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## Chapter 1

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**T**he knock on her door should have given him away, but she was too lost in her own misery to have noticed.

Thus, when she opened it to reveal him standing there, looking—as he always did—so undeniably large and powerful, even though he was just in a pair of jeans, a white t-shirt that clung lovingly to every muscle, along with a blue sports coat, she was taken aback for a moment.

Her hand went to her chest—as if she could already feel his touch there, her eyes meeting his hesitantly.

"Chez—Cesare—what are you doing here?"

"I've come to take you home."

That deep, mellifluous voice flowed over her in a way she shouldn't have welcomed, but parts of her definitely did.

"But I *am* home," she answered automatically, as if in defense against how his voice was affecting her, not even thinking that she was being impolite by not asking him in.

But the bald truth was that she didn't want him in her house, in the house that she had shared with her late husband.

As she hadn't seen fit to ask him in, for some reason he didn't care to dwell too long on, he simply took a step forward, his foot

landing on her doorstep, leaning a bit more heavily on his cane than he preferred, usually, but he needed the support for his bum leg.

She yielded to him with a small, distressed sigh that made him want to wrap his arms around her and protect her from ever feeling any kind of hurt again in her life, but he knew he couldn't do that.

Not yet, anyway.

She wouldn't want him to or allow him to, anyway. Not that he would let her have her way about things like that, but for the moment, he would go as easily as he could with her, not wanting to frighten her off.

Firstly, he wanted to get her back to his house and away from the one in which she had preferred to hide herself away, wallowing in the memories of a man who was no longer able to give her what she needed, which was not to waste the rest of her life pining away for the loss of him.

She needed a man—she was an independent, stubborn and willful woman, and she needed a firm hand to guide her. Wyatt had been that man for her for quite some time, and they had been almost uncomfortably happy—from the outside looking in—but he was gone now, and she was barely living her life, cloistering herself up in this place full of pictures of much happier times with him, reliving her memories and detaching herself from the others in her life who loved her very much.

And he considered himself to be chief among them.

For her part, Tawny felt very disconcerted by his presence. She'd had no warning that he was coming from his sister, who was her best friend. Why Darcy, who was supposedly already at his place and the only reason she'd considered going there, hadn't bothered to call her, or at least send a Facebook message or a text or an email or a frigging carrier pigeon—something, anything so that she would have been able to prepare herself for his presence—she didn't know.

But she certainly intended to find out once she'd gotten rid of—the illustrious—and highly unsettling Mr. Moncrief.

But she hadn't, and here he was, standing there in front of her in the small foyer as if this was the house *they'd* shared, rather than the one she'd shared for almost two decades with his brother-from-another-mother.

A big hand came up to cup her cheek before she could manage to avoid it, tilting her head up so that she had no choice but to look up at him, which always managed to make her feel so much smaller and more vulnerable, somehow.

"You look tired and unhappy, lass."

He was the only one in the world who'd ever called her that, and, as far as she knew, she was the only one he'd ever used that nickname—which was much more a term of endearment when he said it—with. It wasn't as if he was Scottish, such that it might come more naturally to him. If anything, he was Italian, from what she knew from his sister.

She frowned. "Still free with the compliments, I see, Chez."

His eyebrow rose at that, and she knew that her sarcasm had displeased him, but that was just too damned bad.

Then he drew himself up to his full height while still cradling her cheek in a way that didn't allow her to move it but was still annoyingly comfortable. "Darcy said that you cancelled your visit."

She forced herself to continue to meet those fathomless blue eyes. "I did."

"Why? Are you sick?"

"No."

"Hurt?"

Not physically, no, but she wasn't about to say that to him. "No."

"Some unforeseen appointment crop up that you can't reschedule?"

"No," she sighed, knowing where this was going and taking a calculated step back from him.

"Good. Then you're coming with me back to New Mexico, for a few weeks, at least. It'll do you good to spend some time outdoors, with me, on a horse, getting some sun and exerting yourself physically a bit, rather than sequestering yourself, alone, in this house all day, every day."

