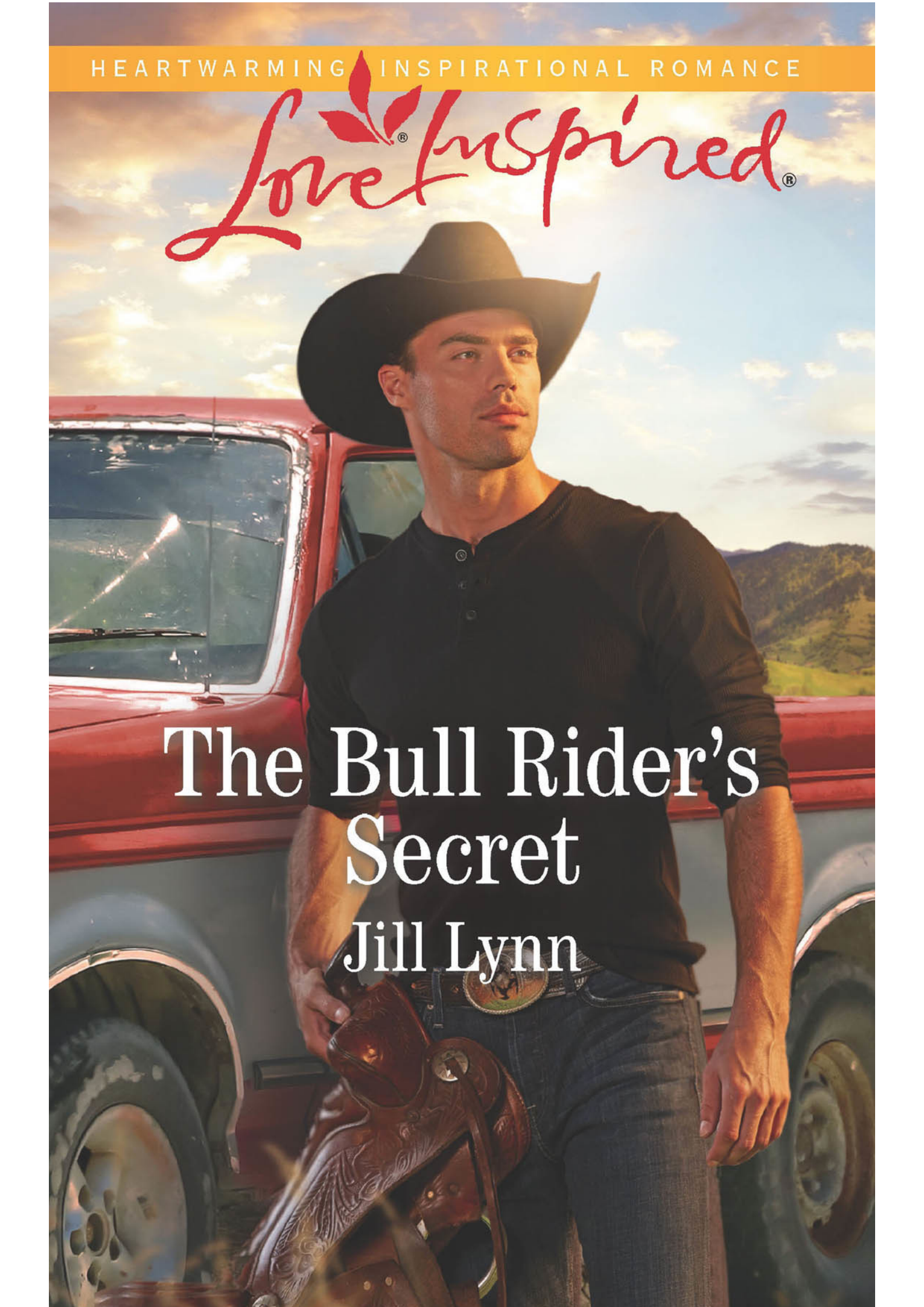


HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

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The Bull Rider's  
Secret  
Jill Lynn

Jill Lynn

**The Bull Rider's Secret**

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**Lynn J.**

The Bull Rider's Secret / J. Lynn — «HarperCollins»,

Will the truth keep them from a second chance? The next Colorado Grooms romance Letting bull rider Jace Hawke back into her life breaks all of Mackenzie Wilder's rules—just like he broke her heart years ago. But he's working at her family's ranch while recovering from a rodeo injury...and chipping away at Mackenzie's tough-girl exterior with each passing day. Which is the bigger mistake: falling for Jace again...or letting him go without a fight?

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Will the truth keep them from a second chance?

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Letting bull rider Jace Hawke back into her life breaks all of Mackenzie Wilder's rules—just like he broke her heart years ago. But he's working at her family's ranch while recovering from a rodeo injury...and chipping away at Mackenzie's tough-girl exterior with each passing day. Which is the bigger mistake: falling for Jace again...or letting him go without a fight?

**JILL LYNN** is a member of American Christian Fiction Writers and won the ACFW Genesis Contest in 2013. She has a bachelor's degree in communications from Bethel University. A native of Minnesota, Jill now lives in Colorado with her husband and two children. She's an avid reader of happily-ever-afters and a fan of grace, laughter and thrift stores. Connect with her at [jill-lynn.com](http://jill-lynn.com).

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The Bull Rider's Secret

Jill Lynn

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THE BULL RIDER'S SECRET

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## Note to Readers

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“I have something to say—”

Jace started to explain, but Mackenzie whirled around to face him.

“Don’t.” She bristled, and her finger jabbed in his direction. “Just don’t.”

“You don’t even know what it is!”

“Is it about Wilder Ranch?” Her tone snapped as fast and furious as a snake’s strike.

“Nope.”

“Then I don’t want to hear it.” She mounted up—the equivalent of a kid placing their hands over their ears. “We should get back.”

He didn’t move.

“I’ve got things to do, Hawke.” The reins twitched in her hands. He’d made her uncomfortable. He wasn’t sure why that ignited a flicker of happy in his gut. Probably because it meant he still affected her.

“You know your way from here.” She turned her horse. “I’ll see you when you get back.”

And then she left him. Sitting in her dust, her canteen still in his hands, words dying on his tongue that had needed to be said for seven years.

Huh. So that was what that felt like.

Dear Reader,

Thanks for visiting Wilder Ranch for this third book in the Colorado Grooms series. When I started writing this story, Mackenzie and Jace were so frustrated with each other, I wasn’t sure how they were ever going to get along. Thankfully it came together, and I figured out who these characters were—what made them tick, fight, laugh and love.

Mackenzie and Jace have wounds, just like each of us. It can be easy to let those past hurts drag us down or define us, but lately I’m learning to do the opposite—to move through the past and into a brighter future. I hope the same for you—that you’ll know the great love and healing power of our heavenly Father to stitch up wounds and comfort hearts.

I’d love to stay in touch. Check out my latest giveaway at [Jill-Lynn.com/news](http://Jill-Lynn.com/news), find me on [Facebook.com/JillLynnAuthor](https://Facebook.com/JillLynnAuthor) or visit me on [Instagram.com/JillLynnAuthor](https://Instagram.com/JillLynnAuthor).

Warmly,

*Jill Lynn*

My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.

—1 John 3:18

To my siblings—I’m thankful for your support and encouragement.

To Lost Valley Guest Ranch—A huge thank-you for your contributions to this series.

To Shana Asaro—Thank you for being a consistently fabulous editor. You make every book so much better.

And to everyone at Love Inspired—You’re the best team, and I’m so glad to work with you.

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## Chapter One

Mackenzie Wilder didn't want to kill her brother in the true sense, just in the what-were-you-thinking, cartoon-wringing-of-the-neck sense. He'd gone and hired someone to help run the guest ranch for the summer—which meant the person would be completely involved in every aspect of her professional life—without asking for her input.

Had Luc talked to Emma before hiring this person? Not that it mattered. Their sister's head was so in-the-clouds in love right now that she'd say yes to anything and not even know what she was responding to.

Mackenzie bounded down the lodge steps, the screen door giving a loud whine and *snap* behind her. One of the new college-aged girls on staff for the summer was heading inside.

"Hey, Bea, have you seen Luc?"

"Earlier this morning he was in his office." Her face went dreamy, eyebrows bobbing. "He had some man candy with him, too." *Great*. Her brother had hired some young buckaroo who would have all of the female staff members sighing, swooning and requiring fainting couches all summer.

Maybe a what-were-you-thinking slug *was* in order.

"I just checked there, so now I'm headed to the barn. If you run into him, would you let him know I'm looking for him?"

If the man would just pick up his phone or respond to the texts she'd sent, Mackenzie wouldn't be on this scavenger hunt.

