



Stormy Ride

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Description: As Sheriff Billy Johnson lays in a hospital bed, gravely injured from a terrible accident, Harrison County is left without anyone to restore law and order. Desperate times call for desperate measures and Travis is assigned the daunting task of filling in for Billy until his recovery. Spring storms ravage the land with fierce flooding, while horse thieves murder local ranchers under the cover of darkness. With danger looming over everyone, can Travis single-handedly protect the county and uphold justice amidst the chaos?

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Chapter One

Tuesday, April 19th.

Wild Stallion Ranch. Montana.

April came down hard on northern Montana, wrapping it in the damp, depressing gray of the grim reaper's shroud. Rain and thunderstorms, then sleet and ice as the temperature seesawed back and forth between winter and spring.

Torrents of rain followed by a couple of late blizzards and then more rain and milder temperatures created dangerous runoff in the hillier sections of Harrison County. Rivers ran high, and with every day of rain, there was an ever-present danger of flooding and roads being washed out.

A seasonal thing and not unexpected by the local citizens, but it made for more work and put more stress on Harrison County's limited services—Sheriff's Office, Fire Department, County Road Department.

Sheriff Billy Johnson was up early trying to take the chill off the ranch house he lived in. Wasn't really his and could never be—belonged to his best friend Travis Frost—but he liked the old place.

April had arrived and winter would soon be over, but in the mornings, he could still see his breath inside the house.

Kneeling in front of the woodstove in the living room, he chopped kindling and

crumpled up a page of the Cut Bank Tribune, and laid in a nice fire. He had it blazing along and reached into the wood box for a medium-sized log to add and keep it going. The wood box was empty and there weren't any more logs split.

Am I that far behind on my chores?

Cursing under his breath, Billy ran out to the neatly stacked cord of wood leaning against the barn and sheltered from the weather by the eaves.

He grabbed a sturdy-looking chunk and set it upright on the chopping block. Trying to hurry so the fire didn't go out in the stove before he got back, Billy grabbed up the axe leaning against the woodpile. He raised it over his head and brought it down on that unsuspecting log with a helluva force.

The blade of the axe hit a knot in the log at a bad angle. The chunk of wood flew off the chopping block barely missing his head, and that fucking axe came down in a perfect arcing trajectory that lodged the blade solidly in Billy's left leg.

The next time Sheriff Billy Johnson opened his brown eyes, he was lying in a hospital bed hooked up to two monitors and an IV pole. His mother was sitting next to his bed crying, and his girlfriend Brenda was cuddled up against him on the bed making him sweat like a fuckin pig.

"Billy, you're awake," said his mother. "Oh, thank God." Shedding even more tears, she jumped to her feet. "Let me get the doctor. He'll want to know."

"Where's my phone?" mumbled Billy. He tried to turn his head to check the nightstand and a wave of nausea swept over him and forced his head back onto the pillow. "Lord Jesus, I feel like shit."

Brenda sat up and Billy saw her eyes were all red and bloodshot. What the hell had

happened to her?

“Guess your phone is at the ranch, Billy. Who do you want to call?”

“Call Travis and tell him I need him up here.”

“Think he’s gonna drive all the way back from Texas?” asked Brenda.

Billy had been thinking of breaking up with Brenda, but this might not be the most opportune moment. He needed her to make some calls and do some necessary shit for him before he dumped her. He’d give it another couple of days.

“Yeah, he’ll come,” said Billy. “Call him now. Please?”

“What’s his cell number?”

Half fuckin dead from the pain in his goddamned leg, it was hard for Billy to recall Travis’s number off the top of his drug-clouded head.

“Where’s my billfold at? The number is in there in case of an emergency.”

“This would qualify,” said Brenda. “You’re the sheriff and you won’t be back in the sheriff’s office until at least Christmas. That’s a legitimate emergency.”

“That ain’t true,” said Billy. “Don’t exaggerate, Brenda. You blow ordinary shit out of proportion all the time and I fuckin hate it.”

Even talking made his leg hurt more. Billy groaned.

“Okay, then Hallowe’en.” Brenda made a pouty face and that was another thing he hated—the fucking pouty face. “You won’t be working until Hallowe’en.”

“Find my wallet, Brenda. It will be with my clothes or in the nightstand drawer right here.” He tried to tilt his head towards the drawer, and the sideways motion of it made him want to puke.

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Moving slower than a wounded sloth, Brenda made her way across the room to the closet and pulled out a brown paper bag with Billy's name and room number on it. "Your clothes are in this bag."

She was making her way back to the bed when the doctor came rushing in with Billy's mother.

Doctor Kramer smiled and looked down at him. "You're awake, Billy. Wonderful progress."

"Is it? How long have I been here at the hospital?"

"Since early yesterday morning. That's when you had your accident."

"Who found me?"

"Your father found you," said Mrs. Johnson. "Almost finished him, son. You should be more careful of his heart condition."

"Yeah, I'll consider Dad's heart the next time I try to chop my fuckin leg off."

"No need for vulgarity, Billy." His mother wagged a finger at him. "Cursing the moon blue won't help with your troubles."

"Makes me feel better though."

The doctor shooed everyone out of the room for a private look at Billy's leg and they

weren't allowed back in until the bandages were changed.

"What's the verdict, Doc?" asked Billy. "Were you able to fix the damage?"

No smile on the doctor's face. "Pinned the tibia together, Billy. You're a strong man and you smashed that bone a good one. It will be a while before it will hold your weight."

"Damn it, Doc. I can't leave the county with no law enforcement."

When that was all over, Billy tried again to make Brenda call Travis. This time, she actually made the call.

Pecan Valley. Texas.

Having spent the past five months in treatment as an outpatient at the VA hospital in Austin, I was finally getting around to cleaning up the ragged ends of my life.

I was finished with the farm I'd rented in the fall in the depths of one of the worst PTSD episodes ever and I'd finally cleaned up the place for the new renters.

Next on the list was my ranch in Montana that I'd run off and left when the episode was coming on and I was losing my grip on reality.

Billy couldn't carry the payments and he'd let me know he'd soon be moving to a smaller place in Coyote Creek where he could manage on his sheriff's salary.

It seemed like I'd left tattered pieces of myself from north to south and now that my head had been straightened out with medication and the help of Doctor Alderson, I had to clean up my own mess.

I whistled for the dogs and stood holding the back door of the truck open for them when my cell started ringing on the passenger seat.

I yanked open the door to grab it and answered a number I didn't recognize. "Travis here."

"Hey, Travis, this is Brenda, Billy's girlfriend."

"Hi, Brenda. Is Billy okay?"

"No. He's not okay. He's hurt bad and he needs you. Can you come to Montana right away?"

"I can leave today if it's an emergency."

"Definitely an emergency, Travis. You have to come and help Billy."

"Okay. Tell Billy I'm coming."

"Good. He's in a hospital bed, Travis. He needs you bad."

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“Jeeze, Brenda. I’ll leave now and I should be there by tomorrow night.”

“Thanks, Travis. Billy is in a bad way. I’ll tell him you’re coming and that will make him feel better.”

Not having a clue what had happened to Billy, I drove out to the highway and phoned Billy’s cousin Jack, who ran the roadhouse in Coyote Creek.

“Travis, I’m glad you called.”

“Brenda called me. Tell me what happened to Billy.”

“Bad, Travis. Billy is hurt bad. We need you here.”

“Okay, that’s what Brenda said. I’m coming. Give me the details.”

“Near as I can tell from the ten different stories I’ve heard, Billy was chopping wood, the axe hit a knot and bounced off the fuckin log. The axe went into his leg and he’s in Cut Bank hospital. There’s nobody watching the sheriff’s office and that’s what he’s worried about.”

“I’m on my way, Jack. I’m calling Molly now.”

“When can we expect to see you, Travis?”

“Even if I drive straight through, I can’t make it sooner than tomorrow night. See how I do. I’ll be in touch.”

“I’ll have a pitcher of Miller waiting for you when you get here.”

“Thanks, Jack. I’ve been missing the Dry Run something awful.”

After speaking to Jack, I called Annie as I drove north on Route 87 through Texas aiming for Colorado. I’d be lucky to get out of Texas by the time I had to stop and sleep. With no one to share the driving, I’d have to get some sleep now and then or end up in the fuckin ditch.

“Hey, Travis. Are you finished at the farm?”

“All done, Annie-girl, and I was ready to come home but I have to take a detour. A long one. Billy is hurt bad, and I have to go to Montana. Sorting out the ranch was on my list anyway. Decisions about all the property I own up there have to be made at my accountant’s office.”

“What happened to Billy?”

“I can only tell you what Jack told me and it’s pretty sketchy.” I told her what Jack said about Billy burying the axe in his leg.

“That’s terrible, and you should go and see if you can help him. There won’t be any sheriff for the county.”

“I’m not sure I want to help with that end of things.”

“You may have to,” said Annie. “How many people up there can just step in and lend a hand like you can?”

“I’m not sure I’m ready to go back to law enforcement, Annie.”

“You’ve made great strides and Doctor Alderson thinks you’re as stable as you’ve been in years.”

“I have a lot of self-doubts.”

“We all have those, sugar. It’s a long way to the north end of Montana and you’ll have to stop and sleep, or you’ll have an accident.”

“I already decided I couldn’t make it all the way without sleeping.”

“Call me tonight when you stop.”

“I will. This wasn’t planned and I feel guilty being away from you after us finally getting sorted out.”

“We’re sorted now, and we’ll stay that way,” said Annie. “We’ll manage.”

“What about Tammy? Will she be okay?”

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“She’ll be fine.”

“She might be upset when she hears Billy is hurt.”

“I won’t tell her right away. I’ll tell her you had to go straighten out the ranch. Stop worrying over her.”

“Okay, I’ll call you later.”

“Keep Max away from the bears. They’ll be coming out of hibernation and that’s a grumpy time for them because they’re hungry.”

“Yeah, there’s the bears. I’ll watch the dogs.”

After smoothing things over with Annie, I called the sheriff’s office to talk to Molly.

“Travis, is that you?”

“I’m on my way, Molly. I’m coming for Billy and for a few other reasons too.”

“We’ll all be so happy to see you, Travis. The new county supervisor is going bonkers trying to find somebody qualified to fill in for Billy while he’s off work.”

“Has the office been busy?”

“Not too many cases. Billy has all the petty crimes under control.”

“We’ll see how it works out when I get there. I’ll cross out of Texas before I stop to get some sleep, but I’ve still got a long way to go.”

“Are Max and Sarge coming with you?”

“They’re here in the truck with me and they’ll be excited to see you, Molly. Can you tell me how bad Billy is hurt? I only know what Jack told me and he didn’t have any medical information.”

“Billy almost severed his own leg. That’s what I heard from my friend Alma who works at Cut Bank Hospital. She wasn’t in the operating room, but she heard from one of the nurses that the surgeon—Doctor Kramer—pinned Billy’s leg together.”

“Jeeze, that sounds like he smashed it up good.”

“I’m worried about a long recovery period,” said Molly. “I’m going to see him on the weekend. I can’t go before then because I’m the only one in the office and I can’t leave during the day.”

“I’ll be there soon, and we’ll have a long talk. I’ll take you to dinner at Olivia’s Inn.”

“Ooh, I love that place...and the desserts are to die for.” She laughed. “Looking forward to it, Travis.”

“Lemon mousse, Molly. You can’t pass that up.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t.”

Vega. Texas.

After driving for hours, I stopped outside of Amarillo at the local Golden Arches to

grab a burger and give the dogs a much-needed run. They'd been patient all day long and I had to park the truck and give them a break. I'd been sitting too long anyway and needed to stretch my legs as much as they did.

After using the facilities, I ordered a Big Mac, double fries and a coffee and took it to the truck. While I leaned on the tailgate eating, I watched the dogs run around at the back of the parking lot. I was pretty damned tired, but the break helped a lot.

I'm good for a few more miles.

Best Western Hotel. Raton. New Mexico.

When I crossed into New Mexico it was time to give it up and get a few hours sleep. I'd get up before dawn and get back on the road, but I had to lay my tired body down and close my eyes.

I let the dogs into my room and fed them right away. They were past their supper time and gobbled up their kibble in short order.

After a quick shower, I flopped into bed and texted Annie-girl to tell her I was done for the day.

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Chapter Two

Wednesday, April 20th.

Best Western Hotel. Raton. New Mexico.

After giving the dogs a run around the hotel parking lot, I stashed them in the truck and went inside to the breakfast room. Completely empty except for one of the kitchen staff preparing the buffet.

I helped myself to the fresh sausages and scrambled eggs and ate at a table alone. When I finished, I fixed a coffee for the road and left.

The dogs and I were on the highway before sunup.

Cut Bank Hospital. Montana.

Billy was in so much distress during the night, the doctor had to be called and he authorized an increase in the morphine dosage.

Morning light filtered through the drapes and found him miserable and wishing he'd died on the operating table. He'd never let his mother know he was thinking thoughts like that. She'd make his wish come true.

Brenda constantly came to visit him, and he wanted to break up with her and tell her to leave him be, but he didn't have the strength for it.

The nurses tried their best to make him comfortable, but it was an almost impossible task. He barely ate anything on his tray. No appetite. The only thing interesting Billy was the time of his next dose of drugs. The good stuff wore off way too soon and he constantly needed more to kill the pain that was frying his brain.

As the breakfast tray was being removed from his rolling table, his cell rang. Figuring it was Brenda, Billy hesitated answering.

“Your phone is ringing.” The nurse standing in front of the monitors handed it to him.

“Hi, Billy. It’s Molly.”

“Molly.” His speech was labored.

“Billy, you sound so...I’m not going to say it. I called to tell you that I talked to Travis and he’s on his way.”

“When will he be here?”

“Late tonight. Very late. Too late to visit you, but you’ll see him tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Molly. I think I might live through the day now that I know he’s nearly here.”

“I’d come and sit with you, but I’m the only one at the station for now. It will be better tomorrow when Travis gets here. We’ll come up with a plan to get us through.”

“Thanks for calling, Molly. You made me feel better.”

Billy ended the call feeling a little more optimistic. Travis would get to the ranch late—during the night—and he would be there at the hospital the following day.

Billy let out a long breath of relief. When Travis came to his room, he could tell him everything that needed to be done at the office.

Does he still have his deputy status?

“I might have to deputize him again,” Billy mumbled to himself, then he closed his eyes.

Cheyenne. Wyoming.

The truck was guzzling gas at an alarming rate, and I had to stop for fuel more often than for anything else. Always well-behaved in the truck, Max and Sarge needed more runs than I was giving them. I had to slow down a bit and give them more consideration.

I was pumping more gas into the tank when Tammy called me on the phone Annie bought her. The sound of her voice told me she was upset.

“Mama told me you have to go back to Montana because Billy got hurt. I’m wishing you came back to the ranch to get me, Travis. I would’ve gone with you.”

“I couldn’t do it, Tammy. It would’ve added another whole day to my travel time, and I have to get up there. Sorry, Tam. I knew you’d be upset about Billy.”

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“What happened to him? Mama said he hurt his leg with an axe. Was it our axe, like out by the woodpile next to the barn?”

“I guess so. Jack told me Billy was chopping wood and he hit his leg with the axe. Cut himself pretty badly.”

“Oh, I bet he can’t walk,” said Tammy.

“He’s in the Cut Bank hospital where you were. I’ll be able to see him tomorrow and while I’m in the room with him, I’ll call, and you can talk to him. Okay?”

“Okay. Thanks, Travis. I miss you a lot already.”

“Be good while I’m gone, Tammy, and help your mother.”

“I will. I have to work at the store and help Gramma Grace too. She has a sale coming up and we have to make some new displays.”

“Miss you, Tam. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

I ended the call, hung up the pump and ran inside to grab a cold Coke before I got back on the road.

Montana/Wyoming Line.

As I crossed into Montana, the sun was setting over the Rockies and it was a gorgeous sight to see. I pictured a perfect twilight ride across my thousand acres, and

it made me wish I had Outlaw with me.

We'd saddle up and gallop like the wind towards the mountains, hoping to catch sight of the wild horses.

In a lot of ways, I missed having my own ranch and I never knew I'd feel this way until I got my illness under control.

In another hour I'd stop for a burger and a break, and then I'd be refreshed enough to keep on trucking. I still had to drive from the state line at the south to the northwest corner, but now that I was in Montana, I was confident I could make it home.

Butte. Montana.

I stopped for dinner in Butte and pulled into the parking lot behind a highway steakhouse. Two hours later I woke up to the sound of the dogs whining.

Max was sitting in the shotgun seat, straddling the console, and licking my face to wake me up.

The dogs hadn't been fed and it was full dark.

"You're right, doggies. I fell asleep and I didn't feed y'all yet." I let them out to run around in the dark while I rummaged around in the load bed getting kibble into both of their bowls.

Once they were fed and back in the truck, I wandered inside the restaurant and got myself a steak and a beer.

The two hours of sleep helped a little, but I felt like a zombie when I hit the highway again.

Dry Run Roadhouse. Coyote Creek.

The parking lot was empty when I finally made it to the roadhouse. I pushed the front door open, and Jack was right there ready to lock up.

“Travis, you made it.” He pulled me into a hug and pointed at the bar stools. “You must be so fuckin tired. Sit down and I’ll get you a beer.”

“I don’t want to keep you from going home, Jack.”

“I was kind of watching for you after midnight. Didn’t know how long it would take you.”

“If I hadn’t fallen asleep in a parking lot in Butte, I would’ve been here a couple of hours sooner. Guess I couldn’t go any farther without some shuteye.”

“I’m glad you didn’t fall asleep behind the wheel. That would’ve been a disaster.”

“I can’t say I didn’t doze off a couple of times.”

“I went to see Billy today,” said Jack. “Didn’t see what his leg looks like because it’s all bandaged up after the surgery, but I can tell you one thing—he’s in a helluva lot of pain.”

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“Feel bad for him and I don’t know what I can do to help him out. I’m not that keen on messing around in the sheriff’s office now that I’m out of there for good.”

“He’ll feel better just having you around for backup,” said Jack. He filled a glass with Miller and set it on a coaster. “We’ve been getting too much rain and sleet, and with the runoff there’s been some flooding. Wetter spring than usual.”

“I never lived here in the spring of the year so I’m not sure how things are at my ranch,” said Travis. “Billy said he couldn’t afford to live there anymore, and he told me he was moving into town. That’s about all he said the last time we talked on the phone—before this all happened.”

“Yeah, he told me he couldn’t afford to buy the ranch. He loves it out there, but it was too much for him and he feels bad about it.”

“It’s okay. I left him hanging when everything fell apart for me. I need a sit-down session with my accountant to straighten out a lot more things than just the ranch.”

“I hope you’re planning on staying for a while,” said Jack.

“No idea about that yet.” I finished my beer and yawned. “I’ll get out of here and let you close up. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Jack grinned. “Great to have you back, Travis.”

Wild Stallion Ranch.

The house was in complete darkness when I parked out front, and I shivered thinking about how cold it would be inside without the woodstove on for that extra bit of warmth we always seemed to need in Montana.

Dog-tired, I grabbed my overnight bag and let the dogs out of the truck. They were excited to see their old place and immediately tore around the side of the house and headed for the barn and the fields beyond.

With the spare key, I unlocked the front door and stepped inside. The chill of the place was the first thing I noticed and there wasn't much sense starting the woodstove and then letting it go out while I slept.

"Leave it until morning. I have to sleep."

I went to the back door, whistled for the dogs, and then found myself some blankets in the linen closet.

"Time to sleep, doggies. Come and keep me warm."

Chapter Three

Thursday, April 21st.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

All those hours of driving caught up to me and I slept like the dead once I hit the bed and pulled the blankets over me.

When my eyes finally opened of their own accord, my room was flooded with bright Montana sunlight. I sat on the side of the bed, and I could see my breath every time I exhaled.

“We have to turn the furnace up, doggies. Billy must have it set at frigid to conserve oil. He’s been on a tight budget.”

After I let the dogs out for a run, I checked out the woodstove in the living room and there was a supply of newspaper and kindling, but no logs to keep the fire going.

To me, that meant one thing and it wasn’t a thing I was looking forward to. I’d have to retrace Billy’s footsteps and probably come face to face with the scene of his accident. Something I’d been dreading and wasn’t keen on doing.

Sucking it up, I tramped through the house and through the attached woodshed to the back door. The woodshed was empty—all the split wood that had been piled against the wall of the house had been burned over the winter. That’s why Billy was using from the cord stacked next to the south wall of the barn.

Anxious about what I was about to see, I walked across the yard and stood next to the chopping block Billy had been using. Not hard to envision what had happened. It was all spelled out for me.

The axe was lying on the ground—covered in blood—the log Billy had been attempting to chop had flown ten feet away and landed close to a spruce tree.

There was a carpet of crimson next to the chopping block where Billy had fallen and almost bled out.

How long had it taken for Billy’s father to find him? Jack didn’t say how long Billy was lying unconscious before Mister Johnson came looking for his son.

Questions I needed answers to.

I stepped away from the site of the massacre and heaved up everything in my

stomach—thankful Tammy wasn't there to watch me do it.

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Once my gut settled, I grabbed a log off the pile and set it up on the chopping block, then reached down for the axe.

Covered in dried blood that belonged to Billy Johnson, I decided that wasn't an axe I could use today. The house would have to remain bone-chilling cold until I drove into Coyote Creek and bought myself a new axe.

Walking away from the woodpile, I circled around to the front of the barn and opened one of the doors. Inside, I had a quick look around and the barn I loved had an empty feel to it.

A faint trace of Outlaw's scent lingered on the air in the barn and peering into his empty stall, I realized how badly I was missing him.

As I closed the barn doors and fastened them, I wondered how long I'd be here this time. For some reason I couldn't explain, this ranch felt like home to me and gave me a deep sense of calm.

Would it be worth it to have Outlaw trucked up here?

"I need to visit Uncle Carson's grave. I never should have left him. I feel like I belong here now that I can think clearly again."

Retreating to the cold house, I cranked up the thermostat figuring I'd be the one paying the next oil bill. Whether the furnace could deliver enough heat to warm the house up was a mystery to me. Billy had taken care of things like that.

In the middle of starting a pot of coffee, it came to me that I'd forgotten to call Annie the night before. When I'd finally arrived at the ranch, it was the middle of the night and there was no point waking her up to tell her I was safe.

That was the excuse I was going to use. I sucked it up and scrolled to her number.

"Sorry I forgot to call last night, Annie-girl. I hit the bed around three and I was out cold."

"Too far for a two-day drive, sugar. As long as you're there and you're safe. Will you see Billy today?"

"I'm driving over to the hospital first thing, and I promised Tammy she could talk to Billy on the phone while I was there."

"She's been asking me questions about his injury."

"I'll find out more when I get a chance to talk to his doctor."

"Let me know and I'll fill her in."

"I will. I love you."

"Same."

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

After making a quick fried egg sandwich and still too early to go to the hospital, I drove to Coyote Creek to see how Molly was doing holding the fort on her own.

With tears in her eyes, she greeted me with a hug and bigger hugs for Max and Sarge.

“I’m so pleased you were able to come back for Billy. He needs you so badly.”

“I’m going to the hospital as soon as visiting hours start and when I see him in person, I’ll have a better idea of the situation.”

“You could glance at the paperwork stacked up on his desk,” said Molly. “He’s been working on something that he hasn’t let me in on. He might confide in you what it is.”

“Huh. I wonder what that could be. I don’t have any real authority in Harrison County any longer, and I’m not sure I want any. I enjoy being an ordinary citizen.”

“Since the minute you walked through the front door of this building, Travis, you’ve never been an ordinary citizen. You are a lawman. It’s ingrained in you.”

I laughed. “Texas Ranger too long and I can’t shake it, is that what you’re saying?”

Molly laughed too. “Something like that.”

Cut Bank Hospital.

Billy was asleep when I walked into his room, and I didn’t wake him up. I sat in the chair next to his bed and gazed over at his pale face.

Jack told me his cousin had lost a lot of blood before his father came looking for him and found him out by the barn.

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Thank baby Jesus Mister Johnson came looking.

It wasn't long before Billy opened his eyes and saw me sitting there. He managed a crooked smile.

"You're here, Travis."

Billy's voice told me how weak he was. "Can't tell you how happy I am to see you."

"Good to see you too, Billy. I saw the mess you made of the woodpile."

"Funny. I wouldn't be here in this bed if my dad hadn't been calling me and come looking for me."

"That's what I heard. I owe him a beer."

"Can you help me at the station?"

"Don't think I've got the juice anymore to stick my nose in county business."

"Yeah, but you will. I already talked to the new county supervisor—Lyndell Gibson—and he wants you to pop into his office for a little chat."

"What did you do, Billy? You didn't tell him I'd take over, did you?"

"I might have hinted at it, but when he was here, I was on a high dosage of drugs. I wish they were still pumping that much into me. I could use it."

“And if I decide to stay and help y’all out for a while, is there stuff pending?”

“Got a notebook? We need to make a list.”

“Yeah, I guess I can dig up paper and a pen. What have you got going on?”

After we went over all the things Billy was worried about, Billy rested for a while. When he opened his eyes again, I asked him if he would talk to Tammy on the phone. “I left her behind with Annie for the sake of speed and she’s a little upset with me.”

“Sure. I want to talk to her,” said Billy. “I miss her, but not as much as I miss you.” He gave me a weak chuckle.

I called Tammy’s cell and handed off my phone to Billy. While he talked to Tammy, I went in search of Billy’s doctor to get the lowdown from the horse’s mouth.

I found Doctor Kramer in the cafeteria eating a bagel and he filled me in. The news was depressing with barely any upside and hearing the truth made me feel worse for Billy. I headed back to his room, and he was only then ending the call.

“Holy hell, man, did you talk all that time to Tammy?”

“No, only part of the time. Tammy started crying and I got to talk to Annie.” Billy’s eyes danced as he grinned wide.

“What do you know that I don’t?”

“She might come up here when Marilyn Pellegrino’s lessons start for the barrel racers.”

“Oh, yeah? She never mentioned that to me.”

“That’s because she’s coming to see me and not you.”

I laughed because it was good to see Billy smiling—even if it was at my expense.

“How are things going with you and Brenda?”

“Not going for much longer. The heat’s gone and there’s nothing left for me. Sex once in a while would be okay, but she’s not the person I can spend days with. A boring person with a nagging side to her.”

“What about the other one? Can you switch twins?”

Billy laughed. “Hell no. Bad to worse. Glenda is even more boring than her sister. I’m sure you know that already.” Billy glanced at the time on his phone. “You’d better get going. Mister Gibson is waiting to talk to you.”

I got to my feet. “I’ll talk to him, but I’m not making any promises.”

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“Call me after you talk. I want to hear about your meeting.”

“Yep.”

County Building. Cut Bank.

Walking into the county building for the first time, I had no clue where I was going. A quick stop at the reception desk helped me out and I was directed to the elevators and sent to the second floor.

Along the second-floor corridor, the offices were all outfitted with little brass plaques, and I found Supervisor Gibson’s office easily.

Gibson welcomed me into his office with a wide smile. He shook my hand and pointed to the chair in front of his desk. “Wonderful to see you, Sheriff Frost. I’m so pleased you were able to come from Texas to help Billy out. He’s such a dedicated lawman.”

“He tries hard,” I said. “I told Billy I’d come and talk to you, but I don’t believe I’ve agreed to anything yet.”

“No, you haven’t, but you are here now, and we’re talking and I’m taking that as a positive step.”

Gibson was a few years older than me. Late forties and he looked fit and well-tanned from the outdoors.

“How about this? You carry the sheriff’s phone while Billy is laid up and the county will pay you full sheriff’s salary. When Billy comes back on the job, you can stay as a deputy or go—your choice.”

“I talked to Billy’s doctor today and he couldn’t give me a clear picture of how long Billy might be unable to work. What if he’s going to be off longer than I can stay here in Montana?”

“Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it, Travis. Not all prognoses are accurate.”

I sighed, knowing all along I would give in for Billy.

“Okay, Mister Gibson. I’ll take the station for now but I’m only doing it for Billy. That’s the only reason.”

“Of course. You trained him and you made him into a mold of yourself, Sheriff Frost. All the members of county council realize that, and the entire county is grateful for your previous service.”

He pulled a bible out of his desk drawer and pushed it across the desk. “Raise your right hand.”

Coyote Creek Needs and Feeds.

Parking in front of the feed store made me miss Outlaw more than ever. Maybe I would have to have him trucked up here in order to hang onto my sanity. It would be lonely living at the ranch all alone. No horse to ride, and no Billy or Tammy. Something to consider.

I walked through the store, passing by the rows and rows of ranch-related merchandise, and headed for the back hallway and Savanna’s office.

I tapped twice on her door and didn't wait for her to invite me in. "Hey, you working or dogging it, girl?"

"Travis," Savanna squealed and ran towards the door to hug me. She kissed me on the mouth, and she tasted good. I was missing Annie real bad and had to keep it between the lines. Hard to do around a gorgeous woman like Savanna Larson.

Long auburn hair, a beautiful face and a body men would fight over. She had the whole package.

"Jack told me you might be around today. You got in late last night?"

"Real late. White-line fever. Jack was locking the front door of the roadhouse when I got there. You and him doing okay?"

She shrugged. "He still has that jealous thing going on, and he asks me too many questions. Where have you been? Who did you see? What took you so long? I hate that suspicious side of him, and when I call him on it, he thinks I'm trying to cover something up and on and on it goes. I don't know how long I'll put up with it this time."

"I'm sad to hear that."

Savanna shrugged. "Just the way he is, and I knew it before I went back for the second try. My bad."

"Look how many times Annie took me back. Jeeze, the woman has patience." I laughed.

"Have you seen Billy?"

“Yep. I spent time with him at the hospital and that’s not a good picture there. I talked to his doctor this morning and he didn’t sugar-coat the prognosis. Billy did a helluva number on his leg and he has a long way to go to make a comeback.”

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“So sorry to hear that. Billy is such a good guy.”

“Yeah, he is, and believe me, I want him to make a miraculous comeback and take the sheriff’s job back.”

After saying goodbye to Savanna and leaving her in her office, I browsed around her store doing some necessary shopping. I picked up a nice new axe—sharp blade, red handle, and no blood. Two pairs of jeans, socks, a couple of flannel shirts, three t-shirts and a pack of boxers. My boots were good.

I had lots of clothes, but they happened to be in Texas. Before heading for the cash, I grabbed a warm jacket from a rack I passed. Even though it was April, there was still a good chance of more snow in Montana.

Bonnie was at the cash counter, and I felt so bad for her. When the store had been robbed in the fall, she lost a person she loved, and I figured she must think of Tim every day when she came to work.

“Hi, Bonnie. How are you doing?”

She glanced up and smiled. “Oh, hi, Sheriff. I heard you were coming back to us. Nice to see you.”

“Thanks. Good to be back.”

That was an actual turning point for me. I wasn’t lying to Bonnie. I truly was happy to be back in Coyote Creek. How weird was that?

Shows how off-track I was before.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

From the feed store I drove down Main Street to the sheriff's office and stopped in to tell Molly about the deal I made with Mister Gibson, the county supervisor.

I parked at the back and came in the back door like I used to do when I was the sheriff. Max and Sarge ran in ahead of me and beelined for Molly.

Her workstation was at the front of the squad room facing the street. She sat there in her spot and filled three positions at the same time—reception, dispatch, and assistant to the sheriff. She was stellar at all three. A competent woman who was aces at police procedure.

I sat down in the chair in front of her desk and smiled at her. "This is the way it is, Molly." I recapped the conversation I'd had with Lyndell Gibson at the county office.

"I'm thrilled you agreed, Travis. Billy's accident turned this office and the entire county on its ear, but now that you're here to help us out, you can set us on the straight and narrow again."

I laughed. "You're expecting a lot, Molly."

"Not at all. I'm an eyewitness to how you operate, Travis. Don't sell yourself short."

"I'm going to spend a little time in Billy's office looking through the stuff on his desk. When I was at the hospital, we made a list."

"Wonderful. Max and Sarge will keep me company while you work on getting started. I'll make fresh coffee for us."

“Have there been many prisoners?”

“No, not since you left.” Molly laughed. “You’re the king of arrests, Travis. The citizens will be on their best behavior now that you’re back.”

“I bet they will.”

I sat in the swivel chair behind the sheriff’s desk, and it had a familiar feel to it. When I left for Texas, I was so mixed up, I barely remember leaving Montana.

Once the paperwork on the desk was sorted into priority sequence according to Billy’s list, I had time to think about the undercover job Billy was working on.

He’d found out that large quantities of drugs were going through the corner gas station owned by Clay Peterson. Clay was using his service center as a depot for dealers all over Montana.

Vehicles would pull in for gas and while they filled up at the pumps, they would wander into the convenience store that Clay also owned and pick up a case of beer or Coke—special cases with the drugs hidden inside.

Billy hadn’t figured out how the drugs were getting to Peterson at the gas station, or who the dealers were who were picking them up. He had barely scratched the surface when he got hurt.

I had to wonder if Ted Wallace, the tow truck driver, or Kirby, the kid who pumped gas, were aware of what was going on under their noses. There was another mechanic working in the garage too that Billy mentioned. I looked for his name on the list. Gary Pikeman.

Need to meet Gary Pikeman. If he was a new player, he might have brought the new

business with him.

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How was I going to handle the investigation? I needed a starting point. Something to think about.

Billy had been careful not to let anybody in on what he had found out so far. Coyote Creek was a hotbed of gossip and one slip of the tongue, and everybody would know about the drugs. Some buddy of Peterson would give him a heads up, they'd move the product, and the entire operation, and Peterson and Pikeman would never be caught.

Coyote Creek Inn.

I spent the afternoon trying to get back into the groove of being the sheriff of Harrison County and I wasn't adapting as quickly as I'd hoped. Still a lot of negative feelings carrying over from Jeff Bridgeman, the former county supervisor, who made my time as sheriff as difficult as possible.

