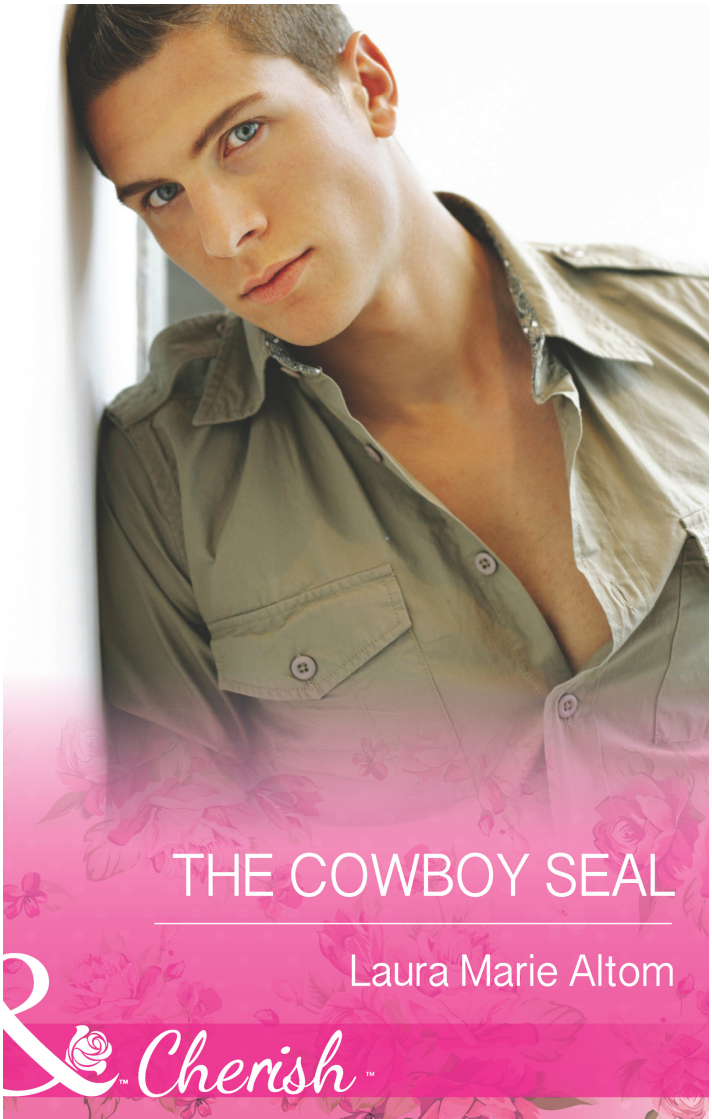

THE COWBOY SEAL

Laura Marie Altom

Cherish™

Laura Altom Marie

The Cowboy SEAL

Серия «Operation: Family», книга 7

Серия «Mills & Boon Cherish»

Аннотация

THE ROAD TO REDEMPTIONNavy SEAL Cooper Hansen hasn't been home in over a decade. He's never forgiven himself for the accident that killed his mother. But when his brother's widow, Millie, needs his help to save the Hansen ranch, Cooper can't stay away any longer.Millie's always loved Cooper in some way – as a childhood friend, a high-school crush and then as a brother-in-law. Now that he's back, she's discovering new, unexpected feelings for him. But if Cooper keeps holding on to the pain of the past, will he ever give their future together a fighting chance?

Содержание

The Cowboy SEAL 5
MILLS & BOON 6
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 62

"You're right. I shouldn't have taken off, but honestly?" Cooper shook his head and his crooked smile further lessened her anger's hold. "I was scared."

He removed his battered straw cowboy hat and crossed the room to hang it on the rack by the door. Even with his military haircut, he sported a wicked case of hat head and damn if it didn't look good.

"Those kids of yours asked tough questions. I don't even know the answers for myself."

"I get that, but they're kids," Millie replied. "They weren't even born when your mom died and they took your disappearing act personally."

"You know damn well I didn't just disappear." His gaze met hers and locked.

The intensity in his eyes startled her to the point that she had to look away. Her pulse raced and she wasn't sure what to do with her hands, so she fussed with her robe's belt, feeling all of thirteen when she realized that Cooper was still the most handsome cowboy in town.

The Cowboy SEAL
Laura Marie Altom

www.millsandboon.co.uk

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

When not immersed in her next story, Laura teaches art at a local middle school. In her free time, she beats her kids at video games, tackles Mount Laundry and, of course, reads romance!

Laura loves hearing from readers at either PO Box 2074, Tulsa, OK 74101, USA, or by e-mail, balipalm@aol.com.

MILLS & BOON

Before you start reading, why not sign up?

Thank you for downloading this Mills & Boon book. If you want to hear about exclusive discounts, special offers and competitions, sign up to our email newsletter today!

SIGN ME UP!

Or simply visit

signup.millsandboon.co.uk

Mills & Boon emails are completely free to receive and you can unsubscribe at any time via the link in any email we send you.

This story is dedicated to Dr Keith L. Stanley and Dr Brent C. Nossaman, as well as the nurses and staff of Tulsa Bone & Joint.

Thank you for giving me back my hand!

Contents

Cover
Introduction
Title Page
About the Author
Dedication
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five

Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Epilogue
Extract
Copyright
Chapter One

"Hey there, cowboy."

From his stool at Tipsea's crowded bar, Navy SEAL Cooper Hansen cast a sideways glance at the stacked brunette who'd slipped her arm around his shoulders.

"Buy a lady a drink?"

"Be happy to..." After tipping the brim of his raggedy straw Stetson, he nodded to the bartender. "Only I'm gonna need you to finish it over there."

When he pointed to the opposite side of the most popular squid hangout in town—her expression morphed from confusion

to anger. “I should’ve known better than to chase after a no-good cowboy in a SEAL bar. Obviously, you don’t have a clue what it’s like to be a *real* man.”

“Guess not.” Rather than watch her go, he swigged his longneck brew, intent on enjoying his few remaining hours of freedom for what he feared could be a good, long while.

His pal and team member, Grady Matthews, took the stool alongside him. Everyone called him Sheikh due to the fact that on any given night of the week, he was surrounded by his own personal harem of beauties. “You do know the object of hitting a bar is to go home with the pretty girl, not to run her off, right?”

After taking another deep pull, Cooper snorted. “Thanks for the advice, but given my current dark-ass mood, the only place any sane woman would want me is far away.”

“There you are, Cowboy!” Another longtime friend and team member, Heath Stone, wandered up. “Everyone’s looking for you. The whole point of this gathering was to give you a night so good, you don’t forget to hurry back.”

“I appreciate it, man—” Cooper patted his friend’s shoulder “—but knowing what’s ahead of me, any hellhole on the planet looks better than where I’m headed.”

“Which is where? Sorry, I only paid attention to the guys’-night portion of the email.” He gave him a wink and an elbow nudge. “Not that I’m complaining, but I can’t remember the last time I’ve been out of the house. Libby keeps me on a tight leash.”

“And if you don’t kiss me, I’ll give that leash a good, hard tug.”

Heath's wife, Libby, snuck up behind him to nuzzle his neck. Cooper was no expert on the whole love thing, but if he was a betting man, he'd say his friend was a goner.

While the two indulged in giggling and good, old-fashioned necking, Cooper discreetly looked away. The bar was dim and Pearl Jam loud. Tipsea's was a legend in Norfolk, and since another team member's wife purchased it, SEALs always drank free—a perk Cooper would very much miss. The grunge rock? Not so much. He was more of an old-school Hank Williams kind of guy.

His pals meant well by hosting this shindig, but the God's honest truth was that he'd just as soon get on with things. No amount of beer or pretty women would sugarcoat the fact that what he had waiting for him back home in Brewer's Falls, Colorado, was good, old-fashioned hell.

* * *

"HOW'S CLINT DOING?" Millie Hansen looked up from the stack of bills she'd been arranging in order of importance. The electric company's blaze-orange shut-off notice took precedence over the two late-payment credit card notices.

"Finally asleep." As she was near to sleepwalking herself, Millie's heart went out to her sister-in-law, Peg.

"I can't thank you enough for your help. Since Jim died..." She removed her reading glasses, blotting her eyes with her sweater sleeve—who could afford genuine tissues?

"He's my dad. Where else would I be?" She arched her head

back and closed her eyes.

At 10:00 p.m. on a blustery January Monday, the old Queen Anne home shuddered from the force of the Colorado plain's wind. The desk's banker's lamp provided the office's only light. Both kids were blessedly in their rooms—Millie didn't fool herself by believing the older one was actually sleeping. Eleven-year-old LeeAnn was probably reading with the aid of a flashlight beneath her covers. J.J.—age seven—had crashed before Millie finished tucking him in.

