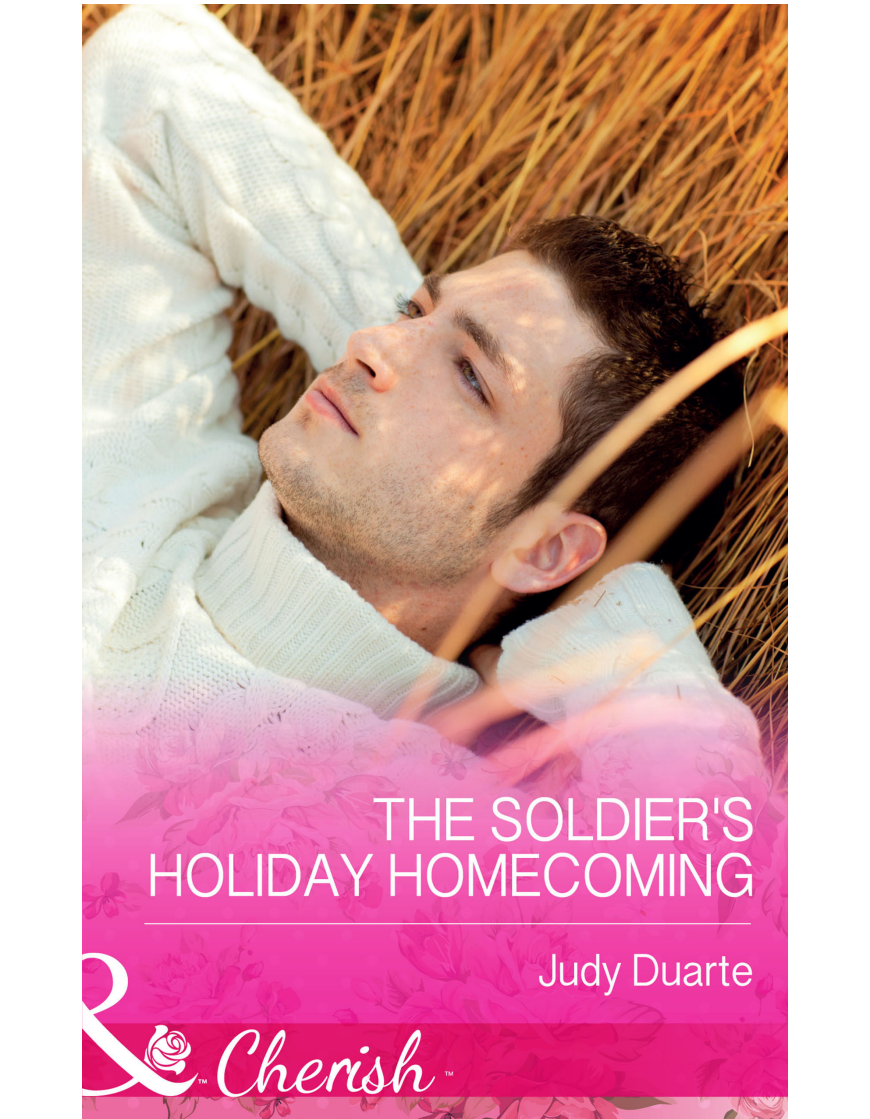


A man with dark hair and light stubble is lying down in a field of tall, dry grass. He is wearing a white, textured cable-knit sweater. His head is tilted back, and he is looking upwards with a peaceful expression. Sunlight filters through the grass, creating a warm, golden glow. The bottom third of the image is covered by a semi-transparent pink banner with a floral pattern.

THE SOLDIER'S HOLIDAY HOMECOMING

Judy Duarte

 *Cherish*™

Judy Duarte

The Soldier's Holiday Homecoming

Аннотация

A HOLIDAY TO REMEMBER...Sergeant Joe Wilcox has been trying for years to forget his past – and he gets his wish when an accident robs him of his memory. Chloe Dawson, who offers to nurse him back to health, is a light in the dark... but the mysterious, beautiful blonde is strictly off-limits. The discovery of a letter the wounded marine was carrying – addressed to Chloe – only deepens the mystery of who he is and why he came to Brighton Valley. And, as a familiar desire burns hotter between them, it's only a matter of time until Joe's memory returns...

“I love Christmas,” Chloe said, drawing his thoughts back to reality.

“All we’re missing is a little mistletoe to hang over the doorway.”

She flushed, and he was tempted to draw her to him anyway, to kiss her senseless. In fact, as she lifted her eyes to his, as their gazes locked, desire flared.

He had no business following through on it, though. He didn’t even know where he’d been, let alone where he was going. But if she didn’t stop looking at him like that ...

Oh, what the hell.

“Something tells me I’ve never needed any prompts.” Then he stepped forward, placed his hands on her cheeks. He waited a moment, taking the time to study her eyes, her expression, checking for any sign of protest.

Instead, her chin lifted and her lips parted.

That was all the invitation he needed.

* * *

The Soldier’s Holiday Homecoming

Judy Duarte



www.millsandboon.co.uk

JUDY DUARTE always knew there was a book inside her, but since English was her least favorite subject in school, she never considered herself a writer. An avid reader who enjoys a happy ending, Judy couldn't shake the dream of creating a book of her own.

Her dream became a reality in March 2002, when Mills & Boon® Cherish™ released her first book, *Cowboy Courage*. Since then she has published more than twenty novels. Her stories have touched the hearts of readers around the world. And in July 2005 Judy won a prestigious Readers' Choice Award for *The Rich Man's Son*.

Judy makes her home near the beach in Southern California. When she's not cooped up in her writing cave, she's spending time with her somewhat enormous but delightfully close family.

In memory of Lydia Bustos, who was called home sooner than any of us expected.

I'm rejoicing for you, Tia—but missing you, especially during

the holidays.

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[Chapter One](#)

Brighton Valley, Texas, was the last place in the world Joe Wilcox had ever expected to step foot in again.

Well, not when it came to the good ol' U.S.A. He sure as hell

wouldn't look forward to another deployment to Afghanistan. But he'd made a promise to deliver a letter for a friend, and if there was one thing that could be said about Joe—he always kept his word.

So he'd packed a few belongings, rented a car just outside of Camp Pendleton and left California. He'd stopped in El Paso long enough to spend the night with Red Conway, a retired marine he'd met on a bus ten years ago. Red had taken Joe in when he'd been a down-and-out teenage runaway, hell-bent on leaving everyone and everything he'd once known behind.

The two men had shared a couple of beers, a pizza and a few stories. The next day, Joe had continued on for another nine hundred miles, finally arriving in Brighton Valley exhausted and hungry.

The first thing Joe did after checking in to a cheap but clean room at the Night Owl, a motor lodge that catered to travelers who were low on funds and just passing through, was to shove his duffle bags under the bed. There was a closet he could have used, but that had never felt like a safe place when he'd been a kid determined to protect his valuables from an uncle who might not have enough cash to buy a pack of cigarettes and a pint of Jack Daniels.

He probably should have shaken the habit years ago, but being back in town brought back all kinds of weird memories, leaving him a bit unbalanced.

Next he took a long, hot shower, slipped into a comfortable

pair of worn jeans and a black sweatshirt and hoofed it across the highway to the Stagecoach Inn.

In spite of the seasonal chill in the air, a cold beer would really hit the spot right about now, but he wasn't looking for a drink or any entertainment. He was on a mission. He had a letter to deliver to a blonde cocktail waitress named Chloe Dawson.

Once he found the coldhearted woman who'd broken Dave Cummings's heart, he'd give her the letter Dave had asked him to deliver.

Now, as he stood on the side of the busy highway, waiting for a lull in the traffic so he could cross, he pulled out Chloe's photograph, the one Dave had always carried. He studied the photo in the flickering streetlight overhead. The snapshot was a little grainy, so her facial features weren't especially clear, but it was easy to see that the platinum blonde had long, wavy hair and a dynamite shape.

To be honest, when he and Dave had been stationed in Afghanistan, all Dave could talk about was the woman he'd placed on a pedestal and the dreams he'd had for them. Joe had been a little envious. He'd never had a family—well, not one he'd wanted to claim—so he'd never dared to consider a white-picket-fence dream. But his buddy had grown up as an only child, adored by his parents. So why wouldn't he expect to have that same life for himself?

Joe had to admit that he'd wondered what such an attractive woman had seen in Dave. Not that his friend wasn't a good

person. He was kind and generous to a fault, but he'd been so sheltered by his doting parents that he tended to be naive about life and other things.

Dave had been more sensitive than guys like Joe, who'd learned early on to get tough in order to survive, and as a result, he'd been hit hard by his father's unexpected death. Then, when his mom had been diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer nine months later, he'd been devastated.

Obviously Chloe had seen how broken up and vulnerable Dave had been and used it against him when she'd set her gold-digging plan in motion.

From what Joe had gathered, she'd rented a room from Dave's widowed mother, and when Dave had gone home on leave last summer, he'd fallen hard for her. And, sadly, he'd been too caught up in grief and lust and starry-eyed wonder to see the writing on the wall.

