

Chapter 1

A black sports car pulled into Grizzly Gulch Resort's paved parking lot and came to a stop, the purring motor cutting out into silence.

Heather Francis lifted her cordless drill and tightened the bolt holding the bench on a wooden picnic table, keeping half an eye on the car, waiting for the occupant to emerge. She shouldn't have been casing out the situation, but she couldn't help herself, knowing her friend's brother-in-law would be arriving today. The man Aimee said was the sweetest guy and best chef in the world... at least next to her husband.

"Uncle Levi!" a young girl squealed. Eight-year-old Shelby scampered across the yellowing lawn as the man climbed out of the low-slung car. He caught the girl, swung her around, then flung her over his shoulder, holding her ankles. Then his gaze landed on Heather.

She gulped and revved the drill, but looking away was beyond her ability at the moment. Aimee was right about one thing. Levi Esteban was sizzling hot. The man wore black from his cowboy hat right down to the pointy toes of his cowboy boots. His snap-front shirt accented broad shoulders that tapered into a narrow waist, where belted black jeans took over. Even his hair, curling out from beneath that hat, was all but black. Whoa.

He raised his eyebrows in Heather's direction, and she waved. Except it was the hand holding the drill, and her finger convulsed against the trigger.

Zing. Zing. Zing.

Heat flooded her face. Could she come off as any more of a moron? And why had she thought catching a glimpse of the man was worth being identified first as a jill-of-all-trades? But he wasn't supposed to notice her. Not now. Not today. Not like this. She'd only wanted to see for herself before Aimee introduced them like she'd promised.

Still staring, Heather lowered the drill to the table and let go. Thud. She yelped as pain shot from the bridge of her foot and tears sprang to her eyes.

Somehow, she'd missed the table. How had that happened? Why did she have to be so klutzy? And in front of Aimee's brother-in-law, no less. There'd be no way he'd look at her twice now, not with anything other than distaste or pity in his eyes.

She turned away, chomping down on her lip, and leaned down to pick up the drill. Ow. Ow. Ow. Her foot hurt like nothing else had since that elbow in her

eye when she was sixteen. Who knew a ten-pound tool could cause this much pain?

In a minute she'd peek and make sure the man and his niece were out of sight. Then she'd yank off her steel-toed boot, assess the damage, and cry. Definitely cry.

Stupid, stupid Heather.

"Hey, are you okay?" asked a masculine voice. "Looked like that must have hurt."

Heather cringed, not looking up. Couldn't he just go away? Couldn't he have amnesia and forget this ever happened? Couldn't *she* have amnesia?

"You might want to get that boot off before your foot starts to swell."

She'd get right on that if he'd only leave her alone.

"Here, sit down, and I'll give you a hand."

"No. No, I'm okay." *Liar.*

Warm hands caught her shoulders through her hoodie and gently pushed downward.

Heather sank to the picnic bench and allowed her shoulder-length blond hair to curtain her burning face. This seriously couldn't be happening.

Shelby knelt in front of her, peering up. "Miss Heather?" The little girl wore a worried frown.

Please, why couldn't they leave her alone?

"Which one did it land on?" asked the male voice. "Your right?" Long tanned fingers loosened the laces of her boot, nearly hidden behind the cowboy hat as he bent over her foot.

Heather choked back a gasp at the new flood of pain, but a hitch in her breath likely gave her away.

He gave a nervous chuckle. “This might hurt a bit.”

You think?

He grasped her boot and, with a deft twist, pulled it off.

Heather tilted on the bench as pain swarmed her senses. No, she couldn’t pass out. She needed to stay alert. Get rid of this man. Hobble or crawl to her staff suite in the Tomah House across the resort’s grounds.

“Shelby, sit beside her, and let her lean on you.”

Like an eight-year-old could prevent her from toppling. Still, the little girl wedged against Heather’s side. “It’s okay, Miss Heather. Uncle Levi will take care of everything.”

He rolled the sock off and tucked it in her boot. Warm hands engulfed her foot, thumbs gently probing the bridge of it. “I don’t think it’s broken, but you should probably have an x-ray to be sure.” He gave a wry chuckle. “Good thing those are steel-toed boots.”

Today she’d needed complete medieval foot armor. Heather willed her voice to be steady. “I honestly think it will be okay. It’s not the first time I’ve dropped something.” Not usually as heavy as that drill, though, and not usually on her foot. “I’m sorry for distracting you from whatever you were doing.” For calling attention to her clumsiness.

She could just see Mom’s disapproving head-shake. *A little more gracefulness, Heather Jeannine. Remember your training.* Right, those twenty-seven pageants had a purpose. To make Mom proud.

“Are you sure? Try putting some weight on it.” His hands settled on her waist and lifted.

Heather pushed his hands away. “I don’t even know you.”

The black cowboy hat tilted up and astonishingly green eyes assessed her from where he knelt in front of her. A grin softened his sober expression and crinkled the skin around those amazing eyes. Aimee had somehow missed mentioning them. “Levi Esteban, at your service. Shelby knows you, so I’m guessing you’ve met my brother, Jared, and his wife, Aimee?”

She nodded. “I’m Heather Francis. Someone who shouldn’t be allowed near power tools.” Now, why had she said that? Maintenance was part of her job description at Grizzly Gulch Resort. That, and coaching junior contestants for the Miss Snowflake Pageant... both of which required more dexterity than she’d shown in the last five minutes.

“Now that we’ve officially met, Heather, can you try standing on that foot?”

Why did the guy have to be so doggone persistent? He wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

Heather braced both hands on the bench, sucked in a deep breath, and pushed herself upright. She could do this. She only needed to keep her face emotionless long enough to pass his inspection. Then she’d sit back down until he was out of sight, and *then* she’d crawl to her apartment.

