

CHAPTER 1

Madeline Westwood clutched the dashboard for dear life as her daughter slammed on the brakes. The SUV screeched to a halt in the driveway of the Hidden Lodge Ranch, their vacation destination. What a way to arrive.

“Mom, I really need to use the bathroom. I’ll be right back to help with the luggage.”

Natalie, twenty-six, and blonde-haired, dashed toward the entrance, leaving the driver’s door of the rented SUV open.

Madeline leaned back in the seat and sighed. Even on a Friday in early June, the snow formed smooth, drizzled icing into the crevices of the San Juan Mountains in Colorado. The lodge stretched rustic, ranch style to her right. This mountain resort and ranch her friend and her friend’s husband had established would be a refreshing two weeks away from St. Louis. Ahead, three cowboys sat on the corral railing watching a fourth work with a sorrel horse. She fingered her heart-shaped necklace with tiny pave-set diamonds, missing her late husband, Mark, who would have loved this place. Had it already been three years since his death? God must have helped her through this time, or she wouldn’t be here. She’d be in a pile of grief closed in on herself.

She reached for the handle and elbowed the door open. Might as well get the suitcases.

Stepping to the rear of the car while wearing comfortable flats, she lifted the dusty hatch and pulled out the luggage. Hefting the largest bag to the ground with a grunt, she stacked a smaller one on top of it, and grabbed Natalie's large suitcase. Maneuvering all three, she walked backwards. Bumping into something solid she tripped.

"Eek!" She careened sideways toward the pavement stretching out her left arm to brace herself.

But the expected impact never happened. Large hands gripped her arms, holding her right above the ground. The luggage lay scattered on the asphalt.

"Whoa there, darlin'." A deep voice reminded Madeline of her grandmother's gravy—smooth, warm, and probably not good for her heart. A burst of warmth filled her insides.

As the strong hands steadied her, she glanced to the side to find a large horse closing in, then snuffing her hair. She jerked her head away.

"Back, Lance!"

The man's voice again. *Where had he come from?*

The silvery-white stallion with a black blaze stared at her with large, curious brown eyes. She hadn't even heard the animal.

She straightened. A tall cowboy with a black Stetson shading his face from the intense sunlight stood too close. *Goodness, they grow them tall out here.*

"What were you doing right behind me?" She stepped back and folded her arms across her chest.

"I was walking my horse across the driveway because someone blocked our path over there with two UTVs." He gestured in the direction of the dirt trail. "Are you all right, ma'am?"

She swallowed, grappling for words. “I...um...think so.” She brushed the dirt from her pants, glanced around, and spotted the strewn luggage. She flattened her lips.

“I didn’t mean to startle you.” The cowboy held out his hand for her to shake, his rolled-up work shirt revealing tanned, muscled forearms. “I’m Clint Remington.” Releasing his stallion’s reins, he removed his hat.

Madeline sucked in her breath, and a vise gripped her heart. *Mark!* No. This man had a mustache, unlike her husband. Would Mark have looked like this with a mustache? She stared. Thick black hair with threads of silver dipped into a soft wave over his forehead. Dark green eyes with blue flecks peered down at her.

A strange, warm sensation started in her feet and edged up her body. *Don’t faint.* Had she stepped into another universe? *God, what’s going on?* Shock, fear, and a hint of happiness grappled with her brain. This is impossible.

Inhale. One, two, three, four, five.

Exhale. One, two, three, four. Inhale—

After catching her breath, it dawned on her she didn’t shake his hand.

Mark’s replica spoke with that soothing voice. “Ma’am, are you sure you’re all right? Why don’t you sit? He gestured to a bench on the front porch and placed his hat back on his head.

Don’t look at him! As she slowed her breathing, she noticed bits of clothing scattered on the ground. The latch on her large, hard-sided case had popped open, and now the new, colorful lace underthings Natalie had convinced her to purchase on sale were on display. Oh no! Her head cleared, and she hurried to shove the delicates inside the suitcase. Heat ran up her neck and cheeks.

The stranger helped her gather the strewn items. He paused and dropped Madeline's blue lace cami into the luggage and straightened. She glanced up at him. His eyes were glued to her face.

