

Seaside Cowboy's Fairy Tale



ALEXA VERDE

Seaside Cowboy's Fairy Tale

Seaside Cowboys

Book 4

~

By Alexa Verde

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SEASIDE COWBOY'S FAIRY TALE

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About Seaside Cowboy's Fairy Tale

While her childhood might be similar to Cinderella's, she rescues others instead of waiting for a prince to rescue her. And she'd never fall for the subject of her investigation, a charming and mysterious CEO, right?



Private investigator / bodyguard Rachel Arvidson has to run from the masquerade ball, her suave dance partner, Tex Lawrence, and yes, even leave her sparkly shoe behind to chase a thief. Her client wants Rachel to trail Tex, but once she blows her cover to save Tex's life and gets to know him better, she questions everything. His guilt. Her no-dating rule. And who's really behind the jewelry thefts plaguing the coastal small-town community.



The beautiful stranger takes Tex Lawrence's breath away twice—the second time by knocking him to the ground. Unlike his cowboy brothers who've gotten married in quick succession, he chose a different path. But this once-betrayed workaholic might risk his bruised heart again for Rachel. What will he do when he learns her secret?



Welcome to Port Sunshine, a small coastal town where a family of cowboy brothers discover the treasures of love and uncover the mysteries of their pasts.



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Dedication



Dedicated to Rachel M.

The kindness of your heart has no limit, and
the beauty of your soul has no comparison.

Thank you so much for your compassion.

You're a bright star to those blessed to
know you. Keep on shining.

I named the heroine of this story for you.



Chapter One



WAS THIS WHAT CINDERELLA felt like?

Rachel was used to working undercover, but this time, she ironed the nonexistent wrinkles on her stunning lavender-hued dress with her sweaty palms, feeling ill at ease.

It didn't help that she'd had to leave her trusted gun at home to attend this charity ball and masquerade. Of course, there was no way to conceal the weapon, but still... Maybe she should've tried harder to work it into her masquerade costume.

The high updo decorated with semiprecious stones instead of her usual ponytail felt weird. The high heels were uncomfortable, and impractical if she had to give chase. No wonder Cinderella lost her shoe. Rachel would love to lose both of hers and change into familiar comfy sneakers or, even better, combat boots. Also a big plus for combat boots—one could hide a knife in their ankle shaft.

She lifted her head, channeling back her confidence. Nobody knew her here or could guess she didn't belong among the upper-crust society. The diamond-studded mask over her eyes, a nice match to her gown, covered the upper half of her face, which was useful for her purpose. When her gaze fell on the floor-to-ceiling mirrors, she could barely recognize herself.

Her client had spared no expense or effort, including loaning Rachel a diamond necklace. People here might not spot a fake smile immediately, but they could discern fake diamonds. The invitation screening was strict, so she'd gone under the guise of being her client.

Then her gaze followed the subject of her investigation, Tex Lawrence. The only Lawrence sibling who didn't remain on the family ranch and become a cowboy. Now, the founder

and CEO of a large company, he seemed far more at ease in these surroundings than she could ever be.

She suppressed a scowl. She'd first seen him at his brother's wedding to a local heiress when said heiress had hired Rachel to provide the security. Thankfully, except for a ruined cake, nothing untoward had happened at the wedding. Well, Rachel had caught the bridal bouquet by accident, but she'd rather not think about *that*. She wasn't in the market for romance whatsoever.

She'd disliked Tex Lawrence immediately. Engrossed in his phone, he'd barely paid attention to his family. He certainly hadn't noticed her as she'd worked undercover as a waitress. Her eyes narrowed. She'd met plenty of snobs, though. Her stepmother and two stepsisters were like that.

He was different today, of course, schmoozing with influential people. Again, like her stepsisters, though they'd never reached this level of success. She let out a rush of breath. At least, she'd escaped this kind of life.

Coming from a family of cowboys, Tex wasn't a prince. But he was *charming*, and any woman he bestowed his attention on seemed to melt in his presence. Yes, he was handsome, and he carried the dashing tailored tuxedo well. But—go ahead, call her prejudiced—she had an instant dislike of people who looked down on others less fortunate. She doubled the smile to cover how he nauseated her.

Now, Kennedy was different from other heiresses Rachel had met. Kennedy was sweet and hardworking and a little shy—a trait someone could presume standoffish if they didn't know better. But Rachel had known better. They could even become friends. That was, if Rachel allowed it.

Nope, Tex Lawrence hadn't noticed her as a waitress, but he noticed her now as their gazes met and held across the room, and a sense of satisfaction sizzled through her. As well as a weird jolt to her heart, but she dismissed that one. Unlike many other ladies here, and she suspected her client too, she was immune to his great looks and status. Besides, she'd never break one of her profession's most important rules—never fall

for the subject of your investigation. A few people had broken that rule, and it never ended well.

Then her heart skipped a beat.

With a confident swagger, he strode across the dance floor—straight toward *her*—as the music started playing. Her lips widened on their own this time. Approaching him and talking to him was her goal. But she'd much rather the mouse came to the trap voluntarily, all the time considering himself not just a cat, but a tiger.

She held his gaze and readjusted the cheese—ahem, her stylish hairdo and ridiculously expensive dress—and lowered her head to infuse a flirty expression in her eyes.

But first, she had to make him work even to get close to said cheese. He'd had too many conquests already and would get bored. She'd caught his interest, but she needed to keep it, at least for some time.

She turned around as if ready to leave and made a few steps, but not so fast he'd lose her in the crowd. She nearly stumbled. Well, she couldn't walk too fast in these treacherous shoes, anyway. Then she glanced back.

Just like she'd expected, his hand was extended to her. "May I have this dance?"

"I was about to leave." Her smile turned coy, conveying she could be persuaded to stay.

"Please?" So simple yet elegant. He grinned as if understanding the rules of the game he'd undoubtedly played many times.

While she was a novice at it. She considered stalling longer. No, best not to. "I'd love to."

She placed her hand in his, and his fingers tightened around hers as he led her to the dance floor. Her eyes widened when his touch sent a delicious current through her blood. She steeled herself against the weird reaction and placed her other hand on his shoulder. This was a work assignment.

Nothing else.

Nothing less.

Nothing more.

“Masquerade or not, I know most people here. But I can’t guess who you are.” His gaze unnerved her.

And now she couldn’t escape.

Huh. She’d been the one to lay out the cheese, but now, she felt trapped in his arms. At the same time, she didn’t *want* to leave.

“Maybe I’m a princess of a faraway country. Or maybe I’m the girl next door. Or maybe I’m a celebrity.” She didn’t like those claims, though she needed his curiosity freshly stirred.

“I think, whoever you are, you’re a thief. I know you’re stealing my breath.” He whirled, then brought her back, his lips inches from hers.

And you’re stealing mine.

Oh boy. He was dialing up the charm, and based on her racing heart, it might start working.

She’d started this game, so she needed to respond. “I meant to.”

Okay, okay. She took a deep breath of air filled with a myriad of perfumes and colognes, including her own. But the most exciting scent from the mix was his—musky but fresh, undoubtedly masculine but with a slight note of vulnerability to it. If she’d made a commercial for his cologne, she’d praise it as irresistible.

Kind of like his blue eyes. Filled with so much confidence, which wasn’t a surprise, but the hint of vulnerability there was. It was so barely there she might’ve imagined it. Surely, she’d imagined it? And yet, wanting to know for sure drew her closer, tempted her to look again and again. Never look away, in fact.

A tremble went through her when she nearly got lost in his baby blues. Why was this happening? She wasn’t attracted to him. She couldn’t be.

People around them stopped dancing, giving them space, watching them.

She swallowed hard. She didn't like being the center of attention. Her survival often depended on her ability to blend in. But she kept her head high and her back straight.

He whirled her around again, making her head spin for a different reason. "Are you a heartbreaker, Thief? Because when you look in my eyes, I feel you aim to steal my heart."

Seriously? How many times had he used those lines?

She nearly stopped but forced herself to keep moving. "I'm not. Because when I aim, I don't miss." She meant when she aimed with her gun—which she'd still love to have with her—but again, he didn't need to know that.

"I'm sure you don't miss. So you'd like to keep your identity a secret." His gaze bored into her. "Do you know who I am?"

"I do. But I want to know more." That was the truth, but he wouldn't like her reasons.

"I find myself at a disadvantage that you know who I am, but I don't know who you are." Despite his words, his tone wasn't whiny but fascinated.

Did she intrigue him? Good.

"But don't you enjoy a little mystery?" Her expression turned coy again, on purpose. She might be out of her league, but she'd give it her best shot.

He laughed, a deep throaty sound that sent her off-kilter. "I do. So can you tell me something about yourself? Your phone number would be best." He dipped her, all the while staring into her eyes. "But I'm guessing you're not going to divulge that."

Her breathing went shaky, and not from the dip. *Concentrate!* "You're guessing right. Well, let's see." What could she reveal about herself? "I have a stepmother and two rather arrogant stepsisters. I talk to my pet mice. And a resourceful female helped me get to this ball."

His eyes widened. “That reminds me of something.”

No kidding.

She’d expected him to be quick-thinking. “Your turn. I already know you grew up in a local ranch family. All your brothers carried on the family tradition and became cowboys. But you have a tremendously successful company you founded yourself with your best friend, who happens to be a genius inventor.” She paused while they moved in sync with the music. “You like a well-done steak and a loaded potato with bacon and lots of sour cream. You work twelve-hour days and sometimes sleep in the office. Yet you always look like you stepped from a magazine cover.”

She almost mentioned his favorite cologne and car make and model, as well as his favorite color and scent of air freshener for said car. But she bit her tongue. After all, no reason to sound borderline stalkerish.

“I’m impressed and almost worried by how much you know about me.” He dipped her again, making her head spin even more.

“But you’re still a mystery,” she added, attempting to regain her balance. “Besides this charity ball you organize every year, you’re rarely seen in public. You’ve dated several celebrities in the past, but the relationships didn’t last. Are you married to your job?”

His lips curved up. “I’m only engaged to it, and now I’m considering breaking that engagement.”

At that moment, the music stopped, and a sharp stab of disappointment surprised her. She lingered in his arms longer than she should have. Then she forced herself to step away, pleased disappointment reflected in his eyes, as well.

“May I have the next dance, please?” He seemed reluctant to let her go. “I won’t ask you for your name. Unless it’s Cindy Ella.”

Her mouth curved up. So he’d caught her hint. Then she reminded herself to dim her smile. “I need to step out to make a call. Remember, you stopped me from doing so before?” She

didn't need to make a call, but she needed to move the cheese from his grasp while he was still hungry.

Hmm, she was going to have cheesecake tonight. Her mouth watered.

He led her across the dance hall back to where they'd started. "Then I'll be waiting."

She lingered for a few moments, watching him. He didn't invite anyone else to dance but chatted to a white-haired lady who looked about eighty and her stooped, balding, but smiling partner.

Not just one but three men asked Rachel to dance as she crossed the room. Her rating had gone up once people had seen her dancing with Tex Lawrence.

She declined, then walked out of the room and, several minutes later, out of the building. The dress felt suffocating, so fresh air wouldn't hurt. And she needed Tex to be missing her. She lifted her mask for a moment, welcoming the cool night air on her face.

Apparently, she wasn't the only one who needed some fresh air. A younger woman in a golden lamé dress and matching shoes was scrolling on her phone. Maybe this spot had better Wi-Fi? Rachel stepped into the shadows to give the woman privacy and pulled her mask back into place.

Then a man in a gray suit with a silver mask walked past the woman, and her diamond necklace no longer shimmered on her neck.

Rachel's eyes widened. "Stop! Right now!" Now she *really* wished she had her gun!

The woman looked up, her expression puzzled, but the man took off running. So did Rachel.

"Don't leave yet!" Tex's voice hit her in the back somewhere from the balcony.

She cringed, though a part of her went excited. Such not great timing! She pumped her legs. She was a good runner due to daily runs, but if high-heeled shoes were designed for legs

to look great in, they weren't designed for running. Tex might have teased her as a thief, but now, a real thief was going to get away!

Well, not on my watch.

She squeezed her teeth.

“Cinderella at least left her shoe!” Tex shouted behind her. He didn't catch up with her. Clearly, he was no stranger to the gym, but he must pump iron and not exert his legs on a treadmill. Plus, she was already much further ahead of him.

She kicked off her shoes to run faster, snatched one, but didn't have time to pick up the other because the man had already disappeared around the corner. She didn't consider leaving her shoe hygienic, romantic, or even safe, but she didn't have a choice.

Breathing fast, she rounded the corner.

And was met with gunfire.



Chapter Two



WHAT WAS THAT?

Tex stumbled and stopped giving chase after the most fascinating woman he'd ever met decided to disappear just like Cinderella had.

Was that a tire blowout, or gunfire?

Every cell in his body went on high alert. Maybe he should call security, but worry for the beautiful stranger won. Besides, security would hear the gunfire.

He didn't even know her name, so before rounding the corner he called out the name he'd started calling her in his mind for lack of a better—or a true—one, “Cinderella, are you okay?”

“Down!” came the answer.

His heart dropped to the asphalt as he peeked around the corner. Was she down? Was she hurt?

Thwack! He was knocked from his feet to the unforgiving asphalt.

His arm nearly shot out to strike back before he looked up into the hazel eyes that had mesmerized him minutes ago. If she'd stolen his breath away when she'd danced in his arms beneath gleaming chandeliers, she literally knocked the breath out of him now in the dim lantern light.

How had she even managed that? He must outweigh her twice.

What in the world?

Okay, the more imperative question was who was shooting and why.

“Are you trying to get shot?” Her eyes blazing with amber fire, she rolled off him, then hid behind the nearest tree and the

row of bushes. The scents of damp earth and grass filled his nostrils rather than that faint whiff of her sophisticated perfume.

“No!” He gave an honest answer as he followed her behind the generous vegetation while mentally thanking the gardener. Still, Tex tried to shield her though he had no clue what direction the shots had come from.

Chills pulsed in his veins. Concern for her slammed into him with the same force this slim beauty had slammed into him seconds ago. “What’s happening? Are you all right? You’re not wounded, are you?”

“I’m all right. You don’t have a gun on you, do you?”

“No. We have a security team on the premises for any safety issues. That, and a gun wouldn’t go well with this tuxedo.” He grasped some twigs. It would’ve been useful to have a gun in this situation. The best he could do here was find a large branch, but one couldn’t come out swinging at a sniper. “What’s going on?”

At least, the gunshots had stopped coming, though a door slammed and tires squealed in the distance, a different direction from the music drifting from the venue. He froze, listening intently. Had the shooter left? Or was that one of the guests leaving? Well, the shooter and the guest could be the same person, so there was that.

She looked from around the tree, her gorgeous lavender-silk gown carrying specks of grass and soil and her updo disheveled, but that made her more attractive. His heart skipped a beat.

He nearly slapped himself. In this intense moment, he shouldn’t be thinking about how she made him feel. Yet he did.

“I saw a bearded man in a gray suit with a mask over his eyes steal a necklace as he passed a woman while exiting the building. I ran after the thief,” she whispered.

“I thought you were the thief. Um, of the heart,” he blurted out.

Seriously? What happened to his quick-thinking, suave-talking ways? And what was taking the security team so long? They should've been here by now.

Once he was sure Cinderella was relatively safe, he called the police and explained the situation in clipped words. Then he called Security. One of the team members had left to pursue the cars that had departed while others were calming down the commotion at the party. Tex commandeered a security team member to keep the theft victim distracted and in place until the police arrived. The guys in the camera room assured him that the CCTV didn't show an active shooter on the premises.

He could look for the bullet casings on the ground, but he'd best leave that to the police.

She got up to her full height and peeked from around the tree. "All fun and games aside, you distracted me. The real thief—of diamonds—got away. By the time we get to a vehicle to chase, it'll be too late anyway."

His eyes widened as he got up, as well. She spoke like she'd meant to catch a criminal while unarmed herself. His protective instincts went on high alert. She started walking back to the brightly lit building, limping in one shoe. She must've lost the other one on her way here.

He joined her, grateful he did distract her since she didn't seem to realize what kind of danger she'd put herself in. "We have cameras. I know it's a masquerade, so we won't get the perpetrator's face. But still better than nothing."

"True." Stalking off one step ahead of him, she waved over her shoulder, not pausing to respond. Then her shoulders inched up. She took off the shoe and stopped limping. Her toes were painted to match her gown, and so were her long fingernails.

Those fingernails moved close as she reached toward him. "You have a leaf in your hair."

He probably had grass stains on his tuxedo, but considering he could have had bullet holes in the tuxedo as

well as his body, he'd take a leaf in his hair. "Well, that's one accessory I didn't mean to put there."

Her fingertips brushed his temple as she flicked the leaf away, and he felt that fleeting gentle touch with his entire being.

With his adrenaline ebbing, the cold from the damp night air and the unpleasant time on the ground seeped under his skin. She must be chilly, as well.

"Are you cold?" Not waiting for an answer, he shrugged out of his tuxedo jacket and placed it on her shoulders.

She nearly disappeared into it but didn't reject it. "Not anymore."

Her hazel eyes studied him and likely saw more than she let on. Mischief no longer glinted in those eyes, no amusement either. He walked close to her to shield her from any remaining danger. And fine, he enjoyed being close to her.

"You have a little dirt here." He swiped a speck from her cheek.

A jolt from touching her smooth skin went straight to his heart. Why was he reacting this strongly to a simple touch? His hand jerked back.

Her eyes widened as if she felt something, too. But then she looked away. If she was attracted to him, she was fighting it now. "Thanks."

Was it because of his reputation of never having a serious relationship?

Hmm. There was a plus in this troubling situation. She'd have to give her name as a witness. He could find her then and ask her out. His heartbeat sped up. Did he want to see her again?

Absolutely, but asking her out now would be taking advantage of the situation.

"Oy!" She winced as her bare foot connected with some sharp stone. She put one shoe back on, but now she limped

along with an uneven gait from wearing one heeled shoe while being barefooted on the other side.

Poor girl. His gaze searched the path ahead, but he couldn't see where she'd discarded the other shoe. It seemed neither could she.

"Would you like to lean on me?" He moved closer, her enticing perfume mixing with the grass scenting the night. It wreaked havoc on his senses. Everything about this night and this woman was unusual and intriguing.

"No thanks." She took off the shoe again because walking was clearly uncomfortable.

How could he help her? Then he spotted a shard to her right and suppressed a grimace. "Careful. There's broken glass to your right."

Good thing she hadn't stepped on that when she'd run there before. And while on an adrenaline boost, she probably hadn't felt the uneven surface then, but she must feel it now.

Something unreadable flashed in her eyes. "Thanks. I saw it."

In the dim lantern light, they could miss the next shard. That wouldn't do. His protective instincts flared up again, and there was a simple solution, after all.

"I can't risk you getting hurt." He swept her up. His heartbeat skyrocketed from having her close in his arms, much closer than when they'd danced.

She gasped, and her eyes went huge. "What...? What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm fairly sure I'm carrying you." A chuckle burst loose, despite the situation. And to think he'd been reluctant to go to the masquerade tonight and had to talk himself into it. He'd never liked social gatherings, but he couldn't miss the charity ball he'd organized. Now, he was grateful he'd shown up.

"Yeah, no kidding." After some hesitation, she wrapped her arms around his neck, sending another jolt straight to his heart. "I'd be fine walking," she muttered.

“Of course.” He enjoyed having her close way too much. This was shaping up to be the best night of his life, though he could live—literally—without someone stealing a necklace at the event and then firing at the pursuer.

The stars in the velvet sky looked down on them, and the moonlight bathed everything in a romantic glow. Her lush lips covered with red lipstick parted, stirring thoughts of kissing her until the blood rushed faster in his veins. He’d danced with strangers before, but he’d never kissed one.

He’d never carried a stranger, either. The mysterious scent of her perfume drew him in, and so did her eyes. Her pupils dilated, and her breathing increased. Was her heartbeat going faster to match his own?

She was close enough for their breaths to mix. And he carried her in his arms. But he still had no clue who she was. “You’re still not going to tell me your name, are you?”

She chuckled, the sound echoing deep inside him. “Just call me Cinderella.”

He wouldn’t push the issue. He’d go through the camera footage and invitations. Mask or no mask, he’d figure this out. He wanted to see her again much more than he cared to admit. Before he invited her to dance, he’d noticed she didn’t wear a wedding ring. But these days that didn’t guarantee her heart wasn’t taken already.

“You already know I’m single. Is there a significant other in your life?” He stopped breathing, waiting for the answer.

“No. I’m single, too.” Her answer sent his heart surging. But her next words made it drop onto the asphalt. “I’m not interested in romance whatsoever.”

He swallowed hard. “Me, either.” Until tonight.

His security team was rushing down the road by now, and Tex and Rachel were close to the building.

“Put me on the ground, please.” Did regret flash in her eyes?

No mistaking the stab of regret that surprised him as he complied. He wasn't this touchy-feely. He was a practical man. Sometimes too much.

"Thank you for the jacket." She handed him the tuxedo and marched into the warm building. Her head high, feet bare, and confidence displayed, she carried the show like she'd always meant to.

"You're very welcome."

Then a whirlwind of questions and answers accosted them as they entered the building. Thankfully, the diamond necklace had been insured, as he'd hoped, but he still wanted to find the culprit. Too much to be a coincidence—another guest had her heirloom ring stolen at his charity gala last year. Not surprising that guest hadn't attended tonight.

Was someone targeting his events?

"Cinderella, would you be willing—" He turned where she'd been minutes ago and found her gone. Disappointment sliced through him. But he hadn't made it to where he was now by giving up easily.

As much as everything in him wanted to rush to find her, he had to think about more pressing issues.

He squared his shoulders and slipped into business mode as he began damage control and gave orders to his employees while reassuring his guests. He approached the victim. His wonderful assistant, Jennifer, had already provided the woman, Vanya Patel, with a cream-colored blanket she was now wrapped in, hot tea that emanated a mint aroma, bottled water, and boxes of tissues, as well as verbal reassurance.

"Thanks, Jennifer. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"My pleasure. I'll attend to the rest of the issues now." Efficient and fast, Jennifer disappeared from the room.

He knelt before the theft victim. "Miss Vanya, my apologies for this happening. Please be assured that we'll do everything in our power to have this resolved and your necklace returned." He ground his teeth. After all, he'd created

the opportunity for a thief to steal something so valuable, so how could he not feel somewhat responsible?

Vanya Patel wrapped her fingers around the golden-trimmed cup. “I’m still in shock. I don’t understand how this could’ve happened.” She was young, about nineteen, with freckles covering her face, neck, arms, and bare shoulders. Her copper-hued hair was swept up in an updo, but it was messy now as if she ran her fingers through it too many times. Her eyes were wide, and her pink lipstick was smeared.

“That’s understandable. I’m so sorry you have to go through this. Can I do anything to help you while we’re waiting for the police?” He leaned closer to her.

“My mom is going to kill me. It’s her necklace. She loved it.” The cup trembled in Vanya’s hands, so she put it down and pressed a tissue to her eyes. Then her shaking fingers moved to her bare neck as if hoping by some miracle the necklace had reappeared there.

Poor kid. Rumor was her parents were going through a public and painful divorce. “I’m sure she’ll understand. It’s not your fault. If you’d like me to, I can talk to your mother.”

“Would you? Please!”

After more reassurances and calming words until Vanya’s fingers stopped shaking, he left for the camera room.

A young blond security person rolled his chair back from the bank of computers. “I assume you want to see the camera footage for the exit in question? I’m sorry, I can’t bring it up, sir. I’ve only just come back to my post after a break, and it appears that the two cameras facing it stopped working half an hour ago.”

Tex cringed. “Hmm, how convenient.”

“Isn’t it, though?” The younger man rolled back to the desk, his face glowing an eerie blue in reflection of the monitors. “But at least there were eyewitnesses. The victim and whoever that was who gave chase tonight—that was so cool, by the way! I’ve played back the recordings trying to see

if the perp can be seen. She's on the tape, even if the thief isn't."

Cool? "So the police will have to rely on the description of the perp." Tex rubbed between his eyes. "While Vanya's here, she seems shaken up, and"—he almost called her Cinderella—"the eyewitness who gave chase and seemed to have it together has now disappeared."

He'd wanted to search for the mystery gal, and now he had an excuse for it besides his infatuation. Yet a promise was a promise, so he made a call to Vanya's mother.

When he hung up, the security person swiveled his chair to face him, seeming genuinely concerned. "How'd that go?"

"Quite well, actually. The lady sounded more worried about her daughter's well-being than the expensive necklace. She'll be arriving soon to pick up her daughter. Please ensure security personnel stay with Miss Vanya until her mother arrives."

"Of course, sir." The uniformed man turned back to his screens. "I hear sirens, so the police are close—ah, yes, you can see a cruiser coming up the drive." He pointed to a monitor where an officer soon entered the building.

Tex nodded. "Thanks. I'd better go update him."

Then one by one, his security team members returned after chasing the guests who'd left after the shooting. None of those guests matched the description Vanya Patel gave.

Once the police concluded their interviews and most of the guests left, Tex started looking for the woman he knew only as Cinderella. His jacket carried traces of her scent, and somehow that brought his loss to life. Even though his employees and a few lingering guests kept interrupting, his thoughts continually returned to her.

An hour later, resisting the urge to grind his teeth, he rubbed his temples and pushed cold fingers against the throb of a sleepless night. Morning's soft glow filtered through magnificent floor-to-ceiling windows of a room opulent enough to belong in a royal palace.

How could she be gone like a beautiful dream disappearing in the morning? Nobody knew who she was. And for the first time since he'd known her, his ever-efficient assistant Jennifer looked puzzled. She'd even taken off her glasses twice and then searched for them while they were on her head.

He watched the camera footage and called the person on the invitation she'd shown to get in, Ms. Natalie Mueller, who he recalled meeting during last year's ball.

In response, he received lots of coughs and the reassurance she hadn't visited the charity ball due to being sick.

At least, his security team found Cinderella's high-heeled lavender-satin shoe with a tiny golden clasp in the alley.

He stared at the sparkling representative of female footwear on the table, unfamiliar feelings riling him. Sure, his curiosity was piqued, but there was more to it. There was much more to this woman than met the eye. He sensed it. Not that his eye could meet much because of the mask. The shoe wasn't made of glass, but his hopes for this to end differently apparently were. Now, they were shattered.

In true Cinderella fairytale fashion, all the beautiful stranger left him with was a shoe.



Chapter Three



RACHEL WINCED AS SHE drove away in her nondescript mouse-gray compact. Its only call for attention were the scratches on its side. It wasn't a pumpkin, of course. But it seemed as insignificant as one when compared to the flashy luxury cars other guests had come in, the modern equivalent of royal carriages.

Dressed like a servant—her hair pulled back in a commonplace bun, her makeup, artificial nails, and of course jewelry gone—she drove a cheap beater, and people at the gate didn't seem to pay attention. Big mistake, but it worked in her favor.

Once outside the gate, she had her hands-free phone connect her to the client. “Ms. Mueller?”

“Rachel! How did it go?”

“I've just left the gala.” No need to say she left her shoe behind, right? “Um, the evening was... interesting. You can say I knocked Tex off his feet, though.” She updated the client on the night's events, including, as Ms. Mueller had requested, a list of everyone Tex spoke to and danced with.

Oddly, her client seemed excited to hear there'd been a theft, but disappointed the thief couldn't have been Tex, as he was nowhere near the victim. Not Rachel's job to wonder why Ms. Mueller asked her to watch Tex so closely at the ball, only to do as she was asked. But still, she did wonder.

“I suppose I should have told them the thief in the expensive tuxedo could've changed into a waiter's uniform or pretended to be some other staff, as well, shouldn't I have?”

“Nonsense. That's someone else's job. You were there on a mission for me and did well not to attract attention—ahem, I mean more attention than you had to.”

“Right, and meddling in someone else’s job, even with the best intentions, is rarely met with gratitude.”

Rachel pulled onto the freeway, red dots of taillights lighting up the morning dusk, leading her onward. She grimaced. She was supposed to wait for the police. She tightened her fingers around the smooth steering wheel as she passed one car, then another. “I feel I failed though, and I can’t believe I left without giving my statement.”

“Seriously, calm down. From what you told me, the necklace was insured. It’s not like the victim seemed extremely upset.”

Huh. The reassurance didn’t do much to placate her conscience. “Thanks, Ms. Mueller. I’ll email you my full report from the event. And, for the record, I didn’t just need to get out without revealing my identity. I had an emergency call from a friend.”

Flooring her gas pedal, Rachel passed another car, tension building.

Ms. Mueller gave a nervous laugh. “I imagine in your line of work you must be used to emergency calls.”

“Indeed.” Rachel flexed her grip on the steering wheel, her palms sweaty. She was used to *work* emergencies.

All that excitement was part of why she enjoyed her job, and her response to such chaos helped earn her superiors’ admiration because few employees eagerly rushed somewhere in the middle of the night. Yes, professional emergencies were plentiful, but she had precious few friends and wouldn’t trade them for a thousand diamond necklaces. She let out a low breath. Kennedy sounded frightened on the phone.

“That’s fine, Rachel. With your police connections, you can provide information about what you saw through them.”

“That doesn’t make leaving as a witness right, but it should give me some leeway with it.” Hopefully. Yet much more tugged at Rachel now.

Her fingers tapped against the steering wheel as she exited the freeway and soon settled on the road to the small coastal

town. Yes, a large part of her regretted leaving abruptly and incognito, but it wasn't just because she'd needed to be an upstanding citizen. She had a much more selfish reason. She didn't want to leave Tex. Didn't want this to be their only encounter. Her heart, dormant for many years, woke up and didn't want to be silenced again.

But she wasn't looking for romance, right? And he'd said he wasn't either, giving her a bitter taste of disappointment. Besides, he was the subject of her investigation, and if they ever met again purely for investigative purposes, she'd have to keep her suddenly awakened heart locked up in a safe.

Unlike the safe she was about to see, it would have to be one impossible to break into. The lavender scent of the air freshener reminded her of the fancy dress now safely packed away, ready to be returned. "Um, I have to warn you—that dress I borrowed? Its condition with grass stains probably leaves a lot to be desired. And I lost one shoe. I'm sorry."

"Huh. Those shoes were expensive. I'll have to deduct it from your fee. But I'll let it slide about the dress. I have an excellent dry cleaner, but if it can't be fixed, it can be replaced." Ms. Mueller's voice dipped so low the speaker barely caught the rest. "Unlike some things."

Right. Here, Rachel was not focusing on the job she was paid to do. And she did create a mess out of her assignment after years of exemplary work. "I'd better let you go now. I'm not sure if I'll lose cell service out here soon."

"All right. Sounds like you're planning a long drive. I'll look for your email in the morning. Have a good night."

After cruising along on the country road leading to a ranch, coincidentally belonging to Tex's family, Rachel drove over the stock gap. The rising sun cast a cheerful glow on greenery dotted with grazing horses and cattle. What a welcome change from the indifferent gray of asphalt and concrete and glass buildings in her far-from-cheerful part of Charleston. Cows mooed as she passed them, maybe expressing their disapproval over her eating a hamburger last night.

Time seemed to slow down here. The sky was clear when she arrived, unlike her mind that kept returning to Tex. Every second spent with him was magical, making her long for more. Yet she couldn't even tell him her name, couldn't allow hope that they'd ever meet again.

"We always want what we can't have, right?" she muttered under her breath.

She had much more compassion for Cinderella now. How heartbreaking must it have been falling in love with Prince Charming, knowing she'd have to disappear and leave him behind? That every moment of dancing in his arms was forbidden? That after midnight she was about to lose not just the carriage and beautiful dress but also the man who'd become dear to her. Rachel had never thought about that part of the beloved fairy tale, too busy trying to work out the logistics of why the crystal shoe in the prince's hand didn't transform back into Cinderella's pathetic wooden clog.

The expensive lavender shoe Rachel left behind bugged her, and not only because of the reduced fee. But it wasn't like she could return, search for it, and retrieve it.

Her heart shifted as she glided the rattling car along the gravel road. It wasn't just about Tex being so suave or carrying her in his arms, his impressive muscles bulging in that tailored tuxedo. She felt a pull toward him, toward those attentive blue eyes, that she couldn't explain, one she should stifle fast.

She drove up to a simple, one-story, terracotta-toned ranch house. Huh. Such a difference from the gigantic futuristic beach house where her new friend Kennedy used to live.

A barking duet sounded inside the house.

When Kennedy opened the massive oak front door, two dogs—a beagle and a golden retriever puppy—rolled out onto the porch, barking in earnest. They jumped and hung on Rachel's legs, one on each.

"Well, hello, my darlings." She leaned to them and petted first the puppy, just edging out of cute clumsiness on her way to becoming a gangly teenager, then the beagle, enjoying the

smooth fur against her palm and the enthusiasm lapping her fingertips.

Their short tails wagged like propellers, and the beagle licked her face, his pink tongue slightly rough against her skin. Meanwhile, the puppy climbed down two steps from the porch, ready to explore any changes in the yard.

“Oh no, you don’t!” Kennedy hurried outside and scooped up the squealing puppy who wiggled before settling in her arms.

It was hard to believe this relaxed, calm woman was the guarded and seemingly standoffish heiress Rachel met when Kennedy hired Rachel and her team to provide security. Rachel hadn’t seen Kennedy even once when she wasn’t dressed up and well put together. Now, she stood barefooted in a white T-shirt and soft-looking sand-hued pants, her face makeup-free. A certain glow showed an inner happiness that a tumultuous night like this couldn’t overshadow.

Kennedy smiled, and some pressure eased up on Rachel’s chest. “Rachel!” Kennedy waved her inside. “Come on in. Thank you so much for getting here so quickly.”

The beagle dashed inside first, slipped on the hardwood floor, then got up.

Once Rachel entered the house that smelled of comfort and freshly brewed coffee, Kennedy sent her an apologetic glance. “Based on your waitress uniform, you were working undercover. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“That’s fine. If anything, you gave me an excuse to get out of a sticky situation.” Tex’s image flashed in her vision, and longing nearly unraveled her composure again.

What was wrong with her? The attraction was untimely, inconvenient, and uncharacteristic of her. Besides, nearly every time she’d been attracted to a guy, her profession intimidated him.

“Hi, Rachel.” Kennedy’s husband, Austin, greeted her in the living room. The beagle darted to him.

“Hello, Austin.”

Small world. Austin was also Tex's brother, and the similarities in features—though Austin's hair had reddish tints—as well as the name association of Austin and Texas made Rachel think of Tex again. She shouldn't. Really, she shouldn't.

He shouldn't have gotten under her skin this much, and surely, her little crush would disappear soon. As a small-town veterinarian and cowboy, Austin was much more on the surface, and she'd find no double meanings in his vocabulary. Tex was more complicated, someone who hid his core from others.

Did he have a reason for that? Her heart made a strange movement in her chest.

Enough thinking about Tex!

Rachel needed to be present in the moment, though the fatigue from the sleepless night started seeping into her bones.

Austin was also the reason for Kennedy's newfound happiness and her newfound sunshine. And with the way he looked at his wife and now drew her close, he dearly loved her. Seeing it illuminated an uncomfortable void in Rachel's life. She wanted someone to look at her like that. Not just someone. Tex.

Stop!

Rachel wasn't envious. She was glad for her friend, and after many years of domestic servitude as a teen, she'd decided domestic bliss wasn't for her. Then regret stung again. Why did the first man she'd been attracted to in years have to be one forbidden to her?

"Would you like anything to drink?" Kennedy asked. "Juice, sparkling water, lemonade? I also just made a fresh pot of coffee."

"No. Let's talk about what happened, first." This wasn't a social visit. Rachel would need coffee later to combat fatigue, but for now, she'd rely on the fresh adrenaline surge. "Now, walk me through what happened. The dogs weren't here when the burglary occurred, right?"

The puppy lifted her head from her comfortable spot in Kennedy's arms and barked as if to say she and her furry companion would never allow anything to be taken if they were in the house.

Kennedy stroked the puppy. "No, and neither were we."

Rachel would get back to that. "My guess, the police have already started investigating?"

"Yes. Brushed for fingerprints and all." Kennedy led them to a small office where paintings entirely covered one wall.

The beagle first trotted after them, then found a sunny spot on the floor, and stretched there.

Some of the paintings were watercolor seascapes done by the local town artist, Austin's sister-in-law. Other oil paintings depicted equestrian themes. Kennedy removed a painting with a stunning beach sunrise and braced it on the floor, revealing a safe which she opened without inputting a code. So, it was open already.

Rachel frowned at the empty safe. "What was in here?"

Kennedy leaned into her husband with the trust Rachel hadn't felt for any man yet. "Mostly, this safe had a few everyday pieces I bought myself. I moved most of my family heirloom jewelry to a deposit box at the bank and the rest to a well-protected safe in one of our hotels. Except for one heirloom diamond ring. I'd left it here so I could get it resized. It was slightly loose on my finger." A shadow passed over Kennedy's face. "Mom loved that ring especially. It was the most valuable piece stolen."

Kennedy's well-known socialite mother used to be famous for her lavish parties and exquisite diamonds. Kennedy preferred a much simpler lifestyle and jewelry.

"Its history goes back centuries to a small European kingdom. She said there's a mystery behind that ring and a local legend about betrayal, love, and revenge that might or might not be based on the truth. I don't remember the details, but I have it written down. The legend has a missing bride, too. Like something out of a fairy tale."

Huh. This was getting interesting, and Rachel looked up as she pulled on gloves. She doubted it, but some fibers could be left in the safe or around, though surely the thief wouldn't have left fingerprints. "I'll want that legend. I'll also need a detailed list of everything taken from the safe with their approximate values and who knew about them. Photos if you have them, especially of the ring."

As the most valuable item, it could have been the reason for the break-in.

Kennedy nodded. "Sure. I've been working on the list and photos for the police, so I'll email you a copy of everything."

Austin hugged his wife and kissed the top of her blonde head. "Sorry you lost all that jewelry."

