

**Heroes of Westhorpe Ridge 3: Desire, Deceit, and the Doctor**

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## Chapter One

Mandy Devlin heard Duffy, the black border collie they were minding for the sheriff, barking somewhere outside. As she peered through the hotel window, her son's frightened yell rang out. "Mom! Help! Get him off me! Put me down, you creep."

Heart racing, she snatched up an empty beer bottle from behind the lunchroom counter as she pelted through the hotel. When she shot out the front door, she saw a huge man standing by a SUV. He held Ben aloft and snarled something Mandy couldn't hear. Both looked like they'd taken an impromptu swim. Their hair plastered their scalps. Their soaked clothes clung to their bodies. Neither wore shoes. The stranger had his back to her, but a pool of water had already formed around his feet. Over his shoulder, she saw Ben's pale face and wide, terrified eyes.

Panicked, breathing hard and fast, Mandy raced across the hotel's parking lot. "Let my son go. Now."

The big guy holding her son ignored her and growled at Ben. "Be quiet and behave."

He sounded fierce and raspy, as if he had something stuck in his throat. Furious, scared, and determined to free her son, Mandy brought the bottle down on the stranger's head. It smashed into a satisfying shower of broken glass. The stranger released Ben, staggered slightly, and crumpled facedown at her feet.

Ben tumbled to the ground. Tears ran down his cheeks, but he would hate that he'd cried. If Mandy had a dollar for every time he'd told her, "*I'm not a little kid anymore,*" she wouldn't have needed a mortgage to buy the hotel. Right now, he was a terrified little boy in need of a hug. He hurled himself into her arms and sobbed against

her chest. Oblivious to the water dripping off him, she clung to him and spoke soothing nonsense.

Only when Ben calmed did she realize how hard she trembled. A knot of nerves settled in her stomach, and her legs felt weak. God alone knew what would have happened if she hadn't heard her son's shrieks. The stranger still lay facedown on the pavement. Hand shaking, she took out her cell phone and called the local sheriff, Sean Mathews. "A man attacked Ben. I think I've killed him."

Ignoring the fallen stranger, she concentrated on calming her son.

Sean arrived within minutes, closely followed by the ambulance he'd summoned. The paramedics jumped out. One tended the stranger while another wrapped a foil blanket around Ben's shoulders. "Are you hurt, son?"

Ben shook his head. "I'm okay, thanks to my mom."

Sean pulled Mandy and Ben aside. He gave them a reassuring smile then crouched at the boy's side. "Can you tell me what happened, squirt?"

Tears ran down the boy's cheeks. "I took Duffy for a run on the sand. I know you said to take him on the cliff top, but he prefers the beach. When I threw his ball, it bounced off the rocks and splashed into the water. Duffy couldn't see it, but it bobbed in the waves a couple of yards from the shore."

Mandy sucked in a breath. "Please tell me you didn't go after it, not when I've gone on about the riptides."

Water dripped from Ben's hair and onto his face. His bare feet made wet footprints on the pavement as he shuffled his weight from foot to foot. "I didn't think it would be so bad. Only, this huge wave knocked me over. The next one washed me so deep I couldn't stand up. I couldn't swim back to shore either. Then I went under and couldn't get back to the surface."

Mandy hugged him again. "Thank God you're safe, but you're grounded until you learn to listen. I make rules for a reason."

Ben pointed at the man the medics were checking. "He ran down the beach, dived in, and hauled me back to shore. Then he picked me up and shouted at me. He wouldn't put me down. I couldn't get away no matter how hard I tried. Duffy kept barking and jumping up at him, but he yelled, 'Sit,' and Duffy did."

Mandy glanced around, wondering where the dog had got to, but her concern for Ben overrode everything.

Her son hiccupped in a great lungful of air. "Once we got off the beach, he opened the back door of his black SUV. Duffy jumped in and sat there like he owned it. I thought that man meant to shove me in his car and drive off, especially since he wouldn't put me down. I tried to squirm free and yelled for Mom. I—"

The rest of his words were lost as he buried his head against her chest and wept harder. Mandy stared at the black SUV, the same make and model every tourist rented. It would have faded into traffic and vanished if the guy she'd decked had managed to force Ben inside it. Only, according to Ben, the man at her feet was a hero not a kidnapper.

