

ONE

IT ALL HAPPENED in a matter of seconds.

And every one of those seconds felt like a year.

Mace Carson had been cruising along behind the unfamiliar car up ahead ever since he'd cleared the city limits of Mustang Creek a few minutes before, when the other rig suddenly fishtailed on the rain-slick pavement and spun a full 360. The slow-motion spin, weirdly graceful, and at the same time potentially deadly, was sickening to watch.

He eased his truck to the side of the road, jammed down the emergency brake pedal, then groped for his cell phone and muttered an expletive, watching the situation unfold, helpless to intervene as the vehicle shot toward the steep slope on the opposite shoulder, where there were no guardrails. The drop was nearly fifty feet, by his calculations, with no trees or boulders to break the fall.

Not that either would have been ideal, any way you looked at it.

With a second curse, he was out of the truck and running to do what he could, heedless of the pounding rain, phone in hand, thumb on the button that would speed-dial 911.

Meanwhile, the car came to a precarious stop at the edge, teetered and then slipped again, winding up at a precarious angle, half on the road, half off, passenger-side down. The mud, a few inches deep and slick as snot, offered the briefest purchase.

Mace didn't rattle easily, but in those moments, his heart zoomed into his throat. He was close enough now to glimpse the driver, a woman, pale and wide-eyed with shock, leaning hard into the car door, as if she hoped to waft right through the metal to the safety of solid ground.

"Don't move!" he said, never knowing if he'd shouted the words or simply mouthed them, dropping the phone to the ground because he was going to need both hands to get her out before the mud gave way and sent her *and* the car tumbling downhill, ass over teakettle.

He saw her nod. Stiffen.

He gripped the door handle, never taking his eyes off her face, realized instantly that the locks were still engaged.

"Shift into Park," he told the woman, giving silent thanks that the air bags hadn't deployed. The mechanisms were sensitive; in some cars, especially newer models, no collision was required. An abrupt change of direction could trigger them. "And then unfasten your seat belt. Slow and easy, now—no sudden moves."

Another nod from her. He was either yelling or she could read lips, because she did what he'd told her to do. With a flash of relief, he heard the locks release.

The car slid a few inches farther down the hill.

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BRACING HIS FEET, Mace pulled at the door. Gravity worked against him, but he'd bucked a lot of bales in his time, dug a lot of postholes and like any man who did hard physical work, he was strong.

A wedge of space opened between them.

"You're gonna have to get out on your own," he told the woman, who was trembling so badly her teeth chattered. His voice sounded strangely calm, at least to him, considering the circumstances. "For obvious reasons, I can't let go of this door long enough to give you a hand."

She slithered through the gap as if boneless, landing on her hands and knees at Mace's feet.

When he let go of the handle a heartbeat later, the door slammed shut with an impact that set the rig in motion. As he helped the woman up from the ground, the car lurched violently, tipped onto its side and rolled over, then

over again and again, gaining momentum with every flip, finally landing with an echoing crash on its top, square in the middle of the creek below.

Still gripping the shuddering stranger by both arms, Mace closed his eyes briefly, comparing what might have happened with what actually had. This was one lucky lady, whoever she was.

In the aftermath of the adrenaline rush, Mace felt a little shaky himself, but he quickly recovered. He needed to focus on what, if anything, still needed to be done; while the woman appeared to be in one piece, she could be in shock, or she might have hit her head at some point and gotten a concussion. Or suffered internal injuries of some kind.

Growing up rough-and-tumble, like any ranch kid, and competing in his share of rodeos, he knew some injuries didn't show on the outside, the way cuts and bruises did. Not immediately, anyhow.

That made his fight-or-flight response spike again, and he took a moment to breathe his way through, line up his thoughts.

Satisfied that the lady was still upright and her eyes hadn't rolled back or anything, he looked down the hillside.

He'd half expected the car to explode into flames when it hit bottom, rain or no rain, but it just lay there, so coated in mud that its color, rental-beige as he recalled, was indiscernible now. With all four wheels turning slowly, the rig reminded Mace of a turtle on its back, kicking in an effort to right itself.

"Holy shit," he said, exhaling the words.