She set her reading glasses atop her open, ledger-style checkbook. "Hate to bring up a sore subject, but did you ever hear from Cooper?"

Peg sighed. "Left a half-dozen messages. Does hearing his gruff voice mail recording count as contact?"

"What're we going to do?" During the long days spent cooking and doing the dozens of other daily chores it took to keep the ranch running, Millie didn't have time to worry, much less spare a thought for her absentee brother-in-law, Cooper. But at night, fears crept in, slithering into every vulnerable part of her soul, reminding her just how bad the past few years had been and how much worse her future could get. If they lost the ranch that'd been in the Hansen family for over a hundred years, she didn't know what they'd do—where they'd even go.

"I ask myself that question every night when I'm up pacing, because worry won't let me sleep."

"Will we make it to spring?"

Shrugging, Peg leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "You know I'd stay if I could, but my savings is dwindling, and I still have a mortgage back in Denver. The hospital won't give me more leave. Come Monday, I'm expected back."

Millie swallowed the knot in her throat and nodded. "I understand."

"Dad's stable enough that I've arranged for a series of nurses and therapists to keep up with his rehabilitation here at home. His speech therapist said Dad's making all the right sounds, so with work, in between official therapy sessions, you and I should be able to help him make the right connections. Hopefully, a few neighbors will step in to help with his general care during the day."

And at night? Caring for a stroke victim was an around-the-clock job. Getting the Black Angus herd that would be their salvation come spring through what was feeling like a never-ending winter wasn't exactly your average nine-to-fiver. Then there were her kids, whom Millie already spent precious little time with. The weight of her responsibilities bore down on her shoulders, making them ache. "Lynette mentioned she'd be willing to come over anytime we need her. I'll give her a call." Lynette was Millie's best friend since kindergarten. She'd been a godsend after Jim died.

"Good. Maybe Wilma could help out some, too? I'll drive up every weekend." Wilma was a widowed neighbor who used to be in a quilting circle with the woman who would've been Millie's

mother-in-law—that is, if Kay Hansen had lived long enough to see her youngest son marry. Her death was never spoken of. Her passing had launched the beginning of the Hansen family's unraveling.

* * *

EXHAUSTION FROM THE twenty-seven-hour drive did nothing to ease the acid churning in Cooper's stomach. The cold, cloudy morning cast a gray pall over his already dreary hometown.

In the twelve years since he'd been gone, nothing about Brewer's Falls had changed. Same bedraggled downtown with the century-old brick bank that also served as the post office and drugstore. Besides the feed store, Elmer's Grocery, the diner, bar and community center, no other businesses lined the only road. The few kids were bused the two-hour round trip to attend school in Wilmington.

The half-block stretch of sidewalks was weed-choked and cracked, and the few trees were bare. Hanging baskets filled with the brown ghosts of summer's bounty swung from the diner's porch.

In all of a minute's time, he'd left town to turn onto the dirt road leading to his family's ranch. He'd forgotten the plain's stark beauty, and yet he'd joined the Navy with the express purpose of finding that same beauty at sea.

The ugly-ass town with its homely jumble of buildings had no redeeming qualities other than, he supposed, the good people

who lived there. A few old-timers. His little brother's widow and her kids—the nephew and niece that due to his father's hatred, Cooper had never even met.

If anything, the lonely town served as a blight upon the otherwise beautiful land. Hell, Brewer's Falls didn't even have a waterfall. The town's founder—Hawthorne Brewer—thought the idyllic name might draw in folks wanting a quieter way of life.

The road was in even worse shape than he remembered, which served his purpose well, considering the rock-strewn surface forced him to slow his pace.

The school bus passed.

Were his niece and nephew on board?

For a moment, the passing vehicle's dust cloud impeded his view, but when the dust settled, the life he'd spent years trying to forget came roaring into view.

At first, the two-story home, outbuildings and the cottonwoods his grandparents had planted were a distant speck. As they grew, so did his dread.

You're not my son, but a murderer....

Bile rose in his throat while his palms sweat and his pulse uncomfortably raced.

The Black Angus cattle that, for as long as Cooper could remember had been the ranch's lifeblood, huddled near the south pasture feeding station. The livestock's breath fogged in the cold morning air. How many mornings just like this had he ridden out at dawn to check on them?

It seemed inconceivable that he'd once felt more at ease on the back of his horse than he now did at a depth of a hundred feet.

The closer the house loomed, the more evident it became that the ranch and its occupants had fallen on hard times. His big sister, Peg—an ICU nurse who'd long since moved to Denver—was the only family he talked to. She'd told him that after his brother's death, his father had for all practical purposes shut down. Cooper had offered to return then, but Peg reported having broached the topic with their dad only to find him not just unreceptive, but downright hostile.

And so Cooper had continued his exile.

He pulled onto the house's dirt drive, holding his breath when passing the spot where basically, his life had ended. Sure, he'd worked hard and made a new family with his SEAL team, but it was his old one he mourned.

The one he'd literally and figuratively killed.

He put his truck in park, letting it idle for a minute before cutting the engine. He braced his forearms against the wheel, resting his chin atop them, staring at the house that in his mind's eye had once been the most wondrous place on earth. Now the front porch gutter sagged and over a decade's worth of summer sun had faded his mother's favorite shade of yellow paint to dirty white. Weeds choked her flower garden, and the branch holding his childhood tire swing had broken.

A dozen memories knotted his throat—cruel reminders that this was no longer his home. Per his sister's repeated requests,

he'd help until his dad got back on his feet, but after that, Cooper would retreat to the haven the Navy had become.

Forcing a deep breath, he knew he could no longer put off the inevitable. From the sounds of it, his dad was in such bad shape, he wouldn't even realize his son had stepped foot in the house. By the time he did, Cooper would've worked up his courage enough to face him.

Out of his ride, he grabbed his ditty bag from the truck bed, slinging it over his shoulder.

Feet leaden, heart heavier still, he crossed the mostly dirt yard to mount steps he'd last tread upon when he'd essentially been a boy. The Navy had honed him into a man, but confronting his past eroded his training like ocean waves ripping apart a fragile shore.

It all came rushing back.

That god-awful night when he'd done the unthinkable. His sister's screams. His brother's and father's stoic stares. The funeral. The guilt that clung tight to this day.

"Cooper?"

He looked up to find his sister-in-law, his little brother's high school sweetheart, clutching her tattered blue robe closed at the throat.

He removed his hat, pinning it to his chest. "Hey..."

"What're you doing here? I thought— I'm sorry. Where are my manners?" She held open the front door. "Get in here before you catch your death of cold."

He brushed past her, hyperaware of the light floral fragrance she'd worn since her sixteenth birthday when his brother had gifted it to her, declaring her to be the prettiest girl he knew. Millie was no longer pretty, but beautiful. Her hair a deep chestnut, and her haunted gaze as blue as a spring sky, despite dark circles shadowing her eyes. He couldn't help but stare. Catching himself, hating that his face grew warm, he sharply looked away.

The contrast of the front room's warmth to the outside chill caused him to shiver. He'd forgotten a real winter's bite.

"I—I can't believe you're here." She'd backed onto the sofa arm—the same sofa he used to catch her and Jim making out on. She fussed with her hair, looking at him, then away. "Peg tried calling so many times...."

"Sorry." He set his ditty bag on the wood floor, then shrugged out of his Navy-issued pea jacket to hang it on the rack near the door. He'd have felt a damn sight better with his hat back on, but his mother had never allowed hats in the house, so he hung it alongside his coat. "I've been out of town." Syria had been *lovely* this time of year. "Guess I should've called, but..."

"It's okay. I understand."

Did she? Did she have a clue what it had been like for him to one day belong to a loving, complete family and the next to have accidentally committed an act so heinous, his own father never spoke to him again?

"You're here now, and that's what matters."

"Yeah..." Unsure what to do with his hands, he crammed them into his pockets.

"I imagine you want to see your dad?"

He sharply exhaled. "No. Hell, no."

"Then why did you come?"

"Peg said you need me."

She chewed on that for a moment, then shook her head. "I needed you when Jim died, too. Where were you then?"

"Aw, come on, Mill... You know this is complicated." Skimming his hands over his buzz-cut hair, he turned away from her and sighed. "Got any coffee?"

"Sure."

He followed her into the kitchen, momentarily distracted by the womanly sway of her hips. Two kids had changed her body, but for the better. He liked her with a little meat on her bones—not that it was his place to assess such a thing. She'd always been—would always be—his brother's girl.

She handed him a steaming mug.

He took a sip, only to blanch. "You always did make awful coffee. Good to see that hasn't changed."

