



Jericho!” Sawyer Delgado bellowed his nephew’s name as the kid slid off the rail fence amid a frenzy of bawling calves and billows of dust. “Nooo!”

Sawyer pivoted Debonair into the melee, his heart in his throat and his gaze lassoed to the spot where the child-size Stetson had disappeared. The wiry pinto cut between dozens of five-hundred-pound calves. How could this have happened? The five-year-old knew better. Who’d even let the boy near the sorting pens? And where was his father, Sawyer’s brother Kade?

Totally oblivious, that’s where.

Sawyer broke through the corral dust and pulled Debonair to a halt.

His nephew grinned up at him from a closed-off chute, his eyes bright with excitement. “Uncle Sawyer! Those calves are *crazy!*”

They were. Sawyer willed his heart rate to slow down, but superimposed on the boy was a vision of what could have been: Jericho's body battered by sharp hooves, his skull broken, blood everywhere. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, but that was even worse, since there was no reality to block the nightmare of his buddy's horrific rodeo accident a few weeks back.

Sawyer forced his breathing to steady and stared out at the mountains beyond his father's western Montana ranch, far from that Texas arena. When he could trust his voice, he turned back to his nephew. "You okay, Jer?"

The boy frowned in confusion. "Yeah, why?"

"You scared me when you jumped off the fence." Nothing had ever frightened Sawyer Delgado before that last rodeo. "I thought you'd fallen in with the calves." The calves that were now milling on the other side of the corral, far from Debonair.

"Sawyer!" bellowed Kade. "Get over here and grab this steer!"

Debonair danced in place as Sawyer pinned his nephew with a glare. "Stay outside the sorting pens. All the way outside."

"I'm safe here. See, there's a gate."

"Outside."

Jericho rolled his eyes and clambered over the rails to the grass beyond. He raised his eyebrows as though to ask if his surly uncle was happy now.

Sawyer nodded. "Stay there." Then he turned Debonair back into the corral where Trevor and Kade struggled to hold a rambunctious steer in the vaccination chute.

"Quit your sightseeing and get in here," Trevor growled, leaning his entire weight against the gate while the calf tried to break free.

Sawyer looped Debonair's reins over a post and jumped in, freeing Trevor to hop over the rails to load the syringe with the four-way solution. Trevor reached through the chute's rails, massaged a flap of skin on the calf's shoulder, and plunged the needle in.

The steer went ballistic, kicking and bawling, but Sawyer kept the pressure tight on the gate at its heels until Kade opened the head-gate and the calf stampeded out to join its buddies.

Kade slammed the head-gate shut and eyed Sawyer. "What were you doing? That calf nearly shoved through the head-gate while you were off gallivanting."

Sawyer skewered his brother with a look. "From here, it looked like Jericho had fallen into the calf pen." If he ever had kids, he'd take much better care of them. Keep them far from danger.

Kade pivoted, shading his eyes against the October sun. "Is he okay?"

"Yeah." Sawyer took a deep breath. "He'd hopped into the exit chute over there to get a closer look."

The older brother shrugged and turned toward his horse. "He knows to stay out of the way." Kade swung onto Bowen. "I'll get the next calf if you watch the head-gate, Trevor."

Trevor filled the syringe and set it on the table outside the chute. "Ready." He scrambled over the rails.

Did no one around here take safety seriously? One mis-step, and Jericho could have been badly injured or even killed. Their mother should keep her grandkids safe in the house on days like today.

Sawyer shoved aside the inconvenient memory of himself as a kid, far more dare-devilish than Jericho likely dreamed of. He'd hopped right in amongst the calves more than once before darting back out, laughing all the way. He was lucky he'd survived.

The mirage of his friend's accident began to sift over this day's reality, but Sawyer superimposed a memory of Anna Winter. Sometimes that helped block the ugliness, until he remembered how she'd stopped taking his calls.

"Quit spacing out!" bellowed Kade. "Get the gate open."

Sawyer blinked, willing the present to win over the past in any form. He surged up the rails then dropped behind the calf and swung the rear gate shut as Trevor slammed the head-gate and Kade slid off Bowen. Somehow he managed to keep his brain in the game, not daring a glance toward his young nephew, not daring another trip down memory lane.