The woman looked up at him, rain-soaked, still pale, but with a quiver of amusement playing at the corners of her mouth. "You can say that again," she replied. "But please don't."

He gave a short, hoarse burst of laughter at that. She was shaking, and he wasn't entirely sure she wouldn't buckle to the ground if he loosened his grip, but she had grit, no doubt about it. Considering what she'd just been through, he wouldn't have considered hysterical sobs, a good old-fashioned fainting spell or a spate of violent retching out of line.

"Are you hurt?" He wished he'd asked the obvious question sooner, instead of just thinking about it.

She shook her head. Her hair, hanging in dripping tendrils, not quite long enough to touch her shoulders, was some shade of blond. Her eyes, still huge, were a remarkable shade of green, flecked with gold. "I'll be fine," she assured him, raising her voice to be heard over the continuing downpour. "Thanks to you."

"Any pain? Numbness?" Mace asked, unconvinced.

"I have a few bumps and bruises," she answered, "but nothing hurts, and there's no numbness, either. I guess I'm shaken up, is all—that was a close one." She bit her lower lip before going on. "If you hadn't been here—"

She stopped, shook her head again and wiped her eyes with the back of one hand.

"I was, though," he said gently. "We'll get you checked out, just to be on the safe side."

Her response was a disjointed jumble of words, partial sentences. "The car—it's a rental—I'm not sure I signed up for the extra insurance."

"Let's worry about that later," he told her. "Right now, we're headed for the hospital."

"I really don't think I'm injured—" He held on to her arm with one hand while he bent to retrieve his phone from the asphalt. It looked a little the worse for wear, although it probably still worked just fine. "If it's all the same to you," he said lightly, "I'd rather hear that from a licensed medical professional."

She sighed.

"Plus, this rain isn't helping," he added, squiring her carefully toward his truck. It would've been faster to pick her up and carry her, but if she *was* hurt, it wouldn't do to jostle her around like a sack of feed.

They reached the truck, and he opened the passenger door, but before he could offer any assistance, she'd climbed onto the running board under her own power and then settled herself in the seat. For the briefest of moments, looking into her face, Mace had the impression that he knew this woman from somewhere.

"If I thought it would do me any good to argue," she said with a hint of a smile, "I'd repeat what I've been saying all along. I don't need to see a doctor. Besides, you've done enough already."

"You're at least partly right," Mace responded. "Arguing won't do a damn bit of good, and I only did what anybody else would have done, under the circumstances. As for not needing to see a doctor, well, that's debatable."

"Seriously. I'm absolutely certain that all I need is a hot bath, a couple of aspirin and some sleep. So if you'd just drop me off at my hotel—"

"Sure thing," Mace agreed amiably. "I'll do that—after the doc looks you over and says you're good to go."

"*I'm fine.*" She was certainly persistent, not to say stubborn, but this time, she'd met her match. He was as bullheaded as they came.

Mace shut the truck door without answering. Maybe she was right, and she really was okay, but he didn't intend to take the chance, and he was tired of standing there in the rain, yammering.

As soon as he was behind the wheel and under cover, the rain slowed to a drizzle.

It figured.

She was shivering, arms wrapped around her ribs, and staring bleakly through the rain-speckled windshield.

Mace cranked up the heat, glad he'd left the engine running earlier, and looked over at her. Tried for a grin and fell short. "Hey," he said gruffly, switching on the wipers to clear the windshield. "You're safe with me, if that's what you're worried about. I might be a stranger, but I'm also one of the good guys."

She glanced at him curiously. "But you're *not* a stranger."

So, he'd been right. This wasn't their first encounter.

Damned if he could recall where and when they'd crossed paths before, though. And that was odd, because even wet and bedraggled and more rattled than she probably thought she was, she wasn't the kind of woman a man forgot.

"I'm not?" he asked, checking the mirrors before making a wide turn and heading back toward Mustang Creek.

She sighed, rested her head against the side window. She sounded almost wistful when she responded. "You don't remember?"

"I know we've met someplace," he replied. "But that's all I've got at the moment."

