



The Cowboy's Justice

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Category: Romance, Western, Adult

Description: A wealthy young woman hits a cowboy's truck on a crowded freeway and takes off.

Her trusted lawyer arrives at her country home to advise her, but he has only evil intentions. Will the cowboy see the imminent danger and save her before it's too late?

Devlin Hatfield owns Rainbow Ranch, a western training facility in Smoky Hill. On his way home from a horse show an expensive vehicle hits his front fender and disappears into the heavy freeway traffic. But the driver is soon traced. He's told it's Portia Peyton, an heiress who has built a house just a short distance from his barn. Devlin's determined to make the willful girl pay for her irresponsible behavior.

When Portia is confronted by the sheriff about the accident, she's grateful her lawyer, William Buckley, is there to help. But William has arrived with nefarious plans. He wants to possess her body and gain control of her fortune.

William's obsessed. He'll do whatever it takes to get what he wants. Can Devlin derail the villain's wicked scheme and keep Portia from harm?

If you enjoy heart-felt romance, horse-loving muscled cowboys, evil villains and thrilling suspense, you'll love this book.

Total Pages (Source): 53

CHAPTER ONE

Trying to stay patient on the crowded freeway, Devlin McCoy checked his side view mirrors trying to determine if any of the motorists on the packed freeway would let him change lanes. He'd been competing at a state show and was hauling his two horses back to his ranch when the motorway had turned into a parking lot.

Thinking it would be better to drive the surface streets than sit for hours in the bumper to bumper traffic, he signaled to change into the right lane so he could exit. Finally seeing an SUV slow to a stop he began to roll slowly in front of it. But the driver abruptly accelerated and swerved past him, clipping his right front fender. Though he tried not to stop sharply it couldn't be avoided and it jolted the trailer.

Saying a silent thank you his two horses were used to bumps and noise, he stared furiously after the gleaming white Cadillac SUV. The ostentatious vehicle sported tinted windows and more chrome than he thought should be legal, and it began honking and forcing its way into the other lanes. Snatching up his phone he videoed the obscene attempted getaway for a few seconds, then hastily jumped from his truck to check the fender. Finding it wasn't as bad as he feared and he could still drive, he climbed back behind the wheel. As he began to inch forward thoughtful motorists behind him allowed him the space he needed to exit.

* * *

Almost forty-five minutes later Devlin was driving down the country road through Smoky Hill and turning down the lane that would take him to his ranch. The day he'd made the decision to purchase the run down property, a perfect rainbow had appeared

over the mountains in the distance. The moment had taken his breath away, and he'd believed it to be a sign. He named the facility Rainbow Ranch.

In the short three years he'd been there he'd made friends with several of the other cowboys in the area. His high-end clients from Dallas loved coming out to the peaceful facility to train with him. They knew their horses were much happier in the open spaces than confined in stalls at a city barn, and word soon spread. New riders began calling and asking if they could join his program.

But he was selective.

Horses he could rehabilitate, but their owners were another matter. Success in the ring required the right attitude and tenacity. But more importantly, they had to put their horses above all else. If the riders didn't show the utmost love, respect, and dedication to their animal, they weren't accepted.

Marge and Belle, the mares he'd been hauling, were both champions, but as he unloaded them his only concern was their wellbeing. It appeared the unfortunate incident hadn't rattled or injured them, and he led them off to one of the paddocks near the barn. As he thought of what could have happened to them he felt a flash of anger, but the moment was interrupted by the sound of an approaching vehicle. Glancing up he spotted Sheriff Cooper's car rolling up the drive.

"Perfect timing," he exclaimed as the sheriff came to a stop and climbed out. "I was about to call you."

"About that?" the sheriff asked, pointing at the front of the truck.

"How did you know?"

"A motorist on the highway called 911. The SUV that hit you was causin' havoc. By

the time Highway Patrol reached the area it was gone, but the motorist filmed it...and you. I was contacted because when they ran the plates they discovered you both live here in Smoky Hill.”

“I’ve never seen that SUV around this area.”

“I haven’t either, but hold on to your hat. It’s owned by Portia Peyton.”

“Can’t say I know the name.”

“You should. She owns that new home next to Annie Baker’s place. Or should I say, Annie King. After all, she is married to Brody.”

“She’s such a big star I’m sure she’ll be known as Annie Baker forever.”

“Probably true. Anyway, I just came from speakin’ with Miss Peyton and she claims you cut in front of her causin’ her to clip your truck.”

“That’s not what happened.”

“Hold on, Devlin, let me finish. She also said she was goin’ to stop but when she pulled next to your truck you started screamin’ at her and scared her to death. She claims she was chargin’ through the traffic to get away from you.”

“Sheriff, that’s a pack of lies.”

“I believe you, but when it’s a he said—she said thing, it can get a bit tricky, especially when she has more money than we could ever imagine. She’ll have high-powered lawyers and said she might sue you. ”

“Sheriff, there’s no problem about who’s tellin’ the truth. I have back-up cameras on

my trailer and I turn them on in heavy traffic. First, you'll see her stop. I thought it was to let me move into her lane so I could get off that damn freeway, but when I started to switch lanes she went flyin' past and hit me. I also have a video of her honkin' her horn and tryin' to push her way into other lanes after she did. I can assure you there was no yellin' from me at any point."

"Damn. Let me take a closer look at the damage to your truck, then show me the videos."

* * *

Ten minutes later they were seated at Devlin's kitchen table drinking coffee and viewing the footage from the trailer cameras. The white SUV had stopped, but what Devlin hadn't seen at the time was the attractive, dark-haired heiress staring into her rearview mirror and applying makeup. She'd looked back through the windshield, and a second later the SUV had bolted forward.

"Well, well, well," the sheriff muttered. "It's hard to know if she hit the accelerator by accident, or she wanted to get past you before you could change lanes. Let me see what you have on your phone."

As Devlin played back the short recording, the young woman's aggressive driving looked even worse than when he'd witnessed it firsthand.

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“This sure settles things,” the sheriff declared. “I’ll need copies of both of those.”

“No problem, I’ll email them to you. I film my riders at the shows and I have movie apps on my computer.”

“Great. I’ll be placin’ her under arrest for reckless drivin’, among other things, and she’ll end up in court in front of a judge. You can sue her for damages if you want. At the very least she’ll have to pay for the repairs to your truck.”

“Huh,” Devlin murmured thoughtfully. “Sheriff, I have an idea. What do you think about this?”

CHAPTER TWO

Turning off the country road and driving up to the wrought iron gates fronting Portia Peyton’s impressive home, Sheriff Cooper slowed to a stop and pressed the red button on the keypad. He’d called ahead, and the gates immediately swung open. Driving up to the motor court, he parked next to a gleaming black Corvette. It was so low to the ground he wondered how anyone could slide into the seat. As he walked up the steps, the front door was opened by a tall, thin, blond man with bright blue eyes dressed in a perfectly fitting grey suit. The sheriff guessed it to be tailor-made.

“Sheriff Cooper, I assume. I’m William Butler, Miss Peyton’s lawyer,” the man said, handing the sheriff his card. “Please come in.”

“Thank you,” the sheriff replied, not surprised the heiress had already summoned her attorney.

“I’ve spoken with her about the incident with Mr. Hatfield,” the man continued as they entered a small lounge. “She’s agreed to let the matter drop if he pays for the damage he caused to her vehicle.”

“Is that right?” the sheriff replied. “Well, Mr. Butler, I have evidence that shows the accident was caused by your client.”

“Evidence? What evidence is that?”

“I’d like to know that too!”

Turning around, the sheriff watched the young woman glide into the room. Dressed in rhinestone studded blue jeans, a pale aqua shirt, and her dark, wavy hair falling around her shoulders, she looked every bit the wealthy heiress, but her entrance felt contrived.

“Hello, Miss Peyton. I’m Sheriff Cooper.”

“I didn’t think you were Bugs Bunny,” she quipped with a laugh.

“Portia...” her lawyer muttered.

“Oh, relax, it was just a joke. Everyone’s so serious all the time. Anyway, as you just heard I’m happy to forget the whole thing. Mr. Hatfield just needs to take care of my car. But as far as evidence, I can’t imagine what you’re talking about.”

“Ah, well, we have videos. The first shows exactly what happened, and Mr. Butler, before you ask, you will soon have copies. I’m sorry, Miss Peyton, but it’s clear you’re responsible for the damage to Mr. Hatfield’s truck, endangerin’ the lives of him, his horses, and other motorists. There’s also the matter of leavin’ the scene. I’ll be placing you under arrest for—”

“Hold on, Sheriff!” the lawyer exclaimed, stepping forward and holding up his hand. “You won’t be arresting anyone until I see those videos.”

“I have them right here. If you give me your number I’ll forward them right now.”

“It’s on my card.”

“Ah, yes, I see.”

“Wait! Where did these videos come from?” Portia asked, suddenly angry and scowling at him. “Who took them and how did you get them?”

“You should have the videos now, Mr. Butler, and it’s not a mystery. Mr. Hatfield has back-up cameras on his trailer, and the video clearly shows you stopping your SUV to apply make up. As soon as Mr. Hatfield began moving into the lane, you sped forward, and a second later you can hear the sound of the impact when you hit him. I just don’t know if your foot slipped onto the accelerator, or you were purposely trying to cut him off. But the why doesn’t matter. The fact is, you—”

“No! That didn’t happen!” she protested. “As for stopping to put make up on, that must be someone else!”

“I’m afraid not. You can be clearly seen. The second video shows you recklessly driving through the heavy traffic, honking your horn trying to pressure other drivers to let you in after hitting Mr. Hatfield.”

“Portia, don’t say another word.” her lawyer ordered brusquely, staring at his phone.

“I’ll leave you two alone to talk for a moment, but Mr. Buckley, when I return I’ll be placin’ Miss Peyton under arrest and takin’ her down to the station.”

* * *

William waited until he heard the front door open and close before sitting down with Portia and playing back the incriminating footage.

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“What the fuck? No, no, no!” she shouted, jerking the phone from his hand. “This can’t be happening.”

“Dammit, Portia, what were you thinking?”

“I was thinking I didn’t want to get stuck behind a fucking truck and horse trailer! What’s going to happen?”

“The evidence is irrefutable. You’ll be arrested. There’s nothing I can do to stop it.”

“You’re not serious!”

“He’ll probably handcuff you and—”

“Handcuff me? Like a common criminal?”

“I’m afraid so. Take a breath and try to stay calm.”

“Take a breath? Stay calm? How the fuck can I stay calm? Oh, no, will he put me in a cell?”

“Ah, probably not.”

“Probably?” she wailed. “William, do something!”

“I should be able to convince him not to hold you, but if the cowboy wants to make things difficult—”

“I’ll pay him. Contact him and tell him I’ll pay for the damages. In fact, tell him I’ll buy him a brand new truck. I’ll buy him two! I don’t care. Whatever he wants.”

“I’ll do what I can, but regardless, you’ve broken the law. Actually, many laws. At the very least you’ll get a bunch of citations.”

“I don’t care about any damn citations.”

“Portia, why don’t you go into the kitchen and make a fresh pot of coffee for the sheriff?”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“Yes! Being hysterical in front of him is the last thing I need. Get out of here before he gets back.”

“Fine, but, William—”

“You pay me a lot of money because I know what I’m doing. Now go.”

* * *

Marching from the room and walking down a short hallway into the chef’s kitchen, Portia made three cups of coffee with the built-in coffee maker. But smelling the enticing aroma gave her an idea. After hurriedly plating several gourmet muffins, she placed the three mugs on a tray, added a bowl of sugar cubes and a small jug of cream, then carried it back to the lounge, But as she approached she heard William’s voice.

“Thank you, Sheriff, I appreciate your cooperation.”

Letting out a relieved breath, she walked in.

“We’ve come to an understanding,” William declared as she set the tray on the coffee table. “You’ll have to make a court appearance in Fairview, listen to a lecture from the judge and pay some fines.”

“Thank you, Sheriff Cooper,” she said gratefully, hoping she sounded sincere. “Please, help yourself to coffee and a bite to eat.”

“Ah...well...it’s not quite that simple,” the sheriff said, shooting the lawyer a look. “I have to clear this with the D.A. and there’s also the matter of Devlin Hatfield’s truck.”

“I’ll be happy to take care of the damage.”

“That may not be enough.”

“I don’t understand.”

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“As I was tellin’ your lawyer, a cowboy’s horses...well...it’s hard to explain, but you put them at risk and that’s a bad thing. Real bad. He may want to sue, he may even pressure the D.A. to press more serious charges. Those videos are—”

“Can’t you talk to him?”

“Yep, but like I said, puttin’ his horses in danger like you did, that’s unforgivable. I’ll do my best, but there are no guarantees.”

“When will you talk to him?”

“I’ll stop into his place now. You’re not aware he’s a neighbor?”

“I had no idea.”

“He owns Rainbow Ranch. You can see the sign and the gravel driveway, but the facility is hidden behind a small thicket. I’ll let you know what he says.”

CHAPTER THREE

“Dammit,” Portia exclaimed, flopping into the heavily cushioned couch. “Tell me the truth, William. Will this go away quietly, or will my name be in all the papers again?”

“If you didn’t insist on—”

“Please, no lectures!”

“Then stop giving me reasons for them,” he retorted. “Whatever this cowboy comes back with just accept it and move on. The last thing you need is those videos going public. We’ll agree to his terms—whatever they are— if he promises to destroy them.”

“Okay, okay, you’re right, I just hope it isn’t anything crazy. I’m going into the gym. I need to work off all this nervous energy.”

“Keep your phone on. I’ll let you know when I hear something.”

As she rose to her feet and marched from the room, William’s eyes followed her. He’d always thought she had a great figure, and while she worked hard at keeping it that way, he worked hard at keeping any admirers at a distance.

She would soon be his.

All of her.

He would own her luscious body, and more importantly, control her fortune.

When she’d started talking about a country home in a small town called Smoky Hill, he’d quickly encouraged her, even finding her an architect. Though one of her longtime friends, Helen Rutherford, had married a local cowboy and would doubtless take up some of her time, Portia would still be away from her busy social circle. Most especially the eager young men chasing after her. Now with the house finished and Portia settled in, it was time to put his wicked plan into action.

A conniving smile curled his lips.

It would start with a spiked cocktail.

But as he began to imagine the scene his phone rang, breaking into his wicked thoughts. Snatching it from his pocket and seeing the sheriff's number he hastily accepted the call.

"Sheriff Cooper, thanks for getting back to me so quickly. I hope it's good news."

"I was able to reach the D.A. and we've had a meeting of the minds. A hefty fine and citations, but—"

"Great. What about the cowboy?"

"I was just about to tell you."

"Apologies, Sheriff. I'm just anxious to get this behind us."

"Your client has to meet with Devlin Hatfield tomorrow mornin' at his ranch at ten o'clock."

"I don't understand. For what reason?"

"Mr. Hatfield wishes to tell her himself, but if you don't agree I'll need to get back to the D.A. right away. He'll have to revisit the case and sentencing."

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“Can you at least tell me why this cowboy wants to see her?”

“He’ll make her an offer. It’s in conjunction with the D.A. and with his approval. Considerin’ the circumstances it’s perfectly reasonable. In fact, I’d call it generous. But, ultimately it’s up to you and your client.”

“I’ll discuss this with her and get back to you.”

“The offer is off the table at 5 p.m.”

“Not a problem. Thank you, Sheriff.”

* * *

Devlin had just said goodbye to one of his riders and was heading back into the barn when he saw the sheriff marching towards him.

“I take it you’ve made contact,” Devlin declared. “What did they say?”

“The lawyer was a bit surprised, but I’m fairly certain Miss Peyton will be here in the mornin’.”

“Thanks for workin’ with me on this, Sheriff.”

“Hey, I think your idea is just what this girl needs. But it’s a good thing the D.A.’s my cousin and we think the same way. He could’ve hit her with all kinds of charges. But I’d best get back on the road. I’ll let you know as soon as I—speak of the devil,”

he exclaimed as his phone signaled a text. “William Buckley and Portia Peyton have agreed. She’ll be here in the mornin’.”

“What’s this lawyer like?”

“Slick. Hopefully it’ll rain overnight and he’ll get mud on his shoes in the mornin’.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that,” Devlin said with a chuckle.

“You’ll feel the same once you’ve met him. One thing’s for sure, I wouldn’t trust him, not for a minute.”

“What about Portia?”

“She’s just your typical spoiled rich girl. I can’t imagine why she wanted to move out here. Well, like I was sayin’, I’d better get back on the road. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As the sheriff climbed into his cruiser, Devlin called to his dogs, Jethro and Jezebel. They were big and loud and he adored them. He’d found them when he’d first started renovating the ranch. They’d just been puppies, and he’d assumed they’d been abandoned by the previous owners. The thought had sickened him, and he’d showered them with affection.

“Hey, you two. Have you been up to no good?”

Jezebel barked, and Jethro dropped a stick at Devlin’s feet, then stared up at him expectantly.

“Just once,” he said with a grin, picking it up.

After hurling it in the air, he watched the dogs race after it, then strode back to the

barn. But as he walked in he lifted out his phone and played back the video of the dark-haired beauty.

As she'd stopped her SUV, he suddenly noticed she hadn't immediately reached for her bag and make up. For a brief moment it appeared she'd wiped tears from her cheeks.

CHAPTER FOUR

The weekends at Rainbow Ranch were always busy, but Monday was Devlin's day off. Though clients might show up he kept a low profile, and would often ride Belle or Marge up the Smoky Hill trail with Jethro and Jezebel running along beside them. He could rely on his two ranch hands, Jimmy and Mike, to stay on top of things while he was gone.

Standing at his kitchen window drinking his second cup of coffee, he spotted a black Corvette rolling slowly down his gravel driveway. It was low to the ground, and a ridiculous car to drive to a ranch. At least the weather was cooperating and there were no potholes or mud puddles, but knowing it would be Portia Peyton and her lawyer he almost wished there were. Mentally preparing himself, he placed his cup on the counter and strode out to the porch. A moment later Sheriff Cooper's cruiser appeared and quickly caught up with the sports car still creeping its way to the front of the house.

Devlin was about to trot down the steps when the Corvette's doors swung open and Portia stepped from the car. He stopped mid-step and caught his breath. He wasn't expecting the girl to arrive wearing hip hugging jeans and a provocative cut-off T-shirt. The clothes did little to hide her voluptuous figure, and she was even more beautiful in person than in the video.

"I'm William Buckley, Miss Peyton's lawyer."

Darting his eyes to a tall man marching towards him, Devlin disliked him on sight. He looked as polished as the ostentatious car he'd been driving. His dark hair was meticulously styled, his khaki slacks had a pressed seam down the middle, and his brown leather loafers sported the identifiable gold Gucci horse bit. The only thing that wasn't eye-catching was his plain white polo shirt, though it was starkly white.

"Hello, I'm Devlin Hatfield," Devlin exclaimed, extending his hand.

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While the handshake itself was firm enough, William's palm was baby skin soft, and his nails were manicured. Devlin didn't judge people, but in addition to his pristine appearance, William Buckley carried himself with a supercilious air.

"And obviously this is my client, Portia Peyton."

"Hi," Portia said, lifting her hand in a wave. "I'm really sorry about everything."

Though she sounded sincere, Devlin wasn't convinced.

"Mornin' Devlin!" the sheriff said, striding up to join them.

"Mornin', Sheriff. Please, everyone, come inside," Devlin offered, then trotted back up the steps and opened the door. "Right through there" he continued, pointing to his study as Portia approached. She looked nervous, which surprised him. He'd expected her to be annoyed, or bored, or arrogant, but she didn't appear to be any of those things.