After Mrs. Cummings's funeral, Chloe had promised to take care of the ranch and to wait for him until he returned from war. Dave, of course, had bought her line of bull and had promised her the moon.

The dream that they'd get married as soon as he got back from deployment and eventually raise "a passel of kids" on the family ranch had been the only thing that kept him going.

Dave might have joined the Marines, hoping to man up and become independent, but he hadn't been cut out for a life of combat, especially when his idea of happy ever after was in

Texas.

Not that life in a war zone had been a cakewalk for Joe, either, but growing up with an abusive drunk uncle and then ending up in the foster care system had made him both street-smart and strong. He hadn't realized it at the time, but in a lot of ways his crappy childhood had been a blessing.

Either way, Dave's defense mechanism for dealing with his depression and fears had been to cling to his future with Chloe. It was all he'd talked about, all he'd looked forward to. But apparently Chloe had envisioned an entirely different future, one without Dave. And it looked like fate had granted her that wish.

As the last headlights of the oncoming traffic passed, Joe crossed the street, his boots crunching on the graveled parking lot as he made his way to the entrance of the Stagecoach Inn, where blinking Christmas lights adorned the front window.

He could have gone out to the ranch looking for Chloe, but from what Dave had told him, she worked at the honky-tonk to pick up extra money. And Dave had spent many nights in the war-ravaged deserts of Afghanistan, worrying that some rowdy cowboy might pick up his girl while she was there.

Was that what had happened? Had Chloe found someone better looking? Someone with more money and a bigger ranch?

Joe supposed it really didn't matter why she'd broken Dave's heart, just that she'd done it—callously and without any thought of how lonely and despondent the poor guy had been.

When her Dear John arrived, Dave's depression spiraled

downward. And in his grief, he'd taken off after a group of combatants on his own, a reckless act that bordered on suicide and nearly got him killed.

Joe had run to his defense and gotten shot, too, which resulted in two career-ending injuries. All because of that damn cocktail waitress. Couldn't she have waited until Dave had gone home to break up with him? Her abandonment in his time of need had led to him having a death wish, which eventually came true.

As Joe neared the entrance of the rowdy honky-tonk, the country music as well as the hoots of laughter grew louder. He pulled open the door, then paused in the doorway, allowing his senses to adjust to the smell of booze and smoke, to the blaring jukebox and the chatter of people milling about.

He was looking for a woman—a sexy blonde who'd be taking orders and serving drinks. From Dave's description, Chloe was twenty-two years old, about five foot four and a knockout. The photograph wasn't going to be all that helpful, although Joe didn't have any reason to dispute Dave's claim. Either way, in a small place like this she shouldn't be too hard to find.

Joe made his way across the scarred wood floor to the bar, which stretched across the far wall. While the bartender filled a glass of beer for a cowboy sitting three seats to the left, Joe asked, "You know a woman by the name of Chloe Dawson?"

"Yeah. She used to work here for a while, but not anymore."

"What happened to her?"

"She quit."

“Know where I can find her?”

The barkeep surveyed him for a beat, as if he was some kind of stalker or an abusive ex-boyfriend or something. “I got no idea where she is.”

Joe didn’t believe that for a minute, but there were plenty of others around here who might talk. Besides, he had a feeling she was still staying out at the Cummings ranch. Why wouldn’t she be? Last he’d heard, Dave had left it to her in his will.

Did she know that already? Dave had already been discharged at the time of his death, so the military wouldn’t have alerted her.

How long did it take for news from the outside world to reach a small town like this?

As the bartender delivered another round of drinks to a couple at the far end of the bar, Joe pulled out the stool and took a seat. It was pretty late to drive out to the ranch tonight. Besides, the sun had set several hours ago, and he was exhausted.

When the bartender finally returned, he wiped his hands on a dish towel. “What’ll you have?”

Joe wasn’t sure. Did he want something strong to help him unwind and go to sleep? Or something light and satisfying to wash down the road dust he’d swallowed since his trek from El Paso?

One thing he knew for sure, he was dead tired and running on fumes, although he doubted he’d be able to fall asleep right away.

“I’ll have a Corona,” he said.

The bartender continued to study him. “Can I see your ID?”

At twenty-six and after eight years in the military, Joe wasn't used to being carded. But then again, he'd only been out of the service and back in the States for a couple of months. He reached into the front pocket of his jeans, only to come up empty-handed.

Where the hell was...? Oh, crap. He'd showered back in the room and changed clothes. He must have left his wallet on the nightstand, next to his cell phone and... Damn. The key to the room had been right beside it. All he had on him was Dave's letter and the photograph, neither of which would do him much good tonight.

So much for hiding his valuables out of sight. Talk about being too tired to think straight. He blew out a ragged sigh. "I'm not trying to pull a fast one. I'm staying across the street at the Night Owl. Apparently, I left my wallet there."

"Sorry, buddy. The guy who worked here before me got fired for serving a minor, and I was told to card anyone who looked younger than thirty."

"I understand. I need to get my cash anyway. Keep that beer cold for me. I'll be back." Joe slid off the bar stool and headed for the door. He felt like a batter with two strikes against him already. What else could go wrong?

As he stepped outside and made his way to the parking lot, a drunk stumbled past him, walking toward a Silverado pickup, the keys in his hand.

"You got someone you can call?" Joe asked the guy.

"Get off my back," the drunk said. "You sound like my wife."

Joe was going to argue, but a woman came out a moment later and called out to the man. “Larry, I told you I’d drive. Wait for me. I can pick up my car tomorrow. Just let me get my purse and tell Shannon goodbye. I’ll be right back.”

Glad the guy had a ride, Joe headed for the Night Owl. Did he want a beer badly enough to return to the bar once he got another key to his room? He wasn’t so sure that he did. Just seeing the drunken man—Larry—was a reminder of his uncle and all the nights Tío Ramon had come stumbling home, slurring his words and raising his fists, ready to strike up a fight with his aunt or whoever crossed him.

For the most part, Joe didn’t drink much at all. But tonight, he might be tempted to tie one on, just like Dave had been prone to do ever since they’d both been sent to the hospital in Germany.

Dave’s injuries had been pretty severe. And just thinking that he’d have to go through life physically damaged had sent the already emotionally impaired man into a depression from which he hadn’t been able to recover.

Hell, Joe had been bummed, too. His own gunshot wound had made him rethink his intention to reenlist, which was why he was here now—no longer officially in the corps, but always and forever a marine.

He’d shaken his own discouragement and disappointment, focusing instead on Dave’s recovery and rehab. That is, until he’d been discharged and sent back to the States. Upon Dave’s arrival two weeks ago, Joe had picked him up at the airport, determined

to help him mend. But Dave's depression and attitude had sunk to an all-time low, and on one of his first nights back, he downed more than his prescribed dose of meds, followed by a glass of ninety proof, ending his pain forever.

The coroner had ruled Dave's death an accident, an unintentional overdose. But Joe believed otherwise.

There was a life insurance policy somewhere, which wouldn't do anyone any good if the death was ruled a suicide. Joe had the power to throw a wrench into the machinery and blow things sky-high, which he was tempted to do. After all, Dave had told him that he'd made Chloe his beneficiary. And on top of that, he'd left her everything—his money, his family ranch in Brighton Valley.

How lucky could a heartless woman get?

As Joe started across the street, heading for the Night Owl, the Silverado started up, but something wasn't quite right about the sound. Instead of backing out in a normal fashion, the driver gunned the engine and the tires spun, kicking up gravel as it blasted forward and over the curb.

Joe's pause to look over his shoulder at drunk Larry cost him his opportunity to make it all the way across the street as oncoming cars zoomed by him, leaving him no safe retreat as the truck shot onto the highway, barreling right at him.

He'd thought his day couldn't get much worse and might have considered this strike three, but he was too busy trying to dodge the speeding truck as it nailed him in the side, sending him flying into the night.

* * *

When Chloe Dawson received the call from the Brighton Valley Medical Center asking her to come to the hospital and identify a hit-and-run victim, a patient they believed to be David Cummings, her heart dropped to the pit of her stomach, and her grip on the receiver tightened. “Is he...*dead*?”

“No, he’s unconscious.”

“I’ll be right there.”

The moment she hung up, she threw on a pair of jeans, a white T-shirt and sweater. Then she climbed into one of the ranch pickups and drove to town, her hands clammy as they struggled to control both the steering wheel and the gearshift at the same time, her knee wobbling as she stepped on the clutch.

Thank God her dad had insisted she learn to drive a stick when she’d turned sixteen, although this beat-up old GMC wasn’t anything like the little Honda Civic she’d once driven.

She kept her eyes on the darkened country road until she reached city limits twenty minutes later and turned down the highway that led to the medical center. She snagged the first parking space she could find and rushed to the E.R. entrance.

Once inside, she told the receptionist to alert Dr. Betsy Nielson of her arrival. It gave her some comfort to know that Dave was under the care of one of the best doctors at BVMC.

After making several visits to the emergency department with Teresa Cummings, Dave’s mother, and also with some of the elderly residents at the Sheltering Arms Rest Home, where Chloe

had once worked as a nurse's aide, Dr. Betsy Nielson and Chloe had become well acquainted.