There was a long, slightly forlorn pause. Another sigh. "Maybe we could talk about old times another day," she said at last, seeming to shrink into herself. "I'm so tired."

Normally, Mace wasn't the type to put things off, but he wasn't going to press for particulars. Not yet, anyhow.

"Just don't fall asleep," he said.

"Why not?" she asked with another sigh and a small yawn. "I've had a long, hard day."

"Because you might've hit your head."

She opened her mouth, obviously intending to protest, but then she must have thought better of it. Or maybe she was too exhausted to put up an argument.

"Thanks," she said. "For everything."

Mace acknowledged her words with a slight inclination of his head, keeping his eyes on the road. Several minutes passed before he broke the silence. "What happened back there?"

"I'm not sure," she replied, and her voice was slow, sleepy. "One minute, I was cruising along, looking for the turnoff to the resort. The next, I was hydroplaning. Maybe I blew a tire or something."

"You were speeding," he commented blandly.

She frowned. "Are you going to lecture me on road safety? Because I'm really not up for that just now."

He grinned. "Unfamiliar roads, heavy rain—"

"I was in a hurry."

"To do what?"

"To get to my hotel. As I said, I was ready for this day to be over."

The outskirts of Mustang Creek were in sight by then; the small regional hospital was on the far side of town, about ten minutes away. He wasn't given to cop fantasies, but at that moment he wished for a light bar and a siren.

"Another few seconds and your *life* might have been over."

"Thanks for that," she retorted with a new briskness Mace found reassuring, despite the tartness of her tone. "I might not have figured that out on my own—how I could've been killed, I mean."

Keep her talking, he thought. *If she's pissed off, oh, well. At least she's awake.*

Although she'd been slouching before, she suddenly sat bolt upright, making patting motions with her hands. "My purse," she said, her voice fretful. "It's still in the car."

Mace was always astonished by how dependent women were on their handbags, as if the things were a necessary part of their anatomy rather than an obvious burden. Something else to keep track of. "It isn't going anywhere," he said quietly and with a note of prudent caution.

Her eyes were big with alarm when she turned to look at him, and patches of pink pulsed impatiently in her cheeks. "My entire *life* is in that bag!" she cried. "And it's a Michael Kors, too."

A purse with a name, he thought, but he wasn't stupid enough to offer up the quip when she was clearly riled. Keeping her awake was one thing; causing her to blow a brain-gasket was another.

"I'll make sure you get it back."

"Suppose it's underwater? My phone—my wallet—do you *know* how much a designer bag costs? And what about my laptop? My clothes?"

"I guess that's a possibility," Mace observed casually, "given the laws of gravity and everything."

"How can you be so calm?" she asked, fuming. Then she answered her own question. "I'll *tell* you how. It isn't *your* purse!"

"You have me there," he admitted, not unsympathetically. "I don't own one, as it happens. Reckon if I did, though, I'd keep that fact to myself."

Her cheeks flared brighter, but a giggle escaped. "This is serious," she said.

Mace shook his head. "No, ma'am," he said, navigating the familiar streets of his hometown. "Car wrecks are serious. Concussions and busted spleens are serious. But a bag named Michael winding up in a creek? Not so much."

"I should call the car rental company," she said, apparently not one for segues.

Mace got his cell from his shirt pocket and handed it over. "If that'll make you feel better, have at it," he said.

She took the phone, then simply stared down at the screen, blinking. "I don't know their number. The contract is in the glove compartment, possibly submerged."

"Plenty of time to get in touch with them," Mace said. They were almost through Mustang Creek; the turn for the hospital would be coming up in a minute or so. "Might be a good idea to call your family, however." When she didn't answer right away, he offered suggestions—with an agenda. "Your folks? Husband? Boyfriend?"

She huffed out a frustrated breath. "My parents are on a cruise through the Greek Islands," she said. He caught the sidelong look she threw his way, although he was still gazing straight ahead, slowing for the turnoff. "And I don't have a husband *or* a boyfriend, for your information." A few seconds passed. "Do you?"

He laughed, swinging onto the paved stretch leading to the hospital. "Do I have a husband or a boyfriend?"

