A man wearing a dark cowboy hat and a brown leather jacket over a white shirt, looking down. The background is a scenic mountain landscape with evergreen trees and a valley under a warm, golden sky.

Wyoming
COWBOYS

A NEVER TOO LATE FOR LOVE ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

REGAN BLACK
& JANIE CROUCH

WYOMING COWBOYS

NEVER TOO LATE FOR LOVE ROMANTIC
SUSPENSE

REGAN BLACK
JANIE CROUCH

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NEVER TOO LATE FOR LOVE: WYOMING COWBOYS

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Love isn't just for the young. Unfortunately, neither is danger. These cowboys will do whatever it takes to keep their women safe...

Please enjoy the Never Too Late for Love: Wyoming Cowboys collection, made up of Maria's Cowboy, Teresa's Cowboy and Callie's Cowboy.

And always remember: it's never too late for love.

...

Passionate alpha heroes and the women they'll do anything to protect...

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MARIA'S COWBOY

CHAPTER
ONE

A branch cracked behind Maria Boyne, and she flinched, shoulders tightening. As she spun around, her eyes flew across the trees—mostly American elm and aspens—but no one was there. She sighed, not sure whether she was relieved or disappointed.

On the one hand, she'd been so tense the last few weeks. Everything that could go wrong on Sky Wide Ranch seemed to be doing exactly that.

On the other hand, she'd really been hoping the noise was Wildfire. The mare had been missing for several days, and at this point, hope was rapidly declining.

Shoulders sagging, Maria trudged her way along the trail and across the pasture. The bright morning sun illuminated Sky Wide's stable, barn, and house, but that morning she wasn't in the mood to take in the view.

Trooper, her fluffy Great Pyrenees, wagged his tail from his spot in the barn's shade, but she didn't stop to pet him. She felt as if lead had been poured into her limbs, each of her movements heavy and awkward. At the house's front steps, she ran out of energy. Dropping down onto them, she leaned forward and rested her head in her hands.

How had life come to this? Five years ago, everything had been so different. She...

No. Thinking about five years ago wouldn't help. This was here and now. The past was dead.

Although, honestly, the present was nearly dead too.

“What do you think, boy? Where do you think Wildfire got to?” Maria selected another nail from her tool bag and looked at her fluffy dog.

Trooper wagged his tail and cocked his head. Since she hadn't said any interesting words like *treat* or *car ride*, he spun around in a circle and plopped down in the shade of a Rocky Mountain maple, not interested in the conversation.

“I don't know either.” They sat there for a few minutes in silence, Maria studying the hole in her fence. The damage had come thanks to a fallen tree and had allowed for the escape of her ranch's linchpin, Wildfire. The gentlest mare she'd ever owned.

Everyone and anyone could ride Wildfire, from little kids who pulled her mane to adults who were loud and grumpy. Wildfire took everyone's attitude in stride. Even people who came to Sky Wide looking to overcome their fear of horses were transformed after ten minutes with her.

And now she was gone.

For a tiny ranch that stayed afloat mostly from training people to ride and teaching them how to care for and saddle horses, that was a near tragedy.

Maria sucked in a deep breath and scrubbed a hand down her face. She couldn't afford to lose even one horse, and Wildfire's disappearance was the worst kind. She'd looked for her for days, asked everyone around town and the neighboring ranches, but still, nothing.

Doing her best to stuff down all the worry, she walked over to the fence. Whether she got Wildfire back or not, it still needed to be mended. She nodded as she fit a nail and picked up her hammer. Work. She needed to focus on her work. There was so much to do around the ranch—

Whack. The hammer came down right on her thumb. Yelping in pain, she dropped the hammer and nail, and sat down on the ground in defeat. Sucking in a breath, she grasped her hand and closed her eyes. Damn it, could things get any worse around here?

Trooper barked, his warning call echoing between the buildings. Lifting her head, Maria found a silver hatchback bumping slowly up the dirt driveway around the potholes that she really ought to fix.

Add it to the list.

She smoothed her hands over her tangled ponytail. Had she remembered to brush her teeth that morning? Who knew. Company had been the last thing on her mind when she'd rolled out of bed before dawn. Unless she had lessons on the schedule, nobody tended to show up here.

The car came to a stop, and Maria smiled as she finally recognized it. Her closest friend, Lovey, climbed out with a wave. Trooper ran over, tail wagging happily and pink tongue lolling from his mouth.

“Sorry I didn’t call first. I figured you wouldn’t answer. I didn’t think I’d find you sitting down.” Grinning big, Lovey walked across the grass toward her, a covered baking dish in her hands and her tight jeans straining with every step.

Lovey always looked so good, her long, curly hair devoid of any frizz and not the slightest hint of bags under her eyes. How she did it was anyone’s guess. Running a coffee shop took a lot of time, and yet the woman had the energy of a spring chicken.

Maria stood and managed to work up a smile. She didn’t really have time for company, but she couldn’t deny how lonely she was.

“I keep misplacing my cell.” Removing her work gloves, she tossed them in the grass.

“So how am I supposed to know if you’re alive or dead?”

Wiping sweaty hair from her brow, Maria scrunched her nose. “I’m sorry. It’s been a busy few days. There’s just too much to be done around here.”

“Surely you can take a break...” Lovey removed the lid on the baking dish. “For double chocolate chip muffins.”

Maria bit into her bottom lip. Double chocolate chip muffins were Lovey's specialty. People lined up at Cup O' Joe at dawn with the hopes of getting one, and there were rarely any left past eight a.m.

But still, Maria shouldn't. She should keep working. But when Lovey waved the dish under Maria's nose, she gave up the fight.

"Coffee?" she asked as they walked toward the house.

"You know it."

Several minutes later, they were seated in the front porch's rocking chairs, steaming cups of coffee in hand and the freshly baked muffins on the table between them. Trooper lay at their feet, his steady gaze sweeping across the ranch, ever watchful for signs of danger...like a rabbit.

If only he could keep the real trouble away.

Taking her first bite of warm muffin, Maria moaned and sank deeper into her chair. "How do you do it? These taste like heaven."

"If I told you, then it wouldn't be a secret recipe."

"Don't tell me. The mystery of it all makes it even better." She finished half the muffin in another bite. God, she loved chocolate.

"So, what's been going on?" Lovey blew on her coffee, her dangling earrings catching the light. "It's been a week since I've even heard from you."

"I know." This time, Maria held the sigh in. She hated looking weak in front of people. "Wildfire has been missing for three days."

"Oh no." Lovey's eyes widened. "Where do you think she got off to?"

"I haven't a clue. The storm the other night put a tree down on a fence, and she got out through there. She's not one to wander. Maybe the storm spooked her, though." She rubbed her tired face. "I've checked everywhere and can't find her."

“Does it make it any better or worse that Wildfire is one of yours?”

Maria’s chest tightened. She always tried to be positive, but it was hard when every direction you looked led to a downward spiral.

“I plan on breeding her next year.” She rubbed Trooper’s thick fur with her boot tip. “Planned,” she corrected.

The money from a foal would have been a godsend. Something to help with all the debt. Maybe contribute toward a new stable. She frowned at the current one, tiles falling off its roof and mold creeping up one side. The horses deserved a better home.

Lovey sipped her coffee. “Hey, she could still show up.”

“Maybe.”

Hope felt like a thing of the past now, though. First, the tools from the shed being stolen, then the fence and the stable damage from the recent storms. Now, Wildfire gone.

Maybe the mare had sensed things were going south on Sky Wide Ranch, and she’d headed off in search of greener pastures.

Sometimes Maria wished she could cut ties with this land that easily.

That wasn’t her, though. The acres of pasture and woods, the horses grazing on the earth’s bounty, the horizon filled with the Rocky Mountains—its rich green giving way to snowcapped peaks—they were a part of her.

There was no leaving this place behind.

“I know you don’t like to speak ill of the dead...”

Maria held up a hand. “Lovey, don’t.”

But her friend pursed her lips. “Howard was a good man in some ways, but he really screwed you over when it comes to this place.”

“He did the best he could.” Maria rubbed the aching point between her eyebrows. “Or what he thought was best at the

time.”

“Mm-hmm.” Lovey sipped her coffee, probably to stop herself from saying anything else.

Her critique came from a good place, of course. She was only worried about Maria.

And she should be.

Since Howard’s death five years ago, the ranch’s expenses had been mounting. He’d left Maria in such debt that all the cattle had been sold off three years earlier. She boarded a handful of horses and made money on some lessons, which had kept her afloat. But it wasn’t enough to keep up with the current string of bad luck.

“Sometimes I feel like this ranch is cursed.”

Lovey stared at her. “Do you mean that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” She reached for her coffee with her left hand, but her whacked thumb ached in protest, so she grabbed it with her right. “At the very least, it feels haunted. Like someone is watching me sometimes.”

It was nothing short of the truth.

Lovey noticeably shivered. “Boy, we need to get you out of here for a bit.”

“I get out.”

Lovey rolled her eyes. “Going into town to buy supplies or to ask your neighbors if they’ve seen your horse does not count as out. I’m talking about real clothes, actual makeup, fix your hair sort of *out*.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” Maria sipped her coffee, trying to remember the last time she’d actually gone out on the weekend for pleasure.

“Hey.” Lovey patted her rocking chair’s arm. “Guess who’s playing at the Barnyard tonight?”

“I can’t even begin to guess.” It had been months, maybe longer, since Maria had been to Sweet Pine’s favorite watering hole. Even when not directly caring for the ranch, it was

always on her mind. That didn't leave much time for things like socializing at bars.

Besides, she'd never been very good at going out and mingling. That was more Lovey's thing.

"Walter Retlaw and Sons." Lovey's bracelets jingled as she clapped her hands. "They're one of the best bands in all of Wyoming, and they're finally coming here."

Maria had never heard of them but knew where this was headed. "Lovey..."

"You need this." Lovey grabbed Maria's hand. "Don't tell me you don't. You've been under so much stress. Take a load off for just one night. Drinks are on me."

"I..." She searched the porch's worn planks. The railing really needed to be repainted. "There's no one to watch the ranch."

It was a poor excuse, and they both knew it. Sky Wide wouldn't sprout legs and walk off.

"Trooper has things under control." Lovey waggled her eyebrows at the dog.

"I'm sure he does, but there's so much to be done around here."

"And none of it can wait until tomorrow? You're not the only person with a ranch to take care of, and those other people take time off, I guarantee."

Maria leaned back in the rocking chair. A fresh breeze wafted across the porch, and one of the horses whinnied in the pasture.

The truth was, she hardly ever left her home. So little, in fact, that thinking about setting foot off it for anything other than the grocery store or library made her skin crawl.

It wasn't social anxiety, exactly. It was more that the ranch was her whole life. She wasn't sure who she was without it. She and Howard had shown up in Sweet Pine in their twenties, a sparkle in their eyes and chutzpah in their hearts. This was

the land they'd loved and fought on. The land they'd raised their daughter, Stacy, on.

And now she was so close to losing it...

She closed her eyes. Maybe a night out was exactly what she needed. It certainly couldn't hurt.

"All right." She opened her eyes. "I'll go."

Lovey clapped her hands. "You won't regret it."

"With you by my side, I'm sure I won't."

"Who knows?" Lovey stretched out her legs and arms and breathed in deep. "Tonight might be the night that changes your life."

Maria laughed and shook her head. That didn't seem likely, but she would take a respite from her troubles. If she got lucky, she might even manage to think about something besides them for a minute or two.

CHAPTER
TWO

“Isn’t this fun?” Lovey shouted above the chorus of nearly ten instruments, half of them guitars.

Maria reached deep within herself to dredge up a smile. “Yeah!”

Raising her arms above her head, Lovey shook her hips. A man nearby took interest and eyed her, but she made a point of ignoring him. “Want another round?”

Maria shook her bottle, which was still half full of beer. “I’m good. Thanks.”

The song switched to something even more upbeat, and the people who had partners grabbed them and took to the floor. Maria pressed closer to the bar, feeling like a fish out of water.

Why had she even come out tonight?

She’d told herself it wasn’t just because Lovey asked, but because she also wanted that momentary escape from life. She’d believed she could have it too—or else she wouldn’t have shaved her legs and put on the rare bit of makeup.

Once she’d arrived at the Barnyard, though, she immediately felt uncomfortable. And not because of the mass of twentysomethings. People her age were packing the floor as well.

But she wasn’t like them. She liked socializing as much as the next person, but this was different. The whole damn town seemed to be jammed into the bar, and there was hardly any room to move or even think.

Plus, she felt self-conscious. Despite the effort she'd put into picking out the right dress and doing her hair, she knew she still fell short. The lines around her eyes and the streaks of gray in her hair were things she couldn't hide.

Some women did, of course. But she didn't have money or time for constant hair appointments and whatever the newest anti-aging fad was.

So, here she was. Plain. Simple.

Being fifty sucked.

"Let's dance!" Lovey rocked back and forth.

Maria waved her off. "I think I'll just watch."

Grinning wide, Lovey pranced off. Immediately, several people surrounded her.

Maria stared into her beer. It would be nice to be more outgoing, like her best friend. Goodness knew, too many of her nights were spent alone, nursing a glass of wine and staring at the TV, wishing she had someone to talk to. Someone to touch.

Someone who had her back.

Sighing, she left her beer on the bar and stepped away. The double back doors were propped open, and they looked pretty inviting right about now. Slipping into the crisp evening air, she let out a relieved sigh. This was better.

The music was still ridiculously loud out here, but at least she had more room to think. More room to just be.

Plus, she had the whole back deck to herself.

Stepping up to the railing, she leaned into the wood and studied the dark trees on the edge of town. It was a quiet night in Sweet Pine, exactly how she liked it.

Something moved out of the corner of her eye, and she straightened up. A man, tall and big, leaned against his own corner of the deck.

The string lights were burned out where he stood, which was why she hadn't noticed him at first. Seeing her watching, he lifted his hand and said something.

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, I can’t hear you. The music!”

He came closer, favoring his right leg and limping a bit. As he stepped into the light, her breath caught in her throat.

Oh...my.

This man wasn’t a Sweet Pine local, that was for sure. One glance at a person like that and she would have remembered him for the rest of her life. His close-cropped silver hair still had bits of black in it, and his bright-blue eyes stood out even in the dim lighting.

With the shoulders of a quarterback and the jaw of a cover model, he looked like he’d been put together in a lab in order to replicate the ideal man. And here he was, gazing down at Maria, a playful smile on his lips.

“I said, it’s nice out here, isn’t it?” He cocked his head at her.

She unstuck her tongue. “Yeah... Yes, it is.”

Suddenly, she wanted to adjust everything about herself. Smooth her hair. Fix the tie on her wraparound dress. Make herself prettier. Younger.

The man was probably around her age, but no way would he go for someone like her. He was the type of person who could easily get women half his age.

So why was he standing out here all alone? There were hordes of women inside who would kill to have one dance with him.

“Did you come by yourself?” He studied her, his gaze feeling like a physical touch on her cheek.

“I came with my friend. She said the band tonight was something really special, so I figured I shouldn’t miss it.”

“They’re good.”

She cocked her head. “And yet, you’re out here on the deck.”

“You are too.” He grinned, and her insides did a jig.

“True.” She dipped her head, hiding her smile.

He cleared his throat. “I figured the music is so loud, I can hear it just as well out here. Better, actually. I don’t have to feel like I’m in a can of sardines.”

It was such an odd, goofy thing to say. She found herself laughing before she even knew the sound was coming.

“I’m sorry.” She pressed her fingers to her mouth, but it was still hard to stop.

“It’s all right.” His eyes twinkled.

“I didn’t mean to laugh, it was just an...interesting way to put it, that’s all.”

“Are you calling me interesting?” Playfulness danced across his face.

“Your comment was interesting.” She clasped her hands in front of her.

“Shoot. I thought I’d just scored a brownie point.”

A brownie point? Her skin heated up. Was he flirting with her?

It seemed crazy that he would be interested in her. She was so plain. So normal.

And he was a dream come to life.

“You come here a lot?” He leaned one elbow on the railing, his plaid shirt straining against taut muscles.

Her heart fluttered. “Hardly at all. I don’t get out much.”

His eyebrows lifted. “You came tonight.”

“I did.” She looked down. “I guess I figured I’d take a chance and see what might happen.”

“And?”

She studied his face—the little scar next to his eye, the stubble along his cheeks—and heat flared in her chest.

“I’m glad I came out.” She bit the inside of her cheek. It wasn’t like her to be so forward, but when it came down to it,

what did she really have to lose?

This guy wasn't a local. She would recognize him if so. Which meant she'd probably never see him again after tonight.

Why not have some fun and flirt a little? Even if she was rusty at it.

"I'm glad you came out, too." He smiled broader, showing off straight white teeth.

"Did you just get into town?"

Even though she didn't frequent Sweet Pine's few bars, it didn't take much more than the weekly grocery store trip to get to know everyone in town, at least by sight.

"Just yesterday."

Just yesterday? He definitely had to be only passing through. People didn't stay in small-town Wyoming for long. What was he, a truck driver? Some kind of contractor?

To her surprise, she found she didn't want to know. Solid answers killed mysteries, and she was enjoying the moment when you first met someone and there was nothing but potential.

"I'm staying at the hotel. The..." He struggled to remember the name.

She laughed. "It's okay. There's only one hotel here."

His hearty chuckle exploded across the deck, and her knees trembled. Good lord, what was happening to her? She felt like a hormonal teenager on prom night, talking to the cutest guy in school.

"The band sounds good." He glanced at the open doors.

"They do." This close, his cologne tickled her nose. More parts of her that had been hibernating for years yawned and stretched to life.

She wanted to touch him. Feel his hard body against hers.

Which was crazy. This wasn't like her. She hadn't even been attracted to a man since Howard.

So why did she suddenly want to be all over this guy? Was it because she'd gone so long without the touch of a man?

Her pulse quickened, nerves starting to take over. Desperate to fill the air, she looked for something to say. "It's not my kind of event."

He studied her, his gaze so heavy she could nearly feel it on her face. "What is?"

She laughed. "A pasture. The woods."

His whole face lit up with a grin. "I like how that sounds."

"My friend asked me out tonight. She's in there right now—dancing, I'm sure."

"And you're out here, talking to a loner like me. That doesn't seem fun."

She grabbed the railing with two hands and leaned away from it. "Haven't you picked up by now that I'm a loner too?"

His wide chest shook with a little chuckle. "I'm Huck."

Huck.

She wanted to repeat it, test it out in all sorts of cadences and volumes. She couldn't imagine it would ever sound bad.

"Maria." She slipped her palm into his proffered hand, and bubbles of electricity ran up her skin and down low into her belly.

If he felt what she did, he didn't show it. His expression remained easy and calm. He released her hand slowly, and she couldn't stop the slight shiver that raced through her.

"You didn't want to pretend to be someone else for the night and just go along with your friend?"

The electricity still crackling within her, she chose her words carefully. Say the wrong thing and he might get bored with her and run off. "I'm okay with pretending sometimes."

"Like when?" He cocked an eyebrow.

"Like..." She lifted her face to the dark sky. "Right now. I could be pretending to be someone I'm not right now."

He let that sink in, and she hoped she hadn't said the wrong thing. She wasn't used to being this playful, this flirtatious. Maybe she was messing it up.

"I wouldn't know, seeing as this is my first time talking to you."

"Exactly." She dropped her head and looked at him, her shyness and anxiety becoming weaker with every moment.

Yes, she was in uncharted territory. And yes, it was scary.

But maybe she ought to just go with it. Throw caution to the wind and see where the night took her.

That would be so unlike her, but maybe it was exactly what she needed.

A satisfied growl rose from his throat. "How do you know I'm not pretending to be someone else?"

Heat spread across her face. "I also wouldn't know."

"Then it's settled." His gaze drank her up. She felt latched to it, unable to look away. "Tonight, we're both pretending to be someone else."

She shivered. Was that an invitation to step into a wild, lawless land? A place where they could do what they wanted and not be held accountable?

Feverish need exploded in her core.

The song ended, and everyone inside clapped. The lead singer's voice boomed from the speakers. "This next one is for all you lovers out there, so grab that special someone and hold them close."

The first chords of a sweet, almost mournful tune filled the bar, and Maria's mouth went dry. Songs like this always made her uncomfortable.

Standing straight, she adjusted her purse strap. Now was a good time to call it a night. She'd text Lovey when she got to the truck.

"It was nice meeting you, Huck. I..." The next words didn't make it past her lips.

Huck had his hand extended, his eyebrows raised. “Would you care to dance?”

Her pulse sped up. This time, she didn’t even need to think about her response.

Tonight was about taking off the heavy cloak of her life and leaving it on the floor. About stepping into a fantasy.

And no better fantasy existed than the one standing right in front of her.

“I would love to.” She slipped her fingers into his big paw of a hand, and he drew her close.

His spicy scent wrapped around her, and he rested his other hand gently against her lower back. Her heart tripped over itself with enthusiasm.

“Is this all right?” His warm breath raked across her cheekbone.

“It’s more than all right.” She wasn’t even sure he heard her, the music was so loud and her voice so soft.

They didn’t need words, though. They swayed to the music, so in tune with each other’s rhythms it felt like they’d practiced this for days. She wanted to memorize this sensation. This exact moment in time. She wanted to remember every detail at will.

That wide chest, full lips, and thick biceps. His cowboy boots, black jeans, and plaid button-down shirt. All of him.

The hand on her lower back pulled her closer. The other curled around her shoulder and slid down her arm. She gasped. Her pulse raced. His hand felt like a brand on her skin.

She’d felt frozen for so long, incapable of getting close to anyone new. In twenty minutes, Huck had melted her exterior and found his way to the part of her that ached for something more in life.

Was it crazy that she didn’t want this to stop with a dance? That if he were to ask her to leave the bar right then, she would say yes?

Her immediate answer was no. Of course she wouldn't leave with a man she'd just met.

Except...she would if that man were Huck.

He swept his hand up her back, over her neck, and along her cheek. Cupping her face, he gazed down at her, the look in his eyes full of desire. For her.

Her heart was pounding in her chest. She wasn't the only one feeling this way.

He was so out of her league, and yet he was interested in her. Would she really let such an opportunity slip through her fingers? Someone like him would probably never cross her path again.

The song ended and they stopped swaying, but Huck didn't let her go. Instead, the two of them stood there, gazes locked and breathing in the crisp night air. Breathing in this perfect moment in time.

"I don't want this dance to end." He brushed his lips against her hair.

She swallowed. "Me neither."

His mouth claimed hers in a searing kiss, his tongue urgent against her lips, hungry for her.

She kissed him back, her lips moving against his, her tongue snaking into his mouth, a little moan escaping her throat. She'd never been kissed like this. She'd never wanted someone like this.

He gripped her waist, and white-hot desire exploded through her.

A second later, she remembered where they were. Anyone in town could look on to the deck and see the two of them making out.

Breaking the kiss, she stepped back.

"I'm sorry." His lips were still right there, tempting her. "Should I not have done that?"

"No, it's..." She touched her mouth. "I wanted it."

“Good,” he rasped, his heated gaze drinking her in.

Should she do this? Would she regret it tomorrow?

Maybe. She knew for a fact, though, that she would regret not seizing what was in front of her. If she walked away right then, she would always wonder what could have been.

Huck made her feel beautiful and safe. Standing next to him, she felt as if her worries about the ranch were a thousand miles away.

She pushed the words out before she lost courage. “You said you’re staying at the hotel, right?”

The way he looked at her, it was like he wanted to eat her right up. Not only that, but he wanted to take his time and enjoy each and every nibble.

He nodded once, a clear and quick affirmation.

She bit her bottom lip. “How about you show me your room?”

CHAPTER
THREE

This was crazy.
Insane.

Ridiculous.

And any other synonym used to describe something absolutely bonkers.

Yet, going back to Huck's hotel room also felt absolutely perfect. Maria wasn't going to let herself second-guess it.

After all, she wasn't herself tonight. She was someone else—the *pretend* woman who'd met a handsome man on the bar's deck and known she couldn't let him slip through her fingers.

If only Lovey could see her now...

She hadn't told her friend where she was going. Lovey had been in the middle of the dance floor, and Maria hadn't felt up to the lewd winks she was sure her friend would provide if she knew what Maria was about to do.

When Huck had stopped Maria right outside the bar and asked if they could take a picture together with her phone, she'd been confused. He'd taken the selfie and handed her phone back to her with a kiss on her forehead. "So there's a record that you were with me. Call it a safety measure."

She shook her head. "You must think I'm some sort of an idiot, leaving with you like this."

He gave her a gentle smile. "Not a bit. I'm honored you're willing to spend time with me at all. Hopefully this will help

you feel even more secure.”

With a shy nod, she'd sent a text to Lovey—*not* with the picture—telling her friend she was beat and heading out. Lovey would probably figure Maria had decided to plop onto the couch, falling asleep in front of the TV.

Which, Maria could admit, was her normal MO.

But not tonight. Tonight, she was some brave, *pretend* woman.

When they arrived, Huck flicked on the light in the hotel room, illuminating a bed, TV, couch, and some local art—a nice small-town touch.

He gave her a one-shouldered shrug. “Home sweet home. For a little while, at least.”

She wanted to ask and get more details about Huck's life. Why was he in Sweet Pine? What were his long-term plans? What did he do for a living?

But no. That wasn't what this night was about, right?

She put her purse on the couch, nervousness creeping in. Not because she was afraid of him, but for all the other reasons.

It had been way too long since she'd done this. She hadn't been with anyone since Howard died. She'd been too sad, then too busy, and always too exhausted to pursue anything with a man.

And beyond that, what would Huck see when he looked at her? She was fifty, not some young bunny on whom everything was perky and taut.

She had wrinkles. She had pudge. She had—

“Doing okay over there? You know, it's all right if you've changed your mind. We can head back to the bar.”

No. She wasn't going to let nerves take over. Both of them knew exactly why she'd asked to see his room, and she wasn't going to chicken out.

She needed this. Needed the escape. The release. Needed to feel, even if only for one night, that she was a woman who was cared for and cherished, not one who had to claw and work till her hands bled.

“Have *you* changed your mind?” she asked him.

“Hell no.” His voice was low and thick and sent shivers over her skin.

She offered a smile. “Me neither.”

“Would you like a drink?” He gestured at the mini fridge. “I don’t drink much, but I have some beer.”

Instead of answering, she stepped into him and pressed her lips to his.

He froze for just a moment against her, before taking charge. He threaded his fingers into her hair and held her face at an angle that allowed him to plunder her mouth—urging hers to open farther and to give in to him.

Closing her eyes, she did.

He kissed her with a shattering absorption, as if he couldn’t get enough of her.

They were both breathing heavily when he pulled away a few minutes later, his nostrils flaring. “You smell as good as you taste.”

“I...” She couldn’t form words. Couldn’t even think straight.

He pressed his lips against her neck, then her jaw, kissing and sucking and licking wherever his mouth could reach. She shuddered, her skin tingling.

He pulled back, his eyes dark with desire. “Who are you, really?”

She could hardly catch her breath to answer. “What?”

“You said you’re pretending. Is that true?”

He searched her eyes for the answer.

She didn't know how to respond. After all, who was she? She was just someone who wanted a moment to separate from her life. To take a breath and be free of the worries dragging her down.

"I don't know. My name is really Maria." She swallowed, allowing the truth to come out. "Although sometimes, I feel like I don't know who I am anymore. But I promise being here with you isn't hurting anyone."

He tilted his head to the side and studied her. "Even you?"

"Especially me. That part is not pretend."

Huck nodded. "Good."

She looked into his eyes, the emotions swirling there so powerful she could almost see what he was thinking. Could feel his passion and acceptance thrumming in her own chest.

She couldn't hold it in any longer. Lowering her chin, she took a deep breath. "I want to be happy again."

"You can. You can be happy again."

Her eyes closed. "And I want to be with you."

"Then let's be together. Tonight, real life doesn't matter."

She lowered her forehead against his chest and nodded. She didn't want to talk about herself or remember her worries or even think. She just wanted to *feel*. To be swept away.

Pressed flush together, Huck walked her backward to the bed. They collapsed onto the mattress, his hands in her hair and their lips locked once more.

The hard angles of his body pressed against hers. Pleasure swept through her, and she let out a pained, hungry cry. Huck swallowed it up, his tongue diving deeper into her mouth.

Giving herself over to the moment, she held his face in her hands, his rough stubble tickling her palms.

His mouth left hers, and he kissed her cheek. Her eyelids. Her nose. She shivered and arched into him, her movements involuntary.

He gripped her waist in his hands and slid them down to her hips. As if she weighed nothing, he lifted her onto him, where their bodies aligned and pressed together. Her legs fell on either side of his waist, and he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close for another kiss.

And then reality hit.

The lights were on in the room. Which meant he would see each and every part of her.

Breaking the kiss, she sat up. Shoot.

“Is something wrong?” Huck swept his big palms up and down her sides.

Her inhale shook her chest. “Um, can we turn out the lights?”

The pause that followed seemed to last forever.

Oh God. The slim wrap dress did a good job of contouring her figure, but he’d already had his hands on her... He had to know how much pudge it was hiding.

She really shouldn’t have gone for that second double chocolate muffin earlier today...and all the other times.

“We can...” His words were slow. “If it makes you more comfortable.”

“I—I think it would.”

He squinted as he gazed up at her. “Okay. But I want you to know I’m not a boy. I know what a woman who’s lived a full life looks like, and it doesn’t bother me. It’s what I like.”

Embarrassment flooded her. “It’s just... I want this to be good for both of us.”

“It will be. I promise.” He shifted, his gaze still on hers. “There’s nothing about your body that turns me off. I like a woman with substance. I noticed you the moment you walked into the bar.”

Her lips twisted in pleasure. “You saw me come in?”

He growled low in his throat. “I watched you the whole evening, trying to work up the nerve to talk to you.”

Something in her gut relaxed. He seemed so genuine, so sweet and tender.

Was it an act? Was this *pretend* Huck or *real* Huck?

Not that it mattered. She was never going to know. This was one night only.

She would take it.

But as he reached for the tie on her dress, she felt like she had to warn him.

“I have horses, so I have calluses.” Her voice cracked. She thrust her hand in front of her face. “And a bruise from a hammer today.”

He gently kissed her sore thumb, and warmth settled in her belly.

“You know what hard work is.” He turned his hand over to show her the thick calluses on his palm. “Me too.”

So he wasn’t a truck driver. And if he was a contractor or something of that sort, his job involved physical labor.

She tried not to wonder about it too much. There was no sense in digging for details.

The question must have been written on her face, though.

“I was in the rodeo.” He laced his fingers through hers. “I know a thing or two about horses.”

She bit into her smile. This was probably part of their *pretend* game, his making up this detail to relate to her. Even if it wasn’t true, she appreciated the effort. “A Wyoming cowboy. I like it. Put your hands on me, cowboy.”

He took her invitation seriously.

His mouth found her neck, where he sucked and nibbled until she couldn’t keep her moans back. He slid his fingers underneath her dress, then her bra, and she shivered at the feel of his rough palms on her bare flesh.

She wanted to feel him everywhere. She sat up, pulling off her dress and tossing it to the side. Huck watched her, his eyes pools of lust.

He hummed a primal sound of appreciation as he stared at her body. Every concern she'd had about how she might look to him disappeared at that sound. Unbuttoning his shirt, he took it off and flung it on top of her dress. Several white scars twisted across his chest, like a map of rivers.

He caught her looking. "Rodeo."

She licked her lips. "Oh."

What else could she say? True or pretend, she wasn't sure. And it didn't matter.

Their eyes locked, he stood and ripped off the rest of his clothes before rejoining her on the bed. His eyes were dark and intense as he studied her.

Something about this man—the way he held himself, the way he moved, the way he kissed and touched—hit her deep.

He was powerful and gentle, strong and yet tender.

She held her breath and waited to wake up from the dream.

It didn't happen, though. The only thing that happened was Huck taking her, claiming her, with the force of a man who knew exactly what he wanted—*her*.

She'd wanted to feel? That was all she could do now.

Pretend or real didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was this moment and the handsome cowboy in her arms.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Even before he opened his eyes, Huck had a smile on his face.

He felt it stretching across his lips, settling deep into his soul. For the first time in a long while, he wasn't waking up disoriented, heart hammering, heavy to his core. Stretching, he reached across the bed, his hands instinctively searching for Maria's warm curves.

But she wasn't there.

Sitting up straight, he looked around the hotel room. Had she gone to the bathroom?

But no. The door was open, that room dark.

A rock formed in his gut. She'd left.

That familiar heaviness returned. He'd just had the best night of his life, only to wake up and find the lovely woman had left without so much as a goodbye. And it didn't take a genius to figure out why.

Throwing off the covers, he tossed his legs over the side of the bed. The scar on his outer thigh glared at him, an ugly reminder of his greatest mistake.

He closed his eyes. *Shit.*

Of course a woman as amazing as Maria wouldn't want to stick around and get to know someone with a gimpy leg. She'd probably had trouble even looking at him last night, though she'd hid it well.

Scrubbing at his face, he limped into the shower. Memories of their time together rained down around him. He couldn't stop seeing her smile. Hearing her laugh.

He'd been stupid to get his hopes up, to think their one-night stand might turn into something else. After all, she'd suggested she was only playing pretend. Maybe Maria wasn't even her real name.

A sound made him cock his head. Wiping soap from his face, he listened. Was that...?

There it was again. Another knock on the door.

Had Maria come back?

Turning off the shower, he grabbed a towel and hustled through the hotel room, leaving a trail of water in his wake. He flung the door open to a predawn morning, the first-floor walkway still lit by exterior lights.

Instead of Maria, a tall, loose-limbed man in a black cowboy hat stood there, his thumbs in his belt loops.

"Cole."

"Nice towel. Really brings out your eyes." Huck's friend looked him up and down. "Were you expecting someone else?"

"Uh..." He really didn't want to answer that question.

"It was blueberry muffin day at the coffee shop. I had to come to town for one. Figured I'd swing by and see if you'd like a ride to the ranch for your first day. If you're not ready, though..."

Huck hurried to find his words. "Give me five minutes, and I'll be ready."

Cole nodded. "I'll be out here."

Closing the door, Huck hurried to dress. He had a whole new day ahead of him. A new job. A new life.

That should have been plenty enough to keep him distracted from thoughts of Maria, and yet as he passed the

bed, he caught a whiff of her citrus scent. The fragrance nearly brought him to his knees.

Pull it together, Samuels. You didn't come here for a woman, and she's obviously not interested.

Dressed and teeth brushed, he joined Cole outside. The first bits of gray had already invaded the darkness. It would be a late start for ranch work.

"I'm sorry you're having to stay at the hotel." Cole led the way to his truck. "Good news, though. Your cabin will be ready later tonight. You can move in soon as you like."

"I appreciate it." Huck climbed into the passenger's seat and jammed his hat onto his still-damp hair.

Cole silently handed him a paper bag with a muffin in it. Huck nodded his thanks but put the bag on the seat between them. He didn't have much of an appetite.

Cole shot him a glance as he drove out of the parking lot. "You doing okay?"

"I'm doing good." He cleared his throat. "You?"

"Well as I can be. You didn't..."

Huck looked at him.

Cole smiled, but it looked strained. "If you need help with anything, if you want to talk...just let me know."

Huck's gaze dropped to his hands. The same hands that had been all over Maria just hours before. "I appreciate it."

Cole nodded, his gaze lingering in the rearview mirror. "I'm sure we'll find a way to keep you busy."

Busy enough that he felt like a normal person again?

If only. Buckling his seat belt, Huck stared out the window at the rising sun.

Cole turned on the radio and flipped through the stations. "What did you do last night? Get into anything?"

"I went to a bar. Heard a band." Did he really want to say anything more than that?

Nope. Cole was one of his oldest friends, but to share what happened with Maria was too personal. Plus, he had her to think of. She'd probably be embarrassed if word about what she'd done with him got out.

Did she live in Sweet Pine? Would he run into her at some point? Would she look the other way and act like they didn't know each other?

Maybe she'd only been traveling through. Maybe he'd never see her again.

“At the Barnyard?”

Cole's question jerked him back to the moment, away from thoughts of the brown-eyed beauty.

“I think that's what it's called.” A pain ran up the side of Huck's injured leg, but he didn't rub at it. Didn't want to look weak in front of someone.

Cole took a turn, and they passed a wooden sign—“Vasko Ranch” painted in sprawling black letters. The truck kicked up dust as they bumped down the dirt driveway, and Cole's cattle ranch came into view.

Dark red-brown cows dotted the pastures, with thick woods in the distance. A two-story house sat at the end of the drive, its wraparound porch hosting several swinging benches. Past the house, footpaths led to barns, outbuildings, and cabins.

Cole slowed down, and they passed a large corral holding several horses. A silky brown one shook its head, its mane catching the morning light.

Warmth spread through Huck. Coming here had definitely been the right choice.

Parking the truck, Cole killed the engine. “Welcome home.”

Home. Huck's home had been Arizona, in a town where he'd spent the majority of his life. When things had turned upside down, he'd found the familiarity of the place to be suffocating.

Which was why he was here. He needed to breathe again. To feel like there was still some world out there not blanketed in disappointments and pain.

As his boots hit the ground, he felt like just maybe he'd finally found the right place.

"Well, look who's here." A man came down the front porch steps, coffee cup in hand. The rising sun obscured his face, making Huck blink and shield his eyes.

"Harvey?"

"Damn right." Harvey clapped him on the shoulder and pulled him in for a hug.

Huck's chest shook with laughter. "What are you doing here?"

"Dipping in for some breakfast." Cole grinned. "Giving my housekeeper a hard time."

"A hard time?" Harvey shook his head. "What, me? She loves me."

"I didn't know you were visiting town," Huck said, still trying to catch up.

"I'm not. I live here in Sweet Pine." He ran his fingers through his hair. Time had turned his light blond to a soft silver, and though he had a few wrinkles around his eyes, all of his boyhood spirit was still there.

"Harvey is running trail rides outside of town." Cole leaned against one of the porch's pillars.

"You don't say." Huck playfully punched Harvey's shoulder. "That's great, man."

Harvey shrugged. "It gets me out. Gets me moving. There's nothing like sleeping under the stars. And what about you?" He jutted his chin at Huck. "When Cole told me you were the new foreman, I said he hired the perfect man for the job."

Huck rubbed the back of his neck. He hoped that was the case. Truth be told, he was a bit rusty when it came to cattle

and horses. Running a bait and tackle shop for years meant he hadn't gotten much hands-on time recently.

He hoped his years growing up and roping cattle on his grandfather's ranch had worked their way into his DNA. He had a feeling they had.

The only thing he was really worried about was the thing he couldn't change.

His damn leg.

Harvey whistled. "How long has it been? Four years? Five?"

"Six. We saw each other when you came through Tempe."

Harvey's eyes sparkled. "And twelve years since you left the rodeo."

Shit. Had it really been that long?

For most of his twenties and all of his thirties, the rodeo life had been everything. Especially once he'd joined the traveling rodeo Cole and Harvey had also been a part of.

"Those were some times, huh?" Cole shook his head. "I don't think any of us realized how quickly things would end."

"Come on, now." Harvey finished his coffee. "Don't start with the 'Best Years of Our Life' Shit. We still have plenty ahead of us."

"And I have plenty to do around this ranch. I need to show my new foreman the ropes." Cole headed up the porch steps. "I assume you didn't drink all the coffee, Eaton."

"I can't make any promises. Take this in for me, will you?" He handed Cole his empty mug.

Huck chuckled. Some things never changed. Those two bickered like an old married couple, yet when it came down to it, they had each other's backs through thick and thin.

Cole turned to Huck. "I'll introduce you to the crew. Most of them are already out in the fields or barns, but let's get you some breakfast first."

“Who is that?” Harvey’s eyebrows knit together as he looked down the driveway.

A beat-up truck pulled onto the grass next to the several other vehicles already parked there. The door opened, and out walked Huck’s biggest obsession in decades.

“Maria,” he said before he could stop himself.

CHAPTER
FIVE

At first, he thought maybe he was imagining it. Had Maria walked out his door that morning, only to now show up at his new job?

The chances of that seemed so minuscule. Then again, it was a small town.

Did this make him lucky, or shit out of luck?

He couldn't decide. Of course he wanted to see Maria again. Knowing why she'd likely left him, though, was a knife to his gut.

His heart climbed into his throat as she walked toward them. Though her strides were long and purposeful, she kept her face down, a grimace on.

"Morning, Maria." Cole came down off the porch. "You're just in time to join us for breakfast."

She smiled at him. "I already ate, but thank you."

She nodded at Harvey, then turned to Huck. Her jaw dropped, and he realized she hadn't recognized him until right then.

"This is Huck." Cole clapped him on the back. "My new foreman."

Her throat rolled with a nervous swallow. "Nice to meet you."

Harvey looked between the two of them. "Hold up. Huck said 'Maria' when you came up. Do you two already know

each other?”

Alarm flashed across Maria’s face. “Um...”

Huck jumped in. “We met at the bar last night. Very briefly.” He drew on his inner actor and smiled. “I don’t blame you if you don’t remember me.”

Relief flooded her eyes, but then she quickly composed herself. “It’s coming back to me now. Nice seeing you again.”

“You too.” He touched the brim of his hat, hoping his hands weren’t shaking too much.

She obviously didn’t want anyone to know about what had happened between the two of them. Which was fine. He knew how to keep a secret.

And honestly, if this was going to be the first run-in of many, he wanted to forget about their one night together. Not because it had been bad, but because it had been so damn good and he could never get it back.

“I’ll get the torque wrench.” Cole headed for the sheds at the east end of his property. “Be right back.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.” She rubbed her palms together and looked everywhere but at the two men in front of her.

“I should take off myself.” Harvey scratched the stubble on his jaw and stretched. “I have some tourists coming in for a trail ride this morning. Hey, Maria. Has Wildfire shown up yet?”

Her shoulders slumped forward, and she seemed to become twice as small. “No. She hasn’t.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for her.”

“I appreciate it, Harvey. Thank you.”

He bumped his fist against Huck’s. “See you later. It’s good to have you here.”

Huck nodded, still feeling too twisted up to speak. He hated it, but having Maria close made him lose most of his

brain capacity. All he could do was focus on her. Her smell. Her soft lips. The way she shifted her weight from side to side.

Waving two fingers, Harvey got behind the wheel of his truck and took off. Which meant it was only Huck and Maria.

Alone.

Just the two of them.

She clasped her hands behind her back. “You’re the new foreman?”

He cleared his throat. “That’s me.”

“Oh. Interesting.” She briefly glanced at him before looking away. “I thought... With all that talk about pretending...” She shook her head.

“It’s okay. I know. Honestly, I figured you probably gave me a fake name.”

She cringed. “I’ve never done something like...that. Like what we did.”

“Do you regret it?”

Her chocolate eyes found his, and it was like falling into a deep well of passion. He never wanted to look away so long as he lived.

A few seconds passed, and she still hadn’t answered him. He dug his boot’s toe into a tuft of grass. “It would have been nice if you’d stayed around longer.”

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m so sorry.”

He shrugged. “It’s all right. I get it.”

“No, it’s not all right. I felt so guilty, I couldn’t stand it. I really am sorry.”

Guilty that she’d slept with him? Or guilty that she’d left afterward?

He was afraid if he said anything more, he’d make things worse. For now, he was happy she was at least talking to him.

“So...” He cocked his head at her. “You do live in Sweet Pine, and your name is Maria.”

“Yes.” Her laughter, like a bubbling creek, lit up his soul. “I have a small horse ranch just a few miles down the road.”

“You don’t say?” He shouldn’t like that news. Maria didn’t want anything more to do with him.

Still, he couldn’t help himself.

“Yup. North of here.” She ran her fingers over her head and along her hair, and the hunger crept through him.

Seeing him watching, she dropped her hand. “When I left, I assumed you didn’t want me there in the morning. Isn’t that how one-night stands go?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had one before.”

She held his gaze, and he got the sense she didn’t fully believe him. It was true, though. He’d always been a relationship man, although it had been quite a while since he’d found himself in one of those.

The rodeo had made it hard to create long-lasting connections, and he hadn’t been interested in any of the buckle bunnies who followed them around. After returning to his Arizona hometown, he’d attempted to date some, but there hadn’t exactly been a booming population of single women his age.

Before moving to Wyoming, he’d resigned himself to the possibility that he would likely spend the rest of his life alone.

And then she had walked onto the Barnyard’s deck.

It was stupid. Crazy. They barely knew each other, and all the signals Maria had sent indicated she wasn’t looking for a relationship.

So why did it feel like there was a magnet in his chest, pushing him straight toward her?

He stepped closer to her, and she tilted her head back, pupils widening.

“I...wanted to see you again. Badly,” he murmured.

Her lips parted in a soft exhale. “I-I did too. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t.”

“I did want you there this morning.”

He cupped her elbows and drew her in, inhaling the cinnamon and lemon scent of her hair. He had the strongest urge to lean in and kiss her. Lightly at first, and then with more pressure. To see if her lips were still as soft as they had felt last night.

His fingers trailed up her bare arm, where goose bumps peppered her skin. As he reached her shoulder, she gasped slightly.

“Huck...” She licked her lips.

“Yes?”

She leaned closer to him, intensity burning in her eyes. Moving one hand to her waist, he breathed her in.

Good God, he could get addicted to this woman so easily. Hell, maybe he already had.

“It wasn’t anything you did.” She spoke in the softest whisper. “You seem amazing. I left because I... It just seemed best.”

His next inhale cleansed his body and soul. So she hadn’t left because of his bad leg.

Though it had been his go-to assumption, he realized now that it didn’t align with what he’d seen of her so far. She had a gentle, open spirit. She really didn’t seem like the kind of person to turn their back on someone because of a disability.

“I finally found it!” Cole called.

The two of them stepped away from each other as if they’d been shocked. Lowering his face so that his hat brim hid it, Huck shoved his hands into his pockets.

“One of the new hands must have put it in the wrong spot.” Cole handed Maria the torque wrench.

“Thank you so much. I’m sorry for having to borrow it... again.” Her cheeks turned a deep crimson.

“Anytime you need it. Neighbors need to help each other out.”

Her lips drew thin. “Unfortunately, I seem to need more help than the average neighbor.”

Her phone rang, and she scrambled to pull it from her jeans. “I’m sorry. I should answer this.”

She swiped the screen. “Yes, this is Maria.”

Whoever was on the other end said something she didn’t like. Her face scrunched up, and her shoulders dropped. “Sure... Yes. See you then... Thank you.”

Chewing on her lip, she hung up. “Thank you again, Cole.” Her gaze drifted to Huck. “It was nice seeing you.”

“You too.” It took a Herculean effort for him to keep his hands to himself. “I hope to see you again soon.”

She nodded, but she wasn’t looking at him. The moment they’d shared right before Cole had shown up was gone. Tool in hand, she hurried to her truck.

“Poor woman.” Cole watched her drive away.

Huck snapped his head in Cole’s direction. “Why is that?”

He sighed. “She’s come upon some really hard times the last five years. Her husband, Howard, ran up a shit-ton of debt.”

Husband?

Huck’s stomach lurched. “She’s married?”

Had he slept with a married woman? He wasn’t the most righteous man by any measurement, but adultery would be sinking too low.

“He passed five years ago.”

Huck checked his sigh of relief. At least that was one thing he didn’t need to feel burdened with.

Cole went on, staring at the horses. “It wasn’t until after his death that she found out about all the debt. Howard was kind, but if you ask me, his trying to protect her by keeping all that secret was a mistake. Course, he didn’t count on not being able to fix things before his heart attack.”

Maria's truck was long gone, but Huck stared at the bend in the driveway it had slipped around. The story made him feel twice as heavy. A woman as special as she was didn't deserve such bad luck.

"She sold all of the cattle." Cole walked up the porch steps, and Huck followed. "And some of the land. She's been hanging on to what she has left, though, and it's not looking good."

"She seems like a tough woman." He wasn't sure what else to say without giving away what was happening between the two of them.

"She is." Cole grinned. "After what she put up with from Howard, I'm sure she can handle just about anything."

"I'm sure you're right." He had no doubt of that.

At the screen door, Cole turned to look at him. "She keeps to herself mostly, but she could use some friends."

Heat simmered in Huck's chest. He didn't want to be her friend. He wanted to be her protector. The person who made her smile again. The man who had the honor of worshipping her body.

Maria had been through some tough times, but so had he. In that way, maybe they were kindred souls.

Regardless, he knew for sure that he had to get to know her better. He needed her in his life.

CHAPTER
SIX

M aria had known as soon as the bank called and asked her to come down in person that the news wouldn't be good. How could it be when the loan officer wouldn't just tell her their decision over the phone?

Sitting in a straight-backed chair in Stephen Robles's office, she rubbed her ring finger. It was an anxious tic left over from the days when she wore her wedding ring.

Honestly, she wasn't even sure why she no longer wore the ring. It wasn't as if she was looking for a man. Or as if she expected any quality ones to be interested in her.

Except...

She swallowed. Huck seemed so genuine in his affections, so honest and sweet.

Could he be the real deal?

The door opened behind her, pulling her out of her thoughts.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." Stephen took a seat behind his desk and adjusted his tie. "It's been a busy morning."

"Of course." She forced a smile. Waiting a whole day for their meeting had been awful, and at this point, she felt like she might crawl out of her skin.

Stephen set his clasped hands on the desk. "I'll get right to it, Maria. The bank won't approve another loan."

Her last iota of hope sank faster than an anchor. "Oh."

Of course they wouldn't. Stephen had already pulled some strings to get her the initial loan, and since her ranch was barely pulling in money, why would the bank take a chance on her?

She looked at her lap, tears collecting on her lashes.

"There are still other options, though." His voice was painfully kind. He felt sorry for her, and she hated it.

She blinked back the tears, refusing to cry in front of him. "What options?"

"There is always Upton Development." He passed her a brochure.

She sniffed and studied the image on the front, white condos blocking out the sky, manicured green hedges lining the walkways. The picture was probably supposed to look cheery and enticing, but it made her stomach turn.

"Upton approached me a few months ago." She slid the brochure back to him. "I'm not selling any more land."

What she had left was only a fraction of the acres she and Howard had bought when they'd moved to Wyoming decades ago. Most of the land she'd had to sell in order to keep her head above water.

Call it pride or stubbornness, but at this point, she would rather drown than lose another square foot. Sky Wide was her home, and she wouldn't be leaving it until they carried her out in a coffin.

"Are you okay?" Stephen's voice was soft.

"Fine." She sat straighter, her resolve strengthening even more.

"I know things have been rough. This is where Upton Development comes in." When Maria shot him a warning glance, he held up his hands. "If you're concerned about selling to them, don't be. They're a reputable company. I can vouch for them myself."

He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "I'm not the only one who has recommended your land to them. It's likely

they'll pay a premium, what with the river going through the property.”

He gestured to the brochure. “With that money, you'd be able to get back on your feet and save enough to invest in your business again.”

Part of her longed for the peace of mind such an arrangement would bring. But without the land, she'd have to start over somewhere else. She'd have to buy another piece of land—and one not as good as what she had.

Plus, the ground her daughter had taken her first steps on would be gone. Memories like that were more precious than any amount of money.

“Think about it.” Stephen put the brochure away.

She didn't need to. The answer would always be no.

“Isn't there anything else I can do?” She leaned forward, desperation clawing at her chest.

“You could file for bankruptcy.”

“There's no way I'm going to do that.” She shook her head, a renewed sense of purpose surging through her.

“Then I'm sorry, but you're going to have to figure something else out.”

“I will.” She swallowed, her throat sore and raspy. “Thank you for trying, Stephen. I really appreciate it.”

He nodded solemnly. “If you need anything else, let me know.”

“Thank you.” She nodded and forced the tears back. Crying never helped anything.

She stood and walked to the door. Once her hand was on the knob, Stephen spoke again. “If you decide not to sell to Upton, I will understand. Just remember that it's an option.”

One that hurt too much to accept.

Her heart heavy, she walked down the hall and outside. Her truck was parked half a block away, giving her a bit of

time to pull herself together.

The sun was shining, and it was a beautiful spring day, but she felt chilled to the bone. For a moment, she paused on the sidewalk. What would she do now? How would she pay her bills, let alone keep her ranch? How could she pay her one hired hand?

Climbing into her truck, she pulled out her phone and found a missed call from her daughter. She must have forgotten to turn the ringer volume up after waking that morning. Closing her eyes, she leaned back in the seat and called Stacy back. After a few rings, she picked up.

“Hi, Mom. How are you?”

“Hey, Stacy.” Maria drew a breath, gathering the will to fight. “Have you and Ollie thought any more about the wedding date?”

“We’ve been talking about it.” Her response was slow. Stacy had always been perceptive, even as a small child. It was hard for Maria to hide anything from her. “What’s wrong? Did something happen?” Stacy’s voice was already strained.

“I requested a second loan from the bank, and they won’t grant it.” She held her body tight, refusing to let the panic show in her voice. “The loan officer’s advice is to either sell the ranch or file for bankruptcy.”

“I’m sorry.” Stacy’s tone was soft, the sympathy clear. “I know you don’t want to do that, but maybe you should sell.”

“No.” She shook her head, even though Stacy couldn’t see it.

“You could come live here with us.”

In Boulder? In a small apartment that barely fit the two humans and two cats who already lived there?

“I can’t do that.”

“Then you can get your own place. There are some cute apartments for rent down the street.”

Maria cringed. Even though her daughter shared Maria's love for the outdoors, Stacy had more of a tolerance for city life than her mother. Stacy had been living and working in Boulder for the last five years, and it worked out fine for her.

For Maria, it was a completely different story. Being around that many people made her feel like she was suffocating.

"I'll figure something out."

"Bankruptcy?" Stacy's voice pitched.

No. Not bankruptcy. Something else.

She just didn't know what yet.

Which was why she needed to get back to the ranch and study the books. Maybe she'd overlooked something, and, by some miracle, she had more money or fewer expenses than she thought.

"I'll take care of it." She fished her keys out of her purse. "Don't you worry about it."

"Okay." Stacy didn't sound convinced. "Do you think you'll still be able to come here for Thanksgiving?"

The holiday was months away, and Maria didn't have the capacity to think about anything other than the right here, right now. She only had one child, though, and one who was a damn good kid and an amazing woman.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world. I love you."

"Love you too, Mom."

They hung up, and Maria planted both hands on the steering wheel and stared at the car parked in front of her. She needed to drive off. Needed to get back home and look at those books. Talk to Jed about switching the horses' feed.

Yet she couldn't seem to get her foot off the brake. She was frozen, the crushing weight of reality pinning her in place.

She had told Stacy that she would figure it out, but who was she kidding? She was up shit's creek so far that she couldn't even remember the way back.

She'd put up a good fight. Done everything she could. But it didn't matter. Sooner or later, she would lose the ranch.

Dropping her head onto the steering wheel, she finally let the tears flow.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

“F uck.” Red-hot pain shot up Huck’s leg, and he stumbled. The grocery bag in his arm hit the ground, cans and vegetables rolling from it.

Gritting his teeth, he bent down and picked up a pepper. The action didn’t come without a price. His leg throbbed in protest, but he ignored it and continued to pick up his groceries.

Even worse than dropping his groceries was having it happen on the sidewalk in the middle of town, where anyone and everyone could see it happen. That meant that they would pity him. And if they pitied him, they thought less of him.

“You missed one.” Maria stood at the curb, a can of beans in hand.

His stomach did a somersault. So, this could get worse.

Heat flooded his face, and he cleared his throat. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” She bent down and grabbed a head of lettuce. “I’m glad I was in the right place at the right time.”

He accepted the lettuce, wishing he had a hole to crawl into and die. Maria had said she’d left the hotel because of herself, not him, but that little voice in the back of his head was making him doubt the veracity of that claim.

With his bum leg, how could anyone not be turned off by him?

“You’re welcome. Well, um, I guess I’ll see you around.” She took a step back, and he really looked at her for the first time. Her eyes were red and puffy, tear streaks lining her face.

His chest constricted. “What’s wrong?”

Had someone hurt her? His hands tightened around his grocery bag so that the paper crinkled. If anyone had done her even an ounce of damage...

She pressed her hands to her cheeks and looked away. “What? Oh. It’s just allergies. Spring, you know?”

“Uh-huh.” He dipped his head and inspected her. “You want some advice? If you want to get away with lying, consider making eye contact.”

Her jaw dropped, and he instantly wished he’d kept his mouth shut. He was trying to win her over, not push her away. Unfortunately, he was painfully out of practice when it came to talking to women.

“Maria!” A woman dressed in leggings crossed the street toward them, her high ponytail swinging. “I’m so glad I saw you!”

All the muscles in Maria’s face shifted as she composed herself. Huck knew the move all too well. He, too, was constantly putting on a facade, trying to prove to everyone that life wasn’t getting him down.

“Hi, Clara Mae. How are you?”

“Oh, crazy busy. You know how it is.” She planted a hand on her cocked hip.

Maria smiled sunnily, though he still knew it was an act. “Huck, this is Clara Mae. She runs a small school in town.”

The two of them shook hands, and Clara Mae eyed him with interest. “And you’re new to Sweet Pine.”

It wasn’t a question. Half the people in the grocery store had stopped to inquire about him. Evidently, new people didn’t show up that often.

“That’s right. I’m working at Vasko Ranch.”

“Lovely.” Clara Mae smiled with a mouthful of teeth that must have cost tens of thousands of dollars. She turned to Maria. “Listen, I want to run this idea by you. A lot of my parents have expressed interest in the therapeutic value of horses, which I’m sure you know all about.”

“Er...” Maria shifted her weight from side to side.

“I would love to set something up with you. Maybe bring the kids out to your place weekly so they can ride and learn to take care of the horses. What do you say? I’d pay well.”

Maria’s eyes widened. “How many horses would you need?”

“Let’s see.” Clara Mae silently counted on her fingers. “Twelve total.”

“Twelve.” Maria searched the ground, her mental wheels turning. “I can do that.”

“Excellent!” The other woman threw her arms around Maria. “I’ll call you this week about the details.”

“Sounds good. Thanks.” She waved as Clara Mae trotted off.

“That sounds nice,” Huck offered.

“Yeah.” She nodded. “It is.”

Her whole demeanor changed after the conversation with Clara Mae. If Cole’s info on Maria was accurate, then no doubt these lessons would bring in some much-needed money.

What else did she need, though? He could tell she was carrying a heavy burden. If only he could shoulder some of it for her.

“I should get going. It was nice seeing you.” She stepped off the curb.

His heart felt all knotted up and achy. He ought to say something. Something witty. Something charming. Something that would make her stay.

Right then, though, he felt about as clever as a rock. Standing there in front of the grocery store, he watched her

climb into her truck and start the engine.

Or...try to start the engine.

She turned her key a second time, but nothing happened. The engine didn't even let out so much as a putter. Her face contorted, her frustration so palpable it flooded the street.

Was this an act of God?

Huck had never believed in such a thing, but hell, maybe for once, things were finally going his way.

Trying not to grin, he went up to her window. "Need a hand?"

She dropped her head against the seat and blew out a breath. "Are you any good with engines?"

He scratched his head. "Uh, no. I'm not. But one of Cole's ranch hands is. I heard him talking about it at breakfast this morning."

She shook her head. "This is the last thing I need right now."

"I know. How about I give you a ride home, and then I'll send Michael over here to look at your truck?"

"Are you sure? Don't you have work to get back to?"

"I'm off early today. We all rotate so we get off at different times on different days." He nodded down the street. "My truck is right over there."

"Sure." A sigh shook her whole body. "Thank you."

He led her to his truck, where he opened the passenger side door for her.

"Thank you." Her fingers brushed his arm as she got in, and heat flared in his lower belly.

"You're just past Cole's, right?" He pulled onto the main street and headed out of town.

She nodded. "Only a few miles."

