
Chapter 1

Wes' only focus that evening was the wild Mustang. The goal was to have the haltered beast stride alongside him just a piece farther than she had the night before, from the barn to the second fence post that stood up out of the split rail. After only stepping a few feet outside of the barn doors, Mabel threw her tawny head back, whinnying, her golden mane shaking.

"Shh, girl, it's okay." Wes stroked the silky waves. Chocolate, his old brown Arabian or Dipper, the Clydesdale that he frequently rode bareback, would have nuzzled his hand gratefully in response. Mabel instead withdrew from his touch, seeming to want to hex him with the white star that sat centered on her head, just above her eyes.

After crossing the border just a few weeks ago to get her, Wes was taking his time taming Mabel, and she was still a danger. The place where Texas meets Mexico is an unusual place, and not one Wes frequented. A little too exciting for Wes' taste. But when he got word about the wild, golden-haired mare who was destined for an overcrowded holding facility, he knew he had to have her.

Taming her was proving difficult. She had made a noise that sounded like a wretched screeching all along those dusty roads that led back home. It took days to get her to eat and even then, she was the pickiest thing. Mabel existed on a diet rich in apples, carrots and sugar cubes as treats, alongside all the fresh hay Texas could offer her. Wes loved her dearly, though she had yet to show anything more than mere tolerance towards him.

Noting her distress, Wes looked down the mile-long dirt road to the entrance of the ranch. Beyond the trees, dust from the gravel road billowed over the soft, citrus colors of the setting sun. Out of place in the quiet evening, a shiny black sports car tore towards Wes and Mabel.

“Damn if Garrett will ever learn.” Wes tightened his grip on Mabel’s lead rope and guided her back into the barn. The spacious, resilient building stood proud, same as he imagined it did when his great grandfather built it. His ancestors were on his mind when just last week he put a fresh coat of red paint on the weathered boards. Rays from the setting sun shone through the door, the familiar scent of fresh hay filled the air. Mabel calmed at the sight of her stall. Wes safely tucked her into the stall, removed the halter and hung it on the wall.

Once Mabel was settled, Wes headed back out to the drive. It was time to see what his younger brother, Garrett, was up to now. Wes leaned against the split rail fence, crossed his arms and smiled, despite his disapproval. Garrett was nothing if not a risk-taker, but Wes loved him deeply. Born less than a year and a half apart, growing up the boys were inseparable and best friends. Wes was the level headed one of the two and a protective older brother.

The car continued to tear towards the ranch, finally slowing down as it approached Wes. Garrett cut the wheel fast spewing rocks and stopping only a few feet from where Wes stood.

“Brother,” Garrett sprung from the flashy, rented vehicle quickly and Wes hoped Garrett had invested in the additional

insurance as he had barely put the car into park. Garrett stood in front of him, dressed in the latest fashion. His brother's Hollywood smile and the mischievous sparkle in his eyes never changed, despite his ever-updating wardrobe.

Wes wrapped his brother in a tight hug, noting with pleasure that his being a head taller than his younger brother had not changed, either.

"Good to see you, bro." Garrett ruffled Wes' long sandy waves. "Dude, you need a haircut."

Wes smoothed the unruly locks. He'd been so busy with the ranch; he hadn't noticed that it was time for a trim. Garrett's dark hair, on the other hand, had what looked like a \$200 haircut, and about a bottle of gel to go with it. Deciding not to take the bait this early in the visit, Wes just smiled good-naturedly, saying, "Good to see you too, Gare. What brings you to town?"

"Just needed some fresh air." Garrett looked to Wes, the sparkle dancing in his eyes. "There's someone I want you to meet." He ran over to the passenger door, leaving Wes to stand there and shake his head at his brother, as 'fresh air' to Garrett meant eating copious amounts of Mama's cooking, washing it down with a few beers from Rays, then sleeping until about the time the sun was ready to set again. And it also meant never lifting a finger to help with the chores.

Garrett swung the black car door open wide. From where he stood, Wes could see a mass of golden curls emerge, a pair of large, chocolate brown eyes peered over the top of the car. Garrett grabbed the arm of the owner of the lovely curls and eyes and brought her around the front of the car.

Wes gazed at the littlest bit of a woman he had ever seen. She was tiny in stature, with a curvy, woman's shape. She wore a prairie style long skirt, and her curls shone like a halo on her head. The little lady did not look like one of his brother's usual picks. They were fast, sleek city girls, but with this one, Wes thought he must be looking at an angel.

Garrett smiled hugely, proudly noting his big brother's approval. "Wes, meet Karen. Karen- Wes."

Karen timidly held her hand out towards him. He took it in his, moving it up and down, gently. Wes feared he would crush her dainty grasp in his huge, calloused one. The touch of her soft hand brought a warmth to him he hadn't before felt.