When my gut started rumbling for food, I locked up the office and headed for the Inn. I hadn't said hello to Olivia yet and she ran the best place to eat in Coyote Creek. Two birds.

Olivia Best was busy escorting guests into the dining room when I arrived at her beautifully appointed Inn. One of my true friends in Coyote Creek, Olivia's mother had been a close friend of my Uncle Carson.

A beautiful woman a couple of years older than me, Olivia always looked like she stepped off the page of a magazine. Porcelain skin, platinum hair and an elegant manner, she was no one who should be seen with the likes of me. And yet we had

developed a special relationship during the time I was sheriff.

When she returned to the lobby and saw me, she ran towards me with her arms extended. “I’m so happy to see you, Travis. Did you come for Billy?”

I held her in my arms for longer than I should have. She tipped her face up and I kissed her, telling myself it was only friendship. My groin area responded much too readily for that to be the truth. She took my breath away.

“I missed you,” I whispered.

“Oh, Travis...” She inhaled a couple of deep breaths, took my hand, and led me away from the center of the lobby. “Sit here beside my desk and tell me about Sheriff Johnson.”

“I saw him this morning at the hospital, and we went over things that are pending at the station. Do you have time to eat with me? We could catch up.”

She smiled. “I have to eat.”

“I’ll sit at a table and have a beer until you’re free.”

“Wonderful. Let me get you seated.”

Olivia sat me near the back of the dining room where we would have some privacy and the other customers wouldn’t overhear us talking. We had a lot to catch up on and in a town riddled with gossipmongers, Olivia shied away from any of them knowing her business.

When she joined me, she brought a glass of white wine with her and told me about the dinner special. The food at her inn was so spectacular in quality, I had no qualms

about eating what she recommended.

“How are things going in Texas? Are you reunited with your beautiful wife?”

“Yes. She took me back for the millionth time. I definitely don’t deserve her.”

Olivia smiled. “Obviously she loves you very much, or she wouldn’t have considered it.”

“I guess that’s true. Are you seeing anyone? You should be. You’re a gorgeous woman, Olivia.”

“The new bank manager has been coming in for dinner quite often and he has been trying to persuade me to take an interest in him.”

“I don’t know him,” I said. “He took over from Jensen?”

“Yes. His head office sent him here from Billings. His name is Miller Ravary.”

I chuckled. “His mother named him after my beer?”

Olivia giggled. “You have no idea how much I missed you, Travis.”

Dry Run Roadhouse.

After a fantastic dinner with Olivia, I drove north as far as the roadhouse and reclaimed my stool at the end of the bar. Jack was busy with customers and filling pitchers for his servers, but he grinned when he saw me sitting there—back where I belonged.

When he had a second to spare, he filled a pitcher at the Miller tap and set it down in

front of me along with a glass and a coaster.

“On the house. I owe you more than that one.”

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“No, you don’t. How’s it going with you and Savanna?”

Jack’s expression changed instantly. “Not bad. I asked her to move in with me, but she said she’s not ready. She likes having her own place.”

“I can see that, Jack. She’s a successful businesswoman and she likes being on her own.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s it. She told me she’d be dropping by tonight, so when she gets here it will be like old times.”

The front doors of the roadhouse opened, and Jack glanced up. “Here comes old times, Travis.” He laughed, and I had to turn my head to look.

Brenda and Glenda came rushing in and they were both zoned in on the bar. “Shit, I don’t want to see her.”

“Too late now.”

Glenda sat down on the stool next to me and her twin sat on the next stool over. “I heard you were coming back, Travis,” said Glenda. “I figured you’d be hanging out here at the Dry Run, drinking beer and talking to Jack.”

“Guess you figured right,” I said. Funny how I remembered Glenda being a helluva lot prettier than the bitchy girl sitting next to me. She was talking to me like I was a lot lower on the food chain than she was and that didn’t make me like her any better.

I picked up my pitcher and my glass and moved to a booth, hoping she took the hint and didn't follow me.

Savanna came through the door at that moment and I waved her over to my new table. "The twins are here," I whispered as she sat down. "Help me."

She settled in laughing and gave Jack a wave at the bar. From my new location we could see the dance floor and one of the permanent troublemakers at Dry Run—Art Andrews.

He spotted me and gave me a look that wasn't a smile. I guess I'd busted his nose one too many times for him to like me.

"Is Glenda still hot for you, Travis?" Savanna winked at me.

"Pissed at me is more like it. She came charging in here looking for me and trying to start an argument."

"Jack told me Billy is thinking of breaking up with Brenda."

"Yeah, Billy told me the same thing at the hospital. He wants her to be out of his life, but I don't think he's strong enough to do it just yet. Lying flat on his back, he probably couldn't take the flack. He'll get around to it when he feels better."

"It's funny how the person we're most attracted to usually turns out to be the wrong person for the long term," said Savanna.

"I hear you. I've been doing a lot of deep thinking along those lines myself."

Savanna's remarks made me think of Annie and Olivia at the same time and that was confusing for my tired brain. No idea what that meant.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Before I got too drunk to drag my ass home safely, I made a wise move and left the roadhouse. When I got to the ranch, the house was chilly, but I wasn't in any shape to chop wood. I'd end up in the bed next to Billy.

I fed the dogs and then sat down on the sofa to call Annie. I had to tell her about the talk with the county supervisor and explain to her that I'd be here at my ranch for a while taking over for Billy.

She said she was fine with however long it took, but she reminded me of the agreement we'd made when she took me back for the last time.

When I left her ranch and went off for whatever reason, she had no intentions of being faithful to me after all the crap I'd inflicted on her over the years. And on the flip side of that coin, I was completely free to please myself as far as women went, and she'd be fine with it.

When I ended the call, I sat and stared at the screen.

I'm not as good at that as she is. I'm not sure I can do it. Do I want to try?

Chapter Four

Friday, April 22nd.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

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Thoughts of Olivia crowded my brain as I was coming out of a deep and dream-filled sleep, and those beautiful thoughts were knocked out of the park by guilty feelings about leaving Annie at home in Texas.

Annie-girl won't be faithful to me while I'm gone, and I've caused her too many years of grief to expect it. Is that going to bother me? It always has. Why would now be any different?

One thing I did know for certain—I couldn't allow my life to get screwed up again after all the treatments I'd undergone and all the time I'd spent at the VA hospital. Taking my meds was my number one priority. Without Doctor Alderson, I was depending solely on the medication to keep me rational.

I had a speedy shower in the cold bathroom, dressed for work and headed for the kitchen. A quick cup of coffee and a fast fried egg sandwich and I couldn't get out of my frigid house fast enough.

As I headed for my truck with Max and Sarge running ahead of me, I swore I'd chop wood later and fill the wood box.

"I've got to get that house warmed up, doggies."

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

On the drive south to the station, I called my accountant in Cut Bank and made an appointment for later in the week. There had to be tons of things she needed me for after I'd been AWOL for so long.

After being away from the sheriff's job for five long months, it was going to be hard to get back into a routine. I'd been convalescing at Annie's ranch and not doing much of anything but riding with the kids and going to my out-patient appointments.

The dogs and I checked in with Molly and I had a cup of coffee with her. No calls had come in so far and I was in the clear.

"I'm going to the bank, then to the garage to fill up the squad and then to Cut Bank to see Billy. Call if anything comes in."

"I will, Travis. It's good to have you back."

Not too bad so far.

Coyote Creek Credit Union.

I lined up at one of the tellers and took two hundred bucks out of my account, just giving myself an excuse for being there.

"Nice to see you back, Sheriff Frost."

"Thanks, Wilma."

I strode down the hall to the manager's office to introduce myself to the guy who had taken over from Jensen, the previous asshole who ran the bank.

For one reason and one reason only, I needed to see the new guy in town. I wanted to meet the guy hustling Olivia.

Before knocking on his door, I studied him through the glass wall and sized him up. About forty-five, under six feet, reasonably fit, dark hair cut too short, a decent off-

the-rack suit.

I tapped twice, opened the door, and stuck my head in.

Ravary glanced up with a slightly annoyed look on his face, probably because I'd interrupted his bean counting.

"Travis Frost. Just a quick visit." I shot my hand across the desk, and he responded. "I'm the new sheriff—actually the old sheriff—and I'll be filling in for Billy Johnson for the next while. Any problems come your way, feel free to call the office."

Miller Ravary got to his feet and told me his name, but I already heard it from Olivia.

"Nice to meet you, Sheriff Frost. I wondered if we were completely devoid of law enforcement with Sheriff Johnson in the hospital."

"Close, but not completely." I laughed. "Y'all have me."

"Do I detect a Texas accent, Sheriff?"

"Former Texas Ranger, sir. At your service."

"Good to have you, Sheriff. Welcome to Coyote Creek."

Back in my truck, I was about to call Molly and ask her to do a background check on Ravary when she called me.

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“Travis, this call just came in. Randy Quade was found dead at his ranch and his wife is hysterical. She was screaming and crying on the phone but from what I understood, two men came and took some of the horses and killed Randy at the barn.”

“Randy Quade is dead in his barn?”

“Yes.”

“I’m on my way. I was about to call and ask you for a background check on Miller Ravary.”

“The new bank manager?”

“The same.”

“Do you expect something to surface?”

“Nope. Also, see if Clay Peterson has any charges we’re not aware of. Previously dropped, or old stuff, or out of state.”

“Of course. I’ll get those checks done right away. Good to have you back, Travis.”

I laughed. “I make more work for you, Molly. You know that’s true. Suspicious nature—always digging.”

“I enjoy your brand of law enforcement, Travis. Keeps me interested.”

Quade's Quarters. South of Coyote Creek.

After a quick trip to the barn to confirm that Randy Quade was indeed deceased, I called Doctor Olson and headed for the house.

I found Mrs. Quade in the kitchen of the big white ranch house drinking coffee. She didn't answer my knock and I figured she might be too distressed to do so, hence, I let myself in and called out to her.

"Mrs. Quade, Sheriff Frost coming in."

She called back to me, and I entered the big kitchen with a huge cookstove roaring in the corner. Made me wish I had me one of those heat-throwers at my place.

A half-full bottle of Irish Whiskey sat next to her coffee cup, and she was running on caffeine and alcohol. She pushed the bottle towards me, and I opted for coffee only.

We sat quietly for a few minutes before I asked her to tell me exactly what happened.

"As I think of it now, Sheriff, it seems so unreal—like it didn't happen at all."

"Traumas are like that."

"Randy went to the barn to do chores before breakfast. All the horses we hung onto at the end of the season are still in the barn for the winter. We've got stalls for twenty. About half the size of the herd we run in the good weather."

"I still have Outlaw, the horse I bought from y'all. Great horse. I'd never part with him."

Mrs. Quade smiled.

“You go ahead.”

“Breakfast was ready, and Randy still hadn’t come in. I pushed the pan to the back of the stove, put a lid on it, and went to look out the door to see if he was coming. I know how long it takes him to feed the horses, and it had been too long. I figured he had some trouble.”

She sighed and took a couple of breaths. “That’s when I saw the big horse trailer backed up to the barn door. Randy never told me anybody was picking up a horse and if we’d sold one, he would’ve handed over the check because I keep the books.”

“Seeing that trailer out there made me nervous. I grabbed the shotgun off the rack on the wall, put my coat and my boots on and went tramping out onto the porch.”

“When I got outside, I could hear the two guys yelling at each other about which horses they were taking, and I knew something wasn’t right. There was no sign of Randy and that scared me a lot.”

“It would. If they were customers, Randy would be helping them load,” I said.

“Yes, he always helps the customers load the horses. I marched out there to the barn and hollered at the guys to start putting the horses back in the barn. One of them laughed at me and asked what I was going to do about it. You know...like a real smart-ass.”

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“I can picture it,” I said.

“That’s when I yelled back at him and started shooting buckshot at them. I fired three times, and the one guy was hit for sure—probably in the leg or the ass. He ran for the truck while the other one slammed the back door of the trailer and ran for the driver’s side of the truck. While he was running, I fired the shotgun twice more and shot him in the ass. For sure, I hit that guy.”

“Good for you.”

“I don’t know what kind of shells Randy had in the gun but I was wishing it was double-ought so I could kill them dead. Horse thieves. Nothing lower.”

I nodded. “They drove off and you went looking for Randy?”

“As soon as they drove out the lane, I ran into the barn, and it only took me a second to find him. Randy was lying in one of the empty stalls and he was dead.” Mrs. Quade tried to hold back her tears. “There’s a shovel lying next to Randy. I didn’t touch it or move it.”

“And you were sure he was dead?”

“Absolutely. I used to be a nurse at Cut Bank hospital. Still am a nurse, but I’m retired.”

“Do you remember any writing on the truck?”

“Dark blue—truck and trailer—dark blue.”

Mrs. Quade was upset and repeating herself.

“No lettering. The guys were big redneck types with beards and bulky parkas. Couldn’t see much more than that.”

“You did well under pressure, Mrs. Quade. You stay here in the house, and I’ll wait for Doctor Olson in the barn.”

“I’ll fix a thermos of coffee for you, Sheriff, and bring it out when it’s ready. I wish I had thought to take the tag number of the truck down, but I guess I was too busy screaming and shooting.”

“You handled yourself well, Mrs. Quade. You said you had twenty horses in the barn?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll count and see how many are gone.”

“When I bring the coffee out, I’ll be able to give you descriptions of the ones that are missing.”

“That would be helpful.”

When I got to the barn, I took a closer look at the crime scene. Randy Quade was dead. I’d already confirmed that when I arrived. Blood on the shovel lying next to him in the stall. Fourteen horses in their stalls meant six were AWOL.

I called the state highway patrol and put a bulletin out for a dark blue truck and horse

trailer combination with no identifying markings—wanted in connection with a robbery/homicide. Six stolen quarter horses on board.

I peered out the barn door now and then looking for the county coroner, but Mrs. Quade came with the coffee before Doctor Olson arrived.

She went from stall to stall writing down a description and the name of each horse that had been taken.

When Doctor Olson showed up, he did his preliminary examination and then I helped him get Randy into a body bag. The two of us carried Randy to the van and put him in the back door while Mrs. Quade watched.

“Do you have somebody who can come and stay with you?” I asked.

“I’ll call the boys and they’ll come. They’ll want to know all the details anyway.” Mrs. Quade gave me a funny look. “Do you think the thieves will come back?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t want you staying here alone in case that happens. They know there are fourteen horses still here.”

“Randy never bothered with much security. We never had any trouble with local folks. Not ever.”

“Did you ever see a trailer like that before?” I asked.

“Don’t think so, and I’ve seen a lot of them coming and going. We’ve been in the horse business for twenty years.”

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Doctor Olson left with a promise to let me know about the cause of death, and I stayed with Mrs. Quade until one of her boys arrived to stay with his mother.

Tall and lanky, the Quade boy looked a lot like his father. Anger in his eyes as he asked me, “You going to be able to catch the bastards who killed my father?”

“I hope so. If you or your brother have any insight, I wish y’all would tell me.”

“What kind of insight are we talking about, Sheriff?”

“Rough dealings your father had with customers in the past or recently. People holding a grudge against your father—for any reason at all. Randy at odds with someone over something that happened. Like that.”

“Okay. I get it. Let me think on that, Sheriff.”

I handed the kid a card. “Call my cell anytime. I’ll be happy to hear from you.”

“Are the cops looking for the horse trailer?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. I’m waiting for it to be spotted.”

“Okay, thanks. I’m Randy Junior. Everybody calls meBuddy.”

“Take care of your mother, Buddy. She’s had a bad shock.”

“My brother is on his way here from work. We’ll stay with her, Sheriff. We’re a close

family.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

On my way back to the office, I had Molly put a bulletin out to all medical facilities in the surrounding area—looking for two guys with butts full of buckshot.

Coming in through the back door of the station, the dogs pushed ahead of me and almost knocked the shovel out of my hand. “Hey, slow down.”

I walked through to the squad room and Molly was busy talking to the hospitals. I stood the shovel up against the wall next to her desk—the mouth of the shovel inserted in an evidence bag.

She turned to watch what I was doing. “This is the murder weapon that killed Randy Quade.”

“Oh, no. He was such a nice man. I feel so bad for his wife and family.”

“I waited until Randy Junior came to stay with his mother.”

“Is he the one they call Buddy?”

“Yes. That’s what he told me. You keep going on the hospitals and medical centers and let me know if we get a hit on the truck and trailer. I’m going to Peterson’s to gas up the squad and then I’m going to see Billy and fill him in.”

“I’ll let you know if I hear anything, Travis. How many horses did they take?”

“Six out of twenty. That’s all they had time to get out of the barn before Mrs. Quade came out of the house with a shotgun.”

“Oh, my. She must have been frightened,” Molly added, “Those quarter horses are valuable.”

I smiled. “I could barely afford Outlaw, but he’s totally worth the price.”

Peterson’s Service Center.

Kirby Pratt came running out when I pulled up to the pumps. “Is it true, Sheriff? Did some lowlives kill Randy Quade?”

Coyote Creek was the gossip capital of Montana. Word traveled on the wind and the citizens seemed to thrive on it.

“Yes, it’s true. I just came from his ranch. Keep your ears open for me, will you?”

Kirby leaned in closer. “What am I looking for, Sheriff?”

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“Dark blue truck and horse trailer. Two redneck guys with their asses full of buckshot. Six quarter horses being sold on the sly. That should be enough to keep you going for today.”

“I’ve got it. See what I can find out, Sheriff.”

“Thanks, Kirby.”

“Glad you’re back, Sheriff. Not that I’m glad Billy got hurt or nothing like that, but it’s nice to see you coming around again.”

“Thanks. Ted around?”

“Out on a call.”

“I’ll catch up with him later.”

I had lots of questions for Kirby about his boss, but I had to ease into it and not arouse suspicion. I had to sneak up on my prey and not scare it away.

Cut Bank Hospital.

I spent the next hour sitting next to Billy’s hospital bed telling him about the murder. We chewed the whole thing over and he came up with one thing I didn’t think of.

“Ask Marilyn Pellegrino about the horse trailer. She might have crossed paths with a truck and trailer like that buying or selling her quarter horses.”

“Damned good idea. I’ll drive to her ranch later.”

“I didn’t know Randy Quade personally, but I heard he was a nice guy,” said Billy.

“My dad might’ve known him. Same age group. I’ll mention it to him.”

“Treated me well. He was a friend of my Uncle Carson, and he gave me a good deal on Outlaw. I owe him for that.”

Coyote Creek Inn.

On the way back from Cut Bank, I called Marilyn Pellegrino, and she had time to see me around three o’clock. I was starving and stopped into the Inn to see if Olivia would feed me.

She wasn’t behind the registration desk in the fancy lobby of the inn, so I walked into the dining room to see if she was in there with a customer. I saw her sitting at a table with Miller Ravary and I experienced a completely unexpected reaction to seeing them sitting at the same table.

Jealousy—green and venomous—flared through my bloodstream hot as lava, and the adrenaline rush made my heart beat triple time. Sucking in enough oxygen to turn a grown man dizzy, I turned for the door and was on my way out when I heard Olivia call my name.

“Travis, wait.”

I turned and she pointed to the door that led into her private quarters. “Don’t leave. Miller stopped in for lunch and he just wanted to talk to me about something.”

As soon as I was in her private space, I shut the door and locked it behind me. I took Olivia in my arms and kissed her with all the emotion that was thundering through

my body. Pent up feelings for Olivia that I didn't even know I possessed.

Pushing her against the wall and breathing into her neck, I whispered, "I have to have you right now." I lifted her dress, pulled off her panties and took her up against the wall in the hallway. The sex was rough and not too refined, but I was in dire need of her at that moment. She was responsive to my demands and gave me everything I needed without a sound of protest.

When I was exhausted, I calmed down a little and just held her close to me breathing in her scent. When I was able to speak, I whispered, "I came for lunch."

She laughed. "If that was lunch, I wish you'd come every day." She picked up her underwear and pointed at the kitchen table. "Sit there and as soon as I make a trip to the bathroom, I'll get you a beer and the lunch special."

"I didn't hurt you, did I? Seeing you with Ravary set me off and made me pretty aggressive."

"At least you're honest about your emotions, Travis. I appreciate that in a man."

"What else do you appreciate, Olivia? I'll see if I've got any of it."

She smiled as she hurried to the bathroom to pull herself together and fix her hair. Customers were waiting in the dining room, and she was in here screwing around with me. Not the best for business.

Before she left to go to the kitchen for my food, she leaned down and kissed me. "A wonderful surprise, Travis. Something I won't easily forget."

"Sorry if I was rough. Didn't mean to be."

Pellegrino Ranch. Shelby.

I was right on time for my three o'clock appointment with Marilyn Pellegrino—former barrel racing champion of the world—who now ran an instructional school for girls aspiring to the popular rodeo sport.

“Come in, Travis. Wonderful to see you.”

“Thanks, Marilyn. I’m sure you heard about Randy Quade already. News travels faster in Montana than anywhere else I’ve ever been.”

“What a tragedy. One of the nicest people in the whole county.”

“I agree, and his entire family is devastated. When I left the Quade ranch, one of the boys was staying with his mother.”

“Maggie Quade is lucky to have her boys. Sit down, Travis. I made coffee for us. Did you want to talk to me about something in particular?”

I sat down at the table in Marilyn’s warm, fragrant kitchen, and she set a mug of steaming coffee in front of me. I added a splash of cream and left it to cool down while I asked a few questions.

“In answer to your question, Marilyn, I do want to talk to you about something specific.”

“Okay, go ahead. I’ll help you if I can.”

“In her statement, Mrs. Quade described the horse thieves as a couple of big redneck types wearing bulky parkas.”

“Okay, I’m listening.”

“That didn’t help much, but what I’m asking you about is the truck and horse trailer they were driving.”

“Sure. I’ve seen a lot of them. They drive past my house almost every day, picking up or delivering.”

“Dark blue pickup truck pulling a dark blue trailer. Big one. They loaded six of Randy’s horses and were going back into the barn for more when Mrs. Quade ran out of the house with Randy’s shotgun and fired buckshot at them.”

Marilyn smiled. “Good for Maggie. She’s a feisty one. I feel so bad for her, she and Randy were so close.”

“Does the description of the truck and trailer ring any bells?”

“Uh huh. Thinking back a couple of weeks, could’ve been three weeks ago, two guys like you described drove in here with a dark blue rig. They parked and asked to see my stock, saying they were in the market for several rodeo horses.”

“They looked at your horses but didn’t buy any?”

“That’s not unusual in the horse business. Legitimate buyers will take a while to pick the perfect horse for themselves or for a family member.”

“Sure. While they were here, they spent time in the barn checking out your setup. Did they seem interested in your security?”

“Honestly, Travis, I wasn’t thinking along those lines at all when they were here. I was convinced they were potential customers, and that was the way I treated them.”

“Understandable.” I nodded. “You had no reason to think otherwise.”

“At the time,” said Marilyn.

“Right—at the time.”

“Do you think I’m a potential target?”

“I’m not ruling it out, girl, but you do have a lot of cowboys living here on the ranch, don’t you?”

“I have six hands full time and more when my season begins with the students.”

“Having your cowboys here would be more of a deterrent than Randy had at his place—only him and his wife. But if they are looking for vulnerable targets, they might choose a woman rancher on her own.”

“I see what you mean. Randy had summer help for hay and straw season, but those cowboys were by the day. The rest of the time, only Maggie and Randy.”

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I stood up to leave. “Talk to your boys and let them know what kind of rig I’m looking for, Marilyn. Please, take precautions.”

“I won’t forget. I’ll talk to the hands at supper. Thanks for the visit, Travis. I missed you.”

I smiled at her. So pretty and sincere. “I missed you too. Maybe I’ll see you at the Dry Run and we’ll dance a slow dance.”

“Possibly, I still go there once in a while.”

As I drove back from Shelby, I called Molly and told her about Marilyn seeing the killers a couple of weeks previous.

“Oh, my, Travis. That makes me nervous. They are circling around this area looking for horses to steal.”

“I’m not too happy about it, Molly. It’s past time for you to leave, but tomorrow morning I’m going to need a list of horse ranchers in Harrison County. And we should also check robbery reports from the neighboring counties, just so we’re in the know.”

“Sure. I can get a list of horse ranchers from the county office, and for similar robberies, I’ll call the neighboring county sheriffs’ offices.”

“Great, thanks.”

“I’ll call the county now before I leave and put a request in. I know some of the ladies who work there.”

“I want to put up a poster in the post office and in the feed store and the bank. Be on the lookout with a description of the truck and trailer.”

“Great idea.”

“We’ll work on it tomorrow. You have a great night.”

“You too, Travis. Oh, I had a thought—what about Wyatt Thompson? I’ll call him tomorrow and I’m sure he’ll put something in the paper to help you.”

“Yeah, we need to do that too. We’ll talk to him tomorrow.”

Dry Run Roadhouse.

As I passed by the Inn and saw Olivia’s outdoor lights glowing and lighting up the park-like grounds surrounding her establishment, I wondered about what had happened between us earlier in the day.

“She probably thinks I’m a fucking animal,” I said to the dogs.”

I slowed down and asked myself, “Should I go in and talk to her or let it gel for a day?”

Being basically a coward around women, I decided to text her—something I’d never done before—to see how the wind was blowing.

I parked behind the roadhouse, sat behind the wheel of the squad, and sent a text to Olivia.

“Any second thoughts about lunch?”

While waiting for an answer, I let Max and Sarge out of the truck to run around the parking lot. When they came back to me, I harnessed them so they could go with me inside the bar.

I checked my phone and Olivia had answered me.

“None.”

“I had concerns.”

“No need.”

“Thanks. Talk later.”

I forgot it was Friday until I walked through the front door of the Dry Run and heard the band warming up.

Jack gave me a wave and pointed at my regular stool.

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I sat down and watched him fill a pitcher with Miller for me and plunk it down with a frosted glass on a coaster.

“Heard about Randy.”

“Yeah, bad day and I’m not staying long.”

“Any leads?”

“Nothing solid. No place to start yet. We’ve got no forensic department to scour Quade’s barn and come up with a stray hair or a piece of skin that will match DNA from a previous offender. The assholes I’m looking for might not even have sheets.”

“How many horses did they take?”

“Six. Randy was down to twenty for the winter and he had them all inside. Fourteen left. Mrs. Quade knew which ones they took by which stalls were empty, and she described each of the six for me. Her youngest son looked over her list and agreed with her.”

“I know Buddy,” said Jack. “He’s the youngest and comes in here sometimes with his friends.”

“He’s the only one I’ve met.”

“Have you eaten?”

“No, but I had a big lunch at the Inn. Nothing since. I’m good for a while yet on hops and barley.”

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Exhausted from a long day back on the job, I made myself a sandwich when I got home, took a long, hot shower, and went straight to bed.

Chapter Five

Saturday, April 23rd.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Molly didn’t work on Saturdays, but she came in for the morning to help me get going on the wanted posters and to check to see if we’d heard back from any of the medical facilities she’d contacted.

We made a rough draft of what I wanted the poster to say, and when we agreed on the wording and the layout, Molly worked her magic on the computer and produced a draft of our bulletin.

I had plans to tack the posters up at the post office, the bank and Petersons’ market, but the best place to post one would be the feed store where the horse ranchers were in and out all day long.

Molly printed out two dozen copies on letter-size paper. “If you want bigger posters or if you want them on colored paper to get more notice, you’ll have to go to the printer in Cut Bank, Travis.”

“Yep. I can drop in there when I go to see Billy. Bigger and on colored paper is a

great idea. I want the ranchers to stop and read the notice.”

Molly took copies for the market and post office because she was going to those two places on her way home.

I took the rest and headed out.

Cut Back Printing and Office Supplies.

The lady who helped me at the printing office was enthused about making wanted posters and she was happy to enlarge them and suggested printing them on bright yellow card stock to get more notice.

They came out great and she wouldn’t accept any money for them. “I’m always happy to help the sheriff’s department. We all have to do our part to keep Harrison County safe.”

“Thank you.”

“We have our own newsy bulletin board near the front door, and I’d be happy to put a poster up for you, Sheriff.”

“Thanks so much. I need as many people to be watching for the horse trailer as possible.”

As I left the printer, I called Wyatt Thompson at the newspaper office and asked him to meet me across the road at the diner.

Katie's Good Eats. Cut Bank.

I sat in a booth near the back of the crowded diner and when the waitress came rushing towards me, I ordered two coffees. Wyatt came in moments later and joined me in my booth.

"Can you help me with this, Wyatt?" I shoved one of my posters his way.

He took a minute to read everything Molly had included, then looked up with a big grin on his face, his eyes dancing.

"Oh, wow, Travis. This is something. This poster says it all and I would be happy to run it for you on the front page."

"Great. I was hoping you'd say that. I want all the ranchers to see it as soon as possible."

"Can you give me any other details if I was to put a story with the poster?"

"I don't have too much more, and I wish I did. For the time being, I'd prefer it if you didn't talk to Mrs. Quade. Waiting until after the funeral would be respectful."

"Yes. I was holding off on contacting her out of respect for her situation," said Wyatt.

"I think I put everything I have on the poster." I read it over one more time. "Two guys wearing bulky parkas, a description of the rig. The number of stolen horses."

“Anything you missed that I could incorporate into a little sidebar?” Wyatt sounded hopeful.

“Both murderers could have been treated for buckshot wounds in the backs of their legs or their asses,” I said. “I didn’t put that on there. Molly is checking clinics.”

“Mrs. Quade shot them?” Wyatt’s eyes were wide.

“Yep. She ran out with Randy’s shotgun and she’s pretty sure she nailed both of them from behind.”

“This is great stuff, Travis. I’ll write about the buckshot and alerting the clinics and hospitals. Fantastic.”

I pulled the paper out of my pocket with the descriptions of the horses on it. “You can use this. Mrs. Quade described each of the stolen horses in detail. People could be on the watch for quarter horses with these markings.”

“For sure, they could. Let me get the descriptions down, Travis. This is great.”

I waved the waitress over for coffee refills. Wyatt was going to need a little more time to get all the details down in his notes.

“Also, you could finish off by asking any ranchers who have been visited by these guys to be cautious of their return and to call the sheriff’s office.”

“Holy shit, Travis. Are they casing the ranchers in the area?”

“Yes. I know of one ranch for certain where they’ve been posing as potential customers. I’m thinking if they’ve been to one ranch, they’ve been to others.”

“You can’t tell me where they’ve been?”

“No. But you can be sure I’ve been there and confirmed it in person.”

“This is going to be a fantastic story, Travis. Can’t thank you enough.”

“No problem. We have to help each other, Wyatt. These guys killed an innocent rancher and they have to be caught as soon as possible.”

Cut Bank Hospital.

My next stop was the hospital where I wanted to spend some time filling Billy in on everything, I was doing to find Randy Quade’s killer. It was Billy’s idea to talk to Marilyn Pellegrino and that paid off big time. She had seen the killers in person.

I hoped Billy had come up with something else since the last time we talked. He had time to lie in his bed and think about the case while I was out beating the bushes for suspects.

He was sitting up a little straighter in his bed than he had been the day before and he grinned as I walked into his room.

“Hey, I brought you something to look at.” I handed him one of the big yellow posters.

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“Wow, this is fantastic, Travis. A wanted poster. I’ve always wanted to have a couple posted at the station. Did you give one to Wyatt?”

“Just came from Katie’s where I gave him all the info I could. He’s going to give us the front page for the poster and a little story.”

“You’re doing a great job and I like being in on what’s going on at the station. When I go home tomorrow, I’m going to be at my mom’s way out in Shelby and I’ll be out of the fuckin loop.”

“You have to spend a couple of days with your mother to let her fuss over you and do her thing. She wants to take care of you, so let her do it. Then I’ll come and pick you up and you can come home.”

Billy frowned thinking about it. “How cold is the house? April is so fuckin damp.”

“The house is frigid. I haven’t had a minute to chop wood.”

“Hire a kid for us. I’m gonna be a piece of shit when I get home to the ranch, and I’ll need a gopher.”

I chuckled.

“Where am I gonna get a kid? I don’t know any kids in Montana.”

“Go to the county office and see if you can get a juvie about sixteen who’s coming out of detention into foster care and needs a home and a job.”

“Jeeze, Billy. Do you stay awake all night thinking up these bizarre scenarios?”

Billy laughed. “I haven’t been sleeping well, and when the drugs wear off, I wake up in a lot of pain and I can’t go back to sleep. The doc says he’s trying to taper me off. Let me tell you, Trav, I fuckin hate it.”

“Tapering off the drugs is going to be tough for you, but soon you’ll be home, and you can dull the pain with booze. I’ll stock up for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Did you taper off Brenda yet?”

“That’ll be a lot easier than the drugs. She’s here every fuckin day and I want to tell her we’re done but I haven’t had the guts to do it.”

“Glenda’s stalking me.”

Billy started laughing and he couldn’t stop. “That’s so goddamned funny, Travis. Those twins are like fuckin crazy glue. Once you get some on your fingers, you can’t get it off.”

“Tell your mother to get rid of Brenda when you get home.”

“Mom loves her.”

“Oh, that’s too bad.”

“Think of something else. I need help with this one.”

“I’ll try to come up with something that’ll make her dump you. If you cheated on her,

that would do it, but you can't go screwing around yet—not on crutches.

Billy laughed. "I'm picturing it."

"Once she's pissed off and dumps you, then the ball will be out of your court."

Billy grinned. "Can't wait until you make it happen."

"I'll think of something."

Coyote Creek Needs and Feeds.

After the hospital, I drove back to Coyote Creek, drove all the way down Main Street to the end and parked in front of the feed store.

After putting it in the newspaper, the feed store was the prime place to tack up my wanted poster.

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I hustled down the back hall to check it out with Savanna and get her permission, because it was her store.

“Hey, Travis. A daytime visit cheers me up.”

I held up the poster. “Work-related, although seeing you cheers me up too.”

