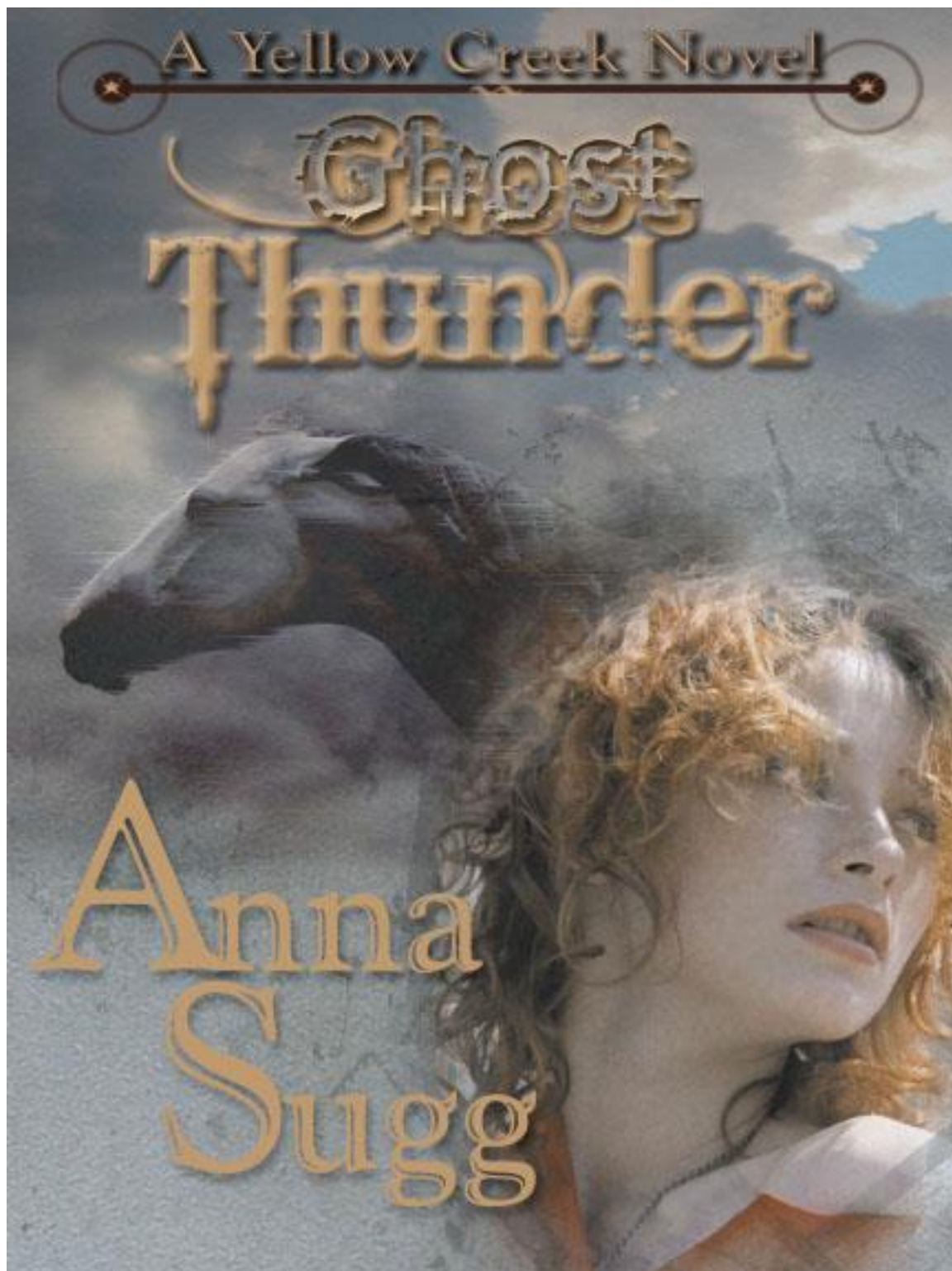


A Yellow Creek Novel

Ghost Thunder

Anna
Sugg



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More titles by Anna Sugg

Yellow Creek Novel, Secret Past
Santa's Pretty Lady
Santa's Secret Gift
Mainland Santa

Dedication

My story is dedicated to the beautiful Tennessee Walking Horses and their owners who show respect and kindness toward their horses.

Ghost Thunder

By

Anna Sugg

Blurb:

Becca Tripp never dreamed she'd endanger her unborn child the day she met Thomas Slye.

Trapped in the dark stables on a stormy night, the crackling thunder fails to cover up the whoosh of a bullet landing in the post near her head.

Becca hugs her round belly as the blue lightening flash reveals a large silhouette.

Why did he want to kill her? She loved him.

Chapter One

Dark cumulus clouds collided filling the air with atomic booms. Becca Tripp jumped. Lightning flashed. Again, thunderclouds clashed ricocheting off her house. Rumbling thunder roared its way down Yellow Creek holler.

Becca stepped to the backdoor, grabbed her raingear and glanced up at the flickering ceiling light. She sucked in a deep breath and listened to the blustery weather thrash against the side of the house. She frowned and glanced down at Maxine. Her Britney Spaniel's round eyes looked up at her pleadingly. "I suppose you want to stay indoors." Becca put her hand on her hip and shook her head. "Really? You want me to get drenched by myself?" She grinned, slipped her arms into the raincoat sleeves and glanced into the mirror on the wall next to the door.

Staring at her reflection, she shook her head and watched the shine reflect off the bright redness of her straight strands. It had been a while since she had taken time to spoil herself. Her hair was beautiful and spending the day at the spa was a treat, a very much overdue relaxing treat. Omar trimmed her hair and took his time to blow dry all the curls out until a long streamline of feminine red hair dropped down her back without a curve or a kink.

Thunder pounded above the house again. Her gaze flew to the door window. Lightning brighten up the dark sky revealing heavy raindrops. Instantly, another angry outburst of thunder rumbled its way toward the south. She shivered and glanced back into the mirror.

With a disgusted frowned, she ran her fingers through the long straight silky strands. She loved it, even if it did cost her seventy-five bucks, but the second she took a step outside in this miserable weather, a kinky curly mess would form over her entire head. Huh, well, nice while it lasted. Shit, natural curly hair was a curse at times.

Her gazed swung down to her protruding abdomen. In a little over a month, she'll be a single mom and counting every penny. "Well, baby girl, today was your mom's last frivolous, selfish spending act. No more spa visits or straight hair."

The bright lightning flashed again. *Boom.* Again thunder crackled over the house. Becca glanced down at Maxine. "Hmm, okay girl, you stay, I'll get drenched. Little does Josie know what she's costing me?" After another quick glance at her straight strands of hair, she mumbled, "Okay, here goes."

With a quick jerk, she pulled the raincoat hood over her head, grabbed a flashlight, stepped out the back door, down the porch steps, and into the pouring rain. Her high top rubber boots sloshed through the puddles, heading across the road and up the trail toward the barn.

Becca held the flashlight down on the saturated muddy road leading her to the stables toward her beloved Tennessee Walking horse. She loved spring thunderstorms, even if it did kink up her hair. Glancing up, she blinked away the heavy rain and squinted against wind blowing against her. The menacing large cumulonimbus formation warned her of the severity of the storm. It wasn't even five o'clock yet and the darkened sky made it seem like late evening. Purposefully, she splashed her rubber boots in the growing puddles. Lightning discharged, crawling across the sky. She counted one one thousand, two one thousand, three one...*boom*, the storm clouds collided in another angry outburst. Huh, the storm's moved a good half a mile away. I'm glad...not too fond of lightning.

A horse neighed.

Her hurried glance swung out into the field beyond the fence line. She frowned and squinted into the heavy downpour, stopped near the fence, and searched the saturated field. Josie wouldn't have left the barn. She didn't like thunder.

There it was again. A horse neighed as if saying, "Over here, where are you?" She was sure of it.

In the seconds the bright blue blaze lit up the sky her breath hitched at the sight before her. Through the pouring rain, a horse ran at full gallop. Another sheet lightning covered the sky above to reveal the large muscular body of a beautiful horse moving at a high-speed. His long stride stretched reaching out toward her. Becca wiped the raindrops from her eyelashes and stared. The flash above shimmered on his black coat and the white marking on his face bobbed with each galloping movement. And then, he stumbled, caught himself, stumbled again, but managed to continue in her direction.

Becca climbed upon the bottom fence rail. He was hurt. The animal lurched forward and went down. He didn't move. How did an injured horse get inside her field and where did he come from? Without any thought of how pregnant she was, she climbed up and over the fence and on a fast run headed toward the horse through the soggy wet field. A gust of wind blew the hood from her head soaking her hair. She stopped.

Where did he go? Her wet hand held out the flashlight and searched the ground. Once again a sheet of lightning turned the sky from night to day. Nothing. Standing beneath the thunderclouds, she dropped to her knees and gazed beyond the field in the dark. Distant thunder roared beyond the rolling hills, moving on with the heavy rains and wind. Her surroundings settled down to a steady drizzle, drenching her entire body. Raising her hand, she wiped her face and eyelashes to scan the field again. Did she imagine the incident? It was too surreal, and yet, she was almost positive he'd been real. Why in this world did she have a vision of such a beautiful animal galloping toward her like his life depended upon reaching her? What did it mean?

Becca pushed to her feet and strolled through the field toward the backdoor of the barn while scanning the area toward the woods. He'd stumbled and fell. She watched him. So where did he go? Biting her bottom lip, Becca made her way to the barn door and slipped inside. Flipping the light switch, she found Josie staring at her through large black eyes. Becca wiped away a tear rolling down her wet cheek. She reached out, stepped close and touched her mare's velvet nose. Her beautiful golden Tennessee Walking horse with her long thick flaxen mane and tail stared back. "I know. I'm late. Sorry girl. You okay? Storm's over. Thunder's moved on down the way, just rain now." Becca's lips thinned into a sad smile when Josie bumped her hand impatiently. "I know. You hate storms."

She glanced back and frowned. Shaking her head, she turned to give Josie a quick pat on her smooth neck before reaching for the feed bag. "I'll get you some grain. Maybe it'll help calm your nerves." What just happened out there? While chewing on her bottom lip, her puckered brow pulled tighter with her thoughts of what she's witnessed. You're crazy woman. A small laugh escaped her throat. Dismissing the vision, she poured the grain into Josie's bag and dropped the strap over her neck to watch her eat.

With a step back, she crossed her arms over her belly, trembled and glanced down. She was soaking wet. Mud covered her boots and pants from kneeling on her knees in the field. Slipping out of her raincoat, she shook the wetness off, and then picked up Josie's brush. Slowly brushing along the mare's back, she listened to the pitter-patter of rain on the barn's tin roof. "At least the downpour's is just a slight drizzle now, girl." She shook her head. "Josie, the weirdest thing just happened. A beautiful horse came at me in the field. There can be only one explanation—my active imagination along with all the lightning and thunder. Weird."

After giving Josie a quick brush down to help calm her nerves, Becca slipped back into her raincoat and gave her horse a hug. “Nite Josie, see you in the morning...bright and early. Clip and I are taking a ride to Montgomery to watch the Tennessee Walking Horse event.” Josie’s gentle gaze stared back, perked her ears up listening to every word Becca said. “I’m thinking you might enjoy entering the event. What do you say?”

A soft nicker escaped Josie’s nostrils. Becca giggled. “So you’ll think about, huh? Well, we’ll see. Love you.” She flipped the switch and stepped out into the silent drizzling rain and smelled the refreshing clean air.

Gradually, walking along the fence line, her gaze scanned the field, looking for any indication of the horse that seemed so real. Nothing.

Chapter Two

“Aunt Bec, I’ve been thinking. Since you can’t ride Josie, I mean, not now anyway. Maybe after you have the baby, you can, but since you can’t...well, what I want to say is, do you suppose Dad will let me learn to ride? And...and, can you let me ride Josie for you?” Clip turned and stared down at his aunt’s protruding belly.

Becca laughed and pressed her hand against her eight, well, almost ninth month of her pregnancy. He was right. She couldn’t ride and more than likely, she’d be too busy for a while after the baby comes. She looked down at her nephew with a wishful plead on his expression.

“Aunt Bec, you know, school’s almost out for the summer and I could help you clean the stable and exercise Josie every day.”

“Well, since you’re willing to spend your summer vacation working for me, and you’ve been such a trooper to come along with me to this event, I’ll give your generous offered serious thought. Now, come on, we better get to our seats before we miss too much of the show.”

She hurried toward the stadium seats and looked around at the crowd which appeared to be several thousand people seated in the climate controlled coliseum. Continuing toward the section indicated on their tickets, she smiled at Clip whose shiny eyes matched her own excitement. Even though they missed most of the High Performance entries, she was mostly interested in the Flat-Shod show. An echo of loud clapping reverberated throughout the dome sending everyone to their feet. Becca peeked through the crowd at the winning horse.

“Wow, Clip, he’s a gorgeous horse. Look at his equine coat color of blue-black.” The horse performed a flashy, animated running walk called ‘Big Lick.’ She grinned. Joe had explained all about the different types of performances. She focused on the horse’s gait. Her smiling lips faded when her brows pulled tight.

“Aunt Bec.”

Becca’s frowning expression looked down at Clip.

“Aunt Bec, he’s too big. Something don’t look right to me, does it to you?”

She put her arm around his shoulders and shook her head. “I agree. It’s not normal.” Her gazed darted back to the animal performing in the arena and again studied the horse’s gait. The Tennessee Walker appeared to sit back too far on his hindquarters while lifting his forelegs extremely high off the ground with each step. Becca noted the pads, along with chains around the fetlock which she was told helped accentuate the gaits. Clearly the spectators around her loved

this show horse with his exaggerated front leg action. The rider returned to halt his horse in front of the judges, dismounted, and waved his hand toward the cheering crowd.

Becca raised her hands to clap with the others, then hesitated. Their seats were close enough to the arena for her to study the magnificent animal appropriately named Forever Blue-Black, and yet, she wanted a closer look. Something bothered her. What was it? He's sad.

The stadium filled people became silent when the judge stepped forward to present the winning ribbon to the owner. Judge Pennington announced Mr. Huffman's Tennessee Walking Horse, Forever Blue-Black Championship winner for 2012. When Mr. Huffman accepted the check, people stood throughout the stadium, hollering and clapping with their approvals.

Becca couldn't take her eyes off the horse exiting from the arena. She didn't know how much the prize money amounted to, but she was certain it was a six figure.

"Aunt Bec." Clip touched her arm to get her attention and asked, "What's he got on his feet?"

Without glancing at Clip, she shifted her gaze to the winning animal's legs and watched him walk from the arena. Pads, at least a good four inches, maybe more, were on each foot.

She gave Clip a hurried glance and mumbled, "I'll explain later."

Her gaze swung back to the poor animal with the sad look in his eyes. She was sure he was suffering and she detected no spirit left in his glassy eyes. Sad for the horse, her frowning gaze swung to Huffman. When a crowd of people followed him out of the arena, she lost sight of the owner and his horse.

The announcer's voice rang out over the sound system and people settled down to watch the next event. Focusing ahead, she waited with interest in the flat-shod Tennessee Walkers competing in the show. Hmm, she could be wrong, but she suspected Josie has a natural flat walk. She certainly has the head nod which might make her a promising competitor in the event. Joe talked about it before he was deployed to Afghanistan.

Becca settled back to watch several noble looking horses take their turn before the judges in the trail performing class. Finally, a hush came over the crowd the moment the Tennessee Walkers strutted their stuff before the judges. The horses were superb.

"Aunt Bec," Clip drew her attention. "I don't see pads on their feet."

“Flat-shod Walkers aren’t allowed to use pads or any other action devices like the “big lick” event we just witnessed. Besides, I’d never put such cruel devices on Josie, like the beautiful animal was wearing.”

“You think it hurts?”

“I know it does. It’s cruel and abusive to the animal.” Her research on Tennessee Walking Horses surprised her when she learned they were the American originals and comprised of mixed breeds. Settlers in the 1800s brought with them Morgans, Narragansett Pacer and Canadian Horses. A Morgan stepped out into the arena. “Huh, look Clip, he’s a Morgan. Don’t you think Josie’s prettier than him?”

“Of course, Aunt Bec. Josie’s got a prettier coat.” He grinned.

Cheers detonated throughout the stadium, agreeing with the judges awarding the final round for Championship of the Flat-shod division to the bay colored Morgan. His prominent head nod and smooth, gliding running walk contained no bouncy trot making him the prize winner.

“What a magnificent animal. Clip, I think Josie’s taller than him. What do you think?”

He shrugged, tilted his head and watched the animal for several seconds. “Maybe. Why don’t we measure Josie and see if she’s stands more than fourteen hands high. If so, she’s taller.”

“I’m glad he won.”

“Me too.” Becca stood to make her way down the bleachers to stroll toward the exit among the hordes of people heading in the same direction.

“Can we get something to eat, Aunt Bec? I’m starved.” Clip jumping from the stadium seat to the walkway.

“Sure.” Becca followed the crowd out, and in the spur-of-the-moment, turned toward the stables. “I need to check something out. Let’s go by the corrals and see if we can get some pictures of the winner.” Foremost in her thoughts was to take another look at the Big Lick Champion and observed the horse a little closer.

The owner, Mr. Huffman was someone she wanted to confront. Where had she heard his name before? Huffman. Huffman. *Hmm.*

Clip followed Becca out of the arena and along the path to where the horses were kept while being prepared for shows. A large group stood around the Grand Champion getting autographs from the owner, Huffman. She stopped short and stared at the horse. He was the most beautiful

Tennessee Walker she'd ever seen and his coat appeared blue-black and the long white marking sat perfectly in the middle of his forehead.

Oh my God. He looked so much like her ghost horse. A chill scurried down her back. *How?* His large round eyes were filled with pain, the same pain she recognized in her ghost horse.

She lifted her iphone and took several pictures of the horse showing his stance in the four inch pads. She'd read studies done at Auburn University. Severe damage resulted to the horse's forelegs when heavier chains of more than six-ounces were used. Curiosity about the horse and the man named Huffman made Becca pull Clip's arm back with her and out of the crowd.

Clip stepped back with her and looked up to watch her key in letters on her iphone. "Whatcha you doing, Aunt Bec?"

"I'm Googling the owner's name. I've heard his name...oh my, now I remembered."

"What?" Clip's impatient tone demanded.

"Come on," Becca's hand indicated for him to follow. Unable to keep quiet, she squeezed her way toward the front of the crowd and lifted her hand along with her voice, "Mr. Huffman, Mr. Huffman." Lifting her arm, she waved her hand to get his attention.

He smiled and pointed toward her, "Yes, little missy, what's your question?" He turned his attention to the people asking for autographs and continued to sign, waiting for her to speak.

After a quick glance at the people staring back at her pushing in closer, her first thought sat a scowl on her face. A man grinned at Huffman and shook his hand after getting an autograph. Huh, the crowd seemed to think the owner won instead of the horse. She stepped in front and near enough to the horse to reach out and touch his soft velvet nose and look into his round black eyes. The horse stared back at her with bloodshot eyes and a wild look. His head jerked up. For a nanosecond she thought a flicker of recognition flashed through his eyes.

"Did you have a question, little missy?" Huffman drew her gaze.

"You don't give a damn this animal is in pain, do you? You've abused him, haven't you?" She suspected soring.

"Now little missy, why don't you run along. You don't know what you're talking about."

"Mr. Huffman, is the chains you use to train more than the legal weight of six-ounces allowed?"

"Little Missy, I was granted approval by the association's inspectors and I follow all regulations, besides everyone knows it's legal to use chains in NHSC horse shows."

“Do you deny you just spent eight months in prison for soring?”

