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Love Inspired

The Rancher's Secret Wife

Brenda Minton



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The Rancher's Secret Wife

Серия «Mills & Boon Love Inspired»

Серия «Cooper Creek», книга 4

Аннотация

HE SAID «I DO» TO A STRANGER. After knowing his bride for all of three hours, soldier Reese Cooper married waitress Cheyenne Jones. She was pregnant and scared, alone in Las Vegas—and he was about to ship out on a dangerous tour of duty. But months later, Reese comes home to Dawson, Oklahoma, no longer the strong cowboy who vowed to help Cheyenne. Shrapnel and a guarded heart changed everything. But with a wife and baby counting on him, Reese is about to learn what real courage is all about. **Cooper Creek: Home is where the heart is for this Oklahoma family.**

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He Said “I Do” to a Stranger

After knowing the woman for all of three hours, soldier Reese Cooper married waitress Cheyenne Jones. She was pregnant and scared, alone in Las Vegas—and he was about to ship out on a dangerous tour of duty. But months later, Reese comes home to Dawson, Oklahoma, no longer the strong cowboy who vowed to help Cheyenne. Shrapnel and a guarded heart changed everything. But with a wife and baby counting on him, Reese is about to learn what real courage is all about.

“Do you think I came here to trap you?” Cheyenne asked.

“No, I think you wanted to know if I was safe,” Reese said. “You wanted a safe place to raise your baby. That’s something we’ll work out. But for now you’re still my wife, and I’m going to help you.”

She rested her hand on his shoulder. “You have to take care of yourself, not me.”

“I have to take care of us both, or I might not make it through the next few months. Let me help you. You’re about the only person in my life right now who makes me feel normal.”

She placed his hand on her arm, and he couldn’t think of anything better than that moment with Cheyenne. For now helping her took his mind off his own problems. He didn’t for a minute think he was home free.

For the moment, though, he could still rescue a beautiful woman. A woman who happened to be his wife.

BRENDA MINTON

started creating stories to entertain herself during hour-long rides on the school bus. In high school, she wrote romance novels to entertain her friends. The dream grew and so did her aspirations to become an author. She started with notebooks, handwritten manuscripts and characters that refused to go away until their stories were told. Eventually she put away the pen and paper and got down to business with the computer. The journey took a few years, with some encouragement and rejection along the way—as well as a lot of stubbornness on her part. In 2006, her dream to write for Love Inspired Books came true. Brenda lives in the rural Ozarks with her husband, three kids and an abundance of cats and dogs. She enjoys a chaotic life that she wouldn't trade for anything—except, on occasion, a beach house in Texas. You can stop by and visit at her website, www.brendaminton.net.

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Consider the ravens:

for they neither sow nor reap; which

neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them: how much more are ye better than the fowls?

—Luke 12:24

This book is dedicated to my dad, Don Cousins, a Korean War veteran. March 1933–September 2011. And to all of the other brave men and women in our armed forces. Thank you.

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[Chapter One](#)

The big white house with the pillars, the multipaned windows, immaculate flower gardens and stone walkway were something out of Cheyenne's dreams. Who didn't dream of a house like this one?

Cheyenne Jones had a lot of dreams. Not many of them had come true. And instead of getting easier, things were getting harder. Maybe God meant to keep her holding on to Him by keeping her on her knees praying to get through each day? She didn't have much else to hold on to.

The only thing Cheyenne had was the 1982 piece of junk car sitting in front of this house and the memory of a man she'd met one time six months ago: Reese Cooper.

Weeks ago she'd gotten notice that he'd been injured in the

line of duty. Now she stood on the stone path leading up to the big house belonging to the Coopers of Dawson, Oklahoma.

She guessed this was what true desperation felt like, standing in front of this home with her final paycheck in her purse and not much else. She'd felt all sorts of pressure in the past seven months or so. The first wave had led her to the altar. The second had led her here. In between, there had been small waves that beat her back, the way the ocean beat against the sand, a relentless pounding.

The door of the house opened. A woman stepped out, smiling. She looked to be about sixty, with light colored hair, a warm smile, a welcoming look. Cheyenne wondered how long she'd wear that look. Once she knew the truth, would she still smile? Cheyenne didn't know much about this family, the Coopers of Cooper Creek Ranch, but she knew that they were close. She knew that they were loyal.

They were everything she'd never had.

"Can I help you?" The woman walked to the edge of the porch.

"I'm..." Cheyenne breathed deep, past the tightness in her throat. The world swam a little, and she closed her eyes. When she opened them, the woman had moved down the steps and was walking toward her. "I'm here to see Reese Cooper."

"Oh." The woman stopped and held out a beautiful hand. "I'm his mother, Angie Cooper."

"I'm here to see..."

"I think you've already said that." Angie's smile faded, and her

gaze lowered.

Cheyenne put a protective hand on her belly, and she bit down on her lip. “I’m Cheyenne.”

It didn’t register. Of course he hadn’t told them. Why would he? Mrs. Cooper stared at her with a blank look, which meant Cheyenne didn’t rate very high on Reese Cooper’s list of priorities. Hadn’t her mother always called her a silly girl? Silly because she’d always loved fairy tales, the kind where the handsome prince rides in on a big horse and sweeps the woman off her feet. Or kisses her and wakes her from a long and deadly sleep.

In her mind, Reese had become that prince—mainly because he’d given her hope that she’d never had. He’d made her believe that kindness still existed in the world. Strangers did wonderful and unexpected things. She’d fooled herself into believing she wouldn’t always be alone.

She’d actually written him letters while he’d been deployed. He’d written back. They’d shared things—not like strangers share but the way a couple shares.

“Cheyenne?”

Cheyenne looked up, pulled herself back to reality and out of her fantasy world. The late July sun beat down on her, and the cotton of her shirt stuck to her back.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I don’t think I know you. Did you go to school in Dawson?”

“No, I’m not from Oklahoma. I grew up in Kansas.”

“I see. Did you meet my son in the military?”

“Kind of.”

Angie Cooper sighed. “Honey, you need to tell me what’s going on and how I can help you.”

“If I could just see Reese.” Her eyes burned, and she didn’t want to cry. She didn’t want to lose control. She’d cried way too much lately, and she’d decided on the trip here that the time for tears had come and gone.

That’s about the only plan she had: to stop crying. Once she checked on Reese, she’d make her next plan. She’d decide where to go and what to do.

“I’m afraid he isn’t here right now.” Mrs. Cooper looked her over a second time—really looked her over.

Cheyenne should go. That’s what Mrs. Cooper meant to tell her. Cheyenne wanted to agree. But where would she go? She closed her eyes as another wave of nausea hit, and her head swam. A cool hand touched her arm.

“Cheyenne?”

“I’m fine. You’re right. I should go.”

“I didn’t mean that you should leave. And as pale as you are, I’m sure you shouldn’t drive right now.” Angie Cooper slid an arm around Cheyenne’s waist. “Let’s go inside and have a glass of tea.”

They walked through the front door, paused in the entryway and then proceeded into the living room. Cheyenne thought she should take off her shoes or change into something nicer than

the loose jeans and T-shirt she'd put on that morning at a gas station. She flicked her gaze across the living room with the pine hardwood floors, the overstuffed furniture and walls decorated with landscape paintings and family portraits.

