
Chapter 1

The black blob came in and out of focus. A quick adjustment of the dial and—there. The small, black calf standing in between two wide, dark green juniper cedar trees became a clear picture.

"There you are." Harriet Frederickson lowered her binoculars and wiped her forehead, exhaling for the first time all morning. That one lost calf had been almost a twenty-four-hour project.

It looked helpless, aimless, and totally lost without its mother. She knew the feeling.

Turning, she picked her way through the rough terrain of white and yellow limestone rocks patched with tall weeds, back to her Polaris Ranger. The tall hills surrounding her made the warm fall breeze swirl her golden brown hair around her face. She swiped her hair aside happily. The days were getting cooler, and she'd found the lost calf. Nothing could dampen her mood.

A faint humming made her stop in her tracks.

As it grew louder, and she presumed closer, she realized it was more of a deep buzzing. Was another helicopter full of suits from

the city coming to survey the wide gap between the chain of hilly terrain that just happened to be on her property? It wasn't quite a mountain pass. The hills weren't quite mountains. It had served as a thoroughfare, though, for several years before her great-grandfather had bought and settled the land. It was called Apache Pass.

More buzzing. Frowning, she shielded her eyes from the sunny, cloudless sky and looked up, pulling her phone out of her back pocket, ready to snap a few pictures of whatever pipeline company name was printed on the side of the helicopter. She'd learned photographic evidence was the most efficient way to legally file a complaint. Shooting at them worked, too, though a little bit *less* legal and totally inefficient.

Made her feel better, though.

Whoosh!

Something flew right by her head in a loud, dark, blurry rush. Her old brown Ariats stumbled around on the loose rocks and her body finally crashed to the hard ground as she sputtered out a few expletives.

Sharp rocks and sticker burrs cut into her skin. She coughed as the clay dust tried to occupy all the space in her lungs. One whole side of her face burned with pain. She lay there a moment, assessing the severity of her injuries, before tucking her knees in and sitting up. Her Paige jeans were torn, and her purple-checked Columbia shirt had a button popped off on the sleeve, making one of them roll down her arm.

She turned her head up to the sky. What in the hell? Either the murder hornets were getting bigger or the helicopters were getting smaller.

She slowly stood, her feet fumbling around as wisps of her hair fell over her eyes. Swallowing the dirt and dryness in her mouth, she carefully walked back to her Ranger, eyes on the bottled water in the cup holder. She drank the whole bottle in

one gulp, hands shaky as she tried to get a grasp on what had just happened.

Her phone vibrated in her back pocket. Wincing as she drew it out and rotating her shoulder a couple of times, she frowned at the number she didn't recognize and tossed the phone onto the bench seat of the black all-terrain vehicle. Her jeans were a mess. She winced as she dusted them off with a frown. When her phone buzzed and danced across the seat two more times, she rolled her eyes and jerked it to her ear as she swiped the screen.

"Frederickson." She bit out the greeting, surprised at the raspy sound of her voice. She wished she had brought more water.

"Are you all right?"

She pulled the phone away from her ear, looked down at it in her hand with chipped pink nail polish, then held it up to her ear again. She didn't say anything, though.

"God, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

"What?" she asked, her voice still scratchy.

"You're not okay. Shit. I'm coming over."

What? "Wait, what—"

"Stay right there." The line went dead and she stared down at her phone again. Then she jerked her head up and looked all around. What in the hell was going on? Who was on the phone? Who was coming over? What had they seen? How had they seen?

She didn't have much time to contemplate before another humming sound began approaching from the back of the gap between the hills. She didn't have a gate on that southern fence, so she instantly knew two things: someone had cut through the barbed wire, and that someone was fast approaching her.

She had only backed up a couple of steps before an army green four-wheeler came into view, with a large man sitting astride. He drove up fast, barely stopping before hopping off and

heading right for her. She fell back against her Ranger, unable to get away as his hands reached out and gently cupped the sides of her face.

"Christ, you're bleeding everywhere," he grumbled, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out a navy bandana. With more care than she would have thought this big man was capable of, he gently began wiping her face.

"Just...wait. Stop!" she ordered, pushing his hands off her and taking a deep breath as her mind caught up. "Who the fuck are you?" Damn it. Her rifle was perched on the rack, well above her head. She dared a quick glance over her shoulder. Yep, too high for her to reach.

He held his hands up, a sign that he meant no harm, before holding out the bandana between them.

"Put this on your nose. Hell, you went down hard. Is it your nose or your orbital bone? Let me get a better look—"

"What? God, get off me!" she shouted, slapping his hand away as he tried to step forward and reach out for her face again. "I asked who the fuck you were, so please, as you are on my property illegally, tell me who the fuck you are!"

A little cowed by her outburst, he watchfully took a step back. His jeans were dusty, boots cracked, and his white button down was smudged and torn as it pulled tightly around his broad shoulders. He adjusted his navy baseball hat and gave her a small grin.