“Now, little missy, a misunderstanding took place and I was cleared, otherwise I wouldn’t be here today.”

“Are you denying this horse has not met with some abuse, specifically, soring and heavier chains.” Becca glanced around the group intently listening to her.

“Open your eyes people. See for yourself.” She wanted to scream, but fought to keep her voice strong and civil. “This poor animal is in pain...look for yourself, anyone can see it in his eyes. They’re bloodshot eyes. I can’t believe you’re allowed to enter this show. And, you,” Becca whirled and pointed a finger to the crowd standing around, listening. “You people disgust me. What’s wrong with you? You want an autograph from a man that’s no better than a criminal. He’s abused this animal. Look at the way he stands-that’s not normal. And *you-*” she point to individuals in the crowd, “-are awarding him for doing such cruelty to this animal. Shame on you.”

“Now, little missy, I take care of my horses. Just ask anyone. You better move on before your temper pops that baby right out of your big belly.” A few chuckles spread through the group, but quickly silenced when she scurried a disgusting gaze around at them.

Becca’s blood boiled so hot she felt her face flaming. “I’m ashamed to let anyone know Tennesseans allow people like you, Huffman, to continue to be abusive to such a beautiful animal. Not only do I blame you, your vet and you-” she pointed to all those asking for an autograph, “-but the entire association and the inspectors running this event. It’s time someone did something.”

Becca grabbed her eleven year old nephew by the hand and mumbled, “Let’s go.”

Livid, she turned to stomp away, but smashed into a man.”Excuse me,” she mumbled and stared up into a pair of understanding smoky gray eyes. She hurried past him and quickly rushed Clip to her vehicle.

“Dad, she was right, don’t you think? That poor horse didn’t look happy. I agree with her, I think he’s in pain. Can’t you do something too?”

Thomas circled his arm around his daughter and headed toward the parking lot. “Elle, we can’t. Not now, anyway.” Thomas raised his gaze in the direction the redhead took and for a moment sat eyes on her stepping up into a Titan truck.

The redhead was gutsy, he'd give her credit. She spoke her mind and more than likely, she'd follow through with her threat. He grinned. When the redhead turned and bumped into him, his reactions to her surprised him, triggering an interesting jar inside his loins. Red hair and fiery green eyes, good thing she was pregnant. Yeah, he'd noticed. Thomas shook his head—*huh*, it had been a long time since he'd been with a woman.

“Dad, are we staying in our new house tonight?”

“You want to?”

“Sure, we have our sleeping bags, it'll be fun, don't you think?”

“Sure kiddo, besides, the moving van will arrive in two days.”

He hugged her shoulders to him and unlocked the truck. “Let's go meet Wil, he'll be waiting for us with the horses.”

Thomas turned his black one-ton Ford truck out of the parking lot and headed south toward the outskirts of Montgomery to meet with Wil, the FBI in charge of their new home. He appreciated Wil for volunteering to load up his horses at their homestead in Kentucky and deliver them to Yellow Creek. He glanced at Elle.

She seemed to be at ease and took in their entire situation like an adventure. Thank goodness. She'd been a trooper. He never intended to put her life in danger. She'd been through enough, especially not having a mother. He'd never understood why a mother couldn't love her little girl.

Chapter Three

Becca steered her truck onto Ellis Mills Road, heading home after the disturbing incident at the event in Montgomery. She bit down on her bottom lip. The ghost horse she envisioned certainly favored Forever Blue-Black, the 2012 Champion. Weird. Glancing over at Clip, she realized they hadn't spoken since they left the stadium.

"Sorry Clip, my brain's in high gear and I've ignored you. So, what's on your mind? You pouting a little?" She reached over and nudged his shoulder.

His dark eyes turned on her and in a serious tone reminded her, "You said you'd think about talking to Dad."

"About what...oh, right. Riding. Okay, I'll talk to your dad today."

He grinned, took his ipod ear piece and shoved it back into his ear to continue listening to his music.

Becca followed the curves of the narrow country road, and quickly glanced out the window at the green terrain filled with newly blossoms popping out and sprouting leaves adorning tree limbs. She hurried a quick glance down at her swollen belly reminding her life changes were in store - a baby coming into her world. Spring was here, April, and her baby was due in May, wow, so much to do with time closing in too fast. Come Monday morning, she'd have to talk to the principal about making arrangements for a substitute to take over by the first of May. But, her secret thoughts of not returning next year didn't need discussing at this point. She'd think about it some more.

Nothing will ever be the same again. Not even teaching. She loved teaching, but now, being a single mom had its priorities, maybe she'd be a stay home mom. Lots of thoughts occupied her mind lately about not returning to teaching, especially this morning when she drove past Vivian Mills' two-story house with the 'For Sale' sign in the yard. For the past six months she'd glanced at the sign on the way to Dickson County Middle School, but not until this morning did an idea form in her head.

When the faded red painted Ellis Mills store came into view, she lifted her foot off the gas pedal. The old building never changed, nor the watermill across the road just up from the late Vivian Ellis' old two-story white house with its white picket fence. Ah, Mr. Finney's car was parked in front of Vivian's house. She glanced over and noticed him sitting on the porch.

Pressing her foot on the brakes, she slowed to park in front of his car. He glanced up when she turned off the engine. Becca waved. He waved back.

“Clip, I want to talk to Mr. Finney for a few minutes. I won’t be long.” She dug into her purse and handed Clip a couple of dollar bills. “Want to run and get a drink at the store?”

“Yup, thanks.” He grinned and jumped out of the truck before Becca could. She giggled, stepped to the gate and with a raised pitch, said, “Mr. Finney, how are you doing today?”

“Not bad at all, Becca. Looks to me you’re about due.”

Stepping through the gate, she rubbed her belly and nodded. “About a month to go and then she’ll be crying and wanting attention.”

“Yup, that’s what they all want. Have a seat and rest a spell.” He pointed to the white rattan chair across from him, closed his computer, sat down and gave her his full attention.

“Mr. Finney,” Becca pulled the chair away from the table just enough to give her belly room. Settling down, she gazed at the man everyone in Yellow Creek knew. He’d been born and raised in Erin, nearly twenty miles away and most of his adult life he’d been selling and buying houses for miles around. She pressed her upper teeth down on her bottom lip and glanced around the green grass and white washed picked fence. Her gaze turned back to the white rattan table in front of her, almost expecting to see a vase containing a bundle of purple flowers in the center. Vivian had always loved her flowers, even her daffodils were still blooming in the corner of the yard. Vivian always kept the place immaculate. It almost didn’t seem possible a year had passed since she’d died.

Becca lifted her gaze to Mr. Finney. “I’d like to talk to you about purchasing this place. I’ve thought about it for a while and I’m really interested-”

“Becca.” Mr. Finney held up his hand interrupting her. “I’m sorry, it’s sold. Two days ago. I’m actually waiting for the buyer right now to show him around the property and give him the keys to the place.”

“You mean he bought Vivian’s house without seeing it first?”

“Yup, saw my ad on the internet, sent his money, signed the contract, and said he’d meet me here this afternoon. He wanted to move in this week or next. Yup, called last week and after talking to him, things moved along quickly. I’ve never sold anything so fast in my life, especially in Yellow Creek.” He scratched his balding head and admitted, “Thought I’d be stuck trying to

sell this place for a couple of years. Amazing what happens when something goes on the internet. I guess that's progress with technology."

Becca pushed to her feet, pressed her lips into a thin smile, but couldn't keep her disappointed tone from coming through. "I guess I waited too long. If things don't go the way you expect and the man changes his mind, will you let me know?"

"I certainly will."

Crunching gravel from a vehicle driving up drew her gaze around. A black one-ton Ford pulled up to the gate and the engine when dead. Becca glanced at the license plate. So their new neighbor was from Kentucky.

She turned back to Mr. Finney and held out her hand. "Looks like he's here. Thank you Mr. Finney. Let me know if things change."

"Sure thing, Becca. You take care of your baby now, and stay close to home. You don't want to go into labor and have her in that truck of yours."

Becca turned to leave and connected eyes with the new owner strolling through the gate. She smiled into the nice looking face with gray eyes and almost the same hair coloring, except more pepper than salt.

He returned her smile, glanced down at her very pregnant tummy and held the gate open for her. She paused, held out her hand. While giving his hand a brief shake, she said, "Mr. Finney tells me you're our new neighbor. Welcome to Yellow Creek."

"Thank you," he said, "I'm-"

"Mr. Smith," Mr. Finney interrupted, hurrying forward. "I'm Frank Finney. I'm here to show you around. Here's a bundle of keys. I'll show you the doors they open."

Becca tipped her head when Mr. Smith nodded at her and turned his attention to Finney, who appeared to be in a rush. Turning, she strolled through the gate to her truck, pulled her heavy body into the Nissan Titan and glanced toward the store. Clip, with his earplugs in place, moseyed across the road, carrying a can of pop.

He climbed in and handed her his drink, buckled up and retrieved his pop from Becca.

"So who's the stranger talking to Mr. Finney, Aunt Bec?" he asked, slurping down some coke.

“I’m told he’s our new neighbor. Appears he’ll be moving in within a day or two. That’s all I know about him.” With a switch of the key, the engine rumbled to life. Her gaze studied the man following Finney into Vivian’s old house.

“Kentucky license plates on his truck.” Clip mumbled while sipping on the coke can.

“Unh...better get you home so I can talk to your dad.”

“Yeah,” he nodded and took another slurp of pop.

Well, there went her wonderful idea. Now what?

About a mile down the road, Becca turned up the driveway toward Clip’s home and pulled to a stop. He jumped out to meet the black and white spotted dog running toward them. Drake, Sarah’s Dalmatian, ran to her after Clip’s greeting. When she reached down and gave him a big pat on his muscular side, he appeared to smile at her with his lip curled up at the side and his long tail whipping back and forth

“Hi boy, where’s your mom?” Becca giggled and strolled up the short incline toward the house. Glancing around, she took in a deep breath. She loved what Sarah had done to the beautiful home on her grandmother’s land. And, the house was a lovely replica of her grandmother’s old farmhouse, except all modern inside. Having a sister-in-law she loved like a real sister was fun, and, she loved her for making her brother, Ketch and his son, happy.

“Hi Becca, come on in and have a glass of tea with me.”

Becca swung her gaze up at Sarah standing on the front porch holding two classes of ice tea. She stepped upon the porch and reached out for the glass.

“Thought you’d never ask. Whew.” She patted her stomach. “Bigger I get, the harder those steps are to climb.” She giggled, then took a sip of refreshing cold sweet tea and followed Sarah to the far end of the porch.

Taking a seat next to Sarah on the white wooden swing, she relaxed, feeling the cool spring breeze touch her skin. She glanced around. “I love spring in Yellow Creek. The weather is perfect. My only complaint is spring doesn’t last long enough. Before you know it the humidity will have our ice tea glasses dripping and melting ice faster than you can drink it.”

Becca turned and met Sarah’s blue eyes and grinned. Sarah reached over and rubbed her belly. “Won’t be long now. I can’t wait.”

“I know. Little scary.” Becca scanned Sarah’s face with her short blonde hair wavy against her face. “When I think about her arrival, I get a little nervous. I’m not too sure I can do this without Joe.”

“I know dear.” Sarah hugged her shoulder and sat back.

Becca swung her gaze out over the manicured yard beyond the white fence to the field where her horse grazed. A ring echoed from inside the house and Clip’s voice floated to her senses, “Hey Bobby...” his words faded into the background indicating his moving direction further into the house.

Sarah’s soothing tone drew her attention. “I wished I had met Joe. Ketch really liked him. I’m so sorry Becca.”

“Me too,” she mumbled and took a sip of sweet tea.

The screen door flew opened. Clip strolled out tossing a red apple into the air from one hand to the other. “Sarah, did Aunt Bec ask you?”

Sarah lifted an eyebrow and glanced at her sister-in-law. “What?”

Becca shook her head. “Oops, I forgot. Okay. Sarah, will you speak to Ketch about Clip learning to ride Josie? Clip wants to help clean the stable through the summer months and exercise Josie for me until I have the baby.

“I think that’s a good idea.” Sarah’s big grin gave Clip hope spreading a wider grin in return. “It’ll keep you busy through the summer. Maybe you won’t get so bored. But, you’ll have to remember to do your chores here first.”

“I will. I promise.” Clip leaned against a porch rail and waited for his step-mother’s confirmation.

“Okay, I’ll talk to your dad tonight.”

“Great.” He jumped from the porch and ran to the fence with Drake on his heels. When Clip climbed upon the fence, Drake put his front paws on the lower fence rail and sniffed toward the horse. Clip held out the apple for the horse grazing in the field. “Silver, come, want a treat?”

Silver Dapple raised her chocolate brown head showing off her long silver mane hanging down her neck. The mare’s ears perked up at the sound of Clip’s voice. Her friendly neigh recognize the time of day, like every day, when Clip got home from school. Becca stood, strolled to the edge of the porch and watched her rescued horse limp toward Clip and gently take the apple from his hand.

Chapter Four

Becca observed Silver Dapple take the apple from Clip with guarded eyes. She recalled the day her sweetheart husband brought the once beautiful Tennessee Walker home. An old man who couldn't afford to buy meds for the abused horse gave her to Joe. Appropriately named Silver Dapple, for her chocolate brown body and silver mane and tail, they all fell in love with her. She cried when Joe told about the soring and chains the Tennessee Walker had endured by her previous owner before the old farmer took her away. She still detected pain in the animal's brown eyes. It took months to get the horse to trust her and Clip enough to take an apple from them. How could people be so cruel and abusive to such a beautiful animal?

"The old girl's come a long way, don't you think?" Becca glanced at Sarah, then turned her gaze back to observe Silver Dapple munch on the apple.

Sarah stood next to her. "She's so much better off now than when you first brought her here."

"Maybe, if I brought Josie over for company, maybe psychologically, Silver's pain might ease mentally. What do you think?"

Sarah shrugged. "Let's talk to Ketch about it."

"Hey, Aunt Bec," Clip swung his gaze toward her. "Bobby said you're all over the internet."

"What are you talking about?" she frowned.

Clip's lazy stroll, so much like his father, brought him toward the edge of the porch. He looked up and chuckled. "He said you were cool the way you hammered the mean man."

"What?"

"Let's go see it." Clip jumped onto the porch, swung open the screen door and waited for his step-mother and aunt to enter.

Becca followed at a slow waddle. She shook her head and tried to glance down at her feet. If this baby didn't hurry and arrive, she'd be duck waddling forever.

Sarah hurried down the hallway and turned into her office where she spent most of her time writing novels. She took a seat in front of the computer while Clip dragged a chair up next to Sarah for Becca. He stood and watched over Sarah's shoulder. She did a search on YouTube and sure enough a video of Becca appeared.

Becca's mouth dropped. "Who in God's name videotaped that?"

“Anyone, Aunt Bec. Everybody has an iphone now days, except me.” He hinted with a nudge at Sarah.

All eyes glued to the computer to inspect Becca’s tirade in the man’s face who owned the Tennessee Walking Horse, Forever Blue-Black, who won the Grand Championship award.

Becca’s eyes widened. Her angry tone spat out accusations of his abusiveness to the beautiful animal standing between them. Whoever took the video not only did a close up of her, and her big belly, but of the horse. Anyone watching the YouTube video could tell the animal was in pain. He couldn’t stand still.

“Good for you Aunt Bec,” Clip slapped her shoulder. “Now maybe people will do something about cruel people like him. Hey, look. Pause the video Sarah.” Sarah clicked the pause button. Clip reached his arm between the two and pointed to a man standing behind Bec. “That’s the man talking to Mr. Finney today.”

Becca took a closer look. She nodded. She remembered him, but hadn’t made the connection earlier at Vivian’s place. “You’re right Clip. He’s our new neighbor...bought Vivian’s old place.” She glanced at Sarah. “Mr. Finney said he’ll be moving in within the next few days.”

“So that’s Thomas Smith.”

“You know him?”

Sarah shook her head and continued the video, which was at the tail end. When it ended, she turned to Bec, “I ran into Finney at the old store and he told me about the family buying Vivian’s house. Said he was from Kentucky and other than an expert with racing horses, he didn’t seem to know much more.”

“Really.” Becca stood, stepped aside so Clip could replace the chair. She followed Sarah back out onto the porch.

“Huh, interesting...expert on racing horses.”

“Maybe you should talk to him about Josie. I mean, you said you’ve thought about training her for the TWH event because she seems to be a natural flat-walker. After all, Josie is a Tennessee Walker and six years old, she’d qualify.”

Becca pressed her lips and shook her head. “I don’t know. After seeing the video, no one will want to train her. Besides, I’m not sure I’d want to support an organization allowing owners to qualify when they obviously abuse their horses.”

“Just a thought.”

“Here you go.” Becca handed her ice tea glass over to Sarah. “Thanks. Now, I’ve got to get home. Josie will be waiting for her feed. Do I need to bring more meds by for Silver?” She jutted her chin toward the horse in the field grazing.

“I’ll have to ask Ketch. We’ll let you know.”

“Okay.” Becca turned to leave and hesitated at the screen door. “See you Clip.”

“Bye Aunt Bec,” echoed a response from inside.

Sarah sat the glasses down on a small table and followed Becca down the rock steps and down the path toward her truck. “So how did you meet our new neighbor anyway?”

“I stopped on the way home earlier to talk to Finney when I noticed him setting on Vivian’s porch. I wanted to make an offer on the place.”

“An offer? Becca, why Vivian’s place?”

Becca’s cell rang out. She shrugged at Sarah and glanced at the ID on her cellular. When she answered, a newspaper reporter stated his name and asked to interview her about the incident at the TWH event and asked if she has seen the video on YouTube. After politely declining the interview, she stared at Sarah listening to the reporter’s reply. “Let him go ahead. After what he’s done to Forever Blue-Black, the entire world should know.” Becca clicked off and tossed the iphone into her truck.

“What was that about?”

“That reporter Gibson from NTN wanted an interview about the video.”

“You mean Bradley Gibson the TV news reporter for the Nashville Tennessee News station?”

“Yup. Gibson said Huffman wanted to sue me for defamation against his character. Well, he can go for it.” She reached out and gave Sarah a quick hug and said, “I better get home...my own animals will accuse me of abuse if I don’t feed them soon.”

Another half mile down the road, Becca turned up her drive to her old remodeled red brick house and parked in the back. The moment she unlocked her backdoor, Maxine met her with a wag and a happy grin lifting her lip. “Hi girl. I know, mom’s late. Come on, run out to potty and then I’ll feed you.” She let Maxine take off down the steps to the yard. Leaving the door open, she hurried to the kitchen and filled her dish with her favorite dog food. She glanced around. The house was quiet since Ketch and Clip moved out. After Ketch and Sarah’s wedding they moved

into the house Ketch built for Sarah on her grandmother's farmland. She missed having her brother and nephew around the place.

Maxine dash in heading toward her food while Becca shut the door, took a deep breath, and strolled upstairs. Pretty soon, little feet running through the place would brighten up things. She was looking forward to her little girl's arrival. Quickly changing clothes, Becca hurried down to the mudroom to shove on her rubber boots.

"Ready Maxine, let's head up to the barn to feed Josie." Closing the door behind her she followed her Brittney down the porch steps toward the dirt road leading to the barn. Maxine stopped near the Titan and glanced up at her.

Becca shook her head. "No girl, we need the exercise, so we're walking." When she passed up the truck, Maxine ran ahead leading her across the driveway and up the dirt road to Josie, her friend.

