

# ONE

Spring had sprung into full splendor on the western high plains of the Gunderson Ranch.

New baby calves frolicked in the lush pastures under the watchful eyes of mama cows. A cavalcade of colorful flowers bloomed from the fields to the forest. Delicate pale pink heads of primrose, stalwart stems of golden yarrow, the emerald green bushes of sumac grew alongside the caramel-colored stalks of autumn's dried grasses. Birdsong and insect chatter abounded on the ground and in the sky. Spring was a fleeting season at best, and I appreciated the metamorphosis after a long winter.

Sunshine burned the chill from the early-morning air. As much as I benefited from solitary communion with nature, I wasn't out picking posies. I was out picking my first target.

Old habits died hard; hunting was in my blood. Plus, I had nothing better to do until my shift started at Clementine's. And the thought of another night dealing with drunks and bar fights always put me in a killing mood.

I'd hiked to a prairie dog town on what used to be Newsome land, but now belonged to the Gunderson Ranch. The section was remote, a flat area surrounded by craggy rock formations that prevented the persistent buggers from digging tunnels unimpeded across grazing land. But the topography created a bowl effect that I likened to shooting fish in a barrel. Since cover was minimal, I'd crawled under scraggly bushes as my "hide" and with luck I'd stay down wind.

Dressed in camo, lying on my belly, propped on my elbows, I peered through the scope of my dad's varmint rifle. Despite the age of the Remington 722, its accuracy was unparalleled. Out of

habit, I used my right eye. The black shadows from the retinal detachment weren't too bad during the day.

A few clicks and the fuzzy brown spots in my sights became clear. Furry heads popped up and disappeared into the mounds of chalky dirt as I scanned the networked holes spread across the rugged plateau.

Bingo. My first target was two hundred yards out. Before I pulled the trigger, a red-tailed hawk swooped down, snatching my kill right out from under me. The prairie dog's surprised screech echoed across the plains. A flurry of panic ensued among the critters as they retreated to hidey-holes.

Their collective caution lasted roughly two minutes. Sleek heads popped up like jack-in-the-boxes. Several brave animals stretched tall, aiming twitching noses to the sky, letting the sun tan their hides.

Suckers.

I zeroed in on one fat rat and fired. The body exploded into hunks of pinkish-red parts. I inserted another bullet, engaged the bolt, and nailed a slow mover; chunks of fur-covered meat rained down. After a quick reload, I picked off another one, ignoring me, on the opposite ridge. *Bad choice, Alvin*. I chambered another round and *bang*. *Bye-bye, Theodore*. Never turn your backs when danger lurks, boys.

My last target—dubbed Simon—decided to run. I clipped it from the back. The headless body went rolling in a ball of bloody fur and dust. Five for five. Not bad.

I reloaded while I waited for the scavengers to come.

Contrary to popular belief, gunshots don't scare away larger predatory animals. In most cases the sound of gunshots is like ringing a dinner bell—bringing them in for easy pickin's. Nature's version of fast food. A meal without the work of hunting it down.

Damn coyotes were thick around the herd this time of year, preying on new calves. Any time I could put a bullet in a coyote, I'd take it. They weren't funny, misunderstood cartoon creatures but a threat to our livelihood. Worse, scabies thrived in the coyote dens, and it passed like wildfire. An infected mother birthed an infected litter. A mangy, scabies-ravaged coyote was just plain

gross—matted fur and oozing sores clinging to a bag of bones. Nasty shit. Shooting them was doing them a favor.

With the cartridge chambered, I re-sited my scope and waited for a flash of reddish-orange fur to dart into view. *Come on, Wile E. Coyote; give me something challenging to shoot.*

Nothing.

No big deal. I could wait. Inhaling the vegetative scents of sun-warmed mud, decomposing leaves, and the sharpness of fresh leaf growth, contentment and a wave of sleepiness flowed over me.

My contentment lasted a mere minute or so. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. A communal silence surrounded me—no birds, no buzzing insects, even the air had gone still.

Something was out there, behind me.

My mind flashed to a predator that commanded that type of respect.

A mountain lion.

Even though I couldn't see it, I knew it was there. I'd bet money it was female. A very hungry female, if she'd ventured out in the wide-open spaces of prairie rangeland in broad daylight.

Fear tightened my skin.

I leveled my breathing, trying not to envision myself getting pounced on and becoming catnip.

*How does it feel when the predator becomes prey?*

Not good. Seriously not good.

