



Luke

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult

Description: "I have to do whatever I can to make her stay..."

Marie

I never envisioned myself moving back to my home town, but it is the right thing to do.

My mom's health is failing and she needs extra help if she is going to get back on her feet.

I have no intention to stay here for long though.

At least that is my plan until I run right into my old high school crush.

The kicker?

He's the hottest man to walk the earth and I never got over him.

Not even now...

Luke

I never expected to see Marie again.

The first time I run into her in five years is when I pull her over for speeding.

She looks even more beautiful than she did back in college.

This is a chance that only comes around once.

The problem is, she has a lot going on in her life and has no plans of staying.

I have to do whatever I can to make her stay...

Luke is a super-hot, friends to lovers insta love romance featuring a protective and passionate alpha male policeman and a younger curvy woman. It is a safe, sweet read with no cheating (ever), and guaranteed HEA.

Luke is the first book in the Rogue County Rangers Series. The stories are connected, for the best experience, read the full series.

Packed with loads of steam and drama, these delicious romances will keep you wanting more and more...

Total Pages (Source): 15

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:05 am

Chapter One

Marie

I feel like I'm lost.

I haven't driven down this road in years. In fact, last time I drove down the two-lane highway, I was heading the other direction certain I'd never be back. Life has a funny way of making you eat your words.

The funny thing is, it's impossible to get lost on a two-lane highway with no exits. I can't accidentally make a wrong turn or end up on the wrong road. There are no turns to make. There are no other roads.

That's how I know I'm on the right track.

I'm on my way to Rose Haven, a small town quite literally in the middle of nowhere, Colorado. Not the fun, snowy, dream-vacation part of Colorado. Ranch country. Eighty percent of the land within the town border is allocated to ranches. The cattle outnumber the people, eight to one.

My mom is one of the few people living in Rose Haven that have nothing to do with ranching.

I'm not far from town, but I can't tell exactly how close I am. There aren't even mile markers on the road to guide me.

This highway did have markers at one point, but they've all been washed away or broken. The town never bothered to replace them because anyone driving out there already knows where they're going, with the exception of me.

When I started my drive two days ago, I thought some kind of homing instinct would kick in but it hasn't. The town could rise up out of the hills in a second or in an hour.

Most of the highway is outside the range of the cell towers. I'll only get signal again once I get within five miles oftown. There's only one cell phone tower in Rose Haven. Only the main streets fall within its bubble.

My mother, who lives sixteen miles out of town, doesn't own a cellphone. She doesn't want one when her landline works just fine. If she calls someone and they don't answer, she knows they're in town.

It never takes long to find someone in Rose Haven. There are only so many places to go and no place to hide. That's one of the reasons why I left.

I've spent the last six years in New Orleans. I went to college there and when I graduated, I couldn't imagine leaving. New Orleans is the opposite of Rose Haven in every way. That's why I love it. It's loud, it's colorful, and every day there's something new to see.

There are places to hide in New Orleans.

Out of nowhere, a battered sign rises up down the road.

Welcome to Rose Haven.Pop. 3071.

Rose Haven takes up a surprising amount of space, though no one would ever guess it. I can drive an hour out of town and still be in the county. There's nothing out

there, but still.

The background of the sign was once a rich, deep purple. It clearly hasn't been touched up since I left. The loopy, cursive lettering was once a rosy shade of pink but the sun's bleached it into the color of a seashell.

I tighten my grip on the steering wheel. My knuckles ache from the pressure, but I don't let up. I need something else to focus on.

Anxiety flutters in my chest as I fly toward the sign.

I press my foot down on the accelerator. My little Prius whirls as she zooms forward. Yes, my car is a She. Her name is Penny.

In my mind's eye, I picture a barricade around the town border. It's made of all my sour memories piled up on top of each other.

Once I pass the town line, I'll be fine. I know this is all in my head. Nothing is going to stop me from seeing my mother, especially not the memories of all the pretty blonde bitches that made middle school and high school a living hell for me.

I don't see the police cruiser until it's too late.

I zoom by, cursing myself for not paying more attention. I slow down, but it's too late. The cruiser's lights come flashing on and the car pulls onto the road. I begin to pull over. My anxiety increases tenfold.

What's a cruiser doing out here in the first place.

The car rolls to a stop behind me. The officer gets out. I can't make out his expression under his wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses. There's something familiar

about him, but I can't see enough of his face to nail down what it is.

I probably went to school with him. He looks about my age.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:05 am

As he approaches my window, he takes off his hat and sunglasses. In my rearview mirror, I finally get a glimpse of his face. My heart slams against my ribs.

It's Luke O'Donnell. I can't believe I didn't recognize him instantly.

His strong jaw looks even more chiseled than I remember. His wavy brown hair catches the gold light of the late afternoon sun. His eyes are like disks of jade.

He's the most beautiful man to ever walk the earth. Heat floods my body when I look at him directly.

He knocks on the window, his smile stretching from ear to ear. He knows it's me. I wonder if my mother told him I was coming back to town.

He starts talking the moment I roll down the window.

"Marie Richardson, as I live and breathe!" He slaps his hand over his chest. "I never thought I'd see you back here."

"Hey, Luke," I nod. I can't make my voice sound natural.

I spent a good ten years head over heels in love with Luke O'Donnell. Now that he's in front of me again, I realize I'm not as over him as I thought. I can't look at him without imagining what it would be like to run my hands over his bare chest.

"Hey, Luke?" He repeats. "That's all you have to say to your best friend?"

“I’m sorry I haven’t been in touch much,” I offer lamely. Truth be told, I’m surprised to hear him refer to me as his best friend. I thought I lost that title when I left.

It wasn’t bad enough to be in love with someone like Luke knowing I didn’t stand a chance in the world. It was even worse when he was my friend. My best friend.

In elementary school, he stood up for me when a few kids made fun of my weight. I’ve always carried a few extra pounds. I spent years of my life hating my body. That’s another thing that changed when I moved to New Orleans.

Despite a healthy relationship with my curves, I slowly felt the old self-consciousness trickle back in.

“Much?” Luke chuckles. “I haven’t heard from you since graduation. I ought to write you a ticket just for that.”

