

Home Is Where the Heart Is

Chapter One

CJ Beck forced herself out of the nightmare of desert heat and blood and opened her eyes.

Moonlight bounced off the snow outside and lit her childhood bedroom with the cold glow of a Montana winter. Even under piles of quilts, she shivered. Thinned by years in the Middle East, her system could no longer handle Rocky Mountain temperatures. Only the dry air was familiar.

She lay still for a few minutes, scanning the walls of the room that reminded her of someone she used to know. Framed photographs threw shadows—photos she'd taken of every animal on the ranch before she'd fled the pain after high school graduation. In the last two decades, she'd schooled herself enough that the hurt no longer made its way past the steel walls of her will.

She threw back the covers. Chamomile tea and a sweet would help her drift back to sleep, maybe even one without dreams. Sliding her feet into fur-lined slippers, she pulled on a heavy flannel robe and left her haven on the upstairs floor. Out of habit she tiptoed past her brothers' rooms, even though they were empty now. Jarod had taken over the guest suite downstairs, leaving the master bedroom bare. Dylan had his own cabin on the ranch, full of canvas and paint. Kaiden yanked oil from the ground somewhere in Wyoming, and Cameron was in the same desert hellhole she'd just left.

She padded into the kitchen. God bless Birdie. The housekeeper had left a full kettle of water on the stove, teabags, cup, and spoon to the side. CJ lifted the cookie jar lid without a sound—an art practiced from the time she was nine.

As the water heated, she lost herself in the moonlit Rocky Mountain Front marching south, snowy peaks etched with granite lines. She used to know them all by heart. Her fingers traced the peaks on the cold glass. If she could bear to pick up her camera again, the moonlight-outlined shapes would make an eerie picture.

But the bag full of lenses and camera bodies that had been permanently attached to her for decades was no longer in her reach. She'd packed it away when she'd returned to the ranch.

She didn't belong here. Not anymore. Jarod had made sure she knew the ranch ran fine without her. Dylan was kind in his vague kind of way. Birdie fussed, but she didn't seem to know what to do with the woman living upstairs.

Other than to leave out tea and cookies at night.

CJ smiled. When all else failed a western woman, she baked.

Why couldn't she wrap herself in the cocoon of Birdie's love like she had when her mother had gotten sick?

Because at thirty-five she was all grown up. What a joke that had turned out to be. But it meant she had to kick her own self in the butt and get on the horse again—no one else was going to help her.

Tomorrow. She'd call the bureau chief tomorrow—get some kind of estimate as to when

they'd let her return to work. She hadn't been injured, not physically, anyway. How long could they keep her on bereavement leave?

Her mind returned to the desert, and she barely tasted the bite of ginger in the molasses cookie she dunked into the tea before pushing it into her mouth. She needed to get past her phobia about the camera and get back to work—it was important. People needed to know the demons loose in the world, and she needed to tell them in the only way she knew how—with her pictures. Some said she was cold-blooded, but it wasn't true. It was only the face she showed the world.

The pictures of ordinary life—kids laughing, men dancing, and women doing embroidery work as they gossiped—no one ever saw those. No one ever would. They were her proof that she still had a soul, even though the last thing she'd done before her husband was killed was to tear at his flesh with words.

All that was behind her. She'd learned her lesson—finally. Men couldn't be trusted. Her father's betrayal hadn't done it. Nor had a broken heart brought on by her high school boyfriend. Nope. It had taken the third affair by her husband of five years for her to finally get the message.

But she was strong. She'd survived all that crap. If she had to walk alone, so be it.

She placed the cup in the sink gently, so not to wake Birdie, who slept in the spacious set of rooms behind the kitchen. Then she slipped back upstairs.

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The sun was well up when CJ rose the next morning. She sighed with relief. No more dreams had haunted her through the night.

The aroma of fried bacon tickled her nose. Sliding her phone from the nightstand, she checked the time. After nine, which meant it was coming up on noon in New York. May as well get the call done before facing the family. Maybe her brothers would be done eating by then so she didn't have to make conversation. Dylan was okay, but in the week since she'd been here, the amount of words Jarod had spoken to her wouldn't fit in a grain pail.

They'd been close. Once. Even though he was younger, he'd always looked out for her, even breaking off a long friendship with Nick Sturgis after her boyfriend had dumped her for a California beauty queen. But after their mother passed, they'd both retreated into their emotional corners.

