

# Chapter One

Kael Carmody was back and everybody in Rascal, Texas knew the minute he breezed into town. His name set off sparks from Mildred's Diner to the all-night Laundromat on First Street to Dorothy's Curl-Up-and-Dye.

Nothing in Rascal had changed in the seven years he'd been away. Kael still set matrons' tongues wagging and young women's hearts swooning.

Everyone except Daisy Hightower.

Daisy was twenty-six. She was also independent, hard-working and stubborn as Kurt McNally's old mule. She could also carry a grudge longer than anyone in the Trans-Pecos. Kael found that out the hard way.

But he had other things on his mind besides Daisy when he strolled into Kelly's Bar off Highway 17, looking for liquid refreshment and an order of Kelly's famous chicken fried steak.

"I don't believe my eyes," Joe Kelly exclaimed, resting a bar towel on his shoulder and extending a palm. "Kael Carmody, as I live and breathe."

Taking care to minimize his limp, Kael hitched himself up to the red vinyl bar stool, doffed his straw Stetson and clasped Joe's hearty handshake. Back in high school, he and Joe had played on the Rascal baseball team together.

"How's the leg?" Joe asked, casting a glance downward.

"Healin'."

Kael wasn't ready to talk about the accident or his shaky prognosis. Less said, the better. But avoiding the topic in Rascal posed a real challenge. Thankfully, the tavern was empty at one-thirty in the afternoon except for the two guys shooting pool in the corner, and Kael didn't know either of them.

“You gonna be able to ride again?” Concern knotted Joe’s mouth.

“Sure.” Kael pulled a confident face that was complete bluster. “Just home recouping for a few of months.”

“Gotta be tough.” Joe nodded.

“Yeah. How ’bout a long-neck and an order of chicken-fried steak? I’m starved for your cooking. There’s nothing like it.”

Joe beamed at the compliment and pulled a beer from the ice. Twisting the top off, he slid the bottle across the bar to Kael. “I’ll go start your order.”

Kael swiveled on the bar stool, sipping his beer. He swung his gaze around the bar. There was still a tear in the screen door. The same posters hung on the rough-hewn, shiplap walls. An oscillating fan rotated at the back of the bar. The windows were open, bringing the scent of high desert, sand and long-buried memories.

Memories he’d rather forget. Memories that had kept him away from Rascal for so long. Memories of Daisy and their lost love.

If he closed his eyes, he could still see her firm, tanned figure in that purple bikini, still smell the coconut aroma of her sunscreen, still taste the frosty Italian ices they’d shared at Balmorhea Springs in the summers.

Dang!

Why was he thinking about that hardheaded creature? He’d gotten over her years ago. Just because he’d come back home to recover didn’t mean he was entertaining any ideas about getting together with her for old time’s sake.

Knowing Daisy, if he dared show up on her front porch, she’d tell him to scat before she sicced the cops on him. Who needed that kind of grief?

“Here we go,” Joe said, proudly sliding a plate of chicken-fried steak with mashed potatoes

and cream gravy in front of Kael. “Bet you haven’t had steak this good these since you left Rascal.”

“You’d bet right.” Kael dug into the food.

“Hmm,” Joe said. “Just you wait. I’m having a blow-out barbecue at my place for the Rodeo Days celebration in June and you’re invited. Not just invited, but as the most famous person from Rascal, you’re the guest of honor.”

“I’m not that famous.”

“The heck you’re not.” Joe snorted. “How many people have made it to the Professional Bull Riders Championship in Las Vegas three straight years in a row?”

And, Kael wondered, how many of those people got so badly wounded doing it, they lost their careers or even their lives?

“Only folks who follow rodeo have ever heard of me,” Kael said. “Besides, that and five dollars will buy you one of those fancy coffees at Starbucks.”

“Like you have to worry about money.” Joe shook his head. “You’re the only child of the wealthiest family in town. You’re destined to inherit a two-thousand-acre cattle ranch. What’s the problem?”