I'd heard talk among the bar regulars who hunted. The mountain lion population in the Black Hills had quadrupled in recent years due to an abundance of game that were their dietary staples: deer, rabbit, and turkey. Several reports of mountain lion sightings in the wooded areas within Rapid City, Sturgis, and Spearfish city limits. Occasionally, local TV stations ran stories where pet owners had witnessed their small domestic dogs carried off by a lion. Chained dogs were an easy target, as were cats. Some ranchers in the Northern Hills reported missing sheep. A few larger hunting dogs had been mauled and left to die.

*Nothing to eat over here, Ms. Lion, move along.*

I'd spent my life dodging bullets, returning fire, living the

“kill-or-be-killed” motto, seeing danger in every shadow. I’d lost track of the times I believed I wouldn’t make it out of a situation alive. But somehow, I always did. Somehow, that fear had almost become . . . comfortable. Expected. Routine.

This fear? Anything but comfortable.

A blur of a tan fur entered the sights of my scope. In all the years I’d lived on the ranch, I’d never actually seen a mountain lion. I’d seen tracks. One night I’d heard the distinctive, jarringly human scream so close to the cabin I swore the cat had been lurking below my bedroom window. But I’d never been close enough to one to count its whiskers.

She was about six feet from nose to tail. Her enormous paws could’ve ripped my face off with one powerful swipe.

But all was not well with the lioness. She panted with exertion. The bones of her rib cage were prominent due to near starvation. Her fur was patchy, worn away in spots on her hind legs and upper haunches. Most of her left ear was missing; the fresh wound had barely scabbed over. No heavy teats swayed from her matted white underbelly. Was she too old to have cubs? Too sick? A freak of nature that couldn’t reproduce? Had she been forced out of her natural habitat and was on the run?

My pulse quickened but not from fear. From something far scarier: empathy.

Crouched low, she nosed at the closest prairie dog carcass, the one somewhat intact after my shooting spree. Those mighty jaws opened lightning fast, and the fresh meat disappeared in two violent chomps.

Holy shit.

Leaves rattled above me in the breeze. Her head swiveled in my direction, her muzzle slick with blood. But proof of her extreme hunger wasn’t what caught my attention. I noticed the white film clouding her left eye.

She was half blind.

Bone-deep pity replaced my panic. This majestic creature, once a predator of the highest order, was reduced to scrounging for scraps just to survive.

Coyotes howled a warning beyond the ridge.

She opened her mouth and hissed. The sharp teeth I expected

were nothing but broken nubs. No wonder she'd swallowed her food whole. No wonder she was famished. She limped to the next pile of meat, gorging herself before the coyotes chased her away or attacked her en masse.

How much longer could she survive? A week? A month?

*End her misery. You have a clear shot. Take it.*

I followed her erratic movements through the scope, a lioness beyond her prime, a former predator out of synch with the natural order, a wanderer lost in a place she didn't belong.

*Kill her. A quick death will be painless compared to the way she's been living.*

I knew I should. I struggled to find that calm center where nothing existed but the target. Where muscle memory and training took over and I didn't have to think. I just had to act.

*Do it. She's in your crosshairs.*

But I couldn't fire. I slowly removed my finger from the trigger and closed my eyes. Sweat trickled from my hairline down my face. My hand shook. Hollowness expanded in my belly.

Angry at myself for my weakness, for my pity, I pointed the scope at her last position.

She was gone.

Dammit. Only a handful of times in my life had I failed to take a shot. Why now, when there was no moral dilemma?

Guilt gnawed at me as I loaded up. I didn't want to rehash why I'd frozen, but as usual, my brain had other plans for me during the long walk home.

I just hoped this misstep wouldn't come back to haunt me.

## TWO

**M**y day went downhill from there. I broke up two bar fights. I chased off two punks for trying to buy booze without an ID.

I ran out of Jack Daniel's.

And I used to bitch about my duties as a soldier? I preferred dodging bullets to dumping ashtrays and slinging drinks. But job opportunities are limited for a former army sniper, especially in the backwoods of South Dakota.

After my military discharge, I'd anchored a bar stool at Clementine's damn near every night. Then John-John Pretty Horses—Clementine's owner and my longtime friend—offered me a temporary job. But John-John's stipulation: no drinking on duty. His way of staging an intervention, without formally intervening.

Months later I was still pulling taps five nights a week, waiting for my life to start.

"Hey, Mercy."

I didn't look up at the customer as I was trying to catch the foam spewing out of the Keystone Light tap. Damn keg needed to be changed out again.

