



Romantic Suspense

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a man and a woman in a rustic setting. The man, on the right, is wearing a light-colored cowboy hat and a grey button-down shirt. He has his hand on the woman's pregnant belly. The woman, on the left, has blonde hair and is wearing a light blue tank top under a cream-colored cardigan. They are standing in front of a dark wooden barn with a corrugated metal roof.

**PREGNANT BY
THE COLTON
COWBOY**

Lara Lacombe

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Аннотация

A cowboy puts his life on the line for the woman expecting his child! Determined to steer clear of the horrors of his family, rancher Thorne Colton keeps to himself – which means resisting Maggie Lowell. Last time they were together, he succumbed and passion took control. But when an explosion nearly claims her life, Thorne discovers their night together yielded more than just sizzling memories. Pregnant and under Thorne's protection, Maggie isn't sure where the bigger threat lies. Out in the open, she's a killer's target. On his ranch, she's in close quarters with the man who's driven to keep her and their child safe, but broke her heart once and might do it again...

A cowboy puts his life on the line for the woman expecting his child in *The Coltons of Shadow Creek*!

Determined to steer clear of the horrors his villainous mother brought on his family, rancher Thorne Colton keeps to himself. That means resisting Maggie Lowell. The last time he succumbed, passion took control. But when an explosion nearly claims her life, Thorne discovers their night together yielded more than sizzling memories.

Pregnant and under Thorne's protection in Shadow Creek, Maggie isn't sure where the bigger threat lies. Out in the open, she's a killer's target. On his ranch, she's in close quarters with the man who's driven to keep her and their child safe but broke her heart once and might do it again...

"Help!"

Her mind raced as she searched for something, anything, she could use to carry water back to her car. She needed the fire department, but they would take too long to get here. Maybe she could dump enough water on her trunk to put the fire out before it spread? But why was it on fire in the first place? Cars didn't spontaneously combust...

"Help!" she yelled again. Where was everyone?

"Maggie?" She heard her name, barely audible over the rush of blood in her ears. There was a bucket sitting a few feet away, full of grain. She dumped it out and scooped up water from the trough.

"My car," she yelled, not bothering to look back. "Call the

fire department!”

She ran back outside, water sloshing over the sides of the bucket and soaking her clothes. Smoke was pouring out of her trunk in earnest now, the stench of it filling the air and burning her nose. There was a shout behind her but before she could respond, the world exploded in a ball of heat and light.

* * *

The Coltons of Shadow Creek: Only family can keep you safe...

Pregnant by the Colton Cowboy

Lara Lacombe



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LARA LACOMBE earned a PhD in microbiology and immunology and worked in several labs across the country before moving into the classroom. Her day job as a college science professor gives her time to pursue her other love—writing fast-paced romantic suspense with smart, nerdy heroines and dangerously attractive heroes. She loves to hear from readers! Find her on the web or contact her at laralacombewriter@gmail.com.

This book is for Elizabeth, friend extraordinaire.

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[Chapter 1](#)

The rain started just as Maggie Lowell finished the last entry in the account book. The drops fell in a gentle patter, but a quick glance at the dark sky outside made it clear the sky wouldn't stay peaceful for long. Time to go home.

She quickly packed up her laptop and papers with one hand and pecked out a text to Mac with the other.

All done. Everything looks good.

Maggie normally didn't come to a client's home to work on their books, but she made an exception for Joseph "Mac" Mackenzie. He was impossible to refuse—always smiling, always kind. He'd been one of her first clients in Shadow Creek, and he hadn't hesitated to promote her bookkeeping services to all his friends. Since Mac was a deservedly popular man, it hadn't taken long for Maggie to build a solid roster of clients. Mac's actions had essentially ensured her success here, and Maggie never forgot it. Dropping by his ranch to work on his books every quarter was a small way to repay him for his kindness.

And if she happened to run into Mac's son, Thorne, while she was at the ranch? That was just a bonus.

Maggie glanced around as she left the office, hoping to catch

a glimpse of Thorne while she made her way to her car. The rich scent of horses and hay hit her nose as she stepped into the barn, and one of the animals whickered softly in response to the sound of the office door being shut. There was no sign of Thorne, but it was clear he'd been there recently—a set of wet boot prints marred the otherwise clean floor of the barn, and since Mac was in San Antonio on business, the prints could only belong to Thorne.

Would she see him as she dashed to the car? The thought made her heart flutter, and a sense of anticipation warmed her limbs. Even a drive-by sighting of Thorne was better than no sighting at all.

Maggie knew her crush on Thorne was irrational, but she couldn't help herself. The man was her personal catnip, and every time she saw him she fell a little bit more in love with him. How could she not? His smile lit up a room, and when she saw those dimples in his cheeks she went weak in the knees. His light brown eyes were full of a quiet intelligence that drew her in and made her want to learn more about him. And the fact that he had the body of a man who made his living working with horses didn't hurt, either. His long, lean frame filled out a pair of jeans in all the right places, and his dark skin contrasted nicely with the light blue work shirts he often wore. Thorne Colton was the total package, and ever since she had first laid eyes on him, Maggie had thought of little else.

She harbored no illusions about Thorne's feelings for her. He

had inherited his father's impeccable manners and he always treated her with respect, but Maggie knew she wasn't the kind of woman Thorne dated. He was horses, hard work and sunshine, and she was...well, truth be told she was more of an indoors girl. They had very little in common, but that didn't stop her inner thirteen-year-old from letting out a squeal of delight any time he was near.

She debated lingering in the barn for a moment in the hopes of seeing him, but decided against it. She had her pride, after all.

Maggie hugged her computer bag close and dashed to her car, diving into the driver's seat with more momentum than grace. She deposited the slightly damp bag in the passenger seat and grabbed a handful of napkins from the console, then set about patting herself dry. The water was cold and she shivered slightly, but she told herself to enjoy the sensation while it lasted. Summer came quickly to Shadow Creek, Texas, and she knew in a few months she'd be begging for the relief of a cool rain.

Feeling slightly less waterlogged, she stuck the key into the ignition. Hopefully the storm wouldn't affect traffic too badly. Her stomach growled in agreement, and she began to mentally review her dinner options as she turned the key.

The engine whined in protest, and thoughts of food vanished as Maggie focused on the car. "Not again," she muttered, pumping the gas before giving the key another turn. The red sedan had been a steady and reliable workhorse for the past several years, but it was starting to show its age. A few months

ago, the mechanic had advised her to start looking for another car, but Maggie had yet to find the time. Besides, she had faith in the old man. Surely they could go a few thousand more miles before she had to say goodbye?

As if in response, the engine emitted an alarming grinding noise that sounded like rocks slamming together. It shuddered, causing the whole car to vibrate, and then stopped with a pitiful wheeze.

Great. It seemed her cheerful red stallion had finally given up and died.

Mother Nature apparently sensed the loss, as the sky opened up in earnest. The torrential rain pounded the car in a deafening onslaught and Maggie sighed, dropping her head to lean against the steering wheel. It just keeps getting better...

She indulged in a moment's self-pity, then fished out her cell phone and called for a tow.

"It's gonna take a while," the dispatcher informed her. "The ranch is outside the town limits, and we've got a lot of calls ahead of you. The weather is slowing us down."

"That's fine," Maggie said. "I'm not going anywhere."

She hung up the phone and eyed the computer bag in the passenger seat. Maybe she could get some work done while she waited...

She pulled the bag into her lap just as the passenger door opened and someone plopped into the seat. Maggie let out a squeak of alarm and jumped, her hand scrabbling for the handle

as she pressed herself against the door.

“Hey there.” Thorne’s deep, calm voice filled the car, and Maggie’s body recognized him a split second before her mind caught up. Her muscles relaxed and a swarm of butterflies took flight in her stomach as her body celebrated its proximity to his.

Her breath gusted out in a shaky sigh. “Hi, yourself.”

“I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to scare you.” He took off his brown, rain-spattered cowboy hat, careful to keep it level so the water trapped in its folds didn’t drip onto her seats. It was a thoughtful gesture, one that Maggie appreciated.

“It’s all right,” she said, offering him a smile. “You startled me more than anything.”

“Everything okay? I noticed you’ve been sitting here for a while now. Are you having trouble with your car?” His light brown eyes were full of concern and her stomach did a little flip. Thorne had noticed her. More importantly, he cared enough to check on her. Maybe she wasn’t so invisible after all.

Maggie reined in her imagination before visions of flower arrangements and bridesmaid dresses crowded out rational thought. “Yeah,” she said, focusing on his question. “My car won’t start. I’ve called for a tow.”

Thorne nodded. “I’d offer to take a look at it for you, but I don’t really know much about fixing cars.” He sounded a little apologetic, as if his lack of mechanical acumen was a personal failing.

“Don’t worry about it,” Maggie said. “My mechanic told me

a few months ago I should start looking for a new car. I guess I can't put it off any longer."

"Guess not," he replied. He was quiet a moment, his expression thoughtful. "Would you like to wait inside?"

She considered the offer. It would be nice to have a little more room for her laptop, and the air inside the car was getting a little stale. But she didn't know how Mac would feel about her hanging out in his office after hours. He had no problem with her working there while he attended to other matters on the ranch, but he might not appreciate her taking up space when she wasn't balancing his books.

"Do you think Mac will mind if I use his office?"

Confusion flitted across Thorne's face, then realization dawned. "Probably not," he said. "But what I meant was, would you like to wait with me? I live in the apartment above the supply building attached to the stables, and I was just about to head upstairs and start dinner. I've got enough to share, and I bet you're getting hungry."

She was, but Maggie doubted she'd be able to eat in Thorne's presence. The idea of sharing a meal with him in his apartment both thrilled and terrified her. What if she said or did something embarrassing? She'd never be able to live it down.

Thorne mistook her silence for reluctance. "Come on," he coaxed. "I don't bite." The corner of his mouth turned up in a grin, and Maggie's heart thudded hard in her chest. Did the man have any idea what he was doing to her?

Probably not, she thought with a mental sigh. He wasn't the kind of man to deliberately taunt a woman, and given his down-to-earth attitude and old-fashioned manners, he likely didn't even realize how attractive he was. His apparent ignorance of the effect he had on the opposite sex was just another one of his appealing qualities, and Maggie felt her worries recede as her desire to spend time with him grew.

"Are you sure you don't mind the company?" She didn't want to intrude on his personal time, even though her sense of curiosity demanded to learn more about Thorne and his life. What did his apartment look like? Was he a good cook, or would he order pizza? Most important, did he have a girlfriend?

"On the contrary, it'll be nice to have someone to talk to while I eat. I usually only have the TV for company."

That answered her question about the girlfriend, and Maggie couldn't help but smile. "I know what you mean," she said.

