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# HER STERN COWBOY

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RENEE MARKS



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.  
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## Chapter 1

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“**O**h come on, Lily, what’s the matter, sweetheart? You’ve been fed, changed, had your bottle, it’s time to go to sleep, everything’s okay.” Andrea Malone tried to soothe her long-time best friend’s eight-month-old little girl. She bounced her in her arms gently, not understanding what was going on. She had never acted like this before. Nothing seemed to be appeasing the blonde hair cutie.

Andrea was almost at her wits end when her phone began to make a high-pitched ringing noise. Who would be calling at two a.m.? Maybe Candice and her husband Caleb had decided to pick Lily up. She rushed to her room with the squirming, upset baby in her arms and got to her phone just before it went to voicemail. “Hello?”

“Andrea Malone?” a woman’s voice questioned.

“Yes, this is she, can I help you?” she answered, struggling to hold the phone and Lily.

“I know this is an ungodly hour and it sounds like the baby is upset but I need you to come down to the station, ma’am,” the woman continued.

“Station? What are you talking about?” Andrea was so confused as she tried to get Lily to settle down.

“Yes, ma’am, the Whitehorse Police Station. You are in Whitehorse, correct, ma’am?”

“Yes, but what’s going on?” Andrea was becoming more confused and she was beginning to get scared.

“I’ll explain when you get here, ma’am. Ask for Detective Murphy when you come in, please.”

“O-o-okay,” Andrea stuttered and ended the call. Panic seized her as she got Lily dressed and then her own daughter Lucy, who was ten months old. She made sure their diaper bags were ready and they headed out to the car.

She placed Lily and Lucy both in their car seats and began the short trip to Whitehorse Police Department, even though it felt like it was taking forever. What on Earth happened?

Andrea finally pulled in to the parking lot and found a spot relatively close to the door. After exiting the car, she took Lucy out and then Lily while still in her carrier. She walked toward the door, one carrier in hand, two diaper bags around her shoulders and another baby on her hip.

She had to look a sight, she hadn’t even taken the time to change out of her baggy t-shirt, black tight shorts and flip-flops. She was sure her hair was a mess and she felt like she was going to keel over from lack of sleep.

She found a very thin, blonde woman sitting behind a desk. Andrea walked up to her quickly and said, “Excuse me, I’m supposed to ask for a Detective Murphy.”

The woman seemed to scrutinize her for a moment then replied, “Give me a few minutes, ma’am. I’ll let Detective Murphy know you’re here.” She got up from the desk and left, leaving Andrea there by herself with two upset kids and looking like hell.

She glanced around at the mostly empty station, she noticed a couple of chairs that were free, they didn’t look too

comfy, but it was better than nothing. She took a seat as Lily began to cry again.

Andrea set the carrier and diaper bags down. She sat Lucy in the other chair for a minute, unhooked Lily from the car seat, pulled her up against her shoulder and rocked her back and forth while Lucy climbed in her lap.

“I know, Lil, shh, I know you’re so tired, I just wish you’d stop fighting it .” Andrea tried to soothe her as Lily rubbed her eyes then tried to push away from Andrea.

“Ms. Malone?” a female voice called out. Andrea stood with the two girls held tightly in her arms.

“Yes?”

“Oh, wow, I didn’t know you had two children with you.”

“Um yeah, I’m watching one for my best friend,” Andrea explained as she adjusted both girls and Lily rubbed her snotty nose against her t-shirt.

“Now I wish someone else would have answered my call,” the woman said as she stepped forward and reached to take Lucy.

Andrea let her, the woman was a police officer after all. Andrea picked up the diaper bags and carrier, adjusted Lily in her arms as she squirmed again, and followed the officer to another room which was quiet and secluded. It looked a lot more comfortable than the waiting room she’d been in.

“Are you Detective Murphy?” Andrea managed to ask as she set the bags on the long dark table and the carrier on the floor.

“Yes, ma’am. Is this little one I’m holding yours?”

“Yes, she is, that’s Lucy. Will you please explain to me why I’m here at almost three in the morning?” Andrea asked and adjusted Lily again. She reached to take Lucy but Detective Murphy shook her head.