"The toilet in the men's can is plugged."

"Fan-fucking-tastic." I locked the register, clipping the key to my lanyard for safekeeping—I didn't trust Clementine's patrons any further than I could throw them. I'd gotten proficient at swapping out kegs; however, my plumbing skills were subpar. I gave up and returned to the main bar to see "Tiny" Tim Waddell filling a pitcher.

He flashed me a moronic smile. "Now, don't go getting that

look on your face, Miz Mercy. I knew you was back there changing the keg, and I thought I'd help you out."

"By pouring yourself a free pitcher?"

"I was clearing the line of foam," he huffed. "Thought you'd be grateful."

The balding, fiftysomething midget could barely reach the beer taps. "Get out from behind my bar, Tiny, before I squash you like a bug."

He focused sulky eyes on me. "I was just helpin'."

"You wanna help? Figure out what the fuck is wrong with the toilet in the men's bathroom."

Tiny flinched. "Ain't no need to use that kinda language."

"Chauvinistic much? Men can say *fuck* whenever the fuck they want, but I can't because it's unladylike?" I crowded him. "Do I look like a lady who gives a shit what anyone thinks of the fucking language I use?"

"Ah. No."

"Good answer. Now, can you fix the toilet or not?"

His shoulders slumped. "Prolly."

I handed him the plunger. "Get it working and I'll pick up your tab tonight."

"Now I wish I woulda been drinking whiskey instead of beer," he grumbled, and headed toward the bathroom.

The door banged open. A barrel-chested biker named Vinnie waved at his buddies, then ambled toward me. "Hey, pretty lady. How about a pitcher of Coors?"

"Coming up." I glanced at the clock after I shoved a plastic pitcher under the tap. Two hours until closing time.

"Where's your boyfriend tonight?"

I squinted at Vinnie. "What boyfriend?"

"That slicked-up dude from the oil company hanging around when you're working."

Damn Jason. I wished he'd find another bar to antagonize the locals and not drag me into it. "Haven't seen him. Besides, he isn't my boyfriend."

"I ain't surprised. A gal like you don't need a boy—you need a man. A real man." Vinnie rested his elbows on the bar top, gifting me with a smoldering stare.

Vinnie might've been attractive—oh, two decades ago. He clung to the biker look: long hair; an unkempt, graying beard; a faded POW-MIA T-shirt; oil-stained jeans draped with chains, and a knife sheathed in a leather case.

Yeah, I was having a devil of a time resisting his charm. I reclined against the bar with equal provocation. "Know what I really need, Vinnie?"

"What's that, sugar? Name it."

"Five bucks for the pitcher and a night off."

Vinnie dug in his front pocket and tossed me a balled-up five-dollar bill. "You're a cool one."

"Stone cold . . . or so I've been told."

His lame attempt at picking me up foiled, he joined his fellow ZZ Top clones beneath the big-screen TV and watched whatever passed for entertainment on the Speed Channel.

Time dragged on like a preacher's sermon. I started closing duties early, and when I returned from the storeroom, he was sitting at the bar. I ducked under the partition and stopped in front of him.

He said, "Hey, South Dakota."

"Hey, North Dakota."

"Heard any good jokes lately?"

I shoved the box of straws beneath the counter. "Did you hear about the two seagulls flying upside down over North Dakota?"

"No. Why were they flying upside down?"

I mock-whispered, "Because they couldn't find anything worth shitting on."

He laughed. "Where do you come up with those, Gunny?"

"Are you serious? Making fun of North Dakotans is our state pastime." I couldn't help staring at him. It was just so . . . uncanny he was here.

*Uncanny? Or intentional?*

"Once again you're looking at me like you've seen a ghost."

"You'd have to look the same for the comparison to work." The first time Major Jason Hawley had wandered into Clementine's, I'd barely stopped myself from blurting out, "What the hell *happened* to you?"

"Just wait until you've been out more than a few months." He

gave me a critical once-over. "You still practicing? Keeping your skill set current? Running five to ten miles a day? Or have you finally figured out it doesn't matter?"

So what if I'd kept up with my PT and marksmanship training? At least I wouldn't look like hell and act touchy about it like him. "What can I get for you tonight, Jason?"

"Jim Beam and Coke. Make it a double."

"Want two cherries in it?"

"You're a fucking riot."

"I try." I mixed the drink and plopped it in front of him.

"Thanks."

Given Vinnie's earlier speculation, I bailed to the back room, where I stacked chairs and picked up trash. But the mindless work funneled my thoughts back to the man out front, the soldier I'd served with off and on for a decade.