"I'm fine about the loss. And it's not your fault the thief or thieves got inside. I just feel... I feel our privacy was violated. Having someone in our home..." Kennedy shuddered. Growing up with rich socialite parents, she'd value her privacy.

Austin's arm tightened around his wife. "It won't happen again."

He must feel guilty she'd moved here from her modern beach house with its high security and multiple cameras. Rachel had heard he'd disliked the sleek and expensive place, preferring his simple ranch house, and Kennedy hadn't minded moving here.

Rachel grunted, then frowned. "Well, this place sure doesn't have any bells and whistles in terms of protection. From what I've seen of it, that entrance lock wouldn't be much of a challenge, either."

Oops. Maybe she shouldn't have been so blunt. Unlike Kennedy, who was subtle, tactful, and thoughtful, Rachel often spoke before she thought.

Austin stiffened. "For what it's worth, the ranch has never had a single break-in before. Even in the tourist season when the local low crime level increases with burglaries and pickpockets on the streets."

“Huh” was all Rachel could say. Couldn’t he see no one had cared to break in before Kennedy brought her moneyed lifestyle here?

At least, Rachel kept *that* to herself. Besides, people in this small town were probably way less cynical than she was. As she searched the room for minuscule traces of mud or fibers, she vowed to do everything she could to help her friend. Besides, the story behind the ring already stirred her interest. Oh, she should’ve asked already, but her tired mind wasn’t as sharp as usual. “Was everything inside the safe insured?”

“Just the heirloom ring.” Holding the puppy with one hand, Kennedy placed her other hand on her husband’s forearm when he winced at her words. “But it’s okay. The rest were just gold chains and a bracelet, much lower in value. They can be easily replaced.”

Rachel suppressed a wince. Kennedy sometimes didn’t realize her privilege, and as untactful as Rachel was, she wasn’t about to remind her. Her previous friendships had never lasted, and she wanted this one to be different.

Unlike Kennedy, all the jewelry Rachel had ever owned consisted of one thin golden chain, and even that one, she’d gotten months after she’d started working in the security business. There were also earrings and a bracelet her sixty-something female boss had given her for different birthdays, but they must be gold plated. Because why would the CEO where she worked give Rachel real gold?

“I know a great company that can install cameras and a security system,” she ventured. “Would you like me to call them?”

Kennedy grimaced. “We hoped we wouldn’t need them in this house. Apparently, we do. I already called someone.”

The puppy squirmed in her arms and demanded to be put down, so Kennedy did just that. The puppy ran to the beagle, who was peacefully stretched in the sunny spot, and nudged him with her nose. The beagle opened one eye and closed it again. The pets got along, but from what Rachel observed, they had different energy levels.

She hid a smile and switched her attention back to the case. “The lock at the entrance didn’t seem broken, and all the windows I’ve checked were locked from inside. I assume that was the case when you found the safe?”

“Yes.” Kennedy nodded.

Hmm, two jewelry thefts in one night. Was it a coincidence? Granted, the MOs were different. This one seemed to be professionally done, and Kennedy was targeted because of her known wealth. The theft at the charity ball had seemed sloppy, brazen, and more like a crime of opportunity.

Or was Rachel wrong? Too bad, she couldn’t discuss it with Tex. Or maybe she just wanted to see him again.

“How did you discover the safe was open?” Rachel searched the floor for any fibers or traces again, this time through the rest of the rooms, though surely the police had already done a much better job than she could. But at least the attempt placated her conscience.

The puppy gave up trying to make the beagle move for now and lay down nearby. That wouldn’t last long.

Kennedy sighed. “I woke up in the middle of the night and remembered I didn’t put away a gold chain as I’d meant to.” Kennedy used to have insomnia but seemed cured at the moment, though she must still wake up at night from time to time.

“So the burglary could’ve occurred one of the previous nights—or rather days.” Rachel frowned. “Um, when did you open the safe previously?”

Kennedy brushed her fingers through her golden hair. “Three days ago. It was locked then. And undisturbed. Two days ago, we went away for the weekend in Charleston and took the dogs with us. That’s when I assume it happened.”

Rachel’s frown deepened. “Who knew you left for a weekend?”

Austin moved forward. “Most of our family. Some people in town. In Port Sunshine it isn’t easy to keep things a secret.”

Indeed. When working for Kennedy, Rachel had discovered there were few secrets here compared to in the city.

After growing up in a larger city, she wondered how it would feel to be part of a small-town community and a rambunctious close-knit family like Austin's. Maybe she and Kennedy had become cautious friends partly due to their lonely childhoods. "I'll do what I can. Sorry this happened to you. I hope the new security system will prevent anything like this from occurring again."

Austin rubbed the back of his neck and ducked his head with a guilty-puppy look. "It's my fault. I never thought of putting in a security system. Nobody at the ranch had been robbed before."

So he'd said earlier.

"But now we have been." Kennedy visibly swallowed. "Because of me."

"No!" Austin hugged her. "I didn't mean it like that."

Kennedy responded to his hug. "I know. It's okay. We'll figure it out together."

They were a unit, while Rachel had to go through life alone. But then, her friend's marriage was one of the few successful ones she'd ever seen. Rachel's mother had abandoned her father with a young child. Then Rachel's father and stepmother's marriage had been painful to watch. And in Rachel's line of work divorces were rampant, maybe because of the frequent travel required.

Kennedy's gaze sharpened as she studied Rachel. She tensed, sensing Kennedy saw something Rachel didn't want her friend to see.

Uh-oh. It was as if a cat spotted a mouse, and despite having several, Rachel had never wanted to be one.

"Why don't we have some tea and biscuits? Or coffee?" Kennedy gestured toward the kitchen.

"Cheese biscuits?" Rachel smiled innocently.

Kennedy didn't even blink, though she must understand the hint. They both knew free cheese was only in a mousetrap. "Nope. Chocolate ones. Austin and I baked them together."

Something suspiciously akin to envy stirred Rachel's tummy, but she stilled it. "Sure."

The beagle woke, trotted to them, and barked at the word *biscuit*. Austin smiled as he scooped the dog up. The puppy, glad her friend was up to playing again, jumped right after him, so Austin picked her up, as well. "I smell girl-talk. I'll leave you to it."

The puppy gave a tiny squeal, probably insisting she was a girl, too, and didn't need to be unceremoniously carried away.

"Thanks, honey." Kennedy kissed her husband's cheek.

The strange feeling inside Rachel intensified, and she ignored it. Early on, she'd learned that things meant for other people, like having a loving mother and a father who wasn't a pushover, or even clothes that weren't hand-me-downs, weren't meant for her.

The cozy ranch kitchen was almost kitschy cute with the veterinarian's pet-themed décor. Black paw prints stamped the white kitchen towels and curtains, and a set of porcelain mice posed as salt and pepper shakers under the watchful eye of a cat-shaped teapot.

What a far cry from Kennedy's previous kitchen, so spacious and gorgeous with skylights illuminating stainless-steel appliances, cream-colored cabinets, and milky-white marble counters. But that immaculate and uncluttered room appeared rarely used, and Rachel suspected Kennedy had existed on takeout and air.

Would Tex's kitchen look the same, as unused as his heart? Both hardworking business executives, Tex and Kennedy had a lot in common.

Rachel shook her head in response to her thoughts. She'd never know what his house looked like inside and would never get close to his heart. Longing surprised her. She loved being independent, cherished it after spending years serving her

stepmother and two stepsisters, who only scolded her and never thanked her.

This much smaller kitchen lacked the stainless-steel appliances of Kennedy's previous kitchen and sported scratches on the beige counter, but it gave off a much warmer feeling. It must be loved and loved often. Rachel breathed in the scent of freshly brewed coffee. Just what she needed.

"Tea or coffee?" Kennedy asked.

"Coffee. I'll pour it." Rachel accepted the mug her friend handed her—which, yes, depicted calico kittens tangling themselves in yarn—and filled it with coffee. She took hers black. The scent of gourmet coffee was as rich as the drink and the woman beside her. A thousand times better than the muddy liquid they called coffee at Rachel's work.

Did Tex have the same gourmet coffee in his kitchen? People like him seemed to want only the best, if his suits or cars were any indication, scorning the simple things and looking down on people like her. Rachel flushed away the bitterness in her mouth with the hot drink.

Kennedy poured herself a cup and added a generous dose of creamer to a cup where a poodle chased the pom-pom of its tail. "Would you like honey or jam with your biscuits?" She opened oak cabinets nothing like the pristine ones in her previous kitchen and, from the clutter within, retrieved a canister with biscuits.

"Honey, please." The domestic scene made Rachel shrug. After cooking elaborate meals for others who never seemed to appreciate it, she now lived on frozen meals and quickly slapped-together sandwiches, splurging for occasional takeout. She never spent much time at her tiny apartment due to frequent assignments that took her around the country.

Once they were seated at the breakfast nook, Kennedy leaned forward. "Spit it out."

Rachel, who just took a sip of her hot flavorful drink, swallowed, then blinked innocently. "Spit out what? I hope you didn't mean the coffee."

“I mean you look different. You have an absent-minded smile.” Kennedy pinned her with a stare. “You met someone.”

Rachel reached for the biscuit and munched on it after drizzling it with honey. “These are very good. You’re becoming a fantastic baker.”

“That’s something I didn’t think I’d ever hear about myself.” Kennedy preened. “Austin helped. Actually, he did most of the baking, and I did the helping.” A blush rose on her neck. “We almost burned the first batch because we were too busy kissing. Wait a moment! You’re distracting me. *Who* did you meet?”

“Technically, the first time I met Tex was at your wedding. He just didn’t pay attention to me in a waitress uniform.” That still stung.

How to become invisible. The fastest way to make people stop noticing you was to be at their service. Working undercover as a cleaning lady worked even better than as a waitress. People considered her little more than an extension of a mop bucket.

Kennedy’s eyes widened, and she clattered her porcelain cup back to the checked black-and-white tablecloth that matched the checkered black-and-white tiled floor. “Tex Lawrence? As in my hubby’s brother?”

“I’d rather keep it between us, okay?”

Kennedy hesitated, then nodded. “As far as I know, Tex doesn’t share much with the family. Rarely comes to our hometown to visit. So tell me—what happened?”

“Not much.” Rachel took another bite of the biscuit to cover how her heart started beating faster. “We danced last night at his annual masquerade charity ball. Then I chased a jewelry thief, who started shooting, and I didn’t have a gun. The thief got away.” She frowned. She didn’t like criminals getting away. “I lost a shoe while running after the thief, so Tex carried me back to the building.”

Kennedy sipped her drink, raising a brow over its rim. “If you call this not much, I wonder what your idea of an eventful

night looks like. Okay, keep going.”

“That’s it. You called me about the burglary at your place. I changed into my backup disguise and left.” Rachel’s fingers wrapped around the warm, smooth mug.

Kennedy gasped. “So I ruined your romance? I’m so sorry.”

“There’s no romance. You didn’t ruin anything.” With her friend’s gaze pinning her, Rachel was beginning to feel like the tale tangled her up in yarn. She stopped staring at the playful kittens, then took a few more sips of coffee, partly because the coffee was excellent and partly because she was afraid Kennedy would see the longing in her eyes.

“Are you going to see him again?”

Once Rachel wrote her report for the client and submitted it, that should be it. Her heart squeezed painfully. She shouldn’t want to see him, anyway. “No.”

Kennedy sighed. “That’s a pity. When you talk about him, your eyes sparkle.” Her friend had a sparkle of her own. Uh-oh.

Rachel wiggled a finger at Kennedy, then drained her coffee. “Don’t even think about setting us up.”

Apparently, it was Kennedy’s turn to blink innocently. “You know, I was set up at Austin’s brother’s wedding, right? That’s how it started for us. And look where we are now.”

A part of Rachel wanted to hope. But the rest of her knew better. “Well, nothing is going to start for Tex and me. I’m not looking for romance. Neither is he.”

“But you want to see him again.”

“Not. Going. To. Happen.” Rachel thwacked her empty cup on the table for emphasis, adding a splash to the checkered cloth. Oops.

Then Kennedy’s mouth slackened, and her hand with the biscuit stopped halfway. “Hold on. Masquerade. Disguise. He doesn’t know who you are, does he?”

“Nope.” Why did so much regret tinge that word?

“But he has your shoe.” Kennedy winked and waved with the biscuit. “And we all know how Cinderella’s fairy tale ended.”

“Only I’m not Cinderella.” Rachel shook her head, ignoring that longing. “Not. Going. To. Happen.”

Was the repetition to get the message through to Kennedy, or to herself?



Chapter Four



TEX LINGERED IN HIS office long after everyone else left the building, a regular occurrence for him. What wasn't a regular occurrence was that he wasn't exactly working while he sat at his handmade cherrywood desk, waving a gold fountain pen. He couldn't stop thinking about the woman he'd met at the masquerade several days ago. And yes, he still had to call her Cinderella because he had no clue about her real name.

Lollygagging was so unlike him. Usually, he had no difficulty concentrating on work and leaving everything else behind. Work was his only food, dessert and drink included.

This was different. He stared at his computer screen but saw a lovely masked face in his mind's eye. His pulse spiked again, like it had when he'd carried her.

He leaned against the back of his luxurious leather chair, one foot rocking it slightly. Maybe it was all about the mystery surrounding this woman. His interest might've diminished if he knew who she was, if he knew the answers.

But now only questions ricocheted in his mind.

Something nagged at him, and he tapped his fancy pen on the old-fashioned notebook. He'd seen her before, hadn't he? But where? Had he passed her at the grocery store? On a plane? In a restaurant? Why couldn't he remember? If only she'd taken off her mask...

He let the pen be and drummed his fingers on the polished table. Not to be vain, but women often tried to attract his attention, probably because he didn't seem interested. He'd suspected Cinderella wanted to attract his attention and didn't want to at the same time, which might be another reason she so intrigued him.

Well, enough was enough. He picked up his cell phone and called the person he should've called much more often and visited more often, as well. He got up and walked to the huge window overlooking the glorious bay. Everything in this office, from the mahogany and cherrywood furniture to golden trophies on the bookshelves to Western oil paintings by renowned artists, was carefully chosen to show success and impress clients and investors. But the view was probably the most impressive of all.

When she answered, he said the words he hadn't said since he'd been a seven-year-old boy. "Mom, I need your help."

"Well, *that* hasn't happened in forever. I'll be glad to." Her warm voice was always a comfort, no matter how many years since he'd moved from his childhood home.

"I know it's late, but can I come over, please? I need your opinion about, well, about a shoe. I'll bring it with me."

"You want my opinion about a *shoe*?" She nearly screeched the last word, then laughed. "I mean, sure. Of course. Come on over anytime. You know you always have a home at the ranch."

Minutes later, he hopped into his sports car and peeled out of the garage.

You know you always have a home at the ranch.

Those words tugged at him. He'd been determined to succeed. But that determination kept him away from the people who loved him unconditionally. Then things started clicking, and he switched into a business mode, making decisions about everything he needed to do this week. Sans the masquerade ball snafus, it had been an excellent week. An excellent year. Excellent decade even.

A little over two hours later, he entered the house where he'd grown up, so different from his condo in Charleston. He held a bag of roast beef sandwiches emanating a mouthwatering aroma and a bag with prime rib for barbecue. The place tugged at him, too. Tonight, it smelled like peach

cobbler. It often smelled like pies or roast beef or brisket or some other hearty food. His stomach perked up.

Wearing a tawny hand-knit shawl, Mom met him and gathered him into a bear hug without saying anything. He swallowed hard. He wasn't a person to apologize, but he nearly apologized for not coming here sooner or more often. A two-hour drive wasn't such a long distance.

"Hello, Mom. I brought some sandwiches for you and the guys for tomorrow. And prime rib." He wiggled the bag.

"Thanks." She took it. "I baked a peach cobbler while waiting for you. It's still warm. Come have a slice." She walked to the kitchen without waiting for an answer, leading him past the lasso and chaps displayed on the entryway wall and paintings of cattle from local artists in the hall. "There's lemonade in the fridge."

A cold gust met him as he retrieved the pitcher. The white fridge from the previous century was still chugging and covered in numerous family photos. Recently, pictures from three weddings joined the others. In contrast, the stainless-steel refrigerator door with its fancy technology at his condo was bare. Kind of like his life.

Why was he thinking that? He winced as he took a tray with a pitcher and glasses to the dining room table that doubled as a desk when he and his brothers were little. It still bore a few scratches from when he'd taken out his frustration on it over having to do homework.

His current life wasn't bare. It was fulfilling. Overflowing even, like this glass if he wasn't careful. He poured lemonade into two glasses.

"Let's dig in." Spreading a wonderful aroma, Mom placed the cobbler on the table that had more tiny grooves now, like the wrinkles around her eyes he hadn't noticed last time he was here.

Man, guilt stung.

When was it? He hadn't made it to Austin and Kennedy's vow renewal and their subsequent reception in this very

backyard. During their wedding, a major merger had been happening, so while physically attending the hotel reception, he hadn't been there mentally. Directing it all from a distance, he'd barely lifted his gaze from his phone.

Once upon a time, this place felt and smelled like home. But in that once upon a time, screams and hits from his father marred his memories.

You're never going to amount to anything!

Mom said grace, and Tex chimed in with a half-hearted amen. Then he forked up the sweet peach cobbler and told his story about Cinderella.

"And tracking the event invitation she used led nowhere?" Mom asked when he finished.

He lowered his full fork, having trouble swallowing the disappointment. "I even drove to Ms. Mueller's place to double-check my memory of her from a previous brief meeting was correct. It was. Going there was a mistake." He stifled a frown at how she'd tried to get him to stay for dinner. "She claimed her invitation must have been stolen. She's much taller than Cinderella. Ms. Mueller has green eyes, not hazel, a deeper voice, and a different perfume."

Mom spread her arms. "Well, if you even sniffed her—"

"Mom! But seriously, why go to such lengths to conceal her identity?"

His mother's eyes narrowed. "You don't think that Cinderella woman could've stolen the necklace and tried to throw the blame on some man?"

"I know I got my brain from you. Vanya Patel corroborated her story."

"But Ms. Patel didn't see her necklace stolen exactly. She just realized it when the Cinderella woman screamed and ran after the guy."

He squirmed against the doubt. No. He didn't want to doubt the first woman he liked in years. But hadn't his trust in a woman he liked gotten him in trouble the first time?

His fingers formed fists. He unfisted them fast under his mother's watchful gaze. "Why would the man run then? And I heard gunshots. That would be an elaborate ruse with several players."

Which still could be a possibility, and his mother's silence said as much.

The sweet peach cobbler soured in his stomach, and the taste in his mouth became bitter. He did his best to sweeten it with the cold tangy liquid. "Then there's even more reason to find her and bring her to justice."

Mom sighed and then sipped her lemonade. "I don't mean to quash your hopes. I want you to fall in love and get married like several of your brothers."

"Mom!"

She lifted her arms. "No pressure. Most of all, I want you happy." She studied the shoe again. "Okay, I know way more about cowboy boots than designer shoes. But I also know someone who grew up with this stuff—your new sister-in-law, Kennedy. She might even guess where it was bought. May I take the shoe to her?"

"Sure." And with that one word, he passed along his hopes with the shoe. "Then I can go to that store and talk to the clerk or manager." Usually, he outsourced things like that. But this case was personal.

"There's also another way." She winked.

"I'm all ears." And he was.

"We can announce you'll marry the woman this shoe fits. I might be a proud mother, but I'm sure you'll have long lines at the ranch tomorrow."

"Mom!"

"Okay, okay." She grinned, pushed to her feet, and gathered him in another bear hug. "I'm glad you met someone, and I hope she's not a jewel thief. After Madison, I started worrying you'd never risk your heart again."

He could breathe again when she let him go and reclaimed her seat. “That was a long time ago.” The pain from Madison’s betrayal was dull, not sharp anymore. But it was still there.

His first love had broken his heart, deceived him, and stolen from him, all in one swoop. He resisted the urge to gnash his teeth. Instead, he changed the topic. “Enough about my love life or lack thereof. How is your romance going with Kennedy’s uncle?”

He helped himself to another bite of the sweet peach cobbler, then flushed it down with lemonade. Who’d have ever thought he’d be discussing his mother’s love life? At least, this should be a pleasant topic as he’d heard she’d been spending a lot of time in the guy’s company.

It was about time, too. The painful disaster of her first marriage had kept her away from romantic entanglements. Plus, she’d been busy raising him and his brothers, who by the time Dad died were teenagers. This time, he *did* gnash his teeth. Instead of helping at the ranch, he’d gotten out as soon as he could. He wasn’t a cowboy, after all. The fact that most of his brothers had stayed and picked up the slack wasn’t an excuse.

Instead of brightening, her eyes darkened. “We hardly see each other now. He’s hurt and dealing with it the only way he knows—by disappearing into his work. He’s working on building another hotel with Kennedy and adding new luxury services to their existing hotels.”

So much for finding a cheerful topic. His mother’s chin was up, but her blue eyes were sad. He ached for her. But he could relate to trying to drown the pain in work, in being productive. “Hurt, why?”

Mom poked into her slice of the peach cobbler. “His daughter doesn’t want to see him. Didn’t I tell you the story on the phone, how his ex-wife kidnapped their little girl, and no one knew who took her? Then when Kennedy found his daughter, the woman refused to return here, poisoned by her mother’s lies.”

“Right.” He did his best to reconstruct the story in his mind. One could write a book about all the things that happened in his family and with the women his brothers had married. An entire series even.

How would his own story pan out? And why did he want Cinderella to be the heroine? His heart fluttered.

But this wasn't about him right now. It was about his mother, who was upset. He got up from his chair, leaned to her, and hugged her. “I'm so sorry. I hope it all works out somehow and you two can still be together.”

When he stepped back, her smile was wobbly. She hid it behind her lemonade glass. “Maybe it's for the best. We're total opposites from different backgrounds and like different things.” Then she chuckled. “Though I did get him to eat chicken wings with his bare hands, and he loved it.” Her expression sobered up again. “We're like oil and water. Like fire and ice.”

“With you being fire, of course.”

“Of course.” She placed her empty glass on the table and squared her shoulders. She'd survived so much hardship by being an optimist. But wistfulness edged her voice and tinted her eyes. She deserved a long-overdue break. She was fond of the guy and missed him.

Tex would have to talk to him. Until now, he'd mostly helped—and placated his conscience—by writing checks and picking up ranch expenses or paying for repairs. Ranching wasn't as lucrative as some people thought, but his brothers and mother loved it with their whole souls.

Early on, he'd decided to earn well, as much as he could so people dear to him could do what they loved and found meaningful. They were feeding the country, after all.

Here was something he could do in person. Unlike Mom and her, ahem, boyfriend, Tex and the guy were alike. Maybe they could understand each other. Then again maybe not, but it wouldn't hurt to try.

“You’re worthy of the best. And I want you to be happy.” He drained his glass, then got up and gathered glasses and empty dishes. As much as he treasured this time with his mother, he had lots on his agenda. And she needed her sleep.

She followed him to the kitchen. “Throwing my words back at me. I see.”

“No. You just raised me well.” He kissed her weathered cheek, then rinsed the dishes, and lined them in the dishwasher. He dried his hands on a soft towel with a rooster imprint. “Anything I can help you with while I’m here?”

“You can help me by staying here to sleep. The room you shared with Darius is still available, though it’s a guest room now. I don’t want you to drive to Charleston this late at night.”

He had to hit the ground running early in the morning. “Oh please. I’ve driven with my eyes half closed.”

“Precisely.” She gave him a pointed stare, and just like in childhood, he relented. Ironic how as children and teens they’d only rebelled more after their father’s beatings, but one word from their mother, one glance, and they all obeyed.

“I’ll be glad to.”

In the morning, he got up with the sun, but his mother had beaten him to the kitchen and met him with the mouthwatering scents of coffee and bacon. After breakfast, he drove the familiar country road, nostalgia and regret twinging him. No, he didn’t question his life choices. He had no regrets about starting his own company and working hard to make it succeed.

He didn’t stay to see his brothers. He didn’t have time for it. Plus, he might’ve been the one who’d driven an invisible wedge between them, and he didn’t know how to remove it.

He rolled down the window, breathing in the fresh salty air while the breeze caressed his skin. He could afford a chauffeur, but he enjoyed the feeling of a muscle car obeying him, the thrill of speed as he passed yet another vehicle. An adrenaline spike invigorated him, gave him energy after a short night.

Just like Cinderella. She'd sent a jolt straight to his heart, and he'd dreamed of her again. But even in the dream, she never revealed her name or her face, for that matter.

Hmm. He'd done some car racing as a teen and then had taken risks with business. They paid off. The fast beat of his heart told him he wanted to take risks in his personal life again, as well.

His gaze swept over the magnificent coastline beyond his windshield as he reached the embankment. Sunrise colored the sky and water in the soft glow of flamingo pinks, peachy creams, and blinding golds. When was the last time he strolled along the beach and let the ocean tap his bare ankles?

He couldn't remember. His fingers tightened around the steering wheel. As mesmerizing as the view was, he'd better concentrate on the tasks ahead.

A sedan with tinted windows stayed behind him, but he didn't pay much attention, though he tensed. It wasn't getting close, always a car or two back. Despite the early hour, tourists were already going back and forth in the busy season, but traffic wasn't as congested as it would get soon. If the sedan got too close, he'd deal with it then.

He had a few police connections, and one of them was thankfully an early riser, as well. So he called the guy on the hands-free phone.

Minutes later, he disconnected, grimacing. Still no news on the stolen necklace.

In his life, he'd often gone all or nothing.

He had to find Cinderella.



“You want me to do what?” Rachel stared at Ms. Mueller in the sparsely furnished office Rachel used from time to time to meet with clients. Did she hear that right?

“The report isn't complete. You didn't find out as much about Tex Lawrence as I wanted you to. Now, especially with this second jewel theft, I want you to shadow him.”

Rachel drew a deep breath. She'd never bailed on an assignment before, and Ms. Mueller had already forgiven the messed-up dress mishap. Plus, the woman had a point. Rachel hadn't found out much about Tex, distracted by the theft and her pesky attraction. Even now, her pulse spiked just from her thinking of him.

That wouldn't do.

She still had almost a week before starting her next assignment. Her rib cage constricted, forcing air from her lungs. The issue was that she didn't want to deceive Tex again. Just the thought grated. "If I go to work undercover in his company, he might recognize my voice, height, body shape, or—well, I don't know. And it might take some time to get hired there."

"No, nothing that drastic." Ms. Mueller waved a manicured hand, her robin's-egg blue nails a sharp contrast to her cream-colored pantsuit. "I meant, just follow him in the street. See where he goes. Who he talks to."

Rachel breathed a little easier. "He rarely leaves the office. His assistant orders food in for lunch. Tex stays late, working. His social life is nearly nonexistent except for the annual charity ball."

Ms. Mueller's green eyes narrowed underneath her long jet-black bangs. Those eyes and that hair, as well as her suave, calculated movements, made Rachel think of a panther. "Then you'll get paid for staying in the car for many hours and doing nothing."

Stakeouts bored Rachel, but she knew better than to argue with a client. Climbing the ranks depended on her reputation. "I'll get a new contract drawn up, and once the logistics are ironed out, I'm in."

"I want to know if he's connected to the jewelry thefts, and if he is, I want proof. You must start today. I'll pay the rush fee." Ms. Mueller rose and picked up a designer purse matching her suit and stilettos.

Rachel smiled brightly despite the veiled accusation and rose as well to see the client to the door. “My boss will be happy to hear about the rush fee.” Then she paused. “Why do you think the subject might be connected to the jewelry thefts?”

“It’s no coincidence that he was present at two events where thefts occurred. I saw him dance with the victim of the first theft, not long before she noticed her ring was missing. And a recent burglary in Port Sunshine is connected to his family. I can’t divulge more.”

And Rachel wasn’t supposed to ask.

No mystery how the woman knew about the burglary. Despite Kennedy’s best efforts to keep the break-in from becoming public knowledge, the local news station had reported it. Ms. Mueller had admitted an interest in true crime and unsolved mysteries.

And Rachel sensed the woman had more than a passing interest in Tex Lawrence. Well, though they were the jobs she enjoyed least, it wouldn’t be the first time she’d been paid to do the stalking for someone.

“I understand. Thank you.”

Once the client was gone, Rachel slumped in the uncomfortable seat someone should’ve replaced months ago. She was already too attached to this case. Her entire being protested the possibility of Tex being guilty. Then she squared her shoulders, logged into the computer, and typed up all the necessary information for her boss. To work on it, she’d need to distance herself from this case mentally. Meanwhile, she repeated the crucial reminder—“Never fall for a subject of your investigation.”

Doing so not only led to ruined careers and disasters but also could lead to lost lives.

She tried to swallow the lump in her throat as her fingers flew over the keyboard. She’d worked hard to have a stellar professional reputation. She’d had to prove herself again and again, often on dangerous assignments—or worse, the long

monotonous ones—nobody else wanted to take. She wouldn't throw it all away or put her company in jeopardy because someone made her heart stutter.

Her fingers paused. Her attraction could constitute a conflict of interest.

No.

She'd keep it all professional. She had to.



Chapter Five



THE NEXT TWO DAYS, Rachel got well acquainted with the exterior of the large building where Tex worked and the interior of her small beater car. Just like she'd told Ms. Mueller, Tex's sports car disappeared into the building garage early every morning, and he didn't reappear until late every night.

By now, Rachel's car smelled like stale coffee, and she must have coffee in her blood to keep awake. Oh, and she'd added the scent of fried onion rings when she treated herself to them yesterday and had those and a hamburger delivered to her car. The lavender air freshener had given up and just hung pitifully.

What did she have to show for all that effort, for two days and nights trying not to dislocate her jaw yawning? No more than the hole inside of that onion ring.

On the third day, Rachel sat slumped in her seat, counting windows on the building from left to right, from right to left, from top to bottom and opposite, and then diagonally. At this point, she considered making a friend with a nearby sparrow by offering what was left of her cinnamon roll.

She'd get the sparrow to talk like a parrot in the years she could be stuck here. And she didn't think she could stomach another cup of coffee.

Then Tex's candy-apple-red sports car rolled out of the building, and she perked up. "It's about time to get lunch outside of the office. Enjoy!" She placed the cinnamon roll on the asphalt outside for the sparrow who barely got a crumb before being elbowed out by pigeons.

Well, Rachel didn't have time to restore justice in the bird's world as she had to follow Tex, staying a discreet distance behind, of course. She had tinted windows, so he

wouldn't see her, but he could get her license plate number. That would be a no-go.

He passed several decent places for lunch that made her stomach yearn, reminding her the unfinished cinnamon roll wasn't enough to fill it. But apparently, they weren't good enough for him.

Finally, he pulled up to an upscale female shoe store and parked.

"Huh. I guess he's buying someone a present," she muttered as she parked a safe distance from the store, near a café.

For his mother? That store didn't look like the sort his mother would shop at. She clearly preferred cowboy boots, considering she'd worn them to Kennedy's wedding and reception *and* vow renewal and reception, even though the first event and reception was in a fancy hotel and the second was at the beach. Apparently, nothing got her out of her chosen footwear. And he didn't have any sisters. He must have someone in his life. That stung. It shouldn't matter if he had a secret love.

It wasn't like he'd ever dated Rachel—or ever would. He didn't even know her name or who she was, and she'd keep it that way.

She donned a cherry-red wig, a wide-brimmed crimson hat, and sunglasses. The disguise might look ridiculous, but it should still work. People would remember the bright hat and cherry hair, not the face. Then she picked up the purse that matched her hat and marched to the store.

"Do you need any help?" The store clerk rushed her way.

Rachel shook her head, hoping her wig sat well enough. It wouldn't do to have her hat flying one way and the wig another. "No thank you. I'm good." She lowered her voice an octave or two, hoping to make it unrecognizable.

"Okay. Let me know if you need something." The young clerk gave her much-needed privacy. Or maybe she'd lost

interest because disguise or not, Rachel didn't look like someone who often shopped at such an upscale store. Or ever.

She wouldn't need anything. First, she preferred combat boots and sneakers as her footwear because one never knew when one needed to run. Case in point the night of the masquerade. Second, the shoes here didn't bear any prices, because if you needed to ask, you couldn't afford them. If she did shop for shoes, the prices here would make her gasp and give her indigestion even with the meager amount of food in her stomach.

So she pretended to look at a magenta pair of high-heeled, sparkly torture devices—ahem, shoes—and even tried a few on. All the while trying to hear what Tex discussed with the cashier and then with the tall slim woman in a gray suit who must be the manager.

Then Rachel nearly gasped for a different reason. Tex was waving the lavender shoe she'd worn to the charity ball. She froze, clutching a red sandal that presumably would complete her outfit.

Was he looking for her? Yes, he was looking for her. Her pulse increased.

Riiight.

She nearly snorted as disappointment stabbed her with the force the heel in her hands could. She pursed her lips and slipped her feet into the sandals with ferociousness. He wasn't looking for *her*, a simple girl who worked herself to the bone to compete in a man's world, who didn't have rich parents or a single diamond to her name.

He was looking for a pretty, well-off socialite covered in diamonds with all the time in the world to flirt and have fun. Maybe even available to be a beautiful accessory on the arm of a successful, important man like him.

Not to mention, he was a suspect in someone's investigation, a possible jewel thief, and she was here to provide information about him. So far, she had pitifully scant information to provide.

Based on the frown hardening his handsome face, he didn't get what he wanted. Good. He strode to the exit.

Uh-oh. She needed to hurry. She lowered her head so the hat hid her face, then put her oh-so-sensible and comfortable shoes back on. She'd prefer sneakers, but even she knew they didn't go with the hat and the dress. She placed the no-doubt outrageously expensive sandals back on the shelf.

Then premonition squeezed her rib cage. She should have let him get inside his car before she left the store, but intuition prompted her to move faster. As she stepped through the glass door, a silver SUV slowed. The tinted window rolled down. Her heart dropped to the pavement. That was a gun barrel! The gun was pointed at Tex.

Oh no! She couldn't blow her cover, but she couldn't risk his life, either.

She shot toward Tex. "Down!"

He turned to her, and his stunned expression would bemuse her another time. But not when she tackled him to the ground. Her hat rolled off, and her sunglasses got knocked off, but she didn't care. At least, her wig stayed in place.

His eyes went huge. Was it a bad time to notice—it was at close range, after all—that he had tiny navy speckles in those baby blues? "You've got to be kidding me."

"My thoughts precisely." She looked up. The gun didn't disappear, but they didn't fire yet, either. She hoped to keep it that way, so she pulled her gun from her purse. The smooth, cold metal felt good in her hand. The gun barrel disappeared, and the window rolled up. Then the SUV drove off.

"I know this voice, these eyes... Though you have different hair now... Cinderella?"

"Yeah, you called me that before." She rolled off him but not before snatching his car keys. His car was much closer than hers, and this wasn't over. Adrenaline surged in her veins as she leaped to her feet and picked up her hat and sunglasses. "I need to borrow your car. Are you tagging along? Or I can return the keys to you soon."

“Wait—What?” Even in his bewildered state, he jumped to his feet.

She clicked the fob and rushed to his vehicle. “Nice car, by the way.” She was in the driver’s seat first and threw her hat behind her before plunking the sunglasses back on her nose.

A moment later, he sat beside her in the passenger seat. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“You already said that today.” Burning rubber, squealing tires, she peeled off. She’d ruined her assignment, but she felt exhilaration, not disappointment. Of course, that exhilaration would become disappointment once the adrenaline wore off and she had to face her boss. Or a furious Ms. Mueller. Would Rachel get fired for this?

For now, she weaved between cars. How amazing to drive a vehicle that could move this fast. It had that new-car scent of leather and excitement Rachel had always considered too much to pay for. Yet she breathed it in deeply, catching a whiff of his intoxicating cologne, as well. Her heartbeat picked up, but this time she could attribute it to the spike of adrenaline.

“You’re going to chase that car,” he said as she moved near another car nearly close enough to tap it.

“You have astonishing deduction skills. Has anyone told you that?” She floored the gas pedal.

He chuckled. Good sense of humor instead of a sensitive ego. That was a plus. The men she’d met often had the opposite. “And you have astonishing driving skills. I used to race cars, but even I might kiss the ground once you park.”

Her heart made a strange movement at the word *kiss*. She could imagine him brushing his lips against hers and waking her to life—but those would be totally different fairy tales, and she lived in none of them.

Not a good time to get distracted. Her fingers tightened around the steering wheel, her attention razor sharp on the road again and on the silver SUV with tinted windows far ahead of her. She memorized the license plate numbers for later, though it was probably fake.

Yet she couldn't help casting a glance at his handsome profile before returning her attention to the road. He looked bemused instead of scared.

Huh. All the men she'd dated had been intimidated by her skills and her profession. Somehow, they didn't find it adorable that she could punch their lights out or outshoot them. And she wasn't about to stand small to stroke a fragile ego.

On the contrary, this man was confident and comfortable in many senses, and it was nearly as intoxicating as this chase. Her lips curved as she passed another car, hers—okay, Tex's—nearly kissing that car's door.

No distraction! Not easy when the man near her was a breathing, walking—okay, sitting now—distraction.

“Hmm. I've got a dilemma.”

“Shoot.” He cleared his throat. “I mean, tell me. I imagine it's not a good idea to shoot and drive. Though I have no doubt you'd do well.”

A pleasant wave spread inside her as the motor growled at another influx of gas. The man knew how to give compliments. There was much more than that, of course. The reason even celebrities wanted to date him likely wasn't the tinge of mystery or his impressive net worth, though there was that. He oozed charisma, injected the air around him with it like with his enticing cologne.

Even she wasn't immune to it.

So much for not getting distracted. She squeezed into a tiny space on the left, but by that time, the SUV passed two cars, including an eighteen-wheeler, and she couldn't see it any longer.

“Where's a helicopter when one needs it?” She resisted the urge to gnash her teeth. With no other opening where she could pass, she couldn't exactly crawl over cars.