“How long have you been a police officer?” I ask.

“Ranger,” he corrects. “In case you forgot how we do things here, we’re called Rangers.”

I had forgotten. I’ve actively tried to think of home as little as possible since I left, but I can’t say that to Luke. He’s always been the Golden Boy. He wouldn’t understand.

“I heard about Alice.” My chest flutters when he says my mother’s name. “Doc says she’s driving to Denver for treatment.”

“Yeah, I’m going to take over driving so she doesn’t wear herself out. It’s a miracle she can still drive herself.”

“It is. We’re all rooting for her.”

“Thanks.” I blink away unexpected tears. “I should get going. I don’t want to keep her waiting.”

“Of course. Try not to speed, though. Gary Wiseman can see the whole highway from his porch. If he sees someone speeding, he’ll be at the station all day trying to wrangle up a posse.”

“Still?” I chuckle. “You’d think he’d have found something else to do by now.”

“Nope.” He pats the roof of my car. “Say hi to your mom for me. Don’t be a stranger while you’re here, either!”

I wave as I roll up my window, eager to get away before I can no longer hide the deep desire I still feel for him.

Chapter Two

Luke

I can’t believe it. I must have been imagining it. Maybe I got a little too much sun today.

Never did I think I’d see Marie back in town. I figure she would’ve called me first, but why would she? She didn’t bother to tell me she was leaving town.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:05 am

It's only when I come to the one and only red light in town, do I realize my heart is pounding out of my chest. It's not the first time she's taken my breath away, but it's definitely the most intense.

I pull into the station shortly after sundown. There's a beat-up truck in one of the three guest parking spots. Gary must've seen Marie's car. Sure enough, he's inside going off on my co-ranger, Rhodes.

"I'm tellin' you!" Gary shakes a gnarled finger. "One of those hoodlums from the valley just drove into town. No one else comes from that direction. They're trying to bring their jazz cabbage and disco powder into my town and I won't have it!"

"We're aware of the situation in the valley and monitoring it closely, Gary. You know that," Rhodes sighs. "No one is bringing jazz cabbage into town."

"You didn't see what I saw!"

"You can relax, Gary," I cut in. "That driver on the road today was none other than Marie Richardson."

Rhodes' brows shoot up. "Your old high school pal?"

Pal isn't the word I'd use. Marie was my only real friend in school. I felt like I could be myself around her without the pressure of expectations. She was the only person who truly knew me at my core. I never understood why she left town so suddenly after graduation.

Gary's nonexistent brows shoot up. "Alice's girl?"

"That's the one."

"She could have disco powder," Gary mutters. "She's a city girl now."

"No, she's not," I laugh. "She's a Rose Haven girl, through and through. She just doesn't remember that yet."

She didn't look like the other girls in town. She wasn't obsessed with turning herself into whatever others thought was cool or trendy. She was unapologetically herself all the time. Not a lot of people at school liked that. They were always ready to remind her of how different she was as if it was a bad thing.

Her dark chocolate hair is a lot longer than it used to be. She used to keep it cut to her shoulders. It looks amazing this long. She's always been beautiful. Her curves enhanced her femininity even when she dressed rather tomboy-ish.

I've been attracted to her since my sophomore year of high school, but she never seemed interested in me that way. It was a shame, but I was still more than happy to have her as a friend. Any piece of her I could have was enough for me.

I try to remind myself of that as my mind takes things to a far dirtier place. I tamp my thoughts down before I'm unable to hide them.

"Are you going to hang out with her while she's in town?" Rhodes asks. "You know, reconnect a bit?"

"I'd like to," I shrug. "I don't know how Marie feels. She didn't seem like she wanted to chat when I pulled her over."

“Most people don’t want to talk when they’re pulled over,” Rhodes points out. “She’s probably worried about her mother, too.”

“You’re right,” I nod. “I’ll give it a few days before I knock on her door. She’ll need to settle in.”

“Why’d she leave town in the first place?” Rhodes asks.

“That’s the thing,” I say, putting my hands on my hips. “I don’t know. I never saw her again after the graduation ceremony. She didn’t even come to the party.”

“Weird,” Rhodes says before turning his attention back to Gary. “See, Gary? No jazz cabbage.”

“Alice’s girl might be a mule!” Gary cries.

I try not to laugh. On a small level, Gary has the right to be alarmed. A few months ago, some known drug dealers from up north settled in a rural part of the county. They rarely come into town. We haven’t found proof that they’re doing anything illegal, but all of us rangers have a bad feeling about it. We’ve been keeping tabs as best as we can.

“Marie isn’t a mule, Gary. She’s just here to take care of her mother,” I say. “Come on, I’ll walk you to your car. Ruthie’s probably got dinner in the oven, right?”

“It’s casserole night,” Gary grumbles as he lets me guide him out of the station. “Worst day of the week.”

“Ruthie’s taco casseroles are to die for,” I protest. “We tear them apart whenever she brings them into the station.”

“I’ll bring some down tomorrow.” Gary climbs into his truck, which coughs to life. Sooner or later, he’s going to have to get another truck. I should start asking around. It’ll make his life a little easier. That’s what being a ranger is all about.

I head back into the station, ready to file the evening paperwork, and call it a night. As I move through my routine, I can’t seem to shake Marie from my mind.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:05 am

Chapter Three

Marie

“It’s not all that bad,” my mother, Alice, says in the seat next to me. “Though, I wish we would’ve taken my car.”

We’re on our way back from treatment in Denver.

“You’re lucky your car made it to Denver and back even once,” I say. “You need to get a new one.”

“Gary Wiseman’s selling his truck,” she says. “I saw Ranger Luke putting up a for sale flyer at the general store.”

“If your little Toyota is struggling to make the drive, what makes you think Gary Wiseman’s old truck is going to do any better,” I ask.

“I don’t know,” my mother says dreamily.

I feel guilty about my rising annoyance. Alice Richardson is many things but practical is not one of them. Growing up, we always lived in the strangest houses. They never looked like the ones all of the other kids lived in. She likes spaces that have character.

Her current house is a refurbished horse barn. I have to admit, she did an amazing job fixing it up. It almost looks normal.

