

# ***SHOWDOWN WITH THE SHERIFF***

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and *Small-Town Face-Off*



## *Chapter One*

Declan Nash wasn't having the greatest of days.

Not only was it raining cats and dogs and elephants, his trusty old pickup had decided not to be so trusty.

"Come on, Fiona." He rubbed the dash trying to soothe the truck into stopping her lurching and ominous rattling sound. Fiona the Ford wasn't impressed. Declan admitted defeat by taking the upcoming exit. There was a gas station at the corner of the short road. He pulled in, sighing. "After everything we've been through, you decide to pitch a fit now and here of all places?"

The city of Kilwin, Tennessee, was an hour out from where he had been on the highway. Which meant his hometown of Overlook was an hour and twenty minutes out of reach.

Not that he was reaching for it.

He might have been the sheriff of Wildman County but, as of that morning, he was just a man on vacation.

Or, at least, he was trying to be.

Declan sighed into the empty cab again. His dark blue Stetson, one he only wore on his off days—which meant he hardly ever wore it—sat on the passenger seat mocking him.

"You're about to become an umbrella," he told it.

The rain was having a great old time drenching Declan to the bone after he got out and propped up his hood. He hadn't parked under the gas station awning, worried about his truck catching fire and making a bad situation way worse. That decision got him wet but was reassuring as steam billowed up, angry, at him from next to the engine. There was also an overpowering oil smell.

Declan jogged back to the cab and grabbed his phone. Just in time for the interior lights to blink out.

His battery had died.

So, Fiona was finally going to pitch a fit. After fifteen years of not making a peep, she was doing it during the first vacation he'd taken in at least five.

Declan hung his head and swore. The motion dumped water from his hat into his seat.

Declan swore some more, spied the diner next to the gas station and decided that he was at least going to get some coffee out of all of this. He could deal with the truck once the rain let up.

Still, he grabbed his duffel bag knowing there wasn't an inch in this world to give when it came to the accordion file he had tucked in with his boxers and toothbrush.

"We'll get you figured out, Fiona," he told his truck with a pat after locking her up. He dashed across the gas station parking lot and right into the diner. When he pushed through the front door, heralded in by a chime, an older woman with a nice smile met him.

"When it rains it pours, huh?" she greeted, motioning to one of the large-pane windows that ran along the front of the building. He could see his truck through the one next to the last booth. "We have some fresh hand

towels in the kitchen. I can get you some to dry off a little if you'd like."

Declan took his hat off and pressed it against his chest. He gave the woman—Agnes, according to her name tag—a smile that he meant.

"That would be much appreciated, thank you."

Agnes went off to the kitchen while Declan took the booth in the corner so he could keep an eye on his truck. He set his duffel on the floor next to the seat.

Then he had a moment of internal crisis.

His hands itched to open his bag and pull the folder out, to riffle through the pages he'd already read and reread countless times. To look at every piece of evidence that had been collected for over twenty-five years. To see his own notes and compare them to the ones his father had made when he had been a detective.

Then Declan heard an inner voice warning of doing just that.

It wasn't his conscience; it was a collective featuring Madi, Caleb and Desmond. They'd all made it clear that they were concerned Declan was blurring the line between dedication and obsession. That finding justice, finding the truth, wasn't worth the toll of the quality of his life.

Not after the same obsession had taken their father's life.

Since Declan was their big brother, a part of him prickled at being directed at what to do or, more aptly, what not to do. Just as quickly, though, as his gruffness reared its head, he'd remind himself that in the small town of Overlook, they weren't just bystanders.

Madi, Caleb and Desmond had told him that from experience they knew what it was like to be slowly

consumed by a mystery. He had to learn to let go and live a little.

Considering the case was about their abduction, Declan figured they might have a point.

Now, though, with his truck broken down and the rain trapping him inside a diner that had only two other patrons, Declan couldn't help deciding his vacation hadn't *really* started yet. This was more of a pit stop. Which meant if he looked at the files now, it didn't count against him.

Agnes returned with a few hand towels, cutting off the physical action of taking the folder out. He ordered a coffee and some bacon and eggs and returned the towels. Then he retrieved the folder and put it down on the tabletop with minimal guilt and maximum focus.

He hadn't been there at the park that day.

He hadn't been attacked and taken and held in a basement.

He hadn't had to trick a man and fight to get out as the three scared and hurt eight-year-olds had done.

He hadn't had to make the terrifying trek through the woods to find help.

No, Declan hadn't been there at all.

He'd been too consumed with his own little world to notice the triplets had disappeared until an hour after the fact.

And then he'd had to wait with the rest of Overlook for three days, hoping and praying they would find nothing but good news.

Declan could still feel the helplessness that had nearly crushed him during the wait.

And now?

Now Declan was older, smarter.

Now Declan had focus and patience and a lot more experience.

