing he was nobody's hero. Far from it. He was a jailbird in a work release program. A man with stains on his soul a mile wide and twice as long. Someone who owed a debt to society, not the other way around.

By now, Jana Marlowe must have gotten wind of his prison sentence and the fact that he was serving his final twelve months of it at Anderson Ranch. Clearly, she was having a little fun at his expense. Unfortunately, there wasn't a thing he could do about it without jeopardizing his job as a ranch hand. The rules on his employee contract were clear. He was required to be nice to all the customers, all of the time, even if they weren't nice in return.

It didn't mean he had to eat the woman's stupid cookies, though, no matter how enticing they smelled. Tossing her note in the garbage can, he snatched up the box to carry them downstairs and leave them in the employee lounge. They'd be eaten in no time by the other ranch hands. Problem solved.

While he jogged down the stairs, the cookies jostled in the box, smelling so good that his stomach rumbled in response. He tried to ignore the feeling, but it was sheer torture. It had been hours since he'd eaten breakfast. Plus, the trail ride he'd been helping out with had taken longer than expected, so he was running late to lunch.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and stomped toward the employee lounge in the back of the barn. Once inside the room, he plopped the box down on the granite counter top beside the coffee bar. Instead of taking off, he stood there staring at it with his hands plopped down on either side of it.

Why are you doing this to me?

Of course, the maddening woman who'd delivered the cookies was nowhere around to answer his question. He was alone with his ravenous hunger. In a room with no witnesses.

At the realization, his remaining shred of willpower swiftly eroded.

He ripped open the box and gazed longingly down at the cookies, knowing he was fighting a losing battle. He'd never seen anything like them before. There were only six of them, and they were huge. Each one was different. One had thick chocolate chunks poking out of it. Another one looked like it might be red velvet. *My favorite.* He could smell the cream cheese icing swirled to a perfect peak in the center of it. The third one looked like it had been dropped inside a tub of sprinkles. He was hard put to see the cookie beneath all the confetti sized bits of candy sticking to it.

One thing was for sure. Someone had put a lot of effort into the cookies. Jana Marlowe must have specially ordered them from a bakery or something. He wished he knew why. It was a truly nice gesture on her part, making him wonder if he'd misjudged her. Maybe she wasn't hounding or harassing him, after all. Maybe he'd been reading way more into the situation than he should've, due to spending the last five years of his life in prison. *Slowly losing all ability to socialize with normal people.*

More angry at himself than anyone else at this point, he lifted the cookie with the chocolate chunks and took an enormous bite.

It was like tasting heaven. The cookie was crispy on the outside and soft on the inside, with a hint of doughiness. The milk chocolate squares melted on his tongue as he chewed. It was, hands down, the best cookie he'd ever eaten — so good that he no longer wanted to share the rest of them.

He glanced at his watch, wondering if he had time to return them to his apartment before the next trail ride he was supposed to help out with. Normally, it was his job to saddle the horses in advance, then brush them down and feed them afterward. Ever since the Wilder brothers had started their own aerial spraying business, however, the ranch had been short two sets of hands. That meant Saint was working double time to pick up the slack everywhere else, too. He knew for a fact there was a fence needing repair in the back pasture.

According to the other ranch hands, though, the head honcho never got in a hurry to replace folks after they left. They claimed that Brody Anderson liked to pray about all of his hiring decisions first.

Assuming the good Lord even cares about stuff like that.

Though Saint didn't put much stock in religion, Brody kind of reminded him of his grandmother. A sense of nostalgia stole over him. She hadn't owned a ranch, but she'd prayed about everything, too — mostly for Saint and his younger brother, Prince. In some ways, he was glad she hadn't lived long enough to see the mess he'd made of his life.

Instead of running back upstairs with the cookies, he ultimately decided to have them for lunch. It would save him a trip to the kitchen at the B&B. He carried the polka dot box to the window and scarfed down the second cookie. He didn't realize until he bit into the red velvet cookie that the cream cheese icing was dotted with something extra. Pecans. Another one of his most favorite things on the planet.

As he munched, a flurry of movement outside the window caught his attention. Someone was in the back pasture with the bull. It was no range rider or ranch hand, that was for sure. No one with any sense would do something so foolish. As far as he could tell, the person was alone. Probably one of the guests.

Spinning around, he tossed the cookie box on the cabinet and made a beeline for the door. Running outside to the empty riding ring, he vaulted over the gate and continued at a jog along the pasture fence, slowing his pace as he approached the bull.

Its back was to him, so he had the advantage of surprise, unlike the foolish tourist who was holding up her hands and slowly backing away from the bull like an unarmed teller in the middle of a bank heist.

He immediately recognized the tumble of dark curls from beneath the brim of her Stetson. *You have got to be kidding me!* The wind was blowing her hair sideways across her face, hiding her features from view, but it was Jana Marlowe,

alright. With her usual penchant for trouble, she'd really stepped into it this time.

He crept along the fence, careful to stay in the bull's blind spot. "Walk my way slowly, ma'am," he ordered in a low voice. "Eyes down. Don't make eye contact with 'em."

The enormous shaggy white beast momentarily swung his head in Saint's direction.

A snuffly sob met his ears as the woman on the other side of the fence took a hasty sidestep in his direction. "I have a name," she muttered beneath her breath, wincing as she came down on her left foot.

Saint's gaze was drawn to the tear in her jeans. A trickle of red ran down her kneecap. "You're hurt."

"No, I'm Jana Marlowe."

He snorted, unable to believe she was joking at a time like this. She probably had no idea how serious of a predicament she was in.

"Keep walking toward me," he coaxed, bending ever so slowly to pick up a fallen branch from the ground. It was roughly the size of a baseball bat.

"I will if you use my name."

He stared at her in disbelief. "Are you crazy?" he growled, careful to keep his voice down.

"No. I'm Jana."

"Fine." *You're as loco as they come!* "Jana, please walk my way. Slowly," he stressed. "No sudden movements."

The bull abruptly heaved his large frame sideways, showing the hapless romance author his full bulk.

Saint's heart pounded with very real fear on her behalf as the creature lowered his head and puffed his breath along the ground. A swirl of frosty breath mixed with dust rose around his head.

"What's he doing?" The romance author sounded nervous, as if finally realizing what a pickle she was in.

Getting ready to charge you. But Saint didn't dare tell her that. "Just keep walking," he ordered tightly, not taking his eyes off the bull for a second as he climbed onto the lowest rung of the fence and prepared to intervene.

He watched the bull paw the ground. Once. Twice. A bigger cloud of dirt rose around his hooves.

Saint raised the tree branch higher, preparing to leap over the fence and start swinging.

Jana glanced fearfully his way. "What are you—?"

"Run my way!" He yelled the words as loud as he could, hoping to startle the bull.

It worked. The bull twirled angrily in his direction, momentarily taking his attention off Jana Marlowe. Then he swung his head back in her direction and charged.

However, he'd been distracted long enough for her to get a few steps around him.

As she ran limping along the final short stretch of pasture toward the fence, Saint whirled the tree limb through the air, straight at the bull's nose. It landed against his broad snout with a resounding thwack!

The bull tossed his head in the air, bellowing angrily and slowing his pace a little as he shook his head back and forth a few times. All too quickly, he recovered and continued pounding his hooves in their direction, making the ground shake beneath them.

He lowered his deadly horns, preparing to gore Jana. Heart pounding, Saint reached out and snatched her the rest of the way over the fence. Her Stetson went flying as they tumbled to the ground together. The bull skidded sideways and veered off in another direction, still bellowing angrily.

Saint managed to twist their bodies in mid-air and land on the hard-packed ground first. Jana fell on top of him and remained there, panting.

He gathered her close, breathing hard into her hair, thankful they'd escaped with their lives. It had been a close

call — too close this time.

She clung to him, mumbling something he couldn't understand. The only word he caught was *hero*.

He stiffened. "We've been over this already. I'm nobody's hero." He unwound her arms from around his middle. Or tried to.

She clung all the harder for his efforts. "And yet you keep saving me." Warm tears trickled between them, quickly turning cold against his cheek, which was pressed to hers.

Whatever. "I just happened to look out the window and saw what was going on." Her tears were a little alarming. She was hurt, but he still didn't know how badly. Considering who he was dealing with, it was probably going to take some time to calm her down enough to examine her leg.

"I'm surprised you didn't walk away and pretend like you didn't see anything," she accused bitterly.

"What?" Saint's callused fingers curled around the shoulder of her plaid shirt. "I wouldn't do that!"

"Oh, really?" Another sob shuddered through her. "It's obvious you can't stand the sight of me, though I have absolutely no idea what I did to offend you." She sniffled loudly. "Other than being a klutz."

"I don't dislike you." How could he? They didn't even know each other. This time, she didn't resist when he drew back from her.

"I annoy you," she pointed out. "Just admit it already."

He wasn't admitting anything. "I just don't understand why you do stupid stuff, like try to ride the meanest horse in the stable or go head-to-head with a bull." He shook his head helplessly, not sure what she was hoping to hear him say. When they'd first met two days earlier, she'd been streaking across the yard on a runaway stallion named Rapture. Bareback, no less.

"I had no idea there was a bull in the back pasture," she muttered, glancing away from him as she pushed her hair out

of her eyes. “I didn’t see him when I started to cut through there.”

“Bulls are very sly. They have a bad habit of sneaking up on people.” Which still didn’t explain why she’d been on the wrong side of the fence. “That’s why there are signs everywhere, warning tourists not to climb on or over the fences.”

Instead of answering, she stuck her tongue out at him.

Real mature. He gently nudged her from his lap to the ground so he could crouch over her. “Any particular reason you were cutting through the back pasture?”

“Yes! Because I fell.” She reached over to retrieve her Stetson, which was lying upside down in the dirt. She dusted it off on her knee and set it crookedly back on her head.

“Where were you when you fell?” He wasn’t sure why she was making him drag the story out of her. If she wanted his help, she needed to give him the details.

She bit her lower lip. “In the canyons.”

He gripped her upper arms. “You were out there alone?” Visions of hungry coyotes and disgruntled bears crossed his mind.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she sighed.

He still planned to spell it out for her. “What you did was dangerous,” he declared flatly. “You should never go out there alone.”

“I like being alone,” she protested. “I do my best thinking when I’m alone.”

Feeling like he was getting nowhere with her, he released his hold on her arms and bent forward to get a closer look at her knee. “Mind if I take a look at your injuries?”

“Sure. It’s not like I’m going anywhere,” she grumbled.

He shot a worried look at her face. “You mean you can’t walk?”

“Not very well.” She winced as he pulled back the torn flaps of her jeans.

“You’ve got a nasty gash. What happened?”

“Someone was chasing me.”

At his scowl, she hastily added, “It could’ve been an animal.”

“Did you see it?”

“No. I was too busy running and screaming like a girl. Right as I was about to reach the open field, I tripped over a rock. Since whatever was chasing me was right on my heels, I twisted around and pointed my hands like I was holding a gun.”

The mental image almost made him grin. “And?”

“I guess it worked, because they took off running.”

He was more puzzled than ever. “Who took off running?”

“Whoever was chasing me. I didn’t get a good look at him.” She grimaced. “Go ahead and tell me how crazy I sound.”

Saint didn’t know her well enough to know if she was prone to bouts of paranoia. If there was any truth to what she was saying, though, he seriously doubted that pretending to hold a gun would’ve scared away a wild animal. If anyone had truly been chasing her, he was betting it was the two-legged variety.

He played it safe and didn’t respond. Instead, he palpated his way down her calf and ankle.

“Ow!” She twitched violently when his fingers probed her ankle. “That hurt!”

“My bad.” He curled his upper lip at her. “Just trying to figure out what’s wrong with you.”

At her muffled sound of outrage, he grimaced. “Sorry. Didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“I bet.” Her voice was sarcastic.

“Can we not do this right now?” He glanced around them irritably and determined they were still alone. *Too bad!* It looked like it was going to be up to him to get her back to the B&B. Or maybe he should take her to the physical therapy clinic again. Since there were no big events on the schedule today, Ben Taniguchi and his wife should be on duty. Dealing with sports injuries was their specialty. They’d know if Jana was dealing with a sprained ankle or worse.

“Can we not do what?” She pushed back her hat to get a better look at him.

“I don’t want to argue with you. I just want to get you the help you need.”

“So you can have me out of your hair, eh?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“It’s what you meant.” Rocking forward on her hands, she attempted to stand. The moment she tried to put any weight on her foot, however, she moaned and sat back down. “Yeah, that’s not happening.”

He held out his arms to her. “May I?”

“Are you offering to carry me?” Her voice rose to an incredulous note.

“Do you have any better ideas?”

“Uh, maybe call an ambulance? That way you wouldn’t be forced to endure much more of my presence.”

His eyebrows flew upward. “We’re out in the boonies. It could take up to an hour to get an emergency vehicle to get all the way out here. I could carry you to the PT clinic in far less time than that.”

“You do realize that would put me in your debt again?” She pressed a slender hand to her heart. “Oh, the horror! You still haven’t recovered from the first time I tried to show my appreciation for your help.”

His gaze was drawn to her wind-chapped hand, which he was just now noticing was missing its glove. He was also just now noticing she had every fingernail painted a different color.

“You’re, uh...more than welcome.” He forced his gaze back to her mocking expression. “You don’t need to send me any more cookies.” His traitorous stomach chose that exact moment to rumble at the memory of eating two of them.

She pointed accusingly at his midsection. “Were they really all that bad?”

“Not at all. They were good,” he admitted grudgingly. “Very good.”

“Then I don’t see the problem.”

“You don’t need to go to that kind of trouble on my behalf. I was just doing my job.”

“Just doing your job?” She reached out to grab hold of the nearest fence slat, turning red from the effort it took her to pull herself to her feet.

“Here. Let me.” He shot to his feet, reaching for her again.

She slapped his hand away. “You’re wrong, Saint Riley,” she spat. “I am most definitely *not* part of your job, so feel free to get back to it.” She made a shooing motion. “I’m sorry to have kept you away from it for so long.” She took a wobbling step in the direction of the B&B and would have fallen if he hadn’t been standing right there.

“Jana, please!” He gripped her shoulders. “Forgive my poor choice of words. Clearly, I’m no good at stuff like that.”

Her aquamarine eyes shot sparks at him. “Oh, so *now* you remember my name?”

“I never forgot it.” It was obvious she couldn’t walk, so he bent to hook an arm beneath her knees. He hoisted her as gently as he could into his arms.

She gasped and bit down on her lower lip as the movement jostled her injuries.

“I’m sorry.” He took a few steps with her. “Are you gonna be okay if I carry you? Because if not, I’ll set you right back down and call an ambulance like you said.”

“No, this is good.” She held herself rigidly in his arms, refusing to relax against him. “I’d rather not wait an hour. Besides,” she shot him another scathing look, “you’ve made it clear this is part of your job.”

“Helping our guests, yes.” It was in his job description, though his gut told him she wasn’t interested in hearing that.

“Oh, really?” Her mocking look returned. “Exactly how many ladies have you lugged in your manly arms to the clinic?”

“You’re the only one.” He wasn’t sure what her point was.

With a sound of annoyance, she tipped her head back to gaze up at the sky. “The only one in ten weeks? The only one in ten years?”

“Less than ten weeks.” His voice grew clipped. “I haven’t been here long.”

“Ah.” Curiosity burned in her eyes as she met his gaze again. “Where were you before you started working at Anderson Ranch?”

He glared at her. “Nowhere.”

“So, that’s it?” Her lips tightened with irritation. “You rescued me from a runaway horse, you kept me from being gored by a bull, and all I’m supposed to do is say thanks and walk away?”

He gave her a rigid nod. “Yep, that’ll do.” He didn’t dare point out that she wasn’t walking anywhere at the moment.

“Why are you trying to make me feel bad for acting grateful toward you?”

“I didn’t mean to.” Why couldn’t she just let it go?

“It’s not like I go around making cookies for everyone I meet, Saint!”

His feet ground to a halt. “You made those cookies yourself?” He’d just assumed she’d bought them.

“Yes, I made them! What did you think I did? Robbed a bakery or something?”

He flinched. “They were really good,” he repeated through stiff lips, forcing his feet to start moving again.

They continued the rest of their trek to the clinic in stony silence. Like most of the other outlying buildings at the ranch, the clinic was a glorified barn. The one-story white metal structure was located roughly behind the B&B. To Saint’s enormous relief, the sign behind the glass door was flashing OPEN.

“Thank you.” Jana’s hand briefly squeezed his shoulder. “I know you don’t want to hear it, but thank you. For everything.”

“You’re welcome,” he retorted gruffly.

“You really are hero material,” she added in a wry voice.

“Don’t.” He couldn’t believe she was going there again.

“Well, you are.” She cocked her head at him. “You’re the textbook definition of a hero.”

“You must’ve hit your head when you fell.”

She ignored him and kept talking. “You’re brave, you’re fearless, and you do noble things.”

“If you say so.” He stared straight ahead, increasing his pace as they made their way up the sidewalk to the clinic entrance.

“And whether you want to talk about it or not, you probably did save my life out there today.” She peered into his face. “Again.”

“You’re right.” He refused to meet her gaze. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Then you leave me no choice,” she sighed.

When he shot her a wary look, he found her smiling wickedly at him. “I’m going to write you into my next book.”

“Please don’t.”

“Since you refuse to believe anything I say, I’ll just have to show you on paper how much of a hero you really are.”

He shook his head in disgust. “Don’t reckon there’s anything I can do to stop you.”

“Nope.” Her voice was matter-of-fact. “I’ll change your name to protect your privacy. And if anyone asks, I’ll outright deny any connection to you.”

He snorted. “Still don’t see the point. I’m not going to read it.”

“Want to bet? If I send you a signed copy, curiosity will eventually get the better of you. It’s human nature.”

His jaw fell open. “You’re not actually going to publish it, are you?”

“Of course not!” She burst out laughing. “I’ll print one copy. I’m only doing it to prove a point.”

He didn’t believe for a second she’d get very far with her silly book. “When you head home, you’ll forget all about me.”

They reached the clinic door. He shifted her weight against his shoulder so he could open the door.

“What if I don’t?” she taunted.

“You will if you know what’s good for you.” He stepped across the threshold with her.

Ben Taniguchi strode across the room in their direction, a frown of concern riding his Asian features. “Jana! You’re back.” He motioned for Saint to carry her around the check-in booth to the wide physical therapy room beyond it. “We’ve gotta quit meeting like this.”

“I know, right?” She gave a pained chuckle as Saint deposited her on the large foam bench he pointed them toward.

Saint gently stretched her leg out on the fresh white towel covering the bench. “Might be a sprain. Not sure. She’s in a decent amount of pain.” He straightened and started backing toward the door.

Jana twisted around to catch his gaze one last time. “I really, really, really do appreciate you getting me here.”

He nodded but didn't answer. Ducking out of the door, he tried to force her impossibly blue eyes out of his mind. It was way too bad that every time her gaze landed on him it felt like a caress.

CHAPTER 2: UNHAPPILY EVER AFTER

Jana



Jana bit her lower lip as Saint wordlessly left the physical therapy room. “What’s his problem?”

She didn’t realize she’d voiced her irritation aloud until Ben gave her a sharp look. “Did he say or do anything inappropriate?”

“No,” she sighed, not wanting to get him in trouble. *Not unless it’s against the rules to barely see me as a human being, much less as a woman.* The only thing his attitude had hurt was her pride. “He probably saved my life again,” she added ruefully, taking a minute to describe the charging bull and the way Saint had thrown a tree branch in his face, then lifted her to safety in the nick of time.

Ben looked relieved as she recounted what had happened. “I’m glad he was there to help out.”

She gazed into the distance, shivering. “He wasn’t at first. I was out hiking alone when I fell and hurt my ankle. I was limping so badly that I decided to cut across the pasture on my way back to the B&B. By the time I realized my mistake, it was too late. The bull had me cornered. If Saint hadn’t come running...” She shook her head helplessly. “I don’t think I would’ve made it over the fence on my own. Not with the shape my leg is in.”

Ben’s expression was grave. “Sounds like you’re very fortunate Saint came along when he did. I’ll be sure to put in a good word for him with his boss.”

“Please do.” Ben knelt in front of her to examine her leg, making her wince. “He sure wasn’t interested in receiving any thanks for what he did.”

Ben arched his dark eyebrows at her. “Was he rude to you?”

“That’s not what I meant,” she said quickly, wondering why he kept grilling her about Saint’s treatment of her. “He was just...quiet. Really quiet. Maybe a little socially awkward?”

Ben snorted. “That’s understandable, everything considered.” His long fingers inched along her leg.

“Why do you say that?” She panted through the pain as he probed her swollen ankle.

The physical therapist shrugged. “Don’t think he’s done a lot of socializing for the last few years.”

For the last few years? Jana’s curiosity spiked exponentially. “He mentioned he hadn’t been at Anderson Ranch for long.” When Ben fell silent, she prodded, “Any idea where he was before he came here?”

Ben glanced at her sharply. “It’s not really my place to say.”

At her crestfallen look, he added, “He’s a good guy. That’s all I know. If he wasn’t, they wouldn’t have tried so hard to get him into our work release program.”

Work release program! Jana compressed her lips, more than a little shocked to discover Saint Riley was on parole. No wonder he wasn’t interested in hearing her go on and on about his heroics! He probably had a past he wasn’t too proud of.

As she replayed their conversation inside her head, she reached the part about her teasing reference to robbing a bakery. “Oh, no,” she muttered, lifting a hand to her forehead.

“You okay?” Ben finished cleaning and disinfecting her gash, then put glue strips over it to hold it together.

“Headache,” she sighed. And no small amount of heartache over the realization that she’d botched things pretty

badly with Saint. Her flirting had probably made him uncomfortable, her anger had probably baffled him, and her joking about robbing a bakery had probably struck the worst chord possible. He'd probably assumed she was making fun of him.

I totally owe him an apology. She doubted he was any better at accepting apologies than he was at accepting thanks, but she had to try.

"We've got Tylenol and Motrin." Ben finished bandaging her knee. Then he snagged a water bottle for her from a nearby mini fridge. "Which do you prefer?"

"Motrin, please."

"Good choice. It'll help with the inflammation, too." He poured a few pills from a white bottle into a clear plastic cup and handed it to her. "I'm gonna wrap your ankle next, then lend you some crutches. You're gonna want to ice it for the first twenty-four hours."

"So, it's not broken?" Relief flooded her.

"Nope, it's just a sprain." He wagged a finger at her. "No more solo hikes for the next few days. It's not a good idea to be out there alone, anyway."

"That's what Saint said." She grimaced at the memory.

"He was right." Ben shook his head, looking worried. "Best to stick to the official ranch tours and trail rides. There's no telling what wildlife you might run into. Coyotes and such."

"Oh, sheesh!" She shivered, wondering if a coyote was what had been chasing her.

Ben eased off her hiking boot and rolled up the ankle of her jeans.

She had to grit her teeth to keep from moaning out loud.

"Sorry about that." He shot her a sympathetic look. "The worst is over. I promise."

“Thanks for fixing me up.” She winced again as he started wrapping her ankle.

“No problem. It’s what I do.”

She was truly grateful for his tending. “What do I owe you for this?”

“Nothing. It’s on the house.”

“In that case, do you mind if I bring some homemade cookies by later on?”

He smiled. “Not at all, but your time would be better spent resting.”

“Maybe later in the week, then.”

“Don’t feel obligated,” he said quickly. “Just focus on getting better. That said, I won’t turn them down if you do.” He shot a bemused look toward the back room and raised his voice to announce, “My wife will probably wrestle a few of them away from me, but only if I let her.”

A woman with a chestnut braid dangling over one shoulder popped her head around the corner. Her affectionate gaze fell on Ben. “You got something you want to say to me, Ranger?”

“Two words.” He winked at her. “Homemade cookies.”

“Omigosh! Where?” She moved into the room so quickly that she nearly tripped over a stool in the walkway.

Ben chuckled and gave Jana an I-told-you-so look. “Can you tell we love cookies?”

His wife’s lower lip came out. “I take it this was a false alarm?”

Ben waved a hand at her. “In case you two haven’t met yet, this is my wife, Elara. Elara, this is Jana Marlowe.”

Elara’s brown eyes rounded in surprise. “Jana Marlowe, as in the author of all those cozy kitchen mysteries with original recipes in the back?”

“That’s the one.” Jana’s insides warmed beneath the fangirl light in the woman’s eyes. “Sounds like you’ve read one of my

books.”

“More like *all* of your books!” Elara’s dark eyes snapped with excitement. “Holy smokes! If I run back to my office and grab one, would you be willing to sign it for me?”

“I would be happy to!”

They were so busy chatting books when Ben finished wrapping her ankle that he grumbled, “I’m starting to feel invisible.”

“I’ll lend you her latest book when I’m finished reading it,” Elara promised with a chuckle.

“I’m not normally into romance books. But now that I’ve met the author, I just might take you up on that offer.”

“He’s a keeper.” Hugging her autographed book to her chest, Elara leaned over her husband to kiss the top of his head. “If you’d like, I’ll walk you back to the B&B.”

“So she can keep talking your ears off about books,” Ben warned in an affectionate voice.

“Believe me. There are few things I enjoy talking about more.” Jana also liked the idea of not hobbling back to the B&B alone.

He held out a hand for the book his wife was clutching. “Want me to put that away for you?”

“Only after you promise to guard it with your life.” She playfully hugged it tighter. “Autographed books are worth their weight in gold.”

“I can do that, but it’s going to cost you.” He tapped a finger playfully against his mouth, making her laugh. Grinning, he turned to hand Jana a pair of crutches. He jimmied with them until they were adjusted to her height. Then he spun back around to his wife’s side to collect his “payment” for the task of putting away her book.

They were so sweet together that Jana’s heart twisted with envy. *Must be nice to have a guy look at you like that!* She was still chafing from Saint’s grumpiness earlier.

And despite his grumpiness, I'm the one who owes HIM an apology. She wasn't looking forward to it one bit. Though she was a romance author, she felt like she was losing her touch when it came to dealing with guys lately. Her recent breakup with her boyfriend of three years certainly wasn't helping her confidence. Apparently, he didn't like how reclusive she tended to get when she was pushing to meet a writing deadline. He'd gotten so lonely during her last one that he'd sought companionship elsewhere. The female kind.

She'd broken up with him the moment she'd discovered he was cheating on her. Three months later, his betrayal still stung.

While Elara escorted her across the short sidewalk leading between the clinic and the B&B, Jana mentally plotted out what she was going to say to Saint the next time she saw him. It only made sense to start off by confessing she hadn't known he was on parole when she'd made that unfortunate comment about robbing a bakery. In her defense, she wrote romantic cozy mysteries about bad guys who robbed bakeries all the time.

As she approached the big red barn that had been converted into a B&B, Elara hurried ahead of her to hold open the glass door on the right. She was toting a pair of ice packs in a reusable black-and-white striped bag that was looped over her shoulder. Ben had sent them back with Jana, but Elara had insisted on carrying them for her.

"Thanks." Jana limped into the waiting area, still getting used to walking with crutches. The last time had been in high school when she'd pulled a calf muscle during a track meet.

She sighed in appreciation at the warm heat radiating from the stacked stone fireplace against the front wall. "Is it just me, or is it getting colder outside?" Usually it warmed up throughout the day, but it felt like the opposite had been happening today.

"Oh, it's definitely getting colder." Elara walked her to the hallway on the left, leading to the elevators. "There's a storm front blowing in. We may be getting some snow tonight." One

of the employees in the adjoining steak restaurant waved to her, and she waved back.

“Are you serious?” Jana’s heart raced with excitement. She didn’t get to see snow very often.

“Seventy percent chance,” Elara promised with a smile.

“I’m liking those odds!” Since it was only a couple of days after Thanksgiving, Jana hadn’t been sure if she’d get to see any snow before heading home. She only had five days left of her two-week reservation. She’d mainly flown to Texas to avoid spending Thanksgiving alone after her breakup. That, and she’d hit a writing wall that she hoped a change of pace would help with.

They reached the elevators, and Jana paused to push the UP button. “Thanks for walking me back. I can take it from here.”

“Are you sure?” Elara eyed her worriedly.

“Very sure. Ben is amazing, by the way. I really appreciate him saving me a trip to the ER.”

“He was glad to do it.” Elara’s expression softened as she removed the bag of ice packs from her shoulder and handed it over. “Thanks again for the autograph.”

“My pleasure.” Jana looped the bag over her shoulder, and they parted ways as the elevator door rolled open.

She limped inside the elevator and leaned back against the wall, closing her eyes for a few seconds. It was a short trip to the second floor. She sighed as she pushed herself down the hallway on her crutches. She’d been using them for only a few minutes and already her armpits were getting sore. *Ugh!*

Shayley, one of the housekeepers, was rolling a cleaning cart down the hallway. She stopped in dismay at the sight of Jana on crutches. Pushing one of her blonde braids over her shoulder, she demanded, “What happened to you?”

“Don’t ask.” Jana made a pouty face at her.

“I already did.” Shayley pushed her cart over before Jana could fish her key card out of her pocket. “I’ve got it.” She

swiped her master key card against the lock and pushed the door open.

“Thanks,” Jana sighed, feeling like a complete invalid as she hobbled into the room. “Would you believe me if I said I got charged by a bull?”

“Please tell me you’re kidding!” With a bleat of alarm, Shayley wedged her cart against the door to prop it open.