Becca pulled open the large barn door to the sound of her horse's neighs. "Hi girl." Josie lifted her head and neighed in reply. Reaching out, she gave her horse a hug, and then she filled the grain bag to let her munch the second the straps were placed over her head. "Josie you're a beautiful horse. Hmm, if Sarah's right and Thomas Smith is a horse trainer, maybe he'd be willing to train you. Or, teach Clip."

Picking up her grip-fit grooming brush, Becca stroked Josie's long back and down her rump. "Josie, did you know you always remind me of Joe. Did you remember him?" Becca glanced at Josie's ears perking up, listening to her voice. She brushed down her muscular side. "Yeah, you were the last thing Joe gave me before he deployed to Afghanistan."

Becca straightened, lifted the feed bag from Josie and hung it over the stall post. She swiped a couple of more brush strokes, and rested her arms on Josie's back, staring out the back barn doors into the field.

The very day the military men knocked on her door to tell her of his death was the day she learned she was pregnant. She'd been so excited to write Joe and tell him he was going to be a father. Tears clouded her vision. She blinked, hugged her belly, glanced at Josie and down at Maxine. "He'll never see his baby girl."

Leaning her head against Josie, tears of sadness and loneliness drip onto her horse's back. Maxine whimpered at her feet.

Chapter Five

Becca stepped from the principal's office and skirted a slight smile toward the secretary setting behind the desk. Impatiently, she shoved the door open into the hallway and slammed into a man's face. "Geez, I'm so sorry." She gritted her teeth and watched the man rub his forehead where a red spot marked the door collision. "I wasn't paying attention."

"No problem," his deep voice rumbled, and then, he smiled. A nice smile. A familiar smile. Gazing up into smoky gray eyes, she detected a spark of amusement. Ahh...now, she recognized him. "Hello again...new owner of Vivian's place. Right?" Becca held out her hand and introduced herself, "I'm Rebecca Tripp, one of your neighbors."

He held out his hand and swallowed hers inside a firm, but gentle handshake. "I remember. Mr. Finney interrupted before we were formally introduced. I'm Thomas...Smith," he stated and glanced at the young girl at his side, and then back, "This is my daughter, Elle. We're here to register for school."

When Becca held out her hand to Elle, a bright, wide smile spread across the dark haired girl's face. She shook her hand. "Hey, I know you. You're the lady who told off the ugly, mean at the TWH show, aren't you?"

Becca's eyes widened. She cleared her throat and nodded. "Guilty. Sorry you witnessed my temper, and I'm sorry I made such a spectacle of myself."

"Oh no, Mrs. Tripp, he deserved it, you were cool."

"Well, thank you, Elle, but Mr. Robinson, the principal didn't think too much about it when his attention was drawn to the YouTube. I'm sorry to say my video went viral." She glanced at Thomas, who displayed a slight frown.

"I teach sixth grade," she explained, "and Mr. Robinson didn't think my angry public display was justified. Evidently, I should have been a bit more, what was the word he used...couth. Teachers don't lose control."

Elle giggled, drawing Becca's gaze. "Someone videoed you? I can't wait to see it."

"Okay, now I'm officially embarrassed." Becca stepped aside and tilted her head toward the secretary. "Gayle's the person you need to talk to for registering. Nice to meet you Elle." Becca glanced up at Thomas, and said, "Mr. Smith."

He smiled, tipped his head and with an arm around his daughter, steered her through the door and toward the secretary's desk.

Geez, what was the matter with her and why the quiver inside like a giddy school girl eying a cute boy. Geez, she guessed she'd spent too much time round too many middle school kids. Becca glanced up at the hall clock. Five minutes left before the final school bell rang. Pushing frustrated air out from her lungs, she frowned and strolled toward the wide front doors. She'd wait for Clip in the truck.

After unlocking the truck door, Becca tossed her purse and briefcase onto the backseat, rolled down the windows, slammed the door shut, and then leaned against the fender to wait for Clip. Her thoughts turned to her talk with the principal. Wait until the principal read what they wrote in the Clarksville Tribune. *Huh*, he'll be unhappy with her again. Maybe he won't see it. After all, it was just a tiny paragraph. Anyway, when they called to confirm her accusations, she couldn't deny it. Geez, Becca, learn to keep your mouth shut.

A small, demanding poke drew her gaze to her protruding belly. Her hand rubbed over her tummy. She grinned. The tiny foot nudged her again. "Stretch baby. It won't be long now," she mumbled. "Mommy needs to get busy and decide what to name you. Can't call you baby forever." Becca took a deep breath and stretched her back, relaxed against the truck and glanced toward the school building.

Thomas Smith and his daughter strolled down the walk toward her. Huh, Thomas certainly was easy on the eyes. When he glanced up, his gray eyes connected with hers for a brief second before he glanced at Elle and mumbled something. Elle looked up from her iphone and smiled at Becca.

"Mrs. Tripp," she stepped near and held out her phone. "I just watched your video. You're the coolest person I know."

"Elle, you're so sweet." Becca returned her smile, and asked, "So, did you get all registered for school?" She didn't want to talk about the video, and neither did Mr. Smith from the look on his face.

He stepped to his Ford truck parked next to hers, opened the door, and then turned his gaze on her. He appeared to be waiting for her to say something. Before she could think of something, Clip ran up and tossed his backpack through the window onto the backseat of her Titan and glanced at Elle.

Becca touched his shoulder and said, "Clip meet Mr. Smith and his daughter, Elle. Elle will be starting school." She glanced at Clip staring at Elle and then Mr. Smith.

“So, you’re the family who bought the old house by the store, huh?”

Becca’s brow lifted at Clip’s obvious interest in the new girl in town.

Both Smiths nodded and before Clip could say another word, Elle popped in with an excited tone, “Your mom said we’re neighbors.”

Clip nodded and stared at Elle.

Elle shifted from one foot to the other and cocked her head while returning Clip’s stare. “I watched your mom on YouTube.”

His eyes brightened. “She ain’t my mom. She’s Aunt Bec. She’s really cool, huh?”

“Yeah, she was awesome. Sorry, I just thought she was your mom...”

Clip frowned. “That’s okay. She’s like a mom.”

Clip’s reply surprised Becca. She hugged his shoulder and glanced at Elle. “Well, I’m sure we’ll see you around Yellow Creek. We need to go Clip. Bye Elle.” Becca glanced at her new neighbor and mumbled, “Mr. Smith.”

“Hey Elle, what grade you in?” asked Clip, suddenly not so shy.

“Sixth come fall.”

“Hey, me too.” He grinned at her and ran to the other side of the truck, jerked open the door, and jumped in.

Pulling the driver’s door open, Becca hauled her body up and onto the seat, suddenly feeling huge, unattractive, and very pregnant. Before she even started the engine, Thomas Smith was backing out of the parking slot.

“Aunt Bec, this might be a fun summer after all, especially with a friend living down the road.”

She glanced at Clip. Most of his friends lived in Dickson County, closer to the school and it wasn’t always manageable to get someone to drive him the distance just to spend time with them. He was right; a schoolmate living close could be fun for him. She hoped so. Elle never mentioned a mother. Maybe Thomas Smith was divorced. Becca squinted when a slight wrenching pain scurried through her abdomen.

“You okay Aunt Bec,” Clip asked noticing her discomfort.

“Fine now, just a twinge, I guess she’s getting close.”

“I can’t wait until she’s old enough to ride Josie with me.”

Becca chuckled, “That’ll be a little ways down the road, kid.”

Clip shoved his earpiece into his ear and turned up his music while Becca drove toward Ellis Mills Road and to Yellow Creek. A curious glance took in Vivian's old house when she drove past. Thomas's Ford was parked on the side and toward the back near the large red barn, he stood outside the barn with a beautiful thoroughbred. *Huh*, he brought a horse with him. Maybe Sarah was right, he could train Josie and teach Clip how to ride.

Not far down the road, Becca turned up the Ketchum's driveway and parked her truck. She glanced at Clip opening the door. "I think I'll check on Silver before heading home." Following Clip up the short rock steps toward the gate leading into the front yard, Becca glanced out toward the pasture surrounding the house where her mare stood staring in their direction.

"I'll get an apple, Aunt Bec." Clip hollered running up the porch steps and disappearing into the house.

She observed her mare's gait limping toward the fence, expecting Clip to treat her with an apple. Becca bit her bottom lip. Her sweet mare stayed in constant pain, but the horse's eyes revealed peacefulness now, which had been absent a year ago when Joe brought her home. *Joe*. Sadness engulfed her, pushing a short heartbreaking breath from her lungs. She leaned forward and folded her arms on the top of the fence. Joe, gone forever. He'd loved horses and when home on leave, his main priority in life was to rescue badly treated Tennessee Walking horses and stop the abuse of those owners more interested in the almighty dollar than in the health of their animals. He'd been determined to end soring and chaining and let the world know about criminals and how they abused such beautiful animals.

Her lips spread into a thin cheerless smile. Well, Joe, you saved this one and if you were here, you'd want to save Forever Blue-Black. She watched the beautiful mare approached her. "Hi Silver. How you doing today?"

Silver Dapple stopped several feet from her and seemed to be studying her.

With a slight shrug, she said, "No apple, yet. Clip's coming with your treat. Come here," her gentle voice perked Silver's ears. The large chocolate brown stepped closer. Becca held out her hand. Silver took another step close enough for Becca to touch her velvet nose. "Do you need more meds? I wish there was something more to give you, sweetie."

Clip silently stepped to the fence and held out a large red apple. He placed the apple on the palm of his hand and held it up. Silver's lips curled up and a soft nicker escaped her nostrils, displaying excitement for her treat.

Becca giggled, shook away the sadness she felt and watched Clip reach out and waited for Silver to nibble the delicious treat from his hand.

Clip climbed upon the second bottom rail and combed his fingers through the mare's long silver mane. Something he'd been able to do only in the last month or so. Evidently the mare was beginning to trust Clip and Becca. "Since the weather's gotten warmer, I think she's doing better. Don't you, Aunt Becca."

"Yeah, cold winters are hard on her joints. I can't imagine how painful it was when she lived with the old man Joe rescued her from."

Clip glance at her with concern in his expression. "Aunt Bec, I know Uncle Joe brought him here for only a while, until he finished your barn and it took longer to build because Uncle Joe died...I mean..." Clip clamped his mouth shut and climbed down off the fence. "Can we keep Silver here? At least until after you have the baby."

Becca turned, circled her arm around Clip and directed him toward the front porch. "Clip, I know Joe brought him here for a temporary home and your warm stable has been a good home for her, but one day I'll want to move her to my place." She glanced at Clip's frowning expression. "But for now, I'll talk to your dad, if he's willing, I'll let Silver stay until the baby comes and I'm able to give her the care she's been given here. Sound like a plan to you?"

He grinned, gave her a quick hug and opened the front door for her. "Sarah, Aunt Becca's here."

Sarah stepped from the kitchen, wiped a tear from her eyes, and said with a shaky voice, "Hi Bec."

"Sarah, what's the matter?"

Her sister-in-law motioned for her to follow her down the hall to her office, where she plopped down on a chair in front of her desk. "This," she sobbed.

Becca glanced at the image on the computer screen and studied the book cover of Sarah's soon to be released book. She cringed.

"Becca, it's hideous. I hate it." She turned her blue eyes on her.

Shrugging, Becca wrinkled up her eyes and bit her lower lip. When her gaze swung to Sarah, Sarah let more tears flow. She didn't know what to say, other than, she agreed. The colors were contradicting and the female image running through the woods appeared fake and artificial.

Most people, whether an author wanted to believe it or not, usually judged a book by its cover and this cover certainly didn't entice one to purchase the book.

"Becca, I called my editor to have her call the publisher and see what she could do. She said I could have a week to present another cover, or in which case, this one will be used." She twisted around in her chair, wiped her eyes, stared at Becca, and said, "Will you do a book cover for me?"

Becca's eyes widened. Her mind spun. She didn't have time—a week? She needed to get ready for the baby and do so much before -"

"Please." Sarah's shoulders slumped. She wrung her hands together and said, "I'll pay you the running price for a book covers. You've read the manuscript. Your art is wonderful and you know what I've envisioned. Please."

Becca took a long deep breath and nodded. "Okay, I'll try."

"Yes." Sarah jumped up and hugged Becca.

"How can I ever thank you, Becca?"

"Hmm, I'll think of something – like, babysitting once this baby girl graces us with her presence." Becca rubbed her tummy, turned out of the office and strolled down the hallway to the front door with Sarah following her all the way to her truck.

"Oh, you don't even have to ask. I'm looking forward to spoiling my little niece. We can't wait for her arrival." Sarah hugged Becca again, and said, "Call if you need me. Anytime, day or night."

"I will." Becca hauled her body into the Titan and looked back at Sarah. "I'm running into Clarksville tomorrow, do you need anything?"

"Oh yes, please. I only need a few staples, if you don't mind."

"Not at all." Becca dug into her purse and retrieved her iphone, touched the notepad and glanced up at Sarah. She listed the few items Sarah named off and when she hesitated, she glanced up at her sister-in-law and waited.

"Oh my," Sarah grinned. "I almost forgot. Can you bring back several gallons of milk for Clip—the way Clip goes through the stuff, I'm thinking about buying a dairy cow and make him work for his own milk."

Becca giggled. "I can picture Clip pulling down on the cow's udder." Both laughed.

“Oh, apples. You know how Silver loves those apples. That’s it. And, thanks Becca.” Becca ribbed up the engine, waved at Sarah and shouted while backing down out of the driveway, “Anything for my favorite sister.”

Chapter Six

For a second time, a horn blared. Becca took a quick look in its direction. The man behind the wheel of a red Honda waved at her. She grinned and waved back at Jerry, Ketch's attorney-poker friend. Spotting a parking place, she pulled into a parking lot and switched off the key. The first stop in her morning shopping spree was Mary Beth's Baby Stuff store, just around the corner.

Within two hours, Becca strolled from the store with four large bags of all the necessary items her little one needed once she entered this world. The mother-to-be grinned.

This was fun. She'd put off shopping for the baby far too long. Rightfully so, she needed to take a little time to adjust to having a baby without a father. Now, she was ready to move on and geared up to the reality of being a single mother. Juggling the bags in her hands, Becca stepped around the corner heading toward her truck thinking about a milkshake. Without warning she bumped head on into a man jarring her into releasing her hold on the bags. Precious items from the bags flew out, scattering onto the sidewalk around her. A hand covered her arm to steady her.

"Are you okay?"

Becca stared into the smoky gray eyes of Thomas Smith. "Ah...ah, I think so." Looking down, she squatted to gather her belongings, but once she got down on her knee and tried to reach for a tiny pink dress, her large protruding belly got in the way. She giggled.

He chuckled. "Here, let me get those," Thomas insisted taking her arm to help her stand.

Becca's short embarrassed laugh allowed him to help her to her feet with some difficulty. "Geez, thanks," she mumbled slightly out of breath. Standing, she looked down. "I'm big as a cow."

"Mrs. Tripp, you are not a cow. Though you are 'big' you're definitely a beautiful soon to be mother."

Becca couldn't think of a reply even though he called her 'big' he also complemented her which made her feel good for a change. Pregnant women should look beautiful. She glanced down at his daughter gathering up her items and shoving them back into the bags. "Elle, I didn't see you."

Elle straightened with the bags in her hands, and grinned. "Mrs. Tripp, where were you going in such a hurry?"

“Actually, I was thinking about a milkshake...I mean...I wanted a chocolate milkshake...and not paying attention to where I was going, again.” Geez, her mushy brain couldn’t think straight with Thomas studying her with a gleam in his eyes, eyes the color of the gray in his peppered hair. She liked his confident persona and his tan face, which complemented the gray in his hair. Geez, he certainly was easy on the eyes. “I...ah...” she cleared her throat and stated, “I was going to put my bags in the truck first.”

“Show us the way. We’ll carry these for you,” Elle’s bubbly voice offered. She handed one of the bags to her father.

“I parked right there.” Becca pointed, several feet away, moving toward her truck, she quickly unlocked the door and stepped aside. Thomas reached for Elle’s bags and placed all five in the back seat.”

“Dad, can we have a milkshake with Becca?”

“Elle, she’s Mrs. Tripp.” Thomas corrected Elle’s casual use of her name.

“No, no, that’s okay, Elle. Call me Becca at least out of school. Mrs. Tripp is too formal.”

Becca’s gaze swung from Elle to Thomas. The smile on his face reached his eyes crinkling the corners.

“Dad...milkshake?”

He cleared his throat and nodded. “It’s okay with me if it’s okay with Becca.”

“Of course. You two are welcomed company. I hate drinking milkshakes alone.”

“Where do we go?” Elle asked, stepping back upon the sidewalk.

“Over there,” Becca pointed behind her at the Shake Café not twenty feet away.

Thomas took her arm to help her step upon the curve, and then he released her and took Elle’s hand. “Well, ladies, can I buy you a shake?”

Becca laughed. “I’d say I should buy you a shake since I keep running into you, literally.”

Thomas chuckled. “That’s a deal.”

Thomas held the door open for her and Elle to enter the café. Becca waddled toward a booth and tried to take a seat without looking so clumsy and fat. The waitress stood next to their table and politely asked what they wanted.

Thomas settled in the soft cushioned booth next to Elle with his arm stretched out along the back seat, he asked, “What’s your flavor, Mrs. Tripp?”

“I’ll take a chocolate shake.” Becca looked up at the waitress. “Can you go light on the chocolate?”

“Sure can. What for you and the little girl, sir?” she questioned, fluttering her eyelashes at Thomas, evidently liking his looks too.

“Same, for the two of us, thank you.” He swung his gaze from the waitress down to his daughter, but spoke for Becca’s benefit. “Elle loves chocolate shakes.”

“You betcha,” Elle nodded agreeing with her dad’s statement. She looked at Becca’s tummy touching the edge of the table. “So, you’re having a girl?”

“How did you know?”

“Easy guess when I picked up the pink dresses that fell out of your bags. All those clothes are tiny enough to fit my dolls.”

Becca giggled. “I’m sure they could.”

The waitress delivered the shakes, placed them in front of each one and stepped away.

Elle’s shoulders swayed while she reached for her straw. “All babies are tiny, I’m sure those dresses won’t be too small.

Thomas took a sip, leaned back and stretched his arm over the backseat. “Elle was so teeny I could hold her in one hand.” He held out his palm and glanced at his daughter.

“Unh-uh,” Elle responded while she slurped up a mouth full of chocolate ice cream shake from the side of the glass.

He chuckled, picked up a napkin and wiped cream from her nose. His gaze swung to Becca, “When’s your due date?”

“Soon, May twenty-seventh.”

“May baby, huh. That’s nice. Elle was born was born in the winter and we kept her bundled against the cold. Your baby can go with just a diaper most of the time, once the weather is hot and humid.”

“Hmm, I hadn’t thought about that. There’s so much more I hadn’t thought about, yet.”

“Yeah, my birthday’s in January. I’ll be twelve.” This time she suck through the straw and swallowed. “So, when’s Clip’s birthday?”

Her curious tone made Becca smile. “December.”

“Oh, he’s older.” She frowned.

Becca chuckled getting the impression Elle thought she was older than Clip. Of course, it didn't have anything to do with her acting older than Clip.

After taking a sip of the cold, creamy chocolate flavored shake, Becca looked Thomas straight in the eyes and asked, "Are you and Elle all settled in your new home?"

"Somewhat, we need some furniture. That's why we're in town today. We should have most of what we need by next Friday when they deliver the order."

Becca nodded and took another sip, swallowed, and out of curiosity asked, "Mr. Smith-"

"Please, call me Thomas. After all, we are neighbors."

"That we are. All my friends call me Becca."

"Becca, can I ask you a personal question?" His slight grin charmed her into nodding.

