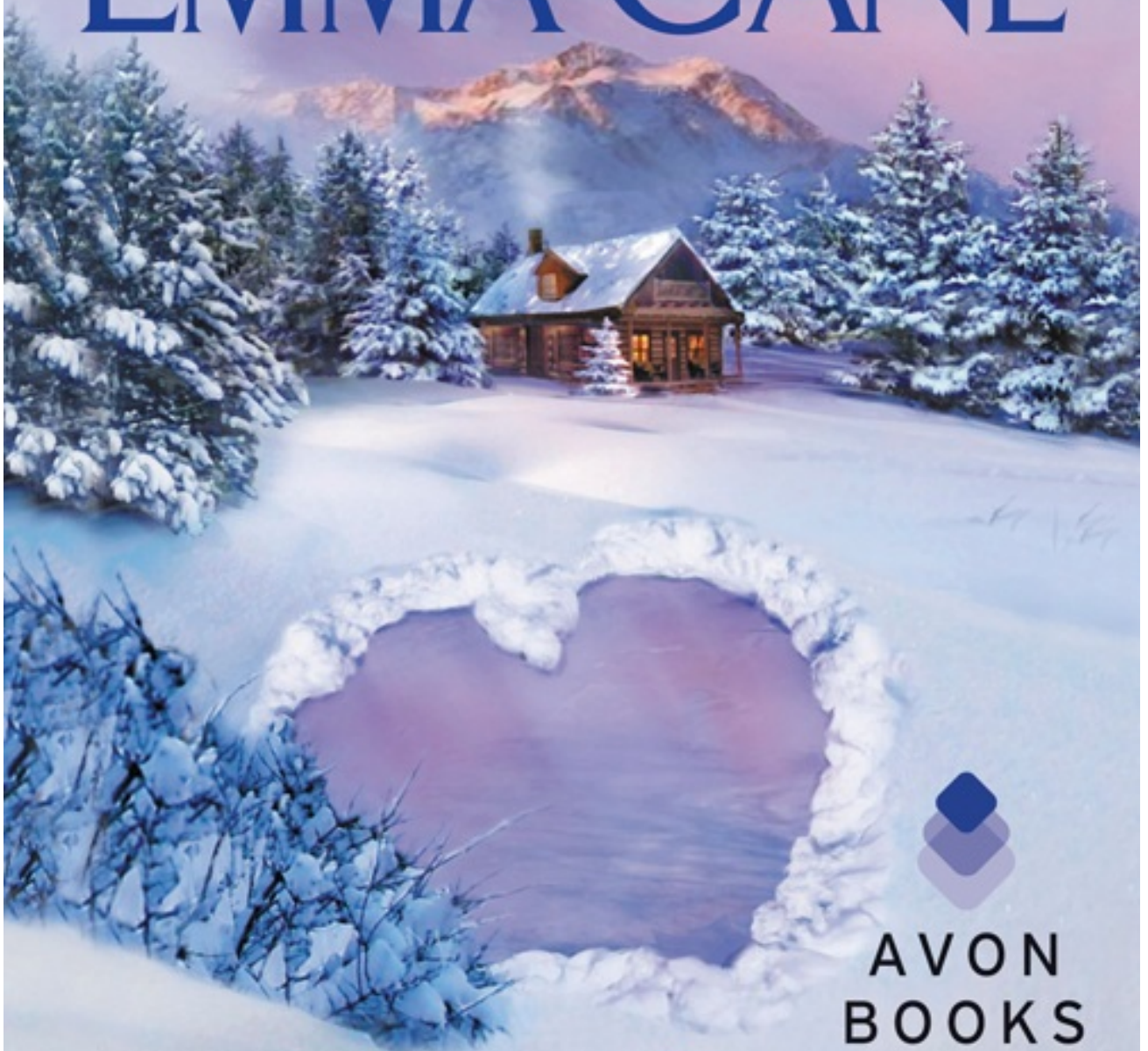


# EMMA CANE



AVON  
BOOKS

*True Love at*  
**SILVER CREEK  
RANCH**

A VALENTINE VALLEY NOVEL

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# True Love at Silver Creek Ranch

*A Valentine Valley Novel*

Emma Cane



**AVON**

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*

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## **Dedication**

To Angie Marasco Callen, who has brought such joy into my son's life—and ours. Thank you for joining our family and making him so happy.

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## Chapter One

Her chestnut quarter horse, Sugar, was the first to notice something wrong, startling Brooke Thalber from her troubled thoughts. The November wind high in the Colorado Rockies, just outside Valentin Valley, was unseasonably brutal, whipping snow off the peaks of the Elk Mountains like lumbering giants exhaling icy puffs of breath. Sugar raised her head, sniffing that wind, ears twitching, leaving Brooke unsettled, uneasy, as she rode the pastures of the Silver Creek Ranch. She was checking the fence line so that the cattle didn't find their way through and wander toward someone else's land.

It was usually peaceful work, but today she was looking down the long road of her future and feeling that something was . . . wrong. And she hated to feel that way because she'd been blessed with so much.

Sugar lifted her head and shook her mane, neighing, her body tensing. Whatever she sensed was going away. Brooke lifted her own head—

And smelled smoke.

A shot of fear made her vault upright in the stirrups. She scanned her family's land, focusing on the house first, framed between clusters of evergreens and aspens. But its two-story log walls seemed sturdy as always, a faint haze of smoke rising from the stone chimney. The newer barn and shed nearest the house seemed fine, and gradually she widened her search until she saw the old horse barn farthest from the house—smoke billowing through the open double doors.

She kicked Sugar into a gallop, leaning forward over the horse's twitching ears, the breath frozen in her throat. *Oh, God, the horses.* Frantically, she saw that several trotted nervously around the corner as if they, too, knew something was wrong. She tried to count them, but it was as if her brain had seized with the terror of what she was seeing.

