



Mistletoe Cowboy

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Category: Romance, Western

Description: In this heartwarming story of holiday romance, one cowboy is ready for love—whether he knows it yet or not . . . Horse whisperer Parker doesn't drink, smoke, or gamble, and he doesn't have much to do with women, either. But that may change when a runaway Palomino leads him to his small Colorado town's new schoolteacher. Widowed Katy, and her sweet daughter, are new in Benton. But while the little girl can't even ride yet, Katy's not new to horses or ranching. It seems she and Parker have a few things in common—including hearts in need of healing. With Christmas around the corner, could kisses under the mistletoe bring the handsome wrangler the gift of his very own family?

*Previously published in the anthology *Christmas Kisses with My Cowboy*

Total Pages (Source): 61

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Chapter One

He had a first name, but they all called him by his last name: Parker. He was part Crow. In fact, he had an aunt and uncle who still lived on the reservation. His parents had divorced when he was young. His mother was long dead, even before he went overseas in the military. He didn't know, or care, where his father was.

He worked on a huge ranch owned by J.L. Denton, near Benton, Colorado. He was the world's best horse wrangler, to hear J.L. tell it. Of course, J.L. had been known to exaggerate.

It was autumn and the last lot of yearlings had gone to market. The bulls were in winter pasture. The cows were in pastures close to the ranch so that they could be taken care of when snow started falling. That would be pretty soon, in the Colorado mountains, because it was late October, almost Halloween.

All the hands had to do checks on the cattle at least two or three times a day; more on the pregnant cows, especially on the pregnant heifers, the first-time mothers. Calves dropped in April. The pregnant cows and heifers had been bred the last of July for an April birthing date, and there were a lot of pregnant female cattle on the ranch.

Calves were the soul of the operation. J.L. ran purebred Black Angus, and he made good money when he sold off the calf crop every year. Not that he needed money so much. He was a multimillionaire, mostly from gas and oil and mining. The ranch was just cream on top of his other investments. He loved cattle. So did his new wife, who wrote for a famous sword and sorcery television series called *Warriors* and *Warlocks* that even Parker watched on pay-per-view. It was fun trying to wheedle

details out of the new Mrs. Denton. However, even though she was a kind, sweet woman, she never gave away a single bit of information about the series. Never.

Parker lived in a line cabin away from the ranch house, where he broke horses for J.L. for the remuda, the string of horses each cowboy had to keep for ranch work. Horses tired, so they had to be switched often on a working ranch, especially during high-stress periods. He was good with all sorts of livestock, but he loved horses. He was blessed in the sense that horses also loved him, even outlaw horses. He'd had the touch since he was in grammar school on the Crow reservation up at Crow Agency, near the Little Bighorn Battleground at Hardin, Montana. His mother had encouraged him, emphasizing that sensitivity wasn't a bad thing in a man. His father said just the opposite.

Parker remembered his father with anger. He'd married Parker's mother, Gray Dove, in a moment of weakness, or so he'd said. But he had no plans to live on a reservation with her. So she went with him to his job in California until their son, Parker, was born. She and the child seemed to be an ongoing embarrassment to Chadwick Parker. He never stopped chiding his wife about her stupid ceremonies and superstitions. Finally, when Parker was six, she gave up and went back to Montana. It would have been nice if Parker's father had missed her and wanted her back. He didn't. He filed for divorce. Parker had never heard from him again. He doubted if the man even knew who he was. But it didn't matter. One of Gray Dove's brothers had taken him in when she died prematurely of pneumonia. He was part of a family, then, but still an outsider, even so. He fell in with a local gang in his teens and barely escaped prison by going into the military. Once there, he enjoyed the routine and found himself blessed with the same intelligence his absent father had. He was a mathematical genius. He aced any math courses he took, even trig and calculus and Boolean algebra.

Those skills after he graduated, with a degree in physics, served him well with government work. He didn't advertise the degree around Benton. It suited him to

have people think he was simply a horse wrangler.

Parker had found work on J.L. Denton's ranch fresh out of the army, through an army buddy who'd been with him overseas in the Middle East. He had a knack for breaking horses without using anything except soft words and gentle hands. Word got around about how good he was at it, that he could do the job in a minimum of time and without injuring the animal in any way. He got job offers all the time, but he admired J.L. and had no plans to leave him.

He had a first cousin, Robert, in the home he'd been given after his mother's death. He kept a careful eye on the boy and made sure he had enough money for school and athletics on the rez. Robert graduated from high school and also went into the military. He was now a petty officer aboard a navy ship somewhere in the Atlantic. He wrote home, but not often. Parker often got the feeling that his cousin was ashamed of his poverty-stricken beginnings and didn't advertise them to people. It broke his parents' hearts that the boy didn't come to visit when he was on shore leave. But they adapted. People did, when they had to.

Money was never a worry for Parker. He had more than enough these days, now that his cousin had become self-supporting. He did send money to his cousin's parents. His aunt and uncle had been kind to him, and they'd had his cousin late in life. They weren't old, but they were middle-aged and Robert's father was disabled. Parker helped out.

Parker didn't drink, smoke, or gamble and he didn't have much to do with women these days. So money wasn't a problem. Not anymore.

He did like the occasional cigar. It wouldn't appear obvious to an outsider, but Parker had a mind like a supercomputer. He could break any code, hack his way into any high-level computer that he liked, and get out without detection. It was a very valuable skill. His degree in astrophysics didn't hurt, either, but it was his math skills

that set him apart in intelligence work. So from time to time, men in suits riding in black sedans pulled up at the cabin and tried to coax him out of Colorado.

Finally, he'd accepted an assignment, for a whole summer. The amount they paid him had raised his eyebrows almost to his hairline. Even after paying taxes, the cash left over was more than enough to invest in stocks and bonds and make him a tidy nest egg for the future.

That one summer led to other summers, and top secret clearance, so that now he could have afforded to retire to some nice island and laze in the sun and drink piña coladas for the rest of his life. But he didn't like liquor and he wasn't partial to beaches. So he gentled horses and waited for the next black sedan to show up. There was never a lack of them.

He was thirty-two and he longed for a home and a family. But he didn't have many friends left on the rez. Most of the girls he'd gone to school with were long married, with lots of children. His best friend had died of a drug overdose, leaving behind two children and a wife who lived in the same condition that had caused his friend's death. He'd tried to get help for her, but she'd gone out of the rehab center the day after he got her in and she never looked back.

Life on the rez was hard. Really hard. They gave all this aid to foreign countries, spent all this money, making horrible weapons that could never be used in a civilized world, while little kids grew up in hopeless poverty and died too young. The big problem with the rez was the lack of job opportunities. What a pity that those entrepreneurs didn't set up low-impact manufacturing plants on the rez, to make jobs for people who faced driving hours to even find one. They could have offered jobs making exclusive clothing or unique dolls; they could have made jobs creating prefab houses and easily-set-up outbuildings; they could have opened a business that would make sails for boats, or wind chimes, or furniture. There must be a thousand things that people could manufacture on the reservation if someone would just create the

means. Craftsmanship was so rare that it was worth diamonds in the modern world. It was almost impossible to find anything made by hand, except for quilts and handcrafted items. Well, there were those beautiful things that the Amish made, he amended. He had Amish-built furniture in his cabin, provided by a small community of them nearby, from whom he also bought fresh butter and cheese and milk. Now there, he thought, was a true pioneering spirit. If the lights ever went out for good, the Amish wouldn't have to struggle to survive.

* * *

Parker had been running one of J.L.'s new fillies through her paces while he pondered the problems of the world, and was just putting her up, when he heard fast hoofbeats and a young, winded voice yelling.

He moved away from the corral at the back of the big line cabin where he lived most of the year and looked out front. A palomino was galloping hell for leather down the trail. A youngster in boots and jeans and a long-sleeved flannel shirt and a floppy ranch hat, obviously chasing the horse, was stopped in the dirt road, bending over as if trying to catch his breath.

He kept his usual foul language to himself, not wanting to unsettle the young boy, who looked frantic enough already.

"Hey," Parker called. "What's going on?"

"My . . . horse!" came a high-pitched wail from the bent-over youngster. She stood up and a wealth of blond hair fell out of her hat. It wasn't a boy after all. She sat down on the ground. She was crying. "She'll make me give him back," she sobbed. "She'll never let me keep him. He knocked over part of the fence. She was calling the vet when he ran away and I was afraid . . . he'd hurt . . . himself!"

“Wait a bit.” He went down on one knee in front of her. “Just breathe,” he said gently. “Come on. Take it easy. Your horse won’t go far. We’ll follow him with a bucket of oats in a minute and he’ll come back.”

She looked up with china blue eyes in a thin face. “Really?” she asked hopefully.

He smiled. “Really.”

She studied him with real interest. She must have been nine or ten, just a kid. Her eyes were on his thick black hair, in a rawhide-tied ponytail at his back, framing a face with black eyes and thick eyebrows and a straight, aristocratic nose. “Are you Indian . . . I mean, Native American?” she asked, fascinated.

He chuckled. “Half of me is Crow. The rest is Scots.”

“Oh.”

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“I’m Parker. Who are you?”

“I’m Teddie. Teddie Blake. My mom lives over that way. We moved here about four months ago.” She made a face. “I don’t know anybody. It’s a new school and I don’t get along well with most people.”

“Me, neither,” he confessed.

Her eyes lit up. “Really?”

He chuckled. “Really. It’s not so bad, the town of Benton. I’ve lived here for a while. You’ll love it, once you get used to it. The palomino’s yours?” he added, nodding toward where the horse had run.

“Yes. He was a rescue. We live on a small ranch. It was my grandmother’s. She left it to my dad when she died. That was six months ago, just before he . . .” She made a face. “Mom’s a teacher. She just started at Benton Elementary School. I’m in fifth grade there. The ranch has a barn and a fenced lot, and they were going to kill him. The palomino. He hurt his owner real bad. The vet was out at our place to doctor Mom’s horse and he told us. I begged Mom to let me have him. He won’t like it,” she added with a sour face.

“He?”

“Mom’s would-be boyfriend from back East,” she said miserably. “He works for a law firm in Washington, D.C. He wears suits and goes to the gym and hates meat.”

“Oh.” He didn’t say anything more.

She glanced at his stony face and didn’t see any reaction at all. He’d long since learned to hide his feelings.

“Anyway, he says he’s going to come out and visit next month. Unless maybe he gets lost in a blizzard or captured by Martians or something.”

He chuckled. “Don’t sound so hopeful. He might be nice.”

“He’s nice when Mom’s around,” she muttered.

His face hardened. “Is he, now?”

She saw the expression. He wasn’t hiding it. “Oh, no, he doesn’t . . . well, he’s just mean, that’s all. He doesn’t like me. He says it’s a shame that Mom has me, because he doesn’t want to raise someone else’s child.”

“Are your parents divorced?”

She shook her head. “My daddy’s dead. He was in the army. A bomb exploded overseas and he was killed. He was a doctor,” she added, fighting tears.

“How long ago?” he asked, and his voice softened.

“Six months. It’s why Mom wanted to move here, to get away from the memories. My grandmother left us the ranch. She was from here. That lawyer helped Mom get Daddy’s affairs straight and he’s really sweet on her. I don’t think she likes him that much. He wanted to take her out and she wouldn’t go. He’s just per . . . per . . .”

“Persistent?”

She nodded. "That."

"Well, we all have our problems," he returned.

There was a sound of hoofbeats. They turned and there was the palomino, galloping back toward them.

"Wait here a sec. Don't go toward him," he added. "It's a him?"

"It's a him."

"Be right back."

He went to the stable and got a sack of oats. The palomino was standing in the road, and the girl, Teddie, was right where he'd left her. Good girl, he thought, she wasn't headstrong and she could follow orders.

"Look here, old fellow," Parker said, standing beside the dirt road. He rattled the feed bag.

The palomino shook his head, raised his ears, and hesitated. But after a minute, he trotted right to Parker.

"Pretty old creature," Parker said gently. He didn't look the horse in the eyes, which might have seemed threatening to the animal. He held a hand, very slowly, to the horse's nostrils. The horse sniffed and moved closer, rubbing his head against Parker's. "Have some oats."

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“Gosh, I couldn’t get near him!” Teddie said, impressed.

He chuckled. “I break horses for J.L. Denton. He owns the ranch,” he added, indicating the sweep of land to the mountains with his head.

Parker smoothed the horse’s muzzle. “Let’s see.” He eased back the horse’s lip and nodded. “About fifteen, unless I miss my guess.”

“Fifteen?” she asked.

“Years old,” he said.

“I thought he was only a year or so!”

He shook his head. He hung the feed bag over the horse’s head and smoothed his hand alongside him, all the way to the back.

“You know about horses?” he asked Teddie.

She shook her head. “I’m trying to learn. Mom knows a lot, but she doesn’t have time. There are these YouTube videos. . . .”

“You never walk behind a horse unless you let him know you’re going to be there,” he explained as he smoothed his way down the horse’s flank to his tail. “Horses have eyes set on the sides of their heads. They’re prey animals, not predators. Their first instinct is always going to be flight. As such, they’re touchy and sensitive to sound and movement. They can see almost all the way around them, except to their

hindquarters. So you have to be careful. You can get kicked if you don't pay attention."

"Nobody said that on the video I watched," she confessed.

"You need some books," he said. "And some DVDs."

She sighed. "Mom said I didn't know what I was doing. He was such a pretty horse and I didn't want them to put him down. They arrested his owner."

Parker just nodded. He was seeing some damage on the horse's back, some deep scars. There was a cut that hadn't healed near his tail, and two or three that had on his legs. "Somebody's abused this horse," he said coldly. "Badly. He's got scars."

"They said the man took a whip to him." She grimaced. "They told me not to touch him on his front leg, but I was trying to look at his hoof and I forgot."

"His hoof?"

"He was favoring that one." She pointed to it.

He patted the horse's shoulder, bent, and pulled up the horse's hoof. He grimaced. "Good God!"

She looked, too, but she didn't see anything. "What is it?"

"His hooves are in really bad shape. Has a vet seen him?"

"I don't know. The animal control man brought him to the ranch for us. Mom was calling to get the vet, even before he knocked part of the fence down and ran away. She's going to be really mad."

Parker noted that the horse had no saddle on. “You didn’t try to ride him bareback, did you?” he asked.

She grimaced. “Mister, I don’t even know how to put a saddle on him. I sure can’t ride him. I’ve never ridden a horse.”

His black eyes widened. “You don’t know how to ride?”

“Well, Mom does,” she said hesitantly. “She grew up on a ranch in Montana. That’s where she met my daddy. She can ride most anything, but she’s been on the phone all day trying to get the movers to find a missing box. They think it went back East somewhere, but they haven’t done much about finding it. It had a lot of Daddy’s things. Mom’s furious.”

He shook his head. “That’s tough.”

“She said we’ll . . . uh-oh,” she added as a small SUV came down the road, pulled in very slowly next to the man and the child and the horse, and stopped.

“Who’s that?” Parker asked.

“Mom,” Teddie said, grimacing.

A blond woman wearing jeans and a black T-shirt got out of the SUV. “So there you are,” she said in an exasperated tone.

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“Sorry, Mom,” Teddie said, wincing. “Bartholomew ran away and I ran after him. . .”

“Bartholomew?” Parker asked.

“Well, he needed a fancy name. He’s so pretty. Handsome.” Teddie cleared her throat. “He did.”

“He broke through a fence. I was on the phone trying to find a vet who’ll come out and look at him, and when I went out to tell you what I found out, the horse was gone and so were you!”

“I was afraid he’d run in the road and get hurt,” Teddie said defensively.

China blue eyes looked up at Parker. “Oats, huh?” she asked as she saw the feed bag over the horse’s muzzle.

He nodded. “Quickest way to catch a runaway horse, if he has a sense of smell,” he added with a faint smile.

“She’s Katy,” Teddie introduced. “I don’t remember who you are,” she added with a shy smile at the tall man with the long black ponytail.

“Parker,” he said. He didn’t offer any more information, and he reached out to shake hands.

“You work for Mr. Denton, don’t you?” Katy asked, and her expression told him that

she'd heard other things about him as well.

"I do. I'm his horse wrangler."

She drew in a long breath. "Teddie, you never leave the house without telling me where you're going."

"Sorry, Mom."

"And obviously the horse doesn't need a vet immediately, or he wouldn't have gotten this far!"

"You know about horses, do you?" Parker asked her.

She nodded.

"Come here." He smoothed down the horse's leg and pulled up the hoof. "Have a look."

"Dear God," she whispered reverently.

"If they lock his owner up forever, it won't be long enough," he added, putting the hoof back down. "There are deep cuts on his hindquarters, and on one of his legs as well. One needs stitches. I imagine an antibiotic would prevent complications from the hooves as well, if you got Doc Carr on the phone."

She made a face. "He's on another large-animal call. I left my cell phone number for him."

"Your daughter knows very little about horses," he began. "An animal that's been abused is dangerous even for an experienced equestrian."

“I know. But she was so upset,” came the soft reply. “She’s lost so much. . . .”

“She can learn how to take care of him,” Parker interrupted, because he understood without being told.

“Yes, and I can teach her. But it’s going to take time. I’m in a new teaching job. I’m not used to grammar school children. I taught at college level. . . .”

“We have a community college,” he pointed out.

She gave him a long-suffering look. “Yes, I’m on the waiting list for an opening, but I couldn’t wait. There are bills.”

“I know about bills.”

“So I got the only job available.”

“You aren’t from here,” he said.

She nodded. “My husband’s mother was from here. She was a Cowling, from the Dean River area.”

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“I know some Cowlings. Good people.”

“She and my husband’s father had a ranch in Montana where they were living when my husband was born. After her husband died, she came back here to live, on the family’s ranch. She ran it herself until her death early this year. She left my husband the ranch. He was going to sell it, but he was . . . he . . . anyway. It took us some time to get moved here.”

“It’s a good place to raise a child,” he said, and he smiled gently at Teddie.

“She’s going on thirty,” Katy said, tongue-in-cheek, as she glanced at her daughter.

He chuckled. “Some mature faster than others.”

“We need to get Bartholomew home,” Katy said, and she was staring at the horse as if she wondered how exactly they were going to do that.

“Give me a second to get Wings and I’ll be right back.” He didn’t explain. He just went around the side of the house.

“Honestly, Teddie,” Katy began, exasperated.

“I’m sorry. Really. But he ran away!”

“I know. But still . . .”

“Next time, I’ll come get you first. I will.” Her eyes pleaded with her mother’s.

Katy gave in with a sigh. “All right. But don’t let it happen again.”

“I won’t. Poor old horse,” she added, looking at the palomino. “Mr. Parker said that he’s been abused.”

“He seems to know a lot about horses,” Katy agreed, just as Parker came around the house leading a white mare.

“What a beauty,” Katy exclaimed involuntarily.

“Wings,” he said. “She’s mine. Two years old and my best girl,” he added with a smile.

The horse had a halter and bridle, but no saddle.

Before they could ask what he meant to do, Parker took the oats gently away from the palomino and put them beside the road. He caught the horse’s bridle, led it to the mare, and vaulted onto the filly’s back as if he had wings himself.

“Okay,” he said. “Lead on.”

They laughed. He made something complicated so simple. Teddie and Katy piled into their vehicle and led the way home, with Parker bringing up the rear riding one horse and leading the other. Both went with him as easily as lambs following a shepherd.

* * *

The house was in bad shape, he noticed as he stopped at the front porch and tied Wings’s bridle to it. He patted her gently.

“Just stay right there, sweetheart. Won’t be a minute,” he said in a soft, deep tone,

running his fingers along her neck. She looked at him and whinnied.

He went to get the palomino's bridle and led him, along with the woman and the girl, to the ramshackle barn.

He made a face when he saw it, along with the broken fence where the animal had broken through.

"I know. We're living in absolutely primitive conditions." Katy laughed. "But at least Teddie and I have each other, if we have nothing else." She said it with affection, but she didn't touch her daughter.

"Yes, we do," Teddie told her mother. "Thanks for not yelling."

"You never teach a child anything by yelling," Katy said softly. "Or by hitting."

Parker glanced at her and saw things she didn't realize. He put the palomino in a stall in the stable and closed the gate.

"We have to lock it," Katy said. She drew a chain around the metal gate and hitched it to the post with a metal lock. "He's an escape artist," she added. "Which is how he happened to be hightailing it past your place. I guess he learned to run away when his owner started brutalizing him with that whip."

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“I’d love to have five minutes with that gentleman, and the whip,” Parker murmured as he looked around the barn. “This place is in bad shape,” he remarked.

“One step at a time,” she said with quiet dignity.

He turned and looked down at her and smiled. He almost never smiled, but she made him feel like he had as a boy when he got his first horse, when he dived into deep water for the first time, when he tracked his first deer. It was a feeling of extreme exhilaration that lifted him out of his routine. And shocked him.

She laughed. “It’s what my mother always said,” she explained. “Especially when Dad got sick and had to go to the hospital. He had a bad heart. She knew it when they married. He had two open-heart surgeries to put in an artificial valve, and he had a host of other health problems,” she added, not mentioning the worst of those, alcoholism. “They’d been married for twenty-five years when he died in a car crash. She said she got through life by living just for the day she was in, never looking ahead. It’s not a bad philosophy.”

“Not bad at all,” Teddie agreed.

“Is this his saddle?” Parker asked suddenly, noting the worn but serviceable saddle resting on a nearby gate. The stable was empty except for the palomino, tack on the walls, and some hay in square bales in a corner.

“Yes,” Katy said. “It was my grandfather’s. I’ve had it for years. I brought it with us when we moved. It’s been a lot of places with me, since my teens.” She joined him and ran her hand over the worn, smooth pommel. “Granddaddy competed in

bulldogging for many years with a partner, his first cousin, up in Montana. He was very good. But he lost a thumb to a too-tight rope and ended up keeping books for my husband's father. They lived near Dan's folks in Montana, but they had a relative who owned the ranch here. When Dan's father died, his mother sold the Montana ranch and moved back here, to her family ranch. Dan inherited it." Her expression was wistful. "His grandfather, who founded the ranch, raised some of the finest Red Brangus around," she added. "He was active in the local cattleman's association as well. So was Dan's mother."

"My boss is, too. He and the Mrs. are pregnant with their first child. She writes for Warriors and Warlocks, that hit drama on cable TV."

"Oh, my gosh!" Katy exclaimed. "It's my favorite show! And she actually writes for it?! And lives here?"

"Her husband's got a private jet," he explained with twinkling eyes. "He has the pilot fly her to and from Manhattan for meetings with the other writers and the show's director and producer."

"That must be nice," Katy said.

"Mom won't let me watch that show," Teddie said with a faint pout.

"When you're older," Katy told her.

"You always say that, about everything," the little girl complained.

"Wait until you're grown and you have kids," Katy teased. "You'll understand it a whole lot better."

"This place needs a lot of work," Parker said when they were back outside again.

“Especially that fence, and those steps.” He indicated a board missing in the front ones.

“It really does,” Katy agreed. “We’re trying to take it one thing at a time.”

“Fence first, steps second. Got any tools? How about extra boards for the fence, or at least wire?”

Katy was shocked, but only for a minute. She went inside and came back out with a toolbox. “It was my husband’s, but I have no idea what’s in it,” she apologized.

“No problem. Boards? Wire?”

“I think there’s a bale of wire out in the big shed behind the house,” she returned.