Major Jason "J-Hawk" Hawley was a shadow of the man he'd been, but my criticism wasn't just about his appearance. I'd gotten used to returning from deployment and running into people at Fort Bragg I'd served with in the sandboxes, and not recognizing them stateside. Months of desert heat dropped pounds off even the chubbiest soldier. Months of access to real food and no real danger put those missing pounds back on in a helluva hurry.

The major was an exception. He'd lost a solid thirty, all of it muscle. His hair was longer, thinner, worn mullet-style. His skin was a pasty yellowish-white tone I secretly called a North Dakota tan. The physical changes were inevitable, but the personality change bothered me on a whole different level.

War transformed soldiers. Some become destructive outside of their military working hours. Some constantly spoiled for a fight as a reason to show off their training. Some became withdrawn, refusing to fraternize with fellow team members in their off-duty time.

But I'd always noticed the biggest change was in the deployed family men. Balls-to-the-wall aggression was lauded when you were in charge of a platoon or a brigade, but not so much when you were in the States running kids to soccer practice in the minivan. Male soldiers called newly deployed female

soldiers “Queen for a Year,” but they never applied a like-minded derogatory moniker to themselves. So my all-female team and I referred to them as “Masturbators of the Universe”—henpecked guys, used to their wives calling the shots, who suddenly didn’t have a female to answer to. They became over-the-top bulging bags of testosterone, determined to prove to every woman in the compound that they’d brought their manhood with them, and their precious big balls weren’t at home with their wives . . . for a change.

J-Hawk hadn’t been that type of guy. As a Ranger team leader, he’d commanded respect without demanding it because he’d earned it. Something he definitely wasn’t doing in Eagle River County working as a representative for Titan Oil. Now he was a smooth-talking company guy, wearing a three-piece suit, Ray-Bans, and tasseled loafers. No one around here liked him. Plenty of guys were genuinely hostile. I’d tried to remain neutral, but several regulars noticed I wasn’t my usual caustic self around J-Hawk, and some people saw my friendliness as cavorting with the enemy. So I was screwed either way.

As I passed J-Hawk on my way back behind the bar, I tripped on the folded corner of the rubber mat.

Bix, the dumb-as-a-brick, but-strong-as-an-ox bricklayer caught me, his thick fingers circled my biceps. “Steady there, Mercy. You all right?”

“Just lost my footing. I’m fine. Thanks.”

He glanced over my shoulder, and his pale blue eyes frosted into chips of ice. “I can see why you stumbled. Mighty big pile of shit next to you. You’ll probably wanna avoid it next time.”

J-Hawk ignored Bix’s attempt to bait him and hunkered over his drink.

When Rose Corwin stopped in for her nightly fifth of cheap gin and cheap talk, I indulged her on the latter for a change. I chanced a look at the clock. The bar closed in an hour, and I still needed to change the register tape before I rang the till out for the night. I rummaged in the beer-soaked box beneath the counter for a new package.

The manufacturer had shrink-wrapped six rolls together. I poked my finger in the small hole, trying to rip it open. The

plastic had no give, and I lifted the package to my mouth to tear it open with my teeth.

“Here. Save those pearly whites and pretty smile. Use this.”

*Thud.* J-Hawk had tossed his knife on the counter. The knife I’d helped my army buddy and former teammate Anna Rodriguez pick out for him. The knife with the engraving that read: *1001 Nights—4-Ever.*

I met his gaze. “You still have this?”

“I’ll always have it. I’m never without it.”

“Never?”

“Never. It’s the only tangible thing I’ve got from . . .”

*Anna.*

“That time,” he said.

It was a sweet knife, a stainless-steel Kershaw. I flicked the blade open with the thumb catch. Three and a half inches of steel sliced through the plastic like hot butter, then through the paper roll, leaving a precise starting point to thread through the cash register’s feeding mechanism. Hell, I could’ve cut through skin, bone, and the shellacked countertop with it. I clicked the blade shut into the knifewell and slid it back to him. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” J-Hawk stirred his still nearly full drink. “Look, Mercy, I’d really like to talk to you.”

“Sure. If it’s about you telling those fuckers at Titan Oil to take their pipeline and jam it up their ass, I’m all ears.”

“Regardless of how you view them, I’m asking to talk to you strictly as your friend. I’d like to catch up with what you’ve been doing.”

Right. Most likely J-Hawk wanted to catch up on news about Anna, his former star-crossed lover.