"The old man at the store across from us-"

"Dad, his name's Howard. He's the owner of Ellis Mills store."

Thomas's head drew back and the frowned displayed didn't match the gleam in his eyes. "You always meet and know people before I do." His gaze turned back to Becca. "She's the friendly one of the family."

"Anyway, Becca," Ella popped the question before her dad could. "Howard said you're not married, right?"

Becca glanced down and touched her hands against the cold glass.

"I'm sorry," Thomas leaned forward, "Elle shouldn't have asked...it's just that-"

"No," she interrupted. "I don't mind. I'm still trying to get a handle on becoming a single mom myself." She gazed up into his gentle eyes.

"Joe, my husband, was killed in Afghanistan last year. Matter of fact, the month I was notified about his death, I found out I was pregnant."

"That's a bummer," mumbled Elle.

Thomas's attention swung to his daughter's. "Elle," his reprimanded tone drew her gaze. "Sorry Dad."

"That's okay. She's right, it was a...a bummer, but," she sat back and rubbed her tummy, "he would have been happy to know it's a girl."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, life's like that, unpredictable." Becca took a short breath. "One minute you're happy and all's right with world and next..."

“I know what you mean.” Thomas stared down at the brown shake in the glass.

“Me too,” Elle joined in, wrinkling up her nose. “When I was three years old, my mom walked out on us and I never knew why she didn’t love us.” Thomas reached over and hugged his daughter’s shoulder against him.

Becca couldn’t stop her quick breath intake, bringing his gaze to hers. “That’s a bummer.”

Elle giggled. She shrugged. “I don’t remember her.” She looked up at her dad and with sweetness flowing from her, she said, “Dad’s always been the one I need. I love him.”

Becca’s eyes watered. With some difficulty she pulled her gaze from Elle to Thomas.

His gentle gaze looked into hers. “Becca, it’s no worse than you losing a husband and now having a child alone.” He lifted his glass half full of chocolate shake. “Can we agree to talk about something else not so depressing?”

Elle quickly held up her glass and waited.

Becca tilted her head, smiled at Elle, then at Thomas, lifted her glass and clanked it against the two glasses. All three said in unison, “Agree.”

“So, there’s a rumor spreading around Yellow Creek. You’re a horse trainer. Is the rumor correct?”

Elle looked up through her lashes at her dad and quickly shoved the straw into her mouth and sucked up the chocolate liquid.

“Hmm, not exactly.” His slow sultry voice answered. “Not now, anyway. I’ve sort of gotten out of the horse training business. But since I know horses so well, I decided to use the property I’ve bought to board horses. Elle likes the idea and I should make enough money to get by. So did I hear you have a horse?”

“I do. Joe bought me a Tennessee Walking Horse a few weeks before he was deployed. Her name’s Josie. She’s a beautiful Morgan. Joe thought she’s a natural for the junior flat-walker event. Do you know anything about Walkers?”

“No, only what I’ve read.”

“Oh, I thought maybe you did since you were at the event in Montgomery the day I lost control of my emotions—blame it on being pregnant.” She rested her hand on her tummy.

“So you remember bumping into me?”

Becca giggled.

Thomas laughed out loud.

“Well, I guess it was our first bump,” she admitted, connecting eyes with him.

“Yeah, now look at us, friends.” Elle joined in with a changed expression, one of joy. “Yup, friends and neighbors.”

Becca forced her gaze from Thomas to give Elle an agreeing smile. Sucking up the last drop of milkshake, she looked back at Elle’s dad. “Ah, do you suppose, I mean if you have the time, do you suppose you could come by and take a look at Josie? Maybe you could give me some ideas whether or not I should waste my money on training her for an event. Well, it all depends on whether or not I can teach Clip to ride.”

“I’d be happy to take a look, but honestly, I don’t have much experience with Tennessee Walkers.”

After several seconds, he glanced at his daughter, moved to scoot from the booth, saying, “I think it’s time we headed back home, Elle.”

Becca grabbed her purse, and slowly pushed her body across the booth. Thomas held out his hand to help her stand. “Thank you. I swear, the bigger I get the harder it is to move.”

His great smile hugged her sensitive heart and triggered her thoughts making her body feel slim and beautiful.

Elle strolled along side her to the truck, gazed upon her for a few second and said, “I like you Becca and the shake was good. Dad, I think we’ve officially been welcomed to Yellow Creek.”

“You’re right Elle.” He did a slight bow toward Becca, and said, “As your new neighbor, we are obligated to tell you when and if you need help in anyway, let us know.”

“Thank you, kind sir.” She did a slight curtsy and glanced at Elle. “Now, I better finish my shopping and get home before dark. Josie will be waiting for her grain.”

Thomas smiled and stepped away. She fired up the engine, waved, and backed the truck out to head for the grocery store. Unable to keep from lifting her gaze into the rearview mirror, she watched for a second, the good looking man strolled toward his truck with his arm around his daughter. They were a devoted father and daughter family. That’s the kind of relationship she wanted with her daughter.

She glanced down at her belly and giggled. What in heaven’s name did she just do for the last hour, flirting? She laughed out loud, took a deep breath and reminded herself, “Rebecca

Tripp, honestly, do you think because a good-looking guy having a milkshake with you was flirting? Woman, you're pregnant. Get real. Geez."

Chapter Seven

What the hell was he thinking? Thomas circled his arm around Elle and gave her a quick hug and strolled toward his truck. Huh, old man Howard failed to mention her husband had been a military man and killed while deployed. She was gutsy, he'd give her that. He jerked open the door, glanced in the direction she had driven, and then shot his gaze at Elle, who was shoving an ear piece into her ears, ready to listen to music on their drive home. He climbed in and started up the motor. Once Elle had her seatbelt on, he pulled out of the parking lot staring out the windshield while driving along the riverfront highway toward the road leading out of town.

He'd just spent the last hour or so talking to a beautiful redhead who happened to be very much pregnant...with no husband. There's no way he should be attracted to her. He couldn't afford to get involved with a woman. Not now. Not when he and Elle's life was in danger. *Stupid*. Not another thought about the redhead.

Needless to say, he got upset when Elle showed him the video. What if the video proved dangerous for them? Why didn't he move back further into the crowd the moment she started her little tirade at Huffman. But no, there he stood in plain sight right behind her listening while some idiot took a freaking iphone and videotaped her.

He didn't waste any time calling Wil Reks to make sure he didn't need to be alarmed. Wil seemed pretty confident all eyes watching the video were focused on Rebecca Tripp and her outburst. Thomas wasn't so sure. He'd have to keep an eye open for any strange vehicle or person driving by their house. Yet, Yellow Creek was a quaint small community and any stranger hanging around for no good reason would certainly be noticed.

His jaws tightened to keep a chuckle from escaping. He definitely liked her gutsy attitude. She'd been right. Huffman abused his animal. He'd recognized the signs. Someone needed to follow through with her accusations. He couldn't. A tense line deepened between his eyebrows when he glanced at his daughter. He'd risk someone recognizing him and getting word back to Kentucky.

Exhaling a heavy sigh, he turned on the highway and headed south to Yellow Creek. He couldn't wait for the next few weeks to come to an end. Once the trial ended, he'd relax and think about getting back to a normal life and his profession. If things went smoothly, he could open up his veterinarian practice right in Yellow Creek, and hopefully never have to pull Elle out

of another school. Elle needed a permanent home, one where she could make friends and stay in school with them all the way through high school.

His cell phone rang interrupting his thoughts. Great, he needed a distraction to keep his brain from circling back around to the very pregnant, sexy redhead. “Slye here.”

“Slye, Slye? What the hell? What’s your name Thomas? Smith, Smith, Smith. Understood? Never mind. About time you answered. I’ve called a dozen times.

“Reks, I’ll remember. Been busy. What’s up?”

“I need you in Nashville first thing in the morning.”

“In the morning. Why?” His quick glance at Elle noticed her focus remained on her music while staring out the side window.

“There’s paper work you need to read over, and I need you to verify a document we found in Joyce Cannon’s safe. There’s a few other items I need to go over with you.”

“Is it really necessary? Can’t I go over all the documents next week before the trial starts?”

“Thomas, another body was found dead last night.”

“What?” his control voice dropped slightly above a whisper. He quickly glanced toward his daughter. Elle’s head swung side to side to the beat of the music in her ears. “Who? How?”

“That’s all I know for now...I’ll know more by the time you come in tomorrow. The investigation is ongoing-”

“Reks, are we in danger?”

“No. No one knows where you are. Look Thomas, be here in the morning.”

An anxious finger tapped on the steering wheel after flicking off the cell and heading west toward Yellow Creek. His worried brows pulled together and turned a hurried glance out the rearview mirror. A black sedan, several car widths behind, trailed him. He slowed. So did the car. Then, its signal light flashed and the black car turned right and disappeared. Thomas took a deep breath and stared straight ahead just in time to noticed the Clarksville Animal Supplies.

He pulled into the parking lot, reached over and touched Elle’s arm. She reached up and pulled out an earplug. “Come on in with me, we’ll only be a second. We need meds for the horses.”

“Can’t I wait here?”

“Nope, you have to come in with me. Ah...we’ll check out the saddles. I’ve been thinking about buying you a new one.”

Elle grinned, unplugged her ears and jumped from the truck. Thomas glanced around. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but still, he wasn't about to let Elle out of sight.

After looking around at the very expensive saddles, Thomas talked Elle into surfing the web for the perfect saddle before making up her mind. Loading up the supplies he purchased for his horses, they finally got back on the road for Yellow Creek.

If he needed to be in Nashville early in the morning, he'd have to figure out what to do with Elle. Becca. Maybe she'd watch her for him. Not a good idea to keep seeing her, but she was his neighbor, so how could he avoid her? Simple, slam his attraction for her into a compartment of his brain and throw away the key. No more sexual thoughts of her. Right.

It didn't take long to reach the turn off onto Ellis Mills road and up Becca's driveway.

"Who lives here, Dad?" Elle asked scanning the area.

"Becca. We won't be long. I need to ask her something."

Slowly driving up the hill to her driveway, he turned in and pulled up next to her Titan, climbed out of his truck, and paused when she stepped from her back door. He waited by his truck observing her slow approach. She grinned and waved. The picture she made was unforgettable. She swung a bucket in one hand, waved at them with the other, and smiled a beautiful smile squeezing the breath from his lungs. Nor did she appear to be embarrassed with what she was wearing. In contrast to the smart, fashionable summer dress she'd worn in town, she now dressed like farmer John's wife.

He grinned. She was so adorable in her oversized jeans, long man's shirt covering her very large tummy with her dog bouncing alongside of her black rubber boots. Un-oh, he felt a twitch in his lower abdomen.

"Thomas, I didn't expect to see you and Elle again today." She threw a quick wave toward Elle and turned her attention back to him.

"Have a favor to ask."

"Sure, what is it?" She looked him straight in the eyes on her approach toward him.

Her green eyes were large and bright against the backdrop of green fields and trees. He cleared his throat and opened his mouth to speak, but she spoke first and continued to walk past him.

“Would you like to walk with me? I’m headed for the barn to feed Josie. Elle, you want to meet my mare,” she hollered over her shoulder at Elle setting in the truck.

“Yeah,” Elle yelled out, climbing out of the truck in a flash. Thomas whirled, shoved his hands deep into his pockets and fell in step with Becca’s long strides and Elle’s vivacious skip. He studied the gorgeous redhead, she surprised him with all the energy she seemed to have, especially with the weight of carrying a baby.

She turned her head and met his gaze. Her questioning expression jarred him into speech. “Ah, I need to be in Nashville on business early in the morning and wondered...I mean, since we’re neighbors, I was wondering if you might..., ah -” His slight pause gave her time to speak.

“Watch Elle? I’d be happy to. What time will you bring her over?” She trudged on up the dirt road toward the barn.

He cringed and stared into stunning green eyes he wanted to lose himself in. “Early-six-thirty.”

“Ah, geez, Dad, that’s early,” Elle gritted her teeth.

Becca giggled, “That’s okay. I’ll be up.”

Chapter Eight

Becca opened the barn door, but before she stepped inside, Elle zoomed past her toward the horse's stall. "Hey, Josie," she greeted the curious eyed horse.

"It's okay girl. Meet my friends, Thomas and Elle." Becca assured Josie with her soothing tone.

A soft nicker through Josie's nose brought a giggle from Elle. "Hello to you too, Josie." Elle reached up and rubbed her long nose. The action brought another soft nicker from Josie and when the horse lifted her top lip, Elle laughed, climbed upon the rail and said, "Becca, Josie smiled at me."

"Yeah, she likes you." Becca dug into the barrow of grain and filled the feed bag. "It's funny. Not sure where she learned to smile. Though, I suspect Maxine, she smiles the same way, so I figured she taught Josie."

Thomas strolled forward, reached out his hand and gently patted the horse's neck "Good girl. You are a beauty," he mumbled, gazing down he observed her stance, her golden coloring and the healthy shine of her coat.

He glanced at Becca. "Here," he said reaching out for the feed bag, "let me do that, it'll give Josie a chance to know I'm a friend." He lifted the bag and waited for her to unlock the gate.

"Josie girl," he softened his tone and stepped near Josie's side. Slowly, he lifted the bag and placed the strap over Josie's head, softly speaking to the horse with guarded eyes on the stranger.

Josie snorted, and then proceeded to eat. Elle leaned on the rail and watched her devour the grain.

"Nice," Becca mumbled, grabbed the brush and move to Josie's side. She brushed along her horse's back and down her muscular leg. In a nonchalant tone, Becca sadness filtered from her voice. "She was a present from my husband a year before he was deployed."

Casually, Thomas leaned against the rail next to Elle, folded his arms, and watched Becca brush her horse. He listened to her soft voice float over the horse to tantalize his wits, warming his blood with pleasure, a contentment he hadn't felt with any woman in a very long while. Her words spoke of her absolute love for another man.

"Joe loved horses. I've always been a little intimidated by their size, but I'm learning. Joe thought Josie was a natural walker."

He pushed away from the rail and bent to raise Josie's right front leg. He observed the horse's foot and rubbed his hand over the shoe. "She's a healthy horse and might prove to be one of the few natural flat walkers around. Think about it. You could advocate for those who enter to be aware of abused horses and campaign against the likes of those who do."

Becca turned and tilted her head, studying him. "You know quite a bit about horses, so if you're not a horse trainer, how do you know so much?"

Elle swung her gaze toward her father and frowned.

He shrugged and ignored his daughter's concern expression. "Grew up on a farm in Kentucky." He glanced around. "Is Josie your only horse?"

"No, but he is my only horse able to be ridden. Clip has offered to ride and exercise him until the baby is old enough for me to work with Josie. The only thing is Clip's never been around horses enough to not get thrown or hurt. So, I'm a little worried about letting him."

"Elle's an expert rider," he jutted his chin toward her, and said, "She could teach him...with me there of course. If you want."

"I can teach Clip how to ride." Elle's enthusiastic nod indicated her desire to show off for Clip.

Becca's head drew back and her eyes widened. "Elle...well...sure. Let me clear it with my brother, Ketch, then I'll let you know."

He stepped through the gate, waited for Becca and then closed and locked it. He gave Josie one last pat, took Elle by the hand and followed Becca out of the barn. "Elle, if the two of you get along, then it could be a fun summer since you don't have any friends close."

Elle's smile brightened.

Becca smiled and nodded. "Clip could use a friend in Yellow Creek. If you haven't noticed there isn't any kids close unless you drive back to Dickson, and Clip's summers are usually boring."

Thomas swung Elle's hand back and forth, following Becca down the dusty road and cross the drive toward his truck. Elle took off running, climbed into the truck, and shove the earplugs back into her ears.

"Then it's settled. Find out from your brother and Clip, and then let me know."

"I will."

He opened the truck door and glanced back.

Becca stood several feet from him, smiling. “Do you have any horses at you place?”

He nodded. “We have three. They’re Thoroughbreds.” He climbed into his truck, rolled down the window and leaning his arm on the door. “It’s a long story, but I rescued them from an abusive owner giving them drugs.”

“Oh my, how horrible. Were they racers?” she asked stepping closer and placing her hand on the door near his arm.

“Yeah, it took me a while, but I think they are nearly back to being drug free and trusting me.”

Her head tilted and her beautiful eyes clouded with a wondering look. He frowned. “What?”

“Funny you should mention rescuing horses. Joe’s rescued horse is just now learning to trust. Before he found Silver Dapple, we discussed the possibility of training Josie for the TWH event. But after Joe brought Silver home, all he could think of was to expose the criminals abusing horses for the sake of winning prize money.”

“It’s unfortunate, but you’ll always find some people like money more than the welfare of their horses.” His brows pulled together. “Soring,” he asked, suspecting the poor horse’s pain would last a lifetime.

She nodded, and her green eyes filled with surprise. He knew she wondered how he knew about soring. He turned the key to the engine. Why did he always talk too much around her?

Thomas glanced around. “Where do you keep him?”

She leaned against the truck and turned a fleeting look toward the barn. “She’s over at Ketch’s place. They have facilities for horses, but don’t own any. Since I’m pregnant, Ketch offered to keep her in his barn and give her the meds. She’s still in pain, but is slowly coming around. I hope to bring her over here with Josie one day.” Before the engine roared to life, she said, “The sad thing is...I...I’m almost certain she’ll be in pain the rest of her life.”

He didn’t know what to say, he only knew he couldn’t get involved with her or her need to rescue another horse until his life and Elle’s was settle. “Well, I best get going. Get this little one home and feed our own horses.”

Becca pushed away from the truck and smiled. “See you in the morning. Bye Elle.” She waved when Elle’s hand flew up.

He nodded, lifted his hand in a short wave when she turned and walked toward her back door.

Thomas backed out and drove down the hill to the main road. What the hell? Now you've gone and done it Slye. What happened to thinking logical and locking away your emotions toward the redhead? Where's your common sense? He pounded his fist against the steering wheel and grunted. No logic on earth gives you permission to get involved with a pregnant woman. Sure, you're not involved yet. But, I know you, you're attracted to her – pregnant or not—and getting caught up in her passion to rescue horses doesn't give you the right to endanger your or Elle's life.

He steered the truck into his driveway, and slowly drove around the back of the house toward the barn about a hundred yards further. He frowned, deep in thought. If he did get involved, it meant more exposure, more danger. What worried him was the video on YouTube, but Reks seemed to think it didn't matter. Told him to make sure he didn't pop up in any more of Rebecca Tripp's tirades and he was almost sure she'd have more.

“Hey, Dad,” Elle holler, jumped out of the truck the moment the engine died. “I'll go put the spaghetti sauce on while you're feeding.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He stepped out of the truck and glanced at Elle taking off toward the back door of the house. Hungry soft neighs from his horses crinkled the corner of his eyes the moment he stepped inside the barn. “Yeah, yeah, I know, I'm late, fellows.

“Dad.”

Thomas turned to the sound of his daughter's loud entrance. He dug into the grain bag and filled the bucket. “I thought you were going to start dinner.”

“I am.” She opened the newspaper in her hand and followed him to the stall. “Look, Becca's in the newspaper.”

He straightened, took the paper from Elle's hand and zoomed in on Becca's face in the news. She'd been interview about the confrontation with Huffman and his abusiveness.

Chapter Nine

Thomas jutted his chin toward the backdoor. “Knock again.”

Elle reached up and knocked again, then turned to her father waiting on the lower porch step.

“Maybe she forgot.”

He shrugged. “She could be sleeping.”

The door swung open and Becca’s sheepish grin met their gaze. “Sorry, I over slept.”

“Not a problem.” He let his gaze trail over her red curls in disarray after a night’s sleep, then down her short robe and nightgown to show off her long shapely legs and bare feet.

