

Chapter One

Hope Moore held her breath as she passed the sign declaring Welcome to Devil's Falls. She hadn't crossed the town boundary in thirteen years, not since she sat next to an open grave as they lowered her brother into the ground. Not since she turned her back on her entire life here, whisked away by her parents to the best medical facilities Texas had to offer.

She touched her knee. She'd never cheered again, never run track, never done any of the things she'd had planned when she was eighteen and had graduated high school with stars in her eyes.

Stars in her eyes, and love in her heart.

Neither had lasted past that car crash.

Oh, it had taken the love a lot longer to die than it had her knee, but Daniel Rodriguez made sure she knew where she stood with him.

She caught herself taking her foot off the gas and picked up speed again. There was no telling if she'd see him while she was here, but it couldn't matter. She'd moved past what happened that night, moved past the disappointment that she'd almost let sour everything else about her life. It might not have happened like she planned, but she'd made the best of her college experience, and she'd gone on to create a successful little niche for herself, helping people and institutions with too much money on their hands create trusts and scholarships for those in need.

And now Hope was back in town to finally do that in her brother's memory.

She pulled onto Main Street, heading for the only lodgings someone out of town with no relatives to stay with would consider—Sara Jane's B&B. It was a nice little place, but Sara Jane was nosy to a criminal degree and gossiped more than anyone Hope had ever come across. The

second she checked in and went up to her room, everyone with a phone would be getting a call letting them know that she was back in town.

It wasn't that it was a secret, but she couldn't help but feel that she'd always be John Moore's little sister, the one who survived when her older brother—her better in a lot of ways—didn't. She *knew* that was her own insecurity. She'd had too many years of therapy to believe anything else, except in her darkest heart of hearts, the place she didn't let see the light any more than strictly necessary.

But it was hard to ignore that little voice when driving through Devil's Falls. No, not through. *To*. This was her destination.

Her parents hadn't been too thrilled about her coming back, even for a limited time, but even they couldn't deny that this scholarship she was here to set up was a good thing—the right way to honor John. He'd been in the middle of a full ride at the University of Texas when he was killed, and it made sense to set it up to allow other kids the opportunity he'd never be able to realize.

She pressed a hand to her chest and pulled into the nearest parking spot against the curb. *God, even after all this time, it still hurts.* Most days it didn't. He'd been gone long enough that she'd processed her grief as much as one person could process grief, and she was able to focus on the good memories.

Most days.

Her eyes focused on the sign she'd been staring blindly at, and she frowned. Cups and Kittens. That was new. In a town as mired in the past as Devil's Falls, change was something of a novelty. Or maybe she was biased in a negative way, because the only thing this town held for her was memories. Some bad, mostly good, all dust now.

Pathetically grateful for something external to focus on, she climbed out of her car and looked at the cheery window painting depicting kittens frolicking in between flowers.

The B&B could wait a little while longer. Her meeting with the town board wasn't until tomorrow, so there was no reason she couldn't do a little poking around in the meantime. Thirteen years was a long time. If anyone had asked her, she would have joked that she hadn't expected anything about Devil's Falls to change while she was gone.

Apparently she'd been wrong.

She pushed through the door and froze in the face of a pair of cats staring at her from their perch on a table overlooking the big window in the front. The sight surprised a laugh out of her. "Cups and Kittens, indeed."

"In the most literal sense."

She glanced over at the woman behind the counter, a third cat lounging near the register. Familiarity rolled over Hope. "Jules Rodriguez." Daniel's little cousin. Not so little anymore. Last time she'd seen Jules, the girl had been lanky to an almost awkward degree and had braces with bright green bands. She'd grown up pretty, and there was more of Daniel about her now than there had been when she was a kid.

Or maybe I'm just back in Devil's Falls and seeing Daniel wherever I look.

Jules's dark eyes cleared. "Hope? What are you doing back in town?" She hesitated. "I don't suppose you're back to sweep my brooding cousin off his feet and shove him back into real life?"

Her mind tripped over itself trying to keep up with the other woman's verbal gymnastics. Jules had always been like that, now that she thought about it—a bright and bubbly steamroller. She tried to weed her way through what the woman had just said, but there was only one thing

she could focus on. Daniel. Always Daniel. “What do you mean, back into real life?”