He turned his head and frowned out the window. "I don't think it's going to let up anytime soon. Want me to go grab an umbrella so you don't get too wet?"

It was a sweet offer, but Maggie shook her head. "Thanks, but I won't melt. Besides, that's not really fair for you to make two trips in the rain just to spare me a few drops."

Thorne lifted one shoulder in a casual shrug. "I don't mind." He glanced over, eyeing her up and down appraisingly. Even though there was nothing suggestive about his gaze, Maggie still felt a chill as goose bumps popped out on her arms. "I don't think

you could get any wetter, though,” he said, a smile tugging at that delectable mouth of his.

She glanced down at her still-damp shirt and pushed a scraggy tendril of hair out of her face. “I think you’re right about that.” She shook her head, trying to see the humor in the situation. Of all the times for Thorne to notice her, and invite her in for a meal, no less! Why couldn’t this have happened when she looked more like a woman and less like a drowned cat? Doesn’t matter, she told herself sternly. There’s no help for it now.

“Ready to head inside then?” His voice was warm and inviting and Maggie nodded, happy to have an excuse to leave the claustrophobic confines of the car. It would be so much nicer to wait for the tow truck inside. But now that she was looking forward to dinner with Thorne, a not-so-small part of her hoped the tow truck driver would take his time in driving out to the ranch. After all, it wasn’t every day she got to share a meal with the object of her affections.

The man in question put his hat back on and turned to face her. “Race you to the door?” Even in the dim light, Maggie could see the flash of mischief in his brown eyes. She felt an answering tug low in her belly and nodded, already groping for the door handle.

“You’re on.”

* * *

Thorne slid to a halt a few steps behind Maggie, grateful her back was to him so she didn’t see him slip on the smooth floor of the supply building. He righted himself just as she turned

around to give him a triumphant grin, and his heart thudded hard in a rhythm that had nothing to do with his near wipeout and everything to do with the woman standing in front of him.

She is so beautiful.

It wasn't the first time he'd had the thought, and he knew from experience it wouldn't be the last. But Maggie looked especially lovely tonight, despite her rumpled clothes and dripping hair. Any other woman would have looked soggy and bedraggled, but Maggie looked even more appealing. His eyes traced a tendril of blond hair that clung to the curve of her neck, and he wished he could follow the path with his fingertip.

Or his tongue.

Shaking himself free of the thought, he focused on her face and her big blue eyes, which sparkled with amusement. "I figured you'd be faster, seeing as how you chase down cows for a living." She tilted her head to the side with a teasing smile.

Thorne removed his hat and brushed the raindrops away with the side of his hand. "In my defense," he grumbled, "I'm usually on a horse." And he usually wasn't distracted by the sight of her curvy backside in front of him, her clothes clinging to her frame like a second skin...

This was a bad idea. But as soon as he had the thought he dismissed it. He couldn't very well let Maggie sit alone in her stalled car while a storm raged—his father had raised him better than to ignore a woman in need. And while he might like to get to know Maggie on a more personal level, he had to keep things

platonically. She was his father's bookkeeper, and Mac wouldn't appreciate him hitting on someone who worked at the ranch, even though she wasn't really an employee. His father would still view it as mixing business with pleasure, and given Thorne's parentage, it made sense the man had strong feelings on the subject.

It was no secret his mother, Livia Colton, had seduced Mac and then broken his heart. Thorne didn't know all the details, but his mother was a devious woman who stopped at nothing to get what she wanted. Mac had been a handsome man—he still was—and Thorne figured he'd caught Livia's eye. Livia wasn't one for delayed gratification, nor was she willing to let a little thing like her marriage vows stop her from having fun. He didn't know what spell she'd cast to get Mac to do what she wanted, but he was the product of that encounter.

In his more cynical moments, Thorne wondered why Livia had continued the pregnancy. He'd never bothered to ask, but he figured she must have thought Wes Kingston, her husband at the time, was the father. Of course, that little assumption blew up in smoke as soon as he was born and people got a look at the color of his skin. His skin color wasn't as dark as Mac's, but anyone could see he didn't share the pale shade of his brother River. It didn't take long for the rumors to start about his parentage. Knowing he was the topic of gossip had stung, and Thorne had found it was easier to spend time with Mac and the horses while he was growing up. The ranch had been his safe space, free from

whispers and rude stares.

As he'd gotten older, Thorne had been curious about Livia and Mac, but he knew better than to press for details. Mac never talked about it, and no amount of pestering was going to get him to open up about the experience. Thorne figured his father had his reasons for keeping things to himself. Some things were better left unsaid.

He pushed aside the image of his father's frowning face and gestured for Maggie to precede him up the stairs that led to his apartment over the supply building. He was careful to keep his eyes on the floor and off her, a task that proved rather difficult. She stopped when she reached his door, and he tugged his keys free from his pocket to let them both inside.

Thorne walked in first and flipped on a light, his eyes doing a quick scan of the apartment in search of any grievous messes that required immediate attention. He hadn't exactly considered the state of his home when he'd issued the dinner invitation, but he was relieved to see the place didn't look too bad. An empty glass sat on the worn wooden coffee table and his denim work jacket hung on the back of a chair, but other than that his apartment was fairly clean. It was a testament to how much he worked as opposed to any great housekeeping skills on his part, but no matter—the effect was the same.

Maggie hung back by the still-open door, appearing suddenly shy.

“Everything okay?” Was she having second thoughts? He

couldn't blame her if that was the case. They exchanged pleasant greetings every time their paths crossed, but they were basically strangers. It made sense she might worry about being alone with him in his apartment. "Would you rather I ordered a pizza and we sat in the office?" They'd still be alone together, but sitting there would keep things from feeling so...personal.

"I'm fine," she said. "I just don't want to drip water all over your floors."

"Don't worry about it," he quickly assured her. "Let me grab you a towel so you can dry off." He trotted down the hall to the bathroom and grabbed fresh towels from the cabinet, then returned and handed one to her. "Here you go."

Maggie took it with a smile. "Thanks." She began to dab at her face and clothes and he did the same. The towels quickly grew dark as they soaked up the rain, but Thorne was feeling drier already.

Thorne gestured down the hall. "The bathroom is the door on the right, if you'd like to freshen up a bit."

"I will, if you don't mind."

He shook his head. "Not at all. I'll just get things started in the kitchen."

Maggie moved past him and he caught a whiff of her scent—vanilla and coconut, like some kind of exotic, intoxicating drink. Thorne was suddenly very aware of how he must smell after working with the horses all day—sweaty, stale and probably on the stinky side. Too bad there wasn't time for a quick shower

before he started cooking.

But Maggie didn't appear to be bothered by his eau de livestock odor, so he shrugged and stepped into the small kitchen. Besides, he told himself as he gathered plates and silverware from the cupboards, this isn't a date or anything.

And wasn't that just too bad? He couldn't deny that Maggie had captured his heart from the beginning. He'd met her when she'd started doing the books for Mac, and it hadn't taken long to fall under her spell. But it wasn't just her appearance that drew him in. It was the way she looked at him, as if she saw him for his own sake and not as an object of speculation or gossip. His siblings and Mac were the only people to treat him like a normal person instead of a walking scandal. The fact that Maggie didn't appear to be fazed by his unorthodox roots and Livia's many crimes made her even more attractive, and he'd spent many an idle moment wondering what it would be like to get to know her better.

Maybe he could start tonight. It was the best chance he'd had in a while to really talk to her. Usually when she came out to work on Mac's books, Thorne was called away to a far part of the ranch to fix a fence or round up a stray calf. This was the first time in months he'd seen her for more than a minute, and he should make the most of it.

The table set, he opened the fridge and stared at the shelves with a critical eye. What to fix for dinner? Normally, he didn't give the subject much thought but tonight was different. He

wanted to make something nice that Maggie would enjoy, but not something with especially romantic overtones—he didn't want her to think he was coming on too strong. Since he didn't exactly have a fridge full of oysters and chocolate-covered strawberries, there really wasn't any danger of giving off the impression he was trying to woo her with food. But he did need to come up with a decent meal, lest she think he survived only on TV dinners and the odd PB&J.

Which wasn't too far from the truth, but still. He had his pride.

Thinking quickly, Thorne reached into the fridge and gathered up the ingredients to make a simple quiche, depositing them on the countertop. He set the oven to preheat, then rolled up his sleeves and got to work chopping vegetables.

“Can I help?”

Thorne jumped at the sound of Maggie's voice. The knife in his hand slipped, the sharp edge of the blade scoring the pad of his thumb. He dropped the offending tool with a muffled curse and stuck his thumb in his mouth, easing the sting of the cut with his tongue. He'd been so engrossed in his task he hadn't heard her walk in behind him, and now he looked like a clumsy oaf.

Maggie's eyes were wide with concern. “I'm so sorry—I didn't mean to startle you!”

He pulled his thumb out of his mouth and examined it. “Don't worry about it,” he told her. The cut was deep enough to bleed freely, but not so bad as to require stitches. It was more of an annoyance than anything else.

Before he could protest, Maggie grabbed his hand and pressed a wad of paper towels to his thumb. There was nothing remotely sexual about her touch, but a thrill shot through his limbs from the contact. She bit her plump bottom lip as she stared down at his hand, and she was standing so close he could feel the heat coming off her body. She was so focused on his hand he was free to study her face, and he traced the lines of her features with his gaze. Her eyelashes were still a little spiky from the rain and her cheeks held a soft pink glow that reminded him of the color of sunrise. There was a light dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose, something he'd never noticed before. And this close, he could see the faint laugh lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth.

Her vanilla-coconut scent filled his nose and went straight to his head, making him feel a little dizzy. He wanted to lean forward and bury his nose in her hair, to drink in her perfume until it filled his lungs and saturated his senses. He leaned forward without realizing it and would have done it if Maggie hadn't lifted her head and met his eyes.

Surprise flashed in her bright blue gaze as she realized how close he was. She sucked in a breath, and a look of such naked yearning appeared on her face Thorne found himself reaching for her instinctively. It was clear she wanted him, and his body rejoiced at the realization. There were a million reasons why this was a bad idea, but he ignored them all. He wasn't interested in thinking right now—he only wanted to feel.

His free hand found her cheek and he touched her gently, silently asking permission. She leaned into his touch, closing her eyes for a second as if savoring the contact. His heart started to pound, the blood whooshing in his ears as he bent his head, already anticipating the sweet pressure of her lips against his own.

He forced himself to go slow, to take his time. Thorne had fantasized about kissing Maggie ever since he'd met her, and he wanted this moment to be perfect for both of them. No matter what his hormones demanded, it wouldn't do to rush into the kiss. He wanted to give her time to change her mind, if that's what she wanted.

He needn't have worried. Maggie dropped his injured hand, grabbed his shoulders and stood on her toes, pulling herself up to meet his mouth. Her lips were warm and soft against his, and he tasted the subtle, waxy flavor of lip balm as he angled his head to get a better fit between them.

