



# The Cowboy's Magic Touch

**Author:** *Maggie Carpenter*

**Category:** Romance, Western

**Description:** She's reached the heights of fame.

But now she's in grave danger.

Can the cowboy she left behind save her?

When horse trainer Brody King is told the love of his life has been spotted at the local hotel he immediately dismisses the idea. Three years before she left their tiny town to chase her dreams in Nashville and is now a huge country star.

But the mention of her name angers him.

She's been out of touch for over a year.

Annie Baker is in disguise and on the run from Geoffrey Palmer, a powerful mover and shaker in the country music world. There's only one man and one place she believes she'll be safe.

With Brody King at his ranch.

But will he listen to her story and protect her?

Even if he does, what will happen if her evil manager tracks her down?

If you enjoy a second-chance love story, heroic cowboys, surprises and suspense, you'll love this book.

**Total Pages (Source):** 54

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## CHAPTER ONE

Brody King was standing in his round pen with a young colt when he saw a cloud of dust billowing up from his driveway. As the vehicle drew closer he wasn't surprised to see his younger brother Clive in his pickup. Suddenly the colt began prancing, then stopped and snorted.

"It's okay, Tommy boy, it's just crazy Clive," he said softly. "Easy, easy. Nothin' to panic about."

The colt snorted again, then stood tall with his ears pricked and his eyes wide. As the truck skidded to an abrupt stop, Brody unhooked the lead rope from Tommy's halter and calmly left the pen.

"What's got you so fired up?" Brody asked brusquely as his brother climbed out. "This better be important. You damn near gave me a heart attack flyin' up here like you did, and Tommy didn't much like it either."

"Sorry, sorry, I know but I had to warn you."

"What's goin' on?"

"Uh...it's Annie. She's here."

Brody felt his face flame, and at the same time a shiver rippled through his body.

"Brody, are you okay?"

“How do you know?” he managed, finding his voice.

“Someone saw her in town.”

“Ooh, so you don’t know for sure, you heard it second hand,” Brody muttered, letting out a heavy breath. “It was probably just a girl who looks like her.”

“Mrs. Swanson rang mom. I heard her talkin’ about it on the phone. When they finished gossipin’ she told me to come up and warn you.”

“First off, I seriously doubt Annie is here, and second, even if she is it’s none of my business. Not any more.”

“Aren’t you the least bit worried, or curious or—”

“What good would that do me? Listen, Annie is history. She’s a big star now. Lives in a mansion someplace, travels the world, sings her songs to thousands of people, and makes more money than this whole town is worth. Why the heck would she want to come back? And if she did, she’d have an entourage with her and be seen by everyone, not just Edith Swanson.”

“What’s an entourage?”

“Seriously? You don’t know?”

“Uh, no.”

“It’s a group of people who take care of someone famous.”

“Oh...you mean like, hairdressers and stuff.”

“Along with bodyguards.”

“You think Annie has bodyguards?”

“When she’s performing she would, for sure, but I’ve got a colt in that pen and he needs me. Thanks for swingin’ by, but do me a favor, if there’s a next time, make sure the emergency is for real, and remember, don’t be drivin’ up here like that.”

“Sorry. I was pretty freaked out when I heard. I remember how...uh...crazy things were when she left.”

“Ancient history. Now let me get back to work.”

“Okay—oh, I almost forgot. Mom says she’s makin’ a roast.”

“In other words, she wants me over there for dinner.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

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“Tell her I’ll be there.”

“Will do. Bye.”

As Clive returned to his truck and climbed behind the wheel, Brody smiled and waved...but his gut was churning. Returning to the round pen, he moved through the gate and walked up to the jittery colt.

“I think we’re done for now, Tommy. Just hearin’ that girl’s name...damn...I swear it’s knocked the wind outta me.”

As if sensing Brody’s mood, the young horse lowered his head and gave him a nudge.

“Thanks, buddy,” Brody murmured, stroking his neck. “It was three long years ago, so why does it feel like last week? I’m takin’ you back to the paddock and gettin’ myself a beer.”

Snapping the lead rope back on the halter, he opened the gate and marched out. The young horse stuck by his side as they headed to the fenced pasture a short distance away, and Brody knew it wouldn’t be long before he wouldn’t need the equipment. As he walked through the gate and slid the halter off Tommy’s head, the colt didn’t amble away, but stood by Brody and stared at him expectantly.

“Hey, I’m okay. Go be with your buddies.”

The colt didn’t move.

“Okay, okay, I know what you want.”

As Brody began sliding his hand over the horse’s body, he lowered his head and let out a quiet snort. After a few minutes, letting out a sigh himself, Brody left the paddock and headed across a wide yard to his house. Walking in, he didn’t stop, but went straight to the refrigerator, pulled out a beer then slouched into a chair at the kitchen table.

“Hey, Bella,” he said as his cattle dog pushed her way in through the doggie door. “Where have you been?”

Bella barked, then trotted across the room, sat beside him, looked up and whined.

“You too? Okay.”

After taking another swig, he placed his hands on Bella’s head, then slowly moved them down her body. As he continued stroking, Bella leaned against his leg, but when he stopped, she picked up her paw and stared at him.

“More?”

She whimpered. Unable to refuse he started again, but also softly traced his fingertips around her head.

“There, now go to your bed and sleep it off.”

Yawning, Bella padded across to a furry mat against the wall and laid down. Watching her as he took another drink Brody felt a wave of contentment. He had no idea why he’d been blessed with the precious gift. That’s what his mother called it. A gift. He had the ability to calm animals, and sometimes people too, with just his touch.

Closing his eyes he recalled the last time he'd seen Annie. She was leaving and his heart was breaking, but he knew she had to go. Though she'd looked as pretty as ever there was worry and confusion in her eyes. He'd raised his hands and placed them on either side of her face.

"Hey, darlin', if you feel you need to do this you've gotta do it or you'll always be restless," he murmured. "I'm not goin' anywhere, and neither is this little town. You can always come home."

"Sometimes I hate that I can sing," she'd stammered as the tears fell from her eyes. "I hate that I have this—this—thing inside me pushing me to leave."

He'd continued smoothing his fingertips over her cheeks, then down her neck, silently wishing her all the luck in the world and telling her she'd be okay. But when she'd climbed into her father's car to be driven to the Greyhound bus terminal half-an-hour away, he thought he'd crumble into nothingness and become like the dirt the tires kicked up.

Somehow he'd survived.

When her letters and calls became less frequent, then she stopped responding altogether he wasn't surprised. But the pain never left, and the empty space in his heart remained.

## CHAPTER TWO

Driving an older model Ford Sedan, Annie had rolled through the town and checked into its only hotel under the name Angel Parker. She'd chosen Angel because that's what Brody used to call her. It didn't change even when he was upset with her. He'd take her wrists, hold them behind her back and say, "Does my naughty Angel need a spanking?" She'd flush bright red and argue, but all the while she'd be craving his

special brand of attention.

Dropping her overnight bag on the bed, she moved across to the window and peered into the street. Even wearing the black wig, sunglasses and hat, she was afraid someone might have recognized her. If word got out it would be mayhem. She didn't mind the fans and excitement, but she had to stay hidden. If word leaked out to the national media and her whereabouts became public knowledge she shuddered to think what might happen.

Taking a deep breath, she kicked off her shoes and stretched out on the bed. She was desperate to call Brody, but she was exhausted from the endless drive. She needed to catch her breath and collect her thoughts. The conversation wouldn't be easy.

She also longed to call her parents, but it wouldn't be safe, not for them, and certainly not for her. There was only one haven, and only one person who could save her. Brody's ranch, and Brody himself.



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Sinking into the bed she said a silent prayer of thanks for arriving in her home town safely. So many things could have gone wrong, from being seen leaving her palatial home, to a flat tire on the drive, or even engine trouble, yet nothing did. But now she'd have to face her past mistakes. She didn't doubt Brody would help her, but when the dust settled just how angry would he be?

Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, she told herself to relax and nap, but after a few fruitless minutes she realized it wasn't going to happen. Reaching into her overnight bag, she pulled out the phone she'd bought on the long trip, stared at the keypad for a moment, then with her pulse ticking up, she placed the call.

\* \* \*

Brody had brewed a fresh pot of coffee and was pouring himself a cup when he heard the familiar song. Sweet Home Alabama was his ringtone. Lifting it from his pocket and seeing the caller was unknown he almost clicked it off, but suddenly had a strong feeling he should accept the call.

"Brody King."

"Brody...it's me...Annie."

An unfamiliar tightness gripped his chest, and try as he might he couldn't find his voice.

"I know this is a shock and I'm sorry to call you out of the blue but I really need to see you. I'm here in town. Are you busy? Can I come over?"

“Annie...what the hell?” he muttered.

“I’m in trouble. I know I have no right to come to you but, uh, I didn’t know who else to call or where to go.”

He could hear the threat of tears in her voice, and as the shock began to wear off he realized she also sounded scared. The Annie he knew was fearless. Nothing frightened her. He’d often thought that’s why she’d become so successful.

But a flash of anger unexpectedly rippled through him.

While their communication had become sporadic, over the last year he hadn’t heard from her. Not even after sending her a birthday and Christmas card. Nor had she answered the couple of texts he’d sent. He’d only wanted to make sure she was okay, but she had completely ignored him.

It had hurt.

Deeply.

“I see. So now, after ghosting me you want my help.”

“I didn’t ghost you, I swear.”

“Ignored me then. I’m not sure there’s a difference.”

“I’m so sorry. I can explain, honestly I can. Just not over the phone. Please, if I ever meant anything to you let me come over.”

“If you ever meant anything to me? Are you serious? Dammit, girl, you know how much I loved you. At least, I thought you did. Maybe I was wrong.”

“No, no, you weren’t wrong. But...okay...” she mumbled with a snuffle. “If you don’t want to see me I get it. I don’t blame you, I don’t. Just believe me when I say it’s not what you think.”

He paused.

She sounded panicky.

“Annie, it’s fine, you can come,” he said quickly, realizing she wouldn’t have called him unless she absolutely had to.

“I thought—”

“When did you arrive in town?”

“About thirty-minutes ago.”

“Are you alone?”

“Yes.”

“Where are you?”

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“At the hotel.”

“Did you drive?”

“Yes.”

“How long were you on the road?”

“I’m not sure. It was endless. Nine, maybe ten hours. Feels like longer though.”

“Have you called anyone else?”

“Oh, no. Just you. No-one can find out I’m here.”

He took a breath.

She’d driven all the way from Nashville, or New York or Hollywood, wherever she’d been, completely alone without stopping then called him. Not her family. Something was horribly wrong.

“Annie, check out and come here.”

“Really?”

“From what you just said you don’t want anyone to know you’re in town.”

“No, I don’t. And it’s really important.”

”Edith Swanson has already called mom and claims to have seen you. If she spotted you someone else might too.”

“Oh, no, this is terrible.”

“Mind you, she was your teacher for ten years, but regardless, if you’d be more comfortable here it’s fine with me.”

“You’re not angry with me anymore?”

“Sure I am, but that’s beside the point. I’ll open the garage door. You can pull in when you arrive.”

“Brody, I don’t know what to say. Thank you. This means the world to me.”

“I’ll see you when you get here.”

### CHAPTER THREE

After quickly changing out of his dusty clothes and washing his face, Brody ran his fingers through his thick mop of dark hair and returned to the kitchen. Feeling restless as he waited for Annie to arrive he started a fresh pot of coffee, then opened the plastic tub of home made blueberry muffins his mother had brought over the day before. As he was laying them out on a plate he heard a car.

His heart skipped.

He couldn’t wait to see her, but he was worried. What could have sent her running from her glamorous life, and why had she felt the need to drive for hours on end? Hastily opening the door to the garage, he was surprised to see an older Ford Sedan, and when she stepped from behind the wheel he was shocked. Her long blond hair

was now black.

“Hi, thanks for letting me come over,” she muttered nervously. “I wasn’t if you’d want to see me.”

“I’ll always be here for you, Annie,” he declared, pushing the button on the wall to close the garage door. “Come inside and—” but Bella suddenly ran across to join him and began barking excitedly.

“Bella, how wonderful to see you,” Annie exclaimed, bending down and making a fuss of the happy dog. “You’re just the same.”

“I can’t say the same about you,” Brody remarked. “When did you dye your hair?”

“I didn’t.” Removing her hat, she yanked off the wig, then unpinned her hair letting it fall around her shoulders. “Any chance of a hug?” she added with a weary sigh.

Wordlessly stepping up to her, he brought her into his arms. Though still upset and confused his heart was melting. As the silent seconds ticked by, he instinctively began moving his hands across her back. When she let out a sigh and sank against him, he slowly pulled back.

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“I don’t know how you do that,” she mumbled, gazing up at him.

“Do what?”

“Take away all the stress. You have magic hands, and I needed them so badly.”

“Annie, sit down, you look wiped out.”

“I am,” she muttered, dropping her wig and hat on the table. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so tired in my life.”

“Not even after one of your concerts?”

“Not even then. When I turned down Main Street and stopped at the hotel, I don’t think I could have driven another mile.”

“Here, you need this,” he said, reaching for the coffee pot and pouring her a cup. “I don’t know if you remember mom’s famous blueberry muffins, but she brought a batch over yesterday. Help yourself.”

“How could I forget, and thanks, I’m starving,” she mumbled, reaching for one and taking a bite, then adding cream and sugar to her coffee she took a long drink and let out a sigh. “That’s so good.”

Still amazed she was sitting at his kitchen table he didn’t know what to say, then suddenly the words spilled from his lips.

“Annie, I don’t know what to make of all this. Maybe I should wait to ask, but—what the hell? Why did you shut me out? I haven’t heard a word from you for over a year, and now—out of nowhere—here you are.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry about so many things. But can we please get into everything later. I’m so tired, and I’m achy. I guess it’s from sitting in the car for so long, though driving through a crazy storm didn’t help. I was really tense.”

“White knuckles?”

“God, yes. There was a tornado warning in the area. I didn’t see anything, but the skies...you know how they get.”

“Unfortunately I do,” he replied with a heavy frown.

“Do you mind if I lie down for a little while?” she asked as she finished her drink. “Being here I can breathe, and hopefully get some sleep.”

“You should, you look worn out. Rest on my bed, or take the guest room if you’d prefer.”

“Where do you want me?”

“Why don’t you take the guest room. That way I won’t disturb you if you’re sleepin’ when I come in.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you have any suitcases?”

“Just an overnight bag. It’s in the back seat.”



“You came all this way with just an overnight bag?”

“I was in a hurry,” she muttered.

“Sorry, just tell me the story when you’re ready. I’ll fetch it for you.”

“Brody, thanks, especially since you’re probably still angry.”

“Yep, I am, but I’d never turn my back on you. No matter what.”

“You’re such a good man,” she whispered, her eyes welling up.

“Maybe that’s why I finished last,” he quipped, and though he instantly regretted the remark it was how he felt.

“You didn’t,” she said earnestly. “But if you want me to leave—”

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“I don’t, not for a minute. You know where the guest room is. I’ll get your bag and bring it in.”

As he rose from the table and moved to the door, he glanced over his shoulder. She’d poured herself another cup of coffee and picked up a second muffin before heading towards the hall. She was obviously hungry and exhausted, but he’d have to wait to hear the gory details. As Bella trotted after her, he stepped into the garage and up to the car, spying the small suitcase on the back seat. He was about to lift it out when his phone rang. It was his mother, and he quickly accepted the call.

“Hey, mom, what’s up?”

“That girl, the one Edith thinks is Annie, she’s gone.”

“Mom, I don’t think—”

“Don’t you think it’s odd? She checked in, used cash to pay for two nights in advance, then said she wouldn’t back and didn’t stop to pick what they owed her.”

“Mom, there’s no mystery. Whoever she is, she must have been in a hurry.”

“What if Edith was right? Maybe it was Annie wearing a disguise and she had to take off in a hurry.”

“I think Edith is letting her imagination run away with her, which you very well know is not unusual.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

“I’m sure I am.”

“Brody I’m not gossiping. It occurred to me she might be on her way to see you and I thought you should know.”

“I see. How long ago did all this happen?”

“Goodness, perhaps fifteen, twenty minutes ago. I’m not sure. Why?”

“Because I’ve had no visitors, and if it was her and she’s here to see me, she’s taking a long time to get to my place.”

“Oh, I suppose you’re right. Yes, it was a silly notion. I hear your father coming in. I have to run. Bye, dear.”

“Bye, mom.”

As he ended the call and picked up the suitcase he felt a ripple of guilt. He didn’t like lying to anyone, let alone his mother, but he’d had no choice. Whatever was going on with Annie was serious, and he wasn’t about to put her at risk.

“Whatever it is, you’d better tell me soon,” he muttered, then grabbed her wig and hat off the table started down the hall to the guest room.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Gently knocking on the door and receiving no reply, Brody gently cracked it open and peered inside. Bella was lying on the rug by the bed, and Annie was under the covers apparently already asleep. As he placed the suitcase, wig inside the room

against the wall, Bella rose to her feet and walked up to him.

“You want to come with me, girl?” he whispered.

The dog moved past him into the hall, then waited while he quietly closed the door. As he returned to the kitchen she trotted along beside him, but went straight through to the back porch.

“You know me too well,” he said with a chuckle, “but I’d better clear up first.”

After washing the coffee cups and putting away the muffins, he headed out to the pasture to fetch Luna, his grey mare, but hearing a vehicle coming up his driveway he paused his step. Turning around he was surprised to see the sheriff coming to a stop by the house. As the burly man climbed out Brody walked up to greet him.

“Hi, sheriff. What brings you here?”

“Mind if we go inside?”

“Sure thing,” Brody replied, glad he’d taken the time to clean up before leaving.

“You want some coffee? I just left and it should still be hot.”

“Sounds good. How are you?”

“Busy as ever. I’m gettin’ ready for a clinic this weekend.”

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Stepping into the kitchen he poured the coffee while the sheriff settled into a chair at the table and petted Belle, but glancing across at him, Brody noticed he was casually looking around.

“Cream and sugar?” Brody asked, knowing there was nothing casual about it.

“No thanks. I’m not sure how to tell you this,” the sheriff began as Brody placed the mug in front of him. “It’s about Annie Baker.”

“What about her?” Brody replied, sitting across from him.

“Apparently she’s disappeared.”

“From where? And how can a superstar disappear?”

“Funny thing, that’s exactly what I asked when I got the call. Seems her manager, a guy named Geoff Palmer, is real worried. He called the police in Nashville, and when they found out Smoky Hill is her home town they called me. I know you two were close before she up and left so you’re my first stop. Have you seen or heard from her by chance?”

“I’m sorry to say I haven’t spoken to Annie in over a year,” Brody said solemnly. “But now I’m worried too. I hope she’s okay.”

“Accordin’ to this manager she’s been a bit depressed recently.”

“I hope you’re not sayin’ he thinks she might have tried to hurt herself. That’s crazy.

Annie would never do that.”

“The officer I spoke with claims that’s what her manager was thinkin’, though he didn’t actually come right out and say it.”

“Not in a million years.”

“At first that’s what I thought, but she’s been away from here for how long?”

“A little over three years.”

“A lot can happen to a young woman in three years, especially comin’ from a peaceful little town like this and bein’ thrown into recordin’ studios and concerts the way she was. It can’t have been easy. Maybe her dreams turned into nightmares.”

“Sheriff, if things had become unbearable she would’ve called me, or her mom and dad. Maybe even come back. You know how stubborn she can be. If that girl wants to do something, she does it.”

“You’re right about that,” he said with a sigh. “The thing is…”

“The thing is what, sheriff?”

“A young woman checked into the hotel this mornin’, then suddenly left. She’d paid for two nights, but walked out and said she wouldn’t be back and didn’t want the refund.”

“You think it was Annie?”

“I don’t know what to think. The girl had long dark hair, and of course Annie’s blond, but I ran into Edith Swanson and she thought it was her.”

“Yeah, I know, Clive told me. He came here a little bit ago to give me a heads up. But if Annie came back she wouldn’t check into the hotel, she’d go home.”

“Unless she doesn’t want anyone to know she’s here.”

“If she shows up I’ll let you know, but only if she says it’s okay. I know Annie, and if she’s taken off with no word and doesn’t want to be found she’ll have a good reason.”

“Huh. Well, there is that. But if she does, let me know so I don’t waste any more time lookin’ for her. I’ll keep it under wraps.”

“You can do that? Aren’t you obligated to pass along the information?”

“That’s what’s known as a judgment call,” he replied with a grin. “Thanks for the coffee. Bye, Bella,” he added, bending down and petting her. “Uh, Brody, one more thing. It’s my darn shoulder—it’s actin’ up again. Can you work your magic for me?”

“Sure.”

As the sheriff unbuttoned the top of his shirt and turned around, Brody took a breath, then stepped up and gently massaged the affected area. Feeling the familiar tingling move through his fingers, he closed his eyes and continued until the sensation stopped.

“Better?” he asked, dropping his hand away.

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“You’re a miracle worker,” the sheriff replied with a heavy sigh. “All the creams in the world can’t do that. I sure appreciate it.”

“Any time, sheriff.”

“The coffee was good too.”

“It’s Italian. It’s not cheap and I have to order it, but I love the stuff. Come on, I’ll walk you out.”

Watching the burly man climb into his car, Brody couldn’t imagine why Annie had chosen to disappear. Though she’d tell him when she was ready and he wasn’t going to push, he couldn’t help but worry.