His truck was ten years old and not in the best condition, but it was good enough to get him where he needed to be on

time. He switched on the radio, which he typically didn't bother to do when driving alone, and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. The music didn't seem to help. Maria was so tense, he could have cracked her like a whip.

"Three days in a row that we've run into each other." He glanced over at her. "What do you think it means?"

She chuckled, the sound instantly making him feel lighter. "It probably means that this is a small town... But I like that it's happening."

Their eyes briefly locked, and his breath hitched in his chest. "I do too."

She rubbed her palms against her jeans. "I meant what I said yesterday. I didn't leave because of your leg. I would never—something like that doesn't determine how I see someone, or even if I want... Uh, if I..."

Her cheeks puffed up, and she exhaled heartily.

"It's all right." He nodded. "I appreciate your saying that."

"It's hard for me. I hadn't... I hadn't been with a man since my husband died five years ago." She squeezed her eyes shut. "God, that's embarrassing."

"No. It's normal." He wished he could reach over and hug her. Even if he weren't driving, though, she might not have wanted that. "Was it a mistake? I understand if it was, and if you'd like me to give you some space now."

He was saying the right words, but secretly he prayed for a "no." The last thing he wanted was space between the two of them.

"I like you, Huck." Her voice was soft. Quiet. "That's a lot for me to process. Especially right now."

"I understand." He wished he had more information. He couldn't help fix her troubles unless he knew the specifics about them.

They'd only just met, though. He couldn't expect her to trust him to that degree. Or to heap the work onto his plate—even though he would gladly welcome it.

“It’s up here on the left.” She pointed at a red mailbox.

Had they reached her place so soon? The drive had gone by in a flash. In a minute, Maria would climb out of his truck. Even if he saw her again tomorrow, that would be too long to wait.

“Want to see the place?” she offered as he turned into the driveway.

His grin stretched ear to ear. “I would love to.”

Several horses ran in the pasture to the right, kicking up their hind legs and playing with one another. Aside from the house, a stable and a number of barns dotted the landscape.

“You just have horses, right?” He parked at the end of the driveway.

“Uh-huh. It used to be a cattle ranch, but after Howard died, I sold all the cattle and focused on horses. They’re what I always wanted to work with anyway, ever since I was a kid. Now I board eight of them, and the other four are mine. I give lessons after school and on the weekends.”

It was probably the most he’d heard her say in one breath. He could have listened to her talk for the rest of the day and into the night. Clearly, being around the horses meant she was back in her comfort zone.

They got out of the truck, Maria leading the way to the fence. The horses trotted over, excited to see her, and she rubbed a palomino’s nose.

“There’s the house, as you can see.” She nodded at it, a simple, one-story type. Big enough for a family of four or five.

Did she get lonely living in it all by herself?

“I raised my daughter here.” It was almost as if she’d read his mind. “She’s not sentimental about it, but I am. It’s one of the reasons I can’t...” She trailed off, looking at the grass.

He didn’t get the chance to ask where she was going with that thought, because a young man barely out of high school emerged from the stable. Seeing the two of them, he waved and walked over.

“Hey, Jed.” Maria smiled. “This is Huck. He’s Cole’s new foreman.” She looked to Huck. “Jed helps me out around here.”

“Sweet.” Jed shook Huck’s hand a little too firmly. “Good to meet you.”

The boy turned to Maria. “I fixed your screen door.”

Her mouth dropped in surprise. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know, but I wanted to.” He wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and beamed at Maria like she’d hung the moon.

“Well, it’s very sweet of you. I don’t want to keep you from home too long, though.”

“Naw.” He shook his head. “I’d much rather be here.”

Discomfort stirred in Huck’s belly. He knew a crush when he saw one. Jed was young enough to be Maria’s son, but that didn’t matter. She was twice as beautiful as the women half her age.

Could Maria be interested in Jed?

Huck couldn’t really see it. She was a woman with decades of life experience, and Jed was a kid barely past puberty.

Still. He was a good-looking kid. Strong and healthy, too.

Huck swallowed hard. He knew he had no claim over Maria, but he couldn’t help but feel jealous all the same.

“Well, thank you. You’re a lifesaver.” She pulled her hair into a ponytail, and Jed’s gaze lingered on her neck. “You should head out, though. Go and take it easy.”

“Sure. I can be in at seven tomorrow.”

She hesitated, and Huck could nearly see the burden return to sit on her chest. “All right.”

“See you then.” With a wink, Jed strode across the grass to a muddy truck with unnecessarily large wheels.

Huck didn’t even wait until Jed had turned onto the road to take Maria by the hips and back her up against the fence. Her

breath caught in her throat, and her gaze drank him in. “I want you.” Huck’s voice was low. Urgent.

She didn’t respond, but he could feel her desire for him sparking like lightning. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. Huck leaned in to kiss her, heat surging through him as their lips grazed.

He slid his hands down her sides, over her waist, and around to her back. He ached for more—to touch every part of her—but he would let her take the lead. Inviting him to her ranch didn’t mean she wanted to have sex with him again.

The little noises she was making, though? Those soft moans and gasps? Good God. She was giving him enough fodder for years’ worth of wet dreams.

He still wouldn’t push it, though. She was too precious to make that sort of mistake with.

Releasing her, he stepped back and pulled the pen he’d used to check off items on his grocery list from his pocket. “This is my number.” After writing it on the back of his grocery list, he handed it to her. “Cole and I can fetch your truck, and I’ll talk to Michael about looking at it.”

“Thank you.” Her swollen lips sent out another tantalizing invitation, but he only gave her one more quick kiss. He couldn’t trust himself with anything more.

“Call me.” He squeezed her hand. “And not just about the truck.”

He got behind the wheel and drove off, watching her in the rearview until she disappeared from sight.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

“Well, I have the answer to your problem.” Angelica set her vet bag on a stool outside the stable and opened it up. “Salmonella.”

“Salmonella?” Maria’s jaw dropped. That couldn’t be right.

But here was the vet, handing over a printout on the bacteria. “The water test didn’t lie. Even though only three of your horses are showing symptoms right now, it’s possible the others are infected as well.”

Maria caught Jed’s scowl, and her face burned.

“We’re careful with the feed and water.” He crossed his arms. “There’s no reason the water should be infected.”

Angelica shrugged. “And yet it is. I’m sorry to say it.”

Maria stared at the pages in her hands, her vision blurring and making it impossible to read anything. Her horses had been sick for the last three days, the first sign of diarrhea showing up right after Huck dropped her off following her truck dying.

She was glad to have an answer, but this was yet another calamity heaped on her plate. She’d already had to buy a new alternator for her truck after Michael informed her water damage had worn it down.

And now this.

“How do we treat them?” She almost didn’t want to know.

“All the troughs will need to be cleaned and dumped,” Angelica said. “Luckily, we caught this early enough that it shouldn’t be fatal. There’s medicine to treat them.”

Maria’s stomach screwed tight. No way could that medicine be cheap.

Angelica made a sympathetic face. “I’m sorry if this causes any problems for you.”

At this point, was there anyone who didn’t seem to know about her struggles?

Jed waved it off. “It’s fine. I’ll help out.” He grinned at Maria, and she could have sworn his gaze lingered on her lips. “I’m free whenever you need me.”

“No, it’s fine.” Over her dead body would she let Jed—a freaking *kid*—help her out. She was his boss.

“I’ll be back with the medicine in an hour.” Angelica walked to her van, the two of them following. “Here’s the invoice.” She handed it over.

It seemed Maria couldn’t draw enough air. The sight of all those numbers made her head spin.

She would pay for the medicine, of course. Even though the bill alone would clear out what little was left of her savings.

But it wasn’t as if she had a choice. “Thank you. I’ll be here.”

Jed waited until Angelica was in her van to speak. “I’ll stay. Clean the troughs.”

“No.” She sliced her hand through the air. “You have plans.”

His eyebrows knit together. “I can change them.”

Her shoulders drawn up to her ears, she walked into the stable. What used to be such a comforting place now caused anxiety. One more knockdown and the chances of recovery would drop to zero.

“You’re a good guy, Jed.” She went into Wynter’s stall and grabbed the metal trough. “This isn’t your problem, though. You’re young. You should be out doing carefree things.”

He blocked the stall’s exit. “I’m exactly where I want to be.”

She bit her lip. Jed was too good of a person. If only she could pay him for all the extra hours he’d already put in.

He took the trough from her. “I’ll get Tyler to help, and we can have this done in fifteen minutes.”

“No. Absolutely not.” She pushed past him, going into the next stall, this one with a sick horse.

“Why not?”

“Because.” She avoided looking at him as she collected Cove’s trough.

Because she was already a burden on everyone who had helped her out. Jed. Cole. Michael, who hadn’t charged her for his labor on her truck.

Huck.

Tears smarted in her eyes. She’d really hoped to avoid that one. Of course, it wasn’t possible to be around her and not be drawn into the shitstorm.

She hadn’t called Huck at all over the last few days, the grocery list with his number on it still folded up in her wallet. He probably thought she wasn’t interested, and maybe that was for the best. He would be better off not getting involved with her.

That didn’t stop her thoughts from drifting to him here and there during the day and right before she fell asleep at night. The feel of his hands was burned into her skin, and she swore that sometimes she smelled him. Spicy, just a little sweet, the scent making goose bumps race up her arms.

Trooper barked, signaling someone’s arrival.

“Your ride is here.” She dumped the first trough in the horses’ wash stall.

“Why don’t you come with us?” Jed asked. “It would be good for you to get away from this for a while.”

“No.” For so many reasons. She had way too much to do here, not to mention she wasn’t going to hang out with Jed and his friends like some pervy cougar.

“Fine, not today. But you’re coming to Spring Fest next week, right? Tyler and I are helping put the stages together.”

She wiped hair from her face with the back of her hand. She hadn’t missed a Spring Fest since moving to Sweet Pine, but there was a first time for everything.

“Thanks for all your help.” She brushed past him without committing one way or the other. “Really. Go have fun.”

He didn’t follow her into the next stall, and a moment later, she heard his boots on the concrete. A truck door slammed, and when she came out of Encore’s stall, she saw Tyler’s truck driving off.

Sighing, she leaned a shoulder against the wall. She’d meant what she said about Jed needing to leave, but now that she was alone, the stable was so quiet it was almost eerie. Her thoughts flitted again to Huck. She was too busy, her life too much of a constant quagmire. He really was better off without her.

That didn’t stop her from wanting to be selfish, from wanting to call him up and disappear in his arms for a while.

With a groan, she pushed away from the wall. She had to stop thinking like that. Huck didn’t know what he was getting into with her; better to keep him guessing and wanting than one day regretting.

CHAPTER
NINE

A red-tailed hawk soared overhead, its wings stretched wide. In the shade, Trooper stretched out and sighed happily.

It was another beautiful morning at Sky Wide, and Maria couldn't have felt worse.

The sick horses were getting better, and she was grateful for that. Wildfire still hadn't returned, though, and Maria was done believing the mare would just suddenly waltz back into the stable one day. Too much hope could do more harm than good.

"How about some breakfast?" Trooper jumped to standing, tail wagging, and fell into step next to her. They crossed the grass and pushed open the house's screen door.

It was cool inside, the radio softly playing in the living room. The house was too big for one person, its silence a constant reminder of that. She bent down and scratched Trooper's ears. "What do you think? You want the same thing you have every morning?"

He wagged his tail as an answer and trotted into the kitchen.

Warm sunlight bathed the refrigerator and tiles in a golden-honey glow. Pouring the dog some dry food, she opened the fridge and took out a few eggs and an avocado.

Another day. The same breakfast. The same everything.

She'd had to postpone the lessons with Clara Mae's students by a couple weeks. Until the sick horses got better, Maria wouldn't have enough of them to go around.

Those two weeks felt like a dangerous amount of time. So many things could go wrong between now and then, and Maria no longer assumed the universe was on her side.

The house phone rang, and she whirled around. Who would be calling so early?

Her heart skittered into her throat. Huck?

She shook the thought away. It had been four days since they'd seen each other, and he'd given her his number, not the other way around. He was letting her take the lead.

She almost wished he wouldn't, because if he were to storm through her front door right then, no way in hell could she say no. She'd let him do nearly anything he pleased to her.

Putting the eggs and avocado on the counter, she checked the caller ID. It was Lovey. Disappointment mingled with relief.

"Hey." Putting the phone between her ear and shoulder, she returned to the counter to crack eggs.

"Hello." Lovey coughed.

"You don't sound so good." She frowned.

"I'm not." Lovey's voice was raspy and thin. "Which is why I'm calling. I can't run the balloon stand today. Not unless every kid in town wants a side of chest congestion with their inflated animals."

"I'm sorry. That's awful." Like many people in Sweet Pine, Lovey played her own role at Spring Fest, which she took great pride in.

"Can you cover for me?"

"Uh..." Maria glanced out the window. She had so much to do at the ranch.

"I know what you're—" Lovey stopped to cough "—thinking right now. You have too much to do, but you actually

don't."

"That's not true." She pressed her lips together.

"You're turning into a hermit, Maria. I get it. You've been so overwhelmed that just stepping out of the mess for a day feels impossible. What's the worst that could happen with you gone from Sky Wide for a while, though?"

It was a completely fair question. Maria rubbed her forehead with a sigh. "Okay. What time do you need me there?"

"Right now would be fine."

"Right now?"

"Yeah. The festival officially starts in an hour."

She chewed that over. That gave her enough time to eat breakfast, hop in the shower, and get into town. "Okay. I'll be out in a bit."

"Good. Thank you."

"What are friends for if not for balloon animals?"

Hanging up, she looked at the dog, spread out in frog-pose on the floor. "Do you think Huck will be there?"

She shook her head. Seriously? What was she saying? Not ten minutes earlier, she'd reminded herself how much better off he was without her. Even if she didn't have all this bullshit going on in her life, she wouldn't be ready for a relationship.

Hell, she might never be. Howard had been a good man, but he'd betrayed her trust by keeping all the debt from her. Burying him at the same time the truth was seeping out of the woodwork had made her toughen up real fast. To the point where she was no longer good at letting people in. She was just too used to doing things herself, too used to being alone.

"I don't need to talk to him," she told Trooper. "I'll only look."

The dog cocked his head. He didn't believe her.

"Okay, okay. We can talk. That's all."

And maybe kiss a little.

The memory of their kiss next to the fence made her shiver all over. That moment, though short, had been one of the best of her life. Better even than their night together at his hotel, because it had been real, not pretend.

Their first real kiss.

And, to be honest, she wanted more.

“LOCK ’EM UP!” Huck called, riding his horse along the mass of moving cattle.

The last few of them ran through the fence, and Thomas and Robbie, two of the younger ranch hands, sealed the gates.

Satisfaction at a job well done seeping through him, Huck turned his horse toward the barnyards. It wasn’t even midmorning, and already, he’d gotten more than half of his tasks done.

Probably because he’d been on horseback through all of it. Riding suited him just fine. It was walking that gave him issues.

His damn leg. Even worse than the pain and the way it slowed him down was the constant reminder, the memory of how useless he had been when he’d been needed the most.

He tried to shake the thoughts away, but they clung to him, sticky and insidious. He knew where this could go. If he gave these memories free rein, he would be spiraling before he even knew it was happening.

“You going into town today?” Michael pulled his horse up next to Huck’s.

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

“Today is the festival. One of the biggest days of the year. Everyone will be there.”

Everyone? Including Maria?

It had been four days since he'd given her his number, and he was trying not to let her silence get him down. Her "thank you" for his help with her truck had been delivered to him via Michael, and he couldn't stop wishing for more.

"It'll be fun." Michael rode ahead as a way to end the conversation.

Huck frowned at the sky. He could go...and be disappointed if Maria didn't show up—or if she didn't talk to him. Alternatively, he could stay at the ranch and play it safe.

"Huck!" Cole waved at him from the stables.

Huck rode up and slid off his horse. "I'm getting to that manure right now."

Cole laughed. "Don't worry about hauling the manure. You're working too damn much."

He stared at his friend. What the hell else was he supposed to do?

"You're working sixteen hours a day." Cole shook his head. "That's too much."

Heat crept up Huck's neck. Doing the best job possible had always been important to him, but ever since his accident, he'd felt even more like he needed to prove himself. To show that he wasn't less just because of his leg.

He shrugged. "I'm fine."

Cole crossed his arms over his chest. "No, you're not." His face softened, and a smile curved his lips. "Huck, you're one of my best friends. And I don't like seeing you like this. You need to relax. Go into town. Have some fun. Go talk to Maria."

"Maria? I'm not sure what you mean."

He knew exactly what Cole meant. Talking to Maria would be...amazing. Even just *seeing* her would be amazing.

"I saw the way you looked at her the other day." Cole grinned. "You aren't hiding anything."

“She seems like a good woman.” He ducked his head, not wanting to give anything away.

“She is a good woman. Just like you’re a good man. Go have a good time. Flirt. Enjoy the festival. I have things under control here.”

Huck scratched his head under his hat. Leaving Cole to care for the ranch still didn’t sit right with him.

Cole squinted and studied Huck long and hard. “You work too hard. You gotta take care of yourself. You know that.”

Except he didn’t know it.

His whole life, he’d been working. That was one of the reasons his bum leg had him so constantly rattled. It was a reminder that he was only human. That one day, he might be rendered fully useless.

“What about that paperwork?”

“It can wait. I’m sorry, my man. I’m not giving you an option. You’re off duty for today.” Cole turned to go. “See you tonight. In the meantime... Maria.”

Huck watched him walk away, not sure whether to chuckle or curse. Hell, he wanted to see Maria. To talk to her, maybe get her to relax and laugh.

But mostly, he wanted to touch her. To feel her curves and inhale her scent.

He sighed and pushed his hat farther over his eyes. “God, I’m so screwed.”

CHAPTER
TEN

“I want a giraffe!” The little girl bounced on her toes and waved her cotton-candy-covered arms in the air.

“Er...” Maria looked at the balloons in her hands. “How about a dog? Or a flower?”

The girl’s bottom lip puckered out, and her eyes filled with tears. Her mother, busy talking on the phone, didn’t notice.

Maria quickly started twisting the balloons. She only knew how to make a handful of shapes. “See? A dog?”

She handed the girl the balloon, and the child just stared at it.

Maria’s shoulders crept up to her ears. She loved children, but good God, how did Lovey do this year after year? The line for the balloon stand had been never-ending all morning, and her hands ached from the awkward twisting.

Plus, not all children were cute. Especially ones demanding wild animals of sub-Saharan Africa.

“I want a giraffe.” The girl hung her head.

“A giraffe?” a familiar voice asked. Huck stepped up to the balloon stand, a cool drink of water in jeans and a tight white T-shirt.

Her heart somersaulted. Catching her eye, he flashed her a smile before crouching down to the girl’s level.

“Miss Maria, may I use some of your balloons?” He looked up at her, the perfect amalgamation of strength and

softness. Right then, she would have tried to fetch him the moon if he asked her to.

“Of course.” She inflated several for him and handed them over.

“Let’s see here.” He twisted and tugged and, in no time at all, made a balloon giraffe.

The little girl squealed. “You did it!”

“One of a kind, just for you.”

Clutching the balloon animal to her chest, she ran off to join her mother.

“You’re a man of many talents.” Maria shook her head. “Lovey should have called you to do this instead.”

He stood, and this close, she was reminded of how tall and big he was, his presence impossible to ignore. “This isn’t your usual gig?”

“No. Lovey—my friend, she owns the coffee shop—is sick, so I took over for her.” She turned her palms to the sky. “I didn’t even plan on coming to the festival today.”

His gaze latched on to hers. “Then it’s my lucky day.”

Shivers ran up her arms and down her back. It took so little from him to make her feel like a teenager again. She could name all the attractive things about him—and there were plenty—but she sensed something intangible there as well. Maybe it was his essence or his soul.

Either way, she liked it. Liked it a lot.

“Maybe it’s my lucky day too.” She held his gaze, and his pupils dilated at her comment.

A smile snaked across his face. “I wish I could be selfish and distract you from your duties.”

“I’ll be done soon. Whenever I run out of balloons.”

He jutted his chin at the table behind her. “You mean like now?”

He was right. Lovey's bag with uninflated balloons was empty. The time to close the stand had officially arrived.

She laughed. "Like now."

"Do you have to get back to your ranch?"

"Not for a while." She bit into her smile. "It can take care of itself for a few more hours."

"Then I have a proposition for you." His words made her flush with heat.

"A proposition?"

He nodded, his gaze dropping to her lips. "A proposition." He chuckled. "Maybe I should say it one more time for greater effect."

"Maybe." She laughed, and the sound was pure bliss. She almost didn't recognize it as coming from her.

"Spend the afternoon with me. You're free. I'm free. It's a beautiful day. I heard the sour apple snow cones are out of this world."

"They really are." She folded up the table. "And I would love to stay here with you."

A day spent with Huck...

She still regretted leaving his hotel room that morning. Regretted not calling him back sooner. He really was one of the best things that had ever walked into her life. Why she'd been resisting him, she didn't know. Maybe the whole thing felt too good to be true, and she didn't want to open up to him, only to be let down.

"Excuse me." The little girl's mom tapped on Huck's shoulder. "Did you make my daughter the giraffe?"

"Yes, ma'am." He raised his eyebrows in concern. "I'm sorry. Did she not have permission to get a balloon?"

"No, no. She does." She laughed, a high-pitched, forced sound that hurt Maria's ears. "I just wanted to tell you how talented you are. Do you ever work parties?"

“Oh. I—”

“Or do one-on-one events? You know, for just one person?” She slipped a business card into the pocket of his jeans and winked. Maria felt her breakfast threaten to come back up.

“I...” Huck turned red.

“Call me.” Taking her daughter’s hand, the woman walked off.

Maria couldn’t even look at him. The woman had been gorgeous and young too. Not from Sweet Pine. And not a day over thirty.

Her hands tightened on the folding table. How could she compete with someone like that? And to think, she’d shown up to the festival today thinking that she and Huck might actually be more than a one-night stand. That, possibly, even though she hadn’t entertained such an idea in years, they could be a couple.

They could fall in love.

Now she was second-guessing those lines of thinking.

“I need to load up.” She turned away.

“Sorry about that.” Huck pulled the card from his pocket, ripped it in half, and dropped the pieces into one of the festival’s temporary trash cans.

Her breath hitched in her chest.

Looking into her eyes, he grabbed the table from her, his effortless lift making it look like it weighed a pound. “Where are these things going?”

She couldn’t speak. Couldn’t breathe. He wasn’t going to pursue that woman?

“Maria?”

She cleared her throat and tried to hide her smile. “This way.”

She directed him to the truck, where they packed away the table, the pump, and the sign. It was only early afternoon, and the smells of fried food and the laughter of kids filled the air. A satisfied, complete feeling settled in her chest. “I love this town.” She leaned against the side of her truck.

“Yeah?” He hooked an elbow on the truck and turned to face her. “What about it do you love?”

She slipped her fingers under her collar and toyed with her necklace. “Even though I didn’t come here till my twenties, it’s been home since the start. I love the way people treat one another. I love the way everyone’s family. I love how everyone knows everyone.”

She’d done a poor job of participating in that family lately. The scales were currently tipped, with her taking a lot more from the community than she gave.

Tools borrowed from Cole. Wages owed to Jed. Bills local contractors were letting her pay off in installments.

She was tired of taking from this town. She wanted to give back.

He closed the distance between them, wrapping an arm around her waist. The feel of his body against hers sent her pulse into overdrive. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too.” She smiled. “You know... There’s something I’ve been wanting to say to you. I need... I need to apologize.”

He slowly blinked, patiently allowing her to take her time.

Pressing her hand against his hard chest, she splayed her fingers. “I’m sorry.”

He rested his hand on top of hers, securing her palm between his shirt and his fingers. “You don’t need to be sorry.”

A burst of warmth flooded her belly. She liked that she hadn’t even needed to explain herself. Huck was perceptive enough to know exactly what was going on.

“Things are just—” she looked down, emotion making her voice catch “—ard right now.”

Gently, he hooked his thumb under her chin and guided her face back up. “What can I help you with?”

She swallowed. “Be here with me. Today.”

His nod was sure and swift. “I promise to do that. Now, how about that snow cone? Or are you hungry for something other than sugar and ice?”

“You mean snow cones don’t have any nutritional value?” Hand in hand, they walked back onto the grass and veered for the food trucks.

Of the women they passed—from aged twenty to eighty—nearly all of them eyed Huck. This time, though, it didn’t bother Maria.

She didn’t know what he saw in her, but she trusted his taste. If he thought she was worth spending time with, well, then maybe she wasn’t half bad.

They got turkey legs and lemonades and enjoyed them in the courthouse’s shade, laughing and wiping grease away from their chins with paper-thin napkins.

“This is the best day I’ve had in a long time.” Huck explored her waist with his hand.

Her chest felt like it might explode from joy. “Same here.”

“Hey, Maria!” Melanie Trumsky, her baby in a carrier, waved as she walked by.

“Hi.” She waved back. “Bennie is getting so big!”

“Do you know everyone here?” Huck chuckled.

“Almost.”

“Who is that?” He pointed at a man standing with two kids in the inflatable slide’s line.

“Wilson Andrews, owner of Sweet Pine’s oldest grocery store. It’s been in the Andrews family for over one hundred years.”

“And her?” He cut his eyes to the side, where a young woman and man made out behind the funnel cake truck.

“That’s Trixie. She works for Lovey at the coffee shop. Everett is her boyfriend of the month.”

“Impressive. Can you get three out of three?”

She followed his gaze. Over by the main music stage, Jed’s friend Tyler talked with a man in a suit. She recognized the man as well, but he was one of the few people in town she didn’t want to see.

“Guess he didn’t get the memo about casual dress.” Huck nodded at the man.

“The one in the baseball cap is Jed’s best friend. They’ve been joined at the hip since kindergarten.” She turned away from the stage, ready to talk about other things.

“When was that, last year?”

She cocked her head at him, sensing some aggression. He was already moving on, though.

“I can’t believe you’re single.” He frowned. “You are single, right?”

“Yes.” Laughing, she swatted his shoulder. “And I could say the same about you.”

He shrugged, drawing circles around her waist with his thumb. Every time he grazed the thin patch of skin between her jeans and shirt, fire erupted in her veins.

“For a big part of my life, I guess you could say I was married to the rodeo.”

“That’s how you know Cole?”

“Harvey, too.” His gaze turned reflective. “Those were some wild times. We had a lot of women following us around from city to city, looking to hook up.”

“Oh.” Jealousy burned through her like wildfire. Had Huck hooked up with any of those women?

“I was never into that, though.” He slipped his hand under her shirt and cradled her lower back. “I wanted something more. A relationship.”

“Oh,” she repeated, except this time, it was breathy, catching in her throat.

“After I left the rodeo, I went back to my hometown in Arizona and opened a bait and tackle shop. Thought I’d find a nice woman to settle down with. Then...” His expression turned dark.

“Then, what?”

His jaw ticked. Wherever he’d gone in his memory, it wasn’t a happy place.

He blinked, and suddenly, the clouds had passed. He was back in the moment, brushing hair from her face. “Life is unexpected, isn’t it?”

She sighed and pressed her hand to his, capturing it against her cheek. “Too unexpected.”

For her, life had started to feel like one curve ball after another.

His gaze traveled over her shoulder, and she looked to see the man in the suit had been replaced by Jed. He and Tyler were horsing around, swatting each other with their hats.

She snorted. “Those two.”

“He really has quite the crush on you.”

Her head whipped back to Huck. “What’s that now?”

His eyes remained on the boys. “Jed.”

“Jed is like a son to me. I’ve known his parents since he was a toddler.”

At the same time she said it, she recalled the way Jed’s gaze had lingered on her lips the other day. Was Huck right?

“That wouldn’t stop him from making a move on you.” A muscle flexed in his jaw.

Her laugh came out staccato and sharp. “Well, I’m not certain that’s the case. And just because someone makes a move on me does not mean that I’ll accept their advance anyway. I’m not that desperate, so settle down.”

She planted her hands on her hips.

He sighed and lifted his hands in surrender. “I’m sorry. That came out wrong. I don’t think you’re desperate at all. You’re so damn perfect, you could have your pick of anyone in this town.”

She snorted. That definitely wasn’t true.

He touched her waist, and instantly, the fire in her chest turned into a warm simmer. He’d snagged her in his net again, and there was no getting away.

“I’m jealous.” He looked at his boots. “All right? I’m a grown man who’s jealous and a little freaked out. I’m not used to having something so amazing in my life.”

She edged closer, his cologne tickling her nose. The festival’s sounds—the laughter, music, and talking—became muted, like someone had turned the volume dial down. “What amazing thing are you talking about?”

“You.”

It was only one syllable, but he said it like it was the most important word to ever be spoken. Like it was the answer to everything.

You.

She was drowning in the blue of his eyes. Not only had she never wanted someone this badly, she’d never been wanted this badly. She could feel Huck’s need floating off him, mingling with her own. Why they had this perfect chemistry, where it came from, she didn’t know.

Stopping to question what was happening would be a mistake. Instead, she intended on making good use of what they had. Taking his hand, she brushed her lips across his. “Come to my place. Please.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

He'd followed her back to her place in his truck. He'd wanted to have her with him, but he knew that in a town this size, people would notice if her vehicle stayed parked at the fair. But it sucked because that meant he couldn't have his hands roaming all over her while he drove.

He made up for it as soon as they pulled in front of her house. Her smile in the moonlight had him tugging her up against him, his lips on hers before he could even stop himself.

Not that he wanted to stop himself.

Nothing on earth tasted as good as Maria Boyne's lips. Nothing felt as right as his hands on her hips. And no place had ever felt like home quite so much as her arms.

Over the top? Yeah. And definitely out of character for Huck to feel that way. But that didn't make it any less true.

They were both breathless when he finally pulled away from her. She took his hand and led him toward the door, only letting go to get her key out of her pocket.

As soon as she turned toward the door, he lifted her hair off her neck and began kissing that soft skin. She let out a little moan that damned near drove him crazy. "I'm never going to get this door open if you don't stop that."

"I can't." And it was the truth. Wild wolves wouldn't have kept him away from her at this point.

The door finally opened, and they stepped inside. He didn't waste a second. Spinning her, he slipped his arms

around her waist and devoured her mouth. Their tongues tangled, and he held her tighter, wishing he could fuse their bodies together.

He'd always done his best to be a gentleman, but right then, right there, he didn't want to be respectful with her. He wanted to be wild. To sweep her off her feet, show her that he was the best damn thing to happen in her life.

He wanted her to be *his*.

He slid his hands under her shirt, enjoying the way her skin felt—soft and warm and so damn perfect to touch. Their lips locked, and they walked deeper into the house, bumping into table corners and walls, but never stopping to see where they were headed.

“The bedroom is the other way.” She nibbled his bottom lip.

He looked around long enough to gauge that they were in her kitchen. “Oh well. This will do.”

Turning her around so that her back was to him, he walked her to the counter. Her legs were shaking, goose bumps pebbling her arms.

Reaching around her front, he swept his hand across her breasts. She gasped and leaned forward to steady herself on the counter, her bottom brushing against his groin. He let out a hiss. “You’re going to be the death of me, woman.”

And what a death it would be.

“God, Huck.” She turned to kiss him again, but he held her back.

“Shh.” Planting a hand on her shoulder, he nestled his finger under her chin. “Don’t move.”

“I can’t promise that,” she whispered.

“Good.” He grinned. “Neither can I.”

And it would be his pleasure to make it damned near impossible for both of them.



IT TOOK QUITE A WHILE, but they eventually made it to the bedroom. The mattress sagged slightly under their combined weight, the candles flickering against the walls.

It had been an hour since sunset, and they'd only taken a break from pawing at each other for him to help her with the evening chores.

“What do you need?” Drawing Maria to his chest, Huck breathed in her hair.

“Nothing.” She stretched an arm across his chest. “Nothing at all.”

He growled in approval. He was feeling the same way.

“What about dinner?” He smoothed his fingers over her shoulder.

“Oh. Right. That.”

He chuckled. “Would you let me cook for you?”

She didn't answer, and his chest twisted. Was this the moment when she kicked him out? She had a right to, of course. He didn't live there.

Was it crazy that he never wanted to leave her side again?

Definitely a little crazy. But hell if he could seem to stop these feelings.

Maria suddenly sat up, features pinched. “Did you see that?”

“See what?” Instantly, he was on high alert. Adrenaline shot through him, and his muscles tensed.

Sitting up, he followed her gaze to the dark window. A light flashed near the stable—a flashlight.

She gasped. “Someone is out there.”

In the blink of an eye, she was out of bed and running from the room, a shirt and pair of shorts in hand.

“Wait!” He tossed the sheets off and scrambled to find his pants.

The sudden movement made his leg throb, and he gritted his teeth. *Fuck*. “Maria—wait!”

The front door slammed. She was already outside.

Still cursing under his breath, he located his pants and yanked them on. The pain was white-hot, angrily demanding his attention.

That wasn’t the real problem, though. No, the real problem was how slow it made him.

Barefoot and shirtless, he stormed through the house like a damn elephant. He had to get to Maria. If someone was sneaking around her property at night, it wasn’t because they were enjoying the great outdoors. Whoever they were, they were up to no good.

Bursting through the screen door, he ran across the grass. The porch’s floodlight was on, and he could see Maria standing in front of the stable.

“What are you doing?” he yelled, his voice sharp with panic.

She didn’t answer, not that he expected her to. She was too focused on something on the ground. Bending, she picked it up.

“Bolt cutters.” Her lips drew thin.

Huck’s heart stuttered. Spinning on his heels, he surveyed the yard. The floodlights lit most of it, although the one above their heads had been broken. And probably not accidentally.

“Did you see anyone?” He kept studying their surroundings.

“No.” She tossed the tool into the grass. “By the time I got out here, the flashlight was gone. I guess they heard me coming. I shouldn’t have been so loud.”

He squeezed her hand. He was glad she’d been loud. No telling what the thief—or thieves—might have done to her if

they'd come face-to-face.

“Are horse thieves a problem around here?”

She sighed. “Not really.”

“Where's your dog?”

Her breath caught in her throat, and her eyes turned panicked.

“Trooper!” Cupping her hands around her mouth, she yelled louder. “Trooper!”

A white mass of fur stepped out of the darkness. The dog yawned big and wagged his tail sleepily. Maria let out a small sob of relief.

Huck scratched Trooper's ears. “They must have been really quiet if the dog didn't bark. Come on. Let's get inside and call the police.”

Maria walked stiff as a board, her jaw tight and her gaze on every shadow. He already knew she wouldn't be sleeping that night.

Neither would he. Even trouble narrowly avoided put him on high alert.

In the house, she grabbed the landline and sat at the table while calling the police station. After filling up the kettle, Huck rooted around for mugs and herbal tea.

It wasn't a cure-all, but a warm cup of tea always helped things at least a little bit. It had been his mother's go-to solution to all of life's hardships, and she hadn't been fully wrong.

“...can they come any faster?” Maria said into the phone, her forehead propped on one hand. “Okay... Thank you. Bye.”

Sighing, she hung up and shook her head at the wall. “This is unbelievable.”

He took the seat next to her. “How long till an officer can be here?”

“Within the hour, but that's not the problem.”

“What is?” He touched her arm, but she didn’t even seem to notice. She still stared at the wall, almost like she was in another world.

“First, some tools are stolen from the shed. Then, my best mare runs off. After that, the horses get sick. Now this.” She closed her eyes and drew a shaky breath. “Things have been hard since Howard died. He...he left a lot of debt. More than I can handle, if I’m being honest. But I could probably get a hold on that, if only all this other stuff weren’t happening.”

The hair on the back of Huck’s neck stood up. “Maria...”

“I know. I should have sold the ranch by now. I just can’t.” Her eyes glistened with tears. “Without this place, what do I have left? And I don’t want to act like I’m a victim, but why does the shit keep hitting the fan over and over? What did I do to deserve this string of bad luck?”

He licked his lips. “This doesn’t sound like a string of bad luck to me.”

Finally, she turned to look at him. Her eyebrows pushed together slowly. “What does that mean?”

That bad feeling he’d had upon seeing the bolt cutters, like a balloon was inflating in his chest, intensified. “A string of bad luck is by chance. You said the horses got sick?”

“That’s right.” She rubbed at her temples. “The vet said their troughs must have been contaminated. We’re so careful, but Jed or I must have made a mistake at some point. I’ve been so distracted.”

He shook his head. “Forget mistakes. I think you’re being targeted.”

She dropped her hands from her face, her mouth slowly falling open. “Targeted?”

He growled, anger burning his windpipe. “All this stuff isn’t random. I think someone has some sort of vendetta against you.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

The whole world seemed to explode, searing pain lacing its way across Huck's leg and chest. He reached out, his fingers raking through thin air.

He was so close! He only had a little bit farther to go. Almost there...

Suddenly, he was on the ground, his cheek against asphalt.

"No!" He sat up, heart slamming against his rib cage.

Sharp gasps filled the room, and it took him a moment to realize it was him breathing that way. Frantically. Uncontrolled.

Pressing his palms to his face, he counted his inhales and exhales. One...two...three...four.

That did nothing to slow his heart rate down, unfortunately.

Dropping his hands, he looked around his small cabin. Everything was different, though. The little wardrobe had been replaced by a longer, bigger one with melted candles on it, and thin white curtains hung in the windows.

Because he wasn't in his cabin. He was at Maria's house.

The realization should have sent pleasure rolling through him, but he only felt nauseated. Had he disturbed her with his shouting?

She lay on her side rolled away from him, her hands tucked under her cheek. He sighed and touched her shoulder.

At least one person was sleeping well.

Carefully, so as not to wake her, he climbed out of bed. His leg throbbed, and probably not just from running after her earlier. Nightmares always had a way of bringing things to the surface.

The house was dark, the smell of the chicken they'd made for dinner lingering in the kitchen. She'd had enough in the fridge to whip up a good meal, which they'd kept themselves busy with until a cop showed up.

There'd been nothing for him to do, of course. Huck had already scoured the ranch for more evidence, but whoever had been trying to get to the horses hadn't left more than the bolt cutters.

Closing the front door quietly behind him, he eased down onto the steps. The stars, undisturbed by any artificial light, shone merrily in the sky. A warm breeze tickled his cheek, and coyotes yipped somewhere near the river. Trooper barked in response, a lazy, just-so-you-know-I'm-here bark.

Clasping his hands between his knees, Huck stared down at them. His chest felt weighted, his heart in his stomach, and his stomach about to fall out his damn ass.

He couldn't afford to be distracted like this. Maria needed his help.

They'd told the cop all about the other "misfortunes" around the ranch, and the man had dutifully recorded them. It wasn't like there were breadcrumbs leading anywhere, though, and Maria didn't have a clue who might be targeting her.

The case was cold, and it was up to Huck to figure it out. He needed his head fully in the game.

Behind him, the screen door creaked open. "Huck? What are you doing out here?"

"I couldn't sleep." His voice was thick, and he doubted his ability to hide his poor state.

She sat next to him, her shoulder brushing his. Even though he didn't want her to see him so weak, having her close

felt good.

“Me neither.” She drew a shaky breath. “I feel like I’ve been under attack for weeks. I didn’t see it till you pointed it out, but looking back now, it makes sense. I told Lovey recently that sometimes it feels like I’m being watched... I feel so stupid.”

“You’re not stupid.” He pulled her against his side. If she didn’t know how much he wanted to keep her from harm, she needed to be told. “And I’m here for you. I’ll do everything I can to help you, and I get what you’re going through.”

She rested her head against his chest. “I have a feeling you do.”

“Yeah.” He pulled her closer, so that her knees were on his lap. The terror of the nightmare melted away a bit more. He could die right now, and he’d be happy.

She sighed. “I just wish I knew the reason all of this is happening.”

“I can’t give you a reason, but I’m sure it’s not a coincidence.” He kissed the top of her head.

She looked up at him, her eyebrows pinching together as she studied his face. The porch light was off, but he was afraid she could sense his angst.

“What’s bothering you?”

His throat closed up. Yep. There it was.

“I, uh...” He cleared his throat.

He’d never talked to anyone about this, save the doctors and a psychiatrist who came to check on him in the hospital. What would be the point in burdening others with his pain?

At least, that’s what he’d always told himself.

Now he was starting to wonder if that had been an excuse. A cover so he wouldn’t have to deal with the baggage he still carried from that day.

It was exhausting, though, lugging all that weight around. Could it be that talking about it, getting it out, might mean

shaving some pounds off the load?

“I had a nightmare.” His voice cracked. “It’s a recurring one, but I haven’t had it in quite a while.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Something must have triggered it.”

He nodded. Running after her that evening had done it. He hadn’t run like that since...

A rock formed in his gut. He didn’t want to make her feel bad. It wasn’t her fault he’d gotten so worked up.

“Huck?” She twisted her fingers through his. “You don’t need to talk about it if you don’t want to, but I’m here if you’d like to.”

His tongue felt wooden, but somehow he got it moving. “Most people assume I fucked up my leg in the rodeo, and I don’t correct them.”

“What happened?” She trailed her other hand gently over his arm, the calming touch helping him breathe a little easier.

“I think I told you that when I left the rodeo and moved back home, I opened a bait and tackle shop.” He stared at their hands laced on his lap, that pinpoint becoming the center of the whole universe.

She encouraged him with a soft hum.

“It was a good move. Didn’t bring in a whole lot of money, but my grandfather left me everything he made from selling his ranch and I could take a business risk. I wish I could say more, but the next ten years were pretty boring. I worked. Dated a little, but nothing went anywhere. Went fishing and camping with the guys I grew up with.” He shook his head. “Not a lot happens in a town like that.”

At least not usually. Not until that one day.

“A year ago...” He drew a ragged breath, feeling like shards of glass were pricking his lungs.

Maria waited, patient and understanding.

He tried again. “A year ago, there was a gas leak on the block my shop was on. I was at the grocery store at the time, and my friend Andrew was at the shop. We went way back—high school—and he was my one employee there.”

His eyes burned, and he blinked hard and fast. “He was in the basement, which might as well be a bomb shelter. There was no reception there, so he didn’t get the call to evacuate. By the time I got over there, the street had been blockaded. He wasn’t answering his phone. I...I couldn’t get in touch with him.”

He bit the tip of his tongue. He never visited that day in such an intentional way. Usually it was only in unwelcome flashbacks and dreams.

His leg throbbed, and he decided to take it as a sign to go on. “I slipped past the cops and ran back to the shop. The building exploded when I was on the sidewalk. Andrew... I thought he was still in the basement.”

Huck stared at the crescent moon. “He wasn’t, though. He’d come out right as half the block blew to smithereens.”

Maria gasped. “I’m sorry.” Her voice was soft and compassionate, but he could hear the shock underneath. Even though she hadn’t been there that day, just hearing about it rattled her.

He nodded, gaze still on the sky. “Doctors said that I’ll have a limp and at least some pain for the rest of my life. The scars on my chest, from the debris, those are fine. Nothing but hideous.”

“They’re not hideous.” Taking his face in her hands, she turned his head to her.

Her forehead dropped against his, and for the first time since waking from the nightmare, he was able to breathe easily. Her mere presence was medicine.

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” she whispered. “And to Andrew.”

He swallowed hard, his throat burning. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to talk about this if it’s hard for you.” Her breath brushed warm over his face.

“I want to.” He’d never been more certain of anything. “I haven’t told anyone this stuff since the day it happened. I need to say it.”

She rubbed her lips over his. Gentle. Sweet. “I’m here.”

He took a deep breath, ready to push past the wall he’d built around the memories. Doing so might be the most difficult thing he’d ever done, but if she was right and he needed to unburden himself, this was how he’d do it. “I was suddenly on the sidewalk, feeling like I’d been hit by a truck. I don’t remember much after jumping out of the way of the blast. People who saw it happen said that I was bloody from the explosion. I mean, I’m sure I was.”

“You don’t blame yourself for it, do you?”

He twisted his lips, knowing what the right answer was but hesitant to accept it. “Logically, I shouldn’t. I couldn’t have known there would be a gas leak. I’ll never stop wondering if I could have done more, though. Gotten there sooner. Never left at all. Not asked him to do inventory that day.”

She shook her head. “You’ll drive yourself crazy thinking that way. Trust me. After Howard died, I kept thinking I could have prevented it. That if I had been there, things might have turned out differently. The truth is that he was headed for a heart attack. He would have died whether I’d gone into town with him that day or not.”

Bringing her hand to his lips, he gently kissed the top of it. “I’m sorry for what you’ve been through.”

“I’m sorry for you too. It’s not all bad, though, right? We’re here tonight. Together.”

Something like relief danced through his chest. They sure were together. And he wanted it to stay that way.

She reached a hand up and stroked his cheek, so gentle. So giving.

He drew a deep breath. “I don’t want to mess this up.”

She caressed his face and neck, the movement soothing. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Neither am I. Not unless you tell me to."

She chuckled, and he put his arm against her and drew her to his chest.

"Is that why you moved here?" She played with his shirt hem. "You wanted a new start?"

"Yeah. Cole offered me the job, and the timing was right. So I sold my house. Packed. Drove up here. You know the rest."

She kissed his chin. "I don't know what comes next, though."

"Hopefully a lot more moments like this, sitting with a beautiful woman, looking at the moon." He kissed the top of her head, gratitude rushing through him. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being here."

She nodded. "Of course."

He could thank her in a hundred different ways, but he already knew none of them would suffice. Maria was doing something to him, opening him up in a way he never expected. The world seemed less threatening with her around.

He wanted to make her life better. Build her a nest the two of them could thrive and laugh in.

First, though, he had to sort out her ranch issues.

"I'll get to the bottom of this for you." He ran his palm down her back. "I'll figure out what's really going on around your ranch."

Instead of answering, she just sat there.

"You don't need to be afraid," he said. "I can protect you."

"I'm worried about you." Her breath hitched. "We need to be careful."

He nodded. "We will be."

What he didn't tell her was that he wouldn't be too careful. Whatever it took, he would make things right for her. When it came down to it, very few risks weren't worth taking to see her smile.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

“**W**hat do you think?” Huck leaned forward in his chair. “Would that be enough of a loan?”

Stephen Robles looked up from the computer. “I can’t give you an official estimate on how much money Maria needs to get back on her feet, but...” He glanced at his closed office door, then flashed Huck a smile.

Relief swept through Huck. He’d known this decision was the right one.

“However...” Robles rubbed his chin.

Huck’s chest lurched. “What’s that?”

“I’ve known Maria Boyne for years. I have to be honest, Mr. Samuels, I don’t see her accepting a personal loan easily. Asking for it from a bank is one thing, but from a friend is another.”

“Well, she’s not asking. I’m offering.”

Robles smirked. “That might make a difference. Are you sure you want to invest in a ranch, though? They don’t have the highest success rate.”

He nodded. Hell yes, he was sure. More sure than he’d ever been about any money matter. “I’m not investing in a ranch. I’m investing in Maria. She loves that land and those horses so much, it’s almost impossible. All she needs is the chance to get back on her feet.”

A smile flickered across Robles’s face. “I won’t argue with that.”

“Glad we’re in agreement.” Huck sat a little straighter. He’d been chewing on the idea of offering Maria a loan for the last week, and now that he was taking action on it, he felt like he was walking on air.

Money had never been important to him, and he’d invested much of his rodeo earnings while living a simple life. A loan for Maria, even if it didn’t pan out financially, was exactly the kind of thing he wanted to liquefy some of those investments for.

Robles looked out the window. “If you change your mind, that man over there can help Maria.”

Huck followed his gaze through the glass and across the street. A gray-haired man walked down the sidewalk with Jed’s friend Tyler.

Huck blinked. That was the same man Tyler was talking to at the festival, right? He must be the kid’s dad.

“Who’s that?”

“Deacon Branch. He’s building some condos in and around Sweet Pine. He offered Maria a pretty penny for her land.”

Huck narrowed his eyes at the other man. “And she didn’t take it.”

“No. If this loan doesn’t work out, maybe you could convince her otherwise. With enough people pointing out the logic, she might finally see that selling would be best for her.”

Huck’s nostrils flared, and his neck became hot. He was pretty damn sure the only person on earth who knew what was best for Maria was Maria herself.

“Thanks for your time.” Pushing back his chair, he stood. “And for the advice as well.”

Even though he’d be taking it once hell froze over.

After shaking hands with Robles, Huck left the bank and strode into the warm sunshine. Birds were singing, and children shouted in the park down the street. It was a beautiful day, and for the first time in a long time, he knew for sure he was on the right path.

Not only did he believe in Maria's capabilities to turn her fortunes around, he believed in the two of them. That woman had shown him more care in the last week than he'd received in his whole life. He'd go to the ends of the earth to make her happy.

There was still one loose string, though. He didn't know who'd been fucking with her.

It was a small town, and at this point, he was chalking it up to bored teenagers or petty thieves.

Over the last week, he'd kept as close of an eye on her ranch as possible. Whenever he wasn't working, he was with her, helping out with chores and warming her bed.

He would have felt guilty about being away from his job so much, except it had been Cole's idea for him to spend time helping Maria. She'd had to let Jed go due to her financial troubles, and without Huck and the occasional hand Cole also sent over, the ranch would be unmanageable.

Turning the corner, he looked up and down the street. He knew Maria was probably home right now, but that didn't stop him from searching the street for her.

God, he was like a love-sick puppy dog, wasn't he? He only had a few hours to go before he headed over to her house for dinner, and yet he could barely contain his excitement.

Shaking his head at himself, he pushed open the door to Cup O' Joe. He and Cole had driven into town together to run errands, and, caffeine-addict that Cole was, they had planned to meet back up at the coffee shop.

The delicious aroma of roasting beans filled the air, and old-timers and moms with little kids sat on the mismatched furniture, playing board games and chatting. A few toddlers drove toy trucks on the play rug in the corner, and upbeat pop music played over the speakers.

From behind the espresso machine, Lovey smiled at him. He touched the brim of his hat.

They'd only spoken a few times, but she was positive and energetic, and he was eager to stay on her good side. He knew

how important a seal of approval was from a woman's best friend.

"Is that your third or fourth one?" Huck joined Cole at a small corner table.

"Very funny." Cole tilted his head back to get the last sip of coffee from the mug. "Where did you get off to?"

"The bank. I'm going to offer Maria a loan."

Cole chuckled. "I almost thought you were serious for a moment there."

Huck's lips turned down. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Cole sighed and scratched under his hat. "Look, Huck. Maria has already accepted a lot of help so far, and that's hard for her. She has her pride to hold on to."

"This isn't charity. It's a loan."

Cole's eyes softened. "I hear you, and I'm on your side. I'm just trying to think of ways to be smart about this, is all."

Huck leaned back in his chair, trying not to feel defeated. He didn't know what to do, short of begging her to take the loan. She needed supplies to get stock on the ground and money for advertising to promote her horses.

He'd never wanted to make this kind of difference in someone's life. Hell, he'd never really wanted anything all that badly. He'd always been content with the good things in his life. That had started to change when he met Maria.

He was so grateful for the chance to do something for her. He just wished he could do more.

"I have an idea." Cole snapped his fingers. "What about the foal that was just born?"

"What about it?"

"Buy it from me and give it to Maria." A grin spread across Cole's face. "Look at it this way. She's much more likely to accept a gift in the form of a horse than a loan."

Huck chewed that over. It didn't take long to come to the conclusion that Cole was right.

"Deal." He reached his hand over the table for a shake.

Cole laughed. "I haven't even given you a price yet."

"What, are you gonna overcharge me?"

Cole shook his head. "Shit, man, you know I'll cut you a deal."

"And you don't have to. You've done too much already."

Cole's gaze softened. "It's nothing. Don't even..." He trailed off, his attention going to something at the front door.

"What?" Huck turned in his seat.

A woman with short curly hair walked into the coffee shop and headed for the counter. Cole tracked her with his gaze, his jaw slowly unhinging.

"You know her?" Huck looked back and forth between the two of them. Busy ordering coffee, the woman hadn't noticed Cole staring at her.

And maybe that was for the best. He probably had no clue how creepy he was being right now.

"Cole. Shut your mouth."

"What?" He looked at Huck, his eyes all glassy.

"You're staring at her." He tried to keep his laughter in, but his chest shook from containing it.

"Sorry." He ran his knuckles across his mouth.

Never in all their years of friendship had Huck seen Cole so mesmerized by a woman. But he understood it.

He'd felt that way the first time he'd set eyes on Maria.

The woman passed by them again, coffee in hand. With her attention on her phone, she didn't even notice the two of them sitting there.

"Wait!" Lovey called. "You forgot your card!"

She waved it in the air, but the door had already closed behind the woman.

In a flash, Cole was up and running to the counter. "I'll take it to her!"

Snatching the credit card from Lovey, he ran for the door. On his way out, he bumped into Jed, who was coming in.

"Sorry." Cole didn't even slow down.

"Not a problem." Jed looked after him with a raised brow, but when he turned to Huck, his face had contorted into a scowl. "There you are."

"Is everything all right?" Huck stood, his pulse picking up. Had something happened to Maria?

"You told Maria to fire me, didn't you?" Jed stepped right up to Huck's face, his nostrils flaring.

Huck guffawed. "Excuse me?"

"She's been different since you showed up." His eyes narrowed and glinted like steel.

Anger rose in Huck's chest, and the part of him that would always be a juvenile wanted to shove the cocky kid away. Show him who was in charge and teach him a little something about respect.

Life had taught him lots of things, and one lesson was, when possible, de-escalation was always the answer.

"I'm sorry Maria let you go." He kept his voice low and calm. "I know she values your help, and she would keep you on if she could."

The answer probably wasn't good enough, but he didn't know how much Maria had told Jed about her money troubles, and he didn't want to share someone else's business without permission.

"She's lying to herself, and she's lying to me. I'm the best damn person she has." He glared at Huck, eyes blazing.

"I'm sure that's true." Huck nodded amiably.

The old men on the couches had stopped talking and were watching the interaction with interest. Over in the play area, the toddlers shrieked over whose turn it was to use the toy microphone. This really wasn't the place for a conversation like this.

"How about we go for a walk?" Huck gestured at the door. "Talk about this outside?"

The kid didn't move an inch. His hands had curled into fists, and his jaw was so tight it could crack nuts. "Maria needs people in her life she can count on. You're just a stranger."

"Listen, Jed. She's talked to me about this some, and she'll be rehiring you when she can."

He knew what this was really about. Jed felt threatened by Huck's presence. Not that Jed would ever admit to having a crush on his boss.

Jed's hands were shaking with anger. "I don't know who you think you are." He practically spat the words out. "But you need to stay out of my way. You're no good for her."

"I'll try to keep that in mind." He struggled to keep his voice level.

Obviously, Jed wasn't thinking straight. He wasn't hearing anything right now, his ears buzzing with anger the way they were.

Huck nodded toward the door. "Let's go outside, and we can talk about this."

For a second, he didn't think Jed would budge. When he did move, it was in the opposite direction. His fist flew right for Huck's face.

Blocking the punch, he grabbed the boy's arm, twisted it behind his back, and pushed his face down onto the table. Jed let out a frustrated cry, but Huck only put more weight on him.

He wasn't trying to hurt the guy, but enough was enough. They'd already made quite a scene—and in front of little kids.

Bending low, he whispered in Jed's ear. "You need to pull yourself together. We're on the same team here. We both want

what's best for her.”

One of the toddlers started crying, and Lovey emerged from behind the counter, her cheeks red.

“Out, Jed!” She pointed at the door, her hand shaking. “How dare you come in here and act like that? Get out right this instant.”

Still keeping Jed's arm twisted behind his back, Huck walked him to the door, which Lovey held open. Jed's head hung low, and he didn't look at her.

On the sidewalk, Huck released him and stepped back. “You'd do well to listen to her and get out of here before there's more trouble.”

Jed spat on the ground. “Whatever.” He stalked down the sidewalk to a parked truck.

As Jed opened the passenger door, Huck caught sight of the person behind the wheel. Tyler smirked at him, the self-satisfaction nearly palpable.

Huck went cold.

He'd never even spoken to Tyler. He only knew of the kid because he'd seen him around with Jed. Given the way he looked at Huck, though, the truth was undeniable. He'd put Jed up to this.

But why?

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

“**H**ow long can I delay that payment for?” Sitting at the kitchen table, Maria held her breath.

“Until the fifteenth,” the service associate on the other end of the line said.

Some of the tension left her chest. “If you could set the payment for that day, that would be great.”

“Yes, ma’am. Anything else?”

The wooden chair creaked as she leaned back in it. “Can you send a miracle or two my way?”

“Er... I’m sorry?”

“Nothing. Thanks for your help.” Hanging up, she looked at the spreadsheet on her laptop. At least she wouldn’t need to pay the electric bill for a couple more weeks.

Spreading the bills out helped short-term, but long-term, all it did was make the mountain of trouble bigger. For the hundredth time, she thought about getting a job in town. She already knew that would be pointless, though. Nothing available paid enough to dig her out of this hole, and it wasn’t like she had much free time anyway.

The best she could do was keep her fingers crossed and pray that nothing else went wrong before the lessons with the school group started in a few days. The last week had been uneventful, but if Huck was right about her being targeted, then that peace wouldn’t last forever.

She just didn't understand who would want to ruin things for her. Even though she'd been over the possibilities a thousand times, she still had no clue who could be holding a grudge. She'd done her best to be a good person all her life. Maybe Huck was wrong, and it was plain old bad luck knocking her down.

A door slammed outside, and she went to the kitchen window to see Huck at the fence. The horses ran up to greet him, and he petted Bunny's nose.

Just like that, all the worry and fear were gone. The man was a calming presence, a sure thing in an uncertain world.

What had she ever done to deserve someone like him? After Howard's death, she'd figured she'd never find love again. Now here it was, breezing into her life out of nowhere.

He turned away from the fence and walked toward the house. She pressed a hand against her heart, her pulse quickening at his approach.

She let out a breath when he came inside, a smile stretching across her lips. "Hi."

"Hey there." He pulled her into his arms, and she melted against his strength and warmth.

She kissed him on the lips. Nuzzled his five-o'clock shadow. "Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thanks." His voice was tight. Loaded.

He pulled out a chair, and the sound of wood scraping against wood grated on her nerves.

Goose bumps dotted her skin. "What's wrong?"

He sank into the chair. "Jed tried to punch me."

She gripped the counter. "What? Why?"

Huck's jaw worked, but the words took a while to come out. "He thought that I told you to fire him. I told him he needed to calm down and that we're on the same team."

"Are you okay?" She went to the table and touched his shoulder.

“He didn’t hurt me. He sure did cause a scene, though. Lovey was pissed.”

“This happened at the coffee shop?” Her stomach sank. She could only imagine the rumors that were surely flying through town.

He rubbed his jaw. “The damn kid wouldn’t listen to reason. It was like he couldn’t even hear me.”

She shook her head, feeling numb. That didn’t sound like the Jed she knew. “I can’t believe he did that.”

“I can. He’s—”

“Don’t say it.” She pursed her lips, refusing to believe Jed was in love with her. At the most, he had a passing crush.

Who would have thought it would cause so much damage, though?

“I think his buddy Tyler put a bug in his ear.”

She stared at him. “What do you mean? That Tyler talked him into attacking you?”

He shrugged. “That he convinced Jed I talked you into firing him.”

“That doesn’t track. Tyler doesn’t even know you. Right?”

He rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. “Could be he’s just bored and trying to stir up trouble.”

She reached for the key hook. “I’ll go talk to him now.”

“No. You need to stay here and be safe.” He looked up at her, the intensity of his gaze making her hold her breath. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

She couldn’t stop her eye roll. “Huck, I’ve known Jed most of his life.”

“Exactly. And you just said this wasn’t like him.”

She opened her mouth to argue, couldn’t find a response, and sat down next to him.

“I’m sorry about Jed. It might just be puberty hormones, which means he’ll straighten out soon.”

She snorted. “Very funny.”

He smiled, though, so she didn’t mind his taking a poke at Jed too much. It also showed that he was possessive of her, and she liked that. Liked it a lot.