She made a soft humming sound and he smiled against her mouth, happy to hear she was enjoying this as much as he was. The pain in his hand receded as he focused on the woman in his arms. He'd wanted her for so long, but given his family history he had never dared to think she might want him back. He tried to lose himself in the moment but his worries swirled in his mind, a distracting chorus that prevented him from truly connecting with Maggie.

Livia's criminal actions had cast a shadow over Thorne's life,

leaving him feeling dirty and ashamed. Maggie was bright and good and kind, the type of woman who deserved a man with a decent family, a man she could build a life with and not have to worry that the sins of her mother-in-law would come back to haunt her own children. Livia had made a lot of enemies, and Thorne knew people weren't ever going to forget her crimes.

Disappointment was a small weight in Thorne's stomach. No matter how much he liked Maggie, no matter how good it felt to hold her, to kiss her, he needed to let her go. The people of Shadow Creek already looked down on him, thanks to his connection to Livia. He didn't want Maggie to be painted with the same brush. She didn't deserve to be the object of gossip, and if anyone learned of his interest in her, she'd be the talk of the town in no time. And not for the right reasons.

He eased back, slowly breaking the kiss. She stood frozen for a moment, her eyes closed and her lips pink and swollen from his attention. It was almost enough to make him throw caution to the wind and reach for her again, but he ruthlessly stomped on the urge. Maggie might not be thinking about her reputation right now, but he was.

She opened her eyes and he saw the question in the bright blue depths. Thorne cleared his throat, searching for the right words to explain why he'd pulled away.

"I'm sorry," he began.

She cut him off, her words lightning fast in the small kitchen. "I'm not."

Thorne rocked back on his heels a little, unsure of what to say next. If Maggie didn't consider this to be a bad idea, maybe he was overthinking things...

She stared up at him, her eyes blazing with a heated arousal that stoked the fire of his need. "What's wrong?" she asked softly. A flicker of doubt crossed her face. "Did I do something to upset you?"

"No!" His denial was instant and fierce and he felt himself reaching for her, wanting to erase her worry. He softened his voice and tried again. "No, you did nothing wrong. It's just... I'm worried. For you."

Her eyebrows drew together in puzzlement. "What do you mean?"

Thorne reached a hand up to rub the back of his neck, feeling his skin prickle with embarrassment. How to explain his concerns without sounding like an egocentric ass? My reputation, my family, my problems. My, my, my. She was going to think he was too wrapped up in his own life, but really, he just wanted to protect her. He heaved a mental sigh and nearly shook his head. This was why he preferred the company of horses. Conversations with people were just too complicated.

"You know who my mother is," he said, risking a glance up. Maggie nodded, but she still seemed confused. "You know what she did."

"Sure," she replied slowly. "Everyone does. But what's that got to do with you?"

“People talk,” he said simply. “They’ve done it all my life, and they’re not going to stop. Especially now that Livia’s crimes and escape from prison have provided new fodder for them. You don’t want to be associated with me.”

Understanding dawned in her eyes. “You’re trying to protect me from town gossip.” He nodded, happy she had caught on. Now she would put some distance between them and he could go back to cooking. They could pretend like this had never happened. The thought sent a pang through his chest, but it was for the best. He could relive the magic of their kiss when he was alone.

He reached for the knife, intent on picking up where he’d left off. But Maggie’s hand on his made him freeze.

“It’s sweet of you to worry for me.” She rubbed the pad of her thumb along the side of his hand, her touch simultaneously featherlight and electrifying. “But I’m a big girl, and I don’t care what people say.”

Thorne swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the sudden lump in his throat. The blood in his body was rapidly racing south, making thought and speech difficult. “You don’t?” he asked stupidly.

Maggie shook her head and moved her hand up his arm, trailing her fingertips along his skin in a teasing caress. She placed the palm of her other hand on his chest, directly over his heart. Could she feel it speed up in response to her touch?

“So if that’s the only thing stopping you...” she trailed off, her

suggestion clear.

“You’re sure?” His voice sounded hoarse even to his own ears. He held his breath as he waited for her response. It had been so long since he’d connected with a woman, and the revelations about Livia and her subsequent trial, imprisonment and recent escape had made him feel more alone than ever. Maggie was exactly what he needed right now, but he wasn’t going to soothe his own soul at the sake of her feelings.

Maggie nodded, her eyes shining brightly with an emotion he couldn’t name. “I’m sure. I like you, Thorne,” she said, sounding a little shy.

Her confession washed over him, breaking down the last of his resistance. He closed the distance between them and captured her mouth again. She reached up and clasped her hands behind his neck, returning his kiss with equal fervor.

Moving carefully so as not to break their connection, Thorne reached down and hooked his hands under the curve of Maggie’s bottom. He hitched her up, smiling against her mouth as she let out a little “oof” of surprise. She recovered quickly though, throwing her legs around his waist and locking her ankles together. The change in position afforded him new access to her body, and his blood heated in anticipation as he registered the warmth of her core.

With Maggie in his arms, Thorne headed for the bedroom. Her body bounced against his sensitive groin with every step, turning the short trip into a seemingly endless stretch of exquisite

torture. By the time he made it to the room he was nearly blind with need, and he rammed his shoulder hard against the doorjamb. He grunted in annoyance and felt the vibrations of Maggie's amusement in his chest.

“Are you okay?”

Thorne deposited her on the bed, then stepped back to toe off his boots. “Never better,” he said, the pain of the blow already forgotten. He paused, hands on his belt buckle. “Are you?” Was she changing her mind?

Maggie smiled and reached for him. She slipped her hands into the back pockets of his jeans and pulled him closer, urging him forward until his thighs hit the edge of the mattress. “Oh, yes,” she said softly. “I'm right where I want to be.”

Chapter 2

Three months later...

“Doing okay in here?”

Maggie looked up to find Mac standing in the doorway of his office, his light brown eyes friendly and warm. She nodded, but the sight of him made her stomach drop. He looks so much like Thorne!

Hoping her distress didn't show, she offered him a small smile. “I should be done soon, and then you can have your office back.”

“Oh, I'm not worried about that.” Mac propped his shoulder against the door frame and crossed his arms over his broad chest. “I just wanted to check on you. You seem a little...off today.”

Apparently she wasn't as good of an actress as she'd hoped. “I

appreciate your concern, but I'm fine," she said. "Just tired. Work has been keeping me busy." It was the truth—mostly. She had been feeling exhausted lately, and to make matters worse, she'd been dealing with a constant, low-level nausea that had turned her off most food. She made a mental note to schedule a doctor's appointment soon. Having dealt with endometriosis for the last fifteen years, Maggie was used to a certain amount of regular physical discomfort. But she knew from experience it was better to try to get ahead of the problem than to wait and allow it to get worse.

"Staying busy is a nice problem to have, especially when you work for yourself," Mac joked.

Maggie nodded again and leaned back a little in the chair. "It definitely is. I'm not complaining, believe me."

Mac studied her for a moment, his gaze searching as if he suspected she wasn't telling him the full truth. His scrutiny was kind, and under other circumstances, Maggie probably would have opened up to him. But not this time.

"I'll let you finish up," he said, pushing off the jamb and straightening. "I hope you know that if you ever need a sympathetic ear, I've got two."

"Thanks, Mac." Tears prickled her eyes and she blinked hard, turning back to the computer in the hopes of hiding her reaction. She heard his footsteps as he walked away and let her shoulders slump. Mac was a sweet man but she couldn't talk to him about her problems.

Not when they all centered around his son.

Thorne hadn't said one word to her since that night three months ago, unless you counted hello and goodbye and "let me find Mac for you." And she didn't. Those were the polite sentence fragments strangers used, not the language of two people who had shared their bodies with each other.

Even now, a shiver of arousal tripped down her spine at the memory of that night. Being with Thorne had been amazing. Their chemistry had been electric, with none of the awkward fumbling that often accompanied her first time with a man. She and Thorne had moved in a seamless rhythm, as if they had read each other's minds and knew exactly where to touch, how to move to give and receive pleasure. She'd never felt such a profound physical and emotional connection with a man before—being with Thorne had truly rocked her world.

Which had made it all the more painful when he'd pulled away from her in the days after their encounter.

It had been three months since that night, and in all that time, they'd only exchanged a handful of words. Her calls to him had gone unreturned, and when she'd dropped by the ranch to talk to him, he'd been "too busy" to see her. Maggie hadn't been expecting a proposal or a declaration of undying love, but she didn't understand why Thorne was giving her the cold shoulder. At first, she'd thought he was feeling shy. After all, things had gotten intimate very quickly and it was possible he was a little unsure of how to act now that the nature of their relationship had

changed. But every time Maggie saw him he seemed to go out of his way to avoid talking to her. It didn't take long for her to get the message that he wasn't interested.

Ordinarily, she would let it go and try to move on with her life. But Thorne's current behavior was so at odds with the way he'd treated her that night that she couldn't stop wondering where things had gone wrong.

Had she said something? They hadn't really done much talking, but perhaps she'd made a comment in an unguarded moment that had rubbed him the wrong way. If that was the case though, why hadn't he bothered to tell her? She felt a flare of irritation that straightened her spine. If Thorne was upset with her, the least he could do was respect her enough to tell her why. This wasn't junior high; they were both adults, and he needed to act like one.

It was the lack of closure that bothered her the most. If she knew what he was thinking, why he had changed his mind, it would be easier for her to move on. But his silence only provided space for her imagination to run wild, conjuring all sorts of explanations for his sudden reversal. She was tempted to force the issue, to grab his arm the next time she saw him and drag him into an empty room so they could talk. She deserved to know why he was treating her like a stranger! But something told her even if she did manage to catch Thorne alone, he wouldn't open up to her.

"It's better this way," she murmured. After their night

together, her crush on Thorne had morphed into a full blown infatuation. Even now, her heart ached at the thought of what might have been between them and the relationship they could have built together. But she deserved better than to be treated like a mistake. She deserved a man who wasn't ashamed to be with her, who was proud to stand by her side and wanted to be a part of her life. She had hoped Thorne was that man, and it would take time to deal with her disappointment at finding out he wasn't. At least she had found out his true feelings for her before she'd fallen all the way into the emotional quicksand of love. His silent rejection hurt, but she had learned a valuable lesson. The next time she met a man, she wouldn't be so quick to involve her heart.

Working quickly, she put the finishing touches on Mac's books and shut down her laptop. She really needed to talk Mac into moving his records and paperwork to a digital filing system—that way, he could simply email her the information and she wouldn't have to come out to the ranch every few months. Although it was nice to get out of Shadow Creek and to see the horses and cattle up close, with her growing client list she simply couldn't afford the commute time.