“Yes, that big one there,” Teddie said, indicating a metal building that had seen better days.

“My mother-in-law used it mostly for storage,” Katy explained. “She kept some of the Red Brangus, just the breeding stock, and hired a man to manage it for her. He still works for us. . . .”

“Yes, that would be Jerry Miller,” he said, smiling. “I know him. Honest as the day is long, and a hard worker.”

“He has two full-time cowboys and four part-time ones.” She shook her head. “It takes so many people to work cattle. We’ll have our first sale in the spring. I’m hoping we’ll do well at it. I’ve forgotten most of what I know about ranching. But that’s what we have Jerry for,” she added with a smile. And it was just plain good luck that the last cattle sale had left her with a windfall that took care of all the salaries. Wintering the cows and heifers, and their few bulls, would be expensive, due

to loss of forage from all the flooding in the West and Midwest, but she knew they'd manage somehow. They always did.

“At least we got the plumbing repaired and a new roof put on,” she said, waving her hand to indicate some rough idea of where the work had been done.

“Expensive stuff,” he commented, looking through the toolbox.

“Tell me about it,” she said, tongue-in-cheek.

He took out a hammer. “Nails?” he asked as he got to his feet gracefully.

“Nails. Right.” She looked around the building until her eyes came to a workbench.

“I think he kept them in a coffee can over here.”

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She produced it. There was a supply of assorted nails. He picked out some to do the job. He got wire cutters from the tool kit and proceeded to heft the heavy bale of wire over his shoulder.

“Can I help?” Teddie asked.

He chuckled. “Sure. You can carry the hammer and nails.”

She took them from him and followed along behind him to the pasture that fronted the stable.

“I could find someone to do it. . . .” Katy began.

“Not before the horse went through it again.” He frowned and glanced at them as he put down the wire and pulled out a measuring tape. “Why did he run?” he asked belatedly.

Teddie sighed. “Well, there was this plastic bag that had been on the porch. The wind came up and sent it flying toward the corral. Bartholomew panicked.”

Chapter Two

Parker burst out laughing. “A plastic bag.” He shook his head. “Horses are nervous creatures, to be sure.”

“You said they were prey animals,” Teddie reminded him shyly.

“They are.”

“How do you tell that?” the little girl wanted to know.

“Prey animals have eyes on the sides of their heads, not on the front like humans do,” he replied. He went on to explain about the evolution that produced such a trait.

Katy was watching him curiously.

He gave her a dry look. “Oh, I get it. A horse wrangler shouldn’t know scientific things like that, huh? I minored in biology in college.”

She flushed. “Sorry.”

He shrugged. “We’re all guilty of snap judgments. Don’t sweat it.” He glanced toward the house. “Those steps need fixing as much as this fence does.”

“Know any reliable handymen hereabouts?” Katy asked him.

He chuckled. “Sure. Me. I work cheap. A couple of sandwiches and some good, strong black coffee. It will have to be on a Saturday, though. Boss keeps me pretty busy the rest of the week.”

She flushed. “Oh, I didn’t mean—”

“He doesn’t mind if I help out neighbors,” he interrupted. “He’s a kind man. So is his wife.”

“You said she wrote for Warriors and Warlocks,” she added, glancing at Teddie amusedly. “Teddie loves it. I have to keep her locked in her room when it’s on, though. It’s very grown-up.”

He was grinning from ear to ear. “It is. If you saw the boss’s wife, you wouldn’t believe she was somebody so famous.”

“I still can’t believe we have somebody that famous here in Benton.” She laughed.

“Yeah. Gave us all a start when we found out. Cassie Reed, now Cassie Denton, was working as a waitress in town. Her dad, Lanier Roger Reed, was working at the farm equipment place. None of us knew they were running from a big scandal in New York. Her father was falsely accused of ”—he stopped and glanced at Teddie—“a grown-up thing. Anyway, the woman who accused him is now occupying a comfortable cell in state prison. J.L. married the writer and she came back out here to live. Her dad produces a hit show about a musical group from the seventies.”

“Oh, my goodness, those are about the only two shows I watch on TV.” Katy laughed. “What a coincidence!”

“She’s a good writer. And she’s a sweet person, too. She’s very pregnant, so we all sort of watch out for her. It’s their first child. Due pretty soon, too. J.L. says the baby’s going to be a Christmas present.”

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“Bound to be.”

She glared at him.

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He grinned. “They don’t know. They wanted it to be a surprise. So all the shower gifts they got were yellow.”

“I didn’t want to know, either,” Katy said, smiling at Teddie. “But my husband did. So they told him and he didn’t tell me.”

“A man who could keep a secret. That’s rare.”

“He was a rare man,” she said quietly. The loss was still fresh enough that she had to fight tears. “Okay, about the porch, I’ll need to get lumber. Can you tell me what to get and where to get it?”

“I’ll come back Saturday morning and do some measuring,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“And we could teach young Annie Oakley here how to saddle a horse,” he teased, smiling at Teddie.

“That would be great!” Teddie enthused.

“So I’ll see you both then.”

“Thanks. I’d like to pay you, for fixing the fence. . . .” She stopped at the look on his face. She flushed. “Well, I’m not exactly a charity case and you work for J.L. Denton for wages, right?”

He pursed his lips and stared at her with twinkling eyes. "Sort of."

"Sort of?" she asked.

He smiled. "I work for him except in the summer. I go away to work for other people." He didn't elaborate. "I make a good bit then."

"Oh."

"So I can do a favor for a new friend"—he smiled at Teddie—"and her mom without having to worry about getting paid for it. Okay?"

She smiled. "Okay. Thanks, Parker."

"No sweat." He mounted the horse, turned it gently, and rode away, as much a part of the animal as its tail, using just his legs and the light bridle to control it.

"That's such a beautiful horse," Teddie said with a sigh as she watched the man ride away.

"It is. Wings suits her for a name," Katy agreed. She gave her daughter an irritated look. "But just for the record, if you ever do anything like that again . . ."

"I won't," Teddie promised. She grinned irrepressibly. "But I got us a new friend who knows all about horses," she added. "Right?"

It was impossible for her to stay mad at her daughter. "Right. Anyway, let me go and try to get the vet again. Your new friend Parker was right. The horse needs a lot of work done on him before you can ride him."

"It will cost money," Teddie said. "I'm really sorry. . . ."

“A vet bill won’t break the bank,” her mother said gently. “We have the money that comes from the service, after Dad . . . well, anyway, we have that and we have my salary. We’ll get by.”

“It will be nice to have him healed,” Teddie said. “I didn’t realize he’d need so many things done. I’m really sorry.”

“He’s a beautiful animal and he’s been badly treated,” came the curt reply. “I really hope his owner goes to jail. Nobody should treat a horse like that!”

“That’s true,” Teddie agreed.

“Come on inside. It’s very cool out here.”

* * *

The vet came out and looked at the poor horse, treated his cuts, recommended a farrier for the hooves, and gave Bartholomew an antibiotic injection. He promised to come back the following week and check on him, just to make sure he was healing.

“Going to be a scandal, when that man comes to trial,” the vet, Henry Carr, told Katy. “In all my years as a vet, never saw a horse in such shape. He had two others, but the county animal control people took those away from him. Well, those horses, and about twenty dogs he had in cages for breeding purposes. They took those, too.”

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“Why isn’t he in jail?” she asked angrily.

“Because his people are rich and they protect him,” he said flatly, and with some anger. “If I get called to testify, they’re going to get an earful from me!”

“Good for you,” she said.

“You need to get the farrier out here before those hooves get any worse,” he said.

“I’ll call him today.”

He smiled. “I’m glad you and Teddie decided to come and live here. Benton’s a nice place to raise a child. I raised three, with my late wife. I miss her every day.”

Katy took a breath. “I miss my husband. He was a good man.”

“Life goes on,” he said. “It has to. Have a good day.”

“You, too. And thanks for coming out.”

“No problem.”

She watched him drive off and called the farrier. He agreed to come right out and check the poor horse’s hooves after Katy had described the state they were in.

He cleaned them and replaced the shoes with new nails. “Hell of a condition for a horse to get in,” he said.

“Yes, it is. They’re prosecuting the former owner.”

“I know him. Bad man. Really bad. I hope they’ll get farther than they did with the last case they tried against him.”

“Me, too.” She watched him put in the last nail. “Do you know a man named Parker who works for J.L. Denton?”

“Parker.” He rolled his eyes. “He’s fine as long as he’s not within earshot,” he added on a chuckle. “J.L. has to keep women away from him.”

“Why?” she asked, with some shock.

“His mouth,” he replied. “Nobody cusses like Parker.”

“But he caught Bartholomew—that’s the name of the horse you’re working on—and promised to help my daughter learn how to take care of him.”

“Nobody knows more about horses than Parker,” he agreed. “He likes kids. But he’s hell on women. Tried to date a couple of local girls and when they got a whiff of his language, they ran for the hills.”

“But he never used a bad word,” Katy continued, trying to explain.

The farrier looked at her with total shock. “We talking about the same Parker? Big guy, long black hair, breaks horses for Denton?”

“Well, yes.”

He caught his breath. “That’s one for the books, then.”

Teddie laughed softly. “Well, apparently my daughter has a good effect on him.”

“I would say so.” He finished his work, accepted a check for it, and said his good-byes after giving Katy instructions about keeping the horse in the stable for a few days until the worst of the damage healed. She didn’t mention that the vet had told her the same thing.

“How is he?” Teddie asked when her mother came into the house.

“He’ll be fine,” she assured the girl. “He just needs to rest for a few days while he’s healing. By Saturday,” she added with a smile, “he should be ready for Horses 101.”

Teddie laughed. “That’s a good one, Mom. Horses 101.”

“Well, let’s get supper going. Then we need an early night. School tomorrow, for both of us.”

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“I know. It’s not so bad here, I guess. I made a friend yesterday: Edie. She loves horses, too. She’s got a palomino.”

“I’m glad. You’re like me, sweetheart. You don’t warm up to people easily. Your father was the very opposite,” she added with a wistful smile. “He never met a stranger.”

“I miss Daddy.”

She looked at her daughter with sad eyes. “I miss him, too. It takes time, to get over a loss like that. But we’ll make it.”

“Sure we will.” She looked up at her mother hopefully. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Katy said, but she turned away quickly. “Now, let’s get something to eat. Do you have homework?”

Teddie was resigned to never getting a hug from her remaining parent. She and her dad had been close. He hugged her all the time when he was home. But her mother almost never touched her. It was the only thing that made living with her hard. Teddie couldn’t change it, so she just accepted it. “Yes. Math.” She groaned. “And history.”

“I used to love history.”

“I would, if we didn’t have to memorize so many dates. I mean, what does it matter if we don’t know the difference?”

“It would if you ever started writing books and you had George Washington helping the men fight in Vietnam,” Katy replied, tongue-in-cheek.

Teddie glowered at her and went to wash up for supper.

* * *

Saturday morning, Parker was at the door just after breakfast, while Katy was mending a tear in Teddie’s jeans.

She went to the door and laughed. “You’re early. I’m sorry, I meant to . . . Teddie’s watching cartoons. Should I get her?”

“Not yet. I just need to do some measuring,” he added with a smile. “For the steps.”

“Oh, yes. Of course.”

She went out onto the porch with him while he marked wood with a pencil and wrote figures on a piece of paper. He handed it to her. “That’s what I’ll need, to do the repairs.”

It wasn’t even a lot of money, she thought with some relief. The vet and the farrier had made inroads into her budget. “I’ll phone the hardware store and tell them to let you get what you need. Are you going right now?”

“I am,” he said. “Shouldn’t take too long. Then I can show Teddie how to saddle Bartholomew.”

“The vet said he should be all right to let out by today,” she began.

“And you’re worried,” he guessed. He smiled. “Don’t be. We’ll keep him in the stall

or the corral while we work with him. What did the vet say?"

"Not a lot. He gave him an antibiotic injection and stitched up his cuts. He gave me the name of a farrier, too, and I had him come out and clean Bart's hooves and replace his horseshoes."

"You're having to go to a lot of expense," he said.

"It's not so much," she replied. "And it's nice to see Teddie interested in something besides TV. She's been sad for so long. She and her dad were really close. It was hard for her, just having him in the service overseas. And after what happened . . . well, she wasn't looking forward to moving here. She's been very depressed."

"Not surprising," he said. "I still miss my mother, and she's been gone for years. I lost her when I was twelve. Another family on the rez took me in and adopted me. We have good people there."

She cocked her head and looked at him. "Which one of your parents was white?"

"My father." He closed up. "I'll run to the hardware and pick this stuff up, then I'll come back and fix the steps. Don't bother Teddie right now," he added, and forced a smile. "Won't be long."

He went to the truck and drove away, leaving Katy guilt-ridden. His father must have been bad to him, she decided, because that look on his face had been disturbing. She was sorry she'd brought up something that had hurt him. It had been a casual remark, the sort you'd make to just an acquaintance. But it had really dug into Parker. Considering how little emotion escaped that face, it was telling that he reacted so quickly to the remark. She'd have to be careful not to bring up the past.

She recalled what the farrier had said about his language and she just shook her head.

He hadn't said a single bad word around her or Teddie. Maybe he only cursed around people he didn't like. He was very good-looking, and very athletic. She smiled to herself. It was much too early to be thinking about men in her life. She'd tried to explain that to the attorney back home, but he hadn't listened. He'd invited himself out to see them next month, but he was in for a surprise if he thought he was staying in the house with Katy and her daughter. She didn't know him well enough, or like him well enough, for that sort of familiarity.

It was disturbing to think of herself with another man right now. Maybe, in time . . . but it still wouldn't be that smarmy lawyer, no matter how desperate she got. And that was a fact.

* * *

Parker was back in an hour with a load of lumber. He lifted it out of the truck with incredible ease. Katy marveled at how strong he was. Involuntarily, she mentioned it.

He chuckled. "I live at the gym when I'm not working. Muscles turn to pure flab if you don't keep up the exercise. I got used to it in the military and never really lost the habit. I have to keep in shape to do the work I do."

"You have an amazing way with horses," she commented.

He smiled. "I get that from my mother's father. He could outrun any horse on the place, but even the wildest ones responded to him. He never used a whip or abused his horses in any way. But he could do anything with them."

"I think that must be a very special skill," she remarked. "There's this guy on YouTube who works with horses like you do. It's a treat to watch him work an unbroken one."

"I know the one you mean. His father was vicious to him. He didn't understand that some people have talents that aren't mainstream."

"Like yours," she said softly. "Did you take a lot of heat for it, at home?"

He shook his head. "I was very small when my mother and I came back here to the rez." He smiled. "My people don't have the same attitude toward special abilities as some people off the rez do," he added. "We think of the supernatural as, well, natural."

We have people who can dowse for water, people who can talk out fire. We have people who know more about herbs than laboratories do. We're a spiritual people in an age when it's frowned upon to believe in a higher power." He shook his head. "Nobody who'd been in combat would doubt there's a higher power, by the way. No atheists in foxholes, and that's a fact."

"You were in the army?" she asked.

He nodded. "It was a bad time. I saw things I wish I could forget. My old sergeant works near here. He's just taken in a three-legged wolf that was stalking calves over at the Denton place. Poor old creature was almost blind and couldn't hunt. They gave him to Sarge. He's a rehabilitator," he explained. "Except that you can't rehabilitate a half-blind, old, three-legged wolf. So the wolf lives with him now. Even watches TV, we hear," he added with a chuckle.

"My goodness! We had packs of wolves up in Montana who were predators. We lost cattle to them all the time."

He nodded. "It's hard to co-exist with wild animals. But the earth belongs to everything, not just to humans. Starving creatures will eat whatever they can catch. That's nature."

"I suppose so."

"Now, let's get those steps fixed before one of you breaks a leg on them," he said, and started ferrying lumber to the house.

Teddie spotted him and came flying out the door. "Parker!" she exclaimed. "Are we doing Horses 101 today?"

He chuckled. "Nice. Yes, we are. But first I have to fix your steps."

He put down the load of lumber and went back for another one. “Still got that fancy toolbox?” he added.

“I’ll go get it,” Teddie volunteered.

“Good girl,” he said.

She brought the toolbox while Katy went in search of the coffee can where the nails were kept. Then Parker got to work with a skill saw and a pencil over one ear.

* * *

He was methodical, but quick. In less than an hour, he had the steps replaced.

“We can’t stain them yet,” he said. “That’s treated lumber. It will last a long time, but you have to let it season before you can stain or paint it.”

“That’s fine,” Katy said.

A truck came down the road and pulled up beside Parker’s. A tall, well-built man in jeans and a denim jacket and a battered old hat came up to them.

“This is Jerry Miller,” Katy said, smiling at the newcomer, who smiled back and offered a hand.

“Hello, Parker,” he greeted.

Parker shook hands with him and smiled, too. “Nice to see you. I’m doing a few repairs.”

“Looks good. I’d have offered, but I can’t even measure, much less do woodwork,”

the other man said ruefully. “All I’m good for is nursemaiding cattle.”

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“Don’t sell yourself short,” Katy instructed. “You made us a nice nest egg with that crop of yearlings you took to auction for us. Which pays your salary, by the way.” She laughed.

He grinned, tipping his hat back over sandy hair. “And my wife’s hairdresser bills,” he added.

“Your wife looks pretty all the time,” Katy said. “And she’s sweet, which is much more important than pretty.”

“Yes, she does,” Jerry had to agree. Then he asked, “Is there anything I can do to help?” He chuckled. “Well, except for offering to cut wood, which I can’t do.”

“Not a thing. All done,” Parker said. “But we have some leftover lumber. If you’ll help me get it in the shed, it may come in handy for another job later on.”

“Good idea.”

The men moved the lumber into the building. Katy and Teddie put up the toolbox and the nails.

“So,” Parker told Teddie, “Horses 101. Let’s go.”

“Yes!” Teddie enthused and followed Parker into the barn.

Parker put a bridle on Bartholomew and led him out into the corral that adjoined the stables.

“Where do your cowboys keep their horses?” he asked.

“Oh, Jerry keeps them at his place,” Teddie said. “He and Lacy, that’s his wife, have a big stable that his father built years ago. Mom says it’s much nicer than ours, and he’s got lots of room. There are two line cabins on the place, too, and the full-time men live in them with their families. They have a stable apiece. It was a really big ranch when my grandmother was still alive.” She sighed. “They said she could outride any cowboy on the place, shoot a gun, rope a calf, even help with branding when she was in her sixties. But she broke her hip and she could never do it again. Mom says she lost heart and that’s why she died.”

“It’s hard for active people to sit still,” Parker replied. “I remember your grandmother,” he added with a smile. “She used to sell milk and butter. My mother, and later my uncle and aunt, bought them from her.”

“Your aunt and uncle, they still live on the reservation?”

He nodded his head. “Yes. They’re the only family I have, except for their son, my first cousin, who’s in the navy. He never comes home. I think he’s ashamed of us,” he added quietly.

“Why?” Teddie asked. “I mean, I think it would be awesome to be a member of a tribe and know all that ancient stuff that people used to know. It’s such a heritage!”

He chuckled, surprised, as he looked down at her. “Where did you get that from?”

“My mom,” she said. “She loves history. She had a friend who was Northern Cheyenne when she lived in Montana. They lost touch, but Mom knows a lot about native customs and stuff. She said that’s how people were meant to live, in touch with nature and not with big stone buildings and pavement.”

He pursed his lips. “That’s exactly how I feel about it.”

“Me, too. I hate the city. This”—she waved her arms around—“is the best place on Earth. Well, now that I’ve got Bartholomew, it is,” she amended. She grimaced. “I didn’t want to come here. I had a good friend where we lived, and I had to leave her. She sends me e-mails, though, and we Skype. So I sort of still have her. And I made a friend here named Edie. She has a palomino, too.”

“You have two friends here. I’m one of them,” he chided.

“Of course, you are.” She laughed.

“So. First lesson. Horses 101.”

“I’m all ears.”

He went over the various parts of the horse, from fetlocks to withers, tail to ears, and he taught her the signs to look for when she was working with Bartholomew.

“Watch his ears,” he told her. “See how he’s got one ear toward us and another swiveled behind him? He’s listening to us, but also listening for sounds that mean danger.”

“Wow.”

The horse looked back at Teddie and both ears swiveled forward.

“That means all his attention is on you,” Parker said, indicating the horse’s ears.

“That’s important, when you’re training him.”

“I guess he’ll need a lot of training. Poor old thing,” she added.

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The horse moved forward and lowered his head toward Teddie.

“Poor horse,” she said softly. She didn’t make eye contact, but she let the horse sniff her nostrils. He lowered his head even more, so that she could stroke him beside his nostrils.

“He likes you,” Parker said. “And he’s intelligent. Very intelligent,” he added, when the horse turned its head and looked directly at him.

He chuckled softly and put out a big hand to smooth over the horse’s mane. “Sweet old boy,” he said. Bartholomew nuzzled his shoulder.

“I was afraid he was going to be mean,” Teddie confessed. “You know, because he was hurt and didn’t trust humans not to hurt him anymore.”

“Some horses can’t be turned back after they’re abused,” Parker agreed. “But lucky for you, this isn’t one of them. He’s a grand old man. He’ll make you a dependable mount.”

“I wish I could already ride,” she confessed. “Mom used to go for horseback rides with Dad when we lived back East, before he . . .” She swallowed. “But I didn’t go with them because I was afraid of horses. But the first time I saw Bartholomew, it was like, well, I don’t know what it was like.”

“Like falling in love,” Parker said, smiling at her.

“I guess. Something like that.” She cocked her head and looked up at him. “You ever

been in love?”

He averted his eyes. “Once. A long time ago. I lost her.” He didn’t say how.

“Maybe you’ll find somebody else one day.”

He smiled sadly. “Not on my agenda. I like my life as it is. I have absolute control of the television remote and nobody to fuss when I don’t take out the trash on time.”

“Have you got pets?”

“Just Harry.”

Her eyebrows went up. “Harry?”

He pursed his lips. “You scared of snakes?”

She shivered a little. “Oh, yes.”

“Me, too.”

“Is Harry a snake?”

He smiled. “Harry’s an iguana,” he said. “He’s four years old and about five feet long.”

“Wow! What sort of cage do you keep him in?”

He pursed his lips. “Well, that’s sort of the reason I’m still single. See, he’s a little too big to keep in a cage. I just let him go where he wants to. His favorite spot is the back of my sofa. He watches TV with me at night.”

“An iguana who watches TV.” Teddie sighed.

“Well, Sarge has a wolf who watches it. Maybe animals understand more than we think they do, huh?”

She laughed. “I guess so. Could I see your iguana sometime?”

“Sure. I’ll invite you both over when we get a little further along with the repairs and your Horses 101 training.” He looked down at her. “Is your mom afraid of reptiles?”

“Oh, no. She’s not afraid of anything.”

“An interesting woman,” he mused as he turned back to the horse.

“That man’s coming out here next month,” Teddie said miserably. “For Thanksgiving, he said.”

“That man?” he asked, trying not to sound too interested.

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“That lawyer who helped her settle Daddy’s business,” she explained. “He doesn’t like me. I really hope Mom doesn’t like him. He’s . . .” She searched for a word. “He’s smarmy.” She laughed. “I guess that’s not a good word.”