Kael didn’t know what would happen if his leg didn’t heal. Three different specialist had come to the same conclusion. Slim chance he’d ever ride again without a radical new surgery. But it was no panacea. Even though his manager, Randy Howard, was pushing the operation, Kael hesitated.

If something went wrong, he might never walk without a limp.

Kael winced. What was he going to do? Bull riding was his life, his identity since he was twelve years old. Sure, he could follow in his father’s footsteps and become a rancher, but Kael possessed such a strong case of wanderlust he couldn’t envision himself settling down any place.

Especially in a dried-up, go-nowhere town like Rascal.

His nomadic nature was what killed things between him and Daisy. Kael winced and ran a palm along his jaw.

One of the pool players sauntered over to the old Wurlitzer, and Dolly Parton's voice filled the room.

Kael finished his food and pushed the platter across the bar. "So how *are* things in Rascal?"

"Your folks don't keep you up to date?"

"They spend most of their time in San Antonio these days and leave the running of the ranch to the foreman, and they miss out on the local gossip."

"Well." Joe steepled his fingers. "The drought's been rough on everyone."

"I saw."

On the drive in he'd noticed parched pastures, scrawny cows, and the dried-up stock ponds. Rascal was in the high desert of the Davis Mountains, so there wasn't ever lush greenery, but he couldn't recall ever seeing the place this barren.

Luckily, his parents divested their holdings and could weather a few lean years, but that wasn't true of everyone in Presidio County.

"A few farmers have gone bankrupt."

Kael clicked his tongue. "I hate hearing that."

"Cattle prices are the lowest they've been in sixteen years."

"That's what my dad's been telling me." Kael knew about the drought and the farmers' problems. What he hungered for were details on the townspeople... and one special person in particular.

"Guess who I saw yesterday?" Joe asked as if reading his thoughts.

Kael shook his head and took another swallow of beer. The outside of the bottle was sweaty.

The coolness already dissipating in the heat. “Who?”

“Daisy Hightower.”

His heart stilled, but he kept a nonchalant expression on his face. “Yeah?”

“She’s just as fine as she was in high school. Maybe more so.” Joe swiped a damp towel across the counter.

“Good for her. She always was a beautiful woman.”

“Waste if you ask me.”

“What’s a waste?” Kael quirked an eyebrow. Despite his best intentions, he couldn’t deny the curiosity zipping through him. He’d love to see Daisy again. Question was, would she love to see him?

“The girl never dates. Stays home, works those beehives and looks after her sister’s boy. She’s turned into a regular hermit.”

“Rose has a child?” Startled, Kael frowned.

“Had.”

“Had? What?”

“Rose is no longer with us.”

“You mean Rose is dead?”

Joe nodded solemnly.

Jolted, the news hit Kael like a slap and he almost choked on the swallow of beer he’d just taken. Why didn’t he know this? “What happened?”

Joe made a face. “She abandoned the boy right after he was born. Left him for Daisy to raise. Then two years ago Rose overdosed on sleeping pills in some New Orleans flophouse. Real sad.”

“No kidding?” An icy blast chased down Kael’s spine and he regretted eating the greasy food. The news left him shaky.

“You remember how wild that girl was, partying nonstop, a different boyfriend for every night of the week. I’ll admit it. I kept company with her a time or two myself. Who didn’t?”

*I wish I hadn’t*, Kael thought, the old self-loathing returning with a vengeance.

“Daisy’s had a hard time.”

“I image she has, raising a kid on her own.” Kael mused.

“Uh-huh. She legally adopted Travis.”

“Nobody could accuse Daisy of slacking.” Kael peeled the label off his beer bottle. And avoided Joe’s eye.

“You ain’t got no interest in rekindling old flames?” Joe settled his elbows on the bar and leaned forward to cup his chin in his palms.

“With that fiery redhead? You gotta be kiddin’. I’d just as soon stick my hand in one of her beehives. It’d be a lot less painful.” Kael snorted, but inside dormant feelings stirred. Feelings he didn’t care to examine too closely.

