



The Cowboy's Promise

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Category: Romance, Western

Description: When a horse trainer crosses swords with a nasty woman at a horse show, he has no idea the lengths to which she'll go to have her revenge...

Blake Coleman has been crazy about one of his students for over a year. Her name is Heather Hunt. She's sassy, though sometimes a bit nervous, and is far more talented than she realizes.

Heather has had a crush on the handsome cowboy since the day she drove into his ranch looking for lessons. He's a sexy combination of easy-going but tough, and he has a look in his eye that makes her toes curl.

When Blake and Heather encounter an unkind horse owner at a show, Blake accidentally discovers she's up to no good and turns her into the police,

Her name is Courtney McCallum.

No-one gets the better of her.

Not ever.

She's determined Blake and Heather will pay!

Even if Blake finds out, how can he stop her hurting the only woman he's ever truly loved?

If you enjoy suspense and sexy cowboys you'll love this sizzling page-turner.

Total Pages (Source): 59

CHAPTER ONE

As Blake Coleman watched the familiar four horse trailer roll into the show grounds he did his best to keep a poker face. It belonged to Courtney McCallum, a world class rider with world class horses. But she was also gorgeous and she knew it. She carried herself with an annoying arrogance that made his blood boil.

“I see she’s arrived.”

Looking over his shoulder he smiled down at Heather Hunt. He’d been training her for the past year, and it hadn’t been easy. Though she was an excellent rider and had a magic touch with the horses, she had a rebellious streak, and a surprising lack of confidence.

But there was a bigger problem.

He was crazy about her.

“I don’t know why I came,” she muttered with a frown. “Apollo and I can’t compete with the horses here, especially not hers. Did you hear she just picked up another gelding? I was told she got him for a song because he’s not easy, though I bet he’s gorgeous.”

“The value of a horse isn’t just measured by how much someone is willin’ to pay for it. As far as I’m concerned, Apollo is priceless, and how many times do I have to tell you how good you are? Besides, you don’t have to worry about her. She’s not in your—”

“Oh, my gosh, Blake, look,” she exclaimed, cutting him off.

Darting his eyes across the parking lot he spied a stunning dapple grey charging away from Courtney’s trailer. Walking quickly into the barn, Heather grabbed the first halter and leadrope she saw and hurried across to a grassy area alongside the driveway. Courtney had started shouting for help, and stable hands were running into the area from all directions, but the big grey was already on his way towards the grass where Heather was standing.

“Wait!” Blake called, waving at the workers. “Heather’s about to catch him. Stay where you are.”

“But he’s only five and he doesn’t know her.” Courtney yelled angrily. “He’ll be too much for her.”

“Trust me, she can handle it. Just stay where you are.”

Quickly looking back at Heather, he watched her lift a treat from her pocket and offer it to the nervous horse. After stepping up and quickly devouring it, the gelding snorted, shook his head, then asked for another. After feeding him a second, she slipped the halter over his head and stroked his neck.

“Thanks, Heather,” Courtney said briskly as she approached. “He’s only five and this is just his second show. He’s a bit wired.”

“He’s absolutely beautiful,” Heather said with a sigh, handing her the lead rope. “What’s his name?”

“King Henry, and he needs to learn some manners.”

“He’s a smart boy. I’m sure he will.”

“He’d fucking better,” Courtney grunted, leading him away.

Hearing the conversation as he approached, Blake shook his head. It was typical Courtney.

“Horses adore you, Heather, every last one of them,” he remarked. “As I’ve said to you many times, you have the magic touch.”

“I figured he’d come over here for the grass and I was right. That’s all.”

“We both know it’s more than that, though I do admire your modesty. But you should probably head over to the warm up ring and get ready for your class. I know you’ll do great. Heck, you’ll probably win the damn thing.”

Building her confidence was an ongoing challenge, and he could see by the look in her eye she wasn’t convinced. As they walked back to the barn and headed down the aisle, Heather called to her horse. The chestnut gelding put his head over the stall door and whinnied.

“I know, honey bunny, I’m coming,” she called back.

“I’ll get your tack out and meet you in the crossties,” Blake said as he continued walking.

“Thanks, Blake.”

He smiled.

She was competing against riders from across the state, but if she held her nerve he was sure could she could win.

* * *

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Bringing Apollo out of his stall, Heather led him down to the cross ties. There were eight, four on each side of the aisle, but there was only one other horse being tacked up.

The facility was called The Kimberly Show Grounds. Hank Kimberly, a nationally known show jumper turned trainer, had built it to accommodate all forms of horsemanship. People flocked to watch everything from jumping to roping and reining, and even bull riding. The stalls were oversized, and the amenities were first rate. While Heather had always found the experience thrilling, the thought of showing there was intimidating.

“Hey, fella,” Blake said, placing her saddle on the stand and giving the horse a carrot. “You’ll be a star.”

“I hope so. That ring is so big and there are so many people here.”

“Nothin’ bothers him, does it, boy,” he said, rubbing the horse’s face. “And Heather, that’s thanks to you.”

“I’m not sure how much his temperament has to do with me.”

“It has everything to do with you,” he replied, placing the saddle pad then the saddle on the horse’s back. “Take a deep breath and hear me when I say you are as good as anyone here, and Apollo is even better.”

“I agree about Apollo.”

“He’ll take it all in stride. Just do what you do at the ranch and forget everything else.”

“You’re right!” she said firmly. “I’m determined to get over these jitters. I know he picks up on my energy, so I have to.”

“Exactly. Here comes Julie. I have to give her a hand. I’ll see you in the warm up ring closest to the barn.”

CHAPTER TWO

Leading Apollo outside and stopping at the mounting block, Heather climbed into the saddle and rode to the ring. Reaching the gate she leaned over and opened it, then turned him around and closed it. She could feel eyes on her. Not everyone could do the simple maneuver, and though they were surrounded by new sights and sounds Apollo took it all in stride

“You’re such a good boy,” she said softly, stroking his neck. “How did I get so lucky?”

After a few minutes of walking around, she was about to break into a trot when she noticed Courtney walking King Henry towards the ring. The horse had a chain around his nose attached to the lead rope. It was a practice Heather hated. She was about to look away when King Henry spotted the water truck parked nearby. Terrified of the odd looking thing he shied and tried to bolt away. To Heather’s horror Courtney jerked on the rope and began yelling.

“Like that’s going to help,” Heather muttered under her breath as her blood boiled. But noticing the commotion was starting to affect some of the other horses in the ring, Heather lifted her phone from her pocket and sent an urgent text to Blake.

Courtney's in trouble with her grey by the warm up ring. Hurry.

He immediately responded and said he was on his way, but Heather continued to worry. Courtney wasn't wearing gloves, and it was possible the spooked horse still prancing would jerk the lead rope from her hand. But a moment later Blake appeared from the barn and jogged towards them, breaking into a walk when he neared. Hastily handing him the lead rope, Courtney quickly stepped back.

Heather watched as Blake stood completely still while the big grey continued its nervous dance and tossed his head. When he finally stopped and snorted, Blake encouraged him to move from side-to-side, then in a small circle. When the horse finally relaxed Blake led him slowly towards the water truck. It was only a few minutes before Henry was sniffing the tires. As Blake walked the horse back to Courtney, Heather glanced around at the other competitors. They all wore spurs and carried crops. She had neither.

"People," she grunted. "I hate them all."

Riding across to the gate, she headed out and was starting back to the barn when she heard Blake calling her. Turning back around, she rode up to join him.

"Where are you going? You were only in the ring a short time."

"I'm sorry, I do want to face my fears, but this is no place for us. I can't stand being around all these people. They don't understand the first thing about horses. All they do is bully them."

"But you can lead by example."

"I'm not sure anyone would pay any attention."

“You’re wrong. People take notice when their horse isn’t doing well and there’s someone around them that seems to have answers.”

“Maybe, but I need to be back in the peace and quiet of the ranch.”

“You can be so stubborn sometimes.”

“I’m not stubborn, I just know what works for me and what doesn’t, and if I see one more horse with a stupid chain around its nose I won’t be responsible for my actions,” she exclaimed. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to yell but it pisses me off.”

“I agree, but you can’t live in a bubble.”

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“Sure I can.”

“You’re impossible sometimes.”

“Yeah? Well, so are you.”

“Are you leaving because you don’t like being around people like Courtney, or because you don’t think you measure up?”

“What does it matter?”

“Just answer the question.”

“I will if you say please.”

“I swear...” he grunted. “One of these days...”

“One of these days, what?”

“Once more,” he said tersely, “are you leaving because you don’t like being around people like Courtney, or because you don’t think you measure up?”

“Both! Now it’s your turn. One of these days, what?”

“One of these days you just might find yourself over my knee.”

Unexpected butterflies suddenly sprang to life in her stomach. Not knowing what to

say, she asked Apollo to walk forward, but as she rode away her heart was racing. She'd been training with Blake for over a year and they'd had their share of quarrels, but there was one she couldn't forget...and a part of her didn't want to.

There was a row of blanket hooks at one end of the barn aisle. Clients were allowed to hang two blankets per horse. Any more and the area became over-crowded and the blankets would fall off, but she would consistently put up three, or even four.

When he'd remind her only two were allowed, she'd complain she didn't have anywhere else to put them, which was true. He knew she loved blankets and had one for every possible weather condition, so he'd suggested a second trunk. She'd brought one in, but continued to break the two blanket rule.

Late one night, worried it might rain, she'd returned to the barn after work to switch out Apollo's cotton sheet for a warm, waterproof one. Blake was still in his office, and as she was hanging the cotton sheet on the hook on top of two other blankets he appeared in the barn aisle.

"Heather!" he called sternly, striding towards her. "You have to store it in that trunk you bought."

"It's just overnight. I'll roll it up and put it there tomorrow, assuming I have room. I just got another couple of the high neck—"

"No, not tomorrow. Put it away now."

"Oh, for goodness sake, you're totally overreacting."

Without warning he'd lunged forward, grabbed the sheet, somehow managed to wrap it around her body, then threw her over his shoulder and carried her into his office as she squealed and squirmed.

“You can sit there until I’m done,” he’d said sternly, plonking her on the love seat and settling behind his desk.

“Are you crazy?”

“Nope, but I am fed up. You may be a talented rider and one of the most gifted horse handlers here, but the rules are for everyone. Now be quiet, I have to concentrate. Give me any trouble and I’ll spank your ass.”

Now approaching the barn the memory wrapped around her like the cotton sheet, and she felt a warm shiver ripple through her body. She’d had a crush on Blake since the first time she’d seen him. She’d driven into his ranch to ask about boarding and training, but when she’d rolled to a stop all she could do was stare at the handsome cowboy. He’d been shirtless, and marched out of the barn carrying a bag of feed over his shoulder. His muscled body had glowed copper under the hot summer sun, and as she’d climbed from her truck he’d paused his step and smiled across at her.

He’d looked like Adonis.

It was a moment she’d never forgotten.

Climbing off Apollo and leading him into the barn, she had no doubt, at some point, Blake would make good on this threat to spank her.

CHAPTER THREE

With her trunk still in the back of her truck, all Heather had to do was drive back to the barn and load Apollo. As she walked through the many rigs she didn’t see anyone, but as she passed Courtney’s impressive trailer she heard a noise. Walking around to the back she found the ramp lowered, and when she looked inside she was shocked to see a groom holding King Henry while Courtney pushed a syringe into the

horse's neck. Quickly ducking out of sight Heather started to creep away.

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“Bitch! Come back here.!”

Heather’s heart jumped.

She’d been seen.

She bolted away, but as she ran to her truck she could hear the crunching of gravel close behind her. Looking over her shoulder, to her horror she saw Courtney had already caught up.

“Nosey bitch!” Courtney hissed, grabbing her by the hair.

“What are you doing? Let me go.”

“You say one fucking word and your horse will get messed up real bad, you hear me. One fucking word!”

“But I’m leaving,” Heather gasped as Courtney slammed her against the trailer. “I won’t even be here.”

“That won’t stop you making a call. I know where your barn is in Smoky Hill, and I swear, if anyone finds out about this you’ll be sorry. You hear me?”

“Okay, okay!”

“Stupid fucking cow,” Courtney growled, shoving her to the ground. “Remember, it will be your horse I’ll hurt if you don’t keep your fucking mouth shut.”

As she turned and marched away, Heather waited, shaking and scared, until the nasty girl had disappeared, then staggered to her feet. But her fingers were trembling so badly she could barely lift her key fob from her pocket. Finally hitting the button to unlock the doors, she climbed behind the wheel, closed her eyes and tried to catch her breath.

“Heather?”

Jumping, she jerked her head around and was shocked to see Blake climbing into the passenger seat.

“You scared me,” she exclaimed, staring at him. “What are you doing here?”

“Lookin’ for you. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s clearly not nothin’. You’ve been cryin’ and you look a mess. Talk to me.”

“I can’t. I have to get Apollo and—”

“Nope, you’re not goin’ anywhere until you tell me what’s goin’ on.”

“I want to—but I can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t? Heather...I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this upset.”

“Please, you don’t understand. I have to leave.”

“Okay, take a breath and try to relax. I won’t stop you, but let me drive you over to the barn and help you with—”

“No! In fact you need to get out!”

But to her shock he leaned over the console and wrapped her into his arms.

“Whatever is goin’ on I’m here for you,” he said, lowering his voice.

“You don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t, and it doesn’t matter. Tell me or not, it’s up to you, but it doesn’t change the fact that I’ve got your back.”

“Blake, I don’t know what to do. It’s Courtney,” she stammered, suddenly unable to hold back. “I, uh, I saw her do something and she’s threatened to hurt Apollo if I say anything. She grabbed my hair and pushed me against the trailer really hard, then onto the ground.”

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“She did what?”

“That’s why I have to go. I don’t care about me, not really, but I’m terrified she’ll do something to Apollo if I stay.”

“Heather, listen to me,” he said firmly, shifting to stare at her. “That girl isn’t goin’ to hurt you, or Apollo, or anyone else. I’ll make sure of it.”

“But—”

“You’re much safer here where I can watch over you. And don’t forget, the barns have video cameras and security guards patrollin’ at night. If you go back to the ranch you and Apollo will be much easier targets. There’s only Lucas there.”

“And Butch.”

“Well, yeah, and Butch is a helluva watch dog, but you’ll still be more vulnerable there than here.”

“I don’t know...”

“Do you trust me?”

“Of course I trust you.”

“Then believe me when I tell you, the worst thing to do is run from a bully. It’s like facin’ your fears. You have to stand your ground. But you leave Courtney to me. I

give you my word I won't let her—or anyone else—hurt you or Apollo. Come back to the barn with me. I know you're not showin' but Tracy and Julie are and I need to be there for them."

"Actually..."

"What?"

"You're right. I should face my fears. I'm still a bit shaky after what Courtney just did, and I am nervous about riding in that big ring, but I should."

"Heather, that's great. You've done wonders with that horse and it's time you showed him off. But before we go there's one more thing."

Before she could ask him what it was his fingers were in her hair tugging back her head, and his lips were devouring hers in a long, luxuriant kiss.

"There," he murmured, pulling back and releasing her. "I've been wantin' to do that for months."

"Blake...I don't know what to say," she whispered. "Wait, yes I do. I've been waiting for that since I drove onto your ranch and saw you leaving the barn with a bag of feed over your shoulder."

"No kiddin'? Well, Heather, the feelin' was mutual. When you stepped out of that truck on that first day I damn near had a heart attack."

"Really?"

"Hell, yeah. I guess Courtney did us a favor, though I'm furious at her for what she did."

“It was horrible, but finally being with you like this was worth it.”

CHAPTER FOUR

With an hour before her class Heather had enough time to warm up Apollo and groom him for the show ring. Blake had two other clients in a class before hers, and told her he'd be back to check on her after they were finished. One competitor placed second, and the other third. In a group of seventeen people he considered it a great success. But when he left he didn't go directly to check on Heather. He walked over to a nearby barn in the show grounds where he knew Courtney was stabling her horses.

Though he didn't see her as he moved down the aisle, he did hear her voice. Continuing to the end and stepping outside he saw her pacing as she talked on her phone. Her eyes were staring at the grass beneath her feet, and in her free hand she was tapping a riding crop against her boot.

“I don't care. You said you'd have it for me today and it still hasn't arrived.”

She had yelled, which didn't surprise him. Whenever their paths crossed she always seemed unhappy and on edge.

“Make sure you do. Text me when it's on the way,” she barked, then jerking her head around she glared at him. “Do you always stand around and listen to other people's private calls?”

“I never stand around and listen to other people's calls, private or otherwise.”

“What do you want?”

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“Just a quick chat, but let’s go over to that thicket where we can have some privacy.”

“Why? What’s this about?”

“If you want to find out you’ll have to join me, and when you hear what I have to say you’ll understand.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said.”

Before she could answer he marched across to the trees, and just as he suspected she would, she followed.

“Okay, I’m here,” she said tersely as she caught up.

“A little further,” he muttered, continuing further and slipping his hand in his pocket.

“This should do it. No-one to listen or watch us.”

“Just tell me what this is about. I’m busy.”

In spite of her bravado he could see the fear in her eyes, and he knew she was worried Heather had told him what she’d witnessed.

“Tell me, Courtney, why are you always so angry?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Is that why you brought me out here?”

“No, but I am curious,” he said, lowering his voice and walking towards her.

“Just tell me what this is about.”

“Sure, I’d be happy to.”

Suddenly snatching the crop from her hand he landed it across the center of her backside.

“WHAT THE FUCK? HOW DARE YOU?”

“Do I have your attention?” he demanded as her hands flew behind her.

“You bastard!”

“Is that a yes, or do I need to whack you again?”

“Yes, yes, just fucking tell me.”

“You injected your horse, and since you did it in your trailer I have to assume it was a banned substance. Then you assaulted Heather and threatened to harm Apollo. Don’t try to deny it. I saw her just a minute or so later and she was in a terrible state,” he added, abruptly grabbing Courtney’s arm and raising the crop. “Admit it, Courtney, you drugged King Henry?”

“Okay, okay, I did. But it was just to calm him down. He was being wild.”

“And you assaulted and threatened Heather.”

“Yes, but she shouldn’t have been snooping.”

“She wasn’t snoopin’, she just happened to walk by, but that’s beside the point. You shouldn’t have been injectin’ your horse, and you sure as hell shouldn’t have attacked her.”

“Fine, so what are you going to do about it? Nothing, that’s what. I can have Henry taken home, and you’ll have no proof any of this happened.”

“Actually,” he said, releasing her and lifting his phone from his pocket, “I just recorded our conversation...and now it’s on its way to my personal email account.”

“Fuck!”

“If anything, and I mean, anything, happens to Apollo or Heather, I’ll come lookin’ for you and I’ll bring the law with me. Got it?”

“You sonofabitch.”

“Hey, call me whatever you want, I don’t give a shit, but believe me I don’t make empty threats. And one more thing, if you do harm either of them I’ll find a way to get you alone and whip your ass. Got it?”

Without waiting for her response he threw her crop on the ground at her feet and marched from the thicket, but as he strode across the grass he broke into a grin. He was sure no-one had ever spoken to her the way he had, and certainly never landed a crop on her butt. But he wasn’t about to underestimate her. He’d have to keep a close eye on Apollo and Heather.

* * *

Trembling and fighting back tears of fury, Courtney stayed where she was and took a few minutes to gather her wits. But it wasn’t easy. No-one ever got the better of her, and she wasn’t about to let a cowboy be the first. But he had her cornered. There was no way she could get into his phone or email account and delete her incriminating confession.

“But I can find a way to get even,” she muttered under her breath. “I know where your barn is. You haven’t seen the last of me, asshole.”

The thought gave her a modicum of comfort. Taking a deep breath, she started walking, but as she reached the edge of the thicket and looked across at the barn, she saw the onsite vet’s truck parked at the entrance. Quickening her pace she was soon walking down the aisle, only to see the barn manager, along with Blake and Heather

staring into King Henry's stall.

CHAPTER FIVE

"All I know is she injected him with something."

As Courtney neared and heard Blake's statement she paused her step.

"I need to know what that something is," a man's voice replied.

"She said it was a tranquilizer, but I have no idea which one."

"Ace is pretty easy to get. That would be my guess, but I need to know for sure."

Just as Courtney was trying to decide what to do, as if sensing her presence, Heather turned her head.

"Courtney!" Heather exclaimed. "Thank God. Was it Ace?"

"Was what Ace?" Courtney stammered, pretending not to know what Heather was talking about.

"Stop playin' games," Blake growled, marching up to her. "Henry's in trouble because of you. What did you give him and how much?"

"Okay, okay, yeah, it was Ace. I think the vial said 5 mg, but I only gave him about half," she replied, stepping up to stare through the stall door. "He was being wild. I had to."

"You're the owner?" the vet asked, glancing up at her.

“Yes, I just got him a couple of weeks ago. He’s being crazy so—”

“I’m Doctor Clayton,” he said sharply, cutting her off. “Any more than that and we might have had some real issues, but this will counter the effects,” he continued gravely as he administered an injection. “Take out this dry hay, put it in a net and soak it for about thirty minutes. He should start looking better in a couple of hours. I’ll be here for the rest of the afternoon so I’ll keep checking on him. And for goodness sake,” he added sternly, rising to his feet and scowling at her, “don’t give an excited horse Ace. Not ever! And do not administer any drugs unless it’s under the supervision of a vet.”

