



*Horses from
Heaven*

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Horses from Heaven

-By Elle Marlow-

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Chapter One

“Good luck and good ride, baby,” Kendall called out to her husband. She wasn't sure if Garrett heard, since his focus remained on the horse jiggling beneath him. The horse and rider became lost in a cloud of dust, but Kendall could see Garrett struggling to maintain control of Diablo.

Kendall firmly held their son's hand. Ty was always running off, and she had to ensure he wouldn't get underfoot of the other contestants entering and exiting the warm up pen. Normally, she wouldn't dream of bringing Ty so close to the action, but he hadn't seen his daddy in days, and she'd hoped Garrett would just take a moment to pay attention to his son.

"Mommy! The Ice-cream man is here!" Ty whined, pulling her toward the colorful truck that pulled into the parking lot.

"Garrett, did you hear me? Ty and I wanted to wish you luck..."

Her statement became lost within the cheers from the stands as the National Anthem began to blast through the speakers. Giving up, she lifted Ty into her arms, and then removed his ball cap. She showed him how to hold his hand over his heart, which he did, temporarily forgetting about his daddy or the ice cream.

Garrett finally got the horse to stand still. She guessed he didn't need her well wishes, he and his roping partner, Big Joe worked day and night proving to everyone on the circuit that they were the team to beat. This run would seal their spot at the finals. So far, Garrett had been unflappable, but her husband was back into one of his dark moods that matched his horse.

Garrett finally acknowledged her and little Ty with eye contact, and with his brows pinched together. Something besides rodeo was on his mind, and Diablo sensed it too, because as soon as the music stopped, the large

buckskin snorted and pranced toward her and Ty, no matter how hard Garrett pulled back on the reins.

“Kendall, get Ty out of here. Give us some space,” Garrett snapped. Diablo tossed his head and quickly shuffled backwards before lifting his front end off the ground.

“Dammit, what the hell is wrong with you?” Garrett hissed, pulling the reins hard to one side, while digging a spur into Diablo’s ribs, forcing the animal into a series of tight circles.

She picked up their son and held him against her. Ty had just turned four, and twisted himself inside her arms to get another look at Diablo.

“Daddy’s mad at me,” he said.

“No, he’s upset with Diablo,” she assured him, but Ty frowned as he watched his father continue to try and control the horse.

“Garrett, what’s wrong?” she dared to call out.

“Nothing’s wrong. Diablo just wants to get on with it, so he can win. He understands how important this is. Not like my old man, he won’t trust me to run my own life no matter what I do.”

Rooster. Now some of this made sense. “Ignore him, Garrett. Stay focused. We love you.”

Garrett nodded, and then Kendall put her fingers up to her lips to blow him a kiss. With so much at stake, this was a terrible time for him to worry

about his dad. Beyond that, she'd thought Rooster had stopped complaining about Garrett's choice to make rodeo a career a while ago, especially since Garrett was doing so well.

Garrett's face settled into determined lines, as his fingers curled around the rope he held to the side. The announcer called out for his team to be ready to run after the team from Wilcox. Kendall took their son to stand along the railing by the gate.

The arena announcer began to playfully engage the crowd with jokes about the local politics of Pinedale. Kendall only half listened, keeping an eye on Garrett. He'd managed to guide his horse to stand alongside Joe and his pretty bay mare to wait. He still looked upset, but at least Diablo had settled somewhat.

Feeling a little better about her husband and his horse, Kendall's gave her attention to Ty, who started to wave at the bull fighter who'd entered the arena dressed in rags and in full clown make-up. Her son giggled at his antics, along with the large crowd that gathered for the event. Most of Pinedale must be in attendance, and judging by the shouting of his name, were fans of Garretts.

In the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Rooster walking with the aid of his cane toward the announcer's booth. Rooster would stop, turn his head and then yell something to Garrett. His raucous voice, distinctive with

his southern drawl, carried over to where she was by the gate, but she couldn't make out what he was saying. Hopefully, the old man was just trying to encourage his son, but their past had taught her different. Kendall hated it when the two of them argued, but for her own peace of mind, she learned to tune them out.

Finally, Garrett's and his partner, Big Joe, names were announced. It took a little extra work, but Garrett managed to get Diablo inside the arena. Garrett continued to talk to the horse and reassure him with pats to the neck and within moments, he'd successfully backed Diablo's buck-tone rump against the rail as the steer bawled and jumped inside the chute. She held both Ty and her own breath, waiting.

Despite all the chaos, Diablo's ears perked straight forward, looking incredibly focused and ready to fire, which was a good sign. Butterflies danced in Kendall's gut as she nudged Ty to stop staring at the ice cream man, and watch his daddy. She whispered a quick prayer, her heart rate escalating until she could hear it's beating in her ears. Diablo might be a handful, but he was fast, and thankfully, this would all be over in a matter of seconds.

The whining of the metal gate as the chute opened, caused her to blink. She must have blinked, because the crowd jumped to their feet, filling the air with a unified chorus of shouts and screams. She jumped with

Ty away from the fence as Diablo flew past without his rider, kicking up large chunks of dirt from the arena, while his rump lifted high in the air over and over. Another cowboy on horseback gave chase trying to rope him, but Diablo easily out-paced the roper as he sailed along the edge of the arena, and all while Garrett's body laid face-down in the dirt.

Kendall looked around her. What happened? What just happened? Paralyzed from confusion, a numbness crawled over her as a few guys scrambled over the rails just as Rooster appeared, flinging open the arena gate. The old man moved with his cane with surprising speed to get toward his son. Someone behind her shouted in her ear about Rooster leaving the gate open and that Diablo would get out. When she looked back toward the arena, she could no longer see her husband. His body was swallowed within the chaos of the cowboys and dust that surrounded him.

"Daddy," Ty whined, pointing toward where the crowd gathered inside the arena.

"Garrett?"

Kendall squeezed her son tightly against her, whispering words of assurance as she blindly walked toward the gate. A large hand landed on her shoulder, stopping her before she could enter the arena. She turned to see Big Joe. What was he doing off his horse already? How much time had passed? He's supposed to be heeling Garrett's steer. The fear in his eyes

instantly pricked her irritation. Why the heck was everyone freaking out? It was just a fall. Just like any other tumble she'd seen Garrett take a million times before. It was part of the sport, part of cowboy life...

“Joe, let me go. He probably dislocated his shoulder like last time or something.”

The big man gathered them both inside his massive arms, holding them tightly against him. Kendall struggled against the wall of muscle that quivered around her. Ty started whimpering, and she pushed against Big Joe, trying to break his embrace. Joe had never, not once in all the years she'd known him, ever tried to hug her. She nervously laughed, but even then, her chest began inflating with something indescribable, something terrible, and she realized she wasn't able to take a deep breath.

“I want ice cream,” Ty whimpered. “Daddy needs ice cream,” he added, rubbing his eyes with balled-up fist.

“Joe let us go, you, big goof. We can't get any air!”

“I'm so sorry, Kendall. Oh, my god, I'm so sorry!”

With Ty on her hip, Kendall used her free hand to push against Joe's chest. It was only when she pulled her hand back, that she noticed the splattering of blood on Joe's shirt. That weird unexplainable tension in her chest tightened like a vice, painfully squeezing reality right out of her.

“Sorry? For what? Will you please take Ty to get ice cream so I get out to Garrett? You’re freaking out, Joe. Garrett’s been tossed before, it will be alright.”

She held her son out to Joe, but he gave Ty a sorrowful look, while shaking his head, and taking small steps backwards. Joe’s eyes instantly pooled, then spilled over with tears that created muddy trails down his cheeks.

“I can’t,” he choked. “I’m so sorry, buddy,” he barely whispered. She placed Ty on the ground to stand between them. She couldn’t hold him anymore, her arms, legs, every part of her body lost strength the more she stared at the big cowboy. “Joe?”

An ambulance pulled up alongside of them, and the arena gate opened wide to accommodate the vehicle.

Ambulance?

No...no...no

She turned her head back toward Big Joe. “What’s wrong with Garrett?” she asked, horrified at how far away her question sounded, like it came from somewhere else, from someone else.

Lord, please let this be someone else .

She turned back to look at crowd around Garrett. They’d parted ways to accommodate the ambulance. Paramedics dressed in blue, jumped out.

Kendall took a step in that direction but again, Joe's big hand stopped her.

"You can't take Ty in there," Joe pleaded.

"Garrett is going to be fine. Just watch Ty so I can show you."

"Kendall..."

"Joe?" she asked again, the words coming out so thin, they threatened to shatter. Now nobody inside the arena moved. Not even one. Why had everyone stopped helping Garrett? He obviously needed help.

"Joe? Joe? Answer me!" she screamed, turning back to look at him. Ty started crying as Joe's tears now flowed at a steady pace landing somewhere inside his strawberry blonde mustache. His mouth moved, but words failed to escape his lips. Panic seared. What could be so horrible that even Big Joe couldn't tell her? Frustrated, she balled up a fist, and then punched him in the arm.

"Tell me, dammit, Joe, tell me!"

"He's gone, Kenny...he's gone."

"He's gone, Kenny...he's gone..."

For months, Big Joe's words echoed in her mind. Like now, while she leaned her head against the wall inside the foyer, for support. She was glad that she'd left Ty to the care of Big Joe's wife, Katie for the day. He didn't need to sit through yet, another tribute to his father, or listen to

another heated argument between his grandpa and grandma. If they were still fighting over Diablo, she wasn't sure if she could handle that on a day like today.

“Will you look at what that crazy horse has done? He clamped down on my arm and ripped apart my good shirt! How much more of that horse do I have to put up with just to keep our daughter in-law from bawling her eyes out?”

“It's not just for Kendall, Ty already lost his daddy, she doesn't want him to lose the horse too,” Mary explained.

“I swear, I'm going to kill that son-of-a-bitch! If I told Garrett once, I must have told him a thousand times that horse was a ticking time bomb!”

“Our grandson loves the horse, Rooster. Now, just calm down, and I'll get you another shirt.”

“Can you get me another son? Can you do that, Mary? No, no the hell you can't.”

Kendall closed her eyes. Diablo had always been hard to control, but since Garret's passing, had grown worse, breaking apart his stall and lunging and snapping toward everyone, but Ty. Her heart broke for Rooster, but his anger had escalated over the past six months, and now his making fatal threats against the horse, was an everyday occurrence. The way he'd randomly explode into rage with shouts of killing Diablo, even in front of

his grandson, made it hard for her to muster up sympathy with the anger—she was angry too, but she wasn't going to take it out on an animal, and she certainly wasn't going to break down in front of her son.

Kendall opened her eyes, and peered out the stained-glass window that ran vertical to the massive pine double doors. She was told to wait in the foyer for the van that would take them all to Garrett's memorial roping being held by the local 4-H club he'd volunteered for. She exhaled. She'd rather go home, crawl back in bed, cuddle with her son and forget about life. She was exhausted and her head pounded from the random bouts of crying she couldn't control. Her chest compressed with so much anxiety, some days, she wasn't sure if she even breathed.

Rooster shouted once more to his wife, his vile words taking on a frightening tone, as he repeated over and over how he planned to destroy Diablo. Something hit the wall and then shattered in their bedroom, startling her. Kendall started to move to stop the fighting until Rooster and Mary appeared in the adjoining hallway. Rooster held his rifle with both hands pushing it against Mary, forcing her to back away from him.

“Mary, I can't stand looking at the horse. Every time I try, all I see is Garrett's dead body. Nobody can handle him, not even my best ranch hands. And look, let's face the facts. That horse killed our son and has gone and left Ty without a father, and poor Kendall a widow.”

Kendall squeezed her eyes closed as her body recoiled at the word. Rooster's tone was morphing into on a childish whine, and she wondered if he was close to snapping for real. He sounded insane. She asked herself then, why, when people claim to love one another, why don't people show that love when it matters? When it could have made a difference. Rooster made Garrett suffer for going against his wishes by marrying a 'city girl' a 'spineless foreigner' and then again, and with vengeance, when Garrett left them all, even a newborn son, to chase his rodeo dreams. She could understand Rooster's anger—his emptiness, she felt it until only bitterness remained, but she wondered if she'll ever forgive Rooster for the things he'd said and done over the past four years. Maybe, if he would have been more supportive of Garrett, then maybe Garrett would have been a better husband and importantly, a father. Now she'll never know.

Ty will never know.

"Poor widow..."

Six months. Six months to get used to this new reality, six months to get used to the new way people looked at her and her son, but she still couldn't stomach it. Overnight, their entire identities shifted into unrecognizable people over an incident that should have never happened. Death happens in rodeo, but death wasn't supposed to happen to them.

Kendall ran her hand along her upper arm to ward off the goosebumps. Even after all this time, she still expected Garrett to walk through the front door, or bounce out of his mom's kitchen holding a peanut butter and jelly sandwich like he used to do. She could easily see the crooked smile on his face whenever he'd sneak an extra sandwich or pie when he thought nobody noticed. The same smile she'd see on Ty—the same charming smile they inherited from Rooster.

But this time, Garrett didn't get away with anything. He was gone, just gone. And, in all the time that passed, she was afraid not to talk about Garrett with her son, afraid Ty would forget his daddy's face or the sound of his voice. They'd listen to Garrett's voicemails daily, until Ty himself in his own way, had let her know that he didn't want to listen anymore. The voicemails had left her even more emotionally depleted, until she realized that Garrett only talked about Diablo, and the progress he'd made with the horse, or how he'd be gone late for this reason or another. How did it never dawn on her until after his death, that he never once, asked about Ty, asked about her, or even told them that he loved them? Maybe Ty already noticed the lack of love in the messages long before she did, and that conclusion broke her, broke her to the point where she wasn't sure if she could muster much feeling toward Garrett anymore.

Kendall closed her eyes and swallowed down the enormous lump in her throat. Rooster's yelling had caused his voice to grow hoarse. Maybe they'll all get lucky, and he'll just go blessedly mute. Every now and then, Mary his wife would find the strength to holler back, to no avail.

Wiping tears with the back of her hand, she simply felt numb all over. She couldn't let the old man hurt Diablo. And as days turned into long lonely nights, the phone calls of condolences from family and friends had stopped, and gave way to this horrid, empty silence. She found herself wandering out to the barn just to stare at Diablo, questioning if he really killed Garrett on purpose, and wondering if Rooster was right. Was the horse responsible? God is never supposed to give you more than you can handle, but she knew she wouldn't be able to handle another death. One more hollered threat from Rooster about how he was going to shoot Diablo right between the eyes with his deer rifle had her squeezing her hands into fist.

No way was that old man going to shoot Diablo. How would she explain that to her son? Why should Ty have to suffer through even more death?

Kendall stopped leaning on the wall, and mentally scolded herself to calm down. But she'd been sick. She hadn't eaten well since the accident, she just couldn't. She couldn't sleep either, and the lack of both, constantly

made black dots swim in her vision and the ground sway beneath her. If only she could find somewhere to breathe. Somewhere to forget about Rooster and Garrett, somewhere to take her son and start life over.

“Give me the gun, Rooster, you don’t need that thing! The van is almost here...Rooster!”

Mary and Rooster started playing tug of war with the rifle. “Let go of my gun, Mary! You can’t stop me!” Rooster’s words landed like a fatal blow to Kendall’s fragile nerves.

Then the family dog, a cross between a German Shephard and a fence jumper, came to Mary’s rescue, barking and snarling at the old man. Rooster raised the rifle to hit the dog. That was the last straw, she couldn’t take it anymore.

“Don’t you dare!” Kendall’s shouted, surprising both the old man and the dog. The dog ran back into the kitchen, his head and tail tucked between his legs. “It wasn’t Diablo’s fault!” Kendall screamed the words as loud as she could. If this family insisted on yelling, then she could yell too. Then Rooster walked into the foyer with his rifle in his hand, and a dark and tormented shadow deep in his eyes.

“I’m killing the horse,” he stated flatly, puffing up his chest, standing with his feet wide, the rifle firm in both hands. Kendall had never seen the man so angry in her life.

He was serious.

So was she.

Her throat quivered, but she lifted her chin to Garrett's father, something she would have never done if her husband were still alive.

"Garrett's death wasn't Diablo's fault."

"What do you mean it wasn't Diablo's fault? Are you crazy or just darned blind? You were right there! That horse is a lunatic and we've both known it for years! He blew up for no reason, crushing Garrett's skull wide open on the roping chute! I am sick of looking at him. I'm sick of feeding him, I'm sick of dealing with his temper tantrums. I'm done! I'm going to go out to the barns and make a good horse out of him," Rooster shouted, jutting his rifle toward her face.

Mary came up behind him, her face blotched from tears. "Leave Kendall out of this," her fragile voice pleaded.

"She's the reason I'm going through this. She babies that horse, she talks to it, cries to it. She doesn't seem to understand the horse killed her husband. Well, I'm putting an end to her ridiculous delusions today."

Mary gently laid a shaky hand on Rooster's shoulder. "Killing Diablo won't bring our son back," she managed with a bit more strength. Rooster shook off her hand and her attempts at reasoning.

“Maybe not, but I’m going to finish what I started ten years ago,” he told her. Mary threw her hands up in exasperation. “Today is Garrett’s memorial, we need to be there as one family. We need to be an example that just because Garrett died, life goes on. We can’t disappoint those kids, they’ve worked for months to put this together.”

Kendall squeezed the bridge of her nose as her breathing labored to ward off the sheer panic that was trying to build. The walls threatened to close in around her. Her brow beaded with sweat and her stomach wouldn’t stop churning. When Rooster suddenly took out his frustration by kicking at the wall, she knew she couldn’t take being in the same room with him for another minute. She shoved open the double doors and ran out into the cool morning air hoping for reprieve. Instead, Mary followed her out.

“Kendall get to your truck and drive to Diablo while I call the sheriffs!”

Rooster shoved his wife out of the way, rifle in hand, running for his truck.

Chapter Two

Kendall’s vision blurred from tears, but she squinted at the digital clock on the dashboard. The memorial roping was supposed to start in thirty

minutes. She pushed down harder on the gas pedal, forcing the truck faster down the dirt road that led to the barns.

She couldn't believe it, she'd stood up to Garrett's father. Memories of Garrett complaining about his father's need for control, resurfaced as she drove. After today, she had no doubt Rooster would come unhinged if a person went against him. But now she was only around the corner from the barns and from Diablo, and there was no point in turning back now. As adrenalin bolstered her nerve, she could swear Garrett's ghost sat next to her, demanding that she drive faster.

Rooster's Red Wagon Ranch. She could still remember seeing the four hundred-acre spread for the first time on the travel brochure. Her parents had put traveling to a real working cattle ranch on their bucket list and insisted she travel along with them. The moment she stepped foot onto the beautiful clay-red soil, and gazed upon the horses grazing under tall stands of Ponderosas, she knew she'd never want to leave. Without telling her parents, she'd applied for her visa and took on a job as an RWR office assistant. And that's when she first met Rooster's son.

Kendall's throat constricted as she thought about those early days with the young cowboy. If she was honest with herself, she would have realized she wasn't in love, just infatuated with the blonde blue-eyed man who seemed just as determined to rule the world like his father. Once Garrett set

his sights on her, there was no escaping and when he found out her visa was about to expire, he insisted they get married so she could stay in the states. She agreed, because she loved him—or at least, she thought she did. She thought that she would feel utterly happy knowing she'd never have to leave Red Wagon and could carry the powerful Stanley name.

The beautiful ranch where she once envisioned her happily-ever-after, suddenly appeared alien to her as she drove as fast as she could toward the massive red-wood barns. As soon as she jumped out of the truck, Rooster's Jeep skidded to a halt right behind her, churning up a dust cloud as he too flung open the driver's door and jumped out.

“Darn it, Kendall. I told you to get out of my way!”

“No. No way am I going to let you shoot an innocent horse!”

Diablo snorted his surprise at the abrupt invasion as Kendall managed to reach the barn first, and then jump into the stall with him. The horse's eyes rolled inside his skull as he ran in circles, snorting and tossing his head. A tremor of fear of what Diablo might do, tempted her to jump back out, but the sight of Rooster's gun planted her feet firmly in place.

The old man stood at the opening of the barn lifting the barrel of his rifle to take aim. At that moment, Diablo became increasingly agitated, pawing the ground and exhaling a strange growl sound from his nostrils. That cold feeling returned as Kendall screamed and jumped in front of the

gun. The hole of the rifle's barrel endless and dark, came directly within her line of view. "Please, please don't do this. Please. Ty loves him."

Rooster lowered the barrel slightly, but his hands shook and she was afraid the weapon would go off anyway.

"Kendall, get out of that stall. What if this monster kills Ty? Have you thought of that? What are you going to do if this horse snaps and stomps on my grandson? By all that's holy, I'm going to send this devil to hell where he belongs. You either let me shoot him or I'll throw you off my property."

Her lower lip quivered as she fought to mask her surprise. Rooster was serious, and his threat would leave her and Ty with nothing and nowhere to go. Still, she managed to grab Diablo's halter to pull the horse as close to her as possible. "Fine. But if I leave, then I'm taking Diablo with me."

"You? And then what? Watch as Ty gets killed trying to cowboy on the damn horse? Isn't one death enough for this family?"

"Rooster, after everything we've been through, I will never let my son become a cowboy. The Stanley tradition died with Garrett. As far as I'm concerned there's nothing good about this lifestyle anymore."

Sirens blasted from the driveway. Diablo broke himself free from her hand as one by one, more cruisers arrived at the ranch.

"Rooster!" one of them called out, "Put down your gun!"

Rooster dropped the rifle to the ground, defeat written on his face. He slowly jabbed his finger in her direction, silently warning this dispute was far from over.

“Rooster, you, crazy old coot. You know I have to take you in for this, right?”

“Sure, I know,” Rooster said, breaking out with the same crooked grin she’d seen on Garrett’s face hundreds of times. Rooster had the audacity to wink at the deputy. The exchange was nothing but a joke between them, but the deputy picked the rifle up out of the dirt and when Rooster reached for it, the deputy refused to give it to him.

“Is this your horse ma’am?” he asked, giving Diablo a quick glance.

“It is now,” she told him, exiting out of the corral gate.

“Then you best get him out of here. There really isn’t a lot the law can do about someone putting down livestock—especially on as notoriously bad as this one.”

“He’s not bad.”

“Ma’am, he’s the devil.”

“Devil? Is that what you heard? What is it about Pinedale being so damned determined to put labels on everyone and everything? He’s just a horse,” she insisted.

The deputies pushed Rooster hands behind his back, while he shook his head. Handcuffs were then clamped around his wrist. Rooster's eyes sharpened to cold steel as he glared down at her. "If you want to keep my grandson from following in the footsteps of his father, my father and his father, then you don't belong here. You gather your stuff and get off my land. You have twenty-four hours to make yourself and this horse disappear," he warned, as he was escorted out of the barn.

"Charlie, are you in there?" the booming voice, accompanied by a series of loud knocks, woke Charlie from his much-needed nap. Charlie stretched and then winced from the pain that settled in every muscle and joint. Finally, he sat up in bed. Where was his boots? He looked amongst the scattering of clothes and horse tack on the floor.

Another loud knock, this time rattling the door hard enough to loosen a hinge. "Hold your horses, Big Joe. Where's the fire? A man can't even get a little shut-eye around here," he called back, locating his boots and trying to shove his feet into them.

"I need a favor from you, Charlie and I need it now."

"Alright, alright," he said, lumbering down the hallway to get to the door. The cooler mornings made it hard to move. When he opened his

living room door, the rising sun landed a beam square on his face. Charlie stepped aside and held out his arm to welcome the roper inside.

“Welcome. Mi casa is su casa.”

Joe looked around scrunching his nose. “Nah, you can keep it. Hey, I need to cash in on a few favors.”

Charlie scratched at his morning beard, sweeping a gaze over the mountain of a cowboy taking up most of the living space. He then reached for a shirt off the back of the chair and then slipped it over his head. His cigarettes were on the table so he reached for one of those too.

“What time is it?” he asked, as he lit the end of his Marlboro.

“Eight in the morning, and I thought you’d quit smoking.”

Charlie exhaled the first puff, considering Big Joe and that familiar look of concern on his face. The man was an enigma. Despite his scary looks, he had the habit of mothering people and because he was so damned big, people usually complied to his request not wanting to piss him off. But he’d known Joe since they were both in diapers roping Cocker Spaniels from the back of their tricycles, and he’d pissed him off plenty and lived.

