



The Cowboy's Ultimatum

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Category: Romance, Western, Adult

Description: She wealthy young woman who foolishly made friends with a drug-dealing biker.

He's a western trainer in a small town.

Can he save her before it's too late?

Though Helen Rutherford is used to fine dining, glitzy night clubs and expensive clothes, when she meets Ken Lockhart, a leather clad, bad boy biker with long, dark hair, she's captivated. But her family moves to a small country town, and she can only see him when she returns to the city for some fun.

As she searches for a barn to board her beloved mare, she runs across a handsome, muscled cowboy named Andy Baker. There's a look in his eye that sends goosebumps across her skin, and when he agrees to take her horse she's thrilled.

Andy is a skilled trainer who rides his horses naked. No bridles, no bits, no saddles. When a sassy, sexy young woman asks if she can keep her horse at his barn he agrees, and as she walks away he suspects it won't be long before she's over his knee.

But Ken Lockhart has plans for Helen. Dark, dangerous plans. And no small town cowboy will get in his way.

Will Andy be able to stop the biker's wicked scheme and save her before it's too late?

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CHAPTER ONE

Sitting on Maverick, his big-boned gelding, ambling towards the barn after a peaceful trail ride, Andy Baker readied himself to meet his girlfriend, Helen Rutherford. She'd been away at a show for the weekend, and on the phone the night before she'd been frustrated and angry. He knew it was best to just let her vent, but now the time had come to spell out some home truths.

There was nothing wrong with her horse.

The problem was her.

As he slid off Maverick and moved the rope from around the horse's neck, Andy began wiping him down and thought about how best to approach the touchy subject. Whenever he tried to discuss her ongoing issues she became defensive and often walked off in a huff.

"I don't know what to do about that girl sometimes," he muttered as he started to leave the barn. "Come on, fella, I'll take you into your paddock."

Though the horse was wearing no halter, and Andy had no lead rope, Maverick followed him like a faithful dog. As they started towards the pasture, Andy heard the sound of a truck and glanced up the driveway. Helen's familiar white pickup was slowly rolling towards the barn. By the time he released Maverick and closed the gate, she had rolled to a stop and was opening the back of her trailer.

"Hold up, hon, I'll help you," he called, breaking into a jog.

“Thanks, I’m exhausted,” she called back, then stepping aside as he joined her, she added, “It was the weekend from hell.”

“It can’t have been that bad.”

“I don’t know why I bother,” she grunted. “I feel as if I’m spending a fortune just to fight a losing battle. My trainer will be in the area tomorrow and she’s going to stop by to give me a private lesson. Is that okay?”

“Sure, but it probably wasn’t as terrible as you think,” he said, opening the back of the trailer. “I’ll take Daisy over to join Maverick and we can go inside and talk about it.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. It is what it is. Do you mind if I go up to the house? I’m desperate for a shower?”

“Go ahead. I’ll be right behind you,” he replied as the chestnut mare backed out.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t worry, Daisy,” he murmured, stroking the mare’s neck as Helen marched away, “I’ll get through to her one way or another.”

As if understanding she gently nudged him, then let out a snort and shook her body.

“Yeah, I know, you need to stretch your legs and hang out in a big grass field where you belong.”

She walked quietly beside him, but when he released her into the paddock she bolted away, bucked a few times, then dropped to the ground and rolled. Smiling, he continued to watch for a minute, then headed back to the trailer.

As he unhooked it from the truck and cleaned it out, his focus returned to Helen. She was the quintessential fiery redhead, with bright blue eyes, a knockout figure and an engaging smile. But she could be difficult and stubborn. She wanted to show in English Equitation classes, and she insisted, because he was a cowboy they spoke a different language. Especially when it came to training. Marching down to his house he felt a grim determination. She needed to listen to him.

“Helen?” he called as he walked in through the back door.

“I’m in the living room.”

“Can I get you a beer?”

“No, thanks. I have a glass of the wine I brought over last week.”

Entering the kitchen, he grabbed a bottle from the refrigerator, popped off the top and ambled into the living room.

“I thought you were takin’ a shower.”

“I just needed to catch my breath for a minute.”

“Talk to me,” he said, settling into the couch next to her. “What happened?”

“Daisy happened! She just doesn’t listen.”

“Maybe you’re not bein’ clear.”

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“Andy, don’t start. What you do and I do are totally different.”

“You’re right there. My horses are naked and I have no issues, but you have all that tack on Daisy and what happens? Problems. What does that tell you?”

“I can’t deal with this right now,” she exclaimed, jumping to her feet. “I’m going home.”

“Hey, take it easy.”

“You keep trying to convince me what you do will work for me, and I keep telling you it won’t.”

“How do you know if you don’t give it a shot?”

“For pity’s sake, it’s like...I don’t know...oil and water. It won’t mix. I love going on the trail with you and riding Big Ben, but Daisy’s isn’t a trail horse. She spooks at everything. I can’t imagine how she’d be with all the things we’d pass going up Smoky Hill.”

“And I’ve told you we can fix that. She doesn’t have to be—”

“I can’t handle this conversation again, I’m too tired, and we’ve talked this to death. I’m going home. My trainer will be here around one o’clock tomorrow. Her name’s Erin, by the way. I’ll get here around twelve-thirty.”

“Okay, get some rest. When I meet her I can talk to her about some of my methods

and hopefully we can have a meetin' of the minds."

"Andy, please just stay out of it. She's going out of her way to come here. I don't want to piss her off."

"Helen," he said, lowering his voice and stepping closer, "I'm sorry I upset you. I want to help, and I'm sure I can."

"I know. I'm sorry too. I didn't mean to be so short-tempered. I'm just wiped out and frustrated. I just want to go home and crawl into bed, but you have to understand, English riding is totally different to what you do."

"Darlin', it's not about whether you're jumpin', or doin' flat work in an English saddle, or ropin', or anything else. It's about helpin' Daisy overcome her fears and—"

"No! It's about making her do what I want!"

"You know what, you're right, you'd better go home," he muttered, dropping his arms away. "I'll walk you up to your truck."

He sensed she was about to tell him not to bother, and though she didn't, they made their way up to the barn in silence. Watching her climb behind the wheel and drive away, he let out a heavy sigh.

"Daisy isn't the only one who could use my help," he muttered. "There's a conversation you and I need to have. One that's long overdue."

CHAPTER TWO

Though Andy's younger sister Annie was a Country and Western singing star, her

fame hadn't changed her, or their relationship. She'd married a close friend, a local horse trainer named Brody King, and was now the proud mother of a little girl who was just starting to take baby steps. It was a happy time, full of laughter and delight. Needing to share the joy, he settled back on his couch, took another drink of his beer and called her.

"Hey, Andy," Annie said cheerily. "How did Helen fair at the show?"

"Not so well."

"Again?"

"Yep, again. Is that adorable little niece of mine still keeping you on your toes?"

"Oh yes. She's so brave. Nothing fazes her."

"Just like you."

"Me? I'm not that brave."

"Are you kidding me? Against all odds, you went off to Nashville and became amazingly successful, then somehow escaped that psycho manager of yours. A person doesn't get much braver than that."

"I admit there were some pretty scary moments when he showed up here, but Andy, why am I hearing tension in your voice? Is it Helen?"

"Is it that obvious?"

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“It is to me. I don’t understand why she doesn’t want your help, but you have to get through to her. At the very least she should tell you why she’s so against it.”

“I can’t figure it out either, but you’re right, this can’t go on. The minute I start talking to her about Daisy she turns into another person. And it’s not a person I like very much,” he added, lowering his voice.

“Then you need to take control of things before it really screws up your relationship.”

“Annie, you’re right. Her trainer’s comin’ here tomorrow to give her a lesson. At least I’ll be able to see what’s goin’ on with that mare firsthand.”

“That’s great, and you’ll be able to talk to her trainer directly.”

“I wish I could, but I’ve been asked not to do that.”

“Do what? Have a conversation?”

“Yep.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“I agree, but I’ll have to play this by ear, and honestly, I’m not lookin’ forward to it.”

“Molly! No!”

“Annie? What’s goin’ on?”

“I can’t believe it. She’s managed to open the pantry door. I have to go. But if you need back up I’m here.”

“I know, thanks, Annie. I’ll keep you posted.”

Ending the call and sipping his beer, he flashed back to his college days, and the deliciously decadent times he’d spent with a young woman named Janet Murphy.

She’d been into bondage and spanking, and he’d been happy to oblige. While they’d wanted very different things in life and inevitably parted company, he often yearned for the salacious sex life they’d shared.

“If anyone needs a trip over my knee it’s you, Helen Rutherford,” he muttered to himself.

It had been an idle remark, but his cock immediately stiffened at the thought. Carrying his beer into the bedroom, he quickly undressed, moved into his bathroom and stepped into the shower stall. With the hot water running over him, he took hold of his hardness and let his imagination take flight. He could see himself arguing with Helen in the living room, and as she started throwing her usual hissy fit he gave her an ultimatum.

“If you keep this up, Helen I’ll spank your ass.”

“The hell you will.”

Closing his eyes he imagined he was striding towards her, grabbing her arm and jerking her over the back of the couch. As he hastily pulled down her stretch jeans and panties she tried to kick out and cursed him over her shoulder. Ignoring her protests, he began slapping her backside evoking yelps and squeals. Picturing her curvaceous, naked cheeks turning red sent the blood pumping through his loins.

His climax abruptly loomed.

With the erotic images still dancing in his head, he urgently stroked his hardness. Moments later, letting out a long, deep, guttural groan, he surrendered to the powerful convulsions.

* * *

Helen lived only a short distance away in one of several guest cottages located on what had once been a farm. Deciding to leave the crime and craziness of the city, her wealthy parents had purchased the property and carried out extensive renovations, including the addition of several cabins for visiting guests.

Helen had laid claim to one of them.

Initially she'd enjoyed the quiet, open spaces, but after a few months she began missing the excitement the city offered. Now she would often stay over at the family's penthouse when she trailered her mare up to a English Hunter/Jumper barn for lessons.

But there was something else she missed.

It was a deep, dark secret.

A biker called Killer Kenny.

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Knowing her parents would be horrified if they knew she kept company with such a questionable character was part of the fun. Though he was quick with his fists, the nickname didn't refer to deadly bodily harm. It was the endless stream of young women who found him irresistible. And he didn't deny any of them.

He was in the forefront of her mind as she turned her truck into the property and followed the driveway past the main house to her cottage. Surrounded by a low, white picket fence and sitting on a slightly elevated bank above a small, manmade lake, it always made her smile when it came into view. It was the kind of place Andy would love, but Kenny would find uncomfortable.

The two men were polar opposites.

Pulling to a stop under the carport, she stared out at the picturesque pond. While she did love Andy's kind, gentle demeanor, she sometimes wished he was a bit tougher about things, but not as intense or volatile like Kenny.

Maybe I should push Andy more and see what happens.

A wicked smile crossed her lips.

An idea was beginning to take hold.

CHAPTER THREE

Andy spent the following morning working with three of the six horses he had in training. Their owners would be arriving in two short days, and after watching and

learning, they would enjoy a trail ride up a gentle slope called Smoky Hill. If the conditions were right, a mist resembling smoke would rise up from the ground and cloak the trees.

They would be staying at the hotel in the small town, but their day would be spent at the ranch, starting at nine and finishing around six. Lunch would be catered by the upmarket restaurant at the Moonshine Campgrounds.

The facility had been made famous because of Annie, Andy's sister, a singing superstar. Not only had she been married there, it was where her nefarious manager had stayed when he'd been hunting her down. Because of the highly publicized dramatic events, the campground had experienced a surge of new visitors, but they always made time to cater Andy's events.

He was working in the round pen, but knowing Helen was about to arrive he led the pretty paint mare back to her paddock. He was closing the gate when he saw Helen's truck turn into the driveway and he hurried down to meet her.

"Hey," he said with a smile as she pulled to a stop and leaned out the window.

"Hi. Where's Daisy?"

"Fine thanks, how are you?" he quipped.

"Sorry, I'm just a bit nervous. My trainer's not used to places like this."

"Like this?"

"A ranch."

"Let me guess. The horses at her barn live in stalls, not outside in paddocks."

“There aren’t any paddocks where her facility is. Well, not paddocks like you have here. She has turnouts. Anyway, I want Daisy ready before she arrives.”

“She’s where she always is. In the pasture with Buck and Rabbit.”

“Lord, I hope she hasn’t rolled. I won’t have time to give her a bath. I’ll just take her into the crossties and do the best I can.”

“Helen, a little dirt never hurt any horse. They’re outdoor models.”

“I know...it’s just...Andy...don’t get me wrong. I’m grateful to be boarding here, I am, but like I keep saying, you just don’t understand. Are you coming up to the barn with me?”

“Sure, if you want.”

“Just don’t lecture me about my equipment.”

“You mean that curb chain and—“

“It’s necessary!”

“I’m entitled to an opinion, but maybe it would be better if I sat this one out,” he replied with a frown. “Just remember, my only concern is the comfort of the horse, and it should be yours too. Don’t forget that.”

“I know, but as I’ve said over and over again, you don’t understand the whole Hunter/Jumper thing.”

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“Helen, what I don’t understand is why you’re trying to do it with a horse like Daisy. She’s not a fit. I’ll see you later.”

As he turned and began walking to the house he felt her eyes on his back, but resisted the urge to turn around. Moving inside and dropping into a chair, he let out a heavy breath.

When he’d first started dating Helen a few months before she’d been funny, warm, and easy to be around. Then a friend convinced her to take lessons and show in English equitation classes. To Andy’s dismay, Helen’s behavior and attitude began to change. Rather than enjoy her new venture, she constantly complained other riders in the lessons were more advanced, their horses prettier, bigger, shinier, or just plain better. When he suggested Daisy wasn’t cut out for the refined English shows, or she might not enjoy it, his comment had been like pouring oil on the fire.

He didn’t want his relationship with Helen to end, but he missed the girl he’d met. The girl who would ride up Smoky Hill with him, stay overnight curled against him, and exchange witty banter whether they were grooming horses or cooking a meal.

You need to take control of things before it really screws up your relationship.

As his sister’s words floated through his mind he nodded his head.

“You were right, Annie,” he muttered. “I have to handle this one way or another. Let the chips fall where they may.”

Slowly rising to his feet, he was about to make a fresh pot of coffee when he heard a

vehicle roll past the house. The sound made him sigh a second time, but it was a sigh of sadness, not annoyance at the trainer's arrival.

His dog Wilbur had passed away a few months before. Andy missed his warning bark and the sound of his feet pattering across the tile floor. Thinking the time may have finally come to bring a new, four-legged, furry friend into his life, he decided to drive to the local animal shelter. It would have to be when the clinic was over, but the decision brought a smile to his lips.

Suddenly wanting a cup of coffee, he moved across to the kitchen sink to pour water into the electric kettle. But when he glanced out the window, he noticed a woman he didn't recognize riding Daisy. She had the reins in a death grip and was spurring the mare forward.

The sight made him sick to his stomach.

He understood what the woman was trying to achieve, but it was clear Daisy was being asked to do something she found difficult, and was having a terrible time. Telling himself it was out of his control he jerked his eyes away, but unable to stop himself, he looked back. To his horror he saw the woman whipping Daisy with a long, thin crop.

"No way in hell!" he shouted as he charged out the door. "I will not allow that to happen on my ranch!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Though he ran to the arena, he didn't want to scare Daisy so when he neared the gate he broke into a walk.

"Andy, what are you doing?" Helen called from the fence as he entered the ring.

“Watchin’ out for your poor mare,” he called back without turning around. “Hey, I assume you’re Erin,” he shouted, marching forward. “Hold up a second. She’s in pain.”

“Who are you?” the trainer demanded, pulling Daisy to a stop. “And what are you talking about? She seem’s fine to me.”

“My name’s Andrew. This is my ranch,” he replied, stopping beside the mare.

“How do you know she’s in pain?”

“Jump off and I’ll show you.”

“I don’t have all day,” she replied brusquely as she climbed from the saddle. “She doesn’t feel lame to—“

“I didn’t say she was lame,” he retorted, cutting her off as he deftly pulled the reins from her hand, flipped them over Daisy’s head and held them loosely.

“Hey, what the hell are you doing?”

“Like I said, the horse is in pain.”

“Where? What are you talking about?”

“She’s in pain because of this damnable whip,” he growled, snatching it from her hand, “and also from those,” he continued, pointing the tip of the crop at her sharp spurs. “You have no business ridin’ any horse, let alone callin’ yourself a trainer. You have exactly ten minutes to leave this property.”

“You’re insane,” she spat, reaching out to grab her crop.

“Oh, no! You’re not gettin’ it back! If you want to abuse another horse you’ll have to replace it, but you sure as hell need a taste of how it feels!” he exclaimed, and without missing a beat he flicked the whip across her backside.

“What the fuck?” she screeched, throwing her hands behind her. “How dare you?”

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“Count yourself lucky I’m holdin’ Daisy, or I wouldn’t have stopped. You deserve a taste of your own medicine.”

“You bastard. You’ll be sorry you did that!”

“Eight minutes and countin’.”

“You’re nothing but a lowlife country hick!” she snapped, then abruptly turning she strode from the ring. “Find yourself another trainer,” she spat as she passed Helen. “I don’t need this shit.”

“No, Erin, please wait.”

“For what? So your idiot boyfriend can fucking hit me again? Not a chance in hell. Besides, that mare will never amount to anything. If you want a decent horse call me and I’ll find you one.”

“Andy, why did you do that?” Helen demanded, hurrying through the gate and running up to him. “You had no right to interfere.”

“I had every right. I don’t allow animal cruelty on my property.”

“You don’t—“

“If you’re about to say I don’t understand save your breath,” he warned, lowering his voice. “I’ll be talkin’ quietly now, because poor Daisy here is already upset, but listen up. You’re the one who doesn’t get it. If you honestly think what that woman was

doin' is the way to train a horse you have no business ownin' one. And what the hell is wrong with you? How could you stand there and watch that? In what universe is the horror show we just witnessed okay? Now if you'll excuse me, I'm takin' all this crap off Daisy's face. It's cruel and completely unnecessary."

"Erin says—"

"I don't give a damn what that woman says," he retorted. "Take off that saddle and put it on the fence. I'll carry it in after I'm done settlin' your mare. It's okay, Daisy girl, it's over now," he murmured, gently removing the bridle,

"You're so annoying," Helen grunted as she removed the saddle. "Honestly. I'd like to see you try to ride her."

"I'll be happy to. Go into the barn and grab the halter with the reins attached. It's hangin' on the hook waitin' to be cleaned."

"You don't seriously think you can ride her in a halter."

"Just fetch it."

"Fine! And when you get dumped I'll laugh my ass off."

"Here, take this torture device you call a bridle with you," he declared, handing it to her. "Daisy and I need to have a private chat."

* * *

Though Helen had hated watching Erin being mean to Daisy, the woman was a well-known, high-end trainer, and getting into her barn hadn't been easy. It was only because Kenny had made the introduction that Erin had agreed to take her. But as she

placed the saddle on the fence and she hurried into the barn, she was glad Andy had stepped in.

Watching him in action had taken her breath away.

He'd been dominant and commanding, and sent the butterflies in her stomach fluttering to life.

Walking inside and hanging up the bridle, she spied the halter with the attached reins. Lifting it off the hook, she jogged back to the paddock and found Daisy resting her head against Andy's chest while he rubbed her ears and stroked her neck. The sight melted her heart. She wanted to make a comment, but nothing came to mind. As she drew closer, he stepped back, wordlessly took the halter and slipped it over her head.

"What about a saddle?" Helen asked. "Surely you're not planning to ride her naked."

"Nope, I'll be keeping my clothes on," he quipped with a grin, then moving the reins over Daisy's ears and around her neck, he effortlessly swung himself onto her back.

"You're crazy!"

"No, Helen, I'm not crazy, and you're about to find out why I keep sayin' you're the one who doesn't understand. Come on, Daisy, let's show her what communication is all about."

For a few minutes all he did was walk around the arena with what she thought was a dangerously loose rein, but occasionally he would pick them up and ask Daisy to step backwards, or drop her head, or turn around. When he began trotting, to Helen's amazement, the mare rounded her body, the very thing Erin had been trying to achieve. Though he only asked her to hold it for a few seconds, it was astonishing. Andy had been on the mare for only a short time, but he was able to demonstrate the

light control in the walk, trot and canter.

“I rest my case,” he declared, walking over and stopping in front of her.

“Andy, I—“

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“Hold on,” he said sternly as he climbed off. “Helen, I don’t know what’s happened to you, but you’re not the girl I met. Either drop the attitude and the bullshit or we’re done. Think about it while you clean up your mare, and make sure you apologize to her. I’ll be in the house.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Erin had been in Smoky Hill to visit a stud farm about thirty-minutes out of town, and she’d figured she may as well book a lesson with Helen while she was there. It would pay for the cost of the trip with a bit left over. Though she was a successful trainer her income barely covered her overhead. Now, thanks to the pushy cowboy, she’d lost a client, something she could ill-afford. Furious, she decided to seek revenge, and hastily placed a call to the man who had initially introduced her to Helen. A tough biker named Kenny.

“Hey, Erin,” he said gruffly as he accepted the call. “I’m busy. What’s up?”

“I was just attacked by a fucking hick cowboy.”

“What? Where?”

“At his ranch. That rich bitch you introduced me to, Helen Ramsey, she boards her horse there. I was in the area to visit a stud farm and I dropped in to give her a lesson. Apparently he didn’t like the way I was handling her dopey mare. You won’t believe this, but the asshole ripped my whip away from me and start hitting me with it.”

“What the fuck?”

“Exactly!”

“Why doesn’t Helen keep her horse at your barn?”