Fortunately, within a matter of minutes, Betsy, an attractive redhead wearing a pair of light blue scrubs came out to the waiting room personally to find her. "Thanks for coming in, Chloe."

"No problem. I'm glad you called. How is he?"

"He's conscious now, but I'm afraid he's not going to be any help. He has amnesia—and no ID."

"And you think it's Dave?"

"I've never met Teresa's son, so I have no idea what he looks like. But the patient is in his mid- to late-twenties. A tattoo of the marine insignia on his left biceps indicates he is or was in the military. So I made the assumption. Sheriff Hollister is checking into that."

Chloe hadn't heard from Dave in months—not since she'd had to take a direct approach and tell him that a couple of shared dinners in the hospital cafeteria didn't mean they were altar-bound. She'd felt badly about hurting him, especially with him being so far from home, but each letter he'd sent her from Afghanistan had included more and more marriage plans. And she'd needed to make it clear that she only wanted to be friends.

"How badly is he hurt?" Chloe asked. "Is he going to be okay?"

"He's bruised, with cuts and lacerations. But there aren't any broken bones. His most serious injury appears to be a concussion."

“Where did it happen?”

“On the highway outside the Stagecoach Inn.”

Chloe had worked at the honky-tonk for a while, hoping to earn some spare cash so she could go back to nursing school once Dave got back home and was able to run the ranch himself. But she'd never liked getting involved in confrontations and tried to avoid them at all costs. Needless to say, she'd gotten tired of having to put some of the rowdier patrons in their places as the night wore on. So she'd quit last month.

“Did anyone inside the Stagecoach Inn know who he was? I mean, Dave wasn't much of a drinker—unless that changed while he was deployed.” Had he stopped by the bar to look for her? He hadn't liked the idea of her working there, but since he'd quit writing to her and her last letter to him had been returned, he might not know that she'd quit.

“From what I understand,” Betsy said, “he might have gone inside, but he never ordered a drink.”

“So what happened? How'd he get hit by a car?”

“The sheriff's department is still investigating, so I'm not entirely sure. Apparently he was on foot. A bystander heard the squealing wheels and the thud, but only caught sight of the taillights of the vehicle. She called 9-1-1, and he was rushed to the hospital. But because he has no wallet, the only clue to his identity was the letter he was carrying.”

“The letter?”

“Apparently it was written by Dave Cummings and addressed

to you. That's why I called the ranch and wanted you to give us a positive ID."

"Where is he?" Chloe asked. "Can I see him?"

"Of course. Come with me."

The doctor led Chloe through the E.R. door and along a maze of exam rooms until she reached a small area just off the nurses' station and slowed to a stop. "He's right here." She pulled the curtain back.

But when Chloe spotted the man lying in bed and took in his dark hair—clipped short but not in the customary military high and tight—as well as his olive complexion and square cut jaw, she froze in her tracks. His eyes were closed, and he had a couple of scrapes on a notably handsome face.

While she'd like to be of help to the doctor, she realized that she wouldn't be. "I'm sorry, Betsy, but that's not Dave Cummings."

"Do you know who he is?"

"I've never seen him before." She certainly would have remembered if she had. Even asleep and with bumps and bruises, the man definitely aroused a woman's soul and would leave a lasting impression.

Upon hearing their voices, he stirred. When his eyes opened, her breath caught at the sight of their stunning sky-blue color.

He zeroed in on her, and his brow furrowed. "Who are you?"

"My name's Chloe Dawson. You had a letter addressed to me."

He merely studied her, his gaze laced with confusion.

“Do you know Dave Cummings?” she asked.

“I suppose I should, since they tell me that’s who wrote the letter I had in my pocket. But the name doesn’t ring a bell.” He reached up and stroked his head, massaging the temple.

“You could be one of Dave’s friends,” Chloe said. “I’d have to ask him, but I’m not sure how to get in touch with him. He was in Afghanistan the last I heard, although he could be back in the States now.”

The handsome but wounded marine looked at the doctor, then back to Chloe. “Apparently, my brains were scrambled in that accident. And the pain medication the nurse gave me is really kicking in.”

“Good,” Betsy said. “Maybe you’ll wake up fresh in the morning and remember who you are and what you’re doing in Brighton Valley.”

“About that letter that was addressed to me,” Chloe said. “I’d like to see it. To be honest, I haven’t heard from Dave in months, and I’ve been worried about him.”

“I don’t have it. The paramedics told me about it when they brought him in. From what I understand, the sheriff is using it as part of his investigation.”

“You mean he thinks that letter may give him a clue as to who the driver was?” Chloe asked. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“It was probably just a random hit-and-run. But they want to rule out any criminal motivation.”

Chloe stiffened. Had there been a crime committed? Had the handsome G.I. Doe done something illegal?

As if sensing Chloe's concern, Dr. Nielson placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. Sheriff Hollister used to be a detective with the Houston Police Department, so he's just being thorough. He's going to check with any witnesses or people working at any of the nearby businesses. He'll get to the bottom of this—probably by morning, if not sooner."

Chloe hoped so. She couldn't imagine how the poor guy must feel—injured, alone, confused.

"If the letter doesn't give us a clue to his identity," Chloe said, "it might let us know where we can find Dave. He ought to be able to shed some light on the problem."

"So I take it I'm the problem you're trying to solve," the handsome marine said. "That's a little unsettling."

"I didn't mean to imply that." Chloe eased closer to the bed. "Besides, I'd think that you'd want to get to the bottom of this."

"To say the least." G.I. Doe blew out a weary sigh. "So how do you know that guy—Dave Cummings?"

"I'm a family friend. I live on his ranch and have been house-sitting until he comes home. That's all."

Betsy glanced at the chart in her hand, then back to Chloe. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to complete the paperwork to have him admitted for the night."

"All right. But under the circumstances—and assuming that

he's a friend of Dave's—will you make a note of my name and number in his paperwork? I'd like to be kept informed about his condition.”

The doctor addressed her injured patient. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“As long as you don't list her as next of kin, I'm okay with it.”

“Why would it bother you to think that I was related to you?” Chloe asked.

A slow grin stretched across his face. “Because you're too damn pretty. If we were related by blood, I'd have to fight the guys off you—rather than fight to be at the top of your consideration list.”

“Would you, now.” So G.I. Doe was not only handsome, but a flirt. She glanced at his left hand, checking for a ring and not finding one.

Not that it mattered if he was already taken. She had enough on her plate these days without stressing over a romance.

Still, he was more than a little attractive, even in his injured state. But she wouldn't think about that now. The important thing was that he was her only link to Dave. And until Dave came home and could take over the ranch, Chloe was stuck in limbo and unable to get on with the future she had planned.

Chapter Two

The ranch foreman, Tomas Hernandez, had just left for the day when Chloe's cell phone vibrated in her pocket. She recognized the number to the Brighton Valley Medical Center

and slid her finger across the screen. "Hello?"

"Chloe? This is Dr. Betsy Nielsen. Joe Wilcox is in stable condition and we're going to be discharging him soon."

She switched the phone to her other ear, thinking she hadn't heard correctly. "*Who?*"

"Joe Wilcox. The hit-and-run patient you came in to see last night."

"His memory returned?"

"No, I'm afraid it hasn't. Sheriff Hollister called shortly after you left the hospital last night. During the investigation, he learned who our patient is. Apparently, Mr. Joseph Wilcox arrived in town yesterday evening and checked into the Night Owl Motel. When the manager let the sheriff into his room, they found his wallet and the keys to a rental car, which also had been leased to Joseph Wilcox. The name on his California driver's license is a match, as well. I was told the photo bears his likeness. But they've yet to uncover any other information, so they still don't know much about him—or why he's in Texas."

Dave mentioned something about a buddy in the corps named Joe. The last name might have been Wilcox, but she wasn't sure.

"A deputy took his fingerprints," the doctor added, "Apparently he has a military record, although it will take more time to get any classified information. Unfortunately, we don't know how long that will be. And, like I said, physically, he's stable. So there's no legitimate reason for me to keep him another night."

Chloe knew Betsy wouldn't release a patient before it was wise to do so, but she didn't have the same confidence in the hospital administration who might be worried about him not being able to pay the bill. Her experience with the administrator of the Sheltering Arms Rest Home gave her cause to worry.

"Surely the hospital won't turn him out on the street," Chloe said. "He has no memory, nowhere to go and no one to take care of him."

"Of course not. That's why I called you. Since you left your name and number as his emergency contact, I was hoping that we could release him into your care."

Chloe didn't want to say no. After all, helping people was her natural calling, an intrinsic part of who she was. But she was living in the ranch house alone. And the man was a stranger.

"If you'd rather not take on the responsibility," Betsy said, "I understand."

Chloe might not know anything about the man, but he either was or had been a marine. And he had to be Dave's friend. Why else would he be delivering a letter to her?

"What time is he scheduled to be discharged?" She still needed to finish up her evening chores, and it was already pushing five o'clock.