Devlin had chosen the room because it was where his trophies and awards were displayed. Shiny cups and medals sat gleaming in a tall glass case, and the walls sported countless ribbons and framed certificates. As she entered he heard her gasp, and when William followed her in, Devlin saw him stop and stare.

"Shall we get down to business?" the sheriff suggested. "Devlin, do you want to outline your proposal?"

"How did you achieve all this, Mr. Hatfield," Portia asked before Devlin had a

chance to respond. “There’s so much here.”

“Call me Devlin, and it’s been years of blood, sweat and tears. When things get tough I come in here to remind myself I really do know what I’m doin’. But, yes, Sheriff Cooper, I’ll be happy to.”

“Sorry, Devlin, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” Portia said, looking him in the eye. “It’s just so much to take in.”

“Not a problem. Have a seat.”

“So, let’s hear it,” William demanded as Portia sat down.

“I know your client is a wealthy young woman,” Devlin began, fixing the lawyer with a steely stare before turning his eyes back to her. “The money it would cost to make the repairs wouldn’t amount to loose change for you. Heck, I expect buyin’ me a new truck would probably be like a raindrop in a winter storm.”

“Might I remind you, Mr. Hatfield, my client will also be facing charges.”

“William, let him speak,” Portia said impatiently. “Sorry, Devlin, you were saying?”

“You’ll be payin’ fines, but from what I understand there won’t be any other penalties, No jail time or even community service. Even if you lose your license you could easily afford a full time chauffeur to drive you around.”

“So...what’s the bottom line?” she asked, her voice tinged with nervousness. “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to work here at the ranch for thirty days.”

“Doing what?” William interjected brusquely.

“I accept!” Portia replied quickly, ignoring her lawyer’s question. “When do you want me to start.”

“Hold on, I don’t think this is a good idea,” William continued. “Portia, you’re not some girl off the streets who needs hard labor. You’re a—”

“I’ve made up my mind,” she exclaimed, cutting him off. “I’ve never been around horses and Helen is always talking about how great it is.”

“This won’t be a picnic. There’ll be hard work,” Devlin warned. “Don’t get me wrong, I won’t be unfair, but I won’t be easy either.”

“Mr. Buckley, bear in mind this deal was made in conjunction with the D.A.,” the sheriff piped up, “It’s part of Miss Peyton’s sentencing. If you choose not to accept she’ll be looking at further charges, and possible jail time.”

“Jail time!” Portia shouted, jumping to her feet. “Never mind, it doesn’t matter. Where do I sign.”

“Here’s the contract,” Devlin announced, lifting a folded piece of paper from his back pocket. “I’m no lawyer and it’s very simple.”

“Give me that,” William demanded, striding over to him.

“I know how to read,” she shot back, but before she could take it, William snatched it from Devlin’s hand.

“This is ridiculous,” the lawyer exclaimed. “It has more holes in it than a slice of Swiss cheese. I’ll have to redraft it and—”

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“The deal’s off!” Devlin said calmly. “It was nice to meet you, Portia. I suspect next time we meet it will be in a courtroom.”

“No! Wait!” she shouted, grabbing the paper from William and striding across to the antique, roll top desk against the wall. “There you are, Devlin,” she exclaimed, scribbling her name on the signature line. “When would you like me to start?”

“Be here tomorrow at nine, and wear old clothes. They’ll get dirty.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Climbing into the Corvette and settling into the passenger seat, Portia watched William stride around the front of the car. He was tall and lanky, and sometimes reminded her of a giraffe. Though he could be annoying at times, he was a sharp attorney and she’d be lost without him. But she sensed he wanted more than just a professional relationship. As he climbed behind the wheel, she glanced back at the ranch house and saw Devlin standing on the porch talking to the sheriff.

When she’d first arrived at the ranch she’d been furious.

All she’d wanted to do was write the cowboy a check and leave.

Then she’d laid eyes on his handsome face and muscled arms.

Standing in his study she’d been impressed by his success.

When he’d said he wanted her to work at the ranch, her heart had skipped a beat, and

she'd been overcome by a very strange feeling.

The very next second she'd heard herself agreeing.

"You shouldn't have signed that piece of paper!"

William's comment snapped her from her thoughts, but she couldn't pull her eyes away from Devlin. He was unlike any man she'd ever met.

"Didn't you hear me?" William demanded.

"Yeah, you said I shouldn't have signed that piece of paper."

"Exactly! You shouldn't have."

"William, stop trying to boss me around all the time. You work for me, remember? It's not the other way around."

She could see him bristle, but she didn't care.

"Actually, Portia, you pay me to keep you out of trouble, and signing a document like that—"

"Oh, for goodness sake. It's no big deal, and besides, I had no choice, and you almost screwed everything up. I could have ended up in jail. Can you imagine it? Me! Behind bars? Are you crazy?"

"It would never have happened."

"You don't know that. Anyway, it's done now, and it's only a month."

“How do you plan on getting there? The sheriff took your license away and I have to get back to Dallas in the morning.”

“Then talk to him before you go. I’m sure you can make him see sense. The ranch is literally five minutes away. He can’t object to me driving such a short distance when working for Devlin is a requirement.”

“I will, in fact, I’ll race back to the ranch right now. He might still be there,” William declared as he pressed a remote control and the gates to Portia’s impressive home swung open.

“Good idea. I’ll probably be in the pool,” Portia replied, climbing from the car. “Too bad you didn’t think of that while we were there.”

The snide remark had slipped from her lips before she could stop it, but she held back an apology. She was tired of the way he talked down to her, and before he could respond she slammed the car door closed and hurried up to her front door.

* * *

As William reversed the powerful sports car onto the country road he was tempted to floor the accelerator, but he couldn’t push his luck. The local deputies often parked under the shade of trees to catch people speeding. It wasn’t far to Rainbow Ranch, and as he turned down the gravel driveway he was relieved to see the sheriff’s car still parked in front of the house. But as he rolled to a stop and climbed out, he was surprised to see the sheriff marching out of the barn.

“Hello, again, Mr. Buckley,” he said briskly. “What are you doin’ back here?”

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“It’s about Portia’s license.”

“What about it?”

“Would you consider returning it?”

“And why would I do that?”

“So she can drive here every day. I imagine it would be an inconvenience for Devlin to have to pick her up and take her home, and I’m going back to Dallas.”

“I’m not sure about this,” the sheriff muttered. “I’ll speak to Devlin and see what he says, but what’s to stop her takin’ off and goin’ wherever she pleases? I’ve done my homework. This isn’t the first time she’s had problems behind the wheel.”

“I understand your concern. Perhaps we could post some kind of surety. A dollar amount that could be—”

“I have to stop you right there. What Devlin said earlier is true. If that girl decided to take her car some place, the thought of losin’ a bond wouldn’t give her a moment’s pause.”

“Then perhaps the threat of a night in a jail cell would do the trick. I know she’s horrified at the thought.”

“Maybe,” the sheriff murmured thoughtfully.

“Please consider it, Sheriff. I don’t see any other way for her to get here and return home every day. Here’s my card,” William continued, lifting out his wallet. “Just let me know. I can bring her in the morning, but then I have to return to my office in Dallas.”

* * *

As the sheriff watched the sleek, black sports car move slowly down the driveway, Devlin walked up and stood next to him.

“What was that about?”

“He wants me to give Portia her license back so she can get here and home every day. He’s gotta point. In fact I should’ve thought of that myself.”

“But you’re worried.”

“Hell, yeah, I’m worried. That girl’s a loose cannon. I don’t trust her. He suggested I threaten her with jail if she’s caught drivin’, but that’s no guarantee.”

“Nope, it isn’t.”

“I can’t get that video outta my mind. The way she tried to race past you was down right crazy, and you saw how she started honkin’ at people and tryin’ to push her way through that dang traffic.”

“You’re right. It was bad.”

“My priority is the safety of the people here in Smoky Hill. If I give in and she ends up hurtin’ someone on the road, I swear I’ll never forgive myself. I guess she’ll have to hire a limo, but that doesn’t sit well with me either. Are you willin’ to pick her up

and take her home every day?”

“Nope, but I do have another idea. She stays here.”

CHAPTER SIX

Portia was floating in her swimming pool when she caught sight of William striding through the sliding glass doors. He was carrying a tray holding two cocktails and a plate of snacks, but he looked grim.

“Did you dent your car?” she asked, moving slowly to the edge.

“No, why do you ask?”

“The look on your face. What happened?”

“Take your drink and I’ll tell you.”

“No thanks, I’m craving coffee.”

“Are you sure? It’s a lime Margarita, your favorite.”

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“Yep, I’m sure,” she replied as she climbed out. “Wait for me. I made the coffee before I jumped in. I’ll only be a minute.” Grabbing her thick, cotton robe and wrapping it around her body, she walked quickly into the kitchen, poured herself a cup of the rich java, then returned to the patio. “So, what’s going on?” she asked as she sank into a cushioned deck chair.

“Sheriff Cooper just called. He won’t give you back your license.”

“Seriously? Crap. I wonder if I can find someone in town. If I can’t I’ll have to bring in a driver from town, and that means paying for their lodging and all their expenses. Not that I care about that, but what a pain. There has to be another way. This is bullshit.”

“Actually, there is, but I don’t like it, not one bit.”

“What?”

“The sheriff suggested you stay there.”

“At the ranch? Where? In Devlin’s house?”

“Apparently there’s a guest cabin.”

“Oh, my gosh. What should I do?”

“Like I said, I think it’s a terrible idea. But you should drink your cocktail. It will calm you down.”

“Huh, stay at the ranch,” she mumbled to herself, ignoring his suggestion. “I can’t imagine living in some crappy cabin.”

“I agree. I don’t think you’d be very happy.”

“No shit. But what if I refuse and the sheriff threatens to put me in jail again? He’s holding all the cards.”

“It was a suggestion not an order. And he would never do that. My law firm has all kinds of contacts. I could—”

“NO!” she barked vehemently. “If this gets out the paparazzi will be all over me. Fuck. I may not have a choice.”

“You can do the limo thing.”

“That would be weird, and Devlin’s clients would start asking questions. If they figure out who I am they’ll start gossiping, and before we know it, the press will be here.”

“So...where do we go from here?”

“I suppose I should check out the cabin. I want to talk to Devlin again anyway. While I was in the pool I realized I had no idea what I’d actually be doing and I need to have some clue. Drop me off and I’ll ask him to bring me back. I’m going to get dressed. Call him and ask if I can come back.”

“But you haven’t had your drink, and I’ve heated up some of those gourmet appetizers from that French place you like in Dallas.”

“Thanks, but I couldn’t eat anything right now, and the last thing I need is alcohol. I

have to keep a clear head.”

“Are you sure you want to go to the ranch right now?”

“William, what’s wrong with you? Of course! I just said that!” she snapped impatiently. “Has something else happened? You seem edgy.”

“No, but this whole drama has me rattled, and I am a bit worried about you living on some ranch with a total stranger.”

“Sheriff Cooper suggested it, so I have no doubt it’s perfectly safe. I’ll be right back, and this time I’ll wear something a bit more practical. I think I have a pair of old jeans and cowboy boots tucked away in my closet.”

* * *

As she strode from the room William placed the tray on the coffee table and stared down at the spiked Margarita. Telling himself he could add the drug to her wine at dinner, he lifted out his phone and called directory assistance. It hadn’t even occurred to her they didn’t have Devlin’s contact information, and William chided himself for not asking. As he got the number and placed the call, he wondered if he should be reaching out to Sheriff Cooper instead, but Devlin answered on the second ring.

“Hello, Devlin Hatfield speakin’.”

“Hi, Devlin, this is William Buckley. Sheriff Cooper told us about your suggestion. Are you sure you want Portia living there?”

“I think it will make things easier for both of us, especially since comin’ and goin’ will be a problem.”

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“Why won’t Sheriff Cooper return her license on a conditional basis? That’s the answer for everyone.”

“No, it’s not. She might ignore those conditions and end up in another accident. That would be bad for everyone, including the sheriff.”

“Ah, yes, I see,” William muttered.

“As far as I’m concerned, havin’ her here is worth a shot. If it doesn’t work out we can always find an alternative solution.”

“In that case, Portia would like to swing by to see the guest cabin and hear more about what she’ll actually be doing. ”

“Not a problem. When does she want to come over?”

“Now, if that’s possible. But she wants me to drop her off. Can you bring her home? I’m returning to Dallas in the morning I’m pressed for time. I have a bunch of work I need to finish.”

“Now is fine. I’ll be in the barn, Just tell her to come on in.”

Ending the call, William stared at his phone.

The last thing he wanted was for Portia to stay at Rainbow Ranch. He needed her with him.

Alone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jethro and Jezebel were already racing from the barn when Devlin heard the Corvette coming down the drive. Stepping outside he watched the sports car slow to a stop, and the dogs run up to greet Portia the moment she climbed out.

“Hi, Devlin,” she called as they tried to lick her face when she leaned over to pet them. “Who are these two?”

“The lighter colored one is Jezebel and the other is Jethro. They’re brother and sister.”

“They’re so friendly. I haven’t been around dogs much, or any animals for that matter. My mother claims their fur gets all over the place.”

“She’s right,” he replied with a grin.

“Bye, Portia, I’ll see you later!” William called, staring out from his window with a dark frown.

“Okay, bye, William.”

“Let’s go into the barn,” Devlin suggested quickly. “I want you to meet Marge and Belle before I show you the cabin.”

“Marge and Belle?”

“My two mares,” he replied, but as he spoke he noticed William glaring at him before turning the car around and rolling up the driveway. “Your lawyer didn’t look very

happy. Did you two have a fight?"

"No, he just doesn't like the idea of me staying here."

"Did he say why?"

"Huh, actually, now that you mention it, he didn't," she said thoughtfully as they walked down the barn aisle.

"I take it you haven't been around horses much?"

"Not at all."

"Just think of them as big dogs."

"I'll try," she said with a grin. "I have to admit I'm a bit nervous."

"That's natural, but you'll soon get used to them. The grey here is Belle," he said, stopping at the mare's stall, "and the chestnut in the stall next to her is Marge. Watch how I give Belle a piece of carrot. I flatten out my hand and put it in my palm like this. Now you do it."

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“Are you sure she won’t take my finger by mistake?”

“Positive,” he replied with a chuckle.

Watching her offer Marge a large chunk of carrot, Devlin was surprised to see how quickly Portia relaxed.

“What a sweetheart. Can I stroke her neck?”

“Sure. She might nudge you for another treat though.”

“Wow, they’re amazing,” she murmured, running her hand down Marge’s neck. “Can I give Belle a piece of carrot too? She’s looking at me so hopefully.”

“Of course, here are a few pieces. You can feed them both.”

“This is so cool,” she muttered as she gave the treat to one, then the other. “I didn’t realize horses could be so gentle.”

“Portia, these are the two horses that were in my trailer when you charged past it and hit me,” he said solemnly. “Fortunately they don’t spook easily, but if I’d been haulin’—”

“Oh, my gosh, I’m so sorry,” she exclaimed, cutting him off and staring up at him.

“As I was about to say, if I’d been haulin’ colts or fillies it might have become a bad situation. Perhaps now you can get some perspective on how disturbin’ that entire

incident was. Endangerin' the life of any animal for no good reason is totally unacceptable."

"I don't know what to say," she mumbled, her face blushing red. "It didn't even occur to me."

"Obviously. Why were you in such a hurry?"

"Uh, I was supposed to be at a dinner party. The traffic was terrible, which you obviously know, and I'd run out of time. I couldn't even get home to change. That's why I was putting my make up on in the car."

"And you didn't want to get stuck behind a truck and trailer."

"Something like that."

"I suspect you're not the most patient person even at the best of times."

"Pretty much," she admitted, then letting out a breath, she added, "and that afternoon was especially bad."

"It doesn't matter what's goin' on, when you're dealin' with horses, you have to remember things take as long as they take. If you get anxious or keyed up it doesn't help, it only makes matters worse. Bein' here you'll soon learn to take a deep breath and take your time. Come on, I'll show you the cabin. I stayed there while I was renovatin' the house. It won't be what you're used to, but it's comfortable and you'll have your privacy."

"Before we do that, can you explain exactly what I'll be doing?"

"Helpin' Jimmy and Mike clean the stalls, feedin', cleanin' tack, stuff like that."

“Did you say cleaning the stalls?”

“Yep.”

“You mean, like, pushing wheelbarrows around?”

“Yep.”

“Uh, but—aren’t they heavy?”

“They can be.”

“I’m not sure I want to do stuff like that.”

“Hey, Portia, this isn’t a vacation.”

“Yeah, I know, but—”

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“If you have any trouble one of the boys will step in, but you’ll be here to work. Any other questions?”

“I guess not,” she muttered with a frown.

“Hey, you don’t have to do this. You can always talk to the sheriff about—”

“No!” she exclaimed before he could finish. “Sorry, but between my lawyer telling me what I should and shouldn’t do, and the sheriff threatening me with jail, I can’t take any more.”

“Hey, I understand. You’re at fault, but I get that it’s been rough. Come on, I’ll show you the cabin.”

As they walked outside and headed towards the back of his house, he began to have second thoughts. She was short-tempered and he was concerned she might upset the calm atmosphere. But the horses had responded to her, and he was growing to like her--a lot--far more than he’d expected.

“That’s it,” he declared, pointing to a cabin set amongst some trees.

“Wow. It looks like a miniature Swiss Chalet. I thought it would be a shack.”

“That’s how it started out, but I lived there for over a year and I enjoyed fixin’ it up.”

Opening the door, he watched her face as she passed him, and grinned when she broke into a wide smile.

“It’s so nice,” she remarked, taking in the granite counter tops and the modern appliances. “I didn’t expect this. Sure, I can live here.”

“Good, but Portia, you have to do as I say, when I say. Do you think you can handle that?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Good. Then come back to the barn with me and I’ll show you the tack room. That’s where you’ll start first thing in the morning.”

* * *

Back at Portia’s house William was pacing. Devlin was a good-looking, well-built cowboy, and it was obvious Portia found him attractive.

The situation wasn’t good.

It wasn’t good at all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Standing in the tack room, Portia was feeling slightly overwhelmed by all the bridles, saddles and other equipment, but she also found it fascinating. When Devlin took her into the feed room and showed her various supplements and grains she shook her head.

“There’s so much to learn. How do you remember it all, and how do you know which horse gets what?”

“There’s a chart, and the buckets are all labeled with the horses’ names. It’s not

complicated, but it's important there are no mistakes. When you get involved in this, don't rush. Do you have any questions?"

"I'll probably have a million once I get started."

"Jimmy and Mike will help you. They're great guys and they've worked for me since I started. They're like family."

"What time should I be here in the morning? Shoot, I suppose I have to buy groceries."

"Are you sure you're up to this? There's still time to change your mind."

"Do I have another choice?"

"Not one you want. Anyway, I'm going to take Marge and Belle for a ride up Smoky Hill. I usually do that on my day off. It's a good break for us."

"I'd love to try something like that."

"Maybe one day you will. By the way, I can see your house from the trail."

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“Really?”

“Yep, I can see the whole area, including Annie Baker’s studio. Sometimes I catch sight of her musicians arrivin’. I heard she’s gettin’ ready to release a new album.”

“I still haven’t met her, kind of strange since she’s my next door neighbor, but I guess I will at some point. So, um, by any chance can you run me home? If you can’t I’ll call William.”

“That would be better. If I don’t get ridin’ up that hill pretty soon I’ll run outta light. But you can watch me tack up while you’re waitin’.”

“Sure, I’d like that.”

As he left the feed room and walked down the aisle and entered the tack room she paused to text William, but when she continued on, she stopped short and caught her breath.