This was the home of fairy tales, where happy people lived happy lives, loved each other, took care of each other. She allowed Angie Cooper to lead her from the living room, through a long formal dining room into a big, open kitchen. She told herself to stop the pity party, because her childhood hadn't been all bad. There had been love. It was conditional love, but love nonetheless.

Angie pointed to a big table that flanked one end of the kitchen. Everything in the house was big, made for a big family with twelve children. She felt like Jack when he climbed the beanstalk and landed in the giant's kingdom.

"Sit and I'll get that glass of tea. Have you had lunch?"

Cheyenne shook her head. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked. Car doors slammed. Angie Cooper paused with two slices of bread on a plate and a slice of ham in her hand. She placed the ham on the bread and kept working. Cheyenne's stomach knotted and twisted.

"That's probably Reese. He's been with his grandmother." Angie Cooper brought the plate and a glass of tea.

"Is he okay?"

Angie's hand rested on Cheyenne's shoulder. "He will be."

The sandwich on her plate no longer appealed, even though

her stomach had been growling for hours. From the front of the house, she heard the door close, a loud thump, an aggravated exclamation. Angie Cooper started to say something, but then she shook her head and walked away.

Cheyenne stood. "I shouldn't have come."

She'd waited too long. Reese Cooper walked through the door. An older woman in a pink suit stood next to him. The woman touched Reese's arm. He stood motionless in the doorway. His grandmother looked from Cheyenne to Reese, back to Cheyenne.

Cheyenne's vision blurred. She sat back down, thankful she didn't have food in her stomach as a wave of nausea assaulted her.

"Reese, you have company. Cheyenne is here." His mother moved toward him, her smile sweetly gentle—a mother's smile.

Reese stood silently and was as tall and handsome as she remembered, though not as clean shaven, and his sandy brown hair was a little longer. That day in the restaurant she might have fallen a little in love with him. He'd been so kind, a cowboy in jeans and a button-up shirt, his boots the real thing. He'd been no urban cowboy. She'd seen plenty of those in Vegas. He'd been a gentleman, sitting with her in a booth as she poured out her life story. In the end, he'd rescued her.

Cheyenne waited, thinking he should at least say something. They weren't strangers. He'd become a friend through letters he'd written—a dozen letters. She had them all in her one suitcase. She'd come here to make sure he was okay. She'd also come here

because she had nowhere else to go and Vegas hadn't been the place to call home.

"Cheyenne?" Reese finally spoke, but he stared straight ahead, not turning to look at her.

Cheyenne felt her fairy tale crumble. This is what happened in real life. People got hurt. Heroes came home injured. Damsels stayed in distress unless they rescued themselves.

Mrs. Cooper's hand held her arm, but Cheyenne pulled away. He had to hear her heart breaking as she walked toward him. It thundered in her ears. Her vision clouded with unshed tears. She reached him and touched his hand.

"Cheyenne Jones." She drew in a deep breath. "We met in Vegas."

* * *

A tiny hand held his. Reese felt her warmth. He inhaled her scent. He remembered her letters. But what was she doing here? He stared at blackness and waited for clarity. His secret was that he kept waiting for vision to return. He kept telling himself the doctors were wrong and he'd see again.

But for two months he'd lived in darkness. Since the day an explosion had rocked his world, killed men in his platoon and left him blind, he'd been praying it was a dream he'd wake up from.

The last thing he'd been thinking about was the woman standing in front of him. Since the accident, he hadn't really thought about that day in Vegas or the impulsive moment when he'd told a crying waitress that he'd marry her.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was as sweet as he remembered. That’s what had struck him about her—even then. She’d been leaving her job as a waitress, dressed for her evening job as a dancer and he’d seen a vulnerable young woman needing a break. He’d seen innocence in her eyes.

He could still hear that innocence in her voice. He smiled because he was sure that some people might not agree with him about her innocence. They would have looked at her life, her job and thought the opposite. He didn’t mean to be poetic, but he had looked into her eyes and seen her heart.

And now she was here. He shook his head because he couldn’t do this. He couldn’t have her here, in his life.

“What are you doing here?” He spoke quietly, but the words were loud and echoed in the darkness, sounding harsher than he’d intended.

“I wanted to check on you.” Her voice wavered.

Next to him his grandmother mumbled that he had the manners of an ogre. She released his arm and told him he was on his own. He could handle that. He’d been coddled since the minute he’d walked through the front door a week ago. His grandmother had actually been the only one who didn’t smother him. She’d told him to cowboy up and remember he still had a life—unlike the men in his platoon.

She hadn’t said those words; they were his. But she’d told him he owed it to those men to live his life to the fullest.

“This was a mistake.” Cheyenne’s voice slipped away from

him. He heard a chair move and heard her footsteps again.

He reached for her, but she wasn't there. "Could we have some privacy?"

Cheyenne stepped close again, bringing her scent: lavender and vanilla. "They've already left the room."

He reached, needing a place to sit down. A hand touched his arm, guiding him to the table where he felt the back of a chair. He smiled. "Give me a minute. I didn't expect you."

"No, of course you didn't." She pulled her hand loose from his. A chair scraped, and he knew she'd sat down across from him. "I got a visit from the military, someone checking on my welfare after you were injured. I wasn't the person to notify in case of emergency, but they saw that you were married and they sent someone to tell me about the accident."

Reese brushed a hand through his hair trying to make sense of how all of this had happened and what he should do. His wife of six months was sitting in his mother's kitchen, needing him. And he couldn't be the person she relied on. He had no hope of ever seeing again. His left arm and his spine had been hit with shrapnel, and walking still took everything out of him. What was he supposed to do for her?

She moved again. He knew she did because her scent brushed past him. He'd only known her for three hours, and he recognized her scent. He didn't know if it had to do with enhanced senses from losing his eyesight or because he'd memorized that scent while he stood next to her in a little wedding chapel in Vegas.

“I should go. I shouldn’t have come.”

He couldn’t agree more. This hadn’t been the deal, her showing up here. In any other life, it might have been okay, but in this new life, everything had changed.

“Where will you go?”

She sobbed a little, and he reached, found her arm. That day in Vegas he’d thought she was the prettiest thing he’d ever seen. Tiny, with light blond hair that hung wavy to her shoulders and big blue eyes smudged with mascara and tears. He’d been about to be deployed, and she’d needed someone.

“I’ll figure something out. I have family, you know.”

“Yes, family.”

She’d told him bits and pieces about the parents who had turned their backs on her. She didn’t really have family. She didn’t have anyone. He took a long breath that hurt deep in his back and wished he could do more for her. “Cheyenne, I’ll give you money. You have to eat and find a place to stay.”

“I can take care of myself. I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time. I used the money deposited in my account to go to cosmetology school. That’s what I always wanted. You gave that to me.”

“So where will you go?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“I’ll need your address.” It seemed like a pretty rotten time to bring this up. “For the paperwork.”

“I’ll get it to you once I land somewhere.” She kissed his

cheek, and he was sorry he hadn't shaved in days. "Goodbye, Reese."

"The baby?"

"He's fine. It's a boy."

He smiled at that. "I'm glad."