Although she might have taken him to task for his disapproving characterization of how she was currently living, she couldn't prevent herself from almost smiling for the first time in a long time, teasing out of nowhere, "You have ulterior motives—I know you! You just want free labor!"

It was a small flash of what she had been like when she was excruciatingly happy, before she'd lost him, and he was glad to see that there was still some of the woman that she had been left.

It gave him hope that he might be able to resurrect her more fully, with time and attention, both of which he intended to devote to her in any amount necessary to accomplish that feat.

Chez grinned, completely unrepentant. "Well, of course I do! Do you know what the labor costs are on the ranch lately? I need all the help I can get!" He took a casual step towards her, closing even the small distance she had tried to put between them. "And I know that you can ride."

His words were said in that deliciously, deliberately inappropriate way he had, the one that—even though he had never once used it on her while she was married—had the same effect on her as it always had when they were teenagers and she had been dating the two of them. It curled around places on her that she would rather forget she'd owned, causing a shiver to run up her spine that she hoped against hope he wouldn't see.

But she knew that was a pipe dream.

To be under his scrutiny was to have him see every single thing about her, every nuance of how she felt or thought or what she wanted or didn't want betraying itself to his scrupulous gaze.

He was the most intense person she'd ever met—making her feel as if she was the only person in the room when they were in the middle of a crowded bar, or the only person who truly existed for him at all when she had been in his arms.

In truth, it had been that intensity, that very potency, when aimed only and directly at her, that had been a large portion of the reason why she had chosen Wyatt over him, who was a much more relaxed—if absolutely no less in love with her—person overall.

While they were married, she sensed that he had carefully kept his distance, although when Wyatt went to visit him, two or three times a year, she was always carefully included in the invitation, although she would beg off and send him by himself for a "boys week" vacation that she knew they both enjoyed immensely. And, indeed, she'd only been back to his ranch once or twice since they had married and moved away.

On those rare occasions when they saw each other—being that she and her husband lived in West Virginia—he was scrupulously polite to her, and absolutely nothing else, which was just what she would expect from Cesare.

He took an inordinately long amount of time to find his own love, and somehow, she knew that was because of her, as surely as she knew that he and Livia didn't share the same kind of all-encompassing love that she and Wyatt did. She hadn't been surprised when it had ended in divorce, although they had remained married for quite some time.

Chez didn't like to give up or, Heaven forbid, lose.

Hence, his appearance on her doorstep.

He had changed only slightly, gotten a bit older—but then, hadn't they all? His hair, which had been black as coal, was flecked with gray, because, Lord knows he wasn't about to color it. That wasn't the kind of man he was at all. The cane was new, left over from a very bad car accident several years ago—while he was still married to Livia—although neither it

nor his slight limp detracted from his nearly overpowering maleness.

Tawny didn't think there was anything that could dull that in the least. Even without his money and half dead, she knew that women would flock to him in droves as they always had, which was another reason why she hadn't chosen him when she'd had the chance. She had less than no interest in being a part of a crowd of female—and male—admirers, not to mention down-right sycophants.

Somehow, the cane only seemed to enhance his attractiveness, much to her dismay.

He still stood as impossibly tall as he always had, which was several inches taller than Wyatt, and he was more muscular than the smaller man, also, due to a good portion of his lifetime being spent—as he'd mentioned—outdoors, wrangling cattle, breaking horses, and mending fences. Although, he preferred using as gentle an approach to that as was possible. There was little on his family's vast property—on which he always had the last word—that he couldn't or hadn't turned his hand to.

Although he also owned several very successful corporations and could be a bit of a control freak, he also knew how to hire capable people and wasn't afraid to delegate, thus his hands weren't the usual soft, unblemished of most CEO's, but rather quite beaten up, rough and callused and bruised, sometimes even broken, if a bull had been particularly recalcitrant.

He wasn't afraid of hard work, and he didn't much tolerate anyone's presence around him who was.

His choice of Livia Spencer as his bride had been a surprising one. They had both known her—she was the opposite of Chez in nearly every way, preferring to be waited on hand and foot and kept in a style to which she had already become accustomed from her parents and then her doting first husband.