“I already quit drinking, what do you think I am Joe, a saint?”

Big Joe shoved one hand into the pocket of his jeans while the other carefully removed red panties from the lampshade. “Nobody could accuse

you of that.” He tossed the panties to the couch. “You got an extra trailer around here? I know someone looking for a place to stay.”

Charlie hadn’t expected that. The trailers were dump. Nobody had asked to stay in one since he’d acquired the land. He shrugged. “Well, I don’t know, Joe...can they pass a credit check? I mean, I can’t rent out such luxurious accommodations to just anyone.”

The returned scrunched look on the big man’s face made him chuckle.

“I’m kidding, Joe. Who is it? One of your roping buddies down on their luck?”

“Kendall Stanley and her little boy.”

Charlie inhaled so hard, he almost swallowed his cigarette. “You’re joking me. Garrett’s widow and son? We both know the Stanley’s have more money than Fort Knox. What does she want with a dump like mine?”

“Rooster kicked them out, Charlie. He’s not giving them a dime. Now she’s got nothing but some clothes, the kid and...Diablo.”

He raised his eyebrows at that. “Diablo? Garrett’s horse?” This was going to take a moment to process. Diablo was a well-known pain in the ass that only Garrett could control. “Sit down Joe, I haven’t even had my breakfast yet. This is a lot to take in all at once.”

Joe sat on the couch and the middle bowed out. “They can’t stay with me and the wife. Every bed is full. There’s no room left in the house.”

“You know what causes all those babies, right?”

Big Joe’s face flushed as red as a tomato. “Katie can’t keep her hands off me,” he admitted.

Charlie shook his head as he retrieved a jug of milk out of the fridge, thinking about Big Joe and his tiny wife. If he’d ever experienced any kind of jealousy, it had to be over Big Joe’s life. He had a great one, with a darn cute family. And talk about saints, If, ever there was one, it would have to be Joe’s wife, willfully letting him rut all over her and then giving birth to all five of Joe’s enormous-headed babies.

“Kendall Stanley,” he repeated the name remembering Garrett’s wife. She was the high-class, fragile, princess type. It was hard not to notice her cheering for her husband from the sides of the arena, though. She was beautiful with her blonde hair and apple bottom. Sure, he remembered her, and the cute little boy, but he tended to avoid prissy women like the plague.

“So, some Stanleys’ need to live here. That’s a load of an irony. I guess Kendall and the Little Scratcher can hole up in one of my trailers. It’s the least I can do. And rent free too. Nobody should have to pay to live in one of those trailers, Joe. But this sure isn’t the fancy kind of living they’re used to.”

Joe seemed not to have heard him as he fidgeted, looking everywhere but at him. The big man was just busting to say something else and was

obviously thinking it through.

“What now?”

“Speaking of fancy living, are you ever going to clean the place up? Since you’ve decided to keep Heaven Ranch it’s become more like Hell. The trailers, the barns, the grounds...your life?” he shifted his gaze back at the red panties barely clinging to the side of the sofa. “The women?”

Charlie swallowed the milk as the last year whizzed past in a blur. He’d given up on just about everything since the doc told him he’d have to quit riding bulls, rough stock, or even the coin operated horse outside the market. He had so many nuts and bolts holding him together, he could open his own hardware store. The only thing that didn’t hurt these days was his dick. Still, if the parade of women walking in and out of his life was going to be a problem for his new tenants, he could probably slow down on that too.

“Maybe. I don’t know,” he commented, spitting out chunks from the milk. Big Joe acted like he was going to gag.

“You’re still young, Charlie. You’ve got to start taking care of yourself. Plus, I need you to be at your best. For Kendall’s and Ty’s sake. She doesn’t have any other family in Pinedale, her folks living in Canada and all that. Garrett was all she had. It’s pitiful. She’s such a mess, Charlie, and she can’t stop with the crying. And Diablo, he paces inside that barn of

his until he's a crazed, sweaty mess. She can't handle that horse, she's not even a rider. Plus, Rooster got arrested for trying to kill him and you know Rooster, he won't stop until he gets what he wants. The whole ordeal is bad any way you look at it. And you're the only man I can think of that might be able to get inside Diablo's head. I'd never tell Kendall this, but I'm about to shoot the horse myself."

"They're all that bad?" he asked, tossing the jug into the trash. "You don't need a just one of my trailers, Joe, you need a therapist, a babysitter and one of those fabled horse whisperers."

"I prayed on this, and your name popped into my mind."

"You prayed, huh? God sure has a funny sense of humor," Charlie inserted, reaching for another smoke.

"Let me put it this way, Diablo can and will strike at any man. Ty, he seems to tolerate, but even that feels sketchy. I don't trust him. A part of me can't blame Rooster, but that old man has gotten worse with his temper, and now I trust him even less."

Rooster. Just hearing Rooster's name sort of drowned out all the other reasons Big Joe wanted Kendall and her son to be there.

"You know, Charlie, people still talk about how you chased Rooster off your land using your backhoe to do it," Big Joe commented, sharing the same memory and shaking his head with a look of appreciation in his eyes.

Charlie's face warmed. Maybe he should have kept his cool. Even he was surprised when Aunt Betty left the ranch to him instead of Rooster. For months, the incident was all Pinedale could talk about. Well, that and his horrible freakish wreck at Tucson Rodeo that resulted in a two-month hospital stay while the surgeons pieced him together like dollar store puzzle.

“If having Garrett's family live here is going to piss off that old codger, then count me in. I'll watch out for Kendall, Ty and Diablo. It would be my pleasure.”

Big Joe smiled. “I kind of figured as much.”

Kendall looked in the rear-view mirror, wishing her normally green eyes wouldn't look so red and puffy when she introduced herself to her new landlord. Big Joe found them a place with Charlie Walters. She should feel grateful, she should feel relief, she should be doing something other than sitting at the red light next to Super Savers tearing up just because the store still wrote out a nice tribute to Garrett on their street-side marquee. It was like she was the only person in town wanting to move on, and that made her surge with guilt. Besides, Garrett not once fulfilled a single promise he'd made to the store for all the support they gave him. When they held their grand opening, Ty was only six weeks old, but she bundled him up and

showed up to perform the ribbon cutting ceremony, because she couldn't get Garrett out of bed. And of course, the crowd that had waited in the cold left the festivities feeling totally let down. She'll never forget people walking away from her. They'd wanted to take pictures with the famous roper—not his wife or his kid.

When the light turned green, Kendall punched the gas. She couldn't get to Charlie Walter's ranch fast enough.

Charlie Walters , Pinedale's infamous Cowboy Casanova .

His ranch sat on the outer edge of Pinedale. She vaguely remembered meeting him a time or two, but the last she'd heard, he had turned away from the parade of women and into a hermit. He was a bit older, and ran with a different crowd than Garrett. She remembered his smoldering dark looks, and how he was considered a legend around Pinedale, but other than that, he had stopped rodeoing about the time that Garrett really got into it.

When she drove onto the red dirt drive and under the log arched, entrance, she got her first full view of pristine virgin country. Heaven Ranch earned its name honestly, the heavily pined landscape broken up by large swaths of thick grasses, gave a person a biblical sense of awe inspiring wonderment. Feeling encouraged that she was doing what was best for Ty, she allowed herself a deep breath. But the further she drove onto the property, she noticed that under the thick, towering Ponderosas, sat at least

a dozen old rusty single-wide trailers and farm equipment in various stages of repair. But what was worse than the old trailers, were the corrals that had more post scattered on the ground than upright and assembled. Big Joe never mentioned Diablo wouldn't have a decent pen to contain him.

Kendall squeezed the steering wheel with doubt burning and her heart tumbling down to her gut. This was now her home, Diablo's home, and even though she kept telling herself to feel grateful, she still decided it might be best to turn her truck around and figure out something else. As she started to turn, an opening trailer door caught the sun and reflected against her windshield, and out walked Charlie Walters.

Kendall blinked as the cowboy approached, fighting to ignore the physical ache pulsing through her at the familiar picture Charlie Walters presented. He wore the same black felt hat, the same style of shirt and the same brand of jeans as Garrett. And even though he moved like a man who suffered from one too many run-ins with a bull, it didn't seem to matter. Charlie still walked with an all too recognizable, confident swagger that could have matched Garrett's stride for stride.

Kendall put the truck in park and then inhaled. Now what was she going to do? What was she thinking taking this offer to live on another ranch, especially one as bad as this one, with another cowboy? And then she remembered her sleeping son in the back seat, trusting her to provide a

roof over his head, and of Diablo. There wasn't much of a choice, she'd have to listen to Big Joe's advice, and accept Charlie's offer for help. Big Joe made himself perfectly clear, if she really wanted to save the horse, then Diablo would need a guy like Charlie to do it. The fact she had less than four hours to get horse out of Red Wagon Ranch and out of Rooster's line of fire, stopped any further thoughts of fleeing.

Charlie was close enough now that his face became visible under the brim of his hat. Deep blue eyes, finely tuned by life, gave the sense he could see right through her and was assessing her weaknesses. Resigning to her fate, Kendall got out of the truck and then held her hand out toward him.

"Kendall Stanley," he greeted, with a warm, liquid voice. "I don't know if you remember meeting me, but I'm Charlie Walters." He took her hand into his large grip, giving her a shake that was vibrant and firm. That surprised her. Since Garrett's death, it was the first time someone didn't treat her like she was made of glass.

"Of course, I remember you. I haven't seen you around in a while, you've sort of fallen off the rodeo radar," she responded, managing to conjure a smile. His responding grin stretched his mahogany mustache across his full upper lip. "Yeah, well, that's because I'm being held together with a bunch of nuts and bolts, and figured I better not push my luck.

There's something about being at a rodeo that makes me invincible and brings the stupid right out of me. So, I stay away because I know I'll jump on anything, just to ride the hair off it."

She nodded, appreciating his humorous honesty, but she doubted he was as fragile as he'd put on. The apprehension she'd experienced earlier, eased in his presence, and she realized that Big Joe was right to suggest coming here. Charlie Walters obviously experienced a thing or two, and Diablo's nasty behavior would be met head-on by Charlie's pure cowboy grit.

"Thank you for letting us stay here. I just want you to know, I don't plan on taking advantage of your generosity."

Charlie bent himself forward, peaking at her son sound asleep in the back of the cab. "Handsome Little Scratcher. Looks like a shrunken version of Rooster," he surmised. Kendall might have felt offended by that if it weren't completely true. Ty looked more like Rooster than Garrett. She didn't want Charlie to think her son would be a problem like his notorious grandfather.

"Yeah, but unlike Rooster, Ty is sweet and kind."

"That's a relief," Charlie winked, and then added; "Do you think the two of you will be comfortable here? It's not fancy. Somedays it's barely livable."

Kendall had formed the same opinion when she pulled in. She wondered about lying to spare his feelings, but realized the moment he introduced himself, that there would be no point in ever trying to fool him. So, she shrugged. “I don’t need fancy. I learned the hard way what “fancy” gets a person. I need stable, safe and normal—for my son. But I do appreciate your kindness and I’ll pay our way soon.”

She detected a glint to his eye with her honesty. “Whatever you feel comfortable paying, is fine by me. I’m not hurting for cash. Number four is the nicest trailer here, and electric and water are hooked up and ready to go. There is one thing though...”

“What’s that?”

“Well, ma’am. I didn’t have a whole lot of time to prepare. The plumbing in your bathroom needs some work. I’m afraid if you and your son want to use the commode or the shower, you’ll have to use mine until I can fix yours—which I’ll get to right away.”

“ Oh, I see...” she said, putting her hands in her back pockets, just trying to do something to mask her horror at having to share a bathroom with a man she barely knew. “That would be a little inconvenient for you, wouldn’t it? Ty is only four. Somedays he has to go potty every five minutes.”

“Not really. I hardly spend any time in that trailer. And, you’ll find that I’m not bothered by much. Besides, didn’t his daddy teach him what trees and bushes are for?”

She cringed at the thought of her son urinating on a tree. “No. Um, thankfully, Garrett never passed along that type of knowledge.”

“Good thing you brought the Little Scratcher here then, isn’t it?”

“Little Scratcher?”

“Oh, that. It’s an old cow-puncher term for a boy that hasn’t yet grown into his...well, you get the idea.”

“Oh...yeah. Cute.”

Kendall wasn’t sure what to think now. She knew Charlie was just being kind, she knew he was most likely teasing, but the thought of him taking liberties and stepping in to help parent Ty, rose a prick of defenses she wasn’t expecting. Not even Rooster tried to father Ty, even after Garrett’s death. She was used to doing all the parenting herself. “I’ll make sure he makes it to the bathroom,” she told Charlie feeling awkward as hell about the whole conversation.

An uneasiness settled over them until her gaze wandered out to the dilapidated piles of wood that at one time must have held horses.

Kendall twisted her lips from side to side. “Actually,” she breathed out, feeling that a guy like Charlie appreciated people who got to the point,

“What I’m most worried about are those corrals. Diablo can be super hard to...”

“Contain,” he finished for her. He was staring at the mess too, looking as though he was thinking the same thing she was. “I guess we better get to work on that wood pile first. But where is that fire breathing dragon, anyway?”

“Joe is hauling him here in a couple of hours.”

She removed her hands out of her pockets so she could now wring them together. A panicky feeling over the living arrangements for Ty and Diablo made her stomach go back to jumping.

“I guess we better get to it then,” Charlie said, frowning at her long, painted nails. “I don’t know how long that manicure will last out here. How are you at swinging a hammer?”

This time she bubbled out a giggle. She had to. No man had ever thought to ask for her help with *anything* . Even Garrett had all the hard labor of Rooster’s ranch handled by hired hands. But the thought of jumping in and helping to rebuild a pen for Diablo sounded great. Maybe if she lent a hand in repairing the corral, she might not feel so dang pitiful and useless. And maybe a little less indebted to Charlie, who for all purposes, was nothing more than a stranger offering her and her son refuge.

Chapter Three

Ty sat cross-legged on the ground rolling his toy truck back and forth across blades of grass, and on occasion, would stop with the play, to shoot death stares in Charlie's direction. Kendall knew her son didn't know what to make of the cowboy that dressed like his daddy, and she had to fight the urge to run over and hold Ty to reassure him that everything would be okay. But, she couldn't do anything about Ty's attitude, because Charlie abruptly handed her a box of nails and a hammer.

"Thanks," she said, looking at the items momentarily at a loss just where to begin.

"Well, duct tape and bubble gum won't hold those posts together. If you want a decent corral, you'll have to drive those nails into those boards."

Was she going to rebuild this pen alone? Charlie said nothing else, and then sat himself down next to Ty. He removed a cigarette from its box and a lighter. She wanted to open her mouth and protest, but then Charlie looked over to her son whose attention zeroed in on him and thankfully, Charlie made the choice to put the items away.

"I guess I can have this later," he said to Ty. Her son reacted by scooting himself a few inches further away from Charlie, and then for some inexplicable reason, decided to pick up a dried-up leaf and put it in his mouth.

“Don’t do that, Ty. Take that out of your mouth,” she scolded.

“Your mama’s right. It starts with leaves and then it ends with full-blown tobacco. No need to start nasty habits at your age. You got your whole life ahead of you for that,” Charlie teased, as he took the leaf from her son. Ty started crying loud enough, that snot bubbled out of his nose. He reached out for her. Kendall started to move, but Charlie held up his hand to stop her.

“Now mama, hold up. I got this. No need to rush in.” Ty continued to cry until Charlie picked up the little yellow truck he was playing with. “Nice tires on this truck,” he told her son. Ty quieted, and then snatched the truck from Charlie’s hand, to hold it close against his chest. Kendall warmed with embarrassment for her son’s behavior, but Charlie didn’t seem phased by it. Ty then seemed to think twice about his behavior, handing the toy back to Charlie.

“Thanks. That’s real nice of you to share,” Charlie praised. Ty’s eyes regarded the man with guarded suspicion. His uncertainty being in the stranger’s presence constricted her throat, and she felt like breaking down in tears right then. Charlie ran the truck a few times across the grass but then stopped when he glanced up at her.

“What are you waiting for, mom? Don’t worry, it’s not rocket science. Just nail the boards together and I’ll join you in a bit,” he said, before

making engine noises and inciting reluctant giggles from Ty. She started hammering, her mind still on her son, and the fact he was obviously enjoying having a male figure to play with. She struggled with the truth of that. No matter what, she couldn't provide everything her son needed, and then she struggled with the boards and the nails, trying to do two different things at once. It might as well have been rocket science, since she was having such a hard time with it.

"That Diablo is something else," Charlie commented out of the blue, breaking her thoughts.

"That's an understatement," she said, taking a swing at a nail and completely missing her target.

"I think it's pretty gutsy that you decided to spare him," he then said.

"Are you going to judge me too? The whole town does already. Nobody considers the fact that other people might have invested themselves into the horse," she explained, as she managed to drive one nail into a board successfully.

"I'm not here push my beliefs on anyone," he told her. "I don't know the whole situation," he added.

"Diablo is my pony and I love him!" Ty said, boldly inserting himself into the conversation.

"Now do you get it?" Kendall asked, nodding toward her son.

“Yeah, now I do,” he said, roughing up her son’s hair.

Charlie had put the truck down to watch her. She pretended that it didn’t bother her that he started watching her work, but embarrassment heated her face and the back of her neck. The boards were heavy, and she continued to drop them. She also struggled to find the humor that he did when she accidentally hammered her thumb and broke the tip of her polished nail clean off.

“I don’t recommend you do that too often,” he said dryly. She stopped to look at him.

“Funny.”

“You’re young. You’ll grow another.”

“Yeah? The past six months has aged me,” she admitted honestly, as she attempted to land the hammer on the nail head and missed again.

“Stress can do that to a person,” Charlie agreed. When Kendall stopped hammering she looked over and was shocked to find that Ty had crawled into Charlie’s lap and was happily tugging on the man’s mustache.

“I’m sorry, he’s...”

“He’s fine.”

“I know, but I don’t expect you to...”

“Mom. Stop.”

She dropped another board. This time on her foot. She ignored the pain that shot through her toe, and she cursed. Charlie quickly covered her son's ears, making an exaggerated shocked face. "Maybe if you'd do more swearing, you'd quit aging so fast."

"Maybe you're right," she agreed, and then let out with a huge sigh. "Why am I doing this? Don't you have your own horses? Don't they have solid pens?" she asked, feeling a little overwhelmed and irritated with her lack of skill. Ty was blowing kisses toward her, but Charlie pretended to catch the kisses mid-air. Ty busted out with deep belly-laugh. She couldn't remember Garrett ever playing with Ty like that while he was alive.

"About a dozen," he informed her, as Ty grew bored with their game, crawling off Charlie's lap to play on his own. Charlie then stood up, picked up his own hammer.

"You've got a knack with kids," she told him, watching him approach. Charlie shrugged a shoulder. "Ty makes it easy," he said.

Kendall wiped moisture from her brow with a forearm, wondering when it would be her turn to sit on the grass and play. Her whole body felt strangely heavy, like sand had filled her pockets. She gave into a deep yawn, wondering if the physical labor was showcasing just how much of a toll Garrett's death took on her physically—she was wiped out.

"Where are they?" she managed to squeak out.

“They like to hang out by the lake,” he told her, efficiently attaching boards with the skill of a seasoned carpenter. The entire time that he’d sat playing with Ty, she’d only managed one stinking board, and even that wasn’t nailed in right.

“Why don’t you give yourself a break?” he stopped the hammering to comment. Maybe he was talking about the work, but she had a sneaking suspicion he was talking about from herself. If only she could take a break from the all grief and the guilt and the weight... “I wish,” she told him, watching Ty munch on another leaf. She was too tired to stop him.

“There’s a hammock by my lake that’s perfect for whatever ails you,” Charlie said, grinning over at her son just long enough to deepen dimples on both sides of his face. “He’s all boy. That’s a good thing,” he said, sounding like he was trying to reassure her that Ty wasn’t acting badly. “If you say so,” she yawned again. “You really have your own lake?”

“Yep, over yonder. About a quarter mile up the trail.” He nudged his head toward a thick stand of ponderosas out in the distance. Apparently, those trees were hiding an oasis beyond them, complete with a hammock stretched between two trees.

“Wow,” was all she could think to say, imagining herself escaping to the hammock and sleeping the day away.

“Yeah. Women seem to love the lake.”

That woke her up. “Women?”

“Yep.”

“Ah, so the rumor about you floating around town is true then?”

He stopped hammering to regard her. “This town has nothing better to do than flap gums.”

“Well, people also say that you’re sort of a bad-ass. That even Rooster doesn’t want to mess with you. Big Joe once mentioned that your word is gold, and that he trusts you completely. A pretty-nice thing for people to say about you—the trust part, I mean. You should hear what they say about me,” she told him.

“Oh, the poor, pitiful widow thing? Don’t let it get to you.”

“See, even you know about it,” Kendall replied, feeling disgusted with everything.

“I never thought of you as a poor widow, but I *have* thought of you as a priss.”

She swallowed a gasp. “A priss?”

“You were with Garrett, I figured you never had to lift a finger.”

“Oh,” was all she could think to say. The Stanleys’ were a tad on the spoiled side. She guessed she couldn’t blame Charlie for thinking that.

“So, where are all these hot women who throw themselves at you?”

Charlie rubbed the hammer on his chin, thinking. For the first time, she took the opportunity to regard him fully. Behind those brown eyes and rugged cowboy exterior, flickered a sparkle of a friendly soul mixed with a whole lot of sand. And then an unexpected twinge of guilt shot through her. She had no business noticing anything pleasurable about Charlie Walters and had no business asking him such personal questions. She let out another long sigh. She didn't want him to think she was flirting, it was just nice to talk to someone about something other than death.

"What I have brought home, you probably wouldn't consider very much a lady," he said answering her forgotten question and pulling her back into the conversation. Her face ignited into flames thinking about Charlie seducing a woman. Something told her he would be really great at it.

"It's really none of my business anyway," she said, trying to end the subject. She found one last board on the ground and then handed it to him.

"I hope this holds your horse," he said to her. She looked at the wood doubtful. Should she tell him Diablo busted down everything and anything Rooster had put him in?

"I might have to eventually buy some heavy steel panels, or something," she thought out loud, still gazing at the weathered wood.

"Maybe a concrete wall would be better, from what I know of the horse. Will you hand me that spool of wire on the ground right there?"

She retrieved it and then held it out to him. He smiled. “When I said women like the lake, I was referring to the horses. Every single one of my horses are mares.”

“Oh,” she exhaled and then stopped. He took the wire from her. “Thank you, Kenny.”

Kenny?

“Don’t...don’t call me that,” she whispered, looking over to her son to see if he had over-heard.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No,” Kendall turned and came face to face with the cowboy. Her body turned itself on like somebody flipped a freaking light switch. Charlie was all man, all cowboy, even more so than Garrett. When his hand landed on her shoulder, she jerked it out from under his touch, guilt burning right through the fabric of her shirt. “That’s Garrett’s term, don’t use it in front of Ty,” she explained shakily. Ty stood up and even though he was only four, seemed to pick up on the fact that she was upset. “Mommy, I want to go home,” he whined. She closed her eyes feeling Charlie’s confusion in her abrupt change in attitude.

“Ty, this is home.”

“But he’s not daddy,” Ty said, rubbing his eyes. “I don’t like him.”

Charlie leaned up against a post, folded his arms and thought of nothing else but the grieving widow and her little boy hiding inside trailer number four, while he stared like a hawk at the entrance of his ranch. The sun was about to disappear beyond the trees and still no sign of Big Joe and Diablo.

He clenched his jaw. Kendall and Ty hadn't even been here for a few hours and already, he almost regretted getting himself involved. But he had to admit, she'd taken him by surprise when she jumped in and helped. She was nothing like he remembered, she wasn't snooty, or high maintenance. She was just a woman with a broken heart, a broken spirit from battling life alone. He caught her peeking out the window at him. If she'd just come back out, he'd explain that when he'd suggested she help repair the corral, he was only joking. But, she surprised him with her willingness to try. He didn't mean to upset her by mentioning the old nick name he'd heard around town. Now here he was worried about her feelings, her son's perception of him, and waiting for Big Joe, while feeling like the world's biggest Jackass.