Her faint smile didn't reach blue eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I can't believe you're really here."

"In the flesh."

"How long are you staying?"

"Long as you need me." Or at least until his dad regained his faculties enough to kick him out again. To this day, his father's

hatred still burned, but the worst part of all was that Cooper didn't blame him. Hell, the whole reason he worked himself so damned hard during the day was so exhaustion granted some small measure of peace at night.

"You haven't changed a bit," she noted from behind her own mug. "I always could see the gears working in your mind."

"Yeah?" He dumped his coffee down the drain then started making a fresh pot. "Tell me, swami, what am I thinking?"

"About her." She crept up behind him, killing him when she slipped her arms around his waist for a desperately needed, but undeserved hug. Her kindness made it impossible to breathe, to think, to understand that after all this time, why he was even here. "It's okay, Coop." She rested her forehead between his shoulder blades. Her warm exhalations sent shock waves through his T-shirt then radiating across his back. "I mean, obviously it's not okay, but you have to let it go. Your mom was so kind. She'd hate seeing you this way."

A dozen years' grief and anger and heartache balled inside him, threatening to shatter. Why was Millie being nice? Why didn't she yell or condemn him for staying away? Why didn't she do anything other than give him the comfort he'd so desperately craved?

"Coop, look at me...." Her small hands tugged him around to face her, and when she used those hands to cup his cheeks while her gaze locked with his, he couldn't for a second longer hold in his pain. What was he doing here? No matter what Peg said, he

never should've come. "Honey, yes, what happened was awful, but it was an accident. Everyone knows that. No one blames you."

A sarcastic laugh escaped him. "Have you met my father?"

"When your mom died, he was out of his mind with grief. He didn't know what he was saying or doing. I'll bet if you two talked now, then—"

"How are we going to do that? The man suffered a stroke."

"That doesn't mean he can't listen. At least give it a try. You owe yourself that much."

How could she say that after what he'd done? The world—let alone his father—didn't owe him shit. "Coming here—it was a mistake. I never should've—"

"You're wrong, Cooper. Your dad may not admit it, but he needs you. I need you." She stepped back to gesture to the dilapidated kitchen with its outdated appliances, faded wallpaper and torn linoleum floor. "This place needs you."

He slammed the filter drawer shut on the ancient Mr. Coffee. "More than you could ever know, I appreciate your kind words, Mill, but seriously? What does anyone need with a guy who killed his own mother?"

Chapter Two

Millie's mind still reeled from the fact that her husband's brother was even in the room, let alone the fact that he was here to stay awhile. His mere presence was a godsend. While she considered the tragedy that'd caused his mother's death to be ancient history, for him it seemed time had stood still. Had he

even begun to process the fact Jim was gone, too?

Before the coffee finished brewing, he pulled out the glass pot, replacing it with his mug. With it only half-full, he replaced the pot.

"Better?" she found the wherewithal to ask after he'd downed a good portion of the brew.

"Much." His faint smile reminded her so much of her lost love that her heart skipped a beat. It'd been three years since she'd lost Jim, and while she thought of him often—would never forget him—in the time he'd been gone, more urgent matters occupied the space grief had once filled in her heart.

"Hungry?" she asked. "The kids got oatmeal, but if you want, I'll cook you up something more substantial." Busying her flighty hands, she rummaged through the fridge. "There's a little bacon. We always have plenty of eggs. Pancakes? Do you still like them?"

"Coffee's fine," he said with a wag of his mug. He looked her up and down, then politely aimed his stare out the kitchen window. "Judging by your outfit, you haven't done any of the outside chores?"

She reddened, clutching the robe close at her throat.

"I assume the routine hasn't changed?"

"No, but you're probably tired from your drive. Why don't you nap for a bit, and after I check on your dad, I'll head outside."

"No need. Fresh air will do me good."

"You do know you're eventually going to have to see him."

"Dad?"

"The Easter Bunny..."

He finished his coffee then put the mug in the sink. "Not if I can help it." He nodded to the tan Carhartt hanging on a hook by the back door. "Mind if I borrow that?"

"Help yourself." The duster-style coat had belonged to Jim. Sometimes when she felt particularly overwhelmed, she wore it to remind her of him. It used to smell of him—the trace of the tobacco he'd chewed. How many times had she scolded him to quit, afraid of losing him to cancer when instead he'd passed from a hunting accident?

"Was this my brother's?"

Swallowing the knot in her throat, she nodded.

She wanted to rail on him for not having had the common decency—the respect—to attend Jim's funeral, but she lacked the strength to argue.

"About that..."

"J-just go, Cooper." She didn't want to hear what he had to say, because no mere explanation would ever be good enough. No matter what, a man didn't miss his own brother's funeral. Just didn't happen.

The set of his stubbled square jaw was grim, but then so was the inside of her battered heart. Peg might've told him what the past few years without her husband had been like for Millie, but he didn't really know. Beyond the financial toll Jim's death had taken, emotionally, she felt as if a spring twister had uprooted

every aspect of her and her kids' lives. And speaking of her kids, they'd never even had the pleasure of meeting their uncle Cooper.

"Okay..." he mumbled.

Never-ending seconds stretched between them. Her watering eyes refused to quit stinging, and her frayed nerves itched for a fight.

"Thanks for the coffee. Guess I'll head outside."

Only after he'd gone, leaving her with just the wall of brutal January air to prove he'd ever even been in the room, did Millie dare exhale.

From a workload standpoint, having Cooper back on the ranch might be a godsend, but would it be worth the emotional toll?

* * *

"HEY, GIRL..." COOPER approached Sassy, the sorrel mare he'd been given for his eighteenth birthday. At the time, working this ranch, finding a good woman, having kids, had been all he'd ever wanted from life. Strange how even though he'd accomplished and seen more than he ever could've dreamed, he still felt like that kid who'd been run off in shame. "Long time, no see, huh?"

He stroked her nose and was rewarded by a warm, breathy snort against his palm. For this weather, he should've worn gloves and a hat, but pride won over common sense when he'd scurried for the barn's safety.

Regardless of where things stood with his father, Cooper knew damn well he'd done wrong by his brother and sweet Millie.

It'd been ages since he'd saddled a horse, and it took a while to get his bearings. Having followed the routine since he'd been a kid, he knew the drill, just had to reacquaint himself with where everything was stored. He found leather work gloves that'd seen better days and a hat that looked like a horse had stomped it to death before it'd wrestled with a tractor. Regardless, he slapped it on his head, thankful for the warmth, but wishing the simple work didn't leave his mind with so much space to wander.

Millie wasn't flashy.

Hell, back in Virginia Beach, she wasn't the sort of woman to whom he'd have given a second glance. Funny thing was, back at Tipsea's, he'd only been on the prowl for one thing, and it sure wouldn't have made his momma proud. A woman like Millie, who was as at home in a big country kitchen as she was out on the range, was the kind of catch a man could be proud to escort to a Grange Hall dance.

His brother had been damned lucky to have found someone like Millie so young. Little good it'd done him, though, seeing how he'd gone and died way before his time. What'd Jim been thinking, shooting from a moving four-wheeler? Had disaster written all over it.

Yeah? How many shots you taken from a Mark V at fifty knots, yet you're still ticking?

Jim may have been hot-dogging, but it wasn't a stunt Cooper hadn't tried himself. Only difference was that Cooper had gone fast enough for the devil not to catch up.

Even when they'd been kids, Millie had been a feisty little thing. He couldn't even imagine the fury she'd had with her husband for putting himself in that position. With two kids, he should've known better.

But then who was Cooper to talk?

His entire adult life had been based on a split-second nightmare from which he still hadn't awoken.

* * *

"HOW ARE YOU this morning?" Millie asked her father-in-law, even though she knew he couldn't respond.

He replied with a snarling growl.

To say Clint was having a tough time adjusting to his new reality was putting it mildly. Poor guy had been a powerhouse all his life. He was making progress in his recovery, but it was far too slow for his liking.

Millie hustled through the personal-hygiene routine Peg taught her to follow. The nurse would handle his primary bathing, but no matter how much her father-in-law clearly resented Millie invading his personal space, for his own well-being, the job needed to be done.

"You should've seen your naughty granddaughter trying to get out of school this morning." While brushing Clint's teeth, she kept up a line of running chatter. She couldn't tell if her attempt at levity had any effect on the patient, but it at least helped calm her nerves. "It's cold enough out there, we might have to break the smoke off the chimney."

All her good cheer earned was another grunt.

"Your new therapist should be here after a while. I think she'll be working on speech today. Peg's got a whole slew of folks coming out to help." She tidied his bedding. "It's gonna be a regular Grand Central Station 'round here."