“Well, you know.”

No, she really didn't. She studied Jules's face, the way she wouldn't quite meet her eyes. “Is he okay?” She hadn't missed the way Quinn Baldwyn had frozen up when she'd asked that same question a few weeks ago at his sister's wedding, and worry had been simmering in the back of her mind ever since, no matter how many times she told herself it wasn't any of her business. Daniel was a grown man, and he had always been more than capable of taking care of himself—and everyone else around him. Things changed, but she couldn't see *that* changing.

Jules shifted, her hand darting out to pet the calico on the counter and then darting away when the cat swiped at her. “Define okay.”

It was none of her business. It stopped being her business a very long time ago.

But that didn't stop her from clearing her throat and asking, “Is he... is he married?” *Did he build the house we always talked about and have those two wild boys and one sweet girl? Does he bring his wife waffles for breakfast in bed on the weekends?*

Oh my God, stop.

But Jules was already shaking her head, her mouth turning down. “Nope. No wife, no kids, no serious relationship in, well, thirteen years.”

Hope blinked. “You're joking.”

“I wish I was.” A calculating look came into her eyes, but then she shook herself and it was all guileless enthusiasm. “What are you doing for dinner?” She rushed on without waiting for a response. “We're having a little thing with Quinn and my friend Aubry, and, well, I kind of went and married Adam Meyers.”

Some things really do change. She remembered Adam, the wild-eyed boy who'd grown

into a wild-eyed man, better than she remembered Jules. No one had expected him to come back to Devil's Falls after he blew out of town that last time, let alone to settle here and...get married.

"Wow. What's Daniel have to say about that?"

"He was best man at our wedding." Jules laughed. "Though he was pretty furious at the beginning. Here, sit down. You look like you could use a coffee, and I'll tell you the story since we're generally pretty dead Thursday nights. Then I'll close up and we can go to dinner. The boys will love to see you. Quinn was just talking about you the other day."

Hope wasn't sure she actually agreed to any of it, but the next thing she knew, she was drinking coffee while a cat curled up in her lap and listening to Jules's wild tale about a fake relationship that turned into a real relationship. Somehow in the middle of that, she was bundled up into Jules's truck, and by then it was too late to change her mind.

She settled into her seat, consoling herself with the fact that Jules had very specifically *not* mentioned Daniel's name. There was no reason to think he'd be there, but it *would* be nice to reconnect with some of her old friends. As much as it had hurt when things went south with Daniel, knowing that she'd lost Quinn and Adam, too, had just been salt in the wound. She'd chased them around since she could toddle after her big brother and his friends, and they'd turned into true friends over the years. She understood why they hadn't reached out, but she wasn't going to turn down a chance to catch up with them.

It would probably be the only nice thing about being back in Devil's Falls.

"Not interested."

"You haven't even heard what I'm asking."

"Don't need to." Daniel Rodriguez leaned down and unbuckled Rita's saddle and hefted

it off the horse's back. They'd had a good run today, the hot sun making it impossible to think too hard about anything other than whether a human being could roast alive in Texas in August. He hadn't yet, so that put the odds ever so slightly in his favor.

All he wanted was to finish here and head back to his place for a cold shower and an even colder beer.

It would just fucking figure that the universe had other ideas. He glanced up, but Aubry Kaiser hadn't moved. In fact, with her arms crossed over her chest and her chin up, all signs pointed to this adding up to an argument he couldn't possibly win.

Damn it.

"No."

She frowned harder. "It's your birthday. You can't just sit at home by yourself."

"Since it's my birthday, this is the one day a year I should be able to do *exactly* that with no one bitching at me." He regretted the harsh words almost as soon as they were out of his mouth, but Aubry wasn't like his little cousin. She was meaner than a rattler and twice as likely to bite.

She narrowed her amber eyes at him. "Your cousin misses you."

That explained why she was out here when he knew for a fact she thought horses were akin to goats—as in, the devil's own creatures. Hell, she was giving poor Rita a suspicious look even while guilt-tripping him using the one person in his life he couldn't say no to.