“Want another beer?”

“Nah.” Kael shook his head. “I better be getting home. Mom’s cooking up a big dinner tonight and inviting all the relatives over.” Truthfully, he’d heard enough gossip for one afternoon.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Joe said, “anytime you wanna talk rodeo you got an audience.”

“Thanks.”

He didn’t need a reminder of that, either. Why torture himself? Until he decided one way or the other about the surgery, he didn’t want to discuss bull riding. Kael could just see himself whiling away the days, hanging out in Kelly’s Bar and gabbing about what used to be or what might have been.

Daisy Hightower and bull riding. The two things he’d loved most. The same two things that

had caused him the greatest heartache in life.

Snagging his Stetson off the bar, Kael dusted the brim, then settled it on his head. He took money from his pocket, but Joe held up a palm.

“This one’s on me, good buddy.”

“Come on, Joe, take the cash.” Kael pushed the twenty at him.

“You tryin’ to insult me?”

“All right, have it your way.”

Kael folded the twenty and stuck it back in his pocket. He wasn’t about to let Joe get away with this. They’d been friends since high school, and although Joe earned a fair living running the bar, he had a wife and three kids to support. The guy just might wake up one morning to find a new freezer sitting on his front porch waiting to take the place of the one wheezing in the back room.

“You outta go see the woman,” Joe said, as Kael reached the door.

Kael turned to look at his friend. “Who?”

“Daisy. You never know. She might have changed her mind about you.”

“Are we talking about the same Daisy?”

“Motherhood has mellowed her.”

“Like it mellows grizzly bears?” Kael lifted his shoulders. “No, thanks.”

“Your call.”

“Yeah.” Kael stepped out into the oppressive heat.

Honey bees floated near the horsemint outside the door. Not a single tree stirred, and heat mirages shimmered up off the asphalt. Absentmindedly, he rubbed his aching leg and crossed the parking lot to his pickup truck.

Those danged bees brought back lots of memories. Memories of clear spring mornings and

sweet amber honey. Memories of colorful flowers and buzzing hives. Memories of stealing a honey-sweetened kiss from Daisy Anne Hightower.

“Forget her,” Kael muttered, slamming his truck into reverse and backing out of Joe’s parking lot. “You got enough problems to contend with. What’s over is over, and Daisy will never be yours again.”

Shifting into drive, he bit down on his lip and reeled from the hardest slap of loneliness he’d felt in seven years.

#

“Did you see Kael Carmody?”

“Oh my gosh, hasn’t he got a body to die for?”

“And those eyes of his, so blue they’re almost silver.”

“I was too busy scoping out his backside to pay much attention to his eyes.”

Overhearing the checkout girls’ conversation, Daisy’s hand froze around the jar of pimentos she was about to drop into her shopping cart. Her pulse gathered speed and her legs went wobbly. She took a deep breath to steady herself.

*Please, Lord, she prayed. Say it isn’t so. Tell me Kael Carmody isn’t back in Rascal.*

“Do you think he’d go out with me?” one girl asked. She was a plump, blonde, who wore her hair pulled back off her face. The girl wasn’t much over nineteen.

The same age Daisy had been when Kael had broken her heart and shattered her world.

“Don’t be silly, Deedee. You are way too young for him. Besides, Kael could have his pick of any woman in Rascal,” the other young woman, a willowy brunette replied.

*Not me!* Daisy thought, straining to eavesdrop. *Not if he were the last man on earth.*

She’d learned the hard way there should be much more to a man than good looks and a penchant for fun. And if her own lessons hadn’t been enough, all she needed to do was

remember Rose and *her* mistakes.

“Still.” The one named Deedee sighed. “He’s too fine for words. Sorta puts me in mind of Scott Eastwood.”

“Everybody puts you in mind of Scott Eastwood,” her friend teased.

“You can hardly tell he limps.”

“They say his bull riding career is over.”

“Guess that’s why he’s back home.”