“Uh, okay.”

“I’ll be reporting this to the show office and the local Animal Welfare Department.”

“What? Why? It was a simple mistake.”

“Drugging your horse is not a mistake,” he barked. “People like you shouldn’t be allowed to own these animals.”

“How dare you speak to me like that. He was being wild. People Ace their horses all the time.”

“That doesn’t make it legal and it doesn’t make it right,” he retorted. “Heather, thanks for realizing something was wrong and finding me,” he said, softening his voice and turning his eyes to her.

“I’m just glad you were nearby.”

“I am too! Now if you’ll excuse me I’m off to the show office to report this,” he declared, glowering at Courtney again, then turned and marched down the barn aisle.

“Proud of yourself?” Blake asked, staring at her. “You almost killed him.”

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“Oh, stop with the drama. He would’ve come out of it.”

“Maybe, maybe not, and instead of bein’ defensive you should be relieved, and you should be thankin’ Heather for seein’ he wasn’t right and findin’ the vet.”

“Thanks, Heather, for telling your boyfriend about what you saw and causing all this commotion. Thanks for making sure I get kicked out of this show.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Heather murmured, staring at her. “How can you be so callous? Don’t you care about Henry at all? Don’t you care that—”

“I care that I bought a horse that’s totally wild and I can’t tranquilize because he reacts to it. What the hell am I supposed to do now?”

“Take up another sport, preferably one that doesn’t involve animals. Hold on...” he muttered, stepping closer to her and frowning as he spoke, “Henry isn’t the only one who’s been drugged. What are you on?”

“Excuse me?” she exclaimed, backing away from him.

“Your pupils, they’re dilated. You’re on something. That might explain your weird behavior.”

“I’m not being weird.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“I don’t have to listen to this.”

“The hell you don’t,” he snapped, grabbing her arm and hustling her into an empty stall.

“What are you doing?”

“Makin’ sure you don’t go anywhere,” he said tersely, sliding a lead rope through the handle and tying it off out of reach.

“You can’t do this! You have no right!”

Ignoring her, he pulled out his cell phone, dialed the sheriff’s office, and asked to be patched through to Sheriff Cooper.

“Hey, Blake, how are you?”

“Angry,” he replied. “I’m at the show grounds. A competitor here drugged her horse. It’s now under a vet’s care, and I’m pretty sure she’s usin’.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Her behavior, and her pupils are dilated. And you should also know the vet is reportin’ her to Animal Welfare.”

“I’m already here. My niece is showin’ and I stopped by to wish her luck.”

“Great. We’re in Barn A. See you shortly.”

“I’m going to get you for this, Blake Coleman. You just see if I don’t,” Courtney railed. “You’re an interfering asshole.”

He was about to respond when his phone signaled an incoming call. Glancing at the screen he saw it was from the show manager, Buck Halsey.

“Hello, Buck.”

“Hi, Blake. I’m with Doc Clayton. Are you still at King Henry’s stall?”

“Yep.”

“Is Courtney with you?”

“She is, and I just called Sheriff Cooper. He’s on the grounds and he’ll be here in a minute.”

“Good, because we found bottles of Ace and some other substances, both powder and pills. Keep her there if you can.”

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“She’s locked in a stall. She’s not goin’ anywhere.”

“Great. I’ll be right over.”

“Courtney, that was Buck Halsey, the show manager,” Blake declared. “Your stash has been found.”

“What? But he has no right to look through my stuff.”

“Read your entry paperwork. If there’s any suspicion of a horse bein’ drugged he does. You’re goin’ down, Courtney.”

“The hell I am. I’m calling my lawyer.”

“That would be a very good idea,” he said as he spotted the vet marching down the aisle with Sheriff Cooper and the show manager.

“Courtney McCallum, you’re under arrest,” the sheriff exclaimed as they reached the stall. “I’ll read you the charges shortly. But first you should know two officers from animal welfare in Fairview are on their way. They’ll probably want to take possession of your horse.”

“Well, good. That saves me the trouble of trying to sell him. He’s been more trouble than he’s worth.”

“Then let me buy him! I’ll give you a check for a thousand dollars right now and take care of the vet bill,” Heather exclaimed. “Or I can wait until he’s taken and work

things out with Animal Control.”

CHAPTER SIX

As everyone stared at Heather in shock, she looked up at Blake silently asking for his support and reassurance.

“I’d take it if I were you, Courtney,” he began, shooting Heather a wink as he spoke.

“Fine, write me a check and he’s yours,” Courtney grunted with a frown.

“Excuse me while I call Animal Control, and Courtney, I need to search your truck. Is it locked?”

“Of course it’s locked.”

“Don’t get snippy with me, young lady. You’re already in a heap of trouble. Where are the keys?”

“In the top tray of my trunk in a pink change purse.”

“I’m off to get your check,” Heather said, trying to control her excitement. “I’ll be right back.”

As she hurried away Blake fell into step beside her, but when they stepped outside he suddenly grabbed her and pulled her into his arms.

“You’re crazy, and I wish you’d talked to me about all this first, but I think it’s a great idea.”

“You do? Thank goodness. But I’ll need your help.”

“Yeah, I know, and you’ll have it. I want to bring Apollo into the stall next to King—”

“Please just call him Henry,” she said, interrupting him.

“King Henry is too much?”

“Exactly.”

“I agree. Anyway, I want to put Apollo next to him. He’s so easy goin’ it will be good for Henry to have him as a neighbor for a bit, then in the trailer when we have to load him.”

“Oh, of course. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“You thought of takin’ him. I think that’s enough,” he said with a chuckle. “But your class is comin’ up. You need to get ready.”

“Maybe I should just cancel.”

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“Nope. No excuses,” he declared, unexpectedly swatting her.

“Hey, what was that?”

“That was encouragement. You’re goin’ into that show ring and you’ll do great. I’ll write up the bill of sale while you make out the check then I’ll take them back to Courtney.”

“You sure can be bossy sometimes.”

“Yep, but you already know that. I’ll meet you at the show ring. And Heather, don’t worry about gettin’ a ribbon. Just enjoy the experience and be proud of your horse. He’s special, and that’s because of you.”

* * *

Though Heather had been nervous when she began grooming Apollo, the more she thought about Blake’s advice the more she realized he was right. By the time she was leading Apollo to the arena she was feeling much better. She wasn’t there to impress anyone. She was there to enjoy a unique time with her wonderful horse.

“Hey, how are you feelin’?”

Turning around she saw Blake jogging towards her.

“Great, really great. Any news?”

“Yep. Courtney’s on her way to the Sheriff’s station, and Henry now belongs to you. I have your Bill of Sale.”

“Oh, my gosh. I can’t believe it. He’s so beautiful, but not as beautiful as you, Apollo,” she added, quickly hugging him. “I just hope he won’t be too much for me.”

“I doubt it, and I’ll be there to help. Now you need to get to that ring.”

“Any last minute advice?”

“Breathe...and enjoy your horse.”

A few minutes later the class was under way, and she was in the saddle walking around the large ring with many other riders. When the judge ordered them to break into the trot, she barely squeezed her legs on Apollo’s sides and he made the smooth transition. She was tempted to look at the other competitors, but told herself they didn’t matter and kept her attention on what she was doing. She’d taught Apollo subtle signals, and as they proceeded through gait after gait, he moved through each of them flawlessly. When the class came to an end she was so proud of him she was almost in tears. Lining up with the others, she was optimistic about her chances of a ribbon, but she didn’t care as much as she thought she would. She was just thrilled at how well Apollo had performed.

Starting with the sixth place, the riders and horses were called out one by one. When the judge had called out the name of the rider and horse coming in third, Heather figured that was it. Though she was disappointed, she still thought Apollo had been amazing.

“Second place to Chief, ridden by Lindsay Montgomery.”

The pretty paint was beside her, and his rider moved him forward, she glanced back

at Heather.

“Congratulations,” she said with a smile. “You two were amazing. You deserve it.”

Confused, Heather assumed she was talking to someone else, but quickly she realized there was no-one next to her.

“First place goes to Apollo, ridden by Heather Hunt.”

Completely shocked, she wondered if she’d imagined what she’d heard, but seeing a young girl carrying the trophy and ribbon and walking towards her. she realized it was real.

They’d won the class!

As the crowd applauded she had to fight back the happy tears and swallow the lump in her throat.

“Exceptional,” the judge said, smiling as she approached. “You’re a gifted rider and your horse is a dream. I don’t know where you’ve been hiding, but I hope we’ll see you back in the show ring again soon.”

“Thank you,” Heather managed, barely getting the words out as a photographer appeared and began taking photographs. “It’s all Apollo. He’s just so smart and so good.”

“He may have a lovely temperament, but he performed the way he did because of you.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Blake had been watching from the exit gate, and when Heather was awarded first place he'd pumped his fist in the air. As she exited and handed him the trophy, he wanted to pull her from the saddle, kiss her passionately, hug her tightly and never let her go.

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“You were fantastic,” he exclaimed as she slipped from the saddle and they started walking back to the barn. “I knew you could do it.”

“Thanks to you and your wonderful training.”

“Nope, the credit is all yours. I’m so proud of you.”

“And I’m proud of Apollo. He was such a star,” she declared, beaming up at him. “You’re the best horse ever.”

“How does it feel to win your first trophy at a big show like this?”

“I’m not sure I have the words. It’s absolutely amazing, and I suddenly have so much energy.”

“Yeah, I know that high, but in a little while it will wear off and you’ll be tired, especially after everything that happened today.”

“I still can’t believe Courtney attacked me the way she did...or that I own Henry. Thank goodness I don’t have to work tonight. I’d be spilling soup on people.”

“We still have to celebrate. Why don’t you come over. I’ll cook something up and you can unwind.”

“I’d love that.”

“The vet said we should probably wait until the mornin’ to transport Henry,” he

continued as they entered the barn aisle. “He and Apollo can hang out here until then.”

“Okay, but I want to come back and check on them later,” she said, as she led Apollo into the cross ties.

“Absolutely, and I need to swing by my other horses as well, though they’re used to bein’ at shows. Unless you need me for anything else I need to check in with the others before they leave.”

“You go ahead. As soon as I put Apollo in his stall and give him his grain I’ll go home. I’m dying to tell mom and dad the news, but I want to call them from the comfort of my couch.”

“Sounds like a plan, and Heather,” he murmured, suddenly bringing her into his arms, “I feel like I won too. We finally connected after all this time.”

“What took you so long?” she asked, tilting her head to the side and shooting him a wink.

“You are one sassy girl.”

“I try.”

“Come to the ranch around seven and we’ll talk about that some more.”

“Okay,” she said with a grin. “And Blake, I know I’ve already said it, but thanks for all your support with Henry.”

“Hey, you know I believe every horse deserves a second chance.”

Leaning down and lightly kissing her, he turned and marched away.

“My gosh, Apollo, hasn’t this been a day for the books,” she murmured, giving him a treat. “You have a new barn buddy, we won our class, and Blake and I have found each other. They say things come in threes. I guess it’s true.”

* * *

Heather lived above a garage on a modest cattle farm. Though it was just a single space with a small bathroom, it was inexpensive, comfortable, and convenient. Located halfway between the Smoky Hill township where her parents lived, the Moonshine Campground where she worked, and Blake’s ranch just a mile further down the country road, she considered herself lucky to have found it.

The only issue was the rickety staircase.

It was outside, and when it rained the wooden steps would become slippery. In winter when the temps fell below freezing they were treacherous. But at least she had a carport for her truck so it didn’t get covered in snow.

Rolling to a stop and carrying her trophy, she made her way up the steps and into her humble home. Placing the prize on the small dining room table, she stared at it for a moment, then flopped down on the couch and called her parents. They were thrilled with the news, and asked her to bring it over as soon as she could so they could see it and celebrate. Her brother was pursuing a law degree at SMU, and she imagined the house felt empty with both of them gone, so she made it a point to visit at least twice a week.

“We’ve been thinking about you all day. I do wish we could have been there, but you know how busy the shop is on a Saturday.” her mother exclaimed. “By any chance do you have a video?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ll check with Blake. There are cameras all over that place, so probably. And, uh, I have some other news. It’s a long story, but I now have a second horse. His name is Henry. He’s a big dapple grey, about five years old.”

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“Heavens. How can you afford it? If you need help just let us know.”

“Thanks, mom. I’ll figure it out. You know me. I always find a way. But I’d love you to come and see him once he’s settled. He’s a bit wired at the moment.”

“Of course we will. What a weekend you’re having.”

“I know! And I may have some more news soon. But I don’t want to jinx anything so it will have to wait.”

“How long?”

“Um, hopefully only until tomorrow.”

“I think I can manage that, and congratulations again. We’re so proud of you. All that hard work and dedication is starting to pay off.”

“Yes, mom, I really think it is. Now I must take a shower.”

“I’m sure. Speak to you later, love.”

“Bye mom. I love you.”

Ending the call, Heather let out a long, happy sigh.

She was sure Blake hadn’t invited her for dinner just to show her how well he could cook. She hoped and prayed she was right.

CHAPTER EIGHT

As Blake pulled the roasted chicken and vegetables out of the oven he broke into a broad smile. He'd bought the ingredients on an impulse a couple of days before. He was telling himself there was no such thing as a coincidence when Butch, his black German Shepherd, suddenly barked. A moment later the dog ran to the door, and as Blake opened it and followed him outside he saw Heather's truck rolling to a stop.

"I know, I know, I love you too," she said as the dog leapt all over her the moment she climbed out.

"Come in," Blake called, waving her over. "I hope you like roast chicken and vegetables."

"I absolutely love it, and I'm impressed."

"Why? It's not difficult."

"I'm hopeless in the kitchen," she admitted as they headed inside. "Isn't doing a roast a lot of work?"

"Not really, but I generally only make it when I'm havin' company."

"Wow, it smells delicious," she exclaimed as they entered. "Clearly Butch thinks so too."

The big dog had trotted over to the stove and was panting up at the roasting dish.

"He'd eat the whole thing if he could," Blake said, moving to the counter to open a bottle of Chardonnay.

“Wine? I’ve only ever seen you with a beer bottle in your hand.”

“Hey, I’m not a total caveman.”

“Too bad,” she quipped.

It was a veiled invitation.

He didn’t need a second one.

Quickly closing the space between them he grabbed her around the waist and jerked her against his body.

“Too bad?” he repeated. “Do you want me to drag you into my bedroom by the hair?”

“Maybe not by the hair...”

It was all he needed to hear.

Sweeping her up, he strode through the door, carried her down the hall and tossed her on his king-sized bed.

* * *

It had happened so fast she could scarcely believe it, but she was thrilled. In seconds he deftly removed her clothes and hastily stripped, but when he slid his belt from his jeans, she watched, captivated, as he held it in his hands and climbed on top of her. Having no idea what was about to happen she held her breath. Seconds later, he swiftly wrapped it around her wrists and moved her arms above her head, evoking a flood of moisture between her legs.

He was fulfilling one of her long-held fantasies.

“Keep them there,” he growled, lowering his naked weight on top of her body.

Before she could respond his lips were on hers consuming her mouth in a crushing kiss. She longed to move her arms around his neck, but his command echoed through her head. All she could do was squirm beneath him.

“Is there something you want?” he murmured, breaking the kiss and staring down at her.

“You, I want you,” she stammered breathlessly.

“Try again,” he grunted, raising his hips and pushing his hand against her sex.

“Damn, girl, you’re so wet.”

As she moaned and wriggled in response, he shoved a finger inside her passage, eliciting a loud cry.

“I’ll ask again,” he muttered softly, moving his lips to her ear. “Is there something you want?”

Though his hot breath sent goosebumps popping across her skin, and his thrusting finger made it virtually impossible to speak, she somehow managed to sputter her reply.

“Your c-cock.”

“What about it?”

“Ooh, p-please will you...”

“Will I what?” he demanded. “Say it.”

“F-fuck...m-me...p-please...?”

She expected him to immediately push inside her, but stretching past her, he opened his nightstand drawer then straightened up. With her eyes half-lidded, she stared at his muscled physique seeming to glow in the dim light. As she watched him sheath his hardness, she realized she had never wanted a man as badly as she wanted him.

“Please?” she whispered, raising her eyes. “I need you inside me.”

* * *

Though her urgent plea fueled his fever, her puckered nipples begged for attention. Wrapping his hands around her breasts, he lowered his mouth to the first cherry tip and hungrily drew it into his mouth. But listening to her soulful moans stoked his already urgent hunger.

He wanted to possess her.

After feasting on its twin, he slid his arm between their bodies, took hold of his member and placed it against her entrance. As he slowly pushed forward he heard a gasp, then a grateful groan. Relishing the feel of her tight warmth he began thrusting with slow, strong strokes, continuing for long minutes. Finally pausing and staying buried inside her, he reached over her head and removed the belt from her wrists.

“Wrap your arms around me,” he ordered gruffly as he quickened his pace.

He began to pump, often changing his speed and the intensity of his strokes, evoking groans and gasps. When he sensed she was drawing close to her climax, he slowly pulled out, flipped her over, grabbed her hips and pulled them into his pelvis.

“You have a great ass,” he grunted, landed a hot slap. “One that needs to be spanked.”

“Oh, my God.”

Though she’d breathed the words into the pillow he’d heard them.

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“What? Tell me!”

“I’ve always dreamed of something like this.”

With a sudden surge of energy flowing through his loins, he smacked her opposite cheek.

“Ask for more.”

“Ohh, please, Blake will you spank me?”

With excitement surging through his loins he delivered his flattened palm from cheek to cheek, continuing until she was bleating and wriggling and her skin was hot pink.

“What do you say?” he demanded.

“I, uh, I’m not sure.”

“Thank me.”

“Oh, yes, yes, sorry, thank you, Sir.”

He hadn’t asked for theSir, and it told him she’d explored the dark, sultry world of Dominance and submission. The world he’d embraced for many years. Overjoyed, he began pumping with vigor.

“You know you have to ask before you’re allowed to come.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Her reply heightened the excitement already coursing through him, and he knew it wouldn't be long before his orgasm would be threatening. Guided by her cries, he quickened his pace, but feeling his moment looming he thought he'd have to slow down.

“Please, Sir, may I come.”

“Yes,” he growled urgently, relieved she had reached her moment just as he had. “Give it to me now.”

Gazing at her reddened cheeks and listening to her wails of pleasure, he surrendered to the sparkling climax shuddering through his body.

CHAPTER NINE

After snuggling together in the post-orgasmic bliss, they shared a quick shower then headed into the kitchen. Heather had never been happier and she could see a sexy twinkle in Blake's eyes. But as they devoured the delicious dinner the conversation centered around Henry.

“I'd like him to just hang out in a paddock for a couple of days and enjoy his new environment,” Blake said thoughtfully. “He needs to know he's among friends and you and I should be the only ones to handle him, at least for the moment.”

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Heather agreed. “But there's something else. He's been clipped, and with the weather changing he'll need a blanket. Apollo's won't fit.”

“I'm not sure I have anything his size either, but I'll order a couple. They deliver so

fast now, and bein' fall there are sales everywhere.”

“Okay, but maybe I should run into town and find something anyway. I don't want him to be cold.”

“The tack store will be closin' any time now. When we pick him up we can ask Buck if he has one we can borrow. But Heather, I'd like us to be in this together. I want to pay for this stuff,” he added, lowering his voice. “I know you don't have —”

“I can manage.”

“Let me finish.”

“Sorry.”

“I'm sure you'd figure it out,” he said, reaching for her hand, “but Henry is a fabulous mover, and with the right trainin' he could be very successful. I want to work with both of you with an eye to the show ring.”

“I'm not sure I understand.”

“This place is doin' okay, but it could do a whole lot better. If Henry does as well as I believe he can it would put Three Oaks Ranch on the map. The other guys here in Smoky Hill have been around a while and they've built up their barns. I've only been here a couple of years.”

“Oh, I see what you mean.”

“If I take care of the financial side of things and the trainin’, it would take that burden off you, and let’s be honest. We both know you don’t make a fortune bein’ a waitress at the Moonshine Campground.”

“This is true,” she muttered with a sigh.

“But ridin’ Henry won’t be like ridin’ Apollo. It will take hard work, and I’ll be teachin’ you almost every day. Are you up for it?”

“Of course, but do you think I’m good enough?”

“I wouldn’t be suggestin’ this if I didn’t. Did you forget you won today?”

“That was—”

“It’s both of you! Apollo is both calm and brilliant because of you!” he retorted sternly. “Do you think if Courtney was his owner he’d be the way he is? Of course not. I swear I’ll put you over my knee and spank that into you if I have to.”

But rather than becoming defensive or showing any concern about his threat, she threw back her head and laughed out loud.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, unable to stop himself from grinning.

“It’s just...when you get intense about something,” she began, talking between

giggles, “you raise your right eyebrow and it reminds me of Dr. Evil from the Austin Powers movie. All you need to do is put your little finger next to your lips and—”

“Are you sayin’ I look like Dr. Evil?”

“No, no, sorry,” she exclaimed, laughing again. “I couldn’t resist adding that. But you do raise your eyebrow.”

“I’m seein’ a side to you I never knew existed.”

“Is that a problem?”

“I suppose time will tell,” he replied with a chuckle. “Now gettin’ back to Henry. I want to get a hair mineral analysis done right away.”

“Ooh, yes, what a good idea. When I first got Apollo he had terrible hives. I did that and it was amazing. I was able to get him back in balance and he hasn’t had them since.”

