



THE SEAL'S SECOND CHANCE BABY

Laura Marie Altom

 *Cherish*[™]

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The Seal's Second Chance Baby

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A SEAL'S REDEMPTION...What Navy SEAL Marsh Langtree needs is to make sense of his life. What he gets is a near-fatal snakebite. If it weren't for Effie Washington, Marsh would be a goner. Her blue eyes and gorgeous smile make him thankful he's still breathing. But he shouldn't be flirting with a single mom...With rambunctious twins and an infant at home, Effie's love life has stalled. Despite the obvious sparks between them, Effie can tell Marsh is holding back, and she won't fall for another man who's not all-in. Will the possibility of a future with Effie finally force Marsh to forgive himself for the past?

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“What’s up?”

Effie was already behind the wheel with the motor running when Marsh approached the window.

“I wanted to tell you to drive careful and thanks again for the laughs. It felt good.”

“I know, right?” There went her pulse again. He’d pressed his open palms against the door frame, which raised his T-shirt enough to bare a strip of skin and his wholly masculine abs.

Mouth dry, she forced her gaze to his eyes, but that didn’t do much to stop the tingly awareness that lately took hold whenever he was around.

“Anyway, good night, Effie.”

“Night.” The sound of her name, pronounced nice and slow with a hint of a Southern twang, produced all manner of havoc in her belly. If she hadn’t been crammed into an old minivan that smelled like Cheerios with her grandmother and a pack of kids, would he have kissed her?

The SEAL's Second Chance Baby

Laura Marie Altom



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LAURA MARIE ALTOM is a bestselling and award-winning author who has penned nearly fifty books. After college (Go, Hogs!), Laura Marie did a brief stint as an interior designer before becoming a stay-at-home mum to boy-girl twins and a bonus son. Always an avid romance reader, she knew it was time to try her hand at writing when she found herself replotting the afternoon soaps.

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Check out www.lauramariealtom.com to win fun stuff!

This story is dedicated to my precious family: Terry, Not-So-Little-Anymore Terry, Hannah & her sweet Steven, Russell, Mom & Dad, and my adopted sisters—Margaret & Amy. You all make my life worth living. Xoxo

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Effie Washington stopped humming to hold her hand to her forehead, shading her eyes from the brutal August sun. Was she seeing a mirage? Was that a mule deer or man on horseback, slumped in his saddle?

From her vantage atop the roof of her grandmother's run-down adobe ranch house, she narrowed her gaze. In southeast Colorado, judging distance could be tricky. On a clear day, she had the front range to her west, but with miles upon miles of rolling grassland and the vast wide-open sky, the object she thought might be a few hundred yards in the distance could turn out to be a mile away.

"Colt! Remington!" she called to her six-year-old identical-twin boys. They were supposed to be on ladder guard duty—a fancy way of ensuring they didn't run off by making them believe they were charged with a highly important job.

"Yeah, Mom?" As usual, they answered in tandem.

"Did you ever put your boots back on after I caught you messing with the hose?"

"Uh-uh," Remington said.

"I will now!" Colt darted around the side of the house.

Remington followed.

A few minutes of silence alerted Effie to the chance that her angels were up to no good.

"Cool! A scorpion!"

She peered over the roof to find both boys beneath the yard's sole tree—a century-old cottonwood—engrossed in poking a stick at the potentially harmful creature.

"Leave it alone!" Effie closed her eyes and sighed. Those two would be the death of her. At least once she finally finished her nursing degree, she'd know how to tend to most of their health emergencies. Abandoning the much-needed roof-patching project, she hurried down the ladder to disperse her boys, who not only hadn't left the scorpion alone, but had scooped it into a tin can they'd snatched from the trash barrel.

"But it's awesome!" Colt jabbed a weed at it to watch it rear up and strike.

"Quit!" Remington shouted. "He's gonna sting my eyeballs!"

"Give me that." Effie took the can, carrying it far from the house to fling the offensive creature over the back fence.

"Aw, why'd you have to go and do that?" Colt pouted. "We was gonna take it to school."

"We were going to take it—and since school doesn't start for another week—no, no and no."

"You're mean!" Colt kicked a dirt clump near the toe of his boot.

"But I love you." Sometimes, Effie silently added with secret smile. Motherhood had never been easy—her twins had been a challenge from day one. "How about you get in the house and see if Grandma needs help with Cassidy?"

Colt scrunched his face. "We don't wanna go inside. Grandma's always watchin' her stupid soap boperas, and Cass is boring."

"Go!" Effie pointed toward the back door. "If Grandma doesn't need help, clean your room."

With the twins grumbling and moping their way into the house, Effie scanned the horizon for the odd sight that had started all of this. Once Colt had his boots back on, she'd intended to send the boys off to scout the situation, but she could now plainly see a chestnut with its rider hunched in the saddle a good hundred yards north of the house.

The four-wheeler was busted, and it would take longer to saddle her trusty paint, Lulu, than it would to walk, so Effie tugged the brim of her straw cowboy hat lower to shade against the sun,

then trudged through thick weeds and grasses, dotted with occasional cactus and yucca. They'd had surprisingly good rain throughout the summer, which meant her herd of thirty Angus was fat and happy.

They sold them off as needed for extra income.

The closer she came to the man, the more obvious it became that he was in trouble, Effie started to run.

"Hello? Can you hear me?" By the time she reached him and his horse, she was out of breath and sweat drenched. The sun's heat pressed her shoulders like malevolent hands.

The stranger was unconscious.

"Sir?" She shook him. Looked as though he might have tried using a rope to lash himself into the saddle, but it now hung loose. If his boot heels hadn't been stuck in the stirrups, he'd have fallen off. Is he dehydrated?

No. A nearly full water bottle hung from the saddle's horn.

His horse neighed, its eyes wide with panic.

"It's all right, boy." Knowing she needed to get this man to a hospital, Effie took the horse by the reins, guiding him toward the house as fast as she could manage.

She didn't slow until she reached the yard's gate, and even then, she hollered, "Colt! Remington! Mabel!" Please, God, let them hear her through the open window screens.

All three came running. Her grandmother carried six-month-old Cass on her hip.

"Whoa!" the twins cried, racing to her.

"What happened to him?" Colt asked.

"Don't know." Effie led the man's horse into the only slightly cooler shade alongside the barn. "I need to call 911." Never had she wished more for the cell phone she'd left back at the house.

"Look at his hand." Remington pointed. "It's all puffy."

Effie paused a moment to look. The man's fingers had swollen to the point that his wedding ring would need to be cut off. Twin puncture wounds oozed a nasty mix of clear fluid and blood. She'd seen similar marks on a horse, and then only because she'd witnessed the rattlesnake strike.

She took off running toward the house.

"What's wrong with him, Mom?" Colt called after her.

"Snakebite," she heard Mabel say.

No doubt from the heat and excitement, just as Effie reached the front porch, Cassidy began to cry.

* * *

MARSH LANGTREE DRIFTED in and out of a strange new world.

His son, Tucker, was still alive, but older—and somehow there were two of him. A baby wouldn't stop crying. And then there was an angel—petite and blonde with eyes the same deep blue-green as the Indian Ocean.

Let's get that ring off and start an IV.

His eyes wouldn't stay open.

Mom, is he dead?

Maybe I am?

The angel knelt alongside him, stroking his hair. You'll be all right. They're taking you to the hospital.

Hospital? Marsh thought he'd died. That was the only way he'd ever see his son again.

A man approached with a tool and then there was pressure on his left hand. Ma'am, would you mind holding his ring? He'll probably want to have it repaired when he comes out of this.

Why were they taking his wedding ring?

Before he could further process the question, his eyes drifted closed and refused to open again.

* * *

“WE’LL BE TAKING him to Arkansas Valley Regional in La Junta,” the older of the two paramedics said to Effie after they’d settled the man in the back of the ambulance. He handed her the stranger’s wallet. She felt foolish for not having looked for it sooner. “Since he’s gotta be from around here, would you please contact his family? This kind of news comes better from friends.”

“Sure,” she said automatically, hoping her grandmother might know the man’s next of kin. “Is he going to be okay?”

“He’ll live, but it’s too soon to tell how much lasting damage there might be to his hand.”

While the twins chased the ambulance down the dirt drive, Mabel approached with Cassidy still on her hip. “Sure didn’t see any of this coming. Some bit of excitement, huh?”

“Yep.” Excitement was one way of putting it. Effie’s pulse still hadn’t slowed.

Her grandmother wrangled the boys back into the house to help fix lunch. “You coming?”

“I will in a sec.” Effie gravitated toward the barn. “Let me take care of the stranger’s horse.”

Effie led the chestnut into the cathedral-like barn, setting the wallet on top of a hay bale. The structure’s ancient wood creaked in the light breeze. She never tired of the smells of hay and worn leather tack and a trace of manure.