“I hope he pops in here often. It’ll make work a lot more exciting.”

Kael’s career at an end? Daisy’s mouth twitched as mixed emotion rocketed through her. She would love to say she was over Kael, but she couldn’t lie to herself. She harbored tender feelings for the man, despite what had happened between them, and she cursed herself for that weakness.

She knew how upset he’d be if he could never ride in the rodeo again. Daisy had heard about Kael’s accident. Even someone as much of a recluse as she could not have missed hearing about that.

Kael’s tragic spill at the PRC in Las Vegas had been big news, overshadowed only by the Dallas Cowboys’ Super Bowl run. But Daisy didn’t know Kael’s injury had been so serious, and that news grieved her.

Worry knots formed in her stomach. How many times had she experienced the same roller-coaster sensation while watching Kael tear out of the chute on the back of some wild Brahma? She’d washed her hands of him seven years ago and good riddance. But, she couldn’t stop the ache that gnawed her.

Angry with herself, Daisy tossed her head and maneuvered her grocery cart down the produce aisle, safely distancing herself from the checkers and their discussion of the man who’d been a thorn in her side for far too long.

Why did she care if he'd gotten hurt? If he was still dumb enough at his age to keep climbing up on those bulls, then Kael deserved everything he got.

*Kael's back.*

That irritating thought echoed in her mind, refusing to leave no matter how hard Daisy willed it away.

Why couldn't she stop wondering what he looked like now and how well he'd weathered the years? Those same seven years that had been the most trying years of Daisy's life. Years spent struggling to raise Travis, dealing with the aftermath of her identical twin sister's death and trying desperately to forget that Kael ever existed.

Get your head back on your business, and finish your errands, she scolded herself. Hurriedly, she completed her shopping and stood in line for Deedee to check her groceries.

She paged through social media on her phone while she waited, trying to distract herself from thoughts of Kael. She wondered how come he hadn't returned to Rascal before now and what brought him back home this time.

After paying for her purchases, Daisy wheeled her cart to the parking lot and loaded the groceries into Aunt Peavy's Jeep Wagoneer.

Her aunt Peavy had come to live at Hightower Honey Farm after her parents died in a car accident when she and Rose were sixteen.

Her sister had never accepted their parents' deaths.

Daisy believed that Rose's inability to move forward caused her wild, reckless behavior...and ultimately her tragic overdose.

She sighed. No point fretting about something she couldn't change. The past was past, and she had to keep looking to the future, for Travis' sake if not her own.

At the thought of her adopted son, Daisy's heart swelled with love. He'd be getting out of

school any minute, and Daisy was never late picking him up. Her only regret in taking care of her nephew was that she had no time for dating.

And if she couldn't date, how could she find a husband? And if she couldn't find a husband, how could she hope to have more children?

Wistfulness filled her. How badly she wanted a baby of her own! She couldn't love Travis any more if he'd come from her womb, but Daisy longed for the experience herself. She wanted to be pregnant, to live through the joys and challenges of bringing a child into the world.

But she didn't want to do it without the right man by her side. A man of good moral character. A man who would be there when she needed him. A responsible man who would put his family first.

A man the exact opposite of Kael Carmody.

#

Daisy guided the Wagoneer down Presidio Boulevard. She pulled to a stop at the red light and the vehicle clattered.

*It's nothing*, she assured herself. It had to be nothing, she could not afford car problems right now.

A powder blue pickup sporting lots of shiny chrome pulled up behind her, the engine idling smoothly.

Daisy glanced in the rearview mirror, wanting a truck like that. It boasted a wide bed, just perfect for hauling farm equipment. Glossy running boards and flashy floodlights mounted on an overhead roll bar.

*Like you could make those payments.*

The pickup probably belonged to some drugstore cowboy who'd never stepped foot on a real

ranch in his life.

She squinted. The driver wore a straw cowboy hat and sunglasses, but with the tinted windows reflecting the sun's glare back in her eyes, she couldn't tell much else about the man.