“It suits,” Parker replied. “It says a lot about a person. But are you sure it fits him? Sometimes people aren’t what you think they are at first. I hated Sarge’s guts until we were under fire and he saved my life.”

“Gosh!”

“Then I saved his, and we sort of became friends. So first impressions can be altogether wrong.”

She drew in a long breath. “That would be nice. But it’s not really a wrong impression. I heard him talking to another man, when Mom wasn’t listening.” She pulled a face. “He said that my daddy had lots of stocks that were going to be worth big money and that my mom wasn’t all that bad looking. He said if he could get close to her, and get control of those stocks, he’d be rich.”

Parker’s black eyes sparked. “What does he have in mind, you think?”

“I think he wants to marry her. She doesn’t like him. She told me so. But he thinks he can wear her down.” She drew in a breath and looked up at Parker with sad eyes. “If she marries him, can I come and live with you and Harry?”

He laughed softly. “Come on, now. You won’t have to do that. Your mom’s a sharp lady. She’s intelligent and kind and she has a sweet nature.”

Teddie's eyes were widening. "You can tell all that, and you've only known us for a few days?"

He nodded. "I have feelings about people," he tried to explain. "You know how horses respond to me? It's like that, only I sense things that are hidden. My mother had the same ability. Nobody could cheat her. She saw right through confidence men."

"Maybe you could talk to Mom, if that man comes out here?"

He chuckled. "I don't mind other people's business, sweet girl," he said softly. "Life is hard enough without inviting trouble. But I'll be around in case I'm needed. Okay?"

"Okay," she said.

"Now. Let's go over the diamond hitch again."

She groaned.

"Might as well learn these things. You'll need to know them in order to be able to ride."

"There's bridles, and all sorts of bits, and ways to cinch a horse, and what to do if he blows his belly out when you tighten it . . . I can't remember all that!"

"You'll learn it because we'll go over and over it until the repetition keeps it in your mind," he said. "Like muscle memory."

"Dad talked about that," Teddie recalled. "He said it saved his life once when he was overseas and he got jumped by three insurgents. He said he didn't even think about

what he needed to do, he just did it. He learned it when he was in boot camp.”

“That’s where all of us learned it,” Parker said complacently. He indicated the horse. “And that’s how you’ll learn what you need to know about how to take care of Bart and ride him: muscle memory.”

She laughed. “Okay. I’ll do my best.”

“That’s all anybody can do,” he replied warmly.

Chapter Three

Teddie was a quick study. She mastered the preparations for riding and was now learning how to get on a horse properly.

“There are all these programs that tell you to get on a stump or a stepladder so you don’t overburden the horse’s back. But you’re small enough that it won’t matter. Ready?”

She grimaced. She looked up to the pommel of the Western saddle she’d put on Bartholomew with Parker’s instructions. “It’s a long way up there,” she said doubtfully.

He laughed. “I guess it is, squirt. Okay. Lead him over here.”

Teddie led him to a stump near the porch, positioned Bart on one side of it, put her foot into the stirrup, and sprung up onto his back.

The horse moved restlessly, but Parker had the bridle. “It’s okay, old man,” he said softly, offering a treat on the palm of his hand.

Bart hesitated, but only for a moment before he took it. Parker smoothed over the blaze that ran down his forehead. "Good boy." He glanced at Teddie, who looked nervous. "You have to be calm," he instructed. "Horses, like dogs and cats, can sense when we're unsettled. They respond to emotions, sometimes badly. Give him a minute to settle down. And whatever you do, don't jerk the reins. Riding is mostly in your legs. Use your legs to tell him when to go, when to stop, which way to turn. The bridle gives you more control, but your legs are where your focus needs to be," he said as he adjusted her stirrup length.

“I have little scrawny legs, though,” she said worriedly.

He smiled. “You’ll do fine.”

He had a calming nature, Teddie thought, because the words relaxed her. She noticed that Bart reacted to it. He tossed his head, but his ears stayed turned to the front, not the back. It was only dangerous when a horse had both ears flattened, because that meant trouble.

Teddie stroked his mane. “Sweet horse,” she said softly. “I’m so happy I got you, Bart.”

He seemed to relax even more.

“Okay. Contract your legs at the knee and see if he’ll respond by going forward.”

He did.

“Wow!” she exclaimed softly.

Parker chuckled. “Good job. Now, when you want him to turn left, put more pressure on your left leg and move the bridle very gently to the left. You don’t want to hurt his mouth.”

“Okay.” She followed the instruction and so did Bart. “This is awesome,” she said.

“Horses are awesome,” Parker agreed. “Try turning him the other way. Same

procedure.”

She did. Bart followed through beautifully.

“How do I tell him to stop?” she asked.

“You pull back very gently on the reins.”

She did that, and Bart stopped in his tracks.

“Nice job,” Parker said.

“Can we go riding now?” she asked.

He smiled at her excitement. “Not just yet. First things first. You have to know what to do in case of an emergency. That’s the next lesson. But we have to stop for now. Boss man is bringing over a few new horses for the remuda and I have to work with them.”

“It’s so nice of you to help me with Bart,” Teddie said as she dismounted cautiously. “I could never have done this by myself.”

“I love horses,” Parker said. “It’s no trouble. I enjoy working with this sweet old man, too,” he added, patting the horse’s withers. “So let’s get him unsaddled and back into his stall.”

“I’m with you,” she said, and followed him back into the stable.

* * *

“How are you doing with Bartholomew?” Katy asked at supper one night.

“Really good,” she told her mother. “Parker’s so smart!”

“He knows horses, all right,” Katy replied.

“No,” Teddie corrected. “That’s not what I mean. He’s really smart. He had a phone call Saturday when he was over here. I only heard what he was saying, but it was way over my head. Something about Einstein-Rosen bridges and somebody named Schrodinger.”

Katy’s mouth opened. “Are you sure that’s what he said?”

“Well, I think so.”

“Did he mention a cat when he talked about Schrodinger?” Katy pressed.

Teddie frowned. “Yes. But the cat was alive and dead in a box until you opened the box he was in. Strange!”

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Katy caught her breath. That was theoretical physics. And it was something she wouldn't have expected a horse wrangler to know anything about. Parker had said he graduated from college, but he hadn't mentioned in what field. This wasn't only over Teddie's head, it was over Katy's.

"Well," she said finally, as she finished her mashed potatoes and skinless chicken breast.

"I told you, he's real smart," Teddie repeated. She sighed. "Some man was trying to get him to go to the Capitol and do some work, but he said it wasn't summer and he couldn't spare the time, they'd have to get somebody else."

"Amazing," Katy said.

"What is an Einstein-Rosen bridge?" Teddie wanted to know.

"Over my head," Katy laughed. "It has to do with time dilation, and wormholes. I used to have a best friend when I was in college who had a degree in physics. She talked like that, too."

"And that cat?"

"It's a thought experiment," Katy replied. "There's a cat in a box. The cat is either alive or dead. But until you open the box and look in, the cat exists in both states."

"Weird."

“Very weird. That’s the sort of thing physicists do. Einstein came up with the theory of relativity, and he was a physicist. Probably the most famous of all of them, although Stephen Hawking came close to that.”

“If Parker’s that smart, why’s he breaking horses out in the country?” Teddie wondered.

“Maybe he doesn’t like the city,” Katy said. She made a face. “Truly, I didn’t either, but your dad loved where we lived.”

“He was a rancher, too,” Teddie said.

“He was, but the military became his whole life after he went overseas. He was a doctor. He said having a practice here was fine, but good men were dying in other countries and he needed to be a combat physician to help fight for his country. He was the most patriotic man I ever knew.”

“He was a good daddy.”

“He was a good husband,” Katy replied, fighting tears, as her daughter was. “We’ll get through this, Teddie,” she said after a minute. “It’s going to take time, that’s all. I thought maybe coming out here to live would make it easier for us. It’s a wonderful ranch.”

“Yes, it is. I made two friends.” Teddie laughed. “Edie and Parker.”

“You did. Parker’s a kind person.” She shook her head. “Theoretical physics and horses. Oh, my.”

Teddie grinned. “Maybe he’s dreaming up ray guns and stuff.”

“Maybe he’s trying for a unified field theory of relativity.” She yawned. “I have to get some sleep. It’s test day tomorrow. My students are dreading it. Me, too, I guess.”

“You like teaching, don’t you, Mom?”

She smiled. “I do like it. I didn’t expect to. It’s really different from teaching college students,” she added. “But I have a good class to teach things to. Education is education, no matter the age of the student.”

“Yes, I guess it is.”

“How about you?” Katy wondered. “Is school getting any easier?”

Teddie nodded. “A lot easier, now that Edie and I can hang out together. We talk about horses. Everybody talks about horses,” she chuckled. “Most of the kids in school around Benton are ranch kids, so most everybody rides. Except me. But I’m learning.”

“Parker says you’re doing well,” Katy told her.

“There’s a lot to learn,” Teddie replied. “He said we have to do it with muscle memory, like in the army. You go over and over things until they’re a reflex, especially if you get in a dangerous situation, like if your horse runs away with you.”

“It’s a good way to teach,” Katy said. “I like Parker.”

Teddie grinned. “I like him, too.”

“You didn’t eat your beans, Teddie.” Her mother indicated the plate in front of her daughter.

Teddie made a face. “I hate beans.”

“Eat just one and I’ll say no more,” her mother coaxed.

Teddie sighed. “Okay. Just one. Just for you. But only one.”

“Only one.”

Teddie glared at the bean before she lifted it to her mouth and chewed, as if she were eating a live worm. The face got worse.

“Swallow,” Katy dared.

Teddie gave her a pained look, but she did as she was told.

“That’s called compromise,” Katy told her with an affectionate smile. “You did great. You’re excused.”

“Thanks, Mom! I’m going out to tell Bart good night.”

“Watch for snakes. They crawl at night and I don’t know how to kill one. We don’t own a gun anymore.” That was true. After her husband’s death, Katy, who was mortally afraid of firearms, sold them to several friends of Teddie’s dad.

“I’ll watch where I put my feet,” Teddie assured her.

“Okay. Don’t be long.”

“I won’t!” she called back over her shoulder as she ran to the front door.

A few minutes later, there was a scream and a wail.

Katy, horrified, went running out the door onto the front porch, flicking on the porch light on the way. “Teddie! What happened?!”

Teddie was frozen in her tracks. She couldn’t speak. She just pointed.

There, standing a few feet away, was a wolf. Even in the dim light, Katy could see that it was huge, much larger than the biggest dog she’d ever seen. It had an odd ruff around its head with black stripes running through it. As she looked closer, she noticed that the wolf had three legs.

“Teddie, come here. It’s all right. Walk slowly. Don’t run, okay?”

Teddie did as she was told. She was afraid, but she followed her mother’s instructions. “He’s so big,” she said in a ghostly tone.

“Yes.” Katy let a held breath out as Teddie made it to the porch. The wolf still hadn’t moved.

Teddie would have run into her mother’s arms, but they were folded over her chest. She never had understood why her mother didn’t hug her. Her friends’ mothers did it all the time.

As Katy stood there with her daughter, wondering what in the world to do, she heard a pickup truck coming down the road. It paused at the end of her driveway and suddenly turned in, going slow.

“It’s Parker!” Teddie said. “That’s his truck.”

Katy wondered why he'd be here after dark, but she was so worried for her daughter that she didn't really question it.

He pulled up at the steps and got out. "Oh, thank goodness. You horror!" he said, approaching the wolf. "Your papa's worried sick!"

The wolf howled softly as Parker approached it.

"It's okay, old man, you're safe. Come on, now." As the women watched, Parker picked up the wolf as if he weighed nothing at all and put him in the passenger seat of the truck. He closed the door and only then noticed how upset Katy and Teddie were.

"It's all right," he said in a soft tone, the one he used with frightened horses. "He's old and crippled and almost blind. Sarge said he left the screen door open accidentally and Two Toes wandered off. Poor old thing probably couldn't find his way home again. He's got a lousy sense of smell."

"Oh, thank goodness," Katy said. "I thought he was going to eat Teddie. She screamed. . . ."

Parker chuckled. "That's what most people do when they come face-to-face with wolves. Some are aggressive predators. Old Two Toes, there, he's a sweetheart." He indicated the wolf, which was sitting up in the passenger seat without making a fuss.

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“He’s somebody’s pet?” Teddie asked.

“My sarge. He’s a wildlife rehabilitator. Two Toes lives with him, though, because the old wolf can’t be released into the wild. He’d die.”

“I remember now,” Katy said. “You told me about him.”

“I did,” he agreed.

“That’s so sad,” Teddie said. “I’m sorry I screamed. I was really scared. He came out of nowhere.”

“Everybody gets scared sometimes. It’s not a big deal,” he said softly, and smiled at her.

“Okay. I’m going inside. It’s cold!” Teddie said.

“It is. You don’t even have a jacket on,” he chided.

Teddie just laughed.

He looked up at Katy. “You’re not wearing one, either.”

“She screamed and I came running,” she said. “I didn’t think about how cold it was.” She looked frightened and sad and almost defeated.

He came up onto the porch, towering over her. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

She drew in an unsteady breath. “Life,” she said simply, fighting tears.

He pulled her gently into his arms, wrapped her up like treasure, and just rocked her. “Let it out. It’s hard being the strongest person in your whole family. We all need a moment’s weakness to remind us that life is like a prism, with many facets.”

“Or like Schrodinger’s cat?” she mumbled into his denim jacket.

He chuckled. “Who’s been talking?”

“Teddie. She heard you talking to somebody about a cat in a box and an Einstein-Rosen bridge.”

“Heavy stuff.”

“Very heavy. Way over my head.”

“Mine, too, at first. But I loved the concept of invisible numbers and tangents and cosine and stuff like that. Ate it like candy.”

She drew back and looked up at him. He seemed different and she couldn’t decide why until she realized that his hair, his thick, soft, black hair was loose. It flowed over his shoulders and down his back like silk.

“Your hair’s down,” she murmured.

He shrugged. “I was getting ready for bed when Sarge called. He’s missing an arm and sometimes it bothers him at night. He asked if I’d go hunt for Two Toes, so I left supper hanging and came running. Driving. Whatever.”

“Supper at this hour?”

“I don’t live a conventional life,” he said. “Supper’s whenever I feel like fixing it. But tonight it was oatmeal.” He made a face. “I think I’ll pass on reheating it.”

“If you’ll come in, I can make you a nice ham and cheese sandwich. I even have lettuce and mayo.”

His eyebrows arched. “All that on one sandwich?” he asked with a smile.

“All that.”

“Okay. Thanks. But I have to take sweetums home to Sarge first.”

“I’ll be making the sandwich while you’re driving. Want coffee?”

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He nodded. “Strong and black, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“I’m grading papers,” she replied. “Strong and black is how I take it, too.”

He smiled. “Okay. I’ll be back in a few.”

“Sounds good.”

“Is Parker coming back?” Teddie asked excitedly when her mother came inside.

“Yes, he is. He doesn’t really want to reheat the oatmeal he left to go find his sergeant’s wolf.” She laughed.

“He’s so nice.”

Katy nodded. “And smart,” she added with a wink.

Teddie smiled back.

* * *

Later, Parker knocked at the door and Teddie let him in.

“Your hair’s down,” Teddie said. “I didn’t notice before. Gosh, it’s long!”

“Warrior hair,” he teased. “It’s my ‘medicine.’ I’ve never cut it, except once.”

Teddie's eyes asked the question.

"When my mother died," he said softly. "It's an old way of expressing grief."

"Gosh," she said, fascinated. "Well, I'm glad it grew back. It's beautiful!"

He chuckled and ruffled her hair. "You're good for my ego."

She made a face at him.

"Sandwiches and coffee," Katy said, bringing out a platter of them and going back for the coffeepot. The small table was already set. "Teddie, want a sandwich?"

"No, thanks. I have to finish my homework," she moaned.

"Feel okay now?" Katy asked gently.

She nodded. "I was just a little scared. He's a very big wolf."

"He's a big baby," Parker said as he took off his jacket and sat down at the table. "Sarge loves him to death."

"I guess he's just scary to people who don't know him," Teddie amended.

He smiled. "I'll take you over to Sarge's one day and you can get acquainted. He likes people. Loves girls."

She laughed. "That's a deal. I'll go do that horrible math."

"Math is not horrible," Parker pointed out. "It's the basis of all engineering."

“I don’t want to be an engineer. I want to fly jet planes. Fighter planes!”

He rolled his eyes. “And here I’m teaching you to ride horses!”

“One step at a time,” Teddie said with a grin. She turned and went down the hall to her room.

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“Fighter planes.” Parker shook his head as he bit into a sandwich.

“She’s adventurous,” Katy said, nibbling at a sandwich of her own.

“When I was her age, I wanted to be a cowboy and live on a ranch,” he said.

Both eyebrows went up.

“Of course, when I was a little older than her, I was a cowboy and lived on a ranch.” He chuckled, swallowing down a bite of sandwich with coffee. “Coffee’s good,” he said as he put the cup down. “Most people don’t get it strong enough.”

She laughed. “I like a spoon to stick up in mine.”

“Me, too.”

“You wanted to be a cowboy, but you already were one,” she prompted.

“My point is, I’m happy with my life. So many people aren’t,” he added. “They’re always chasing something they can’t find, wanting things that are impossible to have. It’s important to be satisfied not only with who you are, but where and what you are. After all, life isn’t forever. We’re just temporary visitors here. Tourists, really.”

She burst out laughing and almost toppled her coffee. “Tourists! I’ll have to remember that one.”

He grinned. “I stole it from a pal, when we were overseas. He was a great guy. He

was going to medical school when we got out of the service. He didn't make it back. A lot of guys didn't."

"I know." She did, too, because her husband had been one of those. "My husband was already a doctor, though. He loved his work. He loved being in the service. He said that patriotism was being sacrificed by people who didn't understand that freedom isn't free. He wanted to do his part." She bit her lower lip. "Sorry. It's still fresh."

He just nodded. "Life goes on, though," he said, studying her. "You have to pick up the pieces and keep going."

"You've lost someone," she said suddenly.

He hesitated. Then he nodded again. "The love of my life," he said with a quiet sadness. "She was eighteen, I was nineteen. While I was overseas, she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. She died before I even got home. We were going to be married that Christmas."

"I'm truly sorry," she said softly, and put her hand over his big one. She didn't understand why exactly, because she almost never touched people—not even her daughter, whom she loved. "I do understand how that feels."

His hand turned and clasped hers. There was a flash, almost electric, between them when he did that. She caught her breath, laughed self-consciously, and took her hand away. He seemed as disconcerted as she felt. He finished the sandwich and washed it down with coffee.

"I'd better go and let you get to those papers," he said, rising. "Think of the poor students who'll be disappointed to have to wait an extra day to learn that they failed the test." He grinned wickedly.

She laughed, the tension gone. "I guess so."

"Thanks. It was good coffee and a nice sandwich. Better than cold oatmeal," he added wryly.

"Anytime. Thanks for coming after our furry visitor. If he ever comes back, I'll know who to call."

"Where's your cell phone?" he asked.

She took it out of her pocket and placed it in his outstretched hand. He put in his contact information and handed it back.

"That's my cell number," he told her. "If you have a problem, night or day, you call me. Okay?"

She smiled warmly. "Okay." She cocked her head. "Where's your cell phone?"

His eyebrows arched, but he handed it to her. She put her own contact information into it and handed it back.

"If you need us, you only have to call," she said quietly. "We'd do anything we could to help you."

He was unsettled. He hesitated. "All right. Thanks."

"I mean, if you come up with some unified field theory in the middle of the night and need to discuss it with someone who knows absolutely nothing about theoretical physics, I'll be right here. Think of it as ego building."

He chuckled. She was a card. "I'll do that."

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“But if you get sick or something, you can call, too,” she added. “I nursed my mother for several years before I married. I’m pretty good in a sick room.”

That surprised and touched him. “I’m never ill.”

“I knew that,” she replied spritely. “But just in case . . . ?”

“Just in case,” he agreed.

He started for the door. “Good night, Teddie. See you Saturday,” he called down the hall.

“I’ll be here, still doing horrible math!” she called back.

“Math is not horrible!”

“It is so! It has numbers that are invisible! I heard you tell that other man that.”

He rolled his eyes.

“How do you see invisible numbers?” she asked from the hallway.

“I’m leaving,” he told her. “It’s much too late for philosophical discussions.”

“I thought you said it was math,” Teddie replied innocently.

“Just for that, you can learn two new ways to tie a cinch on Saturday,” he said

formally, and then ruined it by laughing.

She grinned. “Okay. Good night.”

“Good night,” Katy echoed. “Thanks again.”

“Thanks for the nice eats,” he replied. His dark eyes were warm on her face. “Sleep well.”

“I don’t, but thanks for the thought.”

He sighed. “I don’t sleep well, either,” he confessed. “I play solitaire and mah-jongg on my cell phone until I get sleepy. Usually, that’s about four in the morning.”

She laughed. “Me, too. Especially mah-jongg.”

“I have four apps with it. I’m a fanatic.”

“We should get a board game and teach it to Teddie. She doesn’t like playing games on the phone.”

“Not a bad idea. I’ll pick up a Monopoly game, too. We might play one Saturday night if you don’t have anything better to do.”

“We just sit and watch old movies on DVD,” she said, shrugging. “I watch that series that your boss’s wife writes for, and the one her father produces, but nothing else. Well, maybe the Weather Channel and the History Channel. But that’s about it.”

He grinned. “Two of my favorites.”

“I’ll bet you sit and watch the NASA channel,” she accused.

“I do. It’s not the most stimulating channel on television, but I like seeing how far we’ve come in the space race.”

“We’re really having one, now.” She laughed. “SpaceX fired the gun, and all the other space companies are piling into the game. I’m so excited about Starhopper lifting off!”

“Me, too. I like to watch those rockets land after they’ve lifted the vehicles into space. He landed two at once on floating platforms in the ocean. Do you have any idea how complicated and delicate a procedure that really is?”

“I do. It’s amazing, what Elon Musk has accomplished.”

“A man with a vision,” he replied.

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“A truly great man,” she agreed. “He’s revolutionized space travel.”

“And in a very short space of time, as time goes.” He cocked his head and smiled.

“Well, good night.”

“Good night, Parker.” She frowned. “Do you have a first name?”

He made a face. “Yes, I do, and no, I’m not telling you what it is.”

“Well!”

“Nobody knows what it is.” He hesitated. “Well, the boss knows, because payroll sends me a check. But he’s sworn to secrecy.”

Her eyes twinkled. “Okay. We all have a few secrets.”

He chuckled. “So we do. Good night.”

“Drive carefully,” she said, and then flushed. It sounded forward.

Both thick, dark eyebrows arched. “My, my, do you worry about me already?”

She turned absolutely scarlet and was bereft of words.

He grinned. “Don’t sweat it. It’s sort of nice, having somebody worry about me.”

“Oh. Well, okay then.”

He went down the steps to his truck. She watched him all the way to it before she closed the door and locked it. Her life was suddenly very complicated.

Chapter Four

It seemed a very long week before Saturday rolled around and Teddie was dancing with anticipation because Parker was going to take her riding down the fence lines today. He said Bart was as ready as he was going to be.

“I’m so excited,” she told her mother. “It will be the first time I’ve ever really ridden him around the ranch!”

“You do exactly what Parker tells you, okay?” Katy said. “He won’t let anything happen to you.”

