

Chapter One

“Come on! We’ll be late to the Christmas party!”

Brooke McGuire hesitated in the doorway of their cabin, flinching at the frustrated growl in Kyle Carrington’s voice. Her hand trembled on the door handle. Late to a party she didn’t want to attend. Not after the way he’d acted today. Okay, the way he’d been acting the last month.

“Do I need to come get you?” he snarled. The moonlight shone bright and let her see his glare through the lowered passenger window of his prized 1972 Ford F-100 pickup truck pulled in front of the porch.

She glanced back into the home they’d shared for nearly two years. They’d—more she than Kyle—had such hopes for a new beginning when they’d come here to the Bar Double D Ranch. Hopes that had disappeared with his gradual change in behavior. Dreams that had faded. It was time to let them go.

“I’m coming,” she called back, her voice rough as she forced a smile and pulled the door closed. She reached to make sure the fancy scarf her friend Darcy had given her was still wrapped around her neck. She’d never worn it before, not being a scarf-type person. Tonight, it was more than a fashion necessity. It hid fingerprint bruises from earlier when Kyle had violently reacted to what he considered her nagging. “*Shut the hell up!*” His words continued to scream in her head.

“About damn time,” he grumbled as she eased up into the cab. He didn’t seem to care or notice her wincing. Nor did he wait for her to buckle in. He just jammed the gas pedal down and spun the truck out of the yard.

She scrambled to fasten the seatbelt. Even though she knew he wouldn’t like it, she said, “I could drive. I know you’re tired tonight.”

His answer was to down the snow-covered ranch road toward the highway leading to Conifer, Colorado. The headlights danced over patches of glazed ice beneath the snow on the blacktop highway. That worried her almost as much as the man she’d once loved in his current mood. “Maybe we shouldn’t...”

He reached across the bench seat and grabbed her left forearm, squeezing hard enough she felt pain through the thick down coat. “We’re *not* discussing this again! Understand? We’re going.”

She nodded and whimpered in pain as he gave a final squeeze then released her arm.

The slight sound caught his attention. He glanced at her. There was enough reflected light for her to see his confusion. He’d had a similar expression after the attack earlier.

When he looked away, she sucked in a breath, and stared out the side window. Tears blurred her vision. He wasn’t the only one confused. She didn’t know how to deal with him anymore. She hated giving up on anything, including their failing relationship.

Without a word, Kyle turned on the radio and adjusted the outlaw country music to head-throbbing loudness. He didn’t want to talk. Neither did she. She was all talked out. He no longer listened to anything she said, especially her urging him to get counselling for the PTSD that seemed to be getting worse. Her final mention of it this morning had unleashed more fury in him than he’d ever shown before. She’d reached the limits of what she could take or give.

Tomorrow when he went to Denver for ranch business with Tucker Dalton, she would pack her clothes and leave. She’d take the fifteen-year-old Jeep she’d bought a few months ago against Kyle’s wishes. And she’d hope it would get her somewhere away from here. Leaving the

ranch and the friends she'd made would be rough. She had no choice though. It was a matter of survival.

She watched the snowfall grow heavier. Frost crystals coated leafless branches of Aspens and pine trees. Icicles hung in spots on fences. Her stomach knotted. She shivered with unease and felt the strain of their situation. Never would she have expected him to put his hands to her throat. They'd argued before, although more and more lately. He'd started saying hurtful things, only to in the next second turn around and apologize. Time and again she forgave him. Until today. Verbal abuse was bad enough, physical abuse changed everything.

A tear slipped down her cheek, and she dashed it away. When they'd met eleven years ago, Kyle had been a warm, laughing man. He'd treated her with such gentleness during their dating years while he'd been in the Army. After his medical discharge three years ago he'd been so different. Like two dissimilar men. The transformation had gotten worse these last six months. He was careful to hide the changes in front of others. Foolishly, she had enabled that out of loyalty and a dying hope he would change back. But he'd begun drinking more and more. He laughed away anyone's concerns and still put in a decent day's work. She should have tried to find out if there was an AA group in the area. Not that he would go.

