

Rescuing Harmony Ranch

Jennie Marts

AGRIN TUGGED AT THE CORNER of Mack's lips. "Grandpa accredits his recovery to his steady diet of bacon and eggs, buttermilk, and the shot of pickle juice he takes every Sunday night. He claims it cleans his gut and his palate and sets him right with the Lord to take on a new week."

Jocelyn wrinkled her nose as she laughed. "How does a shot of pickle juice set anything right?"

Mack laughed with her. "I don't know. Personally, I'm going to give modern medicine the credit, but you know there's no arguing with Hank Talbot. Which is why I still live in the caretaker's cottage, and he and my grandma moved into a little apartment in town."

"Oh. I guess I'd heard that they moved into town a few years ago, but I didn't know you were still living at the ranch." Which meant he'd be in the house directly behind the one she'd be staying in—almost close enough to touch.

No. No touching. No even *thinking* about touching Mack Talbot. She was here to help her grandmother, not rekindle an old flame that had been snuffed out years ago.

She lifted her chin, determined to appear noncha-

lant—like this easy chatting about their past wasn't affecting her at all. If he was going to act like everything was fine between them, then so would she. Even though a million questions ran through her head. The biggest one was, *Why?*

But now wasn't the time for questions, for digging up past hurts. Now was the time to focus on her grandmother. "Speaking of grandparents, I should probably head over to see Gram."

"I've already been instructed to bring you to the hospital as soon as you arrived."

"Oh, you don't have to do that." His offer was kind, but spending more time with him felt like just extending the awkwardness.

"How do you plan to get there, then? Walk?" He glanced down at her boots. "Not in those heels."

"I'll have you know I've walked all over New York in these heels." Although the boots *were* starting to get a little uncomfortable. And being back on the ranch had her wanting to slip on her sneakers and explore the sweet-smelling pastures beyond the fences and the cool shadows of the trails leading up the mountain behind the barn. "I figured I could use Gram's car while I was here."

"Good luck with that. Her car was totaled in the accident."

"Oh, no. I was in such a rush when she called me this morning that I don't really even know what happened."

"Spring thunderstorm and wet roads are what happened. She was a mile south of town when she must have hydroplaned and lost control of the car. Tire

tracks show her skidding off the shoulder and into the ditch.”

She brought her free hand up to cover her mouth. “Poor Gram. She must have been so scared.”

“Lucky for her that Taurus was a beast and took the brunt of the crash, or she could have been hurt much worse.”

Mack nodded toward her suitcase. “Why don’t I carry that up to the house, and then we can head to the hospital?”

She held the handle out. “This broke off. But I can get it.” She leaned down and tried to lift the suitcase by the sides. Dang. It was too heavy. She blew up her bangs and got behind the bag to push it forward.

Mack shook his head as he stuffed the broken handle in his pocket. “I got this. You want your backpack inside, too?” He put the backpack on his shoulder, then easily lifted the suitcase in his arms as if it weighed nothing. “If you’re ready, you can head over to my truck. I’ll put this stuff inside and meet you there in a minute.” He nodded to the blue pickup sitting in the shade by the blacksmith barn.

The sight of the truck brought a swirl of memories spinning through her stomach. “Isn’t that your grandpa’s truck? The one you taught me to drive in?”

“Same one. But it’s mine now. Can’t you tell? I added a new sticker.”

The truck had always had an American flag sticker in the back windshield and a *Support Our Troops* bumper sticker. Jocelyn squinted at the bumper and could barely make out the decal in the shape of an anvil and a hammer. “Yeah, you really went crazy. It looks totally

different now.” She shook her head. “I can’t believe you’re still driving it. Or that it still runs.”

He shrugged. “Not everything has to be new and different. Some things are made to last. Especially if they are built strong to begin with. And if you take good care of them.” He kept his gaze on hers for just a beat too long.

She wondered if his words held more than one meaning. But then his gaze shifted to over her shoulder as he gestured to the truck. “Hope you don’t mind dogs. Mine is already waiting in the pickup. His name is Savage, and I’d approach him carefully. He’s quite a beast.”

A beast? She started toward the truck, bracing herself for the growling teeth of a pit bull or a snarling Rottweiler.

Could her day get *any* better? Her phone was dead and her suitcase had broken, landing her in the arms of the one person she’d hoped to avoid during this quick trip home. And now she was going to get mauled by a mangy mutt.

Welcome home to Harmony Creek. The place she’d had her heart broken.