“I’m not.” Jana sank down on the edge of her bed and propped her crutches against the mattress. “Thankfully, Saint came to my rescue. Again.” She watched the housekeeper out of the corner of her eye. “Otherwise, there would be no more cozy baking mysteries ever,” she concluded dramatically.

“Oh?” Shayley stepped farther into the room, looking fascinated.

“Yeah, but I think I totally blew it with him.” Jana blinked to hold back the moisture forming in her eyes. Maybe it was her stinging knee or aching ankle or maybe it was how sore her armpits were, but a burst of self-pity shook her.

“I seriously doubt that.” Shayley gave her a sympathetic look. “Want to tell me what happened?”

“I tried to thank him. He brushed it off and said I didn’t need to follow it up with any more fresh-baked cookies.” She sniffled at the memory.

“You made him cookies?” A smile spread across Shayley’s heart-shaped features.

“I did, and he said they were good. Then he acted all shocked when I said I’d baked them myself. It kind of hurt my feelings, so I asked him if he’d just assumed I’d robbed a bakery.”

“Oh, no!” Shayley winced.

“That was before I knew he was in a work release program. I only found that out when Ben mentioned putting in a good word with his boss about his second rescue this week of yours truly.”

“I honestly doubt Saint will hold it against you.” But Shayley’s smile had dimmed.

“I’m not so sure about that.” Jana’s insides got all tangled up every time she thought about it. “His face lost some of its color. I felt awful but had no idea what I’d done wrong until after he dropped me off at the clinic. I intend to apologize,” she concluded mournfully. “I just don’t want to make things any worse between us than they already are.”

Shayley was silent for an extended moment.

“Say something,” Jana pleaded.

Shayley pursed her lips. “It just strikes me as interesting that you’re so worried about what Saint thinks about you.” She shrugged. “Especially after finding out that he’s...well, what he is.”

“He’s a good person.” Jana protested, utterly convinced that it was true. She had no idea what he’d gotten locked up for, but that didn’t take away from the bravery he’d shown on her behalf. “He risked his own safety to save my backside, not once but twice!”

“It was robbery, in case you’re wondering.” Shayley gave her a rueful look. “That’s what he did time for.”

Jana closed her eyes, feeling miserable. “Of course, it was.”

“Unarmed,” the housekeeper clarified. “He was framed for something he didn’t do at his construction job and got fired. The worse part about it was that Saint’s mom had just gotten sick. They didn’t have medical insurance, and the bills were adding up.” She waved a hand. “One thing led to another, and he started robbing some of the high-end construction sites he’d previously worked at.”

Jana’s heart ached for him. “How’d he get caught?”

“He didn’t.”

Jana’s eyelids flew open. “Then how did he end up in prison?”

“Attack of conscience, I guess.” Shaley grimaced. “The same day he buried his mother, he turned himself in.”

“Oh, wow!” Jana lay back against the bed, more convinced than ever that Saint had a good heart. “So if you were in my shoes, how would you apologize to him?” Her shoulder grew cold from the ice packs in the bag that was still looped over her arm. She sat up to remove the ice packs from the bag and prop them on either side of her swollen ankle.

“Just be real with him.” Shayley walked over to the window. “He’s been through a lot. Had himself convinced that his younger brother was better off without him. Found out that wasn’t the case when Prince ran away from his foster family a few days ago and ended up here.”

“Prince?” Jana eyed her questioningly.

“That’s his younger brother’s name. Smart kid. Heard Saint got out of jail and managed to track him down.”

“Saint and Prince. I absolutely love their names.” Jana smiled to herself.

“Yeah, they’re pretty cool names.”

“So, uh...thanks for your advice about how to smooth things over with Saint.” Jana was really hoping he’d accept her apology.

“You’re welcome.” Shayley swung away from the window. “Not too long ago, my husband was in the same work release program, so I totally get what you’re going through. So was Crew Anderson.”

“Is it a coincidence that Crew shares the same last name as the ranch owners?”

“He’s their cousin.” A smile tugged at her lips. “He helps manage the B&B now, while my husband co-owns and operates K&G Security next door.”

“Sounds like Anderson Ranch runs a very successful work release program.” Somehow, that didn’t surprise Jana.

“They do. They’re pretty selective about who they take on, though. Guys who both want and deserve a second chance.”

She moved back to her cart to lift a stack of clean towels and wash cloths. “I’ll go ahead and switch out your bath linens while I’m here.”

“You’re the best.” After Shayley rolled her cart out the door, Jana dozed off. She dreamed about a blonde cowboy with angry blue-gray eyes and strong arms that made her feel safe.

Saint waited until he’d completed his daily lineup of tasks after dinner. Then he saddled a palomino mare named Wonder and rode her toward the canyons. The skies were growing dimmer, and the wind was blowing harder. The air smelled like a mixture of dust and the coming snow storm. Since the temperature was a few degrees below freezing, Saint had bundled up in a winter coat.

Though he didn’t plan on being out after dark, he’d brought a flashlight along, just in case.

“Come on, girl,” he dug in his heels and urged Wonder into a canter toward the canyon pass that Jana Marlowe had been hiking along. With the way the wind had blown all afternoon, he didn’t know if there’d be much trace left of footprints and such. However, he wanted to take a look at the spot anyway.

She had a clear flair for drama when it came to telling stories. He reckoned that came with the territory of being a romance author. However, the fear in her eyes had been real when she’d described the feeling of being chased.

It was clever of her to have pretended to be holding a gun, though he doubted that would’ve made much difference to an animal. The fact that it had scared off whoever was following her was the biggest reason he wanted to retrace her steps.

He reached the entrance of the pass and halted the mare. “Stay right here, girl.” He slid off her back and turned on his flashlight to better illuminate the ground. It was still daylight, but it was growing shadowy in the mountain pass.

He found what he was looking for all too quickly — two sets of footprints on the sandy trail. The canyon walls had shielded them, keeping the wind from blowing them away. It was easy to pick out Jana's, since he'd seen firsthand the hiking boots she'd been wearing and their approximate size.

The other footprints were much bigger. Man sized. They stopped about ten yards away from where she'd exited the pass. The last one was fan-shaped, as if the man had sharply turned to step behind one of the enormous boulders leaning against the side of the path. He took out his cell phone and snapped a few pictures of the footprints. Then he got back on the horse.

Jana Marlowe had been telling the truth. Someone had certainly been out there with her. A man from the size of his footprints. It was impossible to prove he'd been following her, of course, though the spot at which he'd halted was certainly suspicious. It might not hurt to tell her about the footprints, if for no other reason than to convince her not to go out there alone again.

“Let's head back home, Wonder.” He lifted the reins and nudged her sides with his heels.

As he rode away, he got a prickly feeling on the back of his neck that told him he was being watched.

Jana awoke from her nap shivering and soon realized why. She'd fallen asleep with the two ice packs tented against her leg.

“Oh, my goodness,” she groaned, sitting up and pulling them off. They were almost completely melted inside their plastic sleeves. On the upside, her ankle was so numb from the cold that it was no longer hurting. It was only a guess, but she might have half an hour to forty-five minutes before everything started to hurt again — long enough, she hoped, to grab dinner downstairs instead of ordering room service.

Using only one of the crutches, she hobbled to the mini fridge beneath the TV cabinet and stored the ice packs inside the freezer so she could re-use them later. Then she hobbled into the bathroom to brush her teeth and straighten her hair.

It was an impossible task. Her natural curls always had a flyaway look to them. Nothing she did seemed to be able to tame them into any semblance of order. Her hair tended to look its best when she applied a little leave-in conditioner to reduce the frizz and otherwise let it do its own thing.

Though it was late November, she replaced her torn jeans with a pair of black running shorts. Yeah, it was a little crazy to bum around in shorts with a snow storm headed their way, but her knee and ankle were too sore to stuff inside another pair of jeans. She pulled a white tank top over the shorts and a pale orange hoodie over that. After a moment of deliberation, she tugged on some fuzzy orange and black striped socks to put her in a better mood.

By the time she reached the elevator, her armpits were hurting again. She briefly considered turning back and ordering room service, but she hated the idea of being alone with her own thoughts for the rest of the evening. After dark was the worst time to be alone. That's when she always felt the loss of her grandmother the most — the truly amazing lady who'd raised her. Though she'd been gone for over two years, it still felt like yesterday.

Enough moping. Jana gave herself a mental shake. If her grandmother were here, she'd say something about Jana starring in one of her own books this evening — the *unhappily ever after* version.

Being happy is a choice, she'd say next. It was good advice. Over the past two years, Jana had discovered that going through the motions of being happy was the quickest way to throw off the blahs.

Forcing a smile, she greeted the host at the check-in booth with the most cheerful voice she could muster. “Good evening!”

It was an older fellow with a slouched Stetson and laugh lines around his eyes. “Evening, kiddo!” He eyed her crutches. “Rough day?”

“You have no idea.” She wrinkled her nose at him. Then she dredged her smile back up.

He led her to a table for two on the left side of the room, probably because there were no tables for one. “What can I start you off with?”

“Something to warm me up, please.”

“Coffee it is. I’m Harley, by the way, and you are?”

“Jana.” She propped her crutches against the side of the table.

“Make that two coffees, sir.”

She blinked at the sound of Saint’s voice. Glancing up, she was surprised to see her favorite grumpy cowboy pulling out the chair across from her.

“Drop the sir, and I might just get you that coffee.” Harley didn’t sound the least bit pleased about being given such a title.

“Thanks, Harley.” Saint swung the chair around, straddled it, and met her gaze. “Hey.”

CHAPTER 3: FLAWS AND ALL

Saint



“Hey.” Jana seemed to shrink back in her chair as she scanned his features.

Saint didn’t blame her for her wariness. He hadn’t exactly come across as warm and fuzzy during their last two encounters. He scrambled for the right words to describe the double set of footprints he’d found on the hiking trail.

“I, er—”

“I’m sorry!” Her words came out in a rush, drowning out his lame attempt to begin a conversation with her.

He blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“I’m so sorry.” The usual sassy sparkle in her aquamarine eyes was gone. Her fine-boned features were drawn and pale, like she was in pain. “When I made that dumb comment earlier about robbing a bakery, I honestly didn’t know you were on parole.”

Though it wasn’t a topic he relished discussing with her, he was relieved to finally have it out in the open. “After I thought about it, I came to that same conclusion.” Being deliberately cruel wasn’t her style. She was way too guileless for that. “You’re more of a kill-em-with-kindness sort of gal.”

“Thanks, I think.” She gave him a faint smile.

“And chatter boxing.”

She made a face at him. “Is there anything else you don’t like about me?”

“Didn’t say I didn’t like either of those things.”

“So long as I don’t make the mistake of calling you my hero again, huh?” She rested her elbows on the table and lowered her chin to her hands.

“Now you know why.”

“I don’t, actually. In romance-land-ia...” She waved a hand airily. “That’s the fictional place where my brain spends most of its time. A past like yours would simply get you categorized as a flawed hero.”

He gave a bark of laughter. “Come again?”

“If you hadn’t come to my rescue twice over, I wouldn’t be here. That makes you my hero — nicks, dings, scars, and all.”

He snorted, unable to formulate a worthy comeback for such nonsense. However, being called her hero didn’t sting as much, now that he knew she wasn’t making fun of him. He wished he could think of something to say in return to pull another smile out of her.

Harley arrived at their table with two steaming mugs of coffee. Sitting beside them on his tray was a pitcher of creamer and a duo of syrup flavorings.

“Do I smell pumpkin?” Jana reached greedily for the pitcher of creamer.

“The creamer is French vanilla.” Harley set the porcelain pitcher in front of her with a flourish. “The syrups are pumpkin and caramel.”

“Does it make me sound like a pig to say I want all the above?” As she leaned forward, she winced as she put some weight on her ankle.

Saint pushed out of his chair. Snatching an extra chair from the nearest empty table, he scooted it over to her. Then he reached down to cup a hand beneath her calf, raising it to the seat cushion.

“Not sure why you don’t have this thing propped up already,” he growled to fill the silence.

She watched him, wide-eyed in surprise. “Thanks.”

“Better?” He gave her a mocking bow.

“Much.” The smile he’d been hoping for finally tugged at her lips.

Harley studied the two of them curiously. “How about I rustle up whatever’s left of Bree’s soup of the day? It’s vegetable chili, in case you’re wondering.”

“That sounds amazing!” Jana blew him a kiss that made his lined features soften.

“If you could throw in some bread or biscuits...” Saint wasn’t sure that vegetables alone would fill him up.

“You betcha!”

As Harley sauntered off to fill their order, Jana fixed her expressive blue gaze on Saint. “Why are you being so nice to me all of a sudden?”

“Nice?” He curled his upper lip at her as he contemplated the question. “Just going easy on you while you’re injured. As a general rule, I don’t pick fights with people who can’t swing back.” The truth was, he didn’t like seeing her injured. It was eerily reminiscent of a time years ago when he’d watched a wild bird drag around a clipped wing.

“So, I’m safe for one evening.” A merry chuckle peeled out of her.

“Yeah.” Straddling his chair once again, he hooked his boots around the back rungs, utterly entranced by the sound of her laughter.. *Shoot!* It was more than that. He found the whole female package sitting across from him entrancing, from her riot of nail colors to her silly orange and black striped socks. Her tumble of curls made his callused fingers itch to tangle themselves in them. He wanted to know what the silky strands would feel like against his skin.

Whoa, there! He swiftly reined in his thoughts. Clearly, it had been too long since the last time he’d enjoyed a woman’s company. One thing was for sure, though. His original assessment of her — that she was crazy — couldn’t have been

more off base. She was simply more colorful than the average person. Plus insatiably curious, too adventurous for her own good, and forever saying and doing the unexpected.

Any guy lucky enough to date a woman like her would never be bored. For one thing, he'd be forever rescuing her from one disaster or another. Saint wondered how she'd survived this long alone. Assuming she was still single, of course. His gaze drifted to her left hand. *No ring*. The discovery excited him more than it should have. He had no right to let his thoughts go there. No right at all.

She dumped a bunch of the creamer and syrups into her coffee and stirred them in. Then she leaned over the cup, closing her eyes and breathing deeply as the steam swirled into her face.

“Just so you know,” she murmured without opening her eyes, “I was being tongue-in-cheek about the whole bakery robbery thing.” She sat back in her chair, fixing her luminous gaze on him once again. “It’s because I write romantic cozy mysteries that usually start off with some sort of crime being committed in a kitchen. Sometimes it’s inside a home. Sometimes it’s inside a restaurant or bakery. It’s kind of what I’m known for. My tagline is *taste the danger*.”

“Interesting.” He’d never before met a published author, much less a famous one — which Elara Taniguchi had assured him that Jana was when he dropped back by the clinic to check on her status earlier. Jana was already back in her room at the B&B by then, but Elara had been quick to rave about the book Jana had signed before leaving the clinic.

“I’ve hit a dry spell, though.” Jana’s smile dimmed. “I’ve been stuck on my current book for a few months and just can’t seem to get un-stuck.”

He leaned his forearms against the table. “Maybe I can help.” As soon as the offer left his mouth, he wanted to kick himself. She probably didn’t want or need any help from an ex-con on parole.

She frowned, idly stirring her spoon around in her coffee. “I don’t have the foggiest idea of what’s holding me back.

Maybe I've been writing too much of the same thing lately. Maybe I need some fresh material."

The fact that she was actually opening up to him filled him with awe. He mulled over her confession and tried to think of something encouraging to say. "I haven't read any of your books, but Elara has, and she doesn't seem to think your ideas are running thin."

"Really?" Jana's expression perked up a little.

"Yep. She's bragging to everyone who will listen to her how you signed her book. Sounds like she gobbles up everything you publish the moment it hits the shelves."

"Sweet!" She abruptly lapsed into silence again.

As he mulled over her current lack of inspiration, his logic kicked in. "Did anything in particular happen in your life around the time you got stuck?"

She ducked her head over her coffee again, looking so miserable that he wished he hadn't asked. "I found out the guy I'd been dating for three years was cheating on me."

A blast of fury shot through him, catching him off guard with its intensity. "I hope you shoved him inside the oven in your next book and turned it on the cleaning cycle."

"Wow! That's brutal." Her disgruntled expression dissolved into unholy humor. "I like how you think."

You do? He couldn't remember anyone ever saying that to him. "He's an idiot, you know." He hoped she knew that.

She hunched her shoulders forward. "Apparently, I get pretty reclusive when I'm pushing to meet a deadline. He got lonely."

Saint snorted in derision. "Like I said, he's an idiot. Any guy who would treat a woman like that is complete garbage." Any guy who would treat Jana Marlowe like that was lower than garbage.

She leaned his way across the table and inquired softly, "So, what would a flawed hero do if the woman of his dreams weren't giving him enough attention?"

Her question made something flare deep inside him. The fact that she was seeking his input made him feel like his thoughts and opinions mattered. Like *he* mattered. It was an incredible feeling.

“If she was the love of my life,” he drawled, not having to think too hard about his answer, “I sure as heck wouldn’t be looking somewhere else to fill the void. I would, uh...probably do something to get her attention.”

“Like?” Jana’s aquamarine eyes snapped with anticipation.

“I’m starting to feel like I’m being used to get your book unstuck,” he teased.

“You catch on quick, Sherlock.”

The realization that a world-famous author was sitting across from him and treating him like a normal guy was making him a little dizzy in the head.

He grinned at her, in no hurry for the conversation to end. He was enjoying himself way too much. “I feel like I should get something out of this.”

Her eyes widened with mirth. “More cookies?”

Talk about finding his soft underbelly and striking hard! “I think we both know I don’t have the willpower to say no to that.”

Triumph gleamed in her eyes.

“That said,” he hated telling her no again, but it was the right thing to do, “I’d rather you not go to that kind of trouble on my behalf, while you’re convalescing. I was gunning for something that requires a little less effort. Like information.” He narrowed his gaze wickedly at her.

“Okay, I’ll bite.” She looked intrigued. “What sort of information?”

“We’ll start with this.” He reached out to tap the top of one of her slender hands. “Why are all your fingernails painted a different color?”

“That’s easy.” She fluttered her fingers playfully at him. “I couldn’t make up my mind which color I wanted, so I pulled out all my favorite shades of nail polish and went to town.”

“You painted your own nails?” That surprised him, since she could well afford a trip to the salon.

She shrugged. “By the time you drive to your appointment, wait in line a bit since they’re always running behind, get your manicure, and drive home, it’s a good two hours out of the ol’ writing schedule. With as often as I change my nail colors, that’s a lot of time away from my desk.”

He peered critically at her nails. “You have a steady hand.” She’d done a nearly perfect job of painting them. He’d have never guessed her manicure wasn’t professionally done.

“Believe me. I’ve had *lots* of practice.”

“Okay. My turn again.” He drummed his fingers on the table. “Here’s what a flawed hero would do to get, er, the attention of the woman he loves.” He’d almost said *her* attention but managed to stop himself in the nick of time.

“I’m listening.”

“I’d leave a trail of clues from the place where she was ignoring me,” he pictured her holed up in a cozy attic office, “to the place I wanted her to meet me.”

Her gaze sparkled. “What sort of clues?”

“Maybe I’d drop a single glove on the floor.” He reached into his back pocket to remove one of his leather work gloves and dropped it on the table between them for emphasis. “Two gloves would be too obvious. One would make her curious.”

“What next?” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“I’d leave the door of the room she was sitting in cracked open. Not all the way. Just enough for her to catch a whiff of whatever I was preparing for her in the kitchen.”

“Yum! What would you make?”

“Dessert, of course. Something simple, but classic. Like chocolate chip cookies.” Because of his experience working

construction, he'd watched countless realtors stage houses for sale by instructing the homeowners to bake a batch of cookies. That way, the house would smell like home when potential buyers toured it.

"Something tells me that there's nothing simple about your dessert plans," Jana mused.

"Because..." he raised a finger in the air, "when she steps into the kitchen, nobody is there. The cookies are gone, too. All that's left behind is their scent. She opens the oven. It's still warm."

"The plot thickens!" Jana leaned conspiratorially closer. "What's the next clue?"

"A trail of feathers." It was all he could do to keep a straight face. He was making the entire story up on the spot.

"Not rose petals?" She wrinkled her nose at him.

"Nah. That's too cliché. You said you wanted fresh material."

She chuckled. "True."

"Plus, rose petals are a little too obvious. I'd rather keep her guessing about my intentions."

"So...feathers?"

"Yep. Feathers."

"What kind of feathers?"

"Down feathers from a small hole in one of the cushions I was carrying. I slit a small hole in the corner of it with my pocket knife."

"Clever."

"I thought so."

"Where does the trail lead?"

"To the rim of a nearby canyon, one with a view of the setting sun."

"That she would get to watch with you," Jana exclaimed in an aha voice, "on a comfy cushion while eating chocolate chip

cookies.”

“And drinking coffee with way too much creamer.” He eyed her much lighter cup of coffee that was sitting only inches away from his all-black brew.

“It sounds like the perfect evening,” she sighed.

“After she gets over her irritation about being interrupted from whatever she was doing.”

“Writing,” she interjected softly. “Always writing.”

“With any luck, the sunset would give you a little inspiration, and the cookies would fuel another chapter,” he concluded.

“For a flawed hero, your ideas aren’t too shabby, Saint.”

“Great. I’ll send you the bill for my services.” He winked at her.

“We’d write some interesting books together, wouldn’t we?” She quirked a curious smile at him.

“No.” Her words were like a shower of cold water, reminding him that she wouldn’t be in Texas for much longer. “Because you’re going to return to wherever you’re from in a few days and forget all about me.” His chest ached at the thought.

“Atlanta,” she supplied, studying him with an inscrutable expression.

“Ah. That explains the hint of sweet tea and magnolias in your voice.”

“Why would you assume I’m going to forget about you?” she asked suddenly.

“Because that’s exactly what you should do.” He frowned at her, knowing he was no good for her.

She pursed her lips as she pondered his words. “We’re going to need to stay in touch if I’m going to write you into my next book. It’s called research,” she informed him in a lofty voice.

“There’s not much to tell.” Nothing he wanted told, at any rate.

“I don’t believe that for a second.” She picked up her coffee cup and slid her beverage napkin his way. “This is the part where you write down your number for me.”

“Don’t have a pen.” It felt like they were getting dangerously close to lines that shouldn’t be crossed.

“Neither do I.” She unearthed her cell phone and waved it at him. “How about we cut to the chase and do this the easy way?” She tapped a few buttons on her phone screen, then laid it on the table and slid it his way.

Apparently, her cookies weren’t the only thing he didn’t have the willpower to resist. With a grunt of capitulation, he reached for the phone and typed his number into it. “If for no other reason than to get you to quit hounding me.” He slid the phone back in her direction.

“Thanks.”

“Why bother? You’re never going to use it,” he taunted.

“Guess we’ll find out.” She calmly put her phone back in her purse. “Something tells me you might prove to be a very useful guy to have on speed dial.”

He wasn’t sure why.

Harley returned with their bowls of vegetable chili and a basket of bread and biscuits. He’d also prepared side salads for them. “Sorry for the delay. Bree isn’t feeling too well this evening, so her husband made her go home and go to bed. They aren’t taking any chances with this baby.”

Saint nodded somberly. He’d caught wind of the number of miscarriages Bree had endured and didn’t blame her husband, Matt Romero, one bit for being extra cautious with her health this time around.

“It’s okay. We’re in no hurry,” Jana assured cheerfully. “Saint here has been helping me over my writing slump.”

“Seeing as you’re in such a helpful mood,” Harley’s gaze danced curiously between them, “how about you help me

clean up the kitchen when you're through?"

Saint eyed him in dismay, hoping he wasn't serious.

Harley looked apologetic. "Dinner's on the house if you help out." He pointed at Jana. "Hers, too," he added with a knowing grin. "But you've gotta do all the work, since she's on crutches."

"Sold." Saint held back a sigh. He was tired, but okay. "I'll join you right after dinner." As a resident employee, his dinner was always on the house. As the senior ranch hand, though, Harley could've simply ordered him to the kitchen. The fact that he was pretending otherwise was seriously cool of him. Comping Jana's meal was a nice touch, as well.

Harley gave him a two-fingered salute and took off again.

Jana reached for Saint's hand and bowed her head.

Realizing she was about to say grace, he ducked his head over the table. However, he didn't close his eyes. He was too busy enjoying how her multi-colored fingernails looked resting against the scarred back of his hand. He was also too busy remembering how his grandmother had never failed to say grace over each meal. It made him miss her all over again.

"Amen." Jana raised her head and reached for her soup spoon.

He immediately missed the touch of her hand against his. He cleared his throat to cover the rush of emotion her prayer had stirred in him. "Just so you know, I rode out to the trail you described earlier and found two sets of footprints. Yours and someone else's. They were a lot bigger than yours."

"Like Big Foot?" she teased, lifting her first spoonful of vegetable chili to blow on it.

His gaze dropped to her mouth. She had very kissable lips. "Not that big. More like man sized."

She shivered. "So, there was someone out there with me?"

He watched her stick the spoon in her mouth. His news hadn't dulled her appetite. Once again, she was full of surprises.

“Yep.” He reached for a slice of bread from the basket and tore off a piece. Knowing it probably demonstrated an extreme lack in table manners, he dunked it in his chili and took a soggy bite.

She laughingly eyed his movements. “Are you always this charming?”

“Always.” He dunked the bread again and took another bite.

Her gaze took on a faraway look. “I guess it’s not against the law for someone to follow me.”

“Nope.” It was concerning, though, and creepy. “I think it would be best if you don’t go out there alone again.”

She nodded, looking resigned. “Agreed. I’d rather continue writing about crime, not become the victim in my own story.”

“I hear you.” He was relieved she wasn’t arguing the point. “Speaking of crime, I bet it’s not often a mystery writer like yourself gets to sit across from a bonafide ex-con.”

She made a face at him. “I don’t think of you like that.”

“You should.” His voice was clipped. “That’s what I am.”

“You’re a lot more than that, Saint Riley.”

He wasn’t sure what she meant and didn’t ask.

“In fact, you’re living proof of why I like to write about flawed heroes more than perfect ones.”

He raised his eyebrows at her and took another bite.

“Most of my readers are women,” she explained. “And women tend to prefer guys who need a little fixing.”

He rolled his eyes at her and kept eating. However, he was secretly fascinated to learn that women didn’t mind hanging around men who needed a little work. He’d made it to thirty without a serious girlfriend. And after nearly five years in the pen, he imagined he was full of rough edges from where she was sitting.

“Guys who are redeemable,” she continued in that same mesmerizing voice that he could easily listen to all day long.

Her words were stirring all sorts of images in his brain. Things that might get his hopes up in her direction if he let them, and there was nothing in the world worse than false hope.

He let her monologue about her writing process, enjoying the sound of her voice more than anything else. He was already missing her even though she hadn't left Texas yet.

A discreet glance at his watch told him it was getting late. He let his spoon clatter to his empty soup bowl, purposely interrupting her.

She paused in mid-sentence. “Am I boring you?”

“Nope, but Harley's not getting any younger, and kitchen duty is calling.” He reached for her crutches. “These look mighty uncomfortable.”

“They are,” she sighed. “So much that I almost ordered room service.”

“Well, we can't have that.” Using his thumb and forefinger, he flicked the thin rubber padding that came standard on most crutches. “Not with a storm blowing in and snow to play outside in tomorrow.”

She looked surprised. “What makes you assume I plan to go out in it?”

“A logical guess, considering you're from the Deep South and don't see much snow. Something tells me the writer in you won't be able to resist.”

She chuckled. “You're very intuitive.”

“I have no idea what that means, but hold that thought.” He stood with her crutches and spun away from the table.

“Where are you going?” she asked quickly.

“To make these snow-worthy. Be right back.” He carried them to the Authorized Personnel Only door leading to the housekeeping supplies. Rooting around the shelves, he finally

found what he was looking for — two travel-sized pillows and a roll of packing tape. He went to work on the crutches, fastening a pillow to the top of each crutch. Then he lowered the height of each one by one more notch to compensate for the added fluff.

It was a full ten minutes before he returned to the dining room.

“There you are.” Jana looked a little disgruntled.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“I was beginning to wonder if you’d abandoned me.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you.” After rescuing her from both a runaway horse and a bull, she should know better than that. He held out the crutches to her. “What do you think?”

She took one look at the pillows he’d taped to them and burst out laughing. “They’re perfect!”

He gave her a crooked smile, wondering what she found so funny. “It’s nothing fancy.”

“At the risk of incurring your wrath again, I’m going to just say it.” She used the table to pull herself upright, reaching for the crutches.

“Say what?” He helped wedge them under her arms.

She sighed in appreciation as she leaned her weight on them. “Like it or not, you’re seriously hero material. At this point, there’s nothing you can say to convince me otherwise, so don’t even try.” She took an experimental step with the crutches he’d doctored up for her.

“Then your hero I shall be.” He gave her a mocking bow. “Flaws and all.”

“It’s nice to know you’re finally accepting your fate,” she teased.

Their gazes locked and held for a tension-charged moment.

He gestured awkwardly toward the kitchen, hating the necessity of leaving her. “And now to go work off our dinner.”

She chuckled. “Yeah, I’m totally writing you into a book.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.” His voice was dry.

“You will,” she promised cheekily.

He walked her to the elevator and mashed the UP arrow for her. “Goodnight, Miss Marlowe.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Riley.” She stepped into the elevator.

As a precaution, he held the doors open for her. A side perk of his helpfulness was that their arms brushed as she stepped past him. His last glimpse of her was when she leaned against the wall of the elevator and closed her eyes. She looked exhausted.

