

Where Mustangs Run

By : Marzy Dotes

Set one year after "Darkness before Dawn", with Fiona in Colorado helping ranchers and Chance back in L.A. will they find their way back to where they belong?

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Where Mustangs Run : Chapter 1

Fiona took Sienna out at a gallop across the meadow, as the sunlight of the mid-summer day blanketed them. Behind her, rode Jed and a couple of other ranch hands. They had left the ranch house to seek out the boundary lines between their ranch and the bordering properties as part of a survey process.

"It's a great day to be riding," she said when she pulled up by the cluster of trees which rested next to the stream which led to the great lake. She dismounted and pulled her lunch from her saddle bag. The others followed her and they all sat under the trees listening to the birds twittering in the trees and smaller creatures scattering themselves among the tall grass.

"Hey Fiona," Reed said, taking a bite from a sandwich, "When's that kid of yours getting in tomorrow?"

She laughed.

"She's not my kid," she said, "Cassidy's been staying with my friends Christina and Dan but they've got their hands full trying to figure out whether or not they need to add more rooms to their house now that a little one's on the way."

"So they hoisted her on you to babysit?"

She shook her head and took a sip from her thermos.

"No, Cassidy's a good kid, actually she's a teenager now but I love spending time with her. I think the ranch's a good place for her."

"Does she know how to ride," Jed asked.

Fiona nodded.

"A little, after all she's in Texas but I think she's a natural. She'll have plenty of opportunity out here to work on it."

"Pair her up with Sangria," Jed said, "She'll love a chance to get out again."

"Don't worry I plan to keep her very busy with helping me on this case," Fiona said, "She's discovered boys and Christina' already worried she's growing up too fast."

"Uh huh, good luck with that," Reed said, "My little brother's been useless as a ranch hand since he figured out that girls aren't so bad after all."

"What about Chance," Jed said, "When is he getting in?"

Fiona made a face.

"He's backlogged with tons of cases in L.A.," she said, "No telling when he'll have time to drop by."

"We can use his help," Jed said, "We've just gotten started with this and we could use his investigative skills."

"He knows where I am if he wants to get in touch," she said, biting into her sandwich.

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"What's going on with you two?"

"Nothing," she said, "Montana is and always has been my best friend. He's got his life in L.A. and I have mine in Dallas."

"Do you ever see each other?"

She studied Jed to see where he was going. She didn't think she liked it.

"I've been busy working my new job, what with the training and the workload and he's been busy with the agency in L.A. but we do visit each other once or twice a month when either of us can get away."

"Do you miss him?"

"Of course I do, what kind of question is that," she said, "But he's happy with the way things stand and I like what I've built for myself."

Chance and Brody sat in the car, waiting for their mark to walk out of the building. Chance looked through a pair of binoculars but the place looked quiet. Brody wondered if their guy was still in the building.

"Are you sure he's inside at a meeting?"

"Yes I'm sure," Chance said, "He went in the back way about two hours ago."

"Must be a long meeting then," Brody said, picking up his Hoagie and biting off the end of it.

Chance watched him, marveling not for the first time at the ingredients which Brody packed into his daily sandwiches. Anchovies, pickles and horse radish, all living together under the same roof. Still, Brody's skills as an investigator since he retired from the Los Angeles Police Department as a top homicide detective went unrivaled and Chance was always looking for people to add onto his agency to handle his increasing caseload. His good buddy, Capt. Linc had handed out his business cards to a couple good cops at their retirement bashes and now some of them worked for him.

"So when you taking a vacation?"

Chance looked up from his surveillance at his partner.

"What?"

"You know, heading to that little spread out in the Rockies to do whatever it is people like yourself do when you're chilling out."

"I'm too busy to have a vacation," he said, "There's an assignment out there but I have to finish up some jobs here first."

"Why," Brody said, "You have four investigators now, and another new guy from Newport Beach starting next week."

"I have to train them all."

Brody snorted.

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"You haven't even trained me," he said, "We've all got law enforcement experience, something you don't have partner."

"Okay, there's the books to keep updated," Chance said, still keeping an eye on the building, "My uncle can only do so much in between engagements in his active social life."

"I met her," Brody said, "She seems like a very nice woman."

That diverted Chance's attention away from his surveillance.

"What? You mean Fiona," he said, "Of course she's nice. She's my best friend."

"If I weren't married..." Brody said, "Hell, maybe I will..."

Chance glared at him.

"Knock it off with that talk," he said, "She's been through a very rough year. She doesn't need that."

"You're certainly touchy today," Brody said, finishing his Hoagie with relish, "this week..."

"Fiona's taking a break from her job and helping some folks out in Colorado who helped her last year," Chance said, "She's working on filing some briefs for them in federal court with other attorneys."

"Why aren't you helping her?"

"If she needed my help, she'd ask for it," Chance said, "She's more than capable of working on a lawsuit on her own and she's got help there."

"That's not what I was talking about, Chance," he said, "You obviously need a vacation and she probably would like it if her best friend visited her in beautiful mountain country."

"I'm not sure about that," Chance said, quietly.

"Ooooh, okay did I miss something?"

Chance sighed, then returned to his binoculars, putting an end to that discussion.

Fiona laid back in the tall grass and looked at the wisps of clouds traveling across the blue sky. Summer was her favorite time in the valley. Days that basked sunlight with any heat relieved by afternoon thunderstorms leaving behind nights which were pleasantly cool. Unlike Dallas where nights were only a bit less layered in a blanket of humidity than the hot days and where hurricanes always threatened this time of year.

She had been back in the valley for two weeks and quickly felt as if she had never left it. Now was different because she had returned with her own name and her own life. Alice had embraced her and welcomed her back into the fold, taking good care of her and making sure she felt comfortable. She didn't ask any questions about the last year for which Fiona was thankful.

She had arrived in response to the request for help from Alice and the other ranchers about how to protect the area's mustangs from a business group that had purchased a parcel of property to build a ski and summer resort, bordering federal land where the mustangs spent a lot of their time. So she packed up her bags and brought her legal skills to the ranch and worked with other attorneys on legal arguments to produce to both the

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state and federal courts. Her new job licensed her to practice in federal court and she did a lot of the writing for the state court arguments as well. But she also spent a lot of time taking Sienna out and riding around the valley with several of the guys out to survey the valley and to track the movement of the bands of mustangs. She loved being back on the ranch. It allowed her to not have to think about other areas of her busy life.

"Ready to go," Jed said, walking up.

Fiona stood up, brushing her jeans.

"Yeah, we should check out the other side," she said, "Thanks for signing on for this. I know how busy you are on the ranch."

"No problem," he said, "I'm not about to let anything happen to our horses. They belong here more than we do."

"How does Bonnie feel about this?"

He chuckled.

"She doesn't mind," he said, "As long as I come home with some new poetry at the end of the day..."

She smiled as she grabbed Sienna's reins.

"I'm glad you two figured it out and got together."

"I didn't think I'd get married again in this life time," he said, "But I'm glad I did."

She swung up on her horse and chirped to her. Sienna took off loping. Jed joined her riding alongside her.

"What about you," he said, "You deserve to be happy with someone."

She shrugged.

"I'm just happy to be back doing what I love to do," she said, "And to be back here in better circumstances than my last visit."

"And that Montana guy?"

"He's the best friend a woman can ever have," she said, "He's also doing what he loves and makes him happy."

Chance looked at his watch. Two hours had passed and still no sign of the mark. Brody had knocked off a couple more Hoagies, each more outrageously constructed than the last and the odor of Anchovies permeated the car.

"You ready to go?"

"Not yet," Chance said, "We'll give him 20 more minutes."

"He probably left the same way he came in," Brody said.

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"He could still be inside," Chance said.

"You have that big party you have to get to tonight," Brody said.

Chance frowned.

"The bachelor auction," he said, "I'd almost forgotten about it."

"Come on, it's for charity," Brody said, "The children's hospital, you can't let them down."

"I should have just sent them a check this year," Chance said.

"You're one of the big draws this year," Brody said, "How much do you think the highest bid will be?"

"I don't know," he said, "I haven't given it any thought."

"I can tell," Brody said, "What are you offering as a date?"

Chance looked back through the binoculars.

"There he is," he said as a man left the building after talking with two others.

"Son of a gun," Brody said, "We'd better get this show on the road."

"We'll tail him and see where he winds up," Chance said, starting the car which he did after several tries, "Where'd you pick up this heap anyway?"

"Impound lot," Brody said, "It's old but it's a beaut, isn't it?"

The two of them followed closely behind the Cadillac as it left the parking lot.

"Look at that," Fiona said, pointing to the two mustangs grazing near them.

"It's a mare and her colt," Jed said, "The rest of them are probably close by. Watch out for the stallion if he's nearby."

Fiona got off of her horse, took the camera out of her saddlebag and approached the pair.

"Which ones do you think these are?"

"They're pinto and look at the mark on the hindquarters of the mare," Jed said, "I think it's Lola. She's about 10 years old."

She snapped their photos. Neither horse looked up while they nibbled on the grass.

Jed dismounted and walked up next to her.

"They are beautiful," Fiona said.

"When we have time to go to the south valley, we'll see more of them."

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"I'm looking forward to that," Fiona said, then looked at the sky, "We'd better head back now before the daily monsoon hits."

"Bonnie's coming home early tonight," he said, "You're welcome to come to dinner."

Fiona nodded.

"I'd love to."

They mounted their horses and rode back to the ranch house, making it there just ahead of the summer storm.

"I told you to turn left on Olive," Brody said.

"No, you said to keep going," Chance said, "Now I have to go and shower before I can go home and get ready for this damn auction."

Mac looked up from where he sat at his computer as both men exited the elevator into the penthouse office.

"Rough day," he asked, sipping from his brandy.

"Brody and I were tailing the target on the Myer case and we took a wrong turn," he said.

"You look like you fell into a mud bath," Mac said.

"That was after the car stalled and we had to push it out of the mud."

"It's my fault, Mac," Brody said, "I shouldn't have reminded Chance about the charity auction."

"Oh yes, tonight at the Hilton," Mac said, "I have to say I'm looking forward to it. I think my offer of an evening with me at the Palm Springs Film Festival will attract some good bidding."

"I haven't figured out what entertainment I was planning to offer up," Chance said.

Mac frowned.

"That's not like you Matlock," he said, "Usually you're on top of these charity events especially this one."

"I know Uncle Mac but I've been so busy," he said.

"I thought hiring more investigators was going to help lighten your work load," Mac said.

"That's what I hoped," Chance said, "Listen has anyone called?"

"Anyone like who," Mac said, "You know you get a lot of phone calls during the day. Business is booming even in a recession."

"Any calls from..."

"You mean has Fiona called asking you to run over to Colorado to help her?"

"Has she called?"

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Mac winked at Brody.

"No, any special reason why she would?"

Chance frowned.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that she invited you to come out and help her out in that ranch in Colorado," Mac said, "But she didn't beg you to come, she left it up to you."

"She made it clear she could handle it on her own," Chance said.

"She said she could, doesn't mean that she wanted to," Mac said, "But that's not your problem, getting ready for this charity auction, now that's a problem."

"I've got to hit the shower and get this mud off me before I can even go home and change into that penguin suit."

He walked off and both Mac and Brody watched him go.

"Looks like he's really looking forward to tonight," Brody said.

"As much as he would a root canal," Mac said.

Fiona walked into the cabin and turned on the lights. The living room awaited her and she sank on the couch and picked up her phone. She had opted for the two bedroom cabin because it included office space and also a loft. In the back was a kitchen with a breathtaking view of the mountains from a window but she ate most of her meals at the ranch house with the hands.

She called Christina back in Montana.

"Hi, how you doing?"

"When I'm not throwing up, pretty good actually," Christina answered ruefully.

"Is morning sickness really that bad?"

"The doctor says I've only got maybe a month to go before I'm in the clear."

"I'm really happy for you and Dan," Fiona said, "How's Cassidy taking it?"

"She's on the fence I think," Christina said, "Happy one moment, snappy the next."

"It's called being a teenager," Fiona said, "I'm looking forward to seeing her. I'll be out at the airport to meet her plane."

Christina laughed.

"Thanks loads for this," she said, "Her grandmother's getting frail and can't keep up with her so she's living here now and after that whole thing with her boyfriend..."

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"We've all been there," Fiona said, "Some of us more than once."

"She's upset that she can't see him anymore," Christina said, "She'll probably tell you all about it when she gets there."

"She'll be busy enough on the ranch helping me with this case," Fiona said, "I know she loves horses."

"Do you think this is going to be that easy," Christina said, "Going against major developers? I've heard in other places that can get pretty rough."

"We'll be fine here," Fiona said, "Nothing's happened yet."

"Well, maybe you should call Chance..."

"I asked him to come if he wanted to and he said he's tied up with lots of clients in L.A."

"You know you mean much more to him than any of those clients do."

Fiona sighed.

"I know that, but I'm not going to push him to come out here if he's really busy."

Chance fiddled with his tuxedo tie and tried to remember how to tie it. Uncle Mac looked at him and smiled.

"You mean you made it up to now without ever learning how to tie it?"

Mac had dropped by to share a ride with Chance in a limousine to add ambience to the event. Although Chance could afford dozens of limousines, he hated riding in them. He had wanted to take his new Corvette but the auction organizers nixed that preferring that all of the bachelors and event sponsors step onto the red carpet outside the hotel from limousines for the paparazzi.

"Ready to go," Mac said.

Chance nodded.

"Let's get going," he said, picking up his formal jacket.

"You know you could act more like you're going off to have a great time," Mac said, "It adds to the experience."

"Don't you think it's a bit dehumanizing to be auctioned off like a slab of meat," Chance said, slipping on his jacket as they left the beach house. The limousine and a bored chauffeur waited for them.

"It's for a good cause," Mac said, "And you'll attract a lot of attention after making PEOPLE's Sexiest Businessman Alive in last year's issue."

He had missed that because he had been recovering from when he and Fiona had been trying to bring down a notorious human trafficker. They had spent some time in Montana after returning home and Fiona had remained there starting her training for a new job and recovering from her ordeal. He had hated returning to Los Angeles but he had to take care of his business and she had told him to go do what he needed to do. But once he got back to town, he soon found himself inundated in cases. If possible his long absence and the

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aftermath had put him in even bigger demand as a private investigator.

But his uncle had laminated the full-page photo of him standing on his yacht from the magazine and placed it in a place of prominence in the lobby of the penthouse office in Century City. Fiona during one of her rare visits had raised an eyebrow at it and chuckled with several of his office assistants to Chance's chagrin.

He and his uncle stepped inside the limousine to head off to the auction. Chance pulled on his bow tie most of the way while his uncle sat back with his eyes closed listening to jazz music from the speakers.

Fiona knocked on the door. Bonnie opened it and let her into the small house.

"I brought something," Fiona said and handed her the wine bottle. Bonnie inspected the label.

"That's good vintage. It will go well with the beef," she said, "I turned that over to Jed to handle and stuck with the side dishes."

Fiona walked through the living room.

"It smells good," she said.

They both walked into the kitchen where Jed carved a slab of meat onto a large plate which he set next to the salad bowl and vegetable and rice dishes. They prepared their plates and took them to the living room to enjoy.

Bonnie poured the wine that Fiona had brought into glasses.

"So how the mustangs doing," she asked.

"The ones we saw today looked really good," Fiona said, slicing her meat.

"Do you really think that this development firm can be stopped?"

Fiona nodded.

"I think if Jason and I file the papers in both the federal and state court in Denver, it should look pretty good."

"You like Jason?"

Fiona looked at Bonnie, quizzically.

"Of course I do," she said, "He's an excellent attorney and we both share the same alma mater. He was third year when I started."

"Bonnie..." Jed said, shaking his head.

She feigned innocence.

"What, Jed?"

"Why are you always trying to set people up," Jed said, "Watch out, she's hooked three couples together so far this year."

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"Two are going to the altar...eventually."

Jed laughed at his wife. Fiona looked at the both of them and knew it was all in fun.

"Wait a minute," Fiona said, "You're the local matchmaker?"

"Actually, it's just a hobby of mine," Bonnie said, "I might start my own business some day with a couple more successful matches of course."

Fiona looked back and forth between Jed and his wife.

"You can be perfectly happy on your own," she said, "Women don't have to even have relationships with men let alone get married these days."

"Oh I know," Bonnie said, "it's just that I believed that too until the day I met Jed and just knew I had to have him in my life and I've never regretted it."

Jed smiled at his wife. He couldn't argue with that.

Chance mingled with the other guests in the spacious ballroom, tugging at his tie most of the time. He found himself by the bar ordering a gin and tonic.

A blond woman standing next to a nearby ice sculpture of a man had been watching him. She flashed a smile at him when he looked over at her. He smiled back wondering if he was supposed to know who she was and deciding he didn't. She walked on over, still wearing her smile.

"Hi, you look lost here," she said.

"No, I'm just trying to figure out what the ice sculpture is supposed to be. Is it Michelangelo's David?"

She eyed it carefully.

"No, it can't be because it's missing something."

Chance remembered.

"Ah yes, indeed it is," he said, "My mistake. Art History wasn't one of my better subjects in college."

She laughed.

"That blush puts a nice color in your face," she said, "Actually it's Adonis."

"Now I see it," he said, nodding.

"Hi, I'm Ginger, Ginger Winslow," she said, extending her hand, "I work for the art museum in West L.A. in marketing."

He took her hand.

"I'm Chance Montana," he said, "I own and run a private investigation firm in town."

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She smiled.

"Oh yes, you're the multi-millionaire who took his corporation public to focus on investigations."

"Actually, the company's profits all go to my charitable foundation," Chance said, "It's based in Montana."

She looked at her program.

"And you're on the list of eligible bachelors to be auctioned off tonight," she said, "I'll remember that when it's time to bid."

"You might want to save your money and bid on my uncle," Chance said, "He's offering an evening at a major film festival."

"What are you offering as a date for the lucky bidder?"

He hesitated.

"I'm not sure yet," he said, "I haven't given it much thought."

Her eyes narrowed.

"How long did you know about this auction?"

"A while," Chance said, "But I've been really busy."

She looked him over with a skeptical eye.

"Are you sure you're up for this?"

"No...yes, I've done this every year," he said, "I've always enjoyed the experience."

"I can tell," she said.

Uncle Mac walked over with a martini in hand to check on his nephew.

"The auction's just about to get started," he said, looking at the attractive woman standing with Chance.

"I won't keep you," Ginger said, with a smile as she walked off.

Fiona sat on the sofa in the living room with Jed and Bonnie, finishing up the rest of the wine.

"That dinner was delicious," she said, "And your key lime pie, is the best I've ever tasted."

Bonnie smiled and put her plate down.

"So how are things going with Jason?"

"We're just working together on this case," Fiona said, "He's a really nice guy but that's all there's to it."

"Are you sure?"

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Fiona sighed.

"Definitely," she said, "I'm just not at the point in my life when I'm looking for a relationship."

"I know you've been through a lot," Bonnie said, "But I just want you to be happy."

"I am," Fiona said, taking another sip of her wine, "You don't need to worry."

"Uh huh," Bonnie said.

"Look, it's getting late and I'd better head back," Fiona said, "Jed and I have to head out early tomorrow so I can meet with Jason and his legal assistant in town later on."

Jed walked in and sighed at his wife.

"I'll walk back with you your place," he said, "After what happened last week, I don't want you walking home at night."

"We don't know if anything did happen," Fiona said, "It could have been someone with too much to drink."

"Maybe," Jed said, "but better to be safe than sorry."

Chance lined up with the other bachelors and watched his uncle step up on the stage and be introduced to the audience. Once the auctioneer pounded the gavel, the signs went up immediately. The bidding became fast and furious, so much so Chance could barely keep up.

"Going, going gone, for \$10,000," the auctioneer yelled slamming his gavel as everyone applauded.

Chance looked up in shock as his uncle stepped down from the stage with a spring in his step and looking very pleased with himself. As he passed his nephew, he winked at him, daring him to try to beat *that* winning bid.

A well-known news anchor and a television actor preceded him in line. He began pulling on his collar again since his tie was a mess. He turned to look at the audience, the massive wall of well-dressed and coiffed guests and his eyes caught Ginger's. She smiled for him and gave him a little wave.

Suddenly, his phone vibrated on his belt. He flipped it open and saw Brody's name on his Caller ID. He sighed, watching as the auctioneer closed the bidding on the newsman.

"What's up Brody," Chance said, "You picked a great time to call. I'm just about to be auctioned off."

Laughter filled the phone on the other end.

"This isn't funny," Chance said, "My uncle raised \$10,000 for the hospital."

"You can raise a bid higher than that my friend," Brody said.

"I should have given them a check this year," Chance said.

"And pass up a chance to have a crowd of attractive women bid on a chance to go out with you," Brody said, "Did you ever figure out where you would be taking the lucky winner?"

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"Never mind," Chance said, eying the auction, "Why are you calling me?"

"Dude, there's some serious action outside the Marriot," Brody said, "Your mark on the Martin case showed up. I've been tailing him for over an hour."

"He showed up here?"

"Just outside the front door," Brody said, "Are you coming?"

"I can't," Chance said, "I'm up next."

"This might be our only chance," Brody said, "but don't worry about it. I think I can handle him on my own."

Chance looked up and saw an attractive woman escort the actor off stage to a sea of more applause.

"I'm up right now," he said, preparing to walk up on the stage.

Suddenly a woman screamed and he looked across the room and saw her wrestling with a man who was stealing her purse. Chance jumped off the stage, taking a couple people down with him. He pushed his way through the crowd towards where he had heard the calls for help. He ran and towards the end of the crowd, people began getting the hint and parted before him like he was Moses and it was the Red Sea. Suddenly right in front of him popped up the table with the Adonis ice sculpture. With no time to avoid it, he jumped on the table with his hands in front of him and just missed Adonis as he leapt off the table onto the floor.

Unfortunately, Adonis wobbled and tipped too far in one direction and toppled right off the table, shattering into millions of small shards on the ballroom floor. Men and women started screaming and running for the exits, while the emcees of the auction plead with them to calm down. Chance reached the man and woman who were struggling and jumped onto the man, knocking him into the buffet table, which collapsed to the floor sending stuffed olives and pigs wrapped in a blanket flying like missiles into the guests' faces. The two of them rolled on the floor, knocking over the punch bowl and sending it on its side, splashing the city's mayor and his wife with a rainbow sherbet and club soda concoction that an elderly woman had covertly spiked with some vodka hidden in her large purse.

Finally, Chance pinned the guy on the ground, and pulled the purse out of his grasp. Brody came running up, out of breath.

"Did he get the flash drive," he asked.

Chance dumped out the purse and falling out of one of the pockets was the flash drive in question which Chance and Brody knew contained valuable information about some of the local business proposals that unscrupulous developers were after to get the upper hand in the bidding processes for those projects. He knew that the little device in his hand was easily worth high six-figures.

He looked up and saw a crowd of guests gathering around them. He stood up, dragging the man up on his feet with him. Brody grabbed his other arm.

Suddenly, one person in the crowd started clapping and soon enough, so was everyone else.

Fiona and Jed walked down the dirt road back to her cabin. The night was pleasant, and not too chilly. Stars filled the sky and silence surrounded them, except for the movements of animals through the brush.

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"Thanks for rescuing me," Fiona said, with a laugh, "I know Bonnie means well but this isn't the easiest subject for me to discuss."

He shrugged.

"Fiona, you'll know when you're ready to have a relationship," Jed said, "It has to be on your own time table, no one else's not even my wife's."

She looked at him.

"You understand, don't you," she said, "Was it like this for you after your wife died?"

He nodded.

"I couldn't even think of going out with any woman for years after she died," he said, "I felt like I was betraying her memory."

"Sometimes I think I'm ready, but then I realize I'm just not there yet."

"You've been through a lot in the past year," Jed said, "You need time to feel like you're ready to put that all behind you and are ready to open up again."

She nodded.

"I hope I get to that point," she said, "I've been working really hard at it."

"You will," Jed said, "I did and I'm a much harder case than you. Just don't beat yourself up about it and accept that some things have their own time lines."

Capt. Linc looked at Chance and Brody.

"I should have known when I got this call about chaos at the downtown bachelor charity auction, your prints would be all over it."

Chance looked at Brody.

"We caught the guy who was after the information on the development projects at the marina."

Linc waved his hand.

"He's in the car waiting to be taken to the station," he said, "But look at this place."

They all did and indeed it looked like a tornado had gone through the ballroom.

"Adonis was the only real casualty," Chance said, looking at the huge puddle of water which was all that remained of the sculpture.

"Those ice sculptures don't come cheap."

"They can bill me, Linc."

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"Maybe they can continue the auction Chance and whatever amount you bring in, can be used to pay for the damages," Brody said.

Chance glared at his partner.

"Just kidding," Brody said, backing off.

Ginger walked up to the two men.

"Nice performance," she said, "When they said that entertainment would be provided, this wasn't what came to mind."

"Ginger..."

She gave Chance her card.

"Give me a call sometime and we can continue this auction of sorts in a more private venue."

She walked off and both Linc and Brody looked at Chance.

Brody whistled.

"Hot damn," he said, "That's one fine looking woman."

"Well, she might have bid on me and gotten a date with me if it hadn't been for you," Chance said.

"A date where," Brody said, "You didn't even have that decided before the auction."

"I had a couple of places in mind," Chance said, "I just hadn't settled on any one of them."

Brody rolled his eyes.

"Come on, we both know you had no clue where you were going to take the highest bidder," Brody said, "You're going to go home and call FIONA and tell her all about it."

Chance frowned.

"She's been too busy working on her case to return my calls."

Linc looked at the both of them.

"I think I'll leave you and take this man into custody," he said, then wagged a finger at them, "And if I could go more than a couple of days without receiving a call about the destruction of private or public property that has your names on it, I could toss out my antacids."

With that, Linc walked off.

"Chance are you ready to go home," Mac said, "The limousine's waiting for us."

"Oh yeah, Uncle Mac, I'm more than ready to get out of here."

Where Mustangs Run

Brody looked at the both of them.

"Look I got to get going," he said, "Remember stake out tomorrow morning, six sharp at the marina."

Chance nodded, wondering if he really needed that vacation that Brody always nagged him to take and if so, would he ever take it.

Jed and Fiona reached the front door of her cabin and she said goodbye to him. She walked inside and closed the door behind her.

The evening had relaxed her as she felt comfortable hanging out with Jed and Bonnie who she counted as among her closest friends in the world. Bonnie had meant well, but when she brought up Jason, Fiona found her walls going up again. The walls that she still often built up to guard her against any questions about whether or not she was interested in pursuing any relationships with Jason or any man. She had made tremendous progress in rebuilding her life in the past year but still, thinking about building intimacy with the opposite gender made her uncomfortable. That had already gotten her into trouble once.

On her way to her bedroom, she passed her phone. She thought about calling him, but dropped that thought and headed off to heat some water for some chamomile tea before going to bed. After she boiled water and used that to steep her tea, she headed back to the living room and picked up her phone.

Chance and Mac rode back to the beach house in the limousine, both lost in their own thoughts. Mac basked in the enjoyment of the bachelor auction and his future outing with an attractive and intelligent woman at the upcoming film festival while Chance considered the disastrous end to the auction to be anything but a bad end. He actually felt relieved that he hadn't gone through with the auction which struck him as strange because usually, he enjoyed the event or at least he had in past years. And he always showed the women who bid highest for a date with him a good time. Just not this year.

His phone rang. He picked it up and looked and saw that the area code was from Colorado. He held it to his ear.

"Hello Fiona," he said.

"Hi Montana," she said, "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"No, no you're not," he said, "It's always nice to hear from you."

"I just wanted to tell you that things are going smoothly out here and I might not need an investigator after all."

"Not need an investigator," Chance said, "So you don't need me to come out there and help you?"

"If you want to come out to the ranch, you're more than welcome," she said, "But I don't want you to rush through your caseload on my account."

"Meaning you can handle things without me," he said.

"Jason and I are almost ready to finish up our initial brief for federal court," she said, "Jed and the other hands are helping me with the mustang surveys."

"I was kind of looking forward to going out there," Chance said.

Where Mustangs Run

"You were?"

"Brody said I needed a vacation but I've got to get a handle on these newer cases until my new hires are trained."

"I understand," she said, "Don't worry about it. I can handle things fine on this end. Good night."

"Fiona wait..."

She waited.

"I just want to say I really miss you," he said, "And I've been thinking about you since you left."

"I've been thinking too," she said. "Well, I better head off to bed. I have an early day tomorrow."

"So do I," he said, "Good night."

He clicked off the phone and caught his uncle looking at him.

"Don't start," he warned.

"I wouldn't know where to begin," Mac said with a sigh.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh...nothing," Mac said, "I think it's time to play some music."

He reached for the stereo system and soon jazz music filled the car. It didn't do much to soothe Chance's bad mood which continued all the way home. And when he got home and his uncle had left, he found himself standing on the balcony of his beach house looking at the sliver of moon which hung over the horizon. He listened to the tide of the ocean lap on the shore and he felt lonely.

ii½

Chapter 2

Chance sat with Brody in another car staking out the marina but so far, no one had appeared at a small craft parked in one of the slips by a snack bar and tack shop. Brody sat next to him with one of his Hoagies in hand. Pungent red onions joined Anchovies among the medley of odors this morning.

"I don't know if he's going to show," Chance said.

"Let's give him another hour and then call it a morning," Brady said, sipping some ginger ale, "Would you like a sandwich?"

Chance grimaced.

"No thanks, I already ate at the office."

Brody picked up the daily newspaper.

"We made the society page this morning," he said, thumbing that section open to the coverage of the bachelor auction and its aftermath.

"I'd rather forget that ever happened."

"You were a hit," Brody said, "I bet it's not every year one of the bachelor's jumps off the stage during the bidding and collars a nefarious criminal."

"The bidding hadn't started yet, Brody," Chance said, looking at the boat again.

Still nobody coming or going.

"What about that woman," Brody said, "She sure had the hots for you and when she finds out how much you're worth, she'll put those hooks in you as well."

Chance turned to look at his partner, irritated.

"You don't know that," he said, "Why do you think all women are gold diggers?"

"Before I met the wonderful missus who gave me two wonderful children, I got burned more than once by the fairer sex."

"How many turned you down?"

Brody laughed.

"Not many," he said, "Certainly not as many as you're thinking."

Chance turned back to the boat with his binoculars.