She was already gone. He heard her walk through the house. He heard the front door close. And then he heard the light-soled steps of his mom walking back into the kitchen. He heard her hesitate at the door, but she didn't ask questions. He knew she had them.

"She's a friend. I met her in Vegas." He stood, unfolded the white cane he'd been learning to use and somehow managed to make it to the fridge without bumping into anything. Each day he got a little better. That's what the rehab experts had promised.

The counselor he saw each week told him he'd get past the anger, past the nightmares and the guilt. Cheyenne Jones somehow managed to be on the list of people he'd let down.

"Is the baby yours?" His mom stood behind him, her voice hesitant.

Reese turned, a glass of water in his hand. "No."

"Does she need help?"

He walked to the counter, feeling for it, finding it and then edging around to the bar stool he knew would be there. The first few days he'd had a few bumps and falls because people forgot and left chairs out of place. They were learning. He was learning.

"I don't know."

“Reese, this isn’t like you. She’s young. She’s here alone, and you let her walk out of this house not knowing if she had a place to go or money to get there?”

He brushed a hand through his hair and leaned back in the chair. No, it wasn’t like him. He didn’t know who he was anymore.

“I know. I’ll work through this. I’ll find her.” How?

“Do you need help?”

He got up from the chair, smacking the cane against the side of the counter, looking for a way out. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Reese.” His mom hesitated.

He turned toward her, waiting. And she didn’t say anything. Because she didn’t know what to say? Or because everyone he knew was afraid to say anything to him.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Heather spoke from nearby. He shook his head. When had his sister entered the kitchen?

He wondered if he would ever get used to voices slipping through the dark. It reminded him of a cartoon, a black screen and animals—maybe cats—popping into the dark and then fading again; laughing cats. That’s how he imagined sounds, words. Nothing connected anymore. Everything was separate. There were sounds, words, touch, taste but nothing cohesive. Nothing made sense.

He raked his hand through his hair and wondered how bad he looked. He hated to shave, hadn’t shaved in days. He knew his hair had grown out from the military cut he’d had two months

ago. He wondered if he looked as angry as he sometimes felt.

“Reese?” Heather stepped close, touched his arm.

“I’m going for a walk.” He took a few cautious steps and made it out of the kitchen. With the cane as a guide, he made it through the house and out the front door. And then what? He couldn’t get in his car and go after her. He couldn’t call her.

He couldn’t see anything but black, and Cheyenne had left. The man he used to be was somewhere inside him, and even though he wanted to hide from this life, he couldn’t.

Cowboy up, Reese. He could hear his grandmother’s words, sharp, lecturing. How did a cowboy do that when he couldn’t even get on a horse?

Chapter Two

Cheyenne left the Convenience Counts convenience store and turned right on a little side street with pretty turn-of-the-century homes and big lawns. She took a bite of the corn dog she’d bought and washed it down with a long drink of chocolate milk. She’d planned on going to the park that the owner of the convenience store had given her directions to. Instead she pulled her car up to the curb in front of a stucco building with a For Rent sign in the window. Across the big front window were faded red letters spelling out Dawson

Barber Shop.

For a few minutes she sat in her car, staring at the building and daring to dream. She told herself to drive on, to forget this dream, to forget Dawson and Reese Cooper. In the end she opened the

creaking door of her car and left it open as she walked up to the building and peeked in the window.

She barely had enough money for a hotel and a few meals. She needed a plan. She needed to decide where she would go and what she would do. The last thing she needed to be doing was looking at a building for a beauty shop.

An old bench had been left behind. It sat under a small awning. Weeds were growing up around it, sprouting from cracks in the sidewalk. Cheyenne sat down, scooting to the end of the bench, out of the hot July sun. She couldn't stay in Dawson. She had no one here, nowhere to go.

She could go home to Kansas. But then again, she couldn't. She couldn't face her parents now, not with all of the mistakes she'd made in her life. She couldn't face them because she'd been their problem, their mistake, too. Her birth mother had given her up. Her adoptive parents had given up on her.

But the biggest betrayal had been Mark's. Because after he learned she was pregnant he revealed that their marriage license wasn't real. He had no plans to be a husband and father. He'd laughed at her naiveté.

A little sparrow hopped around on the sidewalk, chasing bugs and dandelion seeds. She caught herself smiling as she watched him.

"Where do I go?" When she spoke, the little bird hopped back and looked at her. After his curiosity was satisfied, he plucked a dry bit of grass from the sidewalk and flew away.

She remembered a sermon from the church she'd started attending back in Vegas. That had been Reese's advice before he'd left that day. He'd promised to love, honor and cherish her. Then he'd kissed her, told her he had to go, but she needed to find a church. So she had.

One of the sermons had been about God's ability to care for people. If He provides for the birds who neither sow nor reap, how much more does He care for us?

She wondered if He knew that she was really at the end of her rope—hopeless. How had she come to this place in her life? She'd always had hope. She'd been the person in school who'd studied, thought about a future and how to be her best—until Mark and Vegas.

That showed how a couple of bad decisions could derail everything.

A car drove down the narrow road. It met another and had to pull off the pavement to let the other car pass. She smiled, remembering the town she'd grown up in. It had been larger than Dawson but had its share of narrow roads and pretty homes. A long time ago she had lived in one of those homes.

One of the cars, a long sedan, pulled in behind hers. Reese's grandmother stepped out of the car. She pulled on lace gloves and situated a white hat on her gray hair. She appeared to be a woman on a mission. And Cheyenne had a pretty good feeling that she was the mission.

Mrs. Cooper walked down the sidewalk and stopped when she

reached Cheyenne.

“What in the name of all that is lovely are you doing sitting in front of this old shop?” Reese’s grandmother dusted off the bench and sat down.

Cheyenne shrugged a little and blinked fast, trying hard not to cry. “Coming up with a plan.”

“Well, if the bench works, so be it.”

Cheyenne glanced at the woman next to her. “How did you know where to find me?”

“I prayed and asked God to lead me. He said to try the old barbershop. Here I am.”

“God told you to find me here?” Cheyenne reached into her purse for a little package of crackers. She opened it and threw crumbs to the birds. “Really?”

The lady sitting next to her laughed...and laughed. Finally she wiped her eyes with a tissue she pulled from her pocket. “Land sakes, no. Before you start thinking I’m addled, I’ll tell you. I asked Trish at the convenience store. Trish is nosier than me, and she watched you head this way.”

Cheyenne smiled and shook her head. “I don’t think you’re addled.”

“Most folks do wonder.”

“Mrs. Cooper, I’m really very sorry about barging in and about Reese.”

“Call me Myrna. Everyone does. Or Miss Myrna if you insist. But that does make me feel like I’m still teaching school. And

you didn't do a thing wrong, coming to see Reese.”

“I should have waited—or called him.”

“Do you want to tell me what the story is between the two of you?”

“No, I'd rather not. I hope you don't mind.”

“No, I don't mind. Young folks have a right to a few secrets. I'm guessing that isn't his baby you're carrying.”

“No, ma'am, it isn't.”

They sat for a few minutes. Myrna reached for the package of crackers and broke off a piece. She tossed it. The birds flew at each other, fighting over the little piece of cracker.

“Well, is there a father?” Myrna pulled off her gloves and pushed them into her little purse.