Now she'd heard the truth, she wanted to shake Ben too. Not that she ever would, but her temper still burned inside her. The guy she'd brained with the bottle had risked his life to rescue her son. She felt bad that she'd assaulted her son's savior, but nothing gave him the right to manhandle Ben. Torn between tending the stranger or kicking him for upsetting her son, she swallowed hard. "Is he dead? Please tell me I didn't kill him."

As she spoke, Ben's rescuer groaned and tried to sit up. "What the hell?"

Gods, she knew that voice. It might be deeper, smoother, and sexier, but she'd never forget the three years she'd spent dating its owner or the dreadful way things had ended between them.

One of the paramedics eased the injured man's arm out of his shirt and gently held him in place. "Lay still. You've had a blow on the head, and you've reopened the wound in your shoulder."

Sean's jaw dropped. "Adam? You weren't due home until Easter. What happened? And what's with that wound in your shoulder?"

Mandy's pulse raced, and she shivered with shock. Adam's voice sounded as mellow as Scotch whisky and just as tempting, making her ache for what might have been. Her hands trembled, and her heart pounded so hard it felt like a hammer trying to break out of her chest.

Even now, she couldn't understand how she'd loved and lost, or why Adam had left her after the one time they'd had sex. Despite the way he'd hurt her, she forced a small smile. One night of sex in thirty years wasn't a great average, especially when the sex had been so bad she'd cried afterward.

At least Adam had moved on and made a life as an army medic, or so she'd thought when she mortgaged her life to buy the hotel. After she'd signed on the dotted line, she discovered Adam would be home soon. "*Easter*," his little sister, Abigail, had said. Mandy had hoped to get Devlin's Hotel's Valentine's Ball out of the way before she considered what to say to Adam, especially since he didn't know about Ben. Now Adam had turned up almost seven weeks early.

She'd always known seeing him again would hurt, but she hadn't expected his presence to make her short of breath or for her body to tremble for his touch. She'd imagined so many ways to greet him once he came home, but none had included laying him out with a beer bottle.

She took a deep breath and satisfied herself that Ben hadn't suffered more than a bad fright. Standing here staring at Adam, she felt scared, excited, and exhilarated, like a human cannonball who'd missed the net. Her gaze felt glued to the only man she'd ever loved. The man who'd hurt her so deeply she'd never dated again.

The intervening twelve years had made his shoulders broader, and when he rose to his feet, he stood taller than when she last saw him. Even damp with seawater, his close-cropped hair shone like a raven's wing. His broad lips still looked they'd been made to be kissed, but he had more muscle than she remembered. At eighteen, he'd

been good looking. At thirty, even soaking wet and furious, he was drop-dead gorgeous. Everything about him seemed...more.

Things had ended badly between them, what with his insults and rejection. *Yeah, nothing like a little public humiliation to make a girl's prom night memorable.* Part of her rejoiced at how she'd conked him on the head with an empty beer bottle. The small, secret part of her that still loved him wanted to cover him in kisses—but he'd made his feelings clear at their senior prom. Calling your long-term girlfriend names and leaving her stranded in the middle the dance floor was a surefire way to end a relationship.

Face set, voice cold, she stared down at him. "Thank you for saving my son, but you had no right to frighten him."

A growl rumbled from Adam Montgomery's throat. "Your son? Why doesn't that surprise me? Someone needed to shake some sense into him."

Mandy narrowed her eyes at Adam, but considering she'd just broken a beer bottle on his skull, she thought it best to say nothing. Instead, she gave Ben a hug. "Go get a hot shower and put on some warm clothes. We'll talk about what happened later, but thank God you're safe."

The boy hung his head and stared inside the hotel. "If I'm grounded, can I still go to the bakery when Jazz gets back? She promised to bake her best chocolate buns for me."

Frowning, Mandy shook her head. "Inside, now."

The sheriff grinned. "He's a growing boy, and my wife makes the best buns ever. So, Adam, how come you're home ahead of schedule? And again, what's with the wound? Damn, I'd invite you around to dinner, but once I've finished my shift, I'm taking Jazz away for a couple of nights before she officially opens her bakery."

The paramedics finished dressing Adam's shoulder and helped him to his feet. "Remember, you've got a concussion. I know you said no hospital, but you should let a doctor check you over."

Adam towered over him. "I am a doctor, but I had my fill of hospitals from the patient's perspective when they dug the bullet out of me."

The paramedic shook his head and muttered about doctors making the worst patients. "Take it slow for the next day or two, and if you throw up, go to the hospital immediately. Have someone wake you every couple of hours during the night to check you're okay."