She laughed. “Nice comeback. Let me look at it.”

“Randy’s killers.”

“You make this?”

“Molly.”

“It’s great. Let me show you our community bulletin board and we’ll give it a prime spot.”

“Thanks. Appreciate it.”

We walked through the store, and she asked me, “Do you think those guys will try for more horses in our county?”

“Based on my preliminary investigation, I have to say there are strong indications they’ve already been looking at other ranches.”

“Jesus, Travis. You sound like a goddamned TV cop.”

“Sorry.”

Savanna stopped in front of the big bulletin board not far from the front entrance. She moved a few items around to make room for the big poster and then tacked it up front and center.

“There. That should get everybody’s attention.”

“Thanks, I owe you one.”

“Buy me a drink later.” She winked at me.

“I’ll see you at the Run.”

Coyote Creek Credit Union.

Next stop, the bank. Only one choice in Coyote Creek—everybody used the credit union. I walked in and checked for a bulletin board and didn’t see one.

I walked up to one of the tellers who didn’t have a customer and asked her. “Does the bank have a bulletin board?”

She smiled. “We do. You got something to post, Sheriff?”

“I’ve got a wanted poster I’d like to put up. It’s important.”

“Is this about the guys who killed Randy Quade?”

“You got it, Wilma.” I showed her the poster.

“Wow, that should get a lot of attention. Let me show you where our board is.” She

headed to the other side of the bank. “It’s over here in the customer lounge.”

Wilma was tacking the poster up for me when Miller Ravary happened to pass by and stopped to see what we were doing.

“Ah, you’re here on official business, Sheriff.”

“Getting the word out on horse thieves and killers,” I said. “Any problem posting the bulletin here?”

“None. That board is dedicated to community service. Could I speak to you in my office for a second?”

“Sure.”

We walked down the glass hallway and he closed the door of his office. “Have a seat, Sheriff.”

“I’ll stand. What’s this about?”

“I saw you at the Inn yesterday and Olivia seemed rather upset and disoriented after you left.”

“And what does that have to do with you?”

“Olivia and I have been cultivating a relationship ever since I moved here to take over this branch of the credit union.”

“So, you’re saying you and Olivia are in a relationship and you’re telling me to butt out? Am I getting it right?”

“That’s right.”

I had a strong urge to punch the guy in the face, but I exercised restraint and used words instead. “What if I told you that Olivia and I were in a...relationship long before you set foot in Harrison County, and I’d like you to butt the hell out.”

He smiled. “I don’t think that’s true. You’re not...”

“Not what? Not good enough for Olivia?”

“That’s not what I was going to say.”

“But that’s what you were thinking.”

“Maybe.”

“Okeydokey. I’ll file your concerns and sort this out as soon as I get a minute.”

“Thank you, Sheriff. You seem to be a reasonable man.”

I pointed my finger at his chest. “Because you just called mereasonable, that tells me what a poor judge of character you are. I hope you’re not the guy approving the bank loans.”

Coyote Creek Inn.

After a couple of hours at the office jotting down notes to bring Molly up to date on everything I’d done in the Quade case, I headed to the Inn to get a beer and some food and discuss Miller Ravary’s relationship claim with Olivia.

She smiled when she saw me cross the lobby and go into the dining room. I had time to drink two glasses of Miller before she was free from the registration desk and had time to talk to me.

“Are you here for dinner, Travis?” She stood at the end of the table and didn’t sit down.

“Is this a bad time to talk?”

“I am completely full of reservations for dinner. Could we talk in my apartment?”

Not sure I was capable of rational conversation, I picked up my beer and followed her through the lobby and down the hall to her locked door.

I haven't been offered a key. What does that mean?

We stepped inside and I closed the door.

"You seem upset, Travis. What's this about? Are you having regrets about yesterday?"

I set my beer on the kitchen table and pulled Olivia into my arms. "Absolutely not."

"Neither am I. Tell me what's the matter."

"I was putting a poster up at the bank and Ravary called me into his office and warned me off. He said you and he were in a relationship, and you are his private property."

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“Umm... it started after you left. After you and I got together... and then you left to go back to Texas...I kind of fell apart.”

“So, it is true then?”

“I’m not going to lie to you, Travis. I’ve been seeing Miller casually for several months. I was thinking of breaking it off with him before I ever knew you were coming back to Montana. That’s the truth.”

“Here’s the big one, Olivia—does Ravary have a key to your apartment?”

Tears welled up in her eyes and she couldn’t answer.

“Okay. I’ve got the picture.”

Dry Run Roadhouse. Coyote Creek.

I left my broken heart at the Inn and dropped into the roadhouse for my pitcher of beer—seriously thinking of changing brands—and to bring Jack up to date on what had gone on during the day. He was stuck behind the bar and liked to know what was going on in the outside world.

I need to put Olivia out of my head and getting wasted is a quick way to do it.

We were laughing at one of Jack’s bad jokes when the smile vanished from his face. “Look out. She’s got you in her sights.”

I didn't turn my head but in the mirror behind the bar I could see Glenda heading my way. "Aw, shit. I've got no time for this."

"But you've got time for dinner at the Inn." Jack winked at me.

No use denying it. Somehow Jack knew about Olivia. "Yeah, I did, but now I don't. Don't ask."

"Aw, dammit, Travis. Tell me later."

Glenda sat down on the stool next to me. "You working on the murder today, Travis?"

"Yes. All day. Where's your sister?"

"Coming later. She went to visit Billy at the hospital first."

"I saw him earlier and he's getting out tomorrow."

"Brenda wants him to go to her place," said Glenda. "She wants to take care of him."

"I think his mother has dibs on him for a few days," I said. "That's what he told me."

Jack jumped in with an amused look on his face. "What are you drinking, Glenda?"

"I'll have a margarita if Travis is buying."

"I'm good for one, Jack," I said. "Then I've got to get home and chop firewood. My house is like an igloo."

"I guess you don't have Billy doing your work for you anymore, Travis. You have to

man up.”

Glenda continued to snipe at me, and I wanted to get as far away from her as possible. One glance in the mirror and I was saved from a fate worse than death.

Ted Wallace walked in alone. I turned my head watching where he was going to sit, then I picked up my pitcher and my glass and I followed him.

“Where you going?” Glenda called after me.

“Business. Stay there.”

I sat down across from Ted, and he grinned. Big tall guy with short, dark hair, face weathered from sun and wind. Tow truck driver operating out of Peterson’s service center and Ted was always outdoors.

“Nice to see you back, Travis.”

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“I guess somebody has to be sheriff.”

“Something on your mind? You seem a bit antsy.”

“Aside from Glenda at the bar stalking me, there’s no easy way to open up this can of worms.”

Ted gave Glenda a quick glance, and then he gave her a second look. “Just say it.”

“I’ll start off by saying I know Clay Peterson is dirty. I’ve known it since the first day I filled up with gas at his pumps. Been a cop for too long not to know. Stuff is going through the garage and the convenience store. I get that. What I’m hoping, is that you and Kirby are no part of it. I’d really like the two of you to be clear when I come at Peterson and knock him down.”

Ted raised an eyebrow. Tina brought Ted’s pitcher of beer and set it down on the table. “Thanks, Tina.”

She gave him a smile like maybe she knew him pretty well.

He filled his glass and drank half of it down. “You can’t help but notice shit when you’re in and out of the garage all day long like I am.”

“I figured you knew.”

Ted nodded his head doing some thinking and trying to get a read on me at the same time.

“My advice to you is to back away from it before I’m ready.”

“You’re a smart cop, Travis. That’s one thing I do know about you. How do you know I won’t go straight to Clay?”

I shrugged. “Don’t matter to me, Ted. I heard Montana State Penn ain’t the place to be. I knew the last guy who broke out of there and I can guarantee you, that guy is dead. Just say’n.”

“Interesting chat, Travis. I’ll think about what you said.”

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Feeling like a drunken piece of dog shit, I staggered into the house and fed Max and Sarge. While they gobbled up their kibble, I sat at the kitchen table staring at my phone and wishing I hadn’t been so brutal to Olivia.

I’d been with Annie the whole time I’d been back in Texas, but I’m pissed out of my tree because Olivia was screwing around with the goddamned bank manager?

“I told Ravary the truth. I’m not reasonable. Far from it.”

I flopped into bed and didn’t have a prayer of getting any sleep. Women were turning me upside down and I was allowing it to happen. It had to stop.

Chapter Six

Sunday, April 24th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

The dogs woke me up early and I hated to get out from under the covers, the house was so fuckin cold. The furnace couldn't keep the temperature up to a human level. I might have to have it replaced. Billy would know. He was in charge of the furnace.

My feet hit that icy cold wooden floor and a shiver ran up my spine. "Jeeze, doggies, is it really spring in Montana? Sure ain't like spring in Texas."

As soon as I spoke to them, they ran for the back door, and I had no choice but to follow and let them out. I ran back to my room and got dressed as fast as I could.

Wood had to be chopped if the house was ever going to warm up. Because of Billy's horrendous accident, I'd been avoiding that chore. I had to get past the effect the accident had on me and look at it rationally. Because Billy hit a knot with the axe and cut his leg didn't mean I was going to do the same thing.

Since the little talk to Olivia, I wasn't looking at much of anything logically. Trying to compartmentalize and block that whole mess out of my brain wasn't working worth a sweet goddamn.

Standing next to the woodpile, I picked up my new axe with the shiny razor-sharp blade and the red handle and I started splitting logs. Once I took the first couple of whacks and got into a rhythm, I was over the trauma of the accident, and okay.

The physical exertion helped to work off my frustration over Olivia screwing around with that desk jockey, Miller Ravary. When it came down to it, the biggest piss off was him having a key to her place when I didn't.

Seemed petty when I analyzed it, but I was still mad.

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After an hour of chopping, I carried an armload inside and finally got the woodstove humming. The heat the stove gave off as well as the smell of the wood burning were both restorative and helped me get the day going.

I made coffee and looked in the fridge at what was available. I decided I couldn't eat anything, and looking forward, I figured I might never eat again.

After two cups of coffee, I got off my ass and went upstairs to check out Billy's room. I wanted to see if it was fit for him to come home to. While I was up there, I came to my senses and realized he wouldn't be able to go upstairs.

"I'll have to fix up Tammy's room for him."

Putting clean sheets on the bed in Tammy's room made me think of Billy's idea to get us a kid to help us out around the ranch. I didn't know how he came up with his ideas. Getting a homeless juvie was something I never thought of. Never crossed my mind—not even once.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

Molly didn't work on Sundays, but I had stuff to do, and it was best to keep busy in my present state of undoing. At any given second, something might come along, and I'd blow apart right on the spot and bust whatever was close to me or I'd kill the fuckin bank manager and hang his nuts over the door of the Inn like mistletoe. That was an event I was trying to avoid.

With a pot of coffee brewing in the lunchroom and the dogs lying next to Molly's

vacant desk, I worked on reports. The entire investigation into Randy Quade's murder and robbery had to be documented—all of it. And I was way behind getting it all down in writing.

A knock came on the front door of the station, and I barely heard it. I left my office and jogged through the squad room and barely trusted what my eyes were seeing.

Olivia was standing there on the sidewalk waiting for me to let her in. I unlocked the door and opened it. "Olivia, what are you doing here?"

"I had to come, Travis. I can't stand the way things are between us and I want to fix it."

"Can't be fixed, girl. You are in a relationship that you didn't bother to tell me about, and I have to stand down."

She stepped into the squad room and pushed the door closed. "Miller is cooking dinner for me at his place tonight and I plan to break it off. I wanted you to know that. You mean too much to me, Travis. I'd gladly give Miller up for you."

I laughed when she said that. "Don't do it, Olivia. I'm not worth it. You can't count on me, but Ravary is a solid citizen, and you should stick with a sure thing. You must like him a lot or you wouldn't have been seeing him this long."

"I'm confused, Travis. I admit, I do have feelings for Miller, but they aren't the same strong feelings I have for you. Not the same at all."

"Like I said, Olivia, I have to stand down. I'm not stable enough to be in the middle of this. Also, I have a murder to solve, and I've got Billy coming home... and I'm adopting a boy."

“What?”

“Never mind. You stick with Ravary. I’ll be drinking Coors from here on.”

Olivia looked puzzled. “Thanks for your time, Travis.” She turned and left the station, and I watched her get into a Beemer I didn’t know she had. She drove down Main Street and I clutched my chest to get rid of the tension I felt there.

I don’t know her at all. Why did I think I had it all figured out?

The landline rang and since I was right next to Molly’s desk, I answered it. “Sheriff Frost.”

“Sheriff, this is Larry Crossman calling.”

“Hey, Larry. How can I help you?”

“I happened to see your poster at the feed store yesterday and I was thinking about it on the drive home. I called to say I did see those two guys with the dark blue rig.”

“Did they come to your ranch?”

“Yes. It was about three weeks ago, they pulled in and had a look at some of my horses. They said they were seriously considering two of them and they’d be back after they decided.”

“Where’s your ranch, Larry? I’m making a little grid here in the office.”

“North of Ethridge about five miles.”

“You don’t have security cams, do you?”

“No, sorry.”

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“That’s okay. I didn’t expect you would. Please be cautious if they happen to come back, and don’t go out to talk to them without a shotgun in your hand.”

“Got it, Sheriff. I’ll be careful. Hope you catch them soon.”

“You and me both. The Cut Bank paper is going to publish the poster and an article tomorrow and that may get us more sightings. What I need is the tag and I’ve got highway patrol looking, but nothing yet.”

“The more people who are looking, the better.”

“That’s what I’m thinking, Larry. Thanks for the call.”

I hung up the landline and called Wyatt Thompson on my cell.

“Travis?”

“Am I too late to add something?”

“Nope. I’m working on the final draft right now.”

“Okay, I had another sighting of the truck and trailer so you could say, the truck and trailer in question has been seen at ranches east of Shelby and north of Ethridge. And then give my number to call. I’m setting up a grid here in the office.”

“Got it. Great stuff. I’ll add that right now. Shows where they’ve been looking for targets, and it’ll put the ranchers on alert.”

“Thanks, Wyatt.”

Dry Run Roadhouse.

I spent the day at the office trying to get a handle on the work that was too much for one person. When my brain stopped working, I locked up the station, woke up the dogs and headed for the roadhouse.

I plopped down on my usual stool and Jack took one look at me, filled a pitcher with Miller and he also brought me a shot of tequila. One of those days.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Just one more thing I fucked up, Jack. I can’t get anything right.”

“Sure, you can. You’re fantastic at your job.”

“Way behind there. I spent all day at the station trying to get caught up.”

Jack poured me another shot of tequila and I tossed it back. He set the bottle next to me.

“Have you eaten today?”

“Can’t remember.”

“That means you haven’t. I’m going to order food for you.” He disappeared into the kitchen and while Jack was gone, I saw Marilyn Pellegrino come in and walk past the bar looking for a place to sit.

Jack returned, waited on a couple more customers, and said, “Your special will be

ready in five minutes.”

“Thanks. I feel like shit. Maybe I do need to eat.”

“Want to tell me?”

I nodded. “Olivia is screwing around with the bank manager, and I didn’t know.”

Jack made a face. “Can’t see that happening.”

I shrugged. “I’m standing down.”

“You sure?”

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“Yeah, pretty sure. I think I just got crazy for a minute and I’m nearly over it.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t look like you’re over it.” Jack zipped into the kitchen and got my food order. He set a plate of pork chops, mashed potatoes, and carrots in front of me along with a couple of dinner rolls, cutlery rolled in a napkin and a condiment caddy. “Eat. You’ll feel better.”

“Thanks.”

“You talk to Billy about his recovery plan?”

“Yeah. He’s going to stay with his mother for a day or two and then he’s coming home. I’m working on getting Tammy’s room ready for him on the main floor. He can’t go up the stairs to his own room.”

“That’s true. You might need help.”

“I’m working on that angle.”

“I saw Marilyn come in. She might cheer you up.”

“I saw her. Do I want to get into a deeper mess than I’m already in?”

Jack laughed. “I don’t know. Do you?”

By the time the band set up and started to play, I’d consumed two pitchers of Miller and half a bottle of tequila. I hadn’t informed Jack about the switch to Coors.

I wandered over to where Marilyn was sitting by herself and sat down. “Hey, pretty girl. Buy you a drink?”

“Sure. One more and I’ll be ready to dance.”

“One more round and I won’t be able to stand up.”

She laughed. “I’m so glad you’re back, Travis. I missed you so much when you went back to Texas.”

“I’m not sure if I’m glad or not. I love Texas.”

The band played a couple of warmup songs and the next one was a slow one.

“You ready?” she asked.

I looked into Marilyn’s dark eyes. She was so beautiful, and I was pretty sure she wasn’t screwing around with the fuckin bank manager. He wasn’t her type. Was I?

I got to my feet and reached my hand out to her. She stood up smiling at me and I led her onto the crowded dance floor. Saturday night in Coyote Creek and the roadhouse was the place to be—the only place there was.

Pulling Marilyn close to my body, I kind of leaned on her a bit so I wouldn’t fall down. She was wearing gorgeous perfume, and I didn’t plan it, but I was hard for her in the middle of the dance floor.

Almost over Olivia.

Sadly, the next song was fast, and I had to escort Marilyn back to our table. That’s when things went to hell for me.

Glenda saw Marilyn sit down and she came to our table and asked me to dance.

“No, thanks, Glenda. Marilyn and I are having a private conversation and I’m too drunk to dance.”

“You are a mess, Travis,” snapped Glenda. “I don’t know what I ever saw in you.”

I grinned. “Me neither.”

Marilyn giggled. “Somebody has a crush on you.”

“One sided. Lately, she’s stalking me, and I can’t shake her.”

“You’ve got problems with the opposite sex, Travis.”

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“You know it.”

Tina brought our round, and I never had a chance to take a sip of my beer before a fight broke out in the middle of the dance floor. Time for me to take action.

Almost too drunk to make it to the fight, I sobered up instantly when I took a fist to my right eye. That got my attention and from then on, I was all in.

Two guys were into it pretty good, and I didn't recognize either one of them. One of Jack's bouncers helped me out and we got the two rowdies separated before they did much damage to each other. I was the guy who would end up with the black eye.

The fight was over, the two guys were in the parking lot, and that was my cue to drag my drunken ass home to bed.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

The dogs were concentrating on gobbling up their kibble and I didn't act surprised and alarm them when I heard a grizzly growling and prowling around out back. “We're staying in here, doggies.”

I caught a few embers in the woodstove and added enough wood to keep the fire burning until morning.

“Feels like rain, boys. We might get wet tomorrow.”

I flopped on my bed, and I was out cold.

Chapter Seven

Monday, April 25th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

It took me a little longer than usual to get ready because I couldn't wear my regular plaid shirt and jeans. I had a morning appointment with Julie Redmond, my accountant, and then I had to attend Randy Quade's funeral in the afternoon.

Two occasions where I needed to be semi-presentable. Tough to do, hungover with a black eye.

For the trip to the accountant, I wore clean jeans, a dress shirt, and a leather jacket. I took my suit—still in the bag from the cleaners—with me and I'd change in my office at the station later.

I hadn't talked to Julie for months—since I'd run back to Texas during a particularly damaging PTSD episode. She'd been calling and leaving messages and seemed relieved when I finally got in touch with her.

After a quick breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast, and coffee, I was on my way to start another hell day as temporary sheriff of Harrison County.

As I loaded the dogs into the back of the squad, I heard rumbling overhead. Ominous looking dark gray clouds were hovering to the west of my ranch. More rain on the way. Billy said there'd been too much rain already. My land was fairly flat with no nearby creeks or rivers, so I wasn't in much danger of flooding, but other areas were more vulnerable.

Redmond Accounting. Cut Bank.

My appointment with Julie was at nine and I'd told Molly that I wouldn't be at the station until later. I walked into the outer office and didn't even get a chance to sit down, Julie was so anxious to get started.

"You can go right in, Sheriff," said the receptionist. "Miss Redmond is waiting for you."

I figured my finances were in a pretty big mess, but I had no idea how big.

Julie flashed me a smile. "Travis, great to see you again. Please have a seat. We have a lot to cover."

"Sorry I took so long. I was in Texas and most of the time I was in the hospital. I didn't even know I had financial worries."

"So sorry you were ill, Travis. Have you completely recovered?"

Not wanting to talk about it, I nodded so I wouldn't have to verbalize a lie.

Julie had a prioritized list and she started at number one. I sat in front of her desk for two hours, then said I had to go and come back to finish another day. I had Randy Quade's murder to solve and his funeral to attend. Neither one could wait.

We made a second appointment for the following week, and I promised I'd set aside more time for the second coming.

I hurried out of there with my brain fried with numbers. Uncle Carson had stuck his finger in so many pies in and around Coyote Creek during his lifetime, I was now connected to more businesses than I cared to be.

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One thing Julie told me that surprised the hell out of me was the fact that I held the mortgage on the Coyote Creek Inn. It seemed Olivia was two months behind on her payments and Julie asked if I wanted to speak to her in person about it. I told her to handle it for me. I didn't even want to think about talking to Olivia about her financial situation. That was a job for Superman from the bank.

Harrison County Office. Cut Bank.

While in Cut Bank I was too close to the county office not to drop in and make an inquiry. Standing at the reception counter, I was at a loss what to ask for.

“Help you, Sheriff Frost?”

Everybody in the county knew who I was even if I didn't know them.

“I think I need to speak to somebody in child services—more like juvie detention or juvies being paroled—something like that.”

“Second floor, Sheriff Frost.” The girl pointed and I got going.

“Thanks.” I climbed a flight of stairs and started over at the next reception desk, knowing I had limited time to pursue this. I explained again.

“I'll let you speak to Gloria Grafton,” said the girl standing in front of me. “She's probably the person who can help you, Sheriff.” I followed the girl down the corridor. She opened the door of Ms. Grafton's office, and I stepped in and introduced myself.

Gloria Grafton was an older lady in her fifties with a kind face and soft curly brown hair. She appeared to be a person who'd be great dealing with kids.

"Please sit down, Sheriff Frost, and tell me why you're here."

"I'm ready to take on a foster boy. Leaning towards a juvie with no family and nowhere to go when the system cuts him loose. I need a young person to help me when Sheriff Johnson comes home to my ranch tomorrow. I'd give the boy a good solid home and at the same time, he could help Billy when I wasn't there. Billy won't be able to walk on his own for a time yet. Does that sound crazy?"

"A little odd, but not completely crazy. You're referring to our current sheriff, Billy Johnson?"

"Yes. We live together and while I'm filling in for him—until he can walk again—I'd like somebody to be there at the ranch."

"Makes sense, but you could hire a nurse."

"Billy doesn't want a nurse. He'd be mortified to think he needed one."

Gloria smiled. "A macho thing."

I shrugged. "I'd be pleased to take a boy who's hard to place—a kid from detention who's been in trouble. Billy and I might be able to give a kid like that a place to live, a job and a better path to follow. That's what I'm thinking—what we're both thinking."

"A boy being released from juvenile detention will be much easier for me to place with you, Sheriff. Homes for boys who have been in detention are difficult to come by. Let me make some calls and I'll talk to the right people at the detention facility."

Boys come up for probation every week, and lots of times when they turn sixteen, they just end up on the streets.”

“That’s what I’m hoping to avoid—at least for one kid. If it works out, I may consider taking another. And not just until they turn sixteen. Permanent home, Ms. Grafton. This is not a whim.” I handed her my card. “Call me when you want me to come get him.”

“Are you sure you can handle a problem boy, Sheriff?”

“Between me and Billy, we should be able to handle one wild kid.”

Gloria laughed. “You may have to drive to the detention center in Great Falls to complete the paperwork.”

“That’s no problem. I’m kind of looking forward to taking this on. I have a girl already—Tammy. She’s sixteen and living with her step-mom now, but becoming her guardian and keeping her out of the system was a fantastic experience for me.”

“Good for you, Sheriff. We need a lot more people like you to help out.”

Feeling pretty good about my meeting with Gloria Grafton, I left the county office and headed back to Coyote Creek. My cell rang on the passenger seat, and I could see it was Billy.

“Hey, Travis. My dad is bringing me to the ranch tomorrow. Don’t worry if you’re not there. I have my key.”

“Great. Just left the county office and got our request for a kid underway. When he’s ready to be cut loose from the detention center, we may have to go to Great Falls to pick him up.”

“Wow, how soon are we getting him?”

“Gloria Grafton, the lady in charge of kids, is checking today. She says kids are released on probation from the detention center all the time. We might not have to wait long.”

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“Fantastic.”

“Get any other great ideas?” I asked him.

“Nope. Just the one.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

The next call came as I was parking behind the station.

“Travis, it’s Olivia. I’d like you to come to the Inn for dinner tonight and talk to me. I can’t stand the bad feelings between us.”

“I’ll think about it, Olivia. I’m not keen about how I’m feeling about all of this either. Pretty much ripped me up the middle.”

“I’m so sorry.”

In the office, I spent an hour catching up with Molly and then it was time to change into my suit and get ready for Randy Quade’s funeral.

I was about to head out to the squad when Marilyn Pellegrino called. “I read the article in the paper, Travis, and it made me nervous. Do you have any idea where those thieves might be?”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it. The newspaper article is an effort to flush them out. I’m leaving for the funeral home now. Are you coming?”

“On my way. Will you sit with me?”

“Of course. I’ll watch for you. See you soon.”

Burke & Burke Funeral Home. Coyote Creek.

I arrived ahead of Marilyn and waited for her in the parking lot. As soon as she parked her truck, we went in together and found seats near the back. The chapel was filled to capacity with many sad faces, and we were lucky to find seats at all.

Before the service even started, Marilyn was in tears over Randy, like most of the town.

Halfway up on the righthand side of the chapel, I could see Olivia sitting with Miller Ravary. Why would she invite me for dinner if she hadn’t broken up with the bank stud? No way I was letting myself get deeper into that quagmire. My life was in the fuckin swamp already.

Quade’s Quarters.

The reception following the service was at the Quade ranch south of town. Coffee and cake and a lot of grieving people milling around, reminiscing about Randy and what a great guy he was.

Even though it wasn’t the time or the place, concerned citizens didn’t hold back. I fielded dozens of inquiries about the investigation. Some of the questions came with definite hints that I should’ve caught the killers by now.

The citizens of Harrison County were definitely on edge.

I managed to hold it together and left as soon as it was polite to do so. I had a lot of

work to do.

Dry Run Roadhouse.

After a long day of bone-chilling sadness, I sat at the bar and acted as Jack's sounding board. He was in just as big a mess as I was. He and Savanna had given their second try a good shot, but the baggage that broke them apart the first time hung around and they were breaking up all over again.

The conversation Jack and I were having was private and we were speaking to each other in low voices. I wasn't pleased when Glenda sat down next to me and asked me to buy her a drink. What was that—three days in a row I'd bought her a margarita? Had her dress shop business gone in the toilet? Were her finances circling the fuckin drain so bad she couldn't afford to pay for her own drink?

"Nope, sorry, Glenda. No more free drinks. I'm supporting a bunch of people already, and I figure you can buy your own booze."

She curled her lip at me. "You're in a foul mood, Travis. I don't even want to sit next to you."

"Then don't." I glanced in the mirror behind the bar and just about jumped off my stool when Olivia came charging into the roadhouse.

"Uh oh," said Jack. "We got trouble, right here at the Dry Run."

Olivia walked up behind me and said, "Travis, we need to talk."

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I left Glenda staring at me with a snarl on her face as Olivia and I walked away looking for an empty booth. We sat down and Olivia didn't waste a minute on pleasantries.

"You didn't show up for dinner, Travis. I thought you would at least do me the courtesy of letting me know if you weren't coming."

"I never said I was coming. I said I'd think about it. Which I did and decided it was another useless move for me. A waste of time and would only add to the anxiety I'm already feeling. I have to steer clear of shit like this, Olivia—for medical reasons."

She stared at me while she pondered my words. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Travis. How can our situation affect you...medically?"

"Trust me, it does. And I have no inclination to explain the inner workings of my feeble brain, Olivia. I saw you at the funeral with Ravary, so what's the point of us talking? No point at all and you're only messing me up more. It's best if I don't see you at all. Period."

Olivia remained calm in the face of my rant. "I did break up with Miller, but he doesn't know many people in Coyote Creek, and he asked me to sit with him at the service. That's all it was."

Out of words, I nodded. "I've got to get home, Olivia. I need sleep. Billy is coming home tomorrow, and I have stuff to do."

"I could help you."

“No, thanks. I can handle it myself.”

Olivia’s eyes filled with tears. “I don’t want us to part this way, Travis. I love you with all my heart.”

“I can’t take the chance, Olivia. A relapse is out of the question. I’m not going back to the hospital.”

“I have no idea what you’re referring to, Travis. Please don’t push me away like this.”

Chapter Eight

Tuesday, April 26th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

My sleep was crimped with troubling dreams of war and chaos, flashes of blinding light and exploding IEDs. Unsurmountable problems with no solutions, and I woke up irritable on the razor edge of battle.

The house felt cool, so the wood I’d stoked the stove with before conking out hadn’t lasted through until morning. Billy was king of the woodstove. It wasn’t me.

I started a pot of coffee while the dogs were out, and I was headed for the shower when Billy called.

“My dad is bringing me over later. Probably after lunch by the time I’m up and my mother fusses over my leg and lets me go to the truck.”

“If I’m not here, you have your key.”

“Sure. I’m good.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “I’ve got to get out of here. My mom is treating me like I’m in kindergarten.”

“We’ll catch up later and it will all work out. Brenda coming with you?”

“Hell no. Don’t even suggest it.”

I laughed.

After Billy’s call, I poured myself a coffee and sat at the kitchen table for a thinking moment. I considered the Olivia mess. She had dumped Ravary—or said she had—and that would wash back on me. For sure it would. I could actually feel it coming like I could still feel the sand in my eyes, my nose, and my throat. The dreams were too real.

Don’t let her mess you up.

I reached for my meds and took them right away. I can’t forget the pills. Not ever.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Molly was in a good mood every morning now that the dogs were back. They crowded close to her desk and most days Max tried to squish his big body underneath but couldn’t quite do it.

I’d been working on reports in my office for half an hour when Molly called to me from the squad room and said I had a visitor.

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The last person I wanted to see was that fuckin bank jockey, but there he was all dressed up in a suit and tie. “Could I have a moment of your time, Sheriff?”

“Come into my office.”

I pointed to a chair. Ravary sat down, stared at me, and never said anything.

“What did I do now? I gave you what you wanted. Why are you here?”

“Olivia ended our relationship.”

I shrugged. “Not because of anything I did. I told her I was standing down. I didn’t know about you, and she didn’t bother to tell me, so you can be as pissed off as you want at her.”

He stared but raised an eyebrow as if he didn’t know what I was talking about.

He wasn’t saying a damned thing, so I kept going. “Olivia asked me to the Inn for dinner so we could talk, and I didn’t go. She tracked me down at the roadhouse and again I said no. As far as I can tell, I’m in the clear.”

“I didn’t know any of that.”

“That’s right. You didn’t, and that’s why I’m telling you now. You want to try again with her, go for it. I’m busy solving a murder and tracking down a couple of killers and I’ve got no time for screwing around.”

Ravary stood up. “I’ll let you get back to work, Sheriff.”

“Appreciate it.”

Ravary dragged his ass out of my office and my cell rang. Gloria Grafton telling me my kid was ready for pickup.

“Pick him up at noon, Sheriff. Can you make it to Great Falls by then?”

I checked the time on my phone. “I think I can if I leave now. Thanks for the quick work.”

“It just happened that a fifteen-year-old boy is being released today and he’s trouble. Harlan has run away from seven foster homes already.”

“What’s on his juvie sheet?”

“Various petty crimes. Mostly what I call ‘survival stealing’ when he was between foster homes.”

“I get it. I’m on my way right now. Will he have a caseworker?”

“She’ll contact you and come for a visit to your residence.”

“Okay. I’m out the door. Thanks again, Gloria.”

“I’m anxious to see how this works out for you, Sheriff Frost.”

I filled Molly in, called the dogs and ran out to the squad. Heading for Shelby—on my way to the interstate—I called Billy and told him to get his ass ready for a fast pickup.

“Be outside waiting for me in ten. We’ve gotta go to the detention center and get our kid.”

“Wow, that was fast. I’m getting ready now.”

A quick stop to grab Billy, then back to the I-15 and straight south to Great Falls. It would take us over two hours to get there and the kid was breaking loose at noon.

“How old is he?” Billy’s battered leg was stiff and heavily bandaged. The best place for him was in the back of the truck with his leg propped up on the seat.

“Fifteen.”

Max rode in the front and Sarge curled up beside Billy. Both dogs were crazy happy when I helped Billy into the truck.

“The dogs missed you.”

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“Not as much as I missed them.”

Juvenile Detention Facility. Great Falls.

About a quarter to twelve, I pulled into the visitors’ lot and found a parking spot. “I’ve got to go in and sign for him. Won’t be long.”

“I’ll wait here with the dogs.”

“You’ll have to.”

Billy chuckled.

My contact at the detention center was a woman named Loretta Clarke. I asked for her at reception and was escorted to her office.

“Mrs. Clarke, I’m Sheriff Travis Frost.”

Sitting in a chair next to her desk was a good-sized kid—maybe about five eight, medium build—a little on the thin side, with longish brown hair and brown eyes.

“This is Harlan Lindley, Sheriff. Just a few formalities and you and Harlan can be on your way.” She turned and smiled at Harlan, and he wasn’t smiling—not a bit.

Several pages of documents had my name pre-printed on the appropriate lines and I had to sign in four places to accept full responsibility for Harlan. I was taking over his well-being, providing him with the necessities of life, and getting him to his

parole officer once a month, and a few other details.

When the signing was done and I had a copy of the paperwork, Mrs. Clarke stood up to escort us out.