"He should have been released a couple of hours ago, but I stalled the admin assistant until I had time to call you personally."

So much for finishing her chores before dark. She walked to the row of hooks just inside the back door and grabbed a red

barn jacket to ward off the winter chill. "Then I'll leave now."

"That's great. He's on the third floor, in room 327. I'll have the paperwork ready for his discharge."

Five minutes later, Chloe climbed into the faded green GMC pickup and turned on the ignition. The old ranch truck roared to life, just as dependable as Chloe herself.

To be honest, she was apprehensive about taking in a stranger, but she chided herself as quickly as the thought crossed her mind. Teresa Cummings, Dave's mom, had let Chloe move to the Rocking C when she didn't have anywhere else to go. So taking in Joe Wilcox was her way of paying it forward. Besides that, Teresa would have taken the wounded marine under her wing in a heartbeat.

One night, before Teresa's death, she and Chloe had shared a pot of tea and talked about Teresa's terminal illness, her fears and her thoughts on life. The dying woman had also shared her regrets, one of which was about a kid she'd neglected to take in and offer a home.

Apparently, years ago, when Dave had been in high school, one of his friends had needed a home. The teenager had been living in foster care and had been miserable. So Teresa had asked her husband if the boy could move in with them. Her husband had been reluctant because the kid had gotten into trouble in the past and had even been suspended from school on several occasions. Still, he'd always been polite and helpful whenever he'd been on the Rocking C, and Teresa had suspected he'd only been acting

out because of his sad childhood and difficult living situation.

Dave had begged them to let the boy stay with them, but his father had been firm in his decision. Teresa hadn't pushed her husband, although she always suspected she could have gotten him to see reason.

Shortly thereafter, the boy ran away from his foster home and was never heard from again. Dave had been inconsolable for nearly a year, and his relationship with his father had suffered terribly because of it.

Teresa had wished that she would have insisted that they take the boy in. And she'd always wondered what might have happened, how he might have fared if she had provided him a loving home. She also wondered if Dave and his father's relationship might have been a happier one, especially since her husband had died of a heart attack shortly after Dave joined the Marines in his one and only act of sheer rebellion.

To appease her guilt, Teresa had promised herself that, from then on, the Rocking C Ranch would always have its paddocks open for any stray, whether it had four legs or two.

And since Chloe had resolved to keep the ranch running exactly as Teresa would have done had she still been alive, that meant letting a hit-and-run victim who couldn't recall his own name recover there.

By the time she reached the medical center, it had grown dark outside and was threatening to rain. She turned into the hospital parking lot and pulled into a spot close to the entrance.

After entering the lobby, which had been decorated with twinkly lights and a big Christmas tree near the front window, she took the elevator to the third floor, where the nurses' station was a flurry of activity, reminding her of the shift changes at the Sheltering Arms. But thanks to the administrator at the nursing home who'd fired her rather than the incompetent nurse she'd reported, Chloe was no longer a part of the staff.

She checked out the room numbers until she spotted 327. The door was open, so she walked in. But she stopped short when she saw the wounded man standing near his bed, wearing a pair of tattered jeans, his broad chest bare.

Unable to help herself, she watched as he attempted to put on a torn black sweatshirt he must have been wearing at the time of the accident. His left hand was wrapped in an oversize bandage, and his muscled form struggled with the effort.

"Would you like... I mean, I could..."

He glanced over his shoulder, those amazing blue eyes locking in on hers and exposing something deep within, something vulnerable.

"Thanks, but I've got it." His handsome face bore a couple of scrapes, but other than that, he appeared strong and healthy. She could hardly tell that he'd been brought in on a gurney last night.

Maybe she should have taken a few extra minutes to freshen up and change out of her work clothes. Not that she was dirty or unkempt. It's just that he...well, she...

Oh, forget it. She didn't have time to let her thoughts drift into

girlish, romantic notions.

"I don't mean to interfere if you'd rather do it yourself. It's just that, with the bandage and all, I thought..." She gave her head a little toss. "I'm sorry. I guess I shouldn't have just barged into your room like that. But...well, you're Joe Wilcox, right?"

"That's what they tell me." He pointed toward a stack of papers on the bed tray with his bandaged hand, yet her focus remained on his broad shoulders, on the scatter of dark chest hair that ran along taut abs and trailed into the waistband of his jeans.

"Do you remember me?" she asked.

"You're the woman who came in last night to identify me. Chloe Dawson, right?"

She tossed him a smile. "Yes, that's me. I'm glad you remembered."

"Don't be too optimistic," he said. "I can recall everything as far back as the ambulance ride. Anything before that is a giant black spot in my mind. Besides..." He patted the paperwork one more time. "Your name is on my discharge sheet."

"So Dr. Nielson told you that I was coming to pick you up?"

"Yep. Right before she signed off on my chart. I think she was eager to get home to her new baby. Not that I can blame her."

So he liked children? That ought to mean he was one of the white hats and that she had nothing to worry about by being alone with him.

"Do you have kids?" she asked.

He froze, and his blue eyes darted upward as if he had to look

up the answer in his cranial database. “I have no idea. But that’s not what I meant. I can’t blame the doc for wanting to ditch this place as soon as she could. Hospitals give me the creeps.”

Maybe, if she prodded him with enough questions, she’d latch on to the thread that would unravel all of his suppressed memories. “Have you been in the hospital before?”

“I don’t know the answer to that, either. I’m going to guess that I have—and that I didn’t like it.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t wait to get out of here.” He finally managed to slip on the sweatshirt. “You ready to go?”

“Sure. If you are.”

He snatched a white plastic bag off the floor by his chair and headed out the door. As she tried to keep up with his determined pace, her dusty cowboy boots clicked along the polished corridor floor.

“Wait,” she called out just before he reached the elevator. “I realize you’re in a hurry to leave and would probably hitch a ride with the first ship setting sail, but Dr. Nielson is releasing you to my care. So let’s slow down just a minute. Is there anything in that discharge paperwork that I need to know about before we hightail it out of here?”

“Sorry.” He handed her the top sheet off his stack for her to read. “Listen, Miss Dawson.”

When she looked up from the paper he’d given her and caught his gaze—or rather, when those amazing blue eyes caught hers

—her tummy did a somersault.

He smiled. “It’s *miss*, right?”

Was he asking if she was single? Or just trying to be polite?

While working at the Stagecoach Inn, she’d gotten used to men—old and young, drunk and sober—hitting on her. And she was usually pretty quick on the draw when it came to letting them know she wasn’t interested.

But she’d make an allowance for the sexy marine who was still probably disoriented from the accident and the shock of having his memory banks wiped clean—at least, temporarily.

“Yes, it is. But let’s make that Chloe.”

“All right,” he said. “Thanks for picking me up, Chloe. And you might as well call me Joe, although, I may not answer to it.”

Why? Had he realized that the sheriff might have mistaken him for someone else?

No, she’d been told that his photo and name lined up. “I suppose, if you don’t remember who you are, your name wouldn’t sound familiar.”

“That’s the problem. Something about that name doesn’t feel right, although I have no idea why. Maybe because my brain is still so scrambled.” He let out a weary sigh. “Anyway, you don’t really have to be responsible for me. I waited for you to get here because Dr. Nielsen seems like a nice woman, and I don’t want to get her in trouble with the hospital bigwigs. But you can just drop me off at a nearby homeless shelter or rescue mission. I’ll be fine.”

She couldn't possibly dump him just anywhere, especially in his condition. Yet he turned his back and continued on his way, his only goal the hospital exit.

"Joe," she called out.

At the sound of his name—or maybe just her voice—he turned in response.

With her boots still planted in the middle of the hall, she asked, "Have you ever stayed in a homeless shelter or a rescue mission?"

"I don't know."

For a guy who didn't seem to know very much about himself, he had no problem putting one combat boot in front of the other and pretending that nothing was wrong.

"Have you ever been to Brighton Valley?" she asked.

"Don't know that, either."

She wondered if he was getting tired of sounding like a broken record. "We don't have any homeless shelters or rescue missions here. There's a community church that lets people sleep in the basement, but the pastor usually goes home before now, so I doubt that they're open."

"Then I appreciate your offer to give me a ride and a place to stay for a day or two—at least, until my memory returns."

"No problem. Dave and his family would have done the same."

The furrow in his brow deepened as if he was reaching deep into his memory banks, only to find them empty. Then he nodded and continued to the elevator.

She followed him. When the doors opened, they stepped inside.

His fingers lingered over the panel for longer than necessary, so she pressed the *L* for lobby. Again, she reminded herself that by taking him home she was doing the right thing. After all, she couldn't very well let him wander the streets if he couldn't even operate a simple elevator.

He glanced at her, and his blank stare tore at her heart. Had the gravity of his situation finally sunk in?

"You sure you don't mind me bunking with you?" he asked.

"Of course not. You're a friend of Dave's, and honestly, it's his ranch. I'm only doing what he and his mother would have done for any of their friends."

"I'll try to make it up to you—the inconvenience and what not—when I figure out who I am and what I'm good for."