“Come on, Bella, let’s go for a ride,” he muttered with a heavy sigh. “I need to think about this.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Smoky Hill was so-named because of a natural phenomenon. Half way up the gentle slope was a small forest. When the conditions were right a thick fog would form then slowly rise above the trees and from a distance it resembled smoke. It had been suggested the event was caused by the trees sweating created by underground water. But whatever the reason, Brody didn’t care. He just loved riding through it. When he’d reach the top of the hill and be above the mist, the experience felt almost ethereal.



Looking forward to the escape, he walked into one of the paddocks and called to Luna, his grey mare. As she ambled across to him, he reached into his pocket for a treat.

“Hey, girl,” he murmured, holding out his hand. “How about we take a little ride.”

Slipping the halter over her head, he effortlessly swung himself on her back, rode through the gate and closed it behind them. He was about to start towards the hill but changed his mind and decided to tack up. The barn was close by, and he was soon inside placing the saddle on her back. He was wondering why he’d felt the need when a shiver rippled through his body.

He knew it was a warning.

Though there was plenty of wildlife in the forest there was nothing he considered dangerous, but he always listened to his instincts.

Always.

Walking into his tack room, he unlocked a cabinet, pulled out his shoulder holster and a small handgun...then paused.

“Dammit. Maybe I should go someplace else,” he muttered under his breath. But even as he spoke he felt the need to ride up the Smoky Hill trail. If there was any kind of lurking threat he needed to find out what it was. Returning to his mare and leading her outside, he mounted up, and started off towards the gentle slope.

\* \* \*

Annie wasn’t sure what stirred her from sleep, but fluttering open her eyes she looked around the room and let out a relieved sigh. She was in Brody’s home and safe.

Yawning and closing them back down, she remembered the many happy hours she'd spent there.

She'd provoke him into spanking her, but when he was done he wouldn't let her go. Instead he'd tease her mercilessly, then toss her on the bed and devour every inch of her body until she was begging for her release.

It had been a fun, sexy game, but there were times she'd push the envelope too far. They both knew she was testing him, and he never disappointed her. Sometimes he'd land a stick across her red backside, perhaps tickle her until she was beside herself, or bring her to the point of orgasm and leave her wanting. Once he'd made her spank herself with her hairbrush.

But she'd loved every moment. They were the two sides of the same coin. The relationship had been one of the most satisfying and pleasurable experiences of her life.

Leaving it...leaving him...had been the hardest thing she'd ever done. But he'd encouraged her, saying she'd always be wondering if she didn't take some time to chase her dreams. Her high hopes had quickly—and shockingly—become reality.

Just a couple of months after she'd arrived in Nashville she'd attended an open mike event. Everyone had performed covers, but she'd nervously sung one of her original songs. To her amazement the cheering crowd had demanded another. She'd obliged, and it had elicited the same rousing response. As she was leaving the owner of the club had given her a business card, and instructed her to call the following day.

She knew the name immediately.

Geoffrey Palmer.

One of the most noted managers in the city.

The night had changed her life.

And took a dark turn she never saw coming.

\* \* \*

Riding up the trail and moving into the fog, Brody's eyes darted from side to side, but he also paid close attention to Luna. If danger was lurking she'd probably alert him before he'd see or hear it.

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While the mist was thick he'd experienced worse, and as they continued through the calm, quiet forest he wondered if he'd misinterpreted the shiver he'd felt in the barn. As he began to relax his mind wandered back to Annie. The girl he loved and thought he'd lost was resting in his guest room.

For over two years they'd been inseparable.

They'd embark on endless trail rides and make love under the stars, or next to a pond with the sun baking their bodies. He'd toss her in the water then jump in after her, and she'd squeal while he laughed. She'd cooked delicious dinners, then tease him until he'd tell her behave or else. It almost always ended up with her over his knee, then in his bed.

But throughout their time together she talked about her dreams of becoming the next Carrie Underwood, Shania Twain or Miranda Lambert. He'd always known one day she'd have to follow her passion. He'd also known, in spite of the thousands of hopefuls in Nashville, she would stand out.

He'd been right.

When she'd called and excitedly told him about the management contract and how she'd be recording the very next week he'd been thrilled for her. But as their conversation ended, as much as he didn't want to believe it, he suspected the beginning of her career marked the beginning of the end for them.

He'd been right again.

For the last year he hadn't heard from her.

But something had driven her away from the fame and fortune she'd achieved and he didn't know what to think...or do.

Whatever it was had scared her out of her wits.

The Annie he knew—and still loved—was fearless.

Luna suddenly stopped, snapping him from his reverie.

As she raised her head and pricked her ears he stared into the trees ahead of him.

“Easy girl,” he murmured, stroking her neck.

Suddenly she jerked her head to the left.

Darting his eyes in the same direction, he caught his breath.

## CHAPTER SIX

In the trees about fifty yards away was a huge grey wolf standing completely still.

The worst thing they could do was run.

But feeling Luna's heart thump against his leg he knew she wanted to do just that.

“It's okay, Luna,” he purred, moving his hand down her neck. “Just stay still.”

As his mare and the wolf stared at each other he considered reaching for his gun and shooting in the air to scare it away. Though under normal circumstances a shot

wouldn't bother Luna, the circumstances weren't even close to normal. But to his amazement the wolf sat down. It was a posture of relaxation.

With his heart still racing, and keeping his eyes on the predatory animal, he slowly turned Luna towards home. Though she was antsy he managed to keep her at a quick walk. When she finally let out several snorts signaling her brain was back in control, not her flight response, he too, let out a relieved sigh.

Reaching the barn, he led her inside, pulled off her saddle and brushed her off, but all the while the wolf remained at the forefront of his mind. He'd never seen one in the forest, though a few had been sighted in the hills east of the town. After returning Luna to her paddock, he lifted his phone from his pocket and placed a call to his lifetime friend and next door neighbor, Hank McLean.

"Hey, Brody, what's up?"

"Mornin', Hank. Hold on to your hat. I just saw a wolf."

"Damn. Where?"

"Up the Smoky Hill trail. He was a beauty. I'm assumin' it's a male because of its size. Strange thing though. I was on Luna and he stood and stared at us for a minute, then sat down."

"Sat down? Are you sure you didn't dream this?"

"If you were tellin' me the story I'd ask the same question. I know you like to ride naked but—"

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“Will you stop with that? I do not ride naked. My horses are naked, not me.”

“I can’t help myself,” Brody replied with a chuckle. “Anyway, if you plan on goin’ up that trail without your tack I’d think twice if I were you.”

“Probably good advice. Uh, Brody, have you listened to the news lately?”

“Not this mornin’, why?”

“There was a press release put out by Pilot Records, Annie’s label. She’s gone missing.”

“Yeah, I heard, the sheriff came out and told me. He thought she might have come here.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me if she did,” Hank remarked. “I bet there isn’t a day she doesn’t think about bein’ with you. And I know the feelin’s mutual.”

“Yeah, well, there’s not much I can do about that.”

“They claim there’s no sign of foul play, but there’s no note either. Are you worried?”

“Of course I’m worried. I’m hopin’ she’ll call me.”

“Weird how a star like that can just disappear,” Hank remarked. “Mind you, she has the money. She could be on the other side of the world right now. Anyway, I’d better

go. I have a new client bringin' her barrel racer here."

"Does she want to ride naked?"

"Ha, funny. She says she wants to understand the process."

"Good for her. I need to get movin' too. Take it easy, Hank, and keep your eyes open for that wolf."

"Sure will, Brody. Thanks for the heads up."

Ending the call, Brody walked back into the barn to muck out the stalls. In the summer months the horses stayed outside in the paddocks, but with fall around the corner the days were quickly becoming shorter and the nights chilly. There were six horses at his ranch, which took up the six stalls in his barn. Two mares, two geldings, and two colts. It was a nice round number. The mares, one gelding and both colts were his. The other gelding belonged to a friend and was boarded there.

As he pushed the wheelbarrow into the first stall, it occurred to him he could use someone to feed and clean in the morning. There were plenty of young, strong boys in the small town looking for part-time work. After cleaning out the first two stalls, he decided to call the local feed store and ask Joe, the owner, to put a card up for him on the bulletin board.

"Do you need another pair of hands?"

Spinning around, he saw Annie walking towards him. Dressed in blue jeans, boots, and one of his T-shirts tied in a knot around her waist, she looked sexy as hell.

"I hope you don't mind me borrowing this," she continued, touching it as she walked up to him. "When I threw my things into a bag I was in a desperate hurry and I forgot



a bunch of stuff.”

“Are you kiddin’? Consider it yours. It looks way better on you than it does on me, but I thought you’d sleep through the day.”

“I did too, but when I opened my eyes I felt like getting up, so I took a shower, got dressed, and here I am.”

“You’ll probably want an early night,” he remarked, staring down at her. “Annie...are you okay? I mean, really okay?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that,” she murmured with a sigh. “Honestly, I don’t know anything anymore...except I’m very glad to be here with you.”

As her emerald eyes shone up at him, he read her unspoken invitation. Dropping the rake, he slid his right hand into her long, blond hair, and his left hand around her waist.

“Damn girl, it’s like no time has passed.”

“I feel the same. Now will you shut up and kiss me?”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Annie was sure her heart was about to leap from her chest. For long months she’d dreamed of being back in Brody’s muscled arms, feeling his hardness pressed against her as his lips devoured hers in a crushing kiss. There had been times she thought she’d never see him again, but she’d fought through the fear and seemingly unsurmountable obstacles and made it happen.

Suddenly he pulled back, stared down at her, then sweeping her up he carried her to

the back of the barn, yanking a horse blanket off a rack on his way.

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“Don’t worry, it’s just been laundered,” he murmured, kicking open a door.

After being in the bright sunshine the room was dark, but she knew it was where he kept the shavings. Dropping the blanket, he stood her on her feet and kissed her again, but slowly and lovingly, then lifted her T-shirt over her head. She wasn’t wearing a bra, and he paused to run his fingertips over her bounteous breasts.

But the respite was momentary.

Their aching need for each other took control.

Fumbling and stumbling, they hastily undressed, then he flapped out the blanket on top of the soft shavings and pulled her down with him.

“Damn, Annie, I’ve missed you like crazy,” he grunted, leaning over her and kissing her neck.

“Me too, I’ve wanted to come home for so long, but I was trapped.”

“You’re here now, that’s all that matters,” he said softly as he caressed her luscious mounds. “You can tell me everything later. Right now—”

“Right now I need you,” she bleated, raising her chest as he lowered his lips to her nipples.

Drawing them into his mouth, he softly sucked, then lightly nipped, eliciting a long, low moan.

“Brody, I’ve missed you...I’ve missed you so much.”

“I’ve missed you too, baby,” he murmured, slipping his fingers into her sex to rub her clit. “You’re so wet.”

“I want you. I’ve wanted you for so long.”

She suddenly wrapped her fingers around his hardness sending the blood pumping through his veins. Letting out a groan, he hastily pushed her hand away, then moved on top of her and placed himself at her entrance.

“Annie,” he whispered, pushing inside her, “I still love you, baby.”

“I love you too...I’ve never stopped...not for a second.”

Kissing her fervently, he began to stroke, savoring the feel of her slick channel and her puckered nipples against his chest, but wanting their coupling to last, he slowed, then stopped, staying buried inside her.

“It sure is good to see you again—all of you,” he mumbled with a grin.

“Back at ya, handsome.”

Moving her arms around his neck, she pulled his head down, glided her lips over his and slipped her tongue between his teeth. The kiss seemed to last forever, as if she was so hungry she couldn’t get enough, until he pulled back and stared down at her.

“I’m not goin’ anywhere, baby,” he promised, then began to pump again, but with strong, robust strokes.

“Take me,” she gasped. “Take me, possess me like you used to.”

Swiftly withdrawing, he deftly flipped her over, gripped her hips and yanked them into his pelvis.

“Are you ready?” he asked huskily as he slid back into her warmth.

“Yes, yes, please.”

“I’m gonna fuck you until you come, but you know the rules,” he said sternly, slapping her backside.

“Yes, sir, I have to ask.”

“That’s my girl,” he grunted, landing several more hard swats.

As she let out a squeal and he gazed down at his red handprints, he flashed back to the many times she’d been over his lap, squirming as he’d spanked her, then groaning when he’d massaged her clit. With the salacious memory rippling through him, he slowly stroked, then gradually increased his pace, occasionally slipping a hand beneath her to rub her sensitive nub.

“Please, sir, please,” she suddenly wailed.

“Please, what?”

“Please fuck me hard? Please...”

With her ardent plea sending energy through his loins, he quickened his pace, fervently thrusting until her cries told him her climax was building. But he wasn't sure how much longer he could hold out.

“Please, sir, please can I come?”

“God, yes,” he groaned as his orgasm threatened.

As the spasms seized her and she let out a series of wild wails, Brody knew there was no holding back. Gripping her tightly, he pounded her pussy, growling loudly as he erupted. The cascading convulsions seemed never-ending, each one stronger than the last...until they finally petered out. With his heart pounding and trying to catch his breath, he slipped out and fell beside her.

“Are you okay?” she murmured, resting her head in the hollow of his shoulder.

“Uh...I'm not sure,” he panted. “That was like...uh...intense.”

“Me too. For a minute I thought I was going to pass out.”

“I don't know what's goin' on with you, but Annie, what we have...”

“Yeah, I know, what we have, it's real.”

“Damn sure is.”

“I don’t want to leave you again,” she whispered with a sniffle.

Abruptly realizing she’d begun to cry, he tightened his hold.

“Hey, baby, we’ll figure things out together. You can still be the star you always wanted to be...the one you’ve become. It doesn’t mean we have to be apart. Maybe when you’re on tour, but—”

“It’s not that simple. Things are really messed up, and, uh, weird.”

“Weird?” he repeated. “Are you with someone else? Someone important.”

“No, no, not like that. I haven’t been with anyone, except once, and I was drunk.”

“Bad girl.”

“Yeah, well, it happened, and I’m not going to lie to you. But there’s other stuff. Bad stuff.”

“Let’s just stay like we are for a few minutes. I’ll finish what I need to do here, then we’ll go back to the house and you can tell me all about it. I’m sure things aren’t as bad as you think.”

“But, Brody...they are. Maybe even worse.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Seeing the fear in Annie’s eyes broke Brody’s heart. As he wrapped her into his arms he silently swore he’d not only protect her, he’d make sure whoever was behind her

nightmare would pay the price.

“We’ll find answers together,” he promised. “Whoever’s responsible for scaring you like this have to deal with me now, and they’ll walk away very sorry they ever messed with you.”

“I hope you’re right, but—”

“Hey, trust me,” he said firmly, pulling back and staring down at her. “Anyone who picks on vulnerable young women is a coward. I’m sure whoever it is has money and power, but that’s artificial.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s window dressing. Can they use it against you? Sure, but once you get past all the crap they’re naked and alone. When push comes to shove they don’t have friends, only people they pay or bully, and there’s no loyalty there.”

“I hope you’re right. I can’t imagine what will happen if he catches me.”



“Who is he, Annie?”

“Geoff Palmer, my manager. It’s such a long story I—”

“Hold on—I think I heard a car and Bella’s barkin’,” he said urgently, hastily pulling on his clothes. “Wait here.”

Marching back through the barn, he stopped behind one of the double doors and peek outside. A stretch limousine and a black sedan were rolling to a stop outside his house. There was a private airfield about an hour away, and he assumed that’s where they’d come from. Quickly opening his gun cabinet, he pulled out one of his rifles and marched out to meet them.

“This is private property,” he shouted as four men stepped out of the sedan. “There’s a sign on the gate. You had no right openin’ it and drivin’ up here.”

“Take it easy, fella,” one of them shouted as Bella ran to Brody furiously barking.

“I won’t be takin’ anything easy and neither will my dog. We don’t appreciate uninvited visitors. State your business then leave.”

They didn’t respond, but they didn’t move any closer either. For a moment he thought they might get back into the sedan, but the limousine driver climbed out and opened the door for his passenger.

“Hey, there,” the man said, slowly walking forward. “No need for guns.”

“Stop right there! I’ll decide what’s needed,” Brody snapped, wanting to punch him square between the eyes. Wearing a denim suit, white shirt, and a stiff, white, spotless stetson, the man looked like an ugly Ken doll a kid had dressed up.

“I take it you’re Brody King.”

“Who’s askin’?”

“What if I said I was here to buy a horse.”

“I’d say I don’t have any for sale,” Brody snapped. “Now you can leave.”

“Why are you so upset?”

“Why did you open a gate with a big black and white sign that says no trespassin’, then drive in here with a small army? Who are you?”

“Geoffrey Palmer. I manage some of Nashville’s top recording artists.”

“I don’t give a crap and I have no idea why you’re on my property. You can just manage your way outta here, and I mean now. I have work to do.”

“I’m looking for Annie Baker. You were her boyfriend. I thought she might be here. Haven’t you heard? She’s missing.”

“That was years ago, and how can a star like Annie Baker be missin’?”

“You haven’t seen her?”

“Hell, no.”

“Mind if we look around?”

“Hell, yeah, I mind,” Brody exclaimed, raising his rifle. “You’re trespassin’. Here in Texas I’m not allowed to kill you, but I can sure shoot you in the foot. I’ve asked you to leave twice. If there’s a third time—”

“Okay, okay, but why are you so angry.”

“I’m a busy man and I don’t like strangers comin’ on my land. I don’t give a rats ass who you are, and if Annie shows up here I’ll hear what she has to say, then let the sheriff know, but only if that’s okay with her.”

“Sorry, not good enough,” Geoffrey sneered, then pointed at the barn. “Look in there,” he ordered, gesturing to the four men behind him. “Go ahead, Brody, shoot them. Then I can have you arrested and you’ll be stuck behind bars.”

As the men jogged past him, Brody snatched his phone from his pocket and called the sheriff

“You need to get here now,” he exclaimed urgently as he ran after them with Bella at his side. “Two cars came rollin’ in here and now four men are goin’ into my barn. Sheriff, I think they might be armed.

“I’m next door at Hank’s place. I’ll be right there.”

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Reaching the double doors just moments after the men entered, Brody saw them moving from stall to stall.

“You have no right to be here,” he shouted as one of them opened the door to the shavings room. Holding his breath, he raised his rifle, ready to shoot if he had to.

“Nothing,” the man exclaimed, stepping back out.

“Of course there’s nothin’. Now get the hell out of here,” Brody yelled, trying to hide his relief.

“Hey, there are four of us, and we have these,” the man yelled back, opening his jacket exposing his shoulder holster. “Do you really want to have a—”

But the sound of a siren cut him off.

“Yeah, I called the sheriff,” Brody declared. “You can explain yourself to him. Now get outta my barn.”

As they filed out he could see the frustration in their faces, and though he wanted to follow he needed to find Annie. Closing the doors, he ran to the shavings room and stared inside.

“Annie? It’s me. They’re gone. Where are you?”

“Under here,” she whispered, moving out from beneath the horse blanket.

“Thank God. It’s okay, stay put. The sheriff has arrived. I’ll be back as soon as everyone leaves.”

## CHAPTER NINE

Leaving the barn, Brody saw the sheriff deep in conversation with the man calling himself Geoff Palmer, who was gesticulating and clearly agitated.

“Brody, do you mind if I have a quick look through your house to satisfy this gentleman?” the sheriff asked as Brody approached.

“He’s no gentleman, but knock yourself out.”

“Mr. Palmer, stay put. If she’s not in there you’ll have to leave, and you’re not to bother Brody King or come on his property again. Do I make myself clear?”

“Whatever you say, sheriff. I’m just worried about Annie, and I know the two of them have been in contact.”

“That doesn’t mean a damn thing,” Brody exclaimed as Bella began barking again.

“Easy, Bella. If I want you to bite off a chunk of his leg I’ll let you know.”

“Not funny, Brody,” the sheriff remarked with a frown.

“I wasn’t jokin’. Will you please just go look? I’m busy and I want these puffed up morons outta here.”

“Sure. I’ll be right back.”

As the sheriff walked away, Brody glared at the stranger. Everything about him

reeked of an insecure, power-hungry, egomaniac. His turquoise and diamond bolo tie and matching cufflinks screamed, notice me. I have money, while his slicked back, dark hair, made him appear sinister. It struck Brody the man looked like a low-life, street pimp.

“The house is empty,” the sheriff announced as he walked up and stood next to Brody. “I’m sure, just like Mr. King and me, you’re a busy man. Don’t let me keep you.”

“You’re sure? Did you check in all the closets—not that a house like this would have many,” the angry stranger added with a scowl.

“Mr. Palmer, I’m askin’ you for the last time, move along, and don’t think about comin’ back. I’ve know Brody here most of his life. He’s a stand up guy. You, I just met, and you’re bein’ difficult. It’s not a good first impression.”

“Okay, okay, we’re leaving. But, Brody, if she gets in touch you’re obligated to let me know. Here’s my card,” he declared, walking forward to hand it to him, but the sheriff moved between them and took it from his hand.

“Goodbye, Mr. Palmer.”

“Bye, sheriff. Thanks for your help.”

Though Brody thought Geoffrey’s parting comment sounded sarcastic, the sheriff didn’t react, but stood his ground as the men returned to their cars and drove off.

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“Damn, that was something else,” Brody muttered.

“Yep, and I’d say that man is capable of just about anything.”

“Thanks for comin’ so quick.”

