



# WOUNDED

AN ASPEN SERIES NOVELLA  
PREQUEL TO RELENTLESS

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BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

WOUNDED  
(An Aspen Series Novella)  
(Prequel to Relentless)

By Cindy Stark

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## Dedication

To my daughter, Sierra—  
You are one of the greatest joys of my life. Thank you for the smiles and laughter,  
and for introducing me to The Doctor.  
I love you beyond words.

## Chapter One

Jerry Tierno's new Camaro ate up the distance between Salt Lake and his hometown of Aspen, Utah, like a mid-summer storm rolling over the Rocky Mountains. The miles of pine-laden canyons interspersed with green valleys disappeared faster than he would have liked, even though he was anxious to see his family.

If he could find a way to stop thinking about *her*, life would be bearable again.

But how could he? The last time he'd deployed, he'd left Aspen believing Kimber Reynolds was his everything, and that when he returned, they'd start their life together.

Believing that had made him the world's biggest idiot, along with the instant he'd taken his focus off the mission in Afghanistan and had become the target of an attack.

He pretended he didn't notice the three-bedroom house nestled in a grove of aspen trees just off the highway as he passed it. The for-sale sign was still there, but that no longer mattered.

As he cruised past Aspen's welcome sign, stating a population of 250, he lowered the window and cranked up his stereo, trying to drown out his cursed memories. The sweet, summer air heavy with the scent of freshly cut alfalfa filled his lungs, a complete contrast to the harsh desert in a part of the world so far from his home.

He slowed as he hit the so-called city limits, grateful to be back where life moved at a slower pace and every person he met wasn't a potential threat. Hanging baskets of flowers and numerous displays of the Stars and Stripes reminded him the small town's celebration of America's independence was only two days away.

The vibrations and sounds of his loud music drew the stares of a couple of his mother's friends talking outside the market. He waved, knowing they wouldn't recognize him in his new car, but wanting to be friendly just the same.

Then he choked. His foot slipped off the accelerator as he caught sight of Kimber walking out of the coffee shop that had opened a few weeks before he'd left the last time. Hell, for all he knew, her last name might be Cameron by now.

Wavy brown hair caressed her sun-kissed shoulders, her unforgettable tan legs disappearing under a short, pink skirt. She'd probably been working in the city clerk's office that day.

He remembered exactly what it felt like to kiss those shoulders, to trail his fingers up the smooth skin of her legs. The way she walked, her scent, everything about her had been seared into his brain, and he would have been able to pick her out of a crowd with a bag over her head.

As he passed, she turned toward him, their gazes connecting for the briefest of seconds. He swallowed past his choke and slammed on the gas pedal. His engine growled with delight as he pushed the boundaries of acceleration, and he could suddenly breathe again.

He was *so* over her. Over the pain. Over the wrenching heartbreak. Rehabilitating from shrapnel severing his calf muscle had been easier than getting over her, but he'd managed it.

Before he made it to the end of the little town, a piercing wail filled the air. He glanced in the mirror to find flashing red and blue lights hot on his tail.

This wasn't the homecoming he'd hoped for. He punched off his stereo as he pulled to the side of the road. "Shit," he ground out.

He pulled the license from his wallet and dug out his vehicle registration while he waited for the officer to approach his car.

"If it ain't Jerry Tierno, back from the trenches," the older officer said as he took his license, not bothering to look at it.

"Hello, Sheriff Reynolds." *Kimber's dad*. Double shit.

Other than some gray lightening the dark hair above his ears, the officer didn't show much of his forty-something years. "Didn't recognize the car, J.T."

"I just bought it yesterday."

"Kim said you'd be back before too long. Healing okay?"

He ignored the comment about Kimber. "Yes, sir." The reminder of his injury sent a recurrent pain through his left leg, and he stretched it out, trying to ease the stress holed up in it. He considered himself damn lucky to have escaped with only a few patches on his body. Some of his friends hadn't been so lucky.

"I heard they ambushed you good."

Jerry inhaled a slow breath through his teeth, hating how a casual question could send him right back to that place. The attack on their unit in a supposedly safe area had taken them by surprise, catching some of them with their pants down. Literally. The ensuing situation had been ugly. Very ugly.

"We lost some good men that day."

"Yeah. I heard that, too. I'm glad you weren't one of them."

He caught a hint of sentiment in the older man's voice, and he fought against his own rising emotions. If Kimber hadn't deserted him, the man would have become his father-in-law. Despite her lack of mercy, Jerry still admired and respected her dad.

Sheriff Reynolds handed his license back to him. "Son, I'm going to assume you were speeding 'cause you were in a hurry to see your mama after all this time, so I won't give you a ticket."

"Thank you, sir." There was no way he could tell the man it was because he was trying to outrun the memory of his daughter.

“Do it again, and I’ll slap a ticket on your ass so big you’ll be working two jobs to pay it off. Am I understood?”

A smile cracked on his lips, and he quickly buried it. “Yes, sir.” The old man loved to play hard ass. For the longest time, he and his buddies had been deathly afraid of the cop. The day Jerry had shown up on his doorstep to pick up Kimber for a date had been one of the most terrifying days of his life. At least up until he’d joined the army.

The man tipped his hat and headed back to his white Tahoe. Jerry waited while he turned around and drove to his hiding spot, preparing to catch the next sucker who decided to speed through his little town.

Instead of continuing through Aspen to his parent’s house, Jerry turned into the parking lot of Sparrow’s Bar and Grill. He needed something to fortify his spirit before he faced the rest of the world.



## Chapter Two

Kimber stood outside Rumors Coffee Shop, stunned. The hot July sun beat down on her, melting her caramel frappuccino. She'd walked over from City Hall on her afternoon break for her favorite treat and found herself completely unprepared for the shock of seeing Jerry.

Moments had passed since her father had sent him on his way, and still, she couldn't move. She had no idea if her father had ticketed him for his illegal behavior. All she knew was when they parted ways, Jerry didn't come back to see her. The stark reality hit. He might be home, but he was never coming back to her.

Her insides shook, leaving her with a sick feeling.

But he was home. He was *alive*.

Her prayers had been answered. It remained to be seen if he could forgive her, but at least he was alive.

And he hated her.

Jerry had caught her gaze and then raced away as though he couldn't get far enough from her fast enough. He might as well have wrapped rusted barbed wire around her heart.

"Hey, Kimber."

She was pulled from her daze as Tara Dixon and her mom passed by on the sidewalk. "Hi, Tara. Hi, Mrs. Dixon." Tara had to be close to nine now, the same age Kimber had been when her mom had been killed by an escaped convict.

What she wouldn't give to have a loving mother she could go to for advice right now. Thank God she had her best friend, Noelle.

She turned around and went back in the coffee shop, knowing Noelle would help her figure out how to proceed with the next minute of her life.

The sunny café didn't seem as cheerful as it had when she'd been inside a few minutes before. Noelle looked up as she entered, a strand of silky, blond hair falling into her face. "Forget something?"

She shook her head.

"Kimber? Are you okay?"

She blinked and tried to breathe. "He's home." For the longest time, she'd wondered if she'd ever see him again. She knew from the local gossip that he'd survived the attack, but he'd been so far away, so far out of her grasp, and it seemed she'd never see his beautiful face again.

Noelle stared at her for a moment, confusion on her face. Then clarity dawned. "Jerry?" she whispered.

Kimber nodded. “What do I do?” She fell into the closest chair, not sure her legs would continue to hold her. “I’ve been waiting for this moment for months, and now I’m lost.”

“You talk to him.” Noelle came around the front of the counter and sat next to her. “Tell him you screwed up. Ask for forgiveness. You know you’re not the same girl he left behind. You’ve grown. You’ve started your foundation for military wives. He needs to know this.”

“It’s not going to help. He hates me.”

“No. He might still be angry, but once you explain things, he’ll understand.”

She bit her lip until it hurt and shook her head. “I just saw him outside.”

Noelle widened her eyes. “What did he say?”

“Nothing. The second he saw me, he sped away.” His rejection drove a hot, searing pain into her. She deserved it, but it didn’t make it any easier to take.

“He was in a car? You saw him driving? Maybe he didn’t see you.”

She nodded, trying to keep her fears and grief inside. “He saw me.”

Noelle’s expression turned sympathetic. “Oh, honey. Maybe he needs some time.”

Could she hope that’s all it would take? “He looked good, Noelle. So good.”

“Yeah?” Her friend smiled.

“Yeah.” The moment she’d heard of the deadly attack on his unit, her world had collapsed beneath her. She’d known then she couldn’t live in a world without him no matter how many nights she’d have to stay awake worrying and wondering.

“He has a new car. A hot-looking black Camaro.”

Noelle’s smile grew bigger. “Really? Not that *he’d* need it to look hot.”

Hot. Handsome. Loyal. No longer hers. She deserved every shattered piece of her heart. She’d had a good man. The best. She’d let her fears and loneliness get the best of her, and she’d let him go.

“You have two choices, girlfriend. You can fight for your man or walk away. It all depends on how much he means to you.”

That brought some of the fire back in her. “*You know* what he means to me.”

“That’s what you keep telling me, but that’s not what I’m seeing. If you love him so much then tell me what you’re going to do to get him back.”

“I don’t know.” There was no doubt she wanted to mend things between them, but how? “I’m willing to do anything.”

“I’m pretty sure I know where he’ll be tonight.” Her friend widened her blue eyes and blinked several times in a flirtatious gesture.

“I can’t.” The thought of a public display of any kind freaked her out.

Noelle nodded, encouraging her.

“Seeing him for the first time in months? In front of all his friends?”

“You’re the one who wants to make amends. Go to Sparrow’s dressed all sexy. Buy the man a drink. You know he won’t be able to resist you.”

“That’s the problem. I’m afraid he can.”

Noelle shrugged. “There’s only one way to find out.”

\* \* \*

The cool, dim atmosphere of Sparrow’s was a direct contrast to the warm and brilliant glare of the sun outside, and it hit Jerry like a soothing balm. Eighties rock music chimed from the jukebox in the corner. Since it was barely past four in the afternoon, the bar was relatively quiet. The lunch bunch had gone home, and the early dinner crowd and later drinkers had not yet arrived. Thank God.

He needed somewhere to hide for a few minutes, somewhere to gather himself after seeing both Kimber *and* her father within seconds of getting to town. He didn’t need to be reminded the moment he returned of everything he’d lost.

He claimed an empty stool at the end of the bar, the farthest away from the door.

“Well, hello, J.T.” The blond female bartender grinned as she approached him, flashing her dimples along with a decent amount of cleavage. “Good to see you all in one piece.”

“Hey, Becky.” They’d flirted off and on since high school, but nothing had ever come of it. For some reason, their timing had always been off. He glanced at her left hand, and sure enough, a new diamond twinkled in the glow from the subdued overhead lighting. “Heard you got married.”

“I did.” Her smile grew brighter. “I wasn’t too sure about Brandon when we met, but he was persistent, and he finally got me to see things his way.”

“You look happy.” The twinge of jealousy burning inside him flared.

“I am. I never realized marriage could be this good.”

“Yeah.” He forced a smile. “I sure could use a beer if you don’t mind.”

Her glowing smile morphed into understanding. “Sure thing. How about one on the house? It’s not every day we get to welcome one of our boys home.”

“That would be great.”

She filled a tankard with golden beer and set it in front of him as the door to the bar opened letting in filtered light. Becky glanced at the newest customer before looking back at him. “I’ll be back in a few to check on you.”

Jerry looked over his shoulder to see Brandon greet her with a kiss.

Love.

He took a healthy swallow of beer. To hell with it.

The atmosphere lightened again as more customers came inside, but Jerry didn’t bother to see who’d entered. He just wanted to sit quietly and nurse his beer. He needed a few moments to settle and to remember what it was like to be in

his comfortable, safe hometown. Afghanistan had been harsh. The V.A. hospital had been a little better, but there was nothing like coming home.

“Good God,” a male voice sounded behind him. “Look what the cat dragged in.”

He recognized the voice and turned, his lips automatically curving into a smile when his gaze connected with Milo Sykes’s. “Shit.” He stood, and the two men hugged, clapping each other on the back. “I should have known I’d run into you here.”

“Hell, yeah. Where else in town can a guy find a little excitement?” He grinned. Milo had always been a good-natured, fun-loving guy, and that, along with his blond hair and blue eyes made him the perfect lady-magnet.

Jerry nodded. “You ain’t kidding.”

Milo took the seat next to him, and Becky brought him a beer. “Luke’s just outside. He accidentally hit some fancy black Camaro with his truck.”

## Chapter Three

Jerry choked on his beer as he jumped out of his seat. "What?"

Milo laughed and shook his head. "I'm just kidding."

He punched his friend's arm. "Not funny. That's my new lady you're talking about. I just put six months of savings down on her, and I'd like to pay off the loan before anyone trashes her."

"Sorry." Milo grinned, his blue eyes flashing. "You were an easy mark."

He frowned at the comment. He was tired of being an easy mark. "How did you know it was mine?"

"I stopped to talk to my boss a few seconds ago, and he told me he caught you speeding through town. Luke really is outside. He's checking out your new ride."

Jerry smiled, his emotions settling. Nothing like being back with his buddies to keep him humble and keep him happy. "Yeah, well, he'd better not touch her."

Milo tilted back his glass, taking a drink, before sliding his gaze to Jerry. "What about Kimber? Are you planning on seeing her?"

"Nope." He refrained from mentioning his earlier encounter. Milo was a smart guy. He'd quickly piece together the sighting of Kimber and the subsequent speeding, and Jerry would never live it down.