“Yep, it can be an eye opener. I’ll also ask Doc Clayton to draw some blood and run a general panel. Until we know Henry’s levels we should put him on soaked grass hay for a few days. That alone should calm him down. I bet Courtney’s had him on a high protein diet.”

“Actually,” she murmured, leaning over the table and fixing him with a steady gaze, “after what just happened I might need to be on a high protein diet to keep up with you.”

“You just might,” he quipped with a wink. “But we should get back to the show grounds before it gets too late.”

“Apollo will be so happy to see me.”

“Because he knows you travel with treats,” Blake said knowingly as he began clearing the table.

“No! Because we’re a team!”

”Well, yes, this is true, and you proved that today. I’ll never forget the look on your face when they announced you as the winner.”

“And I’ll never forget that feeling. Thank you for pushing me. I’m so grateful, and thank you for the wonderful dinner. You have so many talents.”

“Darlin’, you have no idea.”

* * *

A short time later they climbed into his truck and Butch jumped in behind them. Though he moved to the back seat he quickly turned around and put his front paws on the center console.

“You’re such a great dog,” Heather remarked, giving him a hug. “Don’t you need his leash?”

“I have an extra one in the glove box, but it’s late. I doubt there’ll be anyone there except Buck.”

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When they arrived Blake's assessment proved correct. The show grounds were deserted except for the security guards. As they moved down the barn aisle Heather called Apollo's name, and as she knew he would, he popped his head over the stall door and whinnied. As if wanting to know what was going on, Henry peered out as well. While she gave him a treat, Blake spotted Buck at the far end of the aisle and hurried off to ask him about a blanket.

"Sure, I have plenty," Buck replied. "I'm guessin' he's an eighty, maybe even an eighty-two."

"Thanks, Buck," Blake said gratefully, "and yeah, that's what I'm thinkin'."

"They're in a storage locker. Wait for me here and I'll be right back."

As he walked away Blake looked back at Heather. She was reaching into her pocket for more treats, but when she raised her hand to offer one to Henry he jerked his head and jumped backwards.

"Damn," Blake muttered. "That poor horse is fried and Heather still has a lot to learn. This will be one helluva challenge."

CHAPTER TEN

"Good news!"

Turning around Blake saw Buck marching towards him carrying two plastic blanket bags.

“Great, thanks, Buck!”

“I remembered seein’ them in Courtney’s trunk when the sheriff searched it. They have Henry’s name written on them so I know they’re his. There’s a heavy and a light. I assume she’ll be back at some point to get her things and I’ll let her know you have them.”

“Did the sheriff give you any news about her?”

“Just that she’s facin’ a slew of charges, but her lawyer’s on his way so I guess we’ll have to wait and see where that goes. Regardless, she’s locked up for the moment.”

“What about her rig?”

“They didn’t find anything but he said he wants to do a more thorough search. We can house it for a week or so, then it will have to be moved.”

“If it ends up at an auction or put up for sale I’d be interested. Anyway, thanks a bunch. We’ll be here in the mornin’.”

“Maybe I’ll see you then. If not I’m sure we’ll bump into each other at some point.”

“I’m sure we will. Bye, Buck.

As Blake carried the blankets back to the stalls he was delighted to see Henry with his head over the door, but as Heather lifted her arm to stroke him the horse jerked backwards.

“Poor guy,” Blake remarked as he approached. “I guess I don’t have to tell you not to make any sudden movements around him for a while.”

“He’s so nervous. I’m sorry,” Heather said with a sigh. “I should have realized.

“It’s okay, hon, stuff happens. The good news is, these are his blankets.”

“Really? How did that happen?”

“Buck remembered seein’ them in her trunk.”

“That’s fantastic.”

“Yep. It’ll be cold tonight so I’m puttin’ the heavy one on him. I see you’ve already taken care of Apollo so as soon as I do this we can go.”

* * *

After laying the blanket over the stall door, Blake stepped inside, and talking softly as he approached the big grey, he slipped on the halter. As he moved Henry from side to side, it was only a moment or two before he lowered his head and snorted.

“Good boy, that didn’t take long,” Blake remarked. “But you already know me from this afternoon, don’t you fella?” Staring back at Blake, the horse began licking his lips. “We’ll get along just fine,” Blake continued, reaching across and picking up the blanket. “There you go, big fella,” he murmured, placing the cover over the horse’s back and removing his halter. “You have a good night, and tomorrow you’ll be taken to your new home.” But as Blake moved to the door, Henry took a step towards him and lowered his head. “You’re one smart horse,” Blake said with a smile. “You and Heather will be great together.”

“He’s already relating to you,” Heather remarked as Blake stepped into the barn aisle. “It’s amazing. I can see it in his eyes.”

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“It doesn’t take much, but then again I rescued him this afternoon. That’s how he sees it.”

“He’s right, you did. Can I have a hug?”

“Any time,” Blake replied, wrapping his arms around her. “But we should get goin’. It’s already gettin’ cold. Butch! Come on, boy. Time to leave.”

But the dog was fixated on Henry’s other blanket sitting on top of Heather’s trunk.

“That’s weird,” she remarked. “Come on, Butch, come with us. Do you want a treat?”

Butch barked, then trotted over to her.

“Bribery and corruption,” Blake said with a chuckle as Heather gave him a horse biscuit.

“It works every time, although once an animal gets your number they can be very manipulative.”

“This is true,” Blake agreed, taking her hand and moving down the aisle.

But as they stepped outside she was suddenly engulfed by a wave of emotion.

“Are you okay?” Blake asked as she sniffled.

“Yes, it’s just the cold air. It makes my nose run sometimes.”

Though she didn't want to lie to him she had no choice.

How could she admit she'd fallen in love with him.

Totally and hopelessly.

She knew he liked her but there were no guarantees.

He was a hunky cowboy with several very attractive clients.

And she was scared to death.

* * *

Though it was a short drive back to the ranch Blake turned on the heater. The sun was disappearing behind Smoky Hill and the air seemed to be growing colder with every passing minute. Rolling down the driveway and pulling to a stop, he glanced across at Heather and felt his heart swell. He wanted to wrap her into his arms and never let her go.

"What is it?" she asked, staring back at him.

"I was just wonderin' if you'd like to come in for a while."

"Don't we have to check on the horses?"

"Doug's here so we don't have to worry about that," he remarked, seeing his foreman's SUV parked next to the barn. "I'll give him a hand finishin' up. It shouldn't take long."

"Normally I'd love to join you, but I'm wiped out. I think I need an early night."

“You’re right, it’s been a pretty crazy day. Besides, I probably wouldn’t let you leave,” he added, lowering his voice and shooting her a wink. But as they stepped outside a frown crossed his brow. The icy air felt more like early winter than fall. “Damn, it’s cold,” he muttered. “I’m glad we put that heavy blanket on Henry. Text me when you arrive home so I know you got there safe,” he continued, opening her truck door and watching her climb behind the wheel.

“I will. Thanks for everything.”

Stepping back, he stared after her as she drove away and took in a cold, heavy breath.

He had wanted her to stay.

And never leave.

He was in love with her.

All he could do was pray she'd one day love him back.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Locked in a cell at the sheriff's station, Courtney McCallum was having a very hard time controlling her temper. Though she knew yelling and throwing things would have no affect on the sheriff or his officers, the fury rising up inside her was about to explode. But as she heard the door to the cell block being unlocked, she felt her seductive side coming to life.

"Miss McCallum, your lawyer has arrived. A man by the name of Joe Meyer," an attractive deputy declared, stopping at her cell. "Please stand up and turn around. I have to handcuff you."

"You can cuff me any time. What's your name?"

"Deputy Cartwright."

"It's nice to meet you, Deputy Cartwright. You can call me Courtney," she continued, executing a perfect twirl on her toes before stopping with her back to him. "I love a man in uniform."

She felt the cuffs being placed around her wrists, but he didn't say anything. Feeling rejected, her temper suddenly flared and she wanted to spin around and whack him on the side of the head.

“Are you always this unfriendly?” she demanded as he guided her down the short hall and through the door.

“Mr. Meyer is in here,” he replied curtly, ushering her into a small room.

Stepping inside she found her lawyer standing behind a table with only two chairs, one on each side.

“Thank you, deputy,” the lawyer said politely. “Is it possible to take those cuffs off her while we talk?”

“I’ll be right outside the door if you need anything,” the young man replied, quickly removing them.

“Okay, Courtney, what the hell were you thinking taking drugs to a horse show?” Joe asked sternly. “Never mind, I already know the answer. You got off on the risk and stood to make a bunch of money. Well I hope you’re happy. You’re screwed.”

“I’m never screwed. I’ve been in worse situations than this.”

“Yeah, I know, and I’ve been there for every one of them. But I don’t know how I’ll be able to keep you out of prison his time.”

“Are you out of your mind? I’m not going to prison. Just negotiate a big fine.”

“First, I assume you stopped taking your medication.”

“That stuff just messes with my head. I can’t think straight.”

“It’s the other way around. You can’t think straight when you’re off it. I’ve brought you a fresh supply. You’ll be watched as you take your daily dose to make sure you

do.”

“Fuck. This is such bullshit.”

“Courtney, we wouldn’t be here if—”

“Just stick to the legal crap. I don’t need any of your stupid lectures, but there’s something I need you to do for me. I sold King Henry to a girl called Heather Hunt. Her trainer is a guy named Blake Coleman.”

“And...?”

“His place is at the base of Smoky Hill and it’s called Three Oaks Ranch. There are three big oaks in the middle of one of the larger paddocks, you can’t miss it. I need to know where Heather Hunt lives. You might have to wait on the road and follow her home.”

“Hold on, Courtney. What’s this about?”

“Just do it. Now get me out of here.”

* * *

Though Joe made an excellent living working for Courtney he often wondered if it was worth it. But whenever he was about to walk away he’d suffer pangs of guilt and couldn’t abandon her.

And he was profoundly in love.

He'd known her since their childhood. She'd always been difficult and always in trouble, and he was always there to help. As time passed he pursued a law degree, and she'd grown into an exceptionally beautiful young woman sought after by modeling agencies. Much to his dismay they'd lost touch. When she'd called out of the blue asking him to negotiate a prenuptial agreement, he'd been both disappointed and thrilled.

He'd often fantasized they'd one day be together and now she was getting married. But there was comfort in the fact that she'd reached out to him and not someone else.

The meeting had been bittersweet.

She'd looked stunning.

He'd wanted to throw himself at her feet and beg her to leave the man she'd agreed to marry and be with him. In the days, weeks and months that followed, his love for her continued to grow.

He likened it to a disease for which there was no cure.

But she'd put him on retainer to represent her in anything and everything crossing her path.

Her fiancé was twelve years older and extremely wealthy.

The agreement became effective after two years.

She filed for divorce twenty six months later.

Though he was delighted she was single again, her behavior became erratic.

As the weeks passed he'd stood silently through her violent fits of rage, and held her when she'd sobbed. After finally convincing her to see a therapist his fears were realized. He couldn't comprehend the complicated diagnosis, but she had serious mental health issues, and he became her legal guardian.

Though they lived together they had separate bedrooms, but there were nights she would crawl between his sheets and take him to paradise. He was optimistic about their lives and future until one afternoon a new problem came into their lives.

Courtney decided cocaine helped her more than the prescription drugs. Try as he might, she refused to listen. Then to his horror he discovered she was dealing. When she announced she'd met a client at a barn and would be taking riding lessons, he thought being around horses might help her. But her only interest was supplying those in the equestrian community with the adult candy of their choice.

She entered shows, but only as a cover, and when a client couldn't pay, she'd take their horse and sell it—which was how she'd ended up with King Henry and was happy to move him on.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The following morning when Heather arrived at the ranch she found Blake hooking up his horse trailer. Parking nearby, she climbed from her truck and walked across to join him.

“I decided we should take this one. It’s wider,” he declared before she could ask.

“Ah, of course. We don’t know how Henry is to load and the roomier the better.”

“Yep. There, all set. The hay’s in the front and we’re ready to leave, but there’s something I need to do before we hit the road.”

Stepping closer to her, he cupped her chin sending a flurry of butterflies bursting to life in her stomach. As he lightly pressed his lips on hers, she closed her eyes and fervently kissed him back. Suddenly his arms were around her holding her tightly.

“You make me crazy,” he muttered, moving his mouth to her ear, then pulling back he stared down to her. “Why did I wait so long?”

“I was wondering about that,” she quipped with a grin. “I guess things happen when they’re supposed to.”

“Yep, I guess so. Now let’s get Henry. The poor guy needs to hang out in a field and relax. Into the truck, Butch.”

When they reached the show grounds they found the parking area empty of trailers except for Courtney’s rig. Buck appeared and waved them over, allowing them to park next to the barn. After opening the back of the trailer and lowering the ramp, they walked down the aisle with Butch leading the way. When Heather brought Apollo out of his stall, Henry poked his head over the stall door and whinnied.

“Don’t worry, big boy,” Blake said as he walked in and slipped the halter on. “You’re comin’ with us.”

Henry followed Apollo down the aisle without incident, and when Heather led him into the trailer, Blake wasn’t surprised when Henry loaded without any issues.

“Leaving them together overnight worked,” Heather remarked happily as Blake closed the doors.

“Yep, sometimes things can be that simple. When we get back we’ll put them next to each other in the two smaller paddocks. They’re closest to the barn and house.”

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The drive back was also uneventful, but when Blake unloaded Henry from the trailer the big grey snorted loudly and started prancing. As they walked the short distance to the pastures, he continued to dance and toss his head, and once again Heather was amazed by Blake's skill. He barely reacted, except to occasionally stop and back the horse up, or turn him in a circle.

They finally reached the paddocks, and after releasing Apollo she hurried to close the gate behind Blake and Henry. Standing outside, she watched Blake slowly remove Henry's halter. To her surprise the horse didn't race away, and Blake stayed beside him, stroking his neck and talking to him. When Blake turned and started towards the gate, Henry hesitated, then followed him.

"You never cease to amaze me," Heather said, gazing up at Blake as he joined her. "You really are a horse whisperer."

"I just speak their language, and you do too."

"Not like that."

"You will. It's just experience, and like I said yesterday, he's a smart horse. He's already figured out he can trust me. He'll start looking to me for leadership now, and to you as well. But for the moment I just want that brain of his to chill."

"Blake, look," she exclaimed, glancing past him and breaking into a smile. "He's rolling."

"Odds are he'll get up and take off. Yep, there he goes."

The moment Henry was on his feet he began galloping around the paddock, then bucked several times before stopping and letting out a loud whinny.

“He’s having a wonderful time,” Heather murmured. “I wonder how long it’s been since he was in an open space like this.”

“Hard to say, but he sure is one happy horse now.. I’m glad you saved him, darlin’,” Blake added, placing his arm around her shoulders. “If you hadn’t I probably would have.”

“Really?”

“Yep. That’s one of the many things we have in common. We care.”

As he finished speaking they heard the sound of an approaching vehicle. Turning around they saw it was Becky Turner, the first of his morning clients.

“I guess you’re off to work,” Heather remarked.

“Yep, what about you?”

“I’m doing lunch and service all week, but I don’t have to get there until eleven. Could you help me unload my trunk? It’s still in the back of my truck. I’ll get all my stuff sorted out before I leave.”

“Sure, but I’ll grab Doug. It’s heavy.”

“He’s one helluva mover! Where did you find him?” Becky asked as she joined them.

“I found him at the show,” Heather exclaimed, seeing the envy in the woman’s eyes.

“He’s mine now.”

“Damn, he must have cost a penny or two.”

“It was kind of a fire sale. I just got lucky.”

“Did you ride him?”

“Not yet.”

“Good luck with that,” Becky remarked with a grin. “I’ll see you in the arena, Blake.”

“Yep, see you there.”

“Why did she have to say that?” Heather whispered as the woman strode off.

“She’s jealous.”

“But that doesn’t make it any less true. She’s right. Look at him.”

“This is a discussion for another time. I’m off to fetch Doug and move your trunk. Why don’t you visit with Apollo? Once Henry starts to settle down he’ll probably go to the fence to be with his new buddy. The three of you will have a chance to interact for a while.”

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“I already planned to do just that.”

“See? You know what you’re doin’. You and Henry will be just fine,” he said confidently, then pecking her on the cheek, he turned and headed towards the barn.

He’d sounded so sure of himself, and as she watched him walk away she almost believed him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Courtney and Joe had been staying at the Moonshine Campground along with many other competitors, but the show was over and most of the visitors had left. Walking into the dining room at lunchtime he was able to sit at a window table with a view of the distant mountain peaks. But the moment was bittersweet. Courtney was still locked up. Her hearing at the Fairview Courthouse had been scheduled for the following morning and he wasn’t sure he’d be able to convince the judge to grant bail. Sheriff Cooper had told him the small community was determined to keep the scourge of drugs at bay, and selling them was considered a heinous crime.

“Would you like some coffee?”

The waitress hadn’t served him before, but he’d noticed her on previous occasions. She was one of the prettiest servers in the dining room.

“Yes, thanks, Heather,” he said, glancing at her name badge, but as he spoke a sudden thought flashed through his mind. Was it possible she was the same Heather who bought Henry?

“This is such a beautiful place,” he began, trying to keep his voice measured. “I’m with a friend who was at the three day horse show over the weekend. Fortunately she has some business in Fairview so I’ll be here a little while longer. Did you go? To the show I mean.”

“I did, I competed.”

“Wow, that must have been exciting.”

“It was. I won my first trophy,” she said proudly. “I still can’t believe it.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you. So...do you know what you’d like to order?”

“Yes, the Spanish Omelette. I’ve tried your pancakes the first day, then eggs with sausages yesterday, so today I’m going for the omelette.”

“It’s one of my favorites. I’ll get this into the kitchen right away.”

“Could I have an order of tortillas while I wait?” he asked, hoping for a second opportunity to talk to her.

“Of course.”

As she walked away he racked his brains. There had to be a way to find out if she was the same Heather who’d bought King Henry. A few minutes later, as she returned carrying a covered plate, he had a sudden thought.

“Here you are,” she said with a smile, placing it in front of him. “There are small containers of salsa and butter on the side.”

“Perfect, thanks. So, Heather, I have a niece looking for a ranch in this area to take some lessons. Is there a place around here you could recommend? By chance do you have a trainer?”

“I do and he’s terrific. His name is Blake Coleman and his barn is called Three Oaks Ranch. It’s only about a mile or so from here. When you leave turn right, you can’t miss it.”

“Great. I’ll definitely check it out.”

“Tell him Heather from the Moonshine Campground sent you.”

“Will do.”

“I’ll be back shortly with your omelette.”

Though he wanted to laugh out loud in triumph he contained himself. Not only did he now know she was the same Heather who had bought King Henry, he didn’t have to hunt for the ranch. Later that day he’d find somewhere to park out of sight and follow her home. Courtney would have the address in the morning.

* * *

When Heather finished her shift she changed into her barn clothes and drove straight back to Three Oaks Ranch. As she rolled down the driveway she could see Apollo and Henry calmly grazing.

Before she’d left for work she’d followed Blake’s advice and stayed in Apollo’s paddock. Whenever Henry would come to the fence Apollo would amble over to visit. She’d watch while they snorted and communicated in horse-speak, then join the interaction. Apollo stayed close to her, and as she’d left she’d wondered if she’d ever

find that special connection with Henry.

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Now parking near the barn, she climbed from her truck and hurried across to visit them. A rail separated their pastures, and she stopped in front of it so she could say hello to both of them as they put their heads over the fence.

“Hey, you two,” she said as she fed them a treat. “Henry you look so calm.”

“He is!”

Turning around she found Blake marching towards her.

“Tell me everything!” she said excitedly. “How have they been?”

“Great. After Henry kicked up his heels for a few minutes he introduced himself to the horses in the bigger paddock next to his. There was some squealin’...normal horse stuff, then Shadow came up and they became instant buddies.”

“That’s wonderful. What about you?”

“Lesson after lesson as usual. Are you plannin’ to ride?”

“I want to take Apollo up Smoky Hill. I think it would be good for his brain after being at that show. The only question is, will Henry freak out?”

“He and Shadow spent quite a bit of time together. Take Apollo out and let’s see what happens.”

“Will do,” she replied, lifting his halter from the hook and entering the pasture.

Sliding it over the horse's head, she began leading him out the gate. Though Henry began whinnying, he suddenly spun around and galloped across to Shadow who appeared to be waiting for him.

"Wow, that's fantastic, they really did connect," she exclaimed happily. "I was worried."

"I'm not surprised. Shadow's such an easy-goin' guy, and I'm sure Henry picked up his energy the minute they met. But would you like some company? My next lesson isn't for another hour and I need to exercise Big Ben."

"I would love that! By the way, where's Butch?"

"Funny you should ask," he replied as they started towards the barn. "I haven't had a chance to tell you. He's fixated on your trunk."

"My trunk? Why?"

"No idea. Did you finish sortin' through it earlier?"

"Actually, no, I'm only halfway done."

"Then I'd better clear it out for you. There might be a rat in there."

"No! Oh, my God! Please, be my guest."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As Heather and Blake made their way up the trail Butch trotted along beside them, sometimes disappearing into the trees only to suddenly reappear panting happily. Blake was on Big Ben, a stout roan he'd owned for many years, sitting on a saddle

pad with only a rope around the horse's neck.