The light turned green.

Daisy eased her foot off the brake and pressed on the accelerator. The engine surged, but the car refused to slip into gear.

Oh, no! Daisy groaned. *Not the transmission.*

Her neighbor, Keegan Winslow had been warning her about the sound of Aunt Peavy's transmission for a month. They'd put off having it looked at because they could not spare the minimum two grand it would cost to have the car repaired.

*What now?*

Praying for divine intervention, Daisy tried again, but the old station wagon only squealed and didn't budge.

She sighed and lowered her window, motioning for the pickup to go around.

The driver didn't move.

Daisy motioned again.

He stayed right behind her.

"Suit yourself," she muttered. She had enough concerns without worrying about this guy, like how to get to the elementary school within the next five minutes.

The pickup's emergency flashers came on, and the driver's side door opened.

Great. A hero to the rescue. Daisy rolled her eyes.

"Let him help you," she muttered fighting her natural tendencies. She had inherited the infamous Hightower stubbornness, and she found it hard to accept help. But in this case, she better swallow her pride.

Watching through the rearview mirror, she saw one jean-clad leg appear, then the other. This guy moved as slow as Christmas.

Brushing her hand through her hair and forcing a smile, Daisy got out and turned to greet the stranger. The apology froze on her lips.

There, sauntering straight toward her, was Kael Carmody.

Her heart stuttered.

A familiar grin cocked the corners of his full mouth. The straw Stetson riding high on his forehead gave her a good view of his thick thatch of whisky brown hair. His large hands rested loosely at his narrow hips. With mirrored sunglasses and a huge, gold rodeo belt buckle glinting in the sunlight he looked cucumber cool.

A dozen different emotions swept over her, and she didn't want to feel any of them.

Daisy caught her breath at the fierceness stabbing her chest. Many times, she'd envisioned their chance meeting. She'd imagined herself calm, aloof, unimpressed. She had practiced the lines she would speak, the moves she would make. She'd dress to the nines, her hair perfectly coifed, her nails painted and buffed.

Instead, she wore her usual attire—ratty work jeans, a simple white T-shirt and battered work boots. She had pulled her hair back into a ponytail with a rubber band and she wore no makeup. Her cuticles ragged, and her fingernails unpolished.

But worst of all, she had this almost irresistible urge to fling herself into his arms.

“Hello, Daisy.” The words rolled off his tongue soft and easy.

“Kael.” She nodded, struggling to keep her self-control while her knees wobbled.

“Don't I even get a hug after seven years?” He held out his arms.

“Considering the circumstances around the last time we saw each other, I don't think you deserve one.”

“I thought maybe you’d forgiven me by now.”

“In a pig’s eye.”

He dropped his arms to his side. “Same old Daisy.”

Her heart tripped. “Nothing changes here in Rascal. I recall you once told me that before you took off.”

“Dang. But you’re a fine sight for sore eyes.”

Was it a flight of her fancy, or was his voice thick?

*If he sounds emotional, Daisy Hightower, it’s probably because he stopped off at Kelly’s Bar for a beer, not because he’s feeling anything for you.*

“You’re more beautiful than ever,” he murmured.

“Cut the soft-soap, Kael. I’m not a gullible nineteen-year-old anymore.” Her heart thudded so loudly she feared he could hear it pounding from two feet away.

He pursed his lips but said nothing.

The sun beat down, scorching her scalp. Uncomfortable, Daisy transferred her weight from one leg to the other and folded her arms over her chest.

“Aunt Peavy’s green monster giving you trouble?” he asked, switching his gaze to the stalled Wagoneer.

“Transmission.”

Kael slipped off his sunglasses and dangled them from the stem.

Daisy raised her chin.

Their eyes met.

Something inside her shifted. The hard, cold knot of pain and betrayal that had taken root in her heart seven years ago billowed against her rib cage, resurrecting the old hurt. She thought she’d buried her feelings for this man long ago. Obviously, she was wrong.

