Painting the Dead

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PAINTING THE DEAD

by

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ABSTRACT
PAINTING THE DEAD

By

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Under the Supervision of Professor George Clark

In the small town of Juan, Texas, eight residents struggle with tradition versus progress over the course of a story that begins and ends with murder. A few of them are Corine and Lola Espinosa—sisters who are abandoned in Juan while their mother pursues love; Daniel Wilton—nearly an orphan, he resists the constricting traditions of Juan; Felipe Chavez, son of Mike Chavez, the sheriff, struggles with loving a woman who wants nothing more than to live somewhere else than Juan; Mike Chavez is a complicated man who carries the love of two women; and Grace, along with a few other business owners, are also a part of the power struggle with the respected Maria Espinosa, Corine’s and Lola’s grandmother, who wants to honor traditions above all else. This, in essence, is Juan.
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Introduction

“Every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else.” – Eudora Welty

Like Welty, I write stories in which landscapes are a catalyst that prompt the characters into their journey. Landscapes are not merely the canvas onto which the stories are painted; they are the paint and the brushes. Works like No Country for Old Men by Cormac McCarthy or The Milagro Beanfield War by John Nichols would be rendered unrecognizable if placed onto a different landscape such as the Midwest or Northeast. These characters’ histories and cultures would change, thereby transforming them into strangers. In addition, their hardships and struggles would be altered into something new, and therefore these characters’ journeys would change. Because of this, in order to fully examine any southwestern story, landscapes should be part of the discussion, if not the primary focal point.

The landscape that I’m mainly interested in is the southwest. The landscape in southwestern literature, whether in the foreground or background, influences the author as well as the characters within the story. It is not merely a device—it is as important as the characters themselves. The history and culture of this landscape is part of who these southwest characters are because it has become part of who these authors are. As Eudora Welty explains, “Feelings are bound up in place, and in art, from time to time, place undoubtedly works upon genius” (444). It is impossible to grow up in an environment and not be affected by it. Its history and culture is also part of the author’s history and
culture. Just like the characters in a southwestern novel, the author belongs to that
landscape and vice versa. As a southwest writer currently living in the Midwest, I have
been able to take a step back and see the various southwestern influences that have help
shaped me into the writer I am today. I grew up with tales of the Alamo, Santa Anna, and
outlaws like Billy the Kid along with stories of my Cherokee heritage. Akin to many
Texas children, I knew the song “Deep in the Heart of Texas” by heart as well as I knew
the National Anthem. Like other southwest authors, this hot, dry landscape with its
history and culture belongs to me and vice versa.

Romanticizing the Southwest

The southwest, arguably, is comprised of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and
Oklahoma. This area has been a territory of France, Spain, Mexico, and was finally
annexed by the United States. Politically, the area is rife with immigration conflicts and
issues with illegal drug trade. In addition to this, parts of the southwestern landscape
have been utilized by the government for military and weapon experiments, like nuclear
testing. In *The Southwest in American Literature and Art* David Teague argues that
“Uranium ore, extracted from and tested in deserts of the southwest and then utilized in
weapons of mass destruction, becomes a talisman of the entire endangered world” (165).
This damage to the landscape by modern technology adversely affects the characters that
live there. Historically, the southwest has been seen as dangerous (16). Because of the
lack of water, heat, and wildlife—like rattlesnakes, mountain lions, etc.—the population
in the southwest was initially miniscule. Mostly it was inhabited by Native Americans,
cowboys, outlaws, and very few settlers. Then came John C. Van Dyke and Mary Austin
who idealized the desert in their writings, making it a popular place (Wild). Today, the wilderness of the southwest has dwindled down to national parks and the desert, such as the Grand Canyon, the Painted Desert, and so on. But even these ‘protected’ areas are overrun with tourists and pollution (Comer 124). Other places that were once rural communities like San Antonio, Texas or Santa Fe, New Mexico are now thriving cities, changing the landscape and those who live in it.

Overall, the southwest landscape is more than a physical place or setting; it is the people, culture and history of that place. It becomes part of who these southwestern characters are. As Reyes Garcia explains in “Senses of Place in Ceremony,” the self cannot be separated from the landscape: “In fact, as Relph notes, the bond between community and place is so very powerful because ‘each reinforces the identity of the other,’ so that landscape is very much an expression of communally-held beliefs and values and of interpersonal involvements” (38). This is why it is necessary to include discussion of landscape when examining southwestern literature. It is impossible to separate the characters from the landscape or vice versa. Each shapes the other. Like an explorer entering an uncharted space, by merely being there, the environment is forever changed. For years, this has been recognized by conservationists who work towards designating protected spaces—like islands, caves, etc—where no one is permitted (but perhaps a few scientists). In “Hybrid Landscapes as Catalysts for Cultural Reconciliation in Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony and Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima” Holly E. Martin argues,

Although in literature landscapes often function as holders of tradition, either as designated sacred spaces or simply as reminders of the histories
that have been enacted within them, in each of the two works discussed here, landscape goes further and actually serves as a catalyst that jolts the character into a heightened state of awareness of his own cultural hybridity. Such realization occurs when the land itself embodies hybrid characteristics, containing the histories of both conflicting cultural groups, and thereby, reflects the cultural conflict occurring within the character.

(131)

The southwest embodies hybrid characteristics which it has gained from the many peoples who have inhabited it. The characters living in the southwest landscape cannot help but be affected by its multicultural past or altering it by simply living there. Thus, these characters become hybrid.

Claiming the Southwest

Southwest literature and its characters are often associated with hybridity because of the multicultural aspect of the area. The southwest landscape can be broken down into sub-landscapes. For example: Laguna landscape, Anglo landscape, Latino/a landscape (which are represented in the novels discussed in this introduction). Each of these sub-landscapes has their own individual histories and customs, but they also make up the larger image of the southwest. The majority of people today don’t primarily exist in one landscape; instead, most belong to numerous landscapes. However, while acclimating to multiple histories/customs may be a bit easier for children of today, it was not always so. The novels I examine in this dissertation all come from the late twenty century, when belonging to diverse landscapes—especially when one of those was Anglo—caused
internal hardship and struggle. The characters in this study are Abrán from Anaya’s *Alburquerque* who exists between Latino and Anglo landscapes, Tayo from Silko’s *Ceremony* who exists between Laguna and Anglo landscapes, Grace and Nola from Hogan’s *Mean Spirit* who are divided between their home with the Hill Indians and the Anglo landscape, Abel from Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* who exists between Native American and Anglo landscapes and Antonio from Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* who exists between his mother’s Roman Catholic heritage, his father’s vaquero lifestyle and Ultima’s spirituality.

Hybridity is a complex issue with multiple facets. In order to discuss it in the context of Southwest Literature, it needs to be broken into issues of displacement, identity struggle, and tradition vs. modernization. For the purposes of this introduction, I will be examining these five works written by Latino/a and Native American authors from the southwest concerning characters who live in the southwest. In other words, works about the southwest that were written by authors who claim the southwest as their landscape.

**Reconnecting to Place**

One common theme in southwest literature is displacement which refers to the inability of characters to connect with their native landscape. At times, this might be portrayed by a physical displacement such as the character living in an urban area instead of his/her rural home. In *House Made of Dawn* by N. Scott Momaday, Abel becomes a displaced character. As a child, he participates in his tribe’s ceremonies and traditions. When he becomes an adult, he leaves the reservation to fight in World War II.
“Telling the Indian Urban: Representations in American Indian Fiction” Carol Miller explains, “Both Scott Momaday, in *House Made of Dawn*, and Leslie Marmon Silko, in *Ceremony*, present post-World War II America as a critical moment of dislocation” (36). Abel’s experiences in the war cause him to be unable to rediscover his place on the reservation. He has seen too much and been a part of the modern Anglo world for too long: “He had tried in the days that followed to speak to his grandfather, but he could not say the things he wanted; he had tried to pray, to sing, to enter into the old rhythm of the tongue, but he was no longer attuned to it” (Momaday 53). Because he cannot reconnect to life on the reservation or to his Native American heritage, he grows dangerously unhinged. He ends up getting in a fight and killing a white man, and as a result, he is sent to prison for six years.

After prison, he stays in Los Angeles, which is a place to lose rather than find himself. The city is not his landscape. Miller says further that “For Momaday, the city represents a site of ultimate exile, the place where his protagonist Abel hits rock bottom even more destructive than his experience in prison, which Momaday doesn’t describe at all” (37). Abel is disconnected from his cultural landscape. Southwestern characters like Abel cannot survive displacement from their home. He becomes unstable and begins to physically deteriorate through the use of alcohol and physical violence. The only way Abel can survive his displacement is to return to the reservation, his home. He eventually makes peace with his war experiences and the death of his grandfather, and in the end, he joins in a ceremonial running, signaling his renewed connection to his landscape: “He was running, and under his breath he began to sing. There was no sound, and he had no voice; he had only the words of a song. And he went running on the rise of the song.
House made of pollen, house made of dawn. Qtsedaba,” (Momaday 185). Abel has
resolved his displacement and rediscovered his home.

While Abel is able to physically and spiritually reconnect to his landscape, at
times displacement is more of an internal struggle than a physical one. In Mean Spirit by
Linda Hogan, Grace Blanket and her daughter, Nola, are two displaced characters. In the
story Grace goes to live in town: “Grace Blanket had been born of these [Hill Indians],
and she was the first to go down out of the hills and enter into the quick and wobbly
world of the mixed-blood Indians, white loggers, cattle ranchers, and most recently, the
oil barrens” (Hogan 5). While in town, Grace gets rich from the oil on her land, which
allows for a more comfortable life, but she still doesn’t quite fit in. In “Politics of the
Border in Linda Hogan’s Mean Spirit” Yonka Kroumova Krasteva explains, “There is no
rite of passage for the marginals, since they are forever doomed to an in-between and
betwixt existence, where they are invested with the ultimate ambiguity of being half-
human and half-beast, and utterly irredeemable” (52). Grace is disconnected from her
cultural landscape, and she cannot fully adapt to her new urban landscape. She is a
Krasteva marginal, a displaced character, and because of this, she cannot survive.

Grace’s displacement from her Hill Indian landscape passes on to her daughter,
Nola, who is born into this in-between state—not really a part of the Anglo landscape or
the Hill Indian landscape. Her father is unknown—at least to everyone but Grace.

Nola, like her mother, is also a marginal, displaced character in the beginning.
She agrees to marry a man who only wants her for her money and is surrounded by the
trappings of town life. The one solid connection she has to her cultural landscape is her
tribe runners who watch over her. Nola accepts their presence because they make her
feel safe (Hogan 227). Eventually Nola is forced to leave in order to survive when she is involved with the killing of a white man. To stay would mean prosecution and death for, even though she exists within the Anglo landscape, she is not truly part of it. And so she absconds with the runners: “But they were alive. They carried generations along with them, into the prairie and through it, to places where no road had been cut before them. They traveled past houses that were like caves of light in the black world. The night was on fire with their pasts and they were alive (375). For Nola, her displacement is resolved by the realization that she can carry her home with her. While physically she may be away from her home landscape, in her heart she carries her cultural landscape with her.

Elizabeth Blair in “The Politics of Place in Linda Hogan’s Mean Spirit” explains “Landless but not loveless, they have lost ‘place’ but carry with them respect for the sacredness of all life, which, as Hogan suggests, is the only way to create a proper ‘home’ on this planet, the only way to make this land into ‘the house we have always lived’” (20). As long as Nola carries her traditions with her, she will be connected to her cultural landscape; she will not be displaced if she keeps her cultural heritage in her heart.

Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko features a character similar to Abel. Both characters exist between their landscape and the southwest Anglo’s. Unlike Nola, Tayo’s cultural heritage will not need to be carried within. In Ceremony, Tayo returns from World War II, traumatized from the violence and from the death of his cousin Rocky. He also feels guilty for a prayer he said in the Philippines which is meant to stop the rain—for the last six years there has been a drought on the reservation.

Returning from the war with him are four men he grew up with on the reservation: Harley, Leroy, Emo, and Pinkie. All carry the scars from the war, but unlike
Tayo, these men lack Tayo’s tenaciousness to recover their closeness with their heritage. Over and over again in the story, Tayo tries to reconnect with his Laguna landscape but fails. He meets a man, Betonie, who has had dealings with the Anglo world, and sees the evil the Anglo world can create. This idea is revisited throughout the novel and becomes a part of Tayo’s restoration.

Tayo meets a woman named Ts’eh and spends the summer with her. Being with Ts’eh is like a healing balm. Living on the edge of the reservation, she acts like a bridge back into the space where Tayo wants to be. When he briefly returns, Tayo realizes he cannot live solely within the Anglo world. He explains, “He knew why he had felt weak and sick; he knew why he had lost the feeling Ts’eh had given him, and why he had doubted the ceremony: this was their place, and he was vulnerable” (243). Within the Anglo landscape, Tayo is adrift. He needs his native landscape to help him navigate this dangerous world, but in order to do that, he first must resituate himself with his home.

To be displaced from his/her landscape means that the character cannot fully connect to the other. In order to survive, the character’s landscapes need to have a symbiotic relationship.

Eventually, Tayo finishes the ceremony he started with Ts’eh by spending the night in an abandoned uranium mine while trying to escape Emo, who wants to kill him. While hiding, he watches as Harley is tortured and killed by Emo in an effort to drawl Tayo out. Despite what Emo has planned for him, Tayo manages to survive and make it back home. Tayo completes his ceremony and the drought ends, signaling the end to Tayo’s displacement. He is able to reunite with his native landscape while still carrying his Anglo landscape with him.
Negotiating between Identities

A second common theme in southwest literature is identity struggle which refers to a southwestern character who is divided between at least two landscapes and cannot figure out which to identify with. This struggle does not mean that the character should assimilate into the dominant Anglo culture or necessarily choose only their native cultural landscape. Instead, the character needs to find ways to work within and across multiple cultures, and this work may include resistance to aspects of those cultures. It is also important to acknowledge that one landscape cannot exist alongside another without mutual influence. In other words, one culture cannot assimilate with another without affecting change in the other. While it can be argued that the Anglo world demanded both Mexican citizens (living within the current United States borders) and Native Americans to assimilate to their customs, the Anglo landscape also adopted different rural characteristics, cuisine, and bits of their languages. In *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya, Antonio Marez is torn between his father’s vaquero lifestyle, his mother’s Roman Catholic heritage, and Ultima’s spirituality. When Antonio is six years old, Ultima, a spiritual healer, comes to live with his family and becomes Antonio’s guide and teacher. He explains,

> When she came the beauty of the llano unfolded before my eyes, and the gurgling waters of the river sang to the hum of the turning earth. The magical time of childhood stood still, and the pulse of the living earth pressed its mystery into my living blood. She took my hand, and the silent, magic powers she possessed made beauty from the raw, sun-baked
llano, the green river valley, and the blue bowl which was the white sun’s home. My bare feet felt the throbbing earth and my body trembled with excitement. Time stood still, and it shared with me all that had been, and all that was to come… (Anaya 1).

Ultima teaches Antonio about spirituality and natural healing remedies. She represents spiritual freedom and a connection to the earth. Antonio’s father, on the other hand, is a vaquero and wishes Antonio to also become a vaquero, which represents a life of sexuality and wildness—there is no ‘other’ to dictate a vaquero’s morality like there is with his mother’s. But, Antonio rejects this identity early on. Antonio’s mother, however, wishes for him to follow her Luna heritage. She tells him, “‘You will be a Luna, Antonio. You will be a man of the people, and perhaps a priest’” (9). However, there are moments when Catholicism scares Antonio. On one Ash Wednesday, Antonio reveals his fears, saying, “I knew that eternity lasted forever, and a soul because of one mistake could spend that eternity in hell” (215). After witnessing the murder of a deranged man, which his father and other people he knew participated in, Antonio is not just worried for his own sake. If he follows the path his mother has laid before him, there will be many people he will encounter that he cannot save; whereas Ultima’s healing offers hope instead of eternal death.

The story concludes shortly after Ultima is murdered. She asks for Antonio to perform a ceremony, burying her things near the river and her owl near a forked juniper tree (276). This ceremony allows Antonio to say goodbye. In the end Antonio sees evil in the world and two different ways to solve it: Ultima’s magic and his mother’s prayers. Martin argues “When Antonio learns to integrate the two landscapes, he reconciles the
cultural split he has felt since birth” (144). Antonio ends the struggle with his identity by integrating his mother’s heritage with the lessons Ultima has taught him. In a way, Ultima represents a balance between his father’s and mother’s cultural landscapes, and by accepting her landscape, he is able to resolve the struggle with his own identity.

Identity struggle is not always solved by acceptance of one’s fate. Sometimes it takes discovering your native heritage. In Alburquerque by Rudolfo Anaya, Abrán, an Anglo/Latino boxer, discovers his multiple cultural landscapes from a letter he receives from his mother, Cynthia, after she dies. Before the letter, Abrán thought his parents were Sara and Ramiro González, both Latino. At first Abrán refuses to acknowledge his white heritage. He’s angry that his white grandparents are the reason Cynthia gave him up. His grandfather will not even acknowledge him. His mother is dead—Abrán can no longer get to know her nor can he ask her who his father is.

Abrán struggles between his Anglo and Latino identities and delves deeper into the Anglo world, trying to discover his father’s identity. His father, Ben Chavez, knows Abrán is his son but does not feel he has the right to claim Abrán since Cynthia no longer can. In Native American and Chicano/a Literature of the American Southwest: Intersections of Indigenous Literature Christina Hebebrand explains “Ben Chavez, Abrán’s biological father, is also aware of the negative influences of the dominant white society” through both his involvement with Abrán’s mother and her father who destroyed their relationship (106). Ben doesn’t tell Abrán that he is Abrán’s father or what he knows of the Anglo landscape. Because of this, Abrán must struggle with his identity alone.
Abrán’s struggle culminates with a boxing match he has agreed to, which he wins. It is here that he discovers Ben is his father. In “Shifting Borders and Interesting Territories: Rudolfo Anaya” Carmen Junquera explains, “Abrán reaches victory, as the barrio champion, by winning the match in the boxing ring and defying the political bosses who had plotted his downfall. Thus, Abrán finally integrates the different territories and finds his own hybrid space in their intersection” (107). Abrán does not allow his mother’s Anglo landscape to absorb him; instead he manages to end his struggle by finding middle ground between his Anglo and Latino landscapes. Junquero explains, “Indeed, Anaya’s purpose is clear: only by wholeheartedly embracing the Chicano heritage, one of mestizaje of Spanish, Native American and Anglo, can his characters/readers effectively cope in this world. In his first two novels, the quest is recovering the Chicano heritage. Assimilation to the dominant culture is not the answer” (111). The struggle with their identity is not about choosing one landscape over another; it is about melding these identities together, creating a new landscape—internally accepting who they are while negotiating with the outside world.

Modernizing the Southwest

A third common theme in southwestern literature is tradition vs. modernization. Modernization can be anything from urbanization or advancements in technology to modern warfare. In Silko’s *Ceremony*, Tayo is caught between two landscapes: Laguna and Anglo. With his Laguna landscape, he is exposed to tradition, ceremonies and family. With the Anglo landscape, he is exposed to destruction and violence (his fighting in World War II). As a child, he participates in the ceremonies of his tribe. It is these
ceremonies and prayers he remembers and practices throughout the novel. One of these prayers comes to him as a comfort during a battle in World War II.

When Tayo finally comes home, instead of letting go of his time in the Anglo world, he constantly juxtaposes the experience with his present as he tries to reconnect to life on the reservation. Scarred by an Anglo war, Tayo finds it hard to return to his Laguna traditions. In *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* Paula Gunn Allen explains, “His dilemma is one that Native Americans have faced since white contact: how does one remain whole while accepting the supernatural and ritual practices of the tribe and simultaneously assimilating with Christian attitudes required by white colonization?” (88). This becomes even more complicated when the exposure to the Anglo world has been a traumatic experience; Tayo has a hard time conceptualizing what is wrong.

During and after the war, Tayo is exposed to white man’s violence. At one point, he wonders how ceremonies can fight against the white man’s “sickness” (Silko 132). Betonie, a hybrid character, tells Tayo that the white man is a tool of their (Laguna’s) witchcraft, and because of this, they can handle his evil. Betonie explains, “‘We can because we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place’” (132). It is this realization that leads Tayo to try to heal himself and the land through ceremony. He sees the fences, highways, and other sides of modern progress—all the things of white man’s sickness. This modernization that tears apart the land and hurts man is not progress.

After he hides out in the uranium cave, Tayo recognizes the damage inflicted on the land by the white man, and he begins to fully understand the conflict within himself
(Silko 247). Seeing the damage Anglo modernization has inflicted upon the land allows Tayo to look inward and understand his scars and his illness. Allen explains, “Tayo’s illness is a result of separation from the ancient unity of person, ceremony, and land, and his healing is a result of his recognition of this unity” (119). Understanding how he is connected to this land, Tayo is finally able to resolve the conflict between his Anglo and Laguna landscapes. He cannot escape the effects of modernization, but he can adapt and heal by staying connected to his Laguna landscape. As Comer argues, “Landscape is as central a protagonist as Tayo; without landscape there is no Indian or western pathos, no cultural geography that supports a redemption process” (134). Without the Laguna landscape, Tayo wouldn’t have healed from the wounds inflicted by the modern world. While the modern Anglo landscape sets Tayo adrift, his Laguna landscape saves him.

In Bless Me, Ultima, in addition to identity struggle, there is also a conflict between tradition and modernization. Ultima represents the heritage of the llano—traditions pass down through her family. She is part of the open, fertile river land, in contrast to Antonio’s mother and her Roman Catholic heritage and desire to live in town. When Ultima comes to live with Antonio’s family with her healer techniques, the town’s people confuse her with the more dangerous figure of a bruja or witch because they do not understand her traditions. Eventually, this leads to her death when a town member kills her spirit owl. On her death bed, she asks Antonio to participate in her traditions by performing a burial ceremony. The Catholic tradition of mourning would begin the day after Antonio does as she asks, but he says, “But all that would only be the ceremony that was prescribed by custom [his mother’s]. Ultima was really buried here. Tonight”
In this moment, Antonio resists the modern world and validates Ultima’s spiritual landscape.

*Alburquerque* also deals with the tussle between tradition vs. modernization. The Albuquerque of the novel is in political unrest. Two politicians, Frank Dominic and Marissa Martinez, are in a race for mayor. Both want to use Abrán’s success as a boxer for their benefit, but Frank is more aggressive in this attempt. This political race is part of the power struggle of the modern world. Frank alludes that he can help Abrán find his father; even though he really does not know the truth. Frank tells Abrán, “‘You go into training and on the night of the fight I deliver your father’s name to you’” (Anaya 86). Abrán is presented with a choice: whether or not to box for Frank in exchange for information about his father. Ben warns Abrán of the danger of putting their heritage on display for profit. He tells Abrán that their traditions will die if they go to work in the casinos and dance for the tourists (123). In other words, the modern world has the ability to harm their cultural landscape. Another character, Juan Oso, also warns Abrán of the white man’s world (progress). Juan says, “‘My father said our lives changed in the villages when Kearny came in with his army. Good changes, bad changes. Those who didn’t learn the American way suffered. For a while most of the northern New Mexico land grants got bought up by the gringo land speculators’” (166). While Juan acknowledges that not all progress is necessarily bad, the modern world has a way of destroying the traditions of the old. The dominant, modern culture often demands assimilation by the others. It is hard to hold on to one’s traditional customs in the face of progress.
Even in *Mean Spirit*, the characters are trapped between the modern world and the old. The Hill Indians want to exist in their world without disruption from the Anglos, but they know eventually the Anglo world will encroach upon them. As the saying goes, progress cannot be stopped. The original reason why Grace is sent to live in town is to keep the Hill Indians apprised of any laws or policies that might affect them. Once there, however, she becomes mesmerized with the contemporary world and all its inventions. When oil is found under the barren land of the Hill Indians, Grace suddenly becomes rich, allowing her to indulge in her new popular tastes. Blair explains, “Dreaming in one world and living the affluent life in the other, Grace is doomed, as the novel’s vivid symbolism makes clear” (17). She fills her house with fancy objects, attracting negative attention from the envious town members. Grace is eventually murdered due to white man’s greed. In the end, the only way to survive Hogan’s modern world is to escape it—as Nola does in the end, fleeing town in the middle of the night. By escaping the contemporary world, Nola is able to reconnect with her heritage.

The Southwest is a hybrid landscape, preserving several cultures in its rocky surface—from the Pueblo Indian villages to the Spanish and Anglo cities. In examining the role it plays within Southwestern Literature, three themes stand out: displacement, struggle with identity, and tradition vs. modernization. The characters within these five novels survive the danger of their internal and external conflicts by resolving the issues with their dual landscapes. As Junquera argues, “By appropriating this hybrid space, characters re-define their identity, becoming more ‘malleable,’ tolerating ambiguities, but also being enriched by multiple bloodlines and legacies. This intersection becomes a large borderland, full of new meanings, creativity and possibilities” (101). Tayo, Abel,
Abrán, Antonio and Nola resolve their struggles and become better for it. Instead of belonging solely in one landscape, they learn how to exist between two.

Like these Southwest authors, I strive to enrich my characters through the intersection of multiple landscapes, allow for possibilities and creativity through struggle. I am interested in how these issues evolve as culturally as America evolves.

**Painting the Dead**

One of my interests is how characters are created through confinement. In my dissertation, I confine characters onto a southwestern landscape and allow them to develop. The southwest, with its arid land and miles of open space, is in its own right an isolated landscape. Until relatively recently, it was mostly uninhabitable. To settle there was to lead a hard, often short, life, similar to the characters within my story. It was advertised as obtainable for any white settlers willing to be tenacious and adventurous. It did not matter that it was already occupied by Native Americans and Mexican citizens. And so the struggle began.

This narrative, this conflict of ownership, is part of the southwest history, and therefore, part of southwest characters’ history, like my own. By living in this space, these characters are confined within its ideals, culture, and prejudices so much that most cannot see it. Like being too close to a 3D stereogram image, witnesses are oblivious of the hidden picture. In essence, this is part of the backdrop for my dissertation. The story takes place in the very small town of Juan, Texas. Juan is isolated both geographically
and culturally. Over the last century, through illness and hardship, the citizens of Juan have melded their cultures together into something entirely their own. For example, they have a town council instead of a mayor; the entire town is responsible for funeral ceremonies, etc. The funeral ceremony is the primary focus of the novel and causes a large part of its tension. When someone dies, instead of burying their dead, they cremate them, mix their ashes with paint, and paint the ashes on a cross where the person died. In the center of each cross, a small image is painted representing the deceased.

Within the duration of the story, few characters venture outside of Juan, and when they do, it is only to Van Horn, the next nearest town (which is almost an hour away). The majority of the characters are confined within this small place, and even fewer fight this confinement. In this isolated space, the characters struggle and thrive, occasionally crashing into each other as people in small communities often do.

In addition to confinement, I also explore the earlier discussed themes: displacement, identity struggle and tradition vs. modernization. However, unlike the previous discussed works, these characters can survive without resolving these issues. In fact, several of them never do. Like the uncertainty of the real world, these characters do not have a nice conclusion by the story’s end—their struggles go beyond the page.

In order to discuss how these themes work within my dissertation, the seven main characters need to be examined. The first two main characters are sisters: Corine and Lola Espinosa. Corine and Lola are set adrift by their mother, Carmelita. Because of their mother’s lifestyle, they do not know how to stay in one place or how to depend upon anyone else but each other. Constantly, Corine and Lola are being displaced by their mother, moved each time Carmelita ends a relationship. The only stable landscape they
can identify with is the southwest, desert region. Juan, where their grandmother lives, is their native landscape, the home they briefly return to over the years. Juan comes to represent permanency in their lives where once there was hardly any.

In many ways, Corine fills a mother-figure role for Lola. Lola knows that Corine would do anything for her—and has. Before they moved back to Juan, they lived in Las Vegas where something horrible happened. Neither will speak about it, but it is something that haunts both sisters. Individually, Corine is constantly searching for something but isn’t sure what it is. She often wonders about her father, who she has never met but found a picture of once. Though the rest of her family physically resembles their Latina heritage, Corine has inherited several traits from her father, including his blonde hair. Beautiful like her mother, but in her own striking way, Corine learns early from Carmelita how to use her looks to get what she wants. However, while Carmelita uses her beauty in search of affection, Corine sees her own beauty as a tool which has helped her take care of her sister.

Lola, on the other hand, is a shorter, chubbier image of their mother. She is quiet and introverted, artistic and introspective. Because of these traits, she is often awkward around others and has a hard time making friends. Corine is Lola’s whole world, and she is terrified of the day when Corine might leave her alone with their mother or worse, alone in Juan with their grandmother. She hates the desert and the heat, but she is willing to give Juan a shot as long as Corine stays with her. Secretly, Lola would like to stop drifting aimlessly with their mother and settle down somewhere.

Both Lola and Corine are displaced, lacking any stable constant to help them identify who they are. They are continuously struggling to survive, rarely looking up
long enough to see where they are. Once in Juan, everything slows down, allowing for life to finally catch up with them. They are no longer forced to focus on survival and may now concentrate on healing, even though they both would prefer to ignore their internal wounds.

Another character within Juan is Daniel Wilton, son of Wally Wilton, the deceased cremator. Daniel’s mother, Kate Wilton, became ill shortly after Wally’s tragic death a few years ago and has been slowly dying since. Since his father died and maybe even before, Daniel has struggled against custom. He does not believe in Juan’s tradition of burning the dead and painting the ashes, nor does he support the idea of not having a choice of career—another tradition of Juan is that each town elder chooses an apprentice to take over their business. Wally originally tried to force Daniel to become his apprentice but Daniel refused. Instead of fighting for his native culture, Daniel tries for change, though often unsuccessfully. He is entrenched in the town’s customs and traditions, even if he doesn’t believe in them.

Throughout the story Daniel internally debates how he will handle this mother’s death arrangements. He knows she wants to be painted next to his father, but at the same time, he does not like the idea of her becoming ashes. Overall, because he feels responsible for his father’s death, Daniel struggles with the idea of death hanging around almost every corner, inescapable. He longs for the modern world. However, even though he has the means, he will never leave Juan—he cannot deny his home landscape.

A fourth character is Felipe Chavez, son of Mike Chavez, the sheriff. Felipe is a small business owner and artist. Unlike Daniel, Felipe actively participates and supports Juan’s funeral ceremony by painting the ashes onto the crosses. In comparison with the
other young citizens of Juan, Felipe fully fits into the community. He is not displaced
though he is affected by other displaced characters. He knows who he is and is
comfortable with it. The only unstable aspect of Felipe is his affection for Mae Foster,
who is attending college at a school several hours away. Mae comes home for the
summer, and while everyone else knows she is not going to stay, Felipe begins to hope
that she might change her mind and proceeds to try to convince her not to leave.

Felipe struggles with the idea of different forms of love, and within this novel,
there are many. His mother, Sue, tries to tell him that even if he was to win and Mae
stayed, she would never fully be his; she would always be thinking of somewhere else,
someone else, which is something Sue has experience with. For a long while, this
describes her relationship with her husband, Mike.

Mike Chavez is a complicated man who carries the love of two women. His first
love is Kate Wilton, and his second is Sue. Though he tries to move past Kate, living in
the same small area often proves to be too much, and he breaks down and visits her.
Only Sue and Grace are aware of Mike’s affection for Kate. This is Mike’s main
struggle—loving a woman he can never fully be with while hurting another who loves
him.

Mike, like his son, supports Juan’s traditions. He likes the idea of everyone
taking care of each other. As sheriff, he tries to stay objective, not advertising his
opinion. He does his best to keep the peace and watch over his son, who he loves dearly.
When a murder occurs in Juan, Mike realizes the limits to community and wonders how
well he knows these people he watches out for.
The sixth main character of Juan is Marc Foster. Marc looks identical to his twin sister Mae but is opposite of her in almost every other way. He has an extremely tense relationship with his father, who Marc believes is responsible for his mother’s death. Marc struggles not only with who he is but who he wants to be. He is constantly on edge, moments from a violent eruption. The only thing that seems to calm him is his relationship with Amy Belle, the town’s bartender; however, even their relationship is stressed to its limits.

Marc becomes displaced through his father’s lack of affection and his own rebellious nature. Several times he is warned about the destructive path he is on, but he doesn’t pay heed. Instead, he invites the outside world in by accepting money from some sketchy characters who want to use his father’s ranch for illegal transactions.

The last main character is Grace William. Grace was originally an outsider who married Henry William and moved to Juan for him. She comes from high society in the East, although she does not identify with that life anymore. Once she married Henry, she committed herself completely to the endeavor. Then tragedy strikes—Henry dies from a heart attack, leaving Grace to take care of his ranch alone.

Before long, she is battling Paul Foster, Marc’s and Mae’s father, a feud she inherited from her husband’s family. Paul has been determined for years to buy the William Ranch and expand his own. Grace and Paul, along with a few other business owners, are also a part of the power struggle with the respected Maria Espinosa, Corine’s and Lola’s grandmother, who wants to honor traditions above all else. Maria is the community spiritual leader and responsible for the funeral ceremony. Grace and Maria have not gotten along since Henry died when, instead of allowing his ashes to be painted
on a cross, Grace tattooed him onto her back. For this, Maria sees Grace as a violator of tradition. In Juan’s eyes, Grace is a part of the modern, outside world.

These characters and their struggles develop over the course of a story that begins and ends with murder within an isolated Texas town. This, in essence, is Juan.
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Painting the Dead

Prologue

June

Snuggled against the Chihuahuan Desert and embraced by miles of shrub brush and wildness, the small town of Juan was exactly what it should be at six in the morning—quiet. The residential houses scattered through town were dark, the inhabitants still in their beds. It was only on the ranches that the people chose to rise before the sun. Sheriff Mike Chavez himself would be in his own bed if it hadn’t been for the call. The last few weeks had been rough, and he desperately needed the rest.

Mike continued to do a sweep of the town, checking on the citizens of Juan, people he’d known his whole life. He wouldn’t normally be this paranoid, but then it wasn’t often he got woken up in the early morning hours by a caller who had only been able to communicate through gasps that Mike better get there quick—the ‘there’ being the Foster Ranch—that a body had been found.

So, here he was. A gnawing feeling in his gut and a desire to delay whatever waited for him out at the ranch. The first thing Mike had done was call the Foster’s house. It had rang numerous times before a tired Pam Richards, the Foster’s housekeeper and cook, answered, informing him that she was the only one home, and, no, she didn’t know where anyone was. That’s when the gnawing feeling began to grow.
Instinct directed him to call his son, but there was no answer, which was why, instead of heading onto the highway to leave town, he was turning down the narrow road that led to his son’s house. The driveway was empty. Mike pressed the brake on his brown bronco, trying to absorb the information without panicking. There was no reason to believe that the call had anything to do with his son. It was just being woken from a deep slumber that had set him on his guard.

Mike took a deep breath and tightened his grip on the steering wheel. He could sit here and worry, or he could head over the ranch and—he hesitated—deal with whoever was dead. That was one thing he hadn’t been able to figure out from the call, the body’s identity. With another deep breath, he eased off the brake and turned around on the road to head back towards the highway.

Maybe it wasn’t a person at all. Maybe it was a wild animal. He was sure it wouldn’t be the first time someone had mistaken an animal for something more. The body was out in the middle of the Foster Ranch, further than walking distance from the house. Who would be out wondering that far to begin with?

The highway was empty, like all the town streets. It was the only way in or out of Juan and led from the town to Interstate 10, which would then take a traveler to Van Horn, the nearest hopping metropolis, at least in comparison to Juan. Along this track of highway were the three nearest ranches. The closest two being the William Ranch on the Northeast side of the highway and the Foster Ranch on the Southwest side of the highway. The third, Lake Ranch, was at the junction of the highway and I10, and was much smaller than the other two.
As Mike drove to the Foster Ranch, the sun began to edge its way over the eastern horizon, painting the surrounding desert landscape with gold. He wanted to see it as an optimistic sign, to believe that it all had been some kind of mistake, but he didn’t have that luxury. He was the sheriff, and it was his job to figure out what had happened.

He came to a complete stop at the iron grates announcing the entrance to the Foster Ranch. The gate itself was full of no-nonsense angles and a heavy, thick FR on each side of the drive. The ranch drive was unusual in that it was paved instead of the normal gravel that most of the country roads sported, including the other two ranches. Mike remembered when it had been poured. He’d been in his early thirties at the time, and ol’Dade Foster couldn’t help but brag about how well the ranch was doing. Dade Foster had passed away a few years after that, not surviving to see all his hard work boiled down to a game of chicken with the weather.

For the past five years, the area had slowly been entering a drought—this year by far being the worst of it. Wells all over the countryside were drying up. Ranchers, not only the ones around Juan, were having to sell off portions of their livestock early in order to survive. Everyone was on water rations, hoping for a break in the endless sunny skies and over hundred degree temperatures.

It wasn’t the first hard spell he or any of the other older citizens had seen, but it was the first for the young’uns. For them, it was doom and gloom and the end of life as they knew it. For him and the town elders, it was just a reminder of how much they were at the mercy of nature.

Mike stared down the paved road, which was framed by the occasional mesquite tree. The sun was now fully present on the horizon, leaving no shadow. He turned off
his headlights and mustered up the grim determination he’d been relying on heavily of late. Not allowing himself another second of cowardice, he took his foot off the brake and eased down the road.
Chapter One

May

The deep clang from the church bell resounded twelve times. Pete Sheppard and Felipe Chavez both paused to listen before continuing to hammer the wooden cross into the ground. The blistering Texas sun was relentless, and the hard earth resisted all but the strongest efforts to pierce its skin.

Pete took one more swipe with the mallet before testing the cross’s sturdiness. Felipe stepped back and leaned his five foot and nine inch frame against the metal swing set behind them. He shook his jet black hair out of his amber eyes before he pulled out a pack of cigarettes, withdrew one, and lit it with a small stainless steel lighter that had an eagle engraved on the front.

“It’ll do,” Pete said, whipping sweat from his forehead with a red handkerchief. “Want to get Mr. Sanders from the truck?”

Felipe nodded and headed towards the four-wheel drive 1977 Chevy truck, which had a few rusty spots on its blue exterior. He opened the passenger door and picked up a white clay urn decorated with black Navajo symbols, his muscles flexed under its weight. Daggling his cigarette on his lip, he grabbed a paint brush with his free hand before heading back.

Pete eased his large frame into one of the swings as Felipe knelt in front of the cross and placed the clay urn on the ground. Felipe twisted the lid open and dipped the brush in the thick paint. Slowly, he painted the wooden cross a grayish white. He forced his thoughts to Mr. Sanders as a sign of respect. Mr. Sanders was the teacher of Juan’s
only school. The school was small—about thirty students of various grade levels. Mr. Sanders, with his patience and years of experience, had taught them—in fact, most of Juan owed their education to Mr. Sanders. He died at the age of seventy-one, standing in this exact spot during recess the day before summer break.

“He was an old bugger,” Pete mumbled, pulling his cowboy hat low over his tan face. He rocked his feet slightly, making the swing jerk. His pudgy body looked odd squeezed into the narrow swing.

Felipe paused and used his shirt sleeve to wipe away a trickle of sweat running down his face. He shrugged his shoulders in response to Pete’s comment.

“I mean don’t get me wrong—he was still doing a fine job at teaching. And I always knew it would take his death for the town council to replace him. People are too loyal for their own good. He should have been retired years ago and allowed a much needed rest,” Pete continued.

Felipe looked down into the urn. He doubted Mr. Sanders would have thought of retirement as a gift—he would have been insulted at the offer. He was definitely a man who believed in the old saying about idle hands.

Finished with the first coat, Felipe put the lid back on the urn and sat down in the swing beside Pete. They watched the paint dry in the hot sun in a comfortable silence. This was Felipe’s favorite part of the ceremony. His private remembrance. The rest seemed more for show—a statement to the family and community that this person would be missed. But it was in the hours before Mrs. Espinosa began her speech that Felipe felt was the real tribute. His skill with the paintbrush allowed him to honor the person in a way words could not.
Felipe fished a blue bandanna from his back pocket and tied it around his forehead to keep the sweat out of his eyes. Usually he would wait until late evening to paint, but Mrs. Espinosa wanted to have the service at sunset. She had argued that sunset was Mr. Sanders’s favorite time of day, which was true. However, at that moment, Felipe longed for cool shade. He still had a couple of coats before he could paint Mr. Sanders’s mural in the center of the cross. He would barely have time for a cold shower before sunset.

Pete cleared his throat awkwardly and tugged on the brim of his hat.

“What?” Felipe asked, dragging his thoughts back to the present.

“Well, I wasn’t sure if I should tell you, but I guess you’ll find out soon anyways,” he paused and shifted his feet, causing the swing to jerk. “I was out delivering some lumber over to the Foster ranch, and Marc mentioned that Mae was coming back for the summer. She’s supposed to arrive tomorrow.”

Felipe felt his chest clinch. Mae. He stared down at the dirt in front of him, keeping his thoughts shielded. It had been a long time since he’d seen Mae. His last image of her was her small Ford pickup loaded with boxes as she drove off to college.

Pete continued talking, not realizing how much his words had affected Felipe. “Marc said he’s throwing a welcome home party for her tomorrow night. He’s inviting pretty much everyone. It’s going to be a big shindig. He told me to tell you that you should come.”

“Maybe I will,” Felipe said, making himself sound bored with the topic. However, he knew he would be there. He hadn’t spoken to her since she left, but he wanted to see her. “I take it Beth and you are going?”
Pete nodded his head. They fell into silence again. Pete rocked back and forth; the swing creaking rhythmically under his weight. After a while, Felipe started the second coat and Pete took himself back to his lumber store. There wasn’t anything else for Pete to do, and he rarely stayed for the entire painting. Sometimes, when things at the store were slow, he’d bring a case of beer and keep Felipe company. But today had broken a hundred and there was no sense in both of them sitting outside sweating.

Felipe finished the last coat. It would be a few hours before he could paint the mural. He decided to run a quick errand and then reopen the store while he waited for the paint to dry. In his pickup, he navigated his way through the small town, driving past the crematorium to a small two-story white house with a dried up garden. He honked once before sliding out of the cab and walking up to the front door. It opened before he had a chance to knock.

A tall young man with long brown hair and pale green eyes stood in the doorway. He gave a slight nod to Pete before pushing open the screen door to allow him to enter. Felipe walked into the house lit only by sunlight. All the windows were open to allow whatever breeze there might be to come through.

“I’m glad I caught you at home,” Felipe said as the man led the way to the small kitchen. Daniel Wilton had been Felipe’s friend since they were both toddlers crawling around on the floor. It was like that with most of the town—they had all grown up together and were either good friends or had a love-hate relationship that only years of acquaintance could achieve.

Daniel opened the fridge and pulled out two longnecks. One he handed to Felipe and the other he swiftly opened and took a long drink. “I still have an hour before I have
to go to work.” He pulled out a chair from the small kitchen table that sat in the middle of the room. Felipe joined him.

“How’s your mother?” Felipe asked. Mrs. Wilton had been slowly declining since her husband’s death several years ago.

“The same. Doc says she doesn’t have much longer,” Daniel said tonelessly. They drank in silence for a moment. Felipe knew Daniel was waiting to hear what had brought him over here.

“I hear Marc is throwing a welcome home party tomorrow night for Mae.”

“Is that so?” Daniel raised one of his eyebrows.

A smile creased Felipe’s tanned face. “You want to come with me?”

“It’s been almost two years since Mae’s been home.”

“Yeah, she had that internship last summer.”

“Did she now?” Daniel asked, smirking. “Well, I didn’t know you still kept up with her.”

“People talk.” Felipe hedged. “So?”

“Well, I’d like to welcome Mae home, too. We did used to be friends and all.” Daniel leaned back in his chair. “Who knows, maybe I’ll even have a chance with her this time,” he teased.

Felipe kicked the leg of Daniel’s chair. “I thought college was supposed to improve one’s taste.”

“Yeah, but she did date you. There really is only room from improvement.” Daniel gave Felipe his famous dimpled grin.
It was so rare to see his friend display good humor. Felipe didn’t mind Daniel’s teasing. Since his father’s death, Daniel had been tittering on a sharp line between passivity and violent rebellion. Felipe wasn’t sure what side of that line Daniel would eventually fall when his mother finally passed.

Felipe tried to think of other ways to encourage Daniel’s good behavior but was too preoccupied with Mae. He was going to see her tomorrow night. He wondered—no—he hoped they could start back from where they left off. They never actually had broken up. When Mae had left for college, their last words had resembled “see you soon” more than “have a nice life.” Of course they also hadn’t talked since.

Felipe finished his beer and tossed it in the trash, his entire body brimming with tension. “So, you’ll go?” he asked.

Daniel shrugged his shoulders. “Why not,” he replied nonchalantly.

“And one more thing—will you come to Mr. Sanders’s ceremony?”

“Why?”

“Because just like me, you’ve known him since we were kids. He was a pretty good teacher and an even better person.” It was hard for Felipe to explain exactly why this was important—it just was Daniel hadn’t been to a ceremony since his father’s. With Daniel’s mother’s decreasing health, Felipe thought it might be easier on Daniel if he attended someone else’s ceremony before Daniel’s mother passed.

Felipe released a pent-up breath, not realizing he’d been holding it. He felt like a coward that he needed his best friend with him in order to see the woman that broke his heart. He wasn’t sure how she would react when she saw him—it wouldn’t be a surprise, Juan was too small of a town for her to really avoid him. But it didn’t mean she wouldn’t
welcome him with open arms. After all, he’d let her go. He never tried to call her after she left. Then again, she might not think much of him at all.

He finished the rest of his beer in silence—too caught up in maybes to keep up a polite conversation. Fortunately, he knew Daniel understood. The hum of the fridge was the only noise as they sat, drawing comfort from each other’s presence.
Corine Espinosa watched sweat drip down her tea glass, making a ring on the coaster under it. She felt Lola shift restlessly beside her on the small mauve couch. They had been crammed into a small two door sedan for the past two days. Both of them longed to stretch their legs, but instead they were sitting in their grandmother’s stuffy living room. In the distance, she could hear the church bell ringing. She counted the deep chimes until it stopped at twelve.

On the other side of Corine, Carmelita flicked her long dark hair impatiently. Her manicured nails drummed an erratic beat on tan knee. She had the smooth confidence of a woman who knew she was beautiful and was used to getting things her way. Carmelita’s current irritation was one only Maria could create—Corine’s grandmother never gave in easily.

“You can’t leave them with me again. I told you last time. They’re your responsibility,” Maria stated. She sat across from them on a matching couch.

“It’s just for a few weeks. We’re driving to Argentina. The girls will be miserable, and besides, Javier mentioned that it will be crowded with all the guests for the wedding,” Carmelita argued. With her youthful appearance, she often got mistaken for being Corine and Lola’s older sister instead of their mother.

For the first time, Corine wanted to interject. Out of all Carmelita’s previous boyfriends, Javier was the first one that Corine liked. Javier was a businessman Carmelita had the luck of literally running into while grocery shopping three months ago in Las Vegas. Right around when everything in their lives, mostly Corine’s, seemed to
tittering out of control. He was the longest relationship Carmelita had had in a while. He was sincere and kind to Lola and Corine. They had both been so excited when he had invited all of them to his family’s ranch in Argentina for his brother’s wedding—Corine, especially. She’d been waiting impatiently for months for them to finally leave Las Vegas. The shadows casted from the bright lights of the strip had caused Corine to almost lose Lola. She would never forgive the city for that.

Carmelita, on the other hand, chose to ignore anything she deemed unpleasant. After Javier’s invitation, she immediately began to plan the trip, but she wouldn’t share the details with Corine. She grew quiet and would stare into the distance with a small smile. Corine was all too familiar with that look. She had seen it four times before. It always ended with Corine and Lola being left at their grandmother’s for months while their mother disappeared with a new boyfriend. That smile always foreshadowed Carmelita’s impending escape.

Corine felt Maria studying her but didn’t look up. She hadn’t seen or heard from her grandmother in five years—she felt more like a stranger than family. Lola’s small hand clasped hers.

“Humph. They can stay here. On one condition,” Maria said, pursing her lips.

“What condition?” Carmelita asked suspiciously.

“They stay for good. You’re not going to show up in a few months and drag them off to goodness knows where. It’s time these girls grew some roots. They’ve been drifting along with you for far too long. They deserve better.”

“They’re my daughters,” Carmelita argued. “You have no right to ask for such a thing.”
“They’re my granddaughters and that’s the deal.” Maria leaned back and clasped her hands, resting them in her lap.

Corine drew in a sharp breath; her eyes wide. Surely Carmelita wouldn’t agree. She wouldn’t leave them in Juan, miles from anywhere.

“You think I’d let them be raised in this mausoleum of a town? Your traditions are outdated and pointless, and I won’t have you forcing them on my girls like you tried to force them on me.” Carmelita stood up, her fists clenched. She began to yell in Spanish. Corine only understood a few words—Carmelita rarely spoke Spanish and usually only when she didn’t want her words to be understood by Lola or Corine.

Maria quietly listened. She appeared unruffled in her navy dress and styled silver hair. Eventually Carmelita had to pause in her tirade to take a deep breath. Maria pointed to the vacant spot on the couch beside Corine. Automatically, Carmelita sat down.

“This is your choice. I’m not forcing anything on you. You either take the girls with you, or they stay with me for good,” Maria paused, as if another thought occurred to her. “I will make one exception. If you come back married to this Javier, I might let you take the girls with you.”