"Are you sure we're in the right spot," he said, "Doesn't look like much is going on there."

"That's what my source said and he hasn't been wrong yet."

Where Mustangs Run

"We'll give it another hour," Chance said, "We still have that meeting with the new client."

"I booked us at that new restaurant downtown," Brody said, "The best sushi in L.A."

Chance made a face.

"Sushi?"

"I know that's not your thing but this is an upscale client," Brody said, "Steak and baked potatoes aren't going to cut it for this power luncheon and it's too heavy a meal this early in the day."

Chance looked at Brody's Hoagie.

"That's just a snack," Brody said, picking it up and taking another healthy bite.

Chance sighed and looked at his watch again before watching the boat for any sign of life.

Fiona left the cabin early in the morning and drove the rover up to the ranch house to eat breakfast. Alice cooked the best huevos rancheros in the area and all the hands were already in the kitchen scooping them onto their plates to take back to the big table. Jed already sat down and dove his fork into his breakfast. She got her plate of food and sat next to him.

"So you're going to have a meeting with Jason today," he said.

"Yeah, Jason's rented a place in Silver Lode for a couple of months while we work on this lawsuit. We're meeting at the diner."

"The developers are going to file their permit with the planning office sometime this week if it's approved at the meeting tonight in town," Jed said, "So the initial paperwork has to be filed with the courts."

"Are the Flynns going to sell their land to them?"

Jed shrugged.

"I don't know," he said, "I hope not, because it's one of the spots where the mares shelter with their foals after they have them."

"I talked to Clara and she said she didn't want to sell," Alice said, "But the negotiators as they called them sent by the development firm have been putting pressure on them."

Fiona ran her hand through her hair.

"We don't have much time then," she said, "We might have to file a TRO, a temporary restraining order against any proposed action on the Flynn ranch. It's right next to the federal land."

"The development firm already owns the parcel next where the Wyatt ranch used to be," Jed said, "If the Flynns don't sell, they might go for Eminent Domain."

"It's tougher to win that for private development but hardly impossible," Fiona said, "A lot will depend on the mayor and the city council's input into this process."

Where Mustangs Run

Jed laughed.

"The city council and business owners in Silver Lode might want the ski resort," he said, "It's the ranchers who don't."

Alice brought her plate to sit down beside them.

"So do you think a restraining order might be necessary?"

Fiona frowned.

"Maybe," she said, finishing up her eggs, "But it's something we want to use only as a last resort."

Alice nodded.

"This valley's survived without a ski resort for over 150 years," she said, "We don't need to turn into another Aspen."

"Jason and I and the other members of the legal team are going to do our best to make sure that doesn't happen," Fiona said, "And that the mustangs stay free and happy in the valley."

"And we're going to get the surveyor's map done this week to send to the BLM and the county seat," Jed said, "We made a lot of progress the past couple of days."

"You sound like you're both working very hard," Alice said, "Are there enough of you to do all this?"

Fiona and Jed looked at each other.

"We're fine," FIONA said.

"What about Chance," Alice said, "He was going to fly in and help you with the investigative legwork."

"He's busy back in L.A. with a full load of clients to take care of," Fiona said, "We'll have to make do without him."

"Are you sure you can do that?"

Fiona paused.

"We'll be fine," she said, "And if his schedule does clear up, he can always come out here and lend a hand. I'm not going anywhere for a while."

Chance saw the man leave the boat and knew he had to move quickly.

"Get on the phone to Linc," he told Brody after taking his gun out.

"Chance, what are you going to do when you catch up to him?"

"Just give Linc a call, okay?"

Where Mustangs Run

Chance jumped out of the car and sped off after the man who looked up and after seeing him, took off in the other direction running alongside the dock. Chance sprinted across the lot hurdling a couple of benches before reaching where the boats were tied. The man ran about 10 yards ahead of him and after he looked behind him to see Chance, he picked up his pace. Chance pursued him, navigating pedestrians like a slalom ski run. Until both of them reached the end of the pier and were facing only the bay. The man turned around and looked at Chance.

Chance pointed his gun at the man.

"All right, end of the road," he said, "Unless you want to jump in the harbor and swim to Catalina, you're not going to see any dry land."

"What do you want," the man yelled, "My boss told me you might show up."

"I want the rest of the names," Chance said, "We caught your partner last night and picked up a flash drive of some file names. We need the rest of them."

The man fidgeted.

"What makes you think there are more names?"

"Because your partner told us in police custody," Chance said, "Now why would he be giving us false information?"

Brody ran up behind Chance, also armed with a gun. Sirens sounded as police cars blocked off the other end of the dock. Linc and the cavalry, Chance thought. He hoped the man would calmly put up his hands and surrender. No such luck. Instead, he looked behind him, spun around quickly and jumped in the water. Chance looked up and saw a motorboat puttering towards him.

"No! I" he said and jumped in the harbor to go after his man before he could escape. Now Chance was a powerful swimmer but his clothes weighed him down a bit and he began losing ground to the man. He pushed harder and the man kept looking behind him to check his progress. Chance pushed his aching muscles to swim harder and he reached the man, then grabbed him by the collar and started pulling him back towards the dock.

The man didn't like that much and struggled. The motor boat approached. Suddenly, the man on that boat took an oar and tried to hit Chance with it to help his accomplice. Chance still holding onto one man reached out to grab the oar from the other guy who held onto it. Suddenly, that man joined the two of them treading water in the harbor.

The police crowded the edge of the dock with their guns drawn. Brody looked at them and thought, oh god, they're going to shoot everyone.

"Don't shoot Chance," Brody said, "He's the good guy! Almost of the time."

Linc came up and ordered the other men to put their weapons down. Chance and the two men in the drink looked up and saw all the police. The two criminals looked at each other then decided to pack it in.

Twenty minutes later, Chance stood on the dock with a blanket around him and Brody slapping him on the shoulder.

Where Mustangs Run

"Jumping into the harbor was a bit over the top," he critiqued, "That harbor's a mess. I hope you're up to date on your shots."

"Did Linc take them back to the station," Chance asked.

"Yeah, but he's not too happy with you or me for that matter," Brody said, "Still I think he believed most of our story."

Chance sighed.

"Those two are connected to an operation that the guy spilled on last night," he said, "Somebody's scamming the city on development projects."

"Well, he wants us to drop by the station and talk about that," Brody said, "But I told him we have that lunch meeting first whichâ"

Brody looked at his watch.

"We'll just about make it too if we book on over there."

"I have to stop by the office and change my clothes," Chance said, trying not to count how many times he had made that statement in the past week.

Brody looked him over.

"You definitely need to change your clothes."

"Maybe I do need that vacation," Chance said, as they walked back to the car.

"I'm not the one stopping you partner," Brody said.

"The Rockies are nice this time of year," Chance said, as he settled into the driver's seat.

"Now you're talking," Brody said, "And what Fiona's working on can't be any more dangerous and difficult than these cases. It will be a good opportunity for you to get away and relax in God's country."

"She said she didn't need an investigator when she called last night," he said, "She said she had everything under control."

"Did she say she didn't want you to come out?"

Chance shook his head.

"No, just that she could handle the lawsuit fine with the team of lawyers she's working with," he said, "And I know Jed and some of the hands are helping her with the field work."

They drove back to Century City back to the agency's office.

"None of them are you with your skills," Brody said, "Which are almost as fine-tuned as my own."

"Jed's an ex-cop, like you."

Where Mustangs Run

"Well, that will help a lot," Bryce said, adjusting the rear view mirror as they exited the freeway, "But like I said, none of them are you."

Chance studied him.

"Are you talking about investigative skills?"

Brody gave him a sharp look.

"Of course, what did you think I was talking about?"

Fiona and Jason had taken over a corner booth at the diner next to Bonnie's grocery store and ate burgers and fries while Jason typed on his laptop.

"Do you have that document on the transfer of ownership," he asked.

Fiona fished through the stack of papers and pulled it out.

"Here it is," she said, "It's a copy of the sales slip on the first parcel that the firm purchased last year."

"I wrote on a case like this when I did law review," Jason said, "I think some of the same case law still applies."

She leaned over him to look at the computer screen.

"It should work," she said, then looked at her watch, "I have about an hour or so left here and then I've got to go pick up Cassidy at the airport."

He nodded.

"That will work," he said, "We'll have enough done to be able to file it tomorrow."

Two men entered the diner.

"Look who's here," Jason said.

Fiona looked up from her work and saw one of the developers, a tall man with salt and pepper hair named Steve Keely and Calvin Parker the town's mayor. The two men had already spotted them in the small establishment and were heading over.

"Hello, Mr. Stewart, Ms Jackson," Keely said, "Nice to run into both of you in town."

They both looked up at the two men.

"Nice to see you," Fiona said.

"Have you met Mr. Steve Keely," Parker said, "He's trying to bring business to our fair town and get it on the map. Some folks are trying to stop the direction of progress."

Fiona cocked her head.

Where Mustangs Run

"You're talking about the ranchers," she said, "They like the way the valley's been for the past 100 years for their animals and their families. They don't think it needs that kind of progress."

"If they didn't have a bunch of outsiders telling them what to doâ!" Parker said.

"They came to us to ask for our help," Fiona said, "They had already come to a decision on this issue. Unless you don't believe that they can think for themselves."

"They're too caught up in the old ways," Parker said, "If we stick to the old life, this town will flounder and dry up."

"You mean, there will be less green lining up some pockets," Jason said, "Like yours."

Parker's face flushed.

"I'm not making any money off of this deal," Parker said, "I'm only interested in the well being of Silver Lode and its economic future."

"Uh huh," Jason said, "And how much money is Keely and his partners dropping into your reelection campaign next fall?"

"What are you implying?"

"I'll finish this discussion at the town council meeting later," Jason said.

Parker and Keely looked at each other.

"There's no need for you to bother yourselves with dropping in on that meeting," Parker said, "We have the votes to approve the next phase of this project."

"You know what they say," Jason said, "Don't count your votes before they're cast."

Keely looked at Fiona.

"And what is your part in all this?"

"I'm on the legal team," she said, "I'm representing the ranchers of this valley."

"Well, little lady this is already a done deal," Keely said, "The city council and mayor will just tie it up with a nice little bow tonight."

"Don't be too sure," Fiona said.

"Oh we're sure," Keely said, "Didn't you hear what the mayor said? You can't stand in the way of progress."

"We've got work to do," Fiona said, "Unless you have anything else to say."

"The both of you might as well pack up and go home," Parker said, "You're way over your heads here which you'll find out if you keep pursuing this."

Without another word, the two men stomped out of the diner.

Where Mustangs Run

"So do you think we should take their advice and skip the meeting tonight," Jason said.

"Hell no," Fiona said, smiling, "I think it's going to live up to the hype."

Chance showered and changed into one of his collection of suits he kept at the office just in case he needed to change clothes and he and Brody headed to the sushi restaurant to meet their new client.

A waiter showed them to a table where a man sat, dining on some shrimp rolls.

Brody sat down and ordered while Chance sat next to him and daydreamed about a luscious steak, cooked medium rare next to fried potatoes crisped on the edges. And right next to it, a cold beer just out of the refrigerator.

"Are you sure you don't want anything," Brody said.

Chance shook his head.

"My partner," Brody said to the man, "He ate a huge breakfast."

The other man nodded.

"I'm Douglas Fortworth," the man said, "I've been having this affair with this beautiful woman that I met on the road."

Chance put his hand up.

"Now wait a minute," he said, "We don't handle domestic matters."

He raised his brows at Brody who shrugged back.

"Oh no, that's okay," Fortworth said, "I can handle the relationship part but the problem is I'm being blackmailed by some unknown person who's threatening to spill to the tabloids and my wife about the girlfriend if I don't pay a \$1 million in large bills by Saturday."

"Tabloids," Brady said, "Are you someone famous?"

"Why yes, I wrote the best seller on building more fulfilling relationships with the opposite sex. Some say that men and women are from different planets, both uninhabited but we're all the same. We want a partner who will love us unconditionally and who we can trust."

"Can't argue with that," Brody said, munching on a California roll.

"Unconditional love and trust," Chance said, "And which of those does your wife get if you don't mind me asking?"

Fortworth paused.

"She gets to shop at Saks and Tiffany's if I sign a contract for a new talk show on love and relationships in the 21st century but this blackmail thing is complicating the negotiations."

Chance leaned back in his chair.

Where Mustangs Run

"Any chance your female companion could be in cahoots with your blackmailer?"

Fortworth stroked his chin.

"You know I hadn't thought about that," he said.

"Well maybe you should," Chance said, "That's often the case more than people think."

"Okay, I'll check into that," Fortworth said, scribbling notes on a pad of paper next to him.

"How's the blackmailer communicating with you?"

"He sent me flowers yesterday, some beautiful Begonias and the blackmail threat was included with the card."

Chance and Brody looked at each other.

Jason and Fiona packed up their equipment.

"Do you think we're ready for tonight?"

Fiona looked at her watch.

"We got about a couple of hours," she said, "Maggie should be meeting us there."

"I think it's going to be a packed house," Jason said, "I'm hoping that the ranchers come out in force."

"Jed and I spoke with many of them and they said they planned on being there."

"That's great," he said, "Well, I'll see you at the meeting."

Fiona nodded.

They walked out to their cars. A distance away two men sat in a car, watching them leave.

"Don't look at me that way," Brody said, as he and Chance left the restaurant.

"That gentleman in there is probably getting bilked by his girlfriend," Chance said, as they walked to the parking lot.

"How do you know it's not his wife?"

"The begonias wouldn't have had any flowers attached to them."

Brody nodded.

"Look, I think there's still a case there," Brody said.

"He should go to the police and report it," Chance said.

"Obviously he can't or he would have done that already."

Where Mustangs Run

Chance unlocked the car.

"We're not that kind of agency," he said.

"I know that, but this guy's desperate," Brody said, "He needs someone to help him."

"He needs a marriage counselor, not a P.I."

Chance started the car and pulled out of the lot, tires squealing.

"Man, you need a vacation," Brody said.

"Don't start with that," Chance said, "There's way too much cases to close out before I can even think about it."

"Fiona needs you," Brody said, reaching around for his Hoagie.

Chance found it near where he sat and tossed it to Brody, who quickly unwrapped it.

"She's handling herself very well in Colorado," Chance said, "And she insists she doesn't need my investigative skills."

"Well how 'bout just having her best friend spend some time with her?"

"She's as busy there as I'm here," Chance said.

"When did you two get too busy for each other," Brody said, "All I've heard about since I started working with you is this legendary friendship between the two of you and when I saw her that morning in your office, I could see that there was something to all that talk."

Chance's phone rang. He picked it up.

"Hi Uncle Mac, what's up?"

"Linc called you," Mac said, "He wants you down at the station pronto."

"Is it about the men apprehended this morning?"

"Yes," Mac said, "They've been linked to that gentleman that you apprehended at the auction last night."

"That's good news," Chance said, "Anything else?"

"Yes, the sponsors of the charity auction called this morning and they're definitely inviting you back next year."

"I think I'll just mail them a check," he said clicking his phone shut.

Fiona rode Sienna to her favorite spot by the group of trees near where the new barn stood after being rebuilt during a community raising the previous year. She dismounted and sat beneath the tree, watching the wind part the shafts of tall grass which grew across the meadow, tinged brown by the heat of the summer.

Where Mustangs Run

Last year, she had helped rebuild the barn with the other residents of the valley. She and Chance not long after they had returned back to Texas. Only she stayed in Texas and Chance went back to run his agency back in L.A. She spent most of her time training and working on her new business which was consulting and offering legal assistance to federal agencies and other entities which helped women. She had spent the last year working hard to rebuild her life which had nearly been taken away from her, from the ground up. But she missed her best friend who had risked his life to help her come back home and to help her deal with the aftermath of life on the run.

Christina and her other friends who lived and worked in Dallas had also been instrumental in helping her get her life back and she had created a rewarding life for herself. Still after months of hard work and little time for herself, she approached burnout so she took a brief leave and flew out to Colorado to spend several months helping those who had helped her when she had needed them, save their way of life.

She knew that the upcoming meeting at the city council would only be the beginning of what could be a long battle ahead. She would be here at least to get the ball off the ground and started in the courts. The rest would be up to the ranchers who valued the land and the horses which roamed over it as they had for decades.

Jed and Reed rode up to where she sat.

"So you're ready to go to the meeting?"

She nodded, standing up.

"As ready as I'll ever be," she said, "Jason and I worked all afternoon on the TRO for tomorrow."

"I guess tonight is when we'll find out if we need it," Jed said.

"Yeah, I already had the mayor and one of the developers tell me the vote's a done deal and they might be right."

"If so, we're going to fight this," Jed said, "

Reed nodded.

"I've better get going," Fiona said, "I still got to pick up Cassidy at the airport before the meeting."

Chance and Brody walked out of the police station after their meeting with Linc who had read them the riot act about this morning but didn't really mean it. The two men they had caught this morning were singing about their roles in the operation to the detectives right now but Linc still shook his head at Chance and Brody as they left his office.

"He's really a hard case," Brody said, "More so than in the days he supervised me."

"I can see where some of that attitude came from," Chance said, "Made me realize I'd been a bit hard on him these years."

Brody ignored him.

"I still think that if we can get some leads on the Begonia Blackmailer, this will turn out to be a red letter day."

Where Mustangs Run

"We haven't agreed to take on the Begonia case."

"We were talking about that vacation you were planning to take," Brody said.

"And I told you that it's off the calendar until I make headway in closing out some of these cases."

"I and the other guys can handle it," Brody said, "By the time you get back, we'll have it all under control."

"That's what scares me."

"I didn't think anything scared you," Brody said, "Well almost anything."

Chance stopped and turned around to face him.

"Why are you pushing this whole vacation thing?"

"Ah, you got my point," Brody said, "You're quick."

"Why are you pushing it?"

"Because you need one," Brody said, "When was your last one?"

Chance sighed.

"Last year," he said.

"There you go then," Brody said, "This would be a great time to take one. Air fares are going down. Not that this is a problem for you."

"No, I have my own fleet of jets," Chance said.

"Perfect," Brody said, "You could fly one of them out to Colorado and help your best friend. It's got to be more relaxing than life in the fast lane here."

Fiona drove back to Silver Lode from the small airport that was about an hour away. Cassidy sat next to her, looking out the window at the scenery which raced by. She had grown three inches since Fiona had last seen her and her long brown hair now included strands that were pink and blue. That wasn't all that had changed, Fiona noticed. No wonder Christina had her hands full with the teenaged girl.

"So how long are we going to stay at this meeting you've got to be at?"

"It shouldn't be longer than a couple of hours," she said.

"I can't believe I won't be able to see him anymore," Cassidy said, leaning back in her seat, "Aunt Christina is being so unfair."

"Cassidy, he was much too old for you," Fiona said, "You need to go out with boys your own age."

"I don't want to go out with other boys," Cassidy said, "Spike was no boy, he's the coolest guy."

"Spike?"

Where Mustangs Run

"Yeah, his parents didn't want to give him a boring name," Cassidy said, "Awesome isn't it?"

"Christina felt that you and Spike needed some space. Things were getting way too serious," FIONA said, "So you're spending some time out on a ranch in the beautiful Rockies helping me out on this case."

Cassidy rolled her eyes.

"Why do I have to help you take notes," Cassidy said, "Don't you have paid help to do that?"

"This case is being done pro bono for the ranchers," Fiona said. "That means that the law firm involved is covering all the costs."

"You mean you're not getting paid," Cassidy said, "No wonder you need free labor like me."

Fiona looked at the younger woman, who wore lipstick two shades too dark and foundation two shades too light.

"I'm asking you because you have a real eye for details and your penmanship is much better than mine."

Cassidy shrugged but Fiona made out a hint of a smile on her face. She pulled the rover into the parking lot near City Hall where the meeting was being held and saw that there were few empty spaces left in the spacious lot.

As she and Cassidy got out of the car, Jason came walking up to her.

"You got here just in time," he said, "This meeting's just gotten started and it doesn't look very good at all."

Fiona and Cassidy hurried on after Jason into the front entrance of City Hall, wondering what awaited them. They discovered that soon enough.

Chapter 3

Fiona and Cassidy walked into the packed city council chambers, to find seats. At the front of the room, Parker and members of the council sat on a dais which was arranged in a semicircle. Extra chairs had been placed in the back of the room but even with those, it was standing room only as men, women and children crowded into the building.

Cassidy took in the sight of people surrounding her.

"All this for a bunch of horses?"

"It's not just the mustangs," Fiona said, "It's a way of life."

Jason and Jed walked up to them.

"I got us seats in the front," Jason said, and they walked towards them.

Fiona put her things down and sat, and as she did, she saw Keely and the other developers sitting on the other side of the aisle. They didn't look happy to see her.

Jason handed her a folder and she looked through it.

"We might have a chance to read part of the letter," he said, "But they might try to shut us down."

"We'll have to stop them," Fiona said, looking around as more people congregated in the chamber.

Parker pounded the gavel from his seat and gradually the room quieted down as people focused their attention on the front of the room.

"Welcome to the weekly meeting of the city council. Tonight we are here to discuss the proposed conceptual plans for a new ski resort which will be presented by Steve Keely. There will also be an opportunity for public comment."

Suddenly, the room came to life again as people shifted in their seats.

"I've got plenty to say," an elderly man stood up, "I've been ranching in the valley for 50 years."

"Yeah, no outsider is going to come in and tell us what to do with our land," a woman said from the audience.

Parker raised his hands to quiet everyone.

"Now hold on there," he said, "You'll all get your turn to speak after Mr. Keely does his presentation. After you hear what he has to say, I'm sure that will alleviate some of your concerns."

The crowd rumbled, but the room became quiet again.

"Now without any further ado," Parker said, "I'll let Mr. Keely explain his proposed project to the body."

Jason and Fiona looked at each other then sat back to listen.

Where Mustangs Run

Chance and Brody sat in a car at another stakeout. Brody ate another Hoagie which stunk up the car and Chance realized that it was getting harder to tell one stakeout apart from the next.

The phone rang. Chance took the call.

"Hello, this is Chance."

"It's Ginger," she said, "We met the night of the auction."

"Yes we did," he said, "By the Adonis ice sculpture."

"You remember," she said.

"Partly because the office just received the bill for payment on it this morning."

"That doesn't sound fair," she said, "You were just doing your civic duty by going after that purse snatcher."

"I did knock it down and break it into pieces," Chance said, "It's not like it could be put back together."

"Still, that was by far the most exciting auction that organization ever hosted," Ginger said, "They could have covered the cost of the ice sculpture with the entertainment budget."

Chance laughed.

"Any particular reason you're calling?"

"Oh yeah," she said, "The museum is having a special premiere tomorrow night for a new exhibit that's being unveiled. I thought you and your friends might want to attend."

"That sounds tempting," Chance said, "I'll pass the information along."

"I'll leave some tickets for you at the door," she said.

Chance clicked his phone shut. Brody looked at him.

"Don't tell me, it was her."

"Her' meaning Ginger from the other night?"

Brody nodded.

"She's set her sights on you," he said.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Chance said, "She seemed very nice the other night."

"That's how it will be, now that she's probably run a background check on you and found out about all your assets," Brody said, "Dating's gotten so much more technical than it was back in the day."

"You've never even met her," Chance said, keeping one eye on the target of the stakeout, this time a warehouse.

Where Mustangs Run

"I don't have to," Brody said, "She had that look."

"Let's just drop this and stick to the job at hand, okay?"

The chambers rocked in absolute chaos. After Keely had given his presentation and the city council had praised him for everything from his conceptual design of the ski resort to knowing how to operate a Power Point presentation, Parker had finally opened the topic up for public comment.

Immediately, those in the audience began to line up on opposite sides of the room to speak. Early on, members of the local business chamber had on cue, gone up and lauded the pending arrival of the new ski resort to the area even though it hadn't been approved yet.

"All the people on their Rolodexes," Fiona had commented to Jason, "They pick up the phone, they come running."

But after the fans of the project had finished speaking and sat down, the dozens of those in opposition to the placement of a tourist trap in their valley began to speak at the podium. With each one, the beaming smile which had lit Parker's face dimmed bit by bit. Each time someone finished speaking, the others in the audience would cheer, some while standing on their feet. Then Parker would pound his gavel again to get people to quiet down.

Jed, Reed and the other ranchers had made speeches about how they had worked the land in the valley for years, tending cattle and raising horses. How their corner of the world had escaped the development which had impacted other valleys in the state. How they wanted to keep the land as it was to leave to their children and grandchildren just as it had been left to them. Fiona thought she saw one city councilwoman wipe a tear away but she wasn't sure. The rest of the faces listening to the speeches appeared set in stone.

Jed walked back to where Fiona and Jason were sitting with Cassidy who took careful notes of the proceedings.

"I think it's going very well," he said, before sitting down.

Fiona nodded.

"This turnout is great," she said, "I don't think the council or Parker expected it."

"Hopefully, it will give the undecided vote something to think about," Jed said, "Especially with elections coming up."

Fiona left to line up for a chance to speak to the council. Alice stood in line in front of her.

"Isn't it great how everyone came out to speak against the ski resort," Alice said.

Fiona smiled.

"I think someone's phone tree had something to do with this."

"I activated it," Alice said, "But there's people here who aren't even from the valley."

"I called some people in town," Bonnie said, "Not everyone's in cahoots with the chamber club."

Where Mustangs Run

Fiona passed where Keely sat with the other developers at their section. The glance he threw her way wasn't as friendly as it had been when she met Keely at a barbecue not long after coming to town.

Alice brought down the chambers with her speech about how she and her husband Gordon had settled down to a life of ranching in the valley to raise their family. She shed a tear while she spoke and she wasn't the only one.

When Fiona reached the podium, she looked at the city officials and handed the clerk a stack of documents to pass out to each member of the council sitting in front of her. They flipped through the pages noncommittally, then looked up at her almost in unison with stunned expressions on their faces.

"Yes, that document is what it appears to be," she said, "It will be filed through the courts tomorrow. It's a temporary injunction against any further land development in the valley until a future hearing on this matter is set."

Keely swore and pounded his fist on the table. Parker looked like he was cursing under his breath from behind his weakening smile. The rest of the city council members just looked at each other. The audience cheered.

"We were going to wait but then after receiving a declaration from the Flynns and also the Wyatts who told of the methods being used to persuade them to sell their land, we pushed it ahead on the schedule."

Parker stood up.

"This is most improper," he said. "And probably is illegal to boot."

He looked over at the city's attorney for support but the bespectacled young man just shrugged.

One of the council woman spoke up.

"We need some clarification on this matter," she said, "We'll have to adjourn to closed session to discuss this any further."

The crowd stood up and roared in protest.

"You can't make this decision away from the public and take it behind closed doors," a man said.

Fiona tapped on the microphone.

"Excuse me, but I believe that the action that you're proposing might be in violation of state law," she said, "At any point, this is a courtesy notice of what's going to take place tomorrow. "

Parker called for order.

"That is for us to determine," he said, "We will adjourn the current proceedings and call for a special meeting in the next several days to issue a response."

Everyone stood up to leave the building. Keely and his partners walked up to speak with Parker and several other council members.

Fiona walked back to where Cassidy was sitting.

Where Mustangs Run

"We'd better get going," she said, "the meeting's over."

"Are they always this exciting, a bunch of adults arguing?"

Fiona smiled.

"No sometimes, they're even better," she said, "People start throwing things."

"That really happens," Cassidy said, "No way."

Jason walked up to them.

"A group of us are meeting at the diner to plan our next move," he said, "We'd better explain to them that the battle's just beginning."

Fiona nodded as she gathered her things.

Chance walked off the elevator into his lobby and saw his uncle sitting by the bar.

"What's up," he said.

"Oh nothing," Mac said, "I ran those names through this wonderful thing called the internet but I don't think the sites that came up involve the same individuals."

"Have I gotten any calls?"

"You always get calls," Mac said, "Did she call? No but a woman named Ginger called to get your phone number."

"I talked with her and she's invited us all to a premiere art exhibit at the museum where she works."

"I think it would be a great cultural experience," Mac said, "I'll ask Sophie if she has a younger sister and we can go together."

"No thanks, Uncle Mac," Chance said, raising his hand, "I can handle my own social networking."

He sat down at the bar with his uncle after pouring himself some scotch.

"Tough day at work," Mac asked.

"I'm beginning to mix up my stakeouts," Chance said, "Brody keeps trying to get me to take a vacation."

Mac looked at his nephew carefully.

"Do you think you need one?"

Chance shrugged.

"Sometimes," he said, "The caseload's not getting any smaller even with hiring extra investigators."

"It did pile up when you and Fiona were gone all those months," Mac said.

Where Mustangs Run

"I know. Which is why I have been busting my butt to get it back to where I could handle it."

"Then take a vacation," Mac said, "Why don't you go out to the ranch where Fiona 's at and help her out on her case?"

"She said she didn't need an investigator," Chance said.

"She said that because she didn't want you to feel obligated to drop all your work and fly out," Mac said, "But I think she would appreciate it if you did come out and visit."

"Maybe when things settle down around here," Chance said, "It would be nice to get away and relax."

The diner had just enough tables to accommodate the several dozen people who appeared there after the adjournment of the meeting to discuss what had happened. The waitress brought them pitchers of ice tea and lemonade to start them out.

"Did we win back there," Bonnie asked as she sat next to Jed.

"I think we got a stay," Fiona said, "but probably only for several days."

"Did you see how ticked off those developers were," Bonnie said, "And Parker too. He looked like he was going to explode."

"I don't trust those developers at all," Alice said, "I have a feeling they aren't going to take this setback very lightly."

"We've got them where we want them," Jason said.

Fiona sat with Jason and Cassidy in a booth saved by Maggie, the paralegal who was working with them.

"Do you want anything to eat Cassidy," she said, "They've got great burgers."

Cassidy put down her notebook on the table and picked up a menu.

"Any chili cheeseburgers?"

Fiona smiled.

"Sure," she said, "I'll have one too."

"We've got to work on what's going to happen after we file the legal papers tomorrow," Jason said, "I suspect their attorneys will throw a lot of paper our way in response."

"That's to be expected," she said, "What's going to make or break us is what the judge decides."

"That's why we have to have our ducks in a row in federal court," Jason said, "We'll do our part on this end and the team up in Denver can handle that end."

"I can help," Fiona said, "I'm licensed in federal court. You're licensed here so you should be the leg man on this end."