Sugar's hooves thundered beneath her, faster than even in her barrel-racing days, the ground a blur. The smoke pouring out of the open door grew darker and more menacing, twisting Brooke's fear even higher.

At last she reached the barn and threw herself off Sugar's back, stumbling momentarily in the dirt before she found her balance. The smoke made her lungs spasm in a cough, but even that didn't make her second-guess what she had to do. She pulled her neck scarf up over the lower half of her face and ran inside, keeping to a crouch. Immediately, the world became darker as the smoke swirled around her. Her shallow breathing was hot and stifled beneath the scarf. If she let herself panic, she could become disoriented, lost, so she kept a firm grip on her emotions. She'd yet to see flames, but she could hear several horses, their neighs more like screams that tore at her heart.

"I'm coming!" she cried, flailing toward the stalls.

She ran into something hard and was only saved from falling to the ground by hands that clasped the front of her coat.

A man pulled her toward him, a stranger, tall and broad-shouldered, his face beneath his cowboy hat obscured by a scarf just like hers was. She could only see a glimpse of his narrowed, glittering eyes, focused intently on her. Who was he? Had he set the fire? she wondered with outrage.

"Are you all right?" He shouted to be heard above the growing roar of the fire and the frightened cries of the horses. "How many horses are there?"

For a moment, her mouth moved, and nothing came out. She saw the tack-room door hanging ajar, its interior full of fire that crackled and writhed. The sight momentarily stunned and mesmerized her, then she suddenly snapped into a sharp awareness. She couldn't worry about who this man was or what he was doing there. He'd offered to help, and that was all that mattered. Mentally, she counted the horses she'd seen out in the corral. "Should be two inside—no three!"

"I'll take that side"—he pointed through the smoke toward the west side of the barn—"and you start here."

She nodded and turned her back, beginning to fling open each stall door. At the fourth door, she was met by hooves pawing through the air. She cried out, diving sideways as they slammed into the wall right beside her. Before Dusty could rear again, she grabbed a blanket hung near the door, flung it over his head, and grabbed ahold of his halter. For a moment he fought her, but she wouldn't give up.

"Please, Dusty, be a good boy. Come on!"

At last he seemed to dance toward her, and she felt a momentary triumph. She started to run, leading him toward the double doors open to the corral. As they reached fresh air, she pulled the blanket off Dusty's head and he charged to the far end, where the other horses huddled nervously.

Brooke turned around to head back into the barn, only to see the stranger leading two terrified horses outside. *Thank God*, she prayed silently. But could she have counted wrong? How could she take the chance? She tried to race past him back into the barn, but he caught her arm and wouldn't let her go.

"You said three horses!" he shouted from beneath the scarf.

A groan seemed to emanate from the barn timbers, turning both their heads. Smoke wafted out in great streams to the sky, but the fire still seemed contained in the tack room.

"I can't be sure until I check each stall!" She tried to yank her elbow away, but his grip was strong.



A blast of heat wafted out, engulfing her, making her sweat even more beneath her layers of winter clothing. She felt almost light-headed.

He loomed over her, and now she could see the sandy waves of hair plastered above his ears, and his narrowed eyes, brown as the sides of the barn but so intent on her.

“I checked all six on the west side. I didn’t hear anything more coming from the east after you were gone.”

“I can’t take that chance. I only got through four stalls on my side.” She stared at the herd of horses clustered uneasily at the far end of the corral. Nate’s horse, Apollo—was he there? She’d never forgive herself if anything happened to him. And then she saw the dappled gray gelding, and relief shuddered down her spine.

The man didn’t answer her, and she turned to see him disappear into the barn, the smoke swirling out and around him as if to draw him deep inside. A stab of fear shocked her—why was he risking himself for her? Her eyes stung as she reached the entrance, but he was there again, stumbling in front of her, the upper half of his face dirtied by the soot, his eyes streaming.

“It’s empty!” he called.

She could have staggered with relief that her beloved horses were all right—that this brave man hadn’t been injured.

But relief was only momentary as she began to think about the structure itself, built by her family well over a hundred years before. She hugged herself against the sadness.

As if reading her mind, he said, “You can’t do anything now. And I hear sirens.”

The fire engine from Valentine Valley roared down the dirt road that wound its way through the ranch. The horses were going to be even more frightened, so she ran to the end of the corral and opened the gate so they could escape into the next pasture.

When she returned to the stranger’s side, they were pushed out of the way by the trained professionals. Most were volunteers, like Sally Gillroy from the mayor’s office, who liked to gossip, and Hal Abrams, the owner of the hardware store where her dad and Nate met fellow ranchers for coffee. She recognized all these men and women, but it was strange to see their grim faces rather than the easygoing smiles.

“Are you all right?” Hal demanded, his glasses reflecting the flames that had begun to shoot out from both doors.

Brooke nodded, still hugging herself, feeling the presence of the stranger at her back. She almost took comfort from it, and that was strange.

“Horses all saved?”

She nodded again, and was surprised to feel a wave of pride and even excitement. Knowing she’d risked herself made her feel more alive and aware than she’d felt in a long time. Everything in life could be so transitory, and she’d just been accepting things that happened to her rather than making choices. She couldn’t live that way anymore. She had to find something that made her feel this alive again, that gave her more purpose and focus.

And it scared the hell out of her.

“You’re in the way,” Hal said. “Go on up to the house and clean up. We’ll wet down any nearby buildings to keep them safe. But the barn is a goner.” He turned his shrewd eyes on the stranger. “That blood?”

Brooke spun around and saw that the stranger had lowered his scarf. In another situation, she might have been amused at the dark upper half of his face and the white lower half, but she saw blood oozing from a cut across his cheek.

“I’m fine.” The stranger used his gloved hand to swipe at his cheek and made everything worse.

“Come on,” Brooke said wearily, refusing to glance one last time at her family’s barn although she could hear the crackle and roar of the fire. “The bunkhouse is close. We’ll wash up there and see to your face.”