Which doesn't explain why Jules herself isn't here.

"She sees me on a regular basis."

"This is your birthday." Aubry sighed and rolled her eyes, looking put-upon. "Look, it goes like this—Jules has worked really hard to put together a surprise birthday party for you, and

if you don't show up to be surprised, she's going to be crushed."

He stared. "I don't want a surprise birthday party." The fact that it was no longer a surprise said a whole lot about Aubry's priorities, and he couldn't blame her for that.

"Look at my face. This is the face of a woman who doesn't give two fucks what you care about. What *I* care about is Jules, and that means you're going to go shower off the smell of that animal and show up at their house in an hour, right on time." She paused, her brows slanting down in an expression that was downright forbidding. "You helped me out not too long ago, so I'm going to do you a solid and give you the lowdown. Ready?"

Fuck, no. "Sure."

"Jules is worried about you. Really worried. If you don't show up tonight, she's going to take that as a sign to go forward with plan B."

He knew he was going to regret it, but he still asked, "What's plan B?"

Aubry gave a tight smile. "A full-scale intervention with everyone in your life, including your parents. The kind where they sit you down in a circle and each speak their mind in the most uncomfortable way possible until you're ready to beg the ground to swallow you whole." Her smile dimmed. "She's worried about you, Daniel."

Everyone seemed worried about him, though they usually did him the courtesy of at least trying to hide the looks exchanged when they thought he wasn't looking. The whispered conversations with his various cousins and his parents. The never-ending work that was only there because they were throwing him a goddamn bone. It didn't seem to matter that he hadn't done anything requiring an intervention. He'd just stopped enjoying the company of people, mostly because he was such shitty company these days. But try telling that to the family, and they acted like he had just confessed to being an ax murderer.

At least Jules had mostly stayed out of it. Up until today.

He grabbed the curry brush and went over Rita's back. Aubry was right. Showing up to a party he didn't want on a day he sure as fuck didn't feel like celebrating was vastly preferable to the alternative. "Explain to me what the plan is."

She gave a grin that did nothing to reassure him. "Dinner and drinks. It'll be nice. Adam and Quinn miss you."

"I see those assholes every day." Kind of hard not to when they worked the ranch alongside him. It felt right to have Adam back, to have Quinn there, but at the same time it was a constant reminder that they were a man short.

And it was his fault.

"It's different and you know it," Aubry continued, obviously enjoying how miserable he was. She'd always been a mean one, which never failed to amuse him because Jules was her polar opposite—as bright and happy as a spring day. Rita shifted in her stall, and Aubry went even paler than she was normally. "Dinner starts at six. Don't be late." Then she was gone, moving at a clip fast enough that a less cautious man than Daniel would call it running.

He waited a good five minutes before he followed, hauling the saddle into the tack room and sorting out the bridle. He didn't begrudge Quinn his happiness—or Adam, for that matter—but sometimes it sure as fuck was hard to be around them and their women. The fact that one of those women was his little cousin barely entered into it.

He headed for his truck and took the pitted dirt road leading around the edge of his parents' property to the little house he'd built a few years ago. It wasn't anything fancy, but it got the job done, and it was far enough outside town that most people thought twice before stopping by unannounced.

Most people not including his family.

The shower did nothing to ward off the feeling of pending doom. It wasn't that he didn't like Jules or Adam or Quinn or whoever the fuck else was going to be at this damn party, but he wasn't in the partying sort of mood. Truth be told, he hadn't been in that mood for over a decade. It was almost enough to make him call the whole thing off, but the knowledge that Jules would have no problem bringing the party to him got him moving again. Not to mention the potential *intervention* he needed like he needed a hole in the head.

At least if he went there, he could hang out for the appropriate amount of time, make his excuses, and slip out while everyone else was occupied. Two hours, tops.

Feeling significantly better, he pulled on a pair of his favorite old jeans and a T-shirt and grabbed his keys. It struck him as he walked out the door that he was thirty-fucking-four years old. *How the hell did that happen?* He shook his head. He knew damn well how that happened. One day turned into a week, a month, a year, a decade. All while he kept on keeping, the world changing around him, but never changing enough.

He glanced at his watch. "Two hours starts when I get there."