



# The Cowboy's Wild Side

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**Category:** Romance, Western, Adult

**Description:** She knows something she shouldn't!

She's running for her life when a cowboy steps in to help.

He has no idea just how ruthless her enemy is.

Karen Harper is the daughter of a wealthy racehorse owner. One night, ambling around the racing stable, she passes an office and is stunned by what she overhears. Scared she'll be caught she hurries away.

But the famous trainer on the phone realizes she's listening and gives chase. With her parents unreachable and not knowing who she can trust, she leaves town to hide out in a small, rural town named Smoky Hill.

Cade McLean, an easy-going but tough cowboy, meets the pretty city girl and can't deny the crackling chemistry between them. When it becomes clear she's not used to being told what to do he takes her in hand. As the sparks fly she confesses her secret...she's on the run and is hoping she won't be found in the country community.

They have no idea the man chasing her has not only tracked her to Smoky Hill, but has hired a professional assassin.

How can Cade protect her from the desperate, determined killers?  
And will Karen's rebellious streak put them both in danger?

**Total Pages (Source):** 47

## CHAPTER ONE

Panic-stricken and with her pulse racing, Karen Harper packed her suitcase and tried frantically to think of a safe place she could hide. Hotels were out of the question. She'd be found in a heartbeat, and too many people knew about her parent's vacation home in the mountains.

"Where can I go?" she muttered. "Think, think, somewhere remote. But who do you know who—of course! Helen!" she exclaimed, snatching up her phone.

Frantically placing the call to her long-time friend who had married a cowboy and now lived in a small country town, Karen prayed she would answer.

"Karen? This is a surprise. How are you?"

"Great, just great, and you?"

"Couldn't be better. Believe it or not I'm having a baby."

"Oh, my gosh, that's amazing."

"It is, like crazy amazing, but if you're calling to ask me to join you and the others for a night out—"

"No, no, actually, I was wondering if there was anywhere around there I could rent a guest house for a while."

“Sure, you can stay at the cottage where I used to live on my parent’s estate. And you don’t have to worry about renting it. Stay as long as you need. But why do you want to come out here? There’s not much excitement, though the cowboy’s are pretty hot,” she added with a giggle.

“I need a break, and I’ve always wanted to learn how to ride,” she added quickly, the thought popping into her mind out of nowhere.

“Oh. Let me think. Andy would be happy to teach you, but since I’ve been marketing for him on social media he’s crazy busy.”

“That’s okay, it was just an idea. Something to do while I’m out there.”

“There are plenty of great cowboys who train and teach. I’ll ask him who he’d recommend. I’m sure he’ll be able to direct you to the right guy.”

“That’s fantastic. Thanks. Should I come to your place, or drive straight to your parents estate?”

“Definitely come here first so I can give you the rundown, and in the meantime I’ll let them know. When do you think you’ll be arriving?”

“I really want to get out of here. Would it be okay if I came today?”

“Karen, what’s going on?”

“Nothing,” she replied hastily, “I just—”

“I’ve known you forever and I can tell something’s wrong. You can trust me. I won’t mention it to anyone.”

“Okay, okay, I’ve had a huge row with this guy I’ve been seeing and I’m a bit scared,” she exclaimed, hoping she sounded convincing.

“Why? Do think he could get violent?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to hang around to find out.”

“Where did you meet him?”

“Where else, at the club. And after everything that happened with you and that biker, the situation is kind of freaking me out. He seemed really nice at first, then he started to get possessive. But can we talk about this when I see you? I really want to get out of here. If he shows up—”

“I totally understand. I’ll text you the address and I’ll see you when you get here.”

“Thanks, Helen, you’re a lifesaver,” she said, letting out a relieved breath. “I’ll be on my way in just a few minutes.”

Ending the call, she took a moment to gather her wits. She’d hated lying, but the truth was just too difficult to explain and hard to believe. As she darted around her condo to make sure she hadn’t forgotten anything, she suddenly stopped and stared at her phone. She was no tech whiz, and she didn’t know how, but she watched enough television shows to know it could be tracked.

Not wanting to take any chances, she wrote down the address Helen had texted her, then opened it up and took out the SIM card. Still not sure if that would be enough to prevent prying eyes if God Forbid she threw it away and it was found, she paused for a moment to think.

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“I have to destroy it somehow,” she muttered to herself. “Maybe I could drown it, but I’m not sure if that would be enough. I’ll have to try and smash it.”

Taking out her cooking mallet, she wrapped the phone in a thin kitchen towel, placed it on her granite counter top, and smashed it with the mallet. Carefully peeling back the cloth, she let out a relieved sigh. It was completely decimated. Satisfied, she gathered it up and stuffed it into her hobo bag ready to throw down the trash chute on the way out.

Running into the bedroom and frantically closing her suitcase, she placed it on the floor, and looping the hobo bag over her shoulder she headed towards the front door. Afraid to leave the complex in her Lexus SUV, she’d contacted a car company and had a car delivered. There were a ton of rental agencies in Dallas, and she figured it would take ages to track her down. By that time she’d be long gone.

Walking to the end of the hall, she opened the heavy metal door and placed her suitcase at the top of the stairwell, then returned to the hallway and pulled back trash chute. She was dropping in the shreds of her phone wrapped in the towel when she heard the telltale sound of the elevator chime.

Frantically ducking through the heavy metal door back into the stairwell, she held it cracked open barely an inch. The couple that came out were her neighbors. She was telling herself not to be so paranoid when two men stepped out behind them. She recognized them both! They worked for Gino and they went straight to her door.

Almost afraid to breathe, she ducked back, lifted up the suitcase began walking down the stairs. Grateful she’d thought to wear sneakers, and even more relieved she was

only three flights up, she entered the garage and hurried across to the rental car. As she climbed in, she reached into her bag and pulled out a baseball cap. Urgently stuffing her long blond hair beneath it, she started up the car and past the rows of vehicles to the exit. But it was almost half an hour later, cruising down the interstate, before she released her white knuckle grip on the steering wheel.

## CHAPTER TWO

Cade McLean was saddling a horse for a trail ride when his phone rang. Looking at the screen and seeing Andy Baker's name he broke into a smile and quickly accepted the call.

"Hey, Andy, it's been a while. How are you? And how's that famous sister of yours?"

"As sassy as she ever was," Andy replied with a chuckle. "But that's one of the reasons I adore her. She's just about to head out on a short tour. Brody's goin' with her so guess who's takin' care of their horses?"

"How many?"

"Four. We expanded the barn so there's room and I'm happy to do it. How are you?"

"Great. I just picked up the same number of rescues myself," he replied, looking out the window at his new charges grazing in the paddock closest to the house. "They just need kind hands and some good grub for a while, then I'll find out what they know."

"What you do is fantastic," Andy remarked with a sigh. "If I had the time I'd pick up a couple myself."

"It's a win/win. I rescue horses from the shelters and feed lots, fix their brains and their bodies, then sell them on to good people. I make a decent livin' and the horses

get forever homes.”

“Are you still teachin?”

“Sure. Still plenty of kids, but recently a few of their mothers wanted to give it a try. Everyone will be excited to see this new bunch.”

“How would you feel about another one?”

“Horse or human? Though it doesn’t matter, there’s always room for one more.”

“Human. She’s a friend of Helen’s. Apparently her father owns race horses, or invests in them. Maybe both, but regardless, she’s been around them most of her life. She’s just never actually climbed into a saddle and she wants to learn. She’s comin’ in today, though I should warn you, she might not be easy. From what Helen told me her family has crazy money.”

“Ah, got it. But why would she want to come out here? There are plenty of high-end trainin’ facilities in Dallas. I assume that’s where she’s from.”

“Yep, she lives in Highland Park, but why she’s plannin’ on stayin’ in this neck of the woods for a while I have no idea. She’ll be arrivin’ today and livin’ in Helen’s cottage on her parent’s estate.”

“Old man Thompson’s former home,” Cade murmured. “I sure miss him. He was a real character.”

“He sure was. If he’s gazin’ down at his farm he must be shakin’ his head. The place doesn’t look anything like it once did. And speakin’ of old man Thompson, I found Ranger in a shelter.”

“You’re kiddin’!”

“He’s with me now.”

“Thank the Lord!”

“He’s a blessin’. And Helen has a little mutt called Molly. But I’d better get back to work. I’ll be hittin’ the road for a three-day clinic in Oklahoma tomorrow and I still have a bunch of stuff left to do. When Helen’s friend arrives can I send her over?”

“Sure, any time. What’s her name?”

“Good question. Karen Harper.”



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“I look forward to meetin’ her. Stay safe on that trip.”

“Thanks, Cade, and good luck with Karen. If she’s anything like Helen you’ll need it.”

Ending the call with a grin, Cade ambled across to the fence and looked at his new charges. There was a paint, two chestnuts and a grey. Though he was still trying to think of names for the paint and chestnuts, he’d decided on Moon for the grey. Doc Jones, the local vet, was due to arrive any moment to check them over, and hearing a vehicle rolling up the drive he assumed it was the man himself. Striding away and turning past the barn he saw the familiar van rolling to a stop.

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During her drive out of Dallas Karen had been a nervous wreck. Several times she thought she was being followed and exited the freeway, only to discover it had been her imagination. But as she left the busy interstate for the last time and headed towards the small town, she began to breathe easier and loosened her grip on the steering wheel. The navigator led her to a turnoff, and she soon found herself on a two-lane road with woods on one side and spacious fields and homes on the other. When the navigator told her the destination was approaching, she slowed down, then smiled as she turned into the driveway.

Directly ahead was a barn on the right, and paddocks on the left where horses were happily grazing. At the back of the property, rising like a protective barrier between the homestead and mountains was Smoky Hill. Helen had told her all about riding up through the thick mist and coming out into bright sunshine at the top, the romantic

place where Andy had proposed.

But Karen's thoughts were abruptly interrupted by a large dog running up to her car barking a loud welcome. It resembled a German Shepherd, but appeared to be leaner and looked bigger. Behind it was a smaller dog, also yapping and hilariously jumping up and down on the spot.

Suddenly all her troubles in Dallas seemed far away.

But as Helen approached the car Karen caught her breath. The man beside her was everything she'd ever imagined a country cowboy to be. Rugged good looks, muscled arms and carrying himself with a confident swagger.

"I'm so glad you're here," Helen exclaimed as Karen lowered her window. "This is Andy."

"Not nearly as glad I am. Hi, Andy, it's great to meet you," Karen declared, hoping the man who would be teaching her would be just as handsome. "Is it safe to get out? That big dog looks like he wants to eat me for lunch."

"He's super friendly, but he's inherently a guard dog. That's why he's carryin' on like that. Ranger, back off. She's on our side."

The dog immediately stopped making a ruckus, sat down and began panting happily.

"I hope you'll have a good time while you're here," Helen said as Karen climbed from the car. "You're so athletic I'm sure you'll be riding like a pro in no time. But come in for some coffee, then I'll take you over to the estate. You'll love my cottage. Mom and dad are in New York right now, but it's totally private anyway."

"Helen, I know I've only just arrived, but it's so peaceful and beautiful out here I

might not ever leave.”

### CHAPTER THREE

As Gino Stallone marched around the barn the stable hands hastily stepped out of his way. Though he was no relation to the famous actor, Gino had worked hard to attain a similar physique, and wore his famous last name with pride.

He also had a fierce reputation.

Rarely did anyone argue with him. Even the wealthy horse owners who paid him handsomely for his services were careful, and not just because he had a short fuse. It was no secret his clients needed him more than he needed his clients. Gino was a brilliant trainer with an uncanny ability to evaluate a horse’s winning potential. Owners across the country salivated at the thought of having their million-dollar equines at his racing stable.

But as rough and tough as he was, he could be equally charming. Those who hadn’t seen or heard about his thunderous fury would think he was the nicest, kindest, most polite man in the business. And for reasons those who knew the truth couldn’t comprehend, the animals in his care adored him.

From his private jet to his revolving door of beautiful women, Gino had it all. But now his perfect world was under threat, and all because Karen Harper, a stupid girl who had no business being at the stables after hours, overheard something she shouldn’t have.

Marching into his office and slamming the door behind him, he snatched his phone from his pocket and placed a call. Two of his toughest security men, Harry and Mick, had been parked outside her condominium complex since the night before waiting for her to emerge.

“Hi, boss.”

“Harry, what the fuck?” Gino demanded. “Why haven’t you called? It’s not my job to chase after you.”

“You said not to bother you if there was nothing to report.”

“But you’ve been there all night and it’s almost midday. You have to be kidding me. You must have missed her.”

“We’re right here outside the front entrance and we can also see the exit from the garage. She hasn’t come out and neither has her car.”

“This is fucking insane. Go inside and get her. Knock her out if you have to, but I want her at the abandoned barn now!”

“Uh, there’s a doorman in the lobby. We’d have to sign in.”

“For fuck’s sake, use your imagination! When a car leaves, duck into the garage before the gate closes. You have her unit number.”

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“Yeah, okay, boss. I’ll go up and Bruce can stay here.”

“Why are you still on the phone? Get your ass up there.”

“I’m on my—”

“Where do I find these fucking geniuses,” Gino snarled, ending the call before his henchman could finish.

Gino didn’t believe in keeping his appointments on his computer or phone. He carried an old-fashioned, leather bound diary. It was small enough to fit inside his jacket or jeans pocket, he carried it wherever he went, and made entries in a code only he could understand.

Lifting it out, he scanned the next forty-eight hours. Two items jumped out at him. A date with a lingerie supermodel aptly named Lacy Gardner that evening, and more importantly, he was expected at a formal dinner later in the week hosted by Joan and Jimmy Harper, Karen’s parents.

He did have one consolation.

They were still on a cruise and wouldn’t be flying back from New York for a couple of days. It wasn’t much time—but it was enough to nab Karen before she could spill the beans.

Thinking back to the evening before, he still couldn’t believe it had happened. Karen rarely visited the training stable, and when she did she was always with her father.

The staff had left except for Robbie, one of his two barn managers. He was there during the day, while another man named Pedro stayed overnight.

Gino had been spending a few minutes with Ben, one of his favorite stallions, when he'd seen Pedro arrive and Robbie walk out to the parking lot to meet him, leaving the barn completely empty. He always put his phone on vibrate when he was with one of his prized horses, and when he felt it buzz against his chest he quickly lifted it out. The caller was Sonny, and he only contacted Gino in emergencies.

Sonny was the man he referred to as his turf accountant. In actual fact, outside of Gino's small group of bookies, he was the only person who knew about Gino's illegal betting business, and was responsible for laundering the ill-gotten gains.

"Sonny, what's wrong?"

"It's Doggie. He says he can't make his drop tonight. He claims he's deathly sick. I told him I'd go by his house and pick it up and he blew me off."

"What was his excuse?"

"He rambled on about not being able to explain me to his wife."

"This doesn't sound right," Gino grunted.

"That's what I thought, and he must have had a huge weekend."

"Damn right! When those long shots won races five and eight a lot of people lost a lot of money."

"Funny how the favorites were both pipped at the post," Sonny remarked with a chuckle.

“Hilarious,” Gino grunted sarcastically, “but getting back to Doggie. We can’t let him get away with this shit. Tell him I don’t give a fuck if he’s sick. He’s to bring in the money or I’ll send two boys out to collect it, and whether his wife is there or not, it won’t be pretty.”

“Will do, Gino.”

Ending the call, Gino had been sliding the phone back into his pocket when Ben had whinnied. It was something the horse only did if he heard someone walking down the barn aisle.

His heart skipping, Gino had hurried to the door and poked his head out. To his horror he’d seen Karen Harper hurrying to the nearest exit. Darting from the stall he’d called her name, but she either hadn’t heard him or pretended not to.

He’d guessed it was the latter and bolted after her. When he’d run into the parking lot he’d spotted her sprinting to her car. As she’d climbed in and sped off, he’d raced to his Jaguar and followed her, but he’d been held up by a series of red lights. By the time he’d caught up she’d reached her condominium building and was disappearing into the underground parking garage.

The memory sent a surge of anger rippling through his body, but as he let out an impatient, frustrated sigh his phone rang. Snatching it up, he was relieved to see it was Harry.

“What’s going on?” he demanded. “Do you have her?”

“Boss, I just broke into her unit. Her car’s still in the parking garage, but she’s gone.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

Over coffee and muffins, Karen listened intently as Helen described her new country life and explained why she was so much happier. When she described riding up Smoky Hill in the fog, and how she'd seen the huge block of snow fall from a mountain peak, Karen was captivated.

“I'd love to witness something like that, but don't you miss the shopping and restaurants?”



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“Sometimes, and I still drive in and have dinner with mom and dad, but I don’t miss the clubs one bit. Not after the drama with that biker gang.”

“You were so lucky nothing really bad happened.”

“You’re not kidding,” Helen mumbled with a sigh. “The whole thing was terrifying. Andy was amazing. He really was a hero. I take that back. Heisa hero! He’s my hero every day. Who knows, maybe Cade will be yours.”

“I wouldn’t say no,” Karen replied with a grin. “What do you know about him? Have you met him?”

“Sure, everyone knows everyone around here. He looks a bit like Clint Eastwood’s son.”

“Oh, my gosh, you’re kidding.”

“Nope, and I’ve heard he’s a great teacher. He rides his horses naked just like Andy and Brody, and before you say anything, it’s the horses that are naked,” she added with a giggle, “That’s a standing joke around here and I tease Andy about it all the time. In fact...you know Andy’s sister is Annie Baker, right? The country music star?”

“Of course.”

“Well, she’s just recorded a song called, Cowboys Riding Naked. I can’t wait to hear it.”

“Ohhh, that will be a hit for sure.”

“Everything she touches turns to gold, and I’m sure it won’t be any different.”

“Is that really the name of it?”

“It is, can you believe it?” Helen said with a giggle. “Apparently we’ll be hearing it any day now. Anyway, Cade rescues horses, rehabilitates them and sells them to forever homes. The buyers have to sign contracts saying the horse can’t be sold, and if they ever have to give it up, it has to come back to Cade. He refunds them half the purchase price. I know he’d like to just adopt them out, but rehabbing a horse isn’t cheap. Oh, and he has two Golden Retrievers, Jack and Diane.”

“Jack and Diane?” Karen repeated thoughtfully. “Why does that sound familiar?”

“The song. You know, two American kids growing up in the heartland.”

“That’s hilarious.”

“They’re brother and sister and they’re both goofballs. But I should get you over to the cottage.”

“That would be great. I’m pretty wiped out and I’d love to get settled, and now I can’t wait to meet Cade. What a cool name. Mind you, he sounds like a really cool guy.”

“He is, and he said you can go over to his ranch any time this afternoon. It’s not far. I’ll give you the address. I assume that car has a navigator. And by the way, where’s your Lexus?”

“Long story. That’s a rental, and yes it does.”

“You’ll need it. Once you get off the main road there are turnoffs to various farms, but the navigator will take you straight to it,” she assured her. Then pausing, she asked, “Karen, forgive me for asking, why are you really here? We’ve been friends a long time, and I can tell something’s bothering you.”

“You’re right, there is, but do you mind if I fill you in later? I didn’t sleep much last night, and when I woke up this morning I was a bit frantic. Once I’ve caught my breath I’ll fill you in.”