“I’ve been trying to convince her but she says she doesn’t like stalls so she trailers up once a week. Stupid cow. It’s ridiculous. I was going to suggest she pay me to come to her instead, but I was so mad after what that cowboy did I told her to take a hike.”

“Sorry to hear that, but how can I help?”

“I want you to pay that jerk a visit? Make him understand he should mind his own business?”

“I’ll ask one of the boys. I can’t risk Helen finding out.”

“Helen? Why do you care what she thinks?”

“None of your business.”

“Don’t tell me you’re trying to get her in the sack.”

“For fuck’s sake, Erin, I could do that in thirty-seconds. No, I have something else in mind. I’ll send Brian.”

“The bear? Yes, that would be great. Thanks, Kenny. By the way, my supply is running low. I need both the talcum powder and the herbs.”

“Okay. How about I swing by the barn later tonight.”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you there.”

* * *

As the call came to an end, Kenny grinned. The stupid woman thought calling coke talcum powder, and marijuana herbs, would fool the cops if they were listening. But the ruse kept her feeling safe so he went along with it. Picking up his beer he took a long drink, then called Helen.

“Kenny? Wow. This is a surprise.”

“A good one I hope.”

“Of course it is.”

“How are you?”

“Great, well, kind of.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, not really. I don’t want to bore you.”

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“Come on, tell me, or I’ll put you over my knee next time you’re in town.”

“Stop it. You know when you say stuff like that it makes me feel all weird.”

“Weird good, though, right?”

“I plead the fifth.”

“That doesn’t fly with me, sweetheart. But tell me what’s making my poor little rich girl sad.”

“I’m not sad, but I am upset. Erin was in Smoky Hill today and she came to my boyfriend’s ranch to give me a lesson. He’s a trainer too, but western...obviously. Sorry, anyway, when he saw Erin riding my mare he didn’t like what she was doing and charged into the ring. They had a huge fight, then Erin left and told me she wouldn’t teach me anymore.”

“I could talk to her for you. I’m sure I could convince her to change her mind.”

“Actually, it’s okay. I’m getting tired of hauling Daisy into town anyway, and I think Andy—that’s my boyfriend—I think he was right. He doesn’t have anything against riding English, he just didn’t like her style of training. I’m sorry to say I agree with him. I just wish I’d seen things more clearly sooner. But enough about all that. Why are you calling?”

“I was thinking of taking a ride out your way this weekend. Would you like to get together?”

“Really? Yes, for sure, but there’s nowhere around here we can go without it getting back to Andy. Wait...I just had a thought. We could meet up at the Moonshine Campgrounds. They have a restaurant with an outside patio and the locals don’t go there much.”

“You must really like this guy.”

“Honestly, I’m liking him more and more, and I don’t want to do anything to mess it up. If he heard I was hanging out with a leather-clad biker I don’t think he’d be too happy.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

“Is there any special reason you’re coming out this way?”

“I want to get out of town, and I like the ride around Smoky Hill. There are plenty of twists and turns, and there are some great spots to stop and breathe in the clean air.”

“A biker like you cares about clean air?”

“After riding around the city for days on end, sure I do. And I appreciate the scenery there just as much as anyone else.”

“If you’re talking about Moonshine Lake then you must know the campgrounds.”

“I’ve seen their sign, but I’m actually talking about a place just off the main road called Lake View Point. It’s spectacular, but I get the impression no-one ever goes there.”

“That’s because hardly anyone ever does, and you’re right, it’s absolutely gorgeous. I don’t know why it’s not more popular. Anyway, Moonshine Campgrounds is very

close to that spot. When are you coming up?”

“How about tomorrow. I’ll meet you there at say...two o’clock?”

“Great. See you then.”

* * *

Ending the call, Helen felt a shiver of anticipation. She could hardly believe it. Rough, tough, biker Kenny had not only called her, he wanted to see her. She would never consider actually going out with him, but meeting up was an exciting prospect, and though she hoped no-one at the campgrounds would recognize her, the risk made it that much more fun.

CHAPTER SIX

Before Helen had left the ranch, Andy had taken time to explain why his form of horse-speak was so effective so quickly. When they finally walked to her truck, he hugged her tightly, then lowered his lips on hers in a long, lingering, languid kiss.

“You’d better get outta here or I won’t be responsible for my actions,” he murmured. “Just remember, anyone who thinks they have to mistreat a horse in order to train it is just plain ignorant. Horses are extremely sensitive, and smarter than most people give them credit for. Their instinct to run if they’re scared is inherent. In the wild they’re prey, not predators.”

Now sitting on her porch after a light dinner, wrapped up in a warm sweater to keep away the chill of the early evening, she sipped a cup of tea and gazed across the pond. Thinking back to Andy’s wise words, she found herself becoming angry, first at herself for not stopping Erin much sooner, and Erin for being so cruel. Impulsively, she picked up her phone and called him.

“Hey, Helen, is everything okay?”

“Andy, I know I said this earlier but I have to say it again. You were so right. Erin’s nothing but a nasty bully. I can’t believe I’ve been letting her ride my lovely mare. I feel so guilty.”

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“Ah, I understand.”

“Why didn’t I see it? What’s wrong with me?” she muttered, fighting an unexpected swell of emotion.

“Would you like me to come over so we can talk about this in person?”

“I thought you were busy.”

“I was, but I’m ready to call it quits.”

“Um...can I come back there? I want to see her again and give her carrots.”

“Of course. Why don’t you stay over?”

“I’d like that, I really would. Then I can be with her first thing in the morning, and I’ll help you clean out the stalls as a thank you. I owe you.

“Hey, you don’t owe me, darlin’, but that sounds like a plan. See you when you get here.”

“Thanks, Andy. I won’t be long.”

* * *

As Andy ended the call he let out a relieved sigh. Helen had finally seen the light. Now she was open to learning what he had to offer, and he had no doubt her

relationship with Daisy would blossom. But as he cleaned up the last of his dinner dishes a comment she made floated through her head.

Erin's nothing but a nasty bully. I can't believe I've been letting her ride my lovely mare. I feel so guilty.

With a smile curling his lips, he walked into his bedroom and lifted out a small, black suitcase with a combination lock. Popping it open, he picked up a pair of fur-lined handcuffs, a blindfold, and a small, brown leather paddle. Gazing at his other wicked toys, though he wanted to add more, he resisted the temptation.

"These should do the trick this time around," he muttered, sliding the implements beneath one of the pillows.

He had just finished folding back the bedspread when he heard Helen's truck stop outside the house. Hurrying down the hall, he stepped outside and welcomed her with a long, tight, bear hug.

"I needed that," she murmured as they broke apart. "Thanks for letting me come over."

"You're welcome here any time. And I'm not just sayin' that. Are you ready to walk up to the barn and visit your girl?"

"Yes, yes, and yes. I'll give her some of her special treats."

"I'm sure she'll be happy to see you, treats or no treats. I take it you're still feelin' guilty?" he remarked as they started walking up to the barn.

"I am. I can't shake it. I just keep going over it again and again in my mind. How could I have been so stupid?"

“We all make mistakes, but when they affect an animal or person we care about, that’s when the guilt kicks in. The good news is, I can help you get past it.”

“You can? How?”

“I’m not sure if I should tell you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will, but go and see Daisy,” he said as they entered the barn. “I’ll fetch her treats.”

“You have me very curious. Can you give me a hint?”

“Nope.”

* * *

Watching Andy as he disappeared into the feed room, Helen felt an odd sensation ripple through her body. But Daisy nickered, wanting attention.

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“Hello, beautiful girl,” she murmured, stepping into her stall. “Will you ever forgive me? I’m so sorry.” The mare responded by nudging her. “Ah, I see, you will if I give your one of your special cookies,” Helen remarked with a grin.

“And I have them right here,” Andy interjected as he stepped into the stall.

After slipping several into Helen’s jacket pocket, he handed one to Daisy. As she gobbled it up and looked for more, Helen pulled out a couple and held them out in the palm of her hand.

“Here you go, you lovely thing,” she said, holding them out for the mare to scoop them up. “You don’t have to worry. That awful woman is history and you’ll never have to see her again.”

“You really do have a lovely horse,” Andy said softly, “but I have to ask, why did you buy a quarter horse if you wanted to ride hunter/jumpers? I know it couldn’t have been a money issue, so how did it happen?”

“Well, it was kind of a freak thing. I was at a barn to look at a thoroughbred, and while I was waiting for the owners to bring him out I saw Daisy standing in a corral nearby. She whinnied at me, like she was calling me over. I couldn’t believe it. When I didn’t move she whinnied again, so I walked across, and she was just so sweet I fell in love with her on the spot. Then the owners arrived and said they’d rescued her and they were looking for a forever home.”

“Ah! Daisy picked you!” Andy exclaimed. “She saw you, felt your energy, and yelled at you to take her.”

“She did, I swear she did, and I couldn’t say no. I think that’s one of the reasons I feel so bad. I’ve let her down.”

“Helen, you’ve done no such thing. You made a mistake, but we all do, we’re only human. Fortunately you figured it out.”

“Only thanks to you,” she mumbled, handing Daisy another treat.

“When we’re back at the house I’ll ease your guilt.”

“So you said, but how? Why won’t you tell me?”

“Actually, I will so you can think about it,” he murmured, moving his arms around her. “I’m going to take off all your clothes, blindfold you, handcuff your wrists, bend you over pillows, then spank your naked ass with a leather paddle.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Helen was so shocked by Andy’s threat she didn’t know how to respond, but as a hot blush burned across her face it occurred to her it may have been a joke.

“Andy...you can be so funny,” she said with a nervous giggle.

“Funny? Helen, I’m serious. But you can think about it while we walk back to the house. When we get there the choice will be yours. You can leave if you want to. I have no interest in holding you prisoner.”

“I...uh...I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Give Daisy her last treat and we’ll go.”

Though Helen was at a complete loss, she couldn't deny the ripple of excitement moving through her entire being. She'd always wanted Andy to be more of a take-charge guy, and now he was, and in a way that was making her toes curl.

"Ready?" he asked, almost startling her.

"As I'll ever be," she managed, "but can I ask you something?"

"Of course, anything, but while we're walking."

As they left the stall and headed outside she searched for the right words, then decided there probably weren't any and she should just spit it out.

"How did this happen? I mean, you've never been like this before and I've known you for ages."

He smiled, and for reasons she couldn't fathom a fresh surge of excitement sent goosebumps popping across her arms.

"This side of me is not something I advertise."

"So...you've done this sort of thing before?"

"Sure, but it's not just what I do, it's who I am. Do you understand?"

"Sort of. It's like, you're a horse trainer because it's in you."

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“Exactly. Now it’s your turn to answer a couple of questions,” he declared as they approached the house. “But first, are you leaving, or joining me in my bedroom.”

“I’m joining you,” she replied softly, and afraid her eyes would give away her growing excitement she stared at the ground.

“Have you ever been in a situation like this?”

“No...but...” she whispered hesitantly, nervous about admitting she had always harbored dark fantasies.

“Go on,” he pressed, gripping her arm as they entered the house.

“I’ve, uh, I’ve thought about it.”

“I’m not surprised.”

She hadn’t expected his comment and she wanted to ask why, but he was guiding her into his room and a bevy of butterflies had suddenly burst to life in her stomach, and her heart had started to race.

“Close your eyes and don’t move,” he ordered, his voice suddenly stern. “Just so you know,” he continued as she nervously followed his orders, “test me and you won’t be disappointed.”

Suddenly he was deftly peeling off her clothes and it was difficult to do as he’d said, but she was naked in a heartbeat and he was slipping the blindfold over her eyes.

“I’m going to guide you to the bed and position you over the pillows. Once you’re settled, stretch your arms out in front of you and spread your knees apart. Any questions?”

“Uh, no.”

“During times like these you must call me Sir.”

“Yes, Sir. I mean, no questions, Sir.”

Her voice had sounded weak, but that was how she felt. Weak and wonderful, and she prayed everything was real, not some amazing lucid dream. But as he abruptly picked her up and placed her on the bed, any doubt was immediately extinguished.

“The pillows are next to you on the left. Bend over them and stretch your arms out.”

“Yes, Sir,” she whispered, trying to find her way in the dark and clambering over them.

It took her a minute to get settled, and as she moved her hands out in front of her, the promised shackles were quickly locked around her wrists.

She could hear him moving around.

Every nerve in her body sparked.

Her pulse raced.

And she felt the warm wetness flooding her sex.

“Why am I going to punish you?”

As he'd asked the question he'd moved her ankles apart, and she felt him kneeling between her legs.

"Uh, because I didn't stop Erin from riding Daisy, Sir?"

"That's not why. You trusted her and thought she knew what she was doing. I'll never punish you for not understanding a situation. That wouldn't be fair. Try again."

"Um...I don't know the answer, Sir."

"I'm going to spank you because you refused to listen. Even before I saw Erin on your mare I tried to tell you I was concerned, but you blatantly refused to even discuss it."

"Ooh, yes, Sir. I see that now."

"Daisy can do what you want, but not on the level Erin is demanding. You're a very bad girl. You should always keep an open mind and hear what others have to offer. You may not agree with everything they say, but you must learn to listen. You don't know everything, Helen. None of us do. Now I'm going to spank some sense into you, and punish you for being so damn stubborn. It will hurt, and I mean for it to, but it will also ease your guilt. Any questions?"

“No, Sir.”

As his hand began caressing her naked cheeks, and his fingers slipped into her pussy, she sank into the decadent attention and softly whimpered. But his touch lingered only for a moment before he tapped what felt like hard leather against her skin.

“Six on the center of each cheek. Count them out. When I’m done say, thank you, Sir, I will listen in future. Clear?”

“Yes, Sir.”

He began, but delivered the swats slowly. She assumed it was so she would feel the keen sting of each blow, and she quickly understood why he’d handcuffed her.

“Sir...that really hurts,” she whimpered as he finally finished spanking her right cheek.

“I told you it would,” he scolded, adding another. “Say what I instructed you to say.”

“Thank you, Sir, I will listen in future,” she exclaimed hastily.

“Now you’ll get seven on the left to keep things even. Count them out.”

With each swat she caught her breath before proclaiming the number. The burning pain seemed to envelope her whole body, but the moment he’d finished she moaned out the required statement.

“Thank you, Sir, I will listen in future,”

“Stay as you are and think about that.”

Though she longed to feel his arms around her and ached for his cock, she found herself recalling the many times he’d tried to talk to her about Daisy, and often asked what her new trainer was doing. She’d either walked away in a huff, or blithely told him there were no issues.

“So, Helen, what do you have to say.”

He’d spoken softly, and she realized he was sitting on the edge of the bed.

“I’m sorry, Sir, you were right all along.”

“Anything else?”

“Uh...”

“Tell me.”

“I love you, Andy. I think I’ve been in love with you when you first kissed me. I just didn’t realize it until now.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Though surprised by Helen’s ardent confession, Andy quickly released her from the handcuffs, slid off the blindfold, then stretched out beside her and wrapped her into his arms.

“Sorry,” she whispered, “I probably shouldn’t have said that.”

“I’m sure glad you did, darlin’, cos I’ve been in love with you for just as long. I once told Annie how I felt and how it was drivin’ me crazy, and dang it if she didn’t write a song. When it started takin’ off I told her I wanted half the royalties,” he added with a chuckle.

“Really? You really love me?” Helen asked earnestly.

“You bet, and if I’d known a spankin’ would get you to say it, I would’ve put you over my knee a long time ago.”

“I don’t know why it came out. I suppose because it’s been such an emotional day...and what you just did...it blew my socks off.”

“Don’t you mean panties?”

“Oh, stop it!”

“Hey, I’m right.”

“So, uh, what happens now?”

“Now?” he repeated, shifting to gaze down at her. “This...”

Sliding his fingers into her hair and gripping it tightly, he pressed his lips on hers, devouring her mouth as he roamed his free hand over her breasts. As he fondled them and pinched her nipples, she let out a muffled cry, but he continued the endless kiss and traveled his fingers down her body to her sex. Finding her soaked, he shifted on top of her, pushed her legs apart with his knees, placed his rigid rod at her entrance and thrust forward.

“You feel so fuckin’ good,” he growled, finally raising his head and staring intently into her eyes. “We belong together. You know that, right?”

“I do, Andy, I do, I swear.”

Staying buried inside her, he pushed himself up, took hold of her waist and began to pump. As she squeezed her eyes shut and let out a cry, he increased his pace, gazing down at her body as he stroked.

Her puckered nipples seemed to beg for attention, and though he wanted to pause and draw them into his mouth, he felt compelled to continue his fervent thrusting. But moments later, using all his willpower, he slowed, pulled out and flipped her over.

“Andy I’ve wanted this for so long,” she bleated as he clutched her hips and jerked them up. “You’ve been driving me crazy, and now...”

“Good, cos you were drivin’ me crazy too,” he retorted, sliding back inside her. “Every time I looked at you I’d wanna throw you on your back and fuck your brains out, or put you over my knee and spank your butt. From now on I’ll be doin’ both whenever I want. Understand?”

“Yes...God yes....”

She had gasped her reply.

It suddenly hit him.

Not only had she wanted his control, she’d been craving it.

Seized by the realization and gazing down at her reddened cheeks, he delivered several hot slaps to underscore his promise, then clutching her hips, he began vigorously stroking.

“I’m not stoppin’ until I hear you screamin’. Don’t hold back, you hear me?” he demanded, spanking her again without missing a beat.

“Yes, yes, I hear you, and I c-can already f-feel it.”

* * *

Helen had been barely able to stammer out the words. She’d always been attracted to Andy’s quiet confidence, and often suspected beneath his gentle way with the horses lived a take-charge man. But the transformation had taken her breath away. He was possessing her, making her his, enveloping her in fiery passion.

Clark Kent had become Superman.

As the thought flashed through her head he reached beneath her and tweaked her nipples. The sharp pinch sent sparks crackling through her body, and seconds later she felt her climax building.

“Andy...I’m almost there...it’s close...it’s so close.”

“Let go,” he growled. “Let go and don’t hold back. Scream it out.”

His command sent her over the edge.

Wave after wave of tingling sensations shuddered through her body, each stronger than the one before. She could hear her cries mingling with his deep, guttural groans in an endless, passionate duet...

* * *

Collapsing beside her, Andy sucked in several long deep breaths, then slowly opened his eyes. Helen was curled against him with her head resting in the hollow of his shoulder, and her arm draped across his waist.

He felt serene.

All was well with the world.

“I never want to leave this bed,” she mumbled. “Please can we just stay here like this forever?”

“Forever is a long time,” he replied with a grin. “Besides that, I have clients comin’ here day after tomorrow.”

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“I’m really looking forward to watching you. Can Daisy and I join in?”

“Funny you should ask. I was about to ask if you’d be interested. Mind you, it probably won’t be what you’re used to.”

“Well obviously what I’m used to hasn’t worked very well. Daisy is still skittish, and being with that beastly woman had only made her worse. I hate to say, but in spite of your best efforts I’m still feeling guilty.”

“The important thing is, you won’t be so close-minded in future, and helping Daisy get over her fears won’t take near as long as you think.”

“I can’t imagine it, but if you say so.”

“I know so, and I’m suddenly hungry, and I know exactly where to take you. I just hope you won’t be too uncomfortable.”

“Why would I be?”

“The place I’m taking doesn’t offer padded chairs and your butt is still pretty red,” he replied, lowering his voice and shooting her a wink.

“Andy, you are incorrigible.”

“Yeah, well, that’s one of the reasons you love me, and don’t try to deny it.”

“Guilty as charged, and someone’s calling me,” she remarked, hearing the familiar

chime from her phone still in her jeans pocket.

“Answer it. I’m jumping in the shower. Join me when you’re done.”

“I’ll be right there.”

As he left the bed, she leaned over the side of the mattress and managed to lift it out.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Kenny. I’m rushing, but tomorrow I need to meet you an hour later at three o’clock. But it’s a better time. The lunch crowd will be gone and it’s too early for dinner. The place should be fairly empty.”

“Uh…”

“Make it work, it’s important! I’ll see you there, and don’t tell anyone. I mean it, not another living soul,” he said impatiently. “Give me your word.”

“Uh…”

“Don’t fuck with me, Helen. Give me your word.”

“Okay, I promise, but what is—?”

But before she could finish he ended the call.

CHAPTER NINE

When Helen joined Andy in the shower, they joked around as the water splashed over them, but as they climbed into his truck and started down the road he noticed a

worried frown cross her brow.

“Are you okay, darlin?”

“Um...aren't we going into town?”

“Nope, I'm takin' you to the restaurant at the campgrounds.”

“Really?”

“Don't you like it there?”

“Yes, of course, it's fabulous. I'm just surprised.”

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“Hey, this is a special night and it calls for a celebration.”

“You’re right,” she replied, smiling as she leaned across the console and kissed him on the cheek. “It’s wonderful. Thank you.”

“Anything for my girl.”

“Wow, I’m your girl?”

“You’d better not be anyone else’s,” he replied with a grin.

Though she smiled back, he still sensed there was something on her mind but decided to wait until they were seated before asking again. It was a short drive, and they were soon being led to a table by a window offering a magnificent view of Moonshine Lake and the mountains beyond.

“Wow, this is fantastic,” she said with a happy sigh, “and being here at sunset is such a treat.”

“Sure is nice to have a break. There was a lot to do gettin’ ready for this group.”

“Are you done?”

“Pretty much, though there are usually last minute things that come up.”

“You know I’m ready to help if you need me.”

“Thanks, darlin’. Actually, there is something. There are six people comin’, and they each get a welcome gift when they arrive. I’ll be puttin’ all the bits and pieces together tomorrow.”

“What a great idea. What does it include?”

“A small bag of low sugar horse treats, a hoof pick, the double-sided groomin’ mitt I like to use, and a few other bits and pieces. It means they each have new groomin’ equipment, and I write their names on everything so there’s never any confusion.”