"It's a small town, man. If you stay long, you know you're going to run into her."

"I'll deal with it when I have to. If I see her on Eric's arm, I'm liable to punch someone."

"Uh..." Milo looked around. Luke had entered the building and was approaching, but other than that, no one was near. He leaned in closer to Jerry. "Didn't anyone tell you? She dumped Eric on his ass faster than she did you. I think they lasted all of one week."

"It's true," Luke said as he reached them and stuck out his hand. "Good to see you, man." The overhead light caught on one of the small silver hoops his friend wore as a show of rebellion. He'd been the subject of some nasty gossip over the years, most of which had faded, but it had left its scars.

Jerry grasped his hand and shook it, his emotions at war between his happiness at seeing his friends and his confusion over Milo's news.

"What do you mean, she dumped him?"

"Flat on his ass. He's been trying to get her back ever since, but she's not having any of it." Luke sat next to Milo. "Who the hell knows what goes through women's minds? If you ask me, they're all mental."

It was a known fact that Luke had had his share of trouble with women, starting with Hannah Morgan back in high school.

Jerry kept his face passive, but his insides were a battlefield. There was the dumbass part of him who rejoiced to find her still single. But then there was the smart half who repeated over and over that it didn't make a damn bit of difference. She might have dumped Eric, but she'd done the same damn thing to him. "It doesn't matter if she's with Eric or not. She made it clear she doesn't want anything more to do with me. So, it's like I said before, I don't have any intention of seeing her. If and when I do, I'll deal with it." He shrugged. "We're finished. I've moved on. I'm just looking forward to the day when she realizes what she lost, and she finds herself swimming in regret."

Milo narrowed his eyes. "You sure about that? My professional opinion says you're protesting a little too much."

"The hell." Jerry snorted and buried himself in another drink of beer. Milo had served his time in the military as well, learning some badass sharp-shooting skills. He got educated and had honed his people-reading skills, only to take a job as a small-town deputy. Some said it was a waste of talent. Jerry used to wonder the same thing, but now that he'd spent time serving his country, he understood Milo's craving for the quieter way of life.

Either way, he was pretty damn sure his friend had seen right through him. But there was no way he was admitting anything. "Can we just drink some beer and leave women out of it?"

"Here, here." Luke lifted his glass in a mocking toast. "Life is much simpler that way."

Jerry drained the last of his beer. "Tell you what, I have to go home before too long or my mom will be pissed. She's got this big family dinner planned. How about we meet back here later?" It was Friday night, and none of them had work in the morning.

"Luke and I were planning on staying here for dinner, and I'm pretty sure we'll be here when you get back," Milo replied.

Luke nodded his agreement. "Scott and Tyler will most likely stop by, too. Not much else going on. Scott owes me a game of pool."

"And Sierra's expecting me to be here to dance." Milo grinned. Out of the five of them, he was the biggest flirt.

Jerry left, happy with the knowledge he had somewhere to go later on. He expected his family's homecoming to be emotional, and knowing he had somewhere to escape to would make it bearable.

\* \* \*

Jerry's Camaro kicked up a fine layer of dust as he left the paved road and traveled down the long gravel and dirt drive to his parent's home. The old red-brick two-story home surrounded by oak trees and pines that were far older than he was had been his foundation. He'd had an upbringing most would covet. Two

parents who still loved each other. Three brothers and a sister who had played together as much as they'd fought, and who'd grown up genuinely caring about one another. His grandparents had passed, but plenty of extended family still lived in the area, and they were all pretty close, too. More than anything, he wanted to continue that tradition with his own wife and kids.

The numerous trucks, cars and SUVs that lined his parents' drive were proof of the closeness of his family. They'd all come out to welcome him home. He wasn't surprised, but it still touched his heart.

He turned down his stereo as he neared the house, now a little uncertain about the grand entrance he'd planned of showing up in a hot car, looking, on the surface, like a big, bad soldier returning from war. But now that he was home, he realized these were the people he shouldn't have to pretend with.

He wasn't sure they would understand how things had changed since he'd left. *He'd* changed. Now that he'd been out and experienced the harsh, real world, he was no longer the naive man who thought he knew everything.

War had left its mark, and there was no undoing that.

Kimber hadn't been able to deal with it. Would they? She'd run at the first sign of danger. There was no way she could handle hearing about the ugly side of war. About the men they'd killed.

It turned out the volume of his music didn't matter. His mom had set up picnic tables beneath the grand oak next to the house, and most of his family had gathered there. He'd barely exited his car before a squeal rippled through the air, and his beautiful sister came running for him.

The youngest of the bunch, Starlee had been spoiled because she was the only girl. Their mother treasured her, and all four of her brothers had watched and protected her.

"Oh my God, Jerry." Tears streamed down her face as she leapt into his open arms. He buried his face in her soft, blond hair, fighting like crazy to keep his own emotions under control. At nineteen, she was the picture of innocence, and the perfect example of why he'd been willing to lay down his life to protect his country and family.

"Hey. It's okay." He pulled back, and she swiped at the moisture on her cheeks. "Your big bro is home, safe and sound."

"But you weren't. They shot you."

"Yeah, well, they weren't tough enough to kill me. And look..." He held open his arms and turned in a circle. "I'm as good as new."

Her lips puckered together as though she was trying to hold back her words. "Mom says you have a limp."

He rolled his eyes. Leave it to his mother to tell everyone the details. “It’s only a little one. If I keep up with the therapy, doc says I can overcome it. And you know me. I’m not about to let anything stand in my way.”

She nodded, seeming to accept his answer.

He’d spare her the grueling details of how much torture he’d gone through to get back to where he was. It wouldn’t do anyone any good, and he’d make sure he kept those details from his gossiping mother as well.

Most of the rest of his family had heard the commotion and were now making their way toward him.

His mother was the next to greet him. New wrinkles had marked the corners of her eyes and around her mouth. A few more gray hairs had sprouted near her temples, and he was sure he’d probably contributed to most of them. Still, she managed to hang on to the grace and beauty of her youth.

“Mom,” he said, and she pulled him into her arms. He inhaled, dragging the lavender scent of comfort into his lungs, letting it shelter his wounded soul.

“God, Jerry. I don’t know if I should strangle you for what you’ve put us through, or brag to the world about my courageous son.”

Leave it to his mother to make him laugh. “I vote for option number two.”

She shook her head in gentle admonition as she let the rest of the family have a turn at greeting him.

“Welcome home, son.” His dad shook his hand and then pulled him in for a hug. The fact that his father would act on his emotions proved how shaken he’d been by Jerry’s injuries. “Glad you’re okay.”

“I’m doing well,” he said to the older version of himself. “Almost a hundred percent healed.”

“Good.” His dad smiled, wrinkles fanning out from his eyes as well. It had only been five months since he’d last seen his parents, but it seemed as though they’d aged many years. “Your brothers are out back playing tag football with your cousins. Go say hello.”

He nodded and headed around the side of the house, greeting relatives as he went. It would be good to see his brothers, but he had a ways to go before his severed calf muscle would be healed well enough to withstand a rough game of football.

\* \* \*

His mother had spared no expense, buying steaks for everyone. She’d made his favorite potato salad, and he’d eaten so much chocolate cake he thought he might puke. Thankfully, beyond the first greetings, dinner wasn’t the emotional ordeal he’d feared. A few asked about his experiences, but everyone accepted what he was prepared to tell them and didn’t press for any of the sordid details.



Hours later, when the sun rested on the horizon and most of his extended family had gone home, his mother finally managed to get him alone.

He'd carried some of the dishes into the kitchen and was taking a break from the family by using the excuse of washing silverware and platters as a way to get a few moments alone.

The sound of his mother chuckling startled him. He turned to find her standing in the kitchen doorway with both hands on her hips.

## Chapter Four

“I’m starting to wonder if they really sent my son home, or if you’re one of those science fiction implants who looks like him, but isn’t.” His mother approached. “You’ve never washed a dish without thirty minutes of nagging beforehand.”

Jerry rinsed the bowl and set it to the side. “I guess people change.” He picked up a platter and began washing it, the melancholy of being home finally overtaking him.

“I guess people do.” The teasing look on her face dropped along with the tone of her voice. She bumped her hip against him, taking the platter from his hands. “I’ll wash. You rinse.”

He bumped her back. “Fine, but next time I slack on washing you can’t get mad.” It felt good to be able to let his guard down and know that his mom wouldn’t freak out. “You had your chance.”

She lifted a sassy, teasing brow. “I don’t care if you’re a hardened old soldier. I’m still your mama, and you’ll do what I say.”

A smile crept across his lips. “Yes, ma’am.”

They washed dishes in silence for a few minutes giving him time to appreciate the simple task and letting its simplicity help to heal him.

“Why didn’t you come home sooner, son?” His mom kept her eyes on the dishwater, but he knew she expected an answer.

“I couldn’t.”

“I don’t see why not. They have a V.A. hospital in Salt Lake. You would have been closer to home, and I could have visited.”

It had taken him a good four months to heal from his wound and complete the therapy necessary to allow him to walk normally again. “I just couldn’t.”

“Because you didn’t want her to see you wounded? Because you were afraid she’d see you as less of a man?”

Damn. He’d never figured out how his mom could read him so well, but she did. “It had nothing to do with her. I felt like I could heal better without all of you fussing over me.”

“Uh-huh.” She handed another bowl to him.

He wanted to tell her to mind her own business, but that would be admitting she was right. “Why didn’t you tell me she’d dumped Eric?”

“Would it have made a difference?”

He shrugged.

She lifted a dishtowel from the counter and wiped her hands. “You had enough to deal with, okay? You’d already taken damage to your heart. You had enough healing to do between that and your leg. What if I *had* told you about her?”

Then you would have gotten your hopes up. If she spurned you again, what would that have done to you? A man can only heal so much at a time.”

He swallowed and then nodded.

A crushing look of sympathy fell over her features, and she tugged him close to her. “Oh honey. I’m sorry. I honestly didn’t know what to do. I figured if she wanted to tell you, then she would. If she didn’t, then you were better off not knowing. I know how much you love her—”

“Loved,” he corrected.

“Okay, loved,” his mom reluctantly agreed. “But still, now that you’re home and doing much better, the two of you can take some time to figure things out. Sometimes, being apart from each other makes people in love do stupid things. They start to doubt, and...”

“No.” He hugged his mom one more time before he pulled away. “The past is the past. She had her chance, and she made her choice. I’m done.” He couldn’t bring himself to tell her that the day he’d gotten the break-up email from Kimber was the same day they’d been caught in the booby trap. He still wondered if he hadn’t been so focused on his loss if he would have noticed something was wrong. Maybe he could have spared some of his friends. Maybe Tim wouldn’t have had to give his life to protect Jerry from most of the shrapnel that had sliced apart his friend. He blinked away the haunting image, wishing he could bury it deeper in his subconscious.

“Whatever you say. You know you have my support.”

“Thanks, Mom.” He scrubbed a hand over the whiskers on his face. He knew he couldn’t blame Kimber for what had happened—it had been an unforeseen event, but he found it damn hard to separate the two. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to take a shower and unpack. I told the guys I’d meet them later at Sparrow’s.”

“Sure. You could probably use some guy time after being smothered by your family.”

He laughed, and she swatted him with a dishtowel.

“Hey, you said it. Not me.”

\* \* \*

When Jerry arrived at Sparrow’s for the second time that day, the parking lot was much fuller than before. He parked his shiny black Camaro out on the street. He preferred not to get door-dinged by some drunken bastard who was hopefully not driving, but climbing into the passenger seat.

Inside, he found Luke and Milo sitting at a large table in a corner with three empty chairs waiting to be taken. The lights were dimmer than they’d been earlier in the day, and scents of grilled steaks and hamburgers filled the air. Customers

who perched on stools lined the bar, and the pulse of Sparrow's had been kicked up a notch.

"Did you survive?" Milo asked over a song heavy with the sounds of southern rock.

Jerry laughed. "Apparently." He nodded at the waitress, asking for a pitcher of beer when she arrived.

"Planning on going heavy-duty tonight, huh?" Luke asked.

"Yep. I have some serious beer drinking to catch up on. It's a little harder to go down to the local tavern and suck a few suds in the desert." Besides, he preferred party demons to the darker ones lurking in his soul.

"I hear ya," Milo agreed. "We definitely have some celebrating to do. We've got it all arranged. If we get too shit-faced, Luke's brother agreed to give us a ride home."

Luke nodded as he held up his beer. "To the brave men who fight for our country."

Jerry smiled and lifted his glass. All three clinked and drank.

"Are you driving in the derby tomorrow?" Milo asked.

"I don't know." Every year since he'd turned sixteen, Jerry had entered an old beater car in the Fourth of July derby. "Car's been sitting for a while. Not sure I can get her ready in time."

"You got us." Luke thumbed his chest. "We'll get that mother in shape if you want."

After he'd been hit, Jerry had promised himself if he ever made it back alive, he would live each day to the fullest. "Why the hell not?" No time like the present.

The live band cranked through two more songs before Scott and Tyler arrived.

"Damn, it's like old-home week around here," Scott said as he gave Jerry a slap on the back. With his dark hair, eyes and goatee, he looked like the badass of the bunch. Once upon a time, he'd actually owned the title, but he'd cleaned up his act since then and now owned a respectable construction company.

"No, shit," Tyler commented. "Good to have you back, man." He shook Jerry's hand, warmth radiating from his slanted blue eyes that always seemed out of place with his almost-black hair.

