

Chapter One



Twelve-Years Later - 2019

Well, there's no hope for it. I'm good and lost. How did I manage this? That's what happens when I don't know whether to go back the way I came or continue. I have no cell phone signal, so I have no GPS. My phone has no bars, so I can't call my aunt for help, and I have no idea where I am or how far Havre, Montana is from here. My father said there would be days like this, when a map would come in handy. I mean, a real paper map.

I sit on the bumper of my rental car. So much for a cab. The flight attendant snickered at me when I asked her to direct me to where the Lyft desk was at the airport. My aunt wasn't able to pick me up from the airport—something about an emergency. A sick cow.

I unfold the map I found in my purse that my mother—or father, most likely—must have snuck in while I was packing for my summer visit to my father's sister, a vet at a ranch in Montana.

A *ranch*. Aunt Beatrice could have her own practice with high-end clients back in Barrington, where her family and friends are. Far from downtown Chicago but, close enough for me at Northwestern to come home on weekends to see her.

Aunt Beatrice came out west with her husband after they got married. Aunt B. now works with an old college friend and her husband on their ranch.

I look closely at this map for the tenth time, looking for Highway 232 leading out of Havre on the map. That was where I got lost. I drove for an hour outside of Havre and never saw the turnoff, nor have I seen another motorist while I've been on this road.

Now, I'm somewhere outside of Havre, lost. I have never been this far west. Montana. What in the world is in Montana? If there was something interesting in this state, I wouldn't be able to find it, Montana is so big. I probably could get lost out here for weeks without anyone finding me.

I turn the map right-side-up after realizing I've been holding it upside down. I scan the paper closely, and after a few moments, I find Havre. My eyes track the highway line from Route 2, and I trace Route 232 with my finger as it snakes across the map, but Highway 233 is nowhere to be found.

I have no idea where that highway is. I crumple the map into a ball in my fists out of frustration. Then, realizing this may be my only way of finding my aunt's ranch, I un-crumple it, spread the paper over the hood of the car, hastily flatten out the wrinkles, and hang my head in defeat. With no knowledge of Montana geographically, and without any GPS to guide me, I have no idea whether I passed the turnoff. I was so busy staring out at the wide expanse of land before me that I didn't see any road signs pointing me in the right direction. Plus, construction outside of Havre got me sidetracked.

I consider my options. I can continue driving until I see the marker for 233, but how much further might I have to go to find it? I could head back the way I came, although I have no idea how far back, I'd have to go. I could be out here for hours.

I consider myself a pretty smart person. I maintained my GPA, got into med school, and was considered first among the applicants for fellowship money and department scholarships. Yet for the life of me, I can't read a map or apparently a gas gauge. And here I thought I had accomplished a lot in my twenty-five-year-long life. I take a moment to mull my choice over. If I go back the way I came the turnoff may still in front of me instead of behind, I could lose a lot of gas.

I should have thought twice about going with my parents on our annual family vacation. What's more, I should have never chosen to come and work the summer with Aunt Beatrice so I could save up some money for the fall semester. Med school isn't cheap, and my student loans will start to add up.

Now, here I am, in the middle of somewhere, with a paper map with roads on it that I have no idea how to read.

I look back in the direction that I'd come. "Crap," I say.

I had another alternative. I could have stayed in Barrington, gone on vacation with my parents, come back, and then spent my summer working at the downtown café while doing some light reading from medical journals, but no. I had to come out to the middle of nowhere to spend my summer helping my aunt tend to someone else's animals.

It wasn't my idea to come visit Aunt B.; it was hers. I had been the one to suggest that I do more while in Montana than sit around and read. I figured I could also earn some money working on the ranch—helping out with the farm portion, although I have no experience in that kind of thing either. At all.

Aunt B. is sort of an in-house vet for some land or ranch owner, or whatever the title is. I'm a long way from home, a long way from anywhere.

I hear the loud engine of a truck coming up the road behind me. I quickly straighten and stand beside my rental.

The big black truck comes closer, and it's evident that the driver isn't going to slow down and stop. He just drives right on past me.

I refuse to give up. Right behind that vehicle, I see another big black truck rumbling up. I stand out a bit on the road and use my map to flag down the driver. If this driver races by, I don't know what I'll do. Waving the map frantically as the truck approaches, I hold my breath, hoping he'll stop so I can ask for directions to the Sawyer Ranch.

The driver sees me, and the truck starts to slow down. To my hope—and dread—the truck pulls up next to me in the center of the lane. I stand back a bit, fearless at first, now, not so much. But I don't have

the Spirit of fear, so I stand my ground and hope whoever this is will help me and doesn't have horrible intentions toward a young woman stranded on the side of the road.

The truck rumbles to a stop, and the tinted window on the passenger side rolls down right in front of me. As soon as my eyes adapt to the dimness of the cabin, my breath hitches in my throat. I take a step back, and my hands go to my stomach.

