

Chapter One

Storm clouds silhouetted thirty-seven-year-old Jake Holloway in the saddle, unmoving and silent, near the edge of a deep ravine. The cry of an eagle overhead and a jackrabbit scampering in the distance went unnoticed.

A rumble of thunder pierced the gloomy silence, and the horse whinnied softly.

Saddle leather creaked as Jake shifted his muscular six-two frame to assess the approaching storm before returning his gaze to the chasm below, thoughts focused on the past. His chestnut mare, Misty, shook her head and snorted as though complaining about this ritual immersion in self-blame.

How many times had he sat here? How many *I should haves*, and *I'm sorrys* clogged his throat. "Too damn many," he muttered as another roll of thunder interrupted the quiet. "Dammit," he barked at last and tugged on the reins, turning Misty toward the ranch, the yawning abyss of unanswered questions as troubling today as they were four years ago.

They'd argued that morning. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time they hadn't started the day with angry words. But that day began differently.

Jake jerked Misty to a stop and let the past consume him because the pain was better than nothing at all.

Forever etched into his brain, that fateful day remained a vivid memory.

A plate of scrambled eggs and bacon had greeted him when he entered the kitchen. Mary was busy at the stove, wearing her usual attire of black leggings and a long, flowy top. A dark blue bandana secured those long, nut-brown curls he loved into a low ponytail at the back of her neck. Several wayward locks framed an ageless face. Emerald eyes glistened when she offered him a nervous glance. Suddenly, the woman he fell in love with at sixteen stood before him.

Pain and regret vied for dominance as the morning continued to play out in his mind.

Mary had placed a mug of coffee beside his plate and then sat across from him.

“You’re not eating?” he’d asked.

She’d shaken her head and took a deep breath. “We need to talk.”

Something in her voice made him pause as he scooped a bite of eggs. “Okay.” He motioned with his empty fork. “About what?”

She spun the salt shaker on the table, eyes downcast. “I think it’s safe to say things haven’t been...the same between us for some time.”

“You mean because you’ve slept in the guest room the last three months, and we—”

“I’m tired of fighting,” she interrupted softly. “I can’t...” She inhaled deeply. “I don’t...”

The air around them sizzled with tension as he put down his fork and swiped his mouth with a napkin. “Don’t what?”

She inhaled again. “I don’t...”

His heart rate jumped, and the instant rush of blood swooshed in his ears. Silent, his chest tightened, and he barely breathed. He didn’t need a psychic to tell him disaster loomed like a hidden predator, ready to pounce.

The steady tick of the wall clock highlighted the uneasy silence.

Mary sighed and shook her head sadly. “I can’t—I won’t pretend anymore, Jake.” She straightened her shoulders and faced him. “I want a divorce.”

His heart stopped, then raced onward. *What? She can’t mean that.*

The swirling in his ears intensified, and his vision blurred as he tried to make sense of the words circling his head like angry bees. *She wants a divorce.*

“There’s someone else.”

It took a moment for his brain to untangle the words. A shocked heartbeat collided against his chest before anger, white-hot and ferocious, blindsided him. “Who?”

She flinched but didn’t look away. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Like hell!” He rapped his knuckles on the table. “Who is he?”

Back stiff, she didn’t break eye contact. “People change, Jake. We aren’t the same people anymore. It’s time to accept it and move on.”

He shoved his chair back so hard it toppled over. “Seems to me you’ve already done that.” He stomped to the sink and gripped the counter.

“You’re angry, I—”

“No shit,” he barked as he faced her. *And I’m devastated by your betrayal.*

Anger clashed with hurt as he paced in front of the sink. Finally, he righted the chair and clutched the back until his knuckles turned white. Gaze downcast, he slowly shook his head as reality hit home. *She wants a divorce.*

Okay, so things were a little strained lately, but he couldn’t see any reason for such drastic action. *Whatever their problems were, they loved each other once; they could again. Right?*

Heartbroken, he faced her. “Why, Mary? Why?”