"Judging by the dosage of painkillers Dr. Nielsen sent home with you, I don't think you'll be much good at anything for a few days. So let's get you well first." She nodded toward the main entrance to the lobby. "Come on, let's go."

He didn't need any convincing, soon taking the lead as they left the holiday-decorated lobby, leaving Bing Crosby crooning about dreams of a white Christmas behind.

Other than the soles of their boots tapping on the dusty concrete, they walked in silence until they reached the well-lit parking lot. Then Joe paused to look around.

Was he having a breakthrough?

“I’m not sure where we are,” he said, “or what’s nearby. But the doc told me to take the medicine when I eat. And for some weird reason, I have a real craving for Mexican food. Is there a taco shop nearby? Someplace where I can get some good *menudo* or *albondigas*?”

The way the Spanish words rolled off his tongue—as if he was a native speaker—surprised her. That was an interesting twist since Wilcox wasn’t a typical Mexican surname.

Maybe he wasn’t who they thought he was. That was a possible cause for alarm, but the USMC tattoo she’d seen before he’d put on that sweatshirt was enough to waylay at least some of her concern.

“Tía Juana’s is a drive-through,” she said. “And it’s not too far from here. We can pick up something on the way back to the ranch.”

“Thanks. That sounds great. And as a side note, I’d offer to pay, but you’ll have to take my IOU. The sheriff was supposed to drop off my wallet at the hospital earlier today, but he hasn’t done that yet.”

“No problem,” she said. “But as a side note of my own, I’m sorry.”

“About what? Me not having any cash? That’s the least of my problems.”

“I know. And it must be horribly frustrating for you. I can’t imagine what you’re going through.”

Fortunately, though, he’d just had a change in luck.

Joe Wilcox now had Chloe Dawson to watch out for him—and with no one else to nurse these days, she intended to focus all her TLC on him.

* * *

By the time they reached the ranch, Joe was beyond exhausted. It had taken all his energy to finish off the spicy Mexican soup he'd ordered at Tía Juana's and to eat a couple bites of a quesadilla. Then he'd washed down his pills with a glass of iced tea.

"I'll show you to the guest room," Chloe said.

He followed her out of the kitchen, through a cozy living room with a stone fireplace and a built-in bookshelf, past a staircase leading to the second floor. He wondered where she slept. He knew better than to ask, though. No need for her to think he had ulterior motives, although she was one hell of a pretty woman.

He'd always been attracted to blondes...

Hadn't he? While that bit of information seemed to be a memory, it certainly wasn't one that was going to be very useful.

Still, Chloe's hair was a platinum shade that hung down her back in soft, shimmering waves he was tempted to touch and to watch slip through his fingers.

He kept his hands to himself, though. The last thing he wanted to do was to step out of bounds before he'd spent ten minutes alone with her. Besides, he wasn't up to fighting weight yet.

And speaking of hands... He glanced at the oversize bandage that was more trouble than it was worth. The tape was already

flapping up. He'd told the nurse who'd put it on that he hadn't needed it, but she'd insisted, and he'd been too tired and rheummy to argue.

As he followed Chloe to the hall, she pointed out a bathroom on the left, then led him to the first door on the right. "I'd give you Dave's room, but if he shows up, he'll need a place to sleep. So this will have to do."

"I'd be happy on the couch. All I need is a pillow and blanket."

"We can do better than that," she said.

"We'?" He hadn't realized that she might not live alone.

"Sorry. I'm actually just a guest here myself, so I don't consider the house mine." She flipped on the light switch, illuminating a small room with a double bed, a single nightstand and a dresser that rested near the window. "Would you like me to find you something to sleep in? There should be some men's pajamas in Dave's room."

Something told him he'd prefer to sleep in the raw, but he decided not to mention that. "No, thanks. My boxers will have to do."

"Okay." She bit down on her bottom lip, as though worried about something.

"I plan on crashing the minute my head hits the pillow," he added. "I doubt I'll wake up until morning."

"Good." She brightened a moment, and then her smile slipped away. "I mean, a good night's sleep ought to do wonders."

An awkwardness settled around them, but Joe was too far gone

to ponder why—or to even care.

“I’ll leave you alone so you can get some rest,” she said. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Thanks again.”

“You’re more than welcome.” She waited a beat, as if still struggling with something. Attraction maybe?

Well, that was too damn bad. As nice as he might have found that before his accident, his jumbled and sleepy brain was too intent upon hitting the sheets—alone.

Of course, that didn’t mean he’d feel the same way tomorrow.

* * *

For a guy who didn’t know who or where he was, Joe had gotten a fairly good night’s sleep. But now, as the morning rays lit the guest bedroom, he winced and stretched out his bum knee, hoping the ache would ease. He must have exasperated an old injury, because he’d spotted some nasty scarring earlier.

He had no idea what had happened to him. A normal, healthy guy who hadn’t jarred his brains on the highway would have remembered how he’d messed himself up like that, especially since it looked as though he’d had surgery to correct it.

Damn. He hated not knowing anything about himself—who he was, where he was from, where he’d planned to go next.

At the sound of footsteps padding down the hall, he turned to the doorway, where the pretty blonde stood holding a stack of folded clothes.

“Good morning,” she said. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay, I guess. Last night, before dozing off, I convinced myself that I would wake up feeling completely back to normal and with my memory intact.”

“And...?”

“My head doesn’t feel nearly as bad as before. But my memory?” He clucked his tongue. “Still nothing.”

“How about a cup of coffee? Maybe a jolt of caffeine will trigger something.”

Just seeing his pretty caretaker wearing a snug black sweater, leaning sexily in the doorway was enough to jolt him wide awake. But he wasn’t about to make a comment like that. “Sure, coffee sounds great.”

“How do you like it?”

“Black.” The fact that he’d had an answer for her was enough to make him think his memory might actually return before long. He just wished it would hurry up. The brain fog was enough to make him climb the walls.

“You got it,” she said. “How about bacon and eggs? I could also whip up some oatmeal or maybe some hotcakes for you. Do you have a preference?”

Nothing jumped out at him. “I’ll have whatever you’re having.”

“Nonfat Greek yogurt and bananas?”

No, he’d pass on the healthy crap. A slow grin tugged at his lips. “Would hotcakes and bacon be too much trouble?”

She tossed him a sunny smile. “Not at all. Do you want me

to serve you in here?”

While having a beautiful blonde sit on his bed, spoon-feeding him, triggered an intriguing vision and opened up some interesting possibilities, he didn't want her to think of him as an invalid. “No, I'll come out to the kitchen.”

She lifted the folded clothing in her arms. “I brought you something you can wear—pants and shirts that belong to Dave. I also put fresh towels on the bathroom counter.”

A shower sounded good. And so did having breakfast with her. “Thanks.”

“Did you want to eat first?”

“If you don't mind. I want to take another dose of my pain medication, and I'm not supposed to do that on an empty stomach.”

“You got it. I'll have it on the table in no time at all.” She tossed him another smile, then placed the clothing on the top of the dresser.

When she turned and left the room, he threw off the covers, wincing when he bumped the scrape on his knuckles that was no longer protected by the bandage he'd removed, and got out of bed. He couldn't very well join her for breakfast without clothes. And since he was going to postpone the shower for later, he snatched the pair of folded jeans off the stack she'd set on top of the dresser, slipped them on and followed the aroma of sizzling bacon to the kitchen, where he found Chloe standing at the stove, her back to him. Her long blond hair had been pulled back into

a ponytail.

Apparently, she hadn't heard him approach the kitchen, so he could just stand here and enjoy the view. But something told him not to get caught up in romantic dreams when he had no idea who he was or where he was going—or if there was a family waiting for him somewhere. So he decided to let his presence be known. “Something sure smells good.”

* * *

At the sound of Joe's voice, Chloe turned to the kitchen doorway, where he stood wearing one of Dave's T-shirts and a pair of jeans. Yet that's where any similarities between the two men ended.

Dave had been fair-haired and on the thin side, while Joe was dark-haired with an olive complexion. His bulkier frame filled out that T-shirt in a way Dave never had.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” he asked.

“No, I have everything under control. Just come on in and have a seat.”

As he complied, taking one of the kitchen chairs near the bay window that looked out into the nearest pasture, she poured him a mug of coffee and carried it to the table.

He thanked her, then took a sip. “You know, I really appreciate you providing me with a temporary place to stay, although I don't like the idea of causing you extra work.”

“It's no problem.”

“Maybe not, but I'd be happy to help out any way I can.”

Since the ranch hand who usually helped Tomas with the chores had taken some time off to visit his family in Mexico, there was plenty to do. “That’s nice of you to offer. And I might take you up on it—once you’re feeling strong enough.”

He smiled, revealing a pair of dimples and a glimmer in those amazing blue eyes. For a moment, she lost her train of thought.

“I’ll start today,” he said, “but don’t worry. I’ll take it slow and easy.”

“Let’s wait until tomorrow. I’d feel better if you had a little more time to rest.”

“All right. Then I’ll just have to hang out here at the house. But I promise not to get in your way or cause you any trouble.”