More grumbling erupted from Clint, but she ignored him in favor of slipping his small whiteboard around his neck, along with the attached dry-erase marker. It was a struggle for him to smoothly move his right arm and hand, but as with the rest of his recovery, with each passing day he grew more adept at the skill.

"Now that you're all cleaned up, I'm going to make your breakfast then be right back."

She prepared a light meal of scrambled eggs with cheese and pureed peaches. Clint loved coffee, so she filled a lidded mug with the steaming liquid then added a few ice cubes before sealing the top and adding a straw. Would he notice it wasn't her usual awful brew?

Peg said Clint's hearing was fine.

Had he heard Cooper enter the house?

Millie didn't have long to wait for an answer. She entered Clint's room only to find he'd already been practicing his writing. On his board were the barely legible letters: *C-O-O-P?*

His bloodshot eyes begged for an answer that left her wishing they'd found a way to install Clint's hospital-style bed in the upstairs master bedroom as opposed to Kay's old sewing room.

How much had Clint heard?

With an extra cantankerous growl, he waved the board hard enough to send the attached marker flying on its string. The writing instrument landed smack dab in the center of Clint's eggs, which only made him roar louder.

Jerking the marker back as if it were on a yo-yo string, he drew a line through his former word to painstakingly write: *O-U-T!*

* * *

"WHO ARE YOU?"

After a long day of checking the well-being of not just the cattle, but fencing and the overall state of the land, as well, Cooper had just finished brushing his horse when a pretty, freckle-faced girl, whose braids reminded him an awful lot of Millie's back when she'd been a kid, raised her chin and scowled.

"Mom doesn't like strangers messing with our livestock."

The fire flashing behind her sky-blue eyes also reminded him of her momma. "You must be LeeAnn?"

"Yeah?" Eyes narrowed, she asked, "Who are you, and how do you know my name?"

A boy peeked out from behind the partially closed door. He had the same red hair Jim had had when he'd been about that age. Jim Junior? Or J.J., as Peg more often called him. Through emails, Cooper had seen the kids' pictures, but they hadn't done them justice.

His throat grew uncomfortably tight.

How proud his brother must've been of these two, which only made his actions all the more undecipherable. If Cooper

possessed such treasure, he'd be so careful....

But then he'd treasured his mother and look what'd happened to her.

Cooper pulled himself together, removed his right glove, then cautiously approached his niece, holding out his hand for her to shake. "LeeAnn, J.J., sorry it's taken me so long to finally meet you. I'm your uncle Cooper."

"The Navy SEAL?" Seven-year-old J.J. found his courage and bolted out from his hiding spot. "Dad said you blow up ships and scuba dive and other cool stuff."

Judging by LeeAnn's prepubescent scowl, she wasn't impressed. "Mom said you abandoned your family when we needed you most."

How did he respond? Millie had only spoken the truth.

From behind him, Sassy snorted.

"You didn't ride her, did you?" His pint-size nemesis followed him on his trek to the feed bin. "Because if you did, don't *ever* do it again. Sassy's *mine.*"

"Interesting..." He scooped grain into a bucket. The faint earthy-sweet smell brought him back to a time when he'd been LeeAnn and J.J.'s age. Everything had been so simple then. Do his chores, his homework, play with the dog. Speaking of which, he hadn't seen their mutt, Marvel. Not a good sign. "Because Sassy was a birthday present for me."

"You've gotta be like a hundred," his nephew noted.

Most days, I feel like it. "Only seventy-five."

"That's still pretty old...."

His niece narrowed her eyes. "That's not true. I heard Mom talking to Aunt Peg about Grandpa, and she said he was in his seventies. That means you can't be that old—probably just like fifty."

Cooper laughed. "Yeah, that's closer."

LeeAnn wrenched the feed bucket from him. "Since she's my horse, I'll take care of her."

"Be my guest." Cooper backed away. "But since I'll be here awhile, do you think we might work out a deal?"

"Like what?" She stroked the horse's nose.

"Sassy's allowed to help me with the cattle while you're at school, then she's all yours once you get home?"

"Sounds good to me." J.J. took an apple from his backpack and sat on a hay bale to eat it, all the while watching the negotiation with rapt interest.

The girl nibbled her lower lip. Another trait she'd inherited from her mom. "I'll think about it."

"Fair enough."

"LeeAnn! J.J.!" Millie called from the house.

"Bye!" Jim's son bolted.

His sister chased after him.

Cooper gave Sassy one last pat, made sure the three other horses had plenty of food and water, then closed up the barn for the night. As the day had wound on, the weather had only grown more ugly. At five, clouds were so heavy that it was almost dark.

Sleet pelted his nose and cheeks on his walk across the yard.

As miserably cold as the day had been and night now was, Cooper would've preferred to spend the evening in his truck rather than go back into the house. He didn't belong there. At least in Virginia, he'd been part of a well-oiled team.

On the ranch, he wasn't sure what he was. No-good son. Disrespectful brother. Forgotten uncle.

"Coop?"

He glanced out from beneath his hat brim to find Millie hollering at him from the back porch. Much like she had with her robe, she now clutched the lapels of a chunky brown sweater. Wind whipped her long hair, and when she drew it back, she looked so lovely in the golden light spilling from the house that his breath caught in his throat.

Lord, what was wrong with him? Appraising his brother's wife? There was a special place in hell for men like him.

"Hurry, before your feet freeze to the yard!"

He did hurry, but only because he didn't want her hanging around outside waiting for him.

"Thanks." He brushed past her, hating that he once again noticed her sweet floral smell. He removed his hat and stood there for a sec, adjusting to not only the kitchen's warmth, but also the sight of the space filled with industrious bodies.

J.J. sat at the round oak table, frowning at an open math book. LeeAnn sat alongside him, making an unholy mess with an ugly papier-mâché mountain.

Millie had left him and now stood at the sink, washing broccoli. “Pardon the clutter. LeeAnn’s volcano is due soon, and J.J. has a math test tomorrow. I heard you all formally met in the barn?”

“Yes, ma’am.” What else should he say? That she’d raised a couple of fine-looking kids? That he was an ass and coward for not meeting them before now? Instead, he glanced back to the table and said the first stupid thing that popped into his head. “That’s supposed to be a volcano?”

The second he asked the question, he regretted it. His few hastily spoken words ruined the bucolic family scene.

His pretty niece leaped up from the table, then dashed from the room.

“It’s an *awesome* volcano!” J.J. declared before throwing his pencil at Cooper, then also leaving the room.

“I realize you’ve probably never been around kids,” Millie said, “but you might try digging around in your big, tough Army Guy head to look for a sensitivity gene. LeeAnn’s worked really hard on her science project. You didn’t have to tear her down.” Having delivered his tongue-lashing, Millie chased after her brood.

From upstairs came the sound of a door slamming, then muffled tears.

Son of a biscuit...

He slapped his hat onto the back-door rack and shrugged out of his brother’s coat, hanging it up, too. Then he just stood there,

woefully unsure what to do with his frozen hands or confused heart.

"For the record," he said under his breath, "I'm a Navy Guy."

Chapter Three

Millie held her arms around her sobbing daughter, rocking her side to side from where they sat on the edge of the bed. "Honey, he didn't mean it. You're going to have the best volcano your school's ever seen."

"I'll help, Lee." Sweet-tempered J.J. cozied up to his sister's other side. Since their father died, both kids had grown infinitely more sensitive. Millie knew one of these days she'd need to toughen them to the ways of the world, but not quite yet. They'd already been through enough. She couldn't even comprehend what would happen if they also lost their grandpa or the only home they'd ever known.

A knock sounded on the door frame.

She glanced in that direction to find Cooper taking up far too much room. He was not only tall, but his shoulders were broad, too. Back when they'd been teens, he'd been a cocky, self-assured hothead who'd never lacked for the company of a blonde, brunette or redhead. When he'd spent weekends calf-roping, rodeo buckle bunnies swarmed him like hummingbirds to nectar. She'd far preferred her even-tempered Jim. Cooper had always been just a little too *wild.*

"Make him go away," LeeAnn mumbled into Millie's shoulder.

"Look..." Cooper rammed his hands into his jeans pockets. "I'm awfully sorry about hurting your feelings."

"No, you're not!"

"LeeAnn..." Millie scolded. While she certainly didn't agree with her brother-in-law's ham-handed actions, she didn't for a moment believe him deliberately cruel. He spent all his time around mercenary types. She honestly wasn't even sure what a Navy SEAL did. Regardless, she was reasonably certain he hadn't spent a lot of time around kids.