She worked up a good glare, but it fizzled into a wobbly smile before they reached the parking lot near the entrance to the emergency room. "I was joking," she said.

"I laughed, didn't I?" Mace parked the truck, shut off the engine, then came around to her side to open the door and help her down. This time, she let him, and as soon as her feet touched the ground, she swayed and put a hand to her forehead.

Mace slipped an arm around her waist, supporting her. Once again, he considered carrying her; once again, he dismissed the idea as too risky.

"I'm just a little dizzy," she murmured as they entered the well-lighted reception area. "No big deal."

Ellie Simmons was behind the desk, and she stood immediately. She and Mace had gone to school together.

"I don't have my ID or my insurance card," said the woman whose name Mace suddenly realized he didn't know.

"She was in an accident," he told Ellie, relieved by his friend's affable competence. "South of town."

Ellie rounded the long desk and conjured up a wheelchair, eased the patient into the seat. "What about you, Mace?" she asked. "You hurting anywhere?"

Mace shoved a hand through his wet hair. Wet as he and his companion were, he figured they might have passed for shipwreck survivors if there'd been an ocean within a thousand miles. "I just happened along," he said.

"I do have insurance," the wheelchair occupant piped up.

"We'll get to the paperwork in good time," Ellie said, already wheeling the new arrival away from Mace toward an examination room. She bent her head, addressing the patient. "What's your name, honey?"

The passenger hesitated long enough to prompt an exchange of glances between Ellie and Mace. Ellie raised an eyebrow at him in silent question.

Mace shrugged. "I have no idea."

"Kelly," the woman in the wheelchair said in the tone of someone experiencing a revelation. "Kelly Wright."

"Well, Kelly Wright," Ellie said as they disappeared into the ER, "you're in luck. Dr. Draper is on duty tonight, and she's the best."

Mace watched until they were gone, suppressing an urge to follow, ask a lot of questions, make damn sure Sheila Draper ran all the right tests.

Whatever the right tests happened to be.

Since Ms. Wright still had his cell, he went to the pay phone, a near relic in this day and age, dug in his jeans pocket for coins and called his friend Spence Hogan, Mustang Creek's chief of police.

Spence took a while getting to the phone. When he did, he spoke in his usual brusque manner. "Hey, Mace," he said. "What's going on?"

Mace explained, none too succinctly.

"Sam Helgeson called it in five minutes ago," Spence said. "I've already got a squad car and a wrecker on the way." He paused. "You okay, buddy?"

"I'm fine," Mace said. Where had he heard *that* before?

"You sure? You sound pretty jumpy to me."

Mace gave a long sigh. "I'm sure," he said.

"Hold on a second," Spence muttered. "Deputy Brenner's on the radio. He's at the scene."

Mace waited. He heard some back and forth on Spence's end, although he couldn't make out what was said. He was too busy wondering what was going on with Kelly Wright back there in the exam room and, at the same time, rifling through his mental files, which—when it came to women, were considerable—in search of a connection.

He came up dry.

He'd probably known half a dozen Kellys in his time, gone to school with a few of them, dated one or two on the rodeo circuit, but the name Wright didn't ring a single bell.

Spence came back on the line. "You said there was only one woman in the car before it went over the bank, right? No other passengers?"

"Just her," Mace replied. "Doc Draper's checking her out now."

Spence released an audible breath.

"What?" Mace prompted, worried by Spence's hesitation.

"According to my deputy," Spence said, "he and the tow truck driver were taking some personal items out of the car when they smelled gas. They hightailed it uphill with whatever they'd managed to gather, and it's a good thing, because the rig burst into flames and then blew sky-high. Fire department's on the way, to make sure it doesn't spread. Thank God for this rain."

Mace squeezed his eyes shut, opened them again. "Christ," he breathed, the blaze as vivid in his mind as if he'd witnessed it. He thought how close he'd come to stopping by his favorite bar for a beer after his afternoon meeting with the guy who maintained his website, how he'd have lingered there awhile, shooting the shit with friends and neighbors, maybe playing a round or two of pool. If he hadn't remembered that Harry, the family's long-time cook and housekeeper, was serving her legendary sloppy joes for supper that night, if he'd thought there'd be leftovers once his two older brothers, Slater and Drake, ate their fill—

If.