Something told her that any trouble that came her way would be of her own making. “I’m sure you won’t be. And to be honest with you, it’ll be nice to have someone to talk to every now and then.”

The big old ranch house could get lonely at times, especially in the evenings.

“So you’re a guest here, too,” he said.

She nodded, then turned back to the hotcakes that were browning on the griddle. She flipped each one over, then reached for a platter on which she could put them as soon as they were done.

“So what do you do when you’re not nursing the injured?” he asked.

“I’m between jobs right now, which worked out okay in the

long run. Tomas, the ranch foreman, is shorthanded, so I've been helping out when I can."

In truth, Tomas was a good worker—and he tried hard. But he'd never really had a supervisory role before. But when the previous foreman retired, Chloe had to find someone to step up to the plate. If she'd had more money to work with to offer a fair wage to someone better equipped, she would have. As it was, she promoted him based upon seniority.

"When you go back to job hunting," Joe said, "what kind of work do you do?"

"I used to be an aide at an assisted-living facility in town. I also plan to attend nursing school next semester."

"Pretty cool. I have my very own Florence Nightingale to help me get back on the mend."

She turned to face him again and smiled. "Nursing has always been a dream of mine."

Of course, after being terminated from the Sheltering Arms, she'd spent a little time wondering if she'd pinned her heart on the wrong dream.

Had Teresa Cummings, Dave's mother, still been alive, Chloe would have shared her disappointment and concern over her firing, which had seemed so unfair.

Then again, if Teresa had been alive, she would have advised Chloe to handle things differently at the time than she had, to confront her boss, to stir the pot. And if the administrator had seen fit to fire her anyway, Teresa might have encouraged her to

file a wrongful termination suit.

But Chloe had never liked making waves. So she'd rolled over and walked away from the one job that had been the perfect fit for her.

She was tempted to share the details with Joe, but she bit her tongue. What did she really know about him?

Sure, she was drawn to him, although she blamed that on him being injured and her having a nurse's heart. She'd always been a nurturer, and she knew she'd make a good R.N. someday. But it wasn't just her heart Joe had touched. There was something about *him* she found attractive.

But she'd already had one bad relationship, if you could even call it that. Either way, she'd made a big mistake and didn't trust her judgment or instincts about men these days. And as long as she didn't act upon that attraction, they ought to get along just fine.

Chapter Three

By ten o'clock, Chloe had done two loads of laundry, cleaned the stove and washed the big bay window near the antique oak table. She enjoyed having her morning coffee where she could look out into the yard and pastures, so keeping the glass spotless had always been a priority.

While she worked, she kept the noise down. Joe might have offered to help her out on the ranch, but not long after eating breakfast and taking his pain medication, he'd mentioned being dizzy and had returned to the guest room and taken a nap. And

she was glad that he'd done so.

Like it or not, he'd suffered a concussion. There was no way she would let him push himself too hard until he'd fully recovered.

She'd grown up as an army brat—the only girl with two older brothers, so she knew how stubborn men could be and how hard it was to admit their weakness. She'd keep that in mind the next time he offered to help. In the meantime, she continued to do her morning chores.

Next up was the kitchen floor. She'd just entered the mudroom to retrieve the plastic bucket and mop when the phone rang, so she hurried back to the kitchen and answered the old-style wall-mounted telephone before the noise disturbed Joe.

“Chloe,” the caller said, “it’s Betsy Nielson. How’s our patient doing this morning?”

“He had a good breakfast. Now he’s resting again.”

“Good. Is he able to remember anything yet?”

“Not that I’ve seen so far.”

“Give it some time. My husband, Jason, suffered from amnesia about four years ago. It was pretty tough on him, but his memories slowly began to return.”

“How long did it take?”

“A couple of weeks. But each case is different, so it’s impossible to predict. Just encourage Joe to be patient and let nature take its course.”

“I will.” Chloe wrapped the coiled phone cord around her

index finger. “Has there been any news? I mean, how is the investigation going?”

“I haven’t heard, but I’m sure Sheriff Hollister will be contacting Joe soon to give him an update.”

“That’s good. Joe will be eager to talk to him.”

After the call ended, Chloe placed the receiver back in the cradle on the wall. She was eager to hear what the sheriff had to say, too. She hadn’t heard from Dave in months and wondered where he was—and why he’d sent a letter to her through someone else.

A few weeks ago she’d written to him, but he hadn’t responded. Then, just last Monday, she’d found her letter in the mailbox. The military had forwarded it to Dave, using the ranch address, which led her to believe his tour of duty had ended and that he’d been discharged.

If that was the case, then why hadn’t he contacted her or come home yet? If he had actually been discharged, then he was no longer in Afghanistan. And that was a relief. Sure, his attachment to her had made her uncomfortable, but that didn’t mean she didn’t care about him.

She wasn’t sure why he’d latched on to her like he had. She suspected that stress, battle fatigue and the recent death of his mother had all compounded and caused him to assume their friendship was something it had never been.

She’d done her best to explain that to him, but he couldn’t seem to get the picture. Finally, when he began naming the

children he'd imagined them having, she'd sent him a nice letter, trying to be kind, yet firm and direct.

Of course, she'd have to move off the ranch now that he was home. She couldn't risk having him think that there was any chance of her changing her mind about the two of them having a future together. Maybe, if he was out of the service and back in Brighton Valley, he could be more realistic about their relationship.

Either way, she would leave the Rocking C as soon as he arrived. She'd been looking after the ranch and trying to hold things together for him while he was gone, but her savings were just about gone, and the bills were still mounting up. She hoped he returned while he could still dig his way out of the hole he probably didn't know he was in.

"A penny for your thoughts."

Chloe turned to find Joe standing in the kitchen doorway. He was still wearing the same clothes. Even though he hadn't yet showered and appeared to be a bit battered, he looked as sexy as ever.

"My thoughts aren't worth much," she said, shaking off her worries and forcing a smile.

"Either way, I'm sorry, Chloe. I didn't mean to offer my services, then get dizzy and pass out on you."

Her smile deepened. "Don't give that a second thought. There'll be plenty to keep you busy when the time comes. It's best if you take it easy for now."

She couldn't help taking in his broad chest, the masculine bristle he'd yet to shave and those piercing blue eyes that seemed to see right through her. Again, she couldn't help comparing him to Dave, which wasn't fair to the other man. Not when Joe was drop-dead gorgeous.

He seemed to be checking her out just as closely as she'd been assessing him. Flushing, she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, wishing she'd put on something other than jeans this morning.

At the sound of an approaching vehicle's engine, Chloe peered out the window and into the yard, where a police car pulled up.

"The sheriff is here," she said.

Joe stiffened. A flicker of emotion tumbled across his face, while apprehension marred his brow.

The poor man. Chloe crossed the room, reached out and touched his forearm, felt the warmth of his body heat. "It'll be okay."

His gaze seemed to say, *I hope you're right*, yet the tension in his stance suggested he had his doubts. Then he pulled free and headed for the living room, with her following behind.

* * *

Joe opened the front door, where a uniformed law enforcement officer stood on the stoop.

"I'm Shane Hollister," the sheriff said. "I'm heading up the investigation into your hit-and-run accident."

The words wadded up in Joe's throat. What was he supposed

to say, other than “Thank God. What news do you have?”

Yet for some reason, facing the lawman sent a wisp of apprehension through him.

Damn. Did he have some reason to feel guilty?

Rather than stew about all the memories that evaded him, he shook off the uneasiness and said, “Hello, Sheriff.”

Hollister gave him a once-over. “It’s good to see you up and around. How are you doing?”

“Not bad. But I still can’t remember squat—if that’s what you mean.”

“Well, maybe I can help.” The sheriff handed him a wallet. “I meant to give you this before you left the hospital, but I missed you.”

“That’s okay.” Joe turned the dark leather over in his hands, then flipped it open. He pulled out the California driver’s license.

Sure enough, that was his photo staring back at him, verifying his name was Joseph Wilcox, even if it still didn’t sound familiar. According to his address, he lived on base at Camp Pendleton.

“Please,” Chloe told the sheriff, “come in and have a seat.”

Hollister chose one of the chairs near the fireplace, then pulled a small notepad from his breast pocket. He flipped through a couple of pages before launching into his reason for coming by.

“We got a hit on your military service record,” he told Joe. “It looks like you were medically discharged from the Marine Corps a few months ago.”

If that were the case, then his address was no longer valid.

“The military won’t release much of your information,” Hollister said, “but I have a buddy up at the Houston NCIS office looking into it for me.”

“NCIS?” Chloe asked.

“It stands for Naval Criminal Investigative Service,” Hollister explained. “They work with both the navy and the Marine Corps, so my friend should be able to access info for us. Hopefully we’ll know more later this week.”

“Was there any word about Joe serving with Dave?” Chloe asked. “Or do you have any idea where Dave might be?”

“Not yet. That’s something my contact at NCIS might be able to provide.” Hollister turned his focus back to Joe. “It looks like you joined the Marines about six months after your eighteenth birthday. You were a staff sergeant at the time of your discharge, which tells me that you probably had a stellar service record to move up the ranks so quickly.”