“Not to speak of.” She shivered and looked away, at the golden sun peeking through dark green leaves of the trees in the lawn across from the shop. “Dawson seems like a good place to live.”

“It is. I think everyone should live in Dawson. But then, I guess it wouldn't be Dawson if they did.” Myrna twisted to look at the building behind them. “What is it about this shop that interests you?”

Cheyenne looked back at the shop. “I'm a beautician. I thought that someday I might rent a place like this and open a salon.”

“In Dawson?” Myrna Cooper hummed for a minute. “Well, that's something we could use. So why don't you rent this building?”

Cheyenne stood because it was time to go. “I don't have the

money. If I leave my number with you, could you pass it on to Reese?”

“First, let’s take a look at this old barbershop. It was my uncle’s, you know.” Myrna reached in her purse and pulled out a key. “I happen to own it now.”

Myrna stuck the key in the door, jiggled the handle and then pushed it open. “It’s a mite musty after being closed up for the past couple of years.”

“I like the smell.” Cheyenne walked around the little rectangle building. It still had sinks, chairs—even a little room in the back and a bathroom. “But I can’t afford it.”

Myrna ignored her. She sat down in one of the plastic chairs near the window and smiled big. “I used to come in here with my daddy when I was a little girl. Back then Dawson had more to offer. We had a grocery store, a bank and a post office.”

“I bet it was a wonderful place to grow up.” Cheyenne smiled, but she had to sit down. Pain wrapped around her belly, and she breathed deep to get through it.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, just a cramp.”

“You’re sure?”

She nodded and sat down in a chair near Myrna’s. “I’m sure. I have a couple of months to go before I’m due. These are just Braxton Hicks contractions.”

Myrna patted her leg. “Take the shop, Cheyenne. It’s yours. I’ll get the water turned on and the electricity.”

“I can’t. Myrna, I’m broke. Really, I can’t.”

Myrna Cooper stood and beckoned for Cheyenne to join her. “I’m going to help you do this. Young women should have dreams. They should have options. I don’t know your relationship with my grandson, but I know if he could, he’d be the one here helping you. Until he can, you’ve got me.”

“Oh, Myrna.” Cheyenne closed her eyes for a brief “pull it together” moment.

Myrna touched her arm. “Let’s go home. You can get a good night’s rest, and tomorrow I think things will look better.”

“‘Home’?”

Myrna pursed her lips and widened her eyes. “My house, young lady. That’s what I mean by home. Stay the night or a few nights with me. And then we’ll see what we can do with this old barbershop.”

Cheyenne considered saying no but her body ached. She was hungry and tired. To top it off, her car hadn’t been running right. For the last few hundred miles she’d worried she wouldn’t make it to Dawson. And where else could she go? Myrna Cooper seemed to be an answer to prayer.

After a few days of rest, things would look different. Maybe she could take Myrna up on her offer. This shop could be the place to start her new life. But how would Reese feel about her settling in his hometown? That hadn’t been part of their bargain. He had never counted on her in his life for good—not even as a neighbor.

* * *

Reese sat on the front steps of his parents' home, letting Adam MacKenzie tell him what a great opportunity it would be for him to work at Camp Hope and how great it would be for the kids who attended. Reese held out his hand to the dog that brushed against him, licking his arm.

"Adam, I can barely help myself right now. I'm not sure how I could help kids who have been dealing with disabilities their entire lives. There are days that I'm pretty angry. I'm trying to be independent, but man, there are days. Try asking for help finding a pair of shoes. That'll teach you what humility is. I'm a grown man, and I have to ask what shirt to wear."

"Reese, you're honest. That's what these kids need, not someone who puts on a smile and pretends every day is perfect but someone genuine who can admit he gets angry."

"I'm not sure. Not yet. When I can make it through a day on my own steam, maybe then. Right now I'm afraid the kids would be helping me more than I could help them." He took the stick the dog pushed into his hand and gave it a fling.

"Reese, these kids are always teaching me something. That's part of the joy in this camp—what it does not just for them, but for us."

"I'll think about it."

Adam stood, touched his shoulder and walked away. "Pray about it."

"Will do."

Reese sat on the steps until he heard the car door close and the engine start. He waved and Adam honked. He stood and turned to go back inside the house. The dog returned with the stick. Reese took it one last time and gave it a toss.

“Hey, watch it.” His sister Heather let out a shriek. “I’m down here, you know.”

He laughed a little and stopped on the top step. “Sorry. And no, I didn’t know. Are you going to town by any chance?”

Heather joined him on the steps. “Yeah, actually. I had to drop some artwork off with Jackson, and now I’m heading back to town.”

Their older brother had gotten married while Reese was gone, and his new wife was redecorating.

“Yeah, but that would make more driving. You’d have to go in to Dawson, back out here and then home.”

“Yeah, horrible, it might add six miles to my trip. Reese, I can drive you to town. Where do you want to go?”

“Rumor has it that Gran has moved Cheyenne into the barbershop.”

“Not a rumor.”

He unfolded the white cane that hung from his wrist. “I need to find out what’s going on.”

“Okay, let’s go.” She touched his arm. “How do you know her?”

He walked next to her across the yard. “I met her in Vegas.” The answer bugged him. She was more than someone he’d

met. She deserved better than that. Unfortunately he didn't quite know how to give her better. He was still working on that. The situation between them would have been easy if he hadn't been injured, if she hadn't shown up in Dawson. The arrangement they'd made had seemed pretty cut and dried, until now.

"She's pretty." Heather spoke softly.

"Yeah, she is."

"She wears a wedding ring on a chain around her neck. Do you know her husband?"

The question dug for more answers. Rather than giving them, he opened the passenger door of Heather's sedan. "I used to."

The answer seemed to satisfy some of her curiosity. She got behind the wheel of the car, and they headed to town. Within feet of the driveway he was sorry he'd asked Heather for a ride. She was a challenge to ride with on a good day. When a guy couldn't see what was coming at him, she was treacherous.

"Maybe slow down for the curves." He reached for the handle above the door.

"I'm not that bad."

Not bad, his foot. Heather's driving encouraged quite a few "get me there safe" prayers.

She cleared her throat. "How'd rehab go yesterday?"

"I'm going to move back into the guesthouse." He said it in an easy tone and then waited for his sister's reaction.

It took a few minutes. "You what?"

"I'm moving back into the guesthouse." A few years ago he'd

moved into the apartment over the unattached garage next to the main house. Since he'd come home, he'd stayed with his parents. "I need my own space."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Yeah, I think it is. I can't see, but I can still live my life. I'm going to start doing rehab and physical therapy here. They'll help me organize, label everything and even teach me how to keep my clothes together so I know what I'm putting on."

It didn't come easy, listing everything he needed help with, everything he'd always taken for granted. Walk to the closet, pull out clothes. Walk to the kitchen, pour a glass of... He no longer knew what he was pouring in his glass, and he'd never been fond of surprises.

"The clothing part is good. I'm not sure who dressed you today but..."

She laughed and he smiled.

"Thanks, sis, you're a help."

"I aim to please."

There were a few more minutes of silence and another sharp curve. "Do you mind stopping at the store? I've been given strict orders to get out more. Something about proving to myself that I can do these things on my own."