And if she was being truly honest with herself, she didn't want to risk seeing Thorne.

She put on a brave face every time their paths crossed, which fortunately wasn't often. But it was hard to pretend like nothing was wrong, and it was equally difficult to keep her anger and

frustration bottled up inside. She wasn't sure how much longer she could hold her tongue, and the last thing she wanted was to make a scene at Mac's ranch; she couldn't let her personal problems interfere with her professional duties.

"That's what I get for mixing business with pleasure," she muttered to herself. Lesson learned.

Maggie rose and slid the computer into its bag, then glanced around to make sure she'd gathered up everything. The place was orderly as always, the afternoon sun glinting off the metal handles of the filing cabinets that lined the far wall of the office. Maybe it was a little ridiculous to ask Mac to change a system he'd spent twenty years using, but in the end it would make his life easier.

Change was good, even though it was sometimes difficult.

She stepped out of the office into the barn and took a deep breath. Even though she was a city girl, Maggie had always loved the smell of a barn; the sweet scent of hay, the warm whiff of the horses and the potent tang of manure all combined in an instantly recognizable and deeply appealing aroma. Being in the barn, even if only for a few moments, had a relaxing effect on her.

At least, it normally did.

For the first time, Maggie wrinkled her nose at the familiar odors. Something seemed off about the smell—the hay emitted a sickly sweet fume that nearly gagged her. And the horse sweat had a musky tang that turned her stomach. But it was the scent of apples that sent her running out of the barn in search of fresh air; something about the combination of food and manure curdled

her earlier cup of coffee and caused bile to rise in her throat.

She took a deep breath and was assaulted this time by the smell of fresh-cut grass. But at least it was better than the olfactory overload of the barn. Shaking her head, Maggie headed for her car. Its pearlescent white paint sparkled subtly in the sun, a contrast to the dull red of her previous ride. It still felt a little strange to walk out of a building and not see her old sedan waiting for her, but she had to admit, the new car smell was pretty nice.

A movement by the trunk caught her eye and she glanced over in time to see a bird take flight from her trunk, squawking in protest. That in itself was not unusual, but something still seemed strange...

Maggie slowed her pace and squinted at the trunk, trying to put her finger on what she was seeing. Finally, it hit her—the air above her car was shimmering, bending and moving in the liquid, languid dance of heat. She normally saw it in the summer, when the superheated asphalt seemed to melt the air above the road. But why was it happening now?

As she watched, a thin tendril of smoke curled into the air, the wisp so fine she would have missed it if she hadn't been looking. Realization and shock slammed into her, followed quickly by disbelief. Her car was on fire! But how was that possible?

She glanced around the yard, searching wildly for something she could use to douse the flames. There was a water trough just inside the barn and she ran for it, dropping her computer bag in the dirt.

“Help!” Her mind raced as she searched for something, anything she could use to carry water back to her car. She needed the fire department, but they would take too long to get here. Maybe she could dump enough water on her trunk to put the fire out before it spread? But why was it on fire in the first place? Cars didn’t spontaneously ignite...

“Help!” she yelled again. Where was everyone?

“Maggie?” She heard her name, barely audible over the rush of blood in her ears. There was a bucket sitting a few feet away, full of grain. She dumped it out and scooped up water from the trough.

“My car,” she yelled, not bothering to look back. “Call the fire department!”

She ran back outside, water sloshing over the sides of the bucket and soaking her clothes. Smoke was pouring out of her trunk in earnest now, the stench of it filling the air and burning her nose. There was a shout behind her but before she could respond, the world exploded in a ball of heat and light.

Chapter 3

Thorne reached the barn door just in time to see Maggie’s car explode.

He caught his breath and threw up a hand to shield his face as a ball of fire shot into the air. A loud boom shook the building, startling the horses inside. A chorus of panicked whinnies rang out, but Thorne couldn’t spare a moment for them.

He had to find Maggie.

The stubborn woman hadn't listened to him when he'd called out to her. And whose fault is that? he thought bitterly. He hadn't exactly been treating her well lately.

His heart in his throat, he scanned the dooryard for Maggie, straining to see through the smoke that now obscured most of the area. He considered calling 911, but by the time the ambulance arrived Maggie might be dead. There was no time to waste. He stepped into the yard and immediately started coughing as the thick, black fumes filled his lungs. He pulled a bandana from his back pocket and clamped it over his nose and mouth, but it didn't help much. He had to find Maggie and get them both out of here, the sooner the better.

"Maggie!" He shouted her name, hoping she would hear him. But his stomach dropped as time ticked by without a response.

Was she dead? Just the thought made him want to vomit, but he had to consider the possibility. She'd been standing awfully close to the car when it exploded. He could still see her, arms wrapped around the bucket of water as she charged forward to save her vehicle. If only he'd been able to stop her!

He scanned the ground, his growing panic making it difficult for him to see. Oh, God, please let her still be alive!

"Thorne!" He heard his name from the direction of the barn but didn't stop searching. "Thorne, come back! It's too dangerous!"

"Help me find Maggie!" She was still here, he knew it. And he wasn't leaving without her, no matter how much smoke filled

the air. The car was a raging inferno now, and the sparse patches of grass near the dirt of the drive were turning black from the heat. It was only a matter of time before a spark caught one of the nearby buildings on fire...

The cries of the horses grew louder, and Thorne realized the other hands were busy moving them out of the barn. Good—that was one less thing to worry about.

He staggered through the smoke, tears streaming down his cheeks. An odd shape on the ground caught his eye, and he turned, blinking hard and squinting to focus.

It was a shoe.

“Maggie.” He tried to shout her name, but the smoke and his fear caused his throat to lock up. He ran over to find her lying on her back, her eyes closed and her face too pale for his liking.

For a split second, he froze, fear locking his muscles into place. She was so still... He’d never forgive himself if she was dead. If he hadn’t treated her so badly after their night together, she would have listened to him, would have waited for him to catch up instead of running headlong toward danger by herself. This was all his fault...

His hand shook a little as he reached out and gently placed his fingers on her throat. Her pulse beat sure and strong, and the breath shuddered out of his lungs in a gust of relief. She was still alive!

Moving quickly, he ran his hands along her body, feeling for any damp spots that would indicate blood from an injury. When

he came up dry, he hooked his hands under her arms and dragged her across the yard. They made it to the relative coolness of the barn just as a fire truck turned off the main road and came screaming up the drive to the dooryard.

The firemen wasted no time attacking the blaze. Under other circumstances, Thorne would have been right in the middle of the response, helping the other ranch hands with the horses and telling the firefighters what he knew about the situation. But he wasn't about to leave Maggie's side.

Someone knelt next to him but Thorne didn't bother to look over. His eyes were glued to Maggie's face, searching for a sign of awareness, a flicker or a twitch that would indicate she was regaining consciousness.

"What happened?" Mac spoke calmly amid the chaos, and the tension in Thorne's chest eased at the sound of his father's voice.

"Her car exploded." Thorne still couldn't believe it. Cars didn't just explode in real life—that was the stuff of movies. Something was definitely off here, but he couldn't worry about it right now.

"It exploded?" Mac echoed in disbelief. "How in the hell—"

"I don't know," Thorne said shortly. "But I watched it happen." The scene was burned into his brain; Maggie, her body limned in bright light for a split second as the fireball formed, then obscured by a cloud of smoke. It was a terrifying image that would live on in his nightmares for the rest of his life.

Mac gently placed his hand on Maggie's forehead and she moaned softly in response to his touch. "I can stay with her if

you want to check on the horses,” he offered.

“No.” Thorne didn’t bother to elaborate, but he felt his father’s gaze cut over to him in surprise.

There was a brief silence between them as Mac digested his response. “I see,” he said finally, his tone carefully neutral.

The wail of another siren cut through the air, and an ambulance pulled up behind the fire truck. Mac stood and began waving his arms, signaling for the paramedics. They arrived a few seconds later, arms laden with supplies. Mac took a few steps back to allow them access to Maggie, but Thorne couldn’t bring himself to move away. He tried to make himself as small as possible so he wouldn’t interfere with the medic’s exam but he kept a tight grip on her hand. Please be okay, please be okay, please be okay... What he wouldn’t give to see her open those big blue eyes!

“How long has she been unconscious?” asked one of the men.

Thorne jumped at the question, trying to get his brain back on track. It felt like it had taken him forever to find Maggie, but it couldn’t have been more than a few minutes. “Uh, maybe ten minutes?”

The medic nodded and placed a blood pressure cuff around her upper arm. He and his partner moved in a kind of synchronized dance, passing each other instruments and supplies with very little dialogue between them. It was clear they worked well together as a team, and it reminded Thorne of the easy back and forth that developed between a horse and his rider, when man

and animal spoke the same language, if only for a little while.

Maggie stirred under the medic's attention and began to shake her head back and forth. "Stay still for me," one of the men commanded. The pair of them worked to secure a foam collar around her neck and her eyes flew open in shock.

"What's your name?" the EMT asked. He gave her a second to respond, then asked again. "Can you tell me your name?"

Thorne held his breath, silently urging her to speak. Was she simply too dazed to answer, or was something more serious going on?

After an endless silence, she spoke. "Maggie." Her voice was weak and scratchy, sounding as if she'd screamed herself hoarse.

The medic nodded. "That's great, Maggie," he said encouragingly. "Can you tell me where you are?"

She frowned slightly. "Mac's ranch," she said slowly. "I was working on his books." She paused, and Thorne could tell by the expression on her face she was replaying her memories, trying to piece together what had happened. Then everything clicked into place, and her confused expression morphed into one of anxiety. "My car!" She tried to sit up, but both medics held her down.

"Whoa," said one of the men. "Try not to move, please. You may have a spinal injury."

She let out a small sound of distress that sliced into Thorne's heart. "It's okay, honey," he said, speaking before he could think twice about it. Given the way he'd treated her lately, she probably wouldn't take comfort from his presence, but he had to try.

Seeing her lying on the ground, bruised, battered and scared, triggered a wave of regret so strong it threatened to overwhelm him. He'd spent too much time pushing her away because of his fears—he owed her more than that, and he wasn't going to waste another minute before trying to make amends.

She glanced over at him, her eyes wide with fear. He saw her body relax as she registered his proximity, and felt something in his own chest ease. "Thorne?" She sounded lost and a little unsure, but he detected no anger in her voice.

It was better than he deserved.

"I'm here," he said, pushing aside his bitter self-recrimination. There would be time for that later—right now, he had to focus on supporting Maggie.

"Was anyone hurt?"

He shook his head, marveling at her question. Even in the middle of her own troubles, Maggie was concerned for others. "Just you," he said softly.