“I don’t mind holding her, she seems more relaxed than

Lily. Is it okay if I hold her for a little bit? You're new here aren't you?"

"Sure, you can hold her, thanks. And yes, I moved out here shortly before I had Lucy, I wanted to be closer to my best friend, Candice."

"Ms. Malone, I'm so sorry to tell you this, and I don't know any easy way to tell you, but Candice and Caleb were killed last night. We suspect a robbery, their wallets, jewelry, and anything else valuable were taken from them. The only reason we know who they were... well, it's a small town," Detective Murphy explained.

Andrea just stared at the detective, everything felt like it was moving in slow motion. Caleb and Candice were gone? A robbery? In this small town? Why?

"Ms. Malone, are you still with me?" Detective Murphy asked.

Andrea's gray eyes met the detective's green-brown eyes. "What? I'm sorry. Are you sure?"

Detective Murphy adjusted Lucy. "We tried to call all of their family, but no one answered but you, we need you to identify them. We'll do everything in our power to find who did this, they were great people."

"What about Lucy and Lily? I can't leave them," Andrea whispered as tears began to fill her eyes. Her best friend was gone, what was she going to do?

"I'll have a couple officers come in and take care of them while I take you to the morgue."

Andrea flinched a little at the word morgue. "Can't... can't you wait to get a hold of one of their family members? I don't think I can do it."

"We've already tried again, and we waited at least four hours before we called you. I'm sorry I can't make this painless."

Andrea saw the compassion in the detective's green-brown

eyes. She finally took the rest of her in, brown wavy hair, a warm skin tone and petite. Andrea choked back a sob. “Okay,” she said and sighed in defeat.

“All right, I’ll be back with a couple of officers to watch the babies.”

Andrea nodded her head. She had no clue what was in store for her, twenty-five years old and she never once had to identify a body. She shivered at the thought but tried to keep the tears at bay. She had to do this.

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Elijah Cameron woke up to the four a.m. alarm. Ranching started early. He turned the alarm off and rolled out of bed. He checked his phone like every morning. Four missed calls and two voicemails.

He frowned, that was rare. He looked at the number but he didn’t recognize it. He dialed his voicemail and listened to the two messages. Both were from the Whitehorse Police Department. What the hell? He called them back and asked for Detective Murphy as the message instructed.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Cameron, she’s currently with someone. But I’m sure she would want you to come down here, there’s been an accident but that’s all I can tell you over the phone, you should get here as quickly as you can.”

“Okay, I’ll be there soon,” he replied and hung up, forgetting the shower. He threw on his dark jeans and a white T-shirt, headed downstairs and pulled on his dark brown, worn boots. He grabbed his keys and brown Stetson then headed out the door.

He shot a text to a couple of the guys who showed up early to let them know where he went and that he’d be back soon.

He jogged over to his gray two-fifty super duty and headed into town.

A million thoughts ran through his mind as he rushed to the police station. What kind of an accident? Who was involved? His heart began to race as he made the drive. He pulled out his phone to call his big brother but it went straight to voicemail. Odd.

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Andrea jumped when the door opened again. She looked up to see Detective Murphy usher in two male officers.

Andrea felt unsure at first, the feeling must have been written all over her face.

“It’s okay, Ms. Malone. This is Officer Dean and Officer Carl, they’re fathers and know how to handle children well,” Detective Murphy explained.

Andrea let out a sigh and began to get up, kissing both girls she said, “I’ll be right back, sweeties.” Lucy and Lily both grabbed for her and it broke her heart not being able to take them.

She followed Detective Murphy down the skinny hallway to a door. Murphy turned toward her and squeezed her arm. Andrea locked eyes with the woman.

“I know this is going to be hard but I will not leave your side,” the detective assured.

Andrea took a deep breath and nodded her head. She just wanted to get this done and go home. She was exhausted, the girls were exhausted and she just wanted to be able to let all the emotions out.

They walked into the room, she felt an instant chill crawl along her exposed skin. She wrapped her arms around herself tightly, letting her body shiver. Everything sent her reeling. One wall was completely bare, the other wall was metal and had small metal doors. She took a deep, uncalming breath as Detective Murphy walked up in between two doors.