"Isoooowish I could do that," Heather remarked dramatically.

"I assume you mean ridin' without a bit and bridle. You say that all the time and I'll give you the same response I always do. You can."

"What's wrong with me? I trust Apollo completely. Why can't I bring myself to try?"

"That's a good question. What do you think?"

"I suppose I'm not brave enough. But I've always been this way. When other kids in school were about to do something daring I'd leave."

"I have a suggestion. When we get back we can go into the round pen until my lesson arrives and I'll work with you on the lunge line. That way—"

"Yes!" she exclaimed, cutting him off. "Thank you. Why didn't I think of that sooner. I'm desperate to break through these fears."

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“You did at the show and look what happened! You won.”

“You’re right. I did.”

“Heather, when you face life’s challenges head on you may not always walk away the winner, but you’ll always walk away wiser.”

“Wow, that was profound, but I’m sure you’re right.”

“I’m always right,” he said with a chuckle. “Let’s follow the path to the clearing and see what Henry’s up to.”

“I was just about to suggest that.”

Turning off the trail and following a narrow track, they reached a small, flat, grassy area overlooking the ranch. It was a spot Blake often visited, and he kept a length of rope under a rock for a high-line. Climbing off and setting it up, he tethered the horses, then taking Heather’s hand he stepped to the edge of the clearing.

“Progress,” he remarked. “Henry is grazin’ in the middle of his pasture.”

“He’s adapting so well.”

“I have a feelin’ he’s been cooped up in a stall. Bein’ here must be heaven for him,” Blake said, then lowering his voice and staring down at her, he added, “Kind of like I feel right now.” Before she could blink his arms were around her pulling her against him. “I want you so bad,” he whispered, his breath hot in her ear sending delicious

ripples through her body.

“Then take me.”

* * *

She'd moaned the words and he didn't need a second invitation. Hastily pulling off his T-shirt and laying it on the grass, he lifted hers over her head, placed it next to his, then took her hand and pulled her down with him.

“Have you ever made love outside?” he murmured, kneeling over her.

“No...it feels a bit weird, but I love it.”

Her barely whispered words made him smile.

“Consider this a sneak peek,” he said as he pulled off her boots, then shimmied her jeans and panties down her legs.

“What do you mean?”

“I'll explain later.”

Hastily removing the rest of his clothes, he stretched out beside her and lowered his lips to her nipples. As she raised her chest in response, he held her breasts and lustily sucked, evoking loud groans. Though his hardness was begging for attention, he moved a hand between her legs and began rubbing her clit. Guided by her gasps and cries he continued the tantalizing attention until she suddenly caught her breath.

“No! Don't stop,” she begged as he moved his hand to her thigh and raised his head.

“Did you forget you have to ask?”

“Huh? Oooh, Please, may I come, Sir?”

“Take my cock and stroke it.”

“Ooh, yes, Sir,” she mumbled, reaching out and wrapping her fingers around him.

With her touch sending an unexpected quiver of intense pleasure through his loins, he returned his fingers to her sex and fervently agitated the sensitive nub.

“Sir...p-please c-can...?”

But before she could finish she let out a shriek and her grip tightened around his stiffened rod. The sight of her writhing body and the sudden pressure unexpectedly sent him over the edge. With the sound of her pleasure echoing around him, he surrendered to the intense climax.

* * *

Heather’s body was still tingling when she opened her eyes and found Blake kneeling over her wiping himself with his T-shirt. With his naked torso revealing his muscled arms and chest, she thought he looked like a Cowboy God.

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“Hey,” he murmured, dropping it on the ground as he laid next to her. “How are you?”

“I have no idea,” she managed, curling against him. “Weak, feeling like I need to sleep for hours, sooo glad to be alive, and I never want this moment to end. What about you?”

“The same.”

His response made her smile.

“I can’t imagine you ever feeling weak.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have admitted that, but regardless, we need to leave.”

“I know, you have a lesson.”

“Yep,” he muttered, shifting his gaze down to the ranch. “Huh, that’s weird.”

“What?”

“Sit up and take a look. There’s a car parked beside the thicket across the street.”

“Parked? But you can’t stop on that road.”

“I know, that’s why it’s weird,” he said with a frown. “And I think I see someone behind the wheel.”

“I wonder if they’ve broken down.”

“The hood’s not up. Damn, I wish I had my binoculars,. That’s the only downside to ridin’ bareback. No saddle bags to carry stuff. If they’re still there when we get back I’ll go over and see if everything’s okay.”

“Blake, what did you mean when you said, consider this a sneak peek?”

“You’ll find out, but it’s time for us to go,” he declared, picking up her clothes and handing them to her.

* * *

A few minutes later, with the soiled T-shirt folded lengthwise and hanging over Big Ben’s withers, they were about to mount up when Heather lifted out her phone.

“I never want to forget this moment,” she exclaimed, standing back and raising it in the air. “Stand next to Ben. Yes,perfect. I have a feeling this will be one of my favorite photos of all time!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Though Three Oaks Ranch had been easy to find, Joe didn’t know what type of car Heather would be driving or what time she might be leaving. But he had found the perfect place to park. A small thicket of trees sat a few yards down from the ranch on the opposite side of the road. He’d been there almost half-an-hour and was trying to think of an easier way to find Heather’s address when his cell phone rang. Looking at the screen his heart skipped. It was the Sheriff’s office. Praying Courtney wasn’t causing any problems he quickly accepted the call.

“Hello, this is Joe Meyer.”

“Mr. Meyer, Sheriff Cooper here. I’m afraid I have some unfortunate news. Your client has been taken to the hospital in Fairview.”

“Why, what happened?” Joe asked, trying not to panic.

“She complained about stomach pains so we called the local doctor, but before he arrived she collapsed and we sent for an ambulance. There was nothing about any medical conditions or allergies on her intake form. Do you know if she—?”

“No, I’m not aware of anything,” Joe exclaimed, cutting him off as he started up his car. “We’ve been working together for a few years and she hasn’t mentioned anything. Do you have the address of the hospital? I’ll plug it into my navigator.”

As the sheriff relayed the information, Joe took a deep breath and tried to calm himself down.

“It says it’s fifteen minutes away. Will I see you there?”

“I didn’t accompany the ambulance, but the emergency room doctor will contact me as soon as he has any information. His name is Doctor Gabe Atwater. Ask for him when you arrive.”

“Will do, thanks, Sheriff.”

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“You’re welcome, and sorry to be the bearer of bad news.”

“Hopefully it’s nothing serious. I’ll speak to you later.”

In spite of his deep concern Joe did his best to drive within the speed limit. The last thing he wanted was a deputy pulling him over. But as he saw a sign that read, Lake View Point, though he didn’t know why, he had an unexpected urge to follow it.

Swerving off the road he drove down a short gravel lane and came to an abrupt stop in front of a rocky shoreline. The majestic mountains he’d seen through the window at the Moonshine restaurant loomed over a pristine lake surrounded by towering pine trees. In awe of the sight, he climbed from his car and stepped closer to the water’s edge.

“I must bring Courtney here,” he muttered, but just as the words left his lips a dark cloud crossed the sun.

He was suddenly bathed in a swathe of shadowy darkness, and an unfamiliar prickling sensation sent goosebumps popping across his skin. Though he told himself it was because the air had turned chilly, he couldn’t deny a disturbing, almost eerie feeling. Glancing around, he noticed a large, oddly shaped rock boasting an embedded plaque. Though he was intrigued, he fell victim to a third cold shudder and hurried back to his car. But as he settled behind the wheel he had a sudden realization. A hospital bed and the attention of a caring medical staff was far more preferable to a cell with a hard mattress pad and demanding deputies.

“Of course!” he exclaimed, throwing up his arms. “She’s faking it.”

Convinced his theory was right and feeling greatly relieved, he slowly turned around and made his way back to the road. But the plaque continued to dance through his head, and the voice in his head said he should have made the effort to read it.

* * *

When Blake and Heather returned to the barn, Butch immediately raced down the aisle, sat in front of Heather's trunk and barked.

"He's doin' it again," Blake declared, climbing off and removing the bareback pad. "Heather, would you put Big Ben and Apollo in the cross ties while I see what's makin' Butch behave that way?"

"Yes, sure."

"Okay, Butch, let's see what's goin' on," he exclaimed, marching across the aisle.

As he lifted the lid, Butch eagerly stared inside while Blake began carefully removing the contents. But when he lifted out the sheet Buck had given Heather at the show for Henry, the dog immediately barked again.

"Is this what's been gettin' your attention?" Blake muttered. "But why...ooh...what a smart dog you are."

"What is it?" Heather asked, hurrying across to join them.

"Dammit, I should've realized. I have a buddy who trains drug sniffin' dogs. He knew I'd lost my golden and when Butch didn't make the grade he called and wanted to know if I'd take him. What a good boy," Blake exclaimed, making a fuss of the happy shepherd.

“But why would he pick up a scent from Henry’s blanket.”

“It must have come into contact with some of Courtney’s—hold on—this band around the bottom, it’s kind of thick. Damn. I think there’s something in there. I’m callin’ Sheriff Cooper.”

“And I think that’s your lesson coming down the drive,” Heather exclaimed, glancing up as she heard the sound of the approaching vehicle. “It’s Katy, right?”

“Yep.”

“So you won’t have enough time to work with Apollo and me in the round pen.”

“Doesn’t look like it. Time gets away from us sometimes. Sorry, darlin’, but we’ll do it soon, and that’s a promise.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

While Blake taught his lesson, Heather returned to the paddock with Apollo. She was talking to Henry over the fence when she noticed Sheriff Cooper’s car rolling into the ranch. Calling to Butch, she hurried out to meet him.

“Hey, Heather,” the sheriff said, pulling on gloves as he moved around to his trunk and lifted out a large plastic bag.

“Hello, Sheriff.”

As they walked to the barn she explained how the brilliant dog had alerted to the blanket.

“I showed him the heavy one as well, but he didn’t do anything.”

“These canines are such a blessin’,” the sheriff declared, smiling down at him. “Once they learn something they never forget it, unlike humans, and they sure don’t lie the way humans do either.”

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“I’m always saying how I love dogs and horses, but I lose my heart to any animal that crosses my path. You must know about the wolf Brody and Annie King have.”

“Know about it? I sure do. I was on the scene when it saved the day.”

“I’ve heard the story. It was amazing. Anyway, there’s the blanket on top of my trunk. The tape, or ribbon whatever it is, running along the bottom is sort of bulky.”

“I’ll let you know what we find,” the sheriff exclaimed, picking it up and dropping it into the bag. “Good boy, Butch,”

The dog barked, then spun in a circle.

“He’s so proud of himself,” Heather said, leaning down and hugging him. “And he has every reason to be. By the way, what’s happening with Courtney?”

“She was taken to the hospital. We found her passed out on the floor, but I have a feelin’ she was fakin’ just to get away from that cell. We’ll know soon enough.”

*** * ***

Driving into the hospital parking lot, Joe found a spot near the Emergency Room entrance and strode through the doors. The area was smaller than he’d expected, and there were only a couple of people waiting. Compared to what he’d encountered in Dallas it was startling. Walking up to the nurse behind the reception counter, he introduced himself as Courtney McCallum’s lawyer.

“How is she? May I see her?”

“Take a seat please and I’ll check.”

But still anxious from the odd experience at Lake View Point he began pacing. A couple of minutes passed and he was about to check back when a middle-aged man wearing a white coat appeared through the swinging doors next to the counter.

“Mr. Meyer? I’m Dr. Atwater. I’m taking care of Miss McCallum. Please come through.”

“Thank you, Dr. Atwater. How is she?”

“Well, to be frank, I’m not sure,” he replied with a frown as he led Joe down a wide hallway. “Except for an elevated pulse rate—which could explain the fainting spell—I haven’t found anything wrong with her. But I’ve drawn some blood. When the results come back I’ll know more.”

While the doctor had been speaking Joe had spied a deputy seated outside a door at the end of the hall. Apparently Sheriff Cooper was taking no chances.

“She said she’s not on any medications,” the doctor continued. “Do you know if that’s correct?”

“She has a prescription for Codeine. When she has a migraine she’ll take that, but otherwise nothing I know of.”

“Do you know if she took any before her arrest? Depending on how much she ingested that could account for her symptoms. I did ask but she hasn’t been exactly forthcoming.”

“Sorry, she can be defensive sometimes. She did mention she wasn’t feeling great yesterday so it’s possible,” Joe lied. “Though I wouldn’t know how much.”

“Thank you. She’s through there,” the doctor declared, slowing his step as he neared the door beside the deputy. “If you have any questions just ask reception to page me.”

“Thank you, I will.”

The doctor walked away, but as Joe stepped towards the door the deputy abruptly rose to his feet and blocked him.

“Sorry, Sir, I have to search you before you can enter.”

“Ah, of course, I understand.”

To Joe’s relief the pat down was remarkably quick, and not sure what to expect he took a breath before he walked into the room. Staring across at the women he adored, he couldn’t remember a time when she’d looked so miserable.

“Hey, how are you?” he asked urgently, thinking she really was sick. But as he approached the bed she brightened up and grinned at him.

“About time,” she said softly, shooting him a wink. “What took you so long?”

“I was parked outside Three Oaks Ranch waiting for Heather to leave so I could follow her. I left as soon as Sheriff Cooper contacted me, but truth be told I did make a brief stop. I’ll tell you about that later. I assume you’re here because you needed to get out of that cell.”

“No shit, Sherlock. That place was a hell hole, and the food! Good grief.”

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“I spoke to your doctor and he said he can’t find anything wrong with you, so you’ll probably be transported back.”

“Oh, no, you’re getting me out of here.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“They found drugs in my trunk, remember? There was enough to get me on dealing and I’m not going through some endless court case. More importantly, you may not be able to get me bail. That’s a chance I’m not prepared to take.”

“You actually think you can break out of here and take off?”

“Hell, yeah,” she said with a wicked smile, then lowering her voice she muttered, “though I have a score to settle before I leave this crappy town.”

“I want nothing to do with any of this.”

“So you’re just going to abandon me?”

“Courtney, please, this is crazy talk.”

“You haven’t heard my plan yet.”

“Okay, go ahead,” he said with a sigh, knowing she’d badger him until he agreed to listen. “But that’s all I’m going to do. Hear you out. Nothing more.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When Blake finished his lesson two more followed in quick succession. By the time his busy afternoon came to an end the sun was sinking and there was a familiar chill in the air.

Heather had spent time with Apollo along the fence visiting with Henry, then returned to the barn and helped Doug prepare the dinner-time supplement buckets. He was on the quiet side, but was quick with a smile and nothing fazed him.

Now helping him bring the horses in from the paddocks, she watched him as he approached Henry. The horse pricked up his ears and snorted, as if saying, Who are you and what do you want?

“I know, I know, Blake told me all about you,” Doug said calmly, lifting a carrot from his pocket. “You don’t have to worry. We’re all friends here.”

As he slipped on the halter and led him across the pasture, Heather felt a wave of relief. Buying the big horse had been impetuous, but Blake hadn’t objected and he seemed sure she’d soon be riding him. Wondering how he could be so confident, she brought in the last two horses and checked her watch.

“Hey,” Blake said, marching into the barn aisle. “Henry has settled right in. Doug just told me he was absolutely fine to catch, and he’s been calm all day. I might even start workin’ with him tomorrow—and you too in the round pen with that rope around Apollo’s neck.”

“That would be great,” she replied excitedly.

“I need a sit down and a mug of coffee. Can you join me?”

“Shoot,” she muttered, glancing at her watch. “I’d like nothing better but I have to get home. I need to take a shower and head off to work.”

“How late do you stay?”

“We stop serving at ten o’clock so I generally leave about half-an-hour after that, maybe forty-five minutes. It depends on what the guests order and how long they stick around. Quite honestly I’m a bit tired. I wish I could just kick back tonight.”

As he unexpectedly brought her into his arms, she sank against him and closed her eyes.

“I never want to leave this,” she mumbled with a sigh.

“You mean, the barn?”

“No, I mean leaning against you. I swear I could go to sleep.”

“You know you don’t have to stay and help every day.”

“But I love it,” she protested, pulling back and staring up at him. “I’d much rather be here with you and the horses than puttering around my place. Although tomorrow I should probably drive into town and visit mom and dad,” she added with a frown. “They’re dying to see the trophy. Anyway, I have to leave or I’ll be late.”

“Come on, I’ll walk you to your truck.”

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“What do you think will happen with Courtney?” she asked as they started off.

“I know there are quite a few charges against her, though I don’t know all of them, but I have a feelin’ she’ll end up servin’ time. Dealin’ drugs here is a big deal, especially after what happened with Helen Rutherford and that bike-ridin’ thug out of Dallas.”

“That whole thing was terrible.”

“It sure was. Even though that guy was around Andy our paths never crossed, thank the Lord. Huh, I wonder if Courtney knew him. He was livin’ and dealin’ out of Dallas and I bet it’s a small world. Maybe I should mention it to the sheriff, though he’s bound to follow up on everything. But gettin’ back to Courtney. It’s possible her lawyer will find a way out. That’s what lawyers do, and she has money.”

“I’m so glad we got Henry away from her. But I worry about her other horses. She has that big trailer she must have more than one.”

“I’ve been thinkin’ about that too, but my old man used to say, do what you can, but remember you can’t save the world. He was right.”

“I guess,” she muttered as they reached her truck. “Blake, thanks for an amazing day.”

“Back at ya,” he quipped with a wink. “Drive safely, and do me favor. Text me when you get home from work.”

As he leaned down and softly kissed her she felt herself melting, but a second later he pulled back and opened the door. Wishing she could stay, she reluctantly climbed in behind the wheel.

* * *

Watching her slowly roll down the driveway, Blake took in a heavy breath. He didn't want her to leave. He wanted to sit across from her at the kitchen table, cuddle together in front of the fire and watch TV, then wander through the barn before bed and check on the horses.

He wanted her next to him as he slept.

And he wanted to wake up beside her.

His pondering was abruptly interrupted by something touching his hand. Glancing down he found Butch panting up at him expectantly.

“Where have you been?”

When the dog barked in response Blake laughed out loud, then lifting his eyes he saw Heather's truck turn onto the road.

“I guess that's it for now,” he muttered, but as he started to turn around a car appeared, seemingly from nowhere. As it drove past the gates he thought it looked familiar.

“Huh. that's weird,” he muttered, “but we need to go, Butch, I need some coffee.”

With his dog running ahead he began ambling back to his house—then abruptly paused his step.

The car resembled the one he'd seen under the tree when he was looking down from the grassy clearing. Closing his eyes he tried to recall the image.

The vehicle had been grey or silver, and a four-door sedan.

The car passing the gate had been the same.

A chill shuddered down his spine.

“What the hell?” he grunted as his eyes popped open, and snatching his phone from his pocket he called Heather

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Heather was a short distance from home when her cell phone buzzed. Looking down and seeing Blake's name she quickly accepted the call.

“Hey, what's up? Is everything okay?”

“Look in your rear view mirror. Is there a car behind you?”

“Um, yes. But I just turned into the drive and it's passing by. Why?”

“Was it silver?”

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“I think so, though there’s not a lot of light here. What’s this about?”

“I’m probably bein’ paranoid, but I’d feel better if you stayed with me tonight.”

“Why?”

“Darlin’, I was watchin’ you leave and it seemed to come outta nowhere and followed you. I think that was the car we saw parked under the tree just down from the ranch when we were on Smoky Hill.”

“Nooo...”

“I’ve got a bad feelin’ about this. It’s possible someone wanted to find out where you live.”

“But who, and why?” she exclaimed as she picked up her bag and climbed from the truck. “Damn, it’s cold,” she added, starting up the steps.

“I have no idea, and maybe I’m just bein’ paranoid, but can you come straight back here when you finish work?”

“Yes, absolutely. This is creeping me out, but hold on while I let myself in.”

Locking the door behind her, she quickly turned on the heat, then hurried to the window.

“I’m in my place and looking out at the road. I don’t see anything.”

“Good, but Heather, I just had a thought. Has there been anyone strange at the restaurant lately? Any men dinin’ alone?”

“Actually, yes, though I wouldn’t call him strange.”

“Do you remember his name?”

“No, but when I get there I’ll check the credit card record.”

“Please call me and let me know.”

“Okay, and Blake...?”

“Yeah darlin’?”

“Thanks for caring.”

“Hey, I do, a lot.”

“Me too,” she said softly.”

“Be careful and call me when you’re leavin’.”

“I will. Bye, Blake.”

As the call ended she thought back to the conversation she’d had with the man sitting at the window table. He’d talked about a friend who had been at the show. Was that friend Courtney?

Moving into the bathroom she found it too coincidental to ignore.

But what did it all mean?

* * *

Late that afternoon, Joe had been sitting in his car across from Three Oaks Ranch impatiently watching Heather through binoculars. She'd been in a paddock near the barn doing very little except standing next to one horse while petting another through a fence.

The time had dragged, and with every passing minute his anxiety had grown.

Finally, around sunset, she and a cowboy had started taking the horses into the barn. A short time later, when she'd walked up to her truck with another cowboy, Joe had a white knuckle grip on his steering wheel. With only an hour left before visiting hours ended at the hospital he was running out of time.

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But it had been worth the wait.

Now he knew where the girl lived, and he had just enough time to give Courtney the good news.

* * *

Staring at the clock, knowing visiting hours were about to end, Courtney was trying to control her growing agitation when Joe walked through the door.