"Almost there, sweetheart," he announced, dragging her back to the present.

Ahead of them, the lights lining downtown Conifer glinted in the falling snow. Cars and trucks already coated with a thin layer of snow filled the partially cleared off parking lot next to the Civic Center. Even with the worsening weather it looked as if almost everyone from town and the nearby ranches were in attendance. Normally, she would have looked forward to this event.

Brooke sucked in a steady breath and adjusted the scarf again. She had to get through the party without making him suspicious or letting any of the four ranch partners who were here tonight know about her problems. She refused to be more of a burden to them than she'd already been. They'd created a job for her when she'd moved here with Kyle. Tucker was his friend from childhood. He'd gone against his cousins to give Kyle a second chance. Although they had arguments, Tucker seemed to calm him. Hopefully after she left, he could help Kyle when she hadn't been able to do so.

"We were getting worried about you," Darcy Devlin said, walking to meet Brooke and Kyle at the coatroom. She cocked her head and studied the deep blue silk scarf. "I knew it would look great on you, but I had thought you'd never wear it."

Brooke handed her coat to Kyle, then reached up to finger the soft scarf. "I decided this was the perfect night for having something warm around my neck." She was grateful her voice sounded almost normal again.

Kyle thrust her coat and his leather jacket at the teenage girl manning the coat check-in. He didn't bother with a "thank-you" before glancing across the crowded event room. Loud country music came from a local band. Yet people in small groups around the room talked over it. When he spotted the buffet table and the bowl of what would be spiked punch, he grinned. "I'll go fetch us a drink."

"I don't..." She stopped at his frown. "Sure. That would be great."

As he wove his way through the people visiting and the dozen couples dancing in the middle of the large room, she relaxed.

"Something up with you two?" Darcy asked, studying her.

"Of course not," Brooke answered far too quickly when her friend's brow furrowed. "The roads are getting icy. I was just nervous driving here."

She followed his progress. Despite everything, she still had feelings for the lanky, red-headed, green-eyed cowboy. At least for the man he'd once been. Not love, but strong feelings. They'd been together whenever he had leave from the Army. She'd given up her dream of going to culinary school for him because he claimed to need her so badly. Nobody else had needed her so she'd been unable to resist.

"Did I smell alcohol on him?" Darcy pressed, tugging Brooke back to the moment. Her friend also watched Kyle walk away.

Since he didn't have to work today, he'd begun drinking mid-afternoon. Something that happened far too much. Another reason their disagreement had gotten so out of control. "Just a little," she fibbed, not wanting to get into the problem. "I love your dress."

As she'd hoped, Darcy was distracted. She stretched to her full five-foot-nothing height and did a little spin. The skirt of the calf-length red dress fluttered around her. "I love it too! Tucker bought it for me special for tonight. Isn't he the greatest cousin ever?"

Brooke smiled. "He spoils you rotten." Darcy's two male cousins and her brother all did, but Tucker did more than the others. The big, quiet cowboy with rough edges had a heart of gold. He was loyal to his family and friends. Another reason she hoped he would be there for Kyle after she left him.

"What are the two prettiest ladies at the party doing standing here chit-chatting?" Tucker asked, walking up behind them. He eased between them and put an arm around their shoulders. "Why aren't you dancing?"

Brooke gave a quiet hiss of pain from his hand on her shoulder. She'd ducked away from Kyle when he'd gotten angry again, fearing another attack. She'd stumbled and crashed shoulder-first into the fireplace mantle. "Sorry," she said in a rush, feeling heat creep up her neck. "You know me, accident prone. I stumbled at home today."

Tucker dropped his arm and studied her with a pinched brow. The man wasn't a fool and hadn't bought her excuse. Nobody had ever seen her be prone to accidents. "You seem.... I don't know.... tense. What's going on?"

She forced a laugh and avoided his narrowed, smoky blue gaze. "Like I told Darcy, the drive here made me nervous. Slick roads. I'm still a wimp with Colorado winters after living so long in Texas."

