



MILLS & BOON®



Vintage *SUPER*
ROMANCE

Husband and Wife Reunion

LINDA STYLE

Linda Style

Husband and Wife Reunion

«HarperCollins»

Style L.

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She's the last person Luke expected to see. Just why is Julianna staying at his father's ranch? Luke has come to Sante Fe to mend fences with his dad and lie low until the political fury over his current police investigation calms down. He's definitely not there to share memories of the good old days with his ex-wife. It's difficult for Julianna to remember when it had been good between her and Luke. And being close to the strong, handsome man she once loved unconditionally is too much. Either Luke leaves or she does. Except Julianna has nowhere to go. She needs to hide out at Abe's ranch to get her job done. Because nothing, not even anonymous death threats, will stop her. But if Luke finds out about the threats, he's never going to leave....

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With one quick twist, he shoved her face against the wall

“Move and you’re history,” the intruder said, pulling Julianna’s hands behind her.

That voice. She knew that voice.

Swiftly, big deft hands patted her down, moving under her arms, sliding around to her breasts, then down between her legs, at which she felt a familiar pull low in her stomach. He clicked on the light and yanked her around.

His eyes went wide. “Jules?”

Five years and he still looked the same. Same cobalt-blue eyes that crinkled around the corners whether he was smiling or not, the same lean, hard features that said he was a man’s man—a man with a purpose—and always in control. Qualities she once thought sexy and desirable.

He was so close she felt his heat. His familiar scent made her blood rush. And if the look in his eyes was any indication, he felt the same. But then, lack of desire had never been their problem. In the end, desire hadn’t helped the marriage. She hated what they’d done to each other in the year before the divorce.

Things that would stay with them forever.

Dear Reader,

I’m delighted to bring you another *COLD CASES: L.A.* novel and again delve into the inner world of law enforcement—a world that’s always intrigued me. While career choices took me in another direction, I did enroll in my city’s civilian police academy. Little did I know that the six-week class would spark the idea for this miniseries.

Husband and Wife Reunion is the last book in the series, but it seems perfect to end with Luke’s story. It’s about second chances, and don’t we all wish we could do some things over? But even when given the opportunity we don’t always make the best choices. I believe true character is revealed by the choices we make when our personal risks are the greatest. Detective Luke Coltrane is a man who has hit rock bottom. He’s lost his son and his wife, alienated most of the people he loves, and it nearly cost him his job. But he’s on the mend and determined to put his life in order, starting with his relationship with his father. But he never expected to run into his ex-wife, Julianna, back home in Santa Fe. That’s one fence he knows he can’t mend. To do that, he’d have to take the greatest risk of all...and open his heart to love.

Luke and Julianna have been through a terrible tragedy. In order to find love and commitment again, they must overcome nearly insurmountable odds. I didn’t know until I wrote the end of this book whether they’d be able to do it or not. I’m happy with the outcome and hope you enjoy Luke and Julianna’s story.

I always like hearing from readers. You can write me at P.O. Box 2292, Mesa, AZ 85214, or e-mail me at LindaStyle@cox.net. For upcoming books and other fun stuff, visit my Web site at www.LindaStyle.com and www.superauthors.com.

May all your dreams come true,

Linda Style

Husband and Wife Reunion

Linda Style



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For Courtney and Connor,

You are the stars that light up my life.

I love you both.

My sincere thanks and appreciation to all the people who contributed to the research for this book, and all the books in the COLD CASES: L.A. miniseries—the professionals with the Los Angeles Police Department, the city of Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce and the Orange County RWA members who so generously shared their expertise about the City of Angels.

Many thanks to my editor, Victoria Curran, for her guidance and uncanny ability to see the essence of a story.

Since this is a work of fiction, I've taken some liberties with facts where needed.

Any errors are solely mine.

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CHAPTER ONE

“YOU CROSSED THE LINE. You’re going to regret it.”

Julianna Chevalair listened to the distorted digitalized voice, heard a click and then the dial tone droned in her ear.

She swallowed around the tightness in her throat, closed her eyes and waited for the next message. The recorder had indicated there were three.

“If you don’t stop, I’m going to stop you.”

Her heart raced. She’d ignored the caller’s earlier e-mails warning her to stop writing the story, and the second installment was about to run in the magazine’s next issue.

A moment later, the next call started. As she listened, the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. A chill ran up her spine. Hands shaking, she clicked off in the middle of the message.

How had he gotten her number?

The Achilles’ Heel received dozens of crank calls, letters and even more e-mail messages from readers who didn’t like some of its stories. But this was new. She’d never received a phone call at home before. And the two e-mails she’d gotten prior to leaving San Francisco had definite threatening undertones.

It crept her out and she’d jumped at Abe’s kind invitation to stay at his ranch outside Santa Fe. Now the decision seemed even more right. No one knew where she was, not even her editor. Her ex-father-in-law’s ranch was the last place anyone would expect her to go.

She heaved a sigh, fell into Abe’s recliner, its leather soft and cracked with age, and switched on her laptop. When she finished the piece she was working on right now, she’d be done with the series about a little girl’s abduction and murder in Southern California.

It was only one of many she’d written about missing children who’d met the same fate. And someone wanted her to stop. She bristled at the thought. If anything, he’d made her even more determined to complete the series. She’d never give in to a coward who made anonymous threats. She’d finish the story even if she had to go somewhere else to do it. But she would finish.

She pulled up Word on her laptop, went to the last page of the story and typed in, “If you recognize anything about the individual profiled in this article—if you know anything about this case, call the LAPD, your local FBI office or 1-800-CRIME TV. Help us take this killer off the streets before he harms another—”

A noise outside made her sit up straight as a soldier. She stopped typing. She was used to city sounds, but here in the desert, in the stillness of the night, every small noise seemed magnified.

Listening, she heard nothing more. Okay, she was jumpy because of the messages, but that really was silly; the calls had gone to her condo in San Francisco two thousand miles away.

Abe had complained about a family of javelina disturbing his chickens; maybe that’s what she’d heard. He’d had trouble with coyotes, too. It certainly wouldn’t be a visitor at two in the morning—Abe didn’t have visitors any time.

She smiled, thinking of the old man sleeping in the back wing of the sprawling adobe ranch house. Besides being her ex-father-in-law, he was a friend, a surrogate father who’d taken her in, no questions asked. Abe might be cranky and more stubborn than a donkey, but she loved him dearly.

Except for the soft light of an old faux oil lamp across the room and the glow from the laptop screen, the rest of the house was dark. No lights were on outside either since Abe insisted on conserving energy. He called himself thrifty. Others called him cheap.

A coyote bayed in the distance, its lonely howl a faint echo in the vastness of the high desert, reminding her how far they were from Sante Fe. Yet, here, she felt a peace she never enjoyed at home. The air was so pure that sounds traveled for miles, the sky so clear, she could see the Milky Way,

like a road of sparkling light against a velvet black backdrop. She hadn't seen the stars like that since she was a kid and had taken a trip with her mother in their VW bus to Arizona.

Julianna hauled in a deep breath and kept on typing, the keys clicking loudly in the quiet.

Another sound...from the kitchen. Her fingers stilled as the doorknob rattled and her heartbeat quickened. Was someone trying to get in? She heard a crash and the doorknob clattered again.

She pulled her cell phone from her briefcase. They were so far out in the boonies, it would take forever for anyone to get there, but she punched in 911 anyway.

Nothing but static. Then somewhere between the crackles, she heard a voice. She rattled off her name, Abe's address, her cell phone number and that she thought someone was breaking in, hoping whoever was on the other end had heard her.

She should wake Abe. But shouting for him wouldn't do any good because the old man took out his hearing aid at night and he was deaf as a post without it.

Her heart pumped like a piston in her chest. Her gaze went to Abe's rifle in the gun rack against the far wall. She crossed the room, found the key to the case and took out one of the rifles. The wood on the butt felt smooth under her fingers, but she'd never handled a gun in her life. She'd probably shoot herself.

What the hell. It was protection. She opened the drawer and scooped out some rifle shells. All she had to do was put them in and pull the trigger. She'd seen Abe do it before.

She pocketed two shells, then, gun against her chest, edged down the hallway toward Abe's room to wake him. He knew how to shoot. Besides, what was she going to do? Force a burglar to leave at gunpoint? Tie him up for the police? How long would it be before they arrived? If they arrived?

With each step, she tightened her grip on the weapon. She couldn't imagine who would break into an old man's house in the middle of the night when he had nothing worth stealing. It could still be an animal searching for food. In California she'd heard of bears and bobcats wandering into homesteads. She was going to feel pretty silly if that's what it was.

But animals didn't rattle doorknobs. She heard a dull thud and before she could react, the door to the hallway creaked open. A large male form appeared, shadowed in the opening.

Oh, God! Adrenaline coursed through her. She raised the gun, butt end up, and mustering all her strength, smashed the man on the head.

He grunted...but he didn't keel over.

Oh my God! She dropped the gun and turned to run. Fingers dug into her shoulder and in one quick movement, he shoved her face against the wall and pulled both her hands behind her.

"Move and you're history," the intruder said, his voice low and raspy.

That voice. She knew that voice.

Swiftly, big deft hands patted her down, moving under her arms, sliding around to her breasts, then down between her legs, at which she felt a familiar pull low in her stomach. He clicked on the light and yanked her around.

His eyes went wide. "Jules?"

Words stuck in her throat. Abe had assured her there wasn't a chance in hell she'd run into her ex. Frowning, she flung off his hands and rubbed her arms where he'd manhandled her. Then she saw him reach for his head. He was bleeding. Scowling and bleeding.

"You coulda killed me."

She stiffened. "That was the intent. I thought you were a burglar. Most normal people don't come in through a window, y'know."

Blood trickled down his forehead and she realized how hard she'd hit him. "Geez, I'm sorry, Luke. Here, let me get something for that."