“That’s brilliant.”

“Thanks. The first time I held the event I realized it needed to be done. Anyway, the delivery should have come today, but Mack over at the feed store called and asked if it would be okay if they brought it tomorrow. Apparently they had a problem with one of their trucks.”

“Tomorrow? What time?”

“Around two-thirty, and here comes our waitress. What would you like to drink? How about we get a bottle of champagne? Though I guess you’re used to that.”

“Not really. We save champagne for special occasions at our house too.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Andy, really,” she replied with a giggle.

“Okay, let’s do it,” he said as the waitress stopped at the table. “We’d like a bottle of champagne. Is Brady bartendin’ tonight?”

“He sure is.”

“Great. Tell him Andy Baker wants him to make the choice for me. ”

“Will do. My name’s Becky, and here are you menus.”

* * *

Though Helen was deliriously happy, the meeting with Kenny hovered over her like a dark cloud. She’d promised not to say a word, and the last thing she wanted to do was lie to Andy, but she couldn’t be in two places at once,

“Hey, darlin’, what’s goin’ on?” Andy asked, lowering his voice as he leaned across the table, “And don’t say nothin’. I can feel it. There’s been something on your mind ever since you joined me in the shower. What have I done or said to upset you?”

“You haven’t done a single thing,” she replied earnestly. “I swear, you are the absolute best and you’ve made me so happy.”

“Then what is it? Maybe I can help.”

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“I wish I could tell you but I promised him I wouldn’t tell anyone anything.”

“Him?”

“This friend of mine. Someone I know from Dallas.”

“A friend,” Andy muttered skeptically.

“Yes, honestly, he really is just a friend. I’ve never dated him and I never would. Ever.”

“Darlin’, you’re sexy as hell, and—”

“No, it’s not like that, I swear.”

“Not for you, but I’d be willin’ to bet he sees it differently. Wait! Does this have anything to do with that call?”

“Yes,” she mumbled with a sigh. “He wants to see me, but I promised not to say anything about it.”

“And I’m guessin’ he wants to meet up with you tomorrow afternoon.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Did he tell you why?”

“No, just that it was really important, and...uh...”

“To keep it a secret. I don’t like the sound of this, but, hey, if you want to meet up with him then you should. Do you have to go into the city?”

“No, he’s coming here.”

“Well, that’s a relief. Hopefully he won’t take up too much of your time.”

“Sorry...I’m ruining everything,” she mumbled as she spotted the waitress leaving the bar with a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket.

“Hey, darlin’, I love you, and nothin’s gettin’ in the way of this dinner,” Andy assured her, taking her hand. “Forget about—what’s his name?”

“Kenny.”

“Forget about Kenny. Tonight is about us. Everything else takes a back seat and we’ll deal with it later. Okay?”

“Yes! For sure! Thank you, Andy.”

“For what?”

“Being who you are.”

“Back at ya, darlin’. Don’t worry. If it’s bad news we’ll deal with it together. Okay?”

“Okay. Thank you again. I feel better now.”

* * *

Though Andy smiled up at the waitress when she popped the champagne cork and poured the bubbling wine into their glasses, he couldn't ignore the wave of anxiety rippling through him. He needed to find out who Kenny was, and why he was coming all the way out to Smoky Hill just to see Helen.

Something was horribly wrong.

He could feel it.

CHAPTER TEN

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Though it was late and clients had long since left the barn, Erin was still there, but not because of the horses or chores she had to finish. She was waiting for Kenny. Usually she would go to the biker bar where he spent most of his time, but he'd called and told her to wait for him at the stable. She was idly wiping the dust off the shelves in the tack room when she heard the tell-tale roar of his Harley Davidson. Several horses whinnied, others pricked their ears, while some didn't react at all.

Walking down the barn aisle, she stared through the wide doors and studied him as he came to a stop and climbed off his bike. The leather jacket over his muscled physique made him appear fearsome. And he was! None of his gang would dare cross him, and she was always on edge when they had to meet up. When he removed his helmet and his long, dark, wavy hair fell around his shoulders, she felt the familiar wave of jealousy. Her light sandy hair was thin and had no curl whatsoever. At such times she thought life just wasn't fair! Lifting a pouch from his saddlebag, he strode towards her, and the familiar ruffle of fear sent goosebumps across her skin.

"So, Erin, how was business this week?"

"Okay, I guess, but you know how I worry. When these women have a few martinis they start gossiping. If they say the wrong thing to the wrong person, or they're overheard talking about all this, it could—"

"Risk is part of this game," he exclaimed, cutting her off. "You know that and you knew it when you decided to come on board. But as I've told you before, people are inherently afraid of getting caught, just like you are. They don't stick their necks out, especially not when they have as much to lose as your clients do. But enough about all that bullshit," he said impatiently as he marched past her and into her small barn

office. “Lock the door.”

“Jeez...you don’t have to tell me that,” she muttered under her breath.

“Hey! Enough of your lip! I’m still around because I don’t leave anything to chance. Give me the cash and hand over the account book.”

“Sorry, I’m just on edge. I ran out a couple of days ago and it makes me—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Here,” he grunted, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a tiny vial containing white powder. “Now don’t talk. I need to make sure all this is in order.”

* * *

Above all else, Kenny was a businessman. All he cared about was the bottom line. Contrary to his appearance, the man had been born with two gifts. A brain like a calculator and an athlete’s body.

He’d been told many times he had his pick of sports or finance, perhaps even a combination of the two. But Kenny had also been born with a lust for excitement. Living on the edge was his high, and while he didn’t indulge himself, he’d found his niche in the murky, dangerous waters dealing drugs.

But he didn’t sell to just anyone.

He targeted the wealthy, and by chance he’d found an eager clientele in the high-end barns around Dallas and Fort Worth. From show jumpers to barrel racers, the riders thrived on the thrill of their sport, and cocaine made them fearless...or so he’d been told. Over several careful years, he’d built a network supplying trainers and stable owners. And they were all scared to death of him. Not because of what he might do to

them, but the threats he made against the prized equines living in their facilities.

Erin was on the bottom of the totem pole.

Most of the people he dealt with owned or trained horses worth a great deal of money, enough to buy a new house and a Ferrari or Rolls Royce. He thought of Erin's clients as the Volvo, condominium crowd. But on the plus side, her barn didn't invite much scrutiny.

Rarely did anyone try to get the best of him, and an insecure young woman like Erin wouldn't even consider such a thing, but he always double-checked the books. Sitting at her desk studying the numbers and counting the cash, he found no surprises.

"Good," he grunted, placing the money into a tin box, then locking it and dropping it into his bag. "Here are your supplies for the next two weeks, both personal and for your clients."

She'd already snorted the coke he'd given her, and had slumped into a director's chair against the wall. As he placed two plastic tubs on her desk, she let out a heavy sigh.

"What's wrong?"

"I want to talk about Helen Ramsey."

"Okay! Talk!"

"I'm barely scraping by in this place. The costs keep going up. I've raised the board, but now my two grooms and the cleaning guy want more money. If I wasn't dealing for you I'd be closed by now."

“What’s the point and what does this have to do with Helen?”

“I told you earlier, I was angry and kicked her to the curb, but I can’t afford to lose her. Can you convince her to come back, and not just for one fucking lesson a week. She needs to board here and be in full training. That lesson is peanuts. I only agreed because I saw it as a way to break the ice. I’d planned to persuade her to make a proper commitment.”

“Sorry, doll face, I have my own plans for that girl, and I’m not going to complicate things. But a guy I know is dating a girl who rides jumpers. He was complaining the other night that he’s sick of hearing about all her barn problems. I don’t know him very well, but I don’t mind telling him about you. Give me your card and I’ll pass it along.”

“Yeah? That would be great. Thanks, Kenny.”

“And next time you run short, call me,” he said sternly, as if scolding a child. “You don’t want to lose any more clients because you’re fried. That’s not good for either of us. Clear?”

“Yes, Kenny, you’re right. I will.”

Rising from his chair, he strode from the office, marched down the barn aisle and out to his Harley. As he slipped on his helmet a frown crossed his brow. Erin’s personal consumption had gone up. Not unusual, but he’d need to keep an eye on her.

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Now it was time to focus on Helen.

He hadn't been lying.

He did have plans for her.

Big plans.

And a surefire way to make sure she played ball.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The following morning Andy woke up early as he always did, but Helen was still sleeping. Not wanting to wake her, he quietly slipped from the bed, pulled on his clothes, and walked up to the barn to feed the horses and clean the stalls.

As he worked he thought about the conversation he'd had with her the previous night about the mystery man she knew only as Kenny. Though Andy didn't like jumping to conclusions, he couldn't shake off his worry. Walking into his office, he sat behind his desk, picked up his phone and called Sheriff Cooper. A few months before, Andy's sister Annie, a celebrated country music star, had been in dire trouble and the sheriff had saved her life. Since the dramatic event, the family had become close to the likable lawman.

"Hey, there, Andy. Good to hear from you," the sheriff exclaimed. How is everything?"

“Great. And you?”

“Couldn’t be better. I’m happy to say things have settled down since that drama with Annie, though why do I get the feelin’ something else might be brewin’?”

“I don’t know how you do that.”

“Do what?”

“Sense trouble.”

“Too many years on the job, I guess. What’s the problem?”

“Have you ever heard of a guy called Kenny?”

“Sure, I know a few fellas by that name. Can you give me a bit more info?”

“I wish I could. All I know is he’s out of Dallas.”

“I’m sure there are many guys called Kenny from Dallas. What’s goin’ on? You sound worried.”

“I am. He wants to meet Helen this afternoon at the Moonshine Restaurant. The thing is, he told her to keep it a secret and I have a bad feelin’.”

“Ah. Never ignore a bad feelin’. See if you can get a last name. I can run it by my contacts in Dallas. But regardless, I’ll make sure one of my boys is close by in case, and he can follow her home at a discreet distance and make sure she gets back okay.”

“Thanks, sheriff, that makes me feel a whole lot better.”

“In the meantime, I’ll reach out to one of my contacts and see if he’s heard of any bad actors with the first name of Ken, or Kenny. I’ll let you know if he comes up with anything.”

“I really appreciate this.”

“Any time, Andy. Any time.”

The conversation ended, but as another idea floated into Andy’s head, he placed a call to one of his closest friends. His famous sister’s husband, Brody King.

“Andy, hey, good to hear from you,” Brody exclaimed as he answered.

“Hey, Brody. How are you? How’s Annie’ doin’?”

“Great, she’s just left for the studio. Sure is handy havin’ it next door.”

“Do you have a minute?”

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“Sure do, Andy. What’s up?”

As Andy explained the mysterious meeting Helen was about to have with a stranger known only as Kenny, Brody immediately agreed it was cause for concern.

“I want to be there. I’d stay in the shadows and make sure nothin’ happened, but I have a six person clinic goin’ on, and they’ll be comin’ by this afternoon right around the time Helen will be at the restaurant.”

“Ah...I totally get it and I’m more than happy to pinch hit. I’ll arrive at the parkin’ lot early, and when she meets up with this guy I’ll video them with my phone. I’ll also go inside and video in there as well, assumin’ I can do it unseen. I got to know the staff when Annie and I were married there. They’ll help me out if I need them to.”

“Perfect, thanks, Brody. I owe you one. I’m probably overreacting but I can’t shake this bad feelin’.”

“Hey, after what Annie and I went through with that crazy manager of hers I don’t take anything for granted, and I never will again. I’ll keep you posted as things play out.”

“Fantastic, thanks Brody,” Andy said gratefully, but as he spoke he heard a couple of horses whinny. “The sheriff will have a car close by as well, but I think I heard Helen come in. I’ll catch you later.”

“Sounds good. Bye for now.”

“Andy? Are you here?” she called as Andy hastily ended the call.

“Yep, in the office.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?” she asked, walking in as he stood up and stepped around the desk.

“It was early and you were sleepin’.”

“But I wanted to help you feed and clean.”

“Not to worry, it’s all done, but I’m starvin’,” he said as he hugged her. “Have you had breakfast?”

“Nope, but I’ve whipped up some pancake batter. It’s just waiting to hit the pan.”

“Sounds great. Let’s go, and when we’re done we’ll come back and put the horses in the paddocks.”

“Unfortunately I have to go home,” she said with a sigh as she pulled back. “Mom’s hosting a charity event over the weekend and I totally forgot I promised I’d give her a hand today. But I’ll come back here right after I have that meeting with Kenny—if you want me to,” she added quickly.

“Sure I do, and don’t worry about havin’ to help your mom. I’ll be tied up with my clients anyway. They’ll be comin’ by for a meet and greet.”

“Uh, Andy, about Kenny. I honestly don’t know what he wants, but I’m sure it’s nothing romantic.”

“I’m not worried about that, not for a second, but I do think it’s odd he wants you to

keep it a secret. Don't you?"

"Yes, I do. It's weird."

"Will you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Don't go anywhere with him."

"Where would I go?"

"I mean, if he asks you to go for a drive or show him around, please say no."

"Actually, he mentioned Lake View Point."

"That place is isolated. You can't go there with him, or anywhere else."

"I won't, but I'm curious. Why isn't that place more popular? It's so gorgeous."

"When the mountain snow starts meltin' the water levels can rise like crazy and flood the area."

“Really? I never knew that.”

“You haven’t lived here long enough. It’s not every year, but it can happen. And then there’s the wildlife.”

“Oh, right. Well, regardless, I promise not to leave with him for any reason.”

“Good. Now feed me woman, I’m starvin’.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Whenever her mother held a charity fundraiser there would be a silent auction. It was one of the highlights of the evening, and with her excellent organizational skills, Helen had been put in charge of the event. As the hours passed, she constantly checked her watch not wanting to be late for her meeting with Kenny. But as the time drew near, she found herself wishing she hadn’t agreed to see him.

Hoping she could reach him in time to cancel, she hurried into the library, closed the door and pulled her phone from her pocket. To her dismay, when she placed the call his voicemail answered. She wasn’t surprised, and she didn’t want to leave a message, but a moment later it chimed. Thinking he was calling her back she snatched it up, only to find Andy’s name on the screen.

“Hey, there, how’s it goin’?” he asked. “Are you on top of it all?”

“Pretty much. What about you?”

“The delivery just arrived and I’m putting the tack box gifts together. My clients will be here in about an hour.”

“I thought they weren’t coming until tomorrow.”

“They’re just droppin’ in to see the place and say hello to their horses. They’ll only be here for a short time. Of course that could change. But I wanted to check in with you before they arrive to ask about Kenny. Is the meetin’ still on?”

“I’m afraid so. I actually tried to contact him to cancel but his phone went straight to voicemail.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“I’m on top of things, but I want to stay here in case something unexpected crops up and my mother needs me. And honestly...I’m beginning to feel there’s something wrong. I think it’s weird that I can’t tell anyone.”

“Darlin’, I agree completely,” Andy replied solemnly. “You could always leave a message at the restaurant that something came up.”

“If I’d been able to reach him in time to cancel that’s one thing, but to just not show...”

“Yeah, I get that. Just remember, if you feel uncomfortable at any time for any reason, get out of there, or visit the powder room and call me—hang on—I hear someone drivin’ up. I’d better go. But good luck, hon. Call me as soon as you’re done.”

“I will. Bye.”

* * *

Surprised one of the group was arriving so soon, Andy left the tack room and strode down the barn aisle. But as he neared the door, he quickly realized he wasn't hearing a truck or car, but a motorbike.

Pausing his step and cautiously peering around the barn door, his pulse quickened. An exceptionally tall, powerfully built man was climbing off a hefty motorcycle, and his face was contorted in an angry scowl. Not having any idea who the man was, why he was there, or what had made him so furious, Andy chose to stay exactly where he was.

"Hey! Baker! I need to talk to you!"

While he could hold his own in a fight, Andy didn't have any desire to tackle a tough biker who looked like the son of the Incredible Hulk. Quickly snatching his phone from his pocket he bypassed 911 and called Sheriff Cooper directly.

"Andy, hey, what's goin' on?"

"Sheriff, a tough lookin' biker just rode into my ranch. I don't know who he is or why he's here, but he called for me by name, and he looks hoppin' mad, like he's about to cause trouble."

"I'll be right there."

"Uh, Sheriff, he's huge. You might wanna bring a deputy or two."

"Thanks for the heads up. Stay outta sight."

"I will unless he starts walkin' towards the horses."

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“Dammit. I understand, but hold back. I’m on my way.”

Dropping the phone back in his pocket, Andy hurried to his gun cabinet, lifted out a rifle and was quickly loading the chamber when he heard the biker call again.

“Hey! Andy Baker! Where the fuck are you? Get out here!”

Andy was hurrying back when he had a thought. Grabbing his phone, he set it to record, then slipping it back in his pocket, he returned to the door. As he peeked around, his heart sank. The burly tough guy was lumbering towards the paddocks.

“Hold it right there,” Andy yelled, stepping out with this rifle raised. “This is private property. Your trespassing. State your business.”

“Hah! Hello, Baker. My name’s Bear.”

“Put your hands in the air where I can see them.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are? A fuckin’ sheriff from the old west?”

“No, but I am a landowner askin’ you to leave his property.”

“The hell with you,” the man bellowed as he began striding towards him.

“I’ll ask you again, leave my ranch.”

“You won’t shoot me. No fuckin’ way. You’ll end up behind bars if you do.”

The tough biker was drawing perilously close, and not about to take any chances, Andy fired at the man's feet, kicking up the dirt barely inches from his toes.

"Hey, calm the fuck down!" the biker yelled.

"Last chance, get on your bike and head out."

"I'm not goin' anywhere, not until I deliver a message."

"I don't care about your message. Leave! My! Ranch!"

"Not until I take that toy rifle off your hands and really hurt you. First, I'll snap your shoulders outta place, I'm really good at that, then—"

"That's the sheriff. He's here to arrest you for trespassin'," Andy shouted as the sound of approaching sirens filled the air.

"Who the fuck is trespassin'?"

"You are. I have asked you to leave several times and you haven't."

"Oh, yeah? And how the fuck will you prove that?"

"I don't make empty threats."

"You assaulted a friend of mine, now I'm going to assault you...and you'll end up in a fuckin' hospital bed."

"What friend?"

"Her name's Erin."

“I didn’t assault her, I whacked her ass with her crop because she was abusin’ a horse,” Andy growled as the sheriff turned into the driveway and sped forwards with two deputies following.

“On your knees, hands behind your back,” the sheriff yelled, coming to a screeching halt and jumping out from behind the wheel.

“Hey, I haven’t done shit!” the biker yelled back.

“Do it now!” the sheriff bellowed. “Andy, did you ask this man to leave?” he continued as the man clumsily followed the sheriff’s instructions.

“Several times, and he threatened me.”

“Got proof?”

“Sure do,” Andy replied, lifting his phone from his pocket. “It’s all on here.”

“Give me his wallet,” the sheriff demanded as his deputy finished cuffing the tough biker. “Brian West,” he muttered, opening it and seeing the driver’s license. “Okay, Brian West, you’re under arrest for trespassin’, and there’ll be more charges when we get to the station. You can tell me all your excuses when we get there, but you can count on spendin’ the night as my guest. Deputy, read him his rights.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

While the deputies settled Brian West in their car and called for a tow truck to remove the motorcycle, the sheriff asked Andy to step inside the house to talk. As they entered the kitchen, Andy placed his rifle behind the door, and with a heavy sigh sat down at the table.

“So, tell me, Andy, who was that guy?” the sheriff asked as he joined him.

“No idea, but he must be a friend of the trainer who came here to give Helen a lesson. Her name’s Erin. I don’t know her last name but I can get it. I can’t believe she’d know a guy like that, let alone send him over here.”

“What happened?”

“She was hittin’ Daisy—that’s Helen’s horse. I managed to get her to stop and climb off, then I grabbed her crop, whacked her on the butt, and told her she should know what it feels like.”

“Good for you, but probably not the best idea,” the sheriff remarked with a frown.

“I’d do it again.”

“Yep, I’m sure you would, and you think that biker showed up to get even for this trainer named Erin?”

“That’s what he said, so, yeah!”

“Send me a copy of the recordin’. I’ll know what to do once I hear it, and Andy, I’m glad you didn’t have to tangle with that thug,” he added solemnly. “When Helen has a minute I’ll want to talk to her.”

“Sure will, sheriff. She may need to speak with you as well after her meetin’ with this Kenny guy. We still don’t know what that’s all about, but I’ve gotta bad feelin’.”

“Just let me know, and I think I hear the tow truck,” the sheriff declared, rising to his feet.

As they stepped outside, they found the motorcycle already being loaded up, and a few minutes later the sheriff climbed into his car and followed it out.

Shaking his head as he started back up to the barn, Andy’s mind began to race between Helen’s upcoming lunch with the questionable guy called Kenny, and the burly biker’s uninvited visit. He had a strange feeling the two were connected.

But the sound of approaching vehicles caught his attention, and turning around he

saw his clients rolling into the driveway. Relieved the dramatic confrontation hadn't played out while they were there, he hurried down to welcome them and led them across to the paddocks. They were reuniting with their horses and he began answering their questions when he was interrupted by a call from the sheriff. Excusing himself, he hurried into the barn.

"I've got some potentially bad news," the sheriff began solemnly. "When we booked that biker he was allowed one phone call, and it was to a fella named Ken Lockhart. I checked, and there's a man by that name known to the Dallas PD. He's a member of a biker gang, a known drug dealer, and he's considered a danger to the public."

"I can't believe it. Why is he out on the streets?"

"Unfortunately guys like him have high powered lawyers and they're real careful about not bein' in the wrong place at the wrong time. When one of their crew get caught they're too scared to spill their guts."

"And this is who Helen is meeting at three o'clock?"

"We can't know for sure, but yeah, I believe it is."