“No pressure.”

“I want to, I really do. I’m in a terrible pickle and I don’t have any idea what to do about it.”

“I’m sure there’s a solution. If we can’t come up with something, Andy will. He’s really good at problem solving.”

“I hope so,” Karen said with a sigh. “But this is not a run of the mill situation.”

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A short time later, driving through tall, wrought iron gates and rolling down the driveway towards a two-story hacienda style home, Karen’s eyes grew wide. The estate was breathtaking. Manicured green lawns and flowerbeds sprinkled the landscape, and when she spied the cottage, she was captivated by its quaint storybook style and the small pond below it. Climbing from her car and moving across the verandah, she entered the code into the keypad door lock, stepped inside and let out a contented sigh.

“I can’t imagine a lovelier hideout,” she muttered as she moved through the small, exquisite home. “I think I was right. I may never want to leave.”

Fetching her suitcase, she took stock as she unpacked. She'd been in a desperate hurry and just thrown things in without much thought. She soon discovered she wasn't just short on lingerie, she only had one warm sweater, and she'd failed to bring a coat, or even a warm jacket.

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Thinking she could probably find what she needed in the community's small town, she moved into the bathroom and found a generous tub. As she turned on the faucets, she noticed several jars offering a variety of bath salts. Selecting Lavender, she sprinkled in a generous amount, then turned to stare at her reflection in the oval mirror above the bathroom counter. She looked as tired as she felt. But she no longer felt panic stricken and frazzled.

"At least I can breathe now," she muttered. "Gino Stallone will never find me here. I just need to figure out what to do next."

### CHAPTER FIVE

It was early afternoon, and Cade McLean was in his tack room when Jack and Diane began barking. Knowing it meant he had a visitor and they'd be racing up to the car, he dropped the damp sponge into the sink and hurried outside. The only person he was expecting was Helen's friend, a girl named Karen Harper, and though his dogs were extremely friendly they were boisterous.

Based upon what Andy had told him, Cade had expected her to arrive in a Mercedes or BMW, but the SUV that had stopped in his driveway was a Hyundai. He was wondering if it was someone else when a young woman climbed from behind the wheel. As he walked forward, her long, straight, sandy hair fell around her shoulders, and when she bent over to pet the dogs, the top of her simple green T-shirt gaped open exposing generous breasts.

"Your dogs are amazing," she exclaimed, straightening up and smiling at him.

Begging his stiffening cock to go back to sleep he neared, he tried not to stare at her ridiculously kissable, full pink lips.

“I’m guessin’ you’re Karen. I’m Cade,” he managed, “and those two monsters are—”

“Jack and Diane,” she interrupted with a giggle, “and they’re not monsters. Helen told me about them and they’re absolutely adorable. I wish I had a dog.”

“Why don’t you?”

“I live in a condo...no yard...very busy.”

“Ah, well, one thing I’ve learned, dogs and horses dictate how you spend your time. Busy with other stuff usually goes out the window.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of, but seeing these two I know I’d just love it. Anyway, it’s great to meet you Cade. I don’t know if Helen told you, but my father owns race horses and I’ve been around them most of my life. I’ve just never learned how to ride.”

“Do you know I’m a western trainer?” he asked, thinking the gorgeous girl would probably be more interested in jumpers or dressage.

“Oh, yes, and that’s what I want. I dream about going on endless trail rides. When Helen was telling me about Smoky Hill I was so jealous. Now I’ve seen it for myself and I can’t believe it’s right at her back door.”

“It’s easy to reach from this ranch,” he declared, turning and pointing to the back of his property. “I just follow that ridge and it takes me right to the side of the Smoky Hill forest. Everything’s connected around here. When you’re ready I’ll take you if you want.”

“Oh, my gosh, yes, that would be fantastic.”

“Great. Come and meet my horses and we can talk about the details. I just got four new ones in. I’ll take you there first.”

“Helen told me how you rescue them.”

“Yep. Like I tell people, it saves them and keeps this place goin’. Maybe you can help me with names. There are two chestnuts, a mare and gelding, and a grey I’ve named Moon, then there’s another gelding who’s a paint,” he said as they began walking towards the paddocks. “Do you plan to stay in Smoky Hill a while?”

“I’m not sure,” she replied with what he thought was a worried frown. “It just depends on, uh, some stuff. How long do you think it will take me to get comfortable in the saddle?”

“If you can come every day, you should be trottin’ like a pro in about a week and lopin’ in two. But it depends how well you take to it, and your fitness level.”

“I work out at a gym all the time,” she exclaimed as they approached the pastures.

“That will help,” he muttered, forcing himself to stare ahead and not at her deliciously curvaceous body. “There they are.”

“Ooh, you can see they’re neglected, the poor things.”

“Yep, but that’s all about to change. They only just came in this mornin’. Any ideas for names?”

“Umm, what about Sally and Sammy for the chestnuts.”

“Hey, I like that. Sally and Sammy!”

“For the black and white paint, I have to give that some more thought, although...”

“What?”



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“I’m not sure, but what about Astro?”

“Astro? I like it. What made you think of that?”

“If you look at the night sky through a powerful telescope, the planets are like big white blobs against a black canvas. It’s hard to explain, but that’s what he reminded me of when I saw him.”

“No kiddin’. Damn, girl, you’re good at this,” he declared, then opened the gate and stepped into the paddock. “Do you want to hear your new names?” he called, walking forward as all four horses turned and looked at him. “You’re Sammy,” he said softly, nearing one of the chestnuts and lifting a handful of small carrots from his back pocket. He offered the treat, then smiled as it was greedily accepted. “You’re Sally,” he continued, stepping over to the mare and giving another to her, “and you, big boy, I’m happy to call you Astro.” But the paint moved away, and to Cade’s surprise, walked across to Karen standing at the fence.

“What should I do?” she asked as Cade handed Moon a carrot. “I’ve only been around the horses at the track. I’ve never encountered a rescue.”

“He’s the nervous one of the bunch. Just talk to him, but don’t make any sudden movements.”

“Okay.”

Cade’s heart had been broken only once. Badly. He’d avoided becoming involved ever since. But as he stood and watched Karen speak softly to Astro, a warm shiver

rippled through his body.

## CHAPTER SIX

Much to Karen's delight and surprise, the sexy cowboy guided her through his barn then across to the paddocks and introduced her to all his horses. When they'd stop to talk, his clear blue eyes seemed to look right through her and she'd feel the flutter of butterflies in her stomach. She never wanted the tour to end, but all too soon they were walking back to her car.

"Thank you, Cade, I've had the best time. I just love it out here. Everything's so peaceful, and these two," she exclaimed, bending down to pet Jack and Diane, "where do I begin? They're such a happy pair."

"They should be. Their only problem is trying to convince me they'll die if they don't get a milkbone the minute we go inside."

"I'm sure. And I bet they manage it every time."

"Guilty," he replied with a grin.

"So, uh, what time do you want me here for the lesson tomorrow?"

"How does two o'clock sound?"

"Perfect."

"Do you have any western boots?"

"Uh, no. Actually, I'm not sure what to wear."

“There’s a store in town, Luke’s Western Garb. Tell them you’ll be takin’ lessons with me and they’ll see you right.”

“Brilliant. Thanks, Cade. I’m so looking forward to this. I forgot to ask, how much do you charge? I’d like to pay you in cash, if that’s okay.”

“Dammit!” he exclaimed, abruptly raising his eyes.

Startled and following his gaze, she saw Astro and Moon trotting out of their paddock.

“Cade! How did that happen?” she asked urgently. “What can I do?”

“Stay here!”

As he marched away, she stared at the horses and decided she could help. Ignoring his instructions she hastily grabbed a handful of peppermints from her bag in the car, then began running to head them off. But as she passed the house and entered an unfenced field, the ground became uneven and muddy.

A moment later she spotted Cade guiding Moon back into the paddock and closing the gate, but Astro was still trotting around, tossing his head and looking very pleased with himself. As Cade started after him, the gelding changed direction and headed directly towards her. With her pulse ticking up, she quickened her step, only to trip and fall headfirst into the mud.

\* \* \*

Just a few minutes earlier Cade had wanted to call out and tell Karen to return to the car, but shouting could unsettle Astro, or even spook him and cause him to take off. Irritated, he’d kept his eyes on the loose horse, but a sudden movement off to the side

caught his attention. Shifting his gaze, he stared in disbelief. Karen was struggling to her feet covered in mud, then slipped and fell a second time. He was trying to decide if he should continue after Astro or hurry across to help her when the the big paint changed course, marched directly over to her and stood stock still. By the time Cade reached them Karen was leaning against the horse to steady herself as she straightened up.

“Are you okay?” he asked as he neared.

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“Apart from a bruised ego and all this mud,” she muttered with a sigh. “Good grief. Just look at me.”

“Yep, you’re quite a mess,” he said as he looped the halter over the horse’s head. “You should go into the house and get cleaned up.”

“Uh...I don’t want to be any trouble.”

Though he was tempted to retort, that ship has already sailed, he resisted the temptation.

“My housekeeper did the floors yesterday so just take off your shoes before you go in,” he began. “The guest bedroom has a bathroom. It’s the second door on the right. I’m takin’ this boy back to his paddock.”

“Okay, uh, thanks.”

Annoyed and glancing over his shoulder as he led the big gelding away, Cade saw the beautiful, bedraggled girl making her way slowly to the back door. Though he’d taken her to the paddocks along a gravel path, the fields were mucky from a heavy downpour the day before. She’d ignored him, and now she was paying the price. As far as he was concerned she deserved it.

\* \* \*

After stopping at her car and dropping her dirty sweater on the passenger seat, Karen continued to the back door, tugged off her muddy sneakers and stepped into a cozy,

spotless kitchen. Walking carefully across the polished tile to an opening that appeared to lead into a hallway, she followed it to the second door on the right. She was greeted by a cheerful bedroom decorated in yellow and white, and she thought it was a stark contrast to the rugged cowboy with whom she'd spent the afternoon. Moving into the bathroom and staring at her reflection in the mirror, she was shocked by what she saw. Dirt was across her face and in her hair. Chagrined and embarrassed, she washed up, then headed back to the clean, cozy kitchen and found Cade sitting at the table.

"Would you like a cup before you go?" he asked, gesturing towards the coffee pot, a milk jug and a bowl of sugar.

"Thanks, yes, I'd love one."

Wordlessly rising to his feet, he fetched a cup from a cabinet and set it in front of her.

"How are you feelin", Karen?"

"Thanks, and to be honest, a bit, uh, embarrassed," she replied, reaching for the coffee pot.

"It's been a pleasure meetin' you, but—"

"You too," she exclaimed, cutting him off. "Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. In spite of falling into that mud I've had a wonderful time. And I think Astro likes me."

"Seems so, and I'm sorry but this has to end here. I'm not the right person to teach you."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Cade's remark was the last thing Karen expected. Shocked, and having no idea what to say, she just stared at him. But he wordlessly stared right back. The moment seemed to last forever, then Jack suddenly barked. Rising to his feet, Cade moved to a cabinet and fetched two milk bones.

"I don't understand," she managed as he returned and fed them to Jack and Diane.

"I won't teach someone who doesn't listen," he replied solemnly.

"Of course I'll listen."

"I can't trust you."

"Why would you say that?"

"I told you to stay by the car and you ignored me."

"I just wanted to help."

"That's not the point," he retorted with a frown. "I told you to stay where you were for a reason. Those horses have just come in. I don't know them."

"Then why did you let me come into the paddock with you?"

"It was a controlled environment. They were relaxed, not loose and runnin' around. Again, that's not the point," he added, rising to his feet. "I have to get back to work. I'm sure you'll find—"

"No—wait—I'll pay you double."

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The moment the words left her lips she knew she'd made a terrible mistake.

"You may be able to buy people where you come from," he shot back, glaring at her, "but that doesn't work around here."

"I'm sorry, Cade, I didn't mean—"

"Karen, I'm not for sale!"

"Cade, please, I'm really sorry," she continued, speaking hastily as he marched to the door and held it open. "Helen and Andy spoke so highly of you. Please give me another chance?"

As he tilted his head to the side and narrowed his eyes, she felt a glimmer of hope.

"You won't pay me a dime, but you'll be here every mornin' at seven to clean three stalls, and every evenin' at five to feed three horses. If you're late, it's over. If you don't do as I say, it's over. That's the deal."

"Thank you, Cade, yes, absolutely, you won't regret this," she replied urgently, though dreading the prospect of getting up so early.

"Come with me. I'll show you where everything is."

\* \* \*

When Karen had offered to double his fee, Cade abruptly realized he didn't want her



money, he wanted her company. Now walking up to the barn with Jack and Diane bounding excitedly ahead of them, he dared to hope she'd agreed to his offer because she wanted to be around him just as much. But he also sensed she genuinely loved horses, and he wanted to show her the reality of caring for them. Being around a successful racing stable was a far cry from the joys and challenges of ownership.

"Wow, this is a lovely barn," she exclaimed as they entered. "The aisle is so wide."

"Thanks, I designed it and helped to build it. The hayloft is upstairs and you just drop down the flakes. It saves time and energy. But there's no gettin' around pushin' a wheelbarrow when it comes to cleanin' a stall. They're all done now, but when you get here in the mornin' I'll show you. Come this way and you can see the loft." But as he started towards the steps, she lingered at the stall door. "Is something wrong?"

"No, I was just thinking how nice it is that the horses have a corral attached. They don't have those at the racing stable."

"A stall is just a fancy name for a cage," he replied with a frown. "I don't believe in puttin' any animal in a confined space like that. In the wild horses will walk between ten and thirty miles a day."

"You're kidding? I didn't know that."

"Yep, and people stick them in boxes then wonder why they're anxious. Those corrals aren't near as big as I'd like them to be, but at least they can walk around outside, and they're out in the pastures until sundown. Follow me, and you don't have to worry. It's like a regular staircase with a sort of landing at the top."

As he trotted up the steps and emerged into the spacious loft he broke into a smile. Shafts of light were beaming through the small windows on the right side.

“Wow, look at that,” she exclaimed as she stepped up to join him. “It looks like a painting.”

“It happens right around sunset if it’s not cloudy.”

“Sunset? It’s that late?”

“The days are gettin’ shorter faster. Anyway, you can see where the spaces are to drop down the hay, and above each one is a sign with the type of hay and how much each horse gets. My mare, Roxy, get’s a flake of alfalfa and a flake of grass hay each night.”

“What’s the difference?”

“That’s a conversation for another time, but you can tell them apart by lookin’ at them. This is alfalfa, and that’s grass,” he said, showing the difference. “I’ll explain about the supplements and grain when I take you into the feed room.”

“There’s so much to learn.”

“Karen, you have no idea.”

“Apparently.”

“Since I’m up here I’ll drop the hay in now. You take that side, and I’ll do this one. Just follow what it says on the feed chart.”

“Oh, okay. And that’s alfalfa, and that’s grass. It doesn’t look like grass.”

“There are all kinds of grasses,” he remarked with a grin, lifting up a flake and carrying it to the first opening. But even as he dropped it down he kept his eye on her,

and continued to watch closely until they were finished.

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“I’m out of breath,” she declared when they’d finished. “Those alfalfa flakes start getting heavy after picking up a few of them. Do you do all this by yourself? Don’t you have any help?”

“I do now,” he replied with a wink. “And we’re not done. It’s time to fill their grain buckets, then I’ll bring them in. But if it’s too much for you...”

“No, no,” she replied hastily. “I want to learn, I do, and I know when I sit in that western saddle for the first time it will be worth it.”

He grinned again, but it wasn’t innocent. He knew she was on her best behavior. Before too long she’d test him, and would either leave, or be sitting uncomfortably in the saddle.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

By the time Cade had finished showing Karen the various supplements and explaining the feed chart, it was time for the horses to come in for the night. Handing her a halter, he told her she could bring in a mare called Lily, then walked outside and pointed to her paddock.

“You’ll start your lessons on her. She’s easy, but make sure you close the gate behind you when you go in to catch her. She’s a foodie and she’ll be lookin’ forward to her dinner. We don’t need another escape. You saw all the stall doors have nameplates, and hers is the third on the left.”

Thrilled at the prospect, and even more thrilled he was trusting her, Karen made her

way to the paddock. She had no problem slipping the halter over the mare's head, and as she led Lily to the barn and into her stall, Karen couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so happy. Cade was bringing the horses in two at a time, including the new rescues, and they soon settled.

"Time to give them their buckets," he announced. "They're all named. Just grab a few and empty them into their feed bowls."

With the two of them working the job was done quickly, and Cade rinsed out the buckets and put them away.

"That's it, we're done," he announced. "Do you still want to be here at seven in the mornin' to feed and clean?"

"Yes, of course, and thank you again. I've had the most wonderful day."

"You're welcome, and now it's time for me to get cleaned up," he continued, walking with her from the barn. "I'm meetin' Annie Baker in her studio. Do you know her and her husband Brody?"

"We've never met, and I still can't believe a superstar like her lives out here, and it's even harder to believe she's Helen's sister-in-law. It's so weird."

"Annie, Brody, and Helen's husband Andy and I, along with a few others, have been friends for years. We see Annie as the same girl from back in the day. We all hung out together through high-school, and we'd join up again in the summer when we were home from college."

"Why are you meeting at her studio?"

"I play the guitar, and sometimes it's easier for her to use me than bring her guitarist

all the way in from Nashville to help her knock out a song. I'd be happy to do it for nothin', but she insists on payin' me, and she keeps sayin' she wants to take me on the road, but I couldn't leave my horses for that long."

"That's so cool."

"It's fun. Now I have to get cleaned up and go, but we need to exchange numbers," he added, pulling out his phone.

Karen's heart skipped a beat, and for the first time since she'd arrived at the sexy cowboy's ranch the frightening escape from her condo complex flashed through her head.

"Karen? Are you okay?"

"Yes, yes, fine," she lied. "I just remembered something."

"Are you sure? You don't look okay."

"Yes, honestly, but I, uh, it's my phone. I haven't got one. I mean, I did, but I accidentally ran over it in my car," she said hastily, saying the first thing that came into her head.

"How the heck did you manage that?"

"It's a long story and I don't want to hold you up. There's a landline at Helen's cottage. I'll call from there when I arrive."

"Sounds good. This has my number on it," he offered, lifting out his wallet and handing her a business card. "Karen, are you sure there isn't a problem?"

“Uh-huh. Bye, Jack, bye Diane,” she exclaimed, turning her attention to the dogs to escape Cade’s scrutinizing gaze. “I’ll see you in the morning. Have fun tonight, Cade.”

“I’m sure I will,” he replied. “Get some rest.”

As she climbed into the SUV and settled behind the wheel, she smiled and waved. But when she turned into the road all she could think about was the dire situation in which she found herself.

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She had two days before her parents returned from their trip.

Two days before they'd want to know where she was and why.

Two days for her to think of something to tell them.

Two days to find a way out of the mess she was in.

\* \* \*

While Karen had spent an idyllic day at Cade's ranch, Gino Stallone had been receiving a string of calls from the thugs he employed to collect unpaid gambling debts. He referred to them as his 'security guards'. It was his own private joke. They secured the money owed to him. Some worked full-time, others were used when a client was particularly difficult to track down. But in spite of all their efforts, Karen Harper remained missing.