As she turned to go, he grabbed her by the arm. "What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? I think I should be the one asking you that question."

"This is my father's house."

“Well, I’m here by invitation. Abe told me you hadn’t been here for a year.”

A puzzled look crossed his face. “It couldn’t be that long.”

She shrugged. “That’s what he said.” She could tell Luke felt guilty about it. Luke was never good at hiding his reactions. If he was irritated you knew it. If he was happy, you knew that, too. Angry, you really knew it. But he kept his thoughts, his reasons behind the emotions locked inside.

“Yeah, well, if it’s been that long, then he’ll be pleased to see me.”

“Not with you dripping blood all over his floor.” He seemed to have forgotten about his head and was staring at her instead. She gave him a shove, urging him down the hall to the bathroom. “Let’s do something about that cut.” Once inside the tiny room, she pulled a washcloth from the linen closet and moistened it under the faucet. “Here, this will help.”

He took the cloth and, looking in the small mirror above the old cast-iron sink, applied it to his forehead.

Five years and he still looked the same. Same cobalt eyes that crinkled around the corners whether he was smiling or not, the same lean, hard features that said he was a man’s man—a man with a purpose—and always in control. Qualities she’d once thought sexy and desirable.

“Your hair is different,” he said, still looking in the mirror, but gazing at her.

“Different than what?”

“Than before. No ponytail.” His eyes narrowed. “What are you doing here?”

“Is that important?”

“Still good at answering questions with a question, aren’t you?”

“And you’re still good at thinking everything is your business when it’s not.”

A tight smile lifted his lips. “Touché.”

With that one small concession, an uncomfortable silence fell between them, a silence laden with recriminations and guilt. Their divorce had been inevitable, filled with heartache and pain. The hurt was so great, she couldn’t be around him and vice-versa. She’d even moved from L.A. to San Francisco to lessen the chances of running into him.

In the confines of the small bathroom, he shifted his stance and lifted one foot to the edge of the tub, effectively imprisoning her between his leg and the sink.

He was so close she felt his heat. His familiar scent made her blood rush. And if the look in his eyes was any indication, he felt the same. But then, lack of desire had never been their problem.

In the end, desire hadn’t helped the marriage either. She hated what they’d done to each other in the year before the divorce. Things that would stay with them forever.

“Okay, here’s a question you can answer. How’s my father?”

She shrugged. “You know Abe, he wouldn’t admit to anything even if he were inches from death’s door. Personally, I think he’d be a lot healthier if he stopped smoking.”

“Fat chance of that.”

“I know.”

“So let’s quit the sparring and you tell me what’s up with the visit.”

She sighed in resignation. He wasn’t going to give up. “Your father invited me for a vacation. I needed one.” She crossed her arms. “Now it’s your turn.”

“I’m taking a couple weeks off. And since I hadn’t seen Pops for a while, I thought I’d check how the old rooster was doing.”

“You’re taking time off?” He never took time off.

Just then she heard a loud banging at the door. “Oh Geez. I called the police. That’s probably them.”

They went into the living room. Spotlights flashed through the window, rotating red and blue, lighting up the room like a nightclub. Another percussion of knocking rattled the house. “Sheriff’s department. Open up.”

She crossed the room and threw wide the door. A tall man in a black hat stood in front of her. His badge said he was indeed the sheriff.

He peered inside. "I'm Sheriff Ben Yuma. I received a call."

Julianna flipped on a light switch next to the door. "I'm sorry, Officer. I called because I thought someone was breaking into the house, but I was wrong."

The sheriff glanced at Luke. His dark eyes narrowed.

"Luke Coltrane, LAPD," he said, pulling out his shield. "I came to see my father, forgot my key and decided to use a window."

The sheriff brushed a hand across his smooth chin, assessing both of them. "With bad results, I see."

"I was protecting myself," Julianna countered. "Well, I thought I was anyway."

"What the hell is going on here?" Abe's gravelly voice resounded.

Julianna turned. "Abe, what are you doing up?"

Luke gave her a pointed stare, a slow smile tipping his mouth at the corners. "Question with a question," he said under his breath, as if proving his earlier point.

She wanted to laugh, but held it back. He knew exactly how to get to her. Make her laugh and she'd forget everything. But not anymore.

Ignoring him, she glanced at Abe. Though Luke loved his father, there'd always been tension between them. In five years of marriage to Luke, she'd never figured out exactly why. Luke had always passed it off as his father being too hard on him, making him feel he couldn't do anything right. She'd always thought there was more to it.

When Abe saw Luke, he looked surprised at first, but then his mouth turned down, his expression dour. He acknowledged the sheriff and then turned back to Julianna. "I'm up because someone's making so much racket it's impossible to sleep. And that's saying a lot since I can't hear worth spit."

Julianna crossed to Abe and placed a hand on his arm. "There's nothing to worry about. I thought there was a burglar and called the sheriff. But it was only Luke, so everything's okay and you can go back to bed. We'll talk in the morning."

"We will not." Abe made his way to the couch and eased onto the sagging cushion. "Sheriff, you want to arrest someone?"

"Someone?" The sheriff glanced at the only other people in the room. Luke and Julianna.

"I invited one person to stay here. The other is a stranger to me. And apparently he broke into my house."

Luke's nerves bunched. Okay, that was his dad's way of getting back at him for staying away so long. He had to admit it had been awhile, so he probably deserved whatever lambasting he got. Still...his dad was irritating the hell out of him. "Fine. I'll leave right now."

For a fraction of a second, Luke thought his father seemed a little crestfallen. But the reaction quickly passed.

"If that's what you want, then go," Abe said gruffly.

What Luke wanted was a soft bed. After driving six hours from L.A. to Phoenix and another six to Santa Fe, he was dog-tired. But his old man wouldn't be satisfied until he had it all.

Abe wanted Luke to grovel and apologize. "I came to see you, why would I want to go? Why don't we let the sheriff get on with his business and we can talk about everything in the morning."

The sheriff shifted his feet, crossed his arms. "You got a problem with that, Abe?"

"I got a big problem standing right in front of me."

The sheriff frowned. "So do you want me to arrest him?"

Luke groaned. Another nutcase. "For what reason?" he asked incredulously.

"Whatever reason I want." The sheriff shrugged and smiled, his teeth bright white against bronzed skin. "We do things differently out here than in the big city."

Great, just what he needed. His father's wrath and a rogue sheriff who didn't give a rat's ass about procedure. And then there was Julianna. Dear Jules. He cleared his throat. "Fine. Arrest me if you want. Otherwise, I'm outta here." He turned to leave.

"Suit yourself," Abe spat out. "Never could stick anything out."

Luke edged toward the door, primed for a comeback, but then, for the first time since his father entered the room, Luke noticed how frail he seemed. He'd lost weight, and his face looked gray and haggard, the lines deeper, more like canyons instead of crevices. "Okay then," Luke said, "if it's up to me, I need a good night's sleep. I'll leave in the morning."

Abe scoffed and with great effort tried to rise from his seat on the couch. Julianna hurried over, but Abe waved her off, then took hold of the armrests and laboriously lifted himself to his feet. "I'm going to bed."

The sheriff tipped his hat. "Seems everything's okay here, so I'll be on my way, too."

That left Luke alone with Julianna. The woman he'd once thought was the center of his life. The woman whose very presence pounded in another sharp reminder that he'd lost everything that had made life worth living. A reminder that he'd failed her and their marriage.

"I'm turning in, too," Julianna said, her voice oddly quiet. "I'm in the back bedroom, so you'll have to take the smaller one."

"Fine with me." Only he knew there wasn't a chance in hell he'd get any sleep with her in the next room.

CHAPTER TWO

THOUGHTS OF JULIANNA had kept him awake for a while, but it was the nightmares about the kidnapping that woke him a mere three hours after he'd gone to bed.

He rolled over, sweat pouring from his body, sheets drenched.

As Julianna's face loomed in his mind, muscles cramped in his chest. The death of their son had created a chasm between them and destroyed their marriage. Seeing Julianna brought it all back in spades.

He had to go. No matter how much he wanted to mend the rift with his father, he didn't know if he was strong enough to stay in the same house with Julianna. It had taken him too long to get back on track. He couldn't jeopardize everything he'd accomplished.

For nearly four years, he'd gone through the motions of living. He went to his job, he went home and went to sleep, but not before consuming copious amounts of alcohol to speed up the process. He'd alienated his father, put his friends at a distance and had been within a hair's breath of losing his job.

Life might not be everything he wanted, but at least he was among the living again. His job and his friends were all he had.

The sharp ring of his cell phone surprised him. He was used to calls at any hour when he was in L.A., but he hadn't expected to get them here. "Coltrane."

"I need some information," Captain Jeff Carlyle's rough voice blared. The captain had seen him through some tough times. Luke owed him a lot.

"Sure. What's up?" Luke had been working on two high-profile cases before he left L.A. The missing congressional aide, Michelle Renfield, who they suspected was dead, and the latest Studio Killer case, a serial murderer who specialized in killing porno flick stars near the location where their latest movie had been shot.

"It's Thorpe."

"Figures." Congressman Thorpe was the prime suspect in his aide's disappearance three years ago. Thorpe was suspected of having an affair with her and though they'd found no conclusive evidence of his involvement in her disappearance, Luke hadn't let up on his investigation. But Thorpe didn't like anyone messing with his life and he'd let Luke know it. "What's his problem now?"

"His attorney's threatening a lawsuit. Says you have a vendetta, that you've prejudiced the public with your investigation and that it's detrimental to his upcoming election."

"I thought my taking a vacation was supposed to help, get me out of sight for a while. Besides, Thorpe should've thought about that when he seduced a sixteen-year-old and forgot he had a wife."

"She was twenty."

"She wasn't when he met her. He's a predator." Luke's grip on the phone tightened.

"Okay, I know how you feel about it. But the reason I called is to make sure there's no question on procedure if Thorpe's attorney goes ahead with the suit."