Mabel had inherited the ranch from her third husband, Dwayne, a few years earlier. They’d celebrated their thirtieth anniversary before he died from cancer. He’d been a kind, loving man—far better than Effie’s no-account grandfather, who’d gone to jail for cattle rustling a year after their vows.

Poor Mabel had then married his brother, but that marriage hadn’t turned out much better. He’d been a moonshiner who’d gone and gotten himself shot and died a week later from his wound.

After leading the horse to a stall, Effie removed his saddle and set it atop a rack. She then brushed the creature, calming him with each stroke.

The adrenaline rush of finding the unconscious man had reminded her all too much of the first time she’d seen her own ex-husband, Moody, bucked from the back of a bull. He’d lain on the rodeo arena’s soft dirt for a good five minutes before paramedics helped him come around. She’d been six months pregnant with the twins and feared going into early labor from the terror of finding her reckless husband paralyzed or dead.

That night marked the beginning of the end of their marriage—not because he’d been seriously injured, but because he hadn’t. Instead of being relieved to the point that he gave up his PBR dreams to settle down with a nice, safe nine-to-five job, he’d doubled the amount of bull-riding competitions he entered. She’d prayed that once the boys were born he’d realize it was time to call it quits, but he refused.

She’d fooled herself into thinking love would be enough to sustain her through life on the road with newborns and then toddlers, but when the twins turned five and were eager to start school, she’d put her foot down, demanding Moody stop for the sake of their family.

He’d again refused, leaving her with no choice but to go on without him in the hopes that he’d soon miss her and the boys badly enough to realize he needed them more than adrenaline.

Her parents had offered to take her and the boys in, but they led such active lives back in Oklahoma City, where she’d grown up, that she couldn’t imagine how she and the boys would fit in.

When Effie’s widowed grandmother, Mabel, suggested it would be a godsend for Effie to move in and help, she’d jumped at the offer. Not for one second did she believe her high-octane, square-dance-a-holic grandma actually needed her, but she was beyond grateful for the safe place for her little family to land.

Once the twins started school, Moody visited whenever he had the chance, but those times dwindled to the point that if she hadn’t been so determined to stand by her marriage vows, she might have considered asking for a divorce. Cassidy had been conceived the last time Effie had been with Moody. She’d been two months pregnant when he’d served her with divorce papers.

Wasn't something Effie liked thinking about, but far from missing their little family, he'd eventually swapped them for a hot-to-trot raven-haired barrel racer whose daddy had more money than God and the tricked-out trucks and matching horse trailers to prove it.

"Mom! Grandma says hurry up and come eat!"

Startled by Colt's interruption of the barn's peace and her chaotic thoughts, Effie dropped the horse brush to wipe tears she hadn't realized had been falling. "Coming!"

She knelt to retrieve the brush, then rose to smooth the chestnut's mane. "Guess you're probably ready for lunch, too, huh?"

The horse snorted.

"I'll take that as a yes." She filled his water trough and gave him plenty of hay and a scoop of grain.

Her mare, Lulu, was out to pasture, grazing.

"Mom! Come on!"

"Almost done," she said on her way out of the mystery horse's stall.

"What took you so long?" Colt met her at the barn's open door.

"The hurt man's horse was overheated. He needed brushing."

"Oh. How come your eyes are all red and puffy?"

"They are?" She swiped them again. "Must be the heat. What did Grandma make for lunch?"

He wrinkled his nose. "Grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup."

"Sounds good. I thought you loved her grilled cheese sandwiches?"

"Yeah, but when we were at Scotty's house on Sunday after church, his dad cooked steaks for lunch and then we went swimming and stuff. Why can't we ever do that here? And how come Dad doesn't want to see me anymore?"

Effie pressed her lips tight.

Where did she begin with telling her precious son that Daddy knocked up his girlfriend while he'd still been married to Mommy and now he had no interest in anyone but his new family? Then there was the not-so-little matter of child support checks that never seemed to come. Effie had dedicated her entire life to Moody. She'd even dropped out of nursing school one semester shy of graduating—stupid. But that was what love did to a girl. And she had loved that no-good cowboy with every breath of her being.

"Mom? Why can't we have steak? And a pool with a slide? And a house that's so cold inside that even in the summer Scotty's mom wears a big fur coat that looks like a fox."

Because your father is a low-down, two-timing snake who— No. She would never make the boys think their dad was anything less than the hero they believed him to be.

"Mom? I want a pool!" Colt gave up walking toward the house to hop.

"I'd like one, too." She caught up with him and planted her hand atop his head in an attempt to calm him. "Along with a giant bathtub and air-conditioning so cold I need a coat in the middle of summer, but we have something way better than all that."

"Like what?" The way Colt's chin touched his chest, he didn't look convinced.

"Love." She smoothed his hair. "Lots and lots of love."

"Yuck! That's gross!" He ran toward the house. "I want steak and a pool!"

Effie sighed.

Mabel leaned out the screen door. "Eff, hon, do you have that poor stranger's wallet?"

"I forgot it in the barn."

"Could you please get it?" Mabel asked. "I want to call his wife. She's no doubt beside herself with worry."

"Agreed." To her son, Effie said, "Colt, get in the house, and don't forget to thank Grandma for cooking."

“I don’t want a stupid sandwich! I want steak!” Instead of joining his brother and sister inside as he’d been told, Colt darted around the back of the house.

“The boy needs a firm hand,” Mabel noted.

“I know.” He needs his father.

“Let him sulk for a bit. Might do him good.” She glanced over her shoulder. “I see him through the bedroom window. He’s sitting on the swing. Go ahead and grab the wallet, then get in here and eat before your soup gets cold.”

“Yes, ma’am.” In this heat, Effie doubted anything could get cold, but after swallowing the all-too-familiar knot at the back of her throat, she marched back to the barn.

At the moment, that poor stranger needed her help far more than her smart-mouthed son.

* * *

MARSH DRIFTED IN and out of consciousness.

We tried intubating on the way, but he was too combative. He’s bleeding from the site, so we had to restrain him to keep him from pulling tubes out.

Light. So much light. He squinted against the fluorescent track’s glare. Where was his boy? His wife? The angel who’d found him?

How much Crotalidae was given?

He got the initial six, and we’re hanging another six right now.

“Sir? Could you tell us what kind of snake bit you?”

Were they talking to him?

“Sir? Were you bitten by a rattlesnake?”

Marsh tried nodding but couldn’t be sure if he’d even moved.

“Sir, judging by the severity of your symptoms, we need to double-check you weren’t bitten by something more exotic. Are you sure it was a rattler?”

“Y-yes,” Marsh managed. After having to put down one of his grandfather’s best horses when it broke its leg in a prairie dog hole, Marsh had been out on the range, filling as many of the damned things as he could, when the snake lunged without warning. It clamped onto the webby flesh between his thumb and forefinger for an eternity before Marsh shook him free. He’d done his best to stay calm, drunk as much water as he could, then climbed into his chestnut’s saddle, strapping himself in before aiming the horse for home.

Sounds definitive to me. Look at the poor guy. He’s twitching all over. See the fasciculations? How his muscles look like worms under his skin. It’s bad. One of the worst snakebites I’ve seen in a while.

Chapter Two

“Marsh Langtree...” Mabel held up the stranger’s ID to check it with her reading glasses. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“Is he a neighbor?” They’d finished lunch, and while Mabel fed Cassidy her baby food pears, Effie cleared the kitchen table. “I mean, think about it. I found him on horseback, so he couldn’t have come from too far away.”

“Hmm...” Mabel wiped drool from the baby’s chin.

Cassidy grinned and blew a raspberry.

Effie’s daughter had her blue eyes, but the twins had Moody’s soulful brown gaze. Every time she looked at her boys, Effie could be bitter, but she was only thankful that her brief marriage had created such blessings.

“Seems to me—” Mabel fed Cassidy another bite “—Wallace Stokes has family out east.”

“Who’s Wallace?”

“Let’s just say he’s a neighbor and leave it at that.”

“Why haven’t you mentioned him before? You had to have known him, right?”

“Girl, leave it alone.”

"I'm intrigued." Effie fitted the stopper in the sink, turned on hot water, then added a squirt of dish soap. "This sounds like a good story."

"Ha! He's got a fresh mouth."

"This just keeps getting better..." Effie didn't try hiding her grin. Mabel might be a great-grandma three times over, but that didn't stop her from flirting up a storm every Saturday night she went square dancing. "What did he do?"

"Poor Dwayne had barely been in his grave a year when Wallace showed up at the Grange Hall for dancing and told me I was shakin' my behind like a wet dog."

Effie tried not to laugh—really, she did—but Mabel's pinched scowl was too funny.

"How's that funny? The man's a scoundrel."