Marge was still in her stall, but Devlin had placed a thick pad on her back, and was lifting a western saddle off a stand like it weighed an ounce. Watching him position it on top of the pad, she couldn’t help but admire his wide shoulders and muscled arms.

“That looks so heavy,” she remarked as he tightened the cinch.

“They used to weigh a ton, but they’re much lighter now.”

“What about Belle?”

“I’ll be ponyin’ her. That means leadin’ her on a long rope, though truth be told I don’t need it. Once I’m startin’ up the hill I’ll just loop it around her neck. They stick together.”

“Really? That’s amazing.”

“Horses get attached to each other, and they bond with their owners too. These mares follow me around the paddock, but is that your boyfriend I hear comin’ up the drive already?”

“He’s not my boyfriend, not even close,” she replied vehemently “But he’s been working for me since I received my inheritance and he takes his role way too seriously. Anyway,yeah, that’s the sound of his Corvette. I’d better get out there. Talk about impatient, I have nothing on him. Have a nice ride.”

“Thanks, I always do. You’ll be startin’ around nine, so come early enough to put away your groceries and belongings.”

“Oh, okay, will do.”

* * *

Tapping his steering wheel as he waited for Portia, a knowing sneer curled William’s lips. He had everything planned, and there was no way she’d slip through his clutches. Not this time!

Once he had her drugged he’d call the sheriff and explain how sick she was and invite him to see for himself. Then it was simply a matter of convincing him she had to return to Dallas for treatment. The stint at the ranch could be postponed, or they could negotiate an alternative.

“Hi, William. This place is incredible and the horses are so sweet,” Portia exclaimed as she climbed into the passenger seat. “I can’t wait to get started, and Devlin is really nice. I think he’ll be tough though.”

“I’m glad things worked out so well. Since we probably won’t see each other until this is all over I’m making us a special dinner.”

“Great, thanks, and that reminds me, I have to go to the store and I don’t know what time it closes. Can we zip into town real quick?”

“You have plenty of groceries already. Why don’t you just take what’s there.”

“You’re right, that’s exactly what I’ll do. And I have to pack my things. Not that I’ll need anything except jeans and casual stuff, though I think I’ll take something nice just in case. You never know, I might get lucky,” she added with a giggle.

William bristled.

The thought of Devlin laying a finger on her made him want to drive to the ranch and put a bullet through the cowboy’s forehead.

“So what have you made?” she asked, interrupting his dark thoughts.

“Chicken Parmesan. You’ll love it. And I’ve opened a bottle of that Cabernet Sauvignon you like. It’s breathing as we speak.”

“But it’s still early. I should have a quick bite to tide me over.”

“Don’t ruin your appetite.”

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“Not a chance. You know how much I love Chicken Parmesan.”

“I certainly do, and that’s why it’s ready to go in the oven.”

“I think want a cup of coffee and toast with marmalade.”

“You and your coffee,” he said with a grin, thinking about the vial of powder in his pocket.

“Yes, I know. I should probably have black tea now and then just to switch things up. In fact, that’s what I’ll do when I get in. I’ll have that instead.”

“But you love marmalade on toast with your coffee.”

“Yes, but I’m going to see how it is with tea. I’m feeling adventurous.”

Tightening his grip on the steering wheel William thought about the night ahead. Coffee or tea, it didn’t matter. He’d drop it into her mug, or even her wine later, and there was also the sauce for the chicken. It would be no problem adding the powder to that if he needed to. One way or another, Portia would be naked and lying next to him before sunset.

CHAPTER NINE

As Devlin rode up the trail his thoughts were consumed by the beautiful heiress. She was sexy as hell, and though she’d made a terrible error in judgement on the freeway, when he’d reviewed the video it had been obvious she’d been upset.

And he found her to be bright, very bright.

As he'd explained the working of the ranch she'd asked all the right questions and quickly understood his answers. He was also surprised how much she liked the cabin. She was living in a modern, sleek, spacious home, nothing at all like the rustic space she'd be moving into for a month.

But he was under no illusions.

In spite of her good qualities he had no doubt she could be difficult and defiant. The accident alone was proof of that, and he wondered how long it would take before she was over his knee. He'd give her fair warning, but he suspected she'd want to push the envelope and test him.

Following the bend in the trail that would take him on a parallel path above the neighboring properties, he smiled when he saw Brody King and Annie Baker riding in their outdoor arena. They'd been together since high school, but Annie possessed a rare talent. She could sing like an angel, and write songs with memorable lyrics. She'd chased her dreams in Nashville, only to end up in the clutches of a diabolical manager. But she'd managed to escape and had raced back to the man she left behind. Now she and Brody were married, and the psychopath who had made her life a misery was nothing but a memory.

A little further along was Andy Baker, Annie's brother. He'd married a young woman named Helen Rutherford who had found herself unwittingly involved with a tough, drug dealing biker.

The last property belonged to Cade McLean, a cowboy who inadvertently found himself offering refuge to a girl being hunted down by a race horse trainer involved in illegal gambling. The trainer had brought a henchman to Smoky Hill to do his dirty work, but they'd both been caught.

“There must be something in the water around here,” Devlin said with a chuckle as he continued on. “All these gorgeous girls in trouble were rescued by my buddies. I sure hope it’s not contagious.”

A few minutes later he was above Portia’s newly built home. He’d only seen the front from the road and it was impressive, but gazing down at the pristine property he let out a low whistle.

“Damn,” he muttered, lifting his binoculars from his saddle bag. In addition to a tennis court, there was a swimming pool with an expansive terrace boasting a row of sliding glass doors leading into the house. “This place looks like it belongs in Miami or Malibu.”

He was about to place his binoculars back into his saddle bag and turn for home when he spotted Portia stepping onto the terrace carrying a mug. She had just sat down when William’s lanky body appeared holding a tray. As he placed it in front of her, she shook her head, which seemed to upset him. Though he couldn’t hear what was being said they began shouting, then Portia jumped to her feet and marched away. Devlin thought that would be the end of it, but what he saw next sent a chill down his spine.

William lifted a vial from his pocket, tipped the contents into the mug Portia had left behind, then picked it up and hurried after her.

* * *

Portia had marched into her room and was lifting her suitcase from her closet when William walked in carrying her coffee.

“Sorry, Portia, if you’re not hungry that’s fine. It’s such a lovely evening I thought an early dinner by the pool would be nice. Anyway, here’s your coffee.”

“No, William, I’m the one who’s sorry. I know you’re only trying to be nice. I’m just a bit nervous about working at Rainbow Ranch. Not nervous in a bad way. I mean, it’s just so different to anything I’ve ever done before and I don’t want to mess it up. I really like Devlin, and I mean, I really like him. He’s not like any guy I’ve met.”

“Now hold on, Portia,” he began solemnly, placing the mug on her nightstand. “You don’t want to get involved with—”

“Shoot, my phone, hold that thought,” she said hastily, cutting him off and pulling it from her pocket. “Hello?”

“Portia, it’s Devlin.”

“Devlin, hello, I was just talking about you.”

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“Don’t react, don’t say anything, just listen. I’m sitting on Marge above your property. I just saw William pour something into the mug you left at the pool, then he followed you inside. Don’t drink it, and don’t act weird.”

“Um, okay.”

“You need to get away from him. Can you send him off someplace and meet me at the back gate?”

“Yes, I can do that.”

“Great, I’ll be waitin’. You might want to throw on a pair of jeans real quick.”

“Okay, bye.”

“What did he want?” William asked as she ended the call.

“He just wanted to make sure I’m bringing the right kind of clothing. Can you do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“In one of the cabinets in the garage there’s a large, grey suitcase. I need it. The one I have in my closet will be too small.”

“No problem, I’ll fetch it while you finish your coffee.”

“Good idea,” she replied, picking up the mug. “Thanks, William.”

But as he left, her heart skipped.

There was no grey suitcase.

He’d have to hunt for it.

That would take time.

And she had an idea.

Holding the mug, she grabbed a half empty bottle of water from her bedside table and raced into the bathroom. After emptying the water into the sink, she poured in half of the coffee, replaced the cap, then hurried back into the bedroom and set the mug on her dresser. She’d hastily pulled on a pair of jeans and boots and was about to leave when she had a sudden thought. Stepping quickly to the bathroom door, she pressed in the knob at the back and pulled it shut, causing it to lock from the inside.

Hurrying from her bedroom and through the lounge, she moved out to the patio and ran across to the fence. She could see Devlin on horseback waiting on the other side, and as she opened the gate he jumped off his mare.

“Here, this was in my coffee mug,” she exclaimed, hastily handing him the water bottle.

“Great,” he said, taking it and placing it into his saddle bag. “Now face the saddle and kick your foot back at me. When I lift you up just swing your leg over, and don’t worry. Marge won’t move.”

“Oh, my goodness! Are you sure about this?”

“Of course, it’s easy, trust me.”

“I do, I do.”

“On three! One, two, three!”

As he hoisted her up she felt as light as a feather, and settling into the saddle she felt surprisingly comfortable.

“Just relax and sit there. I’m going to ride Bella and pony you, but we have to get movin’ before William comes out and spots us.”

“How can you ride Bella without a saddle or bridle?”

“I ride these horses naked all the time,” he replied with a wink.

In spite of the frightening circumstance she grinned back at him.

“Now that,” she quipped, “is something I’d like to see.”

CHAPTER TEN

Though William hadn’t been able to find a large, grey suitcase he didn’t care and had barely looked. He knew when he returned to Portia’s bedroom she’d be in no condition to pack anything. She’d be perched on the edge of her bed slightly dazed, or perhaps even stretched out and half asleep. Talking to her softly, he’d caress her curves, slowly remove her clothes, then strip off as he admired her nakedness. Coercing her into sex would be easy, and with his cock already stiffening at the thought he marched into her room. To his shock he found it empty and her coffee mug was on the nightstand.

Striding across the room and finding it half empty, a ripple of confused panic moved through his body. She should be lying on the bed totally out of it. Suddenly thinking she might be in her bathroom he hurried to the door and tried the handle, but it was locked.

“Portia!” he yelled, banging his fist against the hard wood. “Wake up.”

He paused to listen.

There wasn’t a sound.

Convinced she was passed out on the floor, he ran from the bedroom, moved out onto the terrace and around the side of the house. Striding past the pool and turning the corner, he moved quickly to the bathroom window. Though it was high, he was tall

enough to peer through.

“What the fuck?” he muttered, a deep frown creasing his brow.

There was no sign of Portia, and looking across to the door he could see the locking button had been pushed in.

His mind began to race.

Something was wrong.

Something was horribly wrong.

He'd been in the garage so he knew she hadn't left in one of the cars, and if someone had picked her up he would have heard them.

Could she have left by foot?

Bolting along the side of the house as fast as his long legs would carry him, he raced through the gates and down the drive. There was no sign of her or anyone else, though there were woods directly across the road. But she had swallowed half the cup of coffee and would be virtually incapacitated. Jerking his phone from his pocket he stared at the screen, wondering if he should call.

“Fuck. It can't do any harm.”

* * *

In spite of the circumstances Portia was loving her impromptu ride on Marge. In the first few minutes Devlin had told her to hold the reins, but lightly, and if she felt out of balance to hold onto the saddle horn. Jethro and Jezebel ran beside them, and when

they sometimes headed off to follow a scent Devlin would call and they'd come right back. As they turned down the track that took them across the hill and looked over the ranches, Devlin told her about each of her neighbors.

“When I was ridin’ to your place I was thinkin’ how crazy it was that my buddies had to rescue their ladies. Now here I am doin’ the same thing.”

“Really? I’m your lady?” Portia asked with a grin. “Does that mean I’m forgiven for hitting your truck on the freeway?”

“Not yet, you’re not, and as to bein’ my lady, that would mean I’m your man, and if I was your man you’d be ridin’ that mare on a sore backside.”

“What did you just say?” she shot back as her heart skipped. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“That’s what you need after that stunt you pulled on that packed highway, a good spankin’, and if we were a couple that’s what you’d get.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“As a rattler! But regardless, it sure is strange how you’ve landed in my life and the next thing I know there’s some jerk out to hurt you. What’s the story with him?”

“What do you mean?”

“How well do you know him. Why is he here with you? And why did he spike your coffee?”

“I honestly have no idea, but hold on, that’s my phone,” she muttered, lifting it from her pocket. “Oh, crap, it’s him. What should I do?”

“Let it go to voicemail and see what he says.”

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“Should we call Sheriff Cooper?”

“I want to talk to you first and get an idea of what’s goin’ on. Don’t get me wrong, the sheriff’s a great guy, but I might be better off dealin’ with William myself. He’s a slick lawyer. He’ll probably have all kinds of ways to mess with a country sheriff. Now tell me, what’s the deal with you two?”

“There is no deal. He’s my attorney.”

“What’s he doin’ here?”

“He has some paperwork I have to sign and he needed to explain some things. I didn’t want to go back to Dallas so he invited himself down for the week.”

“Huh. Well, you can’t be alone with him again, and I’m bettin’ he’ll be comin’ to the ranch lookin’ for you. But I have another question. Why did you decide to build a home out here? Surely you have a life in Dallas.”

“That’s a story for another time. Do you mind?”

“Nope, not at all,” he replied as they started to make their way down the trail to his ranch. “As soon as we get there go straight into my house. I’ll let you into the cabin later.”

“Do you think William will show up?”

“I have no idea, but I’m playin’ it safe in case he does.”

“What about the coffee in the water bottle?”

“You leave that to me.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When they reached the barn Portia climbed off Marge and hurried to Devlin’s house, while he unsaddled the mare and took both horses back to their paddocks. But as he stood watching them he let out a heavy sigh. There was a question he’d been dreading, and to his relief Portia hadn’t asked it.

Why were you in the trees above my house, and how did you see William putting something in my coffee from so far away?

He had to tell her about the strange sense of foreboding he’d felt when she’d climbed into the Corvette and left the ranch.

But there was something else.

Something that was driving him crazy.

The moment they’d met he’d felt a spark, and during the ride back to the ranch the attraction had grown stronger. He was now longing to run his hands over her knockout body and kiss her ridiculously kissable lips.

But it was more than physical.

There was something about her.

Something he couldn’t put his finger on.

Something that made his heart pump.

Something that stirred his cock.

Something that made him want to wrap her into his arms, close his eyes and breathe her in.

Something that made him want to protect her.

It was disturbing, but it was also exhilarating.

* * *

Walking slowly through Devlin's home Portia found it comfortable but decidedly masculine. She wasn't surprised. It was just like him. He was easy to be around, yet the most manly man she'd ever met.

The guys she'd dated in Dallas were nothing like him.

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Their hands were soft, not calloused like Devlin's. While many worked out at expensive gyms, there wasn't one whose physique could compare to his. And most of them were stressed, which was to be expected. Whether it was real estate, stock trading, or some other lofty career, the stakes were always high and they constantly dealt with large sums of money.

As she moved through the hallway she stopped to admire an antique etching of an old western town, but a short passage a few feet away caught her attention. Peering around the wall she spied double doors, and wondered if they led into his bedroom. Unable to resist a peek she moved quickly forward and took hold of the door handle—then paused, pondering whether or not she should continue. Finally throwing caution to the wind she pushed them open and stepped inside.

A chunky, dark wood, four post bed with antique nightstands on either side stood proudly between two paned windows boasting tan, suede drapes. Spying a chest of drawers against the wall to her right, she spotted another door she assumed led into his bathroom.

“Do you like it?”

Startled, she spun around and found Devlin standing in the doorway.

“So? Do you?”

“Uh, yeah, it's very...uh...you,” she replied, trying to ignore the sudden thumping of her heart.

“Why are you so nervous?”

“I’m not.”

“Yes you are, and it’s because I’ve caught you nosin’ around?”

“Sorry, I was just curious.”

“Don’t you know what they say about curiosity?”

“It killed the cat?”

“Well, yes, but there’s something else. It’s also considered the lust of the mind.”

“The lust of the mind,” she repeated softly. “I’ve never heard that.”

“Portia, you’ve been a bad girl,” he murmured, moving slowly towards her. “What do you think I should do about that?”

* * *

As Devlin stared into Portia’s eyes he saw both excitement and trepidation. But most of all recognized her hot, carnal longing.

She wanted him.

All of him.

Just as he wanted her.

“Nothing to say?”

“Uh, I’m sorry, honest.”

“I should punish you,” he said, placing his finger under her chin and tilting up her head. “Maybe I won’t give you what you want.”

“Which is what?”

“You want me to kiss you, and that’s just for starters,” he whispered, moving his lips to her ear. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

“I...I...”

“But before we go any further, tell me why you were crying,” he murmured, shifting his head back to stare down at her.

“Crying? When?”

“Just before you hit my truck. I saw it on the video. You were wiping tears from your face. What happened?”

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“It was nothing,” she muttered, though a frown creased her brow.

“Don’t brush it away. If you don’t want to tell me, that’s okay, but maybe I can help.”

“It’s just something I overheard ages ago, and I can’t seem to get it out of my mind.”

“Go on.”

“It was one night at the country club. I was about to walk into the powder room and I overheard two girls talking. I thought they were my friends, but they were making fun of my clothes, my hair, everything,” she whimpered as a single tear spilled from her right eye. “My family didn’t have much until my grandfather invented that special rubber, and everyone knows it.”

“Damn,” he grunted, pulling her into his arms. “Girls like that—people like that—lead empty lives. It’s all about what they have, not who they are.”

“It’s one of the reasons I decided to have a country house, a place where I could escape when the whole social thing became too much. Anyway, while I was sitting in that traffic jam it flashed through my mind and suddenly I just had to get home. I couldn’t stand being on that freeway one more second.”

“So you hit the accelerator.”

“Yeah. I really am sorry. I just wasn’t thinking.”

“Hey, stuff happens,” he said softly, sliding his hand into her hair and clutching it

tightly. “Forget about them, forget about all that crap. You’re here now, with me.”

“And I’m so glad,” she whispered, “so very, very glad.”

She was looking up at him, but closed her eyes as if inviting his kiss and he couldn’t say no. Tugging back her head, he lowered his lips on hers and softly kissed her. But as she fervently pressed her mouth against his, the passion between them sparked to life.

“Devlin,” she whispered when he finally pulled back. “I feel so weak.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Oh, no, it’s an amazing thing...please, please take me to bed!”

With his hardness pressing against his jeans, he swept her up, carried her to his bed, laid her down and stretched out beside her. He wanted to consume every inch of her, to utterly possess her, to thrust his hardness inside her until she was screaming his name.

“I don’t do this,” she suddenly panted. “I mean, I don’t just jump between the sheets, I don’t, I swear.”

“We’re in the same boat. This isn’t normal for me either. Does that help?”

“God, yes, now shut up and kiss me again.”

“First I’m takin’ off every stitch of your clothin,’ then, darlin’, I’ll do a whole lot more than kiss you.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Devlin's growled promise sent a warm shiver through Portia's body, and as he peeled off her clothes she thought she must have died and gone to heaven. His hands were rough, and his firm caress sent tingles through her entire being. When she was finally naked and he pressed his fingers into her sex, she let out a long, low, groan. But as he thrust them into her passage, he lowered his head and drew her nipples into his mouth, making her moan even louder. The blissful attention continued for long, heavenly minutes, until he reached across to his nightstand and pulled a condom from the drawer. She watched, mesmerized, as he knelt up, tore open the packet and sheathed his rigid rod.

"How much do you want me?" he asked huskily, stretching out over her and placing himself at her entrance.

"So much I can't stand it."

"Will you behave? No more snoopin'?"

"Yes, I mean...I'll try."

"Ah, an honest answer," he muttered as he slowly pushed inside her warmth.

He began to stroke, and she closed her eyes, savoring the feel of him, but when he abruptly accelerated she found herself lost in a sea of scintillating sensations. She was about to beg him never to stop, but he unexpectedly pulled out and flipped her on her stomach.