Now Declan was the sheriff.

He couldn't save the triplets from what had happened, but he could damn sure finally give them the peace they deserved.

The rain continued to fall. Music from the kitchen floated to the front. Declan didn't wrestle with his choice anymore. The diner would actually be the perfect place to look over the newer evidence. No one from his family at his shoulder. No one from the sheriff's department by his side.

He opened the folder.

No one was going to distract him here.

The time for questions was over. Now it was time for answers.

REMI WAS, AS her cousin Claudette said, a "Hot Mess Susan."

Not the worst thing she'd been called in her thirty-three years of life but definitely not the most flattering, either.

What was worse than being called a Hot Mess Susan?

When the nickname actually applied to her.

And now, pulling into the diner off Exit 41B, it definitely applied.

Remi cut the engine in a parking spot and let out a sigh that had apparently been trapped in her chest for the last hundred miles. It dragged down her shoulders, slouched her back and put pressure on the stress headache that had been brewing all morning.

"Go see your father," she muttered to no one, adopt-

ing her mother's pushy voice. "It'll be fun. Stop stalling, Remi. It'll be *fine*."

Her mother wasn't right about much...and she was wrong about that, too. It hadn't been fine. In fact, it had been awful and exactly what she had expected.

Josh and Jonah had met her with hugs and sibling love, and then all of that mush had soured when their father had sat them down at the dinner table. The questions had started and they'd all daggered her. Remi had felt like she was interviewing for her job at Towne & Associates all over again. However, instead of sitting across from a group of public accountants she was looking at three cowboys who didn't understand a lick of why she'd left the ranch all those years ago in the first place.

Which was why she hadn't told them of her current problem. One that she'd been wrestling with before she ever decided to heed her mother's advice and go see the Hudson men in Overlook.

How she ever thought they'd take a second to think outside of the ranch and help her, she didn't know.

But now with the rain hitting the roof of her car, reminding her that she didn't have a rain jacket or an umbrella, Remi felt her troubles being pulled back to her. That, and the weather, had been one of the reasons she'd taken the exit and parked herself outside of a diner. It's neon open sign was a distraction she was ready to fully embrace.

She grabbed her purse, tucked her phone in the waist of her exercise leggings and tried to think about how see-through her shirt was going to become just from her short jaunt between the car and the front doors.

Then she ran.

And immediately became drenched.

A chime sounded over the door as Remi danced inside. She was met with cool air that made her now-wet clothes cold. A song was playing somewhere in the small space, and through the cook's window behind the counter a man gave her a look. An older woman in uniform also looked through the window and called out.

"Be with you in a sec, hon!"

Remi gave a polite smile and decided not to check her shirt to see if her bra was showing through the beige. Instead, she ran a hand through her dirty-blond hair that was probably dark now and took a quick look at the few patrons already seated.

To her right was a couple immersed in their own conversation, and a gray-haired man in a booth two down from her spot in the middle of the space. Straight ahead was a woman and her small son at the counter, making quick work of what looked like apple pie. To her left sat one man in the last booth.

He was facing her but looking down at the table. Remi noted first that he had wide, muscled shoulders; second, that he had dark brown hair as messy as hers must be; and, third, that he was, even with his face angled down, attractive. Then, with a little start, Remi realized the fourth and most intriguing detail.

She dripped water across the linoleum and walked right up to a face she hadn't seen in ages.

"Declan Nash?"

The cowboy hat resting on the table was all the confirmation she needed, but the man still raised his eyes to hers and nodded. Remi couldn't help feeling a bit of heat as he looked at her directly.

She saw both the boy her father had warned her about



when they were kids and the man who had grown up quite nicely.

When he cut a grin and recognition flared behind his green eyes, Remi felt more heat rising in her.

“Well, if it isn’t Remi Hudson.”

Declan surprised her by standing and extending his hand. She felt her eyebrow quirk up as she shook his hand.

The young Declan hadn’t been so formal, especially when it came to her. Why shake the hand of the person you’re competing with or fighting against?

He didn’t make a thing about her questioning look as he motioned to the seat opposite him. Before he officially asked her to sit, he looked behind her.

“Are you here alone?”

She didn’t miss his glance down at her left hand.

So she held that hand up and thumped her ring finger.

“Alone in the diner and single outside of it.”

Declan chuckled as Remi slid across the plastic seat. Her wet leggings made it squeak.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you this close to Overlook since we were, what, nineteen?” He closed the folder on the tabletop and leaned back against his seat. The new position highlighted how the years had been more than kind to the man. His face was all angles and strong. The bump in his nose from the time he broke it after getting into a fight with Cody Callers at a house party when they were sixteen was still visible but, instead of looking awkward as it had then, now it added to the intrigue that was him.

Because, while Remi had known the wild child that was Declan Nash, she hadn’t seen him since graduation day.