



A Lot Like Home

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Category: Romance, War

Description: Destiny isn't a thing in her world. Smooth-talking ex-SEALs need not apply...

Ex-Navy SEAL Caleb Hardy is desperate to atone for past mistakes by helping the old woman whose letters got him through the war. When he and his band of brothers drop into her sweet, dying Texas town, only one thing stands in the way of his redemption.

Superstition Springs native Havana Nixon is convinced letting a big developer into their tiny Texas oasis is the only way to save the town and she's not about to let a newcomer—no matter how gorgeous—derail her plans. Especially after her aunt tosses out one of her famous “love predictions” matching her with the most infuriating man on the planet.

If only these enemies could stop fighting long enough to admit they're falling for each other...

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

One

The pig guarding the Dorito aisle stood between Caleb and the last red bag of chips on the shelf. The fact that there was an honest-to-God pig, rump down in the only grocery store within thirty miles was less important than the fact that Caleb had been on the road for two days and he was starving.

Caleb Hardy did not back down. Not from al-Qaeda insurgents, not from being kicked out of the Navy, not from porky sentinels on aisle two in an establishment implausibly named Voodoo Grocery. A decade of special warfare kicked in, priming Caleb for a fight as his vision sharpened, his spine straightened, and tension curled through his muscles.

The glossy bag taunted him from behind the fat head of the pig. Funny, Caleb would have sworn on a stack of Bibles that pigs were pink. This one was mostly gray with white spots and clearly had never missed a meal. Fat rolls nearly hid the creature's four stubby legs as it guarded its cheesy corn chip treasure.

"It's going down, pig," he muttered as the porker eyed him thoughtfully. "I dissected a baby pig in eleventh grade with no mercy. If I could just find a scalpel..."

"Wow, Hardy. Threatening the locals already?" Tristan Marchande clapped him on the shoulder with a guffaw and stood side by side with Caleb, both of them staring at the interloper. "What do you think it wants?"

"Why don't you go find out?" he suggested from the side of his mouth and elbowed Tristan, which of course did nothing to faze his teammate. Former teammate. Well,

they were still a team even if they weren't SEALs any longer. "If you don't come back, I'll send Hudson after you. Promise. You've seen how creative he can get with a captive and a locked room. That pig doesn't stand a chance."

On the other hand, could be the pig had something to do with why the grocery store had "voodoo" in its name. Probably torturing the merchandise on the team's first day in Superstition Springs wasn't a good way to fit in. Small towns had long memories.

"What am I doing with captives?" Hudson's interest had been piqued from all the way over by the lone soft drink case where he'd been scouting around for a root beer.

All Caleb needed now was for Rowe and Isaiah to join the party, and then everyone would have a bird's-eye view of whatever was about to go down. But he hadn't seen either of them lately, and since the moment he spied the fatback obstacle between him and food, the pig had taken precedence. The other two guys on his team had probably gone back to the GMC Yukon he'd bought to haul his team from California to Texas where, hopefully, they'd eventually find the lady who had been penning them heartfelt letters for the past few years.

Serenity Force had become a treasured lifeline to the States, to all that was good in the world, to sanity some days while they'd been deployed in the worst pockets of filth in the Middle East. She needed their help. And had no idea they were coming. Minor detail.

"Never mind," he muttered over his shoulder to Hudson. "I got it."

This was all beyond ridiculous. It was just a pig. But he hadn't expected to be negotiating the surrender of his Doritos with an animal. In a grocery store. But okay. No problem. All he had to do was skirt the mound of future bacon and grab the chips.

"I'm going to need that bag," he advised his adversary as he edged forward, earning a

snort from the squat creature as it settled its pork butt more firmly onto the 1970s linoleum.

Pigs didn't bite, did they? Caleb had gotten a tetanus shot many times over, as well as the typhoid vaccine and one for yellow fever. Some stuff he'd forgotten the name of. Probably he was safe regardless.

"Nice piggy," he said firmly and rolled his eyes. He sounded like an idiot, but he took a step closer anyway, hand outstretched the same way he would with a stray dog. Hopefully pigs worked the same.

Pig snuffled, and his eyes widened as Caleb waltzed closer. All at once, the pig grabbed the last bag of Doritos in his mouth and took off.

Caleb cursed as the shockingly fast porker rounded a corner, hooves clicking furiously. "Oh, no you don't."

He scrambled to follow, combat boots sliding on the slick, worn floor that might be closer to a hundred years old. As he was thinking he should trade his military-issue footwear for cowboy boots, he crashed into something.

Someone. A woman. A redhead. Planting his feet, he kept them both off the ground due to sheer reflex, hours and hours of training his body to execute his slightest command, and a hasty prayer.

His arms encircled her only for a hot second, but that was enough. It was impossible not to notice that her hair smelled like coconut or that she fit up against his body so nicely. Before anything unseemly happened, he made sure she'd regained her balance and stepped back.

"Apologies, ma'am," he said, and that's when their eyes locked.

A fierce wave of heavy awareness swept over him. Her gaze snapped, crackled, and popped as she took his measure, boldly drawing out the staring contest they'd fallen into. She was achingly beautiful, like a sunset signaling a humdinger of a storm on the horizon. The simple jeans and T-shirt she wore showcased her slim frame in a way that made you look at the woman, not the clothes.

"No problem," she returned, and her voice slicked through his insides, lighting up interesting places that had been dark and dormant for a long time. "I think you lost your pig."

"Oh, the pig's not mine. He stole my Doritos, and I was working on getting them back."

"Since I'm the one who got in your way, let me help corral him," she suggested easily. "A man can't go without Doritos."

Caleb had never believed in love at first sight at any point in his life. But he was heavily considering a philosophy change. What were the odds he'd bump into a lady with as deep a sense of checks and balances as he had and who understood the importance of Doritos to boot? "I completely agree. But you didn't get in my way. I got in yours."

Her slender eyebrows lifted over her incredible blue eyes. "Do you want the chips or not? Clock's ticking. He might even now be hunkered down in the corner, ripping that ba

g open to feast on his bounty. Last chance to be a pig-hunting duo."

He could not pass that up. Four hands were always better than two, despite the lack of human-over-animal dominion thus far. "You take that aisle, and I'll take the perimeter."

The redhead spun away to creep in the direction he'd suggested without argument, so there was really nothing left for him to do but head toward the heavy glass front door in hopes of glimpsing the Dorito thief.

Nothing. No gray-and-white fat rolls. Just a couple of smirking ex-SEALs who were lounging by the magazine rack, not even pretending they were doing anything other than watching the show unfolding. As if Caleb had designed all this strictly for Tristan and Hudson's viewing pleasure. Ingrates.

"Got him!" the woman called, and Caleb dashed toward her voice, angling around a freestanding cardboard display of dragon fruit—which seemed oddly appropriate for a grocery store with live pigs.

But when he rounded the corner, the redhead glanced up from her crouch and the pig took that opportunity to wiggle free from her small hands. Piggy's momentum knocked her backward to the linoleum, but she sprawled so gracefully it was almost like it had been intentional.

"Dang it," she spit out, and Caleb had to grin at her ladylike choice of words.

Welcome to Texas.

Before he could take even a tiny step in her direction to help her up, the pig dashed toward the space between Caleb's feet, and through some miracle, he managed to snag the bag of chips from its mouth before the curly tail cleared the obstacle.

"Victory," the redhead announced wryly as Caleb held up the bag triumphantly and then immediately stuck out his free hand to help her up.

Which he should have done way before now, but he'd only had a split second to react. A true gentleman would have forgone chips for a lady in distress.

She accepted Caleb's outstretched hand readily enough though. "I'd give you my card for the next time you need a plus-one for your pig-wrangling party, but once was enough for me."

He was too busy enjoying the feel of her hand in his to comment, but then she broke the contact far too soon, as if she hadn't even been affected by the heavy awareness that had dropped over them both. It had so many teeth he was frankly shocked goose bumps hadn't started popping up all over her pretty skin.

They had sure popped up on his.

He'd never been this caught up in a woman this fast, and not just because she was beautiful. Anyone who willingly jumped into the fray alongside him earned instant respect, though he couldn't deny she was a lot easier on the eyes than the guys on his team. Red hair had just become his favorite, and hers was deep, rich, and hanging in lush curls to the middle of her back.

The Dorito victory paled in comparison to this chance meeting of... "I didn't catch your name."

Before she could respond, their little moment splintered to pieces as a clean-cut guy with an expensive haircut materialized between them. Not really materialized, like poof there he was. But the guy's back-off vibe sure did.

"Ready to go?" he asked the redhead pleasantly.

She glanced toward the intruder, who needed to vanish faster than a heartbeat. But the redhead nodded with a smile and stepped into the other man's space with the kind of deliberate move that marked them a couple.

Dang it, indeed.

“Nice to meet you,” she called over her shoulder. “Enjoy your Doritos.”

So she would remain both nameless and unavailable in his thoughts. Just as well. He hadn’t driven cross-country to this tiny dot on the map to fulfill that part of the prediction his pen pal Serenity Force had dropped on him.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

He fingered the letter she'd written him while he'd still been in Syria. The worn paper would fall apart eventually, but he'd carried it in his pocket for every second of the horrific events over the past eight months, rereading it often. So he didn't have to pull it out to recall what she'd scratched onto the page.

You feel a strong desire to replant your roots. A move to a new area is your opportunity to meet your soul mate. With her, you'll experience a deep sense of intimacy and shared emotional values.

Replanting, yes. Soul mates, no. Not really. Intimacy meant sharing everything, including the demons that had hitched a ride with him as he shook the dust off both Syria and the Navy for the last time.

No woman deserved to be dumped into the middle of the mess that was Caleb's head right now. The prediction had gotten him off his rear end and onto the road in search of Superstition Springs, the tiny town near Austin where Serenity lived, and that was the full extent of its power.

Knowing that, rationalizing the implausibility of a woman he'd never met in person having some kind of precognitive ability to see his future—even repeating it to himself over and over—hadn't stopped him from longing for it to be true. That maybe he could find someone meaningful in Superstition Springs.

As if he'd needed another reminder that magic didn't exist, the redhead's splash of cold water on his interest served as a stellar recap. It didn't matter if she had great qualities like a nice laugh and a sense of fair play. He wasn't fit for a relationship right now.

Caleb took his Doritos to the cash register so he could pay for them and get on with his new life. His band of former SEALs had been cut loose from everything familiar, and it was up to Caleb to steer this ship in the right direction, namely to a place where they could regroup. Rebuild. Heal maybe. Forget about Syria and all the events that had come along with that godforsaken place. Superstition Springs was plan B, and C didn't exist.

Two

"That was something," the cashier offered in a twangy voice heavy with Texas heritage.

He smiled at the markedly short cashier. She couldn't have been more than four nine or ten and stood on a step stool so she could see over the counter, which explained why she might not have jumped into the pig fracas despite having clearly watched it.

"That pig a regular customer?" he asked.

The cashier grinned back. "Only on Tuesdays. That's when Farmer Moon brings me fresh produce. His truck had a flat, so he's cussing at it out back. Darling wanders when she gets bored. We make sure nothing happens to her."

Darling. Caleb had to laugh. The pig was a girl and a pet. Of course she was. This tiny town was a long way from California and not solely in distance. "Noted. I'll steer clear of buying groceries on Tuesdays from now on."

"You sticking around, stranger?" The cashier stuck her hand out without waiting for his affirming nod. "I'm Mavis J. We don't get newbies too often. Welcome."

The famous Mavis J that Serenity had mentioned in her letters. No one knew what the J stood for, and it was a bit of a running joke among the townspeople. His pen pal had

never mentioned the colorful name of the store Mavis ran though, likely because it didn't seem all that strange to Serenity.

Caleb shook her lined hand, noting Mavis was a good bit older than he might have originally supposed. Probably in her fifties or sixties, but her stature and general cheery demeanor made her seem much younger.

"Thanks. Caleb Hardy. These are my mates, Hudson Rafferty and Tristan Marchande."

He jerked his head toward the ingrates as they wandered over to meet Mavis now that Caleb had dragged them into the intros, both of them shaking her hand like good boys.

"Not often we get such esteemed company," Mavis said, her eyes on Caleb's chest where his dog tags had made an appearance courtesy of Bacongate. "What branch?"

"Navy," Caleb said almost without flinching and left it at that. One day he'd be able to remove his tags without feeling like he'd simultaneously shed a part of his soul. "We've taken enough of your time. I'm sure we'll be back."

"Since this is it, there's no back to come to," she corrected, her eyes dancing. "What you see is what you get when it comes to Superstition Springs. Till next time."

With that cautionary note ringing

in his ears, Caleb led the way out of Voodoo Grocery, stepping out onto the main street of the town where he'd kind of parallel parked the Yukon if you squinted and ignored the fact that there was no curb. At least pavement stretched the length of the main strip, albeit cracked and sun worn.

Across the street, an old-fashioned hotel painted white with a spindle-edged balcony like in a western movie nestled up next to a smaller building with boarded-up windows. Individual letters had once been nailed to the area above the door to spell out the word Clinic. The letters had vanished at some point, but the paint had discolored enough behind them to still form the word. There was another shop with a carved wooden sign that said Antiques, and a few dark pieces peeked out from the window, but that didn't necessarily mean it was still in business.

"So this is it?" Tristan asked with a tinge of disbelief coloring his tone. "Is that what the cashier meant? There's nothing else but this one lone street with these few dilapidated buildings?"

Isaiah and Rowe clambered out of the Yukon, where they'd likely gone so Rowe didn't have to put weight on his bad side for very long. The five of them stood on this very short, very dusty road and surveyed the place they'd traveled two days to reach.

Doritos needed, stat. Caleb ripped the bag open and shoved half the bag down his throat before pausing for a breath. Nothing bad could happen while you were eating Doritos. It was a rule. He'd had a hard time procuring any while overseas, which explained why Syria had taken such a turn for the worse.

Superstition Springs was supposed to be the answer to everything. Serenity had sold them on that concept via her many letters to the team over the past year as they tramped all over Syria in vain pursuit of invisible pockets of al-Qaeda operations. She'd talked about her town so much they felt like a part of it, and when she'd let slip that Superstition Springs was in trouble, Caleb had jumped at the chance to help her.

Now that they were here? Nothing like Caleb had envisioned. But that didn't make it bad, did it? "What were you expecting, Marchande? A parade?"

"Non, mon frère." Tristan slid a hand across the smooth strands of hair at his temple

as if searching for strays that had dared escape from his careful topknot. He was definitely the only SEAL in existence who could pull off a stubby ponytail with such flair. “But maybe a little more of a hint that we made the right move. Otherwise, laissez le bon temps rouler.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“Cut the French, Le Torch,” Hudson said, hauling out Tristan’s SEAL nickname because he knew the other man hated it, mostly due to the fact that it wasn’t intended as a homage to his skill with burning stuff. “It makes you sound like a pimp.”

“Yes, mother.” Tristan snickered. “You’re just jealous that you don’t speak it. Maybe you should find a French girlfriend to teach you some stuff, and then you’ll know what I’m saying.”

“Or use Google translate like the rest of us,” Isaiah offered helpfully, earning an elbow to his ribs courtesy of Hudson, who had obviously pulled his punch or Isaiah would have a lung puncture right about now.

“All of you shut it,” Caleb said mildly, long used to the bickering among the guys when they didn’t have enough to occupy their attention.

They instantly stopped talking, because they still followed him no matter what, for whatever reason. Sure, once upon a time he’d taken his platoon commander’s suggestion to build a small strike team—and they’d been light, fast, and efficient on countless ops—but that had been before. He’d lost the right to lead anyone much farther than to the bathroom.

Caleb hadn’t expected everyone to come with him to Texas when he’d dropped the idea on them. But they all had, despite the implied lunacy of driving cross-country to help the stranger who had been penning letters to the five SEALs regularly during their last deployment.

Except Serenity Force wasn’t a stranger. Maybe they’d never met in person, but he

knew her well from her many colorful letters. They'd connected via the pages they'd exchanged. She was more like a surrogate mom, and in a lot of ways, Caleb owed her. She'd motivated him to get off his butt and fight for his future when the Navy had discharged all five SEALs without fanfare or apology.

He'd wanted to crawl in a hole, pretend he was still a SEAL, put off the rest of his life. Serenity had offered him an alternative, a place for his team to get back on their feet. Granted, she didn't yet realize that her comments about threats toward the town she loved had spurred him to pack up and drive to her rescue. But still.

He aimed to earn his way back to the man he'd been before Syria. Before he'd learned he was capable of such enormous destruction and that the weight of it would feel so crushing some days. If he could find a way to make restitution for the sins he'd committed in the town of al-Sadidiq, his skin might fit right again.

He pointed to the one building that looked like it had been painted during this decade. The letters stenciled on the window spelled out Ruby's in old-fashioned curlicue font, heavy on the gold leaf.

As the other four SEALs eyed the building, the silence stretched. Pointedly. So Caleb filled it. "That's the place Serenity talked about in her letters. The diner. Ruby's is where you can count on finding everyone in town at some point during the day. No time like the present to get started on this adventure."

"It's barely a town," Hudson argued. "I don't get what there is here worth saving."

He'd jumped into the SUV readily enough when they rolled out of Coronado for the last time, but outside of that, he hadn't offered much in the way of his opinion of the plan. They called him Stillwater for a reason. What was on the surface hid enormous depths, but it took an act of congress to disturb Hudson Rafferty's passive exterior.

“That’s not for us to decide,” Caleb said with a curt slice of his hand. “It’s important to Serenity. So it’s important to us. Anyone who thinks different, here’s the keys to the Yukon.”

He dangled the key fob from two fingers, but no one grabbed it.

Caleb’s little brother, Rowe—little being relative; they’d been the same size since Rowe’s fifteenth birthday—bumped his elbow as he moved in closer as a show of solidarity. Still trying to make up for Syria, most likely. Caleb had told him over and over it wasn’t his fault that the intel on al-Sadidiq had been bad.

It was Caleb’s.

“It’s a long drive back to Coronado,” Rowe reminded the others in his gravelly voice—lingering effects of having half a building fall on him during the raid. “And there’s nothing there for us.”

Rowe had gotten better. He had. One day, Caleb wouldn’t have to work so hard to convince himself of that. The sight of his brother’s broken and mangled body after they’d dug him out still flashed across the movie screen in his head at odd times, usually right when he was feeling like it was going to be okay.

As always, Rowe was all in with Caleb, which wasn’t so much of a plus lately. Like a lemming, the elder Hardy had led his brother right off a cliff. He hadn’t taken care of his brother like he should have. Superstition Springs would fix that too. Somehow. Caleb was counting on the town to heal all the wounds that the team had amassed, even the invisible ones.

“No one’s going anywhere,” Isaiah piped up, which was not a surprise. “We’re in this together. Right?”

Isaiah never quit making sure they all stuck together. The team needed his optimism and enthusiastic kicks to the rear now more than ever.

Hudson fielded Isaiah's pointed glance with a shrug and crossed his arms to slump down in a deliberate not-going-anywhere pose. With a long-suffering sigh, Tristan scrubbed at his three-day-old beard.

"Sure, whatever," he said loftily. "This place is bound to be loaded with backwoods farmer types who'll make me look like a GQ cover model in comparison. I can't miss with the chicks here."

Caleb had to laugh. "I have no doubt. Can't have you losing your ladies' man gold club status in the midst of your undying altruism toward Serenity's town."

"Make no mistake. We're here because we need something else too," Tristan said quietly, his voice flickering with things unspoken, things they'd shared and couldn't erase. "I'm willing to give it a chance."

"Me too," Isaiah threw in, which was echoed by Rowe. Hudson's agreement took the form of a nod, but from him, that was like signing his name in blood on the dotted line.

And that's why Isaiah had earned the nickname Elmer over and over. He was their glue and always would be, corralling tough nuts like Tristan and Hudson with ease.

Good. Caleb tried to swallow and found it difficult again. "Let's meet our future head-on then."

The guys followed him down the street to Ruby's, where if he'd interpreted Serenity's letters correctly, they'd find their pen pal. Probably they should have started there, but Caleb had needed Doritos for fortification. Not that they'd helped

settle his nerves.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

They were here. In Superstition Springs. The long journey was over, and yet it was only beginning. What if he'd made another mistake?

Caleb could see shadows moving around behind the tinted glass, which meant either ghosts were inside or live people. At this point, he was prepared for either, and standing around on the street wasn't getting them any closer to the goal. He opened the door, which had one of those old-fashioned ringers that trilled to announce their presence. Five former SEALs spilled over the threshold.

It would have been fitting somehow if all the conversation in the place ceased as curious faces turned to see the strangers invading their peaceful existence. Maybe there would be some whispers among the patrons about who these larger-than-life men were, speculation as to whether they were lost. One pretty waitress would come forward with a smile to welcome them, her uniform crisp and neat but doing little to hide the spectacular, farm-raised body beneath it.

That's not what happened.

Three

An attractive woman who could be forty or a well-preserved fifty-five stood behind the long, worn counter dotted with upside-down coffee cups, who eyed them all like she'd been rooting around in her freezer for hamburger meat and stumbled over prime rib. She was the only soul in the entire diner.

"You boys missed the exit for Austin," she called in a surprisingly honeyed voice that could have easily segued her into a career doing commercials or radio instead of

landing her in a Podunk town in Nowhere, Texas. “By about sixty miles. My coffee eats Starbucks for breakfast, but I doubt you’d think so. Want some anyway? I don’t have to-go cups, so you’ll have to sit like civilized humans or do without.”

“Ah, we... will have coffee,” Caleb agreed with a glance at the others for confirmation. “And we’re here on purpose. Are you Ruby? From the sign?”

“I’m Ruby,” she established as she fetched a carafe from the warmer behind her and dumped it all out in the sink while they watched as if they’d never seen coffee made before. “From Austin and glad to see it in my rearview mirror. I came first. The sign came second. I’ll make you a fresh pot while you tell me why on God’s green earth you’d come here on purpose.”

Isaiah slid into a seat at the end of the counter and flipped his worn mug over in anticipation of the coffee to come. You could always count on him to be first in line, especially if he sensed the others needed the path greased. “We’re friends of Serenity’s. Do you know Serenity Force?”

Ruby paused in the midst of measuring coffee grounds, her plucked brows raised as she pointed at him with her spoon. “Everyone knows everyone here. No place to hide. The real mystery is how you know her. If she’s left town once in the past ten years, I’ll dance on this counter for you.”

Tristan grinned at her with a once-over that would have been smarmy coming from someone who didn’t have his charm. “I’d pay for that privilege. That would be something to see.”

“No doubt,” she advised him with a wink as she flicked on the coffee maker. “It’s been a while since I’ve practiced my moves, so I’m a bit rusty, but you get your dollars ready just in case.”

Without missing a beat, Tristan's smile grew warmer. "You look all practiced up to me."

"Aren't you sweet?" she said, and her laugh had that pleased tinge to it as if she hadn't been flirted with nearly enough lately. "But seriously. I know everyone Serenity knows. And I would have heard if she'd befriended a bunch of strapping boys like y'all."

Boys. That made every one of them grin. Ruby was something else. A fitting next stop on the quirky express that made up this interesting town.

But Caleb had an agenda, and flirting with older women wasn't on it. He made a mental note to remind Tristan that the women here weren't used to his kind of attention, especially not the ones twice his age. Unless he had a serious interest in the much older woman, which Caleb doubted was the case, he needed to tone it down. Flirting was like breathing to a guy like Marchande—he did it without a first, let alone second, thought.

But that was later. Serenity was now. "She wrote to us while we were deployed. So we're here to um... meet her."

If that sounded as lame out loud as it had in his head, they were done before they'd started. Calling ahead might have been a better plan. But why beat around the bush? They had nothing else to do except wallow in the reality of an honorable discharge. As if tacking honorable to the concept might lessen the sting of the involuntary part.

Ruby took the whole thing in stride though, like a champ. "Well, she'll be along in a minute."

"Really?" Caleb glanced around. They'd been talking to Ruby since they walked in the door, and she hadn't moved other than to start the pot of coffee. He'd been about

to ask her directions to Serenity's house or if she could call her or something since the woman in question hadn't been present in the diner after all. "Because you set off a secret bat signal?"

Ruby patted his hand patiently. "Because this is Superstition Springs, honey. We don't need bat signals in order for everyone in town to know your business before you do. Either someone will mention it to her or she'll sense it. Serenity's pretty tapped in to the universe."

On cue, the door chimed, announcing the presence of someone new. Caleb swung around.

Serenity.

It had to be her. How else could he explain the sudden sense of recognition despite never having seen a picture of his pen pal? Her flowing gray hair moved with her as she streamed into the diner, her careworn face beaming. She wore a long, multicolor dress pieced together like a quilt and earrings that dripped with sparkles. One by one she let her gaze rest on each of them.

"Which one of you is Caleb?" she asked, her voice as warm as the smile she treated him to when he stepped forward to shake her hand.

She was having none of that. Pulling him into her embrace, she hugged him fiercely, wrapping him up in a circle of tenderness the likes of which he hadn't felt in a long time.

"Hi, Serenity," he said gruffly, mystified why he was so emotional all at once.

It was just... well, he hadn't expected her to be so welcoming, so motherly, right off the bat. Why this surprised him, he couldn't say. She'd been exactly like this in her

letters, open, caring, never too busy to write. Caleb and Rowe had been on their own for a long time since their parents had been killed in a car accident during their first deployment to Iraq a million years ago. Who could blame him for seeking a mom figure?

You never got too old to want someone in your life who remembered your birthday and loved you just because. Honestly that might have been at least a quarter of his motivation for coming to meet her.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“What are you boys doing here?” she asked as she finally released him and then shook her head with a laugh before he could ask why she hadn’t predicted it. “Never mind. I don’t care! I’m happy to see you. You must be Rowe.”

She moved down the line to give his brother the same engulfing hug, remarking how much he looked like Caleb, a falsehood that Rowe took with good grace. The scar down the side of his left cheek wasn’t completely covered by his full beard, but she seemed not to notice it. His brother had never mentioned what kinds of things he wrote to Serenity in his own letters, so Caleb had no idea if she knew he’d lost most of the hearing in his left ear. Rowe didn’t talk about it, so neither did Caleb.

Serenity moved on like a whirlwind determined to scoop up all five men in record time.

“I’d know you anywhere, Tristan,” she said and pulled him down into her arms, a trick and a half since he topped out at six four and Serenity was nearly a foot shorter. “That ponytail is a dead giveaway.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tristan intoned, clearly amused as he hugged her back, then let her go. “I wasn’t kidding in my letters when I said I was growing it out.”

“Hi, Serenity, it’s me, Isaiah.” He grinned as she squealed over him, and he nearly picked her up off the ground with his enthusiastic hug. “We’ve come a long way to meet you.”

“I don’t doubt that,” she said, pushing her gray hair back behind her ears as she focused on the last man in the line, her eyes softening. “I won’t make you hug me,

Hudson Rafferty. But welcome to you the same.”

He nodded and shook her hand without comment, but Caleb knew she’d scored major points with him by not making a big deal out of the fact that he didn’t like to be touched. And that she’d realized that about him in the first place.

“Now listen here,” she said briskly. “Ruby, why don’t you pour me a cup of that coffee and let me sit with my boys for a bit.”

So that was it then. They were boys in this neck of the woods. Caleb couldn’t hate it though; it was kind of nice to have these ladies think of them as young, when in reality, they were a bunch of battle-hardened warriors who had blood on their hands. So much blood it weighed down Caleb’s shoulders. He felt every minute of his thirty-one years, and every breath aged him in his soul where it co

uldn’t be undone by a sweet mom type calling him a boy.

The other woman hummed her agreement. “Only if I get to join you. First I’ve heard of you having boys, so there’s no way I’m missing a second of this.”

Ruby didn’t wait for anyone’s permission. She hustled them all to a large booth in the corner that might seat a bunch of normal people comfortably but couldn’t begin to accommodate five solidly built ex-SEALs and two fascinated women.

Always eager to maintain his lone-wolf status, Hudson did his part to make room by grabbing a chair from one of the other tables and swinging it around backward to sit in it astride. Old habit. If the back of the chair shielded your torso, less of a chance of being torn up in the event either shrapnel or shots came your direction.

Even in Superstition Springs, you couldn’t take the SEAL out of the man. Discharged against his will or not.

Ruby fetched the coffeepot and filled seven steaming cups with the contents, then untied the old-fashioned half apron she wore around a simple blue dress, dropping it on the counter. She slid into the already crowded booth, nudging Tristan good-naturedly with her hip. Winking, Tristan stretched his arm across the back of the booth behind her shoulders to accommodate her, his charm out in full force as she cozied up to him, all smiles.

Granted, the seating was already cozy. But still. Caleb hadn't had a chance to warn Marchande off his game. Hopefully Ruby had some defenses in place against a smooth dog gone wild in a small town.

"Tell me what brings you all this way," Serenity demanded and poured sugar into her coffee without looking at it, her attention so focused on Caleb that she seemed to miss Tristan's shenanigans. "When Mavis told Augusta Moon that a bunch of hot Navy guys had come through her store, I knew it was you. And you better be planning to stay for at least a few days so I can get to know you in person."

Hot Navy guys. That was one he'd never heard before, at least not to his face. Marchande wasn't too ugly if you squinted a lot, and Isaiah had weird eyes, one blue and one brown, that women fawned over for some reason. But the rest of them... Mavis was being kind.

And since she'd tipped off the lady they'd come to rescue, he owed her a word of thanks. Absently Caleb tapped the Formica tabletop full of scratches and stains that had their own stories, all of which would surely be easier to tell than his own.

"You can't read my mind?" he teased, only he wasn't exactly teasing—he was half hoping she could.

Then he didn't have to explain the swirl of uncertainty that had been riding shotgun in his chest for so many months. Or how he'd failed his team, led Rowe straight into

danger, and then somehow packed up five former SEALs in a Yukon headed to Texas.

It sounded crazy. All of it. Especially the part where he could earn his way into redemption by neutralizing the still-nebulous threat to this town. Which he knew nothing about. What had he been thinking?

“My extrasensory perception doesn’t work like that,” Serenity explained with an indulgent smile. “The universe announces its news to me on its own timetable. I only wish I could get it to whisper things on demand. It would save me a lot of trouble.”

A bit deflated, Caleb nodded. After that, there was no way to lead up to it, so he spilled his plan in one fell swoop.

“We’re here to help you, Serenity,” he told her as his voice cracked unexpectedly. “For as long as you’ll let us. We packed up and left California.”

She blinked. “Help me? I’m all right. What are you talking about?”

“Your letters,” he reminded her. Of course, that didn’t really narrow it down, and the guys started shifting around restlessly, which in turn made him self-conscious. “You mentioned that Superstition Springs was in trouble. We want to fix it for you. That’s why we’re here.”

“Oh, honey. That’s really sweet but...” She pinched the bridge of her nose, which did not ease the feeling that a live eel had gotten loose in his gut. “This is not your problem to fix. You boys stay a few days, see the sights, and head on home.”

“We don’t have a home,” Tristan corrected flatly, and the others chimed their agreement. “You know we’re not welcome back in Coronado.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

She should. In one form or another. They'd all written her with their version of the events that had unfolded in al-Sadidiq. When you destroyed the wrong village in another country, they didn't tend to look too kindly on the foreign forces responsible. The Navy had a PR issue on their hands, and Caleb's strike team became the sacrificial lambs slaughtered in the name of Syria's goodwill toward the US.

They needed to atone for that mistake, bad intel aside.

That was the real reason they were all here.

"Sweetie, you're welcome here. Of course you are," she said and stretched to pat Tristan's hand, her maternal smile tinged with a note of caution that warned them she wasn't about to recant her previous statement. "But I shouldn't have burdened you with my struggles over what's happening to this town. Least ways not so that you thought enough of it to drive all this way. Y'all put all that nonsense out of your heads."

There was far more to this story she wasn't saying, important information that she'd held back for some reason.

Caleb glanced at Hudson for confirmation, and the other man gave a slight nod, his experience with questioning baddies so ingrained he automatically assessed anyone's body language for tells. Even when the person in question was a sweet lady they'd never met.

"I don't think you understand," Isaiah said gently and took Serenity's hand without hesitation, curling it into his. "Your struggles are not a burden. We want to help you.

Tell us what's happening here so we can stop it.”

Genuine tears formed in her eyes as she smiled, somehow encompassing them all in the expression as if she'd hugged them at once. “I don't know what to say. I wish you could help. But this mess with Havana... it's a family matter. You can't get in the middle of it.”