Where Mustangs Run

"Okay, that will work," Jason said, "We make a great team, don't we?"

Fiona nodded.

"Yes we do," she said, "And with the ranchers, we're going to win this battle."

They clinked their glasses.

A bartender poured the vodka and handed it to Keely who walked back to a booth where two other men were sitting.

"The injunction's not worth the paper it's printed on," one of the men assured him.

Keely pounded his glass on the table, startling the other men.

"If the judge grants them a permanent one, it could shut down this project for good," he said, "And I've funneled a lot of money into it already."

"What about your lawyers?"

"They say we have to prepare for the permanent hearing and raise a compelling enough argument for the judge to decide in our favor and throw the injunction out."

"And if that doesn't work?"

Keely sipped his vodka and looked back at them.

"Then we have to use other methods to stop them in their tracks," he said, "No one and I mean no one must interfere with the success of this project."

"Got you boss."

"In fact, let's not wait until that hearing to get the ball rolling back in our court."

Chance finished lifting weights and wiped the sweat off his forehead with a towel. He had hoped that working out in his gym would help relieve some of the stress that his business was causing him. Not that he didn't enjoy the career he had built for himself, he loved it but he felt with so many cases, he had less time to commit to each one in the personalized style that he had built his reputation on during the past few years.

Mac wandered in with a glass of juice and handed it to Chance, who gulped it down.

"Do you feel better," Mac said, "You were at it for over an hour."

"I really thought that hiring those extra four ex-cops would help but I think I'm just going to have to stop taking new cases until I catch up."

Mac looked at him.

"Is this what you really want to do?"

Chance looked up in surprise.

Where Mustangs Run

"My work," he said, "Of course it is. What kind of question is that?"

"I've never seen you this tense about it," Mac said, "I've seen it consume you in other ways but that's not the same thing."

Chance paused.

"I still love the investigating part, the never knowing what the day's going to be like part," Chance said, "or the night for that matter."

"But"

"I'm not sure I'm cut out for the office part of it," he said, "And with Fiona building a new life for herself in Texas and Christina working for Montana Enterprises out there as well, I haven't been able to find anyone who has their talents."

"And their dedication," Mac finished.

"They helped me build the agency to what it is today."

"What's really bothering you Chance," Mac said, "This office work or the fact that you're in L.A. and they're not?"

That stopped Chance in his tracks.

"I miss them," he said, "I miss the days we worked together especially the earliest days."

"So what do you plan to do about it?"

Chance paused for a while to sort out the thoughts which were racing through his head.

"I plan to try to reduce my caseload," he said, leaving the gym.

Mac watched him go and shook his head.

Chance walked out onto the helipad and stood at its edge looking out over the lights of L.A. He and Fiona both separately came out here to collect their thoughts and sort through their feelings when the need arose and most of the time it helped. He had poured himself some more scotch and had watched the activity which defined the night life in the vibrant city suddenly wishing he were miles away.

He pulled out his cell phone and punched some buttons. Someone standing thousands of miles away picked it up.

"Hi, Montana is that you?"

"Yes it is," he said, "I'm standing on the helipad looking at the night sky."

"I can picture you doing that," Fiona said, "How are things going there?"

He sighed.

Where Mustangs Run

"I've been very busy," he said, "Those new hires are a great boost to business but I'm still working through some cases."

"The price of success," she said.

"How are things going in Colorado?"

"Very well," she said, "Jason and I addressed a packed city council meeting today and told them about the injunction."

"How'd they take the news?"

She laughed.

"Not very well," she said, "But you should have seen all the residents, not just the ranchers, who came out and spoke against the project. It was truly inspiring. Even Cassidy was impressed."

"Cassidy's spending time out with you?"

"Christina sent her out to chill out after the breakup of her first big romance," Fiona said, "She was a big help tonight."

"So you're doing fine without an investigator," Chance said.

"Yes, but I really do miss you," she said, "So even if you decide you need a break from your work, it'd be great to see you again."

"I miss you too," Chance said, "It's not the same without you."

"I'm not staying away from L.A. to stay away from you," she said.

"I know that," he said, "And I'm really proud of you for what you've accomplished."

"Thank you," she said, smiling on the other end as she walked out into the corner of the parking lot at City Hall where she had parked her car.

"I'll see what I can do with this caseload."

"Oh wait, Montana, I'm going to have to get back to you."

She hung up. He clicked off his phone and looked at it.

Fiona and Cassidy had walked to the rover while she was still talking to Chance on the phone. But Cassidy had cried out and pointed at the windshield. It had been cracked by a rock which had been wrapped in a copy of the letter that Fiona had presented to the city council at the meeting. Both rested on the hood of the car.

"Damn," Fiona said, as she looked at the damage done to the windshield. She looked around to see if anyone else was around but the lot was quiet. Jed and Bonnie finally caught up with them.

"What happened," he asked when he saw their facial expressions.

Where Mustangs Run

"Some jerk smashed the windshield with a rock," Cassidy said, unwrapping some gum and sticking it in her mouth.

He looked at the damage.

"I knew this might happen," Jed said, "Those developers were mighty pissed off that their project got shut down."

"We don't know it's even them," Fiona said, "They had copies of the letter but so did members of the city council and Parker."

"It doesn't matter," Jed said, "Somebody's really upset at how this meeting went down and they're blaming it on you. I doubt any other cars got hit in this lot."

"Maybe they got lucky," she said.

"Maybe they've been following you and know the make of your vehicle."

Fiona sighed.

"I didn't even see it at first because I was on the phone with Montana."

"What did he think of it?"

"I didn't tell him," Fiona said, "No point in worrying him. He's got enough to keep him busy with his business in L.A."

"You've got to report it to the sheriff," Jed said.

"He'll just tell me I shouldn't worry my sweet little head about it," Fiona said, "that it was a prank by kids."

"We need to call him anyway," Jed said.

"Come on," Bonnie said, "Let's go back and wait in the store."

Chance and Brody drove down the highway back out to the warehouse which they had left hours earlier. After Fiona had hung up on him, Chance had discovered a phone call from his partner on call-waiting. He picked it up and Brody told him he had gotten a tip about a shipment being made at the warehouse.

"I guess they were too busy to show up this afternoon," Brody said, "So it's coming in tonight."

"It could be our client's jewelry," Chance said, turning off the highway.

"Sounds like it could be a huge shipment of stolen jewelry."

"I hope so," Chance said, "I would love to finally close this case out."

"Did I interrupt something with my phone call," Brody said.

Chance shook his head.

Where Mustangs Run

"I just gave Fiona a call to see how she was doing," he said.

"And what did she tell you?"

Chance drove down a darkened side street.

"She's doing fine," he said, "She and that lawyer she's been working with won a key victory today."

"That's really great," Brody said, "I'm happy for her."

Chance raised his brow at the other man's praise.

"Don't be surprised," Brody said, "I always thought she was too good to have ever hung out with you."

"Which makes her better than you," Chance said, "That I can agree with."

Brody chuckled.

"Did she ask you to come out to Colorado?"

"She doesn't need an investigator," he said.

"You didn't answer my question."

"She said if I had a break in my work and I said I would clear some more cases and thenâ she said she had to go and hung up."

"That's what you get for keeping a lady waiting," Brody said as they pulled into the parking lot by the warehouse. Chance parked the car underneath a tree and they sat down to wait.

"I told you," Fiona said, as she paced outside by her car.

"Now hold on," Jed said, "The point was to get the written report taken. It doesn't matter what Sheriff Daniels says."

"He said it was kids," Fiona said, "Maybe he's right."

"Grownups blame everything on kids," Cassidy grumbled as she started listening to her iPod.

"These weren't kids," Jed said, "These were probably people upset about the bomb that you and Jason dropped at the meeting tonight."

"It could have been anybody," Fiona said, "That's one thing I've learned in my experiences."

"It's not going to stop the filing of the temporary papers and the permanent injunction next week in Denver," she said.

Jed crossed his arms.

"This could get rough," he said, "We're going to have to prepare for that."

Where Mustangs Run

"We have to do this regardless of how rough it gets," Fiona said, "This is very important to many people."

"And not just to those who are fighting against this project," Jed said.

From some distance away, someone sitting in a car watched them then started to make a phone call.

Chapter 4

Several months ago :

He saw her sitting in a chair on the balcony of the beach house and went out to meet her, the woman wearing a nice white dress which accented her tanned skin. She wore her curly dark hair back off of her face and nursed a soft drink. Being married didn't mean he stopped checking out attractive women who crossed his line of vision, he reminded himself. But all he did was look.

"Hey is this seat taken," he said.

She looked up at him and shook her head so he sat down.

"I saw you talking with some of the other guests, looking like you were having a good time."

She shrugged.

"They're mostly Montana's friends," she said, "I'm from out of town."

"You came in for his birthday?"

"Yeah," she said, "My flight was late taking off so I got here just an hour ago. It's been a long day."

He studied her face, noticing she did look tired.

"So how do you know the birthday boy?"

"I'm a very good friend of his who used to work with him out here," she said, "I live in Dallas now."

His face lit up.

"Oh yeah, you must be the legendary Fiona Jackson," he said, "My predecessor."

"And you must be Brody," she said, smiling, "I heard you have a thing for anchovies. So do I."

"Chance's a little sensitive about that," Brody said, "But he hasn't banished them from stakeouts yet."

Fiona laughed.

"He must think you're really good," she said.

"So do I," Brody said, "Not that I could be anywhere but in your shadow."

She raised her brow.

"You *are* good," she said, "You should do just fine working with him."

"And you, look lovely," Brody said, "If I weren't married and I knew my wife wouldn't kill me, you're the kind of woman I could see myself spending more time with."

Where Mustangs Run

She cocked her head but she smiled.

"You don't even know me," Fiona said.

"I've heard a lot about you from our mutual employer," Brody said, "not that you work for him any longer of course."

"It's been a while since I've been to L.A.," she said, "My career takes me different places but seldom here."

"He mentioned that too," Brody said, "I know a lot about you."

She looked at him a moment, then nodded.

"You've read the stories," she said, "About what I went through, what we both went through over a year ago."

He nodded.

"So you think you know everything there is to know about me."

"Well...", he said, feeling a bit like he was on the witness stand.

Her smile dimmed and she looked away.

"Then you don't know me," she said, standing up, "Excuse me."

"Waitâ !" he stood up to grab her arm.

Fiona woke up in her cabin, to see that quietness met her and a stream of moonlight came through her window and onto her comforter. She saw that the clock read 2 a.m. so she pulled her comforter closer around her and lay back down to go to sleep. She tried hard to recapture her dream but it had faded. At least her nightmares had receded by now. She hadn't had one since the night of the party.

She had met Chance's new partner that night when Chance had celebrated his birthday at his beach house. It had been an all day affair, most of which had been spent on the spacious piece of sand and surf in front of his property. After the sun set, the guests had retreated to his house for cocktails and a barbecue, Texas style of course. At some point, Fiona had arrived in a taxi from the airport after her flight had been delayed only to see that Chance had left to go on an errand to pick up more steaks and chicken. She had been engrossed in conversation with some of the guests when he returned.

She enjoyed parties especially smaller, intimate ones with close friends but she noticed that she knew few of the guests who attended this party. Oh, she of course knew his closer friends like Capt. Linc who brought his wife and daughter along with some freshly made cobbler and pies. She knew some of the receptionists who worked at his office building who had brought their boyfriends and husbands to the bash. But many of the people, she had never even met and when she heard some of the names during introductions, she was finally able to match unfamiliar faces with names Chance had casually mentioned during their phone calls.

And she also met Brody.

Sighing, she turned and tried to get to sleep. Soon enough, the sun would rise and a hungry teenager would wake up to her first morning in "the sticks" as she called it wondering about breakfast. Then a long day riding across the ranch awaited both of them after she heard from Jason about the filing of the temporary injunction

Where Mustangs Run

papers.

She gave up on sleeping and got out of bed to go to the kitchen.

Chance kicked off his sheets and got out of bed. He had gotten in late that night, actually early in the morning after a fruitless stakeout to try to catch a jewel thief fencing his goods at an empty warehouse. He wondered if Brody had dragged him out there on some false pretence to get him to spill about his vacation plans. When he had returned, sleep had eluded him even after he took a shower and watched television for a while. He found himself thinking back to the night of his birthday party.

He had walked into the door carrying bags of meat to barbecue so his guests wouldn't go hungry and saw Fiona in a white dress that hugged her figure standing and talking to some of his friends as if they were hers too. She listened and laughed at their stories and they did hers. He hadn't seen her arrive, hadn't known she was coming because during their last phone conversation, her trip to L.A. didn't seem too promising due to last minute plans.

Linc had then called him out to the backyard to put out a small fire that broke out while barbecuing. Then some time later when he returned to his living room, she was gone.

He walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. He looked and found a quart of milk, to heat up to help him sleep, which he needed to prepare him for his morning, afternoon and early evening stakeouts before he headed off to where Ginger worked to attend the premiere of the new art exhibit.

His phone rang and he nearly let the machine pick it up but found himself reaching for the phone.

"Hello," he said, stifling a yawn.

"Hi Montana, did I wake you" she said.

"Fiona, is that you," he said, "Is there anything wrong?"

She paused and his hairs on the back his neck stood up.

"No! No I just had a hard time sleeping after the excitement of last night's meeting," she said, "How are things on your end?"

"Great, really great," Chance said, "We spent six hours in a car staking out a warehouse where a jewel thief pulled a no-show."

"Was it Brody's idea?"

Chance chuckled.

"His usually reliable source of information was wrong for once."

She didn't laugh.

"At least you're home safe," she said, "That's what's important."

He switched the phone to his other ear.

Where Mustangs Run

"Are you sure everything's all right in Colorado?"

"Yeahâthough I'll feel better when the TRO's filed tomorrow and we can focus on the hearing at the end of next week."

"That will stop the project," Chance said.

"Most likely, because between the time and cost of appealing it, the developers will probably decide to cut their losses and seek out another location."

"Then the battle will be over," Chance said.

"Hopefully," she said, "That's the plan."

"Sounds like a good one," he said.

Then silence slipped between them.

"I better let you go," she said, "Good night."

"You mean good morning," he said, "You too."

Chance clicked off the phone and looked at it a moment, before putting it down. He mixed some cinnamon in his warm milk as his father had done when he was a child and sipped it. It began to work its magic by the time he half-finished it. Still, his mind wandered as it often did lately when he thought about the direction that his agency had moved in since he had returned to L.A. after months away.

Luckily, he hadn't lost many of his clients but he realized the work he needed to do to restore its hard-built reputation and set to work almost immediately. Within several days, he fell back into the life as if he had never left. He interviewed and hired some of the police officers who had retired from the LAPD, who had received Linc's highest recommendations. And they lived up to the hype, being solid producers who never complained about the late night hours and weekends away from their families. After all, their careers in law enforcement had exacted similar sacrifices and he paid much better.

But even as his agency recovered from his months of neglect, he realized that he spent more time trying to cross out case numbers from a ledger than he did on working through each individual assignment. He missed the days when his agency practiced a more personal touch for his clients. It often led to him bringing the cases home with him at the end of the day, which led to many sleepless nights but heartwarming gratification when the cases were concluded.

He finished his warm milk and went back to bed, but sleep took its time coming.

The sunlight awoke Fiona from her night of tossing and turning and she heard footsteps outside her bedroom so she got up and pulling on her robe, walked out into the kitchen. Cassidy sat at the table spooning cereal in her mouth. She turned around when she saw Fiona arrive.

"I didn't know if you were ever getting up so I just helped myself to some cereal," she said.

"I could make some eggs if you liked," Fiona said, reaching into the cabinet to get some coffee to brew.

Where Mustangs Run

"Not necessary," Cassidy said, "I can handle my own breakfast and this cereal isn't so bad once you eat a couple bites of it."

Fiona picked up the box.

"It was here when I arrived," she said, "I haven't had much time to get to town to get more."

Cassidy shrugged.

"It's fine," she said, "Don't worry about it or me."

Fiona looked at the teenaged girl who was so different than the younger girl she remembered.

"But it's our job to worry about you, Cassidy," Fiona said, sitting at the table and pouring cereal and milk into a bowl for herself.

"You and Christina aren't my parents," Cassidy said, frowning.

"No we're not," Fiona said, "But we both care a lot about you and we're worried about you."

"There's nothing to worry about," Cassidy said, "Especially since I'm not allowed to hang out with anyone without a babysitter."

"Spike was way too old for you," Fiona said, "I know you're in a hurry to grow up and prove that you're grown up but you're still a young girl."

"I'm not a baby," Cassidy said, putting down her spoon.

"You're still a young girl, and you should have time to enjoy being just that," Fiona said, "And Christina and I want to make sure you have that chance."

"Why can't I have that and still see Spike?"

Fiona paused.

"Because Christina said you can't and you need to listen to her," she said, "She only did it because she cares so much about you."

"She won't when it arrives," Cassidy mumbled.

"What do you mean, it," Fiona said and then she understood.

"It' meaning baby," Cassidy said, "You do know that she's knocked up."

Fiona nodded, smiling.

"I'd heard about it," she said, "And I know Christina and Dan are very excited but it doesn't mean they care about or love you any less or that this will change how they feel about you."

"Course it will."

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"Do you really believe that or are you just scared that you don't know what's going to happen?"

Cassidy looked like she was thinking about it.

"Bothâ 'maybe," she said, "Still it would be nice to have a sister."

"I know you miss your sister a lot," Fiona said, "But you're going to have a chance to be a big sister to someone just like she was to you."

"I guess," Cassidy said, but smiled.

"So are you up for a day of riding," Fiona asked getting up to pour herself some coffee.

Cassidy narrowed her eyes.

"They do have horses for beginners here, don't they?"

Fiona smiled.

"Jed thinks you'll do great with Sangria," she said, "She's a bit old, but she's tough and she's good at looking out for others whether they're horse or people. Besides you have great hands, you'll do just fine."

Cassidy nodded and finished her cereal.

"I just have to call Jason and make sure he's fine with the paperwork and we'll meet up with Jed in the barn and get going."

Jed walked into the kitchen where Alice sat at the table eating a plate of eggs and reading a newspaper.

"Would you like anything," she said when she saw him.

"No thanks," he said, "Bonnie made sure I had a huge plate of eggs and hash browns before I left."

"So you'll meet up with Fiona and Cassidy in the barn?"

"Yeah, Fiona 's hoping that keeping Cassidy busy will keep her mind off of her boyfriend."

"It might but not for long," Alice said, "Love and romance are very serious issues for a girl Cassidy's age."

"She'll have plenty of time for more of that," Jed said, "She's only a young girl and there's men out there who prey on that."

Alice smiled at Jed, thinking you could take the man out of law enforcement but not vice versa.

"She'll be fine out there with Sangria taking care of her," Alice said, sipping her coffee.

"We got the sheriff's report taken on the rover," Jed said, "So it should be no problem getting insurance to pay for the damage."

"I don't give a damn about who pays for it," Alice said, "Whoever did that could have hurt someone."

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"Well, the sheriff said it's likely a bunch of kids."

"Convenient, considering everyone knows he's in Parker's back pocket," she said, "How bad do you think this could get?"

"I don't know," Jed said, "But it's not very promising so far if a cracked windshield is only the beginning."

Chance and Brody were sitting in the car, conducting yet another stakeout in yet another location in the underbelly of L.A. Chance with his binoculars in hand and Brody with his beloved Hoagies right next to him. While looking through zoom lens at yet another quiet structure, Chance was beginning to feel like he was in the middle of a bad rendition of the film, *Groundhog Day*.

"You look tired," Brody said, "Busy social life keeping you up late?"

Chance just looked at him.

"Okay, I heard that our missing in action jewel thief might actually be fencing his merchandise here."

"That's what you said about the warehouse."

"Hey, maybe he called it an early night," Brody said, "or the middleman didn't show."

"It looks just as quiet here," Chance said, looking at the boarded up property which had housed a pawn shop, one of many on the side street.

"That shop closed down months ago," Brody said, "Shame too. In these current economic times, business should be booming."

The building looked quiet.

"It doesn't look like business is booming there now," Chance said, "Even on the black market today."

Brody picked up one of his sandwiches and unwrapped it. Chance steeled himself for the strong smell but noticed that at least for today, Brody kept the anchovies away.

"Oh the wife wants me to stop eating so many of them," he said, "Or she'll stop kissing me when I get home."

Chance suppressed a laugh.

"Smart woman," he said.

"So you going to hit it off with Ginger tonight at the museum get-together?"

Chance put down his binoculars.

"She gave us an open invite to the event," he said, "If you and your wife want to attend, you're welcome."

"My wife says I spend too much time away from the house," Brody said, "She's putting her foot down again."

"My uncle is taking Sophia to the event," Chance said, "And Ginger seems like a very nice woman."

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"So you said," Brody said, "Just watch yourself and your billions around her."

"Millions," Chance corrected, "And she might be wealthier than I am. It's possible for a woman to become wealthy in her own right."

"True, but maybe you should check her out before you agree to go out with her."

"Why all this distrust anyway," Chance said, "How'd you ever wind up getting married?"

"We had to," Brody said, "We jumped the gun so to speak."

"Oh," Chance said.

"Not that I regret getting married," Brody said, "I mean the wife and the kids are great but still..."

"I saw you flirting with my former partner at my party," Chance said.

"Don't worry, as you know, she cut me to the quick and put me in my place real fast," Brody said, "Classy lady but definitely not interested."

"It's not personal," Chance said, "She's just been going through a lot for a while."

"I know," Brody said, "And when I found out what happened that day before she got there, I felt badly about my behavior."

"I'm not too proud of my own," Chance said.

Brody put his Hoagie down.

"Why, what did you do?"

Chance looked up and saw the man leaving the shuttered shop.

"Look, there he goes."

The man darted his head back and forth looking down the street and then headed toward an alley.

"Maybe he's just getting a bite to eat," Brody said.

"Maybe he's meeting his contact in the alley," Chance said, opening the car door.

Both of them got out of the car and prepared to follow the man on foot, staying some distance behind him.

"Do you think he's got the jewels?"

"I doubt it," Chance said, "Too risky. He might give the buyer a location to find them."

They saw the man walk into the alley, and then stop to wait for someone. Chance and Brody crept towards the end of the alley and hid behind a large dumpster.

"At least now he can't smell us coming," Chance said.

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"Real funny."

They looked up to see a man walking up to their guy.

Fiona looked back to see how Cassidy was handling Sangria as they rode with Jed and Reed across the ranch. Also riding with them was Carter who looked like a younger version of his brother, Reed. To her relief, she saw that Sangria appeared patient with the novice rider on her back and that Carter rode alongside her tossing out helpful tips.

"Keep your hands soft on the reins," Carter said, "You're doing very good."

On the other hand, Fiona thought, Christina had sent Cassidy to the ranch to get her away from older guys so maybe she should watch this carefully.

"How old is Carter," Fiona asked Reed.

"He'll be 17, next month," Reed said, also noticing the pair.

So he just looked older. Still, she intended to keep an eye on the young man. After all, she had once been 14 herself, the age Cassidy was now and that's what scared her.

"Lookâ!"

Fiona looked up at the sound of Jed's voice and saw the mustangs. Several females and their young foals eating grass on the next meadow. They reined in their horses to watch the small group.

"So these aren't regular horses," Cassidy said.

"They're mustangs, descended from horses that were once trained but then became wild again," Jed said, "Coming full circle."

"They don't look much different," she said.

"You can't see the part that's different right away," Fiona said.

"Are there like any guy mustangs?"

"Sure," Fiona said, "Not as many because stallions can't live near one another but there's several in these parts including Diablo Del Sol."

"Who's he?"

"He's a long-time fixture in this valley," Jed said, "Some people don't think he really exists because he only shows himself to those he wants to see him."

"Have you seen him," Cassidy asked.

Fiona shook her head.

"No, I heard him one night and it's something I'll never forget," Fiona said, "When I was here the first time. But Montana saw him when he was riding up to help Jed and I at the cabin. He said that Diablo saved his

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life."

Cassidy nodded thoughtfully.

"I hope I get to see him," she said.

"You might just do that," Jed said, "But you can never tell. I saw him a couple times myself."

They looked across the meadow to see the two mares looking back at them. But they stayed there with their foals eating grass and didn't run.

Chance and Brody watched the men talking and then one of them pulled something out of his pocket. Brody reached for his camera to film the transaction but his foot stepped backward on top of a discarded aluminum can making noise. The two men looked up and saw them.

"Damn," Brody said.

The men took off and Chance took off after them, with Brody on his heels. The two men split up after they left the alley, leaving the two in pursuit having to choose which way to go. Chance took off after the one they had seen leave the pawn shop and both of them weaved through traffic until they hit the other side of the street. Chance tried to keep up with the guy but it appeared as if the man had grown wings on his feet and he pulled away. Chance tried to turn the corner when he did and tripped over a piece of junk lying on the sidewalk, falling to the ground and rolling over.

When he looked back, the man was nowhere to be seen and several pedestrians were looking down at him in curiosity. Brody's face then appeared and his partner pulled him on his feet.

"Are you okay," Brody said.

Chance brushed himself off but found his shoulder throbbing, one that had served once as the final resting spot for a bullet.

"What happened to the other guy?"

"He jammed out of there," Brody said, "I think he is probably on his way back to his boss."

Chance tried to move his shoulder around and sighed.

"Hey do you need some ice on that," Brody said, "Some morphine?"

Chance glared at him.

"It'll be fine," he said, "Old battle wound."

They both walked back to the car.

"This field work does get tougher as you get older," Brody said.

"I'm not as old as you are," Chance said.

"True, but it's not necessarily the years, it's the mileage."

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Chance cocked his head.

"Maybe you have me there," he said.

They reached the car which fortunately still rested where it had been parked.

"Look Chance, maybe you should take it easy the rest of the day, rest the shoulder so you'll be ready for the art museum event tonight."

Chance started the car and the engine turned over.

"IâWe've got too much work to do," he said, "The day's still too young."

The group of them headed into the kitchen at the ranch house for some lunch. Alice sat at the table, reading through some papers.

"You got a call from Jason," Alice said, "He's back in Silver Lode. There's a huge crowd there by City Hall. Maybe you and Cassidy better get on down there to find out what's up."

"Let's go," Cassidy said, "I want to see what's going on."

Fiona looked at Jed and she pulled out her phone.

"Hi, this is Jason, Fiona is that you?"

"Yeah, we just got back from some surveying of some mustang pairs this morning. What's up?"

She heard noise from a crowd in the background.

"You'd better get on down here," Jonathon said, "Parker's going to make an announcement in about 40 minutes."

"We'll be right there," Fiona said and as she clicked off her phone, she wondered what the hell had happened now.

Chapter 5

Fiona pulled the rover up in the parking lot next to City Hall close to where a large crowd of people had congregated around the building, some of them holding signs.

Bonnie saw them drive up and came running up to the car with Jason and Maggie just behind her.

"Mayor Parker's here with that developer, Steve Kilroy, and they're getting ready to make some sort of announcement."

Fiona got out of the car.

"Can they do that," she asked Jason.

"He can make an announcement but not speak on behalf of the city council."

"What's he going to say," Cassidy said, looking around at all the people.

"I don't know Cassidy," Fiona said, "But I doubt it's good news for us."

"Look, the temporary injunctive papers have been filed on the Flynn place and the Wyatt sale's being looked at," Jason said, "We need to get in touch with them to see if the developers used the same tactics to get them to sell that they've tried with the Flynns."

"Yeah, they'll still have the Wyatt land regardless," Fiona said, "But we can find out the tactics that were used to check for a pattern."

"Speaking of tactics, we heard about your car," Maggie said.

Fiona shrugged.

"Sheriff told us it was kids."

"Do you believe him?"

"No, I don't but we have no proof otherwise," Fiona said, "And they're just trying to scare us off of this fight."

"It's not going to work," Jason said, "And if we have to go for the next step in Denver, we'll just do it."

"I have a feeling that is what we're going to have to do, Jason."

Fiona looked and saw Cassidy talking to Carter in front of the building but both of them had turned to look at the men who passed them, setting up television cameras.

"The press is here," Fiona said, "What's going on?"

"I guess we're going to find out," Jason said as they walked back to where Cassidy and Carter were standing near the crowd.

Chance placed the icepack on his shoulder and winced.

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"Your body really does betray you when it starts getting old," Mac said, walking into the living room area of the penthouse suite, "Every injury no matter how minor comes back like an old ghost."

Chance raised his good hand.

"I get the picture," he said, "But I'm not that old. It's just that this shoulder didn't like getting shot at and won't let me forget it."

Mac nodded.

"Ah that," he said, "We've all been there."

"Brody had to finish out the last stakeout by himself," Chance said, "I don't know if I trust him with the car."

"Brody's a good man underneath his character mannerisms," Mac said, "Linc said he was an excellent cop both on the street and in investigations."

"I know and I like the guy," Chance said, "He just gets impulsive at times."

Mac raised a brow.

"Maybe I do too," Chance said, "But I don't make comments out of the blue or ask questions just to get under the skin of people unless it's part of the job."

"I see," Mac said, nodding, "Brody has clearly mastered that skill. Where did he probe this time?"

"He started pushing me to take a vacation, then he narrowed it down to Colorado."

"Where Fiona 's doing her pro bono work for Jonathon's family," Mac said.

Chance nodded.

"Maybe he's right," Mac said, "Maybe you do need a vacation and the Rockies are beautiful this time of year."

"I'm sure they are, Uncle Mac but like I said, the work's piling up here."

Mac waved his hand.

"It will always pile up Matlock," he said, "It's called the price of success. You've heard the phrase."

Chance scratched his head.

"Yeah I have, someone told me the same thing last night."

"There you go," Mac said, "You could force yourself to work through this caseload and what will happen? You'll get more cases to build it back again. Or you could take a break and let the men you hired help you and the worst thing that will happen, is that it still might be here when you get back."

Chance paused.

"It's not that simple," he said.

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"Life seldom is," Mac said, "Especially concerning you and Fiona ."

Chance narrowed his eyes at his uncle.

"What are you talking about," he said, "I'm talking about whether or not I can take a vacation."

"Are you?"

"Of course," Chance said, "What does that have to do with Fiona?"

"She needs your help, she asked for it and you're still sitting around here worrying about your caseload which will always be there over someone who may not be."

"She's only a couple of states away."

"She's further away than that," Mac said, "Something I think that you do know."

"She just told me she didn't need an investigator," Chance said.