“Come on in, I’ll put some coffee on.” She held the door for Elle and stepped aside for Thomas to enter.

Thomas couldn’t take his eyes off her sleepy morning sexiness. He took a step inside, waited for her to close the door and lead them down the short hallway into the large living area where the kitchen was separated by a counter. He couldn’t help but notice how slim she looked from the rear with her hips swaying toward the stove. Her head turned to catch his lowered gaze the moment he looked up at her.

She paused and turned to face him, but quickly swung her eyes toward Elle. “Would you like some juice, Elle?”

“Sure,” she said and tossed her backpack on the sofa and strolled to a stool on the opposite side of the bar. “Whatcha got?”

Becca took a couple of steps to the fridge and swung open the door. “Well, let’s see. Do you like orange juice, apple juice, or you can try Clip’s favorite-passion juice.”

“What’s that?”

Lifting out the bottle, she grabbed a glass from a shelf and placed the juice in front of Elle. “It’s made from five different tropical fruits. Try it, you’ll probably like it. If not I’ll get you something else.”

Elle poured a small sample into the glass and took a sip. “Yummy stuff.” She filled the glass and took another swallow. “Dad you should try this...this passionate juice. It’s delicious.”

Becca studied his blank expression when he strolled toward his daughter. “Next time maybe, I need to go.” He kissed Elle on the top of her head and said, “Be good.”

Becca stepped to the cupboard, grabbed a cup and turned back. “How about a cup of coffee for the road? It’ll be done in a minute.”

“Thanks, but I need to get moving. Traffic gets heavy this time of morning.”

“I know.” Becca leaned against the counter. “Ketch use to drive to Nashville every morning before he opened his construction business in Clarksville. He said there were times the traffic was unbearable.

He nodded, connected eyes with her, and then trailed his gaze upward to touch her curly uncombed hair. When he dropped his gaze to her eyes, she raised a hand and pushed her hair back. Large green eyes sparkled, aware of his observations.

If she was this beautiful pregnant, how the hell will he resisted her when she wasn’t pregnant.

He dragged his gaze from her and just before turning toward the backdoor, he winked at Elle. “See you about mid-afternoon.”

Becca followed him to the door in her bare feet. “Don’t worry, she’ll be fine.”

“If you need me, Elle knows my cell number.”

“Okay. Now, really we’ll be fine.”

He smiled into her eyes one more time and headed out the door to his car.

Shoving the gear into reverse, he pulled out of the drive before glancing back, but she’d already disappeared into the house. *Huh*, did you think she’d wave you off like some girlfriend infatuated with you? What the hell. What was he thinking? It didn’t matter what she wore, over size pants and shirt, summer dress big enough to go around her tummy, or a shortie nightgown. She was gorgeous. She was like a book cover. A book cover magically drawing his psychic in to see what lay inside. The small amount of what he’d read inside of her hadn’t disappointed him. The awesome book cover triggered his expectations, making him want to discover more.

Two hours later, Thomas sat across from Wil Reks and several other federal authorities working on the case. Thomas swung his gaze out the large windows overlooking downtown Nashville and listened to the conversation circling the men. The man at the head of the table flipped through a file and his concerned tone drew Thomas’s attention, “Eckert’s trial starts in a couple of weeks. We’re pretty sure we can get him on doping racehorses, and any other

information coming out during the trial will be a bonus. The hearing for Joyce Cannon's been delayed and since she's released on bail-

"Whoa...what?" His gaze swung to Reks.

Reks' shoulder lifted in disgust. "She's got a good lawyer, Thomas. Even though she's been charged for embezzling millions while working as the chief financial officer of Bennett City and charged with murder, he managed to get her out on bail."

"Well, I'll be damned." Thomas shook his head. "Unbelievable."

"Yeah, can you believe it? Look, Thomas, there's no body, yet, much less a weapon to incriminate her. The only thing she admitted was her inappropriate use of some city funds, but denies it was in the millions."

"Really. Can you prove it?" he focused on Wil sitting next to him.

"So far we're coming up empty. She did a pretty good job doctoring the books. Frankly, I'm not sure they can make the charges stick."

"What about her murdering Eckert's jockey, Ken Jones?"

"She denied ever being present at the stables on the day you mentioned and swears you made the entire story up."

"What? What reason do I have to make up such a story? I have a phone video. Besides, I'm not the only witness. What about Dr. Holloway, won't he testify too?"

"Thomas, the dead body found was Holloway-he'd been dead for two days. The investigation is ongoing and listed a homicide."

Thomas ran his fingers through his hair, rubbed his puckered brow and studied Wil's worried expression. "Do you suspect Cannon and Eckert? Where did the murder happen?"

"Churchhill Downs stable area. Evidently there was some kind of altercation between him and another man, but no witnesses. Nothing leads to Eckert or Cannon, yet."

Thomas leaned back in his chair. "What a freaking mess."

"Yup, so now you understand. You're the only witness to the jockey's murder."

"No other evidence? No DNA?"

"Nope, only blood spot found on a pitchfork belonged to the jockey, but you're our eyewitness and to prove there was a murder, there needs to be a body too."

"So, the only reason I'm here is to incriminate Eckert for doping, and nothing else will implicate Cannon, will it?"

He shook his head.

“Wil, did she do it. Did she have Dr. Holloway murdered?”

“Not unless, we find the murderer and he confesses to her involvement.”

He shrugged. “She’s got an alibi.”

“Mr. Slye,” a deep base voice drew his gaze. Thomas forgot about the men around the table listening to them.

“You need to come in tomorrow morning to go over every detail and be ready.”

“When’s the trial date?”

“Wednesday. Reks will have a hotel room for you and Elle. You have to stay there until it’s all over. Mr. Slye, I know this has been hard on you and your daughter, but she’ll have to stay put for the next week, maybe two.”

Thomas pushed to his feet, shook his head and strolled to the door.

Reks followed him out to the hallway, touched his arm to stop him in his tracks. “You’ll get through this Thomas. The FBI investigation is ongoing and they’re digging deeper into Cannon and Eckert’s life.”

“Reks, this damn well better not last long. I want our life back to normal.”

“I understand. We’re doing all we can. Hang in there.” Reks fell in step with Thomas heading to the elevator.

“No, not the elevator, let’s go down the back steps and through the alleyway, just to be cautious. I’ll drive you to your car.

Thomas drove out of Nashville on the back roads to Yellow Creek. His gaze shifted to the review mirror continuously just to appease his jittery nerves. Not many cars on the windy back road and if someone followed him, he’d know. His text alert sounded, drawing his gaze. Elle. *Pick me up at Clip’s house.*

Thomas drove up the Ketchum’s driveway and turned off the engine just behind Becca’s black Titan. He searched around the area and up the hill beyond the white picket fence. Clip’s head appeared just over the rim of the incline, which meant Elle was probably close by too. Hurrying up the rock steps to the gate his gaze took in the manicured green lawn, wide front porch decked with a white swing and rockers at the far end, and the white picket fence surrounding the yard.

Elle giggle. Resting his gaze on his daughter leaning against the fence at the far end of the yard, his lips spread thin. She held out an apple in the palm of her hand. The beautiful horse slowly walked toward her, stretched her neck out to accept the treat given her.

Elle giggled again, looked over her shoulder and her grin widened when she set eyes on her dad strolling toward them. “Dad, come meet Silver Dapple. She’s so sweet.”

He gave Elle a quick nod, and then looked beyond her to study the animal. When the horse stepped to Clip for another apple, Thomas didn’t miss her front legs limp. Must be Becca’s horse. The one rescued. He studied the horse standing in the field at an abnormal angle. He frowned. Some son-of-a-bitch had been cruel to her. Living with excruciating pain day in and day out for the rest of her life might prove an insufferable request of any animal. Maybe putting her down would be more humane.

“Hi Mr. Smith.” Clip grinned and handed him a carrot. “Wanna give Silver a treat, then she might not back off...you being a stranger and all.”

Thomas took the carrot and moved forward little by little, hoping not to spook the horse. “Easy girl, want a succulent orange carrot?” he asked lifting the carrot. Large black discs stared at him. Her beautiful silver mane feathered along her neckline when she lifted her head high. The whites of her eyeballs aimed directly at him.

“It’s okay, Silver, I’m a friend.” The velvet dark brown nose lowered, the carrot drew her eyes away from the strange man. Stretching her neck forward, she lifted her lips showing off a row of teeth before grabbing the carrot.

“That a girl,” Thomas softened his tone slightly above a whisper and said, “You’re in pain, aren’t you girl? What if I give you better meds to help? You’ll be my friend then, huh?” Silver’s ears perked to the monotone voice. Unhurriedly, he lifted his hand and gently touched the timid horse’s nose. When the horse didn’t move, he took a step back one step at a time, dropped his head, turned, and walked away.

The horse neighed, throwing her head high, pointing her nose in Thomas’s direction. Thomas chuckled and lifted his head to meet the green questioning eyes of Becca, standing on the porch step.

“Well, Mr. Smith, aren’t you full of surprises.”

“What can I say, horses like me...sometimes more than people.”

She laughed. “I know what you mean.”

That sexy laugh caught his breath. Wasn't the first time.

"How about a tall glass of ice tea. My sister-in-law makes the best southern sweet tea you've ever tasted."

Thomas glanced around at the kids still leaning up against the rail talking to each other while petting Silver who appeared to completely trust them. "Better not." He slowly turned his attention back to capture her sexy look never failing to boost blood flow through his body. "I have horses to tend to, but I'll take a rain check."

The moment she stepped down on the last step and smiled at him, he stupidly dissolved into a wanting adolescent. When she jutted her chin toward the horse, he struggled to look away. "You met Silver Dapple. Did you notice her limp?"

With that, he managed to drag his gaze to the horse beyond the fence. He nodded. "She's still in pain."

"I know," her soft voice revealed her love for the animal. "My vet put her on Rimadyl, but I don't think it's helping enough."

"I might have something better. If you like, we can try it."

In a flash, Becca reached out and touched his arm freezing his thoughts.

"Oh yes, please let's try it, I'll try anything. The vet wants to put her down. Said she'd be in pain all her life. But, I don't have the heart."

Needing space between them, Thomas stepped back letting her hand drop away from him. "I have to feed the animals, and Elle when I get home, then I'll come back with the meds."

"You mean you have some at your place?"

Without connecting with her eyes, he nodded, turned in Elle's direction and hollered, louder than he needed, "Elle, come on, we have to get home." He strolled toward the gate, well aware of Becca following alongside of him.

"I shouldn't be more than an hour or so. If you can get Silver in the barn, she might be more affable toward me giving her the injection."

"That's no problem, the barn's been her home for a while, and I'll be there too. Besides, Ketch'll be home shortly to help."

"Bye Becca," Elle yelled, running past them to hurry to the truck.

"Elle, I enjoyed our day together. Come over anytime and we can do some more painting."

Elle rolled down the window and wave. "I will. It was fun."

Thomas hurried to the opposite side and slid onto the seat. He tossed Becca a smile and heard her say just above the diesel engine, "See you in a while."

"Dad, is Becca coming over?"

"No, she wants me to give Silver some pain medicine."

"Good, I can tell she's hurting. Poor thing. Why are people so mean?"

Backing down the driveway, he pulled onto the road. After a quick glance in Elle's direction, and pondering over her question, he just shook his head and drove home.

Chapter Ten

Why the hell was he so nervous? He shifted from one foot to the other waiting for someone to answer. He raised his hand to knock on the door one more time when suddenly the door flew open. Green sparkling eyes stared directly into his. She smiled. That's why his nerves jittered like jingle bells. He sucked in a deep breath and said, "Hi, I brought some meds."

"Great. Come on in." She stepped aside to let him in, and then led him down the foyer to a door leading into the kitchen. He nodded at the couple sitting round a table with eyes on him.

"Thomas, this is my brother, Ketch and his wife, Sarah." Ketch stood and held out his hand. Thomas accepted the welcoming handshake and nodded to Sarah. "Good to meet you two. Becca mentioned you both several times."

Ketch took his seat, indicating a chair for Thomas. "Funny, Becca's mentioned you to us several times too." Sarah's friendly smile welcomed him. Thomas didn't miss the broad grin Ketch darted at his sister.

Becca's face turned slightly pink. She skirted a quick glance at him and uttered, "Tea?"

"Hmm. Sure." He slowly eased himself down on the seat and took a tall glass of cold ice tea from Becca before she sat down in front of her glass. He took a sip aware of Becca's sister-in-law's inquisitive eyes on him. Swallowing, he turned to Becca, "I meant to ask if you had any problems with my girl."

"Not at all. I needed to finish an art project and while I worked, I gave her a canvas and some paints, and...and let her do her thing."

"Oh, Becca," Sarah reached out and touched her hand, "Is it my book cover you're working on?"

She nodded at her sister. "I'm almost done, thanks to Elle for being so patient and willing to try her own skills at painting."

"Huh. I didn't know Elle was interested in painting." His surprised gaze connected with Becca's. Damn, every time he looked at those expressive eyes, his train of thought went out the window.

Becca tilted her head slightly, and said, "I don't think Elle knew she did either until she picked up the paintbrush. When she asked what to paint, I told her to take a deep breath, focus on the canvas, and dive in. If she focused, her hand willingly moves to where her mind demanded."

"It really works in such a way?" Thomas studied her nodding head.

“Aaah...more or less.” Her secret smile spread her lips putting a twinkle in her eyes.

A wisp of curly hair fell loose against her cheek. Thomas hugged his fingers around the cold glass to keep from touching what he presumed to be the softest hair on earth. He glanced down at the newspaper.

Becca followed his gaze. “I’m afraid I spoke out again and the journalist put a small article in the paper. Huffman gave a rebuttal below my accusations. And, of course, he threatened to sue.” She shrugged, smiled and said, “Let him. He’ll never win, but everyone around will know he’s a criminal.”

Thomas, nonchalantly said, “Do you have proof?”

“Well, all they have to do is look at the animal.”

“That’s not enough. You need more. Once you start, the FBI will get involved because of the Horse Protection Act. You’ll need pictures and all the possible proof you can get your hands on, like a witness willing to testify.”

“Pictures,” Becca mumbled staring at the newspaper.

“For instance, Silver Dapple is proof of abuse. Where did the mare come from?”

“Joe started a website on abusive cruel acts against Tennessee Walkers. An old farmer outside of Dickson County read his article and emailed Joe. We went to visit the man and before we knew it, Joe loaded Silver up and brought her home. Joe always suspected the old farmer...ah...if I remember, his name is Hank. Anyway, Joe suspected he’d been a trainer at one time or another.”

“I see,” Thomas’s low voice indicated his regret for reminding her of Joe.

Ketch jumped in to fill the silence. “The old man couldn’t afford medicine for the animal so he gave the mare to Joe.”

“That’s right,” Becca added, “said he’d rather have someone help her, than to see her in pain all the time.”

Thomas leaned forward and rested his arms on the table and stared at his empty glass. “Did the old farmer ever mention how he come in possession of the mare?”

Becca shook her head. “He didn’t say. He did say his life would be in danger if he mentioned any names.”

“Maybe you could start with him and convince him to help, you’d have a witness – so it sounds like. I’d bet the old man knows someone. After all, if he didn’t have the money to care for the horse, then he probably didn’t travel too far when he took her from the owner.”

“You’re right,” Becca bit down on her lip, thinking. “You know, he lives in Shelbyville. That’s where Huffman lives.” She glanced at Thomas and paused.

Thomas cleared his throat, leaned back and turned directly at the woman hyper-extending his nerves. “Becca, I’m not saying *you* should be the one to get the proof. Matter of fact, you shouldn’t.” He glanced at Ketch and Sarah, and then back to Becca. “Hire a detective. He’ll get you proof without putting you in danger.”

“I just want Huffman not to ever own or harm another animal again. If he’s so malicious to horses, what makes you think he’d not abuse humans too?”

“I agree, but you need a professional to help you.” He pushed back his chair and stood. “You have a baby to think about now.”

“He’s right Becca,” Ketch stood. “I’ll ask the sheriff about a detective you can talk to and if he’s not too expensive, you can have him get those pictures you need.” Ketch turned his attention to Thomas, “I put Silver in the stall when I got home. Come on, I’ll show you the way?”

Becca scooted to the edge of the chair, and slowly stood. “That’s okay, Ketch, I’ll go with him. I want to know all about the meds he’s going to give her.”

She led Thomas out the back door and up a trail toward the large barn Ketch refurbished right after he married Sarah. The moment she stepped inside, Silver Dapple lifted her head high sending a soft whinny echoing throughout the barn. Becca smiled. “Hello girl.” She strolled over to the stall and held out her hand. Silver limped to the rail and released a soft nicker rolling from her velvet nose, telling Becca hello too. “Silver, this is Thomas, remember? He gave you a carrot.”

Thomas held his hand out to Silver’s nose and waited. When Silver’s low whinny told him she accepted his presence, he caressed her velvet nose. “Hey girl, want something to make you feel better?”

Silver’s ears perked.

“I have medicine for you, and maybe, it’ll help with your pain.” Thomas pulled a syringe from his coat pocket and held it up for Silver to see. Her large round eyes focused on the object and then back to Thomas. “It’s okay. A little pin prick won’t hurt.”

Becca observed Silver's reactions toward Thomas and was surprised he knew how to calm her horse. She glanced at the syringe. "What are you giving her?"

Thomas relaxed his arms on the rail and studied the Tennessee Walking horse. "It's phenylbutazone, most people called it Bute. It's an anti-inflammatory painkiller." He gazed at her. "The drug's been used successfully for decades in treating pain from lameness." A frown formed on his brow. "I'm surprised your vet hasn't prescribed this for Silver."

Becca reached out and gave her horse a loving pat on her muscular neck. "Old Doc Porter's mostly a small animal vet and only deals with horses because the nearest large animal vets are in the Nashville area. The horse specialist I've talked to wanted me to trailer her up and drive her into his office, but I couldn't."

"I know. Putting her into a trailer for several hours causes her more suffering."

She nodded toward the syringe, and asked, "Is Bute a steroid?"

He shook his head. "No, belongs to a group of meds call NSAIDs, short for non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug. I'll inject her for a few days, and then you can administer by mouth once the drug is in her system."

"Sounds easy enough."

"Becca," Thomas drew her gaze away from the horse to his. "This-" he held up the syringe with the liquid Bute, "-isn't addictive like powerful narcotic steroidal painkillers, but it is toxic if given the wrong dosage."

Her eyes widened. She glanced at Silver and back to Thomas. She nodded, understanding his instructions.

"Do you want me to give her the injections for the next several days?"

"I rather you let me come over and give them to her until she goes on the tablets. The injection has to go into a vein and not muscle tissue. If it goes into an artery, the horse will seizure."

"Oh. Okay. This makes me a little nervous." Becca faced him and studied him for a moment. "How do you know so much about horses and their meds?"

Becca's gaze followed him. He slowly opened Silver's gate and strolled into the stall toward the mare, all the while using a light, soothing tone.

“I use to work for a vet in Kentucky, and I’ve been around horses all my life. Even rescued racers, like the two I own. I’ve given Bute to my own horses.” He glanced at her, “Trust me. I know what I’m doing.”

Becca studied Silver standing still while Thomas stroked down her neck, along the contour of her back, and down her rump. A soft nicker escaped her nostrils. Thomas’s hand traveled over her hind leg muscles, and then made its way up and along her back again. Gently, he combed his fingers through her silver mane, patted her neck, and dropped his massaging hand down her front leg. Tenderly, he lifted her leg and examined her hoof. Without looking up, his soothing tone directed at Becca, “Can you see the scars, this is proof she’s been sore.”