Eyes averted, she continued to fiddle with the salt shaker. “We’re not the same people anymore, Jake.” Mossy green eyes glistened with unshed tears when she met his gaze. “We want different things now, have different needs.”

He blew out a grief-stricken breath and ran long fingers through dark, unruly hair. He paused a moment, then gripped the chair again. "Is it what I said about wanting a kid? Is that it?" He drank in a deep breath. "I won't push anymore. I promise. I want a child, but I can wait until you're ready."

Her eyes flicked left and right before reconnecting with his. "We both know this ranch is all you've ever wanted, Jake. Or needed. But I need more." She stiffened her back. "I don't love you, Jake."

Stunned silent by the declaration, her words bounced inside his head like pinballs. *I don't love you.*

Chest so tight he could barely breathe, he stared. "You don't mean that, Mary. You can't."

A single tear rolled down her cheek. "I'm truly sorry, Jake. I don't want to hurt you."

"How the hell can seeing someone behind my back not hurt me?"

She hesitated, then squared her shoulders and stood. "I'm going to say goodbye to Honey Bear, and then I'm leaving." She turned for the door and stopped. "Please don't be here...for both our sakes."

Anguish produced a bitter taste in his mouth and forced out words better left unsaid. "Fine. Go." Hands fisted at his side, he stepped back, the urge to shake some sense into her almost too strong to resist.

Mary hesitated, then whispered, "I'm so sorry," before she bolted out the door in tears.

Speechless, Jake watched her leave, hands clenched so tight they throbbed as he struggled to absorb her announcement.

He went to the sink and splashed his face with cold water, ignoring the droplets dripping down his shirt. *How do you fall out of love with someone you've been with since your teens?*

He splashed his face again, but the water did nothing to alleviate the soul-crushing pain eating him alive.

She wants a divorce.

She doesn't love me.

Emotions in turmoil, he tried to pinpoint when things got so far off track, but nothing specific came to mind. More than likely, many petty things morphed into bigger ones, but he was too busy with the ranch to notice.

Maybe it was the vacation he postponed last summer. One of the hottest on record, temperatures passed triple digits daily. He spent every waking hour ensuring the stock survived. He succeeded in saving them, but did he lose Mary in the process?

We just need to talk things through. We can work it out.

With that thought in mind, he stepped off the porch and headed for the barn in time to see her exit astride her favorite mare, Honey Bear. When she passed the edge of the barn, she kicked the horse into a run.

What happened next replayed in his mind like a slow-motion reel. Honey's right front leg buckled when she stepped into a hole near the gate, and she went down, throwing Mary to the ground.

Blood froze in his veins when he saw land on the big iron ore rock resting against the fence. He ran toward her, shouting for his ranch hand to call an ambulance.

She lay motionless on the ground, blood pooling under her head, her right arm lying at an awkward angle. He yanked off his shirt and pressed it against the gaping wound on her head, crying and praying for her to be all right.

The rest of that day and the following weeks became a blur of doctors and specialists who kept Mary alive long enough to give birth to a premature daughter.

He muttered a curse and spurred Misty forward, unable to quash the one memory that haunted him to this day.

Was the child his?

Chapter Two

'Tell Alexa I'm sorry. I'm just not ready.'

Alexa Morgan stared at her reflection in the full-length mirror and inhaled deeply, those eight little words forever embedded into her brain. "Why can't I let it go?" she muttered. "It's been four months."

A soft *whoof* from Biscuit, her canine companion of three years, went unnoticed.

"Because he dumped me at the altar, that's why," she seethed. "At the bloody altar. In front of all our friends and family." She sucked air through clenched teeth. "With a fricking text to my mother, no less. The dipstick didn't even have the guts to tell me to my face."

Biscuit pressed his nose against her hand.

She absently caressed his head. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I said I wouldn't talk about it again, but..." Even now, the memory was a painful wound that refused to heal. "He dumped me, Biscuit. Without a second thought." The truth was a hard pill to swallow. "He never loved me at all."