He tugged his sleeve back to look at his watch.

I barely withheld a disgusted gasp. His watchband dug into the flesh of his wrist so deeply I couldn’t discern the thickness of the strap. The bloated skin surrounding it reminded me of an overcooked chicken sausage about to burst its casing.

“Can I get a twelve-pack of Keystone Light to go?” he asked, interrupting my gawking at his grotesque arm.

“Sure. Seems a little low-end for you.”

He shrugged. “Don’t you remember, back in the day? When you were looking for a cheap drunk? What’d you drink?”

“Pabst Blue Ribbon.”

“Good old PBR. Brings back memories.”

I yanked a twelve-pack from the cooler. Seemed odd Jason wanting a cheap drunk. Odd and sort of lonely. Sitting in his motel or vehicle, drinking alone.

*Like you have any room to talk about solo drinking habits.*

“What’re the damages?”

“Total is twenty-one bucks.”

As J-Hawk riffled through his wallet, I noticed another peculiar thing. He didn’t carry pictures of his kids. He’d never carried photos of his family in the field. Back then I hadn’t thought anything of it; I never carried pictures either. The lack of personal effects was a hallmark of Special Forces rather than personal preferences.

So it struck me as strange that Jason the civilian wouldn’t have a few snapshots of his offspring.

“Here.” He handed me twenty and rooted in his jacket pocket for a handful of wadded-up ones. “Keep the change. See you around.”

As I watched him leave, I felt other bar patrons eyeing me suspiciously. I’d had enough fun for one day. I announced, “Last call, people.”

**Fourteen minutes after** I barred the front door, I’d counted out the till and locked the money in the office safe. A record shutdown for me.

Sad, that my life was still measured in clicks. Not clicks of my scope as I adjusted my sights on a target, but clicks of the second hand on a time clock.

Late spring meant chilly nights, especially at the zero hour, and I shivered in my jean jacket. I set the alarm and started across the pitch-black parking area behind the building. My night vision sucked, but I was too proud to carry a flashlight, so I stumbled around and cursed the darkness.

Amid my silent internal grumbling, a squishing noise sounded off to the left. My eyesight might be for shit, but my hearing wasn’t.

The Kahr Arms P380 was out of my back pocket and in my hand instantly. I swung my arms in the direction of the noise,

keeping the barrel at my eye level. "Show yourself or I start shooting."

"Jesus, Mercy, are you seriously pointing a gun at me?"

"Dawson?"

"Lower your weapon. Now."

I did.

He sauntered into view. When my stomach dipped, I assured myself it was a delayed adrenaline reaction—not a reaction of pleasure at seeing him.

"What're you doing here, Sheriff? Chasing after bad guys?"

"No. Chasing after you."

"Such a sweet-talkin' cowboy." Dawson and I had been making mattress angels since I'd started working at the bar. We'd kept our relationship—for lack of a better term—on the QT.

"FYI: I'd gone my entire shift without anyone aiming a gun at me."

"So it was a boring day, huh?"

He laughed lightly. "Only you would think that, Sergeant Major."

Then his imposing maleness loomed over me, invading my personal space as only a lover can. He wore his Eagle River County uniform, although he'd ditched the ugly hat. Like me, he carried a sidearm. Unlike me, he hadn't even unsnapped the strap on the holster.

"I can't help it if I'm of the shoot-first mind-set."

"Acting like a soldier when you're a civilian is liable to get you into hot water with the law."

"Bring on the hot water, lawman. I need a shower anyway."

"Feeling a little dirty tonight?"

"You're in a mood," I murmured.

Dawson curled his hand around my hip, letting his thumb sweep the bared section of skin between my jeans and my shirt.

"Wanna guess what kind of mood I'm in?"

Damn distracting man. "Depends."

"On?"

"Whether you plan on talking about your mood or acting on it."

Dawson lowered his face to mine until our lips were a breath

apart. "Talking is the dead-last thing on my mind tonight, Mercy."

"Good. Meet me at the cabin. You can park—"

"In the carport so no one sees my vehicle from a half mile up the road. Yeah, I'm familiar with the damn drill by now."

Huh. Dawson almost sounded . . . resentful.

But I knew that wouldn't stop him from following me home.

I woke alone in tangled sheets. Sun blazed through the bedroom window. Tending bar until the wee hours made it hard to haul my ass out of bed at the crack of nothing.

Not that I had a reason to get up.

I heard Shoonga whining and scratching at the door. I let him in, resisting his attempt to herd me back outside.