Finally, Joe's white dually truck slowly made its way onto the property. It was a relief to have Joe here to help smooth the waters. Except,

even from as far back Joe's rig was, he could already hear Diablo's kicking and squealing, knocking himself around inside Joe's stock trailer like a canned tornado. Kendall and Ty must have heard the commotion, because they finally emerged through her trailer door, both of their faces blotched from tears.

The truck parked in front of the corral and Joe got out looking about as upset as his new tenants. "What happened? What took so long?" Charlie asked, feeling a bit edgy himself. Big Joe threw his arms up and started shouting, while Kendall looked on covering her mouth with one hand, the other was firmly clamped around the poor kid's wrist.

"Diablo! Diablo!" Ty shouted, trying to make a leap for the trailer. Oh, that's why she put the latch on the boy. By the banging of the metal, he wasn't sure he even wanted to approach the horse.

"Well, one of Rooster's workers had gone and locked the darn gate to the barn, and then tried to tell me that they'd lost the key. Yeah, right. I saw a rifle shoved between hale bales. They were waiting for Rooster to show up and shoot him, I could see the guilt written all over their lying faces. I had to take crowbar to break the lock and shake a few of them off my back just to get Diablo out of there. Thankfully, he loaded fine. Perfectly fine. We would have been here an hour ago, but someone ran me off the road and pushed my truck right into a ditch. The trailer stayed on the blacktop, which

was a blessing, but look at my grill! Katie's gonna ring my damn neck over this!"

Charlie bent his head back to see the front of the truck with a heck of a dent dead center of the grill. He looked over to Kendall, who's complexion had morphed to a ghostly white. She was now covering Ty's ears with her hands, obviously trying to protect him from Big Joe's foul language.

"Rooster? Do you think Rooster realized you broke the lock and then tried to run you off the road, Joe?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"I don't know, Kendall. I just don't know. I wouldn't doubt it. I don't think I've seen that truck before, but that don't mean anything. I stayed on the side of the road and waited for Diablo to calm down, but he won't. He needs to relax before we unload him."

"Back the trailer up to the gate and let him unload himself into the corral. If he stays inside that tuna can, he's going to wind up hurting himself," Charlie said.

"I tied him inside. When I wrecked, he pulled back so hard on the rope that the knot I tied burned itself together."

"Then I'll cut the rope. I'll do that first, and then you open the gate."

Big Joe backed as close as he could to the corral, while Charlie stood ready with a knife in his hand. It took a few tries and near misses, but he managed to cut through the rope to release Diablo. Two seconds later,

Kendall opened the gate and Diablo tumbled out of the back of the trailer, snorting and hollering. The horse was frantic, running in circles with his tail high, the long hairs flying out like a banner. That's when they all noticed the blood.

Kendall groaned. "Diablo's hurt! He's hurt!"

Charlie looked down at his hand. Blood was everywhere and pain shot up his arm like a bullet.

"He's going to be fine. All that blood isn't his, it's mine."

She spun on him, with eyes wider than before. When she looked down at his hand, she sucked in a huge gulp of air.

"Oh, Charlie, that looks deep. We've got to get you to the doctor!"

"Like heck you do. I'll bandage it up myself."

"Like heck you will. Joe, tell this man that he needs a real doctor!"

Joe's skin turned as white as a bedsheet when he peered down at his hand. "That horse bit half your hand off. You better let me drive you to Pinedale Medical."

"Charlie has an owie," Ty said, looking at Charlie with real concern in his little blue eyes. That look was like a punch. He needed to toughen up in front of the kid.

Kendall raced inside her trailer and then bounded out with a T-shirt in her hand. She didn't ask for permission, she just grabbed his hand and then

wrapped that shirt around the bite so tight, his fingers went numb. It surprised him just how strong her tiny hands were. But the bleeding wouldn't slow down and for a moment, he thought he might be getting a little sick to the stomach.

“I don't want to pass out in front of the kid,” he gritted.

“Joe!” she shouted in his ear, while world tipped on its axis.

Joe took his hand into his and squeezed and held it while Kendall wrapped even tighter.

“Listen up, you're going to emergency care or else,” she demanded. He looked down at his hand. A chunk of his flesh was on the ground. It was worse than he thought.

“Is Charlie going to die like daddy?” Ty asked, and then immediately shoved his thumb in his mouth, sucking as if his life depended on it.

“No, Ty. He won't die. Not as long as he agrees to go to the doctor like a good boy,” Kendall said, empathizing the last of her words to make him feel like a jackass again. Ty pulled his thumb out of his mouth making a popping sound. “I don't want Charlie to die.”

That tore it. “Oh, hell. Sneak me a shot of whiskey before we go—and don't let the kid see me drink it.”

Big Joe muttered something about him being one hell of a role model and then went inside his trailer to retrieve a cup with the whiskey.

“You told me you quit,” Big Joe muttered, looking disgusted with him before shoving him into the back seat of his truck. Kendall raced to get Ty’s car seat and fastened it next to him. The boy wouldn’t stop staring at him with a look of terror on his little face. He wanted like hell to give into the pain but he forced himself to smile at the kid instead. “I’m going to be okay, Little Scratcher.”

He’d almost believed it himself, but Kendall wouldn’t stop turning back to look at him with fear-filled expression. She was over reacting, but her concern for him over just one lousy horse bite tugged at him. The girl had too much heart for her own good.

As the world faded from full colors to shades of grey, he heard her ask Joe why men always had to be so stubborn about taking care of themselves, and why it was due to stuff like this, that she would never let Ty mess with horses. What a shame, he thought, before he faded out.

An hour later and Charlie opened his eyes to stare right into a set of green panther looking orbs staring right back down at him. Kendall hovered over his bedside, golden hair spilling over them both and looking for all the world like she expected for his head to fall from his shoulders. She had really had beautiful eyes, but it would be nice to see them do something other than look so damn unhappy.

Charlie lifted his hand and then winced at the pain it caused. He vaguely remembered the doc putting stitches in it and something about the horse having bit off a chunk of flesh. So, Diablo bit him? First thing when he gets home, he's going to bite the horse back and maybe even take off part of his ear to even out the score.

When he tried to sit up, a small hand pushed against his shoulder. "Doc said you lost quite a bit of blood. You better stay down," Kendall said. Her concern was sweet and amusing, but he wasn't used to being mothered.

"Stay down, and behave yourself," Big Joe echoed from behind her.

"Where's the kid?"

"Katie came and picked him up. You stay down," Joe repeated.

"Well, if the kid ain't here, then where are my smokes?" he asked, staring up at the awful ceiling inside the treatment room. He closed his eyes again, cursing under his breath. Dammit, he hated hospitals.

"We threw them out. You can't smoke inside hospitals," Big Joe informed him.

"You did what? Joe, if I could get out of this bed, I'd kick your scrawny ass."

"I don't want to see you die," Kendall told him softly, standing back up to hover over him once more. She placed a soft hand over his forehead

checking him for a damned fever. When he smelled her perfume, he peeked open an eye and saw right down the neck of her shirt.

“I’m not gonna...woman, I’m not your ex-husband. The Lord has had plenty of chances to take me and I get rejected every time. I’m not going to die.”

“It wasn’t us, the nurse took your cigarettes,” she admitted, innocently unaware that she was giving him a full view of the most incredible cleavage he’d ever seen. He was too worn out to argue, but as soon as they got back to the ranch, he’d set some ground rules. Plain and simple. The room turned in circles. Maybe Kendall was right, and men were nothing but hard headed fools. But he still felt bad for upsetting her and the boy earlier. “I’m sorry I called you what I called you earlier. I’m sorry I brought up Garrett. If I opened old wounds, I didn’t mean to,” he told her.

“Don’t worry about it, Charlie. My husband is dead, and now Ty and I are just going to have to deal with it.”

“Well, I think that just sucks,” he said abruptly. “Could you please go and rescue my cigarettes?”

“No. Those things will kill you even faster than horses will.”

Kendall tossed and turned wondering if the mattress she was laying on had rocks stuffed between the springs. Besides being uncomfortable,

constantly running Ty over to Charlie's trailer to use his bathroom, which, was beginning to look like her son's way of trying to assure himself Charlie hadn't died, making sure Diablo hadn't found a way to break out of the corral, and feeling incredibly lonely, Kendall wasn't sure she would ever know a good night's sleep again. In the last seven days since they'd arrived here, the weather had taken a drastic turn for the bitter cold, and the heater in the trailer had stopped blowing.

Charlie had become frantic trying to make all the repairs with just one hand. She helped where she could, but was in the way more than anything. Charlie finally had to bring them all his extra blankets, acting pretty fed up with his own lack of maintenance with his property. He promised Ty that by tomorrow night, he and his mama would have plumbing and a new heater come hell or high water. Charlie also spent the better part of an hour during a brief snow flurry working with Diablo to earn enough of the horse's trust, so he could put a blanket on his back.

When she went out to thank him for making sure Diablo was warm, she'd found him leaning against a post with his eyes closed and with a lit cigarette wedged between the fingers of his one healthy hand. Even with him relaxed like that, he was in pain. She could see it in the deep V between his brows. She wished she could help him.

But, this gave her an opportunity to take in his long and lean figure, obviously chiseled by years in the saddle. There was no doubt, Charlie Walters was all man, and totally stubborn. She must have made a face when he opened his eyes and exhaled the smoke, because when he discovered her watching, he squashed the cigarette out on the heel of his boot and then proceeded to lecture *her* about who was really in charge of the ranch and that he didn't need a mother looking out for him.

She'd tried to explain that being a mother wasn't a switch she could just turn off. Charlie was a grown man and could take care of himself and his ranch—kind of. She'd never, in her life seen a life in such disarray. It bugged her, and she continually fought the urge to clean or organize something.

As Kendall set aside that scene to stare into the darkness, she wondered how long her bladder would hold out for the night. She had to admit, it wasn't all that bad living in Charlie's world. He was incredibly gracious, extremely easy going (mostly) and the last thought she had, shot guilt right through her, but it was hard to ignore that Charlie was also very easy to look at.

Kendall sighed, as Ty's little shadow entered into her room.

“Can I sleep in here, mommy? I'm cold, and I miss daddy.”

Yep, guilt was her constant companion these days. Ty mentioned Garrett every day, while she was doing her best to forget. She had no idea how miserable she was until she wasn't. Kendall folded the blanket back.

“Sure, you can buddy. Just for tonight.”

He crawled up onto the bed and curled himself tightly against her side. She wrapped Ty in her arms realizing that she would have done it all over again for Ty. She kissed the top of his head, her bitterness easing. At least Garrett gave her a beautiful son.

“I like it here,” he said with a yawn.

“You do? Even though it's not nice like grandpa's place?”

“Uh, huh. And I don't hate Charlie anymore. I'm glad he isn't going to die.”

Kendall tucked the blankets around his little body, happy that they were both content with their new living arrangements. Knowing Ty was okay with it all, alleviated enough guilt that she figured she could sleep now.

“Me too, buddy.”

Kendall continued to snuggle her son, with one last thought filtering through her mind. Before she finds a job, she decided she'd get to really making this a home for Ty. She'd start by cleaning everything. This trailer,

Charlie's trailer, the entire trailer park, *everything*. Plus, it would be a good way to pay Charlie back for all he's done for them.

"Good Morning," Kendall declared to her landlord staring down at her unconvinced. "Did you know I finally got an introduction to your herd of wild horses? They're grazing all around the trailers, driving Diablo absolutely nuts, and getting themselves into the hay and maybe even the oats?"

The morning sun casted him in shades of orange, while he listened at his front door wearing nothing but faded jeans and a headful of thick, wet hair. The smell of soap lingered around him, as she gazed up to his tanned chest, rippled with muscles and evenly mixed with scars and tattoos. He still had the bandage on his hand, but he was holding a cup of coffee with it. When her gaze moved past the cup to land on the dark trail of hair circling his navel, her face warmed, and then her tongue grew ten sizes too big to finish speaking. She dropped her gaze. She shouldn't allow dirty thoughts. Not today, anyway.

"Yep," he said, winking at Ty and putting down his coffee to pull a shirt over his head. "They come down to visit me from time to time," he informed her, as he stepped away from the door to allow her and Ty

entrance. Ty let go of her hand and quickly followed Charlie inside his trailer. The living room in this trailer was only slightly larger than in trailer number four. All the walls held pictures of Charlie's rodeo career, and held a few pieces of worn-out furniture.

Charlie walked into the kitchen, handed Ty a donut and then reached for the coffee pot. She would have said no to the donut, but seeing Charlie fresh from a shower and so early in the morning with his bare feet on the linoleum floor, gave her a strange intimate feeling. And, by the time she'd gathered herself to say something about the donut, Ty had already taken a big bite out of it.

"Coffee?" Charlie offered, holding out an old tin cup, steam rising from the top. The aroma of dark roasted Columbian beans filled the air, but having coffee together would require conversation, and more time to feel guilty about where her head was trying to take her since seeing his chest.

"No thanks. I'll just hurry up with our bathing and we'll get out of your way."

"Suit yourself. But give the water heater a chance to catch up. I take hot enough showers to cook lobster," he winked, and then sipped from his cup.

An image of him hot and soapy flashed through her mind and she forced herself to survey the pictures on the walls to stop thinking about it.

All that accomplished was confirm why Charlie had the reputation that he did. From the looks of the photographs, he was a master riding with anything with four legs. There were several of him on bulls or bareback riding, but when she got to the one of him roping, she stopped and stared at it.

“You roped too?”

“Uh, huh. It wasn’t my favorite, but I guess I better learn to love it though,” he added.

“Why?”

“Well, because Big Joe needs a new roping partner. And I told him I’d give it a try.”

“You’re leaving? To rope with Joe?” The faintest strings of panic pulled on her, and she wondered why. It wasn’t any of her concern what Charlie decided to do with himself.

Charlie rested his weight on one hip, taking a sip of the coffee. “Don’t be mad at Big Joe. Garrett would’ve wanted him to carry on, don’t you think? I’m heading down to Sonoita to see if these old bones can still lasso a set of horns.”

Kendall watched her son sit cross-legged on the floor next to Charlie’s bare feet and chow down on his donut. He was shooting glances up to Charlie that looked way too much like adoration. Wow, her son sure

changed his tune quick, and knowing her son's heart was vulnerable again, terrified her.

“Kendall? Don't you think Big Joe should have a shot at what he worked so hard for?”

Shaken, she forced herself back into the conversation. “Yes, I do. I don't blame him at all. He has all those kids to provide for.”

“That's how I see it too.”

Charlie was right. Garrett would've expected Big Joe to keep going, so no, she wasn't mad, but her son didn't need to get his little heart all wrapped up in another cowboy with a death wish. Kendall didn't realize she was zoning out on him again, until Charlie cleared his throat. When she tore her gaze from Ty to look back at him, he was wincing from pain as he placed his coffee cup on the counter.

“Except...” she started.

“Except, what?”

“Well, what about all those nuts and bolts you keep complaining about? What about doctor's orders?” Your hand isn't even healed yet. What is it about rodeo that turns grown men into cowboy kamikazes?”

He raised his eyebrows at her, and shot a look that effectively stopped her from saying anything else. He didn't want a mother. Truth was, she wasn't worried about him, as much as for herself and for Ty. Kendall bit

down on her lower lip, realizing that they'd come to expect way too much from Charlie. He wasn't going to change his lifestyle just for the sake of his tenants, because that would be insane. It was her. She was the one not being fair and in her right mind.

"I'm riding Lady," he assured her, gently. Kendall's mind flashed back. She remembered Lady. That was the horse Joe put his kids on, she was as gentle as a kitten and famous for taking care of her riders. "I'll be back in three days," Charlie continued, as if he could easily read her weakest of fears that she didn't want to admit, even to herself. "You will be fine. There are guns in my safe. If anything goes screwy, use one," he said, as if handling weapons should be second nature to her.

"I'm not a fan of guns," she admitted.

"I always, always, carry a gun on me. Out here, you'd be stupid not to. There's nothing to be afraid of, I'll teach you."

"Okay, fine, you can teach me. Good luck in Sonoita," she said, a tad flippant, hoping to cover her relief and embarrassing thoughts of him.

He raised a single eyebrow, disbelief clearly written on his features, and she wondered how he could tell she was trying to fool him.

"I understand that this might be hard for you. I can imagine you never want to hear about roping again after the accident, but you need to know that life goes on and what happened to Garrett is pretty damned uncommon.

You and Ty here are going to be fine—eventually. I’m here to help, but I still have a life to live, and so do you. Kendall, you heard what I said about the guns right?”

She nodded, realizing that Charlie had a way of taking control of things and putting her at ease. But she’d never picked up a gun in her life. “Maybe you could give me some pointers before you take off,” she weakly suggested. He smiled, and her heart did an unexpected weird little jolt.

“With the guns?” he asked.

“Yes, with the guns, what did you think I meant?”

“Well, the way you keep on staring at me, I’m beginning to wonder,” he teased, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly. “I’ve never held a weapon before,” she corrected him, but her skin went right back to burning on her face, and the way he continued to give her that certain look, only made it burn hotter.

“I’m glad you cleared that up.”

He looked down at Ty who was still sitting down by his feet like an obedient puppy. It became painfully clear where Ty’s loyalties were heading. “Damn, Little Scratcher. It looks like you rubbed your face in cow pie.” Kendall looked at her son’s face and she had to wonder if he ate the donut or if he was trying to give himself a chocolate facial.

“Cold water or hot, I’m cleaning you up now,” she told her son as she marched up to him to scoop him up off the ground. Charlie never moved to give her the space she needed when she swung Ty up on her hip.

The three of them stood face to face, eye to eye in Charlie’s kitchen and while her knees threatened to quake from the closeness, Ty went and put the last piece of his donut in Charlie’s mouth.

The face Charlie made being forced to eat Ty’s soggy piece of face-washed donut, made Kendall want to cry. Charlie even thanked him for it.

Chapter Four

The breeze lifted a strand of hair, tickling Charlie’s nose and carrying the scent of honey. He stood behind Kendall, reaching around both sides of her to show her how to properly hold a revolver. He doubted at this rate she could shoot the broad side of a barn, since her arms shook so badly. But, the warmth of her body pressed against his, as she tried to level her aim. All the moving around, made it harder than hell for him to concentrate.

“I’m scared,” she whispered.

“Just relax. You’re going to be dangerous with this thing if you don’t relax.”

Her arms dropped and she turned to face him. Charlie swallowed hard. She was inches from him, her panther-like eyes flickering her anxiety.

“I never relax. Never. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. You’re always so darned happy and fancy free all the time and I’m—not.”

“You’ve been through a lot, and you have a son to care for and protect,” he said, hoping to ease her mind.

“I really need a day in that hammock you told me about.”

Charlie paused, thinking about her stretched out on a hammock, but he squashed those thoughts, because he could tell she wasn’t lying, she was indeed, afraid. He really wanted to go to Sonoita, but maybe he’d better not. Not if she couldn’t at least protect herself and Ty. His ranch bordered a national forest and wild animals and trespassing hunters were a common occurrence. Plus, what about Rooster and his stupid threats?”

“I’ll stay home if you want,” he relented. Her eyes snapped up to him, flashing green fire.

“Oh, no. Nope, nope...I can do this. You don’t want a mother, well, I don’t want anyone to baby me. I’ll figure this out.”

She turned back to face the fence post lined with old soda cans. She spread her legs slightly and held out the gun. Charlie shook his head at the picture she presented and wondered if he was going to earn a halo and a set

of wings from the man upstairs. It was tough trying to ignore how beautiful she was. He got up behind her again and spoke into her ear.

“Okay, you’ve got a good steady aim this time. Pretty-soon, Big Joe and Katie will be back from taking the kids to get pizza. We’re running out of time. If you’re going to do this, do it now. Fire the gun!”

Smoke followed the blast from the gun as a can sailed high into the air along with her shout of victory. “Oh, wow, I did it!” she cried, doing a little dance, wiggling herself in front of him with pride on her face.

“Hey! Watch it! That damn gun is still loaded. You’re going to blow my foot off!”

“Oh!” she laughed, carefully handing the gun back to him. He took it and watched amused as she ran to retrieve the can. She held it up in the sun to show off a giant hole dead center.

“I’m going to mount this on the wall. Like hunters do to their deer.”

“Ha! Now that, would look perfect in your fancy new trailer,” he said, laughing and shaking his head. “By the way, everything is fixed in there, so you now have your own bathroom and heat. Thanks for being so patient.”

She took a step toward him, her expression serious as her joy evaporated.

“When do you leave for Sonoita?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Okay. We’ll be fine.”

Kendall decided with Charlie out of the way, and with Ty down for a nap, she could do some cleaning. She wrapped her head in a scarf, patted down her puffy eyes, put on some gloves and then headed out the door. She was looking forward to the work. Anything, to keep her mind off her troubles and to keep herself from slipping into inappropriate visions of Charlie that inexplicably started when she saw him shirtless after his shower.

The lack of sleep and her own guilt needed to be worked off anyway. She could hear Pinedale now; Kendall Stanley has gone and got herself all worked up over a man after becoming a widow after only six and a half months. Yeah, she could already hear the hushed whispers and she didn’t need that. Once this chore was done, she’d have to find a real job and face real life again. But why Charlie continued to invade her thoughts even, innocently, unnerved her, she figured it was just due to her misplaced loneliness. She supposed any woman might be confused at a time like this. That’s why, she was going to throw herself into making this place shine.

Kendall had resolved herself to just scrub away her worries, when she found an empty stall with broken railings. One main beam had been busted

in half, and there was a trail of broken dirt with his tracks heading straight for the lake and the mares.

Kendall had to wake Ty up, give him an apple and carry his sleepy self into her truck. She drove them down the only visible road carved into the grassland that hopefully, would lead down to where Diablo and the rest of Charlie's horses might be hiding.

Just her luck, Diablo would decide to do something crazy like this while Charlie was out of town. Kendall ripped the scarf off her head as she navigated the winding road that snaked its way deep into a stand of tall Ponderosa pines. She had to admit, she had no clue Charlie's property would only increase in beauty the further back she drove. It was untouched, unspoiled and she could just imagine a fancy log cabin situated right in the middle of...

What in the world? Where did that come from?

It was like someone pulled her thought, and then manifested it into reality. There, sitting alongside the lake, stood a log built home. A huge cabin with a red pitched roof, surrounded by a covered porch sweeping around the perimeter, giving anyone standing on it, a perfect view of a lake with water as crystal blue as she'd ever seen. Ty put his apple in his lap and clapped his hands. Even a four-year-old could appreciate how beautiful it was.

Why didn't Charlie live here? Why did he live in that tin can of a trailer when he had this?

The closer she drove, the more her mouth gaped open at the sight of the home. And there, just along the shoreline of the lake, grazed the horses. Diablo was amongst them, content to be with company.

"Diablo!" Ty called out angrily. "You're a bad horse! Go home!"

"It's okay, Ty. There's no way for us to get him back. Not with Charlie and Joe in Sonoita. Hopefully, he won't be a bad horse," she told him. "Want to get out and walk around?" He nodded. Kendall stepped out of the vehicle, second guessing herself for trespassing. Maybe Charlie had a good reason for not mentioning the cabin. But curiosity burned hot enough that she just had to sneak a look at the place.

She took Ty's hand and the two of them stepped onto the porch. The scent of fresh cut pine filled her. There was sawdust piled in places, a circular saw left unattended and showing signs of rust, a leveling stick leaned up against an unfinished railing. At one point, he'd worked and this and quit. So, why did he stop? Is his body hurting that badly? Or did something else cause him to give up on it?

Kendall ran a hand over the railing as they wandered toward the back of the house to get a clear view of the lake. She could easily see across to the opposite shore, but the way the wind rippled along the water's surface,

ruffling the sky's reflection and lifting the scent of the woods, with the snow-capped mountains of Flagstaff hanging by invisible strings in the distance, Kendall knew a peace she hadn't felt in a long time. No, not even Rooster's ranch could compete with this. The crappy trailers alongside the road were nothing but a decoy hiding the incredible truth; Charlie really was living in Heaven.

With a renewed sense of the world around her, Kendall had to convince her son that leaving left Diablo to his new-found paradise, would be okay, and then she drove back them back toward the trailers determined now more than ever to help Charlie. Obviously, he was trying to make himself a home. And she wanted to help.

“You ready, Charlie?”