Carmelita crossed her arms and huffed. Before she could answer, Corine hopped off the couch and ran outside. The screen door banged closed behind her. The heat from sunny afternoon slammed into her and instantly sweat began to dampen her forehead and her neck. She kept to the cool shadows of the porch, staring at Chihuahuan desert which was her grandmother’s backyard.
Corine had spent the majority of her life in the southwest; her mother moving them place to place. Her mother loved the desert. It was her siren song—the place where she went to find love, but always ended up with a broken heart. Corine was drawn to the desert too but not for the same reasons. She loved its vastness, the miles and miles of cacti and dirt. They had lived in all four desert regions of the U.S., and each one fascinated her with its unique personality.

The farthest East Corine had ever gone was a month they spent in Oklahoma, right after her mother broke up with a forest ranger from Colorado. Her mother’s response to the majority of her failed relationships was to move immediately. However, no matter how far they drifted away, they always came back. The southwest was home, albeit a large one. Even the incident in Vegas couldn’t alter that.

The screen door banged again. She knew Lola was standing behind her without looking. She held out her hand. Lola quickly took it and wrapped her other arm around Corine’s waist, hugging her tight.

Corine didn’t have to hear Carmelita’s answer to her grandmother’s proposition. She knew her mother too well. She was going to say yes—she didn’t like it, but she would say yes all the same. This was going to be Corine’s home for the next year. She didn’t imagine she would stick around long after she turned eighteen. Lola, on the other hand, would have to live in Juan for the next six years. Corine rested her head on Lola’s. She wondered if she would be able to leave Lola here when the time came—her heart tightened at the thought.

“She said yes,” Lola said, softly.
Corine held her tighter. “It’ll be ok. We’ve stayed here before. It’s not like she’s leaving us in some strange place. You remember your grandmother, don’t you?”

Lola nodded her head.

“See—everything will be fine. Who knows, maybe mother will surprise us and marry Javier.” Corine forced herself to sound optimistic.

“Maybe,” Lola agreed.

Corine knew they were both pretending to make the other feel better—not that either of them would admit it. Corine took care of Lola and Lola took care of Corine. It was the way it had been since Carmelita had placed Lola in Corine’s five-year old arms.

Upon first glance, Lola and her looked more like distant cousins than sisters, but a closer inspection would reveal the same arched eyebrows and full lips—both of which they got from their mother. Lola, in many ways, was a miniature Carmelita. She had short dark hair and amber eyes. She also had their mother’s short stature. However, despite these similarities, she was more likely to be considered awkward than beautiful. She had always been on the chubby side and lacked Carmelita’s confidence and ease.

Corine, on the other hand, looked more like her father. Though she knew nothing about him, she had a picture of him that she stole from her mother. There was no way that man could ever deny she was his daughter. From her height—she was a little over five and eight inches—to her long, straight blonde hair and dark brown eyes that were almost black. She was definitely her father’s daughter in looks, but her mother’s daughter in resourcefulness. From her mother she’d learn how to use the admiration garnered from those looks to her advantage. As long as her looks lasted, Corine knew she could get by in the world.
Despite these differences, Corine and Lola were extremely close. Lola was her responsibility, and Corine would always take care of her.

Corine patted Lola’s arm. “Think about how nice it will be to stay in one place for a while.”

“We were in Vegas for a year.” Lola pulled away from Corine and leaned against the porch railing. “Before—” Lola’s voice trailed off, unable to put words to the event that had almost altered her life forever. “I had made a friend.”

Corine chose to ignore the slip. “Well, this time you’ll know for sure that you can make friends—you’re not going to have to worry about leaving them.”

Lola took a deep breath and looked around at the red dirt, cacti, and few other houses she could see in the distance. “Juan, huh. You’re going to get bored.”

“Probably.”

“Do you think you could be happy here?” Lola asked, sounding much older than her twelve years.

“Maybe.”

“Are you going to give Maria a hard time?”

Corine smiled in answer. It wasn’t a cheerful smile or her mother’s smile. It was a smile of rebellion. She was stuck in Juan and had no intention of making it easy on her grandmother.

Her gaze shifted to the desert landscape in front of her. Even her love of the desert would help her be content here. She had never liked the town; it was too full of death. She was not looking forward to the next year.
Chapter Three

Marc Foster leaned back in the bed of the pickup truck, a long neck sweating in his hand. Through the narrow slits of his eyes, he watched Jim Houston repair the barb wire fence that separated his family ranch from the rest of Texas. Beside Marc, Donnie puffed on a joint, stretched out on his back. Occasionally, Donnie would crack a joke that would send all three of them laughing.

Marc didn’t know Donnie’s last name. As far as he knew, Donnie didn’t have a last name. About three years ago, Donnie had sauntered into Juan, taking odd jobs. He kept mostly to himself. Eventually, Marc and him became friends, and Marc learned bits of information about Donnie that he could never repeat. Nobody intimidated Marc like Donnie could. On the other hand, nobody was more fun than Donnie.

They were about thirty minutes from the house, and Marc was grateful to be out from under his father’s ever watchful glare. He glanced at his watch and then to the sun blazing directly overhead. Normally he would be sheltered under some tree or in some bar come noon on hot day like today, but that morning he had had another yelling match with his father, which left him with the urge to escape—to get as far away as he could. Since he was left with a beat up ranch pickup, which had to be shared with the ranch hands, he was forced to join Jim. Still, drinking beer out of a cooler was a far cry better than sitting around the house, waiting for another lecture from his father.

Marc adjusted the brim of his cowboy hat and watched Jim idly. His relationship with his father had grown from distant to extremely tense when Marc flunked out of his
second year of college. Already on probation, Marc found himself stumbling back home with a letter explaining his expulsion. His father hadn’t been too pleased, especially since he was the one footing the bill. The whole situation became another thing his father could use to compare Marc to his sister, Mae. He could hear his father’s deep voice informing him, “Look, Mae’s on the Dean’s List again” or “Why can’t you have some of Mae’s ambition?”

It wasn’t enough that they shared the same birthday—he also had to live in her shadow. Not that he held it against her. He loved his sister. It was his father that was the problem.

“When does Mae get in tomorrow?” Donnie asked, his deep voice vibrating the air around him.

“Oh, around three or four. I don’t think she’s in that much of a hurry.”

In front of them, Jim launched into a series of swears at a section of barb wire that ripped his forearm open. He kicked the fence before pulling a handkerchief from his back pocket to wrap around his arm.

It was the most words Marc had heard from him all morning. Jim was lean, about mid-height with sandy blonde hair that brushed the top of his shoulders. He never said much, which Marc appreciated, and he was a hard worker, which Marc’s father appreciated.

Donnie slid closer to Marc. “Do you want to take care of that thing?” he asked, his voice low.
Marc made sure Jim was still preoccupied before answering. “Yep.” He accepted a thick, dirty worn envelope from Donnie and hid it in his back pocket without examining its contents. “Tomorrow?”

“During the party.”

Marc nodded his head, not wanting to discuss the subject longer than necessary. He finished his beer and grabbed another from the cooler. As long as he was paid, he didn’t really care. About six months ago, his father had made the pronouncement that while Marc could continue to live there, his father was no longer covering his expenses. In his deep booming voice, his father told Marc to get a job or to start helping out on the ranch. As far as his father knew, that was exactly what Marc was doing now—helping Jim fix fences.

A trail of dust in the distance caught Marc’s eye. He let out a string of swears and jumped up. He pulled on a pair of work gloves and began helping Jim. About five minutes later, a navy double cab pickup truck parked beside theirs. A tall lean man in a white long sleeve shirt, blue jeans, and cowboy boots hopped out of the cab. The man appeared to be in his mid fifties with weathered skin and soft silver hair. He wore a cowboy hat low over his forehead, shielding his blue eyes.

“I see you’re actually working,” Paul Foster said to Marc. He checked over Jim’s work and let out a low gruff. “Looks good.”

“Is that why you’re out here—to check on me?” Marc asked. His eyes were narrowed, and he widened his stance, preparing for a fight.

“I don’t have to have a reason to drive out on my own ranch, son.”
Marc pulled off his work gloves and tossed them in the back of the work truck. Donnie handed him a beer before sinking into the corner of the bed, making himself invisible.

“What do you want, Mr. Foster?” Marc said with exaggerated politeness.

Paul raised one eyebrow but didn’t take the bait. “I need you to run into town. The paint I ordered for the house is finally in.”

“And how do you expect me to do that? Jim needs the work truck.”

“I’ll let you drop me off at the house, and you can take this one.”

Marc resisted the retort that begged to be released. He did want to go into town, and this was the only opportunity for a while. “Fine.”

Paul got into the passenger side of the truck and waited for Marc. Marc finished his beer and nodded his head at Donnie before he drove off in his dad’s truck. Occasionally he would glance at his father from the corner of this eye.

Paul Foster was a hard man, perhaps because he had to be. Paul owned a large ranch, which had been passed down through his family—father to son for generations. Marc’s grandfather had been a firm believer that in order to run a ranch, it was necessary to know it from the inside out. Because of this, Paul had spent weeks on the range, usually with only his horse for company, when he was just a teenager. His grandfather made Paul fight for everything—but that wasn’t what hardened him. It had made him lean and tough, yes. But he was still capable of laughter. Marc’s mother used to tell him that it was his father’s warm laugh that first caught her attention, and it was the sparkle in his eyes, that made her love him.
Marc had fragmented memories of his father playing with Mae and him when they were little. He remembered great big bear hugs and soft bedtime stories. But this all changed when Mae and Marc turned ten.

No one knows exactly what happened. But one night, his mother ran her pickup off the road, flipping it several times, killing her instantly. Since then, Marc had heard it all: it was the small pickup she was driving—they flip easy; must have been an animal in the road—you know how tenderhearted she was; she must have been tired after working all day—that’s what caused the truck to go off the road. The worst was the one that came much later: Paul and his mother were fighting—she must have been driving recklessly, being upset and all, and this caused the accident.

“Drop me off by the barn.” His father’s gruff voice was like cold water being thrown on him.

“Sure.” Marc shook his head slightly, trying to get rid of the invading dark memories. While he knew the reasons for the change in his father, Marc would never forgive him.

It was a good while later before Marc pulled into Juan. Instead of heading to the store, he pulled into the parking lot of Morris’s Bar. He wasn’t in a hurry to accomplish the task that had lead to his brief bout of freedom.

The bar’s cool darkness washed over him and he breathed in the stale smoky air, relaxing for the first time that day.

“Hello stranger,” a husky voice said.

It took a moment for Marc’s eyes to adjust. Amy Belle, Morris’s only waitress and niece, sat at the bar in short blue jean skirt and a halter top. She was one of the few
women that Marc knew that could pull off that look. Her short black hair was pulled into a high ponytail. Her nutmeg eyes seemed to sparkle as they catch sight of him.

“How you doing Amy?” He said down next to her, examining her outfit closer. His hand automatically began rubbing her knee.

“Better, now.” She flashed a smile. “What can I get you to drink?”

“How about some whiskey.” He glanced around at the empty bar.

Amy stood up and walked around to the other side of the bar. “Rough day?”

“Always.”

She slid a double shot of whiskey towards him and leaned across the bar, giving him a good view of her cleavage. “You know, Morris is out right now.”

“Hmm.”

“And there’s still that cot in the back.”

Marc tilted his head down, hiding his smile. “Really?”

Amy walked around the bar and popped a quarter into the jukebox. Cash’s deep voice began singing about a burning ring of fire. Amy raised her eyebrow at Marc before disappearing into the back.

Marc finished his whiskey with a grin before following her. This was their routine. He’d been with Amy since she turned seventeen, and he suddenly realized how hot the bartender’s niece was. She wasn’t his girlfriend. He didn’t have girlfriends. She was just his—friend with benefits. Although he had to acknowledge, they weren’t that close of friends. He never wanted her to get too attached or to think they were serious when they weren’t. Besides, the great and mighty Paul Foster wouldn’t abide his only
son dating a bartender. No, Paul always seemed to have greater expectations for his son—which was why Marc found such pleasure in disappointing him.
Grace William stood on the lip of the deep tank that sat on the western edge of her ranch. Next to it a windmill squeaked in its effort to bring up water. She wondered how much longer its gears could handle the strain.

Even in the dry seasons, the tank normally sat half full. But this dry season had been longer and hotter than the others, reducing the water in the tank to a muddy puddle.

“And the other two?” she asked, referencing the other tanks which sat on the northern and eastern border.

“The same.” Nate Ackley, her ranch manager, kicked at a dirt clod with the toe of his scuffed boots. “It’s not the windmills. They’re working fine. The wells are just drying up.”

Grace looked up at the clear blue sky—the same sky that had sat over Juan for months. She was used to drought; she’d lived in west Texas for over twenty years. But this one was different—meaner. She’d never had all her wells dry up before.

The sun was at the noon mark. Ms. Halley would be ringing the bell for lunch soon, not that they would hear it out here on the range. Grace walked over to the dusty four-wheel drive pickup and opened the tailgate. She sat down, opened an old red cooler, and fished out two sandwiches and two bottles of water. She tossed one of each to Nate.

“I know you don’t want to hear it—”

“Well don’t say it,” Grace interrupted. She glared at him.
“But you’re going to have to sell,” Nate continued. His tall lean body rippled with tension as he braced for her response. Under his cowboy hat, only a hint of his short sandy blonde hair was visible. The small wrinkles around his pale blue eyes emphasized his worry. Grace slowly opened the bottle of water and took a long drink. She took in the hard, brown landscape around her, miles of cacti and shrub brush that had been in her husband’s family for generations. Once her husband—the last heir—died, it all became hers. She’d resisted at first. Even considered selling, but she could never bring herself to signing the papers. She couldn’t let go of this last bit of her husband. The ranch was full of memories of him.

She hopped off the tailgate and walked away from Nate, seeking a bit of privacy.

“What do I do, Henry?” she asked her husband silently. “Do I just let the horses we intend to sell go to auction early? Can I get away with keeping the rest?” Her stomach knotted and she felt queasy.

She couldn’t afford to lose all her horses, but they might be taken from her one way or the other. Henry would have known what to do—he always had. Half the time, she felt like she was just winging it, even after all these years.

She took a deep breath, easing the tension out of her body, before heading back over to Nate.

“We’ll auction the ones we were going to sell in August. That should make the water last a little longer. Let’s hold off on the rest of the herd. I’d rather not sell them if we don’t have to.”

Nate seemed to approve of her decision, which made her feel a little better. “And let’s see if we can get that old windmill up on the ridge working again,” she continued.
“It’ll cost.”

Grace bit the edge of her lip but nodded her head. “Henry told me once that when the last hard drought hit back when he was a kid, that reserve well seemed to make all the difference. Let’s see if it’ll help us too.”

“It might be getting dry like the others.”

She took a drink of water, deciding to let his last comment pass unnoticed. She refused to believe that their last life line might be false hope. Nate had always been a practical man, choosing to face facts instead of spending his time hoping for something better. He kept her grounded most of the time but at other times, he just made her more determined to look for the shiny side of the coin. He had taken care of her since Henry died, but occasionally she wondered if she depended on him too much.

Nate kept to himself mostly, but all her ranch hands along with everyone in town respected him—mostly because he was always quick to offer his help and wasn’t free with his opinions. In the beginning, it had taken Grace months to realize that Nate’s stern exterior said nothing of the man underneath. And still, after ten years of working together, there was much she did not know about him.

“Well, we won’t know anything until we get that windmill working,” Grace said finally, avoiding optimism since it would provoke Nate. He always worried about her when she got too hopeful. He’d once told her that hope was for those who were too cowardly to face the truth.

Back at the house, Grace headed straight to the office to go over the numbers again. No matter how many times she did the math, it all added up to her having to sell a
larger portion of herd than desired. It wouldn’t shut the ranch down, but it would have them barely scraping by for a couple of years. It was manageable. At least for the moment. She couldn’t think about what would happen if the reserve wells were just as dry as the others, nor what would happen if the drought continued. That might mean losing the ranch altogether. Something she was sure Paul Foster would love. He’d been trying to buy the place out from her for years.

Grace tapped the end of her pencil against the desk. Or maybe not. This drought had to be affecting the Foster Ranch just as much. Sure it was larger with more access to water, but he also had a larger herd that needed that extra water. No doubt he’d have to sell early too. She hated the small pleasure that brought her. She was better than that.

Running an agitated hand through her short honey locks, she leaned back in her chair. Twenty-five years ago if someone had told her she would be running a ranch in Texas, she would have thought they were crazy. She had been what most would call “gently raised” in a small community in Vermont. Both her parents came from wealthy families and had had certain expectations for their only child. She had attended all the right schools, knew all the right people, and by her twentieth birthday, had been engaged to the right man.

If she done as her parents had wanted, she had no doubt she’d still be living in Vermont with a husband who was at work more than he was at home—a comfortable life devoid of any deep emotions. Instead, the Spring Break before her graduation, she ran off with her friends to Vegas. It was there she’d met Henry William, who’d been doing some youthful rebelling of his own.
Like a cliché from a bad movie, she fell instantly in love with the six-foot, dark-haired, brown-eyed man, who was everything her parents disapproved of. Without any hesitation, she made a brief call to her current fiancée, breaking off their engagement, and then married Henry in the same chapel that Elvis had married Priscilla in.

She’d never regretted marrying Henry. She’d loved him from that first day. She’d loved him even more when he’d taken her into his arms and told her several years later, after their second miscarriage, that it was ok that they would never have kids of their own. And it had been. They’d been married for twelve years when Henry passed away from a heart attack. It had felt like he’d been stolen from her. Their time together much too short. Maybe that was why she fought so hard against letting go of any part of him.

Ms. Halley popped her head into Grace’s office, waiting until she had Grace’s attention to speak.

“Yes?” Grace asked.

“Mr. Foster called again.”

“What did he say he wanted this time?”

“He said just a neighborly courteous call. Said he heard how bad the drought was affecting us. Wanted to know if there is anything he could do.” Ms. Halley smoothed the front of her apron. She’d been at the Williams Ranch longer than Grace had and was well aware of the tension between the Williams and the Fosters. It wasn’t quite feuding but it wasn’t friendly either. Grace imagined that Ms. Halley knew more secrets about the two families than she’d ever share.
Ms. Halley had chosen early in life to never marry, though Grace never knew why. Grace had loved being married. She couldn’t understand why someone would want to avoid it. Ms. Halley, however, wasn’t one to ever explain her actions or discuss the past. Grace had made the mistake of trying to get to know Ms. Halley better only once shortly after she’d married Henry. The only thing she’d learned was that Ms. Halley did not like to be called by her first name and did not answer questions about herself.

The short, silver haired woman was a force to be reckoned with when provoked, but she was also extremely loyal. She had been with the William’s through the good times and the bad and was the best cook in a hundred miles.

“What do you think he really wanted?” Grace asked.

“Oh, I suspect he’s been making that pretty clear.”

Grace looked at her blankly.

Ms. Halley sighed. “Anyone could see that man has been trying to court you for months.”

Grace rolled her wedding ring with her thumb, an unconscious habit she’d developed since Henry’s death. “That might be what he’s trying to do, but it doesn’t say anything about what he wants.” She stood and looked out the window behind the desk. “Maybe he hopes that by getting on my good side, I’ll be more likely to sell the ranch to him.”

Ms. Halley pursed her lips.

“You don’t agree?”
“Mr. Foster has asked you for years to sell this place. I imagine he realizes now that you won’t ever sale.”

“Maybe.”

“Eventually you’re going to have to talk to him.”

Grace’s back stiffened but she knew Ms. Halley was right. One could only avoid Paul Foster for so long. She was sure he would accidentally run into her soon.

“What should I do?” she asked, wishing for some motherly advice, which she knew Ms. Halley would never give.

“Go out with the man. What could it hurt?”

Grace jerked in surprise at Ms. Halley’s response. Usually Ms. Halley shrugged her shoulders at Grace’s musings.

“A date. With Paul Foster.” She looked down at her wedding ring.

“Henry wouldn’t begrudge you a companion. It’s about time you had someone warming that bed beside you again.”

Grace felt numb with shock but liked this crack in Ms. Halley’s no nonsense veneer. She hoped that it would become a common occurrence.

She nodded her head and turned back to the window. Not because she was actually considering dating Paul Foster but because she was without words at the moment. Dating that man would be a bad idea. For one thing she didn’t trust him, and she couldn’t imagine going out on a date with a man she didn’t trust. He was up to something. She was sure of it. If she was patient, he’d reveal himself soon enough.
Mike turned the volume up on the radio inside his bronco. There were only two stations available in Juan—country and Christian country. Currently, he was listening to Patty Smith belting lyrics about heartbreak.

He rapped his thumbs against the steering wheel as he headed to the gas and repair station. The bronco was only a fourth of a tank low, but he went ahead and pulled up to the pumps, causing a sharp bell to ring twice. He turned off the engine and rolled down his window. A minute passed before Daniel Wilton walked out of the garage. The tall young man was dressed in work overalls that were stained with grease. He hesitated only briefly when he saw Mike’s brown bronco.

“Sheriff.” Daniel nodded his head slightly and wiped the grease off hands onto a dirty rag.

“Just wanting some gas.”

Daniel unscrewed the bronco’s gas tank and inserted the unleaded nozzle. Once the gas began to pump, Daniel walked around to the front and cleaned the windshield.

“How’s your mother doing?”

“The same.”

Mike wanted to ask more but didn’t. The last thing he wanted was to break a promise he had made ages ago.

The pump clicked to a stop and Daniel replaced the nozzle. Mike pulled out enough bills to cover the gas and a few extra for a tip. Daniel didn’t count it. He just
slipped it into his pocket, tilted his head once towards Mike, and sauntered back into the station’s garage. Mike waited only a moment before turning the bronco’s key and bringing it purring to life. Why ask questions when he could just go see her for himself?

He pulled out of the station and proceeded down several smaller roads, passing the crematorium. He pulled around the back of a small white two-story house. Instead of getting out of the bronco, Mike leaned forward and rested his head against the steering wheel. He knew he shouldn’t be there. Last time he’d promised himself—promised her—that he’d stay away. And he had. It had been six long months. He glanced at the white tulips sitting in the seat beside him. He bought them earlier, knowing then he would break down and see her. She didn’t have much time left; he needed to see her one last time.

After taking a deep breath, he slid his five-foot eight frame out of the bronco and adjusted his cowboy hat. The backdoor was unlocked, like he knew it would be. Silently, he made his way through the small kitchen to the stairs. He knew which room was hers, could find it in the dark. Her door was wide open and sunlight filtered through the doorway. In the corner, her nurse sat in a rocking chair knitting. She stood when she saw him and hesitated briefly before leaving the room.

Mike walked slowly to the bed and the woman lying in the middle. He took off his hat and laid the tulips on her nightstand next to a glass of water. The woman was pale as the sheets she was encased in with long brown hair and dark circles around her eyes. He reached out and gently touched her wrist. Her transparent blue eyes flickered open and focused on him. Her brows wrinkled in confusion before her lips softened into a smile.
“Mike,” she breathed his name tenderly.

“Hi, Katie-girl.” He lightly stroked the back of her hand. “I missed you.”

Her eyes drifted close, and for a moment, he thought she had gone back to sleep. But then a frown marred her peaceful face.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she said, strength coming back into her voice. Her eyes jerked open, and she struggled to rise. “Is he here? Does he know?”

“Shhh,” Mike tried to ease her back onto the pillows. “He’s at work.”

Kate relaxed, her hands shaking slightly. “I don’t want him to know.”

Mike picked up one of her hands and kissed it. “Do you remember the first time we met?”

“Hmm…it was at the dance. I was visiting my cousin,” she paused, her eyes drifting close again. “You were so handsome.”

“I was standing against the wall when you walked into the room. You were wearing a yellow dress with your hair pulled up in a ponytail. I thought you looked like a summer day—all glowing and sweet. I didn’t know how to dance, but I had to talk to you.” He rubbed her hand against his cheek.

“You walked across the room and stood there awkwardly. I thought you were going to ask me to dance, but you didn’t,” Kate said.

“I could barely speak; I was so nervous.”

“So I took your hand and asked if you would care to walk around the room.”

“Your hand felt so small in mine.” Mike encased her hand between his. “I knew then that I never wanted to let you go.”
She allowed him to hold her hand a moment longer before she pulled it free. “But you never told me.”

“And you met Wally.”

“Yes, I met Wally, and I loved him. I still do.”

“And I fell in love with Sue.”

“Yes, and there is Sue,” Kate whispered.

Mike leaned close, his lips almost touching hers. “So why has this feeling never gone away?”

“I don’t know, but I wish it would.”

“I don’t.” He closed the distance and kissed her softly. “I will always love you.”

He rested his forehead against hers.

“I need you to promise me something.”

“What?”

“I need you to take care of Daniel after I’m gone.”

“Don’t talk about dying.”

“Be practical now. We both know I don’t have long. I can feel it. Every day I slip further away. I need to know that Daniel will be ok. I was never strong enough for him. He’s going to need someone.”

“I’ll be there. You don’t have to worry.”

“Good. Good.” She patted his hand. “Now tell me goodbye.”

“I could stay for a little longer—Daniel doesn’t get off work for several more hours.”

“No, now. Before I fall asleep. I want to say goodbye, too.”
Mike straightened his back and took a deep breath. He rested his hand on top of hers. “Katie, I’m sorry for so many things, but mostly, for not telling you how I felt when we were together. I stole years from us and that is something I can’t take back. I just need you to know that I love you.” He fought back tears he never allowed himself to cry. Crying never did anyone any good.

“I know. But I also need you to know that I don’t regret the years I spent with Wally. He was a good man.”

“He was.”

“I love you, too. Always have, always will.” She tilted her head up. “Now kiss me one last time and go.”

He kissed her forehead, her cheek, and last, her lips. He forced himself to pick up his hat, not wanting to leave.

“Mike?”

He paused, waiting.

“Don’t come back again.”

Without saying another word, he left. She was right—he couldn’t come back. Their goodbye would never be enough, but it was all they had.
Chapter Six

In the shadows of the porch, Lola hugged her sister’s waist as they watched Javier’s red Cadillac disappear around the corner, leaving a trail of dust. Beside them, Maria shook her head before going back into the house.

Javier had been only a few hours behind them, and not long after he arrived, Carmelita put her pink luggage in the Cadillac’s trunk, kissed Lola’s cheek, nodded at Corine, and told them she would see them soon.

“Why don’t we go for a walk?” Corine suggested, staring at their mother’s red sedan that had been abandoned in Maria’s driveway. The keys were tucked away in Maria’s pocket; she’d made sure of this before Carmelita left.

“If you’re going to be wandering around town, I’ll let you pick a few things up for me from the store,” Maria hollered from inside.

Lola felt the muscles in Corine’s back tighten, and she held her breath, waiting for Corine’s response. Corine resisted authority like Lola resisted change—together they made quite a pair. After a moment, Corine sighed and patted Lola’s shoulder.

“Sure. Just make me a list,” Corine yelled back.

“It’ll give us something to do,” Lola offered.

Corine kissed the top of Lola’s head and took a step away. “We’ll figure it all out.” She began to pace. “We may be stuck here, but we’ll find something to entertain us.”

Lola knew Corine’s us actually meant her. Corine was never one to sit still long; she was too much like their mother—always looking for something better. Lola longed
for the moment when she could say with certainty where she would be the following month—where she could unpack her things and not worry about leaving something behind—where she could finally make some friends. She didn’t have her sister’s looks or her mother’s charm. People didn’t strive to get her attention. She was just plain Lola. And while her sister might love her, no one else ever had.

“Here.” A hand holding a piece of paper pushed open the screen door. Corine took the list and held out her hand.

“What?” Maria asked.

“If you want us to buy these things, you’ll have to give us some cash.”

Maria humphed but a few seconds later a hand holding a twenty popped open the screen door again. Corine plucked the twenty from it with a smile.

“I expect a receipt.”

Corine didn’t answer her. She grabbed Lola’s hand and ran down the steps. Within a few minutes, Lola’s face turned red from the heat and lack of oxygen. She put her heals down and tugged Corine to a stop.

“We’re out of yelling distance,” Lola huffed.

Corine gave her a smile. “We could ditch the list and buy a bus ticket.”

“To where?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere else.”

“And then what?”

Corine’s smile slowly died. “Well that’s what makes it an adventure. The not knowing.”
Lola’s stomach clenched. She stopped walking and waited for Corine to turn to her.

“What?”

“Promise me you won’t leave me here.”

“Don’t be silly,” Corine said after a moment.

Lola grabbed her sister’s hand. “No. Promise me. Don’t leave me here alone.”

Corine tugged her forward into a hug. “Shhh. You know I would never leave you.” She patted Lola’s back. “It’s just us two. We have to look after each other.”

They headed back in the direction of the highway, where the Trading Post, a gas station, and a few other stores advertised civilization to travelers passing through. The houses that dotted the streets along the way were a mixture of adobe and wood. Their yards were sprinkled with long dry grass and cacti. A few had rock gardens made up of burnt orange, black, and gray.

Lola fanned the bottom of her t-shirt, wishing for a breeze or a stray cloud to drift over the sun. She had lived in the desert all her life but had never grown used to the overabundance of sun and heat. She longed for cool shadows and a season other than summer.

“We could probably get some things there,” Lola said, pointing to the Trading Post store. Corine nodded her head and led the way to the store.

A bell rang above the door as they entered the air conditioned oasis. The store was narrow but long with a small grocery section and another section displaying various southwestern crafts and some clothing. In the back was a sign advertising tattoos.
Corine headed towards the groceries while Lola wandered over to check out the southwestern art. She tucked her hands into pockets as she stared at clay bowls painted with bluebonnets sitting on glass shelves. There were small figurines, flint arrowheads, and paintings of the desert. Lola stopped in front of a small painting of mustangs crossing the Rio Grande with the sunset behind them. Her fingers itched to trace the energetic brush strokes. She knew her own work paled in comparison.

“Do you like it?” a deep voice asked behind her.

Lola jumped and turned around. A tall man with dark hair and tan skin stood a few feet away. His eyes were the exact color of a tiger’s-eye stone she’d found a few summers ago.

“I noticed you staring at the painting. What do you think?” he asked again.

Lola turned back to the painting. “I like the use of colors. And the brush strokes here make me feel like I could almost reach out and touch the horses.” She looked at the man. “Do you know the artist?”

“Yes. Are you an artist too?”

Lola blushed and shrugged her shoulders. She’d never thought of herself as an artist. She just knew she liked to draw and was pretty good at it.

The man grinned. “Well, you have the artistic eye—I’m sure of it.” The bell above the door rang. He leaned back and glanced at the newcomer before turning his attention back to her. “I haven’t seen you around here. Are you passing through?”

Lola tilted her head, examining him. She knew the whole ‘don’t talk to strangers’ bit, but there was something about this man that she liked. Maybe it was his sincerity. Maybe because he thought she was an artist and didn’t treat her like a kid.
“I’m going to be staying here for the summer,” she offered.

“Really? With who?”

“My grandmother.”

“Hey, Felipe! Plan on helping me anytime soon?” a voice yelled from the other side of the store.

The man grinned. “Someone is impatient.” He held his hand to her, “I’m Felipe by the way.”

Lola shook his hand. “I’m Lola.”

“Lola? After the song?”

Lola fought the urge to roll her eyes. It was a question she’d heard a thousand times before. “No. I’m just plain Lola.”

“I’m sure you’re not.” He gave her a grin before heading towards the customer.

Lola was glad he didn’t see her blush again. She bit the edge of her lip and peeked around the corner of the shelf, but he had already disappeared from sight. She glanced at the painting again. For a brief moment, she had felt as beautiful as those horses on the canvas. In its aftermath, she was giddy tinged with sadness—she wanted to feel beautiful again.

She followed the sound of voices to the checkout counter. Felipe was ringing up her sister’s groceries while another man leaned against the counter facing them. This man was shorter than Felipe with light brown hair and narrow blue eyes. Lola felt a like a cold finger of foreboding run down her spine. There was something about the look in his eyes that wasn’t right. They seemed inviting and friendly, but there was something else there. Something she couldn’t name.
“You should come. It’ll give you a chance to meet people,” the man said. He glanced at her sister with a flirty grin.

Lola went and stood by her sister. Absentmindedly, her sister rested her hand on Lola’s shoulder.

“And you can bring your sister,” the man continued. “I’m Marc.” He nodded at Lola—the shadow left his eyes. Lola wondered if her imagination was causing her trouble again. The man was most likely harmless.

Lola’s awkward shyness kicked in. She managed a smile but couldn’t get her mouth to move.

“This is Lola,” Corine said, her arm slipping around Lola’s shoulders in a half hug.

The man glanced again at Lola before returning his attention to Corine. Lola didn’t mind. With both men’s attention on her sister, Lola could observe Felipe without notice.

“Ok. We’ll come. Sounds like fun,” Corine said after a moment.

Lola nodded her head in agreement, although she knew neither man was paying any attention to her. Corine picked up two plastic bags of groceries and gave both men one last smile before walking out of the store. Lola trailed behind her, envying her sister’s ability for a perfect exit. Lola knew without looking back that there were two pairs of eyes following her sister until she disappeared from sight.

They walked a couple of blocks before Corine spoke.

“What do you think about going to Marc’s party?”
Lola shrugged her shoulders. “It might be fun.” She tried to model her sister’s cool confidence. She straightened her back and tilted her chin up.

“I think we might go,” Corine said with finality.

Excitement crept up inside Lola, and she tried to fight it off. She had been disappointed too many times in the past.

They walked the dirt road back to their grandmother’s house. On the porch, Corine handed the two plastic bags to Lola; then sat down on the rocking chair in the shade. Lola didn’t argue. For the first time in days, Corine was in a semi-good mood. She had no wish to spoil it.

Lola found Maria at the kitchen table, drinking ice tea. Without saying a word, Maria poured Lola a glass of tea and took the bags from her.

Lola sat down and took a long drink. Tea always seemed to quench her thirst faster than water. She wasn’t sure why.

“I’m making enchiladas for dinner. We are going to have to eat a little earlier today. Mr. Sanders’s service is at eight.”

“Mr. Sanders?”

“The school teacher.”

Lola watched Maria put away the groceries, paying close attention to where everything belonged. She was usually the one who took care of the meals—not because Corine wouldn’t cook but because Corine was an awful cook. Several years ago they had decided that Lola would cook and Corine would handle the dishes.

She helped Maria prepare the enchiladas and after Maria slid them into the oven, they took glasses and a pitcher of tea to the porch. For once, Corine was friendly to their
grandmother, answering her questions about school with politeness instead of surliness. Lola was beginning to think this was going to work—Corine would settle into life in Juan, Lola would make friends, and—well, that was as far as Lola could imagine for the moment, but it was enough.

They ate dinner in silence, having run out of things to talk about while sitting on the porch. Corine was the first up from the dinner table. While she promptly began to wash dishes, Lola wandered into the small bedroom she was sharing with Corine. It consisted of two twin beds on opposite sides of the room with a large nightstand between them. Beside each bed was a window, which created a nice breeze.

Lola put her small suitcase on one of the beds and unzipped it. Her suitcase contained a pair of jeans, two pairs of shorts, a few t-shirts, socks, underwear, and a boxer/t-shirt set she liked to sleep in. She had a vague memory of attending a funeral service with her grandmother; she couldn’t have been more than five. She wasn’t sure if any of her clothes were really service-worthy, but she did recall that light colors were preferred. She pulled out a light pair of jean shorts and a pale pink t-shirt. It would have to do.

Corine came into the room, lugging her own suitcase. It was twice the size of Lola’s and filled with a variety of clothes. Corine pulled out a lavender sundress and then glanced at Lola’s outfit.

“I guess if we sticking around here, we’ll have to get you something to wear to these.”

“Do that many people die here?” Lola asked. She couldn’t imagine the need for a dress she wouldn’t wear but once every few years.
“You’d be surprised.” Seeing Lola’s frown, she continued, “I remember one winter when we stayed here for five weeks, there were three deaths. I asked Maria about it. I couldn’t fathom three people dying in such a short time span. She said that death always comes in threes. That three was not such a large number. It was to be expected.”

Lola flopped back on her bed, clutching her shirt in her hand. “You mean two more people are going to die?”

Corine looked at her and laughed. “Sure. And black cats are really bad luck.”

Lola changed clothes in silence. She didn’t want to ask any more questions—she didn’t want her sister calling her superstitious, but still she couldn’t get the idea out of her head.

Maria knocked briefly on the bedroom door before entering. She wore a long white dress that was cinched at the waist with a belt. She nodded her head in approval at Corine’s outfit and then turned her attention to Lola.

“I see we’ll need to go shopping later,” Maria said gruffly.

Lola opened her mouth to protest but was silenced by Maria’s narrowed glance.

“We need to leave or we’ll be late. It’s important that I be there early to greet everyone.” Maria stood to the side and shooed both Lola and Corine out the door.

Although it wasn’t that far away, Maria insisted that they drive over in her red 1960 Ford pickup. “I have no desire to become hot and sweaty before the service,” she’d told them, glancing in the review mirror at her styled hair.

They were the first ones at the school playground. It was ten minutes before people began arriving. Lola slid partially behind Corine as Maria introduced them to half
the town. As soon as she could escape, she ducked behind a group of people walking towards the swing set and found a spot where she could observe without notice.

“Hi,” a loud voice said behind her. Lola turned slightly. A young girl about her age with short brown hair and blue eyes in a white dress stood, waiting for Lola to acknowledge her.

“Hi.” Lola shyly focused her attention back on the cross everyone was staring at.

“I’m Janie. Janie Myers.” After a few seconds of silence, she continued, “And you?”

“Lola Espinosa.”

“Are you Mrs. Espinosa’s granddaughter?”

Lola nodded her head. An old woman across the playground caught her eye. The woman had deeply tanned skin and long silver hair pulled together in a rough braid and partially covered by a brown cowboy hat. She wore a long sleeved button-up shirt with an unbuttoned leather vest and jeans. A leather gun belt holding two pearl handled pistols hung low on her waist.

“That’s Violet Lake,” Janie offered.

“Who’s she?”

“A rich widow that lives on a small ranch near the Foster’s. She’s crazy.”

“Crazy? And she’s wearing guns?”

“Yeah. She thinks she’s the great granddaughter of Billy the Kid.”

Lola’s eyes went wide. “Is she?”

“Who knows? Papa says not to pay attention to anything she says. And don’t worry—her guns don’t work.”
“Oh.”

Janie slid closer. “Did you know Mr. Sanders?”

Lola shook her head.

“He used to always holler at me. Said I talked too much and that I needed to listen more.” She bit the edge of her lip and sighed. “I’m going to miss him.”

The crowd around them grew silent as Maria began to talk. Lola wasn’t able to concentrate on the speech—she was more interested in everyone around them. Her fingers itched for her sketchpad to capture this moment of the sun setting behind the crowd and the shadows being cast from the cross. She tried to memorize every detail for when she got home.

A pair of golden eyes locked with hers. Lola felt her heart begin to pound. She shared a half smile with Felipe—somehow she knew he felt the same way about this moment as she did. A man beside him jabbed his elbow in Felipe’s side. The man had long brown hair that caressed his shoulders in waves. His eyes were pale green like summer grass. The intensity of his gaze was almost predatory. Lola stood up on her tiptoes to see who he was staring at. As soon as she saw blonde hair, she knew it was her sister. They might not always know where they were going to be from one day to the next, but one thing would never change—Corine would always have men striving for her attention.
Chapter Seven

“Is that Corine Espinosa?” Daniel asked, keeping his voice low. He was too aware of the crowd around them. He felt every inch of himself tense with awareness.

“Huh?” Felipe followed Daniel’s gaze. “Oh, Corine. You know her?”

It had been years since Daniel had last seen her. He remembered her as being all arms and legs with shiny blonde hair. He also remembered she had a killer throwing arm.

“Yeah—you should too. She’s been coming to Juan since we were kids.”

Felipe shrugged his shoulders. “She introduced herself to me today, so I guess I wasn’t the only one not remembering.”

“When?”

“At the store. She was picking some things up for Mrs. Espinosa.”

Daniel shoved his hands into his pockets. “How’d she seem?”

“Friendly. I think she’s going to be around for a while. She’s coming to Mae’s party.”

Daniel pretended to pay attention to the ceremony for Felipe’s sake, but his eyes kept wandering back to Corine. For a brief second, her gaze flicked towards him but there was no recognition. She frowned slightly and looked back at Mrs. Espinosa.

He didn’t really care about the ceremony. If it wasn’t for his respect for Mr. Sanders and Felipe, he wouldn’t be there at all. While the rest of the town carried on with a tradition that should have been dead and buried long ago—no pun intended—he refused to actively participate.
Mrs. Espinosa finished her prayer and turned to Mr. Sanders’s great grandson and only living heir, Jim Houston. She gave him an empty white urn covered with black Navajo symbols that had been scrubbed clean of its ash white paint. Jim would keep the urn until the next person died. Several years ago, the urn sat on Daniel’s mother’s dresser after his father’s cross was painted on a wall inside the crematorium. Daniel wanted to break into a million pieces then. He chose to ignore it now.

Corine Espinosa. She was definitely more pleasant to think about. His gaze shifted back across the crowd to her. She didn’t remember him. He was sure of it. He still carried her scar, and she didn’t even remember. He wasn’t sure if he was feeling hurt pride or just astonishment. She wore a short sundress with high-heeled sandals that made her even taller. The fading sunlight lovingly caressed her long blonde hair and tan skin. He wondered if her hair felt as soft as it looked and if her skin smelled of the sun.

She glanced at him again, frowning, but he could tell she was curious. Maybe it was good she didn’t remember. If she did, he doubted she would even talk to him. And he was slowly realizing that he really wanted to talk to her. She was the first interesting thing this town had seen in quite some time. He shifted his gaze but kept her in his periphery for the rest of the ceremony.

An hour later, Daniel was home. The small white two-story house was dark except for the porch light and an upstairs room. There was the slight smell of flowers in the air—he wasn’t sure what kind. He frowned.

“How is she?” he asked as he entered his mother’s room. He felt her forehead with the palm of his hand. She was asleep, but that wasn’t usual for this time of day.
Rachel Woods, his mother’s nurse, put down her knitting needles and stood up from her rocking chair. “She had a rough few hours, but she’s doing better now. How was Mr. Sanders’s service?”

“Fine. It feels like her fever has come back.”

“Yes. It spikes for a little bit but then goes back down.”

Daniel brushed her hair from her face. “The doctor said the fever was normal.”

“It is.”

He finally noticed the bouquet of white tulips on his mother’s nightstand. “Who brought the flowers?”

Rachel shrugged her shoulders. “I picked them up earlier when I went to the store. Thought they might cheer the room up.”

Daniel touched a soft petal. “Tulips are her favorite.”

“I know.”

He nodded his head in acceptance of that. Rachel had been his mother’s nurse for the past year, but before that, they’d been close friends. He gently brushed his mother’s frail hand. “Maybe she should be in the hospital now.”

“That’s why I’m here. They couldn’t do anything for her in a hospital that I’m not.” Rachel put her hand on his arm. “Daniel, this is what she wanted.”

“I know. It’s just sometimes it feels like ever since he died, she’s stop trying. That she’s spent the last few years just waiting to die,” he said, stating it as a fact not as an argument. His mother had taken to her room for a full month after his father died. She was never the same after that. At first, his mother’s lack of effort to move on after his father’s death made Daniel resentful. Now he was just resigned.
“Don’t talk that way. Your mother is sick—it’s beyond her control,” Rachel whispered harshly.

Daniel dipped his head. He felt like he was drowning—a feeling he was becoming too familiar with. “I know.” It wasn’t her fault cancer was eating away at her insides. He kissed his mother’s forehead and left her to her nurse. There wasn’t anything he could do for her anymore. Now, he felt like he was waiting too. First his father and now her.

He had never been very close with his mother, but she was all that he had. Once she was gone, he’d be all alone. He left her room and walked downstairs to the kitchen. Pulling open the fridge, he reached in for a beer but stopped. He already had his allowed beer for the day. He usually never permitted himself more—but today had been rough. He closed the fridge. If he was going to indulge, he at least wouldn’t do it alone.

There was a full moon and a nice breeze, so Daniel chose to walk the few blocks to Morris’s. If anything, he would keep him out of the house longer. He wondered what Corine was doing at that moment. He looked in the direction of Mrs. Espinosa’s house across the small town. He considered briefly crossing the deserted streets to her house but resisted the temptation. What would he do—knock on her door and say hi? He was sure that would go over real well. Besides, Mrs. Espinosa insisted on silence after the ceremony. Corine wouldn’t be allowed to talk to anyone until the morning.

Instead, Daniel slid into the bar unnoticed. The interior was dimly lit by a few electric lights and candles. Its soft shadows were comforting to the regulars and fit Daniel’s current mood perfectly. Darryl Holter was playing on the jukebox, drowning out most of the conversations. The pool tables were all taken and only one seat was left at
the end of the bar. Daniel took it then waved his hand at Amy Belle, who was tending
bar.

She sauntered up to him. Amy was a year his junior. She was barely five foot
five with short black hair, brown eyes and a body that curved in all the right places. They
had gotten along well since high school, though they’d never had a fling. Primarily
because she carried a torch for Marc Foster. With her appreciation of his dry humor and
his appreciation of her take-charge attitude, they had developed an easy-going friendship
over the years.

“What’ll be tonight?” she asked. She leaned on her elbows and looked him up
and down. “Unless you’re not here for a drink?”

“Oh, you know I never come here for the drinks,” he said smoothly and gave her a
good leer. “When are you going to leave this place and runaway with me?”

“I’ve got my bags packed—all you have to do is ask.”

The white haired, heavy man next to him put an elbow in Daniel’s side. “Better
watch making promises around Amy—you’ll end up with a shotgun to your back
standing at the altar.”

Amy turned her grin to the man. “Randy, are you offering to make this man
marry me?” She winked at Daniel.

The man shrugged his shoulders and raised his beer mug to her. “I got to take
care of my gal.” He took a drink. “So, what’ll be,” he nodded his head towards Daniel,
“You want this fellow?”

“I don’t know.” She looked Daniel over. “Are you house broken?”

“Barely.”
“Any bad habits?”

“Tons—but I promise they won’t bother you much.”

“What do you think Randy?”

The man huffed. “You could do better. I’m still available.”

Amy set out three shot glasses and filled each with tequila. She slid one in front of Daniel and one in front of the man. “Then we agree.”

Daniel and the man nodded. “To being single,” they said with accord. They shot back the tequila and slammed the glasses on the bar at the same time.

The tequila created a wave of warmth through Daniel’s body. He felt his tension ease. Amy set a Bud Light in front of him and filled up the man’s beer before her attention was drawn to the other end of the bar. Daniel took a long swallow of his beer before he scanned the bar. He saw a few familiar faces. There were some ranch hands from both William and Foster Ranches. Neither group was socializing with each other, of course. The Williams and Fosters had had a long standing rivalry for as long as Daniel could remember. He doubted there was a moment when they weren’t fighting.

Daniel looked down at his half empty beer. If he was a different man, he would spend the rest of the night seeking drunken bliss. But he wasn’t that man. He had made a promise to himself long ago to never again overindulge, and he would only allow himself one more beer before calling it a night. He had to be in control. He had to be responsible. A sigh escaped him. He had to be there to make up for the time he wasn’t.

“What’s got you frowning?” Amy asked, settling her attention back on him.

“What’s thinking about tomorrow night.” He lied.

“Mae’s party?”
“Yep.”

“You going?” Amy leaned on the counter in front of him. Daniel knew that if he looked down, he would get a good view of her breasts. He forced his attention to her gray-blue eyes. Ok—he peeked once. Maybe twice. Amy was curved in all the right places and he wasn’t dead.

“Promised Felipe,” he mumbled.

“Oh, that’s going to be interesting.” She pulled out a bottle of tequila and raised an eyebrow. He shook his head. She poured one shot, glanced around her, and then took it. “Suddenly, I’m not dreading that party anymore.”

“You going?”

“Tending. Mae’s father is paying for an open bar.”

“Suddenly I’m not dreading the party anymore, either.” She smirked at him. “I’d believe that if I didn’t know you better.”

“Perhaps.” He finished his beer and nodded for another.

Amy popped the top on a fresh bottle and handed it to him. She allowed her hand to linger over his. “Have you ever considered—” She left the rest of the question lingering in the air. He knew exactly what she was asking.

“I’d be stupid if I hadn’t.” Apparently that was the right answer. A huge smile broke across her face and she let go of his hand.

“I have too.” She leaned close and pressed her mouth against his ear. “Do you think we ever will?”

He’d be lying if he didn’t admit he felt a shiver of pleasure run down his spine at her breath on his cheek. “Some days, yes.”
“And the other?”

“I remember how you look when Marc walks through the door,” he said with more honesty than she was probably seeking.

And he was right. She pulled away, frowning. “I guess I’m the stupid one.” Her shoulders slumped a little.

He didn’t like that. “No. It just means the lucky guy isn’t me.” He grabbed her hand and kissed it. “Yet.” He wondered what had brought on this particular mood.

Marc was probably being a jerk again.

A blush spread across her cheeks. “That’s why I adore you and why I’m buying your beer tonight.”

Hating to push his luck, he had to ask. “And why is that?”

Amy shot him a flirtatious grin that made him wonder why Marc was so dumb.

“Because you always know how to cheer a girl up.”

