

## CHAPTER ONE

RAIN SNAKED DOWN the windshield of his F-150 in lazy rivers as Walker Pearce waited for the stoplight to turn green. Jackson Town Square was deserted, but the light waited for nonexistent tourists to make their way across the street. He hit the windshield wipers, wishing they could wipe the phantom trace of her fingers from his skin, as well. The cab of the truck still smelled like her perfume.

Ignoring the rain, he cracked his window, then pulled forward when the light turned.

It wasn't that he hated her. It was just that he'd thought she'd really wanted to talk when she'd called. But, of course, that wasn't what Nicole had wanted from him. It never was.

He knew his scruples weren't exactly sound. He'd kissed her, yes. In fact, they would've had sex one night if they hadn't gotten spooked by a near interruption. So no, he couldn't pretend that he was above such things, exactly. But somehow, messing around with the ranch owner's wife had felt less

wrong when it had been...happenstance. An unexpected moment alone in the tack room. An accidental meeting after a summer party. He hadn't meant it. Neither had she. Or so he'd told himself.

But now that he was no longer working at the Fletcher Guest Ranch, Nicole couldn't leave it to chance. She'd called and asked him to meet her by Old Warm Springs. It was important, she'd said. She'd needed to see him. He'd liked that. Feeling important to a woman like her. But he'd mistaken the word.

Walker scrubbed a hand over his mouth, thinking he'd have to shave his beard if the smell of her skin wouldn't wash off.

He hadn't had sex with her this time, either, despite the way she'd climbed onto his lap and pressed herself against him. He wasn't sure why he was so determined to protect her marriage. She didn't seem to care all that much. Before he'd gotten fired from the ranch, Walker had told her they couldn't do it because he worked for her husband, because they'd be doing it under the man's roof, because he'd be fired if they got caught. But those things didn't matter now, so why did he feel even less tempted?

Maybe she'd just picked the wrong meeting spot. The springs had reminded him of junior high, and swimming with girls who'd made his head spin with fascinated lust when sex had seemed unattainable and dangerously romantic.

Sex was no longer unattainable and there was nothing romantic about the danger with Nicole. She just made him sad. And he was worried that everyone at the ranch suspected. He'd been fired for yet another paperwork screwup, but being fired over paperwork wasn't one of the most common stories told around a campfire. It had been an excuse. Walker had known that and so had his manager. Walker had no idea if that meant Nicole's husband knew, or if it was a matter of rumors just becoming too much for management to ignore.

Whatever the reason, seeing her felt wrong now, but his refusal had seriously pissed Nicole off. Maybe she wouldn't call again.

He felt only relief at the idea as he parked his truck in front of his apartment and got out. But instead of heading into the building, he crossed the lawn and walked toward the old saloon next door.

Truthfully, he missed the ranch. He missed his dog. He needed a drink, and fast.

“Hey!” Jenny Stone called from behind the bar as soon as he walked in. “You’re just the man I was looking for!”

Walker couldn’t help the wide grin that spread across his face. Jenny was a damn cute blonde. “Oh, yeah? Is there something Nate ain’t giving you, darlin’? I’d be happy to oblige.”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “You wish.”

“True enough. But I do try to steer clear of a woman whose boyfriend carries a gun. Tends to leave a mark.” He took off his hat and grabbed a stool.

“The usual?”

When he nodded, she drew a beer and shot a nervous look toward the back of the saloon. Walker turned to look, but the place was nearly empty at 3:00 p.m. on a rainy Tuesday.

She slid him his beer and leaned close. “You remember Charlie Allington?”

For a moment, Walker had no idea who Jenny was talking about. He’d worked with a damn lot of cowboys in his day, some who’d come and gone so quickly that he’d never even learned their names. “Charlie,” he repeated, looking for a memory. The one that popped into his head shocked the hell out of him. “Oh, *Charlie*! Of course.”

He and Charlie Allington—known as Charlotte only if you were trying to irritate her—had gone to high school together. In fact, she'd been his tutor for all of his junior year. "It's been a long time," he said.

"So Charlie is Nate's cousin. Once removed or second cousin or however that works."

"Is she doing okay?" Last he'd heard, she'd moved to Vegas for a big job.

"She's great. She's back in town, working at one of the Teton resorts as a security manager, and she called Nate to ask if he knew a place she could stay."

"And you suggested my place?" he asked with an automatic wink. But he felt guilty as soon as he said it. The last time he'd seen Charlie she'd been a sweet teenage girl whose number-one interest had been the track team.

"Oh, I know your door's always open, but I need something else."

"What?"

She smiled and cocked her head. "A favor."

He eyed her fluttering lashes suspiciously.