Now standing trackside staring at his phone, he had no choice but to call a private detective and enforcer named Paddy O'Brien. The man was as Irish as his name promised. He claimed his thick accent and enigmatic smile could charm the panties off any woman, and Gino believed him. But he also knew Paddy could use those same qualities to bring terror to the hearts of the toughest of men.

His calling card was a set of custom-made knives.

He had designed them himself, then had them made by Patrick Joseph, the famous Irish knife company.



Paddy always achieved results.

But he cost a fortune.

Reluctantly Gino sent him a photograph of Karen standing with her parents in the winner's circle, then placed the call

He had no choice.

He only had two days to find the spoiled rich bitch and silence her.

## CHAPTER NINE

As Cade watched the white SUV head off down the quiet country road, he let out a heavy breath. He was sure Karen had been lying to him. When he'd asked the simple question about what happened to her phone, she'd looked panic-stricken, then rattled off an excuse that sounded implausible.

Striding into the house, he continued thinking about the odd conversation as he fed the dogs then showered and changed. Whenever he left the ranch to work with Annie she sent over one of her security guards. As if on cue, Cade was pulling on his jacket when he heard a car rolling to a stop outside his door.

"Come on you two," he called to the happy retrievers. "We're off to see Annie and your friends."

The two dogs always joined him when he worked with Annie. She adored them, and they loved playing with her two her dogs, Bella and Merlin. As he hurried outside, Jack and Diane jumped into the bed of his truck while he waved at the security guard and climbed behind the wheel. But as he rolled away from the house he wanted to drive straight to the cottage, confront Karen and ask her what was really going on.

Fighting the temptation, he made the short trip to Annie's home.

The studio was at the back of the property near the base of the Smoky Hill forest. Pulling to a stop at the gate, he punched the code into the keypad, then drove past the house and came to a stop in the parking area.

"Hi, Cade," Annie called, stepping outside with Bella and Merlin running ahead of her. "I thought we could leave the wild beasts out here to play for a while."

"Good idea," he replied with a grin as Jack and Diane jumped from the truck and ran across to meet their friends. But as he walked into the studio with Annie his smile quickly faded.

"Do you want a beer? Though, from that worried look on your face maybe you need something stronger," she remarked. "What's up?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Uh, yeah. I've known you for a hundred years."

"True," he muttered with a sigh. "One of Helen's friends is here and she spent the afternoon at the ranch with me. She'll be takin' lessons in exchange for helpin' around the place."

"Is that a problem?"

"No, not at all, except—something odd happened. She was leavin', and when I said we should exchange numbers she panicked."

"What do you mean?"

“She said she didn’t have a phone. She claimed she’d driven over it in her car.”

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“Maybe she did.”

“I don’t think so—it didn’t ring true, and for a moment I thought she looked terrified.”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Annie muttered with a frown. “Cade, did she tell you why she was visiting Smoky Hill?”

“Now that you mention it, no, she didn’t. All I know is that she’s stayin’ at Helen’s cottage on her family’s estate. What are you thinkin’.”

“She might have ditched her phone, or even destroyed it in a panic so it couldn’t be tracked, and she hasn’t had time to get a new one.”

“What? Destroyed it? That sounds a bit dramatic, and so does bein’ tracked. Why would someone do that?”

“That’s what I did when I was running away from my maniacal manager.”

“Damn! Are you thinkin’ she has some psycho stalker, or maybe an ex-boyfriend is after her?”

“That would be my guess, and you need to find out. I know how horrible it is to feel alone with a monster chasing you. I felt completely helpless and I was scared all the time.”

“What would you suggest? Should I push her for answers? That might be a bit much.

We only just met, though after spendin' all day with her I feel like we're friends already."

"Why don't you bring her over here? I might have a better shot at getting her to open up."

"She'd love to meet you. When would you suggest? I know how busy you are with this new project."

"Not as busy as I used to be. I'm not under the same kind of time pressure I used to be. Why don't you bring her with you tomorrow night when you come? She can watch, and when we take a break you can make yourself scarce."

"That sounds perfect. I just hope you're wrong."

"Me too, but I have a feeling she has a problem, a big one."

\* \* \*

When Karen arrived at the cottage she immediately called Cade, gave him the number, then hurried into the bathroom to run a hot bath. After dropping in some bubble bath, she peeled off her clothes, pinned her long hair on top of her head, then climbed in and sank into the enveloping foam.

As she closed her eyes and let out a long sigh, she flashed back to the moment she'd fallen in the mud. Cade had been angry, and when he'd suggested she work for him in exchange for lessons it was the last thing she'd expected.

Now thinking back to the moment, she realized their attraction had been mutual. And apparently still was. He wouldn't have reminded her to be there early in the morning if it wasn't. Feeling herself beginning to drift away, his handsome face floated

through her mind and a smile crossed her lips.

Silent minutes ticked by...then she suddenly saw herself in the hay loft picking up a flake of alfalfa to toss down to Astro.

“Karen, what are you hidin’,” he asked sternly. “You can’t stay here unless you tell me what’s goin’ on.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Lie to me again and I swear I’ll spank your ass.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“I always keep my promises, and I’m tired of this cat and mouse game you’re playin’. What really happened to your phone? Why did you panic when I asked you about it? Why are you here in Smoky Hill?”

“I just needed some time off so I decided to visit Helen.”

“That was a lie,” he grunted, then abruptly stepped forward, grabbed her wrist, bent her over and began slapping her backside.

Her eyes popped open.

The vision had seemed so real.

“Would you do that?” she whispered. “Oh, my gosh! I think you just might!”

### CHAPTER TEN

When the successful session with Annie drew to a close, Cade insisted their musical synergy was due to their years of friendship and playing together, but Annie argued it was because he was such a great guitarist and always had been.

“You know you could have a career in the music business if you wanted to,” she said as they walked to his truck.

“And you know I’d never trade-in my ranch life and horses for a recording studio and life on the road.”

“But you can have both.”

“Not the way I do it. I could never leave for weeks at a time.”

“I get it. I miss this place after just a couple of days. But on another subject, let me know about Karen. I hope you can convince her to come over here tomorrow night.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem,” he replied with a grin. “Come on Jack! Bring your girlfriend and get in the truck. Dammit, is that rain?” he muttered, looking up at the sky as he felt a few wet droplets on his face.

“Sure looks like it. I’m going back inside,” Annie said hastily. “Call me.”

Opening the passenger door as she hurried away, Cade waved to his dogs waiting at the back of the truck for the tailgate to be lowered.

“You’re not gettin’ up there. You’ll end up all wet and make a mess in the house. Come on, you’re ridin’ shotgun with me.” Though Jack trotted up to him and jumped in, Diane stayed where she was and barked. “Typical woman. Why do you all have to be stubborn?” he said briskly, marching across to her and pointing to the open door. “Get in the front.”

She did as he ordered, and as he hurried around to the driver’s side and climbed behind the wheel the skies opened up. Relieved he’d made it in time, he headed down the driveway and started off for home. But as a bolt of lightning flashed through the sky, he decided to check in on Karen and called the number she’d given him.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Karen, it’s Cade.”

“Hi, this is a surprise.”

“Is this a bad time?”

“No, not at all.”

“It looks like we’re in for a heck of a night,” he continued as a rumble of thunder rolled overhead.

“It sure does. Oh, wow, the lights just flickered.”

“Does the cottage have an emergency generator?”

“I have no idea.”

“The main house probably does,” Cade said thoughtfully. “You can always drive up



there if you need to.”

“Actually, there’s no-one home. Helen’s parents are away.”

“So...you’re on that big property alone?”

“Yes. I don’t mind, not really.”

“What if there’s a problem?” he asked as another bolt of lightning lit up the sky.

“What kind of problem?”

“I don’t know, any kind of problem. It’s absolutely pouring. That pond might crest its banks.”

“I never thought about that, though I imagine an estate like this would have allowed for—that’s weird,” she said, abruptly interrupting her own thought.

“What?”

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“I’m standing at the window and I think I just saw a flashlight.”

“I’m two minutes away. I’ll stop in and check. What’s the gate code?”

“6116. But you don’t have to. It’s terrible out there. Crap, there it is again.”

“The flashlight?”

“Or whatever it is, but yes.”

“I’m almost there. I’ll stop next to the front door.”

“Thanks, Cade. Sorry to be a problem.”

“You’re not. I’ll be turning into the gates in about thirty-seconds.”

“Okay. I’m just going to throw on some clothes.”

“See you shortly.”

Accelerating through the driving rain, he saw the familiar gates a moment later, but when he rolled into the driveway his headlights illuminated a figure in a raincoat lumbering through the storm. Whoever it was stopped, then turned and began heading in his direction. With his pulse ticking up, Cade punched in the code, the gates swung open, and he sped forward, quickly stopping and lowering his window as the figure waved him down.

“If you’re lookin’ for the Rutherfords they’re out of town,” the man yelled.

“I’m here to see a friend who’s staying in the guest cottage,” Cade replied.

“Oh, I thought that was Helen. I’m Harry, the groundskeeper. I’m just here checkin’ on things. Especially that pond. Can’t be too careful in a storm like this.”

“Do you want a lift?”

“Much obliged. I’m in the wife’s car and I wouldn’t trust it drivin’ down that slope to the pond. It’s gravel but it can get a bit dicey.”

“Hop in, and don’t mind the dogs. The worst they’ll do is lick you to death.”

“Hah, I know that story. Thanks.”

Jack and Diane jumped into the rear seat making room for the drenched groundskeeper, and Cade continued on, relieved the man was not a mysterious stranger lurking on the grounds. When he pulled to a stop next to the front porch, Harry thanked him again, then climbed out and hurried towards the pond.

“Stay here,” Cade said, stepping out and hurrying to the front door, but before he had a chance to ring the bell, Karen had opened it.

“Come in, come in,” she said urgently. “Gosh, what a night.”

“That flashlight was just the groundskeeper here to check on the pond.”

“It was?” she replied with wide eyes.

“Yep. Why?”

“No reason, I’m just glad it wasn’t anyone—you know—snooping around.”

“I can’t imagine anyone wantin’ to do that on a night like this,” he replied, but as he spoke he realized she had been genuinely worried, perhaps even scared.

“Karen, would you be more comfortable in my guest room?”

“Uh...”

“Obviously no strings.”

“Honestly, Cade, yes, I would love that.”

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“Then throw some things in a bag and let’s go.”

“Really? Thank you,” she said earnestly. “I really appreciate this.”

As she hurried away a frown crossed his brow, and his conversation with Annie floated through his head.

“Are you thinkin’ she has some psycho stalker, or maybe an ex-boyfriend is after her?”

“That would be my guess, and you need to find out. I know how horrible it is to feel alone with a monster chasing you. I felt completely helpless and I was scared all the time.”

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

Driving back to Cade’s ranch Karen felt deeply and profoundly grateful. Though she was sure Gino Stallone had no idea where she was, when she’d seen the flashlight through the downpour she’d experienced a ripple of panic. The moment had shone a spotlight on her deep fear of the danger she might be in.

“Thanks for asking me over,” she said softly, finally finding her voice. “You’ve been so great about everything and we barely know each other.”

“I know enough,” he replied, shooting her a smile. “Besides, I don’t like the idea of you bein’ alone on that property. It would be different if Helen’s parents were there.”

“But I shouldn’t impose on you any more than I already have, and I’m sure after the storm I’ll be fine.”

He didn’t respond, and she wasn’t sure what to say to break the sudden awkward silence, but Jack did it for her, pushing between the seats and trying to crawl into her lap.

“Oh my gosh! Jack, what are you doing?” she exclaimed, laughing as she spoke. “There’s not enough room for you.”

“Apparently he’s thrilled to see you, and we’re home now so he can jump all over you when we get inside,” Cade remarked as the garage door rolled up.

“I didn’t realize you had an attached garage.”

“It’s the angle. You can’t see it from the road because of the trees, and you have to drive around the house to get there. It’s in an odd place,” he continued as he came to a stop. “This used to be just a work shed, but the people who built the house left it where it was and turned it into a garage. Okay, you two, I know you’re excited but wait for us to get out first,” he said, looking at the excited dogs.

Karen climbed out and Jack quickly followed her while Diane stayed with Cade, then bounded ahead of him as he entered a short hall and made his way to the kitchen.

“Karen, are you hungry? Did you have dinner?”

“Uh, no. I didn’t have much of an appetite and I was too tired to rummage around for anything.”

“I had a bite at Annie’s but I’m still hungry. How about I rustle us up a couple of hamburgers. I bought them fresh from the butcher the other day and I need to cook

‘em up.”

“That sounds great, thanks.”

As he turned on his griddle and waited for it to get hot, he fetched tomatoes, lettuce and cheese from the refrigerator and a couple of hamburger buns from the pantry. Watching him, Karen felt her heart swell. He didn’t know it, but he’d become her hero.

\* \* \*

Cade was glad he’d swung by the Rutherford estate. The moment Karen had opened the front door it was obvious she’d been scared. Now she was relaxed and smiling, and the fear he’d seen in her eyes was gone. But as they settled at the table he found himself needing to know the real reason behind her visit to Smoky Hill. It was possible Annie had been right, and Karen was scared of an angry ex-boyfriend. But for reasons he couldn’t quite understand, Cade sensed something else going on. Rising to his feet, he moved to the refrigerator, grabbed two beers and brought them to the table.

“Do you need a glass?” he asked, popping off the caps.

“No, thanks. There’s something about drinking from the bottle and eating a hamburger that works.”

“You got that right” he replied with a grin, then lowering his voice he added, “Karen, you can tell me to mind my own business, but I get the feelin’ there’s more to your visit here than just takin’ a break. Am I right?”

“Kind of,” she muttered, lowering her eyes.

“You don’t have to talk about it you don’t want to, but tryin’ to deal with whatever it is by yourself must be tough. Maybe I can help.”

“Cade...it’s...not so easy.”

“What? Tellin’ me or dealin’ with it?”



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“Both,” she mumbled as a deep frown crossed her brow, then taking a bite of her hamburger, she chewed it slowly, then took a long swig of the beer. “For starters, I’m not even sure if you’d believe me.”

“That’s a strange thing to say. Why would you think that?”

“Because it’s not your average, every day, run-of-the mill problem.”

“Like I said, it’s up to you, but I’m happy to listen. Sometimes just talkin’ can help.”

“Maybe you’re right. I—uh—I overheard something I shouldn’t have, and I’m pretty sure the person involved is...I don’t know how I can explain this.”

“The person involved is what?” he pressed. “Is this about an ex? Was he sayin’ something about you?”

“Oh no, nothing like that,” she replied quickly. “I’m sorry, Cade. I do want to tell you but I don’t want to put you in any danger.”

“Danger?”

“Yeah, like, real danger,” she said, staring at him intently, “and I’m not being dramatic.”

“Karen, I think you’d better give me the whole story,” he said solemnly. “There’s only the two of us here, along with Jack and Diane, and they won’t be tellin’ anyone.”

Taking a breath, she turned her eyes to the dogs, then abruptly picked up her beer and took a drink. But as she put the bottle down he saw a single tear trickle down her cheek.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he said, lowering his voice.

“But it’s not, and I don’t know if things will ever be okay again.”

“Damn, girl, what’s goin’ on?”

“I’m scared, really scared, and I don’t know what to do,” she sputtered as more tears followed.

“Start by tellin’ me why, and we can take it from there.”

“My father owns race horses, and his trainer, Gino Stallone, is one of the top men in the country,” she began, her voice trembling as she spoke. “My parents are out of town and I decided to stop by the racing stable to see the horses. It was late, and when I got there the place seemed empty. I didn’t really think about it and I was walking past Gino’s office when I noticed the door was cracked open. I was about to poke my head in to say hello, but I heard his voice and I didn’t want to interrupt. That’s when I realized what he was talking about. He’s involved in illegal betting and fixing races, and he was threatening someone. And I mean, really threatening.”

“Oh no,” Cade muttered, immediately understanding her fears.

“I swear, my heart stopped and I sort of froze, then I started sneaking away. I had reached the nearest exit when he came out and called my name, but I was scared and I ran into the parking lot and drove straight back to my place.”

“What makes you think he knows you overheard anything?”

“At the time I wasn’t sure, but I wasn’t about to stick around and find out. Then I realized he knows where I live and he’s seen me in my Lexus. I didn’t feel safe, not at all, so I called Helen to see if I could come out here for a few days, then I rented an SUV and had it delivered. When I came out of the garage I saw two guys in a Mercedes parked in the guest area. They were just sitting there. I’m sure they were waiting for me. So, yeah, I’m sure Gino Stallone knows I was listening,” she sniffled. “I may not know what to do, but one thing I do know—he wants to make sure I never tell anyone what I overheard.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Overcome with fear and unable to stop her tears, Karen didn’t know what to say or do when Cade suddenly rose to his feet and pulled her into his arms. Gratefully sinking against him, loving the feel of his muscled body and strong hold, she buried her head in the hollow of his shoulder.

“He won’t find you here, and I’ll help you sort all this out,” he said softly. “Nothin’ is ever as bad as we think.”

“S-sorry,” she managed. “I just d-don’t know what to d-do, and I’m s-scared. I only have t-two d-days.”

“Why, what happens in two days?”

“M-mom and d-dad come back,” she stammered as she slowly pulled back and looked up at him. “They’re on a t-trip. I c-can’t imagine what Gino might d-do. He must be desperate to find me.”

“I think this is a job for Sheriff Cooper.”

“I thought about going into the sheriff’s office when I arrived, but Gino’s bound to

have cops on his payroll. I'm worried if the sheriff calls the Dallas police department Gino will find out. Then he'll know where I am."

"Okay, one step at a time," Cade said softly. "First of all, you're safe with me here, and given the circumstances I definitely think you should stay in my guest room."

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“You don’t think the cottage is okay?”

“You’ll rest easier here, and I will too. Bein’ on that big estate by yourself—”

“You’re right,” she murmured, interrupting him. “It’s nerve-racking. Storm or no storm, when I saw thatflashlight I almost had a heart attack.”

“Exactly. Tomorrow we’ll go back so you can get your car and the rest of your things.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Get a good night’s sleep, and tomorrow after we take care of the horses we can sit down and have a real talk about all this. But just so you know, Sheriff Cooper is no stranger to things like this. Not this exactly, but there was a drug dealin’ biker gang from Dallas here just a little while ago and he got the better of them. He knows who he can trust in the Dallas PD.”

“Really? A biker gang here in Smoky Hill?”

“Yep, and before that, Annie Baker was bein’ hunted down by her manager. You probably heard about it.”

“I did, it was all over the news.”

“Sheriff Cooper was involved with that whole thing as well, so don’t be so quick to dismiss him. And you should also know Annie’s husband Brody, along with Andy,

Helen's husband, know their way around trouble. Gettin' people out of it, that is."

"I had no idea."

"You do now, and you're not alone."

"Cade, I feel so much better. Thank you. Maybe I'll actually be able to sleep now."