Daniel watched her bounce down to the end of the bar, good spirits restored. Well at least there was that. He might not be able to help his mother, but at least he could cheer up his friend. He hated the bitterness he felt, but he couldn’t shake it away. He’d felt its sharp edge ever since his father had died.
Chapter Eight

The sun felt like heaven on her skin. Corine stretched on the thin towel that separated her from the hard ground. It was eleven in the morning on the second day of her forced imprisonment in this dried-up town. That morning she’d pulled on a pink checkered bikini, grabbed her MP3 player and found a spot away from the house to lie in the sun. Later it would be too hot, but at that moment, the sun gave off pleasant warmth. She let it seep into her skin, aching for it to warm every part of her.

Her mother used to call Corine her little sun baby because she always chose to be outside in the sun rather than cloistered inside—even on the hottest days. Corine suppressed a sigh. She had been trying hard not to think of her mother, but for that very reason, she couldn’t prevent her thoughts from wondering to Carmelita. She knew they would be in Mexico by then. Corine had never been out of the country. She tried to imagine what Mexico would be like but only brought up images similar to driving down a south Texas highway. She heard that southern Mexico had a jungle, and for this, she used images from her brief stay in Colorado—it was the greenest place she’d ever lived. Regardless of what she pictured, it didn’t bring her mother closer to her.

Corine bit the edge of her lip. She didn’t know why she was homesick for her mother. If there was one thing her mother had instilled in her, it was self-reliance. Corine knew she could take care of herself because she’d had to in the past. She was often responsible for making sure there were groceries in the fridge and food on the table for
Lola. It wasn’t that her mother didn’t care—Carmelita loved them in her own way—she just wasn’t good at it, and Corine couldn’t help but resent her for it.

And now she was gone. Corine figured she would see her again, but no telling how long that would be. Her grandmother had efficiently rid her mother of any responsibility towards them. With a clear conscious, her mother could now stay gone as long as she liked. Even if she did eventually wander back to Juan, there were no guarantees she would take them with her when she left again.

No—Corine needed to accept that she was now fully in charge of Lola and her fate. She took a deep breath and focused on the deep tones of Adele. She doubted her heart could ever break from love of a guy, but she knew it could break from disappointment. Shaking her head, she tried to find that moment of relaxation again. Soon, Lola would find her. She never strayed far. Her brief moments alone were the only times she allowed any weakness to show. She had to be strong for her sister, confident. She never wanted her sister to feel that sick pit of worry from the whole world threatening to crash down. She wanted better for Lola.

“Corine?”

“Over here.”

It took a few seconds for Lola to locate her—Corine had tried her best to hide from her grandmother’s piercing glare.

“Maria is looking for you.”

“That didn’t take long. What does she want?”

“I told her about the party tonight.”
“You didn’t. Why?” Corine rolled over on to her stomach and glanced at the clock on her MP3 player.

“I was helping her get lunch in the oven, and there was nothing else to talk about. The silence was awful. I don’t know her, Corine. I know I should, but she feels like a stranger.” Lola twisted the frayed edges of her cut-off shorts.

“Hey, it’s ok. I just don’t know how she’s going to feel about it. I was excited too. It would be nice to know a few people here.” She sat up. “How did she seem?”

“I don’t know. Tense, maybe.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“I know. This sucks. I’m afraid she’s not going to let us go.”

Corine stood up and pulled on her strapless sundress cover-up. “Guess I’d better get it over with then.” She made a funny face at her sister and elicited a giggle. Holding her arms stiffly in front of her, she pretended to be a zombie and chased her sister through the backyard and inside the house.

They came to a sudden halt in the kitchen where her grandmother was waiting. Maria sat at the head of the table in the kitchen, snapping green peas into a bowl. She looked up as they entered to room.

“There you are,” she paused, grabbing another handful of green peas. “Lola told me you plan on going to Mae Foster’s party tonight.”

It wasn’t a question, but Corine nodded away.

“I don’t much like the Fosters,” Maria continued. “Especially Marc. Always getting into trouble. And that feud they carry on with the Williams is just childish.”

“Does that mean we can’t go?” Corine asked stiffly.
“Don’t put words in my mouth,” Maria said sharply. She finished snapping the green peas and put the bowl next to the sink. Crossing her arms, she leaned a hip against the counter. “I suspect it will be good for you to meet some of the kids your age. And you’re almost eighteen.” Maria pursed her lips before sighing. “You can go, but Lola has to stay. She’s much too young.”

“What?” Lola erupted. “I’m not too young.”

Corine wrapped an arm around Lola’s shoulders. “I’ll watch out for her. She’ll be fine.”

“No. Lola stays.”

Corine squeezed Lola, cutting her off before she argued more. She nodded her head at Maria before dragging Lola from the room. “She’s not going to change her mind,” she whispered in Lola’s ear. “Let’s go for a walk and get out of here for a while.”

Lola shrugged away and headed to the front door. They wondered idly down the streets until they reached the small white school. They sat down side by side in the swings. Lola allowed her feet to drag every time the swing swung forward.

“Why didn’t you try to change her mind?” Lola asked.

“Because it would have been pointless.”

“Maybe not.” Lola jerked her swing to a stop. “It’s not fair.”

Corine pushed her swing higher. “What do you want me to do?” She felt Lola’s eyes on her but didn’t look at her. “Do you want me to stay home, too?”

Lola didn’t answer her. Instead, she hopped out of the swing and began walking.

Corine watched her for a moment before she slowed her swing enough that she could
jump out of it. She didn’t try to catch up with Lola. She just followed her at a distance.

Lola never liked to be crowded when she was upset, so Corine waited.

After a few minutes, Lola stopped walking and waited for Corine to catch up with her.

“This is how it starts.” Lola pulled stray fibers out of the fringe of her cut-offs.

“How what starts?”

“Like Maria said, you’re seventeen. Soon you’ll be eighteen. Then you’ll be gone. Carmelita is never coming back. I’m going to be stuck here. All alone.”

“Whoa,” Corine said. She lifted Lola’s chin, so she could look her in the eyes.

“All this came from me being invited to one party?”

“That’s how it all starts. You’ll make friends and won’t want me hanging around anymore.”

Corine pulled Lola into a tight hug. “That will never happen.”

“Promise?”

“I promise. If you don’t want me to go to the party, I won’t. We’ll do something, just the two of us.”

Lola wiped her running nose on the back of her hand. “No. Go.” She started off down the road again. “You know, maybe you will make some new friends that we can hang out with.”

“Maybe.” Corine threw her arm around Lola’s shoulders. “What about that girl at the ceremony yesterday. She seemed nice.”

Lola shrugged her shoulders. “Do you think I should bother? I’m tired of trying to make friends every few months.”
“Of course you should. What’s her name?”

“Janie.” Lola kicked a rock with the side of her shoe. “You know tonight you could talk to Felipe.”

“Felipe?”

“Yeah, remember, from the store.”

It took Corine a moment to remember which man at the store was Felipe. “Oh, yeah. The owner.” She casted a sly look at Lola. “He is handsome.”

“Yes. I love his eyes. And I think he may be an artist.”

“Don’t know for sure?” Corine teased.

“Not yet.”

Corine couldn’t hold back her smile. “Well, if I see him at the party, I promise I’ll talk to him.”

Corine paused in front of a mechanic shop. A young man with long brown hair wearing blue overalls had his head hanging over a raised hood of a Ford pickup. She saw him last night at the ceremony and thought he looked familiar, but she couldn’t remember how she knew him.

She turned her attention back to Lola. “Do you want to help me pick something to wear tonight?”

“Sure.” Something behind Corine caught Lola’s gaze. “A man’s walking this way,” she whispered.

Corine knew before she turned around that it would be him. She gave her outfit a quick once over, knowing that it was too late to do anything about it. Why did she run out of the house in a swimsuit and cover-up?
“Hi,” a deep voice vibrated behind her. He held out his hand, “Daniel.”

Corine turned, trying to seem nonchalant. “Hi. Corine,” she said, tilting her chin up a fraction. “And this is Lola.”

“Hope you’re not trying to walk to a pool from here. You’ll have quite a hike.”

“No pools?”

“Nope. You try keeping water in a pool in the desert.” He gave Lola a fleeting look before giving Corine a once-over. “Though, I suddenly wish there was one.”

He had small dimples when he smiled, and his eyes were green like fresh-cut grass. They were familiar eyes that brought forth a quiet wave of anger. She didn’t know why.

“Do I know you?” She felt Lola’s arm slide into the crook in her arm.

“Kind of. We met last time you were here visiting your grandmother.”

Corine almost laughed at his use of “visiting.” She didn’t considered being left on her grandmother’s doorstep in the middle of the night visiting. She’d been Lola’s age at the time and terrified. She’d thought Carmelita was leaving them for good that time.

“Did we hang out?”

“Not really.”

Corine narrowed her eyes. “Why are you hedging?”

He grinned sheepishly and wiped his dirty hands on a rag he’d pulled from his pocket. “I’m afraid the story doesn’t flatter me. Also, I’m afraid you might hurt me again.”

“That’s possible. I’m thinking about it now.”
“Wow, you haven’t changed.” He held up his hands in surrender. “Ok. I give.”
He leaned close and pointed to a small scar on the corner of his left eye. It was barely noticeable. “You gave me this. Threw a rock right at me. Scared me to death. It bled so much I thought I was going to lose an eye.”

She remembered now. Last time her mother had left them, they’d stay with their grandmother for a few weeks. Lola cried most of the time, not fully understanding why they’d been left. Corine would sneak away every chance she got just to have a moment of peace. She felt guilty because of that. She knew she needed to be there for her sister, but it didn’t stop her from taking long walks.

On one such walk, she had run into a skinny teenage boy. Though he was fifteen and she was eleven, it didn’t matter. She’d liked him instantly. They seemed to get along pretty well and began hanging out together. This all changed one evening when she came across him with another girl. They weren’t doing much. Just sitting in the ancient graveyard talking, but that didn’t stop the flare of jealousy. He was hers, not the girl’s. Didn’t he know that?

Without thinking, she confronted him. He said some hurtful things—she couldn’t remember exactly what, but she knew her age had been a part of it. She could only remember the pang they caused. He grabbed the girl, who looked like she rather be anywhere else, and kissed her. Corine lost it then. She picked up a rock and threw it at him. Upon seeing the gush of blood, Corine took off running, hating what she had done. She had never physically lashed out at anyone before.
“Daniel,” she said softly. She felt herself redden, knowing they were both remembering how silly she’d been. “I think that story is more unflattering to me than you.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe we remember differently.” He held his hand out. “Truce?”

“How about starting over instead?”

He pretended to think this over. “Ok.” He turned his attention to Lola. “So, Lola like the song?”

Corine bit the edge of her lip to keep from laughing. Lola hated that song. He wasn’t making friends so far.

“No. Just Lola.”

“Ok. Just Lola,” he teased her. It wasn’t working. Lola was already on edge because of the party. He turned his attention back to Corine, seeming to sense that Lola wasn’t being charmed. “Have you been invited to Mae’s party tonight?”

“I ran into Marc yesterday and he mentioned it.” Corine knew he just added another strike against him from Lola’s perspective.

“Are you going?”

“I was thinking about it.”

“You should. It’ll be fun.” Someone behind Daniel called his name and honked a horn. He glanced over his shoulder and waved his hand impatiently. “I have to get back to work.” He gave Lola a big smile. She glared back. “Well, I’ll see you tonight.”

Corine watched him jog back to the garage.

“Don’t even think about it,” Lola grumbled.
“What?”

“You know what.”

Corine pulled her arm free from Lola’s grasp and began heading back to Maria’s house. “Keep that up and I won’t tell you about the party later.”

“Fine. But please pick anyone else but him.”

“Why? What’s wrong with him?” Corine asked innocently.

“I know you two obviously have a history—although I don’t remember him. I just don’t like him.”

Corine playfully pushed Lola. “That’s because you’re too hard on guys.”

“No I’m not.”

“Whatever. Let’s get back, so you can help me decide what to wear. I’m thinking a dress.”

And with that, Corine had refocused Lola’s attention to more enjoyable things. Lola may be upset about Corine going to the party without her, but she liked helping Corine pick out outfits.

The walk back to the house was filled with weighing the pros and cons of Corine wearing a skirt to wearing a dress. It was too hot for jeans to even be a part of the discussion. They eventually settled on a pale yellow sundress with white flowers that emphasized Corine’s slight curves. Lola helped Corine stylishly sweep up her long blonde hair, so that she could show off a pair of jingly earrings.

When Corine was ready to leave, Maria gave her directions to the Foster Ranch and keys to her old truck. Corine didn’t know why Maria wouldn’t just let her drive Carmelita’s sedan, and she didn’t feel like arguing. Maria made her promise that she
would drive straight there and back along with the promise that she wouldn’t drink alcohol. Corine was aggravated but agreed to everything without argument in order to get out the door. It wasn’t like she planned on driving anywhere or drinking beer beforehand. It was Maria thinking that she would that made her want to do the very things she’d promised not to.

She gave Lola a hug and whispered that she would wake her up when she got back. This seemed to cheer Lola up a little.

Corine pulled up to the party fashionably late. The Foster’s house was a huge two story with a wraparound porch on both floors. Beyond the house she could see colorful electric lights setup for the party. Laughter and music echoed across the open distance.

Instead of hopping out of the truck, she sat in the darkness. She’d never arrived to a party alone. She didn’t really know anyone there. The thought of walking into a crowd full of strangers suddenly didn’t seem appealing. She waged an internal battle with herself, trying to build up her courage.

Knuckles rapped against her window and made her jump. She jerked her attention to the person standing next to the truck.

It took her a minute to remember his name. “Felipe,” she said, relieved. She rolled down the window.

“Planning on getting out of the truck?” he teased.

“I’m not sure yet.” She gave him a shy smile.

“Want some company until you decide?” He rested his tall frame against the side of her truck and shifted his gaze to the party in the distance.

“Are you making fun of me?”
“Wouldn’t think of it. A pretty girl shouldn’t sit alone in the dark.”

Corine laughed. “As opposed to a pretty girl walking into a party alone?”

He looked horror struck. “No, you’re right. That won’t do at all.” He rubbed his chin in exaggerated thought. “Nope. There’s no other solution.”

Corine raised an eyebrow and waited.

“You’ll just have to accompany me.” He straightened and held out an elbow.

“Care to?”

She opened the door and hopped out of the truck. “Thank you, I think I will,” she said playfully. She was beginning to agree with Lola. There was just something charming and kind about Felipe. It was hard not to like him.

After she smoothed out her dress, she slid her arm through his hooked elbow. He cracked a few more jokes that had her laughing as they joined the party. There were men in cowboy hats, and woman wearing dresses and cowgirl boots. Near the dance floor, a country band was playing some upbeat song. Quite a few people looked their way and smiled. Corine didn’t recognize any of them.

“Hey, Felipe, who’s your friend?” someone yelled.

“Pretty sure I should keep her away from you Stan,” he called back. That brought a round of laughter. “That’s Stan Potter—he’s a ranch hand,” Felipe whispered in her ear. “Spends most of his time on the range with the cattle. I wasn’t really joking about you staying away from him. He’s quite a lady’s man. Plus, he’s like fifteen years older than you. Not that it would stop him.”

He pulled her through another crowd of people. “That’s Pam Richards. She’s been the cook for the Fosters for as long as I can remember. Makes the best rolls and
pecan pie. She and Ms. Halley, the William’s cook, have been secretly competing for years.” He nodded his head to a short stocky man with silver hair. “Keith Tompkins. Part of the town council as well as owns the local bank. He has the hots for Hannah Lane—she’s the librarian, town clerk and used to substitute teach for Mr. Sanders. She’s twenty years younger than Tompkins and tolerates his attention because he’s a huge donator to the library. That’s her over there.”

Corine followed his gaze to a tall thin woman with bright red hair. She was wearing a long green dress with high-heeled sandals. Corine tried to imagine her with the stocky man but couldn’t.

“And that’s Sam Stuart and his wife Laura talking to Hannah. They run the diner down the street from my shop. Pretty good food.”

Felipe continued to point out people in the crowd, giving her tidbits of back story for each one. It wasn’t long until she began to feel more comfortable.

They walked over to the wet bar that was being attended by a young woman with short black hair that framed her angular face with big soft curls. She had on a black sleeveless dress that showed off her generous cleavage. She seemed somehow familiar but Corine wasn’t sure why.

Felipe gave the woman a warm smile. “This is Amy Belle. Amy, this is our new arrival, Corine Espinosa.”

Corine gave the woman a brief smile.

“So, you’re the newbie. Mrs. Espinosa’s granddaughter?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t think I’ve seen you around here before.”
Corine shrugged her shoulders. “It’s been a while. Didn’t venture out much last time I stayed with Maria.”

An odd look passed over Felipe. Corine wasn’t sure why.

“What can I get you?” Amy asked.

“A soda would be great.”

Amy poured a coke into a plastic cup and handed to Corine. Amy raised her eyebrow at Felipe.

“You know me. A cold beer—don’t much care what kind.”

Amy nodded and pumped beer from a keg into glass for Felipe. Felipe took the glass and then glanced over his shoulder.

“Have you seen her?”

Corine wondered who “her” was.

“She’s over by her daddy. Near the band.” Amy nodded her head towards the country musicians on the far side of the party area.

“How does she seem?”

“Like she’d rather be anywhere else.”

A ghost of a smile crossed his face. “Yep. That’s Mae.”

He began to walk towards the band but Amy stopped him. “Felipe, don’t.”

Corine felt like a voyeur. She knew something significant was occurring but didn’t understand it. She awkwardly rocked back on her heels.

“You know me, Amy. I can’t resist.” He patted her hand on his arm.

“I don’t want to see you hurt again.”
“I’m smarter this time. I know she’s not staying.” He gave Amy a cocky smile.

“Besides, you know I have my heart set on you.”

“You and Daniel both. How shall I ever choose?” she teased.

Felipe patted her cheek. “Just remember, I was first.”

He finally turned his attention back to Corine. Corine felt slightly embarrassed for overhearing the obviously private conversation. But Felipe hadn’t tried to hide it from her, so she decided to act like nothing had happened.

“Want to meet our host?” Felipe asked, holding his hand out to her.

She took it. “Sure.”

He pulled her through the crowd to a tall muscular man with soft gray hair and piercing blue eyes. For an older man, he was quite handsome. Next to him was a young woman with long brown hair. She had the same piercing blue eyes and a heart-shaped face. She closely resembled her brother—Corine recognized him instantly. She gave Marc a shy smile as Felipe introduced her to Mr. Foster.

Mr. Foster frowned briefly at Felipe then turned his full attention to Corine. He looked her over thoroughly.

“Nice to meet you, Corine. So you are the long absent granddaughter of Maria. It’s good to have you with us.” He took her hand between the two of his. “I remember your mother.”

He didn’t say more. Corine wondered what that meant. Was it a good thing or bad thing that he remembered Carmelita? Corine decided he couldn’t have been one of Carmelita’s past boyfriends—he still smiled when he said her name.
“Marc, why don’t you take a walk with Corine, catch her up on the town?” Mr. Foster patted her hand once more before releasing it. “I hope we see you often.”

Marc took her arm and led her away before she could so much as nod to Felipe. She didn’t bother to tell him Felipe had showed her around. She didn’t see the point. If anything, he saved her from the awkward scene which was no doubt taking place behind her.

“Don’t worry about it,” Marc whispered to her, reading her mind. “Felipe and my sister have a—” he paused, as if searching for the right word. “—colorful history. I can pretty much sum it up to the classic boy likes girl, girl’s father hates boy, girl goes off and leaves boy.”

“That’s sad.”

Marc shrugged. “Maybe. It never would have worked out. Felipe will never leave Juan, and my sister couldn’t leave here fast enough. She won’t stay.”

Corine glanced over her shoulder to Mr. Foster. “Does your dad know that?”

“You’re very observant.” Marc pulled her over to an area of dancing couples. Without asking, he spun her and led her into a two-step. “I think he believes he’ll be able to convince her to come back after she graduates. The town does need a local veterinarian. That was how she persuaded my father to pay for her school to begin with.”

Corine absorbed this silently. She wondered if all the Juan men were destined to stay while all the Juan women dreamed of going away. She knew she was looking forward to the day she and Lola could leave. If she had it her way, they would never come back.
Chapter Nine

Marc pulled Corine closer, breathing in the scent of roses. His hand slid lower on her back. He liked the feel of her.

He wasn’t stupid. He knew why his father had thrust Corine into his care. Paul Foster had already judged Corine worthy—at least more worthy than Amy, who he could feel glaring at him at that moment. He stiffened his back. He would not look at her.

He hated that his father had insisted that she bartend the party. It was his way of emphasizing how inappropriate she was to be a part of the Foster family—the line had been drawn.

Hell, that was half the reason Marc kept seeing her. Anything to irritate his father. If he could flaunt his relationship with her more, he would. If it wasn’t for the promise he made to Mae—the only ones he ever kept—he’d be over at the bar now.

Not that he minded dancing with Corine. She was beautiful. There was something to having the attention of a woman who had the attention of over half the men at the party.

“What do you think about Juan so far?”

Her eyes met his. “It’s quiet compared to Vegas.”

“Vegas, huh?”

“That’s where we were living before here.”

“I’ve never been to Vegas.”
“There’s more to it than just gambling,” she paused as if remembering something.

“He nodded his head. “By miles of dry dirt.”

“How do you like Juan?”

“It’s home.” He glanced at his father. “Usually.”

“Everyone seems nice.”

“Couldn’t you say that of most places?” He spun her once and then pulled her close.

“I suppose you could.” She glanced over to where his father was. Mae had apparently left with Felipe. “Why aren’t you off at school with your sister?” The question seemed to slip out of her.

Marc stiffened. He hated that question. It always led to judgmental or pitying looks.

“I’m sorry. You don’t have to answer that.” She looked embarrassed.

“Sometimes I say things without thinking.”

“It’s ok. I was briefly. It just wasn’t for me. I can’t stay being cloistered in a small room, listening to someone lecture about politics or such. I hated it.”

Corine gave him a brief understanding smile. “Is your father’s ranch the only one around Juan?”

He appreciated her trying to change the subject, even if the subject was his father.

“There’s one other close by—the Williams Ranch. Used to be run by Henry and Grace Williams. Now it’s just Grace.”

“What happened to Mr. Williams?”
“Died of a heart attack a few years ago.”

“Oh.” She tilted her head down. “That’s sad.”

Marc shrugged his shoulders and spun her, wanting to get rid of her frown.

“Grace is a tough woman, but I kind of like her. She gives my father a hard time, which I appreciate.”

“Shouldn’t they be friends, being neighboring ranches and all?”

A hard laugh escaped him. “Not even close. The Williams have been our rivals long before I was born. Even the ranch hands don’t mingle. But you know what?”

Marc spun her again, making her giggle.

“What?”

“I think my father has a crush on her.”

“What makes you think so?”

“He always tends to brighten whenever she is around. Oh, he’ll huff and argue with her—sure. But he never actually does anything to her. In fact, since her husband died, I think he’s kind of kept an eye on her. Not that he’d ever admit. And not that it would probably mean anything to her.”

Jim Houston tapped him on the shoulder before Corine could respond. Marc stopped and allowed Jim to cut in. Marc gave Corine a flirtatious smile before he left.

Thirsty, he walked over to the bar he’d avoided for the last hour. Amy was giving Keith Tompkins a double shot of whiskey. Keith nodded his head towards Marc before sauntering back into the fray.

“Hey beautiful.” He gave her his most charming smile. He knew she was still mad at him from yesterday. She kept wanting to slap a label on their relationship, which
he refused to do. He knew he liked her, like spending time in her bed, and on occasion, talking to her, but beyond that, he wasn’t sure.

“Don’t pull that crap with me.” She swiped an agitated hand across her forehead, pushing aside a strand of hair. “What do you want?”

“You. In the barn.” He walked around the bar and stroked her hip. “Now,” he breathed next to her ear. He watched her shiver slightly. He knew her neck was extra sensitive.

She jerked away. “I was referring to your drink.” She grabbed a plastic cup, pumped some beer from a keg into it, and then shoved it into his hand. It sloshed a little over the side. “Now go.”

Someone else approached the bar and she focused her attention on getting the next drink. Marc took a swallow of beer, watching her. He really did want her at that moment.

“Shouldn’t you have a break soon?”

She ignored him.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” He set the beer on the bar, so that both his hands would be free. He stood behind her and caressed her hips. “You’re right,” he said again. He nosed her ear and breathed in vanilla with a slight hint of orange blossoms. It was his favorite.

Amy looked over her shoulder at him. “You were a jerk.”

“I know.”

“I shouldn’t forgive you.”
He looked over her shoulder, making sure no one, especially his father, was watching them. Satisfied, he moved one hand up to cup her cheek. “I’m sorry.” He whispered the words next to her mouth, wanting to kiss her but resisting.

“Marc—promise you won’t storm off again. If you’re upset with me, talk to me about it.”

He nodded his head. She sighed.

“You know I forgive you, you jerk.” She turned so that she could punch him playfully in the arm. He accepted the slight sting of it, knowing it was his due.

Within a matter of minutes, he managed to convince her to go on break. He dragged her to the barn which was a good distance from the party. He took his time, enjoying her need for him. When they were finished, he helped her dress—her arms and legs still shaky from the aftermath. He liked that. Like what he could do to her—that, still, after all this time, he had this power over her.

He hugged her tight and gave her one last kiss before they headed back to the party. He left her smiling and humming to herself.

Feeling content himself, Marc headed over to the band, looking for his sister, but found his father instead. He grabbed the back of Marc’s neck and dragged him off into the darkness, away from the party.

“What the hell do you think you are doing?”

Marc decided to play innocent. “What?”

“Don’t what me. You were with that girl again.”

“So?”

“I told you to leave her alone. I don’t want you messing with her.”
Marc couldn’t help but cracking a grin. “I was more than messing with her.” His father tightened his hands into fists.

“For once, you will do as I ask and leave her alone. She doesn’t deserve your crap. If you need to run around with a girl, ask Corine out.”

Marc was tempted to push his father across the edge he was already tittering on. But he had promised. He forced himself to take a deep breath.

“She’s cute.” He shoved his hands into his pockets, wondering how soon he could get back to the party.

His father visibly relaxed. “Yes she is.” He patted Marc on the shoulder and began to lead them back to the lights and the people. “Why don’t you invite her onto the ranch this weekend? You could take her horseback riding.”

Marc saw an opportunity. “I’ll need the truck to pick her up.”

His father nodded his head absentmindedly. “Just remember to gas it up when you’re done. Where do you think your sister’s gone off to?”

Marc shrugged his shoulders and said he’d look for her before disappearing into the crowd. He had to get away from his father before he exploded. He walked around the designated party area, avoiding the bar, and headed towards the edge of the party that faced the endless miles of his father’s ranch. Stepping into the darkness, he allowed his eyes to adjust. If he stared in the right place long enough, it was almost possible to make out faint lights.

He just had to put up with his father for a little longer. Soon he would have enough money to leave. He wasn’t sure where he wanted to go. He just knew it would be away from here.
Behind him, Corine was dancing with another man. He decided to give her a break from the dancing and do exactly what his father suggested for once.
Chapter Ten

The bed of the pickup was hard and pleasantly cool against Felipe’s back. His entire attention was focused on the woman lying next to him. He didn’t think it was possible, but she’d gotten even more beautiful.

“The campus is great too. There’s a lot of great shops around and always something to do.” Mae turned towards him. “I love it there.”

Felipe felt his stomach pitch. He still knew her well enough to understand her wistful gaze.

“How long do you plan to stay here?” he asked. He knew there was an expiration date on his heaven.

“Till the end of summer. I’m interning with Daddy’s veterinarian.” She shrugged her shoulders. “It’s a great opportunity.”

“So we have two months?” He fought to keep the hopeful note out of his voice.

She rolled on her side and examined his face. “Felipe, you know nothing is going to change my mind, right?” She stroked his cheek. “I’m leaving when classes start back up.”

“I know.” He covered her hand with his. “I’ll take what I can get.”

A pained look crossed her face. “I don’t want to hurt you again.”

“You won’t. I just want to be with you.” He stroked her arm. “Do you want to be with me?”

She cuddled to his side, looking small in her black sundress. “Remember those nights when we used to drive out onto the range?”
He ran a hand up her arm. “Yes.”

She leaned up on her arms and stared down at him. Her hair tickled his face, but he didn’t dare move. She was searching for something, but he wasn’t sure what.

At last, she sighed. “Yes. I want to be with you,” she whispered before she gently kissed him.

He was afraid to breathe. Afraid he would break the spell. She settled back down against him, and they both gazed up at the night sky. Felipe tightened his hold on her, never wanting to let her go.

A while later Felipe heard Paul Foster hollering his daughter’s name.

Mae giggled. “I guess I can’t play hooky from the party any longer.” She pulled Felipe close and softly rubbed her nose against his cheek.

He liked her like this. Young and carefree. Before she left last time, she had become somber, smiling rarely. He had almost forgotten her laugh.

“So I guess that means we better go back to the party?”

Mae sighed. “I suppose.” She sat up and looked around, making sure there was no one around. She gave him one last smile before heading back. He waited until he could no longer see her, as if he needed to memorize every minute with her as a keepsake for later.

Felipe lit a cigarette and then stretched out in the bed of his truck. He listened to the echoes of the party, refusing to think about the future or his promises not to get attached. That was one thing about Mae—she never hedged, and there wasn’t a devious bone in her body.
When they first starting dating, long before she left for college, she never lied about wanting to eventually leave. It was just when it came to Mae, he couldn’t help himself. Daniel called him a fool. Felipe didn’t care. He just knew that one day they would end up together. And he could wait. He was good at waiting.

After about ten minutes, he headed back to the party. Though he couldn’t talk to her again—at least without sending her father into a fit—his eyes immediately located her. She was talking to her brother with a dimpled smile.

He nodded a greeting as Pete slid up next to him. Pete was sporting his party duds—short sleeve pearl-snap shirt, dark blue jeans and a black cowboy hat. The outfit, definitely bought by Pete’s wife, made his large girth somehow appear slimmer. Pete’s normal attire was t-shirts and faded jeans.

“Have you met the new girl yet?” Pete pointed with his beer across the dance floor to Corine who was talking to Mabel, Pete’s wife.

Felipe was aware that anything he told Pete would later be recapped to Mabel, who loved little tidbits about others that she could disperse at her leisure. He chose his words carefully.

“Yeah. Met her yesterday when she came into the store.”

“I remember her when she was here last time. What was it, five—six years ago? She was a little hellion then. Caused her grandmother nothing but trouble.”

“Knowing Mrs. Espinosa that was an easy thing to do.” Mrs. Espinosa also paid close attention to the details. While that was great for being in charge of the ceremonies, it made her difficult to deal with in everyday life. He imagined Corine had to do very little to upset the order of Mrs. Espinosa’s life.
Pete snorted slightly—as if he was trying to hold back a laugh out of respect for Mrs. Espinosa.

“How did she seem?”

Felipe opened his mouth to answer then stopped. Honestly, she seemed like she hadn’t changed much for Pete’s description. But instead of saying that, he replied,

“Pleasant. She’s grown up.”

“She’s a looker. Takes after her mother.”

“Did you know her mother?”

“Not really. She’s a couple of years older than me. But I remember seeing her around, not that she paid me much attention. She was always moving. Even the boys she dated back then couldn’t keep up with her.”

“When did she leave?”

“Oh, as soon as she graduated high school. Took off with some guy on a Harley in the middle of the night. Didn’t see her again for several years. I don’t think Mrs. Espinosa even knew where she was. Then one day she comes strolling back into town with a little blonde haired baby girl.”

“Corine and her sister don’t look much alike.”

“Oh, Lola. Different daddies. Lola takes after her grandmother, though you can see pieces of her mother in her.”

“How often have they visited Juan?” Felipe was curious. He couldn’t understand a mother leaving her children for extended periods of time. Maybe because he had never been away from his own parents for longer than a week.

“Every few years.”
“How have I not met her before?” Felipe searched his memory but couldn’t recall ever seeing her around town.

Pete shrugged. “You are several years older. Maybe you just never paid attention.”

“Maybe.”

The subject of their conversation turned towards them and nodded. She gave Felipe a low wave. He almost waved back before he saw the knowing smile on Mabel’s face. No doubt there’d be rumors of them dating by tomorrow if he paid Corine too much notice.

“Have you seen Daniel around?” Felipe asked, changing the subject. He shifted his body so that he was no longer facing the pair across the dance floor.

Pete nodded his head. “At the bar a few minutes ago.”

Felipe glanced towards the bar and Amy Belle standing behind it. She was leaning on her elbows, flirting with a ranch hand. Daniel was nowhere in sight.

Felipe patted Pete on the shoulder and began to patrol the party for Daniel. He made one round before he finally spotted Daniel dancing with Corine. Felipe must have just missed him. He knew he’d find Daniel eventually. Daniel never broke a promise.

The fast song turned to a slow one and couples drifted closer together. He waited for Daniel to make his exit, but instead, Felipe watched as Daniel tugged Corine close and continued to dance with her.

Something was different about Daniel. It wasn’t the dark t-shirt or the jeans—Daniel wore those all the time. His hair was as wind-tossed as ever. Felipe narrowed his eyes as he examined his friend. Then it hit him. For the first time in a long time, there
seemed to be a spark in Daniel’s smile. Felipe glanced at Corine to see if it was there too. It wasn’t. At least not yet. For his friend’s sake, he said a silent prayer that it would be there soon.
Chapter Eleven

“So, can we count on your support?” Keith Tompkins asked, taking a step closer to Grace. There wasn’t much room between the aisles in the grocery section of the Trading Post, and Grace was left with no room to escape.

Keith leaned his short stocky frame close to hers. She could smell the faint scent of onions on his breath. Holding hers, she tried to insert a foot of space between them. Keith didn’t take the hint, however.

“I’ll think about it,” she said. It wasn’t the answer he wanted, but he must have sensed he wasn’t going to get more out of her at that moment. Politics wasn’t her thing, but she had learned years ago that unless she wanted to be pushed around by Maria Espinosa and Paul Foster, she had to play the game.

Shortly after her husband had died, she ran for a seat on the town committee and had won. Paul Foster, Hannah Lane, Keith Tompkins, Maria Espinosa, and Sam Stuart along with her currently made up the town committee. There was no mayor. They had no need for one. Everyone on the committee had an equal say. It had been that way since the beginning of Juan, Grace had been told.

Slowly over the years the committee had become divided between those who valued traditions over progress and those who wanted to move forward instead of looking back. Grace had never consciously chosen a side, but her actions after her husband’s death had forever placed her on the opposite side of Maria Espinosa. Because of that, her support of votes for change was typically expected on the committee.
“Hannah is hosting a dinner after the meeting. Do you think you’ll come?” Keith asked. Grace could tell the question was more of a nicety than a desire for her actual plans.

“I was planning on it.” She knew better than to not show up to a committee event.

After a brief smile, Keith gave her a quick nod and headed towards the front of the store with a box of crackers in hand. Grace knew the only reason he’d come inside was to talk to her. The crackers were just a ruse.

This was why she hated coming into town. If Ms. Halley hadn’t bugged her about picking up a few supplies before dinner, she would have waited until a ranch hand could do it. She picked up a few more items from the grocery list and tossed them into the basket. Turning down another aisle, she stopped short as she encountered a short, silver haired woman.

“Mrs. Williams,” Maria Espinosa said, a basket hooked around her elbow.

“Mrs. Espinosa,” Grace responded. Apparently she was going to have to borrow the ranch pickup instead driving her own red Ford when she came into town—too many people were choosing to ‘go shopping’ at the same time.

“It’s good to see you.”

Liar. Grace offered a small smile.

“So have you given much thought to the vote in July?”

Grace wondered why she was even bothering to ask. They weren’t friends. Maria had made it clear she viewed Grace as a “defiler of traditions.”
“No,” Grace said. She barely resisted the urge to rub the back of her shoulder.

She was better than that. She didn’t need to remind Maria of why they hated each other.

“I know we haven’t gotten along, but this is an important vote. I hope that you do what is right for the town, not your own needs.”

Grace grew angry at Maria’s tone. “It is important to the town,” Grace acknowledged through clenched teeth. “I’m considering every aspect of it.”

The vote on the table was whether or not the town should keep footing the bill for the funeral ceremonies. Another long tradition—everyone in Juan was considered family, although sometimes a distant one, and when someone died, everyone lost a loved one. Therefore, everyone helped out with funeral ceremony. Juan citizens paid into the town fund, which took care of all the funeral expenses as well as other town expenditures.

“See that you do. This vote could change everything. All that we value could be lost.”

With a polite but irritated nod, Grace excused herself from Maria’s presence and quickly grabbed the remaining items from Ms. Halley’s list. She hated coming into town. It was almost worth the forty minute drive into Van Horn to avoid people.

She was still grumbling to herself as she started the drive back to the ranch. The main road, which curved around both her ranch and Foster’s on the way to Van Horn, was a small two-lane paved road and didn’t see too much traffic. Grace was able to roll her shoulders, take a deep breath and allow herself to relax. Maybe the problem was that she wasn’t in town enough. Maybe if she was around people more, it would be easier.

She shook her head, dreading the thought.
Her red pickup jerked and there was a flop-flop sound. Grace groaned as she slowed down and pulled over. She slid out of the pickup to find the source of the sound. The back driver’s side tire was flat. She knelt down and examined the tire, finding a small nail in the side. No telling where she’d picked it up.

Rubbing her temples, she stood still for a moment and considered how luck hadn’t been with her much that day. Then she turned her thoughts to the cold groceries in the back. They were in a cooler, but still they wouldn’t last long in this heat. She pulled out the jack and managed to get the spare onto the ground. It had been a while since she’d changed a tire by herself, but she still remembered the process.

She’d just begun to loosen one of the lug nuts when she heard someone pull up behind her. She knew it was him before she ever looked up. As her luck was going so great, she couldn’t imagine it being anyone else.

“Need a hand?” Paul Foster asked. His deep voice caused the base of her neck to tingle.

“Nope. I’ve got it,” she huffed, not stopping her efforts.

He leaned against the hood of his truck and watched her for a moment. “Sure is hot out here.”

“Yep.”

“At this pace, you’ll probably be working on that tire for a while.”

She stiffened. Why did he have to choose this moment to bug her? She was well aware that she wasn’t having much success loosening the nuts and didn’t want Paul to see her fail at such a simple task.

“If you’d let me help, you could be back on the road in a hurry,” Paul continued.
Grace had to admit he had a point there. She could continue to struggle and have him watch her all the while or give up and let Paul do it. At least then he’d be busy, and it wouldn’t take him nearly as long to change the tire.

She leaned back and rested her hands on her bent knees. Pursing her lips, she studied him for a moment. His blues eyes softened as they stared into hers.

“Fine.” She stood up and took a step back.

His eyebrow raised but he didn’t move from his relaxed stance.

“Would you please change my tire for me?” she said, barely resisting the urge to growl. The man infuriated her at times.

He gave her a big smile and then proceeded to change her tire. She expected him to bombard her with his chatter, but instead he remained silent. It took him just a little over ten minutes to put the spare tire on. It was the first ten minutes spent in each other’s company where neither one of them raised their voice or stormed away in angered frustration. It allowed her a chance to study him without interruption. His tan cowboy hat shaded his face from the sun and her curious eyes. His tall lean frame even while crouched, commanded authority. While he might be a little over fifty, not an inch of that man spoke of softness—he was covered in sinewy muscle, hard-earned from a lifetime of working on a ranch. He was a very attractive man.

She thought about what Ms. Halley had told her and wondered if she could do it. Could she spend an entire evening in his company? Ever since Ms. Halley had drawn her attention to her empty bed, she couldn’t stop thinking about it. Maybe it was time she had someone in her life. She doubted Henry would want her to spend the rest of her life grieving for him.
She gave her jeans and sweat-soaked t-shirt a short glance and ran a hand through her tangled blonde hair. There wasn’t much she could do at the moment about how she looked. She wondered if Paul even found her attractive. If he didn’t, her current attire wouldn’t raise her in his esteem at all.

Once her spare was on, Paul tossed the flat tire in the bed of her truck and wiped his hands on a handkerchief. He noticed the look she was giving him; his eyes widened briefly in surprise before darkening into a look that was almost predatory. He took a step towards her.

“I called the other day.”

“I know.”

He took another step. “No interest in calling back?”

His question seemed weighted. Grace wasn’t sure how to respond. Sure she’d thought about calling him back, only to be brought back to her senses before she’d dialed the phone. A relationship with this man would not be wise.

“No,” she lied. At first she thought she’d been convincing, but then a slow smile crept across his face.

He closed the distance between them, causing her to tilt her head back to meet his gaze.

“Come out to dinner with me,” he said. Grace couldn’t decide if it was a question or a command.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“It’s just dinner.”
Grace knew nothing was that simple with this man, but try as she might, she
couldn’t resist the urge to say yes. She bit the edge of her lip and nodded her head.

A smile lit up his face and put a sparkle in his eyes. For the first time, she saw
what other women saw when they looked at him—a charming, handsome man that could
no doubt seduce any woman he wanted—could no doubt seduce her if she wasn’t careful.

She took an obvious step back and glanced down at her fixed tire. “Thanks for
the help. I probably would still be changing it,” she admitted.

They exchanged a few pleasantries before Grace managed to politely tell him
goodbye.

Her heart thundered and her hands shook as she drove the rest of the way to the
ranch. What had she been thinking? She couldn’t go on a date with Paul Foster. Steering
with her right hand, she began to roll the ring on her left hand with her thumb. Maybe
she could take it back. Yeah, she could see that going real well—he’d demand to know
why she’d change her mind, which she couldn’t even put into words for herself.

Maybe it was just nerves. She hadn’t been with anyone since Henry died.
Running the ranch by herself had consumed all her time, even now there was a to-do list
sitting on her desk waiting.

She pulled up to the house but didn’t get out of the truck. “What should I do,
Henry?” she asked. She wished he could answer her. He’d know exactly what to say.
Most likely it wouldn’t be something positive about the man—he never did like Paul, but
she imagined he would encourage her to start dating again.
Spying Nate walking towards her, she erased the worry from her eyes and got out of the truck. She was not going to spend any more time thinking about Paul or her lack of dating life.

“I had to order a part for the windmill,” Nate said. He reached into the bed of the truck and pulled out the cooler. “Got a flat?” he asked, nodding to the tire in the bed.

She gave the cursed tire a scowl. “Picked up a nail somewhere in town.”

“Changed it yourself?”

She hesitated. For some reason she didn’t want to mention Paul. She wasn’t exactly sure of what Nate thought of him, so it wasn’t entirely because she was afraid of his silent criticism. She couldn’t quite name the feeling that kept her quiet.

“You don’t think I can change a tire?” she asked, trying to avoid lying to him.

He shrugged and started hauling the cooler to the kitchen door. “Forget I asked.” He gave her a quick glance as she followed alongside him. “Something happen in town?”

“Like every time. I’d boycott it if I could.”

“So I guess if I were going to ask you out, I’ll have to take you somewhere besides Juan?”

Grace stumbled, shocked by his teasing and the charming smile he threw her way. Why was everyone around her surprising her lately? She didn’t know how to process these sudden changes.

“Are you asking me?” she asked, catching up to him just as he opened the kitchen door.
He set the cooler on the table in the empty kitchen. “Maybe.” He leaned against the counter and crossed his arms.

Grace didn’t understand it. She was well aware that she looked extremely rough; certainly it wasn’t her appearance that had inspired two different men to ask her out.

He raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to say something, so she said the first thing that popped into her mind. “A real date?”

“That’s what I had in mind.” He gave her a slow perusal. “So what do you say?”

“Technically you still haven’t asked me.”

“Would you like to have dinner with me?”

She gave him a small smile. “Ok.”

“Good.” He straightened and his face turned serious. “I’d best be getting back to work then. Evan and I are going to ride the western fence. See if we can’t find that missing mare.”

After he left, Grace sagged against the kitchen table. For years she’d been alone. Men didn’t seem to pay too much attention to her nor she them. Now, in a span of an hour, she had two dates with two different men, and she wasn’t quite sure how she’d managed it.
Chapter Twelve

Lola leaned low as the white speckled mare leaped into a gallop at Lola’s unintentional command. Ok, it was intentional. She had never ridden a horse before but had dreamed about galloping across wide expanses of land at full speed with the wind blowing her hair behind her.

In reality, while the mare sailed with well-trained agility across the hard earth, Lola’s body wasn’t skilled enough to make the ride pleasant. Every time the mare’s hooves touched the ground, Lola was jarred roughly, barely keeping her seat. Quickly, she realized she wanted to stop, but didn’t know how. She should have been paying more attention to Marc when he was going over basic commands.

She considered the knowledge of riding she had gained from watching numerous westerns.

“Whoa!” she shouted.

The mare didn’t even flinch.

“Stop!” Still, nothing. “Heel?” She wanted to laugh at herself for the last command, but she was running out of options.

The reins in her hand jerked, reminding her of their presence. She looked at the endless desert the mare was taking her into with a frown. She hated the desert. Sure, she’d lived in desert for most of her life and it was home to her, but that didn’t mean she had to like it.
For the first time, she began to feel fear. People died in the desert. If it wasn’t the heat stealing every ounce of moisture from one until there was nothing more than a dusty shell, it was the poisonous snakes, mountain lions, or scorpions.

In the far distance, she could hear sister and Marc yelling her name. Surely, they would catch up to her soon.

Lola glanced at the reins in her hands again. Two things could happen. She could be thrown or the horse could stop. She took a deep breath and clumsily pulled back on the reins.

The mare instantly responded and slowed her pace. Within seconds, she was stopped. Lola felt victorious, as if she had fought a battle and won. She liked when she figured things out for herself. She was so used to her sister always hovering and taking care of her. It was rare when Lola accomplished something new without assistance.

She patted the mare’s neck and cooed encouraging words. The mare turned her head and nipped lightly at Lola’s leg.

“Ok, girl. Let’s pretend I knew how to do that all along. I promise I’ll give you a huge carrot when we get back.”

Seeming to understand her, the mare neighed and nodded her head. Lola turned her around and allowed her excitement to show on her face. She did not want them thinking she had been scared at all. That would totally ruin the effect of her victory.

Marc reached her first. He pulled up alongside her and checked her as well as the mare, making sure they were both ok.

Corine was seconds behind.
“What were you thinking?” her sister practically yelled at her. “You could have been killed.”

“But I wasn’t. I just wanted to see what she could do.” Lola turned to Marc.

“She runs like the wind.”

“Of course she does,” Marc agreed, silencing her sister’s growing protest. “She also responds well to her rider. That’s why I chose her for you.”

“Don’t encourage her.” Corine absentmindedly patted her own horse’s neck.

“She’s going to end up hurting herself.”

“She’s right, Lola,” Marc conceded. “While Star is a good runner, you haven’t had the lessons to know how to control her. You could have hurt her or yourself.”

Lola felt chagrinned. She never thought about hurting the mare. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

Her sister still looked angry, but Marc gave her a smile. Any prior hesitations about Marc disappeared. Lola decided then that she like him. He was a good balance to her sister, who took things too seriously.

“That’s ok. This just means that you and your sister will have to visit more often for lessons.” Marc began to steer them back to the corral, which was now a good distance away.

“Really? You’ll let me ride again?” Lola felt like she was about to burst with excitement. Suddenly the summer didn’t seem so dull. She couldn’t wait to tell Janie.

“Sure. You can’t live in Juan and not know how to ride a horse.”

Lola thought about that as they rode back. Eventually a question escaped her. As soon as it left her mouth, she wished she could get it back.
“Does that mean Felipe rides?”

Marc raised his eyebrow. “Felipe, huh?”

Corine gave her a knowing smile, her previous anger gone. “Do you know Felipe well?” she asked Marc.

“As well as any other person in Juan. We all kind of grew up together. It’s hard to have any secrets in a place this small.”

“So, does he ride, too?” Lola asked, impatient. The question was already out there, and she wanted to know.

“A little. When we were kids, Felipe, Jim, Daniel and I used to ride off into the desert and go camping.”

“Really?” Lola tried to picture Felipe at her age, but couldn’t.

“We’d make a campfire and tell ghost stories. We always competed to see who could scare the rest of us first.”

“And who usually won?” Corine asked.


“And who was the first scared?” Lola asked. She was quite proud of the fact that she usually didn’t scare easily.

A blush stole across Marc’s face. “Me.” He ducked his head. “I would never admit how much I hated ghost stories.”

Lola was proud that her Felipe wasn’t the coward in the group. She imagined him bravely staying awake, watching protectively over the other two as they slept in the lonely desert.
“What made ya’ll stop?” Corine asked and then blushed. “You don’t have to answer that. It seems I’m going to keep pestering you with questions.”

“No, it’s ok. It pretty much all stopped when Daniel’s father died. He never strayed far from Juan after that.” A shadow passed over Marc’s face. Lola blinked and it was gone. She wondered if she had imagined it.

“So, what do you both thinking of riding so far?” Marc asked, changing the subject.

“I like it.” Corine patted her horse. “Though I have a feeling I’m going to be sore tomorrow.

“I love it.” Lola emphasized the love. “Can we ride every day?”

“Lola,” Corine scolded her. She apologized to Marc. Lola hated that. It made her feel like she was five.

He shrugged. “We’ll see.”

Back at the corral, there was a short, dark headed man waiting. Lola hadn’t seen him before. She glanced at Marc, who greeted the stranger with a flash of a smile. Marc introduced him as Donnie. Just Donnie. No last name. Lola wondered if the man had an embarrassing last name that he didn’t like to admit to.