Kael dropped his gaze. Leaning over, he peered into the station wagon's back seat at the brown paper sacks mingling with her beekeeping supplies. "Have you been grocery shopping?"

"Yes."

Reminding herself of all the trouble Kael had caused, Daisy narrowed her eyes and pressed her lips together in a firm, unyielding line. She could not, *would not*, let him see he still affected her like no man on earth.

A car whizzed around them, the driver honking his horn.

"We need to get you out of the road," Kael said matter-of-factly, folding his sunglasses and sliding them into the front pocket of his light blue Western shirt. The shirt looked brand new, as did his sharply creased blue jeans and those fancy ostrich boots.

"Don't trouble yourself," she said, her attraction to him. "I can manage."

"Daisy don't be stubborn." He reached out a hand to her, but she shied away.

She longed to tell him to get lost, to go soak his head, to darn well make like a cow patty and hit the trail, but school was out, and Travis would be waiting.

"Okay," she agreed.

A wide grin sprawled across Kael's face as if he'd just stayed eight seconds on the back of the meanest Brahma on the rodeo circuit.

"I'll push you off to the side, then we'll call a wrecker."

She nodded. There was no money for a wrecker, but what else could she do? Climbing inside the station wagon, she waited while Kael ambled back to his truck.

*He's trying hard not to limp*, she noticed, surprised at the surge of sympathy arrowing through her. She did not want to feel sorry for Kael. He had chosen his lifestyle. He'd known the consequences when he'd climbed on that bull.

Daisy gulped against her unwanted sympathy and blinked back the tears that threatened.

After all this time why did she still feel the urge to weep when she thought about what they'd both lost?

Kael eased his pickup forward. She felt the gentle tap as metal bumped metal. Steering the Wagoneer into the shallow ditch, she pulled it off the road.

Hands clenched into fists, she waited while he walked back to her vehicle. Without another word, he opened the tailgate and scooped three grocery sacks into his arms.

His masculine scent—a combination of spicy cologne, musky hay and fresh clean sunshine—filled the car.

The aroma slapped Daisy with a blast from the past. Memories of long summer days and cool summer nights. Memories of wet kisses and warm embraces. Memories of their mouths joined as they traded heady pleasures.

Enough!

Daisy shook her head, grabbed the two remaining sacks and trailed behind Kael. The past was past. There could be no going back.

Kael took the paper bags from her and fitted them into his extended cab before walking around and opening the passenger-side door for her.

“Where to?” he asked.

“I’ve got to pick my son, Travis, up at school.”

*That ought to throw him for a loop. Let him wonder where she got a child.*

But to her surprise, Kael merely nodded and got behind the wheel. “Clinton Elementary?”

“Yes.”

“What grade’s he in?”

“Finishing first.”

“Hard to believe that you have a child that old.”

*He could be your son.*

Daisy slid a glance in Kael's direction. Many times, over the past seven years she'd studied her son's face, trying to find a resemblance to some man in Rascal. Her greatest fear was that she'd discover similarities between the boy and Kael. But Travis had taken after the Hightowers with his rich auburn hair and fair, freckled skin. If he had any feature that matched Kael's it was his hazel eyes.

If Kael was Travis's father, she didn't know what she would do. Even after Rose left town, Daisy had not risked calling Kael and telling him he might be a father. What was the point? She'd known he wasn't responsible enough to be a real dad. He'd refused give up his rodeo career for her why would a baby be any different?

*Let sleeping dogs lie.* That was her motto.

Daisy stared straight ahead, noticing the bug guts on the windshield. Anything to keep from looking at Kael Carmody. Why did he have to be the one to drive up behind her when the green monster had picked that moment to die?

"What do you want to do about the Wagoneer?" Kael eased his truck through the twenty mile per hour school zone.

"I don't know." Trying her best to stave off a headache, Daisy lifted a hand to her temple and rubbed.

"You need money to have it towed?" he asked.

"No!" Daisy barked. She'd crawl through the mud, on her hands and knees, before she would accept money from Kael. She darted a quick glance in his direction.