One of his thick eyebrows lifted in question. But Kyle returned with a cup of punch for her, and Tucker turned his attention to his friend. "Brooke said the roads are getting slick. Think we should call this party off? Tell everyone to get home before driving gets worse. We want everyone to be safe."

Kyle scowled at her and snorted. "Don't listen to her. She's just not in a partying mood." He chugged down his cup of spiked punch. "I am."

He took her cup and chugged its contents too, then shoved the cups at Darcy. He grabbed Brooke's arm and tugged her toward the dance floor. "Time for us to do some boot-scooting."

She winced at the tightness of his grip, knowing she would have more bruises later. But she couldn't make a scene in front of their friends. She glanced back at them, with yet another forced smile. "See you all later." Kyle had been one of the best dancers she'd gone honky-tonking with. *Had* being the keyword these days. Now he tended to misstep a lot, crunching her toes. Then he'd laugh it off or blame her for not paying attention.

He stopped a few feet away and grinned approval. As if needing to show his claim on her, he leaned down, pushed aside her waist-length dark brown hair to nuzzle the side of her neck. She stood frozen, letting him, but not experiencing any of the fluttery sensations as when

he'd done it in the past. Any feelings of attraction were long gone.

As he straightened, annoyance flashed in his already red-rimmed eyes. "What's up with you? You usually like that."

She grimaced at his loud complaint, embarrassed that her friends might have heard him. The country band had launched into a wild version of Luke Bryan's Country Girl Shake It for Me. Tucker frowned but didn't appear to have heard. He turned to Darcy and said something to make her laugh. Then he set the cups Kyle had handed her on a nearby table and pulled her to another part of the dance floor.

It didn't take long for Brooke's feet to hurt from dancing, and from Kyle's stomping on her toes. When he decided he needed another drink, she nearly sighed in relief. He led her to a back wall and planted her there. "Stay here! Don't move an inch!"

She stood stiff, trying to act as calm as possible, hating to be ordered by anyone. Around them the filled-to-capacity event room pulsed with noise: people talking and laughing, some singing along with the band, a lot of boots stomping on the cement floors. This would be her opportunity to leave unnoticed.

"I'll fetch us more of that mighty fine-tasting punch." A smile more sneer than anything else settled into place. "Then we'll dance until the band quits."

He leaned down to nuzzle her neck, pushing the scarf out of his way. "Ain't that right, pretty lady?"

She nodded when he stepped back, and she quickly readjusted the scarf. "Sure, Kyle." Those had become her most used words of late.

Pleased with her agreement, he walked away, wobbling a bit, laughing it off.

Okay, this was her chance to leave. Except her coat was in the coatroom, and the keys to their truck were in his pocket. She could at least step out into the cold winter night for a few minutes of peace. Maybe she would think of another way to get home.

"Is something bothering you tonight?" Darcy asked, easing back to look up at Tucker.

He felt bad about being a poor dance partner and gave her a feeble smile. "Sorry. I shouldn't have come tonight." He didn't want to admit his problem was seeing Brooke with Kyle. More and more he tried to avoid being around his oldest friend's woman. Everything about her drew him, and that was so damn wrong.

"Can't get the storm and the cattle off my mind. I should—"

She gave an unladylike snuffle. "Seriously? The cattle have been in other winter storms. They'll be just fine this time, too."

It had been a pathetic excuse for his behavior. Still, he wanted to leave. His interest in partying had faded when his former girlfriend walked past him on the arm of her new husband. She beamed with happiness. Her pregnant belly a clear sign that she'd gotten what she'd been wanting for the three years she and Tucker had been together. A man's commitment and a baby. He hadn't been able to make that big move toward marriage. His parents had tainted the idea of a good union being possible, at least for him. Still, he wished her the best.

As if Darcy suspected where his thoughts had wandered, she said, "You okay, seeing Danielle and Billy?"

He smiled, glancing across the dance floor at the couple. "We weren't meant to be together." He gave Darcy a little twirl. "She deserves a good man like him. I'm happy for them. Really."

When she spun back into his arms, she pressed, "You still think marriage and children

aren't for you, don't you?"