"Sure." Bea's short raven hair shifted with her perky nod.

"Thanks." Mackenzie's boots crunched across the parched asparagus-colored grass, the short walk doing nothing to calm her frustration. When she stepped inside the barn, it took her a minute to adjust to the lack of light. She heard her brother before she saw him and followed his voice. He was talking to Boone, one of the new staff members—almost all of them could be labeled that this summer. And the timing for the turnover couldn't be worse.

Usually they had at least a few veteran staff return for the summer. Ones who could lead and train the more transitional summer help. But this year, everyone seasoned had moved on to greener pastures. Which was why she and Luc had hoped to hire someone to work with them—or at least closely under their direction. Especially with Luc and his wife, Cate, expecting twin girls in July.

Luc finished his conversation, and Boone headed outside. Mackenzie waited for him to be out of hearing range before she laid into Luc.

"Tell me your hey-I-hired-someone text that I missed earlier this morning was a joke."

Luc scrubbed a hand through his short light brown hair, a grimace taking over his face. She was two inches taller than him, but he had her in brawn. Tall and straight, with muscles and barely existent curves, Mackenzie had accepted her body—or lack thereof—long ago.

"Nope. Not a joke. You know how much we need someone. And when I came across the right person yesterday, I snagged him." His hands went up like he was placating a skittish horse. "I know you're mad. Or I assume you are, but please trust me on this. Summer is completely stressing me out with the twins coming. We have no idea what that will look like, and I need to be available for them, for Cate."

"I get all of that." Mackenzie's rigid body kicked down a notch. "And of course we planned to hire someone, but I didn't think you'd go and do it without me."

"It just...happened." Luc leaned back against the workbench. "You know how hard it's been to find someone who's the right fit. And now summer season is here. We should have hired this person weeks ago. So, when I found a match, I jumped on it. I wasn't trying to overstep. I just—" his arms shot up in a helpless gesture "—feel better knowing we've got extra enforcements. Another lead. Someone who can handle the shooting range and staff and guests."

*And how do you know this person can do all of those things? Do they have any experience?*

But Mackenzie knew experience itself was overrated. What mattered was leadership and customer-service skills. If someone could handle a horse and interact well with staff and guests, they could be trained.

She slid her tongue between her teeth to trap it. To keep from continuing her tirade. Luc normally didn't pull stunts like this. But the babies had him all twitterpated. She could probably extend some grace. This time. And if Luc liked this new guy, she probably would, too. They thought alike. Had that twin connection that tethered her to him.

"Okay." She tried to get okay with her *okay*. "So, who is it?"

"Me." That voice.

It came from behind her, and she whirled to face it. *Him*. Jace Hawke. He stood just inside the open barn door, holding a saddle, sunshine outlining his silhouette like he was some sort of gift from above.

What? Impossible. Luc would never have hired her high school boyfriend. The ex who had turned her heart from mushy soft to solid boulder.

With his cowboy hat on, Mackenzie couldn't tell if she was still taller than Jace by a quarter of an inch. Yes—they'd measured back when they'd been young and in love. Before he'd trampled her to smithereens.

She straightened her shoulders, wanting to use every advantage when it came to him. Wishing she were a giant and she could squash him like a bug, then flick him out of the barn.

"Kenzie Rae." He nodded in greeting. As if they were old friends, without a mountain range of hurt between them.

He'd always called her that. Like he'd trademarked it. Owned it. Owned her, really.

And he'd always had an irritating drawl.

Well, in high school it hadn't been irritating. Back then it had curled into her, deep and warm and mesmerizing. She'd been starry-eyed over him. For two and a half years they'd dated. And he'd taken off, leaving her a note? A stupid, worthless note.

Emma's fiancé was always surprising her with notes, and she thought it was romantic. The girl went all swoony over the gesture. But not Mackenzie. Notes were cop-outs. Used when someone didn't have the guts to say something to your face.

Jace's jeans and boots and blue button-up shirt fitted him like a softened ball glove, outlining all of those I-left-you-to-go-ride-bulls muscles he'd accumulated over the years. And the same quiet confidence oozed from him.

The kind that destroyed everything in its wake. That told lies and then turned tail and ran.

"I'll store my saddle. Give you two a minute." He spoke to Luc, eyes toggling back to her before he strode toward the saddle room.

*To store his saddle.*

Because he was planning to stick around. Because Luc had hired him.

Seriously? Was she smack dab in the middle of a nightmare? Mackenzie slammed her eyelids closed. *He's not here. He's not here. I'm having a bad dream. I just need to wake up and then...* She peeked just as Jace disappeared through the saddle-room door. *He'll still be here.*

"You're playing me, right?" She held her brother's gaze. Glued herself there until he gave an answer as to why he'd do this to her.

His mouth was slightly ajar, as if he'd just been declared at fault in a deadly accident. "I didn't know it was like that. I didn't realize... I thought the two of you ended on good terms."

Because that was the story she'd spun the summer after graduation. Jace had left town to chase his dream and ride bulls...and she'd been all for it.

That had been so much easier to say than the truth: *he left me a note and took off. He never said goodbye. He destroyed me.*

Those weren't phrases Mackenzie let into her vocabulary. Ever. And she'd worked incredibly hard to not let anyone—especially her twin—know how much Jace's leaving had hurt her.

Turns out her efforts had worked.

"I ran into Jace in town last night, and we got to talking. He's good with animals and people. He knows cattle roping, team penning, steer wrestling. He can teach the other wranglers some new competitions. The guests would love it. I thought he'd be a perfect fit." Luc's shoulder lift said, *I'm sorry* and *I didn't know*, all rolled into one pathetic package that tugged on her sympathies.

*Oh, Luc.*

She understood why he'd hired Jace without talking to her first: the desperation he felt with twins on the way during their busiest time of year. But what was Jace even doing in town?

Why wasn't he off riding bulls? He couldn't need money, could he? Rodeoing would pay him far more than they ever could. And she'd followed enough of his career to know he'd been successful. Up until about three years ago, when she'd decided she couldn't handle it anymore and had to cut him loose. To not know what was going on with him. How he was faring. Not that Mackenzie ever planned to admit any of that.

Luc groaned. "I practically begged him to help us out for the summer."

Which translated in Luc-speak to "How can I go back on that? I can't unhire him."

*Ugh.* Her brother was her soft spot. Her best friend. And he was destroying her right now.

"When were you planning to share all of this with me? After he'd been working here for two weeks?" Mackenzie detested the tremor lacing her questions, even if it was so slight, Luc probably didn't catch it. She didn't do shaky. Or nervous.

She did strong and unbreakable.

Except when it came to Jace Hawke.

"I called you twice last night and you didn't answer."

She'd fallen asleep on the couch. As usual.

"So then I sent you a text this morning."

"I was on a phone call." Their white-water rafting supplier had raised prices on this year's equipment without letting them know. She'd been negotiating for the sake of their business. *You're welcome.*

Jace cleared his throat, announcing his arrival as he exited the saddle room. Of course it hadn't taken him that long to store his saddle. He'd been giving them space. But the man couldn't stay in there forever, and that was how long it would take for Mackenzie and Luc to work this out.

Jace crossed to stand next to Luc. Like the two of them were a team in gym class Mackenzie wasn't invited to play on. He wrenched his hat from his head in a contrite gesture she didn't believe for a millisecond, sending honey-brown hair loping across his forehead.

"Luc." Bea popped her head into the barn. "Ruby took a tumble and scraped up her leg. She's screaming for you or Cate."

"Coming." Luc strode toward the exit, slowing as he passed her. "We'll talk more," he said for her ears only. "Just...behave yourself. Please."

Well. If he wanted results like that, he shouldn't leave her with the enemy.

But then again, he'd *hired* the enemy.

\* \* \*

*Whoo-ee.* The amount of loathing streaming from Mackenzie was enough to heat the town of Westbend in the dead of winter.

Jace hadn't forgotten what a powerful force the woman was, but over time the memory of her had softened. He'd remembered all of the good. Had clung to it. But there was nothing muted about the live and in-person version of Kenzie Rae. She practically vibrated with intensity.

Looked like she hadn't forgiven and forgotten with time. Hadn't decided that him up and leaving town was no big deal. Bygones. All in the past.

But then, she didn't understand why he'd done it. And knowing her, she'd rather kick him in the shin than listen to any explanation he had to offer.

"What are you doing here?" The woman could sure make her voice hiss and spit fire when she put her mind to it.

Jace definitely preferred being on Mackenzie's good side. A position he'd ruefully given up seven years ago.