And she could look into his eyes and see if he was the sort who set fires for fun. He didn’t seem to for he didn’t look back at the fire either, only trudged behind her.

The bunkhouse was an old log cabin, another of the original buildings from the nineteenth-century silver-boom days, when cattle from the Silver Creek Ranch had fed thousands of miners coming down from their claims to spend their riches in Valentine Valley. Brooke’s father had updated the interior of the cabin to house the occasional temporary workers they needed during branding or haying seasons. There were a couple sets of bunk beds along the walls, an old couch before the stone hearth, a battered table and chairs, kitchen cabinets and basic appliances at the far end of the open room, and two doors that led into a single bedroom and bathroom.

The walls were filled with unframed photos of the various hands they’d employed to work the ranch over the years. Some of those photos, tacked up haphazardly and curling at the edges, were old black-and-whites going almost as far back as photography did.

Brooke shivered with a chill even as she removed her coat. The heat was only high enough to keep the pipes from freezing, and she went to raise the thermostat. When she turned around, the stranger had removed his hat and was shrugging out of his Carhartt jacket, revealing matted-down hair and a soot-stained face. He was wearing a long-sleeve red flannel shirt and jeans over cowboy boots.

To keep from staring at him, she pointed to the second door. “Go on and wash up in the bathroom. I’ll find a first-aid kit.”

He silently nodded and moved past her, limping slightly, shutting the door behind him. He might be hurt worse than he was saying, she thought with a wince. As she opened cabinet doors, she realized the kit was probably in the bathroom. Sighing even as she rolled up her sleeves, she let the water run in the kitchen sink until it was hot, then soaped up her black hands and started on her face. If her hair hadn’t been in a long braid down her back, she’d have dunked her whole head under. She’d have to wait for a shower. Grabbing paper towels, she patted her skin dry.

A few minutes later, the stranger came out of the bathroom, his hair sticking up in short, damp curls, the first-aid kit in his hand. His face was clean now, and she could see that the two-inch cut was still bleeding.

“You probably need stitches,” she said, even as the first inkling of recognition began to tease her.  
“You don’t want a scar.”

He met her gaze and held it, and she saw the faintest spark of amusement, as if he knew something she didn’t.

“Don’t worry about it, Brooke.”

She hadn’t told him her name. “So I do know you.”

“It’s been a long time,” he said, eyeing her as openly as she was doing to him.

He was taller than her, well muscled beneath the flannel shirt that he’d pushed up to his elbows.

And then his name suddenly echoed like a shot in her mind. “Adam Desantis,” she breathed. “It’s been over ten years since you went off to join the Marines.”

He gave a short nod.

No wonder he looked to be in such great physical shape. Feeling awkward, she forced her gaze back to his face. He’d been good-looking in high school—and knew it—but now his face was rugged and masculine, a man grown.

She got flashes of memory then—Adam as the cool wide receiver all the high-school girls wanted to date with his posse of arrogant sidekicks. He’d been able to rule the school, doing whatever he wanted—because his parents hadn’t cared, she reminded herself. And then she had another memory of the sixth-grade science fair, where all the parents had helped their kids with experiments, except for his. His display had been crude and unfinished, and his mother had drunkenly told him so in front of every kid within hearing range. Whenever Brooke thought badly of his antics in high school, *that* was the memory that crept back up, making her feel ill with pity and sorrow.

“Your grandma talks about you all the time,” she finally said. Mrs. Palmer spoke of him with glowing pride as he rose through the ranks to staff sergeant, a rarity at his age.

“Hope she doesn’t bore everybody,” he answered, showing sincerity rather than just tossing off something he didn’t mean. “I hear she lives with your grandma. The Widows’ Boardinghouse?”

“The name was their idea. They’re kind of famous now, but those are stories for another day. Come here and let me look at your cheek.” He moved toward her slowly, as if she were a horse needing to be calmed, which amused her.

“I can take care of it,” he said.

“Sit down.”

“I said—”

“Sit down!” She pulled out a kitchen chair and pointed. “I can’t reach your face. I’m tall, but not that tall.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered gruffly.

She pressed her lips together to keep from smiling.

He eased into the chair just a touch slowly, but somehow she knew he didn’t want any more questions about his health. Adam Desantis, she told herself again, shaking her head. He wasn’t a stranger—and he wouldn’t have started the fire, regardless of the trouble he’d once gotten into. Still,

told herself to relax, but her body still tensed with an awareness that surprised her. She was just curious about him, that was all. She cleared her throat and tried to speak lightly. "I imagine you're used to taking orders."

"Not for the last six months. I left after my enlistment was up."

Tearing open an antiseptic towelette, she leaned toward him, feeling almost nervous. Nervous? She thought in surprise. She worked what most would call a man's job and dealt with men all day. What was her problem? She got a whiff of smoke from his clothes, but his face was scrubbed clean of it. She tilted his head, her fingers touching his whisker-rough square chin, marked with a deep cleft in the center. His eyes studied her, and she was so close she could see golden flecks deep inside the brows. She stared into them, and he stared back, and in that moment, she felt a rush of heat and embarrassment all rolled together. Hoping he hadn't noticed, she began to dab at his wound, feeling him tense with the sting of the antiseptic.

Damn it all, what was wrong with her? She hadn't been attracted to him in high school—he'd been an idiot, as far as she was concerned. She'd been focused on her family ranch and barrel racing and was not the kind of girl who would lavish all her attention on a boy, as he seemed to require. Brooke always felt that she had her own life to live and didn't need a boyfriend as some kind of status symbol.

But ten years later, Adam returned as an ex-Marine who saved her horses, a man with a square-cut face, faint lines fanning out from his eyes as if he'd squinted under desert suns, and she was turning into a schoolgirl all over again.