The medics counted to three in low voices; they rolled Maggie onto her side and slipped a long board under her, then rolled her to her back again. They secured her in place with thick black straps at her forehead, shoulders, knees and ankles, and one of the men moved to her head while the other knelt by her feet. In one smooth motion, they lifted her off the ground.

"Thorne!" The change in position seemed to startle her—she thrust a hand out, searching the air for him.

He jumped to his feet and jogged after the medics, catching

up to them at the ambulance. He slipped his hand into hers and she squeezed hard, causing his bones to grind together painfully. "Please don't leave me," she called out, a hint of desperation lacing her words.

Thorne didn't bother to ask permission; he climbed into the back of the ambulance and slid along the bench seat until he sat by Maggie's head. Her head was immobilized on the board, so he leaned forward until his face was directly over hers. Her blue eyes were bloodshot, but her gaze was steady as she stared up at him.

"I'm here," he said, repeating his earlier assurance. He swallowed hard, trying to calm his frayed nerves. "You're going to be okay." Was he trying to convince her, or himself? She looked fine to his untrained eye, but the medic's comment about a possible spinal cord injury made his guts cramp. He didn't want Maggie to see his fear though, so he tried to give her a comforting smile.

"I'm scared." The words were no more than a whisper, but Thorne heard them loud and clear. Me, too, he thought. Her confession made him feel a little bit better, as if they were working together as a team. A spark of confidence kindled to life in his chest, and his worries began to fade as he focused on being strong for Maggie.

He squeezed her hand gently and leaned down to speak into her ear. "It's all right," he said softly. "I won't leave you."

Not this time...

* * *

Maggie shivered slightly in the cool air of the hospital room. The thin cotton johnny they'd given her was practical for the staff, but it did little in the way of providing warmth.

Or modesty.

She tugged the mint-green blanket higher on her lap and tucked the edges under her legs. Fortunately, Thorne had stepped out of the room when she'd been asked to change, and he hadn't seen her out of the bed since. Not that it mattered. He already knew what she looked like naked.

“Are you cold?”

She jumped a little at the unexpected question. Thorne had been sitting silently by the bed since she'd returned from getting a scan, unmoving except for the gentle rise and fall of his shoulders with every breath. At first, she'd found his presence awkward and uncomfortable. She was not in the mood to discuss their one-night stand. But after a few moments, she realized Thorne wasn't here to talk. And as the silence in the room had continued, her agitation had gradually faded until she'd almost forgotten he was there.

Truth be told, she was surprised he'd noticed her movement. He'd spent the past three months doing a bang-up job of ignoring her, so why should now be any different?

She bit her lip to hold back a sarcastic response and settled for a nod.

“I'll see if I can find you another blanket.” He rose from the chair and lifted his hands over his head in a quick stretch. Maggie

followed the motion with her eyes, noting the flex and play of his muscles under the blue cotton shirt he wore. All at once, she was assaulted with the memory of his strong arms banded around her, the feel of his work-roughened hands on her body. She flushed, and was grateful his back was turned so he didn't see her reaction.

His boot heels tapped against the tile as he walked out of her room, and Maggie let out her breath in a sigh. Why was he still here? More importantly, what was she going to do about it?

She knew why he'd come to the hospital, of course. After all, she'd practically begged him to, the way she'd grabbed his hand like he was some kind of savior. The explosion of her car and the chaotic aftermath had left her terrified and vulnerable, and she'd latched on to the first familiar face she'd seen. It was kind of Thorne to indulge her moment of weakness, but now that the situation was under control, he no longer had to stay. He was probably itching to get back to the ranch to assess the damage and make sure the horses were okay, and as soon as he returned she would suggest he do so. Mac likely needed his help cleaning up the mess, and it would be easier for the both of them if they no longer had to tiptoe around each other.

A steady click announced Thorne's return and he slipped into the room carrying another blanket. Without saying a word, he walked over to the bed and carefully spread it across her legs.

The fabric was surprisingly warm and she burrowed into the heat, fisting her hands in the waffle-print of the weave. She felt like she'd been run over by a truck, and her bruised and battered

body welcomed the warmth. It soaked into her muscles, dulling the sharp edges of her aches and pains. “Thank you,” she said.

He nodded. “Is it helping?” His voice was slightly scratchy from disuse, and it brought back another memory from that night—or rather, the next morning, when she’d woken to find him watching her, an unreadable expression on his face. When she’d met his gaze, she’d seen a flash of something she’d sworn was love in his light brown eyes. But it was there and gone in the space between heartbeats, and as she’d watched, he’d thrown up a wall between them.

“I should make coffee,” he’d said, his voice rough with the morning. Innocent words, and yet Maggie had known in that instant the magic they’d shared the night before had not survived to see the dawn.

“It’s not too hot?” His question cut through her unhappy reverie and she blinked to find him staring down at her, his eyebrows furrowed slightly in concern. “The nurse took it out of some kind of incubator. It felt pretty warm to me when I was carrying it.”

“No, it’s perfect,” she said. Time for him to go...

Just as she opened her mouth to suggest he leave, the door swung open to admit her doctor.

“I’ve got test results,” he said, holding up a manila folder and wiggling it in illustration. Maggie nodded and offered him a smile. “That was fast.”

“Lucky for you, it’s a slow day.” Dr. Jenkins wheeled the stool

over to her bedside and sat, then glanced at Thorne. “Do you mind if we talk in front of your friend? I’m afraid someone is going to need to take care of you for the next few days, so it’ll be good for him to hear the instructions firsthand.”

Great. Just wonderful. Before Maggie could clarify that Thorne would definitely not be her caretaker, the man in question sat on her bed and pulled out his phone. “Do you mind if I record this so I don’t miss anything?”

Dr. Jenkins nodded. “Be my guest.” Then he turned to look at her. “Okay, so here’s the deal. The CT scan revealed you have a minor concussion and a few cracked ribs. There’s not much we can do about either of those things—you need rest and time to heal. And I do mean rest.” He tilted his head down so he could level a serious look at her over the top of his glasses. “Your brain has been bruised. It is imperative you give it time to heal. That means no reading, no watching TV, nothing that would cause any kind of physical or mental strain. How is your head now?”

“It hurts,” she admitted.

He nodded, as if he’d expected that response. “You can take Tylenol for the pain. Stay away from ibuprofen or aspirin, as they may cause bleeding.”

“What about her ribs?” Thorne asked, leaning forward as if he was hanging on the doctor’s every word.

Dr. Jenkins shrugged. “Again, rest is what she needs.” He turned back to Maggie. “We can’t really do anything except make you aware of the problem so you don’t exacerbate it. I want you

to do some breathing exercises a few times a day—I'll have a respiratory therapist come show you what to do before you're discharged."

Maggie nodded. "That doesn't sound so bad. Why do I need help?"

"Because I'm serious about you needing to rest. You basically need to stay in bed for the next few days—no fixing yourself food, or doing any household chores, or anything like that. The only time I want you up and about is when you're walking to and from the bathroom."

"But—" she began, but the doctor shook his head.

"No buts. Besides, I'm pretty sure the OB will tell you the same thing."

Maggie frowned. "What are you talking about? Why would an obstetrician have anything to say about my recovery?"

Dr. Jenkins stared at her for a moment, as if reassessing her mental status. Then realization dawned on his face, along with a flicker of horror. "Oh, dear," he said, under his breath. "You didn't know."

"Know what?" Maggie's stomach started to churn threateningly and her heart pounded hard against her breastbone, causing the monitor beside her bed to beep in protest. Dr. Jenkins glanced at it and pressed a button, silencing the electronic noise.

"Ah, take a deep breath for me and try to relax," he said. He pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose and ran a hand through his graying hair, clearly uncomfortable.

“Doctor,” Maggie replied, careful to keep her gaze locked on him and away from Thorne. “Why am I going to see an obstetrician today?”

The older man let out a breath and met Maggie’s eyes, and the sympathetic look on his face set her world spinning.

“Because you’re pregnant.”

Chapter 4

Because you’re pregnant.

Thorne heard the doctor’s statement, but his brain refused to comprehend what was going on. He examined the words, looking at each one individually, trying to put them together in some new combination that didn’t translate into an earthshaking announcement. But no matter how hard he tried to search for an alternate translation, he kept arriving at the same conclusion.

Maggie was going to have a baby.

As he came to terms with the news, a question formed in his mind: Was the baby his?

He glanced over at Maggie. Her skin was white as chalk and her eyes were wide with disbelief. Either she was one hell of an actress, or she truly hadn’t known she was pregnant. He saw her mouth move and shook his head to clear it of the buzzing in his ears.

“Are you sure?” she was asking.

Dr. Jenkins nodded and placed his hand over Maggie’s in a kindly gesture. “Quite sure. The fetus was clearly visible on the CT scan.”

Maggie shook her head, as if denying the truth of the doctor's words. "But I can't get pregnant!"

The older man smiled ruefully. "If I had a nickel for every time I've heard that..."

"No, you don't understand," Maggie said forcefully. "I have endometriosis. I've had it since puberty. It's so bad I had a surgical ablation six months ago to help relieve my symptoms. My gynecologist told me I probably wouldn't be able to have children due to all the scar tissue that's developed over the years."

Dr. Jenkins nodded. "I hear what you're saying. But the scan clearly showed you're pregnant. As for the how of it, I think the obstetrician will be better suited to answer your questions. That's not my area of expertise."

Thorne finally found his voice. "How far along is she?" He held his breath, feeling like he was standing on the edge of a cliff. What the doctor said next would determine whether he plunged into a free fall or stepped back to the safety of his normal life.

Dr. Jenkins cast him a glance. "I can't say for sure—" he began, but Maggie cut him off.

"Three months," she said evenly. She met Thorne's gaze; her blue eyes glinted with challenge, as if she was daring him to question the paternity of the baby.

The doctor nodded. "I'd say that's consistent with fetal measurements and development. The obstetrician will likely be able to narrow it down further."

"I see," Thorne said weakly. He tried to take a deep breath,

but there wasn't enough oxygen in the room. He gasped, his chest tightening with effort. His fingertips began to tingle and he leaned forward, trying to stand.

A hand shot out and grabbed his upper arm, holding him steady. Thorne looked up and Dr. Jenkins's concerned face filled his vision. "Are you okay?"

Thorne nodded. "I just need some air." He managed to get his feet under him and staggered out of the room, feeling like his body weighed a thousand pounds.

A baby. He was going to be a father.

He found a chair in the hall and collapsed into it, grateful for the support. How was this even possible?

Well, he knew how it had happened. He remembered every second of that night—every touch, every kiss, every sigh. He'd been living off the memories for the last three months, knowing it was all he'd ever have.

But even though he'd finally indulged in his attraction to Maggie, he'd made sure to use protection. He wasn't ready to be a father, and he hadn't wanted to saddle her with a child, either.

Especially not his child.