“I know that.” She cocked her head. “You look really nice,” she commented. “That’s the first time I’ve seen your hair down in a long time, Mom,” she added curiously.

“I rushed to get breakfast and forgot to put it up,” she lied, hating the faint blush that was probably going to give her away to her daughter.

She was wearing jeans with a yellow long-sleeved sweater. She looked neat and trim but also very sexy. Her long blond hair was around her shoulders, soft and waving. She did look nice. It hadn’t been intentional. At least, she didn’t think it was. She was attracted to Parker and she didn’t want to be. She’d only lost her husband a few months ago. It was too soon. Or was it?

Teddie watched those expressions pass over her mother’s face. “Parker’s nice,” she said. “Much nicer than that lawyer who’s coming out here to see you next month.”

“He’s a nice man,” Katy said, frowning. She’d forgotten that he’d invited himself out

to Colorado. Now, she was regretting that she hadn't said no.

"Are we going to get to go trick-or-treating next week?" Teddie asked plaintively. "There's almost nobody near enough for us to ask for candy around here. Well, maybe Parker and Mr. Denton, but nobody else."

Katy grinned. "The school is going to be handing out candy next week. In fact, the businesses in town are staying open after dark so they can hand it out, too. Just between us, even the policemen have bags of it in their cars, and they'll be handing it out. So you'll get lots of candy. I promise."

"Oh, Mom, that's awesome!" She hugged her mother, who stiffened. She drew away at once, embarrassed. But she recovered quickly. "Mmmm." She sighed. "You smell nice. Like flowers."

"It's cologne. I haven't worn any in a long time." Katy felt uneasy. She'd never told Teddie why she didn't hug her like her father had. Someday . . .

"I like it when you dress up," Teddie said. She didn't add that she suspected it was for Parker's benefit, but that was what she was thinking. She grinned. "I'll just go check on Bartholomew."

"Okay."

Teddie went into the barn and Katy sat down in the porch swing and closed her eyes, listening to the sounds of nature all around her. It was the nicest place to live, she thought. She wondered how she'd ever endured city noise. She was certain that she couldn't go back to it after this.

“Asleep, are we?”

Her eyes flew open and her heart skipped. She hadn’t even heard Parker come up on the porch. He was wearing boots, too.

“Goodness, you startled me.” She laughed, putting a hand to her chest. “No, I was drinking in the sounds. It’s so nice here. So different from the city.”

“Amen,” he agreed. He dropped down in the swing beside her, noting her long, soft hair with a warm smile. “You look pretty today.”

She flushed and cleared her throat.

“Too much too soon?” he asked softly. “No sweat. You look cool, kid. How’s that?”

She laughed. “Sorry. I was feeling a little self-conscious.”

“Oh, I like the new look, don’t get me wrong,” he said. He cocked his head. “You and Teddie going trick-or-treating next week?”

“We were just talking about that,” she replied. “They’re having a big deal downtown in Benton. All the stores will be open and giving out candy. We’re having a harvest festival at our school, too.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Did you go trick-or-treating in town when you were a kid?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Too dangerous.”

She frowned and her eyes asked the question.

He looked older than his years as he looked down at her. “I look like my people,” he said delicately. “Back in 1876, some of my ancestors rode with the Cheyenne and the Sioux and the Arapaho and a few other tribes against Colonel George Custer. Old hatreds lingered, especially around the battlefield. We didn’t come off the rez much when we were kids. Not until we were teenagers, at least. I got in a lot of trouble, and I got given a choice—go in the army or go to jail.”

She whistled. “Good choice,” she said.

He shrugged. “It was the making of me,” he said. “After the first couple of weeks, I settled down and really enjoyed the routine. I stopped being a juvenile delinquent and turned into a soldier.”

She studied him curiously. “I thought we were getting away from prejudice,” she said softly. “I have students from all races, all walks of life. They get along well.”

“They do, if they’re taught to, while they’re young. You have to remember that the rez is for one race only: ours. We don’t mix well.”

“I’m sorry about that,” she said with genuine feeling. “Someday, I hope we can look at qualifications and personality instead of gender or race or religion.”

“Pipe dreams,” he said gently. “People are what they are. Most don’t change.”

She made a face. “I guess I’ve lived a sheltered life.”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

She looked up into large, dark eyes. “The story of your life is in your eyes,” she said quietly, and she grimaced. “Sorry. I blurt out things sometimes.”

He smiled. “I don’t mind. I’m pretty blunt myself from time to time. It sort of goes with the job description.”

“And which one would that be?” she teased. “Breaking horses or working on a new unified field theory?”

He laughed. “Both, I suppose.” He rocked the swing into motion and looked straight ahead. “The feds noticed that I had a gift for algorithms, so they send a black sedan to pick me up in the summer and take me off to D.C.”

“Wow,” she said softly. “What do you do there?”

He sighed. “It’s all classified. Very top secret. I do code work. I’m not allowed to talk about it.”

She winced. “I put my foot in my mouth again.”

“Not at all. You didn’t know.” His dark eyes slid over her face intently. “Your major was what, English or education?”

“I did a double major,” she said. “Both.”

“What about your minor?”

She hesitated.

His thick black eyebrows lifted and he smiled. “Hmmm?”

She cleared her throat. “Anthropology. Specifically, archaeology. I went on digs for four years.” She gave him an apologetic glance. “I know, your people think of archaeology as grave digging. . . .”

“I don’t,” he said. “I minored in anthropology, too, as well as biology,” he said surprisingly. “I loved being able to date projectile points and pottery sherds. It was fascinating. You forget, I’m not all Crow. My mother was born on the reservation, near Hardin, Montana. But my father was white.” His face closed up at the memory.

She never touched people. But her small hand went to his shoulder and rested there, lightly, feeling the taut muscles. “We all have bad memories.”

His head turned. “I’ll bet you don’t.”

“Well, my parents loved each other, they said, but they still had knock-down, drag-out fights every so often,” she said. “I learned to hide in the stable until they calmed down.”

He chuckled. “I never had to do that. But my father wasn’t much of a father.”

“Was he a teacher?”

He shook his head. “An astrophysicist,” he said with distaste. “He still works in the aerospace industry. NASA, I think. I haven’t had any contact with him since.”

“I’ll bet he’d be proud of the man you became,” she said, and then flushed, because it was a little forward.

He looked down at her and frowned. “You think so?” he asked, surprising her.

“You’re kind to strangers, you love children, you break horses without harming their spirit, you know about Schrodinger’s cat. . . .”

He chuckled. “You’re good for my ego. You know that?” he teased. “I guess a lot of us are prey to low self-image, especially people of color.”

“You’re a nice color,” she said warmly. “Light olive skin. I’m just pink. I can’t even tan.”

He studied her fair hair, long around her shoulders, and her pretty, pink face. He smiled slowly, a smile that made her toes curl inside her shoes. “You’re a nice color, too,” he said huskily. His fingers went to her hair and touched it softly. “Your hair is naturally this color, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Yes.” Was that high, squeaky tone her actual voice? She was surprised at the way it sounded. “Well, I do use a highlighting shampoo, but I don’t color it.”

“It’s beautiful.”

Her breath was coming like a distance runner’s. Her eyes fell on his mouth. It was chiseled, with a thin upper lip and a full square lower one. It was a mouth that made

her hungry for things she barely remembered. Her late husband had been gone so much that intimacy had gone by the wayside, for the most part. At the end, they were more friends than lovers. And she couldn't remember ever feeling such hunger, even for him. Perhaps it was her age, or that she'd been alone too long. She felt guilty, too, just for entertaining the thought that Parker would be heaven to kiss.

He was staring at her mouth, too. His fingers tightened on her hair. "This would be," he whispered, "a very bad idea."

"Oh, yes," she whispered back, shakily. "A very, very bad idea."

But even as they spoke, they were bending toward each other. Her head tilted naturally to the side, inviting his mouth closer.

"I might become addicted," he whispered a little unsteadily.

"Me, too . . ."

He leaned closer, his big hand clutching her hair, positioning her face. His head bent. She could almost taste the coffee on his mouth. She was hungry. So hungry!

"Katy," he breathed, and his lips started to touch hers.

"Mom? Parker? Where are you guys?"

They broke apart, both flushed and uneasy. Parker got to his feet and moved away from Katy without looking at her.

“We’re out here, sprout!” he called. “Ready to go?”

Teddie came barreling out the front door, dressed to ride. “Yes! I’m so excited!”

“We’ll take it slow and easy the first time,” he told her, grinning, although he was churning inside about what had almost happened. He managed to get himself together in the small space of time he had while Teddie rushed toward the stable.

He turned and looked at Katy, who was standing up, looking all at sea and guilty.

He went back to her, towering over her. “It’s okay,” he said softly.

She swallowed. “I’m . . . I mean . . . I think . . .” She looked up at him with her face taut with indecision, hunger, fear, guilt.

He touched her cheek gently. “We’ll take it slow and easy, Katy,” he said huskily. “No pressure. Okay?”

She took a deep breath. “Okay,” she agreed, and her eyes grew soft.

He smiled in a way he never had. “Suppose I pick you and Teddie up on Halloween night and drive you around to the venues for candy?”

She hesitated just a second too long.

His face tautened. “Or is that a bad idea? You’d rather not be seen with me in public . . . ?”

She went right up to him and reached up to touch his hard cheek. “You know me better than that already. I know you do!”

He let out the breath he’d been holding. “Sorry,” he bit off. “Life is hard sometimes when you’re a minority.”

“I’ve never been like that,” she said. “I’d be proud to be seen with you anywhere. I was just worried about, well, gossip. Small towns run on it. You might not like being talked about. . . .”

He actually laughed. “I’ve been talked about for years. I don’t mind gossip. If you don’t.” He hesitated. “That lawyer’s coming out here next month, isn’t he?”

“He’s a pest,” she said shortly. “He invited himself and I can’t convince him that I’m not interested.”

“No worries, kid,” he teased. “I’ll convince him for you.”

She smiled slowly. “Okay,” she said.

He chuckled. “I’d better go help Teddie saddle Bartholomew before she ends up in a pile of something nasty.”

She smiled from ear to ear. “She’ll love riding. Until she gets off the horse,” she added, because she knew how sore riding made people who weren’t used to it.

“You could come, too,” he invited.

Her eyes were full of affection and something else. “Next time,” she said.

He nodded. “Next time.”

He turned and went toward the stable.

* * *

“Mom got all dressed up and let her hair down,” Teddie said as she and Parker rode down the fence line, she on Bartholomew and he on Wings.

“I noticed. Your mom’s pretty.”

She laughed. “She thinks you’re awesome, but don’t tell her I told you.”

“She does?” he asked, astonished.

“It was the cat,” she volunteered. “She’s keen on brainy people.”

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“It’s a conundrum, the cat,” he replied. “Einstein did thought experiments like that. Most theoretical physicists do. In fact, I follow two of them—Michio Kaku and Miguel Alcubierre. Alcubierre came up with the idea for a speculative faster-than-light speed warp drive. In fact, they call it the Alcubierre drive. One day, it may take mankind to the stars.”

“Gosh, I didn’t know that. You follow them? You mean, when you go back East to D.C.?” she wondered.

He chuckled. “I follow them on Twitter.”

“Oh! Theoretical physics.” She rode silently for a few minutes. “I still want to fly jet fighter planes.”

“I knew a guy who did that, years ago. He said that when those things take off, your stomach glues itself to your backbone and you have to fight the urge to throw up. It’s like going up in a rocket. The gravitational pull is awesome.”

“I didn’t realize that. Goodness!”

“It’s something you get used to. Like the “raptor cough,” if you fly F-22 Raptors.”

She frowned. “Raptor cough?”

“That’s what they call it. Nobody knows what causes it. But the guys who fly those things all develop it.”

“Maybe I can get used to it,” she said. “I love Raptors,” she added with a sigh. “I think they’re the most beautiful planes on earth.”

He grinned. “They’re not bad. But I like horses.”

“Me, too!”

They rode along for a few minutes in silence. Bartholomew took his time, and he wasn’t particularly nervous. Hopefully, being around Teddie relaxed him, because he didn’t try to bolt with her. All the same, Parker was watchful.

“Will it offend you if I ask you something?” Teddie asked as they were on their way back to the stables.

“Of course not,” he replied with a smile. “What do you want to know?”

“We learned at school that all Native Americans have legends about animals and constellations and stuff. Do the Crow have them?”

He grinned. “We do. My favorite is the Nirumbee.”

“Nirumbee?”

He nodded. “They’re a race of little people, under two feet tall. Some of the tales we have about them are violent and gory, but they’ve also been known to help people. I had a Cherokee friend in the service, and he said they also had a legend about little people that they called the Nunnehi.”

“Do you think they really exist?”

“Some credible people have claimed to see them,” he said. “My friend swore that he

heard them singing in the mountains of North Carolina, where he grew up. And here's what's interesting. Archaeologists actually found evidence of a race of little people, no taller than three feet high. It made the major news outlets. They were called the "Hobbit" species, after Tolkien's race from the films," he said, chuckling.

"Wow."

"I think all legends have some basis in fact," he continued. "Like the Thunderbird. It's a staple of Native American legends, a huge bird that casts giant shadows on the ground. There was a lot of controversy about a photograph, a very old one, of several men holding what looked like a pterodactyl stretched out. I don't know if it was Photoshopped or legitimate, but it looked authentic to me. I saw it on the Internet years ago."

"I'll have to go looking for that!"

"I like legends," he said softly. "Living in a world that has no make-believe, no fantasy, is cold."

"I think so, too." She paused. "Do you speak Crow?"

He nodded. "A lot of us do."

"Is it hard to learn?"

"Compared to Dutch and Finnish, it's simple. Compared to Spanish or French, it's hard." He glanced at her whimsically. "We have glottal stops and high tones and low tones, double vowels, even a sound like theachin German. It's difficult. Not so much if you learn it from the ground up as a child."

"I'd like to study languages in college," Teddie said.

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“In between flying F-22s?” he teased.

She laughed. “In between that. I could go in the Air Force and go to college, couldn’t I?”

“You could.”

“Then I’ll study real hard, so that I can get in.”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

She fingered the reins gingerly. “Do you like my mom?”

He hesitated.

She glanced at him and saw his discomfort. “Sorry. I just meant she likes you. I hoped maybe you liked her, too.”

“I do like her,” he said. He sighed. “But you guys are getting over a big loss, a really big loss.”

“She misses Daddy,” she agreed. “But he wasn’t the sort of person who’d want her to grieve forever or spend the rest of her life alone. He was always doing things for other people. Always.”

“I wish I could have known him, Teddie,” he said solemnly.

“Me, too.”

“You’re doing very well at riding, you know,” he said after a minute.

“I am?”

He smiled at her enthusiasm. “Very well, indeed.” He grimaced. “But you may not think so when we get back.”

She didn’t understand why, until they were at the stable and he reached up to lift her down. She stood on her feet and made a terrible face.

“You need to soak in a hot tub,” he told her. “It will help the soreness.”

“Mom never said it was going to hurt so much,” she groaned.

“It only hurts when you haven’t done it for a while,” he explained. “Riding takes practice. You’re using muscles you don’t normally use, so they get stretched and they protest.”

“I see.”

“It will get better,” he promised.

She drew in a breath. “Okay. If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. Go on in. I’ll unsaddle Bartholomew for you and rub him down, okay?”

“Thanks!”

“No problem.”

She walked like an old woman all the way to the house. Katy was waiting on the porch and she made a face.

“I’m sorry, honey,” she said. “I should have told you.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. Honest. I’d have gone anyway. Parker said I’m doing great! I didn’t fall off or spook Bart even one time!”

She laughed. “Good for you.”

“He said I should soak in a hot tub, so I’m going to.”

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“Good idea,” she replied. “Want me to run the bath for you?”

“I can do that. Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re welcome.”

She hesitated and grinned wickedly. “He likes you,” she said, and walked away before her mother had time to react.

* * *

Parker stopped at the steps where Katy was standing. “I’ll be over Thursday about six to take you guys trick-or-treating,” he said. “That okay?”

She smiled. “That’s fine. Teddie will be looking forward to it. She loves Halloween.”

“Me, too,” he said with a grin. “I like anything to do with fantasy creatures, although I’m partial to dragons. But giant spiders and bats are okay.”

She rolled her eyes. “You and Teddie,” she mused. “I always decorate for all the holidays, but my favorite is Christmas.”

“I like that one also,” he said. “My mother was traditional. She didn’t celebrate regular holidays, but my cousin’s parents were Catholic, so they always had a Christmas tree and presents. It was great fun.”

She cocked her head. “Crow people have a proud tradition,” she said softly. “I grew

up reading about them in Montana.”

“I forgot that you were raised there as well. Where?”

“Near Hardin, where the battleground is.”

He whistled. “The rez is close to there,” he reminded her. “That’s where I was raised.”

She laughed. “I’m surprised that we didn’t know each other then.”

“I’m not. I didn’t venture off the rez until I was in my late teens. When I did, I got into all sorts of trouble. I’ll bet you never put a foot wrong.”

She shrugged. “My parents were strict.”

“My mother died in my formative years. My cousin’s parents were lenient; they pretty much let us do what we pleased,” he confessed. “Probably not the best way to raise a child. But we’re not big on heavy-handed discipline.”

“I had a friend whose grandfather was Crow,” she recalled. “I learned a lot from her.”

His dark eyes searched hers. “Teddie wants to learn to speak it.” He laughed. “I told her it was a lot harder than it looked.”

She nodded. “I know it is. Most native languages have glottal stops and high and low tones and nasalization.”

“Do you speak any of them?”

She shook her head. “I just have Spanish,” she said. “I loved it from the time I was a

child. I read a book that had Spanish words in it when I was in fifth grade. I took it all through high school and college.”

“Are you literate in it?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “I love to read books in the original language, books like Don Quixote.”

“I envy you that. I can only read books in English. Well, and in Crow,” he added, “and there are a few, mostly about legends.”

“How about sign language?”

He chuckled. “I cut my teeth on that. My grandfather taught it to me.”

“I learned just a few signs. I can’t even remember them now.”

“You need to brush up,” he teased. “We can talk over Teddie’s head without her knowing what we say.”

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“I’ll get out my books,” she returned, eyes sparkling.

He hesitated. “Well, I’d better go. I brushed Bartholomew down, by the way, and put him in his stall. He’s doing fine. Tell Teddie.”

“I will.”

“Have a good night,” he said.

Her eyes searched over his handsome face. “You, too.”

He smiled and turned away with visible reluctance. She watched him all the way to his truck. When he drove off, with a wave of his hand, she was still watching.

* * *

Parker came to get them on Halloween night. Teddie went as Rey from the new Star Wars movies, complete with light saber. Katy was too self-conscious to wear a costume, although she did wear a pretty black silky blouse with pumpkins and lace, and nice-fitting jeans. She left her hair down, because she knew that their new friend liked it that way.

“The fire department is also handing out candy,” he said when they were on the way into Benton. “So we can make a lot of stops.”

“Oh, boy!” Teddie said. “Endless candy!”

“Endless dentist visits,” Katy groaned.

“Stop that,” two voices said at once. Teddie and Parker looked at each other and just howled with laughter as they realized they’d said it at the same time.

“You two!” Katy said in mock anger. “I can’t take you anyplace!”

“We’ll behave,” Teddie promised.

“Speak for yourself.” Parker chuckled. “I never behave.”

* * *

Their first stop was the side of the town square that contained a restaurant and a sports bar, along with a dress shop. The proprietors were wearing costumes and carrying pumpkin baskets full of candy.

Teddie held out her own bag and received handfuls of candy while Parker and Katy watched from the sidewalk.

“They really pull out the stops to do this, don’t they?” Katy asked. “It’s so nice of them!”

“It’s dangerous for kids to go alone these days,” he remarked. “And houses are spaced so far apart that it would take forever to go door to door.”

“That’s true.”

“Hey, Mrs. Blake,” a young voice called.

Katy turned. She smiled. The girl, a redhead with brown eyes, was in the class she

taught. "Hello, Jean," she greeted. "You look very trendy!" she added.

Jean, who was wearing a Wonder Woman costume, laughed. "Thanks! My mom bought it for me!"

A woman joined them. She was tall and she looked irritated. "Honestly, all this fuss just for some candy we could have bought at the store," she muttered. "I'm missing my favorite program on TV!"

Jean flushed and looked as if she could have gone through the concrete with embarrassment.

"We all make sacrifices for the children we love," Katy said gently, making the tactful remark with just a faint bite in her tone.

The woman actually blushed as she looked from Katy to Parker. She cleared her throat. "Well, of course we do," she added belatedly. She forced a smile, and Jean relaxed. "Come on, Jean, there's another bag of treats waiting for you." She nudged her daughter forward.

"Good to see you, Mrs. Blake," Jean said.

"Good to see you, too, Jean," Katy said softly.

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Parker made a face as the two of them went out of earshot. “My mother would never have complained like that.”

“Neither would mine,” Katy said on a sigh.

“Parker?” came an almost incredulous voice from behind them.

Chapter Five

Parker turned around and there was his former sergeant, Butch Matthews, grinning like a Cheshire cat as he saw his friend keeping company with a woman. A pretty woman, at that.

“How’s it going, Sarge?” he asked, extending a hand to shake. “What are you doing here? And where did you leave Two Toes?”

“Safely locked in the den,” the man replied. “Double locked. Is that Mrs. Blake?” he added.

“It is. Katy Blake, this is Butch Matthews. He was my sergeant when we served overseas. He owns Two Toes.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Katy said, smiling.

Matthews repeated the greeting and tipped his wide-brimmed hat. “Sorry he got onto your place and scared your daughter, ma’am. He’s an escape artist. I was scared to death I’d find him in the road dead.”

“He’s a very nice wolf,” Katy said. “My daughter was fascinated with him when Parker put him in the truck and drove him home. She said she’d love to meet him sometime.”

The sergeant beamed. “I’d be delighted. Any time at all. I’m a rehabilitator for the fish and wildlife folks. I specialize in mammals, like wolves and coyotes, pumas, raccoons, and so forth.”

“I imagine you stay busy,” Katy said.

“Very busy.” He sighed. “Too many people shoot animals without caring if they’re just wounded. We get a lot of city hunters up here who aren’t too careful about what they put a bullet in.”

“True story,” Parker agreed. “A hunter from Las Vegas came up here with a brand-new gun and shot what he thought was a white deer. It was Old Man Harlowe’s prize goat. Talk about a lawsuit!”

“It wasn’t just the money, either. He loved that old goat. Said the property was posted and everything and that idiot jumped a fence onto his property and just killed his goat. They caught him with it on the Benton highway. Said he was properly shocked when they told him what he shot.”

“I hope they lock him up,” Katy muttered. “I have no quarrel with responsible hunters, but I draw the line at idiots.”

“So do I,” Parker agreed.

The sarge looked from one to the other of them with twinkling eyes. “Well, I guess I’ll go ask Lucy Mallory for a few toffees to satisfy my sweet tooth. She’s got the cloth shop over there.” He nodded toward the other side of the square. “I never miss

Halloween in town,” he added on a chuckle. “See you.”

They waved.

“He’s nice,” Katy said. “What happened to his arm?”

