

## CHAPTER 1



Joey cursed her luck as she felt her car struggling to navigate the rough roads of west Texas. Her spare tires—balder than an eagle now—seemed to rattle with each mile passed.

Finally, she saw her destination, The Triple K ranch. It was owned by her brother's best friend, Cole Kaden. Joey knew from her last phone call home to her brother that Cole was in Montana on some cattle buying trip, meaning his house should be deserted—exactly what she needed now. Navigating up the long drive, she avoided the main house and parked behind one of the foaling barns. She glanced down at her phone. Forty-three missed calls and over fifty texts confirmed that her absence had been noticed back home. Shaking her head and refusing to allow the tears that had threatened for the last thousand miles to fall, she turned her phone off and exited her car. She walked around the back of the barn, coming up to a small log cabin. She knew that it used to be the foreman's house, but after he married, Cole had built the man and his new wife a house further back on the range, leaving the one-bedroom cabin open to visitors.

Joey had decided it was the perfect place to lay low and figure

out her plan from here. She knew her brother thought she was in Europe, and Cole was in Montana, meaning she could use this time to fix what had gone so wrong and somehow make her life better.

Approaching the cabin, she dug behind the planter for the spare key that had been there her whole life but now seemed to be gone. Joey cursed again; nothing was going right tonight—it was dark and cold, and she was ready for sleep. She walked around the back of the cabin, remembering, as kids, the back window always was broken. Finally, luck was on her side as she climbed through the window. Moving through the darkness, she tried to get her bearings, but something dark and solid was blocking her path. She froze for a moment before it moved, causing her to stumble backward.

"Whoa, little burglar, not so fast." A man's deep voice cut through the darkness, and Joey felt hands reaching for her. Ducking, she fled for the door, losing her flip-flops along the way. She burst into the open pasture, feeling the desert cacti cutting into her feet, ignoring the pain as her panic fueled her escape. She could hear him behind her, cursing and gaining ground. Suddenly, the pasture was illuminated in light; she heard another voice shouting from somewhere behind her.

"Gotcha." The same deep rumble reached her ears at the same time strong arms lifted her off the ground. She screamed, kicked and punched, but it seemed to have little effect on her captor. He laughed, calling over his shoulder, "You want to help or just watch?"

Joey heard another voice, laced with laughter, "Hell, Slate, if she's running that hard from your bed, figure I might want to help her, not you."

Her captor grumbled as he continued walking towards the porch. He held her like a baby but strong enough she couldn't escape, not that she had anywhere to run, anyway.

Slate looked down at the woman in his arms. In the light of the porch, he could see she was small, her clothes were dirty, and her bare feet were bloody. He tried to see her face, but her hair was

covering her. "Honey, why don't you let us clean your feet up and get some food into you. Then you can tell me why you broke into my home?"

Joey shook her head. "I'm fine, plus, it's not your house."

With that, Joey heard the other man laugh. "See, Slate, she knows you're a couch crasher." He approached her. "Name's Graham, sweetie, may I help?"

Joey groaned, now two men were surrounding her. She started to speak when a third man walked out and said, "It is, however, my house, so can I inquire as to who you are?"

Joey shook, keeping her face pressed into Slate's shirt. She tried to breathe; she would know that voice anywhere. Cole wasn't in Montana; he was here, on his porch. She was screwed.

Cole frowned at the woman; he motioned for Slate to sit on the swing with her and watched as she kept her face hidden, her dark blonde hair hiding any clue to who she was. He could see blood on her bare feet. "Graham, could you get our first aid kit, please?"

Graham nodded, disappearing into the house.

Joey heard them talking; she knew they were talking about her,

She hoped against hope that she could keep her face out of sight and somehow vanish before he recognized her.

Cole sat next to Slate, and talking calmly as he would to a spooked horse, said, "Okay, look, hon, your feet are cut, and this is Texas; we have a lot of things that could infect it, so we have to at least clean your feet."

Joey thought, *if that could get him to leave, sure*, so she nodded.

"I can keep holding you, if you'd like," Slate volunteered.

Joey shuddered. As much as she hated to be around a man as big as Slate, she couldn't risk Cole seeing her. "Yes, please, but maybe just you?"

Cole laughed. "I got the hint, sweetie." He turned to let Slate handle the girl until Graham emerged with the first aid kit. It was then he noticed her right foot, a yellow rose of Texas tattoo right near her ankle.

"Jolene Lee Taylor, what the hell?"

Joey shook. It happened, somehow, he knew it was her. She tried to breathe, but her chest felt too tight; she gasped for air and then blackness fell.