"Jack and Diane are sweethearts, but if anyone tries sneakin' around this place at night they make more noise than a high-school band durin'' rehearsal. Of course they sound a whole lot better," he added with a grin.

In spite of her dread and fear, a smile crossed her lip.

"That's better," he said softly. "Darlin', I'm sorry you're scared and I'm sorry this happened, but I'm not sorry you're here. I'll take care of you no matter what. I promise."

\* \*\*

Cade had been thinking the words and hadn't meant to say them out loud. Though they'd slipped out before he knew it he wasn't sorry. There was a look in her eye, one that seemed to be begging him to kiss her, and she wasn't moving away. Her full breasts were pressed against his chest, almost as if inviting his touch, but just as he was about to lower his lips on hers, she threw her arms around his neck, pulled his head down and kissed him.

Though caught off guard he quickly slipped his hands into her hair, held it tightly, and fervently kissed her back. Her blatant carnal hunger fired his passion, and he knew she wanted him as much as he wanted her, perhaps even more.

“Sorry,” she whispered when they finally broke apart. “I don’t know what—”

Before she could finish his arm was around her waist jerking her against him and he was kissing her again, but taking his time, languidly sliding his lips over hers. Long moments passed, then he carried his lips to her neck, devouring her skin like a starving vampire.

“Ohh, Cade, I love that,” she panted as he gripped her hair and yanked her head to the side. “You’re making me...”

“What?” he demanded. “I’m makin’ you what?”

“Weak.”

“That’s okay, darlin’. I’m strong enough for both of us. But if you want me to stop just say the word,” he murmured, knowing she was feeling his hardness pressing against her.

“I don’t, not for a second.”

“Are you sure,” he whispered, resting his lips against her ear. “It’s okay if you do.”

“I’ve never felt like this, not ever,” she bleated. “But if you—”

Before she could finish his lips were back against hers demanding her response. She didn’t disappoint him. As she slipped her tongue into his mouth, he effortlessly swept her up, continuing the fiery kiss as he carried her into his bedroom. Quickly laying her down, he hastily removed her clothes, then urgently stripped and stretched out next to her.

“Damn, girl, you’re gorgeous,” he muttered, roaming his hands over her breasts.

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“And you’re so strong,” she whispered. “So amazingly strong.”

“You have no idea,” he warned, grabbing her wrists and holding them above her head, “but you’re about to find out.”

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Cade’s words sent goosebumps popping across Karen’s skin, and a moment later, when he lowered his lips to her nipples, she moaned loudly and raised her chest. But he didn’t draw them into his mouth as she expected. He lightly bit them making her cry out, then lowered himself on top of her body. For a moment she didn’t understand what he was doing, then realized he was pinning her down with his weight.

“Now you’re mine,” he growled, sliding his legs between hers and pushing them apart. “Do you know what that means?”

“N-no, b-but I love this,” she sputtered.

“Love what?”

“Everything.”

“Tell me exactly,” he murmured, moving his lips to her ear.

“B-being beneath you and not being able to move, your hands holding my wrists down, and your legs keeping mine spread. It’s...it’s...incredible.”



“There’s a word for it. Do you know what that word is?” he continued, raising his head and locking her eyes.

“Uh...”

“Control,” he said gruffly. “Is that what you love?”

“Yes...yes...”

“Do you want me to fuck you?”

“Yes, please.”

“Beg me.”

“Oh, Cade...”

“I said, beg me. I won’t ask again.”

“Please, Cade, please f-fuck me? I want you s-so much.”

“Close your eyes and keep them closed,” he ordered. “If you open them you’ll be punished. Understood?”

“Uh-huh.”

As he moved off her and she felt him leave the bed she desperately wanted to sneak a peek. But even more, she wanted to find out what would happen if she did. Unable to resist, she fluttered her eyelids open just a hair and saw him sliding a condom on his impressive cock.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he said sternly, jerking his head around. In a flash he was perched on the edge of the mattress and jerking her over his lap.

“Cade, I’m sorry!”

“In this house naughty girls get spanked,” he scolded, ignoring her and landing several hard slaps on her naked cheeks. “But you suspected that and you wanted to find out. Right? Tell the truth!”

“I, yes, s-sorry. I couldn’t help it.”

“That’s also why you chose to ignore me when I told you to wait by the car. Correct?”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“Next time I give you an instruction what will you do?” he demanded, landing a flurry of hot, hard swats.

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“Follow it, I will, I swear,” she yelped, squirming on his lap. “Please, Cade, I know now and I won’t test you again.”

“You’d better not. But I’m sure you’ll be tempted,” he murmured, slipping his fingers inside her pussy eliciting a long, low moan. “Have you been spanked in the past?”

“Once, a long time ago, but not like this.”

“Tell me about it,” he muttered as he began thrusting his finger in and out of her drenched passage causing her to moan and wriggle.

“In high school I teased this boy I liked and he whacked my ass.”

“What did you do?” he asked, pausing his salacious attention.

“Ooh, please don’t stop.”

“Answer the question!”

“I yelled at him, but he did it again. I was so shocked I ran off, but I couldn’t get it out of my mind for ages...like weeks and weeks.”

“Did you see him again?”

“All the time, and he’d wink at me. I used to pray he’d ask me out but he never did.”

“And you still think about it, don’t you, Karen?”

“I do, and I can’t believe this is happening now...here...with you.”

“Believe it, and now you know who’s in charge around here.”

\* \* \*

Though the chemistry had been sparking between them since they’d met, he’d thought it would be at least a couple of days before he’d bring her into his arms. But when she’d thrown herself at him and fervently kissed him, any thoughts he’d had about taking his time bolted like a horse jumping from the gates at the race track. Now they were naked and she was squirming beneath him, and the sparks between them were white hot.

Raising his hips and moving his hand between their bodies, he gripped his hardness, placed it against her entrance and slowly thrust forward. As she groaned his name he began to pump, but only seconds passed before she threw her legs around his back and begged him to go faster.

“Not yet,” he replied firmly. “And I call the shots, remember?”

Her response was a disappointed whimper.

Staying buried inside her, he lowered his lips on hers in an endless crushing kiss, and when he finally broke away he was filled with a feverish need to consume her. Straightening up, he grabbed her waist and pumped with quick, strong strokes. As she cried out her pleasure he accelerated, then slowed when he sensed her excitement building, and abruptly pulled out and flipped her over. Though her curvaceous cheeks were still blushing pink he knew the sting would have faded. Wordlessly snaking back inside her, he artfully thrust until her excitement was building once again, then began spanking her, moving his flattened palm from cheek to cheek.

“Who’s in charge?” he demanded without pausing his hand.

“You are, Cade. Please, I’m so close.”

“How close?”

“Very. I’ll be good, I swear.”

He wanted to make her wait but his own climax was suddenly looming. Telling himself the next time they were together he’d take his time and tease her, he tightened his grasp around her hips and quickened his pace.

“Cade...”

She had cried out his name, then suddenly arching her back she let out a series of wild cries.

There was no denying his release.

The crackling convulsions shuddered through his body, each feeling more powerful than the last. As they finally waned and he fell beside her, breathless and with his heart pounding, he slowly came out of his hazy state. Moments later, when she curled beside him and rested her head in the hollow of his shoulder, he knew their connection wasn’t just about sex.

She was special.

He'd do whatever had to be done to keep her safe.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Standing in the middle of Karen's lounge, Paddy O'Brien scanned the room and shook his head. Life had been so much easier when people kept framed photographs and desks with file folders in drawers. Now everyone kept everything on their password protected tablets, laptops and phones. At least slipping past doormen and security guards was still a breeze, and door locks remained relatively uncomplicated.

Ambling into her bedroom, he stood still as his practiced eye took in his surroundings, then abruptly broke into a grin. Perched on a bookcase filled with bric a brac was a photograph showing an attractive young woman.

"Finally," he exclaimed, marching across and lifting it from the shelf.

Turning the frame over and prying off the back, his smile grew wider. As he'd hoped, there was a message.

For my besties until we meet again here at my new home in Smoky Hill. Mom and dad have actually called this new place The Rutherford Rustic Retreat. Can you believe it? They're a riot.

Love you both,

Helen.

In the distance behind the attractive girl was a beautiful hacienda style home. Slipping the photograph into his pocket, he continued his search, hitting pay dirt a secondtime. Sliding open the drawer in the bedside table, he found a business card with the name, Moonshine Campgrounds. It too was in Smoky Hill. Turning it over he found another message.

Hey, Karen, this is the most wonderful place. It has rustic cabins and a fantastic restaurant. You must come and visit me soon. I love it here and I know you would too. Have a great birthday. XXX Helen.

Assuming it had been sent with a birthday card, Paddy continued his search, but finding nothing more he sat on the edge of the bed and called the number on the business card.

“Moonshine Campgrounds.”

“Hello, my name is Patrick McBride,” he began. “I don’t know if you can help me, but I’m arranging a college reunion and I’m having trouble tracking down an old friend. Her name is Helen Rutherford, and she lives in a Hacienda style home in Smoky Hill. I don’t suppose you know her by any chance?”

“I do. Her family recently built a lovely home here, and it does resemble a Spanish Hacienda.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know the address would you?”

“Um...hold on. We probably have it. They often dine here. Yes, here it is. 78 Old Hill Road, Smoky Hill, and that’s in Texas of course.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you, you’ve been extremely helpful. Maybe I should just come out there and stay at your facility. Is it very busy?”

“Not at all. This is the off season.”

“Then book me in. I’ll be there tomorrow. I like doing things on the spur of the moment.”

“I just need a few details, then you can decide on whatkind of cabin you want.”

In just a few minutes the reservation had been made, and ending the call, Paddy entered the address of the Rutherford home into an app. A moment later an image of the house appeared on his screen. It was the same home behind the three girls in the photograph. Though there was no guarantee Karen was there it was a possibility, and so far the only lead he had. Another search told him the town was only an hour or so out of Dallas. Though it was late, he knew Gino was anxious for news and called him.

“Paddy! Have you found her?”

“Possibly. I’ll be leaving in the morning to check out a lead.”

“Where?”

“A small town called Smoky Hill.”

“Never heard of it.”

“There’s no reason you should have. I’ll call you the minute I learn anything.”

“Thanks, Paddy. I have thirty-six hours to find her and shut her the fuck up. How likely is this?”

“Let’s just say I have a hunch.”



\* \* \*

Ending the call, Gino stared down at the escort staring up at him. She was between his legs, licking the tip of his cock. He had called her in to distract him, and her attention had been working, but now all he could think about was Karen Harper. If she talked she could bury him.

“I’m done,” he grunted. “Grab my wallet on the dresser and bring it to me.”

Watching her as she slid off the bed and moved across the room he let out a frustrated sigh. He still had to pay her and she wasn’t cheap.

“Bad news?” she asked softly as she handed it to him.

“Brains as well as beauty,” he retorted sarcastically.

“You’re such a charmer.”

“So I’ve been told,” he muttered, giving her the bills. “See yourself out. I’ll call again soon.”

“Thanks, Gino. I hope it all works out for you.”

“It will! I’ll make sure of that, believe me.”

Though he watched her dress and leave the room, his mind was focused on Paddy’s news.

“Smoky Hill,” he mumbled to himself.

When he heard the front door close he slipped from the bed, pulled on his robe and headed to his office. After growing up in a crowded home in a poor neighborhood he loved being alone in his majestic home and treasured the silence. Settling behind his desk, he powered up his computer, and was soon reading about the small, rural community of Smoky Hill.

It was an ideal hiding place, but if Karen Harper was there Paddy would find her. With his Irish accent, twinkling blue eyes and boyish good looks, the man knew how to elicit information from people, especially women. Continuing to peruse the images and coming across the Moonshine Campgrounds, Gino was intrigued by the luxury cabins, the magnificent mountains and the pristine lake. He thought for a moment, then picked up his phone and called Paddy back.

“Yes, Gino?” Paddy asked as he answered the call.

“I’m going to drive out to Smoky Hill as well. I have the same hunch.”

“Let me guess. You’d rather take care of any unpleasant business in that remote spot rather than have me drag the girl back to Dallas.”

“Damn right. Where are you staying?”

“I’ll be at the Moonshine Campgrounds .But how canyou get away? Don’t you have to be at the track?”

“I can slip off for a couple of days. I have people who can deal with things while I’m gone. I’ll book a cabin there as well. I’ll call you when I arrive.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When Cade's alarm stirred him from sleep the following morning, the first thing he felt was Karen's luscious body snuggled against him. Though he had horses to feed and stalls to clean, unable to ignore his burning need, he retrieved a condom from his nightstand, sheathed his stiffness, then rolled her on her back.

"Yes, please," she moaned sleepily as he placed himself at her entrance and thrust forward. "Ooh, what a wonderful way to wake up."

Though he kissed her neck as he languidly stroked, with so little time, he soon quickened his pace. Urged on by her utterances of pleasure, he didn't slow down to lengthen their pleasure, but allowed the natural flow to sweep them into their mutual orgasms.

"That was heavenly," she mumbled, sinking against him and letting out a heavy breath. "I could sleep for another hour now."

"Yeah, me too, but we have to get movin' or there'll be a stampede of hungry horses on our hands."

"Can't they wait a few minutes?"

"They already have," he said, glancing at the clock as he slipped from the bed and headed into the bathroom. "Why don't you take a stroll into the kitchen and start the coffee while I take a quick shower."

"Okay," she replied wearily.

As he stepped into the shower stall he broke into a smile. Karen was smart and sassy, and sexy as hell. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so drawn to a woman, but when he stepped back into the room with a towel around his waist he found her fast asleep. Realizing she probably wasn't used to getting up so early he quietly

dressed, then kissed her on the cheek.

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“Come on sleepyhead. You’re on a ranch, not in a penthouse in Dallas. It’s time to get up. I’m off to make that coffee and whip us up a quick breakfast.”

“But it’s so early.”

“Did you forget you said you’d be here at seven? I have a feelin’ you wouldn’t have made it. Be glad you’re here already.”

“I am, but that was yesterday and this is now,” she muttered.

“Maybe I should start your day with a quick spankin’,” he exclaimed, abruptly turning her over and landing a hard swat. “That should wake you up!”

“No, no,” she said hastily, jerking away and sitting up. “Where are Jack and Diane?”

“Are you tryin’ to change the subject?”

“Maybe. Is it working?”

“You can be such a brat,” he retorted with a chuckle. “They’ll be in the yard runnin’ around. When they hear me in the kitchen they’ll come back for their breakfast. And Karen, you may have changed the subject but I expect to see you there in five minutes. Got it?”

“Yes, Cade. You’ve made your point.”

Smiling, he leaned down and softly kissed her then left the room, but as he entered

the kitchen and fed the dogs an idea came to mind.

\* \* \*

Karen could scarcely believe the incredible turn of events. She'd fled to Smoky Hill to hide from Gino Stallone until her parents returned and she could tell them what she'd overheard. Now she'd met an amazing cowboy and was not only staying at his ranch...but sharing his bed. She could think of nothing else as she showered and dressed, and hurried down the hall to the kitchen. Sitting on the table was a plate of French Toast, maple syrup and coffee.

"Wow, this looks really good. Do you cook—like, really cook?"

"I live alone, I don't have a choice," he replied with a grin. "But I have an idea. We'll be busy all morning, and that includes your first lesson, so—"

"Really?" she exclaimed, interrupting him. "That's fantastic, but I still don't have the right clothes."

"Regular jeans and sneakers will be fine. You'll just be sittin' on a bareback pad saddle and walkin'; a bit. But my classes don't start until three o'clock, and I want to take you to the Moonshine Campgrounds for lunch."

"Is this like a picnic thing?"

"Not even close," he replied with a laugh as he dowsed his French Toast with maple syrup. "It's a special place. People come in from Dallas for romantic getaways or celebrations. Annie and Brody were married there, and the chef at the restaurant is incredible."

"That sounds wonderful. But what about the horses?"

“Joe will be here by the time we leave. He usually gets here around noon.”

“Joe?”

“Didn’t I mention him? He cleans the paddocks, does trips to the feed store when I need things, and he keeps track of the supplements and orders them when they’re runnin’ low. The business has grown over the last two years and I can’t do everything myself any more.”

“I did wonder about that,” she remarked thoughtfully. “How often is he here?”

“He comes every other day, more if I need him. He also works for Andy and Helen. Between the two ranches he’s kept busy. You may as well know...” he added thoughtfully, “he got in trouble and spent some time behind bars.”

“Oh, that’s not good. What did he do? And by the way, this French Toast is fantastic.”

“Thanks,” he replied with a grin. “I’m not exactly sure, but his family in Dallas are friends with Sheriff Cooper and they thought Joe would be better off in a small town like Smoky Hill. When the sheriff asked me if I’d give him a chance I said sure. I really needed the help. It’s been almost a year now and he’s been great. He loves the horses and they love him right back. Have you ever heard the sayin’,there’s nothin’ so good for the inside of a man than the outside of a horse.”

“It rings a bell. Who said it?”

“Winston Churchill. I swear he had a cowboy’s soul, but regardless, he was right. Now finish up and let’s get to the barn.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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By the time they'd fed the horses, taken all but Lily out to their paddocks and cleaned the stalls, Karen was exhausted. As she flopped down on a bale of hay Cade ambled over and sat next to her.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "Do you still want your lesson?"

"Definitely, I just need to catch my breath for a minute, but why do you want me on a bareback pad and not in a saddle? Isn't a saddle safer?"

"With Lily you could ride her standin' on your head and still be safe," he replied with a chuckle. "But the answer is, you'll be able to feel the motion of the horse. When we start I'll lead you around and explain a few things, then you'll pick up the reins and I'll stay beside you"

"That's it?"

"That's it. Are you ready?"

"Very ready. I can't wait."

"Fetch her from her stall and take her over to those cross-ties," he said, pointing down the barn aisle.

Excited by the prospect of sitting on a horse with just a bareback pad, she hurried down to Lily's stall, grabbed the halter from the door and walked in. The mare immediately lowered her head to give Karen a gentle nudge.



“You are so sweet,” she said softly as she slipped on the halter. “I know this is going to be fantastic.”

Being around the finely boned thoroughbreds at the race track had been a completely different experience. She would watch from behind a fence as the highly-strung, muscled, race horses were led around a paddock by experienced handlers. She would never dream of attempting to do such a thing. But Cade’s horses were easy-going. Even the rescues had seemed relaxed when she’d watched him take them out to their paddock. When she reached the cross-ties, Cade was waiting with the saddle pad. After helping him brush off the mare and watched him clean her feet, she stood back as he put the pad in place and tightened the cinch.

“Once you’re on, all I want you to do is take a deep breath and relax. That’s it,” he said with a smile as they headed outside. “Can you do that?”

“I’m excited, but yes, I can.”

\* \* \*

Paddy O’Brien could throw back whisky with the best, but when he was on a job he didn’t touch a drop. He would start the day early, thinking and planning as he jogged a three mile route through a nearby park. Tracking down Karen Harper was no exception. He was on the road to Smoky Hill by 7 a.m.

When he reached the small town, he made a mental note of the diner, the hotel, and some other places of interest. It was only a short five minutes later he arrived at the Rutherford estate and pulled to the side of the road.