"Pleasure to meet you," she cooed in a melodious voice. Her eyes met his, and a flush crept onto her beautiful face.

"Pleasure's all mine." Wes held her gaze.

Garrett let out a boisterous laugh. "Let go; you're gonna break her hand, man."

Wes immediately dropped the embrace. Karen looked down, blushing furiously now. Wes shook his head, trying to break the trance this half-pint had him in.

"You'd better be the one to tell Ma we have company. She'll be none too pleased with you." Wes joked. They hadn't known that Garrett was coming, much less one of Garrett's flavor of the months was going to be joining him. Ma was going to dress Garrett up and down for not giving her an advanced notice to get her guest room ready.

Garrett smiled. "Let's go, Karen. She's going to love you. Garrett put his arm around Karen and led her to the ranch house. She gave a small glance over her shoulder as they left, her brown eyes locked on his for only a second, but it was long enough for Wes to know that he was in serious trouble.

Wes washed his hands at his mother's kitchen sink, taking his time. He could hear the rest of the group in the dining room, Karen's tinkling laugh reaching his ears and making his face burn. Maybe he should just skip dinner or better yet, come back in a week when Garrett and Karen had gone back to the city. His

stomach growled loudly, letting him know missing out on his mama's brisket was not going to be an option.

He tucked his shirt into his pants, smoothed his hair back, and sidled into the dining room, his head barely clearing the door frame. Neatly folding his lean body into the chair, Wes kept his eyes on the food. Without looking up to confirm it, he felt Karen's warm gaze was upon him.

"Well, there you are, honey, you are usually the first one to the table when I make brisket, not the last," his mother said. Wes' stomach growled again. Karen laughed. He looked up, feeling a grin spread over his face.

"Sorry, I'm late, Ma. Let's eat." Wes bowed his head as his mama said grace, sneaking a peek at Karen as he did. When he looked up, her eyes were on him again. She blushed furiously and quickly looked down at her plate. Next to her, eyes closed, Garrett had a smug look on his handsome face, he never could tolerate his mother's religious tendencies. When she finished saying the blessing, Garrett added, "Good, grief let's eat."

Karen nudged him, disapprovingly. Garrett laughed and started serving huge portions of the home cooked food onto their plates.

Ma's face shined with pride as Garrett dug into her famous creamed potatoes. She turned her attention to his latest squeeze. "So, Karen, where are you from?"

Karen finished chewing her small bite and dabbed her mouth with the napkin she had laid in her lap at the start of the meal. "Ma'am, I'm from a small town in the Carolinas, but I went to college in the city. I got a job teaching kindergarten right out of college, and I've been at the same school ever since."

Wes continued to eat his meal quietly. A teacher, that was very different from Gare's usual conquests—models, actresses, women who thought of themselves as models and actresses. Never a humanitarian type.

"Now how in the world did you two meet? I know Garrett

doesn't come across many elementary school teachers in his line of work," their mother teased, good-naturedly.

"Yeah, not too many come across my path at the stock exchange." Garrett laughed. He was a high dealing broker on Wall Street, and the people he interacted with tended to be on the more glamorous side of life.

"It was a party of a mutual friend's," Karen explained.

"She'd had one too many rum punches, and I came to her rescue," Garrett said, a lewd grin on his face.

Karen turned the deepest shade of red a woman could turn. "Don't tell that story in front of your mama," she whispered to him in her soft twang.

What on earth was a little wisp of a thing like that doing, drinking hard liquor? Wes couldn't help the instant wave of protective heat that ran through his blood. He had known this girl for less than a few hours, and already he wanted to take her under his wing. Had Wes been at that party, he would have thrown all one hundred pounds of this girl over his shoulder, carried her home, and lit a fire to her bottom for doing something so stupid.

Karen was not his, she was his brother's girl, and Wes' mind was wandering into dangerous territory. Wes quickly stood, taking his plate with him. "You all will have to excuse me. I've forgotten something I must do."

Garrett looked at his brother, curiously. Wes was never known to leave the table before dessert. "What could you possibly need to do, right this instant?"

"Ranch life isn't like Wall Street; stuff has to be taken care of, or animals get hurt." Wes immediately regretted his sharp comment when he saw the good-natured look leave his brother's face. It wasn't Garrett's fault that Wes couldn't be in the same room as his girl, or that when their father had died Wes volunteered to stay on and run the ranch. Wes pasted a smile on his

face, “And the pay isn’t quite as good either, brother.” He winked and was relieved to see Garrett relax.

Garrett put his arm around Karen, “Just don’t be gone too long, I want you to get to know my girl.” Karen looked slightly uncomfortable under Wes’ gaze.