“You’re welcome, but if I was you,” the sheriff said, lowering his voice, “I’d hide that suitcase and wig, and move the car someplace else. It has Nashville plates. Now you have a nice rest of your day, and tell Annie I’ve got her back. Oh, and Brody, this conversation never took place.”

Before he could respond, the sheriff marched away, climbed into his cruiser and drove off.

“Can you believe that, Bella?” Brody muttered, bending down to pet her. “I owe that man. But, come on, let’s get back to Annie.”

\* \* \*

After she was sure Brody and the men had left the barn, Annie had crept from the shavings room and stood behind the double doors to listen. Hearing Geoffrey’s voice had sent her heart racing and a shiver down her spine. She hadn’t expected him to show up so soon. But as she’d waited for him to leave, she realized Brody’s ranch was the first place Geoff would come looking, and the man had his own jet.

“Hey, what are you doin’ here by the doors?” Brody asked, obviously startled to see her standing there as he entered.

“I knew Geoff and his hitmen wouldn’t come back with the sheriff there and wanted to hear what was being said.”

“Don’t be takin’ chances like that,” he scolded as he moved his arms around her. “It’s not worth it.”

“Brody, I’m sorry I came here and caused all this trouble. It was stupid. I should have known it would be the first place Geoff would look.”

“Don’t be sorry, not for one second, you hear me?”

“But—”

“Hey, it’s over now. He’s gone and he won’t be returnin’. The sherifff’s on our side and he’s warned the bastard off. In fact, he wanted me to tell you he’s got you back.”

“Oh, my gosh! He knows I’m here? How?”

“Your wig and hat and suitcase, they were in the guest room, and he also checked the garage. He told me to move the car. It has Nashville plates.”

“That never even crossed my mind.”

“Why would it? You’re not exactly used to havin’ to run for your life and hide the evidence of your escape. I’ll call Hank. He has that big storage shed and he won’t mind me puttin’ it there for a while. I’ll run it over there after dark, but I’ll stay off the road and use the back fields.”

“This is all such a mess,” she groaned. “I’m safe now, but for how long? And what do I do about my clothes and other stuff. I left everything behind.”



“One step at a time. Let’s finish up here in the barn, then we’ll go back to the house and you can explain exactly what happened. And, darlin’, you can’t leave anything out.”

“It’s such a scary story, and there’s so much to tell.”

“We have the rest of the afternoon and all night. Will that be enough time?” he asked with a grin.

“Yes, Brody, of course. But you’d better prepare yourself. It’s not a pretty story.”

## CHAPTER TEN

With both Brody and Annie working it didn’t take long for them to finish cleaning the stalls, but before they walked across the yard to the house Brody took a careful look around to make sure there were no prying eyes. After scanning the surrounding hills with his field glasses, and checking the trail leading from the forest into the back of his property, they walked quickly across to the house.

“Let’s go into the living room,” he suggested as they entered into the kitchen.

“I’d love that. I remember sitting in there in front of the fire while it was snowing outside. It was a slice of heaven.”

“And it still is, but not so much without you next to me,” he said, giving her a hug. “I sure have missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too. I tried to get away so many times but it was impossible—then Geoff happened.”

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“You can tell me all about it. You go on through. I’m grabbin’ a beer. Can I get you anything?”

“Uh, yeah. Do you have any wine by chance?”

“I sure do. Hank brought it over when he and his new girlfriend visited the other night. It’s a Chardonnay.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“I’ll be right there.”

“Come on, Bella.”

Though she’d been smiling, when she entered the living room and sank into the couch her expression grew somber. Trying to explain the drama with Geoffrey Palmer wouldn’t be easy.

“Here you go,” Brody declared, walking in with a wine glass and handing it to her.

“Take a drink and tell me everything. But there’s no rush. In your own time.”

“Where do I start?” she mumbled, then sipped her wine.

“The beginning is probably a good place.”

“I don’t know if there is a beginning. As I said before, Geoff Palmer is one of the most powerful movers and shakers in Nashville, and he sort of, took control of my

life. Actually, he didn't sort of do it. He did it."

"How exactly?"

"It was slow at first, just normal things, like what I should wear, the places I should be seen at, that kind of stuff, but as the months went by he started getting really possessive, even telling me who I should and shouldn't be friends with. It became suffocating, but when I talked to my producer he said Geoff was the best and I should do what he said."

"Did he tell you to stop talking to me?"

"He did. It made him crazy, then..."

"Then what, Annie?"

"I found the birthday card you'd sent me in the trash torn up. It was so upsetting. A couple of days later I thought I'd lost my phone but I discovered it in his office. He'd deleted you from my contacts and all your messages I'd saved. That's when I sort of...well...freaked out."

"Annie..." Brody muttered, feeling a mix of fury and dread. "How bad did this get?"

"Very bad, and I'm not exaggerating. I was about to call you to tell you all this when he came in still dripping from the shower and found me. He snatched it out of my hand and started screaming at me. Brody, it was terrifying. He told me I didn't know how lucky I was to have him in my life, and if I didn't do exactly what he said he could ruin me as easily as he'd made me a star," she finished as tears began spilling from her eyes.

Taking the wine glass from her hand and placing it on the coffee table, he brought her

into his arms.

“I should’ve known. Damn, I’m sorry, baby. I let you down.”

“No you didn’t. Why would you say that?”

“Instead of bein’ pissed because I thought you were ignorin’ me, I should’ve realized something was wrong. I should’ve made more of an effort to find out what was happenin’. To find you!”

“How? Come out to Nashville? You wouldn’t have been allowed within a mile of me, and I wouldn’t have been told you were there.”

“Well you’re here now, and I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“That’s why I came here. Not just because I was desperate to see you, but because I knew he’d come after me and go to my home. If I told mom and dad all this, dad would just reach for his shotgun. I want them to know I’m not missing, but I don’t know how to handle this.”

“We’ll figure it out, but I have to ask—did Geoff ever get violent?”

“Yeah, Brody, he did. He moved me into his mansion. I was afraid to say no. I did have my own suite, but it was weird. He never tried to have sex with me. I didn’t understand it and I still don’t. Anyway, a couple of nights before a big performance I was trying to decide what to wear. When I showed him one of the outfits, he yanked away from me, shoved me to the floor, and while he ripped it to shreds with a knife he said he’d do the same to me if I told anyone about our arguments. That’s what he called those horrible scenes. Arguments. We’d be out to dinner with other people, and he’d say something like, you’ll have to excuse Annie if she’s on the quiet side tonight. We had one of our arguments, didn’t we Annie?”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this. Couldn’t you tell anyone?”

“I wanted to, but things were getting worse and worse, then out of the blue a makeup artist reminded me about Patty Henderson. Geoff was her manager too.”

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“I remember Patty Henderson. She won a Country Music Award for Best New Artist and was killed that same night in a car accident.”

“Exactly...” Annie whispered.

“No! Are you suggesting he was behind her death? Was the makeup artist insinuating that?”

“I don’t know for sure, but it felt like a veiled message. Brody, why was Patty out driving by herself at three o’clock in the morning? I think she was trying to escape.”

“Oh, my God. What exactly did this make up person say?”

“She said, Annie, you’ll win the award this year, and you have Geoff to thank for it. Such a shame Patty Henderson died so suddenly, but it was her own fault.”

“Wow. She was telling you not to mess with Geoff.”

“That’s exactly how I took it. This happened just a couple of weeks ago and things had become completely insane. He was insane. He kept telling me I couldn’t be trusted. I wasn’t even allowed to answer the house phone. Then about...I guess it was three, maybe four nights ago, he was suddenly different.”

“Different how?”

“We’d been to a big birthday party. Everyone was there. I was used to him never letting me out of his sight, but when we got home he was quiet. He hardly said a

word, and he kept looking at me. When I asked him if anything was wrong, he accused me of flirting with Kenny Diamond. I'm sure you know who he is. He's had three number one hits in the last six months."

"Sure."

"Then...uh..."

"What," Brody asked anxiously.

"Geoff told me I was going to be his wife. He started rambling about how we'd be Nashville's power couple, how happy we'd be, and that I had to save myself for him and I'd better not get any ideas about Kenny. Then he said..."

"Annie, what's wrong? What did he say?"

"Patty Henderson could have had it all but she'd blown it."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

As Brody watched Annie lift her glass and take a drink he felt a cold chill ripple through his body. It was almost impossible to fathom. Yet thinking about the snide, arrogant man he'd just encountered he could easily imagine him being a tyrant. But a murderer?

"I know. It's hard to believe," she murmured as if reading his mind. "I lived it, and it's hard for me to wrap my brain around it too."

"Thank God you got away," he muttered, moving his arm around her shoulders. "No wonder you were so scared and came into town wearing that wig."

“If he’d found me he would have dragged me into that limo and flown me back to his mansion of horrors. And there’s something else. Over this last month, when we’d go out, I think he was spiking my drinks. He probably wanted me to appear wasted so if I said anything—”

“People wouldn’t take you seriously,” Brody muttered.

“Exactly. But he needn’t have bothered. Nobody would have believed me anyway. He’s so warm and friendly, everyone loves him. He’s a real life Jekyll and Hyde.”

“Annie, what we’re dealin’ with here is an obsessive freak. If he can’t have you, he doesn’t want anyone else to either, but you’ve made it clear you have no interest in him. The problem is, I have a very bad feelin’ he hasn’t chased you here to take you back. He wants to make sure you don’t tell anyone he’s a complete psycho.”

“Brody, you’re right! He wants to find me to shut me up, just like he did Patty Henderson.”

“Do you remember anything about the cause of her accident?”

“Apparently she was under the influence—oh, my God! He must have drugged her before she took off. Maybe he even told her she could leave knowing whatever he’d given her would kick in.”

“Damn,” Brody muttered. “You could be right. From everything you’ve just told me, I honestly believe he’d be capable of something like that.”

“But what happens now? I can’t hide forever.”

“You’re safe here, at least for the moment, but you’ve been through hell. You need to take some time to relax and unwind.”



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“You’re right, I’m strung out. That drive was exhausting, and not just because it was so long. I was watching the rear view mirror as much as I was watching the road.”

“I bet you were. Speakin’ of which, I need to get that car over to Hank’s place. But, Annie, I need to tell him why so he’ll be prepared on the off chance someone asks him about it. You don’t have to worry, he’ll keep quiet.”

“I know he will. In fact, I’d really like to see him, but not his new girlfriend. She can’t know I’m here. We don’t know anything about her.”

“I agree. Okay, I’ll call him and ask him to pop over.”

As he moved his arm from around her shoulders and reached for the phone, Bella padded across the room and jumped on the couch between them.

“She missed you too,” Brody remarked shifting to give his dog space. “She can see how upset you are.”

“I thought about you a lot sweet girl,” Annie said softly as she hugged her. “You are so special.”

“Hey, Hank, it’s me,” Brody declared, speaking into his cell phone. “I need a favor. An important one. When you have a minute can you drop by? Just you though. I need to speak to you alone.”

“I hope he hears that message soon,” Annie remarked. “I wasn’t worried about having the car here but now I am.”

“How were you able to get hold of it without Geoff knowing?”

“A struggling guitar player I know buys cars needing work, fixes them up and sells them for cash. I made the arrangements with him when I ran into him at a party. He’s one of the only people I know who doesn’t like Geoff. He waited for me behind the building where the band and I rehearse. I pretended to go to the ladies room, but slipped out and there he was. I paid him and took off.”

“We need to find a way to thank him when all this is over. What’s his name?”

“David Forrester. He was close to Patty. She wanted him in her band but Geoff wouldn’t allow it. I’m definitely going to help David if I can ever get free of my management contract.”

“You will,” Brody said grimly. “I don’t care what it takes, you will.”

“I hope so, and I hope Hank shows up soon. I wouldn’t put it past Geoff to send one of his goons back here to do more snooping.”

“Hank will be busy with his horses like I should be. I’m hostin’ a clinic here this weekend.”

“You are? What will you be teaching?”

“I’ll help people with whatever they need, but it’s advertised as, Learn to Speak Horse.”

“That sounds fantastic. I wish I could watch.”

“You can. I’ll be videoing the whole thing. You can sit right here and see it live on my computer.”

“Really? That’s great.”

“Would you like to take a trail ride tomorrow?”

“Yes, please. That would be wonderful. I haven’t been on a horse since I left here.”

“That’s criminal. Why not? You’re such a great rider.”

“You think so?”

“Absolutely. Surely there must be decent barns in and around Nashville.”

“There were, and I did look, but my days were always so full. Rehearsals, writing new songs, social events, it was endless, and of course Geoff was always watching over my shoulder.”

“Gettin’ back in the saddle will do you the world of good.”

“I agree, one-hundred percent. I can’t wait.”

“Hold on, that’s a text,” he muttered as his phone beeped. “It’s Hank. He’s drivin’ through my gate right now. He sure will be surprised to see you.”

“How much do you think we should tell him?”

“A short version of the truth. You had to get away because your manager is a manipulative bastard and you’re scared of him.”

### CHAPTER TWELVE

“We’re in here!” Brody called as Hank entered through the kitchen door and called out his name.

“We? Who’s we?” Hank exclaimed as he sauntered into the living room. “Annie? What the hell? Get over here and give your old friend a hug. What are you doin’ here? The sheriff came by earlier sayin’ you’d disappeared and askin’ if I’d seen or heard from you. What’s goin’ on?”

“It’s wonderful to see you,” she replied, hugging him tightly. “Are you still riding horses naked?”

“Don’t you start,” he replied with a chuckle. “I ride naked horses.”

“But it’s so much more fun saying it the other way.”

“Enough about that. What’s goin’ on?”

“I ran away from a nightmare,” she replied. “My manager turned out to be a monster and I was afraid to breathe. But he has power and influence so I’m hiding until I can figure out what to do.”

“Dammit. Did he hurt you?”

“He was starting to. The last night I was home he shoved me to the floor. I was lucky I wasn’t hurt, and I knew it was the start of another hideous chapter with him. I had to get out. And before you ask, calling the police wasn’t an option. He’s a legend in Nashville.”

“I’ll kill the bastard,” Hank growled. “Where can I find him?”

“Take a number,” Brody interjected. “But obviously that’s not an option, at least, not for the moment, and you can’t tell anyone about this. Her manager’s name is Geoff Palmer, and he’s already been here lookin’ for her. He drove through the gates and rolled up in a big limo with four heavies followin’ in a black sedan. It was like something out of a movie.”

“No shit. How did you get here, Annie?”

“I drove.”

“You drove here? How long did that take?”

“Nine, maybe ten hours. It was forever.”

“Damn, girl, how did stay awake?”

“Fear.”

“Brody, let me teach that sonofabitch a lesson,” Hank said with a heavy frown.

“I want him rottin’ away behind bars, not you, and like I said, no-one can know she’s here. You can’t do or say anything.”

“I know you’re right, but I’m just so hoppin’ mad. What can I do? Anything, just name it.”

“Annie’s car is in my garage and—”

“I’ll drive it to my place right now and put it my storage shed.”

“Thanks, Hank,” Annie said gratefully. “It has Tennessee plates so it’s a dead giveaway.”

“When I get back I’ll switch them with the ones on my old truck. Helen’s not around right now so it won’t be a problem.”

“Helen? Is she your new girlfriend,” Annie asked with a smile.

“She sure is. Her folks bought the old Thompson place.”

“When this nightmare is over we should all get together for a barbecue. I have to make sure she deserves an awesome guy like you.”

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“I think you’ll approve,” Hank said with a grin. “But, Annie, I’m real sorry this happened, but at the same time I’m so damn proud of you. I knew you’d make it big. That voice of yours, it’s like listenin’ to an angel singin’.”

“Thanks, Hank. It was a fun ride until it wasn’t, but I missed this place and everyone here. I can’t wait to see mom and dad. It’s just too dangerous to call them, for both of us.”

“Hopefully that guy—what’s his name again?”

“Geoffrey Palmer.”

“Geoffrey Palmer,” Hank repeated. “Hopefully he’ll decide you’re not here and take off. Are the keys in the car? I’ll drive it through the back fields. I can’t be seen from the road, then I’ll just jog back and pick up my truck.”

“Why don’t we follow you in my pickup then we can bring you back?” Brody suggested. “You wanna go for a ride Bella?”

Jumping off the couch, Bella spun around and started barking.

“I think that’s a yes,” Hank said with a chuckle.

”And I’d love to see the back fields and horses again,” Annie exclaimed.

“Then let’s do it,” Hank agreed. “Will you ride with me, Annie? I want to hear all about what it’s like bein’ on the road and performin’ in front of all those people.”

“You bet. Let’s go.”

\* \* \*

While Brody, Hank and Annie headed off, at the hotel in the small township Geoffrey Palmer was fuming. The suite he’d booked was simply a room with a couch and coffee table against one wall. The four tall, muscled bodyguards he’d brought with him were sharing rooms with twin beds, and the limo driver had been called back to the airfield for a previous commitment. As if that wasn’t bad enough, the only places to eat were a far cry from the high end restaurants where Geoff would dine in Nashville.

But the greatest cause for concern was his realization that showing up at Brody’s ranch had been a grave mistake. Finally deciding on a new course of action, he texted his bodyguards and summoned them.

“Come in, come in,” he called impatiently as they knocked on his door. “I’m convinced Annie is either here or on her way,” he exclaimed as they entered. “It’s time for a change in plan. We’ll pretend to leave, but Gabe and John, you’ll stay here with me. I’ll explain how we’ll do this in a minute. Max and Stan, fly back to Nashville and start asking around. How the hell did she leave? Did she get hold of a car? Fly here in a private jet? Find the fuck out. I want answers. Got it?”

“Yes, boss,” they muttered in unison.

“Gabe, arrange a rental car to pick us up right away. Something basic. Do any of you recall that sign we passed on the way here advertising a campground?”

“Yeah, boss. I remember,” Gabe replied. “It said something like, Cabins and RV Spaces. Moonshine Lake Campgrounds.”



“That was it! Book the best two cabins they have available under your name and make sure you get clear directions. Now go. I need to make a call.”

The moment the door closed behind them, Geoff picked up the hotel phone and asked the front desk to connect him to the sheriffs office. When a young male voice answered, Geoff identified himself and demanded to speak to the sheriff.

“Mr. Palmer, this is Sheriff Cooper. How can I help you?”

“I’m leaving, but if Annie Baker shows up you must tell her to contact me. She’s under contract, and a clause of that contract requires her to stay in close communication with my office. If fourteen days passes with no word she will be in breach and can be sued. She stands to lose a great deal of money.”

“If I see her I’ll be sure to pass that along, Mr. Palmer.”

“I must also point out that besides her millions of fans, there are many people extremely worried about her, and some are dependent upon her for their livelihood. Annie Baker isn’t just a person, she’s a business. If she needs time off she can have it, but it’s extremely irresponsible and selfish for her to simply disappear.”

“Mr. Palmer, aren’t you worried?”

“Of course I’m worried,” Geoff snapped.

“It seems to me you should be lookin’ around Nashville. She might have met with foul play.”

“I can assure you that is being done. But she’s been restless lately and talking about missing home. I believe she decided to take a spur of the moment vacation and hasn’t told anyone.”

“If I see her I’ll tell her that as well.”

“Thank you. Now I must go.”

“Goodbye, Mr Palmer.”

“Goodbye, sheriff.”

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As Hank and Annie drove towards Smoky Hill with Brody following and Bella sitting beside him, Hank peppered her with questions about her celebrity life. When he turned off the dirt road and headed towards his property, the gentle slope and forest was to their right, and Brody’s paddocks to the left.

“The horses look so content,” she remarked with a sigh, gazing out her window. “I can’t wait to get back in the saddle. I wish I could ride a horse naked like you,” she added, then laughed out loud. “Maybe I could make that my next album cover and come up with a catchy title.”

“From now on I’m going to call what I do, riding with no equipment,” he said vehemently, shooting her a look.

“No, you can’t. That’s no fun,” she retorted as they crossed the boundary line into his property. “Oh, wow, you only had four when I left. Now it looks like you have two more.”

“Only one. The other is boarding here. I don’t just do guest appearances any more. I teach and train. It’s how I make my livin’.”

“You don’t have the feed store?”

“It’s leased. I almost sold it, but I thought I’d better keep it until I was sure this would pay off. So far it has, but I like things the way they are. And there’s the oversized storage shed near the barn. Brody and I will need to clear out some stuff to make room. Shouldn’t take long.”

“Thanks so much for this, Hank.”

“Hey, it’s no big deal,” he replied, slowing down to turn towards it.

“Do you mind if I get out here and go into the paddocks?”

“Of course not. Grab some treats from the glove compartment,” he said, coming to a stop.

“Fantastic, thanks. I can’t wait to pet them.”

“Have fun!”

Climbing from the truck, and glad she was wearing boots, she hurried to the first fence and climbed through the rails. The two horses sharing the pasture raised their heads, pricked their ears, and studied her.

“I bring tasty food,” she promised, walking slowly towards them. As they ambled towards her, she let out a heavy sigh, then stared up at the forest. “I’ve missed this place so much,” she murmured. “I feel as if I can breathe again.”

But one of the horses gently nudged her, breaking into her momentary reverie. Stroking his neck with one hand, she opened the other and let him gobble up a treat. She was about to head into the adjacent paddock when she thought she saw something moving through the trees. Curious, she climbed back through the fence and she walked cautiously towards the base of the forest. As she drew near, she was

delighted to see a big, grey, furry dog trotting towards her.