"Now, you beautiful girl, it's time for a quick chat," he began, gripping her hips and jerking them up, "I'm in charge around here. You can't just do as you please, like nosin' around," he declared, landing a hard smack on each cheek, evoking a startled cry.

“Oh, my God, I can’t believe you did that!”

“Are we clear?”

“Yes, yes, we’re clear,” she exclaimed urgently.

“I get the feelin’ you’ve never had your butt spanked. Am I right?” he asked as he pushed his hardness back inside her.

“Yes, you’re right, and I still can’t believe you did it.”

“I’ll do it whenever I think you need it, and you’ve got a really spankable ass, I might just smack it now and then because I want to,” he added, slapping her again.

Though she let out another cry she felt an unexpected surge of excitement, and couldn’t deny the odd thrill from being disciplined. But he gripped her waist and began vigorously pumping, and all thought left her. He was utterly possessing her and she never wanted it to end.

* * *

Though Devlin had been attracted to Portia the minute he’d laid eyes on her, he’d planned to take things slowly. But when he’d seen William pour something into her coffee mug he’d been forced to act. Once she was safely on Marge and they were making their way up the trail, he’d been surprised how quickly she had relaxed in the saddle.

After they’d reached the barn and he’d released Marge and Belle into their paddocks, he’d wanted to talk to her over a cup of coffee in his kitchen. But when he’d found

her standing outside his bedroom door he'd stopped in his tracks. It was obvious she was considering doing something she knew she shouldn't.

The moment had captivated him.

As she'd pushed open the door and stepped into his bedroom, energy had surged through his loins and he'd marched after her. When she'd turned around she'd been enticingly close, and the subtle fragrance of vanilla and roses had tickled his nostrils. He'd felt an overpowering need to kiss her, so he had, and the way she'd responded told him she felt the same spark.

Now oblivious to anything but her euphoric cries and sighs, he had to fight back his climax. Quickly pulling out, he moved her onto her side and stretched out behind her. As he pushed himself back into her slick passage, he wrapped one arm around her breasts, placed the other down the front of her body, then pressed his fingers into her sex.

"That feels amazing," she mewled, wriggling against his touch. "I'm getting so close..."

"You have to learn patience, and now you'll have your first lesson."

As he began to stroke he continued to rub her clit, but when he sensed her orgasm drawing near he stayed buried inside her and cupped her pussy. Though she groaned and begged and urgently pleaded, he remained still, then repeated the tantalizing torture, continuing the teasing and denial until his own orgasm demanded release.

"Okay, naughty girl, are you ready," he panted, his lips at her ear.

"God, yes, please, please."

Tightening his hold around her waist he pumped with abandon as he zealously agitated her sensitive nub. Only seconds passed before he heard her suck in a long breath and felt her body stiffen.

“Surrender, baby, give it to me,” he grunted as he felt himself about to explode.

Her wild cry fueled his excitement, and as she wailed and writhed his climax seized him, sending him into a spiraling vortex of crackling convulsions.

* * *

For long minutes they floated in the post orgasmic haze, until their euphoria was abruptly interrupted by the sound of Jethro and Jezebel furiously barking.

“Sorry, babe, I need to see what the ruckus is all about,” Devlin muttered. “They only carry on like that if a stranger arrives.”

“Maybe it’s just one of your clients.”

“They wouldn’t bark at any of them,” he replied, climbing from the bed.

Hastily slipping into his jeans and T-shirt and pulling on his boots, he strode through the house and out onto the porch. To his shock he saw the Corvette, then spotted Jethro and Jezebel barking furiously at William. He had backed up against a nearby corral and was leaning against the fence, apparently afraid to move.

“Hey, boys, back off!” Devlin called as he trotted down the steps.

Though the dogs stopped barking, they continued to stare at the intruder.

“Hello, William. What’s up?”

“Those dogs are—”

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“Doin’ their job,” Devlin retorted, cutting him off. ”What’s goin’ on?”

“Where’s Portia?”

“Excuse me?”

“I said, where’s Portia?” William shouted, causing Jethro and Jezebel to growl.

“I wouldn’t yell at me like that, the dogs don’t like it, and why are you askin’ me?”

“Except for her friend Helen Rutherford, you’re the only person she knows around here, but I checked with Helen and she’s not there, so where else would she be?” William demanded angrily. “She literally vanished. She didn’t take her car and—”

“Isn’t it bein’ repaired?”

“She has more than one,” William sneered.

“If you’re worried about her call the sheriff.”

“Oh, trust me, I will! I’ll get a search warrant, and when I do I’ll tear this fucking place apart.”

“But there’s nothin’ to suggest she’s here? You’re not makin’ any sense.”

“I’m not an idiot. I saw the way you were lookin’ at each other.”

“Excuse me?”

“Hey, the only other way out of her house is through the back gate. I checked, and horse prints are all over the place.”

“Horse prints?” Devlin repeated with a chuckle.

“You know what I mean!” William snapped. “Their feet, hooves, they’re everywhere.”

“William, we ride over there all the time. There’s a trail that runs along the back of those homes. Like I said, if you’re worried call the sheriff. Come here again unannounced and I’ll let Jezebel and Jethro do the talkin’ for me. Now get off my property.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As Devlin called Jethro and Jezebel to his side, William hurried back to his car, hastily climbed in and headed down the driveway. Though he wanted to speed away he was worried the tires would kick up the gravel and scratch the paint. But as he turned onto the road he slammed his foot on the gas. The car rocketed forward, its powerful engine taking it from zero to sixty in three-seconds. William loved the dangerous thrill, but was forced to quickly slow down as he approached a bend. Not wanting to risk a ticket and end up on the wrong side of the sheriff, he drove the speed limit back to the house. But his mind continued to race. In spite of the cowboy’s denials William was sure Portia had secretly left through the back gate and been spirited away by Devlin on horseback.

But what had Devlin been doing there?

Was it a coincidence, or the two of them made a secret date?

Pulling a stunt like that would be just like her.

She loved to play games.

It was one of the things he hated about her.

But she'd swallowed enough of the spiked coffee to knock her out, or at least make her drowsy and incoherent. How could she have made her way through the house to the back gate, let alone sit on a horse?

As he drove into the motor court his head was still spinning, but when he stepped from his car an idea came to mind.

"You want to play games?" he muttered, walking up to the front door. "No problem. I'll play, but you'll be sorry. I play dirty and I always win."

* * *

When Devlin walked back in his house with the dogs, he stopped in the kitchen to brew a fresh pot of coffee and plate the cinnamon rolls he'd bought the day before.

"Don't you dare touch them," he warned, seeing Jethro and Jezebel eye the tasty treats as he set them on the table.

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As they barked and laid down, he strode through the hall and entered the bedroom. Portia was still lying on her side and hugging his pillow.

“Hey,” he said softly, moving across and sitting on the edge of the bed. “I have coffee brewin’.”

“Wonderful, I’d love a cup, but I just don’t understand what’s going on with William. Why did he try to drug me?”

“I hate to say this, but nine times outta ten there’s only one reason a guy spikes a girl’s drink, and we both know what that is.”

“I can’t believe it. What should I do?”

“First we need to find out exactly what’s in that water bottle. My vet’s a close friend. I’ll call him and see if I can drop it off and have it tested. If we find out it was spiked we can contact the sheriff. In the meantime—”

“In the meantime I want to go back to my house and tell William to get the hell out and never come back.”

“That’s a bad idea.”

“It’s not if you come with me.”

“That’s even worse.”

“Why?”

“Because if he does something stupid I’ll have to step up, and I don’t need that slick lawyer suin’ me for assault. But we do need to go over there so you can get your things. We just have to make sure he’s not around when we do.”

“How will we manage that?” she asked, sitting up and reaching for her T-shirt.

“We can talk about all this over coffee.”

“That sounds good...and can I have a hug?”

“You can have all the hugs you want.”

As she leaned into him and he wrapped her up, he closed his eyes and breathed her in.

“Come on, let’s get out of here before I decide to jump on your bones all over again.”

“You won’t hear me complaining,” she murmured, slowly pulling back and staring at him.

“Good to know, but right now we need to talk. If you want to freshen up the bathroom is through there,” he added pointing to the door. “I’ll see you in the kitchen.”

* * *

Back at Portia’s house William was sitting on the sofa in the living room staring into his open briefcase.

He had a problem.

A big one.

He was supposed to be in Dallas the following morning for a meeting with an important client, but he couldn't leave without Portia and her fortune under his control. There were several legitimate documents she needed to sign, but he'd slipped a Power of Attorney between them.

He couldn't understand how everything had gone so wrong. The plan had been perfect. Get the drug in her system, have her sign the documents before she was too wasted, then seduce her as she fell victim to the effects. She'd wake up in his arms and probably freak out, but he'd make her another cup of coffee with just enough of the drug to keep her quiet and compliant. If luck was with him, over time she'd fall pregnant, then he'd really have her!

But now she was gone, and the unanswered question continued to confound him.

How she had been clear-headed enough to get away?

A sudden thought flashed through his mind.

Had she suspected something, called the cowboy, then tipped half of it down the sink?

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“Fuck! That would explain why I couldn’t find that damn grey suitcase. There wasn’t one!” he yelled, jumping to his feet. “That was just a way to get me out of the house so you could get away with that fucking cowboy. Portia, you shouldn’t have messed with me. This isn’t over. Not even close.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After devouring a cinnamon roll and washing it down with the rich coffee, Portia sat back in her chair and let out a contented sigh.

“Devlin, that has to be the best cinnamon bun I’ve ever eaten, and that coffee was fabulous. Thank you.”

“That’s because it was PO.”

“What’s PO?”

“Post orgasmic.”

“You’re terrible,” she retorted with a grin.

“I have my moments,” he winked back.

“Seriously, where did you get them?”

“The Moonshine Campground. They have a great restaurant. If you’re a good girl I might just take you there for dinner one night.”

“And if I’m a bad girl?” she asked, lowering her voice and titling her head to the side.

“If you’re a bad girl I’ll still take you, but you’ll be sittin’ on a hot seat.”

“Devlin!”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you, but we have more important things to talk about. Tell me more about your life and about William. How did he become your lawyer, and just how well do you know him?”

“I should start with my grandfather. He was an inventor. When I was a little girl I ran over a nail on my tricycle and it changed our lives. Have you heard of Rigid Rubber?”

“Of course, it revolutionized the tire industry—among other things.”

“My grandad created it. That’s why he left me all his shares in that company. He said if it hadn’t been for me he would never have worked on it. Anyway, that was just the start. After that became successful he had the money to explore all kinds of things. I spent hours with him in his workshop. My father was a corporate lawyer, but he started his own firm specializing in patents and copyrights to protect grandad.”

“How does William fit into this?”

“He doesn’t, not really. He just works for a law firm dad deals with. William came to a party at our house and when I mentioned I wanted to build a country home he introduced me to this amazing architect. Once the project started William was extremely helpful, but I had no interest in him, romantically I mean, though I’ve always sensed he likes me. Regardless, nothing ever happened, then a few weeks ago something changed. He was sort of, pre-occupied. I asked him if he was okay and he just said he was crazy busy. That was it. He never seemed aggressive or

threatening...never! I just don't understand any of this."

"Hmm. There must be—"

"Sorry, that's my phone," she exclaimed as the chime interrupted him, but as she lifted it from her pocket she caught her breath. "Oh, my gosh, it's him."

"Put it on speaker and stay friendly, like nothin' happened. If he asks where you are just say you're takin' a break and don't want anyone to know."

"Okay. Hello?" she began, answering the call.

"Portia. Thank God. What's going on? I'm worried about you. Where are you? Why did you take off without a word?"

"It doesn't matter where I am," she replied, staring at Devlin. "I just needed to get away and I didn't want to talk about it."

"But you have to be at Devlin's ranch starting tomorrow."

"Yes, I know. That's part of the reason I took off. I just needed some time to get my head together. I can't imagine staying at that dusty ranch for a day, let alone a month."

"Portia, I'm very confused."

"Why?"

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“For starters, how did you leave? You didn’t take your other car.”

“I went out the back gate. Did you forget I have a friend who lives out here? Anyway, I’m at her place.”

“I should come and get you. ”

“Hold on, William, she needs me for a second,” Portia exclaimed, hastily touching the mute button. “Devlin, that’s true. I’m close to Helen Rutherford. She married a rancher named Andy Baker whose sister is Annie Baker, the famous country and western singer.”

“I know, they’re friends of mine, but get away from the subject of where you are. Tell him you weren’t feeling very well when you left but you’re okay now, then ask him when he’s going back to Dallas.”

“Okay,” Portia muttered, then taking a deep breath, she unmuted the phone. “Sorry about that.”

“No problem,” William replied. “Are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

“Better now. I wasn’t feeling great when I left, kind of woozy, but I took a nap and now I’m fine. Don’t you have to get back to Dallas?”

“Yeah, but I wish you hadn’t taken off without talking to me.”

“Sorry. I just didn’t want to get into a discussion about it. When are you leaving?”

“Tonight, but I have some paperwork you have to sign before I leave. Tell me where you are and I’ll bring it over.”

“I don’t want to bother my friend with visitors,” she replied as Devlin suddenly typed something into his phone and held it out for her. “I’ll meet you at the bar at the Moonshine Campground restaurant in half-an-hour,” she exclaimed, reading what Devlin had written.

“I don’t know that place.”

“Search it on line. It’s very popular with the locals. Helen says they have great pastries,” she added, grinning at Devlin.

“But—”

“I have to go, and I’m sorry I worried you. See you there.” Quickly ending the call, she dropped the phone on the table and let out a breath. “That wasn’t easy.”

“But you were great!” Devlin said reassuringly.

“Now what?”

“We’re goin’ over there, but make sure you check whatever it is you have to sign. He’s up to no good. I can feel it in my bones.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Placing the documents into his briefcase, William strode out to the motor court, climbed into his Corvette, and roared out on to the quiet country road. When he’d searched the Moonshine Campground online there was an endless list of excellent reviews, but all he cared about was Portia’s signature on the Power of Attorney.

He had to come up with a very large sum of money—and fast. His original plan had been to drug her at her country home, then turn into her loving boyfriend and take control of her finances. But suddenly it had fallen apart, mostly because of her reckless accident on the crowded freeway.

Now he saw only one way forward.

Transfer a significant number of shares from her portfolio into his, then sell them and disappear.

Though starting a new life under a different identity was daunting, he'd started making preparations a few weeks earlier when he found himself in over his head. It was when things had gone from bad to worse that hijacking Portia had come to mind.

Now it appeared that route was closing, and he couldn't wait around to see if he could pry it open again.

One of the senior partners had started asking awkward questions, and a client's accountant had requested a meeting. Starting over was a challenging ordeal, but it was a whole lot better than facing prosecution for embezzlement and various other white collar crimes.

Turning into the campground he rolled to a stop in the parking area, grabbed his briefcase and walked quickly to the restaurant. But as he opened the door he stopped short. He could see the bar, and sitting on a stool next to Portia was the cowboy.

William couldn't risk trying to sneak in the Power of Attorney with Devlin next to her.

Furious, he marched back to his car.

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He'd have to find a different way to get her signature on the document.

It was his only way out.

But as he left and started back down the road he saw a sign.

LAKE VIEW POINT.

Impulsively following it, he found himself driving down a short gravel lane leading to a lake set below majestic mountains. It was one of the most magnificent sights he'd ever seen.

Rolling to a stop and letting out a heavy breath, he stared up at the peaks, then across the still, glassy lake.

It was the perfect place to think.

* * *

"This is strange," Portia remarked with a frown as she glanced at her watch. "William is always on time. He's obsessive about it. How long should we wait?"

"Why don't you sign contracts electronically? Whenever my lawyer has documents he shoots them over with an email."

"Most of the time I do, but he came to the house to help me deal with the sheriff and everything after the accident, so he brought the paperwork with him."

“Ah, I see. If he doesn’t show up soon we should leave. I want to show you around the rest of the barn while it’s still light so you’ll be ready to start in the mornin’.”

“Can’t we spend a little more time here? It’s such a great place.”

“It is, but you haven’t met all the horses. When we get back I’ll take you into the paddocks and introduce them.”

“What about their owners?”

“You’ll meet them as they come and go, but don’t worry, you won’t be workin’ for them, just me. I was thinkin’, when we leave here we should swing by your place so you can pack a bag.”

“I don’t want to go until William has left. What he did has freaked me out,” she remarked with a heavy frown, but as she finished speaking her phone rang. “It’s him.”

“Answer it and stay calm.”

“Calm, right,” she muttered. “Hi, William, where are you?”

“Sorry, Portia, I got held up, but I’m pulling into the parking area now. I’ll be right there.”

“Okay, see you in a minute. That answers that question,” she remarked, ending the call. “What do I say about you being here with me?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll handle that, just follow my lead. But a couple of minutes after he joins us go to the ladies room,” Devlin said, then looked over his shoulder at the restaurant entrance. “He just walked in. Remember, act naturally. He has no idea I

saw him put that powder in your tea and we need to keep it that way.”

As Portia turned and watched her lawyer stride towards them she wanted to jump to her feet and scream at him, but she managed to swallow back her anger.

“Hey, Portia, hello, Devlin. I didn’t expect to see you,” William declared, placing his briefcase on the bar.

“Portia called and said she needed a lift.”

“My friend had to be somewhere,” Portia interjected.

“Are you okay?” William pressed. “Why the sudden need to get away from the house?”

“I felt bored and restless, so when she called and asked me over I decided to go. I should’ve left a note or texted. Sorry about that. But would you excuse me for a minute? I’ll be right back.”

As she slipped off the bar stool and walked away, Devlin remained quiet as William opened his briefcase and placed the documents on the bar.

“Devlin, I think we got off on the wrong foot,” he began. “My only concern is Portia’s welfare.”

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“Yep, mine too, and that’s why you’re goin’ back to the house, packin’ up your stuff and leavin’. I’ll give you fifteen minutes. If you’re still there when we arrive you’ll have to see a plastic surgeon about your new nose.”

“Are you crazy?”

“I can be,” Devlin warned, lowering his voice and leaning towards him.

“I’m her lawyer. You can’t threaten me. I’ll sue your ass if you—”

“You can try, but that won’t fix your face or take away the pain, and you’ll have a helluva time provin’ I did anything,” Devlin growled. “And for the record, it’s not a threat. I’m tellin’ what will happen if you don’t skedaddle. She’ll sign what she needs to sign, then you’ll get the fuck outta Smoky Hill and turn her account over to another lawyer. Here she comes. Now make it quick.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Staring at the tough, muscled cowboy, William was genuinely scared, but the moment Portia signed the documents he’d be gone, and not just from Smoky Hill. He was leaving his life, and the sooner the better.

“Did you hear me?” Devlin demanded as he saw Portia making her way towards them.

“Yeah, yeah, I heard you. Don’t worry. I’ll take off and I won’t be back.”

“What is it you need?” Portia asked as she perched herself back on the bar stool.

Though he could feel Devlin’s eyes on him, William didn’t feel rattled. The lake and mountains had magically settled his nerves, and he’d had a brainstorm. After she had executed the documents, he’d cut off the signature line from one of them and paste it at the bottom of the Power of Attorney. When it was copied and emailed to her broker it would appear legitimate. It was referred to as cut and pasting, an outdated way of changing documents. When he was a boy hanging around his father’s busy office the secretaries would sometimes let him help.

“Just sign at the bottom like always,” William said, handing her the papers.

“But these are just minor addendums to the tenancy agreements,” Portia exclaimed. “I don’t understand the urgency.”