"Was there ever any doubt?" Heather said it as if there hadn't been doubts. He'd had plenty.

"A few." He leaned back and relaxed.

The car slowed, eased into a parking space, bumped the curb

and stopped. He laughed because some things never changed. Their dad had been getting on her for that since she'd turned sixteen.

Heather's hand touched his arm. "You ready?"

"As I'll ever be." He reached, found the door handle and pushed.

When he stepped out of the car, he breathed in familiar scents. Molasses-coated grain from the feed mill, Vera's fried chicken at the Mad Cow Café and fertilizer on a nearby field. He stepped forward, white cane swinging and then hitting the curb. He stepped up, wondering where Heather had gone to.

He could hear hammering down the block and a truck leaving the feed store across the street. He turned, took a step and waited.

"You coming with me?" Heather finally spoke.

"Of course." A grown man shouldn't have so many hang-ups. He could walk into the convenience store and get something. Even if it was just a pack of gum, he could do this.

His therapist had told him he had to take these steps because the longer he hid at the ranch, the harder it would be to leave. So he walked down the sidewalk, his hand resting lightly on Heather's arm for guidance.

"We're at the door." Heather had stopped.

"Okay. So the next step is in." He wondered if she was as nervous as he was. He drifted back on the memory of Cheyenne in Vegas and standing next to her at the altar. They'd both had sweaty palms, and he'd felt her tremble.

He hadn't thought about it much, but it took a lot of desperation for a person to hitch themselves to another person that way. Maybe they'd both been a little desperate.

"Here we go." Heather stepped away from him and pushed the door open.

"Right. Here we go." Before stepping through the door, he had another question. "Is Trish in there?"

"Staring. About to head this way."

"Point me in the right direction."

She did, and he walked away from his sister because she would run interference with Trish. The cane swung, hit metal. He reached and touched the end of the rack. Candy. Mints. Gum. He'd been here enough times in his life that he knew what each aisle held—unless Trish had remodeled, and she never had before.

"Reese Cooper, how are you?" Trish called out from behind him, loud, as if it was his hearing that had been lost.

He considered shouting back. Instead he smiled, picked up a plastic container of mints and turned toward the counter. "I'm great, Trish. How are you?"

"Really good. And it is so good to see you out and about." She continued to talk loud and clear.

"It's good to be out."

Trish pushed buttons on the cash register. "That'll be a dollar."

He pulled his wallet out of his pocket, felt the bills and handed the appropriate one to Trish. "One dollar."

“Well, now that’s pretty amazing.” Trish spoke with such admiration he couldn’t be mad. “How’d you know this is a dollar?”

“It’s a new skill I’ve learned. Thanks, Trish.” He pocketed the mints and walked out of the store. Heather followed.

“Do you want to walk across the street or drive?” She pulled him to a stop. “We’re at the edge of the sidewalk.”

Reese nodded. “We can walk.”

He had to stop stalling and face Cheyenne.

“Fine. Let’s go.”

A car honked. He stepped back. Heather reached for his arm. She took a step forward, and he followed her lead.

“Okay, we’re across.” Heather stopped, and he stopped with her when the cane hit the curb.

“What’s all the hammering?”

“Roofers. Gran said this old building needed some help.”

“This has been going on for the past few days, and you all thought I wouldn’t find out? Because secrets are so easy to keep in Dawson.”

“A woman we don’t know, a pregnant woman, showed up in Dawson looking for you. That kind of puts us all on the defensive.”

“The baby isn’t mine, and she isn’t after anything.”

He loved it when the Coopers circled the wagons. But now wasn’t the time for wagons to be circled. True, he didn’t know Cheyenne much better than the rest of them, but he knew she

wasn't there to use him. He knew because he had come to know her through the letters she'd sent while he was in Afghanistan. He knew.

Heather sighed and stepped forward. "One step up and we're on the sidewalk."

"Trust me." He leaned close to her. "I'm a big boy."

"I know you are. But who is she to you? That's all we really want to know."

If he knew, he'd probably tell her. At the moment, he didn't know who Cheyenne was to him. He knew what the paper said. He knew the plan, but somehow it had changed.

Reese reached, touched the door and turned toward his sister. "I can take it from here."

"Reese, we're trying to..."

"I'm good." He pushed the door open and stepped inside. Heather didn't follow him. He smiled, because he knew he could count on her. She'd give him time. She'd wait for him. He took cautious steps forward, the cane swinging right to left. It hit a chair. He stopped to listen.

Then he heard a thump against the back wall.

"Cheyenne?" He took more careful steps.

Silence—and then the hammering he'd heard from across the street. It echoed inside the building. At the back of the room he heard footsteps. He smiled and laughed a little.

"I know it's you."

"Okay, it's me." The voice, soft and tremulous, drew closer.

“What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question. Funny thing, my family all seemed to know you were here. I’m the only one in the dark, so to speak.” He smiled and reached, finding a chair. He sat down. “I hope you don’t mind if I sit.”

“Go right ahead.”

“You’re still in town.” He folded the cane. “I thought you left.”

“I thought I would leave, but I didn’t have anywhere to go. I was sitting on the bench out front when your grandmother found me.”

“Be very careful of my grandmother. She loves matchmaking. It’s her gift.” He smiled and turned, trying to find her. She had moved. He heard soft footsteps getting closer.

“I’m not here to be matched to anyone. I’m here because I needed to know that you’re okay.”

“There’s more. I can hear it in your voice.”

“That’s your imagination.” She sat down next to him, lavender and vanilla. He leaned a little toward her because he couldn’t see her and he wanted some connection with her, some way to know she was there.

“No, it isn’t my imagination. I’m very good at voices. It’s because I can’t see. They say it enhances the other senses.”

“Really, and what does my voice tell you?”

“I hear strain. And you hesitate each time you tell me you’re fine. See. I’m very perceptive.”

“I’m not trying to hide anything from you. I just don’t want you

to think that I came here expecting more from you than you've already given me."

"I want to help if I can." He reached for her hand.

"You've helped so much, Reese." She squeezed his hand. "You don't owe me anything else."

He stood because she had. "I have to disagree, Cheyenne. I think I owe you for better or worse, in sickness and in health."

"Those are vows for real couples who have real weddings. That isn't your promise to me. Your promise to me was your last name and life insurance if something happened to you. Because of you I have insurance and I had money for school."

"What do you know? Something did happen to me."

"I'm sorry." Her voice cracked, and he felt like the creep Heather sometimes said he'd become. "I'm sorry that something horrible happened to you. But I'm going to have a baby. I don't have a family I can turn to. And I want to stay here."

"Cheyenne, you don't have to leave." He reached, found her hand and pulled her close, but she wouldn't step into his arms.

"I have to make a life for myself and my son. I want to be somewhere safe. I want a community. A neighborhood where kids play and ride bikes."

"You'll do great here." He backed up a step and put the distance between them she seemed to want—

distance he probably needed. "Do you need anything?"

"No, nothing. I'm good."

"If you do need help, let me know."

“I’ll let you know.” She walked him to the door. “Reese, I can be here for you, too. If you need anything at all. Even if it’s just a friend.”

“Thank you.” He shrugged as he reached for the door. “I’m still trying to figure out how to take care of myself.”