Joe blew out a ragged sigh. “That’s good to know, I suppose. It’s too bad I can’t recall some of that stellar service myself.”

Chloe eased up to his chair and placed her hand on his shoulder. “Dr. Nielson said to give it some time. Her husband suffered from amnesia a few years back, and his memory returned slowly over the course of a few weeks.”

“That sounds like ages to me,” Joe said. “I’ve never had much patience.”

“You haven’t?” As if eager to grab on to anything positive, Chloe gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze. “I’d say that’s good

news.”

Joe looked up at her and furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“If you know that so readily about yourself, then it sounds like a memory has returned already.”

Unfortunately, Joe didn’t find that very helpful and returned his gaze to the sheriff. “Have you found out anything else about the person who hit me?”

“Judging from the tire tracks and a couple of eyewitness accounts, we think the perp was parked at the Stagecoach Inn and jumped the curb before hitting you. I have a couple of my deputies questioning all the patrons who were there that night—and looking over their cars to see if there’s any corresponding bodywork damage. But that’s assuming it was one of the locals. We’re still gathering credit-card records in case it was someone who was just passing through on the highway and decided to stop off at the bar for a few drinks to wait out the evening traffic.”

“I appreciate your efforts to find whoever it was who hit me,” Joe said. “And for helping me piece my life back together.”

“No problem.” The sheriff put away his notepad and got to his feet. “That’s my job. But you might want to consider that this wasn’t a mere accident.”

Chloe’s hand slipped off Joe’s shoulder. “Why do you say that?”

“There weren’t any skid marks, so either the driver didn’t see you or was aiming right at you.”

The thought that someone might have been out to get him didn't sit well, but when Joe shot a glance at Chloe and saw the worry that marred her brow, his concern shifted.

He didn't like seeing her on edge, which was surely the case since she'd removed the warmth of her support when she'd taken her hand from his shoulder. Neither did he want to bring any trouble her way. But he wasn't about to reassure her with false promises, especially if he had no clue what kind of complications his presence could cause.

"I don't want to alarm you or be a conspiracy theorist," the sheriff added, "but there's a lot we still don't know about you. And with your temporary memory loss, you can't answer any of those questions for us. I can't ignore the fact that someone might have been out to hit you for some reason. Or that they might not want you in town."

Joe wished he could reassure both Chloe and the sheriff, but he couldn't. He might not feel like a wanted man, but how would he know for sure? The lawman was probably just trying to cover all the bases, which was wise. It made sense not to restrict his investigation to the easiest, most obvious case solution.

And while Joe had hoped that the sheriff's arrival would toss him a life raft of sorts, instead, it had only opened up more worries, more concerns, more what-ifs.

What little solid ground he'd once felt under his feet had been whisked away, leaving him alone, tossed about on a choppy sea with no compass, no oars and no sign of the shore.

“So what do we do?” Chloe asked.

We? He couldn’t expect her to help. She’d done a lot already. But the thought of having someone in his corner of the rowboat helped a little.

“My suggestion would be for Mr. Wilcox to try to keep a low profile,” Hollister said. “It might be best if he stayed here at the ranch until we can investigate further.”

“I’d hoped someone in town might recognize him and be able to tell us more about who he is—and why he’s here,” Chloe said.

Joe wasn’t as concerned for his own safety as he was for hers. So far, she’d been a friend, an ally in his messed-up world, and he didn’t want to do anything that might put her in jeopardy.

“Maybe it’s best if I moved on,” he said.

Chloe placed her hand back on his shoulder. And this time, her fingertips sent a whisper of heat through his veins. Her gaze met his, stirring something deep within. “Where would you go?”

He raked a hand through his hair. How the hell did he know? But he’d figure something out. He had to, before this beautiful stranger turned his mixed-up brain even more inside out.

“It has to be frustrating not to know who you are or why you’re here,” the sheriff said. “But from a safety standpoint, I think it’s more important to get to the bottom of this accident first and then figure out the memory problem later.”

Joe could see how Hollister would be more concerned with a crime being committed in his quaint small town. And while it was helpful of the sheriff to go above the call of duty and look for his

personal records, it wasn't as if Joe was suffering from a simple little "memory problem." It was a full-blown loss of identity, a loss of control over his life. And his gut clenched at the thought, at the possibilities....

What if he had somewhere else to be at this exact second? Or what if someone needed him, but he was AWOL?

Crap. What if the person waiting for him was his wife?

"Uh, Sheriff," he said. "Do you know if my military file mentioned anything about me being married or having kids?"

"It didn't say specifically, but you don't have any military dependents listed. So my guess would be that you're single."

Joe released a pent-up sigh. At least he didn't have a family worrying about him. Not that he was completely off the hook. There could be someone else who needed him, someone who...

No, that wasn't true. He wasn't sure how he knew that there was no one else, that no one had ever worried about him. He just did.

"All right," Chloe said. "I'll keep Mr. Wilcox on the ranch while you finish looking into whoever did this."

"Sounds good." The sheriff made his way to the door, then turned and looked at Joe. "I'll keep you posted as to what else we uncover. And I'll call the minute I hear anything from the military."

"Thanks. I'd appreciate that." Joe supposed he should feel better, yet his jumbled mind couldn't wrap itself around so many possibilities. And that left him just as confused as he'd been the

moment he'd woken up in the E.R.

Well, almost as confused.

"I'll walk you outside," Chloe told the sheriff.

As the two stepped onto the porch and continued toward the police car, Joe remained in the living room, feeling like a kid left behind so the grown-ups could have a discussion in private.

But he could see why Chloe might want to talk to the cop in private. No doubt she wanted to relay her fears and misgivings about living with a random stranger.

Hell, if she was afraid, he'd have to leave—no matter what Hollister had suggested. Too bad he had no idea where to go.

For the time being, he headed back to the kitchen, determined to mop the floor and to finish the chore Chloe had started before Hollister had arrived. He figured that he might as well make himself helpful around the house and the ranch so she wouldn't think of him as an obligation or a burden.

Okay. So he was also curious about what was going on outside, what was being said.

He placed the bucket into the sink, then turned on the faucet. While the water flowed out of the spigot, he looked out the big kitchen window, where Hollister and Chloe stood near the squad car.

The sheriff opened the driver's door and reached across the seat. Then he handed an envelope to Chloe.

Was that Dave's letter?

For just being a "family friend," she was certainly concerned

about the guy. Not that Joe had any claim to his personal Florence Nightingale, but he couldn't stop the uneasy feeling rolling through his stomach.

Or the prickle of jealousy that sketched over him, urging him to try and make Chloe experience her own case of amnesia and forget whatever it was that she felt for Dave Cummings.

* * *

Chloe recognized Dave's loopy penmanship the moment Sheriff Hollister handed over the letter. She'd been tempted to tear into it right then and there, but she merely stared at the worn and smudged envelope that someone had folded in half, measuring the weight of it in her hand.

Apparently someone had been carrying it around for a while—either Dave or Joe. Maybe even both of them.

"I'm curious about the contents of that letter," the sheriff said.

She could understand why, but she was reluctant to read what Dave had to say in front of anyone. She wasn't sure what he'd written—or how it would make her feel. She'd never liked hurting anyone's feelings or angering them, and realizing that she'd either hurt or angered Dave didn't sit well with her.

"There might be something inside that would suggest why Wilcox is here," Sheriff Hollister added.

"I thought you would have opened it as part of your investigation," Chloe said.

"It's a sealed envelope. I can't read it without a warrant, and since Dave Cummings wrote it to you, there's no reason for me to

request one.” Sheriff Hollister reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card. “If you find any clues that might help with my investigation, I’d appreciate it if you’d let me know.”

“Of course.”

He nodded, then climbed into his squad car. “Everything I’ve learned about Wilcox suggests that he’s law-abiding. But if you have reason to believe otherwise, give me a call.”

“I will. Thank you.” She refolded the envelope, then shoved it into the back pocket of her jeans.

Rather than return to the house, she waited until the sheriff left and watched the black-and-white vehicle head down the drive, biding her time and tamping down her compulsion to tear into the missive.

While tempted to dash upstairs and pore over the contents so she could get an idea where Dave was and why Joe had possession of the letter in the first place, she reined in her curiosity. She’d already left Joe alone in the house long enough and didn’t want him to think she was rude—or worse, suspicious of him. So she walked up the porch steps and entered the living room.

She thought her houseguest might have gone back to bed—and if he had, she wouldn’t have blamed him. Those head injuries could really take a lot out of a person. But when she heard noise coming from the kitchen, she went looking for him there. She wouldn’t have been surprised to see him fixing himself a snack. But she hadn’t expected to find a bucket on the wet floor and to see him wringing out the mop.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

His movements stilled, and he leaned against the wooden handle, the muscles in his forearms flexed and primed for heartier work. “Thought I’d better help out and pay for my keep.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

“Yes, I do. I don’t like taking handouts.” His eye twitched, and his brow furrowed, his words drifting off. Had a memory crossed his mind?

She was afraid to ask since she’d already jumped to that conclusion a couple of times, and she’d been wrong.