Donnie was a lot shorter than Marc with jet black hair and equally dark eyes. He wore a worn cowboy hat low over his brow. He glanced briefly at Lola before settling his attention on Corine.

Lola tried to follow along their conversation, but grew bored since no one bothered to include her in it. Instead, she entertained herself with petting her mare—yes,
she already decided that Star was hers in every sense of the word besides legal ownership.

There were good and bad aspects of not being noticed. Lola had learned early that people were more likely to say things in her presence that they wouldn’t in anyone else’s. If she chose to sneak around, she never got caught. People rarely noticed when she did something wrong. On the other hand, it sometimes got lonely. No one missed her when she wasn’t there. People rarely addressed her in conversation. For all purposes, she was invisible. Her sister was the only exception—Corine noticed everything she did. Sometimes there would be days where they only had each other to talk to.

Lola felt guilty admitting it, but Corine paid her more attention than their mother. Corine was Carmelita’s favorite. Lola had often felt like she was the disappointment, not that she was trying to feel sorry for herself. It was just a fact.

A man in blue jean overalls came and took Star from her. Lola had to resist the urge to deny him the reins. Without the mare, Lola was forced to rejoin the little circle. She stood by her sister, examining Donnie and Marc critically, trying to see them with an artistic eye. Usually her art was more abstract, but occasionally she’d tried her hand at landscapes and portraits. She liked Donnie’s darkness and Marc’s smile. Torn, she decided she would try to sketch both of them later.

She was getting low on paper and charcoal, but her sister always found a way to get her more. Somehow she doubted their grandmother would give her any.

“What do you think?” Her sister’s voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Huh?”
“Would you like to have a late night picnic by campfire?”

“Here?”

Marc nodded his head. “We can take the horses and ride out a little ways.”

“Sure.”

A man with crisp blue eyes wearing a tan cowboy hat over silver hair sauntered up to them.

He gave a nod to Marc and ignored Donnie completely. “Corine, I’m glad to see you again. And this must be your sister.” He waited for Corine to give him Lola’s name.

Lola thought his voice sounded too pleasant, like he was trying too hard.

“Nice to meet you Lola. How did you like the horseback ride?”

This question was directed at Lola. The tone in which it was delivered caused her to stiffen. She was not a child. She hated it when people sank into that louder, slightly sweet tone that adults used on small kids.

She forced an equally sickly-sweet smile and gave him a brief nod in reply, but only because she felt being rude might cause her riding privileges to be revoked.

Apparently that was enough to appease him. He focused on Corine. Lola sighed in relief. She did not like the intensity of his gaze.

“You girls are both welcomed to come out here anytime you want. I’m sure Mae would appreciate the company.”

Lola knew Mae was Marc’s twin but hadn’t met her yet. Marc had mentioned that she was in town today visiting some friends that couldn’t come to the party last night. Lola wondered if Mae looked exactly like Marc. She tried to picture Marc with long brown hair and makeup. She barely contained the giggle the image caused.
As soon as they were back at their grandmother’s house, Lola took off to find Janie. Of course, this was after several minutes of reassuring Corine that she wouldn’t talk to strangers or be gone long. It exasperated Lola. Juan was so small it could barely be called a town. It wasn’t Vegas, but no matter how hard they both tried, Lola was afraid they’d never be able to leave that city behind—it was a constant dark shadow overhead.

Janie’s house was a large adobe located beside the crematorium. Lola thought this was a little creepy, but she kept that thought to herself.

Janie was helping her mother clean house, but after a little wheedling, managed to escape. They headed to the swings in the school’s yard. As they walked, Lola told her about Star and how fast she could gallop. Janie, in turn, told Lola how she had her father almost convinced to buy her a bow and arrow set she found online. Janie had decided she needed to become an excellent archer after reading a teen novel where the protagonist uses her father’s bow and arrows to fight some bad guys.

They swung on the large swing set, letting the midday sun warm their skin. Lola laughed freely at Janie’s jokes, even the dirtier ones. She never made a friend this fast. In Vegas, it took four months before she got invited to hang out with another girl in her class, and another two months after that before she would even consider that girl her friend.

Janie was different—she was full of contradictions, which Lola liked. Janie was practical about things like death and violence but loved fantasy and adventure stories. She’d even admit to reading a few teen romances. She wouldn’t use cuss words, but
she’d tell dirty jokes. Lola liked Janie’s unpredictable nature and wondered silently why Janie seemed to like Lola. Lola was none of those things.

It was well into the afternoon before hunger and the threat of punishment made them go home. Janie had given Lola all kinds of information about her future classmates and gossip on who the new teacher might be. Apparently Juan’s librarian was in the running, whether she wanted to be or not.

Corine was waiting for her on the porch with one eyebrow raised. Lola knew she was in trouble.

“Sorry. I know I’m late,” she said quickly.

“You were supposed to be back an hour ago.”

“I know. We were talking and I just lost track of time.” Lola couldn’t stop her smile.

“Where were you? I know you weren’t at Janie’s house.” Corine had her hands crossed over her chest and her foot was tapping. This wasn’t good.

“We were at the playground at the school.” Lola took a step closer. “I had fun, Corine. I’m sorry I’m late.”

Corine softened. “I know you think Juan is safe, but it’s still a strange place for us. I don’t trust it yet. Maybe when we get to know more people it’ll be different, but for now, I expect you to be home on time. And no running all over town with Janie.” Corine pulled her into a hug, which Lola returned, feeling guilty.

“I’m glad you had fun,” Corine added. “Maybe next time, Janie can come over here.”
Lola nodded her head. She wasn’t sure if their grandmother would appreciate
them playing in the house, however.

The screen door opened. Lola felt Corine stiffen.

“So, there you are girl.” Maria looked her up and down. “And apparently none
worse for wear. You made your sister worry. What were you doing?”

Lola didn’t want to answer but also didn’t feel like she had a choice.

“I was just hanging out with Janie Myers.”

Maria’s stern expression evaporated. “The Myers’s girl.” She nodded head a
couple of times. “Corine worried for nothing then. Janie’s a good girl.”

Corine didn’t look convinced.

“It’s time for supper. Let’s go inside.” Maria held the door open and waited for
them. Her sternness was back.

They were silent at the dinner table until Maria cleared her throat, loudly. She
looked pointedly at Corine then Lola. Lola wondered what they had done now.

“I’ve decided that as long as you two are going to be here, you might as well
make yourself useful. It’s not good for you to spend your entire day being lazy. It’ll lead
to no good.”

Corine squeezed Lola’s hand under the table. Lola could see the dread sitting on
her sister’s shoulders.

“Corine, I’ve called the Stuarts, and they’ve agreed to hire you as a part time
waitress. You’ll start tomorrow morning.”

“What?” Corine stood up. Anger flashing in her eyes. “You have no right.”
“You should be thanking me. Not only will you have something to do, but you’ll be earning some spending money.”

“You can’t make me go.”

“No. But if you want to hang out with any of your new friends this summer, you’re going to need money to do it with.”

Corine huffed and sat down. Lola knew this wasn’t the end to the argument.

“Lola, you’re much too young to get a job yet, so you’ll be helping me.”

Lola’s stomach clinched. Hours a day in her grandmother’s company? She could barely get through the small amount of time she spent helping Maria with the meals.

Corine gripped her hand again.

Lola wondered if it was too late to hope that Carmelita would come back wearing a wedding ring. She had to believe their mother wouldn’t just abandon them in Juan for good.
Chapter Thirteen

Mike’s voice joined Toby Keith’s as he made his rounds around town. One of the country stations was playing contemporary music for once. Mike appreciated the variety, though he wasn’t as familiar with all the artists that were being played.

It was near on lunch time and his stomach had slowly begun to protest him skipping breakfast that morning. He parked in the front of the diner. Felipe had mentioned he might join him for lunch today. Mike looked for Felipe’s truck but didn’t see it.

Inside, he grabbed a table and waited for Laura to give him a menu. Mike pretty much had the menu memorized at that point, but he liked the act of perusing its contents and considering trying new items, which he never did. He always ordered steak, rare, with mashed potatoes and a sweet tea.

Sue refused to cook any red meat for him because he’d received a bad cholesterol test a couple of years ago. She’d never gotten over it. Of course, he also refused to get retested, fearing it might be even worse than the last one. So, whenever he ate out, he indulged in food he knew Sue would kill him for eating.

He was early for lunch. There were only two other tables occupied. He looked around for Laura, but, instead, a blonde haired girl walked through the kitchen doors. She looked familiar, but it took a moment for Mike to place her.

She was Mrs. Espinosa’s granddaughter. He’d been introduced to her at Sanders’s ceremony. He searched his memory for her name, coming up with it just as she reached his table.
“I didn’t know you were working here Corine. I’m sure Laura and Sam appreciate the help.”

Corine handed him a menu. “Just started,” she answered. “What would you like to drink?”

She wasn’t much for talking. He wished more young people were like that.

“Tea. I think my son will be joining me, so I’ll wait to order.”

She gave him a brief smile and hurried away to get his drink.

Mike looked out the large windows, which gave a view of the parking lot. They were slightly tinted, shielding customers from the bright sunlight. A few more pickup trucks pulled in, but none were his son’s.

A tumble weed rolled by. The only thing that was missing was some cowboy to come into the dinner wearing dusty spurs. His smile grew wider as a dusty cowboy walked in, waving hello to Mike.

“How’s it going, Sheriff?” the cowboy asked.

“Pretty quiet. How are you doing Evan?”

“Been trying to get the pump working again on the old windmill.”

“I heard the Foster Ranch has been having water problems too. This dry spell is sure holding out, but it’ll break soon.”

“Hopefully,” the cowboy replied before Corine greeted him.

Mike took a drink of his tea. The glass was already beginning to sweat. It hadn’t rained in months. This situation wasn’t entirely new. Drought was a way of life in Juan. The only benefit to getting a rain only a couple of times of the year was that there was
hardly any vegetation to worry about catching fire. Juan’s fire department consisted of

two volunteer fire fighters and the bare minimal equipment that was rarely used.

Mike perked up as Felipe’s truck pulled into the lot.

“You’re late,” he grumbled as his son sat down.

“It’s good to see you too.” Felipe shook his head as Mike offered him the menu.

“Hasn’t changed since I was a kid.”

Mike shrugged. “Was the store busy?”

“A little.” Felipe looked relieved as Corine interrupted their conversation.

“Hi,” she said shyly.

“When did you start working here?”

“This morning.”

Mike studied his son as he exchanged pleasantries with Corine. Something was
different about him. He hadn’t seen Felipe in a few days, which wasn’t all that unusual.

They kept different work schedules.

Mike gave Corine his food order and then waited. As soon as she left, he raised an
eyebrow at Felipe.

“What’s got you in such a good mood?”

“Nothing. It’s just a good day.”

“Uh huh.” Mike knew it was more than that. He suspected Felipe’s mood had
something to do with Paul Foster’s daughter coming back into town.

“How’s mom?”

“Fine. Why don’t you go up to the house later and visit her?”
“Can’t today. Maybe tomorrow.” Felipe rolled his straw wrapper between two fingers. “You know I come by when I can.”

“I didn’t mean you to imply you didn’t. You just haven’t been around much this week.” Mike didn’t like guilting his son, but he didn’t want his son neglecting his mother for some girl, either.

Felipe sighed. “I’ll be by tomorrow. I promise.”

Mike accepted this. His son always stuck to his word. Corine arrived at that moment with their lunch. Steak and potatoes for Mike. Caesar salad for Felipe.

“I don’t know how you willingly eat that rabbit food.” Mike watched as Felipe took a another bite of lettuce.

Felipe patted his muscled stomach. “You also don’t have this.”

Mike gave his son a surly look. He was well aware that his once lean body had grown soft from age and hours of sitting in his bronco patrolling.

“Next thing I know, you’ll be joining your mother’s crusade to rid all meat from my diet.” He emphasized his point by jabbing a large piece of steak with his fork and shoving it in his mouth. He chewed slowly, sighing in pleasure.

“No. I don’t think I will.”

Mike looked at Felipe in surprise.

“I think a man should have some pleasures in his life, and the way you are eating that steak, this is one of yours.”

“Truly it is, son.” Mike toasted to Felipe with his tea.

His attention was drawn to Corine across the room. She was waiting on Violet Lake. Violet was a rich widow that had all the means to leave Juan and live on some
beach sipping margaritas for the rest of her life; however, he knew she would never leave. He just wasn’t sure why. He suspected it was due in part to her being bat crazy. Somehow through the years, she had convinced herself that she was the great-great granddaughter to Billy the Kid. Luckily she had a kind nephew who took care of the ranch for her, which allowed her to live out her days however she wished.

She was usually attired as she was now—blue jeans, long sleeve shirt, vest, cowboy hat and boots with bright silver spurs. On her hips she wore a leather holster which held two pearl-handled pistols. Everyone tended to take her outfit and guns in stride. He long ago made sure that the guns were unloaded and stayed that way.

Corine didn’t seem as nonchalant about Violet’s guns. She eyed them warily as she took Violet’s order.

Mike held back a laugh. “What do you think about Mrs. Espinosa’s granddaughter?”

Felipe followed his gaze. “At this moment, I feel kind of sorry for her. Someone should probably tell her not to worry.”

“I don’t see you hopping up.”

“Hmmm.” Felipe gave him a slightly wicked grin. “This will be more fun later.”

Mike laughed then. “So I take it you like her?”

“She’s nice. Mrs. Espinosa’s going to end up giving her hell. I can’t see her lasting long here.”

“Well, I suspect her mother will wonder back into town eventually and take them back again.”

“Maybe.”
As soon as they were finished eating and the bill was paid, Mike walked Felipe to his truck. Mike knew Felipe wasn’t going to like what he was going to say, but he still needed to say it.

“I’m worried about you.” Mike offered as Felipe open the truck’s door.

Felipe paused. “Why?”

“You know she’s going to leave again. That girl will never stay here.” Mike watched the tension roll through his son and frowned.

“I know that. I can handle it.” He slid into the truck’s seat.

Mike stopped him before he could close the door. “When it comes to her, I don’t think you can.”

Felipe jerked the door out of Mike’s hand and closed it. He rolled down the window half way. “Tell mom I’ll see her tomorrow.”

A wave of dirt blew across the parking lot as Felipe drove away. Mike stood there for a moment. He hated feeling helpless, but short of locking his son up, he couldn’t keep Felipe away from her. Mae Foster would always have a hold on him. Mike had hoped for years it would fade away. And now she was back, temporarily.

Maybe Sue could talk some sense into him. She had always been better at dealing with Felipe. Sue had the kind of quiet patience that drew respect. People listened to her. She could walk into the middle of a loud confrontation of brawling men in a bar and have them shaking hands within ten minutes.

It was her goodness that had been balm for his soul all those years ago. Katie had broken his heart; Sue had healed it. Their relationship wasn’t perfect, though. In the beginning, it had been downright rocky. It didn’t help that no matter how hard he tried,
he never stopped loving Katie, which caused waves of guilt that he would then take out on Sue. He didn’t know why she’d put up with him back then. Somehow, though, he’d managed to convince her to marry him. He hadn’t always been true to Sue, but he was now. He was an old and cranky man, but Sue still loved him. That’s all he could ask for.

Sue worked as a receptionist in a doctor’s office five days a week. He wished she worked in Juan, but there just weren’t many job opportunities here. It was the problem that prevented many of the Juan’s young people from staying. They either worked on a ranch or an odd job at a store in town, or they’d have to drive to Van Horn for work. Often they ended up continuing on to El Paso for better opportunities. Because of this, instead of growing, Juan’s population had been steadily decreasing over the years.

Mike got into his bronco and tapped his fingers on the wheel, his mind drifting to the other woman in his life, wishing he could visit her again.

He drove down the town’s streets, taking a well known path that he refused to acknowledge. He slowed down as he passed the white two story house but didn’t stop. Not because he was afraid Daniel was home—he could tell from the driveway he wasn’t. Only Rachel’s car was parked there. He was determined to keep his promise this time. It didn’t do either of them any good to keep revisiting old wounds. It was hard, though. She was like an addiction he couldn’t shake. Knowing that Katie was lying in there, slowly dying, killed him. He couldn’t stand the knowledge that soon he would never again see her face, hear her voice.

Mike forced himself to apply pressure to the gas pedal and tore his gaze off the house reflected in the rearview mirror. For penance, he would clean the house when he got home, maybe even cook dinner. Sue loved his cooking. She tended to protest less at
the unhealthy food when it was him preparing it, but to make her happy, maybe he’d cook that new recipe she’d found for vegetarian chili. He grimaced. In his opinion, it couldn’t be called chili without beef.

He didn’t look forward to his evening—cleaning house and vegetarian chili, but that was the purpose of penance after all.
Chapter Fourteen

It was sweltering in the garage. A large metal fan stirred the air around Daniel, providing some relief but not enough to keep the sweat from running down his forehead. He slid out from under the Ford pickup he’d been working on all morning and wiped his face with a handkerchief. After taking a drink of water from the thermos on his workbench, he stretched his arms over his head, working the kinks out of his shoulders. He was just about finished, which was good since he had a jeep waiting for an oil change.

Max Porter—a short, stocky man with thin gray hair—came out of his office and eyed the Ford Daniel was working on.

“How much longer?” he asked.

Daniel ran a mental checklist. “Probably fifteen minutes. Then I can get started on the jeep.”

Max pulled a toothpick out of his front pocket and stuck it in his mouth. He chewed the edge, a habit he’d had for as long as Daniel had known him. Once, Max had mentioned it was how he quit smoking and kept from picking the habit back up.

“Grace Williams called. She’s wondering if you would come out and have a look at a pump on a windmill.” The request was an unusual one. Daniel often got asked to do odd jobs.

He had a talent with machines that made him a commodity in Juan. While he’d never gone to college for it, he had read a lot of books. Mostly, it just came natural to him. Machines made sense. It was the other things in life that didn’t.
He glanced from the pickup to the jeep. He had been Max’s only mechanic for the last seven years, starting when he was barely sixteen. Usually it wasn’t a problem, but occasionally they’d have multiple clients who all wanted their vehicle fixed immediately, making things a little more challenging. On smaller issues, Max still helped—he just couldn’t slide under the cars anymore.

“I guess I could swing by this afternoon. Shelby wanted her jeep ready by lunchtime.” Max nodded his head. He pretty much let Daniel run his own schedule while he took care of the paperwork and bills. Max was a widower. He never had any kids and tended to consider Daniel as his future heir. Not only did he let Daniel manage himself, but also on slow days, Max would teach Daniel how to handle the books.

Daniel finished the pickup and the jeep just in time for lunch. After washing up, he headed down to the diner to grab something to eat before heading out to the William Ranch. It was a good twenty minute drive of nothing but cacti and tumbleweeds.

He found an empty table and waited. He could have grabbed something from home, but he found himself preferring to eat at the diner lately. The reason for his preference walked out of the kitchen and gave him a smile.

Daniel would be lying if he said he’d been pining away since the day Corine left Juan all those years ago. The fact was, they’d gotten into a childish fight and then she’d left. A few weeks later, his father had died, and Daniel had forgotten about her, more concerned about how to keep his mother from falling apart and food on the table.

But now that she was back, he could remember the smallest details—how they’d talk for hours about things like music, the places she’d been, the places he liked to go—everything seemed possible then. He remembered how much she loved her sister and
going for long walks. He even remembered how once she confessed that she carried around a picture of her father she’d stolen from her mother. It was the only picture she had of him. Back then, he couldn’t imagine growing up never meeting his father. His father had always been such a strong presence in his life.

Corine pulled out the chair in front of his and sat down. “How are you doing today?”

“Busy.” He gave the diner a quiet scan. “It seems you are too.”

Corine shrugged. “It balances out. It seems the majority of Juan residents keep the same schedule—lunch noon to one and dinner six to seven. The rest of the day is boring.” She glanced around at the other tables. “You just missed Felipe.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t know his dad was the sheriff.”

“Yes. Unfortunately.”

She cracked a grin. “I’m guessing there’s a long history there.”

“The whole classic cliché.” He pointed to his chest. “Teenage boy and friends. Small town, nothing to do. Now add in that one of those friends has a sheriff for a father who always knows of what they’re up to.”

She let out a soft laugh that curled around him, making him want to hear it again.

“What are you doing tonight?” he asked.

“Marc’s having another bonfire. I promised Lola we’d go.” She stood up as Laura walked out of the kitchen, carrying a tray of food-filled plates.

“Guess I better get your order before my other tables get annoyed.”
Daniel gave her his food order, and she strolled off to turn it in. He drank his tea in silence, watching the other diners.

A little while later after his food had been delivered, Corine sat back down.

“You could come,” she offered.

“Huh?”

“To the bonfire. I’m sure Marc wouldn’t mind.”

“Maybe.” He wasn’t sure if Marc would care or not. They hadn’t really hung out since they were kids.

Daniel always felt that while he’d been forced to grow up at an early age, Marc never had. He couldn’t afford to run around anymore, and Marc didn’t seem to care for Daniel’s new somber attitude. And that was that. He didn’t harbor any ill-will against Marc, and he was pretty sure Marc felt the same. They had just grown apart.

“Come on, it’ll be fun.” Corine stole a fry from his plate and popped it into her mouth before anyone noticed. He thought it was cute.

He bit the edge of his lip, surprised at his desire to go. He wondered if Marc would really mind.

“You could give Lola and me a ride—it’ll be fun.”

After warring with himself for a few seconds, he nodded his head.

Corine gave him a big smile and stole another fry. “Good.” She hopped back up and began checking on her tables.

A Johnny Bond song began playing on the radio. Daniel finished his French fries, watching Corine dancing slightly to the music as she brought plates out to her tables and filled drinks.
The image stayed with him as he drove out to the William Ranch. The road to the main house was long and paved with gravel. He slowed his speed to keep from kicking up rocks onto his truck. When he pulled up to the house, a ranch hand met him and hopped into the cab to direct him to the windmill.

The windmill was a ways from the house, on the other side of a large red barn. The ranch hand had informed him that it was over twenty years old, but eyeing it, he decided it wore its age well. There was the sprinkle of rust covering its surface, but it was still solid.

He examined the pump, expecting the worse, but found that someone had replaced the majority of the rusted parts. After tying a bandana around his forehead, he got lost in his work. It took him a good hour to figure out the problem and another hour to fix it.

It was a relief when the sun finally drifted behind the windmill, casting his work station into a shadow. He wasn’t a big fan of the hot sun when he was trying to work. He really wasn’t a fan of the hot sun at any time.

Grace brought him out a glass of tea as he tightened the last screw.

“Will it live?”

“Let’s see.” He flipped a lever and took a step back. There was a slight groan of metal as the windmill began to turn. After a couple of minutes, the pump began to bring up water.

Daniel grinned in satisfaction. He accepted the tea glass from Grace and took a long drink.

Grace stared at the pump like it was the magical cure to all her worries.
“Daniel, I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this. We’ve been working on that pump for over a week.”

He looked out at the dry shrub brush and endless miles of clear blue sky. It hadn’t rained in so long; a lot of people were getting worried.

“No problem. I’m glad I could help.”

Grace handed him a check. “How’s your momma doing?”

“The same.”

“I know it’s been a while since I’ve been by. I’ll try to come around soon.”

“I’m sure she’d like that.”

Grace slid her hands into her jean pockets. “Your momma was the first to befriend me when I moved here.” She stared down at the pump. “She has been there for me through the years, including when Henry died.”

Daniel nodded his head, feeling awkward. Ever since his mother took a turn for the worst, people had been offering their stories of her. It made him feel like she was already dead.

“Some people become such an integral part of your life that you can’t imagine them not being there. And if they get sick or die suddenly, it just becomes almost impossible to process. It is easier to just avoid the issue instead of facing it.” The look in her eyes grew distant. It was a few moments before she shook herself out of it. A determined expression settled on her face. “Tell her I’ll be by in the next few days.”

“Will do.”

“And if you need anything, just let me know.”
“Thank you,” Daniel said with appreciation. He knew Grace meant her offer of help. She had always been a good friend to his mother.

He made it back to the shop in time to give Max Grace’s check before it was clocking out time. A green suburban had come in while he was gone, but it would have to wait until the next day.

When he got home, Daniel talked to his mother for a few minutes. She had a little more color in her cheeks and was slightly perkier. She got into an even better mood when he mentioned his conversation with Grace.

“Do you think she’ll come by tomorrow?”

“I don’t know. But soon.” He brushed the hair off her forehead. “I think this drought has been weighing her down lately.”

“I’m sure it’s been hard on everyone. But don’t you worry.” She patted his hand slowly. “It’ll break. You can almost smell the rain in the air—it’s coming soon.”

She was beginning to slump against her pillows, her eyes slinking into slits. Her nurse noticed immediately and hurried him to finish his visit.

“You get some rest now.” He kissed her forehead.

She gave him a smile before closing her eyes. She was asleep within seconds. Daniel tucked her blankets around her and allowed her nurse to check on her. He resisted the impulse to hope that this good moment would be followed by others. In the beginning, he saw all her good days a sign that she was getting well. It had made it that much harder when a few days would pass, and she would be worse than before.
He’d almost come to resent the good days and the false hope they fostered. This feeling of resentment would lead to guilt which would bring him back to resentment. It was a vicious cycle.

Once her nurse had resumed her seat in the rocking chair, he approached his mother’s sleeping form. At that moment, snuggled under blankets with a rose design, she looked almost peaceful.

“She had a good day,” Rachel offered.

“How long was she awake today?” He clasped his mother’s frail hand.

“Several hours off and on.” Rachel put down her knitting needles. “We played cards and looked at some photo albums. She is very proud of your pictures.”

Something twisted inside him. He hadn’t spent much time with her in the last few months. Even though he needed to work, he knew she didn’t have much time left.

“Next time she has a good day, let me know. I’ll stay home with her.”

If she was surprised, she didn’t show it. “I’m sure she’ll like that.”

Daniel watched his mother sleeping for a while before he kissed her forehead and left her room. Grace’s earlier words about avoidance had stuck with him, and he wondered if that was what he had been doing with his mother. It was true he hadn’t been around much, but he always made sure she was taken care of.

While his father’s insurance money took care of the nurse’s bills, he still had to work hard to take care of the rest of the bills as well as stocking the fridge. He allowed himself a few more moments of denial before admitting that even when he wasn’t working, he didn’t spend much time with her. He could do better. Be better.
Filled with a new determination, he turned on the shower to get ready for the bonfire with Corine. It had been some time since he’d gone out to have fun. Usually he left the house at night out of frustration and an urge to escape for a while.

With the water running over his face, he allowed Corine to occupy his thoughts. She was the first girl he’d felt interested in for years. It didn’t help that he’d grown up with the majority of the dateable girls in Juan, which pretty much purged him of any romantic mystery or interest.

Corine was different. She was beautiful but not stuck up. Her smile was genuine as was her kindness, but she wasn’t meek. Not by any means. Daniel smiled, remembering the scar she’d given him. At the time, he’d been shocked and angry. Now, he laughed at the confusion he’d felt.

When they first began hanging out, he thought of Corine as something fun and new. He still spent the majority of his time running around with Felipe, Marc and Jim, but Corine provided extra distraction, keeping him away from home. He had been determined to stay away from his father as much as possible since that summer his father had decided to take him on as an apprentice. Daniel had no desire to work in the crematorium. He considered dead people creepy and the act of burning them to ashes brought that creepiness to a new level. At that point in time, he had seen enough on TV and in other nearby towns to know that Juan was unique in its treatment of the dead.

Fifteen had not only brought on an urge for independence but also an instinctive impulse to rebel against the rigid traditions his parents took part in. When his father notified Daniel that he would have to spend his afternoons with him in the crematorium—it was just too much. So he stayed away. If he slept at home, he’d make
sure he was in late and out early. Usually, he would stay at Marc’s or Jim’s. He rarely stayed with Felipe because his father always notified Daniel’s mother, which often ended with him getting sent home.

Corine, with her long blonde hair, had been shiny and new. It didn’t matter that she was the granddaughter of the woman that represented everything he resented because she resented it too. She was fun and adventurous and had wicked sense of humor upon occasion. She made him feel his age instead of the adult his father wanted him to be.

Daniel soaped up his hair, feeling tendrils of agitation, even after all these years. Wally had stood at a solid six feet with a lean muscled body, tailored brown hair, and hazel eyes that were often narrowed in disappointment or anger. Of course, Daniel was the typical cause of that anger and disappointment. His father was a hard man. His only soft spot seemed to be Daniel’s mother, who could always coax a smile out of him.

It was his father who initiated the fight between Corine and Daniel. Wally had found out that Daniel was spending a lot of time with Mrs. Espinosa’s granddaughter and accused Daniel of using Corine to make him mad. His father had brought up the issues of their age difference, how she was still just a girl and he was a young man. Although Daniel had never encouraged anything other than friendship with Corine, he felt guilty. Was he taking advantage of her? Was he using her to make his father angry?

He went to the only person he felt he could talk to, Amy Belle, who even then had always been brutally honest with him. Amy hadn’t officially met Corine, but she had seen her around. She understood Daniel’s interested in her better than he did. She calmed him down, insisting in his good heart and reassuring him that his father was just mad. Giving him a hug, she told him not to listen to his father.
That was how Corine found them. Amy’s arms linked around him, holding him tightly as he allowed her to comfort him. Corine began yelling—he couldn’t remember all that was said. He knew that her words caused his already tender feelings to lash out. He felt like he’d been attacked all day and he was sick of it. He thought her anger, like his father’s, wasn’t justified. Instead of taking a moment to cool down, he reacted. Grabbing Amy, he planted a hard kiss against her stiff lips. He realized belatedly that he was going to pay for that rash action.

Shoving him away, Amy gave him a disapproving glare. He wanted to apologize but knew that would ruin the effect he was trying to create. He turned back to Corine just as a small rock came flying at him. He felt a sharp sting and then a rush of warmth running down his face.

It took him a moment to connect the flying rock to Corine’s shocked expression. He was equally shocked himself. Amy let out a scream at the sight of Daniel’s bloody face and Corine jolted. He watched her disappear, somehow knowing then that he wouldn’t see her again. As numbness settled into his chest, he barely felt Amy dabbing at his bloody eye.

Daniel leaned his head back, washing the soap out his hair. Unconsciously, he touched the small scar at the corner of his eye. It had faded over the years, growing almost invisible, but it was still there. He used to hate what it reminded him of—a time when he’d been selfish and hateful. He alone was responsible for his father’s death and the scar used to remind him of that. But since Corine had come back, it had grown more complicated. He couldn’t think of the scar without thinking of Corine along with tinges
of guilt that he was replacing the memory of his father’s death with the memory of a red
faced Corine giving him hell.

Daniel pulled on a pair of faded jeans and a black t-shirt. He ran his fingers
through his damp hair. After checking his reflection in his bathroom mirror, he grabbed
his truck keys off his dresser and headed out the door.

On the way to Foster Ranch, Corine and Lola talked nonstop. Daniel didn’t mind.
Compared to the silence that filled most of his day, the noise was a welcome change. The
best thing about their conversation was that it only required the occasional nod or one-
word answer from him. This left him more time to appreciate Corine pressed close to
him in his pickup’s single cab bench seat. She was wearing a tank top and short jean
skirt which made her long legs appear even longer, and he could smell the faint scent of
roses.

He squeezed the steering wheel, resisting the temptation to touch her. Lola
cracked a joke—he didn’t realize she was funny—and Corine rolled into him, laughing.
He offered up a small chuckle and tried to pay better attention to what they were saying,
which he did until they reached the ranch. About fifty yards from the barn, a big bonfire
had been built. The area around it had been cleared of cacti and brush, making it appear
somewhat barren.

Felipe, Mae, Donnie and Marc were sitting in camp chairs while Jim, Pete and
Mabel roasted hot dogs. Marc looked at him in surprise when they arrived, but greeted
him warmly. There were two empty chairs next to Marc, which Corine and Lola took.
Daniel grabbed a beer from the cooler and sat down on the ground across from Marc. At
first their conversation was awkward, covering general niceties, but eventually they sank into familiar territory, and it was like it used to be before Daniel’s father died.

Daniel was surprised to find himself having a good time. He roasted hot dogs with Lola, teased around with Felipe and Mae, who seemed quite chummy, and stole a few minutes of conversation with just Corine. The only sour note was that Marc seemed to occupy the majority of Corine’s attention. It was clear he liked her and she him—Daniel forced himself to grudgingly admit.

He would have been kidding himself if he thought he wouldn’t have competition. Juan was a small town with very few single women under the age of forty. Plus, Corine was gorgeous. He was actually surprised that Marc seemed to be his only competitor at the moment.

After he got over his own disappointment, his thoughts went to Amy. He wondered if she knew yet. She’d been in love with Marc for so long; he couldn’t imagine she was going to take this well.

Marc laughed at something Corine said and brushed a stray of hair from her cheek. Daniel tightened his grip on this beer. He was going to break Amy’s heart and the idiot probably didn’t care. If Marc wasn’t his friend, he’d punch the man.
Chapter Fifteen

“This is where the dead are burned,” Janie said. They were standing in the basement of the crematorium, near a stone furnace with a black iron door. “Touch it,” she dared Lola.

Lola eyed the contraption, her fingers tingling with dread.

“No, you touch it.”

“I’ve already touched it. I touch it all the time. Sometimes I even help my dad with the burning.”

“Then it won’t matter if you touch it again.”

Janie sighed, raising one dark eyebrow. “Fine.” She walked up to the furnace, quickly tapped a finger against its metal door then hopped back. “Now, you do it.”

Lola knew she didn’t have a choice. She would have to touch it. She wondered if it could sense her fear like she could smell the death surrounding it. It was as black as pitch with a large square door, which Lola was convinced would open at any moment to swallow them whole. Making it worse was the white cross painted on the wall near the furnace. The center of the cross held an image of a field of bluebonnets. The bluebonnets did nothing to ease the sense of dread the cross created.

It was the first time she’d ever been in a crematorium. The idea of people being cremated had been an abstract notion before. Now it was a little too real. She didn’t like being this close to death again.

“Are you sure we won’t get in trouble?” she asked, delaying.
“Mom and dad drove to Van Horn, they won’t be back for another hour at least.
Now stop stalling—or are you too chicken?”

“Really—you’re going to go with chicken?”

Janie gave her a cheeky grin but didn’t respond.

Lola took another step. Her hands trembled. She knew it was ridiculous. It was just a furnace, but she couldn’t do it. She kept picturing a monster with teeth and claws.

She backed away, shaking her head.

“Fine. Do you want to see inside?”

She backed towards the exit. “Are you going to open the door?”

“Of course not.” Janie tilted her head up and yelled, “Travis.”

When there was no response, she yelled “Travis” again only louder this time.

Lola protected her ears from the noise.

There was a moment of silence and then a thump. After a minute or two, Janie’s younger brother came barreling down the stairs and through the door.

“What?” he demanded. Travis Myers was a ten year old, five foot, ball of energy. His brown hair haloed his face in soft curls and his gray eyes were constantly seeking out new mischief.

“We just thought you would like to show Lola the furnace,” Janie said, coyly.

Travis glanced shyly at Lola.

Lola shoved her hands into her short pockets, feeling awkward. She knew what Janie was doing and didn’t like it. They both knew that Travis had a crush on Lola.

Janie elbowed Lola in the side. Twice. Lola knew Janie wouldn’t let up until Lola played along.
“Would you mind Travis?” Lola asked.

Travis puffed up his chest slightly and shrugged. It was an awkward combination of pride and nonchalance, but somehow on Travis, it was sweet. Lola had never had a boy crush on her before. She wasn’t sure how to handle it, but she was sure that using his affections wasn’t it.

He walked over to the furnace and grabbed the large iron handle. There was a slight groan of hinges as the door opened. He turned and held out a hand to Lola.

She hesitated, not sure if she wanted to see where the bodies laid before they were swallowed by fire.

“You wanted to see?” It was more of an insistence then a question. Travis stretched his hand a little more towards her.

Lola gave Janie a frown. Resigned, she slid her hand into Travis’s. His hand closed around hers and he tugged her forward. The overhead light cast a wedge of light into the darkness inside the furnace. She took another step forward, curious. Inside was a shiny metal tray that slid into a long narrow space, similar to an oven.

A cold chill ran up her spine. She imagined her own body resting on the tray, awaiting the flames. She could almost hear the whoosh of the blaze and feel the heat on her skin. The air seemed to vanish from the room. Lola stumbled back and ran up the stairs. She didn’t care if she looked ridiculous. She just needed to get out of there.

She didn’t stop until the sunlight drenched her face. After a few seconds she knew Janie was by her side.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to freak you out.”
Lola shook her head. “It’s nothing.” It was, but she forced back the memory of tearing fingers on her skin.

Janie threw an arm around Lola’s shoulders and gave her a half hug. Instead of comforting Lola, it embarrassed her. She wasn’t used to the attention.

“Really—I just let my imagination get the better of me. I’m fine.”

Janie looked doubtful. “Ok. I just forget sometimes. It’s different for us—Travis and I have lived next to the crematorium for most of our lives. Death’s not such a mystery anymore. I guess I got a little carried away wanting to show it to you.”

The pleading expression on Janie’s face placated Lola somewhat. She relaxed enough to give Janie a genuine smile.

“And I wanted to see it. Everything is just so different here. Death seems to be present all the time. Corine’s managed to escape if for the most part—she gets to work at the diner. I have to spend most of my day helping Maria with her ceremonial prep work. It’s so important to her.”

“Well, I guess it would have to be. Mrs. Espinosa has led the ceremony for as long as I can remember. Maybe always.”

“She said she wants me to be her apprentice. She wants me to learn about it.”

Janie didn’t seem surprised. “That’s how it’s done. How else is it supposed to be carried on? She’s got to teach someone. I heard my dad say that several have offered to be taught, but she didn’t accept any of them.”

“Does your dad have an apprentice?” Lola asked, looking back at the crematorium. Travis came out the door, gave her a slight wave before heading next door to his house.
“Yeah. My brother,” Janie said, slouching her shoulders.

Lola thought about how Janie couldn’t bring herself to open the furnace while her brother didn’t even blink at the task and decided it was probably for the best.

“You should feel honored,” Janie insisted.

“I don’t feel honored. I don’t want to know more than I already do.”

“It doesn’t look like you got a choice.”

Lola didn’t like that answer. She didn’t like feeling like she had no options—it reminded her of living with Carmelita. Living with Maria was supposed to be better, wasn’t it?

Lola glanced at her watch. “I better head back. Maria only gave me an hour,” she lied. She actually had a little more time but suddenly had a strong desire to be alone.

“Ok. See you later.”

“Yeah, see you later.”

Janie turned to head back to her house while Lola started down the street. At the corner, instead of turning right and heading to Maria’s, she turned left. Neither Maria or her sister would be expecting her for another hour.

At first, she walked aimlessly, choosing her streets at random. Then in the distance she saw what looked like an old fort with a graveyard beside it. Curious, she ambled to it. The closer she got, the older she could tell the cemetery was. It was small, containing maybe fifty markers and surrounded by an old wooden fence that was falling apart. Some of the markers were crumbling wooden crosses with etched names which were no longer readable. Others were tablets with names and years still faintly visible. The earliest date Lola could see was from the early 1800s. The crosses farthest from the
fort resembled the paint covered crosses throughout the town. She guessed these were
the most recent although no dates were listed on them.

She knelt and ran a hand over one of the stones. As she did, a strong scent wafted
towards her. Recognizing it, she stood and walked down the rows towards a couple of
small boulders that seemed out of place in the rather flat desert landscape. On the
opposite side was a man with silky black hair. He was leaning against the boulder, within
its shadow, with his eyes closed and a joint hanging from his lips.

“Donnie,” Lola said.

Donnie cracked open one eye and looked up at her. “Munchkin.”

Lola cringed at the nickname. He had started calling her that after teasing her
about being so short. She wished she was clever enough to think of an equally
demoralizing nickname for him. Unfortunately, she hadn’t come up with one yet.

Lola plopped down in the shadow of the boulder next to him and gestured towards
the joint. He raised his eyebrow at her but passed it towards her. She took a puff, held it
in, and then released it slowly.

“Not bad.” She passed it back to him.

“So now you’re a smoker?” he asked doubtfully.

Lola stretched out on her back. “No.”

“Is your sister?”

“Sometimes. But she won’t admit it.” She glanced at him. He hadn’t shifted his
position, but now he seemed tense. “Don’t tell me you like her, too.”

He took another puff. “I take it lots of guys like your sister?”

“Always.”
“And you?” He passed the joint back to her.

“What about me?”

“Do you have the boys chasing you yet?”

Feeling more relaxed, Lola found his comment funny. “Sure.” Her body tense in laughter, she choked slightly on the smoke and began hacking.

“Definitely not a smoker.” He took the joint away from her.

Wiping tears from the corners of her eyes, she studied Donnie for a moment. “Why do you like her?” She could tell Donnie was younger than Felipe or Daniel. In that sense, he seemed a better match, but then age had never mattered to her sister.

“I don’t know.”

“No, really. I want to know. Is it her looks?”

He looked uncomfortable. “Those don’t hurt, but that’s not all.”

“What is it then?” She sat up, feeling a bit reckless.

“She just—it’s just—I don’t know. She’s like a flame—all glowing, bright—she draws you in.”

Lola laughed. “Like a moth.”

“Hey, you asked.” He looked embarrassed. She reached for his joint again, but he shook his head. “You think I’m going to let you have it after you made fun of me?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, trying to look contrite.

“Sure you are,” he said, unconvinced.

She pouted slightly, doing her best imitation of her sister when she wanted something.

He sighed. “Fine.”
Lola wiggled happily, taking the joint. She was already feeling it and probably should stop, but at that moment she was beyond caring. She was enjoying the blankness, the sense of ease. Maria was going to entrench her life with more death. Her mother was probably never coming back. And the guy Lola had been crushing on now had a girlfriend. She’d had better moments.

“She’s not perfect, you know.”

“Who?”

“My sister.”

He arched an eyebrow. “How so?”

Lola thought about that for a moment. “She’s a horrible cook. She barely gets by in her classes. She’s snores. She’s never stayed with any guy for long.”

“That’s doesn’t seem so bad.”

Lola narrowed her eyes, searching for something that might put him off. She wasn’t sure why she wanted to detour him, but at that moment it seemed important.

“She’s been arrested.” The minute she said the words, she felt guilty. It was one thing to mention the other stuff—Corine would admit to it herself. It was another to talk about the incident—as Carmelita called it.

“Arrested? For what?” He didn’t seem as upset as Lola had hoped.

She shook her head. Not willing to divulge more. “I should go.” She gave him back the joint and stood. She started to walk away when he called her name.

She turned and waited.

“Nobody’s perfect. Don’t feel like you have to be.”
Confused, she nodded and headed to Maria’s. She wasn’t sure what he meant. Maybe it was the joint. She was feeling slightly off kilter.

Trying to avoid Maria for a bit longer, she snuck into the house and upstairs to the bedroom she shared with Corine. She popped an Adele CD into the small player that was several years old and lay down on her bed. She closed her eyes and saw the iron furnace. She could almost feel its rocky skin under her fingertips—hear the crackle of the flame. It reached out to her with black, scaly hands, trying to pull her inside its wide, expansive mouth.

Lola groaned and reached for her sketchpad under her bed. The only way she could usually get unwanted images out of her head was to put them on paper. Because of this, her sketchpads often contain images from her nightmares or other things that scared her. Her sketchpads were her own personal diary.

Within minutes her fingers were gray from the charcoal and the page filled with jagged lines entangled with curved ones. She had filled two pages when the bedroom door opened. Lola looked up, surprised to see Corine. She glanced at the clock and saw that she’d been in the room for an hour.

“How was work?” Lola asked, putting away her sketchpad.

“Dismal as ever.” Corine immediately began to shed her work clothes and pulled on a light robe. “If anything, this has convinced me of what I don’t want to do for the rest of my life.”

“Well, there is that.” Lola stood up and stretched. “At least you don’t have to be around Maria for most of the day. You can meet new people, get out.”
“I saw you running by the diner earlier with Janie—don’t tell me you’re trapped inside all day.”

Lola shrugged. “I got a couple hours today for good behavior.” She hoped to distract her sister with humor. Corine still hadn’t lifted the ban on running around town.

“Not going to work,” Corine said as if she could read Lola’s mind. “I’m assuming you had a specific destination in mind when I saw you?”

Lola had never been a convincing liar. “No.” Her sister narrowed her eyes and arched one eyebrow. “I’m sorry.”

Corine opened the bedroom door and paused. “I’m beginning to wonder if Janie’s a bad influence.”

“She’s not. I promise.” Lola held her hands up and gestured to the space around her. “It’s just this town.”

Corine bit the edge of her lip. “I know. But we won’t be here forever, and until then I don’t won’t you running around.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” She took a step towards Lola. “I’d give you hug, but I smell like diner food.”

Lola cracked a smile. “I appreciate that.”

“Tell Maria I’ll be down for dinner as soon as I wash up.”

“Ok.”

Dinner consisted of tacos and fresh salsa. It was eaten primarily in silence since Corine had taken an answer-only-when-spoken-to tactic with Maria. Not that Maria seemed to notice. Lola suspected that Maria liked the silence more than mindless chatter.
Lola also didn’t say much, but only because after seeing Maria for most of the day, she didn’t have anything new to offer.

“How did your date go last night?” Maria asked abruptly, startling both Lola and Corine.

Corine put the taco she had in her hands down. “Uh, fine.”

“You’ve been seeing a lot of that boy.”

Since it wasn’t a question, Corine said nothing.

“His father is an avid supporter. Has been since his wife passed away ten years ago.”

Lola wasn’t sure what Marc’s father supported but she guessed it had something to do with the ceremony since nothing else seemed to matter to Maria.

Corine still said nothing.

“I guess it’s all right for you to date him. He’s a pretty good boy. Knows that roots are important. Chose to come back home rather than spend all his time away at school like his sister.”

Lola wondered if Maria knew she had just given Corine a reason not to see Marc again. On one hand, she thought it was funny. On the other hand, she knew that Marc was currently distracting her sister from thinking about leaving. Her eighteenth birthday was in two months. Lola needed her sister to be distracted.

“When do you plan to see that boy again?” Maria asked. She took a bite of a taco and looked expectantly at Corine.

Corine cleared her throat. “This weekend.”

“Where will you be going?”
“To the drive-in at Van Horn.”

Maria nodded in approval.

Lola pushed her plate away. No longer hungry. She gave Marc a week, maybe two weeks top. She thought about all the guys they had met so far, which wasn’t many. Felipe wasn’t an option—even if he wasn’t seeing Mae, he was still Lola’s. Daniel was out as well. Donnie was a maybe. Jim, too. Maybe she could just redirect her sister’s interest. Or encourage theirs.

Curled up in bed later that night, Lola’s thoughts drifted to her mother. She wondered if Carmelita was having fun. She wondered if Javier had proposed yet. Taking Carmelita to meet his family had to mean he was serious—right? Corine had liked Phoenix and even L.A, although she wasn’t a big fan of the ocean. If they could just leave Juan, Lola wouldn’t have to worry so much. They could find a place to be happy.

She wondered if there was the slightest possibility Maria would give Corine custody of her when Corine turned eighteen. Maybe Maria was just angry at Carmelita. Maybe she would see how responsible Corine was with her new job. With that last maybe, Lola fell asleep, hoping to dream about life outside of Juan.
Chapter Sixteen

Marc was mesmerized with the blonde hair sliding through his fingers. It shimmered like spun gold in the moonlight.

He nuzzled Corine’s neck and breathed in roses. The drive-in was pretty empty, which was unusual for a Friday night. Marc preferred it this way. He liked the privacy. He also was discovering that he liked lying on a quilt in the bed of his pickup with Corine.

“Come and play with us Danny,” twin girls insisted through the drive-in speakers resting beside them. “Forever and ever and ever...” The piercing music rose and he felt Corine stiffen.

“You were serious when you said you’ve never seen this,” Marc realized.

“Shush.”

Over the last couple of weeks, he’d come to like Corine quite a bit. He nuzzled her neck again, bringing his hand to rest on her stomach. He knew his limits well. He could touch her stomach but not lower or higher. He could kiss her neck and collarbone but not lower. She like her hair to be played with and liked it when he held her hand. He didn’t fret over his lack of access. He knew slowly she would allow more and more.

Amy had been the same way when they first started seeing each other, and now he’d seen her naked more times than he could count.

He played with a silky tress as his thoughts drifted to Amy. They had spent the previous night together. It had been perfect until she started in on the relationship talk
again. Lately, it seemed every time they were together she would bug him about defining their relationship. He, of course, would refuse—not because he couldn’t define their relationship, but because he knew she wouldn’t like what he would say. He liked her. He really did, but he also didn’t want more than what they already had. He felt he was too young to commit to more, which was why he was enjoying being with Corine more.

At this moment, Corine was perfect. She wasn’t hassling him about how he felt or about being exclusive. They could just be together.

She grabbed his hand as the movie father grabbed an axe, her eyes wide. As soon as the father began to cut down a door that his wife was hiding behind, Corine rolled into him, clutching him tight. This is what he loved about horror movies.

He drove her home later, taking the back roads. She was sitting close to him with her head resting on his shoulder. He liked that.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” he asked, playing with her hand that rested on his leg.

She yawned. “Promised Lola I’d do something with her.”

“How about doing something with me instead? We could have an evening picnic.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why?”

She pulled her hand free and sat up. “Because I promised Lola. We can do something the next night.”