Despite the hurt and mortification of Rodney's callous desertion that day, she had refused to cower in shame. Instead, she had marched into the church with her head held high and informed everyone she'd discovered Rodney was a toxic, self-centered A-hole who didn't deserve her, and in celebration of her good fortune, the party would start at the reception.

Her father and her brother, Bobby, were not so understanding. It took half a dozen people to prevent them from hunting him down like the mangy dog he turned out to be.

Later, the crowd, minus his family and friends who couldn't flee fast enough, cheered when she ceremoniously dumped the beautiful wedding cake in a trash can and turned the pricey reception into a Rodney's-a-creep bash.

Once the party started rolling, she grabbed a bottle of champagne, some mini crab cakes, a side of mac and cheese, and a hunk of chocolate cake for good measure and indulged in a pity party for one.

Over the next two weeks, she returned every gift—except the ones from his side, which she donated to Goodwill. When he dared to ask about them later, she texted where to look.

The honeymoon cruise she paid for and couldn't bear to use became a gift to her brother for not saying, "I told you so," though he had every right. He believed Rodney, a mediocre engineer for a rival company, saw her as a way up the corporate ladder. But if she truly loved him, he would support her.

Only Biscuit knew the bitter truth behind the breakup.

She shook off the unhappy memories. "Suck it up, Buttercup," she lectured herself. "You're thirty-two years old. It's time to put your big girl panties on and decide what you want to do with your life." She paused. "And it's not working for your father's company." She adjusted the chic bun on top of her head. "And I'm tired of being called Alex. It's a guy's name, but Alexa is too formal. I want to use the nickname Andy gave me." She glanced at the dog. "You know him. He's Dad's general foreman." She turned back to the mirror. "From now on, I'm Lexie, not Alex." She meticulously arranged a few ebony curls around her face and nodded. "That's better."

She took a step back and analyzed the image in the mirror. Though she'd lost some weight, and shadows of fatigue left dark smudges under her eyes, the woman staring back was nonetheless attractive. Comfortable jeans faded to a soft blue encased long, slender legs. A royal blue tee-shirt, the front embellished with *Underestimate me*,

that'll be fun in glittery silver letters, highlighted an ample bosom, and the narrow silver belt accentuated a slim waist. Snappy silver and black slingback sandals completed the look.

Intelligent blue eyes scrutinized the finished product. “What do you think, Biscuit?” She turned around and inspected her jean-clad butt over her shoulder. “Nothing says ‘structural engineer,’ does it?” She adjusted the horn-rimmed glasses on her face and frowned. “More like a bored schoolteacher.”

Biscuit tilted his head left and right, then shook his head and sat by the front door.

She sighed, picked up her phone, added a reminder to call Bobby from the road to let him know she got a late start, and stuffed it in her bag. Out of habit, she wedged a pencil in her hair as an unexpected rumble of thunder got her attention. “No, no, nooooo.” She retrieved her phone, pulled up the weather app, and scowled at the forecast. “Fudgesicle and ice picks. Showers off and on all afternoon, and maybe some tomorrow.” She returned the phone to her bag and took a breath. “Great. By Wednesday, it’s sunshine and blue skies.” Bolstered by that touch of good news, she glanced back at the woman in the mirror. “You can do this, Lexie. Two weeks of peace and quiet to find yourself is doable.” She grabbed her bag and the dog’s leash, then headed out the door.

The impromptu vacation was her mother’s idea. Concerned that Lexie worked too hard—she did, and she wasn’t taking care of herself—she wasn’t, Rose Morgan suggested a vacation. Once the seed was planted, Lexie couldn’t wait for it to happen. For the first time in months, she had something positive to look forward to, something that had nothing to do with her father’s company, HRM Construction and Engineering, or *Rodney the Creep*. Granted, she’d have to mix a little business in next week, but other than that, her assistant could handle anything that came in, and Lexie was free to do as she pleased.