The sun shining through the window, casts a shard of light on the driver's face, and I see a set of stark, clear, light-gray eyes staring at me. Those unusual eyes sweep over me, moving from my face to my wild hair, having come loose from the clip I used. Now, a wild, dark cloud of my unleashed curls blows in the warm Montana wind.

I pull hair from across my face. When I do, for a second, something different flashes in this cowboy's eyes. He tilts his black cowboy hat back, sliding it up his forehead so I can see his face.

All the while, we stare at each other, until his deep voice breaks the silence.

"Hello, ma'am. Please tell me your car didn't break down and that you are not out here on your own." He looks from me to the road ahead. "Did you get separated from your DIY group?" he asks, being a smart aleck.

How rude! I'm taken aback by the annoyance in his voice. "No," I snap. "My car isn't broken down, and I'm not with any group." I put my hands on my hips. "Are all cowboys in Montana this friendly?" I ask sarcastically.

He just grins—and I mean a *big* ear-to-ear grin. Which upsets me even more than I am already. And it's not because his smile adds to his attractiveness.

He looks forward again and then back at me. "I do apologize, ma'am. Do you need any assistance?"

I should be grateful that he bothered to stop, but his rudeness is just too uncalled for. "No. Thank you," I say and go back to sit on the hood of my rental. I take my phone out of my back pocket to see if I can get a signal. I touch the screen and grimace. No such luck.

Trying to forget about the loud, big black truck sitting on the side of me, I keep my eyes glued to my phone, even after I hear the ping of the door alert, and a second later, the sound of boots crunching down on the rocks on the side of the road. I don't look up, but I can see his shadow on the ground.

"Well, you flagged me down, so you must need some help," he points out.

I look up, and again, my next breath hitches in my throat. Man, he is big. I mean, tall and big everywhere. From his big barrel chest and thick arms, stretching his faded black shirt, to his big hands.

I have to crane my neck to look him in the face, and what a handsome face it is. He takes his hat off, and I'm struck dumb by how beautiful he really is.

Judging from his thick crop of unruly, thick, curly hair, his stark-gray eyes, his high cheekbones, and a nose that looks like it's been broken, I can say that this cowboy is beautiful and they're made big in Montana.

"Quint, at your service, ma'am," he says with a nod before sliding his hat back on. "I do apologize for my rudeness. I was in a hurry. Do you need any assistance?"

I'm hot and lost, sure, but that hasn't made me rude. I straighten to my full height and say, "I need directions, if you please, to the Sawyer Ranch. Have you heard of it?" I ask, praying that he has. I don't know how big or well-known this ranch is.

He smiles again, showing perfectly straight, white teeth. Then he tilts his head slightly to the side and says, "You can look all around you, and you'll be on Sawyer land."

Startled, I turn in a full circle until I'm right back where I was, staring at him again. "Are you serious? I've been driving over an hour, lost, but I've been where I needed to be all along?"

He rests his hands on his narrow hips. "Yes, ma'am. Can I ask what business you have at the Sawyers'?"

Now, I appreciate his help, but I still don't know this man or his relationship with my aunt's employer.

"None of your business." I didn't mean for it to sound mean, but when he steps closer into my space, he's kind of intimidating. So, I smile and ask, "If you know in what direction the road is that leads to the main property, can you just tell me if it's ahead of me or behind me? I can find my way from there."

"Well, you haven't found your way so far, and you're right on Sawyer land," he reminds me with a sly grin.

I was raised with the idea that kindness to everyone and manners are up there with the Word. But both my manners and kindness seemed to blow away like that paper map that flew out of my hands the second he took off his hat.

"Look here, *Mr. Cowboy*, it's evident that I'm not from around these *parts*. I lost my way because my GPS isn't working and I have no cell phone signal, so give me a break and use one of your thick fingers to show me which direction I need to go to get to the ranch, please," I say with all the sarcasm I can muster.

The stunned look on his face is priceless; his wide eyes tell me he's never been talked to like that before. So, I step back and wait for a blowout, preparing to argue on the side of the road with this big cowboy.

Instead, he doesn't move. That gawking expression seems glued to his face. Finally, he looks me up and down and nods. "Go back about thirty miles. There's a sign that was knocked down from the

spring storm that rolled through here about a month ago. Turn left up that road, you'll hit the main ranch. Go too far up that road, and you'll drive into Canada."

I pray he didn't see my heavy exhale. "Thank you. I appreciate your help. And I'm sorry for my rudeness," I say and step back, open my car door, and get in. I turn the ignition, back up, and do a U-turn in the middle of the road.

I look in my side-view mirror and see the cowboy, still standing near the rear of his truck with one hand on the tailgate and the other in his front jean pocket, watching me speed down the road. If I never see him again... Well, I just hope I don't because I can do without good-looking, rude cowboys.