A flash of anger rolled through him. “Maybe. I might be busy.” He didn’t actually have any plans, but he didn’t want her to know that.
She glanced at him. “Ok,” she said calmly as if she sensed his mood. She didn’t say any more. Neither did he.

He pulled in Mrs. Espinosa’s drive. Instead of walking her to the door, where he knew Maria would be waiting, he tugged Corine close in the pickup and kissed her. It wasn’t a particularly nice kiss, but then he wasn’t feeling nice.

It took only a second for her to push him away. He waited for her to berate him, but she said nothing. With an arched eyebrow, she studied him for a moment then slid out of the pickup.

He drove away before she reached the door. He was thirsty. In more ways than one. Knowing Amy would be working, he headed to Morris’s.

There was the usual crowd inside. Instead of walking to the bar, he raised his hand slightly for Amy’s attention and signaled to the backroom. He didn’t pause or look around. He knew Morris wouldn’t be there. He rarely was anymore since Amy had started tending bar, which meant that they would have the backroom to themselves.

The backroom actually consisted of two separate spaces. One was small with a desk and filing cabinet. The other was much larger with shelves stocked with supplies and a small cot in one corner.

“What’s wrong?” Amy asked from behind him.

He waited until the door closed. Grabbing her arm, he jerked her to him and kissed her. He didn’t break the kiss until her stiff body relaxed in his arms. As soon as she leaned into his kiss, he pushed her away.

He locked the door and then sat down on the cot. He pulled off his boots and socks. Her hand stopped his as he began to unbutton his shirt.
“I’m not a toy.” Her voice was soft, barely audible over the noise from the bar.

“I know.” He wanted her to stop talking. He grabbed her shirt and pulled her into his lap, so that he could capture her lips to cut off her next statement.

With a grunt, she pushed him away. “You can’t just come around like this.”

“I know,” he repeated. The knot of frustration in his chest grew. He knew she wasn’t the cause, but he couldn’t shake the desire to take it out on her. “I just need you.”

She softened with his words. “Tell me what’s wrong?”

He wished he could tell her, but the truth would kill anything that still remained between them. And he wasn’t lying when he said he needed her. He did—just not in a way she would like.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” He nuzzled her neck. The comforting scent of vanilla and orange blossoms drifted over him. He sighed.

She ran her fingers through his hair. “Ok.” She kissed his forehead. “We don’t have to talk about it.” And she gave in to him, like she always did.

They were quick, since Amy was supposed to be tending bar. Immediately after, she began to get dressed. Marc watched her silently, enjoying the short moment of contentment. It had become easier to see Amy since his father had started pushing him towards Corine. Now to borrow the pickup, all he’d have to do was mention he wanted to see Corine. He didn’t quite understand why his father wanted him to date her, but as long as it meant he’d get to leave the ranch whenever he wanted to, he wasn’t going to question it.

Before she headed back upfront, Amy gave him a quick kiss. He knew she hadn’t let his bout of anger go. No doubt she’d question him about it later, not that he’d answer.
A Merle Haggard song greeted him when he found a seat at the bar. He couldn’t help but smile bitterly as Haggard sang about having a beautiful time and Amy brought him his favorite beer.

“How you doing tonight?” a voice asked behind him.

Marc turned and gave Daniel a smile. “Just swell.”

“That good, huh?”

“Always.”

Daniel sat down on the bar stool next to him. “Did you hear some of your ranch hands got into it again with the William’s?”

“Which ones?”

“Tate Young, Ron Ritter, and Lowe Wyatt.”

“My father isn’t going to be happy about that. This is going to be the second time he’s had to talk to them.”

“I didn’t know he cared.”

“He only cares when they get caught. I’m guessing you know because they got hauled in.”

“Yep.”

“That means he’ll have to send someone to bail them out tomorrow. He’ll dock their pay this time for sure.”

“Maybe not. They were fighting with Tex Eastman and Manuel Delgado.”

Marc raised his eyebrows in surprise. “You’re right—maybe not. I thought Grace had them under wraps after their last fight.” He took a drink of beer. “Tomorrow is going to be interesting.”
Daniel waved his empty long neck at Amy.

“Well, look at you two,” she said as she popped the top off another beer for Daniel. “I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen you together.”

Marc realized she was right. They had such an easy friendship; he’d forgotten that up until the bonfire a few nights ago, they hadn’t really hung out in years.

“I know,” Marc said. He clapped Daniel on the shoulder. “It was about time.”

Daniel slapped Marc’s back in return. “I know.”

They tapped their beers together and grinned at Amy.

She shook her head. “I see trouble brewing,” she teased. “I’m remembering all the mischief y’all used to get into. Drove both your daddies crazy.”

Marc laughed. Daniel frowned. Amy looked like she wished she could take it back. It took Marc a moment to catch up. He’d almost forgotten that it was after Daniel’s father died that Daniel had stopped wanting to hang out.

Amy slammed a bottle of tequila on the bar along with three shot glasses. Without asking, she poured each of them a shot.

“Come on Daniel—a toast to friendship,” Amy said when Daniel started to hand her the shot back.

Marc picked up his shot and raised it in the air. Amy and Daniel followed suit.

“To old friends and new,” Marc said. They all tapped the glasses on the bar before shooting them back.

Marc savored the slow burn and spreading warmth. He was relieved to see Daniel start to relax. He was enjoying having Daniel as a friend again—he didn’t want to lose him this soon.
An idea came to him. “Hey, I was thinking about having a camping trip like we used to. Maybe tomorrow night? You interested?”

Daniel bit the edge of his lip. “Maybe. It depends on how things go.”

Marc didn’t always pick up on subtext, but he knew the unspoken here was Daniel’s mother.

“Well, think about it. I’ll ask Jim and Felipe.”

Daniel nodded. “Just like old times. Campfire, smuggled beer, and burnt hot dogs.”

“Well, maybe not exactly like old times. I think we could do better than the cheap beer we bought with our allowance. But we might keep the burnt hot dogs.”

“Sounds good.”

Daniel finished his beer and said goodnight. Marc watched him leave, realizing for the first time how much his friend had changed. Gone was the easygoing guy that used to love to laugh. He’d been replaced with someone much more controlled and somber.

Marc missed the lighter version of his friend and wondered what he could do to bring the old Daniel back. He chose to ponder this for a while since it was a relief from thinking about Amy or Corine.
Chapter Seventeen

This was bliss—Felipe was absolutely sure of it. He sat at his kitchen table with Mae across from him. She’d made him eggs and bacon for breakfast; their third breakfast together this week.

Waking up with Mae beside him filled him a feeling of completeness that he’d only ever felt with her. He wanted her there beside him for the rest of his days. He knew in his heart that there would never be anyone else for him. Only her.

“So what do you think?” Mae gestured down at the eggs on her plate.

“They’re great. I’ve never thought of using chili powder in them.” He smiled through his lie. It didn’t matter to him whether or not she could cook, but he knew it might hurt her feelings.

“My roommate cooked these for me, and I thought they were tasty. Really adds a kick.”

He had made a choice a week ago not to acknowledge her life outside Juan, so instead of answering, he took another bite of eggs.

“How’s work going on the ranch?”

She pursed her lips briefly before answering. “Dad’s tough, but I knew that before I came down here. What I wanted was experience and that’s what I’m getting. However, I’m mostly making sure the horses have enough water. Occasionally I’ve gone over to the Williams Ranch. Yesterday I helped with a delivery. It was great.” She beamed.
He couldn’t help but smile with her.

She took another bite of eggs. “You know, I’ve been sneaking around, afraid of what dad might say, and it turns out that the man’s gone off and asked Grace out on a date.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. He’s taking her out tonight.”

“Hmmm,” Felipe grunted. He was only vaguely interested in her father’s social life.

“On top of all of this, dad gave me his old truck. You should have seen Marc’s face. When dad left, I had to reassure Marc that he could use the truck when I’m gone.”

“Well you need to be able to get around while you’re here.”

“True. I wouldn’t be able to work at the William Ranch otherwise. Or see you as much.”

“There’s the true silver lining.” He gave her a flirtatious grin.

Mae stood, stretching her arms above her. She put both their empty plates in the sink and leaned against the counter. “I thought about driving the truck back to school, but dad insisted that it stay here. I think he’s using it as an incentive—he wants me to come back here and work when I graduate.”

Felipe’s heart quickened. “What did you tell him?”

“I didn’t say anything. It wasn’t like he directly asked me. He gives Marc orders, not me. With me, it’s all about the subtext. He would never out right state he wants me back when I get my degree—instead he does things like give me a truck I have to keep at
the ranch. Sometimes it’s so frustrating because there’s no opportunity to disagree or say I’m not going to do what he wants.”

“Sure there is.”

“No, there’s not. I’ve tried it. It usually ends with me sounding like an ogre while he plays the hurt card.”

Felipe didn’t know what to say. He didn’t suspect Paul Foster was going to change any time soon and asking what her plans actually were went against his ignore-her-outside-life rule. He chose silence.

Felipe crossed over to her, pulling her into his arms and rested his chin on her head. She snuggled close and sighed. They stayed like that for a moment. Felipe listened to the dry wind lifting the curtains framing the small kitchen window. Instead of cooling off the kitchen, the wind seemed to warm it, reminding Felipe that he needed to fix the window unit in the living room. This thought brought forth others, and within seconds, he was making a mental checklist of things to do before going on the campout with Marc that night.

“I guess I better be heading back to the ranch.”

Felipe shook away his thoughts and gave Mae one last squeeze.

“I’ll see you tonight?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Guys’ night.”

“Oh, right. The blast from the past camping trip.” The corners of her lips quirked up. “Well, you boys enjoy your fun and try to not to get lost in the desert. I think I’ll see if Corine and Amy want to have a girl’s night.”

“I see. You want to gossip about us guys while we’re away?”
“Honey, we gossip about you all the time. Would you expect anything else?”

Merriment danced in her eyes.

Felipe wished he could capture this moment; he took in every detail—determined to paint it later.

She gave him a light kiss before disappearing out the door. He listened to the roar of the engine and then listened to her drive away.

A sense of dread came over him. He wasn’t sure why. He almost felt like he was drowning. He leaned forward, dragged in a few ragged breaths, and tried to calm his racing heart. He didn’t know what this feeling was, and he sure as heck didn’t like it.

After a few minutes, it passed. Instead of dwelling, Felipe chose to visit his mother. She’d already left him three voice messages since he hadn’t visited since Monday.

He found her in her kitchen, tending the herbs growing in a window box. She bundled him into a tight hug the moment she saw him.

“Four days you don’t call or see your mother?” She slapped him lightly on the side of the head. “I could have been lying in a ditch somewhere.”

Sue Chavez was a small determined woman who grew fiercer with age. She kept her ebony hair shoulder length and tended to wear jeans and t-shirts when at home. Felipe had gotten his amber eyes from her but had never mastered the scowl she could produce with them—the same scowl that was currently being directed at him.

“A ditch, really? Don’t you think dad would have noticed?”

She huffed.

Felipe gave in. He knew it would be easier. “I’m sorry mom.”
Her up-turned chin lowered slightly. “And?”

“And I won’t do it again.”

“That’s better.” She pulled out a couple of glasses and poured them both some ice tea. “Now tell me what has been keeping you so occupied.”

They sat down at the small round kitchen table. Felipe took a drink of tea and contemplated telling his mother the truth. She wasn’t opposed to Mae, but she wasn’t fond of her either.

“Just been busy down at the store. The online site is really taking off.”

She gave him her best no-nonsense stare. “I’m sure you’ve been busy with your store, but that’s not what has been keeping you preoccupied.”

Instead of giving in this time, he stared right back—for all of two minutes before he broke.

“Mae,” he said, sighing.

“What about her?”

“That’s the answer to your question.”

Sue took a slow drink of tea. “I was afraid of this when I heard she was coming back into town.”

Felipe straightened. “Don’t start. She’s great. I don’t know what you don’t like about her.”

“It’s not that I dislike her. I just dislike her with you.”

“Why?” he asked, standing.

“Because she’s not good for you. Do you remember the last time she was in town?”
Felipe paced to the kitchen door, his hands in his pockets. He was angry and frustrated, but he knew better than to lose his temper with his mother. No one could wield guilt quite like his mother.

He took a deep breath. “I didn’t come here for a lecture.”

“I don’t want to lecture you.”

After a long pause, he thought that would be the end of the subject. He sat back down and took a long drink. Despite the ceiling fan, it was stuffy in the kitchen. Before his thoughts could drift too far, Sue cleared her throat, one of her nervous habits. He frowned. Why was his mother nervous?

“I don’t want to fight, either,” she said softly. “My heart aches for you, baby. I can’t help but try to warn you when I see you heading towards heartbreak. And that woman is heartbreak with a capital H.”

“Everything’s going to be ok,” he said. He felt himself soften—something else his mother was good at.

She nodded though her brows were still furrowed. “Have you painted anything lately?” she asked, changing the subject. She had always encouraged his artistic side. When he was younger, she’d tutored him in the basics of drawing until his own abilities began to exceed hers. Now she mostly offered encouragement and critique when needed.

“No. But I have something brewing. Something different.” He didn’t go into further detail. He liked to hold on to things for a while before he shared them with the world.

They sat for a few moments in comfortable silence. The slightly off balanced fan thumbed a beat, and he noticed the smell of roast his mother was cooking in the oven.
“I stopped by to visit Kate Wilton yesterday after work,” his mother said. One of her callused fingers played with the sweat on the side of her glass.

“Daniel says it won’t be long.”

“I’m starting to think it might end up being a blessing. She’s suffered for so long. I hardly recognize her anymore.”

“It’s going to be hard for Daniel. She’s the only family he has left.”

“He has you as well as your dad and me. Be sure to remind him of that. Better yet, maybe we should have him over for dinner. It’s been a while since he’s visited.”

“I’m sure he’d like that,” he paused. “The funeral service will also be hard. He doesn’t want his mom painted onto a cross.”

“Why not?”

He wasn’t sure how to explain it, especially since he barely understood. “It’s just not something he believes in.”

“But it’s not about him.”

“But it’s his house.” He raised his hand to stop her continued protest. “I don’t really think it’s just about the ceremony. I think it might have something to do with his dad’s death.”

“That was years ago.”

“Pain doesn’t always fade with the years. Sometimes it just gets more twisted.”

His mother’s eyes brightened with appreciation. “Felipe, sometimes you surprise me with your insightfulness. You truly have the soul of an artist.” She pursed her lips and cleared her throat. After a moment she nodded, seeming to have decided something.

“What?” he asked, perplexed.
“Wait here.”

She left the kitchen. The floor in the living room creaked and then he heard some shuffling. After a couple of minutes, she came back, carrying an old photo album.

“I want to show you something.” She sat the album carefully in front of him. Flipping through the pages, she stopped on her wedding photo. “What do you see?” she asked, standing at his side.

“It’s your wedding picture. I’ve seen this before.”

“No. You’re looking but you not seeing.” She tapped his chest. “What do you see?”

Felipe studied the photo more closely. His mother, barely twenty, was wearing a modest white dress and had her arm entwined with an equally young Mike Chavez. His father was dressed in a western jacket and tie. Behind them stood their bridal party: three bridesmaids and three groomsmen.

Felipe didn’t see anything amiss. “You look happy,” he offered.

She leaned closer, examining it. “I do, don’t I?” She pulled back. “I guess I was, in a way. I had finally won your father.”

“Won him?”

“Yes. When I fell in love with your father, he happened to be in love with someone else. But I wouldn’t give up on him. And in the end, I was the one standing next to him in that picture. At the time, I would have done anything for him. There was no else as far as I was concerned. It drove your grandparents crazy. They set me up on other dates—they even sent me away briefly to stay with a cousin in New Mexico. None
of it worked. Love like that doesn’t go away so easily, especially when it’s being tended to.”

“I don’t understand. Dad’s still here. You’ve been happily married for years. What are you trying to tell me?”

“I love your father, very much. I always have and, I suspect, I always will. But it is something I have to work at everyday, though some days are easier than others. Some love is a battle. And I feel like I’m constantly fighting.” She tapped a finger on the plastic-covered image of his father. “You said I look happy. Now look at your father. What do you see?”

Felipe squinted his eyes slightly as he concentrated on his father’s face. Something was off. He was surprised he didn’t notice it before. While there was a smile on Mike’s face, it didn’t quite meet his eyes. “I’m not sure.”

“Do you see the same love there?”

“Yes,” he answered automatically.

She huffed. “You lie like your father—poorly. Not, however, that it’s a bad thing. It’s just, even when he said I was the one and asked me to marry him, I knew he was lying, but loved him so much, I forgave him. I was sure his love would grow. I was sure everything would be ok.”

“And you’ve had several years together to show for it,” Felipe said. He wanted out of this conversation. He didn’t want to hear anymore, mainly because he was afraid of what his mother might say next.
“I love your father. He is a good man, despite everything.” She cleared his throat. “I need to tell you something that you are never to repeat. After today, I will never discuss it again.”

“Maybe it’s best if you don’t say it at all,” Felipe interrupted.

She slammed her palm down on the table, shocking him. His mother rarely lost her temper. “No. You’re not getting off that easily.” She knitted her hands together. “Before we got together, I knew your father loved another, but I kept pursuing him. I was sure that he’d realize that I was the one for him. But even after we were married, he still loved her. And I know to this day, he still does.”

“Are you trying to say that dad cheated on you?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is?”

“The point is, even when I suspected he’d been with her, I wouldn’t leave him. It might be considered shameful to some, but I love him—even when though I know I’m only second best—I love him. Even though it hurts because I know that he pines for her.”

Felipe needed to escape. He didn’t like knowing his mother was unhappy. He wondered if it was all in her head. Maybe the other woman didn’t exist. Still, his mother had chosen to remain silent and unhappy rather then to have it out with his father. He itched with guilt over the desire to call her a coward and a doormat.

“So it was better to stay married to him?” he asked.
She reached for his hand but he jerked it away. “Don’t be angry. My point wasn’t to make you angry at either your father or me. Despite what I’ve said, your father is a good man. I know that. It was his goodness that I fell in love with.”

“Why did he marry you if he was so in love with this other woman?”

“It’s a long story, like most are I suppose. And the details belong to your father and me. No one else.”

Felipe stood. Though his body was rigid with tension, he kissed his mother’s forehead and patted her shoulder. “I’m going camping tonight out on the Foster Ranch. I’ll be sure to give Daniel your invite to dinner,” he said, closing the door on the previous conversation.

“Ok. Be careful. Watch out for snakes.”

“Always do.”

He patted her shoulder. “I’ll give you a call in a couple of days. Love you.”

“I love you too.”

Felipe left. He needed to get to the store, but he didn’t feel like seeing anyone at that moment. He wanted a drink, but this early, even the local drunks would raise an eyebrow.

He wished he could forget everything his mother had just told him. He wondered if it was odd that he was angrier at his mother than his father. He didn’t approve of cheating, and his father had most likely been unfaithful. But still, his anger was primarily directed at his mother. She had been the one that had decided that he needed to know. She was wrong. Some secrets should stay secrets. Only briefly did he wonder who the other woman was, and then he realized it didn’t matter. None of it mattered.
As far as he was concerned, his mother’s secrets were still her own. He loved his parents—that hadn’t changed. He was going to work hard to forget everything else.
Chapter Eighteen

The sun stole through the half-curtained windows, casting patterns across the room. Grace scooted her chair to the bed so that she could hold Kate’s hand.

“I should have come sooner. I’m sorry it’s been so long.” Grace had known Kate was getting worse. It just didn’t sink in until now how much worse.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m just glad you’re here.” Her voice was thin and barely audible.

Grace leaned closer. “I’ve missed you. Things have just been crazy at the ranch.”

“But you love it.”

“Yes, I do.”

“I’ve also heard that you’ve been busy in other areas of late.” There was a small twinkle in Kate’s eyes.

“How’d you hear about that?” Grace asked, blushing.

“Oh, Rachel likes to keep me apprised of all the local gossip.”

“I haven’t told anyone.”

“That’s never stopped gossip before,” Kate paused. “Paul Foster. I would never have guessed it.”

“Neither would I.”

Kate squeezed her hand. “It’s not a bad thing. You were always so much stronger than me. I remember when Henry first brought you to Juan. You stood, back
straight, as he introduced you to all of us. A new town in the middle of nowhere, and you
didn’t even blink an eye.” Her voice was growing softer as her energy faded.

“I was scared. But I loved Henry more. I knew I could do anything as long as he
was there.”

“Perhaps. Yet, he’s gone now and you’re still fighting.”

“It wasn’t a choice. What else could I do?”

“You could have let Maria have her way. Allowed Henry to be on a cross near
your stables. You could have given up, like me.”

“Don’t say that.” Grace hated the defeat in her friend’s voice.

Kate’s eyes drifted close. The silence stretched into minutes. Grace waited, not
sure if she was asleep or just resting. Gently rubbing the back Kate’s hand, she wondered
about the luck of Juan’s residents. There were too many widows among them.

“Daniel thinks I’m weak too.” Kate’s small voice startled her.

“Of course he doesn’t. He loves you.”

“I know. But I also know he thinks I gave up after his father died. That I
could have fought this illness.”

“That’s ridiculous. You went through all the treatment. There’s nothing more
you could have done. Even the doctors said so.”

“He thinks that my love for his father is so strong that I’m rushing to the afterlife
to be with him again,” she continued. She was beyond listening. The need to purge
herself of secrets had seemed to grow too strong. “And I did love his father. But love
divided never grows strong. It’s too unfocused.”

Grace knew the story though it was one that had stayed a secret in Juan.
“It wasn’t Wally’s fault. I met him shortly after. You must understand. It was like when you first met Henry. That feeling of just knowing. I saw Mike, and I just knew.”

“How didn’t you marry him?” Grace had never heard this story. It was before her time. When she first met Kate, she’d already been married to Wally.

“Bad timing. Misunderstandings. Life. Both of us were too proud. It was everything. Then it was too late. I cared for Wally. I didn’t want to hurt him, and I tried to stop loving Mike. But I wasn’t strong enough. I’ve never been strong enough.”

She tried to pull her hand out of Grace’s grasp, but Grace wouldn’t let her. She wasn’t sure what to do with the information that Kate was divulging, but she was determined not to let Kate down.

“It’s guilt. Not love.” There was bitterness in Kate’s voice. “Wally was working on that furnace, which the town refused to replace. It was late. He wasn’t going to be home for hours.” She paused. “When the furnace exploded, I was with Mike. My husband died, and I was in the arms of another man.”

Grace could feel the weight of Kate’s guilt. It washed over her in huge suffocating waves. “Wally’s death isn’t your fault.”

Kate shook her head slightly. She was much paler; her breathing more labored. She needed to rest, but Grace couldn’t leave her like this.

“I know I didn’t make the furnace explode. There was probably nothing I could have done. It doesn’t matter that I’ve told myself this over and over again through the years. I wouldn’t even allow myself to be with Mike again after that night. None of it
matters. It doesn’t erase the fact that I was betraying Wally when he was killed. Nothing erases that.”

Grace squeezed Kate’s hand, wishing she knew what to say to make her friend’s pain go away. Kate turned her head and looked out the window. Grace started to notice ambient sounds: the hum of some electronic, the flap of the curtains across the room as they stirred in the breeze, a car driving by outside.

“It had gotten easier before I got sick.” Kate’s weak voice was barely louder than the other sounds. “I thought for a while that as long as I stopped seeing Mike, I might be able to live with myself. That there was the chance that Wally might forgive me. When I got sick and nothing made it better, I knew I was wrong. I’m being punished.”

Grace started to argue, but Kate waved her hand.

“I know what you’re going to say, but it won’t help. I have such a short time left, and I’m so afraid what’s going to happen to me. I’m afraid of what Wally might say when I see him again.”

“Wally loved you.”

“But it doesn’t mean he’ll forgive me. Doesn’t mean God will forgive me.”

Wishing she could make it all better, Grace kissed Kate’s hand. Only Kate could forgive herself.

“You might be surprised. I still love you. Your son loves you.”

“Look at me go on, and you have a date tonight. I don’t want to put a damper on your whole evening. Let’s pretend to be school girls—what are you going to wear?”
Grace appreciated the effort Kate was making to sound in high spirits. She
decided that switching the topic would probably be good for Kate, especially since it
looked like her energy was waning.

“I have a nice black dress and a pair of heels.”

“Sounds good but make sure to throw in a splash of color. Red. They always say
men like red on women.”

“I might be able to manage that.”

Kate’s eyes drifted close and didn’t open again. Grace sat there for a moment
before heading downstairs. Rachel Woods was sitting at the kitchen table sipping a cup
of coffee.

“She’s asleep.”

“The more it progresses, the more she’ll sleep. Your visit was good for her.
Lately it’s been hard to keep her spirits up.”

Grace nodded though she wasn’t sure if her visit hadn’t caused Kate to dwell on
past mistakes. “How is she doing?”

Rachel sat her cup on the table. “It won’t be long,” she said softly.

Kate nodded her head automatically. She was afraid that if she said anything,
she’d start crying, and she hated crying in front of people.

Hours later, Grace sat before her vanity mirror, placing the final bobby pin into
her hair which was crafted into an upswept French twist. Thinking of Kate, she picked
up a red silk flower and pinned it in her hair. The red shone in her honey locks.
She sat back and examined her hair and makeup. It had been a long time since she’d been worried about her appearance. When she lived in Vermont, her life had been filled with societal events which called for elegant dresses, upswept hairstyles, and flawless makeup—she’d found it tedious. Life in Juan had been different. While she didn’t neglect herself, having perfect hair or makeup in ninety-plus heat wasn’t practical, and Henry always seemed to love it when her hair was messy and she didn’t have a stitch of makeup on.

But that had all changed. Now that she was dating again, she’d have to start paying attention to such things. She had a date with Paul Foster and, maybe, Nate—though, frustratingly, he hadn’t mentioned it again. A few days ago, she’d been sure neither date would happen. Nate had been more silent than usual, and she’d gotten into a big fight with Paul. A few of her ranch hands had gotten into it with a few of Foster’s. It wasn’t the first time this had happened, nor did she think it would be the last. She was still furious, however, when she had to bail her men out of jail. And, of course, it was at the sheriff’s station that she ran into Paul.

One thing led to another, and they got into another of their classic roar-out fights. It was only when the sheriff threatened to throw them both in a cell that they calmed down. Grace had been certain that would be the last she’d hear about their date. Then something unprecedented had occurred—Paul Foster had sent her flowers with a note apologizing. As long as she’d known him, she’d never heard him apologize for anything. From what she’d gathered, he was a man that believed in doing things with purpose—apologies were for mistakes and he didn’t make them.
A couple hours after she’d received the flowers, he’d called her, asking if he’d still have the pleasure of her company. Surprised, she’d realized she was over her anger, so she’d told him yes. Her second “yes” to Paul since she’d met him. Together, they were breaking all kinds of records.

Now here she was, staring at her reflection like the schoolgirl Kate had earlier suggested. Her heart was racing, her hands sweating as well as shaking. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been this nervous. Maybe never. With Henry, she’d always felt so comfortable. There had never been any doubt. With Paul, she was full of uncertainties. She still didn’t know why he suddenly wanted to go out on a date with her. She didn’t understand her own curiosity about him.

She was about to go out on a date with Paul Foster. And apparently everyone in town knew, including Nate. Maybe that was why he hadn’t mentioned their date again, but she would worry about that later.

In about ten minutes Paul would pick her up. He’d take her to Betty’s in Van Horn where they’d eat steak and drink wine and ignore their history. He’d been charming and she’d laugh at all the right moments. It was her first date since Henry, and she was determined to have a good time.
Chapter Nineteen

Amy’s house was a small two bedroom she’d inherited from her parents when they moved to Van Horn. Like many families, they were no longer able to support themselves in the small community, so they’d moved elsewhere—not out of desire but necessity. Amy had managed to avoid that move because of her uncle, who owned the local bar and had decided to train Amy to one day take over.

Corine had learned this sitting cross-legged on a floor pillow in Amy’s cozy living room while Lola quizzed both Amy and Mae for details about their lives. Corine hadn’t seen Lola this animated in a long time. She knew that Amy and Mae were probably getting annoyed by the endless questions, but she didn’t have the heart to put a damper on Lola’s excitement.

“How about y’all?” Amy asked, turning Lola into the interviewee.

Lola glanced at Corine. Corine shrugged her shoulders and finished applying a coat of red polish on her toenails. This was Lola’s game.

“We’ve lived just about everywhere,” Lola said, being purposely vague.

“Such as?”

Lola looked at Corine again. Corine sighed. “Lots of places. California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico—the list goes on.” She leaned forward and blew on her wet toenails.

“Wow,” Mae said. She tapped a bright purple bottle against her palm a couple of times, and then turned to Lola. “Ok girl. Your turn.”

Lola brightened again. “Really?”
“Yep.”

Lola tugged off her sneakers and glanced down at her bare toes. Corine knew that Lola usually didn’t pay much attention to her toenails and was actually excited about having the older girl’s attention.

“What was your favorite place?” Amy asked.

“Colorado,” Lola said.

“Arizona,” Corine said a second after Lola. They looked at each other and laughed. “Lola’s not crazy about the heat.”

Amy stretched her hand out in front of her to examine her fingernails. “I really needed this. I have been neglecting my nails for far too long.”

Corine leaned back to take everything in. Amy sat across from her on another floor pillow while Mae and Lola sat on the couch, Lola’s foot in Mae’s lap. It had been so long since they’d had a girl’s night. Usually, Corine didn’t make too many girl friends, and well, Lola didn’t usually make that many friends at all. They’d both been excited when Amy had invited them over. It had been Mae’s idea to get together, but since she lived with her dad, Amy had offered to have them over at her place.

“How long until you become a veterinarian?” Lola asked Mae.

“A while yet.”

“Are you going to come back here when you graduate?”

“Not if I can help it,” she muttered as she painted Lola’s toe nails purple.

Corine stretched, careful not to smear her wet toes. “Is Juan that bad?” She guessed she already knew the answer, but she asked it regardless. A part of her needed the verbal confirmation that her next year was going to be dismal.
“It’s a town with less than two hundred people—what do you think?”

“Come on, it’s not that bad,” Amy argued.

Mae huffed. “Sure, you’d say that. You’re practically your uncle’s protégé. You’ve always fit in Juan.”

“You could too if you wanted. I’m sure Felipe would put a ring on that finger if you stayed.”

Mae tossed a throw pillow at Amy. “Good grief, don’t say that around Felipe. You’ll just give him ideas. The last thing I need is him proposing. Besides, he knows I’m leaving at the end of summer.”

Lola’s paled expression caught Corine’s attention. Surely, Lola had figured out by now that Felipe was dating Mae, but from her expression, Corine guessed not. Even though Corine knew that nothing would ever come from Lola’s crush, she didn’t like Lola’s hopes getting smashed, especially in front of others.

She watched as Lola took a few deep breaths and eased her expression before Mae or Amy noticed. This was another skill they’d learned from their mother—how to hide their feelings behind an indifferent mask.

“Felipe might know that but don’t forget what happened last time.” Amy stood up and walked into the kitchen.

Mae finished Lola’s toes and set the polish on the end table next to her. “I’m not a horrible person,” she said, more to herself than to Corine and Lola.

Amy came back with a bottle of wine, three glasses and a soda. She handed the soda to Lola and poured the rest of them wine.
“So are y’all staying in Juan or are you leaving at the end of summer, too?” Amy asked.

Corine took a long drink of her wine. Lola shrugged.

“Staying, probably,” Lola answered.

“It’s still not decided,” Corine said. It wasn’t a lie since there was the possibility that their mother would come back married to Javier.

“Well, if you do stay, I’ll make sure to introduce you to all the suitable prospects in Juan. There aren’t many, but they at least provide a little entertainment,” Amy said.

“She’s already met a few. She’s even had a few dates with Marc.” Lola popped the top on her soda, oblivious to the tense expression that swept across Amy’s face.

Corine, however, saw it.

“You’ve been going out with Marc?” Amy asked, her voice tight.

Mae leaned forward. “Amy, you’re still not—are you?”

Corine looked from Amy to Mae. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Mae and Amy said at the same time.

Mae gave her a quick smile. “It’s nothing.”

Corine knew they were lying but let it go even though she was pretty sure it had to do with Marc. She didn’t know if she was going to keep dating Marc, and until she figured that out, she didn’t feel like talking about it.

“So I heard that the last place you lived was Vegas,” Mae said with a slightly too cheerful voice. “What’s the City of Sin like? I’ve always wanted to go there.”

“Crowded,” Corine said. While Marc was their topic to avoid, Vegas was hers. It was the one place in the desert that she never wanted to see again.
“Not as interesting as your horses. What was it like to grow up being able to ride them whenever you wanted?” Lola asked.

“I loved it. My first horse was the reason I decided I wanted to be a veterinarian. Her name was Isabelle. She was a real beauty.” Mae took a drink of her wine.

Amy picked up the bottle and refilled their glasses. “I remember Isabelle. I’d never seen a horse that loved watermelons as much as her.” There was no trace that she’d been upset just moments before.

“What happened?” Lola asked.

Mae curled her feet under her and hugged a throw pillow to her chest with one arm. Her free hand was still clutching her glass of wine. “She died when I was ten.”

“What from?”

“I was stupid. I mean—the whole thing was my fault. She was still a young mare, barely five. Marc and I snuck out of the house one evening and took the horses out riding. We’d been watching a bunch of westerns and—well, I’m not sure exactly what we thought. I guess we just wanted to be real cowboys out riding the range.” Mae set her glass down on the end table beside her. “It’s sort of a blur. We stumbled upon a cub—”

“Bear?” Lola asked, her brow furrowed.

“Mountain lion. I guess it’d wandered away from its mother. Marc decided he wanted to keep it. He thought he could train it to protect us, kind of like a guard dog. I didn’t think it was a good idea, but I couldn’t think of a reason to tell my brother so I said nothing.”
Corine had an idea where this was going, and she wasn’t sure she wanted Lola to hear it. Part of her wanted to protect Lola, and another part thought it might remind Lola that she had to be careful. It had been several days, but she still couldn’t get the image of Lola galloping away out of her head. Corine had been so afraid that Lola would be thrown from the horse or worse. Resolute, she stayed silent.

“I’m not sure why the cub just cowered instead of running away. It should have run away. Then everything would have been ok. But it didn’t. Marc managed to catch it. He handed it to me to hold while he got back onto his horse. That’s when its mother found us. I was holding her baby, and she wasn’t happy. One moment I was sitting on Isabelle with a lion cub in my hands and the next I was laying on my back. Isabelle got between the mountain lion and me. And within seconds she was on the ground.” Mae tightened her hold on the pillow; her face pale.

“Mae, I’m sorry. I knew Isabelle died, but I thought she just got sick,” Amy said.

“What happened to the mountain lion?” Lola asked.

“Marc and I were lucky. Dad managed to find us just in time. He shot the mountain lion before it came after Marc.”

“And the cub?” Lola asked.

“Dad said that cubs grow up to be mountain lions. They weren’t pets. He shot it, too.”

Lola’s eyes watered. Corine hated it, but sheltering Lola had never led to any good. Lola usually had to learn things on her own. Warning was never enough with her.

“I wouldn’t let him shoot Isabelle. I was convinced that somebody could help her. I knew she was in pain, but that didn’t mean she had to die. Dad told me to stop
being selfish. He had Marc hold me back while he shot her.” Mae bit the edge of her lip.

“If I knew then what I know now, maybe it would have been different. After, I decided I
wanted to be a veterinarian, so I wouldn’t be helpless again.” She stood, tossing the
pillow onto the couch. She gave a rough laugh. “Goodness when did I become such a
bummer? This is supposed to be a fun evening.”

Amy stood and walked over to her stereo. “I know exactly what we need—a
little Carrie Underwood.”

Mae closed her eyes. “You know me well.” The music washed away the
shadows from her expression.

Corine was glad. While she felt bad for Mae, a selfish part of her wasn’t in the
mood to be sad. This was supposed to be a fun night. She’d had enough of sad moments.
She grabbed Lola’s hand and pulled her off the couch, determined to cheer her up as well.
Briefly she wondered if the guys night out was going any better.
Chapter Twenty

Marc stretched his legs and leaned against his saddle. The fire roared at his heels, homemade hot dog sticks resting against the rock border. The five of them—Jim, Donnie, Felipe, Daniel, and himself—crowded around the fire, warding off the night chill. A tequila bottle was being passed around and each time it was Marc’s turn, he took an extra long swallow.

It had been years since he’d camped out. He’d gone out a couple of more times the summer Daniel’s dad had died, but gradually it lost its appeal. He’d never been a fan of camping alone—he didn’t understand the point—and after the death of Daniel’s father, Felipe and Daniel stopped camping out. Jim was still around, but camping with Jim, who was renowned for his quiet demeanor, was similar to camping alone.

Looking around at the other four men, Marc acknowledged how much he missed hanging out with them. Ever since he’d come back from college, it’d just been Donnie—who was unpredictable and often vanished for days on end—Jim and him. Marc had been unable to bridge the gap that had grown between him and Daniel and Felipe. Come to think of it, it was the same gap that separated him from most of the people in his life. He wasn’t sure exactly when it began—he had a feeling that it had be developing for some time. Living in Juan, he was surrounded by people he’d known all his life, but he felt completely isolated from them, especially his father.

Marc took the tequila bottle Felipe handed him. He took his drink and waited for its familiar warmth. Behind him their horses munched quietly on the oats they’d brought. Above him the stars in the sky met the horizon. To his left, right, and in front of him,
men he liked to call his friends laughed and told stories. He listened and laughed at the
appropriate times, trying to ignore the sense of disconnect he felt. Marc shook his head
slightly. He’d been lost in his own thoughts for a while.

“Mae had bright orange hair for a week. I’d about thought she’d never forgive

“Did she ever get back at y’all?” Donnie asked.

“She put a snake in Marc’s room one night when we were all sleeping over. It
wasn’t until after we’d run out of the room screaming and Mr. Foster went to investigate
with a shot gun that we realized it was a little ol’ bull snake,” Felipe said. “Mae had a
good laugh.”

“That was the thing with Mae—if you messed with her, you always knew that
eventually retribution was coming,” Daniel added.

“She has always been a tough little thing. She pretty much had to be with us
around picking on her.” Felipe smiled and took the tequila bottle from Jim.

Donnie reached over and grabbed the bottle from Felipe. “So how does that
work?” he asked, his question directed at Felipe.

“You dating this guy’s sister?”

Felipe glanced at Donnie then Marc and shrugged. “He shouldn’t have such a
cute sister.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?” Donnie asked Marc.

“Why should it?” Marc asked, honestly perplexed. His sister could be tougher
than he was—she’d never need him to protect her. If he ever tried, most likely she’d
resent him for it.
“She’s your sister, man. If some guy was messing around with my sisters, I’d beat the hell out of him.”

“You have sisters, Donnie?” Daniel asked.

Donnie shrugged, his expression closed. “I was speaking hypothetical.”

“Of course Donnie doesn’t have sisters—can you imagine what they would look like? God wouldn’t be so cruel.” Marc grabbed the bottle from Donnie. “Now someone like me on the other hand,” his voice trailed off to emphasize the obvious.

“Hey, I just realized something,” Jim said as the bottle moved from Marc back to Donnie and then to him. “Marc, Mae’s your twin.”

“Yeah?”

“So essentially, Felipe’s dating you.” Jim tossed back the bottle, his sleek black hair glinting in the firelight.

There was a moment of silence before Donnie and Daniel began laughing.

“I always did think what a great couple Felipe and Marc would make,” Daniel quipped.

Felipe punched Daniel in the shoulder. Marc grasped a hold of his irritation. He hated jokes being made at his expense but showing that annoyance would only lead to more jokes. He pulled out his pocket knife, picked up an empty hot dog stick, and began to carve the end into a sharp spear. His movements were slow and lazy, like an old man carving a figurine out of a piece of wood.

“Well, what can I say—the ladies have always liked me,” Marc said, sending a sly smile at Felipe, which caused the other three to laugh more.
“Whatever, man,” Felipe grumbled. Marc guessed Felipe couldn’t think of a retort.

A silence rolled over the camp like an itchy blanket. Marc twitched and, unable to sit still, grabbed the bag of hot dogs and speared one with his newly sharpened stick. He thrust the hot dog into the fire and watched as its skin slowly began to darken. The smell of it cooking slowly roused the others to join him. Before long, they all had a cooked hot dog in hand.

Marc wondered what the girls were up to at that moment. When Felipe had told them earlier that the girls were having a night out as well, he didn’t pay it much attention. But a stray thought crossed his mind now, and he wondered what girls’ night out might mean for him. He had never told Amy about Corine, or Corine about Amy. While he’d never made promises to either, he was sure that they wouldn’t see it that way. He felt a twinge of something at the thought of Amy breaking off their current arrangement.

“I brought something that ya’ll might get a kick out of,” Jim said, his low voice disrupting the silence. He reached into his saddle back behind him and pulled out a canteen. “I made us some”—he paused—“tea.”

“You didn’t” Felipe cracked, grabbing the canteen from Jim. “I can’t believe you found some.”

“Really? You’re not just pulling our leg like you did that night?” Daniel asked. It took just a second for Daniel to stiffen, realizing what he’d said.

Marc waited. Daniel would either shake it off or become remorseful. Felipe, apparently refusing to let Daniel decide, tossed the canteen at Daniel, who caught it with ease.
“You go first,” Felipe dared.

Daniel looked down at the canteen in his hands. “Can you believe that I’d never actually tried it before? For the longest time, I thought we had that night, until Jim finally came clean.” Unscrewing the lid, he sniffed the contents. He shrugged his shoulders and took a drink. It was a short drink, and based on Daniel’s expression, vastly unpleasant.

Daniel handed the canteen back to Felipe. “I believe it’s your turn.” And so it went until each had taken a drink. Marc chose to chase the bitterness with a gulp of tequila. The canteen spent, they all sat still for a moment, waiting.

“How long does it take?” Felipe finally asked.

“It depends,” Donnie answered. “But don’t worry, it’s coming.”

They each looked at one another, waiting. Feeling nothing but awkwardness, Marc forced a laugh and grabbed the abandoned tequila bottle.

“I think Jim is messing with us again.” Marc took a long swig before pointing one finger at Jim. “Or, once again he thinks he’s found it but really we’re all just sipping some cactus tea. Man, just because you’re part Comanche doesn’t mean you have some special connection with nature.”

Jim stared at Marc for a moment, as if giving what he’d said consideration. Then Jim looked solemnly around at the other faces sitting around the fire. “That’s ok, Marc. I’ll forgive you for that because in just a little while, you’re going to see how wrong you are.”

Marc handed Jim the tequila. “We’ll see.” He leaned back against his saddle and stretched his hands over his head. Clasping his fingers behind his neck, he rested his
head. The stars above began to twinkle in pattern, mesmerizing him. “We will see,” he said, not realizing he’d repeated himself. He was too busy trying to understand the stars.
Chapter Twenty-One

“Why did you stay after?” Paul asked, resting his hand on hers.

Before Grace could answer, their waiter came by to check on them. So far their date had been much more pleasant than she’d anticipated. The restaurant in Van Horn provided an atmosphere of soft lighting and music. Off to the side of the restaurant was a small dance floor, already occupied by couples. Even their conversation seemed—Grace couldn’t think of any other word other than—pleasant. Pleasant wasn’t a word she would normally use in relation to their interaction. Paul Foster wasn’t the kind of man that would be associated with pleasant, but tonight that was what he was. He smiled charmingly at her and seemed genuinely interested in learning more about her.

This is why when he asked her why she didn’t leave Juan after her husband died, she knew he was just trying to understand her.

“I thought about it. After Henry died, I couldn’t think of a reason to stay,” she paused, playing with the stem of her wine glass. “But when the lawyer came by with the papers for the ranch, I knew I couldn’t just sell it to strangers. Henry loved that land.” She took a drink, trying to find words for what she’d felt back then. “Keeping the ranch going is my way, I guess, of honoring him.”

“It must have been difficult—learning to run the place by yourself.”

She nodded her head, thinking about Nate and how grateful she’d been that he’d shown up when he did all those years ago.

“I couldn’t have made things any easier.”
She bit the edge of her lip and looked up at him. “Don’t go soft on me now. Besides, I think if it wasn’t for you bugging me and challenging me at every turn, I may have given up long ago.”

And then there it was—that smiled he’d been giving her all evening. Eyes crinkled slightly, dimples glinting, and a hint of white teeth. What was it about this smile that made her chest tighten?

“If only I’d known,” he teased. Then his smile disappeared and he became solemn. “I am sorry, though. I know I was awful. There’s no excuse.”

Grace let his words rest between them for a moment before she accepted them and moved on. “How about you?”

“Hmm?”

“After your wife died, how did you deal?”

Paul pulled his hands off the table and straightened. Grace realized how harsh her question was too late. She wished she could take it back or wish them away. Not having this ability, she watched a range of emotions cross Paul’s face. When he finally settled on one, Grace wasn’t sure what to expect.

“When Stephanie died, it changed things. We’d had problems for a while, and I hated that I would never be able to make it up to her.” Every inch of him reminded her of the hard man she knew he could be.

“I’m sorry. That question wasn’t—I guess I’m out of practice.”

“From what?”

“From all of this. I haven’t dated anyone since Henry.”
It must have been the right thing to say because at her words, Paul began to relax again. He refilled their wine glasses and raised his glass. Grace followed suit.

“To new beginnings,” he toasted, his voice soft and silky.

She clinked her glass gently against his and took a drink. They finished their meal with light, casual conversation, neither one willing to venture into the previous murky depths. Once the waiter took their plates away, Paul stood and offered her his hand. He led her to the dance floor, pulling her close as a slow song began. It took a few moments for Grace to relax, trusting Paul to lead them around the dance floor and a few moments after that for her to rest her head on his shoulder.

When he drove her home later, she was ready to invite him inside. She waited as he opened the truck door and walked her to her front door. But instead of lingering, he kissed her briefly, told her goodnight, and left. Grace watched him drive off, standing on her porch long after the dust had settled. What had she done wrong? Why had he not even tried to come inside? She rubbed her chest and sat down on the porch swing next to the door.

“He’s just using you, you know.”

Grace jumped. Nate appeared out of the darkness, a lit cigarette between his two left fingers. He walked up the edge of the porch and looked up at her.

“What are you talking about?”

“Paul Foster doesn’t care about you. This whole thing,” he waved his hand in front of him, “is just because he wants something from you.”

Grace stiffened. “Why do you care?”
“I care because it affects me. It affects everyone on this ranch. In the end, we know the one thing that Paul Foster has wanted all these years, and it isn’t you.”

She stood up abruptly, the swing jerking on its chains. “It may surprise you, but it is possible that Paul likes me, not just my ranch. And no, it doesn’t affect you—I’m not planning on selling, regardless of what Paul does.”

“That’s what you say now, but times are tough, and they’re not going to get any easier anytime soon.”

Leaning on the porch rail, she tilted her face closer to Nate’s. She was determined not to let his hurtful words affect her. “This isn’t what this is about that and you know it. You’re jealous.”

He dropped his cigarette and rubbed it out with his heel. “Of what?”

“Don’t play games. It doesn’t suit you and you’re not good at it. You were the one that asked me out but never set a date. As far as I know, you changed your mind.”

“I didn’t change my mind.” He pushed himself closer to her, grabbing a hold of the porch rail. “You changed your mind when you decided to go out on a date with Foster.”

“Just because you ask me out doesn’t mean I can’t go out on a date with Paul. Besides, if you were so interested in me, why did you wait until now to ask me?”

“I didn’t realize there was a time limit on a man asking a woman out on a date, especially when that woman has spent years mourning her dead husband. A man might be a tad hesitant.”

“I haven’t spent years.”

“You literally have been carrying him around with you since he died.”
Their faces were mere inches apart. Grace could feel his warm breath brushing her face. Something deep down inside of her, something dark and dangerous, wanted her to lean forward to close the gap between them. Clawing her fingers into the rail to keep from doing just that, she stared into his eyes. It was a moment before his words sunk in. Her tattoo. Henry’s memorial inked on her back in a swirl of dark lines and flowers. Nate was right. Henry was with her, always and forever. She’d made that choice shortly after he’d died. Instead of wood and paint, Henry got ink and skin. An act that almost got her ran out of town.

She took a step back, sobering. “I may keep Henry always with me, but that doesn’t mean I have to spend my life mourning him. I told you yes because I’m ready to move on. I’m ready to not be alone anymore. You’re the one who didn’t follow through. Paul, on the other hand, is interested in me. In me. Not just my ranch.” She took another step back. “You have no right to talk to me like I’ve betrayed you. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

Nate reached out for her, but Grace wouldn’t have it. She walked inside and locked the door. She knew she’d have to deal with him eventually, but it didn’t have to be now. Right now she needed a hot bath and a little Carly Simon.

In her blue tiled bathroom, she turned on the hot water in the cast-iron tub. She poured a hefty amount of bubbles into the water and then began to peel off her black dress. In only her bra and panties, she walked over to her CD player in the corner and pushed play. Carly’s rich voice swept over her. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She’d had a good date with Paul. She would not let Nate ruin it. She would not.
In front of the bathroom mirror, she unhooked her bra and turned slightly. The black ink was softened with time, but still distinct. It swirled around her shoulder blades and kissed her lower back. Henry was ingrained in her skin. She reached back and touched a dark line with her fingertips. It had taken almost all night to complete, but when it was done, she knew no one would be able to take him away from her. Not Maria Espinosa, not anyone. She had never told anyone that it was Felipe Chavez that had helped her though she was sure he was suspected at one time.