"That's not what I'm talking about," Mac said, "I'm talking about needing something else."

Chance sighed.

"Did she tell you that?"

"I think she told you that," Mac said, "The question is whether or not you heard it."

Fiona and Jason stood in front of the still growing crowd in front of City Hall as Parker, KilMac and several other developers walked up to the top step which led into the building. The cameras clicked and the crowd quieted down.

"Greetings my fellow residents of Silver Lode and the surrounding area, I'm Mayor Cal Parker and this is developer Steve Kilroy and his partners. These visionary businessmen were planning on bringing economic security and even prosperity that would have put our town on the map. A brand new ski resort that would rival any other in this or any other state and would have brought glory to this town. With divine providence, they will still have that opportunity."

Kilroy smiled broadly at the audience. A chorus of boos began to sound from the back of the audience. Parker waved his hands to quiet them but they ignored him.

"Now now, this project would have lifted this town's status in Colorado and indeed the Rockies considerably but this morning, some outsiders who have been manipulating the obviously impressionable land owners from the valley filed an order for a temporary injunction against this project. It was preliminary granted by a rather misguided judge based solely on politics which means that Mr. Kilroy and his partners can't continue negotiating to purchase properties needed for this vital revenue producing project."

The boos in the crowd grew louder, threatening to drown Parker out. Several residents raised signs saying "Save our Mustangs" and "No Aspen here".

"So now the town of Silver Lode might be forced to spend its own money to assist in this fight. Our attorney will be conducting a closed session meeting with the city council tomorrow and we will issue our decision

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publicly once it's been made."

"Wait a minute, why is the Silver Lode City Council going to authorize paying one dime to finance a developer's fight," Bonnie said, shaking her head in disgust.

Parker stepped down and Kilroy stepped up to the microphone.

"Thank you Mayor Parker for your generous offer and thank you for allowing me to speak in this venue. We came to this town bringing our dream and our money to build something that Silver Lode would truly be proud of, a state-of-the-art ski resort which would have contributed greatly to the tax base of this depressed region."

"Depressed," Jed said, "Who is he kidding?"

"But as Mayor Parker said, some malcontents standing in the way of progress have gone to court to try to block the American dream and my partners and I are going to take the necessary steps to stop that so that you, the town's residents can have the American dream. With the revenue that comes in not just for the resort but your own local businesses, you can build an infrastructure that you can truly be proud of and put your town on the lips of the movers and shakers in this country. Thank you for your time."

The booing outnumbered the five or six people who applauded his speech. The two men moved down the steps and were swarmed by the television cameras as reporters interviewed them.

Fiona stood with Jason and Maggie.

"Media stunt," Jason said, "They know that they're going to have a tough time in court against us so they're trying their case in the court of public opinion."

"We've got our work to do too," Fiona said, "And not much time to do it before the hearing in Denver."

"I'm working on the forms," Maggie said, "They should be ready in more than enough time."

"Thanks," Fiona said, "You've been a huge help to us."

Maggie smiled.

"This is beautiful country and I love horses," she said, "I want to see it stay that way."

"So do we," FIONA said.

Cassidy came up to her.

"Reed wants to know if he can take Carter and me to the diner."

Fiona nodded.

"You have to be back at the ranch by ten," she said. "No later."

Cassidy rolled her eyes but ran back happily to Carter and his brother.

"I don't know whether to be happy she's made a friend or concerned that it's a guy."

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Maggie laughed.

"You're saying that guys and girls can't be friends?"

"No! Of course they can, but it can get really complicated especially at her age," Fiona said, "I think guys make great friends. I know that from experience."

"That investigator you were going to hire," Jason said, "The one from L.A."

"Yeah, the one who's trying to lift his business out from under a pile of cases," she said, "But he's been my best friend for years, since we were younger."

"And you've stayed, just friends?"

Fiona nodded.

"Best friends," she said, "There were a couple of times that we thought about getting more involved but we decided why mess with a great friendship?"

Maggie nodded and Fiona saw her give Jason a look. Fiona recognized it because she had used it herself many times.

"I can get that logic," Maggie said, "But it's really a lot tougher when the guy's good looking."

Fiona thought about Maggie and Jason, wondering if there were anything else between them than friendship and a solid professional relationship that dated back five years.

"I won't argue with that," she said.

"So are you seeing anyone," Jason asked.

Fiona looked surprised but smiled.

"That's a little complicated," she said, "But the shorter answer is, no."

"That's good to know," Jason said, winking at her.

She started to say something in response but a couple of news reporters approached them, keeping them quite busy for a while.

Chance wandered around the art exhibit, pulling on his neck tie. His second tuxedo that week, he thought as he watched Mac explain to his girlfriend some history of the artist who had brought his collection to the museum as part of a nationwide tour. He watched Sophia nod her head, at his uncle's comments on each piece of art and how she held onto his arm as they walked across the room.

Guests filled the exhibit area and tables filled with trays of *Hors d'oeuvres* lined the perimeter of the room. Chance walked over to the bar in the corner to buy a scotch. While the bartender filled his glass, Chance looked around for Ginger and saw her talking to a couple of older gentlemen. She saw him watching and threw him a wave. By the time, he left the bar and walked to a statue of an archer positioned in the center of the exhibit, she had walked over to stand next to him. Ginger looked attractive in her gown, the sleeves just off of her shoulders and the scent of lilacs hit his nose.

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"Look at the fine line of his arm, how seamless it is between his shoulder and his fingers holding the bow."

Chance looked but saw the miracle of a block of marble transformed into a human being in great detail and thought that was enough.

"So how do you like it," Ginger asked, waving her arm around the room.

He sipped his scotch.

"It's very nice," he said, "My uncle knows much more about this type of thing than I do."

"Oh but surely you have an appreciation for the arts," Ginger said, "Do you collect any artwork?"

"Some, but most of it I encounter through work."

"That must be fascinating."

"I've worked on cases involving paintings and sculptures, some very well known," he said, "Some thefts but a lot of smuggling."

"Ah yes," Ginger said, "I can see how art could be used for a lot of other purposes than stimulating the senses."

"So how long have you been involved in art collections," he asked.

"Oh, since I first visited museums while growing up," she said, "I went whenever I could, wherever I could—the Louvre of course, the Prado, the best museums in Europe and several in Asia. I still get to travel as part of the job."

"That sounds challenging," he said.

"I feel so lucky to get the job a few years ago," Ginger said, "Unfortunately the circumstances were not good. My predecessor was murdered and I was hired to replace her."

"That's too bad," Chance said.

"Life goes on, as they say," Ginger said, "And I love my job."

She grabbed his arm.

"Come, I will show you one of my favorites," she said.

After Fiona finished talking to the reporters, she said goodbye to Jason and Maggie and drove back to the ranch with Jed.

"Nice turnout at the press conference," he said, "I'm sure Parker and the developers weren't happy to see their event turned into something else."

"The public is overwhelmingly against their plans," Fiona said, "You'd think that would make some kind of difference."

He shook his head.

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"Money talks even in small towns like this one," Jed said, "Maybe especially in small towns."

"It shouldn't be that way."

"I know but we're going to push this all the way," Jed said, "Not that it's going to be easy."

"Then we'll fight," Fiona said.

"You were great with the reporters," he said, "But I guess you've had some practice."

She nodded.

"Yes I have," she said, "But this was actually fun."

He laughed.

"I'm not sure Parker and this Kilroy character would agree," he said.

"Probably not," Fiona said, "But they should have been smart enough to canvass the residents to see if this is actually something they wanted before investing any more money. That's called living in a democratic society."

"You know things could get pretty rough," Jed said, "I don't trust this Kilroy and his boys one bit. Call it the hunch of an ex-cop but I think we might have trouble ahead."

"There's always trouble ahead in cases like this one which involve lots of money and even more emotions," Fiona said, "I once did a murder case in a small town and ran into some serious trouble there. Even had a Moldav cocktail thrown through the window of the motel where I was staying."

"So what did you do?"

"Called Montana to hire him to help me on the case," she said, "And he dropped what he was doing and did."

"It might not be a bad idea to call him to help you out here," Jed said.

She ran her hand through her hair.

"I've done that too much," she said, "He spent months on the run helping me and when he went back to L.A., his agency was a mess. I offered to help him with the backlog but he told me he was fine."

"He probably knew you needed to focus on helping yourself recover from what happened to you," Jed said.

"I know," she said, "He's really been great about everything but I don't want it to be at his own expense. His agency means an awful lot to him, even more so than when we first started it."

"He's hired some guys to help him," he said.

"Yeah, some of Linc's friends from the LAPD," she said, "They're all very good for the agency and working hard but he still has a lot of cases to clear before he can even think about coming out here."

Chance looked at the statue in the garden.

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"What is it," he asked.

Ginger laughed.

"Anything you want it to be," she said, "It's abstract art."

He nodded.

"Often we look at abstract art and see into it what we want to see," she said, "Studying its design and its form tells us a lot about ourselves."

"Like a three-dimensional Rorschach test?"

She raised her brows in surprise.

"I did take psychology courses in college," he said, "and more training in the military. It's very important in my line of work."

"I imagine," Ginger said, "So when you look at this piece what do you see?"

Chance's phone rang.

"Excuse me a minute," he said, taking out his phone. He saw that it was Brody.

"Brody, I'm out at an art function," he said, "What is it that can't wait?"

"I was sitting at home with the wife, two children tucked away for the night andâ"

"I'm not sure I want to hear this," Chance said, looking at Ginger, "Especially not right now."

"Ohâ well anyway, my wife turned on the news and we saw Fiona speaking on it andâ"

"Fiona, why was she on the news?"

"Oh, she was giving a news conference on that case she's working on out in Colorado," Brody said, "She did very well too."

"Is that what you called me about?"

"No, I received some information on our jewel thief," Brody said, "He managed to unload his cargo to the middleman and he's in your area."

"I'm dressed up and getting a personal tour at the premiere art exhibit in the city right now."

"So," Brody said, "You'd rather be doing that than getting the goods on this guy?"

Chance sighed.

"Not really," he said, "When can you pick me up?"

"I'm just around the corner actually."

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Chance put his phone away. Ginger looked at him.

"Bad news?"

"No, but something's come up at work," he said, "I've got to go."

"Now? There's still other art pieces I wanted to show you."

"I'm sorry," he took his hands in hers, "Maybe I can come back and we can finish another time."

She looked disappointed.

"Look, how about meeting me for lunch tomorrow," Chance said.

Her face brightened.

"I know a lovely place."

But he was already gone.

Fiona opened the door of the cabin and walked in, flicking the light switch and tossing her things on the couch. She walked into the kitchen to get something to drink, settling on some orange juice and then walked back to the couch to sit down and read through some legal documents.

The phone rang.

She reached over for it.

"Hello."

"Hi Fiona,"

"Hi Christina, how are things going?"

"I'm starting to feel human in the mornings," Christina said, "Which makes corporate meetings run a lot smoother."

"I'll bet," Fiona said, "Cassidy's not here right now. She's made a couple friends in her short time here and she's out having dinner with them."

"That's good," Christina said, "I was never against her having friends, I just wanted ones her own age."

"You don't have to explain it to me," Fiona said, "I'm keeping a close eye on her and so are the other folks here."

"How are you doing?"

Fiona laughed, sitting back and tucking her feet under her.

"Busy but things are going much better than I thought they would," she said, "We're working on the permanent now so we can file it in federal court in Denver some time later next week."

Where Mustangs Run

"That's great," Christina said, "So if it works, then that will stop the project?"

"Yes, but that's still a ways off," Fiona said, "We've got lots of work to do."

"You and those other attorneys?"

"Yes, I've been working closely with one who's a Harvard grad and a paralegal he brought with him," Fiona said, "There's other attorneys but they're in Denver."

"How's that been going?"

"It's been interesting," Fiona said, "I think one of them, Jason made a pass at me."

"That's cool," Christina said, "What's he like?"

"Very good looking and very nice," Fiona said, "But I think his paralegal, Maggie has a thing for him."

"Ouch," Christina said.

"I like him and I'm attracted to him," Fiona said, "Butâ!"

"You're worried about Maggie's feelings."

"I think she really cares for him," Fiona said, "I don't want to see her get hurt and know I caused it."

"Okay, then why don't you help her out then," Christina said, "And see what Jason does."

Brody picked up Chance in front of the art museum and they took off towards the pawn shop. This time, Chance got out of the car in front of the boarded up pawn shop and Brody drove the car to the other side of the alley.

Chance watched the front of the shop for any activity, cloaked by darkness and sure enough within minutes, a man exited it, this time carrying a briefcase. Chance watched him walk towards the alley and followed just behind him.

The man stood in the alley and waited, until another man showed up. They had some sort of conversation. Chance reached for his gun and crept towards the dumpster.

After the exchange was made, Chance stepped from behind the dumpster and aimed his gun at the man after the other had disappeared back into the shadows. The man looked up and took off running in the opposite direction as Chance had hoped he would. Now all that was needed was for Brody to block him off on the other end of the alley. Chance looked through the darkness for Brody but couldn't see him. He took off after the man who ran away from him.

He sprinted down the alley, inching on the guy who kept looking behind him. Suddenly, Brody appeared on cue on the other side of the alley. The man stopped between them, looking from one to the other as if deciding which one were the lesser evil. Chance hoped he chose Brody. Instead, the man spun on his heels and tried to climb up one of the fire escapes on the rear side of the buildings which backed the alley. Chance put his gun away and ran up, trying to grab his legs after the man had pulled down one of the ladders and started scrambling up it. The bag fell out of his hands and onto the ground, spilling jewelry on the street. The man kicked his legs to get Chance to loosen his grip, but Chance moved his head to dodge the blows.

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Brody came running up with his gun out to help Chance.

"All right, dirt bag, show's over," he said. The man turned his face around and sneered at both of them.

"You can't catch me," he said.

"It seems we've already done that," Chance said, still pulling on his legs, "Why don't you make it easier on all of us and just give up?"

The man turned around and tried to continue up the ladder. Chance and Brody together pulled him down and he landed with a thud on both of them, so that all of them were piled in the street, next to the bag of jewelry. Chance and Brody finally picked the guy up and got him on his feet.

"That belong to you," Chance said about the bag of spilled stolen goods.

"Never saw it before in my life," the man said, looking down at it.

"Yeah right," Chance said, "You hold onto him. I'll call the police to come pick up their serial jewel thief."

"I'm sure our clients will be happy to see their heirlooms again," Brody said, as he grabbed the guy.

"Yeah I'm sure you're right." Chance said, brushing himself off.

Another check for the ledger, Chance thought as he reached for his cell phone to call Linc.

After saying goodbye to Christina, Fiona continued with her paperwork, lying on the couch as she waited for Cassidy to get back. She reached for her lap top to get on the internet to visit a couple of legal sites to research case law when the phone rang again.

She reached for it.

"Hello," she said.

"Is this Fiona Jackson," a man's voice said.

"Yes, this is she," she said, looking at the Caller ID which stated 'unknown', "Who is this?"

"That's not important," the voice said, "What is important is this so listen closely. You had better drop out of this case if you know what's good for you."

"Listen, who is this?"

"If you don't drop it, you and everyone working with you will pay the price."

"Are you working for those developers," Fiona said, "Tell them..."

"You and your friends will die," the voice said, "You hear that bitch?"

Fiona listened to the dial tone and then hung up, rubbing her eyes with her hand. It wasn't like she had never received death threats and she discovered through experience that most of them didn't pan out to much action besides trying to scare her off of a case or an investigation. However, others that she had received had led to

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action against her or those she loved. Figuring out the appropriate category to place each threat was a skill she had yet to master.

She picked up the phone.

Linc paced between the two men, popping Roloids in his mouth as he did so.

"So let me get this straight," he said, "So I know exactly what dragged me away from a quiet dinner with my wife in our favorite restaurant."

He pointed at Brody.

"You received a tip that he was coming back here to fence some goods tonight."

Brody nodded. Linc turned to Chance.

"And you were getting a personal tour of the new art exhibit at the museum by the director when he called you."

"Exactly," Chance said, "We couldn't let this perfect opportunity to nab this guy slip by, Linc. So we went after him and this time, we got him right in the act."

Linc looked at Chance.

"He's denied ever having even touched those jewelry," he said, "And maybe his prints will show up and make a liar out of him but we don't just need this two-bit thief. We need the network he and others like him are selling to."

"I know that Linc," Chance said, "And we've got leads on the network that's responsible for all the action on the Westside."

"Give me a list and I'll hand it to property," Linc said.

"We will do that when we check out some more leads," Chance said.

"Why did I know you were going to tell me that," Linc said, "I'm leaving now to enjoy what's left of this evening with my wife."

"I'm sorry about spoiling your anniversary dinner," Chance said.

"It's not the first time," Linc said with a sigh, "And she knows that's part of being a cop's wife but she stuck with me all these years anyway."

They watched him leave.

"He'll get over it," Brody said, "I know, I worked with him for years in the field."

"We've got to get to work on that list," Chance said, as they walked back to the car.

"I'm still working on it," Brody said, "My contact is still checking some leads out on his own."

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"So what do we do until then?"

They reached the car and got inside of it.

"We talk about that vacation that you're planning on taking some time inside this century."

"Fiona, it's probably nothing," Jason said on the phone after she had contacted him.

"We don't know that," she said, "It's hard to tell if a threat is serious until the person making it takes some action or not."

He sighed.

"We've got to keep going forward," he said, "Besides if they're threatening us, we know we've got them scared."

"That might be true," she said, "And I'm not saying that we should stop what we're doing. We just need to be more careful."

"I've gotten threats before," Jason said, "Even death threats on other environmental cases. They usually don't amount to much."

"I've gotten them too," Fiona said, "And sometimes the person does act."

"We'll be careful," Jason said, "We won't travel alone. We'll keep in close contact."

"The judge might be coming out with the written order tomorrow," Fiona said.

"Well that's definitely good news," Jason said, "I hope it gives the earlier decision more teeth."

"I guess we'll have to wait and see."

Chance went to his office to do some more research after leaving Brody in his wake with his questions about Chance's vacation plans unanswered. He heated up some frozen pizza and looked through some papers on the jewelry theft case. Insurance claims submitted by several of his clients and photos of the missing jewelry. The police department had seized the bag of jewelry at the scene so Chance couldn't check to see if it contained any that belonged to his clients. His shoulder throbbed after the latest adventure and he rubbed it while looking through the files on the jewelry case.

A pang hit him as he remembered how he had left Ginger at the art museum while he ran off to meet Brody to chase after the latest suspect on one of his many investigation cases. He sighed as he was reminded once again how his career interfered with his social life and another woman was left behind in its wake. He used to commiserate about that with his former partner, Fiona who shared his problem. She usually knew what to say to get his mind off of it and reminded him that his work as an investigator was an important part of his identity and if the women in his life (and the men in hers) couldn't accept it, then they should just keep looking.

He smiled, thinking about her and he did wish he could drop his workload on Brody and his other investigators and jump on one of his jets to fly out to see her in Colorado. He missed the days when they worked side by side much more than he usually admitted to anyone including himself. But life had become so much more complicated in the past year and what happened after his party hadn't made it easier.

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He turned on the television to watch the news.

Cassidy opened the door to see Fiona sitting on the couch covered with documents.

"Waiting up for me," she said, closing the door behind her.

Fiona sat up.

"That's my job," she said, "But I also had a lot of work to do before tomorrow. Did you have a good time?"

"You know I'm not stupid," Cassidy said, "I can take care of myself."

"I know that, but seeing you come in safely after a night out makes me feel better."

Cassidy thought about that.

"Okay, well I'm back," she said, "Is there any ice cream left in the freezer?"

"I think some survived from last night," Fiona said, "Help yourself."

Cassidy started to go then stopped.

"Would you like me to get you a bowl?"

Fiona smiled.

"Sure, thanks."

The phone rang. It was a busy night, she thought picking it up.

"Hello, this is Fiona."

"You're keeping late hours, even for an attorney," a voice said.

"Who is this," she said.

"You've been warned to drop this case," the voice said, "If you don't announce that you're dropping it by tomorrow morning, you will pay the price."

She heard a click then a dial tone.

Cassidy walked out with two bowls of ice cream and saw the expression on Fiona's face.

"What's the matter," she said.

Fiona shook her head, then smiled.

"Nothing," she said, "Thanks for the ice cream. What is it?"

"Butter Pecan."

Where Mustangs Run

Chance glanced at the news while doing his work, then saw a familiar face on the screen.

"We believe that these tactics are being used to elicit favorable publicity towards a project which in actuality, few of the town's residence or the ranchers in the valleys even want in their midst."

Fiona stood in front of City Hall dressed in jeans and a blazer jacket, with her curly hair resting on her shoulders surrounded by a man and a woman and spoke in a microphone held by a reporter.

"So what will your next move be," the reporter asked.

"We will be reviewing our options before we make a final decision on what action we're planning to take to stop this project."

The camera zoomed in on the reporter.

"This is Cathy Streeter from KSLD news, Silver Lode."

Chance reached for the remote and turned the television off. He reached for his phone.

Fiona 's phone rang again and she looked at it, before deciding to pick it up.

"Hello, who is this?"

"It's Chance."

"Oh it's you," she said, sighing.

"Who did you think it was?"

"No one...Not that you're no one," she said, "I'm glad you called."

"I saw you on television talking about the project that you're fighting out there."

"Yeah, the other side had a press conference to generate support," she said, "It didn't work well for them."

"It looked like a huge crowd there," Chance said, "I hope they were on your side."

"Oh yeah, we've had great support here from almost everyone," she said, "Almost everyone."

"So have you had any problems," Chance asked.

She paused.

"No...no serious ones that we can't handle," she said, "How are things going on your end?"

"Busy as usual," he said, "Though Brody and I caught that jewel thief today."

"That's great," she said, "Thanks for telling me. I really miss you."

He paused.

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"How would you feel if I got out from under this mess here and came out for a visit?"

"It'd be great," she said, "But I don't want your business to suffer. I've taken enough away from it."

"You haven't taken away anything from it, Fiona," Chance said, "Don't worry about it. It's doing fine."

She heard a knock on the door.

"Listen Montana, I got to go," she said, "Someone's at the door. I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Bye," he said, then clicked off his phone looking at it.

Fiona looked at Cassidy and then cautiously approached the door. Cassidy looked at her, puzzled.

"What's the big deal," she said, "Open it and see who it is."

"I'm going to see who it is first," Fiona said, as she reached the door.

Cassidy shrugged and returned to her ice cream.

"Who is you," Fiona said.

"It's me, Jed," the voice said, "Something's happened."

Chapter 6

"What's going on," Fiona asked Jed after she opened the door and let him in.

"We received a phone call to watch our backs," Jed said, "Bonnie was the one who picked up the phone."

Fiona and Jed went to sit in the living room.

"Where's Cassidy," Jed asked.

"She must be in her bedroom," Fiona said, "She was just here."

Jed sighed.

"Bonnie was upset but more worried about you," he said, "Have you received anything like that?"

Fiona nodded.

"Two phone calls, both threats within an hour or so," she said, "If I didn't drop the case by tomorrow, something bad would happen."

"Did you tell anyone," Jed said.

"I called Jason and he hadn't received anything but I passed it along."

"We've got to call the sheriff," Jed said.

"That's not an option," Fiona said, "We both know who he's working for and it's not the residents of this county."

"Then we'll call the FBI tomorrow," Jed said, "We can't let this go on."

"Okay, we'll call them tomorrow," she said, "But we've got to be in Silver Lode for that closed session meeting so we'll hear any decision that comes out of it."

Chance stayed up with his paper work and some coffee. He didn't feel sleepy and thought that if he could catch up with updating some of his files, then he might at least see the light at the end of the tunnel. Brody hadn't called back on an update of the list of leads on the jewelry case. Linc had left a message on his voice mail telling him irately that the thief had bailed out within hours. And Chance didn't feel like calling either of them.

He wasn't happy that the thief had been released but knew that was how it usually worked. Now the guy would just disappear for a while before reemerging someplace else, most likely another large city. At least they had some of the jewelry back.

He reached for the next pile of papers to sort thorough and put in smaller piles. His mind drifted to the night of his party.

A few months ago :

Where Mustangs Run

The party began winding down and the guests began leaving. Chance looked for Fiona but couldn't find her. He did run into Brody in the kitchen.

"I thought I'd get started on the dishes," Brody said, "I know, not my style to do women's work but I did bus tables and wash dishes before I became a cop."

Chance looked at the tall stacks which more closely resembled the leaning tower of Pisa than dishes.

"I can handle it," Brody said, "But this isn't going to be a regular gig for me or I'll start charging."

"Where'd Fiona run off to," Chance asked, "I know I saw her earlier."

"She said something about taking a walk," Brody said.

"I saw you on the deck with her not too long ago."

"She's a very attractive woman but very complex," Brody said, "She kind of put me in my place."

"What did you say to her," Chance said.

"We had just met," Brody said. "So not very much."

"She wasn't planning to come," Chance said, "She said something had come up at the last minute."

"She showed up," Brody said, "She got through with the grand jury and hopped on an airplane to L.A."

Chance's eyes narrowed.

"Grand jury?"

"That's what she told me after I apologized for my rudeness," Brody said, "She didn't get much notice before she was called."

Chance put his dish down.

"Excuse me," he said.

Brody watched him go.

Chance let that vision go and sat back looking at the pile on his desk, of folders, papers and photographs of the missing jewelry. After Brody told him about Fiona and the grand jury, he had left to try and find her, without thinking. He continued traveling down that path to where it would go but then stopped himself. That trip down memory lane wasn't helping him in the here and now so he shook his head to clear it and tried to return back to the business in front of him.

Mac poked his head in.

"You still here," he asked.

Chance nodded.

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"Just sorting through everything that's on my desk."

Mac sat down in a chair across from him.

"Why are you really still up and spending time here instead of at home?"

Chance looked at his uncle, who relaxed in his chair waiting for a response to his question. He knew from experience his uncle was a very patient man.

"I've got a pile of work to do," he said, "that's not going to get any smaller unless I go through it."

"You've always had piles of paperwork, Matlock," Mac said, "That's just an excuse."

"No it's not," Chance said, "I've got to get all these pictures of jewelry organized so I'll be ready whenever the LAPD decides to reunite the goods we recovered tonight to their rightful owners."

"That could take time," Mac said, "We both know that they might need to keep it in evidence until the case concludes and it won't until they've brought down the entire fencing ring."

Chance rubbed the sleepiness out of his eyes.

"The jewel thief's already taken off," he said, "Linc said he bailed out."

"He'll turn up again," Mac said, "They always do."

Chance leaned back in his chair.

"So how was the art exhibit after I left," he asked.

"Breathtaking. You missed quite an event," Mac said, "Ginger was a great hostess."

Chance sighed.

"I apologized to her for having to take off like that," he said.

"An oft repeated behavior in your relationships with women," Mac said.

Chance raised his brows.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I thought it was pretty obvious," Mac said, "You have difficulty separating your professional work as an investigator from your personal life."

"You're one to talk from your job history," Chance said, "At least I'm only living one life, not two or three different ones."

"The life of a covert operative had its challenges and its sacrifices as well as its rewards," Mac said, "And it almost cost me everything and everyone I held dear to me. Which is why I wanted better for you and my own son."

Where Mustangs Run

"I got out of intelligence a lot quicker than you did," Chance said, "and I didn't work that side of it."

"Maybe so, nephew," Mac said, "But you are using your career to avoid having a personal life and unlike with myself, that's not a requirement of your profession."

"I'm having lunch with Ginger tomorrow," Chance said, then looked at his watch, "Today actually."

Mac looked at his nephew.

"Who said anything about Ginger?"

Fiona and Cassidy did some riding in the morning, while the sun rose up over the mountains. Cassidy grumbled a bit at having to rise at an earlier hour but after saddling up Sangria and spending a few minutes riding in the brisk, clean air, she began pointing out the horses which grazed in the meadows with their foals.

"So did you enjoy your time with Carter?"

Cassidy shrugged.

"I guess," she said.

"That doesn't sound very enthusiastic," Fiona said, "What happened?"

"He's a nice guy, but quiet," Cassidy said, "Nothing like Spike."

"Is that a bad thing?"

Cassidy looked down at her reins, her face hidden by her hat.

"I don't think he likes me."

"Why ever would you think that," Fiona said, "He just met you."

"I know, but he doesn't talk very much and I have to say everything just to hear him talk."

"Some guys are just like that, especially at his age," Fiona said, "And more often than not, they grow up and become the better men."

"What do you mean," Cassidy asked.

"Carter's spent most of his life working this ranch with his brothers and sisters," Fiona said, "He's never done a lot of the things that most people your age take for granted. He's always had to look out for his family, first."

"So..."

"That means there's a lot he has to learn how to do just like with you," Fiona said, "Maybe you could help each other with that."

Cassidy paused.

Where Mustangs Run

"He's really nice guy, he's very helpful when we're out on the horses because I'm not a very good rider" Cassidy said, "and he's funny too."

"Those qualities are very important when you're in a relationship," Fiona said, "Not that you need to worry about that yet."

"What," Cassidy said, "You didn't go out with guys at all when you're my age."

Fiona smiled.

"Of course I did," she said, "And I thought I was ready for a guy that's probably cut from the same mold as Spike."

Cassidy frowned.

"Spike's a cool guy," she said.

"So was Brick, or so I thought," Fiona said, "Look, you're only young once. You have your whole life to be an adult and when you grow up, these years will be something you look back fondly on."

Cassidy wrinkled her nose.

"Brick?"

Chance sat in his office, drinking more coffee. He had drifted off to sleep for a few hours before waking up to find himself still in his chair and his work still in front of him. He got up, showered and then brewed some coffee, before returning to his desk. He tried to pick up where he had left off but his mind kept returning to his conversation with Mac.

His uncle's words had irritated him even after Mac had gone home. And he knew enough that if what Mac said irked him, then his words had hit home. He knew he had been spending almost all of his waking hours working on his caseload but he didn't see where he had a choice. The investigators he had hired were a boon to his business but it was taking him time to get them up to speed and caught up. He had turned down two cases yesterday, something he hated doing but he didn't have the time to take on any more work. But then he also admitted to himself that if the cases had grabbed his attention, he would have added them to his list without a second thought. And neither of them had done that. In fact, none of his cases he had accepted lately really challenged him to his marrow like they would have a year or so ago.

