

She leaned into his shoulder, placing her hand over his galloping heart. “I just wanted to pretend like it was all over for a second.”

Tempting to let her...to let himself. But not yet. It was hard to think about what would come after, when there was so much in the here and now that didn't make sense. But eventually it'd be over.

She rubbed her hand against his heart. “This is special. It feels special.”

He closed his hand over hers. *Special*. It seemed like a weak word...but whatever this was, this hard, twisting thing in his chest that felt like some mix of terror and elation, it was special, and it was important. “It is, Hilly. It is.” He pulled her hand off his chest. “But—”

“But we're in the middle of danger. That's the only thing holding you back, isn't it?”

“No. Not the only thing.” He knew the next words would hurt her, but he also knew she needed to hear them. Maybe coming from him it wouldn't be so bad.

“Hilly, you don't know who you are.”

***WYOMING
COWBOY
MARINE***



NICOLE HELM

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Wyoming Cowboy Marine

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Nicole Helm grew up with her nose in a book and the dream of one day becoming a writer. Luckily, after a few failed career choices, she gets to follow that dream—writing down-to-earth contemporary romance and romantic suspense. From farmers to cowboys, Midwest to *the West*, Nicole writes stories about people finding themselves and finding love in the process. She lives in Missouri with her husband and two sons and dreams of someday owning a barn.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Cam Delaney—A former marine who is now starting his own security business. Drawn into the case of a missing person, Cam gets way more than he bargained for.

Hilly Adams—A young woman who's lived off the grid for as long as she can remember. When her father disappears, she seeks the help of police. When they can't help, Cam Delaney steps in.

Laurel Delaney—A detective with the Bent County Sheriff's Department, and Cam's sister. She asks Cam to help Hilly find her father.

James Adams—Hilly's missing father.

The Protectors—The anti-government group Cam and Hilly infiltrate in order to find James.

Zach Simmons—A member of the anti-government group. His secret identity unlocks Hilly's past.

Chapter One

Cam Delaney did not care for being ordered around. It had been one thing in the military. A way of life, one with a clear hierarchy. He could take an order from a superior officer, no problem.

In Bent, Wyoming, the only hierarchy he paid any attention to was the fact that he was a Delaney, and no one told him what to do. There were no superior officers, because he was it.

His little sister hadn't gotten the memo.

"I have a situation," Laurel said with no greeting as Cam stepped out of his truck. He'd parked in the lot of the Bent County Sheriff's Department thinking he'd meet Laurel inside, but here she was waiting for him.

"I told you not to agree to marry a Carson, but—"

"Not that," Laurel returned, not even cracking a smile or offering some sibling teasing back. Which could only mean she was in full-on cop mode. "I've got a woman in here trying to file a missing persons' report for a man who doesn't exist."

Cam slid his hands into his pockets, trying to find some patience with his bullheaded sister. “What’s that got to do with me?”

Laurel sighed as if Cam was a special kind of stupid, which didn’t make him any happier about being summoned. “There’s not much I can do to help her in a professional capacity. But you—”

“I run a security business. For profit. We’re not private investigators, and we don’t work for the sheriff’s department.” It wasn’t a *we* as of yet, but Cam had plans. Big plans.

“There’s something here.” She glanced at the squat building that acted as Bent County’s sheriff’s department. “I can’t put my finger on it, and I don’t have time to figure it out. But you do.”

“Laurel—”

“What big bad security jobs do you have? You’re just getting started. If my town gossip is correct the only job you’ve been hired for is watching Frank Gainville’s cows.”

“He had a serious potential cattle-rustling situation happening,” Cam replied loftily.

“Wasn’t it some teenagers trying to hide their pot?”

Small towns. Why had he decided to move back to one?

Unfortunately the answer to that question was something he wanted to dwell on even less than he wanted to do Laurel’s bidding. “Still solved, Deputy.

Which is more than I can say for you and whatever this is.”