In spite of the tall, imposing gates and six-foot high wrought iron fence topped with sharp points, accessing the grounds wouldn’t pose a problem. Lifting his powerful binoculars from the glove compartment, he studied the house. Though he saw no sign

of life it didn't mean there was no-one there. It would be easy to find out, but that would come later.

As he continued on he passed scattered homes on his left, but on the right there appeared to be nothing but forest, then following a sweeping bend, the famous Smoky Hill abruptly came into view. Slowing down and gazing up at the impressive sight, he understood its claim to fame. Towering above the ranches like guardians watching over them, the tall pine trees were shrouded in a light mist.

A short time later he passed a sign announcing Lake View Point. The spot had made headlines after drug dealing bikers had fallen victim to the fast rising waters. He remembered reading the catastrophe had been caused by snow falling from the mountains. Making a mental note to return to check it out, he sped up and only a few minutes later he arrived at the turn off to The Moonshine Campgrounds. The drive had been a long one, and gratefully heading down the lane, he came to a stop outside the impressive lodge housing the office and restaurant. Like the man he worked for, Paddy kept a small leather notebook. Climbing from his SUV, he lifted it from his jacket, checked the name of the woman he'd spoken with when he'd made his reservation, then slipped it away.

"Are you Rebecca?" he asked, marching inside and approaching the desk.

"I am, and you must be Patrick O'Brien."

"The accent always gives me away," he said with a grin.

"Do you need help with your luggage?"

"I think I can manage," he replied as she handed him a key card, "but I might need someone to show me the sights around here. You wouldn't be interested, would you?"

He'd lowered his voice and winked when he'd made the comment, and as a pink blush crossed her face he felt the familiar wave of satisfaction.

"I would, but I'm not sure my boyfriend would be very happy about that."

"If you change your mind let me know," he said, shooting her his best smile. "Now, where do I find my cabin."

"Just follow the drive and take the first turn to the left. You can't miss it, and you'll love it. Annie Baker stayed there for her wedding. It has total privacy and a wonderful view."

"Thank you, Rebecca. And the restaurant? Do you serve lunch?"

"It's actually open all day. Feel free to pop in any time."

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“Excellent. I’d like to talk to you more. I’ll only be here a few days and I don’t want to miss anything.”

“At your service, Mr. O’Brien.”

“Then I’ll see you later.”

As he walked away and felt her eyes on him, he was confident he’d soon have plenty of information about the area and the people living there. It was just a matter of time before he’d find Helen Rutherford, and Karen Baker would be just a stone’s throw away.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Karen was on Lily for just over thirty minutes. Though initially nervous she soon relaxed and allowed herself to move with the mare’s easy rhythm. As they walked, Cade shared stories about Smoky Hill and promised he’d take her on a trail ride before the end of the week.

“Tomorrow you’ll be in a saddle and we’ll go into the round pen. I’ll get you movin’ her forward, then stoppin’ and turnin’.”

“Why don’t we do it now?”

“You can’t do too much too soon or you’ll be sore. You’re usin’ muscles you don’t even know you have. Besides, we have a lunch date, remember?” he added with a grin. “When we get back you should go into town and visit Luke’s Western Garb.”

“I wish you could come with me, but I know you have lessons.”

“Ask for Luke or Jenny, that’s his wife, and tell them I sent you. They’ll make sure you get what you need. Damn, look at the time. We have to get movin’, and here comes Joe, right on time as usual. Why don’t you go in the house and get ready? I’ll introduce you when we get back. There are a few things I need to go over with him before we can leave.”

“Thanks, Cade, thanks for everything,” she said gratefully as she climbed off. “I promise I won’t take forever.”

“Famous last words,” he retorted with a chuckle. “Seeyou in a bit.”

As she began walking to the house she glanced across at the brawny young man marching up the driveway. With his muscled physique she suspected he’d once been a body builder, and she could easily imagine him moving the heavy bales of hay effortlessly. Wishing she had her cell phone so she could take his picture to send to her friends back in Dallas, it occurred to her she should pick one up when she was in the small town shopping for her clothes.

She smiled.

Thanks to Cade she could breathe again, and when her parents came home she could talk to them from the safety of his house.

But as she walked inside a frown crossed her brow.

When the dust had settled and Gino no longer presented a threat they’d expect her to come home. By the time that happened would she want to go back? Though it was early days she was already crazy about Cade, and she knew her feelings would only grow stronger.

“Cross that bridge when you come to it,” she muttered under her breath as she hurried into the bedroom. But even as the words left her lips she knew the question would continue to linger.

\* \* \*

When Gino arrived at the Moonshine Campgrounds he found it to be just as the website described. But when he reached his cabin his focus quickly returned to the crucial task. Finding Karen Harper and keeping her quiet—permanently. He’d already noticed a couple of options. Bury her body in the endless woods or dispose of her in the same lake that had swallowed up the biker gang. She’d never be found. But first Paddy had to track her down. Settling into the comfortable leather couch, Gino called him.

“Hello, Gino. Are you here or are you calling from your car?” Paddy asked.

“I just arrived. I’m in cabin 3.”

“That was fast. I’m in cabin 2. We must be right next to each other, though it feels like there’s no-one for miles.

‘Yeah, they did a good job giving people privacy. What’s the latest? Any news about Karen Harper’s whereabouts? The clock’s ticking.”

“I’ve already located the house where her friend lives. It won’t be a problem getting in, and I’m making headway with the receptionist here. I’m confident I’ll soon know where Karen is staying, assuming she’s here. But, Gino, are you sure it’s wise for you to be here so publicly?”

“I’ll give you my reasoning later. Right now I want to freshen up and head into that township to do some digging. There’s a hotel there, and a diner. I’ll stop into both of

them. What about you?"

"I'm going to stay here and eat in the restaurant. I want to get closer to Rebecca, the receptionist."

"Meet me back here at three o'clock and we'll compare notes. But be sure to call me if you learn anything important."

"I'll let you know right away. Otherwise I'll see you at three."

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Ending the call, Gino changed out of his sport coat, trousers and Gucci loafers and pulled on jeans, a T-shirt and sneakers, then headed out to his car.

But he didn't drive straight into town.

His first stop was Lake View Point.

He wanted to see the beautiful but infamous spot first hand.

As he turned into the gravel driveway, it was onlyseconds before he was staring at the majestic mountains and pristine lake. Rolling to a stop and climbing from his car, the first thing he noticed was how the bank sloped down into the water and immediately understood how the tragedy would have happened.

"Idiots," he grunted, recalling the newspaper report about how the victims had fallen asleep when the snow was falling from the peaks. But his thoughts quickly turned back to Karen. He'd been hoping there would be some small crafts at the site, but there wasn't even a picnic bench. "I guess it will have to be the woods," he said with a sigh. "At least there are plenty of options."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rolling to a stop outside Luke's Western Garb, Karen thought back to driving into the parking garage at the NorthPark shopping center or the Galleria in Dallas. The bustling malls were a far cry from the quiet street in the small town. Climbing from her car and stepping directly into the store she broke into a smile. It was so easy. No trying to find a parking space, heading off to the elevators, then endless traipsing



around looking for a shop that might have what you're looking for.

As she entered, her smile grew.

Country and western songs played in the background just loud enough to enjoy, and the clothing was artfully displayed.

"Can I help you?"

Turning around she found a middle-aged woman with thick, wavy, shoulder-length hair and a warm smile.

"Hello, yes, please. Cade McLean sent me in. He said I should ask for Jenny or Luke."

"I'm Jenny, and I'm guessing you must be a new student of his."

"I am. My name's Karen."

"Hello, Karen, it's very nice to meet you. Come with me and I'll get you sorted out in no time. Are you new to riding?"

"New to western riding, but not new to horses. I mean, I don't ride but my father has race horses."

"That sounds exciting."

"It is, but I'm really loving Cade's ranch. Everything's so...what's the word? Mellow."

"I'm sure it's a far cry from what you're used to."

“Very much so, and it was so nice just parking out front and coming in. I’m used to shopping malls. They can be fun, but they’re also a pain sometimes.”

“They’re a bit over the top for me,” Jenny remarked. “But each to his own. Now, what size are you? The first thing you’ll need is a pair of stretch riding jeans.”

\* \* \*

Directly across the street Gino was rolling his BMW SUV to a stop outside the diner. He owned two other vehicles. A Bentley Sports Coupe and a Mercedes Sedan. He’d thought the BMW would be the least ostentatious, but as he stepped out and spied the trucks parked along the street he realized it was still eye-catching. But at least it wasn’t a car known to Karen Harper. He usually drove his Mercedes to the track.

Stepping into the diner he found a line of red leather booths next to the window, black stools at the counter, and the floor was black and white tile. The decor was predictable, but the place was spotlessly clean and somehow inviting. Sliding into a booth and picking up the plastic covered menu, he realized how hungry he was.

“Coffee?”

Glancing up he smiled at the attractive young waitress holding a half-filled coffee pot.

“Yes, please.”

“Do you know what you’d like to order?”

“What would you recommend?” he asked as she filled his mug.

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“Well, if you like pancakes no-one makes them like Harry. Or the Spanish omelette. That’s my favorite. It comes with thick fries or hash browns.”

“Tough choice,” he said thoughtfully. “I suppose I should have the omelet, though the pancakes sound tempting. How big are they?”

“About four inches across. You can get a half portion if you want, that’s three, then have the omelet.”

“Sounds like a plan, and I’ll take the fries with that. What’s your name?”

“Mandy.”

“Hello, Mandy. My name’s Jim,” he lied. “Bring them as quick as you can. I’m famished.”

“I’ll get Harry right on it.”

As she walked away he poured cream into his coffee and took a sip. Finding it surprisingly hot with a rich flavor, he leaned back to idly stare out the window—and almost dropped the mug. Karen Harper was walking out of a western clothing store directly across the street.

Hastily placing the mug on the table and grabbing a menu he held it over his face as he stared. She was carrying several shopping bags, and began placing them into the back seat of a white Hyundai SUV.

“That’s why they didn’t see you take off,” he muttered, thinking back to the call from Harry and Mick. The two security guards had been watching her condo and sworn they hadn’t seen her leave. In a flash Gino realized she must have arranged for a rental company to drop off the vehicle.

“Your pancakes, sir.”

Jerking his head around, he watched the pretty young woman place the pancakes in front of him and a small jug of syrup on the table.

“Thanks.”

“You’re very welcome.”

As she walked away he hurriedly looked back towards the SUV, but to his dismay it had left. Hastily pulling his phone from his pocket he texted Paddy.

She’s here. I just saw her coming out of a store in town. She’s driving a white Hyundai SUV.

That’s great news. I’ll keep my eyes open.

Anything on your front? Where are you?

I’m sitting at a table in the restaurant talking to a waitress. Nothing yet, but she’s chatty.

Hit the road and start driving towards town. With any luck you’ll see Karen’s SUV and be able to follow her.

On my way.

Slipping his phone back in his pocket, Gino poured the syrup over the pancakes and took a bite. They were excellent, but his mind was still focused on what he'd just witnessed.

Karen had been shopping at a western wear store.

She would have left her place in a hurry so it stood to reason she'd need to buy a few things, but why a western store?

"How are the pancakes?" the waitress asked, breaking into his thoughts as she topped up his coffee.

"Delicious. You were right. By the way, that place across the street, Luke's Western Garb. What can you tell me about it?"

"They sell clothing for all ages, and for both men and women. It's surprisingly big once you get inside. They added a section in the back for riding supplies. It's the only place in town where you can buy them."

"Ah, I see. Thanks, Mandy."

As she moved away a smirk crossed his face.

Karen was taking riding lessons.

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If Paddy didn't run across her on the road and follow her, all they had to do was find out where, and he had an inkling of an idea.

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

Gino had just finished his breakfast when Paddy called to tell him he hadn't spotted any white SUV's and he was returning to the campgrounds.

"It's okay, Paddy. I have an idea. I think I can find out exactly where she is. I'll get back to you shortly."

Quickly ending the call and leaving cash on the table for his meal, he left the diner and strode out to his BMW. Once settled behind the wheel, he took a breath, then lifted out his phone and found the number for the store across the street where Karen had been shopping.

"Luke's Western Garb," a woman exclaimed as she answered.

"Hello, I'm hoping you can help me. I want to arrange a surprise for my daughter and I believe you might be able to help me."

"I'd be happy to if I can."

"Mary, that's my daughter, was speaking to a friend of hers, Karen Harper. She told Mary she has started taking riding lessons in Smoky Hill. I'd like my daughter to join her and I want to call the ranch and make the arrangements then drive Mary there and surprise them both."

“What a wonderful idea, but how can I help?”

“Karen mentioned to Mary she’d bought the clothes she needed at your store, and I was hoping you might know where she’s taking the lessons. There are so many ranches in the area I’d have a devil of a time tracking it down.”

“Oh, I see what you mean, and yes, I do know,” the woman replied. “She’s with a trainer named Cade McLean. If you don’t mind holding a moment I can get his address and phone number for you.”

“That would be great. Thank you. Mary will be thrilled.”

\* \* \*

After Karen had changed she left the house to look for Cade, and spotted him leading one of his horses into the ring, remove its halter, and jump on bareback. Hurrying forward, she watched, amazed, as Cade trotted and cantered, came to a quick stop, turned tight circles, backed up, then to her shock suddenly reared. She caught her breath, terrified he’d come off, then realized the horse was doing exactly what Cade wanted. She thought that would be the end, but when the horse came down Cade sent it into a fast gallop around the ring. When he finally came to a stop and walked up, her heart was racing.

“That was unbelievable. Why did you do that?” she exclaimed as he slid off and strode towards her.

“I guess I have a wild side at times.”

“Apparently,” she retorted with a laugh. “But how can you do all that with no reins or saddle? Isn’t it dangerous?”

“Sure, if you don’t know what you’re doin’. When I rescued this boy he was just two years old, barely been handled, and he was scared of his own shadow. His name’s Riley. He’s become one of my all time favorites. We clicked from the first day. But ridin’ without a well-fitting’ saddle or thick pad isn’t good for the horse’s back so we don’t do it a lot. It’s more of a personal challenge to reach that connection.”

“How do you do it?”

“In a nutshell, win their trust and encourage them to use their brains to figure things out so they won’t automatically respond with fright and flight. Now, are you ready for that lunch?”

“I have a million more questions, but I certainly am. I’m starving.”

“Even though Joe’s here I have to settle the dogs inside before we leave. Then I’ll wash up and meet you in the truck.”

“Why can’t they stay outside?”

“They run after the truck, but once I’m gone they’re fine. I’ll only be five minutes,” he replied, then leaned down and lightly kissed her.

“What was that for?” she murmured as he pulled away.

“Just cos!”

\* \* \*

Sitting at a window table in the Moonshine restaurant waiting for the lunch he’d ordered, Paddy was studying the photograph of Karen Harper Gino had sent him. She was standing with her parents beside a horse in the winner’s circle. Paddy grinned.



She was a pretty girl with a curvaceous figure. Even the toughest of men surrendered when they saw his knife collection and he explained what each was used for. She'd become cooperative in a heartbeat, and he just might have some fun with her before he sent her to the great beyond.

First, he'd slice off her shirt, but slowly, starting with the fabric around her breasts, then cut her bra straps.

His cock stirred.

He could picture her trying to squirm, but he would have her spread-eagled and tightly tied.

“I’ll move the side of the blade all over your naked tits,” he whispered, but his decadent thoughts were abruptly interrupted by an incoming call from Gino.

“I’m doing your job for you,” his boss exclaimed. “I found her. I know where she’s taking riding lessons.”

“That’s great news,” Paddy exclaimed as the waitress arrived with a bowl of soup.

“She probably spends the afternoons there and returns to the Rutherford estate when she’s done. It’s not like there’s much to do in this pokey town.”

“Are you on your way back?”

“I am, and now we know where she is I want to discuss our plans.”

“Do you want to join me for the fun?” Paddy asked, spying a waitress on her way to his table carrying a plate of steaming pasta.

“Paddy, you know the answer to that question.”

“You’ll be on your way back to Dallas.”

“Correct.”

“Sorry, I have to go. I’m in the restaurant and my lunch has arrived. Will you join me?”

“Probably better not to be seen together just in case.”

“Got it. I’ll let you know when I’m back in my cabin.”

“Will there be anything else,” the waitress asked, her eyes twinkling down at him.

“A glass of your best Cabernet. I’m celebrating.”

“Right away.”

Watching her as she turned and left, he was admiring the sway of her hips when his attention was snatched away by a happy group walking through the door. The restaurant had been quiet, but as they were led to a table he suspected the dining room would soon fill up. Picking up his fork, he twirled the noodles, and wasn’t surprised when the door opened again and a couple entered.

But idly glancing in their direction, he caught his breath.

It was Karen Harper, and she was with a tall, muscled cowboy.

Grabbing his phone, he sent an urgent text to Gino.

“Don’t come here. Karen Harper just walked in the door.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

After enjoying a delicious lunch, Cade glanced at his watch then excused himself and walked across to the bar. As Karen watched him stop to speak with the waitress she assumed he was asking for the bill, but her attention was diverted by an attractive man sitting alone a few tables away. He caught her eye and smiled. Not wanting to be rude she smiled back, but only for a moment before Cade returned and reached for her hand.

“I have a surprise for you,” he said, lowering his voice.

“What kind of surprise?”

“A fun one. Come with me.”

Leaving the restaurant and returning to his truck, he drove deeper into the campgrounds and turned down a narrow track, passing a large sign reading NO ENTRY.

“Uh...are we allowed down here?”

“We are, but no-one else is.”

“I don’t understand. Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see.”

“Don’t you have people coming to the ranch for lessons?”

“Yep, but not for a couple of hours and that’s time enough.”

“Time enough for what?”

“This,” he exclaimed, following a sharp curve and stopping in front of a small lake.

“I don’t understand.”

“This pond is man-made,” he replied with a wide grin, “and it comes with that.”

As he pointed off to his right she spotted a cabin with a wide porch and a bench swing.

“Oh, my gosh.”

“They rent this place out by the hour as well as overnight and for longer stays. It’s very popular, especially when the weather starts warmin’ up like it’s startin’ to,” he declared, then climbed out and strode around the front of the truck and opened her door. “Come inside and take a look.”

He was grinning, and though she was sure she could see a wicked twinkle in his eye she followed him into the story-book cottage. There was a kitchenette, a comfortable lounge offering a conversation pit around a stone fireplace, and an open doorway leading into a bedroom.

“Stay here for a second,” he said as he marched away, but he was back in a flash and pulling off his clothes.

“What are you doing?” she asked as he began unbuttoning her shirt.

“What does it look like?”

Giggling, she stayed still as he continued to undress her, but when he’d finished and swept her up, he didn’t carry her into the bedroom, but outside to the pond.

“CADE! NO!” she yelled, realizing what he was about to do.

“YES!” he exclaimed, marching down to the pond and wading into the water. “Are you ready?”

“NO!”

\* \* \*

In spite of Karen’s squeals and protests he knew she was thrilled, and after pausing for a moment to heighten the excitement, he tossed her into the water.

“You’re a beast!” she sputtered angrily, then laughed hysterically as he stepped forward and wrapped her up.