Something had changed within him, only he didn't know what. His uncle did, but in his usual style, he didn't come out and say what but dropped questions here and there like an ex-intelligence operative would and left Chance to tie the ends of them together.

And maybe he could do it faster if he weren't so damned busy all the time.

The phone rang.

"Hello," he said after he picked it up.

"Oh Chance, I thought I might have called too early but you had to take off so quickly last night."

Where Mustangs Run

"I'm sorry about that, Ginger," Chance said, "My partner and I got a lead on a case we've been working on for quite a while."

"Did it work out?"

"Yes, we caught up with the guy, caught him in the act and the police came and arrested him."

"That's good," she said, "Was he a dangerous criminal?"

"He was a jewel thief who had robbed some of our clients."

"I see," she said, "Well anyway, I called and made reservations for today at The Karmic Garden for 12:30 pm. Is that okay with you?"

"The Karmic Garden," Chance said, "Sounds interesting. I'll see you there."

"Good, don't be late."

Chance put the phone down and picked up some photographs of jewelry to look at them again. He tossed them in the pile to forward to the LAPD to see if they matched up with the jewelry recovered last night.

"Hey, what you sitting around for," a voice said.

Chance looked up and saw Brody standing in his doorway.

"Who let you in," he said.

"No one," Brody said, "There's no one else here."

"Oh yeah, sorry I've been very busy this morning."

Brody looked at Chance, then at his cluttered desk.

"I can see that," he said, "Did you ever make it home last night?"

Chance shook his head.

"Too much work to do here," he said, yawning.

"Well pack it up, we've got to get a move on," Brody said.

"Why, what have you done now?"

"I got a lead on who the contact for the jewel thief might be," Brody said, "But we have a very narrow window of opportunity so we've got to get going."

"I've only got a few hours," Chance said, "I promised Ginger I'd be on time to meet her for lunch."

"Sounds serious," Brody said, "Okay, I'll have you back on time for your rendezvous with the luscious art director."

Where Mustangs Run

Fiona and Cassidy met Jed and Reed in a meadow near the corner of the ranch. The two men had been tending to a lame mare.

"Is that Willow?"

Jed nodded, patting her.

"She's got a minor stone bruise," he said, "She should be just fine in a couple of days."

"Cassidy and I saw some more horses in the eastern pasture," she said, "A few pair."

"They were grazing," Cassidy said, "They looked so happy."

"They are," Jed said, then he frowned, "I did hear some reports from Flynn that some of the mustangs were being harassed by some men."

"On what property?"

"Federal, where it meets up with the Wyatt place."

"They're not supposed to be there," Fiona said.

"The problem is," Jed said, "An order's been issued but no one here will enforce it."

"Then we got to do it," Fiona said, "Let's go."

They rode off.

Chance and Brody drove out towards downtown L.A. and quickly found themselves in a traffic jam, with horns honking around them.

"We should have taken the freeway," Chance said.

"That's worse," Brody said, "Besides, this is more scenic."

The light turned red in front of them and a crowd of pedestrians crossed in front of them.

"Why are you so concerned about the jewelry case," Brody said, "It's going to be months before our clients will see their jewelry."

"I turned down two cases yesterday because we can't handle them," Chance said.

"You didn't want them anyway," Brody said, "Or you would have snapped them up and then called me and the other guys and told us to get to work on them."

"Point taken," Chance said, "They were just run of the mill cases the kind I've done hundreds of since I started."

Brody turned around to look at him.

"Chance, do you enjoy what you're doing?"

Where Mustangs Run

Chance looked surprised at the question but Brody thought, not nearly as surprised as he should have been.

"It doesn't look like I'm the first to ask you this question."

Chance sighed as he started inching through the gridlock again.

"No you're not," he said, "My uncle, Mac's been hitting me with it too."

"So what's your answer?"

Chance paused.

"I'm just asking because in this line of work, you have to be focused at all times and you have to really be into what you're doing, keep that edge up because it's dangerous, the hours stink and the conditions can be lousy."

"The pay's goodâ"

"Yeah, but somehow I never got the impression that you're in this for the money."

"I started my agency because I wanted to help people," Chance said, "And I have but lately, it seems that it's mostly about helping wealthy people recover property that most people can't afford and to stop people from blackmailing people who probably deserve it."

"Ah yes, the latest guru of relationships with the girlfriend on the side being threatened through begonias."

"Fiona got out of this line of work and she's doing something to help other women," Chance said, "She seems very happy doing it and it's kept her very busy."

"Would you really want to go through what she did just to get at that point?"

Chance looked out his window.

"If I could undo what happened to her, I would," he said, "But she took something that was a nightmare and used it to change other women's lives."

"You can do that without the nightmare part," Brody said, "Maybe you should take a step away from it and think about it."

"I'm too busy," Chance said.

"That's why this vacation thing in the Rockies is so perfect. It would give you a chance to get away to think about it, to help Fiona on a case which she's passionate about and to get out in the fresh air where it's nice and quiet and away from this chaotic mess which will still be here when you get back."

Chance looked at Brody, thoughtfully then at the wall of cars stretching endlessly ahead of them and no doubt, behind them.

"I'll think about it."

The four of them rode across the land until they reached the federally owned property. They saw three men with rifles waving them at a group of horses which had taken off leaving a cloud of dust behind.

Where Mustangs Run

Jed turned to Cassidy.

"You'd better not come any further," he said.

She nodded.

"And if anything happens, don't ride up. Just take off and get back to the ranch as fast as you can," Jed said, "Alice will know what to do."

"Sure," she said, her eyes widening, "Be careful."

"We will, Cassidy," Fiona said, reaching into her jacket to pull out her gun.

"We'd better go on over and talk with those yahoos," Jed said.

Jed nodded and the three of them rode their horses to where the men were standing. At the sound of the approaching hoof beats, the men looked up and saw them.

"You're on federally owned property going onto a property that's under a protective order by the courts," Jed said, after they pulled up their horses within several yards.

The men put their shotguns down at their sides and one of them walked closer to them.

"What are you going to do about it," he said, "You know these so-called orders are nothing more than paper with writing on it."

"If you violate the order, you will be held in contempt of court," Fiona said.

The man aimed his shotgun at both of them.

"This is the only thing that carries any weight in this situation."

"That's real good to know," Jed said, "Because we brought our arsenal along too."

He, Reed and Fiona pulled their guns out and aimed them at the man.

"By the way, the three of us are expert shots," Jed said, "Are you and your guys?"

Fiona kept her hand steady and looked at the three men closely. They were looking at each other but their leader kept his gun raised and aimed at them.

"You are in violation of the court order and I'm sure the federal government is not going to be happy that you're on its land," Fiona said, "So you need to go off and tell Kilroy and his boys that you are going to abide by that order no matter what instructions you are receiving otherwise."

"How do you know we work for Kilroy?"

Fiona pointed at one of the men standing behind him.

"He was sitting behind Kilroy at the meeting the other night," she said, "and talking to him afterward."

Where Mustangs Run

"They're bluffing," that man said, "They'll never shoot us."

The other two men raised their guns again to aim at them.

"Don't count on it," Jed said, "I've been shot before and I don't intend to go through that again in this life. I just got married."

"If you're going to shoot us," Fiona said, "Then do it quick. I've survived a lot of injuries and they all hurt like a son of a gun. I'm not going through that experience of getting shot."

They stared at her.

"Sorry, bad pun."

"I don't believe you," the leader said.

"We can compare bullet scars if you like," she said, "Jed's got a nice one on his shoulder from a professional hit man hired by an international human trafficker, I've got a few. How about you?"

"And don't think that women are the weaker sex," Jed said, "Because this one's taken down two of those professional hit man herself."

"They're lying," one of the men said.

"No, I think I heard about them on the news," another said, "and watched them on *60 Minutes*."

Fiona and Jed looked at each other.

"So what's it going to be," Fiona said, "Are you going to leave quietly or is it going to come to a shootout with the quickest trigger pullers winning?"

The men looked at each other and slowly lowered their guns.

"Good decision," she said, "Now this is where we say goodbye and you leave."

"You're not going to get away with this," the leader yelled as they headed back to what Fiona and Jed saw was a faded black pickup truck.

Fiona put her gun away and glanced at her watch.

"Look at the time," she said, "We'd better hurry if we want to make that closed session meeting."

"There he is," Brody said, pointing to a thin man with a pony tail standing next to a tree in the middle of the square.

"I hope you remember where we left the car," Chance said as they walked into the square.

"I always do," Brody said, "Now this guy might be a little bit jumpy."

The man glanced right and left with his hands in his pockets as they approached him.

Where Mustangs Run

"Hi, this is my partner, Chance Montana," Brody said, "We're working that jewelry case."

"I heard your guy made bail and split," the man said, "Do you have a cigarette?"

"No man," Brody said, "You know L.A.'s a smoke-free city."

"I only smoke once in a while to calm my nerves," the man said.

"Yeah, well Mac what did you bring us all the way across this fine city to tell us?"

"The vendors are all lying low," Mac said, "Until this latest arrest blows over."

"Why," Brody asked, "It was just one small jewelry dealer who got busted."

"Everyone else is waiting to see if that guy will resurface and talk," Mac said, "I don't think he's going to spill anything. Probably split town."

"You may be right," Chance said, "but eventually if there's merchandise, those vendors are going to sell to satisfy the market."

Mac nodded.

"But they're waiting orders," he said, "From the guy in charge."

"Who's that," Brody asked.

The man looked fearful.

"I can't tell you," he said, starting to walk away.

"What," Brody said, "You brought us all the way out here and you're not going to tell us?"

"He'sâ I can't," the man said walking away, "Leave me alone."

Chance and Brody looked at each other.

The man rushed off.

Chance looked at his watch.

"That didn't tell us very much," he said, "Except that whoever this guy was going to snitch on is a bigger predator in this food chain than he is."

"I wonder if it's some kind of inside job," Brody said, "Who would he be afraid to implicate?"

"He's clearly not telling us who's in charge of this operation."

"Are you going to be late to your mid-day liaison with Ginger," Brody asked.

"If I rush now, I should make it," he said.

Where Mustangs Run

Fiona entered the kitchen and saw Alice there on the phone. When she hung up, she shook her head.

"That was Reed's mom, Carol," Alice said, "She said there was some excitement on federal land."

"Some guys showed up harassing a small group of mustangs," Fiona said, "We took care of it."

"She said there were guns involved," Alice said.

Fiona served herself some soup from the stove.

"We brought ours too."

"This is getting ugly awfully fast, Fiona," Alice said, "We really want to win this fight but we don't want you or anyone else to get hurt or killed over it."

"That's not going to happen," Fiona said, "They're just trying to scare us so we won't push for a permanent injunction."

"They might not stop with threats," Alice said.

"They won't do any good once the permanent injunction is granted by a judge."

"That's going to happen right away if it happens at all," Alice said, "We all know the stakes here and what it means for Silver Lode not to mention the valley. We just want you to be careful."

"The problem is that no one will enforce the temporary order because the feds aren't bringing people down here and everyone locally who should is in cahoots with Kilroy and Parker."

"You know, Parker used to be a good guy," Alice said, "He was close with Gordon before he died but he's changed since."

"Maybe he thinks he needs their backing if he runs for mayor again," Fiona said, "I guess we'll find out what the city council's response is going to be to our legal reaction in a couple of hours."

"We're all going to be there."

Chance and Brody got off the elevator and saw Mac sitting in the lobby reading a magazine. He looked up at them.

"Difficult day at the office?"

Chance glared at Brody then removed his jacket.

"What happened," Mac said, putting his magazine down, "Fall into a ditch?"

"We ran into a little trouble on the way to the Karmic Garden."

"I can see that," Mac said, "I don't think such an upscale restaurant like that one is going to let you in unless you shower and change."

Where Mustangs Run

"I didn't know that the truck driver would drive so close to the puddle," Brody said, "No one could have seen it."

"You parked us next to a tar pit," Chance said.

"No actually those are in West L.A.," Brody said, "Technically it was just mud and a lot of water."

"I'll be back," Chance said, leaving them.

Mac chuckled.

"Eventually he's going to run out of suits in that closet of his," he said.

"It's all my fault," Brody said, "His dry cleaning bills were probably much cheaper before he hired me."

"No, Brody," Mac said, "You've been a great help to him and a good friend."

"He's a good guy," Brody said, "A little wound up. Was he always like this?"

Mac shook his head.

"The opposite," Mac said, "But this is what happens to you when you get off track. He needs to remember why he got into this business to begin with."

"He's got to stop treating it like a business," Brody said, "And more like a passion."

"Agreed," Mac said, "But that means going back to the basics which means the beginning."

"Maybe not," Brody said.

A few months ago...,

She reacted when Brody had reached for her arm and he withdrew it.

"I'm sorry, I didn't meanâ"

Fiona looked at him, came back from where she had gone in her thoughts and smiled.

"It's nothing personal," she said, "It's just that people think because they read about you in some newspapers that they know everything about you."

"Chance talks a lot about you too," Brody said, "How you both started this business and built it up to where it is today."

"It was something he needed to do to live," she said, "To balance out some horrible parts in his life. To bring justice for others if he couldn't get it for himself."

"He did catch up to the man responsible for his kidnapping when he was a child."

"Yes eventually, but he kept at it because he really wants to help others especially those who have no one else to turn to when they're in trouble."

Where Mustangs Run

Brody nodded.

"And you worked with him when any law firm in the city, hell the country would have had you?"

She looked at him pointedly.

"He's my best friend," she said, "And he's always been there when I've needed him without asking. We're family."

"But you moved away and now I'm doing your job."

"And doing it well, I've heard," she said, "So I've left it in good hands."

"The guy has enough money to start his own country, a small one," he said, "But he turned over entire company to charity to focus on being an investigator."

She smiled again.

"Is this 20 questions," she said, "Because these are things you should really ask him."

"Man, look at the crowd," Cassidy said, looking out the window as they drove into the parking lot near City Hall.

Fiona and Alice looked and saw people standing all around them.

"It looks like the entire town came out," Alice said.

They parked the car and left it to join the others in front of the building. Jason and Maggie came up to them.

"They just started the meeting," he said, "It could be a while or it could be done in 10 minutes."

"What's most likely to happen is that the council's going to come out and say it's going to fight the order, unless enough council members vote to stop that."

Jason looked troubled.

"I think there's several members on our side who at least want to keep the town's coffers out of it," he said, "But I think that Parker and Kilroy have a couple in their corner."

"They probably spent the last 24 hours lobbying hard for votes," Maggie said.

"They violated the order already," Fiona said, "Jed, Reed and I ran into several of Kilroy's guys who wanted to compare caliber size."

"Oh my God," Maggie said, "What happened?"

"We ran them off, but we have to find some entity to put some teeth in this order until we can get a more permanent one."

"We could get some ranchers to stand guard on the areas covered by the order which are more vulnerable," Alice said.

Where Mustangs Run

Jed nodded.

"I'll go talk to the ones here and get this started."

"FIONA, are you sure you're going to be okay," Jason said, "It was never the intent to have you act as an enforcer."

"Our intent was to do what we needed to do to help the ranchers save their valley and everything that lives in it."

"But isn't that going to get someone hurt," Maggie said, "I know Jason and I have faced trouble in the past but we may need some help."

"We're short that right now Maggie," Jason said, "We'll be fine."

He walked off to join Jed. The rest of them saw Bonnie setting up a food stand with the employees from the diner and went to help them.

"Fiona, how dangerous do you think this will get?"

"Maggie, I think right now it's more bark than bite," Fiona said, "But that doesn't mean we don't take precautions."

"I'm worried about Jason," Maggie said, "He seems to be brushing this off."

"I think he's just doing that so we'll feel better," Fiona said, "I think he knows how serious this could get."

"I hope so," Maggie said.

"You really care about him," Fiona said.

"Yeah, we've been best friends since I started working with him," she said, "I was a waitress for years before I started going to paralegal school. He was the only one who would give me a chance and hire me."

"It's hard to tell him how you feel because you're worried it will all change, isn't it?"

Maggie turned her face around, startled.

"How'd you know?"

Chance walked into the restaurant and the maitre `de looked at him.

"May I help you sir," he asked.

Chance looked around at the plush surroundings which included a fountain as a centerpiece with wind chimes playing melodies and then looked at his watch. 10 minutes to 1. He almost made it on time.

"I'm here to meet Ginger," he said, before realizing he couldn't remember her last name.

The man's face brightened.

Where Mustangs Run

"Ah, you must be here to meet Ginger Winslow," he said, "She's a regular diner."

"Yes, I'm a few minutes late," Chance said, "I had to stop by the office."

"Follow me," the man said.

He led Chance to a corner table where Ginger sat, looking at her organizer. When she looked up and saw Chance, she smiled.

"Good to see you," she said.

He sat down.

"Sorry I'm late," Chance said, "It's been quite a morning."

"Well, as long as you can promise me an hour of your time," she said.

"That I can do," he said, picking up a menu.

"I've taken the liberty of ordering the house wine."

"That's fine," he said, "What do you recommend here?"

"The pasta dishes are very good," she said, "But the salmon and endive salad are extraordinary. Felix is a master."

"It all looks good," he said, "So how was your morning?"

"Spent cataloging acquisitions from all different places," she said, "We had some exquisite shipments come in from in this morning from Bangkok."

"Nice city," Chance said, "I spent some time there when I was in the military and several trips on business."

"The woman I replaced was much more knowledgeable about Far Eastern art than I was," Ginger said, "She left some good notes behind before her death and that's really helped."

"She was murdered, right?"

"Yes," Ginger said, "I don't know the details but something to do with a drug smuggling ring."

"Donna Singerâ 'l"

Ginger looked at him, surprised.

"Yes," she said, "How did you know?"

"She was a former girlfriend of mine" Chance said, "Fiona and I tried to stop them from going after her but we couldn't get there in time."

"How awful," she said.

Where Mustangs Run

"Yeah it was really hard on Fiona."

"Your business partner."

Chance nodded.

"Your friends mean that much to you?"

"Fiona nearly got shot trying to help her," Chance said, "One of the scariest days of my life."

"I can imagine."

Jason came up to Maggie and Fiona who were eating some French fries being served at Bonnie's table courtesy of the diner.

"It looks like it won't be much longer until they come out with an announcement," he said.

"Here, have some of these," Maggie said, passing him some fries.

"Thanks," he said, " Fiona, so what do you think's going to happen?"

"They'll come out, we'll listen to what we have to say and then we go back to work," Fiona said.

"We've got a lot to do," he said, "Are you free tomorrow?"

Fiona nodded.

"We could work down in the diner again," she said, "Maggie's made great progress on the documents for next week. And I think after today, we'll have more declarations coming in this week."

Jason shook his head.

"I can't believe they violated the order," he said.

"I can," Fiona said, "These guys are obviously desperate to get their hands on their land and they're not wasting a minute to get ready in case it goes their way in court."

"And if it doesn't?"

Fiona rubbed her forehead.

"I don't know what's going to happen then after today."

A distance away, Kilroy stood next to his partners when a man walked up to him.

"I told you not to come up to me in public," Kilroy said, "After that stunt today, we can't be seen together."

"It's too late boss," the man said, "The woman remembered seeing Bob with you at the meeting the other night."

Kilroy cursed.

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"We've got to do something about these outside agitators or we're going to lose this fight."

"We don't have much time to do anything," another partner said, "If there's going to be a hearing on the permanent."

"We've got enough time to do something," Kilroy said, "I'm not losing that land and I'm not leaving it up to Parker and his boys to handle this mess."

"So what are you going to do?"

Kilroy looked at the group of lawyers standing in the distance.

"Whatever it takes to get that land and get moving on this project."

"Threats haven't stopped them" the partner said, "They showed up here after being in an armed standoff with some of your men."

"Then it's time to start taking some actions."

Chapter 7

Fiona looked up along with other people who filled the parking lot surrounding City Hall to see Parker and other city council members come out of the building and stand on the steps in front of a line of television cameras and people holding microphones. People in the huge crowd stopped talking in groups and moved closer to the building as one organism to listen to the city council issue its announcement on the outcome of its closed session.

Parker moved ahead of the other elected officials, looking at the massive crowd in front of him. A woman who served on the city council joined him. After some employees of City Hall had moved a podium in front of him, Parker walked up to it and tapped the microphone.

Silence greeted him as everyone waited to see what he would tell them. Fiona tried to read his face, but couldn't decide which way he would go though she detected a trace of nervousness there. He glanced to the back of the crowd and she turned her head to where he looked and saw Kilroy standing with some of the other developers. She looked back at Parker who cleared his throat.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of Silver Lode, we the city council met in closed session with our city attorney and after he presented the facts of the situation and after we deliberated long and hard over this issue, we came to a majority vote."

"Just tell us what you've decided and skip the buildup," a man shouted from the crowd.

"If people will be quiet and listen, I'll tell you what the city council's decision was," Parker said, pulling at his collar.

"He looks like he's not very happy with the vote," Jed said to Fiona.

"The city council voted 3-2 not to use the town's money to fund the defense," Parker said, "But I exercised my veto power and overrode that decision."

"You can't do that," another voice yelled from the audience.

"Yes I can," Parker said, "It's in the town's bylaws. You are free to read a copy of them at the front desk inside this building."

The boos in the crowd filled the air and some of the city council members looked at each other, wondering if they should go back in the building.

"So the issue went back to a second vote to see if the city council could override my veto," Parker continued, "And one city council member said that she wanted to think on the issue some more so the decision has been postponed until further notice."

People in the crowd looked at each other. Some cheered while others booed and the crowd began to push against the City Hall, pinning the men holding television cameras against the steps.

Jason and Fiona climbed a couple steps ahead of the media representatives. Jason addressed the crowd.

"Did you know Mayor Parker that some men showed up on federal land near the Wyatt property in violation of the temporary restraining order?"

Where Mustangs Run

Parker just looked at them.

"Yes it's true," Fiona said, and stepped down to hand out press releases to the reporters, "They were on the property with guns and harassing a small group of mustangs. Mares and foals who were grazing on the landt as they have been for over 100 years."

Parker's face reddened.

"I have not heard any such thing," he said, "That will have to be verified by us before we give any credence to these outlandish allegations."

"Were you involved in ordering that action," Fiona said.

The crowd roared and inched closer, until the reporters and cameramen were pushed further up the stairs and the city council backed up closer to the front entrance.

"No I was not," Parker said, "And like I said, these allegations must be verified first."

In the corner of the crowd where Kilroy and his partners stood watching events unfold, the mood proved even more somber.

"Damn that city council," one partner said, "We should have never left it up to Parker."

"We needed him to sway enough votes," Kilroy said, "And we're almost there. All we need to do is work on getting one more vote."

"Which one is the holdout?"

"Betty Goodwin would be my bet," Kilroy said, "Parker said she's switched fences before so this might not be a problem."

"It better not be, Kilroy," another partner said, "Because if it becomes one, I'm pulling my money out of this project."

"I think I will as well," another said.

Kilroy held up his hand, feeling his plan slipping away.

"Now hold on," he said, "I told you we can stop this before it goes any further."

"How?"

Kilroy smiled.

"My men are already working on it."

Chance enjoyed his lunch with Ginger and the food proved to be delicious. But his mind kept wandering back to the past.

He sat in a hospital room, beside Fiona who lay there connected to a variety of tubes and wires leading to hospital equipment keeping her alive. She had woken up when he entered the room and had felt his hands

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grasp her own. In typical fashion, she had been more worried about him than herself and told him so. He stroked her face to reassure her that he was fine, knowing that the fates had decided that she should live.

"How do you feel now?"

She smiled despite her discomfort.

"Better now that I'm looking at my favorite face in the whole wide world."

He tried to sit beside her a while longer but she quickly shooed him off to continue to search for her friend's killer. That she would be fine and waiting for him when he returned. And she had been despite another attempt on her life by the crooked DEA agent who had been trying to silence any remaining witnesses to his crimes. If it hadn't been for Lincâ ! Well anyway, the DEA agent was soon apprehended somewhat the worst for wear because Chance had gotten to him first. Linc had shielded him from any potential legal problems by looking the other way though not without raising an eyebrow first.

"You okay?"

He looked up to see Ginger looking at him.

"I'm fine," he said, "Lot on my mind. My workload's been very busy lately."

She laughed.

"I know the feeling," she said, "In fact, I rarely get to do luncheons like this anymore. It's always about business."

"I've been there myself," he said, "My partners keep telling me to take some time off."

"Maybe that's not such a bad idea," she said, "Where would you like to go if you could go anywhere?"

"I was thinking of a ranch in Colorado, south of Denver."

"That's pretty specific," Ginger said, "What's there?"

"My ex-partner's working on a case for some ranchers who are fighting a ski resort," he said, "It's more legal than investigative, a bunch of lawyers getting together and filing papers in court mostly."

"Sounds intriguing," Ginger said, "for lawyers but most people don't choose to spend their leisurely time with attorneys."

"True," Chance said, "But it's beautiful country, lots of wide open space and clean air, a great place to relax."

Ginger laughed.

"All lacking in this great city," she said, "But you can find those things in many other places."

Chance hesitated.

"I haven't seen a lot of my friend lately," he said, "She invited me to come out and assist her on her case but I've been so busy."

Where Mustangs Run

Ginger narrowed her eyes.

"The one who took the bullet for Connie," she said.

He nodded.

"Surely you can take some time off," Ginger said, "You have other employees, yes?"

"Four are just starting," he said, "And one of themâ"

"What is it?"

"Is coming up this way."

"Chance, thank goodness I tracked you down," Brody said, out of breath.

"I'm in the middle of lunchâ"

"I know, but this is too good to pass up," Brody said, "Remember the guy who we met with who got blackmailed?"

"What about him?"

Brody picked some bread off the table.

"You don't mindâ. Anyway, he got another bunch of flowers this morning with a note. Only they're not begonias."

Chance sighed.

"What are they?"

"Petunias."

Ginger looked from one man to the other, trying to keep up.

"I thought we agreed we weren't taking that case," Chance said.

"But he just got another book deal and it could be worth millions," Brody said, sitting down at the table.

"I don't care if it's worth billions. He's cheating on his wife," Chance said, "If he weren't famous and didn't have a fat wallet, no one would think he was worth blackmailing over it."

"He's a victimâ"

"He's not, Brody," Chance said, "He's a hypocrite. He writes books about how men and women should relate to each other and how they have to stick together through the tough times because that's what love is all about and he's cheating on his own wife!"

Brody finally noticed Ginger.

Where Mustangs Run

"I'm sorry about interrupting your lunch date and talking shopâ"

"By all means, continue, this is fascinating," she said, looking at her watch, "And I still have 15 minutes until I have to be back at the museum."

"See that's the difference between you and me, Chance," Brody said, waving his bread stick, "You're a romantic and I'm a pragmatist."

"I hope that's not the only difference," Chance said, "And I just happen to think that when men and women make promises to each other, it should mean something bigger than both of them."

"Hey, I'm married and got the house with the picket fence. Okay it could use a paint job but I got the wife and kids and you've been what engaged a couple of times and left one fiancÃ©e at the altar?"

"She left me," Chance said, "And she was right."

"I remember reading about your breakup in the "Passages" section of *PEOPLE*," Ginger said, "I think she made a mistake."

"It's nice of you to say that Ginger," Chance said, "But it would have never worked out and I'm thankful that at least one of us saw that coming."

"That must have been difficult."

"I'd rather not talk about my personal life in the middle of a restaurant," Chance said.

"No problem," she said, "I've been there a time or two myself. Only I don't have to read about my marital status in the gossip pages."

"So should we go meet with this Fortworth guy?"

Ginger's face lit up.

"*The Douglas Forthworth*," she said, "I've read all his books. He's cheating on his wife?"

Chance looked pointedly at Brody.

"Maybe I'll just leave you two to finish your lunch," Brody said.

"Don't worry about it," Ginger said, "I've got to head back to work anyway. The museum staff is meeting with a delegation from Sri Lanka about a possible exhibit for our upcoming winter series."

They left the restaurant together and went to the parking lot. Ginger embraced Chance and kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank you for the lunch," she said, "It wasâ interesting."

"I'm sorry for the intrusion," Chance said, "Some people say I've got problems separating my personal and professional lives."

"Most of us do," Ginger said, "I'd like to do this again."

Where Mustangs Run

"Gingerâ!"

She patted him on the arm.

"As friends," she said, "Yourâ personal life seems a bit complicated but you're a very nice guy and not just nice looking."

"Thank you and you're a very nice lady," Chance said.

"Take care and we'll keep in touch."

He nodded and she walked away.

"What did you do wrong," Brody asked as they walked to their cars.

Chance just looked at him.

Fiona sat in the diner, with Cassidy, Jason, Maggie and some other people after Parker and the rest of the city council had retreated into the building. Most of those who attended the meeting had gone back home but some had gone to the diner which was serving food on the house in celebration that at least the city council had voted against funding Kilroy's legal defense for the moment. Fiona hoped that Kilroy and Parker wouldn't be able to sway another city council member to vote their way but at least this development had bought them some time.

"What'd you think of the vote," Jason asked while digging into his burger.

"I don't know," Fiona said, "We still don't know how it's going to go but it gives us a breather at least with this issue. We're still going to file the permanent no matter what the city council ultimately decides."

"We're going to have to spend most of tomorrow working on it," Jason said, "And put some time on other days until we are ready to file."

Fiona nodded.

"Will you need my help," Cassidy said, taking a break from her iPod.

"You can help us organize the statements we collected," Fiona said, "But we'll only need you part of the day so you can go back and watch movies with Alice afterward."

"We're watching films from the John Hughes era but skipping *Weird Science*," Cassidy said.

"Cassidy's a film buff. She's seen everything," Fiona said.

"That's cool," Maggie said, "My sister's writes screenplays."

"I've been working on some," Cassidy said, "Just stuff, nothing finished."

"What do you write about," Maggie asked.

Cassidy shrugged.

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"Rampant consumerism in the age of zombies who take over high schools," she said, "I think George Romero is really cool, but totally under represented the female point of view in his movies after the first one."

Fiona looked over at Cassidy.

"I didn't know you were so seriously into this," she said, "Does Chris know?"

"Yeah, and she's been cool about it," Cassidy said, "More cool than she's been about Spike."

"I think we should get through as much as we can tomorrow with the declarations that we do have," Jason said.

"Alice said that she'll help with that," Fiona said, "She's got some free time and she can pick them up from her phone tree group."

"That will really help," Jason said, "But we've still got our work cut out for us to hit our deadline."

Brody and Chance headed into the office and Mac walked toward them.