“Where did you come from? You can’t stay in the forest. It won’t be safe.”

The dog stopped and stared at her.

“You’re so beautiful,” she murmured, thinking the canine must be male because of its size “I have a horse treat. I’m not sure if you’ll like it, but it has molasses in it.”

The dog still didn’t move.

Deciding he was scared and nervous, she sat down to appear less threatening, then softly tossed the treat towards him. To her great delight he padded forward, picked it up and swallowed it in one gulp.

“You liked that? I have another one,” she said, reaching into her pocket and dropping it on the ground just a couple of yards in front of her.

As the big dog drew closer she stayed perfectly still, watching as he gobbled it down.

“Are you a malamute? You sure look like one, or maybe a husky? But you’re not wearing a collar. That’s so irresponsible. I wonder what your name is. I think I’ll call you Moon because you’re so big and grey. Would you like that?”

The furry animal didn’t come any closer, but continued to stare at her, then to her joy, he sat down.

“That’s a good sign,” she remarked with a smile. “I’d love to pet you, but I might scare you if I come too close. We can just sit here together for a few minutes.”

“Annie!”

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“Oh, that’s Brody, my wonderful cowboy. He must be ready to leave. Sorry, but I have to go. I’ll try to come and visit you again. I’m going to get up now. Don’t be afraid.”

Holding his gaze, she slowly rose to her feet, and as she turned to walk away, from the corner of her eye she saw him trot back into the trees. As she strode forward, she saw Brody and Hank standing by the truck obviously waiting for her, and there was no sign of her car.

“Sorry, I was just enjoying being here,” she exclaimed. “It’s just so wonderful. I didn’t realize how much I missed it.”

“I can understand how that could happen,” Brody remarked. “You were caught up in the excitement of your success.”

“And probably didn’t have a minute to spare,” Hank added. “I bet you were busy every second.”

“I was. I’m beginning to wonder how I did it all. But it was following orders more than anything. I was told where I needed to go and when, and there was always someone waiting to take me. Half the time I’d forget where we were going and they’d have to remind me on the way.”

“Well now you have nowhere to be and all the time in the world to get there,” Brody said, placing his arm around her. “Like I said earlier, it’s time to unwind.”

“And get on a horse,” she exclaimed with a wide smile.

“And definitely get on a horse,” he repeated. “You can plan on doin’ that tomorrow mornin’ after a good night’s sleep.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Shortly after Brody and Annie arrived home she fell victim to another wave of fatigue. As she stretched out on the bed, Bella jumped up and laid next to her.

“You’re such a sweet girl,” Annie mumbled, and letting out a heavy yawn, she closed her eyes and drifted off.

“Sleep well, you two,” Brody murmured.

Leaving the bedroom, he stopped in the kitchen for a last swallow of coffee before heading out to continue his preparations for the clinic, and was marching across to the barn when his phone rang. Seeing the sheriff’s name on the screen he quickly accepted the call.

“Hi, sheriff, I’m guessin’ you have news,” he said anxiously.

“Yep, and it’s good. I just finished speaking with Geoffrey Palmer and I’m pleased to report he’s leaving.”

“Already? I thought he’d stick around a while.”

“I did too, but he called and went on and on about how he could sue Annie if she decided to take off for a break without telling anyone, and if she showed up I was to tell her so. He sounded more angry than concerned about her welfare.”

“Figures. He’s such a jerk. He’s just worried about how many dollars he’s losin’ because she’s not cuttin’ a new record or performin’ some place. But are you sure

he's gone?"

"I just got through talkin' to Becky at the hotel. He paid his bill and said he was headin' out to the airfield. I'll call over there in a little bit and see if his plane took off. But I'm pretty sure he's outta here."

"This is great news. I'll tell Annie as soon as she wakes up. The poor girl is wiped out."

"I'll just bet she is. Now she can relax and take it easy. But she does need to let the world know she's alive and well. There are a whole lotta resources bein' used lookin' for her, not to mention the public."

"How do we handle that?"

"I'll give it some thought, but with Geoff Palmer gone it's probably safe to tell her folks. Just make sure they keep it under wraps for the moment."

"I will, I'll get in touch with them now. Thanks, sheriff."

"You're welcome, Brody."

Reaching the barn, he settled on a bale of hay and placed the call. When her mother answered he started to outline the story, but her father hastily picked up the second phone in their bedroom so he could listen as well.

"I knew it, I just knew it," he exclaimed with a crack in his voice. "I kept sayin', she's a smart girl and she's okay."

"I'm truly sorry we couldn't tell you sooner," Brody said earnestly. "I think she was worried about your safety. When Geoff Palmer showed up here it wasn't with a



smile.”

“That’s okay, we understand,” her mother replied with a sniffle. “All that matters is our little girl is safe. When will you be here?”

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“She’s sleepin’ right now, but when she wakes up I’ll let you know.”

“Wonderful, but you must come for dinner,” her father said earnestly. “We want you both back at our table, and she’s in for a surprise. Her brother’s comin’ home. He’ll be here any time now.”

“He was worried sick and wanted to be here if any news came in,” her mother added. “But we’ll call him right away. He’ll be over the moon.”

“Tell Andrew hello from me, and Annie will call the minute she wakes up.”

“You’d better warn her. When she walks through our door we’ll be squeezin’ the life out of her.”

\* \* \*

Standing in his cabin on the elevated banks of Moonshine Lake Geoff was pleasantly surprised. The quaint log cottage bordered on luxurious. The floor to ceiling windows in the lounge offered a spectacular view of the lake and mountains beyond, and a flagstone hearth surrounded a large fireplace. The couch and armchairs were leather, and the bedroom was a generous size with a well-appointed marble bathroom.

And nobody knew he was there!

He’d hunkered down in the back seat while John had driven his car into the campground. Gabe had checked in, and as far as anyone knew, John was staying in the more expensive cabin, while Gabe was in the other,

“Thank God! This is a far cry from that crappy hotel,” Geoff grunted, meandering over to gaze down at the glassy lake. “I just might come back here to enjoy myself one of these days. Right now I have to focus on bringing my naughty runaway to heel.”

Gabe and John were settling into their cabin just a short walk away, and he strode to the liquor cabinet to pour himself some whiskey while he waited for them. Taking a gulp, he nodded his approval, then moved to the door and was about to step out onto the porch when he saw them walking up the path.

“This is so much better than the hotel,” Gabe exclaimed. “It’s a shame we didn’t know about it before.”

“You have a firm grasp of the obvious,” Geoff retorted as they walked inside. “Here’s the plan. I noticed a wooded area behind the paddocks at Brody King’s ranch. It’s the perfect place to watch his house. You’ll be able to see anyone who comes up the drive, including Annie when she arrives.”

“Uh, Mr. Palmer, I had a thought,” Gabe began tentatively.

“What’s that?”

“Let’s say she does end up there.”

“She will. She’s a country girl at heart,” Geoff growled. “She’ll want to come home to her boyfriend and family. It’s where she feels safe.”

“Uh, right, sure, of course,” Gabe continued. “But, uh, that boyfriend of hers, he looked like he’s the type to shoot first and ask questions later. I guess what I’m asking is, how will we get her out of there when she does show up?”

“Let me worry about that. You just keep your eyes peeled. You’ll start at eight in the morning and finish around ten at night. That’s only seven hours for each of you, and make sure you’re in a spot that has cell service so you can call and text. Tell the management you’ll be taking extended hikes and you’ll need sandwiches and thermoses. That will stop you from starving. The question is, how do you get into those woods without being seen?”

“I noticed a neighboring property to the east of Brody King’s ranch,” John began thoughtfully, “but the west side there was just empty land leading up to the forest. I don’t recall any fencing.”

“There’s your answer. Good. Go there now and scope it out.”

“What about her parents house? Shouldn’t we be watching there too?”

“I want to focus on that ranch. There’s only him to deal with. I don’t want the hassle of an hysterical mother hen.”

“Ah, right,” Gabe muttered. “That could get dicey.”

“Exactly. Fortunately this camp ground has internet so I can work from here and take care of things in Nashville. I’m finally getting somewhere,” he said with a satisfied sigh. “Annie will soon be back under my wing where she belongs.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Brody had finished cleaning his tack and was about to saddle a young colt when he heard Bella barking. Alarmed and looking towards home he saw his dog racing towards him. Hastily releasing the horse into the nearest corral, he ran across the yard and into the house. Still barking, Bella led him to the bedroom where he found Annie teary eyed and hugging a pillow.

“Annie, what’s wrong? What happened?”

“I had a terrible nightmare,” she exclaimed as he sat next to her and brought her into his arms. “Geoff was here and his bodyguards were beating you up. I was screaming at them to stop but he just laughed and said it was my punishment for running away.”

“It’s okay, baby. It was just a bad dream. He’s gone, and even if he was still around those losers wouldn’t stand a chance if they tried to get the better of me.”

“I know, but it was horrifying.”

“Of course it was. Bein’ around that bastard and under so much stress these last few months it’s no wonder you’re havin’ nightmares. But you can rest easy now. He doesn’t have any idea where you are.”

“Please, Brody, please will you help me forget?” she begged, pulling back and staring up at him.

Leaning down, he languidly moved his lips over hers in a lingering, sensuous kiss.

“How’s that for starters?”

“That worked. More please.”

Taking his time, he removed her clothes, ran his hands over her body eliciting long, soulful moans, then quickly stripped and stretched out beside her.

“How do you do that?” she whispered. “It’s so amazing.”

“Do what?”

“That thing with your hands. They seem to soak up all my tension and leave me feeling so...”

“So...?”

“I can’t describe it. I never want you to stop.”

“Not even to do this?” he purred, moving his lips to her neck and his fingers into her sex.

As he massaged her clit she whimpered and wriggled, but increasing the pressure, he continued until she was begging for his cock. Moving on top of her, he placed himself at her entrance, thrust forward, then grabbed her wrists and held them above her head.

“Feel good, baby?” he murmured as he slowly stroked.

“Divine. Absolutely divine.”

“Hmmm, I know what you mean. I’ve missed you so much. This bed has been mighty empty without you.”

“Uh...so...in all this time you haven’t...uh...?” she stammered, then hastily added, “Sorry, I shouldn’t ask.”

“It’s okay, you can ask me anything,” he murmured, pausing but staying buried inside her. “This last year, not hearin’ from you, it was tough. I won’t lie, there was a girl here a few times, but it didn’t feel right, not for either of us, and she’s long gone. She was just here on vacation. Now where were we,” he muttered, lowering his lips to her nipples and urgently drawing them between his lips.

Letting out a cry, she lifted her chest to meet his mouth, then groaned as he released her wrists to clutch her breasts. Sensing her growing arousal, he increased his pace as he devoured her luscious mounds, then resting his weight on her body, he thrust his hands beneath her and squeezed her plump cheeks.

“Damn, you feel so fuckin’ good,” he growled, vigorously pumping. Hearing her squeal and squeal again, he abruptly stopped. “Are you okay, baby?”

“God yes, keep going...keep going...” she wailed, squirming beneath him.

With her urgent request spurring him on, he began thrusting with renewed vigor, accelerating as her cries became louder and more urgent.

“Please can I come?” she suddenly wailed.

“Yeah, baby, give it to me,” he grunted huskily.

As her back arched and she let out a wild cry he felt his climax looming, and with her happy howls still echoing through the room, he surrendered to the powerful convulsions crackling through his body.

\* \* \*

Moments later, her heart pounding and her body still tingling, she curled against him and let out a happy sigh.

“That was so amazing,” she purred. “I’m so happy to be here. I guess it’s true what they say.”

“Which is?”



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“You don’t know how important something is or how much you love it until it’s taken away. This is a miracle. There were times I didn’t think I’d ever get away from him.”

“But you did. Oh, I almost forgot. Your folks know you’re here.”

“They do? How did that happen?”

“The sheriff called to tell me Geoff was gone and we could tell your family. He also said we need to contact law enforcement and release a statement for the press. He was concerned about all the resources out there trying to find you. He kind of hinted that you could get in trouble if you didn’t let them know you were safe and okay.”

“Oh, my gosh, I hadn’t thought about that. But once Geoff hears he’ll come after me again...unless...” she muttered.

“You have an idea?”

“They say a good offense is the best defense. I’m going to tell the police everything. Geoffrey Palmer was threatening and abusing me and I was absolutely terrified. I’ll also bring up Patty Henderson and suggest they take a closer look at her death. Then I’ll call Geoff and tell him what I’ve done. He’ll completely freak out.”

“Annie, that’s brilliant. He wouldn’t dare come after you knowing you’ve told the police what he’s like, but just to be on the safe side I’ll hire some private security.”

“I was thinking about that myself.”

“Call your parents on the landline, they’re dyin’ to talk to you. While you do that I’ll get in touch with the sheriff on my cell and ask him to put me in touch with whoever is in charge of the search for you.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The sheriff wasn’t available when Brody called so he left a message, then moments later Annie finished speaking to her parents. She was dying to see them so they hurried out to his truck, and as she was climbing in, Bella suddenly jumped up over her, and perched between the seats. Chuckling at her antics, Brody settled behind the wheel, but during the drive he noticed Annie was constantly glancing into the side mirrors.

“Annie, Geoff’s gone, you don’t have to worry.”

“I guess it’s still hard to believe.”

“Believe it, and pretty soon you’ll be talkin’ to the police, then Geoff will be the one lookin’ over his shoulder.”

“I hope they can nail him.”

“You know what, I’m willin’ to bet there are others who have suffered at his hands but too afraid to speak up. You wait and see. When the news breaks the cops will start gettin’ a bunch of calls.”

“You know, Brody, I think you’re right. I remember one of my backup singers was really quiet when he was around. I thought she was just in awe of him.”

“Scared, more like,” Brody replied, turning into her parent’s driveway.

“Oh, my gosh, it’s Andy,” she shouted, seeing her brother step from the house with her mother and father.

Hurriedly climbing from the truck she ran up to hug him, and as Brody followed he felt his heart swell.

“Thank you for takin’ care of our girl, Brody,” her father said gratefully walking up to greet him. “Are you comin’ in for coffee?”

“Thanks, but you should enjoy your reunion and I have a bunch of stuff to do at the ranch.”

“You’ll be back for dinner though.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Then we’ll see you around six.”

Saying a quick goodbye to Annie who was now being smothered by her mother, Brody returned to the truck and headed off, but halfway home he received a call from the sheriff.

“Hello, sheriff. If you’re lookin’ for Annie I just dropped her off at her parent’s house.”

”Good to know, but I’m glad you’re alone. I have good news and bad news. I’ll start with the bad. I just got confirmation from the airfield. The jet did take off, but with only two passengers.”

“You’re kiddin’. That means Geoff and two of his goons must still here.”

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“I’m sorry, Brody. It looks that way.”

“Dammit. What’s the good news?”

“I have the name and phone number of the person Annie needs to speak to about her press release, Jenny Miller. But more importantly, I also talked with the FBI agent assigned to her case, Special Agent Kevin McCade. I explained how she’d been in fear of her life from her manager, Geoffrey Palmer, and that I believe he’s still here in Smoky Hill. He wanted to speak with her right away, so I gave him her parent’s telephone number, and yours as well.”

“I assume this agent will be coming here.”

“He will, but he said he’d put out a statement right away. He thinks it will stop Geoff taking his vendetta any further.”

“I hope he’s right. Any advice? Should Annie stay with her parents now?”

“I’ve been thinkin’ about that. If Geoff Palmer finds out she’s there, he just might break into the family home and threaten to hurt her mother if she doesn’t go back to Nashville with him. Maybe even her father too. That’s a scenario we want to avoid. I believe your place would be safer. I’ll contact the county office and get some deputies over there, and tell them to keep their eye on the family home as well.”

“Her brother’s there now. Does that make a difference?”

“Yes. I know Andrew and he’s a great kid, but if anything happened he’d try to be a

hero. Annie is definitely better off with you.

“Ah, I understand. I’m just not sure her parents will want her leavin’.”

“I’ll drive over and talk to them. They need to hear about Geoff anyway, and I should tell them in person. I’ll call you when I’m done and let you know how it goes.”

“Thanks, sheriff. I’ll be at the ranch until around six, then I’ll be headin’ over there to join them for dinner.”

“I’ll be in touch soon. Bye, Brody.”

“Bye, sheriff.”

Rolling down his driveway and stopping near his back door, Brody climbed from the truck. As Bella jumped out after him, he stared across at the paddocks, the barn, and the forest beyond. Geoff and his thugs would be exposed if they tried to approach the house from the back. Even trying to creep in from the road would be difficult. The brush clearance to help prevent fires had just been finished so there was no cover there either. When the deputies arrived and their cruisers made their presence known, Brody was confident his ranch would be a safe haven until the bastard was found.

“Come on, girl, let’s get that fencin’ repaired,” he said, but as he was bending down to pet her, his phone announced a call. “Dammit, now what?”

His impatience quickly left him.

It was Annie.

“Hey, baby, is everything okay?”

“Better than okay. I just spoke to the FBI agent in charge of finding me. He believed everything I told him and he’s going on national television in a few minutes to announce that I’ve been found, and also to say something about Geoff.”

“You’re kiddin’. How can they make that happen so fast? Never mind, you’re famous and the entire country has been lookin’ for you. I forgot that for a minute.”

“He pretty much said the same thing. Anyway, before you go out to the horses and start doing your thing, turn on your TV. He should be on any minute now.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Hurrying inside and into the living room with Bella at his side, Brody turned on the television set and clicked through to one of the major networks. The show airing was a soap opera, but he only needed to wait a minute or two before it was interrupted and a solemn reporter sitting behind the news desk faced the camera.

“Just in—breaking news. I’m pleased to report country music superstar Annie Baker is alive and well, but her whereabouts remain confidential, as do the reasons for her disappearance. Authorities wish to speak to her manager, Geoffrey Palmer, as soon as possible,” he continued as a photograph of Geoffrey appeared on the screen. “If you know of his whereabouts, or Mr. Palmer if you see this, please contact a local law enforcement office immediately. Once again, country singer Annie Baker is alive and well. We’ll now return you to the regular programming.”

“Damn, Bella, that should keep Geoff away from her, but I hope it doesn’t backfire. He might disappear,” Brody exclaimed, turning off the set and quickly calling Annie.

“Hi, did you see it?” she asked excitedly.

“I sure did, darlin’. Now Geoff will have nowhere to hide.”

“I hope he doesn’t disappear.He has the money to go anywhere.”

“But he might not have seen it, and even if he did he can’t exactly roll up to an airfield and charter a jet. The FBI will have sent out notifications everywhere.”

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“I hadn’t thought about that.”

“This is almost over. Enjoy the rest of the afternoon and I’ll see you in little while.”

“Okay, and Brody,” she whispered, “I love you.”

“Hey, I love you too, baby.”

Ending the call and letting out a sigh, he strode from the house and headed to his work shed. The broken fence was directly across from the barn and he needed to replace the entire plank. Carrying it over his right shoulder with his tool bag in his left hand, he marched down the path with Bella trotting along ahead of him. The weather had been perfect, but glancing up he noticed dark clouds in the distance.

“I sure hope that doesn’t come this way,” he muttered, still staring at the sky as he reached the broken fence.

The two horses in the pasture meandered over to find out what was going on, then stood a short distance away as he began the work. He had the old plank off and was about to nail the new one in place when Bella suddenly started barking and ran towards the forest.

“Dammit! Bella, come back here,” he yelled, breaking into a run after her. “Bella, wait!”

To his great relief she did, but looked back at him and continued barking.



“What the heck...ohh...did you see the wolf?” he panted, catching up to her.

As she stopped sounding the alarm he stared into the forest. Though he saw no movement, the wolf’s presence was the only thing he could point to that could have caused her to kick up such a fuss—then it suddenly hit him. Geoff’s thugs.

“Stay with me,” he said, touching Bella’s head, then wishing he had his shotgun he walked slowly into the trees. Except for the familiar sounds of the pristine environment he heard nothing, but glancing at the ground ahead he noticed a candy wrapper.

“Damn,” he grunted, striding forward and picking it up. “I guess that answers the question. Good girl, Bella. You were right to warn me. I should—”

Bella’s low growl cut him off.

Feeling a shiver ripple down his spine, he slowly turned his head.

The big wolf was standing off to the side only about twenty yards away.

“Bella, lie down,” he said firmly. “Now.”

As she obeyed, the wolf turned and disappeared into the trees.

“That is the damndest thing,” he muttered, staring after it as he pushed the wrapper into his jeans pocket. “Come on, girl, let’s get back to fixin’ that fence.”

But as he started back to the paddocks he continued darting his eyes from side to side, looking for both the wild dog, and the human predators.

\* \* \*

After running as fast as they could across the open field to their car parked on the side of the road, Gabe and John climbed in and tried to catch their breath.

They'd been walking through the trees towards Brody's ranch eating energy bars when they were met by a huge, snarling dog. Instinct told Gabe to run, but John had grabbed his sleeve, told him it was a wolf and not to move.

After what felt like endless terrifying minutes the animal finally turned and galloped through the forest. In spite of John's warning to walk quietly away, there was no stopping Gabe. As he took off running, John felt he had no choice but to keep up, and when he looked behind them he was glad he had. The wolf was back sniffing around where they'd been standing.

"I'm not going back there," Gabe panted. "I don't care how much money Geoff throws at me."

"I'm with you," John muttered. "We can just drive here and sit in this fucking car. He won't know the difference."