“Thank God! Where the hell have you been?” she whispered, not wanting to draw the attention of the deputy in the hall.

“Sorry, I had to wait for that stupid girl to leave the ranch,” he said softly, standing at her bedside. “The good news is, she didn’t go anywhere. I mean, she didn’t make any stops on the way to her place or I would never have made it here in time. Anyway, it’s easy to find. The house is set back, and there’s a detached garage in front. She lives above it.”

“She lives above a garage? What a peasant,” Courtney muttered. “Are the stairs inside the garage or—”

“No, no, outside. She parked her truck in a carport then walked around it and up the steps from behind.”

“What about lights?”

“There’s one in the carport and one shining onto the staircase. They both went on automatically when she drove in.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Could you tell if the door leading into her place can be seen from the house?”

“Maybe, but it was pretty dark before those lights went on.”

“Perfect,” Courtney said with a satisfied sneer.

“I’m still not sure about—” Joe began, but a knock on the door cut him off.

“Excuse me, visiting hours are over,” a young nurse declared, stepping in with a glass of water and a tiny paper cup. “I’m afraid you’ll have to leave now.”

“I understand,” he replied cordially. “Courtney, you get your rest and I’ll be back tomorrow. Sorry I wasn’t able to get here sooner.”

“Hey, you got here and that’s what matters.”

As Joe kissed her on the cheek and left, Courtney had trouble suppressing a wide smile.

“How are you feeling?” the nurse asked, walking up and handing her the glass and the tiny cup holding two pills.

“Still a bit dizzy when I stand up, and my stomach doesn’t feel good. Not as painful as it was when I first got here, but something’s not right. When will the doctor have

my test results?”

“Probably tomorrow afternoon, but if the lab isn’t too busy he’ll get them in the morning.”

“It can’t be soon enough,” Courtney said, taking the glass and holding out her other hand for the pills. But popping them into her mouth, she held them under her tongue as she took a drink.

“I’ll be back to turn off the lights in a bit,” the nurse said. “Do you want any more magazines?”

“No, thanks. In fact, you can turn the lights out now. I’m really tired and I need to close my eyes.”

But the moment the nurse left Courtney spat out the pills, made her way to the bathroom and flushed them down the toilet.

“You’re all such morons,” she muttered, padding back to her bed. “This is so easy it’s laughable.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

As Heather drove to the Moonshine Campground she kept checking the rearview mirror. Grateful it was only a short distance and there were no headlights behind her, she pulled into the parking area, hurried into the restaurant and headed straight into the cashier’s office. It was easy to find the order for the Spanish Omelette, and she quickly called Blake.

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“Hey, darlin’,” he said warmly as he answered. “Are you at work?”

“Yes, and I wasn’t followed, thank goodness. I found the receipt. The man’s name is Joseph Meyer.”

“That doesn’t ring a bell.”

“I wonder if he’ll show up for dinner,” she said thoughtfully. “He is staying here.”

“Can you ask the manager not to seat him at your station?”

“I was already thinking about that. I wonder who he is.”

“It’s too late to call the sheriff now, but I will first thing in the mornin’. Maybe he can shed some light on this. Let me know when you’re leavin’.”

“Will do. Bye, Blake.”

“Bye, darlin’.”

Heather ended the call with a smile.

She loved how he called her darlin’.

It was hard to believe they were dating!

She’d had a crush on the hunky cowboy since the day they’d met, and while he’d

always been warm and kind, he'd kept a professional distance. But there were other cute girls at the barn, and she couldn't help but wonder why he'd chosen her.

"Heather?" The manager's voice snapped her from her thoughts. Glancing up she saw him standing in the door. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, hi Terry, yes, fine, but there's something I need to tell you."

As she quickly relayed the entire story, from buying Henry, Courtney's arrest, being followed, and the coincidental conversation with the guest seated at the window table, a frown creased his brow.

"That's why I'm here looking at this receipt," she finished. "Blake wanted to know his name, but he has no idea who he is. But if he comes in again...actually...I was going to say I don't want to serve him, but I've changed my mind."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yes, definitely," she replied. "I think it's time for me to be the one asking questions."

"Heather, I don't like the sound of this."

"Don't worry, I won't upset him, I'll be very...what's the word? Subtle. I'll be very subtle."

"I'm not worried about upsetting him, I'm worried about your safety. If he was the one who followed you—"

"That's what I'm hoping to find out. Well, not that exactly, but I'll get some information, and anything I learn might be helpful."

“Okay, but I’ll be keeping my eye on him—and you. If I see anything that concerns me I’ll step in.”

“Thanks, Terry. That’s reassuring,” she said, though she hoped he wouldn’t interfere. “Now I’d better get into the kitchen and check on the specials.”

* * *

When Joe left the hospital he had serious reservations about Courtney’s scheme to escape. While it was brilliant, he knew alltoo well even the best laid plans could fall short. Not to mention life was full of the unexpected. But once Courtney had an idea in her head there was no changing her mind. She wasn’t as stubborn as a mule, she was as stubborn as a team of them. But there was another reason he had to go along with her. If he refused she might not ever speak to him again.

The thought of losing her made his stomach churn.

By the time he’d reached his cabin he’d resigned himself to his fate. If they were caught he’d lose his law license and probably end up behind bars. But it was a very clever idea, and together they might just be able to pull it off.

After taking a long hot shower and mentally running through the details to make sure he hadn’t missed anything, he headed to the restaurant. It was still relatively early. There were only a few guests, and the moment he walked in he saw Heather. He couldn’t quite put his finger on why, but she was the quintessential country girl. Or at least, what he’d always imagined a country girl to be. As if feeling his eyes on her, she turned around and smiled. For a moment he felt captured, as though she was a mythological siren on a rock luring him in, and he was a lowly sailor.

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“Good evening, Sir.” Startled, he jerked his head around. He’d been so mesmerized he hadn’t seen the hostess approaching from the side. “Would you like to sit by the window again?”

“The one I sat at before, if possible,” he replied, hoping it would mean Heather would be his waitress.

“No, problem, and there’s a full moon tonight. You’ll be able to see it over the mountains. It’s an amazing sight.”

“I’m sure it is.”

As the young woman led him across the dining room he could sense Heather’s eyes on him, and the moment he sat down she arrived with a coffee pot.

“Hello, again,” she said warmly, pouring the hot brew. “It’s nice to see you. Would you like something to drink?”

“Does the bar have a quality bourbon?”

“Here’s a list of our spirits.”

Lifting a small leather wallet from her apron she handed it to him, and he noticed she wasn’t wearing nail polish.

Abruptly it hit him.

She wasn't wearing makeup either, except for a light touch of mascara and lip gloss.

That's why he'd seen her as the quintessential country girl.

Her beauty was natural.

"Sir?"

"Sorry," he said hastily, realizing he'd been staring. But when he took the folder he found it difficult to focus.

"The bourbons are at the bottom," she offered, as if she knew he was rattled.

"Ah, yes, I see, thank you. I'll have the Jack Daniels Single Barrel Select."

"Coming right up."

As she walked away he picked up his coffee, took a sip, and looked across at the mountains.

Suddenly Courtney's plan was deeply disturbing.

Then a second later he realized he had to be there.

Not just to help her, but to make sure nothing happened to Heather.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Back at the ranch Blake couldn't relax, and chided himself for not taking Heather to the campground and picking her up when she finished her shift. There was very little traffic at night, and the creep who had followed her might do the same thing again,

but this time run her off the road. Moving out onto the porch and seeing Doug's truck, he broke into a jog and entered the barn.

“Hey, Blake, what's up?” Doug asked, stepping out of a stall.

“Will you be here much longer?”

“Yep, it'll take me a while to check that delivery of feed and supplements. Then I have to empty it all into the bins. Why?”

“I need to nip out for a bit.”

“Not a problem.”

“Have you seen Butch?”

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“Last I saw he was staring at the ground near the side of the barn.” The moment Doug finished speaking, the big shepherd bounded into the aisle. “I guess he heard you,” Doug added with a grin.

“Can you keep your eye on him? I don’t like him runnin’ around at night. He might decide to follow a scent up Smoky Hill.”

“Hey, I hear ya. Sure, no problem. Stay with me, Butch.”

The dog barked as if understanding.

“Thanks, Doug. I’ll see you later.”

As he walked out to his truck and climbed behind the wheel he felt a few drops of rain. He wasn’t surprised. Fall was merging into winter, and when he turned onto the road the light sprinkle soon became a shower. But he was focused on what he’d do when he reached the restaurant. He didn’t want to cause a scene, but if the stranger was there, it would be difficult not to confront him.

It was a quick trip, but during the short drive the rain had become heavy. Entering the parking area and seeing Heather’s truck, he parked next to it and grabbed the jacket he kept in the back seat. Holding it over his head, he ran to the door, burst into the foyer and hung it on a hook.

“Okay,” he muttered, taking a breath and running his hands over his hair, “if he’s there just stay calm.”

* * *

Heather was coming out of the kitchen with appetizers for another table when she saw Blake walk in. Shocked to see him, she stopped short and almost dropped the plates. As he grinned across at her and moved to the bar, she smiled back, served her guests, then hurried to join him.

“What are you doing here?” she asked as she approached. “Is everything okay at the ranch?”

“Nice to see you too,” he quipped with a wink. “And yes, everything’s fine. I was just a bit worried. Whether you’re comin’ to my place or yours I don’t want you drivin’ back by yourself. Is he here?”

“Yes he is, and Blake, that’s so...I’m not sure what the word is...but thank you.”

Looking past her at the diners, he spied a sharply dressed man sitting alone by a window.

“I assume that’s him. Don’t worry, I won’t go over there and punch him in the nose, though I’d like to.”

“I’m sure you would. I have to get back to work, but I’m really glad you’re here. Would you like anything to eat?”

“Sure, surprise me.”

“Okay.”

Feeling comforted by his presence Heather headed back to check on her guests, but when she turned to glance across at Joe Meyer, he darted his eyes back to the

window.

He'd been staring at her.

She was about to hurry back into the kitchen, but changed her mind. Striding through the dining room, she stopped at his table.

"Yes?" she asked. "What is it you need?"

"I don't need anything. Why?"

"I thought you were trying to get my attention."

"Uh, no."

"Ah, my mistake. Your dinner should be ready shortly."

As she walked away a grin curled her lips.

He'd turned pink.

"It'll be a cold day in hell before I let you intimidate me, asshole," she mumbled under her breath.

* * *

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Though he couldn't hear what was being said, Blake had seen the exchange and it was obvious Heather had somehow turned the tables. As he picked up his beer to take a swallow, he saw her walking towards him carrying a plate of appetizers.

"This is our sample platter," she said happily, placing it in front of him.

"Thanks, darlin'. I know you probably don't have time to stop, but tell me briefly, what just happened between you and Joe Meyer?"

"I caught him staring at me so I went over and asked him what he wanted."

"Heather..." he muttered, shaking his head.

"What? He deserved to be confronted, and you're always telling me to go for it."

"Poking the bear is not what I had in mind," he said, shooting her a disapproving look.

"I'm not sorry. He turned positively pink, and you know what? I'm not scared of him. He actually looked...timid. Yes, that's the word. Timid. In fact, I'm wondering if we got this wrong. Maybe it was just coincidence that he was behind me."

"Was it coincidence that he was parked under a tree down from the ranch?"

"But are we sure it was him? Think about it!"

"Yes ma'am," he quipped with a grin.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it to sound like an order.”

“It’s okay. I kind of like this side of you, though it does make me want to bend you over the bar and—”

“Stop it!”

“And there she goes again.”

“You’re impossible,” she retorted. “Now you’ll have to excuse me, I have to check on my customers.”

Glancing across at Joe Meyer, and seeing his eyes fixated on Heather as she walked into the kitchen, Blake lifted out his phone and called Doug.

“Hey, Blake, what’s up?”

“Can you stick around a while? I have a problem. There’s a creep here at the Moonshine Restaurant eyeing Heather and I don’t want to leave.”

“I can certainly understand that. Sure, Blake, no problem.”

“Go into the house and make yourself at home. Grab a beer, watch TV, whatever. And there’s some leftover lasagna in the fridge if you want to zap it in the microwave.”

“Damn, I love lasagna.”

“It’s yours, and help yourself to anything else in there that catches your eye. I really appreciate this.”

“Any time. I’d rather be here with Butch and the horses than sittin’ around at my place.”

“Hey, I get that. I’ll see you when we get back, and thanks again.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Joe was mortified and his head was spinning.

Heather had caught him staring, and had the moxie to confront him, even it was in guise of pretending she thought he was trying to get her attention.

The girl was tougher than she looked.

Her cowboy was at the bar, which probably gave her a confidence boost, but even so...!

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The disturbing conversation had ruined his appetite and he wanted to leave, but he had to sign the check. That meant facing her again. But as the thought floated through his head it suddenly hit him.

He was no longer smitten.

Her confrontation had shown another side to her.

She'd purposely gone out of her way to humiliate him.

She wasn't just a sweet, pretty, innocent country girl after all.

She was actually unkind...even nasty.

He was shown her true nature just in time.

Looking out the window he noticed the rain had stopped. He took it as a good sign and began to regain his composure. Soon she would be at his mercy and he'd make sure she apologized.

Everything was working out exactly as it should.

Glancing at his watch he was surprised how much time had passed, and seeing her at a nearby table he gestured for the bill. While he waited his appetite returned, and he enjoyed a few more bites of the delicious pasta. He was washing it down with the last of the red wine in his glass when he saw her walking quickly towards him.

“Here you are,” she said, placing the leather wallet on the table. “I hope you enjoyed your meal.”

“Immensely.”

She smiled down at him, a smile he assumed was insincere, and waited until she’d walked away before looking at the bill. He was tempted to leave her nothing, then changed his mind and added a twenty-percent tip. Considering what she was about to endure it was the least he could do.

* * *

At the hospital all was quiet.

A new deputy named Simon Tagg had taken over the night shift, along with two new nurses, Amanda Burke and Sandy McCabe.

There were eight patients. The nurses were assigned four each, and Amanda was in charge of Courtney McCallum. Though she didn’t know why the girl was being guarded by a deputy and wasn’t allowed to ask, Amanda wanted to spend as little time as possible in the room. During her career she’d seen enough to know you could never be too careful.

When the shift began the nurses had taken the deputy a mug of freshly brewed coffee and a cinnamon roll, then settled in behind the front counter. Most nights were boring and the time dragged, but they both had their laptops to keep them occupied. A downpour had come and gone, and as the hour grew late Sandy left to check on her patients while Amanda stayed behind the counter in case someone came in. When she came back, Amanda stood up and stretched.

“My turn,” she said with a sigh. “Were all your people okay?”

“Yep, except for Mrs. Beardsly. She still has that headache, poor woman, but she said it’s not as bad.”

“At least that’s something. Migraines are awful,” Amanda remarked. “Okay, I’m off.”

Turning down the hallway, she opened each door and found nothing of concern. Courtney McCallum was in the room at the end. Being the furthest from the entrance, it was the one used for prisoners whenever it was available.

“Can I pop my head in?” she asked quietly as she approached the deputy. “And I don’t know if Sandy offered, but I can get you another coffee if you want one when I go back.”

“Yeah, that’d be great, I think it’s about that time,” he replied, rising to his feet, then lifting the key from his breast pocket, he unlocked the door. “I haven’t heard a peep,” he added.

“I’ll just take a quick look. I don’t want to wake her,” Amanda whispered softly. Peering around the door she saw the motionless figure in the bed. “Dead to the world,” she murmured, cautiously stepping back.

“I’m surprised that heavy rain didn’t wake her,” the deputy remarked, turning his key in the lock and checking the handle. “Mind you, sometimes the sound puts me to sleep.”

“Me too,” Amanda said with a smile. “I’ll get you that coffee.”

* * *

Courtney waited a few minutes, then sitting up she had to stifle a triumphant cry.

Climbing from the bed, she quickly bundled one of the pillows and the blanket into a shape similar to a body and covered it with the bedspread. Standing back and studying her work, she nodded in approval, then gently collected her clothes from the closet and dressed. Fortunately she'd been allowed to keep her watch and it was in the pocket of her jacket. Slipping it on her wrist, she moved into the bathroom and softly closed the door.

There were four windows.

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The big one by the counter didn't open, and she assumed it was shatterproof glass. But running along the top of the wall above the sink were narrower ones and their standard latches could be easily seen. A man wouldn't be able to fit through them, or even a regularly sized woman, but she had her thin, modelbody. It would be awkward, but she was convinced she'd be able to wriggle through.

Climbing onto the counter, she reached up and pushed open the first and largest. As she looked across the parking lot she saw three cars. Two would have belonged to the nurses, and the third, in a dark corner and barely discernible, was Joe's.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

As Joe watched Courtney move towards his car he felt his heart leap in his chest. Her willowy body reminded him of an elegant swan, and when her face came into view he could see her eyes were filled with triumph. She never let anything stop her, and her indomitable spirit was one of the many qualities he both envied and admired. As she climbed into the passenger seat and ran her fingers through her hair, he wondered how he could ever have been attracted to a country bumpkin like Heather Hunt.

"It's freezing," she said with a shiver as he began to drive.

"I'll turn the heat up, but where's your coat?"

"Still in the closet in the hospital room. I couldn't have squeezed through that window wearing it. I thought about tossing it out, but I figured it would just get all wet so there was no point. But I'm so relieved to be free. What a hellacious time I've had, though the hospital was a whole lot better than that hellacious jail cell."

Joe grinned. She always talked a mile a minute when she was happy or excited.

“Do you still want to go straight to our cabin at the Moonshine Campgrounds?”

“Yes, absolutely. Those morons at the hospital won’t realize I’m gone until the morning and I’m dying to soak in a hot bath. Then I’ll put on some warm clothes and have a drink. By that time Miss Goody Two Shoes will be fast asleep. Hah! She won’t know what hit her, and that cowboy will regret ever crossing me.”

It was a short drive, and Joe was soon stopping outside their cabin. Hurrying inside, Courtney moved straight into the bathroom, sprinkled bubble bath into the tub and turned on the faucets. As she began to peel off her clothes, Joe walked in holding a crystal tumbler.

“Your favorite Cognac,” he announced, handing it to her and trying not to stare. It didn’t matter how many times he saw her naked, he never tired of eyeing her body.

“Thanks, you were a star tonight,” she purred, accepting it and taking a drink. “Mmmm, heaven. Hold it while I climb in.”

As he took the glass and watched her sink into the thick white bubbles, he felt his cock start to stiffen.

“Relax,” he murmured, placing the drink on the widest edge of the tub. “But be careful with this, don’t knock it off.”

“I won’t. Ooh, this is divine...”

With her glorious body disappearing beneath the foam, he walked out the door and headed into the bedroom.

“Now I’ll make you mine,” he mumbled as he quickly stripped and stretched out on the bed.

Taking hold of his hardness and closing his eyes, he pictured her straddling him, then slowly lowering herself down. As he imagined himself becoming engulfed by her warmth, barely a moment passed before he was spewing his essence in a series of divine spasms.

The first time was always quick.

Always.

But he’d soon find himself hard again, then he could last for a very long time. Grinning, he reached across for the tissues on the nightstand, wiped himself clean, then idly played with himself while he waited for her to join him.

The minutes ticked by, but the door finally opened and she walked in wrapped up in one of the thick, cotton bathrobes the campground provided for its guests.

“Won’t you join me?” he asked as she moved to her suitcase.

“Join you? Joe, we have to go. And I mean right now, or did you forget what all this is about?”

“I thought we could—”

“You thought wrong,” she exclaimed, cutting him off. “I can’t believe you could even think about sex right now. We have a job to do.”

“Uh, but, uh...” he sputtered as he felt himself shrink. “Isn’t it a bit early? Shouldn’t we wait until we can be sure she’s asleep?”

“Asleep, awake, it won’t matter,” she barked, pulling on a pair of thick black tights.
“Now for fuck’s sake, get dressed. I hope you have everything ready to go.”

“Of course, I do.”

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“Where is it?” she pressed, slipping into a long-sleeved T-shirt then covering it with a cashmere sweater.

“In that brown bag by the dresser.”

As she opened the bag and began checking the contents, Joe moved from the bed and padded across to the closet. He hadn’t expected the cold weather and wasn’t sure what to wear. Finally deciding on his thick track suit, he lifted it from the shelf.

“That won’t be enough,” she declared as he slipped the sweatshirt over his head. “You’ll freeze to death.”

“I have my winter trench coat. Once I put that on it should be.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess so. Just hurry up.”

He was used to her abrupt manner. When there was somewhere she needed to be she was always impatient, and with so much at stake he knew she was even more on edge. But as he began lacing up his hiking boots and thinking about the hours ahead, a deep frown crossed his brow.

“Courtney, are you sure about this?”

“Hey, he squealed to the show manager and the fucking cops?” she barked. “Why didn’t he just mind his own fucking business? Now I have to go into hiding while I find a way to get out of the damn country.”

“But kidnapping Heather Hunt won’t help. ”

“You know how I am! I have to get even! He’s fucked up my life and he has to pay. But don’t worry, I won’t hurt her. I’ll just freak him out and show him what a mistake he made messing with me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

As Heather followed Blake back to the ranch she couldn’t wait to crawl into bed and snuggle against him. It was all she could think about until they turned into his driveway and she saw his headlights catch Butch racing towards the truck. Rolling to a stop, she climbed out only to be momentarily distracted by a blast of icy air.