"Your receptionist is out getting her root canal done but she left this message," he said, handing it to Chance.

"The Begoniaâ I mean Petunia guy."

"Yes, he's called three times this morning," Mac said, "He says he hired you for his case."

"I told him the other day that I would think about taking his case on," Chance said, "But I don't have the time and truthfully, I don't have the inclination to help a man who's going to end up breaking his wife's heart."

"How do you know that she doesn't have something on the side," Brody interjected.

Chance sighed. Mac looked at him.

"So you're letting your personal sentiments for this gentleman affect your business decision?"

Chance nodded.

"It's my agency, my discretion of which cases to accept," he said, "And I'm turning this one down."

"Good for you, Chance," Roy said, "I think you've made the right decision. Now you need to contact him and tell him."

"I will," Chance said, "As soon as I finish my workout."

He left to go to his gym.

"I can't believe him," Brody said, "He spent his noon hour with a gorgeous woman who let him down gently and he's going to lift weights?"

"Working out is his way of releasing stress," Mac said, "One of them anyway."

Brody went to pour himself a scotch. Mac cocked his head.

Where Mustangs Run

"It's been a rough day," Brody said, "and I'm not sure it's going to improve any time soon."

"The meeting with your contact in the jewelry case didn't go well?"

"The guy froze," Brody said, "He was going to tell us and then he zipped his lips."

"Probably has someone more powerful than you to answer to," Mac said.

"Yeahâ well between that and the unfortunately poor timing that truck showed when it splashed through that puddle, it's been one of those days."

"Tomorrow will be better," Mac said, "So Matlock's luncheon with Ginger didn't go well?"

"I don't know, I got there late," Brody said, "But she gave him the 'let's be friends' speech and that never bodes well."

"I don't agree with that," Mac said, "I believe friendship is the strongest foundation for any successful romantic relationship."

"You and Hallmark," Brody said, "But if the spark isn't there, you can't make up for it."

He put his glass down and started to leave.

"I've got to take my kid to ballet practice because the wife's at her mom's," he said, "See you later."

"Well, I'd better head back to the ranch," Fiona said to Jason, "Bonnie's giving me a ride since Alice's driven the others back."

Jason started to pack up his lap top computer.

"Did you save the files on your thumb drive?"

Fiona nodded.

"We should all have our own copies just in case."

She started to leave, then stopped.

"I might be a little late tomorrow so you and Maggie can meet there and get started without me," she said, winking at Maggie.

Maggie smiled.

"We can do that," she said, picking up her backpack.

After they had packed up their things, they left the diner and began walking back to the City Hall parking lot.

"I'll walk you back and Bonnie to your car," Jason said.

"Thanks."

Where Mustangs Run

Bonnie locked up her store and went to join them.

"How's business," Fiona asked.

"Pretty good," Bonnie said, "Some of our crowd decided it was a good time to pick up some groceries."

"We got a lot of work done," Fiona said, "But more to do tomorrow."

"We've got company," Jason said, suddenly.

Fiona looked up and saw a group of men standing between them and their vehicles.

The men approached them.

"At least they're not violating the order if they're here in town," Fiona said.

"Hey you outsiders," one man said, "We're here to give you a message. Walk away from this case right now, if you know what's good for you."

"I live here," Bonnie said, "And I don't know any of you so why don't you take your own advice and leave my friends alone?"

"Can't do that," the man said, "They're standing in the way of progress."

"And a big pay day for your bosses no doubt," Fiona said.

The man grabbed her arm and tried to pull her closer to him.

"Listen lady, it doesn't seem as if you're good at taking advice."

Fiona pulled his arm in back of her and then tossed him over her shoulder on the ground.

"And you seem to have a pattern of underestimating the weaker sex," she said, "Now get up and move along."

The other men approached closer but one look from Fiona sent them back a couple steps. The man got himself off from the ground.

"You're going to regret this," the man said, "You better watch your step."

"So you're the one who's been calling me," Fiona said, "I recognize your voice."

"You'd better hear this then," the man said, "Watch your step."

The men walked away. Bonnie shook her head.

"These guys are on someone's payroll," she said, "And it better not be anyone on the city council."

"I think they're Kilroy's guys," Fiona said, "Unless Parker's working for Kilroy and not just advocating for him."

"We've got them scared," Jason said, "And that might actually be good news for us."

Where Mustangs Run

Chance did his usual weight lifting regime, trying to concentrate on each repetition and not allowing anything to distract him. It usually worked and this time was no different, but it left him exhausted by the time he finished. He wiped his face with a towel and went to the bar to pour himself some juice.

Mac looked at his nephew.

"You know Chance, working out is very good for releasing stress."

"I know that," he said, "But I do it to keep in shape for my job."

"How was your lunch with Ginger?"

Chance sat down and took a huge sip of his juice.

"She's a very nice lady," he said, "But we've agreed just to be friends and keep it that way."

Mac raised his brows.

"She seemed really into you the night of the exhibit," he said, "And really interested in asking questions to learn more about you."

Chance finished his juice.

"Maybe it's the job that's given her second thoughts, like it has for all the other women," Chance said, "At least it's a little sooner this time than on my wedding day."

"I thought you'd put that experience behind you."

"I have," Chance said, "But you're the one that brought up this pattern you see in my relationships with the opposite sex. That maybe they feel they can't compete with my job."

"You do blend your professional and personal life so much that it's not easy to separate the two," Mac said, "And that can leave a woman feeling as if she's being excluded."

"Lily explained that to me before she left," Chance said, "I didn't fully understand what she meant until I had some time to get away and think about it."

"And Ginger?"

"She said my personal life was complicated," Chance said.

Mac looked at his glass.

"Oh."

"Oh. What?"

Mac shook his head slightly.

"Nothing? I was thinking how I always wanted to eat at the Karmic Garden and never had the opportunity."

Where Mustangs Run

Chance scratched his head.

"Really," he said, "I thought you were going to make some point about Ginger and me."

"Noâ lno," Roy said.

Chance's phone rang. He looked at the phone number on the Caller ID.

"Fiona, nice to hear from you. How's life in the Rockies?"

Fiona sat on her couch with her phone, while Cassidy sat on the floor working on her laptop.

"Okay on this end," she said, "We had an eventful meeting today and just got back."

"How's Cassidy doing," Chance asked.

"She's working on some of her writing," Fiona said, "She's been a great help."

"What happened at the meeting?"

"The city council voted against helping the developers with their court battle. The mayor who's in cahoots with the developers vetoed it but the vote needed to override the veto couldn't make up her mind so it's been delayed."

"How does that affect your work?"

"We're still moving forward with the permanent," she said, "Although we haven't got anyone willing to enforce the temporary injunction."

"That doesn't sound good," Chance said, "What does Jed think?"

"He and Alice are getting the ranchers to guard the Wyatt property but it's a 24 thing and they've got their own properties to look after."

"Fiona, what about you," Chance said, "How are you doing?"

"Fine, things are going well. There's been a couple things. Nothing we can't handle," she said, "I'm just tired. It's been a long week."

Chance picked up something in her voice.

"What things?"

Fiona sighed, knowing he knew her all too well.

"Some of the developers aren't happy with what we're doing."

"Andâ l"

"It's nothing to worry about," Fiona said, "We've run into this before."

Where Mustangs Run

"Do you need any help," Chance said, "Becauseâ"

"No, you've got your plate filled there," Fiona said, "We can handle it on this end."

"Meaning you don't want me there."

"No, not at all," Fiona said, "I don't need you here. I'd love to see you."

"I'm thinking about it," Chance said, "Maybe I can get my investigators to pick up some extra work and ask Mac to look after them."

"That would be great," Fiona said, "If you can get away."

"I'll see what I can do," Chance said.

"Thanks, how are you doing?"

"Okay, busy like you."

"Is Brody helping you out?"

"Yeah, I've gotten a lot done with his help," Chance said, "Just don't tell him that."

Fiona laughed.

"That's good," she said, "Listen, I got to go but it's been great talking to you."

Chance clicked off his phone.

"How's she doing?"

He looked up and saw his uncle, having forgotten he was there.

"Fine," Chance said, "She's really busy on her case. Says it's going well but I don't think she's telling me everything."

"Probably doesn't want to worry you," Mac said, "Doesn't want you to come riding in and trying to fix everything for her."

Fiona looked up at Cassidy.

"Are you sure you're okay working with us tomorrow," she said.

Cassidy looked up from her computer.

"Sure, I'll put in a few hours and then Alice and I will make some popcorn and pizza and watch some movies."

"You enjoy spending time with Alice, don't you?"

Cassidy grew thoughtful.

Where Mustangs Run

"Yeah, she's very nice and doesn't talk down to me like I'm a little kid."

"She's very blunt sometimes, but it's only because she cares," Fiona said, "She's helped me a lot since I've known her, almost like a mother."

"You didn't have a mother, did you?"

Fiona looked at Cassidy, surprised at the question.

"We all have mothers, but mine died when I was young. Not long after my father was killed."

"I never really knew my parents," Cassidy said, "I only had my sister."

"And then you lost her," Fiona said, "You know it's funny but I spent most of my life growing up praying for a sister. I used to wish for one every time I blew out my birthday candles."

"You didn't get one."

"No, but I had my uncle and I had my best friend," Fiona said, "She was like a sister."

"And you had Chance," she said.

"Yeah, I did," Fiona said, "He lost his mother too, though he was younger than I was when it happened. He didn't have any brothers or sisters either."

"I have a grandmother," Cassidy said, "And Aunt Chris and Uncle Dan so I guess I'm very lucky."

Fiona nodded.

"Very lucky, to have people who love you so much," she said.

Outside the cabin, a stranger lurked around the property. He crept up to the window and watched the woman and younger girl sitting inside, unaware of his presence. His orders had been to keep an eye on his quarry and wait for the perfect opportunity to strike, to put an end to any threats faced by those who had hired him permanently.

Suddenly, he saw the girl's head pop up.

Inside the cabin, Cassidy looked around her.

"What's wrong," Fiona asked.

"I thought I heard something outsideâ"

Fiona got up from where she had been sitting and walked towards a window. The man saw her and moved to the side where he couldn't be seen.

"I don't see anything," she said, "What did you hear?"

"I don't know," Cassidy said, "Branches breaking I think."

Where Mustangs Run

Fiona knew that meant that someone could be awfully close to the cabin. She went to get her gun and told Cassidy to remain inside.

"Where are you going," she said.

Fiona put her gun in her pocket but kept her hand on top of it.

"Outside."

Chapter 8

Fiona stepped out of the cabin, carefully closing the door behind her. She switched on her flashlight and looked around into the darkness but saw nothing except several trees and the rover parked in front. She thought she saw shadows move in the brush which grew alongside one of the cabin's walls. She flashed her light over there and flinched when she saw a raccoon's face before it scrambled off.

She exhaled and walked back towards the cabin wall near a window. She shone the light on the ground around her as she stepped and saw several imprints in the moist dirt. Footprints. She carefully placed her shoe in one of them and saw that it was quite a bit larger. She looked closer and noticed several small branches broken adjacent to the prints. That's when she knew that she and Cassidy weren't alone. She looked around but couldn't see any other signs that anyone had just been there. But she could feel him.

She walked to check her car, but except for the crack in the windshield from the other night, it looked fine. Finally, she walked back into the cabin.

Cassidy looked up from where she had returned to working on her computer.

"Is there anyone out there," she asked.

Fiona shook her head. There was no point in alarming Cassidy at this point. Whoever had come was probably gone.

"Just raccoons," she said.

Cassidy's eyes lit up.

"Cool," she said, walking over to look out the window.

"I think I scared most of them off."

Fiona returned to her work but couldn't get her mind off the idea that she and Cassidy had been spied on most likely by whoever had been responsible for the harassing phone calls.

"I really thought I heard something outside," Cassidy said.

"I believe you," Fiona said, "And thanks for telling me."

"Those guys are jerks," Cassidy said, "for breaking the windshield just because things didn't go their way."

"We don't have any proof that they're responsible," Fiona said, "But unofficially, I agree with you."

Cassidy moved over to sit with her on the sofa. She still looked nervous, though trying not to show it.

"Are you scared?"

Fiona looked at the younger girl and thought about her answer.

"A little," she said, "Mostly about what's going to happen in court. I always feel that way before I have to appear on a case. After a few minutes, it usually passes."

Where Mustangs Run

"You never look like you get scared."

Fiona smiled.

"In these types of situations, you can feel it but you can't always show it," she said, "And believe me, I've been much more scared at other things in my life so this doesn't seem like much to be afraid of."

Cassidy nodded.

"Like what happened to you last year."

Fiona put her arm around the girl's shoulder.

"Yeah," Fiona said, quietly, "But the important thing is that you can't let your fears run your life."

Chance watched as Brody paced back and forth in front of him. Greg, another investigator who also used to work for the LAPD watched as well from the table where they were sitting inside a sports bar.

"So you don't want to take the Fortworth case," Brody said, "That's cool. It could have given us some exposure but okayâ"

"I agree with Chance," Greg said, taking another sip from his beer, "The guy might not deserve to be blackmailed but he made his bed, he's got to lie in it. He can always go to the police or hire someone else."

An older man walked up to the table bringing more chicken wings.

"Montana, who do you like in the baseball game?"

"Angels by four," Chance said.

The man penciled into his little notebook.

"By the way, thanks for finding my kid's stamp collection," the man said, "He never thought he'd see it again."

Chance smiled.

"No problem."

"The wings are on the house," the man said before leaving.

Both investigators looked at Chance.

"Stamp collection?" Brody asked.

"Someone snatched it right off of him on his way to 'show and tell' at school and tried to sell it," Chance said. "He's only 8."

"Tough world," Greg said, shaking his head, "I hate it when our kids have to experience it."

"That's why I lock mine up in the house when I'm not there," Brody said, "And my daughters aren't dating until they graduate from high school."

Where Mustangs Run

Greg laughed.

"Yeah right," he said, "I tried that with mine. Didn't happen."

"Yours married cops," Brody said, "So I guess it all worked out in the end."

"What about you, Chance," Greg asked.

"He's too busy messing up his social calendar with his work to get down to business in that area," Brody said.

Chance sighed and looked up from his ledger.

"Can we get back to talking about these cases that are still pending?"

Greg took another long sip from his beer bottle.

"I closed out three this week," he said, "I submitted the paperwork on them today."

"I saw that," Chance said, "That's great work especially on the extortion case at the zoo."

"Isn't that the one where someone threatened the primates' handler," Brody said, "Who did it?"

"Inside job," Greg said, "She had been involved with the guy who oversaw the croc pen but he broke it off with her because she chose the apes over him."

"That's a weird one," Brody said, dipping into the wings.

Chance picked up his pen.

"Did you forward the information to Linc?"

Greg nodded.

"They arrested the croc guy this afternoon," he said, "They also discovered the whereabouts of that alligator that somehow disappeared in transit on its way to the zoo. The keeper was wearing what's left of the poor creature on his feet."

"Cold bastard," Brody said, "I hope they put him away."

Chance raised his brow.

"Lucky Fiona wasn't here to handle that case and found out about it," Chance said, shaking his head, "She would have fed him to the crocs after she was done with him."

"I can imagine," Brody said, "but she's safely out of range and in the Rockies doing the good work."

Chance paused, looking at both men.

"Speaking of the Rockies andâ Fiona, I might be going on a vacation."

Both men dropped their jaws at his words.

Where Mustangs Run

Fiona picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

A familiar voice responded.

"You know you shouldn't be putting in such late hours because it's not going to do you any good."

"What? Who is this?"

"You and your lawyer friends didn't drop the case like you were told to do."

"No, and we don't plan to respond to your threats," she said, "We're taking this all the way if we need to, to win."

"That's too bad," he said, "You're such a pretty woman but you won't be nearly as pretty when you're dead."

He hung up.

She held the phone in her hands. How did the caller know she was still working? She got up and walked to the window to look outside into the darkness for the second time that night. She stayed there for quite a while as her coffee grew cold on the table.

"You're going on vacation," the two men said in unison.

Brody slammed his beer bottle on the table, causing people at nearby tables to look at them.

"Just for a week or so," Chance said, "That's why I called you both here to meet with you. You are my two most experienced investigators."

"Oh man, this is great," Brody said, "Your business will be safe in our hands and running smooth as satin when you get back."

"I think that's silk," Greg said.

"Whatever," Brody said, "We won't let you down, Chance and you really do need to go off and relax somewhere for a while."

"It's only going to be a little while," Chance said, "I'm not taking off and handing the agency over to you for very long and officially, my uncle will be in charge."

"So when you taking off," Brody said, looking at Greg who shrugged.

"Day after tomorrow," Chance said, "It's will give me time to clear some remaining inventory forms on the jewelry and tie some things up."

"That's a quick change of heart," Brody said, "I really think the time off is going to be good for you."

"Don't think I'm going to go easy on you when I come back."

"We'd be disappointed if you did," Brody said, "Have you told Fiona?"

Where Mustangs Run

"I'm going to give her a call," Chance said, leaving the table.

"I got another one too, Jason," Fiona said.

She sat on her sofa trying to get some research done on her lap top when the phone rang again. Jason had called her about the latest threatening phone call he had received which was similar to her own.

"I'm getting worried," Jason said, "I didn't want to scare Maggie but I'm starting to wonder if we're safe here."

"I tried to call the Denver office of the FBI this morning," she said, "But they haven't called me back."

"Hopefully, when we file the permanent," Jason said, "Whoever's doing this will back off."

"It's got to be Kilroy," Fiona said, "Look, I'll check with the FBI before I go to the diner."

"Okay, see you tomorrow," Jason said, "And be careful."

"You too."

Fiona got off the phone and lay back on the couch.

Chance stepped outside of the sports bar and took out his phone, to call FIONA

She picked up.

"Hello, Montana is that you?"

"Yes it is," he said, "Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"No, not at all," she said, "How you doing?"

"Pretty good, what about you?"

"Tired, but otherwise good. Is there anything wrong?"

"No, I just got to thinking that I might fly out in a couple of days and visit."

He heard a pause on the other end.

"You don't have to," she said, "We can handle things here."

"I know I don't have to. I want to come out," he said, "If it's okay with you."

"Sure," she said, "I'd love to see you. So would Cassidy."

"I've got some work to finish up tomorrow, but I should be able to leave the following morning."

"That'll be great," she said, "I look forward to seeing you."

"Me too," he said, "Good night."

Where Mustangs Run

Chance walked to the edge of the sidewalk where it merged onto the beach. He could hear the waves crashing in the distance. He took off his shoes and socks and walked across the sand. It had cooled considerably since the sun set but still felt comfortable underneath his feet.

He looked out toward where the tides drew in and saw her sitting on a log, her white dress standing in contrast to the darkness around her. He walked over to join her.

"Seat taken?"

She looked up and shook her head and he sat down. Silence fell between them but not in an uncomfortable way.

"So this is where your walk led you," he said.

"This is my favorite spot on this beach," she said, "It's so quiet at night, and beautiful. We don't get many stars out here but there's the moon."

"It is beautiful," he said, "Brody told me about the grand jury hearing."

She turned to look at him, her hair framing her face.

"I'm sorry I didn't know about it until this morning," she said, "and it lasted most of the day. I took the first plane out here when I was done."

"I know you would," he said, "Don't worry about it. I'm just glad you're here now."

"I had a present for you, but I left it back in Houston."

"You're being here is enough," he said, "So how'd it go?"

She looked out at the ocean.

"It went," she said, "I don't know what the end result was or what will happen."

He stroked her hair back off her face.

"I mean, how did it go?"

She paused, then took a deep breath releasing it slowly.

"I always think that I've finally got past it, but then there are days like today I felt like I was back where I started."

"I think that's to be expected," Chance said, "When you testify to something you've experienced, you're reliving it."

"I know that," she said, "I tell that to people who are witnesses in cases I handle all the time. But it's different to go through it yourself."

"Fiona, you've worked very hard to get through this and build your life back again," he said, "Harder than anyone I've known. Harder than I ever could."

Where Mustangs Run

Her eyes glistened then she shrugged.

"I know," she said, "Most days I know that, just not today."

He put his arm around her shoulders.

"Then I'll sit here with you until today passes."

"But it's your birthday," she said, "You should be happy and having a good time with your friends."

"I had a great party, lots of excitement," he said, "But it's nice to sit and wind down from all of that with my best friend."

She looked at him and smiled, then rested her head on his shoulder.

She woke up, and saw that morning had come, as evidenced through the sun shining through her window. She could hear footsteps down the hallway and into the kitchen. Then she heard a knock on her door.

"Come in," she said, resting back on her arms.

"I made some eggs if you'd like some," Cassidy said, "The first couple broke but the second batch came out fine."

"Thanks Cassidy, that's great."

She got out of bed and followed Cassidy into the kitchen. Cassidy grabbed some toast that she had also made and put it on two plates.

"So what time are we going into town?"

"About an hour," Fiona said, "Thanks for coming with me. I won't need your services all day."

"No problem," Cassidy said, "Alice's going to come pick me up in the afternoon."

"I'll probably be back late, so maybe you'd like to stay at the ranch house overnight?"

Cassidy bit into her toast.

"We're already planning on making it a sleepover because we won't get to *Pretty in Pink* until after midnight so no problem."

Fiona finished her breakfast and went to shower and get dressed in some jeans and a long-sleeved tee-shirt. She and Cassidy gathered their things and headed to the rover.

Chance sat at his desk, going through the final drafts of the invoices to send to the police department for the jewelry seized as evidence the day before.

Mac entered his office and sat down in a chair.

"I thought you were going to the concert with Sophia at Newport Beach," Chance said.

Where Mustangs Run

"We're going to pick up a lunch basket and then head off," Mac said, "What about you?"

Chance gestured to the papers on his desk.

"I'm going to finish up my paperwork," he said.

Mac looked at him and shook his head.

"Then I'm going to get ready to take my plane to Colorado tomorrow morning."

Mac looked up.

"So you've decided to take a vacation?"

"Yes I have," Chance said, "I'm going to need you to look after things while I'm gone. I let Brody and Greg think they're in charge but told them to report to you."

Mac nodded.

"I see," he said, "Between the three of us and your other employees, the business will be in good hands."

Chance sipped his coffee.

"Good," he said, "It's going to be nice to get out of the city for a while."

"How did Fiona take the news," Mac asked.

"She said she was looking forward to my arrival," Chance said.

"How's her case going?"

"Fine," Chance said, "They seem to have things going their way so far."

"It was on the news last night," Mac said, "Pretty contentious issue among the residents but then those involving developers trying to enforce change in areas where people like the way things are, often become that way."

"How contentious can it be," Chance said, "It's just a small town."

"There've been protests at the City Hall," Mac said, "And those are just the ones we know about."

"Well, that's the nature of those types of cases," Chance said, "Emotions get all stirred up like dust on a prairie when you start talking about people's land and all the money involved."

Cassidy sorted through the declarations that had been submitted to the legal team by the area residents. Occasionally she would thumb through one document and read it.

"Wow, I didn't know the Bakers had lived on their land since the 1890s," she said, before putting it down.

"Many of these families have had the land in their families for generations," Fiona said, "So it's very precious to them, something to work with and then give to their children."

Where Mustangs Run

"Aunt Christina is thinking about buying some land and building a house on it."

"Well, now that she and Dan are starting a family, they probably need a bigger house."

"I think they should," Cassidy said, "With plenty of land for kids to play on and for animals to run around free."

"Like Alice's ranch?"

Cassidy nodded.

"I agree with you about that," Fiona said, "It's harder to do these days with all the development going on outside most city limits but there still is good land out there."

"Would you do that some day?"

"Maybe..."

Jason tossed down another document.

"I think that's what we have for now," he said.

"Alice's going to drop another stack over when she picks Cassidy up," Fiona said.

"Every one of them is necessary," Jason said, "The judge needs to know that the developer's proposed report might bring in tax revenue but it's going to adversely impact families that have lived in this area for generations."

"Montana's flying up tomorrow."

Jason looked up from his paperwork.

"Why the sudden change in plans?"

"He's got some time off and is coming up to take a breather," Fiona said.

"So he can help us then on the investigative side?"

Fiona hedged.

"He's here to relax," she said, "He's been under a lot of stress from work and needs to get away."

"He'll be walking into a hornets' nest whether he likes it or not," Jason said, "Whether you like it or not."

Cassidy interjected.

"Well, I think it's awesome," she said, "He's promised to take me fishing."

"He doesn't have to get involved in this legal fight," Fiona said.

"If he sees that you're involved, I would guess that he'll involve himself."

Where Mustangs Run

"I'll make it clear to him that we're doing fine," Fiona said.

"We could use his skills," Jason said, "You and Jed have done a lot of the land surveying but you need help."

"The other ranchers are trying but they have their own places to take care of not to mention the guard duty over the area covered by the injunction."

"The law enforcement should be enforcing that."

"Yeah they should," Fiona said, "But we both know that's not going to be happening."

He nodded then looked at her.

"So what exactly is the relationship between the two of you?"

She looked back at him, surprised.

Maggie walked up with another stack of documents.

"I got these from City Hall," she said, "Fortunately, Parker's aide's on our side."

"These are the histories of land transactions in this region," Fiona said, thumbing through them, "This should be useful. Thanks Maggie."

"How the declarations going," Maggie asked.

"Great," Fiona said, "We're waiting for some more that are coming."

"We need everything useful we can get," Jason said, "We need to get this all to Denver."

Brody dropped by the office.

"Are you faxing those invoices over to the LAPD?"

Chance looked up at him and nodded.

"Greg and I are headed out to do the stakeout at the art museum," Brody said.

"Not where Ginger works," Chance said.

"There's a meeting taking place between a wife of one of our clients and the guy she works with. Greg's out there already with the camera."

"Camera," Chance said, "You know you can't take flash photos around some of those older paintings."

"Relax, it's digital video," Brody said, "Besides, they're meeting in the sculpture garden."

"What case is this," Chance said.

"The guy who's the deejay of that popular all-night show," Brody said, "That's the problem, he works all night, she works all day. Ships passing through the night and she's thinking about jumping ship."

Where Mustangs Run

"You know we don't usually take cases like this one."

"It's my wife's favorite radio personality," Brody said, "She threatened to divorce me if I didn't help him."

"We're going to have to have a talk about business when I get back," Chance said, "in the meantime, I think we'd both better head to the museum."

"Why, you want to see Ginger again," Brody said, "After she just dropped you down a notch on her social registry."

"Ginger's a nice lady," Chance said, "And doesn't deserve to have her museum turned upside down."

He started walking.

"Hey, Chance waitâ!"

Alice arrived at the diner to drop off some more declarations and pick up Cassidy before heading off to the video store to pick up their films for the evening. Maggie took the box and began sorting through them.

"Why don't you take a break and come with us," Alice said.

Fiona looked back at Jason and Maggie.

"Sure," she said as the three of them headed out of the diner to the video store, which was inside a building about the size of a trailer stacked wall to wall with DVDs. A teenaged girl who worked there sat on the steps, reading a magazine.

"I'll go get them," Cassidy said, and dashed inside.

"So how are things going with your case today," Alice said, as they waited outside.

"Very well," she said, "Those declarations will really help."

"We'll be able to get more after next week."

"We have to submit our case in writing a couple days before oral arguments on the injunction in Denver."

"Do you think you'll be ready," Alice said.

"We've still got a lot to do but between the three of us, we should make it."

"What about those threats you've been getting?"

Fiona sighed.

"The FBI can't send anybody out," she said, "If we're still having problems, we can stop by the Denver office when we're there."

Alice shook her head.

Where Mustangs Run

"I don't have a good feeling about this," she said, "I don't think Kilroy's going to stop at anything to get his project built."

"If the court rules our way, it will be a lot tougher for him."

"But that might just him more desperate," Alice said, "And desperate men do crazy things."

"We'll be fine," Fiona said, "We might be working late tonight."

"Stick together while you're in town and call me when you get home," Alice said.

"I will," Fiona said, "Montana's flying in tomorrow morningâ just to visit."

Alice brightened.

"That's wonderful," she said, "It'll be great to see him again."

"He's just here to get away from the stress of his work in L.A. not to do any investigative work"

Alice looked at the younger woman.

"That's fine," she said, "There's plenty to be done on the ranch and that's a great way to relax."

"That will be good," Fiona said, "I'm worried about him."

Alice put her hand on Fiona 's shoulder.

"Would you like to talk about it later, over some tea?"

Fiona looked at Alice.

"Maybe."

Chance and Brody entered into the museum's garden and walked down the brick path that separated the perfectly manicured flower beds of roses in a variety of hues and grass that looked like it had been trimmed by a razor. Several gardeners tended the flowers and looked up to see the two men wandering in their midst.

A magnificent fountain served as the centerpiece of the garden before the entrance into the sculpture garden.

Greg set up shop just inside the entrance, behind a statue that has been sculpted by Rodin with his camera ready to go but his targets hadn't yet arrived.

"Oooh, that's "The Kiss" but not the original," Brody said, pointing at the statue, "Rodin had this real appreciation for femaleâ figures."

"He's a guy," a voice came from behind them.

They turned around and saw Ginger who had walked up behind them.

"So are you here taking an art appreciation tour of our Rodin collection or you on a case?"

Where Mustangs Run

"Maybe both," Brody said, "Why limit yourself to just one activity?"

"It's a case," Chance said, "One of my investigators is doing surveillance on a wife of one of my clients."

"The deejay on the 'From Darkness 'til Dawn' radio show," Brody added.

"Oh yes, I've heard of him," Ginger said, "So his wife's cheating on him?"

"We don'tâ Oh wait here she comes," Brody said.

They watched as a nicely dressed woman walked up to the bench in a small courtyard and sat down. She reached into her bag and pulled out a book.

"Subtle entrance, I like that," Brody said.

"I thought you didn't handle domestic cases," Ginger said.

"This is an exception," Chance said, looking at Brody, "It's not the rule."

"Here comes the man," Brody said, looking at a young man walking towards the woman who seemed not to notice him. At least not at first.

The man approached the same bench and the woman looked up at him.

"He's telling her that the view is nice and then if the seat is takenâ!"

Both Chance and Ginger looked at Brody.

Suddenly, they noticed that while Greg lifted his camera, he caught his foot on a branch next to the statue.

"Uh oh, this isn't good," Brody said, watching Greg crash down on the ground, his camera scattering and landing just next to a heeled shoe of the woman. Both the man and the woman looked down at the camera and then at Greg who was trying to stand up. The man walked over to him, one of his hands balled up in a fist.