“I could hire one, but not on such short notice. I'd need to give them more than a two-minute lead time.” His light tone

made it difficult to guess whether he was joking or serious.
“You said you had a dilemma?”

She turned on the left blinker and hoped for the best. Good. The forest-green sedan to her left slowed down, giving her space to get in. Usually, it only worked if she was in a truck or another large vehicle people didn't want to get hit with. “Well, not any longer. I wanted to get close to that SUV. But if I got too close, I didn't want them to start shooting and risk injuring innocent people in other vehicles.”

“Very considerate of you.” Once again, his tone sounded bemused, but this time, it got under her skin. Was he mocking her?

“How are *your* shooting skills?” She managed to get close to the eighteen-wheeler.

“Decent, though I doubt I could hit a moving tire.”

“I don't think even *I* could do it. It's much more difficult than the way it's shown in the movies.” She moved forward, but no silver SUV with tinted windows waited in front of the eighteen-wheeler. Arggh. She sliced the air with her arm. “We lost them!”

“But we're alive, and we've got their license plate.” He paid attention.

She gave him another side-eye as she tapped on the brakes. “You say that as if those two are of equal value.”

“Not at all.” His low chuckle reverberated through her. “I enjoy being alive, and despite this mad dash, I believe you do, too.”

“I do.” Despite taking dangerous assignments sometimes, she didn't have a death wish. She might've chosen her profession because she needed to come a long and opposite way from her upbringing where she'd felt helpless and insignificant. Like a mouse.

No offense to her pets, of course.

She drove forward for some time, but it was no use. The silver SUV had disappeared. She grimaced. “I'll bring you and

your car to your office.” She shouldn’t let disappointment stab her because she’d have to say goodbye soon, and yet it did.

Okay, fine. She didn’t want to walk away from him again. Plus, this was getting worse and worse. She made a total disaster out of her assignment for the second time in a row. Her client wasn’t going to be happy, and in turn, neither would her boss.

How could Rachel salvage this?

“I appreciate that. But could I take you to dinner first?” His voice dipped. Surely, she wasn’t hearing apprehension in it? As if her answer mattered to him.

Her heart skipped a beat. The intensity with which she wanted to say yes shocked her. “It’s not a good idea.” She pushed the words out through her teeth as she made a turn to head back. Never mind that her heart screamed, “Yes! Yes!”

“Well, I should thank you in some way for saving my life today.” His voice softened. “Name the day and the time. Preferably in this decade. I won’t ask your name or what you do for a living. I won’t ask why you have shooting and, I presume, fighting skills or how you happened to be in place to protect me. Unless you decide to tell me it all yourself. I won’t even mention how you look shockingly different from the first time I saw you. Beautiful, but different. I’ll just keep calling you Cinderella and enjoy your company.”

A woman could have only so much willpower. She’d have to talk to her client and her boss. And use all the persuading skills she had. “Someone could’ve shot you today. You should report this to the police and be careful for some time. Best not to show up in any public places. Consider hiring a bodyguard.”

A muscle moved in his jaw. “You have a point. I’ll do all the things you listed, minus a bodyguard. I like my privacy too much. But if nothing happens for several days... Wouldn’t you want to check on me to know I’m, you know, still alive?”

She couldn’t help chuckling. “Fine. How about you give me your phone number and I call you?”

“Okay.” He didn’t push for more.

She was grateful for it. She pulled up to the parking garage in the tall building and turned off the engine. Then she couldn’t move, reluctant to leave. Her pulse spiked. Did he feel the same way? And why did it matter so much if he did?

No.

The budding romance wouldn’t be fair to him or her. She turned to him and caught his blue eyes staring at her with the vulnerability of someone who wanted something so much and feared they’d never have it. A feeling and look she knew too well. And it tugged at her more than all his previous confidence and charm.

Awareness rising between them, she kept his gaze. “You should know something about me. I’m not rich. I’m not famous. And I used someone else’s invitation to get into the charity ball.”

“I already knew that.” He didn’t look away.

“Oh.” That was everything she could say. How eloquent was that?

But then, she was used to being silent. Her assignments often depended on her ability to be silent, to be invisible, or to be a shadow. Or a gray mouse, for that matter. But now she wanted to be seen. The real her, not the pretend one.

To be seen by this man who attracted her despite her best efforts.

Her stomach clenched. After all, sneaking into a sought-after event while using someone else’s invitation didn’t speak well for her. Yet she had to continue to keep up this charade. Talk about a much bigger dilemma than whether to get close to that SUV or not.

This dilemma was whether to get close to this man or not.

She took a shaky breath of air filled with his intoxicating scent and that new-car smell. “Are you sure you’re okay not knowing who I am for now? Not looking me up?” She

shouldn't be doing this, and she knew it. Guilt nagged, but the voice of attraction drowned it out.

“If that's the price of getting to know you, then yes. I'm already grateful for being able to see your face. You're even more beautiful than I imagined.” He moved closer.

Close enough to kiss? Breathing became difficult. Of course, he was used to giving compliments.

“Thank you.” It wasn't about her face, though she'd never considered herself gorgeous. She was a beautiful enigma to him. *That* was the reason for his interest. Once he knew who she was, his interest would diminish or disappear. Especially if he knew why she'd been interested in him initially.

Something cold gripped her heart—and squeezed painfully. How did she get herself knee-deep in this?

A line appeared between his eyebrows. “Are you a criminal?”

She should shift back in her leather seat. She absolutely had to get away. Yet she stayed in her place. “No. But if I was, I wouldn't have told you, would I?”

“Good point.” He chuckled, but his blue eyes remained intensely locked on hers. “I don't want this to be goodbye.”

Neither did she.



Chapter Six



TEX COULDN'T REMEMBER when he'd been this nervous before going on a date. If ever.

Except for his first date with Madison. His hand stilled on his tie, the familiar pain a grim toll echoing inside him. No, it was best not to remember.

For two days *and* five hours, he'd almost lost hope, but Cinderella called today. After much persuasion on his part, she'd agreed to see him for lunch. The new information about the stolen necklace he'd promised to divulge might have tipped the scales.

His heart stuttered, the tempo beating out his anticipation. His assistant Jennifer had dropped her folder when he'd told her he was going out for lunch, and no, it wasn't a business lunch.

How could a guy be this smitten with a woman whose name he still didn't know? A person he knew close to nothing about? He didn't let anyone close without knowing their background. And even then, he let very, very, *very* few people close. He had to be careful. Plenty of people tried to scam him out of his fortune. Including Madison.

But the only thing he knew about Cinderella for sure was that she made his heart beat faster. Maybe that mystery was part of the fascination. She wore a forbidden air as if it were a dress—or a shoe, for that matter. Even when she'd flirted, challenge and defiance flared like a golden fire in her hazel eyes.

He discarded his tie, then did the same with his diamond cufflinks. Judging by where she'd picked for lunch, she was more into casual food and clothes. He settled for a dressy shirt and ironed black slacks.

Two hours later, he sat on a restaurant deck overlooking the ocean and pier in his hometown. Large white umbrellas provided a welcome shade from the sun that made the ocean sparkle. It was still too early for the lunch hour, so only one other person occupied one of the wooden tables painted aquamarine blue, a white-haired man who stooped over a table, his cane braced against his chair. No wonder she had chosen this time. And the location was worth the drive to Port Sunshine and constantly checking the rearview mirror for a tail. A breeze brought salty damp air from the ocean that mixed with the faint scent of the biscuits the other patron bit into.

What a beautiful day to be alive and to meet with a fascinating woman. Tex winced and looked around. Nothing suspicious had happened since the almost-shooting incident, but he remained vigilant.

A middle-aged waitress with hazelnut-brown hair in a bun and crimson-red lipstick crossed the deck. "Hello. I'll be your server today." She handed him a menu and placed another one on the table. "What would you like to drink?"

"Thank you." He took the menu, which brought back a deluge of memories. How many times had he eaten or helped out at the Bay and Basin as a teen with his brothers? His brother Kai had been sweet on the proprietor's oldest daughter then and finally married her this year. "I'm waiting for someone and will order when she arrives."

"Sounds good. Let me know if you need anything." She strode inside the restaurant, leaving him staring at the exterior's tall windows and whitewashed wood. The crisp benches along the deck wall and railing were painted white, as well.

Now, the only sounds were the screams of the seagulls and the whisper of the ocean. Well, and that of his heart beating out its anticipation of seeing Cinderella. Then the loud squeals of twin girls with pigtails interrupted that silence as they ran to a table and climbed onto the benches.

Their tired mother followed and slumped onto the bench nearby. “Could you please be quiet?”

The girls increased the volume.

As the waitress took the newcomer’s orders, his heart sank to the wooden deck planks. What if Cinderella wasn’t going to show up? She’d called him from a blocked number, so he couldn’t even call her back. Maybe it was best. After all, a mysterious stranger could be deceitful like his first love had been.

His crushing heart didn’t want to listen to reason. He glanced at his Rolex watch. Had only five minutes passed? It seemed like an eternity.

Then everything in him brightened at the sight of her. This time, she didn’t wear a stunning lavender-hued evening gown, sparkling jewelry, or expensive shoes like at the ball. She was dressed in faded jeans, a simple white T-shirt, and scuffed sneakers. Her once-again blonde hair flowed over her stiff shoulders from under a gray cap and was slightly messy. The gusting wind added to that messiness.

It all suited her more than her attire at the charity ball and therefore made her even more attractive. The Cinderella from the ball had been something from a fairy tale indeed, something made up, like a figment of the imagination, and not that of his own. The woman walking toward him was very much real. Falling in love with a fairytale heroine wouldn’t make sense. But falling in love with this woman would be all too easy.

She scanned the entire place before moving forward, then walked fast and with purpose while her right hand stayed in her battered purse that clearly had seen better times. She must carry a gun in her purse.

Her eyes were guarded, but they lit up when she saw him. Her smile was her best—and only—decoration, and she didn’t need any others. Some people wore diamonds, and some people *were* diamonds. Surely, she was the latter.

Everything in him cheered up when he stood to greet her, though a sting twinged him when she dodged from his hug. But then, he might be moving too fast. “Thank you for being here.”

“It’s my pleasure.” Her lips widened, but he wanted to erase the apprehension behind that smile. She seemed to worry about something. Probably several things.

Which brought back the question that needled and sent a shot of worry through him. Why all the secrecy? He wouldn’t like the answer, would he? He was a practical man, and what he was doing now was anything but. Yet, he couldn’t look away.

They ordered drinks that arrived surprisingly fast.

Once the waitress left, Cinderella leaned forward. “Feels unusual, right?”

“I haven’t dated anyone like you before.” He sipped his raspberry tea.

“Thanks. I meant that we’ve been here several minutes already, and nobody has tried to shoot at us yet.” Her gaze darted over the deck then at the windows into the restaurant interior. She didn’t seem to consider the old man and little girls a threat, so her gaze returned to him.

She sure was unique.

He cleared his throat. “Erm, I’m not complaining.”

“I understand why someone wouldn’t want to get caught with a stolen necklace and would shoot at me. But why would anyone aim at you?” Her eyes probed him, and that luminous smile disappeared.

Was this a work lunch for her instead of a date, after all? A twist in his gut wrung the joy from his being. She did have a point in asking the question, though. If bullets were going to fly around him, she had to be prepared. He should commend her for showing up, considering the circumstances.

Instead, he said the words he didn’t say often. “I don’t know exactly.” He’d thought about it already and been asked

by the police, so he went with what he'd come up with then. "I have competitors. I've done mergers some businesspeople might not like. I've had to fire inefficient employees. While I don't think anyone would take disgruntlement as far as to shoot me, one never knows."

"Anyone in particular?" Her hazel eyes studied him.

"I have a competitor named Fred Sersen who seems to have a grudge against me. But he wasn't in the vicinity of the charity ball."

"Someone he hired could've been. Do you have a will?" She brought her iced lemon tea to her lips.

It drew his attention to her mouth again, sending a shot of awareness at the desire to kiss her. He shifted his gaze to her eyes. Could he hope he affected her as much as she affected him? Oh, she'd asked him something.

Her question was direct, and he answered as such. "I do. One-third goes to my mother, and the rest is divided equally between my brothers. Before you ask, I have an amazing family." Though he didn't see them often. Ironic, wasn't it?

"I, um, had someone run the silver SUV's license plate. As I expected, it was fake." Her lips pressed tight, saying what she thought of that. Then she sipped her amber liquid.

Hmm, she had police connections. She was getting more and more interesting, and she was extremely interesting to start with. The woman could catch attention and keep it forever.

However, he didn't do forever. He'd learned his lesson with Madison.

Was it weird that he was more concerned about whether she liked him than about whether someone had tried to kill him? Probably. But he wasn't convinced the people in the silver SUV were going to shoot. He might not have been their target at all. The days since then had been quiet with no suspicious activities. He had many *definites* to worry about and no need to waste his energy on *maybes*.

He reminded himself he should be an upstanding citizen and said what he should've after they'd chased the silver SUV. "You were a witness to a crime. You should go to the police and give the perpetrator's description. I know I said we have cameras, but the two facing the exit stopped working. So the police don't have footage of the crime. Vanya Patel, the theft victim, gave a description but was too shaken up to work with the artist."

A muscle moved in her jaw. "I've already talked to the police and worked with an artist to make a portrait. My guess is that the guy's beard and mustache was a disguise. But I can't be sure, of course. I didn't get a chance to get a good look at him before he ran."

Huh. Jennifer had mentioned that the police had interviewed her and the security team and the waitstaff she'd hired to see whether they could recognize the person on a sketch as one of the guests. She'd pointed them to the three people who could vaguely match the portrait, and Fred Sersen wasn't one of them.

The waitress showed up to collect their menus and orders. But he hadn't even looked at his. He didn't doubt he could chew cardboard and consider it fine if it was while talking to her. Especially in this charming spot surrounded by quirky blue tables, white benches, and white umbrellas and overlooking a stunning marina and pier.

"I'll have the Carolina crab cakes with pickled corn relish, roasted red pepper sauce, and fried onions, please. And chilled blue crab dip with crackers." Cinderella handed back the menu. She must've been here before. He'd wondered, finding it odd that she picked a restaurant in his hometown. "For the sides, I'd like a tomato and cucumber salad and french fries."

"Got it. And for you, sir?" The redheaded waitress in her pink uniform with a white apron turned to him. "Or would you like more time?"

He considered his time valuable, and so was other people's. He'd never waste their time. So he smiled at her as

he returned his menu, as well. “That sounds good. I’ll take the same, please. Thank you very much.”

Cinderella’s lips curved up, giving him the strange feeling he’d passed some kind of test.

Once the waitress left, he shifted forward, his entire attention on Cinderella again. He wanted to ask her so many things, but he started with the reason for a tiny line between her eyebrows.

“You look preoccupied. May I ask what it is and whether I can help?” He worded the question carefully and injected softness in his voice because she didn’t seem like the type to ask for help.

“Work stuff.” She sighed. “And, well, Button ran away.”

“Button?”

“My littlest pet mouse—just a button, really.”

His eyebrows shot up. “You were serious about having pet mice?”

“Oh, absolutely. I travel a lot for work, so I wanted low-maintenance pets.”

He’d never wanted to meet mice until now. “I’ll be glad to help you look for the mouse.”

Jennifer would faint if he told her that.

“Thanks. But no thanks.” Cinderella shook her head.

Fair enough. He suppressed a jolt of disappointment, then understood how his suggestion sounded. “Um, I didn’t mean to try to invite myself to your place. I’m truly invested in the fate of that runaway mouse. There are a lot of cats out there.”

Her smile turned sad. “Sometimes even panthers. You mentioned there’s news about the stolen necklace?” With such obvious interest in her voice, she cared about her question, and it wasn’t an idle one.

How could he trust her? The answer was he couldn’t.

The waitress brought the tray with their food then, and it emanated the aroma of fries and freshly baked biscuits.

“Thank you very much,” he and Cinderella said in unison.

A soft smile touched her lips, and his gaze lingered on them again longer than it should have. Yes, he was thinking of kissing her, and his blood rushed faster. Her face was makeup-free, which was refreshing. The women he’d met in the corporate world so far had impeccably made-up faces. Artificial nails and eyelashes, as well. Today, her nails were cut short and without a trace of polish, and everything about her seemed fresh and real.

She was so different from everyone else, even from the impression she made at the charity ball. That piqued his curiosity even more. But then, he could probably know her a hundred years and still not figure her out. He took a bite of his crab cake followed by fries.

“How do you like it?” She forked at her own dish.

“It’s the best. So is the company.” He meant every word. “Or maybe it’s the best *because* of the company.”

Instead of brightening like he’d expected them to, her eyes dimmed. Why? She drank some of her tea, ice cubes clanking in the glass. “You don’t have to be all suave and charming with me. No need for compliments.”

Did she think he kept wearing the mask, even after the masquerade? But then, he’d known plenty of people like that, so he couldn’t blame her. “I meant it. I enjoy your company and don’t intend to hide it. Don’t see why I should.”

Her expression softened as she munched on her biscuit, then forked up a tomato. “Then I appreciate it. And I enjoy your company, too.”

Her words pleased him more than they should have. His pulse spiked, and he nearly reached across the blue table to touch her hand. Instead, his fingers tightened around the cold smooth surface of his raspberry tea glass. “Besides, it’s nice to relax and simply enjoy the food without worrying about closing a deal or impressing investors. As for meals, my

assistant orders in while I work. Most of the time I don't even remember what I ate because my mind is on something else.”

“Do you enjoy that kind of life?” She studied him over the rim of her glass.

He worked too much to stop and ask himself that question. The sweet tangy drink turned bitter. “I'm good at what I do and proud of what I built.” That didn't answer her question. “But maybe it's becoming more of a hamster-wheel thing for me.” Didn't mice run in a wheel, as well? He didn't ask because he didn't want to remind her of her runaway pet. “Do you love your job?”

Her lovely face lit up, and she placed a ketchup-dipped fry back on her plate. “I do! Granted, some assignments are better than others. But I get to see lots of exciting places, and I help people. It's meaningful to me. And I never know what the next day will bring.”

“What is it exactly that you do for a living, if you don't mind me asking?” He dipped the fry into ketchup. Erm, oops. He'd promised not to ask, hadn't he?

“I live,” she said without batting an eye.

Her job must have something to do with security and protection. A cop? A secret agent? A bodyguard? Once again, why such secrecy?

Okay, maybe her family would be a safer topic. Or would that turn out to be sensitive, as well? “You already know I grew up with many brothers on a ranch. Sorry you had to grow up with a stepmother and two stepsisters.” He teased. “I hope it wasn't as bad as in Cinderella's story.”

Maybe not the best move, either. He was usually much better with the ladies. However, she seemed more difficult to decipher than the land or sea when covered in morning mist.

She took another bite of her crab cake, and her gaze followed a newly arrived teenage couple, then the middle-aged one with five children. She sure paid close attention to her surroundings. “We do have modern cleaning appliances now. Like a vacuum cleaner instead of a broom. But my difficult

upbringing made me appreciate my current independence and freedom more.”

She sounded serious. He'd been joking about the stepmother and stepsisters, but he could almost hear reality behind her words. If so, she wouldn't surrender her hard-earned independence to a relationship. She'd already told him she wasn't looking for romance.

The realization formed a lump in his throat, though it didn't make much sense. He wasn't a relationship kind of guy, either. He tried to flush that lump with cold raspberry tea. “What do you like to do in your spare time?”

“Play with mice. Listen to rock music. Go to the firing range. Walk on the beach.” Her expression turned wistful, and she clattered her half-full glass down on the table, covering the head of a fish painted on its surface. Her gaze darted around again, zoomed in on an elderly couple now seated two tables from them, then returned to him. “I used to run to the beach when I was little. There, nobody yelled at me or gave me impossible tasks.” Vulnerability flashed in her hazel eyes before she turned away as if to look at the pier.

Compassion stirred him. It began to sound as if she truly had been Cinderella, and he wished he could protect her from her miserable childhood. He finished his yummy crab cakes, then drained his refreshing raspberry tea. His fries and biscuits were gone already. Most of his cucumber and tomato salad remained unloved. Then he caught the lifeline she threw him as he finished his crunchy fries. “Would you like to take a walk on the beach after lunch?”

“Don't you have to go back to work?” Her eyes widened as she brought a tomato slice to her mouth.

“I cleared most of my afternoon.” For the first time in years. *Many* years. “Unless you need to go back to work?” He held his breath for her answer.

“I can spare an hour.”

The trace of guilt in her eyes surprised him, but he jumped at the chance to spend more time with her. “Would you like

dessert?”

She hesitated. “They do have an awesome vanilla bean crème brûlée.”

He gestured to the waitress. “Two crème brûlées, please.” He wanted this day to last a lifetime.

His jaw nearly dropped. What was he thinking? Work was his life. And this was just lunch. It had to be.

Yet his mind whirled. Wistfulness had glazed her eyes when she looked at the water, which was no wonder if only mice and the ocean were kind to her while she’d been growing up.

“I have a boat.” Which he used rarely, and only when he needed to entertain important investors. “Would you like to go out on it this weekend? If you don’t have to travel somewhere on an assignment?”

Please say yes. Please say yes.

He needed to keep his cool, so he dimmed the eagerness in his eyes. People who were too eager seldom closed the deal, and this wasn’t a deal to him. It was way more important.

“You don’t have a yacht? Just a boat? I’m kidding. I’ll get back to you on that.” Why could she never answer right away?

At least it wasn’t a no. He leaned back when the waitress brought the dessert. He tried it, and it was tender and sweet as it melted in his mouth. “You were right. It’s awesome. And so are you.”

Her spoon froze midair, and their gazes met and held again. “You don’t know much about me.”

“But I’d love to.” He kept her gaze as the breeze caressed his face and threw her blonde hair around hers. She didn’t seem to be a person who easily allowed people into her life, but surely, there was more to it. Which increased his curiosity.

Her dessert was disappearing fast, so she must have a sweet tooth. He’d send her chocolates if he knew where she lived. But if he asked again, it would be stalkerish.

She scooped out the last of her crème brûlée. “What did you like to do growing up?”

“My childhood was a combo of the ranch and the beach. There’s nearly always lots of work at a ranch, but we managed to get to the beach for fun. Fishing, swimming, splashing around, diving from the pier.” Nostalgia unraveled in his heart as he stared at a beautiful sailboat, its white sails crisp against the blue in the distance.

As a child, he’d dreamed of sailing on one as far from his father’s screams and slaps as he could go. He hadn’t made it far in a geographical sense, but very far in the sense of achievements. But as he turned to her, those achievements didn’t make his chest swell with pride like they used to.

“You were sort of a beach cowboy.” She followed his gaze until the sailboat disappeared.

“Not anymore.”

She pushed her empty plate away. “I’m ready for that walk if you are.”

He asked the waitress for the check.

Cinderella leaned forward, her expression unreadable, but her bright hazel gaze got under his skin. *She* was getting under his skin. “Do you miss it? The carefree time at the beach? The camaraderie with your brothers?”

“I didn’t until now.” She made him ask himself uncomfortable questions, and he didn’t think he liked the answers.

You aren’t going to amount to anything!

His father’s screams and slaps had partially propelled Tex to work hard, but there was more. “Years ago, we nearly lost the ranch after one of my father’s bad decisions.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” The fiery glow in her eyes softened.

He paid the check, but neither of them got up. His fingers tapped on the aquamarine tabletop, landing just below the beak of the pelican painted there. He’d never shared this with

anyone. Was afraid to appear vulnerable, to reveal his soft spot. It was a no-no in business.

Why was he telling it to her? It wasn't that he wanted to appear as a hero—maybe a little bit. He just wanted her to know there was more to him than the outside success. He wanted her to know the real him. Not just the overconfident image he portrayed to the public. "I wanted to ensure my mother and brothers never had to worry about something like that again. They love that land and those animals."

"And you love them." She didn't say it as a question but as a statement.

"Yes." His family was his weak spot and how competitors could get to him. So he hadn't revealed those things before. The next reason was easier to share. "I love seeing the inventions of... of my friend come to life. They help people. Serve a purpose, and therefore, so do I."

"That's admirable. Very much so."

Since she sounded like she meant it, he preened. But a thought bothered him. He kept proving himself to a man who hadn't existed for decades. Why was that? And when would be the time to stop?

She got up, and they walked through the restaurant to the parking lot. Her hand stayed in her purse during the short walk, so she must be keeping her fingers on her gun.

Once in the parking lot, she lingered. "It might not be such a great idea for you to be outside in the open. You risked it already by going to the restaurant."

His heart fell to the asphalt. "Nothing's happened these last few days. Maybe that was a random incident and the person wasn't aiming at me. I should be fine." This was when he should suggest he'd wear a Kevlar vest if that was what it took to get her to walk with him.

The wind sent blonde hair into her face, and she brushed it aside with an impatient gesture. "I hope I'm not going to regret it."

“I promise you won’t.” He hoped he could keep that promise, even if he wasn’t sure whether she meant the walk on the beach or seeing him again. Maybe both.



Chapter Seven



TEX SLIPPED INTO HIS driver's seat and followed her small car. Intuition told him she fought an inner struggle over how to respond to his suggestion of dates. Were they even dates? His eyes narrowed. He couldn't be mistaken about the attraction in her eyes. But she was fighting it.

Was her heart broken in the past, as his had been? Or did something in her history prevent her from revealing her identity?

His insides went cold as he changed the lane after she had. Could she have been sent by one of his competitors? Could it be Fred Sersen? He'd done something like that in the past. Instructing a beautiful woman to weasel out Tex's secrets.

Oh no. As everything in Tex protested that possibility, he clenched his teeth. But then Cinderella would've had a believable story concocted not to raise his suspicions. Still, he'd followed his heart instead of his mind once before, and he'd lost big time.

Doubts roiled him, but he kept driving. He'd just seen her, and he couldn't wait to see her again—*soon*. The road to the beach seemed way too long. He couldn't turn back. But he'd have to be very, very careful.

Minutes later, they stood on the beach surrounded by amazing beauty. But he only had eyes for the beauty right in front of him. It took all his willpower—and he usually had plenty of it—not to reach out and tuck a wayward strand of her hair behind her ear. He was standing on the white sand, but he might be standing in quicksand with her.

“It's gorgeous here, isn't it?”

The air was even more humid here and saltier, as well. Seagulls seemed to greet them, squealing and careening through the sky. Whitecaps of foam topped the waves as they

reached toward an endless cerulean above, but she peered at the distant sails as if searching for something far away.

“Gorgeous, indeed.” He kept looking at her, half afraid she was a mirage ready to disappear. He wouldn’t even know where to look for her.

Her lips curled up as if she understood the meaning of his words, and an adorable blush pinked her cheeks. In simple worn-out clothes and footwear, her face clear and makeup-free, she didn’t try to appeal to him or anyone else, which made her more appealing.

She kicked off her sneakers and picked them up. “I live close to the beach and yet rarely go on it. Shame, isn’t it?” She waved at the seagulls, then turned to him. “In a way, you and I are two birds of a feather. We work too much and allow ourselves to feel too little.”

He flinched. She summed it up so well. “We have our reasons. But it doesn’t make it better.”

“No, it doesn’t.” The wash of the ocean nearly drowned her soft words. She lifted her face to the sun and closed her eyes.

Whatever the outcome of this rendezvous, he’d never forget her. Maybe he’d always remember her this way—her blonde hair flowing in the air like a ship’s pennant, her white T-shirt flapping in the wind like a sail, and her arms spreading like a bird in flight. He almost reached into his pocket for his phone to take a photo, but that would feel intrusive.

Yes, she was beautiful like a mirage, a surreal mystery, and yet she felt more real than anyone he’d ever met. His rapid heartbeat accompanied the ocean’s rumbly pulse.

This must’ve been the only place she’d felt free as a little girl, away from her stepmother and stepsisters’ abuse. The beach was where he’d felt free as a child, too. Away from his father’s abuse. The ocean accepted everyone equally.

She opened her eyes, and their gazes met and held. Busted for staring, he didn’t apologize by voice or facial expression.

Women like her were meant to be looked at, to be admired and cherished, whether she realized it or not.

Then she ran to the water and splashed. “The water feels so good!”

“Oh yeah?” He took off his shiny leather shoes and rolled up the cuffs of his black slacks. He should’ve worn a T-shirt, but oh well. He also rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt.

Warm sand wrapped around his toes. When was the last time he’d gone barefoot in public? He must’ve been a teen then.

He’d achieved everything he wanted, but now what? He’d never realized the worst part about having dreams was when they came true.

He walked to the water and let the tide lap at his feet before getting close to her. “You’re breathtaking.” Considering how she’d reacted to his previous compliments, he shouldn’t shower her with them. But he couldn’t help himself.

She tilted her head. “Even when I don’t knock the wind out of you by tackling you to the ground?”

He laughed. “Even then.”

Then she splashed at him, and he jumped back, resulting in a splash of his own around him.

“Watch out!” He sent sprays of water in her direction.

She squealed, shielding her face, then laughed.

A long-evasive carefree feeling filled him as he rushed to her and lifted her in the air, preventing another splash. She quieted in his arms, her hazel eyes huge. His heartbeat skyrocketed.

Did he overstep her boundaries? She didn’t say anything, just stared at him with those large, doe-like eyes. Every scent and sound seemed to disappear. Well, except for the heart thumping in his chest.

Then he put her down, and she walked back to the shore without saying a word.

He closed the distance between them fast.

“I... I’m not sure I’m ready for a new relationship yet,” she finally said. “I’ve had a no-dating rule for many years.”

“Same here.” He bottled up his disappointment. He wanted her in his life. In whatever capacity she chose, though granted, some of them were much better than others.

She shielded her eyes from the sun as she faced the lighthouse. “Isn’t it weird how we choose our beacons in life and travel to them despite great difficulties—but when we get there, we realize it might not be the best direction for us?”

She wasn’t talking about lighthouses. But with all his intelligence, he couldn’t say whether she talked about herself, him, or both. “My beacon was success. What was yours?”

“Independence and survival on my own. Now I’m not sure anymore.” She started walking along the ocean, something on her mind. “What do you know about the progress in the stolen-necklace case?”

He rubbed the back of his neck, shifting at an inner cringe. He’d sort of click-baited her with that, and he didn’t have much to offer. “The police had a suspect from the party who matched the thief’s description, but that person produced an ironclad alibi. The police have two more possible suspects but haven’t revealed their names. So far, nothing similar to that necklace appeared on the black market. Oh, and the necklace’s former owner said there was a romantic legend behind it.”

“I know about the legend. The necklace used to belong to a royal family in a small European country.”

“Really? Tell me more.” This case interested her way too much. Was her reluctant attention to him only because of the necklace? As the thought sliced through him, he nearly stopped walking the beach.

Something flashed in her eyes when she looked up at him, but he couldn’t decipher it. It disappeared fast like words written in the sand and taken by the tide. She leaned to the water, but this time, she didn’t splash it, just let it run through her long, ringless fingers. “According to the legend, a prince

gave the diamond necklace to his redheaded bride after their wedding. Before that, the necklace belonged to a noble family in the kingdom, but they sold it when they fell on hard times after the king ordered their patriarch's arrest. The family's youngest son vowed to prove his father's innocence and one day get their treasures back."

Tex whistled. "A beautiful present that came with a warning."

"Indeed. She was kidnapped during their honeymoon voyage while wearing the necklace."

"What happened to her?"

She shrugged. "Nobody knows. The ship was taken by pirates. The prince's life was spared, but his young wife was taken captive. The prince later offered a huge ransom to get his beloved back. But she and the pirates disappeared with no trace."

How much of this was true and how much was just romantic words? He didn't voice the question in case she was entranced with the story. He itched to take her hand, but her earlier words stopped him. So he settled for just looking at her against the beautiful ocean backdrop and listening to her soft voice against the waves.

She slowed her pace as if disappearing into her story. "The legend says she might've been in love with the pirate captain. But that part could be the prince's guilty conscience speaking for not being able to save her. There was a rumor later of a rare sighting of a pirate queen—with red hair."

Interesting detail, but some things didn't add up. "What about the son of the noble family who vouched to get the treasures back?"

"Good question. The king pardoned their patriarch and released him. But the son was never seen again." She paused as if pursuing the same unspoken conclusions he was. "Coming back to the necklace now, it'll be difficult to sell. I imagine they will take it apart and hawk the individual

diamonds. Which is a pity, considering it's a historical treasure."

"It should've been in a museum."

Her eyes darkened. "Probably. But a lot of people like expensive toys with interesting histories they can brag about."

Was that a dig in his direction? He liked expensive cars, though he wouldn't call them "toys." "What about other treasures that once belonged to that family? What happened to them? Did they get them back?"

"Most of them. Except for the necklace, two rings, and a bracelet. The necklace resurfaced centuries later in a different European country and then made its way to the US. The great-grandmother of someone I know bought one of the rings at a European auction, and it was passed through the generations in that family to the first daughter, eventually making it to my friend." She opened her mouth as if to say something else, but then clammed up. Except to say, "No word on what happened to the other ring or the bracelet."

"An interesting coincidence."

Her gaze sharpened, and she stopped. "Or it wasn't a coincidence. That jewelry doesn't just have historical value and obvious sentimental value to the family. The items are rather expensive."

He didn't like where this was going as he remembered the gunfire at the charity ball garden. "Expensive enough to kill for?"

"I suspect so."



Chapter Eight



RACHEL GOT UP FROM the carpet and sighed. “Nope, Button isn’t under the bed. And I already checked everything I could think of.”

Kennedy picked up the cookie from the floor and closed the peanut butter jar. “So what’s our next move?”

“We’ll have to ask the neighbors if they saw my mouse.” Rachel checked the cabinets once again, then every shoe and boot in her closet, thankful she didn’t have much footwear.

Kennedy grimaced. “I can imagine how wonderful that’s going to go.”

Rachel crawled under the kitchen sink for the third time, then repeated the process in the bathroom. “Didn’t you tell me you found a pet alligator in a hotel room?”

“Yes, but an alligator wouldn’t have crawled through a pencil-sized hole.”

Rachel put back the cleaning solutions and straightened out. “Good point. Um, you don’t have to go with me.” Despite being the head of a large corporation, Kennedy was shy around strangers.

“No. Let’s do it.” Kennedy fit her hands on her hips, then winked. “Meanwhile, you can tell me all about how your date with Tex went.”

Rachel groaned as she picked up her keys. Yet her heart skipped a beat just at his name. At least Kennedy didn’t ask much about the stolen ring. Not having any news for her friend needed. And the coincidence of both pieces of stolen jewelry coming from the same collection needed her even more.

“Nothing happened.” She jiggled the keys in her hand. “We went to eat and then walked on the beach. That’s it.”

“That’s not just it. That’s a lot.” Kennedy followed Rachel outside her apartment that was probably the size of Tex’s living room. “Did he ask you for another date? Ooooooh, he did.” Kennedy clapped, and she usually didn’t express her emotions. Was taught not to.

“It’s not a big deal.” Rachel knocked on the first door to her left. She spent so little time at home she didn’t know her neighbors. Knowing them sure would’ve come in handy now.

“It is a big deal. I can tell that you like him. Why are you fighting it?” Kennedy asked as they waited for someone to answer.

Rachel swallowed back a yearning. Oh how much she wished things between her and Tex were possible. “There are obstacles. And complications. And, well, difficulties.”

The neighbor answered, sparing Rachel from explaining what kind of obstacles, complications, and difficulties those were. He was bald and hadn’t shaved for days. Maybe he misplaced his razor. His dirty T-shirt, which might’ve been white—no, gray—with stains she was reluctant to identify, was stretched tight over a belly that could provide rain cover for two middle-sized dogs and a cat. Maybe without the cat because the man tried to suck in his stomach when he saw them. “What can I do for you, ladies?”

Rachel resisted the urge to step back from the cigarette stench billowing from the guy and his apartment. He must’ve misplaced his toothbrush with his razor. Then she plastered on a smile. She needed this person’s help, after all. “I’m searching for a mouse.”

“Are you pest control or something? I ain’t got no rodents in my apartment.” He puffed on his cigarette and released the smoke in her face.

She coughed out the smoke. Too bad, he hadn’t misplaced the cigarettes where he’d placed his razor and toothbrush. “No. I have pet mice, and one of them ran away.”

“You gotta be messing with me.”

Kennedy stepped forward. “We’re serious. Did you see a little white mouse, cute as, well, a button?”

“No, but you can search for yourself, blondie.” The man sized Kennedy up, then leered at her. “I gather it might like to hide in the carpet, right? Or I could give you a lift to search in the kitchen cabinets.”

Wide-eyed in her pencil skirt and white blouse, Kennedy stepped back.

A bit nauseous, Rachel shielded her friend. But then, men like this made her appreciate men like Austin and Tex more. She pushed her cap, hiding her hair, lower on her head and shoved her hands into her cargo pants. “We appreciate your time, but we’ll pass. Thank you, though.”

“Yes, thank you.” Kennedy visibly swallowed.

“Your loss, blondie.” The man slammed the door in their faces.

The rest of the apartment visits went about as well. Only, they gathered lots of shrieks from female occupants at the discovery there might be a mouse on the run.

By the time Rachel returned to her apartment, her shoulders slumped. Would she ever find Button? “Wherever you are, little guy, I hope you’re okay.”

Kennedy hugged her. “I’m so sorry we didn’t find him.”

Rachel held in a snuffle. “Thank you. Me, too. I’ll buy a live-catch trap and if he’s in the apartment, hopefully that will get him back. But if he’s really escaped...” She eased out of Kennedy’s embrace, though the hug meant a lot to her. “One of the reasons I shouldn’t date Tex is that someone aimed a gun at him the second time I saw him.”

Kennedy gasped. “As in a *real* gun? Yikes! I don’t want my hubby’s brother in danger. Or you either, for that matter. Maybe a date isn’t a good idea indeed.”

Rachel’s heart dropped when she thought of calling him and canceling. “He’s taking me boating. We’ll stay away from

other boats. And fish and seagulls aren't known for having guns."