Havana was Serenity's niece, who had come to live with her aunt in Superstition Springs along with her two sisters when their parents had died back when they were all still kids. Caleb knew that from her letters—in fact, it had been one of the major factors that solidified their bond since Caleb had lost his own parents—but how the niece factored into this was still a mystery. “I thought Havana left to go to college. Did she come back?”

“She came back all right,” Ruby announced sourly, apparently with no qualms about butting into the discussion. “With her developer fiancé in tow, determined to throw her weight around with talk of razing the main downtown area to the ground in order to build a shopping center.”

The diner's owner practically spat the word, her opinion on that idea clear. Of course, if Havana had a plan to demolish the old buildings in this area, Ruby's would be included in that. It didn't take a rocket scientist to guess whether she'd be on board.

“That's ridiculous,” Isaiah insisted immediately. “You can't destroy all this history, and neither can she come in here and start knocking down buildings. There are laws and zoning restrictions—”

Serenity shook her head. “The land for the town was donated by a wealthy patron in the nineteen sixties. This used to be an artist's colony way back in the day, and it's been privately owned since then.”

“Well, that’s good.” Relieved, Caleb sipped his coffee, his mind already ten steps ahead. “That means she can’t do anything without permission of the owner. Who is that?”

“All of us.” Ruby spread her hands. “We own the town jointly. We made it legal when we incorporated way back in the day. And she’s not talking about getting permission. She’s offering millions of dollars to the residents to sell, and some of them act like they’re considering it. Others won’t. Neighbors who have been friends for decades are suddenly not speaking to each other, fighting over it. It’s a terrible thing when a girl raised here can’t see the harm she’s causing with her shiny urban-planning degree.”

“Hush now.” Serenity firmed her mouth and shot Ruby a look. “You’re airing our dirty laundry to the guests, and they don’t need to get caught up in what’s nothing more than a family squabble.”

Well, that was one way to put it. Caleb had a few more things he could say about Havana and her plan to ruin a town her aunt loved. How she was already causing division and strife. And that pretty much put the stake in the ground.

Caleb wasn’t going anywhere. “This is not a family matter, Serenity, or rather it’s not only that. There’s right and there’s wrong, and turning Superstition Springs into a shopping mall makes literally no sense. Who’s going to drive all this way to shop for crying out loud?”

The scenery in Superstition Springs was... sparse for lack of a better word, and there wasn’t much but scrubby trees and hilly terrain to stare at for an hour until you got here. Serenity’s niece must have some kind of fantastic marketing plan if she thought she’d get folks to drive all this way.

Serenity and Ruby glanced at each other, and Serenity shook her head, eyes shut.

“It’s for the people who will come to the resort Havana’s fiancé is building. That part is a done deal. He bought land outside the city limits from the county. I have to admit, I was all for the resort, at first. The town needs some traffic. But that was before I found out there was more to it.”

“Some of the townspeople are blaming Serenity for being in favor of it,” Ruby filled in bluntly. “And some simply because Havana is her blood. They aren’t too fond of her right now.”

“They’re saying I’m influencing people one way or the other. I can’t tell them how to vote,” Serenity continued, her voice cracking. “I wouldn’t. They have to make this decision on their own. Either their home is for sale or it’s not, and a town that’s little better than a speck on the map is definitely not everyone’s cup of tea. We need to grow. The town is too small to continue on without the resort. But I’m not saying knock down the heart and soul of this town!”

The emotional distress in her voice affected everyone. Caleb could see it in the line between Rowe’s brows and the tight se

t of Hudson’s mouth. And yeah, his own heart hurt for Serenity as she laid out the bare bones of the dilemma.

And yet she still wasn’t telling them everything. Her niece had put her between a rock and a hard place, forcing her to choose between family and neighbors, progress and preservation of history. Serenity needed someone in her corner who didn’t have an agenda.

“Don’t worry,” Caleb said firmly. “I’ll tell them how to vote.”

Serenity glanced at him sharply. “You’ll tell them? What are you about, Caleb Hardy?”

He shrugged. This was all so obvious. Finally his purpose had gained crystal clarity.

Serenity's letters had led him to this path, and he blessed her for it. All five of them had left Syria a little bit broken and a whole lot determined to make restitution. They'd destroyed a town half a world away. Here was an opportunity to build one up. It was nearly poetic.

At the same time, he could create a place for his team, a home. He wasn't the only one searching for something more, and he wasn't the only one without a family outside the team. Permanence would allow them all to replant their roots. They deserved to have something good happen for once.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“You need someone on your side who can see the big picture and take the emotion out of it,” he told her as the beauty of the opportunities available unfolded in his head. “We can bring in new business, revitalize this downtown area while keeping what’s great about it. The shopping center is not the only option. Havana’s got you upset and not seeing clearly. She doesn’t scare me. I’ll send her scurrying back to where she came from fast enough.”

The door jangled as someone pushed it open. On cue, all seven of them turned to see who had entered. A flash of red hair cut through Caleb’s gut. It was the woman from Voodoo Grocery, the other half of his pig-wrangling duo. A long liquid sensation unfolded inside him on the heels of the recognition. He hadn’t expected to see her again, had put her out of his mind because even if she hadn’t been passing through, she was unavailable. So was he, if you wanted to get down to brass tacks. This was the worst time to be thinking about a woman like that.

The jolt to his senses settled as he acclimated to the potent presence of the redhead, but the heaviness between them lingered, growing teeth the longer she stood there taking in the scene without saying a word.

“Hey, honey,” Serenity called, her voice growing more uneven. “Come meet my friends.”

“That’s Havana,” Ruby stage whispered unnecessarily as all the pieces clicked into place with a dull thud.

The redhead was Havana.

The same woman he'd volunteered to go toe-to-toe with on Serenity's behalf.

Four

Sure enough, there were five strangers crowded into the corner booth at Ruby's, as Havana's sister had reported. Only one of them wasn't a stranger. Not exactly, but only because Havana couldn't get the feel of his arms around her out of her head.

It shouldn't be so hard. They'd chased a pig who'd claimed squatter's rights to a bag of chips, she'd helped him corner the thief, and then Damian had broken up the charged moment between Havana and the shockingly well-built stranger like he should have. That was his job as her fake fiancé—keep all men away from her.

During a random phone conversation, Serenity had laid one of her kooky romantic predictions on Havana, and that was an additional complexity she did not need, not after her ex-fiancé had dumped her almost literally at the altar. Her heart was still bruised and her confidence in the gutter after that fiasco.

Poof. Damian Scott to the rescue. The prediction wouldn't be a factor if she already had a fiancé and it protected Serenity's feelings at the same time since Havana wouldn't have to explain yet again that she didn't believe in all that psychic mumbo-jumbo. Damian was such a sweet man for doing her this huge favor, and it wasn't like she'd forced him to go out of his way since they were working this Superstition Springs resort deal together.

Except he'd fallen down on the job, disappearing in pursuit of dental floss long enough for Havana to get wrapped up in a good-looking guy's arms. She'd only volunteered to help get the Doritos back because she'd thought the other half of the pig-chasing duo was lost or maybe on his way to La Grange from Austin. Never in a million years had she expected to see him again. Especially not sitting in a booth with four other guys all cut from the same cloth and chatting with her aunt like they were

lifelong friends.

“Am I interrupting?” Havana asked, strictly to get a feel for the climate in the diner.

Havana had sought out Serenity in hopes of starting over the discussion about selling to Damian’s investors, not realizing that the strangers half the folks had been buzzing about would be at the same table as the person she needed to have a private conversation with. Or that one of them would be him.

“No, honey,” Serenity insisted and held out a hand to motion her over. “Of course you’re not interrupting. You’re always welcome.”

But her tone said otherwise, which gave Havana pause. Who were these men? Cautiously she approached the table, evaluating each one. They shared a hardened look about them as if they’d seen some things that weren’t all that pleasant. Also, they were a unit. That much was clear from their identically closed expressions as if she was the outsider here.

Wasn’t she though? Even back in the day she’d never fit in here, no matter how hard she’d tried. So that’s why she wasn’t trying this time. She’d come to town armed with money and pots of it. Residents needed someone to look out for them who could offer something other than sentiment and emotion, neither of which paid the bills. Folks needed solid solutions and Havana had one: sell.

Growing up orphaned and poor had given Havana limited choices, so she knew the pain of wanting to go somewhere else—anywhere else—and having no means to do so. This was everyone’s opportunity to get ahead. It was baffling why Serenity was fighting her when all Havana was trying to do was help.

But fighting her she was. And Havana needed to sway Serenity onto her side so she’d stop poisoning the rest of the residents against Damian’s plans. The shopping center

wasn't just a means to help people—it was the only thing keeping her going. If her ex-fiancé didn't want her as a wife, she'd make sure someone wanted her in a professional capacity. That was all she had to work with. All she could manage right now.

“These are the military boys I wrote to while they were overseas,” Serenity announced as if Havana had been fully aware that her aunt had taken to sending letters to deployed soldiers. “They’ve come to visit.”

“We’ve come to stay,” the blond with the sleek topknot corrected. He half stood as he held out his hand to her, his gallant gesture hampered by the round table in his way. “Tristan Marchande. Pleasure.”

This one was slick. Polished. Knew his way around a tailor and a hairdresser but still looked like he could break a lesser man in half by intimidation alone. He was tall, even without benefit of being able to pull himself fully upright, and so pretty it almost hurt to look at him.

“I’m Havana Nixon, Serenity’s niece,” she said though odds were good this was not new information to any of them, judging by the half-full cups of coffee scattered around the table. “Thank you for your service to God and country. Glad to have you. We need new residents here.”

She meant it too. New people meant new perspectives, never a bad thing when Serenity had dug her heels in about this falling-apart town. Surely these guys who had traveled to the other side of the world and back would understand what she was trying to do here. Maybe they’d become allies in this fight.

Though to be honest, she didn’t really understand the opposition. Who didn’t want a pile of money? Damian’s resort deal wasn’t the bulldoze job Serenity had badmouthed it as. Havana wanted to rejuvenate Superstition Springs with an influx of

cash. Without that, more people would leave and the town would continue a slow decline until there was literally nothing left. But if people sold their land, they could

buy property near the resort and build a house. Start over in a new town that would spring up almost immediately, where there were jobs and culture. Or leave if they wanted to. Havana was giving them a range of choices that wouldn't be available to them otherwise.

The gaze of the other half of Team Doritos hadn't strayed from her face once, and being the sole focus of a man she'd had such a bone-deep response to was starting to make her a little breathless. Better to let that cat out of the bag pronto before it turned into something much bigger than it was.

With a bright smile, she offered her hand to him. "We've already met. All except for the exchange of names, that is."

"You've already met?" Serenity's gaze cut between them. "What on earth—"

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“Long story,” he said smoothly, his voice as ragged and fascinating as it had been back at Mavis J’s. “I’m Caleb Hardy.”

When he clasped her hand, the buzz that she’d convinced herself had been imaginary arced between them, nearly frying all her circuits as well as it had the first time.

“Caleb,” she croaked and snatched her hand to her side in hopes of jump-starting her brain back to some functional level, which did not work apparently.

By the time she could speak again, the other three men had introduced themselves, and the best she had to show for it was the impression that the one with a full beard had the same last name as Caleb, so they were brothers or cousins, or it was a raging coincidence that she knew nothing about because a man had touched her.

Ridiculous.

Time to get control of this crazy train. She cleared her throat. “Nice to meet you all. If I might steal you away, Aunt Serenity? I have something I need to discuss—”

“Actually,” Caleb drawled, forcing her attention back to his face, where a day-old shadow of whiskers had darkened his jaw to the point of distraction. “You and I need to have a conversation first.”

“We, um... what?”

“Clear out, Elmer,” he instructed the dark-haired one next to him, who moved instantly, allowing Caleb to slide from the booth.

Before she could peep out question one, he hustled her away from the table with a gentle grip on her elbow. No one at the table stopped him. Or said a word. Including her aunt, which was typical. She'd always let Havana take care of herself along with everyone else.

Too shocked to protest, she let him lead her a good four steps before she remembered her voice did actually work. "What are you doing? I need to talk to Serenity, not you."

"Oh, I disagree," he countered, and somehow he'd gotten her feet to move again. "Best we do this outside."

Outside? Where there were no witnesses? The man was former military, which explained why his arms were the size of a tree branch but not what he could possibly have to say to her privately.

Unless he'd mistaken pig wrangling as an expression of interest. Maybe that was considered courtship where he came from. Privacy meant loads of opportunity to flirt with a woman he'd decided to pursue. That stymied her so much she forgot to argue. Where was Damian when she needed him?

Back at the hotel, of course, because she'd stupidly told him she didn't need him while she tried some different persuasion techniques with Serenity—she had to figure out why she wasn't selling this deal, and having a discussion with the other half of Team Doritos wasn't going to get her closer to that.

Fine. Caleb Hardy wanted to talk—so did she. So she could tell him that strong-arm tactics didn't work on her. Once on the street, she jammed her hands down on her hips and whirled to face him. Holy cow, he was much closer than she'd realized and smelled like man and something clean, bright.

His eyes were brown. The dim light at Mavis J's hadn't revealed that, but out here in the sun, it was hard to miss the unusual almond color. Fascinated, she fell into them for a brief moment of insanity, recalling how he'd looked at her after helping her off the floor—as if she was special simply because she'd helped him chase a pig.

She liked helping, the rush of knowing she's made someone's life better. She liked it when people recognized her efforts even more. And he had. For a shining moment they'd had perfect cohesion. They could again; it was all right there in his eyes... She shuddered at the cocoon of awareness that had just formed between them and willed it away. Who cared what color the man's eyes were?

She took a step back. But he followed her, not letting her get more than an inch or two away.

"Stop that," she instructed throatily, mortified that he'd managed to affect her voice. "You're crowding me."

"Stop moving away," he countered, his voice low. "I'm trying to have a conversation that won't be broadcast to the entire town in under ten minutes."

The fact that he'd clued in on that possibility while she was still busy trying to get her reactions to him under control annoyed her for some reason. "You don't know how this town works, so stop pretending you do."

Pot, meet kettle. She was the last person who could claim to understand how this town worked. She'd left of her own free will eight years ago, not for a degree from the University of Texas that would mean she could chart her own destiny in the urban oasis of Austin. She'd met Cole, gotten engaged, had the world at her feet.

Or at least that was how she'd sold it to herself. In reality, she'd been running from the crushing responsibility that had fallen on her after her parents' death. Not only

had she been the one who looked out for her two younger sisters, sometimes she had to take care of Serenity too, who had gladly provided a home for three orphans but had no clue how to be a mother or manage adult responsibilities some days.

Then Ember had gotten pregnant. It was a testament to how out of control everything had gotten, a slap in the face. Too much. She'd fled.

And here Havana was, back in Superstition Springs with no husband, no job, and a mountain of guilt over leaving her sisters and Serenity to fend for themselves. Only to find out her aunt had set the entire town against her because she couldn't listen long enough to see that she and Damian were offering hope. Not change for the sake of change. Or for the sake of pulling the rug out from under people. But Serenity wouldn't even consider Havana's plans because they involved knocking down a few old buildings that were barely standing as it was.

Sometimes progress required sacrifice. A lesson Havana had learned well.

Crossing his arms, Caleb leaned on the corner of Ruby's, staring down his nose at her as if he had all the time in the world for her fit of bad temper. "Seems like you tracked me down quick enough."

She actually flinched. "What's that supposed to mean? I didn't come looking for you."

"Right. It's a coincidence that you showed up at the diner a mere fifteen minutes after I got here."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“The diner is where everyone goes!” And breathe. She scowled at him. Where did he get such ideas? “I was looking for Serenity. Like I said.”

“If you say you had no idea my team and I were there, I’ll call you a liar.”

Her mouth fell open. Caleb Hardy might be the best-looking man she’d ever met, but he was also the most infuriating. Thank goodness she hadn’t actually been interested in him. “I knew five strangers had wandered into Ruby’s. You were solo during the Dorito chase. With the pig. Explain to me how I could have predicted that the man who put his arms around me earlier would be one of the strangers everyone is talking about.”

Which wasn’t even the point. He had her so turned around she couldn’t see backward or forward.

Something that could only be described as heat climbed through Caleb’s almondy irises, and she cursed herself for noticing how gorgeous they were.

“That’s the part I remember too,” he murmured.

“I don’t remember that part.”

How dare he twist her words around like that, as if he knew she couldn’t quite brush off the way he’d touched her. He’d been gentle, yet firm. Holding her so carefully, as if he knew exactly which parts of her would break unless he kept her whole. He’d been moving fast, and if anyone else had crashed into her like that, they’d have both hit the floor. But he’d somehow managed to turn it into an embrace that should not

make her shudder to recall.

Okay, she remembered it pretty well. But he didn't have to know that.

He didn't have to know anything about her. Problem was, she couldn't shake the feeling that in reality, he knew everything. How she yearned to be a part of something whole and lasting, but being dumped had done such a number on her self-esteem that she'd rather lie to everyone about Damian being her fiancé than deal with the small possibility that Serenity's prediction might come true.

There was just something superaffecting about the way he watched her so pointedly. He was the type to miss nothing, no matter how much she might wish to keep secrets. Which meant he really shouldn't be looking at her that way.

"I'm engaged," she informed him, cursing the catch in her voice that would either tip him off that it was fake or alert him to the fact that she was still not quite sure how she'd ended up on this side of her wedding date without actually getting married. Or without anyone to take care of.

That's why the shopping center was so important. She needed that project if she couldn't have the marriage and husband she'd hoped for.

"I heard about that," he said.

The admission didn't change his expression an iota. Smug seemed to be his default now that they were having a real conversation instead of working together toward the mutual goal of reclaiming his snack.

"So I'm not looking for any man except for my fiancé," she continued, strictly to remind herself of that fact. Remind him. He was the one who needed to be told what was what. "Keep that in mind."

“Noted.”

“Is this really what you wanted to talk about?”

He let

the moment draw out until the tension threatened to flay her skin right from her bones. How did he do that trick where he got so still he didn’t move so much as a hair? If he’d been wearing a shirt the same color as Ruby’s clapboard exterior, he’d blend right in like a chameleon patiently waiting for an unsuspecting insect to crawl by. Then he’d pounce.

She shuddered again and wished she could blame it on a chill, but it was eighty-five in the shade, which was typical for Superstition Springs this late in April. What was not typical—Navy boys with an agenda she didn’t understand who seemed to have some kind of special ability to turn her brain into fettuccine.

“I wanted to be sure you and I were on the same page,” he finally said. “The shopping center? Not going to happen. I’m officially shutting it down.”

Heat flashed through her chest in an instant and not the good kind. “Hold your horses, mister. What business is my shopping center of yours?”

Her temper boiled up and over as he grinned. “That’s the first time anyone’s ever called me ‘mister.’ I feel like I should be sitting in a folding chair, cradling a twelve gauge as I protect my lawn.”

“This is not funny,” she practically spat. “You can’t waltz in here and throw down something like that. The shopping center is mine. I say what happens with it, and besides, this is not your town. You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I care about Serenity,” he said flatly, which shouldn’t have been able to pierce the wall of her temper. But did well enough to give her pause because obviously he thought she didn’t care about her aunt. “That makes it my business. If you care about her, you’ll take a long look around at what’s good for the town instead of what’s good for you and your slick boyfriend.”

Without even giving her a chance to explain that her shopping center was good for the town, Caleb turned and sauntered back into the diner, hands stuck in his back pockets as if they’d been discussing the weather instead of a complete stranger dictating the next steps of Havana’s career.

“He’s my fiancé,” she called out to the shut door, furious with herself for letting that man get the upper hand in their discussion. That wasn’t happening again.

Five

It turned out that Serenity owned the old-fashioned hotel next door to Voodoo Grocery and insisted on giving all five of them rooms for as long as they needed. There was a brief skirmish when Caleb insisted on paying for the rooms, and she insisted right back that they were guests, as if that precluded any talk of money.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

Finally she agreed to charge them half price, and Caleb took the deal, mostly because he'd more than repay the amount by taking up Serenity's torch for the town but also so they could move on. Rowe's bad side had to be hurting him, though he'd cut his tongue out before complaining. That's why Caleb had to watch out for him. His brother did a crap job of taking care of himself, and Caleb had a lot to make up for.

It wouldn't be awful for Caleb to shut his eyes for a bit either. Tired didn't begin to describe the weariness he felt down in his bones, which he'd blame on driving the better part of two days if asked.

Serenity chatted about the history of the hotel as she guided them through the front door into a foyer that had seen grander days. Naturally, the place had seen some action as a house of ill-repute during the town's oil boom days at the turn of the century and then morphed into a respectable hotel.

"You can feel the souls of the people who used to spend time here," she explained as she touched the walls reverently. "They speak to me often."

Caleb bounced up and down on the splintery hardwoods when Serenity wasn't watching, testing its strength to be sure a foot placed the wrong way wouldn't go through it. Seemed solid enough, but he made a note to go over the bones of this building with an expert at the first opportunity.

This hotel had all the hallmarks of a place that could easily be the crown jewel of Superstition Springs. Apparently no one could halt the resort from being built, but if the expensive cut of Havana's boyfriend's hair was any indication, mere mortals couldn't afford to stay there. Plus the resort would be positioned outside city limits.

The town needed a facility to house guests to the area, family and friends of residents for example, who wanted to be in the center of things and cared nothing about resort-type things like playing golf or going to the spa.

The guys all got settled in their individual rooms, one each in the five rooms on the second floor. Serenity showed him to his room last, and he didn't think that was an accident. Odds were good she had a healthy bit of curiosity about what he'd said to Havana but hadn't had a chance to ask after he returned to the diner and found the others in the middle of hashing out the sleeping arrangements.

The sparse room didn't have much to recommend it other than a bed and a simple nightstand, but it did feature a door that led out to the balcony overlooking the street. And it beat sleeping in dirt, one ear cocked for the sound of hostile footsteps or a stray word in Arabic that meant you'd be woken in a very unpleasant manner by someone wearing a balaclava.

"Thanks, Serenity," he told her and took one of her hands in his. The skin under his thumb felt paper thin, and for the first time, it occurred to him that Serenity was old enough to be his birth mother. "This is great."

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. He'd like to say he knew her well enough to guess what she might have on her mind, but they'd become acquainted via the written word, which she'd used often to express her thoughts. Now he could only go on instinct. Or ask her to write down what was bothering her, which sounded silly.

"Don't worry," he said and squeezed her fingers lightly. "I've got Havana handled."

"You're the one I'm worried about." Her laugh at least sounded genuine, and he liked that he could amuse her.

"I can take care of myself. She's got a lot of bark but not much bite." Though he'd

had an unavoidable fantasy or two about some other things he might do with her mouth now that he knew she had one on her.

Man, Havana was something else. He'd always assumed hot-tempered redheads were a stereotype, but she'd done her part to live up to it. All that fire and standing her ground had done something to his insides that wasn't going away anytime soon. He did enjoy a spirited woman. Good thing she was taken. Some other guy could figure out how to put all that energy to use.

"She didn't irritate you?"

Caleb cocked a brow at Serenity. "Not really. She called me mister. That was kind of funny, truth be told."

Actually, he'd gotten to the point where he almost couldn't wait to hear what came out of the woman's mouth next, from her G-rated expletives to her insistence that she didn't remember what it felt like to be in his arms immediately after admitting that she did. Strong women turned him on. He couldn't help it. Took a lot of pluck to keep up with him, that was for sure.

Relief spread across the older woman's face. "Okay, good. She can be a little off-putting, but she doesn't mean any harm."

"I can't honestly say that she did anything that could be described as off-putting." But she'd managed to pique his curiosity a good bit. Did Serenity not realize that Havana's tendency to say what was on her mind was her best quality? There was some tension between the lady and her niece that he didn't understand. "I told her the shopping center wasn't happening and left it at that."

Serenity's eyes widened. "Just like that? You told her? What did she say?"

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I stopped listening. There’s nothing she could come up with to sway me, so I’m letting her think on it awhile.”

That’s how you had to treat the enemy. No quarter. Traditional rules of war didn’t apply anymore, not when an al-Qaeda suicide bomber wore the same clothes as a noncombatant and often hadn’t picked up his first shaving razor yet. You couldn’t afford to give anyone a pass. Even if you really liked her.

“That’s amazing.” Serenity seemed

pretty confounded by a simple thing like laying down the law, which meant Caleb had arrived on the scene none too soon. “She’s used to running things her own way. My fault. She came to me already set in her ways, used to taking care of everything, and I always let her. Her two sisters worshipped her, and they were their own little unit. What did I know about raising young girls? Nothing.”

“You did the best you could.”

Not that he’d been there or had any special insight, but wouldn’t anyone in that situation? He’d stepped up to take care of Rowe, who’d been four months on the back side of eighteen when their parents had died. Convincing him to join the Navy had been a no-brainer, because then they’d be together, making Caleb’s job much easier.

Fast forward a decade—it turned out that stepping up didn’t give a guy superhuman strength to pull Volkswagen-sized chunks of a building off his brother. It had taken all of them to dig Rowe out, but there was never a scenario when Caleb would have left a man behind, regardless of whether they shared blood.

Never a scenario that would make it okay that he’d led Rowe—and the rest of his team—into danger. But he’d do what he could to balance the scales as best he knew how. That promise to himself and everyone else kept him going even in the face of

this wretched uncertainty that overtook him sometimes.

Serenity nodded her agreement. “I did do my best. Gave those girls everything I had, took them into this community and gave them a home. Makes this whole shopping center all the more upsetting. This is the town that welcomed three orphaned girls. Why can’t Havana honor that?”

The sheer disappointment lacing Serenity’s tone wrenched at something inside him. This wasn’t his town, and yet here he was trying to save it. You’d think someone with history might take a step back and reevaluate when met with resistance. Not Havana apparently.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

So he'd make her see reason.

"Do you think there's a chance we could do things the way you said?" Serenity asked hopefully. "Revitalize the downtown area and make it a place people would want to come?"

That's when Caleb realized Havana's plan to raze the town would affect Serenity's hotel too. No wonder the two of them were at such odds. His bewilderment at the fractures in their relationship grew. Did her niece have a clue how much Serenity loved this building? Caleb didn't believe in ghosts, but Serenity did, and he had every intention of honoring the ones she'd befriended in her hotel. Maybe Havana had been away too long to see that.

"Of course," he assured her. "Old-timey main strips with the original buildings still intact would be a huge draw. We just have to get some people to agree to open up shop here."

The vision unfolded in 3-D like a movie in his head. The row of buildings took on a sheen of prosperity, new signs, people strolling down the new sidewalk he'd put in. A candy store, spruce up the antique store, maybe a place that sold books. No pigs though.

On second thought... "You said the town used to be an artist's colony?"

At Serenity's nod, the entire canvas blanked out and reshaped itself. He might not have a fancy degree like Havana, but he could use his imagination.

The key here wasn't to remodel the town into a carbon copy of a hundred other historical spots. Maybe they should embrace the pigs. Let the people of Superstition Springs do their thing at the top of their lungs. Serenity was her own kind of different, dispensing love predictions when her extrasensory perception got the nudge. The only place in town to buy staples was called Voodoo Grocery for crying out loud. It wasn't hard to imagine that most if not all of the town's residents had more color than gray.

"I can see a shop that sells crystals and other new age stuff," he said as the plan fell open in his head. "Turn the antique store into a curio shop. Open a bakery called Spirits and Cupcakes, I don't know. This is Superstition Springs. Let's show the world that they too can find some magic in their lives."

Serenity clapped her hands, her eyes damp with emotion. "I love that idea, Caleb Hardy. You have to be the one to make it happen. I can see now that my prediction was always meant to bring you here."

Walked into that one. Magic might be on the horizon for other people but not him and not just because he didn't quite believe in such things. The power of suggestion went a long way toward fulfilling people's expectations about the mystical.

Sure, there was something special about the hotel that you could feel the moment you walked across the threshold, but it wasn't magic, and even if it was, Caleb didn't deserve special, not yet. After he'd built a prosperous town in memory of a Syrian village that had been victimized by five ruthless warriors trained to kill, then maybe.

Of course, he had no idea where to start. More than a decade of special warfare gave a guy the skills to HALO drop from a helicopter over the Mediterranean but not to create a tourist draw from scratch. Sure, he had some skill at seeing the big picture, but that didn't make him overly qualified at filling the gaps in a town that wasn't his—as Havana had so eloquently pointed out.

Maybe he should step back and let someone else run the intel on this op.

“I have some money,” Serenity offered hesitantly. “My grandmother left it to me, and other than buying this hotel from Goldie Mays, I haven’t done a thing with the balance. Could we use it to help make over the town?”

Blind trust. He’d done nothing to earn that. His team was one thing, but Serenity was another entirely, and it humbled him to have her so on board with whatever he might conjure up. She didn’t have anyone else to turn to. That much was clear. Her own niece couldn’t see past her ambitions to the vulnerable town that needed protecting. That alone meant he had to do this right. But he also cared. Inexplicably. He’d never set foot in this town before, and already he had a fierce need to see that vision for the town come to life.

It was the right thing, no question. He’d just have to find someone else to fill the leadership boots.

“Hold that money tight. It might come in handy later, but for now we need to work on getting the town to agree on the direction,” he said slowly, feeling his way through the steps. “If there are some who want to sell out to Havana and her shopping center, we gotta get them to see reason. We have to be united on this.”

“I knew you’d come to be something special to me,” she said, and she’d practically lit up with a glow that made her lined face beautiful. “I got a sense the moment I saw your name on the list of deployed servicemen who had no family.”

That speared him right through the gut. He’d always wondered how Serenity had first decided to pick up a pen and send an authentic handwritten letter to a stranger half her age. The letters had quickly become a lifeline, often bolstering his flagging spirits as the assignments in Syria got tougher and tougher the longer the conflict dragged on.

Eventually she'd started writing to the others on his strike team after he jokingly mentioned that they were jealous of him for gaining a surrogate mom. They all had family-shaped holes inside, only one of many reasons the four of them had jumped in the Yukon after him when he'd announced he was moving to Texas.

Caleb might not deserve his own magic, but even he couldn't deny that this had destiny written all over it. Maybe he believed in the power of suggestion a little more than he'd have admitted.

Six

The first time Havana came to live in Superstition Springs, Serenity had owned a tiny clapboard house nine miles from the center of town, off the dirt road that led to Farmer Moon's property. With window box air conditioners and the random space heater for the short but frigid winters, it hadn't been terribly comfortable, made less so by the fact that Havana'd had to share a room with Aria and Ember.

Aria had been seven and always did everything Havana said. But at nine, Ember and Havana were too close in age, and her sister did not recognize anyone's authority other than her own. Still didn't. Or at least that was Havana's assumption since they hadn't spoken in years, not since Havana had abandoned her sisters in desperate search of her own identity.

Which had been totally selfish. A knee-jerk reaction to Ember's pregnancy. Havana knew that. Had been living with the knowledge that she'd dumped all her responsibility and jetted off like she didn't care, except she did. Her life had turned into this push-pull of insanity where she yearned to be a normal teenager and couldn't in Superstition Springs.

Ember had fled Superstition Springs in presumed disgrace shortly after Havana, which was also Havana's fault. She should have been there to take care of Ember. At

least warn her sister away from that one life-wrecking bad decision. But her sister hadn't ever returned. Havana was the one back here begging for someone to give her another chance to prove she could take care of people as well as she thought she could. She wasn't going to cut and run this time.

Her aunt had bought the old Mays Hotel sometime during the eight years Havana had been away. Serenity lived on the third floor, which had been converted from single rooms into what could have been a trendy loft-style space if done correctly but instead had taken on a Winchester House patchwork feel, with hallways leading nowhere and walls half-painted with a hard line down the middle where the color just stopped.

It was quaint on a good day and weird all the rest of them.

But it was a place to stay, so she'd taken her aunt's offer of a room before realizing the extra bedroom in question already had an occupant—Aria.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

Fortunately, Havana didn't mind sharing with her youngest sister, who had moved to the hotel with their aunt instead of finding her own place. It was a chance for them to catch up while Havana was in town to work on her shopping center pitch, and anyway, the pickings were slim in Superstition Springs no matter what you were looking for, let alone a spare bed.

Aria was family, and Havana didn't have much of that left. Plus Aria still looked up to her, despite all of Havana's failings. That made her sister extraspecial.

Havana flopped on the quilted comforter to watch as Aria braided her waist-length hair in anticipation of

a shift at the diner where her sister waited tables for Ruby. The braid didn't do Aria any favors, muting the already dull red shade of her hair. Havana had gotten their mother's bold red, while Ember's had picked up a ton of gold highlights from their father that had blended into more of a strawberry blonde that worked well with her delicate skin.