“What a sweetheart he is,” she remarked, doing her best to ignore the chill as she watched the happy dog leap and bark with excitement. “He couldn’t wait for you to come home.”

“He’s not used to me bein’ out this late. Thank God for Doug. Let’s get inside. It feels like we’re about to have some freezin’ rain.”

With Butch still jumping up and down, they hurried into the house and found Doug standing by the stove stirring a pot.

“Thanks again,” Blake said gratefully. “You saved the day, or should I say the night.”

“Hey, like I said, no problem, and I’ve made some of my famous hot chocolate to welcome you home.”

“Your hot chocolate is famous?” Heather asked with a grin as she removed her coat.

“Yep, it’s just that no-one knows yet,” he added with a chuckle. “You’re lucky I had

the secret ingredient with me.”

“Which is what?” Blake piped up.

“A very special brand of dark chocolate,” he replied, pouring the enticing drink into the mugs he’d set on the table. “I’d like to join you and chat for a bit but I need to take off.”

“Oh, my gosh! Doug!” Heather exclaimed, taking a sip. “This is absolutely fantastic!”

“I’m glad you like it, and now I’ll be on my way. But if you ever need a night out just let me know.”

“Thanks again,” Blake said as Doug pulled on his jacket. “I owe you one.”

“Uh, no, you’ll never owe me one,” Doug replied solemnly, then slipped out the door.

“What did he mean?” Heather asked as Blake found a milk bone for Butch.

“I helped him out of a jam once.”

“Can you tell me about it?”

“I’ll have to talk to him about that.”

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“Ah, I see. Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Hey, it’s fine, you didn’t know. Let’s drink this hot chocolate in front of the fire. We need to warm up. Then I intend to ravage every part of you.”

“If this wasn’t so delicious I’d ravage every part of you right now,” she quipped with a giggle.

Breaking into a grin, he took her hand, and she walked with him into the living room, but when Butch beat them to the couch, they settled on the floor with their backs against it.

“Really, Blake? Why are you letting him sit up there on the comfy cushions where we should be?” she remarked, shaking her head.

“I have my reasons.”

“Which are?” she asked as he placed his mug on a side table, then took hers.

“Um, excuse me, I was drinking that.”

“Not anymore.”

Before she could respond he leaned down and fervently kissed her.

“You’re right, I’ll drink it later,” she muttered as he pulled back, then urgently lifted her sweater over her head and threw her arms around his neck. “Honestly, you have

no idea how you make me feel.”

He responded by sliding his hand behind her and deftly unhooking her bra.

“Uh, Blake, you do that much too well,” she murmured as he tossed it aside.

“Excuse me?”

“You can only get really good at something with practice.”

“Ah, but practice makes perfect, and now you get the benefits.”

“There is that,” she quipped, but as he pushed her onto her back all thought abruptly left her. He began drawing her nipples into his mouth, moving from one breast to the other, hungrily sucking and flicking them with the tip of his tongue.

“Please, Blake, please...”

“What?” he breathed, raising his head and staring down at her.

“I want you so much.”

“Close your eyes and don’t open them. Understood?”

“Ooh, yes, Sir.”

* * *

After removing her clothes, Blake strode into his bedroom and quickly found the two items he wanted. A battery powered vibrator and a blindfold. With his cock surging to life, he quickly returned and slipped the blindfold in place.

“Spread your legs and rest this against your clit,” he ordered, turning on the vibrator and putting it in her hand. “You can press it hard, or lightly, your choice, but under no circumstances are you allowed to climax. If you get close pull it away. Any questions?”

“No, Sir,” she panted, pressing the massaging wand against her sex.

Quickly removing his clothes, he knelt beside her, fondling her breasts with one hand, while stroking himself with the other. He continued, paying close attention to her moans and cries, then leaned down and devoured her lips in a crushing kiss.

“Blake...I’m already so close...” she gasped. “It feels so...so...”

“Stop! Get on your hands and knees and keep the vibrator in reach.”

“Oooh, yes, Sir.”

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As she followed his instruction, he moved behind her, sheathed his stiff member, then placed himself against her soaked passage and pushed forward.

“Put the vibrator back against your clit,” he said huskily, suddenly delivering a hot slap on each cheek.

Relishing her cry, then her soulful moan, he stayed buried inside her, loving the sensation from the vibrator against his cock. Closing his eyes he savored every scintillating second—until he felt his excitement growing. Though his urge was to pump, he wanted to see if he’d climax from just the intense tingling.

“Sir...can I...can I...?”

Her bleating plea sent a surge of excitement through his loins, and when he felt her channel tighten around him he knew his climax was only seconds away.

“Yes, yes,” he grunted. “Give it to me now.”

Barely a moment passed before her body grew taut and she sucked in a long breath. As she cried out in ecstasy, he pumped just a couple of times before squeezing his eyes shut and surrendering to the spasms as they swept through his being.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The moment Joe stepped out onto the porch he felt as if he’d walked into a slab of invisible ice. Pausing his step, he stared up at the glowing crescent moon in the dark, clear sky.

“Joe? What’s wrong?” Courtney asked stopping beside him, then abruptly added, “Fuck! It’s colder than when I left that damn hospital.”

“That’s what’s wrong,” Joe said gravely. “It rained earlier. The roads will be treacherous.”

“Stop being such a wuss and get in the car, or do you just want to stand here and turn into a human ice sculpture.”

“Okay, okay, but I think this is a bad idea.”

“No! A bad idea is me still being around here when the sheriff finds out I escaped,” she snapped, walking down the steps to the car and climbing inside.

Pulling his gloves from his pockets he reluctantly followed, but as he settled behind the wheel he was filled with dread.

“Courtney, why don’t we just leave? You can take your revenge another time.”

“Another time? When? I can’t possibly come back. Once this is over we’ll be on a private jet on our way to Puerto Rico. You are coming with me, aren’t you, Joe?” she added, lowering her voice and placing her hand on his thigh.

“Yeah, of course, but this doesn’t feel right. The weather isn’t on our side! And we’ll have to get to that private airfield with the cops on our tail! It’s not exactly next door. It’s three hours away. The risk factor is too high. If we went straight there—”

“Joe, you know I’ve always lived on the edge,” she said, cutting him off. “I admit this is a bit dicey, but you know if I don’t deal with that fucking cowboy I won’t be happy. If you’ve changed your mind and don’t want to be involved...”

“Dammit, Courtney, you know I’d never leave you.”

“Then let’s go. The sooner we do this, the sooner we’ll be on that plane.”

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Joe fastened his seat belt, waited for Courtney to follow suit, then started up the car and drove through the campgrounds. The lane was gravel, so he wasn’t concerned, but when he turned onto the country road his fingers tightened around the steering wheel.

“Hold on, Courtney. I’m going to test the road conditions,” he muttered.

“You worry too much.”

“That’s better than not enough,” he shot back, lightly putting his foot on the brake. The car slowed, then stopped, and everything appeared to be normal, then he did it again with a little more speed and a sharper stop. “It seems okay.”

“Of course it’s okay.”

“I’m still going to take it easy.”

“At least we don’t have to worry about other cars. It’s just past 2 a.m and no-one around here will be out this late.”

“That’s another reason I’ll drive slowly. The sheriff might have a deputy hiding somewhere to catch late night speeders or people driving drunk. But Heather’s place isn’t far. We’ll be there in a minute, and at least there’s some light from the moon.”

“How far isn’t far?”

“I’d say...about a minute or two.”

He had heard the impatience in her voice, but still worried about frozen puddles and black ice he kept his speed down.

“I thought you said it was close!”

“It is...and there’s the fence. We’ve arrived. I’m going to turn off my headlights and just leave my parking lights on. I don’t want to alert the people in the house.”

“I don’t see a house.”

“I know, that’s the point. The driveway is really dark. I think it’s because of all the trees surrounding the property. Now you can see the staircase up to her place,” he added, speaking softly as he rolled forward. “Oh, no.”

“What’s the problem?”

“The carport’s empty. Her truck isn’t here. She’s not home.”

“Fuck!”

“Sorry, Courtney, but—”

“Hold on. Let me think about this for a minute. I bet she’s at the cowboy’s house. Hmmm. Maybe I can nail them both. In fact, it would be much easier and far less risky.”

“How?” he asked, cutting the engine.

“I have some stuff with me.”

“Stuff?”

“Stop being an idiot! The cops didn’t get it all at the show!”

“Ohh. Right. What’s your idea.”

“I’ll plant some in her place, find a way to do the same at his ranch, then call in an anonymous tip. I’ll make sure there’s enough to get them both in some seriously hot water.”

“But it’s the cowboy you want to take revenge on. Why are you so determined to cause problems for Heather?”

“She forced me to sell Henry.”

“But you told me you were glad to be rid of him. You said he was too much for you.”

“Yeah, well, she still took advantage of the situation. And why are you sticking up for her?”

“I just don’t think this is fair. By all means, go after Blake Coleman, but—”

“Oh, I get it. You like her.”

“Actually, I do. She seems to be a nice girl. But you know you’re the only one for me. Have I ever let you down?”

“No,” she replied, rolling her eyes, “but I’m going up those steps and getting inside her crappy little bird’s nest. If you want to join me, great. If not...then I’ll have to re-evaluate things. Maybe we’re not such a match after all. You can think about it while I find my lock pick,” she declared, opening her bag. “I know it’s in here someplace.”

The last thing he wanted to do was to step out into the chilly night air and be a party to Courtney’s nasty plan. But when she opened the door and climbed out he knew he had no choice.

He couldn’t lose her.

Not ever.

Not for any reason.

“Wait. I’m coming.”

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Hastily moving around the car he saw she was already walking up the steps with a small flashlight lighting her way.

“I’m right behind you,” he called softly as he began the climb.

But just as he finished speaking her body jerked.

She was slipping.

He started to race up to help but his feet slid out from beneath him. Before he could regain his balance she tumbled on top of him and they both toppled to the frozen ground.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Courtney...are you okay?” Joe mumbled as he tried to gently move her body off his.

“Courtney? Can you hear me?”

“Ohh...my ankle...my elbow,” she bleated. “And my neck. What the fuck happened?”

“The steps...they must be iced over.”

“I feel like I’ve been hit by a fucking train.”

“Easy does it,” he said, propping her up. “I’m going to get you into the car.”

“Okay, but...Joe...everything hurts.”

“I’m sure it does. Just wait a second.”

Not wanting to think how much worse it might have been if he hadn’t broken her fall, he stumbled the few steps to open the car door. Only then did he realize his right hand was scraped and bruised, and he could barely move his fingers. Trying to ignore the sudden, sharp pain, he cautiously returned to her and put his arm around her waist.

“Can you stand up?”

“I’m not sure. My ankle... it’s bad. I think I need to crawl,” she replied, trying to bend forward onto her hands and knees. “Yes, this will work.”

They slowly made it to the car, but as he helped her in she groaned loudly and tears sprang from her eyes. He was about to put her seat belt on, but worried about broken ribs he changed his mind. As he walked to the driver’s side, his hip protested, but it wasn’t terrible and he climbed behind the wheel.

“Courtney, you won’t like this, but I need to get you to the hospital.”

“No, no, you can’t. They’ll put me away forever. Just take me back to the cabin.”

“But you might have serious injuries.”

“I don’t care. Please, Joe. I swear, if I end up behind bars I’ll kill myself.”

“Okay, but only for the moment,” he replied with a heavy sigh, and with stabbing sensations piercing his hand he started up the car and rolled slowly down the driveway.

* * *

Moving Courtney into the cabin hadn't been as difficult as Joe had feared. Once she was settled on the bed he turned the heat on high, gave her codeine and took one himself. Though his hand was excruciating, he managed to remove her clothes and cover her with blankets. But her ankle—already swelling and showing severe bruising—wasn't her only injury. Her elbow looked almost as bad.

“Courtney, you really must see a doctor.”

“I realize that, I do, but there's no way I'm going back to that hospital.”

“Wait, I have an idea,” he muttered, reaching for his phone. “Okay, here, I found two doctors listed in Smoky Hill. One of them has an emergency number. Maybe we'll get lucky,” he muttered, urgently praying as he placed the call.

To his great joy and surprise, a groggy voice answered.

“Doctor Preston speaking.”

“I'm so sorry to bother you at this hour, and thank you for picking up. My name is Joe Meyer and I'm staying at the Moonshine Campground. My girlfriend just had a bad fall and she's really suffering. I think she may have broken her ankle and elbow, they look terrible. Unfortunately she has a phobia about hospitals and won't let me take her to the emergency room. I'm really worried. Money isn't an issue. Is there any chance you could come and see her?”

“Uh...yeah...I’m not far from there. What’s your cabin number.”

“Five.”

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you, Doctor Prescott, thank you so much,” Joe exclaimed, shocked that the man had agreed.

“You mean he’s coming?” Courtney mumbled. “I can’t believe it.”

“Neither can I. Try not to worry. But now I have to come up with a plan for the morning. The sheriff will be banging on the door as soon as they find you gone.”

“Your hand...” she muttered, staring at it.

“Yeah. It’s not great. But right now all I can think about is how fucking lucky we are.”

“Lucky? You call this lucky?”

“Hell, yeah! You’re out of jail and there’s a doctor coming to help us in the middle of the night! The cup is half full, Courtney!”

“Oh, yeah, I see what you mean.”

“I’m going to get some cash so I have it ready.”

* * *

The doctor said they both needed X-rays and strongly recommended a visit to the hospital Emergency Room, but Courtney managed to placate him by promising to go in the morning.

Satisfied, he examined her, announcing her ankle was badly sprained but not broken, her elbow the same, and a couple of her ribs were bruised. After dressing all her injuries, he turned his attention to Joe's battered left hand.

"This definitely needs an X-ray," the doctor said solemnly. "I can wrap it, but you must visit a hospital and get it checked out. Are you right-handed?"

"I am."

"Oh, dear. Don't use it unless you have to. I'll leave you some painkillers."

"Courtney has codeine for her migraines and we've both had one."

"Then I'll just leave you the anti-inflammatories. You still haven't told me how this happened."

"We went to visit a friend and she lives up a flight of outside stairs. We were halfway up when Courtney slipped and fell into me. We both ended up falling down the steps to the bottom. Turns out our friend wasn't even home. Anyway, thank you so much for coming. We're very grateful," Joe said earnestly as he walked the doctor to the door. "How much do we owe you?"

"Five hundred should cover it."

"Here's double that," Joe declared, handing him an envelope. "Drive safely. That

road might be just as slick as those steps.”

Waiting until the doctor left, Joe put the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door before closing it, then returned to the bedroom, kicked off his shoes and laid down.

“Now what?” Courtney mumbled.

“Honestly, I can’t see us going anywhere just yet. You need a couple of days to recover a bit.”

“As much as I want to get the fuck out of here, I agree. But where can I hide?”

“Actually,” he murmured thoughtfully, “I have an idea.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

When Sheriff Cooper’s phone rang early the following morning, he glanced at the screen and sat bolt upright. The caller was Deputy Tagg.

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“What’s happened?” he asked anxiously, hastily accepting the call.

“Sheriff, I’m sorry but it’s Courtney McCallum—she’s gone. The nurse checked her durin’ the night and she was sleepin’, but this mornin’ the bed was empty. I swear I never left the chair except to run to the men’s room, and one of the nurses waited for me.”

“So how the hell did she get outta there?”

“Apparently the bathroom. There are narrow windows above the counter just below the ceilin’. She must have climbed out and was picked up by a waitin’ vehicle.”

“Are there cameras back there.”

“I’m afraid not, Sheriff.”

“I’ll put out an alert. Block off that parkin’ lot and search it. You never know what you might find. I’ll send someone to help you.”

“I’ll get right on it, Sheriff.”

Kissing his wife on the cheek, he quickly climbed from the bed, contacted the station with the APB, then called the Moonshine Campground. When he heard Joe Meyer was still here he felt a shard of hope.

“What about his vehicle? Do you have any details?”

“No, sheriff, I’m sorry we don’t keep that information, but I can describe it. He has a silver four door, not a big car, but not a compact either. I think it might have been a Hyundai. Like a Sonata or Elantra.”

“That’s very helpful, thank you. Can you see the driveway from where you are?”

“I can. Do you want me to call you if I see him leave?”

“Yes. I believe my number will have shown up on your phone.”

“It has, Sheriff.”

“What cabin is he in?”

“I believe it’s number five, let me check...yes, that’s correct. Uh, should we be worried?”

“I don’t believe he presents any danger, but for the moment I’d keep my distance.”

“I’ll make sure everyone knows.”

“Thank you, and please call me immediately if you see him with a woman who’s attractive, tall and thin. Her name is Courtney McCallum.”

“I sure will, Sheriff.”

* * *

Waking up next to Blake’s warm, muscled body, Heather cuddled closer and let out a contented sigh. A moment later she heard him yawn, and his arms came around her.

“It sure is nice to have you here,” he murmured. “I swear I’d be happy if I never left this bed.”

“You wouldn’t be happy when all your clients found other trainers.”

“Yeah, well, it would be worth it,” he quipped, then groaned as she moved her hand to his crotch and gripped his hardness. But Butch, sleeping by the bed, suddenly sat up and barked.

“It appears someone else is happy I’m here as well,” she remarked with a grin as she moved and glanced down at him.

“He can find his own girl. You belong to me.”

“Is that so! Do I get a say in this?”

“Nope,” he declared, moving her onto her back and staring down at her. “I’ve known you for...how long?”

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“It was a year a couple of weeks ago.”

“Why didn’t you remind me? We could’ve celebrated.”

“I think we did,” she said with a wink. “It was just a bit late. Anyway, what were you going to say?”

“I was goin’ to say,” he replied, lowering his voice, “that it’s been since you first brought Apollo here that I decided you were for me.”

“You did not.”

“I did.”

“What took you so long?”

“I honestly can’t say. I guess I was just waitin’ for the right time, and I wanted to make sure the feelin’s were mutual. They are, aren’t they?” he added with a slight frown.

“No, not at all. Jumping into bed a year after I meet a man is a habit. I’ve been trying to break it, but—”

“You are soooo bad,” he growled, interrupting her and abruptly rolling her over. “I should start every day spankin’ your butt,” he continued, landing a couple of playful swats. As she squealed and laughed, he hastily retrieved a condom from his nightstand and sheathed himself. “Dammit,” he muttered as he grabbed her hips and

pulled them up.

“What’s wrong.”

“Nothin’,” he said huskily, placing himself at her entrance.

As he pushed inside her and immediately began thrusting with quick, forceful strokes, she gasped in surprise, then groaned with pleasure. He was pounding without pause, and when he reached beneath her and tweaked her nipples a rush of sparkling sensations radiated through her body. Suddenly she felt her orgasm looming. She thought he would slow down or even stop, but he accelerated.

“Let go,” he growled. “Let go right now.”

His command sent her over the edge, and he couldn’t stop the wild cry escaping her lips. Though sparkling spasms shuddered through her body she could hear his deep groans, and felt his fingers digging into her skin. The crackling convulsions seemed never-ending, until finally she collapsed on her stomach. As he fell next to her, she heard him let out several heavy breaths before moving his arm around her shoulders and pulling her against him.

“Is that what’s called a quickie?” she panted.

“Unfortunately.”

“Why unfortunately?”

“Hey, I’d spend all mornin’ in this bed with you, all day for that matter! But I overslept. Can’t imagine why,” he added with a grin. “Anyway, Doug will already be here and I need to help with the feedin’ and cleanin’. Sorry, darlin’, I have to get myself together.”

“You do that. If it’s okay with you I’ll just stay here for a few minutes. I need to catch my breath.”

“Stay as long as you want,” he said, kissing her softly before climbing from the bed. “When do you have to leave?”

“I have to be at the restaurant between ten-forty-five and eleven so I have plenty of time. I’ll get up soon and visit with Henry and Apollo before I go.”

“I’ll take a quick shower and head off. Help yourself to whatever you want for breakfast,” he said, as he moved to the bathroom, but as he was about to close the door his cellphone rang. “Hey, it’s Sheriff Cooper,” he declared, picking it up from his nightstand. “Mornin’ sheriff. Is everything okay?”

“I’m sorry to say it’s not. Courtney McCallum was taken to the hospital yesterday after collapsing in her cell. Unfortunately she escaped overnight. If you happen to see her please let me know right away.”

“Yes, of course, Sheriff.”

“I’m also on the lookout for a car. It’s silver and could be a Hyundai Elantra or Sonata.”

“A vehicle like that was parked under a tree just down from my ranch and it followed Heather home recently. It belongs to a guy named Joe Meyer. He’s staying at the Moonshine Campground.”

“Ah, thank you,” the sheriff said knowingly. “I’ll keep in touch.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Though Heather had planned to sleep for a little while longer she was too excited about Henry. After taking a quick shower, she dressed and walked into the kitchen, only to find a bowl of granola and small jug of milk waiting on the table. Smiling, she sat down and quickly discovered just how hungry she was. As she continued to enjoy the simple breakfast, Joe and Courtney floated through her mind.

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What was it that brought them back to Smoky Hill?

A horrifying thought suddenly flashed through her head.

Jumping to her feet, she grabbed her jacket and hurried outside. Grateful the air wasn't as chilly as it had been the night before, she looked around and finally saw Blake leading a horse into a paddock.