We pull onto the main road and I pull into a parking spot in front of Jeanette's Grocery, the only grocery store in town.

"Do you need something?" My mother asks.

"You need something," I say. "You heard the doctor. I'm getting smoothie supplies so your system doesn't have to work overtime."

"I don't have a blender," she says.

I let out a long sigh. "You couldn't have mentioned that earlier?"

"I didn't know you wanted to get smoothie stuff."

"The doctor deliberately recommended it," I say. "Why wouldn't I do what the doctor says?"

"Doctors say all kinds of things," my mother waves me off. It's everything I can do to rein in my temper.

"And you should listen to them. I'll be right back."

I get out of the car before she can say anything. I hope she stays put. I need a moment alone.

"Marie!" Jeanette calls the moment I step into the store. "I heard you were back in town!"

"I'm not back," I clarify. "I'm just helping my mother until she gets better."

"Bless your heart." Jeanette lays a hand on my shoulder. "My goodness, you haven't

changed a bit.”

Her eyes drift to my midsection for a fraction of a second.

“Neither have you,” I reply. “Do you have frozen fruit?”

“In the freezer section,” she nods. “We don’t have much.”

“I’ll make do.” I slip away before she can say anything else.

When I get to the freezer section, I spy one bag of frozen strawberries and nothing else. I grab it since I’ve already made the effort.

“Jeanette?” I call when I’m back at the front of the store. “You don’t happen to sell blenders, do you?”

“Not this time of year,” she says. “I usually order a few for spring and summer but since autumn’s closing in, I haven’t ordered any. You making smoothies or something?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:05 am

“Trying to,” I say.

“Is it some kind of weight loss fad?” She asks. “I love hearing about all those new crackpot ways to lose weight. Some celebrities out in Hollywood eat nothing but seaweed. Hand to God!”

“It’s for my mother. Smoothies will help her get proper nutrition while she treats her cancer.”

The color drains from Jeanette’s face.

“Of course,” she nods. “We’re keeping her in our thoughts all the time.”

“That’s so nice of you.” If she can tell how fake my smile is, she doesn’t let on. “Have a good one!”

I leave without waiting for change.

“Need a blender?” Luke’s voice sends a shiver down my spine. I don’t even have to see him for desire to start boiling in my blood. How is that fair?

“What?” I blurt like an idiot.

“I heard you asking Jeanette for a blender,” he says. “We have one at the station we never use. Want to borrow it?”

“No thanks,” I don’t like being so curt with him but it’s either that or rip his clothes

off. Not sure he'll respond to the latter well.

I can't believe Luke is being this nice to me. I'm not proud of how I left Rose Haven. It wasn't fair to him at all. The least he can do is be mad about it like I deserve.

"So, you're just going to make your mom suck on frozen strawberries?" There's humor in his voice. He always sounds like he's about to start laughing. He has the best laugh.

"I can get stuff next time we go to Denver," I say.

"Don't be ridiculous. I'll bring the blender over tomorrow," he says. "By the way, your mom sent me a text about Gary's old truck. I'm trying to help him sell it."

"Oh, god," I sigh. "Please, don't sell it to her. She's not going to be able to drive a car soon, let alone one like that."

"Don't worry," he assures me. "I know how she is with anything weird and unusual. I told her one of the McLarren brothers already made an offer."

"Thank you." Relief mixed with guilt washes through me.

"Do you want to grab something to eat?" He asks.

"Um." My mind goes blank. His question catches me off guard. It's already hard enough to think straight while standing so close to him. He's a good ten inches taller than me, which I've always loved. He looks like a superhero trying to blend into a civilian population.

"It's not supposed to be a brain teaser," he chuckles.

“My mother’s waiting in the car,” I say. “Another time?”

“Sure,” he nods. “I’ll see you tomorrow when I bring the blender.”

Before I can tell him it’s not necessary, he walks away.

Chapter Four

Luke

I knock on the door to Marie’s home at nine the next morning. A tired-looking Alice answers, though her ever-present smile is in place. Her hair was always thin, but I can see where it’s starting to fall out.

“Luke!” Her smile widens. “I haven’t seen the likes of you here in some time! I should get cancer more often if it means handsome men will come knocking on my door.”

“Mom!” Marie appears beside her mother, looking embarrassed. When she eyes the box in my hands, her eyes narrow. She wears a flattering cream colored sweater and jeans that hug her in all of the right places.

“What’s all this?” She asks.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:05 am

My mind goes blank. All I can think about is running my hands over her thighs. I used to be so much better at keeping this under wraps. I guess, I'm out of practice. She snaps her fingers, bringing me back to the here and now.

"Uh, Fresh is better than frozen. Where can I put it?" I look down at the box of fresh fruit and veggies. Maybe I should have brought more.

"I thought you were bringing a blender," Marie says, unable to take her eyes off my box of goodies.

"It's in the car." I step past her and make my way into the kitchen. Marie follows me like she's trailing a criminal.

"I didn't poison anything," I say.

"You didn't have to bring so much," she says. "I have it covered."

"You want your mom to live off strawberry puree?" I chuckle. "All this stuff came from the Horace's garden. Laurel went a little overboard this year. She was happy to share."

"That's really nice of her." Marie looks shocked as if she can't believe old fashioned neighborly kindness exists.

"All this stuff is real healthy, too," I say. "Lots of antioxidants, vitamins, and other stuff I don't understand. Blend it all up and you'll have a bonafide health potion."

“I don’t know what to say,” she says.

“Luke, you’re my hero?” I prompt. “Luke, I’m sorry for disappearing six years ago? Anything along those lines will work.”

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I didn’t plan on leaving like that. I had a chance and I took it.”

“You can take chances and also make a phone call,” I say.

“It was...” she hesitates, “more complicated than that.”

“How?” I ask. “Tell me.”

She lets out a long sigh and runs a hand through her hair. “I don’t want to get into this now. I have a lot on my plate with my mom and everything, okay?”

“Don’t you think I deserve an explanation?” I press. I don’t want to push her too hard but if she knew how many sleepless nights, I’ve had while trying to figure out why she left town the way she did, maybe she’d change her tone.

“You do,” she agrees quickly, to my surprise. “You do. I’m just not in a place to give you the quality explanation you deserve. My mental and emotional bandwidths are at capacity, right now. I’m sorry.”