"Rayleen has been complaining about the Stud Farm being invaded by a swarm of women."

"I'd hardly call Merry a swarm."

“Yeah, well, she’s still pissed that Grace moved out and talked Rayleen into letting Merry stay. She was hoping to pack the place with nothing but big hotties again this winter.” She nudged his elbow. “As usual.”

He gave her another grin. Old Rayleen owned the apartment building next to the saloon. She had a long history of only renting to young men, and since the house had once been the Studd homestead before it’d been broken up into apartments and modernized, the town had started calling it the Stud Farm.

Last year, Rayleen had reluctantly broken with her lecherous tradition and let her great-niece move in. Then her niece’s best friend.

“What does this have to do with Charlie?” Walker asked.

“Um...I was hoping you might talk Rayleen into renting to your old friend Charlie. You know, just another cowboy looking for a place to crash for the winter.”

“Another— Oh, no. No way. Rayleen likes me.”

“Rayleen loves you!” Jenny interrupted. “That’s why she’ll let Charlie move in without even seeing her. And by the time she’s moved in, even Rayleen wouldn’t be mean enough to evict her. Not to mention it’d be illegal to blatantly kick out a tenant for being female.”

“What about kicking out a tenant for lying about a new renter?” he grouched.

“She’ll forgive you. You’re too big and handsome and sexy for her to hold a grudge.” She fluttered her eyelashes again.

“I like it a lot better when you don’t have an ulterior motive for calling me sexy.”

“But that’s the only time I call you sexy, so catch-22.”

He grinned. “You sure about that, Jenny?”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “Save your magic for Rayleen, cowboy.”

“Hey, I’ve got an idea. Why don’t *you* trick her into renting a place to Charlie and leave me out of it?”

“No way. Rayleen’s my boss. She can fire me. She can’t fire you.” Jenny nudged his half-empty beer. “That beer’s on the house if you do it.”

“One beer? I haven’t been out of work that long. I’m not desperate.”

“One beer and the gratitude of Deputy Nate Hendricks. That could come in handy. A cop on your side. And think of your old friend Charlie!”

Yeah. Cute little Charlie. She needed a place to stay. And the Stud Farm was one of the few cheap, nice options in this tourist town. “Shit,” he muttered.

“Yea!” Jenny cried, confident she’d won him over.

Walker shook his head and scrubbed a hand through his hair. It was too long and starting to curl over his collar. He’d meant to shave his beard and get a cut weeks ago, but now it was turning cold and he couldn’t bring himself to shear any of it. Still, it would’ve given Nicole less of a hold if he’d gotten rid of it.

He downed the rest of his beer. “I’m not going to lie to an old lady. But I’ll do what I can, all right?”

“All right. Thanks. You’re the best, Walker.”

“That’s what they say.”

“You’re also incorrigible. Good thing, because here comes Rayleen.”

He grimaced and nudged his glass toward Jenny. “Free refill?”

“I thought you weren’t desperate.”

“I’m not. I’m scared.”

“All right,” she laughed. “Free refill. *After* you pull it off.”

Walker took a deep breath and turned with a grin to meet the harmless-looking white-haired woman. “Well, if it isn’t my favorite landlord. Hey there, Miss Rayleen.”

“Turn back around, Walker,” she snapped. “I wasn’t finished looking at your ass.”

“I’d think you’d have it all mapped out by now. You look often enough.”

“There’s no such thing as enough when it comes to a fine piece of tush, fool.”

“Why, thank you, ma’am.” His smile came more easily now. He really did love this menace of a woman. “I was just asking Jenny here where you were hiding.”

Rayleen raised a silver eyebrow and settled into her normal seat at a table at the corner of the bar. “You finally decided to up your cougar game? Ten-year age difference no longer a challenge?”

Walker felt his cheeks heat a little at that. Was she talking about Nicole? Did everyone know? But he shook it off. She was kidding, and if he didn’t want to own up to his actions, then he’d do better to behave well in the first place. “Nope. I wanted to ask about the apartment across from mine. Is it still vacant?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Maybe. Why?”

“My old friend Charlie is looking for a place.”

“Hmph. Just how old a friend is Charlie? Some dried-up cowhand?”

“Nope. My age, give or take.”

Her eyes sparked with more interest now. “Yeah? Is he a cowboy?”

“No. More of a security expert, I believe. Works at a resort.”

She stuck a cigarette between her lips and let it dangle there. He’d never actually seen her smoke one. She just liked having them on hand, apparently. Her gaze darted down his body and then back up. “How tall is he?” The cigarette bobbed.

Walker cleared his throat and shifted. “Aw, hell, Rayleen. I don’t know. Shorter than I am.”