Laurel nodded toward the building, a sign for him to follow her. “Woman came in wanting to file a missing persons’ report. Subject has been gone for a week. Not uncommon he goes off for a few days, but a week has never happened.”

“Sounds routine enough.”

“Would be. She didn’t have his social security number or any pictures, so we ran him to find a social or a photo from the driver’s license.”

“And you can’t find anyone by that name?”

Laurel opened the door and waved him inside. “It’s a common enough name. But we tried every spelling and none of our hits are him, according to the woman. The man she’s trying to find doesn’t exist in any records we have.”

“I still don’t see what that has to do with me.”

“She seems lost. She needs help, Cam, and I can’t do it. It’s outside my job description, and I have a wedding to plan that could very well implode the whole town. I’m telling you, there’s something about this thing that makes me itch.”

He knew that kind of itch. He’d been a Marine for fifteen years. Most people got gut feelings, but military and law enforcement people tended to hone this sense, and to listen to it more closely than civilians.

Except you, when it matters most.

“Just talk to her,” Laurel urged. “See if you don’t get the same feeling I do.”

It took Cam a few seconds to bring his mind from his biggest failure back to the present and his little sister asking for his help.

He would never be able to make up for the ways he’d failed in the past. His conscience ate at him, a black worm of rot that had led him not to re-up with the Marines. That had led him to come home, and try to find some way to help the people of Bent, the people of his blood and bones and history.

If he could help, he should. He would. It would be something to do anyway, and Laurel was right. His fledgling security business wasn’t exactly swimming in customers. Bent was isolated, but he hoped his military background might be lure enough to get some outsider customers. There was a big mine over in Fremont. Some ritzy folk with ranches here and there. He had plans. Big plans.

“Cam?”

He blinked at Laurel and the note of concern in her voice, and the softening features of her face. The last thing he wanted from Laurel, or anyone in his family, was sympathy. Because sympathy was only one step away from pity.

“Who’s the man who doesn’t exist? How is he related to the woman reporting his disappearance?”

Laurel gave him a raised-eyebrow look as she held open another door and gestured him inside. “Her father.”

DAD WOULDN'T BE HAPPY. That thought sat uncomfortably in Hilly's gut as she sat in the small police station.

But he'd been gone a week. He never disappeared for a week. Three days, tops, that was the rule. So, she'd waited three days. She hadn't really worried until day five. For the past two days she'd searched for him herself.

He'd never been gone this long, and he hadn't left her with the tools to survive without him. She didn't have contact with the outside world. Only he did.

Why hadn't she questioned that more? Why hadn't she insisted on him giving her more understanding of what to do if he never came back?

He had to come back.

She swallowed and looked around the station waiting room. It was mostly empty. Occasionally the front desk phone would ring and the man on duty would answer. Mutter a few things, then hang up.

The people in this place kept telling her there was no record of her father. Had seemed generally baffled by their inability to find any information on him.

It was a mistake, was all. Maybe when Dad had moved them off the grid fifteen years ago he'd somehow wiped out all record of himself. It was possible. It was... It had to be true. After all, there was no record of *her* anywhere.

But Dad had grown up in the outside world. He'd only taken them off the grid because he'd wanted her

to be safe. The outside world wasn't safe, and you couldn't trust anyone.

Which was why she had to leave this police station. She couldn't be here. This was a mistake. If something happened to Dad, it was up to her to figure out what. It was up to her to save him.

What had possessed her to think outsiders should handle her business?

Panic. Plain and simple. She didn't know how to survive without her father, and she couldn't *find* him.

She would have to figure this all out on her own, because you didn't trust the outside world. It was only ever out to get you, and that was why there was no record of Dad anywhere. He'd kept her safe, and she'd risked her and his safety all because of panic and fear.

She had to get out of here. Fix this. Disappear back to her life because her life made sense.