"Well, hell, now that we're all here, I say we do some shots," Milo said.

Jerry had a beer and two shots of Jack warming his veins when he spotted Kimber walking through the door. She stopped just inside the bar and did a quick search until her gaze landed on him. The sight of his former fiancée dressed in a short black sundress and sexy heels kicked him in the gut. "Shit." He turned his back to her and downed the current shot of whiskey sitting in front of him. He might regret it later, but none of that mattered now.

Milo turned to him, the other men still laughing raucously at Scott's joke about a blond hooker. "What?"

"Nothing." He scanned the room, looking for a quick save. He doubted Kimber would have the guts to walk up and talk to him, but he wasn't taking any chances. "I think I need to stretch my legs. You care if I ask Sierra to dance?"

"Why would I care? It's not like she's my girlfriend." Except Sierra and Milo *were* sort of a thing. Not like a real thing, but every weekend, they found themselves in each other's arms, dancing at Sparrow's. Jerry wasn't sure if they'd ever taken it further than that, and he wasn't about to ask now.

"Great." He got to his feet, the room slightly unsteady. Luckily for him, only one table separated him from Sierra and her friends.

He didn't spare a glance toward the door as he approached his target. "Hey, Sierra. Want to dance?"

Sierra turned her brown eyes toward him and tilted her head. "Wow. Really? Jerry Tierno is asking me to dance. I should feel honored."

He snorted. He and Sierra had always had that sort of relationship. He'd tossed a frog in her face in fifth grade, and she'd snubbed him ever since. "Come on, Sierra. It's only one dance."

She smiled. "Fine. Maybe I'll step on your toes and pay you back for that frog."

He led her to the dance floor, wrapping an arm around her waist and taking her other hand in his. "Are you still fretting about that after all this time?"

She grinned up at him with a smirky smile. "I swore that day I'd never forgive you."

"That was fifteen years ago. How can you hold a grudge for that long?"

Before she could answer, he shifted his gaze toward the door. Kimber stood with a bleak expression darkening her beautiful green eyes as she stared at him.

A sharp pain on his big toe brought his focus back to his dance partner.

"You aren't even listening to me." Sierra frowned.

"I'm sorry. What?"

"I said, if you wouldn't have spent all those years staring at Kimber Reynolds, you would have realized I'd forgiven you a long time ago."

He laughed, giving her a sheepish grin. "My mistake." He glanced back to the door.

Sierra shifted in his arms. "What are you looking at?" She snorted. "Speak of the devil." She turned his focus back to her with a finger. "You two seeing each other again?"

"Nope. Never." He forced a smile, hoping he looked confident in what he said.

“Really?” She smiled. “It looks like she’s here looking for you.” She turned her gaze toward Kimber, and he wished he could ask her to stop. “I could get rid of her if you want me to.”

He froze, caught in his own trap. “What do you mean?”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned in close. He thought she intended to whisper something in his ear, but the next thing he knew, she’d placed her glossy, red lips on his.

## Chapter Five

Jerry hesitated for a second, caught totally off guard, before he pulled away from Sierra. He jerked his gaze back to Kimber just in time to see a pained look on her face before she turned and walked out the door.

“Ha! It worked.” Sierra grinned. “You don’t have to thank me.”

“But I do,” he lied as he pulled away from her. He couldn’t very well tell her exactly how pissed he was at the moment, or she’d tell Milo, and then they’d all have him figured out. “Why don’t you join us and let me buy you a beer?” It would get him out of her arms. He’d used Sierra to keep Kimber at a distance, not shove it in Kimber’s face. Even if she had deserved to see him with someone else, he was not that kind of guy.

“Okay.” She let him lead her back to the table, only to be greeted by a frowning Milo.

“I thought you said *dance*, man. What’s up with the kiss?”

Sierra planted herself on Milo’s lap. “Don’t worry, honey. I was only doing a favor for a friend.”

Milo lifted a brow at Jerry.

“Kimber showed.”

“And I got rid of her,” Sierra added before she placed her cherry lips on Milo’s for a wet kiss that had the rest of them rolling their eyes.

“I guess I can live with that,” Milo said and squeezed her waist. “We should dance. It’s our song.”

The band had switched to a country love song, and it only took Milo and Sierra a few seconds before they were on the dance floor, their bodies intimately moving as one.

“I need another beer,” Jerry called to the passing waitress. She nodded and continued on her way, carrying her tray of empty bottles toward the bar.

“Can we talk?”

Every one of the men’s head snapped up at the sound of Kimber’s voice.

Jerry slowly turned toward the beautiful voice that had haunted his dreams many, many times. When the hell had she come back inside? “I don’t think so.” Everyone at the table silenced as a musky, rose scent reached out and grabbed him like a shackle around his wrist. He tried not to breathe.

“Seriously? You can’t give me the courtesy of five minutes?” She glanced at his friends, an awkward expression hovering in her eyes, and he recognized his shield. As long as he kept his friends close, he was safe.

“Why should I? All I got from you was a cold email.” Why did she have to press it and force him to be a dick?

“Whoa,” Tyler whispered.

“Harsh,” Scott agreed.

Jerry hated putting her on the spot like he was, but who the hell did she think she was coming in looking all sexy and acting like she hadn’t broken his heart?

She visibly swallowed. Her bottom lip quivered, betraying her cool demeanor and making him feel like shit. She opened her mouth to say something, then stopped. She turned and walked away, dragging the pieces of his heart behind her. It was better this way.

The guys stared at him like he was an alien.

“What?” he said to the group.

They exchanged glances.

“She’s still in love with you, man,” Milo finally offered.

“The hell.” He challenged them all with a glance and then looked toward the bar. “Where’s my damn beer?”

\* \* \*

Kimber climbed into her Mazda and shut the door. She would not go back in a third time. She inhaled and slowly exhaled, letting her whispering breath calm her. She hadn’t expected his anger to be so strong. Hadn’t expected him to look so good. His dark eyes had always weakened her, although in the past that had been in a good way. The expression in his eyes tonight had been a mixture of anger and something else, and none of the sexy tease she was used to.

She’d thought she could hold her own, but this was too important to her, and she’d let him intimidate her. He’d always been a man worth a second look with his towering height and impressive muscles, but now his body seemed more hardened. It was as though his time overseas had toughened him inside and out.

She summoned her own anger from deep inside because that made it easier to handle his.

To hell with Jerry. Yes, she’d been an idiot and had sent him that fateful email in a moment of fear and uncertainty. Yes, she deserved some of his anger. But he hadn’t completely held up his end of the bargain, and she didn’t deserve the cold humiliation he’d just tossed in her face. She started her car, but instead of driving, she hit redial on her cell phone.

After six rings, Noelle answered.

“He’s a total, complete ass.”

“Didn’t go so well, huh?” Her friend’s voice echoed with compassion.

“No.” Tears welled behind her eyelids, and she tried to coax more anger to the surface. Crying equaled hopeless, and she couldn’t accept that. “He refused to talk to me.”

Silence ensued from the other side, and she heard a male voice ask who was on the line.



“Oh, God. You’re with Ian. I’m so sorry.” She had to stop being so self-focused.

Noelle giggled and then cleared her throat. “It’s okay. I’m here for you.”

Kimber didn’t want to picture what she might have interrupted. “No. I’m going to let you go.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow at the derby, then? Did you finish painting your car?”

“My dad helped.” A watermelon-sized tub of anxiety bottomed in her stomach. Surely, Jerry wouldn’t be driving. With him just getting home, there’s no way he’d have a car ready in time.

“I can’t wait to see it. Afterwards, we’ll come up with a kickass strategy that will have that man begging at your feet.”

A laugh spilled from her, relieving some of her stress. “I love you, Noelle.”

“Love you, too. Good night.”

\* \* \*

Jerry woke the next morning sprawled in the bed of his youth, his mouth as dry as the Afghani desert and his head pounding like rapid gunfire.

He groaned and rolled over, his thoughts immediately returning to Kimber. He wished to hell someone would have told him that all the drinking in the world wouldn’t erase her from his thoughts. He’d done a damn fine job trying, though.

He’d spent the rest of his night trying to ignore the sick feeling churning inside him. No one brought up Kimber’s name again, and neither did he. But the pain he’d glimpsed in her expression had burned into him much like looking at the sun before closing his eyes. He’d tried to distract himself by drinking and by dancing with a few more ladies, but he could not get the scarring image out of his mind.

He and his friends had stayed until the bar had shut down, and he vaguely remembered the five of them piling into the back of someone’s truck. He’d passed out until his friends had tossed him out near his front porch. He’d managed to make his way to his bed, but still wore the clothes he’d partied in.

The hell if he’d do that again. His days of acting like a teenager were over.

He made his way to the bathroom where he popped a couple of aspirin and downed a large glass of water before climbing into the shower.

When he stumbled downstairs thirty minutes later, his head still pounded, but he believed he might survive.

“Morning, sunshine,” his mom said as she rolled out the pastry for a pie.

He grunted in return and filled a cup with coffee. She’d be entering that in the yearly contest as usual.

“Your friends are out in the garage working on your derby car.”

He glanced outside, spying his newest vehicle parked in front of the house. “How did my Camaro get home?”

“Luke and Milo brought it this morning. Crazy night?”

“Yeah,” he whispered. Fucked up, crazy night. He poured his coffee into a plastic mug and set the cup in the sink. “I’ll be outside.”

As he entered the garage, his friends quickly stopped talking and eyed him with wary looks.

“What?”

Luke focused on the car’s engine, and Milo shrugged. “Just wondering how you’re feeling this morning?”

“Like a semi dragged my ass down five miles of pavement,” he snapped. “How the hell are you feeling?”

Luke looked at him beneath raised brows. “Feeling a little grumpy this morning? I’m not surprised after how much you drank last night.”

Jerry looked at his friends like they’d lost their minds. “I wasn’t the only one.”

Luke glanced at Milo with a grin. “You going to tell him, or should I?”

“We might have all had a few beers, but you were the only one who was muttering about Kimber after passing out on Tyler’s lap on the way home,” Milo said. “I won’t mention how you tried to hug him.”

“No.” He would not have embarrassed himself that way.

Luke snickered. “Yeah.”

He stared at his friends for a moment, not certain what to say. They were known for pulling pranks on him, but little snippets of memory flashed in his brain, and he was pretty certain they told the truth. God help him.

Instead of replying, he walked to his toolbox and grabbed a screwdriver. “If we’re going to get this beast running, we’d better start fixing that carburetor.”

Milo and Luke exchanged glances, and Jerry didn’t give them a chance to change the subject back to Kimber. “Well? If we don’t get our asses in gear, we’re not going to have her ready in time.”

## Chapter Six

It took most of the afternoon, but by the time four o'clock, Saturday night rolled around, Jerry, with the help of Milo and Luke, had his old New Yorker loaded onto the flatbed trailer, and they hauled her to the town's rodeo grounds.

The afternoon sun hovered in the sky, sitting at the perfect angle to blind Jerry whenever he looked west across the field of cars and drivers. Engines roared and sputtered in preparation for one of the town's favorite annual events. Some of the drivers were pretty serious about winning, but most of the entrants just wanted the chance to bash another car, him included.

As he exited his dad's old truck, his gaze constantly wandered to the stands. It was a relentless battle between his subconscious who couldn't resist looking for Kimber and the smarter half of him who wanted to kick his subconscious's ass.

*"Dude."*

Milo's voice jerked him from his reverie, and he glanced to his friend with raised brows. "What?"

"If you don't get your ass out of the way, you're going to be your car's first hit."

He focused on the scene in front of him and realized if Luke had backed the car off the trailer another inch, he would have taken him to the ground. "Shit," he whispered and moved out of the way. With all of the engines roaring around him, he hadn't realized one of them had been his.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Milo asked, studying him with a discerning gaze.

"Of course. I'm ready to kick some ass," Jerry responded. He needed to burn off his frustrations somehow.

Milo hesitated a moment longer before nodding. "You sure? Sometimes that Afghani heat can really mess with a guy's head, if you know what I mean."

Jerry shook his head. "No. I'm good." He wasn't denying that his service to his country had changed him forever, and for a while, he'd struggled to manage his issues, but things were better now.

"Then it's Kimber," Luke commented as he joined them.

"Do you have to keep bringing her up?"

Luke adjusted his ball cap. "Just calling it like I see it. I think you're a little more whipped than you're letting on."

"Shit. How about we just don't mention her name again?"

"You sure about that?" Luke lifted a teasing brow, making Jerry want to punch him in the gut.

“Damn sure.” He turned to Milo. “Did you get me registered?”

“Yep. You’re in the first round.”

“Good.” He climbed into his car and slammed the door. He did not need this shit from his friends. The engine growled as he revved it, and he gave the car a little extra gas as he started toward the opening to the arena. He took a fair amount of satisfaction knowing the wheels had spit some dust at his friends in his attempt to show off.

He joined the line of cars waiting to be announced as they entered the arena. When the announcer called out The Smashmaster, Jerry circled the dirt-covered area, doing brodies that created a cloud of thick dust. Man, it felt good to do something a little wild and reckless after the last four years of regimented days.

When he finished showing off, he backed up his car until it bumped against the tractor tires that lined the boundaries of their playground and waited with the other drivers. A few more cars followed suit, creating enough dust to have the fans choking.

“Uh-oh.” The announcer’s voice rang through the air. “It looks like we also have a Crashmaster this year. That sounds a lot like Smashmaster....” He let his voice trail off, encouraging the crowd to speculate if there would be a rivalry.