A cold chill gripped his heart as he thought of his brother Knox and his nephew, Cody. A few months ago, one of Livia's old cronies, Earl Hefferman, had kidnapped Cody in a bid to get back at Livia for cheating him out of some money. Fortunately, Knox had found his son safe and sound, but the aftershocks of that terrifying ordeal still affected them all.

What would happen if Livia or, God forbid, her enemies found out about this baby? He harbored no illusions about how his mother would react; she would see this child as another pawn to be moved around in her sick game of chess. And her accomplices would feel the same way. His stomach cramped at the thought of an innocent baby being exposed to such wicked people. Maggie wasn't safe, either. As long as she carried his child, she was a target.

And it seemed like someone was already trying to hurt her.

He shuddered, imagining the giant fireball that had consumed her car. A few more minutes, and Maggie would have been inside the car when it exploded. She was definitely a target, but who would want to do her harm? And more importantly, why?

Given the look of shock on her face, she hadn't known about the pregnancy, which meant no one else did, either. But it was possible Livia or one of her goons had figured out that Maggie held a special place in his heart. Livia wasn't above hurting an innocent person to get what she wanted, and if she had her sights set on punishing Thorne for his lack of support during her trial it made sense she would target the one woman he'd shown an interest in, even if he had walked away after their night together.

He wouldn't put it past Livia to have hired people to keep tabs on her children, reporting back any developments that she could use against them. And his night with Maggie would not have gone unnoticed. It had been years since he'd dated anyone, and he didn't enjoy one-night stands. A woman staying the night

in his apartment certainly would have been news, and he could picture all too well Livia's gleeful reaction at the discovery of a new button she could push.

Thorne shook his head, cursing under his breath. He'd wasted so much time worrying about Maggie's reputation should anyone find out about their connection. He should have realized the true threat came from Livia, especially after her escape from prison months ago.

"There you are."

Thorne glanced up to find his brother Knox walking toward him. A wave of relief washed over him; next to Mac, Knox was the glue that held their family together. He'd always looked up to his older half brother and just seeing him now made Thorne feel like everything was going to be okay.

"What are you doing here?" Thorne stood and met his brother halfway down the hall. "It's good to see you, but what's going on?" A terrible thought occurred to him, and Thorne's stomach dropped. "Are Cody and Allison okay?" God, had someone targeted them, as well?

Knox clapped a hand on his shoulder, steadying him. "They're fine, everyone's okay," he said. "I'm here for you. Mac called me," he explained. "Said there'd been an explosion at the ranch and you were here with Maggie."

Thorne nodded, glad to know no one else had been hurt today. "She's in with the doctor now. She has a concussion and some bruised ribs." He paused, wondering if he should tell Knox the

rest of the news. Maggie might not want anyone to know about the baby yet.

Knox picked up on his hesitation. “And?” he prompted.

Ah, to hell with it. Her pregnancy affected his life, too, and Knox wasn’t the kind of man to spread gossip. Still, Thorne glanced around to make sure no one was nearby to overhear his next words. “And she’s, uh, she’s pregnant,” he said, keeping his voice low.

Knox’s eyebrows shot up. “By the way you’re acting, can I assume the baby is yours?”

Thorne nodded. “I think so.”

“You think so? You mean you don’t know for sure?”

Thorne looked down, resisting the temptation to scuff the toe of his boot on the shiny linoleum floor. “We haven’t had a chance to talk yet.”

Knox leaned back against the wall, blowing out his breath in a sigh. “Well. That will be some conversation.”

Thorne fell into place beside his brother with a small laugh. “Yeah.”

Knox was silent a moment. Then he leaned over and bumped Thorne’s shoulder with his own. “Don’t you know how birth control works?”

“We used a condom.” Thorne felt his face heat and knew he was blushing. “I still have that box you bought me.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Knox turned to face him, incredulity shining in his bright blue eyes. “I gave you that box

when you were still in high school! Do you mean to tell me you haven't used them all yet?"

"No." Thorne's shoulders hunched and he looked down again, searching for an escape from this conversation. "Wendy Smithson broke up with me a few weeks after your little sex ed lesson, and I haven't really dated a lot of women since then."

"Yeah, but..."

"There were a hundred condoms in the box," Thorne pointed out dryly. "I'm glad you think so highly of me, but I haven't had a lot of success with women. I understand horses a lot better."

"Who doesn't?" Knox muttered. He ran a hand through his hair, ruffling the short light brown strands. "You know they have a shelf life, right? They're not as reliable after the expiration date. The latex starts to break down."

Thorne leveled an arch stare at his brother. "Do tell."

Knox chuckled and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Fair enough. I suppose congratulations are in order, then?"

"I..." Thorne trailed off, wondering how he should respond. In truth, he wasn't quite sure how he felt about the news. He'd gone from an initial sense of shock to fear over what Livia might do to Maggie or the baby. He hadn't really considered what having a baby actually meant, and all the ways in which his life was going to change. Having children was something he'd thought was years down the line. To be faced with the prospect now was a bit unsettling, and to be honest, it was still too soon for him to know what to think.

Knox lifted one eyebrow, taking in his reaction. “Still in shock?”

Thorne nodded. It was easier than explaining everything, and it was close to the truth.

“I can relate,” his brother said, offering a sympathetic smile.

Several months ago, Knox had reunited with his old high school love, Allison, and learned that her son, Cody, was his. At the time, Thorne hadn’t wanted to pry into his brother’s personal life, especially after the boy was kidnapped. But now, faced with his own paternity surprise, Thorne needed some advice.

“How did it work for you?” he asked bluntly. “I mean, how did you come to terms with learning about Cody?”

Knox scratched the side of his jaw, his expression turning thoughtful. “It was different for me,” he said. “I already knew about Cody, I just didn’t know I was his father. I realized it as soon as I saw him, though. Everything just kind of clicked into place.”

“Yeah, but didn’t you worry about how your life was going to change? How different things would be now that you have a child?”

“Of course I did. And let me tell you, everything does change once you have a kid. There’s really no way to prepare for that—it’s just something you have to accept. It’s kind of like trying to swim against the current. You can struggle and fight to stay where you are and burn up all your energy for nothing. Or you can relax and let yourself be carried into your new life.” He shook his head

with a rueful laugh. “I’m terrible at metaphors, but hopefully you get the idea.”

“I don’t know if I can be that Zen about it,” Thorne said. He was a planner by nature and he liked routine. Some might call his life boring, but it served him well with the horses—his methodical, careful actions engendered their trust, which was a gift he never took for granted.

Knox tilted his head to the side, his gaze bright with understanding. “It’ll come,” he said quietly. “Besides, you have months to adjust to the idea of being a father.”

“That’s true,” Thorne allowed. Hopefully it was enough time to figure things out.

“For what it’s worth, I think you’re going to make a great dad.”

Thorne closed his eyes, absorbing Knox’s words. It meant a lot to know that the brother he looked up to thought he could do this job. Maybe he could borrow his confidence until he found his own.

“I hope you’re right,” he whispered.

“I am. Now, let’s go check on your girl.”

Thorne opened his mouth to correct Knox, but thought better of it. Maggie wasn’t his girl, not anymore. His actions had seen to that. But now that she and his unborn child were in danger, would she let him back into her life?

* * *

One of the overhead lights was about to burn out.

It flickered randomly, alternately dimming and flaring bright,

humming faintly in the otherwise quiet room. Maggie hadn't noticed it before, but now that Dr. Jenkins had left and she was alone—

No, she thought. I'm not alone. Not really.

She placed her palm flat on her abdomen, right between her hip bones. Over her baby.

Baby. She marveled at the word, hardly daring to believe it. Was it really true?

Of course it was, she thought. Dr. Jenkins wouldn't lie. Not about something like that. She closed her eyes, picturing the older man's face as he'd told her the news. You're pregnant. He'd said the words so casually, as if he spoke them every day. Perhaps he did. But to Maggie, those two little words did more than just explain her recent fatigue and nausea. They signified a miracle had taken place, marking a transformation she'd never thought she would experience.

She hadn't really given the idea of children much thought, until her doctor had told her that due to her endometriosis she likely wouldn't be able to get pregnant. The painful condition that had plagued her since the onset of puberty had damaged her body, leaving swaths of scar tissue in its wake.

"Your fallopian tubes are almost completely blocked," Dr. Owens had said, her voice calm and kind as she broke the news. She pointed to two thin lines on the diagram she held, the tip of her pen leaving little blue dots against the pink of the illustration. "It's a delicate area to begin with, and because of the chronic

inflammation, I'm afraid it's been damaged beyond repair. I'm so sorry."

It had taken a while for the news to sink in. Maggie had been nineteen at the time, still at a stage in her life where the idea of children was more scary than appealing. But as the years had ticked by, a sadness tinged with anger had filled her. It was one thing to not want children; it was quite another to have that choice taken away before she'd even had a chance to decide for herself.

For a while, she'd stopped dating. Most men wanted a family, and since she wasn't capable of having a baby, she didn't want to fall in love with someone who would eventually leave her or grow to resent her for the things she couldn't provide. Better to be alone than experience the pain of unmet expectations.

Except...she'd grown tired of being single. There had to be a few men out there who didn't want kids, or who would be happy to adopt. She just had to find them.

Her girlfriends Sonia and Amber had celebrated her return to the dating scene. They'd been after her for a while to take a chance. And while Maggie had never been one to act rashly, their words had clearly influenced her because she hadn't hesitated to hop into bed with Thorne as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

Now she had one hell of a souvenir to remember him by.

She closed her eyes, trying to imagine what the baby might look like. Thorne's light brown eyes and her blond hair? Or her blue eyes and his brown hair? How would her pale skin blend

with his darker shade? Whatever the result, she knew their child was going to be beautiful.

“I’ll take care of you,” she promised softly, a sense of determination settling over her like a second skin. And she would. Better to be a single mother than to deal with a man who might not be interested in being a father. This baby was a new life, a blank slate. Maggie was determined to do right by her child, even if that meant her own life would be more difficult than she’d wanted.

A soft knock interrupted her thoughts. “Come in,” she called. Anticipation made her stomach flutter—was the obstetrician here to tell her more about the pregnancy?

The door opened, and Thorne poked his head around the edge. “Hello,” he said, sounding a little shy. “Do you mind if we come in?”

We? Who was he talking about? Curiosity had her nodding her head.

Thorne pushed into the room, followed by his older brother, Knox. Maggie didn’t know Knox all that well, but Mac often spoke well of him, so that was enough for her.

Thorne resumed his seat next to her bed while Knox stood at her side. He offered her a kind smile. “I heard you had quite a scare today. How are you?”

Maggie cut a glance over to Thorne. Had he told his brother about the baby? He met her eyes, his expression unreadable. “I’m okay,” she said carefully. “A little shaken up.”