"Grandma, even you have to admit that when you've had a few beers—"

"I don't imbibe in spirits, and shame on you for inferring I do. I might have had cider, but that's all."

"If you say so." Effie winked.

"Girl, you'd better be glad you're too big for a spanking, or else."

"Sorry, Grandma. But do you have Wallace's phone number? If so, I'll give him a call to save you the trouble."

"Why would I have the old coot's number?"

"We could try calling information or looking it up online."

"Girl, I've got no patience for your fancy detective work. Go see him in person. It's that rock house a fair piece down the road with the leaning barn. Not only is the man foulmouthed, but lazy."

"I've never heard you say a bad word about anyone. Is this Wallace character really so bad?"

As if on cue, Cassidy spit out her last bite of pears.

"See?" Mabel said. "If even hearing about the man left a sour taste in this sweet baby's mouth, then you know what I say is true."

* * *

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, Effie had finished cleaning the lunch dishes, gotten the sulking twins started on their afternoon chores and allowed her grandmother to coerce her into visiting this supposedly wretched Wallace who might or might not have kin named Marsh Langtree.

She now stood on the man's front porch, wishing for even a hint of a breeze to cut the oppressive heat.

At least his yard sported three cottonwoods. She welcomed the shade.

Effie had just raised her hand to knock on the peeling red front door when it opened. Startled, she jumped back, pressing her hand over her pounding heart. "You scared me."

"Good. I don't need religion or a new vacuum, so you'd best be on your way."

"No, sir. I'm Effie Washington—your neighbor from down the road. My grandma says we share a property line with you, and—"

"Mabel's your grandmother?"

"Yessir..." Effie held her breath. If he harbored half as many hard feelings toward Mabel as she did toward him, this visit might turn even more unpleasant.

"Well, why didn't you say so? Come on in." He stepped back to hold open the door.

She entered, and nearly purred with pleasure from a humming window-mounted air conditioner's chill. "Wow, does this feel nice."

"Mabel doesn't have AC?"

"No, sir."

"Humph." The tall, slender man with a shock of white hair and an impressive handlebar mustache wandered to a sagging brown recliner. A massive Maine coon cat took up the entire seat. He hefted it up to toss onto the sofa, then settled into his chair. "Have a seat."

The offended cat glared before starting a tongue bath.

Effie chose a simple oak rocker, unsure how to broach the matter that had brought her here.

“How is Mabel? I trust she’s okay?” Interesting. Far from being the monster Mabel had portrayed, Wallace seemed cordial enough—at least once he’d confirmed she wasn’t witnessing or selling unwanted items.

“She’s good.”

“Does she talk much about me?” He leaned forward. “The last time we met at the Grange Hall, we’d both had a few spirits and I’m afraid I may have said something to offend her.”

“I’m sure not.” So much for Mabel’s claim to never imbibe. “In fact, she’s the one who suggested I come over, to—”

“Does she want me to come for supper? I’m available most any night of the week. My grandson’s living with me, so he’d probably enjoy a good meal, too. Lord knows, neither one of us cooks.”

“Actually—” now Effie was leaning in “—would your grandson happen to be named Marsh?”

“Yes. Why?”

She forced a deep breath. “I’m not sure how to say this, but I was working on our roof when I spied a horse carrying a man slumped in his saddle. Making a long story short, the man’s hand was a mess, and showed signs of having been snake bit. I called an ambulance, and paramedics took him into La Junta.” She fished Marsh’s wallet from her back pocket, along with his broken wedding ring. “He should be fine, but—”

“Take me to him.” He stood, holding out his hands for his grandson’s things.

“E-excuse me?” She gave him the two items.

“I don’t drive, so you’ll have to take me to him.”

“Oh—sure. Have trouble seeing?”

“Hell, no.” He’d already stood and took a black leather cowboy hat from a rack next to the front door. “I got so many damned speeding tickets that the law revoked my license. Don’t get it back till next month.”

* * *

THE ANGEL HAD RETURNED.

Marsh winced from the too-bright lights when he tried focusing on her. She sat quietly by his bedside, staring down at him as if he was no longer a man, but a museum exhibit.

We’ve administered forty-six units of antivenin. It’s too soon to give an accurate prognosis of the probability of lasting damage.

That didn’t sound good.

In fact, nothing sounded good except for the angel’s soft, nonsensical hum. The tune soothed him in a way that he didn’t understand, but welcomed.

His wife hadn’t been in to see him, but his son had assumed a large role in Marsh’s dreams.

The two of them played Frisbee with the dog and made sand castles on the beach. Tucker must not have drowned, because his smile reminded Marsh of his reason for living. His job as a SEAL was important, but being a dad was his life’s true calling.

“Are you awake?” the angel asked.

“I—I think so?” His mouth was so dry that his tongue protested forming even the simple words. Do you have water? He might have asked the question, or maybe he’d only touched his lips?

“Thirsty? I’m not sure if you’re allowed to have anything to drink. There was talk of you having surgery, but I’ll go see.” She stood, as if planning to leave.

“No,” he said. “Stay.”

“I’ll be right back. Let me find a nurse.”

“Stay. Meet my son.” He locked his gaze with hers and more than anything, he needed that connection. Everything was messed up in his head. But if she promised not to leave him, he just might be okay.

* * *

EFFIE TIGHTENED HER grip on the ICU waiting room's courtesy phone. After Effie had explained that their mystery man was Wallace's grandson, Mabel asked about Marsh's condition.

"Wish I had better news to report, but he's still pretty out of it."

"What does his doctor say?"

"Nothing specific. He's not in danger of dying, but his hand's in bad shape."

"I'll say more prayers for him. You stay as long as you need. The kids are all fine."

"Thank you for watching them. Since Wallace lost his license due to a few too many speeding tickets, I don't feel right leaving either of them."

"You're right to stay with Marsh. The poor soul's grandfather might be a heathen, but that doesn't mean he's guilty by association."

After chatting with Remington for a few minutes—Colt still wasn't talking to her—Effie hung up and wandered her way back to Marsh's room.

Poor Wallace. The man had been downgraded from scoundrel to heathen.

She froze outside Marsh's room, hesitant to interrupt his lovable grandfather, who sat near the head of the bed. The last of the day's sun filtered through generous windows, softening the harsh reality of Marsh's grim situation.

Where was the man's wife? The son he'd earlier mentioned?

A machine beeped in time with Marsh's painfully slow pulse. His bed was surrounded by IVs pumping him full of fluids and different medicines. His handsome features twitched from the venom. The sight broke her heart, yet she couldn't look away. Hash marks had been drawn up his arm to show how far the poison advanced.

Maybe because she'd been the one to find him, Effie felt an inexplicable connection to the man. A fierce protective streak made her irrationally angry at his wife, who should have been by his side.

Unable to remain silent, she approached Wallace. "If you have contact information, I don't mind calling Marsh's wife. I'm sure having his family here would be a comfort."

"You're a sweet gal, but it might be best for you to steer clear of messy family business."

"Oh. Okay." The cramped room only had one chair, so she leaned against the far wall, trying to make sense of Wallace's cryptic words. Messy family business? She'd experienced more than her fair share of that. Were Marsh and his wife divorced? Had his ex been given sole custody of their son?

As bothersome as her boys could sometimes be, Effie couldn't imagine a life without her children.

"On second thought..." Wallace grunted before leaning hard on the armrests to rise from his blue vinyl chair. "Show me the way to a cup of strong black coffee and I'll get your take on the matter."

"There's coffee in the waiting room, but it's fresher in the cafeteria. Plus, they have surprisingly good sandwiches." Why couldn't she stop rambling? How had Marsh Langtree grown to matter so much in such a short time?

She took a lingering glance at him before letting Wallace lead her from the room.

At eight thirty on a Monday night, the sandwich selection was slim, but Effie found a turkey on rye and Wallace opted for ham and Swiss, along with a piece of banana cream pie.

He insisted on paying for both of their meals, then showed her to a corner table.

They both ate in silence punctuated by faint metallic bangs and trays clattering in the kitchen. The antiseptic smell on the ICU wing had been replaced by the more pleasant aroma of fresh-brewed coffee.

Hospital employees came and went. The only other patient visitors in the dining area were a family Effie recognized from the ICU waiting room. The father had suffered a heart attack, but his prognosis was good.

Wallace had only eaten a third of his sandwich when he changed course to attack his pie. He finished in four bites, then washed it down with half his cup of joe. "That's better." He wiped pie

crumbs from his mustache. “Now, I suppose this is something best kept in the family, but I would appreciate a woman’s take on the matter.”

“Of course.” Effie leaned in.