"Now, that's a plan. I might—what the hell?" Gabe grunted as their cell phones chimed simultaneously.

As they hastily checked their messages, John read his aloud.

POLICE ALERT: Country singing sensation Annie Baker has been found. Authorities are seeking information on the whereabouts of her manager, Geoffrey Palmer, last seen in the small town of Smoky Hill between Lubbock and Fort Worth, Texas. See attached image. If you see this man please contact your local authorities.

"Thank God we checked into that camping ground under my name," Gabe grunted, "but this isn't good. This isn't good at all."

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“I knew his bullshit would catch up to him,” John said angrily. “He’s been so out of control lately.”

“What do you mean, lately?” Doug retorted. “He’s always been out of control.”

“Well yeah, but he’s worse than ever. It’s Annie. She got under his skin, kind of like Patty did, but even worse.”

“Okay, Johnny boy, what do you suggest?”

“Pick up our stuff and get the hell outta Dodge.”

“Works for me. Let’s go!”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

After sending Gabe and John to scout out the best vantage point to watch Brody’s ranch, Geoff had turned off his phone, placed his Platinum Rolex wristwatch on the nightstand, and settled down for a much-needed nap. After the lumpy, uncomfortable mattress at the hotel the bed in his cabin was a slice of heaven, and he’d quickly drifted off into nothingness.

When he blinked open his eyes he found himself in darkness except for two tiny nightlights on either side of the room. After sleepily switching on the bedside lamp he picked up his watch to check the time. It was just past eight o’clock. Gabe and John had left in the middle of the afternoon. Wondering why he hadn’t heard from them, then remembering he’d turned off his phone and it was in the living room, he reached

for the house phone and called their cabin. When he received no response he assumed they were in the restaurant.

“Fuck. I’m hungry too,” he grunted under his breath.

Climbing from the bed he headed into the bathroom for a quick shower. As he stood under the hot water he started to consider how he would punish Annie for causing him so much trouble. Locking her in her bedroom for a week with no phone or television was one option. She’d be furious for the first couple of days, then she’d start crying and saying how sorry she was—just as Patty had done.

The thought brought a dark frown to his forehead.

The stupid, ungrateful cow had no-one but herself to blame for her unfortunate accident.

Pushing away the ugly memory he stepped from the stall, toweled off, combed his hair, then padded into the bedroom and quickly dressed. As he walked through the lounge he picked up his phone, but deciding to check the messages later, he slipped it into his pocket and headed outside.

The night air was cold. Wishing he’d grabbed a jacket, he quickened his pace and hurried the short distance to The Log Cabin. It was the name of the restaurant, and while he thought it lacked imagination it was appropriate. As he stepped inside he found the atmosphere comforting. A large fire and amber lighting invited relaxation—until the hostess approached. Tilting her head to the side, she blatantly stared at him. Wherever he went in Nashville he was recognized, and it occurred to him she knew he was famous and was trying to place him.

“Good evening, sir,” she began, breaking into what he thought looked like a nervous smile. “Are you meeting friends or would you like a table for one?”

“There should be two men already here but I don’t see them,” he muttered, casting his gaze across the diners. “Huh, that’s odd. I’ll have an appetizer at the bar while I’m waiting.”

“Certainly, sir.”

Still thinking there was something strange about her demeanor, he ambled across the room, settled on a stool and asked the bartender for a glass of their finest cognac. The young man smiled and nodded, then suddenly frowned and hurried to the end of the bar.

Though Geoff thought his behavior was a bit strange, he was more concerned about Gabe and John. Turning to check the tables one more time, he noticed several patrons staring at him. He was used to notoriety, but something about their expressions made him uneasy.

“You’re cognac sir,” the bartender announced, snatching his attention.

Taking a drink and setting the glass back down, he savored the spicy liquor gliding down his throat, then letting out a grateful sigh, he lifted his cell phone from his pocket. As he turned it on he immediately noticed an alert. With so many texts waiting he was about to ignore it, but he suddenly saw his photograph. With his pulse ticking up, he read the short announcement.

POLICE ALERT: Country singing sensation Annie Baker has been found. Authorities are now seeking the public’s help locating her manager, Geoffrey Palmer. He was last seen in the small town of Smoky Hill between Lubbock and Fort Worth, Texas. Image attached. If you see this man please contact your local authorities.

“What the fuck...?” he muttered as a cold chill pricked his skin.

Telling himself to stay calm and quickly downing the last of his drink, he pulled out his wallet, dropped a twenty-dollar bill on the counter, then slipped off the bar stool and strode towards the exit. As he passed the hostess he heard her say something, but ignoring her, he stepped outside and hurried back to his cabin.

He could guess what Annie had said to the police.

She would have painted a dark picture of an obsessive man who controlled her every move. But at their first meeting he'd made it clear if she wanted him to make her a star, she would have to do exactly what he said. As far as he was concerned he'd done nothing illegal—at least not with Annie—but the alert suggested otherwise.

Fighting panic and with his head spinning, he hastily threw his belongings into his bag, ran to his car, tossed it in the back seat, and sped for the exit.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he yelled, banging his fist on the steering wheel as he raced through the campground, but once on the road he took a few deep breaths and managed to calm himself down. Seeing a sign with an arrow and the words, LAKE VIEW POINT, he reduced his speed, turned onto a dirt track, followed it a short distance, and stopped.

The full, glowing moon low in the sky was reflected on the calm water of a small, pristine lake, and tall trees surrounding it stood like imposing guardians. Staring out at the magnificent view settled his nerves, and he understood why Gabe and John had disappeared. The police alert had spooked them.

A smile curled his lips.

He knew exactly what to do.

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

As Geoff placed the call to his life-long lawyer and close friend Barry Stein, he knew Barry would be panicking.

“Geoff! Thank God! Where are you? What’s going on?”

“Barry, I’m fine,” he replied calmly. “Please tell me you haven’t made any public statements about anything.”

“No, though it hasn’t been easy. The phone hasn’t stopped. Did you find Annie in Smoky Hill?”

“Yes, she’s here, but listen carefully and do exactly what I say.”

“Don’t ask me to do anything illegal.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I assume the police have been in touch.”

“I wish it had been the police. More like the fucking FBI.”

“Ah, yes, of course,” Geoff muttered. “Forget about them for the moment.”

“Forget about them? Are you out of your mind?”

“Barry, you’re an excellent lawyer and I trust you completely, but you need to stop being hysterical and listen.”

“Okay, okay, sorry. Go ahead.”

“Annie Baker and I had a fight. A big one. She wanted out of her contract and I refused. This bullshit she’s pulling is payback. First, she breached the agreement by disappearing, and now she’s obviously told the police a bunch of lies and they believed her. But no matter who they ask, no-one will be able to say they saw me treat her badly. They can talk to the band, stage managers, makeup artists, whoever they want, and not one of them will have anything negative to say about what they witnessed between the two of us. When you contact the FBI on my behalf that’s your starting point. Got it?”

“Yes, I’ve got it, Geoff.”

“I’ve seen you in action. You’re the best. Just stick to what I told you. Now...the next thing...they’ll ask to see me. Unless they have some kind of warrant, which I highly doubt, I’m not interested in talking to them right now.”

“What excuse should I give?”

“Say I was worried about Annie so I flew to Smoky Hill hoping to find her visiting her family. When I couldn’t locate her I left and you don’t know where I am.”

“Okay. I’ll handle it, but will you please stay in touch?”

“I’m not sure where I’ll be, but I’ll call you again when I can. I have a couple of my emergency burner phones—”



“You have emergency burner phones?”

“Barry, shit happens, especially in dicey situations. It’s not unusual. I always take a few with me when I’m touring with an artist.”

“Why?”

“They can be handy. The point is, if you get a call from an unidentified number it could be me, so answer it. And you won’t be able to call me again on this phone. I need to disappear for a while so I’ll be destroying the SIM card.”

“Geoff, why all the cloak and dagger crap?”

“I don’t trust Annie. She wants to leave me and I’ve worked too hard making her a star to allow that to happen. Negotiations be damned. It would cost me millions if I released her from her contract.”

“I know the hours you put in Geoff, and also how brilliant you are. I can’t imagine why she’s flipped out like this.”

“It’s that fucking ex-boyfriend of hers. Brody King. She thinks she’s still in love with him and she’d be happier living out here in nowheresville.”

“Ohh... I get it.”

“She’ll come to her senses, but I don’t know how long it will take. Tell the FBI Annie wants out of her contract and telling lies about me is how she’s trying to do it.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Yes. Put the word out—remind people that I have friends everywhere, and they’ll be keeping their eyes and ears open. If anyone says anything defamatory about me or my company they’ll be hit with a lawsuit.”

“That’s a really good idea, Geoff. I know how people gossip. It was terrible when Patty Henderson had that car accident.”

“Exactly. It’s jealousy. I came from nothing and became one of the most influential and successful people in the country music business. I’m either loved or hated. There’s no middle ground.”

“Sad but true,” Barry muttered with a sigh. “Is that it?”

“For the moment. I’ll be in touch again soon.”

“Okay, and you don’t have to worry, I’ll handle everything on this end.”

“I know you will. Thanks, Barry.

“Bye, Geoff. Good luck with everything.”

“What’s that old saying? Luck is for rabbits. Bye, Barry.”

Ending the call, Geoff opened his phone, removed the SIM card, then retrieved his small pouch from the glove compartment. Inside was an engraved, solid silver, fold-out knife. As he cut the card in half and tossed it out the window, a dark frown crossed his brow.

No-one walked away from him.

Especially not a young woman like Annie Baker.

She’d been just another young hopeful waiting tables trying to make a living when he’d plucked her out of obscurity. If he hadn’t invested all his time, energy and effort, she’d still be there.

“No, Annie,” he muttered under his breath. “You’re coming home with me and I’ll give you one more chance. But just one. If you fuck with me again you can join Patty Henderson in hell.”

But even as he spoke he knew it wouldn’t be easy.

Now he was working alone.

Though it was possible Gabe and John would see the error of their ways and return, Geoff wasn’t about to wait around.

He estimated Brody’s ranch was only about ten minutes away. Fifteen at the most. Starting his car and turning around, he headed down the deserted road.

CHAPTER TWENTY

With the FBI now involved, Geoff wasn't about to take any chances, and he was fairly certain Brody's house would have police protection. Approaching the turn in the road a short distance from the ranch, he slowly pulled to the side, then drove up a gentle bank into a thicket so his car couldn't be seen. Leaving his vehicle and walking quickly around the bend he wasn't surprised to see a sheriff's cruiser parked near Brody's gate. But luck was on his side. The car was facing away from him. Breaking into a jog, he entered the open field neighboring Brody's property, but as he headed to the fence to climb through the thin wire he noticed a warning sign stating it was electrified.

"Why the hell do you have a fucking electric fence?" he grunted angrily, then turned his eyes to the only other option.

The forest.

It was a daunting prospect.

Summoning his courage, he strode across the uneven ground to the heavily wooded area. As he stopped and looked behind him, the house, barn and paddocks were easy to see. It brought a smile to his lips, but as he doubled back through the spooky, intimidating forest towards the grounds, he began to feel uneasy. It was much darker than he thought it would be, and the unfamiliar sounds were unnerving. Picking up his pace as he approached the edge of the trees, though he didn't encounter the electric fence he heard a low, menacing growl.

He paused his step.

Afraid to turn around and afraid not to, he froze...then out of the blue an idea flashed through his head. Slowly lifting out his phone, he turned on the flashlight feature and spun around.

Perilously close, a huge, snarling dog stared at him with its teeth bared.

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With his hands shaking and heart pounding, Geoff jerked up his arm and sent the dazzling light into the animal's face. Instantly the animal galloped away into the trees.

Letting out a heavy breath and trying to calm his racing heart, he dropped the phone back in his pocket and broke into a fast run. By the time he passed the horses in the paddocks he was almost out of breath, but he didn't stop until he was nearing the house. Slowing to a walk and panting heavily, he could see a dim light coming from a single window. He stopped and stared. There was no evidence of anyone moving around inside. As he bent down and moved cautiously closer, he noticed Brody's truck was gone. Continuing around to the back door and trying the handle he discovered it was locked. At his feet were potted plants and a few stone ornaments. Moving them one by one, he found a key beneath a concrete frog. Slipping it in the lock, it turned easily and he slowly opened the door.

He was peering into the kitchen.

There were no sounds.

His suspicions were confirmed.

Brody and Annie were gone.

Stepping inside he quickly found the pantry and a tub of blueberry muffins. After wolfing down two, he grabbed a cup from the counter, opened the refrigerator, poured himself a glass of milk, then sat at the table and considered his options.

\* \* \*

The happy evening at Annie's home was drawing to a close. In spite of Geoffrey Palmer's unpleasant visit to the town it had been a joyous reunion. As Annie hugged her parents and said her goodbyes, Brody invited her brother Andrew to stop by the ranch.

"I'd love to come. When would be a good time?"

"If you'd like to watch the clinic over the weekend you're more than welcome. There will be ten people, all different levels, but if you'd rather swing by and take a hike through the forest or go for a trail ride with Annie and me, that's fine too."

"There are some friends I want to catch up with in the next couple of days so the weekend would probably be best."

"Sounds good. Call me and we'll work it out," Brody replied as he and Annie ambled to his truck.

There were more hugs before Annie was allowed to climb in, and as Brody backed the truck down the driveway, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank you," she murmured. "You're the best."

"I am? Why, what did I do?"

"You're just so easy to be with. Mum and dad adore you."

"That's only because I'm taking care of their daughter. Speaking of which, now Geoffrey is gone and the dust has settled I think the time has come for me to keep my promise."

“What promise is that?”

“You don’t remember?” he asked, glancing across at her with a wickedly raised eyebrow.

“Oh...I do now.”

“And that promise was? Tell me, Annie.”

“I came to your house for one last goodbye kiss before leaving for Nashville, and you said the next time you saw me I’d be a singing sensation.”

“And...?”

“And if I’d become a big star, I’d probably, uh...”

“Go on.”

“Be in need of a proper spanking,” she whispered.

“Because?”

“Why are you making me say all this?”

“Answer the question! Because...?”



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“Because stars need to be brought back down to earth.”

“So, do you think you need a trip over my knee?”

“Um, yes and no.”

“Explain.”

“Yes, because just the thought makes me feel all weak and wonderful, and no because I won’t be able to leave you again,” she said softly, then taking a breath she added, “Brody, I’ve missed you so much. I’ve missed our amazing, special times more than I can possibly say.”

“You don’t have to explain, I feel the same, and even though I’m crazy proud of you, there’s a part of me that wants to spank you for leavin’ me.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When they neared home they spotted the deputy’s car parked on the side of the road across the street from the gate. As Brody pulled his truck beside it, Annie lowered her window.

“Hi, Brody,” the deputy called.

“Hey, Luke.”

“I’m Luke Carson,” the deputy continued, smiling at Annie. “It sure is a pleasure to

meet you, Miss Baker.”

“Please call me Annie, and thanks for being here. Can I get you some coffee or something to—”

But before she could finish a bolt of lightning flashed overhead followed by a thunderous roar.

“Dammit, we need to get the horses in,” Brody exclaimed, pressing the remote to open the gate.

“I’ll help you,” the deputy offered.

“Jump in next Annie. I’ll drive up to the paddocks.”

“You’re already cramped with your dog between. I’ll follow in my car.”

“Sounds good, and thanks.”

“Oh, no,” Annie muttered as rain started splashing against the windshield. “We’re too late. At least there’s only six of them.”

“With the lightnin’ they might get antsy. I’d rather have Luke help me. We’ve become friends over the last year and he knows what he’s doin’. But if you could put a flake of hay in their stalls that would be great. And stay there. No sense all of us gettin’ wet,” he declared as he rolled to a stop.

As she climbed from the truck and ran into the barn, Bella ran after her, while Brody and Luke hurried into the paddocks.

“Take the grey, the chestnut and two dark bays over there,” Brody yelled, trying to be

heard over the downpour as he pointed to the pasture closest to them. “They go in the first four stalls.”

Picking up the halters looped over the gates, Brody jogged to the second paddock and was opening the gate when another crack of lightning lit up the sky. River, a nervous black colt, began bucking and running. Moving up to Luna, his calm mare, Brody slipped on the halter, then returned to the nervous horse and managed to herd him into a corner. Slowly approaching and still holding Luna’s lead rope, Brody stood in the pouring rain and stroked his neck.

“It’s okay, River, just nature havin’ a tantrum.”

“I can take Luna.”

Though Brody heard Annie’s voice he kept his attention focused on the colt.

“Easy, fella, I’m here now.”

When he sensed the young horse beginning to settle, he moved the halter slowly into place.

“I can take Luna?” Annie repeated as Brody continued working with the frightened young horse.

“Okay, but don’t wait for us. Just keep walkin’.”

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Taking the lead rope Annie hurried through the paddock with Luna keeping pace beside her, but River continued to toss his head and prance. As Brody began leading him forward, the nervous horse began to settle. Finally reaching the barn, Brody found the other horses already happily munching their hay.

“Wow, that was crazy,” Luke exclaimed as Brody led River into his stall, “but they were pretty good considering this wild weather.”

“They’re used to the flash storms, but not this boy, not yet,” Brody remarked. “You’ll find some clean towels in the tack room.”

“Ah, great, thanks. I’ll bring a couple out for you, then I’d better get back to my car.”

As the deputy marched away, Brody grabbed Annie’s arm and pressed his lips to her ear.

“You know you’re going over my knee, right?”

“Uh...but when I glanced out I saw you—”

“We’ll talk about this later,” he said firmly as Luke strode towards them carrying some towels.

“I don’t know why I bothered dryin’ off,” Luke remarked. “I’m about to get drenched all over again. I should’ve brought my overcoat.”

“There are slickers in that cupboard,” Brody offered, nodding towards a free-

standing, tall cabinet as Luke handed him the towels. “You’re welcome to take one.”

“Great! Thanks. By the way, I’ll be relieved at midnight,” Luke continued as he hurried to the cupboard and pulled on the waterproof coat. “It’s been great to meet you Annie, and try not to worry. I’m sure we’ll catch that man soon.”

“Thanks, Luke,” Annie replied. “Take care, and drive safely when you leave.”

“Sure will. Bye, Brody.”

“Bye, Luke.”

As the deputy left the barn and started running down the drive, Brody and Annie began toweling themselves off.

“This is ridiculous. We need to get out of these clothes,” he declared, taking her hand and leading her into the tack room. Rummaging through a trunk, he pulled out a fleece track suit and a pair of thick socks. “Put this on. It will be big on you, but at least they’re dry.”

“What about you?”

“I have an extra pair of jeans and a sweater in here as well.”

“Why?”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve brought horses in during a sudden storm,” he replied as he quickly changed. “Now we need to get blankets on them. I can feel it gettin’ colder.”

“Can I help?”

“Sure. Then we’re goin’ into the office to wait until this rain passes. There’s a heater in there...and you and I will have a little talk.”

\* \* \*

As Geoff had sat at Brody’s kitchen table and thought about his situation, it suddenly dawned him he could return to his cabin at the campground. He had been seen at the bar, but the reservations for the cabins weren’t in his name, and it would be assumed he’d stopped into the restaurant by chance. All he had to do was park his car at the back of the cottage, and stay out of sight. Relieved, and angry at himself for panicking, he poked around the house, then decided he was pushing his luck and it was time to leave.

He was stepping out the kitchen door when the storm hit.

The timing couldn’t have been more perfect.

Peering through the curtains he saw Brody’s truck and the deputy’s cruiser drive up to the barn.

Quickly checking the hall closet and finding a decent umbrella and a long, black raincoat, he pulled it on, then hurried from the house. But he made sure to lock the kitchen door and put the key back under the frog, before trudging through the downpour back to his car.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

While Annie settled into the loveseat in the small barn office, Brody turned on the fan heater, then walked across to the window and stared out at the paddocks.

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“It will be a mess when this rain stops,” he muttered. “I sure hope it dries out by the weekend. I don’t want my clinic happenin’ in mud.”

“Will you have to keep the horses in the barn?”

“They’ll be able to go back out tomorrow. This storm should pass pretty quick.”

“That’s the problem with fall. I do love it, but the weather can be so unpredictable.”

“Like colts,” he remarked, turning around and frowning at her. “I didn’t tell you to stay in the barn just because I was worried about you gettin’ wet. I didn’t want you anywhere near River. If you don’t know what you’re doin’ you shouldn’t be around a frightened young horse.”

“Oh...sorry...I should have realized.”

“It’s okay,” he said, softening his voice and sitting next to her. “I’m guessin’ you haven’t been in a situation like this in a while.”

“Not at all,” she exclaimed. “I mean, I don’t remember being here and having to bring the horses in during thunder and lightning. In fact, I don’t remember ever being around horses in weather like this.”

“It’s okay, darlin’, but from now on when I tell you to do something just do it. I’ll have my reasons. I can always explain later, but I might not have the time at that moment.”

“I understand.”

“Now, about that promise. Since I don’t want us runnin’ back to the house and gettin’ drenched all over again I think this is as good a place as any to put you over my knee.”

“When you talk like that...” she mumbled, dropping her eyes.

“When I talk like that, what?”

“I get butterflies and goosebumps.”

“And you also get a hot butt,” he exclaimed, sitting next to her and placing his arm at her back. “You know what to do.”

As she crawled across his lap and settled into position, Brody felt his cock begin to stiffen, and he had no doubt if he were to touch between her legs he’d find her wet and wanting.