Becca made her way through the gate, touched Silver to let her know she was there and bent to observe her hoof with her shoulder touching Thomas. “That’s why she stands abnormally to try and relieve some of her pain. Oh Thomas, it’s heartbreaking. I can’t imagine the pain caused from such scarring.”

Thomas’s lips pressed together. He nodded. When he gently lowered Silver’s foot, he mumbled under his breath, “Soring is cruel and barbaric.” He straightened, turned and glanced at her, “If you’ll talk to her I’ll give her the injection and hopefully you’ll notice a difference in a couple of days.”

Becca reached up and rubbed Silver’s neck and said, “Hey girl, you want to feel good? Thomas is your new buddy, and he’ll help you get better.”

Thomas stepped back and strolled out the gate, Becca glanced at him. “Wow,” impressed, she stepped next to him. “She didn’t even flinch. You’re good.”

His serious express held her gaze. “I hope you know this is just a treatment for her pain symptoms and the inflammation, it won’t solve her problem. Her problem can never be corrected.”

“I understand.”

Becca reached up, pressed the palms of her hands on each side of Silver’s head, leaned forward and kissed her horse’s nose. Folding her arms on the top rail of the stall, her encouraged voice softly said, “We’ll deal with it for whatever length of time, if we have too, want we girl.” She bit down on her bottom lip, and then dropped her forehead onto her arms. After a moment she lifted her head to face Thomas.

He studied her.

“Sorry.”

“What were you thinking?”

She shrugged. “I guess I was thinking realistically about the obvious. One day, I guess I’ll have to put her down.”

She pushed away from the rail and stared straight ahead. Before she could stop the flood, tears streamed over her eyelids and down her cheeks.

“Whoa. What-”

Becca didn’t stop Thomas from taking her into his arms. He hugged her close. She closed her eyes and relaxed her body against his chest. She hadn’t felt arms around her like this in a very long time. When he buried his head into her neck, lightning bolts charged her hot blood. She circled her arms around his waist, embracing him closer to breathe in his strength. When her lips touched his flesh along his neck, she knew, God help her, she wanted this man.

He pulled back, tilted her chin up and touched her lips to his. Loving, inviting lips cried out to her lonely needs. His mouth was warm and moist shooting daggers through her blood to the very core of her body. She hadn’t felt this alive in months, maybe longer. A heavy sigh escaped her lips sending a message to further his actions to her responding kiss. Passion surpassed all she expected, wanted, needed. God help her she wanted this man here and now. The moment his lips separated from hers, she threw her arms around his neck and brought him back, kissing him in a way she never kissed Joe. He responded.

Becca couldn’t stop her hands from groping around his shoulders, his back, over his buttocks, while lost in his divine kiss. When his tongue slithered in to mate with her, her entire body shuddered. This time when he pulled back, she opened her eyes, leaned her forehead against his heavily breathing chest, and waited until gradually, both steadied their breaths.

Thomas hugged the palms of his hands against the sides of her head, pressed his lips against her hair, her cheek, and then pulled back and pressed a chaste kiss on her lips.

She glanced up into gray eyes filled with passion.

Oh my.

Becca flattened her palms on his chest and stepped back. Looking down, she turned away and took a deep breath. “Thomas-”

“Becca, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have kissed you.”

She shook her head and faced him. Saddened lips spread into an understanding smile. She glanced down at her large tummy. “Don’t give it another thought. It was my fault. I’m pregnant. We’ll blame it on hormones. For a moment, I’d forgotten.” How could she have thrown herself at him like that? Hormones or not, how could any man find her attractive especially now, pregnant.

“Becca.” He touched her cheek drawing her gaze into his. “You are a beautiful woman and any man lucky enough to have you love him...well, let’s say he’d be the luckiest man on earth. But,” he stepped back, ran his fingers through his hair and looked her straight in the eyes. “I have too much baggage and need to keep our relationship strictly platonic. Maybe another time or place things could have been different. I won’t deny I’m attracted to you, but there are things in my life I can’t explain.”

Becca lifted her hands and shook her head, “Thomas, you don’t need to explain, I understand, I do. Let’s pretend this never happened.” She tried to give him a bright smile, turned and walked from the barn.

Chapter Eleven

“Buckle up guys,” Becca reminded Clip and Elle the second they jumped into the back seat of the Titan after school let out. After steering the Titan onto the highway leading toward Yellow Creek, she glanced in her rearview mirror and grinned. The two were deeply involved in a conversation about a homework project they were to complete together. Elle giggled and grabbed the book from Clip’s hand causing her dark hair to fall over her shoulders.

Becca skirted her focus back to the highway. Pretty girl. Her eyes were her dad’s gray color, but other than that, she probably looked more like her mother. She touched her protruding abdomen. How could a mother leave, no, abandon her child? Was Thomas to blame?

The thought of Thomas warm her cheeks. She’d literally flung her body at the man. Never in her life, had she ever been the seducer, not even with Joe. Sure, she was attracted to him, but geez, she was pregnant. Was she so hard-pressed for sex it only took a second for the touch of Thomas’s lips to cause her to lose all control? Hormones. That’s it. Hormones.

Becca shook her head, glanced out the window into a field where a herd of mixed breed horses scampered about in a playful mood. Happy, healthy horses. She frowned and glanced back onto the highway. Thomas said she needed proof. Gripping the steering wheel with one hand, she took her free hand and dug into her purse until she pulled out her camera. Huffman was a criminal and she needed proof. *Hmm*, what if she took a slight detour on their way home? Couldn’t hurt to drive by Huffman’s place—could it? She glanced at the kids in the mirror. They were too busy chatting over the library books and their project.

After another fifteen minutes or so, Becca read the Huffman Farm sign and continued to drive past the entrance. A mile or so further, she turned onto a dirt road running along the fence line of his farm. Searching the fields left nothing for her to catch a glimpse of any incriminating activities, probably too far from the main house. Just when she slowed to turn around, the top of the Huffman’s barn peeked over the horizon. Ah, maybe luck was with her. She pulled the truck over and switched off the engine.

“What’s going on Aunt Bec.”

She glanced around at the kids, smiled with a shrug, and said, “I want to check on something. You two stay here, I’ll be right back. I’m going to walk along the fence and take some pictures – it’s a pretty area and I might be able to use the photos in my paintings.”

“Okay.” Clip scanned the field with an uninterested gaze, and immediately, his attention zoomed back on Elle and the books in her lap.

Becca slowly stepped down out of the truck, glanced at the two, smiled and headed toward the fence. She took several pictures of the fillies in the field, but couldn’t really tell from this distance if they were wearing pads. Following along the fence line she continued until the barn and several corralled horses came in view. Slowly advancing closer, her gaze searched the area. Huffman’s trainer stood outside the barn doors with a horse.

She made her way through the brushes and leaned against the fence. With a tight grip on her camera, she raised her hand, peeked through lens, and zoomed in on Huffman’s trainer. His hands were busy strapping chains onto a filly’s legs. The beautiful horse was young and by the looks in her eyes the poor thing was frightened. There was no time to wait for a good view, so she kept snapping one picture after another. Suddenly, the filly backed away and tried to rear up, but the man raised his hand and whipped the chains against her flanks, slamming her down on all fours. Tears blurred Becca’s vision, but she continued to click the button for several more pictures.

Suddenly, the man turned and looked in her direction. Her breath trapped inside her lungs, weakening her legs to drop against the fence. Crouching in an uncomfortable position, she waited, hoping the man hadn’t detected her. Not more than a minute later, she grabbed the rail, pulled up to peek toward the barn, and then stood. He was gone. A long shaky breath released the tautness in her chest. One more picture of the horse clicked, and then she turned to leave. The sound of a car driving along the road leading to the barn doors halted her movement, she hesitated and turned back. Her brow furrowed. A white SUV drove up toward the doors and stopped. Movement from the barn drew her attention. The trainer strolled out and made his way to the SUV, stopped, and waited for the man to step from his vehicle. Her eyes widened.

Thomas Smith. What was he doing here?

While the men stood talking, Becca snapped several pictures, and then, hunched over, she slowly moved out of sight before straightening to make a mad dash to her truck.

“Did you get your pictures Aunt Bec?”

Breathlessly, she nodded. “I think so.” She took a deep breath, heaved her body onto the seat, and quickly turned the key to ignite the engine. “It’s...it’s pretty out here, don’t you think?”

She couldn't think of another excuse for taking pictures. "I better get you two home before your parents send out a rescue party."

Becca hurried to drop Elle off, and then Clip, with the intentions of getting home to check out her pictures. But, once walking through the backdoor of her house and met the big welcome wagging tail of Maxine, she knew she'd have to wait. Her animals came first. "Hi Maxine, you hungry?"

Her Britney Spaniel's fluffy tail wagged back and forth in an obvious *yes* to her question.

"Okay, first you need to go out." Becca stepped aside for Maxine to dash out the door to find the perfect spot to pee, after sniffing around the yard for several seconds, she squatted. Becca dropped her backpack on the sofa and turned to watch Maxine dart through the opened door. "Come on girl, I'll give you some fresh water and food. You can eat while I head up to the barn to feed Josie." After filling the bowl with fresh water and food, Becca turned to Maxine, "There you go." Her Brittney's burn-orange and white face and human-like eyes stared back. "What? You want to go to the barn too?"

Woof.

Becca giggled and waddled back to the mudroom. "Okay, come on." Once she replaced her good shoes with her black rubber boots, Maxine dashed through the door to lead the way. It didn't take long to feed Josie, give her a good brushing to settle her down for the evening, and head back to the house. Hurrying to kick off her boots, Becca rushed upstairs to her bedroom, slipped into her comfortable sweat pants and a sweat shirt to relax for the evening. First, she'd fix herself a bite to eat and grade a few papers, but she desperately wanted to review the pictures taken earlier. Impatiently, she retrieved her camera from her purse, plopped down on the sofa and pressed the button on the camera.

A frown wrinkled up her forehead while studying each picture. Shucks, nothing showed real proof of animal abuse. Her pictures were pretty pictures of horses in a field and a man with a horse in front of a barn. Not even the pictures she took of the trainer working on the filly looked incriminating. Her one picture showed him bending over the horse's leg in such a position he blocked the chain he was attaching.

Shit, she'd have to go back. This time she'd get closer. The disgusting, man wasn't going to get away with such cruelty. God help her, she'd get proof.

Becca shifted to her other hip and grinned. Holding her hand over a protruding spot on her tummy, she giggled when her baby kicked again. “Geez, you’re a little active lately.” She rubbed her tummy. Three weeks left. “Okay, baby. I guess I better decide on a name for you or you’ll be asking me if your name is baby. The least I can do is pick out a list of names and once you arrive decide on which one you look like, how does that sound. In the mean time, I need to get good pictures before you enter this world. Afterward, I know I’ll not have time to even think about the horses Huffman abuses.”

Disappointed in her pictures, Becca pushed her heavy butt off the sofa to fix a bite to eat. After consuming a bowl of soup, she graded papers, which took longer than expected, and then stood to stretch the kinks out of her back. Strolling to the fridge, she took out some orange juice and poured a small glass. Her gaze landed on her camera. Now, what was she going to do for proof? Plopping her butt on the stool, she picked up the camera and flipped through the pictures. When Thomas Smith and the trainer’s picture popped up, she stared for several minutes.

“Why were you there and what were you talking about?” Maxine’s head popped up when Becca spoke out loud.

Becca rested her elbow on the counter and placed her chin in her hand. *Hmm*, he knows Huffman. Otherwise, what purpose did he have at the event in Montgomery, when she ran into him? And, what kind of business does he have with such a despicable man? She straightened and headed for the mudroom. Well, one thing for sure, she’d get more pictures. Now.

Chapter Twelve

Becca parked her truck in-between a thick clump of dogwood trees near the fence, switched off the engine, and glanced at Maxine. The moonlight shining through the windshield reflected off the Brittney's white fur. "You wait here girl. I won't be gone long." Quietly, she slipped from the truck and glanced up at the full moon, thankful she had enough light to make her way to Huffman's barn. The katydids sang throughout the woods beyond the fields, and a dog barked in the far distance, other than that, all was quiet. No sign of anyone in the vicinity. If she could get in and out without getting caught, then maybe, she'd have evidence proving horse abuse, and some kind of criminal activities going on around the Huffman farm.

A loud echo pounded in her ears, she paused, stood dead still, and listened. Geez, it was her own heart pounding. Breathing deeply, she demanded her nerves to calm down. Controlling her thoughts, she focused on what she needed to accomplish, forcing her body to move quietly over the rough ground near the fence several feet from the road leading toward the stables. She hesitated and looked back.

Biting her bottom lip, she leaned against the fence and breathed in a long breath and blew it out through her mouth. What the hell was she doing? She shouldn't be doing this. She's carrying a baby. Her hand splayed over her tummy. Sucking in a shaky breath, she took a step back toward the truck. Barely, above the earthly night resonance there drifted a sorrowful, painful cry from Huffman's barn. She stopped dead in her tracks. Pressing her lips tightly, she fought back tears. No. He'll not get away with such cruel and brutal wickedness.

Unable to control her loud pounding heartbeat, she concentrated on her mission and quickly made her way to the side of the barn. Pausing a moment, she leaned against the side of the building and glanced around the corner. The full moon revealed an empty road. All was quiet, except the early spring crickets and katydids' noise coming from the forest surrounding the fields and stables. Palms against the building, she hugged close and stayed inside the shadows, moving toward the stable doors where she hesitated and listened. With shaky fingers she pushed the large door open barely enough to peek inside, and then squeeze through, brushing her belly against the rough door.

Using her iphone, she flipped on a flashlight. With one step at a time, she moved toward a stall, hoping the light wouldn't scare any of the horses. Moving slowly through the barn, she stopped when her boot bumped against an object, she lowered the light downward. Her eyes

widened and her mouth dropped open. There in front of her laid chains, dirty clothes with what appeared to be fresh blood, and three gallon cans with markings. Becca leaned down and shined the light on the words. Her breath hitched. Straightening, she took a picture of the paraphernalia and each can marked with the words mustard oil, kerosene, and salicylic acid. Several large black rubber gloves lay near evidently to apply the toxic chemicals. Quickly she snapped a few more pictures. The clicking sound of her phone seemed to echo throughout the stable.

A horse whimpered and bumped against a wall. She glanced across to another stall and cautiously moved forward. To keep from frightening the animals, she held the light downward. Becca held her breath. The sad faced filly turned balled eyes in her direction, but didn't make a sound. Excruciating pain encompassed her eyes making tears swell in Becca's. She snapped another picture of the filly's stance and the wrap around her front legs. The horse threw back her head and cried out in such a heartbreaking sound Becca covered her mouth with her hand to keep from crying out for the poor animal in pain.

Joe told her about how wrapping plastic was used around the horse's foot between the fetlock and the top of the hoof while chemicals were absorbed. She covered her mouth with her free hand and gazed up into the filly's frightened large round eyes. When her other hand rubbed her belly it reminded her of what she needed to do, even though she wanted to rush into the stall and strip off the plastic chemicals from around the filly's heels.

An eerie sound of wheels rolling over the gravel road drew her head around toward the door. Where could she hide? Panic seized her breath, freezing her muscles in the spot where she stood. A vehicle door slammed shaking her mind into action. Catching her breath, she switched off the cell light, rushed toward a door at the far end of the stables, and quietly squeezed her body inside, leaving the door slightly cracked. She stared out and waited, trying to slow her intake of air to calm her trembling body. Her shaky fingers clicked on the video camera – just in case.

The stable doors swung open. Overhead lights switched on. Becca peeked through the small opening. Huffman's trainer walked toward the stall and when he opened the gate, the young horse snorted blowing air through her dilating nostrils to produce a long, low frightened sound. Daggers from her gaze flew to the disgusting man ignoring the painful cry while he swung the gate wide and strolled to the horse.

When the mare's head flew high and nervous ears flickered, she stumbled back against the wall, biting her bottom lip to keep from screaming. An uncontrollable tear rolled down her cheek

watching the horrific scene before her. The horse tried to rear up, but the man picked up an iron rod and slapped the horse in the flanks. The beaten mare cried out in fear and dropped her head in submission to the man.

Becca held onto her iphone, videotaping while holding her hand over her mouth. Her hand shook and tears streamed down her face. She tried not to breathe or make a sound even though the scream wanted to travel out of her throat to the man.

He dropped the rod, squatted and checked the wrapping on the horse's feet. Within a few seconds, he unwrapped one hoof, brushed liquid chemicals onto the area and replaced the plastic wrap, all the while ignoring the low vibrating cries of the horse. Then, he jerked off the black gloves, turned, and left the stables as if he'd done nothing cruel to inflict pain on an animal.

Becca leaned back against the wall, took in a shaky breath and squinted. This wasn't a tackle closet, but a small office. She stopped the video, switched on the flashlight and slowly moved around the desk filled with papers scattered over the top and a filing drawer open. After a quick glance toward the door, she focused on the papers appearing to be nothing more than a few scattered bills, TWH entry forms and scribbled notes. Her gaze landed on an invoice half hidden by an electric bill. Sliding the paper out, her gaze skimmed the list of items amounting to over a thousand dollars. She smiled. Holding the iphone, she focused on the invoice and took several pictures, and then replaced the paper where she found it. After a quick glance at the door, she stepped to the filing cabinet.

With her free hand, she flipped through the folder titles and paused when her gaze read the word Approvals. Her hand shook when she pulled the file and laid it across the others. Oh my, she'd found the veterinarians' approval for showing TWH, maybe this will help. She focused her iphone over the documents and took several pictures, before flipping through the pages. After several more pictures, she swung her gaze to the veterinarian's signature. She froze. Her heart pounded cutting her breath short. Could it be?

The signature of a Thomas Slye scribbled across the bottom to approve the animals for the event – a vet from Kentucky. Kentucky. Was Thomas Slye Thomas Smith? That's why he came to see Huffman. Why did he change his name and why is he here? She'd have to compare signatures. She zoomed in on the signature and clicked several times to make sure she had a good, clear picture. Shoving the page back, she replaced the file, shut the cabinet and turned to leave. Stopped, turned back, and opened the cabinet, leaving it like it was when she found it.

Becca quietly made her way out of the office, but hesitated to glance toward the frightened horse, and then she switched off the iPhone flashlight before making her way to the barn doors. Slowly, she pushed the door open far enough to peek out, only to swallow her breath. The trainer's car was still parked outside the stables. Now what? Scooting along the large doors, she stopped when her hand touched the wall. There was no time to go back to the small office. Her shaky hand felt along the wall to the corner until she felt a stack of baled hay. Quickly she pushed her round body behind the narrow space between the haystack and the wall. She managed to slide her back down the wall to a squatting position. She waited. Where did he go? Oh God, he must have seen her flashlight. Becca hugged her belly and pressed against the wall. She listened.

How stupid could she be? She didn't tell a soul she was coming here. What if...

An engine rumbled and wheels rolled over the gravel road. She waited until the sound of the vehicle became faint. She didn't move. Minutes later, she squeezed her eyes shut willing the cramp in her legs to go away. Silence grew. Surely, it was safe to leave now. Grunting, she pushed and with some difficulty, she finally stood, but no sooner did she step from behind the haystack, the sound of a vehicle returning halted her movement.

A car door slammed. Another.

Quickly, she slid back behind the haystack and slithered her trembling body down against the wall, and waited. She switched on her video. If all else failed, she'd at least record a voice. The stable doors flew open, the lights switched on, and feet crunching the ground stepped inside and stopped.

"Mr. Huffman, I'm sure someone's been here. I sensed it and smelt it."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"Must be a woman. I smelt perfume."

Becca covered her mouth and held her breath.

"Perfume," Huffman mumbled. He stepped to the stall.