Slate jumped up. At the same time, Graham came running out onto the porch. "What the hell, she didn't lose that much blood, did she?"

Slate shook his head. Moving into the living room and placing the now unconscious girl on the couch, he started talking. "No, seems Cole knows her, and the fact that Cole realized who she was set her into a panic that, well, made her faint, I guess."

Cole moved to the couch. Jolene looked pale, too pale, damn it. What had happened to her?

Slate cleared his throat. "Her clothes are wet, so we need to change her. And her feet need attention. Maybe since you seem to upset her so much, it should be done by one of us?"

Cole cursed, but he nodded and walked out of the room.

Slate looked at Graham. "You think I made it worse?"

Graham shook his head. "No, you were right, and he knows it. Let's handle the girl and then we will talk to him."

Graham moved onto the couch, where he lightly brushed Jolene's hair with his hand. Gently calling her name, he watched as her eyes fluttered open, saw the momentary panic, then watched as she pulled herself together—strong girl.

Joey cursed herself silently; this night was getting worse and worse. As she moved to get off the couch, the man sitting next to her gently pushed her back.

"Not so fast, little filly. Before you passed out, we were going to clean your feet; we still need to do that." Graham moved towards her ankle, gently placing her feet in his lap, and moving quickly, he wiped them off. "Name's Graham, not sure you remember that." He finished by putting a generous amount of antibiotic ointment on them and covering them with gauze.

Joey smiled. "No, I didn't. Well, my name is Joey."

"Joey?" Slate asked. "I thought it was Jolene."

Joey wrinkled her nose. "Ugh, no, that's what my brother and Cole called me, but I go by Joey."

Graham nodded. "Well, then, Joey it is. Now, Joey, your clothes are soaked, so Slate here has a nightshirt for you."

Joey looked down at her clothes; she could feel the dampness. The rainstorm earlier had thoroughly soaked her. She glanced over at Slate, seeing his shirt was wet, as well. Blushing, she pointed at him. "I'm so sorry I got you wet, too. I'm just sorry. Tonight, was—well—a mistake."

Slate barked a laugh. "No apologies needed, little girl; a wet shirt isn't anything to cry over. Let's get you changed, then I'll make you a sandwich before we all head to bed, deal?"

Joey nodded, taking the shirt Slate offered and heading to the bathroom. She waited until she shut the door behind her and then she let the tears fall. She was exhausted, and she wanted to be anywhere but here. She tried to remember seeing Cole, but it was a blur of fear and just tiredness. Moving slowly, she removed her soaked jeans, tank top and sweater. Glancing in the mirror, she saw her normally pale body was ghostly white, her ribs were poking out more than normal, and her scars seemed to shout out to be noticed. Shaking her head, refusing to give in to any more tears, Joey pulled the flannel on. Keeping the sleeves long, she buttoned it all the way up. Taking one more moment to fix her hair and dry her eyes, she took a deep breath and went in search of food.

Entering the kitchen, she saw Slate making a sandwich and Graham leaning his hip against the counter. Both seemed lost in conversation. Seeing her, Graham smiled, and Slate offered the plate. Joey sat, taking a bite of the peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Swallowing, she smiled at them and said, "Thank you, um, is he still here?"

"Yes, he is," Cole answered as he walked into the room. "And *he* would like an explanation. Last I heard, you were in Paris, never

mind the fact that your ranch is a mile away. Oh, and you freaked like I was Jack the Ripper."

Joey groaned. "I'm sorry, exhaustion must have got my directions messed up, and—" She stopped, seeing Cole's raised eyebrow.

"Seriously, Jolene, lying seems like your best course of action right now?"

Joey frowned back at him. "It's Joey now, and, no, it's just late and..."



SLATE WATCHED JOEY; he saw her tense the moment Cole walked into the room. There was a story there. He started to say something when he saw Joey move, causing the shirt to ride up on her thighs, revealing an angry purple bruise on her thigh.

"Joey, can I talk to you privately, please?" Slate asked, motioning to the living room. He watched Joey nod and saw Cole frown. "Thank you, can you wait for me in the living room, just for a moment?"

Seeing her nod and leave, he waited until she was safely out of hearing distance. He started to speak but was quickly silenced by Cole.

"What the hell, Slate?" Cole asked, slamming his hand on the counter "That's my best friend's little sister!"

Slate felt himself getting angry, taking a step toward Cole.

"Whoa, guys." Graham put himself between the two of them. "Look, it's been a stressful night, let's just all breathe, please."