“There’s something else I want to talk to you about.” He reached for her hand, and her breath hitched in her throat.

“What?” she asked.

“You know Cole’s new foal?”

“Of course. He’s beautiful.”

Beautiful enough to make her wildly and shamefully jealous. The foal was the result of two of Cole’s best horses, the kind of result she could only hope for.

She’d kill to have another horse. Especially since she still hadn’t found Wildfire. It wouldn’t solve all her problems, but it would be a big step forward.

“I’m buying it,” Huck said, “and gifting it to you.”

She blinked at him. “I’m sorry, you’re...what?”

“I’m buying it for you.”

“No.” Her back stiffened. “You can’t do that.”

“I want to.” His eyebrows pinched together, and he tried to read her expression, but she looked away.

Heat flooded her face. Huck was only trying to help, but she’d accepted so much from both him and Cole already.

“What if I offer it as an investment?” His chair creaked as he shifted his weight.

She pushed past the burning in her throat to speak. “How so?”

“Another horse means you’ll be able to give more lessons, right?”

“Well...yes. But with a foal, I wouldn’t be able to use him for lessons for a couple years.”

“You could sell him. Make a nice profit.”

Her heart leaped at the thought. That could be twenty thousand in her pocket, easy.

She chewed on her lip. “Huck...”

“There you have it. I’d like to invest in your horse-riding side of things. We can work out a contract if you like. I’m thinking something like ten percent back on all profits.”

She sputtered. They both knew that was a paltry return for what he was offering her, and that he was only using the word “investment” in order to assuage her feelings.

The hopeful expression on his face made her heart skip a beat.

She couldn’t get a word out. If she opened her mouth, she’d definitely say no.

He was offering her everything she’d been dreaming of. A way to solve her problems and find her independence, all at once. But a gift like that would change everything between them.

Her mouth opened and closed, and she struggled to find words. She couldn’t do this. In the end, it came down to the fact that if he gave her the horse, he’d expect something in return. And the only things she wanted to give him were the same things he already gave her.

Acceptance. Caring. Sweetness.

“I can’t take your gift,” she finally said.

He leaned back in his chair. “You can’t take it? Or you don’t want to?”

“What happens between us if you do this for me?” She twisted her fingers together. “Something like this changes the dynamic between people, and I like where we’re at.”

The heated smirk on his face made her stomach flip. “I like where we’re at too. Let’s be clear that I’m not expecting anything in return, aside from you making good use of the horse, and I already know you’ll do that. In my short time here, I’ve gotten to see just how important everyone in this

town is to everyone else. You take away one log, and the whole structure crumbles. Sweet Pine needs you.”

She looked down at her lap, her cheeks warm. “I don’t know about that.”

“Who else will give those schoolkids horseback-riding lessons?”

She didn’t have an answer for that. No one would. The other ranches in the area focused on cattle. Harvey had his horses, but he did more trail rides than anything else. She was the only one who specialized in horseback-riding lessons.

“It has to be me.” She bit into her smile. “I meant what I said, though. I don’t want this changing things between us.”

He nodded, and she felt his sincerity. “It won’t.”

A relieved sigh left her lips, and it was only then she realized how tense she’d been. Just that morning, she’d received another call from the condo developers. The amount they’d offered her was less than before, and still, shamefully, she’d considered selling right then and there.

But now she wouldn’t have to.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Huck leaned forward, taking her hand in his. “Baby, believe me when I say that it’s my pleasure.”

Joy bloomed through her chest, and she wanted to throw her arms in the air and sing. This feeling, this comfort, this ecstasy...

It felt a whole lot like love.

She was nervous to label it that, too afraid that merely acknowledging how good things were would push those things away.

She was so tired of being afraid. Tired of being on edge, waiting for the next shoe to drop.

She wanted to live and love. Wanted to reach the end of her life and say she had no regrets whatsoever.

Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to Huck's. "I have someone coming for a lesson in twenty minutes."

He looked at his wrist, pretending there was a watch there. "Oh really? What should we do until then?" Mischievousness flashed in his eyes.

She laughed. "Oh, something really sexy."

"Yeah?" His voice turned gravelly, his hands finding her waist.

"Oh yeah." She skimmed her lips across his neck. "You can help me tack up the horses."

Instead of laughing with disappointment, he gripped her waist tighter. "I would love to."

She pulled back to look in his eyes. "Really?"

"As long as I'm with you, Maria, I'm happy."

My God. How was it possible to feel this much joy? It was too much for her to hold alone. It spilled from her hands and heart and flooded the land around her, and she never, ever wanted it to end.

The best part? She was starting to believe there was a good chance it never would.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Arms folded over his chest, Huck stared at his cabin's ceiling. Sleep seemed like a faraway thing, but thankfully not for the reasons it usually did.

His heart wasn't racing, and he wasn't sweating bullets. Flashbacks weren't jumping in front of every other thought.

Ever since telling Maria about the accident and Andrew's death, he'd felt a new level of peace. Not completely healed, or whatever you wanted to call it—because the pain was still there—but the load he carried was lighter.

Maria worked magic on him, and he wanted to be under her spell every second.

Too bad he needed to be in his cabin tonight.

He'd been going back and forth between her place and his. Though, the last few days, he'd spent every night at her ranch.

He wished he could be there now, but tomorrow was an early work morning and it made more sense to stay in his cabin. It was hard to sleep, however.

Maybe he ought to have brought something of Maria's home with him.

Turning on his side, he snorted at himself. He'd thought he couldn't be any more like a love-sick puppy dog, and here he was, wishing he had a shirt that smelled like her.

If they were to keep seeing each other—and he hoped to hell they would—then a better arrangement needed to be

figured out. Something that worked for both of them and kept them together.

Some people would probably say it was too early to be making plans, but looking death in the eye once had been enough to teach him that when you were sure about something, you needed to act.

And Jesus, he was sure about her.

Scrubbing his hands down his face, he turned onto his other side. Images of that goddess—her silky hair, her soft lips—floated across his vision, and soon his eyelids grew heavy.

A frantic knocking made him jerk, and he sat up in bed, his heart pounding. Someone was at the front door.

Rolling out of bed, he grabbed his sweat pants and yanked them on. Whoever was at the door continued to knock incessantly.

“I’m coming!” Barefoot and shirtless, he padded out of the bedroom and through the tiny living room. The clock on the wall read ten past midnight.

“Huck!” a strained male voice called. “Open up!”

Huck’s stomach turned. This wouldn’t be good. Not if someone was yelling for him in the middle of the night.

“Who is it?” He paused, ear to the door.

“It’s Jed!”

He frowned. What on earth was Jed doing knocking on his door at this hour?

Goose bumps pricked his arms and the back of his neck. Had Jed come over to try to finish what he’d started in the coffee shop a few days ago?

Pushing the curtain to the side, he surveyed the yard and porch. He could only make out Jed’s legs, and it didn’t look like any of Jed’s buddies were waiting nearby, but then again, the ranch lights weren’t the brightest.

Fuck it. He needed to get his sleep, and he was willing to take his chances.

He threw the door open, and there stood Jed on the porch, shirt torn and face bloodied.

“Fuck.” Huck stuck his head out to see if anyone else was around. The ranch hand cabins all sat dark. “What the hell happened?”

Jed pressed his hand to his side and winced. “It was Tyler and that guy from Upton Development.”

A chill went down Huck’s spine. “Get inside. Sit down.”

He helped Jed onto the couch then closed and locked the front door.

“How’d you know this was my cabin?”

Jed winced in pain. “It’s always been the foreman’s cabin. I worked a summer here.”

“Tell me everything.” Perching on the coffee table across from Jed, Huck studied the boy closer. It looked like he’d taken several punches to the face, and judging from the way he touched his side, he either had broken or severely bruised ribs.

“It was Tyler.” Jed’s face twisted in rage. “Him and that asshole Deacon Branch.”

“Deacon Branch?” The name sounded familiar, but Huck couldn’t place it.

“The guy from Upton Development.”

Huck frowned. “Hold on. How do they know each other?”

“Tyler works for him.” He scowled. “Deacon’s been paying him to do jobs here and there. Turns out Tyler’s been fucking things up at Sky Wide, though.”

Huck sat straighter, his pulse pounding. “What do you mean, fucking things up?” He already suspected he knew the answer, but he wanted to hear it straight from Jed.

“He stole the horse. Poisoned the water. Other things, too.” He shook his head, his face pale.

“Like stole some tools? Or tried to break in to the stable?” Huck clenched his teeth and fought the urge to grab Jed by the

shirt and toss him out the front door on his ass. “So you’ve been a part of this, huh? You—”

“No!” Jed’s eyes filled with tears. “I swear, I didn’t know anything about it until tonight. Tyler was trying to get me to convince Maria to sell. Deacon’s been paying him to do all these things so that Maria gives up on the ranch. I told him there’s no way she’s letting go of her land, and he got pissed. That’s when Deacon showed up. Told me that if I wouldn’t help them, they would have to take care of things themselves.”

It all made sense now. Of course Tyler had convinced Jed Huck was coming between him and Maria. Any and all kinds of shit getting stirred up would be good for business.

Huck swore he was breathing fire. Launching to standing, he went for his keys on the table. “Where are they now?”

“They were going to Maria’s. I—I tried to stop them, but it was two against one. They took my phone and truck and dumped me out on Foster’s Drive. This ranch was the closest place.”

“Shit.” Running into his room, Huck grabbed his phone from its charger. His leg probably hurt from the quick movement, but he couldn’t feel a thing other than the panic coursing through him.

Hitting Maria’s name, he held his breath as it rang. “Come on, Maria,” he gritted out through tight teeth. “Please.”

The call went to voice mail.

Switching to calling Cole, he put on some boots and grabbed a shirt off the floor.

“What’s up?” Cole answered, fully alert and prepared for whatever trouble a twelve-thirty a.m. call might entail.

“I need you to call an ambulance and send them to my cabin, and tell the police to go to Sky Wide. That shit of a condo developer is...” He couldn’t even say it. “Maria is in trouble. I’m headed there now.”

“Copy that. I’ll be right behind you.”

Thank God Cole knew better than to waste time by asking questions. Huck hung up without saying goodbye and yanked the front door open.

“I’ll come with.” Jed tried to stand, but he cried out from pain and collapsed onto the cushions. It was a wonder he’d even made it to the cabin in the first place.

“Like hell you are. Stay here and wait for the medics.”

Not waiting for a response, Huck sprinted for his truck. Cranking the engine, he tore down the gravel driveway that housed the ranch hand cabins and past Cole’s house.

Before he reached the road, he tried Maria again. This time, he could hardly take the silence between rings. This was bad. Real bad.

He knew for a fact that Maria slept with her ringer on and the phone in her bedroom. He cursed himself for not getting the number to her landline.

Hitting the gas harder, he raced for Sky Wide. If anything had happened to her... If Tyler or that Upton guy had put their hands on her...

His vision blurred with rage, and he gripped the steering wheel. “Answer the damn phone, Maria. Please.”

He tried her again. Then again.

And then he saw the bright-orange flames reaching toward the heavens. His jaw dropped, and he nearly ran his truck off the road.

Sky Wide Ranch was on fire.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

Maria stared dumb struck at the stable, one side of it engulfed in fire, flames licking out a top window. Her head pounded, and the land tilted.

Trooper ran around the yard like crazy, barking, not knowing what to do with this new enemy he couldn't bite or chase away.

The horses. She needed to get the horses!

Running back into the house, she grabbed the landline. Her shaking hands dropped it once—twice—on the kitchen floor.

“Shit.” Falling to her knees, she grabbed it and dialed.

“Nine-one-one. What's your emergency?”

“There's a fire at my ranch,” she choked out. “Sky Wide Ranch, on Gregson. It's the stable. Please hurry!”

She grabbed the stable key from a hook and ran back out the front door, her bare feet pounding across the grass. It had been Trooper's barks that woke her up, and she had probably never been more grateful for the dog.

But how had the fire started?

She couldn't think about that now. She had to get the horses free!

The heat seared her face as she approached the stable, and the horses' terrified whinnies carried even over the roaring of the flames.

Waiting for the fire department would be a mistake. Everything was so spread out in this area, it could be twenty minutes or more before they arrived.

The fire was on the far end of the stable, which meant she could get in through the front door. She just prayed to God the flames hadn't reached any of the horses' stalls...

Trooper ran in circles, barking and barking. Smoke wafted around Maria, making her eyes sting.

"Hold tight," she whispered through gritted teeth, working the key into the stable door. "I'm coming."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw movement in the yard. Blinking, she turned to see who it was.

Jed's friend Tyler stood there, watching her. He must have seen the fire from the road and stopped to help.

"Tyler!" She choked on a dry sob. "The horses are still in here! Help me!"

He only stood there looking at her. Like he was nothing more than an apparition. Was he in shock?

She turned the key, and the lock popped. Flinging the door open, she put the stopper down to keep it that way then flicked on the lights.

"Get out of here!" She ran to the first stall. "Come on, go!"

The horses seemed to understand the gravity of the situation, and Maria's presence was enough to get them going. One by one, they filed out, some calm, some scared, all moving faster than she would have thought possible.

She'd have to round them up later. Right now, the important thing was making sure each horse got out alive. She worked her way down the stalls, the heat growing.

The flames were above her now, eating the rafters. She knew what that meant for her available time, and she tried not to think about it too much.

At the last stall, Cliff, her black stallion, reared up, trying to get free.

“It’s okay, Cliff! One second, boy.”

The latch was stuck from the heat, and she fought with it, trying to make sense of the warped metal. It popped, and she pulled back, throwing herself onto the ground as the horse charged out of the stall.

“Run!” she screamed to the horse, pushing herself up.

The heat was scorching, her bare feet burning on the concrete. She staggered and slipped, falling onto her back.

She heard a loud bang, and the roof above her exploded. Wood rained down on her, making her scream and cover her head.

A rope fell in front of her, the tattered end brushing her nose. Her heart thundered in her chest.

Through the smoke, she saw Cliff make it out the door. And then she saw the door close. Her heart seized. Pushing to standing, she ran for the door. She reached out for the handle and turned, but it didn’t budge.

Her stomach dropped. This made no sense. She’d propped the door open. It was unlocked. Had something fallen in front of it?

Panic constricted her windpipe and, combined with the thick smoke, made it hard to breathe. She pushed on the door again, but it didn’t move so much as an inch.

“Tyler!” She pounded on the door. “The door is stuck! Help!”

It was no use. The fire was too loud. He couldn’t hear her.

Terror gripping her, she turned to run to the opposite end of the stable. That door was always locked, but she could open it from the inside.

Before she could even take a step, she heard a rumbling, and wood and fire crashed down between the two rows of stalls.

The stable was caving in.

She was trapped.

A cry flowed from her lips, and she whirled back around. No! She wouldn't die like this. Not here. Not now.

She pressed against the door as hard as she could, her bare feet sliding back over the slick floor. The heat clawed at her back, the fire inching closer and closer. Each inhale was more smoke than air.

She couldn't see. Could hardly breathe.

Faces flashed in front of her. Stacy. Lovey. Huck.

She would die in this inferno. She would never see them again.

HUCK'S TIRES SPUN, spraying gravel on the road as he raced to Sky Wide Ranch.

"Come on, come on." He didn't know who he was talking to—his truck, himself, or whatever God might have been up there in the heavens.

He needed to get to this damn ranch yesterday. The rush of adrenaline that had surged through him when he'd realized Maria was in trouble was quickly being replaced by a boiling rage. If Tyler and whoever the hell he worked for had her, then they were in for a world of hurt.

His tires flew, and he bit back a curse. He didn't know if Tyler was alone, if he had a crew with him, or how many of them there were.

It didn't matter whether Huck was outnumbered or not. The woman he loved needed him, and nothing would keep him from her.

The fire blazed, and as he hurtled down Sky Wide's driveway, he saw that only the stable was on fire. Grim as that was, it was also a blessing.

Maria could still be inside the house. Or out on the ranch somewhere.

Trooper sprinted in agitated circles around the yard, barking at the sky. Several horses ran for the woods, the

darkness swallowing them up.

Braking in the grass, Huck tossed his door open and bolted from the truck. “Maria!”

Too late, he realized his mistake. He should have scouted the yard first. Should have stopped to consider that perhaps he was walking right into the lion’s den.

The punch hit him square in the jaw, and the air blasted from his lungs. He hit the ground on his side, his arm breaking the fall.

Luckily, he’d been in enough scraps as a boy to know what came next. Almost instinctively, he rolled out of the way of the kick. Grabbing for the closest boot, he pulled his attacker’s leg out from under him.

Tyler collapsed onto the ground, and Huck was on him in an instant. The kid was green, too young to—

Suddenly, Huck was on his back, Tyler sitting on his chest. He reached for Huck’s neck, and Huck scrambled to get a hold on his arm.

“You’re...trespassing,” Tyler grunted out as they scuffled.

Seriously? Was that his cover?

Fuck.

No doubt, he’d started the fire, and now, needing to get rid of Huck in any way possible, was losing all his senses.

“You don’t live here,” Huck spat back.

Tyler slammed Huck’s head against the ground, and the whole world spun. Pain stretched from his leg to behind his eyes, and for a moment, he wanted to vanish into the darkness.

But then he heard it.

“Help!” The scream, barely audible, carried from the stable.

It felt like being dunked in ice-cold water. That was Maria’s voice!

And she was in the burning stable.

A rush of energy surged through him, and he bucked Tyler toward his head, making the other man lose his balance and fall forward. Kicking Tyler's leg out, he pushed him over.

Back on top, he landed a blow to Tyler's jaw. Vengeance was there, in the back of his mind, but he knew what was more important.

He had to get to Maria.

Scrambling up, he took off for the stable.

The fire was consuming the wood, the pitch-black smoke already darkening the sky.

Suddenly, two arms wrapped around Huck's throat from behind.

Spinning around, he tried to wrestle himself free. Tyler ignored all the blows that fell on him and only held on tighter. Stars spun in Huck's vision, and he felt himself getting light-headed.

He fought, kicking and bucking, but Tyler's hold was too strong. He couldn't breathe. The fire was less than fifty feet away now, and he could see the stable door.

Almost there.

He kicked again, and this time, he connected with Tyler's knee. He heard the pop, and Tyler relaxed his hold.

Huck let loose a volley of punches, landing a lightning-swift shot to Tyler's cheekbone.

Finally, Tyler crumpled to the ground, howling in pain. Slipping on mud, Huck scrambled to the stable.

Cinder blocks barricaded the door, and Huck threw them to the side and yanked the door open. A billow of smoke and embers wafted out, heating his face and making him choke.

"Maria!" He pulled his shirt over his mouth and nose and squinted into the abyss.

"I'm here!" she screamed.

His heart lurched. He couldn't see her, but he could follow her voice.

“Stay right there! I'll get you!” Ducking his head low, he rushed to the nearest stall.

Her figure emerged out of the smoke, and he grabbed her arm. Her hair was matted at her temple and cheeks, and she looked like she'd been crying.

She was his angel. He'd give his life for her in a second. And he'd be damned if he couldn't save her from this.

She collapsed against him, coughing and gasping.

“Huck.” Her voice was raspy, throat seared.

“I've got you. Everything is going to be fine.” Taking her hand, he pulled her out into the fresh air. They sprinted across the grass, fingers intertwined, panting and wheezing.

At the driveway, she fell to her knees. “Tyler was here.” She leaned back, sucking in fresh air.

Trooper ran up, whining, his tail low. His pink tongue darted out, and he licked Maria's cheek.

“I know.” Huck bent next to her, hand on her back, and studied the yard.

Tyler was nowhere to be found.

Huck gritted his teeth, and his hands curled into fists. That fucking lowlife.

He'd run, but that old saying was true. Tyler couldn't go far.

Unless he wanted to take his chances in the wilderness, he would be easy to find on the limited roads around town. In fact, Huck had half a mind to go searching for him himself instead of leaving that up to the police.

“I called 9-1-1. Where are they?” She went to stand but stumbled back to her knees.

He put a hand on her shoulder. “They're on their way. Cole called too. They'll be here any moment now.”

Her eyebrows knit together in confusion, but instead of asking any questions, she just nodded. No doubt she felt absolutely drained.

And who knew how much smoke she'd inhaled.

"You okay?" He touched her cheek.

"Yeah." She nodded, still wheezing. "I'm fine." He could see the concern in her eyes. She knew how angry he was.

That son of a bitch. How could he do such a thing to her?

Rage surged through him, and he might have given chase to Tyler if Maria hadn't gripped his hand so tightly.

"Huck." She turned to look at him. "The horses got free. It's okay. We're okay."

They were more than okay. They were whole.

He pulled her up, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. His other hand found her cheek, and he thumbed the wetness from her eyes.

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I promise." His voice was hoarse. "I'm never letting you go."

He kissed her, his lips melding with hers.

She shivered in his arms, and he tried to hold her tighter, but she stepped back. "I called to Tyler to open the door, but he...he didn't hear me, and..."

She stared at her stable, going up in flames, and realization washed over her. "He did this."

Huck slid his arm around her shoulders. "Yes."

A siren blared through the night, joined by several others. They turned to watch the procession of emergency vehicles tear their way down the driveway, but it was the truck leading the way that really grabbed Huck's attention.

Cole pulled to a stop and went around to the truck bed. There, Michael sat, facing a humiliated-looking Tyler.

The boy's head hung, a bruise forming on his cheek and loathing in his eyes. His wrists were bound behind his back.

“Jed filled me in on Tyler’s part in this. Found him crossing the creek.” Cole patted the side of the truck, his eyes widening at the fire. “Good God. The horses?”

“They’re out. Maria got them free.” Huck pulled her even tighter, wishing he could pop her right into his very soul and keep her safe there.

The fire trucks pulled up to the blaze, and firefighters jumped to the ground, unwinding their hoses and spreading out.

Maria stalked up to the truck bed, her lips a thin line. “You set my stable on fire.”

Tyler’s gaze shifted to the side.

“Why?” She stared him down, but he still wouldn’t look at her.

Cole caught Huck’s eye, and he could almost hear all the questions his friend was holding back.

Tyler shook his head at his lap. “It wasn’t me. Deacon Branch told me to do it.”

Huck growled. “That’s funny. Because it sounds to me like it’s still technically your fault. Do you know what happens to people who attempt murder?”

“Murder?” Cole’s voice pitched. Apparently he hadn’t stuck around to get the full story from Jed.

Tyler looked up, his eyes wide with alarm.

“That’s right.” Huck took a menacing step toward him.

Maria put her hand on his chest, stopping him. Her attention remained hyperfixated on Tyler.

“What were you planning on doing? Were you going to kill me? Kill us both?”

Tyler looked at his feet, his head shaking furiously.

“It was an accident. I swear it was.”

“What was an accident?” She furrowed her eyebrows.

“The fire. It wasn’t supposed to burn the stable down. It was just supposed to be a little fire, to scare you off. I didn’t know it would get worse.” He paled. “Please. You have to believe me.”

“Oh, I believe you. I believe you were trying to kill me and my horses. And for...let me guess. Money? Deacon Branch is paying you, right?” Her words were ice-cold.

Cole waved over a police officer. “We have the person who started the fire right here.”

Maria turned away, her face flushed, and stalked toward the house.

“Hey.” Huck caught up, standing in front of her and putting his hands on her shoulders. “Let’s have the paramedics check you out. You probably inhaled a good deal of smoke.”

His chest squeezed tight at the reminder of how close he’d come to losing her. It was like the day with Andrew all over again, the explosion flashing in front of his eyes.

He took a long breath and reminded himself that day was over. Andrew was gone. This was a new life, and Maria was well and standing in front of him.

“I can’t believe this.” Her eyes welled up with tears.

“I know.”

“How did you...” She shook her head.

“Jed showed up at my cabin. Tyler told him that Deacon’s been trying to push you off your land by hiring himself a little henchman. He probably hoped you would eventually throw in the towel and sell. Tyler and Deacon beat the crap out of Jed when he tried to stop them.”

She bit her trembling lip. “Jed did that?”

He cupped her face and nodded. “Looks like I was wrong about him.”

She smiled through her tears. “I would say so.” She shook her head, glancing back toward Tyler. “I never imagined that he could do something so horrible. That anyone could. I feel

like I should have seen this coming. Like I should have known.”

“You can’t second-guess yourself. It was a sick and twisted plan, and you couldn’t have known.” He rubbed his thumb across her cheek.

Over her shoulder, the firemen were dousing the ground and the sheds around the stable. It looked like they were turning their attention to preventing the fire from spreading.

Which meant the stable was toast.

Maria had lost so much already. Seeing her being knocked down this low made him shake with anger.

But she was safe, at least. More than anything else, that was what mattered.

“Come here.” He pulled her close, cradling her head against his chest. “It’ll be all right. We’ll round up the horses. We’ll rebuild.”

She sighed against his chest, letting go of her weight and sinking into him. Burying his nose in her hair, he held her tight and watched as the fire lit up the night.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

“**W**e’re going to need another table.” Lovey scrunched her nose at the three folding tables already spread out on Maria’s lawn.

Maria laughed. “Because you brought enough cookies to feed the entire state.”

Lovey winked. “And they’ll all be gone before noon. If I recall, Stacy might eat half of them. She loves my cookies.”

“I think it’s part of the reason she’s in town this week.” Maria walked backward across the grass. “I’ll get the table from the den. Be right back.”

“I’ll be out front.” Lovey set her platters of cookies on a car hood.

The sounds of saws, hammers, and laughter rippled through the air. Golden morning light bathed the yard where the new stable’s bones were going up. It had taken a month of planning and a good deal of Maria being convinced, but today, about forty people had shown up to build her a new stable.

Huck had been quick to shut down her concerns about putting people out. When she’d seen the fund the town had put together for the stable, she hadn’t been able to stop crying for a good three hours. It was the kind of warmheartedness that she and Howard had been drawn to when they first moved to Wyoming.

In between Cole housing her horses and everyone pitching in for the stable, her cup was overflowing.

And then there was Huck.

She couldn't forget about his contributions—mainly keeping her bed warm at night. There were other things, of course. His constant calm presence. The way he encouraged her to hold her head up and keep moving toward a brighter future.

Whenever she stopped to think about him, the emotions became nearly overwhelming. He was more than she'd ever dared dream for.

And he was hers.

She took another step backward and bumped into something tall and firm. "Oh!"

She started to turn around, to apologize to whoever was there, but two warm, strong arms went around her waist, holding her in place.

"Guess who." A sultry breath tickled her ear, and she bit into her smile.

"Gosh, I have no idea who it could be."

Huck gasped with mock offense. "You have that many men trailing after you?"

She spun around to face him. "I wouldn't know. I'm only looking at one of them."

He growled in approval, his hands finding her hips and gripping her tight.

"And I only have eyes for you." He drank her in, his gaze sweeping across her lips and down her body.

Even though putting space between them was agony, she took a little step back. "My daughter is right across the yard. You sure you want to burn her eyes out?"

Huck nodded over her shoulder. "Fair point. Although I'm pretty sure she's happy for you."

She looked, and sure enough, there was Stacy, her head tipped to the side, a bemused little smile on her face.

Maria felt a bit ridiculous for letting a mention of her daughter chase her away. She rolled her eyes at Huck and stepped into his arms.

He pinned her against his chest, and for a long moment, she forgot about the chaos of the yard, about the people all around.

She sighed happily, her cheek pressed against his chest, his heart beating against her ear. “How am I so lucky to have you?”

He wrapped his arms around her waist, and he held her tight, his breath warm on her ear. “I’m the lucky one. I get to wake up next to you every morning.”

He kissed her, his lips urgent and possessive, and then he pulled back. “Now, was there something you were going into the house for?”

It actually took her a moment to remember. “Oh. Right. The table from the den.”

“I’ll grab it.” He hurried ahead of her before she could decline, and she took the opportunity to admire how good his ass looked in those tight jeans.

As she walked into the living room behind him, her cell phone rang. Following its sound, she found it in the kitchen, under a pile of mail.

“Where’s it going?” Huck called from the den.

“Lovey can show you!” She stared at the caller ID, her heart skipping a beat.

It was her lawyer, Crosby.

Licking her lips, she answered. “This is Maria.”

“Hey, Maria. Is this a good time? I have some news about Deacon and Tyler.”

“Sure.” She sat in a chair, no longer trusting her legs.

“Tyler’s being charged with arson and attempted murder,” Crosby said. “And the hammer’s coming down hard on Deacon as well. He’s about to lose everything. Turns out

you're not the only person he was trying to run off their property.”

Her mouth fell open, and she pressed her fingers to it. Even though the news didn't come as a surprise, it was still a blow to the gut. Just how many homes had Deacon Branch broken up? How many lives had he upturned?

She gathered her resilience and strength. “What now?”

Huck peeked through the doorway, and she briefly smiled at him. Picking up on the somber tone, he put down the table and stepped into the room. Even though he gave her some space, his presence was still comforting. She reached out her hand so he could grasp it.

“Now?” Crosby laughed heartily. “You enjoy the money that's heading your way. Upton Development will be required to pay reparations to the homeowners they've screwed over.”

She blew out a breath. More money?

Of course, it would be welcome. Even though she currently had no stable, she'd been holding lessons over at Cole's. With Clara Mae's students now in the mix and a new foal in her future, things were looking up.

She honestly didn't know what she would do with a true windfall. She'd never let herself dream much further than paying the bills and having a healthy savings account.

“Thank you, Crosby. This is... Well, it's good news.”

Mostly for all the other people who had been affected by Upton Development's insidious actions. She would pull through because she had so much support, but what about those who didn't?

Knowing they would have some money to improve their lives made her feel better. It still hurt to think about what Tyler and Deacon Branch had done, but moving forward was starting to feel possible.

“Call if you need anything,” Crosby said.

“I will. Thanks.” She hung up and stood, aware of Huck watching her with raised brows.

“Tyler’s being charged with arson and attempted murder.” She rubbed her hands together. “And it sounds like my lawyer thinks Upton will be sued for all they’re worth.”

“That’s great news.”

He pulled her against him, and she buried her face in his shoulder, emotions rushing through her. It was great news, but she was tired of the roller coaster, and she was more than ready to settle into a regular, boring rhythm.

Days filled with horses and Huck were all she wanted.

“Hey.” Drawing back, he touched his forehead to hers, the two of them sharing an unspoken moment of relief.

“Maria!” Lovey’s voice carried in from the front door. “Come see this!”

She glanced at Huck, but he only frowned in confusion. She led the way out of the house, Huck following with the table.

The sight that greeted her made her gasp. “Wildfire!”

The mare flicked her tail and nosed Jed, who held her reins. She looked healthy and well-fed, happy as ever.

Maria ran down the steps. “Where was she?”

“Tyler had her at a friend’s place over in Rawlins. He planned on selling her after the hunt for her cooled down. It took a while, but I tracked her down.”

Tears filled her eyes. “Thank you so much, Jed.”

Jed nodded, his lips folding in a self-conscious smile.

“Nice job.” Huck shook Jed’s hand.

Maria ran her fingers along her mare’s silky mane. Her heart was warm and happy, and life was starting to feel too good to be true.

“I should get her over to Cole’s. Then I’ll be right back to help.” Jed hitched a thumb over his shoulder, pointing at the work happening on the stable.

She nodded. “Thank you, Jed. So much.”

He ducked his head. “It’s not enough to make up for...you know...”

Even though he hadn’t done anything wrong, it was no secret that he blamed himself for not finding out about Tyler earlier. She’d assured him nothing was his fault, but the boy was stubborn.

“What you’ve done is invaluable.” Huck clapped him on the shoulder.

Jed blushed, and Maria turned away to hide her smile. Huck’s attitude toward Jed had changed a lot in the last few weeks, and she knew his standing up to Tyler and Deacon had a lot to do with it.

Also, Huck seemed to finally believe that his role in her life wasn’t threatened. There wasn’t another man on earth that she could see herself with.

She waited until Jed had guided Wildfire to the horse trailer attached to his truck and Lovey had carried the table over to the lunch spread to speak. “You’re good with him.”

Huck shrugged. “I was too hard on him before.”

She splayed her hands across his chest. “That’s not how I would put it.”

“Oh yeah?” He cocked an eyebrow. “How would you put it?”

She didn’t want to call him out on the jealousy, but he must have read it in her eyes. Sighing, he grasped her hips and pulled her closer.

“I want you to myself,” he growled. “Is that so wrong?”

She lifted her chin, studying his face, drinking in the moment, trying to wrap her head around the fact that this heaven was her life.

“It’s not wrong at all.” Pushing onto her tiptoes, she pressed her lips to his.

EPILOGUE

One Year Later

“APPROACH from the left side and let him see the halter.” Huck hung his arms over the stall and watched as Emilee, one of Sky Wide’s newest students, tiptoed up to the pony.

The tan horse nibbled at the halter, and the girl laughed, her anxiety dissipating. “He’s so sweet.”

“He’s a good boy.” He grinned. “Now slip the halter on... That’s right.”

The twelve-year-old followed his instructions, securing the halter on the young horse and then leading him out of the stall. Huck followed behind at a comfortable distance, knowing that his student had all the skills she needed—she just needed the opportunity to build her confidence.

“Make sure you brush him first.” In the tack room, he waited patiently as she found the brush.

With Panda fully tacked, they took him out into the warm spring air and walked toward the arena. A pep entered the horse’s step, and lightness filled Huck’s chest.

He never got tired of this land. Never got tired of the horses. Never got tired of the woman walking toward him, a piece of mail in her hand.

A grin split Huck's face, and he waved over Jed, who was driving by in the golf cart. "Take over for me?"

"Sure thing." Removing his gloves and dropping them on the seat, Jed loped over to Emilee and Panda. "Let's see what you can do."

The girl's face twisted. "I'm still working on trotting."

"And I bet you'll get it down today."

Confident that Jed had the lesson handled, Huck strode across the yard and met Maria in the driveway. She opened her mouth to say something, but before she could get a word out, he grabbed her by the waist and pulled her mouth to his.

Her lips were sweet as honey, and her body melted into his, right where it belonged.

It was the same every time they kissed, the same every time they touched. He still couldn't believe he had this—Maria, being able to help out on her ranch, all of it. Had life ever been so good?

The two of them together, at last. It was everything he'd ever dreamed of.

Pulling back, he studied her face, the light catching on her hair.

"Hey, you two. Get a room." Jed's voice cut through their embrace. Emilee was trotting the horse at the far end of the arena, luckily out of hearing range.

"I like the one at the end of the driveway," Huck teased.

Maria laughed and swatted his arm. "You're going to make me blush."

Jed's laughter joined hers. "You're both gross."

Huck smirked. As he'd predicted, all it had taken for Jed's crush on Maria to dissipate was finding a girl of his own. He'd been lovestruck for the last six months, talking nonstop about the girlfriend from Rawlins he met in one of his community college classes.

"What's that?" Huck nodded at the letter in her hand.

She took a deep breath, her chest rising high, and handed him the envelope. “See for yourself.”

Unfolding the letter, he skimmed his eyes over the words then stopped, reading them over one more time. “This is for real?”

She nodded, her eyes shining, her whole body alight.

“I don’t believe it!” He hugged her again, his heart pounding in his ears.

Her face was buried in his chest, but he could hear the smile in her voice. “I didn’t think it would be this much.”

Huck stared at the check again. The payout from Upton Development was huge. Giant. “What will you do with this?”

She sucked in a deep breath. “I was thinking I’d like to expand. Make Sky Wide more than a place for lessons and boarding. We could offer some sort of rehabilitative services, too. Build some cabins for people to stay in. What do you think?”

His chest warmed. “I think that’s a great idea.”

“So what do you say?” She shoved her hands into the pockets of her blue jeans. “Would you like to be my business partner? That’ll mean giving up your job at Cole’s ranch.”

His jaw dropped, and he couldn’t find the words.

They’d been attached at the hip since he’d moved in with her nearly a year earlier. The only time they were apart was when he went to his job at Cole’s.

Every once in a while, he’d let the fantasy of them working together, spending every hour together, flit through his mind. He hadn’t let himself fall too far down that rabbit hole, though. Sometimes daydreaming could just get a person down.

And now here she was, presenting him his ideal on a silver platter.

“You mean that?”

She blinked then laughed. “Of course I mean that. Huck, the only thing that could make what we do together better is doing more of it.”

A laugh bubbled up his throat. “I agree. I’ll let Cole know. There’s more than one candidate who can fill my shoes.”

She blinked up at him. “Are you sure? I know you love it there.”

“I love it here more.” He pressed his lips to hers again, already dreaming of a future he’d never thought he’d have. “I’ll make sure you get everything you want.”

He would do that, and a hundred other things.

Everything he could think of to make her life—and his—the happiest it could be.

“Want to see the plan I drew up?” She took his hand.

His eyebrows jumped. “You already have a plan?”

She shrugged a shoulder. “I wanted to do this anyway, even if we needed to apply for grants or loans.”

Laughing, he allowed himself to be led into the house. Through the kitchen they went, up the stairs, and into their bedroom.

Huck stopped just past the doorway, expecting her to pull something from the desk drawers in the corner. Instead, she yanked him closer.

The sudden movement made him lose his balance, and they fell onto the bed, him on top of her.

“Hey there.” He laughed. “Did you mean to do that?”

“I sure did.” She looped her arms around his neck. “And I have a lot more planned.”

His heart thumped hard in his chest, already filled with thoughts of their future. The expansions they could make to the ranch. The trips they could take. The nights sitting on the porch, rocking and looking at the stars.

“I love you, Huck.”

“I love you too. And I hope you know I’m planning to be much more than just your business partner. I want to be your partner in every way.”

“I want that too.”

He leaned his forehead against hers. “I would’ve put my ring on your finger a long time ago, but I didn’t want you to have any questions about my intentions.”

“You’re the most honorable man I’ve ever known. I don’t worry about your intentions.”

“Still. I want you to know that I want you for *you*.” He’d never said anything truer in his life.

“And I want you forever, cowboy.”

He rubbed his nose against hers, his heart damn near exploding with joy. The kiss that followed was more than a kiss. It was a promise, a vow, a testament to the love that would hold them together forever.

He would always be her cowboy.

TERESA'S COWBOY

CHAPTER
ONE

Teresa raced out the front door of the apartment building, heart slamming in her chest. Footsteps pounded close behind her, but she didn't dare look back, too afraid to find out just how close Ricky was.

The Upper East Side area was quiet as she rushed through the night; only one car driving down the dark residential street.

“Get back here, Teresa!” Ricky called.

She rounded the next corner without hesitation. She didn't know what was in this direction, or even which street she was headed toward. Despite spending her whole life in New York City, she was turned around, upended by what she just saw.

The yelling... the gunshot... The memories spun around in her mind, a gruesome movie on constant replay.

She never should've returned. She should've stayed separate from all of this, should've kept to herself and let hope for a family reunion go.

She'd never have that now.

Tears streaming down her face, she pumped her arms and legs as fast as they would go. Ricky was close. The sounds of his gasps now closer, louder.

It was only a matter of time before he reached her. She needed a miracle to survive.

Maybe he wouldn't shoot her out there on the street.

Then again, why not? He could be gone before the cops arrived.

If the cops came at all. Knowing Ricky's deep influence, there was a good chance some members of law enforcement might look the other way. She'd end up in the papers as a robbery gone wrong; another cautionary tale for women to be more careful about walking alone at night.

Ricky's hand skimmed her shoulder, and he grunted from exertion. He almost had her. She had to run faster... push harder....

At the end of the block, a subway station appeared. Just like the street, there was no one around it. Stopping by the apartment after her noon to midnight shift had been a huge mistake. There'd be no witnesses if Ricky got his hands on her.

Teresa darted down the subway stairs taking them two at a time, hoping she wouldn't trip and fall flat on her face. The sound of an oncoming train had her pushing herself even faster. She only had to stay ahead of Ricky a few seconds longer.

A silent prayer spilled from her lips when she spotted the train, open-doored and empty. She flew inside as the heavy barriers drew shut behind her. Whirling around, she locked eyes with Ricky still stuck outside. The protective doors between them.

Ricky slammed his fist on the glass, shouting as the train began to move. Spittle flying from his mouth hitting the window as his face twisted in a mask of anger.

Teresa backed up, her legs wobbling from fear and exertion. She bumped into a seat and collapsed trying to catch her breath.

"You okay?" a voice asked.

She looked up to see a middle-aged Asian woman sitting in the seat opposite. They were the only two people in the car.

"Yes." Teresa pushed sweaty hair away from her forehead as she tried to draw in more air. "Thanks." She worked up a

fake smile. “People are crazy.”

The woman shook her head. “You need pepper spray. I always carry it in my bag. You never know when someone will try something. My cousin was in Central Park and...”

The woman continued with her story, but her words became a distant buzz. Teresa’s hands were shaking, heart pounding, as adrenaline still raced through her body.

She’d almost died back there. God, she was lucky to have gotten away.

Except... She hadn’t gotten away. Not really.

Ricky knew where she lived. They all knew where she lived.

He’d most likely already made a phone call, and his buddies were probably headed to her apartment now.

Fresh tears surfaced, and she squeezed her eyes shut. No, no, no. This couldn’t be happening.

But it was.

And she knew what she had to do.

Even if it was the last thing she wanted.

At the next stop, she got off the train and transferred to the D line. It was going in the opposite direction of her apartment, but that was what she needed.

Life as she knew it was over. She could never return to her apartment, could never return to her job. Could never see her friends again.

Not if she wanted to live.

Alone on the D train, she watched the subway stop slip away. This was it. The day she’d always feared.

And she couldn’t be any less prepared for it.

CHAPTER
TWO

Teresa jerked awake, body stiff and hands up, blocking her face. She blinked as the scene around her came into view. She was safe. It was only the bus stopping.

She took a steadying breath and pressed her hands to her chest, attempting and failing, to calm her racing heart. The memories of the other night still fresh in her mind. Her father hadn't been a good man, but he was still her father. And she'd hoped that one day they'd find their ways back to one another. That they could have a little bit of the relationship they'd had when she was young.

Now he was most likely gone, and she was on the run from his killer.

Beyond her window a quaint downtown beckoned, backdropped by a beautiful mountain range. Most of the people on the bus stood and stretched. A few had already gotten off.

She blinked sleep from her eyes, trying to figure out where she was. The last she remembered, the bus had been pulling out of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

"Excuse me." She stopped an old man passing by her seat. "Where are we?"

"Sweet Pines." He pulled his baseball cap low on his forehead. "Wyoming."

Wyoming? Had she really slept that long?

She checked the flip phone she'd picked up a few days earlier. It was ten in the morning. Apparently, she'd slept through the night and well into the next morning.

Funny, considering she'd been so sure she'd never sleep again.

She kneaded the tightened muscles along her neck and shoulders, feeling every bit of her forty-nine years and the ache from too many hours spent on a bus. Running for one's life would definitely wear a person down.

Turning back to the window, she studied the street some more. It looked safe.

As in, Ricky wasn't on it. And neither was anyone else she knew.

Sighing, she gathered her backpack and followed the other travelers off the bus. The sun was warm, the air clean, and she smiled.

Truly smiled.

Which was insane.

Shielding her eyes from the summer light, she looked up and down the street. Some of the passengers were meandering down the sidewalk, while a few of them smoked in an alley. Across the street, some people sat at tables in front of a coffee shop, the words "Cup 'O Joe" painted in big bubble letters on the window.

Teresa's heart leapt at the welcoming sight. Yes! Coffee. That was exactly what she needed.

She crossed the street and let herself into the shop. A collection of mismatched sofas and easy chairs sprawled randomly across the space, and upbeat pop music blared over the speakers. Judging by the number of dirty mugs stacked in the bin against the wall and the barista frantically cleaning the espresso machine, she'd just missed the morning rush. Aside from the lone barista, the place was empty.

Teresa passed a mirror on her way to the counter and stopped in shock.

Who was this woman?

It wasn't just the newly-blonde hair or the pinched brow that struck her. It was the desperation in her eyes. The fear.

That night in New York, she'd left the old Teresa behind. This new woman was still a stranger. And she looked like trouble.

Clutching the straps of her backpack, Teresa approached the counter. "Hi. I'd like a black coffee, please."

"Sure thing." The woman, who wore a rainbow headscarf and a thousand bangles, smiled warmly at her. "Coming right up." She prepared the drink then poured the steaming coffee into a green mug.

"Oh." Teresa held out a hand. "Sorry. I meant to say to go."

"The next bus will be at least another twenty minutes." The barista set the coffee on the counter between them. "Enjoy yourself a bit."

Enjoy herself? That seemed impossible. The most she dared to hope for was survival.

She turned her backpack around to locate her wallet. "How much?"

"It's on the house." The woman waved the dish towel she was using to wipe up a milk spill. "I'm dumping that pot soon anyway. It's the slow part of the day, and it'll be cold before the after-lunch rush."

"Oh. Thank you." It was a small gesture, but Teresa appreciated it. Every dollar counted until she found a job.

She carried her coffee to a table in the corner and took a seat. The barista moved into the dining area to clear tables, gently swaying her hips to the music.

She stopped at Teresa's table, the overloaded dish bin in her arms. "Where are you headed?"

Thankfully, Teresa had rehearsed this answer. "California. To see a friend."

“That sounds nice. We get a lot of—”

The front door opened, cutting her off, and five people in casual office clothes filed in. The woman hurried behind the counter and put the bin down so she could help them. Before she could take all their orders, the door opened again.

And then again.

In the next ten minutes, a good twenty people swept in and out of the coffee shop. The barista took it all in stride, smiling the whole time she poured espresso shots and worked the register. Teresa guessed the other woman to be in her mid-to-late thirties, but her youthful energy and disposition gave her a much younger vibe.

“Whew!” The last person finally out the door with their latte in hand, she leaned against the counter and raised her eyebrows at Teresa.

Teresa laughed. “I thought you said this was the slow part of the day.”

“It is. That was slow. This town is small, but I have many devoted customers.” She twisted her lips. “Or maybe I should say, many addicted customers.”

So she owned the coffee shop? That explained the eclectic furniture and brightly colored decor. The atmosphere definitely fit her personality.

Teresa sipped her coffee—which was some of the best she’d ever had. “Looks like you could use some help.”

“That’s an understatement.” She blew a piece of hair out of her face.

Both hands wrapped around the mug, Teresa leaned back in her chair. The cushions were soft and worn, welcoming and calming. It would be a dream to spend the whole day curled up there with a book. “I would love to work in a cute coffee shop like this.”

The woman straightened. “So why don’t you?”

Teresa stared. “I mean, because I...”

Because she was running for her life.

“If you lived here, I’d hire you.” The spun back into action, refilling the bean hopper and sweeping muffin crumbs off the floor.

“I would love to live here,” Teresa said. She froze, cup halfway to her lips. Now where had that come from?

She’d never lived in a small town. She was a city girl. A New Yorker, born and raised.

Yet... part of her did long for the slower pace, a chance to catch her breath, earn some money, and make a real plan to stay off Ricky’s radar. The anonymity a small town offered could be priceless.

“What’s this place called again? This town?” She put her coffee cup on the table, excitement building in her chest.

The other woman tied up a trash bag. “Sweet Pines.”

Sweet Pines. It even sounded slow and casual.

She liked it. A lot.

“What if I did stay here?” Teresa asked. She cleared her throat and sat taller.

The woman stilled and cocked her head. “Are you looking for somewhere new to live?”

Teresa tried to act nonchalant. “I am, actually. I was going to check out the town in California where my friend lives, but Sweet Pines seems really nice. I just need a change of pace, you know? I could do a trial shift, if you’re open to it. You wouldn’t need to pay me. I mean, I don’t—”

“You’re hired.” The woman came around the counter, grabbed Teresa’s hand, and vigorously shook it.

Teresa’s jaw dropped. “Really? Well, I—”

“Lovell Jones. You can call me Lovey.”

“Teresa Humphrey. Nice to meet you.” She dropped Lovey’s hand, proud of herself for remembering to use her fake last name.

“So what do you say? When can you start?”

Across the street, the other travelers climbed back on the bus. Only a few more minutes and her ride would leave. She'd be on a new path yet again.

This was it. The moment of truth. She could get on that bus and see what else was out there. Or she could take a chance on this random, tiny western town.

Was it too soon to settle down, even temporarily? Or was Sweet Pines her destiny?

She turned back to Lovey, embracing hope and resolve. “How does right now sound?”

CHAPTER
THREE

“Well? You going in or what?” Huck set the new hoses they’d just picked up at the hardware store in the back of his truck.

“Huh?” Cole tore his gaze away from Cup O’ Joe’s front window.

“You’ve been staring at that new barista for the last three weeks.” Taking off his hat, Huck wiped sweat from his brow.

Heat filled Cole’s face. “No, I haven’t.”

His friend and foreman laughed. “Right.”

Cole turned away from the coffee shop. “I need beans.”

Someone clapped him on the shoulder from behind. “You need more than that.” One of his ranch hands, Michael, leaned against Huck’s truck, and the two of them shared another laugh.

Cole shot them a middle finger, and their laughter grew, knowing he didn’t mean it. He was peeved, though. Just not at his friends. At himself.

He was so confident when it came to almost everything. Roping cattle. Making deals. Throwing all his money into a dying ranch and putting in the work to bring it back to life. Women, though, that was a different matter entirely.

It hadn’t always been this way, but he’d also never met someone quite like Teresa. Every time he got in front of her, his tongue tied into knots.

After three weeks, he was sick and tired of it.

“Guess I’d better do something about it.” He closed the tailgate on Huck’s truck. “See you guys at the ranch.”

He didn’t stop to get their reactions. If he hesitated, he’d lose his momentum and end up backing down. So, he straightened to his full height and walked into the coffee shop.

Teresa was behind the counter, her blonde hair piled up in a high bun, wearing a frilly pink apron. She handed a customer their drink, and the smile that spread across her face nearly stopped Cole in his tracks.

Good God. Was it even legal to be that stunning?

Remembering his commitment—and knowing Michael and Huck were probably watching through the window—he strode up to the counter. “Good morning.”

“Good...” Noticing it was him, she paused for the briefest moment. “...morning.”

Something flipped in his chest, but he didn’t let hope get the best of him yet. That pause could have been either a good or a bad sign.

“Your usual?” She reached toward the paper cups, her hand hovering above a stack.

She remembered his drink?

“Um, sure.” He was already buzzing from three cups of coffee earlier that morning but saying no to her felt impossible.

She turned around, and he studied her smooth, elegant neck as she filled the cup with black coffee. He needed to come on out and say it. Just open his mouth and—

“This is how I like it, too.” She put the cup on the counter. “Plain old black.”

A smile pulled at his lips. “It’s the only way.”

“Yeah.” She glanced down at the counter. “It’s Cole, right?”

“Guilty as charged. And you’re Teresa.”

He’d known her name from the first day he spotted her in Cup O’ Joe. She’d already started working there, but he hadn’t known that yet. Instead, he saw her for the first time when she came in for a cup of coffee. She’d walked off without her bank card, and he’d rushed it to her. Something in her answering smile had instantly done him in.

And he hadn’t been able to stop thinking about her since.

It wasn’t just her beauty: the high cheekbones, elegant looking eyebrows, and big brown eyes. She hummed with an energy that he craved. Though he couldn’t quite put it into words, he wanted to be closer to her.

He’d taken it upon himself to question Lovey about her almost immediately, but aside from ordering coffee he hadn’t taken things further.

Maybe he was just too out of practice. It had been so long since he’d been with a woman. Hell, so long since he’d even gone on a date. He’d gotten rusty in that regard, even a tad complacent as he edged toward fifty, priding himself in being a man who didn’t need a woman around.

But Teresa made him want to change all that. She stirred a fire in his veins, and he wanted that feeling to grow.

The song on the shop speakers switched, and he cocked his head. “The Purple Voids?”

“Yeah.” Her lips pulled into a grin. “You know them? God, they’re so obscure.”

He chuckled. “I have a soft spot for obscure bands. Saw them live a few years back in Austin.”

“Really?” Her eyes widened. “I’ve always wanted to see them live. Their music just... it hits me in a way nothing else does.”

“I know what you mean.” He leaned against the counter, feeling more relaxed. “It’s like they’re speaking directly to you, right?”

She nodded, her eyes locked onto his. The energy between them was electric, and his heart started racing. He wanted nothing more than to lean in and kiss her. He hated that he couldn't. At least not here and now, but maybe another time. Another place. If she liked him too.

"You just moved here, right?" he asked. Eyes on her, he took out his wallet and felt around for some cash.

"Last month." She handed him his change, her fingertips brushing his palm and sending a tingle up his arm. "Are you liking it so far?"

She nodded. "It's smaller than what I'm used to, but I'm finding my way around. The people are friendly. It's a nice change of pace from the city."

He nodded, taking a sip of his coffee. "Yeah, this is a tight-knit community. Everyone knows everyone."

He had to make his move. He didn't want another day to pass without letting her know he was interested. Plus, there was bound to be competition. It wouldn't be a surprise if half the men in town had already asked her out.

"Listen, I know this might come out of nowhere, but I'd really like to take you out to dinner sometime. Show you around Sweet Pines."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Dinner?"

"I know a good steakhouse in town. We can go there. If you eat meat, that is."

"I do eat meat." She hesitated, her gaze flicking around the coffee shop. "But I don't know...I'm not sure that's a good idea."

His heart sank. "Oh."

She chewed on her bottom lip. "I'm flattered, Cole. But I'm not really looking to date right now."

Ouch. That stung.

He nodded, feeling the hit of rejection like a bull's horn to his chest. "Okay, I understand. No worries."

“I’m sorry. I really am.” She twisted a dish towel and didn’t look at him.

He tried to keep his expression neutral, but the disappointment probably showed on his face anyway. He took a step back from the counter, humbled and not wanting to make her any more uncomfortable than he already had.

He should’ve known better than to think a beautiful woman like Teresa would be interested in a washed-up cowboy like him.

“You have a good day.” He tipped his hat and took his coffee.

Turning on his heel, he made his way to the door. The bell jingled overhead as he pushed it open, the bright sunlight hitting him square in the face.

Outside, he leaned against the brick wall next to the coffee shop, his eyes closed as he tried to shake off the disappointment. He’d been so hopeful, so sure that she was interested.

But apparently he’d been wrong.

Cole took a deep breath, his eyes opening to take in the quaint town square.

Sweet Pines was a charming place, a town he’d chosen because it was supposed to be a fresh start for him, a chance to escape his past and start anew.

But it seemed as if his past was catching up, and he couldn’t escape it no matter how hard he tried. Those feelings he’d been running from were still there, buried underneath the surface. Getting shot down by Teresa brought them back up.

He pushed off the brick wall with a shake of his head and moved deeper into downtown. He still had some errands to run, and he was wasting time sulking around. So what if a woman had turned him down for dinner? That was life. The important thing was that he’d put himself out there and taken the chance.

He could still get to know Teresa. They'd already become acquaintances. The jump to friendship wasn't so far.

She wasn't interested in him, romantically, but he could learn to live with that.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Teresa counted the stack of ones again. Thirty-nine dollars total. Not too bad for tips from the midday shift.

Add it to her hourly wage and she'd be able to pay her rent next week, plus cover gas, utilities, and groceries. She'd barely purchased anything since her arrival. Only the bare necessities and a burner phone to call her best friend, Michelle. Of all the things she'd left in the city, Michelle hadn't been one she could live without. So they'd agreed on weekly check-ins as reassurance that both women were okay.

The gig didn't compare to the nursing job she'd left behind. She missed the financial stability of a dependable paycheck, but at least she wouldn't have to battle burnout the way she had at the hospital.

Besides, she couldn't get a nursing job in Wyoming, or anywhere for that matter. Ricky was surely searching hospitals for her.

Because he hadn't just given up, right? She knew too much. Had seen too much.

A shiver ran through her, despite the warm day. She was safe here in Sweet Pines. She needed to keep telling herself that. It would just take a while for the truth to sink in, and that was okay. She was surviving, wasn't she?

"Good afternoon!" Lovey emerged through the coffee shop's back door, cartons of oat milk in hand. "How was your shift?"

“Good.” Teresa hung her apron on one of the hooks by the back door, her mind shifting to Cole.

He’d taken her by surprise, asking her out.

She hadn’t expected it at all, and she’d been caught off guard. But deep down, she knew she’d been hoping for it. She’d been drawn to him since the moment she first saw him. His rugged looks and quiet demeanor had intrigued her. Tall and strong with brown and gray hair, his soulful hazel eyes seemed to see into her soul. One look at them and she felt things she decidedly shouldn’t.

Now wasn’t the time to get involved with anyone. Not when she was still on the run.

Lovey raised an eyebrow, probably noticing the faraway look in Teresa’s eyes. “Everything okay?”

Teresa snapped out of her thoughts. “Yeah, it’s fine. Cole asked me out to dinner.”

Lovey’s face lit up. “Cole? Who owns the ranch right outside of town?”

“I guess so.” She nodded, feeling a pang of guilt for not being more excited.

“That’s amazing!” Lovey clapped her hands together. “You should totally go.”

“I don’t know.” She tapped her nails against the counter, an anxious habit. “I’m just not sure if I’m ready for that yet.”

Lovey put the milk on the counter. “Bad breakup?”

“Yeah.” She rubbed her hands against her jeans and got busy cleaning the counter so she wouldn’t have to look at her boss.

She hated lying. Plus she’d never been good at it. All someone had to do was look in her eyes to spot a fib.

Lovey gave her a sympathetic look. “I’m sorry, hon. But you can’t let that stop you from moving on with your life.”

She couldn’t bring herself to tell Lovey the truth. She didn’t want to drag anyone else into her mess. It was better if

she kept to herself and stayed under the radar.

But the thought of spending time with Cole was tempting. She could tell he was a good guy, and she couldn't deny the attraction she felt toward him. He'd been so sweet, so respectful. And the way his eyes had lingered on her had sent shivers down her spine.

"I know. She forced a smile. "I'll think about it."

Lovey patted her on the back. "Take all the time you need, sweetie. But don't let fear hold you back."

If only her hesitation was due to a breakup. Life would be so much simpler.

Choosing not to respond, she busied herself rinsing the milk pitchers. "Can I do anything else before I leave?"

"Nope. This place is cleaner than it's ever been. I don't know how you do it."

Stress cleaning, that was how she did it.

Lovey opened the milk cooler and began rotating the jugs and cartons. "Go enjoy your afternoon."

Teresa took a deep breath. It'd been so long since she'd enjoyed anything, but now, finally settling into Sweet Pines, joy felt realistic again.

"Maybe I'll go to the thrift store and look at some furniture." She clocked out, a little bit of excitement urging her forward.

"That sounds nice. Oh!" Lovey whirled around to face her. "My book club is meeting here next week. We would love it if you joined."

A book club?

That was one thing she hadn't done in weeks. Read books.

Novels had always been her refuge, her safe space to turn to when the world became too much to handle. She missed the feeling of sinking into bed with a cup of tea and a new paperback. Missed the smell of the pages and the comfort of falling asleep with a book in hand.

“Here’s what we’re reading.” Lovey scrawled something down on a piece of scrap paper and handed it over. “The library has at least a few copies, so there might be one left.”

“Thanks.” She glanced at the paper, recognizing a popular romance author’s name.

Again, Cole came to mind.

Maybe she shouldn’t have turned down his offer. After all, nearly a month had passed with no sign of Ricky or anyone he worked with.

Maybe it was time to start living again, to start taking chances. To take a chance on Cole.

“Count me in.” She tucked the paper into her jeans’ pocket. “Next week, right?”

Lovey nodded. “Yep. Tuesday at seven. We’ll have snacks and wine. It’ll be fun.”

Teresa smiled, and this time it was genuine. “I’m looking forward to it.”

She walked out of the coffee shop and into the warm sunshine, a new hope blooming inside her. She couldn’t wait to call her friend and check in, maybe ask her advice on Cole. For the first time in weeks, she was starting to feel like herself again. And maybe, just maybe, Cole could play a part in her future here.