"I really am sorry." The farther he ventured into the ultragirly room with its pink-floral walls, brass bed piled with stuffed animals and antique dressing table and bench Millie had picked up for a song at a barn auction, the more out of his element Cooper looked. "Ever heard of Pompeii?"

"I saw a movie on it," J.J. said.

"Cool." Cooper's warm, sad, unsure smile touched Millie's heart. He was trying to be a good uncle, but that was kind of hard when jumping in this late in the game. He took his phone from his back pocket then a few seconds later, handed it to her son. "This pic is of me and a few friends. We had some downtime and toured through the ruins."

"Whoa..." J.J.'s eyes widened. "That's awesome! You really were there."

"Doesn't make him like some kind of volcano expert," LeeAnn noted.

"I've always wanted to see Pompeii..." Millie couldn't help

but stare in wonder at the photo. Beyond the three smiling men stretched a weathered street frozen in time. Snow-capped Mount Vesuvius towered in the background. The scene was all at once chilling, yet intriguing. The place seemed inconceivably far from Brewer's Falls.

"It was amazing but also sad." He flipped through more pics, some taken of the former citizens who had turned to stone. "Anyway... LeeAnn, you're right, I'm not even close to being a volcano expert, but if you wouldn't mind, I'd love lending a hand with your project. I wire a mean explosive and between the two of us, we could probably muster some impressive concussive force."

While both kids stared, Millie pressed her lips tight.

Concussive force? He did realize the science fair was being held in an elementary school gym and not Afghanistan? Still, she appreciated his willingness to at least try helping her daughter. Lord knew, her own volcano-building skills were lacking. "That sounds nice," she said to her brother-in-law, "only you might scale down the eruption."

"Gotcha." He half smiled. "Small eruptions."

For only an instant, their gazes locked, but that was long enough to leave her knowing he still unnerved her in a womanly way. It'd been three long years since she'd lost her husband, and as much as she'd told herself—and her matchmaking friend, Lynette—she had no interest in dating, something about Cooper had always exuded raw sex appeal. It wasn't anything deliberate on his part, it just *was.* Had always been. Because she'd been

happy with Jim, she'd studied Cooper's escapades from afar. But here, now, something about the way his lips stroked the perfectly innocuous word, *eruptions,* sent her lonely, yearning body straight to the gutter.

Her mind, on the other hand, stayed strong. If she ever decided to start dating, she'd steer far clear of anyone remotely like her brother-in-law!

* * *

"J.J., HON," the boy's mother asked an hour later from across the kitchen table, "will you say grace?"

"Yes, ma'am." He bowed his head. "God is great, God is good..."

While the boy finished, Cooper discreetly put down his fork, pretending he hadn't already nabbed a bite. The last time he'd prayed before a meal had been the last night he'd been in this house.

He looked up just as J.J. muttered *Amen,* to find Millie staring. Damn, she'd grown into a fine-looking woman. And damn, how he hated even noticing the fact.

Conversation flowed into a river of avoidance, meandering past dangerous topics such as his brother or father. Meatloaf passing and the weather took on inordinate levels of importance.

This suited Cooper just fine. He had no interest in rehashing the past and lacked the courage to wander too far into the future. His only plan was to keep things casual then head back to Virginia ASAP to rejoin his SEAL team.

"Uncle Cooper?" J.J. asked. The kid sported a seriously cute milk mustache.

"Yeah?"

"How come you didn't visit Grandpa with us tonight while he ate his dinner?"

Whoosh. Just like that, his lazy river turned into a raging waterfall, culminating in a pool of boiling indigestion. He messed with his broccoli. "I, ah, needed to clean up before your mom's tasty dinner."

"Okay." Apparently satisfied with Cooper's answer, the child reached across the table for a third roll.

His niece wasn't about to take his answer at face value. "I heard Aunt Peg and Mom talking about how much you *hate* Grandpa and he *hates* you."

"LeeAnn!" Millie set her iced tea glass on the table hard enough to rattle the serving platters. "Apologize to your uncle."

"Wh-why do you hate Grandpa?" J.J. asked, voice cracking as he looked from his uncle to his mom. "I love him a whole lot."

Son of a biscuit...

"Millie..." Cooper set his fork by his plate and pushed back his chair. "Thanks for this fine meal, but I've got to run into town. Please leave the dishes for me, and I'll wash 'em later."

* * *

"WHAT'S HE GONNA do in town?" LeeAnn asked, carrying on with her meal as if nothing had even happened. "Everything's closed."

Cooper had already left out the front door.

Millie covered her face with her hands. At this time of night, there was only one thing a man could do in Brewer's Falls—drink.

"Mom?" J.J. pressed. "What's Uncle Cooper gonna do? And why does he hate Grandpa?"

At that moment, Millie was the one hating Cooper for running out on her yet again. But then wait—during her initial crisis after she'd first lost Jim, he hadn't even bothered to show up.

"Mom?"

"J.J., *hush!*" She never snapped at her kids, but this was one time she needed space to think, breathe. She got up from the table and delivered a hasty apology before running for the stairs.

In her room, she tossed herself across the foot of the bed she and Jim had shared. Never had she needed him more. His quiet strength and logic and calm in the face of any storm.

She wanted—needed—so badly to cry, but tears wouldn't come.

Frustration for her situation balled in her stomach, punching with pain. If she had a lick of sense, she'd do the adult thing—pull herself together and join her children downstairs. She needed to play a game with them and clean the kitchen. Do research on how to build a science-fair volcano. Play mix and match with which bills she could afford to pay. Check on Clint to see if he needed anything.

While she *needed* to do all of that, what she *wanted* was an

indulgent soak in the hall bathroom's claw-foot tub.

* * *

COOPER SAUNTERED INTO the smoky bar, taking a seat on a counter stool. In all the years he'd lived in the one-horse town, he'd never been in the old place. Not much to look at with twenty or so country-type patrons, dim lighting, honky-tonk-blaring jukebox, a few ratty pool tables and neon beer signs decorating the walls. But as long as the liquor bit, that'd get the job of escaping—even for a moment—done. After a few drinks, he probably wouldn't even mind the yeast scent of a quarter-century's worth of stale beer that'd sloshed onto the red industrial-style carpet.

He said to the guy behind the bar, "Shot of Jim Beam, please."

"I'll be damned... Cooper?"

"Mr. Walker?" *Seriously?* Talk about jumping from the frying pan into the fire. The grizzled cowboy not only happened to be one of his father's best friends, but owned the land adjoining the Hansen ranch.

He extended his hand for Cooper to shake. "Please, call me Mack. Figure if you're old enough to drink and serve our country, you're old enough for us to be on a first-name basis." He poured Cooper's shot then one for himself. Raising it, he said, "About time you came home."

"Only temporarily..." Cooper downed the fiery elixir. "I'll head back to my base just as soon as things get settled."

"By *things,* I assume you're talking about your father? Damn

shame. Everyone's just sick about the run of bad luck your family's been having."

In no mood to hash over the past or present, Cooper wagged his glass. "Another."

Mack obligingly poured. "Things that bad out there, huh?"

Cooper winced from the liquor's bite.

"I told your father he was a damned fool for running you off. What happened with your momma... Straight-up accident that could've happened to any one of us. I know deep in his heart Clint agrees, but he's too damned stubborn to tell anyone—let alone his firstborn—any different."

The tears stinging Cooper's eyes hurt worse than the liquor burning his throat.

"He needs you. Millie needs you. Hell, even those ragtag kids of hers need you. Yep..." He smacked the wood counter. "'Bout damned time you came home."

Nice sentiment, but for his own sanity, Cooper knew he was only passing through. A long time ago he'd lost his home, his way, and for a messed-up guy like him, there was no such thing as second chances.

* * *

"WHERE'VE YOU BEEN?" Millie warmed her hands in front of the living room's woodstove, wishing she hadn't been on edge ever since Cooper had run off, vowing she wouldn't lower herself to even turn around and look at him. She thought her lazy, twenty-minute soak would make her feel better, but all it

had done was given her the privacy needed to think—not good for a woman in her condition. Hot water, plus loneliness, plus closing her eyes to envision the first handsome face she'd seen in years had proven anything but relaxing. Especially when that face belonged to her dead husband's brother!

"Where do you think?"

She knew exactly where he'd been. She shouldn't have wasted the breath needed to ask. "It was a serious dick move for you to walk out like that. You owe your niece and nephew an explanation."

"*Dick move?* Talk to your momma with that mouth?"

She spun around to face him, only to find him unnervingly close. "You know better than most anyone I don't even have a mom, so you can put that sass back in your pocket."