It wasn't the same carefree feeling of Tex's childhood—it was better. Because the first one was in the past and the second one was in the present.

Or maybe because Cinderella was with him in the middle of the ocean. At her request, he'd powered the day cruiser far enough out to sea not to have other boats around them. Now the sleek boat bobbed idle on sparkling waters, and they reclined on the plush white leather benches lining the stern. The sun shone above him, and a warm light shone in his soul, as well. Of course, it helped that nobody had pointed a gun at him for days.

It also helped to have Cinderella beside him. Even though she'd dressed in khaki knee-length shorts and a matching sleeveless top where a silk-screened mouse scampered off with a hunk of cheese—a simple outfit as if not to attract attention to herself—he couldn't take his eyes off her, and his heart beat fast just being in her presence. She'd kicked off the sand-hued flip-flops she'd accessorized her outfit with, but sadly, her worn-to-frayed-edges gray cap and tortoiseshell sunglasses still covered her hair and eyes.

"The day after the theft, I volunteered to look through the charity ball's recordings at the police station. Thank you for providing those to them, though it's disappointing those two cameras stopped working and didn't record the incident. Makes me wonder if someone on the staff had something to do with it." She traced her seat's piping with a finger.

He shrugged, having been put in a difficult situation. But he had a rule of not questioning his decisions afterward. Second-guessing never helped anyone. "I didn't have much choice in the matter of providing the tapes. They could've subpoenaed it, and I'd lose my good relationship with them. On the other hand, if it gets out that I did, I'll lose those sponsors who didn't consent to me releasing the recordings. But then, I might stop doing the masquerade ball, anyway."

“Why?” Her cap and sunglasses hid her eyes, and he desperately wanted to see them.

“I don’t like large gatherings.” He crossed his legs, spreading his arms across the bench’s backrest. He didn’t need to steer any longer, so he could enjoy concentrating on her and the ocean. “Then again, that’s where we met. So it means a lot to me. And we surpassed all previous records in donations.”

“That’s admirable. And you never had any other thefts?”

Even though her voice seemed indifferent, his posture stiffened. He sensed she already knew the answer, and that didn’t sit well. “Just once.”

The sunshine in his soul diminished. Was she here because she was interested in the investigation, not in him?

“What was stolen? And was the thief found?” She shifted in her seat, tucking one leg up beside her as she turned to look at the ocean, but her stance remained guarded, her attention seeming acute in its focus on his answer.

He started feeling like a fool for love. He’d called her a thief in teasing before, but he should walk away before she stole his heart. Instead, he settled sideways, facing her fully. His entire being begged to touch her, but he just splayed his hand on the leather seat between them.

“It was a diamond ring,” he said. “The victim was one of the last people to leave and discovered the ring was missing from her finger. She said it was rather loose and maybe she dropped it. My team searched the building, but never found the ring. She was over eighty and wasn’t sure the ring had even been on her finger at the charity ball, but she didn’t find it at her home, either. The police went through the list of everyone she’d danced with or talked to that evening, including me. But they never discovered the culprit.”

“Was the ring insured?” She looked up at him.

Once again, he wished he could see her hazel eyes behind the sunglasses. He imagined them as luminous as the sun. “I don’t know. I offered her compensation, but she refused, saying the ring was all that mattered to her.”

Cinderella didn't say anything as if filing information in her head. "Anyway—even though we didn't get the actual theft on camera—in the recent charity-ball recording, three men looked somewhat similar to the thief. I believe you said the police concluded one had an ironclad alibi. What about the other two?"

"One was cleared, as well. I don't know the name of the remaining suspect as this is an ongoing investigation."

"Understandable. I wonder if the bullet-casing analysis led anywhere." Then she squealed. "I saw a seagull catch a fish! I just saw it!"

"Speaking of lunch. I've got a picnic basket tucked in the galley, and you're welcome to it. I don't have any raw fish in it, though."

She chuckled, the sound warming him, her body now facing him fully. "Not hungry yet, but I do appreciate the offer. And I think the seagulls will forgive you."

His hand moved toward hers, his heart rate spiking, but he stopped himself again. As much as he longed to take her hand, to touch the smooth skin of her face, he stayed still. He didn't dare push her boundaries or make her think he took advantage since they were in the middle of the ocean. Okay, not in the middle, but far enough from the shore. While she was far from a damsel in distress, she was guarded and cautious, and he sensed she didn't let anyone close easily.

He could be assertive if needed, but he could sense that wasn't the way to go with her. He raked his fingers through his hair, a proverbial fish out of water now. He glanced at the ocean. No offense to any fish swimming in these waters.

Being near her and unable to touch her was a sweet torture, but if he pressed too much, she'd take off like a seagull to the sky, if not physically yet, then internally.

This attraction wasn't just physical, though there was that, as his fast heartbeat proved. He respected and admired her spunk, her determination, and her courage. And he could relate to trying to overcome a difficult past and growing up with an

abusive parent. Even now, his chest swelled that she'd trusted him with such information. That she'd trusted him with her pain. He'd never use it for his own purposes, like Madison had done with him.

His reflection stared back at him from her sunglasses, and his fingers twitched to reach over and remove them so he could see her eyes instead. Then his gaze slipped to her lips covered in lip gloss with a faint scent of lavender, and her plush little mouth sparkled in the generous sunlight like the ocean beyond.

His breathing going shallow, he eased toward her before he realized, the desire to kiss her nearly irresistible. Then he made himself scoot back. "I'm sorry for the way you grew up. It's unfair, and you're a remarkable woman for not letting it drag you down." He meant every word as his protective instincts flared. He couldn't protect her from all those hurts, but would he need to protect himself when she hurt his heart in the end? His stomach clenched.

"Thank you." She took off her sunglasses—at last! Her large luminous hazel eyes softened. Then she looked at the ocean lapping against the boat as if deciphering what could be dragged down into its depth. Or maybe deciding how much more about herself she could reveal. "When my stepfamily moved in, my stepmom gave my step sisters my bedroom and moved my bed and all my things to the attic. But living up there wasn't as horrible as it sounds. I was grateful to have my own space, away from them. Well, *mostly* my own. At that time, the mice squeaking around weren't the pet kind."

His eyes widened. "Um, did you get a cat?"

"No." She shook her head. Wind tousled strands of her honey-hued hair free from her mouse-gray cap.

Those wisps dancing as if reveling in their freedom urged him to take off that imprisoning cap, free her gorgeous hair, let it fall on her shoulders, and run his fingers through it. Instead, he had to wrap his fingers around the railing, the metal smooth and warm.

“It’s going to sound weird, but I felt some kind of camaraderie with them. That they were just as helpless as I was then.” She stretched out her T-shirt, fully displaying the mischievous cartoon mouse absconding with his treasure. “It’s like I could relate. Could be worse.” She chuckled, her lips twisting into a grimace. “I could’ve had to make friends with roaches.”

Heat surged through him as he leaned toward her. “Couldn’t someone help you? Parents of friends? Teachers? Counselors at school?”

How could this happen without an adult stepping up to help a lonely, mistreated child? While his childhood wasn’t ideal, he had his mother and his brothers, and they’d stood up for each other. She’d had nobody besides rodents. He gnashed his teeth, then stared at the ocean to calm down. A deep breath of salty air tinted with a whiff of lavender calmed him, or maybe the soothing lavender was his imagination.

The endless waters had often had that serene effect, and his anger ebbed with the outgoing tide, though not completely. But as gorgeous and peaceful as the ocean was, he yearned to see her, so he turned to her.

She twisted onto her knees, leaning over the stern rail surrounding the benches as if it were easier that way. He joined her, close enough, but not crowding her space. And such aching compassion squeezed his heart.

Her hazel eyes were bottomless as she stared at the gentle laps striking the waterline. “You see, my stepsisters were popular girls, so they made sure I didn’t have any friends, either at school or in the neighborhood. As for school staff, my stepsisters spread lies about me—I was a troublemaker, I was a liar. Everyone already knew I wasn’t a good student, but nobody in school guessed it was because I had no time for homework due to the nonstop chores I was given to do. My grades were abysmal.

“So if my stepsisters pushed me to the limit and I lashed out, I was the one who got caught, and they were always innocent. I was the one to get punished.” Her voice sharpened,

and her eyes narrowed. “It’s not that difficult to tarnish someone’s reputation.” She paused, seeming to think about something. Then her voice shook. “Other students would also lie to please my stepsisters and blame me for whatever they wanted. It was understandable. Nobody wanted to get bullied like I was.”

“I’m so sorry. That was unbelievably cruel.” This was even worse than he’d thought. He’d never given much thought to the Cinderella fairy tale before, but with how much she’d gone through, she’d more than earned her happily ever after.

How he longed to give her that happiness, that healing! Yes, because he loved being near her but also because she more than deserved to be loved and treasured.

Though wasn’t it too early even to consider a happily ever after with a woman whose name he didn’t know? That reasoning voice was fast drowning in sweet compassion and attraction.

Then he couldn’t stop himself. His heart aching, he shifted toward her and took her in his embrace as if trying to protect her from the past in the small circle of his arms, even if only for a few minutes. He half expected her to pull away, and she did stiffen, making him freeze in turn. But then she relaxed, and his heart swelled.

Neither one of them said a word, and only his heart was beating louder and louder in his chest as if knocking on the door he’d locked a long time ago. He hadn’t prayed in many years, except a few times for his mother and brothers, because it hadn’t seemed right to pray for material success. But he prayed now for Cinderella’s healing.

The ocean rumbled, and the waves splashed against the boat as it floated. Those sounds blended with the seagulls’ cries, and all fast became mere accents to the soundtrack of this moment, a moment heartbreakingly beautiful in its sadness and heartbreakingly sad in its beauty.

Too soon, she eased out of his embrace. “Anyway, now you know my sappy story. Nobody in my life now knows it. I need to maintain a strong front to survive. I need to be a tiger.

Rrrrrr.” She imitated a roar and curled her fingers to look like a paw with claws. “Not a mouse.” She tugged on her T-shirt. “Never again a mouse.”

“Frankly, I’ll never disrespect a mouse from now on.” He gripped her shoulders and looked into her gorgeous haunted eyes. “Is that why you do what you do? Protect people who can’t protect themselves?”

Her gaze didn’t waver away from his, and the strength and vulnerability there he’d never seen anywhere before tugged at his heart. The only place he’d ever felt the same combo was within himself, and that might’ve been one of the many reasons he was so attracted to her. They couldn’t be more different, and yet on some level, he sensed a fellow spirit in her.

“I don’t always get those kinds of assignments, but yes.” Her lips moved up. “Being skilled enough to defend not only myself but others too gives me an awesome satisfaction now.”

He slid his arms around her again. He didn’t want them to be a confinement, as the attic or her schools had once been for her, so he watched for any sign that she wanted to move. But she stayed there, looking at him, making his blood surge. So he let himself get lost in her eyes, never wanting to be found. Yet he had to ask the questions straining against his throat. “What about your father? Why didn’t he protect you?” He prepared himself for the answer. His father had left a lot to be desired, to put it mildly, and clearly so had hers. “Or...” His voice dropped. “Was he abusive, too?”

She looked away. “Not abusive. Just weak. He loved me in his way, but he could never stand up to my stepmom. He also believed my stepsisters, or it was convenient for him to believe them. Then after he died, it got worse. He left everything to his wife.” She visibly swallowed. “It was either obey her or be out on the streets.”

“How... how did you get out?” He removed his hold on her and sat back in case she needed the space.

Her gaze darted around as if checking for any new developments on the ocean’s mirrored surface. Then she

tipped her head back and stared at the sky, her posture relaxing.

“When I was in high school, my stepmom ordered me to go work at a restaurant, as well as continue doing home chores. Of course, I’d have to give her all my earnings. She said it wasn’t like I was getting a good education, anyway, and there was no hope for me going to college. She was right about the latter.”

He clenched his teeth so much that his molars hurt. “She made sure to ruin your future.”

“I guess it was her way to make me stay a domestic servant forever.” Cinderella’s voice turned bitter. “I managed to squirrel away some tips, but not nearly enough to pay for a deposit on an apartment.”

“So unfair!” he muttered under his breath.

“With time, I gained several patrons at the café who became regulars and who were nice to me. I started talking to one of them, a woman in her late thirties, from time to time. Well, she started talking to me, to be precise. Her name was Irene Bruzlin. Eventually, I told her my story. She offered me a custodial job at her company with the chance to move up later, as well as an advance payment. She had a tiny cottage and rented it to me for a ridiculously low price.” She turned to him. Tears sparkled in her eyes that she wiped away fast. “Irene has been my boss ever since. A year after I started working at her company, I rented an apartment. She could rent out that cottage for a much higher price than I was paying.”

“I’m glad someone was kind to you.” Something inside him softened.

“Yeah, me, too. Sometimes all it takes to change someone’s life is a little kindness. Abuse and cruelty don’t exist just because of the bully. They exist because the rest of the people are weak inside.” She paused. “Irene even offered to pay for me to go to college. And I did take online courses here and there. But I didn’t feel I had the time or resources to spend on college then.”

“Maybe one day.” He didn’t know what her dreams were, but he wanted every one of them to come true.

“There’s a lot of information online these days, so I educate myself that way. Thank you for listening. Even more for understanding.” Her lips shifted up, her hazel eyes lighting like proverbial sunshine appeared from the clouds. “You know what? I feel hungry now. Let’s eat.”

“Gladly.” His stomach started feeling empty, too. He brought the cooler from the galley, then opened the large picnic basket, and took out the spread of cheeses and meats, as well as sandwiches with Japanese Wagyu beef or Ibérico ham and plates with fruit and pastry.

“I don’t know about college. One can’t enter the same river twice.” She leaned over and let water filter through her fingers.

“But one can enter different rivers many times. I hope you like cheese and sweets.”

She chuckled and helped him arrange the rest of the food on the makeshift table. “I do. And true about the rivers. What about you? Not whether you like sweets, but you know, about your family and what shaped you.”

“My late dad was abusive, but I have awesome brothers and the best mother in the world.” Never mind that he’d neglected his relationships with his mother and his brothers for years. He winced. He’d never appreciated his wonderful family as much as after meeting Cinderella and learning about hers. “My brothers are the salt of the earth, and Mom’s loud and outspoken and loves with her whole heart.”

And he’d love for her to meet this woman. A low breath rushed from his lungs at the surprising thought, and to hide the confusion, he turned to look at the sparkling ocean meeting the glorious sky. After Madison, whom his mother hadn’t liked and warned him about, he’d never brought any of his dates home to meet Mom.

How would a meeting with Cinderella even go?

Hi, Mom. This is Cinderella. I have to call her that because she keeps her real name a secret. I met her recently, and I've only gone on two dates with her.

He suppressed a grimace. Yeah, that would go well. Not!

“I’ve met your Mom, but only briefly. She sounds awesome.” Wistful notes turned her voice breathy as she munched on prosciutto, then Genoa salami. “And I’ve met one of your brothers. If the others are all the same, they’ll be awesome, too.”

If only she’d said “all the same as *him*.” Then he set his ham sandwich down. “You’ve met my mom and my brother? When?”

Her eyes darkened as if she said too much. She lowered her head. Was she only pretending to study the assortment of food? As she settled on ricotta cheese, she didn’t answer, so he let her off the hook. Okay, he just fished for different information. “Is it okay to ask when your birthday is?”

“It’s in May, but it doesn’t matter. Since Dad remarried when I was a kid, none of my birthdays have been celebrated. It’s okay. I’m used to it.” Her shoulder rose in a half shrug. She tested another slice of cheese, this time Camembert, then picked up a Gorgonzola.

“No!” Anger surging in him again on her behalf, he leaped to his feet. “It’s not okay. It’s not okay at all. Birthdays should be celebrated. Especially children’s birthdays. Milestones, as well.” But then, how many of his brothers’ birthdays had he missed? “*You* should be celebrated.”

“Thank you.” She gestured to the spread of cheeses. “This is more than enough. When was the last time *you* celebrated your birthday?”

He froze, then sat down again. He couldn’t remember. Oh, he could. “When I was home from college, Mom insisted on celebrating. But once I started working, I decided to stop having birthday parties. There never seemed to be enough time.”

She didn't say anything as she picked up a sandwich with Brie cheese, but he got the message. A new idea perked him up. He'd need help executing it, though, and he knew just the person to ask.

Then she reached for a chocolate strawberry. "It must've been difficult growing up with a father like yours. And extremely difficult to accept what happened to him."

A lump formed in his throat, and he took a sip of water to melt it. Besides, the sun was getting warmer, and ice-cold water from the cooler felt refreshing. So was her compassion. "You know about his suicide." It was a statement, not a question.

"I do." Concern softened her expression as she popped a grape in her mouth. "It was ruled a suicide, and it happened at a small cottage where he had no business being. That cottage has a history of tragic things happening there." She paused, studying him. "It must've affected you very much."

"It did." The words rolled off his tongue. He'd never talked about it before, and there was a reason for it. He didn't want to appear weak. Or rather, was tired of being weak and unable to stand up to his father to protect his brothers. "But probably not in the way others would expect. I didn't grieve him. I was relieved."

"And then you felt guilty for feeling relieved." Again, it wasn't a question, but a statement. Again, it was eerily accurate. While previously it was knowledge on her part, this was something she'd managed to guess, and how well she could understand him—see things he didn't want to admit even to himself—scared him.

"Yes." He drained his water bottle. "Relief, guilt, plus I was scared it wasn't suicide. Because, well, he made lots of people angry. For years. Including the people I loved. And he just wasn't the kind of guy to commit suicide." His hands shook as he discarded the empty bottle in the trash can.

Go figure. Many years later, he was still furious at a man who no longer existed. He'd just suppressed it all this time.

Her eyes widened, and she dropped her chocolate strawberry back on the plate. “You think someone close to you might have...?” She didn’t finish the sentence, and he didn’t want her to. “I’m so sorry for what happened to you and your family. Anger, guilt, and suspicions are heavy burdens to carry on their own. When together, they can be unbearable.”

This time, she initiated the hug as she leaned across the bench, then wrapped her arms around him when he scooted to meet her. It was friendly, compassionate, not a romantic hug.

Yet his heart nearly stopped beating, then resumed with a wild force. He hugged her back and held her, for the first time in many years let himself drink in strength from someone else instead of dispersing it. He still knew precious little about her, but he knew he didn’t want to let her go.

He never wanted to let her go. He was falling into the deep, deep waters of attraction and didn’t know whether he wanted to come to the surface. Breathing was highly overrated.

When she eased back and looked up at him, her luscious, sparkling lips parted as if beckoning him, and the only thing he could think of was kissing her.

His pulse skyrocketed, and the whole wide world concentrated on one person. All of eternity concentrated in one moment.

Here and now.

Her beautiful eyes widened, pulling him in deeper, filling with attraction as if she were thinking the same thing, as if she could think of nothing but kissing him. Well, a man could hope, right?

But then she shifted back, and disappointment ripped through him.

“Have you heard any more news about the thefts?” Her gaze sharpened again.

Again with the thefts! Why did they interest her so much? His intuition hinted it wasn’t idle curiosity, and his intuition was usually right. Irritation twisted his gut that the magical

moment was gone, replaced by something he couldn't entirely understand. "There's suspicion that one of my competitors, Fred Sersen, might've been involved. A man who looked like the one you and the victim described used to meet him for golf a couple of years ago."

She seemed to file that away. She opened her mouth as if to say something, then shook her head. "Have you ever met a Ms. Natalie Mueller?"

His gaze sharpened on her. Should he reveal he knew she'd used Ms. Mueller's invitation to get into the ball? "I met her last year at the annual charity ball. I don't remember who introduced us. We were talking when a dance started, and I asked her to dance. We flirted, and I had a feeling she was interested in more, but I wasn't. That's it."

Rachel frowned. "Hmm. I need to talk to you about something. But first, I need to do more research. Thank you for the picnic. It was way more than I could expect. We, um, we need to put back whatever we haven't eaten so seagulls don't swarm in here." True to her words, some seagulls were already circling close with loud demands.

"Yeah. Sure." His voice sounded husky. "And it was truly my pleasure." It was.

He enjoyed treating her and not only because he liked her or she deserved it, though there was that. She was easy to please, delighted with so little while several of his dates wrinkled their noses at food that wasn't to their liking or if they considered the restaurant service too slow. With Cinderella, there were no demands or expectations, just humility and gratitude.

Ironically, it made him want to give her the world. He looked in the cerulean sky without a single cloud as if the incredible day was a gift. No, correct that. He didn't just want to give her the world—she should have the universe.

He and Cinderella worked in tandem while putting the rest of the food back in the basket and the cooler. His hand touched hers by accident when they were placing the last water bottle into the cooler. Or maybe not so much by accident, because

the draw to her was nearly irresistible. A jolt went straight to his heart.

She didn't remove her hand, so he took it into his, then slowly, deliberately kissed every delicate finger without a single ring, with no nail polish, no embellishments whatsoever. Her audible breath intake made the blood rush faster in his veins. He shifted closer, a silent question in his eyes that he hoped she could read.

Another strand escaped her cap, so he tucked it behind her ear, loving the smooth skin under his fingertips. And yes, causing a new sharp intake of breath on her behalf. His gaze dropped to her full lips again, then lifted to her eyes. His heartbeat seemed to triple as she angled her face toward his, closing the distance between them.

Her lips smelled like strawberries, lavender, grapes, and happiness, and everything inside him wanted to taste them—her lips, not strawberries and grapes. The expression in her eyes turned teasing, increasing his temperature a notch.

Then she lurched back, her expression no longer luminous as the teasing light disappeared from her hazel eyes. “Oh no.”

“No?” Disappointment sliced through him again. He understood her inner struggle, but it was still ripping him apart. He shifted back out of respect for her.

“We have company. Duck!”

Shots thundered in the air.



Chapter Nine



THIS COULDN'T BE HAPPENING. For the third time!

As bullets whizzed overhead, it apparently could.

Rachel threw herself on the boat's floor, and thankfully, Tex crouched beside her without her needing to tackle him again.

But he didn't stay down. Instead, he crouched forward.

"What are you doing?" she hissed in his direction.

"We need to get out of here." He started the motor, which revved to life.

"Good point," she muttered.

Then another thought iced her blood. The shooter or shooters didn't necessarily have to hit Tex or her. If they could get the fuel supply—or tank, or whatever that thing was called—to explode, that would be it. Or if they damaged the motor, the two of them could be adrift in the ocean, and who knew when rescue would arrive. There was a dinghy with oars to use, of course. But the tide was going out, and the wind was picking up.

Despite growing up near the ocean she didn't have much knowledge about boats and it would've come in handy now. She'd never been able to afford even a simple rowboat, never mind a motorboat, and whenever her stepmom and stepsisters had gone sailing, they'd never taken her. Right now, she would love to know where the fuel tank thingie was on the shooters' boat.

Never mind. Her eyes narrowed as her heart raced and determination powered her decision to act. These days, Rachel was the one doing the rescue instead of being rescued. Okay, she needed to prove that point. She looked out from the boat's edge and fired back at the boat the shots had come from.

“What are you doing?” Tex threw her own words back at her.

“Um, shooting?” She fired another shot, then hid again.

“I meant, stay hidden! Stay safe!”

Seriously? There probably wasn't any safe place in the boat right now since fiberglass or whatever that was wasn't much protection, but saying so wasn't the right time. And she wasn't the type of person to stay hidden for long, but again, not the best idea to discuss that now. Adrenaline pumping, she raised her head above the sidewall again.

She understood his intention. He was trying to put as much distance between them and the shooters as possible, but since they were giving chase in a speedboat nearly as powerful as his but smaller and more agile, he wasn't making much progress.

At the same time, he was radioing the incident in, but help wouldn't arrive soon. Even via helicopter. Her heart dropped, and guilt stung her. *She* was the reason they were so far from help. She'd asked Tex to go further out to sea, and the weather was good enough for that.

Well, there was only one thing left to do. The shooters didn't have to know she had no clue where their fuel tank was. They just had to think she might hit it. She returned fire again and again. This time, hot pain singed her.

Grinding her teeth, she held in a scream as she slumped back down below the plush seats at what he called the stern. They didn't feel very stern. In fact, she'd never sat on anything quite so sumptuously soft. But even such a soft cloud could act as a good shield, so she pressed in tight. She didn't need to signal to the shooters that she'd been hit.

Oh no. That was her shooting arm. She had to find a way out of this!

“They are leaving! They're leaving! We did it.” Tex shouted. He might've even clapped, but she wasn't sure. While she enjoyed looking at him—way too much—she had other priorities now.

“Awesome.” She made her voice sound strong. But not strong enough. She infused all the enthusiasm she could muster and yelled, “Whoo-hoo!”

Her pulse was beating in her temples, and that was no good. She took a deep breath, then another one. One more. She needed to calm down, which was easier said than done.

It's okay. It's going to be okay.

Riiight.

The adrenaline in her veins would pump blood out much faster if she was terrified. She needed to stop the blood flow. For the lack of a better idea, she ripped off her cap and pressed it to her wound, turning away from him, so he wouldn't see she was injured. A jacket would be better than a flimsy cap, but she didn't take one along for such a warm sunny day. Tex must have a first aid kit, but she didn't want to distract him.

She didn't trust the shooters not to change their minds and come after them again, after all. He needed to put the maximum distance between them. Blood soaked through the cap's canvas fabric fast, so her gaze searched for other material.

It latched onto the white tablecloth and fancy cream-colored linen napkins—monogrammed, no less—Tex had brought for their lunch. All still looked clean. No food or drinks were spilled. It would have to do for now. She snatched them greedily, grateful for his upscale habits this time. Then she pressed the tablecloth and napkins to her wound.

It wouldn't be enough, of course. She gnashed her teeth from pain.

She needed to tell him.

Of course, she needed to tell him lots of things. She'd done more research about the thefts, then about Ms. Mueller, and him and his family. Things didn't add up. She didn't believe in his guilt. Lots of people were present during both thefts, so why point the finger at him? Could it be jealousy and revenge of a rejected woman? But Rachel would've been a hypocrite if she pointed a finger at Ms. Mueller without having any proof

yet. There was also a viable suspect with way more valid reasons, Fred Sersen. Then there was a person she didn't want to suspect, and the reason for her suspicions was ridiculous to start with.

Well, right now, she had a much bigger problem to worry about.

Rachel suppressed a groan, partly from pain, partly from regret as her right arm weakened. Blood seeped through her shirt, coloring it crimson red, and the white tablecloth turned the same color, as well. No hiding the wound now.

"We're getting closer to the shore. We made it, Cinderella!" He must've glanced at her because then his voice turned from jubilant to terrified. "You're shot!"

"Yeah." What was the point in denying it?

"Why didn't you tell me?" He turned off the motor and rushed to her.

"I need you to stay at the, well, whatever that part of the boat is called and steer." She looked at a few boats far ahead before the thin line of the shore. "I don't want the boat to run into something. Or someone."

"We won't. Why didn't you just hide?" His voice broke.

Did he worry about her that much? Nobody besides Irene Bruzlin had ever worried about Rachel. Well, and her mice, of course. Tears burned behind her eyes. She had a friendly relationship with her colleagues but never let anyone close. The few times she had, the guys had wanted more than friendship, and she'd seen how romantic relationships could go sour in the workplace. Her job was too important to risk it.

She'd already decided to come clean with Tex days ago, save for Ms. Mueller's name and other details, of course. She'd probably never see him again after her confession, which sounded like a trivial thing to worry about considering she'd been shot. Yet her heart ached already.

"It's okay. It's probably just a flesh wound." She managed a weak smile, but his worried features remained taut, so her smile probably didn't look persuasive. "I've been hit before."

He radioed for the ambulance to meet them at the shore, opened the first aid kit, then eased her hand away from the wound, sliding his into its place.

She'd have told him already, but she had to run it by Irene first to make sure it wouldn't affect her company, and Irene was coming home from a vacation abroad today. Having fulfilled the conditions of the contract with Ms. Mueller, Rachel had given her resignation notice and refused to sign a new contract. The resignation was needed so their company wouldn't be liable for her actions. She'd also briefed Irene about the case before she'd left for vacation, so her boss knew the theft situation.

Leaving the only place that had become like home to her was going to hurt emotionally. But now, physical pain pulsed in her arm, spreading to her shoulder and reverberating through her body and edging out other thoughts.

Meanwhile, he cleaned her wound and pressed the gauze he'd found in the kit to it. "You need to remain calm."

"Are you telling me or yourself?" She wanted to infuse teasing notes in her question, but the words just came in a whisper.

"I meant for you so the blood surge diminishes, but good point." He bandaged up her arm, but they both knew it would get soaked through fast. "Lord, please, please, please save Cinderella."

"Rachel," she whispered. She was tired of deceit, or maybe too weak from blood loss to fight it. She wanted him to call her by her real name. "Rachel."

"It's a beautiful name." His eyes sparkled in a weird way as if he were struggling with tears.

"Thanks." She swallowed around a lump in her throat. "It's just a flesh wound," she said again, even as a mental fog started to claim her mind.

"Are *you* trying to comfort *me*?"

"Yup."

“You’re the one wounded, and you are comforting me. I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“And you never will.” Her lids grew heavy, but she kept them open. She needed to stay present. It was important. It was extremely important, but it was getting difficult to remember why. “You need to steer us to the shore. I can hold this to the wound. You can’t be in two places at the same time.”

“Right. We need to get you to help. Sorry.” He rushed back to the, well, whatever that part of the boat was and started the motor again. The boat jerked, then propelled forward, making her nauseous.

What was he apologizing for? She was the one who’d created a big mess. And now she didn’t know how to get out of it. Her thoughts slowed down to a slog. And then everything disappeared, and she stopped thinking anything at all.



“You must be Tex Lawrence.”

In the hospital corridor near Rachel’s private room, Tex didn’t have the emotional strength even to answer the female voice, just nodded. The hall smelled of antiseptics, stale coffee, and desperation. Its white walls and ceiling were like a blank page where a happy ending could be written—but more often, a tragedy.

Numb and fatigued, he fought the exhaustion replacing the adrenaline. His entire life seemed to have concentrated on the tip of the surgeon’s scalpel, and Tex had alternated between pacing the hall and cradling his head, all the time praying. The only break he’d taken was to talk to the police and have his assistant find Ms. Irene Bruzlin’s phone number—yes, he’d learned Rachel’s full name and more when the hospital staff got into her wallet to admit her. Then he’d called her boss. Rachel didn’t mention any friends, and phoning coworkers didn’t seem right. And while her pet mice would probably eagerly await news about her for emotional and nutritional

reasons—after all, someone needed to feed them—it wasn't like Tex could call them.

Now that Rachel was asleep after her surgery, all his strength seemed to seep out of him to an invisible puddle on the floor just like Rachel's blood had gathered in a far-too-visible puddle on his boat.

He forced himself to lift his heavy head as a woman strode toward him with the authority and confidence of someone used to being in charge. He'd never met her. But she knew his name, and he recalled her voice. Tall and elegant, she'd styled her gray hair in a short low-maintenance cut that barely covered her ears and highlighted her dangling gold earrings. He'd been around enough affluent businesswomen to know her classy charcoal pantsuit and matching shoes were expensive. Based on the wrinkles creasing her hands and neck, she might be in her sixties, though the freckles speckling her cheeks and framing her intelligent gray eyes—eyes now wide with worry—made her look much younger.

He got up from the uncomfortable plastic chair to meet her and offered his hand. “Are you Irene Bruzlin?”

“Yes.” Her perfume was as subtle as her makeup and clearly expensive, her gaze was open, and her handshake was firm, just like he'd expected. “Nice to meet you, though I wish it were under different circumstances.”

So this was the woman who'd saved Rachel from a disastrous life. Ms. Bruzlin was much more to Rachel than a boss. She was a mentor and the only maternal figure Rachel had for most of her life. And since she was important to his Cinderella, she was important to Tex. Considering she donated to the charity auction for his annual gala, though she hadn't visited it to his knowledge, it seemed odd their paths hadn't crossed earlier.

“Same here,” he said. “The doctor said—”

“I talked to the doctor.” But of course, she did. She didn't look like a woman to sit and wait. “To the police, as well.”

“Rachel saved my life. Several times.” He hung his head, guilt slamming at him with as much force as his brother Darius often had when they’d played football as teens. “It’s all my fault. Someone is out to get me, and Rachel was in the line of fire.”

“Don’t blame yourself. She *works* in the line of fire.” A shadow passed over the woman’s eyes as she slid into the uncomfortable seat the color of fresh vomit. However, she didn’t lean back in it, and her posture remained rigid.

“Yes, and that worries me, too. But I should’ve done better to keep her safe. Instead, I dragged her into danger.” His stomach twisted. How selfish. He’d wanted to spend time with her and thought they’d be safe out on the ocean. He was wrong, and Rachel had paid for his mistake.

“Not your fault.” She paused. “You see, my company is my life. I’m not married and don’t have children. But my heart hurts when I have to give her some of these assignments. Then I can’t sleep at night until she’s back. But that’s the way she wanted to live. She loves what she’s doing, and she’s good at it. She’s one of the best I’ve ever had.” Her eyes sparkled as if with unshed tears, and she blinked. She wasn’t the type of woman to cry.

Neither was Rachel, and Tex sent up another prayer.

“Does she know that... that you can’t sleep when she’s on a perilous assignment?” he asked, choosing his words carefully.

Ms. Bruzlin shook her head. “I can’t show favoritism to a subordinate.”

He could see why Rachel loved and admired this woman like a mother, though there had to be professional distance between them.

In the corporate world, people were often careful what they said. He’d learned to hide his feelings because he needed to exude the appearance of strength. Emotions were often perceived as a sign of weakness, and weakness could be exploited. People who showed emotions didn’t close the deal.

But something changed in him. He let his eyes show the raw desperation he still felt. “I know we only met recently, but Rachel matters to me, too. More than I even realized. And I believe she’s more than an employee to you.”

Based on the movement of her neck, Ms. Bruzlin swallowed hard. But her expression remained neutral. “*Former* employee. She quit while I was on a vacation overseas.”

“What?” His jaw slackened. Rachel loved her job. Her life and her identity revolved around it.

Ms. Bruzlin didn’t have a chance to answer because the door opened, and a nurse stepped out. “One of you can visit Ms. Arvidson.”

Everything in him came to life at the chance to see Rachel. The doctor had already said the surgery was a success, but one never knew what might happen in recovery. Then there was the risk of infection. And a huge part of him was frantic to see her alive after he’d seen her motionless body carried away on a gurney.

Yet he waved to Ms. Bruzlin. “You can go first.”

A sad smile twisted her lips. “No, *you* go first. I’m not saying it for you, but for her. She’ll want to see you.”

His heart shifted. What exactly had Rachel told Ms. Bruzlin? He didn’t question it and just rushed inside the room housing the person so incredibly important to him.

Dressed in a faded-blue hospital gown patterned with tiny navy flowers, Rachel was propped on a pillow, her tousled blonde hair spread over it. With her so pale, the dark circles under her eyes looked almost like the mask she’d worn when he met her. And it took all his willpower not to rush to her, take her into his arms, and make sure she was alive and all right. Or as all right as a person could be in this situation.

“The last hours were the most difficult in my life,” he said the words in one breath. After growing up feeling weak because of his father’s abuse, he’d spent a lifetime building physical and inner strength. One didn’t complain about

difficulties if one wanted to be a winner. But this time, he didn't care if he showed vulnerability.

He brought a cheap wood chair close to her bed and sank onto it.

"You shouldn't have worried. I told you it was just a flesh wound." Her pale lips lifted slightly.

Here we go again. She was fresh out of surgery, a bullet extracted from her body, and comforting him.

He gestured to the plastic cart-style table holding a pink pitcher, a transparent plastic cup, and a paper-wrapped straw. "Would you like something to drink? Do you... do you need anything?"

"Water, please," she whispered as if still weak, and seeing her without her former spunk and vivaciousness broke his heart.

He removed the wrapping, placed the straw in the glass, then poured water, his hands shaking. Then he brought the straw to her lips, and she took several sips. He prayed for her again. In the last eight hours, he'd prayed more than in his entire life. Much more.

"A hamburger would be nice, but I'm not allowed to eat yet. I hope to get discharged soon. Otherwise, I need someone to check on my mice and feed them."

Right, even now, she was more concerned about her pets than about herself.

"I can do that. If you're okay giving me the key to your place." He left it at that. "I-I was worried." Uh-oh. He didn't sound like he was complaining, did he? "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about." Her words came out slower than usual. The anesthesia probably hadn't fully worn off yet. "I'm blessed."

He stared at her. Was that meds talking?

She continued, "The doctor said the bullet didn't nick any arteries. It'll take some time before my arm functions fully, but I'll manage. It could've been much worse."

He flinched. It could've been. He could've lost her. Everything in him shuddered at the thought. He already couldn't imagine his life without her.

Then a practical part of his brain nudged him. "I can help you during recovery. With whatever you need."

She stared at him, her hazel eyes winging up at the sides with her incredulity, and then she... laughed. Her laughter was quiet, and she coughed a little.

He edged in closer. "Are you all right? Should I call someone?"

She waved him off. "You're going to nurse me back to health, huh? Are you *serious*? You don't even take time for lunch, just gobble up the food while you work."

Well, that stung. Did she think he'd put his work above her well-being? But then, hadn't his job always been his priority?

He mentally rearranged his schedule tomorrow, which was Monday, and the rest of the week, and said, "I'm serious." And he was. About her.

She blinked as if she wasn't used to kindness or someone taking care of her, and sadly, she wasn't, which made him even more eager to right that injustice. "You know I come with mice."

He smiled. "I figured as much. I might ask Mom for help if you're okay with it. I'm not good at making soup, and she's awesome at it."

Her gaze remained fixed on him, unmoving. "Why would you do all that for me?"

He said the same thing he'd told Ms. Bruzlin because it was the simple truth. "Because you matter to me."

She tilted her head. "I want to ask why again, but I don't want to sound like a broken record."

Then the nurse came in and readjusted the IV. "Ms. Arvidson needs some rest. Ma'am, please try to sleep."

