

CHAPTER ONE

Journalists traveled light—especially the unemployed ones running from a tsunami of poor choices. Of course, she wasn't exactly running since she had nowhere else to go.

And now no way to get there.

She watched the flames perform interpretive dance over her 1967 Ford Falcon against the backdrop of the night sky. The interpretation wasn't encouraging.

Her eyes darted to the silhouette of her material possessions now piled in the dark just beyond the edge of the road.

Two medium sized cardboard boxes labeled Fresh Peanuts, an overstuffed Army Surplus duffel bag, and a backpack. She looked like a Hurricane refugee—which wasn't far from how she felt. *But when you're the hurricane, it's hard to escape the destruction.*

Somewhat telling that at age twenty-six everything Maribel owned had fit into the back of a car.

Pressing a hand against her stomach, she exhaled, but couldn't rid herself of the uneasy premonition things might go from bad to worse at any moment. She stared over her shoulder into the dark. Even if something—or someone—were there, she'd never see them. The itchy feeling she was never alone crept up her spine.

She stanchied the flow of rising unease. A job at a simple country camp should give her the chance to get her head emptied of the shadows haunting her.

No one knew she was here.

Shaking the feeling off, she looked at the car and flinched.

For a reason she refused to acknowledge, she'd never bothered to paint the car, leaving it exactly as it had been given to her. Unfortunately, the coat of faded gray primer gave off a deathly sick glow in the flames licking against its exterior. She glanced at the scorched "Life Is Good" t-shirt in her hand—a birthday present from her aunt. She'd used it to swat at the engine inferno before the lack of success and singeing arm hairs made her give up and shift her efforts to rescuing her possessions that weren't yet smoking.

Annoyed the shirt wasn't more useful for fire suppression or proclaiming the truth, she tossed it into the overgrown grass lining the side of the sticky-hot asphalt. One less thing to unpack from her duffel bag when she got to the Pool of Siloam Camp. Not that she planned to unpack. She'd labeled this job temporary.

Her Falcon sat there, calmly letting the fire devour its little body without a fight. But who was she to pass judgment?

Pulling her cell phone from her back pocket, she checked again to confirm it hadn't miraculously acquired a signal since the last time she checked. The battery level blinked a fading five percent. Not encouraging.

The dread of night and a deserted road through the thick cedar backwoods of central Texas was the exact point on the map a woman didn't want to be stranded. Alone. With no cell service.

Nothing new in the life of Maribel Montgomery.

A firm believer *Thou Shall Not Litter* should have been the Eleventh Commandment, she blew out a frustrated breath and retrieved the shirt.

Nothing but stars and a thin sliver of moon pierced the dark above. By her estimations, she was at least seven miles from the camp outside Turnaround, Texas. Doable on foot, unless she

factored in the black of an almost moonless night, snakes, wild hogs, coyotes, and other predatory animals, not the least of which might be of the human species. And did she mention snakes?

The correct protocol for abandoning a flaming vehicle had never been considered. Uncertain, she watched as the last of her net worth nosedived toward negative oblivion.

The car meant more to her than an entry on her list of assets. The Falcon knew her comings and goings and didn't judge. It just waited in the parking lot for her to return—good days and bad days. Always there, always the same. Always keeping her secrets. Friends like that were hard to come by.

She didn't want to be here to watch it become another of her victims—or explode. She took a step back.

Running her fingers through her wind-whipped hair, compliments of driving with the windows down, she lifted the tangled mane from her skin. The warm night air brushed against her neck, turning the damp skin into gooseflesh.

Maybe she did need to find a farmhouse with a phone. She couldn't spend the night out here alone—especially if she wasn't alone.

She picked up her backpack and spun to meet the glow of headlights punching through the night a quarter mile up the road. Relief lasted no longer than the moment of surprise. If there had been anywhere to go, she would have stepped aside from the beam that grabbed for her. At five feet, three inches, Maribel's best defense wasn't intimidation, but showing fear wasn't going to be her ally either. She tucked a sweat dampened curl behind her ear, then crossed her arms, trying to recall why she hadn't bought a gun for protection when she first felt watched.

Oh yeah, fear she'd accidentally shoot someone who didn't need shooting—such as herself.

That she spent too much time scanning police reports for news stories and evenings alone binge-watching true crime shows until the wee hours of morning didn't help. It was the heroism and

self-sacrifice, not the wickedness, that inspired her. But it proved to be an unhealthy habit currently feeding her sense of helplessness and paranoia.

The truck picked up speed, hurrying toward her flaming vehicle. Braking hard against asphalt still hot enough to cook Spam, it slid to a stop several yards away. The smell of rubber tires added another layer of acrid stench to the smoky air.

The headlights blurred Maribel's vision, but not enough to hide the bulk of a man who got out. He reached behind the seat of the extended cab truck and pulled out something she couldn't see.

He would help her, right? Nothing to fear.

She drew her shoulders back, inching her spine up to its height of maximum menace.

Striding toward the flames, the man popped the pin on a fire extinguisher and sprayed the engine. He gave Maribel a quick glance but kept his attention on the area under the hood, then searched the grass for stray embers. Satisfied the fire was out, he shifted his full regard to her.

"You okay?" His sandpaper voice rasped across the night between them.

She swatted at a blood-sucking mosquito and nodded, unwilling to extend the scepter of friendship simply because he carried a fire extinguisher in his truck.

The world was a wicked place. However . . .

"I'm good. Thanks."

His untucked faded denim work shirt stretched tight over the expansion of a waist that wasn't as young as it used to be. Gray hair, silvery in the light, stuck out from beneath his straw cowboy hat. Mid to upper sixties she'd guess, although his deeply lined and tanned face made it hard to tell. Long hours of hard work in the bipolar Texas weather had that effect. But his right hip concerned her most, where the sharp angled bulge beneath his denim shirt divulged the holstered gun strapped to his side.

"You all alone?" His voice scratched the night again.

Maribel ran a dry tongue over drier lips and nodded.