She started toward the thrift store, contemplating all the possibilities that lay ahead, all the adventures she could have in this charming little town.

As she turned the corner, she lifted her face to the sun, soaking in its warm rays.

Things were finally looking up.

“She could be going by a different name. She has some real problems, you know.”

Teresa ground to a stop, ice filling her veins. That voice... It was so familiar. But it couldn’t...

Her heart pounded, and her breath caught in her throat. It was probably just a man who sounded like him.

She lowered her face, and reality immediately proved her wrong. Ricky stood on the sidewalk only a storefront away, talking to a man in front of the barbershop.

It was as if a bomb went off, blowing everything good to smithereens. She couldn't move. Couldn't think. Couldn't breathe. She was numb from head to toe.

Ricky held his phone out for the man, showing his screen. "She could have changed her hair."

The man frowned. "No. Sorry. I haven't seen her."

As if zapped by an electric current, the feeling came back into Teresa's body. She had to get out of there before Ricky turned and saw her.

Spotting an alleyway between where she stood and the barbershop. She changed course and ran like hell. If he caught her, if he even saw her, she would be dead by day's end. She had to get out of town as soon as possible.

But first she had to get off the street. Downtown was small, and if she stayed out in the open he would spot her.

Emerging from the alleyway, she dashed toward a large black truck. She needed somewhere to hide until Ricky left the area. Tugging on the passenger door handle, she jumped into the truck and crouched half on the floor, half in the seat, so her head wasn't visible through the window.

Huddled there, she closed her eyes and willed the nightmare to vanish. Prayed that somehow, someday, she would escape.

"Fancy seeing you here," a man said.

She gasped, her eyes flying open, certain she was officially done for.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Fancy seeing you here?

Cole wanted to kick himself for saying something so cheesy. It'd just come out of his mouth. What else was he supposed to say when the woman he'd been pining over jumped into his truck?

He'd just climbed behind the wheel after putting his groceries in the bed, and had been staring at the road, thinking about the way she'd smiled in Cup O' Joe. Thinking he probably wasn't meant to have a woman in his life anyway, and it was probably better that way. Then, like a miracle manifested, she'd opened the door and climbed right into the cab.

The terror in her eyes, however, was like a punch to the gut.

Something was definitely wrong.

"I... I'm sorry." Her voice shook. "I'll go."

She reached for the door handle, but he put his hand out to stop her. "No. Wait."

They both froze, his hand only inches from hers. *Shit*. She was already freaked out, and he wasn't making it any better by blocking her from leaving the truck.

"You're welcome to stay." He drew his hand back, giving her space. "Is everything all right?"

Hesitation flashed in her eyes, but it only took her a moment to decide. "Do you see a man out there? Kind of short

and sturdy, black hair?”

He blinked and studied the sidewalk. Sure enough, a man who fit her description strode down it, his face in a grimace.

“Yeah. I do... He’s crossing the street now. Looks like he’s getting in a car. Yeah... He’s driving off.”

She sighed. “Thank you.”

But he didn’t feel relief. The woman’s fear was palpable, and he couldn’t help wondering what had happened to her. More importantly, should he go after the dark-haired man and teach him some manners?

She slid onto the seat’s edge, studying the world outside her window.

“Do you want to talk about it?” He kept his voice as gentle as possible.

She shook her head, hair falling from her bun and into messy waves around her face. “No... I don’t even know you.”

“Fair enough.” He leaned back in his seat. Maybe pretending to relax would encourage her to do the same. “But if you need someone to talk to, I’m here. And I won’t judge.”

She gave him a small, grateful smile. “Thank you.”

They sat in silence for a few moments before she spoke up again. “I’m sorry for jumping into your truck. It was just... a reflex, I guess.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He grinned, trying to lighten the mood. “I’ve had stranger encounters. Trust me.”

She laughed softly. “I’ll bet.”

He glanced at her again, taking in her features. She was beautiful in an understated way, with a natural look that spoke to him. He longed to know her story and what had brought her to his little town.

As if reading his mind, she spoke. “I just moved here. Needed a fresh start.”

Cole nodded. He knew that, of course. He'd quizzed Lovey on Teresa the moment he saw her, though there'd been little information to gather. "I get that. Sometimes a change of scenery is all you need."

"Yeah." She looked out the window again, her fingers tapping a pattern on her knee.

He shifted in his seat, angling to face her. This close, he could smell her fruity shampoo, could see a little mole beneath her ear.

"Are you sure you don't want any help?" He tore his gaze away from her neck to meet her eyes.

She chewed her bottom lip. "It's nothing to worry about. He's just an ex-boyfriend, and I, uh, really don't want to run into him."

The way she tensed, her shoulders folding in, he knew there was a lot more to that story. His best guess? The guy was bad news.

"He's looking for you?" Cole asked, struggling to keep his temper in check. He just couldn't stand the thought of anyone giving her trouble. He downright hated the possibility a man she'd intentionally left behind had followed her.

"Maybe." She looked away. "Yes." Teresa shook her head. "He wasn't good to me. He was abusive. I don't want to get into it, though."

Cole's hands curled into fists. He imagined speeding down the street in search of this no-good asshole.

He'd never been one to start fights, but nothing got him to his boiling point faster than people intentionally mistreating others. Especially when it came to women and children. That wasn't something he could look away from.

He took a deep breath, forcing himself to stay calm. "I won't push. But if you ever need help or someone to talk to, please don't hesitate to come find me." He tried to keep his tone light, but he meant every word.

She nodded, her eyes meeting his. “Thank you, Cole. I really appreciate it.”

It was a small thing, but he felt a sense of satisfaction knowing that he could be there for her in some capacity.

They sat in silence for a few more minutes, the tension slowly dissipating. He couldn't help but still feel drawn to Teresa, couldn't help but want to protect her from all the dangers out there.

Finally, she spoke again. “I should probably go. I don't want to keep you from anything.”

He nodded, his heart sinking at the thought of her leaving. But he knew he couldn't force her to stay.

“Of course. Take care of yourself, okay?”

She nodded, a small smile on her lips, and it was as if the sun had come out from behind the clouds. “I will. And thank you again. You're very kind.”

She climbed out of the truck and stood on the sidewalk, looking back at him for a long moment before walking away.

He sat there for a few more minutes, flooded by a mix of emotions he couldn't quite decipher, replaying their conversation in his head. He wanted to help her, but he didn't know how. She didn't seem to want help.

Finally, he shook himself out of his thoughts and started the truck. He had things to do, a long list of fixes and chores waiting at his ranch, and he couldn't sit around all day thinking about Teresa.

He'd planned on forgetting about her, but that would be impossible now. She'd run to his small town, then into his truck, to get away from her ex. Cole had to make certain she was okay.

An undeniable sense of protectiveness had taken root in his chest. He needed to make sure she was safe, no matter what it took.

Even if it meant putting everything he valued on the line.

CHAPTER
SIX

Teresa pressed the burner phone to her ear, stuffing the last of her clothes in her suitcase as she did. The call rang a few more times, and she was about to give up when suddenly Michelle answered.

“Hello?”

“It’s me!” Teresa’s knees went weak with relief, and she sat on the edge of her bed.

“Teresa! Oh my God. I’ve been worried sick! You promised you’d call and I haven’t heard from you in three weeks. I’ve been going out of my mind. Are you okay?”

Tears streamed down her face, but she quickly wiped them away. There wasn’t time to fall apart. She needed fill Michelle in quickly and focus on getting out of town. “I’m sorry. No. That’s why I’m calling now. Ricky’s here and I’m leaving tonight. I don’t know when I’ll be able to call again.”

“What are you going to do?” Michelle’s voice pitched.

“I’m not sure. Right now, I just have to get out of town before he sees me or finds someone who recognizes me. He’s showing my picture around town. I just needed to call you first and let you know. God, I don’t even know how he knew where to look.” Standing, she went to her apartment window and peeked through the blinds.

It was a quiet night downtown, only a few cars on the street. It had been six hours since she spotted Ricky, and while waiting that long to leave town had been excruciating, she’d also known it was for the best. Ricky could still be in Sweet

Pines, and sneaking away under the cover of dark seemed like a wiser plan.

“I heard a rumor about you being somewhere in Wyoming,” Michelle said. “Don’t tell me if it’s true or not. It’s better that I don’t know.”

Teresa gripped her hair at the roots. “He tracked me down somehow. I’ve been so careful. I don’t know how he did it.”

“Did you get rid of your old bank cards?”

“Yes. I...” She trailed off, remembering that on her first day in Sweet Pines she used her debit card. After that, she’d closed the account, withdrawing the funds and starting new with a local bank.

“Oh no,” Michelle said, reading Teresa’s mind. “Did you use the old one when you got there?”

She nodded, even though her friend couldn’t see her. “I had to. I didn’t have any cash on me, and I needed to pay for the motel room.”

Ricky and the people he worked with had so many connections in so many industries it was unbelievable. Of course they were able to get access to her bank statements. She had thought she was being careful, but apparently that one slip was all it took for him to track her down.

Michelle sighed. “Just keep moving, keep your head down. I can send you some money.”

“No. It’s too risky. It could be tracked back to you and I don’t want you involved. Our phone calls are a taking a big enough chance as it is. Besides, I have some anyway, from a job here.”

“Some” meaning about three hundred dollars. She’d been frugal down to every dime, eating beans and rice and keeping the lights off in her apartment over the last month, saving money in case this very thing happened and she had to run.

Three hundred dollars was a measly amount, though. How far could she really expect to go?

It didn't matter. Staying in Sweet Pines was no longer an option. Not after today.

She folded her suitcase closed, zipping it up with a sense of finality. This was it. Time to go.

Her chest ached. She had really thought she'd found a home here, a little pocket of peace and safety.

What would Lovey think when she didn't show up to work tomorrow?

What would Cole think?

It was funny that he came to mind. She wouldn't have been able to date him anyway. It didn't matter that he turned her legs to jelly and she had butterflies in her stomach.

"I need to go. I've probably stayed here too long as it is." She checked the street below one more time. No sign of Ricky.

"Just stay safe. Promise me you'll stay safe."

"I promise." She wasn't sure how realistic that promise was, but she would try her best.

"You'll make it out of this, Teresa. You will."

She closed her eyes, knowing that her friend was only saying that in order to raise both their spirits. Like her, Michelle had grown up in a family connected to the Mafia. She knew you couldn't just walk out of their range of fire. Most people who even tried disappeared without a trace.

"I'll call you when I can, but I don't know when that will be. Bye." Teresa hung up the phone and took a deep breath. It was time to leave. She didn't have much, just a few changes of clothes and the little bit of money.

It would have to be enough.

Grabbing her keys, she opened the front door and listened. The second floor was mostly quiet, just the buzz of a TV coming from the apartment directly across from hers.

Backpack over her shoulder and suitcase in hand, she slipped out of the apartment and down the stairs, tears collecting in her eyes. The apartment had been small and

nothing special, but it had also been hers. A little sanctuary that she had hoped would last. It hurt like hell to say goodbye.

In the parking lot behind the building, she loaded her bags in her car's trunk and jumped behind the wheel.

The hatchback was twenty years old and in need of a number of repairs. It was the only vehicle she'd been able to afford with the contents of her old bank account, and she planned on driving it as far as it would take her.

Where to, she didn't know. Ricky had found her in a small town on the other side of the country because she'd made a mistake. She couldn't afford to make another. She had to keep her wits about her and focus on her survival. On staying safe. Though was anywhere truly safe from his reach?

Not that the answer mattered. She had to keep moving and not let down her guard. Stay off the grid, and avoid anyone and everyone that could potentially link her back to the Mafia.

As she drove out of town, she kept a close eye on her rearview mirror, checking for any signs of a tail. She didn't see any other cars behind her, but she couldn't be too careful.

A few miles out of the Sweet Pines town limits, she breathed a sigh of relief. So far, so good. The night sky stretched out above her and her tires hummed a soothing tune against the asphalt.

She would drive South until she needed gas, then she'd decide where to go from there. Maybe pick a town at random on the map.

If only she'd been able to stay in Sweet Pines. A town full of friendly people, a fun job, and a handsome rancher who wanted to take her to dinner.

Angrily, she wiped tears from her cheeks. Damn Ricky. Damn them all. They'd taken not one, but now two lives from her. The injustice made her want to throw her head back and scream into the night.

But at least she was alive. For now, anyway.

She needed to be grateful for that.

A sign appeared, announcing a turn-off for the next highway in a couple miles. Her heart leapt, each mile under her wheels feeling like real success.

Suddenly, a loud pop filled the air, and she yelped in surprise. Was that a gunshot?

The car slowed and she realized the noise had come from under the hood.

Oh, no.

She gripped the steering wheel. This couldn't be happening. Not here, not now!

Except it was. The car came to a full stop, despite her frantic pressing of the gas pedal.

She shifted into park with a loud swear and swallowed the urge to scream. Not that anyone would hear her. She'd broken down on a stretch of road without houses. Thick grass and copses of trees spread along either side.

She exited the vehicle and moved swiftly to pop the hood. It was too dark to see anything, though, and it wouldn't have really mattered if she could. Beyond keeping up with oil and coolant, she didn't know the first thing about cars.

"Shit." She bit her lip.

She'd have to call a tow truck.

And then what? Have it take her and the car back into town? That wasn't an option.

As she stood there trying to come up with a plan, headlights cut through the night. She froze, every muscle in her body going rigid.

The car was coming from the direction of town, and it could have been anybody. Even Ricky.

No. The driver was probably just a local going home from the bar or a late shift at the tiny community hospital.

Still the hair stood on the back of her neck as the vehicle drew near. She needed to get off the road.

She stepped away, then darted into some bushes as the car pulled to a stop behind hers. Crouched low, she watched as the headlights turned off and a man stepped out.

She squinted, trying to make out details in the dark. The man reached her car and looked around.

He opened the driver's door and the dome light ignited, illuminating the space.

A gasp ripped from her chest as Ricky's face appeared in the night.

His face snapped up, eyes searching in her direction.

He'd found her.

She inched back, deeper into the trees. Until a twig snapped beneath her shoe.

She froze and the car door slammed, snuffing out the light and casting them in darkness beneath the stars.

In the next heartbeat, he was heading toward her, gun in hand.

Whirling around, she took off with the speed and panic of a rabbit.

Her heart pounded, and her breath came in ragged gasps as she sprinted through the trees and up a hill. A gunshot echoed across the land behind her, and she cried out in fear.

If he'd hit her, she didn't know, adrenaline prevented her from feeling it. She kept going, kept pushing.

The hill crested then fell, sending her into a half-run, half-tumble to the bottom. Moments later, her shoes met the icy running water of a creek.

Ricky fired again, and the shots set her back in motion, one of the errant bullets sending dirt up her calves. She could barely see where she was going or what obstacles might be in her way.

An open field lay ahead, edged in dark, thick woods. If she could get to them, she might be able to lose him.

Pumping her arms and legs, she catapulted across the grass and into the trees. Sticks tripped her up and branches slapped at her face, but the gunshots had stopped. Maybe he was out of range.

Taking a sharp turn, she dove deeper into the woods. She'd managed to shake him momentarily, but she would run until the sun rose if need be.

Up ahead, the trees thinned again. She prayed for a busy road or passing car so she could thumb a ride.

She slowed her pace with caution, listening for signs Ricky was nearby. Something caught her shirt, and she swatted it, expecting a branch. Her fingers made contact with an arm instead.

Teresa opened her mouth to scream as a big palm closed over it.

A second hand swept around her waist and pulled her against a massive tree.

There'd be no escaping now.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

“Shh. It’s Cole.” He kept his voice low, his mouth next to Teresa’s ear.

She stopped squirming, and he let her go. “Cole?”

He nodded and placed a finger to his lips. Footsteps sounded on the other side of the creek. Whoever was chasing Teresa—and he had a good guess to who it was—was getting closer.

Cole dropped down into a squat, taking Teresa with him. Pressed as close to the tree as possible, they waited and listened as the steps grew closer still. When the sounds stopped, it seemed as if the forest was holding its breath.

“Fuck.” The man spat in anger.

Cole stayed crouched, his hands in fists, ready to spring. He’d come into the woods unarmed, which in hindsight had been a stupid idea. When he’d heard the gunshots from the road, he hadn’t been thinking. He’d only been reacting, eager to see what was happening on his land.

It wasn’t until he saw Teresa splashing through the creek that he realized she was involved.

Slowly, he shifted his weight and peered around the tree trunk. The dark form of a man stalked through the woods, moving away from where the two of them were hiding.

Cole held back his sigh of relief as they stood, not wanting Teresa to know how worried he’d been. “You all right?”

She nodded, still breathing heavily.

He put his hand on her back, leading her away from the tree. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

They made their way through the woods, staying quiet so as not to alert the guy who’d been chasing her. “My place is right up here.”

She didn’t say anything, just kept pace with him. He could nearly feel the fear clinging to her, and though he longed to comfort her he didn’t want to say the wrong thing.

Emerging from the woods, he led her up his driveway and into the old farmhouse as quickly and silently as possible. After making sure the door was locked behind them, he turned on the light.

“You sure you’re okay?” He started to reach out to her but quickly drew back.

Teresa wrapped her arms around herself and nodded. “I’m fine. Thank you. I’m sorry to bother you. I’ll get out of your hair.”

He blinked at her. Was she kidding? Five minutes ago she’d been running for her life and now she wanted to act like nothing had happened?

“Stay right there.” He grabbed his phone, which he’d left on the coffee table before going out to sit on the porch earlier because he couldn’t sleep. “I’ll call the police.”

“No!” She reached out to him, brown eyes wide. “Please don’t do that.”

He lowered the phone but didn’t put it down. “Was that him? Your ex?”

Her eyelashes fluttered as she looked away. “Yes. It was Ricky. My car broke down and I guess he was following me. When I saw him coming, I ran. He...”

Cole’s vision hazed over and he saw red. “He started shooting at you.”

She didn’t answer. She didn’t even look at him.

Anger filled his chest. All he wanted was to get his hands on that fucker's throat. Whatever had happened between Ricky and Teresa, no way in hell did it warrant attempted murder.

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and reminded himself that Teresa was now safe. He wouldn't let anything happen to her.

"Have a seat." He opened his eyes, anger receding. "I'll make you some tea."

Thankfully, she didn't protest. Sitting on the edge of the couch, she clasped her hands and stared at the floor.

In the kitchen, he set the kettle on the stove and dropped a peppermint tea bag into a mug. While the water boiled, he tried to think of how to address this situation.

Clearly, Teresa didn't want to talk. He couldn't help her unless he knew what was going on.

It was obvious she didn't trust him.

The thought stung, but he couldn't blame her for it. He was barely more than a stranger. For all she knew, he was just like Ricky, someone who would pretend to care before one day pulling a gun on her.

The kettle whistled, and he brought the tea out to the living room. She hadn't moved an inch.

"Thank you." She looked at where he put the mug on the coffee table but didn't reach out to take it.

He sat on the other end of the couch, making sure to give her a generous amount of space. "Is there anywhere I can drive you?"

She cleared her throat. "The bus station?"

Of course she'd been leaving town, what with a mad man after her. Thinking about never seeing her again was like a knife to his gut. He bit the inside of his cheeks, doing his best to not show his feelings.

"There aren't any buses running right now. They don't start again until eight. You'd just be sleeping on a bench."

“Oh.” Her shoulders dropped in disappointment.

“I have a guest room you can use.”

She sucked on her bottom lip. “I don’t want to impose.”

He shook his head before she was even done talking. “You’re not. It’s already set up, with clean sheets and everything.”

“I also don’t want to make... to bring...”

“You don’t want to bring trouble to my door.”

She closed her eyes. “Exactly.”

“I appreciate the concern, but I’m a big boy. I can pick and choose when it comes to risks.”

She rubbed her eyes and when she opened them he realized just how red they were. “This guy, he’s not someone you want to cross. You’ve already helped me by bringing me here.”

Cole shook his head. “I’m not afraid of him. And I don’t want you to be either.” He reached out, hesitating for a moment before placing his hand on hers. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Her eyes flicked up to his and then back down to their fingers. For a moment, he thought she might pull back or recoil in fear. Instead, she leaned into his touch, seeking comfort.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

His heart raced, swept away by the intimate moment. He wanted to hold her, to comfort her, to make all of her fears disappear. But he knew he couldn’t. She’d already turned him down, and he would respect that.

He pulled his hand back, and for the briefest moment he thought he saw a hint of disappointment in her eyes. Clearing his throat, he tried to shake off the desire to pull her onto his lap and bury his face in her hair. “I’m sorry if I’m not saying the right things.”

Her eyebrows knit together. “What do you mean?”

He shrugged and rubbed the back of his neck. What he meant was that when it came to talking to women he had next to zero skills. It had been a miracle he'd managed to ask her out to dinner.

"There are no right things for you to say." She picked up the tea and took a careful sip. "You've done more than enough. I know you want me to talk, but..."

Her hands started shaking, and she quickly put the mug down.

His heart ached for her. He knew what it was like to feel helpless and alone, and right then he would have done nearly anything to make things better for her.

"You don't have to say anything." He leaned closer, looking into her eyes. "But if you ever want to, I'm here to listen."

Her eyes searched his, and for a moment he thought she might lean in and kiss him. But just as quickly, she pulled back, shaking her head.

"I appreciate it, Cole. Really. But I'm not ready to talk about it yet."

He nodded, understanding. "Alright. Well, for now, let's get you settled in."

Standing up, he offered her a hand. She took it, and he led her down the hall to the guest room. It was a pretty, cozy space, with a queen-size bed covered in a blue comforter and a small dresser. The whole house was too much for one person and the guest rooms didn't get much use, but he kept them clean and tidy anyway.

"If you need anything, just let me know." He paused in the doorway, studying her for a moment. "Try to get some rest."

Her smile was small, but it was enough to warm him from the inside out. He closed the door quietly and walked down the hall to the living room, already knowing he wouldn't be getting any sleep. Not with her murderous ex still out there. It went against his better judgement not to call the police and report the shooter, but he wasn't in a hurry to betray Teresa.

He needed more of her story before making that call. On the off chance that Ricky wouldn't be the only one taken to jail, he'd wait. If Teresa was on the run for something criminal she'd been caught up in, Cole didn't want to be the one who unintentionally turned her in as well.

Glancing back down the hall, he started sorting the few puzzle pieces he had into place. Clearly, she'd come to Sweet Pines looking to escape Ricky. Yet somehow he'd found her.

After making sure all the windows and doors were locked, Cole brewed himself some coffee and sat at the kitchen table. His mind was racing with thoughts of Teresa and what she might be going through. He wanted to be there for her, to protect her, but he didn't know how to break through her walls.

Was she this reserved with everyone, or was it only him? If it was a problem with trusting men, he understood. God only knew what Ricky had done to her.

He wanted to be more than an acquaintance she happened to run into during a crisis. He wanted to be the one she turned to when she needed support. The one she leaned on.

He sipped his coffee and shook his head. He was probably asking for too much.

Anyway, first thing's first, they needed to get through the night. If his suspicions were correct, come dawn there'd be a whole truckload of trouble to deal with.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Clear, bright birdsong permeated Teresa's deep sleep. Opening her eyes, she looked around the charming room, morning light streaming in through the crack in the curtains.

Sitting up, she wiped sleep from her eyes. Somehow, miraculously, she felt rested.

Which was crazy. The only other time she'd slept a full night since running from New York was on her bus ride into Sweet Pines, and that had been due to pure exhaustion.

Maybe her tank was empty again.

Or maybe the intense peace and serenity of Cole's house had something to do with it.

The moment she'd stepped foot into the big farmhouse, she felt safe. The place felt like an extension of him, in a way. Strong and secure. Comforting and kind.

Throwing off the blankets, she grabbed the jeans she'd left on the floor and pulled them on. She didn't have much with her, just her burner phone and wallet still tucked into her pants pockets.

Ricky had probably already looted her car. Thank God her phone hadn't been in there. If he knew she had contacted Michelle, it would be bad news for both women.

Pulling on her shoes, she left the guest bedroom and walked down the hallway. The smell of frying bacon and fresh biscuits made her stomach rumble.

In the dining room, Cole was clearing the remains of what looked like a party. A good dozen places were set, coffee mugs and dirty napkins everywhere.

“You had company.” She lingered in the doorway.

Catching sight of her for the first time, he smiled. A dimple popped in one cheek, and her heart did a flip.

“If you call my ranch hands company.” He balanced one plate on top of another. “Have a seat. I’ll get you some breakfast.”

She hesitated. He’d done so much for her already, and all she really needed at this point was a ride to the bus stop. The fluffy eggs and bright orange juice looked too good to pass up and surely she could take ten minutes to eat.

Decision made, she chose a seat and scooted up to the table. Cole was there in an instant, setting a cup of fresh coffee in front of her.

“Thank you.” She turned her face up to him and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror on the wall. Instantly, her heart dropped.

She knew now wasn’t a time to worry about looks, and she’d never been a vain woman, but she also made it a habit to take care of herself. Especially in the last couple years, as she approached fifty.

The woman in the mirror, though, was someone in need of real care.

Her eyes were sunken, with deep purple circles underneath. Her hair was a mess, dark roots showing under the blonde, and strands stuck out in all directions. She looked older, haggard, and unwell.

Cole must have followed her gaze, because he spoke softly. “You look beautiful.”

She ducked her face, heat spreading across it. Could he really believe that?

She didn’t feel beautiful. She felt like a mess, and she wanted nothing more than to shower, brush her teeth, and put

on clean clothes. After she ate, of course.

Cole piled food onto a plate. “There’s a bathroom right next to your room. I’ll put some clothes and a toothbrush in there for you. Sorry in advance for things being too big.”

How did he do that? Read her mind and seem to know exactly what she needed?

“Thank you.” She sighed, trying to pat her hair down in place. The mere promise of a hot shower making her feel better. “I’m grateful for anything.”

Cole placed a plate of food in front of her, and she picked up her fork, her stomach gurgling. She took a sip of the coffee, the strong and rich taste lifting her spirits a smidge.

He carried a stack of dishes into the adjoining kitchen. “Are you feeling any better?” he asked as he passed.

“Thanks to you.”

He shook his head and took a seat at the head of the table, a cup of coffee in hand. “You don’t have to thank me. I’m just doing what any decent person would do.”

She smiled weakly. “You’re more than just a decent person, Cole. You’re a lifesaver.”

He looked away, but not before she saw his blush—and noticed the bags under his eyes. How late had he stayed up last night?

The eggs suddenly tasted like sawdust. He must have been worried about Ricky coming to his house. Had she done the wrong thing spending the night?

“I’m sorry about the mess.” Cole waved his hand around. “My housekeeper just retired, and I haven’t found someone new yet. Most of my employees board here and it’s a lot to keep up with.”

“I can only imagine.” She scraped her fork against an empty plate, surprised to find she’d finished everything—sawdust tasting or not.

Cole was already there, though, heaping another serving onto her plate. “About the bus...”

She put down her coffee. “I’ll get out of your hair as soon as possible.”

His face fell. “That’s not what I was gonna say.”

“Oh.” She looked into her coffee, feeling a little uneasy. “Sorry.”

“I sent a couple of my guys to get your car earlier this morning. They towed it up here and it’s hidden in one of the barns. Michael is real good with cars. Used to be a mechanic. He said he’ll take a look at it for you.”

She lifted her eyebrows, shocked that they would go out of their way to do something so generous.

“That’s...thank you. But I can’t ask you to do that.”

“It’s no trouble, really.” He leaned back in his chair, his shirt stretched taut across his muscled chest. “I’m just worried about you driving that thing. It’s not safe. And I’m willing to bet Ricky’s not done with you yet.”

At the mention of his name, a shudder ran through her. “I’m sorry. I was headed out of town. I didn’t mean—”

“I know.” His voice softened. “I want to help you, Teresa. I’m glad to have you here.”

She swallowed hard, her mind racing with all the possibilities. What if Ricky found her here? What if he hurt Cole, or his employees?

“I don’t want to put anyone else in danger.”

His eyes met hers, and she saw a determination there that she hadn’t seen before. “I’m not putting you out just because of that.”

Something about the way he spoke the words made her heart race. She knew it was foolish, but there was a part of her that wished he would tell her to stay. To never leave his side.

But she knew better. She couldn’t stay here forever, and eventually, she would have to run. Maybe even face Ricky

again.

“All done?” He stood and came around the table in her direction.

“Yes. Thank you. Here.” She reached for her plate at the same time he did, and their hands brushed.

The touch sent a jolt through her, and a barrage of unbidden thoughts rushed inappropriately to mind. *What it would be like to have him touch her in other ways?* But no, she couldn't think about that. She couldn't let herself get distracted when she was still in danger.

“I'll take it.” She stood. “Let me clean up the kitchen.”

“You could.” He grabbed his cowboy hat from the wall. “Or we could spend your first morning here doing something else.”

Her breath hitched in her throat. She knew he wasn't flirting with her... So why did everything he said make her feel as if he was?

Probably because her mind was in the gutter. It had been since the moment she first set eyes on him weeks ago. She just hadn't let herself dwell on the attraction.

“Do you like horses?” His hazel eyes twinkled.

“I don't know. I've never been around them.”

“Really?” His voice pitched in disbelief.

She lifted her palms. “I grew up in Manhattan. There aren't a lot of stables there.” The mention of her hometown sent a blade of grief through her chest. She'd lost more than her favorite city when Ricky chased her onto that subway train. She'd lost her job, her home, and her father.

He laughed, the sound rich and warm. She dropped her hands, shocked at herself for admitting something so revealing about her past. Anytime anyone in Sweet Pines asked where she was from, she always said Chicago. It was her automatic cover, an extra layer of protection between her and Ricky.

With Cole, she'd let her guard slip. She needed to be more careful.

"There's a first time for everything." He nodded at the front door. "Shall we?"

She followed him out the door and across the porch, the crisp morning air hitting her face. She took a deep breath, feeling alive for the first time in weeks.

As they walked toward the barns, she couldn't help but notice how natural Cole looked on the ranch. He was in his element, his hat sitting low on his forehead, his boots hitting the ground in an easy rhythm.

"Here we are." He gestured at the stables, two long buildings with a dirt area between them. "You're in for a treat."

"Sure." She gulped, hoping he was right. The only thing she knew about horses was how big they were. What would she do if one of them tried to stomp on her?

She followed him into one of the buildings, the sound of snorts and hooves hitting the ground filling the space. She couldn't believe how impressive the horses were, their muscles rippling under their coats as they came to the gates of the stalls.

Cole walked toward a brown horse and stretched out his hand. "This is Rusty. He's one of our gentle giants."

Teresa hesitated, unsure if she should get too close. The last time she'd been around animals like this was when she was a little girl and her nanny took her to a petting zoo. Like with most activities, her father had been too occupied with "business" to join them.

Cole smiled at her reassuringly. "Don't worry. He wouldn't hurt a fly. Wanna ride him?"

Her heart raced with excitement, but at the same time, her anxiety crept in. She had never ridden a horse before. Had never even seen one up close until today. But something about the way Cole looked at her made her feel like she could do anything.

“I don’t know.” She bit her lip. “I don’t want to hurt the horse.”

He chuckled. “Trust me, he can handle it. Besides, I won’t let anything happen to you.”

His protective tone sent a shiver of delight down her spine. How did this man she barely knew make her feel so protected, so cared for? And why? The more she thought about it, the more she knew she needed a break from the constant fear and danger she’d been facing. Maybe a little adventure would do her good.

“Okay.” She nodded, a smile spreading across her face. “Let’s do it.”

She watched as he put a saddle on Rusty, muscles straining while he adjusted everything. He was tan and strong, with the kind of solid physique that came from a life spent outdoors and on the move, likely caring for the land and his animals.

And he was interested in her. How was that possible?

She’d never been traditionally beautiful; especially now looking so unkept and frazzled. And she’d never said more than a handful of words to him when he came into Cup O’ Joe. Yet there’d always been a spark on her part for obvious reasons. Knowing he’d felt it too was beyond reason, but she was suddenly, immeasurably thankful.

Her ex-husband had always thought her too bland, not interesting enough. She liked stability too much, preferred a routine of work and weekend trips to the nail salon and brunch with friends. He’d eventually left in search of something more exciting.

Sometimes she believed the things he’d said. Maybe she was boring and didn’t have much going on below the surface. If that were true, she didn’t mind. She’d rather be boring than dangerous.

And she’d rather be anything than unscrupulous.

“Ready?” Cole turned to her, face beaming.

“Um, sure.” She approached the horse with hesitation, not knowing where to grab or how to get into the seat.

“Here. I’ll show you.”

He stepped up to her, his palm warm on her shoulder, and guided her hand to the saddle. “Just put your foot in the stirrup and swing your leg over.”

Her heart raced at the contact, the heat between them palpable. She couldn’t believe how good it felt to have him so close.

“Like this?” She did as he instructed, the leather creaking under her weight.

Next thing she knew, she was in the saddle and looking down at Cole. “Okay, now what?”

“Now hold the reins like this.” He showed her how to grip the leather straps and then moved to stand beside Rusty. “Don’t worry. He’ll do most of the work.”

“Can I touch him?”

“Sure.” He chuckled, a warm, smooth sound.

She ran her fingers down Rusty’s mane, marveling at the roughness of it. “I thought he would be softer.”

“His nose is like velvet.” He grinned at her and for a moment, holding her eye contact.

Heat stirred in her core.

Rusty pawed the ground with his hoof, and Teresa’s rising heartrate jerked into a sprint. “Is he okay?”

Cole glanced away, patting the horse and smiling. “Yeah. He’s just excited to go.” He moved to the front of the horse and put his hand on Rusty’s nose, calming him down. “But you’re doing great. Just take it slow and steady. Gently squeeze your legs against his sides to tell him to walk.”

She nodded, feeling a sense of pride at his praise. Taking a deep breath, she did as Cole said, urging Rusty forward. The horse started to walk, slow and steady, as she held on tight.

“Look at you, a natural born rider.” He smiled, walking alongside her as they emerged from the stable. “How’s it feel?”

“Amazing.” She grinned, being completely honest. The horse was only walking, but still it was like nothing else in the world. Nothing mattered in that moment except for her and the creature she sat on.

It was almost silly, but she had never felt so connected to nature before. It was as if all her worries and fears were miles away.

“Let’s go down the trail.” Cole pointed, keeping a steady pace next to the horse.

They walked past a pond, then along a field with different colored cattle relaxing in the trees’ shade. Cole pointed out different landmarks and told her stories about the animals. His voice was deep and rumbling like a stream, and she found herself listening more to its cadence than the words.

How had she found herself here? It seemed like a dream, soaking in the sunshine on a cattle ranch with a man who was the epitome of a sexy cowboy.

If only things could stay like this.

But they couldn’t. Ricky was still on her scent. And no matter how much she wanted to, she couldn’t let Cole in on her past. It was too risky.

They turned back for the stables, and her heart dropped. Time to get back to reality.

“Thank you.” She glanced at him, unable to keep her eyes on him for more than a moment.

He was too perfect, too strong and handsome. Already, their time together felt like sand slipping through her fingers.

“It’s my pleasure.” He pushed his cowboy hat back, a smile spreading across his face.

At the barn, he helped her out of the saddle, and she stumbled. Reaching out, she found his shoulders.

Teresa looked up at him, her palms sliding down his chest. His whole torso felt exactly as she'd imagined, rock hard and unyielding. A wave of desire passed through her. Then curiosity. Was his whole body like this?

"Easy there." He laughed, holding her arms while she found balance.

For a moment, there was something she couldn't identify in his gaze. Was it desire?

Before she could say anything, he released her arms, and she took a step back, embarrassed.

"I had a great time." She forced a smile, looking away. "Thanks for showing me around."

He cleared his throat and got busy taking the saddle off the horse. "Any time."

She knew she needed to say something else, but her tongue felt heavy and no words seemed appropriate. If circumstances were different, she'd be all over Cole.

God, she was still shocked at his interest in her. While she'd received a lot of attention as a younger woman, that had steadily waned. After divorcing in her thirties, she'd assumed her desirability had passed. The few men who'd asked her out confirmed her suspicions, as they were always the more desperate type.

But Cole was clearly into her. She could see it in the reverent way he looked at her, the way his gaze often lingered on her lips and the way he used such care in his every touch.

He made her feel sexy for the first time in years. Made her feel powerful.

Maybe she should tell him that. Even though there was no future for them, it might feel good to get the truth out there.

"Cole, I..." She took a deep breath. "I hope you understand now that I didn't turn down your offer for dinner because I wasn't interested. With my... with what happened in my past, it's hard to..."

His eyes widened, and he cocked his head away.

Suddenly she heard a dog barking somewhere on the ranch.

Cole's brow furrowed. "Hold that thought, will you?"

She nodded, her heart racing for new reasons. Why did he seem so worried?

He walked to the stable's entrance, with her following only a few steps behind.

"Stay in here." His words were quick and commanding, and she ground to a halt.

Through a dusty window, she saw a car pull to a stop as a black and white farm dog ran around it barking. The door opened, and a bullet pierced her soul.

Ricky had arrived.

CHAPTER
NINE

At the sight of Ricky, all of Cole's senses kicked into hyperdrive. The green of the grass and the blue of the sky sharpened, and he heard every bird call as if it were coming from right next to his ear.

Seeing Cole coming, Ricky raised his hand in greeting. "Hello!"

Cole strode toward the car, his spine stiffening. "What can I do for you?"

Charlie ran a circle around Ricky, continuing to bark. Usually Cole would call off his dog, but in this case he didn't feel inclined to be hospitable. The less Ricky felt welcome on Vasko Ranch, the better.

Ricky, a sturdy man in his fifties, wiped sweat from his brow. "My dog ran off. You haven't happened to see her, have you? She's a labradoodle."

Cole frowned. He'd never seen a dog like that in Sweet Pines and wouldn't put his money on one being there anytime soon. "Sorry. I haven't."

Giving up on barking, Charlie came and lay by Cole, his front paws on the tips of his owner's boots.

"Too bad." Ricky scratched his stubble. "Nice place you have here."

The hairs rose on the back of Cole's neck, and he was painfully aware of the stable doorway, only a few yards behind him. Teresa was probably scared out of her mind right now.

“You must be Mr. Vasko, right?” Ricky pointed at him. “I talked to some of your guys in town yesterday.”

Cole folded his arms. “That’s me.”

Ricky’s gaze had landed on the ranch hand cabins just past the stables. “What’s it like being out here with all men?” He chuckled. “It must get lonely without any women, huh?”

He was fishing. That much was obvious.

Cole also knew that he couldn’t be too defensive. Couldn’t seem as if he had something to hide.

Even though it took great effort, he uncrossed his arms. “We stay pretty busy with our work. I’m sorry. I didn’t get your name.”

“Ricky. Ricky Williams.” He extended his hand, and Cole reluctantly shook it. “I’m just visiting town for a while. Taking a solo trip to get away. Actually, you know what...”

He pulled his phone from his pocket and thumbed through photos. “I have a family friend who might be around here. I was hoping to reconnect with her, but I don’t have her number and she’s not online.”

He turned his phone around to show a picture of a smiling Teresa. Even though her hair was brown in the photo, Cole recognized her instantly.

He worked to keep his face from showing recognition. “What’s her name?”

“Teresa.” Ricky pocketed the phone, his beady eyes on Cole. “I heard she was working at the coffee shop in town. You ever see her there?”

Cole rubbed his jaw. “I don’t have the best memory when it comes to things like that, Mr. Williams. My own cousin could be working there and I wouldn’t notice it when I’m having caffeine withdrawals.”

Ricky chuckled, but it was hollow and lifeless.

Cole could tell that he wasn’t giving up on his search for Teresa. Not anytime soon and maybe not ever. He needed to

get Ricky off his ranch, but subtly. He couldn't just kick him out, or that would only make the man more suspicious.

He cleared his throat, trying to appear nonchalant. "Well, if I happen to see her, I'll mention your name and let her know you're looking for her."

Ricky's eyes narrowed, and he took a step closer to Cole. "Would you? I'd really appreciate that."

A quiet threat dripped from his tone, and a ripple of unease passed through Cole.

This guy was Teresa's ex-boyfriend?

"I'm gonna be honest with you." Ricky planted his hands on his waist and shifted his weight. "Teresa stole from my business. The police are doing everything they can to look for her, but they're not putting in the elbow grease they should be. I figured I'd take matters into my own hands and look around for her. As a businessman yourself, surely you understand."

Cole's stomach twisted. This had to be a lie. Teresa wouldn't do that.

Right?

"A family friend stole from your business?" Cole challenged the flimsy story. "And she's now believed to be working at a coffee shop?" He crossed his arms and wrinkled his brow. "Not exactly the high life."

"She's hiding."

Cole nodded in faux understanding. "I see. Where are you from? That accent doesn't scream Wyoming." He smiled and released a gently chuckle.

"Out East."

"Long way to travel just to serve coffee."

Ricky dropped the pretense of congeniality. He widened his stance and took a long look at the property over Cole's shoulders. "What's going on with me and my friend is personal. I just want to know if you've seen her."

Cole's eyes narrowed. "As I've already told you, Mr. Williams, I have not. If you're asking for my advice on the matter as a businessman, I wouldn't condone taking matters into your own hands. Things have a way of getting out of control when that happens. I would leave it to your local police."

Ricky's expression hardened. "Well, if you do see her...." He paused and sucked his teeth. "Well, like you stated...I'd hate for things to get out of control."

Cole stood his ground, his muscles tense.

That had escalated quickly. Despite his best efforts to not be defensive, Cole had gone there anyway. Ricky probably suspected he knew exactly where Teresa was.

Ricky turned back to his car with a smirk. "You have a good day."

Cole watched as the other man tore ass down the driveway, sending clouds of dirt into the air behind him. He released a deep breath when the car turned onto the main road, but the tension in his shoulders remained.

Ricky had been lying about Teresa stealing. He didn't know her well, but he couldn't believe she'd do that.

Then again...

His stomach dropped. When it came down to it, he wanted to believe her, and if it were just him taking the risk he'd dive in head first.

This wasn't only about him, though. He had his employees to consider. He wouldn't put them in potential danger unless there was a damn good reason, and protecting someone running from an abusive relationship was the opposite of protecting someone running with their pockets stuffed full of stolen cash.

Blowing out a hot breath, he spun around and headed into the stable. Teresa emerged from the tack room, her face pale.

"He's gone." He scrubbed a hand down one cheek.

"I'm so sorry." She bit her lip, looking as if she might cry.

The urge to wrap his arms around her and hug her tight filled him. He wanted to lose himself in her scent and feel, to pull her so close that the whole world disappeared.

He wasn't one to daydream, though. He might pop his head into the clouds every once in a while, but he never stayed there for long.

No matter how mesmerized he was by this woman, he wouldn't let her be the end of the ranch or the life he'd worked so hard to build.

That fact didn't make what he was about to say any easier.

"Listen, Teresa, I don't want this to seem like I'm bringing the hammer down on you. I want to help you, but to do that I need to know what I'm getting into here. I need the whole truth, and I need it now."

He held his breath, knowing that whatever came next would change everything.

CHAPTER
TEN

Teresa stood there feeling numb. Of course Ricky had found her. She couldn't even be safe from him for twenty-four hours.

And now Cole hated her. She could hear it in his voice, could see it in his tense face.

He'd done so much for her. The least she owed him was honesty.

Raising her chin, she nodded. Tears collected in her eyes, but she held them back. "Ricky isn't my ex-boyfriend."

Cole's face fell. He looked devastated. He curled his hands into fists. "What is he then? He said that you stole from his business."

She gasped. "That's not true!"

A horse spooked in its stall, backing up against the wood. Teresa clamped her mouth shut. She hadn't meant to be so loud. Ricky was a murderer, and she'd never forgive him for that, but his telling a lie about her also hit right where it hurt.

She had never stolen from a person in her life, and she never would. Despite where she came from, she had morals.

"Then what is the truth?" Cole sat on a worn wooden bench next to the open doors. Taking off his hat, he looked up at her. The sadness spilling from his eyes nearly brought her to her knees.

This good man didn't deserve any of the hell she'd brought to his door.

“He’s in ... organized crime.” She released a weary sigh as she took a seat on the other end of the bench. “Back home.”

Cole stilled.

One of the horses snorted, and a fly buzzed around. Did he even believe her?

When his eyes finally met hers, the expression was hard, emotions gone. “New York.”

“Yes.” She wet her lips, waiting for whatever came next. This wasn’t a conversation she’d ever had, or one she thought she ever would. In her world, people just seemed to know who her family was. No need for explanation. And those who didn’t know, didn’t get to know, unless it was the last thing they ever learned.

Cole swallowed hard before he spoke again. “Ricky is part of the Mafia?”

Teresa dipped her chin in careful affirmation.

“And how exactly do you know him?” he asked slowly.

“My family was associated tightly with his circle.”

“The Mafia,” he repeated.

She stared at her lap, the shame she’d felt her whole life rising once more. She’d tried so hard to cut herself free from that past, to weave her own destiny. In the end, she’d only come full circle.

“What does that even mean?” he asked. “I thought that stuff was made for the movies, or something that died with prohibition and the Great Depression.”

She felt his gaze on her, but she couldn’t bring herself to look him in the eye. Not yet.

“Ricky and my family carried out jobs for the Boss and the other higher ups. Dirty work.” She shook her head. “When I was a teenager, as soon as I found out what my father and my uncles did, I wanted nothing to do with them.”

She closed her eyes, an onslaught of memories hitting her hard. It’d been a friend who told her about her father’s real

job. About how his accounting business was only a cover for his real work.

She still recalled how sick to her stomach she'd felt. Her father had threatened people. Extorted money from them. Probably even killed them.

And now Ricky had killed him.

A wave of loss and regret rocked through her, stinging her nose and eyes. Her father was gone. There was no way to repair her relationship with him now, but she didn't have to let his choices, or his death, stop her from making new and honest connections. In fact, those were the only kinds of connections she ever wanted to make again.

Finally, she gained the courage to look at Cole. He remained silent, his eyes focused on her. She couldn't read his expression, but she knew he was listening intently.

"My mother died when I was a baby, and I never had any siblings." Telling the story made her feel nauseous and lightheaded, and she gripped the edges of the bench. "I left home when I turned eighteen. Moved out to go to school. I cut off all contact with my family and started working as a nurse. I probably shouldn't have stayed in the city, but it was home. And it's a big place."

She swallowed against a lump in her throat. She was trying to be brief, but it felt important that he knew the whole story. Important that he understood where she came from and what had led to the current mess. "I got married in my twenties. Divorced in my thirties. For the most part, I lived a normal life. I loved my job. I had friends, a cute apartment."

"And then what changed?"

Her chest squeezed tight. She'd been trying her hardest to forget about that fateful night, but the time had finally come when she needed to face it.

"My father reached out. I'd heard that he wasn't doing well, that he had an aggressive cancer. I thought, maybe, he wanted to repair our relationship before he died." She snorted. "That was foolish. I went to see him one night after work and

he just wanted a favor from me. He was working with some other crime organization, going behind the Mafia's back. He wanted me to deliver a message to them. I told him no way; I wasn't getting involved. He got so angry, started calling me all kinds of things. I went to leave, and I only got to the bottom floor when..."

Her inhale shook her chest. The terror of that night suddenly in the forefront. How could she go on?

A warm touch made her look up. Cole had placed his hand on her shoulder, and his eyes were soft and encouraging. She felt some of his strength pass through his hand and into her.

She took a deep breath and continued, despite her voice trembling. "After leaving his apartment I went to the bottom floor to pull myself together. I was pretty emotional. I mean, I'd actually thought my father wanted to repair things. While I was down there, I heard someone come into the building, but they didn't see me. I was sitting in an alcove right behind the stairs. It was a small building, only a few apartments."

She paused once more, collecting her thoughts.

"I heard whoever it was go up to my father's floor, and then they started arguing. Really loudly, too. This man was talking about how they were supposed to be a team, how they were working on some new deal that the Boss didn't know about."

She shook her head. "I know enough to put the pieces together. My father and him had gone solo and started doing work with this other group. But I guess from there my father took it a step further and made some deal without him. Probably so he could keep all the money."

"Was it Ricky?" His hand was still on her shoulder, and she prayed he never removed it.

She nodded. "Yes. They kept arguing, and then I heard the gunshots. Three quick pops. I was frozen, too afraid to move. When I came to my senses I ran for the building's main door, but Ricky was already coming down the stairs. I hadn't seen him for years, but I think he recognized me right away. I'd

known him since we were kids, though he was older than me. His family were also associates, and I guess he went into the family business.”

“And he killed your father because of the backstabbing.” Cole’s voice was hard.

“I assume.” She dropped her head back against the wall. “I tried to leave as fast as I could, but he chased me out. I guess he thought that I’d go to the Mafia and tell them what I heard. I managed to jump on the subway and get away, but knew I had to leave town.”

Tears streamed down her face. “I left right then. Didn’t even go back to my apartment. I took the train straight to the bus station and headed out of the city.”

Cole bowed his head. “God, Teresa. I’m so sorry.”

She turned to him, a fire brewing in her soul. “I want out, Cole. I want to be free of him, of my past. I want to start a new life, one where I don’t have to look over my shoulder all the time.” Her voice shook with emotion. “But he found me. People like that, they always find you.”

He was silent for a moment. “Why did you come here? To Sweet Pines?”

“I needed a place to hide.” She shrugged, feeling helpless. “I thought I could start over.”

His hand tightened on her shoulder. “You did the right thing.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before. I didn’t want to put you in danger. The less you knew the better. That’s why I told you I couldn’t go out with you. I didn’t want to have to lie to you about who I really was.”

He withdrew his hand, and she went cold inside. “I thought you said no because you weren’t interested.”

She shook her head, a little laugh escaping at the absurdity. “No.”

She had always been very interested. But what did that matter now?

Despite her best intentions, she'd pulled Cole into her mess anyway. Based on his conversation with Ricky, the other man suspected Cole was hiding something. She needed to leave before things got even worse.

Wiping her cheeks, she stood. She knew what she had to do, even though walking away from Cole and this ranch felt like stabbing herself in the heart.

"I'm sorry. I appreciate everything you've done for me. I'll go now."

His brow furrowed in confusion. "You don't even have a car."

"I don't need one. Don't worry about me." She would walk to the highway and thumb a ride. Pray that whoever picked her up didn't have ill intentions.

Considering who she was running from, the chance was worth taking.

"Thank you again for everything." Unable to even look at him, she headed for the stable door.

"Hold on." Cole jumped to standing, his fingers closing around her wrist.

She gasped at the electric current running up her arm. Being touched by him was like being submerged in a bath of radiant light.

His lips drew into a hard line. "I'm not letting you go, Teresa. Not like this."

"But you're in danger now. Ricky knows about you."

"I can handle myself." His gaze raked across her face. "And I won't let anything happen to you either."

She wanted to believe him, to let go of all her fears and trust him completely. But she couldn't shake the feeling that she was putting him in harm's way just by being near him.

"I can't ask you to do that." She tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip.

“You’re not asking me to do anything.” He cupped her face, forcing her to look into his eyes. “I choose to stand by your side and help you through this. I know asking you to trust me is a lot, but I’m not going to turn away when you need help.”

Her inner conflict threatened to pull her under. She needed to leave for Cole’s sake, but staying with him was just so tempting. If only he weren’t touching her cheek, if only he weren’t so convincing.

“Don’t look at me like that.” She admonished, suddenly nervous for a different reason.

“Like what?” His eyes darkened as his gaze raked over her face.

Her breaths quickened, and her head spun. “Like you can know my truth and still want me.”

Cole hiked a brow in challenge. “Are you asking for proof?”

Before she could even think of answering, he leaned in and pressed his lips to hers.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

This was it. Cole finally knew what Heaven felt like. It was soft. Welcoming. Tender.

It was Teresa's kiss.

Her lips were like rose petals, and he couldn't get enough of them. It was like they were made to fit perfectly against his own.

He had no idea what had come over him. He just could no longer resist that pull, that irresistible tug toward her. Everything about her, from her vulnerability to her strength, called out to him. He deepened the kiss, feeling her surrender to his touch. A fire suddenly growing in his belly, he pulled her closer changing the angle of the kiss.

She was everything he ever wanted in a woman. He never thought he'd find someone like her in Sweet Pines, but here she was in his arms.

When he finally pulled away, her eyes fluttered open and she stared up at him in a daze.

"I'm sorry." He brushed a strand of hair away from her face. "I shouldn't have done that."

"No," she said softly, her hand still on his chest. "It's okay."

"Is it?" He was still holding her wrist, his thumb stroking the pulse point there. "I don't want to make things more complicated for you. Not when you're going through so much already."

“I know.” She leaned into him, resting her head against his chest. “But I don’t regret it. Not one bit.”

His heart swelled with warmth, and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her close.

“I care about you, Teresa,” he admitted, his voice low and husky. “But I won’t push you into anything you’re not ready for. I also don’t want to take advantage of you.”

Her eyelashes fluttered. “You mean because you think I’m vulnerable right now?”

He hesitated, not wanting to use that word but not knowing what to replace it with.

She nodded, her fingers tracing patterns on his shirt. “I get that, but I’m a big girl. I can make my own decisions.”

He tucked a blonde strand behind her ear. There was something else, too. She was on the run, trying her damndest to get out of Sweet Pines and shake Ricky off her trail.

Where did a romance with him fall into that equation?

It didn’t. She’d asked him for a ride to the bus stop just that morning.

“Want to know something?” Her gaze danced across his face. “I’ve wanted to kiss you from the moment I first saw you. When you chased me down outside of the coffee shop because I’d forgotten my card. Remember that?”

How could he have forgotten? She’d been new to town then. He hadn’t even known she was working at Cup O’ Joe, and he saw her for the first time on her day off.

Ever since then, she’d been a movie playing on a loop in his mind. The constant whisper just behind every other thought.

And now she was here, in his arms. No way in hell would he waste this opportunity. She might be gone tomorrow-and if that was needed for her safety he supported it-but he was set on enjoying today.

He pulled her in for another kiss, and this time, there was no hesitation, no fear. Just pure, unbridled passion. His tongue slid against hers, and she moaned into his mouth, sending heat spreading through him.

Wrapping his arm around her waist, he spun her around and backed her up against the wall. She gasped in surprise, and he tore his lips away from hers to nibble at her neck.

“I’ve got good news and bad news!” Michael strode into the stable, phone in hand.

Teresa squeaked in surprise, and Cole backed up from her so fast he knocked over a stack of buckets.

“Uh...” Michael looked back and forth between the two of them, his eyes wide. “Sorry. I can go.”

“No!” Teresa smoothed her shirt. “It’s fine.”

Cole heaved a sigh as he re-stacked the buckets. It wasn’t fine at all. Pawing Teresa where anyone could walk in probably hadn’t been the wisest idea, and he felt like an ass for embarrassing her.

“Teresa, this is Michael.” He cleared his throat.

“Nice to meet you.” Michael shook her hand. “I took a look at your car.”

“Oh!” Her face lit up. “Thank you so much. Is it bad? What is it? It wouldn’t move at all.”

He nodded. “The timing belt snapped. I called up the local parts store in town to see if they have the right make, but they don’t. I can try to track one down, but it’ll probably mean finding it in a junk yard, given the car’s age. Not sure how long it’ll take to get here.”

The light drained out of Teresa, and she half took a seat, half fell onto the bench. “Oh. Well, okay.”

“Sorry about that.”

She worked up a smile, but Cole could tell it was fake. “It’s all right. I appreciate you looking at it. Thank you for taking the time.”

Michael glanced at Cole, looking for his instructions.

So much for Teresa clearing out of town that day.

It was obvious that Ricky suspected she was still around, possibly even on Cole's ranch. Maybe Cole could throw him off her trail, though. Convince him that she had left the area.

That way it would be safer for her to stay at the ranch until her car was fixed. The way he saw it, whether or not Ricky knew she was there, she would be safer with Cole and his ranch hands to look out for her. Once she ran again, he wouldn't be able to protect her.

And she shouldn't have to run again. She deserved a life of happiness and security. Deserved a home where she could put down roots.

Selfishly, he also wanted her to stay in Sweet Pines. Spend time with him.

He wanted her around so badly it was a full-body ache. Which freaked him out. He hadn't had a woman around in years, and there was a good chance he would screw it up.

"Do your best and keep us updated." He nodded at Michael, who backtracked his way out of the stable.

Cole turned to Teresa. "I have a proposition for you."

Her eyebrows slowly inched upwards. "What sort of proposition?"

"We need a housekeeper and cook here. How would you like a job while you wait for your car to be fixed? It's not safe for you to keep working at the coffee shop, and I could really use the help."

She twisted her lips, gears turning as she thought it over. "I don't know. I appreciate the offer, I do..."

He went to the bench and crouched in front of her so that they were eye to eye. "I'll be honest. If you're at my ranch, I can better keep you safe. You'll never be alone, what with me and my men all around. Ricky would have to be insane to try something here."

Her shoulders relaxed a bit. She was seeing his point.

He wasn't being one hundred percent honest, of course. He was working on his own plan to get rid of Ricky. Once that happened, hopefully Teresa would feel safe staying in Sweet Pines.

"All right." She nodded. "I'll accept your offer. Thank you."

He placed his hands on her knees. "It's my pleasure."

Her smile pushed a button in him, sending him from cultured man to wild animal in an instant. He wanted to pull her into his lap and explore every inch of her.

Thank God he had some restraint. She needed to be the one to lead this, to guide whatever was burgeoning between them.

Anyway, he had some serious work to do. It would be hard to enjoy anything until he took care of Ricky.

"I'll go call Lovey." Teresa stood with a sigh. "I hate to disappear on her like this."

"She's understanding." He cradled the back of her neck.

"I can't tell her the truth." Her face crumpled. "I hate it, but I think I have to lie. I'll tell her that a relative had an accident and I have to go take care of them and I don't know how long I'll be gone."

Cole cocked his head. He also had another idea. Would she go along with it, though?

Probably not. She didn't know Lovey like he did. That woman was loyal through and through. If you asked her to keep a secret, she stashed it away to take to her grave.

Which is why he knew she was the accomplice he needed.

He'd need to act first and ask Teresa for forgiveness later. Hopefully she would understand.

"You can use the phone in the house." He ran his hand over her shoulder and down her arm. "Call me old fashioned, but there's a local telephone book right by it."

“Thank you.” Pushing onto her tiptoes, she pecked him on the cheek.

He watched as she strode out of the stable, a new pep in her step. It wasn't until she climbed the main house's front steps that he jogged across the yard and to his truck.

He'd be to town and back within the hour, and soon after that everything would fall into place. He'd make sure of it.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

“No!” Teresa sat up, her hand reaching in front of her.

Her chest heaving, she looked around the dark room. Ricky was gone.

No. He was never there.

It had just been a nightmare.

Sighing, she turned on the bedside light and pressed her hand to her chest. It had felt so real. She’d been riding Rusty, enjoying the sun on her face and the wind at her back, when suddenly Ricky was there.

There’d been no chance to ride away. No chance to fight back. He’d grabbed her and pulled her from the saddle and pressed her face into the dirt. The metal of his gun had shone in his hand, and she’d known she was done for.

But then she woke up. Ricky wasn’t there. She was safe.

Suddenly, the bedroom door flew open. She screamed, scooting back against the headboard.

“Teresa!” Cole rushed across the room and crouched at her bedside. “What is it?”

She closed her eyes, ashamed she’d woken him. “It was just a nightmare. I’m sorry.”

The mattress creaked, and she opened her eyes to see him sitting on the edge of the bed in a shaft of moonlight through the window. His expression filled with concern, and he held

his hand up, like he wanted to touch her but wasn't sure if he should.

"It's okay. They happen," he said, lowering the hand.

She curled her fingers over his, holding his hand against the cool sheets.

"Was it about Ricky?" His jaw tightened, a muscle in his cheek flexing.