"None whatsoever." He might be aggressive in his investigations and quick to jump on things, but he was thorough.

"I also wanted to tell you I'm putting St. James and Santini on the case."

Luke's nerves tensed. He'd worked his guts out on this case and now because some politician threatened to sue, he had to give it up?

"It's not permanent," Carlyle said. "And they've both got full loads right now."

That meant the assignment was only for looks. No one was really going to work on it. "I'm on it again when I get back, right?"

After a long pause the captain said, "Sure." Then he asked, "How's your father?"

"He looks terrible."

“Well, you’ve got two weeks, or longer if you need it. I just wanted you to know.” Carlyle clicked off.

Luke felt satisfied. The captain knew Luke would be pissed if he came back and found the Renfield case had been pulled out from under him. It didn’t matter if Jordan and Rico actually worked the case or not.

That Thorpe’s attorney had the gall to file a lawsuit burned Luke’s ass. Thorpe had the kind of connections that might help him if he was ever arrested and brought to trial—only the congressman wasn’t about to let it go that far. He wanted to be vindicated now and a lawsuit would probably guarantee it if no other evidence turned up.

Yeah, well, Luke didn’t give a damn about anyone’s connections. With every fiber of his being he believed Thorpe was responsible for the disappearance of the young aide. If the evidence showed he was right, the congressman was going to jail.

Whether he was reelected or not. As far as his having a vendetta—if seeking justice for murder victims was a vendetta, then yeah, he did have one. And the sooner he got back to L.A., the better.

Only in this case, justice would have to wait. He had to first assess his father’s health and see what he could do to help him while he was here. Maybe find him a hired hand—someone who could stay at the ranch. And when his father discovered that plan, all hell would break loose.

“GOOD MORNING,” Julianna greeted Luke when he came in from outside. “Out doing chores?” She busied herself making coffee, trying not to look at him.

“Funny,” he said, letting the kitchen door slap shut with a bang.

“Well, you know there’s plenty of work to do around here. Too much for your father.” She scooped some coffee into the basket.

“I noticed. Everything seems to have fallen apart since I was here last.”

“He could use some help.”

“He could easily afford to hire someone.”

“You mean if he wasn’t so stubborn and didn’t think he could do everything himself.”

He paused for a moment, as if considering what she’d said. “Yeah. While I’m here, I’m going to see what we can do about getting him help.”

“Good idea.” But she hoped that didn’t mean he intended to stay for long.

Luke sat at the old oak table, wearing only a white T-shirt and faded jeans, his sandy sun-bleached hair still wet from the shower. He smelled of fresh soap and shampoo, and just looking at him made her breath hitch. Still. After all these years.

“Weren’t you cold out there without a jacket?”

“I’m tough,” he said, smiling.

She turned and retrieved a pan from the maple cabinet next to the harvest-gold stove that had one door half hanging from its hinges. Even though she had her back to Luke, she felt his gaze boring into her.

“You never did answer me last night,” he said. “What brings you here?”

She turned, leaned against the counter. “I answered you. I said I was invited and I came.”

He arched his brows without commenting. It was obvious he didn’t believe her and his smug know-it-all attitude annoyed her. “I don’t need a reason to visit someone I care about.”

Luke had been gone most of the time they were married so she doubted he had any idea she’d developed such a close relationship with his father, or that they’d become even closer after the divorce.

“I could ask you the same thing. What’s the real reason you’re here?”

He shrugged. “I don’t need a reason to see my father.”

“And when did that become important?” The second the words left her mouth Julianna regretted them. Abe didn’t get along well with people in general. She also knew the distance in Abe’s relationship with Luke hurt Luke a lot—but just like his father, he was too stubborn to admit it.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.” She turned away. “But...can you at least tell me how long you’re staying?”

He shrugged. “It depends.”

She heaved a sigh. If he wasn’t going to leave, then she would have to. Just talking with Luke made her anxious. Made her remember too much. And her only defense seemed to be anger. She wasn’t proud of that, but there it was. “Well, don’t let my presence be a factor in your decision. I’ll be leaving soon.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Abe’s voice boomed as he came in and joined them in the kitchen. “What kind of nonsense is that?”

The scent of hazelnut coffee wafted through the room and she noticed the pot had stopped burbling. She reached for the old chipped mugs, brought them to the table and poured them each a cup. “I’ve been thinking it might be...easier if I go. Besides, I have more investigative work to do on the next series and—”

“Well, you just stop that kind of thinking, young lady.”

Julianna had to smile. She didn’t want to hurt Abe’s feelings, but if Luke stayed, she had no choice.

Luke leaned back in his chair, raised his arms and clasped his fingers behind his head. “You can both stop worrying. I’ve got to get back to L.A. Something has come up.”

She raised her chin. Of course. The job. The job that was more important than just about anything. But she’d swallow her tongue before she’d say it. If it meant he’d leave, she was grateful.

Abe coughed. “I’m going to work on the fence out on the line.”

“What’s wrong with the fence?” Luke asked.

Julianna glanced at Abe.

“Someone keeps tearing it down.”

“Really. Why would anyone do that?”

“Duke Hancock wanted that piece of land for years, but I told him I wasn’t going to sell. Now they want it again.”

“Duke died twenty years ago, Dad. And who are they?”

Ignoring his son’s question, Abe went on. “The fence is destroyed. The cattle can run right through.”

“You haven’t had more than a few head of cattle for years, and that’s not even where they pasture.” Luke gave him a look of exasperation.

Abe scoffed. “It needs to be fixed.”

“Okay. I’ll go out with you to help on the fence,” Luke said, then caught Julianna’s gaze.

For a moment, she couldn’t look away. His eyes were still bluer than Paul Newman’s. Intense. Sexy.

“Okay with you, Jules?” He smiled.

A wide white smile. Her heart stalled...in the same way it had when she’d first met him at that environmental rally where they’d been on opposite sides.

And apparently her recent lack of male companionship was making her hormones shift into overdrive. “I’m scrambling eggs. Anyone else want some?”

Luke looked surprised. “You learned how to cook?”

Dammit. She wasn’t going to acknowledge Luke’s gibes. That’s another way he got to her. He knew it and she knew it.

“No one needs to wait on me,” Abe sputtered. “I can make my own breakfast. Been doin’ it for years.”

“I know you can, Abe. But since I’m making eggs for myself, it’s no big deal to toss in a couple extra. I’d appreciate it though if I could have the kitchen to myself for about fifteen minutes.”

Both men rose. Abe went down the hall toward the bathroom and Luke headed for the living room.

As she watched Luke walk away, an unexpected sadness washed over her. She swallowed back a sudden lump in her throat. After getting the eggs from the fridge, she leaned wearily against the door. What was the matter with her?

Was it being together again with Luke and Abe, like the old days? Was it remembering the love she and Luke once shared? The love. The heartache. The loss.

After three years of grief therapy and finally learning to live in the present, she'd thought she could handle just about anything. But now she felt as if she'd tumbled backward in time as all the memories, all the emotions she'd tried so hard to forget, roared to life once again. She thought she'd resolved all that. Had she only been fooling herself?

Maybe. But she couldn't slide back into the abyss that had been her life. She'd worked too hard to make herself into a whole person again—even though a piece of her would never mend.

She strengthened her resolve and went to the stove.

Seeing Luke again had thrown her off balance. That was all. She'd get over it. She'd carved out a comfortable niche for herself at the magazine. She had a great loft condo in the heart of San Francisco. Her life was good. She cracked an egg into the bowl with so much force it splattered everywhere. Her life was good, dammit.

Except for the loneliness. And right now, she felt more lonely than ever.

But going back home wasn't an option.

LUKE FINGERED THROUGH the magazines piled in the corner of the living room. He didn't remember his father being much of a reader. It was probably why Luke wasn't. That and the fact that he never had time. When he was off duty the last thing he wanted was to read about more crime and world problems.

Most of Abe's magazines were about ranching, except for one called *The Achilles' Heel*. Recognizing the name of the national magazine, Luke was surprised that Abe even had a copy. Hell, he had a whole stack of them. Luke picked one up and flipped a page. Most of the titles had a liberal slant, taking jabs at anything and everything that might be fair game.

Odd, because Abe was the biggest redneck around. Flipping another page, he saw Julianna listed on the masthead as a regular columnist. Ah, now it made sense.

He'd heard Julianna was doing well, but since she'd moved to San Francisco after the divorce, that's all he knew. Reading her brief bio, he felt a moment of pride over her success.

And then sadness. He missed what they'd had before everything went haywire. He missed having a family to come home to.

He dropped the magazine back in the pile. What they'd had was long gone. She'd made that crystal-clear the day she walked out on him, saying the only way she could find herself was to start a new life.

Instead of staying to work things out, she'd run away. He'd been willing, but she hadn't.

It'd stuck in his craw ever since. No, he didn't need reminders, and as soon as he got his father straightened up, he was outta there.

"Better come and get it if you want to eat," his father said as he passed Luke on his way to the kitchen.

Luke followed Abe, watching the uneven gait in his step, saw the gray in his thinning hair. When had his father gotten so old, so frail? "When was the last time you saw a doctor, Pops?"

"Don't need no doctor. I'm not sick."

They walked into the kitchen together. The aroma of sizzling bacon and fresh coffee made his mouth water. Julianna had set the table and was dishing up the eggs.

"Everyone needs a checkup at least once a year. Especially someone with high blood pressure."

"I go when I'm sick. And it's nobody's business when I go and when I don't."

Luke walked over to the counter, refilled his coffee cup, then raised the pot to the others. Julianna said, “Yes, please,” and his father grunted his response. When Luke finished pouring, he put the pot on the table on a trivet and sat.

The tension in the air was so thick you couldn’t cut it with a sharp fillet knife. He felt more uncomfortable sitting here with his father and Julianna than he did scoping out a crime scene.