"We're not going there." Sore subject and not one he wanted to discuss. His gaze shifted across the room where he spotted Brooke appearing to sneak out the front doors. *What's she up to? Where's Kyle?*

"I need to go speak with someone." He nodded toward the other side of the room, hoping Darcy wouldn't ask him who.

With his first luck of the night, the widower she had been seeing stepped beside them. "Mind if I steal your partner away?" Todd asked, his eyes only for Tucker's petite cousin.

Darcy's face lit up, and she abandoned him. "I thought you weren't coming tonight." They spun away together and left him forgotten.

Stupid move or not, he eased his way through the crowd to trail after yet another woman he could never have a future with. She was the kind of woman who would make a man a good wife. Not high maintenance like some women he'd known. Not flighty and flirty like some rodeo bunnies he'd been with in his younger years. Down-to-earth and hard working. She'd sure shown that since hiring on as their cook for the guest ranch operation. Loyal and more tolerant than anyone else he knew outside of his cousins. At least she was with Kyle. He might be a good friend, but Tucker wasn't sure he deserved her.

He found her on the snow-covered wide cement landing outside the Civic Center. In the lights above the door, he saw a blustery wind whip around her. Her long denim skirt wrapped around her legs. She rubbed her thin blouse covered arms for warmth. Foolish woman should have grabbed her coat.

She looked out at the falling snow which had gotten thicker since he'd arrived a couple of hours earlier. By morning, it would snow in everyone at the ranch. He and Kyle wouldn't be driving into Denver. The idea didn't bother him, but Kyle had been looking forward to getting away. He'd talked about them staying a night or two in the big city, hitting a honky-tonk, sharing some beers. He'd even brought up that wild night the two of them had in Dallas four years ago. A night that shamed Tucker and tried never to think about. The last time he'd gotten drunk enough to do something damn stupid. He'd known better after surviving his abusive, alcoholic parents and his own year of too much drinking on the rodeo circuit.

He didn't want to think about any of that. "Are you all right?" Tucker asked from beside the door, his breath fogging the air.

Brooke gasped and whirled to face him. Her chocolate brown eyes were wide in surprise. She'd been so lost in her thoughts she had missed the door opening and his approach.

She shrugged and attempted to slow her rapid breathing. "I needed fresh air." When her gaze met his, he thought he noted a flash of awareness, of something like attraction. Then she glanced away. He figured he'd assumed wrong. The attraction was one-sided and damn wrong. He was an idiot.

Idiot or not, he needed to be closer. He moved until he towered over her by a good six inches, until he drew in her soft feminine scent. But she sucked in a breath and her expressive eyes widened even more. *Fear? What the hell?*

He inched backward, reluctant to leave her. Something was wrong. He knew it in his gut. Then he noticed a tear on her cheek and narrowed his eyes.

She saw his reaction, must have realized what he'd seen. A small hand reached up to dash the tear away as she attempted to laugh. "Must have gotten a snowflake in my eye."

Looking closer, he spotted a thin trail of mascara below one eye. She'd been crying. "Don't think so." He could take a lot, but not a woman's tears. "What's going on, Brooke? Why

are you out here freezing to death? Crying?"

"I... I..." Her teeth chattered, and she looked anywhere but at him.

Unable to stop himself, he moved closer again and tipped up her chin until their gazes locked. He saw a wealth of pain in her eyes. It cut at him. "Talk to me," he prodded gently.

She shook her head. "I can't," she whispered. He could see her wanting to pull away from him. Yet she didn't.

Common sense failed him. It was that moth to a flame thing. His fingers still held her chin. The softness of her skin, the slight flaring of her nostrils, the heat in her gaze brought every cell in his body to life.

He lowered his head. *Don't do this! Damn, man! Stop. Now.* But he couldn't.

His lips were so close to hers that he felt the warmth of her breath. She hadn't moved an inch, neither toward him nor backward. It made her impossible to resist, and he tried. Tensing.

Somehow, he heard the whoosh of the door opening behind them. Footsteps crunched on the ice building on the landing. He stepped backward, heart pounding at what had almost happened, at being caught in an awkward situation.