She grimaced as the world wobbled.

“Carry her boot, Shelby.”

And that was all the warning Heather had before Levi’s strong arms swept her off her feet.



Levi Esteban strode across the leaf-strewn yard toward the front doors of the Grizzly Gulch Resort, carrying Heather. She wasn't all that heavy, even wearing one steel-toed boot. Hot pink nail polish gleamed from the toes of her other foot. He'd nearly burst out laughing when he'd rolled her gray woolen sock out of the way. Who'd have guessed a woman wielding a drill had such a feminine side?

Shelby dashed ahead, triggering the resort's automatic door, and Levi followed his niece inside. He headed across the lobby to the cowhide-covered couches cozying up to the massive rock fireplace, flickering with warm flames.

He didn't really want to set Heather down. She'd closed her eyes, probably to avoid having to look at him while he carried her. Unless she'd fainted? He gave her a little shake. "Heather?"

For just a second eyes the color of the Montana sky blinked up at him from below long dusky lashes in a very pretty face. Her shoulder-length blond hair splayed across the black of his shirt. Then she pushed against him.

Levi lowered her to one of the couches, his arms suddenly cold. Empty. He forced himself not to shake his head. His arms should be used to having no one to hold. He'd sworn off having women in his life, and he'd only be in Helena, Montana, for a month or so. He'd fill in for Jared and be back in Seattle in no time, refreshed and ready to step back into his demanding

career. Or, better yet, land the executive chef position at the new location his bosses were opening in spring. Maybe — eventually — he'd meet someone who could put up with him and his life.

That woman was not in Helena. She was not Heather Francis.

He took a step back just as Aimee followed Shelby into the lobby from double doors open to the dining room.

“Levi! So good to see you.” His sister-in-law gave him a quick hug then turned to sit beside Heather. “Shelby told me you hurt your foot. You okay?”

Heather's gaze flashed to Levi's then back to Aimee. “I just dropped a drill on it. I'm fine.”

He doubted that but, if she wanted to lie about it, it was her problem.

“I'll get Mrs. Mackie. She's a nurse.” Aimee began to rise, but Heather's hand restrained her. The perfectly manicured nails matched her toes.

Levi choked back a smirk.

“No, don't bother her.” Heather sucked in her lower lip for a second. “You guys go on and do whatever it is you were doing before I sidetracked you.”

Aimee searched Heather's face. “If you're sure.”

Heather nodded.

“Here's your boot, Miss Heather.” Shelby set it on the floor by Heather's foot.

“Thanks, sweetie.”

Aimee looked up at Levi. “Ready to meet Dr. Mackie? He's in his office.”

“As ready as I’m going to get.” He grinned at her. Jared was lucky to have found this woman. Lucky to have escaped the ghetto of foster care more intact than Levi had, but then, his brother hadn’t been in the system as long. Now Jared had everything. A great job as a chef, a beautiful wife, and a lovely daughter — soon to be two when he and Aimee returned from China with the newest little Esteban.

Levi followed Aimee up the split-log staircase. He’d visited Grizzly Gulch Resort once before but never dreamed of working here amidst its rustic splendor. Rounded log walls rose to soaring spaces intersected by pegged log beams, where antler chandeliers dangled from thick chains.

A far cry from the sophisticated ambience of the Fireweed Restaurant. That was okay. He’d finally cashed in his holiday time after three years, and the western décor felt like vacation.

Levi glanced over the log railing from the mezzanine level to the lobby below only to see Heather hobbling toward the door. Man, she was really hurting. She should stay off that foot longer. She’d probably have a bruise by tomorrow, and she’d be lucky to wedge her foot into that steel-toed boot anytime in the next week.

Aimee tapped on an office door that stood slightly ajar. “Dr. Mackie?”

“There you are, Aimee. Have you brought Jared’s brother?”

She tossed a grin over her shoulder. “I have. Come on in, Levi.” She led the way into the office.

Levi blinked. If it weren't for the log wall opposite him, he'd think he stood in a Wall Street office with its minimalist design. His gaze fixed on the man standing behind the sleek glass and steel desk that could have belonged in the Fireweed. "Dr. Mackie? Pleased to meet you. I'm Levi Esteban." He reached for the older man's hand. Firm grip.

"Pleased to meet you, too, Chef Levi. My wife and I are delighted to have you join us at the resort for the next few weeks. The Fireweed's loss, but our gain."

A flush worked its way up Levi's neck. "Thank you. It's good to be here." He wouldn't let the resort owner know how desperately he needed this break. Watching the bosses' nephew learn the ropes was painful.

"Chef Jared and Aimee are leaving for China — what day is it again, dear?"

"A week from Monday," Aimee supplied.

"Right. In nine days. I'd like you to work every shift with Jared before then, so you can learn how we do things here at the Gulch. Then you're on your own for a month or so, running the kitchen daytimes from Tuesday through Saturday." The dark gray eyes assessed Levi from below thick gray hair streaked with faded red. "Are you up for that?"

"Absolutely." Levi gave a firm nod. It would be a stroll on the beach after dinner rush in Seattle.

"On Friday, there's overtime during our annual Halloween party for the residents of Helena, which the kitchen staff has already begun prepping for." Dr. Mackie turned to the window, pulled back the vertical blinds, and pointed out. "The event takes place there in

the open area by the pavilion. We set up tents for the food and some games, have a bonfire, a costume contest for the children...” He leaned closer to the window, and a frown appeared as he gazed down. “What on earth?”

“Excuse me, sir?” asked Aimee.

“It’s Heather Francis. She’s...” He shook his head. “She appears to be crawling across the lawn.”

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