“You’re doing better than you think.”

He smiled at her optimism. “That’s good to know.”

“Reese, about the annulment. We should get that taken care of.”

“Soon.”

As he walked out the door, Heather waited for him. He heard her move, felt her hand on his arm. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah, thanks for waiting.”

“Watch out. This sidewalk is pretty broken up in places.” She placed his hand on her arm, and they walked in the direction of the main road. “Step down, and we’ll cross the street.”

“Gotcha.”

“Reese, do you want to talk?”

“Not yet, but thanks. I’ve got to figure this one out on my own.”

It wasn’t simple because he wasn’t the man he used to be. He definitely wasn’t the man Cheyenne needed in her life. Cheyenne needed and deserved a man who could take care of her. She deserved a real marriage.

The plan to dissolve their marriage had seemed easy back in Vegas. Now that he knew her, knew the food she loved most, the

colors that made her happy, the music she listened to when she was down—all of the things she'd shared in her letters—it didn't feel like an easy in-and-out plan.

Chapter Three

A few days after Reese's visit, Cheyenne sat down in the barber chair and looked at the shop, at her dream. She smiled and rested her hands on her belly. She'd cleaned and polished, and the only thing left to do was paint. She would wait until she talked to a doctor before she undertook that task. She wanted to make sure it would be safe for the baby.

She eased out of the chair and headed for the back room. What had once been a storeroom was now her little apartment. It held a bed, a chair, dorm-sized fridge and microwave. She even had a tiny bathroom and a closet. It wasn't much, but at least she had a place to stay, a place of her own.

The bell over the door jangled. Cheyenne stepped around the corner and peeked out. Heather Cooper stood at the front of the shop looking at the pictures on the wall. Cheyenne wiped her hands on her jeans and straightened her top. Those adjustments didn't make her feel any more confident, not with Heather standing in the front of the little shop, looking completely together in linen capris and a pretty top of soft fabric in summery blues and greens.

Years ago Cheyenne had been a lot like Heather, before mistakes that turned her into a different person, someone she didn't recognize. Living in Dawson, she thought maybe she'd find

the old Cheyenne. The old Cheyenne knew how to smile and greet Heather.

“Heather, it’s good to see you.”

Heather turned from the photographs in black and white of customers who used to patronize the Dawson Barber Shop.

“The pictures bring back a lot of memories. I know most of those men.” Heather smiled and walked across the room. “How are you?”

“I’m good. Getting settled and trying to get work done so I can open soon.”

“What else do you have planned?”

Cheyenne looked around the barbershop, and she shrugged. The room was long and narrow. There were molded plastic chairs at the front of the building, midway back a counter with a couple of bar stools. The old barber chair sat between that and the back wall. Opposite the barber chair there were a couple of sinks for washing hair.

“Not much really. Maybe paint the walls.”

“What colors?” Heather walked around the room, as if it was a normal day, normal conversation.

Cheyenne stood in the center of the room and watched the other woman. It wasn’t a normal day. They weren’t friends, although Cheyenne wondered what that would be like, to have someone like Heather to talk to, to have coffee with.

Cheyenne shrugged in answer to the paint color question. “I don’t have a clue.”

"I'll help if you'd like. And if you want my opinion, I think decorate with the photographs and the past in mind."

"That's a great idea. But I couldn't ask you to do that."

"Consider it my 'welcome to Dawson' gift." Heather took a seat on one of the stools behind the counter, and Cheyenne knew this had nothing to do with the shop or welcoming her to Dawson.

"That would be a wonderful gift, but you don't have to." Cheyenne stood for an awkward moment, and then she sat next to Heather.

After a few minutes of silence Cheyenne shifted to face her guest. "Why are you really here?"

"Cheyenne, I want to know about you and my brother."

Cheyenne breathed through a pain that wrapped around her middle, and she wanted so badly to tell Heather to leave, to let it go.

"I'm not going to give you information that Reese hasn't given. This is between the two of us."

And what would people think of her if they knew the deal she'd made with Reese Cooper? Would they be as welcoming as they'd been? Would Vera at the Mad Cow still welcome her with pie? Would Myrna Cooper ask her to leave?

Sometimes she didn't know what to think of herself.

"I'm sure it is between the two of you." Heather shook her head. "He's my brother, and I don't want him hurt."

"He isn't going to be hurt."

Heather gave her a careful look and then she nodded.

“When he’s around you, I see pieces of the old Reese. No matter what the situation is between the two of you, I think you’re good for him.”

“I’m the last thing Reese needs in his life. He has a wonderful family, and he’s going to get through this.” Cheyenne rested her hand on her belly. “I’m here to start a life for my baby and myself. I’m here because Reese told me stories about this town, the people. That’s all, Heather. There’s nothing more between us.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Heather hopped down from the stool. She grabbed her purse, and she smiled an easy smile. “I’m busy the next two days, but I’ll be back Thursday to help you. And if you’re interested in church, Dawson Community Church is at the edge of town.”

“I’d love to go to church. But about the decorating—I really can’t afford to pay you.”

“I’m not asking you to pay me.” Heather stopped at the door. “And if you need anything, let me know.”

Cheyenne nodded and managed a smile. After watching Heather drive away, she went back to her room and sat on the edge of the bed. Another pain wrapped around her belly. She’d been having them all day, these pains. She’d timed them. They weren’t regular, but she still didn’t think it should happen this way, not this often or this soon.

She should find an emergency room—alone. She closed her eyes and leaned back, giving herself a pep talk. She could do this.

She didn't have to call someone. She didn't need anyone to hold her hand. In two months she would be a single mom with no one to call or lean on. She'd made the decision to have this baby, and she could do this.

Alone.

She closed her eyes and let one tear trickle down her cheek—only one. She wouldn't let the rest squeeze out. She was done crying. She had a life to get hold of, a baby counting on her. She picked up her purse and left, locking the door of the shop behind her.

Fifteen minutes later she pulled into the parking lot at the emergency room for the Grove hospital. She sat for a second, telling herself she'd been imagining the pains. But another hit as she sat there. She breathed through it and then got out of her car and headed toward the entrance of the E.R. As she walked through the double doors, a receptionist smiled a greeting. The woman, gray-haired and kind, told Cheyenne to take a seat and she'd get her information.

Cheyenne pulled out her insurance card and driver's license. She handed both through the window to the woman who took them, then looked at Cheyenne over wire-framed glasses.

"You just moved to town?" The woman, her name tag said Alma Standish, asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You'll need to find an obstetrician very soon. We have a couple here in town." She peered at the insurance card and shook

her head before handing it back. “I’ll have our nurse get your vitals, and then we’ll get you right back to the E.R.”

“Thank you.”

As if on cue the door to the E.R. opened and a nurse peeked out. “I can take you back. We’ll get your blood pressure and temp.”

Cheyenne picked up her purse, thanked Mrs. Standish and followed the nurse back to the E.R. The nurse, wearing blue scrubs with teddy bears, pulled a curtain and motioned Cheyenne into the small cubicle.

“You can sit up here.” The nurse helped Cheyenne onto the exam table. “How many weeks?”

“Thirty-two.”

“Okay, has everything been normal up to this point?”