As the elevator doors rolled closed, he wished he’d offered to carry her upstairs.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH TEXTING

Saint



One week later

Jana Marlowe had only been gone for two days, but it felt like two weeks or two months. With every passing hour, Saint grew crankier. He hadn't realized how much he'd looked forward to seeing the bubbly romance author each day. And now that the chance of running into her was gone, the rest of his life stretched miserably before him. Dull, empty, and colorless.

Shoot! He even missed rescuing her.

He felt like he was only going through the motions as he saddled five horses for the guests and trail guides on this morning's ride. Two middle-aged sisters were taking their eighty-year-old mother out at daybreak. Today was her birthday, and her biggest wish was to see another canyon sunrise — something she hadn't done since she'd moved to Corpus Christi ten years earlier.

"Does anyone else besides me think this is a bad idea?" he grumbled beneath his breath as he threw a warm saddle blanket on the mare standing in front of him.

"I hear you." Elara Taniguchi tromped around the barn, gathering extra light sticks and supplies to throw into her backpack. "Like you, I don't make the rules, though. They signed all of our disclaimers and indemnity forms."

"Can we at least put them through the paces in the riding ring first?" He shot her an assessing sideways glance. She was the resident horse trainer. At the very least, she'd be able to

determine if the sisters were telling the truth about their mother's proficiency in the saddle.

"Good idea." She nodded in approval, tossing her dark ponytail over her shoulder. "We can leave through the back door and take a quick turn around the practice ring before hitting the trail."

Their three guests arrived, laughing like teenagers.

"I can't believe we let Mom talk us into this." The tallest sister faced Saint as she pulled the flaps of her hat more snugly over her ears and tied the strap beneath her chin. Wisps of her salt-and-pepper hair poked out around her ears and cheeks. "I'm Gina, by the way." She held out a red-mittened hand to him.

He shook it. "I'm Saint."

She gave another girlish giggle as her gaze raked over his Army green camouflage ski pants and jacket that he'd purchased second-hand. "You look more like a soldier than a saint."

"I feel safer already." Her shorter, rounder sister fed her mount a handful of apple slices. "I'm Grace, and our mom is Glenda, but everyone just calls her Mom. She read a book of horse jokes last night, so be prepared."

"Hi, Grace." He held up a hand. "Hi, Mom." He eyed their mother with interest. Her purplish-red hair was clearly dyed, and she was smiling from ear to ear.

She elbowed Saint as she shuffled past him. "What did the horse say when it fell?"

He kept his expression carefully deadpan, pretending to carefully consider her question. "As one of your two trail guides, ma'am, it's my mission to make sure that doesn't happen this morning."

She snickered. "But what if it did?"

He lifted his cell phone and faked a puzzled look as he did a quick search for some horse jokes to zing back at her. "I've yet to meet a horse who can speak English."

She laughed harder. “If he could, he’d say, *I’ve fallen and I can’t giddy-up!*”

“That’s a good one, Glenda.” He quirked a smile as his gaze zeroed in on the perfect joke to share in return. “Hey! I’ve got one for you.” He pocketed his phone as he sidled closer to her and cupped his hands to give her a leg up into the saddle. “What does it mean if we find a horseshoe along the trail leading to the canyons?”

She braced a hand on his shoulder and heaved herself into the saddle. “That some poor horse is walking around in his socks,” she panted.

“Bingo.” He grinned at her as he adjusted her stirrups. Clearly, she’d read the entire joke book her daughter had mentioned.

“I’ve got another one,” she announced merrily. “Where do horses go when they’re sick?”

“Ours mostly get sent to their stalls.”

“But if they were really, really sick,” she stressed the word *really*, “you’d probably want to take them to the *horse-pital*.”

“Good point.” He leaped onto his horse and took his place at the end of the line.

Elara was riding point. Beckoning the rest of them to follow her, she urged her horse toward the rear barn door, which she’d slid open only seconds earlier.

“Whew! It’s cold.” Glenda shivered and got a lot quieter as they circled the riding ring behind the barn.

“Best way to warm up is to keep moving,” Elara returned cheerfully. “If everyone is limbered up enough, we’ll hit the trail.” She motioned toward the gate.

Gina rode alongside Grace to give her a high-five. Then she held up a hand to their mother.

Glenda gave her a warning head-shake. “I think it would be wisest for me to keep both hands on the reins, so *I* don’t end up in the *horse-pital*.”

As they ventured out of the ring onto the snowy trail, silence settled over their small group.

Only because Saint was riding in the rear did he notice Glenda sagging deeper into her saddle. He pressed his heels into the sides of his horse and moved closer to her.

“Hey, Glenda! Want to know how to make a small fortune on horse racing?”

“Yeah. Save your money and let the others do the betting.”

He guffawed. “Close enough. I was going to say you need to start off with a large fortune, but I like your answer even better.”

Beneath the distant glow creeping over the horizon, he watched her eyes crinkle into a tired smile. “You get wiser as you get older, or so I’ve been told. I stopped counting the year I turned thirty.”

“Was that a special year?” He watched her closely, not liking how tired she looked.

“The best year of my life,” she sighed. “It’s when I met my favorite cowboy.”

At the cautious look Gina threw over her shoulder, Saint perceived that her mother’s favorite cowboy was no longer with them.

“You remind me of him.” There was a bit of a tremor in Glenda’s voice. Without warning, she slumped forward over the neck of her horse.

“Halt!” Saint was already leaping down from his horse as he gave the command. He reached Glenda’s side just as she was tumbling out of the saddle.

He cushioned her fall and slid with her to the ground, keeping her sprawled across his lap.

Her head drooped against his shoulder. “Guess this is as far as this old mare is going to make it.”

He knew she was referring to herself this time, though he gave her a mental point for turning it into a pun.

“It’s alright.” He slid his arms around her shivering frame. “We can watch the sunrise from here.”

It would be a while before they could get an ambulance out this far. They had plenty of time.

Elara joined them, yanking a pair of foil blankets from her backpack. Her phone was wedged between her ear and her shoulder. She was speaking to the 9-1-1 operator.

Saint helped her tuck the blankets around Glenda, thankful he’d had the sense to wear ski pants this morning. They were doing an excellent job of insulating him from the snow-packed ground.

To keep Glenda from slipping into hypothermia, he made an effort to get her talking again. “So, what do you call a horse who’s a world traveler?”

“Lemme guess.” Her voice sounded a little slurred. “A globe-trotter?”

“Boy! You’re really good at this stuff,” he praised. “Clearly, I need to come up with harder questions. How about this one? Why won’t you ever find a horse using an Android phone?”

“You’ve got me there, cowboy.” She shivered again. “Because I’ve never seen a horse use a phone.”

“It’s because they prefer Apples over Androids, of course!”

Despite her chattering teeth, she snickered. “I’ll have to remember that one.”

Elara bent to speak directly in Saint’s ear. “They’re telling me the ambulance is thirty minutes out.” Her unspoken fears were obvious. She wasn’t sure Glenda would last that long in the freezing temperatures, and neither was he.

Though he didn’t know what had caused her collapse, he made a snap decision. “Want me to carry her back to the B&B?” He knew it was a bad idea to move a patient, but he’d rather take his chances instead of watching her slowly slip away in his arms.

Elara moved away from him to go confer in soft undertones with the woman's two daughters. She returned to his side pretty quickly. "They said let's do it. I'll lead the horses."

He nodded, grunting as he stood with the eighty-year-old woman in his arms. "Glenda, you're in for a real treat."

"I am?" She gave a shuddery chuckle.

"Yep, because you're gonna get to watch the sunrise on your birthday from the arms of a real cowboy. No extra charge."

"You won't be getting any complaints from me!" She sounded a little more cheerful than before.

Elara helped wrap the emergency blankets tighter around their patient before Saint started moving. Then she tethered the two unmanned horses behind hers and moved in front of him to take the lead again. Gina and Grace fell back to ride on either side of him, shielding their mother from the wind as much as they could.

"Why do horses look so fit?" Saint gave Glenda a gentle shake to let her know he was talking to her.

"I think I know this one." She yawned.

"So, what's your answer?"

"I can't remember." She yawned again.

"It's because they're on a stable diet."

"Oh, I like that one! I'll have to remember it, so..." she stopped to yawn again, "I can repeat it to my friends over a game of dominoes."

Though Elara kept the horses walking at a decent clip, he had no trouble keeping up with her. Staying in physical shape was about the only thing he'd been allowed to do during his stint in prison. He was in prime condition for a man of thirty.

When the sun started to finger its way across the trail, he turned with Glenda in his arms and walked backwards for a while.

“Oh, Saint!” She roused in his arms, blinking and staring at the beautiful sight. Tears glinted in her eyes. “This is the best birthday gift ever!”

They made it back to the B&B in less than ten minutes. He sat the shivering older woman on a sofa in front of the fire in the waiting area, and the B&B staff took over from there. Sirens sounded outside as the ambulance finally rolled into the parking lot.

Backing toward the kitchen, he made himself scarce.

When it was lunch time, he left the horse barn and trudged back to the B&B, entering through the side door into the kitchen.

Bree Romero was back, serving food to the staff at the wide granite bar in the back of her commercial kitchen. Though she currently served as head chef, Saint imagined they’d be hiring some help for her soon. Either that, or he might be pulling a lot more kitchen duty himself after Baby Romero made its appearance.

“How do beans and cornbread sound, y’all?” She carried a wide silver pan toward the bar. Her long blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Though the tails of her pink and white plaid shirt were untucked, he could see her rounded belly poking out a little in the front.

“We’d eat dirt if you prepared it,” her brother, Brody, assured. He was a dark-haired cowboy with a goatee — so stinking humble that Saint never felt like he was sitting with the top dog during meal times, even though he was.

Bree and Brody’s younger cousin, Crew, joined them only seconds later. “Don’t tell me you started without me.” He swiped a piece of cornbread straight off the tray as he sat down on the other side of Saint.

“Technically, you’re taking the first bite.” Bree looked ready to box his ears for his audacity. “We haven’t even said

grace yet.”

He snickered and ducked his head over his stolen slice of cornbread. Muttering a quick prayer of thanksgiving, he took an enormous bite. “Just making sure it’s safe for the rest of y’all,” he announced with his mouth full.

“And?” Bree paused in the act of scooping cornbread onto everyone else’s plates.

It seemed to Saint that she was anxious to hear his response.

“Adding the creamed corn was a nice touch.” Crew took another bite. “And the cream cheese. Oh!” His eyes widened. “I wasn’t expecting a kick of cayenne, but I like it.”

“How do you do that?” Brody shook his head in wonder at his cousin. Glancing at Saint, he explained, “He can take one bite and deconstruct the ingredients to just about any recipe. Blows my mind every time!”

“World class tastebuds,” Crew explained loftily. A lock of his dark hair fell over his forehead, giving him a devilish look. “Not all of us were born to be heroes,” he added with a smirk in Saint’s direction.

Saint scowled at the term. He could barely stand Jana using it on him, much less anyone else.

“Yep.” Crew gave a decided nod. “Our B&B ratings just went up big-time over your Prince Charming stunt this morning. We oughta use the footage to design a Christmas commercial or something.”

“Footage?” Saint paused in the process of raising his slice of cornbread to his mouth. “What footage?”

“Hoh, boy! I take it you didn’t know the sisters were filming you out there?”

Saint lowered his cornbread to his plate. “What are you talking about?”

Crew produced his cell phone and pulled up a video clip. “The sisters posted this on social media about an hour ago, and it’s already gone viral.” He tossed his phone at Saint.

Saint caught it in mid-air and took a look. He found himself watching a recording of him carrying Glenda and telling horse jokes. The sisters even managed to capture him walking backwards with their mother so she could watch the sunrise over the canyons.

The final caption made him blush. *In all of Texas, there's nothing better than a good old-fashioned cowboy for your birthday. Even when you're eighty.*

He tossed Crew's phone back at him. "I'll just go dig a hole and bury myself right now."

"After you eat your lunch," Bree admonished severely. "We don't waste food around here." She ladled a generous serving of beans into his bowl. It was floating with thick chunks of ham.

His stomach growled in appreciation. "Wouldn't dream of it. I'll eat first. Then I'll die."

Brody leaned closer to bump shoulders with him. "If it makes you feel any better, the main line has been ringing off the hook for the past hour. Lots of single ladies trying to make a last-minute reservation between now and Christmas."

Saint, who'd just taken his first bite of beans, nearly spewed them all over the cabinet. He managed to choke them down. "Very funny," he wheezed, pounding a fist against his chest to reopen his airways.

"Aw!" Crew's voice was mocking. "The new guy thinks we're joking."

"Glad the rest of you find this so amusing." Saint pounded his chest some more.

"Oh, I think you'll be very happy to hear we found one opening on our reservation calendar," Crew continued in the same mocking voice, "but it didn't go to any of the hopeful ladies who called this morning. A certain romance author was wa-a-a-ay ahead of them on the waiting list. She took that two-week reservation off our hands like a dying man reaching for his last sip of water."

Saint's heart thumped with hope. "Jana Marlowe is coming back?" He hated how hoarse his voice sounded.

"Yep. The first woman you rescued is already coming back for a repeat visit. You're turning out to be very good for business, Romeo."

Before Saint could respond, his phone vibrated with an incoming text. He grew still on his bar stool. Very few people in the world had his new number. He could count the number of texts he'd received to date on one hand.

He slowly reached for his phone, hardly daring to hope it was the one person in the world he was longing to hear from the most.

It was!

Jana's name practically leaped off the phone screen at him. Her message made his face turn even redder.

Your heroism knows no bounds. Should I be jealous?

She'd attached a screen shot of him carrying Glenda.

Saint barely tasted the rest of his meal as he wolfed it down. He intended to be alone when he texted her back.

"I, uh...thank you," he mumbled to Bree, as he carried his dirty dishes to the sink.

"You're welcome," she returned kindly. "Hey! Real quick." She waited until he glanced her way again. "Prince wanted us to let you know he'd be home late from school this evening. He made the wrestling team," she announced proudly.

"You're kidding!" His eyes widened in amazement. "Figured we enrolled him too late in the school year to make tryouts."

"We did, but they made an exception. After seeing him in action in gym class, the coach couldn't bear the thought of waiting another whole year to add his talent to the team."

"He won't regret that decision. Prince is small, but mighty." Saint could only imagine how thrilled his brother was

to make the team. “Thanks for letting me know.”

“Of course.” Bree’s smile was warm. As Prince’s new foster parents, she and her husband had gone out of their way to keep Saint informed about his brother’s progress as he got settled into his new environment.

He was enormously grateful to them for keeping him in the loop. As he washed his dishes, he mulled over Prince’s shrimpy stature. He was small for his age, something he blamed himself for. After he’d gone to prison, Prince had ended up in a pretty dicey foster situation. Though he looked closer to ten or eleven, he was actually thirteen — a full seventeen years younger than Saint. The kid had been one of those oopsie pregnancies, one their mother had never fully recovered from. Not wanting the responsibility of another kid, their father had left them, and her health had quickly spiraled after that.

Saint gnashed his teeth at the memory. Depositing his dishes in the drying rack, he made his way to the door, wanting to be alone with his dark thoughts.

“That’s the new standard, everyone,” Bree sang out, pointing at Saint’s drying dishes.

Crew made a tsk-tsk-ing sound from his perch at the bar. “And his hero complex continues.”

Shaking his head in disgust, Saint made his escape outdoors. Since he had about a half hour before he was expected on the next trail ride, he took a quick detour to his studio apartment.

It was pre-furnished, for which he was wildly grateful. A full-sized bed was pushed against one wall. It was covered in a simple gray and white quilt with a cheery Texas flag throw pillow tossed on top of it. An overstuffed leather armchair beside the bed and the TV cabinet across from the bed made the area double as a lounge. An adjoining kitchenette and bistro table completed the open living space. A full-sized bathroom and walk-in closet were tucked behind the only interior door.

He kicked the front door shut behind him and made his way to the overstuffed chair. Sinking into it, he propped his feet on the leather ottoman and settled back to re-read Jana's message.

Your heroism knows no bounds. Should I be jealous?

No matter how many times he read the message, he kept coming to the same conclusion. She was flirting with him. Jana Famous-As-All-Get-Out Marlowe was actually flirting with the likes of him! And not for the first time.

Though he'd never had a serious girlfriend, he wasn't too dumb to notice she was starting to make a habit of it. How to answer her was the question of the century.

It was both a humbling and a terrifying moment for him. Whatever he said to her felt like it would either move him forward or send him flying backward.

Help me, Lord. The words tore from the deepest part of his heart. He had no idea what Jana saw in him. He sure as heck had nothing to offer a woman like her. She already had everything — money, fame, success. Yet he couldn't shake the feeling that their paths had crossed for a reason. Nor could he deny that he'd saved her from bodily harm twice and that she'd been constantly on his mind ever since.

What he hadn't known until her text message today was that she was still thinking about him, too. He hadn't really expected her to make use of the cell phone number he'd given her. He'd longed for it, of course, and daydreamed about it constantly, but he'd written it off as a one-sided fantasy.

I was wrong. He could see that now. From the beginning, he'd greatly underestimated Jana's big, beautiful heart. Maybe it was her writerly mind and incredible imagination, but she'd somehow seen past his many faults to the man beneath them. A man that she apparently liked, because — for some miraculous reason — women tended to have a soft spot for men who needed fixing.

Dragging in a long breath, he finally typed his response.
She's 80.

Her answer appeared on his screen only a handful of seconds later. *You literally carried her into the sunset!*

Saint: *It was the sunrise, and we were walking away from it, not into it.*

Jana: *You were my hero first! I hope you told her you're already taken.*

Her words took his breath away. He wrote, *We mostly traded horse jokes. I was trying to keep her lucid.*

Jana: *Okay, now I'm REALLY jealous! You never told ME any horse jokes.*

Saint: *When does a horse talk?*

Jana: *No idea. (I'm not good at telling jokes.)*

Saint: *Whinny wants to.*

Jana: *You're a dork.*

Saint: *I thought I was your hero.*

Jana: *Hoisted by my own petard.*

Saint: *Shakespeare, right?*

Jana: *Be still my heart! You know Shakespeare?*

High school was a long time ago for Saint, but a few classic quotes from his tenth grade English Comp class had always stuck with him. He typed his favorite one and pushed send. *Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them. (I was born this way. A flawed version of it, or so I've been told.)*

Jana: *I'm laughing so hard I nearly fell out of my chair.*

Saint: *Careful. Don't want to re-injure that ankle. How is it, by the way?*

Jana: *Better. It's sweet of you to ask.*

To date, she'd called him heroic, great, sweet, and flawed. He could live with that list of adjectives all day long. Sadly, though, it was time to wrap up their conversation. Work was calling.

Saint: *Hate to cut this short but gotta get back to work.*

Jana: *Mind if I call you this evening? I have LOTS of questions.*

Saint: *About?*

Jana: *The hero in my next book.*

Saint: *???*

Jana: *You, silly!*

Saint: *Thought you were kidding about that.*

Jana: *Wrong answer.*

Saint: *What time?*

Jana: *You tell me. You're the one on the clock.*

Saint: *How about eight?* That should give him time to hang out with Prince for a few minutes after he got home from school. He wanted to hear all about his first wrestling practice.

Jana: *It's a date!*

Saint stared at his screen, hardly able to believe what he was reading. He was sure she was kidding, but still.

It's a date. Jana's words nestled deep in his chest as he headed downstairs to begin his afternoon chores. For the first time since she'd left town, he felt like whistling while he worked.

CHAPTER 5: DARK NIGHT

Jana



Jana's cell phone rang, making her jump.

"Sheesh! That's loud!" She hastily turned off the sound. Normally, she kept her phone on vibrate when she was writing. That way, it didn't pull her out of the zone. Not that she'd actually succeeded in climbing into the zone for the past few months. Her inspiration tank had continued to run on the painfully dry mark.

But today had been different. She'd finally felt a spark of...something. But thanks to her caller, it was gone again.

She frowned at the caller ID, wondering if she should answer it. Whoever it was had managed to hide their name and number from view.

"Fine. You win. This had better be good!" She tapped her screen to accept the call and lifted the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

There was no answer on the other end. She held the phone away from her face to make sure she hadn't accidentally disconnected it. *Nope*. The timer on the conversation was still clicking away.

She raised the phone to her ear once again. "Listen, I can't hear you, so I'm going to assume we have a bad connection. If you want to talk, call me back. Okay. I'm hanging up now." She ended the call.

That was weird.

She replayed the strange silence in her head, convinced that someone had been listening to her on the other end of the line. Though the sound had been faint, she'd heard something. Breathing, maybe?

Shivering, she forced the thought from her mind. Maybe she'd been writing cozy mysteries for too long, because her imagination could conjure up way too many creepy scenarios to explain the mystery caller — everything from stalkers to vengeful bargain shoppers. She did a lot of online shopping from her Atlanta high-rise apartment. Only an hour ago, she'd bought the last three of her favorite flavors of sparkling juices that one of the local grocery stores had left in stock. She'd paid extra to have it delivered to her door.

A loud crash in the other room jolted her from her thoughts.

What in the world?

She stared in the direction of the sound. Unless she was mistaken, it had come from the kitchen.

She pressed a hand to her racing heart, then reached for her crutches. She was able to put a little weight on her sprained ankle now, but she was still using the crutches.

Since she didn't own a gun, she snatched a letter opener off her desk and curled it between her hand and the grip on her right crutch.

This romance author is officially armed and dangerous!

With a nervous chuckle, she made her way down the short hallway to her living room. She paused in the arched entryway, adoring everything about the space, from her comfy overstuffed white linen furniture to the glass wall beyond it. Since she lived on the top floor, she enjoyed a spectacular view of the Atlanta skyline. At night when it was lit up, it was truly breathtaking.

There was no wall separating the living room from her eat-in kitchen. The tiled floors continued seamlessly on from one room to the next. As she scanned the stone-colored granite

countertops, she didn't immediately see what had caused the crash.

The single rose she'd purchased yesterday was still poking from the clear glass she'd stuck it in. She slowly made her way across the living room to the kitchen, wondering if she'd imagined the sound. According to her agent, she possessed the most active imagination of anyone east of the Mississippi.

As she pushed her crutches forward, one of them crunched through something on the floor.

Glancing down, she spied a series of glass shards scattered across the tile. Here and there, a gold metallic number lay within the shards.

And then she knew.

"My clock!" She glanced up at the wall where it had been hanging beside her double ovens. Those weren't glass shards on the floor. They were crystal. The clock had been given to her by her ex-boyfriend on their third anniversary a few short months ago — right before she'd discovered his unfaithfulness.

Though the clock held no emotional value following their breakup, it had been so lovely that she'd been in no hurry to get rid of it. She glanced back up at the wall, wondering why it had fallen. Had the hook on the back of it come loose?

The worst part about the accident was going to be the cleaning up part. She swallowed a sigh, knowing it wasn't going to be easy pushing a broom or vacuum around the room while on crutches. However, the mess wasn't going to clean itself up. Since she was a natural-born klutz, she certainly wasn't going to risk skidding around on crystal shards in the middle of the night — that she would've long since forgotten were there by then — while grabbing a glass of water or something.

Let the fun begin.

Thinking longingly about the book that she'd been happily writing only minutes earlier, she pulled her broom and dustpan from the corner pantry and went to work sweeping up the

biggest pieces first. After dumping them into the trashcan, she vacuumed the room twice in the hopes of getting the tiniest shards up. Then she continued her efforts across the living room, vacuuming in wide semi-circles. Since the floor was tile, heaven only knew how far the pieces had scattered. Because of her crutches, the process took a lot longer than it normally would have. She was weary and sore by the time she finished.

Back to romance-land-ia, writer gal!

She gave herself a mental kick to get herself moving back toward the desk in her bedroom. Stepping inside the room, she nearly plowed into her suitcase that she'd yet to unpack from her trip to Texas, though she certainly wasn't in any mood to do it now.

Rolling it against the wall, she moved cautiously past it on her crutches. As she was easing herself back into her swivel chair, something bright and purple caught her eye in the bottom of the clear acrylic trash can beneath her desk.

Now what?

She reached for the trash can to scoot it closer and sat riveted. It was the princess cut amethyst ring her ex-boyfriend had given her for their second anniversary. As she pulled it out of the trash, she held out her left hand, splaying her fingers wide. She couldn't remember the last time she'd worn the ring. It had been several months, for sure. No matter how hard her writerly mind tried, she couldn't come up with a single reason for how it might have ended up in the trash.

She opened her center desk drawer and dropped it in the compartmentalized tray insert. Her brain continued to run over the possibilities, trying to come up with an explanation that made sense. Maybe her ex-boyfriend had held on to his copy of the key to her apartment. Maybe he'd paid a visit there in her absence to retrieve something he'd left behind.

Who knows?

She'd been in Texas for two weeks, and there were no security cameras in the apartment to record any unexpected

visitors while she was away.

Time to get the locks changed.

After debating her options for a few minutes, she stood and reached for her crutches again. She slowly made her way to the security panel in the entry foyer and fiddled with the buttons until she figured out how to change her password. For reasons she didn't delve too deeply into, her new password became 72468, the numeric version of SAINT.

Before returning to her bedroom, she moved to the front door and locked the deadbolt for good measure.

Should've done that earlier.

Feeling a gazillion times better, she returned to her room, hoping to finally get some much-needed writing done.

Thunder rumbled in the distance as she re-opened her laptop. *Nice!* In the past, she'd always written better when it was raining. There was just something about a good storm that heightened her senses and whipped her thoughts into razor-sharp mode.

She browsed through her notes on the book she'd been stuck on for so long, wrinkling her nose at the feeling of déjà vu sweeping over her. It almost felt like she'd already written this exact book before.

Small-town setting. Check.

Amateur sleuth in a kitchen. Check.

Nosy neighbor hanging over the fence. Check.

Loyal, furry sidekick. Check.

Plenty of red herrings. Check.

She wanted to continue writing romantic cozy mysteries, but she was desperate to punch up her stories with some new material. She tapped her fingers against her chin, mentally running through the what-if's. Instead of the love interest being super helpful, what if he wasn't? What if he started off as a super cranky, super poor conversationalist like Saint had been during their first few encounters?

Now, that's fresh material!

Excitement coursed through her as she started to type. She even put her heroine on crutches for good measure.

Write what you know, right?

It turned out to be downright therapeutic having her amateur sleuth hobble around on crutches like she'd been forced to do in real life for the past several days.

Because her heroine's foot was in a cast, it took her twice as long in the story to examine the crime scene. However, it also caused her to think outside the box, slowly peeling back the motivations of her villain until she came to the conclusion that he must require the assistance of a cane or a walker.

Jana carefully layered in a few more clues that led her heroine to additionally conclude that it was a cane. That would explain the unusual rubber cap she'd found next to the victim's body, which she'd initially assumed had come off the end of a mop or broom. The sly young chef determined that the cap had been used to seal the murder weapon inside the villain's cane.

The hours flew past as Jana settled into her writing zone for the first time in months and stayed there. Rain beat down on the roof and pattered against the glass wall of the east side of her apartment. The damp pattering transitioned to louder clicking noises as the rain became mixed with sleet and tiny clumps of hail.

As the dinner hour neared, her phone vibrated with an incoming call. Jana eyed it suspiciously, in no mood to listen to another stranger breathe on the other end of the line.

This time, however, the caller ID flashed with her agent's name, Candy Taylor.

Sighing in relief, she accepted the call. "Am I ever glad to hear your voice!"

"Oh, really? Is everything okay?" Candy sounded a little worried.

"Since you're someone I know, and we're carrying on a normal conversation, yes. My last caller was a total creep. He

didn't say a word. All he did was breathe."

"I agree. That's pretty creepy." Her agent sounded sympathetic. "Sounds like something out of a horror movie."

"And then my clock fell off the wall and shattered on the kitchen floor. It was fun cleaning up that mess, since I'm on crutches."

"Why are you on crutches?"

Jana gave her the glossed-over version of the story about tripping while she was out hiking. Then she regaled her agent with the far more entertaining story about her encounter with the bull.

Candy was chuckling by the time she got to the end of it. "You lead a far more exciting life than I do."

"Not by choice. I was born a klutz."

"Sorry to hear you had such a rough afternoon. That's too bad about the clock."

"Thanks. I was in the middle of a pity party. Then the most wonderful book ideas started popping into my brain right and left. It was like the bad stuff had somehow jump-started my creativity mode. I returned to my computer and boom! I've been writing all afternoon. I'm back!"

"That's great." Candy's voice sharpened with excitement. "Really great! Because I've got some news that otherwise might've added to the bad part of your day."

"Uh-oh. I don't like the sound of that."

"You and me both, sweetie. So, here's the deal. Your publisher called me a few minutes ago with a hard deadline."

"You're kidding!" Jana's heart sank. She'd known it was coming, but she'd figured they'd at least wait until after the holidays to lower the boom on her recent writing slump.

"I wish I was, sweetie, but they need a story from you by Christmas, or they're threatening to sever your contract."

"By Christmas?" Jana gulped. "But that's right around the corner!" It felt like her publisher was asking for the

impossible. She might as well hang up her writing hat now and start job hunting.

“Not the whole book, sweetie. Just the story proposal. I’m thinking a synopsis and three to five chapters will suffice. Think you can do that for me?”

“You’re not giving me much of a choice, are you?”

“If you were in the zone all afternoon, surely you hammered out a few pages of something!”

“I did, but…” Jana chewed on her lower lip. “What I was working on today isn’t something I plan on publishing.”