"Sorry." He held up his hands in surrender, and her stupid, confused heart skipped a beat. The only reason she even found him attractive was the endearing similarities he'd shared with his brother. Mossy-green eyes and the faint rise in the bridge of his nose. The way his lips looked pouty when he said his m's. The way he made her wistful and achy and irrationally mad about how perfect her life had once been and no longer was. "You're right. I shouldn't have taken off, but honestly?" He shook his head, and his crooked smile further lessened her anger's hold. "I was scared." He removed his battered straw cowboy hat, crossing the room to hang it on the rack by the door. Even with his buzz cut, he sported a wicked case of hat hair and damn if it didn't look

good. “Those kids of yours asked tough questions. I don’t even know the answers for myself.”

“I get that, but they’re kids. They weren’t even born when your mom died, and they take it personally when their only uncle never even had the decency to send them a birthday card. They’re smart, Coop. Their little ears pick up more than I’d like, and as much as Peg loves you, she’s also that exasperated by your disappearing act.”

“I didn’t just—”

“Shh!” she admonished when he’d gotten too loud. “Do you want to wake J.J. and LeeAnn? Even worse—your dad?”

“Sorry,” he said in a softer tone. He sat hard on the sofa, cradling his forehead in his hands. “But you know damn well I didn’t just *disappear*. When you run down your mother with a truck, then your father tells you to, and I quote—*Get the hell out of my house and don’t* ever *come back*—it tends to linger on a man’s soul.” When he looked up, even by the light of the room’s only lamp, she could tell his eyes had welled. She hated to see him hurting, but she’d hurt, too. They all had. They all were, still. He didn’t own the rights to pain.

“Look...” With every part of her being, she wanted to go to him. Sit beside him and slip her arm around his shoulders, but she physically couldn’t. Her feet literally wouldn’t move. Outside, sleet pelted century-old windows. The weatherman out of Denver said they could have six inches of snow by morning. “I smoothed things over with the kids by giving them an abridged version of

what happened with their grandmother. But for your own well-being, you have to once and for all get it through your thick head that the only one who blames you for the accident is your father—well, aside from yourself. Why did your mom even go out there? She knew better."

A laugh as cold as the wind rattling the shutters escaped him. "Her dying words were that she'd run outside to give me a piece of her mind for drinking and staying out so late. She then told me if she'd had a lick of sense, she'd have gone to bed early in case she needed to bail me out of the county jail come morning."

"There you go. So see? She admitted she was partially to blame. Do you honestly think that just because of your cantankerous father she'd have expected you to carry this ache inside you for all these—"

A crash of metal erupted from the back bedroom where Clint was supposed to be sleeping. Then came a gut-wrenching growl.

"What was that?" Cooper asked, already on his feet, heading in that direction.

Her stomach knotted. "I would imagine, *that* was your father...."

Chapter Four

"Go see him," Millie said. "You can't avoid Clint forever."

Cooper knew she was right. Sooner or later he'd have to make peace with his father. Or at the very least, for Millie and her kids' sake, forge some semblance of civility between them. But how did he start? It wasn't as if the walls of grief standing between

them could be broken with a mere apology.

Another growl rose above the stove's crackling fire and wind rattling the shutters.

"Cooper..." His sister-in-law's condemning stare made him feel all of twelve. He'd felt more comfortable staring down a shark. Her intense stare conveyed more than a day's worth of words. It told him loud and clear that until he at least spoke with his father, she wouldn't grant him a moment's peace.

"Aw, hell..." He brushed past her, hating the cramped space forcing them together. His arm didn't stop tingling from where they'd touched till he reached the end of the hall.

Cooper forced a deep breath then knocked on the closed door of his mom's old sewing room—the only possible downstairs place where Millie and his sister could have stashed his ailing father.

Rather than wait for an answer, his pulse taking the cadence of a rapid-fire machine gun, Cooper thrust open the door. He'd literally dreaded this moment for the past twelve years. "You still got a problem with me, old man?"

Clint launched a new series of growls then pitiful, racking coughs.

"You've got to calm down," Millie said, already tidying the mess her patient had made by toppling his rolling metal tray. "I meant to tell you earlier that Cooper had come for a visit, but it must've slipped my mind."

The cantankerous old man thrashed as best he could then

settled when Millie took a plastic water cup from the nightstand and held the straw to his dried and cracked lips.

Cooper had readied himself for a fight with the man he used to know. The barrel-chested, ham-fisted, mean-as-a-cornered-rattler father who'd sent him packing. What he faced was a pathetic shadow of Cooper's memories. Make no mistake, judging by his scowl and dark glare, Clint still wasn't a teddy bear. But he had lost a good fifty pounds, and his complexion was as pale as the threadbare sheets and quilts covering his bed.

Clint's current condition left Cooper's eyes stinging.

He'd steeled himself for battle with a lion, not a lamb.

"There you go," Millie soothed. "It's medicine time, and I'll bet you thought I forgot you." After kissing the old man's forehead, she fished three tablets from three different prescription bottles, patiently helping Clint one at a time down them all with more water. When he signaled that he had drunk his fill, she covered his lips with ointment. "Feel better?"

The old man had his dry-erase board slung around his neck. With his good hand he wrote *O-U-T* then underlined it twice before pointing in Cooper's general direction.

Instantaneously, Cooper's anger was replaced by profound sadness. And a jolt of something he never in a million years would've expected—a fierce longing to make things right with this man he'd once so deeply loved. His mind's eye no longer replayed their last night together, but flashes of Clint patiently teaching him to change his truck's oil or beaming with pride

when Cooper won his first rodeo. Then came a myriad of shared holidays and ordinary Tuesday-night suppers and racing his brother, Jim, off the school bus, both of them running as fast as they could to find out what their father had been up to in the barn. His dad had taught Cooper how to shoot a rifle, smoke cigars and treat women. What Clint hadn't done was prepare his son for how to let him go.

Which meant that in addition to saving this ragtag old ranch, Cooper now felt responsible for saving his dad.

He felt obligated to say as much, but instead, clung to the room's shadows. Gratitude for Millie knotted his throat while she fussed with his father's pillows and blankets. Cooper should've helped her. After all, the patient was his dad. But his boots felt nailed to the wood floor.

Millie asked, "What did you do with the remote to your TV?"

Cooper had only just noticed the ancient model set atop the dresser. The volume had been turned all the way down on The Weather Channel's forecaster. Another pleasant memory accosted him when he thought back to the time he and Jim had helped Clint with their first satellite dish. Exciting didn't begin to cover how awesome it'd been to have hundreds of channels—not that their mom ever let them and Peg watch as much TV as they'd have liked.

"What're you smiling about?" Millie asked, on her knees, using a towel to sop water from his father's spilled plastic pitcher.

Cooper knelt to help, taking the towel from her. "Remember

when we got MTV?"

She sat back on her haunches and frowned. "How could I forget? That was around the same time you asked why my boobs were smaller than everyone else's."

Cooper winced. "Wasn't it enough retribution for you that because of that comment, Mom made me scrub baseboards for a week?"

"No."

By the time they finished cleaning, Clint had drifted off to sleep and softly snored.

"Looks like his meds finally kicked in." Millie fished the TV remote from where it had fallen under the bed.

"Yeah..." Cooper stood there like a dope, holding the damp towel they'd used for the floor, watching Millie as she finished cleaning the last of his old man's mess.

The past bore down on Cooper's shoulders, making every inch of him ache—not just his body, but soul. He'd lost so much. His mom. Jim. And now, for all practical purposes, his dad.

That sting was back behind his eyes.

Cooper couldn't remember the last time he'd broken down—maybe not since that long ago awful night. "I—I've gotta get out of here."

Planning an escape to the barn, he pitched the towel on the kitchen table before making a beeline for the back door. But before he could get it open, Millie was there, wrapping her arms around him, holding strong through his emotional fall.

His tears were ugly and all-consuming, making his muscles seize. Though he had no right, Cooper clung to Millie, breathing her in. She smelled good and familiar. Of everything he'd left and tried so hard to forget, but clearly had not yet succeeded.

"I—I'm sorry," he managed after finally getting ahold of himself. "Shit..." He released her to rake his fingers through his hair. "I'm not even sure what just happened."

"Something that probably needed to happen back when your mom died? And again, for your brother?" She rubbed her hand along his upper arm. "Plus, it can't have been easy—finding your dad in that condition."

"Stop making excuses." Not wanting her to see him, he turned to the wall, planting his palms flat against the cool plaster, then his forehead.

She stepped behind him. He knew, because he sensed her. Felt her heat. When she kneaded his shoulders, he closed his eyes and groaned. "Lord, that feels good."

"I'm glad."

"You should stop."

"Why?" She worked her thumbs between his shoulder blades.

"Because I don't deserve your comfort any more than you've deserved to be stuck here on your own with this mess."