Jerry couldn’t agree more. This idiot needed to come up with his own name, not a rip-off of Jerry’s. Whoever it was had more or less painted an invisible target on his car as far as Jerry was concerned.

A neon pink Grand Prix entered the arena and created enough of a brown haze that he couldn’t see the driver. When it came to a stop, the driver had parked on the opposite side of the ring.

Jerry revved his engine in response.

The announcer laughed. “Looks like the Smashmaster has thrown down the gauntlet. We’ll have to see if the Crashmaster accepts.”

A loud muffler-less growl roared from the Grand Prix, drawing cheers from the crowd.

*Game on.* A grin spread across his mouth. There was no way a Smashmaster and a Crashmaster could civilly share the same arena. Not if Jerry had any say.

He held his excitement in check while the rest of the cars joined them. Then the announcer along with the crowd counted down to one.

A cacophony of engine roars filled the air, and he pulled out into the fray. Straight in front of him, a big, green station wagon was backing wildly across the arena toward a black Caprice with painted flames licking its sides. He couldn’t pass up the opportunity.

Jerry threw it into reverse and headed after them. The driver of the wagon kept his attention on the Caprice, which was what Jerry had hoped for, and a second after the wagon hit the Caprice, Jerry slammed into the hood of the station wagon.

It made a nice vehicular sandwich, if anyone asked him.

He jerked the shifter into forward and pulled away.

Luckily for him, the neon pink Grand Prix had just smashed into a red Chevy not all that far from him. First round down. On to the main event.

He crushed his accelerator to the floor, kicking up a good bit of dust, giving the Caprice a final insult. Jerry took a hit to the passenger side before he made it to the Grand Prix, and he was sure it left a nice dent in his stars and stripes décor.

He didn't give a shit. It was unlikely this car would be worth running again.

He swiveled his head around, making a mental note to go after that car once he'd taken out the Grand Prix.

The second he was close enough to the blaring neon pink, he stopped and threw his car into reverse, intending to use his back bumper as the offense in an effort to protect his engine.

He had a pretty good run going and itched for the moment his car would make contact with the Crashmaster. Seconds before he hit, the banged up black Caprice came out of nowhere, bashing his front end and shifting his course of action.

He ended up parallel to the Grand Prix, his ass to its engine, the driver side windows of both cars next to each other. He looked over, ready to say some smart ass remark about lack of originality, but his words died on his tongue when he found Kimber's beautiful face peering out of her helmet.

He sat stunned for an awkward moment.

She widened her eyes and stared at him with an unreadable expression. Then she revved her engine and shot away from him. Before he could make another move, the Caprice attacked again.

"Son of a bitch." Who the hell did she think she was copying his name and driving in his derby? If she wanted out of his life so fucking bad, why did she keep popping up in it?

He twisted his head and found that she hadn't made it far before another car had barreled into her side.

He had two choices. He could run from her or run her down. And he sure as hell wasn't running.

He maneuvered his car away from the Caprice and avoided another hit by the green station wagon. On the overhead speakers, he could hear the announcer talking smack about who would take out who...the Smashmaster or the Crashmaster. The townsfolk would eat it up, especially if they knew about his past relationship with Kimber. In his estimation, that would be about everybody in his small town.

Whatever. Ex-fiancée or not, he wasn't about to be beaten by a woman.

His engine growled as he made a beeline straight for her tail end.

His back bumper slammed into hers with a jolt. He cranked his head to find her looking back at him.

A smile crept across his lips.

Instead of frowning, she raised a challenging brow, a satisfied grin on her face. The hell. She was enjoying this. And definitely holding her own. The woman who'd always been a little hesitant before had turned into something of a firecracker. Shit.

She'd turned into a sexier, more powerful version of the woman he'd left, and damn if that didn't turn him on. He looked away before she could read his expression.

He shifted into drive and tried to pull away from her. She did the same, but neither of them moved. His bumper had tangled with hers, tying them together.

He pressed harder on the accelerator, his tires spinning in the soft dirt, generating a fair amount of dust. He was going nowhere.

From across the way, he spied the black Caprice barreling toward his engine.

"Damn it." He was a sitting duck if he couldn't disengage from Kimber's car. He floored it, but it was to no avail. The Caprice hit him, crushing the passenger side of his front end, killing his engine.

Jerry glared at the driver, finally taking the time to get a good look at him. Hell if it wasn't Eric, the asshole who'd stolen Kimber from him while he'd been away serving their country.

He wanted blood. He cranked his engine a few times, but it refused to start. The jolt had broken him and Kimber apart. She sped away, but he was still an easy target.

Eric pulled far enough away from Jerry to get another running start in his direction. As the Caprice began backing toward him again, Jerry gave the starter one more try, and this time it engaged. He floored it, barely escaping another attack.

As luck would have it, the owner of the green station wagon seemed to want another shot at Eric as well. He hit the front end of the Caprice with a jarring blow. Jerry took the opportunity and threw his transmission into reverse. He watched over his shoulder as he headed toward the two cars, aiming for Eric's Caprice. The station wagon moved out of the way at the perfect moment, allowing Jerry to show the power of the Smashmaster.

Smoke coursed from the crushed engine, and Jerry smiled as he heard Eric repeatedly try to crank his engine. One man down. One woman to beat.

Jerry smiled, happy that he'd annihilated the enemy this go round.

He glanced across the arena, surprised to find there were only three cars still moving. Kimber, him and a white New Yorker that was dragging a back bumper. The green station wagon sat nearby, its engine refusing to turn over.

He watched as Kimber headed across the arena, making it look like she was running from the white car. She stopped on top of a dirt hill, and he could see the fans in the bleachers cheering for her. It was as though she was declaring herself the king of the hill.

Crazy, arrogant thing to do.

Pride or something similar welled up inside him. He'd taught her that move.

Then she backed off the hill, heading toward the white New Yorker with all the speed she could muster. The white car started to move out of her way until it sputtered. Sounds of an engine trying to turn over mixed with the loud, mufflerless rumbles of Kimber's car.

The rear end of her Grand Prix collided with the New Yorker's hood, making a tent out of the metal, and leaving the car a smoking pile of worthless parts.

"Looks like the Smash and Crash are all we have left today, ladies and gentlemen," the announcer's voice boomed over the crowd. "Who will take home the trophy?"

Jerry sat on one side of the ring while Kimber faced him on the other.

Time for a showdown.

The rumble of her engine filled the air as she backed toward him. No fear there. For some reason, he found that kind of sexy.

Not meaning Kimber.

Just overall in a woman.

He positioned his car so his rear end faced hers.

She wanted it? He'd give it to her.

He crushed his accelerator to the floor, the sound of his engine roaring in response. His car bumped as he cruised over some small dirt hills, aiming directly for her.

He wondered if she'd chicken out at the last second and swerve, not wanting to take a direct hit. He wouldn't, though. He would see this through to the end. He growled as he prepared for impact.

They met with a roaring crunch of stressed metal. The force would have sent his head through the windshield if the car still had one.

He sat for a second, clearing the ringing from his head, then looked back over his shoulder. She grinned as she pulled away, taking his rear bumper with her.

Smoke rose into the air, giving the crowd a visual of the damage his car had sustained. "Shit." He turned the key, but knew he wouldn't get a response.

"Looks like the Crashmaster has taken down the Smashmaster," the announcer said and a wild round of clapping and yells came from the stands.

Wasn't that the truth, he thought. And it wasn't the first time.

Kimber's car let out a loud roar of victory as she revved the engine.

With the race over, the drivers began climbing out of their mangled vehicles, in order to complete the customary handshakes. He could refuse and walk away, but his self-respect wouldn't allow it.



## Chapter Seven

Kimber swallowed around her dry, dust-covered throat as Jerry walk toward her. Her heart stumbled. Damn. He looked good in his worn jeans and tight blue t-shirt. Every few steps, she caught sight of a tiny limp, but otherwise, there was no outward appearance of his injury. He sauntered the same way he always did, looking like he was hunting prey, making her wish he'd hunt her.

She slipped the helmet from her head just as he reached her, her dark hair tumbling down her shoulders.

He studied her for a moment with his sexy, bedroom eyes, and she wished she'd could throw herself into his arms and welcome him home.

"Nice driving." He held out a hand for her to shake.

She took it, allowing him to wrap his warm fingers around hers for the briefest second. "Thanks."

"Better than when I left."

"Only in some ways." Her head, her heart, the rest of her had missed him like crazy. He'd never know how sorry she was that she'd let him down. "Jerry, I—"

"Congratulations, Kimber," Eric interrupted. "You get better every time."

Heat rushed to her cheeks at the sexual innuendo. And of course, it was in front of Jerry.

The two men exchanged dark glances before Jerry met her gaze again. The traces of civility and a touch of warmth were gone. Eric had crushed the tiniest bit of a chance that Jerry had given her.

"Gotta go," he said before he turned and walked away.

"What the hell was that?" she said when Jerry was out of hearing range.

"What? I was just congratulating you." Eric shrugged, trying to look innocent, but they both knew he hated that she was still in love with Jerry. He'd weaseled his way into her life during a very dark and lonely time and had taken advantage of her weakness, convincing her the life of a soldier's wife would be misery. She'd since set him straight.

"Just...stay away from me."

He lifted his hands into the air. "What did I do?"

She didn't bother with a response as she walked away.

\* \* \*

Heated blood pulsed through Jerry's veins as he stomped toward Milo and Luke. The two of them leaned against the fence that surrounded the ring. They'd had the perfect spot to view the entire travesty.

He never should have gone over to congratulate Kimber. It might have been the courteous thing to do, but she's the one who muddied the waters first. It had

been a less than tactical move to make, leaving his heart exposed like he had. The moment she'd locked her sexy green eyes on his, she'd had him.

Until Eric had shown up. He should probably thank the jackass for reminding him of Kimber's viper heart. Instead, he wanted to beat the shit out of him.

"Why didn't you tell me she would be out there?" He focused his question and a killer glare on his supposed buddies.

"You didn't want to talk about her," Luke tossed back at him.

"The hell." This wasn't funny anymore.

"You didn't," Milo responded. "You said you were done, said you didn't care."

He shook his head, not understanding at all where they were coming from. "You guys are supposed to have my back. If I would have known she'd be here, I would have stayed home."

"You said you didn't care," Milo reminded him.

That was all it took to set him off. "What the hell do you want me to say? That her email was like a grenade that blasted shrapnel into my heart, tearing it to pieces?" The look he gave them was blacker than a moonless night out in the nearby hills. "Fine. She dumped me, and it still hurts like hell. Okay?"

The baring of his soul generated an awkward silence between the group, and his friends looked away, obviously uncomfortable with his frank admission. He turned with disgust and started walking toward the truck and trailer.

"Where are you going?" Luke asked.

"I'm going to load that piece of shit on the trailer and get the hell out of here."

"But you qualified for the final round," Milo said as he caught up with Jerry. "You're not going to let her scare you off, are you?"

"I know my limits. I saw the way Eric looked at Kimber. You might say it's over between them, but that's not what he thinks. I sure as hell am not going to put myself anywhere near the two of them."

"You're going to let him win, then?" Luke taunted.

He knew what his buddies were trying to do, but it wasn't going to work. "In case you don't remember, she dropped me faster than a steaming pile of shit. He may or may not win her, but I've already lost."

"But you still want her," Milo said. "Maybe you should fight for her."

"I told you, I'm done. I know when to cut my losses."

\* \* \*

Jerry didn't look in the direction of Kimber's car as Luke and Milo helped him load the beat up New Yorker on his trailer. Tyler joined them and convinced the others to stay for the rest of the derby. That was fine with him. He'd had enough of everyone's shit to last a lifetime. He needed to go home and lick his wounds, and figure out where he wanted to go from there.

The family home was quiet when he parked his trailer to the side of the garage. Everyone would still be at the derby until much later.

He left his truck and headed toward the creek that ran alongside their property. Crickets chirped as he walked, the warm evening air like a sweet balm to his lungs.

Even in the darkness, he found the large, flat rock at the edge of the creek where he'd spent many summers fishing. He folded himself down on it, listening to the inky water gurgle its way downstream. Pent up tension eased out of his lungs.

Damn.

When had his life become uncontrolled chaos?

It seemed everyone around him got to decide what his days would be like. The army had controlled his existence while he'd been overseas. Now that he was at home, he'd let his friends, Kimber, hell even Eric control his mood. He was damn sick of it.

Starting now, *he* owned his life.

As soon as he finished his last two months in the army, he'd go back to work for Luke's family on the oil rigs. It was a tough job, but it paid well, and he wasn't afraid of hard work. He'd see if old lady Johnson's farm was still for sale and get his own place.

To hell with Kimber. She'd had her chance. Another woman would come along—the right woman this time—and he'd settle down and make the family he'd always wanted. At some point, Kimber would realize what she'd lost, and he hoped to hell she regretted it every day of her life.

He filled his lungs with more of the sultry air and closed his eyes. The only person keeping him from getting what he wanted was him. And now that he'd figured that out, the world was back to good.

He hoped.

## Chapter Eight

The next morning, Jerry was up early enough to help his dad drive some of his horses into town for the livestock show and auction that would be held later in the afternoon. They went for breakfast at Sparrow's and hung out with a bunch of guys from town. Jerry took a moment to enjoy the excitement of a small town celebration. Sure, they didn't have the fancy stuff people might find at bigger town fairs, but it gave the townsfolk a chance to come together and celebrate their way of life along with their country's independence day.

After spending most of the last four years out of the state or overseas, Jerry could appreciate that.