Couldn't be helped now. She'd be here a few weeks, get her next assignment, and then head back to her real life.

Max picked up on the third ring.

"Gearheard here."

"It's me. CJ," she said.

"Oh, hi. How are the wilds of Montana? Got snow?"

"Of course we have snow. It's January. Hell, even New York probably has snow."

"Yeah." He went silent.

"So I was wondering ... when can I get my next assignment?" She pulled her knees up to her chin and wrapped her arms around them.

Max cleared his throat, and her shoulders tensed.

"About that. You've been in a war zone somewhere for the last ten years or so. That's tough on anyone, especially a woman. You need a break."

"I'm as tough as any man."

"Yeah. And I've seen guys crack, too. It's not pretty."

"I'm fine."

"You saw your husband's head blown apart by a sniper's bullet. You are anything *but* fine."

"It's the life we chose to live," she said. "We knew the risks." Although lately, the risks had increased. Instead of only being accidental victims, journalists were becoming targets in their own right.

Had that been what had happened to Ben? Or was it just a case of wrong place and wrong time to indulge in an after-dinner cigarette? Of course, she'd been the one to drive him to need that smoke.

"I know." Max was quiet again. "But it's still too soon to send you back. You need to take a rest—heal. Then maybe an assignment here in the States. Ease your way into it."

"Here? I'd be bored out of my mind. Nothing's going on."

"There's plenty going on," he said. "Not every bad guy is overseas. We've got homegrown ones right here."

"Please," she said, desperation creeping into her voice. "I can't stay here. I'll die of boredom."

"Look," he said, "the only way I'm sending you anywhere is if you get a clean bill of health from a psychiatrist. And not just any psychiatrist. I want one who understands the trauma of war. You've got an air base near you, don't you?"

"Great Falls. About an hour." Whatever it took. She'd make an appointment, convince the doctor she was fine, and get back to her life. There was no other way. Life was a series of either/or choices and her first one had been to leave Choteau, Montana, as far behind as she could. It was still the right decision.

"Good. Find a psychiatrist in Great Falls. Go see him. Have him send a report to our office on your fitness to go back into a war zone. Then we'll see."

She opened her mouth to protest, but shut it. She'd fight that battle when she had to.

"Yes, sir," she mocked, not quite able to keep her displeasure at bay.

"I know you're not happy about this." He was silent for moment. "Look, CJ, I was worried about you even before this happened. You and Ben were playing too fast and loose with life, as if the bill wasn't ever going to come due. You need some perspective. I went to the Rockies when I was in my twenties. If any place can heal you, that's it. Get to know your family again. Who knows? Maybe you'll like it there. Look. I've got a meeting. Take care of yourself. Talk soon."

With that, he was gone.

Someone rapped on her door and cracked it ajar.

Dylan.

"Birdie said if you don't get downstairs, you'll have to eat cold cereal. She's not letting you touch her pans."

"I learned how to cook. I only burned things when I was a teenager."

"Birdie doesn't even let *me* cook, and I'm all grown up with a cabin and my own fridge and everything."

"Then how come you're always over here for breakfast?"

"I'm lazy?" He grinned, his even, white teeth highlighting the winter tan on his face. His black hair fell in an unkempt artistic pattern around his gray eyes. Her brother was a handsome dude.

"How come no one's snatched you up?" she asked.

"Well" — he pushed open the door and perched at the end of the bed like he'd done when they were kids — "it seems no one will have me. My prospects aren't good." Dylan had always phrased things like he lived in the 1800s.

"Not selling any paintings?"

He shook his head. "I sold a passel, but then the economy tanked, some of the rich California wannabe ranchers headed home, and that was that. I'm stuck working here with Jarod while the rest of you gallivant around the world." The words may have sounded bitter, but Dylan said them with a mock seriousness meant to be funny. At least she hoped it was.

"You could do something else," she said.

"I wouldn't know how," he said.

"Yeah. Got it." Ever since she could remember, Dylan had been daubing paint on paper. After Dad died, he'd be gone as often as he could, a makeshift field easel strapped behind the saddle of his favorite horse. She and her second brother had been cut from the same cloth — dreamers who saw the world through different eyes. A total contrast to the other three boys — hardheaded realists, all of them.