"Yeah, just like the other day when I pr'near detected someone out by the fence taking pictures. At first I figured a fan of yours was taking pictures of your horses – you, you know, since you're a winner of the TWH. You know, they've been here before, but never so close. I keep the gate locked."

"Huh, look around. Is there anything out of the ordinary?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

Steps moved toward the other end of the barn. A light switched on. “Grady, did you leave the file drawer open?”

Becca squeezed her eyes.

“No sir, Mr. Huffman. I never go into your room.”

Huffman’s rough voice replied, “Well, it’s open.”

A loud slam indicated his closing the filing cabinet. Then, stomping boots headed toward her.

“I want you to keep a better watch over this place, hear me? If you see any suspicious person hanging around, you call me immediately. Understood?”

“Yes sir.”

Becca held her breath to listen to movement heading for the door. She clamped her jaws against the cramp in her legs.

The light switched off.

She waited until the vehicles’ engines and gravel crunched beneath the tires before she dared move. This time, pushing to her feet in the tight quarters proved to be near impossible. Her leg muscles didn’t want to work. Twisting to the side, she pushed her body out from the tight quarters, laid flat and took several deep breaths before trying to stand. With clamped jaws, she walked several feet to rid her legs of the cramps before peeking out the barn doors. No vehicles or sounds. This time, she didn’t bother to look she rushed out the door, around the corner of the barn toward the fence. She hesitated and tossed a glance over her shoulder before rushing to her truck. She didn’t stop to breathe until she crawled inside and collapsed onto the seat next to Maxine, trembling.

Maxine whined. Becca reached out and rubbed her soft furry back. Raddled nerves prevented her from speaking to her dog, but apprehensively she lifted her head up to peek out the windshield to nervously scan through the trees where the moonlight filtered through causing her imagination to see shadowy figures hovering close. Ten minutes or so passed before her trembling body settled down, but delayed leaving until her senses told her it was safe enough to start the truck. Slowly driving from her hidden spot, she reached down to switch on the headlights, and immediately jerked her hand away. The bright full moon guided her until she drove far enough to not be detected. She couldn’t wait to get home.

Chapter Thirteen

Becca opened her eyes to the sun trickling through the curtain slit. Her gaze swung to the clock while she stretched her arms over her head and breathed deeply. Saturday morning and her body knew it by letting her sleep in later than usual. Becca's cheeks puffed out exhaling a long breath. Stupid woman, you put your baby in danger last night and for what? Will mere pictures be proof? She shivered. Don't do another dangerous thing again, promise yourself.

Crawling out of bed, she threw her robe on, slipped her feet into fuzzy slippers, and hurried downstairs to put coffee on. While the coffee brewed, she picked up her iphone to check the pictures again. She looked at them last night and was happy with what she taken to show proof of abuse. The best part was the video of the trainer abusing the horse and the cries of the animal when he wrapped the solution on his feet.

Now, all she needed to do was download the pictures and videos onto her computer and call the FBI. The one video contained only voices, but proof enough to implicate Huffman who was the instigator of the abuse, giving orders to the trainer. Her gaze hesitated on the vet certificate with Thomas Slye's signature.

She bit down on her lower lip, unable to ignore her gut feelings. Slye, Smith...are they the same? What were his reasons for visiting Huffman's stable in Montgomery, not to mention Huffman's barn. Was Huffman paying him off? Thomas Slye signature on the certificate was a vet. Was Thomas Smith a veterinarian? How could she find out?

Becca scooted off the stool, retrieved a cup and filled it with black coffee. *Hmm*, maybe she should Google the names. Sitting down, she placed the cup next to the computer and typed in Thomas Smith. *Shit*, there were thousands of Smiths. She Googled Thomas Slye, Kentucky. Better. The list was smaller. Again, she typed in Thomas Slye, veterinarian, Kentucky. A short list of four. Glancing down the list, she found an interesting sentence about a veterinarian arrested for doping. She clicked on the article and stared directly into the face of her neighbor, Thomas Smith, only his name was Thomas Slye. Her heart pounded with disappointment. Her attraction to the dishonest Thomas Smith, or rather, Slye, sickened her. Why? Even his daughter was using his alias name.

Becca keyed in the TWH S.H.O.W. site and jotted down the president's name and email addresses. After a few more researches, she found the list of judges and printed their names and email address out. Then she composed her letter to the entire group to send to the president of the

TWH S.H.O.W. Calling the FBI was easier than she thought. The woman asked her to send all her information to an email address. From there the FBI assigned to investigate will contact her in the near future.

Motivated by all her collective evidence, she decided to send a letter to Judge Pennington, the judge who awarded Huffman his prize money. What kind of judge couldn't have known Huffman didn't deserve to be a winner from the looks of Forever Blue-Black? To her, it was like giving Huffman a large sum of blood money for the first place championship. Huh, the judge was guilty too. A knock on her door interrupted her thoughts. She jumped, spilling her coffee on one of the printed letters. After cleaning up the spill, she rushed to the back door.

"Hey, Aunt Bec," Clip's big grin greeted her.

"Clip, what are you doing here?" She glanced out, but only saw his bike.

"I come by to feed Josie for you or help clean her stall." He shifted from one foot to the other and cocked his head to the side, staring at her.

"Well, great. Come on in, I'm not even dressed yet. Have some juice—your favorite's in the fridge. I'll get dressed.

He followed her in and headed right to the fridge. "Whatcha you doing with all the papers, Aunt Bec?"

She gathered up the letters, plopped them on top of her school papers, and wadded up the one containing coffee splatters. "I have some proof Huffman's abusing his horses." She glanced at Clip pouring a glass of juice.

"Great. Did you get a video?"

"Yeah, wanna see?" She hurried and clicked the send button to the Judge Pennington and decided the others could wait until later.

"Sure." Clip rounded the counter, took a sip and waited for Becca to start the video she downloaded onto her computer.

"I'll go get dressed while you watch. I have to warn you it's sad, but hopefully the video can make a difference."

"Hey, Aunt Bec, can I email your video to Dad and Sarah? I'm sure they'd like to see it."

"Sure, Clip, good idea," she hollered half way up the staircase. Once dressed in her loose fitting shirt and pants, she hurried back down to put on her rubber boots. She glanced at Clip standing in front of her computer and asked, "Did you send it?"

“Yup. Pretty sad. That man belongs in jail.”

Becca pulled her hair back into a ponytail and stepped next to her nephew.

“I know. Come on, let’s go to the barn.” She grabbed a jacket and headed to the backdoor. “Come on Maxine, want to see Josie?”

Gravel crunched beneath Becca’s boots with Clip at her side. Her gaze scurried over the field near the barn. She frowned, looking up at the darkened sky. “Looks like another thunderstorm’s coming our way. We better hurry. I’ll show you where you can find everything to clean the stalls, and then you better ride home.”

Becca watched Clip ride down the hill and toward home, and then turned her gaze upward. Clashing thunder roared down the holler. Hope he makes it home before the rain pours. He’d promised he’d call when he got home. *Boom*. Becca’s gaze shot back toward the barn. She’d better check on Josie. She hated thunder.

“Come on Maxine, let’s make sure Josie’s okay.” By the time she stepped inside, large raindrops pounded the tin roof echoing throughout the barn. She threw a blanket over Josie’s back to help her feel secure and safe, pulling it snug around her belly, and then gave her a hug. When she turned to leave, she found Maxine lying on a pile of hay in the corner of Josie’s stall. She grinned. “Okay, girls, you can keep each other company. I’ll check on you after the storm passes.” Her gaze flew upward to the top of the barn. The loud pounding of the raindrops swallowed up her words. She looked back at Maxine with her eyes closed, evidently feeling safe with Josie.

Pushing the barn door open, she glanced out at the rolling ominous clouds turning the day to dark. A chill scurried down her back when the slashing rain and wind touched her face. With a jerk on her hood, she pulled it over her head, took a hurried step out to make a beeline to the house. Automatically, her gaze swung out into the pasture. She stopped. There, standing in the middle of the rainy field was the same horse she had seen running toward her during the last storm.

Becca moved slowly to the fence and stared through the downpour, oblivious to the gush of wind blowing the hood from her head. He wasn’t real. She blinked. His beautiful face with its white marking in the middle of his forehead stared back wanting her to do something. His poignant eyes looked directly at her. What did it mean? Becca’s breath hitched. The magnificent

horse looked like Forever Blue-Black. His sleek wet body appeared pure black and the white marking on his forehead was the same.

“What do you want me to do?” she hollered above the blowing wind and thunder? Becca couldn’t move or take her eyes from the beautiful animal, and then he faded away like he’d never existed. Right before her eyes he gradually disappeared. Heavy rain splattered over her hair, her face, and down her legs into her rubber boots, chilling every bone in her body. Unaware of raising her hand to pull her soaked hood over her head, she turned in a daze, lowered her gaze down to watch her wet boots slosh through the muddy road toward the house. Now, she knew exactly what to do. No matter what, she’d help the horses that couldn’t speak for themselves and follow-through with her accusations.

Becca stripped off her raincoat and boots the second she stepped into the house. Her body shivered from the dampness seeping into her bones. Good hot cup of tea was what she needed. Quickly, she filled a cup with water and shoved it into the microwave to boil. When she reached up to take out a tea bag, the computer dinked, announcing, ‘You got mail.’

Glancing at the screen, her eyebrows lifted. *Huh*, already a reply from Judge Pennington. She clicked to open the email. Scanning his message, she smiled knowing someone was taking her serious. Judge Pennington said he was highly concerned with her accusations and her pictures. He’d follow-up and will notify her of actions taken to keep such atrocity from happening within the TWH events.

She didn’t mention to Clip about the veterinarian signature she’d found or the picture of the vet doping. One thing for sure, Josie wasn’t going anywhere, especially Thomas’s place. She wasn’t going to take a chance of him doping her horse. If he did do what the article accused him of, why did he offer to help Silver Dapple? And Elle, what did she think about her dad? She should confront him? *Hmm...*

Without another thought, Becca hurried up the stair to shed her wet clothes and slip into warm pajamas. All warm and comfy with her hot tea, she quickly sat down in front of her computer. The hours slipped into the late afternoon during her vigil to save those animals unable to speak for themselves. She worked diligently to write and email individual letters along with a couple of pictures to all one hundred and forty judges listed, the twelve individuals on the board of the TWH S.H.O.W, including their president, and the information requested by the FBI. The

last letter she emailed to the Office of Inspection General accusing him of not hiring honest veterinarians for an honest evaluation of each animal before the certification was granted.

Before the evening ended, Becca printed copies of all her letters to each individual. After making one last trek in a soft drizzling rain to the barn, she fed Josie, settled her down for the night and headed back to house with Maxine leading the way.

Chapter Fourteen

With a last brush swipe along Josie's flanks, Becca patted her on the rump. "There you go girl, you look gorgeous. Let's go outside, you can enjoy the beautiful spring day." Becca gripped the lead rope and led Josie out the back doors and unhooked the halter for her to enjoy a day in the field. Josie took off, kicking up her heels. Maxine barked and dashed off to run with Josie.

She chuckled at the two girls frolicking through the field. Becca shaded her eye from the bright sun with her hand and watched the girls frolic in a wide circle. Josie kicked up her back leg and took off with Maxine barking and running after her. Her Morgan classic gold color coat and her flaxen mane and tail swelled Becca's heart with pride, putting a wide grin on her lips. The scene before her was one to treasure. The sound of a car driving up the road shot her glance over her shoulder.

She squinted, recognizing Thomas Smith's white SUV. With a deep breath, she turned in his direction. *Huh*, if Smith was his name. She bit down on her lip. Play it cool. Slow and easy, don't rush into mentioning his alias. Winding Josie's lead rope in her hand, she strolled toward the fence and waited for him to get out of the vehicle.

He waived.

She waived back and gritted her teeth. Why did the sight of him make her heart race? Stupid woman. What was wrong with her? Hadn't he been accused of doping? She leaned against the fence and watched his approach. Who really was this man? Thomas Smith or Thomas Slye?

"Hi there," his smooth, sultry voice traveled to her senses. She swallowed hard when his gaze swung out toward the field where Josie and Maxine dashed about in a playful circle. His bright teeth appeared when his lips spread wide into what seemed to her a forced smile. He stepped near, rested his arms on the fence, lifted a foot onto the bottom rail and leaned forward. "Wish life could be so carefree for some of us."

Becca frowned. "What's wrong? You seem upset."

Thomas slowly turned his worried, gray eyes from the playful scene in the field to hers.

She couldn't stop her gaze from dropping to his lips, reminding her of the kiss they'd shared. She sucked in a quick short breath, drawing her eyes back to his.

He ran his fingers through his peppered hair. "Becca, I know we haven't known each other long, but I need to warn you."

Her head drew back. She frowned. "About what?"

“That video you put on YouTube could cause problems. Maybe you should take it off.”

“Why? I can’t understand why it should cause any more problems, other than my boss thinking about firing me, which he didn’t. I’m the one embarrassed. Losing my cool in public wasn’t too smart.”

Thomas frowned. “Not your first video. The second one you put online last night...the one with Huffman’s trainer pouring acid on a filly’s hooves.”

Her mouth dropped. Her brows deepened with the image of her video. “Where...how...oh no. I didn’t put it on YouTube. Clip...Clip did.” Becca whirled and rushed back into the barn, hung up the rope, and hurried out toward the road. “Can you give me a ride to the house?” Without waiting for an answer, Becca got into his car before Thomas could get in and start the engine.

The moment Thomas drove near the backdoor of her house, and before he turned the key off, Becca shoved the door wide, heaved her heavy body out of the SUV and rushed inside. By the time Thomas walked in, she stood in front of her computer, waiting after switching the on button. Once the internet loaded, she keyed in YouTube and searched. There it was. Her gaze swung to Thomas standing next to her. “There’s over a hundred thousand hits already.” She played the video. “Oh my. That’s the video I took.”

“Maybe-”

Becca’s cell phone rang. She stared at it biting her bottom lip.

Thomas picked it up and handed it to her. She gazed into his eyes, took the iphone from his hand and raised it to her ear without looking away. “Hello.” Becca gradually lowered her butt down onto the stool and listened. Her eyes widen. Her hand shook. When Thomas frowned, she knew her face had drained to a white sheet.

He snatched the cell from her hand, whirled around and listened. “Who is this?” he demanded. His worried expression stared at the iphone. “Whoever it was, hung up.” He whirled to fix his gaze on hers. “Becca, what did he say?”

“He told me to take the video off the internet or else I’ll regret it. He...he said, if I continue with such accusations, I’ll have to deal with some abuse of my own.” Becca rubbed her forehead, feeling lightheaded. “Thomas, he threatened me and my horse.”

Becca twisted around on the barstool and faced the computer. Her trembling fingers clicked to delete the video, but couldn't. She sucked in a quick breath. "I can't, it's under Sarah's account." She stood, looked at Thomas and shook her head, "I...I have to go see Sarah."

"I'll take you-"

"No. I mean, I rather you didn't. I'll drive myself."

"No, Becca. I'll take you."

Unable to find the strength to argue, Becca followed Thomas to his vehicle and within minutes, they were sitting at Sarah's table listening to Clip's apology.

Sarah opened her laptop and opened up her YouTube account. Immediately, she deleted the video, but shook her head. "Becca, I'm afraid your video has probably been shared around the globe. You have over four hundred thousand hits.

Becca rested her elbows on the table and covered her face with her hands. A deep breath slowly filled her lungs. She shook her head, dropped her hands and mumbled, "What I don't understand is how fast Huffman found out about the second video and the letters sent out."

"What letters?"

Becca turned her gaze to Thomas. If he didn't know about the letters, how did he know about the video?

She narrowed her eyes at Thomas and studied him for a moment.

"What?" he asked, frowning.

"Did you tell Huffman about the video?"

"Me?" His head drew back.

"Becca, you can't think Thomas had something to do with..." Sarah's question broke through the tense air.

Thomas ignored Sarah's remark, stared at Becca and shook his head. "I'm not sure what you're getting at, but Elle showed me the video."

"Elle?" she arched her brow.

"Aunt Bec," Clip drew her gaze. "I called Elle last night and told her to look at the video."

Becca chewed on her bottom lip and stared down at her hands resting on the table.

Thomas shoved back his chair, ran his fingers through his hair and drilled his gaze into her. "Spit it out Rebecca. There's something you want to say. Say it."

Becca looked up. When she fixed her eyes on him, her heart pumped so fast shooting blood to her face. She pulled out her iphone, opened her pictures and flipped to the one she took of him talking to Huffman's trainer. "Here," her reproachful tone wafted around the table. She held up her iphone, daring him to deny proof of him knowing Huffman.

Thomas leaned forward and stared at the picture. His chest lifted with a short breath and dropped. "I see," his quiet voice stated softly.

Becca didn't take her eyes off him. He appeared uncertain on what to say. The room grew quiet. Silence permeated through the kitchen even longer when she handed back her cellular with the approval certificate showing his signature.

"Are you Thomas Smith or Thomas Slye?" She watched the color drain from his tan face, but he didn't say a word, nor did he deny the signature on the certificate.

Drake's toenails click-a-d-clacked across the kitchen tiled floor and filled the silent void. Disenchanted with the man next to her, she dragged her eyes away from him to the Dalmatian's large brown eyes. The dog looked up at Sarah, then Clip, and then her. His brown eyes asking, what was going on.

Thomas stood, placed a hand on Becca's chin and lifted her face to him. "It's not what you think, Becca. I can't explain any more than that. You'll just have to trust me for a while longer." With those words, he strolled to the back door and left.

Becca looked at Sarah. She pressed her lips, shrugged, and handed the iphone over for her to see the pictures.

Chapter Fifteen

Becca relaxed her back against the sofa, took a sip of hot chamomile tea and closed her eyes. She rubbed her hand over her tummy and mumbled, “A stressful day, wasn’t it baby?” The loud ringing of her cellular echoed throughout her quiet house sending her heart palpitating so fast she had to take a deep breath before pushing her bottom off the sofa.

Instantly, she recognized Thomas’s familiar sexy voice. She listened quietly while his low tone spoke into the phone.

“Okay,” she agreed and hung up. She glanced down at Maxine.

“So, he wants to talk.”

Her brown eyed dog glanced up at her and cocked her head. Becca stepped around the counter and grabbed the teapot. “I think I need a calming hot cup of tea with lots of lemon.” She reached up and took a treat from the cabinet and handed it to Maxine. “What do you say, girl? We’ll listen, and then ask him politely to leave.” Making her way around the island bar, she strolled to the fireplace and switched on the flames. Rubbing her arms, she glanced out the large window and stared down the hill toward the road. Even though spring was in the air, the evenings were chilly.

Maxine growled, baring her teeth.

Becca frowned and looked down at her Britney Spaniel staring at the backdoor. She growled again.

“What is it girl?” It couldn’t be Thomas. She didn’t hear a vehicle.

The doorknob turned.

An angry mixed growl rumbled from Maxine’s bark with her snarled lips lifted in a hostile curl of white sharp teeth ready for attack.

Fear tripped over Becca’s heartbeat. Certainly, Thomas would knock. The door was locked. Maxine growled again, ran to the door, frantically barked against the bottom of the panel, trying to warn whoever was on the other side.

Blood flooded her brain triggering endorphins to move her feet to the staircase. Faster than she thought she could run, she heaved her body up each step with lightning speed from the adrenaline pumping through her veins. Quickly reaching the closet half way down the hallway, she listened to Maxine’s enraged growl and barking, accelerated her actions. Gripping Joe’s rifle, she turned at the second the door pushed open with a cracking sound of wood splintering. Her

muscles tightened. She heard Maxine's furious growls over her own loud rasping breath, and then a painful yip triggered panic pumping through her veins. What did he do to Maxine?