Aria had long accepted her role as "the plain Nixon sister," as she called herself, and refused to lift a finger to work with what she had. No makeup, shapeless clothes, and her shoes made Havana want to cry. She'd pleaded with Aria to let her do something, a haircut, take her shopping, but no. Some things never changed.

"Sorry if I'm putting you out," Havana called, eager to connect with her sister again. Of course, the reason they weren't close anymore was Havana's fault, so she wouldn't blame Aria if she got a little frosty.

“Of course not. I’m the one who suggested it.” Aria glanced at her in the mirror she was using to view her weaving workmanship. “Though I have to admit, I don’t get why you’re not staying with your fiancé.”

Damian had taken a room at the Best Western in La Grange, which meant he was a good thirty minutes away over country back roads at any given time. It didn’t work so well when it came to faking their courtship but worked exceedingly well for Havana, who had no intention of sharing a room with any man. “You know Serenity. She’s got funny ideas about grown adults sleeping together in her house even if they do it at home.”

That was one of the main factors that had allowed Havana to come up with such a cockamamy idea as a fake fiancé. There was no way she could pretend to be engaged to someone like Damian Scott behind closed doors.

All at once, Caleb’s face sprang into her head and something twanged inside as, totally against her will, she got an image of how things would go if she’d asked him to be her fake fiancé. There wouldn’t be a whole lot of pretending, she had a feeling. He wasn’t the type to put up with fake anything.

The twinge turned into more of a spike as she recalled the very real feel of his arms around her. She shook it off. The man was a lunatic, barging in here and telling her he wasn’t going to allow her to build a shopping center like he had some kind of authority or something. Honestly.

Aria’s eyebrows arched in blatant interest. “Are you and Damian living together back in Austin? Do tell.”

She shook her head, glad they’d already worked that part out so their stories would be straight. “We’re waiting until after the wedding, and then we were thinking about building a house here.”

“In Superstition Springs?”

Havana couldn't blame Aria for her incredulity since she had hightailed it out of town as fast as she could after graduation. “I've been trying to tell everyone. I don't hate this town. I'm here to fix everything. Once the resort is built and there's a lovely shopping oasis nearby, this area will be hot property. People will love it. Best part, everyone can pick up premium land for a song before the boom.”

Including Havana. Serenity had called that idea “mercenary.” Havana called it due compensation. That's how a poor girl from the sticks got ahead, by being first in line. If the husband she'd so desperately wanted didn't want her, she'd invest all her time and energy in her career and this town. She'd find someone who wanted her help or die trying.

“That sounds fantastic,” Aria said loyally, which Havana could not get enough of.

She'd missed her sister's blind support. Sure, they'd talked by phone often, but it wasn't the same as being in each other's orbits again, holding a running conversation that they could pick up again hours later as if they'd never stopped. Havana had given up that right—and the right to her sister's support—when she'd fled Superstition Springs almost a decade ago.

It was on the tip of her tongue to confess to Aria that the engagement was fake. But she couldn't bear all the questions when Cole's betrayal still stung, even five months later. No one knew about Cole because she hadn't told anyone. If she had, Serenity might not have made her love prediction and none of this fake fiancé stuff would have been necessary. Honestly though, Havana liked having the barrier of Damian in place. Kept everyone from asking too many questions.

Her aunt's crazy “feelings” and “senses” had always cropped up at convenient times, usually when Serenity got overwhelmed with adult things like paying bills and

guiding a teenage girl through birth control options. This time Havana had no idea what Serenity hoped to gain from the prediction. Mysticism had no place with Havana, who preferred to chart her own destiny instead of leaving it to the stars.

Though she couldn't quite forget what her aunt had told her. Not when it hit a little too close to home.

Work success may overshadow the desire for a relationship, and a problem may arise in becoming a bit too pushy or aggressive. This is a turnoff to the person receiving your advances, but there is an opportunity to meet a new love through a business colleague or work-related event.

Not if she already had a fiancé! The brilliance of the Damian Scott plan could not be overstated. So what if the first part of the prediction put a worm of doubt in her stomach? She knew she came off the wrong way to people sometimes, but it wasn't because she was pushy. She cared; that's why she tried to help.

"I have to get to Ruby's," Aria said with a frown, clearly unhappy to end their conversation as well. "Come by later. It'll be slow by nine. Bring Damian and have some pie so I can get to know him. You don't come around enough."

By design. She'd been busy trying to figure out how she'd gone wrong with this shopping center pitch. She'd first floated the idea by Serenity several months ago since she—rightly so—suspected her aunt would be a factor in her success. She'd hoped to get a feel for how the project might fly. Badly, would be the answer, so she'd come to town to start working on the townspeople, only to find that Serenity had already spilled the beans and then danced all over them until they were smushed little corpses.

"I will," she promised before she thought better of it.

Ruby's had been pretty empty earlier today when she'd met Serenity's sailor boys, but by dinnertime, it would be packed with people. Especially as word got around that her aunt's new friends had bodies honed by Uncle Sam and pretty faces to go along with that, especially the tall blond. He did nothing for her, but she also wasn't blind and the man had some drool-worthy components.

Her mind snapped back to Caleb, and she did not need the spike to the gut to remind her which of the men did do something for her.

Aria stepped into her gawd-awful, thick-soled shoes that she wore to work and waved goodbye. At loose ends and not the slightest bit interested in going over the architectural drawings of her shopping center for the umpteenth time, she wandered to the window to watch Aria walk the short distance to Ruby's.

The familiar figure of Caleb Hardy slammed through her senses. He stood on the balcony off the second floor of the hotel, directly below the window of Aria's bedroom.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

Rationally, she should have known her aunt's pen pals would have landed at the hotel. Where else would they stay? But irrationally, she would have preferred not to be so painfully aware that Caleb's bedroom lay right below hers. Their showers shared pipes. The exterior staircase from the kitchen hugged the sidewall where it descended to a second-floor landing adjacent to the balcony. She could join him in under ten seconds anytime she felt like it.

Not that she would! He was insufferable. A huge roadblock to her project, which was not going to happen if she didn't figure out how to sway the folks into selling. That was her deal with Damian; he'd front the money if she'd talk them into it. And then it would be her project to run while he focused on the resort.

Caleb's timing could not have been worse.

Or could it not have been better?

Inspired all at once, she didn't hesitate to do exactly as she'd sworn she would not. Taking the stairs two at a time, she hit the landing be

fore fully catching her breath.

"Hey," she called and climbed over the spindle railing. There should have been a gate, but the stairs had been erected as a fire escape, not a second path to the balcony. Or a secret back entrance to his bedroom that her aunt would know nothing about if she chose to use it.

Definitely she should not have thought of that.

“Hey,” he said casually as if women climbed onto his balcony every day.

Maybe they did. None of her business. “I’m on the third floor.”

“Congratulations.”

The temper that lived under the surface of her skin started simmering again. Curse of the Irish, and it figured that she’d gotten that from her mother instead of the luck of the Irish. “Do you have a problem with me? Because we’re not on opposite sides here.”

“Aren’t we?”

He hadn’t moved from his solitary pose, leaning against the spindle railing as he surveyed the street. She’d call it people watching if they’d been on 6th Street in downtown Austin where all the bars and tattoo parlors had apartments above them. If you stood on one of the balconies overlooking the throng at around midnight, you could see one of everything—drag queens, Amish on Rumspringa, drunk college kids, drunk middle-aged tourists, once even someone in a full Buzz Lightyear costume when it wasn’t even Halloween.

In Superstition Springs, only Aria trod the dust until she hit Ruby’s front door, disappearing inside quickly where the air-conditioning was the coldest in town. It wasn’t an accident. Ruby kept it low to get people in the door, which was smart marketing.

Since the sole person available to watch on Main Street had vanished, Caleb only had one excuse for not facing someone speaking to him—rudeness.

She crossed her arms. “I’m on the side of doing what’s best for this town. Since you haven’t been here all that long, I’ll help you understand what that is. We need more

traffic. Locals come in to get carrots and cabbages from Mavis and to eat at Ruby's, but outside of that, it's a ghost town. I want to change that."

"So do I," he said after a long enough pause that it had become a toss-up whether he'd actually respond. "Where we clash is on how to do that."

"We shouldn't be clashing at all! This is not your fight. It's mine—" She cut herself off before she admitted how important it was for her to change the dynamic she'd started eight years ago. "There's no fight here. I'm trying to promote progress and give people fair payment for their land. And maybe get a career boost at the same time."

His expression didn't change. Did he not have any emotions in his cold, hard chest?

Of course a man like him could never understand what it was like to feel so suffocated and desperate that there was no other way out than to slough off all your responsibilities and just... flee. Or what it meant to grapple with guilt over it on a daily basis. Or how a man's unfulfilled promise could devastate a woman's psyche late at night when she had no resources to staunch the crippling emotion.

If she didn't have this shopping center project, she had nothing.

"I've been here long enough to know that people don't want a shopping center plopped down in the middle of their land. Why don't you find somewhere else to put it?" he suggested mildly like she was a simpleton who had never considered how much easier it would be to do exactly that.

But Damian's investors didn't want the failing, falling-apart town near their resort; they wanted a chic shopping center. Her role was to guide the residents into seeing the benefits to them, namely money and lots of it.

“Because the whole point is to buy the land from the townspeople so they have resources to start over somewhere else if they want. Or stay if they want.” She’d given this speech so many times she could do it in a dead sleep, and the constant repetition had only infused the message with her passion for the project. “It’s about giving them choices. I need the locals to be champions for this, or we’re just hostile developers coming here and building up around them without their say.”

“Funny, seems like that’s happening anyway,” he drawled, which put her back up even worse.

“I have a degree in urban planning,” she informed him. “Which means I know a few things, mister.”

At that, he swung around to face her, leaning one hip on the railing and crossing his arms to mirror her but in a maddeningly casual pose that drew attention to the hard swell of biceps that had burst out below his T-shirt sleeves. A slow smile spilled onto his face, which hooked her inside, way down deep.

She liked it better when he was ignoring her.

“Well, now. Did they forget to write the definition of ‘urban’ on the board while you were earning that fancy degree?” he asked, and one side of his grin kicked up into an infuriating smirk. “Because I don’t see anything urban around here. Missy.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

She blinked. Had he called her Missy? “My name is Havana.”

His gaze made a round trip down her body and back up again, laying down trails of heat as it went. “Oh, I’m aware. It suits you.”

She rolled her eyes, hoping against hope that would prevent him from seeing that he had any effect on her whatsoever. Because he didn’t. Shouldn’t. Which wasn’t the same thing at all, and holy cow, why did he have to be so confounding? “Yeah, that’s original. I’ve never heard that one before. Havana is all about hot Cuban rhythms and spice, right? You wanna salsa, let’s salsa.”

“Actually I was going to say it’s ruled by a dictator.”

She stared at him, and he stared back, the corner of his mouth twitching, and for who knew what reason, she burst out laughing. Tension release. Or something. That was a new one, and she had to hand it to him. “Touché. Can we call a truce please?”

Peacemaking was a first for her, though she doubted he’d appreciate the significance of someone who lived on the front lines taking a step back. Holding her position had been an art form for so long that even she didn’t know what came next. But it was painfully obvious she couldn’t win this battle by staying crossways with everyone, least of all this man who seemed to have touched down in the middle of Superstition Springs without a how-de-do.

“Yeah.” He rubbed at the back of his neck, looking as baffled as she felt. “But only because a woman who can laugh at herself is a huge turn-on.”

Mayday ! That was not anywhere close to what she'd been aiming for, and she didn't like the pleased little hum that had started up inside as she internalized his attraction to her. "I'm engaged."

He snorted out a laugh of his own. "Relax. I meant that in the rhetorical sense."

"That's a fancy term. Do you always backpedal using twenty-dollar words?" she asked him sweetly, thrilled to have finally gained the upper hand.

"I never backpedal." The balcony shrank down in size as he treated her to the full force of the heat he seemed capable of producing at the drop of a hat. "And I never misspeak. If I say you've turned me on, take that to the bank. Stop throwing your fiancé in my face like it's some kind of barrier to a man finding you attractive. It's not. All that means is I'm not going to act on it."

Her mouth flapped a bit before she could figure out if she wanted to open it or close it. What was she supposed to do with him? The whole point of having a fiancé was to avoid this exact thing. Well... no, it wasn't. Not at all. More to the point, she'd been angling to avoid Serenity's prediction, and that factor was still in play. He'd said he'd respect that she had a fiancé, which meant she could take his advice and actually relax. Caleb wasn't even flirting with her, not really, just stating facts so she knew where she stood.

That warmed her up faster than anything else he'd done. Who didn't enjoy a man who told the truth and made his position completely transparent? That was one of her biggest turn-ons. But instead of flipping out about it, she let it ride. So what if she found him attractive back? She could keep that under wraps as she changed strategies. Again.

"Great," she said with false cheer, determined to get on some kind of track that led to results. "Now that we've got all that established, as the first order of business under

the new truce agreement, let me show you something that will help you understand the vision Damian and I have.”

His eyebrows lifted in mild curiosity as he spread his hands toward the street below. “Show away.”

“You have to come with me. It’s a little ways outside of town.”

“Sure your fiancé would be down with that?”

His lazy drawl curled through her as the trap sprang closed, and his meaning took shape in her gut. Caleb had admitted he was attracted to her, and any man worth his salt would not like the woman he intended to marry hanging out with a rival. But if she held fast to that premise, then she couldn’t continue her campaign to win Caleb over to her side, which seemed not to have materialized like she’d have hoped in the first place. Neither did she think Damian would be a good addition to the party, or she’d have to spend all her time faking like they were a couple instead of focusing.

Ugh. Why did everything have to be so complicated? Because that was her life, or more to the point, she seemed destined to make it that way.

“He trusts me,” she told him, which was so lame there was no way Caleb would let that go.

He didn’t. He didn’t move at all, but she felt his presence crowding her in a very non-hands-off kind of way. “It’s a matter of principle, not trust. If you were mine, I wouldn’t want you within ten feet of another man unless I was right there by your side.”

“Well, Damian is not a Neanderthal who thinks an engagement ring means he owns me,” she countered with a smirk. Thank goodness. He’d finally revealed something

she could latch onto that decreased Caleb Hardy's attractiveness quotient. Possessive, jealous men did not do it for her.

Shaking his head, he let a wicked smile spread across his face. "You've never been with a real man, I see. Otherwise, you'd understand that I'm not talking about staking a claim. If you were mine, I'd be by your side a

lways, reminding you how beautiful I think you are. Telling you what things I admire about you, holding your hand because I could never get enough of touching you and that's the only publicly approved way to do it. Basically I'd be doing whatever it took so you never wanted to look at another man as long as you live."

The rush of liquid warmth inside should not have been so strong. But holy cow. She shut her eyes for a moment, which did no good because his smile had emblazoned itself across her brain. Probably she'd be seeing it in her sleep tonight.

She had no experience with someone like Caleb Hardy. The last man she'd let into her life had run away from her as fast as he could.

She'd like to order him not to say stuff like that, but doing so would tip him off that it had affected her, which had probably been the whole reason he'd done it—not because he really was that romantic but strictly to mess with her.

"Since I'm not yours, we have nothing to worry about," she informed him primly. "Damian and I have a great relationship, and it doesn't require us to spend twenty-four/seven in each other's company."

That didn't even sound like fun. She liked her space. A man hanging around all the time? No thanks.

But rationalizing it didn't seem to stop a sudden ache inside that wouldn't ease. What

would it feel like to have a man want you that much? And what did she do with the sudden, unexpected,

secret

craving for exactly that?

Seven

Caleb followed Havana down the stairs to the narrow alleyway between the hotel and the boarded-up clinic, opting to keep his mouth shut for once.

What had possessed him to agree to go anywhere with the Dictator? She might be easy on the eyes, but that was the only body part he could say that about. Sometimes just looking at her was a slug to the gut, and that in turn jackhammered at his conscience.

She was engaged, as she loved to tell him. And a pain in the butt. None of that seemed to be getting through to his Neanderthal brain. So of course, they were en route to someplace that would not fix any of the above and had all the hallmarks of sending him to the loony bin instead.

“Do you mind driving?” she asked.

Without waiting on his answer, she headed for the Yukon that she’d no doubt figured out was his either by the California plates or because that information had made the rounds via the Superstition Springs gossip train earlier today.

“Sure, why not?” he muttered. Probably she’d throw down a few more requests before the sun set, and he had a feeling he’d comply with those too, strictly in the

name of honoring the truce they'd somehow fallen into. Caleb prided himself on being a man of his word.

Besides, if he was going to stop her from convincing everyone in town to sell, he had to stick closer to her than a flak jacket, no matter how hard it was to stop imagining his hands tangled up in her hair. He'd promised Serenity. So he couldn't have exactly refused to go on this field trip anyway.

The moment Havana slid into the passenger seat, Caleb discovered that sin did indeed have a scent and she'd taken a bath in it. The punch took his breath, and his eyes crossed with the effort to keep her effect on him from being broadcast in a very graphic way. Never had he had such a physical reaction to the way a woman smelled. Maybe it was a simple matter of replacing Rowe in that seat, who had called shotgun for the entire drive from the base in Coronado. The lady constituted a class A upgrade over his brother, that was for sure.

"Where to?" he wheezed and cleared his throat as he started the engine.

"Just over the hill. Drive down Potter's and take a left." When he cocked a brow at her, she laughed. "You're going to want to learn your way around if you aim to stay, city boy. All our roads are named after the family who owns the house built on it."

"Let me know when we get to an actual road then, okay?" he said tongue in cheek as the Yukon bounced over three deep ruts in a row. Improvements to the thoroughfares wouldn't be out of line before anyone did a thing to the town itself.

Two women stood outside of Voodoo Grocery gabbing, both of whom stopped in the middle of their sentences to stare at the Yukon as they rolled past. Havana waved. The women did not return the gesture, but she took it in stride without comment.

"It'll smooth out in a minute," she said instead and rubbed at her temple almost

absently.

There was something in the set of her jaw that told him the women's snub had bothered her, but as she'd mentioned, he hadn't been here that long and still wasn't sure how to handle anything except the redhead in the next seat. Havana, he got. The rest of the town? His raging uncertainty after screwing up so badly in Syria gave him more pause than he'd like. He didn't know how to do this thing where he hesitated half the time.

The last boarded-up building at the end of town slipped by as he drove, and then there was nothing again but scrubby trees and tall grass that looked to have been hacked low by either a machete or one of those industrial-sized mowers with a dull blade. Landscaping was not a concept embraced by Superstition Springs apparently. Was that something that should be changed?

Caleb headed north, opposite how he'd driven into town, so this was new terrain. Though it looked pretty much the same. As he took the curve in the road and the SUV rolled over a hill, the land spread out beneath the road, shimmering in the sun. A ribbon of dark blue water snaked through a bed of earth, and as he got closer, the water got clearer.

Not the same. Not the same at all.

"That's the Colorado," Havana murmured. "Not the Grand Canyon one. The Texas one, but it has some pretty cool things about it too. Park over there and I'll show you."

The landscape grew greener and denser the closer to the water they got, popping with color against the blue sky that stretched in all directions for a million miles. A rock formation the color of sand jutted out of the ground, and without hesitation, she clambered up onto the smallest one, then the next until she'd almost scaled it. No fear

in that one. Not to be outdone, he followed her easily, drawing up next to her where she had perched on the tallest rock.

A large, clear pool had formed where the river had cut away limestone, creating a perfect, well-hidden swimming hole. The water was a gorgeous color, almost the blue of the Caribbean or Thailand, and with sunlight glinting off the surface, it wasn't hard to imagine you'd been transported to someplace else. As if you'd been cut off from the real world and sent to a... a fairy realm. Or something that sounded less dumb.

The light breeze caught a lock of Havana's bright red hair and flung it over his arm, binding them together as they surveyed the outcropping from their high vantage point.

Something grabbed him by the throat, and it got hard to swallow.

Beyond the pool, the landscape sloped away to become slightly hilly but also stark in a way that made you think about your place in the world. Some areas in the Middle East were like that too, but Caleb had always felt like an outsider there. Here the land welcomed him, embracing him in a way he couldn't quite put into words.

There was something... extra. Something he couldn't deny.

That mystical element he hadn't wanted to believe existed—this was it. He could feel it seeping from the stone through his soles and up into his bones. From the moment the teams had decided they were done with a few extraneous SEALs who'd become a liability, he'd needed a place to land where he could believe again. Havana had unwittingly given that to him.

"Welcome to Superstition Springs," she said and spread her hands wide to encompass the entire pool. "This is what gave the town its name. The water is fresh and stays cool even in the summer when it's a hundred and ten. We don't know why. It's part

of the lore of this area. Imagine a resort built on the river with a view of this place.”

And along with that, the crowds who would spoil it. But he was still too caught up in the beauty of the springs for his voice to work, and that alone barred him from interrupting the vision she spun.

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“Damian wants to build a golf course to the east, with the river woven through it to form water hazards.” Hands fluttering as she shaped the air to illustrate her point with imaginary pictures, she continued. “We’re going to work with the land, become a part of it. Honor it. Can you unbend enough to see it?”

“I can see a lot of room for error with that approach,” he told her with a shrug because honesty was as much of an ingrained piece of his makeup as his drive to change the future for the better. “But I’m just here for the ride, so sell me on it.”

The lock of hair slipped from his arm as she took a deep breath and let it out slowly, savoring. “I love this spot. I came here a lot as a teenager, dreaming of getting out of here once and for all. I never in a million years thought I’d be back trying to save the town that didn’t welcome me home.”

Like the women who hadn’t reciprocated when she’d waved. He tore his gaze from the landscape and fixed it on the redhead, who had brought him here for what were still nebulous reasons. Her expression bordered on grave, and this was too beautiful of a setting to be so serious.

But that was not something he knew how to fix. The concept of home wasn’t his area of expertise either. “You’ve been gone what, six, seven years?”

“Something like that.”

This was not the conversation he’d prepped for, and all at once, she’d clammed up

instead of working on the hard sell he'd expected. "But you still think of it as home?"

"Yeah, of course." Surprise flitted across her face as she answered him. "Austin never felt that way, that's for sure."

"Maybe you should treat it like a home then," he suggested gently, still not sure why she'd brought him along if all she planned to do was some soul searching. "Show people that you care about the things that are important to them. Shopping centers don't seem to be it."

Her brows drew together. "I do care. That's why I'm doing this. Having choices is what's important to people, not strong-arming them into leaving piles of money on the table because Aunt Serenity wants it that way. The town is falling apart. A total eyesore."

"Eyesore? It's..." Well, it wasn't beautiful, that was for sure, but Caleb couldn't find the right way to describe it that wouldn't sound like he was agreeing with Havana. "Quaint. And needs work. I'm not afraid of hard work."

"But you're not the only one who has to do the work," she reminded him. "And not everyone wants to stick around a dying town. I'm offering them the choice that I never had."

Suddenly quite a few things fell into focus that he'd been missing. "You didn't want to move here after your parents died, did you?"

Her expression froze into an emotionless mask. "Boy, Serenity kept no secrets from you, did she?"

Actually, that had been a complete and total guess, one she'd just confirmed. But regardless, once again, he found himself in the middle of this spat between Serenity

and her niece. Or had he put himself in the middle, simply by coming here unannounced?

Well, Serenity could have told him to butt out and leave her be. But she hadn't. She needed someone to curb Havana's enthusiasm, and for a lot of reasons, he'd been the one to sign on the dotted line.

"Sorry if that bothers you. I'm here for good, and I won't lay down so you can run over me either."

She sighed. "I'm not trying to run over you. I know you think of me as a dictator. I don't mean to come across that way."

A little shocked, he eyed her in hopes of gauging her sincerity level. It was pretty high. He didn't know what to do with that. Not only could she laugh at herself, she also had a sense of her own flaws and no trouble admitting them. That was a rare combo indeed.

His estimation of her grew. "Is that why you didn't want to come live in Superstition Springs? Because you didn't have a choice?"

"There were ten kids in our school. Total. In all twelve grades." She gave him a moment to let that sink in, which didn't take all that long. "Two of them were my sisters. Tallhorse was—still is—the only teacher in this area. He has a PhD from Yale in something outrageously inappropriate for school children, like Slavic Romantic Literature, but all the other students loved him. He told stories about the Tonkawa that roamed this area hundreds of years ago like he'd been alive at the time instead of being a descendent. Tallhorse is famous for doing rain dances in the middle of class for no reason. All of it was weird. I missed my parents, and I— Well, I just wanted a normal life."

Yeah, a small school coupled with what sounded like yet another resident comfortable in his own unconventional mannerisms would be hard on a kid, especially after losing a home and parents in one fell swoop. When he'd lost his parents, he'd been twenty and on the ground in Iraq, covertly shutting down a Taliban party outside Kabul. It wasn't the same at all.

And at the same time, they were exactly alike. Both searching for something that they knew was out there but had yet to find.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting a little normalcy in a life that has been turned upside down."

She shrugged. "I didn't ever get normal, not really. I thought I was moving toward it when I finally made the difficult choice to leave. And even then, that didn't quite work out like I hoped."

"What happened?"

Her mouth firmed into a no-nonsense line that said she'd reached the end of her patience with that subject. "Doesn't matter. I'm home now, and I have the means to give people the choices I never had. Money. A new sense of purpose as we work toward a common goal. What's so bad about that?"

Nothing. It was on the tip of his tongue to agree with her. She had a good heart, much more so than he'd guessed. That's what was so difficult about all this. He genuinely believed that she thought she was doing the right thing.

Maybe she'd be willing to compromise. "Why not put the shopping center near the resort and give people even more choices? They can keep the town, revitalize it, and still choose to work at the resort if they want."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“Because,” she said quietly, and he had a feeling he wasn’t going to like what came next. “Damian’s investors won’t let him build the resort with the town still standing. It was part of the deal. I talk the people into selling, and I get the shopping center project. If I fail, there’s no resort or a shopping center.”

As the complexities sank in, a wave of righteous indignation spiked through his gut.

“They don’t want an ‘eyesore’ so close to their million-dollar property, is that it?” he asked bluntly. He shouldn’t be surprised or even care so much. But come on. Those investors needed to catch a clue that there was something special about Superstition Springs that would be a huge benefit to their bottom line.

“I don’t know their motivation,” she hedged. “Only what Damian and I agreed to.”

“Reconsider. The town has some quirks, I’ll give you that. But the people have a lot to offer. You have to admit there’s a certain feel to this area that might be interesting to capitalize on.” At that, she wrinkled her nose. “You’re not into the superstition part of the springs I take it?”

He would have put himself in the same camp thirty minutes ago. Now he wasn’t so sure.

She shook her head with a small smile. “Mysticism? No thanks. A, it’s not real. And B, I like knowing I have control over everything that happens to me.”

“Ah, but that’s the trick, right? Control is just an illusion.”

As he'd learned in full, vivid detail recently. Caleb and his strike team had become an embarrassment to the Navy. A PR nightmare that was easier to sweep under the rug than to do right by, and he'd had zero power to affect their decision to discharge all five of them.

What was he doing if not trying to take back some control in his own life?

"And surrendering your fate to the whims of gods isn't an illusion?" The smirk on her face was her own answer to that. "I'll believe in myself thank you very much. Since we're airing all the dirty laundry here, what happened to you that makes you so hot to plunk down in the middle of my town and cause me trouble?"

He had to laugh, even as he realized he couldn't stop liking Havana Nixon if he tried. She didn't quit. It was as sexy as it was infuriating. "I needed a hobby."

"Try again."

Her arched brow had so much attitude he had an inexplicable urge to kiss it away.

"There was a little mix-up with Uncle Sam, and we opted to part ways."

The details weren't classified, but some laundry didn't need to be aired. Though he couldn't quite figure out why he'd felt compelled to share that much.

"And yet here you are as well, in Superstition Springs at the same moment as me. Not what either of us expected to be the next chapter in our lives, I suppose, but it seems as if we're both determined to make it work."

The reality of that unsettled him. She'd nailed it. He didn't know how he felt about her canny insight. Did she share Serenity's ability to tap into the universe for clues about what went on in a man's soul? Or had it been a lucky guess?

Serenity's prediction took on a whole new dimension, and as much as he'd like to ignore the romantic nature of it, he couldn't. She'd plainly stated he'd meet his soul mate during the process of replanting of his roots. Surely her already-engaged niece hadn't been the woman she'd had in mind. Especially not given how much tension there was between Serenity and Havana. That alone gave Caleb enough pause. If she wasn't right with her aunt, then she wasn't right with him. Havana couldn't be his soul mate. It was unthinkable.

Flirting with her on the balcony had been one thing. A tactic designed to knock her off-balance. This was something different. A shared connection that went far deeper than surface-level attraction. The springs had cast some kind of spell on him, and that wasn't going to fly. He had to break up the coziness that they'd fallen into far too easily.

"The thing is," he said. "I'm here to help Serenity save her town. You and I are at cross-purposes on how to do that. How do you suggest we proceed??"

?

"May the best woman win?" She smiled coyly, causing him to wonder what tricks she had up her sleeve that she hadn't revealed yet. "Or man. Though I'm pretty sure I was right the first time."

That only whetted his appetite to beat her at this game. "You're on."

And somehow that shifted everything. He'd needed that push to set him on the right track. The key to getting over his hesitance wasn't to blunder around looking for answers written on the wind. It was to surge ahead with one hundred percent commitment until he got where he was going. Or hit a brick wall.

That's when he'd call on his team. The guys would band together to get everyone

over the wall. Blow it up. Tunnel under it. Take it apart brick by brick until there was a clear path. A couple of times, one of them had led him to a completely different path that required none of the above. That's why they were all still alive, still watching each other's backs. Rowe was the brother of his blood, and Hudson, Tristan, and Isaiah were brothers of his heart.

Together, they could do anything. Except stay in the Navy.

He would not fail them this time. There was no room for second-guessing his next steps, a default he'd fallen into after Syria. His guys needed sanctuary, and Caleb would give it to them or die trying.

Eight

Aria chattered until the clock flipped over to a.m., and that's when Havana stopped paying attention to the time. Her sister must have saved up or something and chosen tonight to unload a year's worth of words.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

Normally, Havana would love what was basically a sleepover for grownups since they were sharing a room, but she couldn't concentrate. Mr. Hardy wanted a war? He'd get a war.

For a few minutes she'd actually bought into the idea that he'd honor the truce. Silly Havana, tricks are for other women. She shouldn't have been so easy to fool. Nor should she have been so nice to him.

The man was trouble. In more ways than one. The look on his face when he'd first spied the springs—breathtaking. There was something really affecting about that place, and the fact that he'd experienced it at such a visceral level told her he had a depth that made her want to delve deeper.

Except she wasn't interested in exploring a man's depths. At all. Especially not that one. They were complete opposites, and he'd pitted himself against her shopping center, which should have killed every iota of her perplexing attraction to him. It hadn't.

And now she was left wondering what on earth she found so compelling about him. He wasn't her type in any way, rough around the edges where she liked her men smooth and cultured. Caleb had been in the military, had probably seen combat. She didn't even like it when a man killed a spider, let alone other people. But then he'd left the armed forces, so maybe he'd had a change of heart?

A little mix-up with Uncle Sam, he'd said. What was it? Her curiosity was killing her but only because of the color in his voice, as if there was so much more to the story than the simple explanation he'd offered. And what if there was? It didn't matter

unless it offered her some kind of edge in the all-out war they'd declared.

And that's what she should be concentrating on. How to beat him. Except she didn't know a thing about his tactics. Was this battle going to be guerrilla warfare or psychological? If the former, she'd have to learn a thing or two. The latter was more her style.

Aria yawned, cutting off her endless flow of conversation that she'd never seemed to realize had been largely one-sided. "Wow, it's late. I've kept you up. We can talk more in the morning."

"That would be great."

And she meant it too. A good night's sleep would do her wonders and also banish Caleb Hardy from her mind. Then she could indulge in some really honest heart-to-heart talks with her sister, like in the old days. That would fix... well, not everything. But it would make Havana feel like she might actually get to a place where she didn't constantly think about how she'd left Aria behind.

Did her sister resent Havana for leaving? She'd never asked because the answer might drive another wedge between them.

But when she woke up, Caleb had not vanished from her thoughts, and the fitful few hours of sleep she'd gotten left her more tired than when she'd gone to sleep. Aria slept like the dead and didn't even stir when Havana slipped from the king-sized bed in her sister's room.

A low hum of water running through the pipes in the walls filled the bathroom the moment she closed the door. Likely, Caleb was in his bathroom too on the floor below her. Maybe taking a shower. If not, he should definitely be shaving given the dark shadow of whiskers that had covered his face yesterday.