“Blown off when we were in Iraq,” he returned bluntly and then winced. “Sorry. He took a direct hit from a mortar. We didn’t think he’d make it, but we had one hell of a battlefield surgeon. Saved his life. He’s one of the best men I’ve ever known.” He didn’t add that he’d saved Matthews by running through a hail of bullets to recover him and been wounded in the process. Or that Matthews had saved his life by taking out an insurgent who had Parker in his sights. That was while Matthews was still recovering in the field hospital, too, before they shipped him home. A group of insurgents had actually attacked the field hospital.

“I would love to see the wolf again, now that I know he’s not dangerous,” Katy said.

“I’ll take you and Teddie over there one day. Saturday maybe if it isn’t snowing.”

“Snowing?!”

“It’s in the forecast, I’m afraid,” he said on a sigh. “The nighthawks will be cursing.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“It’s not something we mind, keeping watch over the cattle,” Parker added. “I even pitch in when I’m not working with the horses. It’s just the difficulty of getting equipment where it’s needed if we have an emergency. . . .”

“Well, well,” came an amused voice from nearby. It was the owner of the Gray Dove restaurant in town, a coincidence if there ever was one, because nobody knew it was

Parker's late mother's name. "Fancy seeing you two in town."

Katy flushed, but Parker just laughed. "How are you, Mary?" he asked. "Katy Blake, this is Mary Dodd. She owns the restaurant in town."

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“I’m very happy to meet you,” Katy said. “You have wonderful food. Teddie and I ate there one afternoon just last week!”

“Thanks,” Mary replied with a warm smile. “Parker, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you trick-or-treating.”

“I brought Katy and Teddie.”

“Teddie?”

Parker nodded toward the little girl dressed up as Rey in Star Wars regalia.

“Why, isn’t she adorable?” Mary enthused.

“Thanks,” Katy said proudly. “She begged for the costume for two weeks, so I gave in. I have to admit, it does look pretty good on her, even if she is my daughter.”

“That Star Wars stuff sells like mad at the costume shops,” Mary agreed. “I used to go as Princess Leia. But that was years ago. Parker, did you ever dress up for Halloween?”

He shook his head. “We didn’t celebrate it in my family,” he said, and he was withdrawn suddenly.

Mary grimaced. “Sorry. Hit a nerve, didn’t I? I didn’t mean to.”

“It’s nothing,” Parker said softly. “Really.”

“We all have our bad memories of that golden childhood everybody talks about. I never had one.”

“Me, neither.” Parker chuckled.

“Sorry,” Katy replied.

Mary pursed her lips and her eyes twinkled. “You’re getting stares,” she warned. “There will be talk.”

Parker shrugged. “Won’t be the first time I attracted gossip.”

“Same here,” Katy said, and she grinned.

Mary just laughed. “At least you have a good attitude about it. I’ll go help my girls with the handouts. Don’t forget to bring your daughter by the restaurant. We made Rice Krispies treats!”

“I wouldn’t miss those for the world,” Katy promised.

“You can have some, too,” Mary promised, and patted her on the arm. “See you. Parker, you watch your mouth.”

He put a finger to his lips and his eyes twinkled.

After Mary left, Katy looked up at him curiously. “Everybody says you cuss like a sailor, but I’ve never heard you say a really bad word.”

“I’m on my best behavior, especially in front of Teddie.” He glanced at her with real fondness. “She’s a sweet child. You and your husband did a great job with her.”

“Thanks. I’m very proud of her,” she said, her eyes on her daughter, who was now talking with some other children who’d been brought to town by their relatives. She looked up at him curiously. “You’re wonderful with Teddie. It’s obvious that you love children. But . . . ?”

“But I never had any of my own, you were going to say, huh?” he asked, and his dark eyes were sad. “I didn’t know until I got back home, out of the military, but my fiancée was pregnant with my child when she died.”

“Oh, Parker, how horrible,” she said under her breath. “I’m so sorry!”

He ground his teeth together. So many memories, all painful. He shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans. “I got cold feet after that. All I could think about was how much it hurt to lose her, to lose my child.” He laughed, but it had a hollow sound. “I withdrew from the world. I discovered,” he added, glancing down at her, “that most women will avoid a man who can’t say a complete sentence without a few really blue words. So I started cussing a lot, especially when the boss or the other cowboys had women relatives visiting.” He pursed his lips and his eyes twinkled. “It worked very well.”

She laughed. “Should I be flattered, that you don’t use bad words around us?”

His big shoulders shrugged. “I guess so,” he said after a minute. “I don’t want to drive Teddie away. She’s brought the sunshine back into my life.” He looked down at her. “You’re part of that.”

She caught her breath as they stared into each other’s eyes for just a little longer than politeness required.

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“We’re both carrying painful scars,” he said after a minute. “You lost your husband. I lost my fiancée and my child. I’ve had longer to recover than you have, but it’s still fresh, very fresh.”

She drew in a breath and wrapped her arms around her chest. She felt a chill, even with her nice warm coat on. “My husband died doing something he felt a moral obligation to do. It was the most important thing in his life, even more important than us. He said that so few people could do his job, that many men would have died if he hadn’t been there to do it. So I guess it evens out, in a way. But yes, it’s still fresh. A few months’ distance helps. It doesn’t heal.”

“It takes years for that.” He lifted his head and looked where Teddie was opening her bag to another handful of treats from a merchant. “You know, when you have an old dog that you love, and it dies, they all say the best thing for the grief is to go right out and get a puppy.”

Her heart skipped. “They do, don’t they?”

He turned to her. “We’re not speaking of dogs.”

She just nodded. She was spellbound, looking up into those dark, dark eyes.

He moved a step closer, not intimately close, but enough that she could feel his breath on her forehead. “We don’t have to get totally involved, just to have a hamburger together or take Teddie to a movie. Right?”

Her heart was going wild. It surprised and almost shamed her, because she hadn’t had

such a violent physical reaction even to her late husband. “N-no,” she stammered. “I mean, yes. I mean . . .” She just stopped, staring up into his eyes.

His jaw tautened and he averted his gaze. “Don’t do that,” he bit off. “It’s been a long time. A long time,” he emphasized. “I’m more vulnerable than I look.”

She swallowed, hard. “Sorry,” she said in a gruff whisper.

He shifted on his feet, feeling the hunger all the way to his toes. “I would love to drag you behind the nearest building and kiss you until you couldn’t stand up by yourself.”

Her lips parted on a shocked breath. She turned toward Teddie, not looking at him. “I would love it . . . if you did,” she blurted out.

“Oh, God,” he groaned.

“‘Four score and seven years ago’,” she began reciting Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.

She turned around again and he looked down at her in shock.

“It’s what I did at school when I got all embarrassed and couldn’t think of what to say to somebody,” she explained, and flushed, and then laughed self-consciously.

He burst out laughing. “I started calculating the absolute value of Pi,” he replied, and now his dark eyes were twinkling.

“Lincoln’s address is much shorter,” she pointed out.

He grinned. “So it is.” He caught her hand in his and linked their fingers together. “People will talk,” he added softly.

Her fingers tangled in his. “Let them,” she said huskily.

He pulled her along with him and they went to find Teddie.

* * *

Teddie, of course, noticed the new attitude between both the adults in her life, and she smiled mischievously when they got back to the ranch house.

“Thanks for driving us, Parker,” Teddie said on the front porch, and impulsively hugged him and then ran to unlock the front door. “Happy Halloween!” she called back as she went inside. “I’m going to eat candy and watch TV!”

“Not too much!” Katy called after her.

“Okay!”

Parker chuckled. “She doesn’t miss a trick, does she? I guess we might as well be wearing signs.”

“She’s intuitive,” she agreed.

He reached out lazily and pulled her to him. “How about a movie Saturday night?” he asked. “We can take Teddie to see that new cartoon one that came out.”

“I’d love to go to a movie with you.”

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He bent his head toward her. “We can’t make out in a theater,” he whispered. “Probably a good thing.”

“Probably a very . . . good . . . thing,” she agreed as his mouth brushed slowly over hers.

“Come up here.” He lifted her off the ground against him and his mouth grew gently invasive. “You taste like honey,” he whispered, and smiled against her lips as he drew her closer.

She smiled, too. She loved the way he kissed her. He wasn’t impatient or demanding. He was gentle and slow and seductive.

“I like this,” he whispered.

“Me, too,” she whispered back.

He drew in a quick breath and slowly lowered her back to her feet. “One step at a time,” he said huskily, holding her just a little away from him. “We could get in over our heads too quickly.”

She nodded. She was staring at his mouth. It hadn’t been enough. Not nearly enough.

He read that hunger in her. “Too much too soon is dangerous,” he said firmly.

She nodded again. She was still staring at his mouth.

“Oh, what the hell . . . !”

He swept her close, bent, and made a meal of her soft lips, pressing them back away from her teeth so that his tongue could flick inside her mouth and make the kiss even more intimate, more seductive.

She moaned helplessly, and he ground his mouth into hers, his arms swallowing her up whole, in a silence that exploded with sensation too long unfelt, hungers too long unfed, passion that flared between them like a wildfire.

Finally, when her lips were almost bruised, he eased her away from him. His heartbeat was shaking the jacket he wore with his T-shirt. He sounded as if he'd run a ten-mile race, his breathing was so labored.

She just smiled, all at sea, deliciously stimulated, feeling as if she'd finally taken the edge off a little of the hunger he kindled in her.

“Well, that was dumb,” he muttered. “Now we'll have hot dreams of each other every night and I'll wake up screaming.”

She laughed. “I'd love to see that,” she teased.

He laughed, too. “If I do, I'll phone you.”

“You could text me,” she said. “Even when I'm at work. I wouldn't mind.”

He smiled softly. “You can text me, too, even at two in the morning. I don't sleep much.”

“I could?”

He nodded. He touched her cheek gently. “We have differences,” he said. “My culture is not the same as yours. Even though my father is white, I was raised a Crow, in a Crow community.”

“I’ll study.”

He smiled. “That’s the idea.”

“But whatever the differences, I won’t mind,” she said. Her face was radiant. “I’ll adjust.”

He nodded. “I know you will. Meanwhile, we’ll try to keep it low-key. Okay?”

She flushed. She’d started this. “I should probably feel guilty, but I don’t,” she added pertly.

“Neither do I. Some things are inevitable.”

“Yes.”

He drew in a long breath. “Well, I’ll go home and try to sleep. If I can’t sleep, I’ll text you, and you can call and sing me a lullaby,” he said outrageously.

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“I actually know one,” she said. “I used to sing it to Teddie when she was little. It always worked.”

He brushed her mouth with his. “It will take a lot more than a lullaby to get me to sleep, I’m afraid,” he said.

“Bad memories?”

“Very bad,” he said. “And not all from combat.”

She wondered if his father had anything to do with those, but it was far too soon in their very new relationship to start asking intimate questions about his life. Still, there was one question that kept coming up.

“Do you have a first name?” she asked.

He chuckled. “Yes.”

She cocked her head. “Well?”

His dark eyes twinkled. “We need to keep a few secrets just to make ourselves more interesting.”

“Spoilsport.”

“If you’re curious, you won’t mind letting me stay around here.”

“I wouldn’t mind even if I wasn’t curious.”

“We’ll still wait,” he returned. “Tell Teddie I’ll be here bright and early Saturday for her riding lessons, and that we’ll go to a movie Saturday night.”

She made a face. “No places to make out,” she complained.

His eyes twinkled. “That’s not a bad thing. We’ll make haste slowly.”

She let out a deep sigh. “Okay,” she said.

He laughed. “We walk before we run.”

“Some of us are still at the crawling stage, though,” she said with a sting of sarcasm and a big grin.

He just shook his head. “Good night.”

“Good night. Thanks for driving us.”

“No problem.”

He got in the truck and drove off with a wave. Katy watched him all the way out the driveway before she walked back into the house and locked the door.

Teddie was waiting in the hall as she started toward her own bedroom.

“Aha,” Teddie teased.

Katy’s thin eyebrows arched. “Aha?” she repeated.

“Your lipstick is smeared and your hair looks like rats nested in it,” Teddie said with twinkling eyes.

Katy cleared her throat. “Well, you see—”

“It won’t work,” her daughter interrupted. She grinned. “I like Parker,” she added, wiggling her eyebrows. She went back into her room and closed the door.

Katy laughed all the way into her own room.

* * *

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It was two o'clock in the morning. Katy couldn't sleep. She kept feeling the slow, soft hunger of Parker's sensuous mouth against her lips, the warm comfort of his strong arms around her. She was restless.

She heard a buzz. She had her cell phone on vibrate so it wouldn't wake Teddie. She picked it up and disconnected it from the charger. There was a message on it. Are you awake?

Yes, she texted back. Couldn't sleep. You?

Same, he texted. Suppose you text me the Gettysburg Address? It might put me to sleep.

LOL, she texted back.

I had fun tonight, he texted. I don't go out much.

Me, neither, she replied. I had fun, too. Teddie mentioned that my lipstick was smeared, she added before she could chicken out and not text it.

There was a big LOL on the screen. I had lipstick all over my face. Lucky that I live alone, he added.

She laughed to herself. Sorry about that, she texted.

I didn't mind. But you might look for some type of lipstick that doesn't come off. You know, just in case we can't help ourselves one night . . . ?

I'll go right to the store tomorrow after school and search for one, she replied.

And the clerk will go right out and tell the whole town what sort you bought, he teased.

She laughed. Oh, the joy of small towns.

They're the backbone of the world, aren't they? he texted back.

They are. I'm sorry you can't sleep. Bad memories?

Oh, no. Delicious ones. I ache every time I remember those few minutes on your front porch.

Her heart jumped. She felt exactly the same. Delicious, she typed.

And addictive.

Definitely.

I have no plans to stop, he texted after a minute.

She felt warm all over. I don't, either.

There was a long pause, during which she felt as if he was right in the room with her and she was hungry and thirsty, but not for food.

Going to try to sleep now. You do that, too, he said. Sleep well, angel.

She smiled. You sleep well, too. Good night.

Good night.

She turned the phone off, but she felt safe and warm and content. She closed her eyes and went to sleep with the phone under her pillow.

* * *

“Mom! Mom, we’re going to be late!” Teddie called from the doorway.

“Late?” Katy sat up in bed, looking all at sea.

“Late for school and late for work. Late, late, late!”

“Oh. Oh!”

She threw off the covers and got out of bed, groaning when she looked at the clock. She wouldn't even have time to make coffee . . . !

“I made you a cup of coffee and put it in your Starbucks coffee carrier,” Teddie added.

“You sweetheart!” Katy called. “Thank you!”

“I figured it was the least I could do, considering all the candy I got last night. I had fun!”

“I did, too,” Katy mused.

Teddie laughed. “I noticed.”

Katy threw a pillow at the door.

Teddie ran, laughing all the way down the hall.

* * *

Teddie was waiting at the stable Saturday morning when Parker drove up. Katy, standing at the front porch door, hesitated to go out. She was wearing jeans and a frilly blouse, her long blond hair neatly combed and loose around her shoulders. And she'd found a variety of lipstick that would stick only to her lips and not to everything

else. But she was suddenly shy of Parker. She noticed that he looked curiously toward the house before he went into the barn with Teddie to saddle Bartholomew and run Teddie through the basics once more.

They came back out of the stable, with Parker holding the bridle and Teddie sitting high in the saddle, back straight, arms in, eyes looking straight ahead instead of down.

Katy was proud of her daughter's seat when she rode. The child was a natural. She didn't tense up or watch the ground or even jerk on the bridle. She sat the horse like a real cowgirl, when she'd never done any riding in her little life.

Parker walked alongside, holding the reins. He had Snow with him this morning, and she was saddled. He spoke to Teddie and handed her the reins, instructing her how to hold them so that she didn't put too much pressure on the bit in Bartholomew's mouth.

When he was satisfied that she was sitting straight, arms in, he nodded and swung up into the saddle and turned Snow so that she and Bartholomew were parallel to each other.

Katy waved. Parker smiled. Even at that distance, it made her heart race. "I'll have lunch ready when you get back," she promised.

"What are we having?" he asked.

"Tuna fish sandwiches."

He made an awful face.

"You don't like fish," she began.

“I like tuna fish,” he returned. “I just don’t like most tuna salads.”

She pursed her lips. “You need to taste mine,” she said. “I put in a secret ingredient.” She wiggled her eyebrows.

He chuckled. “Okay. I’ll try it.”

“That’s the sign of a man with guts,” she teased.

He laughed. “And other organs,” he mused. “See you.”

He turned to Teddie and gave another instruction. Then he went alongside her down the path that led to the road. Apparently, Katy thought, it was going to be a longer ride today. She went back inside to fix lunch. She could put the tuna salad in the fridge when she made it. It would keep nicely until they came back.

She put pickled peach juice in the tuna, along with mayonnaise and sweet pickles. It was an odd way to prepare it, but she’d learned it from her grandfather, who made the best tuna salad she’d ever put in her mouth. The taste was unique.

She finished her task and went to watch the latest news on TV.

* * *

Parker was riding beside Teddie as they wound around the ranch property. Both were wearing jackets, because there were actual snowflakes.

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“Snow!” Teddie sighed. She laughed as she lifted her face to let the flakes melt on her soft skin. “I love it!”

“You wouldn’t if you were a poor cowboy who had to nursemaid pregnant heifers,” he teased. “It’s a twenty-four-hour a day job. Even in the snow.”

“Gosh, ranching is complicated.”

“That’s why I love it,” he confessed.

She glanced at him and away. “My mom really likes you.”

His heart jumped. “I really like your mom.”

She grinned. “I noticed.”

“We’re going slowly,” he said. “Nothing intense. We’re taking you to a movie tonight, if you want to go.”

“Oh, boy!” she exclaimed. “What are we going to see?”

“That new cartoon movie.” He named it.

“I want to see that one so much!” she enthused.

He chuckled. “You make the sun come out, kid. You’re always upbeat, always brimming over with optimism. I’d fallen into a deep place before I met you and your

mother. I was so depressed that I didn't care about much."

She beamed. "I'm a good influence, I am," she teased.

"You truly are, Teddie," he replied. "I never thought I'd enjoy teaching anybody anything. But this is fun."

She grinned. "It is. I'm so glad you don't mind teaching me about horses. But gosh, it's complicated. There's so much you have to learn, about what not to do. It's a long list."

"You pretty much learn as you go along," he pointed out. "It takes time to get used to an animal you've never been around. But you're really getting the hang of it. You sit like a cowboy."

"Thanks. I love what you're teaching me," she told him. She ran her hand gently over Bartholomew's mane. "I love Bart, too. He's the nicest horse in the world."

Bartholomew actually seemed to understand what she was saying. He turned his head around toward her and made an odd snuffling sound.

"Smart horse," Parker remarked. He smiled. "I think he understands a lot more than we believe he does."

"He's so easy to ride."

"He's been through a lot," Parker said. He didn't add what he'd learned about the man who'd been so cruel to Bartholomew. It seemed that he'd escaped the abuse charge by daring them to prove it. It had maddened Parker, who knew the man was lying. But it was going to be hard to get any evidence that would stand up in court.

However, Parker thought, he knew people in the community who would keep an eye on the horse's former owner and tell Parker anything they learned. It might still be possible to put the man behind bars, where he belonged.

"You're awful quiet today," Teddie remarked.

He smiled. "I'm just thinking."

"You are?" She gave him a wicked smile. "Mom bought some lipstick that won't come off. The saleslady teased her about you."

He felt a ruddy color climb up his cheeks, but he laughed in spite of it. He knew there would be gossip about him and Katy. He didn't even mind.

"You're really nice, Parker," Teddie added with a fond look. "You and Mom look good together."

"Dark and light," he mused.

"You aren't that dark. But you look like a Crow. You really are handsome, like Mom says."

He whistled. "She thinks I'm handsome?" he asked, and laughed.

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“I do, too. Now what about trotting?” she replied.

He jerked himself out of his ongoing daydreams about Katy and they went on to the next step in her riding education.

Chapter Six

While Katy was waiting at home for Parker and Teddie to come back, she had a telephone call from the vet who’d treated Bartholomew’s wounds.

“I thought you needed to know that the man who abused Bartholomew had the charges against him dropped,” he said with some rancor. “He’s friends with the prosecutor, it seems, and since there were no witnesses, they dismissed the case. He’s out again.”

“He should be tied up in a stable somewhere and doused with recycled grass,” she muttered.

“I agree. He says he wants his horse back. If I were you, I’d think seriously about getting an attorney. You’re going to need help.”

She drew in a long breath. “That’s good advice. Teddie’s so attached to the horse. It will kill her if they give him back to that . . . that animal. I won’t let him take Bart. I’ll fight him to the last ditch.”

“I feel as if I should salute you,” he teased.

“The army missed its chance when I didn’t enlist,” she said with a chuckle.

“Well, I just wanted to tell you what happened.”

“Thanks, Dr. Carr. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem. How are Bart’s hooves?”

“Looking good. We keep them cleaned and the farrier came over again this week to have a look. He says Bart’s healed nicely.”

“Good news,” he said. “I’ll say good-bye. If you need me, night or day, you call.”

“I will. Thanks again.”

She hung up and thought about what the vet had said. She only knew one attorney, but he was very good. Despite her dislike for his relentless pursuit, Ron Woodley was a good attorney who won most of the cases he’d tried; and he was fairly famous, for a young attorney. He was sweet on Katy. It would be underhanded and unkind to play on that attraction, she told herself. Then she thought about Teddie and what it would mean to the little girl to have an abusive former owner try to reclaim his horse. She didn’t know any local attorneys, and she was afraid that if the abuser had plenty of money, local attorneys in a small town might not be anxious to go up against him publicly. She needed somebody high-powered and aggressive in the courtroom. Teddie didn’t like the lawyer, but she loved her horse. Katy thought about that.

After which, she picked up the phone and made a long-distance call to Maryland.

* * *

When Parker and Teddie came up on the porch, both laughing, she felt a sudden pang

of guilt. She should have first discussed with her daughter what she planned to do. She had an impulsive nature that sometimes got her into complicated situations. This one would certainly qualify.

“I’ve got lunch ready,” she said, leading the way into the kitchen. “How’s Bart doing?”

“Very well, indeed,” Parker said as he pulled out a chair for Teddie and then one for himself at the kitchen table. “His hooves look good. So does the rest of him.”

“What do you want to drink?” she asked Parker.

“Oh, a fifth of aged scotch, a magnum of champagne . . .” He grinned at her expression. “How about coffee?”

She laughed. “That suits me, too.”

She put the tuna salad on the table, along with a loaf of bread, a jar of mayonnaise, and knives at each plate. “Dig in,” she invited them.

“We haven’t said grace yet,” Teddie reminded her with a pointed look.

Katy rolled her eyes. “Sorry, sweetheart. Let me start the coffee and I’ll be right there.”

She sat down and before she and Katy bowed their heads, Parker was already bowing his. “When in Rome . . . ?” he teased softly.

Katy smiled and said grace.

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She got back up then and went to pour coffee into two cups.

“Cream? Sugar?”

“I’m a purist,” he returned. “I take my coffee straight up mostly.”

She grinned. “I do too.”

“I don’t,” Teddie piped up. “Cream and sugar helps kill the taste! Can I have some?”

“When you’re thirteen,” Katy said, without missing a beat.

“Thirteen?!”

“That’s when my grandparents said I could have it. My parents said it, too. Coffee’s supposed to stunt your growth or something if you drink it earlier than that.” She frowned as she put the cups down on the table. “That sounds very odd.”