Rachel rolled her eyes but then closed them. Minutes later, her breathing evened out. The nurse left the room.

“I’m sorry you didn’t have a chance to talk to Rachel,” he whispered to Ms. Bruzlin when she entered the room, her footsteps quiet and careful.

“It’s okay,” she whispered back as she took a seat by Rachel’s bed. “I’m content to watch her sleep.”

So was he.



Chapter Ten



THE NEXT DAY, RACHEL stared at her apartment complex's dingy walls as Tex stopped his flashy car nearby, her mood turning gray to match the dismal view.

Her heart shifted. She shouldn't have let him drive her here. But he'd insisted on getting her home, and the hospital medical staff wouldn't discharge her without someone accompanying her. Irene had gotten a call on some emergency and left. Rachel could've called one of her former coworkers or Kennedy, but she hadn't told her friend yet what had happened because she didn't want Kennedy to worry.

Then Tex had somehow persuaded Rachel that he'd drive her home and help her settle. Blame the meds, but she'd agreed. After all, she couldn't wait to see her mice. Irene had told her they were fine, but Rachel needed to see them with her own eyes.

Now that the meds had worn off, being confined in his sleek car with him ratcheted up her heartbeat. But then, her heartbeat always increased in his presence. She took a deep breath, but his intoxicating cologne only enticed her to want to lean on him.

She raised her chin. She'd worked hard to stand on her own. Besides, she still hadn't told him why she'd started dating him in the first place, and guilt needled her together with pain in her arm. "Thank you for bringing me home. I'll take it from here." Reaching across her body, she gripped the door handle with her uninjured left hand.

Though her heart started aching already, it was best to leave. Besides, she hadn't left her apartment in pristine condition before joining him at the pier. Heat scorched the back of her neck and burned her ears. Though she'd given him and Irene the key to check on her pets—must've been the meds again—he hadn't mentioned anything about it when he

later returned the key. He probably hadn't had a chance to do it. She didn't blame him. He was a busy man.

"Nope. I promised to get you settled and take care of you, and I'm going to do it." He jumped out of the car, rushed around it, and opened the door for her.

"I can take care of myself." She wasn't used to such chivalry. At work, she was one of the guys. And not at work... She didn't see much besides work. She clicked the seat belt open with her left hand. She'd have to learn to do many things with her left hand because she wasn't supposed to overdo it with her right one.

"Humor me, please." He smiled at her, making her treacherous heart flutter.

Blinds in several windows opened. Flashy expensive cars—or men in tailored suits—didn't appear in this part of Charleston often. She suppressed a grimace. The more she argued, the more attention they'd attract.

Besides, fine, the longing for him screaming inside her shouted that she didn't want to see him leave yet. Coming out of surgery, she'd longed to open her eyes and see him near her hospital bed. When she did see him there, she'd even thought she'd hallucinated in collaboration between the anesthesia and her imagination. "Okay, you're welcome to come in, but not for long. I don't want anything to happen to your vehicle." She took the hand he offered, her heart making a little somersault, and climbed clumsily from the car. He might've called her Cinderella, but she imagined the fairytale girl had more grace.

She did feel a bit dizzy, and at least she could attribute her head spinning to recovering from the surgery instead of his effect on her. She stepped from the secure cocoon of expensive new-car smell and intoxicating cologne, into the reality of smoke from someone puffing away on a balcony and the odor of something rotting in the dumpster.

Yup, welcome home.

And not a great first impression of her dwelling for Tex. Sadly, it was about to get worse.

“Don’t worry about my car.” He leaned to her and swept her up in his arms.

Her eyes went huge as emotions flooded her. “What—how—why—*what* are you doing?”

“Hmm, haven’t we been through this before?” He grinned as he carried her to the apartment.

That smile and those strong arms wreaked havoc on her. Her heart thudded against her ribs like a caged beast searching for escape. “You—I—you—I—” Rarely was she speechless. Finally, she found the right words. “I was shot in the arm, not the leg!”

“But didn’t you feel dizzy while you tried to walk in the hospital room?” He approached her door, a door covered in dirty streaks.

Why hadn’t she washed it? She cringed, but not too much because a pleasant wave spread through her at being so close to him. Okay, after over a decade of forced servitude in her youth, she didn’t like to clean much—or at all, frankly. But from now on, she was going to have the cleanest door in the apartment complex. Seriously.

“Please lock the car. I don’t live in the best of neighborhoods, and I sure hope you still have the car when you return to it.” Despite all her arguing, she let her head dip against the firm comfort of his chest. Hmm... too bad, he’d parked so close and the distance from the parking lot to her door was so slight.

“I’m not worried about the car. I can get another vehicle, but there’s only one of you in the world, treasured and irreplaceable.” His voice soothed, exciting her at the same time, a balm to her soul and yet something to stir her soul, as well. He was charming indeed, if not a prince. So how was she going to keep from succumbing to those charms?

It took all her willpower not to wrap her arms around his neck and ask him to never let her go. The voice of reason that he might be carrying her only to help her filtered through the fog of fascination, a reminder that she’d promised herself

she'd never be a weakling again. She managed to unlock the door with her left hand and turn the handle, then sighed, recalling the condition she'd left her teeny apartment in. Nothing like the pristine palatial place where he must live.

“My apologies for the mess.” Her apartment probably looked like a tornado had gone through it. After a mudslide.

He opened the front door with his foot and carried her inside. “What mess?”

Huh. Good question.

Rachel looked around, unable to believe her eyes, and blinked several times. The place looked too tidy to be hers.

Was she wrong about the meds wearing off? Had she accidentally taken him to the wrong apartment? But the key fit the lock, and she recognized her faded sofa and wood-veneer side table. And yes, there was the cage with her pets who squeaked upon sighting her. “Let me see my mice, please.”

He carried her to them and placed her on the carpet nearby. “Sure.”

She dropped to her knees near the cage. “Oh, my darlings. No, I didn't abandon you. I hope you're okay.”

There was no odor, so the cage must've been cleaned and filled with fresh shavings. Gratitude swelled her heart. She'd have to thank Irene profusely. With fresh food awaiting them, the mice looked happy and healthy. And all five of them were there. Even Button, found and safely back in his cage before the boat trip. No new runaways, a possibility when the cage was opened for cleaning. If she could hug her pets, she would have.

With caution, she opened the cage and let Button, always the most curious one, climb on her arm, then on her shoulder as she closed the door. He tickled her cheek with his whiskers, making her chuckle. “This is Button.” Then she introduced the rest of the mice and gave them treats.

“Nice to meet you all.” He turned to her and whispered. “Am I supposed to shake their paws or something?”

She chuckled again. “No. You’re a stranger to them now. But mice can learn to recognize their owner. And Button loves staying on my shoulder. We watch lots of shows together. I usually skip the ones that have cats, though. For obvious reasons.”

He chuckled, too, the sound warming her. “They are adorable.”

“I agree.” After adding more food and putting in fresh water, she nestled Button back on the fresh shavings in his cage and let another mouse run on her uninjured shoulder as she looked around.

Irene must’ve hired professional cleaners. Most of the apartment was unrecognizable. They’d even gotten out the coffee stain on the carpet where she’d spilled her mug while getting ready for her date with Tex—she was going to do carpet cleaning when she returned, honest. The carpet was a shade lighter than the dark gray she’d left, so it must’ve been shampooed. The beige tile sparkled, and the grout looked not one but two shades lighter.

No dust coated the wannabe cherrywood dresser, and the dishes were missing from the now-gleaming metal sink. The jacket she’d dropped on the living room floor hung on the back of the chair now, with her shirt folded on the seat. The dirty sock—fine, two of them—seemed to have walked away from the carpet.

The place even smelled nice, with a faint scent of lavender. Must’ve been what the cleaning solution was like.

She owed Irene big time, but then, didn’t she already? And now she’d left the company. But she’d had to do it, hadn’t she? And worse—she still had a confession coming with Tex. She’d have done it already, but she’d better be sure she was clearheaded first.

Hmm, she was blaming too many things on the meds, wasn’t she?

“Please sit down.” He helped her get up and led her to the faded-green armchair that matched the lumpy sofa. “I want

you to promise me you'll rest while I bring your things from the car."

She rolled her eyes but nodded. "I promise."

He had to have run because he reappeared soon with the duffel bag containing the things he'd bought for her in the hospital gift shop—toiletries, the fanciest shampoo and body wash he could find there, and an item that particularly filled her with tenderness, a teddy bear holding a heart stamped with the words *get well soon*. She'd discarded the crusty bloodstained T-shirt and shorts she'd taken on the fated voyage, and he'd bought her a new T-shirt and shorts at the gift shop, too. Guessed her size and everything.

He dropped the bag on the floor. "Is it okay if I open the blinds?" He stepped to the window. "To let the sunlight in?"

She blinked. The windows probably still had those dirty streaks she was going to get to—eventually. Unless Irene's cleaning crew had taken care of them, too. "Um, okay."

He opened the blinds, the windows sparkled, and Rachel did a mental fist pump.

"I'd offer you something to drink. But I don't have many things in the fridge." And whatever she did have probably turned moldy already. She swallowed hard.

"Um, I'd better confess something—I cleaned it and filled it with things I thought you'd like after I cleaned the apartment. I did ask for Ms. Bruzlin's advice. So if you'd like something to eat or drink, there's orange juice, apple juice, grape juice, sparkling water, chocolate milk—"

Her jaw dropped, and she leaned forward. "Wait what—*whaaat*? You did what?"

He shoved his hands into his fancy black slacks' pockets. "I hope I didn't overstep."

"Hold on. Rewind, please." She waved her good hand in the air, gesturing a backward replay motion. She still couldn't believe her ears. Her wound wasn't infected, so she couldn't be having audible hallucinations, right?

“I hope it’s okay that I filled the refrigerator.”

She picked her jaw from the shampooed carpet. “No, the second part.”

“That I cleaned the apartment? Why do you look like, I don’t know, you saw a tiger in here?” He stepped toward her.

“If I saw a tiger in my apartment, I’d be far less surprised.” Her brain must be sluggish because she had difficulty processing this. “You cleaned my apartment. Like in using your hands, you—*yourself*—cleaned my apartment.”

He nodded. “I wore rubber gloves, but yes, that’s how it’s done.”

She did know how cleaning worked—obviously! But who could imagine this fashionable, clean-shaven, expensive-smelling man in a suit that cost more than her monthly salary—correction, probably two months’ salary—scrubbing her floor? “I appreciate it very much.” Though, that meant he’d seen how she lived, didn’t it? Yikes. Heat scorched her ears. “But why?”

“The doctor said you shouldn’t overwork your injured arm.”

“No, I mean, why didn’t you hire cleaners to do all this?” She studied him, seeing him in a new light. When they’d met, she’d penned him as a rich, spoiled snob. Were those prejudices?

“How about I bring us something to drink and explain some things you don’t know about me?” He moved the side table to her side and brought one of the only two chairs in her apartment.

“O—okay. I’ll take a glass of orange juice, please.” Her mind whirled. His unexpected gesture brought him closer to her, and it was dangerous.

The hospital stay already weakened her defenses. Not the injury per se, but how he’d stayed by her side while she’d been there. And when he’d left for what she’d presumed was to take care of things at his work, he’d cleaned her apartment to welcome her home and fed her mice.

Nibbles squeaked on her shoulder as if to confirm it, but just in case, she'd better ask. "You took care of my pets, as well, didn't you?"

"Of course. My experience with mice is limited to getting barn cats to hunt them—no offense to your little friends. But I believe I did well." He handed her a glass of orange juice and placed a second one on her table.

She took the cold, smooth glass with her left hand. "You did an excellent job."

Tears welled in her eyes, and she blinked to restrain them as she bowed her head and sipped the sweet tangy liquid. She wanted to hug him and stay in his embrace forever, and she wasn't even the hugging type.

Or maybe she'd learned not to be a hugger because nobody wanted her hugs when she'd been growing up. Nobody held her when she'd cried. Nobody worried when she'd been hurt.

Besides some help from Irene, Rachel wasn't used to kindness and didn't know how to deal with a guy who not only looked like a magazine cover model but also was capable of surprisingly kind gestures. If he'd filled her apartment with flowers, it would've meant less than him cleaning the place. And especially him doing it himself.

She could resist an arrogant, selfish snob. But how was she supposed to resist this man? Maybe she wouldn't have to. Once he heard about what he could consider her betraying him, he'd leave on his own. Hiding a grimace, she thwacked her half-full glass onto the table.

He took a seat, drank some of his orange juice, then set it beside hers, and clasped her hands in his, gently, careful not to bother her injured arm. "I wasn't born into riches. I come from humble beginnings."

She didn't remove her hands, though his touch affected her deeply. "I know." And that knowledge should've prevented her from being prejudiced about him. Instead, she'd assumed he'd forgotten his humble beginnings fast.

“Mom taught us how to cook, do laundry, and clean up after ourselves from an early age. Fair warning, I was the worst cook in the family. So nobody wanted me on cooking duty. But it’s not difficult to clean. Okay, cleaning stables wasn’t my favorite thing. But I didn’t mind cleaning the house. I kind of liked it because it made me feel useful. I even volunteered for it sometimes.” He squeezed her fingers, pumping a jolt to her heart.

“Thank you for sharing this.” She stared into his eyes and didn’t want to look away. “I never volunteered for cleaning—or cooking and washing dishes, for that matter. I just didn’t have a choice if I wanted to eat and have a roof above my head. Still, no excuse to live like a slob now.” She looked down, hiding behind the hair she let fall on her face.

“You’re not a slob.” He brushed her blonde tresses back, his fingers tender on her skin.

The gesture made her heart expand in her chest. “I kind of am. But I’ll do better.”

“It’s difficult to do things that are traumatic for us.” His voice became soft.

She lifted her head and looked into his blue eyes again. The compassion in them reached into her, unknotting the defenses that helped her stay strong. “I’ll manage.”

“It’s okay to ask for help. You don’t have to do it all alone.” He leaned closer, too close, close enough to give her the whiff of that intoxicating cologne.

“I had to.” Breathing deeply, she disappeared in his baby blues and leaned forward, as well. She wanted more of that touch that made her heart melt, more of this connection between them. Could she harbor butterflies in her stomach and hope in her heart? Be loved and admired and cared for and experience the physical profession of that in the mix of their breaths, in the touch of their fingers, in the brush of their lips.

Spurred by the delirium of her meds—or was it the delirium of her thoughts?—the desire to kiss him became

unbearable. The heat in his eyes washed over her, causing heat to pool in the pit of her stomach.

Then Nibbles pranced on her shoulder, her tail slapping Rachel's neck, bringing her back to her senses. Not entirely, but enough to give her a dose of reality. She wasn't Cinderella, about to be swept off her feet again, and this charming hero might walk away as soon as he knew the truth.

"You don't have to do it alone anymore." He brushed the back of his hand against her cheek, and her whole foolish body responded. "You don't always have to be strong."

She wanted to believe it. Oh how much she wanted to believe it. She leaned back, breaking their eye contact, and reached for her glass again. "You need to know something about me, too. You're not going to like it. We need to talk."

No! No, they didn't. Couldn't she hold back another hour? Day? Week? Why did Cinderella's clock have to strike midnight with her words?

His eyes narrowed. "Nothing good has ever started with those words."

Then a knock on the door made her look up.



Chapter Eleven



THE NEXT DAY, TEX STILL couldn't stop thinking about whatever Rachel wanted to talk to him about. With the question pulsing through him, he visited his office to attend to the things that demanded his presence, leave instructions for the rest, and put his assistant, Jennifer, in charge, then swung by the pharmacy to pick up more bandages and the painkillers Rachel would surely still refuse to take.

He'd never gotten a chance for that conversation because Kennedy of all people had shown up, visibly upset Rachel hadn't told her about getting shot and needing help. And that had left him reeling because how did Rachel know his new sister-in-law, as well as his mom and his brothers? Then Ms. Bruzlin arrived and began organizing dinner, both women edging him out of the preparation but not the eating. He'd been grateful. With his cooking skills, he'd have to get takeout, and a home-cooked meal was much better for Rachel.

After the pharmacy visit, he steered his unharmed car to the florist. Stalling? It wasn't like he wanted to have that mysterious conversation Rachel had hinted at. He dreaded it.

His rib cage tightened as he carried red roses to the car, the flowers spreading their amazing aroma. He slammed the car door he'd closed more forcefully than he should have.

What was it going to be? That they couldn't see each other any longer?

He started the engine and drove off, then glanced at the roses in the passenger seat. The bouquet might be a cliché, but he didn't know her favorite flowers. Kennedy didn't, either, when he'd asked her, though how much she knew about his Cinderella he wasn't sure. The two of them knowing each other at all still seemed odd. At least, according to Kennedy, Rachel didn't have allergies, unlike Kennedy herself. His family still teased his brother about one of his first meetings

with his now wife when Austin had brought her hibiscuses and Kennedy nearly sneezed him away.

How could Tex possibly help Rachel and take care of her while she recovered without putting her in danger by his mere presence? He rubbed his forehead before returning his hand to the steering wheel, then pressed the brake pedal to stop at the red light. He tamped down his irritation.

Why was it when one was in a hurry—and he was in a hurry to see Rachel—lights always turned red?

He was a grown man who told other people what to do, but on some occasions, he still came to the same person for advice. So he called his mother on the hands-free phone and shared his dilemma. Then he groaned.

“I mean if I mean danger for her, wouldn’t letting her go be the right thing to do?” *Lord, what should I do?* “On the other hand, I can’t leave her to her own devices while she’s in recovery. And, Mom, since she’s been shot, I’ve gone through such an emotional roller coaster. It’s difficult to believe this incredible girl’s begun to mean so much to me in such a short time.” And yet she had.

“Here’s your solution.” Mom had never disappointed, and she didn’t now, either. “Bring Rachel to the ranch. I’ve got plenty of spare rooms because you all moved out. And I installed a security system after the break-in at Austin and Kennedy’s place.”

He bristled as he released the brake pedal and moved forward on the green light. “I’d never put you in danger.”

“Oh please.” She snorted. “I’ve got rifles and know how to use them. Besides, we’ve got dogs. Plus, I can ask Darius to stay these next few weeks in the room you two used to share, and the rest of your brothers live nearby. Except you.”

Tex swallowed hard at a jab he probably deserved. “I have my reasons.” Eager to get to Rachel as soon as possible, he passed a navy-blue truck with decals curtaining its back window.

“You sure do. I’m proud of all you’ve accomplished and appreciate your help paying the ranch expenses.” Her voice softened. “It’s going to be a safer place for her than an apartment in a bad neighborhood. And, if I might suggest it, I want you to stay here, as well, while the police are searching for the shooter or shooters. We don’t know for sure if the target is Rachel or you.”

He flinched as he made a sharp turn too fast, the tires squealing in protest. He didn’t even want to *think* Rachel could be the target. He’d rather be targeted himself. “I’ll talk to Rachel. She’s very independent, though.”

“Yeah, reminds me of *someone*. After you talk to her, call me and give me her phone number. I can be rather persuasive.”

He chuckled as he passed another car, an SUV with its back window also covered, but this one by dust. Except for the inscription “wash me” someone had done with their finger. “Persuasive? That’s what you call railroading someone?”

His mother chuckled. “Okay, just invite her for lunch, and we’ll work from there.”

“Okay. Love you, Mom.”

“Love you, too.” She disconnected.

Minutes later, he was in Rachel’s apartment. He might’ve run there from the car, but that was because she needed her bandages changed. His heartbeat picked up at the sight of her. Her black T-shirt displaying her favorite rock band hung untucked over slouchy sweatpants, and he’d never seen a more beautiful woman in the world.

Just like he’d expected, she waved off the flowers. “You shouldn’t have brought me roses.”

Mice squeaked when he entered the apartment. Maybe they already started recognizing him. He waved at the cage.

“You don’t like roses?” Good. She wasn’t sneezing. The flowers’ aroma overplayed the sweet scent of oranges. He visually scoured the apartment for a vase, though he hadn’t seen one while cleaning up the other day.

“I love them, but...” She spread her left arm. “I don’t even have a vase.”

“My bad. I should’ve bought you one.” He settled on a tall bottle, filled it with water from the kitchen sink, and arranged it on the dresser. “Is here okay?”

“Splendid. Bossy, huh?” She jammed her left hand on her hip while her right one remained in the sling, reminding him of a bird with a broken wing.

Oh how he wanted to take her into his arms and nurse her back to health! He forced himself to stay in one place and shrugged. “Just a habit. How do you feel?”

He searched for any signs the doctor had warned about, like a fever signaling the wound might be infected. “Not dizzy, not feverish?” He cupped a palm on her forehead, then jerked back. Even touching her for medical purposes affected him. “Your forehead feels normal, but maybe we should check your temperature.”

She rolled her eyes, but her lips lifted a bit. “I’m fine. Well, as fine as can be under the circumstances. A little weak, but that’s to be expected.”

“Please sit down. I hope you didn’t overdo anything with your right arm.”

She groaned as she settled in the armchair. “How could I? You even brushed my hair and nearly spoon-fed me breakfast!”

A pleasant wave rose inside him over the sweet memory. Her hair had smelled of her lavender shampoo, and he’d forever associate that scent with her now. But then he cringed. “Yeah, after I burned the toast and we had to air out the apartment.” Was it his imagination, or was there still a tinge of smoke? “But the omelet was good. I hope. Would you like something to drink? I can make fresh orange juice.”

Her lips rose further as if she enjoyed someone fussing over her despite protesting. “The omelet was excellent. You underestimated your cooking skills. And no need to make

fresh juice. I literally lived on bread and water for a long time. I'm not spoiled."

Yet he *wanted* to spoil her. "Apple juice then? Maybe with chocolate cheesecake? And while I'm being *unbearably* bossy, how about I clean your wound and change your bandage?"

"Stop fussing over me! Kennedy volunteered to change my bandage, and so did Austin."

He raised his hands in a placating gesture. "I know my veterinarian brother has much more experience with cleaning all kinds of wounds, and Kennedy is your good friend." What a small world indeed. Rachel turned out to be friends with his sister-in-law. "But I'm already here."

"You're already here," she echoed, and the expression in her hazel eyes changed from playfully rebellious to unreadable.

He took it for a yes, so he fetched her glasses of apple and orange juice with a plate of cheesecake. Once she finished the orange juice and cheesecake, claiming it was a delicious pairing, he brought antiseptic soap, antibiotic cream, bandages, towels, and a pan with warm water.

"By the way, I never said you're *unbearable*. It's the opposite." She took off her sling with caution.

"I'm bearable?" He grinned at her, despite how his stomach dropped as he started unwrapping the bandages. If that bullet had gone a little to the left... He shuddered. He didn't even want to think that way.

"You're more than that." She drained her apple juice glass fast despite not wanting it earlier, then placed it on the small, well-loved table with a few scratches. "You've been wonderful, and that's a problem."

Why would that be a problem? But his heart started beating faster at her compliment. He forced himself to concentrate on his task, not on the amazing way she made him feel. Well, amazing with a side of worried.

She flinched as he peeled away the gauze stuck to her skin.

“Sorry,” he muttered, wishing he had some of Austin’s medical knowledge but applied to humans. “It’s pink. That means it’s healthy, right?” *Right?*

“Right. If there was an infection, it’d be bright red, and there’d be pus oozing.”

He swallowed hard, doubly grateful to see no pus. He cleaned the wound as gently as he could. “I’m not hurting you, am I?”

“No. I just hope *I* won’t hurt you,” her voice was quiet.

He looked up from his task and nearly shifted back at the sadness in her eyes. “Is that about the conversation you wanted to have yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“Let me finish this first.” He was prolonging the inevitable, but he wanted several more minutes in her presence when things between them were still possible. Plus, he wanted to do this wound dressing right.

He applied ointment and then bandaged her arm. Every time he touched her smooth skin, his entire being reacted. But then, his entire being reacted when he simply breathed the same air as she did. “Not too tight? I’d like to make sure the bandage doesn’t fall off, but I don’t want it to hurt you.”

“No. Thank you for doing this.”

“It’s the least I can do, considering you got shot because of me.” Man, that fact hurt. Grinding his teeth, he discarded soiled bandages in a biohazard bag and replaced the supplies in the first aid kit.

She grimaced. “Stop saying that. And please take a seat.” She looked away as if she couldn’t look him in the eyes.

Uh-oh. His whole body stiffened in preparation as he sat in the oak side chair. “I’m listening.”

“If after hearing this you never want to speak to me again, I’ll understand.” Based on the movement of her neck, she swallowed.

His stomach dipped. He didn't like that beginning at all. "What's going on?"

"I—I hope you won't think I betrayed you." She finally looked him in the eyes, and the level of hurt in hers blasted him so hard he nearly moved back.

His stomach dropped further, all the way to the shampooed carpet. The flashback of a deep-seated betrayal from his first love made him flinch.

"What's going on?" he asked again when Rachel kept quiet. His mind already drew him the worst-case scenarios. "What did you do?" Part of him became as empty as her glass.

Was the story about to repeat itself? His heart was breaking already, and he'd barely glued it together after the first time.

"You were the subject of my investigation." Her hazel eyes became tormented. "I can't tell you the client's name, of course. But that's why I was at the ball and approached you at first."

"What?" He shifted back as if he ran into a brick wall. He couldn't wrap his mind around this yet. Then it hit him. "Is that why you danced with me? Why you went on a date with me?"

Just like Madison, Rachel had only pretended to like him. All this time, while he'd followed her as a puppy, she'd been pretending.

"Yes. At first." Her voice went quiet.

He jumped to his feet and paced the small living room, missing the large spaces of his condo. And here he was falling for her. "So all this was a lie?"

He'd developed feelings for her, and while he'd thought—he'd hoped—she'd reciprocated, he was just a job to her. He reached one white wall, turned around, and paced toward the other. The place now felt like a shoebox he'd been shoved in. How suffocating.

She lifted her chin. "I never lied to you."

“But you never told me the entire truth. It’s called lying by omission.” His blood boiled. How could he be such a fool? How could he make such a grave mistake a second time? The signs had been there, but he hadn’t wanted to see them.

“I’m sorry.” Her lips trembled. “I couldn’t tell you before because I couldn’t betray the contract’s conditions.”

He stopped in his tracks and ran a hand over his eyes. “Wait. Hold up. Investigation about what?”

“You know I can’t tell you that.” She met his gaze now, and hers hardened as she got up from the chair and walked to him. “It’s private information.”

He already connected the dots. “It must be about the jewelry thefts. Though you can’t be serious. Why would anyone ever suspect me of those?” Then he groaned and leaned against the wall. “That’s why you were so curious about those thefts. I was just an information source. Nothing else. Oh wait, I’m wrong. I was also *the subject of your investigation.*”

Apparently, she considered him a weak man she could manipulate in whatever way she wanted. Even making him a suspect in crimes he hadn’t committed.

“You became much more than that to me. I don’t choose the assignments I take on.” Her gaze hardened further, and though guilt still clouded the hazel, the fire of a challenge lit them. She didn’t back off when he stepped to her.

“If I didn’t care about you so much, it wouldn’t be this painful.” His blood like hot lava, he couldn’t stand looking at her any longer. “Even after the masquerade, you never took off your mask, have you?”

There were no tears in her eyes while his heart was being crushed because of her and tears prickled his eyes. But his father had yelled often enough that men didn’t cry, so Tex wouldn’t let them spill. “Do you still suspect me of wrongdoing?”

“No. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have told you all this.”

That was something. But it wasn't enough. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks. "I have to leave, Cinderella."

"I figured as much. Real life isn't a fairy tale, is it?"



Chapter Twelve



“I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT to do with myself now. I can’t take care of you, too.”

Tex stared at a scrawny stray dog of uncertain color—almost white with some brown spots, but those could be from mud—that settled under his car of all places. Good thing he’d noticed a paw and hadn’t driven off. The poor thing was so skinny one could count the ribs, and it didn’t have a collar. Probably didn’t have a chip, either. “You have to leave. So do I.”

He glanced at Rachel’s window, his soul aching. Was he too harsh? He’d wanted someone to like him for him, not because of his status. And definitely not because he was a job assignment. Okay, not just *someone*. Rachel. He wanted that person to be amazing, courageous, and spunky with an infectious laugh and a sparkle in her eyes.

She was the one.

But he wasn’t the one for her, and pain sliced him all over again.

The dog whined a little as if to say, “I wish I had your problems.”

“It would help if I had a biscuit or something, right?” Tex frowned. He was heartbroken, but he was well-fed and had shelter.

The canine barked, probably agreeing it would help indeed.

His frown deepened while compassion tightened his rib cage. He could never run over a dog, and letting the poor thing starve to death would be just as bad. There should be a compromise. “Okay, let’s get you something to eat. I know an animal shelter where my brother volunteers. He’ll give you a bath, food, and water and check you for parasites and diseases.

Who knows, you might even get a nice human to take you home soon. It means a two-hour drive, but it'll be worth it."

As if understanding the words, the dog crawled from under the car. Tex glanced at his crisp white shirt, then lifted the dog, and placed him on the sports car's mini back seat. One of his sisters-in-law had picked up a stray and ended up with puppies, as well. But this was a male, so there'd be no puppies.

Tex stopped at a pet store to get kibble and fed the dog who practically inhaled the food. Then Tex took off for Port Sunshine, where he'd spent many happy moments with his brothers.

He'd spent many happy moments with Rachel until he knew the truth. In fact, the time spent with her—sans when she'd been shot, of course—was the happiest he'd ever been. His heart shifted, and he called his assistant, partly to distract himself, partly because he needed to.

After resolving the most urgent issues Jennifer brought up, he disconnected and glanced back at the dog, who got up and barked. "It's going to get better for you. I promise. It's going to be all right."

Then he winced.

It's going to be all right.

Rachel had said those words when she'd been shot, comforting him when he'd been scared out of his mind that she'd bleed to death in his arms.

Such an incredible woman.

Now, when the anger wore off, worry for her took its place. He pressed on the accelerator as he passed a truck on the freeway. She was recovering from being shot, and she needed his help. Kennedy or Irene or both would step in, but a large part of him still wanted to be there for Rachel, despite what he'd learned today.

But did *she* want him to be there for her?

He rolled down the car window, letting fresh air in. Now that his head was clearer, he could see her reasons. He was a businessman. He knew all about contracts. She couldn't have told him about her assignment without breaking the contract and jeopardizing the company of a woman she admired and owed.

“If only she told me that I wasn't just the subject of her investigation any longer. That she had feelings for me,” he told the dog because who else could he tell? He drove to the shoulder to let someone in a hurry pass, then returned to his lane.

But wait. He flexed his grip on the steering wheel. She did say he'd become more than a subject of her investigation, hadn't she? But how much more? The pain of being betrayed by a woman he'd loved once had affected his judgment. He didn't want to be seen as weak again. He didn't want to feel like a fool.

But while Madison had used him and his love for her purpose, Rachel was simply doing her job. The one that kept her and her mice fed. His heart shifted, and he slowed around a curve. He'd never expected himself to, but he even missed the mice.

“And then there's this teeny, tiny, little detail”—yes, that was sarcasm—“of her saving my life. Twice. Or three times. I'd be a pig if I didn't repay her with kindness.” Instead, he'd lashed out at her. His neck burned.

The dog barked, clearly perking up at the word *pig*.

“Pig in the sense of a not-nice person, not in the sense of bacon, sorry.” For some reason, Tex clarified. “Rachel took a risk by telling me the truth. She might've even left her job to be able to tell me the truth.” Oh, man! Was *that* true? “Or am I just trying to come up with reasons to see her again?” Because everything in him wanted to see her again.

The dog whined, probably thinking, “How am I supposed to know?”

“I don’t know your name. Sorry, buddy. Is it okay if I call you Tiny Tim for now?”

The dog barked, and as Tex couldn’t understand that language, he translated it favorably as a yes.

A few times, he nearly turned around and headed back to Rachel’s apartment, but a promise, even given to a dog, was still a promise.

Some people had called him brilliant. But with all his brilliant mind, he couldn’t come up with a solution. He’d been burned before, but Rachel was worth the risk of getting burned again.

Could his abused heart survive a second break?



“He brooooooke up with me!” Rachel couldn’t stop the stream of tears from flowing over her cheeks as she sat in the armchair and tasted their saltiness. When was the last time she’d cried? Even as much as she’d been hurt in childhood, she’d never had her heart crushed before.

Kennedy, who knelt in front of her, handed Rachel more tissues and exchanged worried glances with Irene. “I’m ready to punch my brother-in-law in the face. And I’m not a violent person.”

“I wouldn’t be so fast.” Irene brought a glass of water and handed it to Rachel.

“It wasn’t his fault! Okay, maybe somewhat. I’m not at liberty to explaaaaain.” Rachel wailed and hiccupped, then took the glass, its surface cold and smooth under her fingertips. The glass shook in her hands.

“You being this upset can’t be good for your recovery.” Kennedy glanced sideways at Rachel’s sling.

“I knoooooow.” Rachel tried to take a sip, but the glass clanked against her teeth.

Irene held it up to Rachel’s lips, and the cloudiness in her gray eyes deepened. “Would you like something else? To eat,

maybe? I can hire a nurse to change your bandages.”

“Noooooo! Not hungry!” Rachel would probably never get anything past the gigantic lump in her throat again. “And I don’t caaaare about the bandages.” She must sound like a capricious child, but it didn’t matter. Besides, she’d never gotten the chance to be a capricious child when she’d been growing up.

A line appeared between Irene’s gray eyebrows, but she nodded. “Do you want our compassion, advice, or action?”

Rachel took several sips of the cold liquid Irene offered. “Thank you.” It wasn’t the fresh-squeezed orange juice Tex made for her, but it would have to do. Crimson-hued roses on the dresser mocked her turmoil. Who said red roses were the symbol of love? The guy not only didn’t love her but also didn’t care for her at all. “Compassion, please.” Huh. Talk about childish. She’d always been more practical. “*Maybe* advice.”

Kennedy exhaled a long breath. “Good. Because I wasn’t looking forward to punching my brother-in-law in the face. Mainly because I don’t want to create problems for Austin.” She got up from the floor, hugged Rachel, then let her go. “I’m sorry this happened to you. Praying Tex comes to his senses and sees what a treasure you are.”

Irene rubbed her temples, her gaze thoughtful. “What if he already sees that? A man like Tex Lawrence doesn’t drop everything to deep clean someone’s apartment and change her bandages if he doesn’t care about that someone very, very much.”

Rachel brightened. Then her shoulders slumped again. Yet gratitude stirred in her that she now had people in her life who could pick her up from the floor and keep her going.

“Not anymooooooore.” Rachel hiccupped again, and Irene held up the glass to Rachel’s lips while she drank. “I ruined everything. He thinks he was just a job to me. And he was. But only at first.”

Kennedy blinked. “I don’t understand.”

Rachel sent her friend an apologetic glance. “I can’t tell you the details. I’m sorry. Client privilege.”

“Did you tell him how you feel about him now?” Irene carried the empty glass to the sink. She’d guessed more than she’d let on.

Rachel searched her memory, then got up, and plucked Button out of the cage. He’d started running inside it irrationally as if sensing her mood. Her legs felt like cooked noodles, so she sank back into the armchair. Button perched on her shoulder, not running any longer. “I told him he became more than a job to me.”

“That’s it?” Kennedy settled on the carpet and wrapped her arms around her legs. “My experience with men is mostly limited to Austin, but even I know we women need to spell out things for men. We think they can read our minds, but they can’t. Me holding back nearly ended in a disaster for my marriage.”

“You know the way I grew up.” Tears filled Rachel’s eyes again, burning her eye sockets. Button tickled her cheek with his whiskers, and it had always made her smile, but not this time. The mouse ran down her unharmed hand, then back to her shoulder, tiny paws ticklish. The sharp pain in her heart became duller, but it was still nearly unbearable. Even her arm ached less than her heart. “I have difficulty trusting people. Difficulty allowing myself to love people.”

But so did Kennedy, and look at her now.

Rachel swallowed hard. “I’ll never have the chance to tell him anything anyway.”

“I wouldn’t be so fast,” Irene said again.

The knock on the door made all three of them look up. Hope stirred in Rachel, but she stifled it. “It’d better not be some box I didn’t order.” She groaned as she attempted to get up from the armchair.

Kennedy waved for her to stay seated. “I’ll open the door.” After she’d glanced in the peephole, she whirled around. “It’s

Tex. Holding a dog, for some reason. Do you still want me to open the door?"

Rachel's eyes widened, and everything in her woke up to life. But all she did in response was hiccup. Finally, she found her voice. "Yes. No. Yes."

"I take it as two votes for yes and one for no. That makes it a yes to me." Kennedy flung the door open as she spoke. "Tex, you're not my favorite person in the world right now. But come on in."

Irene got up from her chair, elegant as always in her pantsuit and with gracious movements. "Hello, Tex." She smoothed down her slacks. "Kennedy, what do you think of having dinner together? We could exchange tips about running a business."

Kennedy shot Rachel a concerned glance. "Rachel, are you going to be okay?"

This time, Rachel didn't answer with two yeses and one no. She simply nodded as she couldn't look away from Tex. What was he about to say? She got up and made a few careful steps, holding back though she was desperate to run into his arms.

On the way out of the apartment, Kennedy didn't punch him in the face, but she did elbow him in the ribs. "Treat my girl well."

"I will." He didn't take his focus off Rachel, even as his ribs suffered.

Seconds later, they were alone, making her pulse spike.

"If it's okay, may I put Tiny Tim on the floor?" he asked.

The dog whined as if seconding that request.

"As long as Tiny Tim doesn't scare my mice. And, um, he is potty trained, right?" Then she eyed him as something suspicious occurred to her. "Don't even think you can bribe me by gifting me a dog." She finally moved her glance. The creamy-colored dog, so skinny and malnourished, didn't look like a gift.

What was happening? They were supposed to talk about their feelings. Instead, they were talking about a pooch not making a puddle on the carpet—the carpet Tex recently shampooed for her.