But their mutual craving for Dominance and submission was only part of the attraction between them. The affection they’d felt for each other since they were kids had grown into a deep and abiding love. Sliding the track pants down her legs and exposing her naked charms, he wondered how he’d managed to get through weeks and months without her. But she shifted on his lap, snapping him from his thoughts.

“On a scale of one to ten,” he began as he always did, “what will it take you to get the stars out of your eyes and bring you back to reality?”

“Not even one,” she replied. “Being like this...it’s enough. In fact, just being in the barn with you is enough. But making sure I’ll behave myself over the next few days, I’m guessing somewhere between five and seven.”



“Because?” he pressed, loving her response.

“Because—and I don’t know why—I’m feeling particularly naughty.”

“Ah, I see. Then I’d better make sure I turn this pale skin bright red,” he declared, smoothing his palm over her cheeks.

Hearing her gasp, he waited a moment to draw out the anticipation, then pinched her flesh a few times, evoking a wriggle.

“Stay still!”

As she gasped again, he moved his hand from cheek to cheek landing several hard slaps.

“You will behave, won’t you, Annie?” he asked, pausing for a moment.

“I’ll do my best.”

“Let’s try that again,” he said with a grin, delivering a volley of stinging swats on her right cheek.

“Ow, ow. You can stop now.”

“I’m only half done,” he declared, spanking the left equally as hard. “There. Will you behave?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?” he demanded, knowing she wanted more and was just baiting him.

“Sorry, yes, sir.”

Slipping his fingers into her sex and finding her lusciously wet, he wanted to rip her clothes off and ravage her. But pushing aside the temptation, he lifted his leg over the back of hers, a warning that he was about to spank her with gusto.

“Sir, I’ll be good,” she suddenly declared, turning her head and staring at him over her shoulder.

“Of course you will, and this will make sure of it.”

Flattening his palm he began to spank her again, but increasing the force and speed as he covered the width and breadth of her bottom and the backs of her thighs.

“Sir, please...”

“Please what, Annie?” he asked, pausing to rub her reddened skin.

“Please, sir, will you stop now?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Please, sir, may I suck your cock?”

Throwing back his head he laughed out loud.

“That sounds like a bribe, you bad girl.”

“It is, sir,” she quipped. “One I hope you’ll accept.”

“You’ll do that another time. Crawl off my lap, take off those sweat pants, then kneel on them and bend over the love seat.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied hastily.

As he watched her, he kicked off his boots and slipped out of his jeans and underwear.

“Are you comfortable?” he asked, positioning himself behind her and taking hold of his hardness.

“Yes, sir.”

Placing himself at her entrance, he pitched forward.

“Ooh, Brody, that feels so good.”

“It sure does, baby,” he growled, and gripping her hips he began to pump, determined to continue until they were both exploding. “I won’t be teasin’ you,” he grunted, relishing her enveloping warmth. “Climax when you want. No need to ask, not this time.”

All he heard in response was an unfamiliar mewling sound, then a moment later she moved her hand between her legs and gently wrapped her fingers around his balls.

The unexpected attention sent a hot fever rippling through his body, and as he felt her move her fingers to her clit he began thrusting with vigor. Then she unexpectedly touched him again, and over several minutes she continued the unpredictable dance.

“I’m coming,” she suddenly cried.

Her wail hurtled him into his release.

Tightening his hold and squeezing his eyes shut, he let the gushing eruption sweep him away.

It was just a short time later the rain stopped.

Slowly disentangling themselves, they dressed and headed into the barn. Though the moon was full, Brody picked up a powerful flashlight to avoid stepping in any large puddles on the way to the house. Bella had been curled up in the shavings, one of her favorite places to nap, and came bounding out when Brody called her name. As she raced ahead, they hurried down the drive behind her and were soon at the back door. Shining the light on the concrete frog, Brody pushed it aside, picked up the key and unlocked the door.

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“I’m exhausted,” Annie muttered as they made their way down the hall. “I can’t wait to fall into bed.”

“Me too,” he replied wearily.

But as they climbed between the sheets and curled up together, he had the uneasy feeling that something wasn’t right.

\* \* \*

When Geoff finally arrived back at the campgrounds he parked his car in the trees away from the cabin so it couldn’t been seen. By the time he walked inside he barely had the energy to peel off his clothes and collapse on the bed. But even as he sank into a deep sleep he was plotting his next move.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Brody was an early riser, and when he stirred he found Annie still sound asleep. Not wanting to wake her, he softly slipped from the bed and padded into the bathroom. After a quick shower he quietly dressed, signaled Bella to follow him, and crept into the hall. As he entered the kitchen he thought he might whip up a batch of pancakes for breakfast, but stopped short.

His favorite mug was sitting on the table.

It was his habit to wash it and leave it on the counter near the coffee pot for the morning.

“That’s weird,” he muttered, picking it up. “I guess I must have been distracted by the storm.”

While the coffee was brewing he washed it out, and decided to have a muffin to tide him over. Opening the pantry and pulling out the plastic tub, he lifted the lid—and frowned. His mother always made a dozen and gave him six. He and Annie had each had one the day before, leaving four, yet there were only two left.

“What the hell is goin’ on?” he muttered, but Bella barked, asking for her breakfast.

Picking up the box of kibble, he filled her dish, then lifted out a muffin, poured the coffee into his mug, and sat at the table.

“Morning...”

“Hey, beautiful,” he murmured, turning around and seeing Annie padding towards him bleary eyed and wearing a long sleeved T-shirt. “I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“Not exactly. I rolled over to hug you and you were gone,” she replied with a yawn as she sank into a chair.

“I’ll get you some coffee, but I have to ask...how many muffins were left in the container?”

“Four, why?”

“There’s only two.”

“Two?”

“Yeah, two.”

“That’s weird.”

“And I found my cup on the table, but I know I washed it out and left it on the counter like I always do.”

“So...what’s going on? Oh no! Do you think...?”

“Geoff was here?” he muttered, finishing the unspoken end of her sentence. “I don’t know if it was him, but unless there’s a ghost in this house someone was. Hold on.” Abruptly standing up and striding to the back door, he stepped outside and stared down at the frog. “Yep. We had a visitor. The frog has been moved.”

“What frog?” she asked, hurrying across to join him.

“I keep the back door key under that concrete frog and it’s been moved,” he replied, pointing down at it. “See? I just tilt it back, but you can clearly see the outline of where it usually sits. It’s out almost two inches.”

“Oh, my gosh! What should we do?”

“We’re havin’ breakfast. Then I’m callin’ the sheriff.”

“Shouldn’t we call him first?”

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“No sense tryin’ to think clearly on an empty stomach. We need to take this in stride and not panic. The sheriff will help us figure out where we go from here.”

\* \* \*

When Geoff woke up he immediately reached for the bedside phone and called the restaurant. With nothing to eat the night before except the two muffins in Brody’s kitchen he was starving. Identifying himself as Gabe Wilson, he ordered a large breakfast.

“I’m expecting some calls. If I don’t answer the door please tell the delivery person to set everything up on the dining room table and add a twenty-percent tip,” he declared. “And I would appreciate putting a rush on the order. I may need to leave soon.”

“Of course, Mr. Wilson.”

“Let that be a lesson, Gabe,” he muttered as he hung up the receiver. “The reservations are in your name, and now you’ll be stuck with the bill.”

Still snickering, he stretched and yawned, then headed into the bathroom, but as he turned on the shower and stepped under the steaming water his thoughts turned to Annie. His contract with her was ironclad, and a new album was already in the works. Not only were millions of dollars at stake, his reputation was on the line. He absolutely had to return her to Nashville and get her back under his control.

A plan of action began to take shape.



First, he had to get her alone, then he'd show great remorse about how he'd treated her, apologize profusely, and promise not to be so controlling in the future. If she gave in, he'd ask her to call the local sheriff and tell him everything had been worked out, then beg her to return to Nashville and finish the album she'd already started.

But if she refused to listen he'd be forced to use more drastic measures.

Stepping from the shower and toweling off, one of his favorite sayings flashed through his head.

Expect the best and prepare for the worst.

He knew how to get onto the ranch without being seen, and where the key to the house was hidden. It was possible he'd have to take her by force.

Stepping into the bedroom and dressing, he opened the door to the lounge and saw his breakfast laid out and waiting. Ravenous, he strode across to the table, sat down and began to eat. He was enjoying hash browns with his cheese and tomato omelette when the cabin phone rang, but he wasn't about to leave the delicious meal. After downing the last of the coffee, he ambled across to the desk and picked up the receiver to listen to the message.

"Uh...would you please call the office when you get this? It's important. Thank you."

A chill pricked his skin.

Fearing Gabe had called, he marched into the bedroom and hastily packed, throwing in all the complimentary toiletries. As he was looking around to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything he heard voices. Hurrying to a window and peeking through a crack in the curtains, he spied a deputy walking towards the cabin with one of the staff.

There was not a second to spare.

Grabbing his bag, he slipped out the French Doors that led from the bedroom to a deck, then hurried through the trees to his car.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Brody and Annie had finished breakfast and were clearing up the dishes when they heard a car roll up the driveway. Looking out the window and seeing the sheriff coming to a stop they hurried out to meet him.

“Hey, Brody, hello, Annie. You got a minute?”

“Sure,” Brody replied. “Come on in. I was about to call you.”

“About what?” the sheriff asked.

“Someone broke into the house last night. It must’ve been during the storm. We had to bring the horses in and we were waitin’ in the barn until it passed. We were pretty wiped out when we got back and I didn’t notice anything at the time, but this mornin’ I found my coffee cup on the table. I’d left it on the counter, and there were four muffins in a container when we went out, but now there are only two. Most importantly, that frog,” he finished as they approached the back door. “I keep my key under it. The key is there, but the frog has been moved. Thanks to the rain it’s easy to see where it usually sits.”

“I’ll be damned,” the sheriff muttered, staring down at the obvious impression in the dirt. “Don’t touch it. I’ll see if we can pull some prints. Let’s go inside, I have some news as well.”

“Sure. You want coffee?”

“Normally I’d say yes but I’m coffee’d out,” he replied as they settled at the table. “So—here’s the long and short of it. Geoffrey Palmer had two men with him. It seems they’ve taken off.”

“You mean they left with Geoff?” Annie interjected.

“No. We have reason to believe Geoff Palmer is still here. It’s the two men who are gone. One of them was named Gabe Wilson. He checked into the Moonshine Lake Campgrounds claimin’ it was just him and his friend John Hammond. Then last night at the bar someone recognized Geoff Palmer from the police alert. Unfortunately he was gone before we arrived. This mornin’ a man called the restaurant from Gabe Wilson’s cabin and ordered breakfast to be sent over, but a short time later Gabe called the campground and said he’d left in a hurry last night, and not to allow anything to be charged to his card.”

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“It sounds as if Gabe Wilson has turned on Geoff,” Annie exclaimed.

“Sure does,” the sheriff agreed. “He said Geoff Palmer was staying in the larger of the cabins. The campground called us and one of my deputies went out there, but apparently he just missed him.”

“So, as things stand now,” Brody began. “Geoff’s two guys have deserted Geoff Palmer. He’s still here but with nowhere to stay.”

“Exactly. So I’m guessin’ it was him who came over here durin’ the storm and somehow managed to get past Luke, the deputy on duty.”

“That’s because he helped me bring the horses into the barn when the storm hit,” Brody replied. “But he couldn’t have been gone more than ten minutes, if that.”

“Enough time to get in without bein’ seen,” the sheriff remarked.

“What should we do?” Annie piped up.

“Change the locks right away, and if you need to have a hide a key make it somewhere less obvious. Bella will warn you if anyone approaches the house, but only if she’s here. I’d like to have one of my deputies parked where my car is now instead of on the road. I know it would be an inconvenience, but—”

“Honestly, that would make me feel so much safer,” Annie said earnestly. “Would you mind, Brody?”

“Not at all, and thanks, sheriff.”

“You’re welcome, and both of you, try not to worry. We’re bound to catch up with him sooner rather than later.”

“I just don’t understand why a man as rich and powerful as Geoffrey Palmer would put himself at so much risk”

“Ego, he thinks he’s above the law, and if he gets into trouble his high-powered legal team will step in and handle things. And he’s right. So far his crimes are petty. Let’s hope he keeps it that way.”

“We really only have to worry about tonight,” Brody remarked. “Tomorrow my clinic starts and there will be people here all through the weekend.”

“Good to know. Okay. I’ll have one of my men come over and take prints off that key and frog. Now there’s a sentence I never thought I’d say,” the sheriff added with a chuckle. “And I’ll have the deputy sittin’ on the road drive in here and park where my car is now.”

“Sheriff, thank you so much for all your help,” Annie said gratefully. “This has been such an ordeal. Getting away from that awful man was extremely difficult and very scary. I’ll tell you about it one day, but just the thought of being around him again...I can’t begin to tell you...”

“Annie, you have made this whole town real proud, but even if you hadn’t we’d still watch out for you. You know folks around here take care of their own.”

“Amen to that,” Brody declared. “I almost hope Geoff does show his face around here again so I can rearrange it for him. And, Sheriff, before you say it, I swear I won’t go lookin’ for trouble.”

“Best you don’t. I’ll stay in touch,” the sheriff said, walking out the door. “I’m sure you’ll let me know if anything happens.”

“Brody, do you think Geoff will come back here?” Annie asked softly.

“Even if he does, there’s no way he’d stick around with a deputy parked so close to the house. But we’re late gettin’ to the horses, and I need to check out those paddocks.”

“We?”

“Yeah, darlin’. We. You and me. That’s how it should be. And there’s a new lyric for you.”

\* \* \*

Settling into his car and rolling down Brody’s driveway, a dark frown crossed the sheriff’s forehead. After years in law enforcement he’d come to understand certain personality types, and he sensed Geoffrey Palmer was a man who wouldn’t give up until he achieved his goal. He wanted Annie and he wasn’t leaving Smoky Hill without her. But just how far would he go to get her?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Geoff had managed to leave the campgrounds without being seen, but now he wasn’t sure of his next move. He couldn’t return to the cabin or the crappy hotel and he had no intention of sleeping in his car. But he wouldn’t leave Smoky Hill without Annie. Needing to think, he drove to the dirt road that led to Lake View Point, and pulling to a stop, he stared at the magnificent view. The sun was shining, the lake looked like glass, and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. It seemed anything was possible. He needed to brainstorm with someone, and there was no-one better at coming up with

ideas than Barry.

“Barry Stein,” his friend declared, accepting the call.

“It’s me, Geoff.”

“What a relief. I’ve been so worried. Update me. What’s happening? And don’t leave anything out.”

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As Geoff outlined the recent dramatic events, he heard Barry quietly groan.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Geoff grunted. “You think it’s time to leave here, but I’m not going without Annie.”

“Geoff, please listen to me. You can’t take this any further. You’re obsessing. You need to get back here before you find yourself doing something you know you’ll regret. Let it go. Walk away. You can do it.”

“But--“

“You absolutely cannot put yourself in another Patty Henderson situation,” Barry exclaimed. “Do you hear what I’m saying?”

“Fuck! Why did you have to bring that up?”

“Because you needed to hear it!” Barry barked, then lowering his voice he added, “Annie just needs a break. Give it to her. She’ll come back to you. She will. She’ll miss performing and recording and she’ll—”

“It’s too hard,” Geoff muttered. “I’m not letting her stay here with that cowboy hick. She’s mine. She belongs to me. I made her. I created her. How can you ask me to walk the fuck away?”

“You must, and when you get back I’ll take care of you. We’ll visit Dr. Weissman together. He can help you.”



“Fucking Weissman. He’s just a pill-pushing quack,” Geoff growled. “I know where Annie is. All I have to do get her alone. Once I talk to her she’ll understand. She knows we belong together. She does. Her head’s just all twisted around because of that fucking cowboy.”

“Where are you?”

“Huh?”

“Where are you?”

“I’m at a place overlooking a lake, why?”

“If you won’t leave, I’ll fly there right now and help you deal with this.”

“NO! Just tell me how to get her out of here! I need a plan.”

“Geoff, you can’t win this one.”

“The hell I can’t! Watch me!” Geoff yelled, and abruptly ending the call, he turned off his phone and marched back to his car.

\* \* \*

The moment Annie stepped outside, she stopped and stared past the paddocks. Smoky Hill was living up to its name. The air was still, and a thick mist shrouded the forest on the gentle slope.

“I’d forgotten how beautiful this is. It looks like an oil painting.”

“Yeah, it’s breathtakin’,” Brody said softly, moving his arm around her shoulders.

“Like it can’t be real. Look, even Bella’s watchin’,” he added, glancing down at the happy dog fixated on the sight.

“It’s magical. I have to go there.”

“I wish I could join you. I have to clean the stalls and get the horses out, but you go ahead if you want.”

“I should help you.”

“No need. I do this every mornin’, it’s no big deal, and there’s some other stuff I have to finish up. Just don’t venture too far in. After lunch we can take that trail ride.”

“Really?”

“Sure.”

“That would great. Thank you.”

“No need to thank me,” he said as they started walking. “It’s the other way around.”

“Why? What have I done?”

“You’re here. I know you’ll be takin’ off again to do what you do, but right now you’re with me, and there’s nothin’ in the world that makes me happier than havin’ you beside me.”

“Brody...”

“It’s true, darlin’. God gave you a gift to share with the world. Just as long as I know you’ll come back I’m good. Well, not good, but I get it, and you have my blessin’.”

“I love you so much,” she mumbled, fighting a rising surge of emotion. “It almost killed me not being able call or write to you. I was in prison with that horrible man.”

“Hey, it’s over,” he promised, pulling her into his arms. “Karma will step in and take care of him. We’re here together and that’s what matters.”

Sinking into his arms and closing her eyes, she felt an overwhelming sense of peace. The many months spent writing songs, recording and performing had been a dream come true. But through it all there’d been something missing. Now she knew it was being away from the man she loved. When Geoff had turned the dream into a terrifying nightmare, the missing piece became a gigantic chasm she never thought she’d be able to cross.

“There were times I didn’t think I’d ever see you again,” she whispered, pulling back and staring up at him as the tears trickled from her eyes.

“Hey, like I said, I should’ve come lookin’, and if you’re ever outta touch again I will, and that’s a promise.”

“Thank goodness you didn’t. I can’t even imagine what Geoff would have done. He’s like a king in that town.”

“Yeah, so I gathered, but now the evil man beneath the crown is about to be exposed. The people he’s used and abused will have their justice, and the ones still bowin’ and scrapin’ will have their freedom,” he said solemnly as he ran his hands up and down her back.

“That feels so good,” she said softly, letting out a heavy breath. “Will you do something for me?”

“Anything.”

“Tonight will you caress me like that all over my body?”

“You just read my mind. I’m just not sure if I can wait that long,” he said with a grin as he stepped back. “You’d better take that walk before I pick you up and carry you back to the house.”

“I won’t object.”

“Maybe not, but the horses will. They need to get out, and I need to get to work. But I promise later tonight, my hands will cover every inch of your naked body. And you know I always keep my promises.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Annie had walked through the forest for only a short time before she slowed her step

to take in the surreal sight. Wisps of mist rose from the ground, so transparent they appeared almost like dust, yet barely a foot away bands of what looked like puffs of powder floated upwards. Raising her eyes to the tree tops, there were none to be seen, just the majestic trunks disappearing into the white fog. The picturesque, quiet scene felt magical.

“If I make a wish will it come true?” she whispered. A moment later she felt a breath of air against her cheek, as if an invisible finger had touched her. “Is it wrong to ask for everything? Can I have Brody and the horses and my singing? Can it all work together in harmony?”

But as the words left her lips a gentle rustling sound caught her attention, and turning her head she saw the large, gray dog.

“Hello, how lovely to see you again,” she murmured, crouching down to be at his level. “I’m sorry I don’t have any treats. Darn it, I should have brought some in case I saw you again.”

The dog tilted its head to the side, then began ambling towards her.

“What a beautiful boy you are,” she continued, speaking softly as he neared. “What happened to your family? You should have a name. I can’t keep calling you boy or dog. I know, how do you like Magic? I was just thinking how magical this place is and you appeared. Or Merlin? Yes, I like Merlin.”

As he stopped in front of her, she confidently reached out to stroke his head, and to her great joy he sat down and panted happily.

“You are such a sweetheart. I hope you weren’t caught in that awful storm yesterday. You seem pretty dry. I bet there are all kinds of ways to shelter in this forest. Will you join me for a walk? I can’t go too far in, though with you to protect me I don’t

have to worry,” she added with a smile.

Straightening up, she started to move forward, but he didn’t follow.

“Don’t you want to join me?” she asked, turning around. Standing up, he barked, but he didn’t step towards her. “What? You don’t want me to go any further?” As if answering her question he barked again and she broke into a smile. “Okay! You know this place better than me.”

“Annie? Where are you?”

Hearing Brody’s voice, she walked a few steps away and looked down the path, but couldn’t see him.

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“I’ll be right there,” she called back. “Please, come with me, Merlin,” she said softly, bending down and waving him over. “You’ll adore Brody, and I bet you’ll fall in love with Bella.” But to her dismay, he turned and ran off, disappearing into the trees. “Darn it,” she muttered with a frown, but when she saw Brody riding towards her ponying Luna, she broke into a wide smile.