He met up with his buddies to watch the annual parade, and of course, they cat-called the reigning queen like they did every year. At the end of the parade, they got in line and followed the procession to the usually empty lot at the south end of town where the car show and the rest of the activities would take place.

Jerry found now that he'd taken that first step toward the rest of his life, things seemed a little easier. Hot July sun beat down on him as he and the other guys sauntered through the old cars that had been restored and detailed with loving hands. The thick, sweet scent of cotton candy hovered in the air along with the sound of children's laughter.

A cherry red '67 Camaro caught his eye, and he wandered toward it.

"Like what you see?" a female voice said from behind.

He turned to find Kelsie Wayne looking as beautiful and blond as she had in high school. "Hey, Kelsie." His smile came easy, and it was nice to talk to a woman that didn't flip his heart on the ground and stomp on it. He glanced at the car. "This yours?"

She matched his smile. "I wish. It's beautiful."

He eyed her soft blond curls, thinking she was pretty as well as nice. He preferred brunettes to blondes, but look where that had gotten him. Maybe it was time to start looking beyond his usual preferences.

"I heard you were back in town." She hooked her thumbs in her front belt loops in a flirty gesture.

"I got back a couple of days ago."

"Too bad you couldn't get your car fixed for the last round of the derby."

Is that what people were saying? "Yeah. Maybe next year."

"You and Kimber still broke up?"

He narrowed his gaze. Aspen was notorious for gossip spreading like wildfire, but he didn't like it when his personal life was the topic of conversation. "Why do you ask?"

She shrugged, still smiling. "Half the town thinks she's been waiting for you to come home. The other half says she's still seeing Eric."

The dagger sliced deeper into his heart, and suddenly, the little blonde in front of him didn't seem so sweet. "I guess if you want to know what she thinks, you should ask her."

The mood turned awkward, Kelsie's smile slipping a bit. "Okay." Her smile faded completely as she focused on something beyond his shoulder. He turned to find Kimber several hundred yards away, obviously watching them. She quickly turned, and then Jerry spied Eric standing only a few feet from her.

Perhaps the rumors were true.

"I'll ask her later. I gotta go now." He turned back to see Kelsie's curls bouncing as she headed in the opposite direction.

What? Did she think he was going to make her go ask Kimber *right now*?

Hell. Women. Maybe he should just go celibate. He did take the slightest bit of satisfaction though, that Kimber had seen him with Kelsie. No time like the present to make her start regretting her choices.

He turned and followed Kelsie. He had no idea if Kimber watched him go after her, but he sure as hell hoped she did.

\* \* \*

Kimber watched Jerry walk away, her heart crumbling. He was never going to give her a chance to explain. She couldn't tear her gaze from him, even as he drew farther apart. The love she held for him crushed against her lungs, making it hard to breathe. She *had* to find a way to get him to listen. She only needed a few minutes alone with him. If she could have that, she'd know for certain if she still had a chance or not.

She turned, catching a glimpse of Eric hovering not too far away, and she groaned. When would he get a clue?

Then thankfully, she spied Noelle amongst the crowd of milling people. She was headed her way with the oddest grin on her face. Kimber didn't spare Eric another glance as she took off to meet her friend. She linked arms with her and tugged her toward the row of trees that grew along the lot's edge.

"You have a wicked grin on your face. Spill," Kimber said as they reached the shade.

"I found you some allies."

"What do you mean?"

"Ian is pretty good friends with Milo Sykes, and Milo just happened to mention to Ian last night at the derby that he thinks Jerry is still in love with you."

Her heart stopped. “Seriously?”

“It gets better.” Noelle beamed, spiking the pounding in Kimber’s chest. “I just *happened* to run into Milo a few moments ago. So, *of course*, I had to ask him.” She gripped her hand. “He confirmed it.”

Kimber tried to breathe. “This is good.” It was what she’d prayed for. “It means I still have a chance.”

“More than that. You have *allies*. During my little conversation with Milo, he agreed that you and Jerry need a chance to figure this thing out before you actually call it quits.”

“We do,” she said, her voice breathless.

“I’m not sure exactly what he and Luke intend to do, but he said to tell you to keep your eyes open for opportunities.”

A pinch of uncertainty pricked her. “What does that mean?”

She laughed. “I’m not sure. I guess just go with the flow. But it seems you now have a couple of cupids on your side. Oh, did I mention that I told Milo you’d be in the kissing booth between seven-thirty and eight?”

Excitement flooded her. “Oh God. I hope this turns out okay. Promise me you’ll find a way to keep Eric as far from that booth as possible.”

A mischievous glint sparked in her friend’s eyes. “That, I can definitely do.”

A deep burning fire fanned to life inside Kimber at the thought of kissing Jerry again. She hoped Milo could somehow pull it off. If she could just get that close to him again, she might be able to show him how much he meant to her.

\* \* \*

The smell of grilling hamburgers and the sound of laughter hung in the air over the small town square. Jerry sat at one of the many picnic tables under the town’s bowery, he and Milo checking out any available ladies who walked by.

“I haven’t seen Sierra all day. Where’s she been hiding out?” Jerry asked his friend.

Milo shrugged. “No clue.”

“What’s the deal with you two?”

“No deal. She’s a friend.”

“She seems like more than a friend.”

Milo grinned as a long-legged redhead passed by. He made no attempt to hide his obvious attraction as he swiveled to follow her movements. “They’re all friends, if you know what I mean. I’m up front with the ladies I date and make no promises. If they don’t like me the way I am, that’s their choice.”

Jerry knew exactly what he meant. Most of his friends, Milo and Luke included, had no desire to settle down any time soon. Wanting marriage seemed be a disease only he’d been cursed with. “One of these days you’re going to fall, and then you’ll know what kind of misery I’m talking about.”

“Exactly what I’m determined to avoid.” His friend glanced at his watch. “Let’s go see if we can find Luke. He’s supposed to be around here somewhere.” He stood and headed across the grass, toward the many booths that had been set up to sell food and crafts.

Milo seemed to be walking with purpose, which surprised Jerry since they didn’t have a designated meeting place or time with Luke. They rounded a corner, and Milo stopped abruptly.

Jerry looked at his friend and then followed his gaze.

Kimber leaned forward and placed her lips on an old man’s cheek. The red, white and blue sign above her head stated, “Kissing Booth”.

His heart started beating faster like it always did when she was around. Jerry turned, but Milo caught his elbow.

“You should kiss her,” Milo said under his breath.

He lifted his brows, not believing what he’d heard. “You’re kidding, man.”

“Not at all.” He turned his back to Kimber. “You’re the one who wants to make her regret leaving you, so go up there and lay one on her that she’ll never forget.”

Jerry hesitated. He did want to see her in as much misery as he was, and maybe this was the first step in sending her down the road of regret. He looked at his friend, a grin spreading across his face. “You don’t think I’ll do it.”

Milo shrugged. “I don’t know if you have the guts.”

“The hell. If I can face down an Afghani tank, I sure as hell can do *this*.”

## Chapter Nine

Jerry strode forward just as the old man left with a huge grin on his face.

He locked gazes with Kimber, her eyes growing wider with each step he took. When he stood directly in front of her, he reached into his wallet and pulled out a twenty. If he intended to abuse the kissing policy, he should probably pay for it. He held the bill up for her inspection before stuffing it into the payment jar. Then he tugged her forward, pulling her into his arms and placed his lips over hers before she could reject him.

The second their mouths touched, he knew he'd made a grave mistake. Every inch of him tightened with desire, and he lost control. He possessed her mouth, pushing his tongue against her lips until she opened for him. Then he drank her kisses in like a man who'd been without water for too many days. He crushed her body against him, lifting her to her tiptoes, taking everything he'd missed for so long.

The feel of her was heaven. Soft, feminine, and he groaned as the scent of her sweet, musky perfume surrounded him.

When she sighed and slipped her hands over his shoulders, he knew he'd won the battle despite his personal cost. He allowed himself a moment to enjoy the feeling of her running her fingers over the short hair at the base of his skull before he pulled away.

He searched her face, proud of the blush he'd caused and the glazed look of passion in her eyes.

*She wanted him.*

He'd accomplished his mission. Unfortunately, it didn't feel like he'd punished her at all. Instead, he had a major hard on and wanted *her* more than ever.

He turned and walked away without saying a word, pissed that it was so easy for her to breach his defenses. A couple of people whistled and clapped as he left, and he was sure they'd enjoyed some entertainment at his expense.

"That'll get people talking," Milo said as Jerry reached him and continued on past.

"Like they're not already?"

"True." Milo snorted, turning to follow him. "The whole town is wondering if you'll get back together."

He scrubbed a hand over his neck as though that would help him erase the feel of her touch. "Don't they have anything better to do?"

"Apparently not."

They walked a few moments in silence before Milo spoke again. "Well?"



Jerry knew he wanted the lowdown on his kiss with Kimber, but how did he explain the contradicting emotions racing through him? “It totally backfired in my face, that’s what.” And that part didn’t sit well with him.

“Cause you still love her?”

Hell, could that really be true? “No, because I wanted to give her a taste of what it’s like not to have me, and it made me miss her all the more.”

\* \* \*

Kimber let her eyes flutter closed as she placed an index finger on her lips, trying to memorize the feel of him kissing her. God, it had been good. And far too long since she’d found herself buried in his embrace, his strong arms holding her, his warm lips on hers.

Heat surged inside her. She ached for him like none other and hated that she had to be patient. But his kiss had been a first step in the right direction. She’d known by the look on his face that he’d been as affected as she had. Maybe he really did still love her.

It was hard, but she refrained from running after him, praying that her little cupids had more magic in the works.

\* \* \*

By the time he and Milo found Luke sitting in the dunking tank, Jerry had managed to slow his aching desire to a sizzling burn. But he was still mad.

At first, he’d thought he’d accomplished his mission, but now he wondered. The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. He was pissed at himself for getting that close to Kimber, and angry with her for breaking his heart. That kiss had not been a punishment at all. At least not for her.

Damn it. Why did life have to be so difficult?

He paid five bucks for three balls.

“Oh, hell no,” Luke said when Jerry advanced to the front of the line. The little kids who’d taken wild shots at him had been no threat, but they both knew Jerry had a pretty vicious fastball.

“Get ready to get your ass dunked.” Jerry used his anger to power his first ball. It missed by a hair. No doubt because Kimber had messed with his concentration.

Luke heckled him.

Jerry took a moment to pause this time before he hurled the ball at the target. It hit with a satisfying smack, and Luke dropped into the water.

Cheers came from the crowd.

“Your turn,” he angled his gaze toward Milo as Luke climbed from the tank, happily accepting a towel from a cute volunteer.

“I don’t think so.” He shook his head with a grin.

Several people in the small circle that had gathered added their encouragement.

“Come on,” one lady said. “All proceeds this year are going to Kimber’s foundation for soldiers and their families.”

Jerry narrowed his eyes, zeroing in on Milo. “Kimber’s foundation. How can you refuse?” He pulled out his wallet, pissed that no one had mentioned her foundation, either, leaving him to wonder what the hell that was all about. His frustration made him a little reckless. “I’ll pay twenty bucks a ball.”

Milo took a step back. “Not wanting to get soaked tonight, Jerry.”

Kimber picked that moment to appear, and it couldn’t have come at a better time. “Fine.” He shifted his gaze to her. “Twenty bucks for every ball I throw. Apparently, it benefits *your* foundation. Whatever the hell that is.”

\* \* \*

A warning tingle crept up Kimber’s spine as Jerry stared her down. The crowd around them had focused on her as well. She couldn’t very well refuse to support her own charity, could she?

“It’s a foundation meant to help military families. We have a support group for those left behind. Get-togethers for spouses.” She swallowed. “And fiancées. Groups of volunteers to help support the family while their loved one is serving.”

He stared at her with an incredulous look. “Nice.” But he didn’t sound nice. More sarcastic in her opinion. “So, are you getting up there or what?”

She didn’t have a choice, and maybe this was one of those opportunities Noelle spoke about. Better yet, maybe he would toss a couple of balls at her and miss on purpose, earning some money for her foundation.

Something dark in his gaze told her that was unlikely.

“How can I refuse?” She smiled even though she felt a little sick inside. After she’d almost drowned as a child, she’d hated water. No, the dunk tank didn’t hold enough water to hurt her, but the thought of slipping and possibly going under freaked her out.

“Don’t do it, man,” she heard Milo warn Jerry in a low voice, but there was no going back for her. He was either supporting her, or hell bent on some sort of retribution.

Either way, she was in for the long haul.

She climbed the ladder and scooted her way out onto the narrow board, taking care not to lose her balance and fall in. When she was settled, she met his gaze through the chain link barrier between them. Dark, hard eyes burrowed into hers, and she shivered.

He handed over a twenty-dollar bill to the volunteer managing the game, never taking his eyes off her.

The tiny ember of hope that had sparked when they’d kissed might as well have been dunked all ready. She smiled, hoping to break through his hard shell, but she came up against an impenetrable wall.

She tried to force in a calming breath.

His gaze narrowed imperceptibly. He raised his arm to throw the ball, and Milo bumped into him, causing him to miss his mark.

Jerry cursed, and the crowd laughed at Milo's antics.

Kimber tried to breathe. She'd thought for sure she was a goner the first time around.

Jerry paid for another ball, and then warned Milo to keep his distance.

Oh God. She glanced down at the water with uncertainty. It wasn't *that* much water. She could just hold her breath until she managed to get her feet under her. For all she knew, she would land standing up.