If she could melt into the ground, she would. "I can get the rest." Shoving the clothing into the suitcase, she slammed it shut. A small piece of lace hung out the side, another reminder of her mortification. She righted the luggage and stood in front of it.

He flashed a cocked grin and raised one eyebrow.

A shiver danced up her spine. Was he flirting? Why did he look so much like Mark?

Footsteps padded on the lodge's wooden steps. "Mom, what happened?"

Her daughter rushed over to her side, moving her head to take in the remaining fallen luggage.

The cowboy went to collect the bags. "Afternoon, miss." He nodded toward Natalie.

Her daughter froze and gaped at Mister—what was his name? In all the commotion, Madeline had already forgotten.

"Natalie. Natalie," Madeline whispered and snapped her fingers in front of her daughter. "It's rude to stare."

The cowboy straightened with the two largest pieces of luggage in his hands. "I gather you two haven't been out West before?"

Her daughter had summoned her wits. "No, we haven't. I'm Natalie Westwood and this is my mom, Madeline. Thank you. We can get the luggage."

Madeline was still riveted in place. Her breathing had slowed, but now chills ran up her arms.

“I’m glad to help.” He started up the stairs carrying their luggage with the tiny piece of lace sticking out much like a hand waving a distress signal.

How humiliating.

Madeline glanced toward Natalie.

Her daughter mouthed the word, “Dad?”

Heat surfaced in Madeline’s cheeks. She wasn’t losing her mind. Her daughter saw the resemblance too. *God, how was this possible? I came here to relax not reopen a wound.*

Madeline nodded abruptly before grabbing the remainder of the smaller suitcases, and following the man inside the rustic building.

He placed their luggage in front of the check-in counter, then pinched the brim of his Stetson. “Good day, ladies. I’m sure we’ll meet again.” His broad smile and wink were directed at Madeline.

Madeline rested her hand on the check-in counter. The touch of the smooth wood grounded her after the shock of meeting the cowboy.

Silence stepped between them like a third person.

As they waited for someone to check them in, Natalie spoke. “Mom, are you sure you’re all right? We can leave if that man upset you. His looks were uncanny.”

Madeline set her purse on the counter and stepped closer to her daughter. “He didn’t upset me, but his appearance sure shocked me. I can’t believe how much he resembles your dad. Besides, why did he have to be so…”

“So what?” Natalie bent forward and made eye contact with her.

“Appealing. He was appealing.” Should she have said that? Maybe Nat didn’t want her noticing men again.

Her daughter's smiling gaze met hers. "He could be someone you'll get to know while we're here. I wanted you to enjoy yourself, meet more people."

"I don't need to meet more people. I'm *fine* where I am in life. Volunteering at the museum three days a week is quite interesting. My book club and cooking classes keep me busy."

"I know, but it would be nice to expand your circle of friends." With her finger, Natalie rotated a tiny notepad on the counter.

Madeline's life was full. She had friends, at least the ones who'd remained after Mark's passing. "Don't worry about me."

Natalie tipped her head. "When was the last time you went out on a date?"

"I don't need to date." Although, dinner or a movie at times would be nice. She had some men friends at church. She hadn't been on a date since Mark passed. Was her grief holding her back or her loyalty to him? Having a husband wasn't mandatory to have a fulfilled life. Perhaps with her time here, she could take some time for reflection. Where was her life going? What was her goal in life?

"You might enjoy it."

Madeline placed her hands on her hips. "Most of the people I know are women. And I could hardly think of dating the museum's security guard, Ike, who is eighty! Sometimes college men come by to do research, but they're younger than you."

"Be serious."

A voice sounded from behind the door at the back of the counter. "I'll be right there."

"Take your time, Effie. It's Natalie."

Madeline rested her hand on Natalie's arm. "Let's enjoy our time together."

“Sorry we don’t see much of each other.” Natalie’s shoulders slumped.

Madeline wouldn’t say anything, but Natalie worked too hard designing women’s clothes. Natalie’s life was her own, and if Madeline wanted Natalie to stay out of her business, she needed to give her daughter the same courtesy. “Living in the same city was supposed to give us more time together. Let’s make the most of these two weeks.”

“Agreed.”

A tall, middle-aged woman slid behind the front desk. “So glad to see you both. Welcome to our Hidden Lodge.” Silver strands peppered the woman’s red hair. She wore jeans and a plum-colored T-shirt that said “Save the Wild Horses.”