Resolve in place, she ignored the light, misty rain and quickly hugged Biscuit after he jumped into the back seat. “I don’t know about you, but I can’t wait to see Dallas in the rearview mirror.” She settled behind the wheel, exhaled loudly, and twisted the ignition with new vigor. “Dad understood when Bobby left the company to follow his dream. Hopefully, he’ll do the same for me.” She backed out of the drive. “I just have to figure out what my dream is.”

Determined to find the answer, she put the car in gear and headed north. “Can you believe we’re actually doing this?” She glanced at the dog. “At a quaint cabin in the woods, no less. Bobby said the place is called Twin Lakes. It’s private, with only four cabins. One on each side of the lake.” She twirled one long ringlet of hair around her finger. “There’s a fishing pier, too. Gosh. I haven’t been fishing in years. I remember camping at Lake Texoma once, and Dad tried to teach me to fly fish. One of my favorite memories.” A momentary cloud fell across her good mood. “Then the company started growing, and those opportunities fell by the wayside.” She released the curl and wrapped both hands on the steering wheel. “Their website says they provide fishing tackle, so who knows? Maybe I’ll see if I remember what he taught me. Oh, and there’s deer and other animals around, too.” She shook her finger at Biscuit. “But you can’t chase them.” She upped the speed on the wipers as the shower strengthened. “I hope this rain goes away soon.” She squared her shoulders, fixed on remaining positive. “But, hey, a bad start means a great finish, right?”

Biscuit’s reply was a soft grunt before he stretched out on the back seat.

“Fine. Take a nap, but you’ll miss all the beautiful scenery.” A few minutes later, she entered the ramp for the interstate and barely stifled a surprised curse when a guy in a

red Corvette cut in front from the far lane to exit. “Idiot,” she grumbled. “I won’t miss this mess at all.”

Her bright outlook dimmed when the misty shower turned into a deluge two hours later.

She read the road sign up ahead. “Comanche Springs, fifteen miles. Finally.”

Anticipation made her antsy. “Twin Lakes is somewhere near here. I was supposed to call Bobby for directions, but I’d rather hit town first and grab something to eat.” She glanced in the rearview mirror, then back to the front. “Dang, this rain is getting on my last nerve. The forecast I saw when we stopped for gas said clearing skies by now.”

The hypnotic slash of the windshield wipers prompted her to crank up the radio. But not even her favorite music lessened the sudden uncertainty enveloping her.

She fingered the heart-shaped charm dangling from the chain around her neck. A gift from her brother when she turned sixteen, it never failed to soothe her.

An unexpected clap of thunder followed by a flash of lightning off to the left startled her. “Dammit!”

Biscuit’s gentle ‘woof’ sounded like disapproval.

“Good grief. You’re worse than Mom. I’ll put money in the jar when we stop.” Growing up around construction sites, she picked up quite a selection of colorful expletives. It wasn’t until *Rodney the Creep* came along that she succumbed to the urge to use them. All of them. More than once.

Enter *The Swear Jar*. Her mother, bless her meddling little heart, gave her one soon after *the event*, as she called it, hoping to improve her vocabulary.

By the time Lexie finished everything, she had progressed to a gallon-sized jar. Lately, though, the contributions declined, and the newest container was a half-gallon plastic jug inscribed with *Swear Jar* in red nail polish.

“What’s wrong with me, Biscuit?” She sighed and chewed her lower lip.

A sharp bark had her glancing back. “I know, I know. It wasn’t me; it was him. But was it? I mean, the same thing happened with Gary. Well, not exactly the same. I was still in college then, and Gary at least ended things before we got that far.” She swallowed hard. “Maybe Mr. Right doesn’t exist.” The notion brought an ache to her throat. “Maybe I’m not meant to be a mom, either. Maybe I’m meant to be alone.”

Misery threatened to edge past her defenses, and her heart twisted as she recalled the pivotal conversation with Rodney the day before the wedding. She had excitedly told him she was late, as in *late*, and the possibility of pregnancy existed.