"Working. When I ran into Luc last night, he told me what you guys need for help and asked if I'd consider it." Taking a job at Wilder Ranch was better than being worthless while his body healed enough for him to go back to riding bulls.

Jace had messed up so many parts of himself over the years that he couldn't remember what all had been broken or crushed. But this time had been the worst. He'd bruised his spleen and his ribs. Gotten pounded so badly in the head that he was currently rocking the concussion to top all concussions.

But none of that would have kept him from the sport he loved.

A broken riding arm had cinched his demise. His *temporary* demise.

Her eyes narrowed. "Why aren't you off riding bulls?"

He rolled up his shirtsleeve to give Kenzie a better view of his cast. Eight weeks casted and then some rehab. Maybe more, the doctor had said. Maybe less, Jace had thought.

Was that a flash of sympathy from Mackenzie? Maybe even concern? The whole thing passed so quickly, Jace couldn't be sure.

"I suppose I didn't notice your cast earlier because of the dark red haze of anger and annoyance at your very presence clouding my vision."

Jace laughed. He couldn't help it. She might hate him, but he didn't reciprocate the feeling.

"I've no doubt you've been injured before. Why'd you come home this time?"

"My mom's not doing well." Her emphysema had worsened over the last few months, but she was still working two jobs. Taking medicine and pretending that the disease wasn't killing her. The woman wouldn't slow down. Jace could appreciate that, but he also hoped to convince her to give herself at least the chance for more time.

But he wouldn't have taken a break from bull riding just for that. He wasn't sure what that said about him. The injuries had forced him out. For now. And not one part of him wanted to admit to Mackenzie that his body was falling apart on his watch.

"I..." Her gaze softened. "I'm sorry to hear that about your mom."

"Thanks." The woman might be mad enough to breathe fire, but she was still concerned about his mother. Jace appreciated that.

"You know what I'm really asking." Her words clipped out—bitter, heavy and dripping with suppressed frustration. "Why are you *here*?" Translation: "Why are you at Wilder Ranch? *My* ranch."

*Because I have to work.* Jace couldn't handle inactivity. Laziness. Ever since he'd been fifteen and made a decision he was still paying for. He refused to sit around this summer, while he healed... And no one else was going to offer him a job that would interest him in the least for such a short amount of time. Plus Wilder Ranch—and Mackenzie's family—had been a haven for him during the worst time in his life. If this place needed him, Jace couldn't say no to that.

Even if Mackenzie wanted to drop a sledgehammer on his bare feet and then shove him across red-hot embers.

"Why not here?" His trite answer earned a flood of silent responses. First anger. So much that her cheeks turned a distracting shade of pink. The pop of color highlighted her striking features, rocking him like a gale-force wind. But before he could deal with his unwelcome surge of attraction, her look changed to resignation, then hurt. The last one didn't stick around long, but it was enough to *whop* him in the chest. To make his heart hiccup.

Jace had never wanted to hurt Mackenzie. Not in a million years. He'd tried talking to her about his plans. He *had* talked to her. She just hadn't listened.

Leaving her had been the hardest thing he'd ever done. He'd hated it. Had even hated himself after.

It had been about so much more than the two of them. It had been about his brother, Evan, who'd lost the chance to chase his dreams because of a stupid, lazy choice Jace had made.

So Jace had done it for him. He'd had to. There really hadn't been a choice.

But it was seven years too late for explanations, and Mackenzie would crush them under her boot if he offered any up.

"You can't do this job with a broken arm." Her chin jutted in challenge.

"Exactly what can't I do?"

"Ride a horse."

He chuckled at that silly idea, and she stiffened so quickly that he was shocked steam didn't shoot out of her ears. Jace really wasn't trying to provoke her, but the idea of a fractured arm keeping him from riding a horse when he still had one good one was ridiculous.

"My arm won't prevent me from doing this job, and you know it."

A strangled *argh* came from her. Sweet mercy, she was mesmerizing when she was angry. All alive and mad and sparking.

"Jace." His name on her lips shot a strange thrill through him. "Please don't do this." Gone was the burning fire. Now she was deflated. Edged with sharp steel—the deadly stab-you-through-the-heart kind. "I get that Luc thinks we need you. And yes, we need someone. But *I* need it not to be you."

She packed a lot of punch into her spiel. And the fact that she'd shown him any kind of emotion—that she was practically pleading with him not to stay... Jace would like to grant her that wish. He really would.

But he couldn't. Because he needed this ranch. And this place needed him back.

It would be the perfect situation if so much hadn't gone wrong between him and Mackenzie.

"I'm sorry. But I can't."

"Can't? Or won't?" Her arms crossed over her Wilder Ranch—logoed shirt, forming a protective barrier, and a scowl marred her steal-his-oxygen features. Man, she was gorgeous. Tall, long and strong, with petite curves. Jeans that hugged her. Worn boots. She was—had always been—a walking ad for all things casual and country and mind-numbing. She hardly ever wore makeup. Didn't need it. And her wild dark blond hair had most certainly air-dried into those relaxed waves, because she would never take the time to blow-dry it or spend more than five minutes in front of a mirror.

And yet she could take down most of the guys Jace knew with just one piercing glance from those gray eyes of hers. They weren't blue. That was too simple of a description. They were storm-cloud eyes, so striking and unusual he'd yet to find another pair that had rendered him as helpless as hers did.

"Won't." She was already upset with him. He might as well fuel it. At least that would keep him from thinking she'd ever forgive him for leaving. From thinking that there could ever be a second chance between them.

Not that he wanted one. Because once Jace got the all clear to go back to rodeoing—despite the doctor's recent warning that he shouldn't be doing anything of the sort—he'd be long gone again.

## Chapter Two

“I’m not doing it. I’m not training him.” Mackenzie winced at her petulant declaration, which was reminiscent of the tone her four-year-old niece, Ruby, used when she threw a fit. When the girl wanted to watch a show *right now*. And then usually ended up losing that very privilege because of her attitude.

Luc shook his head, his sigh long and ranking at a ten on the what-am-I-going-to-do-with-you scale.

The two of them sat on the corral railing as a gorgeous Colorado sunset showed off with pink-and-orange streaks kissing the mountains, and the cool air offered a respite from the warm late-spring day.

They’d been watching, encouraging and directing as the wranglers had practiced for one of the nightly performances they’d put on once the guests arrived. The first week might be rough, but it would come together.

It always did.

Ever since she’d been a little girl, Mackenzie had loved everything about Wilder Ranch. The guests who came back year after year. The wide-open land. The hot springs, the fishing, the shooting, the short drive to glorious, unfettered white-water rafting. This place just made sense to her.

Unlike Luc, she’d never had to run off for a time to figure out that this was where she wanted to be. She understood now why Luc had gone to Denver the fall after they’d graduated high school. But at the time she couldn’t have said anything of the sort.

After Luc’s return to the ranch, when their parents had decided to move to a different climate for their mom’s health, it had been a no-brainer that Mackenzie would stay and run the ranch with her siblings.

She’d never struggled with being here—until Jace’s appearance earlier today.

“If I give in on him staying...” Mackenzie still didn’t say his name. Couldn’t. “Then I should at least not have to train him.”

*If.* Mackenzie clung to the word even though that option was slipping through her fingers. Luc was as sturdy and dependable as tree roots that sank into the ground and held tight for centuries. He wouldn’t renege. If he’d hired Jace, Mackenzie didn’t have much hope of upending that offer.

But maybe she could avoid him. Not run away—that was too weak. But just happen to never work anywhere near him for the rest of the summer.

That sort of impossibleness.

*Please, please, please.*

“Okay. I will. But then you have to do my job.”

She groaned. She loathed bookwork. Paperwork. Life-sucking monsters. “I can’t believe you hired my ex.” That title was too formal. “My high school boyfriend.” That was a little better.

“I really didn’t know things ended badly between you, or I wouldn’t have. I can’t believe you hid that from me.”

Mackenzie didn’t defend her actions, because what he’d said was true. And hiding things from Luc was no easy task.

“I always just thought he’d left to ride bulls,” her brother continued. “I didn’t know you were so angry at him about it.”

Ouch. That smarted. “He left—” she swallowed, but it didn’t add any moisture to her mouth, which felt as if she’d been hiking for a week without provisions “—in a jerky way. Things didn’t end well.”

*And then you left me, too.*

Mackenzie hadn't admitted to anyone how hurtful Jace's departure had been. She was supposed to be strong, tough, solid—physically, yes. But also mentally. Emotionally. And Jace's disappearance had cut so deep, she'd been petrified that she'd never recover.

And then, before she'd even had a chance to begin doing exactly that, Luc had decided to move to Denver.