He placed the dog on the carpet, and the mutt sniffed around but stayed in place. “Tiny Tim isn’t a gift. I found him when I was leaving your apartment.” His eyes darkened. “Austin checked, washed, and vaccinated him. Um, and treated him for fleas. The dog doesn’t have a collar or a chip. So I think it’s fair to say he was a stray.”

Rachel moved back on instinct, and Button hid in her hair. “I can’t believe you adopted a dog.”

He spread his arms as he looked into her eyes. “I can’t believe it, either. My brothers are always offering me dogs to adopt, most recently a golden retriever puppy. But I never had time for a pet. I never had time for anything besides work. Until now.”

Her heart fluttered at the emotion in his eyes he didn’t try to hide this time. “What happened?”

“You. You happened. I’m sorry I lashed out at you. Especially in your condition.”

“You don’t have to treat me with kid gloves just because I got shot.”

“I’m not trying to.” He ran his fingers through his hair while Tiny Tim trudged forward but stopped far enough from the mice. “I’m ruining it again, aren’t I? Before I say anything else, I just need to know. I care about you deeply. Do you care about me at all?”

She’d learned to hide her emotions since her preteens, and the recent crying fest excluded, she’d done a good job of it. Maybe too good. This was the time to show the vulnerability she’d never shown anyone, and she sensed it was the same for him. “Of course. Deeply. Very much. A lot.” She chuckled nervously. “You get the picture.”

“I do. And I want to lift you in the air right now, but I’m afraid to hurt you.” He settled for cupping her face and gliding

his thumb along her jawline.

Even that simple touch sent ripples of pleasure through her, and she leaned into him. But as much as she was eager for the wonderful wave to sweep her up, she had to be realistic. “It’s not going to be smooth sailing for us from now on. You have this thing about always staying strong, always being in control. And I have way too many hang-ups I need to work through before I can be in a relationship. Not to mention that someone seems to want you dead. And someone might be trying to set you up for several thefts. Could even be the same person. Or many.”

A shadow passed over his face. “I can bring danger to you. I shouldn’t be near you.”

“No!” Her heart protested before her vocal cords did. “That’s not what I meant. Though it’s best if you stay away from public places for some time.” Worry for him tightened her gut. She’d even volunteer to be his bodyguard if not for the conflict of interest and the recent wound. Yeah, he wouldn’t have accepted that offer, anyway. “I just want you to realize many things can still separate us.”

“I realize it.” His gaze didn’t waver from her eyes. “But that’s a start.”

“That’s a start,” she echoed while her heart swelled. Even a chance with him was more than she’d dreamed of. She could only hope that chance wouldn’t lead to heartbreak.

“You didn’t leave your job on my behalf, did you?”

“Maybe.”

He frowned. “And I acted like a fool instead of being grateful. I can give you a job in my company if you want it.”

She rolled her eyes, though part of her appreciated the offer. “That would make you my boss, which could complicate things. I’ll figure something out. I need to recover, anyway. And Irene gave me a generous severance package, though I was the one who resigned. I have enough for a few months before I’ll need a new job.” Then it dawned on her, and she stepped back, her eyes narrowing as she studied him. “You’re

not here because you feel pity for me because of my wound? Or out of some misguided sense of duty?"

He closed the distance between them and gripped her upper arms with a sudden fierceness, then released them as if remembering her injured shoulder. A chill replaced his touch, and she wished he hadn't let go. Oh how deeply she ached to have him hold onto her and never let go.

He forked his fingers through his hair, mussing up his smooth businessman persona. "I don't feel pity for you but compassion and admiration, and *that's* different. And it's not a misguided sense of duty. I'm here because I want to be. The question is"—his intense blue gaze locked on her—"do *you* want me to be here?"

"Yes." She didn't need to think about it.

"Not two yeses and one no?" His lips curved up. He stepped closer, his head lowering toward hers. Then he blinked. "There's one condition, though."

She nearly groaned and stepped further back. Of course, there had to be something. "What condition?"

"My mom invited you for lunch at the ranch. She's been very insistent." He touched her chin, tipping her face toward his and edging in closer. Was he going to kiss her? Then his phone rang, and he fished it out of his pocket. "Yup. That's her calling. Sorry, I've got to answer." He swiped his phone screen to answer. "Yes, Mom. She's right here. I'll give her the phone."

"What? No." But Rachel already took the phone. "Hi, Mrs. Lawrence."

"Hello, darling. I'd love to see you at lunch tomorrow or the day after. Do you think you could make it, please?"

"Um, I don't know. I—um, sure," Rachel squeaked. And she'd never squeaked before.

"Splendid. I can't wait to meet you again," Mrs. Lawrence said before disconnecting.

Rachel narrowed her eyes at Tex. "You don't play fair."

He winked. “I never said I did.”

This lunch was going to either change her life or be a complete disaster.

Oh boy.



The next day, the fingers on Rachel’s uninjured arm were beating a rhythm on her lap. She stared through the window of Tex’s apple-red sports car at emerald fields playing host to cows and horses. “Are you sure it’s a good idea?” Hadn’t she already asked?

“For sure, but I forgot to tell you my brother, Darius, might be at lunch. I hope that’s okay. He moved back in with my mom temporarily. He can be gloomy sometimes, but it’s not because he doesn’t like you. It’s just the way he is. He’s kind and caring deep inside. And he’s sort of the glue of the family, keeping everything and everyone together. Except me, of course.”

So she’d have to impress more of his family. But aloud, she said, “Sure. Anyone else?”

“Kennedy and Austin, if that’s okay.”

This news she took with a grateful smile. It would be good to have people she knew and loved in her corner at lunch.

Knew and loved?

Part of her stilled. She’d done her best to avoid attachments. Yet she’d already gotten attached to the new couple. And she’d gotten way too attached to Tex.

Her right arm, dressed in a sling, still ached, but that was to be expected. It would ache less if she’d kept taking the prescribed painkillers, but she’d seen two of her coworkers get addicted to them after being wounded, and it hadn’t ended well. She didn’t want to go down that road.

She swallowed hard. She wasn’t sure she wanted to travel down the country road she was on, either. While she wasn’t easily intimidated, Mrs. Lawrence intimidated her, and though

Rachel had seen her when acting as security for Kennedy's wedding and later met her briefly as a guest at Kennedy's vow renewal, she hadn't really gotten to know the woman. What if she turned out like Rachel's stepmother?

No matter how far Tex made it in this world, his mother still clearly meant a lot to him. And if she didn't like Rachel...

Rachel's heart turned over in her chest as she looked at his handsome profile. The main issue was probably that this meeting felt more important than a mere visit. She was going to meet the mother of the man she liked much more than she wanted to. So she desperately wanted that woman to take a shine to her. Rachel suppressed a sigh.

Riiight.

What mother would want her son to date a tomboy who didn't love to cook, was somewhat of a slob, and had a profession many considered manly?

"As you already found out, it's not easy to say no to my mother." Tex winked at Rachel as if trying to make her feel better. "She's loud and outspoken, but she's kind. And let's be honest, she cooks ten times better than I do."

"Um, that wouldn't be hard. You burned the toast you cooked with breakfast." It still warmed Rachel's heart that he'd made the effort. She just didn't know how to express her gratitude yet. After all, since her preteens, too many of her kind words or gestures had been used against her.

He didn't even blink. "Make it a *hundred* times better."

To calm her raw nerves, she rolled down her window and took a deep breath of country air filled with the scents of grass and wildflowers. Then, to distract herself from the upcoming meeting and because she needed to, she turned her thoughts to the mystery she hadn't been able to solve. While she wasn't part of the investigation any longer, it didn't mean she had to stop her search.

Besides, Ms. Mueller seemed the teensiest bit obsessed with Tex. Understatement. If she decided to take her

suspicious about him to the police, even without any proof, Tex and Rachel had to be ready to defend his good name.

Tex and Rachel...

She did a sharp breath intake. Was there a Tex and Rachel? Or was the relationship between them a fairy tale she'd been telling herself?

Her fingers tapped on the console. And then there was something she found out that made her stomach clench. So she started with the easy part. "Fred Sersen met with Roger Leverett, the man who matched the thief's description. Roger Leverett visited Fred Sersen at a lonely cottage in the middle of nowhere. The cottage was rented via a third party."

"How do you know?" He turned his head to her before returning his attention to the road. "Oh no. You trailed them. You weren't supposed to drive!"

She pressed her lips tight, her fingers drumming faster. "I was extra cautious. And I'm good at surveillance and staying unnoticed. I've done it for years. Anyway, the need for a clandestine meeting put me on guard."

He slowed down as if he needed more time with her, even if for work purposes. "I don't know Roger Leverett well, but he's a reputable and affluent man. Why would he put himself at risk by stealing diamonds he might not be able to sell?"

She nodded. "I asked myself the same question. I sent word to a few informants I keep in touch with. Roger developed a gambling habit, and loan sharks are after him. He's in a tight spot, and Fred might've taken advantage of that."

Tex's eyes narrowed. "It's only suspicions, but I heard Fred Sersen's wife loves diamonds and parties. He and I got into an argument last year when I snatched some investors he'd courted. I worried he might make a scene, so I didn't invite them to the gala this year."

"Here we go. She might hold a grudge at being snubbed, so might he. Oh, and if affluent people decide their precious jewelry might be in danger at your charity ball, they might not

show up next year.” She swallowed hard. Sometimes she could be too blunt. No wonder she had difficulty making friends. Well, besides mice. “Fred Sersen has an entire list of motives now.”

“But no proof.” His hand moved toward hers, causing her heart to skip a beat, but then he returned it to the steering wheel. “It still doesn’t make sense. Fred is a meticulous man. The theft at the charity ball seemed to be on the spur of the moment, brazen, even sloppy. A crime of opportunity.”

“True. But then, why did two of the cameras stop working and not record the incident?” The conclusion was obvious, but she didn’t want to spell it out. “Someone working for you might be, well, working not only for you.”

“Someone betrayed me.” A shadow passed over his face, and he slowed down again. A little more, and it would be a crawl. Which she didn’t mind at all, despite her love for speed, as she’d gladly postpone the visit to what might turn out to be an alligator den. But something about the way he said it put her on guard. There was so much hurt in his voice.

This time, she nearly reached out to him but stopped herself. She told herself it was because he needed to concentrate on the road and a cow might jump out suddenly. As if cows were known for that. The truth was, she wasn’t good at all this emotional stuff. But she was good at being suspicious. “We might need to comb through everyone who had access to the cameras.”

“Okay. Jennifer set up new cameras this year. Supposed to be higher security.”

“Huh. Interesting.” Rachel wouldn’t let her initial dislike of Tex’s perky assistant affect her judgment.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Um, it’s not my business how much you pay your employees. But she recently bought an oceanfront property way over the asking price and put not just twenty but thirty percent down.” She named the amount that made her eyes pop. She loved the ocean, but why some people would pay that

much for a view was beyond her. Then she sensed his silent question. “Yes, fine, I did some digging.”

“Okay, interesting indeed,” he seemed to say the words through his teeth. “I like to think I pay my employees generously. But not that level of generosity.”

He was clearly hurt. Perhaps she shouldn’t have spoken up. She touched his hand as the ranch house appeared in the distance. “It still doesn’t mean anything. She could have a rich aunt. Or maybe she won a lottery recently. Or... something.”

Live oaks grew along the driveway and shaded the house. At their approach, they waved thick arms laden with Spanish moss as if beckoning one of their own home—or warning Rachel away. Then Tex parked before the well-tended Cape Cod-style house. Stone chimneys stood like silent bodyguards on its sides, and dormers peaked like raised eyebrows on its roofline.

Her stomach clenched again.

Riiight. Even the house didn’t trust her.

She almost snorted at herself. Suspicious much?

Tex took her hand and kissed her palm, sending delightful tingles along her skin and easing her shoulders a fraction lower from her ears. “It’s going to be awesome. My mom is wonderful, and she’ll love you. No doubt.”

Rachel wasn’t so sure about his “she’ll love you” and “no doubt.” But she plastered on a smile. “Let’s do this.” Then she remembered the question she was supposed to ask a long time ago if she hadn’t been distracted so much by those baby blues. “What company provided security for the charity ball?”

He stared at her. “You don’t know? Yours. I mean, your former company.”

Her jaw dropped. Why hadn’t Irene mentioned that important tidbit?



Chapter Thirteen



RACHEL'S HEART WAS racing as they entered his childhood home. Tex probably didn't understand her nervousness. His mom was awesome to him. She'd checked her surroundings before leaving the car and made it to the house as fast as possible, watchful of the perimeter. Though she stayed vigilant, she slipped her gun back into her purse when they were inside.

Tex loved his family, albeit from a distance, but Rachel wasn't blinded by that love. After all, his mother and brother were his heirs. She'd done her research on them and observed them during Kennedy's two marriage ceremonies to his brother Austin, but Rachel had kept to herself then, not wanting to intrude. There was nothing like actually meeting and interacting in person. She didn't suspect Austin, though. He now had a generational wealth of his own.

But the danger wasn't the reason for her racing heart.

Yup, she could be confident with bullets flying, but she was terrified of Tex's mom. Maybe she was nervous because she'd learned early not to trust anyone.

Rachel placed a store-bought cheesecake and a chrysanthemum bouquet—Mrs. Lawrence's favorite flowers, according to Tex—on the side table.

He made introductions.

"Happy to meet you again, honey! We can get to know each other properly this time." His mother took Rachel into her signature bear hug, careful not to squeeze Rachel's injured shoulder.

"M-me, too. Thank you for the invitation." Rachel's eyes popped, partly from the surprise and partly from the hug's intensity, even though she'd witnessed Mrs. Lawrence's effusiveness at Kennedy's events.

Then Mrs. Lawrence released her, and Rachel took in her surroundings.

The spacious house boasted gleaming hardwood floors that looked as if they'd been around as long as Tex had. She could imagine the tales behind each ding and dent. With sturdy oak furniture that seemed chosen ready to withstand a pack of boys and Western oil paintings depicting horses and cattle, the place smelled of brisket and roasted potatoes, and her unspoiled stomach perked up.

Tex's mother looked down-to-earth in a gray hoodie and a long magenta skirt with tiny red flowers. Rachel breathed easier about her unpretentious T-shirt, jeans, and cap—a new cap, to replace the blood-soaked one from the shooting—though side by side with Tex in ironed black slacks and a crisp white shirt, she must look like someone who hadn't made an effort. Would his mother find that insulting?

Since Mrs. Lawrence was barefoot, Rachel stepped out of her sensible shoes, the smooth floor surprisingly warm, probably from the sun shining in large windows.

The matriarch's only decoration was small golden earrings. No, wrong. His mother's main and awesome decoration was her wide, generous smile, and as she responded to Rachel with such affection as if Rachel was a long-lost relative who'd just won the lottery, she emanated more warmth than a medium-sized heater.

Rachel let out her relief. Tex was guarded and had a taste for fine, expensive things. And, having only seen his mother dressed up for fancy wedding settings, Rachel had half expected her to be the same, even if she lived on a ranch. And she'd love to remove Tex's mother from her list of suspects. Though not so fast.

“Rachel! You're here!” Kennedy's cheerful voice called Rachel's attention to the dining room, making Rachel's lips curve up. Kennedy used to be quiet and reserved, but she was changing under this family's influence.

Rachel suppressed a pang of envy. She was thrilled for her friend, and Kennedy more than deserved her newfound

happiness. Kennedy's feet, used to designer shoes, were bare now, and like Tex's mother's, Kennedy's luminous smile best accessorized her stylish knee-length cream-hued dress with a keyhole neckline and a silver belt.

"Glad to see you both again." Kennedy's husband, Tex's brother Austin, followed his wife in khaki pants and a polo shirt.

Two golden retriever puppies and a beagle half ran, half slipped on the floor nearby, barking their hearts out, but their tails were wagging. Another bark, a harsher, more threatening one, echoed from deep inside the house.

"Especially together." Austin winked at Tex while Rachel hugged her friend.

The dogs gave another half-hearted warning and plopped on the oak floor as if their job were done already. They probably smelled mice on her and weren't sure what to do with that discovery.

"Thank you. Happy to see you, too." Rachel wasn't much of a hugger, though apparently this family was, and she found a pleasant wave spreading in her. How would it feel to be loved and accepted, not just for part of the day, but forever?

Most likely, she'd never know. She eased out of Austin's friendly embrace fast, trying to ignore the longing—trying and failing.

She did her best not to read too much into this meeting. She'd long since learned that hopes, even small ones, could be crushed so easily. She stole a glance at Tex as he squeezed her fingers, and her heart fluttered. She was falling for this man, and she shouldn't.

But she couldn't tell him he'd become a job to her again in the sense that she'd taken on the self-appointed task of keeping him safe. And that added to the list of reasons why she couldn't melt in his presence. She needed her mind clear and focused. Yet she nearly leaned into him when he touched her hand again. Yeah, easier said than done.

“I’m delighted you’re here, Rachel. Tex hasn’t brought a girl home since—” Mrs. Lawrence’s smile diminished.

“Mom!” Tex sent his mother a frustrated look.

Mrs. Lawrence smiled again. “Never mind.”

Rachel’s eyes narrowed. What was that about?

Based on Mrs. Lawrence’s expression, she highly disapproved of the previous woman Tex liked. Rachel stepped back.

Maybe it was all pretense, and it wasn’t as easy to earn Tex’s mother’s affection as it seemed. Rachel had seen a lot of deceit and hypocrisy from her stepmother and stepsisters. Years of surveillance work on cheating spouses, two-faced friends, and betraying business partners only showed her more of that side of human nature. Why should she believe this family was any different?

Another man with an obvious resemblance to his brothers, but slightly taller and broader-shouldered, entered the hall. Dressed in a Wrangler’s shirt and faded jeans, he firmly gripped a German shepherd’s collar. The dog scowled at her, and so did the man. But maybe that expression was an attempt at a smile. When the German shepherd growled, the guy did not, which she considered a plus.

Tex stepped forward. “Rachel, please meet Darius, my brother. Darius, this is Rachel, my... my friend.”

“Nice to meet you, Darius.” Rachel’s heart sank, not because of Darius, but because she wanted to be more than a friend to Tex.

But who else could she be to him? They weren’t even in boyfriend-girlfriend territory, much less anything further. Considering current circumstances, it was for the best, even if it stung her. She was his secret bodyguard of sorts, so secret, even he didn’t realize that.

She squared her shoulders, upset she’d gotten distracted. As the unofficial head of the ranch, though not the oldest Lawrence brother, Darius could be the most interested in Tex’s inheritance. Maybe not for himself, but for his beloved ranch.

Darius looked gloomy indeed, greeting her with a frown and barely shaking her hand, but that was normal to her.

“Sit.” Darius ordered his dog.

The German shepherd obeyed and stayed motionless while the other dogs started playing with each other, tumbling and squealing from time to time. They resembled a childcare teacher with little children.

Rachel finally remembered the cheesecake and the flowers, retrieved them from the side table, and handed them to Mrs. Lawrence. “These are for you. And may I help set the table or with anything else?” She’d resented domestic duties since she’d been a child but no familiar stab of resentment accompanied her offer.

“Thank you.” Mrs. Lawrence led everyone—except the dogs who stayed under the German shepherd’s watchful eye—into the dining room. “And thank you for the offer, but it’s all set.”

Rachel resolved to put the dishes in the dishwasher after lunch. The desire to appeal to this family was huge, despite her skepticism and suspicions.

Though she didn’t need to try to appeal to Kennedy and Austin. They smiled at her encouragingly as they sat down.

At the sight of a juicy brisket and roasted potatoes with carrots and corn on the cob, Rachel’s stomach quietly sang an ode to this food. Then her belly growled. Okay, maybe not so *quietly*. She suppressed a grimace.

But despite two members of the family flying high now, this family didn’t seem to be for fancy table manners. Just like she’d expected, Mrs. Lawrence and Austin talked the most, and soon Austin had them all in laughing fits over tales of his furry clients’ shenanigans. As the town veterinarian and an animal shelter volunteer, he had a lot of stories to tell.

Without thinking much—or at all as sometimes was her habit—Rachel pointed her fork at him. “My pet stories all revolve around mice, but they are so dear. Button—he’s my smallest, and the cutest little white mouse you ever saw.

Anyway, he loves nothing more than popping into any hole he can find—any buttonhole if you will. His recent disappearing act made me meet most of my neighbors while searching for him, and honestly, going door to door telling someone your mouse might be in their house is not the best introduction. Turns out, after putting me—and them—through all that, he'd just climbed into my bureau and made a nest in one of my socks. I only found him when I started to unroll the sock to put it on the next morning. I was so grateful I didn't, well, put my foot in it."

Had she put her foot in it now? Would they think her weird?

But the brothers guffawed while Mrs. Lawrence's eyes glowed. "There's few things better than discovering an animal is all right after you've spent the day fretting over him or her. You'll have to bring your mice sometime. I promise we will keep the barn cats away from them."

Tension eased out of Rachel's tummy, replaced by the pleasant weight of the food. At the same time, delicious flavors—brisket and generously buttered and peppered corn—danced on her tongue, and the welcoming atmosphere enveloped her like a soft blanket.

Or Tex's tender embrace. Her heart skipped a beat. She glanced at him and caught him smiling at her, caressing her with nothing but his baby blues. Heat rose inside her, and she had difficulty looking away. Frankly, she didn't want to. She only caught herself when she started leaning toward him, drawn by the magnetism in his eyes.

Concentrate!

Time to move her gaze to the hostess. She smiled at her, then forked another yummy potato bite bathed in olive oil and smothered with sea salt, garlic powder, and herbs. Mmm. If she ate with her hands, she'd lick her fingers.

Tex told the others about her heroic actions at the boat and near the shoe store, which she didn't find that heroic. She nearly said she was just doing her job, but she caught herself.

Probably best not to remind him he'd been just a job at the beginning.

Everyone applauded her bravery, and heat rose up her neck. "It's not a big deal."

Mrs. Lawrence pinned her with a stare. "Saving my son's life several times is a big deal. You risked your life for him." Her eyes watered. "We have a debt of gratitude to you we can't repay."

Rachel squirmed in her seat and felt more heat rising. But something niggled her. Was Mrs. Lawrence acting, or did she care that much?

Tex took her hand and kissed her palm, sending a jolt to her heart. "Me, either. I met the most incredible woman in the world."

"Seriously, no debt needed. Please. Besides, you already repaid me with this yummy brisket and biscuits. And let's not forget about the roast potatoes." Her face was probably the color of Mrs. Lawrence's skirt by now.

Mrs. Lawrence chuckled. "Okay, my potatoes are good. But they are not equal to saving my son's life. Honey, you have a place in this home and in our hearts whenever you want it."

"Thank you." Grateful tears burned behind Rachel's eyes. She drained her glass of cold tea, hoping to reduce the pesky heat in her cheeks. "I've never looked at what I've been doing as anything out of the ordinary."

"That's because you're also so humble. I believe you're the humblest person I've ever met, and it's so precious." He kissed her hand again, sending delicious waves of pleasure through her before letting it go.

Except what she felt for Tex was out of the ordinary for her. She shuddered inside even imagining him getting shot. She couldn't lose him. In a short span of time, she couldn't imagine her life without him.

"I do have some not-so-good news. My wonderful assistant, Saylor, said she might resign soon," Austin said.

Darius dropped his fork, and it clattered onto his plate.

Hmm. An interesting reaction, and Rachel nearly stopped chewing. Nearly. She hadn't decided yet whether to move Darius off her suspect's list. His being so gloomy spoke in his favor. If he'd been involved in those assaults on Tex, Darius would've played the role of a welcoming and concerned brother. Or did he behave this grouchy way to throw off those suspicions precisely for that reason?

Rachel munched on a honey biscuit that melted in her mouth, then helped herself to corn on the cob dripping with butter. Her taste buds rejoiced again, grateful for the hearty homemade food after a diet of hastily slapped-together sandwiches before running out the door. She liked it here already, and it wasn't just because of the food. Happiness seemed to live in this home, and renewed longing told her she wished she'd grown up in a similar place.

"I'll put word out in town that we're looking for an assistant with some veterinary knowledge." Then Mrs. Lawrence said to no one in particular. "If a guy likes a girl, maybe he should do something about it."

"Mom!" Darius groaned.

Mrs. Lawrence blinked innocently. "Who said I was talking to you?"

A blush crept up Darius's neck.

Hiding a bemused smile, Rachel lifted her cold glass with iced tea to her lips and took a few sips of the sweet liquid to flush down the brisket and vegetables. According to Kennedy, Saylor had a crush on Austin, which he'd never responded to as he'd fallen for Kennedy. So no wonder Darius wasn't in a hurry to court a woman who'd recently pined for someone else. Not just someone. His own brother.

Oh the sadness of unrequited affection. Her hand moved toward Tex, but she stopped herself. Her affection for him might be responded to, and yet she had to keep her feelings in check. Her rib cage tightened, and she took another bite of the moist, juicy brisket with its flavorful barbecue sauce.

Besides her suspicions, something else needed her. Mrs. Lawrence's mention of Rachel's predecessor.

"What happened to Tex's previous girlfriend?" Rachel blurted out. Her palm flew to her mouth. Sometimes she could be too impulsive and speak before she thought. Okay, *most of the time*.

All conversation stopped at the table, and Austin's hand with a fork froze midair while a shadow passed over Tex.

Tex pushed away his plate. "Rachel, you might as well know. Madison was my first love. I was completely besotted and wanted to marry her. I trusted her and told her everything. Until one day, she disappeared with the details of my new project. Soon, one of our competitors announced they were launching a new app—the one we'd developed." His voice was bitter.

Rachel's stomach, a minute ago content and full, dipped, but more things fell into place. Now his lashing out at her for perceived betrayal made more sense. He didn't seem to get closure with Madison, hadn't gotten a chance to talk it out. But what he'd gotten was a subconscious suspicion that the next girl might betray him, as well.

Rachel had confirmed that suspicion.

A muscle in his jaw twitched. "Sorry for not telling you sooner."

"It's okay." She moved an orange circle of sliced carrot around her plate. "It was bad timing to ask. And... sorry that happened to you."

But it wasn't okay. Far from it. He nursed a wound she'd poured salt in. And that erected an invisible barrier between them she hadn't realized existed. She winced. She'd have reached for his hand or hugged him, but as impulsive as she could be, she wasn't comfortable with such a public display of affection.

His expression softened. "Not your fault. Thank you for your compassion, though."

She looked around at the people who now studied the food on their plates without eating it. Her stomach sank deeper. Leave it to her to ruin the mood. She'd probably ruined Mrs. Lawrence and Darius's first impression of her, and they'd tell the rest of Tex's brothers.

"Well, how about I bring more iced tea? And the biscuit basket is nearly empty." Tex plastered a smile on his face. He was still clearly hurting, but he made an effort to cheer up for everyone else's sake.

He disappeared into the kitchen without waiting for a reply as if he needed to recompose himself.

"Well." Austin slapped his hands together. "Nothing like a fresh basket of biscuits to make someone happy—or some critter. I had a box of doggy biscuits tucked up on a shelf in my office. I assumed no pets could get into them, but I've since learned to keep them in plastic tubs with sealed lids. You see, this agile iguana who was supposed to be recuperating escaped his cage, made it up there no problem, and tipped it over. Well, my next patient happened to be a labradoodle with a sick tummy, and what do I do but bring her into a room carpeted in doggy biscuits! As you can imagine, the poor thing scarfed some up quick and then barfed them up almost as quick."

"Austin!" Mrs. Lawrence scolded, her eyes aglow. "I'm not sure picturing *that* is what our guest wants to think of as she eats."

"*Well-ell*"—Kennedy dragged the word out—"those reptilian antics are nothing compared to having a hotel guest find someone else's pet baby alligator in their bathtub."

Austin clasped his wife's hand. "I suppose an alligator or iguana could have disrupted our wedding reception even more than I did. Having one running along the tables or even under the tables would have been worse than a clumsy groom knocking over the cake, right?"

"Yes." Love in her eyes, Kennedy cupped a hand to his cheek. Then she patted it. "But I'm not sure that it would have been worse than how you ripped off part of my wedding gown

when you stepped on it and I moved forward. If that had ripped higher..." Spreading her hands to draw the rest of them in, she mock shivered. "I would have been a 'blushing bride'—and not for good reasons!"

But she laughed it off with the others instead of being upset with him. That was love, and Austin clearly returned it. Rachel's heart squeezed in her chest as she yearned to have what her friend and her husband had, but more than a random yearning, she yearned to have it with Tex.

Soon, the mood she'd ruined was restored. It would be so easy to fall in love not only with Tex but also with his family and this place. She couldn't imagine them wishing him ill, but she hadn't met the rest of the family yet.

She cleaned her plate, but she was starved for more than hearty homemade food. She was starved for the affection she'd never received. While Irene had helped Rachel a lot, Irene wasn't the affectionate type and also had to keep her distance because of their supervisor-subordinate relationship. Rachel swallowed hard, remembering her other suspicions about Irene. She still didn't want to believe them.

When everyone was done eating, they lingered, still chatting. Every bit of her relaxed, though she did her best to stay on guard. Something shifted in her, though. She didn't want to leave. But she didn't belong here, and she'd best remember it.

Then Mrs. Lawrence got up. "I'll get dessert. Thank you so much for bringing the cheesecake, Rachel."

"Truly, my pleasure. But I don't think I can fit in any dessert." She patted her stomach.

Tex leaned to her, giving her the whiff of his intoxicating cologne. "I don't believe it was a question."

She chuckled. "Okay, I'd love some."

Everyone worked together to secure the leftovers, put the dishes in the dishwasher, and set the table for dessert. Tex's interaction with his family was tender and caring, leaving its imprint on her heart.

For these sweet moments, she could forget her worries and feel a part of something much larger than herself, and she enjoyed the feeling. Especially when Tex sneaked a quick kiss on her cheek while they were alone in the kitchen, awakening everything in her. She laughed, truly happy, even if the danger he was in somewhat overshadowed that happiness.

Then she realized the simple truth as she looked into his baby blues. She wasn't just falling for him. She was in love with him already. And she didn't know what to do with this feeling.



Chapter Fourteen



AFTER LUNCH, TEX INVITED Rachel to see two foals. Yes, maybe it was his secret weapon because who wouldn't be smitten by adorable baby horses?

But there was more to it. "I want you to see part of my world," he said as they entered the stable sweetened with hay, straw, and leather.

"I appreciate it." She raised an eyebrow. "But it's interesting that you didn't take me to your office for that. Or show me your company's website and accolades."

His heart moved. It was interesting indeed. And how could he not like her directness as she spoke what she thought? It fit well with his family. In the corporate world, one had to learn to hide one's thoughts. "I meant, part of my childhood. Besides, I have a feeling you already checked my company's website and read everything about it."

"Of course." She looked around. Her hand never left the inside of her purse, probably keeping close to her gun. Her gaze swept the stable where she'd insisted she enter first, taking in every corner as if she'd expected someone to hide there, sending him a reminder that he should be vigilant, as well. "Including praises in the media, of which there was a lot. You never mentioned it to me. You must be even more humble than I am."

"I just wanted you to see the person in me." He'd visited the ranch, but rarely, so he let the horses get used to his scent before moving forward. Then he watched for the signs that the mama horses were nervous, like flaring nostrils or a swishing tail. "Not multiple zeros in a bank account."

"Your status used to be a minus for me, not a plus." Her expression changed as she saw the two little fillies. "Ooooooh, they are so adorable. May I touch one of them?"

“Just be careful. These little girls have protective mamas.” He pulled out a pack of carrots from his pocket and handed a small one to Rachel. “Horses can’t see right in front of them or behind them, so if you’re in their blind spot, they can kick out of a sense of protection.”

“Got it.” She stared at the lonely carrot in her hand. “Just one? I want to feed this baby well.”

He chuckled as he offered the mama horse a carrot, which she lipped from his fingers. “Horses’ digestive systems are sensitive, and too many fruits or vegetables can cause them colic.” He hid a frown at the memories of him and his brothers taking care of colicky horses. “Especially when horses are so little.”

“My bad. Oh, look at it. She’s eating the carrot! She’s doing it!” Rachel squealed with such delight as if she’d seen the filly paint a masterpiece. “She’s not supposed to drink her mother’s milk any longer?”

“No, she was turned out.” Tex’s insides warmed as he patted the mama horse, but he couldn’t look away from Rachel and the filly. If he were an artist, he’d paint the smiling Rachel with her luscious hair flowing over her shoulders, feeding the filly, and it would be the best masterpiece in the world. But she was more precious than a masterpiece or a diamond necklace, for that matter.

His soul stirred like it had never done before.

She stroked the filly’s forehead, then caught his gaze. “You look happy here. I’ve never seen you smiling so brightly.” She paused. “I know you love your job. And you achieved so much. But it doesn’t have to be all or nothing. This is a good place to spend a vacation. Or a weekend.”

He stepped closer to her, nearly forgetting not to get into the horse’s blind spot himself. He could be flying out of the stable. “The reason I look so happy right now isn’t just because of the place, though there’s that. It’s because *you* are in it.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh.”

He hoped for more than “oh,” but he’d take it. He wouldn’t pressure her. He just wanted her to know how he felt. No more masks, no more reservations.

Tex picked up the grooming basket and walked to the first stall. Might as well make himself useful. “Would you like to groom a filly? While I groom her mama?”

She brightened. “I’d love to.”

After he showed her which brushes to use, her strokes were gentle, but a line formed between her eyebrows. “I need to tell you something I found out. But first, what did you think of Irene Bruzlin?”

He chose his words carefully as he brushed dirt from the Appaloosa’s coat. “She seems to have a sharp mind and a steel will, but it’s clear she cares about you.”

The vertical line on her forehead deepened, but she ironed it out as she brushed the older filly. “I hope I won’t betray her by what I’m about to say. But first, why didn’t she tell me our company handled security at your charity hall? She had access to the cameras.”

It needled his memory. “She might’ve forgotten or didn’t think it was important to pass along that information.” He changed the brushes. Ms. Bruzlin mattered to Rachel, and he’d hate to see Rachel disappointed.

She took a softer brush, as well. “You see, many years ago, I saw a coat of arms in her living room and asked her about it. She said she could track her ancestry through many generations and she’s related to nobility. Not kings, but still noble blood. She’s proud of her ancestry. So after learning the legend about the necklace, I looked up that coat of arms.”

It clicked in his brain, and he stopped brushing. “Was it the same as the rebellious noble family in the legend?”

“Yes.” Rachel sat on the stable floor as she started brushing the filly’s mane. “I found a rare portrait of the son who disappeared. I might be jumping to conclusions here, but his features and Irene’s seemed somewhat similar.”

Tex moved the brush along the mare's mane, his mind whirling. "But it's not like you can compare the DNA to someone from centuries ago."

"No. Hmm. They both have cleft chins. It's a dominant trait. But then, lots of people have cleft chins. I have a tiny one, too." She touched the adorable tiny cleft in her chin, then resumed brushing the foal. "I also asked Kennedy, and she mentioned she talked to Irene about providing security to a hotel event. Kennedy told her she'd be out of town for the coming weekend. And one more detail. One of the people who danced with Anne Tandy the night the first ring was stolen is an acquaintance of Irene's and a former client."

"I imagine lots of affluent people are her former clients. But I'll look into it and hope to give you peace of mind that she wasn't behind the thefts." He needed to save Rachel from disappointment.

Done with grooming, he put the supplies away. "Even if she's involved in the thefts, I don't understand why she would shoot at me."

"She might think you know something you shouldn't. Or there might be faked evidence to throw blame on you once you're out of the picture and can't defend yourself."

He shuddered, even more grateful to have Rachel on his side. But she might get hurt because of him, and that terrified him. "I'd offer to take you riding, but I shouldn't chance being a target out in the open fields and putting you at risk beside me. And I'm afraid for your arm." He stepped toward her, his pulse spiking. "And I care about you."

"I do, too. I mean, I care about you." Her lips parted.

His blood surged faster. He placed his hands on her forearms, gently so as not to hurt her injured arm, and moved her out of the horses' kicking distance. Her breathing went shallow, and so did his. The desire to kiss her was irresistible.

"I want to say... It's... it's the same for me. I'm not good with words. But I hope you know how much you mean to me,"

she whispered, so much emotion in her hazel eyes sent his heartbeat skyrocketing.

“You mean everything to me.” He searched her eyes, knowing there was a silent question in his.

When she didn’t shift away, he dipped his head.

“I shouldn’t get distracted.” Contrary to her words, she angled her face to him as if to give him easier access to her lips and wrapped her arms around his neck.

A man could have only so much willpower. “We’re safe here. And the horses will warn us if a stranger gets near.”

When his lips brushed against hers, she responded without hesitation, and every cell in his body sang with delight. He closed his eyes and deepened his kiss. His heartbeat went into triple digits, and he was swept up into a new world he didn’t want to leave.

Never wanted to leave. Because he found happiness in her arms. Euphoria filled his body and soul.

At that moment, he realized it—he loved this woman. Pure and simple. Now and forever, she was the one for him. It was as if God had meant her for him.

She was the first to pull away, and he’d have held onto her longer. Then she jumped back, her hand in her purse again. The horses neighed.

He was still in a mental daze. “What... what happened?”

Did she regret their kiss? The thought stabbed him.

Darius cleared his throat. “I, um, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Rachel’s posture relaxed a bit but not completely. “Not a problem. But I should’ve heard you enter.”

“Well, I move quietly.” Darius shifted from foot to foot. “And, erm, I was just about to leave.” He turned around and hurried outside.

Tex looked into her eyes, eager to kiss her again. But her eyebrows drew together, and she looked aside. “I should’ve

heard him enter. What if it was someone else? What if that person shot at you? I—It was wrong of me to get distracted.”

His stomach slipped to the floor. To him, their kiss was magical, the best ever, and led to probably the most important revelation of his life. To her, it seemed to be a nuisance.

Was he wrong, and she didn't respond to his feelings? “Don't blame yourself. I was the one who kissed you.”