Cheyenne nodded and held out her arm for the blood pressure cuff. The nurse listened, wrote down information and started to walk out of the room. The curtain slid back, and the doctor walked in, staring at the chart in his hands. He looked up, black wire-framed glasses on a straight nose. His dark hair was a little long.

“Cheyenne Jones Cooper?” He read the name from the chart and then looked at her, clearly puzzled.

The nurse shrugged when he looked at her.

“Yes.” She cleared her throat at the weak answer and tried again. “Yes.”

“You didn’t list a spouse. Is there someone we can call in case

of emergency?”

She shook her head. “No, not really. I’m fine, though.”

“I’m the doctor. I’ll decide that.” He helped her lay back on the exam table. “Cheyenne, I think you should know that I’m Jesse Cooper.”

She moved to sit back up. “I should go.”

“Not so quick. We have an obstetrician who happens to be in the hospital. I’ve called her down to examine you. And now is there someone I should call?”

“No, there’s no one.”

“But you’re married to a Cooper?”

“It isn’t...” She shook her head and blinked back tears.

Jesse Alvarez Cooper pulled tissues from a box and handed them to her. “It’s okay.”

But he didn’t sound as if it was okay. She remembered back all those months ago when Reese had told her about his family. Jesse had been adopted from South America. Reese called him overly serious and said he had no sense of humor.

He was the last person she needed to run into today. Unfortunately, he didn’t seem to be in the mood to let her leave. And the sudden wave of nausea that hit was a good reason to wait and see the doctor.

* * *

Reese lifted the weight one last time and set it on the floor. He stretched and then rolled his shoulders to loosen the overworked muscles.

“The end. I’m done.”

He grabbed the towel off the back of the rowing machine and draped it around his neck. The only thing he wanted now was the recliner and a glass of iced tea. Jeff, the physical therapist, a guy from Tulsa, laughed.

“We’re not done.”

“Really, I thought we were. My body feels pretty done. You know, I have an idea. Tomorrow let’s go riding.”

“We’ll definitely try that in the next few weeks. I need you to step on the treadmill now.”

“Yeah, okay.” He’d never thought he’d be sorry his dad had put a gym in the basement years ago. Tim Cooper had thought a gym would be a way for rowdy teenagers to work off energy and stay in shape.

The door opened and someone walked down the stairs. He paused before stepping on the treadmill. His parents were in Grove. His brothers Jackson and Travis had hauled a load of cattle to an auction. The footsteps were soft-soled—not boots—and heavy, so it wasn’t one of his sisters. He smelled men’s cologne, not cow manure.

“Hey, Jesse.” He grinned and really wanted to pat himself on the back. Instead he stepped on the treadmill and waited for Jeff to turn it on.

“Nice game and you’re right.” Jesse’s voice stopped close by. Reese raised his hand for a high-five. Jesse ignored it.

“What brought you over? Was the sun shining too brightly,

acting a little too cheery for you?”

“Your bedside manner leaves a lot to be desired.” Jesse said it with a hint of humor. “I’m turning this off. We need to talk.”

“Make it quick. I have a nap calling my name.” The treadmill stopped. He pulled the towel off his neck and wiped his face.

“Yeah, I don’t see a nap in your future. So how’s physical therapy going?”

“Great. Two hours today. But that isn’t why you’re here, is it?”

“No. But first I have to tell you I can’t give you confidential information on a patient.”

“I didn’t ask you to, and why would I want information on any of your patients?”

“It isn’t just any patient. Yesterday we had a young woman at the E.R. I called in a consult with our obstetrician.”

“I see. And this pertains to me why?”

“Because her last name is Cooper, and rumor has it, she’s paid you a visit. So I thought perhaps you’d want to know because you might want to drop by and check on her.”

“Jeff, can we end this for today?” Reese reached, touched the table and found his bottle of water. “I promise I’ll work twice as hard next time.”

“Sure, Reese. Take it easy. And I can let myself out.”

“Good deal. See you in a few days.” Reese stood in one place and tried to visualize the gym. There was a bench by the stairs. He took a few steps, found it and sat down. Jesse sat next to him. “So you think you’ve connected the dots.”

“I’ve been told my IQ is pretty high.” Jesse let out a sharp breath. “And it might be because she has our last name and her previous address was Las Vegas—a place you happened to visit some time ago. After that it was careful deduction going through the list of brothers. Lucky is married. So are Travis and Jackson. I’m not and neither is Blake. Who would want Dylan and Gage? Brian is out of the country. That leaves you. And from the look on your face, I’d say you haven’t told anyone that our mystery visitor is your wife.”

“I’d like for you to keep this between us for the time being.”

“For the time being, I will. When are you going to tell the family that you’re married?”

“I don’t know.” He sucked down another drink of water. “We’re not staying married. So maybe the fewer people who know the better.”

“Why not?”

“It’s...”

Jesse groaned. “Please do not say it’s complicated. You’ve married a woman who is pregnant. She’s acting scared to death, like someone might find out she’s your wife.”

“We had an arrangement.” He stood and Jesse did the same. “Are you going to town?”

“I’m going back to my place.” Jesse had a nice house on the lake. Reese had the feeling that big old house got pretty lonely sometimes.

“Could you drop me off at the barbershop?”

“That I can do.” Jesse touched his arm. “Two steps and then the first step up.”

“Thanks.” Reese reached the stairs and grabbed the handrail. They were on the road before either of them spoke.

“So how did you end up married?” Jesse finally asked.

Reese wondered if the word married really fit his situation. There had been a wedding. He’d even kissed the bride. But then he’d taken her back to her apartment, and he hadn’t seen her again until she showed up in Dawson.

“She needed a break, Jess. She was pregnant, no one to lean on and flat broke.”

“She isn’t a puppy, Reese.”

“I’m pretty sure I know that.” He fiddled with the cane, folded and in his hands. “The father of the baby wanted her to get an abortion. And she considered it but then couldn’t go through with it.”

“That’s pretty rough.”

“She needed a break, someone to give her a chance to do the right thing.”

“Do you have any feelings for her?”

Reese leaned back and rubbed a hand across his jaw. The truck slowed and made a right turn. Did he have feelings for Cheyenne? He admired her. Few women could pull themselves up the way she had. She’d used the money he’d given her to better her life. She’d packed up and moved across the country looking for a fresh start. She was having a baby alone.

“I’m not sure.” That seemed to be the safest answer at the moment. Because how crazy would he be if he told his brother he might have feelings for Cheyenne? Because she had written him funny, touching letters while he’d been in Afghanistan? She’d shared the pregnancy with him: the first kick, the morning sickness and being upset that she couldn’t fit into her jeans after the fourth month. Those letters had put him front and center in her life.

He knew that she felt rejected by the family that adopted her. She saw herself as their mistake, the kid they wished they hadn’t adopted. She’d been rejected by the man she thought she had married.

The truck slowed again. “We’re almost there. So do you have a plan?”

“I’m going to make sure she’s okay and see if I can help.”

Jesse cleared his throat. “I meant future plans for the two of you.”

“The plan was to get an annulment when I got back.” He didn’t have much else to say. “Are we there?”

The truck slowed, and he heard the click-click of the turn signal.

“Turning now.” Jesse cleared his throat. “Don’t worry. She’s going to be okay. So is the baby.”