“That’s fair,” I shrug and walk out of the kitchen. I hear her rush after me.

“Wait, where are you going?”

I look over my shoulder with a smile.

“To get the blender,” I say. “I’ve got some recipes I want to try out.”

The visible relief that crosses her face makes me smile. At least, I know she wants me around.

“How’s your mom?” She asks when we’re back in the kitchen. I weigh out smoothie ingredients in an attempt to pack in the most nutrition.

“She’s good,” I say. “She’s dating.”

“Oh?” Marie’s brows shoot up in surprise. “That’s amazing. I’m glad she’s getting back out there.”

When my father died, my mom shut down. It took her years to start acting like a human again, let alone a mom. She’s only been seeing Brad for two months, but he’s been good for her. A small part of me hates that she’s moving on from dad, but I know she has to. She doesn’t deserve to spend the rest of her life alone just because an idiot kid took my dad away.

“Are you okay?” Marie asks quietly.

I realize I’m holding the blueberries too tightly. Purple juice leaks onto my palm.

“Fine,” I nod and dump them into the blender.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:05 am

“I light a candle every year, you know?” She says. “For Andrew.”

It’s always weird hearing someone say my dad’s name.

“Thanks,” I say. “I bet he likes it.”

“I like to think so.”

“Are the smoothies ready?” Alice walks into the room rubbing her hands together like a child who’s about to get a treat.

“Just about.” I put three big handfuls of spinach on top of the fruit and almond milk.

“You’re putting spinach in a smoothie?” Alice cries. “That’s like putting Brussel sprouts on birthday cake. Have you lost your mind?”

“You won’t even taste it,” I assure her.

“And what are those little black things floating around?”

“Chia seeds, mom,” Marie answers. “They’re good for you and they have no taste. You won’t even notice them.”

“None of this seems natural.” Alice peers into the blender with a skeptical eye.

“It came from Laurel Horace’s garden,” Marie says. “It’s as natural as it gets.”

I fire up the blender. The blueberries and the spinach make a weird color. Alice wrinkles her nose. Her expression doesn't improve as I pour the smoothie into three glasses. Marie is the first one to take a sip.

"Crap, that's delicious," she says. "Did you sneak in a little vanilla extract?"

"Just a drop," I wink.

"Mom, you have to try it. It's good!"

"I just don't see why I have to change my whole diet," Alice grumbles. "I like my chicken fried steak from Harry's. I like bacon. I like butter. What's so wrong with that?"

"You can still have those things," I say. "However, these smoothies are going to taste just as good going down as they will if they come back up. Can you say the same for chicken fried steak?"

"Luke," Marie says through clenched teeth.

"Don't chide him," Alice says. "Everyone keeps talking to me like I'm a toddler. Luke's right. At some point, it's going to be hard for me to keep food down. It's okay to acknowledge it."

"Let's also acknowledge that I practically had to tackle you to get you to take your pills this morning," Marie says. "Did I baby you then?"

"Those pills make me all screwy. I don't like them. They sure as hell don't make me feel better."

Marie sucks in a long, slow breath. Tears shine in her eyes but she blinks them away.

“They will if you take them correctly. Is it okay to acknowledge not taking your pills is a bad idea?”

“When you can prove it.”

“I can’t deal with this right now,” Marie mutters and strides out of the kitchen. Alice lets out a sigh.

“I’m not trying to make this difficult, you know?” She says to me.

“I know,” I nod. “So does Marie.”

“It’s just all these doctors telling me what I can and can’t do. I hate it. Complacency isn’t in my nature. It’s not part of Marie’s either.” Alice picks up her smoothie to examine it.

“No, it’s not,” I chuckle. “That just means both of you are natural fighters. That’s going to come in handy in the coming months. All those doctors just want you to have the best weapons.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:05 am

“Like this?” She shakes the smoothie glass.

“Yup.”

“When you put it that way, it doesn’t sound like a list of demands.” She takes a small sip. “Wow, that’s good. I can’t even taste the green stuff.”

“What did I tell you?” I grin. Alice looks up at me, her eyes clear and bright.

“I’m glad to have you around again, Luke. Marie is going to need a friend like you.”

“I’m glad I’m here, too.”

Chapter Five

Marie

Luke comes over every morning to make smoothies for us. With each passing day, it gets both harder and easier to be around him. We’re falling into our old rhythm but I want him so much I can hardly think straight.

On Wednesdays, he brings more produce from Laurel Horace. It’s my mother’s favorite day of the week now. She loves to declare how much she hates something only to listen to Luke work his verbal magic and convince her to try it. It’s like a little game between them.

That’s not the only area in which Luke made improvements. The leak in the roof

mysteriously vanished. Our gutters are spotless. Our lawn is neatly mowed, though my mother likes having a ‘wild lawn’, as she puts it. The trash bins are always put out on time, too.

I don’t know what he said to my mom, but I haven’t had a problem getting her to take her meds. When I drive her to her treatment, she plays pump up music, and acts like she’s about to get into a boxing match. I don’t get it but I sure as hell not going to complain about it. Her hair is starting to fall out, but she doesn’t mind it as much as I thought she would. My mother has always been a little vain, but I don’t blame her. She’s a pretty woman. She’s compact and pixie-like, exactly the opposite of me. I take after my dad, but I haven’t seen him since I was twelve. He’s got a new family somewhere else. I have no desire to know them.

“Knock, knock!” Luke calls as he enters the house at nine o’clock on the dot. Even my mother’s cats, Edmund and Lucy, run to the front room when Luke arrives.

“Morning!” I call from the kitchen.

He hasn’t brought up graduation, my abrupt departure, or anything difficult since the day he brought the blender. I’m eternally grateful to him for it, but I know I have to talk about it eventually. I need to come up with a way to do so without having to admit the feelings I had for him. We’re just starting to get our friendship back. I don’t want to ruin it. When he enters the kitchen, his smile lights up the whole room. Butterflies erupt in my stomach. I can’t help but smile back.

“Are you ready for another gourmet smoothie courtesy of Laurel Horace?” He asks as he sets down a wooden crate overflowing with fruit and veggies on the kitchen counter. “Do you think I can sneak carrots in without Alice figuring it out?”