When he glanced at Brooke, she'd paled, looking horrified.

"You sonofabitch!" Kyle roared, stomping toward them. He grabbed her arm to jerk her away from Tucker. His fingers dug deep enough to make her cry out in pain. Then he shoved her to the side and sent a dark, smouldering scowl at him. "I ought to kill you." He lunged forward.

Brooke's boot heel twisted, causing her to lose her balance. She would have fallen if he hadn't reached for her shoulder and shoved Kyle back at the same time. As his hands touched her, she gasped.

Pain again. "What's wrong?" he demanded, frowning and releasing her.

She ignored him to focus on Kyle. "It wasn't what you thought," she declared and backed away from them. "It wasn't."

"Don't lie! The bastard's lips were on yours!" Kyle swayed and took a threatening step forward. His gaze captured hers. "You were kissing him back. You damn slut!"

"No. No, it didn't happen," Tucker protested. But it almost had. A second later, it would have. "It's not Brooke's fault."

"The hell it wasn't!" Kyle barked, reaching for her.

Brooke flinched, not surprised by Kyle's assertion. Everything that went wrong in his life these days was *her* fault, so he claimed. Every time he lost his temper and verbally struck her was her fault. All the fighting, the name-calling, the accusations were exhausting. The almost brutal making-up afterward had become more than she could stand. Lately there hadn't even been that between them.

"Kyle, please—"

He cut her off with a hard, flinty-eyed look. "We'll talk about this later," he snarled.

"No—"

His expression told her she would pay for talking back once they got home. But she wasn't going home with him. She shook her head, but he shifted his glare to Tucker.

"We quit. Both of us. I'm not working for a worthless piece of shit who tries to get into my woman's pants."

"Kyle!" She knew this was more than his excessive drinking today. There was more to his irrational behavior, but he wouldn't talk to her about what was going on with him. She'd tried over and over.

His eyes flashed. “You flirt with every man in sight.” He glowered at Tucker. “At him, my damn so-called best friend.” He swayed on his feet again, blinked, and steadied himself.

Her stomach twisted; heat rose up her face. It wasn’t true. She never flirted although he’d accused her of doing so many times. She’d let things go too far, too long.

“You need to shut the hell up,” Tucker cut in, temper simmering in his deep tone. “Stop accusing her of things that aren’t true.”

Kyle stepped right into Tucker’s face. “Back off! You’ve been panting after my girl ever since we came to the ranch. It ain’t right!”

Brooke gaped at him; shocked he’d say such a thing. “You’re wrong,” she protested. “He’s a good man. A loyal friend.”

“Don’t be so damn naïve.” Kyle pinned Tucker with a piercing look. “Tell her the truth. Tell her!”

She caught the flinch on Tucker’s face. He wouldn’t look at her. Still, her opinion didn’t change. Tucker Dalton was one of the finest men she knew. He had never once crossed any kind of line, until tonight, when he’d danced right on the edge. To her disgust, she’d wanted him to step over that edge.

Eager to save their dying friendship, she moved to the men and put a hand on Kyle’s muscled forearm. “Don’t keep saying things you can’t take back. He’s your friend. He—”

He shoved her away again; she stumbled backward but stayed upright. To her dismay, her scarf unravelled.

Tucker growled low in his throat, balled up a fist, and shot it at Kyle’s face. “You’re drunk, asshole.”

Kyle moved to miss the blow. He launched himself at Tucker. The two men, both with work-hardened muscles and several inches over six feet tall, fell to the concrete landing with a heavy Thump! They rolled to the edge of the six snow and ice-covered steps.

Fists flew, flesh landed hard against flesh. Curses grew louder, angrier. To make a bad situation worse, the snow changed to sleet and pelted down hard.

“Stop!” she pleaded, trying to figure out how she could separate the men. “Please! Stop!”

Drawn by her distress, Tucker glanced at her. Mistake. Kyle drove his fist into Tucker’s mouth. Blood trickled from the corner. She winced, blaming herself.