Not that she'd noticed how it gave him a daring edge that shouldn't have been so devastating on him. Besides, she didn't know what he looked like clean shaven. Maybe that would be worse.

After taking her own shower in the antiquated claw-foot tub that probably hadn't even been new in the sixties when the hotel had been renovated, she spent a frightfully long time getting her makeup right. Then she surveyed her limited wardrobe choices, cursed that she hadn't brought more clothes with her from Austin, and finally threw something on because what did it matter? She wasn't dressing to impress anyone, least of all a man. Jeans and a T-shirt was practically the uniform of Superstition Springs, and that's what she'd wear.

Damian came by to pick her up, and they spent the day going over the resort plans on site, ensuring they'd indeed picked the right spot, tramping around the river to view the surrounding area from all angles in case the exhaustive surveys they'd had done missed something. The entire time, she had an underlying awareness that all this work could be for naught if Caleb Hardy had his way.

The sun beat down on her, no less brutal in April than it would be later in the summer. Sheer frustration put her in a snappy mood. By five o'clock, Havana was done with being outside and wondering why she'd bothered to take a shower.

Back at the hotel, she looked for someone to soothe her frustration away, but neither Aria nor Serenity could be found. There was a handwritten note taped to the refrigerator that simply said "At Ruby's." The primitive communication method in a world that worshipped text messages was faintly amusing, but it worked. If she wanted to eat, and she did, she'd have to trek to the diner.

Havana jumped in the shower to scrub the sunscreen from her skin. Damian had fished the bottle from his glove compartment without comment and handed it to her, because he was a nice man who looked out for her.

If only he could be the one.

But she'd known him for two years, mostly through Cole. It would be too weird to strike up any kind of romantic relationship with her ex-fiancé's friend, who also did nothing for her. Not even a ping when she looked at him. Shame. He was really handsome, wore a suit with an innate sense of style, and had standing reservations at all the best restaurants.

Totally her type. If she was in the market, which she was not!

Why was she even thinking about anyone's qualifications for "the one"? There was no one. Serenity's prediction must be getting to her. The part about meeting someone through work—why couldn't it be Damian? She'd already stacked up the dominoes for crying out loud.

Annoyed with herself and with Damian for not getting her girl parts going and with Aria for abandoning her and definitely with Serenity for issuing that ridiculous prediction in the first place, Havana pulled on a sundress and stalked to the diner sans makeup. It would take too long to apply, and she needed a cheeseburger now, before she bit someone's head off. Skipping lunch had been a terrible idea.

Nearly everyone in Superstition Springs had packed into Ruby's, which wasn't all that unusual, except ninety percent of them ringed the big corner booth, watching something. Aria and Ruby included, which nixed the idea of food since they were the only waitresses in the place.

She drew up next to her sister and murmured, "What's going on?"

That's when Lennie Ford, who was big enou

gh to get his own zip code, shifted aside, unblocking her view of the table. The one

man she'd tried to avoid thinking about all day held center court at the booth, playing cards fanned out in one hand and his brow furrowed in concentration.

Her entire day went to blazes in a beach chair as he lifted his head. Their gazes locked, and Caleb watched her as he plucked a card out of his hand, placing it squarely on the table while several of his mates made loud noises of disgust.

He hadn't shaved.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

Why that irritated her even further, she couldn't say. Yes, actually, she could. It was because of the very unwelcome tug at her core, the place that should be doing the can-can over Damian, but no. Her treacherous insides had no taste when it came to men, obviously, if they preferred a rough-and-tumble sailor.

Of course, Caleb had beautiful eyes too. And he also had things like principle and determination on his resume. Nice arms. A better-than-average sense of balance and command of his body. He'd gone out of his way to be sure he wasn't stepping on Damian's toes when she'd invited him to the springs.

But he stirred her up. Too much. They were sworn enemies at this point.

"Hard at work, I see," she called to him, but he only grinned.

"Shh. I'm about to take these jokers to the cleaners," he said and jerked his chin at his friends, who were also sitting at the table. Which she'd just realized because her attention had been wholly consumed by the stubble-faced thorn in her side.

Someone else came up on her other side, and she glanced over to see the petite frame of Cassidy Calloway.

"Hey, Cassidy."

"Hey, Havana." Cassidy tore her gaze from the game in progress long enough to engulf her in a hug without hesitation, and it was such an unusual greeting from a Superstition Springs resident that she hugged her old friend back.

“I meant to tell you the other day. You look amazing.”

Cassidy’s cheekbones had gained some definition, and sun streaks had lightened her long brown hair over the years. She’d always been pretty, but the teenager Havana remembered had grown into her looks.

“Thanks.” Cassidy smiled, but her attention was clearly on the table where Caleb had apparently won the game of whatever they were playing, judging by the way he was crowing about it. “Can’t complain about the lack of excitement around here anymore, that’s for sure. That’s a boatload of gorgeous right there.”

“If you like arrogant men who’ve never met a razor, sure,” she muttered.

Cassidy glanced at her askance. “I was talking about the dark-haired one. Isaiah. I met him a few minutes ago when Serenity proudly presented all of them to those of us who hightailed it over here to get in on the action. He’s dreamy. Who were you talking about?”

“Never mind.”

Before she could change the subject to something that had absolutely nothing to do with the five strangers who had generated so much buzz, Aria sighed dramatically as she moved in on Havana’s other side, her hand on her chest as she too watched the card game in progress.

“You can have the dark-haired one. I’ll take Tristan,” she announced as if they’d been doing a school yard pick, divvying up the former SEALs based on first come, first served.

“Which one is he again?” Havana asked, struggling to remember the one who had introduced himself as such. That earned a scowl from Aria.

“The tall blond. How do you not know that? Didn’t you take Caleb out to the springs yesterday?”

“Oooh, you did?” Cassidy’s interest in the game vanished as she zeroed in on Havana’s face, clearly hoping for juicy gossip. Everyone knew you went to the springs with guys you liked. “Do tell.”

Havana shook her head. Of course some blabbermouth had spread that news around, probably with far more editorial than was warranted. “Nothing to tell.”

“Short answers means there’s plenty to tell,” Aria said wryly, her gaze back on the blond man sitting to Caleb’s right, who was laughing at something one of the others had said. “I thought you were unusually quiet last night when we were going to bed. I figured you were just tired. What did you guys talk about?”

There was far too much suggestion in Aria’s voice for what had been an innocuous discussion about their hopes and dreams, the factors that had led them to this place and what the future held. Normal soul-bearing kind of stuff. It had been borderline intimate, which had ended abruptly when he threw a challenge in her face instead of continuing the truce she’d thought they’d fallen into.

“In case you hens have forgotten, I’m engaged.” Why did she always have to remind everyone of that?

“Easy to forget when he’s never around,” Aria countered with an exaggerated glance behind Havana. “For a couple who plans to spend the rest of their lives together, you seem to not want to actually be in the same room very often.”

Ugh. Of course she should have brought Damian with her to the diner. Rookie mistake. She was so bad at being fake engaged. But he’d had some calls to make, and she hadn’t thought twice about waving goodbye when he dropped her off at the hotel

to head back to La Grange.

“We’re busy. Plenty of work to do on the resort. This is a not a vacation,” she explained hastily, and holy cow, could they change the subject already? With a hand to Cassidy’s arm, she asked brightly, “What are you doing these days?”

“Teaching. Or I should say I’m hoping to. Tallhorse took me on as a kind of apprentice or intern, I guess. Next week, I’m supposed to do my first class by myself.” The other woman laughed self-consciously, her attention finally yanked away from the dark-haired boatload of dreamy at the table. “I’m more nervous than a cat in a room full of rocking chairs.”

“I’m sure you’ll be great.”

Cassidy was the same age as Ember, and they’d been pretty fast friends. From what Havana remembered, Cassidy had been the calm, rational one of the duo. Of course, a lot could have changed in eight years.

Caleb threw down a card, and half the people watching cheered what must have been a good play. He stuck both his index fingers in the air in an obnoxious show of victory. The other four men tossed their cards aside in apparent disgust.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“I don’t know why I bother anymore,” the dark-haired one said good-naturedly. Isaiah, Cassidy had called him. “I can’t remember the last time I won.”

Yes, he was kind of dreamy if you liked boyish charm and that type who never forgot his smile at home. He had extremely unusual eyes, one blue, one green, and that alone was enough to keep a woman’s attention for a while.

“December. Two years ago. At the base.”

That comment had come from the one sitting backward in a chair at the head of the table. He was blond too, but that’s where his similarities to Tristan ended. His hair was darker, and he wore it short. Tristan’s was pale, long, and pulled back at his crown, plus he had an angelic face that could have easily graced a magazine cover. The man set apart from the others had a hardness about him that said you didn’t want to get too close, and if you crossed him, look out.

“Do you have to catalog everything, Stillwater?” Caleb said to him with a grin. “Maybe you could delete a few files up there in your brain.”

“Why?” he asked in perfect seriousness. “I have unlimited storage.”

“What’s that one’s name?” Havana asked Aria out of the corner of her mouth. Clearly she needed to get a handle on her adversaries because she didn’t for a moment believe that Caleb wouldn’t call on his friends to help him blow her shopping center plans into oblivion.

“Hudson. Like the river,” her sister murmured back. “The other one is Rowe. Caleb’s

brother.”

Oh, yes, the one she’d registered had the same last name. She’d scarcely even noticed him sitting there on the other side of Caleb. He hadn’t said a word the entire time they’d been playing cards, and he kind of blended into the background since his nondescript brown shirt was the same color as the vinyl stretched across the back of the booth.

Funny how she’d thought to herself that Caleb was the one who might blend into his surroundings given the right circumstances, but his brother was the one who had accomplished it.

“Since they’re done with the show, how about a cheeseburger,” Havana suggested to Aria, hoping she’d morph back into a waitress before Serenity’s pen pals generated a new wave of excitement. “I’m starving.”

Aria started like she’d forgotten she worked here. “Sure, right away.”

When Aria broke away from the group, Caleb glanced up to catch Havana watching him, pulling her into a staring contest. What, did he think he intimidated her? Boldly she kept her gaze on him, eyebrows slightly cocked in feigned amusement.

“You always win card games?” she couldn’t help but call out to him. “How much do you cheat?”

“He doesn’t cheat,” Rowe Hardy said immediately, his quiet brown eyes lifting to meet hers. “He keeps track of the cards better because he’s smarter than everyone else.”

Caleb shrugged that off with a lopsided smile for Rowe. “I count cards. So what? Useless skill unless you gamble, and I don’t.”

Which said a lot about his character, and she wished she didn't appreciate that about him so much. Or that his brother had been the first to defend him against a false accusation. They were clearly close, unlike Havana and her sisters, which made her throat tight for more than one reason. They also had the same eyes, but where Rowe's were soft and unremarkable, Caleb's snappy almond-colored irises had haunted her dreams last night. Against her will, no less.

She didn't want to dream about him, and she definitely didn't want to admire a single thing about him. Especially not the fact that he'd figured out how to maintain a relationship with his brother into adulthood, likely because he hadn't run off at the first opportunity.

Serenity had been chatting with a small knot of women, but she chose that moment to saunter over, joining the fascinated group of onlookers that hadn't quite dissipated after the card game ended.

"Did you have a nice day, Havana?" she asked politely with less warmth in her voice than a subzero freezer.

Their relationship was still strained. Had been since about forty-five seconds after Havana had explained that the few dilapidated buildings along J Street, named for Mavis who lived above Voodoo Grocery, would be taken down to pave the way for the shopping center.

Actually, the strain had always been there flitting around them. She and Serenity had never quite meshed, largely owing to completely different life philosophies. Havana had embraced the responsibilities thrust on her at ten. Serenity had done her best but had seemed baffled by her three new charges, often sticking her head in the sand when things got too complicated. Force wasn't even Serenity's real last name. She'd borrowed it from Star Wars, a constant reminder that they might be related by blood but not much else.

“It was fine.” Which wasn’t even a lie. Any day she got one step closer to her shopping center project was a good day. She just needed to take about ten more steps, or the resort would be in jeopardy and then the shopping center wouldn’t even be on the table. “Did you think more about the cash offer Damian made for the hotel? It’s more than fair, but I think there’s some wiggle—”

“She’s not selling,” Caleb cut in flatly, because of course he was listening in and assumed he was invited to participate in the conversation. “Your money is no good here.”

A couple of the onlookers chuckled out loud, which put a twinge in her stomach. Lennie Ford, the owner of the antique store next to Ruby’s, had hung around to listen, and the longer the conversation went on, the more his mouth downturned. Not good. He’d been on the fence about selling to Damian’s investors despite Serenity’s hatchet job to Havana’s pitch, and she’d honestly thought he might be skewing toward a yes. Or at least he had been until Caleb Hardy showed up.

Honestly, that man could sell ice to Santa Claus with his almond-colored eyes and smooth voice that slithered through a girl’s senses whether she wanted it to or not. Fine. Since she’d stumbled thus far in her persuasion techniques, she could take a few tips from Mr. Hardy.

It was time for her to get down to the business of beating the former SEAL at his own game.

Nine

“Maybe you could butt out of things that are none of your business,” she suggested sweetly to Caleb and deliberately turned her back on him. “Lennie, wouldn’t you like to reopen your antique store in a premier shopping center with guaranteed traffic?”

How he stayed in business, she'd never know. She was offering him a lifeline in the form of cold, hard cash. The mystery was why he wasn't jumping at it. That's where she had to focus, on his hesitations.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

Lennie, who might be part giant, crossed his heavily tattooed arms over an enormous barrel chest and stared down at her. “Fancy customers aren’t my gig.”

“But they could be,” she said smoothly despite the live thing in her stomach that had grown from a twinge to something much sharper. Channel Caleb. Nothing fazed him, and he had this charisma about him that you couldn’t ignore, even when you tried really hard. “Everyone loves antique shopping, and they’ll like that you have such an... eclectic array of goods.”

In addition to antiques, Lennie sold his artwork. He’d long given up his former trade as a tattoo artist, but he still liked to draw with colored pencils and displayed his masterpieces proudly on the walls of his shop. The pinup girls and horned demons that he favored weren’t her cup of tea, but she couldn’t deny he had talent.

Except all of that meant he wasn’t a regular antiques dealer. Or even much of a run-of-the-mill shopkeeper. He cared about Mavis J, whom he was in a relationship with, and telling stories about the old days, in that order.

“I don’t know,” he muttered. “Would I be able to keep providing services to folks?”

The antique shop also served as Superstition Springs’ local video rental swap and occasionally a barber shop when Mavis J had a slow day. She was the only one in town who had skills with scissors, and Lennie didn’t mind hair on the 1940s barstools that lined the original mahogany bar that had come with the building.

When Havana had been a teenager, Lennie had served homemade cookies on that bar to all the schoolkids once Tallhorse had finally freed them for the day. She could still

feel the empty air between her feet and the floor as she perched on one of the barstools and swung her legs.

Where had that memory come from? She hadn't thought about Lennie's butterscotch cookies in ages, but when he'd crossed his arms, the shield with the phrase Born To Kill inked above his wrist was right in her line of sight, as it had been a decade ago. Seeing it brought back the sweet scent of cookies hot and fresh from the oven and along with it, the realization that she'd always associated antique stores with butterscotch.

But they didn't all smell that way. In fact, none of them did except Lennie's. His store was special.

She swallowed. Did the kids still come by for cookies? They wouldn't if he moved into a shopping center. Because there would be no place for him to live above the shop and thus no oven available upstairs. And there would be no kids, most likely, if everyone moved on to bigger and better things.

Well, he could still sell his drawings. That wouldn't have to change.

"Sure," she told him. "Of course you can still give out videos and whatnot. You can run your store however you see fit. And the increased traffic alone will go a long way toward affording the rent."

"Rent?" His expression darkened. "You never said anything about rent. I own my shop now."

Where was Aria with that cheeseburger? A nice interruption wouldn't be out of line. But when she glanced behind her, all she saw was the tight-jawed faces of Serenity, Mavis J, and several other townspeople who were blatantly eavesdropping. As were Caleb and his four friends.

“Well, didn’t I?” she asked brightly, knowing full well she hadn’t, but come on. He was nearly sixty years old and had owned a tattoo place in Austin. Surely he knew how the world worked. “Oversight. But of course you’d pay rent. The structure would be owned by Scott Co., Damian’s investment company. The money you’d get from the sale of your shop will help go toward your new expenses.”

Mavis J, who had apparently closed up the grocery store in time to join Havana’s worst nightmare, sidled up to stand near Lennie. He pulled her into a half embrace, cradling her against his side. They’d been a couple for something like twenty-five years, but they’d never married and didn’t live together. Plus Mavis J was half Lennie’s size, which always made for an interesting visual. Yet another oddity of Superstition Springs that she didn’t get and had no idea how to leverage.

Apparently Caleb’s slick-talking ways encompassed more than just an ability to screw a woman’s head on sideways. There was an art to this kind of persuasion that Havana lacked.

Aria saved her by bustling through the crowd with Havana’s plate held high. She plunked the cheeseburger and side of fries down on the SEALs’ table, directly in front of where Havana was currently standing. But as she moved to pick it up, grateful to have an excuse to flee, Isaiah bulleted out of the booth.

“Please, sit down,” he insisted, waving at his newly vacated patch of vinyl in the booth. The one next to Caleb.

She swallowed again. How could she graciously refuse? She couldn’t, not with Lennie and Mavis J glaring at her and Serenity standing there with her jaw clenched tight enough to sever nails. Havana needed all the points she could get, and fleeing would only leave everyone with a bad taste in their mouths over the concept of rent. Honestly. That was the thing that had them tripped up?

She sat down.

Caleb's warmth immediately bled through the scant few inches between them, winnowing into her pores, heating them with the raw sense of awareness

s. His thigh was right there, next to hers. Probably less than six inches. In the Yukon, they'd been separated by the center console and the curved sides of his bucket seats.

There was nothing between them now but spiky sexual tension.

"Maybe you could see your way to giving local residents a discount on rent," Caleb suggested right as she took a bite of the mouthwatering cheeseburger.

Lennie and Mavis J perked up, their attentions riveted on Caleb. The cheeseburger turned to ash in her mouth. Somehow she swallowed it, scrambling for words. "I don't know if I can—"

"Scott's your fiancé," Caleb reminded her, stressing the word fiancé in a high voice as if he was mimicking her for all the times she'd tossed that out. "Don't you have influence with him?"

"Of course I do."

She didn't. Not the way he'd made it sound, like she had Damian wrapped around her finger. She'd never had a relationship like that, where a man did things for her for no other reason than because.

All at once, she recalled Caleb's definition of a real man—one who spent one hundred percent of his time making sure you never looked at another guy twice. If Caleb was the man in question, that was a given regardless. She could barely peel her gaze from him at this moment, and they weren't even an item.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

So his brand of warfare was chemical. Or more to the point, chemistry. Obviously he knew how to use his appeal to get women to fall all over him. She wasn't impressed.

"Could you find out?" Mavis J asked point-blank. "We need to understand everything you're trying to get us to agree to, Havana. That's good business."

Well, duh. Of course. If anyone had given her the slightest indication that they were interested, she'd have started talking contracts immediately. "Everyone has to sell. Or there won't be anything to agree to. Serenity, are you open to talking about it?"

She shook her head. "I like the ideas that Caleb came up with. I think that we should try that before we take a bulldozer to historic buildings that can't be unleveled."

The buzzing sound in Havana's head that had begun with the name Caleb grew to a fever pitch by the time her aunt finished talking. Ideas that Caleb had? That traitor. He'd gone with her to the springs and stood there the whole time without saying a word about any subversive tactics he might have in play. He'd already talked to Serenity and maybe even some of the others. No wonder they weren't biting—he'd beaten her to the punch.

"I um, seem to have been left off that communication," she managed to say. "Which ideas are these?"

"You tell them," Serenity said to Caleb and nodded at the crowd. "Tell everyone."

Without missing a beat, he began to talk, weaving a spell with his hands as he outlined how he appreciated the mystical element of the area and thought that other

folks might too. How he'd like to see more emphasis on the uniqueness that each resident had to bring to the table.

In other words, embrace the weird instead of plowing over it.

Lennie and Mavis J listened with rapt attention, their expressions mutually growing more and more enthusiastic. Of course, because Caleb made it sound romantic and special instead of off-kilter in an almost uncomfortable way. Maybe because Havana Nixon was the weird one in this town.

She closed her eyes so she didn't have to watch this disaster unraveling at her feet. Finally, he shut up long enough for her to get a word in edgewise.

"This is all great," she said, heavy on the sarcasm so everyone caught that it was not great at all. "But the stuff you're talking about requires infrastructure that isn't here. A police department, fire department. Tax collection and city government to support it all. A shopping center requires none of that. Maybe you should think about these things before you come along and spread your hero complex around these parts."

He actually laughed out loud at that. "Wow, that's the first time anyone's called me a hero. I haven't leaped over any tall buildings yet, but I could sure try."

"It's a disorder, not a compliment," she said tightly, but it might have been more to convince herself. She could totally picture him with a giant S on his chest. "Because you have a misguided sense of your own importance, you think you can save everyone and be the catalyst for transformation. It's textbook stuff, really."

She should shut up now. Why was she baiting him? She wasn't helping her case.

But looking intrigued instead of insulted, he nodded. "That does sound like me. I came here for one purpose. To save this town. If that invites hero-like comparisons,

I'm okay with that."

Okay? Okay? He wasn't even fazed by her comments, an unusual enough of an occurrence to throw her off-kilter. "We don't even have a mayor. Who's going to take that job? You?"

The second it was out of her mouth, Serenity clapped her hands. "Yes, that's exactly what we should do. Caleb would be a great mayor."

"Caleb isn't even from here," Havana ground out, slapping down the first and only objection she could think of before this situation went completely off the rails. "Shouldn't the mayor be a citizen with enough history to have the town's best interests at heart?"

Caleb glanced over at her, his expression sly enough to narrow her eyes. "I absolutely agree. In that case, you should run for mayor."

"Me?" she squawked and then choked on it as he nodded. Her lightning-quick temper flashed, ruffling the hair on the back of her neck. He was up to something. Likely he'd suggested she run because she'd told him—in confidence—that the town hadn't welcomed her. Was this a ploy to embarrass her or what? "Why, because you know you'd lose?"

He spread his hands. "I didn't throw my name into the hat. But no, that's not why. I heard you say we don't have a plan for organizing the town. You have a degree in urban planning that must have given you insight into why creating the missing infrastructure won't work. Plus I happen to know you want to give everyone a choice. So give them one. Run against me and show everyone why you're the best qualified person to make decisions around here."

Oh, he'd like that wouldn't he? It was a testament to how befuddled that man made

her state of mind that she couldn't immediately see the downside of his suggestion. It almost sounded like he was giving her a chance to win by allowing her an opportunity to pitch her talents to the town.

But it wasn't what it looked like. It couldn't be. He had to have an angle that did not benefit her. Men didn't give her opportunities to shine. They dashed her dreams and then vanished.

If she ran for mayor and won, she'd all but conceded anyway because she couldn't be mayor of a shopping center. The town wouldn't exist anymore once Damian got the green light. The alternative would be to let Caleb have the office, unless someone else stepped up—an unlikely possibility given the positive sounding buzz from the crowd—and then she'd definitely be conceding because he'd use his new title to lend legitimacy to the concept of Superstition Springs becoming a real city. He'd paint more word pictures of how the town could transform itself into a new age mecca, and more to the point, he'd use his charisma to get the folks excited enough about it to make it work.

She saw through him more clearly than if he'd been made of glass. How dare he try to make this seem like a fair fight. That alone meant she couldn't give up now.

Grinding her teeth, she gave in to the inevitable. "Fine. We'll both run. But you better be prepared to earn it if you're serious about this."

"I've never been handed anything in my life," he said with a wink. "This is no different."

"Let the chips fall where they may then."

It was done. There was going to be a mayoral race in Superstition Springs. Newcomer against old-timer. Man against woman. Build a town or build a shopping center. Odds

were good she'd go down in flames, exactly as he no doubt hoped would happen. It hadn't been an accident that he'd phrased everything so it sounded good but, in reality, had been a clever ploy to take all the cards while she wasn't looking.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

That's where she'd messed up. He'd used psychological, chemical, and guerrilla warfare. She'd never stood a chance.

Ten

Tristan scarcely waited until the team had gotten back to the hotel to blast Caleb with his opinion of what had gone down at Ruby's. "You can't seriously be thinking of following through with running for mayor. Are you insane?"

"Probably." Caleb scrubbed at the back of his neck. "But what was I supposed to do, let them hand me the job? It seemed like that's where it was headed."

If running for mayor was insane, being the mayor veered into uncharted madness. He couldn't be the mayor. That was a job for someone with a much clearer sense of how to organize and run things. Like Havana.

Tristan didn't like that response much. "But who runs for mayor of a town that doesn't exist?"

"You'll be great," Isaiah said firmly and flopped down on the threadbare couch in the lobby of the hotel, though "lobby" was a pretty grand term for the smallish area inside the front door. "There's no reason to panic."

"Who's panicking?" Caleb said with a shrug in hopes that no one would see through the lie. Having an epiphany at the springs about charging ahead hadn't magically erased his doubt. Just given him the courage to believe he'd eventually get there. "I'll make a few speeches, and I'll lose the election with grace. Havana is right. Someone

who grew up here should get that job if anyone does.”

“But if she wins, she’ll tear the place apart!” Tristan insisted. “That’s the opposite of what we came here to do.”

“She can’t do that.” His whole entire strategy hinged on the fact. Havana had to win the election in order for all this to shake out like it should though. “You heard her. Everyone has to sell, and all I have to do is give a good enough campaign speech to keep at least one person from saying yes. If she wins, and I plan to make sure of it, that’ll be a good incentive for her to take a step back. See what’s really

best for the town. Then she’ll come around.”

Honestly, he couldn’t have imagined a better way to stack the deck. And the plan had fallen into his lap, thanks to Serenity.

“I think it’s pretty brilliant,” Rowe offered quietly, his head turned slightly to the right as he listened with his good ear.

That guy... Caleb swallowed the enormous amount of gratitude that had gotten lodged in his throat. His brother still had his back even after al-Sadidiq.

Rowe deserved better than a brother who had led him into the worst experience of his life. Soon this whole shopping center fiasco would be a thing of the past, they could get started building a home, and Rowe would have a place to really heal. Put down roots of his own. Caleb would make sure of that too. He owed his brother that and then some.

Hudson jerked his chin. “I’m in. Tell me what I need to do.”

With Hudson dog piling on top of Isaiah and Rowe’s support, that was enough to

deflate Marchande and his ire. He dropped onto the couch next to Rowe with a sigh. “Fine. We’re all in. Let’s do this thing. What are we doing?”

“We’re making sure I don’t win this election. Should be a piece of cake.” Caleb snapped his fingers with recently regained confidence, thanks to the support of his guys. That’s what the springs had given him—a solid reminder that he wasn’t in this alone.

He was losing this election for sure.

No one in their right mind would vote for an outsider who couldn’t lead his own strike team, let alone a town. Plus mayors were all old guys who owned car dealerships, not former SEALs with blood on their hands.

That’s where Havana had gotten it wrong. He didn’t have a complex that made him overly eager to fix everything in order to get a dose of hero worship or some such nonsense. Quite the opposite. The marks on his soul demanded retribution. He sought redemption for his own sins, not a platform to stand on as he basked in accolades.

Regardless, he still ended up standing on a platform later that week, surrounded by fifty of Superstition Springs’ finest folks as he kicked off his campaign for mayor. The platform was more of a makeshift wooden dais in the corner of Ruby’s, but he didn’t treat it like anything less than it was—his first opportunity to show everyone that Havana was the better candidate.

She’d blown in with her slick fiancé about ten minutes after Caleb and his team had arrived. He pretended he wasn’t watching her or that his pulse hadn’t kicked up a fuss the moment his senses registered her in the room. Which was instantaneous. It was like he could feel her on his skin even when she was half a room away.

Speaking of slick fiancés... Havana’s crossed over and plunked down in front of

Caleb to stick his hand out. “I don’t think we’ve officially met. I’m Damian Scott.”

Caleb braced for a limp handshake and to hate the guy deep in his gut. But Scott’s grip was firm and purposeful, plus he had a genuineness about him that said he was a straight shooter. “Hardy. Caleb Hardy.”

“Nice to meet you. Thank you for your service overseas. Glad you made it back in one piece,” Scott said with absolute sincerity. “I know a couple of guys out of Fort Hood who weren’t so fortunate. Landmines. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Dang it, he didn’t want to like Damian Scott, but he couldn’t deny the guy seemed legit. And why shouldn’t he like him? Because he was engaged to a woman Caleb couldn’t stop thinking about? If anything, he should be dancing a jig that they were a couple. Saved him from having to come up with a different excuse to stay away from his opponent.

Red hair flashed in his peripheral vision as Havana joined her fiancé, aiming a somewhat pained smile in Caleb’s direction. She made a move as if to get a little closer to Scott, but he didn’t automatically reach out to engulf her in his embrace or try to hold her hand. It made for an awkward moment as she realized she’d overstepped her boundaries and then hastily retreated. A half second later, her fiancé figured out what she’d been going for and stuck his arm out too late.

Wow. They were really uncomfortable with public displays of affection. He kind of hurt for them for a second. If Havana had been his fiancé, they’d have done that dance so many times it would be second nature. Caleb had zero issue with affection, public or otherwise. In fact, it was a requirement in his mind.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

The awkward silence stretched as Havana avoided his gaze, so Caleb did the only gentlemanly thing he could think of—poked the bull. “I hope you practiced your speech. I’m feeling particularly chatty today, so you’ll need your A game.”

Fire flashed through her blue eyes, heating them up nicely as she forgot about her embarrassment, exactly as he’d intended.

“I’ve always got my A game. I hope you’re in the mood to lose.”

He hid a smile and crossed his arms, leaning against the corner booth where he’d eaten dinner every evening this week as he prepped for his losing campaign speech that he’d planned to give tonight. “I’m in some kind of mood all right.”

She tossed her head, not bothering to hide her own smug smile. “I’ll try not to mop the floor with you too much.”

“Appreciate it.”

Dang if he didn’t really like her spirit. Tame, quiet women did not float his boat. At all.

Serenity, who had appointed herself “in charge” of the mayoral race, clapped her hands as she mounted the plywood platform where the candidates would give their speeches. She’d taken on her role as volunteer election coordinator seriously, rallying all the townsfolk with personal visits to their homesteads in order to ensure they had a good turnout for the speeches.

Caleb had grudgingly tagged along to a few of the rounds to meet people, at Serenity's insistence. To give him an edge, she said. He didn't want an edge, but neither did he want to hurt her feelings since she'd been the one to come up with this election in the first place.

Besides, this was step one to getting his pen pal what she wanted. As soon as Havana won this election, things would start to fall into place.

"Thanks for coming everyone!" Serenity called out, and the crowd quieted down.

From his vantage point near the dais, he could see the mix of folks who'd chosen this as their Friday night entertainment, which was most of them. He recognized the stocky man in his sixties who'd taken the center spot right in front of the stage—Keith Moon, also known as the owner of Darling the Dorito thief, a story that had become something of a tall tale in its short existence, as Caleb had learned when Serenity took him out to the Moon farm yesterday.

He'd also learned that Farmer Moon had a huge crush on Serenity, which she refused to even discuss. The widower had tried to engage her several times during their visit, but she was having none of it, blushing behind the fall of gray hair that did little to hide her discomfort.

It was cute, actually.

Toward the back, Lennie Ford, the giant, tattooed antique dealer, held hands with the tiny Mavis J, artfully doing what Havana and her fiancé could not, namely conveying that they were a couple. They were obviously very used to being around each other in public as well as in private. Granted the older couple had their own bits of awkwardness given the huge discrepancy in their sizes, but they made it work.

That was cute too.

Havana's fiancé had melted away toward the rear of the room, opting to watch from afar apparently instead of giving Havana the support of his physical presence. Caleb's team crowded up right next to him, shoulder to shoulder, the way they'd been since their first deployment together nearly a decade ago. They'd have his back, his front, and anything else they needed to watch. It was so ingrained in them all that he didn't even have to question it.

Who had Havana's back? She stood opposite him at the other corner of the dais, listening to Serenity fire up the crowd, wearing a polite smile that didn't reach her eyes. Her sister circulated through the diner, fetching drinks and people's orders effortlessly, as she did every night. Aria Nixon was good people, but she c

ouldn't be Havana's cheerleader while she was working.