But his discomfort didn’t keep him from noticing how little Julianna had changed in the last five years. She was still slim and toned, and her flawless skin looked even more perfect framed by long, wavy chestnut hair. Silky hair that always fell in his face when she was on top. “You still jog?”

She nodded. “Abe, Luke’s right. You really should get a checkup. Everyone needs to do that once in a while.”

Luke smiled at his dad with satisfaction, glad that Julianna had supported him.

Ignoring both of them, Abe mumbled around a mouthful of eggs, “If you’re going to fix the fence with me you better eat and quit talking.”

Luke nearly dropped his fork. It sounded almost as if his father was asking for Luke’s help, something he had never done before. Whenever Luke had offered in the past, he got shot down. Maybe there was hope for them yet. “Sure. I’m only going to be here until tomorrow, so we should get as much done today as we can.”

Abe’s head jerked up. “If that’s all the time you got, then we might as well forget it. It’s a two-day job at best.”

Luke fought another smile. His old man sure knew the art of manipulation. “I’ll stay until it’s done. If it’s done today, I’ll leave in the morning. If it takes another day, I’ll go home after that.”

But he was going to do everything he could to finish in one day. Besides needing to get back to L.A., he wanted to focus on the life he had, not the one he’d lost.

“Fine. Getting the fence fixed is all I care about.”

Julianna gently touched Abe’s arm. “Luke will help and it’ll get done,” she said, always the calm one. With her mediating skills, she should’ve been a diplomat.

She turned to Luke. “Got a big case to get back to?”

He chewed some toast and finished with a sip of coffee. “Always.”

“I heard more on the news about congressman Thorpe’s aides, and Thorpe didn’t seem happy about it. Is he a person of interest?”

“He’s more than interesting to me. The guy’s a weasel who thinks he can use his political influence to derail the investigation.”

“That’s why you’re going back?”

“That and a serial killer on the loose.”

Julianna’s face went white.

Oh, man. Insert foot into mouth. Again. Though he’d long ago separated his personal life from his job, Julianna didn’t know how to dissociate. He should’ve remembered that. “What about your career?” he said, changing the subject.

“Uh...it’s good.” She pushed back the hair from her eyes and tucked it behind one ear. “I’m a regular contributor for a magazine. The Achilles’ Heel. I like it and it pays well.”

He knew it was more than that to her. Writing was a part of her, something she had to do. And the liberal magazine was the perfect venue.

“How is Starr?”

She looked surprised that he’d asked. “My mother’s fine. Still the same. Stumping for one cause or another. The environment, PETA, stem-cell research.” She smiled. “All good causes.”

“Still a hippie at heart, huh?”

“That she is. She thinks it’s the seventies, and that she’s still twenty, and actually, she doesn’t look much older.”

“And your sister?”

“Lindsay’s married, has two children and lives in London. As far away from Mother as possible.”

Luke nodded. “I can understand that.” He remembered the strife between Julianna’s sister, the yuppie, and her mother. Julianna on the other hand, had been Starr’s protégée.

Jules’s mother and her ability to suck her daughter into her causes had been another sticking point in Luke and Julianna’s relationship.

“Unfortunately, my sister’s far away from me, as well. I rarely see Ally and Devon, my niece and nephew.”

Julianna would miss that. She’d always loved children. They both did, and he’d been deeply disappointed when she refused to have another child after Michael. He was surprised that she hadn’t married again. He wanted to ask her about it but didn’t want to open old wounds for either of them.

“Kinda the way Luke thinks, too,” Abe said. “Wants to be as far away as possible.”

Luke shoved his plate away and leaned back in the chair. “I moved because I was given an opportunity. You didn’t want Grandpa’s house, remember? That’s why he gave it to me.” Even though the house on one of the much desired canals in Venice Beach was worth double what the ranch was at the time, his father had turned it down, refused to move to California. Luke suspected Abe didn’t want to be beholden to his father-in-law in any way. That and the fact Gramps never thought Abe was good enough for his only child and wasn’t afraid to say so.

“You can come out and stay with me any time you want.”

“And who would take care of things here?”

“Hire someone. You need help anyway. Then you can come and go as you please.”

Abe shoved his chair back and rose to his feet. “I’m not going anywhere and no stranger is going to come in here and take over. Now let’s get to work.”

Julianna stood and began clearing the dishes. “So, get out of here, you two. I’ve got to write.”

That figured. She was just as intense about her work as he was, only she’d never seen it that way. “What kind of a story are you working on?”

Her brown eyes expanded. “Uh, just a series. I do an installment once a month.”

Gazing at her, he barely heard a word. He’d forgotten how pretty her eyes were. Big brandy-colored pools that drew him in, made him want to get closer.

But her evasiveness put things in perspective. In the past, when he’d asked about what she was writing, she’d couldn’t wait to share her ideas. Now, it was obvious she didn’t want him to know.

Why should she? She hadn’t wanted to share anything in her life for five years. Maybe she was sharing those things with someone else now? For all he knew, she could have a live-in lover.

“What’s the series about?”

She looked at Abe.

“We need to get cracking,” Abe said. “We’re wastin’ sunlight. You can chitchat later.”

The lines around Julianna’s mouth softened, apparently relieved that Abe had ended the conversation.

And that made him even more curious. Okay. He’d play along. For a while. “I’m with you, Pops. Just let me grab a shirt and a hat.”

In the hallway on the way to his room, Luke’s cell phone rang. He recognized his partner’s number. “Yeah.”

“Luke, it’s Jordan.”

“Hey, bud. What’s going down?”

“I wondered if you heard from the boss?”

Luke shifted the phone to the other ear while he pulled on a faded denim shirt. “I did.”

“Did he tell you it’s the chief who’s pushing to take you off the Thorpe case? I heard Carlyle told him to stuff it, in so many words, but—”

“I talked to him. It’s no big deal. I can’t leave here yet anyway. My father isn’t well and I’ve got to get him some help.”

“Bring him here. California has some of the best physicians in the world.”

“Great idea, but he’s dug in. He’ll never leave. And...he has a guest.”

“A guest?”

Luke hesitated. “Julianna.”

Jordan let out a long blow of air. “Whoa. That’s a surprise.”

“You telling me.”

“What’s she doing there?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out before I come back.”

“When’s that?”

“Tomorrow or the next day for sure.” Luke started walking back to the kitchen to catch up with his dad.

“Okay. Let me know.” Jordan was one of Luke’s best friends, and also one of the finest detectives in the Robbery Homicide Division. While Luke often operated without a partner, he’d worked with Jordan on several cases recently.

“I’ll call you when I get back.”

“Good.”

“How’s the better half?” Luke asked.

“Laura’s great. Today she hired someone to stay nights at the shelter for her so she and Caitlin can move into my place after the wedding. Don’t forget, you’ve got a job next month.”

Luke smiled. Jordan could’ve picked any one of their friends to be best man, Rico or even Tex. But he’d asked Luke. “Not for a second.”

As he reached the kitchen doorway, Luke said goodbye and clicked off. Julianna stood only inches away and gave him a knowing look. The one that said he couldn’t leave his job for more than five minutes. “That was Jordan. Remember him?”

Julianna’s eyes lit up. “Of course. How is he?”

“He’s getting married next month.”

Mouth open, Jules put a hand to her chest in surprise. “Really! I never thought that would happen.” She smiled, showing an expanse of even, white teeth and very kissable lips.

“I’m the best man.” Jules had always liked Jordan and for a time they’d all been really close.

“I’d be surprised if you weren’t.”

The pleased look in her eyes switched to wistfulness. Was she thinking of their wedding? She’d once said it was the happiest day of her life.

“Please give Jordan my best,” she said, and then hurried away.

She left him standing there, feeling as if one small moment from the past had somehow brought them closer. But then he could just as easily be misreading things. He did that a lot with Jules. Whenever he’d been sure he knew what she thought or wanted, she’d been on another wavelength altogether.

But there was no denying that something had passed between them. He just didn’t know what the hell it was.

He headed out the back door, glanced around for Abe, who was nowhere to be seen. The old reprobate had probably taken off without him. Luke strode to the barn. As he went inside, the familiar scents of hay and manure took him back to a time when he couldn’t have imagined ever leaving the ranch.

The mare was gone, but Balboa stood in his stall and nickered softly at Luke. When Abe had downsized, he’d kept two horses and five head of cattle, just enough to stay busy, but not too much to handle.

Luke talked softly to Balboa before saddling him up. “Hey, big guy. It’s been a while.” The golden palomino nuzzled him, apparently remembering they’d been inseparable once upon a time. He wished other parts of his life were that easy to resurrect.

He mounted the stallion and headed for the line, not having a clue where the fence was broken. He figured it was at Stella Hancock's property line, otherwise Abe would have no reason to complain about her long-dead husband.

He sat straight in the saddle and took a quick breath of fresh mountain air, a nice change from the smog and gasoline fumes of downtown L.A. Even the salty ocean breezes at his home in Venice were a respite from the pollution that hung like an ochre cloud over the rest of the city.

Out here, he could breathe. The scent of piñon pine teased his senses, reminding him of a time when life was simple and uncomplicated, a time when the only thing he'd cared about was what he was going to do that day.

His mother's sudden death when he was thirteen changed all that. She'd been the peacemaker, she'd held the family together. Clearly something he and his father had no desire to do once she was gone.

Back then his father always blamed Luke's bad behavior on adolescence, but it was more than that. Something he'd long since put out of his mind. He'd never approached his father about it, but he'd always thought Abe knew that Luke knew—and neither wanted to open that door.

One thing was certain, his mother's death had changed his life forever.

He nudged Balboa to a canter. He hadn't thought about that in years. He preferred physical activity over thinking. But being here, seeing Jules again, had him thinking more than ever. Love complicated everything—and losing everything you loved made life intolerable.

When they'd lost Michael he'd soldiered on for Julianna's sake. But when she left...there wasn't any point to anything. He'd hit bottom.