Adam stared into Brooke Thalberg's face as she bent over him, not bothering to hide his powerful curiosity. He remembered her, of course—who wouldn't? She was as tall as many guys and probably as strong, too, from all the hard work on her family ranch.

A brave woman, he admitted, remembering her fearlessness running into the fire, her concern for the horses more than herself. Now her hazel eyes stared at his face intently, their mix of browns and greens vivid and changeable. She turned away to search the med kit, and his gaze lingered on her slight back, covered in a checked Western shirt that was tucked into her belt. Her long braid tumbled down her back, almost to the sway of her jeans-clad hips. It's not like he hadn't seen a woman before. And this woman had been a pest through his childhood, too smart for her own good—seeing into his troubled life the things he'd tried to keep hidden—too confident in her own talent. She had a family who believed in her, and that gave a kid a special kind of confidence. He hadn't had that sort of family, so he recognized it when he saw it.

He wondered if she'd changed at all—he certainly had. After discovering his own confidence, he'd built a place and a name for himself in the Marines. His overconfidence had destroyed that, leaving him in a fog of uncertainty that had been hovering around him for half a year now.

Kind of like being in a barn fire, he guessed, feeling your way around, wondering if you were even going to get out again. He still didn't know.

After using butterfly bandages to keep the wound closed, Brooke taped a small square of gauze to his face, then straightened, hands on her hips, to judge her handiwork. "You might need stitches if you

want to avoid a scar.”

He shrugged. “Got enough of those. One more won’t hurt.”

He rose slowly to his feet, feeling the stiffness in his leg that never quite went away. The docs had got most of the shrapnel out, but not quite all of it. The exertion of the fire had irritated the old wound, but that would ease with time. He was used to it by now, and the reminder that he was alive was more than he deserved, when there were so many men beneath the ground.

After closing the kit, Brooke turned back to face him, tilting her head to look up. They stared at each other a moment, too close, almost too intimate alone there. Drops of water still sparkled in his dark lashes, and her skin was fresh-scrubbed and free of makeup. She looked prettier than he remembered, a woman instead of the skinny girl.

Adam was surprised at the sensations her nearness inspired in him, this awareness of her as a woman, when back in high school she’d barely registered as that to him. He’d dated party girls and cheerleaders—including her best friend, Monica Shaw—not cowgirls. Now she held herself so tall and easily, with a confidence born of hard work and years of testing her body to the limits.

She cleared her throat, and her gaze dropped from his eyes to his mouth, then his shirtfront. “You have a limp,” she said. “Did one of the horses kick you?”

“Had the limp on and off for a while. Nothing new.”

She nodded, then stepped past him to return the med kit to the bathroom. When she came back out she was wearing a fixed, polite smile, which, to his surprise, amused him. Not much amused him anymore.

“I’m glad you’re not hurt bad,” she said. “You did me—us—a big favor, and I can’t thank you enough for helping rescue the horses. How’d you see the fire?”

“I was at the boardinghouse and saw the smoke out the window.” If the trees hadn’t been winter-bare, he might not have seen it at all, which made him think uneasily of Brooke, battling the fire alone. “Where are your brothers? They might have come in handy if I hadn’t seen the fire. I assume they still work on the ranch?”

She nodded. “They’re at the hospital with my dad, visiting my mom. Did you remember she has MS?”

He shook his head. “I never knew.”

“She never talked about it much, so I’m not surprised. Most of the time, she only needs a cane, but she’s battling a flare-up that’s weakened her legs. The guys took their turn at the hospital today, which I rode fence. Guess I found more than I bargained for.” She eyed him with speculation. “So you’re back to visit your grandma.”

She put her hands in her back pockets and rocked once on her heels, as if she didn’t know what to do with herself. That stretched her shirt across her breasts, and he had to force himself to keep his gaze on her face.

“Grandma’s letters were off,” he admitted. “She seemed almost scattered.”

Brooke focused on him with a frown. “Scattered? *Your* grandma?”

“My instincts were right. I got here, and she was a lot more frail, and she’s using a cane now.”

“A cane? That’s new. And I see her often, so maybe I just didn’t notice she’d slowly been . . .” She trailed off.

“Declining?” He almost grumbled the words. Grandma Palmer was in her seventies, but some part of him thought she never changed. She’d been the one woman who could briefly get him away from his parents to sleep on sheets that didn’t smell of smoke, to eat meals that didn’t come from a drive-thru. He was never hungry at Grandma Palmer’s, whether for food or for love. There weren’t holidays or birthdays unless Grandma had them. All he’d been to his teenage parents was an unwanted kid, the result of a broken condom, and they blamed him for making so little of their lives. He saw that now, but at the time? He’d been relieved to enlist in the Marines and start his life over.

Now he and Grandma Palmer only had each other. His parents had died after falling asleep in bed with cigarettes a few years back, and he hadn’t experienced anywhere near the grief he now felt worrying about her. He might have only seen her once or twice a year, but he’d written faithfully, and so had she. The packages she’d sent had been filled with his favorite books and food, enough to share with his buddies. He felt a spasm of pain at the memories. Some of those buddies were dead now. Good memories mingled with the bad, and he could still see Paul Ivanick cheerfully holding back Adam’s care package until he promised to share Grandma Palmer’s cookies.

Paul was dead now.

When Adam was discharged, it took everything in him not to run to his grandma like a little boy. But no one could make things right, not for him, or for the men who had died. The men, his Marine brothers, who were dead because of him. He didn’t want to imagine what his grandma would think about him if she knew the truth.

“Those old women still seem strong,” Brooke insisted. “Mrs. Ludlow may use a walker, and your grandma now a cane, but they have enough . . . well, gumption, to use their word, for ten women.”

He shrugged. “All I know is what I see.”

And then they stood there, two strangers who’d grown up in the same small town but never really knew each other.

“So what have you been up to?” Brooke asked, rocking on her heels again.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Nothing much.”