“Definitely not.”

“Where is she?” He looks into the living room, which is empty except for the cats.

“She’s tired,” I say. “I’m letting her sleep.”

“The treatments are starting to take their toll?”

“Yeah,” I nod. “That and all the travel time. Driving, even being a passenger, is more exhausting than it sounds.”

“I believe it,” he says. “When I used to do patrols, those were my most exhausting days.”

“When did you decide to become a ranger?” I ask.

“About a year after high school graduation,” I say. “Sherriff Cormick offered me a spot in the training program. I had to get a few certifications first.”

“I thought you were going to get a Criminal Justice degree from that school in Texas,” I say. “What happened to that?”

“I didn’t feel right about leaving my mom,” he answers. “I don’t regret staying at all. Because of the ranger program, I’ve met some of the best guys ever. Rhodes and Max are like brothers to me.”

“That’s great,” I smile, though it doesn’t feel entirely genuine. I can’t be angry he’s found people to replace me with. It’s not fair. “I’m glad you’ve found your place.”

“What about you?” He asks. “Have you found yours?”

I want to say yes, but I hesitate.

“Don’t lie to me,” he says with a sly grin. “Honest answers only.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:05 am

“I love New Orleans,” I say. “I really do. However, I feel like I’m on an extended vacation rather than living in a place I call home.”

“Ever consider moving back here permanently?”

“I don’t know,” I shake my head. “So much has happened.”

“Has a lot happened?” He asks. “I still have no idea what you’ve been doing this whole time.”

“Studying. Working. Exploring. Nothing too exciting,” I say. “Let’s get these in the fridge before they go bad.”

Luke and I reach for the same apple. Our hands brush together. My entire body feels like it’s been touched by a live wire.

I pull back too quickly to play it cool.

When I look up at Luke, he’s watching me with a pleading gaze. Up until this moment, I thought I’d been doing a good job of keeping my feelings in check. Now, when I look at him, I realize how foolish I was to think my feelings for him would ever go away.

“Marie,” he says softly.

“I need to check on my mother.” I pull away and leave the room but I linger in the hallway. I can’t let this happen again. I barely made it out of high school without

losing my mind. I spent years in love with my best friend knowing he'd never feel the same way about me. I watched him date perfect, skinny, girls raised to be perfect, skinny southern belles.

He always stuck up for me. He never let me feel like I was less than them. It was so easy to fall in love with him then and it's just as easy to fall back in love with him now. But the bottom line hasn't changed. He'll never be with someone like me. That's why I had to leave the first time. It'll be the reason I have to leave a second time.

Chapter Six

Luke

Marie's been back in town for a month and I'm still no closer to understanding why she left town all those years ago.

Alice's treatment is taking its toll. Her hair is gone. She can only drink smoothies now, which she doesn't mind one bit. In fact, now she gives me lists of ingredients and challenges me to make a smoothie out of them. It's fun for me too, though I'd never recommend mixing peanut butter and kale. It just doesn't work.

Now that Alice is on an all-smoothie diet, I've started bringing normal food for Marie. I'm in the kitchen seasoning chicken for dinner when my phone rings.

"What's up?" I answer, already knowing it's Max, a fellow ranger.

"Are you coming out tonight or are you staying in with the wife?" He jokes.

"Very funny," I mutter. "I'm having dinner with Marie and her mother tonight."

“Ah, so staying with the wife.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call her that,” I say.

Sometimes, it feels like Marie and I can easily slip back into how we were before she left. It’s like we haven’t missed a beat. Other times, she can’t look me in the eye. I don’t understand it and I have no intention of backing off until I do. It doesn’t help that I can’t be in the room with her for an extended period of time without wanting to push her up against the wall or take her into the bedroom.

All this time spent at her home, cooking dinner, and fixing things up has made me realize just how empty my life was without her. It’s a stressful time for her and her mother, but I haven’t felt so at ease in years. Looking after them is as easy as breathing. I want Alice to get better more than anything, but when she does, I’m worried that Marie will disappear all over again. I don’t know if I can go another six years without my best friend. She needs me right now, even though she won’t admit it. What she doesn’t know is that I need her just as much.

“You’re basically a married couple. You look way too damn chipper every time you come into work. It’s obvious,” Max taunts. “Rhodes thinks so, too.”

“You’re just jealous that I get to spend my time with two wonderful women and you’re eating leftover casserole out of Tupperware.”

“We’re definitely both jealous,” Max agrees. “When are you and the missus going to have us over for dinner?”

“When Alice is better, she wants to have a huge cookout,” I say. “You two idiots are definitely coming.”

“Awesome. Tell her we’ve got her back, all right? Marie, too.”

“Sure thing.”

I hang up and grab a can of cat food from the cabinet. Sometimes, Marie and her mother hit a bit of traffic on the way home from treatment, so I’ve taken it upon myself to feed the cats.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:05 am

Lucy and Edmund come running. I place their food in the usual spot by a huge bookshelf crammed with knickknacks. As I straightened up, I spy something I hadn't noticed before.

It's a photo from ages ago at a school event. I must've been around ten years old. Marie is in the photo, too. So are Alice and my mother. The face I'm not expecting to see is my father's. He didn't get to come to school events often. Work took him all over the place. This must've been the last school event he came to before he...

The front door slides open. Marie has her arm around Alice for support.

"How'd it go?" I ask, unable to take my eyes off the photo.

"The doctors get more hopeful every day," Marie says.

She installs Alice in her favorite chair in the office. It looks out onto the rolling hills and the mountains beyond. Alice will probably fall asleep within a few minutes.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" Marie asks when she enters the room. Then she lets out a soft gasp. "I'm so sorry, Luke. I forgot we even had that photo. Do you want me to put it away?"

"No," I say slowly. "Mom doesn't keep any photos of dad in the house. It upsets her too much. She wouldn't even let me keep them."

"I know," Marie says softly. Her hand comes to rest on my shoulder. Her touch sends soothing waves of calm through me. She's always been able to do that. I don't know

how. “Are you okay?”

“Sometimes, I forget how screwed up it was, you know?” I shrug. “Then I feel horrible for forgetting.”