That was not cute at all.

Caleb crossed the small expanse purposefully enough that Keith Moon moved out of his way without question. Havana's gaze narrowed as Caleb bumped her arm companionably.

"Nervous?" he murmured under his breath.

"No." She eyed him with undisguised curiosity. "You?"

"Nah. I ran for Miss Congeniality of my platoon. Compared to that tough crowd, this is a walk in the park."

Havana actually laughed, which made him grin in return. She had a nice laugh when she forgot they weren't operating under the truce anymore. Which was a shame in retrospect. Maybe when she won the election, they could try the idea of a truce again.

“Did you get the title?” she asked under her breath as Serenity began lauding the candidates’ qualifications for mayor, most of which was weighted in his favor unnecessarily.

“Of course,” he shot back indignantly with a small head tilt toward his team. “You see my competition.”

Serenity wound up her comments with a nod at Havana, who had won the coin toss and thus had chosen to go first, naturally. That worked in Caleb’s favor because once she finished, he could agree with anything negative she said about him, as well as figure out a good way to make her seem like the better candidate.

Havana stepped up on the stage, but it was tilted a bit on one side, which caught her off guard. She tripped, then flailed and started to fall. For the second time in a week, she ended up in Caleb’s arms before he could blink.

In a testament to his superior iron will, he somehow managed to not immediately bury his nose in her hair. And he got her standing on her own two feet without coming apart, a minor miracle given how his entire body had shot into high alert the instant it had registered contact with Havana’s warmth. But he’d wound up standing on the platform with her as a result. Awkwardly. And there was no way the crowd could miss exactly how “alert” his body had gotten.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

Flustered, she cleared her throat, smoothing back flyaway strands of hair. His fingers itched to do it for her, and that sealed it—he was going to hell. He could not keep thinking of another man’s fiancée this way. His mind refused to forget the feel of her in his arms, and none of that was helping calm down the physical reaction still unfolding.

“You’re okay,” he muttered to her. Which made one of them. “You can go ahead.”

“Thanks,” she said under her breath. “That was almost a disaster.”

No almost about it. It had been a disaster of the highest order, now that his brain had come unplugged. How was he supposed to make a campaign speech when all he could think about was how much he wished he could continue that embrace someplace more private?

“Hi, everyone,” she began, her voice clear because obviously she wasn’t affected by a small thing like a man she didn’t like very much keeping her off the ground. That was all there was to it, after all. He should keep that in mind.

“You all know Caleb Hardy is an American hero,” she continued. “A Navy veteran to whom we owe a great deal of gratitude. And you see he’s not afraid to lend a helping hand, even to his opponent.”

All of that sounded suspiciously complimentary. What was she doing? She wasn’t supposed to be talking him up. But since he could easily segue her comments into his master plan anyway, he was all over that. “Just taking a lesson from Ms. Nixon here. At our first meeting, she jumped into a major fracas to help me with no thought to her

own personal safety. That's someone you want in your corner when push comes to shove."

Now he'd gotten her good and confused, judging by the way her smile slipped. She glanced at him and then back at the crowd, all of whom were watching this show with rapt fascination. And why wouldn't they? Not only was it the first mayor's race in Superstition Springs' history, it had already jumped straight past conventional into... something else.

"Um, you're welcome," she said, but the last syllable rose at the end like it was almost a question instead of a statement. "Anyone would do the same."

"But you genuinely cared about reaching out to assist a stranger. You have a heart for helping people. That's why you'll make a good mayor."

"Right. I would," she said faintly. "You would too. Probably."

"No. That's where we have to disagree," he cut in with a sage nod at the crowd. "I'm a newcomer. I couldn't possibly make the right decisions for a town I didn't grow up in. You have family here. History."

His throat got a little tight as he spoke. Every word was true. He didn't really belong here, not yet. All he wanted was a chance to earn his place, to be able to say that about himself one day—that he had family here, roots, history.

She stared at him for a long moment, clearly speechless, so he shrugged away the sudden bout of melancholy and went for broke. Nothing like a clear, hard sell. "You'll look out for everyone as well as you did for me when I faced adversity."

"It was a pig," Havana mumbled and lifted her hair from her shoulders, then put it back in exactly the same place as if she couldn't figure out what to do with her hands.

Serenity had grown increasingly agitated the longer this went on, shifting back and forth from one foot to the other until she'd finally had enough, apparently. Jumping onto the small stage, she cut them both off with a nervous laugh.

"So, I have it on good authority that Caleb cares about this town's history too," Serenity told everyone.

"Yeah," Lennie Ford tossed in before Caleb could say a word. "I like what I heard about keeping the buildings and trying to get more folks to open shops in the original town. Talk more about that."

This was not going as planned. He should have had a talk with Serenity, obviously. Havana wasn't her enemy, and frankly, he was a little cross that her own aunt had taken sides against her.

"I, um..." It wasn't his turn, but Havana nodded graciously, lifting a hand in his direction to indicate he should go ahead. Dang it if she didn't have more class than all the women he'd known in California. "It seems to me that all of you bring something unique to the table. We should honor that. Just like Havana brings unique skills to the table that I don't have. We can all work together instead of being at odds."

"You may not have grown up here, but neither did I," Mavis J called out, earning nods and murmurs from some of the other old-timers. "I came here in the eighties because I wanted to find like-minded people. Folks who cared about the same things I did, who had music and art in their veins. This place speaks to the soul. You feel it too, or you wouldn't have been talking about embracing our culture. You are one of us."

That caught him in the gut sideways. The sharp ache mellowed almost instantly into the kind of longing he'd always suppressed well enough to ignore. Not this time. It all surged to the forefront. Superstition Springs wasn't where he'd expected to end up,

nor had any of these people invited him, but he'd found something special nonetheless. And he wanted to embrace it.

Eleven

After that catastrophe of a campaign speech, Havana wanted to crawl in bed. But Damian walked her back to the hotel and for some reason didn't dash off like he usually did. Instead, he followed her inside, his expression unreadable.

He probably felt sorry for her and wanted to be sure she wasn't going to fall apart after essentially being told Caleb belonged here and she didn't. It was fine. Old news. Definitely nothing to cry over. At least not in front of anyone.

"Well, I'm sure you have calls or something," she said with false brightness, pausing inside the door. When she turned to say goodbye, he was a lot closer than she'd anticipated, and her arms brushed his chest. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Damian murmured. "Are you okay? Do you need anything?"

He was such a sweet man, more concerned about her than the shopping center that slipped further and further away the longer she couldn't get her act together. She smiled up at him and shook her head. "I'll figure something out. Don't give up on me."

"I won't." His gaze roved over her face, and that's when she caught a glint in his eyes that she'd never seen before. "I have to admit, I think you're really brave, taking on the entire town in the name of this project. You were pretty great."

"Oh." Rattled, she shook her head and took a step back from his earnest praise. "No, I was a flop."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

She laughed self-consciously. There was a weird vibe here she couldn't put her finger on. Damian was always nice to her, but she'd never picked up the sense that he'd singled her out for any special treatment. He was nice to everyone. This was the first time he'd complimented her with such fervor though.

"Havana."

He reached out and snagged her hand, holding it in his, which he'd done before. Lots of times. Usually when they were pretending to be a couple. No one else was around at the moment though since Serenity had opted to stay behind at the diner to talk up her golden boy to the crowd.

So Damian had no reason to be stroking her knuckle with his thumb.

"Havana," he repeated huskily. "You tried to hug me at the diner, and I messed up. I didn't realize— Well, I see now that you've been using this fake engagement to get closer. I'm sorry it took me this long to clue in."

"I... what?" She stared at him, her hand hanging limply in his as she scrambled to figure out where this conversation had gone off the rails. "That's not what I was doing."

"It's not?"

His brows drew together in confusion. Oh, man. Oh, this was not good. This was an even worse disaster than the campaign speech. Her pulse hammered in her throat.

“No! I mean...”

She took a deep breath and bit back all the things she'd been about to spew out because first and foremost, she couldn't hurt his feelings. He meant a lot to her, and she'd always considered him a dear friend. What was this terrible misunderstanding going to do to that friendship?

Or to the project? If she rejected him, he might not want to work with her anymore. She had to fix this.

Fake engagement. What had she been thinking?

“Okay, look,” she said as calmly as possible and squeezed his hand. “I value you as a friend. But that's a

ll there is to it. I appreciate so much that you've agreed to act as my fiancé, but it's led somewhere I didn't intend for it to go. I'm not interested in you that way.”

That was about as tactful as she could be. He nodded once and let their fingers slip apart, his expression flattening.

“I see. I overstepped. My apologies.”

He didn't sound upset. Cautiously she put a hand on his arm to show that they were still good. “I hope we can put this behind us and move on. As friends.”

Hopefully he didn't take offense to her stressing that last part as heavily as she had. But he just gave her a small smile and briefly covered her hand with his palm.

“It's Hardy then, right?” he asked.

“What’s hardy?” And then it dawned on her. “Caleb? What’s he got to do with this?”

Damian shook his head with an amused hmm. “He’s the reason you only think of me as a friend. I was hoping I was wrong, but I don’t think I am.”

“You are way off base,” she said and forced a laugh to cover the raspy note in her voice that would reveal far more to him than she’d like. “Way, way off. Like a billion miles from base. Maybe even—”

“I’ll remind you of this conversation in a few weeks.”

His smile got a lot smugger as she sputtered. Finally she found her vocal chords and used them to shoo Damian out the door with a firm good night. Honestly. Caleb was not the reason she thought of Damian as a friend. That had been the case before she’d even met Caleb.

He was the reason she hadn’t slept well all week. The reason her mind wandered frequently, only to end up reliving the first and second time she’d ended up in his arms while fantasizing about the third and fourth. He was definitely at least half the reason she’d botched the campaign speech.

And she’d take that to her death bed, thank you very much.

That night’s sleep didn’t go any better. Not only did Caleb make an unsurprising visit to her dreams, nerves unsettled her stomach to the point of ridiculous. The writing was on the wall. The town loved Caleb and didn’t love her. Serenity fell into that camp too—her own aunt preferred an outsider to her niece. It hurt, for more reasons than one.

She was here trying to fix the fact that she’d left. Didn’t everyone get that?

The next morning, the townsfolk all dutifully trooped to Ruby's to participate in the first-ever Superstition Springs electoral process. By noon, Serenity and Augusta Moon, who had married Keith Moon's eldest son, had the ballot box in hand, ready to count the votes so they could declare the official winner.

As Serenity and Augusta disappeared into the back of Ruby's to lock themselves into her small office, Caleb untangled from his friends and made his way over to offer his hand. Of course. Because she needed additional stimuli at this point in time. But she couldn't be rude, so she reached out.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

The moment their flesh connected, a jolt went clear up her arm, and she didn't bother to pretend it hadn't, not when she had Damian's voice echoing through her head. No, Caleb wasn't the reason she couldn't be anything but friends with Damian, but Damian was definitely the reason she knew the difference in what it felt like to hold hands with her fake fiancé and Caleb.

Dang it.

"May the best woman win," he said cheerfully.

Clearly he'd gotten plenty of sleep in his room right below hers. Not that she'd spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about how close he was or anything.

"I think you've got it locked up, Miss Congeniality," she said with an arched brow.

That made Caleb laugh, and she wished she didn't like his laugh so much. He was so comfortable in his own skin, quick to poke fun at himself as fast as he made jokes about anything else. His enormous confidence might be at least seventy-five percent of his attractiveness.

Damian was confident in his own quiet way. Why couldn't their flesh spark when they touched? It was maddening.

"It was a tough crowd," he allowed. "I tried to make sure the whole process was balanced and not weighted so heavily in my favor."

"Yeah, why did you?" she couldn't help but ask. That had been bothering her, but

after having to set Damian straight and expending so much energy trying to forget about the man sleeping in the room below, she'd yet to fully examine that odd piece of yesterday's speeches.

"You started it. Caleb is an American hero," he mimicked in a singsong voice. "That is so far from the truth—"

"I don't sound like that."

"That's exactly what you said." But he grinned to take the sting out of it. "Maybe without the falsetto. But still. My military service has nothing to do with my ability to lead a town."

"I know. I was going to say that," she said wryly. "But we got all off track, and then it didn't seem to make a difference what I said. Serenity and her cohorts would have countered everything anyway. So I'm prepared to lose."

She wasn't. Not at all. Maybe she should have said she was expecting to lose, but that would sound petty. If Caleb got elected, it would be because the citizens of Superstition Springs thought he was the best choice. Period. And democracy said they got to make that choice, misguided or not.

"I hate that it went down like that."

She shrugged with a nonchalance she didn't feel. "The folks don't seem to like my brand of help."

Which was the kicker. The thing that she hated. If she couldn't have a husband, she needed a replacement. Helping the people of this town had been it. But she'd floundered from the start, leaving these enormous depths of nurturing she had inside her untapped. Story of her life. Maybe she deserved to go unfulfilled for abandoning

her sisters and Serenity, who had definitely depended on her help. And maybe part of the problem was that she'd tried to give Serenity money to make up for that, and money wasn't the motivating factor here.

But what was?

"Yeah," Caleb said. "I'm sorry that's the case."

Caleb ran a hand through his close-cropped brown hair, rumpling it, which detracted from his appeal not at all. Nothing did. His face wasn't classically handsome and certainly had its share of worn places, as if he'd spent a lot of time in the sun without benefit of sunscreen. But it worked on him, creating a whole that was downright mouthwatering.

Which of course begged the question—why did she continue to put Damian between them? When she'd conceived of this fake fiancé idea, she hadn't met Caleb yet. Didn't matter. She knew herself and getting married, having that soul-deep connection with someone, was still something she yearned for. What she did not want was the soul-deep evisceration when she lost it. Still didn't.

Except Caleb had happened. He made her feel... alive sometimes, as if she hadn't really been awake until he'd engaged her temper, her vitality, even her funny bone sometimes. What would it be like to explore that even further? Her gaze strayed to his mouth as her thoughts inevitably circled there, imagining how he might kiss her. If she told him the truth about Damian, which she wasn't at all prepared to do.

The expression on his face heated as he caught her watching him, and her gaze automatically lifted to lock with his. He was too close, too male, smelled too much like something her body craved and like her entire world had just spun off its axis.

That was the only excuse she could come up with for why she ached for him to touch

her. However he pleased. He could slide a palm up her arm, cup her jaw. Brush a thumb across her ear. She wasn't picky. But the touch of his lips on hers... The shudder that visual unleashed rocked her to the core.

She clawed it back, desperate to regain some of the control she'd lost. Futile. Control over anything in her life had been slipping away since Cole had announced he was done. And maybe that was the crux of this fake engagement plan—she'd needed to take action, to prove she still called the shots in her own life, not Cole. And neither did Serenity with her wacky predictions, never mind that it had unfolded exactly as she'd sa

id.

Work success may overshadow the desire for a relationship, and a problem may arise in becoming a bit too pushy or aggressive.

Yep, in retrospect, that was a frighteningly accurate statement concerning the events of yesterday. She'd tried to push her agenda on the town, and they weren't buying. Well, if she wanted to be honest, that might have attributed to some of the reason Cole had dropped her like a hot potato too. He'd had a real problem with her ambition as well as her tendency to be assertive. Which was not the same thing as being bossy, like he'd said.

Wow. Fine time to have these realizations, after she'd already barged into town and blown her chances on this shopping center. Probably. But none of this explained why she'd so badly wanted to get married to Cole and then, in response to his rejection, had so carefully ensured she'd never meet anyone new by plunking down the barrier of Damian.

She didn't believe Serenity's predictions had any weight. Not really. But still, just in case, she'd carefully avoided the heartache of constantly wishing for someone to care

for and constantly screwing that up.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

Though she really didn't get what was so bad about wanting to use the untapped stores inside that yearned to nurture. The right way though. Not because she'd been forced into it as a child. Not because she'd latched onto the wrong man for her. And definitely not because she'd railroaded townspeople into a shopping center they didn't want—they had motivations and dreams she couldn't begin to understand.

It would be better if she lost the race. These people needed something better than what she could give them.

Serenity and Augusta picked that moment to return from the back, ballot box in hand with the news of who had won. Havana didn't need to hear the announcement; the answer was written all over the huge smile on her aunt's face. Caleb was the new mayor.

"Congratulations," she murmured to him as Serenity took to the dais, crowing out his name.

Caleb's expression was nothing short of stunned. And that was all she could take of this. Havana fled the diner without looking back.

Twelve

Holy crap what had just happened?

Caleb couldn't catch his breath as Serenity hustled him up on the stage, arm slung around his waist and her face wreathed in smiles. The guys all wore matching expressions of half mirth and half disbelief as if they couldn't decide whether to

laugh or demand a recount. Or maybe that was just him.

“Are you sure I’m the winner?” he muttered low enough that only Serenity and Augusta Moon could hear him. “That can’t be right.”

Of course it could. Even Havana had assumed this would be the outcome. He’d been in denial because... he couldn’t be mayor. A dull buzz started up in his head.

“Stop being modest,” Serenity instructed firmly and shouted out to the crowd, “Our new mayor!”

The folks whistled and clapped, generally having a good old time celebrating an electoral win that never should have happened. Caleb could not be the mayor. It was ridiculous. These people had made a mistake expecting him to lead anything more complicated than a horse to water. And even then, he sure didn’t have the right to make it drink.

“This wasn’t supposed to turn out like this,” he whispered to Serenity with a fierceness that she brushed off.

“It’s providence,” she told him as if that explained everything and probably did if you had the ear of the universe.

Caleb did not. What he did have was an extreme bout of nausea that did not bode well for his acceptance speech. A flash forking through his vision told him some very bad memories were about to surface, and when scenes from al-Sadidiq made an appearance, his demons weren’t far behind.

His leadership days had ended abruptly for a reason. He sucked at it. People had died. Rowe still had nightmares to contend with, and not all of them happened while he was asleep.

“We’re happy to have you as our first mayor,” Augusta Moon told him as she pumped his hand. The pretty woman, who wasn’t much older than he was, nodded at the crowd. “They’re waiting on you to make your acceptance speech.”

Totally befuddled, Caleb turned to the crowd, drinking in their upturned, expectant faces. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Mavis J called out, patting the arm of the gentle giant standing next to her. “Let Lennie and I be the first to welcome you into the fold.”

And like that, his panic vanished in a blink. These people were embracing him for no other reason than because he’d stood up for their uniqueness. His doubt demons might be fighting to make an appearance, but something even deeper began to bleed toward the surface.

He’d come here to find a purpose. A home. A place to belong and heal, and that was being handed to him. Was he really going to throw that back?

No. No, he was not.

“Thank you,” he said sincerely. Forge ahead. “I still don’t know what else to say other than I humbly accept. I’ll do my best to honor the trust you’ve shown me today.”

The crowd applauded, and his team surged forward to clap him on the shoulder, offering their congrats and general support. He could do this. They would be right behind him. Tristan might wisecrack, but he’d break the tension every time. Hudson would be first in line to do anything required to move Caleb’s agenda forward. Isaiah would make sure they all understood their value to the team. Rowe would just be Rowe, never wavering in his solid presence because Hardys didn’t bail no matter how

hard it got.

Caleb's spine straightened, and he swallowed easily for the first time in ages.

One thing in his favor—this town hadn't ever had a mayor before, so the bar was pretty low.

When he got back to the hotel later that night, the guys were in a celebratory mood, so it was a long while until he made his way to his room. But when he got there, he was too keyed up to sleep. He wandered out onto the balcony that overlooked the street. The town had long gone quiet, a reality he aimed to change now that he'd been handed some power in this place. Eventually he'd like to see some nightlife as an alternative draw for guests at the resort. Assuming he could figure out a way for Scott's investment company to still build it if the residents stuck firm to their guns and didn't sell the land they all jointly owned.

If Havana's warning had been right, the resort might not happen if Caleb didn't green light the shopping center. And he had no plans to.

As if thinking about her had actually conjured her, the back of his neck prickled as Havana appeared on the landing of the stairwell that led to the alleyway. She climbed over the railing and stood there, a shadowy figure lurking in the darkest part of the balcony.

"I wanted to say congratulations again," she murmured.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

The lone streetlight shone from down the block near Ruby's, and the moon hadn't risen yet, so it was hard to make out her expression. The sincerity in her voice couldn't be mistaken though.

That hooked him in a place deep inside. She'd lost the election and probably her shopping center, yet she'd sought him out to tell him congratulations. What kind of woman was this?

One he wished he knew better.

Since she seemed a little skittish and unsure about her welcome, he crossed to her so they could at least be within shouting distance. Or even closer than that. The moment he halted, her perfume invaded the space around him, winding up his senses for something far more intimate than shouting.

"Thanks," he murmured back. "Why are we whispering?"

"Because... I don't know. It's dark. And I feel like I'm disturbing you," she responded at precisely the same low decibel level, forcing him to get even closer to hear her.

Which worked for him on several levels. "You disturb me all right."

It wasn't so dark that he couldn't see the brief lift of her lips. "I get that a lot."

He would just bet she did. A woman as beautiful as Havana probably went around disturbing men on a visceral level twice a week. The double whammy of the weight

of his new title and Havana's heavy presence threatened to push him to his knees, but he stayed on his feet through sheer will.

"Do we need to talk about the shopping center?"

Good. Subject change. He could keep it together.

She shrugged. "Not much to talk about. You're going forward with your new age town. That means it's over and I've lost. I still have to talk to Damian about how this is going to go over with his investors. It could mean that we have to pull up stakes permanently and find another spot for the resort."

Yeah, he'd expected her to say that.

"You know that's going to greatly affect what the folks do here with this downtown area. Right? If there's no resort, there's no captive audience and not much reason to do anything fancy to these buildings. I don't think we can conceive of anything catchy enough to pull people from Austin otherwise."

"I disagree." This time he heard the smile in her voice. "You'll figure it out. They elected you because they can see greatness in you. You won't disappoint them."

He had to laugh at that, though it came out choppy and not very amused. "Their loyalty is misplaced."

"I don't think so. You have this ability to influence people. It's kind of mindboggling to watch, actually. I'm a little jealous."

Her voice wound through him, more than a little bit affecting for lots of reasons but mostly because her admiration struck something inside. "I don't do anything special."

“You don’t have to. It’s part of your charm. You talk and people listen, ready to follow you because they’ve already decided you’re an authority figure. Your friends came with you to Superstition Springs, didn’t they? I don’t think that was an accident.”

It wasn’t. But he didn’t recognize himself at all in her descr

ription. Maybe she’d gotten him confused with a commanding officer or a platoon leader—you followed them no matter what because that was the drill. Caleb wasn’t the hero figure she’d been trying to paint him as. “My guys are tight. They’d have followed any one of us.”

“But they didn’t. They followed you,” she reminded him gently with a light laugh. “Why am I the one giving you the pep talk?”

A smile spread across his face. “I was wondering the same thing. Maybe because you know this is messed up. You should have won.”

“No.” She was so matter-of-fact that he didn’t immediately jump into an argument about it. “This is reality. I don’t have the ability to influence like you do. I have to fight my way through any situation.”

“That’s because you try too hard to control everything,” he said without thinking how that might come across and then shrugged. “In the spirit of this conversation, I’m just being honest. It’s like you immediately expect everyone to do what you want without taking time to step back long enough to figure out how to earn people’s allegiance.”

“Is that what you do?” she asked quietly.

“What? No.”

Well, maybe he did. Maybe that was why he got so choked up when his team rallied around him, because what they'd all been through together mattered. He didn't trade on that but instead considered their experiences as a cohesive mechanism. He'd certainly never thought of how he interacted with his guys as earning his place at their head.

But if she was right, it was a good way to think about how to lead a town. Instead of having all the answers right away, he'd take a step back. Figure out how to earn the loyalty they'd already shown him.

"I don't know," he amended. "Yeah. I guess I do try hard to figure out where people fit best, how to help them hone their skills. Think about the greater good and always do the right thing. Same as anyone would."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“But that’s not what everyone does.” The slight note of amused exasperation made him smile. “I try to do that, but it doesn’t come across the same way. You are special whether you like it or not, so stop arguing with me.”

“See there you go being bossy again.”

“I didn’t want to like you,” she said wryly. “You make it pretty hard not to.”

“It’s part of my charm.” And she couldn’t deny that he had some since she’d already admitted as much. “I don’t want to like you either.”

“Because I’m bossy.”

She stated it as a fact, as if that detracted from her sexiness. “Uh, no. I have never been threatened by an assertive woman. In fact, I’d go so far as to say that strong women are a turn-on. Because, you know, I can be a little hardheaded. You don’t let me run over you.”

He could sense her confusion as she contemplated him, though what she could actually see in the dark remained a mystery. “Then why can’t you just like me?”

“Because you’re engaged, Havana!” That had come out a little more forcefully than he’d have liked and also reminded him that he had no business being out here on this semiprivate balcony with Scott’s fiancée. “It’s plain wrong to think about you the way I do.”

Yeah, that was a stellar confession to tack onto the end.

She froze. “What way is that?”

Oh no, he wasn’t digging this hole any deeper. “Forget I said anything.”

The silence stretched to the point of snapping, and then she cleared her throat. “What if... I wasn’t engaged to Damian?”

“Hold your horses.” His hand flew up as if he could physically stop the force of her words. Nothing, however, could stop the very visceral reaction in his gut as he internalized the possibilities. Which was wrong. “I didn’t mention it to get you to do something about it! You can’t dump your fiancé for me. That’s crazy talk. We’re not... I’m not— Jeez, Havana. You can’t drop a thing like that on a guy.”

She had to fix it. It might already be too late. This was bad. So bad he’d have to go very far away because he’d never be able to look Scott in the eye again. He might not even be able to look himself in the eye again.

Her laugh did nothing to mellow him out.

“Relax. I’m not dumping him for anyone. The truth is... Wow, this is harder to admit than I would have expected.” She took a deep breath. “It’s fake. I asked him to play my fiancé to avoid unpleasant questions. I’m not even seeing anyone. And I have no idea why I’m telling you this.”

His whole world fell off a cliff as he internalized her meaning. Havana was not engaged to Scott. Havana was not engaged to anyone. She was single. One hundred percent free as a bird and he could think about her any way he pleased. In his arms. In the shower. Diving into the springs as she beckoned him closer with a laugh. All of it was okay.

Breath his lungs had been holding hostage rattled in his throat and came out as a

cough. “Not engaged.”

“Not even a little,” she confirmed. “It’s exhibit A for why you’re not wrong about my obsessive need to control everything. If I’m engaged, there’s no chance something unexpected will happen.”

Blinking, he filled in those blanks faster than a speeding bullet. “Unexpected. Like meeting someone in the Dorito aisle you mean.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

Her voice trailed off to a low murmur that feathered across his skin, raising awareness that honed his senses to a fine edge. Heaviness in the air pressed down on him, but he couldn’t blame the weight of this conversation on the humidity. It was one hundred percent Havana who’d loaded everything with meaning and significance. On purpose? He burned to find out.

“Then that begs the question. Why did you tell me?”

“Because I want to see what it feels like to let go. Control is just an illusion, right?”

She’d swayed closer to him, so close that he could reach out and gather her into his arms with scarcely any effort. So he did. Her soft sigh fluttered across his Adam’s apple.

“I’ve been dreaming of finding my way here again,” she said.

More confessions of the variety he was coming to vastly appreciate. Especially since he’d been dreaming of that too. “All you had to do was say the word.”

“I don’t do this kind of thing well.”

“Which kind of thing, letting a man hold you?” She was a natural, melting into his embrace easily, as if she’d been formed to fit like this against him. “I’m not finding any issues with your technique, but I’m free all night if you’d like to spend time practicing.”

Her lips turned up against his throat, and he loved that he could feel her smiling. “No, dummy. Telling a man I’m interested. Letting things happen instead of trying to dictate every second.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

Probably because she talked too much to let things happen. “Let me help you out with that.”

Before she could squeak out another word, he settled his mouth on hers, drawing out the contact until she engaged and then it became a kiss.

Holy cow did it. When Havana got on board with something, she went for broke, drowning him in sensation as she took over, shaping her mouth with his and nestling even deeper into his arms.

This was his chance to indulge. Winding his fingers through her hair, he let the silk speak to him through his flesh, and it had plenty to say. That vibrant fall of red felt like heaven, sliding through the Vs of his fingers again and again as he kissed Havana. Finally.

All the tension between them sparked and caught fire, blazing higher and higher as he let her strength and determination heighten the experience.

All at once, she wrenched away, flying out of his embrace before he’d fully registered it happening.

“Sorry,” she gasped out. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“Okay,” he said slowly because his brain hadn’t reengaged yet. He clenched his jeans with both hands to keep from reaching out for her again, because that was a very real danger. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, it’s not you, it’s—”

&n

bsp; “Me,” he finished flatly on her behalf. “I get it.”

“You don’t,” she corrected, and he could feel her chest rising and falling even though they weren’t within touching distance anymore. “Because I didn’t tell you everything. I was engaged. For real. To someone who’s not Damian. Cole. And it ended, not by my choice. I invented the engagement to Damian because I can’t go through that again.”

“So, if I’m reading all this right,” he said as pieces fell into place more quickly than he’d have liked, “you’re lumping me into a category of men like your ex-fiancé who break promises and deliberately hurt you. And that’s why you can’t kiss me. Because I have the same basic equipment as some other loser who isn’t me.”

“No.” She shook her head and then made a noise in her chest. “Well, yeah. I guess so when you put it that way.”

“What other way is there to put it? I’m a man, so therefore I’m going to treat you like your ex. And that means we’re going to be over before we started. Which part did I get wrong?”

“The part where I’m acting like an idiot,” she muttered with a hoarse laugh. “I’m sorry. This is me trying to control every aspect of my life so I don’t have to curl up in a ball after having my heart ripped out of my chest. It’s not your fault.”

He unclenched his hands from his jeans as his swirling temper vanished. Yeah, he’d fallen in a little deeper with her than he’d have guessed as well because this all felt very real and very huge to him too. Her vulnerability humbled him.

“Hey,” he said softly. “We’ve already established that you’re a mess of a control freak. I’m still here. How about this? You go back to your room and dream about me tonight. Tomorrow I’ll take you on a real date with no fake fiancés between us. Then we’ll see what’s what. I’m not going anywhere.”

“You can’t. You’re the mayor,” she reminded him, and her voice had regained some color.

Honestly, he liked it raspy and affected. But he liked it strong and purposeful too. Basically, he wanted to be wherever Havana Nixon was and to prove to her that all men were not created equal.

“That’s right, and don’t you forget that I have a plan for this town. I need you to make it work.”

“Me? I lost the election fair and square. I’ve got to spend the next little while coming up with an alternative to the shopping center project, or I have no job.”

“Sleep on that,” he advised her, not bothering to hide his smile since he suspected she couldn’t see it anyway. “Tomorrow we’ll see if that’s still true.”

He had plans for Havana that were designed to make her forget she’d ever heard the words shopping center. For now, he’d take his own advice and go to bed so he could dream about that kiss and how he’d take it up a few notches the next time he got her into his arms.

Because there would be a next time. No question. You couldn’t kiss a woman like Havana and not want a repeat every day for the next fifty years. And the beauty of it? He could. She wasn’t engaged. The world was wide open with possibilities, and Caleb liked all of them.

Thirteen

The next morning, Havana couldn't decide whether to admit to Caleb that she'd dreamed about him as instructed or play it off like the kiss on the balcony last night hadn't mattered one way or the other. After all, where could this thing between them really go when obviously she had no place here in Superstition Springs?

Maybe he'd forget all about her as he dug into his new job. She should encourage him to do exactly that if she was smart.

But when she entered the vacant lobby area of the hotel to find him waiting for her on the couch, he didn't give her a chance to say anything. He shot to his feet and pulled her into his arms. Her mind emptied instantly of everything that wasn't Caleb Hardy.

"Good morning," he murmured into her hair, and she echoed it.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

At least she thought she did. Her mouth ended up a little busy as he took it in another searing kiss that left the one on the balcony last night in the dust. Every nerve ending in her body sizzled.

So this was Caleb showing her how a real man acted when he liked a woman. It was far more delicious than she would have anticipated, and she'd done a lot of anticipating. She'd have sworn he'd been spouting that nonsense about showing a woman how much he wanted her to throw her off guard. Well, mission accomplished.

When he finally ended that humdinger of a kiss, she regained none of her balance. His gaze was smoky and laced with heat and meaning, and she hardly knew which way was up.

"Um, hi," she croaked, and for some reason that made him laugh.

"Hi." He feathered a thumb across her forehead to smooth back a strand of hair that hadn't been bothering her at all. He bothered her. More than she'd have ever admitted.