“I just wanted to get them out of the way. You know how work can pile up,” he replied as she scribbled her name. “Thanks. Now I’ll go back to the house and get my things. But Portia, if anything comes up I’ll be at your beck and call like always.”

Placing the papers back in his briefcase, William felt his heart tick up. He was almost there. But as he marched away he wanted to spin around and tell Devlin to go fuck himself.

Then he suddenly wanted to laugh out loud.

He’d soon be a free man.

Free from the boring work.

Free from the tough bosses at the law firm.

Free from the demanding clients.

He had no idea why the drug hadn't worked on her, and changing his plans midstream was nerve-racking, but he was starting to see it as a blessing. He'd have his millions, and he wouldn't have to deal with Portia ever again.

* * *

Watching William leave the restaurant Devlin's eyes narrowed. Something didn't feel right.

"What's wrong?" Portia asked softly. "Aren't you glad he didn't argue about anything?"

"I made it clear if he did he'd have a problem. But he backed down too quickly, and he doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would do that. What was it you signed?"

"I own a small apartment building and it was just an addendum to the rental contract. It doesn't even go into effect until the beginning of next year. There was no urgency about it."

"That's weird," Devlin muttered. "I don't trust him. I know you're uncomfortable at the thought of bein' in your house while he's clearin' out his stuff, and I don't see him as a petty thief, but I think we should go over there."

"Maybe you're right. I can pack while you keep your eye on him, though he might be gone by the time we get there."

"Let's go. Who knows, maybe catchin' him by surprise will pay off. My gut is tellin' me something's up."

* * *

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The moment William arrived at Portia's home he hurried down to the basement and unlocked the door leading out to the side of the house. He didn't think he'd have any reason to return, but if something went horribly wrong it could be a temporary hiding place.

Moving to his room he packed the few items he kept there, but as he headed out the front door he saw the cowboy's truck rolling towards the house. Not wanting to speak to him or Portia, he hurried to his car and managed to climb behind the wheel and speed past them as they rolled through the gates.

* * *

"Damn, he was in a hurry," Devlin remarked, rolling to a stop. "Something's up, I can feel it."

"I don't understand," Portia muttered as they climbed from his truck. "He tried to drug me and now he's racing away like—"

"Like his life depends on it," Devlin interjected with a worried frown.

Hurrying through the front door they moved around the house, but Portia found nothing out of place.

"This is crazy," she exclaimed, throwing up her hands.

"Why don't you pack a few things while I call Pete."

“Who’s Pete?”

“My vet. I’ll ask him if he can analyze that coffee you put in the water bottle. It’s in my glove box. We can drop it off on the way back to the ranch. Sammy will be there by now.”

“Sammy?”

“He fills in for Jimmy and Mike. Monday’s their day off too.”

“I can’t keep up,” she said, shaking her head. “When did you put the bottle in your glove box?”

“Right after you gave it to me.”

“Is there anything else I should know about?”

“Plenty. But you go pack. I really do need to get movin’.”

As she marched away, Devlin lifted his phone from his pocket and called Pete. After a quick explanation, the vet was happy to help.

“But, Devlin, you should really give it to Sheriff Cooper,” he added. “Whatever I do will be off the record.”

“Yep, I know, and that’s how I want it, at least for now.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Quickly putting away the rest of her clothes, Portia hurried from the house and into the barn. As she entered the feed room she found Devlin standing in front of the row

of containers scooping out the contents and dropping them into a bucket.

“Do you have to do this every day?”

“Jimmy and Pete do, but I do it on Mondays. It’s their day off.”

“I thought it was yours too.”

“It is, but I have to help Sammy. He’s got his hands full workin’ alone. Stand beside me and familiarize yourself with the labels. You’ll soon learn the order they’re in. As I told you before, not every horse gets the same supplements. You have to pay attention.”

“I love the smell in here,” she remarked as she watched him.

“Yeah, me too, but pay attention. When I’ve finished with each bucket, take it to the shelf with the horse’s name shown’ in the front.”

Standing quietly as he filled each of the buckets, she studied the names of the products, then the chart which he constantly checked. When they’d finished and were about to leave, he suddenly hugged her.

“What’s this for?” she asked as his arms tightened around her. “Not that I’m complaining.”

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“Just cos,” he muttered. “Come on, let’s go out and visit with Marge and Belle.”

As they walked through the barn she noticed Sammy cleaning out a stall. He was shoveling out the soiled shavings and dropping them into a wheelbarrow, then he’d pile in clean shavings from a second wheelbarrow.

“That looks like hard work,” she remarked. “How many horses do you have here?”

“It is, and currently I have eight clients and twelve horses. There’s plenty of room for more, but the reason they’re all doin’ so well is because I can give both the horses and riders so much of my time. Here comes one of them now,” he added, glancing down the driveway.

Following his gaze she saw a white Subaru SUV come to a stop in the parking area.

“That’s Jennifer. She’s a barrel racer. She has a great horse and she’s a really talented rider. She’s on track to be State Champion this year.”

Watching the shapely redhead climb from the Subaru and wave, Portia felt a twinge of jealousy.

“Hi, Devlin, what happened to your truck?” the girl called, staring at the dented front fender as she jogged up to meet them. “Are Marge and Belle okay?”

“They’re fine. I have to arrange to get it fixed, but it’s still drivable.”

“Hi, I’m Penny,” Portia said quickly before Devlin could introduce them.

“Hi, nice to meet you,” Jennifer replied. “Are you bringing a horse in?”

“Uh, no, I’m just visiting.”

“She’ll be stayin’ with me for a while,” Devlin interjected.

“Oh, I see. Have we met before? You look vaguely familiar.”

“People say that to me all the time. I must have one of those faces.”

As she’d spoken a horse in a nearby paddock let out a loud whinny.

“That’s Joey, my boy,” Jennifer declared looking across at him. “I’d better get over there with his treat before he gets mad. Nice to meet you, Penny.”

“You too.”

“Penny?” Devlin murmured quietly as Jennifer hurried off to the paddock.

“I had to come up with something. I told you, if word gets out I’m here the paparazzi will be all over this place. They’ll be up Smoky Hill climbing the trees and trying to sneak onto the property. If that doesn’t work they’ll try bribing your neighbors.”

“You’re not serious.”

“I’m totally serious.”

“Okay, Penny it is,” he said, taking her hand and heading towards Marge and Belle’s paddock.

“Devlin, I’ve been wondering about something.”

“What’s that?”

“When you saw William put that stuff in my coffee mug why didn’t you call the sheriff then? He could have arrived and caught him red-handed--literally.”

“Believe me, I thought about it, but I didn’t know anything about William. If he could be violent, or if he had a weapon and what he might do if he was cornered.”

“Ohhh, I see what you mean.”

“Then I realized I could warn you about the coffee, and I’d have a good chance of gettin’ you outta there safely.”

“Honestly, Devlin, calling me like that was brilliant, and you did it just in time.”

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“Thank the Lord,” he murmured as they reached the paddock.

“Do you think we should tell Sheriff Cooper about it now?” she asked. “Though I suppose, with William gone...”

“Let’s ask Marge and Belle what they think,” he replied with a grin. “They have horse sense.”

As they entered the paddock the mares ambled over to them,

“They’re so lovely,” Portia murmured, stroking Marge’s neck. “Can you really ride them naked?”

“Sure, though horses should have a quality bareback pad to protect their spine. But I can show you for a few minutes.”

Portia watched, amazed, as he took hold of Belle’s mane and swung himself onto her back. The next minute he was walking her in a large circle, then he broke into a trot, and moments later, began to canter.

“That’s incredible,” she exclaimed as he stopped beside her and climbed off. “But everything is. The horses, the ranch, everything, but especially the horses.”

“Oh, dear,” he said, sliding off Belle’s back. “You’ve been bitten by the bug. There’s no hope for you.”

“Bug? What bug? Where?” she asked frantically, wiping her arms and shaking her

hands.

“No, no, relax, not that kind of bug.” he said with a chuckle. “The horse bug. It’s something you’re born with. Like Annie Baker loves to sing. You can have a love of horses but not realize just how much until you’re actually around them. That’s happenin’ to you.”

“You’re right. It’s one of the reasons I wanted to move to the country, so I could be near them. It just never occurred to me that I could actually ride or own one.”

“Well, darlin’, now you can do both.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

As Devlin introduced Portia to the rest of the horses and explained their habits and idiosyncrasies, she found it fascinating and asked him endless questions. By the time they left the paddocks he realized how much time had passed and he had to hurry into the barn to speak with Sammy.

“I can’t believe how long we’ve been out here,” Portia remarked, checking her watch. “And now I’m suddenly hungry. Why don’t I make us an early dinner?”

“You don’t strike me as a woman who’s spent much time in the kitchen.”

“We didn’t always have money. I used to help mom with our meals all the time. I still do when I visit.

“Great, so what can I expect?”

“I’ll have to see what’s in your refrigerator—assuming it’s okay for me to nose around in there,” she added with a sassy grin. “God forbid I lift the lid off something

I'm not supposed to."

"Be careful, young lady, or I'll throw you over my shoulder and—"

"You'll have to catch me first," she exclaimed, cutting him off then bolted across the driveway to the house. But when she reached the porch and looked back, she saw him staring at her with his arms crossed.

Her heart skipped.

The moment seemed frozen in time.

But he abruptly turned and walked into the barn leaving her both exhilarated and titillated.

It was a seductive combination.

Loving the feeling she headed into the kitchen determined to cook up something sexy and scrumptious. Finding a surprising number of vegetables and a packet of hamburger meat, a few ideas came to mind. She was trying to decide when her phone rang. Lifting it from her pocket she was surprised to see it was her stock broker. Most of her investments were longterm and they rarely talked.

"Hey, Sharon," she said, accepting the call. "This is a surprise. What's up?"

"It's this Power of Attorney you sent over. It's been notarized, but the witness signature is illegible and it's not clearly stated beneath the line."

"Uh...but I didn't send you anything, certainly not a Power of Attorney. Where did it come from?"

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“Your lawyer’s office. To be honest I was a bit dumbfounded. I thought you would have contacted me directly.”

“Wait, do you mean it came from William Buckley?”

“It did. I’ve been trying to call him but he’s not in his office and I don’t have his cell phone. That’s why I’m calling you.”

“Sharon, I didn’t authorize this, and actually, I fired him a few hours ago. Oh, my gosh. This is crazy. What’s he attempting to do?”

“Are you sitting down?”

“I am now,” she replied, dropping into a chair at the kitchen table. “This Power of Attorney came with a request to sell a large number of your Rigid Rubber shares and have the funds transferred into an offshore account.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing.”

“I would have contacted you about this before finishing it up anyway. I would never continue with such a big transaction without speaking to you. I have to say, I’m shocked. I thought William Buckley was a whole lot smarter than this. What an idiot.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask, but how much are we talking about?”

“\$2.5 million.”

“You can’t be serious. How the hell did he think he could get away with it?”

“Coincidentally, when I talked to one of my colleagues about this a few minutes ago, he said there are rumors flying around that William Buckley has been attending some pretty wild parties and spending money like he’s one of his wealthy clients. But don’t worry, I’ll make sure everything you have is secure. And just to be on the safe side you should call your bank and ask them to freeze your accounts.”

“I will, I’ll do that right away. Thanks so much for calling, Sharon. I owe you one.”

“You don’t owe me anything. Let me know if you need my help, whatever it might be.”

“I will, and I’m just so grateful.”

“Speak to you later, Portia.”

“Yes, I’ll call you soon.”

Staring at her phone Portia couldn’t believe what she’d just been told. It was despicable terrible betrayal, and before she could stop them tears spilled down her face. When her cell phone buzzed she barely heard it. Not only had William attempted to drug her, he’d tried to steal a huge amount of money. When it buzzed a second time she didn’t even hear it.

* * *

In the barn Devlin had texted Portia to let her know he’d been held up and would probably be at least another thirty minutes. When she didn’t respond he stepped outside and looked across at the house. Trying her a second time and still not receiving a reply he became concerned.

“I’ll be right back, Sammy,” he called over his shoulder as he hurried to the house. Entering the kitchen with Jethro and Jezebel running ahead, he found her at the table in tears.

“Darlin’...what’s wrong?” he asked urgently, quickly sitting down and taking her hand.

“It’s William. He just tried to steal a huge amount of money from me. I can’t believe it. I’ve known him for years.”

“How What did he do?”

“He sent a fake Power of Attorney to my broker ordering her to sell a bunch of shares, along with instructions to transfer the funds to an offshore account.”

“So that’s why he needed you to sign those papers. I knew there was somethin’ wrong.”

“But there was no Power of Attorney.”

“We’ll figure all this out, but the point is he didn’t get away with it.”

“I’m just so shocked. He has dozens of papers in his office with my signature. Why didn’t he just use one of them?”

“Now that’s a mystery, but when the authorities catch up with him you’ll find out.”

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“Don’t you mean if they catch up with him?”

“Nope. Seems like he’s not playin’ with a full deck right now and he’s sure to make another mistake. When he does he’ll go down. In the meantime you’ll be safe here with me. And I know just how to get your mind off all this.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

On the drive back to the ranch Devlin noticed Portia was unusually quiet. When he asked if she was okay she nodded and smiled, and though he sensed there was something on her mind he didn’t push. As he stopped outside his house and they climbed from the truck, Jethro and Jezebel raced up to meet them with Sammy jogging along behind them.

“Hey, Devlin,” the young man panted as he approached, “I’m glad you’re back. I was about to call you. There’s something up with that new chestnut. He’s real edgy.”

“Ah, yeah, thanks, Sammy. Portia, come with me, you should see this,” Devlin said briskly as he headed to the barn.

All the stalls had spacious attached corrals, but the horses spent their days in paddocks. The gelding had arrived the previous week. His name was Sandman, Sandy for short, and Devlin was letting him settle in before deciding on his pasture.

“See, he’s walkin’ in circles and doesn’t want his hay,” Sammy exclaimed. “He’s been whinnying as well.”

Devlin immediately understood why the horse was agitated. Grabbing a halter and rope, he opened the stall door and walked in.

“Easy, Sandy, I know,” he murmured, deftly slipping the halter over the horse’s head and leading him out.

Though the horse was prancing Devlin kept calmly walking, but as they left the barn Sandy whinnied loudly.

“What’s wrong with him?” Portia called, keeping up but at a safe distance.

“Even though he can see the paddocks and the other horses from his corral, he’s already bonded with the two on either side of him. Watch as I move him closer to their paddock. He’ll start to settle.”

As Devlin predicted, Sandy continued to whinny, but appeared to calm down.

“Are you going to let him join them?”

“Yep, I can now, but I’ll stay with him for the first couple of minutes.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Only if you don’t know what you’re doin’,” he replied with a wink. “Close the gate behind me.”

But as Sandy’s two new friends ambled across to greet their new stablemate, Devlin knew there’d be no issue and slipped the halter off his head.

“That’s a good boy,” he murmured, stroking the horse’s neck. “You can relax now.”

“How did you know?” Portia asked as Devlin walked out the gate.

“Separation anxiety is pretty easy to identify, but I had to make sure they’d get along before turnin’ them out together. He’s only been here a week or so, and it usually takes longer for horses to become friends, but they can surprise you. Remember I told you about Marge and Belle?” he continued, pointing to another paddock where the two mares were grazing. “They’re attached at the hip. If I take one of them out and leave the other, they start yellin’. I rescued them from a feed lot and I think they must’ve been together a long time.”

“That’s so sweet.”

“Yeah, though it can also be a problem. But I’m happy leavin’ things as they are between them. They don’t compete in the show ring anymore, but sometimes I use them for lessons. You’ll learn how to ride on Marge. She has the smoothest gaits.”

“I’m going to learn to ride?”

“Sure. You’ll be here a month. All work and no play is not a recipe for success or happiness, and you looked comfortable on her. You sat really well.”

“I did? Wow, thanks. I was surprised how much I enjoyed it. So...what now?”

“You should unpack, then meet me in the barn.”

“But...uh...where?” she asked, lowering her voice.

Devlin stared at her for a moment, then frowned.

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“Ah, I see what you mean. Where do you want to be? You can have your own space at the cabin, or you can hang out with me.”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“Let’s see...would I mind havin’ your gorgeous body in my bed every night,” he murmured, feigning a frown. “Hmm, now that’s a tough decision.”

“You’re a beast,” she exclaimed, punching his arm.

“Guilty, and you don’t know just how much of a beast I can be.”

“Will I get lucky and find out?”

“You are one sassy girl. Come on. There’s a guest room with an empty closet and dresser. You can put your stuff in there.”

* * *

After Devlin had carried Portia’s bag inside and placed it on the bed, he kissed her lightly on the cheek then headed off. Moving to the window, Portia watched him march towards the barn. His shoulders were squared, and she could imagine him as a sheriff in the Wild West wearing a gun belt around his hips about to face down an outlaw. With the image making her grin she began to unpack. But it was only a few minutes later her cellphone chimed, and when she glanced at the screen she saw it was him.

“Hi, this is a surprise. Do you miss me already?”

“Of course, but that’s not why I’m callin’. I just spoke to Pete, my vet. Your coffee was spiked with Rohypnol, otherwise known as the date rape drug.”

“Oh, my gosh,” she muttered, sitting on the edge of the bed. “I knew he’d done it, but hearing that has made me feel a bit weird. What should we do?”

“I’m not sure. We can talk about it more tonight. Maybe we should let sleepin’ dogs lie, but I don’t like the idea of him on the loose. There are other vulnerable women out there.”

“Yeah, I know. But at least he can’t get to me here.”

“Not a chance. Now finish unpackin’ and get over here. I’m in the feed room and we have work to do.

CHAPTER TWENTY

As Devlin rose to his feet, Portia stared up at him and broke into a smile. He looked like Superman.

“Come with me,” he said taking her hand. “I’ll make you forget all about that weasel.”

Feeling butterflies springing to life in her stomach, she pushed back from the table and walked with him down to the bedroom.

“You’re right, this will take my mind off things,” she murmured as he started to peel off her clothes.

“You don’t know what I’m about to do yet.”

“Aren’t you going to jump on my bones?”

“Nope. Now lie on your stomach and relax.”

As she settled onto the bed she watched him kick off his boots, then abruptly climbing over her and straddling her waist, his large, rough hands began massaging her shoulders.

“Ooh, that’s amazing,” she groaned. “You’re so strong.”

“And you’re wound up like a corkscrew. No talkin’. Just sink into the mattress and let me work my magic.”

But as she surrendered to his artful prowess she experienced an unexpected wave of emotion.

“Sorry,” she sniffled, trying to fight back the tears.

“Hey, don’t be sorry, let it out,” he murmured, leaning over and placing his lips at her ear. “That’s part of the problem. You hold things in. Tell me what’s on your mind. Is it just William and what he did, or is there more?”

“There’s more,” she sputtered. “It’s my life. It’s been years since things took off and we started having money, but it still doesn’t feel right. I don’t care about all the parties and stuff. I don’t even enjoy them. That’s why I decided to live out here near Helen. Not that I’ve seen much of her,” she finished with another snuffle.

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“Once you start workin’ around this place you’ll soon forget about all that stuff, and you can invite Helen over whenever you want. Now take a deep breath. Your spine’s out. I’ll pop it back in.”

As he cracked her back, then worked on her arms and legs, the heavy emotion began to lift. When he finally finished and climbed off the bed, she half-opened her eyes and watched him remove his clothes. Seconds later, when he stretched out next to her and brought her into his arms, she let out a long, grateful moan. He held her for long, marvelous minutes, then roamed his hands over her body, kneading her breasts and rubbing between her legs. Finally reaching past her, he retrieved a condom from his nightstand, sheathed his hardness, then moved on top of her and thrust into her warmth.