“Thanks.” Reese reached to unclick his seat belt.

The truck slowed to a stop. “Do you want help getting in there?”

“No, I think I can handle it if you can give me a few directions.” He reached for the handle and pushed the door open just a little. “And keep this between us for now. I don’t care about myself. I don’t want her to be hurt.”

“I understand.” Jesse touched his arm. “I parked right in front of the door, parallel to the curb. Get out, take three steps forward and you’re going to step up. Ten steps and you’re at the door.”

“Is she here?”

Jesse laughed a little. “Yeah, she’s here.”

“What’s so funny?”

“She looked out the window, and I think she’s madder than Mia the day we sold her dolls at a yard sale.”

Reese had pushed the door open. Now he hesitated. “That wasn’t a fun day.” A day they pranked their little sister and ended up grounded.

“You’ve got that right. I have to go, so see you later, little brother.”

Reese stepped out of the car, closed the door behind him and took three steps. He touched the curb with his cane, stepped up and walked to the front of the building. Jesse had given perfect directions. He found the door and pushed. It didn’t budge. He could hear Jesse’s truck pulling out on the road.

He knocked on the glass of the door. No one answered. Great. He knocked again and pushed. It was still locked. He touched his pocket to make sure he had his cell phone. If she wasn’t in there, he was going to hurt Jesse.

After a few minutes of knocking and getting no response, he eased down the sidewalk to the bench he knew used to be there. He couldn't stand up much longer. The bench was still there. He touched it and then sat, stretching his legs in front of him.

It turned out that in July heat sitting on that bench, even in late afternoon, felt pretty uncomfortable. Even in athletic shorts and a T-shirt, he was roasting. He would knock one more time, and if she didn't come out, he'd call someone to come and get him. Before he could move, he heard the door click and then open. He remained in one place, waiting, wondering if she'd try to play a game and slip past him. As she walked out the door, he spoke.

“Marco.”

She didn't say anything. He tried again. “Marco.”

There was no answer, so he smiled and tried charm as he stood to face the direction where he knew she had stopped. “You know, when I say ‘Marco,’ you're supposed to say ‘Polo.’ I'm not sure why it's Marco Polo but you get the rules of the game, right? I'm blindfolded and I say ‘Marco.’ You say ‘Polo,’ and maybe I can find you.”

“I don't think those are the rules.” Her voice reached him from a few feet away—soft, sweet, maybe a little teary.

“Why did you lock me out?”

“Why are you still here?”

“Because I'm nothing if not gallant. I've been told all my life that I'm a real Sir Gala. What was his name?”

“Sir Galahad? I'm not sure that fits.”

“I could be Marc Anthony, and you could be... Isn’t his wife a famous singer?”

She laughed a little. “I think they broke up, and I think that you definitely won’t win points for pop culture or history. Marc Antony and Cleopatra would be the couple you’re thinking of, and I’ve always thought she was tragic and vain.”

He took a few steps and reached for her. Her hand touched his. “I think you’re not vain. Actually, you don’t realize just how beautiful you are.”

“Neither of us is tragic, so we can’t be Cleopatra and Marc Antony. Or the other two.”

“Could we be Desi and Lucy?”

She laughed at that. “That’s more like it. Why are you here?”

“Because you need me.” He stepped close, feeling her breath, hearing her sigh. Her hand touched his cheek. It seemed like an invitation, so he leaned, touching his forehead to hers in an easy gesture. “Because I love being needed.”

“I don’t need anyone. I can do this. My needing you wasn’t part of the bargain. I’m supposed to have this baby and then we get an annulment. End of story.”

“I know it wasn’t part of the bargain, Cheyenne, but if you haven’t noticed, things have gone south in a big way. I don’t think this was part of the bargain, either.” He pulled off the sunglasses he wore and shoved them in his pocket.

“You have beautiful eyes.” She sniffed a little, and he wished those eyes worked so he could see her.

“I’d say, ‘the better to see you with, my dear.’ But that line is so cliché.”

She sobbed a little and then her fingers touched his hair. “You need to shave. And your hair is too long.”

“Are you going to stand here and point out all of my physical faults?” He reached, found the door and pulled it open. “I’m here to rescue you, and all you have are complaints. Wife, enter this building at once.”

“Please stop.”

He took hold of her hand, and he led her into the building. “Don’t cry, Cheyenne.”

“I’m so afraid.”

Once they were inside the building, he pulled her into his arms and held her, the way he’d wanted to hold her a few days ago. They were strangers, friends, husband and wife. He’d make sense of it all later. The one thing they had in common was they were both afraid. “I know. And I’m here.”

She nodded against his shoulder and repeated what he recognized to be her mantra. “I can do this on my own.”

“I know you can. And I’m here to tell you that I can help. I want to help. You need to sit down, and I’m going to make sure you’re okay.”

“Your brother told?”

She led him to chairs at the side of the room, and they sat down side by side. “He didn’t tell me. He just hinted that my wife might need me.”

“I’m sorry he found out. I didn’t realize he would be at the hospital when I went.”

“I’m glad you went. I’m glad he was there. But he didn’t tell me anything. It’s up to you to do that.”

“It’s nothing really.” She released his hand. “I’ve had contractions. I thought at first it might be Braxton Hicks.”

“Braxton who? Is he another Shakespearean hero? Competition for my affections?”

“False labor.”

“Oh, that’s a word I understand.”

“But they monitored me for a few hours and realized they were real contractions. When I rest, they do go away, but they’re real. The bigger problem is that my blood pressure is high.”

“So what do we do?”

“I, not we. I’m not on bed rest at this point. I’m on medication and I’m taking it easy. I go back to the doctor in a week. And the obstetrician said to come in immediately if I have contractions that won’t stop with rest, if I feel dizzy or experience serious swelling or headaches.”

“‘Taking it easy’? Is that what this is, remodeling a building? Do I smell paint?”

“I had help.”

“What were you doing when I got here?”

She shrugged. He felt her shoulder move, brushing his arm. “I was putting up mini blinds.”

“I’m going to help you, and then we’ll call Vera and ask her to

deliver something for dinner.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I’m here, Cheyenne. I’m going to be here, and there isn’t a lot you can do about that. You came to Dawson, remember?”

She stood and he heard her moving away. “Do you think I came here to trap you?”

He unfolded the cane and followed her voice. “No, I think you wanted to know if I was safe. You wanted a safe place to raise your son. That’s something we’ll work out. But for now you’re still my wife, and I’m going to help you get this shop ready and make sure you don’t have that baby two months early.”

“I can’t let you do that.” She rested her hand on his shoulder. “You have to take care of yourself, not me.”

“I have to take care of us both, or I might not make it through the next few months. Let me help you. You’re about the only person in my life right now who makes me feel normal.”

A long silence and then she stepped close. “Can you use a drill?”

He laughed. “Can I use a drill? Of course I can.”

She placed his hand on her arm, and he couldn’t think of anything better than that moment with Cheyenne. For now, helping her took his mind off his own problems. He didn’t for a minute think he was home free. Tonight he’d have more nightmares. Tomorrow he’d feel frustrated and useless. Next week he’d have a good day and think he could conquer the world.

Today he could rescue Cheyenne. He covered her hand with

his. “Where’s that drill?”

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