

Houston, Texas present day

Chapter One

They died two years ago today.

Tori didn't need the calendar to remember the date. Her heart ticked away the hours one anguished beat at a time then stuttered and skipped each September fourth at 7:01 p.m.; the day her husband and seven year old son were murdered.

She sucked in a lungful of air and forced back the tears threatening to crush her resolve.

No more tears. Time to move forward.

Tori stared at the half-packed suitcase on the bed, each item new and chosen for this journey, symbolic of her mission to start fresh. She was certain her best friend since forever would understand and support her decision. Obviously not the case.

“Oh my God, Tori! Have you lost your mind?” Sasha paced in front of the closet, fingers pressed to her temples. “I am so not believing this!”

Her reaction mirrored the one from Tori's family last night. Going to Montana was one thing, keeping it secret until the night before she left was a lot to accept. Apparently.

Hands on her hips, voice rife with tension, Sassy - personifying her nickname - raved on. “I mean, really, what do you even know about this guy?” She crossed her arms, right foot tapping out a staccato. “How do you know he's not some wacko serial killer or if he even *has* a sick mother?”

She didn't give Tori time to take a breath much less respond.

“I can't believe you didn't tell your best friend in the whole world about this hare-brained idea weeks ago instead of the *day* before you leave.”

“You know why.” Tori held up her hand. “You're worried, Sassy, I get it. But I have to do this.” She placed folded pants in the suitcase and walked back to the closet, staring at the unfamiliar items hanging there. “The past two years have been a never-ending nightmare.” She wrapped her arms around herself and struggled to remain calm. “Joey died in my arms.” Tori blew out a breath. “I didn't know a human could endure that much pain and live. I never thought

their killers would go free, but they did and I survived that, too.” Her voice dropped to a soft whisper. “I’m just existing, Sassy. I’m not living anymore.”

“Rico is still out there. You know you’re a loose end he wants tied up.”

“I talked with Captain Lockhart last week and Rico hasn’t been seen in months. Word is he took his drug plans elsewhere. Maybe even as far as Canada.” She turned back to the closet and pulled a blouse from its hanger, folded it, shook it out then refolded it. “When Joey and Eddie died, a big part of me died, too.” She took a breath and tried to speak without crying. “I know I can never get that back. But this job will give me a chance to...re-group, get grounded again.”

“But *Montana*?” Sassy stood in front her. “It’s colder ‘n hell there and snows like a gazillion feet a year! What if you need to go to town or get sick or hurt?”

Tori threw the blouse on the bed and faced her friend. “I can't stay here any longer!” She trembled with the effort it took to control the pain that had defined her life the last two years. Eyes blurring with unshed tears, she blinked several times, sucking air through clenched teeth. “Everywhere I go, everyone I see is a constant reminder of all I’ve lost. And my family, Sassy...they’re smothering me.”

“They love you. We all do.”

She gripped her friends’ shoulders. “Then *please*. For my sake, try to understand. I lost a big piece of myself that day and lose a little more each day I stay here.”

Several seconds passed before Sassy placed her hands over Tori's and squeezed. “All right. But promise you'll call if you need anything, *anything* at all.”

“I *promise*. Now, are you going to help me pack or what?”

“Fine. I'll help, but I want the whole story, start to finish. How the hell did you get hooked up with some cowboy from Montana?”

Tori released a long held breath. “It's not a big deal.” She picked up the discarded blouse and refolded it. “Ted Freeman, Chief of Staff at Memorial?”

“Oh yeah, the yummy one that looks like Richard Gere.”

She nodded. “He has this friend in Butte who knew about a family, the McBride’s’ that wanted a live-in nurse for his elderly mother. She has terminal cancer. Pretty advanced.”

“They don't have nurses in Montana?”

She ignored the sarcastic comment. “He mentioned it to Ted who mentioned it to me in passing. I asked for more information, made a few calls.” Tori shrugged. “And off I go.”