Slate nodded, taking a deep breath before he spoke calmly and softly, "Cole, I know that; I also know she isn't comfortable with you, for whatever reason, right now. However, she has a bruise on her upper thigh, an ugly one, I need to know she's okay but didn't want to embarrass her in front of anyone."

Without waiting for an answer, Slate left, walking into the

living room. He stood for a moment in the entryway watching Jolene, or Joey, as she seemed to want to be called. He knew her or, at least, he knew *of* her. Cole and Remy were constantly talking about Remy's wild sister, the tomboy who had ridden a bull at age seven, snuck into the Bronco competition at fourteen, and snuck off to get that tattoo on her foot when she turned sixteen. All those tales resulted in her getting her bottom spanked by parents or, later, Remy, who became her guardian when she was eleven. Slate knew from them that she was a wild, yet happy girl until she was eighteen and then something changed and she took off, first, New York, then, it was L.A., last Remy knew, it was Paris.

Clearing his throat so as not to startle her, he walked into the room, sitting opposite her on the couch. "Hi, sweetie."

He watched Joey blush. "Hi," she replied quietly.

Slate smiled as he reached for her hands and grasped them lightly. "I don't want to embarrass you, but I saw a bruise on your thigh; it looked angry. I need to ask, are you okay?"

Joey felt the breath leave her body. Trying and failing not to cry, she swiped at her eyes angrily. "I'm fine; it's nothing."

"Okay, well, I need to see it." At the angry shake of her head, Slate held up his hand. "I'm not asking, Joey; it's a nasty bruise. You are our responsibility, for the moment, and we need to ensure that you are okay."

Joey took a breather. She kept thinking this night couldn't get worse, but it kept proving her wrong. "Okay, but just you, please?"

Slate smiled; it was a little bit of trust, but he would take it. "Let's see what you look like. If anything looks too bad, I'll need to tell Graham and Cole."

Joey nodded. Sighing, she turned her back to him, careful to raise her shirt just enough for him to see that bruise. She heard his intake of breath and felt his hand carefully tracing the bruise.

When he talked, she heard the concern in his voice, "Want to tell me what happened?"

She shook her head; she didn't want to tell him. She moved to lower her shirt, but his hand stopped her.

"Why do I feel like there is more?" he asked. "Do you have any other bruises or marks on your body?"

Joey started to shake her head no when he continued. "Please think for a moment, then answer honestly. I'd rather not have you lie."

Joey took a moment. She didn't want him seeing any more. If he did, he would tell Cole, and Cole would tell Remy, but she also hated lying, and it felt like her life was just one lie. Taking a chance and choosing to trust Slate, she whispered her answer, "I have more."

Slate looked at her, saw her back rigid and scared, and he took a breath. Grasping her gently by the waist, he turned her around so he could look her in the eye. "Thank you, sweetie, for the truth. I know that wasn't easy."

She nodded but kept her eyes down; Slate rubbed his eyes, knowing what he needed to do but hating it all the same. "All right, Joey, do you have a bra and panties on?"

He heard her sharp intake of breath, watched her eyes widen in fear. "Shh, sweetie, you're okay, but I need to see what we are dealing with; so, do you?"

Joey blushed but nodded.

"Okay, then, it will be just like a bathing suit," Slate assured her as he sat across from her, giving her space and praying she wouldn't turn this into a battle.

Joey decided it was better to get it over with, so she pulled the top off in one tug and started to turn around.

"Stop," Slate ordered. His voice, no longer joking, was hard, cold.

Joey flinched.

Slate cursed himself. Working to calm his anger, he spoke in a softer tone, "I'm sorry, sweetie, but I need you to stay like that for me, please."



He let his eyes roam her body—her shoulders were yellow, showing an old bruise almost vanishing, her back scarred, whip marks faded over and obviously not new. Walking around her body, he saw the front was almost worse than the back, with three large bruises covering her abdomen. Right under her bra was a deep cut, healing, but still red; lastly, her legs showed bruises—these were new, a couple of days old, at most. He reached for her and, once again, trapped her on his lap. He covered her with a blanket before speaking to her. "Joey, I'm sorry, honey, but Cole and Graham need to see these. I'll keep you covered, and we will go quick, all right?"

Without waiting for her response, he called for Cole and Graham.

Seeing Cole enter the room, he shook his head slowly at him, then spoke, "Joey here has some bruises; none seem new or, at least, not from tonight. She's agreed to let you see them quickly. There is a cut on her stomach that seems healed over, but I would like to be sure."