"Nelson Childress." He placed his hands on his hips and shook his head. "Look, Miss Frederickson, I'm really sorry—"

"How do you know my name?" She interrupted him as she held his bandana to her face. Then she pulled it down. "No, never mind. How'd you get my number? No, forget that. How did you see what happened to me?"

Nelson watched the small woman with a red mark and drying patch of blood under her eye frown up at him. He'd heard all

about the impossible, unflappable, and unattainable Harriet Frederickson from everybody in the small town of Cypress Creek. From her reputation of self-possessed legal battles about water rights and the way everyone seemed to disappear inside every time she drove into town, he had imagined her to be a middle-aged monster with horns and a tail.

But she was the exact opposite of the legends all the other—mostly male—landowners in the area had told him. She was a tiny force of confidence and femininity who had him swallowing hard and staring her up and down brazenly. Which, with her tight jeans, little curves, and golden brown hair, he was sure she was used to.

He held up his hand to tick off his answers to all her questions. "Everyone around here knows your name, Harriet Frederickson. I have a recently deceased and childless uncle, so I just happen to own the property opposite your southern fence line. I got your number from Darlene, who knows everyone's number."

"God damn it, Darlene." She huffed and looked up begrudgingly at the discernibly handsome man. "Okay, Mr. Childress—"

"Nelson."

"Whatever. First of all, Darlene sticks her nose into everyone's business, so while you may have fooled her into giving you my number, beware, because she's likely already spread a lot of personal information about you, too." She made a note to herself to call and tell off Darlene, the owner of the taco stand who knew everyone's everything. First, to demand that she not give out her number, and second, to demand that she tell her about this new guy.

"Duly noted," he replied with a small grin. The scowl she made as she looked up at him was adorable.

"Also, I'll let your trespassing slide this time, but around here, people get shot for crossing onto other properties. And did you cut my fence? Dick move, man. Fix it. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And finally, Mr. Childress—"

"Nelson," he corrected her again, tipping up his hat and folding his arms over his chest. He found that he couldn't wait to hear what else came out of those pretty bow-shaped lips.

"Whatever," she huffed, rolling big blue eyes. "*Nelson*, how are you spying on me?"

He bit his lip as he looked down at her, finally exhaling and turning for the metal rack attached to the back of his four-wheeler. He retrieved a circular drone that was about two feet in diameter, with four propellers and a camera attached.

"I was looking at the gap," he said, jerking his head over his shoulder at the space between the tall, green hills peppered with the light colored limestone.

"It's called Apache Pass, Mr. Childress, and if you think you can turn in aerial photographs to the county to petition for a pipeline to my creek, then get in line. There's about a ten-year waiting list for water and another list about as long as my dick for a right-of-way through here for an oil pipeline. Everyone who's tried has been denied so—"

"Hold on, hold on," Nelson interrupted, placing the drone back onto his four-wheeler and holding up his hands. He was seriously trying not to laugh at her audacious rant, but she was making it really hard. She didn't want to be laughed at, though, he could tell that much. And he knew she wasn't trying to be charming, either, though she was. Totally. "I don't want anything from you, Harriet. I was just playing with a new toy and trying to familiarize myself with the property lines over here."

"Don't call me Harriet." She shrugged her shoulders up to her ears and blew out a sigh. Was this guy telling the truth? Was he another one of those idiots from Houston coming to beg for her to allow them to lay a huge pipeline right through the middle of her property? She narrowed her eyes as he stood there, looking only a *little bit* handsome. She couldn't be sure.

Nelson took his hat off and wiped his brow. She didn't make it easy; that was for sure. There was something about her, though, that completely drew him in. She'd had to deal with a lot of tough legal battles and, from what he'd gathered from the townsfolk, all on her own. She barely looked thirty-years-old. That had to have been hard.

"Don't spy on me anymore."

He looked down at his boots and was about to deliver another sincere apology with a dinner invitation attached when he looked up and found the long black barrel of a gun pointed at him.

"What the *fuck*?" he choked out, stepping back and stumbling around to the other side of his four-wheeler. "Are you crazy?" Surely, she wasn't. She didn't seem to like authority. She certainly wouldn't like a murder investigation centered around her on her ranch. Still, he backed up another step.

She clicked and locked the bolt action, loading the chamber of her scoped .22 magnum, found that damned drone in her crosshairs, and pulled the trigger.

Nelson unloaded a few expletives as he stared at his thousand-dollar drone with a bullet hole straight through it. When he turned to scold the unashamed Harriet Frederickson, she just loaded the chamber again and shot out his front tire.

"What the hell are you *doing*?" His voice was deep and loud, something that always got everyone to stop and look at him at his office, but not this little feral ranch girl. She just turned, perched the rifle on her hip, and then leaned over and started up her Ranger.

"Stay on your side of the fence, Mr. Childress."

She jumped up in the seat and drove off down the trail, tempted to look back over her shoulder but resisting. He'd be mad but he'd get over it.

And he wouldn't dare tell on her because he was on her property. She was well within her rights.