Though not that simple, the explanation seemed to satisfy Sasha for now. True, she insisted on a background check and made a few discreet inquiries herself but not until she’d accepted the position. Tori realized significant steps had to take place if she were to have any chance at *normal* again. This was a significant step. A little rash maybe, but significant, so, no second guessing it now.

It was an ideal solution for her current state of mind. She would live in the McBride home and care for Mr. McBride’s sister and mother, receive an acceptable salary, a private room and meals. Most important of all, she’d be free from constant reminders of her loss and well-meaning friends and family – namely her mother - now determined to *fix her up* with someone.

But she lacked the motivation, and, though loath to admit it, the confidence, to pursue another relationship. Eddie was her first love, and her only lover. Hell, she’d never even kissed another man – not like *that* - and even the thought of doing so now made her palms sweat and her heart race.

I'm a thirty-three year old coward.

“Hello in there?” Sasha tapped the side of her head. “Anybody home?”

Tori blinked. “Huh?”

“Answer me.”

“I’m sorry, my mind was wandering. What did you ask?”

She heaved an exasperated sniff. “I *said* tell me about this McBride fella. What does he look like, is he married? And I want the good stuff, too, not whatever sugar-coated version you gave your parents.”

Tori hesitated.

Sasha poked her shoulder with her index finger. "Out with it. What are you hiding?"

"Nothing." She studied the closet's contents without seeing them. "There isn't much to tell. He runs the family ranch. His brother was the sheriff before he and his wife were killed three months ago." She took a sweater and studied it. "That's about it."

"And you never met 'im?"

"Uh-uh, just spoke with him on the phone. Got the majority of my information from his sister, Sheila. She had some sort of accident, too and needs PT."

"Okay then, what does he sound like? Old? Sexy? Gay?"

"You're incorrigible."

"Well?"

"I guess...hell, I don't know." She swapped the sweater for blouse. "It's hard to describe." *Liar. You know exactly how it sounds; a deep baritone with a huskiness to it that flows through you like fine wine, raises gooseflesh on your arms, leaving you off-balance, a strange tingling sensation racing through you.* She placed a hand at her throat and tried to breathe normally as guilt over such forbidden feelings overwhelmed her. *If just the sound of his voice on the phone has such an effect on me, what on earth will happen when I meet him?*

"Dammit! You're not listening again."

The declaration, complete with a heavy sigh, pulled Tori from those disturbing thoughts. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

Sasha rolled her eyes and made no attempt to hide her frustration. "I said, give it to me."

"Give what?"

"I know good and well you at least got a picture of him before sashaying across the country to meet him, so gimmee."

She looked away, said nothing.

Her best friend held out her hand and snapped her fingers. "Hand it over, girl. I wanna see the man who could persuade my reasonably intelligent – "

"*Reasonably* intelligent?"

Sasha cocked her head to the side, one delicately arched brow raised.

“Point made.”

“As I was saying, persuade my reasonably intelligent best friend to hightail it to Montana in the dead of winter.” She wiggled her fingers and grinned. “I can’t wait to see him.”

Tori glanced at the outstretched hand and reached for her purse. She didn’t bother to glance at the photo as she passed it over; didn’t need to. Her mind’s eye provided a vivid picture. *Wind-blown ebony hair, streaks of grey at the temples. Strong, defined cheekbones anchored by heavy brows. Sky blue eyes framed by killer lashes. And his mouth. Oh God.* What was it about his mouth that intrigued her so?

Full lips parted in a sexy smile that lit up his face and made her breath catch. She gave herself a mental shake and tried to focus on the task at hand. “His sister sent it. He’s the one on the left. The other one is his late brother, Isaac.”

“Holy-moly girlfriend! No wonder you can’t wait to go. Talk about your tall, dark and handsome. He’s what...six feet at least; bedroom eyes if ever I saw ‘em, come hither smile...daaa-yum! I bet he’s got a killer ass, too.”

“Sassy!” Tori reached for the picture but her friend moved away, still studying it.

“What did you say his name is?”

“Wade McBride.”