Harlan picked up a brown paper bag and I figured that bag held everything he owned in the world. The bag wasn't big enough to hold more than a t-shirt and a pair of socks.

"Thanks for everything," I said to Mrs. Clarke. "I realize you had to rush the paperwork. Appreciate it, ma'am."

She gave us a wave as we headed for the parking lot.

Harlan stared at the Bronco with the Harrison County sheriff's department logo on it. "Jesus, I have to ride in a fuckin cop car. Hope nobody sees me." He glanced up at the dorm windows.

"Yep. You're mine now, buddy. You're one of the good guys." I opened the passenger door and told Max to get in the back seat with Billy.

"Holy fuck, we got us K-9s too? I need a fuckin smoke."

"Get in," I said, "and you can have one of mine."

Harlan climbed into the front seat, and I noticed a scar on his left cheek and another one on his neck. Shivs. The kids had been playing rough.

"That's Billy in the back." I passed Harlan my pack of American Spirits.

He picked up the lighter out of the cup holder and flicked it. "My worst nightmare

getting paroled to a fuckin cop.”

Billy laughed. “Two cops.”

“Jesus on a cracker. You guys got any weed?”

“No weed, but I’m starving. How about lunch?”

“Drive-thru for me,” said Billy. “I can’t go into a restaurant.”

“Right. Drive-thru it is.”

Harlan twisted around in his seat so he could see Billy. “What happened to your leg?”

“Chopped it half off with an axe. Got a couple pins in it, so I’m off work.”

“Cop work, right?”

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“Yep, you got it.”

“Coming up on the right we’ve got several choices,” I said. “I’m taking this exit so pick something.”

“Taco Bell,” said Harlan without hesitation.

“Billy?”

“I’m okay with Taco Bell. Don’t care.”

I got in line and Harlan hollered out what he wanted. Probably in juvie and in multiple foster homes, he’d learned to be aggressive.

“Steak burrito and a Coke,” said Billy.

I put in our order and paid for it, then moved to the next window. When we got our bags of food, the dogs whined when they smelled the meat.

“Don’t you feed your dogs?”

“Yeah, I do. They smell meat but I don’t let them beg for people food. Reach into the glove box and get them each a biscuit.”

Harlan moved my extra gun out of the way and grabbed two biscuits. He turned around and gave one to Max and then Sarge. “They got names?”

“Max and Sarge.”

He nodded and went back to eating his burrito.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

“Here we are, guys.” I shut the engine down and Harlan grabbed for the door handle. “Before you jump out, Harlan, I’m gonna tell you one thing. You run, I find you and your parole is violated. That means you do another year in the detention center. Billy and I will treat you good and take care of you. You got no reason to run from us.”

He nodded and jumped out, then opened the back door of the truck, and let the dogs out.

“What do you think?” asked Billy.

“Give him some time,” I said. “Tammy was skittish when I first got her. Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. Wish we had her here. If we did, that kid would never run away.”

“That another one of your good ideas?”

“Sounded good, didn’t it?”

“Damned good. I miss her so fuckin much.”

“Make a call.”

“She loves her Mama too.”

“True, but she’s missing you. I’d bet on it.”

“I’ll call. First, let’s get you into the house. I’ll get the crutches and get the door open.”

“These his crutches in the back?” asked Harlan.

“Yep.”

“I got them.” He stood at Billy’s door and held the crutches until Billy got standing up.

“How many pins you got holding your leg together?”

“Three, I think.”

“Does it hurt bad?”

“Yep. Pretty bad.”

Harlan held the door while Billy struggled out and got set on the crutches. We got Billy up the porch steps, inside and into the living room. I took the crutches as he lowered himself down onto the sofa.

“I made it.”

Harlan glanced at the TV. “How many channels you get out here in butt-fuck?”

“None, but now that you’re here, I might get a satellite.”

“Hey,” said Billy. “You never got me a satellite.”

“Can I go look around?”

“Sure. The dogs are outside. If you hear a grizzly coming, bring the dogs in quick. Max had a bad run-in already and he’s all stitched up.”

“Grizzly—like a fuckin bear? You’re kidding me, right?”

“Nope. You hear one, bring the dogs in on the run. No fuckin around. Hear me?”

“I ain’t gonna hear one.”

“Hope you don’t.”

While Harlan was outside poking around, Billy and I had a beer in the front room. Harlan came in and saw the Miller cans. “Can I have a beer?”

“Sure. You can have one. I don’t mind you having a beer at home. We’re talking one—not ten.”

He smiled and that was a first. “I drank ten before.”

“You puke?” asked Billy.

“Yep.”

Billy held up his fist for a fist bump. “Nice one.”

Harlan chuckled.

A knock on the door and the dogs came rushing in with Savanna. They were all wet and so was she. Long auburn hair dripping in her face. It was definitely raining hard.

The dogs shook off the rain in the front hall and the water flew in all directions. Savanna squealed and moved away from the dogs. “Hey, I’m missing a beer-fest.”

“Billy’s coming home party,” I said.

Savanna smiled. “Welcome home, Billy. Glad you’re okay. Who’s this cute guy?”

“Harlan. He’s my new ward.”

“You lucked out, Harlan. These are two good guys. I’d get myself adopted by them if I could.” She winked at me. “I’m getting a beer.”

“You live here, babe?” asked Harlan.

“Nope. I’m just visiting my besties.”

“Too bad you don’t live here. You ain’t hard to look at. You’ve got a great bod.”

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Savanna smiled. “Thanks.” She pushed her damp hair back from her face. “It’s coming down hard and the weatherman says it’s not going to let up for a couple of days.” She drank down a big swig of her beer. “Can I look in your fridge to see if you have anything I can cook for dinner?”

“Help yourself,” I said. “I should’ve gone to the market with Billy coming home and Harlan coming, but I had too much shit going on with the murder and the funeral.”

Savanna stood with the fridge door open and peered at the meager offerings. The shelves were almost bare. “Looks like I could make spaghetti. How about it?”

Harlan nodded. “I like spaghetti. And pie. I like pie.”

Savanna laughed. “I don’t have any pie on me, but I’ll keep it in mind for another day. We’ve got a nice little bakery on Main Street, and they have great pie.”

“You doing okay with the way things are with Jack?” I got Savanna another beer from the fridge.

“It’s not too bad for me, but I can’t go to the roadhouse right now. It will take a while before we can look at each other and not be upset.”

“Glad I don’t have a girlfriend,” said Harlan. “Girls are a big fuckin pain in the ass.”

“Yeah,” I said, “enjoy your freedom while you can, kid. A good-looking stud like you will have girls climbing all over him.”

He laughed, then turned to Savanna. “The guy you dumped must be shittin’ bricks. Losing a babe like you would be a steel-toe to the nuts.”

“It was a mutual decision,” said Savanna. “It wasn’t working out.”

“Still, mutual or not, breaking up is hard to do.”

Harlan looked at me kind of funny. “What kind of talk you got going on there, Sheriff?”

“Texas talk. I’m a Texan.”

“Goddamn,” said Harlan. “Am I gonna start talking like that if I live here?”

“Could happen,” said Billy. “I saidy’alla couple of times before I bit the end of my tongue off.”

Savanna laughed as she dumped a package of spaghetti into a big pot of boiling water.

Billy pointed across the room. “Stove is dying down. Come in here, Harlan. I want to show you how to take care of the woodstove. If we don’t keep it going, we’ll freeze our asses off in this house.”

Harlan seemed to pay attention when Billy talked. Maybe it was the army Billy still had in him.

After dinner we sat in the living room and had a couple of beers. The wind howled through the stand of spruce that formed a barrier around the house. “It’s so stormy out there, Savanna. Why don’t you sleep here?”

“You don’t want to go out in that,” said Billy.

“I don’t,” she said. “It’s cozy in here with the fire on. Have you got a spot for me to lay my head down?” She winked at me.

“Let’s check out the upstairs bedrooms. I’ve got to get a room ready for Harlan. Got caught a bit short because I didn’t know he was coming to live with us until today.”

“Let’s go up and take a look at what you’ve got,” said Savanna.

“Somebody can take my room,” said Billy. “I won’t be doing stairs for a while yet.”

“I put you in Tammy’s room, Billy,” I said.

“Who’s Tammy?” asked Harlan.

“Umm... I guess she’s kind of like your sister.”

“Never had me a sister before. Got a picture?”

“Yep.” I fiddled with my phone and pulled up a picture of Tammy Traynor sitting on her horse.

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Harlan stared at the picture and his eyes widened. “When’s my sister coming home?”

“Told you,” said Billy.

“Soon. I want her to come home right away and meet you. I’m calling her tomorrow.”

“Huh,” said Harlan. “How old is my sister?”

“Just had her sixteenth birthday in November. She’s trying to get her DL.”

“I can drive anything with wheels,” said Harlan with a lot of confidence. “Born to it. Probably be a race driver.”

“Sure,” I said. “You can drive my Harley on the laneway and practice.”

“You got a Harley, Sheriff?”

“Sure do. Call me Travis.”

Savanna led the way upstairs. First room on the left was Billy’s and it was army-neat. Bed made with perfect corners. Nothing out of place.

The other bedroom on the second floor was smaller and furnished with a single bed and a dresser. The bed was made up with a nice quilt on top. I turned on the light.

“This okay for you for now, Harlan? I’ll get you some stuff tomorrow—whatever you need. We’ll go to Savanna’s store and get you some gear.”

He sat on the side of the bed. “Sure. This is okay. Do I have to go to bed right now?”

“Nope. Go to bed when you want to. I’ve gotta go down and feed the dogs.”

“Can I feed them? I never fed no dogs before.”

“Come on and I’ll show you how much to put into their bowls.”

In the kitchen, I hefted the fifty-pound bag out of the pantry and as soon as the dogs heard the pantry door, they came bounding into the kitchen and sat next to their bowls.

“Wow, they’re hungry,” said Harlan.

I pulled the measuring cup out of the bag and handed it to Harlan. “Three heaping cups in each of their bowls and fill up the water bowl. They drink a lot of water.”

“I’ve got it.”

“Watch they don’t push you while you’re trying to measure. They can be rough.”

I got two more beers out of the fridge for me and Billy and walked into the living room. We could hear Harlan laughing.

“Hey, don’t push me.”

We all went to bed around midnight. Sleeping in Tammy’s room, Billy was close enough to call me if he got into trouble or needed help to get from his room to the bathroom.

Harlan was doing well, and I was happy about that. So far, so good. Tomorrow I’d

call and see if Tammy would come and stay for a while. It would be fun to have a houseful.

Chapter Nine

Wednesday, April 27th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Having Savanna sleep over, I was concerned about the chill in the house first thing in the morning, so I made the extra effort to drag my ass out of bed and get the woodstove going to take the edge off the icy feel.

A half hour later, the dogs were outside, the stove was kicking out a pretty good heat and the coffee was made. I checked on Billy to see if he was ready to get up and he was lying in his bed awake.

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I got him on his feet and handed him the crutches and he claimed to be okay on his own. Until he got into the bathroom, I kind of hovered over him.

Things were moving along okay until Brenda showed up at the front door and none of us were even dressed. Pouring rain, she stood on my porch with an umbrella over her head and a tote bag in her hand.

“Billy left some of his stuff at my place and I thought I’d drop it off.”

“Okay, thanks.” I took the bag from her hand and had no qualms about not inviting her in. Billy didn’t want to see her—I knew that for a fact.

“Can I talk to Billy?”

“Umm...he’s in the bathroom and he’s not dressed. Can you wait in the living room?”

I opened the door wide enough for her to come in and the dogs ran in behind her, soaking wet again. “You’re pretty early, Brenda. What’s the rush?”

She put the umbrella down and leaned it on the hall table before she went into the front room and sat on the sofa. Never bothered to take her wet boots off. I guess she figured I was a man, so I wouldn’t care about muddy tracks across my pine floors.

“Billy’s been avoiding me, and we need to talk. I had planned to go to his mother’s in Shelby yesterday and have a little chat with him, and then I found out he was gone.”

Savanna entered the kitchen fully dressed and saw me talking to Brenda. “Nasty weather. You’re up early, Brenda.”

“I came to see Billy.”

“Uh huh.” Staying clear of Brenda, Savanna headed for the coffee maker.

“Give me a minute, Brenda. I’ll see if Billy needs help in the bathroom.” I hustled down the hall, knocked once and said, “It’s me. You need help?”

“No. I’m good.”

“Brenda is here to see you.”

“No. She can’t be here. I’m not coming out. Get rid of her.”

“I can’t. She brought you some stuff and she’s waiting until she sees you.”

The door opened a crack and Billy crashed around trying to get through the narrow opening with the crutches. He was a pretty solid guy and there was just no room for his stocky body and a pair of crutches.

I gave him a helping hand and he took a minute to get set on the crutches, then he limped his way down the hallway. Standing in the archway between the kitchen and the living room, he snarled, “Brenda, what the hell are you doing here when people aren’t even up?”

“I wanted to drop off your stuff to you and I had to do it before it was time to open the shop. I’ve got a business to run.”

“I know that,” said Billy. “You tell me often enough how tough it is being the owner

of a fuckin dress shop. Thanks for my stuff, but why don't you put me on hold for now? I won't be able to take you out for a long time and you might as well see other people."

Brenda hopped to her feet and stomped out of the living room to take a stance—hands on hips—in front of Billy Johnson.

Harlan walked into the kitchen at that moment and smirked a little.

I hooked a thumb in the direction of the coffee, and he took a mug from the cupboard and filled it. He added a drop of cream from the carton on the counter, picked up the mug and sat down next to Savanna at the table.

She flashed him a smile. "How was your first night?"

"Okay. The bed was good enough."

"You have enough blankets?" I asked. "We can get more today."

Harlan nodded. "I was warm."

"I'm going to start breakfast," I said. "I've got to get to the station."

"I'll help," said Savanna. "What are we making?"

“Pancakes,” said Harlan. “I like pancakes and syrup.”

“You’re easy.” Savanna winked at him.

Harlan chuckled. He obviously liked Savanna.

“I’m in for pancakes,” I said. “I’ll fry up a pan of bacon while you make the batter.”

To Billy’s horror, Brenda stayed for breakfast. She couldn’t go open up her dress store in Shelby because Billy was trying his damndest to break up with her and she wasn’t letting it happen.

I cleaned up the dishes and loaned Savanna Uncle Carson’s umbrella to get to her truck.

“See you in a while,” I said. “I’m bringing Harlan shopping later.”

Dodging raindrops, Savanna ran to her truck, and I gave her a wave.

“She got one of them girly stores too?” asked Harlan.

“Nope. Feed store for the ranchers. Farm supplies. Tools and guns and like that.”

“I like her.”

“She’s nice. Just broke up with my friend Jack, who runs the roadhouse. Billy’s cousin. You’ll meet him later.”

“You call my sister yet?”

“I’ll do it as soon as we get to the station. I was going to leave you here to help Billy, but Brenda is here, and they need some privacy to sort out their mess. You need clothes and boots, so you can stick with me today.”

“Dogs go to the cop shop?”

“Yep. Their harnesses are in the back of the squad. Let’s try to stay as dry as possible getting to the truck.”

“I got no jacket to keep me dry,” said Harlan.

“You can wear one of mine for now.” I grabbed a lined denim jacket out of the front hall closet and Harlan put it on. A bit big but it would keep him dry.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

I parked behind the building, and we ran for the back door in the pouring rain.

“Shit, I’m wet,” said Harlan. Water funneled off his dark hair and down his face.

Standing under the skimpy overhang, I fiddled with the key and finally got it to turn. The dogs pushed in first and ran the length of the building at top speed to get to Molly.

“The dogs are in a hurry.”

I laughed. “Molly gives them a biscuit when they get here in the morning. They don’t like to keep her waiting.”

We could hear her talking to the dogs as we walked down the hall and into the squad room. “This is Harlan, Molly.”

She smiled. “Nice to meet you, Harlan. You look about the same age as Tammy.”

Harlan nodded.

“Would you like a donut?” Molly pushed the box across her desk towards him.

“Okay, sure.” Harlan picked out a donut and followed me to the break room where I showed him how to make coffee.

We sat down at the table with our mugs and Harlan asked, “What you got to do today...like being the sheriff of butt-fuck, Montana?” He laughed.

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“We’re looking for horse thieves who killed a rancher. I’ll tell you all about it. We’ve got to catch them pronto.”

“You gonna call my sister? You said as soon as you got to the station.”

“Yep, calling her now.”

“Can I listen to her talk?”

“Okay, sure.” I scrolled to the number and called wondering about the time in Texas. Ahead of us a little?

“It’s me, Tam. How you doing?”

“Travis. Hi. I miss you so much. When are you coming back to Texas?”

“I can’t come for a while, Tam. Billy is hurt bad, and I have to fill in for him. You knew that already.”

“Yeah, Mama told me, but I still miss you.”

“Want to fly up here and stay with me for a while? I could use help with Billy, and I got you a foster brother to hang out with. His name is Harlan.”

“What? Does he have a horse so we can ride?”

“Not yet, but I’m thinking about it. I need Outlaw. I’m missing him like crazy. The

barn is so empty.”

“If I come, can I bring Bonnie Grace?”

“I’ll have to have the horses trucked up here, Tam. Annie’s boys can’t spare the time to drive all the way up here and back again.”

“When can I come?” asked Tammy.

“I’ll get you a flight and call you with the details. In the meantime, you ask Annie if she’s okay with you coming to stay for a while and tell her to call me.”

“I’m excited for it, Travis. When are the barrel racing lessons starting? I want to go to that course at Marilyn’s ranch.”

“You do? I’ll find out for you today. Talk to you later.”

“Send me a picture of Harlan, please. I want to see what he looks like.”

“Hang on, I’m taking his picture right now.”

Harlan put his hands over his face, then laughed and let me take his picture.

Tammy giggled. “Send it.”

I fiddled with my phone. “I’m so bad as this.” I sent the picture and Tammy squealed. “He is so cute. Can’t wait to meet you in person, Harlan. I’m coming to Montana.” She screamed for Annie and ended the call.

“Wow,” I said. “She’s excited.”

Harlan chuckled. “This is gonna be fun.”

“Remember everything I said I was going to do and write it down. I promised Tammy I’d do a lot of stuff and I’ll forget if I don’t have a list.”

“I need a paper and a pen.”

“Office.”

I spent an hour catching up on reports that had fallen behind, then took a break to stretch my legs and drove Harlan to the feed store at the end of the street.

Coyote Creek Needs and Feeds.

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“Big store,” said Harlan as we walked through the front door. “Savanna own this all herself?”

“I think so.” I inhaled the familiar smell of feed and leather and saddle soap. “Grab a cart.”

Harlan frowned. “We getting that much shit?”

“You go on calls with me, you gotta have clean clothes on.” I winked at him. “How else you gonna impress the local hot chicks?”

“Yeah, how else is right.”

We started with the clothing section, and I grabbed two packs of boxers in his size, two packages of socks, two pairs of blue jeans, one pair of black jeans for good, two snap front shirts, two plaid flannel shirts and four t-shirts.

Then he tried on jackets and picked one he liked. He chose a ball cap, and then he tried on boots. His broken-down trainers were candidates for the trash.

“Pick the boots you like for work in the barn and daily wear. Next time we’re in Great Falls, I’ll get you a pair of Harley Boots for good.”

Harlan raised an eyebrow. “Don’t the state pay you back for my clothes—at least until they dump me at sixteen?”

“I’m not taking the state’s money, Harlan, and I’m not dumping you when you’re

sixteen. You can forget that if that's the way you're thinking."

"Why you doing this, Sheriff?"

I shrugged. "Because I want to. No other reason. I can afford to give you a home—you and Tammy—and I want to. That's it. I got no other motive."

Harlan went quiet.

I pointed to the front cash, and he pushed the cart up there and unloaded it onto the counter. I put the whole works on my card and Bonnie bagged everything up. "Here you go, Sheriff. Nice to see you again. Boss is in her office."

"Thanks, Bonnie."

We said hi to Savanna, then ran to the truck through sheets of rain and tossed all of Harlan's bags into the back seat.

"Shit, it's pissing down."

Max stood with his front paws on the console trying to push into the front seat with Harlan and it made him laugh. "Hey, you sit in the back."

My cell rang and it was the office. "Molly?"

"They came back, Travis. The horse thieves came back to the Pellegrino ranch."

"We're on our way." I flipped on the siren and the strobes and sped out of the feed store parking lot.

Sarge howled in the back seat at the siren.

“What happened?” asked Harlan.

“The horse thieves hit another rancher. They’d already scoped out her ranch a couple of weeks ago, and she was nervous. I’ll kill the fuckers when I catch them.” I grabbed my phone out of the cupholder and called Molly back.

“Get a bulletin out on the same rig again, Molly, and send a special alert to State Highway Patrol. If they’re in a hurry, they might be on the interstate.”

“Copy that, Travis.”

Pellegrino Ranch. Shelby.

Marilyn’s laneway was a swamp of muck and the squad sloshed around prospecting for traction. “I hate this fucking weather,” I yelled as I pounded the steering wheel and the dogs growled.

“You can stay in the truck with the dogs, Harlan. You don’t need to get wet.”

“We bought rain gear.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s in the bag.”

“Want yours? I’ll dig it out.”

“Yeah, thanks.” I jumped out and took a minute to shrug into the yellow slicker before I ran to the back door of the ambulance. The paramedic was just about to close it when I jumped in.

“What did they do to you, Marilyn? How bad are you hurt?”

“Three of them this time, Travis. They knocked me down and I hit my head on the steps. I’m not hurt badly. I’m mostly wet and dirty. Stop worrying.”

“How many horses did they take?”

“None. Charlie stopped them before they got to the barn, and he ran them off. Ask Buster. He got the tag.”

“Fantastic. I’ll come to the hospital. Don’t worry.”

It took me an hour to get all the statements, but I had the tag for the dark blue pickup and that was progress. Too bad Marilyn had to get hurt to get it. Her guys were ready, and I had to thank Wyatt Thompson for that.

Half drenched, I jumped into the squad and called Molly again and gave her the tag for the dark blue squad.

“Wonderful. We got the tag. Is Marilyn okay?”

“They knocked her down on her front steps, Molly, and she hit her head. I’m going to the hospital to check on her and I’m also going to talk to Wyatt while I’m over there in Cut Bank. Call me.”

Cut Bank Hospital.

“Did they steal more horses?” asked Harlan.

“No. Marilyn’s cowboys were ready for the fuckers to come back, and they held them off. Last time there were two and this time there were three of them.”

“Marilyn your girlfriend? You almost lost it, Travis.”

First time he called me Travis.

“Yeah. Friend. Good friend but not a girlfriend if you’re qualifying girlfriend by me sleeping with her—I’m not.”

Harlan smiled. “Not yet.”

I laughed. “Maybe never. Who can tell for sure?”

Cut Bank Hospital.

I parked the squad in front of the Emergency doors and left the strobes flashing. A quick visit to make sure Marilyn was okay and then we had a lot more to do.

Harlan didn’t look like he was getting out of the Bronco, so I motioned to him to come and he jumped out into the downpour, eager to see what was going on and

experience something he'd only seen on TV.

"Marilyn Pellegrino?" I asked of the triage nurse.

"Treatment room four, Sheriff Frost."

"Thanks."

"They know you here," said Harlan.

I laughed. "They think they do. I keep coming back." I tapped twice on door number four, opened it, and looked inside.

A doctor in a white lab coat was bent over Marilyn looking into her eyes with one of those little flashlight things.

She turned her head when I opened the door and she started to cry. "Travis, they came back." She reached her hand around the doctor, and I held it.

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Standing next to the stretcher holding her hand, I kept my mouth shut and let the doctor do his thing. Harlan sat on the only chair—eyes wide watching the doctor.

“You have a slight concussion, Mrs. Pellegrino. No point keeping you here. You’ll rest better at home. Do you have a driver?”

“Yes. Charlie followed the ambulance and he’ll take me home.”

The doctor helped her to her feet. “I’ll leave a headache prescription at the desk for you.”

“Thank you.”

I hugged her. “Come on. I’ll help you find Charlie. Your boys did a stellar job with the thieves. I have the tag for the truck now and there’s a want out on the rig and the driver.”

“Thanks so much, Travis.” She glanced at Harlan. “Who’s this?”

“Harlan.”

“A brother for Tammy? How wonderful.”

“She’s flying up as soon as I get her a flight and I’ll bring her over to talk about the spring training session. She’s got her own horse now and she’s keen.”

“Most girls are, but some don’t have what it takes. Is she a good rider?”

“Umm... a fairly new rider, but super keen to learn. I think she’ll be a great student.”

Marilyn laughed. “Call me, Travis, and I’ll set time aside for you and Tammy.”

We found Charlie in the waiting area, and he took Marilyn to his truck.

Harlan whispered, “She’s a babe.”

“You think so? Barrel racing champion of the world. She teaches young girls now at her ranch. Raises quarter horses for the rodeo too. Marilyn is a rodeo cowgirl.”

“Aw, fuck. When can we go back to her ranch and see them girls racing on them horses?”

“That will happen when Tammy gets here. We’ll drive over to her ranch again. You’ll see a lot of it when Tammy and Lucy start their training.”

“Who’s Lucy?” Harlan’s brown eyes widened. “You ain’t gonna tell me I got another sister, are you? What are you, like—dial-up stud service?”

“We’ll talk about Lucy later. Right now, we have a meeting with Wyatt from the paper, and we’ll eat lunch while we talk to him.”

“I can eat.”

Katie’s Good Eats. Cut Bank.

Harlan studied the plastic-coated menu while I ordered two coffees and waited for Wyatt Thompson to show up.

“They got pie here,” said Harlan.

“Yep. I’ve had the lemon, and it was good.”

“I don’t like lemon.”

Wyatt rushed in with wet hair and his glasses all fogged up and plunked down in the booth across from me and Harlan. “Did you get them, Travis?”

“Update.”

He fumbled around in his shoulder bag. “Wait until I get my pen and my notebook out.”

“You want lunch?” I asked him.

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“Turkey club, cherry pie, and coffee. My regular lunch. I’m in a rut.”

“Sounds good and saves me thinking.” I waved our server over and ordered three turkey club sandwiches toasted and three cherry pies. “No coffee for Harlan. Bring him a chocolate milkshake. He needs more calories.”

Harlan grinned.

“Whose ranch did they hit?” asked Wyatt.

“Marilyn Pellegrino’s.”

“Aw, I was hoping they wouldn’t go back there. Was Marilyn hurt?”

Before I could answer, Harlan said, “The fuckers knocked her down and she got a fuckin concussion and got mud in that beautiful black hair.”

Wyatt stared at Harlan, not having a clue who he was or why he was with me.

I nodded and didn’t need to add much more. “Her cowboys were on the lookout for the rig, and they stepped in before the thieves got to the barn. Three of them this time and we got lucky. Buster got the tag on the pickup.”

“Great,” said Wyatt. “Who does the truck belong to?”

“I ran it through motor vehicles, and it belongs to a guy named Chris Hubbard with an address in Conrad. As soon as we eat, I’m going down there to see if they’re at

that address.”

“Probably won’t be,” said Wyatt. “That would be stupid.”

“I figure they are stupid, so I gotta check anyway.”

“Nice one, Travis. This will make a great follow-up story. You said no horses stolen this time.”

“They didn’t get that far.”

“Good thing Marilyn’s boys were on the ball.”

“Yep.”

Our server brought our sandwiches and pie and there was no more time for talking.

Hubbard Ranch. Conrad.

Following the GPS, we ended up in Conrad on the seedier side of the railroad tracks. The owner of the dark blue truck and trailer lived in a double-wide trailer outside of town on a few acres of property. Old, weathered barn and much newer corral not far from the trailer. No horses in the corral. A couple of dog kennels but no dogs.

“Huh, this is his setup.”

“No dark blue pickup,” said Harlan. “No horse trailer.”

“Lights are on inside the double-wide. Let the dogs out.”

“They’re gonna get all wet,” said Harlan.

“Yeah. You’re right. Leave them. We should be okay.”

Harlan and I ran to the trailer and stood under the sagging overhang waiting for whoever was inside to open the door.

With a temperamental squeak, the door scraped on the floor as a woman tugged on it. She snapped at me, “What do you want?”

“You Mrs. Hubbard?”

“So what?”

The woman—couldn’t call her a girl anymore—about thirty-five, bottle-blond hair, short and chunky, and she gave notice that she hadn’t showered in about two weeks.

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“Can we come in and talk to you for a couple of minutes about your husband?”

“No. I don’t let anybody in when Chris ain’t home.”

“When will he be back?”

“He’s working. Won’t be back for a while yet.”

“Stealing horses?”

“Shut up. You don’t know nothing.”

She started to close the door in our faces, and I gave the door a good hard push and moved right inside. Mother Hubbard backed up a couple of steps and I moved forward a little more.

“Mrs. Hubbard, you are under arrest as an accessory to robbery and murder.”

“You can’t arrest me. I didn’t do nothing.” She ran across the kitchen, grabbed a shotgun off a rack on the wall and pivoted around pointing the gun at us.

“Down, Harlan.” I shoved him down as I dove at blondie and flattened her on the kitchen floor.

She pulled the trigger as I knocked her down and the buckshot sprayed and hit the far wall. The noise was deafening, and I barely heard the glass in the window shatter and fall.

I rolled blondie over, stuck a knee in her back and cuffed her. “Harlan, you okay?”

He jumped up from the floor with a grin on his face and brushed his clothes off. “Yep, I’m good.”

“Wrap the gun in a kitchen towel and carry it to the truck.”

I pulled blondie to her feet, holding onto the chain between the cuffs. “Let’s go.” I shoved Mrs. Hubbard ahead of me, through the door and out into the rain.

“Harlan, put the dogs and the gun in the hatch.”

While he did that, I secured Mrs. Hubbard in the back of the squad. She strung out a nice long line of curse words. Some I’d never heard before.

Harlan was smiling as he settled into the shotgun seat, but he had a bit of a pasty look to him. “You sure you’re okay?” I reached over and gave him a fist bump.

“Yeah, all good.”

“When we get to the station, I want you to give Molly your statement. It has to go in the report because you were there when Mrs. Hubbard tried to shoot us.”

“Freaky shit, Travis. She shot out her own fuckin window.” Harlan chuckled.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

I parked close to the back door of the station, so it wasn’t far to take Mrs. Hubbard in. Harlan let the dogs out of the hatch, and they went for a tear in the rain around the parking lot.

“Take the gun to Molly, Harlan. She’ll log it in and show you where the evidence locker is.”

“Am I supposed to say copy or roger or something?”

I laughed. “Say whatever you want.”

Harlan returned from the squad room and observed me booking Mrs. Hubbard—fingerprints, mug shot—and he seemed interested.

When that was done, I unlocked the run, took her inside and locked her up in the first cell.

Harlan walked down the length of the six cells and back again. “Wow, we got us our own fuckin jail.”

“Yep. We do. You get your statement done?”

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“Uh huh. All done and the gun is locked up. The killer gonna come looking for his wife?”

“Would you?”

Harlan laughed. “No, thanks.”

“Me neither.”

“She gonna tell us anything?” asked Harlan.

“Doubt it, but I’ll give her until tomorrow to sit in her cell and think it over. That sometimes works.”

Dry Run Roadhouse.

A long day and I was beat and ready for a beer. “Miller time.”

Harlan grinned. “We going to get drunk after being cops all day?”

“Something like that. We’re gonna drop in and have a beer with Jack, but we have to pick up food and take it home for Billy. Can’t forget about him waiting for us.”

“Yeah, we got a sheriff with a busted leg at home.”

I usually sat at the bar, but Jack wouldn’t appreciate an underage patron like Harlan sitting front and center at the bar. We sat in a booth and Jack joined us.

“Hey, Harlan. Nice to meet you.” They shook hands across the table.

“You know me?”

“Savanna mentioned you were living with Travis. I heard she made spaghetti for you guys.”

“Yep. It was good too.”

Tessa came over to take our order and I got my regular pitcher of Miller and a Coke for Harlan.

“Want any food, Sheriff?” asked Tessa.

“Harlan?” I gave him the option.

“I can wait until we eat with Billy. We’re getting food to go, right?”

“Yeah. We’ll take three specials to go. Billy’s been alone most of the day. We just dropped into say hi and pick up dinner.”

“How’s his leg doing?”

“If you saw him trying to walk,” said Harlan, “you wouldn’t think it was any hell.”

“I second that.” I turned to Harlan. “Billy is Jack’s kin.”

“My first cousin,” said Jack. “Where are you from in Montana, Harlan?”

“Guess I was born in Helena, but I don’t remember ever living there. Lived in foster homes all over the place. All of them were fuckin hellholes.”

Jack nodded. “You’re good now, Harlan. Travis has hold of the reins and he’ll make sure you’re okay.”

Harlan nodded.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

“Jeeze, all that rain has turned the driveway into muck. I need more fuckin gravel.”

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“I’ll take the food in,” said Harlan. “Gotta run. We’re gonna get wet again.”

The dogs jumped out of the back seat and ran off, not caring if they got soaking wet.

With Billy at home, the house was toasty warm, and it gave me a good feeling to have him back. “Brought food for you, Billy. You hungry, or did a bunch of women come and cook for you?”

He laughed. “My mom came and made me lunch.”

“You big fuckin baby.”

Harlan laughed as he took the containers out of the bag.

I grabbed three beers out of the fridge and put them on the table, then I got Billy from the sofa and hauled his ass to the kitchen. He groaned as he landed his butt on a hard kitchen chair.

“I broke up with Brenda.”

“Yahoo. Another one bites the dust.” I raised my can of Miller. “I’ll drink to that.”

“You didn’t like Billy’s girlfriend?” asked Harlan.

“Didn’t mind her but I don’t like her twin sister. Glenda is stalking me.” I laughed. “I’ll get Billy to get rid of her for me.”

“She look the same as Brenda?” asked Harlan.

Billy nodded. “Carbon copy.”

“You can do better, Travis,” said Harlan. “Go for the barrel racer.”