Joey watched Cole, saw the way his shoulders tensed and she groaned. He would tell Remy; she was sure of it. Deciding to risk it anyway, she said, "Cole, I swear I'm fine; it's nothing."

Cole laughed—it was short and deep, but his smile lingered a bit. He nodded at Graham, who came in with hot coffee for Joey. "Jolene," he said, ignoring her favored nickname. "You want to tell the crew here what happened the last time you thought it was a great idea to hide something from Remy or, at least, the last time that you got caught, I should say?"

Joey glared, remaining mute, choosing instead to sip her coffee, keeping the blanket wrapped around her.

Cole laughed. "I want to see these bruises, and I will, but I'll let you get some coffee in you first. And since you can't seem to remember, I'll tell the tale."

Graham smiled. "Oh, good; it's story time."

Slate rubbed Joey's back, feeling her relax as she glared at Cole.

"See, Jolene here was always a wildcat." Cole sat in his recliner, propping his feet on the coffee table. "Anyway, so, Jolene was constantly in trouble—seemed like her dad, then Remy, was always wearing her butt out."

"Hey!" Joey interrupted. "One, that's private, and, two, that isn't true."

"Sure, it isn't," Cole responded. "So, at sixteen, she decides she wants a tattoo. Of course, Remy says no, so she asked me to take her and keep it a secret. Not only did I say no, what else did I do, Ms. Joey?"

"Told Remy," Joey grumbled.

"Exactly, but Remy was in the middle of a huge cattle buyout, so he grounds her, thinking that will work, but of course, it doesn't." Cole smiled at the memory. "You want to tell this part, or should I?"

Joey glared at him. "Neither, it's none of their goddamn business, and I don't feel like a trip down memory lane."

Joey saw three men glaring back at her; it was Cole who spoke, though. "You are injured and weak, so I'll let it slide, this once, but you know I don't like that language and you always know how I'll handle it."

"And fair warning, Graham and I won't tolerate it, either, and we handle it the same way," Slate added, patting her leg in warning.

"Now, if you'll let me continue." Cole arched an eyebrow at her, daring her to challenge, a dare she wasn't quite ready to face, so she nodded.

"So, anyway, she sneaks off to some border town close to El Paso and gets that tattoo on her foot behind some taco truck."

He was interrupted again; except, this time, it was by Graham's laughter. "I'm sorry, but a taco truck?"

Joey blushed. "Well, the guy was just learning, so his day job was selling tacos, and he did tattoos on the side." Joey held up her foot, showing it to the room. "I think he did a good job."

Cole nodded. "He did, but what else did you get?"

Joey groaned. "Well, so, my brother realized I was missing, and

both he and Cole tracked me to El Paso after a friend of mine blabbed, so Remy puts me in the truck and drives me home, lecturing the entire way."

Cole chuckled and went on. "She's leaving out quite a few parts. Remy finds her, bends her over the tailgate of his truck, asks me for my belt, and—"

"You gave him your belt?" Slate asked, interrupting.

Cole shook his head. "Nope, I could tell he was too pissed to deal out a whipping, so I convinced him a hand spanking would work, with the added embarrassment of the people around watching. However, when she got home, that was another story."

Joey smiled, remembering how Cole had started to feel bad for her, after Remy had pulled over twice on the ride home, to spank her some more, and had let her ride resting on him, keeping her butt off the hard seats. He had convinced Remy that she didn't deserve a whipping after multiple spankings.

Cole returned the smile and said, "Two days after that, she walks over to Remy, in front of his entire team of employees and said that it was worth it, that she had won."

Slate howled in laughter, followed by Graham's comment, "Gutsy girl."

Graham frowned. "Yeah, guts."

Joey giggled at the memory. "Maybe more like stupidity. He proceeded to drag me to the barn, tore my riding pants off, and used a strap on me. Cole swears he kept the ranch hands from seeing, but everyone heard, for sure."

Cole sighed. "All right, much as I love this trip down memory lane, we all need sleep, so how about Joey and I spend some time alone so that I can see her injuries?"

"I need to see, as well." Graham cut in, seeing Joey shake her head, he smiled at her. "I'm FBI, sweetie, something tells me you didn't get these bruises on your own, so I have to see, okay?"

Joey sighed, but knowing she couldn't put it off any longer, she nodded. Slate kissed her on the top of the head and left. Graham

excused himself for a moment, leaving Joey facing the man she had run from twelve years ago.

Cole watched her face; he took a moment and studied the woman he had loved since she was eighteen. He remembered her last day here—he knew the reason she fled, and it was the one and only secret he had kept from his best friend. She had left because of him.