Both of them had abandoned her. It wasn't the first time Mackenzie had been left behind. Nor, she doubted, would it be the last.

"My to-do list is long right now. There's a stack on my desk of insurance issues and bills. Plus we're having a website problem, so I need to call about that."

"Can a person be allergic to paperwork?" Mackenzie rubbed a hand across the front of her neck. "I think my throat's closing off."

Luc snorted.

A fresh chill skimmed along Mackenzie's arms as the quiet night expanded with chattering crickets and a slight breeze rustling new leaves.

"You know you'll probably have to help out some when the babies come. I mean, I'm still planning to work, but Cate will need me. I promised her that she wouldn't be on her own."

*This time.* Mackenzie clenched her jaw. She'd gotten over what Cate had done in not telling Luc about Ruby until the girl was three years old. And it wasn't even her business. Cate was really great. Luc loved her—that much was clear. And Mackenzie had gotten on board. Had forgiven her now sister-in-law for doing what she had done.

But Mackenzie was still protective of Luc. She always had been. When they were kids and he'd needed open-heart surgery, it had felt like she was on that operating table with him. Like she was being cut open, too.

Luc had always been her person. When he'd left the ranch, she'd been so mad. Mostly because she'd missed him so much. The day he'd decided to come home, his truck kicking up dust down the long ranch drive, it was as if she'd been taken off life support and her lungs had kicked into functioning mode again.

Now that Luc had a family, she still missed him sometimes. It only made sense that he'd spend most of his time with them. And yeah, she saw him plenty because they worked together. But he'd been her closest friend for most of her life. She wasn't girly. Didn't have any desire to go shopping with Emma and Cate when they went on one of their marathon trips—she just...wasn't built that way. Mackenzie had always hung out with the boys. She and Luc had shared friends. And pathetically, now that he had a life and she didn't, she missed her brother. A mortifying confession she'd go to her grave denying.

"Hopefully the babies will sleep like champs and not fuss, but there's no guarantee of that. I missed so much with Ruby, and I just can't do that this time."

Knife to the heart. Luc was right, and she should jump on the supportive-sister bandwagon and...support him. "Do you have to be so logical? Can't you take a day off once in a while?"

He laughed. "You're usually right there with me. But Jace has you messed up. I've never seen you so...shaken over a guy."

*Ho-boy.* She didn't like that description of her one bit. She was acting like a train wreck.

Mackenzie had to pull herself together and stop letting it show how much Jace got under her skin.

And really, why should he have that much of an impact on her? It had been so many years since he'd hightailed it out of town that she should be long over these jumbled, intrusive feelings.

Mackenzie didn't think about Jace all of the time anymore. Not like she had when he'd first run away.

But she did have questions. Like, why had he called her the week after he'd left? And the next week, too? Two phone calls, no messages.

She'd been consumed by what she would do if she happened to catch his call. Would she answer or not?

Turned out her uncertainties hadn't mattered, because the attempts to reach her had stopped. Maybe Mackenzie's issues were more with things left unsaid—undone—than the fact that she was still affected by Jace.

Maybe she was truly over him, but those whys remained.

If that were the case, she'd feel like far less of an idiot. Because that would mean she wasn't still hung up on *him*. Just on how things had ended.

"I'll train him."

Luc's head cocked to one side, as he studied her, analyzing her sudden change of mind.

"What? I can do it and be professional." *I think.*

Mackenzie had to prove to herself that she could handle being around Jace without letting him affect her. Had to prove that he didn't still have a hold on her.

And there was a secondary hidden agenda to her offer. If Luc were to train Jace, he'd be so thorough that Jace would be able to run the guest ranch himself in a week's time. But if Mackenzie trained him...she could brush over things. Hurry along. It wasn't like she had a bunch of extra time on her hands anyway.

Despite Luc's confidence in Jace, the man had no idea what he was doing. He'd fail before long, and then he'd leave on his own.

Just because she refused to let Jace affect her anymore didn't mean she wanted him anywhere near her or involved in her life.

So yes, Mackenzie would train him. Because the faster he failed, the faster he'd go away.

\* \* \*

Jace would figure out how to make himself useful this summer if it killed him.

And this staff meeting might do exactly that.

Well, not the meeting so much as the ice-cold gusts rolling off Mackenzie. The ones giving him frostbite despite the sunny, seventy-degree weather outside.

"Jace will be helping out this summer." Mackenzie spoke to the staff, who had gathered. The first full-week summer guests arrived tomorrow, and the group had been wrapping up last-minute details. "Especially with Luc and Cate expecting the babies. We're not sure how all of that will go. So..." Mackenzie swallowed. Took about twenty years to continue. "Let's welcome him."

*Let's.* Meaning everyone except for her. Mackenzie might be spouting one thing, but her body language said, *Pack up and get out of here.*

Jace had hoped that she'd calm down overnight and accept that he was planning to stick around for a bit. He'd thought maybe they could actually forget the past and get along for the summer. But if anything, Mackenzie was even chillier than she'd first been. At least yesterday she'd showed some emotion, asking him not to stay. But now? It was like she'd built a wall between them.

She'd offered him a clipped "good morning" earlier, when she'd told him which room in the guys' lodging would be his and tossed him a key, but other than that, she'd avoided him as if he were a pest or a varmint or some kind of beauty product that she wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole.

And really, Jace didn't expect anything else from her. He'd been a jerk leaving the way he had. Yes, he'd loved her. But he'd also *had* to go. The pull had been so strong, it hadn't been a real choice. Not when his brother's dream had become unattainable for him. Not when he'd told Jace to go, to live it for him.

Mackenzie dismissed the meeting, and the staff dispersed, their conversations light.

"I'm Boone. Good to have you here." A young man offered his hand, and Jace shook it. The staffer didn't look a day over sixteen. Was it even legal for him to work here at that age? Or perhaps he was still growing into his body. Either way, Jace didn't plan to ask for details. When Luc had said they were low on veteran staff this summer, he hadn't been exaggerating. Everyone seemed so young.

Like puppies. No wonder they'd wanted to hire a lead. Jace might not have experience working a dude ranch, but he knew horses and livestock and pieces of ranching from working one during the summers in high school. People, he could do—he'd always had a way with the human species. So maybe this whole idea wasn't so crazy after all.

"I follow bull riding. Saw a clip of the Widow Maker ride."

Just the name of the bull caused Jace to break out in a flu-like sweat.

He'd watched the ride after the fact... He'd had to see it to know what had happened to him, because he didn't remember any of it. His body had been tossed and trampled like a rag doll in a terrorizing toddler's hands.

It was amazing he'd survived the ordeal. He'd only watched the video once, and that had been enough.

"That was quite the ride."

"You can say that again. You ride?"

"No. Did some mutton busting when I was younger, but nothing since."

"You could always get back to it." Possibly. Maybe. Though the kid was scrawny. "Let me know if you ever need any lessons."

Boone grinned. "Not sure I'm willing to risk my life like that, but I'll keep it in mind." After a nod, he took off.

A girl—maybe around nineteen or twenty—was talking to Mackenzie, and their conversation was quiet. Everything about the girl was thin. Her body. The hair barely filling out her ponytail. Was she okay? It looked like the world had chewed her up and spit her back out. In contrast, Mackenzie glowed with health and strength.

Jace wasn't trying to overhear, but their chat filtered in his direction. The girl was asking for an advance on her paycheck.

Mackenzie nodded, listening. "I'll talk to Luc and Emma, and we'll let you know." She squeezed the girl's arm in a reassuring gesture, and then the little mouse scampered off.

Mackenzie was supposed to train him today. At least that was what Luc had said. Jace wasn't sure how that would work when she was treating him like a rat in the gutter, but he was game if she was.

The day was sure to be a barrel of fun. Especially since his head was teetering on the edge of a cliff, deciding, without his input, whether to calm down or throw a fit.

Which could be because he'd had a hard time falling asleep last night. Jace wasn't sure which had caused that symptom—the concussion or the woman in front of him. It was a toss-up. Thoughts of Mackenzie—of the relationship they'd once had—had been resurrected like vivid movies. To the point that he'd finally slept and dreamed about her. Dreamed that he'd stayed in Westbend. That she didn't hate him.

Things that had consumed his mind when he'd first left to ride bulls and had holed up in an apartment with a few other guys in Billings. And then the rodeo had fully distracted him. And finally, finally the part of him that had been screaming that he'd made a mistake had lightened up. Quieted.

Until now—until seeing Mackenzie again. The need to work, to not spend his days lazing around, might not be worth this headache. And yet the challenge of something new, of helping out Luc and Mackenzie and Emma, still pulled at him.