Finally his sister-in-law approached the corral, and the three brothers clambered out and stripped off their gloves. Kade gave Cheri a kiss. "How did the interviews go?"

His wife grimaced. "Not that great. It's hard to find someone who wants to commute all the way up here, and your mom doesn't want someone who insists on virtual work."

They'd been short a cowboy or two this past year, too. Sawyer's dad and brothers had been mighty glad to have him return to the ranch. Only Dad knew the real reason he was back, though. No one else needed to know.

Kade wrapped an arm around Cheri's waist as they led the way toward the ranch house, Jericho's hand clasped in his dad's free one. Sawyer stifled the longing for a family of his own.

Trevor glanced over as he fell into step. "Man, are you okay? You're not the same since you quit the rodeo."

"I'm fine." Liar. "Just got a jolt from Jericho there."

"Nothing used to scare you." Trevor laughed and clouted Sawyer's shoulder.

"I know." He took a deep breath. "Guess I grew up."

Sawyer had taken two steps up the back steps when his phone chimed with an incoming text. He pulled the device out of his pocket and stared at it for a moment, barely aware of the door shutting behind his brothers.

Anna?

As though just thinking about her had conjured her up. But why now, after three months?

He'd tried to convince himself her disappearance didn't matter. That he didn't even care. She was hardly his first, uh... relationship. But he should have known better than to get involved with someone back home. Buckle bunnies chased

rodeo cowboys for the fun and the glory. They had no expectations.

Anna wasn't one of them.

He'd been swept away with her flirty responses to his teasing when he'd been in town for Trevor and Denae's June wedding. It had been fun to needle his brothers at first, but he'd really liked her. She was different. They'd connected a few times over the course of a week or two, texted and called for a few weeks after that, then nothing. As far as he could tell, she'd left Saddle Springs in the rearview mirror, without leaving a trace.

Sawyer wasn't accustomed to being ghosted. It was usually him dishing it out. But he couldn't squash the hope that bubbled up at the thought she was back.

*Sawyer, we need to talk.*

Not a smiley face in sight. Ominous, and completely unrelated to the teasing texts they'd shared in early summer. He'd rather talk than text, but when he tapped her number, it went straight to voicemail. Okay, fine. He'd do it her way.

*Hey, beautiful. I've missed you.* As evidenced by the column of texts he'd sent her since her last reply in mid-July.

This time, however, she responded immediately. *I hear you're in Saddle Springs. I'm here for two days. When can I meet you at the fairgrounds?*

Would Sawyer be able to keep his head in the game for the afternoon work? He'd have to, with a reward like this one waiting for him.



Anna Winter wrapped her bulky sweater around her torso and tied the sash against the chilly evening. There was still a bit of sunshine. That didn't keep it from being cold. Her sweater could keep most of the external chill out, but it did little to thaw the ice in her core.

Seeing Sawyer Delgado again wasn't likely to melt her heart as sight of him had done when they first met. The bold cowboy had been the answer to her very selfish prayer. Now that she was actually praying to a God she had a relationship with, she fervently wished He'd dumped a cold shower on her that June day.

He hadn't.

She paced toward the riverbank, her hiking boots crunching through fallen leaves in vibrant colors. Blue flashed as a Steller's jay took wing across the river, squawking indignantly at being disturbed.

A black pickup wearing the Eaglecrest emblem rattled across the nearby bridge.

Anna wrapped her arms tighter around herself and closed her eyes. *God? I could use a boatload of help here. I know it's my mess, but... please help me.* She watched as the truck

turned into the fairgrounds parking lot and pulled up beside her car.

Sawyer jumped out of the cab, his gaze already fixed on hers as he slammed the truck door and started toward her.

He was gorgeous.

She allowed herself a moment to appreciate his total masculine look from brown Stetson to scuffed boots with shades of denim in between, split with a brass-buckled belt. But his face... that was what she'd missed most. His square jaw with its rough scruff, the crooked nose, the inset of his intense eyes.

Anna turned away to break the connection. What had she been thinking, meeting him again? It would have been best to do this by email, but she didn't know how to reach him that way. Or text. But the entire message was too long to tap out.

No. She was doing the right thing. She'd confess. Then they'd talk like two mature adults. He'd sign the papers she'd brought, and he'd drive back over that bridge while she went the other way.