And she had no barrier against it. Not anymore since she'd stupidly confessed the truth about the fake engagement. She shouldn't have kissed him, and she certainly should have been the one to step back this morning. Except he got her brain all twisted up, which was the only excuse she had for allowing any of this.

She wrenched out of his arms and nearly whimpered at how fast his heat vanished from her body. "I wasn't expecting to pick up where we left off last night. I—"

“Am not in charge today,” he reminded her with a quirked eyebrow. “I asked you to meet me this morning so we could spend the day together with no fiancé between us. That includes you not jumping on the control-freak train. Relax and let me.”

Let him what, exactly? That sounded like a recipe for heartache in her future. This was the part where she should tell him her time in Superstition Springs had an expiration date. She had to find a job since the shopping center was not going to be it. How she’d make it up to Serenity and Aria for sloughing them off like dead weight, she had no clue.

“I thought you were going to take me on a real date,” she said, and holy cow, where had that come from? And in such a throaty, needy voice too. Fix it. “Which I have not agreed to, by the way—”

“Havana.” He said her name with such authority that she instinctively shut up. “We’re going to do something you love today, I promise. Also, I need you to be on board. With everything. If you don’t want to spend the day with me, then why are you here?”

Curiosity. Which was a cop-out. She had to own her decisions. “You said you needed me to make your plan work. Tell me more about that.”

Not that she was considering it, exactly.

He nodded once. “I will. That’s what today is about, which I’ll get to in a minute. We need to address item number one on the agenda first. If you don’t want me to kiss you, say so now.”

Her mouth opened. She tried to speak. Nothing came out. Ugh. Apparently she couldn’t say that. Fine time for an honest streak to show up. She’d had zero problem lying to everyone about Damian being her fiancé, but when it really mattered, she

couldn't squeak out one little phrase that would save her sanity—I don't want you to kiss me.

The problem was that she did want him to. A lot. So maybe she could let it ride and see how that went.

“I need you to say it, Havana,” he advised her. “Out loud. This is not optional.”

Fine. “Kissing you is not the worst thing I've ever done.”

“That's not consent. Either you told me the truth about Scott and your fake engagement because you wanted to see where things might go between us or you didn't. Which is it?”

“I explained why I did that,” she spat out in frustration. “Because I don't know how to let go. Maybe I need you to take control so I don't have to figure it out.”

He raised his brows. “Sorry. It doesn't work like that. I'm not the kind of guy who can force a woman to accept my attentions. I thought you wanted me to kiss you, but then I got a distinct back-off vibe. Both times. You're going to have to do better than that. So I'll make you a deal. I won't kiss you again. The next time, you're going to have to initiate it.”

Oh, he'd like that wouldn't he? Giving her all the control. That was fighting dirty, plain and simple. “Maybe I will.”

“Fine. I'll be waiting.”

They eyed each other, sensual tension swirling between them, prickling the hair on her skin until she couldn't stand it any longer. She reached out and curled her hand around a fistful of his shirt, yanking him forward until their mouths collided.

This kiss unfurled inside her, loosening everything that had grown tight and confused as he forced her to think about what she really wanted. He let her kiss him, eagerly lapping it all up but not taking over.

It was glorious.

Finally she pushed back and shot him a smug smile. “Satisfied?”

“Not even close,” he growled, his meaning rocketing through her instantly—he wanted so much more from her, things she didn’t fully understand but desperately wanted to. “But we can be done for now. To be clear, I will kiss you again.”

“I’m on board, as instructed,” she ground out. What else could she do to please his highness? Honestly the man infuriated her so much more than he turned her on. Sometimes. “Where are you taking me?”

“On a journey called option B,” he said cryptically and hustled her outside to the street.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

Fine. She could play along for a little while.

Sunlight nearly blinded her, and she fished around in her bag for her sunglasses, slipping them on over her face. Blinking, she tried to orient as fast as she could so she didn't get knocked for another loop.

"What do you see?" he asked her and nodded at the dilapidated row of mostly abandoned buildings across from Serenity's hotel. That side included Ruby's diner down at the end and Lennie's antique shop two storefronts closer. Everything else had long fallen out of use.

"A bunch of stuff in the way of my shopping center," she said blithely.

"Yes. That's it exactly. You're having a hard time getting out from under option A. Imagine for a second that I'm the mayor of this town." He laughed at the exasperation that she let show on her face. "Don't be like that. Listen. I'm the mayor. I have h

ired the best urban planner in Texas to help me get this town in shape. I want to preserve this history, the buildings. Embrace the quirks of the residents. How would you advise me?"

She was the best urban planner in this scenario? Something inside her lurched at the phrase and then greedily latched onto it, holding it close and examining it from all angles as if this little bit of gold might vanish before her eyes.

Even Damian didn't say things like that to her. She was a means to an end, which she'd known from the beginning of their partnership. When he'd approached her

about coming on board with his resort plans, he'd only done so because he remembered she was from this area. That had been the deal. She had to earn her way into the project by greasing the wheels with the residents, which had failed miserably.

Caleb wasn't asking her to earn anything. He was just painting more word pictures. For some reason that appealed to her enormously after the election loss and having her bones rattled by the new mayor's mouth.

As requested, she tested out his thought process, not fully committing to it but letting the idea unfold in her head, generating a new landscape with lines and colors that she easily superimposed over the existing one.

"I see a wide sidewalk on both sides, edged by long wooden flowerpots. Streetlights with wide bases that have plenty of room for artistic graffiti. New façades, some with stonework, some with reclaimed barn wood washed white. Cantilevered signposts with hanging wooden signs, hand-lettered. New doors with wrought iron hardware. Parking in a lot behind Ruby's and a cut through created by reducing the size of the building between Lennie's and the one next to it. We can easily concrete over the two cut sides and offer the space as a communal mural."

When she opened her eyes, Caleb was standing there with his arms crossed, watching her with a smile she couldn't interpret. "You're hired."

She scowled. "Hired to do what? Create more fantasies for your crazy talk?"

"Trust me, I can create fantasies all on my own," he murmured, and his gaze never left her face, but that didn't stop the hot, hard flush that traveled all the way down her body as she internalized his suggestive comment. "What I need is that kind of vision. It's so sharp and clear. I only had a nebulous idea that we could do some refurbishment, but you're a true artist. I mean, I figured you had to have some color in you since you're a native Springian, but that far surpassed my expectations."

“Springian?” she repeated, mostly to cover the pleased little hum that had started up in her throat.

A true artist. What did that even mean? That he thought she had talent? Whatever he meant, it didn’t seem to matter to her heart, which was in the process of squishing around in her chest over what was clearly a compliment in Caleb Hardy’s world.

He shrugged. “We need catchy marketing. I like it.”

She liked it too. She liked everything he was saying, but how was she supposed to admit that? None of this was part of the grand plan. The town was supposed to be leveled, and in its place, she’d build a pretty shopping center that would have her signature all over it.

And then she never had to think about how she wasn’t really a Springian, not the way he meant it.

That was the biggest wet blanket on his grandiose experiment. She wasn’t really welcome here. The town had given her that message loud and clear when they voted for an outsider to be their mayor over a local. Local-ish. She’d moved away and then stormed back into town, peddling a bricks-and-mortar makeover that the folks had handily rejected.

She was having a hard time not taking it as a rejection of her. Since the shopping center wasn’t happening, her next trick was to leave. Again. She could take a hint.

“Whatever ‘color’ you think you see in me is the product of education,” she told him flatly. “Nothing more. I’ve taken design theory classes and studied hundreds of towns.”

“Which is why I’m offering you a job,” he said, and she didn’t even have to question

his sincerity—it was all over his expression. “I need a professional, not a quirky artist dreamer type. We’ll let them have their day when we open up the mural to the public and contract out the hand-lettered signs. Until then, it’s purely business, and I can’t have anything less than a control freak with amazing organizational skills and the soul of a dictator in charge of this project.”

A grin tugged at her mouth before she could stop it. How did he do that? No one had ever been able to charm her in the midst of infuriating her. It was sorcery, plain and simple. “Flattery will get you everywhere.”

“I’m counting on it. Say yes. Forget about working with Scott and work with me instead. Only I won’t ever agree to be your fake fiancé, so take that under advisement.”

The ever-present heavy awareness dialed up about ten notches as he communicated exactly how real their association would be without saying a word.

She swallowed, which did nothing to cool her heated throat. “Noted.”

Exactly as she’d suspected. Caleb Hardy didn’t do fake. He was one hundred percent authentic and did nothing by halves. If she agreed to this, she’d be all in, in more ways than one. She’d have to come clean to everyone about the lie she’d perpetuated about her engagement to Damian.

And she’d have to work with Caleb. A lot. Day in and day out.

“What exactly are you proposing?” she asked with a narrowed gaze. “I’m not going to sleep with you just because we’re working together.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“Well, now that’s insulting,” he said with a mock frown. “I don’t usually have to resort to luring a woman into my clutches with job offers. Mostly they come along willingly.”

“You know what I’m saying,” she shot back. “Our association needs to stay professional if we’re going to work together.”

“Like it stayed professional with Scott?” he asked with raised eyebrows. “Seems to me like you traded on that working relationship all kinds of ways.”

“That’s not the point.” It was the point, and she didn’t like that he was forcing her to stay on her toes. “It didn’t matter with Damian because—”

She bit off the rest: I could never fall for him.

And wasn’t that the ugly truth. She could work with Damian and pretend they were engaged all day long because he didn’t stir her up the way Caleb did. The man was confident in his own skin, gorgeous, and oh, so dangerous. She had no clue how to manage a situation that was quickly spiraling out of control.

Curious, he cocked his head as if trying to fill in that blank, and it would not surprise her if he’d guessed the direction of her thoughts. Or had developed some kind of ESP that allowed him to read her like a book strictly by stepping foot in Superstition Springs, the mecca of all things mystical. Either way, none of this was cool.

“I know,” he said softly. “You’re still hurting over the loser ex, and you need someone to treat you like a queen so you lose that panicked look in your eye as soon

as a man pays attention to you.”

No , that was the opposite of what she needed, never mind that it sounded so lovely she almost burst into tears. “I need a man who understands that I’m not looking for another broken heart and backs off.”

He held up his hands in the classic I surrender gesture. “Then we’ll keep it casual. No diamond rings four seconds after the next time I kiss you. Got it.”

Okay, now he was being silly. Because she was too, and it figured he’d find a way to put it all in perspective. She let out the breath she’d been holding, and with it almost all the knots in her stomach dissolved. “Yeah, yeah, I’m an idiot again. We can date and kiss and whatever as long as everyone understands I’m not looking for anything more.”

That would keep it all nice and safe. She could let Caleb focus his time and energy on showing her how a real man did things while she invested none of her heart and soul into a man who would eventually tear up both into little pieces. She could hang out for a while longer, see how his plan played out. Keep one foot pointed at the exit.

“What are you looking for then?” he asked so nonchalantly that she almost missed how critical of a question it was. “With the shopping center? Why does it have to be that or the town?”

Trust him to cut right to the bone, slicing through all the meat and exposing her vulnerabilities. Caleb never once had to question his place in the world because he settled into his niche as if he’d always been there. He knew exactly how he fit, and the way he owned that was a large part of his appeal, if she was being honest. And she was so sick of trying to brute force her way into that kind of acceptance that she told him the truth.

“It was supposed to be me showing my strengths once and for all. My mom was cut from the same cloth as her sister. How do you think I got a name like Havana?” She smiled wryly. “Serenity picked up where my mom left off, depending on me to help care for my sisters because she was mostly clueless about how to handle three kids dropped on her doorstep. I didn’t mind. I loved helping. But my sisters didn’t see me as nurturing, just bossy and domineering.”

Ember mostly had said that, more than once. Sometimes Havana thought she’d gotten pregnant on purpose strictly to spite her. Never once had the girl taken a step back to see that Havana had only wanted the best for her. Aria at least had stayed out of trouble, but that didn’t make up for having failed with Ember.

She shrugged and rounded out the list of her sins. “Turns out I come across that way when trying to sell a shopping center too.”

“But if you could get the townspeople to buy into it, you’d finally be seen for your contributions?” Caleb guessed quietly. “Everyone would appreciate you in a way they never had?”

Was she that obvious, or did Caleb pay that much attention to her? Better question—which one did she want it to be? “You see how that worked out. Once again, I didn’t read the room well enough, so I’m still not a Springian.”

That pretty much put the nail in it. She had no business seeing how Caleb’s plans played out. Since everything had fallen apart, it was a great time to leave before she got her hopes up again.

“You can be,” he threw out. “Do this with me. Don’t you see how perfectly the universe set this up to give you what you’ve always wanted? Help them embrace their destiny.”

Help. It was the magic word, Havana's kryptonite and elixir of life all rolled into one.

Option B didn't seem so outlandish all at once. When laid out in Caleb's dulcet tones, it actually sounded pretty great. A few months wasn't so long to stay in Superstition Springs, not when she could test out dating Caleb at the same time. Maybe she could even segue this design experience into a job in Austin or San Antonio.

If she hadn't succeeded with Ember or crossed the finish line on getting married and the shopping center was out too, why not jump on board with Team Caleb? What did she have to lose?

Fourteen

Somehow Caleb had convinced Havana to completely abandon the shopping center idea and take a job helping him shape this town into something all the residents could be proud of. An unpaid job because, as she'd pointed out, he had no revenue to draw her salary from. And she'd volunteered to talk to Damian Scott about the new plans since they'd have to somehow convince him that he loved the idea of not razing the town.

Dazed pretty well described his state of mind since the election. Maybe even before that. Havana had knocked him for a loop the moment he'd crashed into her at Voodoo Grocery, and he hadn't really ever regained his balance.

She was something else.

When she showed up on his balcony the next morning, he could easily call himself shocked. Hadn't she told him they were taking it slow? That alone had kept him from mentioning the status change in their relationship—if you could call it that—when the guys had ribbed him over the amount of time he spent with Havana.

Yet there she was, knocking on the door. Since he was pretty sure she wasn't there for the same activity he'd been visualizing, he threw some pants on and eased the door open, partially shielding himself behind it.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

Just in case she was there for something a little more hands-on, he'd already be almost undressed for the occasion.

She didn't say a word. Her gaze strayed down his torso as if she'd stumbled over the best side of beef at the market and she was starving.

"It's a little early in the morning to be looking at a man like that," he said drily. "Unless you're planning to come in and make good on it."

She cut her gaze back to his and locked on, a guilty flush staining her cheeks. Which pleased him enormously because it meant she had indeed been indulging in some naughty thoughts despite the back-off mandate she'd issued the last time they'd talked.

"I wasn't expecting you to be half-dressed," she mumbled. "Or have such a fascinating array of nicks and scars on that one shoulder. Your skin is this interesting bronze color that I hadn't properly imagined and... I'm going to shut up now."

Oh, that would be a shame. He tried to hide a grin and failed. "Don't do that on my account. I like listening to you talk about my body. There's more you haven't seen if you need some additional parts to describe."

The flush heightened. "I'd really prefer it if you'd put a shirt on."

"You came to my door at—" He leaned back to glance at the clock, but really it was an excuse to reveal more of his naked chest because flustering her was so much fun. "Eight-oh-five a.m. How dressed did you think I was going to be?"

“Most people put clothes on to answer the door,” she countered and averted her eyes but not before she copped a peek. Hopefully that eyeful had given her enough to consider whether she’d like to take this early-morning meeting to the next level.

“Most people haven’t spent the past decade face down in dirt for the better part of a night. Now that I don’t have to, I like to be as comfortable as possible. I’ve never been modest, nor am I about to start.”

She nodded once. “I’ll take that under advisement.”

“Are you sure you didn’t come by hoping to catch me still in bed?” he asked tongue in cheek. “Or did you actually intend to have a conversation about something other than my poor battle-worn skin?”

Her gaze strayed back to his shoulder, softening. “I guess I should have put that together. It didn’t occur to me that you’d have wounds from being in the Navy.”

“I was a SEAL. We did the stuff no one wants to talk about,” he told her flatly. “I tangled with the wrong end of an al-Qaeda butcher knife. More than once.”

Her head bobbed in agreement a bunch of times as if she couldn’t quite process that. “Sure, of course. I get that it wasn’t pretty.”

“And neither am I. But I fared much better than the other guy.” Fact of life. Some women didn’t like that part of his past, and if she was one of them, now would be a good time to establish that.

But she lifted her eyes to his, and revulsion wasn’t even close to the top of the list of things he saw there. “You’re beautiful, Caleb. You earned those scars in the most honorable way imaginable. Why would anyone see them as ugly?”

Now it was his turn to flush, but why that pleased him so much, he couldn't say. "Now you're embarrassing me."

"Then put a shirt on," she advised him saucily. "If you don't want to be ogled, don't run around naked."

Touché. And she'd made him laugh before coffee, a feat of gargantuan proportions. "Give me a sec."

He ducked back into the room and found a T-shirt, pulling it on over his skin that Havana had apparently been visualizing enough that its color had surprised her. When the Navy trained SEALs, shirts often went by the wayside as recruits spent an ungodly number of hours wallowing in sand and mud. That rigorous bit of fun had been followed by multiple rounds of HALO drops into the Persian Gulf, among other things. Wet clothes weighed a man down. The reasons he had a good base tan were myriad and something he'd rather not think about right now.

"Happy?" he asked her as he pulled the door open wide to reveal his now-covered torso. "Or at least happy enough to tell me the purpose of this early-morning lesson on how I should dress for a woman who sneaks onto my balcony instead of calling first?"

This time she didn't flush, which he immediately missed.

"I'm right upstairs. Calling felt anticlimactic."

Somehow he didn't think she'd appreciate any of the jokes that sprang to his tongue, so he bit them back and crossed his arms to keep from reaching out. He hadn't brushed his teeth yet, and if she kept standing there looking so delectable, he might be tempted to get a little handsy. "And now you're right downstairs. Still not telling me why you're here. A man might start getting the idea that you want exactly what it

seems you came for but you're too shy to admit it."

She scowled. "If I wanted that, you'd know. I came to see if you'd go with me to talk to Damian. I told him the fake engagement was off. We're a united front, and I need him to see that."

Well, well. That statement was full of so many loaded variables he hardly knew where to start. Oh, yeah. He did. "How exactly would I know you wanted that? Give me some clues."

"Please get your mind out of the gutter," she said, her exasperation clear. "If you'll focus, I solemnly swear I will never come to your door this early again."

"Don't be ridiculous. You come to my door any time of day or night that it strikes your fancy. It'll never be locked." His mind refused to get out of the gutter where Havana was concerned, so he didn't even bother to try. But since she'd asked, he shifted the conversation to her chosen topic. "I'd be thrilled to go with you to talk to Scott. Especially if the goal is to establish us as a couple."

She rolled her eyes. "I wish you were half as cute as you think you are."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“Oh, come on. I’m at least sixty percent as cute as I think I am.”

“I’ll be downstairs. Waiting.”

Fighting a smile of her own, she flounced away, hips swinging nicely, and he shamelessly watched her go. Next ti

me, he might break a few of his own rules about how fast he got intimate with a woman and haul her inside to let her examine his war wounds a little more closely. Hands-on. But for now he’d honor her request to keep things casual until it suited him to change her mind.

The car ride to La Grange might have been considered torture in some places. But Caleb kept his cool and pretended an unhealthy fascination with the landscape, which wasn’t any different than the scenery between Austin and Superstition Springs.

Scott answered the door of his hotel room completely dressed in a suit and tie, not that Caleb expected anything less. The man had probably been born in a suit.

“Damian, thanks for seeing us on short notice,” Havana interjected smoothly, apparently picking up a thread from the text message she’d sent him earlier from the Yukon. “We have a proposition for you.”

As he ushered them inside, Scott’s gaze cut to Caleb and back to Havana, clearly trying to figure out the vibe that he surely sensed. That made two of them.

“Don’t mind me, I’ll just stand over here,” Caleb suggested in an attempt to assure

the other man he wasn't a threat and leaned up against the wall unobtrusively as Scott showed Havana to the scarred table near the window.

The Best Western was probably a far cry from the luxury Damian Scott was used to, but he didn't seem to mind, taking the seat farthest away from the door and angling his chair toward both Havana and Caleb. He gave them both his full attention, no cell phone in sight.

Classy. Now that he knew Scott and Havana weren't really an item, some of their awkwardness around each other made sense. And Caleb had to give the man all kinds of props for doing the fake engagement thing without taking extra liberties with the woman in question.

Havana jumped right to the point. "Let's find a different place for the shopping center. Caleb wants to give his town-refurbishment idea a shot, and I'd like to help him."

To his credit, Scott didn't register an iota of surprise, which was more than Caleb could say about his own shock level. When Havana committed to something, the woman went ballistic. The little nugget of heat that had pretty much lived in his gut since the Dorito aisle crash grew into something a great deal bigger.

"Tell me more," Scott said sincerely and steepled his hands. "The text message you sent me didn't have enough details. I have to take it to the group, and I'll need solid numbers."

Figured Havana would have gotten in front of the deal early, which was where her skills really shone. She didn't leave things to chance.

"Sure," she returned agreeably. "Caleb knows your investors aren't thrilled about an old falling-down mining town marring up the landscape. But his vision for changing

that is pretty inspired. You heard most of it the other day at the diner. All we're asking for is a chance to show your investors what a complement a historic town with an artisan soul can be to the resort. I can get you similar projections as what I did for the shopping center by, let's say next Thursday?"

Well, he didn't know about Damian Scott, but Caleb was sure sold. More on the woman than the town though. She was something else, her blue eyes flashing with passion and her red hair nearly bristling. He might be a little more in over his head with her than he'd been pretending.

His heart hurt when he looked at her, and he didn't seem to be able to do anything to stop it. What was he supposed to do with that? Nothing—she'd laid down the law about what she was and wasn't looking for from a man. Odds were good that a sudden declaration of deeper feelings wouldn't go over well.

Scott just nodded as if he had these kinds of conversations twice a day. "If the projections line up, I'd be willing to give you six months to get the plans in order and prove the execution. Otherwise, I think you owe it to me to bow out."

Uh... so that was it? Havana had gotten what she'd come for in under five minutes? Was this the same woman who claimed she didn't have the ability to influence people?

Havana offered her hand for a perfunctory shake, all smiles. "That's more than fair. You're good people, Damian."

He returned her smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Not good enough. I did honestly expect that thing we talked about to take a couple of weeks though. Guess I was more right than I thought."

A fascinating blush stained Havana's cheeks that only heightened her outrageous

beauty as she studiously avoided Damian's gaze. "Don't be silly. You're every bit good enough, and that's way more than needs to be said in present company."

Wait, what present company? Did she mean him? "What am I missing?"

"Nothing." Refusing to look at Caleb too, Havana shot to her feet, nearly toppling her chair backward. "Thanks, Damian, for being a good sport about the shopping center."

"I'm still going to build it," he said, his voice even. "You just won't be on the project. You have six months to convince me I should find a new place to break ground on it. Otherwise, I'll start the hard sell on the residents. Piles of cash turn almost all noes to yeses."

Havana nodded and tried to hustle Caleb out of the hotel room. But he stopped to shake Scott's hand because after all, the man was giving them a chance, no questions asked. The flash of red hair in his peripheral vision vanished before Caleb had cleared the door.

"What was that all about?" he called after her as she strode four lengths ahead of him toward the Yukon. He easily caught up, holding the key fob out of her reach as she tried to fight him for it, presumably so she could unlock the door to escape. She fumed about it for exactly two seconds, then switched gears ultrafast.

"It was about Damian agreeing to give us six months," she said brightly like she thought she was fooling him. "Weren't you paying attention? That's the best news ever."

Oh, he'd been paying attention all right, and the undercurrents had been fierce. Because Scott had been referencing how they'd talked about Caleb's lack of ability to take on a mission of this magnitude? He was missing intel on this, and that wasn't going to fly. "What thing was supposed to take a couple of weeks?"

“Caleb.”

The way she said his name slid down his spine, raising all kinds of awareness that wasn't fitting for a hotel parking lot. Okay, well, it would be if they were headed in the opposite direction, toward a room. But instead, they were circling each other for the eightieth time, and he wasn't sure if he should find it exhilarating or irritating, given the subject in question.

Which still hadn't been addressed.

“Havana.”

Apparently saying her name didn't have quite the same effect on her. She blinked up at him with a small smile. “Is it that hard for you to not be in the know? I am allowed to have secrets. We're not at that place where I tell you everything.”

That deflated him faster than anything else she could have said. Of course they weren't. They were barely dating, regardless of any revelations he might have had about his feelings for her during that speech in Scott's hotel room.

He sighed and ruffled the hair on the back of his neck. “Yeah, now I'm the idiot. Sorry. I'm carrying some crap around from... before.”

It was so ingrained to not talk about classified ops that Caleb's conscience automatically pulled back, though it really wouldn't matter overly much if he told her. The media had torn the op apart after it came out that his team had destroyed a village with not one insurgent present. Bad intel—the gift that keeps on giving

apparently. Caleb hadn't realized he had such issues with trust as a result.

Maybe because he'd been so busy backing off per her request. Funny how easily he'd jumped on that, barely offering one squeak of protest.

"It's okay." She put a hand on his arm, and the skin underneath tingled. "I made a bigger deal out of it than it needed to be. Can we focus on the fact that we have six months to get the town in order?"

Yeah. That was the thing he needed to be freaking out about. Six months was not an et

ernity. It was barely enough time to really get rolling—and that was assuming the whole shebang was being helmed by someone who knew what they were doing. The absolute last thing he should be doing was having some knee-jerk realizations about his own emotional ability to have a relationship with a woman.

He beeped the Yukon locks and opened her car door, praying it didn't seem like the distraction it was. He needed a minute to get his head in order.

By the time he rounded the SUV and jumped into the driver's seat, he'd at least gotten his expression semiblack. That was progress.

"Can we talk about the infrastructure plan?" she asked as soon as he clicked his seat belt into place.

He rolled out of the Best Western lot and headed west toward the dust trail that he had to take to get back to Superstition Springs. Hopefully there would be a sign to differentiate from all the other dust trails. "Which plan is that?"

"Police force. Fire and ambulance services. A school system. That plan. We're going

to need to figure out where those services will be located so I know how to fit them into the master design.” She chatted about that for a few minutes, oblivious to how his chest had gone numb.

What did he know about creating municipal services from the ground up? He’d need people to head those things. Not just people—they had to be experienced, willing to live in an experimental town with an uncertain future, and who knew they were on deck to help make it all happen.

Havana trailed off and glanced at him. “Are you okay? You got really quiet.”

“I’m thinking about all the stuff I have to do.”

It wasn’t even a lie. That was exactly what he was thinking about. Panicking would be a better term than thinking. But how was he supposed to admit that? It would almost be better to flat out ask her how they could get past casual and fall into special.

That’s what he wanted. And it was killing him that he couldn’t figure out how to stop hesitating.

“I’m here to help,” she reminded him and reached out to slide a hand down his forearm where it rested on the center console, stroking his bare skin in what she must have thought would be a comforting gesture. It might have been more so if her touch wasn’t electric, waking up all his nerve endings.

Actually it was both. She’d solidified that they were in this together at the same moment she’d fanned the spark between them.

He didn’t bother to fight it. All this was inevitable. Serenity had even predicted he’d find his soul mate after relocating. He’d just never expected to be sharing emotional

intimacy with the woman he crossed swords with on a regular basis. Or that he'd be faced with convincing her how great they were together and left wondering how successful he'd be at it when she seemed determined to keep her distance.

Instead of pretending she didn't affect him, which he had way too much practice at, he flipped his arm over and captured her fingers in his, lacing them together tight. "I'm counting on it."

Fifteen

When they got back to town, Caleb had a renewed sense of purpose, and only some of it had come from holding hands with Havana for the last few miles of the journey. Shockingly, she'd let it ride without comment, but heightened color in her cheeks advertised that there was something going on inside her that she didn't plan to share.

One day he'd be better at interpreting her blushes. For now it was enough to know that she'd been affected by something as seemingly innocuous as holding hands. He couldn't wait to see what else she'd let slip regarding his progress with her.

"Are you going to tell people you're not engaged to Scott?" he asked her as he pulled the Yukon into the space in front of Serenity's hotel where he'd been parking it.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

She blinked. “I wasn’t planning to make an announcement, no. It’s not really anyone’s business.”

“Except it kind of is since I’m dating you now,” he reminded her brusquely, daring her to contradict him. She might tack on “casually,” but they were dating. “I don’t relish the idea of anyone thinking I’m moving in on someone else’s territory.”

And he had a lot of plans involving late-night rendezvous on his balcony. Strolls down the street to Ruby’s, hand in hand. Jaunts to the springs where they may or may not remember to wear bathing suits. One or all of those things were on the horizon if he had anything to say about it, and he’d rather not have anyone think negatively about Havana or their new mayor while he was doing it.

“They’re not going to think that.” She wrinkled her nose at him. “And so what if they do? We know the truth.”

“Do we?” He shut off the SUV and gave her his full attention, resting one arm across the top of the steering wheel as he faced her. “Do you have any concept of how much I want to kiss you right now? And how I’m holding back because... Well, I don’t know why.”

“Because of me?” she guessed quietly. “Or because of what happened in the parking lot. With the stuff you’re carrying around from your time in the service.”

Both. Neither. He had no idea whether he was coming or going with Havana, and it was messing him up. “Maybe I do have some things to work through.”

She cocked her head. “Before what?”

Before he deserved her.

That blank had filled in instantly without any conscious thought.

It was not what he’d have said the answer was, but it was true. That was the bottom line. Syria had messed him up way before Havana had and then kept making things worse. She no doubt sensed that. Of course that was the reason she’d held back, insisting that she didn’t want anything serious and refusing to see that Caleb wasn’t her ex— that wasn’t the real reason.

It was an excuse. She knew he hadn’t quite gotten it all together yet. Knew he was plagued with self-doubt and had become the king of second-guessing every single step.

Honestly, that was why he hadn’t pushed back when she’d jumped on the casual bandwagon. He’d instinctively known space was what he needed too. And that sucked.

“Maybe table this discussion?” he mumbled, taking the coward’s way out. But it was all he had at the moment.

He let her retreat in the lobby of the hotel, not because he wanted to, but they both needed the downtime. Besides, he had some recruiting to do. Who better to head up the town’s infrastructure than four guys at loose ends who had his back? And vice versa.

He started with Tristan Marchande, who answered his hotel room door on the first knock.

“If it isn’t our illustrious mayor,” Tristan said with a grand bow that at his height only made him look stupid.

Caleb brushed past him with a well-placed elbow. “Don’t call me that.”

“Maybe I should call you Lover Boy instead?” Tristan suggested with a snicker, shutting the door and jerking his head toward the lone window in his room. “Saw you head out with Ms. Nixon this morning, looking very cozy.”

“So?” Caleb shrugged it off. Marchande was the last person he needed poking into the status of his relationship with Havana. Tristan never had female problems and would probably laugh his butt off if he found out Caleb couldn’t resolve his. “We went to talk to Scott about axing the shopping center. It went well.”

“That’s great. What did he say?” Tristan threw himself on the bed to get comfortable, his default when embroiled in a serious conversation. It meant he was ready to dig in for as long as it took and why not be relaxed while doing it?

Caleb couldn’t claim the same ability. When things got real, he tended to pace, which worked well when the other party stayed out of his way. Marchande got that and had automatically made room. Yet another reason he was here. Tristan had a smart mouth, but he also had a thousand other great qualities that couldn’t be bought for any amount of money.

“He gave us six months to build a town. Like the whole thing. I’m officially behind the eight ball.”

Tristan pursed his lips. “But with the right stick, the ball goes in the corner pocket in one shot. Where does my name go on the list?”

And like that, Tristan was in. Relief eased the pressure in his chest. “I need a fire

chief. You've already got the nickname. Put it to good use."

They didn't call Tristan Le Torch strictly because of his skill with the ladies. The man knew fire better than anyone he'd ever met, bending it to his will with almost supernatural ability. It was mindboggling.

But instead of immediately nodding and asking when he could start, Tristan laughed. "C'est fou, mon frère. Get back to me later when you've had your coffee."

Caleb paused midpace to toss Marchande a scowl, having easily translated his teammate's French after so many years of hearing it. "It's not crazy, it's perfect."

Sobering, Tristan stared at him. "I'm not 'in charge' material, Hardy. Bark up another tree."

This was not how this conversation should be going. "You think I am?"

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“Seems like this is a good time to remind you that I was against the idea of you running for mayor,” he said with a little more heat than the situation warranted. “I’m a sidelines guy when it comes to authority.”