He glanced at her once more before shifting his gaze to the target. She sucked in a deep breath. He lifted his arm...and threw the ball. She squeezed her eyes shut. A metallic sound rang through the air before her world fell out from beneath her.

Water covered her, and she grasped for the surface. Her feet seemed to tangle as she tried to get them beneath her. She panicked and released her breath. Then tried to reclaim it before she realized her mistake.

Her hand hit the little step in the corner, and she grabbed it, pulling herself up, choking and sputtering. Mortified, she looked out at the crowd who watched with surprised and concerned expressions.

Then Eric stepped forward.

## Chapter Ten

“Are you okay?” Eric asked, generating a fair amount of heated resentment inside Jerry. The emotion warred with a double helping of shame from the distress he’d caused Kimber. The sight of her struggling doused his anger, leaving him feeling every bit the jackass.

Kimber wheezed and nodded.

“There’s a step in there,” Eric said. “Put your foot on it.”

She wiped her eyes as she looked down into the water. When she pulled herself up onto the step, Eric grabbed her and hauled her from the pool.

“Way to go,” Milo whispered and elbowed Jerry.

“How was I supposed to know she’d react like that?” he whispered back. Oh shit. He’d forgotten her fear of water.

How would he ever fix this?

Milo rolled his eyes and shook his head like he was talking to the biggest idiot in the world. Perhaps he was.

He’d just given his enemy the perfect excuse to rush to her aid.

Hell.

Eric set her down, and Kimber gripped the side of the tank for support. He pounded on her back as she coughed. It took a few moments, and then she seemed to breathe a little easier.

“You’re not supposed to drink the pool,” a man offered, and several others laughed. He was sure the man had meant to revive the lighthearted atmosphere since it was the town’s celebration, but it wasn’t funny.

Kimber nodded, but she didn’t look up. If he knew her, she was probably mortified and wouldn’t want to face her friends and neighbors.

“You okay?” Milo asked Kimber as he grabbed Jerry’s arm and pulled him forward.

She tried to clear her throat. “I’m good,” she said, her voice raspy. Her clothes were soaked, her lacy summer tank top plastered to her skin. She blinked rapidly as she gave them a quick glance, and Jerry was sure the moisture in her eyes wasn’t from the dunking pool.

“I got this.” Eric moved between them, spiking Jerry’s temper.

He hadn’t been able to fight for Kimber while he’d been gone, but he’d be damned if he was going to let Eric come between them now. Not until Jerry was certain there was no hope for them.

“No one asked you to get anything, Eric.” Jerry stepped forward, pushing Eric’s shoulder, forcing him to turn his stance or fall down.

“Keep your fucking hands off me.” Just as he finished his sentence, Eric swung at him.

Jerry had been prepared for the retaliation and leaned to the left just in time. He followed with his own counter-attack, his fist plowing into his opponent’s gut.

Eric grunted. He bent forward, before tumbling backward. Milo caught him before he hit the ground.

“Oh God,” Kimber said, pulling her dripping hair away from her face as her expression contorted with greater embarrassment. She pushed past Jerry, making a beeline for the edge of the town’s square.

Oh hell. Now he’d really done it. He glanced at Milo who nodded toward Kimber. He and Luke would handle Eric. Jerry needed to get to Kimber before she decided she’d never talk to him again.

He’d been mad at her. With good reason. But it was time they worked things out like adults.

Why did it always take him so long to figure that out?

“Kimber.” He called to her as he hurried to catch up. Despite the fact she was quite a bit shorter than him, she could move at a fast pace when she wanted to. He didn’t want to run too fast because it made him limp, but it was obvious she wasn’t going to cut him any slack.

When he finally caught up to her, she wouldn’t look at him. Instead, she bit her bottom lip and kept walking.

It was obvious she didn’t want to talk to him right now. He should have realized his prank would frighten her, and that it was a totally juvenile thing to do. Man, it had backfired. Big time. He slowed, half tempted to give her time to cool down. Then again, something told him that would be a huge mistake.

“Wait,” he called again. He stepped up his game, grabbing her by the upper arm, forcing her to stop. “Can you hang on just a second?”

She met his gaze, the mascara puddled under her eyes making her look pissed and pitiful at the same time.

Concern and regret ate at him. “I’m sorry.” He pushed her bangs to the side of her forehead. How did he explain this? “I’ve been on edge since I got back into town, but I shouldn’t have been such a jerk. I forgot you didn’t like water.”

“No big deal,” she said as she pulled from him.

That was a lie. It was a damn big deal. “Kimber, please.”

She turned once again, vulnerability shadowing her eyes. A half-laugh laced with sarcasm slipped from her mouth. “You know, I’ve been trying to talk to you since you returned home. But I’ve changed my mind. I really don’t want to talk to

you right now.” She paused, her wounded emotions painted across her face. “Maybe not ever again.”

That was the one thing he feared the most. “You don’t mean that.”

“Maybe I do. Maybe I’ve been pining after a man who’s been gone for too long. Maybe Eric was right and time and distance have taken too big of a toll after all.”

“No.” He wished Eric would keep away from Kimber and keep his fucking mouth shut. “Please. I’m really sorry.” He shook his head, trying to straighten his thoughts. He couldn’t remember when things had turned south between them. He’d been struggling after his first close-up kill and hadn’t emailed like he should have. But then she’d backed off, too, and the next thing he knew, he’d received her fatal email. “I knew it would be hard to come home and see you, but I never meant to come across as vindictive.”

“No. I deserved it.” Her words might have seemed conciliatory except for the sorrow dripping from them. A slight evening breeze blew through town, and she ran her hands over the damp skin on her arms. “You deserved better. I should have had faith in you. I screwed up.” She met his gaze with resolve. “But I’d hoped you’d give me a chance to show you that I am better now. That I’ve changed.” She coughed.

He’d changed, too, and not for the better. “Maybe we both have.” But she was still there talking to him, so maybe they had a chance. “You’re freezing,” he said as he unbuttoned his shirt and removed it.

Her gaze slipped to his bare chest, warming him against the chill of the approaching evening. She allowed him to slip the shirt around her, and it took all of his restraint not to crush her against him and tell her how much he missed her.

“Can I drive you home? I’d feel much better talking if you weren’t shivering.” Even if their time as a couple had passed, they both had things that needed to be said before they could move on.

He was relieved, if still nervous, when she nodded her consent.

\* \* \*

Kimber’s house was in shadows when Jerry pulled in front of it. He opened the car door for her and held out a hand. When she latched onto his fingers, her touch warmed a cold and lonely spot he’d held inside for far too long. He kept hold of her hand as he walked her to her door, unwilling to let go of her so soon. The ember of anger simmering inside him faded with each passing second. Despite everything, he *wanted* to forgive her.

“I always liked seeing you in my shirt,” he said as they climbed the porch stairs.

She laughed, and it was a balm to his wounded heart. “Do you want to come in while I change?”

He wanted to say he'd help her remove her clothes, but they were still on tender ground, and she might not appreciate his joke. "Sure."

She flipped on the lights and let him enter before she shut the door. The house looked much as it had before he'd left. He wished he could say the same for him.

"I'll be right back."

It only took her a few minutes to switch from her soaked clothes, to another pair of cutoff jeans and a light pink sweater that hugged her curves like he wanted to. She'd pulled her wet hair back into a ponytail and removed the black smudges from beneath her eyes.

As she approached, he noticed she carried two shirts in her hands. "I always liked seeing you out of your shirt, you know." She smiled after delivering a comeback to his previous comment.

His heart melted a little more.

"I'm sorry I got your shirt all wet, but I do have another you could borrow." She held out a folded dark blue t-shirt, and he took it.

He shook it open, revealing the numbers of his favorite racecar driver. It appeared more worn from use than when he'd let her take it. "This is *my* shirt."

"Not anymore. If I let you borrow it, you have to promise to give it back."

Oh hell. He was in deep shit. He thought of her wearing it with nothing but a pair of panties, the soft cotton rubbing against her bare breasts. Had she thought of him much while he'd been gone? The wear and tear of his shirt hinted she had.

He slipped it over his head, catching a whiff of her perfume. "It smells like a girl." And he loved that.

"That's because it belongs to a girl." Her lips turned up in the sassy smile he'd first fallen in love with. "Take it or leave it."

He met her gaze and held it. "I'll take it."

The laughter in her eyes turned serious. Then she blinked and looked away as though to avoid his discerning gaze.

Could he trust her again? His heart pleaded yes, but something in his head still held him back.

"Do you want to talk in here?" She indicated the couch.

He looked at his watch. "I was kind of hoping we could drive up to the ridge and watch the fireworks, if that won't complicate things too much. We can talk on the way, and it's been far too long since I've watched fireworks burst over American soil. I've missed it."

"Of course." She snagged a folded blanket off the back of the couch. "We can sit on this."

## Chapter Eleven

They hardly spoke a word on the drive. Jerry wasn't quite sure where to start and apparently Kimber wasn't either.

When they reached their destination, he pulled his Camaro off the side of the road. "I hope you don't mind walking a little bit. This car's not up for much four-wheeling."

"I don't mind." She grabbed her blanket as he helped her exit the car. He took a chance and reached for her hand again. His heart warmed another notch when she didn't pull away.

They walked through a thin copse of trees to the edge of the ridge, moonlight illuminating their way. The first explosion echoed over the valley just as they spread out the blanket.

"Good timing," she said as she sat cross-legged on the blanket.

He filled the space next to her, choosing to recline instead of sitting with his head cranked upward. "It's better if you lay down."

She didn't argue as she dropped back next to him. A brilliant display of red, white and blue burst across the sky followed by another loud boom. "I think they're better up here, don't you?"

"Yep." He tried to concentrate on the patriotic colors filling the sky, but each thought and awareness was centered on the woman lying next to him.

He startled when she took his hand. He squeezed it.

"I'm sorry I let you down." Her voice reached deep into his soul.

It more or less scared the shit out of him how easy it was for her to affect him.

She rolled onto her elbows, facing him. "I'll regret it for the rest of my days."

He shifted his gaze to her face, a sparkling burst of red haloing her head.

"I just wanted you to know that." She looked at him a moment longer before laying down again.

Damn. He couldn't stand how bad he wanted to pull her in his arms. This time *he* rolled. The sky lit again, giving him a flash of wide green eyes that burned with longing.

He didn't know what to say to her. Too many things crowded his mind, and nothing singly stood out.

Instead, he lowered his lips to hers, instant heat bursting like the fireworks overhead. The kiss he'd purchased earlier hadn't quenched his thirst for her in the slightest.

Her soft lips parted for him with the slightest pressure, his tongue finding hers like it hadn't been forever since they'd kissed. She tasted of mint and a lifetime



full of desire. A powerful ache claimed him, making it hard for him to not ravage her on the spot.

He trailed his middle finger up the valley of her breasts, remembering the feel of her sweet, tender skin. She gasped beneath his kiss, but he didn't give her time to breathe.

He followed the delicate column of her throat and then splayed his fingers into her hair at the base of her neck, cupping her head, holding her so she couldn't get away. If his kisses were too rough, she didn't complain. She took all he had and matched the potency of his desire.

He slipped a thigh between her knees, and she opened for him. "I want you, Kimber," he whispered in her ear as he settled more fully on top of her.

"Yes. Please take me, Jerry."

He lifted, staring into her eyes, hoping what he saw burning there wasn't an illusion of the nighttime.

"Please." She grasped his head, pulling him to her.

He kissed her again until they were both breathless. As he sucked in a breath, he ran a hand up her rib cage, cupping her breast from beneath. The tantalizing mound filled his hand, making his already hard erection throb. The soft knit of her sweater did little to hide the hardened nipple beneath.

She hissed in a breath.

Damn. He'd dreamed of this moment so many nights, believed he'd never hold her again, and now here they were. He intended to enjoy every moment. One thing combat duty had taught him—enjoy each second because it might be the last.

He flicked open the first button of her sweater, and she inhaled a ragged breath. "Your skin is always so soft."

"Jerry," she whispered, her voice pleading with him.

He leaned forward and kissed the succulent skin between her breasts, trailing his tongue up her neck. He nibbled on her earlobe while his fingers worked the second button on her sweater.

He undid the rest of the buttons, and she inhaled a deep breath when he opened her sweater to the warm evening air. He was grateful for the overhead explosions that allowed him to view her black lace bra with greedy eyes.

Shit. "God, Kimber. You're beautiful." They'd been apart a long time, but it hadn't diminished his memory. There was nothing like the sight of his woman, hot and bothered, and half naked beneath him. Her bra had plumped up her breasts, urging them toward him as though they were ripe fruit waiting to be tasted. Hell if he'd waste any more time.

He swallowed as he slipped a finger beneath the clasp on the front of her bra, freeing her breasts for him and the heavens to see.

She arched as though she needed to encourage him.

“Give me a second, baby. I just...damn.” He lowered his head, sucking a puckered nipple into his mouth, the sweet taste of her adding to the intense pounding in his cock. He sucked hard, manipulating her other breast with a greedy hand.

This was moving too fast, but he couldn't seem to slow down. He pulled from her, dragging her nipple with him until he had to release it.

Her sighs filled the night air.

He trailed his fingers down her stomach until he reached the waistband of her cutoffs. He had to know. She stilled as he undid the button and slid down her zipper. He didn't bother removing her clothes. He needed to feel her now. Needed physical proof of how much she wanted him.

Her body couldn't lie.

He slid his hand beneath the lace that covered her, and she opened, allowing him access to her secrets. His breath whooshed out of him as his fingers found her heated core. Ah, God. She was so hot and wet for him, he nearly came right then.