“It does,” Teddie agreed enthusiastically. “So where’s my cup?”

“When you’re thirteen, regardless of why,” Katy said easily and sat down.

They made sandwiches. Parker bit into his and his expression spoke volumes.

“Hey!” he said. “This is great!”

Katy smiled broadly. “Thanks. I learned how to make it from my granddad. He had a

secret ingredient that set it apart from most tuna salad.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “And . . . ?”

“Oh, no,” she retorted. “I’m not giving it away. It’s a secret,” she said in a loud whisper.

He gave her a wicked look. “For now,” he said, and the way he was looking at her made her flush.

Teddie noticed. She smiled to herself.

They ate in a pleasant silence, except that Katy looked guilty and Parker wondered why.

After lunch, Teddie asked to be excused to watch a special program on the nature channel. Katy agreed at once.

She put up the lunch things and put the dishes in the sink, worried and unable to hide it.

“What is it?” Parker asked when she sat back down at the table.

She managed a jerky smile. “The vet called. They let Bart’s owner out of jail and dropped the charges.”

He sighed. “I know. I just found out this morning. I was going to tell you earlier, but I didn’t have the heart.”

“He suggested I get an attorney.”

“That’s a good idea,” Parker said. “He has one out of Denver,” he added. “A relative who’s a big-city attorney with a great track record.” He sighed. “Problem is, getting you an attorney who can stand up to him in court.”

“I thought about that.”

“We have some good local ones,” Parker continued. “But not one of them has ever gone up against a sophisticated city lawyer. Not to my knowledge. You need somebody comparable to the horse abuser’s counsel.”

“As it happens, I do know one back East.” She gave him an apologetic look. “The attorney who handled my husband’s affairs,” she began.

He rolled his eyes. “Not the suit with the attitude problem who doesn’t like Teddie?”

She winced. “Well, he’s the only big-city attorney I know, and if Teddie loses that horse, I don’t know what will become of her.”

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He made a face. He sipped coffee. “I guess it’s not a bad idea.” His dark eyes met hers. “So long as he keeps his hands off you.”

Her heart jumped. Her lips parted. “Oh.”

Both dark eyebrows lifted and he smiled wickedly at her expression.

She threw a napkin at him and laughed.

“As it happens,” he said dryly, “I’m not kidding. If he makes a move on you, he goes on the endangered species list. I have squatter’s rights.”

Her whole face became radiant. “Really?”

He cocked his head and studied her. “I hadn’t planned on getting involved with anybody, ever again, you know.”

“Actually, neither had I.”

His big hand reached across to hers and linked fingers with it. “Life goes on. Maybe we both need to look ahead instead of behind.”

She beamed.

“I have a few things to do at home before we leave for the theater. But I’ll be back around six. That okay?”

“That’s fine.”

He stood and drew her gently up out of her chair. His dark eyes looked down into hers, warm and soft. “They say it’s a great movie.”

“Teddie will love it.”

He bent and kissed her very softly. “So will we. See you later, pretty girl.”

She smiled with her whole heart. “Okay.”

He winked and left her standing there, vibrating.

* * *

Teddie came bouncing into the living room when her program was over. Her mother was sitting on the sofa reading, but she was alone. “Oh, Parker’s gone,” she exclaimed. “Aren’t we going to the movies, then?”

“Yes, we are. He had a few things to do before we leave. Sit down, honey.”

Teddie didn’t like the expression on her mother’s face. She dropped down into the armchair across from the sofa. “Something’s wrong, isn’t it?”

Katy nodded. “Dr. Carr called while you and Parker were out riding.” She sighed. “I hate having to tell you this,” she added sadly.

“They let Bart’s owner go, didn’t they?” Teddie asked.

Katy nodded. “And he wants his horse back.”

“No!” Teddie exclaimed. “Oh, we can’t let him take Bart back! He’ll kill him!”

“I know that. He’s not getting him back. But he has a big-city attorney from Denver who’ll be representing him. We don’t have any such person in Benton who can go up against him.”

Teddie looked unhappy. “What are we going to do?” she wailed.

Katy made a face. “I called Maryland,” she said.

“No,” she said miserably. “Not him!”

“Honey, if we want to keep the horse, we have to fight fire with fire. We need somebody who’s formidable in court, and Ron Woodley is. He’s practiced criminal law for ten years and he’s only lost one case. He started out as an assistant district attorney. He knows what he’s doing.”

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Teddie took a breath. “Okay, then. Is he willing to do it?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Katy said. “He said it would be better if he came out now than at Thanksgiving, anyway, because a rich client invited him to stay for a couple of weeks at his estate in the Virgin Islands over the Thanksgiving holidays.”

“Lucky him.”

“I don’t like islands,” Katy confessed. “They attract hurricanes.”

“Not in November,” Teddie teased.

“Anything can happen. I like dry land.”

Teddie smiled. “Me, too. Well, I guess I can hide in the closet while he’s here,” she said. “He doesn’t like me at all.”

“He doesn’t like children,” she replied. “I guess he’s never been around any.”

“No, he doesn’t like me, because I’m in the way. He said so. He likes you a lot.” She studied her mother. “I like Parker, and I’m not in his way.”

She smiled slowly. “I like Parker very much.”

“I know he feels that way about you,” Teddie said. “He’s always talking about you.”

Katy’s heart lifted. “So, you’re not mad at me, because I invited the lawyer out?”

Teddie shook her head. “I don’t want Bart to die. Anything’s better than that. Even the eastern lawyer.”

Katy smiled. “That’s what I thought.”

* * *

The movie was hilarious. It was about a crime-fighting family of superheroes, and focused on the baby, whom nobody thought had any powers. There was a scene with the baby beating up a raccoon that had all three of them almost rolling on the floor laughing.

When they were back out on the street, they were still laughing.

“That poor raccoon,” Teddie gasped.

“That poor baby,” Katy chuckled.

“The poor parents,” Parker commented. “Imagine having a child who could burst into flames or walk through walls?”

“You do have a point,” Katy had to admit.

“It was so funny! Thanks for taking us, Parker,” Teddie added.

“Oh, I like being around you guys,” he said, smiling. “You’re good company.”

“So are you,” Katy said softly.

He winked at her and she flushed.

“Are you going to have Thanksgiving with us?” Teddie asked.

Katy gave him a hopeful look.

His lips parted. He grimaced. “Well, you see . . .”

“Don’t tell me. You don’t celebrate it,” Katy guessed. “You probably don’t celebrate Columbus Day, either.”

He laughed. “Caught me.”

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“But Thanksgiving is about sharing,” Teddie protested. “Pilgrims and Native Americans sat down together at the harvest.”

“At first,” Katy agreed. “Afterward, when the vicious cold killed their crops and they exhausted the local game, they died in droves.”

Parker pursed his lips. “Some of them were rather helped into the hereafter, I understand, after they attacked people who did have food and tried to take it from them.”

“Gosh, I didn’t know that,” Teddie said.

“History isn’t quite as pleasant as most people think,” Katy said. “It’s brutal and ugly in places, and some people in historical times don’t stand up to modern scrutiny. Of course, historians are also taught that you can’t judge the morality of the past by that of the present when you read history. And they’re quite right. Can you imagine opium dens in today’s world, or children working in mines?”

“We’ve come a long way,” Parker agreed.

“Not quite far enough, it seems sometimes,” Katy replied. She smiled at him. “It was a great movie. Thanks.”

“We’ll do it again in a week or so.” He paused. “When does your eastern Perry Mason show up?” he added.

She burst out laughing. “I’m not sure. He said in about two weeks. He can’t come at

Thanksgiving because a rich client invited him to the islands.”

“Nice,” Parker said. “He’ll get a suntan. Then he might look almost as good as I do,” he added, tongue-in-cheek.

“Oh, Parker, you’re funny,” Teddie said. She hugged him. “I think you’re just the right shade of tan.”

He hugged her back. “Thanks, sprout.”

Teddie sighed. It would be so nice if her mother ever hugged her.

“I’m going to play games on the Xbox. Okay?” she asked her mother.

“Tomorrow’s Sunday. Just remember, we’re going to church. Don’t stay up too late.”

“I won’t,” Teddie promised. She looked at Parker. “Do you go to church?”

“Of course,” he said. “But not quite in the way you do.”

“Can you tell us about it?” she asked excitedly.

He chuckled. “Plenty of time for that. What game are you playing?”

“Minecraft,” she said. “It’s awesome!”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s maddening. I like sword and sorcery stuff, like Skyrim.”

“That’s ancient,” she said.

“That’s why I like it,” he returned.

“No, it’s ancient. Old. Out of date!”

“Not my fault,” he said. “Tell Bethesda Softworks to get busy on Elder Scrolls VI and I’ll give up Skyrim.”

“As if,” she said with downturned lips. “I’ll be grown and married before we ever see it.”

“Don’t I know it,” he agreed.

Teddie waved and went down the hall.

“Bethesda? Elder Scrolls? Skyrim?” Katy wondered aloud.

“I’m a finicky gamer,” he said. He moved toward her, pulled her into his arms, and bent to kiss her very softly. “I’ll have more chores for a week or two, so we may have to put Teddie’s riding on hold, just for a bit,” he said gently. “But I should be free by the time your attorney gets here, so I can defend my rights.”

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She laughed softly. “He’s just going to help us keep Bart. I don’t have any plans to move back to Maryland, whatever the temptation.”

His mouth brushed hers. “You sure about that?”

“I’m becoming addicted to Benton,” she said, and she sounded breathless.

“To Benton?” he asked at her lips. “Or to me?”

“Same . . . thing,” she managed, just before his mouth covered hers and became drugging, deep and slow and arousing. He lifted her up against him and held her hungrily for a long time before he finally drew back and let her go.

“Wow,” she managed unsteadily.

His eyebrows arched and he laughed involuntarily. “You’re bad for my ego,” he teased. “I won’t be able to get my head through doors.”

“You’re bad for my self-restraint,” she returned.

He pursed his sensuous lips. “That’s a sweet admission.”

“Don’t take advantage of a weakness I can’t help,” she said firmly.

He smiled. “Not my style,” he said gently. “I don’t want anything that isn’t freely given.”

“I think I knew that already. But it’s nice to hear.” She lowered her eyes. “I don’t seem to have much willpower when you’re around.”

“That works both ways, honey. Keep your doors locked, okay? We’ve got a pack of wolves roaming nearby. The feds don’t think they’ll pose a threat, but if we have severe weather and they get hungry enough . . .”

He let the words trail off. She knew what he meant. A wild animal was likely to look for food anywhere he could get it when he was starving. There were some horror stories about wolves and settlers, back in the early days of western settlement.

“We always lock the doors,” she assured him.

“Make sure you keep the stable doors closed as well,” he added.

She made a face. “That would be horrible, after all Bart’s been through, to have him fall prey to a wolf.”

“I agree. But if you take reasonable precautions, it shouldn’t be an issue. Just don’t let tidbit go out alone at night to see Bart, okay?” he said, meaning Teddie. “Not now, at least.”

“I won’t. Or I’ll go with her.”

“I know you don’t like guns; you’ve said so often enough. But do you have a weapon at all around here?”

She sighed worriedly. “Not really.”

“Then both of you stay inside and keep the doors locked. You’ve got my phone number. You can call me if you get afraid, for any reason, and I’ll be right over.

Okay?"

She felt warm and cosseted. She smiled. "Okay."

He moved closer. "I love the way you look when you smile," he whispered. He bent and kissed her hungrily one last time. He drew back almost at once. "I'm leaving. You're getting through my defenses. I fear for my honor."

She burst out laughing. "I feel dangerous!"

He made a face. Then he winked. "Sleep well."

"You, too."

She watched him out the window until he drove away. She felt as if she could have walked on air.

* * *

Ron Woodley arrived several days before he was expected. He checked into the local motel, after being told firmly by Katy that he wasn't living with her and Teddie while they fought for possession of Bartholomew. He showed up at her front door one Saturday morning in a fancy rented sedan while Parker was in the barn with Teddie, saddling the horse.

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“Hello, you gorgeous woman,” he enthused, and hugged her before she could back away. “It’s so good to see you again!”

She drew back. “Good to see you, Ron. Thanks for coming. We may have to pay your fee on the installment plan—”

“Don’t insult me,” he interrupted. “I do some pro bono work. This will add to my curriculum vitae,” he added on a chuckle. “Got some tea?”

She was briefly disconcerted. “Hot or cold?”

“Hot.”

“Okay. Come on in,” she added with a glance at the stable. Parker and Teddie were looking in her direction, but they didn’t come out.

“Where’s your daughter?” Ron asked with barely concealed distaste.

“She’s out in the stable with Parker.”

His chin lifted. “Parker?”

She nodded as she boiled water and searched for a few scarce tea bags. “He’s a horse wrangler for J.L. Denton, who owns the big ranch property next door. His wife writes for television, that Warriors and Warlocksseries.”

“Never watched it,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “Do you think it’s safe to leave

a man you barely know alone with your little girl?”

She stopped what she was doing and turned to him, her pale eyes flashing.

He held up both hands. “Sorry. Obviously you know him better than I do. If you trust him, that’s the main thing.”

“The main thing is that Teddie trusts him,” she said in a soft, biting tone.

He shrugged. His keen eyes looked around the room. “Primitive, but I suppose it’s serviceable,” he mentioned. “Some nice collectibles on that shelf,” he added. “World War II?” he asked.

“Yes. My grandfather brought them back from Japan.”

“They’re worth some money,” he said. “Do you still have those old Western pistols your husband had?”

“I sold them,” she said. “I don’t like guns.”

“Neither do I,” he agreed.

She finally managed to get a tea bag and hot water in the same cup. She handed it to him.

“Sugar’s on the table,” she told him.

He waved it away. “I learned to drink tea in Japan. They never offer sugar with it. You have to ask for it.”

He sipped the tea and frowned. “What is this?”

“I’m not really sure,” she said apologetically. “We don’t drink tea. That was in a housewarming gift the Dentons sent over when we moved in.”

“I prefer Earl Grey,” he said, sipping it. “Or Darjeeling. But this is okay.”

“I’m so glad.” She bit her tongue to keep from making it sound sarcastic.

“So. Tell me about this horse.”

“He’s a beautiful old horse, a palomino. Teddie named him Bartholomew and she loves him dearly.” She drew in a breath. “The previous owner had neglected him so badly that his hooves were clogged and infected, and he had deep cuts where he’d been abused with a whip.”

Ron’s eyes narrowed. “Can anyone prove that he inflicted those cuts?”

She sighed. “There were no eyewitnesses.”

“Surveillance cameras?”

“Please. The man lives in a shack up a mountain.”

“Sorry. I guess this is pretty far in the boondocks.”

She didn’t reply.

“All right,” he said after a minute. “You said he was arrested and charged with animal cruelty.”

“Yes. The animal control officer said that a neighbor reported him. It wasn’t the first time he’d had such a charge leveled against him. But he has friends and relatives in high places, so the charges were just dropped.”

He pursed his lips as he sipped tea and frowned, deep in thought. “First order of business is to speak to the person who reported him, and have the neighbors questioned. If he has close relatives who live with or near him, they can be deposed as well. The local veterinarian examined him?”

“Yes. Dr. Carr.”

“Would he be willing to testify?”

She smiled. “He said of course he would.”

“You’d be amazed at how few people really will, even if they agree at first.

Especially if the perp has connections.”

“The world is a sad place.”

He looked at her. “You have no idea how sad.” He smiled at her. “Do they have any passable restaurants around here? If so, you and I could eat out tonight.”

“I can’t leave Teddie alone,” she said, surprised.

“She’s what, ten? She’s old enough to stay by herself. You can just lock the doors,” he said easily.

“Ron, it’s very evident that you’ve never had a child,” she said sadly. “It doesn’t work like that. A child of ten doesn’t have the judgment she’d need to handle an emergency.”

“Bull. We had a five-year-old boy call nine-one-one after a shooting. He was a material witness in a murder case.”

“This isn’t the city. There are all sorts of dangers out here, including wolves.”

“Wolves are sweet creatures.” He sighed, smiling. “There’s a wildlife center close to where I live. They have two wolves. I love to go and pet them.”

She gave him a long look. “Have you ever seen a wolf in the wild?” she asked.

He smiled vacantly. “What does that have to do with it?”

She was about to explain, in rather biting terms, when she heard voices. Parker and Teddie came in the front door and stopped at the dining room entrance.

Ron stood up. “Ron Woodley,” he introduced himself.

“Parker,” came the droll reply, followed by a firm handshake.

“Parker what?” Ron asked.

Parker just smiled.

“Nobody knows that,” Teddie said, smiling up at her tall companion. “He says it’s a secret.”

“You’re Indian, aren’t you?” Ron asked lazily.

Parker cocked his head. “Crow, actually. Or Absaroka, if you want the proper term.”

“I thought Crows came from Montana.”

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“Mostly we do. I grew up there, on the rez, near Hardin.”

“Reservations.” Ron shook his head as he sat back down next to Katy. “It’s sad that we have such a high civilization in the world, but we still have people living in abject poverty on reservations under government programs.”

“Yes. Amazing that such a high civilization put us there in the first place, isn’t it?” Parker asked. His voice was pleasant, but his dark eyes were saying something quite different.

Ron noted that the man was quite muscular and that he didn’t back down from criticism. In fact, he looked rather dangerous. He cleared his throat. “Yes, isn’t it?” he said, avoiding a confrontation.

Parker raised an eyebrow. “You practice law in Maryland, I believe?”

“Yes. Mostly in the Capitol,” Ron replied. “You break horses, I hear.”

“Most of the time,” he agreed.

“He’s teaching me how to ride,” Teddie said.

“You couldn’t do that?” he asked Katy.

“I don’t have the time, and I’m too impatient,” Katy replied. “Besides, Parker knows more about horses than I do. I’ve forgotten a lot over the years.”

“Pity it’s a skill that doesn’t travel well,” Ron remarked when he noticed the way Katy was looking at the other man. He seemed to feel that a man who worked with horses was too stupid to do anything else. Not that he said it. He insinuated it.

Teddie was perceptive enough to be outraged on Parker’s behalf. “You should tell him about the cat,” Teddie told Parker firmly.

He grinned at her. “Patience is a virtue,” he said gently. “We make haste slowly. Right?”

She made a face. “Right,” she added with a covert glare at their other visitor.

“Well, I’ll say good night,” Parker told them. “I’ve got an old army buddy coming to visit for a while. We were in Iraq together.”

Ron looked uncomfortable. He’d managed to keep out of the military. He didn’t really like being around men who’d served. They made him look bad.

“Then we’ll see you next Saturday, right?” Teddie asked.

He smiled. “Of course.” He glanced at Katy, who looked uneasy. “See you.”

“See you,” she said, and forced a smile. Because even though Parker was polite and courteous, she sensed that he was drawing away from her because of Ron. She didn’t understand why. At least, not then.

Chapter Seven

Katy had thought that Ron would start right away to interview people who knew the horse’s owner, his neighbors and relations. But mostly what Ron did was drive around to see the sights and take Katy out to eat. He allowed Teddie to go with them,

but the invitation was reluctant at best. He didn't like the child around, and it was painfully obvious.

A week after Ron's arrival, Katy came in with the mail and her expression was one of abject misery.

"What's wrong, Mom?" Teddie asked. "You haven't been yourself all the way home from school."

Katy put up her purse and car keys. She pulled out an opened envelope. "It's a legal document insisting that Bartholomew be returned to his rightful owner."

"But he can't! He just can't make us give Bart back!" she exclaimed.

"I'll discuss it with Ron as soon as possible."

"He won't do anything," Teddie said shortly. "He hasn't even asked anybody about how that man treated Bart."

"How do you know that?"

"My friend Edie told me," she said belligerently. "She says her mother and father are furious. They know at least two of the man's neighbors who would be willing to go to court to testify against him, but neither of them has even been asked."

Katy made a face. She was feeling worse by the day about her idea to have Ron come and do them this favor. He was pleasant company, but he spent their time together talking up Washington society and her gift for putting people at ease. She'd make a proper hostess for a politician, he insisted, and instead she was burying herself out here in the boondocks with filthy cattle and wild people.

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She was glad Parker hadn't heard him say that. Sadly, Parker had kept his distance since Ron had shown up at Teddie's home. He excused himself because of the pressure of work, he said, but this time of year, ranch work was more attuned to watching over the cattle and repair work than breaking new horses.

"Ron," Katy began when they were briefly alone at the house, while Teddie was out in the stable grooming Bart, "we need to talk."

"Oh, yes, we do," he said.

He got up, pulled her up into his arms, and began kissing her hungrily.

She was too shocked to react, which was unfortunate, because just at that moment, an excited Teddie opened the door and came in with Parker.

Katy pulled back abruptly, feeling sick when she saw Parker's expression. It wasn't angry. It was disappointed. Sad. Resigned.

"Oh. Mom." Teddie flushed when she saw the glare Ron sent in her direction. "Sorry. I needed to ask a question."

Ron, furious, stuck his hands in his pockets and turned away to look out a window.

"What is it, Teddie?" Katy asked, almost shaking with indignation.

"Parker said Dr. Carr has a neighbor who actually saw Bart's owner hitting him with the whip, and he's willing to testify in court!"

Katy was still catching her breath. “He did?”

Parker’s dark eyes went from Ron’s back to Katy’s flushed face. “He said that the man would have his attorney contact your attorney. When you get one,” he added pleasantly.

Ron whirled around. “She’s got one,” he said tautly. “And just who are you?”

Parker lifted an eyebrow and smiled. “Forgotten me already? I’m just a horse wrangler. I’m helping Teddie learn to ride.”

Ron made a dismissive sound and turned to Katy. “If you want my advice, you’ll take the course of least resistance and let the man have his horse back.”

“Did you not understand what was done to the horse?” Parker asked.

Ron shrugged. “Animals are just animals. Some people are abusive, even to other people. Teddie can always get another horse.”

“You mean man!” Teddie burst out. “You don’t even care about what happens to Bart if that man gets him back. You haven’t done anything to help me save my horse! You only came here to try to get my mother to marry you. And if she does,” she added, glaring at Katy, “I’ll run away from home! I’d rather live at a shelter than have to live with you!” she cried, tears running down her face.

“Teddie, that’s enough,” Katy said quietly.

Teddie was sobbing. Parker pulled her close and held her. He stared at Katy with something akin to contempt.

She flushed.

“It’s going to be a hard case to prove in court,” Ron said breezily. “You have to call witnesses, it will tie you up in court, make you enemies in the community. The man is rich and he has powerful friends,” he added. “You won’t find a local attorney who’ll even consider the case.”

Katy turned to look at him, undecided.

“And it will cost an arm and a leg in legal fees,” Ron added. “You’ll face censure, your daughter will face it, and for what? An old, beat-up horse with hardly any time left to live anyway. It might be a mercy to just let the vet put him down. That’s the course the owner favors, anyway. I spoke to him. He said he’ll let the whole thing go, if you’ll agree to let the vet do what’s necessary.”

“Nobody is putting Bartholomew down,” Teddie said fiercely.

“You’re just a kid,” Ron said with faint contempt. “You don’t have a say about this.”

“She doesn’t. I do,” Parker replied.

“And you’re a nobody around here, horse wrangler. You work for wages,” Ron said with obvious distaste. “You’re Indian, too, aren’t you?” He smiled sarcastically. “That won’t go over big with the locals, will it?”