“Of course.” Wes nodded to them both. “Thanks for dinner, Ma. Delicious as always.” He bent down and kissed his mother on the cheek. He turned his attention towards Karen. “Pleasure to meet you, ma’am.” Her face blushed, and she mumbled a goodbye. Wes turned to leave, relieved to be out of her enchanting presence.

Wes did not keep his word but instead opted for doing ranch chores late into the night. He dropped into bed, well after midnight, thoroughly exhausted. His fatigue didn’t stop him from hearing Gare entering the extra guest room and Karen’s sweet giggles. He covered his head with his pillow, feeling anguish. The pillow wasn’t enough to block out the sounds. Wes reached over to his stereo and put his favorite song on repeat. Eventually, he drifted off into a fitful sleep.

The sun began to appear behind the hills, as it did every morning, brightening Wes’ mood after such a restless night. The early air was fresh and crisp, untainted by the pollution that filled towns and cities. Wes took a deep breath as he stepped onto the porch, appreciating the full beauty of the land that was his father’s and his grandfather’s before him. A line of majestic Bur Oaks stood proudly on each side of the road. The native trees thrived despite the alkaline soil and sea spray. Wes’ great, great grandfather, Samuel Parr, the founder of the ranch had dug up the saplings, down by the riverbanks where they tended to thrive in the limestone soil. He planted the little trees lining the road

when he was the same age Wes was now. They had grown to be as sturdy as the man who had planted them.

Wes took a sip from the steaming mug in his hand. The coffee was hot and strong just the way he liked it and the same way he made it every morning. The promise of a new day was fresh on his mind. Today would be okay. He would stay away from Karen and focus on his life. The couple would be gone soon enough, and then Wes could fully return to the life he had built for himself. One he found completely satisfying.

Walking to the barn to feed and water the horses, Wes was surprised to see the already opened doors. What he found in the barn made his heart sink and soar at the same time; Karen was cooing and patting Mabel.

The little lady stood wearing the most curve-hugging, faded blue jeans Wes had ever seen cradle a bottom. She had on a simple light blue button-down flannel shirt, and her golden curls were pinned to her head haphazardly. Karen turned to greet him, and again he was lost in the warmth of her chocolate gaze. Damn. So much for a new day.

Karen's mischievous smile was too much for Wes. He looked down, without returning the grin and quickly made his way to do his chores. "Morning, ma'am," he mumbled as he drifted past her. The scent of her vanilla perfume was almost his undoing. Instead of grabbing her up and taking her to bed, he somehow managed to dig the pitchfork into the hay. Avoiding her was going to be impossible. He would just have to go about his daily routine, make small talk, and stop looking at her. Especially at the back of her in those jeans.

Karen giggled. "Ma'am? I'm used to the term, being from the South and all, but I feel so old when you call me that. Just call me Carrie."

Carrie. The name was so much more fitting for this little girl than her formal name of Karen. With his back to her, Wes smiled, despite the fact he was trying hard to guard his heart.

What he wanted to call her was “young lady,” but that would be wildly inappropriate. Carrie would have to do.

“Carrie, huh? But Gare calls you, Karen.” He snuck a glance at her out of the corner of his eyes. Her face flushed at the question, as she stroked and coddled Mabel. To his surprise, the horse was tolerating the stranger's affections.

“He, um, he’s more formal in the city. You know? With me being so short, Garrett didn’t think people would take me seriously, calling me Carrie. This place just feels so much like home and everyone there has always called me Carrie.” Her smile returned as the horse nuzzled her neck. “Sometimes I even fail to answer Garrett when he calls my name.”

Wes continued to feed and water the horses. He was already feeling possessive of this woman, and having his own nickname for her was not going to help matters. Much to his dismay and excitement, Carrie jumped right in and helped. She told him about how she had been around horses all her life. They brought a calming presence as well as a thrill of excitement. They made life feel complete. After being in the city for so long, she couldn’t stay away from the barn. Just the earthy wholesome scent alone drew her in.

Working alongside Wes, he mucked out the stalls, using a pitchfork to move the straw to the manure pile, while Carrie pitched the fresh straw into the stalls and made clean beds for the animals. Carrie chatted non-stop as she worked. Telling Wes that she knew she must sound like an idiot, but just couldn’t stop herself from babbling on; about the south, the people there, how much she missed the country life and her family’s farm. Wes nodded and smiled at the right spots, throwing in a mm-hmm, here and there.

Stopping in mid-sentence, Carrie brushed a strand of hair out of her face with the back of her hand. “I’m sorry I’m rambling. I’m just, I’m just, I’m so...” She suddenly burst into tears, “homesick.” Sobs continued to rack her small body.

Wes stopped in his tracks. What was the protocol here? He knew he should not step in, but the tears flowing from this little girl had his heartstrings in a knot.

“Do you want me to go get Garrett?” he offered. He knew his brother wouldn’t be up for hours. He loved to rest at the ranch when he was away from the fast pace of Wall Street.