Though he began with slow, deep strokes, he soon quickened his pace, grabbing her arms and holding them over her head. As he expertly brought her to the brink then backed off, she found herself lost in a sea of sparkling sensations.

“Please...” she begged breathlessly.

It was all she could manage, but it was enough.

Moments later she was tumbling through the spine-tingling spasms, then collapsing, breathless and deliriously happy with her head in the hollow of his shoulder.

* * *

As Portia and Devlin were sinking into their post-orgasmic haze, William was

downing the last swallow of an expensive whiskey.

He was filled with rage.

For the second time a plan he believed would be seamless was in chaos.

Portia's broker bitch had questioned the Power of Attorney, and though he'd said all the right things she'd still called Portia to verify the instructions.

"Stupid cow," William growled, suddenly hurling the cut crystal tumbler across the room.

At least the sale of his Corvette had gone smoothly and he had a briefcase full of cash. But it wasn't enough for a private jet to a far away destination where he could settle into a new life.

He had to think of another way to get his hands on some of Portia's fortune and lie low while he was doing it.

He smirked.

At least that part of his scheme was still viable.

Her house in Smoky Hill.

Leaving the basement door open had been a stroke of genius. Not only could he hide out while he planned his next move, she had an impressive collection of artwork and antiques. He'd pick through them and select those he could sell to his wealthy underworld friends.

But as he thought about her, a fresh frown furrowed his brow.

He still couldn't understand how she had drunk half the cup of coffee and not ended up semi-conscious on her bed. The drug had never failed him before.

"I'm going to find out if it fucking kills me," he muttered, but knowing he was pushing his luck and it was time to hit the road, he abruptly rose to his feet.

Picking up the bag he'd hastily packed, then lifting his precious briefcase from the coffee table, he hurried into his backyard, left through the back gate and marched towards the street. He'd bought an inexpensive sedan with his new fake ID and left it parked around the block. It was a short walk, and he was soon climbing behind the wheel and pulling away from the curb.

Though he was in a hurry and slightly panicked, he reminded himself to obey all the traffic signals, and not to speed, especially when he reached the country. The last thing he needed was a run in with Sheriff Cooper or one of his deputies.

The drive seemed to take forever, but he was finally rolling up the low bank across the street from Portia's house and driving into the trees. Though it was annoying having to lug his bags back to the road, his car was well hidden. When he reached the side of the house and pushed open the basement door, he walked in, locked it behind him, then leaned against the wall, let out a heavy sigh, then smirked.

On the journey he'd concocted a new scheme.

A way to lay his hands on Portia's money.

And get his revenge on the interfering cowboy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Though Devlin was a little taken aback by the intense and sudden romance with

Portia, he wasn't about to rein it in. In some ways she was the stereotypical spoiled rich girl, but she also possessed a loving sweetness and a passionate soul.

"I hope you realize not every day will be like this," he said, tightening his hold. "My ranch is a busy place, and you're not allowed to distract me. I'll be teachin', and when I'm not teachin', I'll be working with horses in the round pen or ridin' myself."

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“And what will I be doing?”

“Helpin’ Jimmy and Mike, cleanin’ the tack like I showed you, fillin’ hay nets, whatever they need.”

“You don’t have to worry. I’m ready to tackle whatever you throw at me. Oh, look. We have an audience,” she added with a grin.

Turning his head he saw Jethro and Jezebel sitting side by side staring at them.

“They look like they’ve been up to no good,” Portia exclaimed.

“They’ve probably been next door.”

“To Annie Baker’s place?”

“Yep. It’s their home away from home. When her musicians are there those two mutts can’t wait to join the fun. Annie claims the guys spend more time playin’ with them than they do rehearsin’.”

“That’s so funny.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s doggie party time. Is that where you’ve been?” Devlin asked as they suddenly jumped on the bed. “Yep, that’s where they’ve been. They always come back rambunctious like this. Come on, we need to get up anyway.”

The dogs jumped down, then started barking and ran from the room.

“What’s up with that?” She asked. “Did they hear someone?”

“Nope, it’s Milk Bone time.”

“They’re so demanding.”

“They can be,” he replied with a chuckle as he quickly dressed. “I’ll see you in the kitchen.”

“I’m right behind you,” she called after him, but as she picked up her jeans her phone rang in the pocket. Sitting back down she lifted it out and was surprised to see it was her father.

“Dad, I’m so happy to hear from you.”

“How is everything working out? Are you getting along with that cowboy? After your email we didn’t hear anything.”

“Sorry, the hours have just flown by. Everything’s great. I love it here, especially being around horses.”

”Good, good, but, Portia, Sharon just called and told us what William Buckley tried to do.”

“Oh, yes, it’s so bad. I was going to call you and let you know, I just haven’t had a chance, but I figured she’d be in touch. Has anything happened? Has he been fired? I assume his firm knows.”

“Oh, yes, everyone knows but he’s disappeared. Your mother and I are a bit worried. There’s no telling what he might do. No-one had any idea he was so crooked...or apparently unstable.”

“He can’t get to me on this ranch, no way, and I won’t go off anywhere by myself. I will have to go back to my house at some point to pick up a few things, but Devlin will take me, so I’ll be fine.”

“Please keep your eyes open. All sorts of things are coming out about that young man. It’s truly shocking.”

“Like what?”

“A couple of the secretaries at his law firm have come forward and claimed he drugged them.”

“Oh, dad, he probably did. He tried to drug me.”

“No! When? What happened.”

“It’s okay, sorry, I didn’t mean to panic you. Devlin came to my rescue.”

“Have you contacted the police there?”

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“Not yet, but we were just talking about that.”

“What a mess. Please stay put and don’t go off anywhere by yourself. Do you need anything?”

“No, dad, I’m fine. Devlin has been amazing, especially considering I hit his truck. I’m guessing he’ll be taking it in to get fixed sometime this week. I’m not sure, we haven’t talked about it.”

“Stay in touch, and if I hear anything about William I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks, dad. Bye for now.”

Ending the call, Portia let out a happy sigh. Since the crazy afternoon on the freeway her life had taken a wild turn, one she never could have imagined. Though it had been a wild ride, she had Devlin, and it was worth every moment.

“Hey, what’s goin’ on?” Devlin asked, poking his head in the door.

“Dad called. William has disappeared.”

“Damn. We’d better keep our eyes open, there’s no tellin’ what that joker might be up to. Get dressed and come back to the barn with me. It’s time to bring the horses in, give them their buckets and blanket them for the night. I’ll show you how we do that.”

* * *

The sun was setting and there was a slight chill to the air. Dressed in slacks, hiking shoes, a thick polo shirt and awindbreaker, William moved through the back gate and started up the hill. He had a small, powerful pair of binoculars, two pairs of handcuffs, a flashlight, and a revolver. With his long legs he had no problem climbing the hill. It was a dry, easy trail, but when the path turned to the left he paused to catch his breath.

He didn't know how long it would take to reach the area above Devlin Hatfield's ranch, and he didn't care. He wouldn't be making his move until it appeared the ranch had settled for the night. Depending on the circumstances he might even wait for another evening. He needed to be alone with Devlin and Portia, and when it mattered, William could be a very patient man.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

After Devlin and Sammy had brought the horses in from the paddocks, Sammy began distributing the buckets while Devlin showed Portia how to put on the blankets. Once the horses were fed, blanketed and settled, Portia stood by Marge's stall while Devlin talked with Sammy before he left for the day.

"Any questions?" Devlin asked walking up and standing next to her.

"I can't think of any. I really like just watching them. It's oddly comforting."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," he said with a sigh, placing his arm around her shoulders. "It will start gettin' chilly soon. The temps dip overnight at this time of year. We should get back to the house. Huh...where have those dogs gone?"

"I don't know, I haven't seen them."

As they stepped outside, Devlin whistled. Within seconds they could hear the dogs

barking, and moments later they saw Jethro and Jezebel racing towards them.

“They’re coming from Smoky Hill,” Devlin muttered. “They’re not supposed to go up there without me.”

“Apparently they don’t know that.”

“Oh, they know,” he declared as the dogs reached them. “What do you think you were doin’?” he scolded, staring down at them. “No goin’ up that hill without me.”

Though the dogs looked sheepish for a moment, they spun around and ran up to the house.

“Why don’t you want them up there without you?”

“Wolves and other wildlife,” Devlin said solemnly. “We haven’t had any trouble, and I want to keep it that way.”

“Wolves?” Portia repeated. “That sounds scary.”

“We’ve lived side by side for years, but I still don’t want those two up there without me.”

By the time they reached the house the dogs were waiting impatiently on the porch, and hurried inside the moment Devlin opened the door.

“So, if they’re not allowed, why do you think they went up?”

“I’m wonderin’ that myself,” he replied with a frown as they entered the kitchen “I guess there must have been a scent too temptin’ to ignore.”

“Devlin, can I have a hug?”

“Sure, darlin’,” he said, lowering his voice and wrapping his arms around her. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, I just never expected anything like this. Being on this ranch is nothing like I thought it would be, and what’s happened between us—it’s taking my breath away,” she murmured, melting against him.

“You’re a natural,” he murmured, tightening his hold.

“What do you mean?”

“The way you are around the horses, you’re a natural. Some people are awkward, but you’re not, you’re completely comfortable. Just like you were when you settled into the saddle on Marge.”

“I really love being around them.”

“Why didn’t you ever take up ridin’?”

“I thought about it, but I guess I was too busy with other stuff.”

“Funny how that happens.”

“What?”

“If a person is meant to be around horses, somehow it happens. I have a couple of riders that came late into the game, and it was a strange twist of fate for both of them. One of them had an uncle leave her his horse in his will, and the other decided to take lessons to get over a broken heart. Now they’re hooked. That’s what happens. You’re either in it completely, or not at all. There’s no half measures. Horses will do that to you. Once they steal your heart there’s no escape.”

“I believe it,” she said, breaking into a smile. “There’s nowhere I’d rather be than here, and it’s only been a day. In fact, once the month is up you’ll have trouble getting rid of me.”

“Beautiful girl,” he murmured, and suddenly lowered his lips on hers in a warm, ardent, endless kiss. “I should put you over my knee,” he muttered as he pulled back.

“Why?”

“You are way too temptin’, that’s why. I’ll fix us some coffee and we’ll go over what you can expect tomorrow.”

“Do you mind if I take a shower first? I feel kind of mucky.”

“Yeah, that happens at a ranch. Go ahead. I’d like to join you but if I do we’ll never leave the bathroom.”

* * *

His heart racing, William was hurrying through the woods back to Portia’s house.

From beginning to end, the plan had totally failed.

First there were the dogs.

He had settled into a spot with a clear view of the house when they'd appeared out of nowhere, barking and growling. His first thought was to shoot them, but quickly realized the sound of the shots would alert Devlin. He'd finally managed to scare them away by waving branches at them, but once they'd scampered off he'd heard a ghostly howl, followed by another and another.

He'd never heard sounds like them, and as he'd hurried back through the trees there seemed to be noises coming from everywhere. To make matters even worse, on his way down the trail to the back gate, he'd slipped and twisted his ankle. By the time he'd hobbled into the house he was drenched in a cold sweat and utterly exhausted. As he'd collapsed on the couch and removed his hiking shoes, his hands were shaking.

"What the fuck was that?" he grunted. "Those damn woods are haunted."

Finally catching his breath, he hobbled to the drinks cabinet, poured a generous amount of whisky into a glass tumbler and downed it in one gulp.

"Now what?" he muttered under his breath. "Now you rest," he answered himself. "Rest and regroup. This isn't over yet, not by a long shot."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The following morning Portia woke to find the bed empty. The night before, when she'd curled up next to her handsome cowboy, he'd kissed her softly and said goodnight. She'd been surprised, but exhausted after her big day she was soon falling asleep to the sound of his deep, heavy breathing.

Now glancing at the clock and seeing it was already past seven-thirty, she yawned and stretched, then climbed from the bed and padded across to the bathroom door. When she knocked and didn't get a reply, she was about to open it when Jezebel

suddenly appeared at her side.

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“Well, hello there,” she exclaimed, leaning down and petting the happy dog.

“You were sleepin’ like a baby. I didn’t have the heart to wake you.”

Jerking her head around, she saw Devlin ambling towards her.

“Good morning,” she said with a smile. “What time did you get up?”

“Around seven. What do you like for breakfast?”

“Just oatmeal, if you have it. With blueberries, walnuts and chopped bananas.”

“The oatmeal and bananas I can do, but we’ll have to go shoppin’ for the walnuts and blueberries,” he retorted with a grin, then abruptly pulled her into his arms. “Sure is nice to have you here.”

“So I’m officially forgiven for hitting your truck?”

“Nope, not yet, but I’ll find a way for you to make it up to me.”

“I’m sure you will.”

“In the meantime I’ll cook up your oatmeal and see you in the kitchen.”

“Devlin...?”

“Yeah, darlin’?”

“I’m sorry about the accident, but I’m not sorry about anything else,” she said softly.

“Me either,” he murmured, then turned her around and swatted her butt. “Don’t take forever.”

* * *

As she let out a squeal and hurried through the bathroom door, Devlin broke into a grin. She could be both spunky and sweet, and she had totally stolen his heart. Returning to the kitchen, he cooked up the oatmeal, making enough for both of them, but when she walked in and sat down he could see something was on her mind.

“I need to go back to the house,” she declared before he could ask. “I left a couple of things behind.”

“Are they important things?”

“For one thing, my daytime sunblock moisturizer. My face will burn if I don’t use it, and a couple of other bits and pieces as well. Plus, there are blueberries in the fridge, and I have an unopened package of walnuts. I sprinkle them on just about everything.”

“Ah, okay. My first lesson is at ten. After we finish puttin’ the horses into their paddocks, I can run you over there real quick.”

“You don’t need to. I can walk. There’s that trail that runs behind my neighbors.”

“With that creep William on the loose I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“He wouldn’t go back to my place, and even if he did he wouldn’t be able to get in.”

“Shoot, look at the time,” Devlin muttered, glancing at his watch. “Sorry, but I need to get to the barn. Join me down there when you’re done.”

“Okay, and I’ll clean up before I do.”

“Thanks, darlin’,” he said, pushing back from the table, then leaning down, he pecked her on the cheek. “You two, keep her company,” he added, petting his two dogs. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

As he left, Jethro and Jezebel moved across to the cabinet where the milk bones were kept, then sat down and stared at her.

“Okay, okay,” she said with a laugh. “I can’t say no.”

After giving them their treat, she finished her breakfast and cleaned up, then left for the barn. But as Jezebel and Jethro trotted down the porch steps, they abruptly turned and ran towards the hill.

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“Hey, where are you going?” she called after them. Though they stopped, they began barking and pacing. “Come on, we need to get to the barn.”

As she started marching away they ran after her, then raced past her towards the stable area.

“There you are,” Devlin exclaimed as he stepped out to greet them.

“There’s something up on Smooky Hill,” she exclaimed. “The dogs kept barking and looking up at the trees.”

“Huh. I’ll check it out later. Come in, it’s time to get to work.”

* * *

In spite of his sore ankle and the frightening experience in the woods the night before, William had ventured back up Smoky Hill trail so he could watch the comings and goings at the ranch during the morning hours. All he needed was fifteen minutes alone with the cowboy and Portia. But the dogs had stood at the base of the hill sounding the alarm, and now a car was coming down the drive. There were also two other cowboys he hadn’t seen before leading the horses into the paddocks.

Suddenly the quiet barn had become a busy one.

Frustrated, he was about to turn around when a thought flashed through his mind.

His plan had been to hold Devlin and Portia at gunpoint while Portia made calls and

transferred funds to an offshore account. But it suddenly occurred to him there was a much safer and sneakier way to get what he needed.

Steal her handbag.

She carried everything in it.

Her wallet, credit cards, even her passport!

With his pulse ticking up, he moved down the hill to the back of Devlin's as quickly as his painful ankle would allow, then continued cautiously around to the front. Glancing anxiously across to the barn and not seeing anyone, he climbed up the porch steps and entered the house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Portia had been in the tack room cleaning the bridles and saddles when Devlin poked his head in and asked her to join him.

"I want you to watch this lesson," he declared as he marched through the barn. "Debbie is an excellent rider, and her horse is push-button perfect. She thinks it, he does it. I want you to see how effortless it can be."

Delighted that he'd pulled her away from the tedious task, she climbed up to the viewing platform and sat down. Though she didn't understand many of his instructions, the more she watched, the more she wanted to learn. By the time the lesson came to an end, all she could think about was sitting on Marge again.

"So, what did you think?" he asked as she climbed down from the stand and joined him in the ring.

“It was fantastic, and that girl was amazing. I didn’t see her actually do anything, but the horse was changing gaits flawlessly.”

“Exactly. We’ll talk about it more later. I have to give another lesson now and you should go back to what you were doin’.”

“I will, but I just need to run up to the house for a minute. I forgot to bring my phone and I should have it with me just in case.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later.”

As he walked back into the barn and she started to jog to the house, Jethro and Jezebel ran up and trotted along beside her.

“I bet you’re coming with me so I’ll get you a milk bone,” she exclaimed with a laugh. As if understanding her, Jezebel barked. “I knew it, and you’ll get one, don’t worry,” she promised as they trotted up the steps. Entering the kitchen, she stopped at the cabinet and gave them both a bone, then stood for a moment and looked around for her phone. “Let’s see, where did I leave it...?” she muttered, then suddenly remembering it was on the nightstand, she hurried down the hall and into the bedroom. But as she strode across and picked it up, she paused.

She’d left her hobo bag on the chair by the window, but it wasn’t there, and the window was wide open.

Her heart skipping she darted across the room and stared outside just in time to see William running towards the trees.

“Stop!” she screamed, but before she could climb through and give chase, Jethro and Jezebel leapt up on the chair and jumped out the window after him.

While she urgently texted Devlin, she could hear the two dogs snarling and barking as they ran. Moments later, as she watched William's lanky body disappear into the trees, she suddenly saw her handbag flying through the air towards them, then a shot rang out. Horrified, she clambered out and called their names. To her great relief they stopped just short of the forest.

“Portia! Jezzie! Jethro!”

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As Devlin's voice rang through the air she spun around and saw him sprinting towards her.

"Thank God," she exclaimed, running up to him and collapsing into his arms.

"What the hell's goin' on? I heard a shot."

"William was here. He stole my bag. When the dogs started chasing him into the woods he threw it at them. I was already out the window by then, and that's when the gun went off," she explained breathlessly.

"You went after him?"

"My bag has my life in it. I can't believe he was here!"

"Take it easy," he said, lowering his voice and hugging her as the dogs ran up. "Are you two okay?" he asked, staring down at them.

As Jethro barked, Jezebel ran back towards the trees, picked up the bag and proudly carried it back.

"Come on, we're goin' inside. You said he came from the woods?"

"He must have. All I saw was the back of him when he ran off."

"Come inside. I'm callin' the sheriff then I'll close the ranch for the day. I can't have my people here with that maniac on the loose."

“Thank goodness he didn’t hurt the dogs, and look, my wallet’s still in here. I wonder why he didn’t take it.”

“When Jezzie and Jethro gave chase he probably panicked,” Devlin remarked as they made their way back to the house. “But why would he want your bag? What’s in it that’s so important?”

“I have no clue, unless he wanted my credit cards, but he would have known I’d freeze everything. Unless...” she muttered as they walked around to the front porch. “Maybe he was planning to use my ID to transfer money from my account to his. He knows my life is in this bag.”

“That sounds more likely,” he replied as they walked in and made their way to the kitchen. “You sit down and catch your breath while I call Sheriff Cooper.”