"Dammit. What should I do?"

"You? Nothin', not yet. It's almost three o'clock. Helen will probably be at the Moonshine restaurant by now, and I have a deputy on the road by the turnoff."

"Sheriff, you should know my brother-in-law will be there watchin' them."

"Brody King? How did he get involved?"

"You know Brody and I have been friends for a long time."

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“Sure.”

“Well, now he’s married to Annie. She may be a big star, but she’s still my little sister. Anyway, when I told him about Helen’s lunch with this weird guy and that I couldn’t be there because I’d be with clients, he volunteered. He said he’d take a video if it’s doable.”

“Ah, I see. That’s great. But the other question is, how the heck does Helen know Ken Lockhart? They wouldn’t travel in the same circles.”

“I want to know the answer to that question myself,” Andy said with a frown, “and once she’s safely home I intend to find out.”

* * *

Ken was in a foul mood when he rode his bike into the Moonshine parking lot. He couldn’t understand how a punk cowboy had been able to get the better of Bear. The guy was tough, ruthless, and quick-tempered. Not to mention he lived up to his nickname. He was several inches over six feet, and a powerhouse of hard muscle.

Climbing off and removing his helmet, Ken tried to push the bad news out of his mind, but it was impossible. He’d wanted to keep a low profile in the small community, and now Erin’s stupid argument with Helen and her rancher boyfriend had inexplicably blown up. The local sheriff would now have the name Ken Lockhart on his radar, and know Bear was connected to him.

Forcing himself to focus on the matter at hand, he glanced around the virtually empty

lot looking for Helen's car. When he saw it parked nearby under the shade of the trees, he felt a ripple of relief. The town was close-knit, and he'd been worried she might have heard about his connection to Bear and not shown up. Gripping his helmet as he strode towards the door, he studied the other vehicles. Nothing screamed surveillance. With his nerves settling and his confidence growing, he entered the high-end restaurant.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sitting nervously at a table in a discreet corner by a window overlooking a picturesque creek, Helen stared across at the door waiting for Kenny to appear.

When Andy had called and told her about his unexpected, threatening visitor—a gorilla sized man dressed from head to toe in leather riding a monster motorbike—then told her about Kenny's connection to a biker gang in Dallas, she'd wanted to cancel the meeting. But Andy thought if she wasn't there, Kenny might show up at the ranch himself with his biker buddies.

"Believe me, darlin', I don't like this one bit, but the sheriff is on top of it now, and from the moment you arrive at the restaurant, and on your drive home, there will be plenty of eyes on you."

Andy's reassurance had been helpful, but glancing around the half-empty dining room she didn't see anyone who looked remotely like a deputy or police officer. Telling herself they would be purposely inconspicuous, she waved to a waitress.

"What can I get you?" the young woman asked.

"Can you bring the menus please, and what are your flavored vodkas?"

"We have vanilla, peppermint and peach."

“Vanilla, and bring it as soon as you can.”

“Sure thing.”

Helen knew from experience the vodka wouldn't make her tired or tipsy, it would just settle her nerves. The waitress returned in a flash, and Helen had just downed the shot when the door opened and Kenny entered. The effects were almost instantaneous, and she waved him over.

Watching him stride towards her with his long, thick, wavy, shimmering hair and engaging smile, she found it hard to believe he was the leader of a tough, possibly criminal biker gang. But his well-worn leathers spoke of many miles on the road and gave him an appealing edginess. It was an intoxicating combination. Studying him with fresh, objective eyes, she understood why she'd been attracted to him. He was the epitome of a tough, sexy, bad boy.

“Hey, pretty lady. Glad you could make it,” he said, leaning down and pecking her on the cheek. “You look great.”

“Thanks, so do you,” she replied as he sat opposite her. “Can I ask you something. Two things, actually.”

“I need a beer first,” he declared, waving at the waitress. “Do you want anything? I see you've had your usual vodka shot.”

“No, thanks. One's always enough.”

As the waitress hurried over and took his order, Helen could see she was fascinated by him.

“Kenny, just how many women are not attracted to you?” she asked as the waitress

left.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Stop it.”

“Okay, not many, and the ones that aren’t I can usually...let’s see, how do I put this...?”

“Seduce?”

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“I was about to say, win over. Is that what you wanted to ask me?”

“Actually, no. How do you get your hair so wavy and shiny, and why do you have it so long?”

“Accentuate your good qualities and people won’t notice the bad ones as much. And it looks like it does because I use the right products.”

“A biker who uses hair products. You’re a walking, talking, oxymoron.”

“Among other things,” he quipped with a grin.

“Now on to the serious stuff,” she said, dropping her smile. “Did you send one of your biker friends to Andy’s ranch this morning?”

“Yep.”

“Oh, my God! You admit it? How could you do something like that?”

“Hey, Erin’s my friend, and your cowboy tried to beat her up.”

“Is that what she told you? He did no such thing! I know! I was there!”

He didn’t respond, but a frown crossed his brow and she suddenly wondered if she’d said the wrong thing.

“Tell me exactly what happened, and I mean exactly,” he said sternly, leaning across

the table.

“Okay. I used to think Erin was great, but I was wrong. Very wrong. I’m still trying to deal with the guilt. She’s a horrible person. She was whipping my poor mare and Andy told her to get off because Daisy looked like she was in pain. When Erin slid from the saddle he grabbed her crop, whacked her on the butt, then let her have it—verbally! He only hit her once, and she deserved it.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes, Kenny, that’s it. You had no business sending a thug to the ranch,” she said angrily as the waitress arrived with his beer. “I was about to cancel this meeting but I wanted to set the record straight.”

“Well, now you have.”

“I intend to speak to Erin as well.”

“No! Leave Erin to me!”

“What does that mean?”

“Just what I said,” he replied sharply. “The subject is closed. I’ll deal with it, and you can tell your boyfriend he won’t have any more visitors.”

“Thanks, I will,” she said, softening her voice, then remained quiet as he took a drink.

“Now, Helen, it’s time to talk about why you’re here.”

“You mean this isn’t just a friendly visit?”

“It is, but there’s more. There’s a charity event at your parents estate tomorrow night.”

“It’s not an estate. It’s just a farm with a renovated home and a few guest cabins, but how do you know about the event?”

“I have a couple of friends attending, friends who prefer I not show up at their offices or their homes. And they don’t like to be seen with me in public either. It really pisses me off.”

“Friends? How can you call them friends if you don’t hang out with them?”

“Never mind. You’re going to hand them something from me, and they’ll have something for me.”

“Oh, no! No! No! No! That sounds dodgy. What are you giving them? And what will they be giving me? Let me guess. This is about drugs. I don’t want any part of it.”

“Listen to me very carefully, Helen,” he said solemnly. “These people are important to me, like Daisy is important to you. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Kenny, you’re threatening me!” Helen exclaimed. “You’re actually threatening me. Or rather, you’re threatening Daisy, which is the same thing.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth. I was simply pointing out my friends matter to me, like your mare matters to you.”

“I’ve heard enough. I’m leaving.”

“Helen, I strongly suggest you stay right where you are.”

Though he hadn’t raised his voice he had shot her a look that sent a shiver rippling through her body.

“Fine, I’ll stay, but—”

“Decide what you want to eat,” he continued, cutting her off and picking up his menu. “We’ll discuss the details of all this over dessert.”

Afraid to leave and afraid to stay, and having no idea what to talk about, she gave in and picked up the menu. But as she tried to study the choices her mind was racing. She didn’t know Kenny at all, and suddenly felt foolish for allowing herself to be titillated by his bad boy charm.

“I think I’ll just have the spinach salad...and another shot of vodka!”

“Another shot of vodka,” he repeated with a chuckle.

“What’s so funny?”

“You know, Helen, I really do like you.”

“Then why are you asking me to do something I don’t want to do?”

“Because needs must,” he replied solemnly, his smile fading as quickly as it had appeared. “And you will do it, not because you’re scared of me--and don’t deny it, you are—but because you’re a smart girl and you know it’s the lesser of the two evils.”

“What two evils?”

“Doing what I ask and knowing the outcome, as opposed to not doing what I ask and looking over your shoulder.”

“No comment,” she muttered. “Am I allowed to go to the ladies room?”

“Why would you ask me such a thing? Honestly, Helen, you can be such a drama queen.”

Without responding, she rose unsteadily to her feet and walked through the dining room to the swinging doors. Pushing through them into a narrow hall, she started forward, but as she passed the door to the kitchen it suddenly opened and someone grabbed her hand. Startled, her eyes darted up and she found herself staring at Andy’s best friend, Brody King.

“Brody? What the hell are you doing?”

“Come with me,” he said, pulling her with him through the busy kitchen and into a small office.

“Hello, Helen,” the sheriff exclaimed, rising to his feet.

“Oh, my gosh! Sheriff Cooper! I’ll ask you what I just asked Brody. What are you doing here?”

“Listenin’ to your conversation. We planted a bug underneath the table. I’ll be sendin’ it off to the boys in Dallas. They’ll decide what action to take, if any.”

“Oh, dear God! I hope Kenny doesn’t find it.”

“It’s very difficult to see, but I have to make this quick. Agree to whatever he wants...but reluctantly. I’ll come over to the ranch later and explain everything to you and Andy. But you don’t have to worry. We’re here. Nothing’s going to happen to you. Now go back, and Helen, don’t drink any more. You need to stay sharp.”

“Thank you, sheriff, this has been absolutely nerve-racking, but I’ll be fine now. In fact, I’ll be better than fine. I’m going to help you catch him.”

“Helen, I don’t like the sound of that. Leave the catchin’ to me.”

“I will, but I’ll help,” she quipped, and before he could reply she had turned and hurried out the door.

* * *

Sipping his beer while he waited for Helen's return, Kenny was confident she would do as he asked. Most of his worker bees were compelled to agree for the money. Erin was a perfect example. Her training barn was about to go under before he'd stepped in and offered her the risky, illegal lifeline. But Helen came from a wealthy family and didn't need the cash. He would have to rely on fear, which wouldn't be a problem. His only issue was her cowboy boyfriend. Cowboys could be stubborn.

"Hey," she said, breaking into his thoughts as she sat down. "I have a question."

"Go ahead."

"Why me?"

"Why you what?"

"Don't be obtuse, Kenny, it doesn't suit you."

"Whoa...who are you and what have you done with Helen?"

"Just answer the question."

"Helen, I don't have to do anything. I'm the one calling the shots."

"That remains to be seen."

“What the hell happened to you in the five minutes you were gone?”

“I had an epiphany,”

“Really. And that was?”

“You wouldn’t be asking me to do your dirty work unless you were desperate,” she replied, then sat back, ignored the shot glass that had arrived while she was gone, and sipped the glass of water.

“Explain,” he said, annoyed but also intrigued.

“You have trouble connecting with these particular—what do you call them? Clients? Anyway, you have trouble and you’ve been looking for someone who can deal with them socially. Someone who won’t raise eyebrows. They don’t want to be seen with you, or meet you in some back alley someplace. Then you realized you had someone right under your nose. Me. The way I see it, you need me, but I sure as hell don’t need you. You could threaten me, you have threatened me, but I don’t scare easy. And Kenny, in case you’ve forgotten, my sister-in-law is Annie Baker, one of the biggest country and western stars on the scene. She knows people. Powerful people. Go ahead, push your luck and see what happens. Oh good, here’s my salad. I’m suddenly hungry.”

As their plates were set in front of them, Kenny stared down at his barbecued ribs trying to think of a response. Not only had Helen’s short speech caught him completely off-guard, she was right. He did have trouble connecting with his elite clients, and she was the perfect person to bring into his organization. He also abruptly realized he’d made a mistake sending Bear over to harass Andy for confronting Erin. It had alienated Helen.

“Now, Kenny, we know where we stand,” she said, picking up her fork. “You’ll have

to use something other than fear to entice me. You can give it some thought while we eat.”

His pulse ticked up.

She was interested after all.

The spoilt little rich girl had been toying with him.

But she had no idea who she was messing with.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Continuing to listen to Helen and Kenny’s conversation in the small office, Sheriff Cooper stared across at Brody and shook his head.

“Just what does that girl think she’s playin’ at?” he muttered. “Didn’t I make myself clear?”

“Apparently not clear enough,” Brody replied, reaching for his phone. “Though you have to admit, what she just did was pretty slick. Not that I’m sayin’ it was the right thing to do. ”

“It wasn’t, and it was too slick if you ask me. Who are you callin’?”

“Andy. He needs to know about this so he can talk some sense into her when he gets the chance.”

“Good idea. You can’t mess with guys like Ken Lockhart. She’s in way over her head.”

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“Hey, Brody, I’m glad you called,” Andy exclaimed as he answered. “How is she? What’s happening?”

“She’s fine, but I need to fill you in on some things. Are your guests still there?”

“They are, but I can step away for a few minutes. What’s goin’ on?”

“Helen has decided to—well—hold on, I’ll let you hear it. I wouldn’t be able to do it justice. Can we do that, sheriff?”

“Sure, one-second.”

“Dang it, what has she done?” Andy asked. “Is it that bad?”

“She went off down her own path,” Brody replied as the sheriff prepared the recording. “Okay it’s all set. Listen to this and you can judge for yourself.”

“You wouldn’t be asking me to do your dirty work unless you were desperate,”

“Explain.”

“You have trouble connecting with these particular—what do you call them? Clients? Anyway, you have trouble and you’ve been looking for someone who can deal with them socially. Someone who won’t raise eyebrows. Then you realized you had someone right under your nose. Me. The way I see it, you need me, but I sure as hell don’t need you. You threatened me, but I don’t scare easy. And Kenny, in case you’ve forgotten, my sister-in-law is Annie Baker, one of the biggest country and

western stars on the scene. She knows people. Powerful people. Go ahead, push your luck and see what happens. Oh good, here's my salad. I'm suddenly hungry. Sorry, Kenny, but you'll have to use something other than fear to entice me. You can give it some thought while we eat.

"Sheriff, can you hear me," Andy asked solemnly.

"Sure can."

"Just how much danger is she in after provokin' him like that?"

"A guy like Kenny won't let anyone push him around, especially not a young woman who dares to think she can get the better of him. But he won't mess with her until after the charity event. He needs her to make those deliveries. Speakin' of which, I'm in two minds about tellin' her parents. I don't know them real well, and she's over twenty-one. But regardless, you need to make her see sense. She's playin' with fire."

"Thanks, sheriff. I have to get back to my clients, and don't worry, I'll handle things on my end when I see her."

* * *

As Kenny and Helen had continued their lunch the conversation had been minimal. When the leather wallet holding the bill was placed on the table, Kenny unzipped his satchel, lifted out his billfold, pulled out cash and placed it inside.

"Helen, I need to go," he said gruffly. "Walk with me to my bike."

"We ordered coffee."

"It wasn't a request. You can come back for your coffee."

Looking up at him and seeing his eyes narrow, she decided it was not a time to argue

“I won’t be long,” she said, rising to her feet and waving at the waitress.

Kenny was striding ahead, and she had to hastily grab her purse and run to catch up. The stark change in his demeanor was unsettling. Not sure how to react, she stayed quiet as they walked to his bike.

“I have two envelopes for you,” he grunted, opening his satchel. “The names are clearly marked. Be warned, Helen, these envelopes are sealed in a very special way. If you don’t know how to open them a powder will fly out and make you very sick. Understood?”

“Good grief, Kenny. Isn’t that a bit extreme?”

“Let me put it like this. Since I started doing this I haven’t had any issues, and from what I’ve heard no-one is tempted to even try. Now pay attention. If you don’t recognize their names they’ll be easy to find. Bill Henly will be wearing a blue bowtie, and Jake Tyler will have cufflinks with red stones. They’ll arrive together. When you approach them you’ll ask, have you seen the library? When they say no, offer to show them. That’s where you’ll make the exchange. My envelopes for theirs.”

“You know about our library?”

“Helen, I have the plans for your parents home. I know every nook and cranny. I don’t do things half-assed. Remember that, and don’t ever doubt my homework skills.”

“If that’s true, why did you send that big brute to the ranch after Andy without checking the facts?”

The moment the words spilled from her lips she knew she'd made a terrible mistake. In a flash his eyes darted around the empty parking lot, then his open palm flew from his side and slapped her across the face...hard.

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“Don’t ever fucking question me again! Now take the fucking envelopes,” he hissed, leaning his head close to hers as he shoved them into her purse. “If anyone asks how you got that mark on your cheek, what will you say?”

“I...uh...” she stammered.

“Think of something! I’ll be in touch, and Helen, don’t fuck up.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As soon as Kenny and Helen left the restaurant, Brody walked quickly from the small office and sat at the bar to wait for her return. When the minutes ticked by and she didn’t appear, he moved across to the windows overlooking the parking lot. It took a moment to see her car under the shade of a tree, but she was nowhere in sight and Kenny’s motorbike was gone. As he hurried outside he suddenly saw her sitting on the ground with her back against her car, her arms wrapped around her legs, and her head buried in her knees. Running across to her and kneeling down, he discovered she was crying.

“Helen, what’s happened?”

“Brody...it’s awful...I’ve been such an idiot,” she sobbed, then slowly raised her head.

Seeing the bright red mark across her left cheek a flash of fury rippled through him, but controlling his anger he helped her stand up and walked her slowly back to the restaurant.

“You need to tell the sheriff exactly what happened,” he said softly as they moved through the empty dining room.

“I c-can’t. K-kenny warned m-me.”

“I know you’re scared, but he won’t be a free man for much longer. You don’t have to worry, hon, we’ll protect you.”

“B-but he’s so...m-mean. What if you c-can’t?” she stammered with a sniffle as he took her into the small office.

“Helen? What happened to you? Is Kenny Lockhart responsible?” the sheriff asked urgently. “My goodness, come and sit down. When you’re ready give me all the details. Take your time. There’s no rush.”

* * *

Andy had said goodbye to his guests and had just finished putting the horses in their paddocks when his phone rang. Seeing Brody’s name he immediately accepted the call.

“Brody! Is it over? Has Kenny left?”

“Yeah, but Andy, you need to get over here. Helen’s okay, but she’s really upset. Kenny hit her.”

“He did what?”

“He hit her. It looks like it was a hard slap across the face.”

“I swear to God I’ll kill the bastard. Does the sheriff know?”

“Yeah, she’s talkin’ to him right now, but she needs you.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Hastily ending the call, he ran to his truck, jumped behind the wheel and sped down the winding country road. Swerving into the campgrounds entrance and driving as fast as he dared, he came to a screeching halt outside the restaurant and raced inside.

“Hey, that was fast,” Brody exclaimed, marching up from behind the bar. “This way.” Walking with Brody across the dining room, they exited through a side door and moved down a short path to a cabin. “We were in the office but the manager came in to check on things and when he saw Helen he brought us over here,” Brody said as they approached.

“I want to say I can’t believe this has happened, but I can,” Andy grunted. “You never know what a guy like Kenny will do. Did Helen tell you he sent a thug to the ranch after me?”

“You’re kiddin’? No, she didn’t. We need to talk about that, but, Andy,” Brody said, lowering his voice as they reached the door. “She says she’s feelin’ okay, but I think she’s pretty shaken up.”

“I’m sure she must be,” Andy murmured, then opened the door and found Helen sitting in an armchair holding a small bag of crushed ice against the side of her face.

“Andy!” she cried, dropping the ice and jumping to her feet as he hurried across to her. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

Bringing her into his arms and holding her tightly, he thought the brash, brave young woman was now neither brash nor brave.

“It’s okay, darlin’, I’m here,” he said softly. “Tell me what happened?”

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“It was Kenny...he sort of...snapped. We were outside talking by my car, I made a comment, and he hit me.”

“Sheriff, when will you be arrestin’ the bastard?” Andy asked as he pulled back.

“I won’t be.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Unfortunately Helen parked her car at the back of the lot under a tree. It’s out of sight of the security cameras. All I have is the allegation but there’s no proof to back it up.”

“Isn’t her face proof enough?”

“I wish it was. We need more than just the accusation.”

“So...that’s it?”

“Not exactly,” Brody interjected. “He gave her a couple of envelopes. She’s supposed to hand them off at the charity event and collect the payments.”

“No, it’s not going to happen!” Andy exclaimed as he led Helen to a couch and sat down. “Enough is enough.”

“I’ve been speakin’ to the boys in Dallas,” the sheriff continued. “They’ve been after Ken Lockhart for a while, and they claim there’s enough evidence to put him and his

crew outta business and behind bars. They're comin' here to make plans."

"When you say the boys, who do you mean?"

"The Narcotics Division of the Dallas PD. Besides cocaine, he's been peddlin' a dangerous new substance called Synthetic Cannabinoid. It sounds like cannabis, but it's not. Chemical compounds are sprayed on organic matter then smoked like weed. It's bad news. Real bad."

"And he's sellin' this stuff as well?"

"Yep."

"Sheriff, where does this leave me?" Helen asked nervously. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Wait until the detectives from Dallas arrive and we'll take it from there. Right now you should go home and try to relax."

"Shoot. My car," she muttered. "I don't feel good. My head's starting to hurt and I don't think I can drive right now."

"Ah, right. Don't worry about that," the sheriff said with a nod. "I'll have my deputies deliver it to Andy's ranch, unless you want it at your parents' place."

"God, no, they can't see me like this."

"Then Andy's it is."

"There's just one other thing," she said with a sigh. "Kenny warned me not to say a word. I was supposed to come up with another reason for having a red face and a cut

lip,” she stammered. “When he finds out I told you...and all this is going on...he’ll come after me.”

“Let him try,” Andy growled. “There’s an old sayin’, forewarned is forearmed.”

“Now, Andy, you leave this to me and the boys from Dallas,” the sheriff declared. “Just get Helen home and call if you need me.”