“But you love that about me!”

“I do not!” she retorted, wriggling in his hold.

“Yes you do.”

“No, no, no!”

In spite of her protests her arms moved around his neck, and she pressed her slick, naked body against his. Quickly sliding his fingers into her wet hair, he tugged it back and fervently kissed her, crushing her lips and demanding her response. Though he'd planned to have fun in the pond their carnal longing took control.

Lifting her up and carrying her back into the cabin, he didn't care about the water dripping across the floor as he hurried into the bedroom. There were two towels on the foot of the bed, and grabbing one, he hastily dried them both off, pushed her onto the patchwork cotton comforter, then grabbed the condom packet he'd left on the nightstand earlier.

“Cade, you're a wild man,” she whimpered as he sheathed himself and climbed on top of her.

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“That’s another thing you love about me, and you haven’t seen the half of it.”

Holding her wrists above her head with one hand, he placed himself at her entrance with the other and thrust forward. As she let out a loud groan he began to stroke, forcing himself to start slowly. But when she wrapped her legs around his back and begged for more he quickened his pace. Finding his rhythm, he continued for endless minutes, then abruptly paused to press his lips against hers in a devouring kiss. Finally raising his head, he stared down at the gorgeous girl beneath him. Her breath was heavy, her chest was red, and her eyes still half-closed, she muttered something.

“What’s that, darlin’?”

“Please fuck me and never stop.”

With her mumbled plea sending the blood rushing through his veins, he straightened up, gripped her waist, and began pumping with power, angling his hardness to rub against her clit. When her cries told him she was drawing close, he paused to lean down and draw her nipples into his mouth. She moaned gratefully, then let out a cry as he pulled away, deftly flipped her over and jerked up her hips.

“Will you be a good girl when we get back to the ranch?” he demanded, suddenly slapping her cheeks.

“Yes, yes.”

“Just watch the lessons and don’t interfere!”



“Why are you—?”

“An ounce of prevention,” he replied, cutting her off, then pushed back into her slick passage. “Come when you feel it.”

“Ooh, thank you.”

But he was already thrusting, relishing the feel of her wet, tight warmth and gazing at her lightly reddened skin.

“Soon I’ll tie you up and spank you real hard.”

His grunted warning had been a veiled query.

When she let out a plaintive cry and bucked back at him, he had his answer. She wanted to travel the unknown road of pleasure and pain.

“But I’ll do other things too,” he continued.

“Please—yes—everything.”

Her breathless remark sent joy pulsing through his body.

For years he’d been searching for the one.

A woman who wanted to explore the dark forbidden.

Spurred on, he pummeled her pussy until she let out an exultant wail. As she exploded beneath him, he was swept up by his own climatic convulsions, and relished the sparkling spasms until they waned and he collapsed beside her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When Cade and Karen left the restaurant, Paddy had stepped outside onto the patio and watched them climb into a black Ford 150. He'd expected them to turn around and head towards the road, but instead they drove further into the grounds. He was about to call Gino with the update when his phone chimed and Gino's name appeared on the screen.

"I was just about to—"

"Have they left?" Gino demanded, cutting him off.

"Not exactly. They climbed into a truck and disappeared down a gravel road through some trees. I haven't seen them since. Maybe there's another way out of this place. I'll ask the waitress."

"I can't risk driving over there until I know she's gone, but the clock is ticking and we need to talk. What are your plans? Do you have any yet?"

"As I mentioned the Rutherford Estate looks empty and easy to access and I didn't see any security cameras. Maybe they don't feel they need them out here. Regardless, I'll have to deal with her there. I don't have time to follow her around and find another option."

"No, you don't, and if she opens her fucking mouth I'll end up spending my time with expensive lawyers, not million-dollar thoroughbreds at the track."

"Don't panic, Gino. I'll handle this. Maybe you should go back to Dallas and let me take it from here."

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“I’m not going anywhere until she no longer presents a threat, and I mean permanently!” he exclaimed angrily. “This whole situation is one big, fucking mess!”

“She was stupid, listening in like that,” Paddy muttered. “But you’re right. She’s bound to tell her parents, and if that happens all hell will break loose. I’ve been waiting for you to get here, but I’ll go over to the Rutherford estate now to find the best place to deal with her.”

“Good. You do that.”

“But there’s something else we need to discuss. She’ll have to pick up her car from the ranch to go back there. If I know when she’s on the way it would be very helpful. How would you feel about keeping watch and alerting me when she leaves? There’s plenty of cover in the trees directly across the street, though you’ll probably have to park somewhere else and walk in.”

“If it means it will make your job safer and easier, you bet I will,” Gino replied brusquely. “I’ll head over there now and see if I can find a place to leave the car where it can’t be seen.”

“Even after she leaves you’ll have to stay there in case John Wayne decides to leave his ranch and pay her a surprise visit.”

“Fuck! I wanted to talk to her before you send her off on her eternal vacation.”

“I understand, Gino, but God Forbid he suddenly shows up! I don’t have to tell you what a disaster that would be. If he leaves the ranch you can let me know which

direction he's headed. If it's towards the Rutherford Estate I'll have time to prepare."

"Yeah, I get it. I'll head over to that wooded area now. Hopefully by the time I'm done she will have left the campgrounds and we can get this thing done."

As Gino abruptly ended the call, Paddy stared at the phone and let out a heavy breath. He'd heard the panic in Gino's voice. The man needed to be kept at a distance. Executing a clean murder required calm, clear thinking. Keeping him in the woods meant keeping him out of the way.

But picturing the pretty girl in the photograph, Paddy experienced a moment of doubt. Though rarely did he renege on a job, he couldn't help thinking about his Erin, his favorite cousin back in Ireland.

\* \* \*

Gino was just a few minutes from the turnoff to the Moonshine Campgrounds when he'd received Paddy's text. Turning around he'd driven to Lake View Point to call him. Now he was back on the road, and as he followed a sweeping curve and the ranch came into view, a wave of concern rippled through his body.

The situation was beginning to feel annoyingly complicated.

The nosey young woman was staying at the Rutherford Estate, but spending her days at a ranch and becoming involved with the cowboy who owned the place.

The relationship could present a problem.

Pushing the irritating thoughts from his mind, he slowed down and searched for a place to park his car out of sight. Though he didn't spy anything suitable, he did see a narrow trail leading up into the elevated, heavily wooded area running alongside the

road. Not knowing what he might find he put his SUV into 4WD and started up the steep, muddy track. Moments later he was rolling into a small clearing covered with branches and rocks with the trees less than fifty yards ahead.

Coming to a stop, he climbed out and walked towards the edge of the bank. To his relief he discovered he had a clear view of the ranch, and the white Hyundai was in plain sight, but if anyone looked up he'd probably be seen. He'd have to lie down if he was to use it as a surveillance spot. But there was a raincoat in the back of the SUV to cover the mucky ground. As he lifted out his phone and called Paddy, he noticed a cowboy pushing a wheelbarrow into a paddock.

"Hi, Gino. I was about to call you," Paddy exclaimed as he answered. "The truck left a couple of minutes ago."

"Are you sure it was them?" Gino asked as he walked back to his vehicle.

"I saw Karen plain as day. What about you? Did you have any luck?"

"Yes, I found an elevated spot with a clear view of the ranch

"That's great news. I'm leaving for the Rutherford Estate now. I'll call you from there."

"Okay. I'll let you know when they get back here," Gino replied, then ending the call, he retrieved his oilskin coat and binoculars and returned to the edge of the bank.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Karen couldn't believe her life had changed so drastically in such a short time. Cade had stolen her heart and she was deliriously happy.

But she remained deeply worried about Gino Stallone.

At some point she'd have to return to Dallas and speak to the authorities. But to what lengths would he go to make sure she didn't share what she'd heard?

It was a terrifying thought.

"You're suddenly quiet. Are you okay?" Cade asked, following the sweeping bend and slowing down as he approached the ranch.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 4:20 pm*

“Yes and no. That lake and cabin was such a wonderful surprise. I still can’t believe you went to so much trouble for me.”

“When the idea came to me I was surprised too,” he exclaimed with a grin. “Though I admit I’m a spur of the moment kinda guy.”

“Apparently, and it was fantastic.”

“But why do I get the feelin’ there’s something botherin’ you?”

“Because there is, and it’s not something, it’s someone.”

“Gino Stallone, the crooked trainer,” he said with a sigh. “Try not to think about him. He has no idea where you are.”

“Don’t think of a brown bear,” she declared. “What did you do? Think of a brown bear, right?”

“Then I guess I should say—don’t think about the greattime we just had.”

“Cade, the thing is...” she said, lowering her voice as he turned into the ranch, “a few minutes ago I suddenly had a really bad feeling. Maybe I’m just being paranoid, but he’s sure to know I’ll tell my parents, and they’ll go to the authorities, I can’t even imagine the fall out. He’ll probably be arrested.”

“There’s no probably about it,” Cade remarked grimly as he pulled to a stop.

“What will happen to his training stable...all those horses and owners...the people who work for him. It’s going to be nuts! Obviously he’ll do just about anything to stop me, but this feeling I have,” she continued solemnly, “it’s...it’s...hard to explain. It feels ominous, like he already knows where I am.”

“Damn,” Cade muttered, staring at her. “I know about those moments. We all have a sixth sense. I had the same thing happen last winter. I woke up in the middle of the night and a second later the dogs started barkin’. They raced to the kitchen and I got there just in time to see a wolf’s head poking through their doggie door.”

“Oh, my gosh.”

“He took off, but yeah, I never ignore those feelin’s, and we shouldn’t ignore yours. I think we should contact Sheriff Cooper.”

“You know I’m scared about that.”

“I understand, but like I told you he has people he can trust, and I have another thought. Even though I highly doubt you’ll be tracked here to Smoky Hill, just to be extra cautious let’s put your Hyundai in the garage. You told me it’s a rental, but even so...”

“Cade, yes, that’s a great idea!”

“And you brought everything you had at the Rutherford Estate, right? You don’t need to go back?”

“No, there wasn’t much to bring. I was in such a rush I left Dallas with practically nothing.”

“Here’s the remote control,” he said, sliding it off his sun visor. “Go ahead and move



it while I talk to Joe. We need to get the horses ready for the lesson and the students will be arrivin' any minute, but when it's over we should make that call."

\* \* \*

When Gino had heard the sound of an approaching vehicle on the quiet country road he'd hurried to the edge of the bank and watched the black F150 turn into the ranch. Hastily throwing down the oilskin coat, he'd laid on top of it and peered through the binoculars. Several minutes passed before Karen and the cowboy climbed out. As he strode towards the barn, two dogs raced up to greet him, while Karen settled behind the wheel in the Hyundai.

Gino's heart skipped a beat.

She was probably heading to the Rutherford estate.

But as he reached for his phone to alert Paddy, instead of turning and leaving the property she drove the SUV around the house and rolled into a garage.

"Fuck," he grunted under his breath.

Hastily making his way back to the BMW, he made the call.

"Gino? What's happening?" Paddy asked anxiously.

"You won't believe this! She's staying at the ranch! She just moved her SUV into a garage."

"That's not good."

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“We have no choice. You’ll have to take them both out.”

“Don’t panic. Come over here and we’ll strategize.”

“I’d rather stay put and keep my eye on things.”

“You could, but I doubt they’ll be going anywhere. They just got home.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Gino, we should discuss all this in person. I’m in my cabin.”

“Yeah, okay. I’m on my way.”

\* \* \*

As Paddy ended the call a dark frown crossed his face. A simple job he now wasn’t thrilled to be doing, had suddenly become complex and difficult. Not only that, cowboys owned guns and weren’t afraid to use them.

Flopping into a wing-backed leather armchair, he closed his eyes, took in several deep breaths, and tried to push away his doubts.

He could stake out the property and snatch her when an opportunity presented itself, but he didn’t have the time to carry out the necessary surveillance. To make matters worse, when he’d watched the couple in the restaurant it was obvious they’d become more than friends, and new lovers were usually attached at the hip. He sighed again.

Not only were his feelings about the girl continuing to bother him, the situation was untenable.

There was only one answer.

A knock at his door abruptly snatched his attention.

“It’s Gino!”

“Speak of the devil,” he grunted, rising to his feet and marching across the room to let him in.

“Any ideas yet?” Gino asked brusquely, striding past him.

“Well, yeah, plenty, but nothing I can do given the short amount of time we have. If I could separate the girl from the cowboy I’d make her death appear accidental. Like—falling and cracking her head on a rock, or a hit and run, maybe even an animal attack. But to arrange anything like that I need days, not hours.”

“Paddy, my fucking life is on the line here,” Gino shouted. “Impossible or not it has to happen. Go in and kill them both. Make it look like a burglary gone wrong.”

“That Gino, is a really bad idea. Sorry, I’m out.”

“But you can’t bail on me,” Gino sputtered, staring at him in shock. “Do you want more cash? Name your price!”

“Gino, you’re on your own.”

“Hey, I know stuff about you.”

Narrowing his eyes, Paddy took a step towards the desperate man.

“Are you threatening me?”

“No, no,” Gino replied hastily, “but Karen has to be stopped and I need help.”

“If I were you I’d spend the next few hours finding the best lawyer money can buy. I’m leaving,” Paddy exclaimed, striding to the door and opening it. “You should do the same. Now go!”

Though glaring furiously Gino didn’t speak, but hurried past him and moved outside.

As Paddy turned the lock he felt an unfamiliar wave of relief. He had no desire to see the pretty girl dead.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

At the ranch Cade and Joe were tacking up four horses for the upcoming lesson while Karen stood back and watched. When Cade started saddling the last horse, a mare named Pixie, he waved her over.

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“You can do this one if you want,” he said as she joined him. “Reach beneath her and bring the cinch up just the way you saw me do it.”

“I’d love to,” she replied, but as she took hold of the strap and began looping it through the ring, she paused and looked back at him.

“I have a friend who rides English and it’s nothing like this.”

“Yes, the saddles and girths are quite different.”

“Her way is much easier.”

“I think it’s just what you’re used to, but—sorry, that’s my phone,” he muttered as it chimed in his pocket. “Huh, it’s Luke’s Western Garb. Hello?”

“Hi, Cade, it’s Jenny. I’m calling to let you know those boots you ordered have finally arrived.”

“That’s great, thanks for lettin’ me know. I’ll stop in tomorrow.”

“You’re welcome. By the way, I enjoyed meeting Karen earlier. Did her friend’s father reach you?”

“Friend’s father? Sorry, I’m not sure what you mean,” Cade replied, feeling his pulse tick up.

“A man came in just after Karen left and said he wanted to arrange lessons with you

for his daughter. He planned to drive her out there and surprise them both. I thought he would have been in touch by now. When I told him where you were and how to reach you he seemed very excited about it.”

“What’s his daughter’s name? Do you remember?”

“I believe he said Mary.”

“Okay, thanks, Jenny. I’m sure he’ll contact me when he’s ready,” Cade said, keeping his voice light and telling himself not to panic. “Joe, could you finish up with Pixie? I need a quick word with Karen.”

“Sure,” Joe said with a wave. “I’m already done with these two.”

“Cade, is something wrong?” Karen asked as he took her hand and led her outside.

“I’m not sure. Do you have a friend named Mary?”

“No, why?”

“Dammit.”

“What’s going on?”

“That bad feelin’ you had...”

“What about it? What’s happened?”

“A fella went into Luke’s after you left and spun a story about a friend of yours named Mary and managed to get my address. I’m worried it might be—

“Gino Stallone? No! How did he figure out I’m here? He can’t have! It makes no sense.”

“Lord only knows, and we don’t know it’s him, but—”

“But I don’t have a friend called Mary! Who else could it be?”

“Don’t panic. Nothin’ will happen while there are a bunch of people here, but stay in the arena right next to me.”

“You’re really worried,” she remarked, lowering her voice.

“But forewarned is forearmed. We’ll take this a step at a time. The group is startin’ to arrive,” he added as a car rolled into the driveway. “Remember, stick with me and don’t panic.”

\* \* \*

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Before the lesson started Cade introduced Karen as a new student who was just starting with horses and would be watching the lesson. Though she found it interesting she couldn't stop thinking about Gino and wondering how he had tracked her down. She was sure there was nothing in her condo that pointed to Smoky Hill, then realized it didn't matter. If he'd found her, he'd found her. But at least she had Cade. It was almost forty-five minutes later he brought things to a close, and the happy students climbed off.

"You're all doin' great," he declared with a broad smile as they approached and thanked him. "I have to take care of something for a minute, but you can take the horses back to the barn and Joe will help you."

Karen watched them amble out, but as she turned to Cade to ask him what she should do, he put his arms around her and hugged her tightly.

"Thanks, I needed this," she murmured, closing her eyes and resting her head against his chest. "I just can't understand it. Maybe it's not Gino at all. Maybe someone else is trying to find me, though I can't imagine who or why."

"Like I said, we have to do this one step at a time," he said, slowly pulling back. "First, I'll call Sheriff Cooper and ask him to stop by, then I'm callin' Jenny back."

"From Luke's Western Garb? Why?"

"I want to know what this fella looked like. Then we'll know if it was Gino or not."

"Of course! Why didn't I think of that? He has a website, Gino Stallone Racing



Stables. His picture is on the front page. She can look it up.”

“Perfect. Karen, if it is him there’s no way I’ll let him find you, let alone hurt you, and once we’ve spoken to the sheriff I know just how to take your mind off all of this.”

\* \* \*

Perched up on the bank across the street from the ranch, Gino was stretched out on his stomach watching Cade and Karen through the binoculars. When the lesson ended and the students headed out, it became obvious the two had become very close. The cowboy had hugged her, then made a couple of calls before putting his arm around her and ambling towards the barn. As they disappeared, he shifted his attention to the house and the golden retrievers playing nearby.

“Of course you’ve got fucking dogs,” he grunted. “Damn, you, Paddy!”

Rising to his feet and picking up his coat, he strode back to his BMW and climbed behind the wheel. Karen’s parents would be home the following evening. She needed to be dealt with, and quickly.

“By this time tomorrow, I don’t know how I’ll do it, but you’ll be dead, and if that cowboy gets in the way, he will be too.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Cade and Karen were leaving the barn when Sheriff Cooper rolled down Cade’s driveway. When he pulled to a stop and climbed out they hurried forward to greet him with Jack and Diane leading the way. After Cade introduced Karen, they headed inside to talk at the kitchen table.

“Thanks for gettin’ here so fast,” Cade exclaimed as he began brewing a pot of coffee.

“You said it was important, and I know you wouldn’t make that claim over nothin’,” the sheriff replied as he petted the two dogs. “Would I be right in sayin’ this involves you, Karen?”

“How did you know?”

“When problems pop up around here it usually has something to do with a visitor—or visitors.”

“Actually, that’s true,” Cade remarked, pouring the coffee and carrying the mugs to the table.

“Thanks, Cade,” the sheriff said, immediately taking a sip. “Okay, Karen, tell me what the problem is.”

“I’m not sure where to start.”

“The beginnin’ is usually a good place, and take your time. I’m in no hurry and details matter.”

“It’s not a long story, but it’s a scary one.”