The anger he thought he'd buried a long time ago burned in his veins. Bitterness rose like bile in his throat. Never again would he let himself feel so much. If he didn't feel, he couldn't hurt.

JULIANNA WENT INTO the den to do some research for her next story. If she could concentrate. Luke had said he'd be there only a day or two. God, she hoped so. He was too intense. Too probing. She was on tenterhooks every time he entered the room.

One day she could handle. Couldn't she? All she had to do was maintain her distance, keep her mind in the present and stay focused on the end result. Luke going back to L.A.

She'd made a quick decision not to tell Luke about the story because she knew the subject would upset him. She knew that as well as she knew her deadlines. It would simply make the time he was here even more strained. He already suspected she hadn't just come simply because Abe asked her to. As intuitive as Luke was, if she told him about the story, he might connect the two. And if he knew she was being threatened, the cop in him wouldn't let it go. He'd have to take action.

There was no way she could tell Luke. But she had to tell Abe about the phone calls.

CHAPTER THREE

BY THE TIME Luke reached his father, Abe had already taken out the new roll of barbed wire and was trying to fasten it to the fence by himself. “Couldn’t wait a few more minutes?” Luke dismounted and strode over.

“Can’t wait forever. I’m not getting any younger.”

“Not getting any easier to get along with either.”

“One of the few good things about getting old. You can say what you want and the hell with what anyone thinks.”

Luke couldn’t remember a time when his father didn’t say what he wanted or ever cared what anyone thought. But he wasn’t going to stay that long and he needed his father’s cooperation if he was going to hire someone to help out. Getting Abe to accept that help was going to be the tough part.

“We need to shore up the posts first,” Luke said and walked over to one that was tilted at forty-five degrees.

“It’ll straighten out with the wire on it,” Abe countered.

Luke let out an exasperated breath. He knew he should just agree with his dad and then get out of there. “C’mon, let’s do it together.”

That seemed to agree with Abe and they both started working on getting the post upright. And while they were somewhat sympatico, Luke said, “I know Jules isn’t here just because you asked her to come.”

His father turned and looked at him. “Is it such a hard thing to believe, that someone would actually want to be here with me?”

“No, Dad. Of course not. You have company all the time, don’t you.” No matter how hard he tried to be nice, his father made it impossible and Luke couldn’t seem to hold back his sarcasm. But then it wasn’t likely he’d hurt the old man’s feelings anyway. Nothing fazed his father. And he usually gave out more than he got.

“People never did take to me, like they did your mother,” Abe said. “And when she died, it was hard to be nice to anyone.”

Including me. But this time, Luke bit back the words. He’d come here to make amends with his father and dammit, he was going to. “I know you missed her. I did, too.”

“I still do.”

The softness in his dad’s voice might’ve made Luke think he actually meant it. “So why are you here?” Abe said. “I know you didn’t come to keep an old man company.”

Luke smiled, hoping to ease the tension. “But you’re wrong. That’s exactly why I came. I had two weeks vacation and I thought it a good opportunity for us to...to reconnect.”

Abe snorted, then as if he hadn’t heard a word, walked to the next post and started righting it.

Yeah. Luke sighed. Had he hoped for a different reaction? What Luke wanted didn’t mean squat when it came to his father. Never had. “So, getting back to Jules. I know she likes you and all that, but what’s the other reason she’s here?”

“Ask her, not me.”

“I did. She won’t tell me.”

“Shoot. If you’d kept in touch with her, you’d know why she was here.”

Keep in touch? Where had his father been all this time? Julianna didn’t want anything to do with him. It was her decision and he’d respected it.

“And if you hadn’t bailed on the marriage, she probably wouldn’t be here at all.”

Picking up the roll of wire, Luke gritted his teeth. Tension crackled in the air between them. Luke started attaching the end of the wire to the first post. “Dad, that was five years ago. Long enough for you to quit harping on something that’s over and done with.”

“She was the best thing that ever happened to you,” his father grumbled.

Yeah. He’d thought so, too. “Like Mom was the best thing that ever happened to you?” Sarcasm laced his words.

Slowly Abe turned, his eyes narrowing to slits. “Yes, like your mother.”

He’d hit a nerve. He’d spent a lifetime wanting to say that and trying not to. And now that he had, he didn’t feel any better. “Julianna may have been the best thing for me, but I wasn’t the best for her. I doubt she’d agree that there’d been anything good between us.”

Abe spat on the ground and grumbled, “People don’t always say what they mean, you know.”

Yeah, he knew. He saw it in his job all the time. People lied to save their butts. But Julianna wasn’t a liar. She’d meant every last hurtful word. Every time he thought about it... Hell, dealing with both Jules and his father, his head felt about to explode.

“Things happen,” Abe said. “Good stuff, crappy stuff. It’s called life. If love is there, it’s there. People go on.”

“Dammit. It’s a dead subject, Dad. Now why don’t you just tell me why she’s here and be done with it.”

Abe grabbed the roll of wire Luke held and yanked it away. “I told you. It’s not my place. Ask her yourself.”

Luke released his grip before the wire cut his hand. Then suddenly Abe spat out a string of cuss words. His face went ghost-white, his lips blue. He staggered back, grabbed his chest and sank to his knees.

Shit. Luke dropped the roll.

“IT’S OKAY, MARK. I’m finishing the story and that’s that. I’m in the safest place I could be, under the circumstances.”

“But you can’t stay there forever.”

She sighed. “I know. Once the story is done—”

“What makes you think this lowlife will stop bothering you when you’re finished?”

“That’s what his threats are about. He doesn’t want me to finish, so if I do, he’s lost.”

“I think you’re wrong. It could make him even more incensed that you didn’t listen.”

That was true. So far it had. “Look, Mark, I’m not going to live my life in fear because of some jackass. No one is going to tell me what I can and can’t do when it comes to my writing.” Her temper flared at the thought.

“Well, I can.”

She stifled a laugh. “Right.” Mark was such a cupcake. He’d given her free rein after only a month on the job. And she was careful not to abuse the confidence he had in her. “You’ll see. It’ll be business as usual after the last installment.”

“Damn, I hope you’re right. Because otherwise I’m going to feel responsible.”

“So, what else is new, Dad?” Mark wasn’t much older than her own thirty-two years, but he acted as if he was sixty sometimes.

He chuckled. Finally.

“I’ll be in touch.” As she hung up, Julianna heard something bang outside. She glanced at her watch. Luke and Abe had only left a half hour ago, it couldn’t be them.

Just as she went into the kitchen, Abe burst through the back door, Luke right behind him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing a little good sense won’t fix,” Luke said.

Abe waved him off with a hand covered with a blood-soaked cloth.

“Oh, you’re hurt!”

“Just a little cut. I’ve had worse. No big deal.”

“When did you last have a tetanus shot?” Luke asked.

Abe shrugged.

“That’s what I thought.”

“That’s enough, you two. What we need right now is a first-aid kit. Do you have one, Abe?”

“Under the sink in the bathroom,” he grumbled, then quickly added, “But I’m not going to get any shots.”

“Can you get it, Luke?” Julianna asked as she lifted Abe’s hand to see the damage. “What were you doing?”

“Nothin’ I don’t do all the time. I just got distracted.”

As Abe answered, Luke returned with the kit and handed it to Julianna. She went to work, cleaning the wound, a gash about two inches long. “You really should see a doctor. It might need stitches.”

No response.

“While you’re taking care of that, I’m going back out to finish what we started.” Luke motioned with a tip of his head that Julianna should follow him outside.

“Hold the pressure on it, and I’ll be right back, Abe.”

Outside on the porch, Luke stood with his feet apart, arms crossed over his chest. “He wasn’t distracted,” Luke said, keeping his voice low. “He looked unsteady on his feet, as if he was dizzy or something. Then he fell. But he wouldn’t tell me what was wrong. Maybe while I’m gone you can find out. I think he needs to see a doctor...whether he wants to go or not.”

Julianna saw the concern in Luke’s eyes. For a tough cop, he felt things intensely, though it wasn’t always easy to tell.

“I’ll see what I can do.” Before she could go back inside, Luke placed a hand on her shoulder.

“You’re going to have to tell me why you’re here, because we both know it’s not just a visit. I don’t have any desire to pry into your personal life... I mean if it’s something like you’ve had a fight with your boyfriend or whatever, just say so and I’ll butt out. But if it’s something else and it involves my father, then I need to know.” He stared at her, determined. “Besides, you know I’ll find out one way or another.”

The skin on her arms prickled. “And what does that mean?”

He shrugged, but didn’t let her go. “I’m a detective.”

Annoyed, but knowing he meant what he said, she pulled away. “Okay...it’s personal, so butt out.” She stalked back inside. It wasn’t exactly a lie. It was personal...and if telling a tiny untruth meant he’d leave her alone, so be it.

After she finished cleaning Abe’s wound and bandaged it as best she could, she said, “So, how about that tetanus shot? I’ll be happy to drive you.”

“Nearest doc is in a little clinic outside Pecos.”

“Fine. Let’s go.” Before he could protest, she said, “Oh, one other thing.”

He glanced at her.

“I received a couple of voice-mail messages on my home phone. Threatening messages.”

“The bastard,” Abe spat out. “It’s a good thing you’re here then.”

“I was thinking of going somewhere else.”

“Nonsense.”

She sat on a chair next to him and clasped his good hand. “It’s not nonsense. If there’s any chance I’m in danger, then my being here puts you in danger, too.”

Abe squinted. “Why do you think you’d be any safer someplace else? No one’s going to find you here. And if they can’t find you, that keeps us both safe. Right?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I took precautions, but I can’t be sure it was enough. I couldn’t bear it if—”

He held up a hand. “I won’t hear of it,” he sputtered. “You leave, you’ll have the same problem. This is the best place and that’s the end of it.”

Julianna smiled, then gave Abe a long hug.