Jace wasn't ready to give up a qualified ride yet, even though that was probably exactly what Mackenzie hoped and prayed he would do.

But since Jace's prayers were the opposite, that left them in a spiritual tug-of-war. Because, as far as Jace knew, God didn't pick sides. He loved both of them. And the Man upstairs was going to have to work this out. Because Jace didn't see Mackenzie calling a truce anytime soon.

"Well." Mackenzie shuffled papers on the table, which held her attention like her favorite pair of boots. Finally she glanced up, regarding him with as much contempt as she might a door-to-door

salesman peddling high-priced skin-care products. “I should show you the trails. You might lead some rides, and either way you’ll need to know where the groups are in case of an emergency.”

“Don’t I already know them?” They’d been all over this land together in high school. Had ridden more times than he could count.

Jace had preferred time with Mackenzie over the agony of watching his brother try to figure out how to live after losing part of his leg. It had been pretty awful around his house for a while. When Jace had been eleven, their father had been killed in a bar brawl. Drinking had always been his most important relationship, and his presence in their lives before that had been sporadic. Four years later Evan’s foot and part of his leg had been amputated because of a lawn-mower accident. Mom had struggled—working constantly to support them and pay for Evan’s medical bills.

Jace had escaped to Wilder Ranch all of the time in high school. Kenzie Rae had been his escape. The truth of that made every bruised, broken and sprained muscle or bone he’d experienced riding bulls roar back into existence.

“You’ll know some. But a few are new.” She strode to the door and then paused inside the frame, tapping the toe of her boot with impatience when he didn’t immediately sprint after her. “You coming?”

“Right behind you.”

And that was how it was on the trail, too. Mackenzie led. Jace followed. There was no riding next to each other. No conversation.

Only him trying—and failing—not to notice everything about her. Being relegated to the back seat on the ride gave him the chance to drink her in, to catalog the slight changes that had come with time. Jace had left a girl behind and had come back to find a woman. One who didn’t need him. Didn’t want him. Didn’t know why he’d done what he’d done.

With her dark blond hair slipped through the back of a baseball cap, and wearing a simple gray V-necked T-shirt, jeans and boots, Mackenzie turned casual into a heap of trouble.

They rode enough of the new trails that he gathered what he needed to know between her directions and the hand-drawn map she’d tucked into her back pocket.

When they reached a wide, smooth path that carved through open pasture, she didn’t give him even the slightest heads-up before urging her horse into an all-out gallop.

The smart thing to do would be to let her ride. Enjoy the view. But Jace had never been one to take the easier road.

He nudged his horse into action.

If he’d thought Mackenzie was distracting earlier, seeing her fly wasn’t helping matters.

The flat-out run was worth it—gave him a hint of that risking-it-all feeling—but by the time Mackenzie slowed Buttercup and eased her back into the trees, the dull ache in Jace’s head had ramped up from barely noticeable to jet-engine-roar levels. And his ribs were on fire.

Probably not his best move, since he was supposed to be taking it easy. But not joining Mackenzie would have been painful in other ways. For a few seconds he’d felt young and free. Like they still had their whole futures ahead of them. He missed that, especially now. If Jace couldn’t go back to rodeoing, what would he do with himself?

He’d never been any good at school. Or any job other than the one currently dangling out of his reach.

“You weren’t lying when you said you could ride with one arm.” Mackenzie tossed the comment/compliment over her shoulder as they reached the hot springs and she dismounted. It registered in Jace’s chest, warm and surprising. *Getting ahead of yourself, Hawke. She didn’t say she was crazy in love with you, just that you could handle a horse.*

Jace mimicked her dismount, needing a second to steady the wavelike motions crashing through his noggin. He’d give a hefty sum of money for an ice pack to press against his wailing ribs, which were none too pleased with his recent activity.

Mackenzie must have realized her mistake in leading them to the hot springs, because her vision bounced from the water, to him, then back.

*Yep, you sure did deliver us right back to the past.*

They'd been out here plenty of times when they were young. Had stolen kisses in those very waters.

Back then she'd welcomed an advance from him. Even initiated.

Jace wobbled and managed to right himself while Mackenzie was thankfully looking in the other direction. He was far weaker than he should be, which only added to the angry rhythm inside his skull.

He hated being sidelined. Benched. Hated it even more that he didn't know when or if these concussion side effects would go away or get better.

The arm, the spleen, the ribs—none of that bothered him, because he knew they'd heal. But his noggin had a mind of its own.

He dropped to sit on a rock in the shade and settled his head in his hands. He sensed Kenzie moving but didn't look up. And then a canteen appeared between his arms.

"Thanks." He took it, meeting those stormy eyes. She walked toward the hot springs as he drank. The water was cool, crisp and, if he wasn't mistaken, the faintest taste of her mint Chapstick still coated the lip. He plucked a pill out of his front pocket and shot it down before Mackenzie turned back in his direction.

She studied him as she neared, stopping about five feet away. Enough that he could feel her intense observation, but not so close that she actually stepped foot into his world, his space.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine. Just hot, I guess." He took another swig.

"Your arm hurting?"

He hadn't even thought about that slight discomfort today. "Nah. I'm good."

Except he wasn't.

Mackenzie was a deer in the forest. Still. Analyzing. Eyes morphing to slits. She'd have him figured out in two seconds flat if this kept up. And for some reason he didn't want her to. If she knew about the ribs or spleen, that would be fine. But his head felt too...personal. No one knew that Dr. Karvina had advised he quit riding.

*I'm going to level with you, Jace. If this were me or one of my sons, I'd quit now. I can't tell you how many concussions you can survive without permanent damage. It's not worth the risk. I've seen too many lives taken or changed forever by this sport.*

His doctor's advice haunted him. Concussions were a big deal these days. Last year a young rider had committed suicide after one too many. After his death, the autopsy had confirmed he had CTE, a terrible disease that came from repeat trauma to the brain.

Head injuries had messed with his moods, his memory, even his personality. Gunner's last hit had been a whopper though. But still, no one knew the exact number of concussions that would be okay. Or how many would push a guy over the edge. Ever since the young cowboy had taken his own life, the rules had gotten stricter for all of the riders. It was logical—Jace could admit that. But that didn't make it easy to think about losing everything.

Which was why so many guys still did what they wanted—still rode when they shouldn't.

And Jace understood that, too. He wasn't done riding. It was his life. His people. He'd done it for his brother, but it had become his, and he wasn't going to quit now.

And he certainly wasn't going to discuss any of this with Mackenzie. The woman who constantly wanted to kick him in the shins and then slug him.

Maybe he should just explain why he'd left. Get it all out in the open now. She could still hate him then, but at least she'd have answers.

"Kenzie Rae."

She'd begun pacing back toward the water but now whirled around.

"I have something to say—"

"Don't." She bristled, and her finger jabbed in his direction. "Just don't."

"You don't even know what it is!"

"Is it about Wilder Ranch?" Her tone snapped as fast and furious as a snake's strike.

"Nope."

"Then I don't want to hear it." She mounted up—the equivalent of a kid placing their hands over their ears. "We should get back."

He didn't move. Just glued himself to her until she called uncle and wrenched her gaze away.

"I've got things to do, Hawke." The reins twitched in her hands. He'd made her uncomfortable. He wasn't sure why that ignited a flicker of happiness in his gut. Probably because it meant he still affected her. And since she was under his skin like a chigger, yeah, that eased the sting a bit. "You know your way from here." She turned her horse. "I'll see you when you get back."

And then she left him. Sitting in her dust, her canteen still in his hands, words dying on his tongue that had needed to be said for seven years.

*Huh.* So that was what that felt like.

## Chapter Three

Seven days at the ranch, and nothing had changed.

Mackenzie still didn't want him here. And Jace still refused to go.

Though he was starting to doubt his decision. Kenzie's disdain for him was beginning to seep into the cracks of his confidence.

Should he give in and quit? Crash on his mom's couch for the next weeks or months, instead of his room at the ranch? Go absolutely crazy from boredom and live suffocated by the fear that he'd never heal and return to his career?

He just couldn't function that way. No matter how much he'd like to not torment Mackenzie. Besides, he liked it here. Liked leading trail rides, the weather, the views, the wrangler competitions they entertained the guests with at night. Guest ranch life was busy—so full of people and staff and horses that his mind hadn't gotten bogged down with what-ifs about his injuries and the future.

Definitely not the worst job he'd had.

Except for the woman who hated him.

Oh, *hate* might be too big of a word for how Mackenzie felt about him. He was a pebble in her boot. An annoyance that she planned to ignore.

And then she approached the table where he was eating lunch with guests and other staffers and did exactly that.