"Yeah." She pushed her fingers through her hair. She must look like quite the mess.

It had been a long first day at Vasko Ranch. Wanting to show how efficient she was, she'd spent half of it deep cleaning the kitchen and meal planning for the week. Then she took a moment to call Michelle and fill her in as much as she could without giving away her location. She'd already dragged Cole into her mess, she wouldn't drag her too. It was a quick, emotional call. It wasn't until bedtime that she'd snagged a shower then fallen immediately asleep.

Her hair was probably sticking up in every direction, and the hottest man in Wyoming was there to see it.

What's more, he was staring at her.

"What?" She went to touch her hair again, but he grabbed her hand.

"I was just thinking about how unbelievably sexy you are." His voice rumbled across her like thunder, and she felt a zing in her belly.

She swallowed hard. Did he have any idea the kind of magic he worked on her? How whenever he came around she found it hard to even breathe?

"I want to tell you something." He laced his fingers with hers. "About Ricky. I don't know how you'll take it. You might be mad at me."

She blinked, trying to guess what he was about to share but drawing a blank. "Well, you have to tell me now."

“When I went to town this morning—while you called Lovey—I wasn’t running errands. I stopped in at Cup O’ Joe to talk to her.”

“O-kay.” She stared at him. Did something happen with Ricky? Did Cole run into him?

Her heart sped up. She knew staying at Cole’s ranch was a bad idea! But he’d made the whole thing so tempting. There were the horses, the job, and—best of all—him. The risk, surprisingly, felt worth it.

He drew a deep breath. “I talked to Lovey. I asked her to help me get rid of Ricky.”

“What does that mean?” She shook her head, afraid she might not like the answer. Cole didn’t seem like a violent man, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t surprise her.

“It was for Ricky to overhear Lovey talking about how you left town. How she found a note from you in her office this morning explaining that you had to go and you couldn’t explain why.”

For some reason, it was hard to process this news. She had so many questions. “Hear her talking to who? And how? Where?”

“She texted me right before bed. I thought about coming down here to tell you, but I figured you might already be asleep. She told Charlene McDougal tonight at the bar while Ricky was sitting close to their table. After he heard the news, he left. Lovey said a waitress at the Italian place across the street saw him driving out of town a few minutes later.”

He shifted uncomfortably. “Since your car is gone from the road, I’m hoping that he thinks you got it working and took off. I didn’t tell you earlier about the plan because I thought you might not like it. I also thought you might be pissed. If you are, I understand. I just...”

“I’m not mad.”

He froze, his head cocked in disbelief. “You’re not?”

She paused, really considering her answer. “No. I’m...” She laughed. “Relieved, maybe? It’s hard to believe he’s gone for good. I mean, I’ll believe it when I see it, but... Thank you.”

Gratitude filled her heart. She was a little miffed that Cole had enacted the plan without filling her in, but since it had worked, her annoyance was overshadowed by relief.

“Anything. Anytime.” He ducked his head, his eyes endearing and boyish. “Hopefully this means you won’t be having any more nightmares about him.”

She wouldn’t hold her breath, but, yes, no more nightmares would be great. So would staying in Sweet Pines.

Because if Ricky were gone, that option was back on the table.

Maybe. If Lovey would take her back on at the coffee shop. Or if Cole hired her long term.

Did she want that last option, though? Their kiss that morning certainly made things more complicated. She didn’t even know if he wanted to explore their relationship further.

She started to draw her hand out of his, but he’d already turned it over. Bending down, he kissed her palm.

“Cole,” she murmured.

“Yes?” He straightened up, his full attention back on her face.

She could have gone on, but she didn’t have the words. How could she explain how much she appreciated him? How much she craved him? How at home she felt around him?

She couldn’t, but she could show him.

Would he reciprocate or turn her away? Yes, he had asked her out, but it’d been a long time since she’d felt so attracted to a man.

The way he was looking at her, though, made her feel as if she wasn’t alone in the matter. Cole made her feel like the sexiest woman around.

If she didn't take advantage of this opportunity, then what the hell was she living for?

Curling tentative fingers in the soft, warm fabric of his t-shirt, she tugged him slowly closer. "Cole?" she whispered. The question on her lips and in the lift of her brows.

He growled softly, allowing her to lead him. His lips were soft and pliant under hers, and she sank into the kiss, losing herself in the moment. Cole's hands found her waist, pulling her closer still. The hardness of his body pressed against hers, making her ache with need. It'd been so long, too long, since she'd felt this way.

Breaking the kiss, she looked up at him, her eyes heavy-lidded. "Stay with me," she pleaded, her voice husky and low.

"Are you sure?" he asked, his sharp hazel eyes searching hers.

"I'm sure." She pulled him back for another kiss. Her lips parted, inviting him in.

His tongue slid slow and languorous over hers, and her body melted against his.

Long moments later, Cole drew back, a smoldering look in his eyes, and she knew he'd make her forget all about the nightmare.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

“Excuse me, I just need to grab the, uh, milk.” Grinning wide, Cole reached around Teresa. Checking to make sure no one else was looking, he squeezed her ass before grabbing the milk carton off the kitchen counter.

She bit her bottom lip, blushing profusely.

How could he get through the day with such a tempting goddess on his ranch?

“I’ll take some milk.” Dawson, the youngest ranch hand, butted right between Cole and Teresa and grabbed the milk.

“Man, do you not see what you’re doing?” Lavon hooted from his seat at the dining room table, where he could see straight into the kitchen. “You’re breaking up the two lovebirds.”

Teresa’s blush deepened, and Cole instantly felt bad. He hadn’t meant to embarrass her in front of his ranch hands; the whole dozen that were assembled for breakfast.

“Sorry,” he whispered to her.

She shook her head. “It’s okay,” she whispered back. “I like it.”

The front door banged shut, and Huck strode into the kitchen, his hair still damp from a shower.

“Well, look who it is.” Michael reached across the table to help himself to more coffee. “Your girlfriend kick you out?”

“Very funny.” Huck shook his head. “Did you save me any coffee?”

“A little.”

The guys were always joking when it came to Huck’s new girlfriend. Cole suspected a few of them were jealous, while the others were just showing their support in the only way they knew how-by talking shit.

Either way, Huck didn’t seem to mind. He was on Cloud Nine when it came to Maria. And Cole didn’t care that his foreman spent more nights at her place than he did at Vasko Ranch. No matter where he slept, Huck was always at work before dawn.

Cole was happy for him. Huck had been through some real shit, and he’d come to Sweet Pines for a fresh start. It made Cole warm in his chest to see his old rodeo friend finally happy and at peace.

Huck nodded at Teresa and Cole. “Good morning.”

“Morning.” Cole leaned against the counter and lifted his mug in greeting.

Huck’s gaze lingered on them a moment longer, but then he went to the table and helped himself to breakfast.

Aware that this might be the last moment they could steal from the busy day, Cole turned back to Teresa.

“Last night was perfect.” He kept his voice low, even though the guys probably couldn’t hear him over the cacophony they were making in the dining room.

“I know.” She splayed her fingers across his chest. “I didn’t want it to end.”

It doesn’t have to.

The words were on the tip of his tongue. She could stay at his ranch. With Ricky gone, Sweet Pines was safe for her again.

He didn’t want to beg, but he would if he needed to. If Teresa left, the joy she’d brought into his life would go as

well.

That was a conversation for another time, though. He'd get to it soon enough.

"I should get started on the dishes." She rolled up her sleeves. "If I don't now, I won't be able to catch up."

"All right." He kissed the top of her head, inhaling the sweet scent of her shampoo.

He'd been doing so well with being terminally single. He'd wallowed in his own misery at first, then he'd thrown himself into his work and his life had been better than ever.

He'd begun to think he was over wanting a partner in this life. That he was strong enough to outrun the pain forever.

Now Teresa had come along, like a gust of fresh air. She'd blown into his world and swept away the lingering sadness. She'd brought him back to life.

And he was head over heels for her.

"I'll see you later." She gave him a quick smile, then grabbed a stack of plates from the counter.

He watched her turn around, his hands itching to grab her and kiss her senseless.

"Cole, when do we start the fence repairs on the south side?" Michael asked.

He blinked, then looked around the room, the question registering with him. Shit. The guys were all looking at him. He'd just completely zoned out.

No wonder Teresa had cut off their conversation. He'd forgotten the guys were even there.

He cleared his throat. "Right now."

Draining the last of his coffee, he put the empty mug down. Teresa caught his eye on his way out the door, and pleasure rippled through him.

Leaving her with a wink, he stepped into the pre-dawn morning and took a deep breath. Today would be a good day.

Maybe the best damn day he'd ever lived.

Huck caught up with him as he crossed the driveway. "I put in the order for the new electric drill. We can pick it up in town after ten this morning."

"Sounds good." Cole whistled as they walked across the dewy grass.

"You and Teresa, huh?" Huck grinned.

Cole tried to keep the smile off his face, not wanting to look like some lovesick kid. This thing was brand new and he didn't even know if Teresa would stay in town, but he was having trouble not getting his hopes up.

"Maybe." He unlocked the stable doors. "She's been through a lot."

He'd already told Huck about what Teresa was running from. Not because he'd wanted to broadcast her business, but because Huck would be more help keeping her safe if he knew what she was up against. The ranch hands didn't know anything other than that Teresa would be working there for a while and if they saw anyone hanging around the ranch they should tell Cole or Huck right away.

Huck reached into Cinnamon's stall and patted the mare. "You want her to stay."

Cole looked at his boots. Hell, yeah. He wanted that more than anything else.

Except...

"Must mean something," Huck said. "I hear you've barely dated since moving here." He filled Cinnamon's water trough before glancing at Cole once more.

Cole frowned, meeting his friend's gaze from under his hat brim. "That sounds like Harvey's meddling."

"I can't give away my sources, but sure. It was Harvey."

Cole snorted. Huck and Harvey had been like brothers to Cole since their rodeo days. He'd needed them both to get through more than one tough time.

Which begged the question: was Cole really that much of a desperate case?

He looked away, fiddling with a rope. "I've been busy."

"She's not Angela."

Cole went cold, and he knew the hurt probably showed in his eyes. Luckily, he was mostly hidden in the shadows, so Huck wouldn't notice.

"I know that." He got busy filling the other water troughs.

"I didn't mean it like that." Huck's voice was low and steady. "I'm just saying, Teresa's not her. If you knew that already, then maybe you should give yourself some credit."

Cole shook his head, his hands curling around Rusty's gate. "I screwed up. Big-time."

"You're not seriously taking the fall for what she did?"

Sighing, Cole leaned his head back and stared at the stable's rafters. "I could have paid better attention. I got myself into that situation. If I'd been less focused on work maybe I would have seen how unhappy she was."

"Shit happens. She's the one to blame, not you." Huck crossed his arms over his chest. "Anyway, it was a long time ago. Don't let it ruin your whole life."

Cole nodded, but letting go of the past was easier said than done. Angela's memory still haunted him.

His friend smiled knowingly. "You really like this one."

Cole couldn't help the grin that spread across his face. "Yeah."

Huck clapped him on the shoulder. "It's about damn time."

Cole rolled his eyes, but he couldn't hide the happiness he felt. He just didn't know how to make it last.

"I want her to stay," he admitted. He rubbed the back of his neck.

"Then tell her." Huck moved on to giving the horses their morning grain. He made everything sound so simple.

But it wasn't simple at all. Cole had been down this road before, and he knew how it ended. He couldn't bear the thought of opening himself up to someone only to have them leave him just like Angela had.

Cole cleared his throat. "I wish it was that easy."

"Why isn't it? You two obviously have something good going on."

Cole leaned against the stall door, letting the weight of his emotions pin him there. "She's dealing with a lot right now, and I don't want to add more pressure."

Huck nodded, understanding. "I get it. But you can't keep her at arm's length forever. Eventually, you're going to have to make a move."

"I know." His sigh was so heavy it made his chest ache. "I just don't want to lose her. If I tell her how I feel and she doesn't feel the same way, it'll be awkward."

"Better to know than to wonder." Huck shrugged. "What do you have to lose?"

Cole thought about it for a moment, the image of Teresa's smile popping into his mind. Huck had a point. He had nothing to lose, but so much to gain.

"Maybe you're right." He straightened up.

Teresa wasn't Angela. Looking back, the woman he'd once thought was the one had been carrying numerous red flags—none of which he saw in Teresa.

Teresa was strong, brave, and beautiful. She had a way of making him feel alive like he hadn't felt in a long time.

"I will," he said finally, determination in his voice. "I'll tell her she should stay."

Huck smiled, giving him a nod of approval. "Good. Because if you don't, someone else will snatch her up."

Cole's heart clenched at the thought. He didn't want anyone else to have Teresa. She was his.

And he'd be damned if he let her slip through his fingers.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

“Good boy, Rusty.” Teresa held the horse’s reins in her hands like they were made of clouds and would fall apart if she moved wrong even once.

The late morning sun blasted overhead, warming her shoulders and ears, but the horse didn’t seem to mind. He’d been happy enough to have her put his saddle on and lead him out to the arena.

She didn’t know how long they’d been walking around in circles. Maybe he was getting bored, but she felt like she never wanted to put her feet back on the ground. Not when a person could ride a horse everywhere.

How had she gone her whole life and never known this joy? It seemed inconceivable now, thinking about it.

“Look at you, city girl.” Cole’s deep, warm voice carried across the arena, and her pulse picked up.

Michael had been the one to help her with Rusty, and he was now in the arena right next to hers, training a young horse. In fact, she hadn’t seen Cole all morning and hadn’t counted on seeing him until lunch.

But there he was, one boot propped on the bars of the gate and a wide grin on his face. He looked like a cover model for some magazine that sold rugged wear.

“You look like you grew up in the saddle.” He took his hat off and raked his fingers through his sweaty hair. She rolled her eyes but couldn’t fight the smile. “It’s all Rusty. Like you said, he’s the best horse to start with.”

Cole nodded, his eyes locked on hers. “Yeah, but I think it might also have something to do with the rider.”

She felt the heat rise in her cheeks, and she ducked her head to hide the smile that threatened to burst forth. Cole was excellent at making her feel good about herself, and she liked it. She liked it a lot.

She stopped Rusty in front of him and he climbed over the fence to help her out of the saddle. As he lifted her down, his hands lingered on her waist, sending shivers through her body. Teresa couldn't ignore the spark of attraction she felt for him. She had tried to keep her guard up, but being around him made it impossible.

Especially after last night. His touch had taken her to a new plane of existence, and she was hungry for more.

Was that practical, though? With Ricky gone, she wanted to stay in Sweet Pines. However, Cole had only offered her a temporary job.

And what if the personal part of their relationship was temporary as well? For all she knew, she was just convenient to him. He could be on to another woman next week.

Her stomach soured at the thought. Too many times, she'd sat on the sidelines and watched other women get the attention. Mostly because she wasn't interested in any man she had to compete for.

She wouldn't be able to handle watching Cole flirt with someone else. She'd rather leave Sweet Pines forever than live through that.

“Thanks,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Cole smiled down at her, his hazel eyes crinkling at the corners. “Anytime.”

They stood in silence for a moment, the only sound coming from the horses snorting and shifting in their stalls in the distance. Teresa tried to ignore the fluttering in her stomach and the way her heart raced in her chest. She wasn't sure what was happening between the two of them, but she knew it was something she couldn't ignore.

She could feel the tension building, the electricity in the air almost palpable. She knew she should probably say something, break the spell, but her mind was blank.

“So, what brings you out here?” she asked suddenly, trying to sound casual.

“Just wanted to see how you were doing with Rusty.” Cole leaned against the fence, his heated gaze roaming over her. “And I wanted to ask you something.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “What is it?”

He took a deep breath, his eyes searching hers. “I want you to stay.”

She didn’t have time to wonder what he meant specifically because he was already continuing.

“The job here at the ranch is yours permanently, if you want it. You can stay here too, if you like. There’s a ranch hand cabin available. Or you can stay in the guest room. Make it yours.”

He cleared his throat and pushed off the fence, moving closer. “Whatever you like. I don’t want to make it awkward. Anyway, I know you have your job at the coffee shop. I was just thinking...”

He took off his hat and paused to gather his thoughts, staring out at the tree line.

Her heartbeat suddenly sped up. There was something he wasn’t telling her.

“Aw, shit.” He took a deep breath and continued. “Here’s the truth, Teresa. I’m fucking crazy about you, and I... I want you to stay.”

He stared at her, his chest heaving as if he’d run a mile, and it was easy to see what the confession had cost him.

A lump formed in her throat. She’d been struggling with her own feelings for him, unsure if she wanted to risk her heart again. But the way he looked at her now, with such vulnerability and sincerity, made her heart ache with longing.

“I... I don’t know what to say,” she managed to get out.

He took a step forward, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. His touch sent a jolt through her body, along with an onslaught of delicious memories.

“I’m not asking for anything serious.” His eyes pleaded with her. “I just want to be with you, Teresa. I want to see where this goes. I know we have something special between us, and I don’t want to let it slip away.”

Her heart swelled with emotion. She’d never expected to find someone like Cole, someone who made her feel so alive. But she was scared. Scared of what letting someone into her life meant. What if Ricky showed up again one day and she had to run?

Or worse, what if Ricky hurt Cole?

“Say you’ll stay,” he pleaded softly, his voice laced with desperation.

She hesitated. “What about Ricky? He could come back. He could hurt you.”

His face hardened, his jaw clenching. “I won’t let him hurt me. And I won’t let him hurt you either. I’ll protect you, Teresa. I’ll make sure you’re safe. Just give me a chance... give us a chance.”

She looked into his eyes, seeing the raw emotion there. She knew he meant every word he said, and she wanted to believe in him. But she couldn’t ignore the fear inside her.

She also couldn’t deny her heart. No place had ever felt like home quite like this ranch, and she’d only been here for a couple days.

The words tumbled from her lips before she could second guess them. “Okay. I’ll stay.”

Cole’s face broke into a smile, and he wrapped his arms around her, lifting her off the ground. Teresa laughed, feeling weightless and free in his embrace.

They pulled apart when he set her down, and when he looked at her his eyes were shining. “I’m so glad. I can’t

imagine Sweet Pines without you.”

A warmth spread through her chest, and she leaned in to kiss him. Their lips met, soft and gentle at first before deepening into a passionate embrace.

They pulled away, panting for breath, and he rested his forehead against hers. “I promise, I’ll make it worth your while.”

Teresa smiled, feeling like she was exactly where she was meant to be. She had found a new home, a new job, and a new love. It was a fresh start for her, and she was excited to see where it would take her.

As hard as the path had been, she couldn’t help feeling grateful for everything that had brought her to this moment. The trauma of running from New York had been immense, but it had also led her to Cole and this new life in Sweet Pines.

She knew there would be challenges ahead, but she was ready to face them with Cole by her side. For the first time in her life, she felt like she was exactly where she was meant to be.

She just prayed that things would stay this good, that Ricky would forget all about her and she would never hear anything about him or the Mafia again.

She wanted to believe that could happen, but standing out there in the warm sun, a shiver ran through her. She couldn’t shake off the possibility that her past would come back to haunt her, and if it did, she would be completely unprepared.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

“What about this?” Dawson put one foot up on a porch step, folded his arms, and narrowed his eyes.

“Uh...” Teresa paused, her finger hovering over the phone’s camera button. “What kind of look are you going for exactly?”

He stared at her. “You know... hot.”

“Oh. Sure.” She nodded and took the picture, glad she’d never gotten into internet dating.

Dawson had asked her to take some photos of him for his profile, and so far that had meant a lot of him lifting heavy things around the farm, his shirt sleeves rolled up to expose his biceps.

“Thanks.” He took his phone from her and swiped through the photos. “These are awesome. You could be a photographer.”

She shrugged the compliment away. “I’m happy to help.”

“Oh, wait. I need to get a selfie. The reel I saw said you need one selfie on your profile and nothing more, or else you look too thirsty.”

Reel? Thirsty?

Boy, did she feel old talking to him.

He was a nice kid, though. Everyone on the ranch was nice. And helpful. And welcoming.

She'd spent the last week getting to know them all better—but none more than Cole. Even though she had her own room in his house, she'd only spent one night in it and she hadn't been alone. Instead, she'd been busy warming his sheets.

Dawson turned the phone around and snapped a few photos, angling the camera and adjusting his smile with each flash.

“Oh!” She hurried out of the frame—and landed right into Cole's chest.

“Hey there.” His arms slipped around her, pulling her close.

“Hey yourself.” She leaned in to kiss him, his lips meeting hers with desperate hunger.

Dawson coughed awkwardly, reminding them that they weren't alone.

“Sorry, guys. Didn't mean to interrupt.” He held up his phone. “I got the shot, so I'm gonna head out. Thanks for the help, Teresa.”

“We were taking pictures for his dating profile,” she explained as Dawson walked back to his cabin.

Cole raised an eyebrow, but didn't let go of Teresa. “Really now?”

“Mm hm.” She snuggled closer to him.

“Not your dating profile, right?”

She tilted her face back to look him in the eye. Was he being serious?

From his smile, she could see he was joking. And yet... he looked uncertain.

“Cole.” She ran her finger down his chest. “This last week has been amazing. I like what we have going here. I'm not interested in anyone else.”

“I'm glad to hear that.” He kissed her forehead, his hand cradling the back of her head. “I feel the same way. I don't want anyone else but you.”

She felt a rush of warmth and affection for him. Cole kind, gentle, and patient with her, and she found herself falling more for him every day.

But as much as she tried to ignore it, the fear of Ricky's return still lingered in the back of her mind. She couldn't forget about her past, no matter how much she wanted to.

"I won't let him hurt you." He said, as if reading her mind. "I'll protect you, no matter what. And besides, we're in a small town. If he shows back up again, we'll know."

She nodded, the lump in her throat making it hard to speak.

"Hey." He ran his palms down her arms. "I need to run some errands. I was hoping you'd come with me."

"Uh... town?" Adrenaline raced through her veins. She hadn't been in town since the night she tried to escape Ricky.

"He's not there anymore," Cole promised. "I've been asking around. No one has seen him."

She bit her lip, still afraid.

She couldn't live like this forever, though. Contained to the ranch and never going into the outside world. Sooner or later, she'd need to step foot outside of the bubble Cole had created for her.

Why not rip the band-aid off and make it sooner?

"Okay. I'd love to go." She nodded, a bit of excitement creeping in at the thought of going into town.

Sweet Pines was nothing in size when compared to New York City, but it was the community she was eager for.

"I have one errand I need to run myself." She slipped her hand into his and they walked to his truck.

In town, Cole parked on the street down the block from the coffee shop.

Before opening her door, Teresa surveyed the sidewalks. An old man watered the plants in front of the bookstore, and a few musicians were having a jam session under some trees at the corner.

Ricky's not here, she reminded herself. He left.

Still, her hand trembled as she opened the truck's door.

Cole took notice and gave her a reassuring smile. "You okay?"

She nodded, trying to steady her breathing. "Yeah, just a little nervous."

"I'm here with you. Nothing's going to happen." He squeezed her fingers gently.

"I'm good." She kept her words firm. "I need to do this. I want to do this." She couldn't let Ricky hold her prisoner when he wasn't even here. She had to live her life.

Cole smiled softly and leaned in to kiss her. "I need to pop by the bank. What was it you had to do?"

She took a deep breath. "I need to go to the coffee shop and apologize to Lovey."

His lips turned down. "She understands. I told her everything."

"I know." She nodded. "She needs to hear it from me, though."

Hand in hand, they walked down the street, taking in the sights and sounds of the small town. People waved and said hello, more than a few sets of eyes lingered on her and Cole's locked hands.

Being seen with him made Teresa stand a little taller. Walk a little prouder. The man at her side was the finest one around, and it made her feel as if she'd done at least one thing right in life.

As they approached the coffee shop, her anxiety returned. It was time to put on her big girl pants, but truth be told, she was afraid.

"Want me to come in with you?" Cole's strong arm slipped around her waist and he pulled her to his side.

"No, thank you. I should take care of this myself. How about you come back for me when you're done?"

“Sounds good.” He gave her a gentle, lingering kiss before releasing her. “Don’t be nervous.”

“I’m trying.” She wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans and opened Cup O’ Joe’s door.

The scent of freshly brewed coffee filled her nostrils, and she took a deep breath. There were a few customers sitting at tables, but no line. Which meant she was out of time to compose her apology.

Lovey was behind the counter, tapping away on a laptop, a look of concentration on her face. When she saw Teresa, she looked up and smiled.

“Well, look who’s here! How are you doing, honey?”

Teresa’s nerves got the best of her, and she stumbled over her words. “I... um, I wanted to apologize.”

Lovey’s face softened. “Oh, honey. You don’t need to apologize. I understand what you’ve been through.”

A wave of relief washed over her. “Thank you, Lovey. I really appreciate it.”

Lovey came out from behind the counter and gave Teresa a hug. “You’re a strong woman, and I’m so proud of you.”

Tears welled in Teresa’s eyes. “Thank you. And Cole told me about what you did. How you helped. I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you the truth before. I was trying to protect you, and—”

“I understand.” Lovey squeezed her shoulders. “I also understand why working here is tricky.”

Teresa bit her lip. “It’s just—I don’t want to risk... if...”

The door opened, and she glanced over her shoulder. At the sight of a familiar haircut, she froze.

Ricky!

The man stepped forward, revealing himself to be someone else. In fact, he didn’t even look like Ricky.

Teresa sighed. Was she losing her mind now?

“You okay?” Lovey studied her face.

“Yeah.” She pressed her palms to her cheeks. “I thought I saw... it’s embarrassing...”

“You thought you saw Ricky?” Lovey’s lips pursed.

“Yes.” Teresa’s throat ached.

“It’s okay, honey.” Lovey gave her a tight-lipped smile. “I know how hard it is to shake off the past. But you’re safe now. And we’re here to support you.”

Teresa nodded, grateful for the reassurance. “Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

“Of course.” Lovey’s hand squeezed hers. “Now, how about I make you a latte? My treat. Sit down and I’ll bring it over to you.”

Teresa smiled for the first time since entering the shop. “That sounds wonderful.”

But as Lovey turned to make the drink, she scanned the room once again, making sure Ricky wasn’t lurking in the shadows. She knew deep down he wasn’t there, but the fear was a hard habit to break.

She made her way over to a table and sat down, feeling dizzy and disoriented. She closed her eyes, taking deep breaths and trying to calm herself down. The sound of a chair scraping against the floor made her jump, and she opened her eyes to see Lovey.

“Here you go.” She put a latte with a heart in the foam in front of Teresa.

“It’s lovely.” Suddenly, Teresa felt like she might cry.

It wasn’t just her anxiety over Ricky. It was Lovey’s kindness. Cole’s open heart. The whole community that she, even as a stranger, seemed to settle right into.

This home fit her like an unexpected glove that had been custom made. She couldn’t bear the thought of losing it.

“The book club was rescheduled, by the way.” Lovey adjusted the bandana holding her hair back. “There’s been a

flu going around and half the ladies were sick. We're doing it Wednesday. Can you make it?"

Wednesday. That was in six days.

She hadn't had the chance to check out the book with all that's happened, but if the library still had one, she could speed read and catch up.

"I would love to, if I can still get a copy." She sipped the latte, which was, of course, exceptional. "I still feel bad leaving you to take care of this all on your own."

Lovey waved her hand. "I hired someone. A girl who is home from college for the summer. For now, I'm set, so you don't need to worry about me. It's you I'm concerned about. You really spooked a minute ago."

Teresa's eyes lowered. The scare had been enough to make her heart race and her palms sweat. She was still afraid, and she knew it would take time to shake that off. But Cole was there for her, and so was Lovey. She wasn't alone.

"I'll be okay," she said softly. "It's just going to take some time."

Lovey nodded. "I understand. He's gone, though."

She took a deep breath. Gone... Sudden memories of her father's shouted words and the gunfire that followed sent ripples of grief and regret through her core. The flashbacks still popped up at the oddest times." I'm just waiting for that reality to sink in."

She knew the road ahead wouldn't be easy, but with Lovey, Cole, and the rest of the town by her side, she also knew she could face it. And for the first time in a long time, she felt like everything would be okay.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

“What if we start with these?” Teresa opened the closet door and pointed at the dusty stack of boxes.

Cole cringed in embarrassment. He’d forgotten all about those.

While most of his house was fairly put together, it still contained a lot of junk. Knick knacks he’d held on to when they had no real meaning. Things he’d thought might be useful one day but never were.

Teresa, busy body that she was, had suggested she help him organize. He couldn’t say no. He could never say no to her.

She hadn’t even been at his ranch two weeks, and already he was wrapped around her finger.

Honestly? He hoped he never came unwound.

“Sure. Let’s start with those.” He set the two glasses of whiskey he’d poured on the coffee table, and they brought the boxes into the living room.

She sneezed as she opened the first box, and he chuckled. “Sorry.”

They dug through the box together, which was filled with old letters, photographs, and trinkets. Cole couldn’t help feeling a pang of nostalgia as he looked through the items.

“These are really old.” She picked up a faded photograph of his grandfather.

“Yeah, they are.” He took the photo from her and studied it. The man had been a tough, no-nonsense rancher. But he had also been a loving father and grandfather. The photo brought back fond memories of his childhood.

“What’s in this one?” She pointed to the smallest box in the stack.

He shrugged. “I don’t remember. Let’s find out.”

She opened the box and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “What’s this?”

He took it from her and smoothed it flat. It was a drawing he’d done when he was a kid. Crude pencil lines formed a stick figure cowboy riding a horse. He couldn’t help but laugh.

“This is embarrassing.” He crumpled the paper and tossed it aside.

Teresa picked up the drawing. “This is cute. And it’s precious that you kept it all these years.”

He felt his cheeks flush. “Yeah, well, I guess I’m sentimental.”

They continued sorting through the boxes. Cole reminisced about old times and shared stories about long-forgotten treasures. As they worked, he stole glances at her.

It felt so good to have her in his life. He almost couldn’t remember a time before her. How had he gotten by without her warm smile and soft touch?

“Here are some more photos.” She pulled out a folder stuffed with them. “I’m sure you’ll want to keep these.”

He opened the folder and discovered picture after picture from his rodeo days, back when he and his friends, Huck and Harvey, spent most of each year on the road.

“Look at that.” He chuckled.

“Let’s see.”

She leaned over to look at the photo. In it, Cole was grinning broadly, his hat tipped back on his head as he sat on a

horse. Huck and Harvey were standing beside him, both with wide grins on their faces as well.

“You were quite the cowboy, weren’t you?” she teased.

His cheeks reddened. “I guess you could say that. You already know Huck. You’d like Harvey too. He’s great to have around in a pinch.”

She smiled as she continued to flip through the photos, stopping at one that made Cole’s stomach twist. “Who’s this?” She pointed to a woman standing next to him in one of the pictures.

His heart sank. “That’s my ex.”

“Oh.” Her face fell. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.”

“It’s okay.” He took the photo from her and looked at it, his heart aching with that familiar feeling he’d spent years trying to ignore. “We were together for a long time, but it just didn’t work out.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” The answer came out sharper than he’d meant it to, and he cringed at his tone.

Teresa nodded and looked away, and even though he put the photo down he found he couldn’t move on. He’d forgotten he had the picture, but apparently his attempts to erase all evidence of Angela had failed.

She was still there, like a rock in his gut. One that he was damn tired of putting up with.

Teresa was curious, and that was natural. He wanted to share with her; it was just hard.

Or, at least, it always had been.

Maybe sharing his story was the missing piece. Maybe if he did that it would be easier to leave it in the past.

He cleared his throat. “We were engaged, but it turned out she’d been cheating on me for quite a while.” He shook his

head. “I felt like an idiot for not seeing it. Looking back, it’s so obvious.”

Teresa’s expression softened. “It’s not your fault. People can be sneaky and hide things well. But I’m sorry that happened to you. That must have been hard to deal with.”

“It was.” He sighed heavily. “It took me a long time to get over it. But I did. Eventually.”

Was that true, though?

He still resented Angela for what she’d done.

He still had moments of anger and hurt when he thought about her. But he also knew he couldn’t keep holding onto those feelings forever. It was time to let them go for good. He couldn’t let her continue to have power over him. Not when he had Teresa in his life. Not when he had so much to look forward to.

Teresa seemed to sense his inner turmoil, and she reached out to take his hand. Her touch sent a wave of contentment through him, and he turned to look at her.

Her brown eyes were gentle and understanding, and he felt a sudden urge to kiss her. He wanted to feel her lips on his, to lose himself in her embrace.

He held back, not wanting her to think he was using her as a distraction.

Her thumb ran over his arm. “I’m here for you, if you ever want to talk about it or anything else.”

He looked at her, really looked at her, and felt his heart swell with affection. She was such a kind, caring person. He didn’t deserve her, but he was grateful for her. And he would do everything he could to make her happy.

“Thank you,” he said softly, covering her hand with his.

She smiled and squeezed his arm before letting go. “Of course. And we don’t have to do this right now. Maybe it was a bad idea.”

He felt a pang of nostalgia as she put away the photos. Those days had been wild and carefree, but they had also been lonely, even with his friends and Angela around. He had been searching for something, but he hadn't known what it was. Until he met Teresa.

He'd been so closed off after Angela, always coming up with excuses as to why he couldn't date or really get close to anyone. The truth was that he'd been afraid. He hadn't wanted to put his heart on the line.

Teresa made him feel like taking a chance was worth it. Like the odds were in his favor.

"The past does hurt some." He smiled at her. "But I've got something better now."

"What's that?" She looked up at him, her eyes soft and loving.

"You." He leaned down and kissed her, savoring the taste of whiskey on her lips.

"I'm glad to be here."

"Me too." He kissed her again, infinitely grateful.

The boxes could wait. Right now, he had something much more important to focus on- the most amazing woman he'd ever met, right there in his arms.

How had he ended up here? Only weeks ago he'd been going about his daily business, running the ranch and basically doing nothing else.

And then she came into his life, and everything changed. He changed.

Teresa brought him back to life when he hadn't realized he was dying.

She was the miracle he hadn't known he needed.

Cole deepened their kiss and pulled her onto his lap. She giggled, the boxes forgotten.

He couldn't get enough of her. His hands roamed over her body trying to memorize every inch and curve. She moaned

against his mouth, her fingers tangling in his hair.

This was what he'd been missing. This connection, this passion. With each kiss, each touch, he felt himself falling deeper under her spell.

He broke away, trailing kisses down her neck and across her collarbone. Delighting when she arched into him, her body hot and pliant in his arms.

“God, Cole.” Her breath hitched. “I want you.”

He groaned in response, his hands sliding under her shirt to feel the warmth of her skin. He wanted her too.

“Let's go upstairs,” he whispered against her lips.

A smile spread across her beautiful face. He stood with her in his arms. Teresa threw her arms around his neck as he carried her up the stairs with ease, his heart racing with anticipation.

Cole knew he was getting in deep, probably too fast, but he couldn't stop himself.

There was no turning back from his feelings now. He was hers, completely and irrevocably.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

Teresa stepped onto Main Street, the summer heat wrapping around her like a tight hug. Breathing deep, she smiled. She'd never minded the heat, and here in Wyoming she actually loved it.

She loved everything this place and town, come to think of it. From the wildflowers she'd picked that morning to the sounds of the cows mooing low in the evenings. From the long rides on Rusty to the nights tangled in the sheets with Cole. She loved it all.

Grinning big, she walked down sidewalk to the coffee shop. It was dusk outside; she could hear car doors slamming as shopkeepers left for the day. Just as she reached the front door, her phone buzzed with a group text from Lovey to everyone in the book club.

Running late. The back door is unlocked!

Tucking her phone back in her purse, Teresa walked around the building and to the coffee shop's back door. She was thrilled she'd been able to find a copy of tonight's book at the library and rushed to finish it in time. It had been good, although not as exciting as romances she'd read in the past.

Maybe because she had a real-life romance to lose herself in now.

Biting into her smile, she opened the back door and let herself in to Cup O' Joe. Each day with Cole was better than the last. Being apart for so much as five minutes literally made her ache for him.

Putting her purse on a table, she got to work pulling chairs into a circle. Since she was ten minutes early, she might as well make herself useful.

The back door opened and closed, signaling the arrival of another book club member. Teresa hadn't met any of them, but she was eager to. If she was going to stay in Sweet Pines, she wanted to get to know everyone. Wanted to put down the kind of roots that couldn't be pulled up.

She called over her shoulder while fluffing a decorative pillow. "In here!"

Heavy footsteps echoed through the shop, and she spun at the sound. "Hello, Teresa," Ricky said flatly. "You thought you got rid of me, didn't you?"

Before she could find her voice to scream, two big men appeared and flanked him.

She didn't recognize the newcomers, but they looked like trouble. One had a nose that appeared to have been broken a couple of times. The other had a neck tattoo partially covered by a brutal scar.

Both men were pure muscle. Probably Mafia enforcers that Ricky had paid off to help him with his dirty work.

Her mind raced as she tried to think of an escape. The trio blocked the back exit, and she'd never manage to unlock and open the front door before they were on her.

Her only option was to stall. If she drew this out, the rest of the book club would arrive. She could yell for them to get help as soon as they stepped inside.

But what if the men hurt the others? Or worse.

No. She couldn't put anyone else in danger. She had to deal with Ricky and his buddies on her own. Which meant she couldn't stall. She had to be fast.

"What do you want, Ricky?" She lifted her chin, trying to look fierce.

"That's not very friendly, after I came all this way."

She folded her arms over her chest. Defiant.

“You know what I’m here for.” His eyes darkened. “You thought you could hide from me, but I’m not an idiot. I saw the photo that little cowboy posted on his online.”

She stared at him in confusion. Her first thought was that he found her through Michelle, found out they’d been talking. Then it suddenly hit her...Dawson’s dating profile. She hadn’t gotten out of frame as she’d imagined, and Ricky had used the photo to find her.

How had she been so careless?

She should have checked the pictures he took, told him not to post anything with her in it. She’d been too distracted by Cole’s arrival, and she’d mistakenly assumed Ricky would never see a selfie intended for Dawson’s dating profile.

Now she’d pay for the mistake. After everything Cole and Lovey had done to help her, this was the end.

But she’d never been one to go down without a fight.

“So now what?” Her voice shook, and she glanced around for something to use as a weapon. There were only pillows and furniture close by.

He grinned, his sharp eyes narrowing. “Now I make sure you never run again.”

She clenched her jaw. “You don’t scare me.”

“Oh yeah?” He reached her in three long strides, grabbing her by the waist and yanking her body against his. She yelped in surprise, her heart in her throat as he gripped her chin tightly in his hand.

“You should be scared,” he hissed, his breath hot and reeking of cigarettes. “You trifling bitch.”

“I never said a word about what I heard that night.” Her breathing turned ragged. “I’m out of that world and that life.”

His upper lip curled. “I wish I could believe you, Teresa, but I can’t take chances. Your father was a rat, and you know what kind of offspring rats have? More rats.”

“Fuck you, Ricky.” She twisted her chin out of his hold.

He sneered and whipped his hand away, then backhanded her so hard she saw stars. Her knees buckled from the force of the blow, and he grabbed her hair, yanking her upright. Tears stung her eyes and her ears rang. She could taste blood in her mouth.

“That’s right, cry.” He mocked, his breath making her stomach turn. “You’re going to learn, princess. You’re going to pay in ways you never imagined.”

He spun her in an instant, knocking her off her feet and dragging her across the floor. She reached out to grab hold of something, anything, but it was no use. The biggest of the men bent to lift her completely off the ground.

The other goon led the way to the back door then pushed it open and stepped into the twilight. Together they dragged her down the alley running behind Cup O’ Joe and several other shops.

“Help!” she screamed, twisting and flailing. She might not be a match for them, but she didn’t have to go quietly either.

Ricky snapped an arm back and thrust it forward, punching her right across the jaw. Pain cracked through her skull and she wailed. They reached a car, its trunk already open.

Dark spots swam in Teresa’s vision, and she fought as hard as she could to avoid what came next. But they still dumped her in the trunk. The lid closed with an unceremonious click, and then she was alone, in the dark.

“Help!” She thrashed, kicking her feet and slamming her hands against the inside of the trunk. “Help me!” She searched for the safety release and rammed her heels against the spot where brake lights should be.

Her face was throbbing from Ricky’s punch and her heart pounded with the force of a jackhammer. Scents of cleansers and bleach overcame her in the closed space, and her breaths grew short and frantic. She was hyperventilating-she was going to pass out.

She needed to calm down. Needed to think.

Her purse was still at the coffee shop along with her phone. There would be no calling for help. No tracking her location. No happy ending to her story.

Three car doors closed and the engine rumbled to life. A second later the vehicle started moving.

It didn't take a genius to figure out where they were going. Somewhere to dispose of her body.

Tears filled Teresa's eyes and this time she let them fall.

As the car bumped onto the road, Cole came to mind. His easy, comforting smile. His strong touch.

She had a number of regrets in life, but one sat at the very top. She'd never told Cole Vasko just how much he meant to her. How deeply and irrevocably she was in love with him.

And now she would never get the chance.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

“Knock, knock.” Cole entered the coffee shop’s back door, Teresa’s book in hand.

A few women were seated in a semi-circle while Lovey bustled behind the counter, putting cupcakes on a plate.

“Oh, hey, Cole.” She smiled warmly. “Cupcake?”

“I’m good.” He held up the paperback he carried. “I was just bringing Teresa’s book. She forgot it, and there are all these sticky notes in it, so I thought she might want it for your meeting.”

Lovey blinked at him, looking puzzled. “We haven’t seen her. She was here. Unlocked the back door and set her purse right there.” She nodded to the nearby table. “But she hasn’t come back.”

“She... No.” A funny feeling scratched the back of his neck. “She wouldn’t have left the door to the shop unlocked and walked away.” And the truck Teresa had borrowed from the ranch was still parked on the street outside. “Did you check the ladies room?”

Lovey’s lips turned down. “Yes. She wouldn’t have been in there all this time though.”

Panic clutched Cole’s windpipe.

Where was she?

A woman who was knitting a sock smiled. “The chairs were arranged like this when Elsa and I got here. And we noticed her stuff.” She nodded to the table again where

Teresa's purse sat. She clearly plans to attend. Maybe she popped out for a bit to grab something."

Cole pulled his phone from his pocket. He was probably overreacting. Nothing had happened to Teresa because there was nothing in this town that could harm her.

Including Ricky.

He was long gone.

Pressing the button to call her, he put the phone to his ear. Right away, a ringing filled the coffee shop. He lowered the phone, his gaze going to Teresa's purse.

She wouldn't have gone anywhere without her phone. Not intentionally.

His gaze cut quickly to Lovey's. "You have a security camera here, right?" He kept his voice low, not wanting to include the other women, though they were certainly trying to listen in.

Her eyes wide, Lovey gestured for him to follow her into the office, where she closed the door behind them.

"You don't think..." She turned on the computer without finishing the sentence.

"Let's see what the tape brings up." He didn't want to jump to conclusions. Especially since none of the possibilities coming to mind were comforting ones.

Lovey opened a security feed and scrolled back twenty minutes. They saw Teresa come into Cup O' Joe, her purse over her shoulder. Cole crossed his arms, squeezing them together hard as Teresa arranged the chairs. When she turned to look at the back door, he leaned forward in anticipation.

And then Ricky walked into frame.

"Fuck," Cole hissed. "Can you speed it up?"

The figures on the screen moved faster, Ricky coming right up to Teresa before grabbing her. With the aid of two other men, they dragged a kicking Teresa out the door.

Nausea rolled up Cole's throat, and his hands started to shake. Ricky had Teresa, and who knew what he was doing to her.

"There's more." Lovey clicked over to the camera feed that looked onto the back alley.

They watched in horror as the men dragged Teresa to a parked car. A lump formed in Cole's throat as Ricky punched her and they threw her into the trunk. The men hopped into the car and took off down the alley, taking a right onto the main street.

He turned to Lovey, his hands clenched into fists. "We have to call the police."

She nodded. Her eyes filled with tears. "On it." She pulled out her phone, her fingers shaking as she dialed the emergency number.

Cole paced. His mind racing with thoughts on finding Teresa. How could this be happening? He couldn't lose her. Not now. Not ever.

And he couldn't wait around for the police to arrive.

"I'm going after her." He was already halfway to the door. "They probably headed to the highway, east out of town. Tell the police to go there."

She nodded, the phone pressed to her ear. "Good luck."

Whether luck would help him or not, he had no idea. He sure as hell had determination, and he intended on bringing Teresa home safely.

Anyone who got in his way would regret it.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

“We should have just killed her at the coffee shop.”

“And then what? Leave it a crime scene?”

“Not if we were careful about it.”

Teresa held her breath, listening to the men in the car argue about the best way to get rid of her. They’d been driving for several minutes, and she’d spent all that time feeling around in the dark for some kind of weapon she could use or a way to escape.

“It’s easier this way.” That was Ricky. She recognized his raspy voice. “Cleaner.”

“So then where are we going to do this?” One of the other men asked.

The second man cut in. “Before that, we need to talk about pay. I’m gonna need my second half now.”

Ricky growled. “I’m not paying you until it’s done. And you don’t get the rest until I’m sure I’m out of the woods.”

The first man spoke again, his voice a little higher. “I’m going to need to know what happens after.”

Ricky’s voice was calm, smooth. “There won’t be anything to worry about. I’ve got it covered.”

“That’s no good, Ricky. If anything happens to me because of this, I’m telling the cops everything. I mean, I don’t want to do that, but I will if you fuck me over.”

“I’m not going to fuck you over, asshole.”

“Well, what if it doesn’t get done?” The men argued back and forth, Teresa’s mind scrambling to keep up.

She had to escape. The trunk was closed tight, but she’d always been pretty good at wriggling out of tight spaces.

She had to hurry before they got to wherever they were going. Her heart was racing, the blood in her veins pumping rapidly.

“Shut the fuck up.” Ricky’s voice was low now. “We’re almost there. You two, keep quiet, and we won’t have any problems. What’s done is done. And if anyone asks...” He let his voice trail off.

“If anyone asks what?” The second man grouched.

“If anyone asks, you guys did it on your own.” He chuckled. It was clear he was enjoying himself, feeling completely in charge of the situation.

That was what scared Teresa the most. She didn’t know what he was capable of.

There had to be some way out of the trunk.

She dug her aching fingers along the edge of the trunk’s carpet, searching for a way to pull it back. She needed better access to the taillights if she was going to kick them out.

Her heart pounded as she worked the carpet, lungs burning from the cleansers and fumes. If this didn’t work...

No, she couldn’t think that way. She had to stay positive.

Suddenly, one fingertip slid beneath the rough carpet, and she felt a glimmer of hope.

With shaking hands, she repositioned herself and pulled the carpet back, exposing the metal frame underneath. Carefully, she inspected the area by touch, until she found the taillight. A small rectangle in the corner of the trunk. Now she just had to readjust so she could put the full force of her kick against it.

Wiggling into place, she took a deep breath, drew her leg back, and kicked the light as hard as she could. The impact

reverberated through her leg, but the taillight didn't budge. She tried again, this time putting all her weight behind the kick.

The taillight inched forward, sending joy into her heart. She braced her arms against the trunk's walls and kicked repeatedly until the entire unit sprung free. The taillight crashed and bounced over the asphalt behind them. Adrenaline surged in her veins.

She gulped the clean night air, praying the men hadn't heard what she'd done. Holding her breath, she heard only the sound the tires on the road.

Wiggling around so she could see out the hole, she inspected the view. It was dark now, the headlights of an oncoming car shined in her face.

Maybe she could stick her hand out and wave for help.

Her heart racing faster than the cars, she plunged her hand through the hole and gestured frantically for help. She wanted to yell, but knew her captors would hear her before anyone else did.

She kept waving, a ball of fear and hope clenched tight in her chest. If this didn't work, she didn't have a Plan B. The road soon curved, and the driver sped up, getting closer to the car Teresa was in.

Excitement filled her chest. Had they seen her? Were they getting closer for a better view?

She waved harder, not caring that she was scraping her arm against the rough edges of the hole. It would only take one person to see her and call the police, then she would be saved!

Suddenly, the car behind her slowed down. Their turn signal came on, and they left the highway.

Her heart sank and a ragged sob broke on her lips. "No! No, no." Her only chance at escape faded away.

Now, it was only her, Ricky, and his two thugs.

Soon it would only be the men.

Tears filled her eyes, but she held back the sob, unwilling to let her kidnappers hear her crying. They could take her life, but they wouldn't take her dignity.

“Cole,” she whispered, closing her eyes.

If only she could tell him that he'd saved her, given her life the meaning she hadn't known it lacked.

“I hope you know I loved you.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY

Cole had been going out of his mind as he raced to the highway, his truck eating up the road. His heart was pounding hard, sweat breaking out on his forehead.

The roads were empty, it being another sleepy night outside of town. Usually he enjoyed the quiet, but today he cursed the lack of traffic that would have slowed Ricky down.

“Damn it!” He slammed his palm against the steering wheel.

This was all his fault. He should’ve kept his guard up. Should’ve expected Ricky to return. Should have protected Teresa better.

And now she was gone.

But he would get her back-nothing on Earth would stop him.

He needed a plan, though. He couldn’t wait for the cops to catch up with Ricky.

And then suddenly, it came to him.

Harvey lived off this highway. If he was home, maybe he could help.

Sweat slicking his palms, he pulled out his phone and called his old friend.

“Hey, man. What’s going on?” Harvey answered.

“Listen. Some real dangerous men took Teresa,” he said, forgoing traditional greetings. “The cops are aware, but we

don't know how far these goons have gotten. My guess is that they're on the highway, looking to get as far as possible from town. I suspect they'll pass your place soon. Is there any way you can stop them?"

"Shit." Harvey's entire tone changed. "Hold on... Uh, yeah. I have an idea."

"Excellent. I'm trying to follow, but they've got a hearty head start." Cole could only pray the car hadn't left the highway.

Any other option was too painful. If Ricky had taken an exit, the odds of saving Teresa dropped significantly. There were a multitude of country roads a person could get lost down around here.

Deep moos came through on Harvey's end. There were cows nearby. "How close are you?"

"Uh." Cole ran a quick calculation in his head. "Maybe five minutes."

More cows moored, and Harvey yelled at them to keep moving.

Realizing what his friend was doing, a grin spread across Cole's face. "You're a genius."

"You can thank me after we get your woman back. Fuck. I think I see them."

Cole pushed the pedal to the floor, his truck racing into the next curve. "I'm almost there."

There was more mooing across the phone line. Tires squealing. A man shouting. Cole could hardly breathe. One more mile...

"What's happening?" he demanded.

Harvey didn't answer.

"Shit." Cole bit his lip so hard he tasted blood.

Half a mile...

Through the darkness, a mass of cows appeared in the road. A car had stopped in front of them, and a man was just getting out from behind the wheel. He was waving his arms, and Cole could hear shouting through his open window.

“What the hell?” The man yelled. “Stupid fucking cows!”

Harvey was nowhere to be seen, but Cole knew he had to be close. He’d herded the cows-which were from the beef ranch right next to Harvey’s place-into the road, then probably hid.

Cole put his truck in park but didn’t even bother to turn it off. He flew out the door, right at the man who was standing in the road blocked by the herd. “Call the police and give them the details,” Cole demanded into the phone, then shoved the device into his pocket.

With a little luck, Huck was still on the line.

“Hey!” Cole yelled, balling a fist as the man turned toward him. Cole landed a punch square in the man’s throat.

The goon bent over, gagging and wheezing for air. Cole didn’t give him the chance to recover. He grabbed the man by his collar and threw him to the ground before running to the car that was stuck behind the cows.

“Help!” Teresa’s muffled cry carried from somewhere in the car, and his heart leaped with joy. She was alive!

“Hang tight!” He couldn’t get to her yet. Another man emerged from the vehicle and charged at him.

Harvey suddenly appeared from behind a cow and took on the third man.

Only a few feet before him, Ricky pulled a gun.

Cole’s blood boiled at the sight of him, and he tackled the asshole, using his weight to send them both crashing to the ground. Cole hit the pavement with a bone-jarring thud.

The gun skidded over the pavement.

Ricky was smaller but fast and he managed to regain his footing first. He kicked Cole’s knee out from under him as he

tried to rise. He kicked him hard in the ribs, then slammed a foot against Cole's back.

Nothing a bull or two hadn't tried before.

He rolled over in one sharp move, pulling Ricky down with him. They grappled on the ground, trading blows and reaching for the handgun. Ricky reached the weapon first and swung it in Cole's direction. Cole clamped his hands over Ricky's, attempting to wrench the gun away.

Boom!

A gunshot echoed through the night, ringing Cole's ears and sending the cows into a stampede.

Teresa's scream shoved his heart into his throat.

He knocked the gun from Ricky's hand, and it skittered away once more.

Grabbing Ricky's arm, Cole twisted it and held it behind his back, then looked around. The man Cole had punched first still lay on the ground passed out. Harvey had the third man pinned, his knee on the other guy's back. Cole's focus snapped back to Ricky.

He couldn't let his guard down, not for a second. Ricky was a dangerous man, and he wouldn't hesitate to strike back if given the chance.

Where were the damn cops?

"You don't know who you're messing with," Ricky warned. His words were barely audible, as his face was pressed into the grass.

"I could say the same to you."

"Cole!" Harvey tossed a length of rope in his direction. The man he'd been kneeling on lay hogtied on the shoulder of the road.

"Hell yeah." He tied Ricky up nice and tight, binding both his arms and feet, and then made a run for the car's open door.

"Gonna take all night to herd up those cows," Harvey said.

Cole yanked the trunk release, then spun toward the back of the car.

Teresa's eyes were wide with fear as she rose from the trunk.. She scanned the scene around them in stunned relief.

He pulled her away from the car and into his embrace, his heart swelling with joy at the feel of her in his arms. He never wanted to let go again, but they had things to deal with first.

Emergency lights and sirens raced toward them, eating up the night and further frightening the cows.

“Damnit!” Harvey barked.

Teresa buried her face in Cole's chest, smothering a laugh.

“Are you okay?” he asked, pulling back and examining her for injuries. A bruise had formed on her face where Ricky punched her and blood ran down her arm.

“I will be.”

She curled against him once more, and he rested his chin on the top of her head.

Relief washed over him in waves. She was safe. They were safe. And Ricky was going to jail.

“You saved me,” she whispered.

“Always.”

That “always” wasn't an empty promise. No matter what she needed, he would be there for her. His dying breath belonged to this woman.

Local police moved onto the scene, and Harvey jumped in to regale the story.

Teresa lifted her face to Cole. “That guy really is good in a pinch.”

He laughed and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “He really is.”

“Can we go home now?”

Home. As in their home.

He swallowed against the emotion clogged in his throat.
“Absolutely.” There wasn’t anything he wanted more.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

As it turned out, they couldn't just go home. First, the medics insisted on evaluating Teresa . Then she and Cole needed to go to the police station to give formal statements.

The whole ride there, she trembled like a leaf. Telling law enforcement what Ricky had done felt like intentionally putting a target on her back.

Cole held her hand and reminded her that Ricky was in police custody. Between the murder and kidnapping charges, plus whatever else he might be charged with, the man was looking at quite a lengthy sentence in jail.

Those facts gave her courage. But not as much courage as Cole's presence at her side. His support made her feel as if she could face any storm.

In the police department, the officer's eyebrows rose higher and higher with every part of the story.

"...and then they threw me in the trunk." Teresa took a deep breath. " I kicked out a taillight and tried to get another driver's attention, but it didn't work. Then the car stopped, and I thought..." Her voice shook.

She'd thought that was the end. That they were about to pull her from the car and shoot her.

Then she'd heard Cole's voice, and she'd cried in relief. Beyond all odds, he'd come for her.

A strong, warm hand squeezed her shoulder, and she looked into Cole's eyes. He nodded encouragingly.

"Then Cole and Harvey showed up." She turned back to Officer Wilson. "I heard a fight then Cole opened the trunk and let me out."

The cop released a heavy exhale. "That's quite a story. I'm sorry you went through all of that. And ma'am, I'm sorry about your father."

She blinked through unexpected tears. "Thank you."

"I'm sure the NYPD and the Feds will see that your assailant is held fully accountable for all his crimes." Officer Wilson gave her a compassionate smile.

She nodded and looked at her hands. "I hope so."

Cole's chair creaked as he leaned forward in it. "Anything else, Officer?"

Officer Wilson shook his head. "No, I think we have all we need for now. That was some quick and effective thinking on your friend's part." He chuckled softly. "Though he could probably use a little help rounding up that herd right about now."

Cole smiled. "No doubt." He'd already alerted his ranch hands to the need, and they were no doubt on their way. "It's always good to know a cowboy."

Teresa couldn't agree more.

Officer Wilson walked them to the door. "If you remember anything else, don't hesitate to come forward."

"Of course." Cole reached for Teresa, pulling her close. "Let's go home."

She took his hand gratefully, following him out of the room in a daze.

It was over. Ricky was caught, and she was safe.

For a while, they drove in silence, the tension slowly dissipating from the air. Teresa stared out the window, watching the darkened landscape pass by in a blur.

When they were halfway to the ranch, she broke the silence. “Cole?”

He glanced over at her. “Yeah?”

“Thank you.” She swallowed. “For saving my life. For everything. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

He reached over and took her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “You don’t have to thank me. I’m just glad you’re safe.”

“But you risked so much for me.” She looked at him, her eyes filling with tears. “You could have been hurt, or worse.”

“I’d do it all again.” He gave her hand another squeeze. “I care about you, Teresa. More than I can say.”

She felt her heart swell in her chest, the tears finally spilling over. “I care about you too, Cole. More than anything.”

He pulled the truck to the side of the road and turned to her, cupping her face in his hands and wiping away her tears with his thumbs. “You’ve done something to me, city girl.” His voice was low and husky. “I want to be with you. All the time. For as long as you’ll have me.”

Her heart pounded. She couldn’t even find the words. Hearing him say that made her so inconceivably happy.

His eyes darkened with intensity. “I want to be the man you come home to every night. The man you wake up next to every morning. The man who makes you smile and laugh and forget about all the bad stuff in the world.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “Cole...”

He leaned in, his lips brushing against hers in a gentle, tender kiss. The touch sent shivers down her spine, and she wrapped her arms around his neck melting into the embrace.

“I love you, Teresa.” He rested his forehead against hers.

“I love you too, Cole.” She smiled through her tears. “I can’t wait to go home with you.”

He grinned, the dimple on his cheek deepening. “Then let’s go.”

Starting the truck, he pulled back onto the road. The rest of the drive was a blur of anticipation and excitement. When they finally pulled up in front of his house, Cole was out of the truck and at her side in a flash, taking her hand and leading her inside.

As soon as the door closed behind them, he turned and pulled her into his arms.

Their lips met in a frenzy, and the fears and dangers of the night melted away.

Cole’s hands roamed her body, tracing her curves and paying special attention everywhere that counted. She moaned against his lips, and the sensation sent sparks of pleasure coursing through her. Every touch, every caress felt as if it was lighting her up from the inside out.

He bent and curved his arms around her backside, lifting her up and holding her tight. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and her arms around his neck as he carried her toward his bedroom.

He planned to show her just how much she really meant to him. Even if it took all night.

A while later, she lay on his chest, listening to his heartbeat as his hand trailed lazily over her arm.

His lips brushed her hair. “Do you have any idea how good it feels to hold you like this?”

She wrapped her arm over his waist and squeezed. “I have a pretty good idea.” She sighed. “It feels amazing.”

He gazed down at her, gently moving hair away from her face.

Happy tears pricked her eyes. “I’m so glad this is my life now.”

“Me too.” He kissed her nose. “Me too.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

Hooking his arms over the arena's bars, Cole whistled. "Looks like you're a city girl no longer."

From where she was trotting Rusty, Teresa shook her head and rolled her eyes. She couldn't hide the smile pulling at her lips, though.