“Sure,” Andy replied, but everyone in the room knew if Kenny, or any of his men showed up at the ranch, they’d be met with a unpleasant welcome.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

By the time Andy turned his truck into the ranch, Helen seemed much calmer. She’d checked her face in the sun visor mirror a couple of times, and made comments about how she might be able to cover the reddest areas with makeup.

“I wish I’d never met that beast,” she exclaimed as he rolled to a stop. “I didn’t even say anything that bad. I was just sort of...”

“Provoking him?”

“I suppose,” she muttered, “but he was being so rude.”

“What exactly was said?”

“He was talking about the envelopes he’d given me, and mentioned the library. He said he knew every nook and cranny of my parent’s house, and not to—what was it he said? He never did things half-assed and never doubt his homework skills.”

“And you said...?”

“I said, if that was true...” she began with a heavy sigh, “why did he send that big brute to the ranch after you without checking the facts? That’s when he hit me.”

“Ah, I see. Not the smartest question you’ve ever asked.”

“No, and I’m worried.”

“Let’s go inside and talk. I’m dyin’ for some coffee.”

“Okay.”

As they climbed from the truck, she glanced across at the horses happily grazing. Soon it would be time to bring them in, and in spite of her sore cheek she wanted to help.

“So, darlin’, sit down and tell me what’s on your mind,” Andy said when they entered the kitchen.

“Kenny and this place. You have no security cameras, no alarms, nothing. If he

wanted to cause trouble before or after the party, he could, and you wouldn't be able to do much about it."

"What reason would he have?" Andy asked as he set about making the coffee.

"Does a guy like Kenny need a reason? But if you want one, he might want to scare me again after I exchange those envelopes at the party. Or even just to show us he's in charge. I'm worried about it."

"You might be right," Andy said thoughtfully, moving across to join her at the table.

"I have a bad feeling," she said with a worried frown. "Today he showed me how quickly he can snap. I've always known he lives on the edge and he's a tough guy, but I never expected him to send that thug over here after you, and I sure as hell didn't think he'd ever hit me for no reason. What else will he do?"

* * *

Wordlessly rising to his feet and moving back to the counter, Andy poured two cups of coffee, brought them to the table, fetched the milk and sugar, then sat down.

"You're so quiet," Helen said softly. "What are you thinking?"

"I hate to say it, but I'm thinkin' you're right. We're sittin' ducks here. Someone could sneak into the property and I'd be none the wiser. I could get workin' on alarms or a security system, but I have no idea how long it would take. I've never felt the need for something like that so I've never looked into it."

"So what can you do. What can I do. This is all my fault. I'm the one who brought all this to your doorstep."

“But you didn’t do it purposely.”

“It doesn’t matter. Trouble came knocking because of me. Hey, I have an idea. Maybe we can put up a tripwire that will make a bell clang if someone tries to creep up the driveway. Andy? Why are you sitting there with that faraway look in your eye?”

“What time is it?”

“Um..almost 4:30. Why?”

“We have just enough time. Are you feelin’ well enough to go for a drive with me?” he asked, placing a call to Brody.

“Sure, but where are we going?”

“Hold on...Brody? Hi.”

“Hey, Andy, is everything okay?”

“Yep, and thanks for all your help today.”

“How’s Helen?”

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“Doin’ better. I’m callin’ because I need to take off for about an hour. I hate to ask, but I don’t want to leave the horses, especially since six of them belong to clients. By any chance can you—?”

“Pop over and babysit your ranch? Sure, no problem, I’ll bring my laptop and get some work done. It’s a bit hectic around here. Annie has brought her band in for the weekend.”

“Ah. Gotcha.”

“I’ll see you shortly.”

“Thanks, Brody,” Andy said gratefully, then ended the call and turned to Helen. “Maybe you should dab some makeup over your red face so it doesn’t look so bad.”

“You still haven’t told me where we’re going?”

“I’ll tell you once we’re on our way, but if anyone asks, a horse swung its head around and your face was in the way.”

“Good plan, and that actually happened once. But what’s the big mystery? Why won’t you tell me?”

“I will, but I need to do something first. I’ll meet you at the truck.”

As Helen headed from the kitchen, Andy stepped outside and walked around to the back of the barn. Under the shade of an old tree, set in the ground, was a wooden

heart with the name Wilbur across the front.

“I’m not replacin’ you, fella,” he murmured, crouching down and running his fingers across the name he’d carved himself. “There’ll never be another you. I just need to have a bit of canine company, and someone to raise the alarm when they hear things we humans can’t. I hope that’s okay with you.”

Fighting back the heat in his throat, he slowly stood up, but as he was about to walk away a small branch fell on the ground next to him. Feeling his pulse tick up, he paused his step. Wilbur was always bringing him branches to throw for him.

“You betcha,” he replied, fighting a swell of emotion as he bent down to pick it up. “There you go!”

Tossing it into the trees, he imagined his amazing dog chasing after it, then shaking off the heaviness in his heart, he marched back to his truck.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

As Andy jogged to the front of the barn he saw Brody had arrived and was talking to Helen already waiting in the truck.

“Hey, Brody,” Andy called as he approached. “Thanks again! I have to hit the road or the place I’m goin’ to might close before I get there.”

“No problem. I’m headin’ over to the paddocks to visit with the horses.”

“Feel free to take Maverick or Luna for a ride in the ring if you want,” Andy continued, climbing in and settling behind the wheel.

“Thanks, I just might do that.”

As Brody waved them off and started walking away, Andy turned his truck around, rolled down the driveway and drove out onto the road.

“You did a good job with that makeup,” he remarked, glancing across at Helen.
“How are you feelin’?”

“It still hurts a bit, but will you tell me where we’re going?”

“The animal shelter over in Fairview. But I have to make it quick. They close at five-thirty and it’s a twenty-minute drive.”

“The animal shelter? Oh, my gosh. Are you adopting a dog?”

“You suggested a tripwire with a clangin’ bell. A dog’s bark is a whole lot better.”

“That’s great, but isn’t it a bit sudden?”

“Not really. The thing is, I lost my buddy Wilbur a few months ago. It was just before you and your parents moved here.”

“Andy...I’m so sorry,” she said, lowering her voice and touching his arm. “I’ve wondered why you didn’t have a dog. It seemed...I don’t know...odd.”

“He was the best and I miss him like crazy. But I’m ready to bring another friend into the fold. And right now, with all this crap goin’ on, the ranch needs a dog around. He’ll sound the alarm and make people think twice.”

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“Did Wilbur do that?”

“He sure did, but the only threat he posed was the possibility of lickin’ someone to death. He was a bit like Will Rogers. Never met a man he didn’t like.”

“What breed was he?”

“A black Lab, but I think he had some Doberman in him. He was more protective than the average Lab, but he never showed any aggression. Annie and I both had dogs growin’ up and we found them at this shelter. She had little ones with attitude and personality—just like her,” he added with a chuckle. “I think that’s why she’s so successful.”

“I’ve never had the experience of adopting from a shelter. How do you know which dog is the one? Isn’t it difficult?”

“Well, it can be. But one of them will have a look in their eye. I can’t explain it, I just know. But of course I want them all.”

“That must be the hard part. Having to leave the others behind.”

“It sure is. Fortunately it’s a no kill shelter and most of the folks around here get their pets from this place.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful.”

“I take it you only have Daisy.”

“My mother has a huge, white fluffy cat. I don’t know the breed but he’s gorgeous. He looks like a walking fur rug. His name is Sampson. She’s a cat person so having a dog around was never in the cards. But I’d love to have one.”

“You have your own cottage. What’s stoppin’ you?”

“Andy, that’s a very good question. I’ve always wanted a lap dog. Something soft and cuddly. In fact...hold on,” she said, lifting her phone from her bag.

“Who are you callin’?”

“My mother. You’re right. I have my own place so there’s no reason I shouldn’t, but I wouldn’t feel right about bringing in a dog before checking it out.”

“You’re really thinkin’ you might get one now?”

“Yes, I am. Why put it off?”

“No reason,” he replied with a grin, but before she could place the call her phone chimed.

“Oh, my gosh, it’s her. Hey, mom, I was just about to call you,” she exclaimed.

“Sweetheart, are you all right? Your father and I are—well—a bit speechless. Sheriff Cooper is here with a detective from Dallas. They told us a biker assaulted you this afternoon and he’s coerced you into doing some sort of drug trade at our event tomorrow night. We don’t know what to make of it all.”

“I’m so sorry, I should have called, but things have been crazy. And I should have been there when they told you. Why didn’t they call me?”

“They tried but your phone kept going to voicemail. They’re explaining all the details to us now.”

“Oh, that’s right. I turned my phone off because I didn’t feel like talking to anyone after what happened.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m with Andy Baker driving up to Fairview. He’s going to adopt a dog.”

“When will you be home?”

“Not for a while yet.”

“Well, regardless, I’m very relieved to hear from you.”

“Mom, I’m fine, honestly, and I’ll tell you everything when I get back, but would you mind if I got myself a little dog?”

“Mind? Not at all. You should have a pet—besides Daisy, I mean. But please get back as soon as you can. The detective needs to talk to all of us together. He’ll be here for at least a couple of hours. He’s setting up all manner of equipment.”

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“Okay, tell him I’ll be there in a little while. Bye, mom.”

“Goodbye, dear.”

“What’s going on?” Andy asked as she ended the call.

“The sheriff is there with the detective from Dallas.”

“Ah, I see.”

“What do I say about knowing Kenny?”

“The truth, that it was through Erin. Just make it clear you didn’t know Kenny was a drug dealin’ thug,” Andy declared as he pulled into a parking space.

“But, uh, I actually ran into Kenny before I met Erin. He was at a bar and I was there with some friends. Erin came into the conversation because I said I had a horse.”

“Oh, I see. Well, regardless, stick to the facts. Any lies will come back to bite you in the butt,” he remarked as he turned into the animal shelter.

“I feel so guilty about all this. The last thing I expected was to have the police at the house wiring it up to record me doing a drug deal. Good grief!”

“Just do as they say. They know what they’re doin’. We’ll talk about how to handle your guilt later.”

“The way you handled it last time?” she exclaimed, turning to face him.

“Maybe. We’ll see.”

“But I’m wounded. My cheek is still red and sore.”

“Not as red and sore as your other cheeks will be, but there’ll be more to it than that. Now let’s save a dog or two.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Walking into the animal shelter, Andy and Helen were greeted warmly by the woman behind the counter who introduced herself as Ingrid, then led them through a locked door into the animal area. The kennels were surprisingly spacious with open doors to outdoor runs. As they made their way slowly down the aisle, Andy suddenly stopped and stared.

“Ranger? What the heck are you doin’ here?”

“You know him?” Ingrid asked as the large dog immediately barked and began jumping up and down.

“I sure do, and I’m takin’ him home with me. How long as he been here?”

“About two months. I’ll get him out and you can take him into the yard to get reacquainted. He can be pretty boisterous.”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve seen all that firsthand, and I’m guessin’ that’s why he ended up with you.”

“Andy, how do you know him?” Helen interjected.

“Believe it or not he belonged to old man Thompson.”

“Old man Thompson?” she repeated. “The man who died? The man who used to own the ranch my parents bought?”

“That’s right,” he replied. “But how did Ranger end up here, Ingrid?”

“When he passed away his eldest daughter took him,” Ingrid explained as she opened the cage door, “but she lives in a townhome with a small yard. It was impossible.”

“I bet it was. I’m on a ranch and he’ll have all the room he needs. He used to visit and play with my dog,” Andy said as Ranger almost knocked him down, jumping up at him as Ingrid tried to lead him out. “I know fella, don’t worry, you’ll becomin’ home with me. Helen, I guess I’ll see you in a bit,” he added, looking back at her as he continued laughing at Ranger’s excitement on their way out the back door.

* * *

As the door closed behind them, Helen moved slowly down the aisle wanting every dog she saw. She didn’t know how she was going to make a choice—until she spied a cream-colored fur ball curled up on its bed. While most of the other dogs were barking, the little cream puff simply raised its head and stared at her. She thought her heart would break.

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“Ah, I see Molly has caught your eye,” Ingrid remarked walking up to her. “Would you like to meet her?”

“Yes, please. What’s her story? And what breed is she? Not that it matters. I’m just curious.”

“We’re not sure. She doesn’t shed and her coat has curl to it so she probably has poodle in her, but I’d say she has several bloodlines. Her owner was an elderly lady who had a stroke and was forced to move in with her daughter who lived in a complex that didn’t allow dogs. What’s even sadder for Molly is that she’d only been with her a short time before it happened.”

“The poor thing.”

“They all have stories, but what’s important is looking forward, not backwards. Every day we see them find their forever homes. Are you ready?”

“Absolutely.”

“She loves to cuddle. She’s quiet at the moment, but she can be very playful. I think she’s just a bit depressed.”

“I don’t blame her,” Helen muttered as Ingrid opened the cage.

“We can go into the inside meeting room. I’m sure Andy has his hands full with Ranger out back, but I’ll let him know where you are.”

A moment later, holding the precious mutt and trying to avoid a barrage of wet kisses across her face, Helen had to fight back a wave of emotion.

“Ingrid, I don’t need to go to that room. She’s coming home with me. Just tell me where to sign.”

* * *

With the paperwork completed, Helen followed Andy and Ranger outside. She was still carrying Molly, and watched in awe as Ranger leap effortlessly into the back of the truck.

“Wow. That dog can jump,” she exclaimed as Andy opened the passenger door for her.

“That’s not all he can do,” Andy replied. “He’s a Belgian Malinois.”

“I thought he was a Shepherd. I’ve never heard of a Belgian Malinois.”

“It’s one of the most athletic dogs in the world and extremely loyal. But they need a ton of exercise. And a job! I’ll have to put some time into trainin’ him, but they’re super smart and they love learnin’ new things.”

“I hope he and Molly will get along. They’re so different.”

“You won’t have to worry about that. Ranger used to come to the ranch all the time and play with Wilbur, and any other hound who happened to be on the property. I wanted to take him when I heard old man Thompson had passed away, but I was told his granddaughter had cleaned out the house and left with him. I wish she’d called me, but I can understand why she didn’t.”

“You can? Was there a problem between you two?”

“Uh, kinda. We went out a couple of times and as nice as she was, we were very different people. I tried to let her down gently but she didn’t take it too well.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Dammit. I hope she didn’t take Ranger just to spite me. That would be—”

“Incredibly unkind to him,” Helen interjected. “But you have him now, and that’s what matters. Are you sure he’s okay in the back of the truck?”

“More than okay. He’s ecstatic. Look at him,” Andy said with a grin, glancing in the rear view mirror. “He’s lovin’ every second.”

As she shifted in her seat to peer around at the truck bed, Molly sat up and looked out the window, panting happily.

“Looks like he’s not the only one,” Andy said with a chuckle. “She sure is cute.”

Helen was overjoyed, and for the remainder of the drive she petted and talked to her new dog. But when they reached the ranch and Andy turned into the driveway, she saw her car.

“Sheriff Cooper had it dropped off for you.”

“Damn,” she muttered. “I just remembered I have to go home. He’s waiting for me with the detective from Dallas.”

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“They’ll need your full attention. You should probably leave Molly here.”

“But I just got her. I don’t want to leave her so soon.”

“She’ll have a great time with Ranger, and I promise I won’t let her outta my sight. When you come back you can tell me all about what they said and what you have to do.”

“You’re probably right, darn it.”

“I usually am,” he said with a wink.

“Andy—thank you—for everything.”

“You can thank me properly later,” he said, lowering his voice, “and I’ll be thankin’ you right back.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When Helen drove down the sweeping driveway to the front of her parents’ house she saw two sedans she didn’t recognize and a panel van. Feeling a flurry of nerves, she parked her car and hurried inside.

“Helen! There you are!” her mother exclaimed walking quickly towards her. “How are you? Oh, my, look at your face. This is dreadful. Are you in pain? Can I get you anything?”

“I was hurting earlier, but it’s much better now.”

“What a dreadful man he must be. How on Earth did you meet him? Do you know him very well?”

“Apparently not,” she muttered with a sigh.

“Hello, Helen,” the sheriff interjected, walking up to join them. “Are you feeling a bit better?”

“I am, and thanks for your help today.”

“You’re very welcome. We have quite a bit to get through so come with me and we can get started.”

“What are all the cars here for, and the van?”

“I didn’t drive my squad car in case the house is being watched. But with the event tomorrow night it wouldn’t be unusual to have organizers here.”

“Oh, I see.”

As they walked down the wide hall and entered the library, she was shocked to see men on ladders doing something with the overhead chandeliers, others removing books from the shelves, and two on the floor beneath the large antique desk against the wall.

“Helen, this is Detective Karl Hawthorne,” the sheriff declared as an attractive, smartly dressed man approached.

“Hello, Helen, it’s good to meet you. Please call me Karl. Detective Hawthorne is a

bit of a mouthful,” he said warmly.

“What’s all this about?” she asked as she continued to dart her eyes around the room.

“These men are installing surveillance equipment. I wanted to meet you in here so you could see it for yourself. Tomorrow night every part of this room will be monitored and filmed. But we should talk somewhere else so we’re not in the way. If at any point you’re not comfortable about something, or if you have any questions, just let me know.”

“Okay, but wow. I never expected anything like this.”

“Come through to the kitchen,” her mother interjected. “I’ll make us some coffee.”

* * *

After Helen had left, Andy had taken Molly and Ranger to the inside arena and released them to run around and get to know each other. Free at last, and encouraged by Ranger’s high energy, it only took a few minutes for Molly’s personality to burst forth.

Watching them filled Andy’s heart.

Though Ranger was energetic he was gentle with the little dog, and when Andy called they both came running. He knew Ranger had received training, and as he put the dog through its paces, he demonstrated the breed’s high intelligence. Molly had been watching, and when Andy started working with her, she became very excited and eager to learn.

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By the time he finished he felt confident letting them both run free. They had bonded, and he knew Ranger would be protective of his new friend.

Entering the barn, as he began making sure everything would be ready for his clients the following day, he wondered if he should have waited until after the clinic was over before bringing a new dog into the picture. But seeing how comfortable Ranger was around the horses, and knowing the potential danger Ken Lockhart and his biker gang presented, Andy was glad he'd taken the leap of faith.

He was returning to the house when Ranger suddenly veered away and ran around the back of the barn towards the trees. Not wanting to be separated from her new best friend, Molly ran after, barking as if asking him to slow down so she could catch up.

Though Andy guessed where Ranger was going, he still found it astonishing when the big dog stopped at Wilbur's grave and sat down.

"You are really something," he muttered, striding forward and crouching beside him. "That's right, our best buddy is here." As Ranger placed his paw on Andy's leg and looked up at him, the swell of emotion was almost overwhelming. "But he's also all around us," he managed, fighting the heat in his throat, "and you can come and visit him whenever you want."

Also wanting attention Molly suddenly pushed forward. Putting his arm around her, he let out a grateful sigh.

"This is meant to be," he said softly. "Now we just have to bring Helen into the fold. All the way in."

* * *

Sitting in his upscale townhome in an elite Dallas suburb, Ken Lockhart sipped his expensive scotch and thought about the scene at the Moonshine Restaurant with Helen. The dining room had been empty, just as he'd thought it would be. Late in the afternoon the locals were busy on their farms, and any visitors would be out touring the picturesque countryside.

Everything had gone exactly to plan.

Rarely did he have a misstep.

He'd learned from a master in New York City.

His late father.

Carlo Lucci.

Carlo's criminal organization specialized in narcotics and firearms.

If anyone dared to cross him, they paid for it with their lives.

Ken had been baptized Carlo Jr., but when his father had been double-crossed and killed, battles waged as several powerful members struggled for control, and the organization quickly fell into chaos. Knowing he was in imminent danger he'd disappeared, laid low for a while, then reinvented himself in Texas with a new identity.

He considered the bikers in his gang his family.

Upon joining they were each given the nickname of a wild animal. With his long hair

and being the King, it was natural for him to be known as The Lion, but they simply called him Boss. His right hand man was huge and feared nothing, hence the name Bear. There were only a dozen members, and each had been carefully recruited by Ken himself. Though he was occasionally approached from outsiders wanting to join, he had no interest in expanding. He knew his men were loyal, and the chemistry worked. As his father always said, if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Smiling and sipping his drink, his thoughts turned to Helen. The girl would soon be under his strict control, and Andy, the annoying cowboy, would be out of the picture. Accidents happened all the time, especially on farms. There were tractors and steel pitchforks, and horses that spooked and dumped their riders. He had a few ideas, but nothing had gelled completely in his head.

But it would.

It always did.

But as he shifted his thoughts to the charity event at the country estate, his satisfied smile transformed into an evil sneer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Though her parents had asked her to stay for dinner, Helen was anxious to get back to Molly. They understood, and knowing the house would be busy all day Saturday with final preparations for the event, she promised to bring the little dog over to meet them on Sunday.

As she drove home her mood was upbeat. The moment with Kenny in the Moonshine parking lot had been terrifying, but he would soon be in custody. Being free of the threat from him and his gang couldn't happen soon enough, and once again she felt foolish for ever thinking he was anything but a thug.

She was halfway to Andy's ranch when her phone rang. Glancing at the screen she didn't recognize the number and decided to let it go to voice mail. A moment later a text came in. Touching the screen and seeing the message her heart skipped a beat.

IT'S ME. KENNY. PICK UP THE FUCKING PHONE.

She was so startled she almost missed the bend in the road and drove into a bank. When it rang again she quickly accepted the call.

"Sorry, Kenny, the number came up unavailable. I don't answer those calls."

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“You’ll answer every one of them from now on. I have several phones. Is that clear?”

“Yes, yes, sure.”

“I’m calling to make sure you don’t have any smart ideas for tomorrow night.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“No bailing out at the last minute. If you’re scared, suck it up, and no calling your local sheriff in a panic. I’m warning you, if you pull any bullshit, that slap I gave you will feel like a whisper in comparison. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Kenny.”

