
Chapter 1

The color spectrum hit her first.

Well, technically, the ground hit her first as she tumbled off the hiking path in a jumble of loose dirt and rocks. But when she was picking herself up onto her elbows and hacking up dust, her eyes locked on the scenery. It was familiar. So familiar, that lately she'd just looked right past it. Now, on the ground and pretty much eye level with nature, she noticed everything.

The high strands of bright green grass waving in the cool wind, a fragrant herb mixed in somewhere. The cold, red rocks mixed in with orange packed dirt that created a red, orange, and even yellow path, packed hard beneath her body. The towering pines and the soaring stacks of rocks that looked more like pillars on Mars, orangish red and spiked up in the canyon as far as the eye could see. Hoodoos, the locals called them.

And gray blue eyes, popping in front of her view with concern and maybe even a little exasperation.

"What are you doing on the riding trail?"

His gaze was stern, his voice was deep, and his hands were huge as they reached down under her arms and gently lifted her

to her feet. She dusted off her jeans and green sweatshirt as she stared up at the tall cowboy standing in front of her, trying to find the right way to answer.

All she could muster was an incoherent mumble, though. *Genius.*

A single eyebrow shot up in the shadow of his tan Stetson and she felt a slight tingling running through her veins. His size was one thing, his eyes were another, but the confident way he stood there, just waiting for her to speak, gave her goosebumps. Jesus, why couldn't she say anything? He finally shook his head, either out of annoyance or mercy, and pointed over his broad shoulder.

"The hiking trails are on that side of the ridge. It's dangerous to walk over here. This side is reserved for trail rides only."

She glanced around the canyon and wondered how in the hell she'd gotten there from her carefully mapped out hike. Her eyes slowly turned back up to his when he cleared his throat, though.

"Do you understand?"

Her stomach tightened again, but she found her head nodding in response to his formidable stature more than anything. Before she did something embarrassing, she decided she'd better just run along, so she turned and quickly stepped around him and his horse, her hiking boots crunching on the dried dirt as she climbed back towards the hiking trails. *Just turn back and say something, you idiot.*

Nope. Nothing. She was devastatingly tongue tied, but what could she have said that wouldn't have pissed him off even more? She hadn't exactly achieved expert level when it came to controlling her temper. And she recognized that he wouldn't stand for that.

His final question rang in her head and made her off balance as she picked her way back through the trails.

Do you understand?

People had, of course, spoken to her in a commanding manner before, but... but what? She'd never reacted to anyone that way in her entire life. It was *carnal*.

So, naturally, she spent the next week asking around town about him, but it wasn't until school started in September that she found out. Her friend, Nell Lynn, informed her that he'd just moved out to a nearby ranch in August. She stared incredulously at her friend as they ate brownies over the white sink in the teacher's lounge of the local high school.

"Seriously? He looks like he's been a rancher his whole life."

Nell shrugged up a shoulder. "That's just the town gossip. He's single but like, so unavailable. I can't believe he even talked to you. Every girl in town's been trying to figure out the inscrutable Boone Childress. With minimal success. Obviously."

"He's a little scary, truth be told."

"Al. I've never once heard you say that you're scared of *anything*."

She took a bite of her brownie and gave a half nod. She was scared of plenty of things. Did she choose not to show it? Sure. She was tough if she was anything. And she wanted to exude strength.

"And besides, if he's anything like the men in this town, *he's* trying to figure *you* out," Nell said with a snort, brushing the crumbs off her hands.

"That is so untrue," Alice sighed, mouth half full. She'd moved to town that summer and had just one friend, Nell, whose classroom just happened to be next to hers. Ten years earlier they'd been in that very high school as students, though Alice's family had to move away in tenth grade.

"Please." Nell stared down her long nose at her little friend. "Mack says that the guys at the bar have one thing on their minds. How to nail you... down. That came out wrong. How to get you in... They want to ride the Alice train. That's for certain."

Alice pressed her lips together and frowned as she thought about Nell's husband and all his friends laughing and drinking and talking about *her*. She'd met Mack and he was a nice guy, but most of the men she knew in town worked at the feed lot or were in some event in the rodeo, and they were definitely most interested in talking about themselves.

Thankfully the bell rang and ended their uncomfortable conversation. Alice returned to her Social Studies class and passed the plastic bin around to gather phones as usual. To be fair, when she walked back up to her desk, she held her own phone up and dropped it in, catching her wallpaper as she looked down and counted the phones.

Bryce Canyon. Orangish red hoodoos. Perfect background. And for some reason that large cowboy scolding her for wandering off the hiking trail converged in the image. No, wait. That was just in her head.

Boone had never scolded anyone in his life. People just did what he said. Mostly, he figured, it was because of his large stature, his commanding voice, and the impenetrable look in his eyes.

But that little girl on the trail, well, there was just something about her. She had light strawberry blonde pigtails hanging out from under a blue, wide-brimmed hat. Pink, pouty, bow shaped lips that she licked one too many times while staring up at him with those huge dark eyes. And the ruffles around the waist of her green hoodie framed her tight little ass in those jeans.

He couldn't make himself stop thinking about her if he tried, which was unnerving since she was most assuredly not his type. She was on the wrong trail so she was definitely a rule breaker. She had dust and grass stains all over her clothes so she was probably clumsy. She stared at him and wouldn't talk so she was probably some ditzy girl, right? Right?

But that wasn't right. When he'd reached down for her and scooped her up under her arms, he saw a brochure of the canyon folded in her pocket, with red marker all over it like she'd tried to map out her route. In her little bag crossed over her shoulder, was a worn book by John Wesley Powell, who'd charted most of the maps of the southwest.

He shook his head as he drove through town in his uncle's old yellow Jeep, the paint chipped and the floor almost rusted through. He'd just inherited the ranch when his uncle had died unexpectedly, and he'd left his job in DC to come out west to Utah and run it. He didn't leave anyone special behind, though, because he never kept anyone around long enough for it to mean anything.

The women he dated were tall, lithe, beautiful, like models. They were great for dates inside the beltway and a quick romp afterwards, but that was it. And he thought he liked it that way. What in the world was he doing spending day and night thinking about that little sprite from the bottom of Bryce Canyon?

"Oh, yeah, that's Alice Ingram, all right."

Boone looked up from his crouching position at the gas station as he aired one of the tires in his horse trailer. What a cute name. His friend leaning against the trailer noticed the look in his eye and spit out some tobacco chew on the concrete.

"Why you askin'?"

Boone busied himself with screwing the cap on the air valve and stood up quickly, avoiding his eyes. "Just asking, Deacon. I ran into her the other day." Literally.

Deacon exhaled and shook his head. He'd known Boone his whole life and he'd never looked the way he did in that moment when he'd spoken about a girl.

"You should know every guy in town's asking about her. Just moved here, like you. Fresh meat, and all that."

Boone frowned and walked back to the driver's side of the Jeep. "I gotta go."

Deacon grabbed a squeegee and began washing the windshield of his truck, grinning at his friend. "It's 3:30. Drive past the high school on your way home."

Still grumbling and in a worse mood than before, Boone pulled out of the gas station and drove down the main street. Growing up he'd lived out on the ranch for a couple of months every summer. It wasn't surprising that Uncle Bill had left it to him. He knew the small town like the back of his hand, too. People didn't move there. They moved away. What was her story?

And then it was as if thinking about her so much willed her into view. There she was, at the high school. Walking slowly to her car in a blue dress. Books folded in her arms. Her hair and her dress blew back in the wind and she looked up.

Right at him.