She bucked as he delved inside her.

“Shit,” he whispered.

“Take me, Jerry. I can't wait any more.” Her extreme need echoed his.

He wanted so much to savor this moment, but it seemed their bodies had been too long parted.

He jerked her shorts and panties from her legs and rid himself of his jeans just as quickly. “I don't have a condom,” he said as he hovered over her.

“I don't care,” she whispered. “I haven't been with anyone but you.”

His heart swelled. Not Eric, he wanted to ask, but he wouldn't let that bastard ruin their moment. “Me, either.” He wasn't about to bring up pregnancy. As desperate as it may seem, if they created a baby tonight, she'd have a much harder time leaving him.

He *needed* this woman in his life.

He locked his gaze with hers and buried himself into her welcoming depths. She gripped his biceps, her nails digging into him. They both moaned at the same time. Then laughed.

He slid out and then slammed back into her. She arched and sighed with pleasure. “Again,” she whispered breathlessly.

He pounded himself into her with an unmatched intensity. It was as though he'd waited his whole life for this moment, and he couldn't get enough. She wrapped her legs around him, encouraging him as she held on.

She cried his name as she stiffened and shuddered beneath him. The sound of her voice and the feel of her nails digging into him cost him his control. His muscles tightened as he spent himself inside her, the feeling owning him for a few glorious moments.

He rolled off her, pulling her into his arms. At some point, the fireworks had ended, and now they were left in the darkness with the quiet chirping of crickets. “God, I’ve missed this.” There was no doubt in his mind, he was home.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered as she stroked his chest.

He crushed her to him, so afraid he might lose her again. “You know we belong together.”

She nodded, bumping his chin. “I know.”

“How did we get so off course?”

“I don’t know. You’d been gone so long, and I hadn’t heard from you in forever. I know it’s not a good excuse, but I found myself in a dark and lonely place, and I let others influence me.”

“Eric.”

She nodded again. “I only dated him once. Then I heard what happened to you, and my world fell apart. I knew I could never love anyone like I love you.”

He squeezed her to him, emotion thickening his throat. “I’m sorry I didn’t call.”

She slid her fingers along his jawline, her thumb playing with his stubble. “It was so hard not hearing from you. I’ve spent my whole life wondering if my dad would come home at night, worrying some bad guy might do him in. As a child, that’s pretty tough to take, knowing the only person you have left in the world might not come home. Not hearing from you was ten times worse.”

“I’m sorry.” He wanted to tell her why, but that was the tough part. That was why he’d backed off in the first place.

“I understand that you couldn’t call all the time, but even an email, something, anything to let me know you were alive.” Her voice cracked, and he hated himself for what he’d put her through. “The not knowing was the worst.”

He had to tell her. If he wanted to give this thing between them the best chance to work, she needed to know what she was getting into. He cleared his throat. “I didn’t know what to say to you. It was a tough time for me.” He took a deep breath. “I killed people. Men.”

A quiet descended upon them, and he feared the thoughts that might be going through her head.

“Did you think I didn’t know that?” she said in a low voice. “Or at least expected it? You were in a war zone.”

“I didn’t know how to tell you. It haunts me. It changed me. And I didn’t know if it would change your feelings for me.”

“Jerry.” She lifted, cradling his face in her hands. “I love you. I know you wouldn’t choose to kill someone. But I also know you’re doing what you’re doing because you’re trying to make the world a better place. You’re in the army. If you find yourself in combat, you have to fight back. It’s that or die. Do I like it? Not

any more than you do. Do I wish there was a way around it? Of course. But you have to do what your commanding officers tell you to do.” She kissed him, her words and touch soothing to his soul. “It doesn’t make me love you less. I’m so proud of who you are. You’re amazing to me. Every part of you.”

Her words humbled him and filled the reservoir of his heart to the brim. He rolled her over, trapping her beneath him. “I love you, Kimber. I’ve always loved you.”

She tugged his head to hers. “I love you, too, Jerry.” Then she giggled. “I think there’s another part of you that loves me, too.”

He’d grown hard again, his erection pressing against her thigh. “You think?”

“I do. And it doesn’t seem to want to be ignored.”

He shifted so that his penis sat against her opening. “What do you think we should do about it?”

“I don’t think you need to ask that question, soldier. You’re an expert with that weapon, and I’m certain you know how to use it.”

A laugh rumbled from deep inside him, and he realized the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. He nipped at her neck. “What if I don’t want to use it?”

She wiggled beneath him. “Then I may have to take you prisoner. I could tie you up and—”

He cut off her words with a kiss. “I don’t think that will be necessary.”

She started to laugh, but he silenced her as he shoved inside her, making her gasp instead.

## Chapter Twelve

Kimber had no idea how much time had passed before she and Jerry made their way to his Camaro.

“I have to go back, Kimber,” he said as he climbed inside the car and shut the driver’s side door.

They both knew he didn’t mean Aspen. “I know.” His words pierced her heart, but she refused to let him see it. “But not for long. I’ve been crossing off the days on my calendar.”

“Are we going to be okay?”

“Yes,” she said, finding strength in the fact that he loved her. He needed her to be strong. “I won’t let you down again. I have my foundation to focus on, plus my job at City Hall, and I have a group of friends that meets regularly. We help each other when times get tough.”

“That’s pretty cool. I’m sure their husbands appreciate it, too, knowing things are okay back home.”

It felt so good to actually be talking about everything after all her months of waiting and wondering.

Another question burned on her tongue. She had to ask, even though she didn’t want to hear the answer. “Did you really get shot the same day I broke up with you?”

He stayed quiet for a moment, then sighed. “Can we just leave that in the past?”

“You did.” Her voice cracked. God, she was a horrible person. “How can you forgive me for that?”

“Because it’s not your fault. There were many things that came into play that day that led to the attack. For a long time, I wanted to blame it on you because I was hurt and angry, but it’s not your fault or mine. It happened. I lost some good friends that day, but there’s nothing I can do to bring them back. I’d really like to try to move past it, live a good life in their honor. It’s what they’d want.”

“I agree.”

She nodded, and he started his engine just as her phone rang.

They exchanged glances as she pulled the phone from her purse. “It’s Noelle.” She noted the time was well past midnight as she pushed the answer button.

“Hello?”

“Where the hell are you?” The panic echoing from her friend’s voice sent her into fight-or-flight mode.

“With Jerry. What’s wrong?”

“It’s your dad. He’s been shot.”

\* \* \*

Lights in the emergency section of the Mt. Uintah Medical Center glared down on Jerry and Kimber, stark and sterile. They'd been sitting in the waiting room for hours, learning bits and pieces of the domestic dispute in town that had taken place after the fireworks and had ended with her dad getting shot.

Noelle had fallen asleep on the couch opposite them about an hour after they'd arrived. Since then, Jerry and Kimber had spoken very little as they sat worrying and waiting to hear of her dad's condition.

Her worst nightmare had come true, and he could see the worry and stress etched into her features. It killed him to know that he might have caused her that kind of misery as well.

"Miss Reynolds?"

Both he and Kimber jumped to their feet as a nurse addressed her. "Yes. I'm Kimber Reynolds. How's my dad?"

"He's doing well. The bullet nicked an artery in his leg, but his doctor was able to repair it with little trouble. They're moving him to recovery right now. If you'd like to go see him, you may. He should be waking up soon." She glanced at Jerry. "One person is probably best."

"I understand." He nodded to the nurse, and she left.

Kimber released a shaky breath. "He's okay."

It sickened him to see her so scared. "Yeah. Sounds like he did well."

"I'm going to go see him."

"You definitely should. I'll tell Noelle when she wakes."

She tried to give him a smile, but it barely reached her lips and came nowhere near her eyes. She squeezed his hand and hurried off down the hall.

He watched her go with a hollow ache in his chest. Maybe he was pushing things between them too fast.

God knows, he wanted her, but was he being fair to her? There was no doubt there was a fireball of attraction between them, but what about the times they had to be apart? Was it fair to her to keep her waiting and wondering? What if he did get her pregnant and then died overseas? Could he put that on her?

Fuck. He scrubbed his hands over his hair and sank back into his seat. When he woke several hours later, Kimber still hadn't returned. He checked with the nurse's station. When they let him know Sheriff Reynolds was doing well and resting peacefully, he woke Noelle and offered her a ride home.

It was obvious Kimber needed time with her dad, and she didn't need to be worrying about him. Maybe it was a sign that they really weren't meant to be together. As much as he loved her, she needed a guy who'd come home each night and hold her in his arms.

\* \* \*

Kimber woke with a jerk. Morning sun filtered through the blinds in her dad's hospital room. She blinked a few times to get her bearings before her gaze shot to her dad.

"Morning, cupcake." Her dad's pale cheeks bore truth to the violence he'd survived, but he had a smile on his face.

"Dad." She jumped to her feet and hurried forward to hug him. "I'm so glad you're okay."

"Of course I'm okay." He had enough strength to crush her to him, which reassured her beyond measure. "You don't think a little bullet is going to do me in. I'm too tough for that."

Tears filled her eyes.

"Now, sweetheart. No crying. You know that makes us guys uncomfortable." She sniffed and laughed. "I know."

"I'm going to be just fine." He glanced at her chair. "You sleep here all night?"

Her gaze flew to the door. "Jerry. He brought me as soon as we heard. Crap. I left him and Noelle out in the waiting room. I meant to go tell them to go home, but I guess I fell asleep."

"Jerry, huh? You two finally talking again?"

Heat crept up her cheeks at the thought of what they'd done besides talk.

"Yeah."

"And?"

"I think he's forgiven me. We came to an understanding last night." She had to quit thinking about being in his arms.

"Is the wedding back on?"

She squeezed his hand. "Are you trying to get rid of me?"

He started to laugh and then coughed. He held up a hand before she could say anything. "I'm fine. Little bit of a dry throat." He took a sip of water. "I'm not trying to get rid of you, but it seems to me Jerry's a damn fine man. You could do a lot worse, and I know if you're with him, you'll be loved and well taken care of."

Emotion flooded her eyes again. "Yeah," she whispered. "I figured that out, too."

"There you go again with the tears. Why don't you go see if you can find your man? Let him deal with your emotions and let me get some rest."

"Dad," she said with mock outrage, and he laughed. "Fine. I'll go, but I'm coming back later today."

"You do that. Bring your soldier boy with you."

A happy grin claimed her lips. "Okay." She kissed his whiskered cheek and shut the door behind her.

She was a little disappointed that Jerry wasn't in the waiting room, but she couldn't blame him. She caught a ride back to Aspen with a deputy and took a quick shower before she drove to Jerry's house.

She found him in the garage, tinkering with his munched New Yorker. Smells of grease and gasoline filled the space, and she remembered the many times she'd spent watching him fix cars.

He had his head beneath the hood and apparently hadn't noticed her arrival. She took the opportunity to study his rear end and the width of his sexy shoulders. The muscles in his triceps bunched when he turned a wrench. "Is it worth salvaging?"

He startled and straightened, hitting his head on the hood of the car. "Shit."

"Are you okay? I didn't mean to scare you."

He rubbed the back of his head. "I'm fine." He bent back under the hood, no happy greeting, no warm kiss good morning.

She waited for a confused moment, not sure how to react to his chilly greeting.

"How's your dad?" he finally asked.

"He's doing well. Back to his old smart-ass behavior."

"He sure scared you last night."

Was that what this was about? "Yeah. It's not a phone call anyone likes to get."

"Exactly." His wrench slipped off the bolt and banged against the engine.

"Damn it."

She exhaled, certain a fight loomed on her horizon. She was armed and ready for battle, and she wasn't about to let her man get away again. "So, what? You don't think I can take a little fear?"

"I saw your face last night. That was more than a little fear."

She wanted to growl. Instead, she walked forward, stopping inches from him. "Do you think we could have this conversation face-to-face instead of you hiding beneath the hood?"



## Chapter Thirteen

Jerry straightened, a spark of irritation in his eyes. Good. Kimber had known her little barb would get to him.

“There’s nothing to converse about,” he replied.

She tilted her chin up, meeting his gaze head on. “I disagree. I thought we’d figured things out between us last night. Now, this morning, your demeanor is less than amorous. What changed?”

He stared at her for a hard moment, but she refused to look away.

“I’m not going to put you through that again.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Yes, you are.”

“No.” There was no misunderstanding the determination in his voice.

A hint of fear scratched at her, and she worried she might lose him again. She bit her bottom lip until it hurt as her gaze warred with his. “I love you, and yes, I will worry about you, but you cannot block me out of your life. I won’t go.” She moved a step closer, their bodies all but touching.

“Damn it, Kimber. I’m doing this for you. I don’t want to hurt you like that again. If you’re not expecting a call or an email from me, then you won’t worry when it doesn’t show.”

“That’s bullshit. I’m going to love and care about you for the rest of my days. I’m stronger now. I can handle a little worry. But you forcing me out of your life will kill me. Do you hear me?”

He stared at her, stone-faced.

She pushed on his chest, hoping to elicit some sort of response. Anything was better than this impenetrable wall of silence. “Don’t shut me out, Jerry. I might have let you go once, but that’s not going to happen again.”

He sighed and gripped his wrench with both hands. He hadn’t spoken yet, but at least she knew she’d affected him.

She moved closer, wrapping her arms around his neck, ignoring the tool he held between them. “I can’t live without you. Without this.”

It might have been considered a sneak attack, but at this point, she was willing to use every weapon she had. She stood on her tiptoes, pulling his head to hers. She claimed his warm lips, tasting the man who rocked her world.