“Okay, I know this is going to be difficult.”

“Just do it,” Andrea gritted out between clenched teeth, no matter how much they talked it wasn’t going to change anything and wasn’t going to prepare her. She tried to prepare herself a little better as the detective opened the first drawer, a sheet covered the body.

The detective slowly pulled the sheet back, there lay Caleb Cameron. He was so pale, so lifeless. Tears blurred her vision as she looked away from him quickly. “Yeah, that’s Caleb,” she choked out.

Murphy pushed the table back in and closed the door. She stepped back to move to the next door beside where Caleb’s body lay. She slowly pulled the table out and lowered the other sheet.

The tears fell. “That’s Candice.” Andrea couldn’t believe what she was looking at. Her best friend of twenty years lying there pale, lifeless just as Caleb was.

Andrea turned away quickly and rushed out of the cold room. She couldn’t find the bathroom, she rushed out the front door and lost everything she had eaten earlier.

She collapsed to her knees as she cried. She held her stomach tightly as she knelt there crying.

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Elijah was standing in front of the receptionist at the police department and chatting with her a little, waiting for Detective Murphy to show up.

All of a sudden he heard the sound of pounding footsteps. His head jerked up and he saw the short spitfire he couldn’t mistake. Andie Malone, Candice’s best friend.

He watched her take off out the door and fall to the ground. He took off after her and heard the gut-wrenching

sound of her getting sick and the tears. He crouched down behind her a little, “Andie, what’s wrong?” he asked calmly.

She turned toward him a little. Her beautiful gray eyes were wide in shock and tears profusely spilled down her cheeks.

“Oh, Eli,” she sobbed out but apparently couldn’t say anything else.

Elijah didn’t know what to do, he pulled her little body back against his huge one. “Calm down and talk to me, Andie.”

She shook her head quickly then began to pull away from him. “I have to get the girls,” she whispered.

“Lucy and Lily?” Eli asked gently.

She nodded and stood up, stumbling a little.

He reached out and caught her, her body felt so cold. “Andie?” he questioned as the door behind him opened.

“Ms. Malone,” Detective Murphy called out. “Oh, thank goodness, you’re still here, the babies are crying. I tried and so did Officer Dean and Officer Carl, we just can’t get them to calm down.”

Andie pulled away from Eli and headed back inside. She seemed so dazed and confused. Eli followed her inside and Detective Murphy followed behind him.

“Eli, can we talk for a minute?”

Eli sighed as he watched Andie rush away. He couldn’t believe she was only wearing booty shorts, flip-flops, and an old t-shirt. She should have known better than to wear something like that.

He heard a throat clear and he turned back to the detective. “What happened, Murphy?” he demanded almost glaring at her.

“There was an incident with Caleb and Candice, no one but Ms. Malone answered, we found her in recent messages and knew she had Lily. Eli, they were robbed and we believe

there was a struggle. Caleb and Candice, both of them are gone. Eli, I'm so sorry."

"What?" he gasped out as he stumbled down into a chair.

"Eli, knowing Caleb he fought the perp off, but they were shot," Murphy explained trying to meet his eyes.

He looked away to back down the hall. "So what did you need Andie for?"

"She was the last one we called, we didn't know she had a daughter as well, we only knew she was watching Lily, we needed someone to confirm who we had here," Murphy explained.

"Out of everyone you had to drag her down here to identify who's lying in the morgue? Well, I'm here now, so let's do this." Anger filled him, how dare Murphy pull Andie into this. She wasn't even family. She was the best friend of his sister-in-law.

"She already did," Murphy whispered.

Eli was up out of the chair in an instant, no wonder she was such a wreck. "Where is she?" he demanded, his temper flaring even more. He always was the one who had a short fuse, Caleb had always been the calm one.

"Second door on the right," Murphy answered.

He took off to the door she directed him to, he pushed it open and couldn't believe it when he saw Andie trying to console both her daughter and his niece. "Andie, here let me," he took Lucy who was closer to him and began to bounce her up and down while Andie dealt with Lily. "Come on, let me get you girls home."