“I figured I might as well bring the horse to you,” he declared. “I got done with everything faster than I thought I would. Are you still up for a trail ride?”

“You bet,” she exclaimed, smiling happily as she hurried over to join him.

Reaching Luna, she placed her foot in the stirrup, pushed off the ground, and swung her leg over the saddle.

“You did that like you’ve never stopped!” Brody exclaimed. “How does it feel?”

“Absolutely fantastic. I don’t mean to keep repeating myself, but I’ve missed this so much. I’ve missed everything.”

“I bet you have.”

“The fog looks really thick. Should we go through it. Do you think it will be clear when we reach the top?”

“We can give it a try. The conditions don’t happen often, but with the rain drenching the ground yesterday and the sun comin’ out this mornin’ there’s a good chance.”

“I’d love to, but only if you’re sure you have the time.”

“I do, but even if I didn’t, I’d find a way to make time,” he declared, then leaning across the narrow gap between the horses, he kissed her.

“Just as well I’m in this saddle,” she murmured when he pulled back.

“Because?”

“My knees are weak.”

“I’ll be makin’ them even weaker pretty soon,” he promised with a wink. “Come on, Bella.”

As they started up the trail Bella ran ahead, but as the mist became thicker, he called her back and told her to stay close.

“This is so creepy but so amazing,” Annie murmured. “It would be so easy to get lost.”

“You bet. That’s why I brought my compass. It almost happened to me once.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Bella got us back.”

“You’re kidding?”

“It was after a storm like the one we had last night but there’d been really high winds. The path was covered in so many downed branches I had a feelin’ a twister might’ve touched down. Anyway, by the time I’d ridden around them I wasn’t sure where the



heck I was, and I decided to head back. I told Bella to go home and followed her.”

“Good grief, that sounds—” she began, but was cut off as Luna abruptly stopped with her ears pricked, and Brody’s horse Maverick did the same. Suddenly Bella started barking and both horses began to snort. “Uh...Brody, what should we do?” Annie asked nervously.

“If I was alone I’d keep goin’, but you haven’t ridden in a while so I’m thinkin’ we should turn back.”

“What do you think it is?”

“A wolf...maybe even a cougar...who knows,” Brody replied as his horse began to jig. “There’s a lot of wildlife out here, though I have to say it’s odd. I can’t remember the last time Maverick was antsy like this.”

“I’m getting scared.”

“It’s okay, just slowly turn around, don’t let her run. If she gives you trouble, just—”

“Nose to the knee,” Annie said, finishing his sentence.

“Bella, stop your barkin’, we’re goin’ home.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

For several terrifying minutes Geoff thought he'd be exposed. Brody and Annie had come perilously close, and though he was sure he hadn't made a sound Brody's dog had barked, and both horses had stopped and stared. Now they'd finally left, and Geoff tried to calm his racing heart.

His plan had been simple.

Jog across the empty field next to Brody's ranch as he had the day before, slip into the forest, watch the house, and the moment he saw Annie alone he'd try to talk to her. If she put up a fuss he'd gag her, tie her up, and carry her back to his car.

But things had gone horribly wrong.

He'd driven off the road to park his car in the same spot he'd found the previous day, only to end up in mud. It was deep, and fearful of getting stuck he'd stopped before reaching the cover of the trees.

When he'd walked around the bend in the road and hurried towards the open field, he'd seen no deputy parked across from Brody's gate. He'd been relieved and optimistic, only to discover the car was now on the ranch and near the house.

Angrily climbing over the fence and into the open field, things had abruptly gone from bad to worse. His feet had sunk into the wet, mucky ground and he'd stumbled over. With his hands and clothing covered in the wet, sticky, smelly dirt, he'd angrily trudged forward. As he did he'd cursed the weather, cursed Gabe and John for

deserting him, cursed Annie for running away, but most of all he'd cursed Brody for interfering in her life.

Entering the foggy forest had been unnerving.

It was completely still, but with sudden, alarming noises. Then to his horror he'd heard Annie and Brody talking. Barely a second later he'd glimpsed them through the mist riding towards him. As he'd ducked behind a tree the dog had barked. Geoff had cringed, and though panic-stricken, he was ready to run, but miracle of miracles Brody had called the dog back, then he and Annie had turned around headed for home.

Now trying to calm himself, Geoff took several long deep breaths and tried to figure out what to do next. He could change out of his muddy clothes when he returned to his car, but he had nowhere to take a shower. And with a deputy parked near the house he couldn't get near the place.

He finally decided there was only one thing to do.

Hike down to the edge of the trees, watch as he'd originally planned, and hope for an opportunity. Convinced his luck couldn't get any worse he started off.

\* \* \*

When Brody and Annie returned to the barn and began untacking the horses, he noticed she was unusually quiet, but as they carried their saddles into the tack room she began to hum.

"What a pretty melody," he remarked, walking up behind her and moving his arms around her waist.

“Thanks. It just came into my head. I have a song brewing.”

“Called?”

“No idea,” she replied with a smile, turning around and wrapping her arms around his waist. “Will you walk back to the forest with me?”

“Uh, sure, why?”

“I want you to meet Merlin.”

“Merlin?”

“He’s a dog. That’s what I named him. I don’t know how he ended up there, but—”

“Annie, you know you can’t trust a wild dog.”

“That’s just it, he’s not wild. He’s calm and sweet, but I think the horses scare him. That’s why I want to walk back.”

“What does he look like?”

“He’s grey and white, more grey though, and big, really big.”

“Good grief! Annie! That’s no dog, that’s a wolf. I’ve seen him.”

“He’s not a wolf! There’s nothing aggressive about him. You may have spotted a wolf but it couldn’t have been Merlin.”

“Annie—”

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“This is why I didn’t mention him before,” she exclaimed. “I knew you’d be worried and jump to the wrong conclusion.”

“Of course I’m worried,” Brody retorted, throwing his arms in the air.

“I’m worried too! About him! I’m sure he’s lost.”

“Okay, let’s start at the beginning. Did you actually pet this dog, or just see him?”

“I’ve run across him twice. The first time he came really close, the second time was right before you arrived with Luna.”

“You mean just now?”

“Yes, just now. I crouched down and he came right up to me. I was petting him but when he heard you he ran off.”

“I don’t know what to make of this. Darn it,” he muttered as his phone rang. “I have to take this. It’s one of the people coming to the clinic.”

“No problem. I can put the horses back in the paddock if you want.”

“That would be great, thanks, darlin’.”

Striding from the tack room and hurrying to his office, he settled behind his desk and accepted the call. Though the questions the woman began asking had been covered in the information he’d emailed, he realized she was nervous and just needed reassuring.

As he patiently talked her through the various details he could sense her relaxing.

“Thank you so much for explaining everything,” she said gratefully as he finished. “I’ve never done anything like this before and I’m really nervous. I don’t want to make a fool of myself.”

“Everyone feels the same when they attend a clinic, especially for the first time. You don’t have to worry. It’s all about learning, not judging.”

“I’m so looking forward to this.”

“I am too. If you think of anything else just pick up the phone, otherwise I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thanks again, Brody. I can’t wait.”

“You’ll have fun, I promise. Bye for now.”

“Bye, Brody.”

Smiling as he ended the call, he rose to his feet and walked back into the barn.

“Annie?”

But it was only Bella who came trotting in from outside.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Grabbing a handful of treats on her way from the barn, Annie jogged up the path to the edge of the forest, then broke into a walk as she entered the trees.

“Merlin? Are you here? Come on boy, I’m back with some yummys for you.”

She waited, hoping he’d come trotting towards her, but there was no sign of him. He’d always appeared from the right, so she decided to walk a little way in. The further she went, the cooler the air became, and the thicker the mist. Wishing she’d brought a jacket and feeling slightly out of breath, she sat down on a tree stump and crossed her arms.

“I wish you’d show up, Merlin,” she murmured, casting her eyes around. She knew Brody would be wondering where she was, but if she’d told him she was returning to the forest he would have said he was worried the dog was a wolf and asked her not to go back into the trees alone. “Why didn’t he believe me?” she grunted, exasperated and rubbing her arms. “I don’t say things that aren’t true!”

“Because I can be a jerk sometimes, and I’m sorry!”

Darting her eyes up, she saw him marching towards her carrying a sweatshirt.

“Brody!” she exclaimed, jumping to her feet. “I’m so glad to see you, and I’m really glad you brought this,” she added as he handed it to her and she hastily pulled it over her head. “How did you know where to find me?”

“Magic.”

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“Magic?” she repeated with a giggle. “I almost believe you. I think these woods are full of magic. But seriously!”

“I know how to track, and your prints were easy to follow after that rain.”

“Ohh, of course.”

“So, why did you come this way in search of your mysterious wolf, or dog, or whatever he is.”

“Because I’ve seen him from this direction.”

“That’s not surprising. There are caves around here.”

“Really?”

“That’s another reason I think he could be a wolf. They usually live in dens and small caves.”

“Oh, I see. I’d love to explore them. Though I suppose it’s not the best idea in the world.”

“Not really. Generally speaking it’s a good idea to stay away from them, and before you ask, yes, because of the possibility of wolves and other wildlife.”

“Well, there’s no sign of wolves—or Merlin,” she said pointedly, “so I suppose this was a waste of time.”



“You know, Annie, you’re still a bad girl for leaving like that.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t play innocent with me! You know exactly what I mean. You took off without tellin’ me where you were goin’. I worry about you, and not just because of the critters around here. That creep Geoff is still on the loose.”

“I can’t imagine he’d be anywhere near here. In this forest I mean. He’s too slick. He wouldn’t want to get his Gucci loafers muddy. Besides, when I left you were on the phone and I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“Uh-huh,” he said skeptically. “Are you ready to go back, or do you want to stick around and see if your four-legged friend shows up.”

“There’s no sign of him and it’s cold and so, yes, I think this is a waste of time. Where’s Bella?”

“Good question. She was right behind me. Bella!”

Barely seconds passed before she bounded through the trees towards them, but ran past them and stopped in front of some boulders a short distance away and began barking.

“There’ll be a critter back there,” Brody remarked. “Come on, girl, it’s time to head back.” Though Bella turned and looked at him she didn’t move. “Bella, we need to go.”

She paused a moment, then trotted towards him and barked again.

“Okay, I promise we’ll come back and explore those rocks, but right now we need to

get back. The mist is gettin' thicker and there's a chill in the air."

But as Bella ran towards them, Annie leaned against Brody and shuddered.

"Gettin' cold?" he asked, moving his arms around her.

"Well, yes, but I also feel..."

"What, darlin'?"

"I'm not sure, but I feel jittery. I think you're right, we need to go."

\* \* \*

Barely a moment before Brody had appeared on the scene, Geoff had been ready to creep out from behind the rocks to grab Annie and make her listen to reason. But Bella had arrived and started barking. For the second time he'd cursed under his breath, terrified he'd be exposed by the damn dog. Now seething as he watched them all leave, he once again found himself at a loss. His clothes were covered in dirt and he had nowhere to clean up, let alone sleep. The only thing he could do was return to the car and change, then come back and try again. He'd worry about a place to lay his head later.

Moving out from his hiding place and tramping through the trees, he reached the track and was about to start up the gentle slope when an idea flashed through his head. Turning around and hurrying towards the edge of the forest, he stared at the ranch.

Brody and Annie were almost at the house with Bella running along beside them. The barn would be empty. The only issue was the deputy's car. It was parked facing directly towards the forest. As Geoff glanced back at Annie, he noticed she'd moved inside the house while Brody had stopped to talk to the deputy. A couple of minutes later, to Geoff's surprise and joy, the officer climbed from his cruiser and followed Brody inside.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Standing at the edge of the forest and studying the open space in front of him, Geoff realized he'd be visible until he reached the back of the barn. Not only would it take a few minutes to get there, as far as he could tell the only entrance was in the front. But remembering the kitchen was at the side of the house, and figuring Brody, Annie and the deputy would probably be sitting around the table, he decided to take the chance.

He bolted forward, covering the distance faster than he expected, but as he walked behind the barn to catch his breath, he discovered a low, half-open window. Inside was a small office offering a couch, and a desk with two folding chairs in front of it. Opening it all the way and climbing in, he felt his luck was changing, and moved quickly to the door. Peering into the barn he wasn't surprised to find the stalls empty and no-one around, but he'd never even been inside a barn and he wasn't sure where to start.

Leaving the office he walked quickly down the aisle and opened the first door. It was a laundry room. Though stripping off and washing his clothes seemed out of the question, he stood for a minute considering the notion, but shaking his head, he continued on.

The next door boasted a brass sign saying, Tack Room. Stepping inside, he found brushes and other grooming items on shelves, towels neatly stacked, and a double row of saddles. There was also a large trunk and a cupboard. Lifting the lid of the trunk he found more implements and equipment, but when he opened the cupboard he broke into a wide smile. A surprising number of track suits and jackets were hanging from a rod. There were also narrow shelves with T-shirts, both long and short-sleeved, and on the floor were several pairs of boots and sneakers.

“What the hell?” he muttered. “Why does he have so many clothes here? Fuck it, who cares.”

Hastily stripping off to his underwear, he pulled on a pair of fleecy black sweat pants, a short-sleeved T-shirt, and found a long-sleeved black pullover. Picking up a pair of sneakers, he checked the sole. They were size eleven and he was a size ten, but he was desperate to change out of his muddy loafers. Rummaging around, he finally found a pair of thick socks. After hastily pulling them on, he slid his feet into the sneakers and let out a sigh of relief. They were perfectly comfortable. Not sure what to do with his belongings, he rolled them up and carried them back to the open window.

It had been a stroke of great luck, almost too good to be true, but he was used to fortune smiling on him. He didn't know why, but throughout his life things fell into place more often than not. Climbing back out through the window he beat a hasty retreat into the trees to wait a little while longer. With any luck Annie would be back.

\* \* \*

While Brody and Annie had been drinking coffee and chatting to Frank, the deputy, Bella had been restless. Brody had given her a marrow bone, but rather than take it to her large, furry bed and devour it as she usually did, she paced around the kitchen carrying it in her mouth, asked to go out, then wanted back in.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with her today,” Brody remarked as Frank stood up to return to his car. “She’s been actin’ funny for a while now, but today she seems even more on edge.”

“Dogs know stuff,” Frank declared. “That’s what my dad always says.”

“He’s right. I just wish I knew what has her so wired.”

“Brody, she kept barking when we were by those rocks. I know you said it was just an animal or something, but I keep thinking we should go back there.”

“I’ll check it out,” Frank offered. “Until this man is caught we can’t be too careful. Is it okay to drive up to the edge of the forest? I don’t want to scare the horses in the paddocks.”

“They won’t care, but maybe I should come with you,” Brody said thoughtfully.

“If you’re going, I am too!” Annie exclaimed, jumping to her feet.

“Thanks, both of you, but I’m pretty sure I can mange,” Frank replied with a grin. “I’ll take a good look around and see if there’s anything there that shouldn’t be.”

“Please can I join you?” Annie pressed. “And Bella too. She’s so smart.”

“It’s hard to say no to Annie Baker,” he replied, shaking his head. “My girlfriend is a huge fan. She can’t believe you’re here.”

“What’s her name?”

“Susie.”

“I’ll make you a deal. Take me with you and I’ll sign a CD for her, and when this is over I’ll make sure she gets some other things as well.”

“Uh, that’s called bribery.”

“I won’t tell if you don’t, and I’m sure Brody knows how to keep a secret, right Brody?”

“Don’t get me involved in your shenanigans!”

“Please, Frank?” Annie pressed.

“Okay, you’ve twisted my arm.”

“I need to printout some paperwork for the clinic tomorrow or I’d join you, but since you’re goin’ up in the car could you drop me at the barn?” Brody asked, rising to his feet.

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“Sure thing, and for the record I’m not expectin’ to run into this guy. If I thought that I’d go in alone.”

“Why don’t you think he’ll be there?” Annie asked.

“Comin’ through that open field next door would be tough goin’. It’s a muddy mess, and the fog in the forest is no picnic. I just want to see if there’s any trace of him.”

“Oh, yes, I see. I hadn’t thought about that, but I still want to check those rocks.”

“That will be my job,” Frank declared. “You and Bella will have to stay back.”

“We will, right Bella?”

“About Bella,” Brody began. “I think I should keep her here. She was runnin’ off when we went out before. If she wasn’t actin’ like she is I wouldn’t mind, but right now I want to keep an eye on her.”

“Understandable,” Frank remarked as they headed out the door. “And that fog is lookin’ pretty thick. Probably a good idea.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY

As the deputy stopped at the barn, Bella jumped out first and Brody followed, but the moment he stepped into his office he felt something was wrong. Bella was also sniffing around as if picking up a fresh scent. Not seeing anything he decided the situation with Geoffrey Palmer had him unnerved, and Bella was probably smelling a

rodent.

Letting out a sigh, he sat down at his desk and pulled a folder from the top drawer. It contained a release form, a list of rules, some general information, and the schedule of events. But as he began reading it to make sure there were no mistakes, he couldn't concentrate.

Walking back outside with Bella, he entered the paddock and approached the colt. Working with the horses settled his nerves as much as theirs. As he stroked River's neck and the young horse began to relax, Brody felt his own stress leave his body.

He continued for several minutes, then glancing towards the forest and seeing the deputy's car he thought about joining them, but he still needed to check the paperwork and print out several copies. Telling himself if they weren't back by the time he was finished he'd jog up and find them.

\* \* \*

When Frank and Annie had entered the forest, she'd immediately noticed how much thicker the fog had become and wasn't sure if she'd be able to find her way. But she soon spotted the track she'd taken and in just a few minutes she was pointing out the rocks to Frank.

"I'll see what's back here, but please stay where you are, Annie," he ordered, shining his powerful flashlight in front of him and making his way behind the big boulders. "Damn! Someone was here. Come and take a look at this."

"What is it? What have you found?"

"Clear footprints. See?" he declared, shining the light on the ground. "They're fresh and they were made by a man."



“Oh, my gosh. They have to be Geoff’s. He was here.”

“The question is, where is he now? Hold on, what’s this?” Frank muttered, stepping forward and bending down. “Clothes! Dirty, muddy clothes. These need to be bagged. I have to call the sheriff.”

“Bagged?” Annie repeated.

“Picked up with rubber gloves and placed in a plastic evidence bag.”

“Oh, just like on television.”

“Yep, just like that. I’m callin’ the sheriff,” he said, lifting out his phone, “Darn it, the signal’s too weak.”

“But, Frank, if those are his, what’s he wearing? He can’t be running around naked.”

“I was just thinkin’ the same thing. Where could he pick up clean clothin’? He sure as heck didn’t come into the house.”

“The barn! Brody keeps a few things in a cupboard there. I wonder if he’s still in the forest,” she murmured, feeling goosebumps popping across on her skin.

“I need to get you back to the car,” Frank said solemnly, “and I mean right now.”

“I agree! I’m feeling really creeped out.”

\* \* \*

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Geoff had just dumped his clothes when he'd heard the deputy and Annie approach. His first thought was Bella. Desperately hoping the muddy pile behind the rocks would be enough to keep her busy, he hurried across to the opposite side of the track and crouched down behind a group of trees. Mere seconds later the deputy and Annie appeared.

At first he was afraid to look, but he could hear every word, and it quickly became obvious the dog wasn't with them. Breathing a sigh of relief, he finally peered around, only to see them step behind the rocks and find the clothes. But as the Deputy told Annie he wanted to take her back to the car, an inkling of an idea floated through Geoff's head.

He waited until they were almost out of view, then followed. By the time they drew near to the edge of the forest, though his plan was extremely risky, and he'd have to play everything by ear, he decided it might be his last and only chance...at least for the foreseeable future.

As the deputy walked Annie to his car, Geoff moved from tree to tree, and was soon close enough to hear them talking.

"Why don't I just walk back to the barn, it's not far," Annie said as he opened the back door of the squad car.

"We know Geoff Palmer has been here very recently, and it's likely he's still around. I have to go back in and secure the scene so I can't go with you. God Forbid some animals come along and find those clothes. I suggest you wait in the car, lock the doors, and call Brody. He can come up and get you. Like you just said, it's not far.

I'm sure he'll be here in no time."

"You really think it's necessary? It's so open out here, and so is the walk down to the barn. He'd be crazy to expose himself like that. Geoff may be many things, but he's not an idiot."

"Ah, perhaps not, but from everything I've heard, he is a bit on the crazy side. Call it an abundance of caution. Call Brody, and when you see him, get out and meet up with him. We're only talking about a few minutes."

"Okay, okay. And thanks for being so protective."

"Hey, you're our shining star. I can't let anything happen to you. Susie will never let me hear the end of it."

"Oh, I see, so this is to keep you out of trouble," Annie retorted with a laugh.

"Exactly!"

"Then I guess I have to go along with it. I'll call Brody now," she said, climbing into the car.

"Thank you. "I'll lock the doors with my remote. To unlock them just press that red button on the door handle."

"Will do."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Brody had finished checking the documents and was placing the papers in the copier when his cell phone rang. Seeing Annie's name he quickly accepted the call.

“Hey, baby. Is everything okay?”

“You won’t believe it. We found a bunch of muddy clothes behind those rocks and we’re sure they must be Geoff’s.”

“You’re kiddin’.”

“And I think he replaced them from your cupboard.”

“What makes you say that?”

“As I just told Frank, he can’t be running around naked and where else would he get them?”

“If you’re right he was here pokin’ around.”

“Exactly, there’s no other explanation.”