The horses neighed again, and a few raised their heads, nostrils flaring as if sensing the tension. He didn't want to add to their worry. He took her hand. “Would you like to go back to the house?”

“We'd better.” She removed her hand from his, sending another stab of disappointment. “Sorry, but while my right arm heals, I might have to shoot with my left hand, if needed. I can't hold hands right now.”

“Of course.” His mind understood her reasons, but the rest of him not so much.

At the exit, she lifted her hand. “Hold on. Let me check outside first to make sure it's safe.” So she did, then waved for him to follow her. Since he was used to being in charge, a part of him balked at being a follower, but he reined it in.

They stepped out, the bright sun and the scent of grass greeting them, and with a clarity akin to that sunlight, it dawned on him that she was right. He was a pragmatic man, but he was so taken by her that he'd ignored the obvious.

How could he be this dense? Wasn't it enough that she'd been shot because of him? She had a point. Someone could've entered the stable while he'd kissed her and fired at them.

Everything inside him froze as they hurried back to the house. Then his gut twisted.

What was he doing? He'd put her in danger because he wanted to be with her so badly, and he was putting her in danger again by his mere presence. Then to add to it, he was distracting her with the signs of affection.

If he wanted to keep her safe, he had to stay away from her until they found the culprit. His heart protested the idea, and his stomach rolled into the grass. It was as if he'd gotten so attached that he needed to breathe the same air she did. But apparently, he could make that air poisonous for her. He couldn't even tell her why he needed to stay away from her because she'd only decide to march to his rescue. She was that courageous and selfless.

They hurried up the porch and entered his childhood house, thankfully without any adventures. It greeted him with the cooling blast of air-conditioning and the lingering aroma of brisket and biscuits.

His mother met them with a broad smile. "Rachel, would you like to spend a few days at our ranch? You're welcome to bring your mice as long as they don't run around or burrow up in my socks. Fresh air might do you good."

Rachel blinked. "I don't want to impose."

Mom waved off the concern. "No imposition—no *imposition*! Oh, whatever the word is. We'll be happy to have you here. Right, Tex?"

"Absolutely." His heart broke already at having to spend some time apart, but it needed to be done. "I won't be able to stay, though." He used the same excuse as always. "Work, you know."

His mother sent him a glare.

Rachel's eyes dimmed. "Oh. I understand. But—but you need someone to watch out for you."

"No problem." He shrugged with as much nonchalance as he could muster. "I can hire a bodyguard. Or two."

Mom shook her head at him but thankfully didn't try to steamroll him into staying. "Are you sure? I'd love for you to stay here."

"Yes." By staying at the ranch, he'd put everyone dear to him in peril. Outrageously, he'd considered it before, but loving Rachel made him less self-centered. "I—I'll miss you."

“I understand—or I’m trying to.” The hurt in Rachel’s eyes cut through him.

But she mattered too much to him to risk her life.



“I can’t believe this. First, he tells me how much I mean to him and kisses me. Then, he just—*poof*—disappears.” Her heart heavy, Rachel waved in the air. Then with that same uninjured hand, she placed the last chocolate chip cookie on a tray in the ranch house’s spacious kitchen.

Tears blurred her vision, so she blinked them away. She wasn’t going to cry about him again. “I admit, he calls me all the time. And he sent me flowers three times already. Three dozen roses each time. I bet he’s fast becoming the florist’s favorite person in the world.” She could smell roses from the living room. “The baker’s, as well, considering all the cookie baskets he sent here. He even sent me fancy cheese baskets—a large one for me and five small ones. Seriously. A cheese basket for each mouse.”

“That’s amazing.” Kennedy slid the tray into the oven. Then she paused. “The mice are enjoying their cheese *inside* their cage, right?”

“Right. But I don’t want enough flowers to open a florist shop. I need, you know, the *human being* back.” Her heart longed for him.

“He’ll be back soon. I saw the way he looked at you.”

Rachel found she didn’t resent baking if it was for people who appreciated it. And Kennedy was still learning how to cook and bake. Together, they could make one decent baker. Especially if the dough was premade.

“I don’t know if I’ll be sitting and waiting for him until that happens. I spent too many years feeling tiny and insignificant. I decided I never wanted to feel that way again.” As she arranged store-bought cookies on a colorful plate, disappointment still gnawed at her with sharp teeth like Button gnawed at cheese.

The preparations were for a party celebrating Kennedy and Tex's sister-in-law's baby-to-be, and the rest of the expectant mother's friends were decorating the ranch house. Too early for a baby shower, but just right for a "Squeee, she's expecting! Let's all make a fuss of her" party.

Rachel had donated all the flowers Tex had sent to the cause, as well as two of the cookie baskets. It wasn't just generosity. As much as she and her mice loved sweets, they couldn't possibly consume all those cookies.

Kennedy sliced the chocolate cheesecake. "I'm sure Tex never meant to make you feel that way. I'm a workaholic myself. Sometimes so many things call for my attention with my hotels that I look up from the computer, and it's late evening already."

"Maybe." So, why did Rachel have the impression he avoided seeing her? She sighed as she opened the cupcake box and started arranging them on a tray. "I get he's a busy man. I offered to get lunch or dinner and drive to his office. He said no."

Her heart still hurt from rejection. Every particle of her being missed him, while he didn't miss her at all. "He couldn't even spare half an hour. I want to be with someone for whom I matter. He told me I did. But his actions prove otherwise."

Kennedy's eyes narrowed. "Have you considered that maybe he—"

"Come to the living room if you're done in the kitchen! We want to see what you think of this." Kennedy's friend and sister-in-law Marina rushed into the kitchen. "Oh, sorry. I wasn't interrupting anything, was I?"

Rachel squared her shoulders and stepped forward, though she was curious about what Kennedy was about to say. "Not at all. Let's see it. Though I'm already sure it looks fabulous."

"Thanks." Marina grinned.

Giant sea-green balloons and colorful banners met Rachel in the living room. As the expecting mother loved the sea, seashells, and nautical things, the wall was decorated with

seashell cutouts, and the gift table with transparent vases housing real seashells. Pastel seahorses floated in the nautical pattern on the tablecloth, and on the snack table, it was no surprise to see golden fish cookies. Everything matched the seaside theme.

“It looks beautiful,” Rachel said, and Kennedy echoed the sentiment. “You’ve done a fantastic job.”

Then, with a more critical eye, Rachel looked at the banner displaying glittery green letters. “Maybe the left corner needs to be a little higher.”

Marina tilted her head. “You’re right.”

“I’ll move it,” Saylor said.

As Kennedy and Rachel guided Saylor, Rachel stole a glance at Kennedy, who was smiling as if it was her celebration. Kennedy was friendly and kind to Saylor later when they put up a few more green balloons and added saltwater toffee to candy bowls, as well as fancy jelly beans that could pass for whimsical sea stones. Rachel wasn’t sure she’d treat someone who’d crushed on her husband with the same joy as Kennedy treated Saylor.

Then again, Rachel didn’t have a husband. Or a boyfriend. The man she loved practically ran away from her to his important job.

Her heart constricted as she glanced at the corner for presents where a rocking chair—Kennedy’s gift—played host to plush toys side by side with the luxury pampering basket full of fluffy towels and lovely self-care items Marina provided for the mom-to-be. Then Rachel returned her attention to taping another cutout seashell to the wall.

“Some people think there can’t be too many seashells,” she muttered under her breath. As much as she loved the ocean, she wasn’t those people, but she wasn’t the expecting mother, either.

Until she’d met Tex, she hadn’t cared about getting married and/or starting a family. After all, her role model and boss didn’t, either, and the few guys at work Rachel was

friends with were either single or divorced. Considering the way she'd grown up, she'd equated relationships and family with heartache and disappointment. As well as people who took advantage of her.

But now something stirred in her soul. Maybe because she got to see a different kind of family in Kennedy and Austin, in Tex's mother and brothers, in Tex himself. Relationships here reflected natural, effortless joy and care for each other, and she was more drawn to that than a mouse to cheese.

"I hope it's okay to steal these." She sent a few cheesy golden fish crackers to her mouth.

Kennedy chuckled and did the same. "I'm sure it's fine as long as we don't wolf down all of them. How's your arm, by the way?"

"Much better."

Or maybe Rachel had started pondering marriage because, due to her injury, she had too much time on her hands. A lot of seconds, minutes, and even hours to see, to think, to ask herself questions she had no answers for. To feel the longing for Tex that wouldn't go away.

Too bad that once again, the family and love so many others took for granted wasn't meant for her. Her stomach clenched despite the cheerful decorations surrounding her.

"Well, I believe we're done here." Kennedy stepped back to observe the room and nodded to herself. "Yup."

The oven chimed in, and Rachel glanced in that direction. "The cookies must be ready. I'll get them out of the oven."

"I'll help you." Kennedy followed Rachel into the kitchen.

Rachel put on the mitten and opened the oven, greeted with heat and the scent of freshly baked sweets. She removed the tray with them, closed the oven, then blurted out, "Why do we always want things we can't have?"

Kennedy's gaze became thoughtful. "Because we can't have them. But I pray you'll get whatever it is your heart desires." Then she winked at Rachel. "And I think you will."

Riiight. Rachel nearly snorted as she munched on a still-warm snickerdoodle cookie from the previous batch. “I learned a long time ago that my life isn’t a fairy tale. Well, not the part with the prince and the palace. At least, I’ve got my mice.”

Kennedy pouted, feigning offense. “Tex’s family loves you. And Tex is taken with you. And you know you’ve got me.” She gave Rachel a quick hug. “I want to believe I’m better than a mouse.”

Gratitude edged out Rachel’s sadness. “Thank you for being my friend. And yes, you’re better than a mouse, but please don’t say so in their presence.” Then her phone rang in her pocket. She fished it out and glanced at the screen, and her heart skipped a beat at Tex’s name.

Kennedy waved to her. “Please go ahead and take it. The preparations are done anyway.” Then she hurried out of the kitchen, probably to give Rachel privacy. Kennedy was tactful like that.

Rachel could use some of that tact because the first thing she said after swiping the screen to answer was, “Wonderful for you to finally call.”

There was a pause. “I—I called three times today. You missed the first call.”

Rachel slapped herself on her forehead. No wonder she had a better relationship with mice than people. If Tex hadn’t been running away from her already, she’d send him running now. “Right. You did.” She didn’t say sorry, though. Once she’d grown a hard core around her heart, she’d rarely allowed herself to go back.

“I can’t wait to see you.” His voice softened.

Then why don’t you?

That question she did manage to hold back. Her fingers tightened around her smooth phone as she leaned against the counter, breathing in the cookie aroma that smelled like home. The right kind of home, not the kind where she’d grown up.

In her childhood, any cookie aroma usually meant she'd had to make them, lucky to snatch a little raw cookie dough before her stepmother locked the cookies away to keep them for herself and her own daughters only. Like the mice in the attic, Rachel got only crumbs.

Shaking off the memories, she replied to Tex, "Me, too."

She couldn't wait to get lost in his baby blues, wrap her arms around his neck, and kiss him with abandonment. Her pulse went wild at the thought. But he clearly didn't feel the same, and it broke her heart. Now what was she supposed to do with this irritating and growing love?

Maybe it would be easier to cut all ties and start anew, but her entire being protested the idea of walking away from him. Yet she wasn't the kind of girl to sit around and wait while Prince Charming wandered somewhere, forlorn with a lost shoe. "How about dinner tonight?"

There was a pause, and her stomach sank to the tile. That was an answer in itself, but she hoped he was rearranging his busy schedule.

Kennedy's puppy wandered into the room, and Rachel scooped her up before the little one could get into any mischief. She'd begged her parents for a puppy, but her stepmother was against it. Never mind that she'd later gotten one for her biological children. Rachel had to clean up after their puppy, bathe him, and feed him, but she wasn't allowed to play with him. When she grew up, she'd traveled a lot, which would be unfair to a dog, so she'd avoided getting any pet other than mice. Mice required way less care and could also travel the world with more ease.

Now tenderness filled her as the puppy licked her face.

Then anger fueled her words. "You know what? All my life I had to make do. With Dad gone, I didn't have friends of my own, siblings of my own, dogs of my own. My stepmom never stopped reminding me that nothing in the house belonged to me except for hand-me-down clothes and backpacks and textbooks."

“I’m very sorry that happened to you.”

But the compassion coating his voice only caused more words to tumble out of her mouth. The puppy squirmed in her hands, and she placed her on the floor and let her go as the little one ran away to other, more welcoming people. “Even as I became independent, I continued on the same path. But now I want it all. I want friends of my own. I want a family of my own. I want a house of my own. And yes, I want a dog of my own.”

The women’s laughter from the living room as they shared snacks or put some final touches on the baby shower made her chuckle. “Children down the road. And you know what else I want? I want a man of my own. A man who loves being by my side and stands by me. I get it that you have a busy job. I’d be thrilled to eat cheeseburgers together at ten o’clock at night in your office while you type away at your computer. Just once in a blue cheese moon. So how about we have a late dinner tonight or tomorrow or any day this week? I don’t care how late.”

He had to eat sometimes, so why not with her?

“I—I can’t.” He gulped. “I’m sorry.”

“Of course.” Tears burned behind her eyes, and a lump formed in her throat. “You have more pressing issues.”

“It’s not—listen, another thing I wanted to tell you is I talked to my assistant, and she received an inheritance from her aunt.” His topic change wasn’t subtle. “So she decided to buy the house. I had it checked, and she was telling the truth. Besides, Jennifer’s been with me for many years. I don’t think she was bought.”

“Thanks.” She filed it in her mental file, but she’d process it later. A strange thought formed in her mind, then another one. She might’ve been searching for the thief in the wrong place all along. But tears were choking her right now, so she’d have to analyze the new suspicions later.

“I just need some time.” His voice turned sad.

“How long? A week? A month? A year? A decade?” She couldn’t bear to lose him, but really, how could one lose something one never had?

She didn’t mind waiting, but for what? A mouse could squeeze through a pencil-size hole, but Rachel couldn’t squeeze into his busy life. And she deserved better than stealing crumbs of his attention once in a long while. She’d grown up with hand-me-downs and leftovers, but she deserved something of her own.

“I don’t know,” he said.

At least, he didn’t give her false hope, didn’t string her along.

Her legs went weak, and she resisted slipping down to the kitchen floor. The lump in her throat grew. Even if he was okay with the fact that she wasn’t a rich socialite, maybe he preferred someone... someone warmer and softer? She was far from a purring cat. She was rough around the edges, blunt, and threw punches where other people faked smiles.

She wasn’t going to change her personality for someone else or surgically remove the backbone it had taken her so long to grow. So she straightened her spine to its full capacity. “We should take a break from seeing each other. Until you have an opening in your schedule again.” She blinked, fighting tears, and swallowed around the lump. “But I can’t guarantee that, whenever you’re ready for a relationship with me, I’ll be here waiting.”

Then she disconnected before he could talk her out of taking time off—or worse before he wouldn’t even protest.

For so long, she’d avoided attachments. She’d been careful not to let people close. Only to lose her heart to someone who didn’t care for it at all. But she wasn’t as fragile as Cinderella’s crystal slipper. Rachel’s hands fisted, but she uncoiled her fingers and pasted on a smile before going to the living room with upbeat decorations for a happy event.

Pulling her shoulders back, she marched forward. She’d live through this heartbreak, survive, and be joyful again.

She didn't tell him she loved him. There was no point. And her crushed heart suspected there was no coming back from this.



Chapter Fifteen



STAYING AWAY FROM RACHEL these last few days was the most difficult thing Tex had done in his life.

Again and again, he ached to pick up the phone and explain the reason he couldn't see her in person, explain his fear of putting her in danger. She'd already paid a high price for their picnic date on his boat.

But he couldn't because he cared too much about her safety. She'd said it right. She wasn't a person to sit and wait. She'd rush here, ready to take a bullet for him, and he couldn't let it happen again.

He'd canceled most of his in-person meetings and communicated with people remotely, including Jennifer. The only person who now occupied Jennifer's desk in front of Tex's office was Brady, the bodyguard Tex hired. Missing Rachel was nearly unbearable, so Tex did what he'd done best when something bothered him—he'd thrown himself into work.

Tonight, he raised his glance from the laptop screen, mostly because of hunger pangs. What? It was already dark outside.

What was the time? He checked his expensive watch.

Wow. Ten o'clock at night. Maybe he should sleep at work again instead of driving home.

Then the memory of Rachel saying she'd drive here just for scraps of his time and attention gripped him, tightening around his rib cage and stealing his breath. Every minute with her was precious, but her life was a million times more precious.

His cell phone rang, and he perked up, hoping it was her. After their fateful conversation where she'd declared they should take a break, all his calls to her had gone to voicemail.

Disappointment sliced through him at Darius's name on the screen, but Tex answered nonetheless. "Hello, bro."

"So you're avoiding family dinners again."

Tex would've quipped that an attitude like that might be why he avoided the ranch, but he knew Darius hid a caring nature behind his hostile front. "Don't you know I'm a walking target these days?"

"Exactly the point. We could protect you here at the ranch." Darius's voice became even gruffer, if that was possible.

Darius had always been the one who pushed Tex to visit more often, just as Darius had been the one who helped him and their brothers growing up. This time, other brothers had called, as well, and offered help—they'd rally around Tex if he allowed it. But Darius had been the first and the most insistent one. Though he wasn't the oldest in their family, he sure acted like it, and he was as unstoppable as a tractor with an unlimited fuel supply.

Tex leaned against the back of his luxurious chair, gratitude warming him. "Thanks. I appreciate it. I do. But look at what happened to Rachel. I don't want people I love to get hurt." He swallowed hard, then admitted. "I'm terrified people I love can be hurt."

"Wait a moment. Do you love Rachel?"

Tex rubbed the brewing headache in his temples, buying some time. Too little sleep combined with too few and infrequent meals and too much worry about his family and Rachel were taking their toll.

His inner defenses must be down because he'd let the proverbial cat out of the bag. Well, as long as that cat didn't chase Rachel's mice. "I love her."

"Wow. I don't say that word often, but this calls for it. If you love her, then why is word going around the family that you broke up? People aren't happy about that, by the way. Especially Mom."

“I’m among those people.” Pain ricocheted inside him. He closed his eyes, imagining Rachel’s lovely face in that gray cap that tried to but couldn’t hide her beauty and that smile, all the more precious because of how rare it was. Everything in him was begging to see her again, but he couldn’t risk her life.

“Why don’t you tell her the truth?”

“Because as courageous as she is, she’d be barging in here, determined to protect me.” What a woman she was! “I’d rather have her angry with me and alive than, you know...” No way could he say *that* aloud. He shuddered.

There was a pause again. “Man, I don’t know what to say. Just if you ever need us, you know you only have to say the word. We’re here for you.”

Warmth swelled his chest. “I know. And same here.”

“You think you always have to be strong. But you don’t have to be.”

After disconnecting, Tex stared at the wall without noticing all the certificates of accomplishments. He tapped his fingers on the massive hand-carved cherrywood table that like many other carefully chosen things in the room was meant to impress investors and clients.

Something about what Darius had said struck a chord. After being made to feel weak and small while growing up, Tex had done everything he could to erase that image from his memory, to appear strong and capable. He’d accomplished that, much more than he’d dreamed of.

But what if, deep inside, he still couldn’t forget that childhood trauma? Yes, he’d left home to achieve things, but Charleston wasn’t *that* far from the ranch. Had he mostly avoided going home because the people there, the closest people to him, might’ve remembered him as weak?

He’d told Darius the truth about his feelings for Rachel and the reason for staying away now. But what if there was more to it? Had it bothered him on a subconscious level that she’d been protecting him instead of the other way around?

That she'd saved his life three times instead of him saving hers, being a hero in her eyes?

He got up and paced the room, his high-polished shoes whispering over the expensive burgundy carpet.

How hadn't he seen it before?

He needed to accept that what happened in his childhood hadn't been his fault and find strength in weakness. He needed to realize he didn't need to prove anything to anyone. And to be worthy of Rachel's love, he needed to admire her for the amazing, brave woman she was. Her abilities in fighting or shooting didn't diminish him. Her strength complemented his instead of threatening his... his masculinity, maybe?

Of course, she might not give him a chance again, and his heart hurt.

He should've brought the stray dog he'd named Tiny Tim in here, and they could cheer each other up. But today, he'd placed Tiny Tim with a trainer in obedience school after he'd shredded several important documents, barked long enough to keep the condominium building awake at night, reupholstered the leather sofa and chairs, and redesigned all Tex's leather jackets by chewing them up. The dog, not the trainer, though Tex had no idea about that person's diet.

Tex's heart constricted. He missed the dog already and would bring him to work tomorrow. And he couldn't blame Tiny Tim for eating everything in sight after being starved for so long.

To distract himself, he pulled up his email again. A new email from today he'd left to check for later was from Jennifer about the donations for the charity gala.

He opened it.

Good afternoon, Mr. Lawrence.

During this year's charity gala, a larger list of donors wanted to remain anonymous. One such donor made a sizeable donation right before the gala. In light of recent events, I thought you might like to know her

name was Rachel Arvidson. My apologies for not bringing it to your attention sooner.

Then Jennifer mentioned the impressive amount Rachel donated.

He whistled as he stared at the computer screen and blinked a few times in case fatigue was playing tricks on him. That couldn't be right. This just couldn't be right.

He'd seen the tiny apartment she rented and the humble way she dressed. The beater car she drove only seemed to start after three tries, much sweet-talking, and rounds of prayers. Besides the charity ball where she'd worn a disguise provided by the client, her nails seemed to have never met a manicurist. So he'd assumed...

He shook his head as if he could shake away the surprise. One of the first rules he'd learned in business had been to never assume. Unlike at the ranch, things weren't always the way they appeared to be. In fact, they rarely were.

He didn't care about her status and loved her for who she was. He'd proudly introduce her to the cream of society. She was worth more than any embellishments or expensive jewelry. But she was even more amazing than he'd first realized.

She didn't donate because she wanted recognition or gratitude like many other people had. While some loved to bask in the light of their own magnanimous generosity, she'd contributed anonymously. Just like Austin, who'd never even asked for a simple thank you while caring for abandoned pets and strays in the animal shelter. Well, the animals probably thanked him, but it was difficult to understand barks and meows, and reptilian pets didn't talk at all.

Then Tex realized something else. The reason he'd fallen for her so fast and so deeply wasn't because of her strength but because of her kindness, even if she tried to hide it since some people took kindness as a sign of weakness. He smiled at the kind way she treated her mice or fed birds or shielded people who couldn't defend themselves.

Since being beaten as a child and then fighting his way into the ruthless business world, he'd hardened his heart and hadn't allowed himself to feel much or love at all.

We didn't need to always stay strong, because God was the strong one. It was okay to need someone. It was okay to surrender part of oneself to them. It was okay to admit he needed her help. He drew a deep breath. It wasn't just *okay*. It was a blessing.

It wasn't a sign of weakness. And even if it was, so what? He was a human being with faults, not a cartoon action hero.

The light of the intercom lit up, and the beep made him wince, throwing him out of his thoughts into the present. He forgot he wasn't alone. Usually, at this point, he was the only person in the building. He pressed the button.

"Anne Tandy is here to see you," Brady said.

Tex's eyes widened. "This late?"

"She says she recalled something important about the ring theft."

The dear lady might be thinking she recalled something when she'd only imagined it. But Tex could be wrong. And he couldn't just send her away. "Please ask her to come in."

Tex rubbed his eyes that were getting heavy from the lack of sleep. And Jennifer wasn't here to make him coffee.

But he missed Rachel much more than he missed coffee. Or sleep. His life without her felt as empty as one of the atrociously expensive antique vases in the corner, another item carefully chosen to impress visitors. Or impress himself with how far he'd come. On the other hand, Rachel didn't try to impress anyone, and yet he couldn't stop thinking about her.

The door opened, and Anne Tandy shuffled into the room. Her white hair seemed to be freshly styled, and a ring sparkled on each finger. He did his best to switch from thinking about Rachel into business mode.

"Good evening, Mrs. Tandy. Please take a seat." He strode toward the lady and offered her the crook of his arm to lean

on. When she did, he led her to one of the leather armchairs that would undoubtedly excite Tiny Tim. “It’s kind of you to help in the investigation.”

She smiled sheepishly as she lowered herself into the armchair. “Thank you. I should’ve remembered it already. Well, I don’t know if it’s important.”

“Any detail can be very important.” He did his best to assure her. They were overdue for a breakthrough in this investigation.

Her eyes looked sad. “Have you ever had a time in your life when you had to correct a mistake? And then there was a difficult decision to make.”

What was this about? Puzzled, Tex raised an eyebrow as he sat in his chair behind the desk. “Um, I’m not perfect. I made my share of mistakes. And sometimes, I had to make difficult decisions.”

“I admit it. I love and admire beautiful, expensive things. I love it when others admire beautiful expensive things I have. I’ve had people disappear from my life, especially lately, but those beauties are with me forever. I’m sure you can relate.” She waved toward the hand-carved cherrywood desk, then to the oil paintings by famous artists.

Could he? And where was she going with this? Unease clenched his stomach. “I guess they are a sign of success to me.” A suspicion started needling him. But maybe she was just a lonely woman with insomnia who wanted to chat. “What was it you remembered about the ring theft?”

“I’ve lived a long life. And I want to spend the rest of it in luxury.” Her faded eyes hardened.

He tensed, and his hand moved toward the phone. “Nobody stole your ring at the charity gala. You made false accusations.”

A gun appeared in her hands, making his jaw drop. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. And yes, that was what I remembered about that night. Not that I forgot it to start with.”

Blood turned to ice in his veins. But Brady was just behind the wall. He'd help once he knew the situation.

His gut twisting, Tex leaned forward. "Why did you do it? Why are you doing this? You have everything."

"Not everything. I didn't have that amazing diamond necklace. Nobody was supposed to get hurt. Nobody." The corners of her mouth turned downward.

Tex didn't consider himself a nobody, and she meant for him to get hurt.

Could he throw something heavy at her? Tackle her? She'd fire first, and from such close range, most likely she wouldn't miss. His heartbeat turned frantic. There had to be a way out of this.

He wanted to see Rachel again, to tell her how much he loved her. And now, when he was at risk of losing his life, he had an absolute clarity that he wanted a lifetime with her.

"I didn't intend to hurt anyone, until you and that woman started digging too deep. In fact, I was doing Vanya Patel a favor." She spoke with a surprising conviction.

"You've got to be kidding me," he muttered through gritted teeth.

She sighed but didn't lower the gun. "It was a win-win situation. The family received an insurance payout. I got the necklace."

Thwack! He leaped to his feet, making the chair drop. "That's not a win-win situation! That's stealing and insurance fraud!"

Surely, Brady would hear the commotion and the shout and would call the police, then charge in here.

But nothing happened, and the chilling realization traveled to Tex's core. "Brady is in on it with you."

"Pick up the chair and sit down." She twitched the gun at him. "Why didn't you go to the police and tell them about Brady already?"

His heartbeat thundered in his ears as he slumped onto the chair again. He needed to stall and figure out what to do next. “I only realized he’s part of this seconds ago. Why would I hire him as a bodyguard if I suspected him?”

“Really?” Mrs. Tandy cocked her head, her watery eyes blinking. “When he saw your request for a bodyguard come in, he grabbed it, as a chance to find out how much you knew. But then he wondered if you hired him as a bluff, in order to gather proof on him. Ever since the ball, he’s been sure you and that woman who saw him take the necklace were onto him. When he saw her on the camera recordings, he thought it was Rachel, because they’ve worked together. When she asked me so many questions, I knew for sure it was her. You both needed to be eliminated.”

Tex’s hands clenched. So Rachel was the target as much as he was. He’d wasted all these days apart from her, in the vain hope he was protecting her.

What would she do in this situation? All he could think to do was keep Mrs. Tandy talking and look for a chance to disarm her.

He missed Rachel so badly, for more reasons than one. “So he shot at us?”

“Yes. And he failed twice. Such sloppy, amateur work on his part. I chose poorly when I hired him. But it wasn’t as if I could run away with a necklace myself or mess with the cameras, and the Patel’s insurance would need proof.” She shrugged and sighed again. “It’s so difficult to get decent help these days. Even a job as simple as shooting someone I have to do myself.”

“You can’t be serious!” He slapped the table. If he could find a way to distract her, maybe he could knock the weapon out of her hands.

“I’m dead serious.” She chortled. “Well, *I’m* not *dead*—it’s you who’s going to be dead soon.”

Heat surged in his veins. “They’ll find out you did this.”

“Nobody will even look for me. I’ve got a suicide note you typed. Like father, like son, right? Plus, rumor has it that Rachel broke up with you. Your heart was crushed, and you took your life.” She tsked, a teary sheen glossing her eyes. “So sad. So very sad.”



Chapter Sixteen



AN HOUR EARLIER...

Rachel wasn't the kind of person to mope around, unless it involved the mop and bucket in her childhood. Well, *moping* around was different from *mopping* around anyway. But her gut was still in knots as she'd busied herself with the investigation. Even if Tex wasn't going to be in her life any longer—she suppressed a snuffle—she owed it to the theft victims to try to recover what they'd lost. While the jewelry had been insured, they were heirloom pieces and meant a lot to the families.

More importantly, she wanted to know who was behind the shootings so Tex would be safe again. Worry for him clenched her heart as she drove home in darkness from doing surveillance at Fred Sersen's place. The hours of that stakeout yielded nothing so far.

The police had cleared the last suspect in the necklace theft case, and they'd found no leads for the burglary at Kennedy's place. Rachel twisted her clenched hand on the steering wheel. Seriously, no leads? Talk about failing her friend.

For the last several days, as well as conducting interviews, she'd done surveillance, driving with her left hand on the steering wheel.

While she hadn't removed Tex's family from the suspects' list completely, she'd moved them lower. The same with Jennifer, after talking to people who knew her and verifying the inheritance angle.

Rachel's fingers tightened around the steering wheel. The next part of the investigation was more difficult. Over the years, she'd met up many times with Irene for lunches and dinners and bonded somewhat at the shooting range because neither of them were for shopping or getting nails done except for hammering nails into the wall. Rachel still had a feeling

Irene was hiding something from her, and Rachel squirmed in her seat as much as the seat belt allowed. Was that something as huge as thefts and attempted murder?

Frowning, she pressed on the accelerator and passed a truck. Just because Irene was related to the family that once owned the heirloom necklace didn't mean she'd have someone steal it. And she had no connection to the other thefts so far. Or was Rachel's admiration of the woman affecting her judgment?

Investigating Roger Leverett was way less heartbreaking, but she'd hit a wall there. Mr. Leverett hadn't visited Fred Sersen again. But he visited Gamblers Anonymous regularly and reconciled with his wife, who was rumored to have paid off his debts. Oh the intensity of a woman's love.

Eager to get to her mice, Rachel passed another vehicle. She leaned forward, staring into the darkness. She'd spent countless hours watching the recording of the charity gala where Anne Tandy had lost her ring. Rachel had investigated every person who'd stood close to Mrs. Tandy that day. One of them was Mr. Leverett, but something felt strange about that coincidence.

And when it came to coincidences...

The necklace seemed like a crime of opportunity, but was it really? Something didn't add up. How could the thief have known Vanya Patel would be close to the door at the time the two cameras overlooking the spot stopped working? The thief had worn a disguise, but the guards had stated nobody resembling that description had left during the time slot she'd provided.

Could Vanya have waited for the thief there, the robbery prearranged?

Rachel took the freeway exit when her hands-free phone rang. Even though she'd ignored Tex's calls since she'd suggested taking a break, a part of her hoped he'd call again.

She ignored a sting of disappointment at Kennedy's name. "Hello, Kennedy."

“How are you holding up? Sorry to call you at this hour.”

“No apology needed.” Knowing her friend cared softened something inside Rachel. She took the left turn. “I often stay up late. Um, usually in someone’s else driveway.”

“Thanks. But you didn’t answer my question. Are you okay?”

“Trying to be. Please, don’t worry about me. I’ve been through worse.” Good. She somehow kept her voice chirrupy.

Kennedy’s voice softened. “Despite your difficult upbringing, you never played the victim card. Never asked for anything. You achieved everything yourself. But I want you to know that, if you ever need anything, please know I’m there for you. Just because you’re the strongest woman I’ve ever met doesn’t mean you have to do it alone.”

Grateful tears stung Rachel’s eyes. She slowed down behind an SUV. “I know.”

“Not because I see you as weak. I don’t. But because as your friend, I care for you.” Then Kennedy chuckled. “Well, and because I like to see myself as kind.”

“That’s because you are.” Rachel’s heart warmed.

“I know it’s late, so I’ll let you go. Praying for you.”

Something from what Kennedy had said needled Rachel as she pulled up into the parking lot near her apartment complex.

What was it? She checked her surroundings before exiting the car, then dashed to her apartment. One of the lanterns didn’t work, as always. She had the house key ready and entered the apartment fast, then locked the door behind herself.

“Hello, my lovelies. I hope your day was wonderful.” She greeted her mice.

They squeaked in response, and Button rose on his hind paws. She smiled as she always found their tiny front paws with little fingers adorable.

“No escapees, right? So far, so good. I haven’t solved the jewel theft puzzle yet, so I’m still walking through the maze.

But hopefully, I'm getting closer."

Button squeaked again.

"I said maze, not mice." She often ran her ideas by them. They were fantastic listeners. "It's more complicated than I'd expected. And my experience is in collecting information and evidence, not drawing conclusions from it. But yeah, I know. Excuses, excuses."

As she brought them fresh food, what had bothered her finally clicked, and she froze in place.

Kennedy had said, "You never pulled the victim card."

"How come I couldn't see it?" Rachel came out of her stupor and handed the mice their vegetables.

They were too busy eating to answer. Not that she could understand their language, anyway.

"I was looking at all this wrong. I was investigating the wrong people." She slapped herself on the forehead. The mice stopped eating as if scared, then discussed it among themselves, probably complaining to each other, and resumed their late dinner.

"Or am I mistaken about my new suspicions?" she asked Button.

The idea that formed in her head did sound preposterous. She might be jumping to these conclusions simply because she'd walked into a wall with her other theories too many times. But any new hypothesis was worth investigating, especially if it helped Tex.

Just because they weren't together anymore didn't mean she'd stopped caring about him. Her love wasn't a faucet that could be turned on and off at will.

Her heart fluttered as she refilled the water bottle for her mice. If anything, her feelings only seemed to increase, though it didn't make sense.

Energized by a fresh surge of adrenaline, she turned on her laptop and lowered herself onto the carpet near the cage. She carefully opened the cage and placed her hand there with an

offering of a treat. As often happened, only Button was curious enough to climb onto her hand for the treat, then onto her arm and shoulder. Or maybe as the littlest and most often pushed aside, he was the hungriest.

“Okay, let’s see what we can find.” Things on the internet were limited and not always true, but it was a start.

Anne Tandy didn’t have much presence on social media, which was shocking these days. Rachel did find several articles about the lady’s visits to different parties. Not much else.

She frowned. “I’m trying to follow crumbs, but there aren’t many crumbs to follow.”

Button squeaked and looked around. He even turned around, his tail hanging over her shoulder. Then squeaked again as if disappointed.

Rachel sighed. “I meant, figuratively speaking.”

She fished her phone out of her pocket and debated calling. It was late, and besides, she didn’t like asking for help. Then she remembered what her friend had just told her.

When Kennedy answered, Rachel apologized for calling at night this time.

“Not a problem. Can’t sleep?” Kennedy sounded groggy. She used to have insomnia, but it sounded like she’d been asleep now.

“No. I just need some information. I don’t know why it couldn’t wait until the morning, either. What do you know about Anne Tandy? If anything?”

“Hmm. Let me see. She’s a fascinating lady with a love for royal history. I don’t know her well, but my mother mentioned her several times.” As a well-known socialite, Kennedy’s mother had been on the social scene not only in the seaside playground accurately known as Port Sunshine but also in Charleston.

“Do you remember what she said?” Rachel’s attention sharpened as she got up and cut herself some cheese. She

shared it with her investigative partner. Sometimes Button accompanied her on stakeouts, as well.

“Hmm. Let me see. She said Anne Tandy loved to travel to Europe to tour castles. She’d bring back jewelry, usually with centuries of romantic history behind them. Not exactly royal jewels, but fascinating enough. She had quite a collection, all with a story attached.”

“Do you think she ever attempted to buy your mother’s heirloom ring?”

Kennedy gasped. “She did! Mom refused, of course.” She paused. “After Mom passed on, Mrs. Tandy asked me, as well, but I said it wasn’t for sale. Do you think that might mean...?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“By the way, about a week before the burglary, she was at the local beach with her pooch, and the pet didn’t feel well. So she stopped by Austin’s clinic.”

Rachel tensed like a cat before a jump. “Did Austin mention that you’d be away for the weekend?”

“He might have. You know how chatty he is. You don’t think that...?”

“I need to talk to Tex. Now.” Then doubt crept in. “Though the polite thing would be to wait until the morning. I can’t turn up at his apartment at this time of night.” But then again, when was she polite? She didn’t grow up learning noble manners.

“Tex often works until midnight. He’s sure to be at his office. Besides, I’m also sure he’ll be happy to hear from you at any time of day or night.”

Rachel hoped for the latter with all her heart. Longing stirred her again. “Okay. Thank you.” She tucked Button back in the cage and closed it. Her empty stomach demanded more than cheese, but she emptied a bottle of lemonade instead, her mind on the road already.

“Anything you need me to do? And please call me after you talk to him.”

“I will. And you’ve been super helpful already.” Rachel disconnected and called Tex. Three times. Every call went into his voicemail.

Her heart sank. “Is he asleep? Or is ignoring me?” she asked the mice.

They squeaked something back, probably that they had no clue what Tex did or thought.

Her eyes narrowed. Barging in when it was the middle of the night might be rude, but once again, she wasn’t raised with royal manners. Besides, this could be an urgent matter.