“So, let’s quit jawing and get that shot.”

“I’ll leave a note for Luke.”

She started to help Abe get up, but he protested.

“Tell him we’re going to the grocery store. He doesn’t need to know we went to the clinic.”

“I’ll write the note however you want it.” Luke would know where they’d gone. He was a smart guy. Someone who could unravel puzzles in a flash, who understood people at a glance. And he hadn’t believed for a second she was there on vacation. But what difference did it make to him why she was there?

If he’d just finish the fence, hire someone to help Abe and then go home, she’d be fine. But from the determined look she’d seen in his eyes, she had an awful feeling that wasn’t going to happen. Luke would hound her until he found out what he wanted to know.

THAT NIGHT during a very late dinner, Luke told Julianna and Abe about his progress with the fence. “But there’s still more to do,” he said.

Luke didn’t ask why Abe’s hand was bandaged differently and Abe didn’t offer that they’d gone to the clinic. Julianna talked about the weather, of all things, simply because she wanted to get through the meal without any further references to why she was there.

So far, so good, she thought as she brought dessert to the table, a pie that she’d picked up at the grocery store after Abe had his hand stitched and had grudgingly submitted to a tetanus shot.

“Good pie,” Luke said.

“Thanks to Sara Lee.”

“Pot roast was good, too.” Luke forked another piece of pie and brought it to his lips.

Her eyes fastened there, on his mouth, the little indentation in the middle of his top lip.

“I don’t remember you cooking much before.”

Maybe that was because he was never home at dinnertime. She and Mikey had eaten alone most nights. “I learned a thing or two when I had an exchange student living with me for a while. Actually the student was doing an internship at the magazine and somehow I ended up with her at my house.”

“You have a house?” Luke looked surprised.

“A loft condo. No upkeep, and someone else does all the fixing.”

He nodded. “Not a bad idea. At my place there’s always something going wrong.” His bluer-than-blue gaze caught hers. “But then, you know that.”

Her pulse quickened. Was he still living in his grandfather’s house? The house they’d shared?

“That’s why I didn’t want that place,” Abe grumbled. “Too much fixin’.”

Both she and Luke turned to Abe. Then Luke said, “And there isn’t here?”

“It’s different,” Abe said gruffly. “There’s memories here.”

Julianna sighed. There were memories—both here and at the house in Venice Beach. She couldn’t believe Luke was still living there.

“The ranch has memories of all kinds,” Luke said. “Some good, some not so good.”

Abe’s chair scraped on the tiles as he abruptly rose to his feet. “I need to feed the horses, and then it’s time for me to turn in.”

When Abe was gone, she carried some dishes to the sink. “The doctor gave your father a tetanus shot and put five stitches in the cut.” Luke was right behind her with the dessert plates. Close. She moved to the side to put the dishes in the dishwasher.

“Good.” Luke scraped off a plate and handed it to her.

“He said Abe should come in for a checkup.”

Luke gave a dry laugh. “I don’t have to guess what the old coot’s response to that was, do I?”

“Right. But I think someone really needs to make sure he goes. He hasn’t seemed like himself since I got here.”

Luke leaned on the counter, watching as she finished up. She felt sweaty all of a sudden, unnerved to have him so close. It seemed odd that they were talking about Abe as if they were still married.

“If you could work some of your magic to get him to agree, I’d be indebted,” he said.

The soft plea in his eyes touched her. She put the last cup into the dishwasher, added soap, pushed the button and started the machine. “I’ll see what I can do. But right now, I’ve got work to do.”

Luke’s gaze followed as Jules walked away. She’d seemed nervous—as if she couldn’t wait to get away from him. If he didn’t know better, he might think... But hell, she was probably worried that he was going to ask again why she was there. And truth was, if she hadn’t left, he would’ve.

Repeatedly asking the same question was one way to wear someone down. He did it with suspects all the time when he thought they weren’t being truthful. While Jules might not be lying, something was definitely wrong. She jumped out of her skin every time the phone rang.

Walking into the living room, he heard the kitchen door slap shut. His dad coming back inside. Abe had said he was going to bed, and though it seemed early for that, his father’d had a busy day what with the fence and the doctor and all. Luke felt tired, too, but he knew it was more mental exhaustion than physical.

As he reached the worn-out couch, its worst parts covered with a red-and-blue Southwestern serape blanket, he inhaled the familiar scent, a mixture of cigarettes, Old Spice and old man. He glanced around. Nothing had changed. Nothing in the house and nothing with Abe.

Though he’d come here with the idea of smoothing out his relationship with his dad, he could see now it was a bad idea. Abe was too set in his ways. More importantly, his dad didn’t care about mending anything between them. And now, in addition to finding hired help, he had to get Abe in for a physical.

He couldn’t leave until he had those two things under his belt. He hoped Jules would help. She was good at getting people to do things without them realizing it.

An image of Jules immediately popped into his head. An image of how she looked today, not the one he’d carried for the past five years. She looked more mature, more comfortable in her own skin, and she was every bit as beautiful as he remembered. Just watching her had made his blood run hot...made him remember what it was like to feel something.

Something other than duty and responsibility.

And Jules was the last person he should be thinking about like that. He reached for a magazine. The Achilles’ Heel. What the hell. Reading might get his mind on something else. He flipped it open. The title of the article practically leaped off the page. “Missing.”

He read a couple paragraphs. Turned the page. What the—the story was about a little girl who’d been abducted fifteen years ago in Los Angeles. Renata Willis. He tossed the magazine on the pile and picked up another. Another story with the same theme, but a different child.

Anger rose from the dark well inside him, the place where he’d buried his feelings. How long had she been doing this? A sharp, heart-stabbing pain drove into his chest.

How could she!

CHAPTER FOUR

SOMETHING WAS WRONG. Luke had kept his distance all day, barely grunting when Julianna or his father asked a question. Would he like coffee? Grunt. Aren't you going to have breakfast? At least that one had gotten a grumble that she thought was a "No thanks. Gotta get to work."

He'd left immediately and, since he'd been gone all day, Julianna suspected he'd long since finished the fence. "He can't still be working, can he?" she asked Abe as they finished up dinner. "It's getting dark."

"Luke can take care of himself."

"I know he can, Abe. But for him to be gone so long, something could've happened. Aren't you worried just a little? Curious maybe?"

"Nope. I learned a long time ago that Luke doesn't need anyone to worry about him." He glanced at her from under his brows. "And I think you seem more worried than necessary."

Julianna stared at him in surprise. Abe never talked about anything personal. Never once had he mentioned the divorce. "I don't know what you mean."

As he smiled, the crevices in his face deepened and she saw a glint in his faded blue eyes. Eyes that reminded her vaguely of Luke's. "You know what I mean." He rose from the chair and then raised his hands in the air. "But then I'm an old man and you probably think I don't know what it's like to be in love."

She did a double take. "I...I'm not...there's nothing—"

"It's okay. No need to explain."

Sheesh! What did Abe think? That she'd been pining away for Luke for five years?

JUST AS LUKE WAS finishing up the fence, he heard a noise behind him and turned to see Stella Hancock astride a pinto that looked as old as she was.

"Hello, Luke."

He tipped his Stetson. "Mrs. Hancock."

"How are you? It's been a long time."

Luke drew a breath, then shifted his stance, feet apart, arms crossed. "I'm fine." He didn't ask how she was and instead said, "I'm surprised to see you out here. You ride out very often?"

She smiled and the fine wrinkles around her eyes fanned out. For a woman who'd spent most of her life on a ranch, she'd aged gracefully. Most ranch women were well weathered by the time they were forty.

"No, I came because I heard you were fixing the fence and I wanted to know how Abraham is doing?"

When he didn't answer right away, she added, "I saw your wi—Julianna at the grocery store yesterday. She told me your father had hurt his hand."

Luke looked away. Jules had met the Hancock woman once when they'd come to visit when they were first married, and she'd been impressed that Stella had run her own ranch after her husband passed away. Luke didn't think it was a big deal, not when you had her money. She might run the place, but other people did the work.

Coughing, Luke grated out, "He had a couple stitches, that's all."

"The last time I saw him in town he didn't look well."

Annoyed that he was even talking to this woman about his father, this woman who'd— Luke stared at her, willing her to get the drift and go away. "I'll take care of whatever is bothering my father."

He saw her wince a little, but she quickly recovered, then said, "That's good to hear. He needs someone right now." Then she pulled on the reins, made a clicking sound and rode away.

What did she mean by that? And how did she know what his father did or didn't need? As far as Luke knew, she and his father hadn't had any contact for years. Maybe he was wrong?

Climbing onto Balboa again, he took a minute to survey the land, a vast span of nature at its best. Just east of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the landscape was made up of rolling hills and piñon pine. Mountains and streams surrounded the valley and as a kid, Luke had always thought he lived in a magical place, a utopian paradise. What did he know?

His mother had loved it here and he remembered riding with her often, to picnic or fish or just to soak up the scenery. The land reminded Luke of her. Beautiful in its simplicity, yet strong enough to withstand the elements.

In the end, cancer had taken his mother at too young an age. But she'd seemed at peace with herself. Unlike him, her faith had held her in good stead. He'd gone the other way, damning whatever forces had taken her from him so soon. And then later, took Michael. And Julianna. If there was a God, he wasn't doing his job.

No, he didn't have the kind of faith his mother had. Why should he?

He touched Balboa's side with his heel, but the stallion wasn't in any hurry to return. The horse probably didn't get enough exercise with only Abe to take care of things, so Luke took the long way back to give the stallion a workout and on the way, he stopped at a shallow creek to let Balboa drink. He dismounted. Except for the burbling sounds of crisp clean water over the smooth rocks, it was so quiet he could hear himself breathe.

Balboa suddenly rose up and whinnied. "What? What's wrong, boy?" The horse snorted and jerked away, spooked. "It's okay," Luke soothed, stroking the animal's neck and scanning the area to see what had scared him. "It's okay, big guy."