“Hi, Henry,” she said softly, caressing the lines she could reach. “I miss you.” She kissed her hand and then touched her back. With a sigh, she adjusted the temperature of her bathwater and then slid beneath the wet, silky bubbles.
The diner’s morning rush was busier than normal, but Corine contributed that to everyone gearing up for the rodeo that was taking place in Van Horn that afternoon. Having lived around cowboy towns before, Corine was well aware of the crowd bull riding and barrel racing could draw. She’d only been to a couple, but even she could understand the excitement at watching a man on top of a bucking, thousand-pound bull. Of course, she was also a fan of the tight jeans those cowboys tended to wear. A big fan.

Corine paused midstride in washing a table to frown at the people around her. Unfortunately, she would not be joining in on the fun. She was pulling a double shift to help out the Stuarts. The extra money was also a big incentive since Corine had decided she wanted to buy her own car. It was a thought she had played with since she turned sixteen, but it seemed there was always some expense that Carmelita’s paycheck wouldn’t cover. In a weird way, they had always been a team when it came to paying the bills. That was one thing she couldn’t fault Carmelita for—regardless of the where they were currently living or her current relationship, Carmelita always had a paying job that she worked hard at. They weren’t always glamorous jobs, most of them had been waiting tables or bartending, but they paid the rent.

“Are you going to wash that table all day or are you going to get table four’s order?” Laura asked.

Corine looked up from the shining tabletop and blinked a couple of times. “Sorry.”
She put the wash towel back into its diluted bleach bath, dried her hands, and pulled out her order pad. The sole person at the table was hidden behind the restaurant’s menu, but Corine knew who it was before she even saw his face.

“Hi Donnie.”

He slowly lowered the menu and gave her a smile, dark eyes flashing in amusement. “Hi beautiful.”

“How are you doing?”

“Better now.”

She bit the edge of her bottom lip to prevent the bashful smile that lately seemed to make an appearance around Donnie.

Laura cleared her throat behind Corine. It was a sound she recognized too well. It meant: get back to work before I tell your grandmother.

“So, what will it be?”

“Orange juice, eggs, and pancakes.”

“Scrambled?”

“Like always.”

“K.” She gave him a quick grin before heading to the kitchen to turn in his order. She checked on all her tables before grabbing an orange juice and heading back to Donnie’s table.

“Thanks.” He took the glass from her and took a drink.

In the week since the girl’s night out and the boys’ campout, Donnie had come in every morning she worked to eat breakfast. She didn’t know what it meant, but she enjoyed his company all the same. There was something calming about Donnie’s
presence. In light of her brief explosive relationship with Marc, it was just what she needed.

“Are you going to the rodeo?” Donnie asked, looking at the crowd around them.

“Working.”

“It seems you do that a lot.”

“Well, a girl needs spending money.”

“In Juan?” His expression was incredulous.

She laughed. “Well, I guess you have a point there.” She tried to think of another reason. The car-thing was something she hadn’t told anyone yet, and until she had the down payment, she wouldn’t voice a word. No telling what Maria would do, and Lola would no doubt see it as an indicator of Corine’s eventual departure. “It keeps me from getting bored.”

Donnie nodded his head, accepting that answer. He ran a hand through his dark hair and shifted in his chair awkwardly.

“What?” Corine asked.

After a moment, he said, “Marc’s been asking about you.”

“Well, he knows where to find me.”

“You’re not answering his calls.”

“So now you’re his messenger? Is that why you’re here?” She took a step back.

“No.” He gave her an apologetic smile. “Don’t get mad at me. I just thought I’d mention it. I don’t know what he did—”

“Of course you do,” she said, not letting him finish. “Apparently everyone in this town knew but Amy and me.”
“If you would just let him explain.”

“I don’t need an explanation. We’d barely starting seeing each other. It wasn’t my heart he broke. I’m angry at him for putting me in that situation. I like Amy. I’m lucky she didn’t blame me for the whole thing.”

“We all like Amy.”

“That’s hard to believe, seeing you’ve all been lying to her for him.”

Corine knew it wasn’t Donnie’s fault, but she couldn’t stop herself from turning her anger towards him. Without giving him a chance to respond, she stalked off. Amy’s hurt expression still haunted her. She hadn’t always had a ton of girl friends, and she hadn’t always been nice to other girls where guys were involved. But this time, she was innocent and she couldn’t forgive Marc for the role she played in causing Amy pain.

Donnie’s order was up. She forced herself to take several deep breaths and calm down. It wasn’t his fault. She actually liked Donnie. If she kept yelling at him and blaming him for Marc’s actions, she wouldn’t have him for a friend much longer.

She slid his plate of eggs and pancakes in front of him. He looked up, skeptical.

“You’re not still mad at me, are you?”

She shook her head. “Why?”

“Just wanting confirmation that my food is safe.”

“Smart boy.”

“Hey, a few of my sisters were waitresses. I know the game,” he said.

“Sisters?” This was the first time he’d ever talked about his family.

“Yep.” His easy-going demeanor disappeared into something darker.
“Brothers?” She could tell he didn’t want to talk about it anymore, but she was curious.

“Nope.”

“Where does your family live?”

He glanced around him. “Nowhere.” He paused. “You are sure a curious one today.”

“Just wanting to know more about you.”

He was saved from responding as a table across the restaurant called to her. Apparently everyone had their secrets though she didn’t know why his family was such a big one. Why did it matter if she knew or not? She really did want to know more about him, but since there were things about herself that she never wanted to tell, she’d respect his privacy.

After the breakfast rush was over, she cleaned her tables, restocked sugars, and then headed to the back to take out the trash. She dragged two heavy bags through the kitchen to the backdoor, wishing there was an easier way or that she had more arm strength.

The backdoor was a screen door and then a heavier metal door on the outside. Since Corine had started working there, the metal door was kept open during business hours, letting cooler air drift in through the screen door. This made the temperature in the kitchen a little more tolerable. She did not envy Sam cooking over a hot stove all day one bit.

Gathering up the big black trash bags, Corine pushed open the screen door with her hip. The large industrial dumpster was located across the alleyway. She half-dragged
the heavy trash to the dumpster then paused. Using both hands, she managed to swing both bags, one at a time, up the five feet to the metal opening.

She dusted off her hands and turned, finding Marc blocking her path back to the diner.

“What the—” she said, raising a hand to cover her thudding heart.

“It seems if I want to talk to you, this is about the only way to do it.”

“Did you not get the hint from that? If I wanted to talk to you, don’t you think I would have answered one of your calls?” She put both hands on her hips and glared at him.

“And if I wanted to talk?”

“Not my problem.” She stepped around him to head towards the door, but he caught her by the elbow.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.” He pulled her towards the wall, his fingers pressing into her arm.

“And now?” She looked pointedly at his hand on her arm.

“I just want you to listen.”

“I thought you wanted to talk?”

“Amy and me, we’ve had this thing off and on through the years. Nothing serious or exclusive.”

“Is this where you tell me that it’s me you really want to be with? That Amy was just old habit?” Corine couldn’t help her snide tone.

“No. This is where I tell you that you shouldn’t jump to conclusions. What we have is between us, no one else. You had no right to rub it in Amy’s face.”
“I didn’t know our few dates were such a secret.”

“She won’t even talk to me now. What did you say? What did you tell her?” His fingers tightened around her arm. He pushed her against the wall and leaned close. “I want to know what lies you told her.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You must have done something. Amy always talks to me eventually. Always.”

“Well, maybe she’s finally wised up. Figured out you’re not the charmer you pretend to be.” Corine had had enough. She’d let him vent just to get it over with, but she was done. She tightened her fists, ready to go on the offensive.

“No. Amy knows me. She knows who I really am. You must have lied to her.” Marc’s voice broke slightly, momentarily distracting her.

“Not so confident now, huh?” she whispered.

Marc caught her gaze, looking directly in her eyes for the first time. “What did I ever do to you?”

Corine relaxed. The fight had gone out of him. With one hand she disengaged his hand from her arm. “You hurt her. I didn’t say anything more than we had gone out on a date. If she’s not talking to you, it’s not because of me—though I completely approve of her anger.”

He pulled out a cigarette and lit it. “I liked you. If you got hurt in this mess, I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t hurt me. We barely know each other. Besides, it’s not me you should be apologizing to.”

He nodded his head. “She’s all I have. I’m not going to lose her.”
Corine wanted to tell him he should have thought of that first but restrained herself. She just wanted out of this awkward situation as soon as possible, and she wasn’t sure she completely trusted Marc’s sudden calm. She had no desire to have another confrontation with him alone.

She left him smoking his cigarette in the alley. The screen door slammed closed behind her, but she didn’t care if she got yelled at again by Sam. Corine couldn’t stand the awful pit that had formed in her stomach. It was almost like suffocating. For the first time, she understood why her mother moved them after each breakup. The need to move on—to be somewhere new, to not have to deal with hurt or awkwardness—was overwhelming. If she had a car then, she couldn’t promise that she wouldn’t have taken off. The need for freedom was clawing at her gut. She rubbed her stomach and took a few slow deep breaths, trying to shake the feeling.

“Corine?” Laura called as she walked into the kitchen. “You’ve got a table.”

“Ok.” She straightened her uniform and pasted a smile on her face. “I’m coming.” She walked by Sam cooking and gave him her smile to see if it would pass muster. He gave her a nod in return, so she guessed it was enough. For the moment, it would have to be.
Chapter Twenty-Three

All the lights were on, but somehow the crematorium still had a dark, cave-like feel to it. It was beyond Mike why anyone would choose this life—to deal with remains. On any other day, he preferred his job where he got to help the living. He never liked death, but living in Juan had taught him to accept it. He had to. The traditions were as much alive as the residents. If it had been anyone else on the floor before him, he wouldn’t even have blinked an eye. He would have taken the scene with a quick nod of his head and hurried through to the inevitable paperwork.

But it wasn’t anyone else. It was her. And today he would have given anything else to have made a different career choice when he was young. Why did she do this to him? She had to have known that it would be him that would be forced to deal with the whole matter.

His hands shook as he took out his notepad and pen. He managed to jot down a few details, detaching himself as much as possible: body leaning against wall; one hand outstretched to the side, palm up, as if it had been reaching towards the cross overhead; nightdress with robe, one slipper missing; no signs of struggle; no signs of foul play.

He glanced over his shoulder to make sure he was still alone before kneeling at her side. He stroked her cheek and leaned forward to place a kiss on her forehead, reminding himself that she was no longer in pain—her peaceful expression said that much.

When the call had come, he knew—somehow—he just knew she was gone. It was a sudden heart aching void. He needed time to take it all in, to deal with the loss, but
as sheriff he wasn’t allowed that luxury, nor did he want to have to explain his feelings to Sue. So here he was, beside the woman he wasn’t supposed to love, but did, writing a report about how she died. It wasn’t a mystery to anyone, but the report still had to be filed. By now, everyone knew that Katherine Wilton had gotten up in the middle of the night, snuck passed her nurse, and somehow managed to walk several blocks to the crematorium. Apparently the Myers had neglected to change the locks, allowing her to use her old key to enter the premises. Then she walked downstairs to where her husband’s cross was painted, sat down, and passed away.

He was sure the residents of Juan thought it terribly romantic—to want to be remembered next to your dead husband, to spend eternity together. But he knew the truth. This was her atonement to her husband, and while it might have a little to do with love, it was mostly about guilt.

Mike brushed a hand across her cheek one last time, and then walked upstairs where Devon Myers was waiting. Mike managed a brisk nod to Devon. Per request, there would be no autopsy. One wasn’t needed. Katie would stay there until she was ashes.

Mike drove straight to the station. It was small with two rooms. The first was the office and the second was fitted as a small cell with a single metal cot attached to the wall. The station itself was mostly free of death except for the one white cross above the metal cot. It belonged to Jonny Wilkes and had been there long before Mike’s time.

Mike closed the door to the cell, went to his desk, and sat, his movements almost mechanical. Mabel Sheppard, his secretary, sat at her desk by the door, watching him.
He could tell she was about to start in with a round of questions, which he was not in the mood to answer.

“Mabel, why don’t you go get yourself some breakfast.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Would you like me to bring you back anything?”

“No.”

She pulled out her purse, glanced at him one last time before heading out the door. He could already hear the gossip she would start down at the diner about Kate.

He was alone at last. For some reason, the lines from a poem he read once as a kid kept circling in his mind: *This is how the world ends, not with a bang but with a whimper.* Kate’s passing was quiet, unnoticed. To most of the town, she died long ago when she’d become shut up in her room.

It was exactly as she told him it would be. She was gone, but he was still here. Only this time, he was the one waiting. He’d come to the realization long ago that while he might love his wife, Kate was his soul mate. There was no happy ending to that tale. Only writers have tried to sell the happily-ever-after ending. To the rest of the world, life isn’t that simple or kind. This is what he wanted to tell his son. He wanted to tell Felipe to fight—if the Foster girl was to Felipe what Kate was to him—then Felipe should fight for her. He should do what Mike never did. Mike hadn’t realized what Kate was until too late.

Something began to burn within him. He fisted his hands as the feeling grew.

What had he done to deserve this? Who had he ticked off? Why did Wally get to have
Kate again? The one thing in the world Mike wanted, and he would never have it. Every muscle tightened. Kate had known years ago that Mike was hers and she was his, but still, she had chosen to imprison herself in guilt. She had chosen Wally over him.

His vision dimmed and he slammed his fists against his wooden desk. It wasn’t enough. He swiped one arm across it, spilling the keyboard, papers, pens and other items to the floor. Still not enough. He stood, kicking back his chair and with two hands, flipped his desk over. The screen to his computer slammed to the ground and cracked. It still wasn’t enough. He kicked the desk and turned to slam his fist into the hard wall behind him. It felt like a thousand needles had pierced his hand, and he knew instantly something had broken.

It was the pain from his hand that momentarily distracted him from the other, darker agony. He cradled his hand against his chest and viewed the destruction he’d caused. Papers and files littered the floor like dust after a sandstorm. His computer screen was dark with lightening-shaped crack down the side.

He righted his chair and sat down, suddenly too tired to clean up the mess. In the end, Kate had made the decision to walk several blocks in the middle of the night to her husband’s cross. She had chosen Wally. To Mike, this was her biggest sin.

The door to the station opened and closed. He didn’t have to look up to know who it was.

“I just heard,” Sue said, her voice soft. “You should have woken me when you got the call.”

He raised his head to look at her, standing in front of the door, hands in her pockets. She was wearing a pair of dark blue jeans and one of his button-up shirts. Her
hair was pulled into a carefree ponytail. The image of her twisted his gut, reawakening the burning sensation.

“I know,” he said, his voice low, warning.

She looked at the debris around him. “She’s gone.”

“Yes.” He waited for her to comment on his reaction to Kate’s death. He was surprised at how badly he wanted to wipe that calm, patient expression from her face. He wanted her to hurt. The feeling was basic and beyond reason.

Sue bent and began to pick up the papers on the floor, stacking them into a neat pile.

“Don’t,” he barked.

She jerked and looked up at him, questioningly.

“Just don’t. It’s my mess. I’ll fix it.”

Without argument, she stopped and stood. He watched her walk towards him, while the burning within him grew.

Softly she brushed his silver hair back from his forehead. He slapped her hand away.

“Don’t act like this doesn’t matter to you. I bet you’re just jumping for joy that she’s gone. Well, you finally got you’re wish. I’m all yours.” He spread his arms out, his broken hand forgotten.

“I know you’re hurting, and that you don’t mean that.”

“Oh, but I do. We’ve never talked about it, but it’s always been there. You knew from the beginning that I loved her.”

“Don’t say that.”
“But it’s true. I have loved Kate forever. I have loved Kate as I will love no other. Not you or anyone else.”

“Stop.”

“But you finally got what you wanted all along. You made it impossible to be with her then, and now you rest assured that she will never have me.” He gave her a bitter grin, allowing the burning to consume him. “I’m all yours until death, and then, at last, I’ll be hers.”

She slapped him. Hard. He could taste a bit of blood in his mouth where his teeth had cut his cheek. He touched his face with his uninjured hand.

“Are you done now?” she asked, her voice shaking slightly.

“No.”

“Then don’t come home. I don’t want you sleeping under my roof until you’ve let this go.”

“It’s my roof, too.”

“I’m not the one to blame for this, so you can sleep somewhere else.” She walked to the door, stepping over the mess in the floor. “I’m not the one to blame for her, either. I deserve better.” Then she was gone.

Mike glanced at his broken hand to his upended desk. He needed to clean up the office, put in an order for a new computer screen, and drive to Van Horn to get someone to look at his hand. He stood. What he really needed was a drink. He walked to his desk, awkwardly opened the bottom left drawer, and fished out a bottle of Jameson. He didn’t bother finding a glass; it wouldn’t be appropriate for an occasion such as this.
He fell back into the chair and raised the bottle in the air. “To Katie girl.” He dribbled a little Jameson on the floor and then took a long drink. He kept drinking until the burning darkness devoured him.
Chapter Twenty-Four

Maria sprinkled ash into a dark blue clay jar filled with light cream paint. Lola sat on the floor in front of her, watching quietly as Maria stirred the ash and paint together, turning the cream into a dusty white.

“Remember, too much ash, the paint gets clumpy. The trick is to slowly stir in a little ash at a time, adding more paint when needed.” Maria repeated the process until the urn was empty. “This was the way my father did it, and when I’m too old, mija, you will do it.” She picked up a clay lid and sealed the jar. “Would you put Mrs. Wilton on the table?”

Lola took the jar, surprised at first at its weight. She placed it on the small oak table next to the window and tried not to think too long on Maria’s words. The idea that this would be her life until she was Maria’s age seemed daunting, and she wasn’t sure she wanted it. She always thought she wanted to stop moving around and stay in one place, a real home. But now, faced with the actual opportunity to do so, she found herself tempted to follow in her sister’s footsteps.

When Maria had told her that she had to help with the ceremony, Lola had at first been curious. She vaguely remembered one ceremony when she was much younger, but because of her age, no one had bothered to explain the intricacies of the process. She knew Maria had led the ceremony as her family had done for over a century, but Lola wasn’t exactly sure what that meant. Now she knew that in addition to leading the actually ceremony, Maria also prepared the ashes.
Lola glanced out the window behind the small side table. Outside Corine was sunbathing, enjoying her afternoon off from the restaurant.

Maria stood up and stretched her back. “I started helping with the ceremony when I was ten. My father had done it before me and his father before him. It became my sole responsibility when I was sixteen.” She waved one hand at the half empty paint can.

Lola picked it up and put it in the closet where there were three other similar paint cans.

“How what?” she asked.

“Her son will come and pick her up. Then he will give her to Felipe.” Maria handed Lola a sheet of paper and pencil. Then she began to dictate to Lola the list of things that needed to be done before the ceremony: make sure Felipe was ready to paint Mrs. Wilton’s portrait, announce the ceremonial time to the town, and finish her ceremonial opening address.

Maria had already told Lola that Mrs. Wilton would be painted as a base coat on the cross placed on the wall of the crematorium where she died, and then her symbol would be painted in the center. It was a form of respect, and everyone who would see her cross would spare a moment to think of her. She’d told Lola that as long as they remembered them, they would never truly die.

Lola wasn’t sure exactly how she felt about it. It felt morbid, painting ashes on someone’s wall, but at the same time, it sounded nice to be remembered. She had spent so much of her life unnoticed; she hated the thought of no one caring when she was gone,
or even sparing her a second thought. It was almost terrifying to consider that her entire life could pass by and disappear into obscurity, never to be thought of again.

The clock on the wall chimed three times. Lola gave Maria the list, which Maria promptly reviewed, nodding her head silently.

“Ok. We should be able to do this by tomorrow evening.”

“Why is the ceremony always in the evening?” Lola asked, curling her legs under her and leaning back in her chair.

“As the day comes to a close, so we wish our loved ones farewell. It’s the completion of a circle, like life.”

Lola didn’t understand, but she nodded her head anyway.

Maria set the list down and slowly examined Lola. After a moment she continued. “Ok. I think it’s time I told you the history of the ceremony.”

“Would you like me to get Corine?”

Maria waved her hand. “This story isn’t for her. Let her have her sunbath.” She settled back into her chair and folded her hands on her lap. “A long time ago, when this territory was a little piece of land owned by Mexico, Juan had been an outpost of sorts. It had a small Spanish monastery next to the military fort and a trading post, where Felipe’s store is now. Ranchers would push their cattle through here on the way to the market, and it was seen as a good resting place for people going or coming from the El Paso area. There was also a small camp of Comanche, who were on relatively peaceful terms with the citizens of Juan, as long as the ranchers didn’t protest the occasional pilfering of some cows.
“Compared to other nearby places, Juan was quite a booming little area. But then one night, a terrible sickness crept its way through town. Within a few days, half of Juan’s population was dead, and the rest were weakened by the illness. The monks in the Spanish monastery knew something had to be done with all the poor souls before their bodies brought on even more sickness, but even they were too few and too weak to dig graves in the rock hard ground.

“Then one night, a Comanche shaman rode into town. He told the monks that the Great Spirit in the Sky warned him that he must help the people of Juan or else the sickness here would carry in the wind to his camp. It was a short battle of wills before the monks consented to his help.

“The shaman took from his possessions a white clay urn etched with black symbols. He told the monks that this urn was magic. It had been possessed by many tribes before it chose to stay with him. He told the monks that they must burn their dead and transfer their ashes into the urn where the Great Spirit could lead them into the afterlife.

“The monks agreed that burning would be the best way to get rid of the bodies that were continuing to pile up around the mission. If the shaman was willing to help, they would let him put the ashes into a clay urn. Their beliefs didn’t permit them to accept the magic of the urn. Not willing to cast the ashes into the wind as the shaman directed, the monks created a paint-like mixture to mix with each soul’s ashes. Then the monks painted the ashes onto crosses they had blessed. They placed the crosses around monastery, since this, in essence, was their final resting place.
“When the sickness was over, the monks tried to return to the urn to the shaman. The shaman held it in his hands for only a few short moments before he returned it to them. He told the monks that the urn was no longer his. That it had chosen to stay with them.”

Maria reached for her glass of tea resting on the end table. She took a long drink. Lola watched her silently, feeling contemplative. Something about the story had touched her. Her fingers longed for her sketchpad and pencil, so she could express this feeling she didn’t quite understand.

“Instead of going back to the old ways once the sickness was gone, the people of Juan stuck with what had saved them—the ceremony. After the monks grew old and died and no more came, a respected citizen promised to lead the ceremonies. That was your great great grandpa. And so the responsibility of the ceremony has been passed down our line to me and now to you.”

“Why me?”

“It is the responsibility for every elder to choose an apprentice. I have chosen you.”

“But why not Corine? Or someone else?”

Maria sighed. “Because I chose you. Now no more questions. I have an opening address to prepare. Why don’t you go get some fresh air.”

It wasn’t a question. Lola knew she was being dismissed. She didn’t feel like arguing. She was still too wrapped up in everything she had learned. Without another word, she left Maria alone to her writing. She made sure the screen door didn’t make a sound as it closed behind her, not wanting to draw her sister’s attention. Silently she
headed down the road towards the highway and the old fort with its surrounding graveyard. She wondered if she’d be lucky enough to catch Donnie there again.

The air was still in the graveyard, the last living reminder of an even older tradition. Most of the tombstones had crumbled to dust, but a few of the more recent stone monuments still clung to existence. The graveyard reeked of neglect. Even the newer painted crosses showed their age.

Lola walked through the fort and amid the tombstones, looking for company, but finding no one. She chose a stone engraved with the name Henry Doss and the year 1802 and flopped down. She felt like a suffocating blanket had been thrown over her head. She’d thought coming here would help—it was the only place she could escape Maria or the concerns of her sister—but being around even more elements of death just seemed to be making it worse. Still, she didn’t move. She drew her legs up to her chest, leaned against the stone, and stared into the distance.

Daniel’s mother had died, leaving him an orphan. Granted he was of an age he could take care of himself, but he was still alone. Lola still had her sister, but if she ever lost Corine, she’d be alone. Logically, she knew she’d have Maria and Carmelita, but for all the care they’d shown her over the years, she’d pretty much be alone.

It scared her that her whole world revolved so tightly around one person, who could at any moment leave her. She wanted to be stronger. She needed to start taking care of herself. If she was going to end up staying here and be the woman Maria wanted to groom her into, she’d have to buck up. She just wasn’t sure how to start.

“What are you doing there?” a voice behind her asked.
Lola jerked and turned around. Violet Lake stood, hip cocked, with one hand resting on her colt. “I’m just sitting.”

“You better not be disturbing the resting. Better be showing them some respect.”

“Ma’am, I meant no disrespect. I was just visiting.”

“Oh. Well, then. That’s ok. I come out here to visit them too.” She took a step closer. “My own dear husband is planted over there.” She pointed to a lone cross surrounded by stone markers. “Died one day when he was visiting with me. So now in addition to these souls, I come to visit him.”

Lola didn’t know what to say. She nodded her head and stood. From what she’d heard, Violet Lake had long ago lost her marbles, but for some reason, Lola didn’t feel frightened by her.

“What was your husband’s name?”

“Reginald. He was a decent man. Worked every day of his life on our ranch. Worked himself to death, I think. But no one ever said that ranch life was easy, especially out here in the Devil’s country.”

“I’m sorry?”

Violet kicked at the hard earth, stirring up a bit of dust. “Look at this. Dry as an old bone. Can’t tell me this is God’s country. He’d see to it better than this. Hasn’t rained in over nine months. Lesser ranches have shut down, sold their stock. If it wasn’t for that aquifer that butts my ranch along with Foster’s and William’s, I believe the rest of us would have to close our gates too.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” Lola said, feeling the need to fill the silence.

“What do you have to be sorry about? I’m just telling you the way of the world.”
There was a slight breeze. It carried through the old fort behind them, creating a soft whistling sound.

“There are spirits here,” Violet said, tilting her head as if to listen to something. “You know this fort and cemetery is haunted?”

“What?”

“All those souls that passed away so cruelly, they haven’t been able to seek their rest in the afterlife. At least not yet. I come here to talk to them, to get them to move on like my Reggie, but so far, I haven’t had much luck.”

Lola looked around at cemetery. The shadows cast by the afternoon sun seemed to take on a new, foreboding shape. A chill ran down her arms. She hugged them around herself for warmth.

Seeming to understand Lola’s actions, Violet reached out a hand to pat her on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. They like the company—as long as you’re respectful. They won’t hurt you. And it seems as if they like you.” She tilted her head again. “Yep. You should visit them more often. Talk to them. Maybe they’d listen to you.”

Lola took a step back. “Ok. I will,” she said, though she was pretty sure she wouldn’t be coming back. She never given ghosts much thought and wasn’t even sure if she believed in them, but she figured it was best to avoid where they might be just in case.

Lola started to leave the graveyard and then stopped. “Are there ghosts anywhere else in town?”

Violet looked surprised. “Of course. Ghosts are everywhere. But don’t worry, these here are nicer than them.”
Chapter Twenty-Five

In a mix of reds, yellows and browns, the land met the horizon, unbroken by any signs of civilization. It was what Henry had called heaven. Grace shifted in the saddle and absentmindedly patted Temperance’s neck. They were on the ridge, the highest point on her land.

In the beginning, Grace had appreciated the land because she loved Henry, and it was a part of him. After Henry died, she looked after and cared for the land like flowers on a grave—it was his memorial. Now, as her best friend turned to ashes, Grace finally got what Henry had tried to tell her for years. In the end, the land remained. Through sickness, hardship, droughts, deaths—the land might occasionally get a scar, but it would always be there. Its constancy was the one thing she could depend upon.

Henry was gone. Kate was gone. And Grace was alone. She waited patiently for the land to ease some of her ache. To comfort her as it had in the past.

Behind she heard a horse approaching. She knew without looking it was Nate. He was the only one who would bother her when she was out on the ridge. She kept her eyes on the horizon but felt it when he stopped beside her.

They hadn’t talked much since her date with Paul. And even then the conversations were only work related. She was still upset with him, and she figured he was still aggravated with her. Because of this, she waited for him to tell her what he needed, but she would not look at him. She couldn’t afford to when she was using all her energy to keep from falling apart.
Temperance shifted under her, sensing Grace’s tension. Grace rubbed her neck, calming her.

“How are you doing?” Nate finally asked after several minutes of silence.

“Fine,” She replied tersely though she was surprised by his personal inquiry. She felt him look at her. “No, you’re not.”

Grace lifted her chin, refusing to give an inch. “I’m fine.”

She watched from the corner of her eye as Nate slid from his horse and walked around to her side. Before she knew what he intended, he hauled her from her Temperance’s saddle. She was too shocked to do more than sputter indignations. Once her feet were on the ground, however, shock turned to anger, and she began to struggle against his tight grip on her.

“You can lie to yourself but don’t lie to me.” He shifted his grip, so she would be forced to look at him. “I know you’re hurting.”

She managed to get one hand free and hit his arm. “Don’t pretend you care. I’m your boss. That’s all that there is here. Now let me go.”

“Lie.” He leaned and whispered in her ear, “You’re not alone. Stop acting like it.”

She jerked away and slapped him. “You don’t know the first thing about me.”

He shifted his arms again and captured her free arm. “Of course I do. I’ve been here, Grace. I’ve been here with you for years. You don’t think I’ve been paying attention? I know you. And I’m not going anywhere.”

“Yes you are. You’re fired.”

“No, I’m not.”
Remembering she also had feet to fight with, she kicked him in the shin, making him wince, but still he didn’t let her go. “I’m the boss. You’re fired.”

He studied her. “No, I’m not. You don’t mean it.”

She kicked him again. “Stop telling me what I feel.”

“Can you stop kicking me?” he asked, softly, his arms still holding her captive.

During this whole time he had held her tightly but not painfully. He had taken every jab she gave him but had not hurt her in return. She paused, her foot raised to deliver another kick. She lowered it; the fight leaving her.

“Let me go,” she demanded calmly, looking him straight in the eye.

His arms slipped from her, and she immediately felt their loss.

“I’m here,” he said, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

“I know.”

“Do you? Cause I feel like I’ve been standing in front of you waiting.”

“Waiting for what?” she whispered, her chest tight.

“You know what,” he whispered as if in pain.

She bit the edge of her lip and took a step back. She looked out at the land that fell before the ridge. Maybe after all these years, its hard rockiness had finally worn off on her.

“Why now?” she asked.

“Because we’re ready.”

She didn’t have his certainty. It seemed like too much of a coincidence that their readiness came about just as Paul started showing interest in her.

“It sure took a long time,” she said, fighting to keep the bitterness from her voice.
“I know.” Though he stood still, his expression said it all. She could read the emotions that flashed across his face. She knew this man. Had worked alongside him for years.

He took a step towards her. “I want to try something.” He extended a hand towards her, but she took a step back, unsure. “Let me try this. It’s the least we deserve.”

A breeze caught and lifted her unbound hair. She knew what was coming and she was nervous, but she still allowed him to take her hand, pulling her against his chest. She waited for his kiss, but it didn’t come. Instead, he pressed her head to his shoulder, wrapped his arms tightly around her, and just held her. That was it. He didn’t ask for anything. He just offered her comfort.

It only took her a moment to lean into his embrace. She hadn’t realized how long it’d been since she’d been held—truly held. A gasp of emotion escaped her. He squeezed her tighter, but said nothing. Something within her broke. She gripped the back of his shirt into two tense fists and burrowed her head deeper into his shoulder. She didn’t feel herself crying, only the dampness of his shirt.

It was much later, with red eyes and flushed cheeks that Grace pulled away. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled, straightening her shirt and brushing her hair back with shaking fingers. She felt exhausted.

“Don’t be.” He offered her a pale blue handkerchief.

After padding her cheeks dry and wiping her eyes, she gave him a small smile. “I wasn’t expecting that.”
“I know,” he paused. “It’s not that I don’t want to kiss you. I do. I just want you to know that no matter what, you will always have this. We were friends first. That won’t change.”

She wanted to tell him that of course things would change—that he couldn’t promise that they would remain friends—but the moment was too sweet to spoil.

“You want to kiss me?” She took a step closer, brushing her hand casually against his chest. She was curious. She wanted something to compare Paul’s kisses to.

He ran a finger down her cheek. “I was thinking about it.”

“Only thinking?” She caressed his chest again, fascinated by the strength there.

“Hmm.” He leaned forward, a breath away. He brushed his lips against hers once as if testing her reaction. She leaned into him and that seemed to be all the encouragement he needed. A kiss that had started off sweet turned into something else.

Unlike Paul’s possessive kisses, Nate’s felt like he was exploring possibilities, like he was in this moment of discovery with her. She wouldn’t allow herself to compare either Paul or Nate to Henry. In fact, every time her thoughts turned to Henry, she slammed the door shut, refusing to dwell on a man that she would never again see in this lifetime. She made herself focus on Nate. Focus on this one sweet moment. She refused the guilt swimming at the edges of her consciousness. She was alive. And Henry was not.
Chapter Twenty-Six

Daniel sat in his mother’s empty room. The only light filtering in the windows from the setting sun. In an hour, he would be expected at the ceremony. In an hour, he would be saying goodbye to the last of his family. He was now truly alone.

He waited for tears to come, but he was too numb to produce them. He got up from the rocking chair by the window and walked over to her bed. The covers were new and fresh—Rachel had seen to that before she left. She had thought correctly that Daniel would not be able to bring himself to wash away that little bit of her memory. He had spent the last five years of his life caring for his mother. And now there was nothing.

The house was silent. He walked through the empty hallway and down the stairs to the empty kitchen to grab a beer, hating everything about the house. He wanted to grab a sledge hammer and tear it down. But reason won in the end. He had to have a place to sleep, and the house was now his. Cool, crisp beer soothed his aching senses. Why couldn’t he just cry and get it over with? Whatever this was—this nothingness—it felt worse than crying. It burned his chest and made it hard for him to breathe. He finished the beer and grabbed another—his previous self-control gone. It didn’t matter anymore. There was no one to disappoint with his drunkenness.

Her ceremony was in an hour. Mrs. Espinosa, Felipe, and the rest of the town expect him to be there. To stand inside the crematorium—a place not even his father could get him inside of—and pay his mother tribute in a way the town deemed appropriate. Felipe would have painted her ashes in the shape of a cross on the wall next
to Daniel’s father by the time the service started. And his mother would finally have her wish—she would join his father’s cross and finally be with him in death.

Daniel took a long drink. He hadn’t been in the crematorium since his father’s ceremony. He had stood alongside his mother, offering her his strength, hiding his guilt from her. He knew it was his fault that his father had died. He should have been there that night instead of out in the desert with the guys. But he had resented his father for assuming Daniel would take over his job. Daniel had never wanted it. He hated death. Hated the ceremony. And even then, before his father’s death, Daniel had done everything he could to rebel against the tradition.

His mother was ashes. Ashes on a wall. He could rebel all he wanted but that wouldn’t change. Nor would it change if he didn’t go. She wouldn’t know the difference. He had done all he could for her, and now she was gone.

Standing up, he tossed his empty beer bottle into the trash across the room. He straightened his button-up shirt and ran his hands through his wavy hair. It was time. He walked out the front door, letting it slam shut behind him. The setting sun warmed him immediately. He got into his truck, started the engine, and headed down the road. When he came to a four-way stop, he looked east then west. The crematorium was towards the northeast. After a moment of silence, he turned the steering wheel west, heading towards the desert and away from town.

As he passed the old graveyard by the dilapidated fort, something glinting along the tombstones caught his eye. Before he knew it, he was slowing down his truck and parking it in the fort’s dirt driveway. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been to the old fort. It wasn’t a place that many came to anymore. It was mostly pushed aside and
forgotten, a part of Juan’s unwanted history. It attested to a time before the tradition.

Before ghosts haunted every corner of the town.

He slid out of the truck and walked around the fort to the cemetery. Most of the tombstones and wooden crosses had weathered over time, the inscriptions barely, if even, legible. There was a flash of white behind a tombstone on the far side of the cemetery. He called out but only the wind answered. Ghosts. Even here. He shivered involuntarily. Winding around the markers, Daniel tried not to walk on anyone’s resting place. He called out again. This time there was a shuffle and another flash of white. A young girl’s head poked out from behind a particularly large tombstone.

“Lola.”

“Daniel,” she answered, standing. The white dress she was wearing was marred with dirt stains, and she didn’t look too pleased to see him.

“What are you doing out here?”

“I could ask the same of you.” She leaned upon the stone in front of her.

“Shouldn’t you be at your mother’s ceremony?”

A wave of guilt and anger washed over him. Yes, he should be. Instead he was standing among the dead talking to a girl who didn’t like him much. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and nodded. Turning, he began to head back to his truck.

“Wait.”

He stopped.

“I’m sorry.”

He looked over his shoulder at her. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I really am sorry.”
“You’re right, though. I should be there.”

“Probably. But then again, I should be too. Maria bought me this dress and everything. She expects me to help her with the ceremony.”

“So why are you here?”

She pursed her lips. “I guess the same reason you are.” She studied him for a moment before waving him over. She sat down, leaning against the tombstone, and waited for him to join her. Once he did, she pulled a joint out of her dress pocket. She lit it, took a deep drag, and then passed it to him.

He had never smoked before. Sure he’d messed around with peyote, but that was about it. He knew Marc and even occasionally Felipe smoked. It was just that being in control had been so important for so long. But now none of that mattered. He took the joint from her and took in a slow drawl. It burned his lungs and tickled his throat until he began to cough.

“First time?”

“What are you, like twelve? Does your sister know?” He sounded defensive but he couldn’t help it.

“No, she doesn’t.” She took the joint away from him. “And it should remain that way.”

“It didn’t seem like you two kept secrets from each other.”

“We don’t. But this, she wouldn’t understand.”

A slight breeze stirred up the dust around them, lifting Lola’s dark hair off her face. She wasn’t pretty like her sister. In fact, she looked very little like Corine. There
was something sad and dark about her, something that with time and age would transform her. She would eventually lead the boys around much like her sister already did.

“What wouldn’t she understand?”

Lola narrowed her eyes. “Don’t be condescending.”

“I didn’t mean to be,” he paused. “I know you don’t like me much. I’m not sure why. But the thing is that I’m here. I have no desire to go anywhere else. I’m here, listening, if you feel like talking.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I guess ‘cause we all need someone to talk to sometimes.”

She nodded her head. “That’s usually Corine for me. But there are some things we’ve agreed not to talk about. Some things that would hurt her to say.”

He waited in silence, his hands resting upon his knees, but instead of explaining, she changed the subject. “Why are you here and not at the crematorium?”

He wasn’t sure if it was her straight-forwardness or the joint, but the tension was slowly seeping out of his body. For the first time in days, he felt capable of thinking of his mother. He held out his hand, and she passed the joint back to him. It was another moment before he spoke.

“It’s just everything,” he said, waving his hand around. “I did everything I could for her, but it still wasn’t enough. She’s still gone.”

Lola frowned. “That’s not your fault. You know that, right?”

“Sure.”

“It’s not.”

“I know.”
She leaned forward and put her small hand on his knee. “It’s not your fault. People go away. Sometimes it’s because somewhere else seems shinier, sometimes it’s because of death. But regardless they’re gone and it has nothing to do with you.”

He took a deep breath. “How did someone as young as you get so smart?”


“Yes it does.” A comfortable silence fell between them. In the distance he could hear the church bell start to chime. His mother’s service would be starting. Maybe Lola was right, but even in this relaxed state, he couldn’t accept it yet. Maybe later. Maybe all he needed was time.

“I don’t dislike you.”

“Huh?”

“You said I didn’t like you. You might be ok.”

“Might be?”

“Alright. Are. You’re ok. You never did anything wrong. It was just you were too much like her.”

She didn’t have to say who. He knew. “And that’s bad?”

“It could be. She needs someone grounded. Someone that will make her want to stay—not someone to run away with.”

He examined her again—this girl who excelled at keen observation and seemed to understand more about human nature than most.

“You sister loves you.”

“I know.”

“You should trust in that. Whatever you need to say to her, it will be ok.”
“Look at us.” She took one last drag and then pocketed the joint. She held in the smoke for a moment before she slowly expelled it. “We’re a happy lot, huh?” Her eyes widened briefly. “Please don’t say anything. About any of this.”

He glanced over his shoulder, seeing the cause of her sudden nervousness. Corine walked towards them, wearing a pale purple dress. She looked like spring and life and everything bright in the world. “I won’t. I promise.”

“Everyone is looking for you,” Corine said to him. She turned to Lola, “And to answer your unspoken question—yes, Maria is ticked. I thought it was my job to make her mad?”

Corine sat down by Lola and pulled her into a hug, kissing the top of her head.

“Too much?”

Lola nodded.

“I know. It is for me too.”

Daniel envied the closeness of their relationship. He wished he had someone in his life that he could communicate with like that. He longed for the security of such a relationship.

“So what are you doing out here?” Corine asked him.

“Just keeping the ghosts company,” Lola answered for him. Corine gave her a questioning look before turning her attention back to him.

“It’s just not my thing.”

“She’s your mom.”

“And she’s gone. This isn’t about her.”

“Isn’t it?”
“No. It’s about this town. It’s about the fact that I don’t have a say in how she will be remembered.”

“Did she not want to be painted next to your father?”

“No, she did. She went to the crematorium so exactly that would happen. She was so concerned with the tradition that she couldn’t just trust that I would take care of her. Instead, she dragged herself down several streets in the middle of the night to where he was. She was so weak in the end; she couldn’t stay awake for more than a few minutes at a time. Yet, she somehow managed to make it to the crematorium. She put herself through all that because she believed in the tradition more than me.”

He leaned back, stunned at all he had said. Was that it? Was that why he was so upset? Neither Lola or Corine said a word. They sat, arm in arm, watching him, as if waiting for his head to start spinning around or explode. He had surprised even himself with the force of his ferocity. He waited to feel better now that it was out, but he still felt angry.

“Ok,” Corine finally said.

“Ok,” Daniel repeated.

“Yeah, I definitely think you are alright.”

He couldn’t help it. A rough laugh escaped him. “So after that tirade, I’m ok?”

“Yep.” She looked smug.

Corine hugged her. “My sister is an odd duck, but there you go.”

“How about you?”

“Am I an odd duck?”

“No. I mean, do you think I’m alright, too?”
She hesitated. “I think you’re like the rest of us.”

He lifted one brow.

She sighed dramatically. “Yes. I think you’re alright.”

“Good,” he smiled. “Ditto.”
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Night had fallen before they left the graveyard. Corine was surprised that no one else had come across their hiding place. After talking with Daniel for awhile, they had finally gotten him to agree to visit his mother’s cross. Of course it would be after everyone had left. They all had agreed that an audience would be too much for all of them. Corine already dreaded the lecture Maria was bound to give them, Daniel included. Nothing was more important to Maria than the tradition, and Daniel, as far as Maria would be concerned, had outright turned his nose up at it.

They all climbed into Daniel’s truck and drove over to the crematorium, parking a street over so that no one would notice. He made no move to get out.

Corine placed her hand over his. “We’re not going to make you do this. That wouldn’t be right. If you are really not ready for this, it’s ok.”

“She’s in there right now beside him.”

Corine said nothing.

“I haven’t been in there since my father died, and I told Maria and the whole town that I wouldn’t carry on the tradition—that I wouldn’t follow in my father’s footsteps.”

He looked through the windshield, staring at the crematorium but not really seeing it. Corine wished she knew what to say, but she’d never lost a loved one. Her mother was in Argentina with her boyfriend and her father was somewhere out there, though she’d never known him. Death had only been a part of her life in Juan and Las Vegas.
After a moment, he wove his fingers through hers and squeezed her hand. “Will you come in with me?” He looked at Lola. “Both of you?”

“Ok,” Lola whispered.

Corine squeezed his hand and gave him a small smile. “We’re here with you—you’re not alone.” She meant the words although she was aware of how cheesy it sounded.

That seemed to be the right answer. Something in Daniel’s demeanor loosened. He leaned his shoulder against hers briefly before opening the door.

The door to the crematorium wasn’t locked, allowing residents to stop by and visit Daniel’s mother—not that they would. Corine had the feeling that the ceremony was where everyone said their goodbyes.

The entrance was dark but there was a light on downstairs near the furnace. They moved quietly towards the stairs, but then Daniel signaled for them to stop. There was someone downstairs talking. Corine strained to hear, but the words were deep and muffled. Daniel crept closer, leaning his head down to spy between the railings. He stiffened.

“Who is it?” Lola whispered.

He waved his hand in a shushing motion. His face grew pale, and Corine wondered who it was and what that person was saying. After a moment, he stepped back and grabbed both their hands to pull them into the shadows.

A figure shrouded in darkness came up the stairs. As the figure pulled the door open, Corine caught a glimpse of his face—it was Sherriff Chavez. What was Sherriff
Chavez doing visiting Mrs. Wilton’s cross? Daniel stilled looked disturb. What had he overheard?

She opened her mouth to voice these questions, but Daniel silenced her with a gentle finger against her lips.

“Don’t. If I talk about it now, I won’t be able to visit her. I just need to push that aside for now.”

“Are you sure?” Corine asked when he took a step back.

“Yep,” he said briskly. His demeanor had completely changed. He no longer appeared grief-stricken; instead he was resolute. “Let’s get this over with.”

Daniel headed down the stairs without another word.

“Daniel, wait,” Corine called after him, but he ignored her. She felt Lola’s hand slide into her own.

“Is he ok?”

Corine shook her head and squeezed Lola’s hand before following Daniel down the stairs. He stood several feet away from the crosses of his parents. Mrs. Wilton’s cross was still slightly shiny and there was a faint smell of fresh paint. Yellow tulips were painted in the middle of her cross. Next to her cross was an older one with bluebonnets in the middle and beside that was a jet black furnace.

“He didn’t ask me for her symbol,” Daniel said, his voice stripped of all emotion.

“Felipe?” Lola asked. But Daniel didn’t respond.

“Yellow was her favorite. Especially yellow tulips. She always said tulips smelled the best of all the flowers.” He took a few steps forward and gingerly reached
out his hand. He touched her cross, leaving a slight finger print. Corine noticed then there was already another finger print near Daniel’s. She wondered who it belonged to.

“She’s not here. Neither is he.”

After that, he didn’t say a word. They stood, Corine on one side and Lola on the other, for several minutes. The silence, smell of paint and significance of the moment weighed heavily on Corine. She wasn’t good at this, but she was trying.

“Ok.” Daniel took a step back.

“Ready?” Lola asked, but Daniel didn’t answer.

“Do you want to come over for a little bit? Maria mentioned she had a meeting tonight; she won’t be home.” Corine led the way up the stairs to the first floor. She was relieved to be leaving the basement behind.

Daniel paused right before the front door. “I can’t. Thank you both.” He looked at the door. “I needed to do this. You made it easier.” He gave them a tense smile then disappeared out the door.

“I guess that means we’re walking home?” Lola asked.

Corine ruffled Lola’s hair. “I guess so. At least it’s a pretty night.”

They walked down the quiet streets; the full moon high above their heads. As they passed homes lit from within, Corine wondered about these other lives. Wondered how different and similar they were to her own.

Eventually they came to the road that ran past Maria’s house. They both paused when an unknown black Lincoln was parked in the otherwise empty driveway. Someone was sitting inside. Lola grabbed Corine’s elbow and pointed to the Lincoln’s license
plate. Nevada. Shivers ran down her spine. Nevada—there could be only one reason someone from Nevada would be here and it wasn’t good.

She began to back up, dragging Lola with her. Maybe whoever was in the car hadn’t spotted them yet. They made it five feet before a man in a black suit stepped from the car.

“Don’t run, Corine.” He appeared to be in his mid forties with dark brown hair streaked with grey.

“Do I know you?”

“No. I’m from the Las Vegas homicide division. Detective Reed.” He flashed his badge. “Can we talk?”

Corine felt her whole world crashing around her. Why did Carmelita have to leave them here? Didn’t she know that something like this would eventually happen? Men like the ones they’d gotten mixed up with didn’t usually stop until they had gotten what they wanted, and she had a pretty good idea what they wanted, seeing that there was a homicide detective here and all.

“What is it?” she asked, gripping Lola’s hand tightly.

“Could we go inside?”

“No. Here. Tell me here,” she demanded, making sure to keep enough distance between them.

“Is your grandmother around?”

“I’m seventeen. Tell me what you need to say.”

He leaned against the trunk of his car. “I’m not here to cause you trouble, Corine. I’m here to warn you.”
“Warn me?”

“The man you killed, he’s brother, Antonio Hanson, just got out of prison.”

“And?”

“He found out about you. He violated parole. We believe he’s heading out here.”

“How does he know I’m here?”

“Men like him have connections everywhere, even, I believe, within our department.”

Lola wrapped her free arm around Corine’s waist. Corine had only gotten involved in this mess to save Lola. Not that Lola had really done anything wrong. She had just wandered into the wrong place. It was Carmelita’s and Corine’s job to keep Lola safe, and for one brief moment, they had failed.

“Are you sure he’s coming after me?”

“We can’t be certain—no. But I’m trusting my gut. I know Antonio. I was the one that sent him to prison ten years ago.”

Corine considered this for a moment. They needed to leave. They couldn’t stay here anymore. Surely Maria would understand.

“Is that why you drove all this way?”

“No. I’m going to stick around for a little while. See if Antonio shows up.”

Corine glanced up and down the street. They could leave tonight. Be in another state, another town by morning.

“Don’t.” His tone commanded while he continued to relax against his car. That one word was all he had to say to have the hair on the back of her neck stand up. His tone commanded while he continued to relax against his car.
“You can’t make us stay.”