"Blake!" she called, breaking into a run.

"What's wrong? You look upset."

"I was thinking about Joe and Courtney and wondering why they came back here, and it suddenly hit me. Maybe they want Henry back! Maybe they're here to steal him."

"I highly doubt that, and even if they do there's no way a horse can be stolen from this ranch. The gates are on a timer. They automatically close and lock at seven, and if someone did get them open Butch would be out there in a heartbeat barkin' up a storm. But besides that, what's the point of following you if they're here for Henry?"

"Oh, right, I hadn't thought about that. Then why are they in Smoky Hill?"

"That's anyone's guess, though it's possible Courtney has some buyers here—for her drugs I mean," he added, lowering his voice. "She was at that show and probably made some contacts."

“Now that makes sense, but that doesn’t explain why Joe followed me either.”

“No, it doesn’t, and that’s the very reason I wanted you to stay here. In fact, until this whole thing is resolved I think you should stick around. Please say you’ll think about it.”

“Blake, I don’t need to think about it. I love it here. Of course I will.”

* * *

Turning off the country road and entering the campgrounds, the sheriff slowed down and followed the gravel lane past the restaurant. It was still early and there were no cars in the guest parking lot, but as he approached Cabin Five he spied a silver Hyundai. Nodding knowingly, he rolled to a stop and called in the plate number of the car. It was no surprise when it came back registered to Joseph Meyer. Climbing from his squad car, he walked up to the door and knocked. It took a minute or two, but it was finally opened.

“Sheriff Cooper,” Joe Meyer exclaimed. “This is a surprise.”

“Hello, Mr. Meyer. May I come in?”

“Of course. What brings you here?”

“Have you heard from your client?”

“Uh, no, why?”

“She’s disappeared.”

“What do you mean, disappeared?” Joe asked anxiously. “How can she disappear?”

She's in a hospital bed with a deputy sitting outside her door."

"She was, but she escaped in the middle of the night. The thing is, last night was very cold. Even though she'd put on her clothes there's no way she could have made it very far. Not without help. Where were you last night, Mr. Meyer?"

"Here! Where else would I be? And why are you questioning me and not out looking for her? This is terrible. We have to start a search immediately. Call in your deputies. I have resources in Dallas. I'll get in touch with them right away."

"Mr. Meyer, I need to check this cabin."

"But what about--?"

"Mind if I have a look around?"

"Be my guest, but she's not here! You should be out finding her, and that's exactly what I'm going to do."

"This won't take long," the sheriff replied, ignoring his comment and marching past him into the bedroom.

Studying the scene with his experienced eye, the sheriff immediately noticed the two pillows on the disheveled bed. They both had the telltale indentations of a person's head.

"Did you spend the night alone, Mr. Meyer?"

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“Yes, of course, but I didn’t sleep very well.”

“What happened to your hand?”

“That why I couldn’t sleep. I went for a walk around the grounds and slipped. The ground was frozen.”

“Mr. Meyer, don’t you know lyin’ to an officer is a crime?”

“I’m not lying.”

“I didn’t accuse you, I just asked if you knew.”

“Of course I know, I’m a lawyer.”

“So, I’ll ask you again. Where were you last night Mr. Meyer?”

“The only time I left the cabin was when I went for a walk. I thought it might help me sleep.”

“Where did you go?”

“Just through the trees. It was a bit creepy. I wasn’t out long.”

“I see. And that’s when you fell and hurt your hand.”

“Exactly.”

“Did you see anyone else?”

“No...it was cold. I didn't see a soul.”

“Anything you'd like to add?”

“No...not that I can think of. “

“If you hear from Miss McCallum I'd advise you to contact me right away,” the sheriff continued, handing him a card.

“Sure. I'll walk you out.”

They moved wordlessly into the living room with the sheriff leading the way, but when he opened the door, he stopped and stared down at Joe's bandaged hand.

“You're a very talented man, Mr. Meyer. I've been trained to help medics in emergencies, but I don't think I could bandage my own hand as well as you have. Where did you learn to do that?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said you didn't see anyone on your walk last night and that's when you fell. If you didn't see anyone, then you must have dressed that hand yourself.”

“Oh, yes, I see what you mean. I have a friend who's a paramedic. He's taught me a few things along the way.”

“Where did you find the wrapping?”

“I have a first aid kit in the car. It has everything.”

“Ah, I see. That’s handy,” the sheriff remarked with a chuckle, thinking it was a clever pun. “I’ll be in touch as soon as I have any news.”

Striding from the cabin, he returned to his car and rolled away. But as soon as he was out of sight he backed up into the trees, cut the engine, and radioed Deputy Tagg.

“I’m at the Moonshine Campgrounds. I have reason to believe Courtney McCallum is here. Park outside the entrance. When I see Joe Meyer leave I’ll let you know. Block him. I’ll come up from behind. He’ll be drivin’ a Silver Hyundai Sonata.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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When Henry was at the show he'd been nervous and spooky. Though buying him had been impetuous she'd felt compelled to do it. At the time she'd been surprised how quickly Blake had supported her. Now standing outside the round pen and watching him she was almost in tears. Happy tears.

He had put Henry on a lunge line and moved him from side to side, walk in a circle, then trot. In a short amount of time Henry was following the cues flawlessly, and stayed at Blake's side when he began walking beside him.

"There's nothin' wrong with this horse," Blake declared, striding up to the gate. "His brain isn't fried. He started listenin' right away, and he's smart."

"I knew it!" she exclaimed. "Don't ask me how, I just did."

"Yep, you did. When I caught him after he bolted away from Courtney in the warm up ring, I did too."

"Wow. I'm so excited."

"I have a lesson, but put his lead rope on and walk him around the barn and past the house. I'll bet he'll take it all in stride. He needs to understand you're his special human."

"No, you and I both are," she said emphatically, then lowering her voice she asked, "Blake, how can I ever thank you?"

"For what?"

“Supporting me when I told Courtney I wanted to buy him. I’m sure many people would have told me spending money on a horse I knew nothing about with no vet check was crazy. I was even saying it to myself.”

“The vet check thing, that was a risk, but the situation was urgent and my instinct told me to move forward. And, Heather, I always trust my instinct. I’ll call Doc Clayton today and ask him to swing by to give him the once over,” he declared, but suddenly taking a breath, he lowered his voice and added, “Heather, no matter what, I’ll always be here for you, and that’s a promise.”

“Blake...”

“Now I’d better get into that ring.”

Unexpectedly leaning down he softly kissed her, and though he’d just lightly brushed his lips against hers it took her breath away. Moments later, watching him head to the arena she felt lighter than air, but finally giving Henry a treat, she led him through the gate. Apollo was in his paddock, and as they walked past he trotted to the fence.

“Hey, handsome. I’ll be back to ride you after work,” she called as Henry nickered. “I’m so glad you two have become friends.”

She continued on, but when they walked past the house Henry paused his step to stare at the porch swing.

“Yes, it’s an odd looking thing,” she said calmly. “Let’s take a closer look.”

Though he initially backed away, when she moved slowly forward he followed, then snorted and began looking around. It was a sign he was no longer worried.

“You’re such a brave boy,” she murmured, stroking his neck “Let’s keep going.”

The walk was going so well she lost track of time. Almost forty-five minutes passed before she glanced at her watch and returned to the barn. As she led him up to the paddock gate, Apollo whinnied and ambled over to greet them.

“Okay, you two, play nice and I’ll see you later.”

“You were gone so long,” Blake remarked, appearing behind her with Butch at his side.

“Blake, it was wonderful. He took everything in stride,” she replied happily. “But now I have to run. I didn’t realize how late it was, and I still need to stop by my place and change for work.”

“Barn time,” he remarked knowingly. “I regularly think fifteen minutes is only five.”

“Yeah, me too, constantly,” she agreed with a grin. “I’ll see you when I get back.”

“Yes you will, gorgeous,” he murmured, abruptly wrapping her into a bear hug.

“Aren’t you worried someone will see?”

“Like who? The horses don’t care, and Doug thinks this is great.”

“He does? How does he know? Did you tell him?”

“I didn’t say anything. He drew his own conclusions. But we can’t stand here yappin’. Come on, I’ll walk you to your truck.”

* * *

When Heather arrived at the restaurant she was a few minutes late, and noticed the hostess was already on the phone taking an order. Hastily moving into the small staff room, she pulled off her coat, put on her apron, and started towards the kitchen.

“Can you take a tray to one of the cabins?” the hostess asked as Heather walked by.

“Yes, sure.”

“Thanks. It’s going to Cabin Five.”

“Ooh...”

“Is something wrong?”

“Actually, no,” she said thoughtfully. “Text me when it’s ready.”

Heading into the kitchen, she moved to a quiet corner to think about what she was about to do. By the time she received the text she was ready. Taking a deep breath, she walked quickly back into the dining area, and saw the tray waiting on the bar counter. Trying to calm her nerves ,she picked it up and started for the door.

“I assume you’re delivering that to a cabin,” one of the other waitresses asked as she walked by.

“Yes, why?”

“I was in Cabin Four a couple of days ago and I think I might have lost my bracelet. I can’t find it anywhere. Can you pop in and take a quick look for me? I got here too late to check. Front desk told me the key code is 1497”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Thanks, Heather.”

Walking down the lane, though she told herself she was perfectly safe, her heart was racing. When the cabin came into view she thought about leaving the tray at the door, knocking loudly, then taking off. But fighting her fear she walked up the steps and lightly tapped.

“Heather,” Joe exclaimed with a smile. “Come in. I didn’t expect to see you.”

“Mr. Meyer, I’m not just here delivering your lunch. I want to know why you followed me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Though Heather was shaking in her shoes she continued to stare at Joe Meyer, her eyes narrowed, silently demanding an answer.

“Follow you?” he finally repeated. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You were parked under a tree just down from Three Oaks Ranch a couple of days ago.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Both Blake and I saw you, though of course we didn’t know it was you at the time.

Then that same car—yours—followed me home. Not then, another time.”

“You must be—”

“I’m not mistaken.”

“If, and I do mean, if, I was behind you on that road it would have been a coincidence.”

“And parking under the tree? Was that a coincidence too?”

“I didn’t park under any tree,” he retorted, a frown crossing his brow. “I happen to own a popular car. There are many people who have that model.”

“Not around here. Most of us drive trucks or SUV’s. I’ve never seen a silver Hyundai—until I saw yours beneath that tree! Just tell me what you want? What’s going on? Why did you follow me, and why did you come back to Smoky Hill?”

“For the last time, I did not follow you, and why I’m here is none of your business. Heather, I’m a busy man and I don’t have time for this nonsense. You’ve done your job, you’ve delivered my lunch, now please leave.”

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“Fine, but if I see you behind me again I’m calling the sheriff!”

Before he could respond she spun around and marched through the door. But her bravado was contrived. Her legs felt like jelly and her heart was racing. Desperate to sit down and catch her breath she hurried to Cabin Four, and with trembling fingers she punched in the code.

“I guess he’s not so timid after all,” she muttered under her breath. “He’s like Jeckyll and Hyde.”

Pushing open the door and stepping inside, she flopped into the nearest chair and took in several long, deep breaths. When she started to feel calmer her focus turned to the bracelet. She had to have a quick look and get back to the restaurant before it opened.

Glancing around the floor and seeing nothing, she rose to her feet and began checking behind the chairs. Still coming up empty, she was lifting up the sofa cushions when she heard a noise from the bedroom. For a moment she froze, then thinking the guests must not have left she crept to the front door.

“Hey. I don’t know how you found me but you can’t get away that easy!”

Instantly she knew the voice.

It was Courtney.

* * *

A short time before the sheriff's unexpected visit, Joe had helped Courtney as she'd painfully hobbled to the next door cabin. After making her way up the steps to the back porch, she'd picked the lock, limped into the bedroom and laid down.

"I'll be back with something to eat soon," Joe had said. "You'll be safe here for a while. We're lucky. Apparently this is the slow time of the year."

"Oh, yeah, real lucky," she'd grunted sarcastically.

"Get some rest. This afternoon we'll figure out where to go from here, but we should leave overnight."

"I agree, but I think we should still go to Puerto Rico. Will we need new ID's?"

"Probably. We'll discuss all this later. I won't be long."

A few minutes had passed when she'd heard what she thought was someone walking in through the front door. Startled, she'd sat up, but her elbow knocked an ornament off the side table. Realizing she needed to check, she'd hobbled across the room to peek.

Seeing Heather she'd almost cheered.

Now staring at Heather's wide eyes and shocked face, Courtney knew, in spite of her painful, bandaged ankle, she had the upper hand.

"Sit down, Heather."

"The hell I will. I'm calling the sheriff right now, and from the looks of things, you can't stop me."

“If you don’t sit down, I’ll make sure King Henry won’t survive the next six months.”

“You’re crazy!”

“So I’ve been told, and maybe I am, but I don’t make empty threats. It doesn’t matter where I am I can still make a call, and there are people I know who will do exactly what I tell them.”

“But why would you do something like that?”

“I said sit down and you’re still standing. If you don’t do as I say that’s what will happen. Did you forget I’m a drug dealer? I do other things as well, but that’s irrelevant. The point is, I have friends, and those friends are not people you want visiting your horses. Now sit the fuck down or you’ll be sorry.”

Seeing Heather’s fright and fear Courtney savored the heady feeling of power and triumph. She’d learned early in life that she could make people bend to her will just through nasty threats. It didn’t matter if she could make good on them or not. All that mattered was the victim believing she would.

“Okay, okay, but will you at least tell me what you want from me? What’s going on? Why was Joe stalking me?”

“Why do you think, you stupid cow?”

“I have no idea.”

“Did you forget what happened at the show? Your fucking boyfriend turned me into the cops, that’s what happened.”

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“What does that have to do with me?”

“The best way to hurt him is to hurt you,” she sneered. “But you’re guilty too. You called the damn vet to check on King Henry.”

“But he was in a terrible state. You should be thanking me for helping him, not—”

“Hey, you stuck your nose where it didn’t belong, and that pissed me off. It still pisses me off. But enough of all this shit. Ah, finally, Joe’s back,” she exclaimed as they heard the sound of the patio door opening and closing. He’ll be very happy to see you here. You’ve saved him a lot of trouble.”

As if on cue Joe walked into the room, but seeing Heather he stopped short and broke into a wide grin.

“Well, well, look who’s here,” he exclaimed. “Talk about perfect timing.”

“Joe, please, I’ve done nothing to you. Just let me go. I won’t tell anyone I’ve seen Courtney, I swear. “

“I’ll make you a deal. Do exactly as I say and you’ll be fine.”

“And so will your horses,” Courtney chimed in.

“Okay, fine, whatever you want I’ll do it,” Heather said urgently.

“Good. It’s a simple request. Just follow my instructions to the letter. Start by pulling

out your phone.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Sheriff Cooper was convinced Joe Meyer had helped Courtney escape and they had spent the night together in the cabin. Sitting in his cruiser he tapped his thumb against the steering wheel. He was a patient man, especially when it came to waiting for perps to show themselves. He was thinking the couple were somewhere in the campground when his cell phone chimed. Glancing at the screen he was surprised to see Heather’s name.

“Hello, Heather, what can I do for you?”

“Hello Sheriff,” she began breathlessly. “I’ve just seen Courtney McCallum and Joe Meyer down at the cabin by the swimming hole.”

“Go back to the restaurant and tell the manager to keep everyone in there until he hears from me.”

“Sure, Sheriff. Will do.”

Hastily ending the call and ordering Deputy Tagg to join him, the sheriff drove cautiously down the lane. But as he approached the small, man-made lake, he was startled to see a family coming from the cabin and laying food on one of the picnic tables.

“Dammit,” he grunted under his breath, snatching up his cell phone.

When the call to Heather went straight to voice mail a cold chill rippled through his body. Deputy Tagg had arrived, and signaling him to follow, the sheriff sped back to Cabin Five. Only when he saw the silver Hyundai Sonata still parked in front did he

take a breath. Swiftly, leaving his cruiser, he hurried to the deputy's car.

“Cover the back,” he ordered as the young man climbed from behind the wheel.

Waiting until the deputy confirmed he was in position, the sheriff crouched low to the ground and moved across to the Sonata. Finding it unlocked, he opened the car door and pressed on the horn, hoping it would lure Joe Meyer outside.

There was no response.

He waited a moment and tried again.

Not sure if the couple had fled on foot or were just holding out, he marched up the steps and banged his fist on the door.

“Joe Meyer, this is Sheriff Cooper!”

When no-one appeared, he cautiously opened the door and poked his head in.

There wasn't a sound.

Instinctively he knew the cabin was empty.

* * *

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While the drama was unfolding at the Moonshine Campground, Blake's lesson had come to an abrupt end. The horse had lost a shoe. As Molly, his student, led him into a stall Blake called his farrier. The man could make it out but wouldn't arrive until the end of the day. Assuring Molly the appointment had been made, Blake stepped outside and looked across at the paddocks. Doug was with Henry getting to know him.

Blake smiled and waved and Doug waved back, but as Blake started walking across to join him he felt an odd, sudden impulse to call Heather. Lifting out his phone he placed the call, only to have it answered by voice mail.

"Is everything okay?" Doug called.

"Yeah, but I want to surprise Heather and go to the campgrounds for lunch. I shouldn't be more than an hour."

"You can't be away from that girl for five minutes," Doug remarked with a grin.

Chuckling and thinking his foreman might be right, Blake hurried into the house to clean up.

* * *

Inside the dining room the hostess was becoming worried. Heather had been gone far too long, and she wasn't responding to texts. Seeing the manager walking in from the kitchen she waved him over.

“What’s up?”

“It’s Heather. She took an order to Cabin Five about fifteen minutes ago and still hasn’t come back“

“That’s weird. Have you texted her?”

”Several times and I haven’t heard from her. She was going to stop into Cabin Four to look for a bracelet Sarah thinks she lost there yesterday. But she still should have responded to my texts. This isn’t like her.”

“That’s odd. I’ll run down there,” he said, marching to the door, but as he stepped outside he caught his breath. Heather’s truck was gone. Frowning, he tried calling her, only to get her voicemail. But a moment later he spied the sheriff and a squad car driving up the lane towards the road. Running forward he urgently waved them over, and waited anxiously as the sheriff abruptly stopped and lowered his window.

“Sheriff Cooper, this is probably nothing, but, uh, it’s about Heather Hunt. She’s not missing exactly, but—”

“Slow down and tell me what’s happened.”

“She delivered an order—”

“To Cabin Five?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“Just keep talkin’.”

“She hasn’t come back and now her truck is gone. She would never just take off like

that, not without telling me.”

“Okay. Try not to worry, Terry. We’re on it, but if you hear from her, call the station right away.”

“I sure will, sheriff. Will you keep me posted?”

“Of course.”

Before Terry had a chance to thank him, the sheriff was kicking up gravel as he accelerated down the lane.

* * *

After forcing Heather to tell him the key to her pickup was on top of the right front wheel, Joe had locked her into a closet and jogged up the lane. After returning with the truck he’d quickly tied her hands behind her back, made her crawl into the small, cramped space behind the seats, then awkwardly carried Courtney out and placed her in the passenger seat. Now leaving the campground and turning down the country road he tried desperately to think of a place to lie low.

“They’re probably already looking for her, and when they see this truck is gone every deputy in this Godforsaken place will be watching for it,” Courtney railed. “We need to find someplace to hide for a while.”

“I agree, but where? We could disappear into the trees, but I think the nearest turnoff into the forest is directly across from a couple of ranches. We’re bound to be seen. Wait!” he suddenly exclaimed, pointing excitedly as he approached the signpost for Lake View Point. “There. That’s where we can go.”

“Lake View Point?”

“Yes! It’s an amazing place. I stumbled across it the other day. There are huge boulders everywhere, and in this truck we can probably find a place to park out of sight.”

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“Did you say lake?” Courtney asked, her eyes lighting up.

“Yeah, there’s a lake, and you can walk right to the edge of it.”

“Yes, that will be perfect,” she mumbled, her lips curling into an evil smile.

“Absolutely perfect.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Looking forward to surprising Heather and enjoying a delicious lunch, Blake was driving down the road towards the campground when he thought he saw Heather’s truck coming towards him. But it was traveling fast. He was sure he must be mistaken, but as it sped by, he was shocked to see Joe Meyer and Courtney McCallum in the front seat. Abruptly pulling to the side of the road, he looked in his rearview mirror and saw them taking the turn-off to Lake View Point.

“What the hell...?” he muttered, grabbing his cell phone and calling the sheriff.

“Yeah, Blake, what’s up?” the sheriff asked gruffly.

“I just saw Joe Meyer and Courtney McCallum in a pick up driving into Lake View Point, and I could swear it was Heather’s truck.”

“She wasn’t in the front seat?”

“Not that I could see.”

“Thanks, Blake.”

“Wait—”

But the sheriff was gone.

His mind racing Blake dialed the restaurant.

“Moonshine Restaurant”

“Hi, Heather Hunt, please.”

“Uh, sorry, she’s not here at the moment.”

It was all he needed to hear.

Hastily cutting off the call and suddenly fighting panic, he did a fast u-turn and accelerated forward. In seconds he was at the turn-off to Lake View Point, but abruptly realized if Heather was in danger he couldn’t charge in. Hitting the brakes, he drove slowly through the entrance, then pulled to the side and jumped out.