“It’s been a while since the girls graduated college.” Madeline stepped around the counter and embraced Effie in a warm hug.

“It sure has. Hope you enjoy our humble ranch.” She extended her arm in a sweeping motion.

Natalie beamed. “I can’t believe I haven’t seen you since Glenna and I graduated from college. I remember you and Mom ran to Walmart five times to make sure we had everything for our dorm room the first day there.”

“How *is* Glenna, Effie?” Madeline asked.

“Loves her job in Philly. She’s up for promotion to detective at the police department.”

“How wonderful.”

Effie tapped Madeline’s arm. “Remember, you’re more than a guest. You’re family, and we have a lot to catch up on.” She handed the keys to Natalie. “Your room is down this hall and to the right.”

Madeline smiled. “Thank you so much.” She grabbed her purse, reached for her luggage, followed her daughter to their room, and dropped her suitcases on one of the beds.

A sitting area was adjacent to the bedroom. After Madeline opened the sliding door onto a cedar deck, she took a deep breath of the fresh mountain air and embraced a splendid view of the garden. Coleus, columbine, bellflowers, and the Aphrodite rose lifted their blooms to the sun. The rich scent of pine transported her back to a castle in Germany where Mark and she had toured. She closed her eyes remembering his smile. Warmth encompassed her heart.

She shut the glass door and moved to the bed to open her luggage and put away her clothes.

“You need a change of pace.” Natalie unzipped her bag and unclasped the strap holding her clothing in place.

Madeline stiffened. “What’s wrong with my pace? I’m as busy as ever.”

“As you said, all your friends are women. Since Dad passed away—”

“I miss him.” Madeline paused, clutching a shirt in her hand. Her heart clenched. She took a deep breath, and she pushed away the memory of being told of his sudden heart attack.

“You and Dad danced to all kinds of music. You two were the best partners. You must miss it.”

“Of course. It was one of our favorite pastimes.” Memories assailed her, crumbling the wall of protection she had constructed around her broken heart.

“Effie mentioned a place in town where they have country dancing.” Natalie shook out a flowered maxi skirt.

“I wouldn’t go without a partner.” She placed her Bible on the nightstand. “But I do want to go riding.”

“I remember Dad teaching me to ride when I was seven. Sure came in handy with all those diplomatic trips we took with him. By the way, Mom, I don’t recall you ever traveling with expensive jewelry except for your wedding ring. Don’t you think that necklace should be put in Effie’s safe? Mom, those *are* diamonds.”

Madeline tilted her head. “I’m sure this ranch is perfectly secure. We’re not in a third-world country where you have to lock up everything valuable.”

Natalie sighed. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I’ll be careful.” Madeline spoke over her shoulder as she carried toiletries into the bathroom. “By the way, how’s your job going?”

“Great. I enjoy working, but the environment stifles my creativity. I’d love to start my own line, run my own business, but Troy doesn’t think I can do it.” Natalie closed her luggage.

“Are you still dating him?” Maybe her daughter and Troy weren’t a good fit.

“We never actually dated.”

“Oh.”

“Mom, Troy and I are *friends*. He filled in when Dad had to cancel lunch plans. He’s polite, educated, and is a nice guy, but he’s not my type.”

“What is your type?” Madeline fingered the jeweled heart at her neck, the pendant Mark had given her on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Two months later, he was gone.

“I’d like someone more relaxed. Troy is too structured for me. Even his wardrobe is boring.” Natalie held up her hands. “Excuse me—efficient. Heaven forbid he should have something fun to wear. The man doesn’t own one T-shirt with a logo on it. A friend of his once made the mistake of giving him one, which read, ‘I have CDO. It’s like OCD, but the letters are

alphabetized.’ He regifted it.” She placed her laptop on the small round oak table in the corner of the room. “I’ll wait for the right man. I’ve given God a list.”

Madeline, too, had prayed for a good husband, but his life was short-lived. Why had God let him die so young? She had worn her wedding ring for almost a year after Mark’s passing. “A list?”

Her daughter sat on the bed with one leg tucked under her. “Here goes. He must love the Lord—first things first. Be attractive. He needs to hold a decent job, make me feel special, and be respectful to others and me. Willing to listen to my ideas and dreams. A love for children would be wonderful too. Oh, and if he loves animals, bonus! Am I asking too much?”