“At least, I don’t think I do,” he added.

“Dr. Nielson said that you should take it easy.”

“Yeah, and she also told me to be patient, but something tells me I’m not one to sit around and wait for things to happen.”

She continued to stand in the doorway, the letter burning a hole in her back pocket.

“I’ll tell you what,” Joe said. “I’m almost finished here. As soon as I dump out the dirty water, I’ll go to the barn and check out the stables. That way, you can read the letter the sheriff gave you in private.”

Chloe smoothed her hand over the front of her jeans, fingering the hemmed edge of the pocket, making sure it was still hidden inside. Had she been that obvious?

“I saw Hollister give it to you outside, and if I were in your boots, I’d be dying to read it, too. Especially if it says Joe Wilcox is a nutcase and you shouldn’t let him within a hundred feet of

you.” He smiled, but she knew he was itching for a clue as to why he was here.

Still, she wanted to be alone when she read whatever Dave hadn’t wanted to tell her in person.

If truth be told, she felt badly about possibly hurting his feelings while he was in a war zone, no matter how gentle she’d tried to be. And she regretted the distance her honesty had created between them.

“Thanks for understanding,” she said. “I’ll let you know if it says anything about you.”

Joe nodded. Then he began to mop the floor under the table, which was the only dry spot left. After he finished, he leaned the mop against the wall and carried the bucket through the mudroom and out into the yard.

When Chloe was finally alone, she went into the living room, took a seat in the chair in which Sheriff Hollister had once sat and took the envelope from her pocket. After opening it, she withdrew the letter and unfolded the single sheet of paper.

Chloe,

If you’re reading this letter, then that means Joe found you for me and hand-delivered it.

I can never thank you enough for what you did for my mom during her last days, and I’m sorry that my love and gratitude made you uncomfortable. Even though my feelings weren’t reciprocated, that doesn’t mean that I felt them any less.

I can’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be than with you. But

if you're not interested in what we could have together, then I won't bother you again.

Goodbye.

Dave

Chloe read the short note several times, focusing on the last cryptic part. Dave had a penchant for the melodramatic, so it was hard to know what he meant. Still, he didn't have to stay away. The ranch belonged to him, and she would gladly turn the reins back over to him when he came home.

If he came home. Joe clearly knew where he could be found—that is, if his memory ever returned. When it did, she'd ask him to contact Dave and tell him she was leaving, that she couldn't stay on the Rocking C forever.

But why hadn't Dave contacted her in person? And why had he wanted the letter delivered when it would have been much easier to mail it? Or even to call?

Had Dave asked Joe to evict her? Maybe, once she'd cleared out of the house, Joe was to inform Dave so that he could return to the Rocking C without having to see her.

But if that was the case, all he'd had to do was say the word and she'd start packing.

However, she wouldn't leave the ranch unattended until he actually arrived. So he'd just have to man up and deal with her temporary presence.

In the meantime, what in the world was she going to do with

Joe?

And what would he tell her once his memory returned? She had no idea.

For a moment, she pondered showing him Dave's letter, thinking it might jar his memory. But she didn't consider that option very long. She'd just tell Joe that Dave had asked him to deliver it in person.

Perhaps just her reassurance that Joe was actually Dave's friend was enough. It would have to be—until she figured out just what Dave meant when he said, "But if you're not interested in what we could have together, then I won't bother you again. Goodbye. Dave."

What if he'd actually been saying goodbye forever? What if Dave had...?

Oh, God. And what if, somehow, it had been her fault?

Chapter Four

As Joe made his way through the Rocking C barn, the smell of straw and dust stirred more than his senses. He stopped for a moment, scanning the walls where the tack hung and pondering the feeling of déjà vu that settled over him.

Had he actually been here before? It seemed as though he had.

Or was it something about the ranch or the scent of feed and leather that made him feel at home?

A horse whinnied, and he continued to walk to the back of the barn, where an Appaloosa was stabled.

"Hey there," he told the mare. "How's it going?"

She snorted, threw back her head, then stepped closer.

He reached in to stroke her neck. He didn't know how long he stood there, talking to the horse, striking up a friendship of sorts. Certainly long enough for Chloe to have read her letter from Dave.

He supposed he could go back into the house now, but he lingered in the barn, trying to wrap his mind around the cloak of familiarity. Too bad he wasn't having much luck.

Behind him, boot steps sounded. He glanced over his shoulder and spotted the approach of a stocky, middle-aged cowboy.

When their eyes met, the man introduced himself. "I'm Tomas Hernandez, the ranch foreman. You must be Joe Wilcox."

For some reason, even though he'd been assured that his identity had been confirmed, the name still didn't seem to fit. That was probably to be expected with amnesia.

Shaking off the lingering uneasiness, Joe turned away from the horse and reached out a hand to greet the foreman.

"It's good to see you out and about," Hernandez said. "I heard about the accident. Sounds like you were lucky."

Joe didn't feel so lucky. He felt lost and out of control. But he wasn't about to whine about it. "I suppose it could have been a whole lot worse."

Hernandez nodded. "You're right. You still could be laid up in the hospital."

Or in the morgue.

Again, Joe let the reality of the thought pass. "The doctor said

to take it easy, but I'm going stir-crazy. I never have been able to sit still."

He wasn't sure how he knew that. Maybe because he was chomping at the bit to get back to normal, whatever that might be.

"If you have any work that needs to be done," Joe added, "just say the word. I'd like to help out any way I can."

"Chloe said you're still recovering and won't be available for a while."

So they'd talked about him. Joe couldn't blame them, he supposed. But he didn't like the idea of being a burden—or someone's problem. In fact, his gut twisted at the thought, and a shadow of uneasiness draped over him once more, this time weighing him down even worse than the amnesia did.

"I figure I'll take it easy today," he told Hernandez. "But I'll be ready to pitch in tomorrow."

"That's good to hear. I'm down a ranch hand, so there's plenty to keep us both busy for a while."

As the silence stretched between them, they assessed each other like two stray dogs wondering if they should be friends or foes.

Joe nodded toward the mare. "She's a pretty horse."

"Yes, she is. And she has good bloodlines, too. Her name's Lola. She's going to foal soon, so I brought her in and stabled her until her time comes."

Joe still couldn't shake the feeling that he'd been on the ranch

before. And in the barn. Did Hernandez recognize him?

"Have you worked here long?" he asked the foreman.

"About four years." Hernandez lifted his hat, revealing a balding head. "It'll be five this coming February."

"I don't suppose you recognize me," Joe said.

"No, I'm afraid not."

"I thought maybe Dave had brought me around," he told the foreman.

"Not that I'm aware of."

That shot down his theory, he supposed. Maybe he'd grown up on a ranch. But where?

He scanned the barn again. So why did he have this feeling of déjà vu? Was his scattered brain playing tricks on him? Maybe. Still, Hernandez wasn't very forthcoming.

"When did Dave join the Marines?" he asked the foreman.

"About two and a half years ago. He and his father had a big falling out over something or other. And Dave enlisted to spite him."

"What'd they fight about?"

"Almost everything. But that last time was the worst. And I'm sure Dave was sorry about it afterward."

"You mean joining the corps?"

"Leaving home, mostly. His father died of a heart attack shortly after Dave finished recruit training. And I think Dave blamed himself for it. Last time he was here, to attend his mother's funeral, he told me he'd be home soon and wouldn't

ever leave again. He asked me to look out for things until he did. But he hasn't contacted any of us in quite a while."

No wonder Chloe was eager to read that letter.

And now Joe was even more curious than ever to know what it said. He and Dave might be buddies, but they hadn't enlisted at the same time. According to what the sheriff had said, Joe had joined five years earlier.

He stroked his chin, felt the stubble of the beard he hadn't shaved this morning. That shower he'd been meaning to take after he'd taken his morning pain meds was long overdue.

"Well," he said to Hernandez, "I'm going to head back to the house. If you start making a list of chores you'd like me to do, I'll get started on them tomorrow."

"All right. I'll do that."

Joe gave Lola's neck one last stroke, then strode toward the barn door. He hated not knowing anything about himself. And while he continued to get some fleeting thoughts about his character and things he liked or disliked, he had no idea how to cobble them together.

After entering the living room, he took a moment to survey the leather furnishings, the built-in bookshelf in the far wall, the stone fireplace with photos lining the mantel. When he noticed one of a smiling marine in uniform, he made his way to the hearth so he could take a better look.

He lifted the brass frame and studied the fair-haired man's image. He wished he could say that he recognized him, but he

didn't.

"That's Dave," Chloe said.

Joe turned toward her voice. She stood in the doorway that led down the hall to the bedrooms. The moment their gazes met, he felt another stirring—one that was far more appealing than the scent of leather and hay that had provoked his senses in the barn.

"His mother never understood why he'd joined the service in the first place," Chloe said. "As the only child, the only son, he knew his father expected him to stay on the ranch and take over someday. But I've sensed there was more to it than that. I think he had a blowup with his dad, although he never said anything to me about it."

Joe took another gander at the photo in his hand.

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