They'd never see each other again, and that was for the best.

"Anna?"

She took a step away as she turned, arms still in protective mode. "Hi, Sawyer."

His eyes caressed her. "You look great. I've missed you." But there was hesitation in his dusky voice.

Totally her fault, showing up three months after their last communication. He was right to be a little wary, but that was

better than the anger she deserved. The anger that was sure to come.

She raised her chin slightly. "I, um, have something to tell you."

He scanned her quickly before meeting her eyes again. "Oh?"

Suspicious, was he? He had a right to be. "I... I'm pregnant."

Sawyer reeled back a step as though she'd slapped him. "No way," he breathed.

"I'm sorry. I should have known better..." The thing was, she *had* known better. She'd taken a gamble she now regretted.

He shook his head. "It took two."

It definitely had, and those were memories she'd like to erase. "I want to put the baby up for adoption. I shouldn't have taken a chance. Shouldn't have... you know." She clenched her sweater tighter. "I have papers for you to sign. This doesn't need to affect you at all."

Arms crossed over his jean jacket as his stance widened. "No."

"What?" Tears welled in her eyes. Dratted hormones. "Why?" She hated how weak her words came out even as her gaze locked onto his.

"I'm not going to make a snap decision here, Anna. You've had a bit of time to think about this." Those eyebrows rose into his thick hair. "How long, exactly, have you known?"

“Late July,” she whispered.

“Before I came home that time and tried, repeatedly, to get in touch with you.”

Anna chomped on her lip until she felt the pain of it. “Yes.”

“I can count to nine as well as anyone else. You’re what, four months along?”

She nodded.

“So there’s no rush to make a decision. A few weeks won’t matter.”

“I can’t stay.”

“Sure, you can.”

“No. I have a job in Bozeman—”

“I’ll offer you a job here. What are you making? I’ll pay you that, and your medical expenses and free rent besides.”

Anna lurched back a step as she stared at him. “What? No.” Whatever he was offering, she wasn’t taking it.

“Mom’s looking for someone to take over some of the office duties at the ranch.”

“But then...”

Sawyer leaned in a little, his dark eyes sharp. “Then she’d find out? Yeah, she would. My parents will know, anyway. Because I’ll tell them.”

“No...” It was hard enough without that. Why did he think she’d quit her job at the Branding Iron and left Saddle Springs?

He grimaced. “It’s not like they think I’m an angel, Anna. I’ve done my best to flaunt my lifestyle in front of my family,

but you know what? I'm done with all that. I'm back at Eaglecrest for good, and I'll do the right thing."

Anna shook her head frantically. "This isn't the right thing. Signing those papers is. Tonight."

Sawyer stepped closer and grasped her arms firmly but gently. "Look at me, Anna."

She didn't want to. She wanted to either tear herself loose and flee or throw herself into his strong arms. But she forced herself to meet his gaze. Oh, those eyes.

"You want my cooperation? It comes at a cost."

Everything always did, but this price was too high.

"You come to Eaglecrest. There's an empty apartment, so don't worry about that part. I'm not asking you to move in with me."

Her face heated.

"Give me at least one month. No, until after Christmas. If we can't come to an agreement on a different plan by December thirty-first, I'll sign your papers and you can do whatever you want. I'll pay all the medical expenses for... our baby. No matter what we decide."

She'd still have about six weeks on her own in the new year before giving birth. But he was asking for even more time than that now. Time in which she'd face his family's accusations and see him every day. She couldn't. She just couldn't. Anna tilted her chin up, trying for defiance. "Or what?"

“In Montana, a birth mom can't release a baby for adoption without the father's consent. Don't even try to test me. I'll block you. I promise.”

Those dark eyes did not waver. How could he know about adoption laws? Did he have more babies stashed around the state? But a guy who had the nerve to ride wild mustangs had little to fear from a weak woman like her. She'd build a cage for her heart and lock it away. By the time February was over, she'd be on her own, all this behind her. Wiser, by far.

“You leave me little choice.”

“I know,” he said simply, releasing her, then pulled out his phone and tapped it. “Mom?” But his gaze was riveted on Anna's. “You might want to close down the office assistant ad. I've hired someone for you.”

# **The Cowboy's Reluctant Bride**

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