"This *mess* you refer to happens to be your father. The man who taught me to cook a mean elk steak and nursed me through losing my husband." She stopped giving Cooper pleasure to instead urge him around. Her pained expression, the unshed tears

shining in her eyes, made the whiskey lingering in his gut catch fire.

He winced from the sudden pang.

Something in her expression darkened to the point he hardly recognized her. She took a step back and crossed her arms. "Mess, huh? You honestly think of your own dad having had a stroke so callously?"

"Come on, Mill, it was just an expression. I didn't—"

"Hush." For what felt like eternity, she stood hugging herself, lips pressed tight, eyes luminous from tears threatening to spill. "For a second I actually felt sorry for you." She laughed before conking her forehead with her palm. "But now I realize who I'm dealing with—the guy your brother called *Cold Coop,* aka The Human Iceberg. Jim hated you for leaving like you did, but I always made excuses. I told him you were hurting. When our daughter was born, and you couldn't be bothered to meet her, I told him you were an integral part of our country's security, and that I was sure you'd come just as soon as you got leave. When our son was born, and you still didn't show..." She shook her head and chuckled. "Despite the fact that Peg had told you our happy news on the phone, I assured Jim you must not have received the official birth announcement, otherwise nothing could've kept you away. When Jim died, and you still didn't come home, well, that I chalked up to you being wrapped up in your own grief. But how could you bear knowing all of us were here falling apart? How could you just carry on as if your brother and niece and

nephew and father didn't even matter?"

By this time, Cooper had fully regained his emotions, while Millie seemed to be teetering on the edge. She didn't bother hiding her tears, and as usual, according to her capsulated version of the past decade and then some, he didn't bother to care. He sure didn't extend one iota of effort to provide her the comfort she obviously not only needed, but also deserved.

The woman was a saint, but after his meltdown, he felt empty inside. Like a shell. And so he just stood there. Stoic and still as if she'd been a drill sergeant giving him hell for not shining his shoes.

"What's wrong with you?" she shrieked. "You're like a machine—only instead of working, someone flipped your *off* switch. Peg needed you! *I* needed you, but you weren't there!" When she stepped deep into his personal space, pummeling his chest, he stood there and took it. He deserved the worst she could dish out and then some.

"I'm sorry," he finally said. And he was. But what did she want him to do? Sure, he'd help with his dad and the ranch, but he had no means with which to magically repair their mutually broken past. "Really sorry."

"S-sorry?" She laughed through her tears then raised her hand to slap him, only he caught her wrist and pulled her close, instinct screaming at him to hold on to her and never let go. This woman was a lifeline to all he'd once held dear. Every bad thing she'd said about him had been true. He was the worst of the worst.

Lower than pond scum. For the past twelve years, she'd carried his world, and he'd callously, cruelly let her.

That stopped now.

He had to get a grip. But to do that, he'd need her help.

"I hate you," she said into his chest while keeping such a tight grip on his T-shirt that it pulled against his back.

"I know..." *I hate me.* He kissed the crown of her head. "I'm sorry. So crazy, freakin' sorry. But I'm back, and everything's going to be okay. I promise." *With every breath of my being, I promise, Millie.*

"I want to believe you." She sagged against him until he held the bulk of her weight just to keep her from crumpling to the floor. "But..."

She didn't have to finish her sentence for him to know what she'd been about to say. That of course she wanted to believe him, but when it came to his family, he'd dropped the proverbial ball so many times, it'd shattered.

Chapter Five

"Mom? Are you alive?"

Millie cautiously opened her tear-swollen eyes to find her son standing at the head of her bed. Though J.J.'s expression read concerned, his red snowsuit and Power Ranger hat and gloves read Snow Day.

"Cool! Since you are alive, can I go build a fort?"

She groaned. "Honey, what time is it? And did you do your chores?" On weekends and any other time they didn't have

school, the kids were in charge of egg collecting and cleaning the litter box—not that they often saw the orange tabby named Cheetah, who mostly preferred hiding behind the dining room's half-dead ficus.

"Me and LeeAnn tried doing chores, but Uncle Coop already did 'em."

She sat up in the bed. "Even the cat box?"

"Well..." J.J. dropped his gaze in the telltale sign of a fib. "Since he made breakfast for me and Lee and Grandpa, I bet he did that and checked on the chickens, too."

"Uh-huh..." She grabbed her robe from the foot of the bed, then slipped her feet out from under the covers and into house shoes. The home had been built in 1905, meaning the woodstove and a few space heaters were all they had for heat. On many mornings, she'd woken to air cold enough to see her breath. Thankfully, this wasn't one. "Come on," she said to her son after switching off the valiantly humming space heater then shrugging into her robe and cinching the belt. "Let's see what's going on."

"Okay—" J.J. took her hand "—but we'd have more fun if we just went outside and built a fort."

"Why's that?" she asked with trepidation. To say the previous night had been rocky would be the understatement of the century. She and Cooper's uncomfortable scene had ended with her dashing upstairs and slamming her door. Not only had she been saddened and infuriated by her brother-in-law, but the fact that she'd then sought comfort from him as well had all been

too much to bear. For the first time in recent memory, she'd cried herself to sleep. But she didn't have time for such folly. She had Clint and her children to care for—not to mention this godforsaken ranch. Most winter mornings, she woke wishing herself a million miles away. Then came spring, and along with the first daffodils, up rose her indefatigable hope.

"Well—" on the way down the stairs, J.J. wiped his runny nose on his coat sleeve "—Lee's having a fight with Uncle Cooper, and Grandpa's been making a *lot* of scary noises."

Swell...

From the base of the stairs, raised voices could clearly be heard.

"Grandpa doesn't like you! Leave him alone!"

"Doesn't matter if he likes me or not. He just needs to quit being a stubborn old mule and eat."

Never had Millie more understood the meaning of being careful what she wished for. She'd long believed Cooper's return would be the answer to her every prayer, but apparently, she couldn't have been more wrong.

She hastened her pace only to find herself in the middle of even more chaos than the night before.

Cooper sat calmly on the edge of his father's bed, doing an admirable job of trying to feed him what she guessed from the beige splatters dotting his quilts, the floor and walls was oatmeal. With each new spoonful, he used his good arm to swat at his son.

"Gwet aut!" Clint hollered.

Initially, the shock of his volume took Millie aback, but then the significance of what'd just happened sank in. "Clint, you spoke!" She approached the bed and gestured for Cooper to hand her the oatmeal bowl. "That was awesome. Your speech therapist will be thrilled."

"I'm happy for you, Grandpa!" J.J. hugged Clint's clean arm.

"See, Dad?" Cooper took a damp dishrag from the rolling tray table and wiped cereal clumps from his father's red flannel pajama top. "No matter how much you hate me being here, I'm technically good for you."

"Arggghh!"

"What?" Cooper prompted his father. "I didn't quite catch that. Mind repeating?"

"Mom, make him stop," LeeAnn begged from the foot of the bed.

"Aigh ate uuu!"

"Mom, *please...*"

"What's that, old man?" Cooper taunted. "You hate me? Good, because right about now, I'm not exactly feeling warm and fuzzy toward you." He tapped his temple. "Even after all this time, though I can rationalize in my head that what happened to Mom was an accident, in here—" he patted his chest "—the way you treated me—the way you made your pal, the sheriff, keep me from attending my own mother's funeral? What the hell? Who does that? The whole thing still keeps me up at night."

"Stop!" LeeAnn cried to Cooper. "I don't blame Grandpa for

hating you! You're the devil!"

"Lee!" Millie set the bowl on the nightstand in favor of going to her daughter. "Honey, please take J.J. outside to gather the eggs and make sure the heat lamp's still on."

"But, Mom, I—"

"Lee, just go." Millie hated being short with the girl, but felt at least temporarily removing her kids from this toxic environment was best for all involved. Deep down, as tough as this father-son duel was to witness, she suspected it was doing them both good.

"Fine." LeeAnn held out her hand to her brother. "Come on, brat."

"You're a brat!"

"Both of you, knock it off!" Millie snapped. What a difference a day made. She'd grown accustomed to constant worry, but this added a whole new dimension to family fun.

When the kids were outside, Millie drew Cooper into the hall, shutting Clint's door behind her. "Look, I think I get what you've been trying to do with your dad—the whole tough-love routine—but maybe adding stress to an already difficult situation isn't the best course."

"I wasn't *trying* to do anything. I heard him banging around in there, and since you were still sleeping and your friend Lynette called and said because her car won't start, she won't be able to make it today, I figured I'd give you a hand. Turns out the old bastard didn't want breakfast, but to give me a hard time."

"Cooper... You belittling him makes me uncomfortable."