His reaction hit her like a gut punch. “How could you be so careless? You’ve ruined everything.”

The resentment in his voice still wrenched her heart, and she shook her head. “I can still see Mom’s face when she handed me the phone. And poor Dad. He was speechless.” Rodney’s text had been brief and cold. *Tell Alexa I’m sorry and good luck. I’m just not ready.*

“Good fricking luck?”

The words scraped over her broken heart like a razor blade. He cared nothing about her or the child. Their child.

Ultimately, the pregnancy was a false alarm. Probably due to the stress of planning a wedding, striving to meet her father's expectations, and endless hours on projects around the state. But the end result didn't change—no happily-ever-after for her.

“Enough.” She made a slicing motion with her hand. “I refuse to let anything spoil our vacation.”

Biscuit nosed her cheek again.

She sighed and leaned into his doggie kiss. “You always make me feel better.”

Reinvigorated, she gripped the wheel. “But you could have warned me he was a jerk. Dogs are supposed to sense these things.”

He shook his head as though to say, ‘It’s not my fault.’

“Okay, fine. But still, you could have at least hinted he was an ass.”

She ignored his sharp ‘*whoof*’ and looked ahead, the pain an open wound that refused to heal. “I’ll never be a mom, ” she whispered, gripping the wheel tighter. “Enough. It is what it is. I need to focus on this vacation and accept that I’m destined to be an old maid working for my father in a job I don’t like and get on with half a life.” She took a deep, calming breath. “But reality truly sucks.”

Biscuit shook his head.

“I’m trying to be a realist here.” She shifted in her seat. “Fairy tale endings are for other people. Not me. I’m done.”

The dog whined and looked around her out the side window.

She followed his gaze and squinted. “Oh no. Hogs. A whole slew of them.” Focusing on the road, she slowed her speed. “I read somewhere that over a million feral hogs live in Texas.” She quickly rechecked their location. “Marci told me a bunch destroyed her parents’ entire

backyard last year. Even tore down the fence.” Another nervous glance at the unpredictable hogs made her heart rate jump. “Dammit. They’re changing direction.” She tapped the brake and snapped, “Down. Now.”

Immediately, Biscuit stretched out on the back seat.

Suddenly, rain poured from the clouds despite clearing skies up ahead, and a loud popping noise sounded a split second before the Ford Edge swerved hard to the right.

Between the rain and the aftermath of a blowout doing fifty-five miles an hour on a rain-slick road, she didn’t see the hogs head straight for her until it was too late. She hit one, maybe two, with the left fender. Or perhaps they hit her; she wasn’t sure. The impact came as she hit a large puddle on the highway, and the vehicle hydroplaned. Out of control, she held on to the wheel as the car spun around and skidded off the other side of the road, landing with a sudden teeth-jarring stop in a muddy ditch, facing the opposite direction.

The airbags deployed, filling her eyes, nose, and mouth with choking powder. Glasses askew, she coughed and pushed against the material, groping for the button to lower the window. Unable to see, she eventually got the front windows down, and fresh air wafted in along with sprinkles of rain. Momentarily stunned, she sucked in the moisture-laden air, righted her glasses, and took a moment to regroup.

As her foggy mind cleared, she assessed the situation. The car rested at an awkward angle in the ditch. The blowout happened to the right front tire. She had no idea what damage the hogs did to the left side, but she was going nowhere any time soon. And she was still some distance from her destination.

Annoyed, she shook her head slightly, and a wave of dizziness washed over her, followed by the first inkling of a headache. She touched a knot on her left temple and stared at the crimson liquid coating her fingers. She pulled down the sun visor and looked in the small mirror. Blood dripped from a cut on her forehead, down her cheek, and onto her new blouse. “Pop tarts and buzzards,” she grumbled, grabbed a takeout napkin from the console, and pressed against the cut. “Ouch.” She shifted in the seat, testing for aches, knowing most wouldn’t show up until tomorrow. The only bright spot was the sudden shower ended almost as fast as it started, and clear skies showed in the distance.