“But how the hell did he come in without bein’ seen? Dammit! I just realized something. When I first walked into my office I thought something was wrong but I couldn’t put my finger on it. It just hit me. The window is all the way open and I always leave it half closed.”

“Oh, my gosh.”

“Annie, where are you?”

“That’s the next thing. I’m locked in the deputy’s car. He’s gone back into the forest and he didn’t want me walking down to the barn by myself.”

“Hang tight. I’ll be right there.”

\* \* \*

With his back against a tree and gripping a thick branch, Geoff waited for the deputy's return. Hearing the approaching footfalls, he took a breath and readied himself. The moment the lawman walked past him Geoff charged forward and slammed the heavy wood down on his head. As the muscled young man tumbled to the ground the car's key fob fell from his hand. After swiftly picking it up, Geoff took the deputy's gun and raced to the car. Though Annie stared at him with wide eyes as he appeared at her window, he unlocked the vehicle and jerked open the door.

"Don't panic, don't panic," he said hastily, leaning in and grabbing her arm. "I just want to talk, that's all, just talk."

"Where's the deputy?"

"He was in the way and I had to take care of him. Now get out of the car."

"Have you completely lost your mind? You can't assault a deputy. You'll end up in prison."

"Don't be naive. People like me don't go to prison. I could buy this entire town and it wouldn't even dent my wallet. I've told you time and again, money and power, that's what matters. Now I'm asking you nicely, get out and come with me. We need to go somewhere quiet and talk. Please, Annie, I've gone to a lot of trouble to find you. Don't make me do something we'll both regret," he warned, lowering his voice.

"You're insane. You're completely insane."

“Stop being so fucking dramatic! I don’t have time for this shit! You’ve got three-seconds, then I’ll drive down to that barn and introduce this gun to your boyfriend! One—two—”

“Okay, okay, just put that thing away.”

“Not yet,” he replied tersely as she climbed from the car. “Walk ahead of me, and when you enter the trees turn right. I found a place where we won’t be disturbed.”

\* \* \*

Leaving the barn to fetch Annie, Brody jogged up to the deputy’s car with Bella trotting along beside him, but as he drew near he realized it was empty. Trying not to panic, he snatched his phone from his pocket and called her. The moment he heard her voicemail he raced into the forest.

“ANNIE!”

Getting no response he hurried forward, and only moments later he discovered Frank lying on the ground, moaning and holding the back of his head.

“What the hell happened?” Brody asked, crouching beside him and helping him sit up.

“I got slammed from behind. Is Annie okay?”

“I don’t know. She’s gone.”

“He must’ve taken my key. Hold on, I’ll get help,” he muttered, lifting the radio from his vest. “Keep looking, but if you find her and she’s with Geoffrey Palmer come back here. Don’t do anything. The guy is nuts.”

“Sorry, no promises, but I won’t put her in any danger,” Brody replied, then taking Bella by her collar, he looked at her intently. “Bella, find Annie. Understand? Find Annie.”

The dog tilted her head to the side, then barked, and dropping her nose to the ground she began sniffing. As he followed her in a circle he began to think she might not be able to help, then she suddenly took off running.

\* \* \*

Geoff had led Annie into a small, damp cave, sat her down, then settled himself in front of the entrance. To escape she’d have to get past him, and they both knew that wouldn’t happen. Frightened and not wanting to provoke him, she stayed quiet and avoided looking him in the eye. She’d always known he’d do just about anything to win, whether it was a simple argument or a contract negotiation, and as she stared at the ground, she thought about Patty Henderson.

“We need to stay here for a little while,” he began, breaking into her thoughts. “Just until I’m sure no-one’s around.”

“Geoff, you can’t possibly get away,” she whispered. “You’ve taken things too far. This is madness.”

“Madness is walking away when you’re halfway through a new album and you’re getting ready to perform in the biggest concert arenas in the world and about to make millions.”

“I’m not walking away from anything, I just need a break.”

“Why didn’t you just say so? Am I that much of an ogre? Have I ever denied you anything?”

“Yes, you have!”

“Oh, I see, you’re talking about your cowboy. I understand you miss him, but—”



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“You cut me off! You wouldn’t let me talk to him! In fact you wouldn’t let me do anything without you.”

“That’s only because I care about you so much, and you’re right. I’ve been unreasonable. I’m sorry, truly I am. Come back to Nashville and we can work this out. Your boyfriend can visit as much as you want.”

Though his voice was filled with sincerity she didn’t believe him, but she knew the only way to escape was to agree.

“Geoff, is that a promise?” she asked, lowering her voice and hoping her question would be enough to convince him she was buying his act.

“Absolutely.”

“But what about that deputy? And the sheriff? They’re looking for you.”

“Let me worry about that. Just say you’ll come back with me.”

“There’s a lot to consider, and I—” she began, but suddenly, over Geoff’s shoulder she saw Brody, and he was holding his finger against his lips.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Is something wrong?” Geoff asked, frowning as he spoke. “Finish what you were going to say.”

“Sorry, I’m having a bit of a dizzy spell,” Annie lied as Brody disappeared. “I need some air. This space is so claustrophobic it’s getting to me.”

“You wouldn’t be trying to pull a fast one, would you Annie? That would be a mistake. You know how I hate being lied to,” he snapped, then raising his gun, he jerked sideways and stared out the small opening. “Stay where you are, and I mean it, Annie. Stay here! I’m going to have a quick look around, but I’ll be watching this cave the whole time. Don’t do anything stupid. Understood?”

“But I need some air.”

“You’ll get some air when I know everything’s okay. Once you start cooperating things will be a lot easier for both of us. While I’m gone think about how great things were when we first started working together. It can be that way again. I’ll be right back.”

\* \* \*

As Geoff climbed out the narrow entrance, he darted his eyes from side to side. Everything appeared to be normal, but he was sure Annie had seen something—or someone—over his shoulder.

“Brody, show yourself,” he demanded, thinking it must have been him. “We can talk this out. Annie and I have been discussing her new album. She’s only halfway through and she needs to come back to Nashville to finish it and prepare for her next tour. She’s under contract. She can’t just up and leave because she’s a bit homesick. I’ve told her you’re welcome to visit, but taking off like she did isn’t acceptable.”

“Geoff...stop this craziness,” Annie called from behind him.

Looking over his shoulder he saw her standing a few yards away.

“Annie, what the hell are you doing?” he demanded, spinning around to face her. “I told you to wait.”

“I may be under contract, but that doesn’t mean you can make me your prisoner.”

“Get back in there,” he ordered, raising the gun and waving it at the cave’s entrance. “If you don’t you’ll be—”

But a deep growl sent a chill down his spine.

Darting his eyes around he spotted Brody’s dog, but she wasn’t snarling. She was just sitting there, staring at him and panting.

“I think you’d better put that gun down before someone get’s hurt,” Annie continued. “Don’t you know you’re already in terrible trouble? You’re only making things worse.”

“Annie, if you die before your contract expires I’m entitled to not just all your recording royalties, but the money that comes in from your merchandising. Did you know that?” Geoff asked, walking slowly towards her. “And that contract has an automatic renewal clause. Unless I receive a termination in writing it continues on. I’ll make a fucking fortune if anything happens to you. Maybe that’s what I should do. Just get rid of you once and for all,” he grunted, raising the gun and pointing it at her. “You could just disappear, or better yet, I’ll find Brody and make it look like he was behind your death...yeah...then he shot himself because he was riddled with remorse.”

“No-one’s shooting anyone,” Brody declared, moving out from the shadow of the trees. “It’s over, Geoff. The sheriff and his deputies are on their way, and they know exactly where you are and what’s goin’ on.”

“FUCK YOU!” Geoff screamed, stepping forward and taking aim.

But he suddenly heard the menacing growl again.

It had come from above and behind him.

And this time it was louder and sounded more threatening.

Slowly pivoting on his feet, he looked up and spied a huge, snarling, drooling canine sitting on a narrow ledge above the cave. Before he had a chance to shoot the animal leapt on top of him sending him crashing to the ground, and as the dog sank his teeth into Geoff's arm the gun fell from his hand. Charging forward Brody picked it up and shot at the ground to scare the animal away.

\* \* \*

Though she'd watched the mayhem in shock, Annie quickly recovered and ran to Brody's side.

"Are you okay, darlin'?" he asked urgently, hugging her tightly but keeping his eyes on Geoff who was groaning in abject pain

"Merlin saved me...he saved us," she exclaimed. "He's a hero."

"That was Merlin?"

"Yes, and look, it seems he and Bella already know each other," she added, pointing across at Bella and Merlin sitting next to each other.

"But...he's a wolf."

"Brody, he can't be, he just looks like one."

“We’ll talk about this later,” he said as the sound of sirens filled the air. “I called the sheriff when I found the car empty. That will be him and his deputies. But are you sure you’re okay? That creep didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“No, it was just scary. I knew he had a dark side, but—”

“Brody? Annie?” a deep voice called, interrupting her. “It’s the sheriff. Where are you?”

“Over here, sheriff,” Brody called back. “We need an ambulance, not for us, for Geoffrey Palmer.”

“It sure is good to see you both,” the sheriff declared, striding towards them with two of his men following. “How are you Annie?”

“Just a bit shaky,” she replied, but as the deputies hurried across to Geoff, the sheriff stared down at Merlin.

“What are you doin’ here, fella?”

“You know him?” Annie asked, wondering if the big dog had a home.

“I sure do, but I’ll tell you the story after I’ve finished dealin’ with the situation in here. You need to wait out by the cars. I called an ambulance just in case and it looks like its needed. If it arrives before we come out can you please tell them where we are?”

“Of course, sheriff,” Brody replied, and as he guided Annie away, Merlin and Bella walked quietly along beside them.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The ambulance was already coming up the drive when Brody and Annie stepped out of the forest. While Brody explained the situation to the paramedics, Annie sat on the ground and hugged Merlin. But Bella wanted attention too. By the time Brody had finished both dogs were clambering all over her and licking her face.

“Hey, take it easy, Bella. You too, Merlin, or whatever your name is.”

“I don’t want them to stop. I love this,” she exclaimed, laughing out loud.

“His name is Rocky,” the sheriff announced, striding up to join them, “and let me tell you, he’s one helluva dog.”

“Who does he belong to?” Brody asked. “I don’t remember seein’ him around.”

“No reason you should. He was old Jack Thompson’s dog, and Jack didn’t get out much. When some wild boys from across the river started giving poor old Jack a hard time, he adopted him, and Rocky put them in their place real quick. He was a great watchdog and never left Jack’s side. But Jack passed away a few months back, and when the animal control folks arrived to take Rocky, he ran off and hasn’t been seen since.”

“See! I told you he wasn’t a wolf,” Annie exclaimed, punching Brody’s arm.

“Brody isn’t far off, Annie,” the sheriff continued. “He’s a Saarloos Wolfdog. At least that’s what Jack claimed. I looked it up. They have more wolf in them than any other breed.”

“Well he saved us sheriff,” Annie declared, “and if it’s okay with you I’d like to adopt him.”

“Fine by me.”

“Brody? Do you mind?” Annie asked, staring up at him.

“I’d say yes if I were you, or Bella might just run away with him,” the sheriff interjected with a chuckle. “They sure look like they’re fond of each other. Now if you’ll excuse me, Geoff is bein’ brought out and I want a quick word.”

“I do too,” Annie said angrily, running towards the stretcher.

“Hey, hold up,” Brody called, but she was already on her way and nothing was going to stop her.

“Geoff, your office will receive a letter of termination from a lawyer in the next couple of days, and I’m suing you for everything I can think of,” she said angrily as she walked alongside. “And the minute I get back to the house I’m calling Julie Preston. That’s right, Geoff, Patty Henderson’s former PR agent. I’m going to tell her everything that’s happened, and do as many interviews as I can manage. In twenty-four hours everyone will know all about you, and your name will be mud.”

“You ungrateful cow, I made you a star! You can’t threaten me,” he retorted though grimacing in pain as he spoke. “Tell her, sheriff,” he added as the sheriff joined them. “Tell her she can’t threaten me like that.”

“She can talk to you any way she wants. You clobbered my deputy over the head with a heavy branch,” the sheriff snapped. “You’ll be facin’ charges here, and count yourself lucky I didn’t let Rocky attack you a second time. Get him outta here, fellas,



before I permanently reshape his nose.”

\* \* \*

As the deputies left to escort the ambulance to the hospital, Brody, Annie, and the dogs started walking down to the house while the sheriff climbed into his car.

“Hey, Brody I forgot to ask,” he called, lowering his window. “Do you want to press charges?”

“For what?”

“That bastard broke into your barn and stole those clothes.”

“I think kidnapping Annie and all the other crimes he committed will be enough. I suspect he’ll be lookin’ through prison bars for years.”

“You’re right about that. Okay, I’ll be in touch. I need to take your statements but that can wait until tomorrow.”

“Bye, sheriff,” Annie said gratefully. “You were amazing.”

“Nope, Rocky was amazin’. I just cleaned up. Bye now.”

“So, Rocky,” she murmured, reaching down to pet him as the sheriff drove away.

“Do you want to be part of our family?”

“Family?” Brody repeated, taking her hand and pulling her into his arms. “You’ve got a whole other life.”

“I don’t see why I can’t have both. I can buy that field next door and build my own

recording studio, and a house where the band can stay. The guys would love it out here.”

“That’s a brilliant idea, but what about your tours?”

“I think I’ve reached a point where I can perform in bigger venues and do less shows. I’ll figure it out. But, Brody, the most important thing is you and me,” she said, lowering her voice. “Yes, I love what I do—but I love you more, and if anyone’s going to manage me, it will be you.”

“How about I manage you right now?” he whispered, moving his lips to her ear.

“What did you have in mind.”

“First, you’ll soak in a hot, soapy tub, then you’ll lie on our bed, naked of course, slip on the blindfold you find on the pillow, and wait for me.”

\* \* \*

Thirty minutes later, stretched out and filled with erotic anticipation, Annie heard Brody enter the bedroom. As he stretched out next to her, she was about to speak but he placed his finger on her lips.

“No talkin’,” he murmured, roaming his hands across her body. “You have pain here,” he said softly, stroking her upper arm. “I’ll take it away.”

She fleetingly wondered how he knew, but as his palm caressed her skin she felt a tingling sensation, and the ache began to subside. Continuing to roam his fingertips across the front of her body, he found all her sore spots and caressed away the discomfort, then rolled her over.

“Your poor shoulders,” he whispered, lightly kneading them. “There, that’s better. But you know my hands can carry a hot sting if I need them to, don’t you, Annie?”

A shiver of excitement suddenly rippled down her spine.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m going to give you a reminder at least once a week.”

“Uh...”

“Is that a problem, darlin’?”

“Uh, no.”

“Just as well,” he crooned, then delivered a hard swat on her right cheek. “Balance, baby, we’ve gotta keep things in balance,” he continued, landing another on the left. “Punishment and pleasure, equal measures of both.”

He began spanking her in a steady rhythm, evoking gasps and cries, but just as she was about to beg him to stop he slipped his fingers into her sex.

“Is there something you want, Annie?”

“Yes, yes, please, sir, will you take me?”

Wordlessly straddling her thighs, he gripped her hips, pulled her up, and placing his hardness at her entrance, he slowly pushed forward. After waiting a moment to savor her warmth, he began to pump, thrusting slowly until her moans told him she ached for more. But wanting to see her, he pulled out and flipped her over.

“Damn, you’re gorgeous,” he grunted, gazing at her body.

Taking hold of her wrists and pinning them on either side of her head, he lowered his lips to her puckered nipples and drew them into his mouth. Urged on by her moans, he sucked harder, then shifted his attention to her lips, kissing her urgently while he positioned himself against her wetness and thrust forward. As she let out a muffled cry, he suddenly needed to utterly possess her. Vigorously stroking, he squeezed his eyes shut and relished the feel of her engulfing warmth.

“Please, sir...?” she suddenly begged. “I’m so close. Please may I come?”

“Yeah, darlin’, I’m right there with you.”

Accelerating and tightening his grip on her wrists, he lowered his chest so her nipples would brush against his wiry chest hairs. He knew it would be the spark to send her over the top, and with her cries filling the room, he surrendered to his sparkling explosion...

Long minutes later, curled in his arms, she whispered something he couldn’t hear.

“What did you say, darlin’?”

“I’ve have a song in my head about you, and I just thought of the title.”

“Go on.”

“The Cowboy’s Magic Touch.”

## EPILOGUE

The following day, while Brody was welcoming the visitors for his clinic and helping

their horses settle, Annie was busy on the phone. After contacting her lawyer and outlining the hellish months she'd suffered through and the recent events at the ranch, he assured her he'd break all ties with Geoffrey Palmer and the management company.

Her next call was to Julie Preston. The savvy PR agent who once represented Patty Henderson was horrified but not surprised by Annie's account of her hellish days with the famous manager.

In the following days, Annie appeared on national television entertainment shows and national news shows sharing her story and warning eager young hopefuls to stay on the alert for predators like Geoff.

A few weeks later, the investigation into Patty Henderson's deadly car accident was reopened, but already facing a slew of charges, on his lawyer's advice, Geoff became cooperative and confessed to tampering with her vehicle.

In spite of her busy schedule, Annie took time out every day to watch Brody with his horses. One afternoon, gazing up at the forest, she noticed Smoky Hill was once again living up to its name.

"Are you ready to venture back there," Brody asked, walking up to her. "We can go on that overdue trail ride."

"I'd like nothing better," she replied. "And I bet Bella and Rocky would love it too, though you know he's still Merlin to me."

"I don't think he cares what you call him. He loves you to pieces, like I do."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:01 am*

“Brody, I love you too, so much,” she murmured, moving her arms around his waist and leaning against him. “I thank God for you every day.”

“We’d better get those horses tacked up before I give into temptation and carry you back in the house.”

\* \* \*

A short time later they entered the peaceful forest with Rocky and Bella happily sniffing the ground running along beside them.

“Thanks for this,” Annie said with a happy sigh. “It’s so wonderful to be on a horse and riding through this magical place.”

“Wait until you get to the top.”

“We’re going all the way up?”

“The conditions are perfect, and if you think this is magical, you just wait. How about we lope a bit.”

“Sure.”

“Come on you two,” he called to the dogs as he asked Maverick to step into a canter. In just a few minutes, the mist became thicker and Brody slowed back down to a walk.

“Not long now,” he said, shooting Annie a grin. “It get’s dense like this, then suddenly it’s—”

“Brighter,” she exclaimed, cutting him off.

“Yep, and see how the fog is breakin’ apart.”

“I do.”

As they moved through the last of the mist she suddenly found herself on a plateau under bright sun, but Brody continued to ride forward, then turned around.

“Oh, my gosh,” she breathed stopping beside him. “You were right. It’s like being in heaven. It is heaven.”

Beneath them the fog looked like puffy white cotton, while behind her the mountain peaks soared into sky, and huge white clouds drifted aimlessly overhead.

“Annie,” he began softly, “wherever I am, I’m in heaven if I’m with you.”

“Brody, I feel the same,” she whispered, barely able to make her voice work.

“Marry me, darlin’.”

“Marry you? Oh, my gosh, Really?”

“Really!”

“YES, YES, YES,” she exclaimed as happy tears brimmed in her eyes.

Breaking into a wide smile, he leaned across the space between them and pressed his



lips against hers in a long, lingering, loving kiss.

\* \* \*

Though Annie wanted to have the wedding at the ranch she was afraid it would be too easy for the paparazzi to intrude. It was Brody who came up with the answer.

“The campgrounds,” he declared. “You’ve never been there, but it’s a beautiful location. We’re keeping it relatively small so there should be enough accommodation for the guests, and there’s a bridal cabin overlooking the lake.”

“The campground is where Geoff stayed when he was on the run,” she remarked. “Talk about poetic justice.”

“Do you want to drive over there and check it out?”

“Absolutely!”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:01 am*

When they arrived unannounced, the manager was thrilled to meet Annie and overjoyed at the prospect of hosting her wedding. She immediately fell in love with the quaint log cabins, and found the bridal cottage overlooking the lake breathtaking.

The arrangements were made, and on the big day, the guests were met at the private airfield, but had no idea where they were being taken. No reporters had uncovered the details, and there were no helicopters or drones flying overhead.

On the big day, Rocky and Bella were dressed like a bride and groom, and stood like perfect angels as Annie and Brody exchanged their vows. When they moved into the restaurant for the celebrations, Annie surprised everyone by walking onto the small stage with her guitar.

“Brody, this is one of my wedding presents for you,” she began, adjusting the microphone stand as she sat down. “Thank you for saving me, and thank you for making me happier than I ever thought I could be. It’s called, The Cowboy’s Magic Touch.”

With just a touch he heals a heart.

With just a touch he calms a soul.

With just a touch he shows his love.

With just a touch he made me whole.

He’s the cowboy with a special gift.

A cowboy who is brave and strong.

With wisdom and a warrior's spirit,

He will always fight to right a wrong.

He's the cowboy with the magic touch.

Who brought love and joy to my life.

He's the cowboy with the magic touch.

And I'm so lucky to be his wife.

\* \* \*

Three months later, when Annie discovered she was having a baby, she decided to take a year off and recorded the simple song. It hit the number one spot on both the country and contemporary music charts.

"When you go back you'll be a bigger star than ever," Brody murmured as they cuddled in bed. "Everything you sing turns to gold."

"And everything you touch is kissed with magic."

THE END