"Not before my first cup of coffee, dog." I yawned and shuffled to the tiny kitchen. I saw the note taped to the coffeepot:

You're out of coffee again—MD

Mason Dawson. In the months we'd been together I'd never called him Mason, just Dawson. Did that bother him?

*Probably not as much as the fact you won't acknowledge you're knocking boots with him.*

I didn't want to drive into town for a cup of joe, and coffee was always on at the house. Plus, Sophie would be making lunch soon. I could run over, make nice with the fam, fill my belly, fuel my caffeine fix, and get my aerobic exercise in one fell swoop.

Shoonga barked happy circles around me as I laced up my running shoes. Damn dog made me smile. Although Shoonga spent half his time with Jake at the ranch, I considered him my dog, and I'd gotten used to his company in the nine months since my nephew Levi's murder. Shoonga had adjusted to life without Levi much better than the rest of us.

I slipped on my shades and we set off. With the excessive spring rain, the shortcut through the pasture to the main house was a mud bog, so I ran on the road. The gravel made a sodden *squish, squish* with my every pounding footfall.

My mind blanked to everything but the sounds of my huffing

breath, the feel of sweat coating my skin, and the endorphin rush that was almost as good as sex.

Almost. But not quite.

Once the familiar jagged tree line of the Gunderson Ranch solidified, I slowed to a jog. Home sweet home. Not that I was hanging my hat here full time these days.

After Levi's murder, I asked my grieving, pregnant sister, Hope, and Jake Red Leaf, her baby daddy and the ranch foreman, to move into the house we'd inherited from our father. I'd lived in group housing during my military service, so I was accustomed to being surrounded by people almost 24/7. I even believed it might be fun.

Wrong.

The first month of our communal living arrangement, Hope started to miscarry the twins. With the miracle of modern medicine, they managed to save one baby. Upon her release from the hospital, the doctor confined her to complete bed rest for the duration of her pregnancy.

Asking Sophie Red Leaf, our elderly housekeeper, also Jake's grandmother, to play fetch and carry for Hope was ridiculous when I was underfoot and unemployed. Besides, I'd barely dipped a toe into the responsibilities of running a ranch; Jake was essential to the Gunderson ranching operation, not me. So I temporarily shelved my aspiration of becoming a hands-on owner and helped Sophie tend my fragile sister. I nagged Hope to eat, to take her vitamins and stay in bed. I held her hand during the bouts of false labor. Wiped her tears when our conversations shifted to Levi, which they always did.

Growing a new life-form tuckered Hope out, leaving me at loose ends. Overwhelmed with boredom—and probably slightly drunk—I decided to repaint the living room, dining room, and main-floor bathroom. I bought new furniture. Installed new carpet. I paid for everything out of my pocket, not out of the ranch-operating fund.

No one liked the changes in the house. I hadn't cared.

Although Hope appreciated my spending time with her, she preferred Sophie's company to mine. Any need Hope had for me evaporated after Jake finished his daily ranch duties. So every

afternoon, as soon as Jake's boots hit the welcome mat, I hit the bar.

No one liked the changes in me. I hadn't cared about that either.

Two months into the living arrangement, I started crashing at the foreman's cabin. I got tired of apologizing for my guns. I got tired of apologizing for my late nights. I got tired of the looks passing between them whenever I cracked open a beer. Contrary to their silent accusations, I craved some semblance of normalcy, not just booze. My life was nothing more than marking time: waiting for the baby, waiting for my retirement checks, waiting for the bank to approve our loan, waiting for calving. I drank to blur the slow passage of time. But I ended up with gaps in my memory and too much pride to ask anyone what I'd said and what I'd done. No one came forward to fill me in.

Except Rollie Rondeaux. Rollie was a full-blooded Sioux Indian with a sketchy past that included a love affair with my mother before she'd married my father. He relished playing the part of the wise old Indian and maintained an arsenal of secrets that he wasn't opposed to sharing—or keeping a lid on—for a few bucks or for a favor. Since my return to the ranch, Rollie had become a serious pain in my butt, determined to fill a father-figure role in my life. But other times, I knew he was the only person who understood me, who saw the real me, and didn't judge me for it.

Rollie had shown up the morning after my drunken middle-of-the-night phone call—a call I hadn't remembered making. He hadn't cared that I suffered from the mother of all hangovers. He'd dragged my ass out of bed and into the kitchen of the cabin. Through bleary eyes, I'd noticed he'd centered a .45 cal Smith and Wesson on the table.