She asked the guests how their day was going. She made sure to acknowledge each of the staff. And then she left the dining room. Didn't she realize that completely ignoring him was more noticeable than treating him like she did everyone else?

Jace popped up, cleared his dishes and then chased after her. He caught sight of her in the lodge living room—an inviting place with high ceilings, comfortable furniture and a massive fireplace that begged for snowstorms and cold winter nights.

Mackenzie's hair was down today—long and wild, and bringing him back to high school and the memory of what it had felt like to thread his fingers through those waves and kiss that mouth that had once been receptive to his.

Even in her jeans and a simple Wilder polo, the woman could cause a freeway pileup. She had on turquoise boots today—the third different pair he'd seen her wear since he'd arrived at the ranch. Mackenzie had hated shopping back in high school. Her only girlie addiction had been boots. Apparently that infatuation had continued.

No guests occupied the lobby at the moment, so Jace called out to her, “Kenzie Rae.”

She turned to face him, upset heating her cheeks. At his presence or the use of her nickname?

Either way she'd have to adjust.

He stopped in front of her, ignoring her obvious irritation at his interruption. “What do you need me to do tonight?”

Being that this was his first week, he was still learning the schedule. Mackenzie might not want him here, but while he was, he planned to do a good job of whatever they asked him to do.

The glint in her eyes was quick as a bullet and disappeared just as fast. “The square dance is tonight.”

Huh. He wouldn't be much of a help with that.

“Why don't you lead it?”

Jace snorted. “Ha. Very funny.” She didn't laugh, didn't join in. “Wait. You're serious?”

“Why not? Luc seems to think you're so qualified to be working here. Not that anyone asked me. So, if that's the case, you can be in charge tonight.”

“So that's how you're going to play it? I don't have any idea how to square-dance. You know I'm a pathetic dancer.” The only real rhythm he'd ever had was on a bull. When he'd competed on

the weekends in high school, Mackenzie had always come to watch him ride when she hadn't been working herself. After, there'd often been a dance, a band, a crowd. A few times they'd attempted the steps, but never with much success. Once or twice he'd just held her. Held on as if his life had depended on it. On her. He supposed it had in a way. She'd been everything to him. The future he'd denied himself when he'd chased Evan's dreams.

"I haven't seen you in seven years, so I know nothing of the sort."

Silent accusations brimmed, and Jace understood them. Had she wondered what he was up to over the years? If he was dating anyone? Because he'd wondered those things about her. It would have destroyed him to find out she was in a relationship or married, even though he didn't have any right to her anymore.

"I didn't take you to be vindictive, Kenzie Rae." He dropped the name on purpose now, goading, a little of her anger seeping over to him.

"Really? Maybe *you* don't know *me* at all anymore. I'm not sure you knew me then either."

*Sweet mercy.* The woman's punches were fast and furious and vicious and deserved. Jace rubbed a hand over his certain-to-be-gaping chest wound before that same traitorous hand snaked out and latched onto her arm.

The heat between their skin sizzled as much as their rising irritation. "I knew everything about you back then and vice versa."

"The Jace I knew would never have left like you did."

There would be no closing the wound today. Not with Mackenzie hitting the same spot over and over again. "I tried to tell you." His voice dropped low, aching with remorse. "So many times. But the words always got stuck." He swallowed. "And when I did manage to get some of it out, you didn't listen."

For a split second she'd softened during his speech. Those mesmerizing eyes had notched down from bitter to curious, *tell me why* shooting from them. But at his *you didn't listen*, everything in her hardened and lit like fireworks.

"I'm not doing this." She shook his hand loose as if he were nothing more than dirt—or worse—hitching a ride on her boots. "This is exactly why I was so mad that Luc hired you. Wilder Ranch is my family business, Hawke. My life. And you're not in it anymore. As far as I'm concerned, your time here is strictly about work. I don't want to hear any of this. It's too late to make apologies...if that's even what you're doing. It's too late to try to blame me for what *you* did. So if you want to be here, figure out how to lead the square dance, because as your *boss*, that's what I'm directing you to do."

Before Mackenzie could take off or Jace could process his jumbled thoughts enough to respond, the screen door to the lodge opened and Emma walked inside. Thankfully it was her and not a guest. She was all sunshine in a yellow shirt, jeans and rain boots as she paused to study them—probably taking in their irritated body language or analyzing whatever she'd just overheard.

Emma bravely continued in their direction. "Everything okay in here?" A faint curve of her lips attempted to diffuse the negative energy that surely radiated from them.

Kenzie's gaze slit and slid from him to her sister. "We're great." Fake perkiness punctuated her answer. "Jace and I were just discussing his duties for tonight. And he was expressing how excited he is about them. I mean—" her sarcasm ramped up "—since this is the perfect place for him to work, and Luc seems to think he's so qualified, I thought I'd give him some more responsibility."

Vicious woman. Jace willed himself not to find her attractive in the middle of her feisty little speech.

It didn't work.

If Emma wasn't watching them like a spectator at a UFC fight, Jace would seriously toy with the thought of kissing Mackenzie just to get her to stop spewing venom. An action that might very well leave him as messed up as stomping through a field of rattlesnakes.

“Of course. I’m happy to do anything I’m assigned.” Square dance? Fine. He’d figure it out. Somehow. There had to be another staffer who had a clue about what to do.

Mackenzie’s determination to boot him out of here only increased his resolve to stay. She should know better than to challenge him, to turn this into a competition. His whole livelihood depended on him besting a two-thousand-pound bull.

Emma’s strangled sigh was filled with exasperation, and a tinge of remorse lit in Jace. He shouldn’t have engaged with Mackenzie at all. Certainly not in the lodge lobby, where guests could walk through at any second of the day.

“Feel like you two could use a mediator. Or some workplace counseling. Is that a thing?” Emma beamed, finding her own joke amusing. Jace’s lips twitched, because the idea of Mackenzie and him sitting on a couch, trying to figure out how to work together when she couldn’t stand the sight of him, *was* funny, but he couldn’t let Mackenzie win the third-grade angry-staring contest they’d somehow begun.

“Um, so...listen.” Emma was made of velvet—a stark contrast to Mackenzie’s most recent tone. “I need people to get along. I can’t handle all of this.” Her nose wrinkled, and she waved a hand, encompassing them. “What can I do to help you guys? Because I get the past mattering and all that. Trust me—I understand how much that affects things. But you two have to figure out how to work together and not do this—” another hand motion “—anywhere guests or staff can see you.”

She was right, of course. But Jace had been trying. For the most part.

“Maybe we could schedule in special argument time after everyone else has signed off for the night. Or get up early and duke things out.” Jace let the retort slip, hoping it might earn the faintest shadow of humor—like the old Mackenzie would have offered up.

New Mackenzie released a growl/wounded-animal screech of frustration. “Actually, Emma, the best scenario would be for Jace to realize he’s not welcome at Wilder Ranch and leave.”

Emma’s mouth formed an O shape as Mackenzie made a U-turn and strode toward the front office, her boots pounding as strong and fierce as she was.

Attraction swallowed Jace up. Confounded woman.

“That is not true.” Emma’s light brown ponytail and silver hoop earrings bobbed back and forth with her shaking head. “Of course you’re welcome here. You always have been. I’m sorry for her—”

“You don’t need to apologize for Mackenzie. I’m not surprised. And I deserve everything she’s throwing my way.”

The woman only seemed to reserve direct hits for him. Jace had learned that the Wilders had extended the paycheck advance to the girl asking for it. They were gracious like that. Even Mackenzie was. Just not with him.

“Oh, Jace.” Emma softened. “It has been a long time. I was never sure exactly what happened between you two, but I didn’t believe things ended well, like Mackenzie tried to spin it.”

Mackenzie had kept the way he’d left under wraps? Sounded like something she would do. The woman was too tough for her own good. She needed to let people in. But then again she’d let him in, and he’d bailed on her.

“Over the years I kept thinking you’d contact her. Make things right.”

“But I never did.” He scraped his noncasted hand along the hair at the nape of his neck. “It wasn’t like I didn’t want to. I just didn’t know what to say. How to say it.”

Emma offered him an understanding smile. At least she didn’t consider him a varmint. But then he hadn’t left her high and dry. And Emma had always been homemade apple crisp with ice cream melting into the nooks and crannies, while Mackenzie was the kind of spicy dish that tore up your taste buds and still managed to leave a person wanting more.

If only a little of Emma’s sugary demeanor would rub off on Mackenzie. Maybe then she’d actually hear him out. But Jace couldn’t deny that the challenge of Mackenzie was exactly what had attracted him to her in the first place.