Chuckling, Cole stayed where he was, enjoying the break from a long afternoon of work and enjoying the view.

He could watch this woman until the end of time.

She brought Rusty over to the fence and climbed from the saddle, looking like a professional. In the few days since the kidnapping, she'd spent a lot of time with the horses. Cole had encouraged it, knowing how therapeutic the creatures could be.

A few times he'd even seen her talking to Rusty. In those cases, he'd steered clear, giving Teresa the space she needed to process whatever she was vocalizing.

"It's like you said. This horse is gentle." She pulled a baby carrot from her pocket and fed it to Rusty.

"I guess that's why you're so good with him." He grinned. "You've got that same gentle spirit."

She blushed and looked away. "You're just saying that to build my confidence."

Cole climbed over the fence and came up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. "No. You're amazing, Teresa. Gentle and strong. Brave."

She twisted in his arms, her face inches from his. He could see the memories of the things Ricky had done planted there, still tormenting her.

If only he could tear them out and replace them all with good, happy memories.

Maybe, in time, that would happen. He just needed to keep doing his best, keep providing her with all the love, safety, and comfort she needed.

Ricky was in jail, awaiting his trial, but it didn't look good for him. As it turned out, the Feds had been watching him for a while. The chances that he would be put away for life were high.

“What about you?” Her question pulled him from his thoughts. “Are you gentle, like these horses?”

“I think I can manage to be gentle with the things that matter.” He brushed his lips against hers.

Her breath hitched, her body melting against him.

He angled back, giving her a chance to pull away. When she didn't, he deepened the kiss and stifled a moan.

God, she was ecstasy. Pure, unbridled bliss.

And she was all his.

“Teresa!” someone called.

Cole released her with a sigh.

Michael walked across the grass, waving his arm. “Your car is ready.”

“It is?” Her eyelashes fluttered and she pressed her lips together, suddenly lost in thought.

Panic tore through Cole's chest. Why did she have that look?

Was she thinking about leaving after all?

His heart beat faster. Maybe that was what she'd been talking to the horse about. Maybe she'd been trying to figure out what to do going forward. Or how to let Cole down easily.

He'd opened his life up to her, and it damn near killed him to think that his everything might not be enough. Maybe Sweet Pines held too many bad memories. In her short time there she'd been through a lot.

Maybe it would be better for her to drive off and start somewhere fresh.

He didn't want to let her go, but if that was what she needed, he wouldn't stand in her way. He'd do anything for her. Even if that meant living the rest of his life without her.

Michael stopped at the arena's fence and nodded at her. "Whenever you're ready to drive it, the keys are in the engine."

"Thank you, Michael. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome." He touched the brim of his hat. "I'm glad to have you here with us. That was a close call the other day."

Her gaze dropped. "Yeah."

With a nod to Cole, Michael headed toward the barns.

Cole's hands found her waist, but his body buzzed with conflicting needs. He longed to have her close, but if she were about to walk out of his life, wouldn't it be better to never touch her again? Just rip off the band-aid right then and there?

He cleared his throat, trying to figure out how best to approach the subject.

The light in her eyes dimmed. She seemed to know what he was going to say.

"Do you want to go?" He tripped over the last word, dropping his hands and taking a small step back to give her space.

Her lips parted. "Why are you asking me that? You offered me the job permanently, right? You don't want me to stay?"

Heat and despair clambered up his chest. He removed his hat and raked his fingers through his hair. "Christ, Teresa. I

want you to stay more than I want air. I want to make sure it's right for you, though."

"Why wouldn't it be?" She cocked her head slightly, awaiting his reply.

He sighed. "Because of what's happened here. You might want to get away from those memories."

"Because of what's happened here?" She reached out and took his hand. "Cole, what's happened here is that I've found myself a home. New York was nothing like this, and nowhere else on Earth could come close. I already know that."

A wave of pure relief flowed through him, and his heart thudded wildly in his chest.

"So you're staying with me?" He needed the confirmation. Needed to make absolutely sure he wasn't dreaming.

She nodded, her eyes shining. "I want to stay with you. Forever."

He gathered her close, heart soaring as he stared into her eyes. "Forever needs to start now."

She nodded. "I agree."

He kissed her once more, then scooped her up in his arms.

"Where are we going?"

"Back to the ranch house." He grinned. "I'm going to show you just how forever with me is going to be."

EPILOGUE

“Who wants muffins?” Lovey came around the coffee shop counter, the plate in her hands laden with an assortment of choices.

The book club nearly went crazy, most people grabbing for the chocolate ones, which Lovey was famous for.

“So.” Vanessa settled back in her chair. “Enough town gossip. Should we get to the book?”

Amanda Greaves laughed. “There’s no such thing as too much gossip.”

Everyone murmured their opinions. Smiling to herself, Teresa cracked her book. This month it had been her turn to pick, and she’d gone with a fantasy.

They’d been her preference lately. Crime?

She’d already lived that. No, thank you.

Romance?

Well, that was her day-to-day life. Why read about something when you could go home and experience it firsthand?

“Before we start the discussion...” Jenny Lee turned to Teresa. “You’ve been awfully quiet. How are things going with you and Cole?”

Teresa drew a deep breath. It had been almost a year since she’d arrived in Sweet Pines, exhausted and running for her

life. So many things had changed in that time. She had changed so much that she almost didn't recognize herself.

She'd been riding every day and also talking with her best friend more frequently. She'd even introduced Michelle and Cole over the phone. Then there was all her time outdoors, she loved spending time in nature. That alone had helped her find a kind of peace she'd always been missing and helped her finally come to terms with her father's death. Then there was Cole and all the time she spent between the sheets with him.

As for Ricky, she hardly ever thought of him. He was still in prison waiting for his trial, but there was no doubt that he wouldn't be walking away a free man.

Life was looking bright. She and Cole were talking about breeding some of the horses, and Michelle was coming for a visit later that summer.

She didn't have a single doubt that she would stay with him forever.

"Things are great with me." She smiled and sipped her latte.

"And Cole?" Amanda pressed.

"He's amazing." She glanced around the room. "I mean, look at him. It's pretty easy to see why I'm not scared."

Several of the women nodded and the rest laughed.

"I'm so happy for you." Jenny Lee smiled.

"I can't wait for you to tell us everything."

Teresa groaned. "Please, let's just talk about the book for a bit."

"Is he going to propose?" Jenny Lee asked.

Teresa hesitated. Odd as it was, she'd never even thought about marriage with Cole. What they had was just so right. So perfect.

She never dwelled on how it could be better.

"Oh, let her be." Vanessa laughed.

The group settled down, and the focus shifted to the book. Even while they discussed the story, though, Teresa's thoughts kept jumping back to Jenny Lee's question.

Was marriage important to her?

It was certainly something to think about. Her first marriage had ended in disaster, leaving a bitter taste in her mouth.

But Cole wasn't her ex-husband. He was a completely different man. A devoted, loving one.

So why hadn't he brought up marriage at all in the last year?

She pushed the thought aside and tried to focus on the discussion, but her mind kept wandering. Was he not interested in marriage? Was he waiting for her to bring it up? Or was he just content with how things were between them?

The questions swirled around in her head until she couldn't take it anymore. The room felt too small, the oxygen too lacking.

"Excuse me, ladies." She stood up, grabbing her bag. "I need some fresh air."

"Are you okay?" Jenny Lee asked, concern etched on her face.

"I'm fine." She forced a smile. "Just need to clear my head."

As she stepped out of the coffee shop, the sun hit her face, warming her skin. She took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of blooming flowers. Sweet Pines was beautiful this time of year.

But her mind was too preoccupied to enjoy it. She walked aimlessly down a familiar road and ending up at the small park in the center of town.

Chasing the shade, she took a seat on a bench. A young family with two small children played nearby, and a bittersweet tug pulled at Teresa's heart.

She had thought marriage wasn't important to her, but what if she'd been wrong? Could she be happy just as things were with Cole?

She didn't have time to answer that question, because right then his truck came down the street. She watched as he parked it, got out, and spotted her.

Waving his arm, he jogged over.

"Hey, what are you doing out here?" he asked, his voice laced with concern. "Your club's not over for another hour, right?"

"Just needed some fresh air."

He sat down beside her, taking her hand and rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. "Is everything okay?"

She hesitated, then decided to share her thoughts with him. "Jenny Lee asked me if you were going to propose. And it got me thinking about marriage."

There was a moment of silence as he considered her words. "Is that something you want? Marriage?"

She sucked in a breath. "I didn't think about it until today."

He nodded slowly, a serious look on his face. "I have my own thoughts about it."

Her pulse skittered. "You do?"

"I do." His voice turned husky, and his eyes found hers. "In fact, I was going to wait until we went out to dinner this weekend, but I don't want to wait another moment longer."

He got down on one knee in front of her, and she felt her eyes widen.

"Cole, what are you doing?" Her jaw dropped and she shook her head in shock.

He took her hand and looked up at her. "Teresa, I love you more than anything in this world. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and I can't imagine living without you. Will you marry me?"

He pulled a small box from his pocket, revealing a beautiful diamond ring inside.

In a flash, tears welled up in her eyes. She threw her arms around him without hesitation. “Yes, of course, I will.”

He pulled back, grinning from ear to ear. “Really?”

She nodded, laughing. “Yes, really.”

He slipped the ring onto her finger, and she admired it, feeling like the luckiest woman in the world. “I love you so much, Teresa.” He leaned in and kissed her once more.

As they broke apart, she looked into his eyes, feeling the weight of their commitment settle on her chest. It was a good weight, though, like a heavy blanket or a tight hug. It was the kind of thing she’d cherish forever.

A new thought struck and she giggled. “How long have you been carrying that ring around?”

He shrugged, looking sheepish. “A few weeks. I’ve been waiting for the right time, but after you said what you just did, I couldn’t wait another minute to make you officially mine.”

She leaned her head against his chest, feeling content and completely in love. She knew that with him by her side, their future together would be nothing short of amazing. Forever with him had already begun, and she couldn’t wait to see what else was in store for them.

CALLIE'S COWBOY

CHAPTER
ONE

Driving into Sweet Pines, Wyoming, Callie Thompson lowered her window and breathed in the crisp air. It truly was a beautiful day and she wished she could enjoy it. Instead, she kept glancing in her rearview mirror with a white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel.

After so many sleepless nights, the breathtaking mountain backdrop should have been a balm to her frayed nerves. But she couldn't let down her guard. Couldn't relax. Not yet.

Each passing mile marker was another step away from Calvin, but the black sedan three cars back had been there since Denver and her anxiety was reaching a tipping point. She noticed it pulling out of the gas station but didn't think anything of it until several miles later and it was still there. Exactly three cars behind, holding a steady speed.

Her panic ratcheted up another notch and her grip tightened on the steering wheel to the edge of pain. Calvin couldn't have found her that quickly. Could he?

She focused on her breathing. In... and out... In... and out.

Her GPS suddenly spoke, causing her to jump in her seat. "Your destination is on your right."

Glancing to the rearview mirror one more time, the sedan was still there. The GPS chimed again stating she'd arrived at her destination and she started to slow. What should she do? Turn into the driveway and hope that it wasn't him? Keep going through town to find the local police station?

Suddenly the vehicle in question took the decision out of her hands, speeding around her slowing car and darting around the corner ahead. It had been going too fast to see the driver.

Her heart seized with fear as she pulled into the driveway next to a charming little house.

Callie, feeling like she'd run a marathon, sagged against the steering wheel, pulse racing.

It wasn't him. You're safe. He can't find you here.

But was that true? How did she know that wasn't him following her rental car and that he wouldn't be back for her later?

Her heart still pounding and a firm grip around the strap of her bag, she stepped out of the small car and scanned the quiet street filled with smaller, well-cared for homes. The fresh Wyoming air filled her lungs, and she took another deep breath for good measure.

Two weeks. She had rented this cute little house and planned on enjoying her time in the mountains for two weeks before moving on to the next destination.

Had that been too ambitious?

If that really was Calvin behind her, she shouldn't even consider staying. She'd have to be extra vigilant until she knew for sure.

After another quick glance around, she fumbled for her phone. She needed to look at the check-in instructions the landlord had emailed her again. Before she could do that, though, a piercing shriek filled the air.

Callie yelped and spun around just in time to see a woman collapse in the gutter on the other side of the street.

Checking for traffic, Callie darted across the road. "Are you okay?"

The woman, blonde and in her thirties, clutched her ankle. "I twisted it." Her face pinched in pain.

Callie knelt beside her and examined her ankle. “It doesn’t look broken, but it might be a sprain. Let me help you up.”

Together, they got the woman to her feet.

“Thank you.” The blonde smiled with embarrassment heating her cheeks. “I’m Olivia, by the way.”

“I’m Callie. Do you need a ride somewhere? I can help you get back home or to a doctor if you’d like.”

Olivia bit her bottom lip. “I think I need to get it checked. I saw a clinic just down the road.”

“Let’s get you there. My car is just across the street.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to inconvenience you.” Olivia was already pale and looked like she was doing her best not to cry.

“It’s not an inconvenience. I’m happy to help.”

“Okay. Hold on, I need to get my phone. I had it...” Her gaze fell on a smashed device laying in the gutter. “Oh, no. I fell on it!”

Callie picked up the phone, so damaged it was a wonder it was even in one piece. “That sucks, but let’s worry about it later. Right now, we should get you to a doctor.”

She put her arm around the woman, helping her take the first step. They slowly made their way to Callie’s car, Olivia clearly in a lot of pain but trying to be brave about it.

Callie helped her into the passenger seat, making sure she was comfortable before closing the door. Taking another glance around the area, she quickly got into the driver’s seat and started the car.

“It’s right that way.” Olivia pointed.

“Got it.” She nodded and set off, feeling bad for Olivia but also somewhat happy to have a task to distract herself with.

“You’re a real guardian angel.” Olivia leaned her head back against the seat.

“I’m not an angel.” She chuckled. “But I guess you could call me a guardian nurse.”

“Is that what you do? I’m really lucky then.”

At the clinic, Callie helped Olivia take a seat in the waiting room before going up to the receptionist and explaining what had happened.

“They’ll be with you soon as they can.” Callie thanked her and returned to where Olivia sat waiting.

“You said you saw this clinic over here. Does this mean you’re not from town?”

“Nope.” Olivia shifted in the chair trying to find a comfortable position for her ankle. “I came here for this trail ride. It’s actually a camping and horseback riding adventure in the wilderness for five days.”

“That sounds amazing.”

Olivia’s next exhale fluffed up her bangs. “It would have been. Obviously, I can’t go now. How would I ride a horse and pitch a tent with my ankle like this?”

“I’m so sorry. That’s got to be disappointing.” She took the chair next to Olivia.

“I know.” Olivia closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall. “It’s also nonrefundable. I was really looking forward to the break.”

Callie’s vision started to warp, and her ears filled with an odd buzz. Five days where no one could find you?

That sounded exactly like what she needed. It would give her time to figure out her next step.

If she were to disappear for a few days, even if Calvin came to Sweet Pines, he would find no evidence of her there.

He would most likely move on.

And if that had been him in the sedan, he would assume that she had spotted him and kept driving through town to somewhere else.

She licked her lips, excitement starting to bubble in her veins. “Do you know if there’s any room left on the ride?”

Not that she was an expert with horses or knew the first thing about camping out. She was a fast learner, though. A desperate learner, too.

“No. I got the last spot.” Olivia crossed her injured ankle over her other knee. The swelling was noticeable through her sock now. “We’re supposed to meet at the coffee shop this morning and head out from there. Instructions were to be there within the hour. I really need to call the guide and explain what happened. But with my smashed phone, I don’t have the information to make the call.”

Callie’s heart rate picked up. What if she asked to take Olivia’s spot? Or what if she went on the trail ride as Olivia instead...

She gulped. No. That was crazy, pretending to be someone else. Right? Her conscious would never allow it. What if someone found out?

It really sounded like the answer to her prayers, though. It would give her time to figure out her next step. Give her a chance to stop running and rest for a few days without constantly looking over her shoulder.

She could tell Olivia she’d contact the guide for her and just take her place instead. No one would be the wiser.

“Olivia?” A nurse appeared in the doorway, interrupting Callie’s inner musings.

“Would you like me to go back with you?” Callie stood to offer her assistance.

The other woman smiled warmly at her. “It’s okay. You’ve been kind enough to bring me here and wait. I don’t want to take up more of your time. You should go get settled in and do something fun.”

“Okay, if you’re sure. But, how about I run by the coffee shop and tell the guide what happened so you don’t have to worry. Then you can concentrate on feeling better.”

“That would be great, I can’t thank you enough for your help. Maybe we’ll run into each other again and we can hang out and get to know each other.”

Callie gave Olivia a quick hug and watched as she awkwardly hobbled her way to the nurse. Callie stood there for a long moment after the two disappeared behind the door replaying their conversation in her head.

Could she actually do it?

It wasn’t like she would be stealing Olivia’s identity. Not long-term anyway. And the trip was already paid for. Instead of stopping by the coffee shop to say Olivia couldn’t go, she would just show up to the ride and take her place. No one would know.

It’d be no big deal, right?

Just a scary, risky deal.

But not as scary or risky as waiting around for Calvin to show up.

Taking a deep breath, she checked her watch and hurried out of the clinic. She’d passed an outfitters store on her way into town, and she had some last-minute shopping to do.

CHAPTER
TWO

Checking his watch for the third time, Harvey jammed his cowboy hat on his head. “We should go.”

His assistant, Anthony, put away his clipboard that had the list of this week’s guests on it. “Maybe she got lost.”

Nearby, in the shade, the five other riders they were taking out that week chattered with excitement. They were all here for a break from their no-doubt stressful lives, prepared to let loose and enjoy five days with nothing but their small group, their horses, and the mountains.

They should have headed out thirty minutes ago, but the sixth person still hadn’t arrived. They’d waited at the coffee shop longer than they should’ve before Harvey decided to leave word with the shop’s owner, Lovey, and passing along instructions regarding their missing guest. Then he and Anthony gathered their other guests and walked down the alley to the clearing right behind downtown, where Harvey’s rented stable resided. Now they really couldn’t wait any longer.

Harvey frowned. “She had clear instructions and I left word with Lovey in case she does show up there. I don’t think she got lost.”

Anthony gestured towards the empty spot at the picnic table where the missing guest’s saddle and gear lay. “What should we do with her things?”

“Put them back in the stable.” They’d already given her a thirty-minute grace period and now they were behind

schedule. He had the other guests to think about, and he couldn't hold things up for one person.

Anthony nodded, his face showing concern. "Do you think something might have happened to her?"

Harvey's mind raced with different possibilities. "I don't know, but it is concerning for her to be this late without any word. I'll give her a call one more time before we leave."

He took out his phone and dialed the number he had for Olivia as Anthony took the items back to the stable. It rang a few times before going to voicemail.

"Hey, Olivia. Harvey here with Sweet Wyoming Trail Rides. Just checking in on you. The group met half an hour ago at the coffee shop, now we're back at the stables and ready to go. I'm sorry we have to leave without you but we really can't wait any longer. Calls are spotty in the mountains but leave a message and let me know you're okay. We can discuss the rest later. Thanks."

He hung up with a sigh and looked back towards the waiting group. "Alright, we really need to get going. Let's get the others saddled up and ready to head out."

Anthony nodded, and the two of them began to prepare the horses for riding out. They would only be traveling between ten and fifteen miles each day, making a round trip up into the mountains and back, but it would still be strenuous for anyone who wasn't used to it.

With it being early September, this was one of the best times to take a camping trip. The forecast predicted low fifties in the mornings up to mid-seventies during the day. The guests would probably find it hot sometimes, but it wouldn't be unbearable.

"Okay, everyone. Time for a safety meeting." Pushing his hat lower on his head to shade his eyes, Harvey stepped up to the guests. The five of them—two couples and a solo traveler—instantly stopped talking and turned to him.

"We're glad you're all here." He launched into his speech; the same one he did every week. "We'll be setting off shortly

on our trail ride, and I just wanted to go over a few safety guidelines before we start.”

He paused as he looked at each of the guests, taking in their eager faces.

“Firstly, please be aware of your surroundings at all times. We’ll be moving through some beautiful terrain, but it can be dangerous if you’re not paying attention. Keep an eye out for uneven ground, low-hanging branches, and any other potential hazards. It’s important that you stay close at all times. If you need to step away from the group, let me or Anthony know so we don’t worry about you.

“Secondly, always keep your horse under control. They’re gentle creatures and all hand selected for multi-day rides, but like all animals they can be unpredictable. If you’re having any trouble, let one of us know, and we’ll do our best to help.

“And finally, please listen to any instructions I give you. I’ve been doing this for a long time, and I know what we’ll be up against in the mountains. If I ask you to do something, it’s for your safety and the safety of everyone else on the ride.”

Harvey paused, scanning the faces of his guests to ensure they were all taking the safety precautions seriously. He wanted them to have fun, but he also wanted to make sure they all returned home in one piece.

“Now.” He cleared his throat. “How about we all go around and introduce ourselves?”

The guests nodded in agreement, eager to get to know one another before embarking on their adventure. Harvey gestured towards the couple standing closest to him. “Why don’t you two go first.”

The man lifted a hand in greeting. “My name is Jack, and this is my wife, Lisa. We live in Seattle and have been looking forward to this trip for months.”

“Welcome, Jack and Lisa.” Harvey smiled at them. “And how about you?” He gestured towards the other couple.

The woman brushed a strand of hair back from her round, cheery face. “I’m Sarah, and this is my husband, Mike. We’re

from Denver and have been riding horses since we were kids. We're so excited to be out in the wilderness again."

Harvey nodded in appreciation. "It's great to have experienced riders on the trip. And last but not least, how about you?" He turned towards the solo traveler, a man in his forties.

The man stepped forward, and Harvey noticed he was wearing new designer clothes, from his multipurpose boots to his wristwatch. He definitely looked out of place from the rest of the group. Though he did look fit, it seemed more of a gym-related fit than being in the outdoors. He'd be surprised if the man had ever gotten a speck of dirt on him in his life.

Harvey was prepared to be surprised, though. He'd learned by now not to judge a book by its cover. This guy could be the most experienced rider of them all.

"I'm Brett." He nodded at everyone. "I'm from New York, and—"

"I'm here! I'm here! Sorry!" A woman's voice rang out, cutting Brett off.

Everyone turned to see who was yelling, and a woman in her forties with red hair ran towards the group, a backpack in hand.

Harvey blinked. This was their sixth person? Olivia Pilkey? He hadn't expected her to be so...

Well—beautiful.

Heat crept up his neck, and he found himself fighting the urge not to stare. Trying his best to remain professional, he kept his eyes on her face.

Olivia was panting by the time she reached them, her cheeks flushed with exertion. "I'm so sorry. I stopped by the coffee shop but had already missed you. Then I got lost on the way here."

"Olivia? Harvey Wade." He shook her hand, and a delicious shiver danced up his arm. He wanted to keep hold of

her hand. But he resisted, instead stepping back and clearing his throat.

“It’s good to meet you. Sorry again about being late.”

“Well, we’re just glad you made it.” His voice sounded normal, right? “Let’s get you saddled up and ready to go.” He nodded toward Anthony to bring back out the things he’d already returned to the stable.

Olivia grinned, her green eyes sparkling in the sunlight. “I’m ready.” She lifted her backpack. “I’ve been packed for this for weeks.”

A sales tag hung from the backpack. Evidently she’d been too busy packing to remember to take that off.

“Right then.” He checked the time again. “Let’s get in the saddles, folks. We have a lot of ground to cover today, but it will be well worth it. You’re in for some spectacular views.”

The eight of them walked over to the horses, where Anthony and Harvey assigned a rider to each one. Everyone swung into the saddles, eager to begin the trip.

Everyone except Olivia.

She hesitated, her hand on the saddle horn, chewing her lip.

“You okay?” Harvey looked down at her from on top of Whiskey, the thoroughbred that had been with him since he started this business.

“Yeah.” She cleared her throat. “Of course.”

His gaze lingered on her. Why wasn’t she getting in the saddle? His website was clear, as was the email he sent out upon booking. This trail ride was for experienced riders only.

And yet here she was, looking like she didn’t even know how to get up on a horse.

A twinge of annoyance moved through him. He didn’t have the time or the patience for a novice rider who thought they could take on a mountain trail ride. His first priority was

the safety of his guests, and if Olivia couldn't handle herself, it could put the whole group at risk.

“You sure?” This time, his voice was curt.

She swallowed hard; her eyes downcast. “I...I've ridden before. It's just been a while.”

He frowned. He didn't want to come off as harsh, but he also couldn't risk any accidents. “I'm sorry, Olivia. This trail ride isn't for beginners. If you don't think you can handle it, I can't let you come with us.”

Her face fell, and a pang of guilt hit him out of nowhere.

Shit.

He didn't want to disappoint her, but he also had to prioritize the safety of his other guests.

But then, something in her eyes changed, and she looked up at him with a fierce determination. “No, I can handle it.”

Sticking her foot into the saddle, she swung onto the horse. It was clumsy and painful to watch, and she clung to Honeypot's saddle horn like she might fall to her death if she didn't.

Harvey felt his lips draw thin. Was this woman bullshitting him? No way in hell did she have horse experience.

He sighed. First she was late, and now she couldn't even ride her horse?

This wouldn't do. He would need to leave her behind.

He started to open his mouth to tell her she had to stay, but then she adjusted her posture and took a deep breath; like she was getting ready for battle. Seeing the change, for some reason unknown to him, he felt sorry for her.

He didn't want to leave her behind.

Christ.

He noticed Anthony watching her, as well. Saw the uncertainty in his assistant's face.

Fuck it.

“Just stay close.” Harvey turned away from Olivia before he changed his mind. “And keep your horse under control.”

She didn’t answer, but he knew she’d heard him. Whether or not she could do as he said was a different story.

He’d made stupid decisions for pretty faces before, but he’d never put his business or anyone’s safety on the line for one of those faces. And if this woman’s lack of experience turned out to run deep, it could slow the group down—or worse. They couldn’t afford to have an accident miles away from the nearest hospital.

So then why was he taking such a risk for her?

Shaking off the question, he guided the group onto the trail leading out of town. He didn’t want to dwell on why Olivia had such a sudden effect on him. The ride would be over in five days and she’d be gone. He’d still be doing his normal routine, guiding trail rides into the mountains and spending his down time between his home and the stable.

Harvey enjoyed his bachelor status.

A woman wasn’t part of the plan.

Not now, not ever.

CHAPTER
THREE

As they left the stable and headed up the worn trail, the scenery changed dramatically. The trees and undergrowth became thicker, the air cooler and more fragrant. They were following a path along the river, which would take them up into the mountains, where the first campsite waited.

The group rode in a single file line, with Harvey in front and the others following behind. Olivia was towards the back, clearly struggling to keep up.

It was more than obvious that she was not an experienced horse rider. With her swaying in the saddle and her white-knuckle grip on the reins, he'd have to keep a close eye on her for the duration of the trip. He was not impressed and irritated with himself for letting her come along.

As they rode deeper into the wilderness, Harvey kept glancing at Olivia over his shoulder. She seemed so alive and full of energy, despite her lack of experience. He felt drawn to her for reasons he couldn't explain to himself.

And then there were her other features he was finding hard to ignore. Aside from her bright smile and dazzling eyes, she had mouthwatering curves in all the right places. He could feel his body responding to her nearness, despite his attempts to remain professional.

He was in trouble. Big ass trouble.

The harder he tried to focus on the ride, the more his mind kept drifting back to her. What was it about her that had him

tied in knots? Was it her beauty, her determination, or just the way she looked at him with those green eyes?

Whatever it was, he knew he had to keep his distance. This ride was about the guests, not about a hook-up or his personal feelings. He couldn't let a passing fancy distract him from his job, which was making sure everyone had a fun and safe time.

“What will the campsite be like?” Lisa pulled her horse up next to Harvey's.

“It's right by the river. We'll be able to sleep with the sounds of the water. In the morning there's—”

Laughter burst through the air, and he glanced back to see Olivia giggling, Brett now riding right next to her.

Just like that, he forgot what he'd been about to say.

“What kind of wildlife will we see?” Lisa asked. “Are there bears around here?”

He cleared his throat. “Uh, there are black and grizzly bears in this area, but sightings have been low in recent years. If...”

“It was huge.” Brett's voice cut in. “I mean, I didn't know a killer whale could be that big.”

“And it came right up to the boat?” Olivia sounded hooked on his story.

“Yep. And it wasn't being aggressive at all. It was amazing.”

Harvey tightened his hold of Whiskey's reins, trying to focus on his own conversation. Brett chatting up Olivia shouldn't bother him. It should be easy to tune the two of them out.

“But if we do come across a bear, we can avoid a confrontation with it. The best ways to do that is to pay attention to our surroundings and make sure our food is safely stored.”

But Olivia's laughter was infectious, and soon the whole group was joining in, sharing stories and jokes. Even

Anthony's normally serious expression had softened, and he was even grinning as he talked to Lisa.

Slowly but surely, Harvey found himself relaxing, enjoying the camaraderie of their group and the beauty of the wilderness around them. Maybe he had been too hard on Olivia. She seemed to be fitting in just fine, and she and Honeypot were doing a good job together.

As they rode deeper into the mountains, the trail grew steeper and more treacherous. The chatter died down and everyone paid attention to the slope changes. Most were experienced riders and they handled the challenge with ease. Even Olivia seemed to be getting the hang of it, her posture improving, her grip steadier on the reins.

Harvey felt a surge of pride in this group, and in himself for guiding them through this beautiful country. He was in his element out here in the wilderness, and he couldn't imagine doing anything else.

The shadows grew longer, and they stopped to have lunch next to the trail. Harvey watched Olivia to see if she even knew how to stop a horse, or if he would need to intervene. Honeypot saved the day by walking over to a familiar spot, one she'd been to dozens of times before knowing that a water break was coming.

"Everyone grab some food and water." He dismounted and pulled out the bag of sandwiches. It would be their only quick meal of the trip. After this they'd be cooking using both what they brought and what they had stored in caches at the different campsites. "We'll take a little break here before we continue on."

The group scattered, finding spots to either sit or lean against trees as they ate their lunch. Harvey sat on a log, drinking from his water bottle and watching the others, but not wasting time talking. The lunch break would have to be a short one, since they'd gotten a late start.

He took one last swig of water, checked his watch, and stood. "Five minutes, everyone."

There was a round of acknowledgements, but something was missing.

No. Someone.

“Where’s Olivia?” He frowned.

Anthony shrugged. “I thought she was with you.”

Harvey scanned the immediate area, but there was no sign of her. Panic started to rise in his chest. He couldn’t lose a guest on his watch.

What if she had gotten hurt? What if she had wandered off and gotten lost?

“Everyone, we need to find Olivia. Spread out and call her name.” He gestured towards the trees. “She couldn’t have gone far.”

The group scrambled into action, calling out as they searched the nearby area. Harvey’s heart was pounding in his chest as he walked down along the river, his eyes darting across the rocks and trees.

And then he saw her.

She was sitting on a small bluff overlooking the river, her knees pulled up to her chest.

“There you are!” The words came out harsher than intended. “What are you doing, wandering off like that?”

She looked up, her eyes red and puffy. He froze, realizing that she’d been sitting on the rock crying.

“What’s wrong? Are you hurt?” He crouched next to her.

“No.” She wiped her face and stood. “I’m fine.”

His exhale felt like a rake against his lungs. “Okay. Good. You can’t just wander off like that. Something could happen. You could—”

“I got it. I’m sorry.” Her lower lip trembled with emotion, but she held her head high.

His stomach sank. Clearly something was wrong, and here he was being a hard ass.

He felt bad for his gruffness, but he needed her to be responsible and understand that wandering off was not alright. Despite whatever was going on in her personal life, if she got lost out there, she might never be found. Or, if she happened to meet up with a grizzly bear or fall down a cliff... No, he didn't even want to think about something like that.

The thought of something happening to her made fire flare in his chest. "You have to stay close, you understand? It's important."

Her jaw flexed and fire sparked in her eyes. He'd snapped at her, but he didn't know how else to get through to her. To make her understand the mistake she made.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think this was that far."

"If you'd been on time and at the safety meeting, you would have known better. You're supposed to tell me or Anthony before you step away."

A little voice in the back of his mind told him to stop talking, to more patient and gentle his tone. But one wrong decision out here could mean life or death.

He was also aware that he might have been over reacting due to the strong influence she had on him, the way her presence made him feel hot all over and completely out of control.

Out here he couldn't afford that loss of control. He was leading a group of people through potentially dangerous territory and they were depending on him for their safety.

Olivia was a distraction he didn't need. He knew his decision to let her come would bite him in the ass.

Shaking his head, he turned away. "This was a bad idea. I should have left you in town."

She was quiet, and for some reason that was worse. If she were to argue, then he could feel justified getting in his temper. However, the silence meant she knew he was right.

He didn't turn back to her. He couldn't handle the look he knew would show on her face. "You're a liability out here."

You don't know how to handle yourself and you're putting yourself and the rest of the group in danger."

His words were curt and unforgiving, but he couldn't help it. He was both frustrated and concerned. "I'll have Anthony ride with you back to town. Be ready in two minutes."

His jaw tight and an unfamiliar ache in his chest, he strode away.

CHAPTER
FOUR

This whole thing had been a bad idea from the beginning.

That was the painful, honest truth that Callie had to contend with as she trudged back to the horses in shame.

She didn't know what she had been thinking. It was probably only a matter of time before Harvey found out she wasn't even Olivia. And that would be so much worse than the confrontation they'd just had. He'd probably have her arrested.

The shame Callie felt showing up and taking the other woman's identity compounded with the fact that she knew she would be exposed due to her lack of experience. Then she'd gone and broken a trail ride rule without even meaning to.

She heaved a broken sigh as she made her way closer to where Honeypot was currently standing in the shade, while her thoughts still wandered.

Seeing the beauty of the mountains, the power of the rushing river, and feeling the heat rising from the ground and wrapping around her like a cozy blanket... Those are the thoughts that had tears streaming down her cheeks.

It was all so calming, so magical.

TUCKED AWAY in the edge of a wilderness, it had been like her previous life never existed. She'd never married Calvin. Never even met him. There was nothing but her and the great expanse of nature surrounding her.

And now she was heading back.

Which was no less that she probably deserved.

Seeing the anger flash in Harvey's eyes had made her want to throw up. She never liked disappointing people, but the failure felt particularly painful with him. And she didn't even know him.

She admired the way he carried himself and the confidence he exuded. The way his movement, even the smallest ones, seemed so intentional. He didn't waste a breath; no action was un-purposed.

And he wasn't bad on the eyes either, with his thick, slightly graying brown hair and ropes of muscles straining beneath his shirt. In another life, if she were another woman, then she would have made a move.

This was this life, though. She was this woman.

A late forties' divorcee who looked older than her years. A man like Harvey could never be into her. Who was she kidding? She ought to—

A cry cut through the air, and Callie stopped walking.

In the clearing, Mike sat on the ground, his face twisted in pain.

His wife, Sarah, ran over to him. "What is it?" She crouched next to him.

"A snake." His face turned red, and he grabbed his leg.

Callie's heart sped up, and she ran over to join them. Another person down. That made two in one day.

Was she just bad luck? Did having her around meant people got hurt?

The whole group gathered around, everyone talking at once, asking questions and offering insight.

"Where did it go?"

"What kind was it?"

"Oh, man, I hate snakes!"

Callie hunched down next to Mike. “Did you see what kind of snake it was?”

“A rattlesnake, I think.” He gritted his teeth in pain. “I recognized it from the guidebooks.” He hissed and tightened his hold on his leg.

“Okay. Let me take a look.” Callie touched his arm. “Then we need to get you on your horse. That will be the best way to keep your leg as low as possible.”

Harvey suddenly appeared behind Mike. “What’s going on?”

“A rattlesnake.” Sarah sounded on the verge of tears.

“Okay.” He bent over the other man’s shoulder to get a better look. “Here’s what we need to—”

“Someone get me a bottle of water, please.” Callie held her hand out. “And a pocket knife or scissors to cut his pants.” She hadn’t meant to interrupt Harvey, but there wasn’t time for pleasantries.

Someone put a water bottle into her hand, then a pocket knife, and she found and cleaned the bite while talking. “You’ll be okay, Mike. We’ll get you straight to the clinic where they’ll have antivenom for you.”

“I have the horses ready.” Anthony brought his and Mike’s over.

“I’m going too.” Sarah hurried to grab her horse.

Brett and Anthony helped Mike into his saddle, and Callie stood and wiped her hands on her jeans. The adrenaline was still racing through her, but it felt good. She felt accomplished.

Mike would make it to the clinic before sundown, and he would be okay. There was great satisfaction in knowing that, and it reminded her of why she’d become a nurse in the first place.

Callie turned to head to her own horse but stopped short at Harvey blocking her way. “How do you know that particular first aid?”

“I used to be an emergency room nurse.” She shrugged. “Now I do remote triage.”

The way he was looking at her, his brown eyes searching, it was like he was seeing her for the first time. It made her feel exposed and thrilled at the same time, and she both liked it and hated it.

She cleared her throat and stepped to the side, heading for Honeypot.

“Where are you going?” Brett asked.

“To town with them.” She nodded toward Mike, Anthony, and Sarah, who were already guiding their horses to the trail.

“And leave us?” Lisa’s voice pitched. “What if something like this happens again?”

Harvey’s lips thinned. “What just happened is rare, and I know first aid—”

“She’s a nurse, though.” Lisa planted her hands on her hips.

Her husband, Jack, grunted in agreement.

Callie shook her head. “You’ll be okay. I’m sure Harvey knows what he’s doing.”

“Really?” Brett looked uncertain. “Not like you do.”

There was a heavy, uncomfortable moment. Clearly the others didn’t know Harvey had just kicked her off the trail ride for wandering off.

She looked around at the others and cleared her throat. “Really, you—”

“Stay.”

Hold on. Had that been...

Yep. Harvey had been the one to say it. He wasn’t looking directly at her, but he’d said it anyway.

“You should stay.” He heaved a weighted sigh and walked past her to say a quiet word to Anthony, and then the party of three was headed down the sloping trail.

Harvey cleared his throat and looked at the four people that remained—Callie, Lisa, Jack, and Brett. “I’m sorry to get us moving so soon, but we need to keep going so we can make it to our campsite before dark.”

The others moved to their horses, but Harvey and Callie lingered behind, the unspoken need for a conversation palpable.

She looked at the ground, feeling self-conscious. “I don’t want to be a burden to anyone. If you really think I should go back to town, then—”

“I don’t think that.” His voice was firm. “You saved Mike’s life just now. You’re a valuable member of this group.”

She felt her cheeks heat at the compliment. It had been a long time since she’d received praise like that, but then again, she wasn’t used to being around people. Her years with Calvin had meant a slow retreat from the outer world.

“I appreciate that.” She twisted her hands together. “But I don’t want to cause any problems. I’ll just keep to myself for the rest of the trip.”

He took a step closer to her. “You don’t have to keep to yourself. That’s how accidents happen in the first place. We need to stay together out here.”

Their eyes met, and her heart raced. She’d never had a man look at her like that, like he was seeing all of her and still accepting it. It made her feel...alive.

But she also knew that it was dangerous to feel that way. She couldn’t afford to be distracted. She needed to keep her focus on getting through this trip without any more incidents.

And she needed to make sure Calvin didn’t find her. That was the most important thing.

She ducked her head. “I’ll stay then. Thank you.”

Harvey opened his mouth, like he might say something more, but then just cleared his throat and looked away. “Right. We should get going.”

He walked past her, and even though they didn't touch she felt a jolt of electricity. Was she imagining the way he had looked at her?

Like he wanted to know her better. To touch her. To...

She shook her head. She couldn't go there. It didn't matter.

She knew better than to let herself get attached to any man. Not after Calvin.

She climbed onto Honeypot, being about as graceful as a newborn giraffe, and the group—three smaller now—set off, climbing higher into the mountains. She was getting what she wanted, she was hiding out where her ex-husband wouldn't even think of looking for her.

So then why did she feel like something was missing? Especially every time she glanced at Harvey.

Surely, she'd imagined his interest in her. He was only keeping her on the ride because the others wanted her there.

She swallowed hard and pushed the desire down. She'd been through too much, and it showed on her face. She was no longer the pretty young thing she used to be.

Love was for other people. Not someone like her.

It never had been, and it never would be.

CHAPTER
FIVE

As they made their way up the mountain, Harvey asked himself at least a hundred times whether or not he'd made the right decision.

Clearly, the other guests wanted Olivia there. And since it was his job to keep them happy and the five-star reviews coming in, it benefited him to agree to let her stay. But, if he were being honest with himself, that wasn't the only reason he'd changed his mind. He'd been pissed as hell at the river, but the woman also tugged on his heartstrings more than a little bit.

Damn, did he hate it. It made him feel weak, made him feel one step away from being putty in Olivia's hands.

He'd let his guard down before, and he'd been burned for it. He wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

So, though Olivia remained on the ride, he would make sure to keep his distance from her.

They arrived at the night's campsite as the darkness closed in around them; the ground trampled smooth from previous stops and a large fire pit sat in the center. The horses perked up, eager to get their saddles off and put some dinner in their bellies, courtesy of the grain in the cache.

Harvey dismounted from his horse and the others did the same, plenty of stretches and groans coming from the group. They all started to unsaddle and unbridle the horses, preparing them for the night.

Even though he tried to be inconspicuous, he kept an eye on Olivia as she fumbled with her horse's cinch. She was still flushed from the ride, her hair falling out of her ponytail in messy tendrils. She looked beautiful to his eyes.

He could offer to help, but from the determined look on her face it seemed she was set on figuring it out herself.

Besides, he didn't want to always be stepping in when it came to her. He didn't want the others to get any ideas about the two of them. She was a passing curiosity, nothing more.

He busied himself with setting up the campsite, delegating duties to everyone. Brett and Jack were tasked with gathering firewood, while Lisa and Olivia were asked to set up the tents.

That, at least, she knew how to do.

Actually, she'd gotten better at horse riding throughout the course of the afternoon. At this point, you wouldn't have guessed it was her first day.

So while he was still looking for reasons to be annoyed with her, it was becoming increasingly harder to do. On the contrary, his respect for her was growing.

"What's for dinner?" Brett looked up from the fire he'd started.

Harvey opened the airtight cache and pulled out the night's meal.

"Chicken and rice." He held up the package. "I'll get the pot and stove set up if you'd be so kind to fetch and filter some water."

As he got to work on dinner, the rest of the group chatted and joked around him. Olivia remained quieter than the others, but her occasional smiles seemed to suggest she was at least enjoying herself a small amount.

He still couldn't help but feel drawn to her, much to his own frustration. He knew he needed to keep his distance, but it was difficult when she was right there in front of him, her eyes sparkling with amusement as Lisa recounted a funny story

about the time she, sleep deprived after getting a new puppy, went into work in her pajamas.

He busied himself with cooking, trying to shake off his thoughts. It wasn't until he heard a soft noise behind him that he realized he had company.

“Need any help?” Olivia asked quietly, extending a hand.

He turned fully around, taking in the sight of her standing there, the firelight flickering across her face. It was enough to make his pulse race, and he had to work hard to keep his expression neutral.

“Thanks, but I've got it handled.” He turned back to the pot on the stove.

She didn't seem deterred by his tone and instead moved closer, peering over his shoulder at the simmering food. He could feel the warmth of her breath on the back of his neck and it took all his willpower not to spin around and pull her into his arms.

Instead, he cleared his throat. “You don't have to keep watching me, you know. I'm not going to mess up dinner.”

“I know.” Her smile was small but friendly. “I just wanted to see if there was anything I could do to help.”

The words were innocent enough, but the tone in her voice was anything but. He had to remind himself that she was off-limits, that he couldn't let himself get attached to someone like her. But as she stood there, her eyes locked on his, he couldn't help but feel his resolve slipping.

“It would be helpful if you found some more wood. This dry stuff is burning fast.” He tried to keep his tone friendly, but not too inviting.

She nodded, and he watched as she walked away, feeling a sense of regret that he couldn't allow himself to get closer to her.

With dinner prepped they each took a plate and sat around on the logs placed around the fire.

“I hope Mike is all right.” Lisa shook her head and blew out a breath. “A rattlesnake bite is no joke.”

“He should be fine. They have the antivenom he needs in town.” Harvey put his empty plate on the ground. Eating fast was a habit he’d been trying to break for years, to no avail. Even though he was his own boss now, he still felt like he was always racing the clock, trying to get everything done at once.

“It’s a good thing you were there.” Brett smiled at Olivia; the admiration clear as day.

Annoyance rumbled through Harvey’s chest.

But why? It wasn’t as if he were going to pursue her. Let Brett do what he wished. If Olivia were interested, she would return the attention. She was a grown woman who could make her own choices.

And it was none of Harvey’s business what she did one way or another.

At least, that’s what he was trying to tell himself.

Olivia shrugged. “It would have been all right, even if I wasn’t there.”

Brett wasn’t convinced. “Nah, you saved his life. You’re a real hero.”

She blushed at the compliment, her eyes darting over to Harvey. He tried not to show any reaction, but he couldn’t help feeling a twinge of jealousy. He didn’t want to feel this way about her, but he couldn’t stop the emotions from flooding his system.

“I just did what lots of people could have done.” Pure modesty shone in her face.

Harvey couldn’t help but think that she was selling herself short. She had a bravery and a kindness about her that was rare to find these days.

“Maybe,” Brett conceded. “But not everyone would have. You’re a real asset to this group, Olivia.”

Harvey's jaw clenched as he watched the easy way Brett flirted. It was clear the man didn't have any reservations when it came to pursuing someone he wanted.

Harvey cleared his throat. "So. What do you do, Lisa?"

She took a sip of water and brightened. "I'm a school teacher."

The conversation turned to life in general from there. Jack was a freelance photographer, and Brett worked for a tech company. Harvey listened intently, happy to see the group getting along, but couldn't help but feel like he was missing something.

It wasn't until Olivia spoke up that he realized what it was.

"So, what about you, Harvey? What do you do when you're not leading group trips through the mountains?"

He hesitated, not sure he wanted to reveal too much about himself.

"I own a few different properties. Houses around town. I was living the rodeo life before that." He poked the fire with a stick.

She looked at him thoughtfully, and he could tell that she wasn't satisfied with his answer. He knew she was thinking that there was more to him than he was letting on. And she was right.

But he couldn't let himself get too close. Not with her. He had to keep his distance, for both their sakes.

"I'm sure you're very good at it." She turned to Lisa to ask her more about her teaching job.

Harvey stretched his legs out, watching the others laugh and talk. He was mostly a loner in general and usually kept to himself on the trips, just basic talk during the day about their surroundings or answering questions. This time it felt different, and he knew why.

Olivia.

Her being there on the ride changed the dynamics of the group. Everyone was included, even him. It was a calmer, friendlier atmosphere.

“Well. I’m heading to bed.” Lisa stood and clapped her hands. “Goodnight, everyone.”

“I’ll join you.” Her husband stood and stretched. “I’m beat, and it’s only the first day.” With a chuckle, he followed her to their tent.

“I should get some sleep, too. I wanna wake up early. Catch the sunrise.” Brett stood and yawned, making his way to his own tent.

It was only Harvey and Olivia left, staring at the flames licking the last log. He knew he should get up. Wash the plates and climb into his sleeping bag, but he felt glued to his spot on the ground.

He kept waiting for her to get up and retire to her tent, but she only sat there, her gaze fixed on the fire. What was going through her mind?

She’d sat quietly and listened while everyone shared about their lives, but not offered anything about herself. So far, the only things he knew about her were that she was a nurse and that—for some reason—she’d lied about being an experienced horseback rider.

Finally, call it a mild interest or a desperate need to learn more, he had to break the silence that stretched between them. “So why did you do it?”

Her gaze cut away from the fire, and she looked at him as if she’d forgotten he was even there. “Excuse me?”

He shrugged a shoulder. “Why did you pretend to have horse riding experience? There are rides out there for beginners.”

Olivia grimaced. “It’s complicated.”

“Try me,” he said, his curiosity piqued.

She hesitated for a moment before finally speaking. “I grew up in a city, far away from any kind of outdoor activity.

When I was in college, I met a guy who was really into horseback riding. He was so passionate about it that it was infectious. I started going on rides with him, and soon I was hooked.”

Her voice became wistful, her gaze unfocused. “We were together for a while, and he promised to teach me everything he knew about riding. But then he moved away, and I didn’t have anyone to ride with. I didn’t want to lose that part of myself so when this opportunity came up, I fibbed to get on this ride. I thought it would work, that I’d remember what I’d learned back then, but finally getting out here... I see how dumb of an idea it was.”

He could see the regret in her eyes, and something else—a longing, maybe. It made his heart ache.

“Sounds like a jerk.”

She made an amused sound. “He was Prince Charming, compared to my ex-husband.”

He cocked his head at that. So she’d been married?

“What happened?” He was trying to not sound too interested, but the moment the words came out he knew he was failing.

“The usual stuff.” She picked up a twig and snapped it in half.

He knew what that answer meant. The topic wasn’t open for discussion.

But he couldn’t help himself. “And the not-so-usual stuff?”

She looked at him, a glimmer of surprise in her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, what’s the thing that keeps you up at night? The thing that you don’t talk about with anyone?”

It wasn’t like him to ask such a deep, personal question. He wasn’t even sure what had prompted him to do it. As the question hung in the air, sweat was collecting under his collar over taking such a risky chance.

Olivia looked away; her lips pressed together in a thin line. He could tell he'd hit a nerve.

"You don't have to tell me," he offered quickly. "I just...I get it. Sometimes it feels like there's no one in the world who understands."

She turned back to him, her expression softening. "Yeah. I know what you mean."

They sat in silence for a few moments longer, both lost in their own thoughts. But he knew he couldn't leave it there. He still wanted to know more about her, to understand the person behind the nurse with a penchant for fibbing.

"Why did you become a nurse?" He hoped to shift the conversation to something lighter.

Her face lit up at the question. "I've always wanted to help people. When I was younger, I used to volunteer at a nursing home. The residents were always so lonely, and I wanted to make their lives a little bit better."

He couldn't help but smile at the thought of her as a young girl, bright-eyed and eager to help others. "That's really admirable."

She shrugged. "It's just something that's always been a part of me, I guess."

They sat in silence for a while longer, the only sound the crackling of the fire. Harvey couldn't help but feel a sense of longing. It wasn't just physical attraction—although there was plenty of that—but he genuinely felt a connection with her. He wanted to protect her, to keep her safe, to make her happy.

But he couldn't. It was too dangerous, too complicated. He was already playing with fire by giving in and having such an intimate conversation.

Finally, he stood up and stretched. "I should probably hit the hay."

She nodded, looking up at him with that same intense gaze. "I can take care of the cleanup."

“No, I’ll do it before I go to bed. It’ll only take a few minutes.”

She also stood and tucked her hands into her back pockets and smiled softly at him, the gentle curve of her lips just visible in the last of the firelight. It was like he’d been hit by a bolt of lightning—he wanted her so badly, it was a physical ache.

But he wouldn’t act on it. Number one, it wasn’t professional. Number two...

Well, he just wouldn’t do it. And he could leave the matter at that.

“Goodnight, Harvey.” She turned away, lifting her face to the moon for a moment before walking into the darkness.

He swallowed against the ache in his throat. “Goodnight.” His whisper was so quiet it got lost in the breeze.

CHAPTER
SIX

The birds sang like it was their first morning on Earth and they intended on taking in all the glory. Callie rode with her face up to the sun, soaking in its rays. The cool afternoon breeze tickled her cheeks, and every breath brought another wave of relaxation.

“Want some sunscreen?”

She opened her eyes and found Lisa riding next to her, a canister of sunscreen spray in hand. “I thought you might need it. With your red hair, I assume you burn pretty easily.”

“Thanks.” She accepted the sunscreen and put her hat back on. Lisa was right. She just hadn’t been thinking of the consequences of all the sun bathing.

For the first time in months, it hadn’t been Calvin taking up ninety-nine percent of space in her mind. She’d been thinking about something else entirely.

Or, rather, someone.

Harvey.

It wasn’t until last night that she realized how much she wanted to know him. He was quiet and reserved, but there was something about him that drew her in. Deep layers shrouded in mystery and intrigue.

Maybe it was the way he looked at her, like he saw past the walls she’d built around herself. Or the way he made her feel safe, like nothing in the world could harm her when he was around.

Every time he spoke, the timber of his voice made her pulse race and his lingering stares made her feel hot all over. The way he carried himself, sure and confident. How he seemed to understand her without even trying; especially the parts of herself she didn't want anyone to notice.

She didn't hold that against him, though. She wanted more of that attention, more of that intense scrutiny. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this drawn to someone.

But she couldn't let herself get too attached. It was just a camping trip, after all. In a few days, they'd all go back to their lives and never see each other again.

"Hey, are you okay?" Lisa's voice brought her back to reality.

Callie realized that she'd been staring off into the distance, lost in her thoughts. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just tired, I guess."

Lisa nodded sympathetically. "I know the feeling. These long rides can really take it out of you."

They continued on the path, listening to the birdsong and the steady clip clop of their horses' hooves. She couldn't keep her eyes off Harvey, who was leading the group. He'd said very little since they packed up camp and started the day's journey to the next destination.

She couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking—if he was replaying the conversation from the night before. She certainly was.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Lisa's voice pulled her out of her thoughts again.

Callie nodded, forcing a smile. "Yeah, positive. Just lost in thought."

"Harvey, huh?" She wiggled her eyebrows.

Callie felt her cheeks flush. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, come on. I saw the sparks flying between you two. You can't tell me you don't feel something for him."

Callie hesitated, biting her lip. “I don’t want to get too attached. It’s just a camping trip.”

The other woman murmured in agreement. “I understand, but you can’t help who you’re attracted to. And who knows? Maybe something will come out of it. Harvey is a catch. And he seems to be into you too.”

The possibility made her heart skip a beat. Was it really possible that he felt the same way she did?

It was tempting to let fantasies take over, but she’d been through too much to give in to a momentary weakness. After years of living under someone else’s thumb, she’d finally gotten the strength to take charge of her own life. She wasn’t about to lose herself to girlish delusions. She had to stay grounded in reality.

She shook her head. “It’s not that simple.”

“What’s not simple?” Harvey’s voice cut through their conversation like a hot knife through butter. He’d ridden up beside them, his face unreadable.

She tried to force a smile, but it was like her facial muscles didn’t work. “Nothing, just girl talk.”

Hopefully, he hadn’t heard anything else from the conversation.

“I just wanted to let you know that we’re coming up on a steep incline. At the top of it will be tonight’s campsite.” His eyes lingered on her for a moment longer.

“I’ll be okay.” She patted Honeypot’s neck. Thanks to spying on everyone else, as well as asking a few questions whenever Harvey’s back was turned, she was starting to feel somewhat confident in the saddle.

Harvey nodded but didn’t move away. “You’re doing really well on this trip, you know. I’m impressed.”

Her heart skipped a beat at the praise. “Thanks. It means a lot coming from you.”

He smiled, a small curve of his lips that made her heart race. “You seem to be getting the hang of it. You shouldn’t

doubt yourself so much.”

The words sent a warmth through her chest. It was like he could see right through her, see all the insecurities she tried to hide, and see exactly what she needed to hear.

They rode in a companionable silence, the horses slowly picking their way up the steep incline. A light sprinkle started, turning into fat, slow raindrops. Callie watched as the others put on their ponchos or light rain jackets. She didn't mind it, though. The water against her skin was a refreshing break from the heat of the day, and she couldn't remember the last time she'd just enjoyed a rain shower.

Yet even with the distracting rain, she couldn't stop thinking about Harvey. Despite her intentions to not fantasize, her mind kept drifting back to him. She couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to be with him. Would it be everything she imagined, or a disaster?

How would it even work between them? He didn't even know her real name. He was already annoyed with her for not being an expert at horse riding. Once he found out the extent of her lies to get on this trip, he would never want to set eyes on her again.

She pushed the longing away, just like she had so many of them over the years. She needed to remind herself that she couldn't get involved. No matter how fascinated by the man she was.

After another thirty minutes of climbing, they reached the top of the incline. The rain was stopping, leaving sparkling drops clinging to the leaves. A beautiful view stretched below them, the valley a patchwork of greens and browns.

“Wow.” Callie laughed out loud, the beauty almost too much to handle.

Harvey looked over at her, a smile spreading across his face. “It's something, isn't it?”

She nodded, feeling a flutter in her stomach at the way he looked at her. “It's amazing. I've never seen anything like it.”

He turned to the rest of the group, gesturing towards the valley. “Take a look, guys. This is what it’s all about.”

The rest of the group gathered around, snapping pictures, and taking in the scenery. Callie stood back, watching as everyone else enjoyed the moment. She couldn’t help but feel a pang of loneliness—the view was gorgeous, but what would it be like to share it with a special someone?

As if he could read her mind, Harvey turned to her. “Come on, Olivia. Let’s get a picture together.”

Her heart skipped a beat at the suggestion. “Sure.”

Pulling out his phone, he snapped a quick picture of the two of them, their horses in the background.

The moment felt electric, a rush of adrenaline coursing through her veins. This camping trip had started as a way to hide from Calvin for a few days, but now it was turning into something more.

She didn’t want this to happen, but her resolve was weakening. She was used to living small, keeping to herself, to running.

What would it be like to stop? To stay in one place, to just live?

What if the kind of life she’d always assumed she couldn’t have—a safe home, a loving partner—really wasn’t that far out of reach?

Assuming she did manage to be rid of Calvin permanently one day, then what would be standing in her way?

Nothing. Nothing other than herself.

Harvey cleared his throat and stepped away, the intimate moment ending too soon. She barely had time to process his retreat before he was at the horses, unloading his packs.

Feeling awkward just standing there, she got busy as well. She didn’t want anyone to think she was drooling over Harvey, plus it was important to show everyone that she was getting the hang of this camping thing and could pull her own weight.

She helped gather firewood and set up the tents, her confidence growing with each completed task. By the time everything was set up, she was feeling proud of herself for stepping out of her comfort zone.

As the sun began to set, the group gathered around the fire for dinner. The delicious smell of their fried one-pot rice filled the air, and the crackling of the fire became pure music.

A sudden bittersweet yearning filled Callie, and at that moment she felt sure she would stay in these mountains, on this trail, for the rest of her life if she could. After all, what had her life in the city given her?

Calvin had sequestered her from her friends years ago. What little family she had she wasn't close to, and that especially included the mother whose abuse she'd endured her whole childhood.

Here in the mountains, she was free from all that. She was someone new. She was whoever she wanted to be.

“What was that?” Lisa stood up, looking toward the overlook.

Callie's chest squeezed tight. There was worry in her tone of voice.

“What's what?” Harvey abandoned stirring the pot to go and look.

Callie couldn't stop herself. She trailed behind him, the adrenaline already kicking through her veins. Was it Calvin?

No. That was silly. He hadn't followed her there. He couldn't have known...

“There.” Lisa pointed. “I saw a light. It looked like a flashlight.”

Callie choked on her next inhale. A flashlight? “Who would be up here?” She tried to keep her voice calm so no one would know how much she was freaking out on the inside.

Brett joined them. “Maybe it was a firefly.”

“Nu-uh.” Lisa shook her head. “It wasn't a firefly.”

“It could have been someone hiking at night.” Harvey didn’t sound concerned. “There are more than a few people backpacking up here this time of year.”

Okay. That made sense. It was probably a backpacker. Someone enjoying the mountains, just like they were.

So then why couldn’t she calm down? Why did it feel like she was on the edge of a yawning ravine, waiting to be pushed over the edge?

Her breathing sped up. Oh, no. Not a panic attack.

Not here. Not now.

She hadn’t had one in weeks. If it happened now, everyone would know something was up. They would suspect she was keeping something from them, and they would start digging.