Most likely, the Wright woman—Kelly—would've been trapped, unable to push open the driver's door, with the rig on a slant like that. She would have gone over the cliff along with her car and, if by some miracle she'd survived the rollovers without losing consciousness, burned to death.

He swore under his breath.

"Reckon this makes you a hero," Spence put in, gravely wry.

"I was there, that's all," Mace said. "Right time, right place. You would have done the same thing if you'd been there, and so would just about everybody else around here."

"Just about everybody," Spence noted with a very slight emphasis on the middle word.

Mace made no comment. Every town had its lightweights, and Mustang Creek was no exception, but that was beside the point. All that mattered now was that the Wright woman hadn't gone rolling down that hillside with the car. She'd walked away, still breathing, possibly in need of some patching up, but alive.

A shudder went through Mace, reminding him that his clothes were soaked through, clinging to his hide, clammy and cold. He was hungry, he was tired to the marrow of his bones and he was damn grateful that fate, so often fickle, had dealt Kelly Wright a decent hand.

"Mace?" Spence asked. "You still with me?"

"I'm here," he replied.

"I'm guessing there isn't a whole lot more you can do tonight. Might be best if you go on home."

"Soon as I know Kelly's all right, I'll do just that. She'll probably need a ride to the resort. That's where she's staying."

“Fair enough,” Spence agreed diplomatically. “I’m thinking the lady will be admitted for observation, though, and the kind of tests they’ll want to run can take hours. You really want to cool your heels in the waiting room for that long?”

Mace sighed. “She’s from out of town. Seems like somebody ought to hang around until they decide whether to keep her overnight or turn her loose.”

“Fine,” Spence conceded. “We’ll do what we can on our end.”

Mace found himself nodding, then realized his friend couldn’t see him. “Her name’s Kelly Wright, and the car was a rental, but she couldn’t say which company she used. That’s about all I can tell you, as of now.”

“Not to worry,” Spence said. “Mustang Creek PD works in mysterious ways its wonders to perform. Ask Ms. Wright to call me when she feels up to it, will you? There’ll be some paperwork, of course.”

“I’ll do that,” Mace answered. Goodbyes were exchanged, and the call ended.

Mace was pacing the floor when a young couple hurried through the main doors, looking anxious. The man carried a toddler, bundled in a blanket and whimpering.

Ellie appeared immediately, her smile wide and white and reassuring. She greeted the new arrivals, handed the woman a clipboard and led the trio to an exam room.

When she returned to the reception area, she returned Mace’s cell phone. “Kelly asked me to give you this.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Any news?”

Ellie shook her head. “Not yet,” she said, gently noncommittal. “Want some coffee?”

“No, thanks.” He was hyped up enough, he figured, without a caffeine buzz.

“How’s your night going?” he asked. He wasn’t a talker under normal circumstances, but the waiting was driving him crazy.

“Better than yours, I’d say,” Ellie replied with an understanding smile. By then, she was back at her station behind the reception desk. “So far, business has been pretty slow. Which, of course, is a good thing.”

Mace realized he was fresh out of sparkling conversation. He sat down in an orange plastic chair, opened an outdated copy of *Field & Stream*, read one paragraph of an article about trout fishing in Montana and gave up.

Another hour passed, during which an elderly woman was brought in with respiratory problems, and the young couple returned with a prescription and their child, now sound asleep, head resting on the man’s shoulder. Mace nodded in greeting, and the man nodded back.

Soon afterward, Sheila Draper came out, spotted Mace and smiled as she approached. She was a good-looking redhead with a figure that did great things for the blue scrubs she was wearing.

“Hey, Doc,” Mace said. Sheila had grown up on a neighboring ranch, and the two families were long-time friends.

“Hey, yourself,” Sheila responded. She carried an electronic tablet but didn’t consult it, and there was a twinkle in her bright green eyes. “You can rest easy, Sir Galahad,” she said. “Kelly isn’t seriously injured, just shaken up and a little dehydrated. I’m admitting her overnight, for observation and the appropriate fluids.”