She got to her feet a little abruptly, and the man behind the counter raised an eyebrow, but she couldn't worry about that.

She had to get home. Away from the outside world and all its strangers' secrets and lies. She'd go home and double-check to make sure Dad hadn't returned in the time she'd wasted making the trek here and back.

If not, she'd mount a real search, and she wouldn't stop until she'd found him. And if she never found him...

It wasn't possible. She couldn't think like that.

She walked for the door, coming up short when the woman from earlier came through it, holding it open for another person behind her. A man. A large man with hazel eyes that seemed to move over her and file every little detail away.

She didn't like that. Anyone with that kind of interest in a stranger wasn't to be trusted. They both weren't to be trusted, even though the woman had been kind enough.

You couldn't trust kindness from the outside world, Dad had always said. You couldn't trust, period.

So why had he left?

"Were you going somewhere?" the woman asked gently.

Hilly didn't remember what she'd said her name was. Hilly had been out of her mind with panic when the police officer had introduced herself, and their inability to find a record of Dad had been the reality check she'd needed to get her back home, to take care of this herself.

They were probably lying about Dad not showing up in their computers. Computers. That was how the government kept you under their thumb. How they used you against your will.

"I just realized how silly I was being," Hilly said, doing her best to sound calm. Maybe a little chagrined. "He's a grown man who can take care of himself." *And I'm a grown woman who can take care of myself.* Dad hadn't given her any skills to deal with

outsiders or the outside world, but she knew how to survive.

They always survived.

“We’d like to help, if we can,” the woman said kindly.

A lie. Besides, the man behind her looked anything but calm. He looked... She couldn’t even come up with a word for it. It was almost like a void. He didn’t give anything away. “I don’t need help,” she returned, forcing her gaze to return to the woman instead of the man.

“Ms. Adams, you came to us for a reason. Because you’re worried about your father. Now, I know we can’t find a record of him, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to help.”

“It’s very kind of you,” Hilly said politely. “But I think I overreacted. I can handle it from here.”

She scooted in between them and out the door, doing her best not to run. They would find running suspicious. She wanted them to forget she existed, not suspect anything. None of this was their business, and she’d been stupid and dead wrong to think it would be.

She hurried through another doorway and then out the front of the police station. *Idiot.* The word looped in her brain like a chorus. If Dad found out, he’d be furious. She had to get home and make sure he hadn’t returned.

It was a four-mile hike, but it would give her the time to plan and get ahold of herself. She walked

around the building of the station to the back and the bushes where she'd stashed her backpack. She'd been afraid they'd want to search it, and she didn't want anyone finding her revolver.

She opened the pack and checked its contents. Everything was how it should be. She pulled the gun out and stuck it into the back of her jeans. It wasn't comfortable to hike like that, but she wanted to be prepared. She'd stash it away again once she was on safe ground.

Any place where buildings and cars could be seen was not safe ground. Other people weren't safe. Ever.

She adjusted her pack, the gun in her waistband, and then was about to set out toward the trees and mountains when the man rounded the corner of the building, opposite the way she'd come.

He stopped when he saw her. "Ma'am, can I talk to you for a second?"

His eyes dropped to her arm as she slowly moved it to her back, where she rested her hand on the butt of her weapon. He seemed to know, somehow, that was exactly what she was doing as he raised his gaze very slowly and carefully to hers.

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" he asked. There wasn't a kindness or gentleness to his voice like with the policewoman's, but his tone wasn't nearly as hard as his body was.

"A strange man is accosting me in a parking lot."

His mouth quirked, and Hilly's stomach swooped. She felt breathless for a second in the joy of that smile.

Dangerous, dangerous man.

“Leave me alone, stranger,” she said with some force.

He didn't say anything to that and, as she walked away, keeping him in her sights to make sure he didn't follow, his gaze stayed on her the whole time. Until she disappeared over a hill.

She had a bad feeling those hazel eyes would haunt her for a while.