“Let’s see it, anyway.”

“I can’t do that. It’s more of a joke than anything else — between me and this guy I met in Texas.”

“Oh?”

“A really cranky guy who saved my life. Twice!”

“Whoa!”

“I know, right? From both a runaway horse, then the charging bull I already told you about.”

Her agent made a sound of exasperation. “Janaaaaaaaaa! I need you writing books, sweetie, not running off to the wild west, risking life and limb.”

“I’m fortunate that my adventures came with a real-life hero.”

“Yes, you are!”

“A very cranky one, who wouldn’t allow me to thank him properly. He refused to let me bake him cookies or anything, which I did, anyway.”

“Of course, you did! You’re you.”

“After eating them, he still swore up and down he was nobody’s hero.”

“He sounds larger than life.”

“He totally is. Anyhow, one thing led to another, and I ended up threatening to write him into my next story to prove that he was, in fact, hero material.”

Candy burst out laughing. “So *that’s* what you’ve been working on?”

“All afternoon!” Jana snickered.

“I really, really, really want to see it now!”

“Sorry! I told him it was for his eyes only. I’ll get you something else in the next few days. Promise!”

“I can’t believe you’re going to leave me hanging.” Candy’s voice grew wheedling. “I thought we were friends!”

“I don’t even want to think about what he would do to me if he found out I showed it to anyone else.” Jana lowered her voice ominously. “You seriously might never find my body.”

“Pfft! He doesn’t have to know. It’ll be just between the two of us. Two women laughing over a man. It happens all the time.”

“I’ll think about it.” Jana would much rather stick to her original plan and come up with something entirely new. She was so inspired right now, how hard could it be to brainstorm one more story?

“Okay,” Candy sighed. “Just don’t think too long. I really need something to submit to your publisher...like yesterday.”

“I hear you loud and clear.” Jana grimaced. “I’ll get cranking on it right away.”

After hanging up the phone, she jumped right into plotting a new story. It was set in a small town with canyon views. The victim was found lying on the floor in the commercial kitchen at the mountain B&B where he worked. Sitting next to him was a tray of half-eaten brownies. On the other side of the tray was a dead mouse surrounded by brownie crumbs. Both the chef and the mouse had been poisoned. The victim’s ex-fiancée, a known gold-digger, had threatened to shorten his life if he was ever unfaithful to her. As it turned out, though, he was pretty unpopular with a good number of women — the

personal assistant he'd recently fired, a night shift worker he'd refused to move to the day shift, and a sous chef he'd passed over for a promotion. There were plenty of suspects, and all of them had motive.

Jana was so engrossed in typing her outline that it took her an extra few seconds to register the fact that her phone was vibrating with another incoming call. She glanced at her watch. It was only seven-thirty, so it was too soon to be Saint. Not that they'd precisely agreed on who would call who. She'd sort of implied it would be her, though, since she had research questions to run past him.

As the phone continued to vibrate, she mechanically picked it up and held it to her ear, more to silence it than for any other reason. "Hello?"

Dead silence met her ears.

"Hello?" she asked again.

Still no answer.

She glanced at her phone screen, and her heart started to pound. It was the same unmarked number from earlier. She returned the phone to her ear. "If you're trying to make me laugh, you succeeded. Cozy mystery author receives a mysterious call. Haha! Good one. Now goodnight, and don't call back." She hung up on whoever it was and tossed the phone on her desk. "Girl, you have got to do a better job of screening your calls," she chided, giving her desk chair an impatient spin.

The doorbell chimed.

She stopped spinning. "Here we go again. Lemme guess. I'm going to walk to my front door, and nobody's going to be there." It would be the perfect end to her slightly weird day.

She was going to be furious, though, if that turned out to be the case. It was work for a girl on crutches to hobble all the way to her front door. If someone was cruel enough to ding-dong-ditch her on a rainy night like this, she'd be half tempted to chase them down and box their ears.

The doorbell chimed again.

“Coming,” she yelled. Reaching for her crutches, she heaved herself to her feet.

The doorbell rang a third time while she was hitching her way slowly across the living room. “Laying on the doorbell isn’t going to make me to move any faster,” she grumbled.

She finally reached the door and leaned forward to squint through the peep hole. She couldn’t see anyone standing there. “Are you serious?” She took a second look and gave a yelp of surprise as something big and round bumped against the peep hole.

During her third peek, she was finally able to make out the shape of a dark balloon bobbing in the hallway. It appeared that someone had delivered flowers to her. They must have left in a hurry, because the balloon was still swinging back and forth. It was hard to make out any more details than that without opening the door.

With a huff of resignation, she unlocked the deadbolt and twisted the door handle. Sure enough, a small bouquet of roses was resting on the rug outside her door. A single balloon was tied to it.

She bent down, scooped them up, and hurriedly shut the door. Locking it behind her, she shuffled into the kitchen, awkwardly carrying her burden. She set the bouquet on the countertop and turned on the overhead light to get a better look at the flowers.

And stared.

And stared some more.

Sitting in front of her in a clear glass vase with no water in it were six perfectly dead roses. Not artfully dried out petals, but deader than dead ones in full wilt. The balloon that had been tied to them was solid black. The ribbon used to tie it to the vase was also black. There was no accompanying note.

She took a step back, feeling utterly perplexed. Clearly, someone was messing with her. Someone who knew that she and her boyfriend had broken up. Someone who knew that

he'd given her exactly six red roses on their one-year anniversary.

Feeling like she'd slipped and fallen into one of her own cozy mysteries, her brain feverishly ran over everything that had happened to her today — starting with the flower delivery and working her way backwards. She'd received six roses like she had on her first anniversary with Thomas, except these were dead. She'd found her two-year anniversary gift at the bottom of the trash can beneath her desk, and her three-year anniversary gift was lying in a bazillion shards in the kitchen trash can.

Someone had gone to an awful lot of trouble to torment her today. Though her ex, Thomas Walford, was the most logical culprit, it didn't feel like something he would do. For one thing, they hadn't parted on the worst of terms. He'd actually acted relieved that she hadn't put up a bigger fuss over his unfaithfulness.

Plus, he was from one of Atlanta's oldest, wealthiest families. As one of the executive VPs in their banking conglomerate, he — quite simply — had better things to do with his time. She had a sneaking suspicion he'd already moved on to buying roses, rings, and crystal knick knacks for his newest girlfriend.

Which brought Jana back to square one. Who would work so hard to make her feel guilty about breaking up with Thomas? Who stood to gain from tormenting her like this?

Yeah, I've got nothing.

With a sigh of defeat, she snapped a few photos of the hideous flowers before sweeping them off the countertop into the trash.

Shuddering, she left the light on as she exited the kitchen, having no wish to be alone in the dark. She flipped on more lights as she walked across the living room and returned to her bedroom. Given her current state of mind, she might very well leave on every light in her apartment tonight.

She sank into her office chair and swiveled to face the door, feeling distinctly vulnerable despite the new password she'd set on her security system. Then she reached for her phone and called Saint. Though it was a few minutes before eight, she was anxious to hear his voice again.

He picked up so quickly that he must have been waiting for her call. "Hey!"

"Hey, Saint."

"What's wrong?"

"Who said anything's wrong?"

"I do. I can hear it in your voice."

She drew a deep breath. "It's been a very long, very difficult afternoon."

"Tell me about it."

So she did. "It literally feels like I fell into the pages of one of my books. Well, except for the fact that no actual crime was committed."

"Other than breaking and entering," he growled.

"Maybe." If it was Thomas, she'd given him a copy of the key.

"There's no maybe about it!" Saint was seething, which went a long way toward soothing her frazzled nerves. It was nice having someone on her side.

"What should I do?"

"Return to Texas immediately." There was no hesitation in his answer.

She chuckled, feeling her insides warm like melting butter. "I have a reservation to return to the B&B in a couple of weeks."

"So I heard."

"Word travels fast around there."

"Especially when the guys think they have something to razz me about."

“Oo!” She pounced on that. “Care to explain?”

“They claim the video that went viral caused a bunch of single ladies to call the B&B for reservations. Fortunately, we’re booked solid through Christmas.”

“And you said I had nothing to be jealous about!”

“You don’t.” His matter-of-fact response made her heart race.

“I wish I was there already,” she sighed.

“Me, too.” His voice grew caressing.

She opened her lips to say something else, but a loud clap of thunder jolted her into silence. Then the lights went out.

She drew a sharp breath, gripping her cell phone tighter.

“You alright?” Saint asked quickly.

“Yes. It’s just a thunderstorm.” Her voice shook a little. “The lights just went out. Give me a sec.” As she rummaged through her desk drawer in search of a flashlight, her fingers brushed over the amethyst ring she’d tossed there earlier. It made her insides chill.

Abandoning her search for a flashlight, she switched on her phone’s flashlight app instead and used it to grab a blanket and pillow off the bed. Then she made a beeline for the bathroom and locked herself in.

She was so unnerved by the events of the evening that she made the snap decision to barricade herself in there for the night. Reaching for her makeup chair, she jammed the back of it beneath the door handle.

“Everything okay there?” At some point in her mad dash to the bathroom, she must’ve bumped the speaker phone button, because Saint’s voice filled the air. “I hear a lot of noise, but you’re not saying anything.”

“I’m almost embarrassed to admit this.” She made a face in the darkness.

“Lay it on me, babe.”

Babe! Though she wasn't sure he'd meant to call her that, or even realized that he had, her heart sang at the endearment. "Call me crazy, but I barricaded myself in the bathroom for the night."

"Good." He didn't sound like he thought she was one bit crazy for doing so.

The approval in his voice buoyed her spirits. "I'll probably be sleeping in the bathtub with the pillow and blanket I grabbed on my way in here."

"If I wasn't on parole, I'd catch the next flight out of here to come check on you."

She smiled as she sagged to the floor beside the sink cabinet. "You know how they say it's the thought that counts?"

"Yep."

"They're totally right. The fact that you even want to be here means the world to me right now."

"Guess rescuing you has become a habit." His voice was gruff.

"Aw! Are you bored without me there, Saint?"

"Very bored and very cranky."

"You say such sweet things to me."

"I have it on good account that it's because I'm flawed," he drawled.

"I like you just the way you are." Her voice hitched.

He expelled a long breath of air. "If you really mean that, then the next two weeks can't go fast enough for me."

CHAPTER 6: ONE DEAD END

Saint



Two weeks later

Jana is returning to Texas tomorrow!

Saint glanced at his watch. If anyone had asked, he could've told them the exact number of hours and minutes that were left until her flight landed in the morning. To avoid the necessity of her shelling out money for an expensive shuttle service to bring her the rest of the way to Hereford, he'd convinced Harley Anderson to do the honors. In exchange for the favor, Saint had promised to work any extra shift of Harley's choosing.

That's why he was currently covering Harley's shift at the check-in booth.

Easiest job on the planet.

It almost didn't feel like work. Since there were no new guests scheduled to arrive at the B&B this evening, all he'd done so far was reset one key card that had gotten scrambled. Plus, he was seating hungry guests inside the steak restaurant. There was a laminated print-out of the tables laid out on the cabinet in front of him. Each time he seated anyone, he marked off their table with an erasable marker. When the table became free again, he wiped off the X with a damp cloth.

Not exactly doing much heavy lifting this evening.

As the evening wore on, the crowd of guests thinned out, and there were longer stretches of time between seating new arrivals. Saint had his boot heels hooked on the middle rung of the stool he was perched on, downing his third cup of coffee.

He was chain drinking tonight for two reasons — Bree's holiday brew was that good, and he had nothing better to do.

Out of sheer boredom, he pretended like he was casing the restaurant.

Old habits die hard.

The enormous three-story barn had been converted into a multi-purpose space that was used as a dining room most days. Occasionally, it got rented out for weddings, family reunions, and business conferences. There was a stage at the far end of the room with floor-to-ceiling black velvet curtains pulled closed. At the base of the stage, a trio of evergreens stretched toward the ceiling, their limbs twinkling with countless strands of tiny Christmas lights. The tree on the left had green lights, the middle tree had red lights, and the one on the right had white lights.

The backstage areas and dressing rooms were kept locked on nights like tonight, so there was no way out in that direction for any would-be thieves. On the right side of the dining room, a silver swing door led to the kitchen. It contained an exit that led to the side lawn. Across the entry foyer where he was seated was a hallway that led to a set of elevators. The elevators went up one level to the second-story guest rooms. At the end of the hallway was a balcony with a fire escape. He mentally earmarked that as exit number two.

If a person were to walk past the elevators and keep going, they'd reach the public restrooms, then the housecleaning and supply closets. Beyond that, the third exit from the B&B opened to the rear parking lot. Then there was the most obvious way out — the double glass entrance doors in front of him.

That added up to a grand total of four ways to enter and leave Anderson Ranch B&B this evening. In the typical, laid-back style that so many country businesses had, only the front entrance doors were even being manned.

By me. An ex-con.

Yeah, the Andersons were a pretty trusting group. Not that there was much to steal around here. Saint wasn't sure what the resale value was on their signature brand of beef, but he doubted most prospective robbers were on the prowl for a freezer full of frozen steaks.

Since the majority of their customers paid by credit card, there wasn't much cash on hand. And no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't picture anyone trying to make off with one of the pine bough centerpieces anchoring each of the round dinner tables.

He idly watched a well-dressed couple finish eating and tip back their glasses to down the final drops of Bree's famous sparkling juice. The woman stood in her Christmas red pantsuit, reached for her silver beaded clutch, and made her way through the arched doorway on the far side of the room. Since she turned right instead of left toward the elevators, he could only presume she and her dinner date were locals — not B&B guests. Her choice to leave through the rear exit struck him as odd, though, since he distinctly remembered her and her companion entering through the front double doors.

Her dinner date lingered at their table for no obvious reason to Saint's observant gaze. Then he stood and headed in the same direction as the lady in the red pantsuit. Like her, he passed through the arched doorway into the hall and turned right.

Saint's suspicions prickled to life, since he didn't recall seeing a waitress come by their table to collect their payment yet. She'd dropped off the bill only a handful of minutes earlier, and it was still sitting on the edge of the table.

You have got to be kidding me!

Apparently, there was something to steal from the B&B, after all — dinner. Saint shot to his feet and bolted through the front double doors, just in time to watch the woman in red unlock a dark Land Rover and climb into the passenger seat. It was impossible to tell the exact shade of the vehicle at this time of evening. The only light in the parking lot was from the muted glow of the motion-detector lights along the building.

Moving closer to the vehicle, he whipped out his cell phone and snapped a quick photo of its license plate. It looked like a dealer plate, possibly a rental.

The plot thickens, as Jana would say if she were here.

As Saint straightened and glanced around the parking lot, he found himself face-to-face with the woman's dinner date.

"Did you just take a picture of my vehicle?" He took a menacing step in Saint's direction. He was a tall, dark-haired man in a business suit that was hanging loose over his broomstick-thin frame. His trousers were cinched in pretty tightly with a belt.

"If I did, sir, it was an accident. I'm just out here taking pictures of the snow." Without waiting for a response, he spun around and ducked his head a little to snap a picture of himself with the gaunt-faced scumbag in the background.

He quickly straightened and faced the man again. "It's a beautiful evening, isn't it?" He hastily loaded the two photos into a text message for the security line at Anderson Ranch. Then he pocketed the phone while keeping his thumb hovering over the SEND button.

"Aren't you supposed to be on duty at the front desk?" The man took another step closer to Saint, invading his personal space and drawing back his suit jacket on one side to reveal a holstered gun.

Saint flicked a glance at the gun, well aware it was being shown to him for the purpose of intimidation. It was all he could do not to laugh in the guys's face for flashing a regular ol' hand gun at him. Since it wasn't sitting deep enough in its holster, it didn't contain a silencer. And there was no way the guy planned to shoot him point blank without a silencer in such close proximity to others.

"Oh, I'm still on duty," he drawled, "which is how I know there's an unpaid bill on your dinner table inside the restaurant. I'm sure it was an oversight." His tone indicated he thought it was anything but. "So, if you'll just head back inside and square things up, I might be inclined to delete any

photos I *accidentally* took of you or your license plate number.”

The woman in the SUV cracked the passenger door open and called, “What’s going on out there, Theo?”

Saint smirked at her innocuous question. She must not know her dinner companion had stiffed the restaurant, since she was so freely using his first name.

“I’ll be right there!” The man leered at Saint, baring his teeth in the moonlight. “Since only one of us has a jail record, I’m liking my chances of how this is going to end.” He jerked his head at Saint to get him to move out of his path to the vehicle. “So how about you just step aside, and we’ll forget this ever happened?”

The fact that the man knew who Saint was made his suspicions ratchet exponentially higher. Something more was going on here than two stolen steak dinners. He pushed the SEND button on the text message before responding.

“You sure that’s what you really want, Theo?” He stressed the guy’s name to remind him that he knew it. “Because the moment you drive away, that means you’re no better than me.”

A thief.

Though Saint didn’t say the word aloud, he could tell by the way the man’s face darkened that he knew Saint had served time for robbery.

Interesting.

“Good evening, folks!” A cheerful voice rang out as the redheaded security guard on duty sauntered around the rear corner of the barn.

Saint’s shoulders relaxed. Reinforcements had arrived quicker than he expected. “Evening, Grecia!”

Grecia Stephens was engaged to the B&B manager, Crew Anderson, so she was very much vested in the success of Anderson Ranch. She’d also served a few years in the Marines, so she was a lot tougher than she looked.

“Aren’t you enjoying this gorgeous weather?” She spread her hands grandly in the crisp night air. A small white slip of paper fluttered between two of her fingers.

“Yep. That’s how I ran into this very satisfied customer.” Saint waggled his eyebrows mockingly at the seething man. “He was just getting ready to head back inside and square away the bill he forgot to pay.”

As the man started to bluster, Grecia waved the white slip of paper beneath his nose. “Oh! Here you go then. Your waitress just dropped it off at the security desk and asked if I’d track you down before you left.”

“She must have forgotten we paid cash.” The man looked down his nose at her. “If the money turned up missing, maybe you can look into it for me at that security desk of yours.” His gleeful expression told Saint that he expected the snub would bring a tidy end to their encounter.

“I’d be happy to, sir.” The exaggerated note of sympathy in Grecia’s voice was Saint’s first clue that the man wasn’t getting away with anything. She whipped out her cell phone. “Please be assured we have zero tolerance for that sort of thing around here. I’ll notify the police right away. If you’ll just stick around a few minutes so they can take your statement...” She held up a finger as she lifted the phone to her ear.

“Oh, for crying out loud! I don’t have time for that.” The man angrily snatched the bill from her hand. “I’d rather pay for our meals a *second* time than spend another minute in this hillbilly joint.” As he stomped toward the entrance of the B&B, he added, “Not sure how you folks stay in business while treating your customers this way...”

Grecia caught Saint’s eye as he disappeared inside. She snickered. “Actually, we stay in business by making sure folks like him pay up.” Then she sobered. “Thanks for your text. That joker must have skedaddled out of the restaurant the moment I stepped into the kitchen to refill my coffee. If it weren’t for you, he’d have gotten away with it, too.”

Saint shrugged offhandedly as he turned to head back to the check-in booth. “Guess I’m accustomed to thinking like a

thief.”

Surprisingly, there was no censure in Grecia’s gaze as she fell into step beside him. “Not a bad skill set to have in my line of business.” Through some complicated arrangement he didn’t fully understand, she worked as a full-time security guard at Anderson Ranch, though she was technically employed by K&G Security next door.

“I bet.” He kept his head down as they trudged up the sidewalk together. When they reached the front entrance, he held the door open for her.

“Thanks.” She canted her head curiously at him as she stepped inside. “Have you given any thought to what you’re going to do after you finish your work release program?”

She posed the question so casually that it took an extra second or two for his brain to register what she’d said. “Yes and no,” he said carefully. “I don’t expect many places are gonna want to hire someone like me.” He moved purposefully toward the check-in booth, hoping to put a swift end to the conversation.

To his dismay, she followed him. “Maybe you’re not looking in the right places.” Her voice was matter-of-fact. “Security work is clearly down your alley. Just saying...”

He stared at her for a moment before taking a seat on the stool behind the booth. “As if I could even pass a background check!”

She shrugged. “I guess that all depends on what your employers are looking for.”

He snorted. “Not a jail sentence, that’s for sure.”

Her red eyebrows rose. “Exactly how many security guard jobs have you applied for, cowboy?”

When he didn’t answer, she chuckled. “Your silence is telling.”

He drew a deep breath, trying to hang on to his temper since she was only being nice. “Tell you what. If you can

name one firm that would consider someone in my shoes, I promise to look into them.”

“Fair enough.” She jutted her chin at him. “It just so happens that one of my coworkers graduated from the same work release program you’re in, tough guy. Eh, technically he and his partner own the place, so there’s that.”

Saint’s jaw dropped, dragging a chuckle from her. “Who?”

“Foster Kane. He’s married to one of the housekeepers on staff here. Oh!” She snapped her fingers, as if just remembering something else. “And the man I’m engaged to is another graduate.”

Saint choked and tried to cover it with a cough. “You’re telling me the manager of Anderson Ranch B&B is...” *Like me?* Wasn’t he related to the owners? It was almost too much information for his brain to process in one swoop.

Grinning broadly, Grecia reached across the booth to deliver a not-so-gentle punch to his shoulder. “To get things rolling, I’m gonna put in a good word for you. I can guarantee my bosses are going to be very interested in hearing about the robbery you stopped.”

“I, uh...thanks!” He was so grateful that he could’ve hugged her, bruised shoulder and all.

“No problem.” She was still grinning as she sauntered away to hover over their would-be dinner thief and the waitress he was conversing heatedly with.

Saint returned to seating customers with a much lighter feeling in his chest. He couldn’t wait to tell Jana about his conversation with Grecia. It made him see Anderson Ranch in a whole new light. This was one very special place, more so than he’d previously realized.

He was awash with so much gratitude that the first thing he did when he made it back to his apartment was hit his knees beside his bed.

“Thank you.” It had been years since he’d even attempted to pray, and he certainly wasn’t doing it now because he considered himself worthy of saying anything to the Big Guy

Upstairs. However, he couldn't just go to bed and ignore the miracles taking place right underneath his nose. "I don't deserve any of this," he continued. "But I'm mighty grateful for the second chance You've given me, and I'm gonna try my best not to screw it up this time." After an awkward pause, he added, "Amen." He wasn't sure what the word meant, but his grandmother had always ended her prayers that way.

As he pushed to his feet, he googled the definition of the word out of sheer curiosity. According to the dictionary website he pulled up, it meant "it is so" or "so be it".

That's kind of cool.

He closed the tab to the website and was about to pocket his phone when it started to ring. Jana's name flashed across the caller ID.

His chest leaped with excitement as he accepted her call. "Hey!"

"Hey!" She sounded a little breathless, like she'd been running or something. "I figured I'd place a proof-of-life call to you instead of a proof-of life picture this evening." She'd been checking in with him every day since the night she'd spent barricaded in her bathroom. Fortunately, there'd been no more scary incidents since then. Whoever had been harassing her had gone completely silent.

"You could do both." He'd been enjoying all the selfies she'd sent him over the past two weeks, each one more entertaining than the last. The amount of effort she always put into them felt significant — like she was trying to make an impression on him. One of the coolest pictures had been of her standing in front of the glass wall in her living room. She'd taken it at night from an angle that made it look like she was holding the moon in the palm of her hand.

"You do realize I'm busy packing?"

Bummer! "Guess I can survive one night without a picture. I mean, it's only the highlight of my day every day." He employed his most pitiful voice.

“Are you seriously trying to guilt me into sending you another selfie?”

Is it working? “Proof of life picture,” he corrected loftily. “I’m just looking after you.”

“Well, when you put it *that way...*”

His phone immediately pinged with an incoming text.

He took one look at the picture she’d sent and burst out laughing. It was one of her curled up inside her empty suitcase. Her legs were drawn up to her chest, and she was laughing into the camera. Or laughing at him. He didn’t really care which.

“You just made my day.” He didn’t bother squashing the caressing note that crept into his voice. “My week. My year.” If she picked up on the fact that he was falling for her, so be it. She was such a perceptive person that it wasn’t like he’d be able to hide it from her for long, anyway.

“You’re welcome.” Her voice grew soft and wistful. “I’m so ready to get out of Atlanta again.”

“I’m even more ready to have you back in Texas.” She could read whatever she wanted to into that. He wasn’t worthy of her on any level, but he missed her terribly and didn’t mind letting her know it.

“Good, because ever since that triply weird evening, my apartment hasn’t felt the same.” She blew out a breath. “Even though I had the locks changed, it’s still harder to relax now. Harder to sleep. Even harder to breathe inside these walls.”

Anger burned through him at the fact that some creep had invaded the sanctity of her home, utterly trampling her peace of mind. And he’d gotten away with it. His sudden silence didn’t make Saint feel much better. Anyone who’d gone to that much trouble to torment another person wouldn’t simply fade into the woodwork. He’d be back to continue feeding his inner beast, because that’s what stalkers did. It was only a matter of time.

“Something else that’s kind of weird,” Jana continued, “is how silent my ex has been on social media lately. Not that I’ve

been trying to keep up with him or anything, because I haven't. But after I broke up with him, it seemed like he was everywhere at once, like he was going out of his way to be in the public eye. To be seen by the paparazzi. To prove to me that he was better off without me, I guess. It felt so in-your-face that I took a break from social media for a while. The only reason I'm back is because my publisher is pressuring me to ramp up my book marketing for the holidays. And, surprisingly, Thomas Walford is no longer in the headlines. He's just...gone."

Saint's mind immediately jumped to the worst possible conclusion. What if her ex hadn't taken their breakup as well as he'd pretended? What if he'd decide to get a little payback? What if he was the person now stalking her from the shadows?

It still didn't add up, though. Something about the deliberate destruction of their three anniversary gifts still felt off. Like someone was trying to send some sort of message to her, but what? The fact that they'd been systematically destroyed in reverse order had to mean something, too.

"What are you thinking, Saint?" Jana's pleading voice permeated his troubled thoughts. "I know you're listening to me, but you're not saying anything."

He forced his attention back to her. "I'd rather tell you what I'm thinking when you get here." He didn't want to ruin any chance she had of sleeping during her last night at home.

"Okay." Her voice was hesitant, like she wanted to say more, but was holding back.

"Get some rest, babe."

"I'll try."

"Thanks for the picture." *It meant a lot to me. You mean a lot to me.* He wished he had the courage to tell her that outright, but it was still too early in their relationship. He had no idea where he truly stood with her — if she merely felt safer having him a phone call away because of all the weird stuff going on in her life. It made sense that she'd chosen him

to fill that role, considering how he'd stepped in and saved the day a couple of times already.

"You're welcome, Saint. I guess this is goodbye then."

She sounded so forlorn that his heart went out to her. "No, it's not." His voice was firm. "I never say goodbye to the people I plan on seeing again."

She gave a sad sounding chuckle. "I like the sound of that."

"The only reason I'm letting you go right now is so you can finish packing," he added, "but I expect to hear from you if anything — and I mean anything — weirds you out tonight, you hear?"

"Bossy," she shot back, sounding more like herself.

"Call it whatever you want, but I'm here for you, okay?"

"Thanks, Saint. For reals."

"Welcome." His voice was gruff.

"Sweet dreams."

"Night." If he had any dreams at all, they'd be of her. Guaranteed. He waited for her to disconnect the line, wanting to give her every sense that she was in control. She had enough things in her life that weren't in her control. He didn't want her connection to him to be one of those things.

He'd meant it when he said he intended to be there for her. He'd be there for her as much or as little as she wanted. It was her call. She could set whatever pace she wanted between them, and he'd follow her lead.

A knock sounded on the door of his apartment. He glanced at his cell phone, frowning. It was past ten o'clock. He couldn't imagine why anyone would seek out his company at this hour.

Unless there's a problem.

He strode across the room and stood by the door. "Who's there?"

“Prince,” his brother called back, sounding excited.

Saint yanked open the door. “Why aren’t you in bed?”

“Why aren’t you?” The thirteen-year-old lifted his chin and marched right in to the apartment. He was clutching a box in his arms.

“Because I was on the phone with someone,” Saint spluttered, wondering what the little punk was up to.

“With Jana, huh?” To his astonishment, his brother proceeded to make a few loud, annoying kissing sounds.

Saint scowled at him. “Have you met her?”

“No, but I know she makes the best cookies.” His younger brother marched across the room to plop his box on the bed.

Saint couldn’t have agreed more. “You’ve sampled her cookies? When?”

Prince scrunched up his freckled nose. “Few weeks ago, I guess. Some dope left a box of ‘em in the employee lounge in the barn. I ate all four that were left,” he bragged, looking hungry at the memory.

“So that’s what happened to them!” Saint had been wondering. By the time he’d returned from carrying Jana to the clinic that day, the entire box had disappeared.

“Aw! Were they yours, bro? ‘Cause I can try to give them back if you want.” He made a bunch of fake gagging sounds, like he was attempting to cough them back up.

Saint moved across the room to elbow him playfully. “Keep making sounds like that and you’ll never get a girlfriend.”

“Oh, that won’t be a problem now that I made the wrestling team, bro.” Prince brandished his spindly arms in the air and popped up his minuscule biceps. “Girls dig this stuff.”

“Dig what stuff?” Saint pretended to have to squint to see his brother’s muscle.

“Oh, that’s just cold.” Prince lowered his arm, shaking his head. “Makes me regret trying to help you out with your love

life and all.”