Chez wasn't that kind of man or husband, and the two of them had been surprised that it had lasted as long as it had.

Truth be told, they'd had a bit of a pool going between them as to when Chez was going to say, "Enough," and he had outlasted both of their predictions, so no one had won.

As if he needed anything else to attract women! The man smelled ridiculously good. She didn't know what kind of cologne he was wearing, but it had to be part pheromone. He had awakened her in ways that she was sure she could no longer function with the absence of the love of her life and wasn't at all eager to realize that she could respond to anyone else—especially him.

He was entirely too dangerous to her peace of mind.

"Because you taught me how to ride," she finally said.

"I did. Those were some of the best days and weeks of my life—when your parents had just moved here and you'd come into our senior class, blowing all of us out of the water with your intelligence and sense of humor and that gorgeous hair."

He adored watching her blush and was delighted to see that she still did as readily as she always had, despite the fact that they were far from high school age.

"And I finally managed to convince you to go out on a date with me."

"And you took me back to the ranch to go riding out with you on a picnic and discovered that I didn't know one end of a horse from the other!" He was looking down at her so intently that she crossed her arms over her chest in self-defense, although his eyes had never wavered from hers.

"Ah, but you did, as I recall. You mentioned that you'd had horse fever when you were a little girl, and you were still a very eager pupil."

He made it sound as if he was teaching her how to please him intimately—rather than letting him teach her how to saddle a horse—for the first time.

"Chez, stop!" Tawny lowered her eyes, at first to his chest, then deciding that was hardly a safe spot to stop at, then finally landing at her own feet.

But not for long.

Cesare's finger tilted her head back up, and he almost whispered his command, making it just that much more devastating to her and harder for her to ignore, somehow. "Go throw some things into a suitcase—just comfortable stuff—jeans and t-shirts and a warm coat. It's chilly in the mornings, even in the desert southwest."

"No," she said decisively, stepping away from that finger and the rest of him. "I thank you for the invitation, but I'm staying here."

That "eyebrow of dissatisfaction" she was all too familiar with went up again.

He remained where he was, but his voice continued to be very soft and stern, renewing those alerted nerves that skittered up her spine, leaving gooseflesh all over her in their wake and visibly tightening her nipples. "I've come here to take you back with me, lass. Whether or not you have any clothes to wear when you get there is a matter of complete...well, not complete, really," he confessed with a mischievous smile, "indifference to me." Chez didn't elaborate any further about that leading statement, allowing her to draw her own conclusions. "But, make no mistake, one way or the other, we will be leaving here together and you will be flying home with me within the next few minutes."

She glared up at him. "That's kidnapping! Darcy will not be happy with you, and neither will I!"

He didn't bother to deny it. "Darcy has gone home to her husband, since you weren't going to be at the ranch. And I would prefer that you acquiesce and obey me, but if it comes down to it, I meant exactly what I just said."

Of course, he did. Cesare never said anything he didn't mean.

And what was worse, she didn't know when his patience—which could be limited, especially in situations like this when



he thought she might not do as he preferred—would run out. And when it inevitably did, there was less than no hope that she'd outrun him, with those long, muscular legs of his. Even though one of them wasn't quite up to par, she had no illusions about whether or not he would catch her if she made him chase her.

She had absolutely no doubt that she'd soon find herself lifted easily over his shoulder and carted out to his car, probably after he'd delivered several sharp smacks to her completely vulnerable behind before doing so.

It was the scolding that she would inevitably receive from him, though, as well as his slight movement towards her that spurred her into action with an annoyed sigh she didn't bother to try to hide from him.

"Autocratic, dictatorial, domineering, bossy son of a bitch," she muttered under her breath as she headed to her bedroom.

The dictator in question came to slouch casually against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest as he watched her filling her suitcase and still mumbling quiet invectives aimed at him as she did so.

"What was that?" he asked pointedly.

"Nothing I'm willing to repeat to you, but I'm certain you have a good idea exactly what I was saying, considering that you're forcing me to go to your place against my will."