“Let me first say I’m no angel. What seems like a hundred years ago, I made a killing in oil. I let the money go to my head, stepped out on my wife, and she packed up our little girl and left me. Marsh is my daughter Jacinda’s son. I only cheated that one time, and I was so damned drunk I didn’t remember much other than waking up with a head throbbing with regret, but my wife wasn’t having it, and she moved back out east to stay with her folks. They were a hoity-toity bunch who dabbled in Thoroughbred breeding and never much cottoned to me. We were separated for forty years before Jacinda called to tell me her mama died from flu.” He shook his head while tears shone in his eyes. “Flu. You hear about folks dyin’ from it on the news, but it seems like an unnecessary way to go.”

“I’m sorry.” Effie placed her hand over Wallace’s.

He snatched his hand back and waved off her concern. “No need for sympathy. The damned fool woman made her choices, same as me. Save for ten minutes, I was faithful to her my whole life, but got nothin’ to show for it. Now, I finally have my grandson with me, and look what happened to him.”

“You could no more control Marsh getting bit by a rattler than you could the outcome of your infidelity. Sometimes life just plain sucks.”

He snorted and reached for his fork, pressing crumbs between the tines. “What’s worse, my grandson’s now in the same kind of bind.”

“Marsh cheated on his wife?” Effie’s respect for him plummeted.

“No, no. Of course, not. Hell, they’ve been divorced for darn near three years, and he still wore his ring—took a rattler to pry it off him. I just meant that he’s as alone as I am. When his little boy drowned, Jacinda worried grief might drive Marsh under.”

Wallace’s story trapped Effie’s heart on a spinning carnival ride. Up and down, around and around. Whereas moments earlier, she’d felt contempt for the man, she now ached for him. Had his wife blamed him for the loss of their son? And was that why their marriage died, too?

She drew her lower lip into her mouth. Poor, poor Marsh.

“I didn’t share all of this to draw pity. I don’t get out much, and am genuinely curious to hear a woman’s point of view. Was my wife right to never speak to me again? Was Marsh’s wife right to leave him?”

Effie slowly exhaled. “Honestly, without hearing both sides, it’s hard to say. But just having heard your version, sounds like you and Marsh both deserved another chance.”

Silent tears streamed down the man’s weathered cheeks.

He wadded his napkin, turning his back to her while drying his eyes. “I’m a silly old fool.”

She rose to hug him. “It’s never wrong to love someone, and it sounds to me like you and your grandson loved your wives very much.”

Achy longing took hold in Effie’s gut.

More than anything, all she’d ever wanted besides being a nurse was to be a great mom and to be loved. Love seemed like such a simple thing. Lots of people had it. What was it about her that Moody had found so unlovable?

Would any guy find her worthy of his affection?

She chided herself for even asking the question. With three kids and a grandmother and ragtag ranch to tend, the last thing she had time to even think about was a man.

[Chapter Three](#)

Marsh woke to bright sun, cartoons and fighting. Since none of that made sense, he closed his eyes, figuring when he next woke, life would once again be normal.

Give it!

No!

Yes!

Boys!

Something broke.

Both of you sit down. If I have to tell you again, you're not going to Scotty's party.

I hate you! I'm calling Dad!

Colt William Washington! This voice was different—older sounding, in a scolding, grandmotherly way.

Grandma, I'm sorry. I thought the boys would behave, but—

"Hey..." Marsh fully opened his eyes to find not one boy who would have been older than Tucker when he'd passed, but two. "How come you're giving your mom such a hard time?"

"You're awake!" A petite blonde rushed to his side. My angel? He recalled the sweetest humming and soft strokes to his hair. She clapped her hands to flushed cheeks, then her hair, then to his shoulder. "Oh my gosh. I need to get your grandpa. He's going to be so happy."

One of the boys stepped alongside his mom. "Your hand blew up to the size of a football and had lots of icky gunk squirting out of it. It was awesome!"

Not to be outdone, a clone of the first boy said, "When I was little, a stick poked out my eyeball!"

"Remington, Colt, come here." The grandmotherly voice was attached to a slim body with spiky white hair. "Leave that poor man alone."

Marsh licked his lips. "Would one of y'all mind helping me out with a few clues as to what's going on?"

The boy scampered to a window seat, where he joined his other half in coloring in a Transformers book with crayons.

"I'm sorry." The angel's flighty hands were back to her cheeks. "I'm Effie. You were bitten by a rattler, and I found you and your horse. These little hellions are my boys—Colt and Remington. And this—" she put her arm around the older woman who had her impish smile "—is Mabel. My saint of a grandmother, who took us all in."

Mabel said, "We're your grandfather's neighbors to the east."

"Guess I owe you a heap of gratitude." Marsh struggled just to scratch his stubble-covered jaw. "Everything that happened is kind of a blur." Mostly what I remember is you, Effie. The way you made me want to fight my way back from the dark.

A crying whimper came from somewhere near the window.

His angel headed that way to pluck an infant from a carrier. With a cherub-cheeked mini version of herself, only with curls, settled on her hip, Effie returned. "This is Cassidy. She gets cranky when she's left out of the action."

"Don't blame her." Marsh tried reaching for the nearest of the infant's bare feet, but even that small effort seemed too great. The sensation of not being in control of his body was not only unfamiliar, but intolerable.

He needed out of this bed now.

"You probably shouldn't try to do too much at once."

"Lifting my arm is hardly too much."

"I'll be damned..." His grandfather took off his cowboy hat while entering the cramped room. "You lived."

"Don't have to sound so excited about it."

His granddad chuckled. "Believe you me, I am. If something happened to you while you were out here, your mama would have my hide."

"True." For as long as Marsh could remember, Wallace had been part of his life. He called every Sunday morning and sent him cash-filled cards for holidays with extra on his birthdays. When Marsh's perfect family had officially gone to hell, and his CO told him to get his head on straight and not even think about coming back until he'd made peace with his son's passing and his wife leaving,

the only place that made sense for him to go was to the ranch where he'd spent every childhood and teen summer. His maternal grandmother's Thoroughbred farm where he'd grown up was home, but about as regimented as his Navy schedule. What he needed was plenty of time and wide-open spaces to make sense out of the mess that had become of his life. "Have you talked to Mom? Told her I'll be all right?"

Wallace nodded. "She wanted to fly out, but I told her you didn't need a woman interfering in your business."

"Sounds like something you'd say." Mabel crossed her arms, and a slash replaced her pretty smile.

"Thank you for proving my point," his grandfather snapped before slapping his hat back on his head.

Never had Marsh wished more for the strength to form a simple time-out T with his hands. After the two septuagenarians bickered for another five minutes, he glanced toward Effie and caught her gaze.

She smiled.

His chest tightened when they shared a moment of mutual frustration with their elders.

"Grandma?" One of the boys had left his coloring book to cock his head and stare up at her. "How come you tell me and Colt not to fight, but you and Mr. Wallace fight, too?"

Marsh didn't even try hiding a smile.

Effie squeezed her son's shoulder, steering him toward the door. "Colt, would you please pack up your coloring books and crayons, then grab Cassidy's carrier. We should probably go."

"Agreed." Mabel glared toward Marsh's grandfather. "I need out of here before this darn fool goes and tells me again that I'm shakin' like a wet dog."

"You're still holding a grudge about that?" Wallace asked.

Effie winced. "Remington, please help your brother put those crayons back in the box."

"Woman..." Wallace made the mistake of pointing his finger in Mabel's face. She looked angry enough that Marsh wouldn't have put it past her to break his grandpa's finger clear off. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"Oh—now, you're going to fake amnesia? My poor Dwayne had barely been in his grave a year, and I was finally able to get back to square dancing. You blustered into the regular Saturday night party and sauntered up to me without even taking off your hat. Then you said those horrible words, and Wallace Stokes, I've hated you ever since."

"Hated me? I said you shook like a dog as a compliment. I used to have an old hound named Peacock, and I loved that girl something fierce. Nothing made me happier than taking her down to the swimming hole and watching her play in the water, and then shake off. Made me smile—truly. Just like your dancing." He removed his big black cowboy hat, pressing it to his chest while making the strangest smile. "Miss Mabel, from the bottom of my heart, I give you my deepest, most sincere apology."

Mabel shook her head. "Boys, hurry along before we all suffocate from Mr. Stokes's bloviating hot air."

"Grandma." Effie shifted her baby to her other hip. "Wallace said he was sorry. After hearing his explanation, don't you think this is all sort of funny?"

Marsh yawned. "I don't mean to interfere in anyone's business, but I sure could use a nap."

"Aw, now, I'm sorry," Effie said to him. "Boys, Grandma—let's go."

"Gladly." Mabel huffed and headed toward the door.

The boys marched behind her, as did Wallace, smooth talking all the way out into the hall.

When only Effie remained, she said, "I really am sorry. After what you've been through, you should have woken to a nice, peaceful scene."

“It’s all right.” He cast her a faint smile. “Guess I’m lucky to even be alive.” Which surprised him. At what point had he decided living was better than dying?