In a small town like Valentine Valley, everyone thought they deserved to know their neighbor’s business. Brooke wouldn’t think any different—hell, he remembered how she used to butt into his high school, when they weren’t even friends. She’d been curious about his studies, a do-gooder who thought she could change the world.

She hadn’t seen the world and its cruelties, hadn’t left the safety of this town, or her family, as far as he knew. *He’d* seen the world—too much of it. There was nothing he could tell her—nothing he wanted to remember.

“Oo-kay then,” she said, drawing out the word.

He wondered if she felt as aware of the simmering tension between them and as uneasy as he did.

He wouldn't let himself feel like this, uncertain whether he even deserved a normal life.

“What am I thinking?” she suddenly burst out, digging her hand into her pocket and coming out with a cell phone. “I haven't even called my dad.”

She turned her back and stared out the window, where the firemen were hosing down the smoldering ruins of her family barn. For just a moment, Adam remembered coming to the Silver Creek Ranch as a kid when his dad would do the occasional odd jobs for the Thalbergs. He'd seen the close, teasing relationships between Brooke and her brothers, the way their parents guided and nurtured them with love. Their life had seemed so different, so foreign to him.

And now Brooke would never be able to understand the life he'd been leading. So he turned around and quietly walked out the door.

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## Chapter Two

Brooke stood beside the ruins of the old barn, arms crossed, her chin tucked down inside the wool lining of her coat. The firemen were gone, and she was alone, staring at the remains, which hissed and steamed, even as ice flowed down cooling wood beams like frozen waterfalls. A few blackened timbers rose out of the debris, fingers pointing up at the blue sky. Incongruous against one another, she thought, feeling almost distant with disbelief.

And then the parade of pickups came barreling down the road on the other side of the pasture. Black Angus cattle raised their heads to look, then dropped them again, searching for grass tufts free of snow. Their grunts and lowing were the sound track of Brooke's life, always playing in the background. She could see Josh and her dad in one truck, Nate and his fiancée, Emily Murphy, in the other. Brooke smiled, relieved that Emily had come along, too. Something about her just . . . settled Nate. Nate had always been a genial workaholic, driven about the ranch, especially the business end of it, a man who helped everyone even when they thought they didn't need it. That tendency had kept him away from long-term commitments until he met Emily. "Helping" her had become loving her, and though both Nate and Emily had resisted, they'd each decided that love was worth taking a risk.

Brooke envied them. Valentine Valley had worked its magic, bringing the two of them together, although they'd fought it worse than a calf at branding time. Despite living in Valentine her whole life, there'd been no romantic magic for Brooke, not yet anyway.

Nate and Emily jumped out of their pickup first, followed by Scout, Nate's herding dog with black and-white patches across his coat. When they saw the barn, they reached for each other's hand, their faces full of dismay. Scout gave a little whine and gingerly went forward to investigate the scent.

Nate was tall, with their mom's black hair and his biological dad's green eyes. Doug Thalberg had adopted him when he was only five years old after falling in love with his divorced mom, Sandra. Emily was much shorter than Nate, strawberry blond hair back in the ponytail she favored when she worked at Sugar and Spice, the bakery she owned.



Emily didn't spend much time staring at the ruins—she ran to Brooke and hugged her, then pulled back and gripped Brooke's upper arms. "Are you okay?" she asked, her gaze roaming her face as searching for signs of injury. "Your clothes are covered in soot."

Brooke looked down at herself. "I'm okay." She wasn't sure if the sudden realization that she could have died was making her weepy, but she gazed on Emily like the sister she'd never had, so grateful to have her in her life, to have her care.

Then her dad gave her a bear hug that almost crushed her rib cage.

"Oh, Brooke," he whispered, the sound rough.

For the first time, she felt a sting of tears. But she was okay, she reminded herself, and so were the horses . . . because Adam had helped her. "I'm fine, Dad. I'm so sorry about the barn."

He broke the hug and cleared his throat, not bothering to hide the dampness in his eyes as he scanned her face. "The barn? What do I care about the barn as long as you're all right?"

Beneath his Stetson, Doug Thalberg's hair was the same plain brown as hers and Josh's, but his was graying, along with the full mustache above his lip. His eyes, usually twinkling as if he knew life's hidden amusements, now studied her soberly. "I called Hal after talkin' to you. He says you ran into the barn yourself and saved the horses. That was too dangerous, Cookie."

Brooke felt a flush of warmth at her dad's use of his childhood nickname for her. "Any of you'd done the same thing," she countered.

"Always said you were brave," Josh said, his grin lopsided.

As usual, he was unshaven and sleepy-eyed, as if he'd just rolled out of bed. For some reason that escaped Brooke, women seemed to like that look.

She shrugged, suddenly feeling a bit too warm at the praise, although the winter wind continued to tug at her braid, and a few strands of hair danced in front of her eyes. To her surprise, Josh threw his arms around her for a quick squeeze, then passed her off to Nate, who almost lifted her off the ground.

"Okay, okay, I'm fine," she said, hearing the quiver in her voice and hoping no one else noticed.

Keeping an arm around her, Nate looked back at the ruins, as if by staring he could make things better. "We hear you had help. A stranger driving by?"

"Not a stranger. Adam Desantis."

Nate's eyes widened. Brooke expected Nate to start in on Adam's past and felt strangely defensive on Adam's behalf. Nate had never approved of Adam's antics or arrogance. But to her surprise, Nate tugged on her braid, gave a relieved grin, then let her go.

"I'll have to thank him personally for keeping my little sister safe."

She blinked at him, even as she rolled her eyes. "Maybe I kept *him* safe." But she couldn't help glancing at Emily with amazed respect, knowing the other woman was responsible for the gentling of Brooke's big brother.

"I didn't know Adam was in town," Doug said. "But his arrival was certainly lucky for us."