* * *

Panting heavily and hobbling down the trail to Portia’s house, William was still cursing under his breath and trying to control his panic. When he’d seen the hobo bag sitting on the chair by the window he couldn’t believe his luck, but as he’d been sneaking away the dogs had suddenly come after him...and they’d been snarling.

He’d still been lifting his gun from his pocket when they were nearing the edge of the trees. Hurling the bag was the only thing he could think of to stop them. It had slowed them down, but in his panic the gun went off, scaring him half to death. Knowing it would bring Devlin and the other cowboys running he’d made a hasty retreat, but with his sore ankle it hadn’t been easy.

The entire episode had been an unmitigated disaster.

Reaching the back gate, he limped across the terrace, entered the living area and

collapsed on the couch.

“Back to Plan A,” he muttered, leaning his head back and closing his eyes, “and if I have to fucking kill them both, I will.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

When Sheriff Cooper rolled down Devlin’s driveway he did so with a bad feeling in his gut. He’d already been alerted to keep his eyes open for Portia Peyton’s lawyer, William Buckley. Now the man had tried to steal Portia’s tote bag from inside Devlin’s home and been scared off by his two boisterous dogs. The ranch was unusually quiet, but the sheriff knew Devlin had cancelled the lessons for the rest of the day.

“Hi, Sheriff, thanks for comin’ so fast,” Devlin exclaimed as the sheriff pulled to a stop and climbed out. “It’s hard to believe William showed up here but he did.”

“There’s already an alert on him,” the sheriff replied. “If he’s still in the area it’s only a matter of time before my deputies catch him.”

“I hope so,” Portia piped up. “I’ve known him for years, and I had no clue he was such a bad guy. I still can’t wrap my brain around it.”

“They come in all shapes and sizes,” the sheriff remarked solemnly as he lifted a small, leather covered pad and pen from his pocket. “So, tell me exactly what happened.”

As Portia outlined the events of the morning, and Devlin added in that he’d heard a gunshot, the sheriff made notes, then tilted his head to the side.

“Portia, is there any way he could get inside your house? He has to be stayin’

somewhere, and there's been no sign of him in town or at the Moonshine Campgrounds."

"I don't think so," Portia replied thoughtfully. "He doesn't have a key, and the locks are pretty sophisticated."

“What about the windows?”

“Well, I suppose he could smash one, but I imagine it would be seen or heard by one of my neighbors. Though there’s no-one next to me on the west side.”

“With your permission I’d like to take a wander around your property and check it out. Your back yard is nestled at the base of Smoky Hill, so it would be fairly easy for him to get here. All he’d have to do is follow the trail through the trees.”

“Yes,” Devlin agreed emphatically, “in fact, there’s more you should know. Come on up to the house. I have something for you.”

“I’m callin’ my deputies,” the sheriff said as they started walking. “They need to stop by the other homes around here and let folks know to keep their doors locked and stay vigilant.”

As they reached the house and walked inside, they were excitedly greeted by Jezebel and Jethro.

“I left them in here to guard the place,” Devlin said as he opened the refrigerator. “If William Buckley is stupid enough to try to get in again they’ll scare him off.”

“Dogs are great burglar alarms, that’s for sure,” the sheriff agreed.

“So, my apologies. I probably should have brought this to you sooner, but this is spiked coffee,” Devlin declared, placing the half-filled water bottle on the table.

“Spiked with what?”

“Rohypnol. I was on the trail ridin’ Marge and I was on my way down to Portia’s house when I saw William pour something into her coffee cup.”

“Damn.”

“Devlin called and warned me,” Portia interjected. “I was able to sneak into the bathroom, tip the water out of that bottle, and pour in the coffee. I’m sure William is still wondering why it didn’t affect me.”

“You should’ve turned this in sooner,” the sheriff said with a frown, “and why didn’t you let me know about this when it happened?”

“To be honest, I wasn’t sure what to do,” Devlin admitted. “And there’s more. A little while ago we learned he tried to forge paperwork to sell some of Portia’s stock portfolio and steal the money.”

“Damn,” the sheriff repeated. “But gettin’ back to this coffee. How do you know it contains Rohypnol?”

“I had my vet test it for me...off the record.”

“Devlin, there’s this thing called chain of evidence, but I’ll take it to the station and log it in. Portia, you’ll have to make a formal statement, but when did he try to drug you?”

“Just a couple of days ago. Devlin met me at the back gate and got me out of there.”

“Okay, well, thanks for all the information, I just wish you’d reported it when it happened. I’ll run over to your house and check it out, though I doubt he’ll be there.”

“Actually, can I come with you? I need to pick up some things.”

“Sure. Devlin, are you joinin’ us?”

“I’m sure Portia will be safe with you. I’ll stay here just in case he decides to make a return visit.”

“Sounds good. Okay, Portia, let’s go.”

* * *

William had managed to make it up the Smoky Hill trail and down the other side to the back gate, but it hadn’t been easy. The pain in his ankle had turned into a stabbing pain, and he was a nervous wreck. Downing a drink and pouring a second one, he sat on the couch, removed his shoes, then limped to Portia’s bedroom and settled on her bed.

As his heart began to settle, he looked around at the expensive antiques and wondered if he’d be better off taking what he could and getting out of there. He’d sell them as he’d already planned, and find another way to get the larger sums of money he needed. Picking up his glass and taking a sip, he was trying to decide his next move when to his horror, he heard voices.

He recognized Portia immediately, and the deep male voice was all too familiar.

Sheriff Cooper.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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As Portia led the sheriff through to the living area, she abruptly stopped, grabbed his arm, and pointed to the pair of men's dirty shoes in front of the couch.

"Go back to the car," he whispered, lowering his lips to her ear as he reached for his revolver.

But before she could take a step William strode into the room from the hall with his gun raised.

"Don't do it, Sheriff, not unless you want the poor little rich girl to get a bullet in her head."

"William! Why are you doing this?" Portia demanded, trying to keep her voice from shaking. "What have I ever done to you?"

"Shut the fuck up. Sheriff, put your gun on the floor...real easy...kick it over towards me, then lie face down on the floor with your arms above your head."

"You're makin' a big mistake, son."

"I'm not your son!" William snapped. "Now do it. Portia, where's your phone?"

"In my pocket like always," she replied as the sheriff followed William's instructions.

"Perfect. Call your personal banker. You're going to transfer a bunch of money, and don't try anything or I'll shoot the fuckin' sheriff. Got it?"

“Yes, yes, no problem,” she said quickly.

“Once you have him on the phone I’ll give you the bank details. Just repeat them. Don’t add anything, no chit chat.”

“I understand.”

“Good, now make the call.”

Slowly lifting out her phone, she took a deep breath and called Devlin.

“Hey, is everything okay?”

“Hello, James, it’s Portia Peyton here. I need you to transfer some funds from my personal account, the one ending in 2280.”

“William’s there,” Devlin declared.

“Yes, that’s the one.”

“Three million,” William exclaimed,

“James, transfer three million, and the bank it’s going to is...?” she continued, staring at William.

As William recited the account information she repeated it, then paused.

“Do everything he tells you,” Devlin said quietly, “and Portia, don’t worry. The guy’s toast.”

“It’s being done,” Portia declared, hastily ending the call.

“See how easy that was? You would’ve saved us a whole shitload of trouble if you’d just allowed your broker to sell those fucking shares. Now lie on the floor next to the sheriff and don’t move while I call my bank and make sure the money went through.”

“But it won’t land until tomorrow.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“It’s after three o’clock. It won’t transfer until tonight and won’t show until the morning,” she lied, hoping she sounded convincing. “That’s how banks work. Surely you must know that.”

“Goddamit to hell!” he shouted, waving his gun in the air.

“I have a bunch of cash in the safe.”

“How much?”

“I guess around twenty-grand, and my jewelry.”

“Handcuff the sheriff.”

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“Portia, don’t give me any of your shit or I swear to God I’ll shoot the motherfucker. Take the handcuffs off his belt and shackle his fucking wrists. Wait! No! His ankles.”

“William, you’re makin’ a real big mistake,” the sheriff said, turning his head and staring up at him.

“The only mistake is you showing up here. Portia, do as I say.”

* * *

As William had watched Portia cuff the sheriff’s ankles, he was satisfied the lawman would remain incapacitated while Portia emptied her safe. It was in what she referred to her as her office, though as far as he knew the only work she did was talking with her father and grandfather from time to time.

“Right, let’s go,” he barked as she straightened up.

“But, William, your name and photo will be all over the place. You can’t possibly get out of the country, it doesn’t matter how much money you have.”

“Hah, what the fuck do you know. Private jets are everywhere, and everyone has their price.”

“You’re not making any sense. You’ll need cash, and no bank will—”

“Shut up. I know exactly what I’m doing. Now, move!”

“Just do as he says, Portia,” the sheriff said, turning his head and looking up at her.

“Hear that?” William snapped. “The sheriff’s right. I’m already pissed off and you don’t want to make it worse!”

“Fine, but what have I ever done to you? Why are you so angry?” she asked as she started down the short hall.

“A rich bitch like you wouldn’t understand, but now it’s my turn to ask the questions. I laced that coffee. Why didn’t it affect you? You drank half of it.”

“I emptied out my water bottle and poured the coffee in that.”

“What the fuck? Why?”

“Because Devlin saw you spike it, that’s why, and he had it analyzed. Now the sheriff’s office has it. You’re toast, William, you may as well just—”

“Devlin saw me? How?”

“He was riding down the hill and watched you put the stuff in the mug. He called and warned me. You were outsmarted.”

“That sonofabitch. He’ll pay for screwing with me. And I’m not done with you either.

One of these nights you'll wake up and find me naked standing over your bed."

"William, you're dreaming," she retorted as they walked into her office. "This is over, you can't get away, you'll never see that money, and you'll end up in a prison cell."

"Just open the fucking safe!"

* * *

While Portia was following William's orders, Devlin had called his three neighbors, Brody King, Andy Baker and Cade McLean. They were all horse trainers and the best of friends. Now gathered together on the bridle path running behind their ranches at the base of Smoky Hill, they quickly made their plans.

* * *

On the living room floor, the sheriff had taken the handcuff keys from his vest pocket and unlocked the shackles around his ankles, but remained where he was with the cuffs still seemingly locked in place.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Portia had removed the cash from the safe and was reaching for the jewelry cases when her phone rang.

“Ignore it!” William barked.

“But it’s Devlin,” she exclaimed, glancing at the screen. “If I don’t answer he’ll wonder why.”

“I don’t give a shit. Let him wonder. If he comes over I’ll be gone by the time he arrives. Now get those cases out and empty everything into one box. What was that?” he abruptly demanded as a faint chime echoed through the house.

“The doorbell.”

“The doorbell?”

“Yeah, the doorbell,” Portia repeated. “I must be getting a delivery.”

“Forget it. Finish what you’re doing,” he snapped, then suddenly stepped over to the window. “What the fuck? I don’t see a van.”

In a flash she saw her chance.

Grabbing a large, round, glass paperweight off her desk, she charged towards him and slammed it against the back of his head. To her shock he didn’t make a sound, but his

legs crumbled beneath him and he toppled into a heap on the floor. Dropping the globe and dashing out, she ran into the living room and was about to crouch down to help the sheriff when he abruptly sat up.

“What’s happened?” he asked urgently, hastily pulling the cuffs off his ankles. “Where’s William?”

“In my office. I hit him on the head with a glass ball and he sort of—fell down and didn’t get up. Lord, I hope I didn’t kill him.”

“I doubt it, and I don’t approve of citizens takin’ chances like that, but good for you,” he exclaimed, snatching up his phone. “Before I check on him I’d better see who’s ringin’ your bell.”

“Sheriff, look, Devlin’s here,” she exclaimed, staring across at the sliding glass doors.

As she hurried through the room to let him in, the sheriff strode to the front door and found Cade McLean, Andy Baker and Brody King.

“I guess you’d better join us, but what are you fellas doin’ here?”

“We’re the cavalry,” Andy replied, “though if you’re in charge I guess everything’s under control.”

“It’s gettin’ there, but mostly thanks to Portia,” he replied as they followed him inside. “She just told me she hit the guy on the head and knocked him out. I need to check on him.”

“Portia? You did what?” Devlin demanded.

“I saw the opportunity and I took it. It was no big deal.”

“Uh, yeah, it’s a very big deal.”

“I have to see how bad he is and get him in cuffs,” the sheriff declared striding from the room.

“Hey, Portia, where are you goin’?” Devlin asked, hurrying after her as she followed the sheriff.

“I want to be there. Can you blame me?” she shot back, continuing down the hall.

“Stop! You’ll just be in the way,” he said firmly, grabbing her arm as the sheriff opened the office door.

“Uh, Portia, there’s no-one in here,” the sheriff declared, staring around the room.

“But he was there!” she exclaimed, pointing at the floor, “and there’s the paperweight I used.”

“Dammit, and that window’s closed,” he muttered, marching over to it. “He’s still in the house. I’m callin’ in my boys, and you all need to leave.”

“We can help you search,” Devlin suggested.

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“He’s armed, Devlin, I can’t take that chance.”

“But we’re armed too, and it will take time for your deputies to arrive. He could get out.”

“I can’t let you stay in the house, but you can keep watch outside in case he hasn’t left and he tries to make a run for it. Just make sure you all have cover. ”

“Sheriff, I just had a thought,” Portia piped up. “He might already be gone. The basement has a door that opens to a path running down the side.”

“Show me.”

* * *

In the small bathroom in the basement, his gun at the ready, William prayed his ruse would work. When he’d left through the side door he’d immediately spotted three cowboys in the driveway. There was no way he could get past them and head to his car without being seen. Hurrying back inside, he’d left the door open and slipped into the tiny bathroom. Now he was hoping it would appear he’d managed to get away.

“It’s just a big, empty storage space!” he heard Portia say. “I want to turn it into a workroom like my grandfather’s. But look, that side door isn’t closed all the way. He must have left through there.”

“But go where?” Devlin asked. “The guys were out front, and even if he got past them he can’t just walk down the road.”

“He might have run across the street before they arrived. I’ll get my deputies to check out the woods.”

William bristled.

His car would be found.

“Well, I guess there’s nothin’ else to see down here,” the sheriff continued. “Let’s go back.”

“Wait,” Devlin interrupted. “What’s this door Portia?”

“A small bathroom.”

Before the sheriff could intervene, Devlin slowly opened it. Though he couldn’t see William, he immediately sensed the man was pressed back against the wall hoping he wouldn’t be found. He paused, then made a snap decision.

“Nothin’,” Devlin said, closing it quickly. “Let’s go back up and tell the fellas. Looks like he got away.”

* * *

Letting out a heavy, relieved sigh, William sank down to the floor. His head was throbbing, the stabbing pain had returned to his ankle, and he was desperate for a drink.

But a smirk curled his lips.

He’d fooled them.

After sunset he'd sneak out and get to his car, assuming the sheriff hadn't towed it away. Even if it wasn't there he'd still make his escape, and maybe he'd stop by Rainbow Ranch.

He imagined drugging the dogs, then tying Devlin up and making him watch while he jumped on Portia.

"Yeah," he sneered, "I'll make sure you'll both regret screwing with me."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

By the time the deputies arrived, the sheriff had searched the rest of the house and found no sign of William, but he'd sent two of his men across the road to the woods. When they'd radioed in and said they'd found a vehicle, the sheriff had called for a tow truck.

"I reckon that's how he'd planned to make his escape," the sheriff declared. "Now he'll have a real problem. He might try to steal a car, but that won't be easy around here. Everyone has dogs, and most people garage their vehicles."

"Do you think you'll catch him?" Portia asked.

"I've set up roadblocks at both ends of the main road leadin' in and out of Smoky Hill. If he does manage to get a car or truck he won't get past them. Try not to worry, you'll get your things back."

"It's not the value of what he stole, it's what they mean to me," she said sadly. "What if he's on foot? Won't he be able to sneak past them?"

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“If he’s on foot he’ll have a real problem come nightfall. It gets real cold in these parts, and don’t forget, you hit him on the head. No tellin’ how he’s feelin’.”

“I hope he freezes his, uh, tail off,” she grunted. “Do you think he’ll come back here?”

“He might try, but we’ll keep watch. If he does he’ll be caught real quick. You and Devlin can go back to the ranch. I’m headin’ to the office to write up the report.”

“Yeah, we’ll be goin’ soon,” Devlin replied. “Jezebel and Jethro will be wonderin’ where I am, though they’ve probably gone next door to play with Jack and Diane.”

“Jack and Diane?” Portia repeated. “Who are they?”

“My dogs,” Cade exclaimed, walking up to join them. “Bye, Sheriff.”

“Bye, Cade, and thanks for the help.”

“Not a problem.”

“Goodbye, Sheriff, you’ve been amazing,” Portia said gratefully, walking him to the door.

“I’m just doin’ my job.”

As she closed it behind him and moved back into the living room, she found Cade, Brody, Andy and Devlin huddled together and talking.

“It’s been great to meet you all,” she began. “I’d love to thank you properly, maybe have you all over for dinner or something.”

“Hey, we stick together around here,” Cade said with a warm smile. “Devlin, do you want to tell her?”

“Tell me what?”

“William’s still in the house,” he said, lowering his voice. “He’s hidin’ in the bathroom basement.”

“I don’t understand. Why didn’t you tell the sheriff?”

“We know the court system is slow and has all kinds of loopholes, and that guy’s a connivin’ lawyer who knows just how to exploit ‘em. We’ve decided to show him some real justice.”

“Yeah, cowboy justice,” Brody piped up.

* * *

In spite of his uncomfortable hiding place, William had decided to wait until nightfall before attempting to escape. But he didn’t know if he should try to sneak down to the road, or take the trail behind the neighboring properties.

And he was starving.

He was about to leave the cramped space and make his way to the side entrance when he suddenly heard a voice and immediately recognized it as Devlin’s.

“I can’t imagine how that guy disappeared, but once we lock this door there’s no way

he can get back inside and we can finally take off. Portia will rest easy at the ranch.”

“Yep, and the forensics team should be here any minute,” a second male voice declared. “They’ll go over this place with a fine tooth comb. Maybe they’ll find something to indicate where he’s gone.”

“I doubt it, but I hope so. There! All locked up,” Devlin continued. “Let’s go. It’s reassuring to know the sheriff will have his deputies watchin’ the place overnight.”

As he heard them leave, William let out a long, exasperated breath.

He had to get out, and right away.

Waiting until he was sure Devlin and his buddy had left, he pushed his gun into his waistband, picked up the box with Portia’s jewelry, then slipped out of the bathroom and walked stealthily up the short staircase.

The house was in darkness and there wasn’t a sound.

Cautiously making his way to the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator and found only a bottle of vodka. Downing a mouthful, he quickly checked the cupboards looking for something to eat, but there was only a package of chocolate chip cookies. Stuffing a few in his pockets, he moved into the living room and cautiously peeked through the closed drapes to the front of the house. A deputy was sitting in his car in the motor court. Moving quickly across to the sliding glass doors, he slid them open, crouched down and peered along the track behind the neighbor’s home. A deputy was patrolling.

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The only way out was up Smoky Hill.

The air was chilly.

Hurrying back to the closet by the door, he was relieved to see he'd left a jacket there. It was thin, but better than nothing. Hastily pulling it on and zipping it up, he put the gun in one of the pockets, and stuffed the box with Portia's jewelry and cash in the other. Returning to the patio, he closed the doors behind him and hurried to the gate. Quietly opening the latch and slipping through to the trail, he started up the hill.

It was dark, and as he continued on it seemed to be getting darker. Glancing up at the sky through the overhead branches, he saw clouds criss-crossing the moon.

A chill rippled through him, a mixture of cold and fear.

He quickened his step.

But a moment later he suddenly tripped and fell headfirst onto the forest floor.