Chapter Ten

Thursday, April 28th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

I was up early because I had tons to do with Tammy coming home. Clean up a room for her. Trip to the market. Make arrangements for the shipment of the horses, and on and on, plus my regular work.

I had been missing Tammy a lot, but I understood that she wanted to be with Annie too—Annie being her legit stepmom—and Tammy did love Texas.

I understood it, but in my head, I thought of Tammy as mine and I wanted her back. Yeah, I had to admit I had a selfish streak. All my life it had been all about me.

I heard Billy in the bathroom, so he was moving around a little better on his own this morning. Now that he was free of the Brenda stress, he might relax and start to feel better.

The dogs were out taking care of business and I was in the kitchen organizing breakfast when Harlan came down.

I had a glass of orange juice sitting on his placemat for him and pointed to it.

“What?”

“I think kids are supposed to drink orange juice. I make Tammy drink it.”

“I’m not a kid.”

“You’re a big kid. I didn’t want a little kid. No time for it.”

“That’s the truth.” He picked up the glass and drank half of it down. “Billy help you before he was hurt?”

“Yeah, we worked together for a long time. Then he took over as sheriff and I spent some time in Texas in the VA hospital. Now I’m back to help him out.”

“You a vet?”

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“Marine. Special ops. Billy is army.”

Harlan nodded.

Billy made it to the kitchen on his own with the help of his crutches. He plopped down on a chair and handed off his crutches to Harlan.

I got him a mug of coffee. “You’re doing better.”

“I don’t intend to let this shit-show last too much longer.”

“You mean you’re gonna jump up and take my part-time job away?”

Billy laughed. “Something like that. The big comeback.”

I sat a coffee in front of Harlan and started cooking breakfast. “We got us a prisoner. She has to be fed breakfast, so I guess we’d better roll it.”

“Am I going with you or staying with Billy?” asked Harlan.

“You can go, Harlan,” said Billy. “My mom is coming over again around noon, and I’ll be okay until she gets here.”

“Tammy will be here tonight, and she’ll take care of you tomorrow.”

“She don’t go with you, Travis?” asked Harlan.

“Nope. She’s a home-sticker. Spends a lot of time in the barn. Just the way she is. She’s an organizer.”

“She bossy?”

I shrugged. “If she is, I never noticed it.”

“She ain’t bossy,” said Billy. “Hard worker. Not too bad at cooking. She works her ass off.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Molly had provided breakfast for Mrs. Hubbard by the time Harlan and I got to the station, and I was grateful to have that out of the way. Saved me time. One less job I had to do.

I unlocked the run and leaned on the wall outside of her cell and asked her a few questions.

“I ain’t telling you shit, Sheriff, so you can shove your questions right up your tight ass.”

Ignoring her, I kept going. “Chris got a boss or is he running this ring of thieves on his own?”

“Nobody tells Chris Hubbard what to do. Not even me.”

“Who does he sell the horses to? Where’s his market?”

“No idea.”

“Who are the two guys he runs with?”

“No idea.”

“You help me out and I could get you consideration from the court when you go to trial, Mrs. Hubbard.”

“I won’t go to trial. You can take that to the bank. Chris will never let that happen.”

“How’s he going to prevent it? Break you out of this jail? I hope to hell he tries that.”

“Piss off and leave me alone. When’s my lawyer gonna show up?”

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“When he gets here.” Harlan and I left, and I locked up the run. I headed to the squad room to see what time the PD was coming for the prisoner and Molly was taking an incoming call.

She was writing down information on her yellow pad.

“Zeke Traymore, out on Wild Horse Break says his neighbor, Walt Clemson, was buried in a mudslide. He wants help out there to look for Walt.”

“Did he call Fire and Rescue?”

“Yes, he’s waiting for somebody to come and help him, and nobody showed up yet.”

“We’ll take the dogs and see what they can do. Molly, check with Fire and Rescue and make sure they got the call. Come on, Harlan. Let’s go.”

Wild Horse Break.

Still raining—not quite as hard as the day before—when we left the station, but when we got driving across Wild Horse Break, the sky went black as tar and the rain came down in torrents.

Harlan and I both wore our rain gear. Yellow slickers and rubber boots. The dogs had their harnesses on, but those wouldn’t keep them dry.

Zeke Traymore’s house was perched a long ways up the hillside, high above the deep ditches on both sides of the road that were supposed to take the spring runoff and the

spring rains away. Those ditches were full.

Halfway up his sloped driveway I stopped, not wanting to get stuck in the quagmire. Harlan and I walked the rest of the way. I knocked and Zeke let us in. The small house was warm—wood burning in the stove was kicking off a lot of heat.

“Sheriff, something god-awful happened to Walt next door to me. I walked the trail of where his house slid down the mountain and I can’t find him. Don’t know how to find him without help.”

“I brought my dogs, Mister Traymore. Show me what you mean.”

We walked to the property line and Zeke pointed.

“His house was sitting right there.”

“His house is completely gone?”

“Mud slide came down the mountain and just shoved Walt’s house down the slope. He was inside.”

“There’s no house where you’re pointing, sir.”

“I’m telling you the house slid down the hill with Walt inside. You gotta go find him.”

“The whole house?” Harlan wasn’t quite believing it.

“I’ll do my best to find him,” I said. “You wait at your place for the firemen.”

“Okay, Sheriff. I’d better do that.”

When we got closer, I could see where Walt's house had been sitting. It was now a clear patch of mud surrounded by a shallow stone foundation. That's all that was left.

"The whole house got pushed by mud?" Harlan looked puzzled. "How is that possible?"

"If the mud was as big as a wall—like an avalanche of snow—it is possible," I said.

"That would be a fucking huge amount of mud," said Harlan.

"Yeah, it would be, and it would be a helluva lot heavier than snow."

"I can't picture it," said Harlan.

"Yeah, hard to imagine, but if there was a man inside the house, we'd better find him and get him to a hospital. We'll start here and work our way down the mountain."

"Wouldn't we see a house if there was anything left of it? Like wood or shingles? Like that?"

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Harlan was a logical kid, and I was grateful for that. He never asked a stupid question because he was way smarter than that.

With Max and Sarge running ahead, we followed the skid marks the house left behind in its wake. Trees had been uprooted and bushes tossed aside as the house, pushed by the wall of mud, gained momentum.

When we worked our way lower and could see a dense stand of evergreens several hundred feet below us, I had a glimmer of hope for Walt.

“If we can get down to those trees without killing ourselves, the house might’ve caught purchase there.”

“Looks pretty slick, Travis, and there ain’t a fuckin thing to hold onto between here and there.”

“We’ll have to climb up from the bottom.”

“Yeah, I can see that being the way to go. We’ll go down Zeke’s driveway and cut through when we get to the start of the trees.”

“Yep. The dogs are barking their heads off at something, so maybe they have Walt.”

“Be a miracle if the old guy ain’t dead,” said Harlan. “His own fucking house could’ve flattened him.”

“That’s a fact. Let’s get to him as fast as we can.”

“Where the hell are the fucking firemen?” asked Harlan.

“They’ve gotta come from Cut Bank.”

We slipped and slid and skidded our way through the mud as we made our way back to Zeke’s driveway. Once our boots were gripping on traces of gravel that remained on the shoulder, we were able to run until we got even with the start of the evergreens.

“Let’s cut through here. The trees will help with the fuckin mud situation.”

Tramping through the trees it was definitely drier and easier to run. The dogs were ahead of us, and they were still barking to tell me they found something.

“They’ll keep barking until I come.”

“They ain’t moving,” said Harlan. “The barking is coming from one spot.”

Another hundred yards and I saw lumber—broken boards and the chunk of a roof with shingles attached. “Walt, can you hear me?”

“The rain is so fuckin loud,” hollered Harlan.

We kept going and a bit deeper into the trees, Max came running back to me bouncing and barking and wanting me to hurry up.

“Did you find him, Max? Good boy.”

Following Max, it wasn’t far to the chunk of the house that Walt was in. He was pretty bashed up and there was a dresser pinning him down.

“Let’s get that off of him.”

Harlan hoisted the pine dresser off of Walt on his own and pushed it aside.

Walt moaned once the dresser was removed, and I wondered if we should have left it until the medics came. He was breathing a little funny.

“See if you can run down far enough that the firemen can see you from the road. Wave them up here. I’ll look for something we can drag Walt out on.”

By the time Harlan came back and said the fire truck had just got there, I had Walt lying on the mattress off his bed.

“Yeah, you got him on the mattress. That will work,” said Harlan. “We got no rope, or we could hook the mattress to one of the dogs.”

“I’ll drag him, and you push if we get stuck. Let’s try it. Where are the firemen?”

“That way.” He pointed. “They’re coming straight up the hill from the road.”

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“Hang on, Walt. We’re gonna get you out of here.”

With a lot of pushing and pulling, we met the firemen about halfway down to the road and they transferred Walt into a Stokes litter and carried him the rest of the way to the ambulance.

Old Zeke was standing next to the fire truck and smiling wide when he saw that his neighbor wasn’t dead.

Harlan and I trudged back up Zeke’s driveway to the squad and waited for the dogs to come back.

“Jeeze, I’m tired after that,” said Harlan. “My legs feel weird.”

“Me too. I’m a lot older and more broken than you are. That fuckin near killed me.”

I got two bottles of water out of the hatch and we each drank one down.

Max and Sarge came running back and I praised them. “Such good boys. You found Walt and saved his life. Give them each a biscuit, Harlan. They deserve it.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

When we got back to the office and dried off, Harlan and I dictated our statements to Molly to document the search and rescue of Walter Clemson and how Max and Sarge had found him in the wreckage of his house.

She typed it all into the computer and when she finished, she spent some time hugging the dogs and telling them they were heroes. She gave them each biscuits and they laid down next to her desk to crunch them.

“You might want to give the hospital a call to check on his condition, Molly. He didn’t look good when the paramedics put him into the ambulance.”

“I’ll do that right away, Travis. Having his house collapse on him, it’s amazing that he survived at all.”

Harlan went to the break room for coffee as the front door opened, and the Public Defender for Mrs. Hubbard arrived.

“Frank Wendover to see a Mrs. Hubbard you have in custody?”

I shook his hand. “Sheriff Frost. Sorry we don’t have an attorney-client room here, sir. You’ll have to meet with your client in the run.”

“That’s fine, Sheriff. Show me where she is.”

While Wendover was with Mrs. Hubbard, I went into my office, closed the door, and listened to the tag I had in her trailer. Nothing to hear. No voices. Nothing but the sound of pouring rain.

Wendover came out of the run, and I escorted him to the front door. “Thanks, Sheriff. I’ll see you at Mrs. Hubbard’s arraignment.”

Great Falls. Montana.

Two long hours of driving in the pouring rain got us to the airport in Great Falls in time for Tammy’s flight to land. I had worries that it would be too stormy for the

plane to touch down, and she'd be diverted to some god-forsaken place in Wyoming, and I'd never find her.

"You stressed, Travis?" asked Harlan.

"Tired more than anything. After all that slogging through the mud we did, I wanted to go home and sleep—that's what my body wanted to do."

"My legs are tired and a little shaky from all that climbing and running." He laughed. "I'd better get into shape if I'm gonna keep up." He turned and patted Max and then Sarge. "Only the dogs aren't tired."

Harlan and I sat in the arrivals lounge waiting for Tammy to come through the door. The plane from Austin had landed a little late and some of the passengers had come through the doors, but not Tammy. Not yet.

Tired of sitting and wanting a smoke, I stood up, paced a little and watched the door. "There she is."

Harlan jumped up and stood next to me and we both watched Tammy break into a run pulling a big suitcase behind her, a smaller one in her hand, her Harley purse slung over her shoulder. She was loaded down.

She squealed as she hugged me. "I missed you so much." Then she turned and hugged Harlan and kissed him on the neck. "Hi, Harlan. I'm so happy to have a brother of my very own."

Harlan stared at her and the look on his face was priceless.

I took over the pulling of the suitcase so Tammy could hold Harlan's hand and walk close to him. The kid was a goner.

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On the long ride home, we stopped for a quick drive-thru meal and cold Cokes loaded with caffeine to keep us awake.

Tammy asked lots of questions about the horses and the barrel racing course and I had to tell her about Marilyn getting hurt.

Harlan was quiet riding in the shotgun seat. Tammy had insisted on riding in the back with the dogs, and she cuddled up holding onto both of them. They whined and licked her face; they were so happy to see her.

“Annie say anything about when you had to go back to Texas?” I asked her.

“No. She said to stay and start the training and she’d send Lucy up a week ahead of when we were starting.”

“Things will have to dry up before y’all can start,” I said. “All we’ve got up here is mud.”

“Mama is getting the horses ready. They’re being picked up tomorrow morning.”

“Good. A couple of days and we’ll have them. She remember our saddles?”

Tammy laughed. “Mama wouldn’t forget something like that, Travis. She’s too familiar with the horse business.”

“Yeah, I guess she is.”

“You got a horse, Harlan?” asked Tammy.

“Nope. Never had me a horse.”

“Travis bought me a horse for my sixteenth birthday, and I love her so much. Her name is Bonnie Grace, and she is so beautiful.”

“Got a picture?”

“Yep. You got a phone? I can send it to you.”

“Just show me. I ain’t got a phone.”

“Never thought of it,” I said. “I’ll get you one tomorrow, Harlan. You and Tammy will want to text.”

“I never had a phone before Mama got me one,” said Tammy, “but I like having one a lot.” She leaned forward over the console to show Harlan a picture of Bonnie Grace.

“Pretty horse.”

“Blue roan mare,” said Tammy. “She’s an Appaloosa. All Mama’s horses are Appaloosas.”

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Billy was asleep on the sofa and woke up when the dogs ran in barking with Tammy, Harlan, and me right behind them.

Tammy squealed and ran into the living room and hugged Billy. “I missed you so

much, Billy. I'm gonna take care of you now. Mama sent stuff to heal your leg too. It's in my suitcase."

"Great. I want to get back to work." Billy yawned.

"How about one beer and we call it a night?" I asked. "Me and Harlan had a particularly rough day up a muddy mountain."

"I drink Coors," said Tammy when I handed her a can of Miller.

"Of course, you do."

Just like Annie.

Chapter Eleven

Friday, April 29th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Sleeping in a strange bed, Tammy woke up and didn't recognize the room for a couple of seconds, then she remembered that Billy had to sleep in her room downstairs until his leg healed.

She ran across the hall to the upstairs bathroom and Harlan was just coming out and she nearly ran into him. Tammy giggled. "Sorry. I'm not used to sleeping upstairs. I'm in your way."

"No problem. I'm just getting used to living here myself."

"I was scared at first," said Tammy, "but Travis is the best person who ever came into my life. I love him like he was my own dad."

Harlan nodded. "He treats me good."

"Always. He'll look out for you. I'll see you downstairs. What do you like for breakfast?"

"Pancakes."

"You got it."

Tammy was making pancakes and sausages when I dragged my sorry ass into the kitchen. The food smelled good and so did the coffee.

Harlan sat at the table watching her cook.

“You put wood in the stove, Harlan?” I asked.

“Yep. Caught it in time, I think.”

“Feels nice. I like waking up to a warm house.”

“It’s warmer down here than it is upstairs,” said Tammy. “We took quite a few blankets with us to Texas to the old farm, Travis. Where are those boxes now?”

“Umm... I think they’re at Annie’s.”

“I think they are too,” said Tammy. “We might need a couple of comforters for the upstairs beds.”

“Remember that the next time we go to Cut Bank,” I said. “I think there’s a store there with bedding.”

“I’ll ask Billy if there’s one in Shelby. We can go there when we go to Marilyn’s ranch.”

“Yep. Put it on the list.”

“Do we have a grocery list, Travis? There ain’t much in the fridge to cook with.”

“Make one. Harlan and I will do shopping today. I need to get him a phone anyway.”

“You like working the sheriff’s office, Harlan?” Tammy put a huge stack of pancakes in front of him.

“Uh huh. I like it fine.”

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

Mrs. Hubbard was eating breakfast in her cell when Harlan and I got there. I checked with Molly and the arraignment was at nine.

“I'm hoping her husband shows up at the arraignment, Molly. Then we'll have him. Wish I knew the name of the other two thieves running with him.”

“Is Chris Hubbard the boss of the operation?” asked Molly.

“Same thing I asked his wife, and she said Chris don't take orders from anybody, including her.”

“Not even if she shot his ass?” asked Harlan. “She's handy with a shotgun.”

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Molly rolled her eyes. “I hope she doesn’t make bail, Travis. That would mean we’d still be feeding her, but it would help bring the others in.”

“How?”

“I don’t know how exactly. Just a feeling.”

“I’ll get her ready to transport. Did she have a coat when we brought her in?”

Molly got up. “I’ll get it for you. Was it still raining when you and Harlan came in?”

“Yep.”

“Wyatt heard about Walt Clemson and the rescue, and he asked if he could have a copy of the police reports for a story.”

“Sure. There’s nothing criminal in the reports. Send him my statement and he can make a story out of it. Don’t mention Harlan being there. I don’t want his caseworker thinking I’m putting him in dangerous situations.”

“We ain’t met her yet,” said Harlan. “She might be a scary bitch.”

“Or” said Molly, “she might be a nice lady who cares about kids like you.”

“I guess,” said Harlan. “Ain’t had me one of them workers yet that gave a rat’s ass about me.”

“Aw,” said Molly. “You’re in good hands with Travis, Harlan. I’m sure he’ll handle whatever kind of caseworker they send your way.”

“Don’t think they ever send nice ones,” said Harlan.

“Bring it,” I said. “Send me the mean bitches. I got you covered, Harlan.”

Harlan chuckled and so did Molly.

Harrison County Courthouse.

We didn’t have to wait long for Mrs. Hubbard’s case to be called. She stood before the judge with Frank Wendover, her PD and he did all the talking. She was granted bail and seemed to have no trouble coming up with it.

When she came out of the bond office, a woman was waiting for her. Long auburn hair and sharp features, tall and thin.

Harlan and I casually followed them out to the parking lot and watched the tall lady unlock a dark green pickup. The two women got in and Harlan wrote down the tag before they drove away.

We sat in the squad, and I ran the tag through motor vehicle registration and came up with a name. “Norma Wilson.”

“Her address there too?” asked Harlan.

“Conrad rural route just like the Hubbards. They can’t live too far apart. Maybe on the same county road.”

“Want to check it out?”

“Need gas first and I’ll grab you a phone in the convenience store. Be handy if we get separated.”

Harlan laughed. “Or if Tammy is texting me like she said. What the hell is she gonna text me about? It’s kind of freaking me out.”

“Right now, she’s all about horses. Annie, my part-time wife and Tammy’s stepmom has a big Appaloosa operation and Tammy loves the horses.”

“You got a wife you’re keeping secret in Texas?”

“Yeah, something like that. My life is a little complicated at the moment.”

“Jesus, Travis. You are that dial-up stud.”

“I am not that guy.”

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“Got a picture of the secret wife?”

“Yeah.” I pulled out my cell and scrolled to Annie’s picture. “This is my Annie-girl.”

Harlan’s eyes widened. “I wouldn’t be staying away from her too long. Might not turn out well for you.”

“I worry about that.”

“You should.”

Peterson’s Service Center.

I parked the squad at the pumps, and we ran inside the convenience store to grab Harlan a phone. I paid for the phone, two Cokes and a carton of smokes at the counter.

“I need a fill up on the squad and you can charge the gas to the county.”

“Sure, Sheriff. I’ll send Kirby out to take care of you.”

“Thanks.”

We sat in the squad and waited for a couple of minutes and Kirby came running out of the garage to pump the gas. I could’ve done it myself, but it was Kirby’s job and I let him do it.

“Hey, Sheriff. I heard Tammy might be coming home.”

“Oh, yeah? Who did you hear that from? There are no secrets in Coyote Creek.”

He shrugged. “Can’t rightly remember. Might have been Ted. You mind if I ask her out?”

“Hell yeah, I mind, Kirby. She’s only sixteen.”

“Okay, just a question. Don’t want to set you off. I’ve heard how that can go. Lot of blood spilled at the Dry Run and you’re the hard hitter everybody talks about.”

“How old are you, Kirby?”

“Eighteen.” He cleaned the windshield and didn’t press it any further.

“How does that guy know Tammy?” asked Harlan.

“Seen her in the squad with me a few times, I guess.”

“Huh,” said Harlan. “I didn’t think about guys looking at her like that.”

“I guess I didn’t either, Harlan. Never crossed my mind that she’d go on a fuckin date... without me. Now I gotta watch out for that. Tammy is pretty.”

“She’s beautiful, Travis. We might have ourselves some trouble.”

I laughed. “Better not.”

Wilson Residence. Conrad.

I drove to the address I had for the woman who picked up Mrs. Hubbard at the courthouse and found she didn't live far from the Hubbards. About two miles east on the same county road.

Norma Wilson's dark green pickup was parked next to her long, low ranch house. A few acres of property, big barn, and a corral. Empty corral.

I parked the squad in front of the house. "Let's go see what line of bullshit she's gonna lay on us, Harlan."

"Police, Miss Wilson. Need to talk to you." I pounded on her door, and she didn't keep us waiting.

Norma opened the door right away. No smile, but she didn't look angry either. Calm and cool. "What can I do for the police?"

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“I noticed you picked Amanda Hubbard up at the courthouse this morning.”

“Is that a crime?”

“Not unless you’re mixed up with Amanda and her husband and their little band of horse thieves and murderers.”

Norma laughed. “Murderers? What are you talking about, Sheriff?”

“How do you know Amanda Hubbard?”

“She’s a neighbor down the road, and a friend.”

“You telling me she’s a close enough friend that you would pick her up at the courthouse after she’s been charged with accessory to robbery and murder?”

“Yes. Amanda is a good friend and I happen to believe the charges are false.”

“Do you know Amanda’s husband, Chris?”

“Of course, I know him. I just told you I’m good friends with Amanda.”

“Who else do you know in Chris and Amanda’s circle of acquaintances?”

“Nobody.”

“You don’t know the boys Chris hangs around with? The two buddies who help him

steal horses and murder ranchers?”

“I don’t know anybody like that. I’m a law-abiding citizen, Sheriff.”

“You made a mistake coming to pick up your friend Amanda from the courthouse, Miss Wilson. You’re in my sights now and that is one place you do not want to be.”

She tossed her hair and laughed. “Nice try, Sheriff, but I’m not the least bit intimidated by you and your threats.”

“You should be.”

We went back to the truck and Harlan was shaking his head. “We got nothing from her.”

“Maybe nothing, but I think in one minute, Norma is going to phone Amanda and warn her. I’ve got a tag in Mother Hubbard’s kitchen.”

“We can hear her talking?” Harlan’s eyes widened. “Is that legal?”

I chuckled. “Want to call the cops?”

“No. I want to hear what those women are saying.”

I sped down the county road and parked not far from the Hubbard’s trailer. I put my phone on speaker and let Harlan listen to Amanda communicate with Norma.

The cops came to your house? Yeah, I’m surprised. Oh, they saw you pick me up. Yeah, okay. We’ll stay away from you, Norma. Don’t worry. I’ll tell Chris when he calls me.

“Stay away from her?” asked Harlan.

“Yep. Norma Wilson is higher up the ladder and she doesn’t want Chris and his crew connected to her. We have to dig into Norma Wilson and possibly bring her in as a person of interest. That might shake things up.”

“We need surveillance on the Hubbard trailer.”

“But we don’t have anybody to do it,” I said. “And I can’t involve civilians. It’s too risky.”

“I’ll do it.”

“You’re not doing it. I’ll see if I can get a deputy on loan from Price County to do it for us. The Sheriff over there owes me one. Only other shot is to ask the county council if they can cough up enough money for a temporary deputy of our own.”

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“I want to be a deputy,” said Harlan. “They don’t need to know how old I am.”

I nodded. “We’ll talk to Billy and work something out. He’s the one with the bright ideas.”

“Is he?” asked Harlan. “Guess I don’t know Billy too much yet.”

“He’s smart,” I said. “A big thinker.”

“Didn’t see that side of him yet,” said Harlan. No sarcasm in his voice. An honest statement.

Peterson’s Market. Coyote Creek.

When we got back to Coyote Creek, our next stop was the market. I pulled into the angle parking at the front of the store. “Did Tammy give me a list?”

“She said she’d send it to your phone.”

“Aw Jeeze, I’m so bad with my phone.” I handed my cell to Harlan. “Here, you look for it.”

He found it in half a second and handed the phone back to me. “Let’s grab this stuff and get home. Tammy will be mad if we’re late for supper.”

Harlan laughed. “What time are we supposed to be there?”

“Text her and find out while I find the stuff she wants real fast.” Pushing the cart like a shopping maniac, I flew down the aisles tossing in everything on the list.

Shoving the cart ahead of me, looking at the list on my fucking phone, scanning the shelves for what I needed to find—doing all that at once nearly pushed me over the edge.

“Help me, Harlan. At least push the fucking cart.” We rounded the corner of the aisle, and I almost ran right into Olivia. “Oh, hi, Olivia.”

“Hello, Travis. Nice to see you.”

We kept going and Harlan whispered, “She’s a babe.”

“We broke up. She’s pissed at me.”

“Shit, man, you’ve got a wife and you’re messing around. You are a fuckin stud.”

“Keep going. What time is dinner?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

“We’ll never make that. We’ve got ten minutes of drive time.”

“We’re almost finished,” said Harlan. “Give me a couple of things from the list and I’ll speed us up.”

Harlan grabbed everything else we needed, and we lined up at the checkout—right behind Olivia.

She turned her head and asked, “Who is this young man, Travis?”

“He’s my ward, Harlan.” To Harlan: “Olivia Best. She runs the Inn.”

“When you have a civil moment, Travis, we need to have a business meeting about the Inn.”

“Sure. Not tomorrow. How about on Sunday?”

“Sunday afternoon will be perfect. I’ll expect you at one o’clock for lunch.”

“Sure.”

“Put the date in your phone,” whispered Harlan.

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I handed my phone to him while I gave the girl on cash my credit card.

Butch, the box boy, loaded all of my boxes and cases of beer onto his big blue cart and wheeled all of it out to the squad. I introduced Harlan. The boys loaded the hatch with our purchases, and I handed Butch five bucks for his trouble.

As we drove to the ranch with the siren on—so I didn't have to watch the speed limit—I told Harlan, "I'll give you an allowance so you can buy your own smokes and whatever else you want."

"Do I need it? You pay for everything already."

"The last couple of days I've been working you pretty hard."

"Does Tammy get an allowance?"

"No. I buy her what she wants. She never asks for much for herself. She just puts it on the list on the fridge."

"Okay. I want to be the same as her," said Harlan.

"Okay. Same as Tammy. I'm good either way. You want something bigger, like a laptop or shit like that, I'm good for it."

"You would buy me a laptop?"

"Course, I would."

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Harlan and I hauled the groceries in and put all the bags and boxes in front of the pantry. “Sorry we’re a bit late. Got hung up at the grocery store.”

Harlan rolled his eyes and didn’t mention Olivia.

“Just put away the stuff that needs to go in the fridge and I’ll do the rest later,” said Tammy. “Dinner is ready. I’m trying out my pie making on you guys. Mama taught me how to make pies and I’ve been practicing.”

“I love pie,” said Harlan. “What kind did you make?”

“My favorite one that Mama taught me. Banana butterscotch.”

“Never had it,” said Harlan, “but I’m keen to try it.”

Chapter Twelve

Saturday, April 30th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

At breakfast Harlan wanted to talk about surveillance on the Hubbard trailer and Billy was all for doing it himself. I argued against it and seemed to be losing. Before I knew what was happening, Billy and Tammy were going to do it during the day, and Harlan and I would take the late shift.

I refilled my coffee and was about to sit down at the table when a county department number showed up on my cell.

“Sheriff Frost.”

“Good morning, Sheriff. This is Haley Drayton, and I realize it’s the weekend, but that’s exactly why I thought it might be a good time for me to come to your ranch and pay Harlan a visit. Do you have a time that works for you?”

I mouthed the words *social worker* to Harlan, and he scowled. “How about eleven?”

Harlan shrugged.

“Eleven is perfect for me, Sheriff. I’ll see you then.”

“Do you need directions, Miss Drayton?”

“No thanks. I’ll find your ranch.”

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“Oh no,” said Harlan. “Those social workers make me sweat.”

Harlan jumped when Tammy stood behind him and stroked his shaggy hair.

“Don’t you be afraid of no social worker, Harlan. If they try to take you away from me and Travis, I’ll drag your ass to Texas and hide you in the safehouse on Mama’s ranch. No Montana woman will ever get you there. We got guards and security cams and guns. Mama’s got lots of guns. Scopes too. She loves her scopes.”

Harlan’s eyes were wide. “Thanks.”

Tammy’s sincerity made me smile.

Eleven o’clock rolled around soon enough but Tammy and I had been busy during the wait time in between cleaning up the house and putting things away.

Tammy spent time with Harlan in his room, getting everything in order, making his bed and hauling his dirty clothes to the laundry room on the main floor.

By the time Haley Drayton stood knocking on our front door, we were ready for her.

“Miss Drayton, come in. I’m Travis Frost.” I shook her hand, and she smiled a wary smile. I figured a lot of places she visited tried to put it over on her.

“Nice to meet you, Sheriff. You have a lovely home.”

I showed her into the living room where Billy was sitting on the sofa with his leg

elevated. “This is Sheriff Billy Johnson, on leave for his injury.”

“Nice to meet you, Sheriff.” She turned to where Harlan and Tammy were sitting in armchairs near the stove. “You young people are certainly well protected.”

After a few minutes of small talk, Haley asked Harlan to show her his room and he took her upstairs.

After a glance at his room, Haley pointed to his bed, and he sat down to answer her questions. “How do you like living with the sheriff, Harlan? Any problems so far?”

“No. None. I figured I wouldn’t like living with a cop, but I do like it. Travis treats me good and so does Billy.”

“And you’re interacting well with your foster sister?”

Harlan smiled. “Tammy is so nice to me. I just met her, but I like her a lot.”

“Have clothes been provided for you since you arrived? May I look in your dresser and your closet?”

“Go ahead. All of my clothes are new, and Travis said he wasn’t taking money from the county for anything I needed.”

“Your well-being is the only thing I’m interested in, Harlan.” She gave him a card.

“Keep my number handy and if you need me for anything at all, just call. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Haley Drayton came back downstairs after her secret talk to Harlan, and it was my turn to answer her questions. The two of us sat at the kitchen table and she brought up

the subject I knew was coming.

“I’m concerned about Harlan’s education, Sheriff Frost. You haven’t had time to put anything in place yet, but have you discussed going to school with Harlan?”

“Not yet, but if he wants to get his diploma and go to college, I’ll certainly provide the funding.”

“You will only be responsible for Harlan until he turns sixteen and according to his file, that’s only a few months from now.”

I shook my head. “No. After he turns sixteen, Harlan will be staying with me. We’ve already discussed it.”

“I see. Isn’t that a little unusual?”

“Maybe, but if there is any trepidation on the part of the county, I’m prepared to take the legal steps necessary.”

Haley Drayton left the ranch and we all let out sighs of relief. Her stressful visit was over.

“How often does she come?” asked Billy.

Harlan shrugged. "Once is too often."

We all laughed, and the tension eased a lot.

"I'll make grilled cheese," said Tammy, "and then we'll go see Marilyn Pellegrino."

"Yep, that's exactly what we'll do."

Pellegrino Ranch. Shelby.

After Tammy made Harlan an extra three grilled cheese sandwiches, and he ate a big piece of the leftover butterscotch pie, we drove to Marilyn Pellegrino's ranch outside of Shelby.

Tammy was hyped up to start training to be a barrel racer in the rodeo. Whether she would ever make it that far was yet to be determined.

"Lucy is a lot better than me," said Tammy. "That's because she's a better rider and has more control of her horse. That's what Mama said. She said I would be just as good once me and Bonnie Grace were thinking the exact same way."

"That's probably true," I said. "If you've ever seen Annie ride Target and shoot from her back, you would believe that."

"Mama showed me, I couldn't believe how she could stand up in the stirrups while Target galloped, and still get a bullseye with her rifle."

I smiled. “I’ve seen her do it, and she is amazing. Lucy has been practicing under Annie’s guidance for a lot longer than you, Tam. You’ll catch up to her.”

“But Lucy is younger than me and when I watch her, I feel like a loser. What if she beats me when we’re in the rodeo against each other?”

“You can’t win every event, Tammy. Even the best riders have a bad day. You will win on the day that you and Bonnie Grace are in perfect sync.”

I parked and shut off the truck. “Come on. Let’s talk to Marilyn and see if she’s got room for you in the spring session. Annie told me Lucy was already registered, so she has a guaranteed spot.”

A welcoming smile on her face, Marilyn was waiting for us and seemed to have no ill effects from the concussion the horse thieves had given her.

“So happy to see you, Travis. All of you—Tammy and Harlan too. Come on. I’ll show you my training setup but keep in mind everything looks a lot better when the sun is out and there is a lot less mud.”

“It has to stop raining soon,” I said. “This is too much for the ground to soak up.”

“You’re right,” said Marilyn. “My entire ranch is saturated. Not a dry spot in the entire five thousand acres.”

“I’m sure mine is the same,” I said. “Haven’t been to the back property line in a while.”

“I’m usually ready to start training classes on the first of May,” said Marilyn, “but I’m going to need another week for the ground to dry up. The girls can’t ride on the course the way it is. The horses can’t get any speed in mud.”

After a tour of the racing ring and a walk through the barracks where the girls slept, and the dining room where they all ate together, we went back to the house to Marilyn's office where I signed Tammy up.

I handed my check to Marilyn, and she put it in her lockbox. "That's it for the spring session. The class is full, and I can't take one more girl."

Tammy smiled. "I'm glad I made it in time."