* * *

While Joe had found cover for the truck it wasn’t behind the big boulders, but shrubbery. When he’d climbed out he’d discovered it wasn’t high enough to cover the top of the cab. He’d frantically tried to break off branches to lay over, but with only one hand he’d found it impossible.

“You do it,” he barked at Heather.

“I’m not tall enough, and in case you’ve forgotten you tied my hands behind my

back. By the way, what did you use? It feels like a sock.”

“That’s because it is a sock,” Courtney hissed, “and you shouldn’t be complaining. At least it’s soft. Joe, take it off. She can pick up all twigs and crap on the ground. That will help.”

“Sorry, Courtney, that will take too long, and I have a better idea,” Joe said thoughtfully. “If we can get past those big boulders facing the lake we’ll be out of sight. If anyone does come across this truck they’ll think it’s parked while whoever owns went hiking. We only have to wait a few hours until it gets dark, then we can leave.”

“Besides the fact there are more holes in that plan than Swiss Cheese, how the hell can I climb around rocks with my ankle?”

“I’ll help you.”

“There’s no way I can do that without my hands,” Heather declared. “You can forget it.”

Scowling, Courtney hobbled towards her.

“You’re tough, I’ll give you that, but your clock is ticking. In fact, time has just run out. Joe! That big flat boulder,” she exclaimed. “The one jutting out into the water. That’s perfect.”

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“For what?” Heather demanded as a rush of fear suddenly surged through her being.
“Courtney, tell me, perfect for what?”

“My revenge!”

* * *

Staying close to the low bank that flanked either side of the entrance, Blake had moved quickly and cautiously across the small, smooth rocks. But as the magnificent lake had come into view he'd heard voices. He'd strained to listen, but the only words he'd been able to hear clearly were my revenge.

Now pausing his step and peering around the bank, he caught his breath. Joe Meyer, with what appeared to be a bandaged hand, was carrying Courtney towards the edge of the lake. With no sign of Heather, and confused by what he was witnessing, Blake continued to watch as Joe made his way onto a large, flat boulder jutting into the water. As he set Courtney gently down on one foot, Blake saw bandaging around the opposite ankle.

“What are you doing, and where the hell is Heather?” Blake muttered under his breath.

Wishing he'd brought his shotgun, he was about to step out when Joe started jogging back and disappeared into the bushes. Just minutes later he reappeared holding Heather by the hair and hustling forward.

My revenge.

As the words flashed through Blake's head he knew exactly what Joe and Courtney planned to do. Snatching his phone from his pocket, he texted the sheriff.

Joe and Courtney, Lake View Point. Urgent but approach with caution and stealth. No sirens. Heather in serious danger.

Praying the sheriff would heed the warning, Blake crouched down, hurried to the cover of the abundant bushes, then searched the ground for a weapon. There was nothing of any substance. With his anxiety and panic growing, he studied the thick stalks.

* * *

Now standing on the rock with Joe's hand grasping a fistful of her hair, Heather tried to control the fear pulsing through her body.

"That water looks inviting, don't you think?" Courtney sneered, hobbling closer.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Heather asked, barely able to get the words out. "I don't understand. What have I ever done to you except buy Henry?"

"I'm not doing anything to you. Well, that's not strictly true. I am, but this is about doing something to that bastard cowboy of yours."

"What? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Blake! He turned me into the cops! I ended up in jail because of that bastard. Now he'll suffer—probably for the rest of his life."

"But...how...why?"

“Why do you think? I’ll make sure he knows I threw you into an icy grave because of him. He’ll blame himself for your death.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Courtney!” Joe suddenly shouted. “What the hell are you talking about? I never agreed to this. I only said we could get back at Blake by kidnapping her to scare him.”

“Yeah, well, I couldn’t tell you because I knew you’d turn into a wuss. If I didn’t have this fucking sprained ankle you could leave, but I can’t balance properly. If she gives me any trouble I could end up in the lake myself!”

“Uh...what happened to your ankle, and J-joe, how d-did you hurt your hand?” Heather sputtered, hoping if they could talk about normal things he’d let go of her hair.

“Your damn staircase, that’s how,” Courtney spat.

“My s-staircase? What were you doing there?”

“We were going to wait for you in that dump you call a home and take you, but those damn steps were like ice. My feet slid out from under me.”

“She fell backwards into me, then we both tumbled down the steps,” Joe interjected. “That’s how I ended up with a crushed hand. Damn thing hurts like hell. I’m sure there are some broken bones.”

“So that’s why you followed me!” Heather exclaimed, jerking her head around to face him. To her shock the sudden movement jarred her hair from his grip. Seizing the moment she leapt off the boulder onto the rocky ground, but with her wrists still

tied behind her back she stumbled over and had trouble standing up.

“Get her!” Courtney shrieked. “For fuck’s sake get her!”

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Though Courtney was screaming Heather thought she heard Blake calling her name. Panic-stricken and thinking she must be imagining things, she looked up and stared in disbelief. Hewas running towards her. Tears of relief and joy sprang from her eyes, but she was still scared. Looking over her shoulder at the monsters who had terrorized her, she saw Courtney was still pointing at her and yelling at Joe.

“Darlin’, are you okay?” Blake asked frantically as he hurriedly untied her wrists.

“Uh, yeah, s-sort of,” she stammered, but she couldn’t take her eyes off what was happening on the rock.

“My God, I’ve been so worried,” Blake continued, dropping next to her and bringing her into his arms.

“Blake...look.”

* * *

With his heart still hammering Blake darted his eyes across to Joe and Courtney. To his horror he saw the evil woman tilting backwards, flailing her arms in the air as she tried to steady herself. Joe suddenly lunged forward to grab her, but in his panic he instinctively used his right arm.

The arm with the injured hand.

Though he managed to grasp the corner of Courtney’s jacket he immediately let out a wail and it slipped from his fingers.

“Oh, my God, she’s lost her balance,” Heather gasped. “She’s falling into the lake.”

Jumping to his feet Blake raced to the rock but arrived too late.

“NOOO...COURTNEY YOU CAN’T LEAVE ME!” Joe bellowed, and before Blake could stop him he jumped in after her. Unable to leave without trying to save them Blake began pulling off his boots.

“Blake! No! Wait!” Heather cried, running towards him. “The sheriff’s here!”

“Dammit, boy, get down off there,” the sheriff yelled, climbing from his car.

“But Joe and Courtney fell in! I need to—”

“Leave it to us,” the sheriff ordered, cutting him off as three squad cars rolled in behind him. “We have the equipment and trainin’. Now get off that rock!”

Realizing the sheriff was right Blake jumped down, only to be met by Heather punching his chest.

“What were you thinking?” she demanded breathlessly. “You scared me half to death.”

“Sorry, darlin’,” he said, grabbing her wrists then hugging her. “I’m takin’ you home right now, and I’ll ask Doug to make you his amazing hot chocolate. Then I want to hear exactly how you ended up in this mess.”

“Excuse me,” the sheriff interrupted, walking up to join them as two of his deputies hastily donned wet suits. “Come on back to my car. I just need a quick recap. You can give me a full report after you rest up. Tomorrow will be fine.”

“What about Joe and Courtney?” Heather asked. “Do you think there’s a chance they’ll survive?”

“My boys know what to do and they’ll get them out as fast as they can and ambulances have already been called. Please come to the car and tell me how you ended up here in your truck with those two.”

* * *

Sitting in the sheriff’s car, Heather explained how she’d volunteered to take a lunch tray to Joe so she could ask him why he’d followed her. Then she’d stumbled across Courtney in the cabin next to his.

“I don’t believe it,” Blake grunted, but before she could respond a deputy strode up to speak to the sheriff.

“What’s the news?” he asked, lowering his window.

“Not good, Sheriff. Sorry.”

“Ah, I see. Well, the medics have arrived. Maybe they can work miracles.”

“Uh, no, I mean, the divers can’t find them. The spot where they jumped in is deep and really murky. I expect their bodies will wash up at some point.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” the sheriff said with a heavy sigh. “Okay, wrap it up.”

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“What do you mean, I wouldn’t count on it?” Heather asked.

“That lake has an appetite. Just recently it took a biker gang and they haven’t been seen since.”

“Really?” she muttered, feeling a chill prick her skin.

“Yep. So, gettin’ back to your story, I take it they forced you to call me and send me down to the swimmin’ hole, then took your truck.” “Yes, Joe forced me behind the seats and drove it here.”

“Okay, come to the station tomorrow around eleven o’clock and make the full report. And don’t worry about your truck. I’ll make sure it’s dropped off, but should it be taken to your place or Blake’s ranch?”

“The ranch,” Blake replied, then looking at Heather, he added, “You’ve just gone through one helluva drama. I’m takin’ care of you for a while. No arguments.”

“You won’t get any,” Heather replied with a grateful sigh. “Shoot, I need to call Terry and let him know I won’t be back.”

“I’ll take care of Terry for you,” the sheriff offered. “I have to go back there and finish up with those cabins.”

“Thank you, that would be great...strange though.”

“What’s that?”

“How Joe and Courtney just seemed to disappear into the lake. It’s like they were swallowed up.”

“Do you see that tall, oval rock over there?” the sheriff asked, pointing through his windshield. “Read the metal plate. I’ll see you tomorrow, and I’m real glad you’re both okay.”

Climbing from the car, Blake and Heather walked the short distance to the imposing boulder and stared down at the brass plaque.

If your heart is pure the lake spirits will save you.

If you carry evil the lake spirits will take you.

Author Unknown

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

On the drive back to the ranch Heather and Blake held hands across the console, but lost in their own thoughts they barely spoke. When he pulled to a stop outside the barn, Heather kissed him on the cheek, then said she wanted to hug Apollo and say hello to Henry. Blake understood. Seeing Butch race up to the truck Blake wanted to hug him too.

“Hi, Blake, is Heather okay?” Doug asked, striding up to join him. “Why isn’t she at work? What’s goin’ on? You look beat up, like you’ve been through the mill.”

“I have, and it’s a long story,” Blake replied, crouching down and making a fuss of his dog. “I don’t even know where to start. Bottom line, a couple at the campground kidnapped her and drove to Lake View Point. She got away just as I arrived, but the man and woman...well...they weren’t so lucky. They ended up in that icy water. The

sheriff thinks they'll never be found."

"Damn. Sounds like you could use a beer."

"I think a double shot of whiskey is more likely."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Do you have that special chocolate with you?"

"I never leave home without it," Doug replied with the hint of a smile. "Truth be told, I'm addicted."

"Could you make Heather a mug of that special drink?"

"I'll get right on it."

"Thanks, Doug. I'm goin' into the paddock to join her. We'll be there in just a few minutes. Come on, Butch, let's go."

* * *

As Heather had reached Apollo and wrapped her arms around his neck, he'd leaned his head over her in a horse hug, eliciting a wave of emotion.

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“I love you so much,” she mumbled as tears slipped from her eyes. “I did something really stupid today...it was bad, really bad. Blake saved me. Hereallysaved me.”

A nicker made her look around, and she saw Henry standing at the fence.

“Hello, you,” she exclaimed, stepping back and wiping her wet cheeks. “Don’t worry, I’ll come in and visit you too.”

As she climbed through the rails he lowered his head, then nudged her when she straightened up.

“You’re adorable, and so smart. You’ve already figured out we’re good people,” she murmured, stroking his face.

“Most horses are.”

“Blake!”

“Hey, darlin’,” he murmured, striding up and placing his arm around her shoulders.

“How are you feelin’?”

“Better, but still a bit shaky. Spending a few minutes with these two has helped.”

“There’s nothing like bein’ around horses and dogs, but I think that applies to animals in general. Have you ever seen videos of the guys in South Africa lovin’ on the big cats?”

“I have, it’s amazing. I’d give anything to do that, though I think I’d be terrified.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“You? You’re not scared of anything.”

“I was scared today,” he murmured as a frown crossed his brow. “Real scared. Maybe as scared as I’ve ever been. Are you ready to come inside? Doug’s makin’ you that hot chocolate.”

“Ooh, yes, please. That sounds perfect.”

“I’ll be havin’ a double whiskey, and I think I might drop a little in your drink.”

“That might be a good idea. I’m still trembling,” she said, holding out her hand.

“I’m not surprised. We’ll see you two later,” he added, looking across at Apollo and patting Henry’s neck.

As they started back to the house he took her hand in a strong grip, and she leaned against his arm.

“Blake, the awful thing we just went through—it’s beginning to feel like a dream--or rather a nightmare,” she said softly.

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

Climbing up the porch steps and entering the kitchen, they found her hot chocolate and his whiskey waiting on the table.

“Look at this,” she exclaimed. “What a thoughtful thing to do.”

“That’s Doug.”

“He’s awfully quiet though.”

“Yep.”

“Does he have a girlfriend?”

“Not that I know of.”

“He should.”

“Is that right,” Blake remarked, settling into a chair and picking up his drink.

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“Yes, it is. He’s really good looking, and he’s...intriguing. I wonder if—”

“No match makin’!”

“But, Blake—”

“No! Stay out of it. Doug’s a resourceful man. If he wants a woman in his life he’ll make it happen. But, Heather,” he said, lowering his voice, “I have to ask--why did you decide to confront Joe? I know I should probably wait to talk about this, but dammit, I can’t. What the hell possessed you?”

“I know I shouldn’t have and I’m sorry.”

He didn’t speak, but raised his glass and downed a swallow.

“So...why did you?” he finally asked again.

“I’m not sure. It was a spur of the moment thing. The tray had to be delivered, and I thought it would be my only chance to ask him why he’d been stalking me. I mean, everyone knew where I was so I felt safe. I never imagined I’d run into Courtney. She was so mad you turned her into the police. That’s why all this happened. I still find it hard to wrap my brain around that.”

“No, it happened because she’s psycho.”

“And I made a mistake,” Heather said softly. “Confronting Joe was a really stupid thing to do. I’m sorry, truly I am. I won’t do anything like it again.”

“No, you won’t. And Heather, there’s something else. If that staircase outside your place gets that slippery durin’ a cold spell, I don’t want you livin’ there.”

“Honestly, Blake, last winter I didn’t think I’d survive. I actually slipped a few times and just managed to catch myself with the handrail. But it’s really scary carrying up groceries. Sometimes I have to make more than one trip. I talked to the owners a couple of times, and they said they’d put down some grid mats, but they didn’t.”

“Do you have much stuff in your place?”

“No, it came furnished. Just my television and—”

“Spend the winter with me.”

“Really?”

“Actually, no...I take that back. I don’t need a trial run,” he suddenly exclaimed. “Heather, when I saw you on that rock with Joe and Courtney, I swear my heart stopped. Then when you jumped off I damn near had a total meltdown. Bottom line...it made me realize just how much you mean to me. Dammit, I love you and I want you here.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, darlin’, really.”

Blake...I love you too...so much. Yes, I’d love to be here. I’d love it more than anything.”

“Fair warnin’, once we’re both over this and our lives are back to normal we’re gonna have a serious talk. You can never put yourself at risk like that again.”

EPILOGUE

Two Weeks Later

The day after the horrific ordeal at the lake Heather visited her parents. Though she gave them a detailed account of the events leading up to the terrifying moment, she didn't say anything about her pending change of address. Now, a couple of weeks later, sitting in the kitchen enjoying coffee and cake, she nervously told them she had moved to Three Oaks Ranch to be with Blake.

"I'm glad you left that place above the garage," her father said with a frown. "I've never been happy about those stairs, though apparently they became a blessing in disguise." Then taking a breath, he added, "Even so, this cowboy had better produce a ring pretty quick or I'll have to pay him a visit."

"Dad!"

"Don't worry, sweetheart," her mother interjected. "Your father won't be visiting unless he's with me, and he'll be warm and friendly. Won't you, Tom?"

"No promises," he grunted, then looking at his wife he broke into a grin. "Yeah, that's right. But he'd better!"

Though Heather laughed, and told herself couples lived together all the time, she suddenly felt oddly uncomfortable.

* * *

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With only her clothes, a television set and her trophy, Heather's move had been quick and easy. Blake had been using the small second bedroom for storage, and he'd taken great pleasure in clearing it out so she could have a dressing room and closet.

Most of the boxes were filled with old clothes, but there were also some books and household items he never used. While she'd been visiting her parents, he'd stopped at the church to deliver the load and help Emily, the minister's wife, sort through it all.

"This is just wonderful," she exclaimed. "There are so many needy people and everything here will find a grateful home."

"To be honest, Emily, I didn't realize how much I had. I cleared out the room because my girlfriend is movin' in and I want her to have a closet and dressin' room."

"Ah, I see," Emily said with a nod.

She was still smiling, but he could feel her disapproval. A short time later, driving on his way to pick up Heather, he felt a twinge of doubt. Though he loved her and wanted them to be together, he wondered if living together was right.

* * *

Blake had started riding Henry shortly after the drama at the lake. Watching from the viewing platform, Heather had been amazed how relaxed Blake appeared to be and how easily Henry transitioned between gaits. But whenever Henry suggested she climb on board, she'd shake her head and say, I'm not sure I'm ready. Now arriving home, he rolled to a stop and turned off the engine, but didn't climb out.

“Heather, wait,” he said as she started to open her door. “I want you to change into your riding gear. The time has come for you to sit on Henry.”

“Uh, you mean now?”

“Yep. By the time you get back I’ll have him saddled and we’ll be waitin’ in the ring.”

“But—”

“I made you a promise,” he said, lowering his voice. “I told you I’d support you, and I did. I also said you’d ride Henry, and now you will.”

* * *

A short time later Heather stood in the middle of the arena while Blake lunged the big dapple grey for a few minutes, then led him over to the mounting block.

“He’s very much like Apollo. You can ride him with a light rein. His stride is bigger, but it’s comfortable. You won’t have any trouble.”

Though still nervous, she moved to the top of the mounting block while Blake adjusted the stirrup lengths, then swung her leg over and sat down.

“Oh, my gosh, he seems even bigger up here. Are you sure about this?”

“Of course I’m sure. You wouldn’t be up there if I wasn’t. Walk around the arena and relax.”

“Okay. Here goes nothing.”

To her surprise and relief, in just a few minutes she was confident enough trot.

“You’re right,” she called as she circled. “He’s really smooth and so responsive. This is fantastic. Buying him was a leap of faith, but I’m so glad I did.”

By the time she finished riding and led Henry back to the barn it was dusk. As Blake and Doug brought the horses in and fed, Heather took care of Henry then returned to the house for a shower. Elated, she washed off the day, then wrapped a towel around herself and stepped into the bedroom—only to find Blake sitting on the edge of the bed waiting for her.

“You and I have some unfinished business,” he declared as she ambled towards him.

“We do?” she asked, noticing two stacked pillows in the middle of the bed.

“We do. Decidin’ to confront Joe was a really bad idea.”

“I know, but we’ve been through this!”

“Heather, I have to make sure you never...and I meannever...put yourself at risk like that again. Drop that towel and bend over the pillows facing the headboard.

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

“But—”

“Now, Heather!”

With butterflies in her stomach bursting to life, she moved to the bed, let the towel fall to the floor, then placed herself across the pillows. “Now put this on,” he ordered, handing her a blindfold.

Though she was nervous as she slipped it over her eyes, she couldn’t deny the thrill rippling through her body.

* * *

Once she was in position, Blake straddled her back facing her feet, and smoothed his palms over her full, round cheeks for several long seconds before speaking.

“Heather, if you ever find yourself in any kind of trouble walk away and call me,” he began. “I’m going to teach you some self defense, but there are three basic don’ts. Are you listenin’?” he demanded, landing the first hard slap on each cheek.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Don’t think you can get the better of a man. Don’t borrow trouble. Don’t go where you know you shouldn’t. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I’m spankin’ you now to punish you for thinkin’ you could confront Joe on your own. You knew at the time it was a terrible idea. Am I right?”

“Yes, I did, and I’m sorry...and...and..it’s my fault they’re gone.”

“No!” he barked, spanking her again. “Joe and Courtney are in that lake because they were out to kill you. They’re the only ones responsible for what happened to them.”

“You’re right, I know you’re right,” she bleated as he continued to slap his hand from one side to the other.

“But from now on—”

“I won’t do anything stupid. I promise!”

“Good,” he said, softening his voice as he caressed her red skin, then slid his fingers into her sex.

Hearing her gasp, he rubbed her clit, allowing her groans to guide him as he increased the pressure. But just when he was about to spank her again she let out a cry, and he couldn’t resist thrusting his finger in and out of her soaked passage.

“Ooh, Blake, that feels so good. Please don’t stop.”

Though his cock had become a steel rod, he continued the lewd attention, bringing her to the brink, then backing off, until she was pleading for her release.

“No more risk-takin’?”

“No, never, please....”

It took just a few seconds to bring her to a shuddering orgasm. With her body limp

beneath him, he gripped his hardness and stroked himself into a powerful climax, taking great joy in exploding over her reddened backside.

* * *

After cleaning up the mess with a warm damp, cloth, Blake moved the pillows and they stretched out on the bed.

“I love you, Heather,” he murmured, bringing her into his arms.

“I love you too, Blake. Sometimes I love you so much it hurts.”

“So...should we get married here at the ranch or in the church?” he asked softly.

“Um...the church,” she replied without missing a beat. “My parents go there every Sunday. They’d be very disappointed if I was married anywhere else.”

“We should check the calendar and set a date over dinner, and there’s something you should know. I’ll spank you if I feel you need it.”

“I know, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Just as well, because that’s a promise.”

THE END