“No, I can’t. But I’m here now. I can’t promise you’ll be protected somewhere else. And trust me, if he wants you, he will find you. This guy is dedicated.”

“You’re going to protect us?”

“Yes.”

For once, Corine didn’t know what to do. She wanted to keep Lola safe, but she wasn’t sure what the best way to do that was. “I have to talk to my grandmother,” she said, not willing to make any decisions at that moment. Not that Maria would be included in this. Corine was pretty sure that Maria didn’t know what occurred in Vegas, and it was probably better that way. Corine already had to deal with everyone she knew in Vegas looking at her differently. A single act had erased all the hard work she had done to make friends. Suddenly she was an outsider again, and a dangerous one at that. She didn’t want people in Juan looking at her that way. She didn’t want to lose the friends she was slowly starting to make.

And then there was Lola. Lola had finally made a friend—Corine couldn’t ruin that. Lola had already been through too much, seen too much. It had taken weeks for her to be able to sleep through the night, to not be awoken screaming with nightmares.

Corine grabbed Lola’s hand and pulled her into the house, giving the detective a wide berth. Once inside, she locked the door and leaned against it.

“What are we going to do?” Lola stood in front of her, arms crossed tightly.

Corine bit her lip and shook her head. She had to figure this out. There was no one else. She wanted to scream out her frustrations; this was supposed to be over. Brett Hanson was dead, and his family had forgiven her, or so she had thought. Maybe this
was the plan all along. Maybe his family had waited for the brother, knowing he would take care of everything.

Laughter—insane, uncontrollable laughter bubbled out of her. She couldn’t have stopped it if she tried. Lola looked worriedly at her.

“What?”

Corine bent over, gasping for breath. “We’re in a mob movie. A really bad one.”

“They’re not the mob.”

“They might as well be.” Corine slid down the door and wrapped her arms around her knees.

After a moment, Lola knelt down in front of her, starting to cry. “I’m sorry Cor. I know I never said it, but I am. I was stupid and angry and—” she paused, as if search for the right words.

“Shhh. It’s ok.” Corine pulled Lola into a hug. “It’s going to be ok.” She forced conviction into her words. “You have nothing to be sorry for. It was my fault. I knew that guy was trouble. I knew it, but instead of saying anything, I just ignored it.”

“I think I knew too, but I never really thought we were in danger.” She laid her head on Corine’s knees. “I didn’t realize how evil people could be.”

“I don’t think I did either.” Corine had been sixteen and stupid at the time. She thought the world could be won with a smile because that’s what her mother had taught her. And it had worked for them, for a while. Until she stormed after her sister, who was in the middle of a tantrum, out the staff door of the casino into the dark, deserted alley. Until she saw Brett, who she thought had a crush on her, grab her sister and force her against the building. Until she heard Lola’s sharp cries and saw Brett slide a knife
against her throat. Until she ran up behind him, silent and determined, though without a
clue on how to fight.

It all boiled down to good old fashioned luck. She managed to catch him by
surprise, which could have been disastrous since he had a knife to Lola’s throat, but
instead of using that knife, he dropped it. She was lucky that he was drunk. She was
lucky that Lola managed to distract him for a few seconds while Corine claimed the
knife. By the end, all three were battered and bruised. It should have ended there, with
Lola behind her as they backed out of the alley, their only defense a pocket knife. But
Brett wouldn’t have it. With a shout of rage, he lunged at Corine, falling on top of her,
beating her head against the ground.

It took him a moment to realize he had a knife in his chest, and agonizing seconds
for him to die. He kept eye contact with her the whole time, burning himself into her
soul. She still woke up, remembering the expression in his eyes, the blood dripping from
his mouth onto her cheek. She still could remember his weight on her, and how it took
both her and Lola to move him.

She had killed a man. It may have been an accident and possibly justified, but she
had still killed a man. No matter how far she ran, that would always stay with her.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

It was nearing midnight, and Morris’s bar was crowded and noisy. There were a group of cowboys from the William Ranch along with the Foster’s. This alone would normally indicate a fight would eventually break out, but tonight something was different. There were more smiles than jeers, more laughter than angry tirades. Though it seemed farfetched, Marc’s father’s budding relationship with Grace William was finally starting to affect those who worked for them.

Marc, sitting backwards in a wooden chair, leaned forward against the back, dangling a long neck between two fingers. He couldn’t take his eyes off Amy. It had been forever since she talked to him. He didn’t realize how much he miss her husky voice, the feel of her silky skin, her smile—the list went on. He missed everything about her, and she wouldn’t look at him. She wouldn’t wait on him. He had to bug Morris to get a beer.

He knew he had made a mistake. He’d never truly cared about Corine; she’d just been a distraction. And because of his flirtation with her, he’d ruined everything. He’d realized too late the depth of his feelings for Amy and his trust in her—he had shared almost every secret with her. She understood why he’d flunked out of college. That it wasn’t because he was lazy or stupid, it was mix of things. Things that he couldn’t identify until he talked with her. She knew the best and, now, the worst parts of him, and he knew the same of her, though her worst parts were dusk compare to his darkness.

Amy walked back into his line of sight, looked up, and stared at him across the bar for a moment. He didn’t blink, hoping she could see his regret, his apology in his
eyes. She didn’t. The moment was over in a flash, and she turned away as if she’d never seen him. No improvement. It had been this way ever since she discovered he was dating Corine behind her back.

He took one last swig of his beer, sat it on the table behind him, and left the bar. He had suggested to Corine that he’d forgiven her, but he hadn’t. She was the one that mentioned their dating to Amy. Everything would have been fine if it wasn’t for Corine. He would have eventually gotten bored of her and gone back to Amy exclusively. Nothing had been right since Corine and her sister came into town.

He pulled out a cigarette, placed it between his lips, and struck a match against the small case. He didn’t smoke often, but every once in awhile, it took the edge off. What he really needed was something stronger. He wondered if Donnie could help him out. Donnie seemed to always have something on him. The problem was Donnie tended to disappear at night. That was work hours for him on most days. The rest of the time he never quite knew for sure where Donnie would be. After two years, he was still a mystery, popping up out of the blue and divulging very little about himself.

Resigned, he hopped into his father’s pickup and headed out of town. No doubt the great Paul Foster would be wondering where he was. His father had found out that he wasn’t seeing Corine anymore, so Marc no longer had much of a reason to take the pickup. Lately he’d just been swiping his father’s keys when the need struck him. It was ridiculous that he had to beg every time to go to town. If it wasn’t for the heat, he would have saddled a horse rather than resort to asking his father for anything.

The house was silent and dark. Everyone must have already turned in, which was great because then no one would know for sure what time he got in. He parked the
pickup and headed up the walkway to the wraparound porch. It took him a moment to see the shadow sitting on the porch swing.

“Finally decided to come home.” It was a statement, not a question. Paul Foster rarely asked questions.

“And you’re still up. Any particular reason?” Marc walked to the front door and turned the handle.

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t you dare walk through that door.” He pointed to a chair by the swing.

“Sit down. We’re going to have a talk.” Which, of course, meant that his father would lecture while Marc was expected to sit and listen.

Marc knew Paul’s talks all too well. He’d gotten them on a regular basis since he come back from college. He suspected that his father derived great joy from them.

“Not tonight,” Marc said, pushing the door open.

“If you make me raise my voice inside, we are going to have a bigger problem. Now sit down.”

Marc sighed as he closed the door and collapsed into the designated chair. He put his hands into his pockets and slumped down, resting his head against the back of the chair. Sometimes these talks took forever. It was a little after one in the morning; even if he was inclined to care, he was too tired to work up the energy.

“This isn’t going to go on. I’ve had enough.”

Marc tilted his head towards his father, but said nothing.
“Instead of getting better, you’ve been acting out more and more all summer. You’ve messed things up with Corine, and, now, you’ve destroyed things between Amy and you. Do you not care at all about who you hurt?”

Marc straightened up. “Since when do you care about Amy?”

“I’ve always cared about Amy. Before her parents left, we were good friends, and I’ve always had respect for her uncle.”

“Wait, you good friends with the lowly working class?”

“I’ve had enough of your attitude. That’s the whole problem. You’ve been on this destructive path for far too long. You need to sort it out.”

“So that I don’t become like you? I thought fathers wanted their sons to follow in their footsteps. That’s all that I’ve been doing.”

“I don’t know what you’re hinting at.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. I was there that night. I saw the state you were in when you slammed through the door, alone. Didn’t say too many kind words about mom, did you. Did you care about who you hurt? Mom died because of you.”

Marc stood up, surprised by his own words and the rage behind them.

“Your mother had an accident. I was home when it happened.”

“Exactly. You caught a ride with a ranch hand and left mom to drive home, alone and upset.”

“I wasn’t responsible.” His father was standing, a mere foot in front of Marc.

“Weren’t you? Haven’t you been blaming yourself for all these years?”
The great Paul Foster opened his mouth then closed it. He staggered back a few feet and sat back down in the porch swing. Marc had never seen his father so shattered. Paul’s face grew pale, and suddenly he looked older than his years.

“How could you think that?”

“How could I not?”

“Does Mae feel the same way?”

Of course, Mae. She would always matter more to him than his own son. Marc was used to it. Mae could never do anything wrong while everything Marc did was drawn into question.

“I don’t know. We don’t talk about it. Never have.”

“Maybe that’s why I can’t convince her to stay. She never says she’s not coming back after she graduates, but I know. She won’t ever come back here to stay.”

Marc didn’t reply, but he said all his replies to that comment in his head. None of them, of course, were kind.

His father was silent for a moment, and then shook his head. “Is this what you’ve been holding against me all these years?”

“No. I don’t know.” And he didn’t. He didn’t even know he felt that way until he said the words.

“We were fighting again. Those last two years were tough. She was unhappy and nothing I did made it better. I loved her. I did. She was the first girl I ever felt that way about,” his voice trailed off. “We fought that night at that restaurant in Van Horn. I can’t remember about what, but I do remember it was one hell of a fight. She told me I better catch a ride home, so I did.”
“Did you even consider her? You knew mom wasn’t the best driver.”

“I guess, I didn’t think about it.” He leaned stood back up. “I was too angry. I did what she asked because I needed space from her.”

“It was your job to take care of her.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” His father’s voice grew louder and gruffer.

“Don’t you think I’ve thought about that every day since she died? I know I messed up, but I didn’t kill her. It was an accident. A stupid accident. And you have no right to blame me for it.”

“Are you now telling me how I can and cannot feel? Nothing I ever do is right, is it?”

His father walked around Marc and towards the door. He pushed it open and then paused. “You’re wrong son. I had hopes for you. Both your mother and I did. But you kept disappointing. And now I find out it was all in revenge for something I supposedly did or didn’t do. Someday you are going to have to stop blaming everyone else and take responsibility. And you’re right. Until that day, you won’t be able to do anything right.”

His father walked inside, closing the door softly behind him. Marc stormed off the porch towards the barn. He had a small fridge loaded with beer. He opened a long neck, grabbed another, and then sat down in the barn’s small office. The office was equipped with a desk, chair and an old couch. Marc flopped down on the couch, sloshing beer on his shirt and not caring.

His father was wrong. Marc didn’t do everything out of resentment. He hadn’t even known he felt any resentment until a few minutes ago, but at least now he had
confirmation on how his father felt about him. Apparently Marc had been right by assuming that Mae was the favorite, and he was the disappointment.

He finished the first beer quickly and then opened the second. At that moment, Marc wanted nothing more than to get drunk—very drunk. If he was lucky, this night would just become a blurred memory. If he was very lucky, he’d be able to forget everything for a few hours.

Everyone was abandoning him. He’d never felt so alone before. In the past he’d always had Amy, and now he had no one. He longed to curl up next to Amy, to wrap her body around his, and empty out his thoughts. She had always been able to sort through them for him, make sense of them.

He didn’t deserve any of this. It wasn’t like he hadn’t tried. He’d learned how to run the ranch alongside his father after his mom had died. When he graduated high school, he’d gone to college, just like Mae, even though he’d never really liked school. But it was never enough. Nothing was enough. In the end, there was just him and no one else. Even Mae would eventually leave, not that they were that close to begin with.

Amy had no right to shut him out. They’d never said they were exclusive. He’d never made any commitment to her, he’d only ever suggested a friendship with benefits. Her anger wasn’t justified.

Marc sat up on the couch, feeling like a new awareness had taken over. He’d make her see. It wasn’t just the beer talking. He’d only had two. It was something that had been bugging him for awhile. Amy had no right to be angry at him. She was supposed to be there for him when he needed her. He lay back down. Tomorrow. He’d make her see tomorrow.
The next day, he waited until Amy’s shift ended, close to two in the morning, to confront her. He leaned against her beat-up pickup for awhile, but eventually grew impatient. He hadn’t really planned what he was going to say to her. He just knew he’d had enough. First he was a disappointment to his father and then Amy. Neither was deserved.

He flipped out his pocket knife and played with it for a few moments. He knew the general time that Amy’s shift ended, but it didn’t always mean that was when she left the bar. Occasionally it would take ten minutes or so for her to finish cleanup. The parking lot was empty except for her pickup, so at least she wasn’t still dealing with patrons.

The night was clear and the sky full of stars. There was no moon. He tested her door handle. It was unlocked, like always. Amy had always told him that on the chance someone chose her pickup to steal, it would be a blessing. He didn’t want to freak her out, but he also didn’t want to stand out in the parking lot anymore, looking suspicious. He glanced at the bar door one more time before sliding inside the pickup. Amy would not like it, but at least she would be forced to deal with him.

He opened and closed his pocket knife again. If this didn’t work, maybe he could pay Corine another visit. Amy might accept his apology if it came from her. He twirled the knife and then tested its sharpness. With the barest of pressure, it drew a drop of blood from his thumb. He stared at it for a moment before he stuck his thumb in his mouth to suck the blood away.
The door to the bar opened. Marc put the knife back into his pocket and waited for Amy to see him, which wasn’t until she stood in front of her pickup. She froze, staring at him.

“What the hell are you doing in there?” she asked—her voice raised and angry.

“Waiting for you.”

“And you thought my pickup was the best place to do that?” Her hands rose to her hips, her ultimate stance to display irritation.

“Not at first, but now I do. If you want to go anywhere, you’re going to have to talk to me.”

“Get out of my pickup.”

“No.”

“Get the hell out of my pickup.” She slammed her hands down of the hood for emphasis.

He paused. He’d never seen her so angry, at least, not at him. Usually a few sweet words and well placed kisses always brought her around.

“Please get in. I just want to talk. Then I’ll leave. I promise.”

She stood there for a few more moments. Sighing she walked around the pickup and got in. “As soon as you’re finished, you’ll get out—right?”

“Yes.”

“Then start talking.”

“I’m sorry you got hurt.”

She glanced at him. “Is that all?”
“No. Let me finish. I’m sorry you got hurt, but we never said we were exclusive.”

She stiffened, but he ignored it.

“I know going out with Corine surprised you. But I didn’t do it to hurt you.”

She placed her hands on the steering wheel. “We have gone out for years. In all that time, we’ve only seen each other. Didn’t that suggest we were exclusive?”

“We never said the words.”

“So you need words? How about this—I’m done. I’m tired of all this. I keep forgiving you, and for what? Apparently not because you’re my boyfriend. You’re just some guy I occasionally slept with.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I mean it.”

“No, you don’t. You’re just mad right now. Just give it some time.” He felt like the world was closing on him.

“No.”

“I didn’t sleep with her. It was just a couple of dates.”

“It’s not the only reason.”

His eyebrows rose on their accord. “What else?”

“Did you think I wouldn’t find out? Juan’s a small town. I’m surprised not more people know.”

“About what?” He was genuinely perplexed.
“The drugs. I know you’ve been letting them use your father’s ranch as a landing pad. How in the world have you kept it a secret from him? How do you think that whole venture is going to end?”

“How did you find out?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes it matters. Tell me.”

She rolled her eyes. “This is the whole problem. You never notice how you treat me.”

He clenched and unclenched his hands. “Please. Please tell me.”

“Donnie. He mentioned it the other night. He thought I already knew. But of course I didn’t. I’ve recently discovered how many secrets you like to keep.”

“Donnie told you. He never talks to anyone. Why would he suddenly tell you this?”

“I don’t know. You’ll have to ask him.”

“I’m not hurting anyone with the ranch thing. Why are you holding it against me?”

“Maybe not directly, but people will get hurt. What about your father when he finds out? What about the people they plan to sell to?”

Marc leaned his head back and stared at the roof of the cab. “My father’s not going to find out.”

“You can’t be sure of that. Besides, you’re allowing dangerous people onto his land.”

“It will be alright.”
She shook her head.

“I care about you Amy. Please give me a chance.”

A raw laugh escaped her. “You care about me. Care about me?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate. Until a few days ago, I would have said I loved you. It’s great to finally settle that. Please get out now.”

“Wait—”

“No. You had your say. I listened. Now get out.” Her expression was cold; her eyes narrowed.

He could tell she was on the verge of crying. He’d tried. He really had, but it still wasn’t good enough for her. “So I’m a disappointment, huh?”

“Don’t bunch me in with your father. I don’t deserve that.”

He opened the door. “What if I told you I loved you?”

“I wouldn’t believe you.”

Marc slid out of the pickup and allowed the door to slam closed behind him. He stood and watched as Amy backed up and drove out of the parking lot. He wasn’t going to let her go yet. There was still Corine. And she owed him. Owed him big. And then there was Donnie. Donnie knew that Marc had told no one about what they were doing. It was as much for him as it was for Donnie. Marc wasn’t a fool—he knew their transaction was illegal. So why did Donnie tell Amy?
Chapter Twenty-Nine

It was quiet and dark except for one overhead lamp that Mike had turned on. He knew he shouldn’t be in the crematorium—it revealed too much. But he didn’t feel like he had a chance to say goodbye at the service. Not with everyone there. And if he was going to keep his promise to himself to never see or mention her again, he had to have this. It was beyond regret or desire—it was a deep aching need.

Kate’s cross, complete with a bunch of yellow tulips in the center, was still wet. He found it somehow symbolic. He lifted his right hand, which was sporting a cast, and pressed his index finger to her cross.

“I love you Katie girl. I always will. I know you’ve always pushed me to treat Sue better, and you were right. She’s waiting for me now. I will be the man she deserves. I promise. You know I really hurt her the day you died. I don’t know if she will ever forgive me for that. I’ll admit I haven’t tried very hard.”

Mike leaned his shoulder against the wall. He kept his finger pressed against her cross. “I miss you Katie. Why couldn’t you wait for me? Why did you have to give him the rest of your years?” He knew what she’d say—that she’d made a commitment to Wally. But he would argue—her heart had already made a commitment to him, not Wally. And so it always went. In the earlier years, it would end with her in his arms, pressed tightly against him. He lived for those moments. But then Wally died and everything changed. They’d still have the argument, but instead of it pulling them closer, it pushed them apart.
“I love you Katie. You will always be in my heart.” He pulled his finger away and pressed it against his chest, directly over his heart. It left a smudge of ashy white paint. He looked at his print pressed into her cross. “And I’ll always be with you.”

He closed his eyes and remembered her as a teenager, beautiful and wild, in her yellow dress. He saw her swaying up to him, their eyes locked. He heard her sweet laughter. Felt her breath against his neck as she whispered in his ear. He remembered his young heart thudding in his chest and the slight shake in his hands. Though the room was crowded with other dancers, he heard and saw only her. She was bright and sunny and perfect—everything he’d been missing from his life. It had been instant love for him.

“We’ll always have that night, before life caught up with us, before everything fell apart.” He paused patting his chest, and then straightened his shirt. “I won’t be back here. So for now, I’ll say goodbye. I won’t see you again. Not until my time. I have to say goodbye now. I love you.” He was finding it hard to leave but forced himself to take several steps back. “Goodbye, baby.”

It took a moment more before he could leave. He headed up the stairs and outside to his bronco, which was parked around the corner. He drove through the quiet streets to his home. He had only been allowed back that day. It was going to be nice to sleep at home again instead of the beat-up couch at the station.

He parked his bronco in the drive next to Sue’s blue sedan. He turned off the engine and sat, staring at his house. It was a single-story, with three bedrooms, two baths, and a rather large kitchen, which was the reason Sue fell in love with it. When Felipe was home, it was the perfect size for them. Now that he had a place of his own,
the house seemed too big. He always wished they’d had another kid, but after some complications with Felipe’s birth, Sue couldn’t. She had been devastated at the time, but, eventually, both of them grew to accept it. It was just one of life’s trials. It had also helped that they had Felipe to focus their attention on. Now both of them were waiting for Felipe to settle down and give them some grandchildren to spoil. Mike couldn’t help the sigh that escaped him. It was just now Sue and him. The world seemed emptier, lonelier.

The kitchen light was on inside; the curtains drawn. Mike went inside pausing by the kitchen door. Sue was standing in front of the stove, stirring something in a pot, gently swaying to some romantic country song coming from the radio next to the toaster. Her dark hair was tied up in a ponytail, and she was wearing jeans and a gray t-shirt.

He leaned against the door frame, just watching her. Covering his heart with one hand, he felt something unknot and release. Sue had always been there for him. For some reason, she had loved him from the beginning—he didn’t know why.

Mike silently walked into his study and flipped through his CDs and pulled out an old Lady Antebellum album, smiling. This was one of Sue’s favorite bands. He walked back to the kitchen, quietly crossing behind Sue to the radio and popped the CD into the player, turning it to track ten.

Sue paused as the song began playing. Slowly, he crossed the kitchen to stand behind her. He breathed in her scent and then ran his hands down her arms, capturing her hands. She sighed and allowed him to pull her away from the stove. With a soft spin, he turned her to face him and then pulled her close. They danced to the song, not speaking. He wished it could just be like this—no complications or arguments, but then Sue
wouldn’t be Sue, nor would he be himself. Maybe, though, he could try to make it easier for the both of them—he just wasn’t sure how.

No words were needed. After all these years—after all his mistakes—he was amazed that she still came to him so easily; that was one thing she had never denied him. She wasn’t into playing games; if he wanted to know why she was upset with him or what she was thinking, all he had to do was ask.

The song came to an end, and she pulled away from him. She cupped his face between her small hands. Pulling his face down to hers, she kissed him.

“How are you doing?” she asked, knowing where he had been.

He kissed her cheek and forced a smile. It was still too raw to say out loud. It was like a jumbled up mess of emotions that he was still trying to sort out.

“I’ll be alright.” He ran a finger down her cheek, not realizing it was the one still stained with paint.

She caught sight of it and grabbed his hand to inspect it. Without a word, she brushed back his shirt with her other hand, revealing the smudged paint on his chest. He tensed, waiting for an explosion—Sue was too sharp to not put it all together.

He raised his brow in surprise as she covered the smudge with her hand and kissed his cheek.

“I’m sorry you lost her.”

He didn’t know how to reply to that.

“I never asked you to stop loving her. I knew she was a part of you from the moment we met.”

“How could you not want me to stop?”
“Because I know love isn’t like that. You can no more stop loving someone as you can stop a flood.” She paused. “Kate was a good woman. She didn’t deserve those last few years of pain.” She slipped her hand down his chest and tucked her hands into her pockets. “I never told you this, but I used to visit her.”

Mike wasn’t quite sure how to handle all these surprises she was throwing at him.

“How?”

“But I wanted to understand. When Wally was alive, I was afraid to approach her, not knowing how much he might know. But after, there was just us three, so I went to see her. It didn’t take long for me to see why you loved her. She was kind to me, which I’ll admit, surprised me. I made her promise not to tell you. I didn’t want you to think I was invading your relationship.”

“It would have been your right.”

“Maybe. Maybe I was more afraid you would choose her if I caused a fuss.”

“Sue—”

She silenced him with a finger against his lips. “Don’t. It’s ok.”

“How can it be? How can you ever forgive me?”

“Because I love you. Always have.” She put her hand back on his chest. “I liked her. I didn’t expect that. I visited her several times over the last two years. I think we kind of became friends, as much as two people stuck in the same trench can.”

“She never hinted. How could I have known?”

Sue smiled. “It doesn’t matter. What I’m trying to say—” She paused. “I never asked you to not love her.” She paused again. Whatever she was trying to say was difficult for her. “I just wanted you to love me too.”
His breath caught and his chest tightened. “Sue, I do love you. You’re the one I chose to make a life with. You’re the one that has always been there for me. There’s not been a day when I haven’t recognized that you’re too good for me. I’m sorry I wasn’t better at showing you that. But I promise from now on, I will be.”

A tear escaped her. “Please baby, don’t cry,” he whispered, pulling her against him, wanting to surround her in his warmth. “I love you. I do. And I’m sorry you ever doubted that.”

She raised her eyes to his. “I love you too.” Wrapping her arms around his neck, she kissed him, again and again. It was more than he deserved. He tried his best to show her all the love that she didn’t know he had for her—all the love that until that moment, he hadn’t realized he felt.

Eventually the smell of something burning on the stove roused them. They both laughed.

“Like silly teenagers,” Sue said, turning her attention to the stove. She turned off the burner and wrinkled her nose at the pot. “Well, that’s ruined.”

“How about I take you out somewhere nice.” He took the pot from her hand and set it in the sink. I’ll help you clean this up in the morning.

“Wow, how long can I look forward to this?” she teased.

“For a long while at least. I have some making up to do.”

“Going out somewhere would be great. Would you give me a moment to change?”

“As long as you need. I need to clean up as well.” He gave her a quick kiss before she headed to their bedroom.
He pulled out a chair from the small kitchen table and sat, exhausted. He knew Kate would be proud. He was lucky—so very lucky. The album was still playing in the quiet house. He closed his eyes, and for the first time in years, began to count his blessings.

“Mike, are you coming?” Sue called.

“Coming. Just turning off the radio.” He stood and pushed the power button on the radio. That night was the beginning of his mission to make it up to Sue.

The next morning, Mike stood next to Sue, drying the dishes that she washed. He loved how she couldn’t stop smiling. Apparently last night had been a success. He leaned over and kissed the side of her neck; she leaned into his caress and sighed softly. They hadn’t talked much that morning, having said what needed to be said last night. At that moment, there was no need for more words; instead, they were just enjoying each other’s company.

They had just finished washing dishes when there was a loud knock at the door. Sue went to open it while he finished putting the dishes away.

“Where is he?” a loud voice asked.

“Daniel, what’s wrong?”

Mike stiffened. No, not now. This couldn’t happen after he just got Sue to start believing in him again.

“No one’s hurt,” Daniel replied, softening his tone for Sue’s benefit. “Please, I need to talk to the Sheriff.”
“I’m here,” Mike said, walking out of the kitchen and into the hallway. He watched as Daniel tensed, his fists clenched. “What’s wrong?”

“You might want to speak to me in private. Sue might not like what I have to say.”

“I don’t keep secrets from her.”

Sue took a step back, allowing Daniel to walk towards him.

“Did you think I wouldn’t find out?”

“About what?” Mike asked, though he already suspected what this was about.

“Don’t play the fool. All these years I thought it was all my fault. Now I discover that I shouldn’t have carried the blame alone. Did he know? Was that why he was working so late that night?”

“Daniel, calm down.”

“Why should I? At this moment, I think I have every right to not be calm. You were having an affair with my mom.”

There it was. Those words were finally spoken aloud. He wanted to move to Sue’s side, but Daniel was in the way.

“Yes, I was. I loved her.”

“Behind my father’s back? Did neither of you consider him?”

“It’s more complicated than that.”

“Sure it is. It always is, isn’t?”

Mike wasn’t sure what to say. He didn’t know what Kate would want him to tell her son. She had asked him to look after Daniel, and he wasn’t off to a great start.

“Just tell me one thing,” Daniel continued. “Were you with her that night?”
Mike didn’t want to answer. He knew there would be no going back once the words were out.

“Tell me,” Daniel shouted, his voice rough with pain.

“Yes, he was,” Sue answered, her voice soft.

Daniel whipped around to look at her; apparently he’d forgotten that she was there. “You knew?”

Mike was also surprised. He knew Sue was aware of their relationship, but not that she knew about that night. That night that had changed everything.

“Yes, I knew. I always knew. Mike’s right, though. It wasn’t a simple affair. Your mother loved Wally—she mourned him every day after he died. But in the beginning, before Wally, there was Mike. She loved him too.”

“How can you be so nonchalant about it? He’s your husband.”

“Because life isn’t simple. Things don’t always work the way you want. You can either throw your hands up and move on, or you can stay and fight. I was never one to give up.”

Daniel turned back to Mike. “You were with her that night. How could y’all let me carry this burden alone? How could she let me? I wasn’t there that night; I should have been there to check on him, to convince him to break for the night. It was late and no doubt he was tired,” he paused, pushing his fingers through his hair. “She should have been there too. We both failed him.”

“It was neither of your faults,” Sue spoke up again. “That furnace was old and faulty. Wally had been petitioning the council for a new one for months—but it wasn’t their fault; money had been very tight for a while. Wally knew he needed to be careful
with it—it wasn’t his fault either. In the end, it was just bad luck. Very bad, unfortunate luck. He was taken home to the Lord. We might grieve the lost, but we need to acknowledge his gain.”

“It was my fault,” Daniel said brokenly.

“No it wasn’t,” Mike said, hating how both Kate and he had failed him. How could they not have known that Daniel blamed himself for his father’s death?

“How do you know? Did you know I was supposed to be there? He asked me to help him, but I ignored him and went out with my friends. Did you know he wanted me to take over after him, but I hated the idea? I’m not even sure if he knew that I loved him. I was so hateful to him. And I can’t take it back. I can’t tell him I’m sorry.”

Sue put a hand on his shoulder. “He knew. Parents always know. That love is unconditional.”

Daniel turned and hugged her tight. “I should have been there.”

“No, honey. No. The Lord step in and kept you away. If you had been there, you would have been taken with Wally, and it wasn’t your time.”

“I could have done something. I could have stopped it.”

“How?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Somehow.”

“Wally had been working that furnace since he was your age. What makes you think you could have done something that he couldn’t? He was good at his job. Don’t insult him by assuming he was killed because of a lack of knowledge.” She pulled back a little and brushed his hair from his face. “There was nothing you could have done. Nothing.”
“She’s right. I have the report from the inspection. It was nothing that he did, that furnace would have blown regardless.” Mike took a step closer to them. “You mother loved you. She used to tell me how she thanked the Lord every day that you weren’t with your father that night.”

Daniel flashed his cold eyes at him. “That still doesn’t change the fact about you and her.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“How could she love you both?”

“Because she did.”

“You didn’t deserve her.”

“I didn’t deserve Sue either, but somehow, they both forgave me.” Mike said the words as a statement, but it was really a question for Sue.

“Yes we did.”

Daniel focused his attention on her. “Why?”

“Do you forgive your mother?”

Daniel was silent for a moment, considering her question. Mike waited; his chest tight. Surely after everything, Kate wouldn’t lose the love of her son as well.

“Yes, I forgive her. I knew she loved my father, but I also knew for some reason she felt guilt. I just never knew why.”

“That’s how. Because when you love someone, truly love someone, you forgive them—not just for their sake, but also for you own. Anger, hatred, will eat a person up.”

“Maybe, but don’t ask me to forgive him.”
“Not yet, but eventually you might consider it. Neither of them was trying to hurt you.” Sue patted his back. “But until then, I want you to know that you are not alone. Anytime you need anything, even if it’s just to talk, you have me.” She kissed his cheek. “I’m always here for you.”

Daniel looked surprised. “I would like that.”

Mike couldn’t love Sue more than he did at that moment. Daniel might allow Mike to help him, and Sue knew that, knew that Daniel was now their responsibility. She would be the family Daniel needed and would love him like a son.

“I’m sorry I stormed into your home and raised my voice,” Daniel said, looking abashed. “My mother raised me better than that.”

“Thank you.” She took a step back. “Now Felipe is coming to dinner tomorrow night, and I expect you to be there as well.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.”

“I don’t believe that was a question. You’re family, and you will be at family dinners.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.”

Daniel told her goodbye and left. He completely ignored Mike, but that was ok. Mike knew better than to rush forgiveness.

“Are you ok,” he asked Sue once she closed the door.

She took a deep breath. “Yes. Are you?”

He nodded his head. “Thank you for doing that.”
“It wasn’t just for you. It was also for Kate and that young man that’s now left adrift.”

“I love you,” he whispered, wrapping his arms around her.

She rested her head against his shoulder. “I love you, too.”

Mike closed his eyes and tried to absorb that moment. Perfect in its imperfections. This is what he had been missing, and he had no one to blame but himself.

There was another knock on the door. Mike pulled away and sighed. “It’s going to be one of those days, isn’t it?”

Sue started towards the door, but Mike stopped her. “Let me, this time.” He opened the door to find a man in a black suit, holding a badge.

“Sheriff Chavez?”

Mike nodded his head. “And you are?”

“Detective Reed. Las Vegas homicide division.” He put away his badge. “Your secretary at the station said you’d be here. Do you have a moment to talk?”

“You’re a long way from home.” Mike eyed the Detective. “Come in.”

He led the man down the hall to the living room. The Detective sat down on the couch. Mike sat down in the chair facing him and waited.

“I believe one of my past cases might be heading your way. Have you ever heard of the Vegas Hansons?”

Mike shook his head.
“They’re a big, powerful family in Las Vegas. A year ago, Brett Hanson, oldest son of Montgomery, was killed by one of your residents. I believe his brother, Antonio Hanson, may be heading your way.”

“Why?”

“Corine Espinosa. Brett attacked her sister and her outside his father’s casino. She killed him in self-defense.”

“What makes you think this Antonio is heading this way?”

“I know Antonio. I put him away ten years ago for robbery and three accounts of rape. He violated parole last week. He’s going to head here.”

“This could have been said in a phone call.”

“I needed to be here. He’s my responsibility. I will catch him and bring him back to Vegas.”

“It seems you’ve got this planned all out. What do you need me for?” Mike asked, portraying a sense of ease he did not feel.

“I know this is your town and I have no jurisdiction here. I’m asking for you to let me stay and help.”

“Does your department know you’re here?”

“No. I took a vacation. They didn’t believe my theory.”

“Well it seems like you’re in a pickle. All I have to do is make a phone call, and you’ll be suspended.”

“Are you?”

Mike hesitated. “No. Not yet. But I want you to know that while you’re here, I’m in charge. The minute you forget that I’ll make that phone call.”
Det. Reed nodded his head. “Ok.”

“Good. Now, tell me all about Antonio Hanson.”
Chapter Thirty

The desert seemed to shimmer in the fading light. Purples, pinks, and oranges stained the horizon in a fragile mosaic, it was temporary, lasting for the barest of moments before it was shrouded in darkness. Felipe sat down on a small cliff’s edge on the Foster Ranch; sketching the scene before him with an experienced hand while he waited for Mae.

They had decided to meet at their spot; a place they had found when they were teenagers. He brought a blanket to sit on while he knew she would bring a picnic basket. One month was gone. He had less than four weeks before she would leave again. It wasn’t long enough. When they were apart, he ached with every breath. He couldn’t concentrate on his shop, his painting—nothing. He had a best friend that was aching from his mother’s death, and Felipe found himself not able to be fully there for him. There had been an awkward dinner with Daniel and Felipe’s parents a few days ago, but Daniel left right after, not giving Felipe much of a chance to talk with him.

Daniel hadn’t showed up to his mother’s ceremony. It wasn’t surprising, but Felipe worried that Daniel was avoiding dealing with Mrs. Wilton’s death. Felipe should be there for him, but instead he found himself desperate for every moment he could steal with Mae. He had this sinking feeling that this would be the last summer she spent in Juan unless he could convince her to stay.

There didn’t seem to be any grand gestures he could think of that might do the trick. She already knew he loved her. She already knew he had a nice place of his own
and his own business. What could he say or do that would make her want to spend her life with him?

He heard a horse coming and glanced behind him. While he’d drove his pickup out there, Mae had chosen her favorite mare. He helped her down and unstrapped the basket from the saddle.

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Did you have to wait long?”

“Not too long. I was keeping myself busy.” He glanced towards his open sketchpad on the blanket.

“Can I see?”

He nodded his head and watched her pick up the pad.

“This is beautiful.”

Felipe shrugged his shoulders, enjoying Mae’s interest in his work.

“No, it really is great. Have you ever thought about trying to get a show for your work?”

He set the basket on the blanket and took his sketch from her. He looked over it, but instead of seeing a great work, he noticed all the imperfections.

“I’m not there yet. But maybe one day.” He tossed the sketchpad down and pulled Mae to him. “Besides, I’m more interested in you right now.” He kissed her, pouring all his feelings into the kiss.

She pulled back, a wrinkle in her brow. “Hungry?”

“What’d you bring?”

“As if you care.”

“True. I know better than to make a fuss when someone is feeding me.”
“You mother raised you right.” She gave him a big smile and pulled out a couple of chicken salad sandwiches along with a thermos of ice tea.

“Perfect. My favorite.” He didn’t care at that moment whether it was or not—he still would tell her it was.

They ate in silence, watching the sunlight disappear from the sky to be replaced with starlight. He closed his eyes, trying to absorb everything, but he knew it wouldn’t be enough. It would never be enough. Less than four weeks. With her work, he couldn’t see her every day, so it was even less than that.

Words bubbled up, desperate and drenched in pain. He tried to stop them, but couldn’t. “Stay. Don’t leave. You can finish school somewhere closer.”

“Felipe, we already discussed this.” She put everything back into the basket, agitated. "On the night I came back, you said you understood."

“No. Not really.” He rose to his knees and pulled out a ring he’d been carrying with him for the last two weeks. “I love you. I want to spend my life with you. Marry me.”

The diamond was modest, but the ring was unique in its intricate design. He knew he had chosen well. “Marry me,” he repeated, holding the ring out for her to see.

She closed the lid on the basket and took a deep breath before she turned towards him. She looked at the ring for a long moment. “It’s beautiful.”

He beamed.

Mae took the ring from him, examining it. “You’ve always had an eye for beautiful things.”

“Yes,” he paused, looking her up and down. “I have.”
“We’ve been close for a long time and friends for longer than that. I had all my firsts with you. First kiss, first date, first—” she blushed instead of finishing that sentence. “I care about you. I always will and, in my own way, I love you.” She took his hand and placed the ring in his palm before wrapping her two hands around his clenched fist. “But sometimes, firsts are not meant to be your lasts.”

“So this is a no.” He couldn’t keep the bitterness out of his voice.

“I missed you when I was away at school, but I didn’t call or write you because I knew that wouldn’t be fair to you.”

“Why not?”

“Because I wanted my friend, not my lover. That’s what I missed. Our friendship. And that’s going to be what I will continue to miss. I don’t regret a moment of my time with you—I just wish we could stay friends.”

He waited, not saying a word. He couldn’t. There was too much anger inside.

She leaned down and kissed his hand. “You will always be my first love.” She let him go and stood up. “No. I won’t marry you. I’m sorry.” Her face pale and hands shaking slightly, she picked up the basket and headed towards the mare.

He didn’t move from his kneeling position, willing her back, willing for those words to disappear, be forgotten. She tied up the basket and mounted the mare. She gazed at him for a long moment before heading back towards the house.

Numbness consumed him, replacing the previous anger. Felipe sat back on the blanket, staring blankly out into the desert. He’d promised himself last time she left that he wouldn’t allow her to do this to him again. He thought back to the first night she’d come back—how they’d lay in the back of his pickup catching up. He’d been so excited
at the possibility, at the hope that he might be able to somehow convince her to stay.

How could she have agreed to be with him this summer if she didn’t love him anymore?
How could she willingly choose to hurt him?

He felt lost, adrift without an anchor. He wasn’t sure how long he sat there; time didn’t seem to matter. Eventually he became aware of a pain in his palm. He opened his fist to find it bloody from the diamond ring—he hadn’t realized he’d been squeezing so hard. The ring was smeared with blood. He put it in his pocket and gathered the blanket and his sketchpad, throwing them in his pickup.

A drinking partner was what he needed. He headed towards town, considering his options. Daniel had enough he was dealing with. Mae was Marc’s sister, so that might be a little bit awkward. Besides, Marc would tease him about being taken in again by Mae. Jim was somewhere out on the range. His only option left was Amy. Amy would understand; she had been in a relationship of sorts with Marc for years. And now that she was finally clear of Marc, she might have some advice to give him.

Morris’s bar had several vehicles parked in front of it, which was common for this time of night. There was still an hour left before the bar closed. Inside, Felipe saw the regular crowd as he grabbed a seat at the bar. Amy was working alone. She saw him the minute he sat down and gave him a big smile. She finished pouring a whiskey for a cowboy at the end of the bar before coming to him. After taking one good look at his face, she grabbed a whiskey glass.

“What happened?” she asked as poured him several fingers of whiskey.

He took a long drink. “I asked Mae to marry me.”

Amy raised her brow and then poured herself a finger of whiskey. “And?”
“You don’t have to pretend. You know what she said.”

She shot back the whiskey. “I’m sorry Felipe. I truly am.” She covered his hand with her own.

“I knew. I did. But I got lost in the idea of her.” He pulled out a cigarette and lit it with his silver lighter. “I’ve always loved her. I just—I don’t…” his voice trailed off, not sure how to put his feelings into words.

Amy refilled his whiskey glass. Someone down the bar called for her. She leaned close and kissed his cheek. “I understand. I do. I wish there was some sage advice I could give you, but the truth is it just hurts.” She squeezed his hand before attending on the caller down the bar.

That was one of the main reasons Felipe liked Amy; she never tried to fix something that couldn’t be fixed. She just acknowledged it without saying everything would be ok. She may have never gone to college or made great grades in school, but she was one of the smartest women he knew next to Mae and his mom. Marc had messed up big, and from all appearances, Amy wasn’t going to forgive him this time. Felipe was proud of her for standing up for herself. He never felt right about keeping Marc’s activities from her.

Considering Amy’s situation was much more appealing than agonizing over his own. Mae had warned him. Even his mom had warned him. But he had refused to listen. He finished his whiskey with one long drink, savoring the slow burn down his chest. It warmed him when he wasn’t sure if anything else could.

She didn’t love him. He couldn’t stop thinking about her, and she didn’t love him. He felt like someone had scooped out all his insides. Some Johnny Cash song came
on, a perfect song to fit his mood. He reached over the counter and grabbed the whiskey bottle Amy had left behind. He filled his glass, swallowed that down, and then filled it again—it wasn’t working. The pain was still there.

Felipe sat there, submerged in his own thoughts until the bar closed. Once the last person was gone, Amy sat down next to him.

“What better?” she asked.

He looked up from his empty glass, his red eyes saying it all. He slid his glass towards her; his version of asking for another.

She took the glass from him and sat it behind the counter. “Nope. I do believe you’ve had enough. If you’re not feeling better now, you’re not going to.”

“How do you know?”

“Because, honey, I’ve been there—more than once. Come on. I’ll drive you home.” She stood and pulled on his arm. He followed suit, faltering slightly, before allowing her to lead him out the door to her pickup. He climbed into the truck, and she closed the door behind him.

On the ride home he tried to focus on a single thought but found the task too difficult. Amy hummed along with a tune on the radio. Her deep voice had a sultry quality to it—he’d never noticed that before. She brushed a stray hair behind her ear—her cute shell-like ears. Everything about Amy was dainty and yet, impossibly strong.

She pulled in front of his small house and turned off the engine. “Need help getting inside?”

He nodded slowly and watched as she walked around and opened his door.

“Come on, honey.”
He liked how she said that word—honey. It rolled off her tongue much like the substance itself. She took his keys from him and opened the front door.

“Come inside?” he asked, pulling gently on her hand. She followed him in, turning on the kitchen light as they entered. “You’re alone now.” It wasn’t a question. He softly touched her cheek, leaning closer.

“Felipe, he’s your friend.”

“And she’s yours.”

“That’s way this isn’t a good idea.”

“But you came inside. You can’t tell me you weren’t thinking about it.”

She looked like she was about to argue and then stopped. “It’s because I’m frustrated, hurt, and alone for the first time in years.”

“I know. I’m hurting too. Is it wrong for us to comfort each other?”

“What about our friendship?” she asked, placing a hand on his chest.

“That’s why this will work. Because we are friends. Because we care about each other.”

She sighed and leaned into him. “We can’t tell them.”

“There’s no reason to. This is just for us.”

Without another word, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. It wasn’t Mae, but her touch ignited something in him. He picked her up and carried her to his bedroom without another word.
Chapter Thirty-One

Kate’s ceremony was over, the paint almost dry, the words said. Grace missed her best friend. Who would she talk to now? While Ms. Halley had been friendlier of late, Grace doubted Ms. Halley would ever be her confidant. The only things she’d ever felt comfortable talking to Nate about was ranch business. There was no way she could talk to Paul, especially since he hadn’t talked to her since Kate died. No matter who she considered, she knew that none of them would be able to replace Kate.

Grace sat on her porch, feet up on the rail in front of her, and a beer in her hand. All day long, Nate had been giving her odd looks. She suspected he was seeing if she was still doing ok. He hadn’t mentioned a word about the conversation he had on the ridge with her. She missed the time when her life wasn’t so complicated. It had used to be all about the ranch and the numerous ways she could annoy Maria Espinosa. Now, on top of her best friend’s death, she was wondering about the men in her life like some hopeless school girl.

Her thoughts shifted back to Maria. The vote on the ceremony was next week. She was surprised Maria hadn’t done any surprise visits. Maybe it was because she had been busy with Kate’s ceremony. The one thing she knew for sure—Maria would not go down without a fight. If Maria thought for one instant that she might lose the vote, she’d be out banging on all of their doors. That must be it. Maria hadn’t bothered her recently because she knew the vote was already hers. Juan would continue to pay for the ceremonies.
Grace pondered that for a moment. She still hadn’t decided which way she would vote. She knew everyone expected her to vote for the change—her dislike for the ceremony was well-known—but part of her felt like she would be dishonoring her friend by doing so. She’d be a hypocrite to say she didn’t participate in the tradition at all. She attended the ceremony of everyone she knew, which was pretty much all of them. She even had Henry’s ashes forever etched onto her back. But she still didn’t believe in Maria’s tradition. What would happen to Maria’s position, to the town, if the council no longer took care of all the ceremony expenses? Sure the Juan residents would notice a little extra cash in their pockets but would that be better? Grace wasn’t sure any more.

She glanced at her watch. Daniel should be getting off work about now. She hadn’t seen him since Kate died, but it wasn’t for lack of trying. Every time she stopped by his house or the shop he either wasn’t there or was too busy. She knew the real reason though. He wasn’t ready to talk about it, which worried her.

Resolute, she set down her empty beer bottle and headed towards her pickup. Nate raised his brow, probably wondering where she was going, but she had other things to worry about than Nate. He wasn’t her keeper or her protector.

She drove to Daniel’s house with the radio blasting, trying to drown out her worries and frustrations. It didn’t work. When she pulled up behind Daniel’s pickup and cut the engine, all those feelings and fears were still there.

Daniel opened the door before she even knocked. She gave him a hard look, not liking what she saw. His eyes were rimmed with purple, his face haggard.

“How’s it going?” she asked as he allowed her inside. They sat down in the living room, which apparently hadn’t been used in a while.
He shrugged his shoulders.

“You weren’t at the ceremony.”

“Did you really expect me to be?” His voice was gruff like sandpaper.

She leaned forward resting her hands on her knees. “No. I guess not. But it didn’t stop me from hoping to see you there. She would have wanted you to be there.”

“Don’t.” He stood up and began to pace the room. “At this moment, I’m not sure if I’m too concerned about what she would have wanted.”

“You shouldn’t say that.”

He stopped in front of her. “I know.”

“Know what?” she asked, confused.

“The sheriff and my mom. Did you know?”

Grace froze in surprise. “How did you find out?”

“How did I find out? That’s what is concerning you? Well, I’ll tell you what is concerning me—how could everyone I know keep this from me?”

“Not everyone knows, Daniel. Just Mike and Kate and me.”

“Don’t forget Sue.”

“Sue knows?” Grace couldn’t imagine what Sue must be feeling.

“Yes. She’s known for a while.” He sat down. “How could she do that? How could she betray my father?”

Grace wasn’t sure what to say. She got up from her chair and walked over to the open window. “I can’t claim to understand what was going on inside Kate’s mind. Nor can I claim to understand her situation. I married the only man I’ve ever loved.”
Daniel stiffened. “I’m not saying your mother didn’t love your father. She did. I wasn’t here in the beginning. I came to town after she had married Wally. I didn’t know about Mike until we’d become good friends.”

“If she loved my father, how could she cheat on him with the Sheriff?”

“I don’t know.” She sat down on the couch next to him. “I can tell you what she told me a long time ago.” She waited for him to nod his head.

“I asked her once, why she didn’t just marry Mike in the beginning. And she told me, ‘Love is never that simple. Time, obstacles, and pain sometimes mucks things up so bad that it is almost impossible to go back to where you were—it’s easier just to let go and move on. Even if it isn’t right. Even if you still love that person. It’s the coward’s way out.’” Grace paused. “I didn’t understand her then. I was a few years younger and newly married. Love had never been difficult for me, but, now, I wish I could tell her I get it. I wish I could tell her that she wasn’t a coward. It is possible to love more than one person at a time.”

“I think she was a coward. She should have told my father.”

“And then what?”

“Dealt with the consequences of her actions.”

She placed a hand on his back. “You don’t have to understand right now. Just allow yourself to accept that you loved your mother, despite what she did or didn’t do, and that she loved you. She loved you so much.”

“But not enough to stay.”