“No,” she said through her lessening sobs. “Garrett doesn’t know. He just loves the city so much and I never told him I don’t. I’ll be fine, just... just give me a minute.” Carrie took several deep breaths, drying her eyes with the tail of her shirt.

Wes put his hands in his pockets to stop himself from wrapping his arms around her. Getting to know her, knowing he felt something for her was wrong. He tried to hold his tongue, but the question slipped out in a whisper. “Why do you stay?”

She wiped away the last tears with the backs of her hands, then dried them on her jeans. “For Garrett, of course,” she answered quickly. “And my kids. It’s my first year teaching, and the school is underfunded. My students come from pretty tough backgrounds. I just love them and try to pour myself into them every day.” Carrie’s heart, soul, and every extra dime of her paycheck went straight to the children in her classroom. From her pocket, she had funded a cupboard of snacks for the kids who ‘forgot’ theirs, extra art supplies, even carpets and beanbag chairs to make her reading corners cozy. She often worked long after the children left, creating individualized lesson plans for those who were behind. The janitor, Mr. Phil, walked Carrie to the city bus stop in the dark, many nights.

Wes’ already aching heart grew three more sizes for this stranger. If he wasn’t careful, he was going to declare his love for his brother’s girlfriend less than twenty-four hours after being introduced. Wes needed a distraction.

“Do you ride?”

“Of course,” she visibly cheered up. “I grew up on a farm. Unless you think riding on a farm is much different than riding

on a ranch,” she teased. Carrie walked down the length of the barn, petting, and cooing at each horse in turn. Wes followed along behind her. The horses of The Lonestar Cattle Company seemed as smitten with this little vixen as the men did.

When she had visited each horse, in turn, Carrie came back to Mabel’s stall; her face shone with delight. Mabel was a vision to anyone, but especially in the eye of the horse loving beholder. “I’ll take this one.” She petted the horse longingly.

Wes stepped protectively between Carrie and Mabel, not sure which one he was trying to protect from the other. “No.”

“Why not? I’m a great rider.” Her face remained a mask of calm, but a hint of temper flared in her eyes. Feisty. Wes liked her even more.

“She’s not yet tame.”

With an air of haughtiness, Carrie said, “I know what I’m doing.” She pushed past Wes and placed a hand on the latch of the stall. Wes grabbed the arm attached to the offending hand. He quickly turned Carrie, so she was fully facing him. He stood well over a foot taller than her, and she shrunk back in his commanding presence.

He leaned down his voice grave. “I said, no, young lady.”

A blush ran up through her cheeks and brought a shine to her eyes. Wes could feel the tension between them, and it was delicious.

Carrie straightened herself to her full height. “I’ll ride her before I leave. Make no mistake.” An angry, yet playful glint shone in her eyes as she was trying to tug her arm away.

“You make no mistake—you ride that horse, and I will spank your bottom until you aren’t sitting comfortably for a week. Garrett’s girl, or not.” He held her arm firmly, rendering her tugging useless. “My ranch, my rules, little girl.”

She stood, shocked, her eyes wide. In a breathless whisper, she said, “Like a Daddy.” Carrie had dated few men. She held onto them for a few months, but none could fulfill her. Each man

lacked what Carrie desired most. It was something she could never quite put into words. Finally, meeting Garrett, she had put those thoughts away. Time to settle down and no longer be looking for something that didn't exist.

Pinned by the strength of Wes' hand, the threat of his discipline ringing in her ears, a piece of Carrie's life suddenly fell into place. The fog cleared and light shed on her lifelong desires. What she had always been looking for stood in front of her in the form of her boyfriend's brother.

Wes' blood had never run hotter than it did at that moment. The way she said the word, "daddy," had every ounce of his bottled up masculine energy roaring for her. It was wrong. He instantly released her arm, spun on his heel and headed out of the barn without a word. He didn't have the heart to look at her face.

His red truck sat, dusty and familiar. He jumped in the cab and cranked the engine- thankful he always left the key in it. In less than a minute he was headed down the dirt road.

Wes drove until he knew for certain he was out of sight of the ranch. "Damn. Damn it, Damn it all to Hell." Wes slammed his fists on his steering wheel then ran his fingers through his long hair. He knew it had been wrong to run out of the barn, but what was he supposed to do with that? Yes, he had threatened to spank her, and he meant every word of it, but her response revealed a feeling so carnal in him, he knew he would never be the same man he was moments before.

He ran his hands through his hair again, grateful for the straight road and clear sightlines because he could barely concentrate on driving. Maybe Garrett was right; he did need a haircut. Anything to take his mind off of Carrie. The words "like a daddy," ran through his mind as he drove the many miles it took to get to the sleepy town of Poke.