Something unclenched inside Mace. He heaved a deep sigh. And even as the question took shape in his mind, he wondered why he needed to ask it. He’d done what he could for Kelly, and he knew she was in good hands, had been from the moment he’d brought her in.

He asked anyway. “Could I see her?”

Sheila shook her head regretfully, touched his arm. “Not tonight, Mace. I gave Kelly a sedative, and she’s on her way upstairs. I’m guessing she’ll be zonked before she gets to her room.” The rest went without saying—Kelly needed sleep, not visitors.

He nodded again, sighed again.

Then he thanked Sheila, said goodbye to Ellie and left for home.

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MACE CARSON DIDN’T remember her. Not quite, anyway.

That was okay for now, Kelly decided, rummy from the sedative she’d been given minutes before. She remembered well enough for both of them.

She closed her eyes against the bright overhead lights and the dizziness as she was wheeled, lying on a gurney, into an elevator, then down a long hallway. She flashed back, momentarily, to another hospital, another night, over a decade before.

The recollection made her want to curl into a fetal ball, but the medication and the IV needle lodged in her arm rendered any such movement impossible. Too much effort.

Another memory flooded her mind, soothed her. Mace had been with her that other time, too. He'd accompanied her to the hospital, holding her hand. He'd told her everything would be all right, that she was safe now, that nobody was going to hurt her. He'd promised to be there when the police came to question her, and he was as good as his word when she was discharged the following morning. He'd driven her to the police station, sat with her while two SVU detectives questioned her about the events of the night before, when, walking to her dorm, she'd been assaulted and nearly raped.

Mace, a student at the same California college, had heard the scuffle, hauled the man off Kelly and restrained him until the police arrived.

How could Mace have forgotten all that? Perhaps he made a habit of saving people. Did it happen so often that one incident blended into the next until it was all a blur?

She giggled at the thought.

Tomorrow, or maybe the next day, she would see Mace again. If he still didn't recall their first meeting, she'd just have to refresh his memory, though that wasn't her first priority.

She'd come to Mustang Creek to do business with the man, after all, not to renew their old—and brief—acquaintance. Great Grapes International, the company she worked for, wanted to establish a partnership with Mountain Winery, something they'd done successfully with other vintners.

Big of them, Kelly thought. As far as she could tell, the board members had zero doubt that everything would go their way; their confidence bordered on outright arrogance, in her opinion. She didn't know much about Mace Carson as a person, after one dramatic encounter and a few brief meetings during her attacker's trial, but recent online research had filled in a lot of gaps.

Carson wasn't likely to be swayed by the money GGI was prepared to offer, as the Carsons were among the wealthiest families in Wyoming. Mace's company appeared to be a labor of love, rather than a source of income; the winery was debt-free, and the net profits went to various charities.

Kelly had explained these things to upper management, of course, or tried to, anyway. And she had gotten exactly nowhere.

Failure wasn't an option, her boss, Dina, had informed her cheerfully. If GGI had a motto, it would be Rah-rah-rah.

Thinking about it, Kelly sighed. She knew the power of a positive mind-set, especially after years of company-sponsored "you can do this!" seminars, ranging from standard motivational talks and "trust exercises," like depending on someone to catch her when she fell backward, to trekking barefoot over beds of red-hot coals.

She'd done all those things and, yes, it was true—the experience of walking on burning embers *did* cast a new light on what was possible.

It was *also* true, however, that no amount of positivity or fearlessness or persistence was going to sway someone who didn't want to be swayed. Mace Carson, she was all but certain, fell into this category. He liked his independence far too much...

Kelly was in over her head this time, and she knew it, but she had too much riding on this deal to give up without even trying. She was up for a promotion of life-changing proportions, with some heavy-duty perks, such as profit sharing and stock options, access to company jets, opportunities to work overseas, six-figure bonuses and more than double her present salary.

The equation was a simple one: no deal, no promotion.

Lasso the moon, or crash and burn.

Bruised and scraped, dazed by pain meds and good old-fashioned exhaustion now that the adrenaline rush had subsided, Kelly closed her eyes. Sighed again.

She could worry, or she could sleep.

She chose the latter.