Charlie held the rope, feeling goosebumps prick his skin. If he didn't know any better, he could swear Garrett's ghost was right there with him watching his every move. Maybe for a good reason, not only was he trying to be Joe's new header, he was also having a heck of a time keeping himself from worrying over Kendall and Ty's welfare. What was he thinking leaving them with a gun, alone with Diablo, alone period? Three times he picked up his cell to check to see if they were alright, and three times he

shut the phone down. Now, here he was, staring down at an empty arena with a rope in the hand that Garrett's horse tried to bite a hole through.

They were only tenants. Not his responsibility, he tried to convince himself. "Yeah. Let's go," he told Joe.

The sound of the chute rang in his ears and instinctively, his horse dropped his rear before making the mighty lunge with his hind end to propel them both forward. His hand lifted over his head as he swung the loop. With a leap of faith, Charlie let the rope fly. The steer's momentum stopped abruptly by the rope that perfectly landed around his horns, and before Charlie could register what had just taken place, Big Joe had already caught the animal by its hind feet and had stretched him out. Charlie's eyes moistened as he heard the score. He could still do it.

The big man's face broke into a wide grin as he rode up alongside him collecting his rope. "Wow, Charlie, I admit, I struggled just thinking about roping without Garrett, but I gotta tell you, buddy. That was damned impressive. You might need to oil your joints now and then, but you haven't forgotten how to catch a steer."

"It felt good too," he admitted, but thinking to himself that he might have to swallow a bottle of aspirin tomorrow. It would all be worth it.

By the end of the day, Kendall managed to load the back of her truck with trash. She tossed everything that wasn't nailed down or looked to be personal or useful. The cool air, the picture of Charlie's reaction, kept her going, and she'd even caught herself singing a few of her favorite songs to pass the time. Ty happily kept himself busy looking for bugs to put in a mason jar, and every now and then would stop his search to listen, or to ask when Charlie was coming back home.

“I don't know exactly when, Ty.”

Ty placed his jar on a straw bale and then wiped at his nose. “He said he'd come back,” her son said reassuringly. His sweet tone made her wonder if while she was worried about his little feelings, if in fact, he was also worried about hers. She wrapped her hand around his little one. Even though Ty was only four, she could already tell that he would inherit the Stanley's long fingers and strong grip. But he was also inheriting the love of everything cowboy. She sighed. The last thing she wanted, was to fight Ty at every turn.

“Ty, Charlie has his own life, to do the things he wants to do, and we have ours, okay?”

Ty shrugged. He didn't understand, and she didn't want to push the issue and hurt him.

She knew he missed his daddy, but he seemed to be so taken by Charlie, and knowing that was a good reason to worry. She just didn't want to see her son hurt when eventually, they'd have to move out and start out on their own.

"Can I ride my stick horse now?"

"I really don't want..."

"Why?"

"Because, I'd rather you go back to catching bugs for your jar, okay?"

The disappointment on his face, pierced her heart.

"Come give me a hug, I'm sorry, son," she said, wrapping her arms around him. "Ty, I know you like horses, so do I. But people get hurt around them, and I just want you to stay safe."

"What about Charlie. Don't you want him to stay safe?" he surprised her by asking.

"Sure, I do. But as I said before, he has his own life. I don't make his decisions."

"I saw Charlie riding horses with daddy," Ty insisted, his blue eyes brightening.

"You did?"

"Uh, huh. In the barn."

"Show me."

Ty took her by the hand and led her into the barn where a small, wooden trunk was hidden under a few layers of saddle blankets. “In there,” Ty said, pointing at the box. Curious, she went ahead and opened the lid to discover buckles and few of old photos. Pictures, some of them torn, were of Charlie roping off a pony at a young age. Photos of Charlie and Big Joe all grown up and sitting at a bar. And then there was a photo of Charlie and Garrett standing side by side next to a Christmas tree. Kendall stared at the photo in amazement. Ty was truly Garrett’s little reflection when Garrett was young, and she had no idea that Charlie and Garrett even knew each other back then. Why didn’t Charlie mention it? Clearly, he knew him well, so what gives?

Ty grabbed onto one of Charlie’s old buckles and held it tight. She exhaled. “I’m sorry, son but you can’t keep that. It belongs to Charlie.”

“Mine.”

“No, Ty. Come on, please put the buckle back.”

“But I want it,” he argued, his voice whining.

Kendall gently pried the buckle from his fingers feeling horrible as she did it. “It doesn’t belong to us, we can’t keep it,” she tried to explain. Gee, the last thing she wanted to do today, was be the bad guy.

Ty crossed his arms and jutted out his lower lip when she put the buckle in the box and closed everything up exactly how they’d found it.

“I know what will make you happy. Want to go with me to the dump? You’ll like it there, big tractors, noises, and it stinks!” she told him, playfully poking at his belly. Ty struggled to hold his angry face, but one more tickle to this belly and his little cheeks puffed, as he broke out into a grin.

“Okay!”

“Okay, let’s get you in your car seat and maybe afterwards, we’ll stop and get a snack.”

“And then Charlie will be home?”

She was about to pull out of Charlie’s ranch when the sight of Rooster’s black Jeep had parked sideways, blocking the entrance.

This day is only getting better and better...

“Papa!” Ty yelled, clapping his hands.

Kendall couldn’t move forward, Rooster had them effectively trapped. When he got out and slammed his door, she held her breath, wondering what was so important he had to block them from leaving.

Rooster walked right up to her driver window and started tapping on the glass with the end of his cane. His breath fogged the glass between them until she couldn’t even see him anymore.

“I need to talk to you,” he demanded. She didn’t have to let the window down, she didn’t even have to look at him. But she couldn’t ignore him, Ty loved him and she did too, in a way. Knowing she’d probably wind up regretting it, she inched the window just far enough that he could see her eyes unobstructed.

“What in God’s name are you and Ty doing here? Where’s Diablo?”

“Hi Papa!”

“Hey there, boy,” he returned, rewarding Ty with a wink, and then went right back to glaring at her.

Kendall shrugged. She thought he knew they’d moved here and brought the horse. After all, Pinedale was a small community, and news travels like a locomotive. “We live here,” she informed him, a little bit proud of herself for the surprised look that quickly transformed the old man’s face.

“Live here? At this pile of crap trailer park? Where’s the horse?”

“You gave him to me, and now that’s my business—not yours. Rooster, what do you want—to point a gun at him again? You’re not getting that chance, I promise you.”

His bushy salt and pepper eye brows raised.

“Oh really? Well, you tell Charlie to get ahold of me, pronto.”

“I can’t. He’s roping with Big Joe down in Sonoita.”

The moment she'd said the words, she wished she could take them back. Surprise turned to pure anger, and the way Rooster could go from zero to ninety had always unsettled her—today was no different.

“Roping? That’s a joke. Some days, that man can barely walk.”

“He’s fine, Rooster,” she said, realizing she sounded a little too protective. Rooster squinted at her, and she could feel his accusations coming before he could spit them out.

“Charlie plays trucks with me,” Ty interrupted, leaning over in his car seat to reach out toward his grandpa. “That’s nice,” Rooster replied thinly, but never removing his stare from her.

“Kendall. You know, people in this town are pissed at you for not putting Diablo down. How can you live with yourself for harboring a killer?” he asked, shoving a hand deep into his pocket. “And now you’re flirting with someone else? It just doesn’t look right,” he said.

Humiliation, anger and hurt, all rolled up to form rock in her gut that she wished like hell she could clobber him with. “Garretts only been gone for just over six months. Do you really think...”

“I don’t know what I think. But I do know that I don’t want my grandson or Diablo here. And since I have your attention, when are you going to bring Ty over to see Mary? Her feelings are torn up thinking that you’re going to keep her grandson from her.”

“I’d never do that. I know how much you *both* love Ty. I’ll bring him by.”

“Why don’t you just let Ty live with us? It would be better than this garbage.” Kendall mentally willed herself to stay calm. “Rooster, Ty loves it here, and as far as the horse, you’d rather see him six feet under, right? Now, get out of our way or I’m calling the Sherriff—or do you have the entire department in your pocket?” Rooster grinned at her remark, but took a few steps away from her truck. “Diablo is as good as dead. It’s only a matter of time. The law can’t be everywhere, Kendall. And I expect you to bring the boy to the ranch soon.”

Ty started whimpering next to her, his little eyes following his grandpa as Rooster angrily climbed back into his Jeep, spinning dirt from the back tires. Kendall white-knuckled the steering wheel watching him go feeling like she’d done something wrong as a mother. She hated arguing with Rooster in front of Ty, but Rooster had no right to show up here uninvited and start issuing threats. She was glad that Diablo had broken out of his stall now. Nobody knew about the lake and how it sat protected deep inside the woods, so that would at least protect him until Charlie got back. But what business does Rooster have with Charlie, anyway? The picture of Charlie and Garrett standing by the tree added more fuel to her thoughts. Of course, most of the cowboys in this town knew of each other, so, it wasn’t

all that surprising. It never dawned on her to even ask Charlie, how much he knew Garrett or his dad. She'd never felt strong enough to talk about it, and he never offered—never once even offered condolences. If they were close, then why the heck not?

As she drove them toward the county dump, she made up her mind to get to know more about Charlie Walters.

Charlie pulled into his property totally unprepared for what he saw. Not only was the property picked up and looking damn nice, Kendall was sitting on the tailgate of her truck wearing a flowery skirt with boots, her hair loose, and seemed to be waiting for him. As he shifted the truck into park, he stared at her for a moment, deeply appreciating the beautiful picture she'd made, and wondering why he was such a low-life to even take notice.

What's wrong with me? I'm acting like a damn buzzard, wanting to swoop in on a dead man's beautiful wife. Only jerks take advantage of the broken hearted. Jerks. Guys like Garrett, in fact.

Charlie grounded his jaw just weighing what was right and wrong. The sight of one of Ty's toy trucks sitting by the steps of their trailer, reminded him what was important, and solidified that in this case, there

can't be any fantasies floating around in his brain. He couldn't chance it. It wouldn't be right, he knew it wouldn't, and by God, he'd been wrong too much in his life already. He figured he could come up with some excuse and find a way to keep his distance. Big Joe only asked him to give Kendall and her son a roof over their heads and to work with the horse. Sounded easy enough at the time. Now he wasn't so sure. His gaze, like a damn magnet clung to Kendall's shapely leg, that she crossed over the other, that ended with a colorful cowgirl boot. She just sort-of rocked that boot back and forth. It was saying, "Come and get me, Charlie," he thought. Charlie closed his eyes, cursed at himself and then thought of something totally different before he stepped out to greet her.

"Howdy, stranger," she smiled, as he stiffly made his way toward her. Just as he predicted, his body wanted to enact its revenge for the weekend of rodeo. Everything, everywhere hurt like hell. But the smell of Kendall's perfume, along with her happy greeting, forced all that aside and challenged his brand-new oath to keep himself detached. Kendall's upturned face wasn't blotched up anymore, and she'd gone and put on some make-up. In fact, she looked genuinely happy for once, making him wonder if she had finally come to terms with her situation. He sure hoped so, for her and Ty's sake.

"Ouch, Charlie. You're walking a little funny, there. How'd you do?"

He sat next to her, but not too close. “I’m hired—as a part time, back-up only. I told Big Joe that I can’t rodeo full-time. I have too many other things to do. But, I guess I’ve lowered myself, and now I’m a pussy roper like the rest of these Yahoos in Pinedale.”

She laughed, and he was glad that she understood it was all a joke. Bull riders and ropers always poked fun with one another, and nobody meant a thing by it. Although, he might have to rethink the whole which sport was tougher, bulls or ropes, because he couldn’t recall hurting this much when he fell from a bull.

“Wow. Well, I’d say congratulations, but you look like crap. Want a massage?”

“Oh, no, no...no. I’ll get over it. Crap, huh?”

“Well, I bet crap doesn’t hurt as much as you do, right now.”

Her retort made took him off guard and made him chuckle. “Gee, thanks. But it’s nothing a few pills and a good night’s sleep can’t cure. How about you? It looks like you’ve been busy playing Cinderella around here.”

Her green eyes sparkled. “Yep. Heaven Ranch is almost livable now. It was the least I could do. Thanks for taking me, Ty and Diablo on. I know it was a bit more than you expected.”

Charlie nodded appreciatively, and then shot a look over to the corral. Only Diablo wasn’t there. That’s when he noticed the broken rails back to

laying in the dirt. “Kendall, where’s Diablo?”

“At the lake. Which is good because Rooster was here and...”

He jumped off the tailgate.

“What’s wrong?”

“Kendall, he’s a stallion. With his temper and his hormones, he could do a lot of damage to those mares. Why didn’t you call and tell me the horse got loose?”

“I...I...he just looked so happy and I didn’t think...”

“Get in the truck, we’ve got to go get him. Where’s the kid?”

“Rooster came and got him,” she’d said, quickly jumping into the passenger seat. Then it hit him. “Did you just say Rooster was here?”

Her eyes widened. “Yes, while you were in Sonoita. Twice. The first time he blocked the road so I couldn’t get out and...”

“No way. As soon as I deal with Diablo, I’ll deal with Rooster.”

“Are you mad?” she asked, her voice strained. “I know what you’re thinking, but he and Mary really do love Ty.”

“I’m sure they do, but that man has been told to stay off my property so many times, I ought to tattoo a ‘No Trespassing’ sign on his forehead.”

“He insisted he needed to talk to you,” she told him, as she placed her hands on the dash, probably to steady herself. Charlie had no choice but take the rough road that led to the back side of the lake. He had a hunch the

horses moved there to be under the protection of the trees from the advancing cold. He swept his gaze across the shore and then up the hill. It took a moment, but eventually, he saw the wild horses, but there was no sign of the big buckskin. “I still don’t see Diablo. Where the hell did he go?”

Kendall followed his gaze, her lips taking a downward curve.

“I didn’t know we could go this way. It’s so different back here, so much grass and boulders. Wow.”

“Yeah, and mountain lions too. Dang it, do you see him anywhere?”

Kendall made a despondent noise that caught his attention. “No I don’t... Is he really gone?” Kendall then surprised him by leaping out her door as soon as he stepped on the brakes.

“Kendall!”

He got out and immediately, followed after her. He repeatedly called out her name to stop her from running. Kendall ignored him until she reached a row of granite boulders surrounded by flowers. “Kendall! He shouted again, this time loud enough to send a flock of birds to take flight from a nearby tree. When he finally caught up to her, she was holding herself around her middle, fighting to catch her breath.

“He’s gone,” she said between gasp for air. “Something else I tried to trust, just gone.”

“It’s okay, Kendall...we’ll find him. He’ll come back. He probably got a whiff of one the neighboring Apache reservation mares. A stallion can smell a mare’s heat for miles.”

She shook her head, her watery eyes looking up to the sky before dropping her gaze to the ground. “He might come back, I can’t trust him.” Garrett used to do the same thing. Leave for long bouts of time and then come home completely different. Every time he’d change a little more, until one day, I just looked at him and realized that I didn’t even know who or what he was—certainly not a husband or father. Certainly, not the guy I had met and fell in love with. I used to love this lifestyle so much, I left Canada for it. Now I wonder what I was thinking.”

A cold chill swept through him and it had nothing to do with the weather. Watching her anguish over Garrett had come to a point he wasn’t willing to take it anymore. The man never deserved her loyalty, and even though he was a decent rodeo cowboy, he damn sure didn’t represent a real man, or a real cowboy for that matter. No wonder she was determined to keep Ty away from his birthright.

“Kendall, I think there’s something you need to know about Garrett.”

She casted sorrowful eyes at him, and for a moment he couldn’t bring himself to speak. He knew he was about to crush her, but to stand by and do

nothing while she beat herself up over Garrett seemed like a much crueler thing to do.

“Kendall...I know you’re hurting, and it’s understandable. But, I know a few things about Garrett, and I think you better to hear it.”

“What about him?” she asked stiffly, as if she already knew and had to brace herself to hear it again.

Damn, what if she already knows, and I’m just rubbing salt in a wound? And, what if she doesn’t have a clue?

His chest tightened, as his thoughts teeter-tottered. “I may as well tell you, because if you don’t hear it from me, you’re bound to hear it from someone else, since what I want to say is common knowledge around the rodeo community, hell, I think it’s common knowledge everywhere.”

Kendall’s brows squeezed together, indicating she really had no idea where he was going with this. Her lower lip dropped a tad, and then began to slightly quiver as her eyes honed in on him, reflecting her pure innocence.

She really has no clue. Damn you, Garrett.

Charlie inhaled deeply, thinking that if Garrett’s ghost were to magically appear in front of him, he’d probably kick his ass hard enough, he’d die twice. The hurt and confusion in Kendall’s expression, physically hurt. In fact, He could almost talk himself out of telling her. But if he were

in her shoes, he'd want someone to tell him. If he doesn't, she'll keep on agonizing, or worse, hear the news in front of her son by some heartless jerk hoping to stir up typical Pinedale drama.

“This isn't easy, and it's going to hurt. But, you know how Big Joe joked with you that I was a ladies' man? Well, I was nothing compared to Garrett. Kendall, he cheated on you with every woman from every town from Pinedale clear up to Las Vegas. Until now, I wasn't sure if you knew. But you've taken his death so hard, and even though you try and hide your pain from Ty, I can see your hurt. It's so hard for me to just stand by and watch you suffer, and I felt guilty, not saying anything.”

Her blue eyes shifted as she silently listened to him, and he wasn't sure if she was waiting for another shoe to fall. After a few more drawn out moments, and building frustration, he flung both his arms up in the air. “Damn, Kendall, say something! I'm sorry, I know you loved him, I know he's Ty's daddy, and I respect that, but a part of me thinks the son-of-a-bitch got what was coming to him. You and your boy deserve better.”

She finally winced, as if he'd punched her with his words. Then she closed her eyes and left them closed. He wasn't much for feeling bad about the mistakes he's made in life, but he almost wished he could take the words back. When she opened her eyes again, they'd darkened over with a

cold acceptance. "I'm sorry," he said again, feeling his own emotions burn close to the surface.

"No offense, but I'm so sick of people telling me how sorry they are. That's all I hear every damn time I set foot in Pinedale. Well, if this town is so sorry, then why did they make Garrett out to be such a hero when they all knew what he was capable of? Sorry? Maybe they're just sorry he can't prowl around anymore, because they sure had no problem looking the other way for their hometown hero. And then, when they thought I couldn't hear them, folks snickered about it behind my back. Hell, they're still laughing behind my back. I never understood why I felt like I was constantly the brunt of some stupid joke. Even after his death, I came up with all sorts of excuses as to what warranted such behavior from people. I guess I've known all along, but you're the only one brave enough to look me in the eye and tell me the truth. You're the only one who has ever called Garrett what he truly was; A no, good cheating son-of-a-bitch. Thank you."

She still held one arm around her stomach while the other hand wiped at her eyes. "Do all men cheat, Charlie? Is that something people consider normal and I'm the only one who finds it horribly wrong? Of course, I'm sad he's gone. He was my husband and Ty's father. But I've been killing myself with guilt because I don't miss him. I don't miss the life we had. Does admitting that make me even worse of a person than Garrett? Does

that make me terrible, because Ty is suffering from missing Garrett every day, and I feel nothing? My son doesn't realize that he'd never got to spend time with his daddy. He thinks all men just take off whenever they feel like it, that they just follow the rodeo from place to place and its normal not to give a crap about the people you leave behind. God, I hate this, Charlie. I hate what this might do to my son when he grows up and has nobody but Rooster as a role model to look up to. Rooster. The same man that molded Garrett—no damn thank you.”

He could feel Kendall's anger reach out and grab him. She crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked toward the horses once more. There was a bitter expression on her face and he knew she had a damn good reason for it.

“No. It shouldn't ever be normal. I'd like to think there are still some honest men out there. And Kendall, you're a good person. Don't beat yourself up over this. You couldn't have controlled Garrett's behavior any more than you can controlled Diablo's behavior now. There are still good men out there, and you're a strong woman that won't allow Ty to grow up to be like his father. I know that as sure as I'm standing here.”

“Then, chances are good they don't rodeo,” she commented dryly. “Being a cowboy is death sentence for men and their families. And, you're right I won't. Ty is never, ever going to follow in those footsteps. He might

love Diablo, but I'll be sure he loves him from a distance. I'm not going watch my son become obsessed with something so incredibly dangerous." She took a deep breath, looking back at him. "I never used to feel this way. I used to love Arizona and everything that came with it. Now? Now I have a love-hate relationship with just about everything."

Her words stung like hell. He knew it wasn't personal, but she was personally attacking everything he was, everything that made him tick. One of the first things he noticed about Ty was that he and the boy shared the same spirit. He didn't think it was right or fair for her to prevent the kid from becoming a cowboy, if that was what he wanted. Hell, Ty's cowboy roots grow generations deep within his Stanley blood. But, he figured he wouldn't argue. She deserved to feel that way, considering. But if she honestly held such a low regard for cowboys and this life, then what was he beating himself up over? There'd be no chance for them—ever, no matter how much he toyed with the idea of it.

Diablo ended the conversation by emerging from the tree line, head up, onyx tail flagging. He was animated, but otherwise didn't look as though he'd hurt the mares. Kendall exhaled a relieved breath, watching the horse with a both relieved and pained expression.

"Kendall, that's not what I mean about not being like his father, and I don't know what else to say to help you feel better about what you've gone

through,” he admitted, looking down at the dirt beneath his boots. He’d never cheated on anyone, but he’d had plenty of women in his life. Who’s to say if one of them had been cheaters, and he’d unwittingly had a hand in destroying a marriage? The thought churned his gut. “But try not to judge us all for the actions of one man, who let’s face it, was probably never denied anything he ever pointed a finger at. Garrett was a spoiled kid who grew up to be a spoiled man.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t call you when Diablo got loose. He just seemed so happy out here. He was free. I don’t even know why I am fighting so hard to protect him. I know he’s dangerous. Everyone tried to get Garrett to have him gelded, but Garrett hated geldings and he wanted Diablo to remain intact, claiming that keeping him a stallion would keep him hungry, wanting more. She took a deep breath before continuing, a sad chuckle accompanying a head shake. “I guess Garrett thought being with all those women kept him hungry too.”

Charlie could not find a decent response. Garrett probably had all sorts of insane twisted reasons for his actions. Kendall took a few steps toward Diablo and then turned to face him with a defeated expression on her beautiful face.

“Nobody understands why I wanted to save that horse, but, at the time, I couldn’t tell my four-year-old son about all my troubles, so with no

one else, I found myself wandering into Diablo's barn late at night to pour my heart out to him. And as a mom, I also didn't want Ty to see another thing die. Ty is always thanking me for keeping Diablo. That damn horse was the only thing his daddy loved—and he even though Ty is a baby, he knows it. Am I wrong for wanting to protect my son's heart? Do you agree with Rooster and Big Joe? Do you think Diablo is really so dangerous that he caused Garrett's death?"

Charlie closed the distance between them and then instinctively reached out to offer comfort, but he thought better of it and dropped his arm. "I don't think it was on purpose, but Kendall, to be honest, I don't know of a more dangerous animal than a rank stallion. How old is Diablo?"

"Ten. Why?"

Charlie removed his hat and rubbed his forehead against the sleeve of his shirt. "Even if we geld him, it's not going to do much to improve his attitude at his age. But, if I were you, I'd get that done regardless, so at least he can't breed. I guess I better get him back into his corral before something else happens."

"How? He's got all this room, it would be like trying to catch the wind."

"I don't have to control him if I've already earned the trust of the rest of the herd," he told her, before letting out a long and low whistle. "Get in

the truck. The horses should follow us back to the trailers.”

She shot him a skeptical look, but got inside. He also climbed in and then drove slowly back toward the trailers. As he predicted, the mares dutifully followed in line, and as they did, Diablo tucked himself close at the back and followed a few paces behind.

“That’s amazing,” Kendall breathed, as she twisted in her seat and stared out the back window. “How is that even possible? How could you have known they would follow you?”

He shrugged a shoulder. “I’ve just spent many, many hours with those mares, showing them who I am, what I expect, and earning their trust. It all boils down to time and communication. It won’t always work on Diablo though. I think I better order some heavy paneling to try and keep him locked up.

“I um...can’t afford that—at least not yet,” she told him under her breath.

“That’s something else I don’t understand. Why are you broke? You were Garrett’s wife. Where’s your share of his estate?”