Kael snorted and shook his head.

"What's that mean?"

"Haven't changed, have you? Still too danged stubborn to let anyone help."

“I don’t need help,” she denied hotly.

“Suit yourself.”

Daisy raised her eyebrows, surprised that he hadn’t argued further. That was different. In the past Kael would have insisted until their push-pull of wills dissolved into a shouting match.

He came to a stop outside the elementary school. Dozens of children skipped across the lawn, freed from another day’s learning. Daisy’s eyes searched the throng for Travis.

She spotted him, sitting off by himself, gazing dreamily at the sky. He looked so small, so vulnerable. Many times, she’d wondered how a woman as wild and impetuous as Rose had produced such a quiet, introspective child. Was Travis’s biological father introverted? If so, she could allay her fears that Kael had a hand in the boy’s conception. Kael was not the shy, retiring type.

Rolling down the window, Daisy stuck her head out and waved. “Travis, honey, over here.”

The boy looked up, and a smile broke across his face. “Mom!”

He gathered up his books and ran toward the pickup. Daisy opened the door and scooted over for Travis to climb in beside her.

#

Kael studied the thin, young boy with the serious expression on his slender face. “Hi.”

Travis ducked his head.

“Say hello,” Daisy prodded.

“Hello,” Travis murmured. “I like your truck.”

“Why, thank you, Travis.” Kael extended his hand across the cab, and he accidentally grazed Daisy’s shoulder.

The contact sent white-hot sparks sizzling down his nerve endings. Gulping, Kael kept his gaze focused on the boy and he wondered if Daisy had also felt the earth tremble. “My name’s

Kael.”

Travis shook his hand and offered Kael a shy grin. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Kael.”

“No mister, just Kael.”

Daisy had done a fine job raising him. It couldn’t have been easy, playing both mother and father to her sister’s child. *You and Daisy could have a baby of your own by now.*

The thought, like a lonely phantom, passed through his mind. His sadness intensified, and he felt a sudden and deep regret for his life choices.

They drove down the street. Silence, like an accusation, hung between them.

“How’s the beekeeping business?” Kael asked.

“All right.”

“I thought maybe the harsh winter might have caused you some trouble.”

“We lost a lot of bees,” Travis said solemnly.

“Really.” Kael frowned. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“But we’re doing fine,” Daisy insisted.

Was Hightower Honey Farm in financial trouble?

“If you need any money...” Kael made the offer even though he knew he risked riling Daisy.

She gave him a sharp look, and Kael read her thoughts. *Not in front of Travis.*

At one time they’d shared an uncanny telepathy, as if their minds traveled the same track.

Apparently, the ability still existed. Kael pursed his lips and stared out the window.

“What do you want to do about the Wagoneer?” he asked again, turning onto Presidio Boulevard.

Daisy stared down at her hands, and Kael realized she had no money for a wrecker or car repairs. Dang the stubborn woman. If she’d allow him, he would take care of everything. But being essentially on her own since sixteen had made Daisy used to standing on her own two feet.

She didn't take handouts, especially from him.

Travis raised his head and stared at the Wagoneer in the shallow ditch. "What happened to the green monster, Mom?"

"Transmission went out," Daisy mumbled, "but let me worry about the car."

Kael pulled over on the shoulder, engine idling. "Do we haul it to the shop now, or do you want me to take you home?"

She rubbed her temple with her fingers. "Would you take us home? I need time to sort things out before I decide what to do."

"You got it."

Kael knew how much effort it took for her to make that simple request. He also knew that he would have the car towed and the repairs made behind her back and let the chips fall where they may.

He drove out of town, headed toward Hightower Farm. How many times had he driven this road with Daisy beside him? A melancholy sensation tightened his chest, and he sneaked a glance in her direction.

She was staring out the window, her hands resting in her lap, her chin held high.

She was more beautiful than he remembered, with that long, red hair glowing in the sunlight, her peaches-and-cream complexion bronzed to perfection, her full lips pursed into a determined pout.