He pulled away, growling with frustration. His almost-tangible hesitation hung in the air between them as he rubbed his hand over his jaw before raking his fingers through his hair. “It’s not going to work.”

She touched his face, capturing his gaze. There was no mistaking the love that shimmered through his worried expression. “I’m not the same woman you left last time. I know you’re not the same man. But we belong together.”

“Kimber—”

“The truth is, Jerry, you’re a soldier. I wasn’t strong enough to love you before, but I am now. It might not be easy, but I’m more than capable of handling things here while I wait for you to return home safe to me. I’m going in with my eyes wide open.” She traced a finger along his jaw. “Just love me, Jerry. It doesn’t have to be more complicated than that.”

Slowly, his expression shifted from one of worry to one of acceptance. “You’re right.” He blew out a deep breath. “We are who we are. And I do love you. I want us to be together. Anything else would be less than a life.”

He wrapped his strong arms around her as he claimed her lips, the wrench landing to the side of them with a clank as he fully embraced her.

“I’m glad I’ve fallen for a man who can see reason,” she said, taking a breath. “If God forbid someone or something takes you from me, I...I don’t know what I’ll do, but let’s promise now that it won’t be either of us that breaks us apart.”

He cupped her face, kissed her hard. “I want to get married.”

She laughed. “Wow. You go from *no* to *all the way* in a hurry.”

“Hey, you’re the one who wanted to change my mind. Now that I have, why wait? Let’s do it. Today.”

“I can’t pull off a wedding that fast,” she whispered between more kisses.

“I’ve got two weeks before I ship out again. Is that too fast?”

“I think I can make that work.”

“Good. I hope your dad doesn’t mind us living together until then, ‘cause I intend to spend every possible minute with you until I leave.”

A happy smile blossomed on her lips. “He’ll get over it.”

“After that, I want you to stay with him until I get back, okay? Then I’m buying us a house, and we’ll start making babies.”

She laughed. “So soon?”

“It’s never too soon.”

“What if we made a baby last night?” She lifted her brows and gave him a sly grin.

His smile matched hers. “Then I’ll miss the first part of your pregnancy, but I’ll be there when the baby is born. Oh honey, I’ll be there for the rest of your life if you’ll have me.”

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and sealed the deal with a kiss.

\* \* \*

Ten days later, Kimber walked down the stairs that led from the upper deck of Luke’s massive wooden cabin into his shady backyard, the long train of her beaded white dress trailing behind her. At the bottom, she took her father’s arm, excitement-induced adrenaline racing through her veins.

A sea of family and friends stood between her and her future husband. She glanced at all the people who'd supported and loved her through her life, emotion welling inside her. It seemed as though the whole town had come out. Jerry's family sat on the front row, his dad giving her an approving nod, his mom blessing her with a warm smile as she passed them.

The only one missing was her mother.

Kimber tried to tuck that thought in the back of her mind. Her mom would want her to be happy today, and for all she knew, she might be watching from heaven if that was a possibility.

She took a deep breath and focused on the man who waited for her. But the sight of him standing in his military blues left her breathless. There had never been a sexier man alive. His height, the uniform, everything made her heart slam against her chest.

He would be now and forever hers.

Jerry's eyes sparkled with happiness as her father handed her over to the man she'd love the rest of her life.

"You're so beautiful," Jerry whispered. "I can't tell you how much I love you."

"I love you, too," she whispered back. Those simple words could never express how deeply.

Kimber tried to focus on the ceremony, but her thoughts kept straying to the fact that from this day forward, she and Jerry would be as one.

Her hand shook as he slid her mother's wedding band on her finger. He promised they'd shop for her own ring when he returned.

The next thing she knew, they were pronounced man and wife.

Jerry pulled her into his embrace, bending her over his arm, and he kissed her until the crowd started whistling.

"Save some of that for your honeymoon," Luke said, offering his congratulations. He shook Jerry's hand and kissed her heated cheek.

Milo did the same, but right before he kissed her, he whispered in her ear. "You can thank me and Luke later."

After she and Jerry had greeted all of their guests, Kimber smiled into the mischievous eyes of her favorite pair of cupids. "You guys should think about opening a dating service or something."

Luke rolled his eyes. "It would never work. Milo would want to keep all the prospective clients for himself."

Milo shrugged and laughed. "Guilty."

"What's this all about?" Jerry asked.

“Nothing.” Kimber smiled and shook her head as the band started playing a waltz. “Dance with me, soldier. And kiss me. I haven’t had nearly enough of that yet.”

He hauled her against him, sending a heated thrill straight through her. He captured her gaze, his deep brown eyes promising he’d be giving her everything she wanted and more. She inhaled just before he pressed his delicious lips to hers.

Through a haze of happiness, she heard Milo groan and Luke suggest they go check out the single women and the booze. She would have agreed, but she was too busy kissing her man.

The End

This short story is a glimpse into the lives of the hard-working, sexy men of Aspen and the women who love them. Continuing stories can be found in the Aspen Series. Read on for an excerpt from Relentless.

## Excerpt From Relentless

### Chapter One

From the corner of her eye, Lily Chandler caught a blur of black as it dashed into the road. She slammed on the brakes. The tires on her little white Honda screamed as she swung off the pavement and onto the grassy area at the side of the road, narrowly missing a ditch.

When the car had come to a standstill, she plastered a hand against her chest, trying to slow her racing heart. "What the hell was that?"

Hannah eyed her as though she'd lost her mind. "I was going to ask you the same thing. Are you trying to kill us?"

"No." Lily glanced across the isolated two-lane highway, searching for the critter that almost lost its life. "There was something in the road. Didn't you see it?"

"Uh...no." Her friend looked around. "It was probably a skunk or raccoon. We have those out here, you know," she said with a tinge of sarcasm.

Lily narrowed her eyes. "I know that." Actually, she had no idea what she'd find in the small town of Aspen, Utah, but she wasn't about to admit it. She scanned the surrounding green pastures one more time for the little beast who'd stolen a year of her life.

"Can we go now?"

Lily sighed as she pulled out onto the never-ending stretch of blacktop. Her bug-spattered windshield showcased nothing but farmland alive with early summer grass. Occasionally, a house had popped up on the horizon, but not often enough for Lily's comfort. Somewhere up ahead was Hannah's brother hauling a good portion of their possessions in Hannah's truck. Everything else had been left in a storage shed in Salt Lake with the hopes that she and Hannah would be returning soon. "I'm starting to wonder if this was a good idea."

"Are you kidding?" Her friend tilted her head, the action making her auburn ponytail shake. "Don't second guess this now. When I left home seven years ago, I swore I'd never move back. I'm only going now because you begged."

"I didn't beg." She hadn't. But moving in with Hannah's family seemed preferable to being homeless. Two weeks ago, they'd both been fired from their respective jobs at a local newspaper in Salt Lake City, all because their boss hadn't been able to keep his zipper zipped. His wife had found out, and now the paper was slowly disintegrating from all the bad press and soon to be split assets. If it hadn't cost her a job, Lily would have been happy the jerk had been found out. She

could totally commiserate with her boss's wife. She'd dealt with similar humiliation and pain when she'd caught her fiancé cheating with her sister.

Hannah folded her arms. "This was your idea. No complaining. I warned you my family lived in a rural area."

"Rural?" Lily let go a nervous laugh. "To an L.A. girl, rural is like...subdivisions. Like the outskirts of Salt Lake. Places where people still live. Not this...vast emptiness." She gestured to the hills that didn't stop until they touched the sky. "If a person got lost out here, they may never be found."

"Ain't that the truth," Hannah said with a laugh. "Let me rephrase then. My parents live in a backward, podunk, God-forsaken town." Her friend pretended to shudder. "And look. We're here." Hannah pointed to a sign stating, Aspen, population: 250. "Welcome to my version of hell."

Only 250 people? There had to be that many living on their block in downtown SLC. Lily forced a smile and slowed as the speed limit dropped considerably. What if the people here didn't like her or couldn't relate to her? She was a city girl through and through.

The little town was cute, though. Baskets of pink and purple petunias swung from streetlamps, and all of the buildings were in good repair. It was like going back in time fifty years.

"Sorry to postpone our arrival. Mom asked if I could pick up a couple of things before we head out to their place." Hannah nodded toward a building with Andersen's Grocery painted on the side. "Do you mind if we stop?"

"Not at all." Lily cruised into the small parking lot, grateful to have arrived. "I'd like to look around the place I'm going to be calling home anyway."

Hannah snorted. "Don't get too excited."

Her friend seemed really down on her hometown, but Lily hoped it wouldn't be that bad. More than that, she hoped they'd both have new jobs before long and be headed back to civilized Salt Lake. Lily shouldered her purse and headed down the short street as Hannah went inside the store. The air was fresh, if a bit cooler than it had been in the city. She inhaled again. Like *really* fresh. Like it almost had a sweet taste to it. That was certainly a nice change her lungs would appreciate during her morning runs.

In the same parking lot as the grocery store, stood a small strip mall with a pizza parlor, a beauty salon, and Betty Johnson Real Estate. A small "help wanted" sign tucked into the corner of a window near the door of the real estate office snagged her attention. She'd be headed there first thing after they got settled in.

A gas station took up space on the other side of the strip mall, and a bit farther down was a bigger building with the words Swallow's Bar and Grill. The other side of the street housed a cute little bakery and coffee shop. The town's version of

Starbucks, perhaps? She'd definitely check it out later. Ahead of her was Randall's Western Outfitters that apparently carried clothing, tools and more. Everything a girl could want, all in a few short steps. It would certainly provide a different shopping experience than Rodeo Drive.

The door to the western outfitters store swung open in front of her, and she had to stop short to avoid running into it.

"So sorry, Miss," said the older guy in a worn cowboy hat when he realized he'd almost plowed the door into her face. He totally looked the rancher part with short, gristled whiskers, accompanying denim jacket, and carrying a large bag of something over his shoulder.

Lily shook her head. "It's fine. You couldn't have known I was here."

The wrinkles around his grass green eyes creased when he smiled. "Still, I apologize."

She was about to respond when another man came out right behind him, carrying two identical bags.

"Dad—"

The younger guy stopped short when he saw Lily. "Well, hello."

He was a taller version of his father, with the same beautiful green eyes. His biceps bulged beneath his dark blue T-shirt from holding the weight of the two bags, and an interesting tattoo peeked out from beneath one of his sleeves. A hint of short brown hair hung below a khaki-colored ballcap, and she was surprised to find he wore small, thick silver hoops in his ears. Apparently, the small towns of the world were finally catching up with everyone else.

"Um...hi." She felt silly now, impeding him and his dad.

"Did you want something, Luke?" his father asked.

He hesitated. "I'll tell you in the truck." He nodded toward a big black pickup, and Lily couldn't help but feel he'd just dismissed his dad.

The older man seemed to pick up his cue as well. He winked at Lily, nodded and headed toward the vehicle.

"You're new in town." The younger guy smiled, making Lily feel slightly giddy inside. She wasn't quite sure what to make of him. Hannah had been dead wrong in her assessment of the men in this town if this guy was any indication of who she'd find here.

"I just arrived. I'm going to be staying with my friend's family for a while." A soft breeze blew several blond curls into her face, making them stick to her lip gloss. She tried several times to remove them, but kept missing some. He reached out, holding the weight of his load with one hand, and pulled the last hairs away from her lips.

"Thanks." She tugged her long tresses to one side, away from the breeze, to keep them under control. The attraction she felt for this guy was awkward, surprising, and a little exhilarating.

"What's your name?" He continued to stand there as though the heavy weight he carried meant nothing to him.

"Lily. Lily Chandler."

"I'm Luke Winchester. It's nice to meet you." His lips tilted into a grin, and she couldn't stop herself from mirroring the gesture. "Who are the friends you're staying with?"

"The Morgan family. Do you know them?"

"Of course."

At her puzzled expression, he continued. "You're obviously not from a small town, 'cause here everybody knows everybody."

"Lily?" Hannah yelled from down the street. "Let's go."

Luke turned his gaze to her friend, his demeanor cooling. "Hey, Hannah. Welcome back," he called out.

Hannah sent him a heated look and then got in the car, slamming her door.

Lily raised her brows. "Ouch. You and Hannah have some sort of history?"

He shook his head, a disappointed look hovering in his eyes. "A slight misunderstanding. She'll get over it one of these days. In the meantime, promise me you won't believe everything she tells you."

Interesting. She couldn't wait to hear Hannah's side of the story. "Okay." She would give Luke the benefit of the doubt. For now.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Lily Chandler. I'm sure I'll run into you again."

He held out a hand, and she took it. His fingers were strong and warm, and they sent a fascinating spike of energy coursing through her. "Nice to meet you, too."

She let go of his hand and turned, walking toward her Honda. She desperately wanted to look back at him, but she was certain he still watched her. She could feel the almost physical touch of his gaze. When she reached down to open the car door, she dared a glance in his direction. A swift current whipped through her when their gazes connected. He nodded as though affirming they'd meet again and turned.

Lily blew out a slow breath and slipped into her car, trying to pretend Luke Winchester hadn't shoved her pulse into overdrive.

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## Book List

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Come Back To Me

Surrender

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Which Witch is Witch?

Which Witch is Wicked?

## About the Author

Award-winning author Cindy Stark lives with her family and a sweet Border Collie in a small town shadowed by the Rocky Mountains. She writes emotional romantic suspense, sexy contemporary romance, and sizzling paranormal romance. She loves to hear from readers!

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