"Uh huh. Me too," I said. "To have Lucy in and not you would have made you sad, Tam."

"And mad," she added.

I chuckled. "Yeah, that would've made you mad."

Wild Stallion Ranch.

When we got home from Marilyn's ranch, a big horse trailer was backed up to the barn door. Billy was outside standing in the rain on his crutches watching two guys unload the horses.

"Four horses," said Tammy. "Outlaw, Bonnie Grace, Lucy's horse Buckshot, and the other one is Windrider. Why are four horses here, Travis?"

"I told Annie to send a horse for Harlan. He'll want to ride with you and me. We need another stall cleaned out and fresh bedding put down. Show Harlan how to take care of his horse and help him through it."

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Tammy smiled. “A horse for Harlan. This is going to be so much fun.”

Harlan rolled his eyes.

“I’ll get the tack and settle up with the driver,” I said. “Billy, go back in the house. You’re getting wet.”

“Come on, Harlan,” said Tammy. “The horses are a bit antsy after such a long trip. It would be best to let them run off energy in the corral, but it’s too wet for them to stay outside.”

“I don’t know nothing about horses. Never had me one ever in my life.”

It took a couple of hours to get the horses squared away, feed them, and brush them. Tammy wanted to put Bonnie Grace’s blanket on her for the damp weather and she blanketed Outlaw and Buckshot as well. There was no extra blanket for Windrider.

“Windrider needs a blanket, and you need a saddle, Harlan. We’ll get you set up tomorrow.”

“I don’t know what the fuck I need. Not sure I’m ready to have a horse and look after the fucker.”

Tammy stroked his arm. “Don’t be upset, sugar. Travis is just trying to be nice. He don’t want to upset you in any way.”

Harlan gave into a sudden urge and pushed Tammy up against the side of the stall and

kissed her. Then he walked out of the barn into the rain.

I was having a beer with Billy in the kitchen when Tammy ran into the house to make dinner. “Where’s Harlan?”

“He’s out there worrying himself sick about having a horse and not knowing how to take care of it,” said Tammy.

“Okay, I’ll go.” I went back to the barn and Harlan was sitting on a bale of straw staring at Windrider. I left him there while I put the tack away and tried to organize the barn. My barn had never been home to four horses before. It smelled great and felt warm and cozy.

“You need a saddle, Harlan. We’ll get you one tomorrow at Savanna’s store. If it ever stops raining, we’ll all go for a ride. My ranch has a thousand acres and way at the back is the spot where the wild mustangs run through.”

“Don’t know how to ride a horse,” said Harlan. “I’m worrying about it some.”

“Neither did Tammy when she got her horse. She had to learn, and she’s only been riding since her birthday last November when I got Bonnie Grace for her.”

“I’m not sure I can do it.”

“I’m not a great rider myself so don’t worry about it. Everybody has to learn. If you want to know the truth, I’m way better on my Harley.”

Harlan’s eyes widened. “Can I see it?”

“Help yourself. It’s in the garage under a tarp. Check out the new paint job.”

“Thanks”

After dinner, Billy was restless, and he wanted to go to the roadhouse for a pitcher of beer. He hadn't seen his cousin, Jack, for a few days, and he just needed get out of the house.

“Are you sure you want to try it? It's rainy and nasty out there. The crutches might be difficult in mud.”

“I'm going nuts,” said Billy, “and Brenda keeps texting me about getting back together. Just give me an hour at the Dry Run to drink a pitcher and feel normal, and I'll get my sanity back.”

“Okay, I'll stoke up the stove before we leave, and we'll take a drive down there. Are you coming, Tammy?”

“Sure, I'll come. I haven't seen Jack or Savanna since I came home.”

“Savanna broke up with Jack,” I said, “and he isn't over it yet.”

“Aw, I'll be sympathetic,” said Tammy.

Harlan hung back until Tammy took his hand. “Come on, Harlan. Let's go have some fun.”

Dry Run Roadhouse.

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The band was blasting out a fast song as we walked through the front doors and the dance floor was jammed. It took some looking to find a booth for all of us, Billy, me and two underage kids. Jack strolled over and chatted to us when he wasn't too busy behind the bar.

We'd been there for about an hour and Billy seemed to be relaxing a little and having fun until Brenda and Glenda appeared and squeezed their unwanted butts into our booth.

Harlan was in the corner and Tammy was squished right up against him when I moved over to let Glenda sit down. Harlan had a look on his face that I wasn't sure about, but he sure wasn't complaining about how close Tammy was.

"Hey, girls," I asked, "why don't y'all get your own table? We don't really have room for y'all here. My kids are squished."

"We like it here." Brenda stuck her stubborn jaw out and Billy's lip curled in response.

"You girls should go hit on some single guys," I said. "Billy and I are off-limits to y'all. Been there—done it. No thanks. Can you take a hint?"

"No," said Glenda. "We're not taking a hint from you, Travis. This is where me and Brenda want to sit."

"Come on, girls. Give us a break. Go get your own table. Harlan and Tammy are here, and this is a family outing."

“Trouble here?” Jack walked over with a smirk on his face.

“You mind finding the twins their own table, Jack? They’re crowding the kids and Billy needs his leg up on the bench.”

“Sure. Come on, girls. I’ll get you set up somewhere closer to the band. Billy needs more room to rest his leg.”

The girls never moved. Jack left to scout out an empty table for them and he wasn’t gone long before he shouted for me. I had to push past Glenda to get out of the booth and it pissed me off.

As soon as I was free of her, I ran to help Jack.

Shoving my way through the crowd of dancers, I got to the middle of the floor, and I could finally see where the trouble was.

Two guys I didn’t know were pushing and shoving each other and throwing the odd punch when they got an opening. Yelling and cursing at each other over whatever had set them off.

“Break it up,” I hollered at them and pushed in between them. I tried to separate them peacefully and that didn’t work. They were both fuming about something.

They shouted threats at each other, and the fight accelerated over...something. Cause unknown. They wouldn’t quit, and I didn’t want more joiners, so I grabbed the hair of the closest one and smashed his face into the closest table.

Customers shouted and jumped out of the way, glasses and bottles tumbled off the table and smashed.

The guy came up waving a blade and caught my right forearm. Pain shot through my brain and made me see red. I knocked him to the floor and was thumping him hard while blood spurted out of my arm and splattered both of us.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Harlan jump in and crack the other guy in the face with his fist and knock him to the floor. He was a big strong kid for fifteen.

One of Jack's bouncers jumped in and helped us out and we managed to get the two guys rolled onto their bellies and cuffed.

My arm was cut twice. Hadn't noticed the second one. Forearm slice and the nick above the elbow was gushing pretty freely.

"Travis, you're bleeding," said Jack. "I've got a first aid kit in the office."

"Let me get these guys locked in the truck first."

Outside in the parking lot, Harlan helped me get the two guys secured in the back of the truck. He was quick and slick with the D-ring—knew right where it was—and I sensed some familiarity.

I slid behind the wheel and wiped the blood off my arm. "Run back in and tell Billy we'll be right back to pick him and Tammy up. We've got no room for them until we ditch these assholes at the station."

Harlan smiled as he jumped out and ran.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

We left the drunks in the truck while Harlan and I went inside the station first and used the first aid supplies to patch up my arm temporarily. Once the blood was

washed off and the gauze pads taped on, I was good to go.

We ran out to the truck and brought the guys in one at a time and locked them in separate cells, leaving an empty cell between them.

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Both drunk and belligerent, they hollered and yelled curses at us, but we were too tired to bother with them.

“Night boys. See y’all in the morning.”

I turned out the lights and locked them up.

“That was fun,” said Harlan. “Don’t mind a good dustup and I never got to lock anybody up before. Always was the other way around—cops locking me up.”

I chuckled.

Hubbard Residence. Conrad.

We drove north to the Dry Run and picked up Billy and Tammy, then we took a quick run down to Conrad to the Hubbard trailer.

“This won’t take long. I just want to make sure I’m not missing the blue pickup coming back home.”

“Yeah, we don’t want to miss that,” said Billy. “Tammy and I will be starting our surveillance shift in the morning.”

There was one light on inside the trailer and I could see that the front window was still broken where Amanda Hubbard had shot it out.

“No vehicle. Okay. The boys haven’t come home to roost. We’ll call it a night.”

“I’m tired,” said Tammy.

“Wussy,” said Harlan.

Tammy giggled.

Chapter Thirteen

Sunday, May 1st.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

“You look beat, Billy. A night at the roadhouse too much for you?”

“As if. I wanted to strangle the twins. They are such pushy bitches. I should have broken it off with Brenda long before I did. My bad.”

“I never should’ve bought Glenda as many drinks as I did. Now she’s fuckin stalking me like I’m her sugar daddy or something.”

“We’ve got to get rid of both of them permanently,” said Billy.

“Got a plan in place to do that?” asked Harlan as he spooned sugar into his coffee.

“Not yet, but I’m going to come up with one. Have to find the right guys to sic the twins on.”

Tammy giggled. “Pick somebody you don’t like, Billy.”

“Yeah, let me give that some thought. Who do I owe payback to?” Billy laughed. “I’ll introduce him to Brenda.”

After breakfast Tammy and Harlan headed for the barn to do their chores while Travis cleaned up the kitchen and got ready for work. She fed her horse and while Bonnie Grace was munching on her oats, Tammy began mucking out the stall and filling the wheelbarrow.

“You’re gonna think I’m stupid,” said Harlan, “but I forget how much oats I’m supposed to give the horses.”

“I’ll show you, and I don’t think you’re stupid. When I first got my horse, Mama wrote it on a piece of paper for me and I kept it in the pocket of my jeans.”

“Is she your real Mom?”

“No. I don’t have a real mom, but Annie is my real stepmom. She was married to my dad when I was little. His name was Jackson Traynor and I have his picture.”

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“I don’t have a picture of my parents,” said Harlan. “I don’t even know who they were.”

“Now you have Travis and he’s the best dad you could ever get,” said Tammy.

“Yeah, I like him, but I still don’t know how I got him. He just showed up at the detention center and picked me up when I got released on parole.”

“Fate,” said Tammy. “It was Fate. Same way he got me. Luckiest day of my life—well, getting beat up real bad by Tibor wasn’t the lucky part—but after that it was lucky.”

Harlan shrugged. “Guess it was. Was Tibor your boyfriend?”

Tammy teared up and didn’t answer.

Harlan said, “You don’t have to tell me.”

“He kidnapped me from the lady who took care of me after my mother dumped me and left. I was only ten and didn’t know what was happening. He kept me with him until Travis got me that lucky day.”

“He kept you for five years?”

“I didn’t know no different,” said Tammy. “I was scared when Travis took me to the hospital. I knew Tibor would come to get me back. And he did and he cut Travis. You see his left arm?”

“Yeah, I saw the scar amongst the tats. Where is that guy now?”

“He got out of jail and tracked me to Texas and Mama killed him in the middle of the night. She’s good with a gun.”

“Jesus, Tammy. That’s a horrible story.”

“Let’s forget about it. I’ll show you about the food.”

As they walked over to the bin together, Harlan asked, “Should we talk about me kissing you? I’m not sure I should’ve done that.”

“Only if you want to talk about it. I’m okay with it. I don’t have a boyfriend and I don’t think Travis will let me have one anytime soon. He’s strict with me like that.”

“Yeah, I got that impression when that Kirby guy at the gas station asked if he could take you out. Travis said no fuckin way.” Harlan laughed and Tammy laughed too.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

When we got to Coyote Creek, Harlan and I got breakfast for the prisoners across the street from the station at the Mainliner Diner.

While the two brawlers from the roadhouse were eating, I brewed a pot of coffee for all of us. As soon as they had their required cup of coffee, I took them out of their cells one at a time and booked them.

Harlan watched carefully during the fingerprinting process and the taking of the mug shots.

I charged Dylan Kemp with felonious assault for using a knife on me, and his buddy,

Pete Bannister, I gave public drunkenness. That was about the least I could charge him with. He was getting off lucky.

Harlan took the bag holding Kemp's knife to the evidence cupboard and locked it up. We both owed statements of the fight to Molly for the report.

With the booking over with, I had to move on to something else I didn't want to do—lunch with Olivia Best. I told my accountant, Julie Redmond, to handle the financial difficulties at the Inn, but Olivia wanted to do it face to face and I had to tackle the mess myself. I had to sit down with Olivia and listen to her money troubles whether I wanted to or not.

Because I dreaded being alone when I came face to face with her, I decided to take Harlan with me as a kind of buffer. That way, Olivia wouldn't talk about our personal relationship, and I wouldn't have to deal with that and the Inn stuff at the same time. I was a raving coward where women were concerned.

I figured with Harlan sitting at the table with us, Olivia couldn't be mean to me, and she wouldn't talk about the desk jockey from the bank. Batting zero on that one.

Coyote Creek Inn.

I was right on time for the one o'clock lunch and when Olivia saw Harlan with me, she was stuck for words. So far, so good.

Trying to legitimize his being with me, I gave it a shot, "Harlan was giving me a hand with the prisoners at the station. You don't mind if he joins us for the lunch meeting, do you?"

Olivia had a lot of color in her face when she snapped out her answer, "Of course not. It's only a business lunch to straighten out a few things here at the Inn. A mutual

interest meeting for both of us, Travis.”

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She turned quickly and showed us into her private quarters down the hall from the main lobby. The table in her small dining area was set for two. Quickly, she added a place for Harlan and went to the kitchen that served the Inn to get our food.

“That woman ain’t happy I’m here,” whispered Harlan. “You been doing her too?”

I shrugged. “Sort of. She’s pissed that I broke it off, but it’s going to stay that way. There’s no going back.”

Harlan grinned. “You’re the Coyote Creek stud, Travis. You going after Marilyn next?”

“Nope. Nobody in the future. I’ve been messing around way too much and the best woman for me is in Texas.”

“But you ain’t with her.”

“Not all the time.”

“Huh.”

Olivia returned with a large tray and unloaded our plates onto the table. “Chicken pot pie with rolls and a salad is the lunch special today.”

“That’s fine, Olivia. Sit down with us and stop fussing.”

She placed a glass of Miller in front of me and gave Harlan a large glass of iced tea.

“You make me nervous, Travis. I know you’re still angry with me over Miller, and since you showed me your stubborn side, I’ve been anxious. I never pictured you digging in and being so obstinate.”

“There you go, Olivia. You found out how mulish I can be if I’m pushed, and you pushed me to the limit.”

“I’ve come to regret that, and I am sorry.”

“I’m over it.”

Harlan rolled his eyes and shoved a forkful of chicken pie into his face.

After we ate the delicious lunch and Harlan consumed two pieces of pie, it was time to talk about the financial state of the Inn that I held the mortgage on.

“In the past,” said Olivia, “I’ve done all of my communicating through Carson’s accountant, but after Carson’s death you hired a new accountant, Miss Julie Redmond, and I’ve never met her. I’ve only spoken to her on the phone. She definitely isn’t as accommodating as old Porky Flowers.”

“I’m afraid I’ve never met Porky,” I said, “but go ahead and tell me what you need me to hear and then we’ll decide what we’re going to do.”

“Business is good, and this Inn has been operating in Coyote Creek for fifty years. It’s a landmark. Thirty years with my parents running it, the next ten with my mother and me, and me alone for the last ten after my mother passed.”

“And what has changed so drastically that you fell behind on your mortgage payments?”

“There never was a mortgage on the Inn until I took it over from my mother. In her declining years, she had let it run down and I wanted to renovate and do upgrades in all of the guest rooms.”

“I can see that would need to be done, and it does look gorgeous,” I said.

“That’s when Carson gave me a first mortgage so I wouldn’t have to go through the bank and pay a high interest rate. He generously gave me a lower rate.”

“If business has remained consistent, explain how you fell behind, Olivia. It doesn’t seem like something you would allow to happen.”

“You’re not going to like this part, Travis.”

“Just tell me how you got messed up. Ever since I’ve known you, I’ve been impressed by what a savvy businesswoman you are.”

“I did something that’s going to make you change your opinion, Travis, and I’m ashamed to tell you what I did.” She picked up a napkin and I figured she was going to cry. Something I didn’t want to happen.

“Go ahead and get it over with,” I said.

“I loaned money to someone for a short term. A personal loan. Thirty days and I was to get the money back with interest.”

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“Written agreement?”

“No. On faith.”

I shook my head when she said those words. “Someone you knew well, and you believed they were trustworthy.”

“Yes.”

“Why can’t this person pay the money back? The thirty days must be up, or you wouldn’t be behind on your mortgage payments.”

“Correct. Time for repayment was up over a month ago and I need my money back. I’ve always kept a reserve fund strictly for the Inn and I’ve never in my life been behind on any of the bills.”

“How much did you give this person?” I asked.

“Twenty-five thousand dollars.”

Harlan rolled his brown eyes.

“Okay, and tell me the reason for the loan.”

“He needed cash for a one-time investment opportunity...in the market.”

“Okay, you gave the money to a fucking gambler, and he bet on the stock market.”

“Yes.”

“And the stock went down, and your money is gone.”

“Not gone. He says the market will come back and that’s when I’ll get my money back. He never once verbalized that he lost the money.”

“And who is this financial wizard?”

“Miller Ravary.”

“Jesus, Olivia, how did I know you were going to hit me with that asshole’s name?” I stood up and tossed the linen napkin on my chair. “I’ll speak to him as soon as possible and work out a repayment plan for you. In the meantime, try not to get any further behind or Julie will be calling me again.”

“Thank you for being so understanding, Travis.”

“Come on, Harlan.”

I was fuming and Harlan was chuckling a little on our way to the truck. That’s when Molly called. “Molly, what’s up?”

“The Mill Run bridge washed out, Travis, and a car slid into the river. The driver is missing.”

“Okay. I’m on my way. Jump in, Harlan. We’re going to get wet again.”

Hubbard Residence. Conrad.

Tammy parked down the road from the Hubbard trailer in a secluded spot that Billy

chose. “I think we’ll be well hidden here, Tam. Even if the husband comes home with the horse trailer, he won’t see us.”

“What if he does come back?” asked Tammy. “How will you and me get the cuffs on those three guys?”

“We won’t be able to. We’ll have to call Travis to come for backup.”

“Backup. Right,” said Tammy. She patted her Harley purse. “I brought my gun, just in case.”

“Hey,” said Billy, “don’t you go shooting anybody and getting us into trouble. We’re surveillance only.”

“I won’t shoot anybody unless you’re in danger.”

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“Okay, thanks for that.” Billy turned on the listening device and all they could hear was Amanda Hubbard banging around in the kitchen.

“If she’s cooking,” said Tammy, “then Chris and those killers might be coming home for dinner.”

“I guess that’s possible,” said Billy, “or maybe she just feels like a fried egg sandwich.”

Tammy laughed.

Milk River Bridge.

Endless days of rain had turned the placid Milk River into a raging torrent. The bridge was hanging by a thread, still connected by a few pieces of bracing on one end. The other end dangled precariously in the turbulent water, swishing back and forth in imminent danger of braking free and being swept away.

“Shit,” said Harlan. “Look at that fuckin mess. Never seen a washout before.”

We stood together on the side of the road looking down at the car. Sitting on the bottom of the river on its side, it was obvious the driver was gone.

Ted came along with the tow truck, took a look and shook his head. “No way I can hook onto the car, Travis. No way in hell to get to it until the water goes down.”

“Rain has to stop first and then it’ll take days to dry up after that.” I moved closer to

see what kind of car it was and said to Ted, “Can you guess what kind of car it is? If we could get the make and model or see the tag, we’d know who we were looking for.”

“Can’t tell a damned thing from here,” said Ted. “And I don’t want to get into that freezing water. The current is moving so fast, I’d be swept downstream and never get out.”

“Where does the Milk River empty?” I asked. “I’m asking...like... where would a body end up?”

“Huh,” said Ted. “That’s a good question, Sheriff. Best if we had us a map. Or we could call and ask Joe. He knows the terrain around here better than anybody ‘cause he’s always on foot or on horseback and off the main roads.”

“I’ve got his number in my phone.” I pressed the number for the local game warden and Joe Erickson answered.

“Travis, what can I do for you?”

“I’ve got a body in the Mill River, Joe, and I need to know where it’s going to end up. It’s long gone from the point of entry at the Milk River Bridge.”

“Okay, let me think. The Milk is a tributary of the Flathead, and that river flows directly into Lake Elwell.”

“Great. Can you give me a hint where the Flathead enters Lake Elwell? I’m talking, north side, east...some place I can drive to.”

“Go to Shelby and turn south on the interstate. Go about two miles and take the ramp for Elwell Lake Road. That road follows the Flathead as it heads for the lake, and you

might get a sighting of the body along there. Any idea who it is?"

"None. The car is in the Milk and Ted can't get it out. We can't see the plate on the car."

"Right. Good luck, Travis."

"Thanks a lot, Joe. I appreciate it."

Elwell Lake Road.

Harlan and I drove up and down that muddy lake road in the pouring rain looking for the body. Every time we saw something that might resemble a floating corpse, we got out of the squad and checked it out.

We spent hours looking along the banks of the Flatonia from I-15 to the far end of Lake Elwell and found nothing. "That's it, Harlan. We're done for today. Somebody will find the body and call it in. Until then, we're going home."

Drenched and tired, I called Molly and told her we hadn't found out who it was, and we hadn't retrieved the body.

"You sound exhausted, Travis. Go home and try again tomorrow."

"Yeah, we have to call it for today, Molly. We need food, dry clothes, and half a dozen beers."

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Tammy and Billy were home when we got there, the woodstove was kicking out a beautiful heat and Tammy was frying pork chops for dinner.

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“Smells good in here, Tam. Me and Harlan got soaked. As soon as we change our clothes, we’ll have a couple of beers. How did the surveillance go?”

“Boring,” said Billy. “Amanda Hubbard banged a few pots and pans, but she didn’t get any phone calls and no visitors. Don’t know what she was doing in that trailer all day long.”

“Maybe all the action is at night,” I said. “I gotta get these clothes off.”

Tammy served us mashed potatoes, carrots and pork chops and it was great to come home to a meal already cooked. “Your cooking is great, Tammy. Gets better every day.”

She smiled. “Thanks, Travis. I learned a lot of stuff from Mama and Riley. Did you know Riley went to a chef school to be a cook in a big hotel?”

“Yep. I did know that. Riley is a dandy cook—I mean chef.”

After dinner, I saw Harlan yawn. “You can skip on the surveillance tonight, kid. I can do it myself.”

“Nope. I’ll be okay. Two cups of coffee, and I’ll be ready to go.”

“Long day,” I said. “Tramping around for hours in the rain sapped our energy.”

“Don’t you be sleeping on surveillance. You’ll miss hearing Mother Hubbard banging her cupboard doors.” Billy laughed.

“We’re taking our turn,” I said, “and we won’t sleep.”

Chapter Fourteen

Monday, May 2nd.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

I woke up exhausted, wearing my scars and my age like a lead weight around my neck, the baggage I carried holding me down so I could barely get out of bed in the morning.

I dragged myself forward not having a clue I was so far behind. Coffee was made in the kitchen, and the stove belted out reassuring heat.

First week of May. Texas would be hot, but Montana was far from it.

Tammy and Harlan were at the barn doing chores while I was the old man sawing logs under his quilt.

A smoke and one cup of coffee and the kids were in from the barn looking all bright-eyed and ready to take on the fuckin world. I wondered if I was like that once. Couldn’t remember ever feeling like that.

Tammy started breakfast and I dragged myself off my sluggish ass to help her.

“Lucy coming tonight?” asked Harlan.

“I’m so excited,” said Tammy. “Lucy is so much fun. You’re going to love her, Harlan.”

“I’m not great meeting new people. Especially girls.”

“Lucy is family,” said Tammy. “She’s one of Travis’s kids. She ain’t a stranger.”

“More like a stepdaughter,” I said. “She has a father of her own and he’s a decent guy. I like Mack Sturgess.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

As soon as we got to the station, Harlan and I gave our statements to Molly about the search for the missing person in the Milk River.

“I hope it’s nobody I know,” said Molly. “I’m starting to feel apprehensive already.”

“If we could get at the car,” I said, “and see the tag, we’d know right away who we were looking for and we could notify the family.”

“No one has called in with a missing persons report,” said Molly. “I keep thinking the phone is going to ring.”

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“Somebody is missing from somewhere,” I said. “Could be a person who lives alone and that’s making it take longer.”

Peterson’s Garage.

My next stop was the garage on the corner to talk to Ted Wallace. Ted’s office at the back of the garage was the size of a closet. In the small space, he had a tiny table with an invoice book and a pen sitting on it, a small flatscreen hung on the wall. Keys to the tow truck lay on the table next to his coffee mug.

He sat there and watched TV while he waited for a tow call. That was the essence of Ted’s Towing.

I stood in the doorway and leaned on the frame to talk to him. No room in the office for two of us plus the table.

Ted glanced up and grinned. “Hey, Travis. First time you’ve been to my office.”

“How would you like a bigger office?”

“What do you mean... bigger?”

“I have an idea and you can tell me what you think after I run it by you.”

“Okay, go.” He picked up the pen and twirled it through his fingers.

“How would you feel about being a part-time deputy until Billy comes back to

work?”

“When’s he coming back?” asked Ted.

“Don’t know. He’s having a lot of trouble with the pins in his leg. Won’t be for a long while yet. Months.”

“Huh. Never thought about being a deputy. Would I get paid?”

“I’m going to talk to the county supervisor to see what they’ve got in the budget for a deputy, but I needed to talk to you first to see if you were interested.”

“Be kind of dicey with me having my office here in the garage—know what I mean?” He tilted his head towards Clay Peterson’s office, and I knew exactly what he meant.

“I already figured that angle out for myself, so I’ll set you up with a desk in the squad room. I’ve got tons of space there. When you weren’t on a call, or we weren’t working a case, you’d have your own spot.”

“How much they gonna pay me?”

“That’s what I have to find out. Do you want to think about it?”

“Not thinking on it too hard, Travis. I have payments on the tow truck, and I need a second job pretty bad. Been sitting here wondering what the fuck I could do to make more money.”

“Molly would give you all the tow calls that came in for the county—all the impound calls. That might help you out too.”

Ted nodded. “I can see where an arrangement like that might work out for both of us.

Okay. See if the county can pay me hourly for when I'm helping you, and I'll do it."

"Great." I pushed into his private space and shook his hand. "I was hoping you'd come on board, Ted. I think you'll be just the guy I need."

Harlan waited in the truck while I talked to Ted and when I jumped into the driver's seat, he wanted to know the outcome. "He gonna do it?"

"He said he'd try it if he was getting paid. He's got payments to make on his tow truck and he was thinking of a second job."

"Yeah, I can see that. I saw that truck yesterday and that baby must have cost him."

"A trip to the county office and we'll see what they say about bringing Ted on board."

"Am I gonna like him?" asked Harlan.

"Yeah, I think so. Ted is pretty laid back, but he's a big strong guy and we could use him."

Harrison County Offices. Cut Bank.

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Earlier in the day I'd called Lyndell Gibson, the County Supervisor, and he was waiting for me when I arrived.

I explained my idea to Mister Gibson, and he felt it was workable. "We already have the extra squad vehicle," I said, "and Ted would be happy with an hourly rate for when he was backing me up. The only things I promised him were a desk in the squad room and all the tow calls connected to the sheriff's office."

"Sounds like a fair arrangement for him," said Gibson. "You would provide him with basic skills training and test him on the range?"

"I would."

Gibson smiled. "It will work, Travis. I'll set Ted Wallace up right away and he can start whenever. Just keep track of his hours or have Molly Swann do it for me. Thanks for coming in."

Driving back from Cut Bank, I called Ted and told him he was hired. "You can think about moving tomorrow."

"How much am I getting per hour, boss?"

"Twenty bucks an hour is as high as they can go, but it's average for deputies across the state. Mister Gibson checked it out. You give your hours to Molly, and she'll keep track. You don't have to."

"You'll see me tomorrow. What time do I start?"

“We start at eight.”

“Good enough, boss.”

I want him out of Peterson’s garage before I take it down.

Coyote Creek Credit Union.

When we got back to Coyote Creek, I dropped Harlan and the dogs off at the station and drove down the street to the bank. I had to make an effort to see if I could straighten out the mess Olivia was in. She had let the shifty bank manager sweet talk her out of twenty-five thousand bucks and I had to get it back.

Without bothering to announce myself, I strode down the hallway of glass offices and knocked on Miller Ravary’s door. He could see me through the glass and wasn’t wearing his happy face.

He motioned for me to come in and I didn’t waste any time getting to the point of my visit. “You need to set up a repayment schedule to give Olivia back the money she loaned you.”

“What? That is a personal loan between Olivia and me and is none of your business, Sheriff Frost. I resent your interference.”

“Oh, yeah, well I resent you too—on general principles.” I chuckled at his outrage.

“I’m busy, and I’d like you to leave my office.”

“No. I’m not done talking to you.”

“Well, I’m done talking to you, Sheriff.”

“You don’t have to talk. In fact, the sound of your voice irritates me, and you don’t want to see irritated become something else.”

“You can’t come in here and threaten me.”

“Oh, no? You’re wrong about this being none of my business, Mister. See, I hold the mortgage on the Inn, and because Olivia forked over her buffer fund to you for one of your quick profit schemes, she is now slipping behind on her mortgage payments. From this moment forward, you will deposit five hundred dollars weekly into her business account until all of her money has been recovered or you will be going to jail on fraud charges.”

“You can’t charge me with fraud. That was a personal loan freely given by Olivia.”

“You made promises, Ravary. Fraudulent promises.”

He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest.

I smiled. “Do you want to test me, Ravary? You offered Olivia a sweet investment with a quick profit and any judge will smell con written all over it. If I pursue this, you are in serious trouble with jail time attached. I’m suggesting that you get back what you can of her money from the market and continue to make payments until you have recouped all of it.”

“The market is volatile right now. A bad time to sell.”

“Do I look like I care? I’m sure your employer here at the Credit Union would be horrified to learn of your lack of money management skills, wouldn’t they? You running their bank and taking care of their money n’all. Think about it from their point of view. I can easily find out who you answer to.”

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“I’ll deposit the first five hundred in the Inn account today.”

“Thank you.” I left the door open and never looked back at the slimy asshole.

Great Falls Airport.

By the time we got to Great Falls and found our way to the airport, I was almost asleep at the wheel. Annie had emailed me all the details about Lucy’s flight, and I guaranteed I’d be there to pick her up on time so she wouldn’t be scared. Lucy had never been out of Texas more than once or twice.

Billy stayed home to rest his leg and to keep the home fires burning, but Tammy was keen to come with me and Harlan to pick Lucy up.

Inside the airport reception area, I checked the board to see if the flight from Austin was on time.

Harlan stood next to me looking up. “Five minutes early.”

Only a few minutes until the plane touched down and Lucy came running through the doors pulling her suitcase behind her. “Did my horse and saddle get here, Travis?” She hugged me as an afterthought.

I grinned at her. “Yep. The horses arrived and they are in the barn. No worries.”

“Great.” She stopped to give Tammy a hug and then stopped short in front of Harlan. “You must be Harlan. Mommy told me about you. I’m Lucy.” She let go of her

suitcase, threw her arms around Harlan, and hugged him.

Harlan stood frozen like he was in shock, and I was kind of surprised myself. Lucy wasn't a kid anymore. She'd grown up. Not quite as tall as Tammy, Lucy was a beautiful girl with long black curly hair and big brown eyes that could melt hearts of steel. I figured Harlan's heart was melting already.

"Come on, kids. We've got a long drive home to the ranch."

Harlan sat in the front with me, and the two girls rode in the back. They chatted away catching up while Harlan leaned his head against the window and dozed off.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

When we got back to the ranch, Harlan and I still had surveillance ahead of us. I was beat and wasn't sure I had the strength for it.

Tammy helped Lucy with her luggage, and Harlan and I followed the girls inside for a couple of minutes to have a beer.

"How tired are you, Harlan? I'm so fuckin tired, I'm thinking of skipping the surveillance tonight."

"What if tonight is the night they come home with the horse trailer? We can't skip it, even if we're dead fuckin beat."

"Yeah, you're right. One more beer and we have to go."

Hubbard Residence. Conrad.

Harlan drove down to Conrad because I was too tired to drive. He didn't have his

license yet, but it would only be a couple more months. I justified it by saying it was good practice.

We'd been in position for about twenty minutes when a phone call came into the trailer and Amanda Hubbard answered.

"Hey, Chris. I'm lonely. When are you coming home? Yeah, I know they're watching the trailer, but I miss you and I'm all alone here. It won't be much longer, will it? Yeah. Okay. Hargrove. I know where that is. Don't get caught, babe. I want you to come home."

"We can go, Harlan."

"Why? What did you hear?"

"Hargrove. Amanda said Hargrove and I know who that is. They're going to hit my neighbor. Hannah Hargrove is a widow who runs her ranch alone. Chris and his gang are hitting on vulnerable people. We'll get those fuckers tomorrow."

Chapter Fifteen

Tuesday, May 3rd.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

After our long day yesterday, I was in no hurry to haul my tired ass out of bed. But I had to get up and get things started. Had to talk to Billy about the Hargrove situation, and I had to get down to the office and break Ted in and let Molly know about what might be going down.

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I dragged ass to the kitchen and was third man in. Billy and Harlan were already up, dressed and drinking coffee. “Why do you guys make me feel like I’m over the hill and not cutting it anymore?”

Harlan chuckled. “I woke up because I heard girls talking and laughing and I wondered where the fuck I was.”

“Yeah, we’ll have to get used to having two teenage girls living with us.” I poured myself a mug of coffee and sat down. “Billy, Harlan and I heard something last night at the Hubbard trailer, and we have to get ready for the horse thieves today.”

“Oh, yeah. What did you hear?”

“Hargrove. Chris Hubbard called his wife while Harlan and I were there, and Amanda repeated the nameHargrove. Those fuckers are going to hit Hannah’s ranch and take her horses.”