Spinning on her heel, she walked for her tent. “I’m not feeling so good. I’m gonna lay down.”

“What’s wrong?” Harvey called after her.

“I’m just feeling a little dizzy.” Her voice trembled. She hoped he wouldn’t follow her, wouldn’t ask more questions. She needed to be alone, to calm down.

“Want me to bring you dinner?” Brett asked.

She shook her head but didn’t respond. Fumbling with the zipper of her tent, she crawled inside and lay down on her sleeping bag. She focused on her breathing, inhaling deeply through her nose and exhaling through her mouth.

It took a few minutes, but eventually her heart rate slowed and the tightness in her chest eased. She closed her eyes, willing herself to relax.

But it wasn’t so easy.

The image of Calvin’s angry face flashed through her mind, and she couldn’t shake it. She was trapped up here, with no way out. What if he was up here, right now, looking for her?

She shook her head, trying to push the thought away. It was impossible. He couldn’t have found her. He didn’t even

know she was on this ride. She was safe.

But the fear lingered, a cold dread that settled deep in her bones.

She lay there for what felt like hours, her mind racing with worst-case scenarios while the others chatted around the fire. Eventually she heard everyone say goodnight and drift to their tents, while she remained there, staring into the dark.

Alone.

Just like she always was.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

A scream pierced the air with the violence of a gunshot. Jerking awake, Harvey scrambled to yank open his tent flap.

He burst onto the ground, his heart racing. Where had the scream come from? Olivia's tent?

His eyes fell on it, a dark mass on the other side of the fire pit. He started to walk toward it, but then Lisa and Jack's tent opened, and the two of them emerged.

"Someone was outside of the tent!" Lisa pressed a hand to her chest.

Olivia and Brett came out of their tents, and Harvey breathed a sigh of relief. Everyone was okay.

Olivia was silent, her face pale in the dim light. Her expression was similar to the way she had looked earlier, when she had said she wasn't feeling well. She'd been fine one moment and then, after Lisa said she saw a flashlight, her entire demeanor changed.

"What happened?" Brett asked.

"I heard footsteps." Lisa shook her head in distress. "Then I opened my eyes and someone bumped the tent, and then I—I screamed."

"It looked like a person?" Jack touched her shoulder.

"I... Well, I didn't see a shape. It sounded like shoes, though, and the tent gave against someone's weight."

“It was probably an animal.” Harvey kept as calm as possible. “I’m going to check around for any signs of it. Everyone stay here.”

“I’ll help.” Jack grabbed a flashlight from his tent.

Harvey nodded, grateful for the support. The two of them set out into the dark, their flashlight beams cutting through the shadows. He tried to keep his mind focused, searching for any signs of an animal or intruder. But his thoughts kept drifting back to Olivia.

What was going on with her? He couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong.

This whole trip had been a weird one, starting with Olivia arriving late and not knowing how to ride, and then with the snake bite, and now this. He didn’t know what to make of everything.

They searched yards from the campsite in all directions, but no animal eyes peered at them from the dark. If it had been a raccoon or a deer, or even a curious bear, the critter was long gone now.

Unless Lisa was right about what she’d heard, and it had been a human.

It was rare, but every once in a while campers in the area were robbed. A thief could easily hide in the woods before slipping back into town once the coast was clear.

His heart sank at the thought. His guests had come out here to escape the stresses of their daily lives, not potentially be mugged.

He had his phone, although reception up here was beyond spotty, which was why he also carried a radio. He could call for help if need be, but it could be hours or more before anyone reached them—even by helicopter.

He and Jack returned to the campsite, their flashlights cutting through the darkness. The others were gathered around the embers in the fire pit, looking worried.

“Did you find anything?” Lisa’s voice shook.

Harvey shook his head, trying to put on a brave face. “Nothing. It was probably just an animal. We should still be careful, though.”

Olivia was silent, her eyes darting around nervously. Harvey felt a pang in his chest. He didn’t want to pry, but he couldn’t help wondering what was going on with her.

“Let’s all just try to get some sleep.” He clapped his hands together. “We have a long day of riding ahead of us tomorrow.”

The group nodded, but he could tell that no one was going to be getting much rest tonight.

As the others retreated to their tents, he hung back to check on Olivia. “Are you okay?”

She looked up at him, her eyes wary. “Yeah... I’m just a little spooked.”

He frowned. “Is there something else going on? You seemed off earlier.”

She hesitated, then shook her head. “It’s nothing, really. Just... some personal stuff.”

“It’s not something that will affect this trip, will it? The safety of everyone here?”

Her eyes widened. “What? No!”

She was one of the worst liars he’d ever encountered, but what could he do? Badger her until she broke down and confessed whatever secrets she was keeping?

Knowing later he’d probably regret not pushing her for answers, he just nodded. “Okay. Well, if you need anything, just let me know.”

“Thanks, Harvey.” She ducked into her tent like a rabbit darting for cover.

He sighed, feeling both helpless and anxious. Something was going on with Olivia, but he didn’t know what to do about it. He couldn’t force her to talk to him, but he also couldn’t ignore the feeling that something was wrong.

As he crawled back into his own tent, he couldn't shake the feeling of unease that settled over him. What if there was someone out there, watching them? What if they weren't safe after all?

He tried to push the thoughts away, reminding himself that they were in a group and there was safety in numbers. But as he lay there in the dark, listening to the sound of his own breathing, he couldn't dismiss the feeling that something was about to go terribly wrong.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Morning came with the sun slowly rising over the campsite and the forest waking up with the sounds of nature all around.

And, just like every morning, Callie felt a wave of relief as she opened her eyes and found herself still in one piece.

She was alive.

The scars were still there, of course. They weren't physical. No, Calvin had always been careful about not leaving a mark.

Instead, they were in her heart. In her soul. In the places that were truly permanent.

But she was still here, and she was still breathing. Still pushing forward.

Opening her tent, she crawled out. A thin fog filled the air, and the horizon glowed orange. The smell of coffee percolating over the fire made her feel a little warmer inside. And the sight of Harvey...

Well, that made her more than warm. Seeing him first thing in the morning sent a tidal wave of heat rushing through her.

"Good morning." He picked up an empty mug and filled it with coffee before passing it to her.

"Thanks." She wrapped her hands around the mug, inhaling the rich aroma and tried not to stare at the thick ropes of muscles wrapped around his arms.

“How did you sleep?” He poured himself a cup.

“Fine.” She looked away, hating to lie.

Soft chatter came from inside of Lisa and Jack’s tent, and Brett was nowhere to be found. It was just the two of them for the time being, with the horses tethered under the nearby trees.

“I know last night was scary.” He cleared his throat.

She looked into her coffee. “Yeah, it was.” She took a sip, the warmth soothing her throat. “Do you think it was just an animal?”

“Yeah, it had to be. No one would be sneaking around our camp.” He sounded so confident, but she didn’t miss the way he hesitated.

She shivered, despite the warmth of the mug in her hands. “What if it was a person?”

What if it was Calvin?

The restraining order she got against her ex-husband had done no good. The man was determined to find her and punish her.

“It wasn’t.” His voice was firm. “But, Olivia, if you’re worried about something, if you feel like something’s not right, I need you to tell me. We’re all in this together, okay?”

She nodded, grateful for his concern but knowing she couldn’t take him up on his offer. “Okay. Thank you.”

They stood there in silence for a few moments, drinking their coffee, listening to the animals scurrying around them. Her worries and fears didn’t exactly slip away, but the volume on them turned down as she enjoyed the start of a new day.

It was the fresh air. The sweet smell of the pines. Nature itself. And Harvey.

Just being close to him brought her a sense of peace.

Suddenly from somewhere behind the tents, she heard a twig snap and a slight rustle in the brush. Her heart jumped in her throat and her eyes widened in fear as she searched for the source of the noise.

“Did you hear that?” Her voice pitched at the end.

He listened intently for a moment, then shook his head. “No. What was it?”

“A twig breaking.” Her fingers tightened around the mug.

“It was probably a squirrel.”

She wasn’t convinced. She couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being watched. That Calvin was just waiting for the right moment to attack.

She squinted at the trees and her breath hitched. A figure took shape from the shadows, and she gasped. It was a man!

He stepped forward, and she dropped the mug, coffee splashing across the dirt. She had to run! She had to get out of there!

“Hey. Good morning.” Brett smiled easily at her.

Closing her eyes, she bit her lip willing herself to calm down. God, what was wrong with her? It had only been Brett, probably coming back from taking a leak!

“You okay?” Brett picked up her mug.

“I’m fine. Thank you.” She took the mug from him and brushed off the dirt, conscious of Harvey’s questioning gaze on her the whole time.

As Brett walked to the fire to pour himself a cup of coffee, Harvey approached her with a concerned expression. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

She forced a smile, trying to shake off the feeling of dread that had settled in her chest. “Yeah, sorry. I just...”

“Hey. We’re okay. We’re safe. I promise.”

The way he said it, with full confidence, she actually believed him. Which was a shock.

She didn’t believe anyone. Didn’t trust anyone either. Not for a long time.

Yet here she was, putting her faith in a man she’d only known for a couple of days.

He touched her shoulder, and just like that she forgot what she had planned on saying next. The only thing she knew right at this moment was the way energy coursed through her at his touch, the way he made her feel when he was close.

Butterflies took flight in her stomach and she felt lighter than air.

“I think you’ll like today. We’ll be passing a waterfall.” He ducked his head, his warm brown eyes meeting hers.

She swallowed against the lump in her throat. “That sounds nice.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “I should get breakfast going. Do me a favor and tell the others to start packing up, will you? We want to go right after we eat so we can be at the waterfall during the hottest part of the day.”

She had to unstick her tongue from the roof of her mouth in order to speak. “S-sure.”

With his touch removed, her head was a little clearer, but not much. She drifted away from him, feeling even more confused than ever.

She needed to stop this burgeoning crush before she caused herself even more pain.

Lisa emerged from her tent, bags under her eyes. It looked like she had hardly slept.

“Harvey said we’re leaving right after breakfast.” Callie stuck her hands into her jeans’ pockets.

Lisa nodded, but she looked distracted. “I can’t stop thinking about last night.”

“Harvey is sure it was nothing to be concerned about.” She breathed in deeply, satisfied to find she now believed it as well. His confidence and experience had reworked things for her, and she felt like she was looking at the situation clearly for the first time.

It had only been a curious animal. That’s all.

Lisa studied her face. “Really?”

“Yes. Really.” She stepped away. “Will you tell Jack we’re leaving soon? I’m going to take down my tent.”

She strode across the grass, a new pep in her step. She hated being paranoid and was always glad when the inner storm passed.

At her tent, she opened the flap, ready to take her sleeping bag out. At the sight of something odd, she paused.

Jack and Lisa’s tent was right next to hers, Lisa’s purple hiking boots sitting next to it. And there were footprints in the ground.

Callie’s breath hitched. They were probably Lisa’s or Jack’s. Right?

Except...

A desperate need to know tugged her forward, and she followed the footprints as they made their way around the tent. They were a large size, at least a twelve.

“Lisa?”

“Yeah?” Lisa came over from the fire.

“What size shoe does Jack wear?”

“Eight and a half. Why?” She followed Callie’s gaze to the ground and gasped.

The trees and sky began spinning. Someone had walked a circled around the tent last night. Someone with a larger than average shoe size. And it hadn’t been Jack or Harvey, because they hadn’t searched that closely around the tent. She’d been watching them the whole time.

Callie’s stomach dropped like a brick. She knew someone with a size twelve shoe, and that knowledge aligned with everything she feared.

Calvin. That someone was Calvin.

And he was there.

CHAPTER
NINE

“Olivia!” Lisa yelled, her voice echoing against the trees.

Harvey spun around from where he’d been making oatmeal and found Olivia on the ground, Lisa bent over her.

Dropping the spoon, he tore ass across the campsite. His pulse drummed in his ears, and he was dimly aware of the log he half tripped over. He didn’t go down, though.

He had to get to Olivia. Nothing would stop him.

“She fainted.” Lisa touched Olivia’s hair.

“Did she hit her head?” His eyes darted to Olivia’s still form. She looked so fragile just lying there.

“No, I don’t think so.” Lisa’s voice shook. “She was just standing there, then she went down like a sack of potatoes.”

Harvey crouched beside them, his eyes scanning Olivia’s face. “Olivia, can you hear me?”

There was no response, and he touched her wrist feeling for a pulse. He was relieved to find a steady beat beneath his fingertips.

“Olivia, wake up.” He tried again, shaking her shoulders gently.

This time, her eyes fluttered open, and she blinked up at him. “What happened?”

“You fainted.” Lisa’s voice was gentle.

“Oh.” Olivia sat up slowly, rubbing her forehead.

When she tried to stand, Harvey helped her up keeping his arm around her waist as she swayed. “Let’s get you some water.”

He guided her over to the fire, where she sat on a log and Brett handed her a water bottle.

She took a few sips, her breathing finally returning to normal. She looked up at Harvey, her eyes wide and embarrassment coloring her cheeks. “I’m sorry. I’m fine, promise.”

He shook his head. “It’s okay. Do you feel dizzy or nauseous?”

“Um...” She looked like she didn’t want to answer.

“It was the footprints.” Lisa gestured toward her tent. “Olivia found them. They’re all over the place, like someone was walking around the tent.”

Brett’s face scrunched up. “Maybe it was Jack.”

She looked at her husband, but he shook his head. “I haven’t walked around the tent like that. Lisa and Olivia set up the tents, though, so maybe—”

“It’s from a man’s shoes.” Lisa’s eyes flashed.

A heavy silence settled around them. It seemed no one knew what to say.

“You stay seated.” Harvey jutted his chin at Olivia. “I’ll be right back.”

He strode across the campsite, his heart and mind racing. Damn it, this was just what he didn’t need. Some weirdo creeping around their tents.

The footprints weren’t hard to find at all. Just like Lisa said, they formed a ring around the tent. Like someone had been studying it, maybe trying to figure out how many people were inside and if they were worth robbing or not.

Harvey pulled off his hat and slapped it against his thigh. “Shit.”

He'd convinced everyone that they were safe, that no one was staking them out. Apparently he'd been wrong, and it was hard not to be angry with himself for it. This group counted on him, and here he was letting them down. Leading them right into danger.

"The women are really freaked out." It was Jack, speaking right over Harvey's shoulder. "Lisa's never been like this before. If she says something isn't right, then I'm with her. Something isn't right."

There wasn't any need to think it over. At this point, the right choice was obvious.

Harvey turned to face him. "We'll turn back. If someone is staking us out, it's the best option. Finishing the loop will take an extra day, versus going back to town."

Jack's jaw was tight, and he nodded once. "I'll start packing up."

"I want to have a meeting first, if you don't mind." Jamming his hat back on, he strode back to the fire pit, the three pairs of waiting eyes tracking his every move.

He took a deep breath, gathering his thoughts before beginning. "I think it's best to err on the side of caution. We don't know who left those footprints, and we don't want to take any chances. We'll be turning back. It's not worth the risk to keep going, especially if someone is watching us."

"Who could it be?" Brett crossed his arms. The man was trying to look brave, but his eyes couldn't hide the unease he felt.

"Probably someone looking to rob local hikers. I'll radio in a call to the park rangers so they can notify others coming out here. I wish our trip didn't have to be cut short, but right now our priority is our safety. We'll pack up and head back to town right after breakfast. We'll figure out the rest once we're safe."

The group nodded in agreement, and they ate a quick breakfast then set to work packing up their gear. Harvey supervised the process, making sure everyone was moving quickly and efficiently.

The atmosphere was somber and the chatter light as they tore down their campsite, readying to leave. Olivia didn't make a peep at all. Her hands trembled as she worked, and she kept glancing at the woods, like she expected to see someone there.

The mere fact that she had fainted was telling. Whatever she was feeling, it had to do with more than the current event.

Had she been through something like this before? Had she been robbed or attacked?

Thinking about someone threatening her made his hands curl into fists. If he saw someone so much as lay a finger on her, it would be hard to maintain control.

Hell, he wouldn't want to maintain control.

As they packed up the final tent and watered the horses, he radioed the ranger station to let them know what had happened and that they were heading back down the mountain.

"We'll send someone out to investigate the area around your campsite." The radio crackled around the ranger's response. "By the way, be careful coming back. A big storm is coming in."

Harvey lifted his face and studied the gathering clouds. The week before had been filled with rain, and he had hoped they would get mostly sun for this trip. The fact that bad weather was on the way felt like a sign that the decision to turn back was the right choice.

"You got it. Thanks for the heads up." He put the radio in its pouch on Whiskey's saddlebag and turned to the group. "Alright, let's get moving. The weather's not going to hold off forever. There's a pine thicket five miles back where we can set up tarps to ride it out."

They mounted up and began the trek back to town, their surroundings growing darker by the minute.

Harvey rode at the front, his senses on high alert. He couldn't shake the feeling that they weren't alone in these woods. He kept his eyes scanning the trees, looking for any sign of movement or danger. He would have felt more secure

with Anthony there to bring up the rear, but he couldn't help the deficit he was working with.

The storm started making itself known. The wind howled, and thunder boomed in the distance. His horse's ears kept twitching, and he could nearly feel the creature's anxiety. The sooner they reached the pine thicket at the bottom of the cliff, the better.

They rode single file down the steep trail, little pebbles and dirt shifting under the horse's hooves. One of the horses whinnied, and Harvey glanced over his shoulder.

"Everyone doing good?"

There were nods and murmurs of agreement, but Olivia seemed to be struggling to keep up with the rest of the group. Her horse was lagging behind, and she was gripping the reins tightly.

Harvey slowed Whiskey and hung back, letting the others pass so he could ride beside her. "You doing okay?"

She swallowed hard, her eyes darting around nervously. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"I know riding down a steep area with a storm coming in isn't ideal. But we'll make it through." He gave her a reassuring smile before urging his horse forward again.

The rain began to fall in heavy drops, wetting their shoulders and sliding down their backs. Everyone was reaching to find their rain gear as the wind whipped their hair around their faces and the sky darkened further. The thunder was so loud that it felt like it was shaking the earth beneath them.

"Keep the horses walking!" Harvey had to shout to be heard above the storm. "You stay calm, and they'll be calm."

He glanced at Olivia. She was doing better than a few minutes ago, now petting Honeypot's neck and murmuring soothing words to the horse. Satisfied that the two of them would be all right but still wanting to keep an eye on everyone, he fell back again and brought up the group's rear.

Another boom shook the sky, this one right above them. Lightning flashed, and Honey-pot reared onto her hind legs in terror.

Olivia did her best to hang on, but she couldn't keep her legs locked around the horse. The reins slipped from her hands and she was tossed from the saddle.

"Olivia!" Harvey only had time to yell her name before she tumbled over the cliff's edge, her screams echoing along the way.

CHAPTER
TEN

Callie was falling, falling, into a vast area of space.

Her upper back hit the ground with a painful smack and she remembered to tuck her chin to her chest just in time.

Her screams suddenly died in her throat as the world turned upside down, then right side up, repeating itself so often that she couldn't keep track. She rolled, an awkward ball of a person, rocks meeting her here and there causing her to call out in pain.

Finally, after what seemed a lifetime, she landed on flat ground. Rain attacked her, and she ached from head to toe.

“Olivia!” She heard someone's distant shout through the storm, but she had more important things to worry about.

Was she injured? God, she hurt all over. What if she had broken her back?

It had all happened so fast. Honeypot had freaked, and the next thing Callie knew she was flying through the air.

Carefully, she planted a palm on the ground and pushed herself to sitting. A long, painful groan sounded as she finally righted herself. Well, at least she could do that.

She tilted her head back and saw the trail way above, and the humans and horses looked like toys. Good God, how had she fallen so far? And how was she still even alive!

Apparently, miracles did happen.

She took a deep breath, wincing as she did. There was a sharp pain in her right side, but she couldn't tell if something was broken or just bruised.

“Olivia!” The voice was closer now. Harvey.

“I'm here!” Her voice was barely audible over the storm.

She tried to stand, but her legs gave out from under her. She landed back on the ground with a thud and painful shout, the rocks beneath her stabbing into her back.

“Stay still.” Callie gasped as she registered Harvey speaking from beside her.

“Harvey! Where'd you come from?” She asked startled by his sudden appearance. How did he get down here? Did he fall, too?

He knelt down beside her, sheltering her from some of the rain with his body. “I took the less painful way and climbed down. Well, more of a slide-climb with the loose mud from the rain. Can you move your arms and legs?”

She hurt too badly to try to laugh at his lame joke, but she appreciated the effort he was making to soothe her fear. She nodded instead, wincing as she did so. “Yes. I sat myself up and hurt everywhere, but I don't think it's anything life threatening.”

“Okay, let me check your back. You took quite a tumble and I might see something you can't feel yet.” He carefully rolled her onto her side, his hands gentle against her skin. “Looks like you've got some nasty bruises forming, but I don't see any broken skin or feel anything out of place. Can you tell me where it hurts the most?”

She winced again as she tried to sit up, moving her hand to cover the flair of agony that shot through her. “My right side. It's really painful.”

Carefully, he helped her finish sitting up so he could examine her side, pressing his fingers gently along her ribcage. “It's definitely bruised. I don't know about a break, though. We need to get you out of this rain and get that looked at.”

She nodded, her teeth chattering from the cold. She hadn't had a chance to put on her rain jacket before Honeygot threw her off. "I think I can walk. If you can help steady me..."

"I don't want to risk it." Harvey quickly interrupted. "Let me carry you." Without waiting for her reply, he scooped her up in his strong arms and started walking.

The sudden closeness took her by surprise. Despite the rain and her aching body, it felt amazing to be held by him. Even though they were both drenched, she felt a natural warmth emanating from him. She wanted to burrow deeper into that warmth and not let go.

But she didn't. This wasn't the place or time for that. The storm had only gotten worse, and it was becoming harder to see where they were going. She couldn't imagine what it must be like for Harvey to carry her through this.

"Are you okay?" She asked, a hint of worry in her voice.

He chuckled, the sound deep and rumbling. "I'm fine. Just keep your eyes closed and focus on breathing."

She nodded, letting herself relax against his chest. She tried not to think about how her body was pressed up against his, how her wet clothes were clinging to her skin, or how she could feel his muscles working as he carried her.

Instead, she focused on the sound of his footsteps, the cadence of his breathing, and the feeling of his heat against her skin.

She couldn't believe what had just happened. Falling off a cliff, surviving, and now being carried in the arms of a man she barely knew.

But there was something about Harvey that made her feel safe, even in the midst of all this chaos. His steady presence and strength were a comfort. She knew she could trust him to take care of her.

They were moving further down the ravine, looking for a point that they could climb up.

But how could he do that while carrying her? It was amazing he got down to her without incident in the first place.

No, that wouldn't do at all. She would need to walk herself.

She shifted in his arms trying to get down, inhaling quickly from a sharp pain. "Harvey, I think I can walk now."

He stopped and looked down at her, concern etched on his face. "Are you sure? You took a hard tumble."

Her color was off but she nodded, determination clear in her eyes. "I'll manage, I just need to go slow. I don't want to be a burden."

He hesitated for a moment before gently letting her feet touch the ground. She wavered for a second, but was able to steady herself with his help.

They needed to find their way back to the others or find a shelter from the raging storm. They were soaked through and the rain was still pouring down.

"We'll take it slow." He gripped her hand tightly. "Just focus on putting one foot in front of the other."

She nodded, wincing as she took her first step. The pain in her right side was still there, but she gritted her teeth and pushed through it. They couldn't see the others any more, due to the way the ravine was dipping, but they were up there somewhere, hopefully moving on to the pines that would provide a little bit of cover.

"Do you know of a way back up somewhere close?" She squinted through the rain while focusing on putting one foot in front of the other.

If he answered, she didn't hear it. The only sound that filled the air was a rumbling, rushing noise. She stopped walking and looked around. That wasn't thunder. It was something entirely different. Something she'd never heard before...

Harvey suddenly grabbed her arm, and she looked past him, up at the mountainside. The trees there shook and

trembled, then collapsed. A tidal wave of mud and debris came crashing down the mountain.

And it was headed straight for them.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

For the briefest moment, Harvey froze. He'd never seen a landslide in person, and the sight was glorious.

A second later the reality of the situation kicked in, and the sight became terrifying. The slide was coming their way. In fact, a few more seconds and it would be in the ravine they stood in.

“Run!” Grabbing Olivia's hand and grimacing at her sharp yelp, he tore ass across the ravine dragging her with him.

They scrambled up the steep incline, the mud and debris chasing them like a wave. The rain made the rocks slippery and their footing uncertain, but they kept going. Harvey helping to balance her and quickly push her along at the same time.

They reached the top just as the landslide hit the bottom of the ravine. The ground quaked beneath their feet, and they lost their footing as the shockwave hit them.

He pulled Olivia close, ignoring her pained yell, shielding her from the worst of the rubble as it flew past them. Mud, rocks, and branches whizzed by, the force of the slide carrying the various pieces of the mountain for hundreds of feet.

It felt like an eternity before the noise and the trembling stopped. They were battered and bruised, covered in mud, their clothes torn and their hair matted. Harvey only hoped Olivia wasn't injured worse.

“That... that was insane.” Olivia stared in shock at the massive pile of mud and rocks that had just filled the ravine

where they'd been.

“A landslide.” He was still trying to catch his breath. “Happens sometimes in these mountains after heavy rain.”

She looked at him with wide eyes and a pale face. “We could have been killed.”

“I know.” He put a hand on her shoulder, the weight of what had just happened settling heavily on him. “But we weren't. We made it out. How are you doing?”

She nodded, still staring at the destruction below them. The rain had lessened to a drizzle now, and the clouds were starting to clear. “My side is hurting a bit more, but I think I'm relatively in one piece.”

They had made it out alive, and Olivia hopefully not any worse than she already was, but now they had a new problem. The trail—and the rest of their group—was on the other side of the mudslide.

And it would be a suicide mission to try to pick their way across it. It was more of a soup than anything else. A person could easily go under and never come back up.

The two of them locked eyes, and he didn't have to say it. She'd also recognized the grave situation they were in.

“We're separated.” She stared at the other side of the ravine.

His chest tightened. Shit.

“They'll be okay. They all have experience in the outdoors.”

“Yeah, but what about us?” She looked up and down the ravine, which was filled with the mudslide debris for as far as they could see. “We need to get out of here.”

“And we will.” He gently tugged on her hand, leading her along the ridge. “First things first, let's find some shelter.”

They walked in silence for a while, the only sound the squelching of mud under their feet. Eventually, they came across a small rock overhang, barely big enough to fit the two

of them. It was out of the drizzling rain, at least, and the ground was relatively dry.

Harvey sat down with a sigh, his back against the rock wall. “Well, this is something.”

She eased in beside him, their shoulders brushing. They were banged up and soaking wet, and the storm had left a chill in the air. At least they had a bit of shelter for now.

Olivia grimaced and shivered, wrapping her arms around herself. The sight of her in distress made him feel sick to his stomach. Taking off his ultralight jacket, which was rainproof and partly dry, he draped it over her shoulders hoping it would help some.

“Thanks.” She smiled at him, and his heart did a flip.

Harvey nodded, his eyes flickering over her face. God, she was beautiful. Even with mud smeared all over her and soaking wet, he couldn’t tear his gaze away.

He couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like to kiss her. To feel her body against his for reasons other than survival.

He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. This wasn’t the time or the place. They were lost in the wilderness, separated from their group, covered in mud, and she was injured. The last thing they needed was to complicate things with a romantic entanglement.

But the desire was there, simmering just beneath the surface. He couldn’t deny it anymore.

She shifted, trying to get more comfortable. “What do we do now?”

“Well, we have shelter. Now we need to find water.”

“And walk into town?”

He took a moment to think it over. He didn’t have his radio. He’d left it in Whiskey’s saddle bag—and he’d left Whiskey on the trail with the others.

Should they stay put and wait to be rescued? That was the logical thing, the choice you were supposed to make when lost in the woods.

Except he wasn't lost. He knew this area well, and he knew that if they followed the ravine it would in fact take them to some farmland outside of town.

But Olivia needed to rest before moving. She'd been banged up good, and the walk down the mountain wouldn't be easy.

"We'll go in the morning." He put on a cheerful face for her. "I have flint and a pocketknife so we can get a fire going, and there's a natural spring near here. The water is safe to drink."

She nodded. "Okay. Sounds like a plan."

"Sit tight while I fetch us some water. Be right back."

Luckily, he wasn't empty handed. Other than his pocketknife and the flint, he had the filtered water bottle he always kept clipped to his belt.

Going back into the drizzle, he picked his way up an incline until he found the springs. The water was probably already clean enough to drink, but the filtered bottle would make it even better.

After filling up, he hustled back down to the rock overhang, worry gnawing at his gut. It could get cold during the nights up here, even in early September. Add that to the rain they'd just had and how wet Olivia had gotten and she was in for an uncomfortable time.

She would dry faster if she took her clothes off, but he wasn't about to mention that. Especially not if she'd been catching the way he looked at her. He didn't want to make her uncomfortable or give her the impression he had ungentlemanly desires.

Okay. Yes, he did have ungentlemanly desires.

But he wouldn't be acting on them.

Back at the overhang, he gave Olivia the water then gathered kindling and wood. It wasn't easy, since almost everything was wet, but he did find some good pieces underneath some thick brush.

With a small fire going, the smoke curling up the side of the rock wall, he settled back down. "This should warm you up."

"Thank you." She took his jacket off and scooted closer to the fire, drying her clothes in the heat. "I'm sorry about that. I didn't know what to do when Honeygot reared back like she did. It happened so fast, and..." She shook her head, looking on the verge of tears.

"It's all right. She would have thrown anyone. I shouldn't have brought her on this trip. I thought she had the demeanor for it, but she'd never been up against a storm that big."

"I hope they're all right."

He stared into the fire, thinking about Lisa, Jack, Brett, and the horses. It was a straight shot back to town, and the pine thicket was impossible to miss. They would be just fine.

It was Olivia he worried about.

Despite what they'd just gone through, she didn't seem half as shaken up as when she fainted over the footprints. Which further increased his suspicions about her.

He was missing something here. He just didn't have a clue as to what.

"I must be bad luck." Her smile was rueful. "First the snake bite, then someone at our camp, now this. I should have left when you told me to, when I showed up at the stable late."

"I'm glad you didn't."

The words were out before he even realized what he was saying, and they sat there in stunned silence. Shit.

Talk about putting his damn foot in his mouth.

He cleared his throat, not having the courage to look at her face. "You've been invaluable on this trip. You catch on quick,

and you've made the others feel safe.”

He gulped, praying to God that had been a good enough cover. The only thing worse than his growing feelings for Olivia would be her knowing about them.

That would invite all kinds of complications. The top one being that she might actually return his interest.

But was that even plausible? He hadn't been with a woman in years. Sometimes he even felt awkward just standing close to them.

He needed to keep it together. Focus on getting the two of them back to town as safely and as soon as possible. Anything other than that, and he would be dancing with danger.

He cleared his throat again, needing to fill the silence. “Are you hungry? I can probably find some—”

Olivia gasped, her eyes widening in fear as she stared past him.

He froze, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. He knew that intuitive feeling.

Something very, very bad was right behind him.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Harvey started to stand, but she put an arm on him to hold him back, her heart racing with both excitement and fear.

The black bear stopped just a few yards away from the rock overhang the two of them were under and shook its heavy body. Water droplets flung from its fur and into the air.

Callie sucked in a sharp breath; her eyes locked on the huge creature. Harvey was tense beside her, his muscles coiled as if ready to spring into action at any moment.

The bear huffed and took another step forward, its head swinging around and its dark eyes locking onto the two humans. Callie's heart climbed into her throat, her palms slick with sweat.

The bear took another step forward, its hot breath wafting over them, and a trickle of fear raced down Callie's spine. She had read enough about bears to know that they could be unpredictable, and that a single wrong move could be deadly. At this point the bear was so close that there would be zero chance of getting away should it choose to attack.

"Stay still." Harvey kept his voice low and urgent. "Don't move."

The bear huffed again, then took another step forward. Its massive paw was just a short distance away from Callie's leg.

But then, as quickly as it had appeared, the bear turned and lumbered away.

Callie released an uneven breath, her body trembling from the adrenaline rush. Harvey put a hand on her shoulder, his touch grounding her.

“That was amazing.” She let out a laugh.

He shook his head, but he was smiling. “I’ve never been that close to one before.”

“Me neither.” She pressed a hand to her chest, adrenaline still racing through her. “I thought for sure it was going to attack us.”

“Bears usually don’t want to attack humans. They’re more scared of us than we are of them.”

“It was so... magnificent.”

She knew it was a lofty word choice, but any other description would fall short. Some people would probably laugh at her, but it almost felt like seeing the bear was akin to seeing a miracle.

That’s how much awe she felt.

Harvey cocked his head, studying her. “Yeah. It was.”

Under his gaze, her skin heated up.

There was a moment of silence between them, and her heart started to race again, but now for an entirely different reason. She had been trying to ignore the way she felt about him, but it was getting harder to do. He was so kind and brave, and there was a quiet strength to him that made her feel safe.

But he was also off-limits.

She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. “We should keep moving. I’m feeling well enough to walk.”

“Are you sure?” Skepticism laced his handsome face, but there was also respect there. If she were truly determined to walk for town, he wouldn’t push back.

She nodded. “Yeah. I’m just a little banged up. I’ll be—”

A clap of thunder rumbled overhead, cutting her off. The sky opened up and rain came down in buckets, barely missing

the fire at the edge of the overhang.

Her shoulders dropped.

“The weather gods have spoken. We’re not going anywhere right now.” He pushed his fingers through his hair, and she realized his cowboy hat was missing. He must have lost it somewhere in the ravine.

“I’m sorry. We’re here because of me.” Unable to even look at him, she stared at the sheet of water running off the overhang.

“It’s not your fault that Honeypot spooked.”

She swallowed hard. No, but it was her fault that they’d needed to turn back in the first place. If she weren’t on the trip, then Calvin wouldn’t be creeping around their camp, scaring the hell out of everyone.

Come to think of it, she was pretty sure that he had assumed Lisa’s tent was hers, probably based on the women’s hiking boots sitting outside of it.

A wave of nausea passed through her. What if Calvin had gone into the tent and attacked Lisa, thinking it was her?

If anything happened to anyone on this trip, Callie would never forgive herself.

A tear slid down her cheek, and she turned further away from Harvey, hoping he wouldn’t see.

He didn’t deserve the trouble she had brought into his life. None of them did.

Which is why, the moment they returned to town, she would grab her unpacked bags and leave Sweet Pines immediately.

“Hey.” Harvey’s voice was so soft, so sweet, she couldn’t bear it. She didn’t deserve such kindness.

“I’m all right.” She blinked away the tears and turned back to him. “The stress is just getting to me, you know?”

He hooked his arm over his bent knee and nodded. “Yeah, I can understand that.”

He didn't look stressed out, though, and something told her he'd been through much worse than the day's landslide and almost being eaten by a bear.

She would love to know more about him.

She knew she shouldn't ask, because then he would return the question, but staying silent felt impossible.

"How did you end up out here, anyway? Running trail rides in Wyoming?" She bit her lip, wondering if she should take the question back.

She didn't deserve anything good this man had to offer, and that included his story.

"I used to be in the rodeo." He angled himself sideways so that his back was to the fire—and he was facing her straight on. "After an injury, I left. I was pretty lost for a while. Didn't know what to do, what path to take next. But then I found myself here. I love the land and the animals, and I love sharing that with other people. I have a couple friends here from the rodeo, and the locals here are about as good as they come. A man can't complain."

"I like that." Her heart swelled with genuine admiration for him. "You're doing something you love and helping others to enjoy it too."

"Yeah." He chuckled. "And getting paid for it."

They fell into a companionable silence, watching the rain as it beat against the rocks around them. It was a peaceful moment, the kind that really ought to last forever.

There was more to his story, of course. Every person had many layers they didn't share with every person they came across.

What was his greatest fear? His biggest dream?

Had he ever been in love? Had he ever lost love?

Heck, she didn't even know if he was single. Maybe he had a girlfriend back home.

Jealousy for a hypothetical person burned a path through her. She shook the thought off, not wanting to torment herself.

“What about you?” He studied her, and she felt that heavy gaze as if it were a physical touch. “You’re a nurse, but that’s about all I know, aside from the fact that you lied to get on this ride.”

She sucked in a breath. How much truth should she tell him?

Part of her wanted to share about her divorce and about Calvin. How he had been stalking her the better part of the last year, ever since she moved out. Or, rather, escaped.

That was Callie’s story, though. Not Olivia’s. And anything too close to the truth was dangerous. It could invite more investigation, which meant greater chances that he figured out she wasn’t who she was pretending to be.

“I grew up in Chicago. Only child. Moved around a lot. Especially once I became a nurse. That’s pretty much all there is to it.”

Except there was so much more. The part about her falling for the handsome blond during her internship. The way he made her feel like she was the most beautiful woman in the world, like she mattered more than anything else.

And then, later, the slow descent into a twisted reality. The insidious change in the man she’d thought she knew inside and out.

The yelling and screaming. The broken dishes and mirrors. The strict rules about not leaving the house when he wasn’t home and not speaking to other men. The bruises on her arms and legs, the punches to her back—every blow selected in a spot where the marks could be easily covered up.

Many people wondered how a woman could stay in such a situation. What they didn’t know was that there’s never a moment when you look at the person you married and think, “Oh, this is who they really are. Someone crazy.” Because there are periods of sanity in between, times when they’re the

person you fell for, times when they bring home flowers and apologize and promise never to do it again.

And you believe them. And you stay.

Because who doesn't want that happy ever after?

The image of her perfect marriage had been the first big lie she ever told. Now here she was, telling the second.

Realizing that, she suddenly hated herself intensely.

She cleared her throat. "It's all pretty boring, really."

He nodded, but there was a flicker of doubt in his eyes. He was trying to read her, but she kept on her calm, cool mask. She couldn't let anyone know the truth or risk putting herself or anyone else in danger. The more he knew, the more of a target he would become for Calvin.

A long moment passed with the fire crackling, and Harvey was still looking at her like she was some sort of mystery to be solved. Conflicting apprehension and excitement lit her up from the inside out. Did this man have any clue what he did to her with just his gaze?

"You know, Olivia, there's something about you that's different from most people." He leaned back against the rock and crossed his arms over his chest. "It's like you're carrying around this weight, this burden, but at the same time, you're so resilient. You're tough, yet gentle."

She couldn't help but look away, feeling exposed under his gaze. No one had ever seen her like this before, not even her ex-husband.

She didn't trust anyone, especially not a man. But there was something about Harvey that made her want to open up to him, to tell him everything.

Maybe it was the way he looked at her, like he truly cared. Or maybe it was the way he'd been there for her during the landslide, so strong and steady.

Whatever the reason, she felt a sudden urge to confide in him. She took a deep breath and began to speak, her voice low and hesitant at first.

“You want to know something? I don’t think I ever want to leave these mountains. Is that crazy?”

He shook his head, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Not at all. There’s something about these mountains that takes hold of you and never lets go.”

She nodded, knowing exactly what he meant. “It’s like the world just fades away, and all that’s left is the quiet and the beauty.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, both lost in their own thoughts. She couldn’t help but feel a sense of comfort around him, like he was a kindred spirit.

“I’ve never felt so at peace.” She closed her eyes. “Not since...”

She trailed off, unable to finish the thought. Harvey reached over and placed a hand on hers, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“You don’t have to say it. It’s okay.”

Tears stung the corners of her eyes, but she blinked them away. He didn’t even know what she was talking about, but he wasn’t pushing her. He was giving her space. Letting her feel. Letting her be.

It was the simplest thing in the world, and yet it was the most important.

“Maybe I should stay up here. There’s nothing for me to go back to anyway.”

He chuckled. “I understand that.”

She studied him. His solid physique. His square jaw. The light in his eyes.

It seemed impossible he didn’t have women swarming all over him. Yet he didn’t wear a wedding ring.

So then... a girlfriend?

“Surely you have someone who would miss you.” She tried to sound innocent.

“My friends, sure. No family, no significant other, if that’s what you’re asking. I got close to that once, but...” He trailed off, eyes on the fire.

An awkward silence filled the space, and she realized she’d asked the wrong question. Clearly, this was something he didn’t want to talk about.

“I’m sorry.” She cleared her throat. “You don’t need to—”

“It’s fine.” He turned his gaze on her. A new wall had gone up in his eyes.

Obviously, it wasn’t fine, and she felt bad for opening the topic.

Maybe if she shared something more personal, he would feel less put on the spot.

“I almost had love once, too.” She licked her lips.

“The boyfriend who promised to teach you to ride?”

“No.” She looked at her laced hands, her voice cracking. “Ah, someone else. I thought he was the one... turned out he was someone else entirely.”

The fire crackled and popped, and it seemed he wouldn’t answer. And then, suddenly, he was talking.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

Harvey didn't know what in the world had come over him. He had never been one for talking. Sitting under the rock with Olivia, though, the rain pounding the earth and the ground hard beneath them, he felt his most comfortable in a long time.

He wanted to know this woman. Really, truly know her.

But that couldn't just be asked of someone. The best way to get people to open up was to do so yourself.

"There was a girl." He cleared his throat. "Years ago."

Olivia's bright eyes were unblinking. "What happened?"

He let out a deep sigh. "It's a long story, but I'll keep it short. We were together for a few years, and I thought she was the one. I was planning on proposing."

"What went wrong?" Her soft and understanding voice made him want to go on.

"Turns out she was cheating on me the entire time. I found out when I came home early from a trip and caught her with another man." He shook his head, trying to hide the pain in his voice. "I was devastated. I never saw it coming."

She reached out and placed a hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry. That must have been awful."

He shrugged. "It was a long time ago. I've moved on."

But as he said the words, he knew they weren't entirely true. He had moved forward on the outside, but he still carried

the hurt with him. It was something that had fundamentally changed him, had made him hesitant to trust anyone again.

But now he was wondering, how happy was he really with all these walls around his heart? Sure, no one had the opportunity to hurt him, but that didn't mean his life was pain free.

On the contrary, he had more lonely nights than not. More hours of wishing that he could find the way out of the dark hole he'd seemed to dig himself into.

More minutes of wanting something exactly like this, this moment right here, with a beautiful woman by his side, feeling the best that he had in years despite all the chaos that had just happened.

He looked at Olivia, her hand still resting on his arm, and he felt something stir within him. He knew it was too soon to say for sure, but he couldn't help but wonder if she could be the one to break down his walls.

He turned to look at her more clearly, and their eyes met. At that moment, he knew he had to have her.

“Olivia.” His voice cracked over her name. “I know this is bad timing and might seem crazy, but I feel like we have a connection.”

Her eyes widened with surprise, but there was excitement there, too. Real desire. “Oh. I... I don't know what to say...”

“Say you want me.” He leaned in, his lips almost touching hers. “Say you feel it too.”

She closed her eyes, her breathing ragged. “I do want you. I feel it too.”

Before she could say anything else, he leaned in and captured her lips with his own. At first, she froze, but then he felt her relax into the kiss, her arms winding around his neck.

It was like coming home after years of wandering in the wilderness. Her mouth was warm and soft, and he couldn't get enough of her taste. He deepened the kiss, his tongue flicking against hers, causing her to moan in pleasure.

She was everything he had been searching for, and he didn't want to let her go.

They pulled apart, both breathing unsteady, and he lightly grazed her cheek with the back of his hand. "I don't know where this is going, but I have to ask. Will you give me a chance? Give us a chance?"

She smiled, her eyes full of desire. "I would love to."

He grinned, feeling like he was on top of the world. They may have been in the middle of a thunderstorm, stranded in the mountains, but he had never felt more alive. He kissed her again, pouring all his feelings into it, and felt her respond eagerly.

As they pulled back, he rested his forehead against hers, their breaths mingling. "I don't want to rush things, but I can't help how I feel."

She smiled up at him, her eyes bright. "Honestly, I thought you didn't like me at all."

A deep chuckle rumbled through his chest. "You're a handful, but I love it."

He knew that their situation was far from ideal, but for the first time in a long time, he felt hopeful.

As they sat there, under the shelter of the rock, the rain continued to pound the earth around them. But somehow, it didn't seem to matter anymore. They had each other, and that was all that mattered.

Harvey's heart raced as he looked into Olivia's eyes, feeling a sense of peace wash over him. He knew that there were going to be challenges ahead, but he was ready to face them with her by his side.

Suddenly, there was a loud clap of thunder, and she jumped in surprise. He pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her as they watched the storm rage on.

"Don't worry." He whispered in her ear. "I've got you."

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

The rain came down in sheets, and Callie snuggled closer against Harvey's chest. For a few minutes, everything felt perfect.

But that was a lie. A momentary escape from her reality.

Why had she told Harvey they could see where things between the two of them went? She wouldn't be staying in Sweet Pines. She couldn't.

Not with Calvin so close.

Staying would not only put her in danger, but Harvey in the same boat as well. If she really cared about him—which she did—she would need to leave him behind.

She blinked away tears, glad he couldn't see her face.

“Looks like it's letting up.” He rubbed her arm. “Do you think you're up to walking? If we get across the ravine, we might be able to meet up with the others. Or find a hiker who has a radio.”

She swallowed against the lump in her throat. “Let's do it.”

They crawled out of the cave, and he kicked dirt over the dying fire. The downpour had turned into another drizzle, sunshine poking through the clouds. It felt like a new beginning.

Too bad she couldn't seize the opportunity.

She had to tell him now. Before she lost any more nerve.

“Harvey.” She turned to him, but his eyes were on something on the ground.

“Did you drop this?” He bent and picked up a small brown wallet with several cards that had fallen out.

“Oops. Yeah. That’s mine.” She extended her hand, but he was holding a card, staring at it intensely.

Her driver’s license.

Her chest seized up.

Harvey’s brow furrowed, like he was trying to put together a puzzle that made no sense. “Your name on here is Callie Thompson.”

She licked her lips, her whole body weak and shaking. Oh, God. Why couldn’t she have told him the truth two minutes earlier?

The timing of this was so cruel. She had to say something, to speak up. And yet, her tongue felt stuck to the roof of her mouth. She stood there staring at him, feeling incapable of even moving an inch.

He looked up at her, his eyes full of confusion. “Why is there a different name on this?”

She sucked in a breath that rattled her rib cage and made her side ache more. “Because... that is my real name. My name is Callie Thompson.”

His eyes widened in shock. “What do you mean, your real name?”

She took a deep breath, steeling herself for what was to come. “My name isn’t Olivia. I’ve been using a fake name because...”

She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t tell him about Calvin. He would try to help her, but that wouldn’t do. The police had already done everything they could, and look where that had gotten her.

Had she really thought it could be that easy? That she could reveal all, lighten the load on her chest, and the two of

them would somehow ride off into the sunset together?

Nope. There was no helping her. Harvey would only be putting himself in harm's way by getting involved.

She shoved her hands into her pockets, hating every second of this but knowing it had to be done. "I met the real Olivia in town. She sprained her ankle and couldn't go on the trip, so I took her place."

He stared at her for a long moment. "Why didn't you just use your own name?"

Her stomach dropped. This would be the worst part. "Because she doesn't know I came. She didn't offer to give me her spot."

His face fell. "Another lie."

Shame washed over her. She wanted to crawl into a hole and disappear. Yes, that was her. A liar through and through.

It didn't really matter that she did it to survive. For the people who were hurt by her lies, the whys were insignificant.

His expression hardened. "So you just stole her identity to get a free trip?"

She felt her heart break as she watched the trust and warmth in his eyes turn cold and suspicious. She wanted to reach out to him, to explain herself, to make him understand. But she knew it was futile.

She lowered her gaze, the tears coming now, no longer able to hold them back. "It's not like that. I needed to get away, and this was the only way I could do it."

He stepped closer to her, his voice laced with anger. "You could have told me the truth. I thought we had something special, but all along, it was just another lie. Callie."

She flinched at the use of her real name, but she knew she deserved his anger. "I'm sorry, Harvey. I should have told you. I planned on telling you, but..."

"But what?"

She held back a sob. “It’s complicated. My feelings for you, though, they’re real.”

“Complicated? Is that your way of telling me you’re married?”

“What? No!”

He nodded, his jaw tight, and put the cards into the wallet, then handed it to her. “I should have known this was too good to be true.”

She felt as though her world was crashing down around her. She wanted so badly to tell him about Calvin and the danger she was in, but she knew it would be useless. He would be risking his life trying to help her. Calvin had zero problems mowing down anyone who stood in his way.

She took the wallet from him, fumbling with it as she stuffed it into her back pocket. Her hands were shaking and her body trembling. She wanted to tell him that she was sorry, that she never meant to hurt him. But the words wouldn’t come. They were stuck in her throat, suffocating her.

Harvey turned away, his shoulders stiff with anger. He walked a few paces across the wet ground and then turned back to face her, his expression hard.

“Let’s get back to town.” His voice was distant, and he looked at the ground in front of her.

Her heart shattered into a million pieces as he turned away-long, angry strides carrying him forward. Whatever momentary fantasy she had was now over.

She had lost the one person who had made her feel safe and happy in her whole life. She had known that telling him the truth would mean the end of whatever they had, but she hadn’t expected it to hurt this much.

It felt like being turned inside out. Like falling into a deep, dark well and expecting to hit the bottom but it never happens. You just spend every second with this terrible fear filling you up.

The rain had finally stopped, but the air was heavy with unspoken words and unshed tears. She followed him as they picked their way through the woods in silence. The tension between them was palpable, and it felt like every step she took was taking her further away from the happiness she had found in his arms.

She tried to think of something to say, some way to fix things between them, but her mind was blank. She had messed up too much, and there would be no going back.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

With each step he took, Harvey's gut twisted tighter. He couldn't believe this. Hell, it didn't even seem real. Olivia—Callie—wasn't the person he'd thought she was. Did she even really like him? Or was that also a lie, a game where she got her rocks off by leading men on?

He couldn't shake the feeling of disappointment and betrayal that washed over him. He had let his guard down with her, allowed himself to believe that he had found someone special. Then she had gone and shattered his trust in her.

As they walked back to the trail, he tried to keep his mind focused on anything but the woman walking by his side. He couldn't trust himself to look at her. He didn't want to see the hurt and fear shining in her eyes. He needed to get away from her, to sort out his feelings and decide what he wanted to do next. But he knew he couldn't just leave her on her own.

Despite everything that had happened, he still cared about her. He just wasn't sure what came next. Her betrayal had skewered him, and the salt in the wound would be her knowing just how much it all hurt.

"Hey!" A shout rang out across the ravine.

On the other side, near the edge, a man waved at them. Brett.

They'd found the rest of their group. Now they just needed to get across the debris from the landslide.

"Over there." Callie pointed at an area further down the ravine, where the trees and mud smoothed out. "Looks like we

can cross there.”

Harvey nodded, grateful for the distraction. He led the way, carefully picking his way over the jagged rocks and loose soil. He didn't dare look back at her, lest he give in to the temptation to forgive her. And that wasn't going to happen; at least not yet, maybe not ever. The pain was too fresh and raw.

After the closeness they shared in the cave, he had been hoping to start something new. Not have those hopes shattered by her lies.

It was hard to reconcile the two images in his mind: the Olivia he had come to know and the Callie who had stolen her identity.

As they approached the other side, Brett came forward to help them across. “You guys okay?”

Harvey finally shot a glance at Callie, then nodded. “We're okay. We got caught in the landslide, but we're fine now.”

“God, that was intense, man.” Brett turned to lead the way back to the trail.

He was saying something, but Harvey found it impossible to listen. He had always been a cautious man, careful not to let his emotions rule him. But with Callie, he had let his guard down. He had allowed himself to feel things he hadn't felt in a long time. And now, he was paying the price.

“Lisa and Jack are just over here.” Brett pointed down the trail. “Shit, is it good to see you two. We thought you might have been dead.”

Harvey forced a smile, not wanting to give away his inner turmoil. He needed to put his personal life aside and get back to being professional. He was responsible for getting everyone back safely and he needed to concentrate on that. No matter that he felt like his world was crumbling down around him.

Lisa and Jack rushed over to them, relief evident in their expressions.

“Thank God you're okay.” Lisa threw her arms around Callie, he saw her wince as she hugged her back. “We were so

worried about you two.”

Harvey stood off to the side, feeling like he was on the outside looking in. He knew he should be grateful for their safety, but he couldn't shake off the anger and hurt that Callie's betrayal had caused.

Jack clapped him on the back, making him jump. “Glad you made it out okay, man. We were starting to worry.”

“Yeah.” Harvey's voice was strained. “Glad to be back.” “The horses are right over here.” Lisa pointed, and the group continued down the trail.

“That storm. It came out of nowhere.” Jack looked them up and down, taking in their muddy clothes. “We put some tarps up in the pine thicket like you suggested, and that mostly kept us dry. It's so good to see you two. Are you hurt? Everything okay?”

Harvey shook his head, trying to push the memories of the last few hours to the back of his mind. He couldn't focus on that now, not when they still had a long journey ahead of them. He needed to keep his head in the game, to make sure they all got out of here in one piece.

“We're mostly fine.” He kept his voice even. “Just a little battered and bruised, and she injured her side.” Harvey couldn't even say her name or meet her eyes as he answered Jack.

Callie still hadn't said anything, just slightly shook her head. He could sense her anxiety, and maybe even a desire to make things right between them. But he wasn't ready yet. He needed time to sort out his thoughts, to figure out where to go from here. “I'll be okay.” She finally volunteered.

“One good thing about the storm, though.” Jack petted his horse's nose. “Whoever was around our tent is probably off our trail now.”

Callie visibly stiffened. The second Harvey started to study her, though, she turned away and pulled herself into Honeypot's saddle, her face scrunched in a wince before she turned her head away.

“That’s good.” Harvey put on his best leader face. “Let’s get going. The sooner we get back to town, the better.” This whole trip had been cursed from the very beginning. First the snake bite, then the stranger at their camp, then the landslide... and then, Callie’s lies.

In the face of that, everything else seemed inconsequential. He’d really thought he had found something special in her, that her entrance into his life marked a turning point. He had been wrong, though.

Again.

Apparently it didn’t matter how many times he pulled himself up when it came to women. Life was intent on knocking him back down over and over.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

The rest of the trip to Sweet Pines was full of tension. They stopped that night to camp and clean up as best they could, and Harvey kept mostly to himself. Even when everyone retired to their tents, he stayed up, staring at the fire.

A hundred times she thought about going over to him and starting a conversation, and a hundred times she changed her mind. She had already messed up so badly. There probably wasn't anything she could say to make things right. At least not while she was still keeping the full story from him.

The next day, they arrived in town, exhausted and sore. But alive. So far, anyway.

As Honeypot trotted to the stable, Callie gripped the reins and glanced at the backs of the buildings. Was Calvin close by? He had to be. He could even be watching her right then. Which meant she had to get out of town.

Now.

Sliding off Honeypot, she walked the horse into the stable. Harvey was at the far end, talking with Lisa and Jack. This was it. Her chance.

She could say goodbye, but it would probably be better if she didn't. More than likely, Harvey didn't want to hear a word from her. After all, he hadn't acknowledged her since the mudslide incident. He wouldn't even look at her anymore.

Opening the stall with Honeypot's name on it, she led the horse inside then grabbed her pack and slipped out of the

stable. The whole time, a rock sat in her stomach. It felt so wrong to run off like this. Especially without making things right with Harvey first. But what other choice did she have?

This was her life now. She should have known any fantasy about the two of them was too good to be true. Men like him didn't end up with frumpy, untruthful divorcees like her.

Tears burning her eyes, she hurried down the street. It was a ten-minute walk to her rental, and she was trying her hardest to not panic and break into a run. That would only draw attention.

As she walked, she went over her plans, playing them mentally like a song stuck on constant repeat.

Step one: Toss bags into the car. Step two: Drive as fast as I can and keep to the busy roads. She should really get checked out at the clinic, but that could wait until another town if she was still in a lot of pain.

Luckily, her bags were mostly packed. She had only grabbed the things she needed for the trail ride and left everything else sitting in the living room.

At the small house, she unlocked the door but kept it open, just in case Calvin had found her and was hiding inside. She, hopefully, could make a fast escape if necessary. Grabbing her first suitcase, she turned around—and gasped.

Someone was blocking the doorway.

“Oh my God.” She pressed a hand to her chest. “You scared me.”

“Sorry.” Olivia smiled apologetically. “The door was open. I was just about to knock, and—”

“No, no. It's okay.” Callie dropped her hand and breathed in deeply, but her heart still raced. “How did you know where to find me?”

“Your car was parked out front when you helped me the other day, so I thought I'd take a chance. You're leaving?” Olivia nodded at the suitcase. She was using a single crutch, her ankle in a bandage.

A fresh wave of guilt passed through Callie. This sweet woman didn't deserve to have her identity stolen. What a deceitful person Callie had become.

"I think I've seen everything there is to see here." She worked up a smile.

"It's a charming town, isn't it?" Olivia leaned against the door jamb. "I wanted to call and thank you for helping me to the doctor, but after replacing my phone I realized I didn't get your number. I thought I'd stop by here and see if I could catch you instead."

"I've been keeping kind of weird hours." She glanced through the doorway at the empty street. "How is your ankle?"

"It's getting better, thank you for asking." Olivia shifted her weight, and Callie could still see the pain in her eyes despite the smile on her face.

"I'm glad to hear that." Callie paused, her fingers tightening around the handle of her suitcase. She had to leave, but she didn't want to seem rude.

"I'm just glad it wasn't anything more serious. And I'm grateful for your help. You really went above and beyond."

Callie nodded, feeling the weight of her own guilt intensify. "It was nothing. I'm just glad I was there to help."

There was a moment of silence, and Callie shifted her weight awkwardly. She needed to end this conversation and go, but the other woman looked so happy to see her, and that felt good. Amazing, really.

How many people had ever been truly joyed to be around her? Harvey, yes. For the briefest of time.

"So, where are you headed next?" Olivia broke the silence.

Callie hesitated for a moment before answering, considering whether or not to confide in this woman. But something in Olivia's kind eyes told her that she could be trusted.

"I don't really have a plan. I just moved and I'm kind of living nowhere right now. I need to get out of here for a while.

Start over somewhere else.”

Olivia nodded with understanding. “I can relate to that. Sometimes a fresh start is exactly what we need.”

“Yeah.” Callie looked down at her feet, feeling a lump form in her throat. “I messed up pretty bad here, I think. I don’t know if I can ever come back.”

Olivia placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Whatever happened, you can always come back. Sweet Pines seems like a forgiving place. And we’re all just trying to figure things out, you know?”

Callie felt a sudden surge of emotion, and tears spilled down her cheeks.

“Thank you. That means a lot to me.”

Olivia pulled her into a hug, and Callie clung to her, grateful for the warmth and comfort. For a moment, she forgot about everything else, lost in the embrace of a stranger who felt like a friend.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Olivia cocked her head.

Of course she wanted to, but that wasn’t an option. “I’ll be okay. Thank you.”

“I know you will be.” Olivia’s phone rang in her pocket, and she pulled it out then answered. “Hello? Oh, hi, Harvey. I tried you the other day, I’m sorry I couldn’t get in touch.”

Callie’s stomach dropped like a ton of bricks. That was Harvey on the line? She watched Olivia’s face, looking for any signs of shock or anger. The woman would be so furious when she found out what Callie had done.

“Uh huh...” Olivia glanced at Callie. “Oh, really?” An amused grin pulled at her lips. “That’s quite a story... No, you don’t have to apologize to me. I’m sure. I’m happy everything turned out well... Okay. Bye.” She hung up, a question in her eyes.

“I think I know what he just told you.” Callie twisted her hands. “And I am so, so sorry.”

Olivia took a seat in the chair by the door, setting her crutch next to her. “You think I’m mad?”

“Well... of course.” She stared. “Aren’t you?”