Gasping, he tried to push himself up but there was a weight suddenly pressing on his back.

"Goin' somewhere?"

CHAPTER THIRTY

Filled with terror, William looked up and found himself staring at Devlin. Portia was

standing slightly behind him glaring down with hatred in her eyes, along with three other cowboys holding rifles.

“Where’s your gun?” Devlin demanded.

“Uh, in my pocket.”

“Take it out real slow and place it on the ground. Try anything and I’ll let Jezebel and Jethro have some fun.”

Squinting, William cast his eyes to the side and spotted the two dogs sniffing the ground nearby. With the rifles pointed at him he didn’t need the extra threat, but seeing the big dogs was unnerving. Lifting out the revolver, he placed it on the ground.

“And Portia’s jewelry and cash?”

“Here,” he muttered, retrieving the property from the other pocket.

“Roll over on your stomach and put your hands behind your head,” Devlin continued as one of the cowboys picked up the items.

The thought of being face down on the dank forest floor filled him with dread, but he had no choice.

“What are you going to do to me?” he grunted as he stretched out.

“That depends. Answer our questions and we’ll get you outta here. If you don’t, or if you try to lie to us, we’ll tie you to a tree and leave you. With the wildlife around here you’ll last about—what do you think, Brody?”

“An hour max,” Brody replied.

“I’d say more like thirty-minutes,” Cade interjected.

“That’s what I’m thinkin’,” Devlin said grimly. “Do yourself a favor and start talkin’. Tell Portia every slimy thing you’ve done to steal money from her and her family.”

“How...how...d-do you know about that stuff?”

“That doesn’t matter,” Portia snapped.

“But...but...you never said anything...you never questioned me. You always just signed the papers. I don’t understand. If you were worried why didn’t you—?”

“Tell me about the off shore accounts,” she shot back, cutting him off. “How many do you have?”

“Uh, just the one.”

“Jezzie, Jethro, come here,” Devlin called. “This fella needs a little help with the truth.”

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“No, no. Wait. Six. I have six.”

“Where’s your phone?”

“In my back pocket.”

Lifting it out, Devlin tapped the record button and set it on the ground.

“Tell us all about these accounts and exactly what you’ve done.”

“But it will take ages and I’m freezing.”

“The sooner you talk, the sooner you leave, and remember, if you try to screw with us you’ll be tied to a tree...and that will be after Jezebel and Jethro have their fun. Once you’ve told us about your dirty dealin’s, you’ll tell us about the girls you’ve victimized. Every last one of them. Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah, but please let me sit up?”

“Nope. There’s this thing called Justice, and you’re gettin’ nothin’ less than you deserve. Start talkin’.”

* * *

Portia decided to record William’s confession as well, not just so she could play it for her family, but to make sure there was a back up. As the information spilled from William’s lips, she could scarcely believe the depths of his duplicity.

When she'd told him she'd always suspected him, it had been a lie. She'd had no idea, and the more he talked the more upset she became, cursing herself for being so trusting and believing everything he'd told her. By the time he finished tears of fury and frustration were spilling from her eyes.

"If we find out there are more victims, or you've done more than what you've just told us, wherever you are we'll find you," Devlin warned.

"I swear, that's everything."

"Get on your hands and knees and start crawlin' back to Portia's house. The deputies can arrest you there."

"It's against the law detaining someone like this. You'll be in trouble. Big, big trouble."

"I don't see any rope burns around your wrists, do you, fellas? And there are five of us, only one of you. We already have our stories straight, and we're respected around here. It will be our word against a lyin', cheatin', rapist, and a man who's been screwin' his clients. Who do you think they'll believe? We'll be tellin' the sheriff we found you out here in the woods, and you were so upset, and so cold, and so scared, you confessed your sins. Now start crawlin'."

* * *

Brody, Cade and Andy returned home while Portia and Devlin followed William to the back gate. Only when they neared did they allow him to stand up. As they walked him into the house, Portia hurried out to the motor court and told the deputy she and Devlin had gone for a moonlight hike and found William stumbling along the Smoky Hill trail.

“He was babbling about ghosts and wolves,” she exclaimed as the deputy hurried with her up to the front door. “He was really out of it, then he started telling us everything he’s done. Those woods can be really spooky and I think he had a scare or something, because he just kept jabbering, like he had to confess his sins. I recorded everything.”

“Good for you, and yeah, my girlfriend won’t go up there at night.”

Entering her home they found William sitting on the couch wrapped in a blanket holding a glass of whisky.

“He’s pretty cold, it was freezin’ up there and he was on his hands and knees. Don’t ask me why,” Devlin declared.

The deputy quickly contacted the sheriff, then sat beside William and took the glass from his hand.

“Can you get him something hot to drink?”

“Sure, I have an automatic coffee maker,” Portia replied. “I’ll make us all a cup. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay, Mr. Buckley, what happened in the woods?”

Slowly lifting his eyes, he stared up at Devlin then turned to the deputy.

“I guess when you face an icy death you want to clear your conscience...and I did. It feels weird...but to be honest it’s a big relief. I’m glad it’s all over.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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The sheriff arrested William, handed him off to one of the deputies to be transported to the station, then drove Portia and Devlin and the two dogs back to the ranch. Rolling to a stop in front of the house he walked with them up to the front door.

“Would you like to come in, Sheriff?” Devlin asked. “Is there anything else you need to ask us?”

“I have plenty of questions, but I’m satisfied the moment. You ran across him on a walk, he’d had some kind of epiphany and confessed his sins.”

“Exactly,” Portia said with a sigh. “It’s as if it was meant to be. The mysteries are solved, and if the women he abused want to step forward they’ll be heard.”

“You’ll have to come to the station tomorrow and give your official statements, but I don’t see any issues. Get some rest. You both look beat.”

“Yeah, we are, thanks, sheriff,” Devlin replied. “It’s been a helluva night.”

As the sheriff walked to his car and drove off, Devlin put his arms around Portia and hugged her tightly.

“Are you okay, darlin’?”

“I am. Exhausted but very relieved. I wasn’t sure he’d believe us.”

“I think he wanted to, and there was no reason he shouldn’t. I need to check on the horses real quick. You can come with me if you want, or—”

“No, thanks. I’m dying to get cleaned up, then I’ll be crawling into bed.”

“You do that. I won’t be long.”

* * *

Though Portia was utterly drained she couldn’t fall sleep without Devlin beside her. When he returned he ambled into the bathroom, took a quick, hot shower, then crawled between the sheets and pulled her into his arms.

“I thought you’d be dead to the world,” he murmured as she curled against him.

“The bed felt so empty without you.”

“Well I’m here now. Get some rest.”

“Thank you for letting me be with you in the forest tonight. I’m still surprised. I thought you’d want to keep me away from William and that whole scene.”

“I thought about it, but you had every right to be there, and I knew he didn’t pose a threat, not with Andy, Brody and Cade with me.”

“And Jezzie and Jethro,” she added.

“Yep, and Jezzi and Jethro.”

“William was so much worse than I imagined. I still can’t believe everything he’s done.”

“It’s pretty crazy he wasn’t caught before now. I can only think he must have had help. I bet he’ll spill his guts to save his own skin. Now go to sleep. We’ll talk about

everything in the mornin'."

"Okay," she mumbled with a yawn. "Goodnight."

"Nite, darlin'."

* * *

Devlin woke up before Portia, and though he longed to wrap her in his arms and devour her body, when he glanced at the clock he discovered he'd overslept. He was already late contacting his clients to reschedule the lessons they'd missed. By the time Portia woke up, showered and dressed, his week had been arranged and he was in the kitchen making pancakes.

"That smells so good," she mumbled, walking up and hugging him. "I can't remember the last time I had pancakes."

"Have a seat. They're all ready," he said, lifting the last one out of the pan and adding it to the top of the pile. "The maple syrup is on the table, unless you'd rather have something else."

"No way, maple syrup is the best."

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Settling in and placing two on her plate, she took a bite and let out a moan of pleasure.

“Wow, these are so good. How did you learn to make them?”

“My mom. She said every man should know how to whip up pancakes.”

“That’s brilliant.”

“But, Portia, I need to speak to you,” he said solemnly.

“That sounds serious.”

“It is. You took some dangerous chances and I’m not happy about it.”

“When?”

“For starters, the day William grabbed your bag and took off. What were you thinkin’ chasin’ after him?”

“I was thinking I wanted my bag back. It has my life in it.”

“If you feel you need to carry all that stuff around, you should make copies and keep the originals somewhere safe.”

“I suppose I could do that.”

“But even that’s not a good idea. If someone did manage to get hold of your bag it would be easy to steal your identity.”

“Ohh, I hadn’t thought of that. You’re right.”

“And then there’s the paperweight.”

“Excuse me?”

“Hitting William with it. Again...what were you thinkin’?”

“That I could knock him out and get away, and I did.”

“You got lucky. If he’d turned around he could have wrestled it away from you. It was way too risky.”

“Okay, okay, I get it, I do, but it was a spur of the moment thing.”

“Like when you were on the freeway and slammed your foot on the accelerator to cut me off?”

“You know I’m sorry about that.”

“Yep, but do you remember what I said?”

“About...?”

“Portia! The accident!”

“Uh...I’m not sure.”

“I said, if you were my lady I’d spank your butt for drivin’ like a maniac on that packed freeway. The way I see it, you’re my lady now, and I’m gonna do just that.”

“But—”

“Then tomorrow you’ll make arrangements to get my truck fixed and make sure I get either a loaner or a rental until it’s done.”

“Yes, of course I will. I would have done that sooner except—”

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“Except we’ve been dealin’ with William, I know, but now it’s time to take care of unfinished business. At noon I’ll be takin’ my lunch break. You’ll come home a few minutes before me, and wait for me naked on the bed bent over the pillows.”

“You’re not serious.”

“You said that to me once before, and I’ll give you the same answer now—as a rattler,” he declared, rising to his feet. “But,” he added, lowering his voice, “if this isn’t for you, no problem. We can call it quits. You can stay in the cabin and finish your month of work. Your choice, darlin’.”

“I, uh, it is for me,” she replied, staring up at him. “I can’t quite believe it, but yeah, it is.”

“I’m real happy to hear that. Now stand up, put your hands on the table and arch your back,” he ordered, opening a drawer and lifting out a wooden spoon. “You’ll get a few good swats to remind you who’s in charge around here, then we can finish our breakfast.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Portia had squealed as Devlin delivered the stinging swats, and though the hot, tingling pain quickly passed, the pending punishment consumed her thoughts. She was still learning about how things worked at the barn, and the distraction made it difficult to concentrate. When it was nearing the noon hour, Devlin approached and told her it was time to go back to the house to prepare his lunch.

“You know what I expect,” he said, lowering his voice even though they were alone.

“Yes, I’ll be ready.”

As she hurried up to the house her pulse ticked up, and she realized she was as excited as she was nervous. By the time she’d arranged the pillows in the center of the bed, removed her clothes, and placed herself in position, it was almost twelve o’clock.

The few remaining minutes seemed to take forever--then she heard the door open and close, and Devlin’s footfalls as he strode down the hall.

“What do you have to say for yourself,” he asked, approaching the bed.

“Uh, I shouldn’t have taken the chances I did. Looking back I can see how hitting William with that glass globe was probably a bad idea.”

“Probably?”

“No, sorry, it was, and I was an idiot on the freeway. I was upset and I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“I realize that...and I should never have run after William when he took my bag. I don’t know what I would have done if I’d caught up with him.”

“Or what he might have done,” Devlin scolded. “Close your eyes. I’ll be right back.”

She could hear him enter his closet, there some rustling sounds, then he returned to her side and she felt a blindfold being placed over her eyes.

“Rest on your elbows and lock your fingers together,” he ordered sternly. “I’m going to tie your wrists. When I’m done ask me to spank you.”

The blindfold and his command took her by surprise, but she couldn’t deny the surge of excitement pulsing through her body.

“Uh, please, Devlin, will you spank me for, uh, what I did?”

“Do you think you deserve to be punished?”

“Yes, I do. I shouldn’t have done those things, any of them.”

“No, you shouldn’t, and I’m glad you realize that.”

As he spoke she heard sounds, and guessed he was taking off his clothes. It sent a second rush of heat through her body, and when he climbed behind her and touched her sex, she let out a long, loud moan.

“You’re already so wet,” he grunted, thrusting a finger inside her. “But any pleasure will have to wait.”

In spite of his words, he fingered her for a moment, eliciting grateful groans, then suddenly his palm landed on her right cheek with a hard slap.

“No yellin’, Portia, but if you have to, bury your head in the pillow,” he ordered as his rough, calloused hand began slapping from cheek to cheek. He started slowly, but as the spanking continued he increased the force and speed, finally delivering fast, hard smacks making her gasp and yelp.

“There!” he exclaimed, stopping as quickly as he’d begun. “Your ass is red, and I’ll bet it’s stingin’.”

“It is,” she panted..

“What do you think you should say now?”

“Uh, thank you?”

“Yep, but for what?”

“For, uh, punishing me. I’ll be better, I promise.”

“I’ll rub you for a minute,” he murmured, but as he spoke, she felt his hardness against her entrance. “Do you want me?”

“Yes, yes, so much, please...”

Gripping her hips, he pushed into her warmth and began stroking with slow, hard strokes, evoking, deep, grateful groans. But when he slipped a hand beneath her and began rubbing her clit, she let out a cry.

“Uh-huh,” he muttered. “You’re gonna come real hard, so make sure your face is in that pillow.”

Staying buried inside her, he increased the speed and pressure of the erotic massage, then suddenly began pumping his rigid rod, quickening his pace as her excitement grew.

“You wanna come?” he demanded. “Tell me, do you?”

“Yes, yes, please.”

“You promise to behave?”

“Yes, yes, I swear.”

“What will happen if you don’t?”

“You’ll punish me.”

“That’s right, darlin’. Are you sure you’re okay with that?”

“Yes, yes, yes, please, Devlin, please...”

His hand lifted from between her legs, landed a hard smack on each cheek, then his fingers tightened around her hips.

“Come when you want,” he grunted, accelerating his thrusts.

Barely seconds passed before the convulsions seized her, shuddering through her body with spine-rattling, dizzying spasms. She could hear his groans as his body controlled and dominated her...until the last ripple of tingling excitement faded away.

She barely felt his ropes leave her wrists and the blindfold slip from her eyes. He was cradling her, whispering in her ear, telling her she was the most gorgeous creature on the planet. Finally opening her eyes, she shifted in his arms and gazed up at him.

“Devlin...that was...there are no words.”

“Sometimes there aren’t, there’s just feelin’.”

“Actually, there is something I have to say, I mean, I have to. I just hope it doesn’t...”

“Doesn’t what?”

“Mess things up, but I can’t hold it in.”

“I’ll make it easy for you,” he murmured with a sigh. “I love you too.”

As a wave of emotion rippled through her heart a single happy tear slipped from her eye.

“I’ve heard about bondage and stuff, but I never imagined it could be so amazing.”

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“Pleasure and pain, and punishment when needed. That’s what you can expect,” he purred pulling her into his arms and holding her tightly. “But if you ever have a problem with what we’re doin’ you have to tell me.”

“So...what do you call it?”

“A cowboy’s justice.”

EPILOGUE

When William Buckley returned to Dallas he offered up the names of accountants and bookkeepers who had helped him embezzle money from clients. But shortly after his arrest was made public, several women came forward and accused him of drugging and assaulting them. The charges were filed guaranteeing him a long stint behind bars.

* * *

Though Portia’s days were filled with chores around the barn, Devlin made sure she had time to learn how to ride. But as the end of the month drew near she didn’t know what would happen next.

Change was in the air.

Even the weather was becoming colder and the leaves had begun to turn. Late one afternoon Devlin suggested they take a ride up Smoky Hill to see if any snow had hit the mountains.

With Jezebel and Jethro running along beside them they made their way up the trail. Portia was on Marge, and Devlin was riding Belle with just a rope around her neck. As they made their way through the trees and broke into the clearing at the top, Portia caught her breath. The majestic peaks glowed white and gold in the setting sun.

“Wow, look at that,” she exclaimed. “It’s like an oil painting.”

“It sure is. In a month or so we’ll probably have our first dusting at the ranch, maybe even sooner.”

Looking across at his handsome face, she suddenly had to know where things stood between them.

“Devlin, what will happen now?”

“With what?”

“Me, you, the ranch.”

“I guess that depends. Are you plannin’ on returning to your home or goin’ back to Dallas?”

“Uh, well, you haven’t said anything about me staying on so...”

“Portia,” he began, lowering his voice, “for the record I don’t want you goin’ anywhere. But stayin’ with me is your choice. Do you want to stick around?”

“Absolutely,” she said urgently. “I love it here, and I’d miss Marge and Jezzie and Jethro so much, but mostly I want to be with you.”

Moving Belle closer to her, he reached out and took her hand.

“Darlin’, I wanna be with you too. Let’s get the rest of your things from your house and bring them over. You can store stuff in the cabin if you need to.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, darlin’, really. We’re a team now, and I want it to stay that way.”

* * *

After several more weeks Portia knew she’d never want to return to her modern, empty home, and ended up selling it to her superstar neighbor, Annie Baker. When Annie’s musicians came into town they would stay at the Moonshine Campground. Having them next door was far more convenient, and the basement became a second rehearsal space.

* * *

Late one winter night, with snow blanketing the ground and a full moon glowing down from a clear sky, Portia and Devlin made their way back to the house after doing their nightly checkon the horses. As they paused their step to watch Jezebel and Jethro bound and play in the white stuff, Devlin wrapped her in his arms and devoured her lips in a long, lingering kiss.

“What was that for?” she murmured breathlessly.

“Do I need a reason?”

“Nope, not ever.”

When they reached the house and pulled off their heavy coats, she offered to make them hot chocolate.

“Sure, that sounds great, but there’s something I need to talk to you about first,” he said, softening his voice. “Let’s go into the lounge and warm up by the fire.”

Curious, she followed him into the living room and settled on the couch while he threw another log into the flames. But when he sat next to her, a frown crossed his brow

“Devlin? What’s wrong? You look worried.”

“I am, well, not really worried, I’m just...”

“Okay, now you’re scaring me. What’s up?”

“Uh...hold on,” he muttered, rising to his feet.

With her pulse ticking up she watched him walk across to the bookshelf, open the low cabinet and take something out.

“This is for you...if you want it,” he murmured, returning to sit next to her.

As he opened his hand, she found herself gazing down at a ring box, and before she could speak he lifted the lid exposing a sparkling, pear-shaped diamond surrounded

by tiny, green stones.

“Oh my gosh. Is that what I think it is?”

“Portia, I love you like I’ve never loved anyone. Please will you marry me? Please will you be my wife and spend the rest of your life drivin’ me crazy?”

“Yes, of c-course,” she managed, though tears suddenly sprang from her eyes and she could barely breathe. “I can’t believe it.”

“Honestly, darlin’, I never thought I’d say this, but I’m so damn glad you hit my truck on that freeway. Talk about a happy accident.”

Gazing down at the twinkling ring, she took in a deep breath, then raised her eyes.

“Devlin, my grandad is the smartest man you’ll ever meet, and he says there are no such things as accidents.”

“Lookin’ at you right now I have to agree. You—me—we’re way too special to be an accident.”

“So...does this mean I’m finally forgiven for hitting your truck?” she asked with a giggle.

“Damn, girl, you just never give up. But, yeah, since it was fate you’re forgiven. Now get in that bedroom and take off your clothes so I can ravage you.”

“Don’t you mean thank me?”

Throwing back his head, he laughed out loud, then suddenly grabbed her and jerked her over his knee.

“What are you doin?”

“I’m thankin’ you, darlin, the best way I know how.”