As Karen began to tell him who Gino Stallone was and how she’d overheard his phone conversation, the sheriff leaned forward and paid close attention. When she explained how she’d rented a vehicle and had it delivered because she was so worried, his expression grew grim..

“And I was right,” she exclaimed. “I was at the end of my hallway about to leave

when I saw two of Gino's men step out of the elevator and head to my door. Thank the Lord I'd planned to take the stairs and my suitcase was already there."

"Sounds like a close call," the sheriff muttered. "What makes you think they're in Smoky Hill?"

"We don't know if they are, but Gino is, and he knows she's here," Cade interjected. "A stranger went into Luke's Western Garb after she shopped there this mornin' and managed to get my address out of Jenny. She called me about something unrelated and told me. Gino has a website and when I sent her the link she confirmed it was him."

"I'm sure he wants to find me before mom and dad come home tomorrow night," Karen exclaimed urgently. "When I tell them what I overheard I'm sure dad will make some calls. Gino will be ruined, and that's just for starters."

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“Damn,” the sheriff grunted. “You did the right thing gettin’ in touch with me. But why didn’t you go straight to the police? And what brought you here to Smoky Hill?”

“Gino’s wealthy and he has so many influential friends I was afraid to speak to anyone. I came because I have a friend who lives here. Helen Rutherford, though she’s married and she’s Helen Baker now. Anyway, I thought it would be the perfect place to hide until mom and dad get home. I have no idea how Gino found me. I just can’t understand it.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a mystery,” the sheriff grunted, “but we’ll get to the bottom of it.

“What do you think we should do?” Cade asked solemnly.

“First, I won’t leave you unprotected. I’ll have one of my deputies keep an eye on this place like I did for Andy and Helen Baker when they were havin’ their problems.”

“I heard all about that,” Karen remarked.

“Yep, it was quite a drama, but gettin’ back to this fella Gino Stallone, do you know what kind of vehicle he drives?”

“He has two cars that I know of. A black Mercedes and silver Bentley Sports Coupe.”

“Okay! Good to know. Leave this with me and I’ll be in touch as soon as I have anything to report. In the meantime, you two stay put.”

“Thank you,” Karen said earnestly. “I appreciate this more than I can say.”

“It’s my job, and I’m happy to do it. The man has to be stayin’ somewhere so I’ll check the Moonshine Campgrounds and the hotel in town. If anything else comes to mind call me. When I get back to my office I’ll reach out to my contact at the Dallas PD and give him a full report.”

“Uh, about that,” Karen began nervously. “Like I said, Gino has friends everywhere.”

“I understand, but my contact will know exactly how to handle this, the sheriff replied, lowering his voice. “I can assure you, Gino will not be alerted.”

“It’s all so scary.”

“As soon as I get in my car I’ll call in Deputy Dobbs, he’s one of my best men. He’ll be in here real quick, and I have a feelin’ Gino will be found in no time.”

“You do?”

“Sure, it’s a small community. Strangers stand out. Thanks for the coffee, Cade,” the sheriff exclaimed as he rose to his feet, “and what’s that website you sent Jenny? The one with his picture.”

“Gino Stallone Racing Stables.”

“Okay, I’ll get his image out around town. Like I said,he’ll be found in no time.”

“What will you do when you catch up with him?” Karen asked as she followed him to the back door.

“That depends on what my friend in Dallas says. He may send someone out here to

pick him up, or I might have to transport him there. But he'll stay behind bars until that decision is made."

"Don't I have to make a formal statement?"

"Yep, though I don't know if you can do that here or if you have to be in Dallas," the sheriff replied as he climbed into his car. "I suspect it will be there, but it might be possible to do it from my office if you'd prefer."

"I'd like to wait until mom and dad get back. I'd like dad to be there,"

"Understandable, but one step at a time. I'll be in touch shortly."

As the sheriff turned around and drove onto the road, Cade put his arm around her shoulders.

"How are you feelin'?"

"Relieved, but still worried."

"I told you I have something that will take your mind off all this, and I do. You and I are takin' a ride up Smoky Hill."

"But...how?"

“You’ll see.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Sheriff Cooper was deep in thought as he drove down the two lane country road towards the Moonshine campgrounds. He paid no attention to the BMW SUV that passed him traveling in the opposite direction. His mind was on the information Karen Harper had given him. It was deeply troubling.

After going through Gino Stallone’s website the sheriff believed the trainer would opt for one of the campground’s luxury cabins, not the hotel in town. As he neared the turnoff he prayed the famous trainer would be there and agree to come to the station without any fuss. But his phone chimed, snatching his attention, and a quick glance at the screen told him it was his friend in Dallas, Detective George Hawthorne.

“George, thanks for gettin’ back to me so soon,” the sheriff exclaimed. “I’ve got a helluva story for you.”

“I figured from the tone in your voice. What’s going on? Not another biker gang, I hope.”

“No, thank the Lord. But just as bad. Have you ever heard of Gino Stallone? He’s a race horse trainer.”

“I sure have. There are a few rumors floating around. He sounds like a shady character. What about him? Is he in your neck of the woods?”

“He sure is,” the sheriff declared as he drove slowly down the winding gravel road to the campgrounds main building. “What I’m about to tell you is pretty shockin’ so prepare yourself. To cut a long story short, I have a youngwoman who claims the guy is fixin’ races and runnin’ a gamblin’ operation.”

“That’s a serious accusation. How did she find out?”

“She overheard a conversation she wasn’t supposed to, and now she’s here hidin’ from him, but it looks like he’s tracked her down.”

“Damn. Why would he risk his business for a few dollars?”

“You know how greedy people can be. No matter how much they have it’s never enough.”

“We’ve both seen that plenty of times,” the detective muttered with a sigh.

“I’m confident I’ll find him,” the sheriff continued, “but this young woman says he has important friends and she’s scared to death. She has reason to be. He sent two thugs over to her condo before she left. She got away by the skin of her teeth.”

“Ah, understood. So I should take over the investigation and bring him back under arrest before he can fix things with one of his buddies.”

“That’s what I’m thinkin’.”

“I can probably leave in a couple of hours, but I have to ask....does this girl have enough for me to charge him?”

“She’ll swear to it all, and her father has horses with Gino, so she’s not just someone who was wandering around the stables. She’s solid.”



“Okay, so you have to find him.”

“I’m at the Moonshine Campgrounds to bring him in. I just hope he’s here. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Sounds good, and I’ll leave as soon as I can.”

As the call ended the sheriff climbed from his car and strode quickly into the office. The receptionist, Rebecca smiled up at him.

“Hello, Sheriff Cooper. What brings you here?”

“Do you have a guest by the name of Gino Stallone?”

“Yes, but you just missed him. He left about ten minutes ago.”

“When you say left—”

“Sorry, checked out.”

“I see,” the sheriff muttered. “What kind of car was he driving?”

“A black BMW SUV. Do you want the details?”

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“Yes, please, and I need to have a look in his cabin.”

“Of course, it’s cabin #3,” she exclaimed, handing him the key, “and here’s a print out of his car’s plate number and his driver’s license.”

“Thanks, Rebecca,” he said as he accepted the piece of paper, then hurried to his car.

As he continued into the campgrounds, he sent the information to his office with an order to alert his deputies to stop the vehicle if it was seen, and to hold the driver until he arrived. But as he stopped at the cabin he abruptly remembered passing a BMW SUV on the road.

“Dammit,” he grunted, and hastily sent out a second message that the SUV in question had been traveling north on Old Lake Road five minutes earlier.

Even though he’d missed Gino by a hair’s breath he remained optimistic. The vehicle would be easy to spot. But fifteen minutes later, after searching the room and finding nothing of interest, he still hadn’t heard anything. Returning to his car he checked in and the bad news was confirmed. There had been no sightings of a black BMW SUV anywhere.

“He couldn’t just vanish,” the sheriff grunted as he left the campground. “He has to be somewhere, and I’ll damn well find him.”

\* \*\*

Parked directly in front of the forest above the road, Gino’s vehicle was shrouded in

the shadows of the towering trees. As he walked away and looked back, even though he knew it was there it was difficult to see.

Satisfied, he buttoned up his oilskin coat and continued on, but as he approached the edge of the bank he stopped short. A deputy was parked on the side of the road. Assuming the officer had business with the cowboy, Gino decided to stay back and wait it out. But after a few minutes passed and the deputy still hadn't left his car, it occurred to Gino the man was probably waiting for speeders coming around the sharp bend.

Though he wanted to move closer Gino couldn't risk being seen. Stretching out where he was, he raised his small but powerful binoculars just in time to see Cade and Karen lead two horses from the barn and mount up. Two dogs were with them running alongside, and he noticed the cowboy was ponying Karen heading towards Smoky Hill.

It was a gift!

The forest was shrouded in mist, and there would be no-one around.

With his handgun tucked in his shoulder holster, and a knife given to him by Paddy safely sheathed in one of the pockets, he rose to his feet.

All he needed was to enter the property unseen by the deputy.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

With Jack and Diane racing through the trees and happily sniffing the ground, Cade rode Moon slowly up the gentle slope with Karen beside him on Lilly. Though the mare was bombproof, he always erred on the side of caution and had attached a lead rope.

“We’re goin’ to make a slight turn and go through there,” he declared, nodding towards a narrower trail a short distance ahead. “There’s a small patch of flat, grassy ground. The horses can relax and you can stretch your legs.”

“Cade, this is fantastic. Thank you so much for bringing me up here. I’ve never done anything like this. And I’m not nervous in the saddle at all anymore.”

“That’s great, and you don’t have to be, especially not with Lily.”

“I’d like to spend more time with Astro if I can. Every time I look at him he lifts his head and looks right back at me as if he already knows me.”

“All three horses have settled in so I’ll start workin’ with him in the next couple of days. You can get to know him along with me. It’s possible you remind him of one of his former owners,” he remarked as they followed the narrow track through the trees. “See,” he declared just moments later as the small meadow came into view.

“Oh, my gosh, it’s so beautiful,” she exclaimed, gazing around the flat, round patch of land. “How did this happen? Why are there no trees?”

“It’s a mystery. Annie and her husband Brody believe it was a UFO landin’ site.”

“That’s funny, but it’s so perfectly round maybe he’s right.”

“Maybe he is, but dammit, where have those dogs gone? Jack! Diane!” he yelled as she climbed from the saddle.

“Should I tie her up?”

“Yep, to that tree,” he replied, tossing her the lead rope.

“Are you really worried about Jack and Diane?”

“Not too much. They do this sometimes. They’ll pick up a scent and decide to follow it.”

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“That’s weird, they were right beside us. I’ll run back and see if I can spot them,” Karen exclaimed, abruptly turning and jogging back towards the main trail.

“No, stay here.”

“I’ll only be a minute.

“Karen!” he yelled, but she’d already disappeared down the path “That girl...” he muttered, but as the words left his lips, he heard the dogs barking. “Karen? Are you okay?”

“CADE! HELP!”

\* \* \*

Determined to follow Cade and Karen into the hillside forest, Gino had taken his life in his hands. Leaving his vantage point and hurrying back down to the road, he’d stayed close to the bank and sprinted around the sharp bend.

If the deputy had glanced in his rear view mirror he would have seen the fleeing suspect. Even worse, the space between the edge of the road and the bank was narrow. Drivers taking the sharp turn wouldn’t have seen him until the last second.

But fate had been on his side.

Sneaking onto the property adjacent to Cade’s, Gino had climbed over the fence and raced past the back of the barn. Once again he’d lucked out. Passing a window he’d

spotted the ranch hand emptying large bags of feed into big bins and had ducked out of sight in the nick of time.

When he'd reached the entrance to the trees he'd been out of breath and forced to stop. As he'd stared up the hill, a chill had shivered through his body. An eerie grey mist cloaked the trees, and the strange silence seemed filled with foreboding. He'd almost turned back, but the threat of Karen's testimony pushing him out of his luxurious life and into a prison cell had propelled him forward.

Opening his coat and lifting his gun from its holster, he'd walked up the slope. He'd been on edge and moved quickly, twice tripping over leaf covered branches before finally deciding to stop and wait for Cade and Karen to come back down. But suddenly hearing odd noises off to his right, he'd nervously peered around to see Cade's golden retrievers digging furiously. It was just seconds later he heard Cade calling for them.

Then out of the blue Karen appeared. The young woman who could, and would, destroy his life if she wasn't stopped. But before he had a chance to grab her, she'd darted away screaming for Cade.

\* \* \*

As Cade burst out from the narrow track the first thing he saw was Karen hiding behind a tree, then a second later Gino Stallone walking slowly forward holding a gun apparently looking for her.

Grabbing his rope as he broke into a canter, Cade sent it flying through the air. Gino saw it, but too late to stop the lariat from falling around his body. As Cade pulled it tight and pinned Gino's arms to his side, the gun fell to the ground. Leaping off Moon, Cade shoved Gino to the ground and picked up the weapon.

“Move and you’re dead,” he growled as Jack and Diane ran up and began barking.

“Cade, thank G-God!” Karen shouted, stepping out from the tree.

“Are you okay, darlin’?”

“Uh-huh, but you’re crazy, he could’ve killed you.”

“Hittin’ a movin’ target isn’t easy,” he retorted, moving his free arm around her and hugging her tightly. “I need to tie him up properly and call the sheriff. Can you stay with Jack and Diane for me? I don’t need them rippin’ him to shreds.”

“Yes, yes, of c-course.”

As she stepped away and sat on the ground with the dogs, Cade rolled Gino onto his stomach and hog-tied him.

“You’d better stop or you’ll regret this,” Gino bellowed. “Be smart. I can pay you more money than you’ll see in a fucking year!”

“Keep talkin’ and I’ll take off my boots and stuff my socks in your mouth,” Cade warned, tightening the last knot.

“You’ll regret this! You don’t know who you’re messing with!”

“You can tell me how tough you are later. Right now I’m callin’ the sheriff to haul your sorry ass away,” Cade quipped as he pulled out his phone. “Hey, Sheriff, it’s Cade,” he declared as the sheriff answered. “I’ve just caught Gino Stallone. He followed Karen and me up Smoky Hill.”

“Damn! I’m only a few minutes away. I’ll be right there.”



“I’ll call Joe and ask him to roll out the ATV. It would be a hike to get up here.”

“That’s great, thanks, Cade. I’ll see you soon.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

As Cade promised, when the sheriff and Deputy Dobbs drove into the ranch Joe was waiting with the ATV. Climbing on board, they headed off and were soon making their way up the trail. But when the sheriff spotted Cade and Karen with their horses and the two dogs at their side, he immediately sensed something was wrong. Cade had a deep frown across his brow and was holding Karen.

“What’s happened?” he asked, hastily climbing off the moment the ATV came to a stop. “Did he get away?”

“Far from it,” Cade replied solemnly. “He’s just up there off to the left. He must have been attacked by a wolf, or maybe even a cougar. Odd thing is we didn’t hear anything.”

“Just hang tight. Come on, Dobbs.”

Gino’s lifeless body was just a short walk away. Gazing down at the man lying hogtied and in a pool of blood, the sheriff knew he had not been savaged by a animal. Though it was a gruesome sight, his experienced eye told him Gino’s neck had been expertly sliced.

“What the hell did that?” the deputy muttered.

“This man was not the victim of an animal attack,” the sheriff grunted. “He was murdered. Start takin’ pictures, but be careful, and try not to disturb the leaves and dirt. I’m callin’ Detective Hawthorne. Wait—what’s that smell?” he added, giving the

body a wide berth as he moved carefully around the area.

“It’s like chicken, barbecued chicken,” the deputy replied, sniffing the air. “The kind they sell at the diner.”

“Damn, you’re right...look...”

Cautiously walking forward he stood beside the sheriff, and the two men stared down at the bits of white meat in the dark brown dirt.

“What does this mean, sheriff?”

“It means we have a very clever killer on our hands. He used this to keep the dogs busy so they wouldn’t interfere with his work,” the sheriff replied. “When you’ve finished takin’ the pictures call an ambulance in from Fairview. I need to call Detective Hawthorne in Dallas.”

\* \* \*

As he waited for the sheriff to return Cade’s mind was racing. Though he’d told Karen a wild animal must have attacked Gino Stallone, he didn’t believe it. Not only had he seen the neat slice across Gino’s neck, it appeared to be the only wound. If a predator had attacked there would be more injuries.

“I’ll be scared every time I come up here now,” she stammered, pulling back and looking up at him. “In fact, I don’t think I ever want to.”

“We’ll talk about this back at the house, but I’ve lived here a long time and I’ve never seen an attack like this.”

“Could the animal be rabid?”

“Possibly, but if that was the case it would have been more likely to go after Jack and Diane.”

“The whole thing is weird. Can we please go home?”

“As soon as the sheriff says we can,” then pausing, he added, “Karen I have another theory about this. I just don’t want to talk about it here.”

“Ah, Cade,” the sheriff exclaimed reappearing from the trees, then pausing his step he moved his eyes from Cade’s boots, up his body to his hat.

“No, sheriff, I had nothing to do with this,” Cade said firmly.

“Yeah, sorry, I had to check, but I can’t imagine you doin’ anything like that.”

“Wait, you two think Gino was killed by someone?”

“Seems likely,” the sheriff declared.

“Oh, my God, I don’t know which is worse. A lunatic on the loose or a wild beast.”

“I don’t think either of you have to worry,” the sheriff said firmly. “Gino Stallone was a bad guy with plenty of enemies. I’m guessin’ one of them followed him here and took care of business when he had the chance.”

“But he was still up here when we were,” Karen continued. “Please can we go now? I’m really creeped out.”

“Sure, but first, did Jack and Diane disappear for a bit?”

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“They did. We found them diggin’ near Gino. Why do you ask?”

“Whoever did this planted some chicken under the dirt to keep them busy,” the sheriff said with a sigh. “This was carefully planned.”

“But how would the killer know we’d come up here?”

“I think that was coincidental. He knew his victim, and I’m guessin’ he’s been watchin’ him while he was watchin’ you, so he knew about the dogs. He had that chicken ready for whenever he was goin’ to strike.”

“That sounds like the work of a pro,” Cade murmured. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprise, not after everything I’ve heard about Gino Stallone.”

“Yep, it was done by a pro for sure.”

“Uh, Sheriff Cooper, is it safe for us to stay here at the ranch?” Karen asked nervously. “Whoever this is might come back.”

“If they’d wanted to harm you they would have, but if you’d feel safer stayin’ somewhere else for a while I wouldn’t blame you. But now you’ll have to excuse me, and I need to ask you to leave. I have to secure the scene, and the ambulance is on its way. Oh, and Karen, my detective friend from Dallas is comin’ in. I’m sure he’ll want to talk to you.”

“Okay, Sheriff, thanks for gettin’ here so quickly,” Cade said gratefully. “Karen, are you okay to get back on Lily?”

“Yes, in fact I want to. I loved sitting on her coming up here and my legs are a bit shaky at the moment. It’s terrible what’s happened to Gino, but at least I don’t have to worry about him anymore.”

“No, you don’t,” Cade replied as they moved to Lily’s side so he could give her a leg up. “I just wonder who it was and if he’ll be caught.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The ambulance arrived just as Cade and Karen emerged from the trees. In spite of the activity the horses walked calmly past and continued on to the barn. Climbing off and leading them inside, Cade glanced around and called for Joe. Receiving no response, he strode down to the feed room and opened the door.