“What were all those cars doing there today? And that van?”

“Just workers for the event,” she replied, shocked he’d been watching. She hadn’t seen him or any other biker in the area.

“What kind of workers. Be specific.”

“Decorators and the catering staff checking things out.”

“Remember, if any shit hits the fan, you and that cowboy will be the first I’ll deal with. And I have plenty of friends to help me.”

“Okay, Kenny, you don’t have to worry.”

“Are you sure you don’t have anything to tell me? This is your last chance, little girl.”

“I’m sure, there’s nothing,” she replied, wondering if she was making a terrible mistake.

“I’ll be in touch.”

He’d ended the call just as Andy’s ranch came into view, and she immediately wondered if it had been coincidence or if he was somehow watching her too. But with a white knuckle grip on the steering wheel, and shaking so badly she could barely turn her car into the driveway, she tried to focus. Slowly driving forward, she rolled through the gates, came to a stop, then took in several, long breaths. Finally climbing out, she spied Andy with the dogs up by the paddocks. He suddenly looked up, then waved and began jogging towards her. Seeing the big Belgian Malinois gallop ahead of him, and her little fluffy dog trying to keep up almost brought tears to her eyes.

“Hey, darlin’, how did it go?” he asked as he reached her, then narrowing his eyes he quickly added, “What’s happened?”

“Kenny. He called and threatened me and I’m really scared.”

Before Andy could respond Molly barked, wanting Helen’s attention. Though she was still shaking she picked up the little dog and cuddled her.

“My precious pup,” she crooned, loving the feel of her soft fur. “I’m so glad I found you.”

“Come inside and tell me everything,” Andy said, placing an arm around her shoulders and guiding her towards the house. “Damn, girl, you’re tremblin’.”

“He said some awful things, and I don’t know how he did it without being seen, but

he was watching mom and dad's house...or someone was and reported back to him."

"We'll let the sheriff know, but I want to hear everything first."

* * *

Still holding Molly, Helen relayed the frightening conversation. When she'd finished Andy sat quietly for a few minutes, then picked up his phone.

"I'll call the sheriff, then we're doin' something to get your mind off all this."

"Wait, before you call him, what do you think?" she asked urgently.

"I think Ken Lockhart is a cowardly thug. While I'm talkin' to him, get changed. We're goin' for a ride with the dogs up Smoky Hill."

"But Molly's a small dog. Will she be okay?"

"She's not a teacup poodle," he replied with a chuckle. "She'll have a blast, and we won't be gallopin' up the hill. Besides, Ranger will take care of her."

“Are you sure?”

“Would I do anything to put you or her in danger?”

“No...it’s just...”

“It’s just that you’re already a mother hen. It’s fine, darlin’, I get it. Now go get ready.”

As she walked away, he placed the call and told the sheriff the details of Ken’s threatening call to Helen.

“That’s predictable,” the sheriff remarked. “That’s how men like him operate. They scare the bejesus outta people to make sure they do as he says. I can’t wait to see how he acts when the tables are turned and all hell brakes loose on him.”

“You and me both,” Andy said with a heavy sigh. “I’m takin’ her on a trail ride. She needs a change of scenery and the mountains look incredible up there now. If we’re lucky we might even see some snow droppin’ off. It was a warm day.”

“Yeah, it’s meltin’ quick. I’ll be talkin’ to George soon. When I do I’ll tell him what happened and he may want to speak to Helen. In the meantime I’ll send a deputy over to your ranch to keep an eye on things until you get back.”

“Thanks, Sheriff. That will put my mind at ease,” he said, turning to see Helen walk into the kitchen. “I’ll speak to you later.”

“What did he say?” she asked as he ended the call. “Did he have any suggestions? Is he concerned?”

“His exact words were, that’s predictable, it’s how men like him operate. They scare the bejesus outta people to make sure they do as he says. He’ll have deputies keepin’ their eye on this place, and pretty soon Ken Lockhart won’t be a threat to anyone! Now let’s go for that ride.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Flanked by tall trees on either side, Andy and Helen rode up the foggy, peaceful trail. Though she was initially worried about Molly and Ranger running off, they never ventured more than a few yards away. As they moved deeper into the trees, she was captivated by the shards of light piercing the overhead branches, and the occasional sounds of what she assumed was wildlife.

“You were right, I feel so much better,” Helen said with a sigh as they reached the top of the trail and entered a clearing. “Wow, a plateau. I can’t believe it.”

“Believe it, and this is the perfect time to be here. Look at the mountains.”

“They seem near enough to touch, like they’re five minutes away.”

“I know, it’s amazing, and it only happens this time of year. I was told it’s called a Superior Mirage. Apparently it has something to do with the refraction of light. But whatever it’s called, or however it happens, it’s just an incredible sight. And now it’s time for another incredible sight,” he added, lowering his voice.

“Which is?”

“You, naked, on my blanket,” he replied, climbing off and removing the rolled up rug

from the back of his saddle.

“Here?” she sputtered, watching him flap it out on the ground. “But—”

“But what? Are you worried someone will drive by and see us,” he asked with a chuckle.

“What about the horses and dogs?”

“We’ll tether them,” he replied, leading Maverick to the closest tree. “They’ll appreciate the break after that climb up the hill. Look, Ranger and Molly are already lyin’ down.”

“Is it...safe? I mean...there’s wildlife around here.”

“You don’t have to worry. I’ve had picnics up here plenty of times.”

The thought of being with him naked in the open spaces was exciting, but also nerve-racking, though she wasn’t sure why. With her pulse ticking up, she slipped from the saddle and tied Daisy next to Maverick.

“Have you ever had sex out in the open?” he whispered, moving behind her and placing his lips against her ear.

“No, and it’s making me quivery.”

“Good word,” he murmured, turning her around. “You’ll love it. You’ll feel completely free.”

“Now I’m jealous.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ve obviously been up here and done this before.”

“You’re right and wrong,” he said, lifting her sweater over her head. “Sure, I’ve been up here plenty of times, but not to do this.”

Though it wasn’t cold, the gentle breeze had the hint of a chill, and as he deftly peeled off her clothes, he momentarily paused to gaze down at her stiffening nipples.

“This is so weird,” she murmured as he stepped back and quickly stripped.

“There’s nothin’ weird about it,” he replied, taking her hand and bringing her onto the blanket with him. “Lie back and close your eyes.”

But as she stretched out, she couldn’t help but stare up at the majestic peaks.

“Those mountains,” she muttered as he began roaming his hands over her body. “It’s as if they’re watching us.”

“They are,” he purred, lowering his mouth to her breasts. “Now close your eyes and feel the air touch your skin.”

Letting out a whimper she did as he said, then moaned softly when he drew her nipples into his mouth, then moved his fingers between her legs.

“Damn, girl, you’re so wet,” he crooned, thrusting his finger inside her. “Tell me how

much you want my cock.”

“I feel as if I’m dreaming.”

“Tell me,” he growled, abruptly pinching a nipple.

“More than I can say,” she gasped. “This is all so surreal. And you’re right, it’s liberating to be naked out in the open like this.”

“Keep your eyes closed.

As she felt him moving away she was tempted to sneak a peek to see what he was doing, but he was back in a flash and resting his weight on top of her.

* * *

Andy had often thought about bringing a woman to the magical spot, but no-one had inspired him to take the ride up the Smoky Hill trail—until he’d started spending time with Helen. Now having her naked on his blanket he was glad he’d waited.

“I’m going to fuck you slow and hard,” he purred, placing his hardness at her entrance. “But you’re not allowed to come until I say so.”

“Just hearing that turns me on. I mean, really turns me on.”

“I know,” he growled as the thrust into her channel.

Gripping her waist he began slowly thrusting, then increased his pace, continuing for endless minutes before suddenly stopping. Ignoring her protests, he leaned over her body and devoured her neck, and though she whimpered and writhed he made her wait.

“How much do you love being naked out here like this?” he murmured, finally raising his head.

“It’s heaven. I never want to leave, but you have to keep going. I was getting so close.”

“I don’t have to do anything. But if you ask nicely…”

“You’re torturing me.”

“I’m waiting,” he grunted, then quickly pinched her nipples to underscore his point..

“Sorry, sorry,” she squealed. “Please, Sir, please will you fuck me?”

“Sir? Much better.”

Moving his hands beneath her, he clutched her fleshy cheeks and squeezed, eliciting a loud cry. But it had barely escaped her lips when he began to pound her pussy with powerful strokes. When he sensed she was drawing close to her climax, he paused to shift his position, then started again, making sure his cock brushed against her clit with every thrust. It was only a moment later her body stiffened, signaling her orgasm was at hand.

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“You have to ask,” he warned, his voice husky.

“Please, Sir, may I come, please, please...”

“Now, give it to me now.”

As she exploded beneath him, he squeezed his eyes shut and let his climax sweep through his body. He could hear her cries as his powerful, sparkling spasms seized him. When they finally released him from their grip, they left him breathless with his heart pounding.

* * *

Nestled in his arms, Helen let out a contented sigh. She never wanted to leave, but the air against her skin was turning cold.

“We’d better head back,” Andy softly remarked. “The light’s fadin’ and it’ll be chilly pretty soon.”

“I know, I was just thinking the same thing, but this has been amazing. Thank you for bringing me here.”

“Hey, the pleasure’s all mine, like, seriously,” he replied with a chuckle, then sat up and reached for her shirt. “Here, put this on.”

As she took it from his hand and began slipping her arms into the sleeves, she glanced across at the mountain just in time to see a huge slice of ice break off.

“Andy! Look! The mountain.”

“Wow, you don’t see that every day!” he exclaimed, darting his eyes across just in time. “I wish I’d had my phone out.”

“Me too. It makes me want to sit here and watch for it to happen again.”

“That was one chance in a million.”

“Like you,” she whispered.

“And you,” he murmured back, then closing his eyes, he placed his lips on hers in a long, lingering kiss.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Across from the ranch in a heavily wooded area Ken had been watching the ranch. When he’d spotted Andy and Helen head out on a ride he’d planned to break in for a poke around, and he’d make it obvious. Keeping Helen on edge and the cowboy worried could prevent a foolish last minute change of heart. But a deputy’s car had arrived and parked on the side of the road.

Ken had been forced to stay where he was, hoping the annoying lawman would leave. But he didn’t budge until Helen and Andy returned. By the time they had settled all the horses into the barn and returned to the house it was almost dark, and Ken still faced a long ride all the way back to Dallas. There were important matters waiting for him at his clubhouse, including a meeting with one of his biggest suppliers.

The following day he would be supervising the deliveries to his sellers, including Erin. When he was finished he would have to ride back to Smoky Hill with several of his gang to ensure he had control of his new pipeline. Small towns were surprisingly

profitable. He didn't have a crystal ball, but he was pretty sure he knew how it would all go down, and rarely was he wrong.

"They're back, now get the fuck out of here," he grunted under his breath staring down at the deputy's car, then abruptly broke into a grin. Andy had appeared and was jogging across the road. Ken knew it was to thank the deputy and send him on his way.

* * *

Andy planned to invite the deputy in for a cup of coffee, but as he approached the car he couldn't shake the edgy feeling he'd had since he and Helen had been putting the horses away. Pausing his step, he stared up and down the empty road.

"Hey, Andy, what's wrong?" the deputy called, leaning out his window. "Did you see something?"

"No, but I've got one of those weird vibes. You probably know what I mean," Andy replied, walking towards him.

"Oh, yeah, you bet I do."

"Maybe I'm just bein' paranoid."

"I've been parked here the whole time you were on your ride and I haven't seen any bikers."

"I guess I'm just twitchy. Anyway, I came out to thank you and to ask if you'd like to come in for coffee."

"That's real nice, but I need to get back to the station then head on home. But the

sheriff said I can call in a replacement if you want.”

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“I have a dog now,” Andy replied. “He’ll alert me if any unwelcome visitors show up, but I sure appreciate you bein’ here while I was gone.”

“No problem, Andy. Have a good rest of your night.”

“Thanks, you too.”

Stepping back, he watched the deputy drive off, but as he turned to head home the trees in the fields beyond caught his eye. Staring at the dark woods a sudden chill pricked his skin. His first instinct was to run to the barn, grab one of his powerful flashlights and check it out, but there was no way he’d leave Helen in the house alone. Jogging across the road, he walked quickly into the house, and found her draining a pot of pasta.

“I hope this is okay,” she said as he pecked her on the cheek. “There was a jar of spaghetti sauce in the pantry and it’s heating up in the microwave. I’m afraid I’m not much of a cook.”

“It’s perfect darlin’. I’ll grab the plates.”

“I’m really tired,” she mumbled with a sigh. “After we eat I think I need to lie down.”

“I’m pretty beat too. We could both use an early night.”

“What time are your clients coming tomorrow?” she asked as he fetched the sauce and opened the jar.

“Around nine. When are you goin’ back to help your mom?”

“Probably about the same time. I really wanted to stay and watch you but I know she needs me, and I still have to set up the silent auction table. It takes ages.”

Watching her stir the sauce into the pasta and dish it out onto the plates, though he tried, he couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling.

“Helen,” he began as they sat down to eat, “how did you meet Kenny?”

“Clubbing,”

“Clubbing?” he repeated, startled by her response.

“Yeah, I met him at an underground club in Dallas. My favorite one, actually. It’s called Nighthawk.”

“I didn’t know you were into the night life. How much time do you spend at those places?”

“When I get bored I go back to the city for some fun. The clubs I go to are great. I’d love to show you.”

“I enjoy a country bar with a live band, but what you’re talkin’ about isn’t my thing, darlin’,” he said with a sigh, twirling the pasta around his fork. “But gettin’ back to Kenny. You said you two crossed paths at a club. How did it happen?”

“It was nothing out of the ordinary. I was sitting at a table with my friends and he sent over a bottle of champagne.”

“Champagne?”

“Yeah. Even though it’s underground it’s a high-end. Anyway, one of the girls waved him over, and when he joined us he sat next to me. The next thing I knew we were dancing.”

“Did you actually date him?”

“No, nothing like that. We’d meet for coffee, and we’d go for rides on his bike. But that aside, when all this is over I’d really love to take you to Nighthawk. We could have a weekend in the city and stay at—”

“Helen, I have this ranch. I can’t just up and leave.”

“Can’t you find someone to take care of things?”

“Sure, but I’m sorry, I really have no interest in those kinds of places.”

“You might change your mind once you see what it’s like. At least think about it. And we don’t have to be gone all weekend. We could go for just a night. My parents have an awesome penthouse.”

“Right now, all I care about is gettin’ through tomorrow,” he said solemnly. “Durin’ the day I have client’s comin’, and you have the event, then tomorrow night you have to hand over those envelopes. I can’t see past that. And I’m suddenly beat,” he added, laying down his fork and leaning back in his chair. “I’ll clean up my plate, then take a quick shower and hit the sack.”

“You go ahead, I’ll take care of the dishes, and I’m hungry. I’ll join you when I finish.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Leaving the kitchen with Ranger padding along behind him, Andy entered the bathroom, peeled off his clothes and moved into the shower stall. As he began washing off the day his thoughts stayed on Helen. He loved the sparkle in her eyes, her sassy mouth, and most of all he loved her big heart. But when she'd starting talking about her other life, the one that involved hanging out in noisy nightclubs with flashing lights, too much booze and undoubtedly drug use, he'd felt a wave of disappointment. It didn't seem to fit with the girl he loved. Soaping his body, then standing under the hot water as it splashed over him, he decided he had to tell her if she wanted to go to clubs, fine, but he wouldn't be at her side. Finally turning off the water and stepping out, he began toweling off when she knocked on the door and poked her head around.

"Shoot, I wanted to join you," she said with a soft smile as she entered.

"Just as well you didn't," he replied, managing to smile back. "We both need our rest. Who knows what would've happened if you'd been with me all wet and slippery?"

"Well, there is that."

"I'll see you in the bedroom, darlin'."

Lightly kissing her, he grabbed his robe from the hook on the back of the bathroom door and wrapped it around his body. But as he turned down the hallway towards the bedroom, Ranger suddenly froze and began to growl.

* * *

Putting on his helmet and riding his bike slowly through the dark woods, Kenny had emerged into the field and picked up speed. When he reached the road he'd climbed off, and leaving his helmet on the seat, he'd walked briskly across into Andy's driveway and started up towards the barn. He planned to let all the horses out, knowing when Andy woke up in the morning he'd have a hell of a shock—and it would be a sure-fire wake up call.

“Don't fucking mess with me, cowboy,” he muttered under his breath, but he was passing the house when he heard barking.

As far as he knew Andy didn't have a dog, but when he darted his eyes around and saw what looked like a German Shepherd climbing through a doggy door, his heart stopped. Though he knew there was no way he'd out run the snarling canine he had to try. Praying the cowboy would come out of the house and call the dog off, Ken sprinted towards his bike.

“Ranger! Stop!”

Though he heard Andy's voice Kenny didn't look around. Racing to his bike and frantically pulling on his helmet, he climbed on and started up the powerful engine, but from the corner of his eye—to his horror—he saw the dog leave the ground with an enormous leap.

There was no escaping the hit.

Though the animal almost knocked him off the bike, Ken somehow managed to keep his balance, and with the powerful canine in pursuit he managed to ride away.

As he approached the bend in the road he dared to look behind him. To his shock, not

only was the dog still chasing him, it was running with unbelievable speed. But the sharp turn was suddenly in front of him and he had to slow down. Easing off the accelerator, terrified the extraordinary dog would catch him, he leaned into the curve, then squeezed the accelerator as he came out of it. Roaring off down the country road, he looked behind him. The dog was gone.

“Fuck!” he growled as he sped down the country road. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

Then barely a moment later, he heard a siren.

Rolling his eyes and thinking he was in the middle of a lucid nightmare, he slowed down and came to a stop.

“Take off your helmet, step away from the bike and put your hands behind your head.”

* * *

Still in his bathrobe, as Andy watched Ranger gallop back to him, he heard a siren. Sheriff Cooper often had his men on the back country roads to catch the night time speeders. They were usually out of town visitors. Breaking into a grin, Andy jogged back to the house, making a fuss of Ranger and telling him what a good dog he was. But in the years he’d known Ranger, and even though he’d seen videos of Belgian Malinois in action, he’d never realized just how athletic he was.

“What happened? Is Ranger okay? Are you okay?” Helen asked anxiously as they walked in the door.

“Yep, we’re fine. There was a biker walkin’ up to the barn and Ranger chased him away. He literally jumped on him as he was about to ride off on his bike.”

“You’re kidding. Was it Kenny?”

“I have no idea, but I’ll soon find out. Right when Ranger was comin’ back to me I heard a siren. I’m pretty sure one of the sheriff’s boys got the guy for speedin’.”

“That’s fantastic.”

“Sure is, but there’s something even better. If it was Kenny or one of his guys they won’t be comin’ back here for a while. Ranger has seen to that.”

“The timing is amazing.”

“Sometimes things just fall into place.”

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“Did you have a feeling you should get another dog?”

“You know, I kinda did. But I can’t say it had anything to do with what’s goin’ on. I just knew it was time. Now let’s hit the hay. Come on, Ranger.”

“If it was Kenny, he’ll be furious,” she remarked as they started down the hall. “Not only did you and your dog get the better of him, he’ll be leaving with a ticket.”

“Darlin’, it won’t be long before that will be the least of his problems.”

* * *

After being chased by a ferocious canine and ticketed for speeding Kenny was in a foul mood as he rode back to Dallas. But he was also relieved. There had been no drugs or paraphernalia stashed inside his saddle bags or in his pockets, and that was unusual. By the time he rolled into his garage it was almost midnight, and though the late hour didn’t bother him, the day ahead became his focus.

He’d be meeting his supplier at the clubhouse. He’d hand over a bag of cash and receive a suitcase stuffed with cocaine. His men would head out to make the deliveries, but the package for Erin he’d take care of in person. She was a Nervous Nellie and he knew how to handle her.

Then it was back to Smoky Hill with four of his crew.

If everything went as planned, the sleepy little town would be his, and in spite of her interfering cowboy, Helen would be under this thumb.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The following morning Andy sleepily opened his eyes, rolled over, and wrapped his arms around Helen's warm, inviting body. As he pushed his hardness between her legs she moaned softly and reached down to guide him into her warmth. For endless minutes he slowly thrust, loving the feel of her slick, inviting channel and her murmurs of pleasure. But suddenly wanting more, he pulled out, rolled her on her stomach, settled on his knees behind her, then clutched her hips and pulled them up.

"You'll be careful tonight, won't you, darlin'," he muttered, sliding his rigid rod back inside her.

"Uh-huh."

"I mean real careful," he added sternly, landing a hot slap on her right cheek, then the left. "Don't take any risks!"

"I won't," she replied hastily.

"Do exactly what the detective tells you!" Before she had a chance to respond he began spanking her in earnest, moving his flattened palm from side to side. "Call this an ounce of prevention," he continued. "I know you can be impulsive and sometimes you think you know better, but tonight isn't the time or place for either of those things. Just follow orders, no more, no less. Got it?"

"Yes, yes, I will, I promise."

"I can't come into the library with you, but I'll be outside the door. If anything happens, don't panic. I'll be right behind the detective if he needs to go in," he assured her, smoothing his palm over her reddened skin. "Don't take matters into your own hands."

“I won’t, Andy, I swear.”

Satisfied, he began to pump, and quickly sensed the short, sharp spanking had fueled her arousal. As he slipped a hand beneath her and rubbed her clit she let out an urgent cry.

“I know, darlin’,” he crooned. “Get ready, I’m gonna ride you hard. Bury your head in the pillow so the dogs don’t think I’m hurtin’ you.”