“Oh, I’ve never been one to curry favor,” Parker replied.

“Are you going to let them kill my horse?” Teddie asked her mother, with a dignity that sat oddly on such a young face.

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Katy was torn. Ron sounded very logical. The horse was old. But that look on her daughter's face wounded her.

"It's painless," Ron said. "The horse won't even feel it."

"Why don't we get the vet to put you down first, and you can tell us if you feel it?" Parker drawled.

Ron looked outraged. "You have no right to even be here," he began.

"Parker is my friend," Teddie said. "The nicest thing you ever said to me was that it was a shame that my mother had a child."

Ron didn't deny it. He just shrugged. "I guess the local attitudes are corrupting your daughter, Katy," he said. "Another good reason to come back to Maryland where you belong."

Katy was feeling sicker by the minute, torn between logic and her daughter's pain.

"I have a simple solution," Parker told the child. "Give the horse to me." He looked up at Ron with a cold smile. "And I'll take on his former owner in court, with pleasure."

"I don't think a public defender will take the case," Ron commented smartly.

"Mr. Denton employs a firm of attorneys out of L.A.," he replied. "I've already spoken to him about the case."

“A rancher with attorneys in L.A.” Ron laughed.

“His wife is the lead writer for Warriors and Warlocks,” Parker replied quietly. “Mr. Denton owns Drayco Properties.”

Even Ron had heard of those. It was one of the biggest conglomerates of oil and gas property in the country.

“He also likes horses,” Parker added. He looked down at Teddie. “You get your mother to sign Bart over to me, and I’ll do the rest.” He glanced at Ron. “I don’t mind a good fight.”

He was insinuating that Ron would run from one. And Ron knew it. His face flushed. “I could win the case if I wanted to,” he said.

“We all need to calm down,” Katy said, glancing from one heated expression to the next. “Let’s sleep on it and talk again tomorrow.”

Parker bent and dropped a kiss on Teddie’s hair. “Don’t worry. We’ll save Bart. One way or another,” he added, with a cool glance at Ron and an even cooler one at Katy. He went out, with Teddie right behind him.

“You need to keep that man away from your daughter,” Ron told Katy firmly. “He’s using her to get to you.”

But it didn’t look that way to Katy. Parker had barely glanced at her on his way out, the sort of impassive expression you might expect from a total stranger. It had hurt. She’d felt guilty about her closeness to Parker and he’d backed off. Asking Ron out here had been the last straw, and she could see it. Parker thought she was serious about Ron, especially after he’d witnessed that impassioned kiss.

Ron approached her, but she backed away.

“I’m not interested in you that way, Ron,” she said firmly. “I’m sorry if I gave you the impression that I was. I honestly thought you meant it when you said if I ever needed help, you’d come.”

“Of course, I meant it,” he protested.

“So you talked to the horse’s owner, without telling me, and offered to have Bartholomew put down, knowing that I got you out here because my daughter loves the horse and wants to save him.”

Ron cleared his throat. “I prefer negotiation to a stand-up fight.”

“Oh, I can see that negotiation is certainly more preferable. It would have been a great solution when my great-great-grandfather was fighting off cattle rustlers up in Montana, negotiating with people pointing loaded guns at him.” Her eyes were sparking now.

“Nobody rustles cattle anymore,” he argued.

“Yes, they do. They use transfer trucks instead of horses, but they still use guns.”

“Barbarians,” he muttered.

Her eyes went over his expensive suit, his styled, neat hair, and his expensive jewelry. And she found that she infinitely preferred Parker’s simple denims and long hair.

“Barbarians,” she mused. She smiled. “That’s what you think Parker is.”

He wrinkled his nose.

“You should never judge people by the way they look,” she said.

He made a rough sound in his throat. “I’m going back to my motel. I’ll see you tomorrow. By then, hopefully you and that rude child will have come to your senses. Good evening.”

She held the door open for him and watched him drive away in his expensive rented car.

She walked out to the stable to find Teddie still grooming Bart, tears running down her cheeks. Parker had already gone.

“Teddie,” she began.

Her daughter looked at her with eyes that were red with tears and disappointment and anger. She put Bart back into his stall and put up the grooming tool.

“Daddy would be ashamed of you,” Teddie said simply. She walked out of the stable and left her mother to turn off the lights.

Teddie didn’t come out for supper. Her door stayed locked.

Katy was miserable. She shouldn’t have listened to Ron. He was part of another world, another mindset. And yes, her late husband would have fought Bart’s former owner to the Supreme Court, if he’d needed to. But he would have saved Teddie’s

horse. Even Parker fought for her, which was more than Katy had done.

She took a shower and dried her hair, put on a night gown, and sat down on the side of her bed. She picked up her phone and sent a short text to Parker.

It wasn't answered. She tried again and her number had been blocked.

She put the phone down, tears stinging her eyes. If she needed to know how he felt, that was her answer. Obviously, he felt that she'd taken the lawyer's part over her own daughter's, and he was disgusted with her. He'd witnessed that kiss, as well. It must have been painful to him, because he'd thought that he and Katy had something going for them. That kiss had shown him that they didn't.

She lay down and turned out her light. But she didn't sleep.

* * *

Parker couldn't sleep either. He was sorry that he'd blocked Katy's number, but he'd thought they were headed for a good place together, and that wasn't happening. He'd found her in the arms of this eastern attorney whom she'd vowed that she disliked. It hadn't looked like dislike to Parker.

He got up and made coffee. It wouldn't help him sleep, but it was something to do. He heard a vehicle coming down the road. It stopped and pulled into his driveway.

For an instant, he thought it might be Katy. But it was only his boss. Odd thing, to find the boss out driving at this hour of the night, he thought as he opened the door.

"Hey, boss. How's things?" Parker greeted.

J.L. Denton came up on the porch, out of sorts and weary. "Got any coffee?" he

asked.

“You bet. Come on in.”

The two men sat at Parker’s kitchen table sipping black coffee in a companionable silence.

“Okay, what’s this about some lawyer from back East sucking up to the man who beat that horse that the Blakes rescued?”

“Him.” Parker made a face. “Sleazy so-and-so. He’s ambitious. Bart’s former owner is rich and he has friends.”

“I have a few of my own. I called Beck and Thomas in L.A. They’re flying out here Monday. If the child’s mother will give custody of Bart to you, I’ll handle the rest.”

“That’s the thing,” Parker said quietly. “She was all hugged up with the lawyer when I went over there earlier. Teddie begged her not to let the man take the horse. The lawyer said the former owner would drop the whole thing if they’d have the horse put down instead.”

“What did Mrs. Blake say to that?”

“She told Teddie that it might be the best solution.”

“Damn!”

“I said that and a few other things. Right now, I’m pretty sure I’d like to go home to Montana and live on the rez and be a real Indian.”

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“Baloney. You’d die of boredom in a week.”

Parker laughed, but it had a hollow sound. “I could always move to D.C. and work for that letter agency.”

“You’d die of stress in a week.” J.L. chuckled. “Stay here and break horses. It’s what you were born to do.”

Parker sighed. “I guess it might . . . what the hell is that?”

They got up from the table and went out on the front porch.

“I don’t believe it,” Parker said heavily.

It was a little girl with a flashlight, leading a horse. It was Teddie, crying and muttering to herself.

“Oh, honey,” Parker said, feeling her misery.

She handed the reins to J.L. and ran into Parker’s arms. He lifted her and hugged her, rocking her.

“She’s going to have him put down, I just know it. I can’t let her kill Bart,” Teddie wailed.

Over her head, Parker’s tormented eyes met J.L.’s.

“Nobody’s putting the horse down,” J.L. said firmly. He pulled his cell phone out of its holder and started making calls.

* * *

A horse trailer arrived, along with a redheaded woman in a luxury car, about the same time Katy Blake came driving up in front of Parker’s house.

She started toward Teddie, but Teddie, standing next to Parker, turned away.

J.L. Denton glared at Katy. “Nobody’s putting this horse down,” he said shortly. “I’m taking him home with me. Burt Dealy can get himself a damned good lawyer, because I’m going to put him behind bars and let him rot there if he doesn’t! As for that child”—he pointed at Teddie—“if you were my wife, I’d divorce you for the misery you’ve caused her tonight!”

“Now, J.L., that’s not helping,” the redheaded woman said gently. She smiled at Teddie and went to Katy. “I’m Cassie Denton, J.L.’s wife,” she said in her soft voice. “Apparently, there’s a little trouble here.”

Katy choked back tears. “I’ve been behind it all, I’m afraid,” she managed.

Cassie pulled the other woman into her arms and rocked her while she cried. Katy was stiff and unyielding, and Cassie let her go almost at once. “There, there,” she said gently. “We all have hard times. We usually live through them.”

Katy moved away, dashing tears from her eyes. “Thanks,” she said huskily. She turned toward Teddie. “Sweetheart . . .”

“I’m not going home with you,” Teddie said miserably. “You can marry that awful man and have kids that you love.”

Katy's face contorted.

"I want to stay with Parker," Teddie muttered. "He cares about me and Bart."

Parker smiled at her. "That's sweet, and I appreciate it. But it's not practical. Brave girls don't run away from trouble, you know. Your mother loves you."

"Sure she does. That's why she wants to kill my horse. Or, worse, let that horrible man take him back and beat him to death," Teddie said angrily.

Katy wrapped her arms around herself. She felt thoroughly miserable and ashamed. J.L. Denton was absolutely glaring at her.

"I won't let him take the horse," she said after a minute.

"Who'll stop him? That fancy lawyer?" Teddie asked.

"Not likely," Parker said flatly.

"Burt Dealy buys people," J.L. said icily. "He's bought off public officials for years. This isn't the first time he's been brought up on charges. He always walks. Apparently he thinks he can buy your lawyer friend off, too." He smiled coldly. "He won't buy me off. I'll have him drawn and quartered first. My attorneys are coming out here from L.A. on Monday. They'll handle the case. All you have to do, if you think you can manage it, is give me legal custody of Bart. I'll do the rest."

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“She won’t do it,” Teddie said, glaring at her mother. “Her friend won’t like it.”

“Teddie, I’m sorry,” Katy said miserably. “I made a mistake. I shouldn’t have listened to him. It was wrong.”

Teddie wasn’t budging.

“Why don’t you come home with us for tonight?” Cassie suggested gently to the child. “Then we’ll take you back home in the morning.”

Teddie looked up at Parker.

“Go,” he said quietly. “J.L. has a nice big stable, much nicer than mine. You can settle Bart for the night. If your mother approves,” he added. The look he gave Katy made her feel two inches tall.

“Yes, that would . . . that would be all right,” Katy stammered. “If you’re willing to fight for Bart, I’ll thank you. I’m not really sure that Ron would fight for him, or even try to.” She lowered her eyes.

“Everybody makes mistakes,” Cassie said softly.

Teddie hugged Parker and walked away with Cassie. She didn’t look back.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” J.L. told Parker. “Thanks for the coffee.”

“No problem. Good night, Teddie.”

“Good night, Parker,” she called back.

They loaded Bart into the horse trailer and within five minutes, the yard was deserted except for Parker and Katy.

She was still standing in the cold in a thin sweater, her arms wrapped around herself. She looked miserable.

“Go home,” he said shortly, and turned back toward the house.

“He was kissing me,” she said. “I was too shocked to fight at first, and then you and Teddie came in and I was ashamed.”

He stopped at the steps and looked back at her. “You called that yellow polecat and asked him to come out here. I figured you wanted what happened. Especially after you broke Teddie’s heart with that comment about taking the easiest course and letting them put Bart down. That was cowardly.”

She flushed. She drew in a breath. “Yes,” she said after a minute.

“He doesn’t like Teddie.”

“I know.”

“Maybe you’d fit in better with Washington society after all,” he told her. “You’d probably be better off than living out here with barbarians. Good night, Mrs. Blake.”

He went into the house and slammed the door.

* * *

Katy drove home. Her daughter hated her. Parker didn't want anything more to do with her. J.L. Denton thought she was despicable. And she'd deserved every single miserable thing that had happened to her tonight.

She could hardly believe that she'd agreed with Ron about having the horse put down, even knowing how much Teddie loved him. Teddie had loved her father, too. They'd been close in a way that Katy and Teddie had never been close. Her daughter had never warmed to her. Perhaps it was because Katy didn't know how to let people in close. She'd loved her husband in her way, but she was always alone, apart, even from her own family. Her parents had hardly ever touched. They got along, said they loved each other, but they fought a lot. They'd married to combine two huge ranch properties. They'd cared for Katy, but they didn't know how to show it. In turn, Katy had never been able to show that love she had for her daughter.

It occurred to her only then that Bartholomew had been the catalyst to bring Teddie and Katy closer together. The child had grown more optimistic, more outgoing, since she'd had responsibility for the abused horse. Parker had helped there, too. The two of them had made Katy look at the world in a different way. She and Teddie had been growing closer, more every day.

Until she called Ron to help save the horse and he'd defected to the enemy. Worse, he'd almost convinced Katy that his course of action was the right one, despite Teddie's outraged and hurt feelings. She was losing her daughter's love and trust, and for what? For a society lawyer who didn't really care about Katy as a person, only as an asset to his legal career, because she'd become a good hostess and organizer among military wives, many of whom were big in social circles. And because she had those stocks that her husband had invested in, stocks that might make her very wealthy. He'd convinced her, with logic, that terminating the troublesome horse was the quickest way out of her legal dilemma.

Quickest, yes. And an excellent venue for destroying her relationship with her only

child. She saw Teddie's tearful, shocked face every time she closed her eyes. Teddie hadn't expected her mother to sell her out to a stranger who didn't even like her. Parker would never have done that. Katy was sure of it. Now the Dentons had involved themselves, and J.L. was going after the horse abuser with a firm of high-powered attorneys who made Ron look like a law student.

First, she was going to have to sign over custody of Bart in a legal manner. She thought about how that would look to her daughter and Parker and the Dentons if she got Ron to help her. No. She'd have to go into Benton Monday and find an attorney who'd be willing to do the work for her. It would be an expense, but if it would help mend the breach between her and Teddie, it was worth any amount of money.

Maybe she could win Teddie's trust again. But Parker wanted nothing more to do with her, and he'd made it very clear tonight. Until then, she hadn't realized how much a part of the family he'd become to her. It was painful to think she wouldn't see him helping around the place, teaching Teddie horse care, explaining Crow legends. Talking about the cat in the box.

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She smiled sadly as she thought what a high intelligence he had, and he'd let Ron treat him like a vagrant. She couldn't imagine why. Or maybe she could. He wasn't even going to try to compete with the society attorney. He'd witnessed that impassioned kiss and he was probably convinced that Katy had chosen Ron over him. It wasn't the truth. But what did it matter? They all hated her.

Tomorrow was Sunday. She'd have to drive over to the Dentons to bring a furious Teddie home and discuss Bart's future. Ron would certainly arrive after lunch, to complicate matters. She hadn't felt such impotent sorrow since her husband's death.

She missed her late husband. She felt guilty that she'd started seeing Parker, because it was like betraying her husband's memory. But it wasn't at all. Teddie loved Parker. He was larger than life, a strong and capable man with a stunning intellect and a big heart. He never ran from a fight. Ron did. It was why he negotiated settlements out of court for most of his cases. He wasn't a stand-up fighter and he didn't like confrontation. Well, not unless he considered his adversary inferior to him. That was why he'd been so condescending with Parker. Pity, she thought, that Parker hadn't aired his views on theoretical physics. But Parker wasn't competing, because he didn't think Katy was worth the competition. That thought was like a knife in her heart. She hadn't realized how important Parker was to her until she'd alienated him. She'd alienated her daughter as well. Somehow, she was going to have to make amends, if she could.

She went back to bed and turned off the light, but she knew she wasn't going to sleep. Her life was in turmoil all over again because she'd gone nuts and invited Ron down to aid her in the struggle for possession of Bartholomew. He hadn't aided her at all. He'd helped lose part of her family.

So she closed her eyes on welling anger and considered her next course of action. Tomorrow, after she got her daughter back, she was going to have a long and very hot conversation with one eastern attorney.

* * *

The Dentons were already up when she pulled up at their front door, after calling and asking if it was all right to come fetch her daughter. She didn't want to make J.L. any madder than he already was.

Teddie was sitting at the breakfast table with Cassie and J.L. and the baby, in his high chair, when she walked in.

"Good morning," Katy said hesitantly.

"Good morning," Cassie greeted. "Won't you have something to eat? Or at least coffee?"

J.L. didn't speak. He glared.

Katy flushed. She took a deep breath and put her hands in her pockets. "I'm going into town tomorrow to see an attorney and have Bartholomew signed over to you, Mr. Denton. I'll be very grateful, and so will Teddie, for any help you can give us. I don't want him put down and I don't want his former owner to get him." She shifted her feet restlessly. "Ron is very logical. He helped me settle my husband's affairs after he was killed overseas. He seemed like a capable, trustworthy man, but he's not. He's a snake. I just didn't know it until yesterday, when he almost convinced me that I was being stupid and unrealistic."

Teddie was looking at her mother, not glaring. J.L.'s hard face softened just a little.

“Anybody can be taken in by a fast-talking lawyer,” Cassie said. “My poor father was the victim of one, who helped his shady client ruin my father’s reputation so they could get his position for her. The uproar caused my mother to commit suicide.”

“Oh, my goodness. I’m so sorry!” Katy exclaimed.

“We were very close,” Cassie confided. “It took a long time to get over it. In fact, I haven’t yet.”

“Teddie and I haven’t really been close,” Katy said, not looking at the sad little girl at the table. “My fault. My parents married to combine two ranching properties. I think they wanted me, at first, but neither knew how to show affection. I was raised with almost no touching, no sharing, no affection.” She smiled. “It’s hard to show love when you haven’t been shown it.” She glanced at her daughter. “I’m in the learning stages about that.”

Teddie flushed. She squirmed in her chair.

“Coffee?” Cassie asked again.

“Thanks, anyway. But we’d better go,” Katy said. Her face tautened. “I have a lawyer to parboil after lunch.”

J.L. chuckled helplessly. Teddie’s face lightened.

“He’ll be leaving very soon, I believe,” Katy added with a glance at Teddie. “And I’m not listening to anything else he says. I’ll have those papers for you tomorrow afternoon, Mr. Denton. I’ll see the lawyer first thing after I dismiss my class.”

“Wait and let my attorneys draw up the papers,” J.L. replied. “They’ll be here by noon tomorrow. I’ll have Parker drop the papers off at your place when you get

home.”

She bit her lower lip. “Parker isn’t speaking to me at the moment.”

J.L. cocked his head, his eyebrows arching in a question.

“He’s mad at me about the horse. He thinks I sold out my daughter. It looks that way.” She searched Teddie’s eyes. “When I flub up, I do a super job of it, don’t I, baby?” she asked.

Teddie got up from the table. “Me, too,” she confessed.

“So we’ll go home and get our ducks in a row,” Katy continued. She grimaced. “But it might be kinder to ask somebody besides Parker to hand over the paperwork. Kinder to him, anyway.”

He shrugged.

“You’ll take good care of Bart, won’t you, Mr. Denton?” Teddie asked worriedly. “You won’t let that awful man come and take him?”

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J.L. smiled at the child. “He’d need a tank at the least to get through my security, and he’s much too lazy to learn to drive one.”

Teddie laughed. “Okay. Thanks. And for letting me stay.”

“You’re always welcome,” Cassie told the little girl, and hugged her.

“Thanks, from both of us,” Katy said.

Cassie hugged her, too. “Don’t take life so seriously,” she said gently. “Things work out, if you just give them time.”

“Good advice,” Katy said warmly. “We’ll take it. Ready to go, Teddie?”

“I’m ready.”

They said their good-byes, stopping at the stable so that Teddie could say good-bye to Bartholomew, who had a huge stall and plenty of food and fresh water.

One of the cowboys grinned at them. “That your horse?” he asked Teddie. “He’s super nice.”

Teddie beamed. “Thanks!”

“I’ll look after him, no worries,” he assured her.

“Okay.”

“Thank you,” Katy added. She herded Teddie out of the stable and back to the SUV, putting her in before she got behind the wheel.

“You meant it?” Teddie asked at once. “About that lawyer?”

Katy nodded. “I meant it.” She drew in a breath. “I’m sorry. You were right. Daddy would have been ashamed of me.”

“I’m sorry I said that,” Teddie told her. “I’m sorry about it all. It’s just, I love Bart and I thought you were going to let that man talk you into having him put down. I was scared.”

“Nobody’s putting Bart down,” Katy said firmly as she started the car. “And Ron is going back home tomorrow, whether he wants to or not.”

Teddie didn’t say anything as she put on her seat belt. But she smiled.

Chapter Eight

It was after lunch before Ron drove up to the front porch. Katy let him in, but not with any sort of welcome. He glanced beyond her at Teddie sitting on the sofa, glaring, and he made a face.

“I thought you and I might go for a ride,” he said. “To talk about the horse.”

“How much did Mr. Dealy offer you, Ron?” she asked abruptly.

His lower jaw dropped. He stared at her while he searched for a reply that wouldn’t get him kicked out the front door. The man was extremely wealthy and he’d offered the lawyer a whopping fee if he could convince the woman to have the horse put down. If there was no evidence, he could get out of the abuse charge, just as he’d

gotten out of similar charges in the past—with money.

But it looked as if Katy was wise to the deal. He wondered who'd been talking to her. He suspected the Indian, but how would that man . . . what was his name again, Parker? How would Parker know?

“So it's true,” Katy continued, nodding. “I thought so.”

“It's just a horse, honey,” he said softly. “An old horse. He could drop dead tomorrow.”

Teddie stared at him coldly.

Odd, how guilty that stare made him feel. He didn't like kids, especially this one. He'd never wanted any, and he still didn't.

“You could get a colt and raise it,” he told the child.

“That isn't your decision,” Katy said quietly. “You have no place in this family except as my late husband's attorney. I was wrong to trust you. I should never have asked you for help.”

“Now listen, let’s not be hasty,” Ron began.

“I’m signing over custody of Bartholomew to Mr. Denton tomorrow. His firm of attorneys is coming here from L.A. and they’ll handle the litigation. Mr. Dealy is going to find himself in more hot water than he ever dreamed, and this time he won’t walk away from the charges.” She smiled coolly. “You see, we have photographic proof of Bart’s injuries and at least two witnesses who can attest to them in court.”

“Dealy said there were none,” Ron blurted out.

“Amazing how you’re willing to believe the word of a man who’ll half kill a horse and lie about it. It must have been a big sum he offered you,” Katy added cynically.

Ron took a long breath. He glared at Teddie. “If it wasn’t for that kid, you’d have done what I asked.”

“That kid is the reason I asked you to come here, to help us save her horse. And you sold us out for a promise of money,” Katy added. “I’d like you to leave now, please. Don’t ever come back,” she added. “Don’t call, don’t write, don’t even try to text me. If you like, I’ll be happy to write you a check for all your expenses, including airfare and the rental car. Even your usual fee for representing a client,” she added with icy disdain.

He shifted uncomfortably. “That won’t be necessary,” he said stiffly. “I’m not a poor man.” He moved just a step closer, stopping when she moved a step away. “We could have good times together,” he tried one last time, forcing a smile. “You’d shine in Washington society.”

“I prefer living with the barbarians,” Katy said easily. “Sorry.”