To her surprise—and not a little bit of alarm—he took a few steps into the room, looking at nothing in it but her, boxing her in against the bed until she had no choice but to look up at him. There was nowhere for her to go except into his arms, if he'd held them out. She couldn't continue packing until he moved.

"Is it truly against your will, Tawny Rae?" he murmured.

To her horror, her eyes filled with tears that were never far from the surface any more—more so, lately, if she was willing to admit that to herself, and she wasn't.

She forced herself to meet his eyes even as the tears began to

race down her cheeks. "I want to stay here, Chez. Please. I-I just want be by myself. I'm not fit company, anyway."

Those thick, hard arms wrapped around her gently then, holding her wonderfully tight and close.

He was so damned invitingly warm—she wanted to melt into him, to cry all over him, to let him soothe her hurts and her aching heart.

"No, baby girl," he whispered huskily. "That's not what's best for you at the moment. You've been allowed to be alone, to drown in your sorrows for too long. I've neglected you; failed in my duty towards you. I should have come and gotten you much sooner than this, and I'm sorry I didn't."

For the briefest of moments, she allowed herself to rest against him completely, her cheek laid tentatively on his shoulder; then she abruptly forced herself to straighten and move as far away from him as she could—which didn't really even take her out of his arms.

"I'm not your duty—you have no obligation to take care of..." his finger pressed itself vertically over her lips "...me," before it moved to brush her tears away.

"Ah, but there you're wrong, lass. Wyatt charged me with taking care of you—long ago, actually—if anything happened to him, and he renewed that charge—quite presciently—not long before he died."

Tawny could barely believe her ears. "He what?"

"You heard me."

"He did not!" she charged, not wanting to believe what he was saying.

His arms tightened around her, and her eyes drifted to his. "Do I lie, Tawny Rae?" he asked quietly, pointedly.

"No."

Her lack of hesitance in answering him pleased him considerably. "And, if you truly don't believe me, I'll let you read the

letters," he said blithely, turning her loose, remaining disconcertingly close but no longer in her way.

"Letters?"

"Well, one letter, early on in your marriage, and one email a few months before the accident."

"Oh."

She stood there for long moments, lost in her thoughts, and he realized he was going to have to pull her out of them.

"Hurry up. We don't have much time." He glanced at his watch.

"When is the flight we're catching?" she asked, not noticing that he hadn't answered her as she continued cramming clothes into her luggage until she moved into the bathroom, where she began to throw makeup into her makeup bag. Until she found it removed from her hands, and each vial and brush taken out of the bag.

"No makeup. You don't need it. You never have."

"I have dark circles under my eyes; I look like I haven't slept in, well, as long as I haven't slept, and my face is a train wreck! Believe me, I need the makeup!" she countered, putting things back in.

"If I find you wearing makeup around me, I will put you over my knee. Fair warning."

"And then you will find me getting on the next plane home."

She came to a full stop, facing him, her arms over her chest, mirroring his position, although he was relaxing in the doorway.

"No, you won't."

"Yes, I will."

"There's no need to get so upset. After all, it's not as if you haven't been thoroughly spanked before, little one."

She gasped at that revelation of just how much Wyatt had told him about their relationship, turning what she knew was a wholly unbecoming shade of red and finding herself utterly unable to meet his eyes after that.

He wasn't sure that this was really the right time to drop that particular bombshell, but then it was already out of his mouth and too late for regrets.

And he had to admit that he was enjoying her outraged—and terribly embarrassed—reaction.

His respect and admiration for her multiplied a thousand-fold as he watched her deal with what he knew had to be a very trying situation for her. She didn't weep or wail or dissolve into tears, as many women would have. Instead, she closed her eyes, hugging herself tightly in a way he wished he was doing for her, taking a deep breath, then opening her eyes and looking him directly in the eye.

"My husband spanked me because I gave him the right to do so. You have no such dispensation—and thus, lack consent—from me."

"Even if I could provide you with letters that suggest to me that I should be certain to handle you that way, myself?"

He didn't lie. Chez wouldn't suggest that he had something like that without being able to produce it, because—in this type of situation, particularly—she was certainly going to call his bluff.