"He saw the smoke from the boardinghouse when he was visiting his grandma." She still felt a little surprised at the memory of getting off the phone with her dad, only to find that Adam had gone

She had seen his old battered pickup truck driving off toward the boardinghouse and felt both regret and interest.

“Whose grandson is he?” Emily asked with interest.

“Mrs. Palmer,” Brooke said.

“Ah.” Emily nodded. “Does Adam resemble her?”

Josh chuckled before Brooke could say a word, and even she had to smile at the thought of a man's version of Mrs. Palmer. She had a thick Western drawl, a big, blond wig, a penchant for clothing with outrageous prints and colors, and a nose for everyone else's business. The latter she had in common with her widowed friends.

Then they all sobered as they turned back to the smoldering ruin.

Brooke sighed. “Hal said he doesn't think the fire was deliberately set.”

“According to his preliminary report,” her father corrected. “There's been some vandalism in town recently.”

“Graffiti on the town gazebo hardly equates to starting fires,” Brooke said, knowing she sounded like she was defending whichever teenagers were involved.

“And let's not forget that we did have a case of arson last year,” Nate pointed out.

Brooke met Emily's curious eyes. “He's right. Cody Brissette was eighteen when he started a fire at the park along Silver Creek, and ended up burning down a pavilion. He claimed it was an accident that they'd only been trying to get warm, but it didn't matter. A kayaker was injured when he tried to retrieve his equipment from the blaze. The kid's still in jail.”

Emily winced.

“He's a man, not a kid,” Josh said mildly. “He had to accept the consequences.”

“So he couldn't have started this fire,” Brooke said. “This is an old barn. Maybe the wiring was bad.”

“If only we'd been here,” Nate said with a sigh, turning back to the pile of blackened, steaming timber.

“And what would you have done?” Brooke asked patiently. “I was riding fence, and by the time I saw it, it was too late.”

“I know,” Nate said.

He always thought he was Superman, so she didn't take it personally. She'd ridden beside her brothers from the time she was ten years old, doing everything that needed to be done on a ranch, from guiding cattle to pasture to changing tires. She'd long since proven herself a man's equal.

Doug draped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “I'm just glad you're okay,” he whispered gruffly.

She leaned her head against his shoulder, and they all went back to silently studying the wreckage.

“What did you tell Mom?” Brooke asked her dad, suddenly worried about how this trauma could affect her mom's recovery.

“About the fire?” He hesitated. “I tried to minimize your involvement, but I'm afraid she figured

me out. I think she's okay, but—”

“I'll go visit her, put her at ease.”

“A good idea,” Doug said with relief.

Nate glanced at Josh. “I never did like to use this barn much once we built the new one—too far away from the main house.”

Josh rubbed his chin. “Mighty cold walk in the winter.”

Brooke rolled her eyes, knowing there'd be a lot of discussions later. She glanced at Emily. “You want to come to the hospital?”

Emily grinned. “Can we stop at the Widows' Boardinghouse? Your grandma will be worried, too.”

When Emily had first come to town last spring, she'd had no place to go, and Nate had taken her there, where the widows had made a fuss over her and insisted she stay until her building was habitable. The building had been vandalized by the last tenants, and Emily—with Nate's help—had made the repairs herself. Instead of selling and going back to San Francisco, she'd stayed to open her own bakery, a dream she hadn't known she had.

Brooke thought Emily's idea to visit the widows a good one, and she tried to tell herself it wasn't because Adam Desantis was staying there.

The two women went back to the main house, so Brooke could shower, then drove Brooke's Jeep to the boardinghouse on the edge of the property overlooking Silver Creek. The house was a white, three-story Victorian, with pretty gingerbread trim and wraparound porches where you could always find a perfect view of the mountains. A sign out front said WIDOWS' BOARDINGHOUSE as if they took in guests. Not paying guests, but they certainly sheltered the occasional lost person who needed a home. As Emily was thinking the same thing, the two women shared a grin.

“I still miss it here,” Emily said, as they drove around behind and parked near the back porch.

“Really?” Brooke asked in disbelief. “You have your own apartment, no one to report your every movement to.”

Emily smiled. “I felt cared for.”

Together, they crossed the porch and entered the kitchen. Brooke never failed to smile when she saw all the cow decorations, from the horns on the wall where she now hung her coat, to the cow and bull salt and pepper shakers, to the pastoral scenes of grazing cows during all four seasons that lined the walls.

The three widows were gathered in the breakfast nook, papers spread across the table, but they all looked up with various exclamations of surprise and relief when they saw their visitors. Adam wasn't among them, and Brooke felt a little disappointed, although she told herself it was natural to be curious about him.

The widows tried to unobtrusively gather together their papers, as if they had something to hide. Brooke exchanged a glance with Emily, who pressed her lips together to conceal a knowing smile. Brooke wondered what new project the widows were working on for the Valentine Valley Preservation Fund. They were the most active ladies on the committee, from handling the grant applications

dealing with possible investors. But they always kept their projects private until they were ready to reveal them. And then sometimes all hell broke loose.

Grandma Thalberg rushed forward first, her hair unnaturally red and curly above a face skillfully highlighted with makeup. She wore crisp jeans and a turtleneck, with a corduroy vest for added warmth. Her eyes filled with tears. “Brooke!” she cried, throwing her arms around her granddaughter. “Oh, you brave, brave girl!”

Hugging her back, Brooke found herself sniffing at the powerful emotions that surged between them. Her grandma spent more time at the ranch than not, the home she’d once ruled over with Grandpa Thalberg. Brooke remembered countless hours on her knees weeding the garden at her side, hearing the stories of the ranch from the silver-boom days, tales that had been passed down through the generations.

Brooke looked over her shoulder at the other two ladies. Mrs. Ludlow resembled someone’s perfect vision of a grandma, with her cloud of white hair, pressed slacks and blouse, and her smooth use of a walker. Then Brooke saw Mrs. Palmer, and she remembered Adam’s concern. Mrs. Palmer’s blonde wig was still perched atop her head like a crown. Her face was devoid of her usual makeup, making the lines of age starkly visible, though she was wearing a bright red-and-green polka-dotted dress as a token of the approaching holiday season. She had a cane over her arm, but at least she didn’t use it. She rose smoothly from her chair.