“What exactly did you have in mind?” Saint infused as much sarcasm into his voice as possible.

“Putting up a Christmas tree.” Prince flapped his arms like a bird as he waved at the sparsely furnished room. “This is a complete man cave. You need to soften the place up a little.”

Saint gave him a dirty look. “You say that like you don’t have smelly socks all over the floor of your room!”

“But I made the wrestling team, and you didn’t,” Prince reminded in a superior voice. “So, are you gonna help me put this tree together or what?” He yanked a spindly-looking pine branch out of the box and started assembling a miniature tree on the corner of Saint’s TV cabinet.

“Does Bree know you’re up here?” Saint leaned over the bed to peer inside the box. It contained an odd assortment of red ball ornaments, white acrylic snowflakes, and a very tangled ball of lights. He seriously doubted they were worth messing with.

“Yep. It’s Friday night, so I get to stay up ’til eleven.”

“Since when? You’re only thirteen!” Their mom had never afforded Saint those kinds of liberties when he was that age.

“Since the coolest people in the world decided to foster me!” Prince sounded so happy that Saint’s heart ached all over again for the things he’d suffered at the hands of his last foster family.

He had to swallow hard before answering. “Can’t deny that. Both Bree and Matt Romero seem really great.”

Prince jammed another branch into the rather odd shaped tree he was assembling. “Matt’s the best,” he bragged. “He checks my homework every night and helps me with the hardest math problems. I might even make the honor roll.” He sounded awed by the prospect.

“That’s really cool. We’re gonna celebrate big time when it happens, you hear?” Saint decided on the spot that he’d hit his

knees one more time tonight to send another round of thanks heavenward before rolling into bed.

“Maybe Jana will make more cookies to celebrate with us,” Prince suggested in a hopeful voice.

“I could certainly ask her.” Saint had every intention of doing so. Something told him that Jana wouldn’t mind one bit.

After watching Prince flounder through the tree assembly for another minute or two, Saint finally took pity on him. With a chuckle, he moved across the room to intervene. “Seems to me that the biggest branches should go on bottom and the smallest ones on top, eh?”

“Whatever!” Prince threw up his hands in disgust. “It’s your tree, bro.”

“Yeah, and the idea is to impress Jana with it, not scare her off for good.” Saint pulled out a few branches and stuck them in better spots. In no time, the tree took on a more balanced shape.

They fished through the ornaments together and ended up hanging all the red balls first. After adding only a few of the fat white snowflakes, the tree grew full.

“I’m not sure that wad of lights is worth tackling.” Saint eyed the tangled strands doubtfully.

“Oh, ye of little faith,” Prince scoffed. He sat down on the floor with the ball of lights and went to work untangling them.

While he made slow and steady progress, Saint plopped down in the leather recliner and fiddled on his phone, searching for anything he could find about Thomas Walford.

Jana was right. The most recent headlines of him were dated a good three to four weeks back. Like she’d said, he’d been in the news a lot until then, attending charity dinners and holiday galas on behalf of the wealthy Walfords. There was even a little speculation whether he was setting himself up to run for one of the state congressional openings during the upcoming election season.

While Saint was scrolling through one of Thomas's social media accounts, a breaking news announcement flashed into the top of the feed.

Atlanta mourns the loss of philanthropist Thomas Walford, who perished in a tragic yacht accident off the coast of Gasparilla Island.

Frowning, Saint hastily scanned the accompanying news article and was surprised to discover that the press release had been delayed for over three weeks, pending a police investigation for foul play. After a thorough examination of the evidence, it had since been determined that Thomas had been suffering from depression, following some recent personal troubles that were not stated in the article. It was additionally determined that he'd been under the influence of anti-depressants while sailing his yacht, and the side effects might have contributed to his failure to dock his boat before the storm that had ultimately claimed his life.

The article made Saint's concerns skyrocket on Jana's behalf. One thing was terribly clear at this point. Whoever had been terrorizing her in her own home wasn't Thomas Walford. It couldn't have been, since his body had been sitting in a morgue at the time.

New theory. Maybe Jana's stalker is someone who blames her for his death.

It would certainly amount to a powerful motive. Saint replayed the stalker's actions in his mind, trying to re-think them from this new point of view.

A shattered crystal clock could signify anything — from Thomas's time on earth running out to the fact that Jana had shattered their relationship by breaking things off with him.

Next, she'd found her amethyst ring in the trash. It might represent an opportunity lost. Or perhaps a relationship thrown away.

The dead bouquet of roses was the creepiest clue of all. The picture Saint had seen of it made him think of one of those dried up displays often found at gravesites.

“Hey! We’re supposed to be spending some quality bro time together,” Prince complained from his spot on the floor. “But all you’ve done is grunt at the last ten things I’ve said.”

“Sorry.” Saint abruptly turned off his phone. He could continue picking through Thomas Walford’s final hours on planet Earth later. “Whoa!” He eyed the nearly untangled strings of lights in awe. “You did it!”

“I know. I’m a genius.” Prince leaned over to the wall to plug in the first strand. The tiny multi-colored lights started to twinkle. “We probably shoulda put ‘em on the tree before we added the ornaments. It’ll be harder now.”

Saint made a scoffing sound as he stood. “Watch me!”

They knocked a few ornaments to the floor while adding the lights, but the red balls bounced unharmed to the rug. When they were finished, they found themselves staring at a halfway decent looking Christmas tree.

“Thanks, man.” Saint placed Prince in a playful headlock, which soon turned into a wrestling match. After he wore his younger brother out, he offered him a can of soda.

“Nah, I’ll just take a bottle of water,” Prince sighed, sounding much older than his thirteen years. “Gotta keep my weight down for wrestling.”

“Whatever! You look like you could use a little more meat on your bones.” Saint was definitely going to be asking Jana about making those cookies soon. Having Prince back in his life meant the world to him. He was going to do his part to fatten him up a little and make sure he had the best school year ever.

“As long as it’s muscle, bro,” Prince snickered. “Otherwise, coach will have me running laps nonstop between now and Christmas.”

CHAPTER 7: THE DANCE

Saint



Saint waited on the side of the gravel road as Harley Anderson rumbled closer in his classic blue Chevy pickup.

Saint had been surprised to learn that the grizzled old ranch hand was the uncle of the siblings who owned the ranch, Bree and Brody. He lived in one of the employee cabins on the premises. In an interesting twist of fate, he worked for them, not the other way around. Saint figured there was more to the story, but it wasn't his place to ask.

He pushed away from the fence as Harley feathered his brakes and came to a stop beside him.

“Morning, Saint.” Harley tipped his slouched Stetson at him. “You need something?”

He nodded. “I know I don't have any right to be asking for more favors, but—.”

“Spit it out, Saint.” Harley switched the piece of straw he was chewing from one side of his mouth to the other. “In case you forgot, I've got a purty gal to pick up from the airport.”

Not likely to forget that. “Really appreciate your help with that, man. I—”

“Before I forget,” Harley interrupted, “nice job of collaring that thief outside the B&B last night.”

Saint glanced away, feeling embarrassed. “Takes one to know one, I guess.”

“That's not what I meant.”

“It’s still a true statement.” Saint scowled as he turned back to Harley to meet his gaze squarely. “Listen, that guy knew me.”

The old ranch hand frowned thoughtfully. “I take it we’re still talking about the fellow who stiffed his waitress?”

“Yeah. He knew who I was and what I’d done. He knew I was on parole.”

“But you didn’t know him, eh?”

“Never laid eyes on him in my life.” Saint shook his head vehemently. “You don’t forget a face like that.” He lifted a hand in the air to indicate the man’s height. “Tall, extra thin, had a belt cinched in really tight to hold up his suit pants. Kind of gave off those Jack Skellington vibes...”

Harley gave a bark of laughter. “As in *A Nightmare Before Christmas*?”

Saint pointed his thumb and forefinger like a pistol at him. “Exactly.”

“I’ve seen the movie. Sounds like that fellow was a real freak show.”

Saint leaned closer to the truck, resting his hands on the door. “Can you get his name for me?”

Harley’s expression grew shuttered. “Depends on what you plan to do with that information.”

It was a fair question. Saint held his gaze pleadingly. “I’d like to figure out who he is and what he’s up to. I want to make sure he’s not gonna cause any trouble.” He glanced around them. “Folks around here have been too good to me.”

Harley nodded. “Then you won’t mind me sharing what I find out with Brody and Matt first?”

“Not at all. I’ve got nothing to hide from them. That guy, uh...” He didn’t want to hold any details back that might prove useful. “The woman he was with called him Theo. That’s all I know.”

“Okay, then. I’ll get you a name.” Harley gripped his steering wheel tighter. “Right after I go fetch your gal.”

My gal.

Though she didn’t belong to him yet, he’d sure spent a lot of time daydreaming about the possibilities lately. Lightly slapping the truck door with both hands, he stepped back. “Appreciate everything you’re doing for me. I don’t say that enough. I know I don’t deserve it.”

“Says who?” Harley growled. “You did your time. You paid your dues.”

“I hear what you’re saying, but...” Saint didn’t feel like the stains had been entirely erased from his soul and wasn’t sure they ever would be.

“No buts.” Harley’s voice was sharp. “If you’re having trouble forgiving yourself, join the club. You aren’t the only black sheep on this ranch, kid.”

His words dragged a chuckle out of Saint. “If you say so.” The kind acceptance in the senior cowboy’s gaze went a long way toward soothing the darkness inside him.

“You want my advice? Go talk to Preacher about your issues.”

“You mean the guy next door?” Saint glanced in the direction of the chapel on the opposite side of Anderson Ranch as K&G Security. He’d seen it from a distance, but he’d never darkened its doors.

“Yep. He’s real down to earth. You’d like him.”

“I, uh...didn’t figure they’d appreciate a guy like me coming inside a place like that.”

“Then you’d be wrong.” Harley’s voice was brusque. “Church is like a hospital for the heart. It’s more for folks like you and me than anyone else.”

“Huh.” Saint’s mouth twisted. “I never thought of it like that.” For the life of him, though, he had no idea why Harley was including himself in the equation.

Harley wagged a finger at him. “You want to impress that gal of yours? You should take her there for service in the morning.”

“I just might.” Though Saint had mixed feelings about going to church for himself, he didn’t mind inviting Jana. If nothing else, it would be something nice for them to do together.

Harley waved and drove off.

Since it was Saturday, Saint’s duties were lighter today. He was finished feeding and brushing down the horses long before Harley’s two-hour round-trip to the airport was finished. He shuffled his way from the barn toward the B&B to grab a cup of coffee in the kitchen while he waited.

“Yo, Saint!”

Saint glanced up to find Matt Romero jogging in his direction from the house. He slowed his steps to give the ranch manager time to catch up with him. The former Army Ranger was stacked like a body builder, not the kind of guy you wanted to offend in any way. Saint had every intention of remaining on his good side.

“Morning, boss.” Saint nodded respectfully at him.

The ranch manager snorted as he reached around Saint to hold open the door for him. “You ever going to get around to calling me Matt? Everyone else does, you know.”

“If that’s what you prefer.” It was all Saint could do to hold back adding a *sir* to his answer. Though they had to be about the same age, Matt had always impressed him as a *sir*. Probably because he oversaw the whole operation around them — the farm, the cattle herds, the B&B, and the adjacent clinic.

“I do.” Matt followed him into the kitchen and pulled the door shut behind him. “Brr!” He stomped the snow off of his boots.

Bree sailed in their direction. “Hi, Saint,” she sang out, stepping around him to slide her arms around her husband’s middle. “There you are!”

“Miss me?” He cuddled her close, splaying a hand across the rounded curve of her pregnant belly.

“Of course! You took off at the crack of dawn,” she chided, tipping her face up to his. He unashamedly sealed his mouth over hers in a very slow, very tender kiss.

Way to rub in your marital bliss! Saint blew out a breath and turned away, feeling lonelier and singler than ever as he headed toward the coffee dispenser.

Matt joined him moments later. “Harley called from the road and said you were looking to track down a name.”

Saint stared at the cup he was brewing. “I hope it’s nothing to worry about.” It didn’t feel like nothing, though.

“Theodore Walford.”

Saint’s head jerked Matt’s way at the familiar sounding last name. “Walford?”

“Yep.” Matt slid an empty cup beneath the second dispenser and pushed the button to start brewing. “From an old southern family. They’re loaded.”

Which made the guy’s attempt to leave without paying his bill make even less sense. Saint lifted his cup the moment it was full. Blowing on it, he took a sip and turned around to lean against the cabinet. “Not sure if there’s any connection, but Jana recently broke off a three-year relationship with a man by the name of Thomas Walford. He died a couple of months later in a yacht accident off the coast of Florida. Got caught in a storm. The article I read about it online blamed it on his depression meds.”

Matt’s expression was unreadable. “If Thomas Walford is from Atlanta like Theodore Walford is, it’s probably more than a coincidence.”

As Saint took another sip of his coffee, he had a sinking feeling that the two situations were very much related. He just didn’t know how yet. Theo Walford definitely bore looking into further.

“Tell you what.” Matt picked up his mug of coffee and turned around to lean against the cabinet beside Saint. “I’ll make sure our entire security team and staff get a copy of that photo you snapped of Walford last night.”

“You mean that dumb little selfie I took?” Saint gave him a crooked smile. “Like Grecia, I was just outside enjoying the winter weather.”

“That’s your story, huh?” Matt snickered.

“And I’m sticking to it.” It wasn’t Saint’s first rodeo. He knew how to cover his bases in terms of liability.

Matt cocked his head at him. “I’m beginning to see why you’re on K&G’s radar.”

Though Saint’s eyebrows rose in question, the ranch manager didn’t explain what he meant by that. “You’ve been awfully good for business this side of the fence, too. When the time comes, I hope you’ll consider a more permanent position with us before moving on to greener pastures.”

Saint gaped at him. “Are you serious, sir?” After an extra beat, he added, “I mean Matt.”

“What can I say?” Matt spread his hands, careful to keep his coffee balanced. “You’re a good fit around here. Literally everyone you work with says the same thing.”

Wow! Saint blew out a breath, feeling bowled over. “I really appreciate you saying that.”

“I mean it, too. We’re looking for some new hands on deck now that the Wilder twins are spending more time running their aerial spraying business.”

“I’ll, uh...yeah.” After fearing no one would want to hire him on permanently, it was kind of hard for Saint to wrap his brain around the fact that he might have to decide between two different job opportunities soon. “Thanks for keeping me in mind. Working here has been great. More than great!”

Matt looked satisfied with his response. “About the Walford situation, I’d appreciate you sharing anything more you find out about it, and I’ll do the same.”

“You bet.” Saint raised his coffee cup for emphasis. A glance at his watch told him it was nearing the time when Harley was supposed to return. “Glad I ran into you this morning.”

Matt lifted his coffee cup to acknowledge Saint’s words as Saint headed out to the waiting area at the front of the B&B.

Shayley was perched behind the check-in desk this morning. “Hey, Saint!” She swung her legs in front of the tall stool.

“Hey!” As he paced toward the front entrance, he continued sipping on his coffee. She didn’t ask what he was up to, making him wonder if she already knew. Word seemed to travel fast among the employees at Anderson Ranch.

The moment Harley’s ancient blue Chevy rumbled into view on the other side of the glass, she materialized at his side. “I’ll take that.” She swiped his near-empty coffee mug from his hands and angled her head at the door. “Go!”

Grinning his thanks at her, he headed outside and jogged to the truck to open Jana’s door for her.

“Saint!” She spun his way, looking like a million bucks in a white fur cloak and black high-heeled boots.

He’d promised himself that he’d let her set the boundaries for their relationship, so he waited until she reached for him before assisting her to the ground.

She stood on her tiptoes to slide her arms around his neck. “Are you glad to see me?” Her breath was warm against the side of his neck as she hugged him tightly.

“Yeah.” *Like you wouldn’t believe.* He hugged her back, awed at the fact that she didn’t mind being seen embracing him in public like this.

“I brought you a gift.” It was with great reluctance that she unwound her arms from around him and stepped back.

“You didn’t have to do that.” He mentally kicked himself for not considering the idea of purchasing some sort of gift for

her, too. His younger brother was right. He really needed to up his game in the romance department.

“I wanted to. Here. Help me get these upstairs.” She reached for his hand and dragged him around to the back of the pickup. Harley was already there, lowering the tailgate to reach for her suitcases. There were four of them — sleek black hard shell cases with cheerful red plaid bows tied to the top of each one.

Saint eyed them with interest, reaching for the handles of the two largest ones.

“You can piggyback the smaller ones to the bigger ones.” Harley helped him tether the carry-on bags to the larger suitcases Saint had lifted to the ground.

“You’re the best.” Jana thanked Harley by kissing his leathery cheek.

He grinned and waved at them as he hopped back in the truck to move it away from the front entrance.

Saint found himself playing bellhop, rolling Jana’s suitcases through the front doors and waiting for her to check-in and collect her room key. As soon as she rejoined him, he rolled her suitcases on toward the elevators.

She led the way, chattering a mile per minute. “I don’t enjoy flying very much, but I kept telling myself it would be worth it when I landed in Texas. It was definitely more practical than driving in this weather. I can’t believe how much snow you have on the ground.”

The elevator doors slid open, and she stepped inside.

Saint rolled her suitcases after her, drinking in the sight of her animated features and tumbling dark curls. She was truly the most stunning woman he’d ever laid eyes on.

Since she liked talking with her hands, his gaze was inevitably drawn to her freshly painted fingernails. She’d changed the colors again. On one hand, her nails were a solid red shade. On her other hand, they were a solid green.

“What do you think?” She held out her hands, wiggling her fingers.

He reached for her hands and tugged them closer to get a better look. “Let me guess. You couldn’t decide which color?” He lightly ran his thumbs over the tops of her hands before letting them go.

“You know me so well.” Her aquamarine eyes sparkled into his as she stepped closer to him.

The elevator doors rolled open again before he could say anything else.

She led him to her room and swiped her key card. “They put me in the same one as last time. Can you believe it?”

Saint was sure it was only a coincidence since the B&B was booked solid through Christmas. However, she didn’t let him get a word in. While he rolled her suitcases inside the room for her, she quickly moved on to the topic of his gift.

“Don’t laugh.” She gave him a mock look of warning as she pushed a red oblong box with a ridiculously frilly white bow into his hands.

“What’s this?” Though Saint didn’t laugh, he was smiling in puzzlement as he tugged on one end of the gauzy white ribbon to untie it.

“Open it, and you’ll find out.” Jana wrapped her hands around his upper arm as she watched him, longing to reach up and trail a finger down his aquiline nose. Her flawed hero was looking seriously gorgeous this morning in a long-sleeved gray t-shirt that stretched over his insanely ripped chest and shoulders. His blonde hair was in its usual carelessly tousled state that practically begged for her touch. To her frustration, though, he seemed completely unaware of the effect he was having on her. Despite all the hints she’d dropped, the guy had made exactly zero moves on her so far.

“I’m working on it, babe.” When Saint’s biceps flexed beneath her fingers, she squashed a delicious shiver. She couldn’t wait to have his well-corded arms around her again. She was sort of dying in anticipation. However, he was acting so reserved that she was starting to worry that everything she was feeling might be one-sided.

“Hurry!” she urged, tipping her head against his arm. She’d endlessly daydreamed about the day he would finally admit he had feelings for her. But what if he didn’t? What if she’d read way too much into his noble rescues? What if he was only being nice? It wasn’t as if she was the only female he’d rescued lately. He’d been just as kind and noble to that eighty-year-old woman on her birthday.

“I’m trying, but you’re distracting me.” He softened his words by winking at her as he removed the green vinyl book from its wrapping.

Her heart sang at the flash of...something glinting deep in his greenish-gray eyes. “Open it, and read the title,” she instructed breathlessly.

He opened the top flap and arched a single eyebrow at her. “The Book of Saint?”

“To be fair, I warned you I was going to do it.”

He thumbed to the first page. “Once upon a time,” he read, “there was a grumpy cowboy named Saint.” The glint in his eyes flared into green flames.

She caught her breath when he paused. “Keep reading,” she urged softly.

“Who met this really annoying romance author,” he continued huskily without looking at the page, “with bright orange nail polish and goofy cats painted on her big toes.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t remember writing that.”

He closed the book. “And she kept getting herself into really harrowing situations that required constant rescuing. The end.”

“No author would end a book on that note,” she protested.

“I’ll finish reading it later.” He stuffed it in his back pocket.

She made a face at him, a little disappointed that he didn’t want to keep reading it now. “Do you really find me that annoying?” His improvisation to her story was far from flattering.

“Very.” His expression grew hooded as he gazed down at her. “It’s Saturday, so I’ve got the rest of the day off. What do you want to do first?”

His casual tone didn’t sound the least bit like he was preparing to sweep her into his arms. Swallowing her disappointment, she asked, “Have you eaten breakfast yet?”

“Why? Are you hungry?”

His answer told her he’d probably eaten hours ago. Rising at the crack of dawn seemed to be one of those cowboy things. “A little,” she admitted. “I got up super early to head to the airport, and they don’t feed you much on the airplane.”

He angled his head toward the door. “If you want a full meal, we can storm the restaurant. If you want something lighter, we can raid the continental breakfast Bree has set up in the kitchen.”

Though Jana very much preferred the second option, she held back. “That’s probably only for employees.”

He covered the hand she had resting on his arm. “I’m under strict orders to do whatever it takes to keep the guests happy,” he teased.

She pouted up at him. “Is that all I am to you? A guest?”

His gaze dropped to her mouth. “A very annoying one. I thought we already established that.”

She drew back her fist and socked him lightly in the gut.

He pretended she’d knocked the wind clean out of him. “Come on.” He straightened, holding out a hand to her.

Her heart leaped as she took it. *Wow! We’re finally holding hands.* Though she didn’t want to read too much into it, it

certainly wasn't nothing.

He used it to tow her toward the door.

“Where are we going?” she inquired breathlessly.

“To the kitchen first. Then I've got someone I want you to meet.”

The moment they reached the hallway, he dropped her hand.

Disappointment clogged her throat. However, she took heart in the elevator when he leaned against the wall beside her. Their arms remained lightly pressed together during the short ride to the first floor.

Once they reached the kitchen, she deliberated over the spread of biscuits, cereal, yogurt, and fruit. It was a hard decision, but she finally selected a biscuit, a spoonful of three different flavors of homemade jam, and a fresh fruit cup.

Saint led her to an empty granite bar in the back of the room with a long line of stools rowed up behind it. “This is where the staff eats.” He waved her onto the nearest stool and gave her a hand as she climbed onto it.

Then he lounged beside her, resting his elbows back against the cabinet.

Jana popped a wedge of tangerine into her mouth. “Mmm!” She closed her eyes as she chewed. “It's such a perfect mix of sweet and tart. Like it's right off the tree.” She opened her eyes. “How is that even possible in December?”

“Greenhouse gardening.” He quirked a grin at her.

“Right here at Anderson Ranch?”

“Yep. It's one of Brody's special projects.” At her puzzled look, he explained, “He's one of the owners.”

“This is seriously the best tangerine I've ever tasted.” She took another bite. “Have you had one of them?”

He shrugged offhandedly. “Not this morning.”

“You have to try it.” She held a tangerine wedge out to him.

He reached for her hand and guided it to his mouth. His upper lip brushed against her fingertips as he took the wedge of fruit between his teeth.

She caught her breath at the intimate feel of feeding him. “Good?”

“Yeah.” He chewed and swallowed. “Real good.”

To her disappointment, he moved away from her, but only to go brew some coffee at the beverage bar. He fiddled with his cell phone while he was over there, then returned with two steaming cups.

“Just how you like it,” he promised, setting one of the cups in front of her with a flourish.

She leaned forward to give it a tentative sniff. “Oh, wow! Pumpkin syrup,” she sighed.

“Yep. Bree’s special recipe.”

Jana stared at him in amazement. “Is there anything *not* homemade around here?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Speaking of homemade,” he drawled, leaning back against the bar again. “A certain thirteen-year-old here on the ranch is a very big fan of your cookies.”

“Really? You shared them with someone else?” She glanced around the room eagerly. “Who?”

“Me!” A skinny boy swaggered into the room.

“Hi.” Jana smiled at him, wondering why he looked vaguely familiar. “I’m Jana.” She held out a hand.

He shook his mane of shaggy blonde hair back as he made his way across the room to shake it. “I’m Prince.” He angled his head at Saint. “His brother.”

“Oh! You’re related. Guess that’s how you sampled my cookies.” Jana glanced between the two of them, realizing that

was why the kid must have looked familiar. There was quite an age difference between them. She sensed a story there.

Saint scowled playfully at the teen. “He more or less helped himself to them.”

Prince jammed a thumb in Saint’s direction. “He left them laying out in broad daylight in a public place. I thought it was a free-for-all.”

Saint’s scowl deepened. “Only because I’d caught sight of a lovely guest facing off with a bull in the back pasture.”

“Lovely, eh?” She shot him a teasing look. “I thought you said I was annoying. Make up your mind!”

Prince glanced curiously between them. “Have you shown her your Christmas tree yet?”

“Nope.” Saint wadded up his beverage napkin and threw it at him. “She just got here.”

Prince caught the napkin in mid-air and finished tossing it toward the trash can in the middle of the room. It sank into the canister beside the preparation counter with a papery thud. He whooped in delight, leaning over to give his brother a high five.

“Show off,” Saint scoffed.

Prince beamed cockily. “In case you missed it, there was no rim involved, bro. That’s what you call a solid dunk.”

“Oh, yeah?” Saint swooped in on him to hook an arm around his neck. “Well, this is what you call a solid head rub.”

The two of them wrestled for a moment, making Prince’s plaid shirt ride up a few inches in the back.

Jana caught a glimpse of some scars there. She bit her lower lip, wondering what had caused them. Surgery? Some sort of accident?

Saint hastily yanked the tails of his brother’s shirt down. “Bottom line is,” he grinned as Prince dropped into a wrestling crouch and bounced around him some more, “we’d be happy

to join you if you decide to host another cookie making fest here in the kitchen.”

“Why not?” She spread her hands. “It’s the holidays.”

Prince gave a whoop of delight. Then he glanced at his watch and grew quiet. “Got a homework date with my foster dad. Guess I’d better head back to the house.”

“Tell him I said thanks.” Saint waved goodbye to him. “And if he ever needs a break from you, I can help out with your homework, too, you know.”

“Oh, really?” Prince shot him a withering look. “Thought you graduated with the dinosaurs.”

“Ha. Ha. Nice try, punk, but I’m the same age as Matt.”

“No, you’re not, old man. He’s only in his twenties.” When Saint made another dive for him, Prince danced out of the way and ran out the door, laughing uproariously.

“Late twenties,” Saint growled, returning to the bar where Jana was still seated. “I’m only thirty, not *that* much older than him.”

“It’s okay, old man,” she teased, repeating his brother’s words as she reached out to pat his cheek. “We can still be friends. I’m twenty-seven myself, in case you’re wondering.”

He reached up to hold her hand against his face for an extended moment. “It’s nice to know I have one ally in the world, at least.”

She wasn’t exactly gunning to fill that role, but she thoroughly enjoyed the scrape of his mid-morning shadow against her fingers. “About that Christmas tree you were supposed to show me,” she reminded as she slid down from her stool.

“Right.” With a lazy grin at her, Saint helped her clean up her spot at the bar. Then he beckoned her to follow him. They strolled outside together, down a sidewalk toward the horse barn.

She shivered and stepped closer to him.

“Cold?” He slid an arm around her shoulders.

She snuggled against his side, feeling instantly warmer. Unfortunately, it was only a short walk to the barn. Once inside, he dropped his arm from her again as he led her down the aisle between the horse stalls to a stairwell in the back.

“This way.” He lightly touched her lower back as he guided her up the stairs. At the top was a narrow hallway that ran alongside the loft railing overlooking the horse stalls below. There were two identical doors, one on each end of the hallway. Saint led her to the one on the rear side of the barn.

He unlocked it and ushered her inside.

Stepping across the threshold, she gazed around at the tidy studio apartment. “This is where you live?”

“Yep.” He pointed toward the TV cabinet. “And that’s the Christmas tree Prince helped me decorate.”

“Aww!” She drank in the miniature tree with its twinkling multi-colored lights. “It’s very festive. He did good.”

“I’ll tell him you said that.” There was an awkward pause as they stared at each other.

Jana’s patience finally snapped. She was beyond tired of them dancing around each other. She stepped directly in front of him and slid her arms around his waist.

“I’m really looking forward to spending Christmas with you, Saint.”

His arms slowly came around her. “Me, too.”

Then why are you holding back?

She reached up to touch his face, wondering how he could’ve missed every last hint she’d been giving him. “I’ve been counting the days until I got to see you again.”

He turned his face into her hand. “Yeah, I know the feeling.”

“Do you?” She tipped her face up to his, longing for him to say more.

“You have no idea, Jana.” He closed his eyes as he nuzzled her palm.

“Then tell me,” she urged.

He raised his head. “You sure you know what you’re doing?” he rasped.

“I’m a romance author,” she reminded. “What do you think?”

“Honestly? I don’t know what to think. That’s why I promised myself to let you set the pace between us.” The color in his face deepened as he spoke.

She blinked at him, blushing as she processed his words. If she understood him correctly, he was waiting for her to make the first move.

She slowly rose to her tiptoes and brought her mouth closer to his. “Do you want to kiss me, Saint?”

“Yeah.” His voice was husky with longing.

She stretched a little further to touch her lips to his.