“We should get her out of there,” said Billy. “Keep her away until it’s safe.”

“Exactly. Right after breakfast, I’m going to drive you and Harlan over there to keep watch, and I’ll bring her back here to stay with the girls. I’ll go get Ted at the station, and we’ll wait for them together.”

“Okay,” said Billy. “That sounds sensible. Let’s get breakfast and get moving on it. You never know how early those fuckers are going to come. They might want to catch Hannah at the barn doing chores like they did Randy Quade.”

“Who’s coming?” asked Tammy as she and Lucy ran into the kitchen looking a lot fresher than I felt.

“We need breakfast in a hurry this morning, girls. We have to get to work.”

“What’s happening, Travis?” asked Tammy. She opened the door of the fridge and started yanking out packages of bacon and a carton of eggs.

“On our surveillance last night, we heard Mrs. Hubbard say Chris was going to rob the Hargrove ranch.” I hooked a thumb over my shoulder. “That ranch is next to ours, so I’m going to drop Billy and Harlan over there and I’m going to bring Hannah back here to stay with you girls until the robbers are caught.”

“Okay,” said Tammy. “If they come here, I have my gun. I’ll shoot them just like I shot Tyrone Reading. Well, that was by mistake, but I won’t miss this time.”

Harlan smirked.

“I can shoot really good, Travis,” said Lucy. “Mommy and Mick trained me and Jacks on the range. Do you have a gun I can use?”

“Umm...I’m not in favor of my two teen girls having guns. The robbers won’t come here.”

“You don’t want them to come here,” said Tammy, “but that don’t mean they won’t. You can’t know for sure.”

“I know for sure. We’ll be right next door and if they are headed over here for any reason, I’ll be right behind them and I’ll kill their asses.”

“This is gonna be good,” said Harlan with a grin on his face.

“As soon as we eat, we’re leaving, girls, so y’all are in charge of the barn chores this morning.”

“Yep. We can handle it,” said Lucy. “No sweat, Travis. We’ll muck them all out, nice and pretty.”

“We’ll brush all of them too,” said Tammy. “I love having four horses instead of just two. The barn feels cozier.”

“Good. One less thing for me to worry about. I’ve got a new guy starting this morning and I haven’t had time to train him.”

Hargrove Ranch.

Hannah Hargrove had a stubborn streak I wasn’t aware of until I tried to talk her into leaving her ranch for the sake of safety. She was at the barn when I got there with Billy and Harlan, and she politely leaned on her pitchfork and listened to my story. Then she gave me a flatno.

“I’m not leaving my ranch. I’ll stay and face the horse thieves myself. I’ve been waiting for them to come since I read the stories in the Cut Bank Tribune.”

I stood my ground and shook my head. “Nope. I can’t let you stay, Hannah. I’m sorry, but you are going with me to my ranch to stay with my girls where you’ll be safe until this is over.”

“This is my property, Travis. My horses are in this barn and the corral outside, and I want to be here to defend my place.”

“Hannah, please. I don’t want you to end up like Randy Quade. Please, do it my way.”

“My chores aren’t finished.”

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“Harlan and I will help you finish, and then I’m taking you with me.” I turned to Billy: “Watch the laneway from inside the house.”

“Copy.”

“I don’t know your boy, Travis.” Her voice softened a little. “Nice to meet you, Harlan.”

“Same,” said Harlan.

We rushed through the rest of the feeding and cleaning out and as soon as we were done, Harlan took Max and Sarge and went to the house to stay with Billy, and I drove Hannah home to my ranch.

I stopped long enough to introduce her to the girls and then I had to get to the station to pick up Ted Wallace.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

I parked at the back of the building and rushed in alone. No Harlan and no dogs.

“What’s going on, Travis? Where are Max and Sarge?”

“I left them at Hannah Hargrove’s ranch with Billy and Harlan, Molly.” I gave her the capsule version while I took Ted into the office and swore him in. From the bottom drawer of the desk, I gave him a badge and a gun.

“Wish I had time for some training this morning, Ted, but I don’t, and neither do you.”

“I heard you telling Molly what was happening with the horse thieves. They gonna steal Hannah Hargrove’s horses today? How do you know?”

“Late night surveillance at Mother Hubbard’s trailer.” I took a set of keys off the rack in the office. “We’re gonna need both squads if we have three prisoners to transport.” I handed him the keys. “Let’s go.”

“Be careful,” called Molly. “That bunch are killers.”

“Where are the dogs? Did you say?”

“With Billy. He’s watching the Hargrove ranch.”

“Right,” said Ted. “You’re on top of this already. You were putting things in motion before I was even out of bed.”

“Can you shoot that gun I gave you? We need a session at the range, but we can’t do it today.”

“I’m better with a hunting rifle or a shotgun, but I’ll be okay. I’m not too bad with a pistol.”

“What did Peterson say about you leaving?”

“Nothing. I said you hired me on as a deputy and nothing much he could say.” Ted grinned. “I like my new desk. Only got to sit in it for a minute.”

“You can sit in it later and enjoy it. Follow me to Hannah’s ranch.”

“Right behind you, Travis.”

Hargrove Ranch.

I turned the Bronco into Hannah’s laneway with Ted on my tail, and up ahead I could see that back end of a dark blue horse trailer. “The bastards are here already,” I mumbled to myself.

Slamming my boot down on the gas, I pulled in behind the rig just as the third guy was jumping out of the pickup.

I hopped out of the squad and reached under the seat for my shotgun. Not taking any chances of missing with a fucking handgun.

As I ran towards the thieves, I could see Billy on Hannah’s porch and Harlan running towards Hubbard with the dogs behind him.

“Down on your knees. Hands on your heads. All of you.” I waved Harlan to get back.

“You ain’t taking us, Sheriff. No way you can take three of us at the same time.”

“Try me.”

Hubbard pulled a gun and turned towards me, and I shot him in the face.

Bang.

He dropped like a sack of potatoes into the mud and his blood and brains rained down on him like confetti at a wedding.

“Face down on the ground,” I hollered at the other two. “Max, Sarge.” I gave the dogs a hand signal and Max ran at one guy, gave a loud growl, and took him down. Jaws around the guy’s throat, he didn’t move.

I called Max off and the guy assumed the position as Max stood in front of him growling. I tossed Harlan my cuffs while I covered him with the shotgun. Ted caught up by then and I motioned him to cover the third guy that Sarge knocked down and had by the pantleg.

Harlan stuck a knee in the asshole’s back like I’d showed him in a training session, and he almost had the cuffs snapped on when the guy rolled and pulled a knife from his boot. He slashed at Harlan and cut him.

That infuriated me and as Harlan jumped away from the blade, I pulled the trigger.

Bang.

I shot him in the head, and we were down to one horse thief left standing. That guy

finally got the message and raised his hands. Ted was right there to cuff him.

“Billy, call Doctor Olson for these two assholes. I want to take Harlan inside and look at the slice in his arm.”

“Copy,” said Billy.

“Ted, secure that guy in the back of my squad.”

“Copy,” said Ted. He grabbed the guy he had just cuffed and pushed him into the back of the Bronco.

In Hannah’s kitchen, I ran warm water and cleaned up Harlan’s left arm. Still bleeding like a fuckin river. About a three-inch gash and not too deep. The blade that caught him hadn’t gone into muscle or ligaments, but he needed stitches to close it up.

“You need stitches.”

Ted came running into the house, pretty worked up. “Is your kid okay?”

“He needs stitches in his arm. I’m going to wrap him up tight and you’re going to take him to the clinic in town. Got it?”

“Yep. I’ll take him.”

“I have to wait here for the coroner. You take Harlan home to my ranch when you’re done at the clinic, and then bring Hannah back here.”

Ted nodded. “I’ve got it. Clinic. Ranch. Back here.”

I rummaged around and found stuff in Hannah’s medicine chest. A roll of gauze and

some white medical tape and that's all I needed. I wrapped Harlan's arm and taped it. "You okay? You look a little pale."

"I'm good. Been sliced before."

I touched the scar on his cheek and smiled at his bravado. Juvie was a tough place to grow up. "You go with Ted and get your stitches and when you get home to the ranch, drink a coffee with a shot of whiskey in it, then lie on the sofa. Got it?"

"I've got it." He smiled.

"Rest until I get home."

"I don't want the girls fussing over me."

"Good luck with that." I winked at him.

Harlan grinned.

Ted was long gone to the clinic with Harlan when Doctor Olson arrived. He looked down at the two bodies and shook his head. "I hate shotgun deaths, Travis. Couldn't you have used a nice clean rifle bullet?"

“Had a shotgun in my hand, Doc. Sorry.”

Coyote Creek Medical Center.

Ted parked the squad in front of the clinic and took Harlan inside for stitches. As soon as the nurse on the front desk saw the blood that had seeped through the bandage, she rushed Harlan down the hall to a treatment room.

“Sit here, dear.” She pointed to the examination table and Harlan hopped up.

The nurse removed the makeshift bandage and cleaned up his arm to get ready for the doctor.

Doctor Radisson rushed in and held Harlan’s arm in his hand. “A knife wound. Those serrated blades made a mess. You might have a scar, son.”

Harlan nodded.

Ted held up his badge and the doctor nodded his head. “This wound will be reported?”

“Yes, sir.”

The doctor froze Harlan’s arm, stitched him up and the nurse came in and gave him a nice snug bandage. “The doctor prescribed pain medication for you, son. I have it for you at the front desk.”

Ted took care of the bill and charged the visit to the county medical insurance number that employees used. “We’re all done, Harlan. Gotta run you home now and pick up Hannah Hargrove. You feeling okay?”

“My arm is numb.”

“When the freezing comes out, it’s gonna hurt like hell on a Sunday. That’s when you take the pills.”

“Got it.”

Hargrove Ranch.

I was still at the Hargrove ranch when Ted returned with Hannah. Not bothering to look at the bodies or chat to Doctor Olson, she went straight into her ranch house and made coffee. She dug in and made a pile of sandwiches, then called us inside.

Her sandwiches tasted pretty good, and we were all close to starvation. I’d eaten one of her casseroles before and I had to admit, she was a good cook.

“How did Harlan make out?” I asked Ted.

“Never said boo. He’s a tough kid, Travis. He related to you?”

“Nope. He’s my ward and a good kid.” Only a few people knew Harlan was on parole from Juvie Detention and I wasn’t spreading it around.

“I seen your girls at your ranch.” Ted grinned. “They are a couple of cuties. Heard Kirby talking about dating one of them. Didn’t know you had kids.”

“Neither one of them are old enough to go on dates. If Kirby took Tammy out, he’d

have to take me too.”

Ted laughed. “That would be fun.”

As soon as we finished our sandwiches and coffee, I thanked Hannah and got her statement about when the horse thieves first arrived. Ted and I had to get back to the station to lock up our one surviving prisoner.

“You drop Billy at my ranch and meet me back at the station. We’ve got more arrests to make.”

“Copy that,” said Ted. And then he grinned. Dollar signs in his eyes.

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

When we got back to Coyote Creek, I locked Jonah Hacking up in the run and explained to Molly that we had the killers—two dead and one alive—but there were more arrests to be made.

“Tomorrow we’ll dig in on all the statements and reports. There’s too much for right now, and I’ve got two more people to arrest before I can quit for today.”

“I’m so glad you got them, Travis,” said Molly. “Nice job.”

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“Thanks. If you wish, you can call Mrs. Quade and let her know. She asked to be notified and so did her son, Buddy. She can pass it on to her boys.”

“Of course. It would be my pleasure to do that.”

“I’ll be glad when it’s all wrapped up.”

As soon as Ted got back, the two of us went to gather up the rest of the gang.

Hubbard Trailer. Conrad.

It was a double-duty call at the Hubbard trailer. First, I had to arrest Amanda Hubbard for being complicit in all of the robberies and the murder of Randy Quade, and at the same time I had to tell her that Chris wouldn’t be coming home for dinner. In fact, he wasn’t coming home...ever.

I knocked and when Amanda opened the door, I held my badge up at eye level. She knew who I was, but the notification was formal, and I went by the book.

“Mrs. Hubbard, I have some bad news about your husband.”

“Is Chris hurt? Was he in an accident?”

“Your husband is deceased, ma’am, and I’m placing you under arrest for your complicity in your husband’s crimes. Robbery and murder, numerous counts.

While she screamed bloody murder about Chris being dead, Ted bravely grabbed

Amanda's chunky arms and pulled them behind her back. He snapped the cuffs on and pointed her towards the door.

We secured Amanda in the back of the squad and drove down the road two miles farther to her neighbor's house to pick up some company for her.

Norma Wilson wasn't quite so easy to get the cuffs on. A nasty piece of work, she twisted away from Ted and kicked him in the shins while aiming higher, then ran to get her phone to call for help.

I figured she was trying to reach the next step up on the horse robbery ladder. No idea who that would be, but possibly numbers on her phone would tell me. We needed the guy behind the scenes.

Running like an elk, Ted caught Norma as she was about to scam out the back door of her long rancher. He had to borrow my cuffs to secure her.

"Got her, boss." Ted was a little out of breath, but the grin on his face told me he was enjoying it.

"I want my lawyer," she hollered as we shoved her into the back of the squad with her underling, Amanda Hubbard.

"Y'all lost your team of horse thieves today, ladies," I said. "Two dead and one locked up. Y'all have to rebuild."

Both women were noisy on the drive north to the station. Hollering threats and curses at us from the back seat of the squad, it was just a lot of racket.

Ted compensated by turning up the country station.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

When we got back, it was quitting time for Molly. "Two more prisoners," I hollered to her. I unlocked the run, locked Amanda, and Norma up in separate cells, and had Ted read them their rights, just for practice.

With that done, I sent Ted across the road for three dinner specials. I leaned on Molly's desk, put a smoke in my mouth but didn't light it.

Ted returned with the food, and we walked into the run together to deliver the three meals and three cans of Coke.

"Goodnight, everybody. See y'all tomorrow." I flicked the light off and locked the run. "We'll book them tomorrow and you can do all of that for the practice. Do three bookings and you'll have it down."

Ted let out a long breath. "Been busy for my first day. I like it, though. Interesting being a cop and kicking ass. Don't think I'm gonna mind it too much."

"Good. I don't want you to quit. I'm going home to eat and clean up, then I'll probably go to the roadhouse later for a pitcher. We usually do that after we've wrapped up a case and made arrests."

Ted grinned. "I'll meet you there."

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Close to exhausted by the time I got to the ranch with the dogs, I was ready to drop, but having a houseful of people waiting for me revived my spirits and made me feel good.

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Dinner was ready and I was starving. Tammy made meatloaf and mashed potatoes, carrots, and a salad. Since she'd been at the ranch with Annie, there had been a huge improvement in her cooking skills.

"So good," said Harlan. "I was starving."

I glanced at the big bandage on his forearm. "You rest like I told you?"

Harlan nodded. "Even slept for a bit after the whiskey."

"Good. You're excused from chores tonight. I'll help the girls."

"I can feed my own horse," said Harlan. "I want to."

"Okay. If your arm isn't hurting too much. After we're done, we'll get cleaned up and meet Ted for a pitcher at the roadhouse. Time to celebrate closing this case."

"Yahoo," hollered Billy. "We're going out for a pitcher. I'm up for it."

"You sure?" I asked. "You were walking around on your crutches a lot today."

"Did me good," said Billy. "I need to move around a lot more."

I wasn't convinced Billy should be moving at all.

Dry Run Roadhouse.

We got to the roadhouse about nine and the country music was blaring from the speakers. Harlan picked out a booth for us, and I sucked in a breath. I was now toting three minors with me and hoping Jack didn't get too pissed at me.

When he had time, Jack came over to our booth and had a beer with me and Billy and Ted. Eager to hear what went down at Hannah Hargrove's ranch, Jack listened to Billy's version of the story.

"And you got stabbed, Harlan?" asked Jack. "First wound on the job. I'd give you a free beer for that if I could. How about hot wings instead? They might ease your pain."

That made Harlan grin.

"After we get the bookings and reports done tomorrow," I said to Jack, "I'll give Wyatt Thompson a call and have him come to the station to get the story."

"Mrs. Quade will be happy too," said Jack. "Those creeps killed her husband."

Chapter Sixteen

Wednesday, May 4th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

At breakfast, the girls talked about nothing but the beginning of Marilyn Pellegrino's training course. Tammy seemed more nervous about starting and that was understandable. She was a new rider and far less experienced than Lucy.

Lucy had been coached by Rowdy Butler. Not that he was a barrel racer, but he knew a lot about riding, and quarter horses and the rodeo, him being the reigning champion

of the world.

“We’re starting on Monday,” said Lucy. “I might go screaming nuts waiting that long.”

“Go for a long ride every day to keep the horses in shape,” I said. “You don’t want to start with a horse that’s been standing in a stall for a week.”

“Good idea, Travis,” said Lucy. “We have to get the horses ready as well as us.”

Tammy nodded. Lucy was the forceful one and Tammy usually went along with what Lucy suggested.

“How long is the training?” asked Harlan.

“All summer,” said Lucy. “Beginners from May to July and then advanced from mid-July to the end of August.”

“Huh. Lots of training,” said Harlan. “If you survive the training, are you ready for the rodeo?”

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“Yep,” said Lucy. “We’ll be able to compete for about two months before the season ends and then we’ll have to wait until next year to compete around the entire circuit.”

“How much money does it cost for all of this?” asked Harlan.

“Plenty,” I said. “Annie is paying Marilyn’s fee and I’m feeding the girls and taking care of them while they’re in Montana. That’s my contribution.”

“Twenty-first of May is our new start date,” said Tammy. “There was so much rain, Marilyn had to postpone for a week.”

“Yeah, the rain has been fuckin brutal,” said Harlan. “Washed out the Milk Run bridge and we still ain’t found the body of the driver of the car that went over.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Harlan, Ted, and I gave Molly our versions of everything that had taken place at the Hargrove ranch the day before. I had Hannah’s statement recorded and I handed that over too.

While she was busy entering all the data into the system, I took Amanda Hubbard out of the run and got Ted started on the bookings.

“Harlan, help Ted if he runs into any trouble.” He was only a kid, but he’d been knocked around in the system long enough to know exactly how booking worked.

Ted was halfway through taking Norma Wilson’s mug shot when Molly got the call

from a fisherman on the Flathead River.

Molly hollered for me, and I ran to the squad room.

“A body has turned up, Travis.”

“Where?”

“Flathead River,” said Molly. “Take Lake Elwell Road and follow it until you come to Barney’s Bait Shop. The fisherman who found the body is waiting at the bait shop for you.”

“He got a name?”

“Perry Laforteza.”

“Ted, finish up with Norma and you can book Jonah when we get back.”

“Copy, boss. Won’t take me long to finish. Her prints are done. Gotta get her picture.”

I had Ted and Harlan both with me at the station. Harlan had refused to stay home and rest, so I was watchful of his arm.

Lake Elwell Road.

I found the bait shop easy enough. Been by there once or twice before. I parked and ran inside. Saw the guy leaning on the counter with his head in his hands. Pale, looking like he was close to puking.

“Perry? I’m Sheriff Frost. You found a body?”

“I did and I’m feeling a bit queasy.”

“Understandable. It happens. Want to show me where the corpse is?”

“Not really. Can I just point you in the right direction? I don’t want to go back there.”

“Sure. Point me.” To Ted: “Take Perry’s statement and while Harlan and I look for the body, I’ll call Doctor Olson.”

“Copy, boss.” Ted pulled out his new notebook and Harlan and I left to tramp along the riverbank.

She wasn’t far away. I could see her bobbing on the water, tangled up in a lot of weeds near the shore. The river was high from all the rain we’d had, and the current was strong. The woman’s body had gotten hung up in a growth of thick weeds and rushes and wasn’t going any further downstream.

“Female,” I said to Harlan. “Why the hell hasn’t anybody reported this woman missing?”

Harlan shrugged and I wasn’t expecting an answer from him. Just venting. I called Doctor Olson.

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Ted finished up the witness's statement at the bait shop and walked along the riverbank to find us. He was standing with us having a smoke when Doctor Olson joined the party.

For the first time in days, the sun was out. Day after day the weather had been drizzly, damp, and chilly but today was a welcome change.

While waiting for Doc Olson, Harlan had gone for a run with Max and Sarge, and they hadn't come back yet.

Ted and I got considerably soaked helping Doctor Olson get the victim freed from the bull rushes and lifted out of the water onto the muddy bank.

Doctor Olson did a preliminary examination of the victim, and the woman had no identification. "If she had a purse, all of her personal information would be in there."

"Could be in the car," said Ted.

"Yep. We're presuming this is the lady whose car went off the Milk River Bridge, but we can't be absolutely certain until Ted and I go back and get that car out of the water."

"Let me know when you positively identify her, Travis."

Doctor Olson left with the drowned woman in the back of his van, and as soon as Harlan came back with the dogs, we headed to the station.

“We need the plate number,” said Ted. “Before we go back to the station, let’s take a detour and go see how much the water has gone down at the bridge.”

“Want to get the tow truck or look at the water level first?”

“Let’s look first,” said Ted. “Might save you some gas if it’s still the same.”

Milk Run Bridge.

The water level was not the same. There had been an improvement since the day the bridge gave way. The river had gone down a few inches since the rain stopped, and the current had slowed.

The car was in the same spot, but with the water being much calmer, Ted managed to read the tag. Standing on the bank and leaning over, he hollered out the letters and numbers to me.

I ran the tag through the Montana motor vehicles database and came up with Evan Bronowski. “You know an Evan Bronowski, Ted?”

“Yep. Lives outside of Ethridge. North a piece on a county road. That woman is his wife, Kala. Didn’t recognize her all bloated up with water like that, but yeah. For sure, that was her.”

Bronowski Residence. Ethridge.

Ted knew exactly where Evan Bronowski lived north of Ethridge, and he gave me directions. There was a ten-year-old gray Ford pickup in the driveway next to a small ranch house. Not a large piece of property—about two or three acres—huge cinderblock workshop behind the house.

“This guy self-employed?” I asked Ted.

“Welder. Has a big shop in that building.”

“Let’s go tell him about his wife.”

The three of us walked up to the door and I pounded my fist against it a couple of times. The door was opened by a big muscular guy who went about two and a quarter. Unshaven, shaggy brown hair, plaid shirt, dead eyes.

I held up my badge. “Mister Bronowski?”

“Yeah, that’s me. What do you want, Sheriff?”

“Can we come in for a minute and talk about your wife, sir? I’m afraid I have some bad news to deliver.”

“What about Kala? I thought she was at her sister’s place in Cut Bank.”

“She is in Cut Bank, sir, but your wife’s body is in the morgue.”

“You telling me that my wife is dead?”

“Yes, sir. That’s exactly what I’m telling you. Your wife’s body was found in the Flathead River along the Lake Elwell Road.”

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Bronowski opened the door wider and motioned us inside. We conducted the interview standing in the kitchen—a strong smell of bacon grease in the air—the sink full of dirty dishes.

“When were you expecting your wife to return from her sister’s house?” I asked.

“Didn’t know when she’d be back, or if she was coming back. We had a row and Kala took off out of here hollering at me that she was going to Gretchen’s place, and she was done with me. She’s done it before, and I figured she’d come back when she cooled off.” He chuckled. “You know what women are like.”

“I’m not an expert on women, Mister Bronowski. Far from it. Your wife’s car is in the Milk River, but Ted will be towing it to the station later today.”

“Thanks for coming to tell me about Kala. I appreciate it.”

As we walked back to the squad Harlan said, “I smelled perfume on him like he’d been screwing around right before we got here.”

“Good observation. Maybe Mister Bronowski had a motive for getting rid of his wife.”

“How are we gonna prove that, boss?” asked Ted. “You think he knew when the Milk bridge was gonna give out?”

“Nope. And you might have noticed he didn’t ask about his car right off either.”

“Because he already knew where it was?” asked Harlan.

“Didn’t notice that” said Ted, “but I should’ve.”

“Could be he knew where the car was and he was waiting for us to find Kala’s body,” I said. “We’ve got to dig deeper into that guy and see what he’s been up to lately. He’s dirty. I can smell it on him.” I laughed. “And it ain’t perfume.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

When we got back to the station, Wyatt Thompson was leaning on Molly’s desk waiting for us. The boys and I hadn’t eaten, and I figured Harlan would be starving by now.

“Wyatt, let’s discuss the story at the diner across the road. Molly, have the prisoners had lunch?”

“Not yet.”

“I’ll bring food back for them when I come.”

“Thanks,” she said. “Save me a trip.”

“You go ahead and take your lunch break. We won’t be gone long. I’ll leave Max and Sarge posted outside the run just in case there is an attempted jail break.”

Molly laughed. “The prisoners can’t get out of the run without outside help.”

Mainliner Diner.

While we indulged in burgers and fries at the diner, we gave Wyatt the story of the

takedown at Hannah Hargrove's ranch.

Wyatt pointed to Harlan's bandage. "You got hurt yesterday during the arrests?"

"Guy sliced me while I was trying to get the cuffs on him," said Harlan.

"Be best if you didn't mention Harlan being present at the takedown," I said. "His caseworker might take it the wrong way if she knew he was with me all the time, and I don't want to lose my boy."

"I won't mention your name, Harlan. I don't want to make trouble for you or for Travis."

"Thanks."

"You can say it was me and Deputy Johnson and Deputy Wallace and two K-9's who got the job done," I said.

"Great story," said Wyatt. "The ranchers with horses can rest easier now."

"The names of the people arrested are Jonah Hacking, Norma Wilson, and Amanda Hubbard. The other two murderers were killed during the arrests. If you want their full names, Molly can provide them."

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Wyatt wrote it all down.

“You want pie, Harlan?” I asked.

He nodded and I waved Maryanne over. “What kind of pie do you have today?”

“Apple, cherry, blueberry and lemon meringue.”

“I’ll have lemon.”

“Cherry,” said Ted.

“I’ll have cherry too,” said Harlan.

Wyatt finished writing his notes and closed his notebook.

“Get a clean page.”

“What?” Big grin. “You have more for me?” Wyatt opened the notebook to a new page and picked up his pen.

“A body was recovered from the Flathead River this morning on the Elwell Lake Road section of the river. The victim has been identified as Kala Bronowski of Ethridge.”

Wyatt’s eyes were wide. “Was she the driver of the car that went off the Milk Run Bridge?”

“Yep. And if you want pictures to go with that story, Ted will be pulling the car out of the water right after we leave here. Got your camera in your car?”

Wyatt grinned. “Sure do. I owe you, Travis.”

“I’ll get the bill and you can get the tip.”

Milk Run Bridge.

I pulled over to the side of the road, hopped out, and Harlan and I removed the barricades and the road closure sign. The people who lived at the end of Milk Run were patiently waiting for the county to fix the bridge so they could drive all the way to their residences. They’d been parking on the side of the county road and walking to their homes for several days.

Ted hollered out orders to Harlan and both of them got soaking wet hooking onto the car so Ted could pull it out of the freezing cold water.

Once it was hooked up the way Ted wanted it, he hopped into his truck and began dragging it out of the river.

Wyatt got into position and took a dozen pictures of the car being lifted out of the river and pulled up onto the bank.

Once the muck-covered car was out of the river, Ted towed it back to the station. Harlan and I put the barricades across the road again.

“When are they gonna fix the bridge?” asked Harlan. “People who live down that way have to walk from here.”

“Yeah, they do, and that’s a good question. I’ll phone Mister Gibson, the county

supervisor and ask him that, or maybe Wyatt should do it for his story on the bridge and the drowning.”

“Yes,” said Wyatt. “I’ll do it. Be a good comment to add at the end if I can get him to commit to a repair date.”

I laughed. “A couple of opinions from the people who are walking from here might hurry the county along.”

“Good point,” said Wyatt. “I’ll wander down the road and get a couple of those opinions and pass them along to the county.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Ted was already unhooking Kala Bronowski’s car when I got back to the station. Harlan and I walked to the back of the parking lot and watched Ted open all the doors and the trunk to allow the interior to dry out.

“Stinks like fish in there.” Ted made a face.

“If Bronowski has insurance on that car, it’s going to be a write-off,” I said. “A mess like that can’t be fixed.”

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“He didn’t seem to care where his car was,” said Harlan. “Didn’t ask if it was still in the river or nothing.”

“Yeah, that is so weird,” I said. “Even if he knew where it was, why wouldn’t he inquire about it and act like he didn’t know?”

Harlan shrugged.

“Yellow tape it, Ted. We’ve got to have a look through it as soon as it dries out inside.”

Ted grinned. “My first go with the yellow tape.”

Dry Run Roadhouse.

I stopped into the roadhouse on the way home for a pitcher and Marilyn was there for an early dinner.

“Hey, I didn’t expect to see you here.”

She smiled. “I was doing some shopping in town and got thirsty.”

“Don’t you go to the market in Shelby? Wouldn’t it be a lot closer?”

“Not shopping for groceries. I was at the feed store putting in an order and picking up a few things I needed for the coming session.”

“The girls can’t talk about anything else,” I said. “They are so excited to get started on their training.”

“You can trailer their horses over tomorrow or Friday, Travis. Appreciate it if you’d do it early. There will be so many trailers coming in on Saturday and Sunday it will be bedlam. Always is. I want your girls on Sunday afternoon to meet the other girls and I always have a little meet and greet on Sunday night before we start.”

“Will they come home on the weekends?”

“Yes. They could be day students if you’re more comfortable with that, but you would have to run them back and forth. The whole experience is better for them if they eat and sleep with the other girls.”

“Can we watch them?” asked Harlan.

“There will be two or three times during each session where I’ll run a little rodeo competition, and the parents and families are invited. I’ll give you the dates.”

Harlan grinned.

“Yeah, I’m keen to see them race,” I said. “Might give me a heart attack, but I want to see it happen.”

Marilyn laughed. “A lot of the parents get pretty worked up over the races. Are you going to be one of those guys, Travis?”

“I think I might be.”

Harlan nodded in agreement.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

Tammy and Lucy had dinner ready when we got home.

“We were talking to Marilyn at the roadhouse,” said Harlan. “She wants the horses soon.”

“Oh, wow,” said Lucy. “It’s almost time, isn’t it?”

I got beers out of the fridge for me and Harlan and we joined Billy in the front room to tell him about Kala Bronowski.

“Is that who drowned? Huh. Doctor Olson got the cause of death yet?”

“I think it will be drowning, won’t it?”

“Bronowski’s first wife left him and was just gone,” said Billy. “Made everybody wonder.”

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“Huh. News to me. I’ll call Doctor Olson in the morning and see if he’s done the autopsy yet. I sensed Bronowski was dirty when we were there, and I said so to Harlan. Harlan said there was a woman in the house with him while we were there, but we didn’t see her.”

“How’d you know, Harlan?” asked Billy.

“Smelled her perfume on the dude.”

“Something ain’t right there,” I said, “but not much I can do until Doc Olson makes his ruling. If he says it was an accidental drowning, I’m fucked. I won’t be able to investigate.”

Chapter Seventeen

Thursday, May 5th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

I was beat at breakfast and didn’t feel like facing another day as sheriff of Harrison County. My injuries from the plane crash were sending me signals and I desperately needed down time. But the way things were going in my life, there was little time for me to kick back and be a couch potato.

“When are we taking our horses over to the Pellegrino ranch?” asked Lucy.

“We have arraignments this morning at the courthouse, so it will have to be later.

Probably at the end of the day when Harlan and I come home, we'll load them then. Y'all can still get ready—tack, saddles, and all the rest. Be ready for whenever I can get back here.”

“I wish I had my license,” said Tammy, “and I could tow the trailer over to Marilyn’s ranch by myself.”

“Harlan will have his license soon too, then we will have no shortage of drivers.”

Harlan had no comment. He reached for more toast and the jar of peach jam.

At the breakfast table, Billy complained about being left behind with the girls, but there was nothing I could do to help him. The healing of his leg would take whatever time it took. No way I could speed things up.

“You think I don’t want you to get better faster?” I asked. “Soon as you take over, I’m off the hook. I probably want your leg to heal more than you fuckin do.”

“Yeah,” said Billy. “I shouldn’t be bitching at you. I did this to myself.”

“It was an accident,” said Tammy. “You’ll be better soon, Billy.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Molly had fed the prisoners and provided them with coffee before Harlan and I got there. All we had to do was load them into the squads when Ted arrived and transport them to the courthouse.

I poured myself a coffee and went through the messages on my desk. Nothing pressing but there was one from Olivia asking me to call her. While I waited for Ted to get to the shop, I called.

“Travis, thank you for calling.”

“No problem. What is it, Olivia?”

“I wanted to thank you for cleaning up the mess I made with Miller. I noticed the five hundred dollars deposited to my business account.”

“That will be a weekly deposit until he extracts what’s left of the principal from the market. I trust that’s satisfactory?”

“It’s wonderful, Travis, and I thank you for talking to him. It takes a lot of pressure off me.”

“Happy to help.”

“Would you come for dinner sometime soon? Bring your whole family, I’d be delighted to see all of you.”

“I may do that, Olivia. The girls are leaving soon for Marilyn’s training camp, and I may bring them to the Inn for dinner before they go.”

“I’m so looking forward to it, Travis. I miss having you in my life more than I thought possible to miss someone.”

I ended the call to Olivia thinking about which day I’d take the girls out for dinner. My cell rang and startled me. Doctor Olson was on the line, and I wanted to talk to him. “Doc, you got something for me?”

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“Travis, I’m finished the autopsy on Kala Bronowski and the official cause of death was asphyxiation. No water in her lungs. She was strangled before she went into the river.”

“Huh. So, it’s officially murder.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I’ll take care of it, Doc. I’ll head up to Ethridge and bring Evan Bronowski in on murder charges.”

“The cause of death was difficult to discern with all the water damage to the body. The killer almost got away with it.”

“Nice work, Doc. I’ll have Bronowski locked up by the end of the day.”

Harrison County Courthouse. Coyote Creek.