“Oh, Brooke, I was so worried about you!” Grandma Thalberg said, managing to give Emily a quick hug before continuing her scrutiny of Brooke.

“When Adam saw smoke,” Mrs. Palmer said excitedly, “he just ran off before I could do anything.”

She didn’t *sound* any different, Brooke thought with relief, and her stride was brisk as she approached.

“Everyone is okay.” Brooke towered over the three old women and Emily, and felt like a mother duck trying to reassure her ducklings.

“I could hardly stop to explain.”

Brooke heard the deep male voice, and her breath gave a little hitch of surprise. Adam was standing in the doorway that led to the first-floor bedroom suite the widows used for guests. He was wearing only a t-shirt and jeans over boots, and his short, sandy hair was damp and wavy. The bandage was a white patch on his tanned cheek. His shoulders seemed to touch both edges of the doorframe, then he leaned against one side and crossed his arms. His somber eyes regarded the newcomers, and she felt flustered. That, she thought, was an alien word to her—“intrigued” was far better.

Emily gave the sweetest smile and walked toward him, hand outstretched. “Adam, I’m Emily Murphy, Nate’s fiancée.”

“Adam Desantis. A pleasure to meet you, ma’am,” he said, as they shook hands.

Then his gaze slid past her to Brooke, unreadable, but enough to make her nervous. And she was never nervous.

Emily glanced over her shoulder at Brooke, eyes wide with innocence. “Brooke said you were very brave, going into a burning building.”

Brooke forced herself not to roll her eyes.

“It must be all that Marine training,” Emily added, when he said nothing.

He gave her a small smile. Brooke tried not to study him, but it was difficult. He seemed so . . . different. She remembered a young man who would jump into every conversation to make himself part of it. For a boy whose grades weren't all that great, he'd always raised his hand in class even if he didn't know the answer. He liked to be in the spotlight. He had opinions, and a belief in himself that was a bit overinflated . . . more than a bit. Now there was a calmness about him, a watchfulness, that hinted at deep thoughts he didn't mean to share. He glanced at her more than once, and she couldn't look away.

And there was his body, of course, the finely sculpted arms and chest of a soldier beneath the tight olive t-shirt, the narrow hips, the thighs that jeans had to stretch across. Brooke felt a little flushed under all the scrutiny she couldn't seem to stop.

“If only I'd read the cards this mornin',” Mrs. Palmer berated herself, “I would have known somethin' was goin' to happen.”

She was leaning on the cane now, when she hadn't seemed to need it a moment ago, and her voice had a faint quiver to it. Brooke tried to catch Grandma Thalberg's eye to give her a bemused look but couldn't.

“‘Read the cards’?” Adam echoed with confusion.

“Tarot cards,” Mrs. Palmer said, reaching out to Adam as if her walk across the kitchen had tired her.

Brooke frowned as she watched Adam lead his grandma back to the kitchen table. “What don't you know about Mrs. Palmer's health?” she whispered to her grandma.

Grandma Thalberg just waved a hand as she whispered back, “We're all getting old, dear. You can't expect our strength to stay the same. Renee's fine.”

*Fine?* Well, she'd seemed fine at first, but she didn't now. Brooke felt a little pang of worry at the thought of Grandma Thalberg too old to weed the vegetable garden or serve dinner to all the neighbors who came to help at branding time. Adam must have felt the same, by the way he hurried back for Valentine from . . . where?

“Tarot cards,” Adam was saying, doubt laced through his deep voice as he sat down opposite his grandma.

His limp had disappeared, and Brooke was relieved he hadn't been seriously hurt.

“I didn't practice the art when you were small,” Mrs. Palmer told Adam. “I learned it much later. I like seein' the patterns that tie the present to the future. I can offer guidance and possibilities for someone who needs them—without soundin' like I'm buttin' in.”

“I must admit I was skeptical,” Mrs. Ludlow said, shaking her head, “especially when she convinced Mrs. Wilcox, who works part-time for Monica, that her headstrong daughter might be wise

child but everything would work out fine. And don't you know, the boy proposed the next day, right on the Rose Garden bridge."

Adam continued to frown, and Brooke chuckled, though she could have told him not to try to solve the logic in what the widows did. Surely Mrs. Palmer had written to him of their continued exploits. They'd certainly done a few wild things when he was a boy. But he was already gone when they gave the given cap guns to all the kids attending the grand opening of the toy store, only to set off the smoke detectors.

Adam began, "Grandma, you know—"

"Can you stay for dinner, girls?" Mrs. Ludlow smoothly interrupted. She gestured to Grandma Thalberg. "Rosemary is going to make her famous chicken salad. And we still have cookies from the Sugar and Spice left over from the school bake sale."

Emily grinned, then her expression clouded as she looked at Mrs. Palmer. "I know you're on the schedule at the bakery tomorrow, Mrs. Palmer. I'd be happy to cover for you if you're not feeling well."

"You work?" Adam said to his grandma in surprise. "You didn't mention that on the phone. You don't need to do that."

"It's only been the last few months, and I enjoy it," Mrs. Palmer insisted. "We all work part-time for Emily, along with several of our friends. That way none of us works too much. So don't worry about me, dear. If I'm feeling poorly, Connie and I will exchange shifts."

Mrs. Ludlow nodded regally. "Of course we will."

Adam didn't look convinced, and Brooke didn't want to hear the negotiation.

"We can't stay for dinner, Grandma, but thank you," Brooke said. "We're on our way to see my mom."

"I'm sure she needs to see for herself that you're okay," Grandma Thalberg said. "You go on, and we'll expect you both another time."