Gripping her hips, he slowly withdrew his cock, then slammed into her and began pummeling with fervor. Listening to her muffled cries he continued the vigorous thrusting, determined not to stop until he sensed her orgasm drawing near. When she abruptly threw back her head and sucked in the air, he knew her moment was looming.

“Please, Sir...?”

He hadn’t expected her to ask permission, and the unexpected request sent a jolt of energy through his loins.

“Yeah, darlin’,” he managed as his powerful explosion threatened. “Give it to me!”

The urgent command had barely left his lips when the cascading convulsions crackled through his body. He could hear her joyous cries uniting with his deep groans, then to his shock, just as the spasms waned, Ranger howled. Slipping from her depths and collapsing next to her, he glanced across and saw the dog sitting up, happily panting and staring at them.

“Oh, my gosh, I can’t believe he did that,” Helen said breathlessly. “Do you think it’s a good thing or a bad thing.”

“I’m takin’ it as applause,” Andy managed with a chuckle. “Dammit, I wish I could stay in this bed with you all mornin’, but I have to grab a quick bowl of cereal, then feed and clean and get the horses out.”

“Can I help? I love being in the barn with you.”

“Back at ya,” he said, lowering his voice.

* * *

At the Rutherford estate, Detective George Hawthorne had driven past the house and was coming to a stop by the back door. He was followed by the van and another agent in the second car. It was still early, but the final pieces of equipment still needed to be set up in the room next to the library. Though most of the work had been completed the day before, experience had taught him to have everything prepared well in advance, and to check and double-check every last detail.

Outsmarting Ken Lockhart hadn't been easy, but after a tremendous amount of effort and many man hours, he and his team were on the verge of nailing him. George's only concern was the involvement of a civilian, especially a young woman. But she'd already been unwittingly hijacked into the situation by the nefarious drug dealer.

When his close friend, who also happened to be the sheriff of Smoky Hill, had called with the startling news that a biker named Ken Lockhart was pressuring a local girl, George couldn't believe his luck. He already knew the drug dealer was planning to infiltrate the small town and had plans to pursue the investigation. As the sheriff outlined the demands Ken had made to the young woman in question, George thought the news was almost too good to be true. But now, after meeting Helen Rutherford, he believed the opportunity he'd been seeking was finally at hand.

* * *

When Andy and Helen had finished their chores, and the horses were ready to be taken out to the paddocks, Helen decided to saddle up Daisy for a quick ride before leaving. With Molly running alongside, she followed the track to the entrance of the

forest, then stopped and looked up through the trees.

The mist was already rising from the ground, and the temptation to move forward was hard to resist. But without Ranger with them, she worried for Molly's safety. As she turned around to head back she paused. The area was slightly elevated, and looking down at the ranch sprawled out in front of her, she felt her heart swell. It wasn't grand like her parents' estate, but it was homey and inviting.

She could see Andy meeting his clients, and Ranger running around excited to see them all. Suddenly, for no apparently reason, she flashed back to the night before, and Andy's lack of enthusiasm when she'd mentioned the clubs she frequented.

A frown crossed her brow.

She'd be running into several friends at the charity event and she had no doubt they'd want to plan their next night out.

"What do you think, Daisy?" she murmured, stroking her mare's neck. "I love those crazy times and I really want Andy to be with me. Should I just continue to go by myself or try to drag him along? Shoot. I hope this won't become a problem."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

After Helen returned Daisy to her paddock, she walked across to the round pen to wave goodbye to Andy. He was working with a skittish young colt, demonstrating how to calm the horse's nerves and get his attention. Though she knew she had to leave she couldn't pull her eyes away. There were no whips, or a chain around the animal's nose, something she hated but had often seen at Erin's facility. When the colt stopped acting up and let out a snort, Andy stepped up to him and stroked his neck.

“It’s not magic,” he declared, “it’s just patience and confidence. Horses are extremely sensitive. If you’re nervous, they will be too. They’re looking to you for direction. Give it to them. Show them there’s nothing to fear. When you pass a scary object, touch it, then let them take as much time as they need to approach it and explore it themselves.”

Watching the faces of his clients eager to learn, she felt like one of them. She’d been riding for years, but around Andy she felt like a beginner.

“Now let’s get tacked up and move into the arena,” he continued, then spotting her, he hurried over with a wide smile. She wasn’t surprised when the colt followed him.

“That was wonderful,” she said softly. “You make it look so easy.”

“It is. Are you headin’ off to the estate?”

“I am. What time will you get there?”

“Probably between seven-thirty and eight. We’re supposed to finish at six, but that never happens,” he remarked with a grin.

“What will you do with Ranger?”

“I’m not sure. He’ll probably pretty worn out after all the activity today, but I still don’t want to leave him on his own so soon. I know he’s good about stayin’ in the truck, so I might bring him and let him hang out there.”

“I could put Molly with him.”

“That’s a great idea. They’ll be two peas in a pod. Problem solved.”

“I have to run, I’m a bit late, not that it really matters, but mom will be in a panic.”

“I’ll see you tonight, darlin’,” he murmured, then leaned forward and pecked her on the cheek. “And don’t forget, just follow orders. That detective and the sheriff know what they’re doin’.”

“I will, I promise. Bye...and Andy...I love you.”

“I love you too darlin’.”

* * *

Kenny knew Erin spent the morning on horseback, and started her lessons at one o’clock. Not wanting to be seen he always arrived before noon. Ever vigilant, when he rode his Harley through the gates, his eyes darted around the facility looking for anything out of the ordinary. There were no cars except for her SUV, and two workers were cleaning the stalls. Satisfied, he continued on and came to a stop beside the indoor arena. Climbing off his bike, he removed his helmet, lifted her package from his saddlebag, and walked briskly inside expecting to see her on a horse. But the ring was empty.

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“Erin?”

Receiving no reply, he moved hastily through the riding ring to the gate that lead to the grooming area.

“Erin?” he called again.

When he didn’t get a response a second time he began to worry. Her office was at the end of the barn aisle, and marching forward, he reached the door and tried the handle. It was locked.

“What the fuck...?” he grunted.

The whole place felt empty, almost as if it had been evacuated. Snatching his phone from his pocket he sent her a text.

Where the fuck are you?

To his great relief he received an immediate reply.

I’m here. Sorry. I had a horse catch the back of his shoe and it was half on and half off. I had a helluva job removing the damn thing without ripping the sides of his feet.

Just hurry the fuck up

Yep, I’m on my way. Sorry.

Kenny didn't like last minute hiccups.

Not having any drugs on him when the cop stopped him for speeding the night before had been a good omen. Erin having to mess with a horse and keep him waiting was not.

"I'm here," she called, breaking into his thoughts.

Glancing down the aisle he saw her half walking, half running towards him.

"Where's the shoe?" he asked as she stopped and unlocked the door.

"I left it outside the stall for the farrier. He may be able to straighten it out and put it back on. Come in."

Ken had a keen sense of a person's state of mind, and she was nervous.

"Erin, why are you so on edge?"

"Have you ever been on a horse that flipped out and caught the back of its front shoe and flipped out again?"

"I can't say I have."

"And when you finally manage to get it back in its stall, you have to somehow get the damn thing off," she continued. "Trust me, it's no fun."

"Okay, I get it, but now it's time for business. Where's the money?" he demanded as she moved behind her desk.

"One-second. It's in this—"

“Erin, you forgot to lock the door,” he barked, quickly turning the knob. “You have to get your shit together. In fact, I’m not sure continuing to work with you is a good idea. I’m thinking perhaps I should call this off and forget our arrangement.”

“No! I’m sorry. It’s just been a crazy morning. Please, Kenny, my clients are expecting their stuff this afternoon, and I just got two more people who will be regulars.”

“Then pay attention. If you don’t, it’s over. I mean it, Erin. You can’t forget something as basic as locking the fucking door.”

“You’re right, you’re absolutely right,” she exclaimed as she opened a drawer and pulled out an envelope. “It’s all there. Twenty-thousand in cash for one kilo of cocaine. That’s up five grand from last time. I thought you’d be pleased.”

“I would be, but I can be pleased and pissed off at the same time. I have to go. I’ll call you and we’ll have dinner. I have a new product. It’s called Synthetic Cannabinoid. If you have people who like weed they’ll love the stuff.”

“I do, thanks. I’ll see how many want it and let you know.”

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“Yeah, you do that,” he grunted, picking up the envelope and stuffing into his zippered jacket pocket. “And, Erin, calm the fuck down.”

Marching back out to his bike, Ken checked his watch. It would be a busy day and he was on a tight schedule, but a wicked smile curled his lips. It was all so easy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Helen had planned to leave Molly at the ranch, but when she'd started walking to her car the little dog had run after her barking up a storm. Unable to say no, she scooped her up and took her to the estate. To her great relief, her mother fell in love with the adorable dog on sight, and even Sampson, the notoriously precocious cat, accepted her.

The day was as busy as Helen knew it would be, but it didn't prevent her nerves from kicking in. When George took her into the library for a private chat, she flashed back to the moment Kenny had hit her when they were outside the Moonshine restaurant.

“Helen, I can see how scared you are. You don't have to do this,” he said, lowering his voice. “We can figure something else out.”

“No, I want to. I'll be fine, besides, if I wasn't nervous Kenny would suspect something. I'm sure he'll be watching or listening somehow. One of those two men will probably be wearing some kind of camera or bug or something, maybe even both of them.”

“We have to assume that's the case, and you're right, if you weren't upset about this

whole thing it would give him cause for concern. But again, if you don't want to go through with it—"

"All I have to do is hand over an envelope and get one in return. What's so difficult about that?" she declared, feigning a confidence she didn't feel. "I'm more worried about what Kenny will do later when he finds out I told you about this."

"He'll have more important things on his mind, like being locked up."

The conversation with the kind detective had helped, and by the time the guests began to arrive she had her nerves under control. When she spotted the two men she'd be meeting, they looked exactly as Kenny had described them. One was wearing a blue bowtie, and the other had jacket with sleeves oddly short showing off cufflinks with red stones. But Andy still hadn't shown up, and she didn't want to approach them until he was there. As several of her friends strolled in she welcomed the distraction, and was excitedly catching up on all the gossip when Molly began barking. Seeing her at the buffet table begging guests for food, she hurried across the room and picked her up.

"I should have known you'd be tempted," she said, carrying her down a nearby hallway and up a staircase. "I'll have to put you away until Andy gets here, then you can join Ranger in the truck." Choosing a guest room that overlooked the driveway, she set her on the bed and petted her. To her relief, the little dog yawned and settled down. "Good girl. I'm not surprised you're tired. You've had a big day."

Quietly leaving the room she started back down the stairs, but paused her step when her phone chimed. Lifting it from her pocket she saw Andy's name on the screen and quickly accepted the call.

"Andy, where are you? Is everything okay?" she asked, continuing down the steps.

“Sorry, darlin’, I got held up by a client who was havin’ trouble. I’m takin’ a shower and I’ll be there soon.”

“Thank goodness. I don’t think I can do this without you here,” she said with a sigh, but as she started down the hall the noisy crowd suddenly fell quiet. “That’s weird, hold on,” she murmured, slowing down as she approached the opening to the living room. “Andy! Oh, my God!” she whispered urgently, darting her head back. “There are four men with their faces covered in black masks in the living room, and they have guns!”

“What? I’m on my way.”

“No...Andy...please don’t come here, not yet,” she continued breathlessly. “Just stay on the phone with me.”

“Okay, darlin’. Tell me what’s goin’ on. What are they doin’? Can you see?”

Terrified and trembling, she peered around the door frame. Three of the intruders were herding everyone into the library, while the fourth was standing at the front door.

“They’ve moving all the guests into the library, but there’s a guy at the door,” she breathed. “George and Sheriff Cooper are watching from a room off the library but they won’t know about him. I’d call him but I don’t have his number.”

“I do. I’ll let him know right away.”

“Just don’t come here, please, and don’t hang up. I’m going back upstairs. I put Molly in a room that overlooks the driveway.”

“I’m here, don’t worry. When you get there look outside and tell me what you see.

I'm texting the sheriff now."

Hurrying up the stairs as fast as her wobbly legs would carry her, she entered the room and moved quickly to the window.

"Andy...motorbikes. It must be Kenny and his gang."

*** * ***

Detective George Hawthorne had been in several dangerous situations, but he'd never been faced with a large group of hostages being held at gunpoint by four men carrying serious weaponry. Two of them were walking around the room with black cloth bags collecting the men's wallets, the women's jewelry, and everyone's phones. As the items were handed over, the victims were ordered to lie on the floor. George had only two options.

Let the scene play out and attempt to apprehend the thugs when they tried to escape, or charge the room and order them to drop their guns. But suddenly the door behind him burst open.

"Guns on the floor, all of you! Don't even think about being a hero."

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Jerking their heads around, George and the sheriff were horrified to see one of the masked men, and he was holding a revolver.

“Okay, okay. Boys, just do it,” the sheriff ordered, addressing his two deputies as he lifted his gun from its holster and placed it on floor.

“Here’s mine,” George declared, opening his jacket. “You do know you can’t possibly get away with this,” he continued as he laid it next to the sheriff’s.

“Shove them over here,” the gunman barked, ignoring the comment, “and all of you on your knees with your hands at the back of your head.”

As they did as he said, a second thug entered with zip ties. Quickly securing everyone’s wrists behind their backs, he pushed them to the ground, then did the same with their ankles while the first thug collected the guns.

“I don’t think I need to tell you this, but stay put,” he said gruffly, then they left, slamming the door behind them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Unable to reach the sheriff Andy had sent him a text, and had just finished when another call came in from Helen.

“Helen, has something happened?”

“Yes, the bikers came out and they’re racing down the driveway.”

“Hang tight, darlin’, I’m on my way.”

“Please be careful.”

“I will, and I’ll be right there.”

Ending the call and stepping outside with Ranger, he opened the truck door, waited for him to jump into the passenger seat, then hurried around and climbed behind the wheel. But just as he was rolling down his driveway towards the road, the bikers roared past his house.

“I probably shouldn’t do this but here goes nothin’,” he exclaimed, pushing his foot down.

Though they had disappeared from view around a bend, he sped after them, and as he made the turn, he could see the faint red glow of their taillights ahead. Now on a straight stretch, he touched his console and tried to reach the sheriff a second time.

“Andy...” he muttered breathlessly.

“Sheriff? What’s wrong?”

“Two of the gang exploded into our room and caught us by surprise. We’re all fine, thank the Lord. One the guests came in and cut off the zip ties, but the bikers are gone.”

“Sheriff, they went flyin’ past my house headin’ east and I’m behind them.”

“That’s great news. I’ll call the fellas up at the Fairview station and ask them to set up a road block. You can come back.”

“Sheriff, hold on. The taillights just vanished.”

“Can you estimate where they are?”

“I’m guessin’ near the Moonshine Campgrounds.”

“I’ll alert the manager. The woods there are pretty thick and they might have gone there to hide out for a while.”

“I’ll drive a bit longer in case they show up again.”

“Keep your distance!”

“Don’t worry, Sheriff, I have no interest in havin’ a conversation with a biker holdin’ a gun.”

“Wise decision, and stay in touch.”

As the conversation came to an end Andy slowed down. On the left was the lake, and the only turn off was Lake View Point further ahead, but it had been chained off. On the right were the woods, and he stared up at them looking for any sign of headlights. Seeing nothing, he decided there was no point continuing and called Helen.

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“Andy! Where are you?”

“The bikers went past the house just as I was leavin’ so I followed them, but they’re gone. I’m comin’ over there now. By the way, they got the better of the sheriff and everyone else in that room off the library.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. Thankfully they’re all okay, and he’s callin’ the Fairview station to set up a roadblock. It’s likely Ken and his gang will be caught by them.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Me too. I’ll see you soon, darlin’.”

* * *

At Lake View Point, Ken and his crew were checking out their haul. Though there was a chain across the entrance, rolling their bikes past either side of the posts had been easy. But earlier in the day, Bear had broken it with a sledge hammer so they could drive a car through, then put it back together with zip ties. Now a biker nicknamed Wolf, given the title because of his thick salt and pepper hair, was dropping the jewelry, cash, wallets and phones into separate bags.

“How’s it looking?” Ken demanded as he lifted a hamper from the trunk of the BMW.

“Pretty fucking good,” Wolf replied, “and what an easy score. I just wish we didn’t have to sleep out here all night. Why don’t we go over to the campgrounds and find an empty cabin?”

“Are you crazy?” Ken exclaimed. “This spot is chained off. No-one will bother us, and it’s only one fucking night. Now let’s run through everything again. Tomorrow morning I’ll drive the car out with the bags and weapons stowed in the hidden compartment beneath the trunk. The rest of you will leave one at a time, a couple of hours apart. Bear, you and wolf will go east through Fairview, and Roger, you’ll go west through the town. Then Bear, you’ll meet me at the clubhouse and bring me back to pick up my bike. Remember, when the cops stop you and search, be cool. There’s nothing for them to find, and they have no reason to take you in. Don’t give them one. Any questions? No? Good.”

“I’m finished,” Wolf exclaimed, rising to his feet and carrying the bags to the car.

Watching him hide the ill-gotten gains, Ken allowed himself a smile. Though he was a superstitious man and would save the celebrations until everything had been sold, he knew his crew needed to toast the successful evening.

“Okay, Bear, break out the whiskey.”

“Before I do, you never did tell us why you went to all the trouble of pretending to do a drug sale with that girl?”

“Why do you think?”

“Uh, I can’t figure it out.”

“Anyone?” he asked, looking at each of his crew.

“We don’t have a clue,” Wolf replied.

“I knew she wouldn’t be able to keep it to herself and she’d tell her cowboy, then he’d call in the sheriff, and the sheriff would reach out to that asshole detective in Dallas who’s been trying to nail us.”

“I don’t understand,” Bear grunted, shaking his head.

“Just listen. I also knew that detective would jump at the idea of catching my two supposed buyers and get them to turn on me.”

“But how did that help you? And who were they?”

“They’re users, and they actually believed they were there to pick up their packages, but they buy their stuff from some lowlife. They don’t even know who I am. Anyway, by manipulating the girl to get the sheriff involved, I got him and two of his deputies off the road. That’s two less to come after us and he only has four. As for the detective—well—that’s personal. I wanted to make a fool of him. And I did. He thought he’d be dealing with two regular guys, and instead he was faced with a group of balaclava clad thugs armed with guns, terrorizing all the guests.”

“But what if they’d decided to burst into the library while we were there?” Wolf asked.

“Not a chance. They couldn’t risk one of those wealthy people getting shot. They had no choice but to let us leave and set up roadblocks to catch us, which they’re probably doing right now, but it won’t work. Any questions?”

“No...except...how do you come up with these ideas,” Bear grunted, “and why don’t you ever tell us the details beforehand?”

“I didn’t dream up this one, my old man did, years ago. And I don’t tell you anything because I often change plans at the last minute and I don’t want any confusion. Is that it? Anything else?”

“Uh...yes, I have a question.”

Ken, Bear and Wolf turned to look at the man who rarely spoke. His gang name was Mouse.

“Yeah? Spit it out,” Ken said with a grin.

“Why is there a chain across the entrance to this area?”

“Don’t know, don’t care. Now it’s time for a drink, then we’ll roll out the sleeping bags and get some rest.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

When Andy arrived at the estate and walked through the front door, he found women crying, men obviously still shaken up but hoping to comfort them, and Sheriff Cooper along with his two deputies trying to keep some kind of order. Looking around and not seeing Helen, he grabbed his phone and called her.

“I’m here, darlin’, where are you?”

“If you’re facing the door to the library, look over to your right and you’ll see a hallway. Go down there and up the stairs at the end. I’m in the second room on the right.”

“I’m on my way.”

But as he walked quickly towards the hall, the sheriff caught his eye and waved him over.

“Hi, Sheriff. Are you okay?”

“Yep, but damn, what a mess. George has called in his team from Dallas. They’ll be here in about thirty-minutes. We can’t let anyone go home until we get witness statements. We’ve started but with so many people it’s a long job.”

“Isn’t that a bit rough? Can’t you let them go home and come into the station tomorrow?”

“That’s what I suggested, but George was insistent. He’s interviewin’ them one at a time in an office through there,” he declared, pointing to a door on the opposite side of the room.

“That will take all night.”

“Yep, though once his men get here it will go faster.”

“But we already know who did this,” Andy declared. “Ken Lockhart and his gang.”

“It sure seems like it, but we can’t take anything for granted.”

“I guess. Well, if you need me just send a text. I have to go, Helen’s waitin’.”

“Sure, sure, go ahead. But Andy, are you sure they disappeared somewhere near the Moonshine Campgrounds.”

“Yeah, for sure. That stretch is dead straight. I would have seen their taillights for a while, so they must have left the road.”

“They might have ventured into the woods, but they’re not easy to access up there. That only leaves the campgrounds or Lake View Point. I’ve called the manager over at the campgrounds and he said it’s been quiet all evenin’. If those bikes had gone through he would’ve heard them for sure.”

“Maybe they were just ridin’ so fast I lost sight of them,” Andy said thoughtfully, “but I really need to get upstairs now.”

“Okay, Andy, and thanks.”

Hurrying away and taking the stairs two at a time, Andy opened the second door on the right and poked his head around.

“Andy!” Helen exclaimed, jumping to her feet and hugging him as he walked in. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Damn, girl, I was worried about you. Thank God for Molly or you would’ve been in that library.”

“I keep thinking the same thing. When Kenny found the sheriff in that room he would have known I tipped him off.”

“Maybe, but you’re okay, and that’s the only thing that matters. Did you know George is keepin’ all the guests here until they’re interviewed?”

“Yeah, I do. I’ve already given him my statement so I can go, and I can’t wait to get out of here.”

“How are your mom and dad?”