“Well, Mr. Wade McBride, you are one delicious lookin’ cowboy.” She made a show of fanning herself with the picture. “And I’d be on ‘at puppy like mornin’ glory on a fencepost.”

Her face grew warm and she shook her head. Sasha had a one track mind of late and did her best to get Tori on the same track.

“Damn. Damn. *Damn!*” She handed the picture back. “Sure you don’t want me to come along? You’re a bit out of practice you know, and he may be more than you can handle alone.”

“It’s nothing like that and you know it. It’s a job.”

“Yeah, well, it *should* be.” She rummaged through the contents of a dresser drawer and tossed a filmy nightgown at Tori. “Better take this along. Winter or not you’ll want it ‘fore this is

over.”

“Good grief! Is sex all you think about?” She tossed the garment back to her and pulled out a pair of sweat pants.

“Hell yeah when I see a Timex man.”

Tori ducked her head and sighed. “I know I will regret this, but...a Timex man?”

Sasha giggled. “Think a can of Redi-Whip topping, some chocolate syrup...a strategically placed cherry.” She paused for effect. “And see if ‘at cowboy can take a lickin’ and keep on tickin’.”

Her face flamed as an image of McBride lathered in whipped topping and chocolate syrup formed. “Oh my God, Sasha! Where on earth do you come up with this stuff?” She extended her arm, palm up. “Never mind. I don’t want to know.”

“Trust me...one day you’ll thank me.”

“No. I won’t. Besides, he has a lot on his plate with his sister and mother both ill and the ranch. He needs a nurse, not a lover.”

“Says who?”

“Sassy, please.”

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again; you were too good for Eddie.” She waved her hand back and forth to silence Tori’s rebuke. “I know, I know, it’s wrong to speak ill of the dead. He was a good cop, a decent father, but a crummy, cheating husband.”

Tori sat on the edge of the bed and said nothing as her friend continued. “You’ve got the kindest heart of anyone I’ve ever known.” Sassy joined her on the bed, her smile reflective. “I guess that explains why you put up with me all these years. And you have a capacity for caring I truly envy. It’s why you are such an awesome nurse. Well, that and the reasonably intelligent thing.”

Tori snorted. Sassy would never change. Thank God.

“I know you loved Eddie. I never understood why, but I know you did. But he’s gone, Tori. You need to let him go and love again.”

“I...I don’t know if I can. Every time I think about moving on, of getting involved with someone, I feel guilty. Like I’m...betraying him. I know it sounds silly to you, but it’s how I feel.”

Sasha slid an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “I don’t think it sounds silly at all. He was your husband and you loved him. But he’s gone.” She blew out a breath. “You’re my best friend in the whole world. I want you to be happy. I want to see your eyes smile again.”

“I know you do. And I appreciate that.” She leaned her head on her friend’s shoulder. “I’m not interested in a relationship right now.” She sighed. “I don’t think I even remember how to kiss anymore so a relationship is out of the question.”

Sasha looked at the picture and grinned. “Wanna bet? Besides, kissing is like riding a bike, once you do it, you don’t forget how.” She giggled. “And if you did, I’m bettin’ this cowboy is one hell of a teacher.”

Tori placed the last bag on the cart by the door and called for a taxi. She stood in the middle of her living room, staring at the expensive set of matching luggage she’d splurged on, mentally checking off her preparations. Her rent was paid up for six months and the mail forwarded to her parents who would take care of any bills. Her friend had a key to the apartment and would keep an eye on things while she was gone.

She suffered no misgivings about leaving. In fact, her excitement grew as departure time approached. The need to take control of her life was of major importance right now. When she heard about the McBride’s needing a nurse, it was like a rainbow following a thunderstorm proclaiming the worst was over.

Maybe it was the prospect of change itself making her tingle with anticipation or something else altogether. Wade’s enticing voice notwithstanding, exactly what pulled her to Montana remained a mystery. She only knew she had to go.

The doorman rang to say the taxi arrived. Tori grabbed her purse, the cumbersome luggage cart and headed out the door. As it shut, she heard the phone ring.

She let it go to voicemail.