"Of course," Brooke said, reaching for her coat. "Thanks."

"Can I speak with you for a moment?" Adam interrupted.

Emily bit her lip and let her big blue eyes go all innocent. It was a handy talent, Brooke thought, with fond exasperation.

"I'll wait here with the ladies," Emily said. "You two go ahead and talk in the parlor."

If Adam thought "parlor" an old-fashioned word for the living room, he didn't say so. Brooke led him through the formal dining room—too close to the kitchen—feeling all prickly with the knowledge that he was looking at her. She didn't know what the heck her problem was. She stopped in the parlor where the widows' crafts decorated everything, from crocheted afghans on the back of the couch to needlepoint pictures of ranch landscapes on the wall. Turning to face Adam, she saw him looking around with bemusement.

"I keep thinking this place is old," he said, "but then I look beneath the Little-House-on-the-Prairie décor and see all the remodeling."

“*Little House on the Prairie?*” she echoed, amused. “That was barely in repeats when we were kids.”

“Grandma insisted I watch with her,” he said without embarrassment.

Brooke had to admire his attitude. She saw his gaze focus on an antique tin candle mold.

“She absorbed more of it than I thought,” he said. “She wanted mementoes of the show, and I told her about eBay, but didn’t think she could manage a computer since she never wrote me an e-mail.”

Brooke gestured behind her to the old dinosaur of a computer, with its big cube monitor. “They don’t have that, so you never know. As for the house, my brother Nate is responsible for the other improvements. He remodeled the place before they moved in, gutted the kitchen, put in all new windows, anything you can think of.”

“Surprised he has the time.”

She shrugged. “He made the time. We all love our grandmas.”

“Now do you see what I meant about mine?”

She sobered. “I do. She does seem . . . off. I asked my grandma, who only answered that everyone gets older.”

“Not an answer,” he practically growled.

Brooke could sense his frustration, but he didn’t pace, didn’t betray it with movement. He was always so still. It was not a normal characteristic of the men she knew, and she found it oddly attractive.

“I’m not going anywhere until she’s doing better,” he continued. “I’ll talk to her doctor, whatever it takes.”

Brooke felt both interest and uneasiness at the thought of his staying. She wasn’t sure she liked the way he made her feel, a jumpiness she hadn’t experienced with the few guys she’d dated over the years. Heck, she was usually as easygoing as her brothers.

Or maybe she was honestly attracted to the man Adam Desantis had become.

“You’re staying here at the boardinghouse?” she asked although she knew the answer.

“Yeah.” A frown deepened the lines of his brow as he gave another glance around, then sighed.

Brooke smiled. “The décor not masculine enough for you?”

His gaze came back to her and didn’t let her go. “Something like that. And what’s this about tarot cards?”

Brooke put up both hands. “*That*, you’re going to have to discuss with her. Now I’ve really got to go, Adam. See you later.”

She turned back toward the kitchen, wondering if he was checking her out from behind. But she didn’t glance at him again, and by the time she’d donned her boots and coat, and reached her car, she was feeling almost disappointed not to know.

“Now *that* was interesting,” Emily said with amusement as she buckled her seat belt.

Though Brooke suspected she was referring to Adam, she gave a whistle as she backed out of the driveway. “Poor Mrs. Palmer. I had no idea.”

Emily's smile faded a bit. "She started using the cane just this week. I tried to make her sit and eat frost cupcakes, but she says she likes being out with customers. The other two widows are taking it in stride. Hopefully that means it's nothing too serious."

"Adam thinks it is. That's why he dragged me into the parlor."

"That's why?" Emily batted her lashes at her. "I don't know if you're right about that. Seems to me Adam just wanted to be alone with you."

Brooke felt a touch of guilty pleasure mixed in with her suspicion. But she kept her eyes on the dirt road as it became asphalt right before entering Valentine Valley. "I've never been the type he was interested in."

"As your dad said, war can change a man. Maybe he's figured out that Valentine is where he belongs, and he's ready to find a wife and make babies."

Brooke coughed as if she were choking. "Where the hell did *that* come from?"

"Should I take the wheel so you don't kill us?" Emily laughed merrily until she wiped tears from her eyes. "The expression on your face . . ."

"Look, I'm glad if Adam straightened himself out. According to Mrs. Palmer, he did well in the Marines. But I don't think people's personalities change all that much. He was full of himself in high school until he was caught joyriding in a stolen car."

Emily winced. "Well, we all make mistakes . . ."

"The judge was good to him, a first offender and underage, so they assigned him to the supervision of the football coach. And yes, by focusing on football, he found something he was good at. But he was still so arrogant. He had no use for me, and I had no use for him." *But I could think of a few uses for him now . . .*

"I understand," Emily said solemnly, even though her eyes twinkled. "Maybe he's not thinking that way now."

"Let's not go crazy," Brooke said, but she felt a little thrill of pleasure. *Stop it*, she told herself.

They reached the light where Main Street ended at Highway 82, and she turned onto the highway toward Aspen. They drove the twenty minutes in silence. Snow blew across the road occasionally, but it was clear for the most part. As they reached the exclusive town, she loved seeing the mountains crowded with skiers and snowboarders, stretching up toward the blue sky. On the left were tiers of mansions built into the foothills and sprawled across the valley, their windows reflecting the sun.

At the hospital, Brooke led the way into her mom's room, then held a finger to her lips for Emily's benefit. Sandy's eyes were closed, a book across her lap. The room was a flower garden, vases brimming with roses, daisies, and multihued carnations, all nestled in Baby's Breath or greenerery. Brooke recognized Monica Shaw's handiwork in more than one display. "Get Well" cards lined the windowsill.

Brooke hesitated a moment, telling herself her mom looked no different, that she was petite and always appeared small in a hospital bed. She had Nate's deep black hair, helped a bit with coloring now, and it framed her face in an attractive way. Even in the hospital, Sandy made sure she looked



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