In the corner of his eye, he saw her shake her head. “Rooster owned absolutely everything. Garrett had nothing in his name. Ty should get his social security, but that’s about it.”

“Seems like a good attorney could figure something out,” he thought out loud.

“Yeah? Those cost money too, and the only decent one around Pinedale, happily works for Rooster,” she shot back. Charlie shook his head. Rooster really did hold all the cards in this town. No wonder it irritated the old man that he couldn’t control Heaven.

Chapter Five

Kendall awoke to the sound of hoofbeats and her son’s giggles outside her bedroom window. Charlie must be home from the rodeo and working with Diablo, and Ty must have wandered out to watch, she thought, stretching herself under the sheets. Today was also the day she’d decided to face Pinedale’s ridicule, and find herself a real paying job. It had been a month since she’d started cleaning up the property, and with Charlie’s help, things around Heaven Ranch shaped up nicely. There wasn’t much left to do unless she started on that beautiful cabin by the lake. Somehow, she

hadn't gotten around to asking Charlie about the cabin, maybe she'd bring it up to him today.

She rolled to her tummy and then used her fingers to separate the blinds in the window at the head of her bed. Ty sat on a nearby log with a juice box wedged between his knees while he clapped for Charlie who was smiling as he sent the horse off to run along the rails of the round pen. How did she sleep so late? Did Charlie get Ty the juice? She was about to jump out of bed, but the sight of them enjoying each other's company, froze her gaze in place. The more she took in the scene, appreciating how their shared smiles reached deep into their eyes, the more she wondered just what she was going to do about the whole situation. Ty was attaching himself and identifying with Charlie more and more every day. A part of her wanted to rush out there and grab her son, but Ty's laughter soon blended with Charlie's, and all that manly happiness rendered her useless. Maybe it wouldn't hurt for Ty to have a few more uninterrupted moments with Charlie Walters. Maybe it wouldn't hurt her either, she thought, before she could stop herself.

Kendall stepped out of the trailer, into the bright morning sun, and all over Charlie's heart.

“Mommy!” Ty cheered, running up the stairs to wrap his tiny arms around Kendall’s legs. Charlie stopped coiling his rope and tried not to stare. She was stroking her son’s hair, but his gaze focused on the fact that she’d gone back to dressing like that high-class princess he once remembered. Nothing that beautiful and classy should ever be walking out of one of his crappy trailers. Her dark slacks, high heels and a fancy red sweater, probably cost more than the place was worth. After she hugged Ty, and then kissed him on the head, she stood and made eye contact with him. This time, Charlie felt heart jump all over the place. He couldn’t help it.

“Ty, go inside, and put on the clean clothes I laid out for you on the bed, okay?”

“Okay, where are we going?”

“Grandmas.”

“Okay!”

Ty disappeared inside the trailer, and then Kendall turned back again, but her expression had turned serious. He figured she was getting ready to drop the hammer about something and he had a sneaking suspicion it was about the kid.

“Charlie,” she began.

“Don’t yell at me, Kendall. The boy came out on his own and sat down and watched. He started telling me stories about how his dad deals

with horses. The Little Scratcher seemed like he really needed to talk about Garrett. What do you want me to do? Turn him away? Tell him to shut up or that we can't be friends? I don't have the heart to do something that. Ty needs to process what happened in his own way, and if he thinks I'm a good one to say these things to, then that's a good thing. No, that's a great thing, and I'm going to encourage him to do it. God damned, Garrett's death doesn't just affect you."

She clamped her mouth shut, looking properly stricken, but dammit, he was getting frustrated himself. If he would have had his way about it, he would have made the boy feel better by bringing him inside the round pen. He would have showed him a thing or two to keep his little mind busy, and to learn how to work with horses in a way that *he* saw fit. That boy watched that horse move with the eye of a real cowboy, and it was a shame to let all that natural curiosity go to waste. Plus, her attitude was making him out to be the bad guy. It was bullshit, but Ty's not his son, so ultimately, no matter how much he had to say about it all, the decisions were all hers to make.

"I was only going to say that I'm out of money and I'm sure you'd like to have some rent, so, I'm off to find a job," she explained, softly.

She was deflecting what they really needed to talk about, but maybe it was for the best. He's liable say something that he shouldn't.

"I told you before, I don't need money."

“Charlie, our fridge is empty, Diablo is almost out of feed, and those panels you ordered are going to require payment, if they ever get here. There’s nothing left for me to do around here except maybe work on that cabin you’ve kept hidden in the woods. I need something to feel like I’m contributing.”

He snapped his gaze up to her, feeling like an ass. Ty wasn’t the only one who needed to keep busy. Plus, he had no idea Kendall knew about the cabin. “How’d you find out about it?”

She shrugged. “Ty and I accidentally found it when we went looking for Diablo the first time he ran off. It’s beautiful. I absolutely fell in love with it. But I have to ask; why don’t you live in it?”

He rubbed the stubbles on his face. It was a good question that he didn’t have a reasonable explanation for. “It’s too big. It’s way too big. I honestly don’t know what I was thinking constructing that monstrosity. I guess I got carried away.”

She walked right up to him, bringing with her the scent of freshly washed skin, pricey perfume and that damned honey scented shampoo. He bit back the urge to reach out and touch her hair.

“You know, cowboy, one of these days you’ll have to tell me about yourself. What makes you tick. And, who you were really building that house for. I bet it has something to do with why Rooster wants this place so

much. This land and that house puts his to shame. He doesn't like being bested."

He couldn't believe it. Her assessment of the situation was on point. Rooster did want the land and the cabin, and even though he had a reason for building the cabin, he'd allowed himself to go overboard on the construction, just to be a thorn in the old man's side—and then he'd decided to sell it all.

Charlie pretended interest in his rope as sudden memories of Garrett surfaced. Rooster's son showed up out of the blue one day and asked him to carry the loan so he could have it. Garrett was a distant cousin, so he reluctantly agreed. He should have told Garrett to take his daddy's money and go jump in a lake.

Charlie used his free hand to rub the tension developing along the back of his neck. Kendall already had dealt with so much, he wondered how she'd react to finding out the Stanley family had family ties to the Walters.

Kendall continued to stand patiently in front of him, forcing him to exhale his long-held breath. "Fine, you win. Tonight, I'll tell you my life story, but it will bore you to sleep. But I want us to come to an agreement about Ty."

She crossed her arms with a look that warned him that he was about to tangle with a mama grizzly. "What kind of an agreement?"

“Let me teach him a thing or two—about cowboy work. If you don’t, he’ll be in even more danger than if you try and shelter him. Dammit, Kendall, he’s going to gravitate toward horses naturally, it’s in his blood. Why not educate him with the hopes it keeps him out of trouble?”

She untangled her arms, her expression softening. “I’ll think about it, but please don’t get your hopes up.”

“You do that. And if the Pinedale businesses refuse you give you a job. I can pay you for things to do around here. Things I should have done instead of feeling sorry for myself.”

“I’ve lived off your good graces long enough. I’ll find something. I need to make my own way. My parents offered to pay for tickets back to Canada, but I don’t want resort to that if I don’t have to. I need to stand on my own two feet.” Kendall then grabbed a handful of her hair and tossed it behind her shoulder. “Mary wants Ty to stay the night at Red Wagon, so how about I bring home a pie, and then tonight, you and I can talk about this yawn fest that you claim has become your life?”

The thought of alone time with her made everything inside of him buzz like a soda can full of bees.

“Sounds like a plan, and apple pie,” he informed her.

Her responding smile warmed him, and came as a relief to know that she could quickly recover from being scolded. He figured he couldn’t get

away with it too often, though.

“Then, apple it shall be,” she finally confirmed.

The sun dipped below the horizon, frosting the air and sending a shiver down Kendall’s spine as she pulled back into Heaven Ranch. Charlie was still outside, and lounging against a log in front of a campfire. He’d pulled his hat down low over his face, and if she didn’t know better, could swear he had fallen asleep.

She exhaled and parked the truck just staring at the picture he’d made. With Garrett, she was the one at home, fussing over minor details, hoping she could make his homecomings special. But, Charlie’s way was better, she realized. He simply waited for her by a cozy warm campfire with nothing but the stars for decorations. His presence warmed more than just her body, it warmed her soul. The same soothing effect he had on horses, seemed to work on her as well. She couldn’t wait to tell him about her new job and break open the pie and coffee she’d brought.

The flames danced shades of crimson across the side of his face as he lifted his hat to look over at her. The fire put a twinkle in his eye. “Well, how’d it go?”

She sat down on the log, bags in hand. “Well, once I got used to everybody’s dirty looks and nasty comments about Diablo, I finally found someone willing to give me a shot. I am now working with Big Joe’s wife, Katie, as a cocktail server down at the Outrider Saloon.”

He sat up, straightening the Stetson on his head. “Well, are you happy about it?”

She shrugged. “Sure. It could be worse. I start tomorrow night.”

“Well, then, I’m happy for you. Whatcha got in that bag?”

Kendall opened the bag and pulled out a fresh baked apple pie.

“This,” she told him holding it out toward him. “Mmm, my favorite. I figured if you were bringing dessert, that I’d better make a dinner. There’s steaks staying warm on the grill over there,” he nodded toward an old barrel he used as a grill. The thought of a good steak made her mouth water. She put the pie back in the bag and leaned forward to get a better look at him.

“You, are incredibly thoughtful.”

“I try.”

“You are. And sweet too.”

“It’s a gift,” he winked. They gazed at each other for a second, before Charlie jumped to his feet. “I guess we better get to those steaks and that pie,” he said, abruptly.

The next thing she knew, Charlie handed her a plate covered with a sirloin. He sat down with his own plate and then surprised her by reciting grace. There were many sides to Charlie Walters, and she was getting extremely curious about all of them.

“Okay, working girl. What do you want to know about me first?”

“Well, tell me about that cabin,” she asked, as she cut into her steak. She thought it was a good ice breaker, but he looked down at his plate like he struggled with the answer.

“Believe it or not, I was engaged once. It was while ago. Trish Thompson was all flash and no substance, I guess. A pretty-good barrel racer from Montana, but that’s about it. She’d told me once, that she wanted a houseful of kids—so did I. Within days, I started building that cabin. Not long after, I got busted up in Tucson that left me bedridden. I couldn’t work on the cabin—hell, I couldn’t move period. Trish stuck around for only a couple of days before she left. After that, my heart fell out of it. There was just no more reason to keep building. I couldn’t have, even if I wanted to back then. I was hurt pretty bad on the outside and she finished me off on the inside.”

Kendall swallowed down the bite, but it went down hard. She vaguely remembered Garrett talking about that awful wreck, and could vaguely remember the little red head named Trish that rode a paint horse at Garrett’s

rodeos. “Wow. She left you over that? I’m sorry. What a terrible reason to leave someone. I can’t help but think the loss is all hers, though.”

Charlie lightly shrugged a shoulder, seemingly unconvinced of the fact. “Since then, there’s been a couple of women here, but I don’t think there’s been enough to earn me that legendary reputation you heard about. Pinedale likes to make mountains out of molehills. Mostly, I keep to myself.”

“Are you from Arizona?”

He wiped at the corner of his mouth, nodding. “Yep. In fact, Rooster and I are distant cousins. We have an aunt in common. The same lady who left me this land.”

She sat back against the log, the question of the photo she found explained. “You’re related? You’re kidding,” she said. She took another bite of her steak and then her lower lip quivered from the cold air that found its way under her sweater.

“I wish I was. Are you chilly?” he asked, and then he got up from his spot. “I’ll get you a jacket and then build this fire up nice and hot. We’re going to see some snow, I can feel it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“That I am Garrett’s cousin?”

“Yeah, and you didn’t come to the funeral, didn’t offer condolences... why?”

“Our families drifted apart when Betty first found out she was sick. Everything became about money. Everything. It was just something I couldn’t stomach. Let me get you that jacket,” he said, going inside.

Kendall chewed on that. No wonder Rooster is frothing at the mouth. She exhaled, he certainly had enough of his own money. It must still drive him nuts to know he can’t have this land.

Charlie emerged from his trailer with a Navajo wool jacket and he laid it over her shoulders. Immediately, she was surrounded by warmth and the faint smell of sandalwood. When he sat down again, he gave her a look of pure defeat.

“I kind of hate talking about myself,” he admitted.

“You don’t have to, but maybe it would help getting things off your chest.”

“Maybe,” he agreed and then rubbed his chin. “Kendall, when I lost Trish, and then was held up in bed all busted up and full of metals keeping me together, I really didn’t see the point in keeping Heaven Ranch. I couldn’t work it, I couldn’t finish the cabin, and honestly, being alone, I didn’t want to. So, I put the ranch up for sale. Garrett approached me and asked if I’d carry the loan on it for a short time. Since he was family, and I

knew how much money the Stanley's had, I figured it was a safe bet, and I agreed. I had a local attorney draw up the contracts and on the day that I was supposed to meet Garrett to receive the down payment, he showed up drunk and with twenty-five thousand in cash. The agreement was for fifty-thousand dollars down. I tried to refuse his offer, but he insisted, and I went ahead and agreed—on the condition that the other half would be in my hands days later. We shook on it.”

Now she her head buzzed from shock. “Garrett tried to buy this land? He never told me...”

“I didn't think so, since you never mentioned it. Anyway, I never saw Garrett again after that. Not when a single payment was due. That was right when he got serious about rodeo. I've been told by several people the fact he didn't follow through on this ranch was the reason he and Rooster fought all the time. Rooster didn't want Garrett to rodeo, because he was barely winning enough to keep himself going, even as a champion. Rooster found out the other half of my down payment he gave Garrett, Garrett kept for himself. Probably to pay for all his rodeo expenses. Anyway, every now and then, the old codger shows up here to try and finish Garrett's deal. When I refuse, Rooster then demands the initial down payment back. I am constantly turning him down. A deal is a deal, plain and simple.”

“This explains so much...this, and Garrett’s affairs...I was living in the dark about everything,” she whispered, lost inside her own thoughts, and feeling foolish. Charlie tossed a scrap of fat from his steak into the fire and he sat in silence for a moment while it sizzled. “Kendall. While I laid in my bed broken and depressed, believing my life was done, I started waking up every morning to hear those mares out my window. I had never seen them before, never even knew we had wild horses in these mountains. They just appeared out of nowhere. Each, and every sunrise, they’d gather outside the trailer and call out to me. They were so insistent, that I had to force myself out of the bed and look. Eventually, I ventured outside just to check on them, and then the days came when I started leaving them treats. I took such joy out of winning their friendship, that it slowly gave me my life and my strength back. Taming those horses took time, patience, gave me a purpose and a whole new set of horsemanship skills. I stopped asking myself what a horse could do for me, and started asking what can I do for the horse. The changes in the kind of bonds I develop with horses, has been amazing. I guess that’s why Big Joe figured a troubled horse like Diablo would benefit from being here. You know, those mares came down from the mountains of their own free will. They are free to come and go whenever they want. Since I developed their trust, they haven’t left since. They saved my life and inspire me every day. No way am I going to let a man like

Rooster Stanley buy this ranch and ruin it. Garrett defaulted on his contract and I am legal to keep the money and my property. I've changed my mind about Heaven. I'm keeping it."

Kendall didn't even realize she'd been tearing up, until Charlie reached over and used his thumb to swipe at a tear. All she could think, was that it was a truly moving story from a truly remarkable man.

"No, I agree, Charlie. Don't ever sell. What could be better out there than this? This land is like a part of you. Those horses and how they trust you. It's out of this world. And that cabin, oh Charlie that cabin is amazing. If someday you decide to finish it, let me know, I'd love to help however I can."

His sky colored eyes dove into hers. It was easy to see how the past had hurt him and how much love he had for Heaven Ranch. But when she offered her help, a wall had gone up. A wall built by his ex—and she could relate.

"I'll think about it," he said, repeating the same words on her that she used on him when it came to Ty.

Chapter Six

She reached out and laid her palm against his cheek. She didn't know what emboldened her to do such a thing, and Kendall couldn't explain it to herself, because Charlie's story had evoked so much emotion from her, she wasn't sure what to do with it. She knew exactly what it was like to feel abandoned, and she felt closer to him knowing he'd been through that type of pain as well.

“Charlie?”

He licked at his lips and then his Adam's apple bobbed. “Yeah?”

“Thank you for being my friend. This town won't let go of the fact that I saved Diablo. Plus, I was so busy being Garrett's wife and Ty's mama, I forgot to go out and make friends of my own. Anyway, I really appreciate everything you've done, and I appreciate you opening up to me about your past.”

A shadow moved across his features and his pupils dilated just before he lightly reached out to wipe a few stray hairs from her eyes. “Friends are good,” he agreed thickly. Butterflies danced in her gut as she nodded. Her gaze followed the sharp lines of his face until it settled on his full mouth. There was no mistaking the years he had on her. His face told a story of man with a past. But, there was something deeply attractive about this man

that put a sliver of fear in her heart that she could become vulnerable to him.

He moved closer, close enough that his breathing whispered across her lips. Her heart started beating so fast, she imagined herself falling right into him. But his gaze held her in place, and she remained still, waiting and holding her breath.

“What if I don’t want to be just your friend?” he asked, reaching behind her head, burying long fingers deep into her hair, stoking a different kind of fire than the one beside them.

“What do you want to be?”

“This,” he said, drawing her close enough to him that he pressed his lips against hers.

The intimate contact swelled a wave of yearning that melted her against it. The warmth, the softness, the smooth friction of skin sent flickers of excitement that made everything, everywhere extremely sensitive. With every stroke from his hand through her hair, Charlie pulled invisible strings inside of her until she thought they’d snap. She’d never dropped her defenses so quickly, and as much as she wanted to cave into her cravings and lose herself in the moment, guilt began to creep up on her. Charlie deepened the kiss, offering her his tongue and intimately began to explore her mouth shattering the guilt, lightening her senses and tightening her core

until she was afraid she would lose control. He tasted sweet but utterly masculine, with a gentle, but firm command of her mouth. Charlie's kiss held promises of many tomorrows that made her want to wake up to the next day just to see what would happen next. But Ty's cherub face flashed in her mind, his sweet innocence and fragile friendship with Charlie surfaced, and the wave she was floating on instantly crashed down into a pile of guilt. It wasn't just her heart she had to consider.

Kendall pulled her head away, breaking the kiss. Charlie sat back and then rubbed his hand over his face before raking his fingers through his hair in frustration.

"Dammit, I'm sorry, Kendall. I'm not that kind of guy. Damn, you're probably still in mourning, I just lost my head for a minute...It won't happen again. He jumped to his feet and then held his hand down to help her stand. "Maybe we better call it a night."

She wasn't sure what to think or feel at that moment. She didn't want to end their evening, her heart softly drummed inside her chest in a way that made her want more. But, where she'd lost her senses, Charlie regained his. Regretfully, she placed her hand into his.

Charlie helped her rise and then he lifted her hand to his lips. He pressed a kiss against her curled fingers.

"You've been lied to enough. I won't be that guy."

“I know that you’re not.”

Charlie still held her hand, and the warmth and the strength in his grip felt so good, so comforting she wished she could crawl inside of it. But he was right. It had only been months, and maybe she was just confusing her need for comfort with something else. When she braved to look deep into his eyes, she saw her confusion mirrored in his expression. And then he dropped her hand to turn himself away from her and dip down to grasp a handful of sand that he threw on the fire.

Charlie couldn’t get the kiss out of his mind, when he got up the next morning to do the feeding. He was surprised to find that Kendall had already gotten up to take care of Diablo. She had a hot cup of coffee waiting for him, perched on top of a post. He’d been so used to being the only person on the ranch, that having someone else looking out for things made him feel a little lighter, a little less burdened from doing it all himself.

“Good Morning,” she said, retrieving the cup and handing to him. He reached out for it with his hand no longer wearing a bandage. “All better?” she asked, eyeing it.

“It’s about healed,” he said. Kendall nodded with a smile, and then turned to face Diablo.

“He’s pretty restless this morning. He eats a few bites and then he paces.”

Charlie took a sip from his coffee and peered over the rim of his cup at Diablo. The horse was determined to live his life walking on eggshells. Even his wild mares weren’t quite as skittish as Diablo. The question of why, started burning in his mind.

“He doesn’t trust anything,” he said at last. “And if those panels don’t get here soon, he’s going to get out again.”

“I don’t know what’s taking so long. But, I can relate to Diablo’s fears, once you’ve been screwed over, it’s hard not to feel like every shadow isn’t out to get you,” she agreed.

“Interesting,” he said, handing her his cup. “Who screwed you over, Diablo?” he asked, before walking inside Diablo’s pen. He then faced her, leaning his body against the panel, completely ignoring the horse.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing. That’s the point. I’m just going to stand here, and not even act like I see him. So, tell me about Canada. What’s it like?”

“Aren’t you afraid he’s going to bite you or strike at you?”

He shook his head. “I’m not posing a threat.”

“But he’s watching you,” she told him, her eyes gazing over his shoulder.

“Good.”

Diablo then snuck up behind him to touch the back brim of his hat with his nose. Then he snorted and balked. Charlie couldn’t help but chuckle. “He’s a big ol’ scaredy cat.”

“That was good though, wasn’t it? He wants to know more about you,” Kendall said, her whole demeanor brightening at Diablo’s bravery.

“Yep.”

“Me too. I enjoyed our evening last night. I wanted you to know that.”

Her smile as she spoke, was immediately followed with a flushing of her face. Charlie inhaled and then held it. She sure was a beautiful sight first thing in the morning. He could get used to the kissing and the coffees out in the barn. But she was as scared as the horse, and he wasn’t going to push her.

When Charlie opened his eyes the next morning, he had hopes of another coffee date beside Diablo’s pen. Instead, a quick look out the bedroom window told him Kendall’s truck was gone. Maybe she needed to start her new job.

It was for the best. He'd spent the last couple of nights restless, tossing and turning with thoughts he shouldn't have of Kendall. All that thinking accomplished nothing but burn a big fire he had no way of putting out. The kiss the other night hadn't lasted very long, but it left one heck of an impression. He'd kissed plenty of women in his life, but he realized that he was only after the pleasurable sensation, the chase to the end. He had fallen for Trish, for her confidence, her skill with a horse, her desire for children, but he never felt a deep connection with her. When they kissed, it never moved him or stuck in his mind quite like Kendall's kiss had done. This time, it was different, and he'd spent long hours trying to figure out why. Was it her past, was he feeling sorry for her? Sorry for Ty? Or was the truth something deeper, more meaningful? Maybe he really was losing his heart. During their kiss, all he wanted was to please Kendall, to dive into her and discover what it took to draw out her joy and her passion. He'd relished in her taste, how she felt against his lips, and he found himself wanting her to want him for so much more than just casual interest.

That realization scared him, and he knew from here on out, he'd have to quit waking up hoping for more coffee dates and find a distraction. She was still a Stanley, and even though any reasonable man would understand a daughter-in-law moving on after a good amount of time, he knew in his gut, Rooster would come unhinged if he discovered that

Kendall ended up with him. Okay, so there would be a certain satisfaction in seeing Rooster explode, but it wouldn't be good for Kendall, and it damn sure wouldn't be good for the kid. Kendall had enough to deal with. Charlie sat up in bed, his mind made up. The only thing he could do that would be good for Kendall, was to stay away from her. The only place that made sense, was his cabin.

The cell rang. Expecting it to be Kendall, he answered without looking at the screen.

“Charlie, it's Rooster. We need to talk. Now.”

An hour later, Charlie found Rooster's vehicle parked across the street from Outrider Saloon. Kendall's truck was in the saloon's lot, so no doubt, Kendall would probably witness him meeting with Rooster, and then come home loaded with questions. A part of him felt irritated that Rooster wouldn't take no for an answer, but another part of him was curious too. Just what would Rooster try to use to convince him to sell this time? Or maybe, this meeting had nothing to do with his land. Maybe, Rooster wanted to make sure that he wasn't planning on moving into Ty's life as a father figure. Either way, he wasn't looking forward to the visit.

The old man stood in a line, heavily leaning on his cane. As Charlie approached, he thought about how the old man's face had changed over the years. Once, a handsome man, Rooster now seemed older than he should. Keeping in mind that Rooster was also suffering from his son's passing, Charlie let his guard down a little. The minute Rooster casted a hardened glance in his direction, he knew immediately that his sympathy would probably die the moment Rooster started talking.