“You sure are.” She came close enough to cup her hand to his shoulder. Her simple, kind touch flooded him with a sense of calm and well-being. “Since my crew isn’t exactly suitable for hospital visits, now that you’re awake, I probably won’t be back.”

“Sure. I understand.” Only he didn’t. Why did he suddenly want more than anything to see her and her wild brood again? “Thanks for the time you were here—and for calling an ambulance for my pitiful behind.”

“It was my pleasure.” When she smiled, the pleasure was all his.

* * *

“THAT MUST HAVE been horrible.”

“It was,” Effie said.

It was Sunday afternoon, and while the twins splashed in Scotty’s pool, Effie sat at the back porch table with Cassidy asleep on her lap. Scotty’s mother, Patricia, and three other moms she’d just met whose names she couldn’t remember had shared Little League gossip until the conversation turned to Marsh’s snakebite ordeal, whose injury made the local paper.

“Will he regain full use of his hand?” one of the moms asked. She had big hair and wore an equally large purple sundress patterned with cows jumping over pink moons.

“Hope so.” Effie wished she knew what was going on with Marsh. Had he been released? It seemed strange that she’d spent so much time with him when he’d been unconscious, yet now that he was awake, she hadn’t seen him at all. How could she miss him when she didn’t even know him?

The conversation wound to the upcoming school year that officially started in the morning. Effie excused herself to grab the boys from the pool. With all the excitement over Marsh, she hadn’t even started shopping for their supplies.

Rounding the edge of the free-form pool, she couldn’t help but notice how luxurious Patricia’s home was. Scotty’s father, Roy, was a lawyer, and had spent more time on his cell phone than playing with the boys, but now he’d joined his wife on the porch. They shared a kiss, and when he whispered something for only her to hear, Effie fought a jealous pang.

She didn’t miss Moody, per se, but she missed the intimacy of being a couple. Of knowing no matter what curves life threw her way, he had her back. Only in the end, he hadn’t. The fact still kept her up nights, and when the boys acted out, it made her more convinced than ever that they needed a firm masculine presence in their lives.

Effie turned from the happy couple to summon her boys.

The pool had been constructed to resemble a country pond. A pile of boulders at the deep end featured a grotto with a swim-up bar and slide. Country music played from speakers hidden in more rocks, and the sweet scent of petunias blended with suntan lotion and chlorine and lingering smoke from the grill to form the perfect backdrop for a lazy summer afternoon.

“Colt! Remington!” she called above the splashing, shifting Cassidy to her other hip. “We need to go!”

“No!” Colt swooshed his hand through the water, creating a massive wave. “We’re having fun!”

“Now.” Effie walked to the pool’s edge. “If you’re not out of this pool by the time I count to ten, you’re grounded from TV and your friends for the whole first week of school.”

Cassidy must have sensed the change in her mother’s mood, as she whimpered. “It’s okay, sweetie,” Effie said with a light jiggle. “Mommy’s not mad at you.”

Remington sloshed to the pool’s edge and hopped out, racing across the sandstone pavers for his towel.

“Don’t run!” she shouted after him.

Meanwhile, Colt crossed his arms and glared. “I don’t wanna go!”

“One.” Why was Colt doing this? He never used to talk back when Moody had been around. Was she such a horrible parent that she’d brought out this defiant streak?

He stood chest-deep in the water, staring.

“Two.”

His friends stopped playing keep-away to gawk. Apparently the parental showdown was more entertaining?

“Three.”

“Colt, come on,” his brother said. “We gotta pick school stuff.”

“No!” Colt looked away to swim to the deep end.

“Four.” Effie’s heart pounded. She’d always hated confrontations, and fighting with her son in such a public setting was the worst.

“I’ll get him, Mom.” Bless his little heart, Remington handed her his towel, jumped back in the pool, and swam to his brother. He whispered something in his ear, then Colt slapped the water but eventually turned for the shallow end.

“Thanks for your help,” she said when Remington stood beside her while Colt took his time getting his Spider-Man towel.

“You’re welcome.”

She wanted to ask Remington what he’d said that had worked such magic but in the end realized she didn’t want to know. What if her youngest boy had told his big brother that if he didn’t come, Mom was going to have a stroke? Or embarrass them even more in front of their friends?

When Colt finally reached her, Cassidy’s weight had taken a toll on Effie’s lower back. Eager to place the baby in her car seat, she said to both boys, “Go and thank Mr. and Mrs. Crawford, then get dressed. We need to hurry and get to the store.”

* * *

TWO HOURS LATER, frazzled didn’t begin to cover Effie’s mood. The school supplies had cost double what she’d budgeted and Colt had insisted on specialty items instead of plain number-two pencils and standard notebooks. She knew she should have told him no, but it was tough when Remington behaved like a saint in the crowded back-to-school aisle and deserved a little something special for the start of first grade.

She had money tucked away from selling vegetables and eggs at the summer farmer’s market, and every so often Moody did send a check, but she hated needing his money and felt guilty living off Mabel’s generosity. Effie vowed to one day finish nursing school so she’d be able to support herself.

Last year, Moody had been with her and the boys when they’d shopped for kindergarten supplies. When Colt pitched a fit over wanting the extra-large box of crayons with the built-in sharpener, Moody hefted him over his shoulder and carried him kicking and screaming to the truck.

Unsure what she’d do if Colt behaved like that with her, she’d bowed to his pressure—a horrible parenting move, but what else could she have done? With Cassidy riding in her carrier, if Colt pulled a stunt like running off, her only option would have been hefting his brother into the cart, then chasing after him.

Back at Mabel’s ranch, Effie was surprised to find a familiar red Ford pickup in Mabel’s drive. What was Wallace doing at the house? Had he driven himself without a license? More importantly, her racing pulse wondered, had he brought his grandson? If Marsh was even out of the hospital.

After parking her minivan, she flipped down the visor to check if she looked as bad as she felt—just in case Marsh was feeling well enough to tag along. In a word? Yes. Her once-neat ponytail sagged, and dozens of wispy curls framed her flushed face.

“What’cha lookin’ at, Mom?” Remington still sat in his safety seat, but Colt had already unbuckled himself and opened the van’s side door.

Since she couldn't tell her son she was checking herself out for a possible encounter with the handsome neighbor, she crossed her fingers behind her back before saying, "I, um, thought I had something in my eye."

"Oh." He scrambled from his seat to take Cassidy from hers. "Ready to see Great-Gramma?" he asked his baby sister in an adorable soft tone.

Cassidy grinned, bucking with excitement.

"Sure you're strong enough to carry her?" Effie asked.

"Mo-om." He rolled his eyes. "I'm really big, and she's really small."

"Oh, well in that case, you can always carry her." She kept a close eye on the pair while opening the van's rear door. "How about you start by taking her in the house. Colt and I will grab your school supplies."

"Okay." He took his time with his baby sister, being extra careful on the short step to the porch.

"There you are." Mabel burst out the front door.

Wallace followed behind her, then spotted Effie. "Let me help with that. Looks like you've got your hands full."

He bounded out in front of Mabel to take Effie's bags.

"Thank you." She eyed her blushing grandmother, whose expression landed between the cat who swallowed a canary and a randy teen who'd been caught making out. "Everything all right?"

"Oh, fine, fine," Wallace said. "Marsh!" He waved toward the barn, where his grandson exited at a snail's pace. "Come on over here. You should both hear our happy news."

Mabel beamed.

What in the world is going on?

And how did any man have a right to look so good straight out of the hospital? Should he even be walking? Marsh's left hand was bandaged. He wore jeans and a white T-shirt with NAVY written on the front in big blue letters. She couldn't tell which was in worse condition, his battered cowboy boots or his equally shabby brown leather cowboy hat. The closer he got, the more she couldn't help but wonder how she hadn't before noticed his eyes being quite so dark. Like decadent fudge pools.

"Hi," she said with a painfully awkward wave in his direction, willing her runaway pulse to slow. "Should you already be up and around?"

"Judging by how crappy I'm feeling, nope." He winced. "But I needed to check on my horse. Thanks for taking care of him."

"It's been my pleasure. If you want, he can stay here till you feel up to riding."

"That'd be great. Thanks." His half smile turned her knees to rubber. Shame on her. As the single mom of three kids, the last thing she had time for was checking out a cowboy—especially one with even more emotional baggage than her.

"Did you kill the snake that bit you?" Colt asked.

"I did not," Marsh said.

"Aren't you mad at him?" Her son had already taken his new Batman backpack from the van and now wore it.

"Nah." Marsh ruffled the boy's hair the way Moody used to. "I figured he was just protecting his land the same way I would mine. Make sense?"

"I guess?" Colt cocked his head and frowned.

Wallace cleared his throat. "I don't mean to interrupt, but me and Miss Mabel have some mighty exciting news." He slipped his arm around her slim shoulders. "Don't we, darlin'?"