As he took in the property on the other side of the creek, on the hill he spotted an animal on the ground. Very still. "It's okay," Luke reassured his mount and stroked him again. He tethered the horse to a tree and made his way across the creek, rock by rock.

It was a calf. But what was it doing out here alone? Was it sick? A few more steps and he knew the animal was dead. He didn't want to get too close, but he had to know what had happened. As he moved closer, he saw a pool of blood under the animal's head. The calf's throat had been cut.

On instinct, he reached for his weapon and swung around. Only he wasn't carrying and felt like an idiot. He was standing in the middle of a pasture with a dead calf and he'd reacted like he'd been ambushed by the Mob.

Maybe the captain was right, his nerves were shot and he needed the vacation more than he realized. Even though he'd covered numerous crime scenes, the coppery odor of blood, the scent of death, made him cover his mouth with his hand. He never got used to that. People who thought police were immune to gruesome scenes were either misinformed or stupid.

He rode Balboa back to the ranch at a gallop and twenty minutes later, after unsaddling the stallion and brushing him down, he walked into the kitchen. It was quiet, so he headed down the hall and tapped on Abe's door. "It's Luke, Dad. I need to talk to you." Without waiting for an answer Luke opened the door.

"What's wrong?" Abe was sitting in his favorite chair. On the table next to him was a photo of Luke's mother. The room reeked of stale tobacco, even though Julianna had persuaded Abe long ago to quit smoking in the house. She hadn't wanted Michael exposed to secondhand smoke.

Luke pulled an old oak chair up next to his father's and turned on the lamp. "Sitting in the dark for a reason?"

"You get the fence fixed?" his father asked.

"Yep. I did. But I came across a dead calf on the way home. Down by the creek."

"Dead?"

"As a doornail."

"One of mine?"

Luke nodded. “Had your brand. And...it looked like its throat had been slit.”

Abe drew back, his face turning red as he glowered at Luke.

“Any ideas?” Luke asked.

“Yeah. Get me my gun.”

“No, I mean any ideas who might’ve done this?”

His father shifted in the chair. “Someone who doesn’t like me, I guess.”

Well, that took in half of San Miguel County. “Anyone in particular?”

Abe shook his head. “Could be kids. Teenagers thinking it’s fun to wreck people’s property.”

“This isn’t just property, Dad. That calf was a living animal, part of your stock. It’s more than vandalism. It’s animal cruelty.”

Abe took a moment, then said, “I’ll take care of it.”

Luke crossed his arms. “How?”

When Abe clammed up, Luke bolted to his feet. “I’m going to call the sheriff,” he said, turning to leave.

Before Luke got out the door, Abe said, “I said I’d take care of it. I don’t want you calling anyone.”

His father could be so damned bullheaded sometimes. But maybe it was kids out raising hell. Instead of doping up on meth or heroin as some teens did in L.A., the youngsters here found their fun in other ways.

When he’d lived here, there wasn’t anything like this going on. A little vandalism maybe, but nothing so sick. No, whoever had done this had a twisted mind...and no respect for life.

Luke strode into the living room and looked up the sheriff’s number. He didn’t care if Abe wanted him to call or not. The dispatcher answered, then said the sheriff was out, but he’d be there as soon as he could. Two hours later, Ben Yuma was at the door.

“Twice in one week,” Yuma said. “Nothing serious I hope.”

“I think it is, but if you ask my dad, you’ll get a different answer.” Luke went back to tell Abe the sheriff had arrived, but his dad was asleep in front of the TV. Odd. Luke turned off the TV, then filled in the sheriff on what had happened.

“So,” Luke said. “You know the area, the locals and their crimes, do you have any idea what’s going on here?”

“None yet. I’ll have to take a trip out there. There have been similar incidents on other properties. Some ranchers think they’re connected to the corporation that’s trying to buy up the land around here to build a spa resort.”

Abe hadn’t mentioned anything about that.

“Others say it’s kids. Rich kids with nothing better to do.”

“Rich kids? When I went to school here, most ranch kids had to scrape by.”

“There’s been a big real estate boom in the past few years, spreading out from Albuquerque and Santa Fe. Condos, planned communities, people with money.”

“Whoever did this, rich or poor, they’ve got some real problems.”

“True,” Yuma agreed. “I’ll be back tomorrow morning to take a look.”

When the sheriff left, Luke headed for Julianna’s room.

THE KNOCK on her door made Julianna jump. She checked her watch. 10:00 p.m. It wouldn’t be Abe, and that left only one other person. “Hold on,” she said, “I’ll be there in a minute.” She saved the story on her laptop, closed the cover and went to the door, opening it a few inches. Luke stood with one arm resting on the door frame.

“We need to talk,” he said.

Her heart thumped. “What about?”

“Abe.”

She expelled a silent sigh of relief. “Okay. Just give me a minute.”

“Sure. I’ll be on the patio.”

He’d always liked the outdoors, the fresh air, at the beach or wherever. Closing the door, she quickly threw on the pink zip sweatshirt that matched her sweatpants, and then slipped on her flip-flops. She took a quick peek in the mirror. Plain. She’d always been plain. Nothing like her classy sister. She ran a comb through her hair, then dabbed on a bit of lip gloss before realizing the futility. What did she think? That the gloss would somehow transform her into something she wasn’t. Dammit, she’d come to grips with her self-image a long time ago. So why were the old insecurities resurfacing now? What the hell, she dabbed on some blush, too, and then headed down the hall.

At the back door she saw Luke sitting outside on a bench. She stopped to look at him. So handsome, so... masculine. Instantly, she remembered how she’d felt being the other half of the couple people whispered about and said, “What is he doing with her?” She’d always wanted to feel his equal, like they belonged together. She’d tried hard, but it never quite came together for her.

But when she and Luke were alone, he always made her feel beautiful, as if he saw something in her that others didn’t. Something even she didn’t see. She realized later it had been easy to forgive a lot in their marriage because of those stupid insecurities.

The door creaked as she went out. “Hey.”

“Hey,” he said, then indicated the place next to him on the bench. He wore jeans and a black sweatshirt and was sitting near the beehive-shaped chiminea in the corner. A crackling fire radiated warmth and the pungent scent of cedar, instantly conjuring memories of better times. The first time she’d met Luke’s dad. The Christmas they’d spent here when she was pregnant. Memories she didn’t have time for anymore. Luke wanted to talk and that’s what she was going to do.

But as she lowered herself to sit next to him, she sensed something was wrong. “What’s up with Abe?”

“That’s what I want to know. Has he said anything to you about problems on the ranch?”

She shook her head. “No, but he did say he thinks Mrs. Hancock wants him to sell his property.”

Luke shifted uncomfortably, as if she’d hit a nerve. “Sheriff Yuma was here a little while ago and mentioned something about a corporation trying to buy up land for a spa resort.”

“Do you think someone approached Abe about it? And maybe Mrs. Hancock, too?”

“Could be.”

“If she comes by again, I’ll ask her.”

“No need. Pops wouldn’t sell to anyone for any amount of money.”

“So, why was the sheriff here again?”

“I called him because when I was out on the line, I found a dead calf.”

“Oh, that’s awful. But why call the sheriff?”

“The calf’s throat was slit.”

“Oh, my.” Goose bumps rose on her arms. Had the caller found her and was this a warning? “What did the sheriff say about it?” There’s no way anyone could possibly know where she was. With help from Patrick, the private investigator she used as a resource, she’d effectively disappeared. Except for calling her editor once a week, she had no contact with anyone else.

“The sheriff said there’s been some vandalism at other ranches and they suspect some high school kids may be involved.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. That made more sense. “But killing a helpless animal? That’s sick.”

“I know. Sociopaths are sick. And they start young. Usually with small animals.”

The thought made her shiver. She rubbed her arms. “Does Abe know?”

“I talked to him before calling the sheriff.”

“How’s he feeling?”

Luke shrugged. “With him, you never know.”

“I do. I can tell when something bothers him. It’s subtle, but noticeable. I see it every time he talks to you.”

“Yeah. Well, I’ve been bothering him since I was thirteen. That’s nothing new.”

“What I mean is that I can see it bothers him that you two don’t get along.”

He gave her a sideways glance. “You take up psychiatry somewhere along the line?”

She smiled. “I have learned a few things in that area, but no, my knowledge of your father is based on years of watching how he reacts when you say something that hurts him.”

“I don’t say things to hurt him.”

“Not intentionally, but some of the things you say, do hurt him.”

“Well, I’m not going to debate your sixth sense when it comes to my dad. And I’m not going to monitor my words either. He and I have never understood each other and we probably never will.”

“So, why are you staying? I thought you were leaving as soon as you could.”

Wearily, he leaned against the post behind him so he was facing her. “Things changed.”

“Like?”

“One...my dad seems...not himself. Two, I need to find him some hired help, and three, the dead calf. I wouldn’t feel right about leaving until those things are resolved.” His gaze narrowed as he turned to look at her. “I’d also like to know why you’re really here,” he said softly. Teasingly.

There it was again. The question that wouldn’t go away. She cleared her throat. “When I spoke with your father before I decided to come, he sounded a little flat, depressed almost. I thought maybe my visit would cheer him up.” That part was true. She had felt Abe needed someone, if even just another person in the house. He was alone too much.

“Getting help for your father would be wonderful. And it would give him someone to talk to. It has to be hard being alone all the time.”

“You’d think. But that’s the life he’s chosen. He doesn’t like too many people.” Luke grinned, then touched the sleeve of her shirt. “Except for you.”

Julianna’s heart warmed at the comment. “He’s been the father I never had. Even though I haven’t seen him too often, we’ve stayed in touch.”

Leaning back on one elbow, Luke rubbed a hand over the stubble on his face. By the end of the day he always had more than a five o’clock shadow. “I didn’t know that,” he said, his voice still low, reflective almost.