“What the hell is that, Rollie?”

“If you're gonna kill yourself, be a man and do it quick. Put the gun to your head and pull the trigger.” He gestured to the empty bottles of Wild Turkey, lined on the counter like good little soldiers. “Save us who care about you the misery of watchin' you kill yourself slowly with that shit.”

My reaction left a lot to be desired. I hadn't burst into tears

and thanked him for his concern. Instead, I got in his face and pushed back. "Maybe I will just end it. It's not like anyone cares. Oh, right. Unless it comes to the cash I'm kicking into the Gunderson Ranch coffers every month."

"You're wrong, Mercy girl. Lots of people care, but you're keeping them out. Let me take you to the VA. They can help you."

"No. Way. So I can be labeled another PTSD freak and become medicated until I die of boredom? No thanks."

"Then let me help you."

"What can you do? Give me back my eyesight? My purpose? The life I had?"

No response.

"See? You can't help me. And this little 'come to Jesus' talk is just pissing me off, old man, so leave."

"Sorry. I ain't giving up on you because I know where you're coming from. Seeing your face is like lookin' in a mirror."

"Why? 'Cause I'm just another drunk Indian?"

His eyes hardened. "No, you're just another drunk soldier trying to find your way back. You think you're special? Guess what? You aren't the only one to deal with this shit. We all went through it. Coming back from Vietnam wasn't no picnic either. We all seen bad things, *kola*."

"You don't know fuck all about what I saw or what I did, Rollie."

"Yeah? How are the nightmares? Having flashbacks during the day?"

I glared at him.

Rollie's gaze swept the counter. "At least you ain't takin' a mountain of pills." He paused and looked at me challengingly. "Yet."

I glowered even more.

"You think dousing them bad dreams with booze will make 'em go away?"

"Yep. Now why don't *you* go away and leave me alone." I turned around, and his next words froze me to the spot.

"If it were up to me, I would. But John-John wants to talk to you."

“About what? He have a vision or something?”

“You’ll have to ask him.”

Fucking Sioux woo-woo shit drove me crazy. Problem was, as a *winkte*, the Lakota word for two spirits residing in one body, John-John’s visions were usually dead-on. “Why didn’t he come here and talk to me about it himself?”

“He tried. Don’t you remember?”

An uneasy feeling flitted through me. “No.”

“You scared him. And he don’t spook easy.”

I vaguely remembered a crying jag, throwing empty bottles at the door and screaming. I wasn’t sure if the screams had been mine. Maybe I hadn’t thrown the bottles at the door. Maybe I’d thrown the bottles at John-John.

Rollie heaved a weary sigh. His gentle hands landed on my shoulders. Even with my super-duper stealthy military training I hadn’t heard him move. Yeah, I was pretty much a train wreck.

“I’m not your daddy, Mercy girl. But I do know what it’s like to come home to a place that ain’t the same as it was when you left. People ain’t the same. But mostly . . . you ain’t the same. Go talk to John-John. Please. For all our sakes. But mostly for yours.”

A day later I clocked in at Clementine’s for my first shift. John-John had shared his vision, something about fire and pain, watching my loved ones hurting, while I stood by and did nothing. I’d sort of tuned out the mystical gloom-and-doom forecast, because John-John always added a disclaimer about visions being subject to interpretation. But I knew it bothered him that this particular vision hadn’t materialized into reality. The only reality I cared about was that months after my niece’s arrival, I was still working as a bartender, unsure how to address my resentment over the situation at the ranch—or whether I even had a right to it.

Shoonga whined, bringing me back to the present. Sophie hated the “dog mess” so Shoonga’s meals were served on the porch. I dumped food in his dish, and my stomach rumbled. I kicked off my muddy shoes on the porch and entered the kitchen.

Jake, Sophie, and Hope stared at me like I should’ve knocked. Not exactly a friendly welcome. In my own damn house.

“Ah. Hi, guys.”

"Hello, yourself. You hungry?" Sophie asked.

"I could eat."

"I'll fix you a plate."

"No, finish your lunch. I can do it." After I washed up, I uncovered the pans on the stove. Steamy scents of chicken-fried steak, mashed potatoes, and country gravy wafted out.

Sophie gave my heaped plate a wry look. "Save room for dessert, hey."

Joy fussed. Hope murmured to her while trying to eat one-handed, which was ridiculous when a perfectly good high chair sat right next to her. But Joy rarely left her mama's arms.