Mabel beamed. "We sure do."

Much as they had at the hospital when their grandparents had been fighting, Effie shared a look with Marsh. Was he as confused as she was?

“Look here.” Marsh’s grandfather took Mabel’s hand, waving it for all to see. A massive diamond solitaire glinted in the setting sun. “Effie, honey, your gorgeous grandmother has agreed to marry me.”

“What?” Effie pressed her hands to her galloping heart.

Marsh looked ready to topple over.

“You heard right,” Mabel said. “We’re getting married! And we want the two of you to be our best man and maid of honor.”

Chapter Four

“Wait...” Marsh fought the temptation to conk the side of his head to check for something in his ear, because surely he hadn’t heard right. “Did you just say you’re getting married?”

“Isn’t it exciting?” Effie’s grandmother gushed. “And since neither of us is getting younger, we want to hold the ceremony right away—but with enough time to do it up right.”

Her beaming groom slipped his arm around her waist and the two shared a kiss.

Lord...

Marsh sneaked a peek at Effie and found her looking as bewildered as he felt.

“Grandma,” she said, “and Wallace, I’m thrilled for both of you—really, I am. But don’t you think this is a little sudden? At the start of the week, you hated each other.”

Wallace waved off her concern. “Like your grandmother said, at our age, there’s no sense in putting off till tomorrow what should be done today.”

“Mom?” One of the twins tugged the bottom of Effie’s pretty floral shirt. “Do married people share beds? ‘Cause my friend Scotty said—”

“Gosh, Colt.” Effie clamped her hand over her son’s mouth and steered him toward the coop affixed to the side of the barn. “I’m pretty sure you and your brother forgot to feed the chickens this morning.”

Remington thankfully followed.

Marsh struggled to hold back a laugh. But then he thought of his grandfather’s upcoming honeymoon night and wanted to cry. How was it fair the old guy would soon be seeing more action than him?

“Ready to set our big date?” Wallace asked his bride.

“Absolutely.” Mabel was already heading for the house. “I’ve got one of those big bank calendars on the side of the fridge.”

“Perfect.” Wallace took her hand to walk her into the house. It was a damn shame his grandmother had held tight to her grudge for so many years. Wallace clearly had an abundance of affection to share with no previous outlet. Maybe this marriage was a good thing after all?

“Quite a turn of events, huh?” Effie tucked her hands in the back pockets of faded jeans that hugged her in all the right places.

“No kidding.” Marsh tried not to notice the strain her pose placed on her shirt’s pearl buttons.

“How are you doing? Let’s get you off your feet and out of the sun.” She led him toward a bench in the barn’s deep afternoon shadow.

“Better now.” He hated feeling as if his normally strong body had betrayed him. Upon sitting, he released a long sigh. “Crazy, isn’t it? How a critter no longer than my arm put me out of commission.”

“If you think that’s bad, don’t mess with a brown recluse. When I was a nursing student—”

“Hold up—you’re a nurse? No wonder you took such great care of me.”

“No. Not quite.” She leaned against the barn wall and lowered her gaze. “I, ah, dropped out just before my last semester.”

“That sucks. Not that it’s any of my business, but why?”

“Long story. Let’s just say I caught a bad case of bull rider fever that led to an even more serious condition called marriage.”

“Uh-oh...” He nodded. “I can relate—only the other way around.”

“I’m sorry. Wallace told me the highlights—or I guess that would be lowlights—of what happened. Sorry doesn’t seem adequate.” Initially, Marsh had been irked by the fact that his grandfather had shared his private pain with a stranger, but for the instant it took Effie to cover his hand with hers, and he glanced up to find her blue-green gaze shimmering, his annoyance faded into appreciation for this woman who’d done more for him in the past week than his ex had in the past three years.

“It’s okay.” He stretched his legs out in front of him and leaned back. “I mean, clearly, it’s not, but you get the picture.”

She nodded and swallowed hard. “I can’t imagine losing your son. You must have—”

“Stop.” He straightened. “That’s not a part of my life I care to hash over, so could we change the subject?”

“Sure. Sorry. I never meant to—”

“Damn, it’s hot out here.” Since she apparently hadn’t gotten his earlier memo, Marsh stood. “Wonder when this heat’s going to let up?”

He made the mistake of looking her way, only to find her big blue eyes once again shining. Swell. If there was one thing he couldn’t abide more than heat, it was a crying woman. Unable—or hell, maybe just plain unwilling—to make more small talk, he nodded toward her grandmother’s ragtag house. “I’m gonna see what’s keeping Wallace.”

Instead of waiting for her to acknowledge his statement or even follow him, Marsh took off. Over the years, Wallace had done a lot of crazy things, but this engagement took the proverbial cake to a whole new level. Marsh was partially pleased as punch for the old coot, but another part of him knew if the planning constantly threw him and Effie together, the next weeks could be rough.

The whole reason he’d come Colorado was to avoid people. Since losing Tucker to drowning and then his wife to a spectacularly civil divorce, Marsh hadn’t been himself. A few months after the ink had dried on their papers, he’d been in Afghanistan watching a terrorist cell. He’d witnessed them strapping a bomb around the chest of a boy who couldn’t have been much older than his son and lost it. Marsh had been on a strict intel-gathering mission that soon turned into a bad-guy bloodbath. He’d come damn close to being court-martialed for failure to follow orders, but by God, that innocent child had survived. Reuniting him with his mother had been one of the few times since losing Tucker that Marsh had felt alive.

Now? Hell, most days he wasn’t sure what he felt—if anything at all. Truth be told, that snakebite had been a blessing if only for the fact that it had shaved a chunk of time from his life when he hadn’t had to think about what happened to his marriage and son.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, guilt churned Effie’s belly, because she actually felt relieved and a trifle giddy about waving goodbye to her rowdy twins, who had just climbed on the school bus. It had been a long summer, and later, she looked forward to planting her behind on one of the front porch rockers to linger with Cassidy over a nice cup of tea.

And if her thoughts strayed to the proud, handsome, clearly heartbroken man to whom she would soon be related by marriage?

The unspoken question warmed her cheeks.

Well, there was certainly no harm in thinking about a person, was there? His story was beyond tragic, and lingered with her long after he and Wallace had gone. It had been hard enough losing her husband, but to have also lost a child? No wonder Marsh hadn’t cared to talk about his situation, but the way he’d cut her off had been downright rude—especially when she’d only been trying to help.

She’d just entered the house to clean up the breakfast dishes when she spotted her grandmother not where she’d last been—at the kitchen table, feeding the baby pureed peaches—but emerging from her bedroom wearing her best Sunday dress and a huge smile.

Cassidy squealed while racing down the wood-floored hall in her walker, making an awful racket with the squeaky buttons and electronic horn.

So much for my quiet morning...

“How do I look?” Mabel performed a lively pirouette.

“Pretty as a picture. But where are you off to so early on a Monday morning?” She didn’t drive, so one of her friends must be coming to get her.

“Did you already forget? When Wallace and Marsh were leaving, we decided to meet up for a planning breakfast at Mom’s Café and then hit the ground running. Hurry up and get dressed. We’re supposed to meet them in fifteen minutes.”

“Grandma, you never said anything about seeing your fiancé today.” Just saying the word sounded awkward, but not nearly as bad as spending a whole day with Marsh would be.

“I’m sure I did...” Mabel ducked into the hall bathroom to fluff her white hair. “Now, hurry. I don’t want to be late.”

“For the record, you must have been talking to angels, since you sure never ran any of this past me.”

“Watch your sass, or I’ll downgrade you from maid of honor to punch bowl attendant.”

Effie rolled her eyes.

Under the best of circumstances, prepping Cassidy and all of her gear was never easy, but on short notice? The task was darn near impossible. By the time Effie swapped comfy jeans and a T-shirt for a sundress and wrestled the baby into a cute yellow gingham romper, her fifteen minutes had ticked to five. After loading the diaper bag, stroller, carrier and her purse in the back of the minivan, then plopping the baby into her safety seat, Effie was not only exhausted, but ten minutes off schedule.

She slid behind the wheel, relieved to have at least made it into the car.

“Couldn’t you have at least tried doing something with your hair?” Mabel cast a dour glance in Effie’s general direction. “I don’t want Wallace thinking he’s marrying into a bunch of hillbillies.”

Overheated, Effie turned on the engine and AC before yanking down the visor to peer into the lighted mirror. Good grief. The ponytail she’d slept on hung sideways with more hair out than in. For added flavor, compliments of Colt, there was oatmeal just over her right ear. Effie said a quick prayer for his teacher, Mrs. Logan. She’d need all the help she could get to hog-tie him to his desk.

“Is this better?” Effie asked after yanking out her elastic, only to smooth her hair back and work it back in.

Mabel frowned. “I like it better down. And when you add a bit of curl. For sure wear it that way at the wedding. I don’t want it looking bad for pictures.”