“Hm.”

Everyone knew Rayleen liked a lot of eye candy hanging around. Walker didn’t care. He was just happy for the chance to get a decent place at a decent price. And he could use her fondness for his ass to his advantage now. “I have heard the word ‘cute’ bandied about on occasion.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, then.” She shuffled a pack of cards with a flourish and started dealing out her first solitaire game of the day. “That snowboarding instructor I’d hoped to rent to broke his damn leg or something. Won’t be here this season. A shame. He was almost as big as you. Not sure about this whole cute thing.”

Walker shot Jenny a look and she made a hurry-up motion with her hands.

“Well,” he tried again. “I’ve known Charlie a long time. Since high school.”

“Charlie who?”

Walker rolled his shoulders. This was it. “Charlie Allington. You know the Allingtons?”

She shrugged. Charlie had left town for college, so she might never have been around after reaching legal drinking age.

“Charlie’s one of Nate’s cousins,” he clarified.

Rayleen made a noncommittal noise, but she liked Nate. Maybe that would work in their favor. Rayleen flipped over another card. Jenny hovered close by, rubbing a slow circle into the bar with a rag.

Finally Rayleen shrugged. “All right. I am getting a little tired of these seasonal workers. That last one really tore up my wood floors. What the hell was he doing in there? Playing hockey?”

He shook his head sympathetically. They’d all had to listen to Rayleen complain about refinishing those floors, but he’d heard the real reason for her anger was that the kid had called Rayleen a nasty old bitch when she’d kept his security

deposit. Walker shook his head at that. What kind of punk would say something like that to a woman?

She flipped another card. "How long does he want to rent the place?"

Walker met Jenny's eyes. "Through the winter?" She nodded.

"So he'd be up for a six-month lease?" Rayleen asked.

"I'm not sure. Probably."

"Okay. Tell him to come on by. No pets. No water beds. A month's rent as a security deposit up front. If I like the looks of him, I'll offer a six-month lease. If I don't, it'll be month to month and he can get gone before the skiing starts."

"Thanks, Miss Rayleen."

She shrugged. "I ain't doing anyone any favors. I'm just looking to fill in the next couple months of dead time before the season."

"Aw, you're sweeter than you let on."

She snorted. "Not hardly, boy."

*Shit.* "Here's the thing..."

The cigarette went still between her lips and her eyes rose to meet his with a hard gaze. "What?"

Walker glanced at Jenny, who shook her head, but Rayleen would find out sooner than later, and his mama hadn't

raised him to lie to old ladies. "My old friend Charlie? Charlie is actually short for Charlotte."

"Charlotte?" She cackled. "What kind of a name is that for a..." The amusement left her face and was quickly replaced with tight anger. "No," she said firmly. "No, sir. I don't care how fine your behind is in those jeans, I ain't letting one of your floozies move in here."

"She's not one of my floozies! I haven't seen her since high school!" He frowned at his beer and muttered, "Not that I have floozies."

Rayleen snorted. "I said no, and that's that."

"Come on. Charlie is a great girl. And she'll take good care of the apartment, not like some twenty-something snowboarder looking for a place to party with his friends."

"He's right," Jenny finally jumped in. "The last two seasonal renters were a nightmare. And you say all the time how disgusting men are."

"Hmph." She took up her cards again. "They are disgusting. And idiotic. That's why I don't keep any in my own house. But they're nice from a distance."

Trying not to imagine that he and the other residents were just exotic animals in a zoo, Walker ducked down and met Rayleen's eyes above her hand of cards. "It's just for a few

months, Rayleen. Please? As a favor to me? I'll make sure she doesn't play hockey in there. In fact, if she does, I'll kick her out myself."

Rayleen scowled. "Goddamn women. They're starting to breed like rabbits in there. Every time I look up, there's another."

"Please?" he repeated, folding his hand around hers, cards and all. "For me?"

She jerked her hand away. "Fine. Just cut the shit. She can move in, but she'd better not put up any pink paint. Or frilly curtains. It ain't a damn henhouse."

Walker leaned in and kissed her cheek before she could get away. "I owe you, Rayleen."

Her face went pink as she shoved him away. "Oh, go on. Stand by the bar and look pretty before I change my mind." She was grumbling as he moved away, but Walker tossed Jenny a big smile.

"Refill?" he asked, pushing his glass toward her.

"I can't believe you pulled it off!"

"Aw, she's just a big softie."

Jenny laughed so hard she had to brace herself on the bar. "Yeah. Sure. You keep telling yourself that."

But Walker knew he was right. Rayleen was harmless, and she was going to love Charlie. He was sure of it.

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