"Glad you showed up," Rooster said, returning an annoyed stare at the diner's door. It was Sunday morning and the church folk had already filled all the tables. Rooster raised his cane in the air and waved it forward in quick, jerky movements toward the door.

"You'd think they'd open up a bigger restaurant so we don't have to stand out in the elements and freeze to death waiting to eat," he complained. The other people in the line turned to stare. "What the hell are you looking at?" he snapped, effectively turning them back around.

Charlie shoved his hands into the pockets of his flannel jacket. Rooster's outburst was embarrassing, and wondered how he always managed to get away with acting like an ass. Ever since his childhood, Charlie could remember the old man cursing and yelling at Garrett and the rest of the cousins for some odd reason or another. The only thing that changed in this town was the temperature, and currently, it dropped as fast

as his own patience. “Look, Rooster, I don’t have an appetite anyway, so why don’t we just cut to the chase?”

Rooster turned his whole upper body to look at him. “Can’t I get warm first? I’d like a stinking cup of coffee, and maybe a hot meal before I discuss important matters.”

“No. I’m sorry, but I don’t have time today.”

“Fine. I don’t usually discuss business right out in the open, but I’ll get to the point. My attorney has a million-dollar check with your name on it for the deed to Heaven Ranch. I also know you have Diablo, and I want the horse destroyed as part of the deal.”

Shocked numbness fell over him. He couldn’t believe what he’d heard. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I am. Deadly serious, and that check is sitting at the attorney’s feeling a lot warmer than I am, waiting for your signature. You’ll never have to ride rough stock again. All you’ll have to do, is show up at his office with the deed in hand, and proof that Diablo is gone.”

Disgust rolled over him, but he tried not to show it. “That land isn’t worth that much. And what about your grandson? What about how much Ty loves Diablo? Rooster, I know you’re a cantankerous old fuck, but just what are you trying to pull?”

Rooster shrugged a shoulder. “Nothing. It might not be worth that much now, but it will be, given time and development. I’m willing to take the chance.”

“I don’t think so. And as far as Diablo goes, he’s not mine, he’s Kendall’s. And I think we both know how she feels about the horse.”

Rooster’s posture straightened despite using the cane. The loose lines of his face firmed, while his eyes hardened over like ice. “Her loyalty is misplaced. Diablo killed Garrett. Not only did he kill Garrett, I think the horse has his own death wish. I know people think you’re like a horse Houdini, but you’ll see. Either way, I hope to see the son-of-bitch dead so I can dance on his grave. If I don’t, he’s going seriously hurt someone else—maybe even Ty, maybe Kendall. Hell, probably even you.”

Charlie couldn’t think of a response. He had heard all the horrid tales about the horse long before Kendall put him on his doorstep. But he was willing to try—for her and the kid. Rooster took a deep breath and leveled his gaze at him. “You *are* screwing around with Kendall, aren’t you? So, isn’t it right for me to assume that you’d do what you could to keep her and the boy safe? Or maybe you already know the horse is junk, and you’re just biding time until you put another notch in the ol’ bedpost?”

People turned to look at them again at that last comment. Offended, was not a strong enough word to describe the burn of disgust heating

through him at that moment. Rooster's arrogance just hit an all-time high, and Charlie was glad his hands were shoved deep inside his jacket, or he might've cold-cocked the old man out on the frozen concrete below. Then a deeper meaning to Rooster's words sunk in and chilled him far more than the weather.

“Rooster, for the last time, you will never get your hands on my ranch. And as for Kendall, that's one hell of a thing to say over your daughter-in-law.”

Rooster chuckled, shaking his head. “But, you don't deny your starting to care for her, do you?”

“I haven't slept with her, so don't get the wrong idea. You don't need to drag her into this, the lady has dealt with enough. Are we clear?”

Rooster raised his eye brows and smirked. “Are you threatening me?”

“Take that any way you want to. I'm done here.”

“How about I just take you to court? An aunt that was mentally ill, leaving you such a large chunk of land could easily be reversed. And as far as Diablo...accidents happen all the time—just ask Garrett.”

“No way in this world, Rooster. No way, will you ever get my ranch or anywhere near that horse.”

“We'll see. And just so you are aware, it's too soon for that girl to be getting involved. My son's body isn't even cold in his grave yet, and

already you're sniffing around. I'd be careful if I were you. And here I considered you family," he threw in at the last moment.

Charlie straightened his hat on his head. "Well, you know what they say; you can pick your friends..."

Every morning at sunrise, the sound of Charlie starting his truck's engine, filtered through Kendall's bedroom window. He'd been spending his days at Big Joe's practicing his roping, or at the cabin. And while it was nice to know that he was happy to be back in the saddle, or to be working on the cabin again, she wondered if he was just trying to avoid her.

Kendall ran her finger over her mouth thinking about that kiss. Nearly two weeks had gone by, and since then, Charlie had made himself unavailable to her or Ty for anything. She exhaled out her frustration. Why was it so hard though? When he told her that she hadn't enough time to mourn, she didn't argue. One, because of her son. Two, because she wanted to be on the right side of morality. But as she rolled over in bed just so she could peer at Charlie's departing truck through the slats of the blinds, she struggled to make sense of her reasoning. How long was long enough to mourn? Was she really holding back to protect Ty, or was she holding back because she worried what everyone else would think of her for jumping into a new relationship after only seven months?

She'd done nothing but mourn and be miserable—and all for a man who died leaving her unsure if he even loved her or their child. He certainly never loved them like Big Joe loves Katie and their pack of babies—that much she knew.

Eventually, Charlie's truck had become simply a dot on the road until it disappeared. Kendall dropped the blinds and then rolled back to where her head rested on the pillow. She could hear Ty's deep breathing from the other room. As she laid there listening to the rhythmic sound, she wondered if she was no better than the others. Just another woman falling for Charlie Walters. Just like now, when she should be focusing about her new job, or where she and her son could find permanent residence, her thoughts drifted back towards Charlie. A cowboy who'd made a name for himself with rodeo and all the beautiful women he'd been with. It was like jumping from the proverbial frying pan into the fire, wasn't it? And what about Ty and his constant begging to do cowboy things with Charlie? The very thing she'd swore herself she wouldn't allow? Friends. That's all they could be, despite the fact she wanted another kiss.

She stared at the filtered light streaming through the blinds. Today was Thanksgiving, and she thought she'd take Ty, and they could at least go visit Charlie at his cabin and offer a hand, or just say hello. If nothing else,

she didn't want their friendship ruined over one heated moment that probably won't ever happen again anyway.

The morning was a cold one, but she'd managed to get the oven good and hot. Not only did it help warm up the trailer, but the batch of pumpkin cookies she placed inside, made it smell good too. Ty got up and dressed, and let out a giant yawn as she set down a plate of scrambled eggs in front of him. His little face scrunched at the yellow pile drizzled with ketchup.

"Do I have to eat turkey with grandma and grandpa? I want to be with Charlie," he said through another yawn.

"I know, honey. Just do this for me, okay? They really want you there," Kendall explained. "We are going to take these cookies and some coffee to Charlie this morning and wish him happy turkey day though, would that make you happy?"

Ty's eyes brightened. "Uh huh!"

"Okay, then, hurry up and eat those eggs."

"Does Charlie eat eggs?" Ty asked, rubbing his eyes, and then sticking his finger in his mouth.

"He eats eggs, but he doesn't suck on his finger," Kendall pointed out.

Ty removed his finger and then picked up a fork. He didn't look happy with her answer. "It's good for you," she assured him. "Charlie would want you to eat them," she added guiltily.

Kendall looked out the kitchen to see that the sky had darkened and ice formed crystal patterns on the glass. Charlie was right about that too. The snow will come early.

More ice had crystalized on the steps, along the handrails and the rooftops. Kendall carefully helped her son down the stairs and into her truck. Still no snow, but the clouds hung low over the mountains, wrapping themselves like ghostly tendrils around the pines. Worried that Ty wasn't warm enough, she ran back into the trailer to retrieve all the extra blankets Charlie had loaned them. And then she went to corral to give Diablo an extra feeding of hay, which he happily accepted.

She wasn't halfway to the cabin when the first of the flakes fell heavily on the windshield. "Yay! Snow! Snow, mommy!" Ty said, clapping his hands and kicking his booted feet up and down. She giggled. She loved it too, but she was taken aback at how much was coming down and so quickly.

When the cabin came into view, all the world's colors had faded into white, except for Charlie. He stood on his porch, hands on hips, looking up at the flurry with the same wondrous look upon his face that Ty held. Her stomach immediately began to flutter with the wings of a thousand snow angels. She paused at the steering wheel.

Charlie acknowledged their arrival with a tip of his hat. He looked right at home out in the woods, wearing faded jeans, his heavy red and black flannel jacket, and a black cowboy hat. She bit down on her lip trying to get her stomach to calm down. It was hard to judge how he might be feeling about her and Ty intruding on his sanctuary, but it was Thanksgiving, and she wasn't going to let it pass without saying hello.

Kendall got out of the truck and stepped into enough snow that her boot sunk a few inches. "I hope you don't mind that we came out here. I have the holiday off. Do you need a hand? I promised to help, and I'd like to keep my word."

"No, I don't mind," he said. "It's a beautiful day. I haven't seen snow fall like this for several winters."

"It's really coming down," she agreed, watching the flakes wander down toward earth. "Are you hungry? I brought burritos, cookies, and a thermos of coffee."

"What kind of cookies?"

"Tofu."

He crinkled his nose.

"Just kidding, pumpkin spice," she said, unfastening the clips of Ty's car seat.

"That's more like it. Get those cookies over here."

Ty paid no attention to the snow, as he took off at a dead run to race up the steps of the cabin. He threw himself into Charlie's outstretched arms. Kendall still stood by the truck and watched Charlie lift her son into the air and then use his hand to scruff up her son's hair. When Ty wrapped his little arms around Charlie's neck and squeezed, it was her that couldn't breathe. When did those two develop such a bond with each other?

"Hey, Little Scratcher, where's your cowboy hat? It's cold out here, and your ears are going to fall off."

"Mommy won't let me have a cowboy hat. She says I'm not allowed."

They both turned to give her the same disgusted look. Kendall winced, as she slowly made her way up the steps to join them. Charlie put Ty down. "He can't have a hat?"

"Yes, he can. He has plenty of ball caps. I just forgot to bring one today."

"That's not what I meant."

"Charlie, you already know how I feel about the other kind."

"It's just a hat," he pointed out.

"No, it isn't. You know one thing leads to another. Did you hear about Tommy Jacobs? Just last week he suffered a concussion when his horse stumbled on the trail." Frustration built inside her at the blank look shaping

Charlie's face. "A concussion," she repeated, wondering if he just didn't hear her.

"Shit happens. You dust off and keep going. That's life."

"Not for my son. I'm sorry, maybe we should go. I just wanted to say hello, and keep the promise that I'd made to help if you needed it."

"You don't have to go, you just got here," he said.

"Yeah, mommy. We just got here," Ty agreed, tugging on the hem of her jacket. His little face, hopeful and rosy from the weather made her take stock of the situation. It wasn't about what she wanted, or what Charlie wanted. Everything was about her son. Absolutely everything.

"Okay, but we can't stay long," she compromised, already regretting her hasty decision to come out. Immediately, she was put on the defenses about the cowboy thing, and Charlie's cologne and good looks were drawing her in making her forget herself. They'd have to be friends for Ty's sake, but no more than that, she decided.

"Let me show you the cabin," Charlie offered, holding out a hand for her. Not wanting to be rude, she accepted, and was met with pure warmth.

"This tour will cost you one cookie," Charlie told Ty with a wink.

Ty giggled. "Mommy, give daddy a cookie."

Kendall stopped breathing, frozen right where she stood as she glanced up at Charlie who she could tell was as equally surprised as she

was by Ty's mistake.

"Little Scratcher, I'm not your daddy, but I am your friend, and the cookie monster!" he said, dropping her hand to lift Ty up in his arms and begin tickling his stomach.

Ty giggled, and when Charlie reached back for her hand, she didn't offer it. He acted like he didn't notice and then walked on inside without her.

Everywhere she looked, pine wood had been carefully sculpted to shape the door frames, the fireplace mantle, and the cabinetry of the kitchen that faced a large, open living room. The floor was also a soft, natural pine that shone under recessed over-head lighting. But the best thing of all, were three tall, arched windows that over-looked the lake and the surrounding hills, with the horses perfectly framed like painting, pawing the snow laden grown to graze. She turned to face him.

"You did all of this by yourself?"

"Yep. I have more work to do on the bedrooms yet, but I'll get it done soon, I suppose."

"Incredible. This isn't just a cabin, Charlie. This is a home, a masterpiece. It's absolutely stunning."

Ty ran to the windows, pressing his face against the glass to see the horses. When Kendall looked back at Charlie, he was already looking at her

with a soft look to his eyes. “I just wanted something that felt far removed from the hustle and bustle of the real world. I wanted to build a life here.”

His words touched her. Despite it all, Charlie was a good man. “It’s stunning,” she whispered.

“Rooster wants to pay me a million dollars for the whole thing. The land, the cabin, all of it.”

Kendall physically felt her jaw drop as she took a step backwards. “What did you just say? A million dollars?”

“I know, I had the same reaction. The man must be crazy or desperate or both. I’ve done nothing but think about his offer since.”

Kendall almost began to shout her protest, but then she realized, that none of this was her business. None of it.

“Can I use the potty, Mommy?” Ty asked, holding himself. She looked at Charlie.

“Right there, through that door.” He pointed down a short hallway. Ty ran off.

Charlie leaned toward her and lowered his voice. “The old codger also said he wanted me to destroy Diablo as part of the deal.”

Now it just became her business. “What! Wait, he can’t do that! Who does he think he is? That man is crazy...he’s...”

Strong hands gripped her around the arms. Charlie bent himself forward to get eye level with hers. “There’s not enough money on Earth that would make me cause harm to Diablo and hurt your little boy,” he assured her.

Charlie drew her closer, until she went into his arms, her body melting against him and her better judgement. Charlie’s breath, warm and sweet, fanned down along the top of her forehead. Kendall’s heart and her mind wouldn’t stop racing at this latest development with Rooster. That was until Charlie began to run his hands along her spine, gentle and slow. The tenderness in his touch effectively evaporated one fear, but birthed a new one. She tilted her head back to look at him and discovered that he was already looking down at her, concern and desire mingling within the depths of his eyes, making her feel guilty and wonderful all at the same time.

“I don’t know if I should be holding you,” he whispered, releasing her. He went to stand by the windows, his unsaid apology hanging in the air between them. She followed, wishing they could talk. The snow outside the windows had thickened into a solid curtain so that the lake and the herd was no longer visible. Ty came out of the bathroom struggling with his zipper.

“Can we go outside and make a snowman?” he asked, giving up on the fight.

“I think we better leave Charlie to fix his cabin,” Kendall said, lowering to her knees to help Ty with his zipper. His face scrunched with his disappointment. “We have to go? I didn’t get to play.”

“Kendall, the snow is falling too heavily for you guys to leave right now. Stay put, let’s have some of those cookies and coffee you brought,” Charlie suggested. Ty’s eyes turned nice and round as he silently pleaded for her to agree.

“Okay, we’ll stay. But as soon as the snow lets up, I’ll have to take you back. Grandma and grandpa are having a big Thanksgiving dinner today.”

They sat on the floor together, eating cookies and talking about the fact that Christmas was now just weeks away. Charlie talked about his plans for the cabin and Ty reminded him that he’d better finish the fireplace, right away, since Santa would need to slide down it. They laughed at Ty’s comment until he reached out for Charlie’s hat. Charlie hesitated, looking at her for approval. Charlie went ahead and put his hat over Ty’s mess of golden hair. Ty’s face beamed. “Look, mommy!”

“You sure are handsome,” she agreed. Her cell buzzed. “Okay, well, it looks as though the snow has eased up. And grandma Mary is waiting by the gate,” Kendall said.

“I’ll need my hat back, Little Scratcher,” Charlie said. Ty took it off and gave it to him without a fuss. Charlie messed his hair up once more. “You’re a good kid. Now, go enjoy your jerky dinner tonight.”

“Not jerky. Turkey!” Ty corrected him with a laugh. Charlie put on a comical wide-eyed expression. “Turkey? No, you’re supposed to have jerky and smashed tomatoes,” he playfully argued.

“Mommy! Charlie eats jerky and mushy tomatoes!” he giggled, looking at Charlie with baby blue eyes dancing with his humor and adoration of the cowboy.

They continued to tease each other, as Kendall stood to leave. Ty and Charlie reluctantly got up too, but Ty raced to the door first, and was quickly trying to open it to go outside.

“Ty, wait for mommy. Please don’t run off like that.”

Charlie touched her arm. “Come back after you drop him off, okay?”

Those butterflies she experienced earlier just morphed into jet airplanes. “Okay, because I came to a decision about your offer on teaching Ty,” she said.

“Am I going to like it?”

“Probably not.”

Chapter Seven

After she kissed Ty good-bye and left him to Mary's care, she stopped by the corral to once again check on Diablo. He had pawed a hole into the ground and worked himself into a sweat. Kendall leaned against a post as the horse continued to dig. She approached the railing whispering soft, soothing words hoping she could calm the animal. She reached out to grasp the top rail and Diablo charged right for her, eyes wild, teeth bared. She pulled her hand back in time to miss the snapping bear-trap sound of his teeth clashing with the metal rail.

Diablo trotted himself around the edge of the pen, bellowing out to some unknown source and then he'd stop, his nostrils flaring and perking his ears to listen for a reply. Kendall backed up against the post, trying to catch her breath. Diablo tossed his head and then paced some more. He was in his own world, oblivious to her presence. What if someday Ty decided to crawl inside this pen to try and ride the him? Rooster's words echoed in the back of her mind and she realized she agreed with Rooster more than she'd like to admit. Diablo was beautiful, but not a pet. At some point, Ty would have to understand that they can't keep a dangerous pet no matter how much they might love him.

Kendall drove back to the cabin to let Charlie know that she was going to stick to her guns when it came to Ty, and after today, no longer

wanted Charlie to attempt and train Diablo. She'd made a mistake, a horrible, potentially deadly mistake.

Light from the fireplace casted soft ember shadows across the windows as she pulled up to the cabin. The snow had taken a break for the moment, rewarding her a clear view of Charlie standing in the doorway waiting.

She got out and started toward the stairs, and a wild string of attraction pulled hard at her. The thought of being alone in such a beautiful cabin with such a beautiful man, stroked every nerve of her body. Every step closer to Charlie grew her guilt, taking her right back to the past, and making her question how long was long enough for a widow to morn? Every step also made her wonder what it would be like to be with a man who might be as excited to be with her as she was him. Charlie certainly had let it be known several ways, and she was ready to find out.

“How’s Ty. Is he going to be alright?”

“Yeah. Rooster might be a lot of things, but he’d never do anything to hurt his grandson”

“No, I don’t think so, either. In fact, I can remember some good times growing up and being at Red Wagon Ranch. It wasn’t often, but Rooster had his good moments,” Charlie said closing the cabin door behind them.

The sound of the door closing raised her anticipation and created a tension in her stomach. “Wow, this place really takes on an ambient mood with the fireplace lit,” she acknowledged.

“I’ll have to be sure to clean it when I’m done before Santa gets here though,” Charlie observed, directly behind her. His breath, warm and sweet brushed across her ear. Kendall’s body jolted from pleasure.

“Charlie,” she said turning to face him. “Before we go much further, I have to once again say something about my son.”

“Oh, boy, here it comes.”

“I’m sorry. I understand your point about Ty. I get that he was born with this love of rodeo and horses, but as his mom, I have say over his life and I’m saying no. He’s not going to do it. Not even a little. I’m sorry. I don’t even have good health insurance should he get hurt. As a matter of fact, I don’t even want to see you try and train Diablo.”

“But...”

“No buts. He’s my son, that’s my horse, and I have to do what I think is best.”

“I understand,” he relented. “I won’t try and step in anymore. You need to know something else.”

Kendall leaned up against the kitchen counter. She knew she’d need the support, and she was disappointed that the sexual charge they shared

had faded with the seriousness of the conversation.

“Rooster is like an old hound dog. He knows something is happening between us, and in his not so subtle way, he’s let me know that he’ll turn everyone and everything against us if he doesn’t get what he wants. If it just involved me, I wouldn’t care, but...”

“Ty. My son. See, that is why, Charlie, that is why I want nothing to do with...”

He walked around the counter to take her shoulders into his hands.

“I’m not like Rooster or Garrett. You are still wrong to lump all men together.”

Kendall closed her eyes, the fight in her weakening. She gave into it, allowing her head to drop forward and against Charlie’s chest. She inhaled his sandalwood cologne, and immediately, her body reacted.

“I don’t know what tomorrow brings, but please don’t sell you ranch,” she told him.

“I won’t sell. I’ll face Rooster as many times as I have to, if that’s what it takes.”

“Been there, done that already. How much longer am I supposed to give a damn about a man who never gave a damn about me? Answer me that, Charlie. How much longer am I supposed to feel sad, miserable and alone?”

“You’re not alone,” he insisted, as he pulled back and then placed his finger under her chin to lift her face to meet his gaze. “Or maybe you don’t want the same things I do,” she realized, admiring the brown speckles that dotted along the edge of his blue eyes. She licked her lips, her core tightening like a drum to have him so close.

“I think I do,” he said, sweeping a warm gaze over her face.

“Then how much longer do I have to wait?”

“Not one more minute.”

Charlie lowered his lips towards hers. He paused just above her, as she squeezed his shirt into her fist. “This might start something we can’t stop,” he said, against her mouth, his eyes, fully dilated and looking down at her reflecting both his warning and his desire.

“I don’t want to stop it,” she assured him. A groan from somewhere deep inside his chest rumbled between them. “You are beautiful, Kendall,” he breathed, finally lowering his lips to seal firmly against hers, their bodies pushing out daylight between them.

Kendall let herself go. The way Charlie moved his mouth against hers, drew a need from her that wouldn’t be satisfied until she drowned herself within it. He tasted sweet, he moved with confidence and precision, and he only broke his embrace long enough to wrap her tighter and to hold her closer against him. Kendall responded to the pressure by submitting and

opening her mouth to receive his tongue that he softly inserted to slide against hers.

It was hard not to feel surprise as the kiss continued. Charlie wasn't rushing or demanding. He wasn't taking and seeking his own selfish pleasure. Instead, his kiss moved with her, quieted her doubts and drew passion from her she didn't know existed. Kendall had never been kissed so sweetly, and with such a promise of more. She slid her hand under his shirt and along the muscles that stretched and bulged along his back. It enflamed and awakened a part of her that truly never lived.

"Tell me now if you want me to stop. Stop me now," his words, soft and warm, breathed a gentle warning into her ear. "And by god, if you think this is just going to add to the mountain of guilt you're already dealing with, I'm going to end this right now."

"No, I won't. I need to know," she managed to say, before his mouth once again claimed hers. Charlie broke the kiss to lift her into his arms. "I want this to be special for you. You've had enough to feel sad about, so I wouldn't be able to live with myself if you end up regretting this."

"I already don't."

Waking up in the crook of Charlie's arm, and wrapped in a blanket by the windows, Kendall gazed out at a snow draped world illuminated by

nothing but indigo moon light. Just feeling his warmth, the rhythm of his breathing and observing his horses cut a trail through a layer of snow, healed something inside of her. She physically felt better, complete, and content. It seemed so natural and right, that she allowed herself to relish in the moment and find strength to push away the negative thoughts that up until now, had haunted her.

Charlie stirred in his sleep, but he never let go of her. He was lost to the world and vulnerable to her gaze. And she couldn't stop looking at him. Never in her wildest dreams would she have ever expected to feel something so fast and so fully for a man she'd only known for a short time. But, the more she looked at him, and the more she shared herself with him both mentally and physically, the more she knew her feelings although new, were real. And unlike Garrett, this time discovery was returned with the equal passion.

“Good morning,” he whispered into her ear.

“Good morning. I can't believe we slept the entire evening away,” she murmured. He reached his free hand across her to run his hand over the crown of her head, petting her and then pulling her closer against him.

“Well, maybe not the *entire* evening,” he teased, kissing her temple. Kendall sat up slightly, balancing herself on her elbow to see him fully.