“Really, Marchande? That’s how you’re gonna be about this when I’ve come to you for help?”

All Caleb got for his trouble was a nonchalant shrug. “Don’t be such a baby. I’m here for better or worse. But you need someone who knows the score. I don’t have a clue what a fire chief does. Besides, I like to play with fire, not put it out. You got a crew doing demo? I’m your man.”

That was the problem—they weren’t demolishing anything. Not anymore. This was about building on the foundations of a town that had welcomed them with open arms. Creating a place to flourish.

Maybe he was the only one who wanted that. Or maybe Tristan Marchande needed a swift kick in his laissez-faire attitude. Not hard. Just enough to get his butt in gear. They’d all been affected by the honorable discharge; that’s why they’d relocated to someplace that wasn’t crawling with guys still in the Navy. Tristan needed to get on board and do it fast.

“This is your chance to figure out what a fire chief does,” Caleb said. “Google it.”

Tristan spread his hands, palms out, the nonverbal equivalent to not my circus. “I’ll screw it

up.”

Which wasn't the same as not being interested or not having the skill set. That was pure fear talking. Caleb wasn't the only one carrying around a boatload of emotional crap from al-Sadidiq, and that alone was enough of a reason to mellow out. He could cut Tristan some slack.

“Not like you'll have to live up to the previous one,” Caleb reminded him.

“Oh, Dieu merci!” he shot back, so heavy on the sarcasm that it was apparent he wasn't actually thanking God. “That makes it all better.”

Okay, Marchande wasn't biting. Obviously. Frustration curled Caleb's hands into fists, but he held back from driving one into the solely out of respect for Serenity's property. How did Marchande not see that this was his chance to vanquish the demons? Whatever they'd brought home with them from Syria, hiding from it wasn't going to fix anything. Tristan should take this opportunity and run with it.

All at once, the conversation he'd had with Havana crowded into his mind—this was where he needed to take a step back and figure out how to win Tristan's allegiance instead of brute forcing it down his throat. Caleb had a tendency to push people past the point of comfort. Usually for their own good.

And just maybe Havana hadn't been too far off about Caleb's hero complex. Except it wasn't that he wanted to win this argument with Marchande because of an overly aggressive need to arrange everything like chess pieces. This was Caleb leading from the heart, with a genuine desire to make sure his guys were taken care of.

Wow. When exactly had he started thinking of himself as a leader anyway?

He blew out a breath, his thoughts a jumble.

“You’re right. This is not the job for you,” he told Tristan. Not yet anyway. “If I get the guys together, will you at least hear me out? Figure out where you fit?”

Cautiously Tristan shrugged. “Sure, ami. I’m not aiming to be difficult, just... you know.”

Yeah, he knew.

There was no time like the present to move the dial on this hoedown. Caleb rounded up the others, and as had become custom, they wound up at Ruby’s in the corner booth. The diner shouldn’t have started to feel like home so quickly, but the cracked plastic over foam already knew the shape of his butt, conforming to it instantly as he slid into the middle spot, Rowe on his left, Tristan on his right, and Isaiah next to him. Hudson took a chair from the nearest table, the same one he always grabbed, and turned it backward in a move so smooth it looked choreographed.

Implausibly, they’d already found a groove. Now they all needed to step up and give back.

“For whatever reason, the citizens of this place elected me mayor. I’ve got to find a way to honor that trust,” Caleb told his team, meeting the gaze of each one individually so they really got the importance of what he was saying. “I need you guys more than I ever have before, and that’s saying something.”

“Name it and it’s done,” Hudson said before he’d stopped talking, bless him.

The others nodded, Tristan included, which hadn’t been so much of a given. But at the end of the day, they were all good men who needed a bit of guidance from Caleb.

“Appreciate that. Here’s the deal. Superstition Springs needs a police department. A school. A fire department. A thousand other things I haven’t thought of yet. And I

have six months to get it operational. How do I do that?"

"With our help," Isaiah suggested as if that was obvious. "Are you looking for us to pick up a hammer or start making a list of the thousand things?"

"All the above. I'll assign things if need be, but I'd rather you do what makes sense for you." This is what he should have done in the first place instead of making a potentially serious misstep with Marchande. "I need a police chief, a fire chief, some people to help get this town on the map. A PR genius would be stellar. Get people in Austin to relocate their businesses here. Someone has to run the school. Stop me when you hear something that appeals to you."

The rundown alone exhausted him, let alone the thought of the work involved. Six months seemed like a blink of an eye. Not nearly long enough to scratch the surface of this task, let alone get the town profitable and attractive to a resort guest.

"Here you are."

Havana's voice slid into his gut and unfurled, inexplicably calming him at the same time it pulled a sharp thrill through him. His inner turmoil would never be strong enough to block the way she affected him. Caleb glanced up to see her standing there, red hair drawn up in a saucy ponytail and a pretty brown-haired woman behind her.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“Here I am.” He grinned at her with absolutely no reservations about the ribbing he’d get later from the guys about the goofiness quotient. “Were you looking for me?”

She nodded without an ounce of guile. “I brought you your first volunteer. This is Cassidy. She’s working with Tallhorse at the schoolhouse, but she’s ready and willing to be dedicated to organizing it into something state approved.”

Which wasn’t even close to what he’d hoped she’d sought him out for. But it was a start.

Isaiah jumped up immediately. “We’ve met.”

He took Cassidy’s hand and made sure she heard everyone’s names again, asked after her mother as apparently they’d had at least one conversation about that subject. Caleb let him do the niceties. He loved that kind of stuff. Caleb only had eyes for Havana. When he’d left her earlier, she’d been quiet and he really hadn’t expected to see her again today.

There wasn’t really a good way to extract himself from the increasingly large crowd of people, all of whom were in the way of what he really wanted to be doing—spending time with Havana. But he had a job to do, and she’d been holding him at arm’s length for a reason. Maybe he should let it be for now.

Caleb invited Cassidy to sit down so they could talk through her ideas. Hudson pulled over another chair for Havana, and they all listened intently as Cassidy outlined some of the programs she’d hoped to start. Some of the kids in the area were being homeschooled, and she thought a few of the moms might be willing to teach a bigger

group if they could find a building that would hold so many. Cassidy had done research into creating a charter school, which she thought would be easier than creating a whole school district but would still allow the institution to receive state funds for operational costs.

For the first time, this build-a-town idea had something concrete they could hang their hats on. The big knot that had formed in Caleb's throat eased off a little. It could work. The whole plan could work. And then he'd be free of the demons that were howling for restitution.

Maybe then he could figure out how to move from casual to special with Havana.

"You're hired," Caleb said instantly when she'd finished talking. "Do you have any friends who are as articulate and motivated as you? Send them my way."

Cassidy smiled as Aria drifted over once she arrived at the diner to start her shift.

"Anyone hungry?" Aria asked dutifully, her puppy dog eyes for Tristan in place. She was totally unashamed to wear them for the length of her entire shift and not at all concerned that everyone knew she had a huge crush on the man.

"Always," Tristan told her with a wink, which might explain why she had a crush on him. He flirted with her shamelessly, no matter how many times Caleb warned him that Havana's sister had no barriers against a player who had blown through half the women in San Diego before their first deployment.

The guys ordered burgers, and Isaiah asked Cassidy if she wanted anything, insisting that he was buying. Caleb rolled his eyes. Apparently he was in the middle of a giant group date. But since the focus of the conversation had fallen away from desperately needed city services, he let them have their fun. This was part of finding a place in Superstition Springs, and he couldn't be the only one who got lonely late at night.

But if they weren't going to talk shop, then he had better things to do. It was probably fine to let his pleas marinate for a while anyway. Everyone was eating and laughing at T

ristan's jokes, clearly not concerned with the heavy subject of building a town from almost nothing.

"Let me out?" he murmured to Rowe, who obediently moved, allowing Caleb to slide out of the booth. He snagged Havana by the elbow, smoothly extracting her from the group.

Anyone wanted to make a federal case out of him spending time with Havana, they could come talk to the mayor on Monday morning at... wherever his office ended up being.

"Take a stroll with me," he implored Havana as she eyed him curiously.

Apparently she'd picked up on the urgency of the request because all she said was, "Sure."

There wasn't much room to stroll in Superstition Springs. They wound up on his balcony because he couldn't think of another place to have a private conversation. She needed to hear some hard truths about Caleb Hardy before this went any further.

"I figured out the answer," he told her as they leaned on the railing together and watched the dust settle in the road below. "To what I have to work out before I can do any of this."

"I wasn't holding my breath," she said wryly. "But okay. What is it?"

"I have to figure out how to be okay with the fact that seventy-five people died

because of me.”

Sixteen

Havana’s insides turned to ice, but she somehow kept the reaction off her face. “Tell me more.”

This wasn’t what she’d expected to be doing when Caleb had dragged her away from Ruby’s, but clearly he needed to talk. How could she refuse to listen, even though his leading sentence had made it sound like he’d butchered human beings in cold blood?

She’d never believe that was the case no matter what he said next.

He rubbed the back of his neck, a habit he fell into when he was considering what to say.

“In Syria. There was a mix-up. My fault,” he croaked and cleared his throat. “We went in hot and didn’t bother to ask questions, assuming the intel was right. It was a bad scene. Lots of women and children, but it was too late. The explosives had already been detonated. Rowe tried to go back, desperate to save even one small child...”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

When Caleb trailed off, she didn't scramble to fill the silence, just rubbed his arm as his gaze went glassy. This was somehow tied to the reason he'd gotten defensive outside Damian's hotel room and went far deeper than she'd ever dreamed. And still she didn't fully understand what he was telling her, what it meant to him, why she wanted to pull him into her embrace and hold him for an eternity.

"They told us later that we'd missed the mark," he continued woodenly. "By about fifty kilometers. Someone scrambled the coordinates. Us. The informant. We're not sure. We don't write this stuff down, we memorize it."

"Of course," she murmured because he'd paused as if seeking validation.

"It's hard to reconcile." He stared out at the buildings across the street, but it was a toss-up whether he really saw them or was watching something flash through his mind. "I'm highly trained to kill enemy combatants. That's why they sent us into those cesspools, to take out insurgents before they hit our troops on the ground. Being given that kind of power, that kind of advantage, can bring out the worst in you, show you that you're capable of taking the emotion out of something so sacred as human life in order to protect. And then when you find out you made a mistake and innocent people are dead, emotion is all there is."

Her throat went tight and hot as she registered the pain in his voice, and inexplicably, tears pricked at her eyelids. He hurt over this, and his anguish clawed at something inside her.

"The key word is mistake," she whispered and blindly sought his fingers with hers, twining through them to hold on. "It's a terrible, horrible mistake. But not your fault."

You can't let it weigh you down this much."

Like she'd done with her own failings? That was precious. But he didn't need a rundown of her issues right now. He needed her, and she wasn't taking that away from him.

He laughed without humor. "Care to guess how many variations of that I've tried to convince myself of over the past eight months? A million. Five million."

"You need to try it again until you're successful," she suggested, but he shook his head with a ferocity that should have scared her.

"It's not something I can just forgive myself for. I have to atone for my crimes, shed my own blood, sweat, and tears until I've paid for it."

"Oh, Caleb," she murmured and stroked his knuckle with a thumb, hoping it was soothing. "How on earth can you ever hope to do that?"

That's when he turned to face her for the first time since unloading his burdens. His expression was so bleak and yet so resolute and beautiful that her breath caught.

"I'm going to build a town to replace the one I destroyed. This one. Work my fingers to the bone until seventy-five people are happier and healthier than I found them."

All the dominoes he'd set up since the moment he'd blown into town made complete sense now. He was driven to compensate for his mistakes and determined not to fail, which she got. Boy, did she get it. No wonder he'd been so bent on relocating her shopping center. In the path of that much resolve, she'd never stood a chance. "And you will."

"It's not easy to see the path. Some days I feel like I'm wandering around in the

desert with no manna in sight.”

He looked so defeated in that moment that she couldn't help but gather him up in her arms, holding him tight. He hesitated for only a moment before returning the embrace and dang if he didn't feel good. She rested her head against his chest, ear flat to his T-shirt, and the thump of his strong heart thrilled her.

This is what it would be like to belong to each other for always. Be there in sickness and in health, for better or worse. She could imagine it so easily, and for as long as she could stand it, she let herself pretend that kind of wonderful might be in the cards for them.

“You're a good man, Caleb Hardy,” she murmured. “Don't doubt it.”

He pulled back enough to scan her face, his fingers still tangled in her hair. “Not good enough. Not yet.”

Because she'd been so adamant about keeping things surface level between them? Was she somehow a player in his pain?

Frozen, she stared at him, letting her gaze drink in his in an effort to read his ambiguous thoughts. Something profound and meaningful swirled through his depths, things she didn't want to see or acknowledge. Things she definitely didn't want to admit her own heart might echo.

They were supposed to be taking this thing slow, working things out internally on both sides. The emotion she could plainly see on his face was not slow.

It couldn't have been an accident that he'd echoed Damian's words to her back in the hotel room when she'd said something similar to her fake fiancé. Did Caleb know that Damian had been referring to Havana's rejection of him? Was Caleb putting

himself in the same boat and suffering as a result?

For the first time, she considered that her moratorium on letting a man into her heart was hurting those around her, and she couldn't even get out from under it long enough to figure out whether this one was worth the risk. Because she knew the moment she did that, there would be no going back. Caleb would fill her up completely on the inside, and she'd be nothing but a hollow husk if—when—he decided to move on.

She could not do it.

With a deliberate step back, she separated from Caleb.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I need to—"

Be somewhere else. Before she had a breakdown. None of this was his fault. But she had a suspicion he'd take it that way, especially when she fled for the relative safety of the room she shared with Aria.

The passage of time ceased to have any meaning as Havana lay curled in a ball under the comforter. It wasn't a cool night, but she was so chilled that even a comforter full of down neither warmed nor comforted.

How had she gotten to a place where Caleb posed such a danger to her heart? The fake fiancé trick should have worked. And the barrier it had provided should have lasted longer, especially on his side. How could she not have seen that he wasn't holding her at a distance like she was with him? Or if he had been, he'd definitely stopped at some point. What was she supposed to do with that?

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

All this time, she'd thought the danger would come in the form of working with Damian after having to set him straight about the future of their relationship. Instead, she'd be working with Caleb, who posed extreme peril to her very body and soul.

When Aria came in from the diner, Havana hadn't finished being morose about the impossible quandary she'd splatted into. Her sister didn't seem to notice. She hummed as she traded her waitress uniform for pajamas and then slipped into bed next to Havana. Who was still fully dressed.

"I've decided that Tristan and I will have beautiful children," Aria announced with a happy sigh. "He's gorgeous enough for both of us, so surely his genetics will win out. Right? Ooooh, do you think our children will possibly get his blond hair, or am I just dreaming?"

At that, Havana half rolled to take in her sister's expression, which should not have been so wistful and besotted when surely she was joking. "The color of your children's hair? That's the part you're dreaming about?"

Okay, that could have been delivered with less sarcasm, but Havana was fresh out of tact.

Aria made a face, which shockingly did not mar her dreamy half smile. "I know. I know. I'm far too plain for a man who looks like Tristan Marchande, but it's fun to imagine that's not true. For once."

Havana bit back yet another offer to give Aria a makeover. Tristan may or may not be shallow enough to care, but she didn't think that was the obstacle here.

Her sist

er was being a phenomenally good sport about a subject that must be pretty painful. An unrequited crush on someone her sister considered unattainable wasn't a laughing matter. Havana swallowed. What kind of terrible person was she that her big problem of the night lay in a man who wanted too much from her?

"Damian and I aren't engaged," she blurted out.

"Oh, honey." Aria immediately reached out and stroked Havana's hair because she was an amazing sister. "I'm sorry."

"Oh. No." Of course she'd assumed the worst, and Havana scrambled to get the truth out. "We didn't break up. I was never engaged to him. It was fake. I was being stupid about... well, everything."

The last thing she needed to admit was that she'd been trying to circumvent Serenity's prediction—especially when she suspected that what she'd actually done was take the exact right steps to ensure she fulfilled it to the letter. Her own personal variation on the story of Oedipus.

"Fake?" Fascination and confusion warred through Aria's expression. "Really? That explains so much. So the thing with Caleb is the real deal then."

"What thing with Caleb? There's no thing with Caleb," she countered fiercely. "Why does everyone jump to that conclusion?"

"Because the sparks between you two are strong enough to incinerate those of us around you," her sister informed her blithely. "We were all waiting for you guys to notice."

Oh, she'd noticed all right. Just not the part where everyone else had already figured out there was something between them. "That's the problem. There are a lot of sparks, but I'm not in the market for another fiancé."

"Another one? You said the engagement to Damian was fake."

Ugh. Trust her sister to clue in to the slightest word variation. But there was no reason not to come completely clean, not when it was Aria. Her sister had always been her biggest supporter, and frankly, it was a relief to finally tell Aria the truth. Maybe this was the heart-to-heart they'd needed to really connect as sisters again. "I was engaged. For real. To Cole. It... fell apart. I didn't want anyone to worry."

Or ask questions Havana couldn't answer like what happened? If she knew that, she might have been able to prevent it.

Actually, she had a good guess. Cole had complained endlessly that she'd been a bridezilla of the highest order, throwing her weight around with the caterer and with the florist.

Well, she couldn't help it if the caterer had gotten the menu wrong three times in a row. The man could have written some things down, but no. He'd tried to convince her to let him "surprise" the guests with his own spin on Hill Country cuisine. How about no?

It was her wedding, for crying out loud. Hers and Cole's, but he hadn't cared about anything she'd asked him to decide, so she'd handled it all. Gladly. If nothing else, Cole should have gone to bat for her instead of taking the side of people he'd never see again. Was that so much to ask? Sad that Havana's list of criteria in a perfect man had dwindled to one that knew how to spell loyalty.

"Oh. Well, then I'm sorry for that part."

Aria's undertone knifed through her. Her sister was hurt that Havana hadn't told her in the first place. It was all over her voice and her expression. Havana sighed. "I shouldn't have lied to everyone. I'm sorry."

"I guess I don't understand why you're telling me all this now."

That made two of them. "I needed to talk to someone."

And yet she hadn't spilled the most important part—how she was falling for Caleb and had no barriers against it. How she had to stop this train before it crashed into a brick wall. How it all felt so big and scary and real that she couldn't breathe sometimes. But she couldn't. If she said it out loud, that would make it true.

Aria processed that and finally smiled gently. "You know I'm always here."

Yes, she was always here. Aria had stayed in Superstition Springs, taking a job at the diner and seemingly happy enough to work for Ruby instead of chasing her own ambitions. It was Havana who had left, treating their friendship like it wasn't special or as if she had no need to nurture it. Maybe coming home had been a swift kick in the hind end that Havana had needed but not realized.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“I hate that we’ve drifted apart. My fault. Will you forgive me?”

Aria didn’t even hesitate, just pulled Havana into a hug. “Nothing to forgive. You’re my hero, the one person I could always count on after mom and dad died. I barely remember them, but I have plenty of great memories of you helping me with homework and sewing up the hems I ripped.”

Havana sniffed as the tears started to fall. What had she done to deserve so much grace? “I was too bossy.”

Not because she’d wanted to tell everyone what to do. Because she cared about her sisters and they’d been cast into the world as orphans, thrust into a new, tiny town where everything was unfamiliar. Who better to pay attention to her sisters’ needs than Havana?

Except she’d abandoned them for her own reasons, some of which she still hadn’t reconciled.

“According to Ember,” Aria said quietly. “Not me.”

That marked the first time either of them had mentioned the missing Nixon sister in years. Ember’s betrayal had always been a bit of a sore spot with Havana, and Aria usually honored that by not bringing it up. Maybe Ember and all the lingering resentment Havana still carried about how their falling out had happened was yet another millstone that she needed to work on now that she’d come home.

“Thanks for that. I figured you were better off without someone who told you what to

do all the time. That's why I left." Havana swallowed against the sudden burn in her throat. How selfish was she? She'd let so many dynamics affect her decisions, including the one that had driven her to leave. "I knew Serenity would make sure you ate and got your shots."

Aria shrugged, her face a mask. "I just wanted my sisters. Both of you left."

Havana nodded about a billion times in hopes that would keep the tears inside. It didn't. "I'm sorry I hurt you. I needed to do something different before I lost my sanity. Forgive me."

"I did a long time ago." Her sister finally smiled, and that went a long way to loosen the knots inside. "Besides, you came back."

Yes she had.

They settled into a companionable silence, and Havana experienced a moment of peace like she hadn't had in a long time. Maybe because she'd actually thought of it as coming home instead of coming to Superstition Springs, as if she could ignore all the history here.

And that's when she realized why she'd failed so miserably at convincing the town to build a shopping center—why she couldn't persuade folks into doing things like Caleb could—she'd been trying to help everyone by showing them what she thought was best for them instead of figuring out what people really needed from her.

Seventeen

Tristan and Isaiah had volunteered for construction duty on the new schoolhouse despite zero experience, and as Caleb wasn't in the position to be picky about his resource pool or Serenity's limited budget, he readily accepted. The three of them

stood in the middle of the empty building at the very end of the hotel side of town, surveying the property for possible use.

“Looks like this was once a canning factory,” Tristan said with a curled lip and kicked at a questionable pile of metal in the middle of the floor. “Or a garbage dump.”

“It was an art studio.”

They all three glanced toward the door. Cassidy Calloway stepped over the threshold and picked her way inside, gradually ending up pretty close to where they were standing. Caleb had asked her to come by to help them evaluate the site, and he was gratified that she’d been both interested and on time. Apparently they’d gotten a bonus in the form of someone who knew the town’s history.

“It was open,” she explained unnecessarily since Caleb had deliberately stuck a piece of wood under the door to let in some sunlight. One of the first or

ders of business would be to clean the windows if they figured out this space would work for the school.

A cleanup wouldn’t be out of order regardless. All the empty buildings were subject to being leased eventually if they ended up not being used for municipal services. Caleb added finding a body to supervise cleanup to his ever-growing mental list of things to do.

“An art studio?” Tristan kicked at the metal again with a bit more curiosity. “What kind of art?”

“Sculpture mostly,” she said easily, tucking her long brown hair behind one ear. “In the sixties, this was a hub of the alternative art scene. It was too small of a town for a

lot of those it attracted, so they eventually drifted to Austin. Some of the old-timers stayed though. Briar Rose for example. She still sculpts, but she's got a room in the back of her house where she does her work."

Caleb's mind turned that over as he envisioned this space as an art studio once again. There were a lot of places to put a school but not many with original history that he could draw on. "Does she sell any of it?"

Cassidy shook her head. "I don't think so. It's just something she does because it makes her happy."

He filed that away for later, along with other bits he'd learned over the past few days that he'd eventually pull together into a workable plan for the retail spaces in the downtown area. "What do you think of turning this into the schoolhouse?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I haven't been in here in years. Not since I was little. It's smaller than I remember."

Tristan laughed, shooting Cassidy one of his trademark winks. "That's always the way, right? Buildings do tend to shrink if we don't visit them for a while."

"I think I grew," she deadpanned without the slightest bit of a mouth twitch that might eventually turn into a smile.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

Tristan's own smile slipped as he finally caught on that she either hadn't gotten the joke or didn't think he was funny.

Wow. A female who was immune to Marchande's charm. If Caleb wasn't so busy sweating over his monumental to-do list, he'd find a moment to circle today on a calendar.

Isaiah cleared his throat, likely sensing that was his cue to smooth things over. "If you think this building is too small, I had another thought. What about expanding the place where you currently teach?"

For Isaiah, she had nothing but genuine cheer, blinding him with a megawatt grin. "You know what? I was thinking the same thing."

And they were off and chatting about their mutual ideas, ignoring everyone else. Tristan stared at the two of them as if he'd been hit in the face by a tree branch.

"Guess that's the first party you haven't been invited to," Caleb commented mildly. "Tough break."

"Shut up, Hardy." Tristan scowled. "If we're not using this as the schoolhouse, what do you want to do with it?"

The subject change didn't fool Caleb. Cassidy's shutout had stuck in Tristan's craw something fierce. Probably it would be good for him to spend some more time in Cassidy's company. He could stand to gain some humility in that department. But that was a long game, and Caleb wasn't in the mood to push it today. He had bigger

fish to fry.

“It needs to be an art studio again,” he said decisively and had the guy in mind to handle it. “That’s right up Rowe’s alley, and he needs a project like this.”

“Because he hasn’t started drawing again yet?” Tristan guessed quietly.

That was why he and Tristan had survived a decade plus together. They were in sync in so many ways, which was the only reason Caleb would discuss something so personal as Rowe’s difficult road to recovery with someone else. “Not since the surgery after Syria. Maybe this will jog something loose.”

Tristan nodded, his lips pursed. “That means I’m still on schoolhouse duty, right?”

“I need someone I can trust on that. It’s the most important project thus far.”

The atmosphere in the empty storefront shifted, and he didn’t have to glance up to know that Havana had crossed the threshold. But being aware of her presence didn’t stop the hard punch to his heart when he did meet her gaze. The long red ponytail at her crown swung against her shoulders as she skirted a large wooden block that had probably been a platform for the metal structures that had once apparently been on display here. She had a rectangular leather portfolio under one arm, but he couldn’t seem to tear his attention from her arresting face.

How did she get more beautiful with each passing day?

He hadn’t seen her since she’d bailed after his balcony soul-baring routine. He got it. She had no room in her life for a relationship with someone who wasn’t in any kind of emotional condition to give her the commitment she needed.

“I have some plans drawn up,” she said by way of greeting. “I wanted to show them

to you before I presented them to Damian.”

She’d come to him first. That pleased him enormously. It shouldn’t. There was no competition here, and if there was, both men had already lost. He cleared the dust from his throat that she’d stirred up with her entrance. “Sure. I have a makeshift office in the building next to the antique store. You want to go there?”

She nodded. “Lead the way.”

Caleb called out to the others that he was leaving. The walk across the street wasn’t nearly long enough for him to get the wild beat of his pulse under control. He ached to lace his fingers with hers, to bond with her in some small way, just to assure himself that somehow everything would be okay.

But the magic he’d started to believe in, that he’d felt in the very earth at the springs, seemed to have deserted him, if it had ever really existed in the first place.

When they got to the shop he’d commandeered for the mayor’s office, he unlocked the door and held it open for her. The sweet brush of her body against his as she entered shouldn’t be such a thrill, but he couldn’t help his reaction to her any more than he could help the impossible roadblocks that seemed to eternally stand between them.

He shut the door behind him, and she turned, mouth open to speak, but he’d moved closer to her than she’d apparently guessed because she froze. But she didn’t step back, and the space surrounding them crackled with energy and anticipation. No different than it normally did, but he had a heightened sense of awareness that there was also a lot unsaid.

He didn’t say any of it though. His fingers burned to touch her, and he couldn’t seem to stop himself from reaching out to brush back a stray bit of hair that had rebelled

against her ponytail holder.

She leaned into his touch ever so slightly, and that was all the encouragement he needed to sweep her into his arms. The leather portfolio thunked to the floor as her arms came around him in tandem, and their lips met in a torrid kiss that should have discharged the electricity swirling between them.

It didn't. The energy intensified, and he thought he might burst clear out of his skin from all the things that Havana did to his insides. He soared along a bright stretch of heaven until she pulled back, her torso rising and falling as she tried to catch her breath.

“Caleb—”

“Don't say it,” he murmured, loath to break the spell. “Let me kiss you, and then we can argue about it later.”

When she was under his fingers, their mouths in perfect alignment—and not capable of hashing out yet another variation of why they wouldn't work together—the world made sense. Barriers vanished. He wanted to stay in that place.

She shook her head, but not one iota of the vibe between them faded. “I don't want to argue at all—”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“Then don’t,” he cut in, emboldened by the indecision he could see flitting around in her gaze. What if they could spend all their time together kissing instead of arguing? Then no one had to think about logic and issues and other stuff that shouldn’t have become such a big deal.

“Then stop trying to confuse me!” She threw up a hand as if to ward him off, though he hadn’t moved.

“You wanted that kiss as much as I did. Don’t deny it.”

“I...” She couldn’t, that much was clear. Probably because she knew he’d call her a liar. “Maybe we can call it a lapse in judgment. Can we leave it at that?”

“So now I’m that fattening piece of cake you think isn’t good for you, but you can’t resist a taste?” Anger licked through his gut as her back-and-forth started to fray at his temper. “News flash. I’m not the kind of guy you can take a bite of and walk away.”

“Because you’re that good of a kisser?” Her own temper started flaring in the depths of her blue eyes. “That’s so vain. I can say no to cake all day long, thank you.”

“Because I’m not going to let you,” he countered, opting not to call her out on that one either since clearly that wasn’t true. “I don’t do things by half. I don’t let go easily. And I can’t stop the way I feel about you.”

Probably that was the last thing he should have said, but he was so tired of dancing around her. So tired of feeling a little bit broken and wishing she’d hold him together

a little longer before bouncing away.

She went so still he thought about checking her pulse, but then she blinked about twenty times and exhaled. “What way is that?”

Since she’d asked, he told her.

“Like the carpet has been pulled out from under me repeatedly. As if I can’t quite catch my breath. Sunlight is brighter when you’re around.” He bit off the rest, rubbing at the back of his neck. “I’m sure there’s more where that came from. But you don’t want to hear any of that because you think I’m going to hurt you, so you don’t even give me a chance. I’m trying here, Havana. Can’t you see how hard I’m working to earn my way into your life?”

She flinched, recoiling enough to snap her ponytail backward. “Earn your way? Is that what you’re doing?”

“Yeah.” Too caught up in the reconciliation of his demons, he couldn’t look at her any longer and paced the length of his makeshift office. “I’ve got blood on my hands. I get that you don’t trust me enough to let me touch you with them. Where’s the breaking point though? When will it be enough for you

to finally say, okay Caleb—you can stop now and just be with me?”

“Is that what you’re waiting on?” she whispered. “For me to recognize that you’ve atoned for what happened in Syria? I’ve never even once thought about that as a reason we can’t be together, because that’s not for me to judge. You have to get that straight with yourself.”

He shut his eyes for a beat as the truth of that—the inescapable logic—settled deep inside. Those were all hollow excuses for something that shouldn’t be such an

insurmountable problem. “Then what’s the real issue here? Why are we doing this to ourselves?”

“I don’t know.” Her voice broke, and her obvious anguish burrowed into his heart until he wanted to pull her into his embrace to hug it away. But he didn’t. This was too important to cut off prematurely because they both hurt. “Every time I think about throwing caution to the wind, I get this panicky feeling in my chest and it makes me shut down.”

All at once, he got it, cursing himself for being so colossally blind. “This is about you staying in control. Still.”

She nodded once as if processing and finally arriving at the conclusion that he might be on to something. “Maybe. Probably. I don’t know. I’m sorry if you thought this was about you. It’s not.”

“But you’re making it about me by not figuring out how to stop it.”

“I didn’t mean to.” She sniffled miserably. “I’m hurting you, which is the last thing I wanted. I tried to keep you at arm’s length to avoid that. It’s your own fault that you didn’t listen to me.”

“I’ll accept that.” It didn’t change anything to assign the proper blame for this situation. “Where does that leave us?”

“No place different than before. We’re still working together, and I have my own stuff to sort through before you can say okay, Havana. That’s enough now.” She lifted her lips in a watery smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

That was the tipping point. He threw his own caution to the wind and gathered her up in his arms for a bittersweet embrace that had none of the fire of the first one. Instead,

there was a whole lot of understanding, regret, and just plain emotion wrapped up in it.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said into her hair, pausing long enough to inhale the coconut notes. “You have an open invitation to visit the mayor’s office anytime you feel like barging in here to sweep me off my feet.”

“Noted,” she said with more lightness than he’d have expected, which eased the pinch in his heart.

Somehow he let her go and spent another twenty minutes in her company as he went over the plans with her. He could do this. Patience wasn’t his favorite virtue, but he had honed his to a fine point as a SEAL. Havana was worth it.

Nothing had changed. And yet everything had. For the first time, he had hope they might eventually figure this out.

Eighteen

Havana’s chest went numb as she walked away from Caleb for what she fully expected to be the last time. Oh, she’d see him again, definitely. The town wasn’t going to plan itself. But she had no illusions about whether he’d really wait around for her to figure out how to stop being such a control freak about everything.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

Men didn't wait. Not really. Caleb might think he'd been speaking the truth when he'd said he wasn't going anywhere. He might even do it too, for a little while. Until he found someone else who wasn't so difficult and then she'd be nothing but a memory. After all, that's what people did when they got tired of her tendency to direct everything to the nth degree—they disappointed her. Ember and Cole were two really vivid examples of a pattern she'd been dealing with her entire life.