He could see her jaw clenching angrily. "It's not some sort of warranty on equipment—it's non-transferrable, for God's sake, don't be so obtuse." She relented a little, though, saying, "But I would like to see the letters, anyway, if they truly exist."

"Oh, I think it's quite transferrable. As Wyatt wrote to me, it's in your best interests to have a firm hand on your bottom at all times to remind you of whose you are and how he expects you to behave."

Her sharply indrawn breath told him that he had hit the exact spot within her that he had intended to.

"That's it! That's enough! I am certainly not going to go to New Mexico with you after you've told me that! Get out of my way."

To her surprise, that was exactly what he did.

She stormed out of the room, not paying any attention to whatever the hell he was doing.

That would prove to be a rather large error on her part.

As she stood, fuming, in the living room, Cesare calmly grabbed her makeup bag from the bathroom—after relieving it of the makeup she had put into it in defiance of what he'd said—putting it into her suitcase and closing it up, then bringing it out to drop it by the door.

She was facing away from him, staring out the French doors at the end of the dining room that went out onto the deck. He wasn't even sure if she knew that he was in the room with her, his mouth tightening as he saw her shoulders shaking.

Nonetheless, he stalked determinedly over to her, touching her shoulder gently and feeling her jump in surprise just as he leaned down to lift her onto his shoulder.

Her tears dried rather quickly in the face of her wrath.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" she railed, trying to push against his broad back in order to extricate herself from his hold, but she knew she wasn't going anywhere but by his permission even as she did it.

Cesare bent his knees—cursing the pain in his leg as he did so—just enough to be able to catch her case and the purse that hung above it as he hit the door, closing and locking it behind him as he brought her to his car. He didn't trust her enough to do what he would normally do—put her into the passenger's seat and draw the seatbelt into place for her like a gentleman. Instead, he leaned in the driver's side and deposited her there, in a bit of an ungainly lump.

Of course, she immediately tried the door, but it was locked, and she'd never been in a car like this before, so the latch to release the lock wasn't immediately evident to her.

By the time she figured out where it was, he was on the high-

way, going—she leaned over to look at the speedometer—seventy-five miles an hour, so it had been rendered moot.

She'd have to bide her time. If she made a big enough fuss at the terminal, someone was bound to notice, and—although she didn't intend to press charges against him, necessarily—she'd certainly be able to catch a taxi or an Uber back home with no interference from him.

He adjusted the heat in the car towards her, since she hadn't had a chance to bring a jacket, then turned on some smooth jazz before looking at her and changing it to something that played eighties music, hoping she'd forgive him enough to let him hear that beautiful voice of hers singing along.

But Tawny just sat there stiffly, gazing diligently out at the passing scenery, but not really seeing it, remaining sullen and silent and royally pissed at him the entire time, biding her time, waiting for the opportunity to get away from him that pulling up to a busy terminal would provide. But, once they got near the airport, they didn't go the way she went when she was leaving.

She'd forgotten. He was a pilot.

Instead, they headed right out onto the tarmac, to pull up to small airplane that must've been his.

When Chez brought the car to a halt, and before he got out, he turned to her.

"I realize that you're angry with me for doing this, and I'm sorry for that. But I really am worried about you being alone so much in that house, with all of your memories. I know from Darcy that you don't see anyone or go anywhere or do any of the things you used to enjoy doing." There was no response from her, so he continued more sternly. "You're depressed and you're giving up on the life you have left, only I'm not going to let you do that."

Tawny had been a very spoiled little girl—and adult—before she married Wyatt, and she could freeze out anyone she put her mind to. Wyatt had cured her of both of those tendencies, but it

appeared that it was a skill much akin to riding a bike, because the behavior came right back to her when she wanted it to.

Entirely disregarding her own peril, she didn't so much as acknowledge that he was inches away from her, as he was, but continued to sit there and look out the window.

"Are you going to walk onto the plane under your own power, or am I going to have to carry you there?" he asked.

Nothing.

Chez didn't wait very long for her to say anything, which turned out to be a smart move on his part, because she would have quite happily have literally died before doing so.