“That was amazing last night, Charlie.” His sleepy smile reached right in and hugged her with its sexy warmth. “Yes, it was, and judging by the amount of snow I falling outside, we might be trapped here until the sun has time to rise and melt it away.

“Pity,” she returned, bending her head to kiss his lower lip.

“We better find some way to pass the time,” he playfully suggested against her kisses.

“Oh, definitely, because the sun won’t be up for a long, long, while.”

His soft laughter died inside her mouth that she used to cover his completely. Charlie wrapped his arms around her and turned her until she was pinned underneath him.

“I can’t remember, did we start here?” he asked, as he used his tongue to flick at her collarbone. A series of tremors danced along her skin.

“Mmm... maybe...”

“Or was it here?” he asked, moving even lower to cup both breast in his hands.

“Yep. I think it was there.”

Charlie’s mouth, warm and wet, sucked in a nipple and the heat mixing with the cold air of the cabin across her skin, tore a gasp from her.

“Easy,” he breathed, as he left that one to find the other.

Kendall ran her fingers through his hair and then curled her fingers around the strands as her head fell far back, lifting herself to him as he continued caressing her with his tongue.

“Charlie...” A roller coaster of sensations rocked her as he took her into his mouth. His member, hot and thick, began to push and pulsate against her thigh.

“Open for me,” he softly demanded.

Kendall bit down on her lip to keep from moaning when he finally entered her, stretching her until she’d taken all of him.

“You don’t have to stop yourself, Kendall. Never hold back from me. I think we’ve both waited long enough in our lives to feel something real for somebody.”

Kendall walked into the Outrider saloon, ready to start her day. The smell of coffee brewing, and mesquite burning from the kitchen grill welcomed her as she stepped inside the rustic, old wooden building with a sign that read; “Wyatt Earp once played poker here.” The building was constructed back in the 1800’s and all those years gave the place a thick ambiance of history—and she loved it. Only all the snow was leaking water through the aged wooden timber roof, and before she could put away her purse, she spotted several puddles of water pooling on the floor.

She could see her breath as she began the task of taking all the chairs down from the tables and when that was done, she found the daily specials inserts and then slipped the paper into the plastic holders. She hummed to herself. Funny, how things can change so rapidly. One minute she was Kendall, the grieving widow miserably working in Rooster's office, and the next she was Kendall, the single mom who walked on air inside a saloon with a leaky roof.

"Good morning, Kendall," Katie greeted, walking out of the double swinging doors of the kitchen, her apron already covered with soot from the grill. "I'm sorry it's so cold in here. I'll start a fire in dining room fireplace and once the grill gets going, it will warm up in here pretty quick."

"Good morning. It's not so bad. Aren't you here early?" she asked. She liked Katie, she was sweet, fun and so in love with Big Joe, that she wore her happiness on her face like a neon sign. If anyone were to notice, Kendall was also feeling like glowing this morning.

"Yeah, well, it's the first Monday of the month, and that means city council will be in here for their monthly meeting chowing down on pork ribs and beer. It's probably the only town in America that holds important meetings at a leaky saloon," she said, while exhaling and shrugging a shoulder.

"It's good business though, you must be doing okay."

“I’m glad I bought the place. I mean, I had to race Rooster to get to it first, the man thinks he should buy up everything in town, he’s such a control freak. And, I like how the business keeps my mind off Joe while he’s on the road. Plus, my kids come here after school and help, and I don’t have a boss with a cobb up his butt telling me I can’t do that. When Ty gets a little bigger, he can hang out here too.”

“Ty would love that. It’s funny that you mention Rooster wanting to buy everything. He’s been bugging Charlie for Heaven Ranch,” she said to Katie, grabbing the handle of a mop to swab the snowmelt off the floor.

Katie grabbed an industrial sized can of BBQ sauce and then shook her head. “I hope Charlie doesn’t sell it, Rooster owns enough of this town, but wait until those councilmen get here, you’ll hear it for yourself. They’re totally sick of Rooster’s bullying people to gain their businesses, and have been for a while now. The council has been blocking him left and right using all kinds of loopholes hoping to make it impossible for him to grow his empire in this town anymore. But, who wouldn’t want Charlie’s land? If he’d clean up those trailers, the place is probably the most desired acreage in Pinedale, and there’s nothing left for a person to acquire, since we are surrounded by mountains.”

“Rooster doesn’t seem to like Charlie, but I know they’re related.”

“Charlie doesn’t put up with Rooster’s crap. None of us want to anymore. Plus, Pinedale wants to retain its western heritage and the old-west image. Rooster acts like he wants to turn it into a concrete jungle.”

Kendall didn’t reply, instead, Katie went back to working in the kitchen, and she went out to the dining room to mop the floors. She couldn’t wait to get home and tell Charlie what she’d found out though.

Charlie sat mounted on Big Joe’s horse Lady, when Kendall and Ty got out of the truck. He started swinging a loop over his head and aimed it toward a metal post. He pulled the rope snug. The way he handled the rope seemed as if roping was as natural to him as the bulls had once been. Ty started bouncing up and down in his seat, clapping his hands.

“Do it again, Charlie. Do it again!”

Kendall got out of the truck and then helped Ty.

“Do it again, Charlie!” Ty squealed.

Charlie chuckled as he jerked the loop to free it from the post. “How about you give it a try?” he suggested, as he tossed the coiled rope down to Ty.

“I want to rope!”

Kendall grabbed Ty by the arm to keep him from catching the rope. “No. You are never going to rope or ride, Ty. Please stop.”

“I want to ride like Charlie!” Ty shouted back.

“No! Now, dammit, stop asking!”

Ty jerked his hand from her. Charlie slid off the horse. “Kendall, was that really necessary?”

“Yes, it was. Totally. Next time, keep your talents to yourself.”

“That seems a little harsh.”

Kendall picked up Ty and held him. He tucked his head under her chin. “You told me you understood,” she said, feeling terrible for having yelled, her emotions thickening her words.

“I understand your fear, I get it. But, I don’t understand you punishing your son for your lack of trust.”

She winced. “That was uncalled for.”

“That’s the truth. You know it and I know it.”

She locked gazes with Charlie, standing her ground. He muttered something under his breath.

Charlie transferred the reins into one hand and then used his free arm to wrap it around Kendall’s shoulder, pulling her and Ty against him. “I don’t want to fight with you,” he whispered, placing a kiss on the top of her head.

“I don’t want to fight either, I truly don’t.”

“Kendall, you’re going to have to trust somebody, someday. You can’t let you or Ty live in fear. It will destroy you, no matter if its other men, crazy horses or who or whatever. Let the past go, once and for all.”

Ty leaned away from her to reach for Charlie. Kendall reluctantly allowed Charlie to take her son out of her arms. The first thing Ty did was lay his head down on Charlie’s shoulder and put a thumb in his mouth. His eyes focused on Charlie as he batted a few times before fluttering close to fall asleep.

“When he wakes up, let’s take him out to dinner,” Charlie said, patting Ty on the back.

“People are going to talk,” she squeaked out. “You know they’re going to assume things,” she pointed out.

“They’re doing that anyway. I don’t really care what anyone thinks. Do you?”

“No. Quite honestly, I don’t.”

“Good girl. I hear there’s a pizza joint with dancing bears or fat rats that shake their ass for the kids, or something.”

Kendall’s laugh was like a shot in the arm. He’d loved how her face brightened up when she laughed. “Ty would love it. And, it’s the favorite hang-out of a bunch of bored housewives,” she joked.

“Perfect. Let’s give them something to talk about,” he grinned.

Chapter Eight

Charlie just tossed a bag of feed inside the bed of his truck. For the first time in weeks, his body wasn’t hurting. In fact, he felt great. He’d been spending all his time with Kendall and the boy, and the cabin was really beginning to take shape. So, when a flashy red car pulled into the space next to his. He gave it a quick glance, not thinking anything of it while he fished for keys out of his pocket. When the driver slammed the car’s door, he lifted his gaze. Trish Thompson shocked the hell out of him by standing next to the vehicle and smiling over at him.

His joy deflated like a popped balloon. Good god, wasn’t she supposed to be living in Montana? What was she doing back in Pinedale? After everything she’d put him through, Trish was the last person next to Rooster, he wanted to run into—ever.

“Hello to you too. Can’t I get even a simple hello from a man I almost married?”

Her sticky-sweet tone tensed the muscles along his neck until they felt like bricks. It was hard to even look at her after the brutal way she’d left

him. The thought pretending to be nice to Trish, seemed too hard of a thing for him to muster, so he didn't bother trying.

“What are you doing back in Pinedale?”

Her lips, painted slick with red, cracked a smile. “*That's* the question you want to ask?” The catty way in which she asked that question, made those bricks build a wall.

“Should I ask something else?”

She walked around her car, removing her gloves as she did. “How about, where have you been? I've missed you, and why do you look so fabulous and... full,” she joked, patting her hand over a slightly protruding stomach. “I'm going to be a mama,” she announced, answering the question before he could ask.

“Congratulations. I have to go.”

Trish pushed herself between him and his truck to block him from opening the door.

“You look rested and all better from your accident,” she observed slowly.

“No thanks to you. Want to move out of my way now?”

“Why don't we discuss old times over coffee? I hear the Outrider Saloon brews a mean cup of Java.”

Outrider Saloon. That just seemed like an entirely too convenient location for Trish to mention. Little hairs stood up on the back of his neck and he wondered what he ever saw in her. He wasn't good at playing games, and clearly, Trish knew about Kendall, and now plans on becoming a pain in the ass about it.

“Out with it. What are you up to, Trish?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all. I was actually thinking of relocating permanently to Pinedale, and I was hoping your ranch was still up for sale?”

“No, it's not for sale.”

“Are you sure? That's a lot of land for just one person,” she said, lifting her hand to touch the flannel lapel of his jacket. He took her by the wrist, pulling her hand away. “Go back home Trish. If Rooster paid you to drive down here to help him land grab, you're both crazy and will only end up empty handed.”

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

“Like hell you don't. You're a lot of things, but stupid isn't one of them.”

She stared at him, her eyes squinting as if she was preparing to argue, but then she shrugged and smiled at the same time. “Whatever, Charlie.

Please buy me a coffee? I drove down here on fumes, and I'm cold and out of cash."

Trish was never a good liar. But now he wondered just how low Rooster was willing to go to convince him to sell. The curiosity took a firm hold of him.

"Not at the Outrider," he told her.

"The only other place we can get coffee is across the street at the diner," she laughed. "Not exactly stealthy if you're planning on keeping our date a secret from the little woman."

"Are you talking about Kendall Stanley?" *So, she did know.* "This isn't a date, Trish. This is me trying to figure out what kind of unholy alliance you've struck with that old man."

"I guess the pickings in Pinedale must be slim if you have to resort to screwing the town widow."

Charlie's jaw tightened. Trish had always come out swinging when she didn't get her way, and if Rooster's plan was to use Trish to drive a wedge between him and Kendall, Trish wouldn't stop until she got the job done. Especially if she was broke. He'd have to be careful about this, for Kendall's sake.

"You don't know a thing about Kendall. She just needs help with Diablo."

“I remember you telling me about Diablo. Let me think...I’m sure the words you used at a rodeo once, were; “Extremely dangerous and a widow-maker. Huh. A pretty prophetic thing to say, I mean, you were right. The horse made Kendall a widow. So, why would you offer to help? Why would you offer to allow Garrett’s widow to move in with you? The horse is a lost cause. Gee Charlie, you’ve even been spotted around town playing husband and daddy. Really, Charlie, is that such a smart move? Garrett was like royalty, and the town is pissed at her for saving the horse.”

“Want to know what I think this town can do with all of its worthless opinions? Kendall only lives at the ranch, and anything else we do is nobody’s business,” he corrected her.

“Except any woman that close to you, always winds up a little closer, am I wrong?” She winked, and then laughed at her own joke. He put his hands on his hips staring down at her.

“How much did Rooster pay you to get you to drive all the way down from Montana and stir up trouble?”

“Obviously, he hasn’t paid me anything—yet. Coffee, and I’ll tell you what I know,” she promised, raising a brow and smiling like the cat that ate the canary.

“Fine. One cup and that’s all,” he relented. Trish’s eyes brightened like diamonds.

“Shall I jump in your truck for old times sakes?”

“Nope, drive yourself. Hopefully you have enough fumes in your tank, that you’ll make it one, entire block.”

Kendall sat on the bar stool and exhaled. It was pure relief to get off her feet after eight solid hours of waiting tables. There wasn’t a single patron left in the building, leaving just her and Katie. Whom, had decided to belt out Christmas carols at the top of her lungs.

Christmas. It was just a couple weeks away, and she wondered if she’d make enough tips to afford it. She couldn’t help but wonder if her and Ty would spend it alone, or with Charlie. Dammit, she really needed to stop wondering so much about the man, but she couldn’t. This morning, when she caught her reflection in the mirror behind the bar, she found herself smiling. A real smile, and he was the reason why.

Kendall pulled her tips out of her apron, when memories of yesterday resurfaced in her mind. The three of them had spent the entire day decorating the entrance to Heaven Ranch with big, red bows. Ty sat on Charlie’s shoulder and giggled as he placed a star on top of a Douglas pine that grew next to the barn. It was such a beautiful day, full of fun and snowball fights, and it took Ty twenty minutes to stop talking about it before he’d finally fallen asleep with a look of pure satisfaction on his tiny

little face. It was beginning to feel like a family, a real family, and she couldn't wait to go back to Heaven for a chance to do it all over again.

She'd counted out fifty dollars when she happened to look out the window. Surprise, and a spark of joy filtered through her to see Charlie standing across the street. Maybe he'd stop into the saloon and say hello. But, she noticed he was with another woman, and they were both waiting to enter the diner. Charlie placed his hand protectively on the small of the woman's back and then escorted her through the glass doors.

"Who the hell is that?" Katie asked from behind her. Katie held a tangle of Christmas lights in her hand, but her gaze went straight out the windows.

"I don't know," Kendall admitted, feeling stupid for the warmth creeping up her neck.

"Oh, I know...that's Trish. His former fiancée. I thought she lived in Montana or somewhere up north. I hope she isn't here trying to get her claws back into Charlie."

Kendall wanted to agree, but held her tongue. Still, her curiosity soared while hopes for her and Charlie crashed.

"Wanna help me hang these lights?" Katie asked.

Torn between wanting to run across the street or just run away, Kendall shrugged and then nodded. "Sure." A lump of tension formed at the

base of her throat. Charlie never mentioned his ex was back. Why? Insecurity, that she thought she'd conquered, rose from the grave like a darned ghost and she quickly changed her mind.

“I’m sorry, Katie. I think I need to get out of here. I have to at least try and give somebody the benefit of the doubt.”

Katie gave her a puzzled look. “Who are you talking about? Charlie? He needs the benefit of the doubt?”

“No, yes, not...”

Katie squinted at her. “Uh, huh. Unless you’re made of stone, you’ve got it bad for Charlie Walters. That’s great. Joe was hoping the two of you would hit it off.”

“He was?”

“Oh, yeah. You know, Joe cares about you, and he grew up with Charlie. He thinks the two of you make total sense. And he hates all the hype the gossip mongers of this town created,” Katie told her, as she sat on the floor with the lights in her lap. Kendall sat down with her, mulling over what she’d said, and the two of them began the task of unwinding the mess.

“So, don’t you like Charlie?” Katie asked, obviously suggesting that if she didn’t, she was an idiot. She wasn’t an idiot, yes, she liked him—a lot. The feeling blossomed to even more than that and had gone straight to her head and her heart. Especially when Charlie proudly held her hand when

they'd decided to go out the other night. It could have been a disaster, Garrett had been a town hero, and she could tell by the looks on people's faces that she hadn't waited long enough to start going out again. Especially with someone with the reputation of Charlie Walters. They could hear the whispers, and feel the burning stares behind their backs. It could have ruined the evening, but Charlie wouldn't allow that. He kept telling her she was beautiful and he was proud. Who could worry about town gossip with Charlie blowing everything off with a laugh? She'd never met anyone so impervious to drama. It was a both an education and a relief. It taught her something valuable, too. Kendall sighed.

Kendall only managed to shrugged her reply to Katie, and when the sting of tears began to burn, she became angry with herself. Even though Charlie was certainly a free man and they had never discussed other people, just knowing he was at the diner with his ex, stung. Maybe she had rushed into everything, but it had not once felt like it.

"Garrett hasn't been gone for long and I..." Katie stopped working with the lights and looked directly into her eyes. "So, what? That was months ago, and he didn't deserve you anyway. You know why, right?"

"Yeah, unfortunately, I do."

"I would have told you about Garrett's affairs, myself. But Joe didn't want me to get involved. But since Garrett is gone, there's no reason you

can't go after someone good, and I think underneath that tough guy exterior, and sexy charisma, Charlie Walters is a good man. It really doesn't matter what people think. You know the truth."

Katie's words helped, but old pain wrestled with the new and Kendall couldn't respond. She also couldn't blame Katie for not having told her about Garrett's affairs. Still, knowing Charlie was with another woman made her feel a horrible case of Déjà vu.

"I don't know, Katie. Even though Garrett was unfaithful, losing him was painful. And, I've been scared to be alone. I don't want to confuse my feelings just because I've spent some time with Charlie. And I don't want to go through the heartache of another broken relationship."

"I understand. I do," Katie said softly. "Charlie and Trish were together for almost a year. I suppose he might not have her out of his system yet," she admitted.

"I know he has a reputation, but it doesn't seem like he takes his relationships lightly," Kendall pointed out.

"No, you're right. No good man, would," Katie agreed sadly. "Kendall, I don't think Charlie would deliberately hurt you, but it is weird that he's having lunch with Trish. She's such a bitch though. She left him just because he got hurt. Not just hurt, Charlie could hardly get out of bed. Joe and I were constantly checking in on him. For a while, I thought he was

going to lose his will to live. What kind of woman walks out on a guy during a time like that?"

Kendall stared at the Christmas lights, hurting over what Charlie had gone through, but she couldn't ignore her own disappointment.

An hour later, they had finished hanging lights and watched as Trish got inside Charlie's truck with her hand resting over a baby bump . "Oh, my," Katie breathed, "She's pregnant."

Kendall thought she was only imagining the baby bump, but knowing Katie saw it too, dropped her heart right out of her chest. Whatever hope she might have had, was now gone. "Well, I guess that's it then. I can't do this anymore, and I can't stay at the ranch."

Katie nodded in agreement. "The little apartments behind the saloon has a unit open, I saw the lady put the sign on the window this morning, you should go ask about it. Whatever is going on with Charlie and Trish, you'd probably sort it out better in your own space."

Charlie's truck drove right past their windows, the couple inside already looking like a family. "Thank you. I guess that's what I'll do. Can I stay and work tonight?"

"Until five. That's the best I can offer," Katie said, looking at her sympathetically.

Charlie drove down main street heading home. The meeting with Trish left him feeling damn guilty. He'd taken Kendall and Diablo on for one cold, and selfish reason, and that was to get under Rooster's skin to get even for the constant badgering of him to sell Heaven Ranch. But, now things have changed. They've changed a lot. Trish's return to Pinedale solidified the truth. He was never in love with her, because what he felt back then, couldn't compare to what he feels for Kendall. And, he hated to admit it, but Diablo is what he is, and he should have been honest with Kendall about the horse from the get-go.

He tried asking Trish questions about Rooster, but all she wanted to talk about was her surprise pregnancy and the fact she was broke. She tried several times to talk him into loaning her money, but the most he agreed to, was a ride to the hotel where he'd paid for her room.

Wanting to work on his cabin and get back to spending time with Kendall, he pulled onto the ranch with a load of piping for the cabin's plumbing only to be disappointed that her truck was still gone.

He slipped on his work gloves and then began the task of lifting the pipes from the bed of the truck. Diablo squealed a high-pitched sound and began to kick against the rails of his stall so violently, that Charlie figured he better do something before the horse injured himself.

Forgetting that he held the pipe, Charlie ran toward the horse. Diablo took one look at him and reared over backwards, coming straight down on the railing and cracking apart the wood. Diablo struggled on the ground before finding his footing and trotting off a few paces.

“Damn, maybe Rooster was right, and you do have a death wish,” he breathed, as he dug his phone out of his pocket to dial the feed store. Those steel panels should have been here long ago. Surely, they’ve have arrived by now.

No answer. When he took a step toward Diablo once more, the horse snorted and then reared straight up. “What’s wrong with you?” he sighed. Diablo watched him, his nostrils exhaling clouds of vapor while he dug his front hooves into the ground pawing a hole in the snow. Charlie took another small step in his direction and then Diablo’s entire body flinched. Garrett looked down at the PVC pipe in his hand, and came to a stunning conclusion. He lifted that arm holding the pipe just slightly and Diablo’s eyes rolled in the back of his head just as he cried out a guttural sound before spinning on his haunches to race off toward the lake.

“Darn it, Rooster. You and your stupid cane. I ought to crack it over your head,” he mumbled to himself.

Kendall’s truck pulled up at that moment and she jumped out, obviously witnessing Diablo exit. “What happened? She asked, as she

unbuckled Ty.

“I think I know now why Rooster wants Diablo dead.”

Kendall’s skin looked pale, and her eyes held that same haunting shadow that he noticed the day she first arrived. “Kendall, what’s wrong?”

“Aren’t you going to go after him?” she asked, ignoring everything he’d just said about Rooster. He shook his head. “I’d rather talk with you, right now.”

Kendall wrapped her arms around herself, and stared off. She avoided looking at him, and he could tell she was holding back something. Even though she acted upset, just seeing her made his heart trip. Her lips hardened into a thin straight line and he wanted to know why she’d been staying away. “What’s wrong?” he asked again, a little harsher than he intended.

“Nothing. Listen, I know this isn’t much notice, but Katie needs a lot of help down at the Outrider, and the apartments behind her saloon just got a unit available if I hurry back and claim it. Which means, I’m leaving and I can’t take Diablo. I’d to give him to you, if you’d like to have him. Obviously, he’s more than I can handle, and right now I can’t handle much. You have a way with him, and I hate to see that end.”

Kendall went to turn away from him, but he grabbed her by the arm. He tried to pull her toward him but she resisted, so he loosened his grip.

“What are you talking about? You’re really leaving?”

“Yes. Hey, thank you for giving Ty and I a place to stay, but I’ve got this now. Diablo’s yours. You keep doing whatever it is you do, and hopefully, someday you’ll have a good horse.”

It was like being hit upside the head with a two by four. He thought there was more between them than this. “Did Trish Thompson get to you? Why are you acting like this?”

Kendall put her hands on her hips and tilted her head. “Oh, is your fiancée, back?” The way she lifted her tone, told him she already knew the answer.

“Why do I think you already know that?”

“Yeah, and it would have been nice to hear the happy news from you.”

“I just found out myself, of course, I was going to talk to you. Why are you moving out?”

Kendall sighed. “Because, I hated being labeled a widow, and I don’t plan to add homewrecker to my list of failures.”

“Homewrecker? What are you talking about? You’re not a homewrecker.”

“Darn right, and I don’t plan to be. Thank you again for everything, you can have the horse, once I send you the papers, that makes us even,”

she explained, before heading toward her trailer.

“Yeah, a crazy, dangerous horse makes us even. Kendall, stop. I need to talk with you.”

“I have to hurry and pack before my apartment gets rented out from under me,” she said thickly before heading for her steps.

“Ty, let’s go inside.”

“Trish and I are not a couple,” he tried to explain, but suddenly, he also realized that Ty was nowhere around.

“Ty!” he yelled, his shouts joining with Kendall’s.

“Maybe he’s in the barn,” he said, trying to comfort the panic he saw building in Kendall’s eyes. “Hey, Little Scratcher, don’t goof around, we need to see you, buddy.” Kendall’s own screams for her son sounded off like rapid gun fire in his ear and birthed his own panic over the situation. Kendall appeared at the barn opening, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Is he in here?”

“No. Don’t worry, he’s probably playing hide and seek, or something.”

“Ty!” he yelled out, as loud as he could.

Kendall sobbed, then raced out of the barn and he followed right after her. Then a thought hit him that rolled a chill over him. He headed toward

the end of the trailer lots, taking the same path Diablo took, and there, he discovered one of Ty's red sneakers in the grass.

Kendall ran up to him, "He ran after Diablo? Are you kidding me? He took off while we were arguing? Oh, my god!"