Man alive, but he wanted to pull the truck over, drag her out the passenger-side door and kiss her until she begged him to come back into her life.

But Kael knew that would never happen. Daisy was a woman of strong convictions. It was one thing he admired most about her. Once she decided on an issue, she didn't change her mind.

And seven years ago, she'd ended their relationship.

Kael had cloaked his pain by focusing on bull riding. He'd lived and breathed rodeo. There had been no other lady to steal his heart since Daisy.

Oh sure, he'd dated casually, but he had let no one to get close enough to burn him the way Daisy had. A man could only take so much suffering before he turned his back on love.

And then a bull had taken away his ability to ride. He'd lost that love, too, just as surely as he'd lost Daisy.

He felt a hot, hard sensation inside him—regret, remorse, sadness, sorrow.

Guiding the pickup toward Hightower Honey Farm, Kael yearned for a second chance.

He killed the engine. More memories swept through him as his gaze drifted over the farm. The house begged for a fresh coat of paint, and the fence needed stretching. Grass grew ankle-deep. Overgrown tree limbs hung low. The place fairly cried out for a handyman.

*At least she hasn't found someone to replace me.* Startled at the direction his mind had taken, Kael shook his head.

He recalled sitting right there on that same front porch swing with Daisy. They had kissed and giggled and held one another until Aunt Peavy came out on the porch with a pitcher of fresh-squeezed lemonade and a tray of chocolate chip cookies.

He'd once helped Daisy and Aunt Peavy in the apiary. They'd united colonies, cleaned the hives, clipped the queens. A humming noise rose in his memory along with the sweet aroma of honey.

Yes. Hightower Honey Farm brought back a lot of old feelings. Feelings he couldn't recapture. But maybe, just maybe, Daisy would allow him to be her friend. He hated to think he'd lost her from his life forever.

"Hey, Travis, why don't you carry this sack inside for your mother?" Kael reached into the extended cab and handed the boy a small sack of groceries.

Travis nodded, took the sack and climbed to the ground.

Daisy followed him, but Kael laid a restraining hand on her shoulder. “Wait. I’d like to talk to you alone.”

She hesitated, wariness in her eyes. “What do you want?”

Kael swallowed. “The farm needs work, Daisy.”

“I’m doing my best,” she snapped. “You think it’s easy? Running a business and raising a six-year-old?”

“That’s not what I meant. I’m very aware of how hard you work.”

“Then what did you mean?” Daisy’s green-eyed gaze had a hard edge to it.

“You could use a man around here.”

One eyebrow shot up high on her forehead. “Oh, no, Carmody, you’re not about to weasel yourself back into my life.”

“There you go, jumping to conclusions. I can see you’re still the same old Daisy.” Irritation snapped through Kael. He’d forgotten just how hardheaded this flame-haired woman could be. “I have absolutely no intentions of pursuing you.”

Daisy folded her arms over her chest.

Irritation transformed into something darker, deeper.

Memories.

Swallowing his angry words, Kael met her stare.

Daisy didn’t even blink. She leaned over the seat and pulled out grocery sacks and sat them on the ground outside his truck.

“I’ll get those.” He opened the door and walked around the pickup.

“I can unload my own groceries.”

She was one tough cookie. He had to give her that. But even the hardest of cookies crumbled

under the right conditions.

“I want to help. Let me pay for having the green monster repaired.”

“No way. It’s not your problem.”

“Daisy, I care.” He reached out a hand to touch her, but she shook him off.

“You don’t owe me anything, Kael.”

“I was hoping to be your friend,” he whispered, realizing that was true. If he couldn’t have her as his girlfriend, then he’d settle for anything to be near her.

“You and I could never be just friends, Kael.” She slammed the pickup door, and the sound echoed the finality of her statement.

“Daisy.”

“Please,” she said, her eyes filling with pain and it killed him because he knew that he was the reason for her suffering. “Do us both a favor and stay out of my life.”