She strapped on her purse, gun secure inside, and tucked handcuffs into the waist of her jeans. Not that she intended to handcuff Tex to get him to tell her why he’d been avoiding her. Never go anywhere unprepared was her motto.

Her mice squeaked again.

“Okay, I’ll take you with me, too. Why not?” She picked up the cage and rushed to her car. Maybe they could relieve the tension and provide some comic relief during the upcoming meeting with Tex.

“I’m not pathetic. I’m resourceful,” she muttered under her breath.

She recalled what she knew about Vanya Patel, the young lady from whom the necklace was stolen, and more things fell into place.

As she drove through the night city to Tex’s office in the prestigious part of town, her palms became damp. Not only because of the excitement of moving forward in the investigation but also because of the excitement—with a touch of dread—of seeing him soon.

Her pulse spiked. What if he wasn’t in his office but somewhere else? What if he wasn’t glad to see her? Then a lump formed in her throat. She’d be telling herself fairy tales if she thought he’d be excited to see her. He’d all but asked her to stay away from him. She should save herself embarrassment and turn around, then call him in the morning to provide new information.

Instead, she pursed her lips and pressed the gas pedal. This concerned Tex's safety, and that was more important than her feeling awkward over meeting with him.

Her heart stuttering, she neared the tall dark building. There were lights only on one floor, the floor where Tex's office was located. She entered the parking garage and parked, picked up the mouse cage, then waited for the elevator in an eerily silent building. When the elevator chimed and opened its doors, it nearly made her jump.

On the needed floor, she muttered, chastising Tex for the lack of security. Even if he'd hired a bodyguard as she suggested, he should be in a much better guarded place than this with nobody allowed to approach him.

Well, nobody besides her.

Yeah right.

Apprehension tightening her rib cage, she let Button climb her arm to her shoulder before closing the cage door.

"I need you for moral support," she told the mouse perched on her shoulder. "Well, and maybe some entertainment value."

She entered the room Jennifer usually occupied and peered at the heavysset, graying man at the desk. Despite his disguise, she recognized Brady Matthews. Hiding her surprise, she carefully arranged her face into a bland smile.

And she shouldn't be surprised. Brady worked for Irene's company, but also freelanced for others. She'd seen his name among the people providing security to the charity gala, one of the few with camera access. He was the same height and build as the thief who'd snatched the necklace. The thief had much darker hair and a beard, unlike clean-shaven Brady, but she'd long suspected it was a disguise, along with the fancy suit and shoes, a disguise easily traded for his security uniform.

His start of recognition was obvious, and his expression slid into a frown.

Please, let him believe I don't recognize him. "You must be Tex's new bodyguard. I'd like to see him, please?" Somehow,

she kept her voice light and pleasant as worry for Tex ripped through her.

“Sorry, but I can’t let you pass through. He said no visitors. Please leave.” He blocked her path. “Now.”

Her eyes narrowed, her heartbeat picking up. “Could you, um, call him on the intercom? He might make an exception for me.”

His frown deepened. “He told me not to bother him.”

“I understand.” Her stomach lurched, but she’d been trained long enough not to show her distress. “It’s super late, anyway. I’ll call him in the morning.”

His posture relaxed. “Good idea.”

Then she mentally apologized to her mice and hoped their love for sweets would be enough to bring them back to her. As she turned toward the door, she placed the cage on the floor and shielded it from view as she opened the door. “Oh no! I wanted to show Tex my pet mice, but the cage door got open somehow! My mice have escaped!”

“Well, just buy new ones,” Brady snapped.

“They are like family. You can’t buy new family.” She’d always been afraid of them running away from the cage, and now she begged them to do just that.

As if understanding her, Sneaky and Squeaky dashed out of the cage before she closed it, and Button ran down her arm and torso and then her leg while Big Cheese, the lazy bully, stayed in the cage as if to guard their food source. “Would you please help me look for them?”

Brady lurched back a step. “You want me to do *what?*”

She pulled her gun from her purse and turned around. “Put your gun on the floor. Slowly.”

“You’re going to regret this, Rachel,” he said through clenched teeth.

No more pretending. “Nope. I won’t regret it one bit. And if you think I won’t put a bullet through your head—”

“I know your reputation.” He placed his gun on the floor.

“Turn around.” The next moment, she pinned his arm behind his back. “Now tell me. Is Anne Tandy inside?”

“I’m not telling you anything.”

“Is she inside and is she armed?” She twisted his arm.

“What’s that commotion?” Anne Tandy’s voice rose from Tex’s office.

Rachel made Brady step closer to the door and twisted his arm further. Her shoulder screamed at the strain, but she ignored it. “Open the door ajar to the office and tell her there are mice on the floor you’re trying to catch.”

“Listen, there’s a huge payout here. I’ll share it with you. Nobody will have to know. I heard Tex broke up with you anyway,” Brady whispered fast.

Her heart shifted at the breakup part, but she pressed forward. “Do it. Or you’ll get something besides your favorite food in your stomach, and I guarantee you won’t be able to digest it.”

Brady opened the door. “I’m sorry for the disturbance. But there are mice I’m trying to catch, and I believe one sneaked in here.”

“What? Mice?” Mrs. Tandy shrieked as she held a gun to Tex’s head.

From the corner of her eye, Rachel saw Button and his friends dash inside, which was a huge feat. Usually, mice were shy and avoided humans. At least, humans they didn’t know.

“Get them out of here! Get them out of here!” Mrs. Tandy shrieked again as she jumped onto a chair with astonishing agility for her age, then fired at the floor.

But now what?

Rachel couldn’t handle two people at the same time. She was about to neutralize Brady when Tex knocked the gun out of the woman’s hand.

She clipped the handcuffs on Brady's hands. "Awesome job!"

"That was you all along?" Thankfully, Tex didn't let his surprise stop him from grabbing the fancy silk tie lying on his desk and using it to bind Anne Tandy's hands.

"Well, mostly my mice." Adrenaline ebbing away, she called the police and reported the crime. As much as she was relieved this was over, a significant part of her was heartbroken to say goodbye to him forever. She lifted her chin. The important part was that Tex was safe and would be from now on.

"Humble, as always," he muttered under his breath.

Once she was done and all the perps could do was sputter and glare, Tex stepped to her. "Thank you for saving my life again. Fourth time already."

"You saved yourself this time. I do need your help, though."

"Anything." His eyes warmed.

She wished she could believe it. "Do you have any sweets?"

"Are you hungry? I'd love to invite you to a late dinner. Um, a very late dinner."

Now he wanted to have dinner with her? She swallowed down the bitter memory of him treating her like an afterthought. The tension and danger were gone, and she should be leaving, as well. After she got her mice back and talked to the police once the latter got here, of course. "I need sweets so my mice will hopefully come back to me."

Her heart squeezed. Button and his company were the unsung heroes in this situation, and they were her friends, as well. She couldn't leave them behind. But they might be too shy to reappear from whatever place they'd scattered to, especially considering all the strangers in the room.

He rushed to his desk. "Would chocolate chip cookies work?"

Her stomach responded even more eagerly than her heart, but she hushed them both. “Perfect as long as we don’t let them get into the chocolate. Too much can hurt mice.”

Button didn’t even need the cookie. He climbed onto her hand when she extended it, but the other two were persuaded by cookie crumbs, and Big Cheese and his sweetheart, Nibbles, hadn’t left the cage at all. Once all the mice were secured and Rachel breathed out her relief, mentally promising them lots of cheese, a siren split the air.

“The police are almost here.” Her heart shifted painfully at leaving soon. She was grateful for Tex being all right, but now she wouldn’t have a reason to see him again. She looked into his baby blues, and every cell in her body wished for things that couldn’t be.

Was this going to be it?

“I’m not saying anything to the police.” Anne Tandy spat on the floor.

Rachel tsked. “Oh, ma’am, such manners. Well, I’m sure Brady and Vanya will. Why should they pay for something you organized and persuaded them to do? Not just thefts, but attempted murders.”

Brady’s eyes went huge. “She totally made me do it!”

“Shut up!” Anne Tandy hissed at him.

Tex took Rachel’s hands, sending a delicious tingle along her skin against her will. “Thank you for being there for me.”

With a gigantic effort, she forced herself to remove her hands from his. The surge of adrenaline gone, her shoulder ached more, but that wasn’t the reason she stepped back. She’d never been one for long goodbyes, and her heart was getting crushed again with the finality of it.

Then the police were gone with Anne Tandy and Brady. Tex and Rachel were alone again—plus the mice, who in Rachel’s mind, each deserved a medal made from cheese.

Tex clasped her hands again, searching her eyes. “I need to explain something.”

She looked away but didn't remove her hands this time. It might be ridiculous, but she wanted to enjoy his touch for one more minute before walking away. "There's nothing to explain. I get it. I do. You have an important job that takes all your time." Her stomach clenched, but she ignored it.

"My job wasn't why I couldn't see you in person. I couldn't bear to be the reason you might get shot again. I didn't want to put your life at risk another time."

"Oh." It was all she could say while hope flourished inside her. "Does that mean...?"

"I was terrified to lose you. When I was sitting near your room in that hospital, I realized I couldn't imagine my life without you. I thought loving someone would make me weaker, but it's the opposite way."

"Hold on. Hold on." Her head was spinning. "Did you just say loving... *loving* someone?" As in loving her? But she was scared to ask the rest of that sentence in case she was wrong. Love wasn't just a rare commodity in her world. It was near nonexistent. Her heart about stopped beating before resuming with a wild force.

Could he... could he love her?

His bright smile nearly made her melt. "I love you, Rachel Arvidson. Forever."



Chapter Seventeen



TWO DAYS LATER...

“Tiny Tim, stop!”

Rachel laughed as Tex ran on the beach after his dog—*their* dog now—happiness filling her to the brim. Maybe she didn’t exactly get a dog of her own, but she was happy to share Tiny Tim with Tex.

He came back leading Tiny Tim on the leash. The dog dug his heels into the sand, clearly not understanding why he couldn’t just run anywhere like he used to. “He’ll learn the commands soon. He will.” Tex had gotten Tiny Tim back from the obedience school the day after the standoff.

Unlike his usual attire, he wore jeans and a cowboy hat today. She wouldn’t call him a proper cowboy yet. But he’d spent more and more time at the ranch, and so had she. Mrs. Lawrence had greeted Rachel with tears in her eyes, for some reason saying Rachel had saved her son’s life yet again—no matter how many times Rachel told her it was the mice. Mrs. Lawrence had also gifted Rachel a cowboy hat and boots, which Rachel wore proudly, be it while playing with the horses or now walking at the beach.

“Yeah, eventually.” She tipped the edge of her cowboy hat to him playfully, then petted Tiny Tim, who jumped and licked her face, nearly knocking the hat back. “I know I’m not a cowgirl yet. But I love being at the ranch.”

“I’m happy to hear it, though I hope you enjoy your lunch today with Irene in Charleston.”

“I will. We’ll also be touring university campuses together.” Rachel’s heart expanded as if trying to take in all the changes in her life as she walked side by side with Tex and Tiny Tim. Well, Tiny Tim was more running in circles around them and nearly tripped Tex with the leash.

One of those changes was more shocking than others. “I still can’t believe Irene turned out to be my biological mother. How did I miss the similarities? I know I took after my dad in appearance. But I talked about her having a cleft chin like her ancestors and me having it as well, and it didn’t click in my mind that we could be related. What kind of investigator am I if I couldn’t see what was right under my nose? Or a chin in this case?”

“An awesome one.” He placed a kiss on her cheek, sending yummy tingles along her skin, then nearly stumbled over Tiny Tim again. “I do wish she told you much sooner or didn’t disappear from your life to start with.”

She untangled the leash. Otherwise, eventually, the three of them would tumble onto the sand. If only she could untangle her past as easily. “I’m still working through all this. It’s a long, complicated story. She said she wanted to have a career, not children. She isn’t lovey-dovey, and she knew that about herself. I was an unplanned pregnancy, and she went back to work almost as soon as I was born. Nannies took care of me when I was a baby. Then I was in daycare and after that school. Then Dad met my stepmother who already had two daughters she doted on and seemed very maternal.

“She was so sweet and treated him oh so well, so he started meeting her in secret while my biological mother worked long hours building up her company. She later learned that my future stepmom assured him her dream was to be a housewife and take care of him and their *three* daughters. She told him she’d be happy to raise the girl whose selfish mother didn’t seem to want her. He fell in love and thought this would be his close-knit happy family. He blamed my mother for emotionally abandoning him and always working and told her she should leave me with him to be raised right, seeing she lacked maternal instincts.”

Rachel let out a long sigh, trying to imagine that moment through her mother’s eyes. “My mother surrendered parental rights to him, and gave him generous child support so I’d lack nothing. Without saying a word about it all to me since she’d barely been part of my life anyway, she allowed herself to be

persuaded it was better for everyone, especially me, for her to disappear out of my life while I was still too young to really remember her.”

Tex clutched her hand in silent sympathy, encouraging her to continue.

“Apparently, she sent me gifts, but I never received them. I remember my stepsisters often getting gifts from an aunt living far away whom we never met. So it looks like my stepmom intercepted those gifts. She sent letters, but I never received them, either. When she wanted to visit me or take me for vacations, my stepmom forbade it and told her I was happy in the new family and not to ruin my life. Irene backed off for a long time and concentrated on her career while sending gifts. Then she started missing me more and more. Meeting her at the café where I started working in high school wasn’t an accident. And there was a reason for all those huge tips. She decided not to give herself away when I didn’t recognize her. I had a slight sense of familiarity, but she’d never really been around, so my memories of her were vague. I assumed what I felt was just relief at finding a kindred spirit at last.”

“Why didn’t she tell you everything when she found out how horrible your life was?” Tex’s brow furrowed.

With his compassion warming her, Rachel stared at the ocean sparkling in the generous sunlight. The trauma of being an unwanted child would never go away, but it was never too late to be loved. Tiny Tim jumped, placed his paws on her, and licked her face again. He understood how precious love was after a lifetime of begging for crumbs of attention. She ruffled his ears, wishing humans gave love as unconditionally as dogs. “She wasn’t sure I’d believe her and forgive her. So she tried to help me in whatever ways she could. But then our boss-employee relationship couldn’t be too friendly, so she forced herself to keep her distance.”

“Do you think you’ll ever fully forgive her?” His voice was quiet against the murmur of the ocean.

Her heart shifted, and she hid the sadness in her eyes by hugging Tiny Tim. A part of her rejoiced at the discovery, but

a bitter part of her remembered every hurt of her childhood. Could she treat this new development as a gift she didn't expect?

"I'm trying. And some of this wasn't her fault but my father's and stepmom's." She breathed in the salty air and took in the sunshine in several senses. "I got my dream. I've got a parent of my own and a dog of my own. And I've finally decided to buy a house of my own."

"I'm happy for you, but could you wait a day on the house part?" Then he stopped in his tracks before walking again. The dog bumped into him and whined, complaining half-heartedly. "Hold on. Irene Bruzlin has noble lineage. That means you do, too. You're no longer Cinderella. You're a princess."

She laughed. She'd never laughed as much as in the last few days spent with him. "It's not like it's royal blood. And you're the one who makes me feel like a princess."

Letting the leash go, he took her hands in his. "I want to."

As much as she cherished this moment, she needed to update him on the case.

Just as she'd suspected, Brady and Vanya turned on Anne Tandy fast.

Some things were a surprise, though, like Anne Tandy's talent for burglary and safecracking. Never underestimate an older woman. Turned out, Anne had learned some interesting skills in her youth. Snatching the necklace wasn't a crime of opportunity because Vanya was waiting for Brady to get it at the precise time. But stealing Kennedy's heirloom ring had been.

"According to Vanya, she needed funds to help her father with medical expenses and wanted to sell the necklace. But with bad feelings between the divorcing couple, her mother refused. Anne Tandy heard about it and offered the teen the best solution. The necklace would be stolen at a public event, and her mother would get the insurance payout for it. Plus, Anne Tandy would give Vanya a hefty sum. Nobody would

ever have to know. Her father was much more important than some necklace, right?”

He squeezed her fingers. “What happened to the ring Anne Tandy reported stolen from the previous charity gala?”

Her pulse kicked up a notch. She loved his touch, simply being near him, and it was difficult to keep her mind on the case. “It stayed in her possession, though she never wore it in public again. The thief wasn’t discovered because there was no thief. Anne Tandy got the insurance payout, kept the ring, and created a precedent for future thefts.”

“All this for some shiny stones.” He shook his head as if in disbelief.

“To her, they’re not just shiny stones. The idea of being a part of the fairy tale story enchanted her.”

“Not all fairy tales have a happy ending.” He let her hands go and peered over at the runaway dog. “Time to chase Tiny Tim again.”

When Tex walked back carrying Tiny Tim this time, she picked up a different kind of stone and threw it in the water, then glanced back at her footprints in the sand. She didn’t know yet where her path in life would lead, but she wanted to leave an imprint that wouldn’t be erased by water or time.

“I’m so proud of you for going to college,” Tex said when he got closer. “I know you’ll ace those classes. I’m sure Tiny Tim supports it, too.”

Tiny Tim barked as if to confirm it, but mostly, he was demanding to be put back on the sand. Especially considering he was missing out on chasing a bird that flew not too far away.

She smiled. “Thank you for helping me study and get good scores for admission. And for the offer to pay tuition, but Irene said she’d got it covered. She created a college fund for me that my dad and stepmom couldn’t access, but my stepmom kept it secret from me.” Rachel grimaced at all the deceit, the pure spitefulness of it, but she didn’t want bitterness to keep

her down. “Until classes start, I’m happy helping Saylor at the animal shelter.”

Tiny Tim barked again, probably remembering the first decent meal he’d gotten in years.

“That’s very kind of you.”

She basked in his praise as much as she basked in the sunshine. “It aligns with helping those who can’t help themselves. It probably brings me more joy than it brings them.”

“Is it okay to ask why you led such a frugal lifestyle?”

“At first, it was out of necessity. Then I wanted to make sure I had enough to live on if something happened. I wanted to have the safety net I didn’t have in childhood. And then... I guess all the expensive sparkly shiny things don’t mean as much to me as they do to other people.”

“That’s admirable. I spent a lot on expensive sparkly things to impress other people, to elevate myself from the scared little boy I’d once been.”

“Well, you impress me a lot just as you are. If you lost everything tomorrow, I’d love you just the same.” Her heart beating faster, she moved closer.

His hands wrapped around her waist, the intensity in his eyes making heat pool in the pit of her belly. “Then I’d still have everything because you’re everything to me.”

Her temperature increasing a notch, she raised herself on her tiptoes, and then he claimed her lips with his. They’d kissed a lot since his confession, and yet every kiss felt incredible. She felt as light as a feather, and a wave of pleasure swept her up into a world that had been elusive to her until now. A world where love and happiness weren’t just possible but lived already.

When she came up for air, still in a daze, she nearly stumbled back at Austin and Kennedy walking to them. “I should’ve been more vigilant. There could be other people, um, sneaking up on us.”

Tiny Tim tilted his head as if to say he wouldn't have let it happen.

Tex looked into her eyes, so much love in his. "There's no more danger. And there's a reason Austin and Kennedy are here. As much as I love Tiny Tim, I don't want him to trample something."

Austin winked at his brother as he picked up Tiny Tim's leash. "Or get burned by accident."

Puzzled, Rachel looked from Tex to Austin and back. "Trample? Get burned?"

Tex smiled at her, but some nervousness left that smile taut. "You'll see soon enough. But first, get on my back, then close your eyes. I'll give you a piggyback ride to the place."

Rachel looked at her friend. "Kennedy, what *is* he talking about?"

Kennedy raised her hands in a mocking surrender. "Sorry! I was sworn to silence. Just trust us."

Trust didn't come easily to Rachel, but Tex had helped her learn it.

While he carried her, she did her best to figure out what the surprise was going to be, but the seagulls' cries weren't exactly informative. Her heartbeat increasing, she wrapped her arms around his neck.

What could this be?

As she listened to the ocean's murmur while hugging him close, her chest swelled with gratitude over all the wonderful things that had happened to her already. There was one thing that would make her world complete, but could she dare hope for it so soon?

"I'm going to put you down on the sand, but don't open your eyes yet." His warm breath caressed her cheek.

"Okay." Her feet felt for the ground, and she loosened her hold on him. Was that lavender she was smelling? Standing on her own now, she braced her feet on soft sand and could barely

resist the curiosity to peek from her eyelashes. The wait seemed an eternity.

“Now please open your eyes.” He didn’t need to ask her twice.

She flung her eyelids open and gasped. The lavender aroma emanated from candles forming a heart in the sand. A round white table with sweets and a cheese charcuterie board stood in the middle of it. But as beautiful as it was, that scene wasn’t what drew her attention and then made her chuckle.

Someone dressed in a costume of a gray mouse—or it could be a rat—stood near the table, side by side with Darius, who was wearing a cowboy hat and holding one, as well.

“Tex, that’s you, right?” Rachel asked the mouse.

“Yes.”

“Okay, now I can leave,” Darius grumbled. “You owe me, bro. You have no idea how many seagulls I had to fight off the table.”

“Thanks, Darius. You’re right. I owe you.” The man-sized mouse prince patted his brother on the back.

“I was kidding. You look ridiculous, by the way. And I’m serious about that.”

“I know,” the giant mouse said.

Then Tex pulled the chair back for her. “My first idea was to dress up as Prince Charming. But then I decided I’d rather make you laugh than impress you. You taught me humility. And you like mice.”

“The pet kind.” She sat down at the table and reached for a mozzarella slice. “Maybe it’s best if you take the headpiece off. Otherwise, I don’t know how you’ll be able to eat.”

He took it off, his hair adorably ruffled. “Thank you. It was also rather hot inside that thing.” He drew a bottle of sparkling water from an ice bucket—the ice mostly water now—and poured it into the flutes.

It tugged at her heartstrings that he'd make himself look ridiculous to bring her a few chuckles. "I love it all."

"And I love you. So much it hurts to breathe sometimes." He lifted the cover from the cheesecake and put a slice on her plate.

She nearly squealed with delight. "My favorite!" And then she did squeal for an entirely different reason. "The ring! Is that a ring?"

He dropped onto one knee on the sand, which clearly wasn't an easy feat in a mouse costume, not paying attention to the fact that his costume was getting dirty. "I thought of asking to bake the ring into the pie. But I didn't want you to swallow it accidentally. Not good for your digestive system and all."

She swallowed hard—happily *not* swallowing a ring. "Um, I appreciate it. Weren't you going to ask something?"

"Right. Talking about your digestive system isn't the beginning of the romantic proposal I imagined."

She leaped to her feet. "The answer is yes."

His eyes lit up. "Yes?"

Doubt crept in. She could be impulsive and imagine things that didn't exist. "You were going to ask me to marry you, right? I hope."

"Of course. I want to spend the rest of my life with you." He rose to his feet.

Should she dig the ring from the cheesecake herself? "And I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you. Um, you can place the ring on my finger now."

Her heart sang as he slipped the sticky ring on her finger and then lifted her and whirled around. Her head was spinning, and she laughed again.

He put her down, smiling sheepishly. "I considered ordering fireworks or renting a yacht, but I figured you'd rather I chose simpler things. Sorry I sort of fumbled the proposal."

She looked into his eyes that sparkled more than the diamond on her finger. “It was perfect to me. And I do appreciate all the effort you put into it. But I’d have said yes if you proposed to me at a fast-food café with a donut instead of a ring. Hmm, a donut would be better for my digestion. What I wanted to say was you’re the one who matters to me.”

“And you to me. You mean the world to me.” And when he kissed her again, happiness filled her to the brim. It didn’t even matter that a seagull stole a bite of cheesecake, thankfully without the ring in it any longer.



Chapter Eighteen



MAYBE RACHEL COULD get her fairytale wedding, after all.

She didn't need sparkling palaces or a gleaming white dress decorated with sparkly diamonds or later the reception with dishes she couldn't pronounce for her wedding to feel magical. She just needed Tex to be in it. Being the groom, specifically.

The ocean sparkling in the sunshine like it had during her second date with Tex offered more than enough bling. As did the sparkle in the eyes of the man she loved and knew loved her in return with a love more than she could ask for.

When she started the slow walk toward him along the rows of white chairs, her heart sang a duet with the ocean, giving voice to a song known only to the two of them. Tex beamed at her, and in turn, happiness filled her to the brim, and trying to hang onto it and not float away on pure euphoria, she tightened her grip on Irene's arm. Rachel had asked Irene to give her away and, to her delight, her mom/role model accepted.

She'd chosen a sleeveless ivory-hued top and a matching long skirt so she could wear it again, the ensemble simple in its elegance. She combined it with sneakers, not caring anymore that they might not go well with the outfit. Having decided to forego the hairdresser, she'd let her hair flow over her shoulders. Kennedy had decorated it with lavender sprigs, but that was it. Tex had said he was already thrilled she'd decided not to hide her hair under an old cap for the wedding.

Of course, she could've afforded a more expensive dress and shoes as well as a private appointment with a good hairdresser. Tex had insisted the budget for their wedding was whatever she'd wanted it to be. Irene and Kennedy had written

her blank checks as wedding gifts, which had shocked Rachel and brought tears to her eyes.

But she wanted her wedding to be as simple as possible. Okay, she'd considered a lavish wedding because of Tex's status and his possible need to impress investors. When he'd said he didn't need to impress anyone but her, she'd loved him even more—which was saying something considering how her enormous love for him swelled her chest as she now stood by his side.

It was becoming a tradition for the Lawrence brothers to get married at the beach and follow the ceremony with a reception in their childhood home's backyard. Rachel was happy to follow the endearing tradition, though she'd be just as fine eloping. The main thing was that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with Tex, and the entrance to that magical land mattered much less compared to the lifetime there.

"You make me so happy," he mouthed to her.

"Same," she mouthed back. She wasn't the kind of person to say lots of words, so she let her eyes speak for her, saying how much she loved him. Surely, he could see that.

She was getting better at communication, though. Including with Kennedy, who was both her matron-of-honor and bridesmaid. Rachel didn't ask for any dress code, and Kennedy wore one of her gorgeous silvery evening gowns that reached her metal-tinted sandals. Austin had once compared his wife to moonlight in a conversation with Rachel, and Rachel could see why.

She glanced back. While she had no relatives seated among the guests, she wasn't alone in the world any longer. Of course, she had several fantastic coworkers and the best boss in the world. She softened her grip on the arm of her said boss—no, her mother, wow!—held crooked to support her. But this feeling of elation and belonging was because Tex's family, each member in attendance today, had taken her into their fold and accepted her as if she were one of their own. She'd love to credit her wonderful personality for it, but according to her sisters-in-law, the Lawrences treated them with the same love.

Now that Irene wasn't Rachel's boss any longer, they'd slipped into the mother-daughter relationship Rachel always craved but didn't dare to ask for. Leaving her job, as heart-wrenching as it had been at first, turned out to be an unexpected blessing. She'd had a lot of those lately.

Months ago, she never would have imagined herself here or having applied for college and been accepted. Tex was much less surprised by that than she was and fully supported her. It was difficult to say whether her mice were surprised, but Rachel was sure they supported her wholeheartedly, as well. Button and she had already started reading textbooks together, both fortified by cheese from time to time.

Tex had put his condominium up for sale, and the two of them along with Tiny Tim had been searching for a cottage close to the beach. Kennedy had said she'd gladly gift them *that* cottage, but didn't think it a good idea because of what had happened there. Tex and Rachel had gratefully agreed.

Of course, whatever they found would need to have a spacious yard for Tim. Rachel glanced back and smiled, then turned back. Austin was minding the dog during the ceremony and, even more importantly, the reception. Tim looked much healthier, his fur lustrous, and since one couldn't count his ribs now, they'd dropped the tiny from his name.

When it was time to say their vows, worry pinged her. Tex's speech was long and beautiful. In comparison, all Rachel could say was, "I love you so much! I'll love and cherish you forever. Well, until my last breath."

But based on his huge smile, that must've been enough.

Austin had agreed to multitask for this wedding, now acting as their best man and ring bearer. Rachel had suggested Tiny Tim be a ring bearer, but considering the dog often chewed and swallowed everything in sight, which was understandable after years of starvation, Austin seemed a better choice. He handed them the rings, and once Tex slid the wedding ring on her finger, she could finally fully, completely, totally believe it was happening. Until this moment, some part

of her still expected the other crystal shoe to drop. But it hadn't.

Thank You, Lord.

She'd gotten her fairy tale. As people lined up to congratulate the couple and her new journey as part of the family began, she knew she'd gotten more than she could dream of.

But this wasn't a fairytale ending where so often everything ended with the wedding. Her glance fell on Tex's grumpy brother Darius, who stared at one of Kennedy's friends, Saylor Helms.

It was just the beginning.

For her and other people.



Epilogue



SAYLOR HELMS WOULD rather stab her hand with a fork than attend another wedding of the Lawrence cowboy brothers.

But here she was again, sitting at the reception barbecue of yet another wedding, this time of Tex Lawrence. A fork with a brisket cut was in her hand indeed, though so far held in her fingers rather than plunged into her flesh.

She plastered on a smile that probably looked like a scowl. The air smelled of grass, meat, and mesquite smoke. People's laughter mocked her gloomy mood.

She chewed the delicious-smelling brisket without sensing much taste. She could've chewed on her new salad-green shoe with the same enthusiasm. Well, her sister Marina's puppy used to chew on Marina's shoes with a lot of enthusiasm.

Saylor leaned to her sister, who'd come as the plus-one of her husband, the groom's brother, who sat there now chatting up the couple beside them. The light caught on his pirate-like earring and his laugh rang out as loud as his parrot's voice often did. Marina had been the second bride in this wedding avalanche fast toppling the most eligible bachelors in town, and many a heart had broken when the charismatic Kai proposed to and married Saylor's sister.

"Tell me again how you roped me into attending this?" Saylor whispered. "I'm not related to either the bride or groom."

"But you're related to me." Marina hooked their arms together, leaning in so close her hair tickled Saylor's forehead. "Rachel was happy to invite you. I wanted to distract you from whatever's been making you so forlorn. And you love me too much to say no."

At that, Saylor returned the sisterly hug, but she eased out of it soon. She'd grown apart from her elder sister, and it had taken her a long time to realize how much Marina sacrificed for her siblings. Now Saylor hadn't been able to say no because she owed her sister a debt of gratitude. But nobody wanted to see a downcast face at a wedding. Usually, Saylor was the most cheerful person at a gathering. But not today. "Your distraction isn't working, sis. I should head out."

"Wait, please." Marina shook her head as she lifted a glass of orange juice to her lips. "Rachel didn't even throw the bouquet yet."

Saylor grimaced and wrapped her fingers around her cold iced tea glass. "It's going to be a while before I consider a relationship, much less marriage."

Her gaze moved not to the new couple, but to an existing one, Austin and his wife, and her heart squeezed painfully. He was taken now, and she had to let it go. She *had* let go, of course, but her heart still ached.

To distract herself, she looked at the three-tiered cake where five mice posed on top as a decoration, thankfully made from buttercream. On the main table, an assortment of fancy cheeses accompanied good ole barbecue. She reached for a slice of Brie. Nope, still tasted like rubber.

"May I have this dance?" Darius, one of the remaining unmarried Lawrence brothers, extended a hand to her.

She was about to say no, but her sister elbowed her. After all, why not? Saylor wasn't the type of person to sit and mope around about the man who couldn't love her. Never mind that she'd done just that today and, well, for how long now?

She got up and took Darius's hand, her heart making a little jolt at the touch of his callused palm.

Weird. This was Darius, her brother's friend and someone she'd known since childhood. Well, it had been more like quiet, responsible Darius had done his best to keep her way less responsible brother out of trouble. But that was the way she'd looked at Darius ever since. Her brother's best friend.

Never mind that Darius had grown up into a fine, hardworking man with broad shoulders and muscles chiseled by daily labor outdoors. He smelled of leather and hay, and even at the wedding reception, his outfit consisted of traditional ranch wear, including a white cowboy hat, leather cowboy boots, a white Wrangler's shirt stretched over an impressive torso, and blue jeans hugging narrow hips. She'd have considered him handsome when she'd returned to her hometown if she hadn't already laid her eyes on the easygoing, fun veterinarian whose personality matched hers. She'd even become Austin's assistant before her feelings for him deepened and he'd met his now wife.

Never again was she going to fall for her boss.

She placed a hand on Darius's shoulder and swayed with him to a country song that, of course, had to talk about love and heartbreak. Who played sad love songs at a wedding anyway?

Thanks a lot for the reminder.

"What did you say?" Darius's eyes searched hers. His eyes were the family's signature brilliant blue, but his had tiny sapphire dots in them.

"Did I say it out loud? Oops." She attempted a giggle but nearly choked on it. Where was her easy laughter now?

"Is it okay to ask what upset you?" His gaze was compassionate instead of just curious as he whirled her around.

How embarrassing. She couldn't tell him the reason. She swallowed hard. "Well, for starters, I just quit my job and am currently jobless."

He brightened. "That's not sad. It's awesome."

Well, how insensitive. From surprise, she stepped on his foot. Yes, it was from *surprise*, not on purpose. "Excuse me? And excuse me for stepping on your foot."

"It's okay. You can step on my feet all you want. But I didn't mean that it's awesome you're jobless. It's awesome that maybe you could come work at our ranch office. We could

use an assistant. And if you could help with accounting, all the better. Our accountant resigned, and I heard you're taking accounting courses."

Did he ask around about her? But then, there were no secrets in a small town. Well, there could be some secrets, as her cousin's story proved. Then there was that mystery surrounding the early demise of these brothers' father...

Her heart shifted as Darius brought her a little closer. His eyes were captivating in a way she didn't realize. Or was she getting attracted to him simply because he resembled Austin, minus the reddish hues in his hair and the cheerful hues in his personality?

With an effort, she brought her thoughts to matters at hand—as in how to make a living from now on. When she wasn't heartbroken, she loved to laugh and tell jokes, but she was also a practical girl. "My cousin, your oldest brother's wife, would be much better suited to help with the books. She has tons of accounting experience while I have none." Her gaze slipped to her cousin whose baby bump was noticeable now, and Saylor's heart shifted again.

Once upon a time, Saylor had dreamed of family and children. But she had to be more realistic now.

"She's busy with her paintings. And then she'll be busy with the baby." His expression turned wistful when he mentioned the baby.

What was all that about?

"And maybe you could help me find some important papers. I've been searching for them for days," he added as his fingers tightened around hers a tad.

Some people called her impulsive, but she warmed up to the idea fast. What better way to forget a man than to throw herself into work? And it wasn't like small towns brimmed with employment opportunities. Most jobs here were seasonal with lots of work during the tourist season and lots of unpaid downtime during the rest of the year.

“Sure,” she said. “Let’s discuss benefits and salary tomorrow.”

“Awesome!” He smiled. “This time, it’s just awesome.”

His smile was open, sincere, and lit up his face in a way she hadn’t noticed before. It did something strange to her senses she couldn’t logically explain.

He dipped her, and it stole her breath away. Her breath didn’t return when he brought her back and she stared into his baby blues.

What exactly was happening?

She didn’t get the answer to her question because the song ended and Rachel announced the bouquet toss.

A sting of disappointment surprised Saylor when he led her back. Was she... was she sad to let him go?

“Thank you for the dance. I loved dancing with you.”
Once again, wistfulness softened his expression.

She didn’t expect it, but she loved dancing with him, as well. Her lips curved up, and this wasn’t a pretend smile like before.

Hmm, she never wanted to leave a job because of falling for her boss again. “It’s going to be a while before I’m ready for a romantic relationship again. So it’s a good thing we won’t worry about office romance. You’re still sort of my brother’s best friend to me.” Her heart moved as she said the words and finished in an upbeat tone. “And I guess, to you, I’m still your friend’s little sister who grew up.”

Did she want it to be different?

His eyes widened, and he stumbled back. “R—right.”

Then Marina intercepted her. “You’ve got to be there for the bouquet toss.”

Saylor groaned. “Come on. Didn’t I just say—”

“Humor me. Please?”

Once her cousin joined in, they practically dragged her to the lineup.

“Okay, okay, I’m going.” She readjusted her long olive-green dress with spaghetti straps.

“Wait for me! Wait for me!” The groom’s assistant rushed out of the house and dashed to them. She leaped over a chair in a jump a kangaroo might find impressive.

Some women really wanted the bouquet. She shrugged. She’d be glad to let Jennifer have it, and anyway, with Jennifer’s basketball skills, it was clear who’d get it.

Huh. Even Darius’s mother joined the lineup, though not as enthusiastically as during the previous wedding—Austin and Kennedy’s—when she’d been dating Kennedy’s uncle.

Rachel raised the bouquet. “One, two…”

“Tim, stop!” Austin’s shout registered in the back of her mind, and Tex and Rachel’s adopted dog, Tiny Tim, dashed forward. Austin was taking care of him for the wedding.

Saylor wasn’t sure what had happened, but some kind of reflex reacted in her when Rachel called out, “Three!” Then Saylor jumped into the air without thinking about it.

Apparently, she wasn’t the only one with those kinds of instincts. And she didn’t mean the women in the lineup.

When she and the bouquet had gone in the air, so did Tiny Tim. Maybe words *three* and *fetch* were somehow the same in the dog’s mind.

As the canine intercepted the bouquet, he knocked Saylor back with his paws, and she lost her balance. Her heart dropped into the grass as she toppled backward.

“Saylor!” Was that Darius’s voice? “No!”

Her bouquet-free hands flailed with her attempt to prevent her fall, but it was too late. She was about to land on her behind.

Seconds later, she reassessed her damages as people gathered around.

Nothing hurt besides her pride.

“Saylor, I’m so sorry,” Austin muttered.

Well, well, well. She ended up on the grass in a sandwich between a dog and a man, who turned out to be Darius. And she didn’t even get the bridal bouquet because Tiny Tim had caught it in his teeth.



THE END



From Alexa. If you enjoyed Tex and Rachel’s story and would like to know what happened to Darius and Saylor, please [click here](#). Thank you so much for reading my books!



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