It was official. Her normally sane grandmother had turned into Bridezilla.

* * *

“THERE’S MY BLUSHING BRIDE.”

While Effie struggled into the crowded café with Cassidy on her hip and the diaper bag over her shoulder, Mabel glided to where her groom sat at a table loaded with rowdy geriatrics Effie recognized from the Grange Hall, where she drove her grandmother most Saturday nights. Funny how she hadn’t noticed Wallace, too. Had Mabel deliberately kept her distance?

Mabel and Wallace shared a brief embrace and kiss, then he pulled out a chair for her alongside his.

“Hope you don’t mind,” he said to Effie, “but there’s no more room here, so I figured you could sit with Marsh.” He nodded to the room’s far corner, where his grandson glowered over a mug of coffee.

Effie opened her mouth to tell him that as a matter of fact, she very much minded, but the group of three women and four men was too loud for her voice to have even been heard. Resigned to her fate, she lugged the baby a little farther.

As if the whole town was relieved school was back in session, honky-tonk played on the jukebox. Laughter and high-spirited conversations rose above the music. The scents of strong coffee and bacon and the café's famous cinnamon rolls had Effie's stomach growling.

"Are you as sick of this wedding as I am?" she asked upon reaching Marsh's table.

"Oh, hey. Yes." He jumped up to help her with Cassidy's bag. "Welcome to the kids' table. I wouldn't be surprised if the waitress shows up with a pair of smiley-face pancakes."

"I know, right?" The brief brush of the back of his hand against her shoulder had her fighting a flutter of awareness low in her belly. Gracious, he was a looker. He hadn't shaved, and if possible, when he politely removed his cowboy hat, his hair looked even worse than hers.

She'd always had a thing for untamed cowboys.

Case in point—her no-good ex.

Once she'd sat herself in a chair, her cell on the table and Cassidy on her lap, Marsh asked the waitress to bring a high chair, then slapped his hat back on.

"Thank you," Effie said, relieved to duck behind the laminated menu. When the waitress returned with the high chair, Effie hefted Cassidy in, then ordered hot tea and a cheese omelet with hash browns.

"Question," Marsh said once they were alone. "Do you remember hearing anything about this meeting yesterday afternoon?"

Laughing, Effie shook her head. "I walked my boys to the school bus, thinking Cassidy and I had the whole day to ourselves, only to learn I was wrong."

"Sorry." Marsh sipped his coffee.

"Why should you apologize? I assume you had better things to do this morning, too."

"True—no offense."

"None taken." She fished the baby's favorite rubber whale teething toy from the diaper bag and set it on the high chair's tray. "This engagement happened so fast. The wedding's the third week in October. My head is spinning."

The waitress came and went with her tea. Effie added plenty of sugar.

"What if we divide and conquer?"

Effie wrinkled her nose. "You mean like Mabel and I handle flowers and you and your grandfather tackle beer and wine?"

"Exactly." He leaned in. "You have no more time or desire to be around me than I have to be around you. This way, we make Wallace and Mabel happy without the two of us being miserable. Sound like a plan?"

"Sure."

The waitress arrived with their meals, and Effie dived in, closing her eyes while savoring the gooey cheese.

But upon glancing into Marsh's hooded, dead-sexy gaze only to realize she wasn't miserable, she swallowed and then froze. What had she just agreed to? It wasn't as if she craved seeing the guy, but now that she'd lugged Cassidy and her gear into the real world outside her grandmother's modest home, she recognized that along with the café's food being far tastier than her own, she'd been tapping her toe to the lively music. Her baby girl grinned from all the neighboring diners' waves and silly faces.

Marsh might have admitted he was miserable, but she was far from it. Breakfast out was actually kind of a fun treat.

As for the view across the table? Whew...

Even brooding, Marsh Langtree's chiseled features were ridiculously easy on the eyes. Proven by the fact that she wasn't the only woman staring. How could his wife have left him? He seemed like a stand-up guy. Why had the death of their son driven them apart instead of bringing them closer?

Her cell rang.

One glance at the caller ID snapped her from her thoughts—Admiral Byrd Elementary.

“Need to get that?” Marsh asked.

“Unfortunately.” What had Colt done? Dipped a girl’s braids in paint? Freed the occupants of the teacher’s hamster cage or ant farm? Effie steeled herself for the worst. “Hello?”

“Mrs. Washington? I’m sorry to bother you, but—” Effie recognized the voice of Samantha, the school office clerk.

“What did Colt do?”

Samantha laughed. “Actually, nothing. The twins’ teacher just wanted me to see if you’re available next Thursday for a brief field trip. The kids are learning about money, so they’ll be walking to the bank at the end of our block. Mrs. Logan is desperate for volunteers.”

“Please tell her I’d be happy to help.” Effie released the breath she’d been holding.

“Perfect. I’ll let her know.”

Upon disconnecting, Effie couldn’t help but smile.

“Good news?” Marsh asked.

“In a roundabout way.” She skimmed her palm over Cassidy’s soft blond curls. “My twins are a handful—well, mostly Colt. He’s oldest by three minutes, and always in trouble. This school year couldn’t have come at a better time, as I’m in sore need of a parental breather. Anyway, during kindergarten, I got far more calls than I would have liked from the boys’ teacher, and with today being the first day of school, I saw the caller ID and assumed the worst.”

“But everything’s okay?” He held a bacon strip to his lips, causing her tummy to flutter. When he’d been in the hospital, she’d stared at him for hours at a time, but he’d always been asleep. Now that he was awake, it was tough not to notice even more—like the way a fraction of an inch up or down at the corners of his mouth made him look happy or sad or devilishly sexy.

“Yes.” Or was it? Face flushed from her latest assessment of her companion, she focused on squirting ketchup on her hash browns. For the moment, her twins might have been behaving, but her overactive imagination certainly wasn’t. It was high time she focused more on this wedding and less on the best man!

* * *

MARSH COULDN’T GET away from Effie and her cute-as-a-button baby fast enough. He’d paid the bill, and Effie was back on her phone, gabbing with someone about healthy school snacks, when the baby dropped her toy. In the moment, he found himself back on parental autopilot, reaching to the floor to get it, then dipping his napkin in his water to wipe the whale clean.

He returned it to Cassidy, and her smile filled him with the kind of awe and wonder he’d long ago had for his son. He never would have pegged himself for the kind of guy who liked kids, but not long into Tucker’s brief life, Marsh found himself wholly consumed with his son. What he ate, what he wore, what toys he played with. Tucker had been his world, and when he died... Well, for all practical purposes, Marsh had, too.

Effie’s crew was his first exposure to kids since Tucker’s passing, and Marsh found the experience to be all at once heady and cruel. He’d caught himself sneaking peeks at little Cassidy’s chubby pink cheeks and big blue eyes that matched her mama’s. When he bent forward to return her toy, he’d caught a trace of her baby-lotion scent, which led him right back to Tucker’s infant years, and to how much fun it had been to make boat noises while playing with his rubber fleet in the tub, then wrapping him in a big soft towel, lotioning him before adding a fresh diaper and PJs before rocking him and watching his wife, Leah, nurse before they’d tucked him into his crib.

Knowing he’d never again kiss his son good-night or play catch with him or watch him shriek at the beach while running from a crab was too much to bear.

He had to get out of there.

Away from Effie and her sweet baby girl and her talk about how relieved she was to have breathing room away from her boys when he’d have literally given anything for one more moment with his son.

In that instant, hearing Effie laugh over the fact that she was actually happy to be away from her kids filled him with irrational rage. Not with her, per se, but his particularly painful lot in life.

On autopilot, desperate for fresh air and the kind of quiet he could only find in the middle of nowhere, Marsh pushed back his chair, pressed his hat tighter on his head and left the diner and town.

Grief drove him to push his truck too fast, and back at his grandfather's ranch, he followed the same trend while four-wheeling to the old homestead.

Only when Marsh had well and truly driven to the end of his world did he allow himself badly needed release.

He screamed at God.

Cursed fate.

He broke down and cried and wished that damned snake had finished what he'd started. Most of all, Marsh wished for a moment's respite from the heartache stemming from being well and truly alone.

Chapter Five

"Effie May Washington," Mabel scolded. "What did you do?"

"Nothing."

Mabel planted her hands on her hips. "You had to have done something to make Marsh bolt out of here faster than a spooked horse."

"Did he at least have the courtesy to pay for your meal?" Wallace asked.

Effie nodded.

"Since Marsh ran off with his truck, Effie, looks like you're our official chauffeur."

Swell.

"No worries. We'll have fun." Forcing a smile, Effie took Cassidy from her high chair, then vowed the first time she saw Marsh again, she'd give him a piece of her mind.

* * *

BY ELEVEN, THE BABY was squirming from being held too long and Effie couldn't tell whether Wallace and Mabel were fighting for real over the flowers or having a brief lovers' quarrel.