Though she could feel the suppressed energy in him, he didn’t immediately devour her. He slowly nipped at her lips, drawing out their first kiss with an excruciating brand of tenderness.

“Saint,” she breathed, pressing closer to him.

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Jana.” He spoke against her lips. “You know that, right?”

“I do now,” she whispered. “It’s the first time we’ve spoken about...us.” She’d wanted to, though. Oh, how she’d wanted to!

“Us,” he repeated, experimentally dragging his mouth across hers again. “You sure that’s what you want, Jana?”

“Yes.” Her knees grew weak at the admission.

He raised his head, frowning in concern down at her. “You know what I am.”

“My very own hero.” She studied him dreamily from beneath her lashes.

For once, he didn’t argue the fact. “Maybe you’re right.” Hope glowed deep in his gaze. “When I’m with you, anything feels possible.”

“When I’m with you, I feel cherished.” She touched her lips to his again. “Special. Safe. And I don’t ever want to *not* feel that way again, Saint.”

“If you’re sure about this, babe...” He swooped in to claim her lips at long last, deepening their kiss and making her heart soar to places it had never been before.

CHAPTER 8: OUT WITH THE OLD

Jana



Jana felt like laughing and crying at the same time. Her connection to Saint was so real. So strong. So potent. All the fears and uncertainties she'd grappled with in recent days faded. It was difficult to tell where she ended and he began as they clung to each other.

After a while, he reached up to rub his thumbs across the soft skin beneath her eyes. "I didn't mean to make you cry."

"They're happy tears, Saint." She gave him a tremulous smile. "I hope you don't mind them too much. Maybe it's the romance author in me, but I'm a very emotional creature. It's like I *extra* feel everything."

"You've been making me feel a lot of things lately, too." He slid his hands into her hair, threading his long fingers through her curls. "Babe, you got under my skin the first time we met." He leaned in to kiss her forehead. "And stayed there."

They stood there, just holding each other and soaking in the wonder of being together.

"Want to watch a movie or something?" he finally asked.

"Absolutely! Which one do you have in mind?" She adored the idea of staying inside where it was toasty warm. She also wanted to spend more time with him, to have a chance to get to know him better.

"How about we just surf channels and find something?" He backed toward the leather recliner, tugging her along with

him. “There’s gotta be a Christmas movie or two showing this time of year.”

She giggled when he took a seat and pulled her into his lap, dangling her legs over the side of the chair.

He reached for the remote control and pointed it at the TV. The screen flashed to life. He surfed channels for a few seconds. “I stopped a guy last night from driving away without paying for his dinner at the B&B.”

“Are you serious?” She straightened in his lap to meet his gaze, wondering how in the world he could keep insisting he wasn’t a hero. Every time she turned around, he was doing something insanely brave.

“Yeah.” He pressed a thumb to the edge of his mouth, as if trying to hide a smile. “To be honest, I was bored. Harley had me covering the check-in booth, and there wasn’t much action up there. I was sort of scanning the room, thinking like a criminal...”

He paused when she chuckled.

“I don’t know why that doesn’t scare you more.” He shook his head at her.

“You should see my search history on my laptop.” She giggled. “I seriously wouldn’t be shocked if the FBI swooped in on me someday and hauled me off for questioning.”

He tapped her nose. “You have a good excuse since you write bestselling fiction.”

“You have a pretty decent excuse yourself,” she pointed out, “since you stopped a robbery.”

His eyes twinkled. “About that...Grecia Stephens was the security guard on duty last night. She backed me up 100% and made sure the guy didn’t weasel out of paying. Afterward, she talked to me about job opportunities at K&G Security where she works.”

Jana’s lips parted in amazement. “That’s so wonderful, Saint!” From the way he was shaking his head, she could only presume that the conversation had caught him off guard.

“Can you imagine me doing something like that?” He studied her seriously, clearly anxious to hear her answer.

“Totally!”

“Thanks.” His expression lit. “Then this morning, my boss, Matt, made some noises about offering me a full-time position at the ranch.” He grimaced. “After, uh...”

“You should do it,” she said quickly.

He raised his eyebrows at her. “Which one do you think I should take?”

She shrugged. “Whichever one makes you the happiest.”

He tipped his head back against the recliner. “Being with you makes me the happiest.”

It felt more like a statement than a question. “I can write anywhere, Saint,” she informed him softly.

He hitched her closer, tumbling her against his chest. “Including Texas?”

“For sure.” She couldn’t believe they were actually talking about the future — *their* future together. “Atlanta has gotten awfully creepy lately. I’m honestly in no hurry to go back.” She was silent for a moment, not sure how to broach the next subject with him. She finally decided to take the plunge and get it over with.

“Thomas is dead.” She watched the strong lines of his face for a reaction. The two of them had long since stopped paying attention to whatever was showing on TV.

“I know, babe.”

“You do?” That surprised her since the news had just gone public.

“Yeah.” His gaze narrowed on hers. “There’s something else you should know. That guy who tried to stiff his waitress last night at the B&B was Theo Walford.”

She gasped. “That’s Thomas’s older brother!” She bit her lower lip. “Half-brother, actually. Theo never got along with his stepdad. He took off with his trust fund the day he turned

twenty-one and headed west to leave his own mark on the world.”

Saint reached out to tweak one of her curls. “Do you happen to know where he ended up?”

“Right here in Texas. He owns businesses all over the panhandle.” She gave a humorless huff of laughter. “From what I understand, they’re plagued with problems. If it’s got the letters TW in front of its name, it’s probably got half a dozen lawsuits filed against it.” She ticked the list off on her fingers. “TW Storage, TW Waste Management, TW Home Lenders, TW Construction...”

Saint jolted at the mention of the last company. “He owns TW Construction, eh?”

She nodded. “Have you heard of it?”

“You could say that.” His voice was bitter. “I used to work for them.”

“Whoa!” Her eyes rounded. “Small world.”

“Full of small-minded people,” he growled. “They blamed me when some supplies went missing. Fired me right when Mom’s health started going down hill. Dad took off, leaving her without health insurance. I was all she and Prince had left.”

Jana’s heart wrenched in sympathy for everything his family had been through. “Is that when you started, er...?”
Robbing?

“Yeah.” His upper lip curled at the memory. “It was a bad idea, I know, but I wasn’t thinking straight at the time. Mom was dying, and I was desperate for money to cover her medical expenses, so I decided to become the very thing I’d been accused of. Why not? My termination from TW Construction had made me virtually unhireable.” His gaze grew cold as he dispassionately recounted what she imagined was one of the darkest, most painful times in his life.

She sat motionless in his lap, just listening.

“I made a point of targeting all the high-end houses I’d worked on. I already knew their layouts, how their security systems were set up, that sort of thing. It was almost too easy to rob ‘em blind.” His voice grew bitter. “As a side perk, it blew back on TW Construction and cost them a bunch of contracts. Word on the street was that the string of thefts were inside jobs, which they were in a way. Felt like poetic justice. They ruined my life, so I gave them a black eye in return.”

When he grew silent, she whispered, “I’m sorry, Saint. Sorry for what you went through. For everything your family suffered.”

The look he gave her was hard to read. “Does anything I’ve told you change the way you feel about me?”

“No.” She leaned her head against his shoulder, snuggling closer.

“I wouldn’t blame you if it did.” He buried his face in her hair.

“You made it right in the end, Saint. Yes, you made some mistakes, but your moral compass pointed you back in the right direction.”

He grunted. “I had a praying grandmother. Maybe that had something to do with yanking me back on the right path.”

“I’m sure it did.” She smiled against his shoulder. “You’re a good person. Better than you give yourself credit for.”

His arms tightened around her. “I’m humbled that you see anything in me worth loving.” He barked out a dry laugh. “Sorry about using the L word. It, uh...sort of slipped out.”

“I’m not sorry.” She burrowed closer. “Because it’s true.”

“Jana.” He tipped her chin up so he could scan her features. “Did you just...?”

“Yes. I love you, Saint.” Her heart felt like it was racing a thousand beats per minute as she laid it bare for him to see. “I love your bravery, your strength, and the way you make me feel. I don’t know if you feel even half of what I feel in return, but—”

“You’re kidding, right?” He covered her hand with his and held it against his chest. “My heart beats for you, baby. Ever since that runaway horse dropped you into my arms.”

“I thought you said I annoyed you.” She leaned closer to bump noses with him.

“Please don’t ever stop,” he rasped against her lips.

Their mouths seamed together in a wordless promise. Then he drew back a little to gaze at her in wonder.

“Does this mean you love me, too, Saint?” she whispered.

“With everything in me, babe.” He smoothed a stray curl back from her face. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

“Including listening to me read a few paragraphs from the Book of Saint?”

He shook his head incredulously at her. “The whole time you were threatening to write me into your next book, I thought you were joking. And then you went and did it.”

She propped an elbow on his shoulder and lowered her chin to her hand. “I wanted you to be able to see yourself through my eyes.”

He caressed her cheek. “You are, without a doubt, the most incredible person I’ve ever met.”

“Is that a yes on a little book reading time together?” she inquired pertly.

With a snort of surrender, he shifted in the chair to pull the green vinyl book from his back pocket. “Knock yourself out, babe.”

She recited the first line from heart. “Once upon a time, there was a grumpy cowboy named Saint.” Then she glanced down at the first page. “Each morning, he rolled out of bed before the sun burst over the horizon, so he could feed, exercise, and brush down all the horses on the ranch where he worked. He knew every one of them by name, and they knew him in return — from the sound of his footsteps, to the firm but gentle way he fastened on their bridles, to the loneliness they could sense in his heart.”

Saint studied her with fascination. “Could you really tell I was lonely when we first met?”

“Of course.” She felt a little like she was drowning in the greenish-gray depths of his eyes. “Loneliness recognizes loneliness.”

“You were lonely, too?” He looked surprised.

“Writing is solitary work,” she reminded.

“I thought you said you liked being alone.”

She tried to explain. “I like being alone on an open trail during a hike through the canyons. I like outlining the next chapter of my book inside my head, uninterrupted. I don’t like returning home to an empty apartment and having no one to tell about my day.” She gestured helplessly. “Even when I was dating Thomas, I felt alone. I didn’t understand why at the time. But when you’re not with the right person, you’re alone. You just are.”

“And now you’re not,” he finished quietly.

“And now I’m not.” She leaned closer to press her cheek against his.

He held her like he was never going to let her go. “We’re an unlikely pair, aren’t we?”

“What do you mean?”

“A romance author and a robber.”

“A reformed one,” she corrected, not wanting to hear him call himself that.

When he turned to nuzzle her cheek, she could feel his smile against her skin. “If you can handle having a very flawed hero in your life, babe, I’m all yours.”

She smiled. “All mine,” she agreed. It felt like she’d waited a lot longer than a few weeks to hear him say that.

Later that evening, Jana stared at the screen of her laptop without really seeing it. She wasn't too happy about her agent's recent lack of backbone. Nobody should have to spend the holidays trying to slap together a last-minute book proposal. Holidays were for friends and family. Christmas, in particular, was for celebrating the birth of her Lord and Savior. It was wildly inconsiderate to ask her to increase her work hours at a time like this. Her publisher could've easily waited until after the New Year. She seriously doubted they would even bother reading whatever she submitted before then.

“You know what? I'm just going to get it over with. Tonight. Now.” She wanted to spend the next two weeks with Saint — not slaving away at her keyboard. Blinking at the screen, she forced herself to reread the outline she'd written back in Atlanta, along with the three sample chapters she'd drafted on the plane ride to Texas. They weren't the best few pages she'd ever written, but they certainly weren't her worst, either. She spent the next hour polishing them to the best of her ability, even running the document through spellcheck and grammar check. It didn't need to be perfect. It simply needed to be good.

When she was finished, she was looking at a solid storyline with a fresh twist or two and plenty of wrong turns to keep her readers guessing. Before she could change her mind, she attached it to an email, along with the draft of her three sample chapters, and sent them to her agent.

“Merry Christmas to me,” she murmured, shutting down her computer. Determined to give herself the gift of a real holiday vacation, she actually might not open her computer again until she returned to Atlanta.

After showering and changing into her PJs, she laid down on the comfy patchwork quilt in the center of the bed and stared up at the ceiling. Though she was tired, sleep hadn't come easily to her lately, and tonight was no exception. Her mind was too full of thoughts — sadness over the way Thomas's life had been cut short, a teensy bit of guilt over any contribution their breakup might've had to his depression, and

a swarm of butterflies in her stomach over all the wonderful things that had happened between her and Saint today.

He was *the one*. She was sure of it. Everything about their relationship felt right. They truly cared for each other. And because of the long, winding paths each of their lives had taken to reach this moment, they truly appreciated what they'd found together.

When Jana's eyelids finally started to droop, her cell phone vibrated on the nightstand, jostling her back awake. Reaching groggily for it, she held it up to squint at the screen.

A message from Saint awaited her. *Want to attend church with me in the morning?*

She smiled. It was one question she didn't have to even think about. She typed a single word answer. *Yes*. She was a little surprised that he'd asked. Nothing in their many conversations had ever indicated that he was a church goer.

Haven't been in years, he wrote back. But Harley recommended the chapel next door, and I've been wanting to check it out. There was a short pause before he added, *with you.*

She smiled and typed the first thing that came to her mind. *It's a date.* She added an emoji blowing a kiss.

Saint: *I'm assuming that's an IOU, because I intend to collect the real thing from you in the morning.*

Jana: *What time?*

She needed to know what time to be ready for church, but she also enjoyed the double meaning he was sure to read into her response.

Saint: *Coffee and kisses at 8:00. Chapel starts at 9:00.*

She fell asleep with her cell phone cradled against her chest and a smile on her lips.

Sunday

Saint rolled out of bed, wondering what he'd been thinking when he'd invited Jana to attend church with him this morning. She was probably going to see him as a complete fraud when he showed up without a Bible. *Shoot!* He didn't even own one.

Or a suit. Or anything that remotely resembled dressing up. He settled for donning a freshly pressed black-and-white plaid shirt, tucking it in, and buckling his nicest belt buckle over it — a two-toned cameo with a longhorn steer riding in the center of it.

Stepping into his black boots and tossing on a black leather jacket, he deemed himself as dressed up as he was capable of pulling off with his limited wardrobe.

Striding across the frozen yard, he entered the waiting area of the B&B. The familiar blast of warmth from the fire met him, along with a whole new feeling — pride laced with wonder. His favorite romance author was standing in front of the stacked stone fireplace in a long-sleeved gold corduroy dress that fell just above her knees. She'd paired it with black tights and high-heeled black boots. Her white fur cloak from yesterday was draped over one arm.

“Wow!” Like a moth drawn to a flame, he cut the shortest path to her. He had no idea how many curious employees were watching them, and he didn't care. Her opinion was the only one that mattered to him.

“You're so beautiful.” He rested his hands on her tiny waist, gazing in amazement down at her.

She hooked an arm around his neck, claiming him as her own. “Morning, cowboy!”

Her eager kiss lit the deepest, darkest parts of his heart.

He kissed her back. “I love you, Jana.” If such a thing were even possible, he loved her more today than he had yesterday. It was a feeling that just kept growing.

“I love you, too, Saint.” She drew back a little. “Now that you've collected your IOU, I'm holding you to your promise

of coffee.”

He unhooked her arm from around his neck and laced their fingers together. Backing toward the silver swing door to the kitchen, he pulled her after him.

While he made her coffee exactly the way she liked it, she chatted happily about the submission she'd sent to her agent at the crack of midnight. “If she doesn't like it, I'm gonna be half-tempted to fire her,” she concluded.

He smirked as he handed her cup of coffee to her. “Harsh! I like it.”

“Yes, it's a little drastic, but I'm so ready for a change, Saint.” Jana's lush lips flat-lined. As usual, they were sparkling with lip gloss. “Like it's time to step off the rat wheel. I'm beginning to wonder if that's the source of my writer's block. I've been dutifully churning out what my publisher wants instead of writing what I want.”

He reached out to tweak one of her flyaway curls, loving the way it gave a little boing as it bounced back into place. “Once you get a taste for flawed heroes, there's no going back, huh?”

“Absolutely no going back,” she agreed, drenching him with another smile. Her smiles were like magic. They always felt like they were lighting him from the inside out.

Crew swaggered past them and greeted Saint with a mellow punch on the shoulder. Saint mumbled something back without taking his gaze off Jana.

He watched her sip her coffee. “You ready to take off?” He'd been so busy enjoying her company, he'd entirely forgotten to make himself a cup.

“Just as soon as I finish this.” She held it out to him. “Want to help a girl out?”

Without considering how much creamer he'd stirred into it, he took a long, slow drag of it. “Whew!” He lowered the cup, blowing out his breath. “Guess I could taste a little coffee in there somewhere behind all that creamer.”

“It’s a la Jana,” she informed him loftily. “Your new favorite, remember?”

“In that case...” He braved another sip, a much tinier one that made her chuckle.

“At least you tried.” She finished it off. “E for Effort.”

“That’s awfully close to an F,” he grumbled.

“I’ll sweeten the deal with a consolation kiss,” she offered.

“Now you’re talking.” He held up her cloak for her to shrug into. Then he steered her out the side exit.

Harley had been kind enough to lend them his old Chevy pickup. He’d subsequently turned down Saint’s offer to join them, assuring him he preferred to play the third wheel to his own son, Crew, and future daughter-in-law, Grecia.

“Not sure why he’s diddling with their wedding date,” he’d ended sourly. “He should just go on and marry her.”

Saint suspected he knew the reason, though he didn’t bother setting Harley straight. Crew was probably close to finishing out his parole sentence. He didn’t blame the guy for wanting to head into his marriage free and clear of that weight.

To his delight, Jana shimmied to the center of the truck seat and rode right next to him.

Though they were only going a short distance, he slung his arm around her and drove slowly, enjoying every second of the ride. It had been years since he’d last owned a vehicle, but he probably needed to start looking into purchasing one soon.

Thanks to his mom’s life insurance policy, he had plenty of money. He hadn’t touched a penny of it yet, preferring to save most of it for Prince’s college education. He hadn’t even known she had a life insurance policy until after she’d passed away.

“You’re awfully quiet all of a sudden.” Jana snuggled closer to get his attention. “What’s on your mind?”

“Buying a vehicle.” He glanced down at her. “What kind do you think I should get?”

She pursed her lips, making him long to kiss her again. “You strike me as a truck man.”

“That’s a broad category. Can you narrow it down a little?” He was truly interested in her opinion on the matter.

“You and this classic Chevy fit well together.” She glanced around the tidy cab. Harley clearly babied the thing. “Don’t know if Harley would be willing to part with it, though.”

He shrugged. “I could ask. I imagine he’d at least point me in the direction of where he got it.”

“I like beautiful old things,” she admitted with a sigh. “Country cabins, patchwork quilts, rag rugs, apple-scented candles. I’m not sure why I’ve stayed in Atlanta for so long. I guess because my grandmother raised me there, but I’ve never been a city girl at heart.”

He winked at her. “Texas is a big state. There’s plenty of room here for a country gal at heart.”

She was silent for a moment. “If you can find a realtor who’s not on vacation this week, I might be interested in looking around town to see what’s available.”

His eyebrows rose to the ceiling as he pulled into the chapel parking lot. “I’ll, uh...ask around for you, babe.”

“Thanks.” She gazed with interest at the building. “Pretty. I was expecting something older, though, when you called it a chapel.”

He hurried to fill in those details for her. “According to Harley, it used to serve as a salvage yard office, with three attached auto bays.” You’d never know it, though, from its current adobe white walls, candlelit windows, and steeple rising toward the clouds. A pair of pine wreaths were mounted to the double front doors.

Saint felt a sense of awe as he led Jana into the newly renovated building. Since it was wall-to-wall with people, he scooted her into the first two empty spots he found together. They were near the back of the sanctuary, right on the center aisle.

The service began only minutes later. Since it was plenty warm inside, he helped Jana shrug out of her cloak. He took off his jacket, as well, and draped them together over the seat back.

She reached for his hand during the opening prayer.

A guy with a guitar strapped over his shoulder stepped on stage and led them in a few Christmas carols, Mary Did You Know and Hark the Herald Angels Sing.

Saint listened to Jana's alto singing voice, entranced to discover she had yet another talent. He could've listened to her sing all day long.

The minister stepped forward next with a Bible in hand. He was a dark-skinned guy with kind eyes and a conversational tone of voice that immediately put Saint at ease. He'd been expecting a man in a suit with a sing-song voice. Instead, he found himself staring at a cowboy in blue jeans and a button-up shirt. No tie. There was no pulpit in sight, either.

"I'm Jeremy Morgan, and I'm glad you're here. For those who are doing an official countdown, there are fifteen days left until Christmas."

There were a few muted cheers across the room.

He grinned. "Yeah, those are the ones with kids or grandkids. Or those of you who are kids at heart."

That comment drew a few chuckles.

He opened his Bible. "If you brought a Bible with you, turn to the Book of Second Corinthians, chapter five, verse seventeen." While he waited for people to finish turning pages, he glanced around the room. "I know the holidays have gotten awfully commercialized in recent years, but the biggest message of Christmas is one of hope."

A flash of movement caught Saint's eye. Jana had pulled out her cell phone and opened a Bible app, of all things. *Clever!* She scrolled to the verse the preacher had mentioned.

“Let’s read together.” Jeremy Morgan lifted his Bible higher. *“Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!”*

He closed his Bible. “I’ll say it a different way. Those who follow Christ leave the old behind and embrace the new. It’s as simple as that.”

Simple? Never before had anyone described living for the Lord as simple. Saint had always thought of church goers as people who lived by an exhaustingly long list of rules. However, Jeremy Morgan hadn’t pulled out a list or recited any rules. He also didn’t look like he intended to keep his audience seated while he delivered a nauseatingly long sermon. If anything, he looked and sounded like he was ready to conclude his ridiculously short message.

“If you have an old life you’re ready to leave behind,” the cowboy preacher continued, “I’d like to pray with you this morning. Why not let this Christmas season be the start of your new beginning? Anyone can pray this prayer. Trust me. There’s nothing in your life that’s too hard for God to fix, heal, or forgive.”

Saint bowed his head. If turning over a new leaf was as simple as the young preacher claimed, then he was all in. He had more reasons than ever to let go of the old and embrace the new.

Jana squeezed his hand as they prayed together. It felt a little like what a reptile must go through when shedding its skin. When they were finished praying, Saint’s heart felt lighter and cleaner.

“If you prayed this prayer with me, welcome to your new beginning.” Jeremy Morgan’s smile was full of empathy. “My staff and I will be in the front of the room if you have any questions or if there’s something more specific you’d like us to pray with you about. Enjoy the rest of your Sunday!”

“Welcome to your new beginning, Saint.” Jana’s voice was soft in his ear.

“Our new beginning,” he corrected, lifting her hand to his lips.

“Our new beginning,” she repeated dreamily.

CHAPTER 9: THE LEAK

Saint



Monday

Saint woke before dawn like he always did. To his surprise, a message from Jana was already waiting for him.

I've royally screwed up! Please don't hate me.

Shaking his head, he wrote her back. *That's not possible. What's up?*

Jana: *I accidentally emailed the Book of Saint to my agent instead of what I was supposed to!!!*

Saint: *Aww! Were you offered a movie deal because of me?*

Jana: *This is serious!*

Apparently, there was no movie deal. Because their text messaging was getting a little long, he asked, *Mind if I call you?*

Jana: *Yes, please!*

He rang her.

“Oh, Saint!” She sounded so full of despair that his heart went out to her. “There’s no excuse for what I did. I was just so anxious to get this project crossed off my to-do list that I got careless.”

“How bad can it be, babe?” He couldn’t imagine anyone being all that impressed with her story about a super grumpy cowboy. Surely, flawed heroes weren’t in that big of a demand!

“Very bad!” Her voice was full of doom and gloom. “I feel so betrayed. My agent knew I was writing the Book of Saint for your eyes alone. The only reason I told her about it was because it helped pull me out of my writing slump. I figured that would make her happy. She should’ve known it was a mistake when I sent it to her. The story didn’t match one thing I’d typed in my outline for the new project.”

“How exactly did she betray you?” Saint felt like he was still missing a big chunk of the story.

“She forwarded the Book of Saint chapters to my publisher, who is now demanding to see the rest of the book. The Book of Saint, mind you, not the project I wanted to pitch to them.”

“If you don’t want to do it, tell them no.” Saint wasn’t sure what the big deal was.

“It’s worse than that.” He could hear her shudder. “Someone — either my agent or the publisher...I’m not sure which — leaked the Book of Saint to the public. It’s like they’re trying to arm my audience against me or something. Apparently, they have so many readers requesting the rest of the story now that they think I have no choice but to deliver it.”

“You can still tell them no,” he repeated firmly. “You still have your walk-away power. The only person who can give that up is you.”

“The only way I could simply walk away from my publishing contract is if I cancel the lease on my apartment. There’s no way I could afford to maintain a place like that without a guaranteed income.”

He still didn’t see the problem. Wasn’t she considering moving to Texas, anyway? He searched for the right words to convince her to remain in the driver’s seat with her career.

“I know it’s a big decision, but cancelling your lease certainly wouldn’t break my heart.”

“I may have to, regardless.” Jana drew a shaky breath. “My clock-shattering, ring-hiding, dead-flower-delivering

stalker is back.”

“What?” His voice rose several decibels.

“Yeah, I had an anonymous email waiting for me this morning, accusing me of dumping Thomas so I could chase after the grumpy cowboy in my book. He says he knows the grumpy cowboy is based on a real person. For that reason, he’s going to punish us both for Thomas’s untimely death.”

How can he possibly know the grumpy cowboy is a real person? Saint’s suspicions kicked into overdrive. “Did he give any specific details as to what he’s planning?”

“No. That was it. I’ll show you the email as soon as I see you.”

Saint’s anger flared. “He’s clearly threatening us. We should report him to the police.”

“But we don’t know even who he is!”

“Let the police worry about that, babe.”

“Okay. I seriously doubt they’ll do anything, though,” she sighed.

“I’m not sure it’s a good idea for you to be alone right now.” His mind raced over his schedule for the day. “I’ll talk to my boss and see what we can do to ratchet up security around the B&B.”

“As much as I appreciate you saying that, I’m not exactly their problem.” She sounded weary.

“You’re my girlfriend. That makes you my concern,” he said flatly. “Plus, you’re a guest at Anderson Ranch. That makes you their concern.”

“I’m really sorry about all of this,” she muttered. “I can’t help feeling like it’s my fault. If I’d just paid more attention to what I was sending to my agent.”

“You’re kidding, right?” He couldn’t believe she was blaming herself. “No way are you responsible for Thomas Walford’s death. Whoever is claiming otherwise is a total

creep. Not to mention a coward for terrorizing an innocent woman.”

“I wonder if the person who wrote the email is the gal Thomas cheated on me with,” she mused, sounding miserable. “If he was truly depressed about our breakup, that couldn’t have set well with her.”

“Do you know who she is?”

“Not personally, but I’ve got a name, and they were in a bunch of paparazzi photos together.”

“Tell that to the police. They can look into it.”

“Um...okay.” She drew a deep breath. “I’ve never had to call the police for anything before.”

“There’s a deputy who hangs around the steakhouse quite a bit, and everyone seems to know him. I’ll find out who he is. Might be a good idea for us to start with him.”

“Okay.” She sounded nervous. “Guess I’ll just wait to hear back from you before I do anything, then.”

“It’ll be this morning,” he promised. “Please don’t go anywhere alone until we figure this out.”

“I won’t. Believe me. I’m too much of a coward to deliberately flirt with danger. I can’t tell you how glad I am *not* to be in Atlanta right now.”

“That makes two of us.”

Saint rushed through his morning chores. Then he jogged across the dark, snowy yard to Matt Romero’s office. He wasn’t sure if the guy would even be at his desk yet, but there was only one way to find out.

A light was on behind the sunroom windows that served as the ranch office. It was attached to the farmhouse adjacent to the B&B.

Saint gave a few raps on the door before entering — not because it was required but because he didn't want to startle whoever was inside by simply barging in.

Matt's dark head was bent over his computer when Saint cracked open the door. He glanced up and nodded at him. "Come in."

Saint stepped inside the room and quietly shut the door. It was a crowded room, jammed end-to-end with desks and filing cabinets. "Listen, I know you don't owe me any favors..." Far from it. Saint was 1000% in the guy's debt for accepting him into the highly sought after work release program at Anderson Ranch.

"What's going on, Saint?" Matt rolled his chair a few inches back from his desk. "If it concerns you, it concerns me." Since a small desk lamp was the only light in the room, his Hispanic features were partially in the shadows. However, his tone invited Saint to be flat out honest with him.

"Jana received a threatening email, and I think it's because of me."

Matt straightened in his chair. "Can you elaborate on that?"

Saint told him everything he knew, then asked for the name of the deputy he'd seen hanging out at the B&B restaurant.

By the time he finished, Matt's mouth was quirked in a grin. "She actually wrote you into one of her books?"

Saint glanced away. "Like I said, it was a private joke. No one else was supposed to see it." It was way too bad Jana's agent had broken her confidence. He didn't blame her one bit for wanting to fire the woman.

Matt rolled his chair closer to his desk, bringing his face back into the light. "Can I just throw this into the conversation? You seem a lot happier since you started dating Jana."

"I am." Saint didn't bother asking how his boss knew they were officially dating. It wasn't as if he and Jana had been

overly subtle about the fact they were in a relationship.

“You were already doing well in the program. Exceeding everyone’s expectations.”

“Thanks.” Saint ducked his head in embarrassment.