“I wonder where he is,” Cade remarked as he returned. “I didn’t see him when we were riding back here. Did you?”

“No, but I did notice the wheelbarrow in one of the paddocks.”

“Huh, that’s weird. Let’s get these horses out. Hopefully he’ll show up by the time we’re done.”

A few minutes later, Cade and Karen walked Moon and Lily into their pasture, and with an uncomfortable feeling still rippling through him, Cade started towards the house to see if Joe was there. But a moment later he heard Joe calling him. Turning around he saw his ranch hand jogging towards him from the back of the barn.

“Hey, Joe, where have you been? I was worried.”

“Long story, but what’s all the commotion about? Why is the sheriff and ambulance here? Did something happen on your trail ride?”

“That’s a long story as well.”

“Who was hurt?”

“The guy who was after me,” Karen piped up. “Someone got to him first. I can’t imagine who it was, but it was a really grisly scene...like out of a horror movie.”

“Sorry, you probably don’t want to talk about it, but what do you mean?” Joe asked with a frown.

“Prepare yourself,” Cade said solemnly. “We found him with his throat cut.”

“I figured,” Joe muttered. “You’d better come with me.”

Before Cade could respond Joe had turned and was walking briskly towards the shed where the farm machinery was kept.

“Joe, what’s goin’ on?” Karen asked as they joined him.

“Uh, Karen, I’m not sure you want to see this.”

“I just stumbled across a horrible man with his neck sliced open! I can’t imagine it’s any worse!”

“Go ahead,” Cade said with a sigh.

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“Okay. You’ve heard of Jack the Ripper? Meet Paddy the Slicer,” Joe exclaimed, opening the door.

Staring into the shed, Cade saw a man sitting on the floor sporting a black eye and a bloodied nose. He was blindfolded with a cleaning rag, while duct tape was across his mouth, wrapped around his ankles, and his arms were secured behind his back. Cade guessed they’d be taped as well..

“I knew him in Dallas,” Joe continued with a heavy sigh. “He’s a professional enforcer and killer for hire. Knives are his thing. I suspect the guy you found up Smoky Hill contracted him to come after Karen and something went wrong.”

“I’ll call the sheriff, but first I want to hear exactly what happened, and I mean every last detail,” Cade growled, stepping forward and pulling off the gag. “Start talkin’.”

“I just saved her life! You should be thanking me, not making demands.”

“You came here to kill her. Now what happened, what stopped you, and I swear if you don’t tell me I won’t cut your neck, I’ll put a noose around it and you’ll never be found.”

“I highly doubt that. Americans are weak.”

“Listen, and listen carefully,” Cade growled, crouching down next to him. “My family goes back to the Wild West. One was a hangin’ judge, another was a gunslinger, and a few were outlaws. And that’s just for starters. Gino was aimin’ his gun at me when I lassoed him and he ended up hog-tied. The genes live on, so you’d



better talk or I'll get real mad and my wild side will show up again. I'll ask you this only once. Why did you bail on Gino Stallone?"

"Okay, okay," Paddy grunted. "There wasn't enough time to plan properly, but after I saw her I didn't want the job anyway," he muttered, glancing across at Karen. "When I told him I was out he threatened me. He said he knew things about me, and he does, or rather, he did. It was only after I was on my way out it occurred to me if things went wrong he might try to make a deal with me as his bargaining chip."

"So you came back to make sure that didn't happen."

"Yeah, Gino had watched the ranch from that bank across the street. I was there as well, and I remembered seeing the two dogs. That's why I brought the chicken with me, in case I needed it to keep them out of the way."

"I take it you took Gino by surprise."

"Totally, it was done in seconds and I took off. I was almost at the bottom of the hill when the sheriff arrived on an ATV. The timing was great...but then I ran into Joe. Or rather, Joe's fist ran into my face. Fucking came out of nowhere," he said woefully. "Then he punched me in the gut and knocked the wind out of me. Next thing I knew he was dragging me over here and shoving me into this fucking shed."

"How do you know him, Joe?" Cade asked, finally turning his attention away from Paddy.

"He tried to frame me for one of his many murders. It didn't work, but my alibi wasn't exactly legal and I was busted. Somehow he still squirmed his way out of trouble, but now look at you, Paddy," Joe said, glowering at him. "You've ended up in the middle of nowhere and about to get arrested. Karma's a bitch, but revenge...damn it's sweet."

“And on that note,” Cade exclaimed. “I’m callin’ Sheriff Cooper!”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The police activity at the ranch continued throughout the day. Detective George Hawthorne arrived from Dallas with a forensics team, a vehicle to transport Gino Stallone’s body, and another car to drive Paddy O’Brien to a medical facility to patch him up before taking him into headquarters. Though Joe was questioned and released, he was cautioned not to take matters into his own hands again. He’d remained quiet and nodded, but Cade knew his ranch hand wasn’t sorry.

“What a day,” Karen mumbled, leaning against Cade as they finally watched all the vehicles drive away.

“It was one for the books,” Joe muttered. “When I saw Paddy O’Brien I damn near had a heart attack.”

“I don’t care what the sheriff said,” Karen continued. “I’m very grateful you were here and able to stop him. As far as I’m concerned you’re a hero.”

“That makes two of us,” Cade interjected. “We’re in your debt.”

“Are you kidding? I don’t think I’ll ever be able to repay you for giving me a job here. I love being on this ranch. In fact, I think I’ve finally found my calling.”

“It’s obvious the horses sure like you. How would you feel about workin’ here full-time?”

“That would be great. Thanks, Cade.”

“Hey, I’m glad you’re open to it. The business is growin’ and I need you. In fact,

we'd better get the horses in for the night. It's gettin' dark and all this activity has unsettled them."

"If it's okay with you I'm going in," Karen mumbled. "I'm really tired."

"I was just about to suggest you do that, and take Jack and Diane. They've had big day too. I'm sure they'd love to settle down with a couple of milk bones before dinner."

"And I'm going to have a glass of wine," she said with a heavy sigh, then called them over and walked slowly towards the house.

"I hope she'll be okay," Joe remarked as he and Cade headed to the paddocks. "Poor girl has been through a lot."

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“She sure has. Besides everything that happened today, she was terrified Gino would find her. Being on edge all the time is exhausting. But she doesn’t have to worry anymore. It’s over now.”

But as the words left his lips he suddenly realized what he’d just said. It’s over now.

Would she return to Dallas?

Were they over now?

\* \* \*

After giving the dogs their treats, Karen found a bottle of white wine in the refrigerator and poured herself a glass, then walked slowly into the lounge. Dropping on the couch and taking a sip, she leaned back and closed her eyes.

The relief that Gino was gone was almost overwhelming, but she wondered if she’d ever forget the horrifying sight of his grisly body. But as she sipped the crisp wine and silent minutes ticked by, the dreadful scene drifted away and she thought back to wonderful moments she’d had since arriving at the ranch.

The moment Astro had walked over to her when she’d fallen in the mud.

The amazing sight of Cade riding his horse with no reins or saddle.

Sitting on the bareback pad and feeling Lily moving beneath her.

The thrill when Cade had swept her up and tossed her into the small lake, and the salacious time they'd spent together in the storybook cottage.

Unexpected tears began dribbling down her cheeks.

She didn't want to return to Dallas.

She didn't want to say goodbye to Lily.

She'd felt something special with Astro and she wanted to spend more time with him.

But mostly, she wanted to stay at the ranch with Cade.

"Hey, darlin', what's wrong?"

Startled, her eyes popped open and she found him standing over her.

"I don't want to go home!" she exclaimed, the words falling from her lips before she could stop them. "Sorry, sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"Hey, don't ever apologize for sayin' what you feel," he interjected, sitting next to her and bringing her into his arms. "For the record, I don't want you to go either."

"You don't?" she sputtered, pulling back and gazing up at him.

"Hell, no! It may be early days—really early—but we've been through a lot together. Besides, I'm just gettin' used to havin' you around, and so far it works for me."

"You mean I can stay for a bit?"

"As far as I'm concerned you can stay as long as you want, though you'll run out of

clothes pretty soon. Mind you, that might not be a bad thing. I'd love to have you walkin' around the place naked."

"You're terrible," she said with a grin as she punched his arm.

"Yep, and that's not about to change. So...will you hang around a while longer?"

"I would absolutely love to. But you're right. I do need to go back and get some things, and of course I have to talk to mom and dad. They won't be expecting any of this, and I can't even imagine what they'll say when they hear about Gino. Especially when I tell them I was the one who stumbled across him," she added, lowering her voice. "About that. Uh, Cade?"

"Yeah?"

"I have a confession to make."

"I'm listenin'."

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“When we were in the clearing and I took off to look for the dogs—”

“You can stop right there, I already know.”

“You do?”

“Yep, but I still want to hear you say it.”

“Oh, Lord,” she muttered with a sigh.

“Go on, Karen.”

“I was pushing the envelope.”

“I think you mean you were testin’ me.”

“Sorry...”

“I think it’s time to head into my bedroom. Correction! Our bedroom.”

### CHAPTER THIRTY

A few minutes later, lying naked next to Cade in his bed, Karen moaned her pleasure as he roamed his lips over her neck and fondled her breasts. But she knew what was coming and guessed he was just building her anticipation.

“So, sassy girl, just how hard should I spank you?” he whispered, confirming her

suspicious. She caught her breath, and a second later butterflies burst to life in her stomach.

“I, uh, I don’t know what to say,” she managed.

“The right answer is, as you see fit.”

“Ooh, Cade, as you see fit.”

“I already told you I’d heat up your ass. Is that why you ignored me when we were in that clearin’?” he pressed, raising his head and staring down at her. “Did you want to push me into doin’ it right there?”

“It—uh—sort of crossed my mind,” she breathed, hating that her face was flushing red.

“Damn, girl, you must think I was born yesterday.”

“No, no, I don’t, not at all, I swear. It just sort of happened. But you have no idea how much I wish it hadn’t. Finding Gino like I did...it was a hellish nightmare.”

“I know, darlin’,” he said, softening his voice. “There’s nothin’ I can do to change that moment, but I can sure take your mind off it and ease your guilty conscience. Get up on your hands and knees. I’ll be right back.”

As he slid from the bed and padded into his closet excitement—tinged with a drop of fear—rippled through her body.

“Lock your fingers together,” he ordered, snapping her from her thoughts.

Jerking her head around she saw he was holding a narrow strip of sheepskin.



“When I tell you to do something I expect you to do it immediately, not five minutes later.”

“Sorry,” she said hastily.

Sliding the sheepskin around her wrists, he tied it off in a knot, then slid his fingers into her hair, gripped it tightly, tugged back her head and pressed his lips against hers. The kiss began languidly, but quickly turned fervent and seemed never-ending, fueling the passion already pulsing through her body. When he finally pulled back she was breathless and ached to be back in his arms.

“Now, young lady, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“I’m sorry, I should have listened to you. I was a brat.”

“And what happens to brats who don’t listen?”

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“They get punished?”

“That’s right, darlin’. Lower your shoulders and put your head on the pillow.”

With her wrists bound it wasn’t as easy as it sounded, but she was soon in position feeling vulnerable and exposed as he kneeled on the bed behind her.

\* \* \*

Gazing down at her perfectly round moons, Cade sheathed his stiffened member with a condom and touched his hardness against her dripping channel. But before she had a chance to react he delivered a hot slap on each cheek.

“You’re a very bad girl. This is a ranch, not a playground. Do what I say when I say, or you won’t just end up gettin’ hurt, you’ll be spanked,” he warned, smacking her soundly.

“I will, Cade, I promise.”

“The trail up Smoky Hill is real nice, but there are dangers. From now on you stay with me or I’ll be landin’ a stick against this backside,” he scolded, abruptly moving his flattened palm from cheek to cheek in quick succession.

“Ow, Cade...I’ll behave...I swear.”

“I’m gonna make this ass bright red so you get the message loud and clear,” he continued, sending his punishment to her sit spot. “And I’m thinkin’ a spankin’ every

Sunday night for a while should keep you outta trouble.”

“Oh, it hurts.”

“Yep, just like it’s meant to. I say what I mean, and mean what I say. A hackneyed phrase but a true one,” he growled, continuing to spank her as he slid into her passage.

She squealed, then groaned, but as he increased the force of his hard hand traveling across her backside she yelled out loud.

“Cade, please, I’ll be good, I swear, please stop,” she begged. “I will, I promise.”

Gripping her hips, he started to pump, thrusting with slow, powerful strokes, but only for a minute before he stayed buried inside and landed a series of quick, hot smacks.

“If there’s a next time you’ll be over my knee. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Sir? Why did you call me Sir?”

“I don’t know, it just came out.”

“We’re makin’ progress,” he muttered as he began to thrust, then slipped his hand beneath her to rub her clit.

“Ooh...that feels so good.”

“I know,” he grunted, sending his fingers up to her breasts and sharply pinching her nipples. “Has anyone ever done this to you before?”

“No, never,” she whimpered. “Nothing even close.”

“This is just the beginnin’. I’ve got a bag full of wicked toys and you’ll get to know them all.”

“T-toys?” she repeated as he moved his hand away and began spanking her again. “Ow, oh, Cade...”

“I told you I’d spank you hard. Just be glad I haven’t pulled out my paddle or flogger.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Or the vibratin’ dildo that will end up inside this tight little hole one day,” he growled, touching her dark, forbidden entrance.

As she let out a strange, mewling cry, he gripped her waist and began vigorously pounding her pussy.

“You’re gonna come for me when I say and not before. Understood?”

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“Yes, Sir...ooh...yes...”

“I know you’re gettin’ close, but you’d better wait or I’ll fetch my leather paddle.”

“But my ass is already so sore.”

“Then do as I say. This is a lesson, darlin’, a lesson in obedience. You’re real good at doin’ what the hell you want, and that has to change.”

“Ooh, yes, Sir.”

But suddenly feeling his own orgasm building, and exhausted from the drama-filled day, he decided to save the tantalizing teasing for another time.

“Get ready! I’m countin’ to ten, then you can climax.”

As she let out a cry, he began calling out the numbers, reaching down to tweak her nipples again, then quickening his pace. As he called out nine and ten, she let out a shrill scream, threw back her head and exploded beneath him, catapulting him into his release. Groaning loudly, he surrendered to the glorious convulsions rippling through his body, until they finally waned and he collapsed next to her.

“Cade,” she whimpered breathlessly, “my ass is really sore.”

“Good.”

“But I have another confession to make.”

“Go on.”

“You’re...you’re...”

“I’m what?”

“You’re a wild man sometimes, but I love it, and, uh, I love you. Totally and completely. Sorry, maybe I shouldn’t have said that, but I had to.”

“Thank the Lord. I’m crazy in love with you too, darlin’, and in your own way you’re every bit as wild as me. We’ll make quite a pair.”

## EPILOGUE

Upon their return Doug and Jenny Harper were shocked and horrified to learn Gino Stallone had been running an illegal gambling organization for years, and found murdered in a small, rural town. He’d been chasing their daughter when he’d discovered she’d overheard a damning conversation. The couple were told the gory details before the news was made public by Detective George Hawthorne and Karen herself.

She also told them she owed her life to a western horse trainer named Cade McLean, and as the dramatic events had unfolded they’d fallen in love. Eager to meet him, they made arrangements to drive to his ranch in Smoky Hill.

\* \* \*

Though Karen had been gone only a few days Cade couldn’t wait to see her again and meet her parents. But when a gleaming Bentley turned into his driveway he experienced a rare moment of nerves. He wasn’t expecting them for another hour, and was still riding Moon in the arena. Wishing he’d had time to get cleaned up, he

cantered across to greet them.

“Mom, dad, this is Cade,” Karen exclaimed as they climbed from the car and stepped up to the rail. “And here come Jack and Diane,” she added, seeing the dogs bounding across from the barn.

“Great to meet you, Cade,” Doug said warmly. “Thankyou for taking care of our little girl.”

“Dad! I’m not a little girl.”

“As I have told you many times, you willalwaysbe our little girl.”

“Great to meet you as well,” Cade replied with a grin, sliding off the big grey and shaking Doug’s hand.

“What a beautiful horse,” Jenny exclaimed. “How do you ride with no saddle or bridle? Isn’t it dangerous?”

“Not at all. We understand each other. Would you like to come into the house for coffee.”

“Yes, very much,” Doug replied. “I have a million questions.”

“I’ll do my best to answer them all, and if you’d like I can take you up Smoky Hill in the ATV, or even on horseback if you want.”

\* \* \*

What Cade thought would be a quick visit lasted through the afternoon. After running into Joe and hearing how he'd stopped Paddy McBride, Doug and Jenny accepted Cade's invitation to take a trail ride up Smoky Hill.

With the magical mist cloaking the trees, and the sun sending shards of light through the overhead branches, they made their way up the gentle slope, pausing briefly to stare at the spot where Gino had met his demise. Though it was a somber moment, by the time they reached the unexpected clearing at the top of the hill the heaviness had passed.

"This is absolutely incredible," Doug exclaimed as they gazed across at the mountain peaks. "It must be spectacular in winter."

"It is, and you're welcome to visit."

"The entire area is just beautiful," Jenny said with a sigh. "I had no idea it was here. I hope it stays under the radar."

"Yeah, me too," Cade agreed. "We like visitors, but not hordes of people. The Moonshine Campground is gettin' pretty popular now. You probably heard Annie Baker had her weddin' there, and word has spread."

"Well I'm not telling anyone!" Jenny exclaimed. "This place needs to stay just as it is. I understand why you love it so much. If I could live here, I would."



“Let’s look into that,” Doug suggested. “Maybe we can find a retreat for the weekends.”

Glancing across at Karen, Cade saw her beaming.

His fate was sealed.

And he couldn’t remember ever feeling so elated.

\* \* \*

Six months later, during the first snowfall of the season, Cade proposed to Karen in front of a roaring fire in the small cottage next to the man made lake.

“Yes, yes and yes,” she exclaimed, happy tears filling her eyes as she threw her arms around him.

“Just as well or I’d spank you until you agree.”

“Really? Sorry, I’ve changed my mind,” she retorted with a sassy wink.

“Don’t worry, that’s comin’. I have to make sure you’ll love, honor and obey!”

“I’ll do my best, but you know how I can be.”

“Uh, yeah, though I have to admit your unpredictably has its appeal.”

“Speaking of unpredictable, why did you choose this place for such a special moment?”

“Don’t you like it?”

“Are you kidding, I absolutely love it. I was just wondering.”

“Think back,” he murmured, narrowing his eyes. “What happened here?”

“You tossed me into the lake! How could I ever forget that?”

“You called me a beast, and I said,that’s one of the things you love about me.A few minutes later you accused me of bein’ a wild man, and again I said,that’s another thing you love about me.Remember now?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, I was thinkin,and I love that you’re such a sassy brat.Lookin’ back, we knew what was happenin’ between us then. That, darlin’, is why I chose this place. And you were right. I am a wild man. I’m wild about you, and I plan on spendin’ the rest of my life showin’ you just what that means.”

THE END