“You haven’t forgotten. You’ve just healed.” Marie takes my hand and makes me sit down on the couch.

I don’t think about my dad enough, but when I do think about him, I get so angry I want to hurt someone. Marie used to help me keep my temper under control. She’s the only one who knows how much my dad’s death messed me up.

When I was ten, he picked me up from school one day. We had to stop and get gas on the way home. While he was filling the tank, a nervous kid that couldn’t have been more than seventeen, held my dad at knifepoint. Now that I know more about this sort of thing, he was obviously having intense withdrawals, probably from meth.

When my dad refused to give him anything, the guy got mad. I don’t think he realized he stabbed my dad until he fell to the floor. The junkie took off. I used my dad’s cell to call 911 but by the time the ambulance arrived, he was gone.

“I don’t think I have,” I say. I stand up. I can’t sit still. I need to walk. I need to run. I need to do something.

When I was offered a position with the rangers, I thought that was my chance to catch the guy. A lack of witness reports and the spotty memory of my traumatized ten-year-old brain wasn’t enough to go on. I’ve never found so much as a lead. I doubt I ever will.

“The oven is pre-heated. The chicken is all ready to go. I don’t think I can stay tonight.”

I make my way to the door, but Marie catches my hand.

“If you need a landing spot, I’m here.”

Landing spot was one of our little code words. It’s our way of saying we’re here for each other.

“You are?”

She smiles, nods, and gives my hand a squeeze.

I believe her.

Chapter Seven

Marie

It’s been a few days since Luke found the photo of his dad. I miss having him around. My mom tells me I don’t make smoothies as well as he does, which is completely true.

He gets like this every so often. There was a time where one day finding the monster who killed his father was the only thing that got him up in the morning. Sometimes, we talked on the phone all night because he couldn’t stand the idea of sleeping. He felt like he was wrong to sleep when that guy was still out there. I had no idea it still bothered him this much.

The fourth morning without Luke, I finish making my mother her breakfast smoothie and make my way into her room to give it to her. She’s exhausted all the time, now. She usually only leaves her bed for a few hours in the late afternoon.

It's worrying. She's losing weight. Despite all of that, her doctors in Denver say she's doing well. I just can't wait until it's over.

"Mom?" I knock on the door. No answer. She's probably asleep.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:05 am

I open the door a crack, just to make sure. She's not in her bed. I let the door swing open. Her room is empty. The door to her bathroom is closed. I knock on that door but there's no answer. I hear running water inside.

Panicking, I place the smoothie on the nightstand. I don't set it down correctly and it topples over. The cream carpet turns purple as blended blueberry splatters everywhere, but I don't care.

"Mom!" I shout. No answer.

Thankfully, the door isn't locked. I open it slowly, terrified of hitting her by accident. Inside the bathroom, the tub is just about to spill over. The faucet is on full blast, sending wisps of thick steam up into the room.

My mother is on the floor in her nightgown. Her eyes are closed. She's not moving.

I sprint to the kitchen where I left my phone and dial 911 with trembling hands. I don't actually remember speaking to the dispatcher. My brain shuts off. Adrenaline and pure panic take over. My mouth does what it needs to do.

"An ambulance will arrive shortly, ma'am," the dispatcher says. I snap back into my body.

"Thank you." I hang up and call Luke.

"What's up?" He answers. I start crying the second I hear his voice.

“Mom is unconscious. An ambulance is coming. I don’t know what to do,” I sputter through sobs.

“I’m on my way,” he says. “Try to stay calm. I’ll be there in ten minutes. The ambulance will probably get there before me. Call me back if you start to freak out.”

“I’m freaking out right now!” I cry. “Please, stay on the phone with me until the ambulance gets here.”

“Of course,” he says gently. “Want me to distract you?”

I make my way back into my mom’s bathroom and sit beside her. I’m scared to touch her but I want to feel for a pulse. I can’t believe I didn’t check to see if she was breathing before I called the ambulance.

The steady, but shallow, rise and fall of her chest is the best thing in the world. Through the phone, I hear Luke’s heavy breathing. I realize he’s running from wherever he is to get to me. A fresh wave of tears sweeps through me.

At some point, adrenaline pulls me out of my body once more. I know Luke is speaking, but I can’t focus on his words. The only thing I can truly focus on is my mom’s breathing. Whenever her breath stalls, I feel like my heart is going to give out with hers. When I hear the sirens, I drop back into myself.

“The ambulance is here.”

“So am I.” Luke stands in the bathroom doorway.

I’m on my feet in an instant. Luke wraps me in his strong, sturdy arms and crushes me against his chest. He moves me away from the bathroom and out of the way of the EMTs. Luke answers every question about my mother’s health. He even tells them

the names of her doctors in Denver.

“We’re going to take her to the Rose Haven hospital,” an EMT tells Luke. “We can’t wait the two hours it would take to get her to Denver.”

“Okay,” Luke nods. “We’ll follow you.”

I should be answering the questions and working out the logistics, but my brain is a blank slate of fuzzy static. The only thing I can focus on is the steady beating of Luke’s heart beneath the fabric of his shirt.

“Come on,” he urges gently. “They’re going to take your mom. We’ll meet her at the hospital and go from there, okay?”

I nod numbly and let him lead me to my car.

Chapter Eight

Luke

It’s after midnight when I bring Marie back home. She’s exhausted and emotionally drained.

Alice’s cancer took an aggressive turn, seemingly out of nowhere. The doctors at Rose Haven General stabilized her but her specialist doctors from Denver have to come down tomorrow to check her out.

Everyone’s worried, but no one has said anything truly terrifying like prepare yourself.

“Let’s get you into bed,” I say. “Do you want to shower?”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:05 am

“I don’t want to sleep,” Marie waves me off.

“You should get some rest,” I urge. “You’ve had a long day. You’ve barely eaten.”

“If I lay down in the dark and try to sleep, I will completely freak out. What you saw earlier was a partial freak-out, albeit a major one. Do you want me to go full freak out?”

“No,” I laugh dryly. “I don’t. How about a movie then?”

“Sure.” She nods shakily. “I can do a movie. And a shower, now that you mention it. The hospital smell is making me want to-”

“Freak out?” I finish.