"Sorry." Outside, the wind howled. In the cramped hall, he paced, his expression every bit as tormented as the storm. "At the moment, his very existence isn't doing much for me."

"You don't mean that."

"No, I don't, but honestly?" His pinched expression broke her heart. No—what really broke her heart was the way so much time had passed, yet everything between father and son had not only stayed the same, but maybe even grown worse. "I've been here just shy of twenty-four hours and feel like I'm going batshit crazy. I know my dad's going through a rough patch, but we're all in this together now."

She winced at his language, though mirrored the sentiment.

"If you don't mind taking over in there—" he gestured toward his dad's room "—I need to check the cattle."

Though he was yet again retreating, Millie knew that this time it was only temporary and for a noble cause. Their prized herd did need to be checked, and the fact that she wouldn't be the one making the long ride out to the south pasture in these treacherous conditions made her heart swell with gratitude.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." His gaze met hers and locked.

His intensity startled her to the point that she had to look away. Her pulse raced, and she wasn't sure what to do with her hands, so she fussed with her robe's belt, feeling all of thirteen upon realizing that Cooper was still the most handsome cowboy in town. Don't get her wrong—she'd loved her husband with

every ounce of her being, but Jim had been a kind soul. Cooper? Well, even back in high school his downright sinful sooty-lashed stare had made rodeo queens swoon and female teachers forgive missing homework.

From the kitchen came the sound of the back door crashing open. "Mom!" LeeAnn hollered. "Come quick!"

Covering her suddenly flushed face with her hands, Millie found herself actually welcoming whatever emergency her daughter had brought inside. At least it would distract her from Cooper's mossy-green gaze.

The rooster's crow coming from the kitchen was her first clue that she should abandon all hope of finding peace that morning.

"Mom, the heat lamp's not on and the chickens were shivering. We're bringing them inside."

Millie pressed her lips tight while J.J. set his favorite golden wyandotte on the kitchen floor. She fussed a bit, fluffing her feathers and preening, then made a beeline for the cat food.

Cooper cut her off at the pass to set the food bowl on the counter. "Mill, before we get the house full of feathers and chicken shit, do you have a spare bulb for the lamp in case it's an easy fix?"

J.J. gaped. "Uncle Cooper, you're not allowed to say that word."

"Sorry." He had the good grace to actually redden.

"Apology accepted." Millie was embarrassed to admit she didn't have spare anything. The bulbs had been on her shopping

list for ages, but with barely enough money to pay for food, let alone heat, what was the point of even having a list? "And no, I don't have an extra."

"Okay..." He covered his face with his hands, then sighed. "J.J., how about you help your mom build some kind of pen, and I'll help your sister bring the chickens inside—"

LeeAnn shuffled through the back door, carrying a hen under each arm. "It's freezing out there, and a branch knocked a hole in the roof."

Millie groaned, looking heavenward to ask, "Really? Our plates aren't already full enough?"

"Relax." Behind her, Cooper lightly rubbed her shoulders. "We'll keep the chickens inside until the storm passes, then, after our next supply run, I'll rig a lamp for them in one of the empty horse stalls in the barn. Hopefully, the coop shouldn't take but a day or two to fix."

"Sure. Thanks." She didn't want to find comfort in his take-charge demeanor and especially not from his touch, but how could she not when it felt as if she'd been running uphill ever since Clint's stroke? To now have a man around to do the stereotypically manly chores made her feel as if her uphill charge had, at least for the time being, transitioned to a stroll through a nice, flat meadow. Call her old-fashioned, but when it came to gender roles, she missed doing mostly so-called woman's work. "J.J., hon, do me a favor and run out to get some firewood. Pretend it's giant Lincoln Logs and build a little fence."

"Cool! That sounds fun!" He dashed outside.

LeeAnn had placed the ladder-backed table chairs in front of the living room and hall pass-throughs. She was such a good girl. Always eager to help. It broke Millie's heart to see her always so blue—even more so ever since Cooper had shown up. Would she eventually cut him some slack?

Millie glanced his way to find him bundled up, once again wearing Jim's duster. He'd slapped his hat on, and the mere sight of him took her breath away. She wanted to stay mad at him for having left all those years ago, but she lacked the energy to fight.

"I'll bring in the rest of the hens then check on the cattle."

"Thank you," she said to him, then again to her daughter, who'd cleaned poo with a damp paper towel.

Cold air lingered when Cooper left. It smelled crisp and clean. Of cautious hope.

"He's awful," LeeAnn said after Cooper had closed the door. "I wish he'd stayed away."

"I'm sorry about what you saw between him and Grandpa. When your grandma died, things were..." Where did she start in explaining to her little girl just how terrible Clint's grief had actually been? True, what'd happened to Kay had been an accident, but Clint had treated his elder son as if the tragedy had been no less than murder. The uglier details weren't the sort of matter she cared to casually discuss with her daughter. "Well... Things were really hard. And Grandpa and your uncle... They didn't get along. Your uncle didn't leave because he wanted to,

but because Grandpa made him."

LeeAnn furrowed her brows. "Grandpa Clint wouldn't do that. He's nice."

"Sure, he is. But, honey, remember that this all happened a long time ago. Way before you were even born. Your uncle has a right to be upset. So does Grandpa. The two of them have a lot of talking to do, but that's kind of hard with Grandpa not being able to talk." Millie would be lying if she didn't admit to also harboring a deep well of resentment toward her husband's brother. But acting on that now wouldn't get the chickens in from the cold or make sure the cattle were okay or perform Clint's morning bathing routine.

"Mom?" LeeAnn picked up a chicken, stroking her neck until the creature happily cooed. Millie thought it was Cluck—the kids had them all named, but she couldn't keep them straight. "Do you still miss Daddy?"

The question caught Millie off guard and raised a lump in her throat. "Of course. I think about him every day."

"Good." She set down the chicken to hug Millie. "I didn't like it when Uncle Cooper rubbed your shoulders the way Daddy used to. My friend Julie's mom and dad got divorced, and now her mom married some new guy who Julie doesn't like. I don't want you to be with anyone else."

"Honey, where is all of this coming from?" Millie tipped up LeeAnn's chin, searching her dear features. "Your father meant the world to me. He always will."

"Promise?"

Millie had just nodded when J.J. and Cooper laughed their way through the back door. Both carried squawking hens and were red-cheeked and coated in a dusting of snow. The vision of her smiley son warmed her more efficiently than a roaring fire. As for the fire in her belly Cooper's whisker-stubbled jaw evoked, well, she just wasn't going there.

"You should see it, Mom!" J.J.'s nose ran, so she handed him a paper towel to use to wipe it. "That tree smooshed the chicken coop like Godzilla! *Bam! Rwaar!*"

"It's that bad?" she asked Cooper.

"'Fraid so." His expression was grim. "It's a wonder none of the *occupants* were hurt."

A series of muffled growls erupted from Clint's room.

Millie punctuated those with her own groan.

"Want me to check on him?" Cooper offered.

"Thanks, but the mom in me thinks you two should be grounded from each other."

Judging by Cooper's scowl, he disagreed with her judgment. "Whatever. J.J.? Wanna check the cattle with me?"

"Yeah!" His supersize grin faded. "But I need to build the chicken fence first. Can you wait?"

"I'll do you one better—while you work on the fence, I'll grab some plywood and straw from the barn. We'll use it to protect your mom's floor until we rig a heat lamp in the barn."

"Okay!" J.J. dashed outside for more wood.

"Cooper..." Millie's mind reeled. Too much was happening too fast. LeeAnn making her promise to never love another man besides Jim. Chickens in her kitchen. J.J.'s instant connection with his uncle. LeeAnn's instant hatred of him. Toss Clint and way too much snow into the mix and Millie's plate wasn't just full, but spilling over onto her now filthy kitchen floor. "Do you think it's wise to take J.J. out to check the cattle?"

"Why wouldn't it be? He's already bundled up. I assume he can ride?"

"Well, sure. Jim had him on horseback practically since he learned to walk."

Cooper sighed. "Then what's the problem?"

Where did she start? Her son was beyond precious to her. Along with his sister, the duo had been her reason for living ever since Jim died. As much as one part of her appreciated Cooper riding in on his white horse disguised as a ratty old pickup, another part of her resented his very presence. She and Clint had managed on their own for all these years and didn't need Cooper showing up, thinking he had all the answers. Only the joke was on her, because at the moment, as overwhelmed as she was—he did.

A fact that scared her to her core.

Because Cooper might be a dependable, stand-up guy in the Navy. But when it came to his track record on being around when his family needed him most? His stats were an abysmal 1-288-0. A single, early-morning chicken rescue hardly made

him a trustworthy man.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.