He let out an angry breath. “It’s the Indian, of course,” he said icily. “What, you going to marry him and live on the reservation? The man is ignorant!”

“Really? What do you know about Schrodinger’s cat?” Teddie asked with faint contempt.

“Schrodinger’s cat?” he asked, surprised. “It’s an experiment in theoretical physics.”

“Parker has a degree from MIT in theoretical physics,” Katy said. “His father is an astrophysicist who works for NASA.”

Ron looked properly shocked. He started to speak and just gave it up. He sighed. “Okay, it’s your life.” He looked around the place. “It’s a shack, but if you want to live here, it’s your choice.”

“Why, that’s right,” Katy said with a smile. “It is, isn’t it?”

He shrugged. “If you ever change your mind, you know how to find me.”

“Piece of advice,” Katy said as she showed him out the door. “Don’t hold your breath. Have a nice trip home.”

She closed the door in his face.

Teddie let out the breath she’d been holding. She still hadn’t trusted her mother not to give in to the man’s persuasions.

“Thanks,” she said.

Katy looked at her daughter with regret. “I’ve failed as a mother,” she said. “I’d like to think it was someone else’s fault, but it’s mine. I never should have taken a stranger’s part against you. You’re my daughter, and you love that horse. I can’t believe I agreed with Ron about putting him down. I’m so sorry, honey. So very sorry.”

Teddie got up and went to her mother. “I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t have run away. But I feel sorrier for Parker. He was only trying to help, and that lawyer treated him like an idiot.”

Katy sighed. “Parker won’t speak to me anymore,” she said. “I don’t blame him. I wish I’d made better decisions.”

“I thought you and Parker were getting close,” Teddie said.

Katy sat down on the edge of the sofa. “We were. But I got to thinking about your dad and that it was too soon. I felt guilty.”

“Daddy would want you to be happy,” Teddie told her. “He wouldn’t want you to be alone. He wasn’t that sort of person.”

Katy smiled. “You loved your dad.”

“Oh, yes, I did. I miss him awfully. But I love Parker,” she added. “He’s very like Daddy was. He’s strong and funny and gentle, and he fights for me.”

Katy flushed. “Something I didn’t do.”

Teddie put her arms around her mother, feeling the woman stiffen. She drew back at once, but Katy caught her and pulled her close, rocking her.

“My parents never touched me,” she whispered to Teddie. “It’s . . . hard for me to show affection. But I’ll try. Really.”

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Teddie hugged her back. “That’s okay. I can do all the hugging. I’m good at it.”

Katy laughed and fought back tears. At least one good thing had come out of the misery of the day before.

* * *

A truck pulled up in her driveway the next day when she got home from work. Her heart jumped because she thought it might be Parker. But it was the man who had the wolf. What was his name . . . ? Matthews, that was it. Butch Matthews.

“Mrs. Blake,” the man said, tipping his hat. “Mr. Denton sent me over with these papers about custody of your horse.”

“If you’ll come in for a minute, Mr. Matthews, I’ll sign them, and you can take them right back.”

“That would be fine.”

“Come on in,” she invited.

Teddie was waiting in the living room. “You have the wolf!”

He chuckled. “Yes. I have the wolf. Sorry he scared you that time.”

“I’m not scared anymore. I’ve been watching nature specials on wolves. Could we come over sometime and see the wolf? Maybe this weekend. If it’s okay?” Teddie

pleaded.

He smiled warmly at the child. “It’s okay. How about Saturday just after lunch?”

Teddie looked at her mother, who’d just finished signing custody of Bart over to J.L. Denton. She looked up. “What? Saturday after lunch? That would be fine with me. But I don’t know where you live,” she added.

“Parker does,” he said, and smiled.

Then she remembered that he’d seen her and Parker holding hands at the Halloween celebration downtown. Obviously, he didn’t know that things had cooled off between them.

“It would probably be best if you told me where to go,” Katy said, and looked so miserable that Butch just smiled and gave her directions.

* * *

Katy didn’t hear from Ron again. Well, except for once, when he tried to text her about rethinking her position on the horse. She blocked his number, as Parker had blocked hers. She didn’t even feel guilty about it.

Things were better between her and her daughter. She opened up to Teddie in a way she hadn’t been able to before. She hugged the little girl coming and going, which made Teddie happier than she’d ever been in her life. The distance that had existed between Teddie and Katy was slowly closing.

* * *

Thanksgiving Day came and was uneventful. They went to Butch Matthews’s house

the following Saturday to see Two Toes, the big white wolf with the dark gray ruff around his head.

“He’s got dark streaks in the fur on his head,” Teddie exclaimed as she stared at the enormous animal lying quietly on a rug in front of Butch’s television.

“He looks like he’s had a stylist color him up,” Katy laughed. “He’s really big, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he is,” Butch agreed. “Poor old thing, he’s about blind and most of his teeth are gone. I take him in to see Dr. Carr from time to time. He sure does attract attention in the waiting room on a collar and leash,” he added with a chuckle.

“I’ll bet,” Katy agreed. “Is he gentle?”

“Very,” Butch said. “He can’t see much, but he sits close to the television and when they run wolf stories on the nature channel, he howls,” he added. “So I guess his hearing is still good. I know his sense of smell is,” he murmured dryly, “because he figured out how to open my fridge and helped himself to a beef roast I was going to cook.”

They both laughed.

“He likes beef. But he’s a lot safer now that he’s getting it fed to him,” Butch told them.

“Can I pet him?” Teddie asked, fascinated with the animal.

“Sure. Just go slow. Let him smell your hand first.”

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Teddie got down on her knees in front of the big wolf and extended her fingers. He sniffed at them and cocked his head, sniffing again.

She ran her fingers over his thick fur, just at the side of his head, and he nuzzled against them.

“This is just awesome,” Teddie exclaimed. “He’s so sweet!”

“They’d have put him down if I hadn’t offered to take him in,” Butch told Katy while they watched her daughter pet the wolf. “Old things aren’t useless, you know.”

“I do know,” Katy said solemnly. “My late husband’s attorney came out to help us keep Teddie’s rescued horse, and he sold us out to the man who beat him. I sent him packing a few days ago.”

“Good for you,” Butch said. “Your horse may be old, but he’s got a lot of life left in him. Shame what that man did to him. Real shame. I hope he doesn’t get off the hook this time.”

“He won’t,” Katy said. “We signed over custody to Mr. Denton and his attorneys are getting ready to pin Mr. Dealy to a wall. They have eyewitnesses to the beatings, even recordings taken from cell phones. Apparently, Mr. Dealy wasn’t too careful about hiding his abuse.”

“If J.L.’s involved, Dealy will do time.” He shook his head. “Those lawyers from L.A. are real hell-raisers. I wouldn’t ever want them after me.”

She bit her lower lip. “Have you seen Parker lately?” she asked quietly.

“I see him occasionally,” he said. “He spends a lot of time working out with weights at the gym when he isn’t working on the ranch. He’s been pretty sad lately. Told J.L. he was thinking about moving back up onto the reservation in Montana.”

Katy winced. She knew why he felt that way. She crossed her arms over her breasts and sighed.

“Guess you two had a dustup, huh?” he asked.

“Something like that,” she replied. “I made some really stupid mistakes over the horse. Ron was so logical and he laid out the difficulties of a lawsuit in such a way that I considered taking his advice and letting them put Bartholomew down. Teddie was almost hysterical. Parker told her that nothing was going to happen to her horse. He stood up to Ron. For a few minutes,” she added ruefully, “it would have looked to an outsider as if he were her concerned parent and I was an outsider trying to ruin her life. He cares a lot about her.”

Butch didn’t comment.

“I’m still in the learning stages about showing affection,” she confessed after a minute. “My parents were ice-cold with me. I think they cared, in their way, but they never touched me. I grew up being alienated from other people. Now, I hug Teddie coming and going and I’m trying very hard to make it all up to her. Luckily for me, she has a forgiving nature.”

“And Parker doesn’t,” he murmured dryly.

She flushed. “And Parker doesn’t.”

“He lived with an abusive father. His mother died young and he was left to the mercy of relatives, but they already had a son whom they loved. Parker was pretty much a beast of burden to them, from what I learned about him. He had a great brain and a teacher sent him to MIT to study theoretical physics, helped him find a scholarship that paid for everything. When he came out, he couldn’t see himself teaching. And there was the war. He was patriotic to an extreme. He still is. He signed up for overseas duty and went to war with me.” He sighed. “It didn’t turn out the way we thought it would. War is glamorous until you see what happens to people who fight in them. After that, it’s an evil you wish you could erase from the world.”

“That’s what my late husband said.” She watched Teddie with the wolf, who was lying on his back now, letting her pet his chest. “I felt guilty, because my husband has only been dead a few months,” she blurted out. “Teddie said he wouldn’t want me to spend the rest of my life alone, that he was never like that. She knew him so well. They were close, in a way that she and I had never been, until just lately.”

“So you backed away from Parker and now he won’t talk to you,” he guessed.

She nodded. “He was the best thing that ever happened to my daughter. I feel worse about separating them than I do about alienating him myself. He’s a good man.”

“He is. Stubborn. Bad-tempered from time to time. But he’ll never desert you under fire.”

They stood in a companionable silence for a few minutes. Katy looked at her watch.

“I hate to break up this lovefest,” she teased Teddie, “but I have to put on stuff to cook for supper. Time to go, sweetheart.”

Teddie smoothed over the wolf’s head one more time and got to her feet. “So long, Two Toes,” she said softly. “I’ll come back to see you sometime if Mr. Matthews

doesn't mind."

Butch laughed. "Mr. Matthews doesn't mind. Anytime. Just call or text me first."

"I don't have your number," Katy said.

He held out his hand. She gave him her cell phone, and he put his name in her contacts list. "Now you have it."

"Thanks very much," she said.

He walked them out onto the porch. A cold wind was blowing. "We hear that Dealy's lawyer in Denver quit and he's trying to find a local lawyer who isn't afraid of J.L.'s bunch from L.A."

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She laughed. “Good luck to him. Anybody who supports that polecat is going to be in some really hot water. There are things that money can’t buy. A lot of them, in fact. Beating up a poor old horse is low on my list of desirable character traits.”

“Mine as well,” Butch agreed. “I love horses. I’m not good with them, like Parker is. But he’s got a gift. Some people have more of an affinity with animals than others do. Your daughter definitely has it,” he added, watching her climb into the SUV.

“Yes,” Katy said. “I was reluctant to let her adopt an abused horse. They can be problematic. But she solved that problem nicely by getting to know Parker.” Her eyes grew sad. “Ever wish you had a time machine?” she wondered.

“Lots,” he said.

She smiled at him. “Thanks for letting us visit Two Toes. He’s a celebrity in these parts.”

He grinned. “Maybe I should start hawking autographed photos of him. Dip his paw in ink and put it on a picture of him.”

She pursed her lips. “Lesser things have made people wealthy.”

He shrugged. “I’m like you. I can take money or leave it. If I can pay the bills, that’s all I want.”

She chuckled. “Me, too. See you.”

“See you.”

She turned on the ignition and drove them home. Teddie was wired like a lamp the whole way home, enthusing about the sweet wolf.

When they got home, Katy put on her roast while Teddie looked at animal videos on her cell phone.

“I miss Parker,” Teddie said sadly.

Katy drew in a long breath. “I know.”

Teddie looked up. “You could call him.”

Katy bit her lip as she put the cover on the Crock-Pot and set the timer. “I tried,” she said huskily. “He blocked my number.”

Teddie winced. “Oh.”

“Sometimes, we just have to accept that things and people change, and there’s not a lot we can do about it,” Katy told her daughter. She sat down beside her. “We have a roof over our heads, and some cattle, and we’re going to have Bartholomew back when Mr. Denton gets through having his lawyers trounce Mr. Dealy in court.”

“I hope they trounce Mr. Dealy from head to toe,” Teddie said angrily.

“Me, too.”

“Can you take me over to Mr. Denton’s place to see Bartholomew sometime?” she asked her mother. “I really miss him.”

“Of course, I can. I’ll text Cassie and see if it would be convenient to go tomorrow, if you like.”

Teddie smiled. “That would be great! Thanks, Mom!” She hugged her mother.

Katy hugged her back, thanking God for second chances. “I don’t say it much. But I do love you.”

Teddie hugged her harder. “I love you, too, Mom.”

“I’ll bet Bartholomew doesn’t miss us much, where he’s living,” Katy teased. “It’s like a luxury hotel for horses.”

Teddie laughed. “Yes, but it’s the people you miss, not the place.”

Katy only nodded. It was a wise comment, from a young girl. Wiser than her age denoted.

* * *

Cassie said it was all right, so Katy loaded up Teddie and they drove over to the Denton ranch, both wearing jeans and red checked shirts and down-filled jackets, because it had turned cold. In fact, snow flurries were coming down around them and heavy snow was predicted for the next two days.

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“I hope it doesn’t become a blizzard,” Katy murmured as they got out of the SUV at the barn. “I hate driving in snow.”

“They’ll close the schools, won’t they?” Teddie asked hopefully. “If they do, you and I could make a snowman!”

“We’ll build one of Ron, with a hay mustache, and we’ll pelt it with mud balls,” Katy muttered.

Teddie burst out laughing.

* * *

Bartholomew was in his own spacious stall, chowing down on a mix of corn and additives to make him healthy.

Drum, J.L.’s foreman, smiled at their approach. “Missing your horse?” he teased Teddie. “He’s been miserable.”

“He lives in luxury,” Katy pointed out.

He chuckled. “Even living in squalor where you’re loved beats living in luxury where you’re not,” he said philosophically. “Not that you guys live in squalor. It’s a good little ranch.”

“Thanks,” Katy said with a smile.

“Bart looks so nice!” Teddie enthused. “You guys have been brushing him!”

“Well, Parker has,” Drum replied, noting Katy’s sudden flush. “He comes over almost every day to check on him. He’s fond of the old fellow. We all are.”

“Bartholomew’s special,” Katy said in a subdued tone. She’d ruined everything with Parker. It was hard, remembering that.

“Have you heard about Dealy?” Drum asked, excitement in his tone.

She turned to him while Teddie petted her horse. “No. What about him?”

“He heard about J.L.’s lawyers from L.A. and ran for his life. He skipped town. Nobody knows where he went.” He chuckled. “So J.L.’s attorneys got their investigator out here. Wherever Dealy ran, it won’t be far enough.”

“Good,” Katy said shortly. “I hope they find him and convict him and put him in chains. A man who’ll beat a horse will beat a person.”

“You’re right about that,” came a deep, quiet voice from behind her.

She knew the voice. She couldn’t bear to turn and see the censure in his eyes.

But Teddie had no such reservations. “Parker!” she cried, and ran into his arms, to be picked up and hugged and swung around.

“Oh, Parker, I’ve missed you so much,” Teddie said, her voice muffled against his broad shoulder.

“I’ve missed you, too, tidbit,” he replied. There was a smile in his voice. “How are things going?”

“Fine.” She grimaced. “Sort of fine.”

He put her down. “Bart’s looking good, don’t you think?”

“He looks great. Doesn’t he, Mom?” she added.

Katy was standing with her face down, her arms folded, feeling alone and ashamed and vulnerable. “Yes. He looks . . . very good.”

“Oh, there’s a calf!” Teddie enthused as she glanced over a gate farther down while Bart was eating. “Could I pet him?” she asked Drum.

He chuckled. “You bet. Come along.”

They stranded Katy with Parker.

She couldn’t bring herself to meet his eyes, to see the accusation she knew would be in them.

“How are you?” he asked.

She moved one shoulder. “Teddie and I are getting along better than we ever have,” she said noncommittally.

“We heard that your lawyer friend left tracks heading out of town, he was in such a hurry.”

“Too little, too late,” she said stiffly. “I expect to spend years making it all up to Teddie.”

He moved a step closer. “You won’t look at me, Katy?”

She bit her lower lip. Tears stung her eyes. “I’m . . . too ashamed.”

“Oh, baby.” He pulled her into his arms and folded her against him, enveloped her in the scents of buckskin and smoke and fir trees. He rocked her while she cried, his lips in her hair.

“I turned against my own daughter,” she choked. “Against you. I agreed to let a greedy man almost put down a horse to save myself legal problems. I hate myself!”

He drew in a deep breath. “We have disagreements. We get over them.”

“Not always.”

“I have a regrettable temper,” he said after a minute, aware that Teddie and Drum

were deliberately paying attention to the calf and not the two people down the aisle. “I’m sorry, too. I never should have blocked your number. That was low.”

“I deserved it,” she whispered. “I was horrible to you.”

“I was horrible back.”

She lifted her head. Her eyes were red and wet.

He bent and kissed the tears away. Which, of course, prompted even more tears.

“You aren’t really going back to Montana, are you?” she choked out.

He laughed softly, delightedly. “Not if you don’t want me to.”

She looked up at him with wonder. He was saying something without saying it.

“I’d love to have a ten-year-old daughter of my own,” he said solemnly. “I’d buy her pets, and drive her to parties, and take care of her horse. I’d take care of her mother, too, you understand. I mean, that would have to be part of the deal.”

Her eyes widened and then she laughed as she realized what he was saying.

He understood what her eyes were saying, as well. “I’d like a son, too,” he said softly, touching her hair. “Boys run in my family. Not a girl in the bunch, which is why yours would be so treasured.”

“I like little boys, too,” she whispered.

He bent and touched his mouth gently to hers. “We could get married. I mean, so people wouldn’t gossip about us. We wouldn’t want to embarrass Teddie. It’s a small

community, after all.”

She reached up and kissed him with her whole heart. He kissed her back with all of his.

There was a loud clearing of a throat and a giggle. They hadn’t heard the first cough, or the first giggle.

They drew apart, a little flushed, and stared down into a child’s dancing eyes.

“Are you going to be my daddy now, Parker?” Teddie asked him.

He bent and opened his arms.

She ran into them and hugged him and kissed him and hugged him some more. “You’ll be the best daddy in the whole world, next to the daddy I lost,” she said against his shoulder.

“And you’ll be my little girl as long as you live, even when you’re married with kids of your own,” he said huskily. “You won’t mind, if your mom and I get married?”

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“Oh, no,” Teddie agreed at once. She glanced at her flushed, happy mother with teasing eyes. “It’s nice to see her smile again. I thought she’d forgotten how!”

Parker only grinned.

* * *

And so, they were married. Teddie stayed with the Dentons while Parker and Mrs. Parker drove to Denver for a weekend honeymoon in a nice but not expensive hotel. Not that they saw much of it.

“Oh, my,” Katy gasped as they moved together in the huge bed.

He laughed softly. “I like it very slow. Is that all right?”

She was shuddering. “I’ll die.”

“Not just yet,” he whispered as he moved over her.

He was tender, and patient, and he knew a lot more about women than she knew about men, even after several years of marriage to her first husband. By the time she started winding up the spiral that led to an explosive, passionate culmination, she was sobbing with ecstasy she’d never experienced in her life.

He went with her the whole way, his voice deep and throbbing at her ear as his powerful body buffeted hers in the last few feverish seconds before the explosions began.

Afterward, as they lay in a sweating, exhausted tangle, she rolled over and pillowed her cheek on his broad chest. “And I thought I knew something about men.”

He laughed. “You knew more than enough. We’re very good together.”

“Oh, yes. Very, very good.” She smoothed her hand over his chest, deep in thought. “You know, we never spoke about birth control.”

“We never did.”

“Should we?”

“If you want to wait to start a family, we probably should.”

“I’ll be thirty soon.”

He rolled over toward her. “Does that mean something?”

“I’d like to be young enough to enjoy our children,” she whispered with a weary smile. “And Teddie will love not being an only child.”

“In that case,” he murmured, rolling her over again, “perhaps we should be more . . . energetic . . . about assuring that.”

She laughed. “Perhaps we should!”

* * *

Predictably, a few weeks later, Katy started losing her breakfast. Parker was dancing around the room like a wild man, hugging Teddie and swinging her around.

“Parker, Mom’s sick. Why are we celebrating?” she asked worriedly.

“She’s not sick, honey, she’s pregnant!” he burst out.

“Oh, goodness, really?!”

“Really!”

“I won’t be an only child! I’ll have brothers and sisters!”

“Well, maybe brothers,” he said hesitantly. He put her down. “There aren’t any girls in my family. Not any girl children. Except you,” he teased, grinning.

“Except me,” she agreed smugly.

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“Could you stop celebrating and bring me a wet washcloth, please?” came a plaintive wail from the bedroom.

“Gosh, I’m sorry, sweetheart!” he said, rushing into the bathroom to wet a cloth.

Teddie sat by her mother on the bed. “I’m sorry and happy that you’re sick, Mom!”

Katy managed to laugh as Parker put the wet cloth on her forehead. “Thanks, sweetheart. I’m sorry and happy myself. Goodness, how will I teach while I’m throwing up?”

“I’ll get you a bucket to carry to work. Not to worry,” Parker teased.

“Parker, don’t you have a first name?” Teddie asked suddenly. “I mean, I call you Dad, and she calls you honey, but don’t you have a real first name? Is it Crow?”

“Not really. My father didn’t like my mother’s family, so he insisted on naming me after a man he idolized.”

“Really?” Teddie asked. “Who?”

Parker and Katy exchanged an amused look.

“Albert,” Teddie guessed suddenly. “For Albert Einstein.”

Parker whistled. “Sweetheart, you are a deep thinker. That’s it, exactly.”

Teddie grinned.

Katy laughed. “Albert.” She shook her head. “It doesn’t suit you. Parker does.”

“It does,” Teddie agreed. “But I’m still calling you Dad.”

She hugged him. He hugged her back.

Katy looked up at both of them and almost glowed with joy. “What a Christmas we’re going to have this year,” she exclaimed.

“The first of many,” Parker agreed. “I can’t wait to kiss you under the mistletoe!”

* * *

And it was a joyous one. The tree sat beside an open fireplace with logs blazing in it. The lights on the tree blinked in patterns and Teddie did most of the decorating, only letting Parker put the decorations and lights on the places she couldn’t reach.

The result was a nine-foot-tall wonder. They took photos of it to show the coming child, when he was old enough to understand the beautiful expression of the season.

Parker put an arm around both of his girls as they stared at the end result of Teddie’s and Katy’s labors.

“It’s the most beautiful tree we’ve ever had,” Katy said.

“Oh, yes,” Teddie agreed.

“We should bring Bartholomew in here and stand him up beside it. He could be a decoration,” Parker suggested dryly.

Bart had been returned by J.L. after Dealy was pursued, caught, arrested, and charged with animal cruelty. He faced years in prison for it. J.L.'s attorneys and their investigator had managed to dig up several prior charges that had been dismissed for lack of evidence. They found evidence to convict, so he was charged in more than ten cases. No local attorney would agree to try his case, so the judge appointed a counselor for him. The consensus of opinion was that Mr. Dealy would spend a long time contemplating his brutal acts.

Meanwhile, the Parkers sat around their beautiful tree and listened to Christmas carols and drank eggnog and ate fruitcake. Parker kissed Katy under the mistletoe and she called him her mistletoe cowboy. They even took a special horse treat out to the barn for Bart.

"This was nice of you, Dad," Teddie remarked as they watched Bart nibble his treat.

Parker chuckled. "He had it coming. After all, he brought me a family of my very own," he added softly, looking from a radiant Katy to a beaming Teddie. "And it is," he added, "the nicest Christmas present I ever got!"