Which could turn out to be quite the problem this summer. Since he planned to go back to riding. Since he was an invalid, with all of these sidelining injuries. And since no matter what he did, Jace couldn't tame his attraction to the woman who wanted nothing to do with him. All because he refused to leave like she wanted him to... All because, the first time around, he'd left when she hadn't wanted him to.

But Kenzie Rae wasn't the only one who had issues and wants and demands. Jace had a few of his own. And if he didn't occupy himself with something useful this summer—like working at the ranch would provide for him—then he'd lose his mind even more than he already had when it had been demolished by the Widow Maker ride.

He'd worked hard this week to make himself useful, to stay busy, to help things run as smoothly as he could from his limited knowledge of the ranch. And Mackenzie refused to recognize that. All she could see was the trail of dust he'd left behind seven years ago.

Emma was studying the front office door Mackenzie had disappeared through, and Jace couldn't help wanting to ease the turmoil creasing her face. She wasn't in charge of fixing his and Mackenzie's past or current issues.

"I heard a rumor that the reason I haven't seen much of you is that you keep running off to spend time with your fiancé."

Just like that, her demeanor flipped and she turned all sparkling Emma, hands racing to cover pink cheeks. "It's true. I'm crazy about him. Can't seem to get enough. Thankfully, Mackenzie and Luc have been turning the other way when I keep sneaking off to meet him." Her lyrical laugh bubbled up. "That makes it sound so untoward. But it's not! I'm just..."

"Crazy in love."

"Exactly."

"I'm happy for you, Emma. If anyone deserves to be noticed and appreciated and cherished, it's you. Love looks good on you."

"Aw." She playfully shoved his arm. "You always were a sweet-talker." Her attention bounced over to Kenzie's wake again. "She's probably going to lose her mind if she comes back out here to find me consorting with the enemy." Her hand paused on his arm. "Be gentle with her, Jace. After you left..." She faltered and grew silent, her head shaking. "Did you know Luc left, too, shortly after you did?"

Oh. That wound opened up again. "I did not know that."

"He moved to Denver and came back eventually, but between the two of you, I wasn't sure what to do with Mackenzie."

Jace had so many questions. Like whether Emma thought Mackenzie would ever forgive him. Not to restart their relationship. He really couldn't do that when he planned to leave again. But he wouldn't mind getting along with the girl he'd once thought he'd marry.

"I really can't say more." Emma's hand squeezed his but dropped away. "Hang in there. If I know my sister, you're in for a fight if you plan to stick around."

Fight, he could do. And Mackenzie was worth it. Even if Jace was only here to right the wrong of their past. She deserved the truth from him—whenever she'd finally let him say it. His earlier doubts vanished. While his arm—and the rest of him—healed, he didn't have anywhere else to be.

\* \* \*

Emma dropped into the chair across from Mackenzie's desk. The front office was surprisingly empty this afternoon, with everyone out with the guests, and Mackenzie had hoped to buckle down and get some work done—especially now that she didn't have Jace trailing her every move.

She'd only managed to train him Saturday, Sunday and Monday, and then she'd cut him loose. It wasn't enough. Of course, she should have done more for the sake of a well-run guest ranch.

But Mackenzie couldn't bring herself to continue.

She just kept hoping and praying that Jace would give up on his outrageous idea to work here for the summer and leave already. Preferably yesterday.

“How’re you holding up?” Emma’s question was soft and caring, but Mackenzie wasn’t willing to go anywhere near the meaning behind it.

“Fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Really? You might be able to get away with that attitude with the staff or a stranger, but I’m your sister. I know that Jace being here is killing you slowly.”

“I can’t... I just...don’t want to talk about it. Him.” Mackenzie didn’t want to deal with the thought of Jace at all. That had been her plan for the week, and for the most part it was working.

Except she was exhausted.

Not being affected by Jace took all of her energy. Not letting the man crawl under her skin and set up camp was hard work. Not yelling at him for the way he’d left was, too.

Not caring about any of it like she’d hoped? Utterly impossible.

“You want me to beat him up for you?”

A laugh escaped. “Kinda, yeah. I’d like to see that.”

“Hey, I can be tough when I need to be.”

“I have no doubt about that, sister. So...what’s going on with you?” Mackenzie motioned to Emma, desperate to change the subject. “I heard you come home late last night. I don’t know how you’re functioning on so little sleep, heading over to Gage’s whenever you can.”

“Nice conversation turn.” Emma raised an eyebrow.

Mackenzie waited her out. Emma wouldn’t push too much on Jace. She was too sympathetic and patient and understanding—qualities Mackenzie only possessed in small amounts.

“All right. I give. But I’m here if you need to talk to someone. Or vent. Okay?”

“Okay. Thanks.” She might take Emma up on that offer if she had any idea how to deal with the jumbled, frustrating emotions Jace created in her.

“In answer to your question about me...I’m tired. I’m overwhelmed. I don’t know how this summer is going to work. I miss Gage and Hudson so much already and this is only our first week. And on top of that, Hudson is sick.”

Gratefulness at the turn in topic swelled, but then concern for Hudson took its place. “What kind of sick? Is he okay?” Emma’s fiancé had become a guardian to the one-year-old boy recently, and Emma already loved the tyke as if he were her own.

“Nothing serious. At least I don’t think so. Just a nasty cold. He’s congested and has a runny nose. He’s miserable and I didn’t want to leave him or Gage to come home last night.” A grin surfaced. “No offense.”

“Ouch. You want to see your fiancé more than your sister? I’m wounded.”

Humor tugged at the corner of her mouth. “It’s just so hard not being there. Gage is doing his best, but he’s drained. I am, too, from going back and forth. From trying to find a couple of minutes in the day or evening to sneak over there and see them. And then just when I get there it feels like I have to come home. And with Hudson sick, I’d like to be there to help. He was clinging to me last night.” Her hands formed a self-hug, rubbing along the skin of her arms. “That’s why I got home so late.”

“So why don’t you stay?”

“Ah, that’s not really an option, as you know.”

Mackenzie snorted. “Not like *that*. I mean, are you ever going to change your mind about marrying Gage?”

Emma’s head shook slowly. “No. Of course not.”

“You don’t have any doubts about him or Hudson.” Mackenzie didn’t say it like a question, because it wasn’t. She already knew what Emma’s response would be.

“No doubts about either of them. Of course not.”

“So get married.”

Confusion flickered. “We’re planning to.”

“I know you were thinking fall.” Gage and Emma had tossed that idea around because both ranches slowed down and the schedule switched at Wilder Ranch. But that didn’t mean they couldn’t change their plans. They didn’t have to follow some wedding protocol. “I’m saying get married sooner. What are you waiting for?”

Emma’s mouth hung open wide enough that Mackenzie could toss a popcorn kernel into it without a problem—a game they’d played often as kids. One Mackenzie had always been the reigning champ of, much to Luc’s frustration.

“Wait... What?”

“You want to be with Gage. That way you could be. After you’re done with work, you’d go home and stay.”

“Oh.” Emma’s eyes pooled with tears. “I want that.”

“So get it. What do you really need to make a wedding happen?”

“Dress, pastor, flowers, food, people, place.” Emma ticked items off on her fingers. “Mom and Dad. Gage’s parents and his sister.”

“You already have your dress picked out, right?”

She nodded, worrying her lip.

Of course, Emma had her dress picked out. The girl had probably been planning her wedding since she was five. Just like she probably had a Pinterest page filled with rustic, shabby-chic wedding ideas, like candles in mason jars and string lights, and the perfect shade of bridesmaid dresses. If anyone could pull a wedding together fast, it would be her.

“So, the biggest thing is family. And Pastor Higgin. Or you can always find another pastor to stand in if you need to—like the new assistant pastor at church.”

“Actually...now that you mention it, Gage’s parents are already coming at the end of July. I wonder if Mom and Dad could come, too. And his sister.”

“That’s a great idea. You could do a Saturday-evening wedding. The staff would rally to take care of things and complete the turnover for guests arriving Sunday. And you have so many friends you’ve helped over the years. You’ve been there for everyone. Let them be there for you. Mrs. Higgin could probably be convinced to make the cake. She’s a fantastic baker. And you can ask for help with flowers and decorations. The only issue would be where.”

She lit up. “I always imagined getting married here. Setting up chairs and a trellis in the grassy open space behind the lodge, with the mountains in the background. Casual and pretty.”

“That makes it even easier if you don’t have to find a venue.”

“True.” Emma bolted out of the chair and enveloped Mackenzie in a tight hug. “You’re so right. This is the best idea you’ve ever had. Seriously, the best. Thank you, thank you, thank you.” She let go and stood in a burst of energy. “I need to call Gage.” And then she was off, with her phone in her hands. Mackenzie listened to the excited timbre of her voice for a few seconds before it faded away.