"At some point, someone has to come waltzing through town looking for an unsuccessful painter and part-time ranch hand. I have faith."

She smiled.

"What about Jarod?" she asked. "Think he'll ever find someone?"

"He says he'll start looking when he has the ranch under control."

"Which means never."

"Which means never." He glanced over at her. "I'd hoped when you got married, he'd be able to move on, but ..." He splayed his hands and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm sorry about Ben. How are you doing?" he asked, leaning toward her.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said.

"You coming?" Birdie yelled up the stairs.

"C'mon, sis. Put on a robe and get downstairs or Birdie'll have a cow." He got up, pausing at the door. "It's good to have you home again."

She stared at the open door for a few seconds then swung her legs out. Her feet hit the rough wooden floor.

Cold. Everything about this damn state was cold in winter.

Her feet quickly found the slippers she'd left behind when she'd gone overseas and threw on a quilted robe. The slippers' flattened fleece was still warm, and the extra layer kept out the chill — barely. Even though her dad had redone the upstairs heating several times, it sweltered in the summer and froze in the winter. The walls really needed to be ripped down and

insulated.

Jarod probably didn't have the money for that, and since no one had been living upstairs til she'd returned, there was no need. When they were kids, they'd shut the door to the stairway after they'd gotten up, and lived in the spacious ... and warm ... first floor during the winter months.

"About time," Birdie said when she entered the kitchen. She pulled a plate from the oven and placed it on the table: fresh scrambled eggs from the hens out back, bacon no doubt purchased from one of the traveling Hutterite trucks, and homemade biscuits.

"You're going to make me fat," CJ declared.

"You need some weight on those bones," the housekeeper declared. "Now sit down and get out of the way so I can get some baking done. If I don't attend to those boys' sweet teeth, they are grumpy as two-year-olds without naps."

"Thanks," CJ said as she slipped into the chair closest to the wall and picked up the coffee mug Birdie slid toward her. Coffee and a toasted pita, perhaps with a bit of lamb, had been her standard breakfast fare for years, often with the secondhand smoke her husband gave off as he took his version of the morning meal.

Familiar food was a relief. She dug into the yellow eggs—so much richer than the pale-yoked versions they'd served in overseas eating establishments that catered to Americans. She savored the meal as she watched Birdie perform the same routine CJ remembered from her teenage years.

The housekeeper had come to them the year her mother was diagnosed with cancer, a reference from someone who knew someone. It was supposed to be temporary; her mother was going to get better, for sure, but that had never happened and Birdie stayed on, dispensing food and fierce compassion from her lair in the kitchen.

CJ's throat tightened with affection for the housekeeper.

Not good.

Emotions left a woman vulnerable. Better not to show them.

Best not to have them at all.

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"I'm sorry, but late tomorrow morning is all he has," the receptionist told her an hour later. "The day after, he's leaving for Florida or someplace like that, and he won't be back until mid-February."

"I'll take it," CJ said, hoping the weather would hold. Snowstorms were unpredictable in January. She got directions and headed back down to the kitchen. May as well pick up anything Birdie needed while she was in the city. Probably some warmer clothes, too. If the doctor was going to be gone for a month, thirty days from now was going to be the earliest she could get out of here. Unless she could convince him during their first meeting that she was fine.

Which she was. All of this fuss was about nothing.

"I have to go to Great Falls tomorrow," she announced as she came into the kitchen. Rows of cooling oatmeal cookies lay on racks on the counters. She picked one up.

"I saw that," Birdie said as she took another tray out of the oven.

“How could you?”

“Same way I did when you were a kid.” She put the tray on the top of the stove and shut the oven door. “Got eyes in the back of my head.”

“I believe it,” CJ said with a smile. She looked around. “How many are you making? There must be two dozen already.”

“Your brothers would inhale those within a few days—even less now that you’re home.”

CJ sank her teeth into warm, buttery goodness. “Thanks for leaving the tea things out last night.”

“Hope you enjoyed the cookie as well.”

The housekeeper missed nothing.

“I just hope I get up some morning and it’s all still sitting there,” Birdie said.

“Why’s that?”

“Because then I’d know you were sleeping through the night again.”

That miracle was probably never going to occur again in her life. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d slept through without waking up in the early hours of the morning. “Need anything in Great Falls?” She took a step toward one of the racks.