“Not gonna lie, though. You were pretty cranky for a while there with everyone except the horses. But that all changed when Jana came along. She’s been bringing out the best in you ever since.”

Saint dragged in a breath. “I love her,” he confessed. “Heaven knows I don’t deserve her, but...” He waved his hands, searching for the right words. Jana owned his heart, plain and simple.

“Love isn’t something you deserve.” The hard line of Matt’s jaw softened. “You just accept it, embrace it, and thank God every day for it.”

“I have been.” Matt was such an easy guy to talk to that Saint didn’t mind baring his soul a little with him.

His boss’s gaze glinted with curiosity. “While we’re on the topic, I heard you made it to chapel.”

Saint snorted. “Is there anything I do that *doesn’t* get reported back to you?”

“Nope.” Matt’s voice was matter-of-fact. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re like one big family around here. It’s next to impossible to keep secrets from each other.” He shook a finger at Saint. “So don’t be offended if I square folks away on the threat Jana received. If that joker dares step foot on Anderson Ranch, it’ll be best to have as many eyes and ears as possible on the situation.”

“I’d appreciate that, and so would Jana.” Saint felt confident about speaking for both of them.

“The deputy’s name you’re looking for is Emmitt McCarty.” Matt’s brown gaze raked over him. “With as much time as he spends at Anderson Ranch, I’m actually surprised the two of you haven’t met yet.”

Saint shrugged sheepishly. “I tend to make myself scarce when I see a badge. Old habit.”

Matt nodded in understanding. “You might want to make an exception for this guy. He’s worth having on speed dial, if you know what I mean.”

Not really. “Speed dial?” Saint repeated his words to make sure he’d heard them correctly.

“It’s a small town,” Matt reminded, “and he happens to be part of the family I mentioned.”

Wow! Okay. If anyone had told Saint a few months ago that he’d be getting friendly with a cop, he’d have told them they were crazy.

Matt chuckled. “You should see the look on your face.” He wrote something on a sticky note and held it out to Saint.

Saint mechanically accepted it.

“That’s his cell number. By the time you call him, I’ll have already shot a text his way, letting him know he’ll be hearing from you.”

Saint stared at the number scrawled across the sticky note. “Guess you weren’t kidding about having him on speed dial.”

“Nope.” Matt already had his cell phone out, typing. He held it up for Saint to see him hit the SEND button. “Tag. You’re it.”

Saint waved the sticky note at him as he backed toward the door. “I really appreciate this.”

“No problem.” Though Matt was making it sound like it was no big deal, they both knew it was.

An entire hour passed before Saint called back. Jana eagerly snatched her cell phone off the bed, accepted the call, and held it up to her ear. “Oh, my goodness! I was wondering when I was going to hear back from you.”

“How do you feel about a cop joining us on our next coffee date?”

Her heart sped in anticipation. “When?”

“Now.”

“Now?” she squeaked, glancing down at the sweatpants she’d slept in. It was barely daylight outside.

“In five or ten minutes, tops.” She could hear the grin in his voice. “He’s on his way. Name is Deputy Emmitt McCarty. He’s friends with everyone on staff. More like family from what Matt made it sound like.”

“That’s, um...great.” As soon as she ended their call, she moved to her suitcase, which was propped open on the silver stand inside the closet. Rummaging around for something to wear, she settled on a pine green sweater and a pair of ivory jeans. Since it was almost Christmas, she’d pretty much only packed holiday colors. Half of her fingernails were painted red, and half were painted green, so they matched, too.

As usual, her hair had a mind of its own. On a whim, she attempted to pull it back into a ponytail instead of simply defrizzing it. Cocking her head at herself in the bathroom mirror, she decided she liked it. At the very least, it was fun and flirty enough to put her in a better mood.

A knock sounded on the door while she was applying a coat of lip gloss. “Coming!” She slipped her feet into sassy high-heeled ankle boots as she rounded the corner of the bathroom.

Only because she’d been so jumpy all morning did she remember to glance through the peep hole first. To her relief, Saint was standing on the other side of the door.

She hastily undid the deadbolt and pulled it open.

He stepped inside and immediately took her in his arms. “Cute ponytail.” He nuzzled his way from her earlobe to the corner of her mouth. “Not sure why you bother wearing lip gloss all the time, since you know I’m only going to kiss it off.”

Without waiting for her to answer, he hungrily sealed his mouth over hers and proceeded to smear her lip gloss to Kingdom Come.

She slid her arms around his neck, hugging him close. After being on pins and needles for the past hour or so, being with him made her world tilt back in the right direction.

“Got the cop’s number for you to put on speed dial,” he informed her before crushing their lips together a second time.

She smiled against his mouth when he finally broke off their kiss. “You’re seriously telling me to put another guy on speed dial?”

“He’s married,” Saint clarified gruffly, “and it’s only for emergencies. Feel free to call me for everything else, babe.”

“You mean annoy you about everything else.”

“Same difference.” He leaned his forehead against hers for a moment. “I’m kind of addicted to your lip gloss.”

“Why do you think I keep wearing it around you?” she teased.

He kissed her again. “I’m falling so hard for you that it’s...” He stopped as if searching for the right word.

“Annoying,” she supplied with a giggle.

“Close enough.” He reached for her hand. “Let’s go. We have a cop waiting for us downstairs and you look...” He reached out to tuck a curl behind her ear as he studied her with pure male satisfaction. “Well kissed.”

“Oh! That reminds me.” She snatched up the purse she’d almost forgotten about on her way out the door.

As soon as they stepped inside the elevator, she made a big show of pulling her lip gloss out of her purse and applying another liberal coat of it. She smacked her lips and everything.

“You’re a cruel, cruel woman,” Saint grumbled, watching her.

She moved closer to him with the tub of lip gloss and pretended like she was about to apply a coat on him.

In one swift movement, he pinned her shoulders against the back wall of the elevator. “There’s only one way you’ll get that on me, babe.” He hovered his mouth suggestively over hers.

Sadly, the elevator doors rolled open before he could make good on his threat.

As they walked hand-in-hand across the lobby, he rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth, presumably to remove any remaining traces of her lip gloss from their previous kiss.

“Did you rub off my kiss?” she hissed.

“Nah, I was just rubbing it in better.” He winked at her.

She was still laughing when he ushered her into the kitchen. A man in a uniform was waiting for them on one of the bar stools in the back.

He stood and held out a hand when Saint led her up to him. “I’m Emmitt.” He was a tall, dark-haired guy with a Stetson pulled low on his forehead. A well clipped goatee covered the lower half of his face.

“I’m Jana Marlowe.” She shook his hand. “And this is Saint Riley.” She glanced shyly up at Saint. “My boyfriend.”

Emmitt’s gaze glinted with curiosity and interest as he and Saint shook hands. “I’ve seen you around. Heard a bunch of good things about you, too.”

Saint nodded without smiling. Considering his past, Jana could only imagine how the deputy’s comment made him feel.

Emmitt motioned for them to take a seat on the stools across from him. “Saint told me a little about your situation over the phone. That said, why don’t you pretend I don’t know anything and start from the beginning?”

So she did. “The creepy stuff that happened in my apartment sort of started it all.”

He nodded slowly. “It sounds like it happened around the same time your ex-boyfriend died.”

“I guess so.” Her eyes widened as she made the connection. “I didn’t know about his passing, of course, until it hit the news a few weeks later.”

“It’s a pretty personal set of threats,” he mused. “Logic says it’s someone close to the situation.”

She mulled over his words. “Well, whoever it was had a key to my apartment.”

He drummed his fingers on the bar between them. “I wouldn’t mind seeing a list of friends you and Thomas shared.”

“That’s the thing.” She shook her head. “We really didn’t share many contacts.”

“Even after dating each other for three years?” The deputy looked like he wasn’t sure he believed her.

“I know how it must sound.” She grimaced. “But I live a pretty reclusive life, and he didn’t seem too anxious to introduce me to his family. I always figured it was because of my lack of pedigree.”

“You’re a bestselling author,” he reminded, looking taken aback.

“I know.” She spread her hands. “Unless you’ve lived in the Deep South, it’s hard to explain, but there are a few big founding families there. Four to five generations of them. Old money. You’re either a part of them or you’re not. You can get a ticket into their social circle by dating one of them, but you’ll never be fully accepted by them. Ever.”

“I see.” Emmitt fiddled with his phone for a moment. “Here’s a photo I just found of a statue made to commemorate the first Walford in Atlanta.” He held it up for her and Saint to see.

“It’s located in Town Square.” Jana pursed her lips. “It’s been there for over a hundred years.” It had been repaired and updated a number of times.

Emmitt resumed fiddling with his phone. Something he found made him scowl. “Looks like that old family money you

mentioned has all but dried up.”

“That doesn’t sound right.” She stared in puzzlement at him. “The Walfords are seriously loaded. We’re talking mansions, luxury cars, swans swimming on the lake, that sort of thing...”

Emmitt shook his head. “Not sure how much longer those swans are going to stick around. According to the article I’m reading, the latest generation of Walfords made some bad investments and are in debt up to their eyeballs. All except the stepson, Theodore, who left town to do his own thing. Oh, wait! No, he’s in trouble, too.” He scrolled through the article. “Sounds like he’s facing a class action suit from some investors. According to the allegations, he’s been skimming from his business accounts for years, costing the shareholders millions in profit. Or so they claim. He’s countersuing a few key employees, but it’s not looking good for him.”

Jana reached for Saint’s hand beneath the bar. “Saint, this might be a good time to share what happened to you at TW Construction.”

His expression darkened. “I used to work there,” he informed the deputy. “Eh, you probably already know the next part of my story.”

“I understand the gist of it, but pretend like I don’t.” Emmitt gestured for him to continue.

“Roger that. I didn’t know the Walfords by name at the time. All I knew was that I got blamed for some supplies that went missing, and I lost my job over it.” He glanced away. “It’s not something I’m proud of, but I wanted to make them pay for punishing me for something I didn’t do. So I did. Over the next year-and-a-half, ninety-nine percent of the places I robbed were affiliated with TW Construction — customers, suppliers, and third-party contractors. I kicked enough dirt in their direction that they started losing contracts. Big ones.”

Emmitt let out a low whistle. “This article makes a vague reference to that part of the company’s history, but the writer more or less blamed Theo for every drop of his misfortune.”

He glanced up from his phone to catch Jana's gaze. "What about you, Jana? Did you ever meet Theo?"

She carefully considered the question. "Only once. Thomas and I ran into him at a local library where I'd sponsored a book basket for a fundraiser. Though Thomas introduced us, he acted surprised to see Theo there. He didn't seem too happy about it, either. Theo struck me as a bit of an oddball. Super tall and skinny. Almost sickly looking. He made some joking comment about whether he'd get a wedding invitation. It was awkward, considering we weren't even engaged."

Saint held up his cell phone to her. "Recognize this guy?"

To her surprise, he was holding up a selfie of him and Theo.

"It's him. How'd you end up in a picture together?"

"He's the same guy who tried to leave the restaurant without paying the other night."

Her stomach twisted with alarm. "So, Theo is in town? Why?"

"I'm working on a theory," Emmitt drawled, "but it's not one you're going to like."

"If it matches my theory, you're right." Saint's voice was flat. "I don't like it one bit."

Jana glanced between the two of them, sighing. "The crime writer in me says Theo Walford checks all the boxes of the villain we've been trying to identify."

"Yep." Emmitt's expression was grave. "It's possible he blames you for his stepbrother's demise. It's equally possible he blames Saint for the tailspin TW Construction ended up in. Finding out you two are romantically involved would've only added fuel to that fire."

"Thomas cheated on me." Her voice shook. "And Theo framed Saint for something he didn't do at the worst possible time in his life."

“Not saying the thug is justified in whatever burr he’s got under his collar. Far from it!” Emmitt laid his phone face down on the cabinet. “Just trying to get inside his twisted head to start peeling back the layers. Anything that might shed light on his next move. In case you’re wondering, Theo has an entire team of attorneys defending him. Some of the best in the country.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Saint shook his head.

“And he’s killing time between now and his court hearing by hanging out here in town.” Jana shivered. “Seems kind of dumb to draw attention to himself like that at the steakhouse. It’s like he’s deliberately trying to get on our radar.”

Emmitt shrugged. “Either that, or he’s gotten away with this junk for so long that he thinks he’s untouchable. Think about it.”

“What do we do next?” Jana pressed a hand to her midsection, feeling sick.

“We put everyone on alert.” Emmitt looked grim. “Then we watch and wait.”

“What about his threatening email?” Saint looked incensed. “Isn’t that enough to bring him in for questioning, at least?”

“Not unless we can tie him to it somehow.” Emmitt didn’t look any happier about it than Saint did. “We have a guy on staff who might be able to trace the IP address of the email, but that’s a big maybe. There are things people can do to make emails virtually untraceable.”

“So, that’s it?” Saint abruptly dropped Jana’s hand. Leaping from his stool, he started to pace the long kitchen. “We’re gonna just sit around and do nothing, while that creep continues to terrorize the woman I love?”

Emmitt gazed after him, looking more understanding than offended. “I get that it feels like that right now, but I promise we’ll be using every resource available to tie this thug to the threat Jana received.” He stood and squared his shoulders. “In the meantime...patience, my friend. Let the wheels of justice

turn this time.” His meaning was clear. He was warning Saint not to do anything stupid.

Jana watched as every shade of anger worked its way across Saint’s mottled features.

She stood and moved to his side, touching his arm. “I have an idea.” She wasn’t sure he’d go for it, but it was worth a try.

He reached up to cover her hand. “Listening.”

“Let’s reach out to Jeremy Morgan.”

His blonde eyebrows rose. “The preacher?”

“Good idea,” Emmitt cut in quickly. “In case you weren’t aware, he’s my partner.”

“He’s a cop, too?” Jana stared at him in surprise. She hadn’t seen than one coming.

“A good one.” Emmitt’s nod was firm. “They don’t make ‘em any finer.”

“Fine. Let’s go have a word with him.” Saint caught Jana’s gaze and angled his head toward the side exit. “Harley said we could use his truck any time. Even gave me a copy of his keys.” His hard gaze softened as he spoke of the senior ranch hand’s kindness.

Jana held out a hand to Emmitt, appreciating the time he’d spent with them. “Thanks for agreeing to meet with us. I know you’re doing everything you can to help.” She hated knowing Saint probably didn’t agree with that statement, but she believed it with all of her heart.

The deputy shook her hand. “I’ll be in touch. Until then, remain vigilant.” He tipped his hat at her.

She stifled a shiver, knowing it was his way of telling her to watch her back.

A white food truck was pulled up to the side of the B&B, nearly blocking the door as she and Saint stepped outside.

His cell phone vibrated with an incoming message as they squeezed past the long truck bed. “What now?” He reached for it. Whatever he read made him give a huff of irritation. “Looks

like Emmitt wants to have a quick word with me about something.”

“Really?” She glanced over her shoulder. “We were just in there.”

“Alone,” he growled as he led her toward Harley’s truck. “Probably wants to remind me one more time not to do anything stupid.” He opened the driver’s door, which Harley had left unlocked, and assisted her into the cab. “Lock the door behind you. I’ll be right back.”

“Gladly,” she promised. “I love you.”

“Love you, too.” He shut the door and pointed at the lock.

She nodded and reached over to mash it down. It looked like a small black golf tee. Then she leaned over to do the same to the passenger door lock. It didn’t budge. With a sigh, she scooted closer to jimmy with it and discovered it was solidly jammed into place.

“Oh, for crying out loud!” As she jiggled it a few more times, she caught a sliver of movement out of the corner of her eye.

She glanced up and found a trio of deer grazing about ten yards away from the truck. “Oh, you beautiful things!” As she continued to jiggle halfheartedly on the lock, she reached for her cell phone, held it up, and pushed the record button.

A shadow fell over her as someone moved around to the passenger side of the truck.

She glanced up, surprised at how quickly Saint had returned, but it wasn’t him. Her heart thudded in alarm as she recognized the gaunt features of Theo Walford. Oddly enough, he was wearing a white food service uniform.

As he attempted to open the passenger door, she let go of her cell phone and reached for the handle, pulling on it with all her might to keep him out of the truck. She even managed to wedge a foot against the dashboard for leverage. However, his strength proved to be greater than hers.

The door was wrenched from her grasp, making her topple toward the ground.

Theo caught her arms, breaking her fall.

“No!” She wrestled viciously with him as he finishing pulling her out of the truck. “You’ll never get away with this. The police are already on to you!”

He yanked her back against his chest. Then a damp cloth was pressed against her mouth and nose.

The world around her grew dark.

CHAPTER 10: TEXAS TOUGH

Saint



Saint stalked across the kitchen, wondering where in the world Deputy Emmitt McCarty was and why he was being so difficult to track down. The guy had just finished warning them to be vigilant, and here he was pulling Saint away from the one person in the world he was supposed to be protecting.

Chef Bree Romero stepped out of her office at the far end of the kitchen, swinging a pair of red hand mitts against her jean-clad thigh. “Hey, Saint! How’s it going?” She was up early as usual, going through her morning routine of popping bread and biscuits in the ovens.

He nodded at her. “Looking for Emmitt McCarty. Have you seen him?”

Looking worried, she shook her head, making her long, blonde ponytail swing around her shoulders. “No, I just got here. Is everything okay?”

“I hope so. He said he wanted to talk to me alone.” He strode toward the silver swing door leading into the dining room.

“That’s weird.” She followed him. “I can’t imagine Emmitt requesting to talk to you without telling me, Matt, or Brody first.”

He paused at the door, impatient to keep moving. However, Bree had always been so nice to him that he hated to leave her hanging. “Matt’s the one who put me in touch with him. Jana received a threatening email earlier, and, uh...” He

pushed open the door. “If you don’t mind, it might be best if I catch up with the deputy first and explain everything later.”

“Okay.” Continuing to look worried, she trailed behind him at a slower pace as he glanced around the dining room in search of Emmitt.

Not seeing him anywhere, Saint hurried across the lobby and peered out the double glass doors. He was just in time to watch the taillights of Emmitt’s cruiser disappearing down the driveway.

What in the—? He pushed open the doors and stepped outside, swinging his head from side to side. Catching sight of the passenger door of Harley’s truck hanging open, he broke into a run.

“Jana,” he hollered at the top of his lungs. Reaching the truck, he found it was empty. He slapped his hands on both sides of the open door, wondering where Jana could’ve gone.

A dark shadow on the ground at his feet made him bend down to take a closer look. It was a damp piece of cloth. He held it beneath his nose and gave it a tentative sniff. A wave of lightheadedness rocked him.

Holy smokes! His brain went to the worst possible place. Had his girlfriend been drugged? Abducted?

Pushing dizzily away from the truck, he spun in a half-circle, taking in the details of his surroundings. The first thing he noticed was that the food truck was gone.

“No!” He panted through another wave of lightheadedness that had nothing to do with the chemical clinging to the cloth in his hand.

Lifting his cell phone, he mashed the speed dial button for Deputy Emmitt McCarty. He’d set the officer up in his contacts list only an hour or so earlier, never dreaming he’d have cause to use it so soon.

The deputy picked up right away. “What’s going on, Saint?”

“Did you text me a few minutes ago, telling me you needed to speak with me alone?”

“No. Why?”

Saint groaned, knocking his Stetson from his head as he fisted a hand in his hair. “He took her.” He sank to one knee on the frozen ground, fighting to catch his breath. “Right beneath our noses.”

“What are you talking about?”

Saint’s breathing had become more of a wheeze. “There was a food truck parked outside the kitchen. We had to walk around it on our way to Harley’s truck. Then I got that text from you.”

“Not me,” Emmitt insisted.

“Short version is, I left Jana alone.” It was the stupidest decision he’d ever made. “Told her to lock herself in the truck, and I’d be right back. The moment I saw your taillights heading down the road, I knew something was wrong. When I got back to the truck, I found the passenger door open and a piece of cloth on the ground. Whatever is on it made me dizzy.”

“I’m turning around.” Emmitt’s voice was tight with concern.

Saint could hear the wail of police sirens. Moments later, Emmitt was sprinting across the sidewalk toward him.

Saint felt like he was losing his mind as Emmitt shone a flashlight on the ground and searched for clues.

“Did you see the food truck on your way out or in?” Though they had no proof, it was possible Jana had been abducted inside that very truck.

“No. It must have left the ranch right before I did.” Emmitt continued to search the ground.

“The Walfords took everything from me,” Saint rasped, hating how helpless he felt. “Everything!” It was anyone’s guess if his mother would’ve won her battle with her failing health if she could’ve received proper medical treatment

sooner. His own subsequent spiral into a life of crime had cost him his custody of his younger brother, who'd been sorely abused in foster care. And now Jana was gone.

“We’re going to catch whoever is behind this,” Emmett promised. “You have my word.”

Considering that Jana was missing, Saint wasn’t inclined to put much faith in anything anyone said at the moment. He listened dully as Emmitt called in reinforcements. The side lawn between the B&B and ranch house was soon flashing with emergency vehicle lights. The sheriff arrived and issued an APB for the white food truck.

Like a hawk, he swooped in on Saint next. “I’m Sheriff Cade Malone.” He skipped the niceties and didn’t bother shaking Saint’s hand. Instead, he proceeded to grill him mercilessly about the events leading up to Jana’s disappearance.

No stranger to interrogations, Saint very much appreciated the rugged Scotsman’s no-nonsense approach. His shaggy auburn beard and fierce green eyes glinting from beneath his Stetson made him look like he meant business. His questions felt like carving knives, peeling back the ugliest details about Saint’s past and present.

A slender man in a dark pinstriped suit was glued to his side. His eyes looked demon black in the morning shadows. Though he didn’t speak, his gaze raked over Saint as he answered each of the sheriff’s questions.

Saint handed over the piece of black cloth. Both Cade Malone and the dark-eyed creature at his side took a quick whiff of it.

“Roofenol.” The man in the suit produced a clear plastic bag and dropped the cloth inside.

Saint’s head spun between the two men. “Are you saying she was roofied?” The first rays of sun spilled over the horizon, making him squint to continue watching their expressions.

The dark-haired man nodded. As he crouched down to examine the ground around the truck, Saint caught sight of a bracelet circling his ankle beneath the cuff of his trousers.

He stared pointedly at the bracelet. “Who are you?” Unless he was mistaken, a convict was working in conjunction with the local police. Outside of the movies, he’d never heard of such a thing.

“Jude Westfield.” The man’s voice was low and without emotion as he continued his meticulous examination of the ground. “There’s something else down here, sheriff.” He produced a handkerchief and used it to retrieve a rectangular white and pink object.

“It’s her cell phone.” Without thinking, Saint reached for it, but Jude held it away from him.

“It’s still recording,” he announced coolly. “This should be interesting.”

The way the lawmen kept Saint within arm’s reach made him wonder if they considered him to be a suspect in Jana’s abduction. On the upside, he was standing within hearing distance when they paused the recording on Jana’s phone and played it back.

He heard her soft, musical voice crooning silliness to the creatures on the other side of the truck window. “You beautiful, beautiful things. Miracles in motion. I should write a mama deer and her Bambi into my next book.” Then her tone abruptly changed. “You!” There was a clatter as the phone fell from her hand, then female panting as she presumably fought to keep her assailant out of the truck. The sound on the recording changed, and she shouted in a fearful voice, “you’ll never get away with this. The police are already on to you!” Then the recording faded to silence once again. It remained silent until the crunch of Saint’s boots sounded in the hard-packed snow. His phone call to Emmitt came next, then the sirens.

“It’s him.” Saint felt dead on the inside. “We knew it was him.” It was the most difficult element of the law — the

inability of innocent people to do anything until after the crimes against them had been committed.

A dark-skinned man in uniform materialized beside Saint. "I'm Officer Jeremy Morgan." He pushed back his beige Stetson and held out a gloved hand. "Not sure if you remember me from the chapel."

"I do." Saint briefly clasped his hand.

"I'm praying for Jana's quick restoration to us," he assuredly quietly.

"Not sure your prayers will do any good at this point, Preacher." As far as Saint was concerned, they'd come too late.

Jeremy met Emmitt's gaze, and the two partners seemed to exchange a silent message. "Walk with me." Jeremy motioned for Saint to step away from the group of emergency vehicles.

Saint jammed his hands in the pockets of his jeans as they moved toward the back pasture together. "What's up?"

"I can only imagine what's going through your head right now." Jeremy's voice was low and without censure.

"I'm angry," Saint admitted.

"That's understandable."

"And I'm desperately tired of losing." The taste of defeat crept across Saint's tongue at the realization that he wasn't even free to hit the road and help search for Jana. His movements were still very much constrained by his parole sentence.

Jeremy gave him a sideways glance. "At the risk of getting slugged, I'm going to say something to you that you may not want to hear."

Saint felt his face turn red. "I've never assaulted a police officer before." Just because he'd been to jail didn't mean he was guilty of everything.

"Can we please lay that stuff aside?" There was a sigh in Jeremy's voice. "I'm speaking to you as a friend right now.

Man to man. Or at least preacher to new convert.”

Saint belted out a humorless laugh. “Is that how you see me?” He didn’t feel the least bit like cracking open a Bible at the moment. He was too mad at everyone, including God. He glanced up at the sky, wondering why He allowed bad things to keep happening to him and his family.

“Hey, you prayed that prayer with me yesterday,” Jeremy reminded. “It looked sincere from where I was standing.”

“That was yesterday.” It felt like years ago. The hope Saint had experienced during those few moments was entirely gone.

“It was,” Jeremy agreed, “but the promises that are yours as a follower of Christ are still in play. Today. Right now.”

“What do you mean?” Saint viciously kicked at a pebble on the ground, sending it careening across the snowy landscape.

“To quote an ancient king from the Book of Psalms, *I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging for bread.*”

Saint snorted. “If you think you’re speaking to a righteous man, you’re sorely mistaken.” He was scarred from the inside out. Even Jana lovingly referred to him as her flawed hero.

“Am I?” Jeremy’s voice was mild. “Here’s another promise for those who believe. This one is from the Book of Hebrews. *For He Himself has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you.* That means you’re not alone with your anger and frustration right now.”

Saint wasn’t sure what he believed at the moment, but he’d be lying if he didn’t admit that Jeremy’s kind words were making him feel a little less alone in his misery.

“Since you haven’t yet started slugging at me for sounding too preacherly, here’s one more quote. Book of Romans this time. *For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God.*”

Saint shook his head in befuddlement at the officer. “I don’t know what half of that means. I just hope you’re not telling me to say goodbye to her.” His voice broke. “Because I can’t do it.” He’d rather die.

“Not even!” Jeremy’s boots ground to a halt. “That was actually my way of trying to bolster your hopes, because you’re on the winning team now.”

Saint faced him, squaring his shoulders. “It doesn’t feel like we’re winning.”

“You can’t always go by your feelings. Not with stuff like this.” Jeremy paused and seemed to be searching for the right words. “Do you like baseball?”

Saint shrugged. “I played a few years of Little League.” He wasn’t sure what that had to do with anything.

“So, you know what a ninth inning comeback is, right?”

Saint shrugged again. “It’s when the other team suffers a major setback. Bullpen collapse, that sort of thing.”

“And the losing team pulls the game out of the dust, puts some unexpected points on the board, and wins the game.” Jeremy dusted his gloved hands. “That’s what we’re praying for this morning, Saint. I know it looks bad, but if a bunch of dusty, sweaty baseball players can pull off a ninth inning comeback, just think of what the Creator of the universe is capable of doing.”

“Thanks.” Saint nodded, wanting more than anything to believe what the young preacher was saying. If nothing else, the guy had helped him calm down enough to breathe normally again. And to think.

He took a step away from the officer, then turned back impulsively. “I think this thug is gonna make a ransom demand. It’s the only thing that makes sense. He’s a financial fraudster. A con man. A thief. He has no history of violent crimes. Well...until now.” He drew a ragged breath.

Jeremy nodded slowly. “True, and he put her to sleep before abducting her. He didn’t employ...other methods.”

Saint knew he was referring to violence. “Which means we have every reason to think she’s still alive.” *For now.* The unspoken words lay heavy in the air between them.

An encrypted email arrived on Saint’s phone within the hour. It contained a recorded message. Whoever it was had used a voice distortion device, giving his words a robotic quality.

Apparently, Theo Walford was under the mistaken impression that the law enforcement community was still in the dark concerning his identity.

You won’t be able to buy your way out of this one, loser!

Saint could only hope and pray that the police would recover Jana before Theo Walford realized just how badly he’d screwed up this time. His whole crooked empire was unraveling. Instead of facing his many failures, however, he was looking for someone to blame. To punish. It underscored his growing desperation, and desperate men did desperate things.

Like abduct my girlfriend.

The recording droned on, demanding that two hundred and fifty thousand dollars be wired to an international bank within twelve hours. An account number with twenty-two digits was given. It contained a mix of letters and numbers.

“That’s an interesting amount,” the sheriff muttered.

To Saint, however, it made perfect sense. It was the exact amount of his mother’s life insurance payout. He wondered how long it would take the law enforcement team to figure that out. He certainly wasn’t volunteering the information until he heard the kidnapper’s full list of demands. If the situation boiled down to a matter of dollars and cents, he intended to give the thug what he wanted, no matter what the police advised.

The robotic voice requested an additional five thousand dollars in unmarked twenty-dollar bills to “the beginning of

the end”. It was a strange request that wasn’t followed up with a physical address, though he was very specific in his demands that it be delivered unarmed and alone.

“He’s just playing games now.” The sheriff shook his head, looking grim as he adjusted something on his headset.