I didn't blame my sister for her overprotective instincts. She'd lost her son to a murderer. She'd lost a baby in utero. But her "my baby" attitude and near-agoraphobia were wearing thin for everyone. I'd never even held my niece, though, granted, that was partially my own fault.

Jake pushed his plate aside. "I'll hold her so you can eat."

"I don't mind," Hope said crossly.

"I do." Then Jake did a very un-Jake-like thing. He plucked the baby from Hope's lap and said, "Now eat up so we can go."

Hope watched father and daughter, chewing her lip instead of her food.

"Go where?" Sophie asked her grandson.

"It's a slow day. Thought I'd take my girls for a drive. Get Hope out of the house into the fresh air. Tempt her with a sundae from the Custard Cupboard."

Sophie and I exchanged an "oh crap" look.

"Joy has finally settled into a regular naptime," Hope snapped. "I won't screw that up to go driving around the countryside with you."

"She'll sleep just fine in the car seat."

Wasn't Jake's way to push, especially not with an audience. The fact he was doing both indicated he'd reached the end of his rope with my little sister.

A feeling I was familiar with.

"Jake, you don't know—"

"One afternoon, Hope. The three of us acting like a normal family."

Jake's voice was calm, but pure steel.

Impressive.

Hope continued to gape at him with a mix of confusion and alarm. I half expected she'd snatch Joy and stomp upstairs, and that'd be the end of it.

But Jake reached out, gently touching Hope's cheek with a soft plea. "Please."

She smiled, almost shyly. "Okay. Right after I feed her and get myself ready. I'm kind of a mess."

"I'll feed her. And you always look great," Jake added.

Hope flounced upstairs, her step lighter than I'd seen in months.

Kudos to Jake for his well-played moves.

Sophie's foot nudged mine under the table. Twice.

"What? You need help with the dishes?"

"*Shee*, I think aliens done abducted the real Mercy and left this imposter who volunteers for chores." Her strong, wrinkled hand briefly covered mine. "Ain't it good to see things are getting back to normal around here?"

"Define normal."

She harrumphed. "Such a smarty-pants. What are your plans for the day?"

I glanced at the clock. "Working. My shift starts in two hours." I focused on Jake, murmuring to Joy, waiting for the bottle to heat. "I wanted to tell you that I saw a mountain lion yesterday."

"Where?"

"Over by the prairie dog town in the northwest corner of the Newsome's old place."

"What time did you see it?"

"Morning. She didn't look good. She was mangy. Starved. A bit too long in the tooth to have cubs."

"She attack you or anything?"

As far as I knew, we'd never had a mountain lion attack our cattle, to say nothing of attacking a human. "Nope. Have you seen her around? Or any kind of tracks?"

"I haven't been up in that section for a while. But I ain't surprised. Lots of people are reporting seeing mountain lions where they ain't supposed to be."

In the last few years, the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks started a mountain lion season to deal with the growing

problem. Some folks were appalled, calling it a barbaric practice. But I figured they'd change their tune right quick when the lions started snacking on little kids.

Jake tucked Joy in the crook of his arm and popped a baby bottle in her mouth. Greedy sucking noises sounded. "Did you kill her?"

"No."

He frowned. "You *didn't* shoot her?"

No. "I . . . ah, missed." *Liar.*

"*You* missed? That's a bad sign."

Automatically, I assumed he meant I'd lost the weapons skills I'd spent years honing. I bristled. "Why?"

Jake and Sophie exchanged a look.

"What?"

Sophie pinch pleated the ruffles on the place mat. "You know about spirit animals, right?"

I nodded.

"They're a reflection of ourselves. Sometimes they lead us to something; sometimes they lead us away. You must've seen a part of yourself in her. Destroying her meant you'd destroy that part of yourself, so you didn't."

Of all the . . . "I call bullshit on that, Sophie. I also saw two squirrels going at it for like twenty minutes, up and down a pine tree, bark flying everywhere, and I didn't shoot them. So if what you're saying is true about the lioness, I should also consider the mating squirrels . . . my spirit animals? I should read their intensive mating practices as a sign I'm dying to have wild squirrel sex, hanging upside down in a tree?"

A funny smile tilted the crinkled corners of Sophie's mouth. "That's exactly what it means."

Jake and Sophie looked at each other again and busted a gut laughing.

I wasn't sure if I'd been had. But I was happy to hear laughter in the house again, even if it was at my expense. I got up to leave.

"Seriously, Mercy," Jake called out, "if you see that lioness again? Shoot her."

"I guarantee it. But I'm still undecided on the squirrels."