We transported the prisoners without too much difficulty. The three of them were a docile lot. A bit of cursing and that was as far as it went.

The first case called was Norma Wilson. She had a hotshot lawyer from Great Falls representing her—a guy in an expensive suit named Colby Chesterton. Didn’t impress me much because I’d never heard of him. Didn’t know many people in Montana and I wasn’t good at making friends.

The judge granted Norma Wilson bail and she left with the bailiff to arrange the

bond.

Next up was Jonah Hacking—third member of the horse thief gang—last man standing, as it were. Jonah pled not guilty, but his charges were much more severe than the two women. His bail was denied by the judge who was a long-time buddy of Randy Quade.

Hard to be impartial when a guy kills your friends and stands in front of you saying he didn't do it.

Amanda Hubbard was the last case to be called. She made bail but I wasn't sure she could afford the ten percent to secure the bond. As it turned out, she had enough room on her credit card to float the five thousand bucks she needed.

I was surprised, but relieved that I wouldn't have her in my jail any longer. Having Jonah Hacking was enough.

What I needed to find out, was the name of the person who retained Colby Chesterton on behalf of the ring of thieves and murderers. An ideal job that Billy could do at home while he was reclining on the sofa and cursing his battered leg.

Every time he complained about his injury, I got a sinking feeling that Billy would never be able to work again. Not something I would say out loud, and not something I wanted to be true. If Billy didn't come back to work and take over the sheriff's job, I'd be stuck until the next election.

Horror story.

Sheriff's Office. Coyote Creek.

Clear of the arraignments, we picked Jonah Hacking up from the bailiff at the back

door of the courthouse and delivered him back to his cell at the station.

While Ted locked him up in the run, I told Molly that Norma Wilson and Amanda Hubbard made bail and weren't staying with us any longer.

"Just Hacking for lunch, Molly." I filled her in on Doctor Olson's ruling on Kala Bronowski and she was surprised.

"I thought that would turn out to be an accidental drowning."

"Nope. Going to Ethridge now to pick up the husband. Back as soon as we get him."

"Be careful, Travis. He killed his wife, and he won't care if he kills you or one of the boys."

"We'll be careful."

Bronowski Residence. Ethridge.

Without calling ahead or giving any warning, we descended on Evan Bronowski and found him in his workshop. Welding gear on his head and a torch in his hand, I pulled my gun in case he had any ideas about turning the torch on me.

"Mister Bronowski, put the torch down and put your hands behind your back. You are under arrest for the murder of Kala Bronowski."

Bronowski took off his protective head gear, turned off the acetylene and put the torch back in its cradle. He stepped away from the work bench and just stood there.

Ted grabbed the big guy and cuffed his hands behind his back while I read him his rights.

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As we secured him in the back of the squad, he glanced at the house more than once and I figured the girlfriend might be in there, as Harlan had predicted.

I gave Max and Sarge the command to watch Bronowski in the squad while we ran inside to see if the house was empty.

A tall, leggy brunette dressed in a pair of short shorts and a halter top was drinking coffee and enjoying a cigarette at the kitchen table.

“Miss, I’m afraid you’ll have to come with us. You are under arrest as an accessory to murder.”

“I didn’t kill anybody.”

“You’ll be questioned at the station and at that time you will be allowed to call an attorney if you wish.”

“I ain’t going with you, Sheriff. Didn’t do nothing to get arrested for.”

False eyelashes fluttered at me as she stood up to walk the other way. I grabbed for her, caught her by the arm and she expertly pivoted on her stilettos and clawed my face with her long silver nails.

Harlan was close enough to smack her across the head. She screamed in anger and fell to her knees. Harlan grabbed her arms, pulled them behind her back and cuffed her.

From the gouge just under my left eye, blood trickled down my face as we secured the woman in the truck next to her boyfriend, Evan Bronowski.

“You’re bleeding,” said Harlan. “She got you a good one with her claws.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

It took both Ted and I to get Bronowski out of the squad and in the back door of the station. He fought against us, kicking, twisting, and cursing every step of the way while his girlfriend egged him on and encouraged him.

At one point, I was worried he was going to get away from us and I took the opportunity to taser him.

The girlfriend screamed as Bronowski went limp and we managed much better after that. Harlan had hold of the girlfriend and she clicked along smartly in her shorts and stilettos.

Harlan locked her in the cell at the far end of the run. Jonah Hacking was in one of the cells between Bronowski and his girlfriend. Keep them all separate. Good idea.

Ted put the two new arrivals through the booking process with me watching over him. And when he printed the girlfriend, she turned out to be Louise Carrigan. A stripper who danced under the name of Candy Ann at Krystal’s Palace in Ethridge.

Candy Ann had a police record for solicitation and petty theft.

Later when we gave our statements to Molly, she said she knew Louise Carrigan’s mother and felt bad for her having a daughter like Louise.

Bronowski asked for a lawyer, and I gave him his phone call, then put him back in his

cell.

I offered a PD to Louise, and she declined. “Don’t need a lawyer. Ain’t done nothing.”

“That’s it for today, Harlan. Let’s go home and load the horses. The girls are waiting for us.”

Wild Stallion Ranch.

It was after five o’clock when Harlan and I got back to the ranch. I ran inside to grab a beer and Billy said the girls were at the barn and they’d been out there most of the afternoon.

“Yeah, I guess they’re excited about moving the horses.”

“They’ve gone a bit crazy over this training camp,” said Billy. “I’ll be glad when they are bone-tired from practicing and get it out of their systems.”

I nodded. “They have no idea how hard Marilyn is going to work them. It will be interesting to watch.”

After chugging my first beer and handing one to Harlan, I grabbed two more and headed for the barn. “They’re gonna be pissed that I didn’t knock off early to move the horses.”

“We were working.” Harlan popped the top on his brew and took a big pull on the can. “Bringing in a fuckin murderer, and it wasn’t a picnic.” He pointed at my face, starting to scab over.

I laughed. “That won’t matter. Let’s get the truck hooked onto the trailer and I’ll back

it up to the barn door.”

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“Travis, you’re finally home,” called Tammy. “We thought you were coming earlier.”

“Would’ve been earlier, but we had a murderer to arrest, and he was up north of Ethridge.”

“The horses are ready,” said Lucy, “and all of our tack is ready too.”

“Let me get the trailer hooked up and we’ll get started.”

Harlan gave me a hand with the trailer hook up and I backed up to the barn and parked. “Who’s first?”

“Buckshot can be first,” said Tammy. “He’s more used to going in trailers.”

“Your horse should be used to it too,” I said. “Bonnie Grace just spent two days in a trailer getting up here to Montana.”

“That’s true.”

Buckshot proved to be a dream to load into the trailer and Bonnie Grace was the opposite. She did not want to ride over to Marilyn’s ranch in a trailer, and she showed her displeasure in numerous ways.

Nickering, shaking her head and snorting, rearing up and pawing the ground, Bonnie Grace showed how pissed off she truly was.

Tammy tried her best to calm her horse down, but it didn't do much good. It took good old-fashioned muscle and determination to get that mare into the trailer.

Pellegrino Ranch. Shelby.

As we unloaded the horses at Marilyn's ranch, one of her hands showed the girls where to put their horses. Tammy and Lucy were each assigned a stall for the duration of the training course. They were told they would be responsible for feeding, caring for, and cleaning out their own horses.

As the girls were hugging their horses one last time, Marilyn came into the barn smiling. "Got time for a coffee, Travis?"

"Sure. Now that the horses are here, some of the pressure is off me." I laughed and Harlan smiled.

We spent a few minutes with Marilyn in her cozy living room. We had coffee and Marilyn rounded up pecan tarts for us too. While we chatted, she gave the girls a list of what they should bring with them in the way of clothing, boots and more. The girls would be home on the weekends to do laundry, so we'd go one week at a time.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

With the horses all squared away, we headed back home for a quiet dinner. Tammy made spaghetti and garlic bread and I could tell by the way Harlan was eating that he liked it a lot.

"We're down to two horses for the summer," I said.

"We can do all the chores tomorrow," said Lucy. "Tammy and I won't have anything to do until Sunday."

“Thanks, girls. That’s nice of y’all. I have an announcement. Since Saturday night is your last night here—until next weekend—we’re going out for dinner at the Inn. Olivia invited us and I said we’d go.”

“I like the food at her place,” said Harlan. “Her pie is the best.”

“Olivia has an excellent chef running her kitchen,” I said. Speaking about Olivia revved up feelings that I didn’t want revved, but they were bubbling around in my gut anyway. We were over, and for my own sanity and well-being, I had to keep it that way.

When dinner was over, I had one more stop to make before I was done for the day. I finished my coffee and looked at Billy. “You in for the night or are you up for a visit to Krystal’s Palace?”

He grinned. “You messing with me?”

“Nope. Molly told me that Bronowski’s girlfriend works the pole at Krystal’s place. I want to get the goods on her before her arraignment.”

“Sure. Let’s do it,” said Billy.

Harlan nodded. He was usually up for anything.

Krystal Palace. Ethridge.

Harlan’s brown eyes were wide as we entered the strip club in Ethridge. Double front doors painted in bright pink opened to a small darker pink lobby. Onward into the main room, the stage well-lit by spotlights and the rows of chairs for the spectators receded into darkness.

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Nobouncers came running towards Harlan to check his ID, so I pushed forward past Shorty in the bar—Krystal’s watchdog—and as we passed center stage, Harlan paused for a few seconds to watch the gyrating routines of an almost naked dancer.

Halfway up the pole, she hung upside down showing the men in the front row all of her good stuff.

“How does she get her leg up that high?” asked Harlan.

“She must work out,” I said, then laughed and so did Billy.

Moving forward down the red-carpeted hallway, dim lighting showed the way past small cubicles designed for private lap dances.

At the end of the lap dance walk was Krystal’s office.

A knock on her door and she hollered for us to come in. “Oh, Sheriff, it’s you. I thought it was Shorty.”

“Nope, just me, Krystal. Can I ask you a couple of questions about Louise Carrigan?”

“Go ahead. What do you want to know?” Krystal winked at Harlan. “Hey, cutie. You here for your first lap dance?”

“No, he isn’t.” I answered for Harlan, and he grinned. “Anything you can tell me about Louise’s relationship with Evan Bronowski.”

“Evan is a regular and I think Candy Ann has been seeing him.”

“I have reason to believe that Evan killed his wife, Krystal, and I want to know if it’s because of his relationship with Louise.”

“I don’t know that, Sheriff, but I don’t think what’s going on with him and Candy is anything serious. A lot of the regulars have favorite dancers, and they take them home for the weekend, or on a trip. I think it was something like that. Not a serious thing to kill his wife over. Louise has never let herself get too involved with a customer before.”

“Just to let you know, if Louise is on your schedule, I have her locked up in my jail.”

“Oh, no,” said Krystal.

“When I arrested Bronowski earlier for killing his wife, Louise was in his house.”

Krystal flipped through papers on her desk. “Does that mean she’s not going to show up all weekend?”

“She won’t be arraigned until Monday morning at the earliest.”

“Thanks for the heads up, Sheriff. I was expecting her to show up for work in an hour.”

As we piled into the truck, Billy wanted to know if Harlan had ever been to a strip club before.

“Only at the carnival where they had the strippers in a tent. You had to be over eighteen, but me and a couple of guys went in anyway. Don’t remember where it was.”

“You’ve lived a lot of different places?” asked Billy.

“Yep. A few. Never lived this far north in butt-crack territory.”

Dry Run Roadhouse. Coyote Creek.

On the way back to the ranch from the strip club, Billy wanted to stop at the roadhouse for a pitcher of beer. He was suffering from cabin fever and didn’t want to go home.

Loud and crowded, there wasn’t an empty table or booth in the whole place. The only available seats were at the bar.

“You’ve got a sell-out tonight here, Jack,” said Billy to his cousin.

“Spring fever has hit Montana, and the bears are coming out of hibernation,” said Jack with a chuckle. “Good for business.” He plunked a Coke down in front of Harlan and a pitcher of Miller between me and Billy.

I filled my first glass and chugged it down.

“What’s new in the world of crime prevention?” asked Jack. “Bring me up to date.”

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I laughed. “I’m not preventing much of anything. It’s happening all around me and I’m trying to grab the assholes who did it. Didn’t prevent a damned thing so far.”

“The girls not with you tonight?” asked Jack.

“We had business at the Krystal Palace, and I didn’t want them with me. Don’t want my girls anywhere near that place.”

Jack smiled.

I didn’t get a chance to explain what we were doing at the strip club before Brenda and Glenda came through the front door. Since there were no other seats, the twins sat down next to us. Brenda grabbed the seat next to Billy and cuddled in close to him.

“You buying drinks, Travis?” asked Glenda.

“Nope. Time for us to go home as soon as we drink this pitcher.

“Come on, Travis,” said Brenda. “You’re the hottest stud in this county, next to Billy. One drink and one dance.”

“You’re looking at the wrong guy.”

Harlan chuckled.

“I heard you been hanging around Miss Marilyn,” said Glenda. “Got something going

on with the barrel racer?”

“No. My girls are signed up for her racing camp, so yes, I did take their horses over to the Pellegrino ranch. You happy now?”

“Not yet,” said Glenda.

“Let’s go, Harlan. Time for us to get some sleep.”

“Stay here, Billy,” said Brenda. “I’ll give you a ride home later.”

Billy chuckled. “I’d better go. Travis might lock me out.” He untangled himself from Brenda’s arms and limped along behind me and Harlan.

Chapter Eighteen

Friday, May 6th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

The girls were already at the barn when Harlan went out to feed his horse. “We’re finished with Outlaw, Harlan. Do you want help with Windrider?”

“Nope. I can do my own chores.”

Tammy stood at the door of Windrider’s stall. “Want me to put him in the corral while you muck out his stall?”

“I can do it, Tammy,” Harlan snapped at her. “I know how to take care of my horse.”

“Me and Lucy are going to miss you while we’re staying with Marilyn.” Tammy

stepped into the stall, pushed Harlan up against the wall of the stall and kissed him.

“You shouldn’t be doing that, Tammy. Travis finds out and we’re all in deep shit.”

“He won’t find out if you don’t tell him.”

“Tomorrow we’ll go for a long ride to the back of the ranch while you’re off work,” said Lucy. “It will be fun, and Travis won’t see us kissing you way back there.” She squeezed past Tammy, tipped her head up and kissed Harlan with Tammy watching her.

“Jeeze, girls. Let me get my chores done. Travis will wonder what the hell is taking us so fuckin long.”

At breakfast, the girls were chatty, and Harlan was silent. I had to wonder if there was something going on that I didn’t know about. Did I want to know what was going on with three teenagers? Probably not. More to worry about and with the three of them under my roof, I had plenty on my plate already.

After the girls cleared the table and were doing the dishes, I said to Billy, “Work on Evan Bronowski’s background today. I need some solid evidence for the DA to take to trial. Right now, Kala’s murder is all circumstantial.”

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“I can work on that today. Not like I don’t have time.”

“Look into the disappearance of the first wife, too. We might be able to dig something up while we’re at it.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that case was ever solved,” said Billy. “But if it wasn’t solved the first time, I probably won’t find anything this long after.”

“Was the story in the paper? Would Wyatt know anything about it?”

“He might,” said Billy. “Go talk to him.”

“You had a narrow escape last night from Brenda. You better watch yourself or she’ll be over here trying to get you to have make up sex.”

Billy made a face. “Don’t even say that out loud, Travis.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

I was in my office calling Wyatt Thompson to set up a meeting with him about the missing first wife when Molly called from the squad room.

As soon as I finished my phone call, I hurried to the squad room to see what was up. Molly never called me without a good reason, and it was a good one. A surprise visit from Harlan’s caseworker – Haley Drayton.

Just what we needed when we’re so fuckin busy.

“Miss Drayton. Nice to see you. I presume you’re here to see Harlan?”

“No other reason.” She was a bit arrogant—full of her power to take Harlan away from me if she chose to do so. Harlan stood next to me, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jeans and a freaked-out expression on his pale face.

Nothing scared Harlan except his fucking caseworker. And I felt bad that she could do that to him.

I pointed down the hallway. “Why don’t you and Harlan talk in the break room? You’ll have privacy in there.”

“Thank you, Sheriff.”

Molly rolled her eyes as Drayton marched Harlan into the break room and closed the door.

“See the look on his face?” asked Molly. “She scares him.”

“It’s not right. She’s already done her home inspection and as soon as she leaves, I’m calling Gloria Grafton at the county office. Papers have been filed to make me Harlan’s guardian, and I don’t want any reports by Drayton screwing me up with the judge when I go to court to make it official.”

Molly nodded. “He’s such a good boy and you and Harlan are doing so well, he doesn’t need interference from a caseworker.”

Drayton sat down at the round table in the break room and pulled a notebook out of her leather briefcase. “How are you and Sheriff Frost getting along, Harlan?”

“Fine. We got no problems.”

“Do you like living with the sheriff?”

“Yep. All good.”

“Would you tell me if there was something bothering you about your living arrangement?”

Harlan shrugged. “Like what?”

“Like if Sheriff Frost wanted you for more than just giving a boy from juvie a home.”

“That what you think, you pervert?” Harlan jumped to his feet and started yelling. “I hate you county people. All my life you screwed me over. I could never get settled in a foster home because of bitches like you, and you’re not doing it to me this time. No fuckin way.”

From my office next door, I heard Harlan hollering at Haley Drayton. I jumped out of my chair and ran to the break room next door. I opened the door and lost my cool.

“What the hell is going on in here?”

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Harlan had retreated to the far end of the room, and I was facing Drayton.

“This is a private meeting, Sheriff.”

“Not no more, it isn’t. You get on out of here and don’t come back. I’m calling your superior and reporting you and your fucking attitude. If I have my way, this will be your last day on the job.”

“You can’t get me fired.”

“That a challenge? Let’s see who wins, Miss Drayton.” I pulled out my phone and called Gloria Grafton in Cut Bank.

Haley Drayton packed up her briefcase and left.

“Travis, what can I do for you?”

“You can get Haley Drayton off my boy, that’s what you can do. I don’t like her dropping into the station when we’re working and stirring up shit and upsetting Harlan. I’m working on a fucking murder.”

“She came to the sheriff’s office?” asked Gloria.

“Just came through the door and wanted a private meeting with Harlan. He didn’t know she was coming, and he wasn’t ready. She said things that upset him. Harlan is doing well, and I don’t want her messing him up for no reason.”

“I apologize for that, Travis.”

“I don’t know what Drayton said to him, but I’m not letting her screw up my application for guardianship. Harlan only has a few more months until he’s sixteen and Haley Drayton will not be allowed to see my boy during that time.”

“I understand, and I’ll tell her that she’s no longer needed on Harlan’s case, Travis. I’ll put myself on as his case worker, only because he has to have someone assigned to him until he’s of legal age.”

“Okay, fine. When I find out what Drayton said to him, you’ll be the first to know about it and you can cut her a severance check.”

“I’ll be waiting to hear from you, Travis. And again, I apologize for Haley coming to the station.”

I ended the call and pushed the door of the break room closed. Without saying anything to Harlan, I walked over to the coffee maker and filled two mugs. I took them over to the table and sat down.

And I waited.

A few minutes passed before Harlan turned around, looked my way, and saw the mug of coffee on the table. He sauntered over and sat down.

“You don’t have to tell me what she said. Tell me five years from now and that will be soon enough.”

“Thanks.”

Bronowski’s lawyer was next up, and I hadn’t calmed down much from the Drayton

fuckup. “Sorry, Mister Trammell, but we don’t have an interview room here. You’ll have to talk to your client in the run. Best I can do.”

“No problem, Sheriff. Happens a lot. Most of these small stations are the same.”

I unlocked the run and showed the legal beagle where his client was and locked him in there to talk to Bronowski.

When he knocked on the door, ready to leave, he asked when the arraignment was, and that was it.

As soon as he left, I took Harlan from the break room, and we went back to Bronowski’s property to snoop around.

Bronowski Residence. Ethridge.

Room by room, Harlan and I ran the house looking for evidence. “What exactly are we looking for?” asked Harlan.

“Honestly, I have no idea what would incriminate Bronowski in his wife’s death. Because of the days of water damage to Kala’s body, Doctor Olson couldn’t tell if he strangled her with his bare hands, or if he used a weapon or a pillow to smother her.”

“Whatever he did, he did in the car, right?” asked Harlan. “He had to be at the bridge.”

“Had to be.”

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“So, the stripper would’ve picked him up when the car went over,” said Harlan.

“That’s what I figure too. Bronowski had to be picked up from the bridge. Louise is my pick for that.”

“How did he know the bridge was going to collapse?”

“He didn’t. That was a stroke of luck for him. Pure coincidence.”

“Huh. Too bad we don’t have all the techs they have on CSI. They could find a scrap of evidence to tie it all together.”

“Our county can’t afford a forensic unit, and there’s not enough money in the budget to hire a team from Butte or from Great Falls. Costs way too much money.”

“A lot of women’s clothes in the bedroom closet,” said Harlan.

I went to take a look. “That’s more than a weekend amount of stuff. Definitely looks like Candy Ann moved in with Evan. That says the relationship was more serious than Krystal thought it was.”

“Yeah, he had a motive.”

Harlan was learning. “Let’s go check the welding shop. Might find something out there.”

We trudged out to the big workshop behind the house and the door was locked and

padlocked. “Run back to the squad and get the bolt cutters. We’re going to look while we’re here.”

Harlan came back and I showed him how to snap the padlock off. He smiled and seemed to enjoy it. Probably thought about Haley Drayton’s neck while he was doing it.

Took us a while to search through all the crap in the shop. Nothing we could use to convict Bronowski.

“Maybe Billy got something,” said Harlan. “He’ll tell us the good news when we get home.”

“I hope you’re right.” I checked my watch. “We’ve got to hurry. Wyatt’s going to be waiting for us at Katie’s.”

“That the diner with the good pie?”

“That’s the one.”

Katie’s Good Eats. Cut Bank.

Wyatt was waiting for us, but he had already ordered his regular lunch and was eating his turkey club sandwich. I ordered two more for Harlan and I, and two cups of coffee.

“You got more for me on Kala Bronowski’s murder?” asked Wyatt.

“I want to talk about the first wife.”

“Eva,” said Wyatt. “That was her name. Eva Bronowski. Young girl.”

“How long ago was it?” asked Harlan.

“About five years ago. Shortly after Eva disappeared, Evan began seeing Kala.”

“I need you to send everything you’ve got on Eva to Billy’s email. He’s working from home on both wives at once. Be cool if you did a comparison story like they do in true crime.”

Wyatt’s eyes widened. “Fantastic idea, Travis. That would get everybody’s attention. A lot of the citizens in Ethridge knew Eva. She was the kindergarten teacher at Ethridge Elementary, and sadly missed by parents and kids alike.”

“Yep. I like it. It’s getting good already.”

“Can I ask why you’re going this route, Travis?”

“Because I’ve got dick-squat to convict him on Kala so far. I have to prove he was at the Milk Run Bridge and I have no way of doing that.”

“If he was there,” said Wyatt, “and he had to be if Kala was asphyxiated, then someone picked him up. Your best shot would be to roll the girlfriend.”

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“Yep, I’ve got to haul Candy Ann’s ass out of her cell and scare the living bejesus out of her.”

Wyatt pointed to the scab on my face.

“Yep, that was her. Got to get my courage up and try again.”

Harlan laughed. “You should see her fuckin nails.”

After Harlan ate a turkey club and two pieces of coconut cream pie, we headed for home.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

I grabbed a beer out of the fridge and sat down with Billy in the living room. He had his laptop open on the coffee table and a serious look on his face.

“I’ve been reading through all the stuff Wyatt Thompson sent me from the Tribune office. He said he’s going to do a comparison story on the two wives?”

“Yeah, something I thought might cast serious doubt on Bronowski. What do you think?”

“Yeah, I like it a lot,” said Billy. “You need to brace the dancer hard, Travis. Squeeze her until she gives you something you can use.”

“Yep. Tomorrow. I’m working up to it.”

Harlan laughed. “He’s afraid of her claws.”

“Damn right.”

I was tired, but around nine o’clock when the girls had already gone upstairs, Billy wanted to go to the roadhouse for a pitcher.

“What do you think, Harlan? Want to come or stay home with the girls?”

“I’d better come.”

I chuckled. “The girls scaring you?”

He smiled. “Can’t say.”

“Uh huh. They fighting over you?”

“Don’t want it to happen.”

“Do you want me to talk to them?” I asked.

“Not yet.”

I laughed. “I’ll let you handle it.”

Chapter Nineteen

Saturday, May 7th.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

After his talk with Travis, Harlan didn't feel so guilty about the way the girls were coming on to him. Travis had already figured it out and if it got too tough to handle, he'd give the girls a talking to.

Long as they don't say the 'C' word, I should be okay. As soon as they go for training, I'll be able to relax. Where would they get condoms anyway? I'm worrying for nothing.

Ever since Lucy arrived, he'd been trying to decide which one was the prettiest and which one he liked the best. Harlan thought Lucy was the winner, but Tammy was pretty and nice to him too. A hard decision.

At the breakfast table, I watched Harlan watching the girls and it almost made me laugh out loud. A lot of teenage hormones were bouncing around the kitchen.

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“Up for a long ride this morning, Harlan?” I asked.

“Yeah, I need more practice on Windrider.”

“Aw,” said Tammy, “we won’t be able to go with y’all. We have no horses to ride.”

“All male ride this morning, girls. Sorry.”

Harlan had never ridden all the way to the back boundary of the thousand acres.

Travis led the way on Outlaw and Outlaw was a fast horse. Harlan kept thinking he’d fall off, but he didn’t, and he was gradually becoming more comfortable in the saddle.

Up ahead he heard Travis shouting and saw him waving his arms and pointing.

“Yep, I see them.” Harlan pulled up on his reins and slowed Windrider down so he could reach for his phone and take pictures of the mustangs.

Travis wheeled Outlaw around and came galloping back to him. “See them? Three of them.”

“I think I got some pictures. We almost to the back of the ranch?”

“Uh huh. Almost to the boundary. We’ll turn and ride back down the other side.”

Sheriff’s Office. Coyote Creek.

Harlan and I headed for the station after our big morning ride. Felt good to get out on Outlaw again and he enjoyed the freedom to gallop.

Now that the rain had finally stopped, the corral was dry enough for Outlaw and Windrider to stay outside in the daytime. I still didn't trust the bears at night.

Across the road we grabbed lunch specials for the prisoners, and for ourselves as well. All that fresh air and Harlan was starving. The kid could eat.

Giving the prisoners ten minutes to eat, I cleaned up stuff on my desk and got ready to bring Louise Carrigan into the office for questioning. I couldn't talk to her in the run with Evan Bronowski there listening to our conversation. She might be next on his list.

While I collected the lunch containers and handed them off to Harlan, I cuffed Louise and led her out of her cell.

"Where am I going?"

"To my office for a few minutes."

"Don't want to talk to you, and I'm not going to."

"Suit yourself, Louise."

I sat her in a chair in my office and locked the door. Harlan moved his chair up against the door and we were ready to start as soon as I turned on the tape recorder.

"I know you picked Evan up from the bridge, Louise, and that fact alone puts you at the scene of Kala's murder. You being present at the scene, even if it was only to pick Evan up, makes you just as guilty of the crime as Evan, and when you are convicted

you will be sentenced to death.”

She stared at me, focusing on the scab on my face. The one healing over the gash she put there with her long ugly nails.

“The only way for you to avoid the death penalty, Louise, is to testify against Evan. It’s not an option if you want to have any chance at a life, it’s the only choice you can make. There’s no other road for you to travel. Chose to stick with Evan and say nothing to help me convict him, and both of you sit on death row for the rest of your lives.”

“You don’t scare me, Sheriff. You’ve got a rep for being tough, but I think that’s all bullshit. You’re all talk.”

“I’m not into beating up women, Louise, but if that’s what you want, hey, I can break your nose for you.”

“You can’t do that. I have rights.”

I jumped off my chair, circled the desk, jerked Louise to her feet, spun her around and smashed her face into the wall.

Blood gushed from her nose and her split lip, and I handed her a couple of tissues. “I’ll take you back to your cell to do a little thinking. Open the run for me, Harlan. I think Louise is going to trip and fall on her way back to her cell.”

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Harlan ran ahead and got the door of the run open while I pushed Louise ahead of me, bouncing her off the walls in the hallway. She fell and I whistled for the dogs.

Max and Sarge came running. They growled and snarled at Miss Candy Ann, and I finally got the response I was looking for.

Tears.

I shoved her back into her cell and locked her up. "Get used to it. It's going to be forever."

She spit at me, and I laughed. "We'll have another meeting tomorrow."

I went back to my office and washed Louise's blood off my wall.

Wild Stallion Ranch.

The girls were dressed and ready when Harlan and I got home to the ranch. "What time is our reservation, Travis?" asked Lucy.

"Six thirty. Harlan and I have to shower and change. Is Billy ready?"

"He's in his room," said Tammy. "He's already showered. He'll be ready soon."

"Harlan, you go first," I said. "I'm going to have a beer and unwind a little first."

"Yep. I'll get ready." He ran upstairs and I headed for the fridge.

“I made you a grocery list for when I’m not here to watch the fridge and pantry,” said Tammy. “It’s on the fridge.”

“Thanks. That was thoughtful. We’ll miss you girls all week. Especially when we have to cook our own meals.” I chuckled. “It’s so great when you girls cook.”

“Who will be cooking for all the girls at Marilyn’s camp?” asked Lucy. “They will have to make a lot of food for every meal.”

“Yeah, that’s true. She probably hires someone. If she’s with you girls on the training course, she’s not cooking for twenty girls.”

I relaxed at the kitchen table and drank a couple of beers while Harlan was in the shower, then I took my turn and got cleaned up. My hair needed to be trimmed. I liked it just touching my shoulders, but it was longer than that now.

While the girls got their purses and found their phones, I fed the dogs and when everybody was in the truck, I locked up the house.

Coyote Creek Inn.

Olivia had our table ready for us when we arrived at the Inn. Five places set on the white tablecloth, and I had a weak moment when I almost asked her to join us.

Something I couldn’t do after swearing Olivia and I were over. She wasn’t honest with me and there was no going back. It was best for me to stay away from women whenever possible.

“It’s fancy here, Travis,” whispered Lucy. “There are flowers on every table.”

“I thought you girls might like it, and the food is over the top. Just as good as Annie

makes it.”

“I ate the food here before, but we didn’t sit in the dining room,” said Harlan. “We sat in the private part where Olivia lives so Travis could talk business.”

I nodded. “True story.”

A server came by and took our drink order. Billy and I ordered beer, Harlan ordered a Coke, and I ordered virgin strawberry daiquiris for the girls.

“Are we going to like the drinks you ordered for us?” asked Tammy.

“I will,” said Lucy. “Mommy always orders one of those for me when we eat out. They look pretty and taste fruity and yummy.”

Harlan was smiling across the table at Lucy, and I couldn’t help but notice the happy look on his face. If he was choosing one of the girls, it was going to be Lucy. Just a guess.

They were both the same age, but Harlan would be sixteen before Lucy would. Close enough.

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The drinks came and Lucy was right, Tammy loved her drink. Olivia passed by our table and asked if everything was satisfactory.

“Of course, it is, Olivia. This is the best place in town.”

The girls took a while to decide what they wanted, but I went for the prime rib, and it didn't disappoint.

When dinner was over and the table had been cleared, our server came around asking about dessert. I asked for the lemon mousse that I had become attached to. Harlan chose pie and so did Billy. Both girls went for chocolate mousse.

“The desserts here are so good,” I said. “Amazing.”

“Sounds like you eat here all the time, Travis,” said Lucy.

“Once in a while.”

Harlan smirked.

When dinner was over, Olivia tried to comp our bill, but I insisted on paying for my family. In my own best interest for the Inn not to go broke comping meals.

Dry Run Roadhouse.

After our celebration dinner, we went to the roadhouse for the big windup to our family outing. The Montana Marauders were blasting out country music from the

stage and the dance floor was packed.

“Wow,” hollered Lucy. “So busy and so loud in here. Just like Boots when I help Mommy.”

“What’s Boots?” asked Harlan.

“Mommy’s roadhouse. It has a pool hall attached to it too. I’m learning to play. Jackson is teaching me. He got pretty good when he was on the rodeo circuit with Rowdy.”

“Stay here at the bar while I go find us a booth,” I said. There were so many people on the dance floor, I couldn’t see the booths and tables at the other side of the room.

Over near the band, I found an almost empty booth—one with just Savanna sitting in it and I asked her if we could sit with her.

“Sure, the more the merrier, and I’m not too merry right now.”

I winked at her. “We’ll cheer you up.”

“Who’s we?”

“You’ll see. I’ll go get them.” I hustled back to the bar area near the front door and Billy had settled on one of the bar stools.

“I’m good here with Jack,” Billy said. “It’s too noisy in there for this old cripple.”

I punched him in the arm and left to part the Red Sea. It felt like that trying to get through the dancers to where Savanna was sitting.

She grinned when she saw I had all the kids with me. “Is this family night out?”

“Yeah. We went for dinner at the Inn.”

“How’s your thing with Olivia going?”

“No thing.” I shook my head and Harlan grinned.

The band slid into a slow song and Lucy grabbed Harlan’s hand. “Come on Harlan, we can’t get wasted but we can dance.”

“I don’t know how to dance.”

“Neither do I,” I said, “but I do it anyway.”

“I’ll teach you,” said Lucy. “Then Tammy can have a turn with you.”

“You girls sharing Harlan?” asked Savanna.

“For now.” A bit of resignation in her voice and I knew why.

A young cowboy cruised by our table and asked Tammy to dance and that made her smile.

With only Savanna and I left, I had no choice. “You dancing with a broken-down lawman?”

“Sure am. Best offer I had all day.”

I laughed. “Must’ve been a bad day.”