Knox nodded. “That’s to be expected.”

“Are you here as part of an investigation?” She knew he’d retired from the Texas Rangers, but perhaps Knox was consulting with the police because the explosion had taken place on Mac’s ranch.

He shook his head. “Not exactly. Mac called me and told me what had happened. I was in the area, so I figured I’d stop by and see how you and Thorne were holding up.”

Maggie leaned back against the too-small pillow with a sigh. She hadn’t really given the explosion much thought after learning about her pregnancy—funny how her priorities had already shifted. Now the memory of her new car going up in flames invaded her thoughts, and the heavy weight of worry dropped onto her shoulders.

“I’ll be doing much better when the police figure out why my car blew up.”

Knox shifted, cocking one hip and hooking his thumb through a belt loop. “See, that’s the thing,” he said, his tone friendly. “In my experience, cars just don’t explode for no reason. This was the result of a deliberate act.”

A chill skittered down Maggie’s spine, and goose bumps broke out on her arms. “There’s no chance this was some kind of mechanical flaw? A frayed wire, maybe?”

Knox gave her a pitying look. “I don’t think so.”

Maggie suddenly felt very small and vulnerable. She drew her knees up to her chest and hugged them, then practically jumped

out of her skin when a hand fell on her shoulder. She looked over to find Thorne standing next to her, his expression apologetic.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s okay,” she said, surprised to find that she meant it. She hadn’t expected Thorne to touch her, but she hadn’t minded it, either. It seemed her body was willing to draw comfort from any source, no matter what her heart had to say about it.

Dismissing the moment, she returned her focus to Knox and the issue at hand. “Why would someone want to blow up my car? I’m nobody important. What could possibly be the motive here?”

Knox opened his mouth to respond, but a voice from the door beat him to it.

“Excellent questions, Ms. Lowell. Fortunately, I think I have the answers.”

Chapter 5

Sheriff Bud Jeffries strolled into Maggie’s hospital room, acting like he owned the place. He stopped at the end of her bed and eyed her like a cat sizing up a trapped mouse. Then his gaze shifted to Knox and Thorne, and his brown eyes hardened.

Thorne felt an answering disgust rise in his chest. There was no love lost between the sheriff and his family. The man’s incompetence had been on full display after Cody’s abduction—if Knox hadn’t gotten involved, they’d probably still be looking for the boy.

Bud returned his focus to Maggie. “I have a few questions for you, Ms. Lowell. Gentlemen,” he said, not bothering to look at

Thorne or Knox again, “I’m going to need you to leave.”

Maggie cast a quick glance at Thorne, her eyes wide. Her distress ignited his protective instincts, and he placed a hand on her shoulder in a show of solidarity. “I’m not going anywhere,” he said, quietly but firmly. He didn’t want to pick a fight with the sheriff, but he wasn’t going to let the man run roughshod over Maggie just because of her connection to the Coltons.

Bud didn’t bother to hide his disdain as he glared at Thorne. “That wasn’t a request.”

Thorne’s blood began to boil, but he clenched his jaw and held his tongue. Jeffries smirked, knowing the barb had hit home.

“I want them to stay,” Maggie said.

Bud glanced at her dismissively. “I’m afraid you don’t have much to say about it.”

Finally, Knox stepped forward. “Sheriff Jeffries, are you here to make an arrest?”

The man’s expression turned sour, as if he’d just bit into a lemon. “No,” he said grudgingly.

“Then, as I’m sure you know, Ms. Lowell’s visitors are not required to leave the room for this conversation.”

“I’ll take her down to the station if I have to.” Bud’s chest puffed out in belligerence, the buttons of his shirt straining to contain his indignation over Knox’s challenge to his authority. Thorne eyed the one right above his belly button and smothered a smile as he imagined the button popping off. The sheriff was already a joke; losing a few buttons would only enhance his

resemblance to a clown.

Knox nodded. "That's one option," he said agreeably. "But she hasn't been cleared medically yet, so you'll probably be waiting awhile. Why don't you just ask your questions now?"

Bud narrowed his eyes and his voice dripped venom as he spoke. "You're not a Texas Ranger anymore, Colton. Keep this up, and I'll arrest you for interfering in an active investigation."

Knox didn't respond, but his level stare made it clear he wasn't impressed by the threat.

Maggie found her voice again. "You said you have some answers." It was an obvious attempt to change the subject and get things back on track. Thorne gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze in appreciation. Bud Jeffries had felt threatened by Knox ever since Cody's kidnapping, and the man couldn't resist baiting Knox into a pissing contest every time the two of them crossed paths. His brother generally refused to engage, but Bud took any response as a challenge.

Better him than me, Thorne thought. Knox's tolerance for the sheriff was several orders of magnitude greater than Thorne's. If the shoe was on the other foot and Bud Jeffries was going after him, Thorne didn't think he would handle it nearly as well as Knox.

After a moment's silence, Jeffries turned back to Maggie. "Do you have any enemies, Ms. Lowell?"

She frowned and shook her head. "I don't think so, no."

"No professional rivals, anyone who views you as competition

and wants to see you fail?”

“Not that I know of.”

“What about personally? Anyone angry with you, or want to see you come to harm?”

“No.”

Bud flicked a glance at Thorne. “You sure about that? Because if this is the company you keep...” he trailed off, the implication clear.

Thorne narrowed his eyes at the man, but didn’t speak. He refused to give Jeffries the satisfaction of a response.

“No.” Maggie’s voice was sharp and cold, and Thorne blinked, touched by her unspoken defense of him. It was far more than he deserved, given his recent actions toward her. Further proof that Maggie was far too good for the likes of him.

The sheriff ignored her tone. “All right then,” he said. “That’s all I needed to hear.” He turned and headed for the door.

“Wait,” Maggie called out. “Do you have any suspects?”

Bud paused by the door and nodded. “I sure do.”

“Can you tell me who it is?” Maggie pressed. Thorne’s exasperation grew with every passing second—it was clear Jeffries was dragging out the process, enjoying the drama of the moment. He was a disgrace to the office of sheriff, and not for the first time, Thorne wished Knox would run for the position.

Bud tilted his head to the side, his brown eyes glittering with satisfaction.

“You, Ms. Lowell.”

* * *

The man hunkered down at the edge of the tree line bordering Mac's farm, careful not to make any sudden moves that might give away his presence. The barn and main buildings were about fifty yards away, so realistically there was little chance anyone would see him, especially with everyone focused on the smoldering remains of the car in the dooryard. Still, best to be careful.

He lifted binoculars to his eyes and peered through the lenses, surveying the aftermath of the explosion. The car was nothing more than a steaming pile of twisted metal, a broken skeleton lying naked in the dirt. Firemen still moved around it, searching for any residual flames among the smoke, but he didn't linger on the sight.

He was interested in other things.

He turned his gaze to the surrounding buildings, searching for signs of damage amid the breaks in the thick gray smoke polluting the area. The stables were directly in front of the car, but from this angle he couldn't tell if the explosion had had the desired effect. The supply building to the right of the stables showed gaping black holes where the glass of the windows had shattered. The structure to the left hadn't fared much better—the wood paneling was scorched and several patches of shingles had blown right off the roof. He felt a small measure of satisfaction as he surveyed the area. It wasn't quite the Armageddon he'd hoped for, but it wasn't bad for a first effort.

Unfortunately, his enjoyment was short-lived.

As he watched, Mac emerged from the barn. His clothes were streaked with soot and his face gleamed with sweat, but otherwise he looked fine. Damn him.

He thought he'd timed things perfectly; he'd been watching Mac for weeks, learning the man's daily routine. Mac was a creature of habit, and he should have been crossing the dooryard from the stables to the supply shed at the exact moment the car detonated.

Instead, he'd still been inside the stables, safe from the brunt of the explosion.

It hadn't been a total loss, though. A woman had been hurt. He hadn't recognized her, and she didn't look like an employee—her blue skirt and wedge sandals were far too impractical for ranch work. For a brief second, he'd thought she might be Mac's lover. Why else would she have noticed the fire in Mac's trunk? But then he'd seen the way Thorne had come flying out of the stable after her and realized he was the one who cared about her.

He'd filed that tidbit of information away, knowing it might come in handy later.

As he watched, Mac gave the car a wide berth and walked over to one of the men standing next to the gleaming red fire truck. He pulled a green bandana out of his back pocket and mopped his brow, his lips moving as he spoke to the fireman. The pair of them stood in place for a moment, talking and gesturing to the remains of the car and the buildings. Finally, Mac held out his

hand and the two men shook, both of them blissfully unaware of his surveillance.

He couldn't read lips, especially not at this distance, but it was easy enough to guess that Mac was thanking the men for saving his property. Their timely arrival had spared the nearby buildings further damage and probably saved lives. Mac and that son of his likely thought they had dodged a bullet today, and in truth, they had.

Too bad they didn't realize what was coming next.

The man smiled as he slipped the binoculars back into their black leather case. He pushed himself off the hard dirt and headed down the gentle slope of the hill, back toward the car he'd parked on the side of one of La Bonne Vie's abandoned service roads. Today had been a practice run of sorts. He'd discovered the explosives weren't as reliable as he'd hoped; the initial fire in Mac's trunk had tipped that woman off and in the future, he didn't want there to be any warning before he struck. Time to try a different tack for his next move.

He unlocked his car and climbed inside, tossing the binoculars into the passenger seat next to the birding book. The thick tome was his excuse if anyone stopped him and wanted to know why he'd been roaming around the area in the wake of the explosion. He hadn't seen a large police presence at the ranch, but that didn't mean they weren't in the area. Better to be prepared for any eventuality, no matter how unlikely it may be. He had to stay out of trouble, at least until he'd taken care of Mac.

He pointed the car north and headed back into town. Thanks to today's events, Mac would be on edge for a while. And as much as it pained him, he was going to have to wait to strike again. He needed Mac to let his guard down so he could catch him unawares—it was the best way to ensure he was successful.

“Enjoy your time,” he muttered, glancing in the rearview mirror at the smoky haze rising from the ranch. “You don't have much more of it.”

Chapter 6

Bud Jeffries did his best to slam the door as he left, no doubt hoping to make a dramatic exit. Under any other circumstances, Thorne would have laughed at the man's pathetically obvious attempt to seem important. But one glance at Maggie's pale, worried face and his animosity toward the incompetent sheriff melted away.

“I don't understand,” she said softly, her voice small and scared. “How could he think I would blow up my own car?”

Thorne sat on the edge of her bed and reached for her hand. Even though he had no right to touch her and he knew she might well pull away from him, he wanted—no, needed—to connect with her.

“Bud Jeffries is just being an ass,” he said. She glanced over at him, her expression uncertain. But she left her hand in his, a gesture he didn't take for granted.

“He's trying to scare you,” Knox added. “He's a man on a power trip, that's all.”