Adam nodded. "Thanks, guys. I haven't seen Abigail since my overseas posting, and now I'm dragging her from her new husband's bed at two-hour intervals. She's not going to thank me for it."

Mandy shifted from foot to foot, her fixed smile fading. "Abigail and Jared are having an overnight in Polka Springs City. Jared's cousin, Sophie, testified against the men who murdered her husband, but now the trial's over, Abigail insisted Sophie stay with them while she gets her life back on track. They've gone to pick her up and won't be home until tomorrow afternoon at the earliest."

Adam grimaced. "I sort of lost touch with everyone else. Maybe Doc McFadden will let me stay overnight at his place since I'm buying into his practice. Damn, I shouldn't drive. Sean, can I scrounge a lift?"

Mandy sighed. "I owe you for diving in after Ben. You can have the room next to mine in the family side of the hotel. I'll check on you through the night, but if you say one wrong word to my son, you're out on the street."

Adam shook his head, winced, and gave Mandy an appraising look. "Looks like I don't have a choice."

Clearly relieved he didn't have to postpone his trip, Sean grinned. "Great. I'll get back to work right after Adam tells us about the wound in his shoulder."

Adam opened the car door and patted the dog's head, obviously unwilling to talk about his injury. "Duffy remembered me from our hiking weekend before my last posting. Who says dogs aren't as smart as people? Duffy wasn't the one giving me trouble, but how come you left your dog with the little dude?"

Sean stroked his hand down the dog's flank. "Ben's a good kid and bright, so lay off the attitude. Mandy's done a great job raising him, but I'm surprised she didn't move back sooner. Anyway, Ben's dog-sitting while I take Jazz away for a couple of nights. So, explain the gunshot wound. What've you been up to?"

Adam went to pull a suitcase from his car's trunk. "I got shot. No big deal. The army patched it up, but since my replacement had already taken on my role, they discharged me a few weeks early."

Mandy felt torn, but much as she wanted to check out Adam's wound, she needed to run after Ben and hold him so tight he squirmed. Without Ben, she didn't have a reason to get up in the morning. Her last thought before sleeping should have been about him too, but memories of Adam always intruded in her dreams. She still wanted to yell at him for the way he'd acted with Ben, but if not for him, she might not have a son. The irony almost made her laugh.

Adam showed courage diving into a riptide, especially with a partly healed bullet wound in your shoulder, but he'd always rushed at things—more a bull in a china shop than a fully qualified doctor. Mandy told herself she didn't want him in her hotel, her life, or anywhere near her son. Deep down, she knew she lied. Besides, after smacking him on the head with a beer bottle, she had no choice but to take him in for the night.

Sean glanced across at her as he grabbed Adam's suitcase. "The room next to yours, right?"

Mandy nodded and tried not to think of Adam lying in bed just a few feet away in the next room. Waking him so often wouldn't be a chore. Getting out of his room afterward, however... But that boat had sailed almost twelve years ago. "I serve dinner at seven, but I'll bring yours to your room if you prefer."

Adam's stare made her blush. Finally he growled, "Let the boy's father bring it."

Mandy bit back a laugh. "He didn't stick around once he screwed me. It's me or Ben, and you've already put the fear of God into my son. Either I bring it, or you go hungry."

Adam narrowed his eyes, and his jaw set like granite. "Then I hope he pays you child support. Raising a kid alone must be hard."

Sean stepped between them. "Adam, let it be. Whatever happened, it's in the past. Mandy gave my Jazz a chance when nobody else would. As far as I'm concerned, she's family."

Chin high, Mandy met Adam's gaze. Keeping her hands by her sides almost killed her. She wanted to stroke his pecs or lick the drops of saltwater off his partially bared chest, but she refused to let him walk all over her. "Let's face it, after one night of bad sex with you, anyone's an improvement."

Sean looked between them and shook his head. "I'll dump Adam's case and get out of here. Don't kill each other overnight. Adam, I'll drop a key to my house off in reception. You can stay there after tonight, but no picking on Mandy or Ben."

Beside them, Mandy felt her cheeks heat. "I'll go see how Ben's doing, but Adam Montgomery, I don't want you anywhere near him."

Adam's cold grin made shivers run down her spine. "The feeling's mutual."

What with his attitude, the way her body ached for a man she should despise, and her having to invade his bedroom every two hours, it was going to be a long night.

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