Marie sticks her tongue out and moves off to her room. I make myself comfortable and put on a movie I know she’ll like. I keep it paused at the start until she gets out of the shower. When she does, she’s wearing an oversized sweater and fuzzy pajama pants.

“That’s the same outfit you used to wear during finals week,” I point out.

“It’s my mental breakdown outfit. Tried and true.”

Her damp hair looks shiny and tousled. Her eyes are rimmed in red. She settles into a comfortable position on the couch beside me.

I play the movie.

Within ten minutes, her head rests on my shoulder as she drifts off. I do everything I can not to move. Once the movie is over, that becomes more challenging. One of my hands is asleep and my knees are feeling stiff from staying bent for so long. Slyly, I try to shift into a more comfortable position.

Marie's head shoots up.

"Hmm?" She mumbles, her hair still damp and stuck to her face. I gently pull the strands away.

"The movie's over," I say.

"Oh," she mumbles. "Can we watch another?"

She looks up at me, eyes shining. I want to say yes but the word hitches in my throat. I can't breathe with her looking at me that way.

Her gaze darts to my lips. It's then I notice that her lips, full and plump, are parted just slightly. I've never seen such perfect lips in all my life.

I've always thought Marie to be beautiful, but she looks unreal to me now. My hand slides along her arm then around her back. Her body seems highly attuned to my touch. She lets out the softest of sighs.

My cock twitches in my jeans.

When she gently bites her bottom lip, I'm undone. I dip my head and press my lips against hers. She kisses me back with passion and force greater than I was expecting. I wind my fingers into her hair and hold her mouth against mine.

My cock is rock hard now and starting to ache. I want her so badly but I also don't want to push her. It doesn't help that none of my blood is in my brain right now and I'm so turned on I can barely form a proper thought.

She wraps her arms around me, pressing her chest against mine. Even through the thick sweater, I feel the perfect shape of her generous breasts. My brain is no longer in control as I slip my hands beneath the hem of her sweater. She's not wearing a shirt or a bra beneath the sweater. She sighs against my mouth when my fingertips brush the bottom of her breasts.

I seek out the hard little nubs of her nipples and stroke them. She gasps as a shudder passes through her body. Urged by her reaction, I lift the hem of her sweater, completely exposing her breasts. I dip my head to swirl my tongue around the closeted nipple.

She winds one hand through my hair and holds me close to her. The other trails down my chest until it comes to rest on the solid bulge in my jeans. Without a word, she unbuttons my jeans and frees my cock.

I let out a sigh of relief which quickly turns into a guttural, almost primal, groan as she wraps her hand around my cock and starts to stroke it.

I can't take it anymore. I have to be inside her. I'll go insane if I go another moment without claiming her in the way I've fantasized about so many times.

A tiny voice in my head gives me pause. What if this ruins our friendship forever? Another stroke of her hand on my cock and the thought flies from my head. My hands release her breasts so that I can yank down her pajama pants. She lays back on the couch and wiggles out of her sweater. She lies there, naked except for the simple black panties she wears.

I want to tear them off with my teeth.

She watches me with eyes full of wanting as I strip out of my clothing. I crawl up the couch, covering her body with mine. I run my hands over every single perfect curve, stopping to pay extra attention to her breasts. I kiss my way up her neck to her mouth as my cock seeks out her entrance.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:05 am

I rub my throbbing head against her slit for a moment before pushing between her slick folds and plunging into her warm, wet depths.

She gasps beneath me as she rakes her nails down my back. The slight stinging sensation brings far more pleasure than pain.

After allowing her a moment to adjust to my considerable length and girth, I slowly start pumping in and out of her. She rocks up to meet me with every thrust, urging me to go faster. She locks her legs around my waist, allowing me to slide deeper inside of her.

“I’ve wanted to do this for so long,” I groan against her lips.

“Really?” She sounds surprised, though it’s hard to tell between her little gasps of pleasure.

“You have no idea.” I slow down for a moment, just so I can savor the sensations gripping my cock. I’m nearing my climax but I refuse to finish until I’ve made Marie’s entire body shudder and her toes curl.

I reach between us so I can stroke her while I slide in and out.

Her breathy moans involve into cries of pleasure as she grips the pillows and arches into me. Her legs tremble as she tightens around my cock, effectively bringing me to my climax while she hits hers.

I’ve never experienced anything as incredible as this. I want to do this all day, every

day for the rest of my life.

Marie lets out a final sigh and unclenches her muscles.

I slide out of her and get to my feet. By the time I've retrieved my underwear and a blanket for Marie, she's sound asleep.

A small part of me is disappointed. I was hoping to go again. I will never be able to get enough of her.

The rest of me is relieved. She needs her sleep. Tomorrow is going to be another long day.

I drape the blanket over her naked body and press a kiss onto her forehead. The couch is small. There isn't enough room for both of us. I don't want to risk waking her up by moving her so I decide to leave her be. I settle myself into the armchair near the bookshelf. I fall asleep watching her.

Chapter Nine

Marie

I'm on cloud nine when I walk into the hospital. I feel guilty for being so happy when so many around me are in pain and suffering.

My mother is awake but on painkillers. Her doctors from Denver checked her out earlier this morning. Her condition isn't ideal, but it's not nearly as bad as it could be, so they're still optimistic about her overall recovery. Her treatment program will have to be either extended or intensified. They need a day or so to work out the best course. I imagine they have to run tests.

Doc at Rose Haven General tells me she'll probably be here for two or three more days. Thank goodness she's drugged up. She'd throw a fit if she knew she couldn't leave.

"You're not liking these magazines, are you?" I laugh and put down the glossy gossip rag I picked up from the gas station on the way here. Not the gas station where Luke's father died. I'll never go to that gas station. I'm just grateful that a town as small as Rose Haven has more than one station.

In response to my question, my mother shakes her head. She might not be with it enough to understand what she's indicating, but I'll take any excuse to stop reading the magazine. I should bring some of her books next time.

If she were more with it, she'd say the magazine is nothing but consumerist propaganda urging me to buy things I don't need and hate my body. She's not wrong.