"Definitely not good."

The man grabbed Greg and pulled him by his collar. Greg pulled away and after the man threw a punch, they started wrestling, bumping against the statue.

"My Rodin," Ginger said.

Then the men fell on the ground and both Chance and Brody ran over there to pull the man off of Greg. Greg kicked the man off of him sending him backward into Brody and Chance. Unfortunately, the fountain caught Brody, and he fell into it splashing water everywhere. The woman got off the bench and started yelling at them.

"What the hell are you doing," she said.

"Is that your boyfriend," Brody said, climbing out of the fountain.

The woman crossed her arms.

Where Mustangs Run

"No you idiot, he's my accountant."

"What?"

The woman pushed Brody away.

"I missed the tax deadline and needed an extension," she said, "He just wanted to run over the final figures with me."

"In a museum?"

"Brody, let's just let these two go and call it a day, okay," Chance said.

"Look, we thought this would be a quiet place to review the return before sending it in," the woman said, brushing the dirt off of her accountant's suit, "Did my husband hire you?"

"We can't tell you that," Brody said, "Investigator, client confidentiality."

"Oh so he did, did he!"

Chance tried to intervene.

"Look, I'm sure we can settle this likeâ"

She threw a punch at Brody but instead hit Chance squarely in the eye.

Fiona returned to the diner after Alice left and saw Maggie sitting at the table alone.

"Where's Jason," she said.

"He went to get some fresh air," Maggie said, "He'll be back. It's turning into a long day."

"Sure is," Fiona said, "We'll work for a few more hours and then call it a day."

"It'll be night by then."

Fiona laughed.

"The life of an attorney means never ending workdays," she said.

"Did you always want to be a lawyer?"

Fiona paused.

"Ever since I was a young girl, it's all I ever wanted to be."

"And you've become a very successful one," Maggie said, "I thought about going back to law school. I did a semester before I got married."

"You were married?"

Where Mustangs Run

Maggie nodded.

"Not too long, well longer than I should have been," she said, "But I'd love to go back."

"You should," Fiona said, "You'd make an incredible lawyer."

Maggie smiled.

"Thanks, but it must wreak havoc on your social life," she said, "Have you ever been married?"

"No I haven't," Fiona said, "I've come close a couple times but never did it. I haven't always made the best choices in men."

"Join the crowd," Maggie said, "There should be a sisterhood of women who fell in love with jerks. I'd be president of it butâ"

"You really like Jason, don't you?"

"I think we both know which one of us heâlikes."

"He's very attractive and he's a nice guy," Fiona said, "But I'm not interested in a relationship with him. If it comes up, I'll tell him so."

"Why aren't you interested," Maggie said, "He's a great guy."

Fiona looked down for a minute.

"I know he is, and maybe there might have been a time," Fiona said, "But I have my own baggage to deal with and I think if he knew about it, he'd walk away."

"I'm sorry," Maggie said.

"Don't be," Fiona said, "Life's filled with good things too."

Ginger passed Chance a makeshift ice pack to put over his eye.

"That should stop the swelling in its tracks," she said.

He took it and gingerly placed it on his face.

"Thanks," he said, "I'm sorry about what happened. I'll have a talk with Brody and Greg."

"It ended well," she said, "The deejay and his wife are getting a hefty tax refund this year according to the accountant."

Chance smiled.

"What are you thinking about?"

"I'm wondering if the agency will be in safe hands while I'm out of town."

Where Mustangs Run

The news startled her.

"You leaving for work?"

"No, vacation," Chance said, "I'm going to Colorado to visit Fiona."

"That's great," Ginger said, "I'm sure she'll be glad to see you."

"I hope so," Chance said, "We haven't seen each other in several months."

"Whatever it is, I'm sure it won't matter when you get off the plane," Ginger said, winking at him, "We women are funny that way."

Fiona sat with Jason in the diner while Maggie went on a quick errand. She looked at her watch.

"We should pack up and get going when she gets back," she said, "We're all tired."

"I'm glad that we're finally alone," Jason said, looking at her.

She stopped writing and looked up at him.

"We've been alone before," she said.

He smiled.

"I think you know I'm very attracted to you," he said, "I'd like to see you socially."

"We're working together," Fiona said, "I don't mix work with pleasure and besides we live thousands of miles apart."

"How about when this case is filed away and done with, maybe get together for a few days in Denver," Jason said, "You're a beautiful woman and I really like you."

She looked at him for a moment.

"Look, I find you very attractive too and part of me is tempted."

"Part of you?"

"But there's a woman in this equation I like and respect who I don't want to hurt."

"Maggie?"

Fiona nodded.

"You're a very nice man, Jason, and I've met a few of those too in my life," she said, "But you don't see what's right in front of you because you're too busy looking everywhere else."

Jason remained silent for a while.

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"I seeâ well Maggie's very pretty and smart, a hard worker, but she's a friend and I've always believed it's best to keep your friends apart from your lovers."

"That's not a bad rule," Fiona said, "But she has strong feelings for you and I'm not going to be the cause of any pain for her."

He nodded.

"I don't want to hurt her," he said, "I really do care about her."

"My advice to you would be to take a closer look at those who care for you, who look out for you and really appreciate them," Fiona said, "Then who knows, maybe someday you can build from there or at least be honest to them about your true feelings."

"So I guess you and I will be...friends?"

Fiona started to say something but instead, nodded.

Two men sat in a pickup truck watching the diner while a third one walked towards a rover in the parking lot.

"They should be leaving pretty soon," the driver of the pickup said.

"Is this something that you really want to do," the other asked.

"We're just following orders from our boss," the driver said, "and he said to remove these outsiders from the equation no matter what the cost."

Chapter 9

"It won't start," Fiona said from inside the rover, "I know it's got a full tank of gas."

Jason opened up the hood.

"Is the battery working all right," he said, looking inside but not really sure what to look for.

"It was earlier," Fiona said, "I haven't been having any problems with anything."

"I've got some cables," Jason said, "We can try to charge it if it's the battery."

"I don't think it's the battery," she said.

Maggie walked up to them with some coffee.

"It's a bit chilly tonight," she said, "Drink up."

Jason took a cup.

"I think I need some brandy."

She looked at him and smiled.

"Maybe later."

Fiona tried to start her car again, not expecting anything to happen and nothing did.

Chance put his suitcase on the bed in his beach house and started packing. He had just gotten home after a long day spent finishing up paperwork. After returning from the debacle at the art museum, he had sat down and worked through dinner, actually getting a lot done. His eye smarted but the bruising didn't look too bad. Ginger's attentiveness and ice pack had worked.

He had left instructions with how he expected the agency to be run in his absence with Greg and Brody who had returned to the office after changing his clothes for a change. Chance suppressed a chuckle at the sight remembering how many times he had been in Brody's shoes. The ex-cop had his faults for sure but he was a crack investigator and a solid backup to Chance when he needed one. No one could replace Fiona as his partner but Brody hadn't tried. And if Brody went off on some tear through the city, Greg had enough sense to rein him in and if Greg couldn't, then Uncle Mac surely would.

Still he worriedâ

His own phone rang. He found it among the pile of clothes and picked it up.

"Hello,"

"Hi Chance, I hope I didn't catch you too late."

"It's never too late for you to call, Alice," he said, "How are things going?"

Where Mustangs Run

"I'm sitting here with Christina watching a movie marathon and eating lots of cheese popcorn."

"Homemade, I hope," Chance said, "I guess Fiona told you I'm flying in tomorrow."

"Yes she did," Alice said, "She's out working late in town with the lawyers and probably won't be back home for a while. I told her to call me when she gets back."

"She's been working really hard?"

"Mostly this week," Alice said, "They have some briefs due in court coming up and a hearing next week. But I'll make sure she's got some down time."

Chance chuckled.

"Good luck," he said, "Once she gets her teeth into something, she's not going to let go of it."

"This hasn't been an easy case, Chance," Alice said, "I'll explain more when you get here. Just hurry on up and I'll make sure there's plenty of food waiting when you get in."

"How's she doing, otherwise?"

"She's doing well," Alice said, "She's got a lot on her mind though and she's worried about you."

"I'm doing fine," Chance said, "I've just been very busy on this end. It will be great to get away for a while."

After he hung up, he continued with his packing. He would wake up early, go to the airport to finish prepping his plane and then take off. Three hours later, he would be in Colorado and on his way to the ranch and among other things, Alice's cooking which would fortify him for whatever else waited his arrival.

He knew everyone was worried about him because he had worked nonstop for most of the past year trying to get his agency back on track after his long absence. He hoped that his decision to take a spell to relax and recharge himself had placated them because everything really was fine if people would just stop asking. However, as he tossed in some pairs of socks, he thought that rarely did it ever happen that his vacations went according to plan. This time, he vowed, things would be different. He'd do some riding, take Cassidy fishing like he promised and stick to working on the ranch if needed, not on cases. And hopefully despite her busy schedule, he'd spend time with Fiona. He thought about calling her but realized it was getting late where she was staying.

So he continued putting items in his suitcase, looking ahead to rest and relaxation. Getting away from the grind of his job would allow him to think about his future and where everything in it fit together. No danger or risk in doing that amid the breathtaking beauty of the Rockies.

Still, he packed his gun in his carryon. He never traveled anywhere without it anyway, and you could never be sure when you might need it. Experience had taught him that.

"The car's not going to start," Fiona said, getting out of it.

"Too bad there's no triple A out here," Jason said, putting the hood down.

"Yeah," she said, "No cab service either."

Where Mustangs Run

"We can give you a lift back to the ranch," he said, "Or you can spend the night here."

"Well, Cassidy is spending the night at the ranch house," Fiona said, "So I could stay in town."

"Well, then it's set," Jason said, "I'm sure you can get a room at the motel."

They started walking.

"No wait," Fiona said, stopping, "I've got to get back to the cabin. I've got an early day tomorrow on the ranch."

"Are you sure," Jason said.

Fiona looked at Maggie who stood watching and nodded.

"If you could just give me a lift back to the ranch, I'll appreciate it."

"Okay sure thing," Jason said, "Maggie, do you want to come or stay here?"

"I'll come," she said.

"Then let's get going," he said, looking at the sky, "I think it's going to start raining".

Chance answered the door. His uncle walked in his living room.

"It's awfully late," Chance said, "I've got to get to the airport early."

"I talked to Brody and Greg," Mac said, "I told them how it was going to be and they're going to be just fine."

"Thanks, Uncle Mac," he said, "I trust them, even if they go off in some strange directions sometimes. Their records as cops speak for themselves."

"You need this vacation Chance," Mac said, "You need to get away and relax for a while."

"Look, that's what everyone's been telling me," Chance said, "But I'm fine and the agency's going to be fine."

"What about you and Fiona?"

Chance paused.

"That's what I don't know about," he said, "I think I hurt her feelings and I didn't mean to do that."

"I don't know what happened, but you need to work it out," Mac said, "You've been friends for far too long."

"We are still friends," Chance said, "Best friends."

"You need to remember that when you talk to her."

"I know that," Chance said, "It's not that simple."

"You want to make life more complicated than it has to be?"

Where Mustangs Run

"More complicated," Chance said, "I'm trying to figure out if I want to keep my agency going, if not, what I want to do nextâ"

"You thinking of selling the agency?"

"I don't know," Chance said, "I did some thinking when I was in the hospital."

"Where you wound up with pneumonia because you worked yourself into the ground," Mac reminded him.

"I'm fine now," Chance said.

Mac nodded slowly watching his nephew pace.

"Fiona spent three days at your bedside, after flying out from Texas until you stabilized. They couldn't kick her out," Mac said, "She offered to help you with your agency."

"I couldn't accept that," Chance said, "I knew what she would be giving up and I couldn't be responsible for that."

"Did you explain that to her?"

"Wellâ I decided to hire some more investigators to help with the caseload."

Mac sighed.

"You're so thick sometimes for someone who inherited his mother's smarts but his father's stubbornness."

Chance turned around to face his uncle.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Mac shook his head and walked away into the kitchen.

Jason drove down the darkened highway. Rain drops started hitting the windshield and he turned on the windshield wipers.

"We got a tremendous amount of work done today," he said, "It shouldn't be so bad from this point out until our date in Denver."

"I hope the judge is in a good mood," Fiona said, "That hearing's going to be critical."

"I haven't been to Denver in a while," Maggie said, "It might be great to spend a couple of days there seeing the sights."

Jason grew silent and Fiona looked out the window.

"Maybe we'll do that," Jason said.

"Isn't your friend coming to town," Maggie asked.

"Yeah, he's flying in tomorrow," Fiona said, "It's been a while since I've seen him."

Where Mustangs Run

"He's coming out to help?"

Fiona shook her head.

"Just to rest and relax," she said, "He was ill earlier this year and he never took time off to recover. Just went back to work."

"This is a beautiful place," Maggie said, "Plenty of ways to relax and if he's feeling better, maybe he could join us in Denver."

"We'll be very busy while we're there," Jason said.

Fiona looked up at the mirror and saw headlights coming up behind them. She looked behind her and saw rapidly approaching light which blinded her.

Chance looked up for a moment while zipping his suitcase.

Mac watched him.

"What is it?"

Chance shook his head.

"Never mind," he said.

"So you will spend some time on this trip deciding what your future holds," Mac said.

"I won't make any major decisions either way without consulting you and the other investigators," Chance said.

"What do you want to do?"

Chance sat on his bed.

"I love my work," he said, "But I haven't had a case that's grabbed me for a while now. I think I need to change my focus and remember why I started doing this work."

Mac cocked his head and looked at his nephew for a while.

"You thinking about leaving L.A. and moving back to Texas?"

Fiona sat on the examining table after struggling to put on her jacket. The attending physician had advised her that she had a mild concussion and should stay overnight for observation. She naturally refused to do so and he shook his head, muttering something about being able to give medical advice but being able to force someone to take it. She shut him out but then Chance started in about how worried he was about her and that she was lucky to be alive.

He looked at her and then they had walked out together. This time it had been his turn to be impatient with her for ignoring a doctor's advice, next time it would probably fall back on her.

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Fiona woke up, lying on her stomach, feeling something dripping down her face and the first thought in her mind were those words that Chance had said to her several years ago. She struggled to move, but pain answered her efforts from all over her body. She finally lifted her head several inches and images swam into view but they weren't clear. She saw what she thought was a glass window pushed inward and the door warped into shapeless metal.

She heard moaning from the front seat which was several feet lower than where she lie.

"JasonâMaggie," she called.

"Fionaâ!"

She recognized Maggie's voice, which sounded as jagged as the metal surrounding her. She couldn't see the other woman.

"Are you hurt," Fiona called out.

"I can't move my legs," Maggie said, "JasonâHe's not moving at all."

Fiona took a deep breath which hurt her chest.

"Where are we," she said, "What happened?"

She tried to remember but she couldn't think back through her hazy recollections when something had gone horribly wrong.

"Weâmust have gone off the road," Maggie said.

"Where's Jason," Fiona asked.

"He's here but he's not moving," Maggie said, "I don't know if he's breathing."

"Can you check to see," Fiona said.

"IâI don't know," Maggie said, "I'm pinned in here."

Fiona got one hand free and pushed a piece of metal off of her.

"I think I can move a little," she said, closing her eyes against a sudden eruption of pain.

"The windows must be broken," Maggie said, "I can feel the cold air and rain coming in."

"At least you can feel it," Fiona said, "That's a good sign."

Fiona struggled to move, then felt the car shift beneath her.

"What was that," Maggie said.

"We must have gone down into the gorge," she said, "That means we were approaching Jamboree road."

"We could still slide down further then," Maggie said.

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Fiona remained still, even keeping her breath shallow, trying to think about what to do.

Alice looked at Cassidy, asleep on her bed. She had passed out, a few minutes ago with a bowl of popcorn still in her hands. She had removed it, then placed a quilt over the girl while she slept. She left the bedroom to go get a cup of tea in the kitchen.

She looked at the clock. It read 3 a.m. and still no phone call from Fiona that she had arrived home safely. In the kitchen, Alice picked up the phone and called Fiona's cell phone and the phone at the cabin but received no response from either, except that it was out of range. Maybe Fiona had gotten back really late and hadn't wanted to wake her but as the hours had passed, Alice grew more concerned.

She picked up the phone to call Jed.

"Heâ illo," Jed said.

"I'm sorry to wake you Jed, but I'm worried about Fiona," she said.

Jed sat up in bed, careful not to wake Bonnie up.

"She hasn't gotten back yet," he said.

"She hasn't called," Alice said, "Because of everything that's been going on, I asked her to do so when she arrived back."

"She should be back from town by now," Jed said, "I'm going to get up and get over to the cabin and check on her. I'll call you from there."

"Thanks, Jed," Alice said and hung up. Then she went to the stove to heat up some water to prepare coffee, knowing that she wouldn't be able to sleep until she knew Fiona was home and safe.

Fiona gingerly sat up and tried to move slowly to where she could see the front seat, willing the car not to shift its position from where it had landed. Darkness still surrounded them, and the chill began to permeate the inside of the car but the raining had slowed. She could feel it occasionally hit her face, which she discovered she had cut on some glass. One of her cheekbones smarted and felt very tender when she touched it.

She looked over the top of the seat and saw that metal and glass had intruded into where Jason and Maggie had been sitting.

The other woman looked up at her.

"I think something's wedged into my leg."

"Then you better sit still," Fiona said, trying to shift her position to be able to see Jason.

"I tried to call 911 on my cell but I couldn't get through," Maggie said.

"Someone's going to come looking for us when they notice we're missing," Fiona said, "But it might be a while."

"I don't know if Jason has that long," Maggie said, "He's not responding."

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Fiona reached over and saw him sitting back limply in his seat but like Maggie, he had been pushed back by the dashboard and in his case, the steering wheel. She did reach over with her hand to feel for a pulse on his neck which was sticky with blood.

"How is he?"

"I feel something but it's very weak," Fiona said, looking back at his ashen skin, "He might be bleeding inside."

"I can't reach him," Maggie said.

"I'll try to see how close I can get," Fiona said, "But I have to move slowly."

She inched forward over the seat, taking care not to bump her head and testing the car for its reaction. When she felt pain, she just closed her eyes until it passed and then continued.

Chance woke up with a start and looked at his watch. It was five a.m so he got out of bed and headed to the shower. As he passed, he didn't notice the message light blinking on his phone.

Alice and Jed stood in the kitchen.

"I called the other ranchers," Jed said, "They're going to send their men out on a search party."

Alice sighed.

"I can't believe that Daniels said that we have to wait 24 hours until we can report them missing," she said.

"What can you expect," Jed said, "He's on the payroll of the men who might be responsible."

"Then you think Kilroy and his men did something to them," Alice said, more calmly than she felt.

"I think they did what they had threatened to do from beneath their rocks," Jed said.

Jed had done as he promised and had gone to Fiona 's cabin but discovered she had never come back and her car wasn't in the driveway. He had tried to call the lawyers at their motel in town but received no answer. One of his friends dropped by the motel to look for them and then discovered their car was missing and so were they. After he had called Jed back with the news, Jed had delivered it to Alice who had put her head in her hands but then resolved to find them.

She had tried to call Chance out in L.A. hoping to catch him but he hadn't answered. Now she had to go look for his cell phone number.

Cassidy wandered in, wiping her eyes and yawning.

"What's going on," she said, after looking around and seeing worried faces, "Has anything happened?"

Several hours had passed and Jason still hadn't regained consciousness. Fiona had taken off her light jacket and put it around him but didn't know what else to do, since most of him lay underneath the twisted metal and glass of what had once been his car. Now Maggie began to drift in and out of consciousness, leaving Fiona alone with her own thoughts. Her head hurt and she felt dizzy but she remained awake. She tried to remember back to exactly what had happened but her mind remained fuzzy. All she remembered was seeing a bright

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light moving towards them from behind, getting larger until it blocked out the darkness. She remembered thinking that a car had joined them on the deserted highway and waiting for it to pass. Then, nothing.

She discovered that her cell phone had worked but when she tried it several times, she discovered she was not within range.

Fiona leaned back in her seat, and noticed it had grown lighter outside. She shivered in the cold and wrapped her arms around herself. She thought it's been at least six hours or so and help hasn't arrived. Sitting in the silence of the car, he didn't know how much longer she should wait but she had to think about leaving and somehow getting up to the road to look for assistance. She didn't know how much time Jason had left if he was still alive at all. Looking over at the window, she realized she would have to smash the remaining glass out of it to have any chance of climbing out. She reached, grimacing until she discovered a piece of metal lying on the floor. She pulled it up and then turning away from the window raised it against the glass.

It took several attempts and she had to rest briefly between each one but finally, no glass remained to block her passage. She crawled over, trying not to flinch when the car shifted and then she pushed herself through the window, inching her hips through the frame.

She fell only several feet and nearly blacked out but after the pain passed, she looked around her. The air blew frigid against her and a light rain fell but the ground proved solid. She looked back at the car and found that a solid tree had kept it from sliding further down the gorge. She looked up but couldn't see the top, except for the sky. She got down low on her hands and knees and started climbing.

Chance prepped his plane outside the airport hanger and found the time passing quickly. The sun had risen over the horizon, turning the sky a light pink. He sat inside his cockpit, checking the equipment on the console. Satisfied, he went back outside.

Brody came walking up to him. Chance saw him and raised his hand.

"I'm not working," Chance said, "I'm on vacation so if it's job-related, drop me a line."

His partner looked hurt.

"I'm just coming to wish you good luck on your journey," he said, "And to help you if you need it."

Chance smiled.

"Thanks," he said, "No I'm fine and about ready to take off."

"Before you do, there is one caseâ "

He saw the look on Chance's face then changed his mind.

"Never mind," he said, "Between Greg and me, we've got it all handled."

"I know you do," Chance said, "And you've got Uncle Mac to help you stay on the straight and narrow while I'm gone."

Brody grimaced.

Where Mustangs Run

"I think it's time for a sandwich," he said, pulling out a Hoagie, "Would you like one for the road? It doesn't look like you have inflight service."

Chance shook his head. His phone rang and he looked at the Caller ID.

"I'll take this," he said, stepping away.

"Chance, are you there?"

A chill filled him at the sound of Alice's voice.

"What's wrong," he asked.

"I tried calling you at your house," she said, " Fiona didn't come home last night."

"Wasn't she working late in town with the legal team?"

"Yes she was," Alice said, "But they're missing as well and so is their car. Fiona 's was found parked near the diner."

Chance's mind filled with a thousand different thoughts.

"So you think that they drove off together," he said.

"Something happened to them, I know it."

"Listen, I've got the plane almost ready to go and I'll be on my way," he said, "What are the police doing?"

"Nothing Chance," Alice said, "They say they can't do anything. But the Sheriff, Daniels, he's on a couple different payrolls."

Chance grew silent and then asked a question which had been on his mind for a while.

"Alice, exactly what's been going on here."

She paused.

" Fiona and the other attorneys and even Jed have been receiving threats, probably from individuals tied in with the developers they're fighting against in court."

Chance digested that.

"Okay, I'm going to call the Colorado State Police when I get off the phone. I've got some friends there and they'll send out people to search. They've got a station near Silver Lode so it shouldn't take them long to get started."

"I'm so worried," Alice said, "We've got to find them."

"We will," Chance said, "I'm on my way."

He clicked off the phone and Brody's mood grew somber when he saw the expression on his face.

Where Mustangs Run

"What's up," he said, walking over.

"Something's happened to Fiona and the other lawyers last night," he said, "No one can find them."

"What do you need me to do," Brody said, quietly.

"I'm about ready to go but I need you to call the state police and talk to a guy named Phil," Chance said, "Tell him you work for me and tell him to get some officers out searching."

"Do you have any photos of Fiona I can send them?"

Chance reached into his wallet and dug out one that was taken a few months ago, which was worn around the edges.

"Do you need me to come with you," Brody said.

Chance looked at him.

"No, Thanks, but I need you to watch the agency while I'm gone."

"How long's it going to take you until you can leave?"

Chance looked at his watch.

"About 30 minutes," he said.

"I'll get you some coffee," Brody said.

As he left, Chance looked at the sun slowly rising higher in the sky, turning its rosy hue slightly blue.

Fiona sat on a ledge about several dozen feet above the car. Waves of dizziness hit her so she had stopped to rest a while. She felt coldness permeate her body, as the rain had started falling steady again. She leaned back against the rock to try to shelter herself a bit. She reached in her pocket for her phone and decided to try calling again. When she looked at its buttons, her vision blurred. She pressed what she thought were the correct ones.

Chance heard his phone ring and picked it up. His eyes widened when he saw the phone number that appeared on his Caller ID.

"Fiona where the hell are you," he said, "Are you okay?"

And somewhere about a thousand miles away, Fiona held her phone to her ear and listened to his voice.

Chapter 11

"Fiona, Are you there," Chance said, walking across the tarmac to his plane, "I'm getting the plane ready to leave to come find you."

Silence answered him and he wondered if she were still there or even if he had imagined the phone call. Finally he heard her voice.

"Is that reallyâyou?"

Relief filled him.

"Yes, where are you," he said, "Everyone's out looking for you."

"HoustonâI'm not sure where I am," she said, looking around her from her ledge.

"What happened," he asked.

"IâI don't knowâwe crashed the car on the way back to the ranch last night."

"That was hours ago," he said, "What have you been doing since?"

"I got outâI'm trying to climb up the gorgeâJason and Maggie are both hurt in the car."

"Where do you think you might be," he said.

She concentrated.

"I think we were just about to reach the Jamboree Road turnoff whenâ"

"What?"

"I'm not sureâI," she said, "It's cold."

"Are you hurt?"

"IâI don't know," she said, "I ache all over but I think I'm okay."

"Listen, you sit tight," he said, "I'm going to call the state police and tell them where to start looking," he said, "They're already on their way to Silver Lode."

"I'll stay here," she said, holding the phone.

"I'm leaving now too," he said, "It'll be a few hours but I'll be there as soon as I can."

Brody came up to him.

"Was thatâ"

Chance nodded.

Where Mustangs Run

"How in the hell did she call you," Brody said.

"I don't know," Chance said, "But we got to call the state police and tell them where to start looking."

"I'll do that," Brody said, "You'd better just go."

Chance walked towards his plane and up the steps, pulling the door closed behind him. He went up to the cockpit and did the final preparations to ready his plane to taxi down the runway.

Fiona sat on the ledge, trying to curl her legs under her and to flatten herself against the wall away from the rain. She didn't know how much time had passed since she had left the car and had inadvertently called Chance but it felt like hours. Her phone had died soon after she made that call so she never was able to call 911. Then again, she wondered if the local police would send a search party for them even if one of them had been able to call for help. She struggled to remember what happened in the time before she had woken up inside the crashed vehicle but all she remembered was a flash of bright light.

"So how long will you be in L.A. this time," Chance said, as he and Fiona walked across the sand towards his house. They held hands and carried their shoes as they made their way up to the boardwalk where some businesses housed in shacks which catered to fishermen had closed for the night.

"I have to go back to Houston tomorrow night," she said, "I have some meetings with some lawyers the following day."

"You've been really busy lately."

"So have you," she said, "I hope you're taking care of yourself. It's not been long since you were sick."

He sighed.

"What has my uncle been telling you?"

She stopped and looked at him.

"Not much just that you've been working nonstop since before the doctor had cleared you for going back to work."

"It was just a little pneumonia," he said. He tilted her chin up with his finger and saw tears in the corners of her eyes.

"It scared me seeing you so sick," she said, "Three days in intensive care before the doctors knew for sure you'd pull through."

"Well I did Fiona, and I'm doing just fine," he said.

"Just take time for yourself okay," she said, "I worry about you."

"Are you taking your own advice," he said.

She relented with a smile and they continued walking.

Where Mustangs Run

"I'm pulling in some long days and nights," she said, "But in several months, I'll be going to Colorado to help on that development case that Alice's been telling me about."

"It's nice of you to help them," he said.

"They did so much for me last year," Fiona said, "and they're like family now."

"I miss you," he said, "I wish we could see more of each other."

"I do too," she said, "But we both have our lives to get back on track."

He paused and in response, she stopped and turned to look at him before they stepped onto the board walk.

"I've got something I need to say."

Fiona opened her eyes and saw that some sunlight had poked through the clouds that filled the sky and warmth had touched her face. From above, she heard someone shouting. She tried to stand up, but couldn't so she tried waving her arms instead.

Chance landed at the small airport after maneuvering through the approach path which resembled an intricately designed trail between different peaks of the Rockies and required his close attention. The sight which greeted him took his breath away for reasons that didn't just have to do with its beauty. Still, he hit the runway just right, didn't get buffeted by cross winds and brought the plane to a stop at the slot which had been assigned to him at the small airport. He said a silent prayer as he always did when he landed there.

He took care of his plane and then rented a car to drive the short distance into town. He picked up his cell phone to call Alice.

"Hi, it's Chance," he said, "Any news?"

"Yeah, they found the car," she said, "Thanks to the location you passed along."

"How are they," Chance asked.

"They're not sure," she said, "They found Fiona on a ledge but she's suffering from dehydration and mild hypothermia so she didn't make a lot of sense. She did give them the general direction of the car and they sent a team down there but they had to use special equipment to excavate the other two."

"Where is Fiona now?"

"I don't know, last I heard they were still trying to evacuate her."

"I'm on my way there to the Jamboree road turnoff," he said, "Do they have any idea what happened last night?"

"None," Alice said, "They just know the car veered off the road. No sign of the driver tried to stop to avoid an animal or another car. Maybe the driver fell asleep."

"You told me when you called before that there'd been trouble," Chance said, "What was that about?"

Alice sighed.

Where Mustangs Run

"I think you need to talk to Jed about that," she said, "He received a couple of the phone calls too. He's at the scene."

Chance put his phone away and kept driving down the curvy highway hoping that they had gotten Fiona and the other attorneys out safely but it sounded like a serious accident. Not to mention that all three of them had spent hours out in the elements awaiting rescue. He imagined that even during the summer months, the mountains got chilly at night and the rain hadn't helped matters.

He pulled over when he saw the ambulances and a couple of fire rescue vehicles along with police cars all parked alongside the highway. He got out of his vehicle and walked up to Jed who was standing next to one of the fire trucks.

"You just missed Fiona," Jed said, "They loaded her up in an ambulance and took her to the hospital in town. Bonnie went with her. The doctors will determine if they need to evac her out to the trauma center in Colorado Springs."