What a list. “God always answers prayers. Sometimes it’s a yes, no, or I have something better for you.” Madeline rubbed the ghost of her wedding band wondering how God would fill her loneliness. Mark’s image came to mind. And then the cowboy’s. Surely, he didn’t look *that* much like her husband.



Clint swung the gate open to the corral where Renegade stood defiant, staring at him. He shifted his Stetson against the glaring sun. Approaching the stallion with care, he released the coiled rope from his shoulder. Experience guided him. This was so routine that he could do it with his eyes closed.

“It’s okay, boy. I need to examine your leg.” Glad we brought our horses to Earl’s ranch.

The horse pawed the ground, stirring dust, and dipped its head, his majestic dark mane catching in the breeze.

As Clint stepped closer, the lariat snagged in his roughened hands.

The animal snorted.

Raising the rope, he approached the horse to place the loop over its head. Renegade reared, slamming his front hoofs into the dirt a little too close to Clint's boots.

"How about cooperating?" He kept impatience out of his voice and remained near the animal, letting the rope fall to his side, the knot held loosely in his hand. He'd wait.

While holding on to his patience, he prayed the fires in New Mexico would end. He envisioned his brother, Russ, honchoing the ranchers in the area, supporting the firefighters, and offering their ranch to the animals who had lost their homes. His sister-in-law, Honey, would help neighbors or provide food for the firefighters. His spunky niece, Amelia would probably be helping her mom. And his nephew, Justin, who had joined him here, reminded him of himself when he was younger.

Years ago, when he stood up for Russ at his wedding, he had hoped to find a good woman like Honey. At fifty, what did he have? He stared at Renegade. "Are you ready to stop limping on your back leg, big guy?"

The horse had stepped a few feet away from him. In a split second, Clint had the rope around the animal's neck. The animal reared, Clint tugged on the lariat, and Renegade froze in place, his back left leg shaking.

Boots thudded on the hard-packed dirt behind him. "Hey, Unc, want some help?"

"Yeah, Justin. Could you hold this while I check his gash?"

"Sure." His thirty-year-old nephew took the lariat from his hand.

"Quite a deep cut here. Not sure where he got it." Clint set the animal's hoof on the ground and went to his nephew's side. He took the rope from Justin and walked Renegade into the barn.

Once inside, he guided the stallion into a stall.

Justin stepped away. "I'll get some medicine."

"Thanks." Clint would have loved to have a son like Justin, but that never happened. His relationships with women failed to work out. He needed to concentrate on the task. Not stand around wondering *what if*.

When Justin reappeared, he handed the supplies to Clint. "Good thing Earl offered his ranch for us."

"Yeah."

His nephew placed his arms on the gate. "He'll be okay. Don't worry."

"What makes you think I'm worried?" Clint bent to apply the medicine to the wound on Renegade.

"The expression on your face."

He bent to a kneeling position. "It's nothin'." His nephew usually knew when not to pry.

"I thought maybe you were concerned about the fires back home."

"Somewhat. I'm glad we're here with our prime breeding stock." He poured the antibiotic onto the horse's injury.

"Yeah, but it bothers you."

Clint glanced up after bandaging the animal's back leg. "Hated leaving your mom and dad with all the heavy work."

"But we're doing a good thing here, plus, we're helping Earl." Justin stepped back from the gate.

Without Earl and Effie's ranch available to them, he wasn't sure where their prime stud horses would stay. Clint stood. "I suppose. Wish I could do more back home." He'd call his brother soon to find out how many acres had been ravaged by the ongoing fires in New Mexico.

Making sure the feed bucket was full, he stepped out of the stall and walked with Justin to store the medical supplies. He needed to stop questioning himself about his life. The attractive woman with the luggage brought his loneliness to the forefront. Longing crept into his heart. Not again! He didn't need a woman in his life. He had a relationship with two very different women, and they'd both left him. What was he doing wrong? Or was he meant to be alone? As if conjured up by his thoughts, the woman appeared in the distance, the breeze catching her hair as she took photos of the lodge and a flower bed. He needed to focus on something else, not those deep-chocolate brown eyes.