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Andie looked up at Eli, she frowned a little when she met his amber eyes, they were more coppery right now, "Just help me get them to the car, I can handle everything else."

“Andie, I can help,” Eli tried again.

She shook her head. “No, I’ll handle it,” she said icily. She learned a while ago not to trust men. Not to depend on them. And this cowboy would be no different.

“I can call my mom, she’ll take Lily,” he offered.

“No, she still needs to be told with a chance to acknowledge it, Eli. Not be told then adding ‘hey take care of your granddaughter’. It’s fine, Eli, I can handle it.” She placed a now calm Lily in her carrier, grabbed the bags and rushed out of the room. She made her way to her candy blue Camry with Eli right behind her.

She placed Lily in the car and buckled the carrier down, then took Lucy and walked around the other side of the car and placed the miniature her in the other carrier.

She got in the driver’s side and went to start the car. She had to get away from Eli, away from the police station. She just wanted to be home.

She heard a knock on her window which made her jump. She looked over and Eli was standing there. She closed her eyes tightly but put her window down. “What, Eli?”

“Do you have my number?” he asked as he leaned down in the window, which couldn’t be easy with him being over six feet tall.

“No, I don’t, Eli. You know I don’t.” She sighed feeling exasperated, they never got to know each other over the last year that she’d been here. So when would they have ever exchanged numbers?

“Phone,” he demanded holding out his huge hand toward her.

She narrowed her eyes at him, refusing to look into his eyes. She grabbed her phone from the front seat and handed it to him. “I don’t know why we have to do this, Eli.”

“Because you shouldn’t be alone during this, so if you need

me or anyone just call.” He finished putting his number in her phone and handed it back to her.

She’d just delete it later, she thought, as she took the phone and threw it in the seat beside her again.

“I’m serious, Andie, I’ll check on you later. I’ll talk to Mom and Dad, see how they want to handle all of this. I don’t want to ask but can you call Candice’s family and let them know?” He squeezed her shoulder.

Tears began to fill her eyes. “Yeah, I’ll handle it.”

“Thanks, Andie.”

“Can I go now?”

“Yeah.”

She waited for him to step back from the car before she backed out and began to head home. She had just pulled into the driveway as both girls began to cry again. She closed her eyes tightly, looked like she wasn’t opening her bakery today. It didn’t matter it was right beside her house.

There was just no way. She got out of the car, got the babies and bags out, then headed to the small two-bedroom gray house. She laid them both down on the floor in the living room near their toys and began to prepare their bottles.

Lucy seemed to calm down once she was out of the seat but poor Lily wasn’t having any part of calming down.

Andie rushed to her and began to feed her first. The poor little girl knew something was wrong.

Andie let out a sigh of relief as Lily began to eat. Once she was done, Andie changed her diaper then laid her down in the play and pack as she finally began to fall asleep, over exhausted.

She did the same with Lucy and laid her in the play and pack also. She pulled out her phone and called Mrs. Howell, Candice’s mother.

Mrs. Howell answered on the third ring. “Andrea, have you heard from Candice? I cannot get a hold of her.”

Andie bit back the tears. “That’s why I’m calling, Mrs. Howell. I don’t want to do this over the phone but if you’re not sitting down, Mrs. Howell, I think you should,” Andie said.

“Andrea, dear, you’re scaring me but I’m sitting down.”

“Mrs. Howell, Caleb and Candice were involved in a robbery, they were shot late last night. They... um... they didn’t make it. They’re both gone,” Andie barely got the words out before the tears started again.

“Oh my God! The baby?”

“She’s with me, I’ve had her since last night. Caleb and Candice were having their weekly date night,” Andie explained.

“Oh my God, Bruce and I will come out right away. Are you okay, Andie?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. I’ve got two little girls to take care of at the moment, they come first,” she whispered into the phone.

“We’ll be there soon, sweetie.” Mrs. Howell hung up the phone.

Andie threw her phone on the other side of the couch and checked on the girls to make sure they were still okay. She lay down on the couch and curled up into a ball as she stared blankly at the wall. She felt so numb, she hadn’t felt this numb in her life. What was she going to do now?