Grace didn’t know what else to say. She pulled Daniel towards her and gave him a hug. He sat stiffly in her arms, but she continued to hug him regardless. “Being mad at
her now won’t do you a bit of good. You need to try to move on. You need to try to find
some happiness.” She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and then left.

Grace sat in her pickup, wondering what advice Kate would give her on Nate and
Paul. There was a time when she would have known, but Kate had changed so much in
the last few years, Grace wasn’t sure any more. She wasn’t even sure if there was a
choice to be made since Paul hadn’t spoken to her in a while.

Paul, who had chose to pursue a relationship with her, who’d called her
repeatedly and sent her flowers—and now he was silent on the matter? Without another
thought, she began to drive to his ranch. He may be able to avoid her everywhere else
but not his ranch.

She drove down Foster Ranch’s paved road to the ranch, jealous. She still had
dirt roads that stirred up miniature dust storms anytime some drove down it. Several of
his ranch hands looked up as she parked in front of the huge house. It had been a long
time since she’d been out to his ranch.

“Can I help you ma’am?” a brown-eyed cowboy asked as she closed her door.

“I’m here to see Paul.”

“He was out on the range this morning. He should be coming back soon. You
can leave a message and come back.”

She glanced at the porch and the rocking chairs there. “Nope. I think I’ll wait.”
She didn’t wait for an answer. She chose a chair nearest to the steps and sat down,
crossing her arms over her chest. It wasn’t a long wait. Within twenty minutes, Paul
came riding up towards her. One of the ranch hands must have told him she was there.
He slid off his horse and handed the reins to a man standing nearby. At the bottom of the steps, he put his hands in his pocket. “Hi Grace.”

“That’s it?”

“I thought it was a good start.”

Grace felt herself pout slightly. She tried to stop herself but couldn’t. She was not a pouter—at least she didn’t used to be.

“Why have you been avoiding me?” she asked.

He tilted his head. “Avoiding you?”

“You haven’t spoken to me in days.”

“I was giving you space. Your friend just died.”

“And you didn’t think I would like a shoulder to lean on? Someone to talk to?”

He looked genuinely confused. “Talk about what?”

“How about Kate? Or my feelings? Or how I miss her?”

“Shouldn’t you talk to a friend about those things?” There was no coyness in his eyes—he was serious.

Grace wondered at this. How could this man have survived the twentieth century? “Were you not friends with Stephanie?”

“She was my wife.”

Grace knew she needed to tread carefully but was feeling reckless. “Exactly. Did she never talk to you? Tell you how she felt? Did you ever tell her the same?”

He took a step back. “I’m not talking about Stephanie with you.”

The sun was starting to set. Rays of reds and yellows lit up one side of Paul’s face. “Ok. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,” Grace backtracked.
“Probably not. We’ll just forget about it. I’ll call you later this week; we’ll go out somewhere nice.”

Grace walked down the steps until she was looking up at him. “No. I meant this whole thing.” She gestured to both of them. “We’re too different.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“We want different things.”

He narrowed his eyes. “As opposed to Nate?”

“What does Nate have to do with this?”

“I’m not stupid. I hear things. I know he’s been angling for a relationship with you.”

“We never agreed to anything. We’ve just had a couple of dates. Nothing else. I can go on a date with Nate if I want.” Grace clenched her fists to control the anger shaking through her.

He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her close. “So you’re dating him now, huh? Is that why you came out here—to rub my face in it?”

“Let me go.”

“We could have had a good thing. We could have joined our ranches and had our own empire. You wouldn’t have had to worry about anything anymore. I would have taken care of it all.”

“Is that what this was all about? You decided the best way to get my ranch was to marry me?”

“Don’t act hurt. It would have benefited you too. We’ve both been alone for some time. It made sense.”
“To you. Not me. I don’t need you or anyone else to run my ranch. My ranch. Not yours or anyone else’s.”

He shoved her away. She stumbled but didn’t fall. “That will be the last time you ever touch me Paul. You can go to your grave knowing that the William Ranch will never be yours.”

His face was red, his body rigid with anger. Grace had never felt more afraid of him than in that moment. She backed away until she reached her pickup. She drove away without looking back. She was feeling too much to clarify a single thought. All she knew was that Ms. Halley had been wrong. Paul didn’t care about her. He never did. It was always and would always be about the ranch.
Chapter Thirty-Two

It was just like when Marc was little, but this time, he understood it better. He watched from his bedroom window while his father fought with Grace William. It started off small and then exploded into a shouting match. Grace wasn’t alone in her assumptions. Marc had thought, for one moment, that there was something other than the ranch his father cared for. It turned out they were both wrong. To his father, Grace was convenient, a means to an end—he would get a new wife and a ranch he’d coveted simply by getting Grace to marry him.

It had been the same when Marc’s mother was alive. She had loved Paul Foster, Marc was sure of that. He may have been young, but he saw the love in her eyes every time she looked at his father. But that had been before Marc’s grandfather, Dade Foster, had gotten sick, forcing Paul to take on the responsibilities of the ranch. Before Paul managed to catch Dade’s greed—seeing the William Ranch as an opportunity for the first time. Sure he’d heard Dade spouting off stories about how the ranch should have belonged to his father’s father. Sure he was aware of the quiet feud between the two families. But it wasn’t until he became head of the family ranch that it all finally clicked. Dade passed away and Paul no longer looked at Marc’s mother the same. Instead all his attention was devoted to obtaining the William Ranch.

It had taken a long time for Marc to understand all this. At the time he’d only known that his father went from a playful loving man to one who no longer had any time for his twins. That was reason enough to make Marc resentful, and Mae try harder to get
her father’s attention back. When Marc managed to get the whole story from old ranch hands and a few people in town, his resentment grew stronger. He no longer cared about having his father’s approval. Though Marc wasn’t there, he was pretty sure that the argument his parents had that night his mother died was about his father’s growing desire for the William Ranch. In the end, his father had chosen the ranch over Marc’s mother.

Marc watched as Grace sped off, her pickup fishtailing slightly around a curve. He wondered what his father would do now that any chance of getting the William Ranch was slipping away. Paul paced in front of the porch, taking off his cowboy hat and running a hand through his hair. He shouted something at a ranch hand nearby and stormed towards his black pickup. Within seconds, he was taking off down the road.

Marc took a step back from the window, feeling vindicated. His father would be denied the one thing that had consumed him for years. After Paul was gone, the feud would die, and either Mae and Marc would sell the ranch, or, perhaps, Marc would run it with Mae acting as a silent partner.

While it didn’t make up for the years of living with his father, constantly being berated and never being able to do anything right, it was enough. For the first time in days, Marc smiled.

He decided to push his luck a little further and visit Amy; he wasn’t ready to give up on her yet. He wandered down the hallway to Mae’s bedroom. After a brief knock, he opened the door and stuck his head in.

“I’m glad I’m dressed,” Mae said. She sat on the edge of her bed, painting her toenails.

“It wouldn’t be anything I haven’t seen before.”
“Whatever. What do you want?”

“Can I have the keys to the car?”

Mae looked up. “She doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“Did I say I was going to visit Amy?”

“No. You didn’t have to. You really messed that one up.”

“Can I just have the keys?” he asked, his frustration showing but not his temper.

He never lost his temper with his sister.

“Ok. Hey, if you have time, can you check on Felipe?”

Marc leaned his body against the doorframe. “Why?”

“We had the Talk last night. He was pretty upset.”

Marc kicked the frame. “Why did you have to do this now? Why couldn’t you wait until you were heading back?” It would have been just a delay, but at least then he wouldn’t be dealing with Amy and Felipe at the same time.

“He proposed. It kind of couldn’t wait.” She sat down the nail polish and hugged her knees. “I told him in the beginning that all we had was the summer, but he didn’t listen.”

“He proposed?” Marc kicked the doorframe again. He took a deep breath.

“From now on, no more messing with my friends. This is it.”

“They’re my friends too.”

“Just don’t.” She stared at him for a moment before pointing to a set of keys on her dresser. “Thanks,” he said as he grabbed the keys and left.
Marc drove to Amy’s house first but found her pickup missing. He sat there wondering where she might have gone before heading over to Felipe’s. He would have talked to his friend last night if he had known. He knew Felipe loved his sister—that was the fact that kept Marc from beating Felipe up every time he thought of them together. There was no doubt in Marc’s mind that Felipe wasn’t taking Mae’s talk well.

It took just a couple of minutes before he pulled in front of Felipe’s house. Felipe’s truck wasn’t there, but Amy’s was. Marc cut his engine and stared at Amy’s pickup. Maybe Felipe slept off a bender at the bar last night and Amy gave him a ride home this morning. Or maybe she was checking up on him to make sure he was still doing ok—something that any friend would do for another. There were several reasons why Amy’s pickup could be there.

Marc slid out of his pickup and walked over to Amy’s. He put his hand on the hood to find it cool. Maybe they were just visiting or maybe Amy was trying to cheer Felipe up. Amy had always had a kind heart. He walked to the kitchen window and peered in—nothing. He walked around to one of the living room’s windows. There was Felipe and Amy, wrapped in a sheet, cuddling on the couch watching TV. Without thinking, Marc slammed his fist against the window. Both Felipe and Amy jumped and looked at him. Time stopped as everyone absorbed the situation, and then, all at once, it sped forward. Amy jumped off the couch, trying to keep the sheet around her, and shouted his name. Felipe, now naked, covered his mouth with his hand, all the blood draining from his face.

Marc stumbled away and ran for his pickup. Tires screeching, he pulled out of Felipe’s drive. He wasn’t sure where he was going. He just knew he had to get away.
There was nothing he wanted to hear from Felipe or Amy. There was nothing they could say to make this better.

He was tired of this town. He needed to get out for a while, but the only way he’d manage that would be with more cash, which would mean help from Donnie. Marc turned around and drove to the old cemetery next to the fort. Donnie had taken to hanging out there as late—Marc wasn’t sure why. He pulled around where his pickup was out-of-sight from the road. He had no desire for Felipe or Amy to find him. Instead of walking around, Marc cut through the broken-down fort. It was a landmark that no one kept up any more, which made it a great place for teenagers looking for a place to hook up. Inside the crumbling walls, shadows danced alongside the fading rays of sunlight filtering through the missing tiles on the roof. A cool wind blew past Marc, causing him to shiver.

“What are you doing, young man?” a voice asked from a shadowed corner of one room.

He took a step closer, trying to see who the voice belonged to. “Who’s there?”

“You should be more careful when you walk through the House of the Spirits.” Violet Lake stepped into the light. “You never know what they might do.”

Marc couldn’t stop the bark of laughter that escaped him. “Crazy woman.”

“Just because I see things you don’t, doesn’t make me crazy.”

“Is that right? And what do you see?”

“Everything. Too much.” She caressed the pearl handle of her handgun. “Just because someone says you’re crazy or stupid or lazy doesn’t make it so. Only you can decide who you are.”
“Sage advice?” he asked, not bothering to hide the sarcasm in his voice.

She huffed, straightening her shoulders. “I know what you are about to do, boy.”

Marc sucked in a breath. “And what is that?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Do you want me to speak the words out loud in front of all these spirits? They’re not too happy with you right now.”

“Right. Sure, you know about what I’m about to do.” Marc stepped around her and started to head for the door.

“If you asked the dark-headed one for more, it will not turn out well for you.”

Marc stopped, his back to her. “When has it ever worked out well for me?”

Without another word, he left her behind in the fort and stepped into the fading sunlight.

Donnie was leaning against a very old stone tombstone, sleeping. His arms were crossed over his chest, his cowboy hat pulled down low. There was no other person Marc knew that would feel comfortable sleeping in a graveyard.

He pushed at Donnie’s side with the toe of his boot. Donnie mumbled but didn’t wake.

“Come on, Donnie. Get up,” Marc said loudly, pushing at Donnie with more force.

“Alright. Alright.” Donnie pushed his hair off his forehead and looked up at Marc. “What do you want?” he asked surly.

“Sorry to interrupt your nap.” He wasn’t sorry at all. “I want to talk about our business arrangement.”

“What about it?”

“I need more money.”
Donnie turned from surly to serious in a blink. “Do you know what you’re asking?”

Marc nodded his head. “I do.”

Donnie stood up. “These aren’t the kind of guys you mess with. Once you’re in, you’re in.”

“Look, I need to get out of Juan for awhile. The only way I can do that is with more money.”

“Have you ever thought about getting a job?”

Marc frowned. “This is Juan. There’s no job here where I could make the kind of cash I need.”

“I just want you to be sure.”

“I’m already doing business with your guys—how’s this any different?”

“It just is, man.” He took a step back and examined Marc closely. “There’s no going back once you sign on. These are the type of guys that will take everything from you first.”

“Hey, all I want is a quick job. I’m not asking for a career.”

“I might be able to come up with something. I’m not sure. Look, you have a family, friends, a girl—are you sure about this?”

“Just ask them.”

Donnie was about to argue some more, but Marc turned and walked away. This time, instead of going through the fort, he went around. He didn’t need to run into crazy Violet again.
Chapter Thirty-Three

The dark dreams were back. Lola filled page after page of her sketchpad with shadowy images with claws and teeth. They had visited her before, right after she’d been attacked in the ally, and now they were back with their huge eyes that saw everything and forgave nothing. They were the reason she had started hiding her sketchpads a year ago, when she stopped talking about her art. She was afraid what her mother might do if she saw them. She’d seen too much TV—she knew artwork like hers tended to lead to a handful of meds or land one in endless therapy sessions. While she knew Corine wouldn’t send her away, she didn’t trust her mother.

Lola stretched out on her stomach, resting her weight on her elbows as she finished a sketch. Corine had left her alone in their bedroom for the first time since the detective had visited them. Granted, it was just because she had to go to work, but still—Lola finally felt able to ditch the tough façade she’d been trying her best to portray. There was a man out there who wanted to hurt them, and she was frightened.

In bitter moments, she wondered if this was the reason Carmelita had dropped them off in Juan to begin with—that somehow she’d known that the nightmare with Brett Hanson wasn’t over. Lola, of course, knew this wasn’t true, but still, she resented the fact that her mother wasn’t there. She was never there. She wasn’t there when Brett cornered Lola in that alley. She wasn’t there when he pressed Lola against a wall and held a knife to her throat. Nor was she there when Corine accidently stabbed him, rescuing Lola and killing Brett in one fatal move. She didn’t hear Corine’s screams or see them
struggle to get his body off of Corine. Carmelita didn’t show up until after the police had arrived and called her.

Lola dropped her charcoal and looked at her black smudged hands, stained from the image of the monster before her. In one quick move, she tossed her sketchpad across the room, hitting the opposite wall and knocking down a small painting of a Native American village.

When Maria had found out about what had happened in Vegas, she had barely reacted. She looked at the detective, who had chosen to visit them the very next day, and simply said, “Well, that explains that.” She didn’t clarify her response; she just asked the detective what he planned to do to keep her granddaughters safe. It was as if she dealt with convicts with vendettas all the time.

For once both Maria and Corine found something to agree upon; unfortunately, the topic at hand was her. They decided that Lola didn’t need to be running around town anymore until this was settled, which meant, she was essentially being held prisoner in Maria’s house. She had never had problems with claustrophobia before, but now there was a paralyzing feeling of the walls enclosing around her, of this constant need to do something, that she couldn’t shake. She’d tried sketching out her feelings, but that only seemed to make it worse. It was as if she was putting a face to her fear, making it more real.

She knew she wasn’t alone in her anxiety, and at times she could be too focused on herself. She heard Corine’s whimpers in the middle of the night, saw her jump at the slightest noise—Corine was probably more haunted than she was. Corine had looked into the eyes of death while Lola had closed her eyes tight, waiting until it was over.
Neither of them discussed it. For all purposes, it was as if it had never happened.

Carmelita had encouraged this, and Maria did nothing to persuade them otherwise on the matter.

Lola rolled off her bed and picked the painting off the floor. She inspected it closely, found it unharmed, and rehung it. Next she picked up her sketchpad. The sketch she had been working on was slightly torn in the corner. She ripped it out and crumbled it. The need to do something, break something, was still there. Slowly, she ripped each page out and tore them into tiny pieces. When she was finished, it looked like it had snowed on the carpet.

Lola stepped around the flakes, careful not to disturb them. There was something beautiful in their destruction. She poked her head out of the bedroom door and listened for a few seconds. Maria was still in the kitchen, humming to herself. She’d been making homemade tamales for the last hour.

With the carpet insulating her movements, she pulled on a pair of old tennis shoes and popped the screen off the bedroom window. She knew what she was about to do was stupid and childish, but she didn’t have it in her to care. She stuck one foot out the window and climbed out. When the hard earth met her feet, she felt almost instantly better. The sun was low on the sky, allowing her to edge from shadow to shadow.

It didn’t take long to make her way to Janie’s house. While she wasn’t restricted from Janie, Lola hadn’t felt like inviting her over, refusing to accept the new perimeters of her prison. It was dark inside the Myer’s house, but Lola knocked anyway. It wasn’t surprising when no one answered. She turned from the door and scanned the neighborhood around her; no one had taken notice of her yet.
There was really only one other place for her to go. One place Maria wouldn’t consider looking. She reached the graveyard by the old fort just as the last rays of light were fading from the sky. It should have bothered her, being in a graveyard at night, but after everything, it would take more than that to frighten her. Besides, after talking with Violet, Lola found the grounds surrounding the old fort oddly comforting. According to Violet, the spirits there liked Lola, which was more than she could say for most people. She liked the idea of them there, keeping her company.

Busy considering what the spirits or ghosts or whatever did when no one was around, she failed to see the two shadows in the corner of the graveyard until she was too close to back away without being seen. Instead she ducked behind a crumbling tombstone, hoping the shadows hid her presence. It took her a moment to associate the voices she overheard with Donnie and Marc. She almost stood up until she realized what they were talking about.

Lola knew that Donnie smoked pot—she’d even smoked with him, but she didn’t realize what he was mixed up with, or that Marc got paid to help. She didn’t want to think that either Donnie or Marc would be involved with dangerous people, but their conversation told her otherwise.

Her muscles strained with the effort to keep still, to not make a noise. She felt like every breath she took was a blaring signal alerting them to her presence. Why couldn’t they just finish their secretive conversation and leave already? Sweat poured down her back and between her bent knees.
When Marc abruptly departed, she wanted to shout with relief. She waited for Donnie to follow suit, but instead, he continued to stand there. She peeked around the corner of the tombstone and saw him stick his hands in his pockets and turn towards her.

“He’s gone, little one.”

She waited to see who he was addressing before realizing it was her.

“I know you’re there. You made enough racket walking here. I’m surprised Marc didn’t hear you.”

Lola wanted to sink into the ground and disappear, but unfortunately the ground wouldn’t oblige her.

She stood up, using the tombstone to keep her legs steady. “I didn’t mean to overhear,” she whispered.

"Lola, Lola, Lola. Just like the song but thrice as much trouble." His voice was low and rough, barely audible.
Chapter Thirty-Four

The ranch road wound down around a couple of dry ravines and a few crops of mesquites until it reached a flat patch of earth occupied by a two story ranch house, a big red barn, and a few other small buildings.

Mike pulled up to the front of the barn, looking for Jim Houston. He scanned the quiet grounds from the dark ranch house to the closed up barn. Where were all the ranch hands? Were they already out on the range?

Jim walked around the corner of the barn, leading a black mare that was still saddled. Mike rolled down his window and gave a short wave. Jim nodded and then led the horse into the barn, reappearing a few minutes later.

“Can we take the bronco?” Mike asked as Jim approached.

“Most of the way. It’ll be rough.”

“But quicker.”

Jim nodded. He appeared to still be shaken from what he had seen. Mike gestured for him to hop in before heading past the barn to the shrub brush desert beyond.

"No word on Paul?"

"Not yet. I left a message."

Mike fought to keep his grip on the steering wheel as it bumped along the rugged terrain. He tightened his grip and asked the question he’d been dreading. "Who is it, Jim?"

"I don't know."
"How could you not know?"

Jim gave him a quick glance. "There's not much left."

Mike absorbed that for a moment. Felipe popped into his mind, and he had to reassure himself that just because Felipe wasn’t home didn’t mean that he was dead out in the desert. It could be anybody or no one—still not willing to rule out the possibility of a wild animal.

“Up to telling me how you found it?”

Jim was a little older than Felipe, but at that moment, wide-eyed and pale skin against his long dark hair, he reminded Mike of the little boy Jim used to be. Jim wasn’t a coward or the type to scare easily, which told Mike that what he’d found was bad. Real bad.

“I was out on the southwestern fence, doing some repairs. Last night, I heard the coyotes acting up. This morning I got up to see if some cattle had gotten into trouble. I smelled it first. I don’t think I’ll ever forget that smell. I know what you’re thinking, Sheriff, but it ain’t no animal.”

They were quiet for the rest of the drive. Eventually Mike pulled to an edge of a shallow ravine cut by past flood rains. It had been a long time since that ravine had seen water. Mike turned off the engine and slid out of the bronco. He would assess the scene first and then call in what he found. He needed to make absolutely sure it was a body before anyone in town found out.

“This way,” Jim gestured, leading a path down the ravine to the other side. “It’s not far from here.”
Mike sidestepped shrub brush, prickly pear, and other thorny plants. They might be in the middle of a drought, but desert plants always found a way it seemed. After about a ten minute walk, they crested another ravine. Jim came to a sudden stop and pointed.

Mike gave him a quick glance and then began to edge his way down. This ravine was a tad steeper than the previous. After a few steps down, it hit him. There was a dead smell and it was definitely not an animal.

He found it near the bottom, wrapped around a prickly pear in an almost loving embrace. It was torn and bloody, barely recognizable as human anymore. He tilted his hat back and knelt down to examine the remains. The coyotes and other animals had gotten a hold of it, strewing pieces across the ravine floor. Jim was right. There wasn’t much left.

For as long as he’d been a sheriff, there hadn’t been a murder in Juan, and though he didn’t want to jump to conclusions, he doubted this was an accident. He’d have to call county for an autopsy.

He headed back up the ravine to Jim. Mike realized it must have shown on his face as Jim took one glance at him and said, “I was right.”

Mike nodded and headed towards the bronco. He needed to find his son. He needed to check on Daniel. He’d brought his cell with him, but there were no service bars that far out on the range. He’d have to wait until he got closer to the house.
By the time the medical examiner from county had taken possession of the body, it was late afternoon. There was still no word from the Fosters. Mike wasn’t sure what to make of that.

When he got to the sheriff’s station, the entire town seemed to know. He was guessed the culprit was Mabel Sheppard, not that he would say anything. She was often more help than a hindrance. Besides, he’d been dreading the rest of Juan finding out. Now he didn’t need to worry anymore. So he accepted the pile of messages from Mabel without a word and sank blissfully into his desk chair.

Mike decided to start calling up the surrounding ranches, see if they were missing anyone. He’d already talked to Foster’s foreman, and apparently everyone but the Fosters, themselves, were accounted for. Mike called the Lake Ranch first. It took only a few minutes to confirm that everyone was there. Next he rang up Grace William. She answered on the fifth ring, sounding exhausted.

Grace had been Kate’s best friend, and because of this, he felt like he was violating some rule by talking to her. He kept his tone brisk and the conversation to the point, letting her know what had occurred.

“No, everyone is here. I actually just came in for breakfast.”

He was about to let her go, but then paused. He remembered hearing that Paul had started courting Grace. “Have you seen Paul?”

“Why?” she asked, her voice elevated.

“I haven’t been able to get a hold of him. Is he there?”

“No, he’s not here.”

“Was he?”
There was a pause.

“Grace?”

“Last night. We had a fight and he followed me home. We fought some more, and then he left.”

“And that was it?”

“I know he didn’t do anything.”

“Who—Paul?”

“No. I mean, Nate stepped in. Paul grabbed me and Nate stepped in. I know Paul didn’t mean any of it—I know he was just upset. But that doesn’t mean he has the right either.”

“Of course not, Grace. What else happened?”

“Nate forced him to his truck. Paul got in but said it wasn’t over. Nate warned Paul that he’d regret it if he ever messed with me again.”

“Do you want to file charges?” Mike asked, wondering how much worse this day was going to get. That’s all he needed—the Fosters and the Williams to renew their feud.

“No.”

“I’m not saying there will be, but if there’s another problem with Paul, will you call me first?”

“I will.”

“And that was the last time you saw him?”

“Yes.”
Mike reminded Grace to call him if she remembered anything else and then hung up. He tapped his fingers against his desk, considering. If he had learned anything about Marc Foster, it was he could usually be found at Morris’s.

He started to stand as the station’s door slammed open.

“Mike Chavez,” Paul Foster growled as he sauntered in with a five o’clock shadow and blood-shot eyes. “What do you mean to come onto my land without talking to me?”

Mike had never seen the rancher so out-of-sorts before. Even when Stephanie Foster had died, Paul had appeared cool and collected.

“Paul, sit down. Mabel, grab Paul a cup of coffee.”

“I don’t want coffee. I want answers.”

Mike ignored him and waited for Mabel to pour him a cup. Paul glared at Mike, but accepted the cup that Mabel offered him.

“Now, why don’t you tell me where you’ve been?” Mike asked calmly.

“What business is that of yours?”

Mike leaned forward. “There was a body found on your property. I need to know where you were last night.”

Paul scratched his cheek and looked down at the coffee in his hand. “I was in Van Horn.”

“Can anyone back that up?”

“Yeah. I spent the night at Bar Z. I slept at the bar. Luke Tate will vouch for me.”

“How about Marc or Mae?”
“Haven’t seen them since yesterday, but you better not be suggesting they had anything to do with this. I know my kids. You’re looking in the wrong direction.”

“It’s part of the process. I have to know where everyone was.”

“Try Morris’s. Marc has a fancy for Morris’s niece.”

“And Mae?”

Paul raised an eyebrow. “You know as good as me that Felipe’s been seeing my daughter. I guess that’s another statement you’ll need.”

Mike narrowed his gaze. “I guess so—if it turns out he was with Mae last night.”

As soon as Paul left, Mike grabbed his hat and headed out the door. He needed to find Felipe and get rid of the gnawing worry.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dim lights of Morris’s. He pulled his hat off, blinking a few times. Amy Belle was behind the bar, washing the counter. She looked up as he entered, surprised. It wasn’t often the Sheriff came into the bar.

“What can I do for you Sheriff?”

Mike glanced around the bar. It was mostly empty except for a couple of cowboys playing pool in the corner.

“I’m looking for Marc.”

Amy frowned. “Haven’t seen him since yesterday.”

Mike nodded, smoothing the brim of his hat with his fingers. He started to leave but stopped. “How about Felipe?”

“What about him?”

Mike caught the faint blush on Amy’s cheeks. “Have you seen my son?”
She dried her hands on a towel and walked down the bar to a door in the corner.

She opened the door, stuck her head inside for a moment and then turned to face him again.

Mike was about to ask the question again when Felipe walked out the door by the bar. Felipe looked tousled with dark circles around his eyes.

“Hi dad.”

A wave of relief washed over Mike. “What’s going on?”

Felipe glanced at Amy and then back at him. “Amy said you’re asking about Marc. Did something happen to him?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out. I need to know where you were last night.”

“At my house for a bit.”

“And after that?”

Felipe ducked his head and cramped his hands into his pockets. “Can we talk outside?”

The sun was blindingly bright walking out of Morris’s. Mike pulled the rim of his hat low to shield his eyes.

“Now, what’s going on?”

“Mae broke up with me the other day.”

“I’m sorry, son.” And he was. He knew how much Felipe cared for Foster’s daughter.

“After Amy and I got to talking and one thing led to another and—” his voice trailed off.

“So you and Amy?”
Felipe nodded.

“And Marc?”

“Caught us together yesterday. I haven’t seen him since. I looked. Both Amy and I did.” Felipe leaned against the bronco. “I messed up. Marc is my friend. I knew he still had feelings for Amy, even if they weren’t together anymore. I messed up and I can’t find him to tell him I’m sorry.”

Mike could tell his son wanted some kind of reassurance from him, but Sue was always the one better at that than him. He patted Felipe’s shoulder. “Give it time.”

“The thing is—I am sorry that Amy and I got together so soon after they broke up, but I’m not sorry it happened. I know I’m getting over Mae still, and it wasn’t planned or meant to be anything, but it is. I feel something with Amy that I never felt with Mae. I’m just not sure what it is.”

“Really?” Mike asked, surprised and relieved.

Felipe gave him a small smile. “I know. I don’t want to examine it too closely, not yet. Right now I just want to enjoy it.”

Mike pulled Felipe close for a brief hug. A little because he was happy that Felipe was ok. A little because he was glad that Felipe wasn’t devastated by Mae. “Make sure to give your mom a ring.”

“I will.”

He gave Felipe another hug and then slid into his bronco. Felipe was looking at him oddly, no doubt noticing Mike’s strange behavior. Mike didn’t care. He was just grateful that his loved ones were ok.
Juan was a small place. There weren’t there many places left to look for the Foster twins, which led Mike to believe that they must not be in town. He went back to the station to regroup and found the two objects of his search sitting patiently in front of his desk. Side by side, it was easy to tell Marc and Mae was twins. They had the same pale brown hair and piercing blue eyes—if Mae ever cut her hair short, they could almost pass for each other.

“Now where have you two been?” Mike asked, taking off his hat and setting it on the coat rack.

“We would have been here sooner, but we didn’t know you were looking for us,” Mae answered.

“We were crashed at Daniel Wilton’s,” Marc offered. His arms were crossed defiantly over his chest, which conflicted with his courteous tone. Mike guessed Mae was responsible for Marc’s effort to be civil.

“And Daniel?”

“Working. He’s expecting your call, though.”

Mike directed his attention to Mae. “What were you doing at Daniel’s?”

“It’s a long story.” Marc glared at Mae but she continued. “Suffice to say, it was a bit of an intervention on Daniel’s and my part.”

“It wasn’t an intervention,” Marc protested.

“And what would you call it?”

“Distraction. You were distracting me.”

“From what?” Mike asked, interrupting the growing argument.

“Marc was angry at Amy and Felipe.”
“About what?”

“Your son slept with my girl,” Marc growled, civil tone forgotten.

“Amy isn’t your ‘girl’ anymore. You know that.” Mae looked annoyed. “You made sure of that when you ran around with Corine.”

“Don’t start again. If you hadn’t broken off things with Felipe, this wouldn’t have happened.” Marc leaned forward and rested his head in his hands for a moment before running his fingers through his hair and focusing on Mike. “Look sheriff, I don’t know what answers you want. I was at Daniel’s. So was my sister.”

“Did your dad tell you what this was about?”

“No,” Mae answered, looking curious. “He just hollered at us for not answering our cells. What’s going on?”

Mike examined them both carefully. Both looked genuinely inquisitive. “There was a body found out on your ranch.”

“Where?” Marc asked.

“Towards the Southwest fence.”

“Do you know who it is?” Marc leaned forward.

“No. Not at this moment. But we will soon.”

Each twin absorbed the information in their own way. Mae looked at first surprised and then concerned. Marc appeared tense and then relieved—though this was odd, Mike still doubted that Marc had anything to do with the body.

After Marc and Mae left, Mike called Daniel to confirm their story. He could tell Daniel was still upset with him but answered Mike’s questions regardless. Mike wondered if Sue was right—if he was patient, would Daniel forgive him?
It was later that Mike remembered Detective Reed. With all the uproar, he was surprised that the Detective hadn't made an appearance. Mike called Maria Espinosa first, but she hadn't heard from the Detective. It seemed that was becoming a theme. Why was no one where they were supposed to be? He called the hotel in Van Horn where the Detective was staying, but he wasn't there either.

Mike drummed his fingers against his desk. He'd called the Vegas police to inquire about Detective Reed and was still waiting to hear back. He guessed answering some questions from a small town sheriff wasn't at the top of their list.

"Mabel, we've had a long day—would you like go down to the diner and grab a snack?"

Mabel pushed back her chair. "I really shouldn't. We've been getting endless calls." She pulled her purse out of the bottom drawer. "But maybe I should grab you something to eat." She headed towards the door. "If you insist, I think I will take that break."

And then she was gone, leaving a quiet wake. Mike took a deep breath. The phone had been ringing all day, but it was just residents wanting to either convey their worries or to ask what was going on or both. It would be ok if it rang unattended for a bit. Besides, he would rather Mabel not be present for the call he was about to make.

No one in Juan besides the Espinosas and himself knew about the man threatening Maria's girls. He'd rather it stayed that way.

He dialed the Las Vegas Police department, and instead of having his message taken, was transferred to Detective Reed—the Detective Reed, not the Reed that had
introduced himself to Mike. Mike berated himself for not seeing through Reed’s disguise. The whole thing had been suspicious, but he’d been too involved with his own problems to investigate it further. He had seen Reed as convenient help and left it at that.

It was a long phone call, and by the end of it, Mike felt more exhausted than he’d ever been. He slowly hung up the phone and leaned back in the chair. He knew the girls were fine, but that didn’t stop the guilt. He would have never forgiven himself if something had happened to them. He wasn’t sure where Reed was, but Mike would make sure that no harm came to those girls.

It was a good week before the medical examiner got back to Mike. By then, the town had started to settle back down, reassured that whoever had been found on the Foster Ranch wasn’t one of their own. It was easier to accept the discarded remains of a stranger. A stranger could be acknowledged and just as easily forgotten.

There was a brief discussion on whether the stranger would get a ceremony or not. Since the vote was just a few days away, those in favor of not changing the current system argued that honoring the stranger with a ceremony would allow the entire town to move beyond the tragedy. Those in favor of change argued that the town shouldn’t be responsible for paying for a stranger’s ceremony.

When Mike received word that the body had been identified as Antonio Hanson, convicted rapist and all-around bad guy, the voice for change became louder. Why should the town pay for a convict’s—a man who had violated parole and somehow ended up in Juan—ceremony expense? It didn't matter that the Hanson family might want to
conduct their own funeral ceremony or that Hanson’s body was still in the medical examiner’s custody.

The meeting hall was standing-room only on the day of the vote. Paul Foster, Keith Tompkins, Hannah Lane, Maria Espinosa, Sam Stuart and Grace Williams sat at a long table at the front of the room, a small microphone in front of each one. Maria Espinosa, senior council member, went through old business and then new before calling for the vote.

Mike stood awkwardly in the corner as a symbol of peace. It was hotter than usual in the meeting hall, and his uniform was stifling. He did care about the vote, but the sweaty, more miserable part of him wished for the council members to hurry up and get on with it. The votes were cast one by one down the line, starting first with Paul Foster. When it reached Grace, the vote had four in favor and two against.

Mike had a good idea how Grace would vote, and it seemed that half of the room felt the same as he did—disappointed. He liked how things were in Juan. He liked that people took care of one another and helped when needed. Though he wouldn’t and couldn’t admit it, he didn’t want things to change.

He watched as Grace leaned forward and then sat back. She appeared uncertain. She looked down the table at the other members. Finally, she looked at the crowd before her. "No."

It was a tie. Maria immediately leaned forward to speak into her mic. "In light of this tie, I motion that we table this issue to a later date."
The town council only met every six months unless there was an emergency. By tabling the vote, Maria bought herself several months to continue to build her case. The motion was seconded by Hannah Lane and then voted on. It passed.

It didn't seem to concern anyone about how Antonio Hanson had died. By the time it was ruled a homicide, most had moved on to older conversations such as the drought or the renewed tension between the Foster and William Ranches.

Mike pored over the medical examiner’s report as much to find a clue about Antonio's killer as to protect the Espinosa girls, but the report didn’t offer much. He now knew Reed was Antonio, which solved that mystery. As far as Antonio’s death, it was due to his head being crushed. The state of his remains was caused by wild animals ripping it apart. Mike knew the body had been moved, but from where he didn't know.

Mike hated having an unsolved case—in fact, it was his first one—but with no one from the Hanson's family caring enough to ask questions, Mike was inclined to let this one go and redirect his attention back to Sue and Felipe. He was still trying his best to make it up to Sue and to be a better husband. He realized, almost too late to his regret, that family was all that mattered. Family was everything.
Corine lit a match and dropped it onto the small fire pit before her. It crackled for a moment, threatening to extinguish itself, before engulfing the clothing piled around it with one blazing lick. Lola watched the evidence of the previous night slowly turn to ashes. Her arms hung limply at her sides. She now understood her sister better than she ever had. This is how Corine had felt for the past year. No wonder she wanted to run away from Juan, which was so filled with death—ash painted crosses in every corner. Lola was now filled with the same desire.

“Let’s take Carmelita’s car and go,” she whispered, hoping if the words were gently spoken, they might somehow get granted.

“We can’t. You know that. Besides, it would look suspicious if we left right now.” Corine didn’t bother to hide her anger. “Maria didn’t even realize you were gone. As far as everyone knows, you were in your room all day yesterday.”

“I’m sorry.” And she was. She wished she could take it all back, but she couldn’t.

Once the fire began to dissipate, turning from a flame to glowing cinders, Corine grabbed her hand and pulled her further into the desert, out of sight of Maria’s house. They found a clear patch of earth and sat down.

“Now talk.”

All in all, Lola had to admit that Corine had been very patient with her. When Lola had turned up in the alley outside of the diner, her t-shirt and shorts stained with
blood, unable to utter more than a string of syllables, Corine had calmly told Lola to stay put while she told Laura she wasn’t feeling well and needed to go home.

Lola had followed Donnie’s instructions exactly. The moment they got home, she’d hid her clothes, waiting for morning to burn them so the light from the fire wouldn’t appear as suspicious. While they waited for morning, Corine had quietly cuddled with Lola on her bed, holding Lola tight as shivers raked her body. Never once did she ask a question. Maybe, like Lola, she couldn’t get the words out.

“Tell me no one hurt you,” Corine’s voice broke slightly. “Tell me I didn’t fail you again.”

Lola reached out and grasped her hand. “No. He didn’t hurt me.”

“He?”

“He was here all the time.”

“Who?”

“The brother. Antonio.” Lola wanted to crawl into Corine’s lap like she used to do when she was younger. “He was playing with us the entire time.”

“Where is he now?” Corine asked, searching the desert around them.

“Don’t worry. He can’t hurt us anymore.”

“Lola, you’re scaring me. Where is he?”

“Dead.” The word creaked out of her, barely formed. There wasn’t enough air in her lungs. She took several deep gulps, but it didn’t help.

Corine grasped Lola’s head, pushing it down towards the ground. “Slowly. Take a slow breath. That’s it. It’s all over. You’re all right. It’s all right.” She rubbed Lola’s back.
After a few minutes, Lola could breathe again. She tried the word again. “He’s dead.” It was a little easier that time.

“Did you kill him?”

“No. Donnie did. He saved my life.”

“Donnie?”

“He was there in the graveyard.”

“Wait, graveyard? Is Antonio still there? Do we need to call the police?”

Lola squeezed her hand. “No. Donnie’s taking care of it.”

“Taking care of it?” Corine shook her head. “I need you to start from the beginning. Start at where you thought it would be a good idea to leave the house.”

And so Lola did. She explained how Janie hadn't been home, so she went to the graveyard to hide from Maria. How she'd come across Donnie and Marc and the conversation she overheard. She described the fear she felt as she stood up when Donnie called out to her. That part of the story was easy—the crazy, short-lived adventure of a spoiled, almost teenager.

She was surprised when Donnie was more upset about her sneaking around at night than her hearing about what he did for a living. He scolded her as if she was his little sister. He made her agree to go straight home and that she wouldn't go on any more nighttime adventures. She was so surprised by his concern that she agreed. Lola headed out of the graveyard while Donnie disappeared in the opposite direction.

Lola was just passing the corner of the fort to reach the road when a clawed hand reached out from the shadows, capturing her in a tight grip. It was just like her nightmares. She waited for sharp teeth to devour her, but instead, a wave of foul breath
washed over her as the monster slammed her against the fort’s wall. A shrill shriek escaped her before a piece of duct tape was placed over her mouth.

The monster that held her captive was encased in darkness, shapeless and terrifying. Lola's mind went blank and she couldn't manage a single coherent thought no matter how hard she tried. The monster leaned close, whispering "And now you're mine."

That's when she realized who the monster was. It was the brother, Antonio. But more than that—as he shifted his body closer to hers, a blade of light sliced across his face, and she saw that Antonio and the detective were the same person. There was no help coming. No one in Las Vegas was looking for Antonio. It had all been a lie.

"I was just going to kill your sister, but then I thought how perfect it would be to kill you first, just like she killed my brother. I want her to feel what I felt—my brother was all I had left."

A thought squeezed through the panic. Maybe if she could get him talking she could convince him not to hurt her. She took a struggled breath and tried to talk, but it was impossible with the tape on her mouth.

"Want to talk now, huh?" He shrugged and then ripped the tape off. It felt like it had taken some of her skin with it.

Lola wasn’t sure how to start, so she said the first thing that popped into her head. "But you have the rest of your family."

She didn't think he'd heard her at first. He appeared to be far away, remembering something difficult. "There are a few cousins, sure, but every one of them thinks they're better than me." He pulled out a knife with a long blade. "And my father, he disowned
me when I got convicted for assault. He never asked me if it was true. He believed those women over me."

"Did you do it?" Lola asked softly.

He caressed her neck with the tip of the blade. "Does it matter? I served my time."

"So you did."

"Do you want to hear all the details? Do you want to know how great it felt?"

Lola shook her head. "Please let me go."

Antonio shook his head. "No. I can’t do that. I’m the only one who cares about Brett. The only one who will get justice for him."

“I’m sorry about your brother."

He raised an eyebrow, incredulous. “I doubt that. I don’t kid myself. Brett liked to play with women too—he just didn’t care about age. I don’t condone what he did, but he’s still my brother.” He paused. “He would have played with you and then killed you.”

Lola tightened her fist, trying to stay in control of her emotions. She knew that day that Brett had something planned for her, but she didn’t imagine that. She raised her eyes to Antonio’s. He was only a couple of years older than his brother, but it looked like at least a decade separated them.

“Please don’t hurt me too.” It was the last thing she had to say. She poured every emotion in each syllable, hoping it might reach some part of him untouched by darkness.

He leaned his forehead against hers and sighed. “I have too. For him.” He sounded honestly sorry, not that it mattered.
“That’s too bad. I might have let you live.” While Lola couldn’t see him, Donnie’s voice was the sweetest thing she’d ever heard.

Antonio jerked. He spun around, keeping one hand on Lola’s throat while the other held the knife out in front of him.

“What are you?”

“Does it matter?”

Finally able to see him, Lola absorbed the image of Donnie, standing relaxed with his hands in his pockets, like he was the last bit of water in the desert. She didn’t understand how he could be so calm while her heart felt like it was about to break loose from her chest.

“I guess it doesn’t. I would think twice about what you are about to do. I have the knife and I have her.”

“That still won’t protect you.”

Silence stretched between the two of them as they examined each other. Lola wanted to scream to break the tension but was afraid to distract Donnie.

She closed her eyes, not wanting to see the end—knowing that whatever happened, death would be there.

Something broke. She felt herself being released and promptly crumbled to her knees, unable to support her weight. On her hands and knees, eyes still closed, she heard grunts and fists hitting flesh. Then there was something like metal hitting rock.

It would be easy to crawl away, to disappear into the desert. To curl into a ball and allow whatever would happen to happen. Just like she did when Brett attacked her. Just like she did when he threw himself at Corine.
She dug her fingers into the hard dirt and raised her head. Antonio and Donnie were rolling on the ground, just a few feet from her. Both were getting in a successful amount of punches. While Donnie was quick, Antonio definitely had him on strength.

Metal on rock. Lola examined the ground around the fort’s wall and found the knife. She picked it up and stood. It was heavy and uncomfortable in her hand. She tried holding first in one hand and then in two.

Donnie glanced at her, his eyes widening as he spied the knife in her hands. He wrapped one arm around Antonio’s neck and stretched his other towards her. His fingers were closing around the blade when Antonio bucked. The knife went flying again, and both men went scrambling towards it. Antonio reached it first. He raised it victoriously as Donnie brought a fist sized rock down on the back of his neck. Clutching the rocking, Donnie punched Antonio again and again.

Lola took a step forward, not feeling the splatters of blood hit her. “Donnie?”

He didn’t hear her. He just kept hitting Antonio over and over, long after Antonio ceased to struggle. Lola wanted to close her eyes. She didn’t want to see Donnie split Antonio’s head open. Didn’t want to see Donnie’s face soaked in blood or know what the inside of a battered skull looked like. The image burned into her, and she knew it would be a part of her nightmares for a long time.

“Donnie?” she touched his shoulder, but he shrugged her off. “Please, Donnie?”

He paused, his chest heaving. The world around them grew quiet again. He shook his head, as if waking from a dream.

“Vicki?” He looked for her, searching her body for injuries once he found her.

“Vicki?”
He crawled towards her, forgetting the rock and body behind him. Rising to his knees, he wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his head against her. “I’m so sorry Vicki. I didn’t know. I’m so sorry.” Sobs shook his entire body.

Lola stood there for a moment, not sure what to do, before eventually cradling his head against her. “It’s ok, Donnie. I’m fine.”

“No you’re not. None of you are. Please forgive me. I tried to get out. I told them I wouldn’t work for them anymore. I did. Just like I promised you. But then they took Mary and little Aster. I was supposed to take care of you all. I failed. I’m so sorry. They killed you all. I let them own me because I’m a coward. I’m so sorry.”

Lola rocked him with her body; her heart breaking at his grief. Like him, she forgot about Antonio. She did her best to comfort him, knowing it was very little. Time passed. Maybe it was just a few minutes, maybe hours. Lola only knew she felt the blood on her skin drying as Donnie’s tears turned into dry sobs. Eventually he pulled away and looked up at her as if seeing her for the first time.

“Lola?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You saved my life.”

He backed up and glanced at the body behind him. “You shouldn’t have seen that.”

“Who were they?” Lola asked as he stood.

Donnie wiped his face off with an edged of his shirt. It did little good. “They are the spirits who haunt me.”
She touched his arm. “They were your family, weren’t they?”

“Were.” He laughed bitterly. “They are my family. I will be with them again someday.”

“But not today?” She asked, afraid.

He leaned forward and kissed the top of her head. “No. Not today.”

“Thank you,” she whispered again. “He was going to kill me.”

“He can’t hurt you anymore. You’re safe.”

“What about that?” she asked, pointing to the body. She couldn’t relate the broken body to Antonio any longer.

“I’ll take care of it.”

“And you? What if the police find out?”

“I’ll be ok.” He gave her a sad smile. “I always am.”

Corine wrapped her arms around Lola, squeezing a squeak out of her. She rocked Lola back and forth.

“This will just be our secret, ok?” Corine whispered.

Lola nodded. “I don’t want Donnie to get in trouble. He did it for me. For them.”

“He saved your life. I will not betray that. Don’t worry.”

“Agreed.”

They sat in each other’s arms until the sun lit up their faces.

“Maria will wonder where we are.” Corine stood and helped Lola up. She started to walk back to the house, but Lola stopped her.
“Corine, I am sorry. So sorry.”

“Shhh, honey. No more.” She pushed a strand of Lola’s hair behind her ear.

“This was just a nightmare. No more. For our sakes and his, we need to let it go.”

Lola took a deep breath, feeling the tension leave her body for the first time. “I love you.”

“Same here, sweetheart. Same here.”
CURRICULUM VITAE

CHERRI CONLEY

Brownwood, TX: Milwaukee, WI

EDUCATION
Doctorate of Philosophy in English: University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Fall 2007-Spring 2013; specialization in creative writing and professional writing; dissertation—Painting the Dead, novel.

Master of Arts in English: Texas Tech University, Fall 2004-Spring 2006; area of concentration: creative writing; thesis—Rampion, collection of short stories.

Bachelor of Arts in English and Psychology: Texas Tech University, 2000-2004.

DISSERTATION TITLE: Painting the Dead

TEACHING EXPERIENCE
Teaching Assistant, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2010-present:

- Taught Eng 233: Introduction to Creative Writing (online and face-to-face), Eng 234: Writing Fiction-Structure and Technique, and Eng 205: Business Writing.
- Created the curriculum, chose the textbook and designed the lesson plans.
- Used D2L (Desire to Learn) to provide supplement materials for f2f class. For online classes, D2L was used as a virtual meeting site for students to converse with one another about the class readings, their creative pieces, and various craft skills.

Instructor, Bryant and Stratton College, 2008-present:

- Designed lesson plans and exercises around college-specified learning outcomes.

Graduate Assistant Coordinator and Tutor, UWM Writing Center, 2008-2011:

- Responsible for training and supervising tutors, as well as co facilitating monthly meetings.
• Provided weekly and semesterly reports.
• Helped maintain all the Center’s technology, website, and advertisement.
• Established the Center Piece newsletter by designing, soliciting material, and editing. Also tutored in both f2f and online sessions.

Volunteer Instructor of Creative Writing Classes, Spring 2008:

• Volunteer teacher for creative writing classes given for low privileged students at Shalom High School.
• Co created lesson plans which focused on poetry.

Teaching Assistant, Texas Tech University, Fall 2004-Spring 2006:

• Taught Eng 100: Freshman Composition, both face-to-face and online.
• Created Lesson plans and coordinated with other composition instructors to maintain consistent instruction for all composition classes.
• Used TOPIC, an online program, to provide feedback to students on their writing.

English Tutor at i-SIMA, Inc., 2006-2008:

• Tutored non-native speakers through an interactive online program.
• Used Skype and a specialized online program to communicate with students in Beijing, China.
• Crafted goals with the students, designed lesson plans, and assisted with TOEFL prep.