All of this was her fault. She shouldn’t have let Tucker even touch her, but she hadn’t been able to resist that small amount of comfort he offered. It had been missing in her life. Kyle hadn’t touched her in nearly a year with any gentleness. He had become controlling, possessive, aggressive, and now violent. This was turning into one of his worst moments.

Tucker shook his head. Shaggy, black hair brushed his collar. Blood dripped onto his white shirt, growing wet from melting sleet pellets. He cupped his injured jaw. Then he looked from her dangling scarf to the bruises on her neck.

“What the hell?” He turned toward Kyle again, now standing, angry beyond words.

She tried to wrap the scarf again, mortified at what he’d seen. “It... it’s nothing,” she mumbled.

“You did that?” Tucker hissed, pinning Kyle with a furious glare.

For a second, Kyle appeared confused as he looked at her. “We argued.”

“Argued!” Tucker shouted and shoved to his feet. “You put your hands around her throat.”

Kyle rammed a fist into Tucker’s stomach.

Determined, Brooke moved closer. “Stop!”

The men glowered at her for interfering. "Stay back," both growled.

Uncertain what to do, she retreated. Her heart hammered, and she wrapped her arms around her ribs. Tucker was distracted watching her.

Kyle hit him again, causing Tucker to stumble backward. He reached up to cup his jaw, swore as more blood trickled from his mouth. "Damn, Kyle!"

She felt sick about the fight. This had to stop.

Kyle's expression hardened. "This has been a long time... coming." The words came out slurred.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Tucker shook his head, his forehead creasing. "What's gotten into you? You're acting crazy."

Kyle's fury exploded. He attacked Tucker with a forcefulness she had never witnessed before. She needed to do something. She shouted, "Stop it! Oh, God, stop!" She grabbed Kyle's shoulder and tried to pull him away. An impossible task.

"Stay out of it, bitch." His eyes glistened with loathing when he glanced at her. He thrust her aside.

She fell on her butt and pain shot up her tailbone. Despite it, she tried to scramble to her feet. Her long skirt hindered her effort and her heels couldn't get a grip on the ice accumulating on the concrete.

She screamed, praying someone inside the building would hear her. The music was too loud. The partygoers boisterous.

With mounting fury, Kyle shoved Tucker to the ground. The back of his head crashed against the unforgiving cement. He looked dazed for a second, blinking.

She gasped, "Tucker!" Her reaction earned her a look of loathing from Kyle.

When Tucker didn't retaliate, Kyle's face lit with triumph. He took advantage of the moment snagging her arm, fingers digging deep into her forearm. He jerked her up so fast she slammed into his chest and cried out in pain.

Tucker snarled in outrage and tried to regain his feet.

Kyle bent to thrust his shoulder into her stomach. She cried out even louder. Unconcerned and out of control, he tossed her over his shoulder, against his wet shirt. He'd left his coat inside. Her scarf slid off.

"Put me down!" Pummeling his back, she tried to kick. "Let me go!"

He ignored her. Trudging on, he held her legs tight against him. She couldn't kick anymore. All she could do was hope he didn't slip on the ice coating the parking lot. She prayed someone would leave the party and see what was happening.

Behind them, she saw Tucker on his feet, trying to run in their direction. His boots slipped and yet he fought to stay upright. A large patch of ice became his downfall. His arms windmilled, and he crashed hard on his butt.

She locked gazes for a second with him, feeling helpless, hopeless, and guilty. None of this should have happened. She should have left Kyle last month when she'd thought about it.

A roar of frustration carried toward her in the breeze. "Dammit, Kyle, put her down." Again, Tucker tried to climb up from the slick pavement.

She pounded Kyle's lower back. He didn't seem to notice.

When he reached his beloved vintage pickup truck, he yanked open the driver's door. She fought to resist him dragging her from his shoulder and stuffing her inside the cold cab. She struggled to get to her knees on the torn vinyl bench seat, tried to scramble to the other door.

He latched onto her leg, stopping her. "You're not going anywhere without me." His hold

on her leg turned tighter, painful.

“You can’t do this!” Brooke shrieked. “Let me go!”