"Did they pull out the others?"

"They're still working on it," Jed said, "It doesn't look very good for the other two. They're banged up pretty bad."

"How did Fiona look?"

"She's bruised up a bit and had a few cuts but they're concerned about internal injuries," Jed said, "She was conscious when they found her and fairly lucid."

"I'm going to go to the hospital," Chance said.

Jed nodded.

"I'll be there pretty soon," he said, then looked gravely at Chance, "There's a lot I need to tell you about what's been going on here the past couple of weeks."

"Then you don't think this is an accident?"

"I doubt this was an accident," Jed said.

Fiona lay back on the examining table in the small ER, while a doctor examined her and a nurse took her blood pressure. After a good amount of poking and prodding and endless questions, he flipped open a folder and jotted down some notes.

"Okay, it looks like we might have to x-ray the ribs and the cheekbone but it looks like the wrist is just sprained and there are no signs of any internal bleeding."

She sat up, and tried to throw her legs over the table to step down, but a wave of dizziness hit her.

"Oh and you might have a mild concussion."

She nodded.

"Where my clothes," she said, looking down at her flimsy outfit. She hated hospital gowns.

Where Mustangs Run

"Not until you're checked out and even if your x-rays come back clean, we might want to keep you over night."

She lifted up her hand.

"No, I've got to get out of here," she said, "I've got work to do."

A nurse came in with a wheelchair.

"Not right now, your cab just arrived to take you to x-ray," the doctor wrapping his stethoscope around his neck.

"How are the people I was traveling with," she said, "I've asked since I've been here and no one can tell me anything."

The doctor looked up from her chart.

"The male's very critical and probably going to Mercy's in Denver and the female's fractured several bones. She might be joining him."

Fiona put her hand over her eyes which suddenly stung. She allowed an aide to help assist her into the wheelchair again reminded by the fragility of life. One minute they were talking and enjoying the conclusion to a hard but rewarding day and the next, inside a crushed car which had gone down into a gorge without having a clue about what happened in the split second in between.

Chance walked quickly into the hospital after parking his car. He weaved his way through emergency room personnel and patients until he reached a young woman at what looked like Command Central in the busy room.

"May I help you," the woman said, looking up from her paperwork.

"I'm looking for a Fiona Johnson," he said, "She was just brought in from a car accident on the highway."

"Hmmm, I'll look her up," the woman said, switching her attention to her computer screen and clicking some buttons on her keyboard.

"She came in not too long ago," she said, "She's going to x-ray for some precautionary films."

"How's she doing," he asked.

"You'll have to ask her doctor that," the woman said before returning to her paper work.

"Chanceâ"

He turned around and saw Bonnie walking towards him.

"Jed told me you rode with Fiona to the hospital," Chance said, embracing Bonnie in a hug.

"I think she's going to be okay," she said, "Mostly bruises and some hypothermia."

"I hope you're right," Chance said, as they both sat in chairs near the front desk to wait for any further word.

Where Mustangs Run

She patted his hand, after seeing how anxious he looked.

"She's in good hands," Bonnie said, "It's a small town but it's a very efficient, professional hospital."

"I got the news when I was getting the plane ready to fly out here," Chance said.

"That information that you passed along to the state police made all the difference."

"That was FIONA," he said, "I don't know how or why she called me."

"I imagine phone reception is tricky down in that gorge," Bonnie said, "She's lucky she could call anyone at all."

Jed walked up to both of them.

"They finally pulled the other two out of the wreck," he said, "They're going to fly them evac to Denver without bringing them here."

"How are they," Chance asked.

Jed shook his head.

"They don't know if Jason's going to pull through," he said, "He's in critical condition with massive internal bleeding and some possible leg fractures."

"And Maggie," Bonnie asked.

"She's got a couple bones broken in her arm and a concussion," he said, "She also had some bleeding in one of her legs from debris but they were able to stop it."

"Those poor people," Bonnie said, shaking her head, "They were working so hard for the people in this town and very willingly too without complaint."

"Why do you think they wound up in that gorge," Jed said, quietly.

"You don't think it was an accident," Bonnie said, "That Jason fell asleep at the wheel?"

Jed shook his head.

"Bonnie, you were the one that answered the phone when that threat came in," he said.

"Tell me more about these threats," Chance said.

"I'll go get us some coffee," Bonnie said.

The men both nodded at her and she left them.

"The lawyers including Fiona, their lives were threatened," Jed said, "And those were the phone calls."

"What do you mean," Chance asked.

Where Mustangs Run

"There have also been a couple altercations," Jed said, "One of them took place on federal property. Some of Kilroy's guys were violating the temporary injunction by trespassing and brought shotguns to harass the mustangs running there. "

"So what happened?"

" Fiona wasn't going to back down and met their guns with hers and between the group of us, we outnumbered their fire power so they left."

Chance ran his hand through his hair.

"What the hell," he said, "This battle was supposed to take place inside a courthouse not with guns out on the range."

"That's never how it works though is it, in these kind of battles over land," Jed said, "not as long as this country's been a country."

"I guess not, I mean I'm from Texas," Chance said, " Fiona left some details out of her accounts of what was happening here."

"Don't get mad at her," Jed said, "She didn't want to worry you. The last thing she wanted was for you to get upset and come out here, trying to rescue her."

"She's made that clear," Chance said.

"It's not personal," Jed said, "I think she's still working very hard to find her place in a world that makes sense. You don't go through what she did and stay the same person."

Chance nodded.

"I know, and I think she's amazing in all that she's done," he said, "But I still worry about her and now thisâ"

"The worrying goes both ways, Chance."

"Yeah I know that," Chance said, "She told me that she's been worried about how hard I've been working since the pneumonia."

"My advice is that you follow her lead on what to do with her case," Jed said, "That's going to be hard to do when you see her because she's pretty banged up from the accident but she needs to feel that sense of control over her own life and that you trust her to have that control."

"That's good advice," Chance said.

"And now, more of the work's going to be on her shoulders with the other two lawyers out of commission," Jed said.

Bonnie approached with the coffee and handed them each a cup.

"I ran into an orderly friend of mine," she said, "He says that she's still getting x-rayed and demanding to be released so she can go back to work."

Where Mustangs Run

Chance smiled.

"That sounds like the woman I know," he said.

"Do you really think this is Kilroy and his boys?"

"Who's Kilroy," Chance asked, sipping his coffee.

"The developer in charge of the ski resort project," Jed said, "He's got partners who primarily contribute money but he's the main guy."

"Yeah, he and Mayor Parker and the good old boys," Bonnie said.

Chance narrowed his eyes.

"So you've got elected officials shacking up with developers?"

"That's one way to put it," Jed said, "You've come here straight into a hornets' nest."

Fiona finished her x-rays and waited to be taken back to the examination room, feeling totally exposed in her gown. She looked around but couldn't find her clothing anywhere.

"Looks like you're about done," the orderly said, "We're going to take you back to the ER and the doctor can talk to you about the results there."

"I feel fine," Fiona said, "A little sore but I'm ready to leave."

"That will be up to the doctor," the orderly said, "If your ribs are fractured and the doctor doesn't catch it, you could develop a pneumothorax."

"I'm pretty sure that they're fine," she said.

The orderly just nodded and after she stepped back into the wheelchair, took her back to the ER.

Alice came in with a bag to joined the rest of them were sitting. Cassidy trailed behind her listening to her iPod, until she saw Chance. She broke out into a wide smile and walked towards him. He stood up and hugged her tightly and then held her at an arm's distance.

"You've really grown," he said, "You look at least three inches taller."

"They still treat me like a baby," she said, "But Fiona and Alice have been kind of cool."

"How's Fiona," Alice asked.

"The doctor hasn't talked to us yet," Chance said.

"I brought her some fresh clothes in case she is allowed to leave," Alice said.

A doctor walked up to the group.

"Are you relatives of Ms Johnson?"

Where Mustangs Run

"We're friends," Alice said, "Chance's the closest to family that she's got."

"I'm Dr. Warner, I'm handling her case."

"How's she doing," Chance asked.

The doctor flipped open a folder.

"She's very lucky to be alive," he said, "Let alone gotten off as lightly as she did."

"Then the news is goodâ"

Warner looked at Chance.

"She doesn't have any fractured ribs or internal injuries," he said, "She did sprain her wrist and suffer some deep bruising. Her cheekbone might have a hairline fracture but we won't know until we do follow-up x-rays in several weeks."

"So she can be released?"

Warner hedged.

"I'd like to keep her overnight," he said, "She did bang her head a bit but I don't think she has a concussion. Still, she's going to be very sore for several days but she insists on checking herself out."

"When can I see her," Chance asked.

"In a few minutes," Warner said, "I just have to finish some paperwork if she's going to be released."

Alice reached into her bag.

"Can you take her this change of clothes," she said.

Warner examined it dubiously but finally nodded and took them.

"Thank God," Alice said, "She's going to be all right."

"I didn't know if she would be," Chance said.

A nurse walked out and motioned for Chance to follow her into an examination area surrounded by a curtain. FIONA sat on the table, dressed in sweat pants and a tee-shirt and wearing sneakers. Her wrist was wrapped and as she looked up at him, he saw the bruises and cuts on her face which had been Cassidy stitched.

She smiled, gamely.

"More scars for the collection," she said.

"I still got you beat," he said.

He walked over to where she sat and embraced her tightly without saying anything else. She tucked her face in his shirt and wrapped her arms around him.

Where Mustangs Run

"Ouchâ my cheek," she said, pulling away. He examined it, gently touching it with his fingers.

"It looks pretty bad," he said.

"It doesn't feel too bad," she said, thinking that while he touched it, it didn't hurt much at all.

"I'm so glad you're all right," he said.

Her eyes threatened a couple of tears.

"But they're not," she said, "I heard the news about Jason and Maggie's not so good."

"They're going to a trauma center in Denver," Chance said, "They've got top doctors there who will help ensure they have the best fighting chance."

"I'm going back to the ranch," Fiona said, and was about to get off the table when Mayor Parker walked in the room with Sheriff Daniels.

"What are you doing here," Fiona said, warily.

Chance looked at the men and then back at Fiona.

"We rushed here as soon as we found out about the accident," Parker said.

"It was the State Police who found us not your deputies."

"We are in charge of the investigation," Daniels said, and Parker nodded.

"What investigation," Fiona said, "It's an accidentâ right?"

"Fiona, maybe we should let him finish," Chance said.

"You can listen to him," she said, "I'm getting out of here."

"The doctor said he advised you to stay overnight," Daniels said.

Fiona got on her feet, a bit unsteady then stepped backward away from the two men.

"Like I said, I'm leaving."

She walked out on the two men while Chance gave them one last look before joining her.

"Fiona, what was that all about?"

She kept walking.

"I'm not talking to those men," she said.

"Jed and Bonnie told me what's been happening."

"Then you know why I don't want or need what they call 'help,'" she said, "I just want to get out of here."

Where Mustangs Run

A nurse followed her with a wheelchair, telling her she had to sit in it but she ignored her.

They encountered the others in the lobby and they gathered around Fiona relieved to find out she was okay and being released from the hospital.

"I'll take you back to where you're staying," Chance said.

"My car," Fiona said, "It's back at the diner but it wouldn't start."

"I'll have Joe take a look at it," Jed said.

"I've got to get my thumb drive," she said, looking around.

"Here's some of your things that were on you," Bonnie said, handing them to her.

"Good, here it is," she said, "I've got my laptop back in the cabin so I can continue working."

Chance looked at Bonnie.

"Don't you think that you should rest for a couple days," Bonnie said.

Fiona looked at the both of them and shook her head.

"No, I've got a ton of work to do and not too long to do it," she said walking out in the parking lot.

"Fiona," Chance said, following her, "You just were involved in a car accident that you're lucky to walk around you. The others weren't quite so fortunate."

She turned around to face him.

"That's why I've got so much work to do," she said, "I'm by myself now and it's on my shoulders to prepare this case to bring to Denver next week."

"We could get you some more help," he said.

"I don't need help," she said.

"Is she always this stubborn," Bonnie asked.

"No, usually she's really stubborn," Chance said.

Still he couldn't fault her for it. There were times enough when she was following him to a parked car telling him to take it easy.

"And it wasn't an accident," she said, "Something happened on that road."

"Do you remember anything," Chance asked.

"No...Yes, I think I remember at some point seeing a bright light."

Chance and Jed looked at each other.

Where Mustangs Run

"Do you know when they're going to pull the car out and take a look at it?"

Jed sighed.

"Maybe tomorrow, day after," he said, "It's pretty far down. But they didn't say anything about running forensic tests. To them, it's an accident."

"Maybe we could check it out ourselves and see if we find anything suspicious."

Jed nodded.

"We could get a couple of guys to help us."

"I want to get her back to the ranch and settled first," Chance said.

Fiona placed herself between them.

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here," she said, "I'll be waiting for you in the car."

"Fiona, I rented one," he said, "You don't know which one it is in the lot."

"Good point," she said.

The group broke up and headed to their respective vehicles to go back to the ranch. Fiona and Chance walked towards his car. From a distance, two men watched them.

"Damn, we came so close," one of them said.

"We got two of them out of the way," the other said, "They're not dead but they're out of commission for a while."

The first man nodded.

"Two down," he said, "One left to go."

Chapter 12

Chance drove down the highway back to the ranch, while Fiona sat quietly beside him looking out the window.

"How was your flight," she said.

He laughed.

"Hair raising coming through the Rockies into that tiny airport," he said, "Though the view is always beautiful and well worth the flight."

"Thanks for coming," she said.

"Thanks for inviting me," he said.

She turned away from the window, looking at him.

"I thought you came because I got into trouble."

"I was still fueling the plane when I got the news from Alice that you were missing," he said, "I was flying out to the ranch this morning to see you and to do some of that relaxing that everyone says I need to do."

She smiled, ruefully.

"Some vacation," she said.

He looked at her bruised face.

"It's off to an eventful start for sure," Chance said, "Which means it can only get better."

"I've got to get back to work," she said, "I've got to download the work we did last night on the laptop."

"Now hold on," Chance said, "I know this is very important to a lot of people but you need to take it easyâ"

He read the look she gave him.

"At least for now," he said, "You can get up and knock yourself out tomorrow but today, take it easy."

"I can't," she said, "I have legal papers to finish up today and more land surveying tomorrow along with more legal work. That accident wiped out most of the legal team. I'm all that's left on this end."

"So, you need to get all this work completed by when?"

"I've got to submit it to the federal court in Denver next week," she said, "There's a couple of attorneys up there working on this and then we're all appearing for oral presentations several days later."

"I can help with the field work," he said, "If you need it, so you can concentrate on the legal side."

She looked at him and started to say something.

Where Mustangs Run

"I know you don't need any help," he said, "But I'd like to help and you know how much I love riding in open country so doing the field work would be more relaxing than almost any activity I can think of engaging in."

Chance watched the furrows on her brow form, knowing she at least was thinking about it.

"And I'm only \$500 a day plus expenses," he added.

"Okayâ", she said finally, "I guess you could help Jed but I'm coming on a couple of those field trips."

He nodded.

"I hope so," he said, "After you're feeling better."

"Then you have a deal," she said and they shook on it.

With that settled, they continued driving back to the ranch both lost in their thoughts.

Fiona opened the door to the cabin. She saw Cassidy's laptop and her iPod on the coffee table.

"I can see someone's back already," she said as Chance followed her in with his luggage, "You can take the spare bedroom. Cassidy can sleep in the loft."

"I can sleep in the loft," Chance said.

Cassidy breezed in the living room with a sandwich and a coke.

"No, I've already moved my things up there," she said, "You're stuck with the other bedroom."

Chance went to find it to drop off his luggage.

"You look pretty gnarly," Cassidy said, looking at Fiona's face, "Put on a wig and some face powder and you could be the Bride of Frankenstein."

Fiona chuckled.

"Gee thanks," she said.

"Was it scary," Cassidy asked.

"The accident," Fiona asked.

Cassidy nodded.

"I don't remember much about what happened," Fiona said.

"You mean you have amnesia?"

"No, thank god," Fiona said, "Been there, done that."

"Anyone want anything to eat," Chance said, when he returned to the living room.

Where Mustangs Run

Cassidy looked at one then the other.

"You're not going to like go all domestic are you?"

Fiona tried to suppress a laugh, because her face did hurt.

"No, no need to worry about that in this lifetime," she said, "I'm not that hungry. Maybe some soup."

"Alice's brought some over already," Cassidy said, "Some of her vegetable and beef soup. It's on the stove warming up."

Fiona wandered into the kitchen.

"It smells wonderful," she said, "Who wants some?"

"I'll do it," Chance said, "Why don't you sit on the couch and rest?"

"Yeah, join me Fiona," Cassidy said, "I need some help on my screenplay."

Chance mouthed a silent "thanks" to her.

"What are you working on," Fiona said, sitting down beside Cassidy on the sofa.

"Oh, the usual, radiation turns students into zombies at some high school in a Midwestern townâ"

"Sounds eventful," Fiona said, "what do you need help on?"

"I need to know how to write for one of my characters," Cassidy said, "She's the only student not to be infected by the zombies and she's got this crush on this guy who's what they call, the town bad boyâ"

Fiona nodded, while Chance put a bowl of soup on the table in front of her.

"I think I see where you're coming from," she said, "I advise that they don't kiss on the first date or the secondâ maybe the third."

"Who said anything about kissing," Cassidy said, "It's all about the crisis involving the zombie invasion that brings these two people from different worldsâ"

"The opposite sides of the universe," Chance interjected.

"Yes, exactly and even though they're so different, they're drawn together by a common goal which is to save the high school and then the world from this and all future zombie invasions. After that's done, then they can go make out."

"Sounds like a winner to me," he said, winking at her.

"Exactly what rating are you giving to the relationship between these two characters," Fiona said.

Cassidy looked puzzled.

"You know, G, PG, PG-13â"

Where Mustangs Run

"Oh that," Cassidy said, "PG-13â because those films tend to attract the largest cross-sections of the movie going population and make the most money at the box office. I want my own Corvette by the time I'm 20."

"That sounds like a plan," Chance said.

"What about college," Fiona said.

Cassidy shrugged.

"Most of the major directors flunked out," she said, "But Grandma and Aunt Christina put their feet down and say I have to go, so I'm thinking of some film schools in California."

"You'd make a good lawyer," Fiona said.

"Hmph, no thanks," Cassidy said, "I'm not spending the formative years of my life locked up in a library all the time studying books when there's a world out there."

Fiona started to say something but looked at Chance and thought better of it. She finished her soup and sat back on the couch.

Cassidy suddenly hugged her.

"I'm glad you're back safe."

"Thanks Cassidy," she said, stroking her hair, "I'm hoping that Jason and Maggie will recover."

Cassidy sprang up and went back to the kitchen.

"She's really growing up quickly," Chance said.

"Too quickly," Fiona said, "I'm worried about her."

"She seems like she has a good head on her shoulders and a hell of an imagination."

"Christina and her husband have had their hands full with her," Fiona said, "She's a sweet girl and smart as a whip but she's a teenager and that's a confusing time."

"It'll be good practice for raising their own kids," Chance said, "And it's good for Cassidy to know that there's a lot of people who care about her welfare."

"I love having her here," Fiona said, "She's been a great help but I think she's already got a boyfriend."

They heard someone knock on the front door.

Cassidy ran up to answer it.

"Check to see who's there first," Fiona said.

"We're in the middle of a ranch," Cassidy said, swinging the door open, "Who else would it be?"

Jed stood there with Bonnie, who brought some food.

Where Mustangs Run

"Hey, I made some muffins and some stew, where should I put it?"

"In the kitchen," Fiona said, "I'll help you."

The two women left the living room.

"Looks like you're settled here," Jed said.

"Fiona's promised to get some rest today if she can work tomorrow," he said, "And to let me help you with the field work."

Jed nodded.

"Great to have you along," he said, "You said you wanted to go to the crash site."

"Yeah, I want to look for any evidence which will show what happened last night," Chance said, "Before the authorities have a chance to clean it up."

"I got some guys who can come with us," Jed said, "They just finished some ranching duties and could leave right now."

Chance reached for his jacket.

"I'm ready," he said, as Fiona and Bonnie came back into the room.

"You're leaving," Fiona said.

"Bonnie's going to stay with you while we go out to the scene of the crash," Jed said.

Fiona nodded.

"Tell us what you find when you get back," she said, "And be careful."

Chance looked at her before he left.

Fiona closed the door behind them.

"I don't know if it's such a great idea sending them out there to go look at the car."

Bonnie put her arm around Fiona's shoulder.

"Why don't you sit on the couch and I'll get some tea," she said.

She did that and Bonnie brought them both some tea and muffins. Cassidy took some muffins and a can of cola and returned to writing about zombies on her laptop.

"They'll be fine," Bonnie said, "Jed said that they need to get to the car before the local authorities do."

Fiona sipped her tea.

Where Mustangs Run

"I don't trust the sheriff to do a thorough and unbiased investigation of the accident," she said, "Especially since I don't think it was an accident."

"You starting to remember anything?"

Fiona shook her head.

"No, just seeing that bright light," she said, "I think it was getting larger before everything went black."

"It must have been another car," Bonnie said, "Maybe they hit you?"

"Then why didn't they stop and help us," Fiona said, "Unless it was on purpose."

"To run you off the road and kill the three of you," Bonnie said, "And the chances were high that if you hit the bottom of the gorge, you would have all died."

"If someone did it intentionally, they didn't have to kill us," Fiona said, "They just had to put us out of commission and except for me, that's what happened."

"Still, if they were caught, they could face serious criminal charges," Bonnie said.

"Maybe that's why they didn't stick around to do a body count," Fiona said.

Chance, Jed and the other men reached the crash site. The sky had turned slate gray again and a fine mist fell from it.

"I've got some rope," Jed said.

"Tie it to your truck," Chance said.

Reed and Jed did that while Chance looked for the best route down the steep gorge to where he could see the wrecked car partially hidden by shrubbery.

"We're going to have to go slow," he said, "The rain might make for slippery going."

Jed nodded.

"I'll send Reed down with you," he said, "I'll stay up here with Mac."

Chance and Reed tied the rope to themselves and slowly inched down the gorge, careful to pick out their toe holds and where to place their hands before continuing. Chance wiped the sweat off his face several times during the journey.

Finally, they reached the car and Chance took out a small camera and began taking photos of it.

"What should we look for," Reed asked.

"Traces of paint that don't match that of the vehicle," Chance said, "That can be critical."

Reed started inspecting the exterior of the car.

Where Mustangs Run

"And also look for any unusual dents," Chance said, "It's going to be tricky for a vehicle this badly damaged but it's also important. Look for anything that doesn't fit with the scene here."

Chance looked inside the broken window into what remained of the inside, which contained large pieces of crushed metal and shattered glass. The most significant damage had been done to the front seat area of the car where Jason and Maggie had sat. Less damage from the impact was present in the rear seat where FIONA had been sitting. Still, after looking carefully at the debris even in that section, Chance realized how lucky she had been to avoid death and more serious injury.

He saw possessions that belonged to the lawyers including a laptop computer and a briefcase and also remains of emergency equipment used to evaluate and treat the injuries suffered by those remaining inside the car.

"I'm not sure I can find anything," Reed said.

Chance looked at him.

"We need to keep looking."

Fiona began to feel sleepy and wondered if Bonnie had spiked the tea. She relaxed on the couch and listened to Bonnie tell her about her latest attempts at matchmaking one of the rancher's daughters with the new town pharmacist.

"I think there's a Christmas wedding in their future," Bonnie said.

"You're really sure of your matches, aren't you?"

"I'm not the one matching them," Bonnie said, "I'm just getting them together."

"And there's a difference?"

"Well, if you believe in God or fate or a higher power outside ourselves, you believe that it's a matching of two halves which are seeking each other out."

"You mean like soul mates?"

Bonnie nodded.

"You really believe that's true," Fiona said.

"I believe that anything's possible in the name of love," Bonnie said.

"I used to think that way," Fiona said, "In another lifetime."

"What about now?"

Fiona shrugged.

"I don't trust myself to know what I'm feeling when I'm with a man," she said, "I feel disconnected from myself most of the time. Fortunately, I'm too busy with my life for it to matter much."

"Honey, it's going to take some time after what you experienced," Bonnie said.

Where Mustangs Run

"Maybe," Fiona said, "But it's really nice that people like you help people find their other halves and help bring them happiness."

"I've found it very rewarding," Bonnie said, putting her cup down.

Fiona paused.

"Jason made a pass at me last night," she said, "He wanted to spend a few days with me in Denver after the court hearing."

Bonnie's brows lifted.

"What did you do," she asked.

"I said I was attracted to him but turned him down," Fiona said, "it was just sex he was interested in and a casual fling, not me."

"How did he take it?"

"Pretty well," Fiona said, "I did it partly because I know that Maggie's crazy about him and doesn't think he knows her feelings."

"Hmmmâ!"

She looked thoughtful.

"And if he knew my recent back story, he'd run."

"Not if he's a man worth knowing," Bonnie said.

"Maybeâ!"

Bonnie shook her head.

"No maybes here," she said, "It's a test of a man's character and his feelings about a woman if he knows all about her and doesn't run away."

Chance looked at the car again and then he saw it. Chips of black paint, on one of the rear corners of the vehicle, lying adjacent to a sizable dent.

"Bingo," he said, "Reed take a look at this."

Reed did.

"They were hit by a black vehicle."

"Which means it definitely was no accident," Chance said, then pulled out a small plastic baggy, "We need to take a very small sample of the paint. I can feed it to my partner out in L.A. to test it, see if we can reduce the population of vehicles in this area that could be responsible."

Reed watched as Chance gingerly scraped a few flakes of paint off the car into the baggy which he sealed.

Where Mustangs Run

"How long have you been doing this," he asked.

"Sometimes, I can't even remember."

Reed looked at the sky.

"We'd better head back up," he said.

"I just need to take some more photos," Chance said.

Bonnie looked down at Fiona who had drifted off to sleep on the sofa. She took the cups into the kitchen to wash them. Cassidy sat at the breakfast table, reading a book.

"Fiona's asleep on the sofa so we'll need to be quiet so she can get some rest," Bonnie said.

Cassidy nodded.

"Do you want to play some cards," Bonnie said.

"Sure," Cassidy said, "I think there's a deck somewhere."

She found one in a kitchen drawer.

"So what are we playing," she asked, sitting back down.

"How about some Hearts?"

Just short of reaching the board work, Fiona turned around to face him.

"Okay, you got my attention," she said.

"Just that I miss you," Chance said, "I miss working with you, I miss talking to you and I miss seeing you. I miss our friendship."

She looked down at the sand.

"So do I," she said.

"We live thousands of miles from each other and our lives are separate."

She sighed.

"I needed to be in Houston," she said, "My career is there, I've got friends and my counselor is one of the best in her field."

He nodded.

"I know," he said, "I know that's where your life is now."

"And your life is here," she said, "You've got people to help you with your cases now and your friends. They seem like very nice people."

Where Mustangs Run

"Yeah they are," Chance said, "But none of them is my best friend."

She stepped up on the boardwalk.

"L.A.'s not the same place for me now," she said, "I have a hard time even going into your office building."

"Because of what happenedâ" "

"I know it sounds like something I can just get over," she said, "I mean, it's just a building and I've got a lot of good memories there."

"But not your last one," he said, "Inside the parking garage."

She nodded slowly as they continued walking.

"I'm trying really hardâ" "

"I knowâ", he said, "Sometimes I think you try too hard."

She cocked her head at him.

"What do you mean?"

He took a deep breath.

"You try to push yourself to try to be someone you're not ready to be."

She digested his words.

"Iâ" "

Brody ran up the boardwalk and both of them broke their gaze to look at him.

"What's going on," Chance asked.

"I just got a lead on the extortion case," Brody said, out of breath.

"Now," Chance said, "It's getting late and I've got Fiona here."

Brody looked at her.

"You look really nice in that dress," he said, "She can come along with us. It's just a little stakeout."

She nodded.

"Sure," she said, "Count me in."

Chance took her hand in his as they followed Brody back to the beach house.

Chance opened the cabin door and saw Fiona lying on the couch fast asleep. Her papers were cast on the table in front of her.

Where Mustangs Run

Bonnie walked out and saw Chance and Jed. She put her finger over her lips.

"She's sleeping," she said, "So we'll have to be quiet. I've got some soup in the kitchen and some leftover muffins."

They followed her and Cassidy jumped up from where she was sitting when she saw them.

"We were playing cards," she said.

Bonnie shook her head.

"She beat the tail off of me," she said, "I think we have a ringer."

"What's that," Cassidy asked.

"Someone who's a pro but passed off as an amateur in a competition."

"Cool," Cassidy said.

"So what did you find," Bonnie said.

Chance looked at Jed.

"Paint chips off the rear fender," he said.

"So that means they were hit."

"The paint was black," Jed said, "Chance forwarded the evidence he collected overnight to his partner out in L.A."

"Didn't you say the truck that you, Reed and Fiona encountered on the federal land was black?"

"Yeah it was," Jed said, "But there's a lot of black vehicles around here."

"So what does the sheriff have to say about this," Bonnie said, "Or should I even ask."

"He doesn't know," Jed said, "We had to collect some evidence ourselves in case it 'disappears' during the official investigation."

"I wouldn't put anything past Daniels," Bonnie said, "I wish I never voted for him. Of course, he ran unopposed and said all the right things."

"Most of his money came from developers," Jed said, "Maybe Kilroy was one of them."

"But would he obstruct an attempted murder investigation," Bonnie asked.

"Bonnie, there's some serious money involved in this project," Jed said, "Millions of dollars."

"People have killed for a lot less," Chance said.

"True," Bonnie said.

Where Mustangs Run

Jed looked at his watch.

"Bonnie, we'd better get going," he said, "I got to pick up some cattle that are out in the far pasture."

She nodded and picked up her things. Chance walked them to the door.

Jed looked over at Fiona on the couch.

"Make sure she gets plenty of sleep," Jed said, "I'll talk with you later."

Chance said goodbye and Cassidy chimed in somewhere from the kitchen. Then he closed the door and walked over to Fiona. He watched her murmuring in her sleep and snuggling into the couch. No need to wake from her much needed slumber. He walked to the linen and brought out a light blanket to place on top of her. He sat in a chair nearby and picked up his magazine and started reading as she slept.

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