"Okay, how about a story? You're too high to remember this so I can tell you without emotionally damaging both of us for life, right?" I'm only half-joking. She nods once before her head droops onto her pillow. Incoherent as she may be, she looks relaxed and comfortable. I haven't seen her relaxed and comfortable in some time.

"I left town after graduation for a really stupid reason," I say. "So stupid that I didn't even tell you. I'm sorry I didn't. It might have made things easier for all of us."

My mother blinks. Her eyes are glassy and unfocused.

"I've been crazy in love with Luke for years," I laugh. "He was my very first crush. I loved him from the second he told Mary Jane Patterson to screw off when she called me a cow. I thought it would wear off but it never did. I loved him more with each passing year."

The corners of my mother's mouth twitch. I think she's trying to smile.

"Watching him date was terrible. He was gorgeous, athletic, and popular. Obviously, all of the pretty, popular girls wanted to be with him. The worst was Emmaline Kay Hudson. Do you remember her?"

My mother shakes her head faintly.

"She's not worth remembering. She used to put ham in my locker." I roll my eyes. "Anyway, she was Luke's girlfriend in senior year. After we walked and did the cap toss, I heard her telling her friends that she thought she was pregnant with Luke's baby. She was so convinced they were going to get married. I was convinced, too."

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:05 am

My mother furrows her brow. Maybe she's more aware than I originally thought. Oh, well. I can't stop now. I don't want to. I've held this inside for years. It needs to come out. If I can tell my mother without a hitch, then I can tell Luke. I just need a rehearsal, that's all.

"I couldn't stand the thought of watching Luke get married and raise a family with Emmaline. I knew he would do it because it's the right thing to do. I also knew that he'd be miserable if he knew he was causing me pain. I did the only thing I could do, for all of our sakes. I removed myself from the equation."

My mother nods faintly.

"It was stupid and selfish, but I've loved him so much for so long. I didn't think my heart could take it. I never thought he'd love me that way, ever. Then, something happened last night. I won't go into details but it was amazing. I've never felt so great."

My mother narrows her eyes just slightly.

"I'm sorry to feel so great when you're so miserable," I say as if I can read her mind. "If it makes you feel better, I had an anxiety attack that lasted twelve hours."

Laughter twinkles in her eyes as her gaze slides behind me. I look over my shoulder expecting a doctor, but instead, Luke stands in the doorway.

"Oh!" I leap to my feet, sending the magazine onto the floor. "Hi. Um, how long have you been there?"

“I came in at ‘she used to put ham in my locker’,” he smiles.

“Ah.” My face heats up before I can control it. “And you heard the rest?”

“All the rest.” His smile grows bigger. “I now feel like the biggest idiot on the planet.”

My stomach flutters in a way that feels more like a knife. “You do?”

“I’ve been in love with you for years and I was too stupid to see that you loved me too.”

At first, I think I’ve hallucinated his words. Then, he closes the distance between us and wraps me in his arms.

“Is there any chance you still love me, even though I’ve been an oblivious moron?”
He asks.

“A chance?” I nearly choke on my words. “Of course, there’s a chance. I’ve loved you for over a decade. I’m going to keep loving you through all of the decades to come.”

When he kisses me, I feel like I’m going to dissolve into a cloud of sparkles and flower petals.

“You know,” he murmurs when we break apart, “that means you can’t run off to New Orleans for another six years, right?”

“I’m only going to run off if I can run off with you.”

Epilogue

Marie

“I can’t believe you’re going to live in a box,” my mother huffs.

“It’s not a box,” I laugh. “It’s a very nice three-bedroom home.”

“Three-bedroom box,” she corrects as she looks around the vast empty space that will soon become my living room. “Why don’t you and Luke buy that abandoned brewery? It’s small, but the space is so unique.”

“You’re insane,” I say. “We can’t raise our future children in a renovated brewery.”

“I raised you in a renovated bakery,” she points out.

In the past six months, she’s made incredible strides. She officially had her last round of chemo last month and her hair has started to grow back. Her doctors are confident the cancer is gone for good.

“My bathroom only had three walls,” I retort. “Don’t worry if this place doesn’t have character right now. Luke and I are going to add character, personality, and memories.”

“You better or else we’re having Christmas at my house until the end of time.”

“I already assumed we’d do Christmas at yours,” I say.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 3:05 am

“Well?” Luke asks as he strides into the empty space. “What do you think, Alice?”

“I think you’re going to have to breathe some life into it,” she says. A smile appears in one corner of her mouth. “I think you two will be able to pull it off.”

“High praise,” Luke laughs. “Are you sure you don’t want to move in with us? We have three bedrooms now.”

“I’m not an invalid just yet,” my mother winks. “When I am, this is the first place I’ll come.”

“Noted. Our boys will have to be content with sharing the second bedroom,” Luke nods.

“Our boys?” I raise my brow. “I think our girls will fight over closet space.”

“What if you have a boy and a girl?” My mother asks.

“Then we’ll build you a She Shed in the backyard,” Luke grins.

“This man has thought of everything,” she laughs. “Your eventual children are going to grow up in a fairytale.”

I’m not pregnant. At least, not yet. Luke and I agreed that while we could get engaged and married within the month, we want to date. We want to have the experiences we should have had in high school.

Marriage and children are in the future. We talk about it as easily as we talk about what to make for dinner or watch on TV.

As eager as I am to embark on that part of my life's journey with him, I also want to savor every moment.

No more stolen fantasies. No more looking in from the outside. No more wishing. It's all become my reality.

When we first started walking out and about together, people looked at us strangely. At first, my old fears resurfaced. I worried everyone would think I wasn't the sort of girl he should be with. Then, I simply stopped caring. I'm too damn happy to let my fear stop me from having what I want.

"I'm going to head home. It's nearly time to take my meds."

I give my mother a hug goodbye. Luke walks her to her car.

When we're all alone, he takes me in his arms, and kisses me hard enough to make me forget my name.

"This is a nice, spacious house," he says.

"It is," I agree, pulling him in for another kiss.

"There are a lot of rooms," he says.

"Indeed."

"We better get started now if we're going to christen all of them before the furniture arrives."

I giggle against his mouth. “Let’s start right here.”

To be continued...