They both took off racing toward the lake. Charlie couldn't believe how much ground the boy had covered in a span of only a few minutes.

They stopped when they reached where the large boulders began to dot along the landscape. Charlie could see Ty's little blonde head poking just over one of the rocks. "I see him, he said. Let me catch my breath, and I'll go get him."

Just then, shots rang out. Far away, rifle blast that Charlie recognized being from hunters. Today was the first day the hunts opened for deer. Kendall heard the shots too. "They're not shooting on my ranch. It's too far away," he assured her. But, something caught the corner of his eye, and when Charlie turned his head, he witnessed Diablo running at full speed between a rocky outcrop, and his blood ran cold. Ty was right in Diablo's path.

"Ty!" Kendall's blood churning cry echoed in his ear as Diablo raced toward Ty at full-throttle. "Ty!" Kendall screamed again, racing toward the boy without regard for the horse thundering toward them both. Charlie's heart hammered hard in his chest as he instinctively drew his revolver out

of his holster. He called out Kendall's name. The buckskin was not going to stop.

Charlie held up the gun just as Kendall fell to her knees in front of Ty. He fired the entire clip into the horse until it fell with a heavy thud just a few feet away from them both.

Kendall held her son in her lap, rocking him back and forth while she sobbed her heart out.

Charlie watched helpless, as he replaced the gun into the holster, the ground dropping beneath him. With heavy steps, he walked toward Kendall and Ty, knowing already that all of this was his fault.

"Diablo..." the boy cried into his mama's neck. Kendall eyes squeezed closed, tears slipping from the corners as she patted the boy's back as she held him. "I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry. Diablo wasn't going to stop. He would have hurt you, he probably didn't see you, you're so small," she choked out. "Ty, this is all mommy's fault. I knew he was a bad horse, I knew he was...I should have listened to grandpa...I'm so sorry..."

"It's Charlie's fault! He killed daddy's horse. Charlie is a bad, bad man," he said angrily, through his tears.

"No, no he's not a bad man, Ty, Charlie is not a bad man," she repeated, over and over.

“It’s all my fault, Ty. I should have listened, I should have listened,” she sobbed into her sons embrace. “I’m sorry I ran away,” Ty cried.

Charlie inhaled a deep breath, feeling a knife full of guilt shoving itself deep into his chest. He blinked several times trying in vain to stave off tears. He glanced over at the horse, and then looked away. He had no choice, he had no other choice but to shoot Diablo. But, that won’t mean a thing to the kid, and it won’t change the fact that Diablo was dead and Kendall would soon take her son and leave. Somehow, in just the span of a few minutes, he had managed to lose everything he’d come to love—and all because of this land. When he raised his gaze toward the horizon, the wild mares were watching him, and one by one, each turned to disappear into a thick stand of Ponderosas.

“I guess you’re right, Kendall. Being a cowboy is a death sentence,” he said. “A wrongful sentence that I’m about to make right.”

Ty kept his arms wrapped snugly around her neck as Kendall sat on the bed trying without much success to figure out what to do. She’d probably lost the apartment, since she couldn’t pack anything, with her son so upset. Her heart broke for Ty, his little heart not understanding that what Charlie had done. She just couldn’t stop blaming herself. How many times had Rooster repeatedly warned her the horse was unredeemable, and she

refused to listen. Why? Because she wanted to make him pay for his treatment of Garrett. Because she had wrongfully blamed Rooster for her own unhappy marriage. None of this was Rooster's fault.

Kendall swallowed down the enormous lump in her throat. Her frustration had put her son in harm's way, and If it weren't for Charlie, she might have lost Ty. The only thing she could think to do now at this point, was to call home and ask her parents for two tickets. She'll take Ty back to Canada and start life over, far away from cowboys, horses, and anything remotely related. The thought squeezed at her as Charlie's face floated in her vision. But, as long as she lives, she'll never forget the despair she saw in Charlie's eyes when Ty called him a bad guy. Before she leaves, she'll make sure Charlie knows that he had done the right thing and he shouldn't blame himself. She'd wished she could tell him she loved him, but that was an emotion she'd have to keep to herself. Her love for Charlie would be something that her son wouldn't be able to endure. Not anymore. Plus, it looked as though Charlie was about to have a family of his own with Trish.

Kendall's plan was to finish out the day at work, and then put in her two-week notice. She would call her mom in the morning and find out what

she'd have to do for her and her son to return to Canada. Her exhaustion had returned ten-fold, each, and every step seemingly heavier than the one before. As she waited on tables, a few people had heard about Diablo's passing and would make off-handed comments about how his death was long over-due. She couldn't bring herself to look at anyone in the eye, because of course, it had turned out they were right. While she struggled with the truth of the matter, her mind wandered back to Charlie and the last thing he'd said to her.

"A death sentence...make it right..."

Katie brought out a plate of appetizers for the bar and at that moment, Rooster and Trish walked through the doors. Kendall closed her eyes. Surely, he was here to gloat over the horse's death, and she'd have to tell him what happened and apologize.

"Ah, hell. Why did they have to come in here? Do you want me to serve them for you?" Katie asked, annoyed. Kendall took a deep breath.

"No, I have to do it."

"Well, keep your cool. I don't have bail money," Katie said, departing back into the kitchen.

Kendall approached the table with a smile plastered to her face.

"Welcome, what can I get you folks to drink?"

Rooster chuckled while Trish's gaze swept over her with interest.

“Is that any way to greet your ex father-in law?”

“Hello, Rooster. How are you today?”

“That’s better. Kendall, this is Trish Thompson,” he introduced. The woman with medium length red hair and large, blue eyes looked back at her expectantly.

“I know. Nice to meet you,” she lied.

“Is it?” Trish asked.

Rooster smirked. “Now, don’t you two get into a cat fight over that two-bit bull jockey.”

Kendall held her breath at that remark, but Trish’s lips twisted into a half smile. “I don’t have to fight,” Rooster,” Trish told him with a cocky lilt to her voice. Kendall didn’t think her heart could drop any further than it had already, but it did. No, Trish didn’t have to fight because there was nothing to fight about. Obviously, Charlie was all hers.

“Look, can I take your order?” Kendall asked, developing a dull ache in the back of her neck.

“Two beers,” Rooster told her.

“It’s pretty early for drinking,” she pointed out.

“I’ll conduct my business however I see fit. Besides, Trish and I are celebrating.”

“Celebrating?” she shouldn’t have asked, but it slipped out before she could think about it.

“Yes, ma’am. We are celebrating because Trish here, who spent her time in Montana gaining her real estate license, finally convinced lover-boy to sell his land. That’s going to be a nice first commission for you and your baby, isn’t it Trish?”

Trish leaned back in her seat, practically glowing. “Yeah, and I need it,” she laughed, nudging an elbow into Rooster’s shoulder.

A sarcastic chuckle involuntarily escaped Kendall. Charlie had promised several times he would never sell, and despite the little play act being performed before her eyes, she still believed him. He loves that land and those horses. This is nothing but another one of Rooster’s stupid jokes. “Like hell. Keep dreaming.”

“It’s true,” Trish confirmed. “I know you’ve been shacking up at Charlie’s ranch, but Charlie was *my* fiancée. If anyone knows that man, it’s me.”

Kendall met Trish’s stony glare head on. “What Charlie does is none of my business. But Charlie loves that land and the horses that run wild on it. If you hadn’t walked away from him when he needed you the most, you might’ve discovered that for yourself. So maybe you don’t know him as well as you think you do.”

“Ooh, defensive, are we? Hmm...I guess Charlie can still charm the stupid ones.”

Kendall slammed the tray on the table but her gaze dropped to Trish’s swollen belly and she immediately checked herself. Rooster juted his cane out to put it between them.

“Listen, Trish, that remark was uncalled for. Kendall is far from stupid, she’s a good person and an excellent mama to my grandson. She just has unfortunate luck with men.” Then he lowered his cane, seemed to think about something, and then looked Kendall in the eye. “I know you can’t provide a good life for my grandson working here slinging brew. Stop by my ranch and we can talk about you getting your old job back, moving you and Ty back to Red Wagon. But, no matter what, Diablo can’t come with you. Let lover-boy have him. I better never see that son-of-bitch again.”

Kendall stopped breathing. It was the first time she’d ever heard Rooster defend anyone, let alone, her. Beyond that, his last statement proved he really had no idea about Diablo. He didn’t know yet that Charlie had to shoot the horse.

“Thank you, but, I have to do this for myself,” she rushed out. Kendall spun on her heels to head to the bar as this new information whirled in her head. She was stunned to learn that Rooster had no idea about the horse. She grabbed two mugs and then proceeded to fill them, but

she was thinking about Charlie and their claims of him selling his ranch. If that were true, then why would he do an about-face on something like that? Her heart escalated to an alarming beat. Was it because of her? Her son? Diablo?

The beer overflowed onto her hands and she looked down at the mess, lost inside her thoughts. Suddenly, it all became clear. She didn't want Charlie to sell, she didn't want to move to Canada, she didn't want Ty to miss out on Charlie's friendship and guidance—and if her son was destined to ride, then she didn't want any other man than Charlie to teach him how. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't think. The sudden urge to fight for Charlie, to fight for her son's destiny made her whole-body tremble. She couldn't make another mistake; her son would never forgive her.

“Whoa, girl,” Katie said as she took the glasses from her. “I heard what they said, and that doesn't sound like the Charlie Walters I know. And, if that bitch thinks she's going to swallow beer down to her unborn baby in my saloon, she's got another thing coming.”

Big Joe walked through the doors with his five kids and with Ty perched up on his shoulder. His kids looked so happy with their father, each dressed in hats, chaps and with mud on their boots, that Kendall stopped to take it all in.

“Look! We won ribbons at the gymkhana!” They all yelled in unison. Ty was the only one not happily yelling. In fact, he was the only kid acting miserable. Joe put Ty down, his expression pinched.

“Ty is upset that he didn’t get to ride with them, Kendall.” Joe said, annoyed. She’d made it clear that her son wasn’t going to ride horses, and apparently Big Joe dutifully followed her orders. But he was looking damned irritated, and even Ty didn’t bother to look her way as he joined the other kids at the table screaming for ice cream. Kendall knew what she had to do. She quickly untied her apron.

“Katie, please don’t be mad, but I need to talk to Joe in private.”

“Go ahead. You should talk to Joe. Ask him whatever you want. He’s got a lot to say. In fact, ask him about Garrett. Ask him about Mount Everest.”

“Huh?”

“You’ll see. Go ask him.”

Kendall met with Joe in the alley behind the saloon. The man held both hands on his hips, shifting his weight from foot to foot. She’d never seen him angry before, but she knew it was due to her.

“Okay, let me have it,” she said, knowing he needed the invitation. Joe shook his head, looking everywhere but at her.

“Dammit, you’re wrong, Kenny. You’re just wrong. Hell, I know what you’ve been through with Garrett. And none of that was your fault. Maybe I blame myself for keeping so much from you, but that doesn’t give you the right to take it out on Ty.”

“I was just trying to protect him,” she whispered.

“What about Charlie?” Joe shot out, surprising her with the question.

“Well, I wanted to ask you about Charlie, but Katie told me to ask you about Mount Everest.”

His brows scrunched. “Dammit. I don’t want to talk about that.”

“But, I need to know.”

“Kendall, it’s about Garrett’s cheating.”

“How many times, Joe?”

Joe reached up to squeeze the bridge of his nose between his thumb and finger. He stayed in that position for few heartbeats. “All the damn time,” he admitted. “I couldn’t tell you. It wasn’t my place. Garrett and I were winning, and I couldn’t risk it. I know that makes me a horrible man. But, I’ve got kids, a family, and we were relying on Garrett’s ability to rope and put food on the table and pay for this saloon that Katie loves so much.”

“I understand, Joe, and I want you to know I don’t hold anything against you. You were Garrett’s friend.”

“I really don’t know about that. Especially when he started with all the deception. He didn’t just screw you over, he screwed his parents over too.”

“I know, I have to keep reminding myself that Rooster and Mary were also victims. Okay, why Mount Everest?”

Big Joe let out a pent-up breath, looking up to the sky. “Damn, my wife has a big mouth. Kendall. One night I confronted Garrett after yet, another woman left his horse trailer one night. I asked him why, when he has such a beautiful wife at home, why he would cheat the way he does. And, he came back with, “A man can only appreciate the beauty of Mount Everest for so long, until he has to look at the ocean. Boy, that pissed me off, so I hit him. I hit him square in the nose for that. We went on to lose a few rodeos afterwards, and I couldn’t afford to keep being angry. I never confronted him again.”

Hurt over Garrett’s words and appreciation for what Joe had done for her honor, rolled around in her chest.

“Thank you,” she managed.

“Kendall, but, Charlie. We need to talk about Charlie. Sure, the man has had a past, but that man, that man is the real deal. Katie told me how you feel about him, and I’m here to tell you that you won’t go wrong. I’m guessing you’d like to never set eyes on another cowboy again, but there

are still good ones out there,” he said. Kendall touched his arm. “You’re a good one. And, I think Charlie is too. I don’t know if you’ve heard, but he’s about to have a baby with Trish.”

“No, he’s not. The daddy is some calf-wrestler up in Montana.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep. The doc told Charlie that he can’t have kids. Didn’t you know that? That accident in Tucson robbed Charlie of the ability to make babies, and I know, he regrets that deeply. You ought to see Charlie at the rodeos. He’s always taking time to shake a kid’s hand, give them pointers about bulls or horses. He was born to be a father. Hell, he brags about Ty all the god-damned time. I can’t remember Garrett ever doing that. Not even once.

And, above all that, Pinedale talks about more than just you. Trish has become the new town punching bag since she returned. The whole town knows Charlie isn’t the daddy of that bun in her oven.”

“Wow,” was all she could think to say. “I guess I need to rethink a few things.”

“I hope you do. Canada is too damn far to fix shit from there. You know what I’m saying? If you take Ty, you’re taking him from the best man that could have ever happened to him—and to you.”

“I heard you were kind of hoping for something between me and Charlie,” she said, giving him a wink. Joe’s face turned bright red.

“You two were like two broken puzzle pieces. It just seemed to me you two would fit.”

Kendall reached out and wrapped her arms around the big man’s middle. When Big Joe hugged her back, it was nice to have a hug from him for a good reason.

“Thank you for everything, Joe.”

They walked back into the saloon together, and Kendall noticed that Rooster and Trish had left. There wasn’t any other patron inside the saloon, judging by all the chairs Katie had stacked on the table-tops.

When Katie stopped working to watch them come into the saloon, her skin paled.

“What happened?” Joe asked first. But, Katie looked at her and Kendall swallowed down the intuition that whatever was going on, she wasn’t going to like it. Katie cleared her throat. “Rooster walked over to the table where the kids were having ice cream and asked Ty if everything was okay. Ty told his grandpa that he was a bad kid and Charlie had to shoot Diablo. Rooster took out of here so fast...I don’t know what he’s going to do.”

Chapter Nine

Charlie sat in his backhoe using the front bucket to dig a grave for Diablo. It would be the last thing he does here and then he would meet Rooster's attorney to sign the deed. He wasn't sure where he'd go once he handed over the ranch. Maybe he'd just go back to rodeoing full time and live out of a horse trailer. He certainly wouldn't need a permanent home for Kendall and her son. The thought tumbled to his gut as he took one more scoop from the ground when the sight of Kendall's truck stopped him.

He turned the engine off and waited.

As she held Ty's hand and approached, he realized that they both had been crying. Their shared look of despair ripped his heart out of his chest. He jumped down from the tractor.

"I guess I should have told you I was going to bury Diablo today. It's so cold out, I could have waited, but it didn't seem right. He stopped, feeling like he was stammering over his words.

"It's okay, Charlie," she said.

"I'm selling the land. I know I said I wouldn't, but there's nothing keeping me here anymore," he told her, looking to the side. He couldn't bring himself to watch her reaction.

"Rooster told me. I didn't believe him. I didn't want to believe him..."

Charlie rubbed his face with his hands. His eyes were burning, and he damn sure didn't want to cry in front of them. "It's true. I'm supposed to go meet with the attorney after I get Diablo buried."

She took a step closer to him. "So, we're not too late?"

He looked at her, confused by her question.

"Too late for what?"

"You haven't sold Heaven yet?"

He exhaled, and then gazed to the ground shrugging a shoulder. "Not yet. But, I don't have a good reason to stay. Hell, how much longer can I stick around to babysit a herd of horses? They don't need me. They're just fine on their own."

"I'm not. My son and I ... we're not. We need you, Charlie. Scratch that, we don't just need you, we *want* you in our lives."

Charlie was afraid he misunderstood. He braved a look at Ty who was staring up at him with his cobalt blue eyes. The anger Ty showed toward him, was gone.

"What are you saying, Kendall?" He stepped forward until she was close enough to touch. Her expression softened. Kendall's eyes sparkled with emotion as she reached out a hand, laying her palm against his chest.

"I'm saying you're the only one I trust with my son. I want you to teach him everything there is to know about being a cowboy, about being a

man—a good man. I’m saying you’re the only one I trust with my heart...”

“Are you serious? Are you sure? Are you both sure?”

“Charlie, I’m sorry,” Ty’s little voice squeaked up at him.

Charlie bent himself at the knees and scooped up Ty. And then he reached out one arm and wrapped it around Kendall’s shoulder in disbelief.

“Kendall, are you sure? I know you and Ty have been through so much. I never blamed you for being so angry with cowboys, with this town, with all of it. Are you absolutely sure?”

She leaned her head back so he could see her, the corner of her beautiful lips lifting into a smile. “I’m very sure. I think I have been for a while, I just couldn’t admit it to myself.”

He drew her close to him, holding her and marveling at how good and how right it was. There was no doubt in his mind, that Kendall was the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life loving.

“Kendall, I will always do what’s right by you and your son. I will always put the two of you first. I love you both. Every day I couldn’t wait to wake up, to meet you for coffee or to find Ty waiting by the corral with that look in his eye. I love you both so much.”

“We love you too, Charlie. I don’t know exactly when or how, I just know that we do, and it feels right this time. It feels more than right, it feels

amazing. Kiss me,” she pleaded. “How much longer do I have to wait for you to kiss me?”

Charlie’s joy came straight from his soul. “Not one more minute.”

When he placed a kiss upon Kendall’s lips, Ty started clapping.

They were still locked into an embrace, when Rooster pulled into the drive. Kendall looked up to Charlie, unable to hide the fear of what would happen when Charlie tells Rooster that he’d changed his mind about selling.

Rooster didn’t come alone. He’d brought his wife Mary with him and when they both got out of his Jeep, they held equally matching expressions of remorse.

“I can’t believe that horse is gone,” Rooster said. He gave them a look but didn’t comment on the fact that Charlie held Kendall and his grandson in his arms, leaving Rooster no doubts about his intentions. Rooster cleared his throat and then gazed back at the hole. “I wanted Diablo gone and now that he is, I truly wish things could have turned out differently. I’ve done nothing but act like a horse’s ass,” Rooster admitted.

“It’s okay,” Kendall told him. “It’s my fault too. Rooster, you shouldn’t blame yourself, you tried to tell me...”

“No, it’s not okay. It is my fault. All my life I have craved control,” he said, and then paused a bit. “Kendall, Charlie, I don’t feel like a man if I

can't control what's around me. I couldn't control Garrett, and I couldn't control this horse. And when this land came up for sale the first time, I wanted it for my son. When he dropped the ball on it, I became angry. And then I found out developers from Phoenix wanted it. You're sitting on a fortune, right here," he said, shaking his head. "Garrett had a golden opportunity at a real future and he let it slip from his hands. I guess I was ashamed," he admitted, clutching his hat between his fingers. "To me, Garrett had always been careless. I knew Diablo was trouble the moment he hit the ground. There was just a look in his eye. I got so frustrated with the horse after months and months of training that I told Garrett to destroy Diablo, but that boy loved to try and prove me wrong. That damn horse was just a living embodiment of the risk Garrett loved to take with his life. But, the worst thing Garrett done, was to be careless with his own family. I admit, I was against your marriage, not because of you, but because I knew Garrett wouldn't man up and be good husband to you, or a decent father for Ty."

"We've all made mistakes," Charlie chimed in.

Rooster chuckled sadly. "You got that right. I guess I should have taken your point loud and clear when you chased me with that damn back hoe. Anyway, I wanted to come by and offer my apologies and my

condolences. I think it's time we bury more than just the horse, I think it's time we bury the hatchet."

Rooster then nodded to his wife. Mary returned to the Jeep and took out a stack of papers. "This my offer on Heaven," Rooster explained, as he took the papers from his wife and then proceeded to rip them up into confetti. "Grab me that other paper," he instructed Mary. She went back to the Jeep, retrieving another paper, handing it to him.

"What about this one, Charlie? Should I rip up this one too?" Rooster asked, holding the paper between pinched fingers, seductively swinging it back and forth.

Kendall turned and gave Charlie a questioning look. He didn't say anything, but the flushing of his face spoke volumes.

"Charlie called my attorney and had him draw up a stipulation to the sale. He insisted that a sizeable chunk of his money go into a separate account for you and my grandson," Rooster said, with a grin.

Surprise rolled over Kendall as Charlie held her tighter against him. "Charlie, you really did that for us? That's incredible. But..."

"Tear that paper up as well, Rooster. I think I have a better offer for Kendall and Ty."

“I’ll bet that you do,” Rooster said, looking past all of them toward the horizon. “It sure is a beautiful chunk of land, but it’s way too much for just one person,” he stated, smiling. “I’ll trust you’ll make the most of it, Charlie Walters?”

“Yes, sir, I will,” Charlie agreed, pulling her and Ty even closer to him.

“I figured you would. Mary, hand me that box Aunt Betty left me in the will.”

Mary reached into her jacket, with a smile that Kendall hadn’t seen on her face since before her son died. The box was small, blue and velvet. She went to hand it to Rooster, but he shook his head. “I think if Aunt Betty thought enough of Charlie to give him all this property, then she’d probably meant for him to have this too.”

Mary nodded in agreement, wiping a tear from her cheek. “Here, you go, Charles,” she whispered. Kendall had no idea what was going on, but Charlie seemed to know as his eyes moistened over with tears. “Thank you, I know a good place for this,” he said, thickly.

One year later, early Spring.

Kendall stood inside the master bedroom of the cabin as still as possible while her mom fastened the last button on her wedding dress. Her

gaze lovingly swept up the window frame that she'd helped build with Charlie. Together, they created a big picturesque window like the one in the living room so they could see the horses every morning when they opened her eyes.

Through the glass, she gazed out over the cobalt lake, the bright colorful flowers and the green, lush grass while her mom stopped buttoning to now fuss over her veil. Just outside the door, Ty was busy running up and down the hallway, hollering out his joy.

"I get to wear a cowboy hat, a belt buckle and spurs!" he yelled to someone. Kendall and her mother both broke down with a mixture of tears and giggles.

"My grandson is so happy," Sarah said.

"He is happy. So am I."

"You wear your smile and that dress beautifully."

Kendall lowered her gaze, she couldn't believe she was standing in front of a mirror wearing an actual wedding dress. A year and a half-ago she would have never thought it possible.

"Thank you, mama."

"Oh, what a pretty baby," Sarah said with awe in her voice. Kendall squeezed her eyebrows together. "Baby?"

“Right outside the window,” Sarah explained, pointing toward the lake.

Kendall lifted her gaze and then inhaled deeply. A newborn foal stood on wobbly legs in the center of a patch of wildflowers. Kendall let out a cry as she rushed out of the bedroom only to run straight into Charlie rushing out the guest room, his black tie hanging around his neck.

“What’s wrong!” he asked, grasping her by the arms.

“A foal!” she laughed, tears breaking from her eyes

“A what?”

“A foal!”

“You’re not supposed to see the bride,” Sarah whined from behind them.

Together, Charlie and Kendall opened the double doors that led to the outdoor deck. Ty ran out, climbing on the railing to get a better look. There was not just one foal, but two babies born with a sooty-buckskin coat.

“Look mommy! It’s my daddy and Diablo!” Ty exclaimed, waving his arms wildly. “They’re babies again!”

“Charlie? Kendall questioned, looking up at him astonished. Charlie pulled her close to him and then kissed her on the top of her head.

“I believe Ty is right. I was given a second chance, and I think Garrett and Diablo are getting a second chance too. Everything will be fine now,

Kendall—for everyone.”

The End

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