Olivia laughed out loud. “I wanted you to go on the trip! You obviously were interested. I think it’s smart that you used my name to get on. Shit, I wish I had half the gumption you do. I’m such a goody two shoes.”

Callie’s jaw dropped in surprise. She had expected to be scolded, but instead, Olivia was praising her for her boldness.

“Really?” Callie asked, her voice barely above a whisper. “Really.” Olivia smiled warmly. “I mean, I wouldn’t make a habit of it. But in this case, I think it worked out for the best. You needed a break, and you got it.”

And here came the tears all over again, making Callie sniffle and blink hard. This woman was too kind for her own good.

“Thank you.” Callie bit her lip, wanting to express more gratitude but not knowing the words.

Olivia stood up and hobbled over to her. “Hey, it’s okay. You’re going to be okay. And if you ever need a friend, you know where to find me.”

Callie nodded. She didn’t deserve such kindness, but she was grateful for it nonetheless.

“You know...” Olivia twisted her lips thoughtfully. “Harvey sounded really messed up. Like, distracted and depressed. I could have been imagining it but...” She tilted her head, clearly waiting for Callie to pick up from there.

An ache gnawing at her heart, Callie paced the living room floor. “Something happened between us on the trip. There was an attraction. We kissed.”

Olivia’s eyes widened in surprise. “Oh wow. That’s a big deal.” She paused, taking in the weight of Callie’s confession. “That wasn’t in the brochure.”

To her surprise, Callie laughed. “No. No, it wasn’t.”

“Well, how was it?”

Callie closed her eyes and shook her head. “It might have been the most amazing moment of my life, but it doesn’t matter. He found out that I wasn’t Olivia—wasn’t you—and I’m sure he hates me now. He hasn’t spoken to me since.”

Olivia cringed. “I’m sorry. That’s really hard.”

Callie nodded. She felt like crying again, but nothing came. She must have run dry. “I’ve made such a mess of everything. I ruined our trip, ruined the start of something good with Harvey... Now, I’ve lost him.”

Olivia squeezed her shoulder. “You didn’t ruin anything. Sometimes things just don’t work out the way we want them to. But that doesn’t mean it’s the end. It’s just a new chapter in your story. Maybe even the story of you two together.”

Callie twisted her hands, letting that sink in. She didn’t believe the words, but it felt nice to believe someone else might. “Do you really think so?”

“Absolutely.” Olivia gave her a reassuring smile. “You never know what the future holds. Maybe you and Harvey will find your way back to each other. Or maybe you’ll meet someone even better.”

She didn’t like the thought of that last option. There was no one else in the world quite like Harvey, and even though their time together had been short it had also been meaningful. Right then she couldn’t imagine being with anyone else.

“Hey.” Olivia cocked her head. “I know you’re headed out of town, but do you have time to grab a frozen yogurt? My treat.”

Callie studied her bags, considering it. If she took all her things with her and then left from town, she should be okay. Calvin wouldn’t attack her in such a public area. At least she hoped not.

And it had been so long since she’d had a friend. Her ex-husband had made sure of that.

She craved the connection with another woman, almost as much as she craved safety from Calvin.

What could thirty extra minutes hurt?

“That sounds nice.” She picked up her suitcase. “I’ll drive.”

They made their way to the car, and with each step Callie expected to feel better.

Except she didn’t.

And she knew she wouldn’t any time soon.

She’d lost something really special with Harvey, and there would be no getting over that. Maybe not ever.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

“Glad to see you’re doing good.” Harvey took his seat at the coffee shop table, across from Mike. “I’m sorry you had to get a snake bite on my watch. However, if you’re willing to take another chance out there, I would love to have you back on another ride.”

Mike and his wife shared a quick look, which ended with Sarah smiling.

“We’ve already talked about it.” She looped her arm around her husband’s shoulders. “We can’t wait to come back. It was such a great group. Even though our time on the trip was cut short, we’re grateful for what we did get.”

Harvey’s chest tightened. He didn’t know what to say at the mention of the group as a whole, so he just sipped his coffee.

At the other end of the table, Brett nodded eagerly. “It was, but it was insane what happened. The snake bite was just the beginning.” He blew out a big breath.

“Really?” Sarah’s eyes widened. “What happened?”

Brett, Lisa, and Jack filled the other three—Anthony, Sarah, and Mike—in on everything that had occurred since they left for town, from the footprints around the campsite to Callie falling down the cliff to the landslide.

“Where is Olivia?” Anthony directed the question at Harvey.

He worked his jaw around. “She already took off.”

“Did she get checked out by a doctor?” Brett’s eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline. “That was a crazy fall she took.”

Harvey cleared his throat, avoiding everyone’s eyes. “She said she would.”

Truthfully, he hadn’t spoken to Callie at all since they arrived in town. He had been in the middle of watering the horses, and saying goodbye to Lisa and Jack, when he turned around and discovered she was gone.

Not that she could be blamed. He’d seen the shame in her eyes.

There’d been more than guilt, though. And there was more to the story. When it came to such a shifty situation, there always was.

What else was Callie keeping from him?

He felt like an idiot, opening up and telling her all about his past. Only for her to turn the tables thirty minutes later.

Where was she now? Had she already left town?

He found himself fantasizing about leaving the coffee shop and running into her on the street, about the right words coming out of both their mouths. Trouble was, he didn’t know what those right words were. He didn’t know how to get out of this predicament.

How could he ever trust someone who had started their relationship with lies?

The group continued chatting, and Harvey inserted a comment here and there. By the time the conversation was over and everyone was leaving the coffee shop, though, he felt relieved.

Time to drive back to his ranch and be alone. Exactly as things were meant to be.

“Hey.” Anthony turned to him. They were the only two still at their table. “What’s wrong?”

“What do you mean?” He drained the last of his cold coffee, avoiding his friend’s eyes.

Anthony pointed to Harvey's face. "You look like someone has died."

Harvey let out a humorless laugh. "Fuck. It kind of feels that way."

Anthony raised an eyebrow. "You mean Olivia? Is she all right?"

He nodded, his throat feeling tight. "Yeah. I don't know what to do about her. She lied to me, man."

Anthony leaned forward; his expression serious. "What did she lie about?"

Harvey hesitated, not wanting to share too much with anyone else. But he needed to talk to someone, and Anthony was a good friend.

"She pretended to be Olivia. Her name is actually Callie. I didn't know until after the storm, when her driver's license fell out of her pocket."

"Are you serious?" Anthony's eyes widened. "Damn. That's messed up."

Harvey nodded, that now familiar anger and hurt mixing together in his chest. "And then, after everything that happened on the trip, she just disappeared. I don't know where she went or even if she's still in town."

Anthony leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowing in thought. "You know, man, sometimes people do messed up things because they're scared. Maybe she felt like she had to lie to you to protect herself. And maybe she disappeared because she was afraid of what you would think of her."

Harvey swallowed hard. "There's something else going on. I can tell. You know when you feel things just don't add up? It's like that. This trip was weird, and I just think it's not a coincidence. It's all connected. Callie's lies... those footprints..."

Anthony let out a low whistle. "That's definitely strange. You think someone was following her specifically? That it was more than that one night?"

He shrugged. “I don’t know. But I’m going to find out. I’m going to track her down and get some answers.”

Anthony nodded. “Just be careful, man. If there’s something sketchy going on, you don’t want to get caught up in it.”

His friend was right, but he couldn’t just sit back and do nothing. He had to know the truth, even if it meant putting himself in danger.

First things first, he needed to find out where Callie was. Assuming she hadn’t left town.

“I just need to know.” He pressed his fingers to the ache between his eyes. “I need to make sure she’s safe.”

Anthony smiled a bit.

“What?” Harvey dropped his hand and furrowed his brow.

“It’s just... a few minutes ago you seemed furious with her.”

“I am.” He sighed. “But what if you’re right? What if she lied because she had to?”

Anthony rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Well, that’s a tough situation, man. But you gotta ask yourself if you’re willing to forgive her for lying to you. If you can’t, then it’s probably best to just move on.”

Harvey nodded, the weight of the decision heavy on his chest. Forgiveness was never easy, especially when someone had betrayed your trust in such a fundamental way. But he couldn’t deny the pull he felt towards Callie. Even after everything.

“The only thing I know for sure is that I have to talk to her.”

Anthony clapped him on the back. “Then go do it, man. You won’t get any answers sitting here. You want my advice, though?”

“Of course.”

“Callie seems like a good person. Look at how quick she was with that snake bite. Someone like that doesn’t lie unless they’re in some real trouble.”

Harvey nodded, anxiety twisting at his gut. He’d been too rash with Callie. He’d reacted when he should have listened. Of course she had a reason for lying—and a reason for not sharing the truth.

Something serious was going on, and he’d been too busy being an asshole to show compassion.

And now Callie could be gone forever.

The idea made him sick. If she slipped through his fingers, he’d bet his last dollar he would never find another woman that made him feel the way she did. He had to fix what he’d broken.

Now.

Lovey, the coffee shop owner, passed by carrying a dish bin.

“Hey, Lovey.” Harvey sat a little straighter. “Have you seen a woman around here with red hair? She was on this week’s trip with us. She left some of her stuff and I need to get it back to her. Know where she might be staying?”

She stopped and planted a hand on one hip. “You mean that lady who fell down the cliff?”

Word certainly spread fast in this town. They hadn’t even been back for a few hours yet.

Harvey nodded. “That’s her.”

Lovey’s expression softened. “Oh dear. I saw her earlier today, looking like she hadn’t slept in days. Try the rentals off Cedar.”

“Thank you. I will.” He stood up, ready to leave. “Thanks for the coffee, Anthony. I’ll see you later.”

“Hey.” Anthony gave him a warning look. “Be careful, man.”

Harvey hesitated. They both knew that if Callie was in some sort of trouble, he could be getting in over his head.

He also knew that was a risk worth taking.

“I will.”

As he walked out of the coffee shop, a sense of purpose propelled him forward. He would find Callie and get to the bottom of everything. This whole mystery would be sorted out.

And maybe the two of them would be sorted out as well.

They would get the chance he'd been excited for. An opportunity to be in each other's lives.

Yet he also knew it wasn't that easy. As he got into his truck and started driving, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was in way over his head. The mystery surrounding Callie and the strange events on the camping trip were beginning to consume him.

He knew he had to be careful, but he also knew he couldn't back down. Not when there was so much at stake.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

In the driveway of Olivia's rental, Callie let the car idle. The last half hour had been special, and she didn't want it to end.

"Thank you." She smiled at Olivia, trying to keep the mood bright. "I needed a little break from life."

Olivia grinned back, but there was concern there. "Hey. Are you sure you're okay?"

She fought to keep a dry sob back. No, she wasn't okay. She was about to drive out of Sweet Pines and leave something really good behind. Probably the best thing she'd ever stumbled upon in her whole life.

She didn't know where she was headed, but there would be no Harvey there. That much was for sure.

Olivia reached out and touched Callie's arm. "You can talk to me, you know. Whatever it is that's bothering you, I'll do my best to understand."

She gave a sad sigh, wanting to spill everything. But she couldn't. Calvin was her load to carry. She couldn't put Olivia in danger, just like she couldn't do that to Harvey.

"It's just bittersweet, leaving this town."

"I know what you mean. Maybe we can plan to come back here at the same time. Have a girls' weekend. You have my number. Let's stay in touch."

"That sounds nice. I'd like that. A lot."

Unfortunately, that probably wouldn't be possible. For all Callie knew, she would be running and hiding for the rest of her life. Relaxing vacations didn't fit into a life like that.

"Are you still thinking about Harvey?" The question was soft. Cautious.

Callie nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Harvey had been on her mind constantly since she had left him. She already missed him more than she ever thought possible.

Olivia sighed and dropped her head back against the seat. "You know, sometimes things aren't as bad as they seem. Maybe you should talk to him, let him know what's going on."

Callie shook her head, tears burning her eyes. She couldn't do that to him. She couldn't burden him with her problems.

"It's too late for that," she choked out. "I've screwed everything up. I just have to live with it."

Olivia's expression was full of empathy. "I'm sorry. Whatever it is, I hope you find a way to work it out."

Callie forced a smile, knowing deep down that it was unlikely. She had made too many mistakes, and there would be no going back now.

So she just nodded, grateful for Olivia's kindness and listening ear. She would miss her, too. "Here, I'll help you to the door."

After seeing Olivia into her house, she returned to her car and placed both hands on the steering wheel. Deep breath in. Long breath out.

Time to go. Even another minute in Sweet Pines meant a bigger risk to her safety. She'd already been here too long.

She hadn't seen any signs of Calvin in town, but that didn't mean he wasn't close by. Watching. Waiting to strike.

A shiver ran down her back, and the hair on her arms stood on end. She felt that desperate need to move, now coupled with a desire to stay where she was, to find Harvey and make things better with him.

But, no. She had to leave. Not just for her, but for him as well.

Determined to do the right thing, she reached for her phone so she could turn on the GPS to find the interstate.

Except her phone wasn't in the glove compartment or anywhere in the car.

Her heart sank. She'd left it in the rental.

Chewing on her lip, she studied the little house in her rear-view mirror. Okay. This was fine. She could do this. Calvin wasn't waiting in that house.

Nope. Not at all.

And she would be really fast grabbing her phone. In and out. She even remembered now that she had left it on the couch.

With one last deep breath, she quickly pulled in front of the house, got out of the car and hurried up the path to the door. She tried to shake off the feeling of being watched as she turned the doorknob and stepped inside, leaving the door open again just in case she needed a quick exit.

Everything seemed like she left it, quiet and empty, and she didn't even bother turning on the light. She walked to the couch and found her phone on the cushion at the far end, where she'd dumped it earlier. She breathed a sigh of relief and picked it up, quickly checking the notifications.

Other than a few emails, there was nothing. Which was good. It meant Calvin still hadn't figured out her new phone number. She would take that as a win.

Tucking her phone into her back pocket, she took a step for the door—and again, saw someone there.

She screamed, fear taking hold of her, and shuffled back.

With her eyes adjusting to the bright light from the doorway, she blinked rapidly trying to focus her sight on the hulking figure standing there.

Her heart fell into her stomach as heavy footsteps entered the house.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

Harvey froze in the doorway, light streaming around him, his heart pounding in his chest.

Right as he walked up to the door, he'd heard a scream. A woman in trouble.

"Callie?" Panic clawed at his throat. Was someone in here trying to hurt her?

"H—Harvey?" Her voice shook from somewhere in the dark room.

He sighed in relief. At least she could talk. That meant she couldn't be in that much trouble.

"You okay?" Leaving the door open, he stepped into the room.

His eyes were still adjusting, but he saw her emerge from the other side of the couch. She looked so small. So terrified.

It made his heart break in two.

Damn it. This woman had a way of undoing him, of making him question everything he thought he knew.

He drew a ragged breath. "I wanted to—"

She launched herself forward, slamming into his chest. Her arms slipped around his torso, and she buried her face in his shirt.

He froze, but it didn't take long for the shock to wear off. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her tight.

“What happened?” He breathed in her hair, hating how the scent alone made him weak in the knees. “Are you alright?”

She shook her head, her grip on him tightening. “I thought someone was here. I saw your shadow in the door... I-I thought it was Calvin.”

He’d never heard her say the name before, but the way it slipped from her lips made his blood run cold. “Calvin?”

He didn’t know who the hell Calvin was, but if he incited this much fear he couldn’t be good.

“He’s been following me. He wants to hurt me.” Her whisper was so low he barely heard it.

Harvey’s heart ached for her. He couldn’t imagine what she was going through, but he knew he couldn’t let her face it alone. “Let’s get out of here.” He pulled away slightly to look at her. “I’ll take you somewhere safe and we can talk.”

She nodded, fear still etched on her face. “Okay.”

Taking her hand, he led her out of the house and into the light of day. He helped her into his truck, his mind racing with the need to protect her. After quickly retrieving her stuff from her car at her request, he got behind the wheel and drove.

Callie pressed herself against the door, looking like a deer frozen in headlights. He wanted to ask her more questions, but those could wait. Right then he needed to focus on getting her somewhere she felt safe.

That meant his house. The safest place he had.

As they pulled into the driveway, he couldn’t help but feel a sense of relief. This little spot was his personal slice of paradise, tucked away in a grove of trees. When he was here, it felt like nothing bad could happen.

“You’ll be okay here.” Hustling around the front of the truck, he opened the door for her.

Her hesitation was a punch to his gut. Did she not trust him?

He really couldn't blame her. After all, they hadn't ended things on a good note.

But as she looked up at him, he saw the resistance melt away. She stepped down from the truck and followed him inside.

As she entered his home, her gaze swept around the almost bare living room filled with only a couch, an easy chair, a bookcase, and his father's old sketches of nature.

His cheeks burned. His place wasn't much to brag about. In fact, he'd never really put much thought into making it look good.

Certainly, he'd never expected to bring a woman back here.

"Sorry it's nothing special."

She shook her head. "No, it is. It's cozy. It's... it's a home."

The way she said it made him think she hadn't had a place that felt like home in a long time.

Maybe ever.

He smiled at her again, his heart swelling with something he couldn't quite name. A joy, a freedom that had always felt out of reach.

"Thank you." She turned her big green eyes on him. "I don't know what I would do without you."

The sweetness in her voice made his heart twist. Just like that, he was falling for her all over again.

He pushed the thought away. This was not the time. She was in danger, and he needed to focus on keeping her safe.

"I'll get you some water." He headed for the kitchen. "Make yourself comfortable."

She nodded, sinking onto the couch, her shoulders tight with tension. When he returned with a glass of water she took it gratefully, drinking it down in one long gulp.

He sat down in the chair closest to her, studying her. How to start? He didn't want to push her to speak, but if he was going to help protect her then he needed to know the full story.

"Tell me what happened."

She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry that I lied to you. I... I..."

Her hands started shaking, so he scooted to the edge of his seat and took them in his. "I'm sure you had a good reason to lie. Am I right?"

She blinked, looking on the verge of tears. "My ex-husband... I think he's following me. I've been trying to get away from him. I got a restraining order but it—it wasn't enough. He's still out there."

Just like that, all the puzzle pieces slid into place. He almost felt stupid for not seeing it before. Of course Callie was running from someone. The woman always looked like she was expecting to be attacked at any moment.

"Why didn't you tell me about this before?" He fought back the anger and pain that filled his chest. He wasn't angry at her, of course, but at her ex.

Any man who would hurt a woman like Callie—or any woman—deserved to burn in hell.

"I didn't want to burden you with my problems." Her whisper was barely audible. "Or put you in danger. Anyone I get close to, he'll hurt."

His mind raced with questions. It was tempting to ask them all at once, but he also didn't want to overwhelm her.

"He's here in Sweet Pines? When did you last see him?"

"I... I haven't seen him in Sweet Pines. I think maybe..." She shook her head. "I think he's following me. But sometimes I don't know."

She turned away, hiding her face. "Sometimes I can't tell what's real and what's in my head. I'm sorry. Maybe I'm going crazy."

“No you’re not.” He touched her face. “Listen to your feelings. They’re telling you something. Is this why you were so rattled after Lisa said someone was outside of her tent? Do you think that was him?”

She nodded, her face pale. “I don’t want to believe it, but it could be. It feels like he’s been following me for weeks, ever since I left him. There was a car at a gas station...” She stopped talking and inhaled a deep breath. “I thought I would be safe here in Sweet Pines, but... I don’t know anymore. I’m just not sure.”

Harvey was at a loss at what to say. He’d already told her that everything would be okay, that he would make sure she was safe, but she was still afraid. Sitting there, holding her hand, he felt the most helpless he had in his whole life.

“Listen.” He leaned forward more, bringing his face close to hers. “I want you to stay with me until we can figure this out. We’ll go to the police, make sure every cop in town is on the lookout for him, whatever it takes. But until then, you’re not alone. You can take my bedroom and I’ll sleep on the couch. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Her eyes welled up with tears, and she reached out to him, pulling him into a hug. As he held her close, her whole body trembled like a leaf in the wind.

“I can’t help but think he followed me here and that he was out with us on the camping trip.” She shook her head against his shoulder. “It’s a feeling I can’t shake. He won’t stop until he makes me pay for leaving him.”

Harvey’s jaw clenched with determination. “I’m not a man who’s about to stop either, all right? And he didn’t count on me entering your life.” He squeezed her hands. “You don’t have to face this alone. I’m here for you.”

The appreciation in her green eyes—so total, so intense—washed away every ounce of uselessness he’d been feeling. “Thank you.”

Electricity crackled between them, and he fought the urge to kiss her.

“I’m sorry about how we left things.” He looked at the floor. “I didn’t want you to go. I was trying to figure things out, to make sense of what happened.”

She shook her head. “It’s my fault. You don’t have anything to apologize for.”

He sighed. “How about we put that in the past? We’re here now, and I’m not letting you go anywhere.”

He leaned forward, cupping her face in his hands. “I’ll protect you, Callie. I won’t let him hurt you.”

Her eyes met his, and for a moment, he saw all the fear and pain melt away.

She leaned forward, closing the distance between them, and pressed her lips to his.

It was a surprise, but he didn’t hesitate to respond. He’d been aching for this moment ever since he decided to leave the coffee shop and find her. Now that he had the chance, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her onto his lap, deepening the kiss.

She tasted like sweet vanilla, and he couldn’t get enough of her. He wanted to take away all the pain and fear she was feeling, to make her forget about everything but him.

They parted for a moment, gasping for air.

“I don’t want to pressure you into anything.” He cupped her face. She was vulnerable right now, and he wasn’t in the business of taking advantage of people.

“I want this.” Her pleading eyes backed up her words. “I want you.”

He didn’t need to think twice. “As long as you’re sure. By the way, I’m serious about you staying here. I’m not about to leave you alone for a minute.”

She smiled, a genuine smile that reached her eyes. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He pulled her close, his hands tracing down her back. As they kissed, he could feel the tension in her body slowly

fading away. Her heart beat against his chest, and their breathing fell into sync. So quickly it almost seemed impossible, this woman had become an essential part of his life.

And he wouldn't have it any other way.

He picked her up, carrying her to the bedroom, her arms around his neck.

As he laid her down on the bed, a sense of peace washed over him. For the first time in a long time, he felt like he was exactly where he was meant to be.

As they tangled together in the sheets, he knew that whatever happened, he would stand by her side. He would protect her, cherish her, and never let her go.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

Stepping out of the police station and into the bright morning, Callie squinted at the mountain range behind the town. Her heart was full of a strange feeling that she couldn't name.

It felt... light.

Free.

A strong arm slipped around her waist, and Harvey tugged her close. "How did you feel about that?"

She splayed her fingers against his chest. "Good. I felt good."

What strange words to hear from her mouth. Even weirder that she meant them.

The police of Sweet Pines seemed to take their jobs very seriously. When Callie and Harvey told them about Calvin possibly lurking around and breaking his restraining order, they took copious notes and promised to post a photo of him in the station. He wouldn't be able to walk through town without being recognized.

Which meant maybe he would finally leave Callie alone.

She knew there was a chance that it hadn't been Calvin in the woods, but she also didn't know which parts of her mind to trust. Fear was a powerful thing, and at this point she'd been run by it for so long that there was no turning off the switch.

But maybe she could turn the volume down.

Talking to the police helped. And so did being with Harvey. That alone seemed to be working a miracle in her life.

“That’s what I wanted to hear. Whatever you need, anything, just let me know.” Harvey brushed his thumb across her cheek, heat sizzling in his gaze.

She sighed happily, her insides turning to liquid at his touch. She leaned into him, seeking the sweet comfort of his arms.

“I know. I feel safe with you.”

His eyes softened, and he pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Good. That’s all I want.”

They stood there for a few moments, just enjoying each other’s company. It was the kind of moment that she had always dreamed of, the kind that came with a sense of belonging.

A car honked right next to them, and they both jumped. Without realizing it, they’d been standing in the middle of the street.

Harvey chuckled. “I think we should get out of the road before someone runs us over.”

She laughed along, feeling light and carefree in a way she hadn’t in a long time.

They walked back to Harvey’s truck, hand in hand. As they drove away from town, she leaned her head against the headrest, watching the trees rush past them.

“Where are we going?” Abandoning the scenery, she turned to him.

“I thought we’d take a drive up to the lake.” A smile tugged at the corners of his lips. “I have a surprise for you.”

She raised an eyebrow. “A surprise?”

He nodded. “You’ll have to wait and see.”

They drove in comfortable silence, the radio playing softly and the wind coming through the windows and tossing their

hair. Every few minutes or so, she couldn't help but steal a glance at the man sitting next to her.

He looked so focused on the road, his jaw set. But every time she caught his eye, he'd smile at her, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

It was then that Callie realized that she had never felt this way before. Not with anyone. With him, she felt alive, cared for, and cherished. And she knew in her heart that she would do anything to keep him in her life.

Finally, they pulled up to a secluded area by the lake, surrounded by trees. Harvey got out of the truck and came around to open the door for her, offering his hand to help her down.

As she stepped out, she saw a blanket spread out on the ground, rose petals strewn across it. She felt her breath catch in her throat.

“What's this?”

He smiled at her, his eyes soft. “I wanted to do something special for you.” Reaching behind her seat, he pulled out a picnic basket. “I know breakfast at the lake isn't much, but I thought you might like it.

Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes as she took in the scene before her. She'd cried so much in the last couple of days, but right now these were tears of joy. She'd never felt so cared for in her life.

As they sat down on the blanket and watched ducks swim around the lake, all her stress just fell away. She leaned her head against Harvey's shoulder, feeling the warmth of his body against hers.

For the first time, she felt like everything was going to be okay. That she had someone who would stand by her no matter what.

“I want to ask you something.” He pulled away and turned to her.

Her stomach flipped. This morning was so perfect, but deep down a part of her was waiting for the other shoe to drop. She wasn't used to things going this well.

"What?" She licked her lips, trying to stay calm.

"I'm taking my next group into the mountains in a couple days. I'd like you to come with me. We'll be out range if something was to happen and I'd like you to be close so I won't worry."

"Are you sure it's a good idea?" She nibbled on her bottom lip. "There will be less people there. I don't want to put you in danger."

His expression hardened. "You're not putting me in danger. I'm taking you with me because I want to keep you safe. Up there, we'll be leaving everything behind. It'll be a chance for you to get away from everything and relax."

She chewed over his words. Maybe he was right. And the mountains would do wonders; they did last time, before everything fell apart. Being close to Harvey would definitely be the safest place she knew.

Besides, the more she thought on it, the more she realized that she had probably imagined Calvin following her. After all, she hadn't actually seen him in months.

Fear could do powerful things to a person's mind, and she was evidence of that. Most likely the intruder at their campsite had been a random person looking for something to steal.

"Okay." She smiled softly at him. "I'd like that."

His eyes lit up, and he pulled her into a tight embrace. "Thank you. You won't regret it, I promise."

She melted into him, enjoying the pleasure of his lips on hers. It was a feeling she never wanted to end.

When they finally pulled away, he grinned at her. "I'll start packing for us tonight."

As they finished their breakfast and packed up their picnic, Callie realized she was breathing a little easier. Maybe the mountains were just what she needed to leave her past behind

and start anew. She had Harvey by her side, the police were taking her situation seriously, and she was going to get away for a few days.

Maybe, just maybe, she could start to move past the fear and begin to live again.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

“How is Flash treating you?” Harvey rode up next to Callie, doing his best to not be too obvious in his attraction to her. The guests on this week’s trail ride were looking for an adventure, not for a romantic show.

Good God, though, it was hard to not constantly look her up and down. She looked so damn good in her tight jeans and linen top with the first couple buttons undone.

She grinned, a touch of mischief in her eyes. “Pretty well, considering he’s a nine-hundred-pound animal.”

He couldn’t help but chuckle at her response. He had to admit that he was impressed with how quickly she had adapted to riding. Most people took weeks to gain the confidence that she had in only a few days.

“You look like a pro.” He gave her a playful nudge with his elbow.

She rolled her eyes, but the smile on her face betrayed her amusement. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I have just yet to fall off him.”

He winked at her. “Well, let’s hope it stays that way.”

They rode in comfortable silence for a few minutes, taking in the scenery around them. The mountains were breathtaking as always, with tall trees and crystal-clear streams that wound their way along the trail. This week’s group—five people total—was a quiet bunch. They hadn’t said much since starting the ride that morning, and Harvey was more than fine with that.

Not talking meant he could spend more time staring at Callie. More time thinking about how soft her lips were. More time daydreaming about her laugh.

It was hard to believe that just a few days ago, she had been a nervous wreck, constantly looking over her shoulder and jumping at every sound. But now here she was, riding a powerful animal through some of the most beautiful terrain in the country. There was something about the way she carried herself now that was different. More confident. More at ease.

He hadn't been the one to make her who she was, but nonetheless he felt proud of her. He had a feeling that this trip was exactly what she needed to start healing.

"Hey, you okay?" Callie's voice broke through his thoughts, and he suddenly realized that he had been staring.

He shook his head, feeling a flush rise to his cheeks. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Just lost in thought."

She smiled, her eyes dancing with amusement. "Thinking about what?"

He hesitated, unsure if he should tell her the truth. But then he wondered what he had to lose. "You."

She bit into her smile and looked away, a hint of pink on her cheeks. "Well, isn't that sweet." There was teasing tone to her voice. "What about me?"

"Just thinking about how amazing you are. You've come so far in such a short amount of time, and I'm proud of you."

Her expression softened. Clearly she hadn't expected such a serious answer. Her eyelashes fluttered, and she looked at him with a tenderness that made his heart swell. "Thank you," she said softly. "For all you've done."

A deep, satisfying warmth spread through him. He couldn't believe how much he cared for her already. It felt like he had known her for years, not just less than two weeks.

"I meant what I said earlier, you know." He drew his horse closer to hers. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

Her eyes met his, and for a moment, something flickered in them. Something that made him think that maybe, just maybe, she was starting to feel the same way he did. Like the two of them had been brought together for a reason. Like they were meant to be each other's fresh start.

"Whoa." At the front of the group, Anthony suddenly stopped his horse and got down from the saddle.

"What is it?" Harvey frowned.

Anthony inspected his horse's face. "She's acting lethargic. I thought I was imagining it at first, but it seems to be getting worse."

A ripple of concern passed through the group, with everyone murmuring. Getting off Whiskey, Harvey strode forward.

"Let me take a look." As he ran his hand over her muzzle, she trembled slightly. "She's definitely not feeling well."

Callie joined him, concern etched on her face. "What could be wrong with her?"

Harvey shook his head. "Hard to say. It could be something she ate or drank, or she could be coming down with something." He stepped back and looked around. "We need to find a place to set up camp so I can take a closer look."

Anthony nodded in agreement. "There's a clearing up ahead. We can stop there."

As they made their way to the clearing, Harvey couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. Something wasn't right. It wasn't just the sick horse, but the way the air seemed to be charged with an energy he couldn't explain. It was almost like... like they were being watched.

But maybe he was imagining that. Ever since Callie told him her full story, he'd been on constant alert, knowing he couldn't afford to let his guard down for even a minute.

In the clearing, they walked Anthony's horse over to some shade. Harvey ran his hands over the animal's side, his lips tugging into a frown.

A sick horse was bad news. It meant Anthony would need to turn back, and that would mean his doing so twice in a row.

“Harvey.” Callie nodded at her horse, Flash. “Is he acting funny, too?”

Indeed he was. Flash stood with his head down, his tail limp. He’d turned into the opposite of the usual energetic horse who loved mountain trips.

Harvey’s stomach twisted into a knot, and he held back a curse. Two sick horses meant contamination.

He and Anthony were careful with the horses’ feed and water, always making sure they were clean as could be. Accidents did happen, though.

But damn, what a time for an accident. He’d have to take the horses back into town and call the vet out to see them.

But were the animals even capable of making it back?

Harvey took a deep breath. He knew it wasn’t anyone’s fault, but it sucked to have two trips in a row cut short. This wouldn’t bode well for his business’ reputation.

“I’m sorry everyone.” He raised his head and addressed the group. “But it looks like we have two sick horses here, and that could mean that the others aren’t doing well either. We’ll need to turn back for Sweet Pines.”

There were disappointed looks all around, as well as a groan or two. Their frustration was understandable. Hopefully a substantial discount on a second trip would help soften the blow.

“What can I do to help?” Callie touched his arm, and he looked down into her kind, soft eyes.

A wave of peace washed through him. “You’re already doing it. Just keep being yourself.”

She grinned in that way that drove him crazy. “Yeah, but ___”

“Excuse me!” A woman, her cheeks flushed, appeared on the trail. She was breathing heavy like she’d been running and

there was a slightly panicked look in her eyes.

Harvey straightened up. “Is everything all right?”

She sucked in a deep breath. “There’s a hiker about a quarter mile up the trail. He’s been injured. Does anyone have a radio?”

Well, damn. When it rained, it poured. Maybe his trail rides were cursed after all.

Anthony pulled his radio out. “I’ll call for help. Do you know what his injuries are?”

She shook her head. “I don’t. His friend is waiting at the trail for help. I’m doing the fifty-mile trail solo.” She sucked in a breath. “I passed him and I told him I’d go for help.”

“Here. Sit down a minute.” Harvey grabbed a water bottle and led her over to a log.

“I’m a nurse.” Callie was already going for the first aid kit. “You said a quarter of a mile up the trail?”

The woman nodded. “That’s right.”

“I’ll go with you.” Harvey stood, but just then a third horse—Casper—let out a pitiful whinny, dropped his head, and pinned his ears back.

Another one down.

“Shit.” Harvey bit his lip.

“You stay here.” Callie pulled her hair back into a ponytail. “Anthony needs help with the horses. I won’t be far.”

Harvey hesitated.

He didn’t want to leave her alone, but he knew she was capable of taking care of herself. And if there was an injured hiker out there, they needed to try to help.

“Okay.” He nodded his consent, though he still didn’t like it. “Be careful.”

She gave him a reassuring smile before turning and jogging down the trail. His gaze lingered on her, and it felt impossible to look away. He’d only known this woman for a

short time, and yet he felt so much pride and admiration for her it was crazy.

He turned his attention back to the sick horses, and the frustration and worry returned. Three sick horses in the stable were bad enough, but now they were stuck on the trail. If they couldn't get the horses to walk back into town, they'd need to bring the vet up here.

As he helped Anthony tend to the animals, Callie sat in the back of his mind. He couldn't wait to see her again, to wrap her in his arms and tell her just how much she meant to him.

But for now, he had to focus on the task at hand. She was capable, and soon enough they would have everything taken care of and be together again.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

Callie jogged up the steep trail, her lungs and calves aching. The woman had said the hiker was about a quarter mile away, which meant she ought to have found the two people by now.

Stopping near an overlook, she sucked in air and spun around. A hawk cried from a treetop, and the leaves danced delicately in the breeze. There was no sign of any other people, though.

She frowned and checked her phone, but there was no signal. Knowing she couldn't waste any more time, she pressed on.

As she neared a bend in the trail, a low moan came from the other side close to the trees. Her heart rate increased, and she quickened her pace.

When she rounded the bend, she saw a man lying on the ground, a hoodie pulled up and his back to her.

"Hey!" She carefully picked her way across the uneven ground towards the tree line. "I'm a nurse. I'm here to help."

The man groaned in response, and she clutched the first aid kit tighter, hoping that whatever injuries he had weren't too serious and she could stabilize him until a medical helicopter arrived.

"My name is Callie." She crouched next to the man. "What's your name?"

Instead of answering, the man suddenly twisted around and stood, his hoodie slipping back. As she recognized the person standing in front of her, her muscles went weak.

“No,” she gasped and jolted back.

“What’s wrong, Callie?” Calvin sneered. “You not happy to see me?”

She couldn’t move. Couldn’t make a sound. She was frozen, just like she’d been so many times before in the shadow of his rage.

Her mind raced as she tried to come up with a plan. She couldn’t let Calvin know that she was on a trail ride with a group of people, including Harvey. He was dangerous and unpredictable, and the last thing she wanted was for him to harm anyone.

Finally, she found her voice, though it shook with fear and anger. “What do you want, Calvin?”

He stepped closer, a dark look in his eyes. “What do you think I want, Callie. I’ve been searching for you. I want you back with me, where you belong.”

Her heart raced as she scrambled to her feet, backing away from him. She had to think fast, but her mind suddenly felt so jumbled.

“Stay away from me, Calvin.” She held up her hands, her fists shaking. “I’m warning you.”

He laughed, a cruel sound that sent shivers down her spine. “You know I could take you down in seconds. Why don’t you just give in?”

“I’m not going to let you hurt me. Not anymore.” This time, her voice was steady, even despite the fear. “I’ll scream.”

He just laughed. “Who do you think is going to hear you all the way out here? You’re all alone.”

He was right. Harvey and the others were far back down the trail. She was on her own.

This was it. A true reckoning. She either let Calvin deal the finishing blow, or she fought back.

She looked around, trying to find something she could use as a weapon. Finally, her eyes landed on a rock near her foot.

Without hesitating, she grabbed the rock and threw it at his head with all her might. He tried to duck, but it connected with his temple. He stumbled backwards, his hand flying up to the spot where he'd been hit.

He was only momentarily distracted, though. A second later and he lunged at her.

Callie screamed and dodged his attack. She had to find a way to get away from him. She couldn't fight him off for long, and she didn't have any other weapons to defend herself with.

She backed up, trying to put as much distance as possible between the two of them.

"I'll make you pay for that!" He growled, wiping at the blood that was now flowing from a gash on his forehead.

Her heart was pounding in her chest. She had to keep moving. She couldn't let him catch her.

She looked around frantically for a way to escape, knowing that her chances were slim but that she needed to try anyway.

And then she saw it. A narrow path that led off the main trail. It was steep and rocky, but it might be her only chance.

Without a second thought, she took off down the path, her heart in her throat. She didn't dare look back to see if Calvin was following her.

A moment later though, she heard the sound of his footsteps pounding after her. The path was treacherous, and she stumbled several times, but she refused to stop.

Finally, she emerged from the trees and found herself at the edge of a cliff, the wind whipping her hair and clothes.

She turned around just in time to see Calvin barreling towards her. It was like a switch flipped in her head. She'd

spent all this time running, but now?

Now she was fighting.

Without a second thought, she lunged at him. Taking him by surprise, she tackled him to the ground.

She fell on top of him, landing with her knee in his groin. He grunted in pain, and she jumped to standing and took off.

She only made it a couple of steps before his fingers closed around her ankle and he pulled her to the ground.

She crashed against the hard earth, stars exploding in her vision. Weight pressed on her legs as her ex-husband pinned her down.

She thrashed around trying to move him off her but, with her legs restrained, he had her good. She couldn't move an inch.

“You'll never be free of me, Callie.” His lips curled in a sneer as he looked down at her. “I'll always find you.”

Her heart sank. He was right. The man was obsessed with her, and she couldn't shake him off. But she refused to give up. Even if she died up on this mountain, she would fight to the very end.

She twisted her body, trying to wriggle out of his grasp. But all his weight pressed down on her, crushing her ribs and making her previous aches and pains known. His hands went around her throat, squeezing tight. She gasped for air, and her vision began to blur.

She had thought she could escape this man, be free of the terror and pain. Thought that she was finally free.

As it turned out, what she'd experienced had been nothing more than a taste of freedom. A little slice of Heaven among all the fear.

But at least she'd tasted it at all. At least she could die knowing what true happiness was.

As her vision darkened and she slipped away into unconsciousness, Harvey came to the forefront of her mind.

And she smiled.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

The scream echoed along the mountainside, and every alarm bell went off in Harvey's head.

Without knowing how, he knew exactly who had cried out.

“Callie!” He started jogging across the clearing, yelling at Anthony over his shoulder. “Stay here!”

He ran harder than he ever had in his life, harder than he knew he could. With each step, he prayed to hear another scream—because that meant Callie was alive. Alive and not dead from whatever had happened to her.

As he ran, scenarios raced through his mind. A snake. A fall. A bear.

A person.

Calvin.

Grunting with exertion, he sprinted over roots in the trail. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught something red.

The first aid kit, sitting on some rocks. And with no one nearby.

His blood turned to ice. He had to find Callie, and fast. He pushed himself harder, ignoring the pain in his legs and lungs as he ran towards where he was pretty sure the scream had come from.

As he rounded a bend in the trail, he saw her. Callie was lying on the ground, with a man on top of her.

A man he recognized from the pictures she had provided the Sweet Pines police.

His hands were around her throat, squeezing tight, and Callie wasn't moving.

Everything in Harvey roared as he charged forward, tackling Calvin to the ground with all his strength. Calvin grunted in surprise as the other man landed on top of him, but he was quick to recover. He twisted out from under Harvey and scrambled to his feet.

“You!” Calvin snarled, looking between Harvey and Callie on the ground. “She’s done and you’re next. You’ll pay for touching what’s mine.”

Stark terror punched Harvey in the chest, but he couldn't let the other man's words affect him. He attacked Calvin again, grabbing him by the shirt collar and punching him in the face. Calvin stumbled backwards, but he was quick to retaliate. He swung wildly, but Harvey dodged the blow and landed another punch to the asshole's gut.

Calvin grunted in pain again, but he didn't give up. He kept coming at Harvey, throwing punches and kicks with wild abandon. Harvey dodged and weaved, trying to stay out of his reach.

Finally, he saw his opening. Calvin was off-balance, and it was the perfect advantage. One solid punch to his jaw and Calvin went down, his face landing in the dirt.

He didn't move an inch. The man was out cold.

Not wasting another second, Harvey dropped on his knees next to Callie, checking to make sure she was still breathing. She was, but she was unconscious.

“Callie!” He shook her gently, trying to wake her up. “Come on, sweetheart, you have to wake up. Open your eyes for me.”

Her eyes fluttered open, and she looked up at him with confusion.

“Harvey?” Her voice was weak. “You’re here! What happened?”

“Calvin attacked you. Don’t worry, he’s knocked out. We need to get you to the hospital. Are you able to stand?”

She nodded weakly, and he helped her to her feet. She stumbled a bit, but he kept a firm grip on her, making sure she didn’t fall.

He needed to get her to Anthony then come back and deal with Calvin. Damn it, if he had some rope he could tie the man up, but he hadn’t—

“Harvey.” Callie quietly croaked while trying to gain her footing.

He gripped her arms. “What is it? Where do you hurt?”

“Thank you.” Tears filled her eyes and her breath hitched.

“Baby.” He wiped some dirt off her cheek, his chest burning with anger at himself. “I shouldn’t have let you come up here by yourself. I’m so sorry.”

But it seemed she wasn’t listening. Her eyes had gone wide, and her mouth fell open. “Behind you!”

He whirled around, but he wasn’t quick enough to avoid the hook to his jaw. He started to fall but caught himself, pain radiating through his head.

Calvin came at him like a wild animal, teeth bared and full of hatred.

Harvey raised his fists, ready to defend himself. He knew he was in for a tough fight, but he wouldn’t let Calvin hurt Callie anymore. He wouldn’t let that man hurt anyone ever again.

Calvin swung a punch at him, but Harvey dodged it. He responded with one of his own, hitting his opponent in the solar plexus. Calvin grunted and stumbled backwards, but he didn’t give up. He came at Harvey again, trying to get him in the ear.

Harvey ducked and landed a punch in Calvin's side. Calvin groaned in pain, but he kept throwing punches trying to land a hit on Harvey.

Harvey was quick, though, and he'd been in more than a few scraps as a boy. He dodged and weaved, hitting Calvin with precise punches and kicks. Calvin was getting weaker with every blow, but Harvey knew he had to end it soon. He needed to subdue the other man, and get the police up here.

"Callie, get out of here!" He backed up, trying to lure Calvin away from the trail so she could make a run for it.

She didn't answer, and he couldn't see where she was. Calvin reached under his hoodie and pulled out a knife, sharp and glimmering in the light. Every muscle in Harvey tensed, and he tightened his fists. If his opponent wanted to up the ante, then fine. That would be his loss, because Harvey was done playing nice.

Calvin lunged forward, but all of a sudden a tree branch hit him in the side. Taken by surprise, he stumbled losing his footing on the uneven ground, and tumbling over the side of the cliff.

Callie dropped the branch with a ragged gasp, and she and Harvey rushed over to the cliff's edge. Calvin's unmoving body lay a good fifty yards below, the knife next to it.

Callie turned to Harvey, and he looked deep into her eyes, search for the right words.

"He's dead." She took in a deep breath and stared down at the body as if she couldn't comprehend it.

All the emotions—fear, anger, relief, guilt—knotted in his throat, and he nodded.

Yes, Calvin was dead and her nightmare was over.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

“Here you go.” Harvey handed Callie a steaming mug, and for a second she just stared at it.

“Sorry.” He sat next to her on his couch. “Do you not like tea?”

“Huh?” It took a second to process what he’d said. “Oh, I do. Th—thank you.”

She put the mug on a coaster, feeling so weak that it was hard to even hold a drink. Her head was foggy, her throat and neck were sore and she kept seeing Calvin fall over the cliff. The scene kept flashing over and over in her head.

Calvin was dead.

She had killed him.

And she wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

Of course she was glad he was gone, but she had never wanted to take another person’s life. Even if that person had tried to kill her.

She looked at her hands. “What I did...”

“Hey.” Harvey’s voice was gentle, his touch soft as he took her hands in his. “Everyone knows that you were protecting me. That Calvin would have killed us both if he could. The police said you did the right thing.”

She sighed. “I know, but it’s just...” She trailed off, looking away. “I never thought I’d be capable of something like that.”

“None of us do until we’re put in a situation like this.” His thumb rubbed circles on the back of her hand. “But you did what you had to do to survive.”

She looked back at him, tears prickling at the corners of her eyes. “I’m just so tired, Harvey. Tired of all the fighting, the fear...”

“I know.” He pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her. “But it’s over now. You’re safe. We’re safe.”

She let out a shuddering breath, some of the tension she’d been carrying around all day leaving her body.

And what a long day it had been. When the helicopter arrived to find an injured hiker—who had never really existed—they found Calvin’s body instead. The whole time, Callie felt like she was walking in a dream.

Having her neck checked out at the clinic. Giving their statements to the police. Watching the vet treat the horses at the stables. None of it felt real.

Now, sitting in Harvey’s living room hours later, everything that had happened was finally sinking in.

“Do you think Calvin had something to do with your horses?” She blinked up at him.

His lips pulled thin. “I’m sure he did. Anthony and I are always so careful. Calvin probably slipped something in their water. We’ll know more when the vet gets the results, but at least they’re doing okay now.”

He shook his head, his disappointment in himself clear as day. “I messed up.”

“No.” She squeezed his hand. “You saved me.”

Her voice cracked, and for a moment she couldn’t even speak. The man sitting next to her was her hero, and she didn’t know what she had done to deserve him but she intended on doing whatever was needed to keep him.

“Likewise.” He ran his fingers through her hair.

She stared out the window, where dusk was settling on the land. What now? How did she move forward?

She had killed a man, and she didn't feel sorry for it, but she also didn't feel proud. Calvin had tried to kill her—and done plenty of awful things before that—and he hadn't hesitated at all when it came to attacking Harvey.

Maybe, one day, she could come to believe that things had ended in the best way they possibly could. Until then she would need to have faith that she had made the right decision in protecting herself and Harvey.

Satisfied for the time being, she leaned her head against his shoulder, feeling safe and secure in his embrace. For the first time in what felt like forever, she allowed herself to imagine a future where she could move on from the trauma of the past few months. She could see herself here in Sweet Pines, with Harvey and the horses, guiding trail rides and falling in love.

“Thank you, Harvey,” she whispered.

“For what?” His breath tickled her ear.

“For everything. For being here for me and helping me through all of this.”

He pulled away, looking at her with serious eyes. “Callie, there's something I need to tell you. Ever since I met you, I've felt this connection between us. And after everything that's happened, I know that I can't keep it to myself anymore. I care about you deeply, and I want to be with you.”

He took a deep breath. “I love you, and I want you to stay here permanently with me. But it's up to you, and I know this is a lot and it's all happening fast. You've been through so much, and I don't want to push you into anything.”

True happiness spread through Callie, and she felt like she'd just landed on Cloud Nine. Harvey had been a solid presence at her side through all of this, and she couldn't imagine leaving this town, leaving him behind.

“I'm so glad you said that, because I do want to stay here with you.” She leaned in, pressing her lips to his. It was a soft,

tender kiss at first, but then it deepened, and soon she was lost in the sensation of his lips on hers.

Harvey's arms wrapped around her, pulling her closer, and she felt a surge of desire wash over her. This man... this moment... it was all a dream come true.

They pulled back, gasping for breath, and she smiled up at him. "I love you too."

His eyes sparkled with joy, and he kissed her again, this time slowly and passionately.

Breaking the kiss, she buried her face in his chest and breathed in his familiar scent. For a moment, she just let herself be held, let herself feel safe and loved.

But then headlights swept across the window panes breaking their bubble of happiness. "Who is that?"

"I don't know." Frowning, Harvey got up and opened the door. Seeing who it was, he chuckled and turned to Callie. "Do you feel like company? If not, I'll send them away."

"Them?" Confused, she got up and went to the window.

Two vehicles had parked at the end of the driveway. Anthony got out of one, and Olivia emerged from the other.

Callie gasped in surprise. "I thought she had left town by now. How did she know I was here?"

"My bets on Anthony. I'm guessing that's Olivia?" Harvey cocked an eyebrow. "I can tell them it's not a good time for guests if you want a little more time to process."

She didn't even have to think about it, even with all the chaotic thoughts running through her head. She's been lonely for so long, cut off from the rest of the world, living under Calvin's scrutiny with fear of reprisal for the smallest thing. Being alone right now was the last thing she wanted.

Yes, she was still dealing with the shock and pain of Calvin's attack and the aftermath. But she was also feeling joy and love. She wanted people around her. Friends.

“I would love to see them.” Smiling, she walked to Harvey’s side opening the door further and waved their two guests inside.

“Oh. Excuse me.” Olivia bumped into Anthony then stopped on the porch and waited for him to go ahead.

“No. Ladies first.” His cheeks turned pink, and he suddenly looked flustered, like he didn’t know what to do with himself.

Tucking some hair behind her ear, she smiled easily at him. “Okay. Thank you.”

And just like that, you would have thought she’d hung the moon, the way Anthony looked at her.

As soon as they stepped inside, the air changed. The tension and anxiety Callie was sorting through suddenly melted away, and happiness and comfort took their place. Just being in the same room with Harvey and her new friends gave her a sense of peace she had never felt before.

Anthony greeted Harvey with a quick handshake and Harvey pulled him to the side as Olivia rushed over to Callie, pulling her into a hug.

“I’m so sorry to barge in, but I had to see that you were okay. Word got around town about what happened and I went to the stables to see if I could catch you. Instead, I ran into Anthony and he was kind enough to let me follow him here. I didn’t know about... about...” She sniffed.

“Don’t apologize, I’m so happy to see you. I didn’t want to tell you.” Callie took the woman’s hands. “I didn’t want to put you in danger.”

Olivia shook her head. “That would have been up to me to decide, but I get why you didn’t tell me.”

The ladies broke apart and Callie officially introduced Olivia to Harvey as they all settled in the living room. Finally, she felt the weight of the past few months start to lift. Having good people here with her, at this moment, made her feel better, more grounded.

“So, what’s the plan now?” Olivia asked, looking back and forth between the two of them. “Are you going to stay here?”

Callie looked at Harvey, who was watching her intently. She knew without a doubt what she wanted.

“I want to stay here,” she said firmly. “With Harvey.”

There was a moment of silence before Anthony spoke up. “I’m happy for you both.” He clapped Harvey on the back. “You’ve been through a lot, man. You deserve some happiness.”

Callie leaned into Harvey’s side, fitting perfectly under the crook of his arm. For the first time in a long time, it felt like she had a future worth pursuing. With an amazing man by her side, she knew she could conquer anything.

The nightmare was over, and the rest of her life was just beginning.

EPILOGUE

“Good morning.” Harvey kissed Callie’s bare shoulder and drew back, taking a moment to admire her.

“Mm.” She stirred under the sheets but didn’t open her eyes. “What time is it?”

“Don’t know. Why look on our day off?”

Eyes still closed, she smiled. “Good point.”

He chuckled, running his hand along her side. “I couldn’t sleep in. There’s something I can’t wait to show you.”

That got her attention. Sitting up, she studied him, noticing he was already dressed. “What’s that?”

He shrugged. “You’ll need to get up and see for yourself.”

“Oh, come on.” Rolling her eyes, she grabbed his shirt and pulled him closer pressing her lips to his. Too soon, she pulled away and jumped out of bed looking for clothes. “Okay, okay. I’m up.”

He grinned back, his heart swelling with love for this woman. She had been through so much, but they had come out on the other side stronger than ever. One year into their relationship, he was more in love with her than ever before.

Taking her hand, he led her outside, where his horse trailer was hitched to the back of his truck.

Callie stopped walking and stared at the truck. “Are we going somewhere?”

“Nope. We’re—”

A whinny from inside the trailer interrupted him.

She cocked her head. “Who’s that? Why did you bring one of the horses here?”

Trying to stop his smile lest he give the surprise away, he walked to the back of the trailer and opened it. The soft, brown yearling peered out at him with big, black eyes.

Callie gasped at the young horse. “What a cutie! Who is this?”

“I don’t know. I was hoping you could come up with a good name for him.”

She blinked at him, and he waited for the understanding to hit. When it finally did, her jaw dropped.

“You got me a horse?” Eyes shining and a huge smile spread across her face.

He nodded, satisfied with her reaction. “You’re so great with the horses on the rides. I thought you might like to train and bring one up yourself.”

Tears filled her eyes. “Harvey,” she murmured.

“You like him?”

With a hearty laugh, she wiped away tears. “He’s wonderful. Come here, little fella.” She held her hand out to the young horse and he came over to investigate.

Pulling a carrot piece from his pocket, Harvey passed it over so she could feed the animal. “I mean it. You’re a natural out there. Riding. Leading.”

A blush spread across her cheeks, and she shook her head. “I’m just doing what you taught me.”

“No. It’s more than that. You’re leading by instinct. With heart. That can’t be taught.”

In the year that she had been going on trail rides with him, his business has grown by a good twenty percent. People heard from their friends about how much fun the Sweet Pines trail rides were now that Callie was there, and many folks that went on one trip ended up going on another.

Without a doubt, part of the reason for his success was because of Callie. She had a way with the horses that was hard to describe. Even the most stubborn ones would listen to her. She was a natural-born leader, and he was lucky to have her by his side.

“I love you.” He leaned in to kiss her.

“I love you too.” She pulled away from the yearling and wrapped her arms around Harvey’s neck. They lost themselves in the kiss, just like they did each and every time their lips touched.

As they finally pulled away, Harvey grinned. “So, what do you want to name him?”

She thought for a moment. “How about Stormy? He looks like he has a bit of mischief in him.”

Harvey chuckled. “Stormy it is.”

For a while, they stood there in silence, lost in their own thoughts, watching Stormy munch on his second carrot. The crisp morning air filled their lungs, rejuvenating them, reminding them that today was special and not to be wasted.

Not that Harvey had wasted one single hour since this woman came into his life.

“Thank you,” Callie finally said, breaking the silence.

“For what?” His eyes locked on hers.

“For everything. For being there for me through all the tough times. For giving me a reason to believe in love again. For this.” She gestured to their surroundings and her gift.

His heart swelled with pride and joy. He had never been happier than he was now, with her by his side. He could tell her as much a hundred times over, but the words would never come close to reality. What he was experiencing went beyond language.

“You don’t have to thank me. I love you, Callie. More than anything in this world. And I’ll always be here for you, no matter what happens.”

Tucking her face into his shoulder, she breathed deeply. “I know.”

“So are you going to take some pictures of Stormy, or what?” Chuckling, he patted her rear. “I know you’re dying too.”

“You know me too well.” Pulling her phone from her pocket, she snapped a few pics of the beauty. “Just to send to Olivia now. I’ll post some online later.”

He leaned against the trailer and watched her capture shots from a few different angles. Even though her friend would be in town visiting Callie in a couple weeks—and visiting Anthony as well, since they had been dating long distance—the two of them talked almost every day.

It was good to see Callie with her friends. Both her long distance one and the ones who lived in town.

Satisfied with the pictures she took of Stormy, she put her phone away. “Have you introduced him to the other horses yet?”

“Nope. I wanted you to meet him first.”

“Well, what are we waiting for? My little guy needs some breakfast.”

She headed for the cab, but he grabbed her arm and pulled her tight against his chest. “One more second,” he murmured, right before his lips pressed to hers.

As they broke apart, his thoughts drifted over the last year. He couldn’t believe this was his life now. It was all almost too good to be true.

It had been a long journey to get here, but he wouldn’t trade any of it for the world. This woman was his everything, and he was grateful for every single day they had together.

Callie sensing the direction of his thoughts, looked up at him with a sweet smile. “Do you remember when we first met?”

“Of course I do.” He chuckled. “You were so stubborn, it drove me crazy. And a terrible liar, too.”

She giggled, reaching up to run her fingers through his hair. “But you came to like me anyway.”

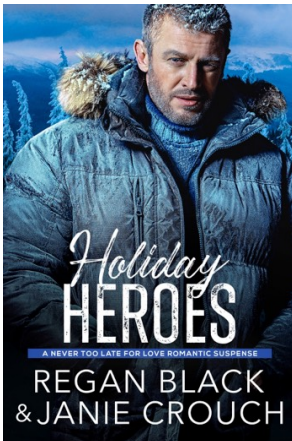
“More than like you. You were so damn gorgeous you had me going crazy from the first second I saw you.” He leaned in for another kiss, and this time it was deeper, more passionate.

As they pulled back, he looked into her eyes and saw it all. His priorities. His heart. The future he had always dreamed of.

Without a doubt, he had made the right choice in bringing Callie into his business and his life. The love they shared was strong and unwavering, and he knew that nothing could ever come between them. They had been through so much together, and he was proud of the way they had come out on top. As they stood there, watching the yearling sniff the early Autumn air, he looked forward to everything that was to come.

Together they would build a life filled with love, laughter, and horses. And, as he gazed into Callie’s sparkling eyes, he knew without a doubt that it would be the best adventure of his life.

...



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR (REGAN BLACK)

Regan Black, a USA Today and internationally bestselling author, writes award-winning, action-packed romances featuring kick-butt heroines and the sexy heroes who fall in love with them. Raised in the Midwest and California, she and her husband share their empty nest with two adorably arrogant cats in the South Carolina Lowcountry where the rich blend of legend, romance, and history fuels her imagination.

Keep up with Regan online: www.ReganBlack.com



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR (JANIE CROUCH)

“Passion that leaps right off the page.” - Romantic Times Book Reviews

USA Today and Publishers Weekly bestselling author Janie Crouch writes what she loves to read: passionate romantic suspense featuring protective heroes. Her books have won multiple awards, including the Romance Writers of America’s coveted Vivian® Award, the National Readers Choice Award, and the Booksellers’ Best.

After a lifetime on the East Coast, and a six-year stint in Germany due to her husband’s job as support for the U.S. Military, Janie has settled into her dream home in Front Range of the Colorado Rockies.

When she’s not listening to the voices in her head—and even when she is—she enjoys engaging in all sorts of crazy adventures (200-mile relay races; Ironman Triathlons, treks to Mt. Everest Base Camp...), traveling, and hanging out with her four kids.

Her favorite quote: “Life is a daring adventure or nothing.” ~ Helen Keller.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A very special thanks to the *Calamittie Jane Publishing* editing and proofreading team for the Never Too Late for Love books:

Denise Hendrickson

Susan Greenbank

Tesh Elborne

Lisa at *Silently Correcting Your Grammar*

Thank you for your ongoing dedication for making these romantic suspense books the best they can be.

And to the creative minds at Deranged Doctor Designs who fashioned all the covers for this series and made the books so beautiful—thank you!