The police had commandeered the Anderson Ranch home office for their central planning zone. The sunroom was literally crawling with uniforms — deputies, the sheriff, Jude Westfield, and a handful of K&G Security guards. Grecia was among them.

She elbowed her way through the bodies to hand Saint a cardboard cup of coffee. It had a black plastic lid capped over it and a tiny coffee straw poking out of it. “Black as tar for the extra kick you’re probably needing about now.” Her voice was infused with sympathy.

He nodded gratefully at her as he accepted the coffee.

She stood by him, watching and listening as the sheriff played back the ransom request for the umpteenth time. He and Jude had Saint’s cell phone hooked up to a number of devices on Matt’s desk.

“My gut says he’s stalling.” The sheriff shook his head in disgust.

Or delivering a message meant for my ears alone.

Saint’s shoulders tensed as he mulled over the kidnapper’s strange choice of words. *The beginning of the end.* From his angle, TW Construction’s problems had begun with the misappropriation of supplies that they’d blamed on Saint. Saint’s subsequent venture into crime was what had ultimately brought the company to its knees, but it had cost them far more than the two hundred and fifty thousand dollars that Theo was currently demanding. The only thing the ransom would truly accomplish was that it would bankrupt Saint Riley once and for all. This was personal.

“There.” Jude stopped the recording. “The sound gets louder toward the end. Let’s remove the voice and amplify what’s happening in the background.”

“It’s a grain dispenser,” the sheriff declared. “Any farm boy could tell you that.”

“That doesn’t exactly narrow things down.” Frowning, Emmitt leaned over the desk. “There are probably thousands of them in the panhandle alone.”

Yes, it does narrow things down.

The truth sank home to Saint, nearly making him choke on the sip of coffee he’d just taken.

Grecia gave him an odd look. “You alright over there?”

He nodded, wiping his mouth on the back of his sleeve. As soon as Sheriff Cade Malone had mentioned the grain dispenser, he’d known exactly where Theo was holding Jana. It actually made a warped sort of sense. The thug had taken her to the first place Saint had robbed — one of the biggest granaries in the panhandle.

The sheriff was right about him playing games at this point, too. Saint seriously doubted that Theo gave two hoots about whether anyone showed up with five thousand dollars in twenties. He’d just said that to throw off the authorities. What he really wanted was...

Me.

Unarmed, alone, and ready to accept whatever punishment he was planning.

For me and Jana.

Saint leaned closer to Grecia. “Is there a restroom nearby, or should I head back to the horse barn for a pit stop?”

She pointed toward the pocket doors leading into the house. “Second door on the left.”

“Thanks.” He quietly maneuvered his way across the crowded room and disappeared inside the house. Without looking back, he traversed the rustic ranch-style home, stepping over woven rugs and past folded quilts draped over sofas and chairs. He could smell a fresh cobbler cooling somewhere nearby.

In a few seconds, he found what he was looking for — a side exit facing the horse barn. He stepped outside and broke into a run. Once inside the barn, he swiftly saddled the fastest horse in the stable, a white stallion named Rapture.

He walked him toward the rear barn door, which was slid half open. Reaching the riding ring, he dug in his heels. “Come on, boy!” Leaning over the horse’s neck, he scaled the short fence circling the ring instead of taking the time to go through the gate.

“Good job!” He patted the horse’s neck and urged him into a gallop. Their destination was only a few miles away, and cutting across the snowy fields was a much straighter route than taking the highway.

Grecia eyed the door leading into the house with a nagging sensation that she should follow Saint. He knew something he wasn’t telling the rest of them. She could feel it. She could also see it in his eyes. It had only been the smallest of twinges, but he’d reacted to the robotic voice when it spoke of *the beginning of the end*. He’d reacted again at the mention of the granary.

Beginning of the end.

Beginning of the end.

Emmitt had already briefed the K&G Security team on a few key details about the case, enough for her to understand that both Saint and Jana had ties to the kidnapper.

She snapped her fingers as a thought struck her, making heads turn in her direction. “Saint’s crime spree was contained to the panhandle, correct?”

“I believe so.” Emmitt nodded slowly. “Why?”

She held up a finger. “Where was the first place he robbed?”

The sheriff leaned over his laptop and started typing. “Looks like it was a granary. A coincidence? I think not!” He reached for the jacket he’d slung on the back of the swivel chair he was sitting in. Glancing around the room, he hollered, “Where’s Saint Riley?”

Grecia shook her head guiltily. “He asked for directions to the bathroom a few minutes ago.” But that wasn’t where he’d gone. He’d used it as an excuse to leave the house undetected.

Cade Malone brought his fist down on the desk with a growl of rage. “That fool must be going after her! What’s he thinking?”

Grecia’s thoughts were spinning a mile per minute. “He’s doing exactly what the kidnapper demanded,” she informed her listeners in a resigned voice. “That was the game Theo was playing. He was speaking in code directly to Saint, and now Saint’s heading his way, unarmed and alone. Exactly as he was instructed.”

“Without the cash in hand,” Emmitt reminded, looking worried.

Grecia shook her head again, more disgusted with herself than ever. “That was probably just to throw us off. To keep us chasing our tails while Saint got the jump on us.”

“He can’t do this alone.” The sheriff gave the rally sign to load up their vehicles and get moving. “We have to assume Walford is armed and dangerous.”

Yeah, and Saint doesn’t care. He feels like he has nothing left to lose now that Jana is gone. Blinking back tears, Grecia stepped outside, hating that she’d been so slow to pick up on what was happening to the man standing right beside her only minutes earlier.

He’s a fearless fool. I’ll give him that.

Grinding her teeth, she lifted her cell phone to her ear and dialed one of her two bosses.

Lyon Garrett picked up on the first ring. “Any update on the kidnapping?”

“Yep. Remember that favor you owe me?” she shot back.

“I don’t like the sound of this.”

“Tough! I’m on my way back to home base. What I need you to do is fire up the helicopter first and ask questions later.” Two innocent lives hung in the balance. Grecia would simply have to take whatever slap on the wrist she had coming for interfering in an ongoing investigation.

In less than ten minutes, Saint reached the outer fence surrounding the granary. He brought Rapture to a halt inside the tree line and tethered him to the trunk of an enormous spruce. “Wait for me here, boy.” He leaped down from the horse, running his hands down his heaving flanks to calm him. He patted his neck, speaking in a hushed voice. “I’ll be back with the girl we came to fetch. Then I’m going to need you to run like your life depends on it.”

Rapture tossed his head, nickering in response as if he’d understood every word.

Saint pressed his gloved hand to the horse’s mouth. “Shh!” he cautioned.

The horse immediately quieted down.

“Good boy,” Saint whispered, briefly leaning his head against the horse’s head. He silently sent up a prayer, begging the Lord for the ninth inning comeback Jeremy Morgan had spoken of earlier. Saint had no idea if praying in baseball jargon was considered sacrilegious, but there was no time to come up with anything more eloquent.

Leaving Rapture in the tree line, he circled around the granary until he reached the source of the sound on the voice recording. Someone was emptying out one of the grain silos into the bed of a semi truck.

The kernels of grain slid through the metal shoot, tumbling into the bed. It would hold up to seventy or seventy-five thousand pounds before it was full. The semi had one of those

extra deep truck cabs attached to it, the kind that contained a sleeping berth. No doubt that was where Jana was being held. He could see the outline of a man sitting behind the wheel. Probably Theo Walford. Yep, the truck was the most logical getaway vehicle. Anyone who saw it on the road wouldn't give it a second thought.

Just like Theo had used a food truck to sneak her off Anderson Ranch, he would use the grain truck to sneak her out of town — possibly until the ransom was paid, possibly for good.

Unless I stop him.

Knowing he needed to create a distraction, Saint's mind raced over everything he knew about grain silos. The dust and pressure that built up inside them could amount to a highly combustible combination. Under the right conditions, it would explode just like a bomb.

Yep, that'll be distracting, alright.

He scanned the long line of silos and chose the tiniest one the furthest distance away. Keeping low, he sprinted toward it. A barn-like shelter rose in the distance, the kind used to store tractors beneath it. Bypassing the silo, he headed for the shelter and rummaged feverishly through the supplies he found there. Locating a coil of rope, he carried it to the nearest tractor and dunked it inside the gas tank, soaking several feet of it. Then he lugged it back outside and secured the dry end of it to the small grain silo.

Hunkering over the wet end of it, he hastily scraped two dry sticks together until he got them smoking. Once the end of the rope was successfully ignited, he took off running toward the semi-truck again, careful to keep low and out of sight. If the man in the truck cab detected his presence, it was over.

Less than a minute later, the silo exploded. A plume of fire shot into the air. Smoke billowed above the flames, and debris rained down where the granary had once stood.

The driver's door of the semi-truck flew open, and a man leaped to the ground. It was Theo Walford, alright, minus the

suit. He was wearing a ball cap and overalls, which would fade much more easily into the Texas panhandle population.

As Theo raced toward the site of the fire, Saint ducked behind a barrel to avoid being seen.

Once Theo moved past him, Saint wasted no time sprinting to the semi-truck and climbing through the door the con man had left open. As expected, he found Jana sprawled across a rumpled set of blankets in the sleeping berth.

“Babe, it’s me,” he called urgently.

She moaned and reached blindly for him.

He wordlessly scooped her up, knowing they might only have seconds to spare before Theo returned. As he climbed down from the truck cab with her, he watched Theo slowly swing back in their direction.

He jogged a few steps forward around the hood of the truck, pausing by the front right tire.

Theo came barreling their way. Saint wasn’t a hundred percent sure he and his precious burden hadn’t been spotted until Theo leaped behind the wheel, yanked the truck into gear, and rolled forward.

Saint danced out of the way, narrowly avoiding being run over. Though he and Jana weren’t out of danger yet, another hurdle had been crossed. Theo clearly hadn’t yet noticed the empty sleeping berth behind him.

Flattening to the ground, Saint sheltered Jana beneath him and sent up another prayer as Theo rolled further away from them. It was the most praying he’d ever done in his life.

The rumble of a helicopter sounded overhead, and police sirens blared in the distance. He remained huddled on the ground as Theo mashed down harder on the gas pedal and took off as fast as he could in the grain truck. Since he hadn’t taken the time to disengage the grain shoot, it creaked loudly as the metal shoot bent and was pushed aside. Grain continued to pour on the ground, quickly mounding up.

Saint watched the helicopter swoop down and do a crazy dance over the grain truck. It took his dazed brain a few seconds to realize the pilot, whether intended or not, was providing the perfect distraction for him to make his getaway with Jana. Scrambling to his feet, he scooped her back into his arms and took off running toward the tree line.

To his eternal gratitude, Rapture remained tethered where Saint had left him. His head was tossing wildly, and his eyes were rolling back in his head as he tugged against the cords. The silo explosion had probably terrified him. To his credit, though, he wasn't trying that hard to get away. Otherwise, he would've been long gone.

“Whoa there, boy! Whoa! Whooooooooooaaaa!” Saint slowed his speed and crept closer, one precious step at a time.

Rapture listened to his voice and grew still, trembling with agitation.

“It's me, boy. You know me,” Saint pleaded, “and you know Jana. She's the crazy romance author who tried to ride you bareback on Thanksgiving Day.”

Jana made a sound in his arms that was part sob and part laughter. He took it as a good sign that the drug she'd been given was starting to wear off.

By some miracle, Rapture calmed down enough to allow them to mount up. Saint rode with one hand on the reins and one arm around Jana. After the first mile, her arms slid weakly around his middle.

“That's it, baby,” he crooned to her. “Hang on a little longer. We're almost there.”

An ambulance was waiting, lights flashing, in the parking lot of the B&B when they arrived. K&G Security guards were crawling the icy ranch grounds. They converged on Saint and Jana as he rode with her the rest of the way to the ambulance.

The helicopter that had been playing chicken with the semi truck touched down in the front yard. Grecia leaped out and sprinted in their direction.

“You loco cowboy!” She shook her head at him as she reached the ambulance.

Jana was quickly laid out on a stretcher. Two paramedics bent over her as Saint explained her condition. They took her vitals and inserted an I.V.

He shot an agonized look at Grecia. “Go with her to the hospital,” he begged, knowing he wouldn’t be allowed to.

Grecia was already climbing into the back of the ambulance. “You’re completely insane. You know that, right?” The grudging admiration in her gaze softened her words a little.

“Insanely in love.” His gaze blurred as he glanced toward the still figure on the stretcher.

“Yeah. I kind of connected those dots for myself.” Grecia blinked rapidly to clear the moisture forming at the corners of her own eyes. “I’ll go with her, but only if you promise to stay here and face the music.” She shook her head in warning at him.

“I will.” He nodded. “You think they’re going to arrest me?” He’d tried so hard not to break any rules, but he wasn’t sure if he’d succeeded.

“For what?” The petite redhead gave him a withering look. “Last I heard, foolish acts of extreme valor weren’t punishable offenses. Doesn’t mean you’re not going to get an earful from the sheriff for the risks you took, as you rightly should!” She slammed the ambulance door in his face.

After it rolled away, police sirens screamed up the driveway. Within moments, patrol vehicles surrounded the K&G Security guards, who were already surrounding Saint.

He made no effort to get away as Sheriff Cade Malone, Deputy Emmitt McCarty, and Deputy Jeremy Morgan converged on him. Furious scowls darkened their faces. His heart sank, knowing this was what Grecia had meant about facing the music. As the three men reached his side, he held out his wrists. If they wanted to slap cuffs on him, so be it.

Jeremy Morgan's black eyebrows flew upward. Ignoring Saint's outstretched hands, he leaned in to clap him in a tight hug. "Looks like we got our ninth inning comeback, my friend!"

EPILOGUE



Christmas Eve

Saint knocked on the front door of the main house at Anderson Ranch, trying to wrap his brain around the fact that he'd been invited to celebrate Christmas with the top brass. He'd finally gone shopping, which was why he was in black jeans, new boots, and a suede vest over his white shirtsleeves — properly dressed for once.

To his surprise, Jana was the one who opened the door. She excitedly waved him inside. He paused in the entry foyer to drink her in.

She looked like Christmas in a long red dress that fell to her ankles. The toes of her favorite high-heeled boots peeked out from beneath the hem, and her dark curls were piled high on her head, held in place by tiny crystal clips.

“You’re so beautiful.” He started to reach for her, but stopped at the sound of gagging noises.

Prince stumbled into the entry foyer, clutching his neck. “You’re in love. We get it. Everybody gets it. We can’t unsee the kisses you’ve already slobbered all over her.”

Saint pressed his thumb to the corner of his mouth to hide a grin as he pretended to lunge menacingly toward his brother. Prince hastily ducked into the living room, and Jana burst out laughing.

She wrapped her hands around his arm. “Merry almost Christmas, Saint! I love you so much.”

“Love you, too, babe. I’ll prove it to you later,” he promised, eyeing the fresh coat of lip gloss sparkling on her lush lips.

“You’d better,” she teased, smoothing a hand across his new vest. “Wow, but you clean up nice, cowboy!”

He reached up to lace his fingers through hers. “Got some fashion advice from a certain romance author.” He was glad she liked what she saw.

“Well, she certainly has incredible taste. Do I know her?” she teased.

“Eh.” He shrugged like it was nothing. “Just some chick who’s a sucker for flawed heroes.” He flicked a finger down her cheek. “Or so I’ve heard.”

“Saint!” Prince groaned out his name from the doorway. “You’re not even kissing, and you still look like you’re going to...argh! Gobble her up or something!”

Curling his upper lip at his younger brother, Saint escorted Jana into the living room to join those gathered around the Christmas tree.

Brody and his pregnant wife, Star, glanced up from where they were standing beside the mantle. She had snapping dark eyes, shoulder-length brown hair, and looked as if her baby might arrive any day now. Since she’d been on bed rest — doctor’s orders — it was only the third or fourth time Saint had seen her.

Jana dragged him right over to them. “You are so completely awesome to invite us to join you for dinner,” she gushed. “I couldn’t be more excited about celebrating my first Christmas in Texas.” She squeezed Saint’s arm for emphasis.

“We’re so glad you could make it.” Star rolled her eyes as she smoothed a hand over the red and green plaid tunic covering her beach ball belly. “I’m really glad to be up and about today, instead of cooped up in bed.”

Saint nodded respectfully at both her and Brody. “I just want to say thank you again for taking a chance on me.” Emotion made his throat tighten. There were no words

adequate enough to describe all the healing and transformation that had been taking place in both his and his brother's lives since their arrival at Anderson Ranch.

"Chance had nothing to do with it." Brody gravely shook his hand. "You're an answer to our prayers."

Watching the look of doubt creep over Saint's face, Star was quick to offer assurances. "He means it, Saint. Your application seriously crossed my husband's and Matt's desks when we needed help the most." She held out her arms to Jana and enclosed her in a hug. "And I can safely speak for thousands of readers across the globe when I say how grateful we are to you for rescuing our favorite cozy mystery author from one of the most villainous villains who ever stepped foot on our ranch."

"Hear! Hear!" Matt called from the corner of the sofa where he was cuddled up with Bree. "And before my favorite chef expires from excitement, she has an announcement to make." He gallantly swirled one long arm, pretending to roll the red carpet out for her.

Bree, who'd had her head bent over her cell phone, spun toward the door so quickly that her ponytail slapped her husband in the face.

Crew burst out laughing from his crouch on the floor by the Christmas tree, where he'd been lifting and shaking gifts like a five-year-old. "Women!" He shook his head mockingly at his fiancée. "They're nothing but trouble."

Grecia had just stepped into the room. At his words, she moved to stand over him, pretending to tip her cup of hot chocolate over his head.

He leered up at her. "If you think, for one second, that you're proving me wrong, darlin'..."

The doorbell rang, interrupting whatever he was going to say next, and probably keeping him from being drenched in a bath of hot chocolate.

"I believe my announcement has arrived," Bree announced, glancing eagerly toward the door. "In person!"

“I’ll get it,” Prince offered, swaggering in from the kitchen with a video game controller in one hand and one of Jana’s cookies in the other.

Saint glanced pointedly at his brother’s full hands. “How are you planning on opening the door, clown? With your toes?”

For an answer, Prince stuffed the rest of the enormous cookie in his mouth, making his cheeks poke out like a chipmunk.

“You asked,” Jana reminded with a chuckle.

Alice Underwood had way too much to carry into the large, rambling ranch home in front of her. However, she would deny it profusely if anyone offered to help her. After practically being on her own since the age of fourteen, she’d completely mastered the art of self-sufficiency.

Or so I keep telling myself.

It was too cold outside this morning to make the more practical choice of two trips. Snow flurries danced along the breeze, adding a swirl of ice crystals to the mix.

Exactly what I need. Not!

Sticking her favorite gel pen behind one ear, she tucked an enormous vase of pink roses beneath one arm. Then she swung to the ground of the ridiculously tricked-out gun metal gray pickup truck with its enormous snow tires. She landed with an oomph on the soles of her snow boots, barely avoiding spilling the water in the vase. If it had been more than a quarter full, she surely would have.

I should’ve known better than to ask my brother for a favor.

Though he was only a year younger than her twenty-four years, he was like a boy who’d never grown up on the inside,

still playing with cars and trucks — just in a man’s body these days.

Reaching back inside the cab, she stretched, and stretched, and stretched some more, feeling like her arm was about to slip out of its socket. Sadly, she’d left her black cherry leather briefcase just out of reach.

I’m going to strangle that brother of mine the next time I see him!

The fact that he’d jacked his truck an extra twelve unnecessary inches off the ground was about to spark a medical emergency for a certain five-foot-two-inch realtor in snow boots.

“Do you need help with something?” A rich baritone voice spoke from behind her, making her jolt so badly that she nearly dropped the vase of roses.

With a startled yelp that she almost succeeded in muffling, Alice spun around and found herself facing one of the tallest, darkest, handsomest men in uniform she’d never laid eyes on. Okay, maybe not the tallest. In her defense, most people towered over her tiny self, but he was far from short — six feet or close to it.

He definitely fit the dark and handsome part of the bill, though, rendering her as close to tongue-tied as she ever got, which was never.

“Are you going to arrest me?” She tipped her face pertly up to his, not that she’d done anything more wrong than being born short. It was simply a habit of hers to fall back on humor when she was nervous.

He looked annoyed, probably because people said stuff like that to him all the time. “If I was, you’d already be spread eagle against your truck, listening to your rights.”

“Good point.” Swallowing a chuckle, she all but shoved the vase into his arms. “Here. You’re accustomed to manhandling critters that put up more of a struggle, but these roses won’t give you any trouble. Promise. I’ve already failed to spill water on myself twice this morning.”

“You might be surprised.” His sinfully dark gaze gave the flowers a once-over. “Most stakeouts are pretty low-key. You can go for hours without seeing any action. Sometimes days.”

“Stakeouts, huh?” She tossed the question over her shoulder as she reached back into the cab for her briefcase. “What kind of policeman are you?” Unfortunately, her briefcase was still out of reach, and her efforts resulted in an unladylike grunt of exertion.

“The detective kind.” The moment Alice spun dejectedly around to face him again, the police detective lightly shoved the vase back into her hands. “New plan. You handle the non-violent flowers, while I collar whatever’s putting up a bigger fight inside your truck.”

“Not my truck.” She shuddered in distaste. “It belongs to my overgrown, overly immature stepbrother.”

“So *not* the guy who gave you these flowers, eh?”

It was such a smooth way of digging for personal information that she almost missed it. She was so impressed, though, that she decided to humor him. “If my stepbrother was trying to impress me instead of tormenting me, which he greatly prefers doing, he’d gather a few wildflowers on the side of the road.” Like a lot of women, she was much easier to please than most men gave their species credit for.

“Not this time of year, Ms. ah...I didn’t catch your name.” To her embarrassment, he walked around the truck, opened the unlocked passenger door, and retrieved the pesky briefcase that had utterly refused to be carried out the door of her choice.

“My friends call me Alice,” she supplied, opening the door to the rear of the cab to retrieve the two trays of brownies she’d stored back there, “but you may address me as Miss Underwood, since you seemed determined to show me up during this morning’s roundup.” She bit her lower lip as it dawned on her that she’d left her brother’s keys in the ignition.

The detective’s hard mouth quirked as he followed her despairing gaze. However, he reined in his smile with so much

ease that she was grudgingly impressed — right up to when he reached around her to retrieve the keys and dangle them beneath her nose, at which point she became miffed that he was making such a big deal out of her shortcomings. Again. Couldn't he see that her hands were full?

“My friends call me Zayden,” he informed her in even tones as he deliberately towered over her, “but you can call me Detective Wolfe, since you seem to need my assistance more than my friendship.”

“Maybe I'm not looking for any new friends.” She tried and failed to shake back the blonde bangs that were blowing across her eyes.

“You're not looking at much of anything at the moment,” he pointed out in a gruff voice.

To her amazement, he used one long gloved finger to brush her hair from her eyes. His touch was much gentler than she was expecting — so much so that she was rendered speechless as he proceeded to brush a few stray snowflakes from her cheeks.

“Something tells me you've always struggled with authority, Miss Underwood.” He mockingly held up her briefcase and pointed to the words engraved beneath its handle. *Underwood Realty*. “You work for the family business, eh?”

Her eyes rounded, not because of his words, but because he was still holding her hair out of her eyes. “I guess you could call it that. My employees claim we're one big happy family.”

“*Your* employees?” To her enormous satisfaction, she'd finally managed to surprise him. Or impress him. Maybe both.

“I own the company, Detective Wolfe,” she informed him in her most sugary voice.

His hard mouth finally quirked into a smile. It was faint, but it was enough to transform his strong nose and square jaw into some semblance of empathy.

“Like I said, Miss Underwood, you clearly have issues with authority.”

Her heart gave an undeniable flutter beneath her ribcage. Most men bored her within the first five seconds of their conversations. However, Zayden Wolfe had utterly failed to do that.

Something told her that the darkly handsome detective was going to continue being a problem for her peace of mind for a long time to come.

“There she is!” Bree Romero’s squeal of excitement made heads spin toward the door as a petite blonde woman in a navy business suit and bright red snow boots stumbled into the room. She was holding two trays of something that smelled deliciously warm and chocolaty.

Jana hated the way Saint’s arm stiffened beneath her hand at the sight of the tall, dark police officer accompanying the woman. She didn’t recognize him, but she did recognize the blonde from the website for Underwood Realty.

“Alice!” Though Saint tried to hold back, Jana tugged him along to make the introductions. “This is my realtor, Alice Underwood. Alice,” she pointed to Saint, “my boyfriend, Saint Riley.”

“It’s so nice to finally meet you.” Her realtor angled her head firmly at the policeman standing behind her. “I have some good news,” she added. Her gaze was sparkling brighter than the Christmas lights on the tree in the living room.

She paused as the policeman dutifully shut the door, effectively cutting off the swirl of wind and snowflakes that had entered the house with them. Then he held out an enormous bouquet of pink roses to Jana.

She accepted them, eyes rounding into an O. “Do we know each other, officer?”

He jammed a thumb unceremoniously in the direction of her realtor. “They’re from Miss Underwood. I think they go with her good news.” The sardonic edge to his voice and the way Alice’s cheekbones flushed told Jana there was something percolating between the two of them — the romantic kind of something.

“Come join us in here,” Bree called from the living room. “We all want to hear your news.”

Saint bent to mutter in Jana’s ear. “Do you know what this is about?” He cast a baleful look in the dark officer’s direction.

“I may have an idea.” If her theory was correct, she was seriously going to explode from happiness.

Saint hooked an arm around her waist, keeping her anchored in front of him as he lounged back against the doorway. “It’s getting a little crowded in there for my taste.”

She knew without asking that he was referring to the sudden appearance of the man in uniform.

“Zayden Wolfe!” Matt hurried forward to shake the guy’s hand and clap him on the back. “To what do we owe the honor of your presence?”

“On Christmas Eve, no less, detective!” Brody joined them in the center of the room with his hand outstretched.

Bree and Crew hurried over to Alice to relieve her of her two trays. “Brownies,” she explained with a happy glance in Jana’s direction.

The detective immediately pivoted to transfer the leather briefcase looped over his shoulder to Alice’s shoulder, a move that — for some reason — made her blush deepen.

“I defer to Miss Underwood.” He gave her a mocking bow. “She should go first with her announcement.”

Alice clasped her hands around the strap of her briefcase, looking like the news she had to share was enormous. “Claymore Ranch is about to have a for sale sign posted in front of their gate. Before anyone asks, the reason I know is because I’m the listing agent.”

Yep. My idea was point on. As Jana's knees grew weak, Saint's arm tightened around her.

"You okay?" He nuzzled her earlobe.

If dying from happiness amounts to okay, then yes!

Watching her expression, Crew leaned closer to Saint. "The Claymores have been herding cattle since the time of the Flood," he explained in a stage whisper.

"It's the big farmhouse on the ridge overlooking the canyons," Jana added breathlessly. "The one I keep saying I'm going to snap up if they ever decide to sell. Oh, Saint!" Twisting around to face him, she threw her arms around his neck. "I'm moving to Texas!"

"Merry Christmas, Jana!" Alice's announcement was met with a round of applause from those gathered in the room.

"We'll have our very own bestselling romance author in town," Star sighed, sounding ecstatic.

In the poignant silence that followed, Zayden Wolfe declared, "I'll gladly take the place off your hands if she doesn't want it."

"You're moving to town?" Alice gaped at the detective. "You?"

"I definitely want to purchase Claymore Ranch," Jana assured quickly. Alice would just have to find someplace else for the hunky detective to purchase if he was truly relocating. "Where do I sign?" She blinked back happy tears. Or tried to. They fell anyway.

Saint reached up to gently cup her face, brushing the dampness away with the pads of his thumbs. "Sorry about your lip gloss, babe," he muttered, claiming her lips.

From somewhere in the background, Prince made more gagging noises.

When a ring slid onto Jana's finger, she gasped and broke off their kiss. "What's this for?" She held up her hand to gaze in astonishment at the classic round diamond solitaire sparkling there.

“A promise ring.” He ducked his head a little to gaze deeply into her eyes. “I don’t know what all our tomorrows will hold, but I know this. I will always love you.”

“Saint!” A few seconds ago, she wouldn’t have believed her first Christmas in Texas could get any better, but it had.

“I love you, too!” Her eyes swam with more happy tears as she kissed the flawed hero who’d irrevocably stolen her heart. She was more than ready to start her very own happily-ever-after with him.

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Oh, and she's totally not buying his claim about transferring from the Dallas Police Department to the country, simply to enjoy the farm-fresh air. He's up to something, and she'd happily expose whatever it is if she wasn't busy trying to stop a ruthless band of criminal land developers.

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NOTE FROM JO



Guess what? There's more going on in the lives of the hunky cowboys in my bestselling sweet romance stories.

Because...*drum roll*...I have some Bonus Content you can read by signing up for my [mailing list](#). There will be a special bonus content scene for each new book, which I write exclusively for my subscribers. If you're already a subscriber, you'll receive the link in the next newsletter. Plus, you'll always be the first to hear about each new title as soon as it's out (*a-a-a-and all new subscribers get a free book while you're waiting*). Woohoo!

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Much love,

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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.

A sweet and inspirational, small-town romance with a few Texas-sized detours into comedy!

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ABOUT JO



Jo is an Amazon bestselling author of sweet and inspirational romance stories about faith, hope, love and family drama with a few Texas-sized detours into comedy. She also writes sweet and inspirational historical romance as Jovie Grace.

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