Emma had always been a bundle of cheerfulness. But Gage made her absolutely glow. Mackenzie didn’t want to lose her sister, but she loved seeing her even happier than normal.

And really, shouldn’t one of them be? Because ever since Jace had marched back into her world, Mackenzie wasn’t confident she remembered how to get back to that feeling.

Probably wouldn’t until he left again.

She’d been waiting all week for the man to hurry up and fail. For him to flounder. But he hadn’t. So yeah, she’d thrown the square dancing at him as sabotage. If Jace couldn’t figure it out, if he couldn’t catch on, then he’d just have to leave.

And unlike the first time, that was exactly what Mackenzie wanted him to do.

## Chapter Four

Mackenzie stood on a platform that towered above the forest floor. Gorgeous blue Colorado sky stretched above her. Bright green foliage spread out before her. It was a perfect day. Just the right temperature of warm but not too hot. Just the right everything.

She relaxed her legs and pushed off, her zip-line harness holding her as she flew through the path in the trees. Wind whipped by as she attempted to capture everything around her.

She reached the next tower and came to a stop, adjusting her T-shirt and shorts before taking off again. If only Luc and Emma would consider her idea to build a zip-line course at Wilder Ranch. But Mackenzie would have to wait, because the next project they'd decided to undertake would be the ice-cream parlor and small store Emma had proposed. In the meantime she counted on a friend's offer to let her use their course whenever the desire struck.

And today she'd needed to soar.

She'd needed to escape Jace and everyone at the ranch.

And Luc had known it. Having someone attuned to your idiosyncrasies wasn't the worst thing in the world.

This morning he'd shown up at the door to the cabin she shared with Emma. "Why don't you get out of here for a bit today?" he'd said.

"But what about the turnover?"

"I can handle it. We'll survive without you. Take a break. For everyone's sake." He'd infused teasing into his tone, but fear had sent her body into a panicked sweat.

Had the whole world witnessed her agitation over the last week? Did everyone know how torn up she was about Jace working at Wilder Ranch?

"Is it that noticeable?"

"No," Luc had responded. "I just know you."

She'd almost burst into tears—proof that she was a hot mess in need of some Jace-free time in a Jace-free zone.

Thankfully Luc knew her well enough to rescue her from herself. When she'd tried to protest, to say that she'd stay so that he could spend time with Cate and Ruby, he'd simply hugged her. "I'm sorry I hired him without talking to you first."

And then he'd left before she could argue more.

Bless him. The offer—or command—had been a huge answer to her prayers. The past week had left Mackenzie frayed and on edge. With Jace invading every portion of her life—living in the guys' quarters at the ranch, present at every meal—she'd been unable to find her footing.

Mackenzie had heard enough "Jace is so funny," "Jace is so great," "Jace did this" and "Jace did that" from both guests and staff that she wanted to cover her ears like a toddler.

He'd even come through with flying colors on the square dance last night. She'd arrived early, planning to save the evening and make sure the guests still had the experience they'd been promised, and there Jace had been—working out details and steps with the other staffers.

Things had gotten jumbled a few times during the night, but the guests hadn't cared. They'd loved every second. They'd loved Jace.

How come no one else saw through him to the man beneath that charming grin and those soulful chestnut eyes?

Mackenzie certainly did.

Clarification—she did now. In high school she hadn't. Back then she'd been intrigued by him. Jace probably still didn't know that she'd observed him for a few months before he'd talked to her. He'd been good at switching gears—one second sporting sad and serious, the next entertaining friends as the center of attention.

Once Mackenzie had gotten to know him, she'd realized it was his brother's accident that had broken him. Slowly but surely, as they'd hung out, Jace had shed that lost look. He'd bloomed back to life, and she'd fallen so hard for him.

No one had ever really gotten her the way Jace had.

They'd talked about getting married someday. Having kids. Where they'd live—somewhere near Westbend, because even back then Mackenzie hadn't wanted to leave Wilder Ranch. She'd somehow always known it was where she belonged.

She and Jace had been inseparable, and she'd had no reason to doubt him. That was why the fact that he'd left, and the way he'd done it, had been such a shock.

Why it had hurt so stinking bad.

What Jace had said to her in the lodge lobby yesterday had rattled around in her mind ever since. Was he right? Had he tried to tell her he wanted to continue competing at the next level after high school? She remembered maybe one instance like that and nothing more.

But maybe she hadn't been listening, like he'd claimed.

Still, if that were the case, he should have made his plans more clear. He should have made sure she understood.

And now the man should really stop expecting her to somehow get over his callous departure just because he'd decided to grace Wilder Ranch with his presence.

Last night, after the square dance, when she'd been trying to quietly escape, Jace had caught up to her in the hallway. He'd had the audacity to wink. And then he'd toggled his eyebrows and said, "One word. YouTube."

YouTube. That was how he'd figured out the dance? The man had to be kidding. Except he wasn't.

A crease had split his forehead. "You're irritated that I handled tonight well, aren't you? Still don't want me here, do you?"

"Nope." The truth had just skipped right out.

"You could take a minute. Think about your answer. Give the illusion of grace."

"Nope." Mackenzie had wanted nothing more than to flee, but then Jace had wrenched the conversation up another level, while his voice had dipped low and meaningful.

"You ever going to forgive me for leaving the way I did?"

She hadn't spoken. There'd been no need to repeat the word that still fitted a third time.

Jace's fist had clenched, and his lips had pressed tight. And then he'd turned back to the guests, to the staff, to what was supposed to be her world. He'd left her standing there, wrestling a supersize hissy fit into submission.

Composure was usually her thing. Nothing ruffled Mackenzie unless she let it.

But Jace Hawke broke all of her rules.

Mackenzie finished the rest of the zip-line course quickly. The temptation to fly through it a third time was herculean strong, but she couldn't.

She should really get back to the ranch and make sure everything was going smoothly with the turnover for the guests that would arrive tomorrow. Mackenzie had fitted in a hike before zip-lining, so she'd already been gone for hours.

She probably shouldn't have left in the first place, but Luc had been right—she'd needed it. Time away from the ranch—from Jace—had been good for her. She already felt lighter, better.

The drive back went way too fast.

When she turned down the ranch drive, agitation rose up and choked her. Mackenzie loved this place. Always had. But Jace was ruining that for her, too.

Was she crazy to be this upset with him for sticking around? With the way he'd left... How much he'd hurt her... Nope. She had a right to be mad. But holding on to that anger was draining her.

Mackenzie parked at the lodge, planning to head inside, check on how things were going. But before she could even open the door of her little pickup truck, Jace stood next to it.

She ignored him and took her time switching from her tennis shoes over to flip-flops, then tossed the hiking shoes to the passenger floor of her truck.

Jace must have swallowed one of her impatient pills, because he hauled open her driver's door.

"What do you want, Hawke?" Why did he have to be the first person she saw when she returned? Hadn't God heard her prayers this week? She'd been requesting less Jace, not more, but the opposite kept happening.

Concern radiated from him, tightening his features. "You have your phone with you today?"

"Yes, but it's on Silent." Otherwise it would have been going off the whole time. Mackenzie had known Luc would handle things, so she'd gone off the radar. "I forgot to check it when I got back into my truck." She winced. That hadn't been smart of her. "Why? Is something wrong with the turnover?"

"No." Jace rubbed a hand over the slight stubble on his cheeks and chin. His eyes—they stayed tender. Sympathetic. Something *was* wrong.

"What is it? What's going on?"

"It's Cate. She went into early labor. She and Luc are in Denver."

"Wait, what? But isn't it too early? Are they trying to stop the labor?"

"She was too far along to stop it. Luc just talked to Emma. Cate had the babies."

"Already?" How was that possible? Mackenzie had only been gone for a handful of hours.

"The girls are tiny but getting good care. But Cate..."

Dread wrapped talons around her windpipe. "But Cate what?"

"She's having complications. She's losing blood. Luc didn't tell Emma much. He had to go. He just said to pray."

*Oh, God. I take it all back. How could I complain about such trivial matters like Jace being back in my life? I promise I'll be better. I'll be more mature. Please don't let anything happen to Cate or the babies. Luc would never recover. None of us would.*

Mackenzie stared out the front windshield of her truck. "This can't be happening. Everything was fine when I left this morning." How could the world just tip upside down like that?

"Since the staff knows about Cate, Emma took Ruby over to Gage's to prevent her from hearing anyone talk about...any of it. No need to scare the girl. Then she'll take Ruby to see Cate and the girls if...*when* Luc gives the okay."

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