Biscuit’s whimper drew her back to the moment and sent her heart rate through the roof. “Please don’t let him be hurt.” She struggled with the airbags and seat belt, then leaned over the console toward the back, thankful her luggage and supplies hadn’t been thrown forward.

The dog lay on the floorboard, wedged in behind the passenger seat. Unable to reach him from this angle, she tried to soothe him with her voice. “Hang on, sweetie. I’m coming.”

Knowing the hogs were unpredictable and dangerous, she looked around before getting out and saw they were nearly out of sight across the road.

Fighting another wave of dizziness, she fumbled with the door. The vehicle’s right side pitched downward in the ditch, which made opening the driver’s side door more difficult. “Crap on a cracker,” she snarled as she wrestled with it and stepped out. A surprised yelp escaped when the heel of her snazzy new sandal slid off a jagged rock, and her left ankle folded, followed by unbearable pain up to her knee. Unprepared, she tumbled out, landing hard on the rock as her forehead banged against the bottom of the door. Only a last-minute reflex kept it from closing on her head. “Oomph.”

Stunned, it took a moment for her mind to clear before she struggled to stand, using the door for support. Upright at last but unable to put weight on her injured foot, she leaned on the vehicle and saw a hog lying on the other side of the road. Quickly averting her gaze, she felt something near her eye and swiped at it, dismayed to find more blood on her fingers. “Great. Must be where I hit the door.” Jaw tight, she moved, only to discover walking was impossible. “Son of a bucket.”

She closed her eyes, did a mental ten-count, then eased down on the muddy ground and crawled to the passenger side door, gritting her teeth against the pain as she dragged her foot along. “Only for you, Biscuit,” she muttered, “would I ruin my favorite jeans. And my new shoes.”

After several attempts, she stood on one foot and wrenched the door open. “Oh, baby, are you all right?”

He whined and tried to wiggle toward her.

“No. Stay. Stay.”

Thankfully, the angle made the car door stay open, and using it for balance, she hopped and slid to the front, jerked open the door, and nudged the seat forward.

Biscuit whined again.

“Wait, baby. Stay. I’m coming.” She grabbed her phone from the cup holder, shoved it in her back pocket, then pulled her pistol from the glove box and secured it in the specially made pouch of her purse.

A few agonizing moments later, her companion was free and sat in the back seat. He whined again and moved to get out. “No. Stay put. No point in both of us being muddy and wet.”

A quick exam showed no visible injuries, though he yelped when she touched his front left paw. “You’ll be okay, baby. I’ll get you to a vet as soon as possible.”

Ankle and hip throbbed in unison, and a growing headache added to the misery mix.

She took a breath and looked around. The front bumper dug into the far side of the muddy embankment, and the blown-out tire rested in muck halfway up the rim. Dingy water in the ditch swirled around her feet and leached up her mud-coated pant legs. Her disgusted gaze took in the filthy jeans and soaked and blood-coated tee shirt. “Crap,” she muttered. “Brand new shoes.” She swiped a hand across her cheek, leaving a streak of bloody mud in its wake. “Great way to start my first vacation in years.”

She adjusted her grip on the door and blew wet hair away from her mouth. “Alrighty then.”

Muttering under her breath, she reached past the dog and plucked the half-full *Swear Jar* from the floorboard. An irritated swipe at the wet hair clinging to her cheek left more muddy streaks behind. “Time for the big guns.” She placed the jug on the seat near Biscuit and pulled two soggy one-dollar bills and three quarters from her pocket. She took a breath and ceremoniously dropped the quarters through a slot cut into the lid, mumbling after each one. “Damn. Damn. Dammit.” She took a deep breath and crammed the wet bills through the hole. “And son-of-a-bitch.”

“Don’t reckon that’s gonna help much.”

An f-bomb exploded before she could stop it.