Rainbow Bridge Floral was owned by the same family who owned the town's only funeral home, so the rentable wedding arches and casket displays didn't make for the most ideal ambience. At least the place smelled good, with its sweet mix of roses, freesia and carnations.

"If we hold the ceremony at Rock Chapel but the reception at the Grange Hall, then we'll have to decorate both places, which means double the cost," Mabel explained to her fiancé, whose cheeks had turned red.

"But, darlin', I already told you," he said, "I don't give two green figs about the money. I've got more money than time, and want to spend my money and time on you."

Mabel opened her mouth to form a fresh argument, but Wallace leaned in to kiss the fight right out of her.

Swoon.

As frustrating as this whole wedding business was, Effie couldn't help but be thrilled for her grandmother—even a bit jealous. Being a single mom had never been part of her grand plan. She was supposed to have had a rewarding nursing career before even thinking about starting a family, but that hadn't exactly worked out, either.

Gloria, their floral consultant, cleared her throat. "Since your choice of venues is decided, are we ready to get back to deciding between roses and chrysanthemums?"

"Mums," Mabel said with a firm nod. "Much more budget friendly."

"Roses," Wallace said with a firm smack of his hands against the planning table.

"What if I kind of like mums?" Mabel asked. "Especially for fall?"

"Then we'll have both. Would that make you happy?"

Mabel nodded, and then she and her groom-to-be started in again with their kissing. Really?

Effie couldn't remember the last time she'd been well and truly kissed—probably the night Cassidy had been conceived. The notion made her sad. She used to love a night spent smooching beneath the stars.

A flash of Marsh and his oh-so-kissable lips popped into her mind's eye, but she squashed that image the way she would have a picnic ant. When—if—she ever found a suitable man for her and father for her children, he needed to be a whole lot more dependable than a guy who couldn't even be bothered to stick around for the official end of a meal.

* * *

“SOME BEST MAN you turned out to be.”

“Sorry.” From his seat on the living room sofa, Marsh glanced up from the online article his team member Rowdy had forwarded on the escalation of piracy along the Ivory Coast. He was just in time to catch the full brunt of the furrow between his frowning grandfather's bushy white eyebrows.

As if sensing trouble, Rocket, the massive Maine coon Wallace had found on the side of the road as a kitten, leaped from Marsh's lap to dart under the sofa, only his gut was so big, his entire ass end, complete with whipping tail, stuck out.

“Sorry doesn't cut it.” Wallace slammed the front door. “You embarrassed the hell out of me, and hurt that sweet little gal Effie's feelings.”

“Did she say something?”

“Didn't have to.” Wallace snorted before collapsing onto his recliner and pushing himself fully back. “Poor thing had disappointment written all over her pretty face.”

“Hope she didn't use permanent ink.” Marsh didn't bother looking up from his iPad. He already had his grandfather's crotchety expression locked in his head.

“You're not too old for me to put soap in your mouth.”

Marsh rubbed his suddenly throbbing forehead. “Point of fact, I kind of am, and I'm sorry. Next time I see Effie, I'll apologize.”

“No, you're gonna do it now. By the time this wedding rolls around, I want everybody feeling harmonious. Besides, I left my wallet in that ugly minivan those women drive, and not only do I want it back, but I want you to take Effie into town and have her pick out a nice new SUV—something big enough to hold me and my bride, plus all those cute rugrats. Don't care what it costs. Oh—and don't skimp on the bells and whistles. Be sure you get those fancy heated seats and some of those TVs in the seat backs for my new great-grandsons.”

“Is that all?” Marsh raised his right eyebrow. Another tour in Afghanistan was starting to sound simpler than his current ranch life. “You do realize the nearest dealer with a rig that swanky is gonna be in Colorado Springs?”

“I don't care if you have to drive all the way to Denver, just bring back that girl's smile or else.” He signaled the conversation's end by using the remote to flip on his giant TV. The old guy loved Let's Make a Deal.

After setting his iPad on the coffee table, Marsh fished Rocket out from his hidey-hole to plop him back on the sofa, then trudged to the kitchen, where he'd left his truck keys.

Honestly, even if Wallace hadn't been adamant about Marsh apologizing, he'd planned on it anyway. Leaving Effie in the lurch hadn't been cool.

On the way to her and Mabel's place, he got stuck behind a school bus. This far out on their dead-end road, it no doubt carried Effie's sons.

Strange, but being around them hadn't dredged up the same stinging frustration that spending time with Effie's baby girl had. Maybe because Tucker had died so young, Marsh hadn't had the privilege of seeing him at the stage where Colt and Remington now were.

He hung back—not just to avoid the dust cloud the vehicle raised on the dirt road, but to gain time to gather his composure.

What happened at breakfast wasn't just out of character for him, but one more indicator that his CO had been right in casting him off on extended leave. His head was in a bad place. But while there were all kinds of facilities and doctors he could have turned to for help with medical issues or PTSD, what was a guy supposed to do to cure the heartbreak of losing a kid? Oddly enough, he wasn't even that upset about his divorce. What did that mean?

When the bus stopped at the end of Mabel's drive and the boys shot off the vehicle in a sprint to the house, Marsh pulled the truck onto the road's weed-choked shoulder. And then he watched as Effie, with her adorable baby riding her hip, burst out the screen door to meet her twins. Clearly eager to talk about their first day back to school, the boys bounced like a couple of springs.

Effie's smile was big enough to see from fifty yards.

But then she raised her hand to her forehead, blocking her gaze from the sun. Understandably, upon seeing him, her happy expression faded.

Shit. Not that he much cared about losing her favor, but considering how much they'd be forced together till after the wedding, it made sense to keep the peace.

What didn't make sense was the fact that a long-buried part of him craved bringing back her smile.

On edge about a possible confrontation, Marsh's pulse hammered uncomfortably when the bus left, giving him the space needed to aim his truck down the drive.

By the time he parked, both boys raced to greet him.

Marsh opened his door slow enough not to accidentally give one of them a conk, then grabbed his trusty cowboy hat from the passenger seat to plant on his head. The heat was intense, and he welcomed the shade.

"Guess what?" asked the twin in a red T-shirt with Spider-Man on it.

"We got hamsters in our school room and the dad ate his baby!" The other twin, wearing a blue T-shirt with the same character, beat his brother to the epic story.

"Yeah, and Miz Logan got all pinchy faced and told us to go to the reading corner, but I wanted to see, so I just stayed even though we weren't supposed to."

"Colt got a time out, and a poor choice X on Miz Logan's chart. He's in big trouble and gots a note for Mom to sign."

"Has a note for me to sign." Effie had slowly walked their way. "Marsh. I'll bet you're here for Wallace's wallet. Grandma just found it." Her words might have been friendly enough, but her expression wasn't. The boys' teacher wasn't the only "pinchy faced" woman in town.

"Right. He sent me to get it. Plus, I owe you an apology for what happened this morning."

"I'm okay." She jiggled the baby.

"I'm glad, but seriously, I'm sorry to have run out on you like that, and it won't happen again."

She shrugged.

"Hey!" A grubby hand tugged the hem of Marsh's black T-shirt. "There was blood in the hamster cage, and Miz Logan got sick-looking and called the janitor to clean it. He said that wasn't in his job disk-kiption, but he took it anyway, and then brought it back all clean."

"Colt..." Effie said in the universal mom warning tone. "Why don't you and your brother start on your chores, then we'll do homework."

"Don't have any!"

"Liar!" his twin said. "We've got math and a word find!"

"You're a tattletale!" The kid in the red shirt that Marsh assumed was Colt grabbed a fistful of dirt and chucked it at his brother.

"Ouch! You hit my eyeball!" The kid who had to be Remington by default started crying.

"Colt," Effie barked, "go to your room."

Cassidy's eyes welled as if she wasn't sure what to make of the situation.

"Mommy, my eyeball fell out!" Effie's youngest son clamped his hand over his left eye.

“Aw, honey.” She looked to him, her huffing daughter, then Marsh. “Would you mind?” She held out the baby to him.

“Not a good idea.” Backing away with his hands up, he added, “I’ve got germs.”

She waved off his concerns and thrust her crying infant into his arms. “By the time you get to your third kid, you kinda give up on the whole germ thing.”

Of course, Marsh grabbed hold of Cassidy or she might have fallen, but that landed him in the untenable position of feeling as if he were falling. The baby smelled so good and pure. And then there was pretty Effie wrapping her son in an invisible quilt made of love. Had fate not taken everything, this might be his life. Tucker would easily be old enough to have had a baby sister, and his ex had been great with their son.

“See, silly?” Effie pried Remington’s hand finger by finger to get him to move it. “Your eyeball is not only still there, but I’ll bet it works just fine. Want to check and see?”

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