She shrugged. “No reason you would.”

“Well, like I said, there are things I have to do before I go.”

“I don’t think there’s anything you can do about the calf other than let the sheriff handle it. If it is vandals, he’ll do something about it.”

“But there have been other incidents, so I’d like to know what he’s doing about it before I go.”

She looked down. “So, when are you leaving?”

His eyes sparkled with mischief. “Can’t wait to get rid of me, eh?”

She laughed, feeling her cheeks flush. “You found me out.”

Luke’s expression softened. “I always liked the way you laugh.”

He’d never told her that before. Hearing it now made her more self-conscious than anything. Sitting here with Luke was a dangerous place to be. She looked away. “I didn’t do that very often during the last part of our marriage, did I?” Their last couple of years together had been so bitter, so filled with pain.

“No. But you had good reason.” He reached out for her.

Even though his touch was tender, she felt her muscles tense and launched to her feet. “I...I need to go in. I still have work to do.”

He stood almost at the same time, then stepped in front of her, effectively blocking her way. “What’s the rush?”

She placed one hand on her hip, hoping she looked cool and calm—even though her insides felt like they were in a meat grinder. “You heard me. I have work to do.”

“Really?” His voice seemed lower, huskier. He stroked her cheek with his fingertips.

Her blood rushed. “Yes, really.”

“You look like you need to relax.”

Her heart thumped so hard she was certain he could hear it. “Nighttime is when I work best. Besides, I have a deadline to meet.”

He frowned, his mouth forming words that didn’t come out, as if maybe they were too difficult to say. “What?” she asked.

Squaring his shoulders, he said, “I’m still wondering why you left me.”

Oh, God. Her throat constricted. “Luke. Don’t. Please.” When he just stood there, she said, “You...you know why.”

“But that’s just it. I don’t. I know what you said when you left, but I know there was more to it. And it’s been eating at me for five years.”

Her voice was barely a whisper when she said, “I can’t get into all that again, Luke. I just can’t.”

“Was it me? I couldn’t blame you there.”

Her head came up. “Oh, no. God, no. It wasn’t you, Luke. I promise.” His drinking hadn’t helped, but that wasn’t it at all. On instinct, she rested her hand on his arm.

He looked at her hand, then placed his other one over hers.

Tears welled, but she pushed them back. She’d gone through therapy, learned how to live with her grief over losing Michael, thought she’d learned how to live with the breakup of the marriage. So why was she such an emotional mess?

Finally, she managed, “I can’t do this, Luke. I’ve moved on. I hoped you had, too.” She pulled herself up to her full five feet six inches. “Now please let me go.”

Tears burned behind her eyelids as she walked inside, trying desperately to hold herself together. Trying desperately not to turn around and rush into his arms.

CHAPTER FIVE

LUKE WATCHED Jules walk away, his jaw clenched, his fists kneading his thighs. If it wasn't him, then what the hell was it?

People who loved each other were supposed to stand united and support each other when bad times came. People who loved each other didn't run away and destroy everything good that they'd built together. Maybe she'd never loved him. Maybe the wonderful relationship he'd thought they had was a bunch of garbage. He'd convinced himself of that more than once.

And now, seeing the pain in her eyes as she ran inside to escape him made him feel even worse. He'd brought up things that hurt her. Damn. He banged the wood railing with the flat of his palm. He was like a fox in a chicken coop, tearing things apart because he wanted something. Because he needed to know. God, he was a jerk.

He stomped inside and on the way to his room hesitated outside her door. He wanted to say he was sorry for hurting her. But the hurt was already there. Sorry didn't change anything.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow he'd apologize. Tell her he'd never bring it up again. Then he had to get outta here. Go back to work. Work was what he did best.

In his room, he punched in his partner's cell number. "Yo," he said when Jordan answered. "What's happening?"

"That's what I was wondering. When are you coming back? I've got a good lead on the Renfield case."

Luke's pulse quickened. "Does Carlyle know? He didn't want me on it until after the election."

"No. But I'm not doing anything to stir the pot as far as Thorpe's concerned."

"How good is the lead?"

"It's hot. I tracked down an old friend who'd heard Thorpe threaten to kill Michele Renfield."

"Who's the friend?"

"Betsy Stephens. Renfield's former college roommate."

"So why haven't we heard about her before?"

"She said she was questioned way back but nothing ever came of it. And in the back of her mind was the thought, if her friend disappeared, so could she."

"So, what changed?"

"She said she was cleaning out some of Michele's things and found something. An ultrasound photo."

"Renfield was pregnant?" With Thorpe's kid? Luke's nerves vibrated with excitement. All his instincts said Thorpe was guilty as hell and Luke wanted to get him so bad he could taste it. He hated politicians who thought they were above the law. Now they had motive and if they could get this girl's testimony...damn. He had to get back to L.A. "I'll be back the day after tomorrow. It's a full day's drive and I have to clear up some things here first."

"So how's it been?" Jordan asked.

"My dad needs help. I'm going to try to take someone on before I leave." Then he'd plead with Jules to get his father to a doctor. And she'd be overjoyed that he was leaving.

"That's good. But I meant how are you managing with Julianna in the same house?"

Luke rubbed the stubble on his chin. "No big deal. The past is in the past."

There was a hesitation on the line before Jordan said, "Yeah? So that's what you tell yourself."

Annoyed that his partner had him pegged, Luke gripped the phone tighter. "Yes, it is. But I fully understand your thinking. You have this pie-in-the sky philosophy that love conquers all, and because you're about to be married, you can't understand why everyone doesn't feel the same way. But take my word for it, in my case, love doesn't conquer anything. The past is in the past. It's done. Kaput. Finito."

Jordan coughed as if choking on what Luke had said. “Yeah, okay. Whatever you say.”
“I’ll call you when I get close to home.”

When he was finished with the call, Luke stripped off his clothes and headed for bed. Dammit. The past was in the past. Except he kept seeing how Jules had looked when she came out and sat beside him tonight. She’d smelled clean and fresh and he longed to feel her in his arms again, to be as close as they’d once been.

The fat yellow moon and the brilliance of the stars had reminded him of all the other times they’d sat together simply enjoying the night.

Times he needed to forget. Done. Kaput. Finito.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON Julianna was taking a break from her research and making lemonade when she heard a noise outside. After taking the sheriff out to see the dead animal this morning, Luke and Abe had disposed of the carcass and then spent the rest of the morning working around the place. Though Abe had come in earlier, Luke was still in the barn.

Last night after she’d gone to bed, her emotions warred with her needs. She wanted to go to Luke and try to explain, but she knew going to his room wouldn’t end well. She hadn’t been with a man for six months, at least. Not since her one attempt at a relationship—post-Luke—fell apart. And right now, her hormones were working overtime. Getting too close to Luke could be a dangerous proposition. In more ways than one.

Luke was comfortable. She knew him, knew how to please him. He knew how to please her. But to do that would be misleading. He’d think it meant more, and even if it did, it wouldn’t be fair to either of them. Because nothing would change.

Luke was probably staying outside so he wouldn’t have to see her again. She couldn’t blame him. Every time he’d tried to talk to her she’d cut him off.

She poured the lemonade into a large thermal container, placed some cookies she’d made into a Ziploc bag and headed for the barn. Luke was inside, replacing the hinges on the side door and didn’t seem to hear her come in. Wearing jeans, a blue denim shirt and his Stetson, he looked the typical rancher. A far cry from the perfectly groomed, designer-suited detective she’d once been married to.

She knocked on a wooden box to alert him she was there. When he looked up, she said, “I made some lemonade.” Putting both the cookies and the container on the box, she motioned for him to come and get some. Then she’d get the hell out of there.

Luke untied the bandana around his neck and wiped off his forehead. He seemed surprised to see her. “Sure. Thanks. It’s hot in here.”

“But it’s nice outside.” A crisp fall day and the sun was shining. She handed him a glass and saw his hands were covered with tiny cuts.

“Where’s Abe?” Luke asked.

“Taking a nap.”

“Great. Good time for me to call some people about the job. I’m calling a couple guys I know and see if they can recommend anyone, and I put a help wanted ad in the local paper.”

Luke took a cookie, and then after another swig of his lemonade, said matter-of-factly, “I’m sorry about last night. I was out of line.”

She glanced away. He shouldn’t be apologizing. She was the one who’d fled. She was the one who couldn’t explain herself. An irony that hadn’t escaped her. A writer who couldn’t express herself. How sad was that? But then the only time she had the problem was when she was with Luke. “It’s okay. Let’s just leave it alone. Okay.”

His gaze caught hers again. “Deal. If I can hire someone, I’m leaving tomorrow morning, so I want to do as much as I can today.”

She felt the tension in her shoulders ease. “Well, if you need anything, if you need my help—”
That got a raised brow.

“Okay,” she said. “I know I’m probably the most unmechanical person around, but I am good at helping if I’m told what to do.”

He smiled, then picked up another cookie. “Great. I do have something I’d like you to help me with.”

“Oh...okay.” She hadn’t really expected him to take up her offer.

He walked over and sat on a bale of hay, then gestured for her to have a seat, too. She sat on the bale opposite him, pulled up her feet and sat cross-legged. The scent of hay teased her senses, dredging up a long-ago memory of the time they’d made love in the hay loft. She wondered if Luke remembered.

Luke took one last sip of lemonade, then said, “It’s about my dad. Since I’m leaving tomorrow, I won’t have time to get him to see a doctor, but he needs a checkup.”

“And you were wondering if I’d convince him to go.”

He nodded. “That’s it. I know it’s asking a lot. He can be stupidly stubborn when he wants to be.” He gave a half laugh. “Which, now that I think about it, is all the time. At least when I’m here. You might have better luck asking him after I leave.”

“I’ll be happy to do what I can. But you know—with Abe—there are no guarantees.”

“If you can’t, then we’ll have to go to plan B.”

“Plan B? What’s that?”

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