“I’m not so sure,” she said, her tone doubtful. “He seemed pretty serious to me. But why am I his chief suspect? It was my car that was destroyed!”

Knox lifted one shoulder in a dismissive shrug. “It’s not unheard of for people to ruin their own property in the hopes of filing a fraudulent insurance claim. When people need money, they can get pretty desperate.”

Maggie frowned and shook her head. “But surely if he did any actual investigating he’d know I’m not in financial trouble. There’s no reason for me to try something like that.”

Thorne snorted. “You’re assuming the man is capable of doing his job properly.” Jeffries had displayed nothing but incompetence during the search for Cody, and Thorne wasn’t about to give him the benefit of the doubt now. A small kernel of fear formed in his belly. If the sheriff was so shortsighted as to really believe Maggie was responsible for the explosion, he would probably dismiss any evidence to the contrary. That meant the true culprit was free to strike again.

And next time Maggie and the baby might not be so fortunate. “I don’t want you to worry about this,” Knox said. “I still have some friends on the Shadow Creek police force. I’ll put out a few feelers, see where the investigation stands. It’s going to be okay.” He offered her a reassuring smile. “I’ll go make some calls and check in when I know anything.”

“Thank you,” she said. Thorne saw her body relax into the mattress and felt a flash of gratitude toward Knox for his offer.

If anyone could point the police in the right direction, it was his brother. All the more reason for him to run for the sheriff's office...

"It's my pleasure," Knox replied. "I'm happy to help." He turned to go and Thorne stood up. "Let me walk you out," he offered. He gave Maggie's hand a gentle squeeze and let it go. "I'll be back in a few minutes, okay?"

She nodded, and for a brief second he wondered if she would miss him while he was gone. Probably not. He shook off the thought and walked to the door to join his brother.

Knox turned to him once they were in the hall, the door safely closed behind them. "What's on your mind?"

"The investigation," Thorne said shortly. "I'm worried the sheriff is going to let his hatred for our family blind him to the evidence. You and I both know Maggie didn't do this."

Knox nodded thoughtfully. "I wouldn't worry too much about it," he said. "The guys on the force are pretty sharp. It won't take long to clear her from the suspect list."

"That's not all I'm worried about." Thorne briefly described his concerns regarding Livia and her goons, and his fears for Maggie's and the baby's safety.

His brother stilled, no doubt reliving the horror of his own son's kidnapping. "Do you think I'm overreacting?" Thorne asked, feeling a little paranoid. After all, Livia hadn't been seen or heard from in weeks. She was a smart woman; she likely had no desire to get arrested again, so she'd probably gone to ground

after sticking her neck out to kill Cody's kidnapper and Leonor's assailant.

"No," Knox said flatly. "I don't think we should discount the possibility that Livia is somehow involved. It would be a mistake to underestimate her."

"What can we do?" He'd feel better if there was some concrete action he could take to protect Maggie and his unborn baby. But short of wrapping Maggie in Kevlar and locking her in a windowless room, there was no surefire way to keep her safe.

"Stay close," Knox said. He glanced back at the closed door. "As close as she'll let you, anyway. I got the impression things aren't totally smooth between you two?"

Thorne shook his head, reluctant to go into the details. He felt bad enough as it was; he didn't want his brother knowing just how much of a fool he'd been. "I'm working on it," he said.

"You want my advice?" Knox continued before Thorne had a chance to respond. "Grovel. A lot. Flowers, chocolates, you name it. But get back into her good graces, and the sooner the better. Both of you are going to experience a life-changing event soon. It'll be a lot easier if you can face it as a team."

Thorne nodded, knowing his brother was right. He didn't think a bouquet of roses would earn Maggie's forgiveness, but it might help soften the ground. "Thanks."

"Anytime." Knox set off down the hall. "I'll call you," he said over his shoulder.

Thorne stood by the door to Maggie's room for a moment,

considering his options. They clearly needed to talk. He owed her an apology—had owed her one for quite a while, in fact. Now might be the best time to offer it, while she was stuck in the hospital bed. It was a little cowardly of him to use her situation to his advantage, but he did have things to say and he wanted to make sure she heard them. Since she was essentially a captive audience until the doctor released her, he might as well bite the bullet and plunge ahead, despite the fact that he wasn't used to trying to explain his actions to someone else. Still, he had to try. He might not get another opportunity like this again.

Nerves jangled in his stomach, making him feel like he'd just jumped off a galloping horse. He took a deep breath and decided to take a page from Knox's book. Flowers might not be the answer to every problem, but they certainly wouldn't hurt. And the walk to the hospital gift shop would give him a little time to compose his thoughts.

He glanced around, checking to see if there was a doctor nearby who might be going to see Maggie. He definitely didn't want to miss the obstetrician's visit, provided Maggie was okay with him staying in the room. Fortunately, there were no white coats in sight.

He set off down the hall in search of a peace offering. He couldn't think of the right words to say, but hopefully the flowers would help make up for that.

He'd find out soon enough.

* * *

Maggie sighed and rubbed her eyes, trying to massage away the dull throb of her headache. Now that she knew she was pregnant, she didn't want to take anything stronger than Tylenol for fear of hurting the little life inside her. She mentally reviewed her actions over the last few months, trying to recall if she'd done anything that may have harmed the baby. Nothing came to mind; she hadn't so much as had a drink since the beginning of the year. That was good news for the pregnancy, but a rather sad commentary on her social life.

Or lack thereof.

What would her friends say about this news? The last time they'd had a girl's night had been New Year's Eve, five long months ago. They stayed in touch with regular texts and a few phone calls, but everyone was so busy it was hard to find time to get together. They all worked too much, and on top of that, Sonia and Amber had families of their own keeping them occupied.

And soon I will, too.

She smiled at the thought. Her life was going to irrevocably change in a few months. Was she ready?

Was Thorne?

He had seemed different somehow when he'd returned to the room with Knox. Still quiet, but she'd sensed a determination there, as if he'd made up his mind about something. And then when Sheriff Jeffries had stopped by to make his nasty allegations, Thorne had practically vibrated with silent indignation on her behalf.

She wasn't quite sure what to make of this apparent shift in his behavior. Had he experienced a true change of heart, or was this simply a reaction to the explosion and the news of the baby? Would he go back to ignoring her after the shock wore off and life returned back to normal?

Only time would tell. She was going to have to be patient.

A wave of dissatisfaction swelled in her chest. She wanted answers now, not in a few months! But pushing Thorne for a response might actually drive him further away. And while she was going to protect her baby no matter what, she didn't want to deny her child a father.

An upbeat jingle interrupted her thoughts, and she grabbed her cell phone off the rolling lap desk next to her bed. It was a wonder the thing still worked, but she supposed her body had absorbed the brunt of the impact when she'd been blown across the yard.

"Hello?"

"Hi, sweetie." Her mom practically sang the words. "Your father and I are taking the RV to Big Bend to do some camping, and we thought we'd stop by on our way out so we could all have dinner together. We should be there in about a half hour."

Maggie's stomach dropped. She loved her parents, but her mom had a tendency to overreact. The last thing she needed was for them to find out she was in the hospital—she'd never hear the end of it.

"Oh, this is a surprise," she said, stalling for time. How could

she convince them to skip the visit without raising suspicions?

“Well, it’s not too hot yet, and we’ve been wanting to go for a while. And we haven’t seen you in ages, so I thought it would be a nice chance to catch up.”

“Sure,” Maggie said, trying to sound enthusiastic about the possibility. “Um, but the thing is I’m pretty swamped at work and I don’t know if I’ll be able to get a break for dinner—”

“Oh, honey,” her mom said, disappointment and disapproval warring for dominance in her tone. “You have to eat. And I know you’ve been working a lot lately. You need to take a break. You know what they say about all work and no play.”

“I do. But this is such short notice, I don’t think I can get away tonight.” Inspiration struck, and she nearly cried out in relief. “Why don’t you swing through town on your way home? I’ll make sure to take the afternoon off and we can spend a few hours together. How does that sound?”

“Well...” her mother said, a bit grudgingly. “That might be okay.”

“Paging Dr. Thompson. Dr. Thompson, please report to the ER.” The disembodied voice blasted into her room without warning, and Maggie scrambled to cover the phone with her hand.

Please don’t ask...

“Maggie? What was that?”

She cursed silently. Brenda Lowell had ears like a bat. Of course she had heard the loudspeaker announcement.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Maggie said, striving for nonchalance. “Maybe it was the radio.”

“Margaret Helen Lowell.” Her mother’s voice was sharp now, all business. Were all women born with a “mom voice,” or was it something that manifested during pregnancy thanks to the effect of hormones on vocal cords? One more thing she would find out soon enough... “Don’t lie to me. Where are you?”

Maggie sighed, knowing she’d been caught. “There was a small accident. I’m in the hospital.”

“Oh my God! What happened? Steve—she’s in the hospital. No, don’t slow down—drive faster! We have to get there! Where are you? No, take the next right. The next right. Hold on, honey, we’re almost there.”

Maggie could hear the rumble of her father’s voice in the background and couldn’t help but smile. After thirty years of marriage, he was used to her mother’s knee-jerk reactions.

“Fine, just wait a minute, will you?” Her mother sighed. “Maggie, your father wants to talk to you. Do you feel up to it?”

“Of course. I really am okay, Mom.”

“If that were true, you wouldn’t be in the hospital.” Her mother sniffed and Maggie could tell she was trying to hold back tears. She felt a pang of guilt for making her mom cry, but she had tried to protect the woman from the news...

There was a muffled sound as the phone was passed, and then her father came on the line, his voice calm and measured. “Sweetie, what’s going on? Are you hurt?”

A rush of love filled Maggie's chest and tears sprang to her eyes. She really was fortunate to have two parents who still worried about her, even though she was a fully functioning adult. Sometimes she felt smothered by their concerns, but she knew they only wanted the best for her.

"I had a car accident, and I got a little banged up. But I'm doing okay. Just waiting for the doctor to clear me so I can go home."

"That's good. How's your car?"

"Well..." Maggie hedged. "It's going to need some work."

"I'm sorry to hear that, honey. I know it was new. Hopefully your insurance won't give you a hard time about it." She heard the phone shift, and then her father spoke again. "She's okay, Brenda. Here's a tissue—you don't have to cry, honey."

"I'll deal with the insurance company later. I'm sorry to have worried you," Maggie said. "I hope this doesn't ruin your vacation."

"It won't," her mom said. Maggie realized her dad had put her on speakerphone. "We're canceling it and coming to see you."

"Mom, I don't think that's really necessary—"

"Don't bother trying to talk her out of it, Mags," her father advised. "Your mother won't breathe easy until she sees you with her own eyes. We'll just pop in and make sure you're really okay, then we can continue on our way."

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