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“Mom’s handling it really well. She and a couple of her friends are making cups of tea and coffee for everyone. I wanted to help but she told me to come back up here and wait for you. Dad, though, he’s furious. He’s in his office making calls. I’m guessing he’s trying to find a private detective agency to track down Ken Lockhart. He’s not one to sit around and wait.”

“Ah, I get that.”

“But please will you take me back to the ranch? I want to get out of here.”

“Yeah, let’s go. Hey, Molly,” he said, lowering his voice and reaching down to pet her. “I guess you saved your mom by beggin’ for food.”

“From now on she can beg any time she wants!” Helen exclaimed. “Is Ranger in the truck?”

“Yep. I thought he preferred bein’ in the back, but he really enjoyed ridin’ shotgun when I was chasin’ Ken and his crew.”

“I’m just glad you didn’t find them,” she said with a sigh as she picked up Molly and started for the door. “You can’t win against four bikers with guns.”

“True, but it sure is a mystery how those tail lights just disappeared.”

“Maybe they turned them off.”

“Huh, that’s a thought. Anyway, let’s go. I don’t like leavin’ my ranch with no-one

there, especially while they're on the loose."

But as they left the room and started down the stairs, the vanishing taillights continued to bother him.

* * *

At Lake View Point the bikers had been passing around the whiskey bottle, laughing and joking about the scene at the charity event. By the time it was empty the clear night had given way to clouds hindering the muted light of the moon, and the air had become frosty. All the while Ken's phone had been vibrating in his pocket, and finally pulling it out he found several messages from an unfamiliar number. Grunting, he began to listen to the first.

"Mr. Lockhart, my name is Samuel Friedman. I have been retained by Erin Leary. A police raid was carried out at her training facility late this afternoon and a large amount of cocaine was found. She and several of her clients have been arrested. Please call me as soon as you get this."

For a moment Ken couldn't breathe, and a sharp tightness enveloped his chest. Suddenly filled with fury, he rose unsteadily to his feet and hurled the phone into the lake.

"Don't toss stuff in there," Wolf yelled. "That's not cool. It's...you know...messing with nature."

Ignoring him, Ken snatched up the empty bottle and staggered to the water's edge, surprised it seemed closer than it had a short time before. Thinking he was just confused because of the whiskey, he lifted the bottle in the air.

"How far do you think I can throw this? A hundred yards? Shit, we have no way to

measure.”

“But, Ken,” Wolf continued, “you’re always saying how you like coming out here because of the woods and lake and stuff.”

“Fuck the woods and fuck the lake and fuck the fucking clouds,” Ken shouted, staring up at the sky. “I don’t give a shit.”

“Hey, Wolf, cool it,” Bear warned, lowering his voice. “You know not to screw with Ken when he’s like this.”

“Yeah, yeah, but it pisses me off. He shouldn’t throw things in the lake. It’s like saying fuck you to...to....”

“To what?”

“I don’t know, the Nature Gods or something. I’ve heard the mountains and lakes have spirits. If they do we don’t want to make them mad.”

“Hah!” Ken suddenly spat, spinning around and staring at him. “You know what you are, Wolf? You’re a fucking pussy. Hey, lake spirits,” he yelled, turning back around raising the bottle, “fuck you!”

Throwing it into the lake, the splash cut through the cold, still silence, but a moment later there was another splash echoing through the air, one that sounded much bigger.

“What the hell was that?” Bear grunted, lumbering up to stand next to him.

“Don’t know, don’t care, and I need to get some shuteye.”

Staggering to the nearest sleeping bag, Ken pulled off his boots and belt and wriggled

into its warmth. The rest of the crew followed suit, except for Wolf who continued to stare at the dark water and the mountain peaks beyond.

“The lake spirits,” he whispered. “You’ve upset them. I can feel it.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

When Helen and Andy returned to the ranch, he knew all she wanted to do was crawl into bed and curl up in his protective arms. Holding her tightly, he assured her Ken and his gang would be found and arrested, hoping he sounded more convinced than he felt. Even with the video from the library it would be difficult, if not impossible, to identify them. As he felt her sink against his chest, he was swept up by a yawn, and finally closing his eyes he began to drift away.

“Can we ride up Smoky Hill again soon?” she whispered. “It’s so peaceful and beautiful up there.”

“I thought you were sleepin’.”

“I am...sort of. I’m imagining I’m up there again.”

“Me too,” he murmured, almost feeling transported as he thought back to the moment they’d shared.

“The way that snow just broke off,” she mumbled. “I’ll remember that for the rest of my life.”

“Dammit,” he said sharply as a sudden realization flashed through his mind.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m such an idiot,” he replied, abruptly sitting up and reaching for his phone. “I

know where Ken and his gang might be, and why those taillights disappeared. There's a chain across the entrance to Lake View Point, but they could push their bikes through the narrow opening on either side of the posts. I need to call the sheriff and tell him."

"But they'll have to come out at some point and continue down the road. When they do they'll be stopped by the roadblocks."

"Hold on, darlin'," he said as the sheriff answered. "Hey, it's Andy, I'm pretty sure Ken and his gang are at Lake View Point."

* * *

Passed out in his sleeping bag, Ken was surrendering to a dream about a long ago summer. He was a teenager, and his father had taken the family to a beachfront hotel in Florida.

He was sitting at the waters edge when a gorgeous girl in a skimpy bikini walked up and sat next to him. She was blonde, and every time he was about to kiss her the ocean breeze tossed her long hair into her face. Frustrated, he pushed her back into the damp sand and lowered his lips on hers. But as she wrapped her arms around his neck, a large wave broke close to shore and enveloped them both.

The dream was wonderfully real, but suddenly transformed into a nightmare.

The ocean was icy cold, not warm and inviting, and her arms and legs were wrapped around him making it impossible for him to move. Someone was screaming his name, but when he tried to call out his mouth was filled with the freezing water. He kept trying to spit it out it was impossible. He was gasping for air, but he was being smothered...then everything turned black.

* * *

Siren's wailing and lights flashing, Sheriff Cooper sped through the dark night on his way to Lake View Point. George was at his side, two deputies were following in their own vehicles, and an ambulance was on its way from Fairview. Though there was no direct evidence Ken and his gang were there, the sheriff couldn't take any chances. If they were, they were in imminent danger.

* * *

As tired as Helen was, when Andy explained why he believed the bikers were at Lake View Point, and what could happen if they were, she had insisted on going out to see the situation firsthand.

"If you don't take me I'll just drive out there myself," she said vehemently as she hastily left the bed and began to dress.

"Dammit, Helen, the sheriff will call us."

"Ken Lockhart terrorized me. I can't sit around and wait for the phone to ring."

"Okay, okay," he muttered. "I'll take you. Just please calm down. You're scaring Molly."

Glancing down at the little dog she could see Andy was right.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, picking her up. "Everything's okay. We're just going for a little drive."

"I think we should leave her here with Ranger. It's late and she's tired. She'll be fine if he's with her."

“You think so? Yes, you’re probably right. Okay.”

“Ranger, you take care of Molly. We won’t be long.”

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The big dog, still stretched out on his mat, sat up and barked, then laid back down.

“See, he’s scary smart,” Helen muttered as she put Molly back into her bed. “We won’t be long, sweetheart.”

As they finished dressing and stepped into the hall, Helen paused and peeked back into the room. Her little dog was already going back to sleep.

* * *

Lake View Point was only about a ten minute drive, and it wasn’t long before they saw the flashing lights in the distance.

“I can understand why you could make out those taillights. It’s so dark out here,” Helen remarked as Andy sped down the deserted country road.

“Like I said, they just disappeared. In a way I hope I’m wrong about this. There’s no question Ken and his gang should be locked up, but bein’ by the lake this time of year—it’s not safe.”

“Does the water really swell up and cover everything that fast?”

“Yep, every spring. It’s like a small, quiet tsunami, and it can happen any time and it’s fast. That’s why there’s a chain across the entrance, to stop people.”

“Why aren’t there any signs.”

“Oh, there have been, but they get stolen.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Nope, and here we are,” he declared, rolling to a stop behind the line of vehicles. “Prepare yourself. This could be grim.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

They were barely out of the truck when they saw the sheriff marching towards them.

“Andy, Helen,” he grunted. “I tried callin’ but the signal’s bad out here tonight.”

“What’s happened?” Helen asked anxiously.

“Not good news, though I guess that depends on your point of view. Just one survivor, and he’s completely traumatized. Keeps talkin’ about lake and mountain spirits. And, uh, only two bodies.”

“So...who...?”

“Ken Lockhart, he’s gone. The lake took him,” the sheriff replied with a sigh. “He’s not the first, and probably won’t be the last.”

“I’ve chills all through me,” she muttered with a shudder.

“Me too, it’s cold out here,” Andy said, moving his arms around her. “Is the water still up?”

“About half-way. The two victims were still beneath it and the boys had a helluva time gettin’ them out. They were wrapped up in soaked sleepin’ bags. Sorry, Helen,

that was probably too much detail,” he added hastily.

“No, don’t apologize, I want to know everything. Will you be dragging the lake to find Ken?”

“Not a chance. We’d never find him. It’s real deep, and deceptively big. But if he has relatives who want to do that we’ll issue a permit.”

“Wow, this is just unbelievable. May I see what it looks like?”

“A tow truck is on its way for the bikes and car, but other than that the scene is cleared, so sure, I can walk you up and you can view it from the top of the bank.”

“Car?” Andy repeated.

“We think they hid the valuables they stole somewhere inside it and planned to drive it outta here.”

“So everyone will get their belongings back?”

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“It looks that way, but come with me. There are lights up around the area so you’ll be able to see it clearly, and with the water still so high—well—it’s quite a sight.”

As they followed the sheriff through the vehicles, Helen clung to Andy’s arm, and though the shiver had passed she still felt oddly uneasy.

“Watch your step, it’s pretty rocky,” the sheriff warned.

As he led them through the entrance, he turned left and stood on the top of the bank.

“Wow, I can’t believe this,” she mumbled, gazing down at the water lapping softly on the shore. “When we were here it was way further back. Look at the car, Andy, it’s halfway up the tires.”

“Yep, sometimes it comes all the way to where we’re standin’. It’s never crossed onto the road, but it wouldn’t surprise me if it did one day. If we had an extra heavy snowfall at the end of winter and a heavy spring rain it could happen. There’s talk of closin’ this off completely, but how? We could erect a heavy-duty gate, but teenagers would just climb over it, and how would they get out if the worst happens?”

“Andy told me the sign gets stolen.”

“Yep, every year.”

“Perhaps you could wrap a hot wire around it.”

“What did you just say?”

“I said, perhaps you could wrap a hot wire around it, or that rolled barbed wire so they can’t reach it.”

“Damn, Helen, that’s brilliant. I’ll bring that up at the next council meetin’.”

“She has her moments,” Andy said, giving her a hug. “Have you seen enough?”

“I have. Thank you, Sheriff, thank you for everything.”

“No, thank you! Oh, before you leave there’s some other news you should know. Today George’s department carried out a series of raids on Ken’s dealers all over Dallas. He believes the entire operation has been shut down.”

“That’s fantastic,” Andy exclaimed.

“Yep. Ken had people in hair salons, auto repair shops, even a horse trainer.”

“Do you know the trainer’s name?” Helen asked, feeling her pulse tick up.

“Erin Leary. She had a fancy barn in a real nice area. Now I’d better get back to work. Drive safe!”

* * *

Walking back to the truck Helen didn’t speak, and Andy didn’t push, but as he opened the door for her, she stared up at him with tears in her eyes.

“Erin. I didn’t like her at the end, but even so...”

“She was probably usin’, but it’s over now, all of it,” he said softly. “No more Ken, no more Erin, no more worryin’.”

“I think he was going to blackmail me into working for him here in Smoky Hill.”

“You would’ve found a way out, but now you don’t have to. Like I said, it’s all over.”

“Um...Andy?”

“Yeah, darlin’?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, and it’s cold out here. Let’s get home.”

“I don’t think I can wait that long.”

“For what?”

“I need to ask you something. But first, it’s okay if you want to say no. Honestly, I’ll understand.”

“What in the world are you talkin’ about.”

“Andy, please can I live with you and Ranger?”

For a moment he was shocked, but seeing the earnest longing in her eyes he quickly recovered.

“Are you sure?” he asked, lowering his voice. “Things have been crazy lately, and tonight—”

“Tonight is what made me realize I don’t want to be without you. I want to wake up with you, and take care of the horses with you, and go to sleep with you, and eat and drink and—”

“Darlin’, I want all those things too.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Tomorrow you can pack your bags and bring them over.”

“Andy, thank you, I love you so much,” she exclaimed, throwing her arms around him.

“Now can we get in the truck?”

“Yes, and when we get home I promise to warm you up.”

“Back at ya,” he quipped with a wink.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

As they walked through the door Ranger came bounding towards them, then ran into the kitchen and stood by the cupboard where Andy kept the treats.

“Like I said, scary smart,” Helen said with a grin. “I’m going to check on—there you are,” she exclaimed as Molly walked in before she could finish. “You look so sleepy.”

“See, I told you she’d be okay,” Andy remarked as he found a milk bone and gave it to Ranger.

“You were right and it’s a relief to know we can leave her if we have to. Come on, sweet girl, let’s get to bed. It’s late and I’m very tired.”

“I’ll be right there. I’m going to let Ranger out for a minute.”

“Okay.”

Moving down the hall and into the bedroom with Molly in her arms, she placed her back in her bed, then moved into the bathroom to freshen up. But as she finished brushing her teeth she heard her phone chime. Worried something else had happened at her parent’s house she hastily lifted it from her pocket.

“Hello?”

“Hey, where are you? It’s Karen. I’m here at Nighthawk with Debbie and Charlene. Come and join us, we haven’t seen you in ages.”

“You sound totally wasted,” Helen replied with a laugh ambling back into the bedroom.

“I am, and you should be too. I’m putting you on speaker. Say hello to the girls.”

Just as the sound of the music and crowd came through the phone, Andy and Ranger walked in.

“Hi, everyone,” Helen said, shouting to be heard over the racket.

“It’s Charlene, where have you been? Ha ha, that rhymes, but seriously, what’s going on?” a female voice yelled back. “We miss you. The night’s still young, get over here.”

“Hi, Charlene, I would but I’m not in town.”

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“You’re not out in Hooterville again, are you? Every time I watch that old show I think about you and laugh my ass off.”

“Yeah, it’s hilarious,” another girl exclaimed. “We should all get together at my place and make a night of it. Will you come, Helen, say you will.”

“Sorry, gotta go,” Karen interjected, abruptly taking the phone off the speaker. “There are two really cute guys coming over. Call me, or better still, show up. The drinks are on me.”

“Those girls,” Helen said, shaking her head as she ended the call.

“Yeah, they sounded like they were havin’ a wild night,” Andy remarked as he quickly stripped and climbed into bed. “Will you go?”

“Go where?”

“Into town to join them.”

“Now?”

“No, not now. I mean generally. Do you miss the clubs?”

“Sometimes,” she replied as she peeled off her clothes and slipped between the sheets next to him. “When I was alone in the cottage on the estate I’d get bored and drive into town.”

“And the place they were at, is that where you met Ken?”

“Yes, though I’d seen him around at the other clubs. He was high profile. Wow, I still can’t believe who he really was. Everything that’s happened is just so crazy.”

“Helen--”

“Andy, you look so serious. What is it?”

“I’m sorry, darlin’.”

“Why?”

“I thought I’d be okay with you goin’ off to those places from time to time, but I just realized I’m not.”

“What are you saying?”

“I don’t like ultimatum’s, gettin’ them or givin’ them, but sometimes they have to be made. You need to really think about things. Will you be happy with a simple life here at this ranch? I’m not sayin’ I’m a hermit, I’m not, and I’d love to take you to my country and western tavern. When they have live bands it’s great, but no way will it compare to those clubs in Dallas.”

“So...are you saying I have to choose?”

“Yeah, and I’m sorry, but I can’t be sittin’ here not knowin’ if you’ll suddenly say you need to drive into Dallas and have a wild night with those girls. I’d be worried sick the whole time. You could run into another jerk like Ken, or get behind the wheel after too many drinks, or whatever. Helen, I’m a simple cowboy. I love my horses, and I love sharin’ what I’ve learned with people who want to hear about it.

That's it. Yeah, I can get drunk with my buddies, but these days it's rare. So, that's it. Me and my life here, or your wild life in Dallas. Maybe there's a guy who can let you have both, but that's not me."

"Andy—"

"By the way, you're welcome to invite your friends out here. We can take them on a trail ride up Smoky Hill. Who knows, maybe it will open their eyes a bit. And yeah, I know this is an ultimatum, and I'm sorry, truly, but I'm makin' it for both our sakes."

"Andy—"

"Don't answer me now. Sleep on it. Really think this through. You must be sure. I can't have you resentin' me down the line."

"Andy—"

"You've been goin' to those places for ages, and you—"

"Andy will you please shut up!?" she said sharply. "I don't need to think about it. It's a no brainer! When I listened to Karen and Charlene on the phone and heard all that noise, I remembered how loud it is. You can't hear yourself think. And it's so smoky. Not that lovely, cool fog up our hill, but caustic, choking, cigarette smoke. Then I thought back to how the guys are almost always slobbering and drunk. By the time the call was over I realized I have zero desire to ever go there again. Not ever! So I made the decision before you'd even started talking. Now if you don't mind I want to snuggle up next to you and go to sleep. I'm totally and completely drained. Is that alright with you?"

"Darlin', don't ever change."

“I won’t if you let me go to sleep. Otherwise I’ll be a real grouch in the morning.”

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“Nite, darlin’, I love you.”

“I love you too, cowboy,” she murmured, then slipped into sleep with her lips curled in a soft smile.

EPILOGUE

One Year Later

It was a warm spring day, and riding up Smoky Hill with Helen and the dogs, Andy was trying to control his nerves. Shortly after Helen moved into his home, he discovered she was a social media genius, something he knew nothing about. She’d created a Facebook page for him, opened an Instagram account, and began posting videos of him working with colts and teaching his clinics. One night over dinner just a few weeks earlier, she’d told him he was approaching fifty-thousand followers on Facebook and almost as many on Instagram.

“You can’t be serious,” he’d exclaimed. “Wait, is this a joke?”

“No, see for yourself,” she’d replied, handing him her iPad. “Look at the bottom of the banner.”

“This is unbelievable. No wonder my clinics sell out so fast. I’m still amazed I’ve been invited to hold one at that big western facility in Lubbock.”

“Don’t be, you’re fantastic. You do what Brody does, ride horses naked, but you put your own twist on it with how you do the roping thing.”

“Fifty-thousand,” he muttered, shaking his head. “That’s almost as many followers as he has.”

“And I bet many of his are because of your sister. She’s a huge star.”

“Maybe, but Brody has that magic touch. What he does with his hands that makes animals just sort of melt is incredible. And people too, so I’m told. But still, fifty-thousand. Just a month ago you said around twenty-thousand.”

“Um...well...I posted some other pictures. That’s when things took off. Click on the Meet Andy button.”

As he touched the link, a short video appeared showing him shirtless and tossing hay to the horses.

“What the hell is this?”

“You now have a ton of adoring fans,” she declared with a giggle. “Remember that day I followed you around taking photographs?”

“Hell, yeah, you drove me crazy.”

“Well, they’re a hit. You could be on the cover of Cowboy Love if you wanted to be. Scroll through them. You are one fit, handsome man, and the best thing is, you’re all mine.”

He’d been astounded, and also a bit embarrassed,

“I’m going to start merchandising you,” she’s continued. “A friend of dad’s owns a clothing company and I can get T-shirts at a huge discount.”

He'd been blown away, but in addition to her enthusiastic support, =she had a passion for horses that took his breath away. She was devoted to them. Now reaching the top of the trail, he readied himself to ask the ultimate question. As they climbed off and tethered the horses under the shade of a tree, he brought her into his arms and hugged her tightly.

"Darlin', I love you to bits."

"I love to you, Andy. It's hard to believe it's a year ago today since that awful thing happened at Lake View Point."

"Yeah, it feels like ages ago, but at the same time, like yesterday. The sheriff said some people will be there to pay their respects, so he's openin' it up and he'll stay to make sure everyone's safe."

"Um, Andy, there's something I have to ask you, I mean, tell you, and it's really important. I'm just not sure how to begin."

"Sorry, darlin', I have to go first or I might not, uh..."

"What's wrong? Are you upset with me?"

"Lord no, but I will be if you don't agree to something."

"Andy, you're talking in riddles. Whatever it is, just ask."

"Okay. Here goes nothin'." Reaching into his pocket and dropping down on one knee, he presented her with a solitaire diamond ring. "Darlin', will you make your stay here permanent?"

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“Oh my gosh! Are you asking me to marry you?”

“No, I get down like this and present diamond rings to girls all the time,” he retorted.

“What do you think?”

“Then ask me.”

“Damn, Helen, I am going to spank you silly. Will you marry me? There!”

“Of course I’ll marry you. I’m ecstatic, and I’m sorry I couldn’t resist teasing you a bit.”

“That’s okay, your butt will pay the price,” he said with a chuckle as he rose to his feet.

“Stop!”

“Nope, you earned it, now give me your hand.”

As she held it out and he slipped the ring into place, he spied a happy tear slipping from her right eye, and he thought his heart would burst.

“Thank you, it’s the most gorgeous ring in the world and I’m so happy.”

“Do you want your spankin’ up here, or when we get home?”

“You decide, but first I have to ask you something, and you have impeccable timing.”

“Really? Okay, I’m listenin’.”

“How would you like to be a daddy?”

Ten minutes later, sitting on a tree trunk and gazing down at her naked, curvaceous cheeks turning pink under the slaps of his flattened palm, he thought there couldn’t be a happier man anywhere in the world.

THE END