“Don’t even try.” Birdie shifted cookies from the sheet to the rack. “Let me think on that. Go ask Jarod. I know he’s been muttering about pipes and fittings. Something froze in the barn and broke a thingamajig.”

CJ chuckled.

Birdie shrugged and smiled. “Go. Get out of my kitchen.” She grabbed two cookies. “And take these to the boys.” She plucked one more and handed it to CJ. “And one for the delivery girl.”

Even though they were into their thirties, her brothers would always be “the boys” and she “the girl” to their surrogate mother. The youngest hadn’t even made it into his teens when she’d arrived.

“Sure, Birdie.” CJ headed to the mudroom off the kitchen. Setting the cookies on the dryer, she began to bundle up for the short trip across to the barn. One of her brother’s jackets—probably Kaiden’s—kinda fit. Pair that with gloves she’d last worn as a teen that she’d found in a drawer upstairs and she’d be warm enough. Her desert boots worked fine even in the snow.

She crunched across the dirt-churned snow to the classic western barn—its boards weathered and worn, replacement wood standing out in contrast. Working ranches didn’t have time for pretty maintenance jobs like the “gentleman” ranchers who’d flocked in from Texas and California and driven up land prices so regular folk had a hard time finding places to live.

Not her problem to solve. There were worse conditions elsewhere—mothers watching their children starve, men killing each other over the best way to interpret a religious text. It was madness.

“Hey, Jarod,” she called out as she entered the dim light of the barn. She blinked a few times to help her eyes adjust.

She hadn’t been in here since she’d gotten back. Jarod had made her feel like the barn was off limits. It hadn’t changed that much. The high roof corner cobwebs had thickened and the floor more stained, but the disassembled machinery looked like it was in the same pieces as when she’d left. A pile of pipes lay at one end of the floor. To the other side, a rubber-covered

cement aisle was lined with horse stalls. One of the animals had been a chewer, judging from the top rail of the stall.

"Shut the darn door!" A muffled voice came from somewhere under a tractor.

She pulled the door tight, which the wind had pushed open, and latched it.

"Jarod?" she shouted again. "Birdie said you might need something from Great Falls."

Metal clanged against metal, and a set of blue-jeaned legs morphed into her brother—her *glaring* brother.

"What do you want?" he said.

"Whoa. What crawled up *your* ass?"

Jarod shook his head. "You always did have a potty mouth after you went to school, but I swear it's gotten worse."

"War zone'll pretty much do that to you. Sorry." Church-going Jarod had always disliked any kind of swearing. He was already uncomfortable enough around her; she didn't need to add to his unease.

"So ..." he said, his tone more measured this time. "What do you want?"

"I have to go to Great Falls tomorrow," she said. "I need to see someone—just some hoops I need to jump through before they let me return to work. Birdie said you might need some things—pipes?"

Jarod looked her up and down. "Sure you can handle it?"

"I grew up here. And I've spent the last bunch of years fending for myself in difficult circumstances. I can handle it." She gazed steadily at her brother, a contest of wills like they'd had when they were teens. Even though she was a year his senior, he'd always been messing with her life.

He hadn't talked to her for days after she told him she was leaving for college in Kentucky.

"Okay," he said. "I'll make out a list. You can get it at North 40. They've got pretty much everything." He looked at her hands. "Get some gloves, too. Those are about as worthless a bathing suit in January."

"Uh-huh." She handed him the cookies. "They're from Birdie. She's baking up a storm. It's amazing you guys aren't rolling around the ranch," she added with a smile.

"She's upped her game since you came home. Says you're too skinny."

"So she's mentioned. One of those is for Dylan."

Jarod stared at the cookie in his hand. "Dylan's out feeding cattle. He won't be back for a while." He grinned. "I won't tell if you won't tell."

"Birdie will tell."

"I'll just have to fess up then." He bit into the cookie.

"Just get me the list by tonight," she said. "I want get started early tomorrow." She turned to head back to the house.

"You don't have to leave," he said.

"The barn or the ranch?" She looked at him over her shoulder.

"The ranch. It's your home as much as mine or the rest of us."

She smiled. It was the nicest thing he'd said to her since she'd been back. But the statement was dead wrong. This wasn't her home. Not anymore. No place was home for someone like her.

"Thanks. But, yeah, I do." She opened the door and made sure she latched it behind her

before plodding back to the house.

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