Havana presented her plan to Damian, got the green light from his investors—with the six-month caveat—and the revamp of Superstition Springs geared up in a big way. She volunteered for cleanup duty since Caleb needed every extra hand he could get. And it was solid, mindless work that had the benefit of obvious progress as a natural reward system. There was immediate gratification as she cleared a wide swath of debris in first one building and then a second.

This was how she could help for now, and it had to be enough.

The cleanup task took the better part of a week. She rarely crossed paths with Caleb, which she didn't believe for a second was an accident. He was giving her space, which she appreciated. At first.

Eventually she caught herself missing him. At night she drifted to the window of her bedroom in hopes of catching him out on his balcony.

She'd come to think of that as their place, a private venue where she could count on having an honest conversation with some romance thrown in. But he'd obviously gotten too busy to spend time there. Sometimes she imagined that he didn't go out on the balcony because he missed her as well, and it was too painful to be out there by

himself. Probably it was the former.

Good thing he never did appear. Because as the week wore on, she'd probably be unable to stop herself from joining him, and then where would they be? Kissing again in a pure rush of feeling and emotion with no clear path forward. That would be awful.

Except for the kissing part. And the way he made her feel, as if she might float away if he didn't have such a solid grip on her. That part was so amazing too. She couldn't help but think about what it might be like if he'd tilted his head toward the bedroom in silent invitation and she took him up on it, following him through the door to a place where they could lose themselves in each other, heightening their bond in the most physical way.

But they hadn't gotten that far. Her fault. Mostly it was better that way. Probably.

At the end of the week, she'd finally moved on to the old art studio. She and Aria had been teaming up in the mornings to fill the large temporary dumpsters that Caleb had rented from a waste management company out of Bastrop. They'd left the art studio for last because it had the most junk still left over from its last tenant in the eighties.

They'd been working for about thirty minutes when Havana had enough of a pile that she was ready to start making trips to transfer the debris to the nearest dumpster. But when she stepped outside for the first time that day, someone was leaning over near the door, hand over her eyes as she peered inside.

When the woman straightened and met her gaze, Havana's hands lost all feeling. The metal scraps fell from her nerveless fingers.

Mom.

No. Havana's throat closed, even as her heart cried out. Her mother was dead.

This woman was very much alive, with red-gold highlights that Havana had always envied and an attitude problem that eight years hadn't erased apparently, judging by the sharp angle of her sister's jutted hip.

"Ember. What are you doing here?" Havana asked more calmly than should have been possible given how her pulse had skyrocketed.

Instantly Ember's face shuttered as they stared at each other. "I could ask you the same thing. I was looking for Aria. The hot new mayor said she was here."

Havana blinked at Ember's off-the-cuff description of Caleb but let it ride. He was a beautiful man, inside and out, so she had no call to pull out her cat's claws because another female had noticed him. "She is. I am too. Is there something you want?"

Look how civil they were being. She hadn't spoken to Ember in eight years and wouldn't be today if Havana hadn't come back home. The things unsaid seethed between them, but she bit them back until she had a better feel for how this surprise encounter was going to go down.

"I'm not sure what business it is of yours," Ember said point-blank. "Don't let me get in the way of you running back to your life in Austin."

Ah, yes. The famous Nixon temper that had somehow skipped Aria and doled out her share equally among Havana and Ember.

"Same goes, except I have to insert 'wherever you ended up' since you didn't bother to let me know."

Ember sighed and smoothed back her silky curls that even a scorching Texas spring

couldn't wilt. "Is that still stuck in your craw, Van? That was a million years ago."

"Funny, it feels like yesterday," she countered with a fierceness that the situation didn't warrant, but it had been a long time since someone called her Van. And hearing her sister use it so casually dug at a tender place inside that longed for connection and family and people to care about who cared about her in return.

Which, outside of Aria, she'd yet to actually cultivate.

How much of that was her fault? One hundred percent?

Havana sucked in a breath through her nose, hoping it would calm her. The fallout with Ember was a long time ago. Why was she so stuck in the past? Ember wasn't a seventeen-year-old girl anymore, knocked up and defiant about it. In fact, she must have a child somewhere around here that Havana had never even met. Was she really going to stand here and argue about ancient history?

If even fifty percent of the reason Havana felt so empty inside sometimes was her own fault, that meant there was something she could do to change it. She could figure out what Ember needed from her instead of telling her what she needed. Starting now.

"I'm sorry," she told Ember sincerely, and with it, the knot in her chest eased. "I was just shocked to see you. I'm not handling this well. How are you? Are you staying in La Grange or someplace else?"

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“With Serenity,” Ember offered cautiously, her gaze tight on Havana’s face as if trying to ensure she didn’t miss the blindside headed her way.

Caleb got that look sometimes. What was happening with him—or not happening more like—was definitely her fault. She just didn’t know how to stop waiting for him to show his true colors. There was a reason she always tried to seize control of every situation, including the one that had led to her fall out with Ember—she had a bone-deep need to keep giving herself choices and robbing everyone else of them. Then no one had the power to hurt her.

In turn, she hurt them instead. Not on purpose. But that didn’t change facts. If she wanted to stop, today would be the opportune time to take that first step.

“I’m living in town permanently, to answer your earlier question about what I’m doing here,” Havana said. “I’m staying with Serenity too. That’ll give us a chance to catch up.”

“Catch up?” Ember wrinkled her nose. “As in, so you can figure out which part of my life you need to start running? No, thanks.”

“No, so we can talk like adults who respect each other,” she countered, clamping down hard on the funny squiggle in her stomach that was sending SOS signals to her brain, screaming things like, What are you doing? What if Ember is making all kinds of mistakes? How can you take care of her if you don’t know what’s going on?

But she didn’t say any of that. Because Ember was an adult, and the best thing she could do to show she cared was step back and figure out how to earn her allegiance

instead of running roughshod over her sister. The way Caleb did things. He showed he cared by letting people figure things out on their own.

The way he'd done with Havana. That realization settled into her heart, beating along with her pulse as if it had always been there. Caleb cared about her. Of course he did. It was in everything he did, the way he looked at her, how he touched her. The way he'd stepped back when she'd told him to and let her figure out how to be ready for what he was offering.

Caleb cared about her. And he wasn't going anywhere. These were inescapable truths that had no room to be misinterpreted. What did she do with that?

A little stunned, she surveyed Ember, really opening her eyes to her sister. Ember's waist-length red-gold looked the same, but her sister's face had filled out a little, gaining the womanly contours that made her look so much like their mother. She wore a simple sundress that displayed her stunning figure that showed no signs of having carried a baby.

Perhaps she hadn't. Maybe something terrible had happened, but Havana hadn't earned the right to ask. Not yet.

This conversation was so far out of the norm she couldn't figure out what to say next. Flying blind, she tried to think what Caleb might say. His teammates worshipped him, likely because he put their needs ahead of his own. She could take a lesson.

"Is that okay?" Havana asked since Ember was taking her measure just as heavily. "If we start over as adults? You're right. What happened when we were teenagers shouldn't affect things now. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when you needed the support of your family. Give me a chance to do it right this time."

Ember hesitated for so long Havana thought she was going to say something smart-

alecky and tell her off. But then her sister nodded. “I can do that. I’m here for the foreseeable future, so I guess we’re going to have to find a way to get along if nothing else.”

“Really?” Quickly Havana wiped the surprise off her face. Looked like they were both doing things differently. “You’re planning to stay?”

Ember shrugged, her expression nonchalant. “I needed a place to land, and when I got here, Aunt Serenity said the new mayor was trying to make a go of this town as a tourist destination. I figured I could use something to do. So here I am. Looks like there’s an influx of good-looking men around town these days, so I’m calling my timing a win.”

“The mayor is mine.” Havana coughed and cleared her throat. “I mean, you know. In a nonpsychotic kind of way.”

For whatever reason, that made Ember smile. “Don’t worry. His devotion to you was pretty clear when I met him.”

“What? What did Caleb say?” Now Havana sounded like a schoolgirl hashing out her love life at lunch. But really... had Caleb been going around telling people they were a couple or something? And why did that thought please her so much? Better not to examine that. “Never mind. Come inside and say hi to Aria.”

Ember followed her inside the art studio, and Aria squealed the moment she spied their sister. The two hugged and started jabbering, so Havana left them to get reacquainted or whatever. She had no idea if Ember and Aria spoke three times a week or if they’d been estranged this whole time too. Hopefully, all of it would come full circle as Havana and Ember both settled into the concept of home, whatever that looked like.

Maybe they'd both end up Springians. Wouldn't that be something?

Instead of picking up where she'd left off, Havana opted to cut out early so she could prepare for the presentation to the town that she and Caleb had planned for this afternoon. The likely addition of Ember to the audience ruffled Havana's nerves for some reason.

Now that Damian's investors were on board with the six-month deadline to get this town off the ground, the town had to get to work. This presentation was the culmination of what she hoped to convince everyone to do together. The folks had to like it, or she and Caleb would have to go back to the drawing board.

Or give up and let Damian figure out how to get the townspeople to sell. He would too. She had no doubt. And then Havana wouldn't have a chance to finally settle into a niche that she could call home forever.

Now that she had the chance, and a semireasonable plan for getting it, she wanted it.

The folks crowded into Ruby's, which had become a makeshift town hall of sorts over the past few weeks. Eventually they'd build a real one, according to her plan that included an entire new section of buildings to house the infrastructure offices that she'd convinced Caleb they needed, including a firehouse, a police department, and offices for city records.

First they needed to start making money in the form of taxes. Never an easy subject.

Havana stood near the round booth in the corner, where Caleb's friends had already taken their customary seats, with the notable addition of Cassidy. She'd wedged in next to Isaiah, and Ember stood next to the chair occupied by Hudson, though he was studiously ignoring her as Tristan flirted up a storm with the gorgeous newcomer. Cassidy and Ember had been fast friends in high school; clearly they'd continued

their relationship since they'd both ended up at Ruby's together.

Caleb wound his way toward Havana from the back of the diner, stopping every few feet to say a word to someone, share a smile, pat a little one on the head. Basically he was the perfect mayor and man rolled into one, and her lungs hitched as he saved his best smile for her.

"Hey," he called softly as he joined her. "I haven't seen you all week. You're a sight for sore eyes."

Ridiculously pleased, she smiled back. “I was busy.”

Lame excuse. I was stupid would have been a better explanation and far more accurate. Why hadn’t she gone looking for him when he didn’t appear on the balcony? Well, she knew. She had no next steps, no reason to seek him out other than to see him, and that didn’t seem fair when she couldn’t figure out how to stop being herself long enough to go with the moment.

“Me too,” he said. “I would have made time for you though.”

With that promise ringing in her ears, she cleared her throat and called out, “Thanks for coming everyone.”

The noise level in the diner lowered not one iota until Caleb clapped his hands. “Hi, everyone. Havana has a plan she’d like to share with you. Ask questions, get clear on your part, and then let’s vote on it. Show of hands will do. I’ll let you know when. Havana?”

She fumbled with the projector she’d hooked up to her laptop and somehow got the thing to display on the back wall of Ruby’s after the second try. She’d practiced the presentation four times but somehow still managed to forget the part about Damian’s timeline, so she tacked that onto the end, after she’d outlined her vision for the downtown area.

“In conclusion, we’ve been given six months to get this from a CAD drawing to reality, so we’re going to need everyone’s help.”

The crowd buzzed like a hornet's nest in the path of a brush fire, which did not bolster her confidence level.

"Six months?" Mavis J called out. "Why the arbitrary deadline?"

"Well, it's not arbitrary," Havana explained with a short laugh. "It's a requirement from the resort developers. If we don't get the town up and running, they?

re going to need a different draw for tourists, and they'll have a really short window to get that decided since the resort construction will be in full swing by then. So in reality, this is very generous—"

"This is our town," Farmer Moon cut in with a scowl. "I don't see why an outside developer should get a say in how long we have to make this work."

"Well..." Havana took a deep breath as her stomach flipped in on itself. "The fact of the matter is that they wanted the shopping center and—"

"We were supposed to get to vote on the shopping center," Lennie reminded everyone, his tattoos rippling as he crossed his bare arms. "I vote no."

Several others in the crowd murmured their agreement and nodded their heads. Right before her eyes, her control over the room vanished and took with it most of her composure. This was a disaster. But typical. She had no influence with them and lacked the ability to find the right leverage to sway them. Nothing had changed. These people were not on her side, nor did they have any intention of listening to her.

"Folks." Caleb's smooth voice cut through the noise easily, and everyone stopped talking. "You don't get to railroad Havana's presentation. This is something she worked really hard on for a long time."

Dumbfounded, she stared at him as he defended her. Defended her to the entire room, as if they were a unit and when someone went after what was his, he pushed back.

“In fact,” he continued, his voice filling the spaces between people and all those inside her too. “She’s the one who convinced Damian Scott to let us try this. He was going to say no, I could tell. But Havana cares about this town and about all of you. You owe her your attention, and frankly, you owe her for this one chance we’ve been given to show everyone from here to Austin that Superstition Springs is open for business. Now quiet down.”

Oh, dear heavens. Havana’s heart slid right out of her chest and fell into Caleb’s hands, whether he’d meant to catch it or not.

That’s what a real man did to show a woman he cared about her. Caleb’s loyalty to Havana had been hauled out and put on display for the entire town to see, and dang if her greedy little soul hadn’t soaked up every word.

The mayor wasn’t hers. She was his, lock, stock, and barrel. Havana was Team Doritos, one half of a stellar pig-wrangling duo and one hundred percent in love with him. There was no going back.

The “but” in Serenity’s prediction had saved her bacon. Work success may overshadow the desire for a relationship, and a problem may arise in becoming a bit too pushy or aggressive. This is a turnoff to the person receiving your advances, but there is an opportunity to meet a new love through a business colleague or work-related event.

She was a mess of a control freak who let her personality quirks overshadow something great. But. She had an opportunity for new love if she’d get over herself for once.

With her pulse going a mile a minute, she delved back into the presentation, this time with her spine straight and her mind clear. Within ten minutes, she had a majority show of hands voting yes for her town plan.

It was okay that she hadn't been able to influence them, also known as bending people to her will because that had been the only way she knew how to take care of people. Instead of demanding control, this time, she'd earned the right to be in the middle of this town, leading with her heart, Caleb by her side. He filled her gaps and then some.

Finally she knew what her next steps were.

Nineteen

After Havana's amazing presentation, Caleb assumed she'd want to spend some time mingling and working the room to get people organized. But she pushed through the wall of Lennie and Mavis J straight to his side, grabbed his hand, and forcibly hauled him from the diner without giving him the option to peep out a word.

Not that he was complaining. Her skin warmed his as she led him straight to the stairs clinging to the side of the old hotel and started clambering. He followed her to the balcony, content to let her take the lead in complete silence because there was too much expectation zinging between them to speak. Too many things he wanted to say. Too many possibilities for how the next few minutes could change everything and not in a good way.

This was the tipping point in their relationship, when it would go one way or the other. There was no question in his mind about that. The heavy expectation and awareness laced every molecule in his body, in the atmosphere. The tension threatened to break him apart, but he had a lot of practice holding himself together with sheer determination. After all, he'd been doing exactly that since al-Sadidiq.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

She turned at the midpoint on the balcony, facing him with the canopy of sky as a breathtaking backdrop. The expanse couldn't compete with the bright cobalt gaze of the woman though.

"I wanted to talk to you," she told him unnecessarily, which made him smile for some reason.

"I'm listening." He was always ready to hear whatever she had to say.

"I'm in love with you."

Except when she said that. His lungs seized, and he choked on a breath, wheezing until his eyes watered. Her concerned face floated through his murky vision until he blinked back the worst of his shock.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her brows drawing together as she rubbed his back in soothing circles. "That wasn't the reaction I was expecting."

"That makes two of us," he croaked and finally got his lungs clear enough to drag in a cleansing lungful of air. "Sorry. I can do better. Say that again."

The concern on her face turned to skepticism. "I don't know. I'm a little concerned this conversation is too much for your delicate constitution—"

His mouth crashed down on hers before she could finish the rest of the smart-aleck comment she'd been about to voice. Havana was the cure to everything that ailed him anyway. As her sweet lips conformed to his, his heart unfurled like a motionless flag

caught by a breeze, wrapping around her until she was a part of him.

Softening the assault, he kissed her until they were both senseless and she was clinging to his waist with both hands. Good. That was how it should be. All fire and honey and no room for nonsense.

The balcony's railing bit into his back as she kissed him in kind, and he had half a mind to move the party indoors, but first they had to get a few things straight. Like whether or not this was his cue to repeat her sentiment or if she'd confessed that she was in love with him right before telling him she was leaving.

In case it was the latter, he prolonged the kiss for another three or four minutes because he was not an idiot.

When he pulled back, Havana's hair had a slightly rumpled look from his fingers, and her lips begged to be sampled again. All he wanted to do was dive back in. But he didn't.

"Now it's time to talk," he said. Okay, he was an idiot, obviously, if this was what he'd rather be doing than trying a few more ways to kiss her. But they'd done a lot of that and not enough settling things once and for all. "Give me some clue where this conversation is headed. Because I know where I intend for it to go. If it's not going to include words like 'I want to be with you, Caleb,' then say so now."

"It's going to include words like 'it's enough,'" she said, her eyes wide and huge and misty as she gazed up at him. "You're enough. I'm through being scared of what's happening between us. I want it all even if it means one day you figure out I'm bossy and controlling and that you can do better."

He snorted. "I already knew you were bossy. Somehow that's never decreased your attractiveness. And for your information, the only way I could do better is if you

married me.”

Havana froze in his arms, her whole body going still as if she'd turned into an ice sculpture, and he cursed his stupid mouth for getting ahead of the game. Where had that even come from? He'd never had one thought about marrying anyone until now, but he wasn't hesitating anymore, and then it had sort of popped out... Clearly he needed to work on the delivery. Or move to Timbuktu be

fore he screwed everything up again.

But then he watched as she forcibly relaxed, almost as if she'd pushed a button.

“If you're trying to scare me off, it's not going to work,” she announced decisively. “I'm not going anywhere, so do your worst.”

“Fine. Then I love you too.”

It seemed like saying something so momentous out loud should at least result in the earth shaking or a comet streaking across the sky to mark the occasion. But nothing like that happened. Instead, something so much better did. Havana smiled and framed his jaw with her hands, placing a sweet kiss on his lips.

“Good,” she murmured against his mouth. “I was worried I was the only one who'd been walloped by this craziness. Now that we're both on board, I have a confession to make.”

Caleb did his own impersonation of an ice sculpture. “There better not be any more fiancés in the wings.”

“One is enough,” she said with an arched brow that shouldn't have made him smile as broadly as it did. “No, this is much worse, and I can fully understand if you want to

retract your proposal as a result of learning this heinous secret. The truth is... I hate Doritos.”

“Jeez, Havana. You can’t drop something like that on a guy.” He clutched his chest, faking a heart attack. “How will we raise the children? Because Fritos are never gracing a cupboard in my house—”

“Children?” Her gaze went limpid and watery and serious, and he nearly claimed a real heart attack to explain the sudden prick behind his own eyelids. But they were getting real, so he nodded.

“Maybe. One day.” He shrugged. “If that’s what we both want. Let’s build a town first though, okay? I’ve been the mayor for like five minutes, and Serenity’s prediction didn’t say anything about all this.”

“She gave you a prediction too?” Havana eyed him suspiciously. “You never said anything about that. What did it say?”

“Too? Don’t tell me you also got one.” Oh, man. This was too much. “Apparently we should have compared notes way before this. Mine said I was going to be bowled over by a redheaded dynamo who would give me a lot of crap before finally figuring out that I was her soul mate.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

“It did not.” She quirked a brow. “She’s been issuing predictions like candy since I can remember, and they’re never that specific.”

“She said I’d meet my soul mate, and I did. The redheaded part was just a bonus. What did yours say?”

“That I’d meet someone through work. Damian. I made sure of it.”

“Of course you did.”

No surprise there. She’d tried to control the outcome of Serenity’s prediction because stacking the deck was Havana’s MO all day long, and he loved that about her. The beauty of it was that apparently she returned the sentiment, and the magic of Superstition Springs had done the trick after all.

How did one man get so lucky anyway?

Or was it luck? “Do her predictions always come true?”

Havana shrugged. “I generally don’t pay a lot of attention to them, because you know. I always thought of it as hokum. This is the first time she’s directed one at me, so given my limited experience with taking this kind of thing in stride, I’d say she nailed it.”

Yeah, and then some. Serenity had made other predictions with the guys’ names on them, but he’d never asked them to share. Now he was curious if all five of them were in line for romance Superstition Springs style.

Somehow he'd also gotten to a place where he could believe all this had unspooled exactly as fate had intended. But he couldn't quite believe it was that easy.

"So this is it?" he couldn't help but ask. "We're done dancing around, and you're in it for the long haul? Or is there another land mine I need to look out for?"

"Here's the thing, Caleb," she said, her blue eyes sincere and full of the magic he hoped would never fade. "Control is just an illusion. I'd rather spend a lot of time figuring out how we complement each other, what we can accomplish together, what loving you looks like next year, in ten years. How many pigs we can take down on a weekly basis. That kind of thing."

"The answer is as many as come at us," he told her just as sincerely. "I suppose you think I'm going to marry you now."

She quirked a brow at him in that no-nonsense way that said she was about to tell him exactly how it was going down. "You better believe it. You're stuck with me now."

"That wasn't even close to the proposal you deserve. I can do better." Just as soon as he checked a few boxes that he would have already cleared if he'd known what Havana had intended when she'd dragged him from Ruby's. "Give me a few."

And then kissed her because he could, whenever he felt like it. After he got her good and breathless, like a good boy he sent her back to her floor and went in search of Serenity. His surrogate mom was a loose end that was poking at his conscience.

He found her at Voodoo Grocery chatting up Augusta Moon and Mavis J, so he hung back instead of disturbing them. But he should have known better.

"I told that boy he had to slow down and stop taking so many silly dares—" Serenity paused midspeech as she caught sight of Caleb, then beamed in his direction. "Hi,

honey, you come on over here. You're not interrupting. I'm explaining how Isaiah's prediction is going to play out. He's got some soul-deep healing to do before it's all going to work out for him."

Well, that answered the question about whether Serenity had lobbed love predictions in the other guys' direction. Caleb couldn't wait to hear more about that, especially if Isaiah's touched on the worrisome tendency that the man had developed to do crazy stuff simply because Tristan had dared him to. Isaiah had always looked for the best way to motivate the team, especially if he could get a laugh or take their mind off things, but since Syria, the dares and bets had gotten a lot more dangerous.

He'd have to ask Isaiah what Serenity had predicted. Later.

"I need to ask your permission to marry Havana," he told her bluntly.

Everyone would hear about four seconds after he'd asked anyway. No reason to be secretive about it.

Mavis J and Augusta offered their congratulations immediately, but Serenity gushed and stuttered and blushed so much that he started to wonder if she'd mistaken his intent and thought he'd asked her to marry him.

But then she pulled him into a hug and said, "I couldn't be happier that Havana finally figured out that she was meant for you. I have something I've been saving for her that I want to give you. Come with me."

Mystified, he followed Serenity back to the hotel and soon found himself ushered into her bedroom. It was covered in quilts, amateur oil paintings, stuffed animals, crystals, and all manner of books and knickknacks. She crossed straight to an antique armoire and pulled out a small black box, then flipped the lid to show him the sparkling ring inside.

“It was Janelle’s. My sister,” Serenity explained quietly, her eyes on the band with a simple diamond in the center. “She would have wanted Havana to have it. I wish she could be here to give it to her daughter herself, but she’s not, so I want you to. It’s fate.”

Caleb could only nod as he swallowed back the hot, slick emotion that had coated his throat, and it was a toss-up whether the prick of tears at his eyelids would stay put or fall. He accepted the box from Serenity and pocketed it. Under normal circumstances, he would never have accepted something of such value unless he had a plan to pay for it, but there were other forces being balanced here that he couldn’t disrupt.

He would have promised Serenity that he planned to love, honor, and protect her niece for the rest of his life if he could have talked, but words weren’t happening. Besides, he had a feeling she knew. Came in handy that Serenity had the ability to sense things.

He hugged her, and that’s when a lone tear escaped. He might not be done building the town to his satisfaction or anyone else’s, but the spirits of the people whose lives he’d had a hand in destroying didn’t feel as restless all at once. Maybe they’d found a home themselves among Serenity’s ghosts, fading into the walls of this old hotel as if they’d always been there.

Or else, this was simply what peace felt like. Either way, he was exactly where he was supposed to be, and he couldn’t wait to take the next steps of his new life.

Epilogue

"Where are you taking me?" Havana asked for the fourth time.

Caleb shushed her and pointed to the windshield of the Yukon where the dusty road lay ahead for miles.

"You've already said that," she informed him with a scowl.

They hadn't seen each other much over the past couple of weeks as they dug into the heavy lifting of making her plans a reality. Finally he'd forcibly hauled her away for a couple of hours so he could get on with his own plans. "Then you'd think you'd take a lesson and stop asking, Missy."

She glanced at him sideways, her bright red hair framing her arresting face so perfectly that it distracted him from driving. She distracted him in all the best ways.

"Why do you keep calling me that?" she asked with a scowl that did nothing to detract from her features. Of course, he might be biased.

"Because of that time you called me 'mister,'" he reminded her. "I'm pretty sure that's when I fell in love with you."

A pleased little hum sounded in her throat as she absorbed that. "So not when I informed you about your hero complex? Because that should have endeared me to you right off the bat."

He grinned. “That was when I knew it was forever. You pegged me dead to rights on that one.”

“Again. It’s not a compliment. It’s... Hey. You’re taking me to the springs.” She sat up a little straighter as she noticed the surroundings she no doubt had more than a passing familiarity with. “Are we going swimming?”

The hope in her voice put a funny hitch in his chest, mostly because he’d planned something really special, and if she’d gotten her heart set on swimming, she’d be mighty disappointed with the reality.

Or he could improvise and Havana with less clothes on worked for him. “If you want. It’s pretty hot out.”

/> May had arrived in Superstition Springs with a vengeance. Figured Damian Scott would give them a six-month moratorium that stretched over the Texas summer, when they’d be begging for a breeze and sweating buckets by August as the residents had gleefully informed him on many occasions.

He parked the Yukon and raced Havana to the springs, clambering up ahead of her on the rocks so she’d be sure to follow. She did. When she drew up beside him on the tallest rock, he couldn’t peel his eyes from her despite the beauty of the hidden gem at the base of the outcropping.

“I have something for you,” he said huskily, shocked at the bare emotion climbing into his voice as he pulled the ring box Serenity had given him from his back pocket and flipped the lid. “A better proposal. See, I shouldn’t have won the election. Frankly, I think it was rigged and I need you to be the actual mayor. You know the woman behind the man? Will you do me the honor of becoming Mrs. Mayor?”

She laughed, nodding along with the joke until she caught sight of the ring. She

zeroed in on it, her expression growing misty and wondrous as she reached out to touch it as if to ensure herself it was real. “Is that my mom’s? I haven’t seen it in ages.”

“Serenity gave it to me. I hope that’s okay?” Maybe she didn’t want a hand-me-down ring or a guy who couldn’t exactly afford anything magnificent.

“Caleb—” Her breath caught, and she glanced up at him, her soul in her eyes. “It’s everything.”

And so was she. She let him slip the ring on her finger, and she made a fist, holding it to her heart. Except she took his hand with her, their fingers tangled, and he could feel her pulse pounding. He could feel everything.

“See, I know how much you enjoy taking care of everyone. But I thought it might be okay to stop for a while and let me take care of you. Forever. How does that sound?” he asked her.

She nodded, speechless for once, and that worked for him. He kissed her to seal his heartfelt proposal and then advised her, “Last one in is a rotten egg.”

Then he started shedding clothes. She caught on in a heartbeat and stripped just as fast, down to her underwear since they hadn’t brought bathing suits. She chased him into the water, and they swam for about four seconds until he couldn’t stand not touching her anymore. He wrapped her up in his embrace, and through sheer force of will, kept them both above the surface of the water.

This was what home felt like. And he wasn’t ever letting go.

Aria has both her sisters back home for the first time in eight years. Will that give her the courage to go after the man she wants? Or will courage look more like admitting

she's targeted the wrong SEAL? Find out in *A Lot Like Perfect*!

Turn the page for an exclusive excerpt.

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SEALs of Superstition Springs

A Lot Like Perfect

Navy SEAL Isaiah West has trouble calling himself “former” military, but after an involuntary discharge, redefining himself is the only option. The small town of Superstition Springs seems as good a place as any to regroup while he figures out where he's supposed to go next—and deal with how that last operation in Syria messed up his place on the team.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 4:19 am

Aria Nixon has long accepted her role as the “plain” sister and really, she has no use for a man who only sees her looks anyway. So when her Aunt Serenity’s love prediction mentions the word “makeover,” it’s game on to prove she can get noticed without one. Who better to help her get the inside track on how a man thinks than... a man? Isaiah specifically, who has his own prediction to sidestep.

But in a mystical place like Superstition Springs, nothing ever goes as expected. It turns out Isaiah and Aria have a lot in common, and what’s with the attraction between them? Not supposed to happen. She can’t fall for Isaiah. He’s too perfect, too much what she wasn’t looking for and too likely to break her heart when he leaves. And Isaiah isn’t about to admit he’s got feelings for the woman he’s supposed to be helping attract an entirely different guy—his teammate. They should stay friends. Right?

No one had mentioned anything about springs, which in retrospect might have just been a miss on Isaiah’s part given the name of the town. But he hadn’t had any reason to care about sorting that out. Until now. Aria’s face had taken on this glow as she’d spoken that might have been left over from running three quarters of a mile in the May heat. But he didn’t think so. And now he had to know more about what had lit her up.

“Springs? As in the Superstition ones?” he asked.

She tilted her head to the left. “It’s not far from here. A little over a mile. Other end of town though, by the river.”

Springs and a river? He should get out more. His downtime consisted of rooftop

stargazing. Alone. Which just sounded... lonely all at once. He had a very odd urge to invite Aria to join him in his makeshift tree fort sometime. They both lived at the hotel, so it would be convenient, though she often worked late at the diner. Maybe after her shift? Or was that presumptuous?

He shook his head. Hard. No women. Even unassuming ones who had never so much as tripped his radar that way. Which was a shame because he really liked Aria.

"I'm a fan of peace," he said instead. "Sounds like a place I might like. Seems like there would be a lot of spots like that around here though since there's not much else?"

"There are a lot of places to be by yourself, that's for sure," she acknowledged wryly. "Especially when people don't seem to stick around long."

"That's the spiel I keep hearing from Caleb. There isn't much to anchor folks here. I think the schoolhouse will help, don't you?" Or at least that was the party line. They had to get some basic stuff in place before the town could really function as a tourist draw. This barn renovation was step one of about a million.

"Sure, that's why I volunteered. Well, one of the reasons." She broke off and he had the distinct impression she'd said something she regretted. "Actually, that was a good segue into what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Talk to me about?" That's why she'd hightailed it over here from the diner when she'd realized he was alone? His intrigue meter shot into the red.

"Yeah. I need your help."

The long pause did not seem to fix her hesitation. Surely she wasn't uncomfortable around him. He'd always worked hard to make sure people felt at ease. Clearly he was falling down on that job too. "I'm a helpful guy. This is the part where you tell

me what it is.”

She huffed out a breathy laugh that seemed to release some of her tension. “It’s just kind of silly now that I’m actually contemplating saying this out loud. But here it goes. I need you to promise that what I’m about to tell you stays between us. It’s a secret.”

This just got better and better. “Like a pinky swear?”

She scowled, which only made her look cute instead of annoyed. Aria didn’t have an ounce of meanness in her whole body, which kind of ruined the expression. “I’m being serious. I have a proposition for you.”

Uh... if it had been anyone other than Aria, he might have been concerned that whatever she had on her mind might be of the illicit variety, but he couldn’t even imagine something of that nature coming out of her mouth. Intrigued didn’t even begin to cover it at this point. “I’m listening.”

“Here’s the thing. You can’t laugh. I made a bet with Havana and Ember that I could get Tristan to ask me out on a date. I’m pretty sure that’s not going to happen unless I stack the deck.”

She paused, eyeing him meaningfully and he caught a clue pretty fast. Decoy, fake boyfriend, make Tristan jealous. Take your pick. “You want me to help you.”

A Lot Like Perfect