Silence. Becca couldn't breathe. Her shaking hands held up the heavy weapon. She took a step from behind the closet door and stopped at the top of the stairs aiming the cocked rifle downward.

A man in a hooded jacket covering his head strolled to the bottom of the stairs. His foot took the first step and another.

She fired.

Boom. The echoed vibrated throughout the house so loud, Becca's ears rang. The intruder grabbed his arm. His shadowy face stared up at her. He took another step up. Becca cocked the rifle again. He paused only for a second, turned and flew out the door. She waited with the rifle pointing toward the door.

Maxine whimpered.

On wobbly legs Becca moved cautiously down several steps. Again she paused, and listened. Once again, she took another step down and another. In a flash, a figure stood inside the doorway, Becca's trigger finger pulled back before she could aim. The explosion boomed through the house shattering the door window from the bullet's impact.

"Becca." Thomas hit the floor and covered his head. "Becca, it's me. Thomas."

Her breath whished from her mouth releasing her muscles into an uncontrollable shaky mass, collapsing her knees and dropping her butt onto the step.

Thomas stood, flipped on the overhead entry light and looked up at her. "What the hell? Becca, what happened?" He slowly held out his hand, moved to her side, and gently took the rifle from her shaking hand.

"Ah...a man broke in and...and...Maxine, he hurt Maxine." Becca scrambled down the steps to the mudroom. Maxine lay still, whimpering. "Oh Maxine, you saved my life. You're hurt," she cried, slumped to her knees and touched her hand to Maxine where blood oozed from her side.

"Here, Becca, let me take a look." Thomas gently moved Becca aside and bent over Maxine to examine the wound. Blood flowed from a long, deep slit. "Whoever it was sliced her with a knife. She needs stitches."

The building cry lodged inside her throat. Thomas tenderly lifted Maxine up and carried her to the island bar where he laid her down. She switched on the ceiling lights, grabbed a towel and wiped away warm red blood. She waited for Thomas to examine the cut with his gentle fingers.

Thomas's head bent over the dog to examine the knife wound closer. He glanced at her. "There's a bag in my car...in the back seat. Go...go get it. Hurry. I need to stop the bleeding." Becca hurried out to his vehicle.

Forgetting about her fear of the intruder, she grabbed the bag out of the vehicle and headed for the house. A car drove up behind Thomas's SUV. Her heart stopped. A relieved breath pushed from her lungs when she recognized Ketch.

"Becca." He stopped short, glanced toward the house. "What's going on? We heard gunshots sounding like they came from this direction. Sarah was sure it came from here."

"Ketch, hurry. Maxine's been hurt." Without more explanations, she hurried inside the house. Ketch followed with a worried scowl. Becca placed the black bag on the bar near Thomas.

He quickly opened it and retrieved a bottle of liquid. Before he poured the solution over the wound, he skirted his gaze toward Ketch. "I need you to hold Maxine's head. She's weak from loss of blood, but still could manage to attack me if the pain is too severe."

Ketch nodded, stepped around Becca and held the dog's head firmly.

"Thomas, how bad..." A lump squeezed the words inside her throat.

"She needs minor surgery. This solution is a pain depressant for her central nervous system, and then I'll staple her wound." While talking in a soothing tone, he continued to work focusing on the slit caused by the intruder's knife.

While Ketch held down Maxine's head and Thomas worked on her wound, he fixed his eyes on Becca and demanded. "What's going on?"

Becca kept her eyes on Maxine and Thomas's proficient hands move gently over the bloody gash. "Some man broke in and Maxine tried to stop him."

Ketch's head swung around looking toward the backroom and the broken glass scattered over the floor. He drilled his gaze toward Thomas, suspiciously.

More worried about Maxine, she dismissed Ketch's perplexed expression to keep her focused on her dog. Thomas's competent fingers worked their magic in stapling the injury

afflicted upon Maxine. She didn't appear to be breathing. A tear slid from Becca's eyes. Reaching out she rested her hand on Thomas's arm. "Is...is she going to be okay?"

He stood straight, and with relaxed shoulders, he nodded. "I gave her something to put her under." He took a slow breath and mumbled, "You can release her head now. She isn't feeling anything. She'll sleep for an hour or so. The knife didn't cut into any vital organs." He stepped back, pulled the bloody red gloves from his hands and with eyes fixed on Maxine, said, "She'll be fine in a few days, but you'll need to keep her quiet." He glanced up at Becca. "Where do you want me to lay her?"

Becca glanced around and pointed to her doggie bed in the corner of the living room. "Over there."

Ketch stepped up. "I'll carry her while you get washed up, doc."

Becca's gaze studied Thomas, but there was no sign he'd even heard her brother calling him doc. He stripped off the rubber gloves and looked at her. She quickly stepped to the counter, opened the door beneath the sink for him to drop the bloody gloves into the trash, and then she switched on the warm water for him to wash. Picking up the soap container she squirted a few drops into his hand. When she turned her gaze up into his, he was studying her with concern. She put the bottle down, opened a drawer and pulled out a clean towel for him. She turned to Ketch who stood watching them.

Thomas cleared his throat, looked at Ketch, and then skirted his gaze toward Maxine.

After a moment of silence, Ketch spoke first. "You two need to tell me what the hell's going on." He motioned for Becca to take a seat near Maxine and he sat, giving a nod to Thomas to take a seat too. Thomas gathered up his instruments, took them to the sink, rinsed them off and placed them in a plastic bag before putting them inside his black bag.

Becca didn't say a word.

Ketch watched his every move and waited silently.

Thomas strolled to Becca, squatted in front of her, reached out and touched her arm. "You look pale, you should rest." He turned to Ketch and said, "Maybe you should take her home with you. I don't think it's a good idea for her to be alone tonight."

Becca's ardent expression went from Thomas to Ketch. "I'll not leave Maxine."

Ketch nodded. "I'll stay with her."

Thomas stood with an apprehensive gaze fixed on Becca. “I need to leave. Elle didn’t think I’d be gone this long. She’s home alone.”

“I’m fine Thomas, just a little tired. And, Thomas,” she reached up and grabbed his arm. “Thank you for...” a sob ended her words turning her gaze upon Maxine.

He leaned down and whispered in her ear, “She’s going to be fine. We’ll talk tomorrow. Get some rest.” Straightening, he turned to leave, glanced one last time toward Maxine sleeping on her bed and looked back at Ketch. “Call me if Maxine appears to get worse. I don’t anticipate any problems, but just in case, keep a close eye on her.”

Ketch stood, nodded and stepped to the backdoor. When Thomas stepped through the broken glass and out the door, Ketch drew his gaze back, “Thomas, you and I need to talk. And soon.”

Without pausing, he nodded and hurried to his vehicle.

Once Ketch nailed up a heavy blanket over the broken window, he put on a pot of water to make Becca some hot tea, and then he sat near her where she knelt on the floor by Maxine. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Becca, she’ll be good in a few days. Tell me dear, what really happened? And, why was Thomas here? Is he the one that-”

“No. No, Ketch. The guy broke in wearing a hoody and when he started...started up the stairs toward me...I...I think I shot him in the arm.” She looked up into her brother’s face and tried to smile. “At least, I think the bullet grazed him from the way he jerked.”

“And Thomas?”

Becca bent over and gave Maxine a kiss on the nose and with some difficulty, pushed to her knees. Ketch jumped up and helped her stand to make her way to the sofa. When he gave her a steamy cup of tea, she felt her body finally begin to relax. She studied her brother. He was so patient.

“Did Sarah tell you about my visit with her earlier today, and...and about the video?” When he confirmed with a nod, she continued, “I supposed I all but accused Thomas or...or whatever his real name is, of collaborating with Huffman.” Becca leaned back and closed her eyes. “I think, maybe the man broke in to warn me about speaking out about Huffman.” She opened her eyelids and stared at Ketch. She knew he agreed.

Ketch leaned his head back against the top of the armchair and studied Becca. “You like him, don’t you?”

She took a sip of tea and returned his thoughtful gaze. “I suppose I do.”

“Do you trust him even though he’s not being honest with you?”

Becca shrugged, “I feel safe around him. I can’t explain it. He wanted to talk to me tonight about something that’s why he arrived right after the intruder. Ketch, I almost killed him. After the man ran, I thought he’d come back, but it was Thomas I shot at...geez, thank goodness, I missed.”

“Well, whatever your Thomas is mixed up in, he must have been a pretty good veterinarian at one time or another. Even carries his own black bag with him too. Maybe, he’s still a vet, who knows at this point.”

Ketch stood and pulled his cell phone from his pocket. “I’ll give Sheriff John a call and tell him about what happened. He can at least keep an eye out for someone with a gun wound.” He looked at Becca with an encouraging smile and held the phone to his ear.

Chapter Sixteen

Becca awoke early, lifted her eyelids to rest her gaze on Maxine. Her furry white and red head lay relaxed on the sidearm of her doggie bed, but her large brown eyes were opened and looking straight at her. "Are you waiting for me to wake up?" Becca smiled at the sweet face of the dog that saved her. She slowly dropped her feet off the sofa and twisted around to set up. She yawned and patted her stomach. "Baby you certainly were restless last night. Too much excitement?" After pushing to her feet, she grabbed the blanket and swung her gaze toward the big overstuffed chair where Ketch slept. She shook her head and covered him. No matter how hard she'd tried to talk him into going home, he refused to leave.

Becca strolled quietly to the counter, prepared the coffee and flipped on the switch. Out of the corner of her eye, she turned to find Maxine moving toward her in a careful protective manner.

Becca squatted. "Hi girl," she whispered, gently patted her she reached down and gave her a kiss on the top of her head. "You want some water? Are you hungry?" She picked up her water bowl and rinsed it out to fill it with fresh water. Placing the bowl in front of Maxine, she straightened to find Ketch standing on the opposite side of the island bar. "Well, good morning. Coffee's almost ready."

He yawned, ran his fingers through his dark hair. "How's Maxine this morning?"

Becca nodded. "She's doing well. Probably sore, but it didn't hurt her appetite...she's going down on her food."

"Good-" A soft knock interrupted him. Swinging his gaze toward the door, he frowned, and held up his hand when Becca started to move. "I'll go. Little early to have visitors, don't you think?"

When Thomas's deep soothing voice drifted from the backdoor, she felt a tingle scurry over her. She bit down on her bottom lip and took a deep breath through her nose. Footsteps drew her attention toward the archway. Her gaze locked with Thomas.

"Becca," Ketch drew her gaze, "I'll ask him to leave if you want."

She shook her head. "No, Ketch, Thomas and I need to talk."

"Do you want me to stay?"

Her pressed lips thinned. "No, please, you need to go home. Tell Sarah thank you for lending her husband for the night. I'll be fine."

Becca didn't move, but squinted at her brother when he stopped and whispered in Thomas's ear. She could imagine what he said, knowing his foremost concern was for her safety.

Ketch glanced back at her and said, "I'll be back in an hour to fix your door."

She nodded and swung her gaze to Thomas, turned and poured herself a cup of coffee, and then handed a cup to Thomas. She strolled over and took a seat near Maxine, who had returned to her bed.

Thomas took a seat opposite her, stretched out his long legs and took a sip of coffee. She looked at him, arched a brow, and said, "So, talk."

His eyes slid from hers to rest on Maxine. Slowly, he leaned forward, placed his cup on the coffee table, and stood. He quietly stood over her dog, squatted, and with a soothing tone he spoke to Maxine while his fingers separated her fur in order to examine the wound. "Good girl. No sign of infection."

He stood, strolled back to his seat. Placing his elbows on his knees, he put his palms together and rested his chin on his linked fingers. His fixed eyes swallowed her. The baby kicked. She shifted position and stared back.

"Becca, I can't explain everything...not yet anyway."

"Thomas Smith isn't your real name, is it?" Her blatant statement put a slight smile on his lips.

"No, but give me a couple of weeks and I can tell you everything."

"Does Elle know who you are?"

"Yes, and that's why I can't tell you certain things. It could endanger her life. If it were just my life, I'd explain all."

"Are you a vet?"

He dropped his arms onto the chair armrest, leaned back and nodded. "Trust me, dear, I want to tell, but to keep you safe and Elle, you'll have to wait."

She frowned, took a sip of coffee and gazed into his eyes. Eyes she wanted to trust. Suddenly a pain blasted down her side. "Ow," she twisted and grabbed her abdomen.

Thomas jumped up staring at her large tummy. "What is it?"

Becca puffed out a deep breath and frowned. "Nothing now. She must have kicked too hard." Handing him her cup, she pushed to her feet. While holding her hand against her ribs, she strolled to the window and stared out at the cluster of heavy clouds. Appeared another

thunderstorm was on its way. Thomas brushed her arm when he strolled over to stand beside her. She glanced up into his face.

“Becca, the people I’m involved with are bad. I’m pretty sure they’re connected with Huffman. I need you to stay clear of him and stop accusing him...for now anyway. Can you promise me, for now?”

Dragging her gaze from his to the raindrops splashing against the window and rolling downward, she circled her tummy with her hand. Spring rains were a wonderful way to waken all the sleepy foliage. A tiny foot kicked her hand. She glanced down. He was right. She should be thinking of her baby’s safety. But, what about all the hurt Huffman inflicted on those poor horses? Looking up, she said, “Thomas...should I still call you Thomas?”

“Thomas is my name.”

“Right.” She stepped back to put a little more distance between them. “I’ll try. But something has to be done with Huffman.” Becca strolled back to the sofa and eased her body down. “Thomas, twice now, I’ve had a vision.” She waited for a reaction, but when there was none, she continued following his stroll back to the sofa to sit next to her, waiting for more.

She swallowed hard. “I...I’ve never told anyone. It sounds crazy, but it happened twice.” She leaned back and stared out the large window at the drizzling rain. “I’m sure it was just my imagination conjuring up an image during the thunderstorm.” She glanced at him with his gray eyes fixed on her and listening patiently. “But, it was so surreal. I have to help those horses somehow, someday. Huffman is an evil man.”

His hand covered her hand resting on her tummy. “And I’ll help, Becca. Once this situation I’m in is over with, I’ll make sure Huffman pays.”

His gaze flew to his hand. A wide grin spread over his face. “She kicked us.” He looked up with a twinkle in his eyes.

Becca glanced down and giggled. “There she goes again.” She looked up into his intense, smoldering grays. Her body demanded her to sway toward him. He softly pulled his hand away. She reached up and touched his cheek, leaned in and placed her lips on his. He didn’t move. She pulled back.

“I’m not sure why I did that, but-”

His tantalizing lips cut her word off, pressing against hers, triggering a wanting need inside her. She threw her arms around his neck and melted against him. His fingers rake through her

hair and held her head to him pulling her closer. She clung to him wanting more of his mouth to explore. Her body screamed out for the need she hadn't had in a long, long time. Her lips parted to slip her tongue into his mouth, wanting to taste more. His arms tightened around her. From the way his tongue mated her, he too wanted more. Unable to stop, she flung against him so hard he fell back onto the sofa with her hovering over him. His hand moved down her back to clutch her bottom, he shifted to rub his growing need against her. He tasted so good, felt so right, she couldn't think of anything but the stimulating bond pulling them together.

Alarms detonated inside her brain. Her eyes flew open. What was she doing? Suddenly, she collapsed her head into his neck, breathed in his male scent of earthy cologne, and relaxed her whole body on top of his. He didn't move.

She giggled.

"Becca," his low breathless voice broke through the quietness. "I can't breathe."

She giggled again, rolled off him onto her side. She laughed and tried to apologize. "I'm...I'm sorry."

He chuckled. "Wow." He turned slightly to look her in the eyes. "You took me by surprise. I-

"Thomas," she interrupted, "can you help me up. The baby's causing cramps in my legs."

When he tried to set up, he slipped off the sofa onto the floor. Becca giggled. His surprise expression looked up at her and he started laughing.

"This should be on video," she laughed.

"I agree." A chuckle escaped his lips. Pushing to his feet, he held out his hand.

With his help, she sat up straight and scooted over to make room for him. "Thomas," she rubbed her forehead and with a gleam in her eyes she said, "blame it on hormones, again. It's been a long time since...since, well you know what they say about pregnant women -"

"Becca," he reached out, touched her gently on the chin, rubbed his thumb over her lips, and dragged his gaze up into her eyes. He leaned his head down and kissed her lips, pulled back, and with his gaze fired a tingle from her lips down to her toes. He whispered, "After our kiss in the barn, I've wanted to kiss you again."

"Really?" her lower voice mumbled.

"Hmm, I wanted to find out if another kiss from those lips tasted real and electrifying like the first kiss, or if my selfish needs overshadow reality."

“Well?”

He frowned, dropped his hand and stood. His captivating smile spread across his lips. “Now, I’m afraid I’m in trouble.”

“Why?” she questioned, confused by his frown and the smile.

“I don’t want to stop. You are more than I can handle right now.” He reached down and picked up their cups. “Can I get you some hot tea?”

Dazed from his confession, she could only nod. She leaned back listening to the pitter-patter of the rain on her tin roof and took in a deep breath. What in God’s name came over her? She practically forced herself on him, belly and all.

Accepting her tea, she waited until Thomas took a seat opposite her before diving into her request for forgiveness for throwing herself at him. “Thomas, I don’t know what came over me.”

“I do.”

“You do?” her brow arched waiting for an explanation.

“You want me.”

“I...I...I-” she sputtered.

He chuckled. “Becca, there’s chemistry between us, so don’t deny it.”

“Thomas, I’m pregnant.”

“Your pregnancy has nothing to with my strong attraction for you. It’s not the baby I’m captivated with, it’s you.” His gaze trailed over her tummy. “By the way, it doesn’t bother me you’re pregnant.”

Becca took a sip while trying to get a grip on what he was saying. He leaned forward, held his coffee cup between his hands and rested his arms on his thighs. He was adorable sitting there in his relaxed persona, peppered hair slightly dipping down his forehead, the twinkle in his gray eyes, and those enticing lips smiling back at her like he just discovered a pot of gold.

He glanced down at his cup and hesitantly asked, “Tell me about Joe.” He looked up and cocked his head to the side, waiting.

She shrugged and stared down at the cup in her hand. “Joe and I practically grew up together. We attended high school together, started dating and even attended University of Tennessee together. We married right after graduation. He enlisted and was deployed on his third tour when he was killed.”

She lowered her gaze to her protruding belly and rubbed her hand over her baby. “We tried to have a family for ten years, but it didn’t happen until Joe left this last time for Afghanistan.” Her gaze scurried around the room. “Joe fell in love with this old red brick house and with Yellow Creek. We lived here for two years when he received his orders.”

She paused and studied the man setting across from her. She loved Joe all her life, but this man kissed her differently than Joe. His kiss was addictive. Her gaze zoomed in on his lips. “Thomas, I’ve only ever dated and kissed Joe, so my experience is limited. Huh, I wasn’t even sure I knew how to kiss, much less flirt. Maybe we should forget what happened?”

Thomas sucked in a breath and released it slowly. “You’re lonely. It’s natural to reach out. And, forgetting we kissed, well...that won’t be easy. Becca, you didn’t just kiss me, you kissed me passionately and I kissed you back.”

Chapter Seventeen

Blinking away the moisture, Becca hurried to her classroom, packed all her belongings in a box, and tried to hold back tears. She looked around the empty room. Gosh, her teaching time was over and in a blink of an eye, the principal made a decision to put her on leave, now. After all, he said her baby was due soon. *Huh*, she knew the real reason Principal Robinson put her on leave was her video and drawing attention to the school and her, a teacher. He didn't give her a chance to say goodbye to her kids. The principal sent them to the gym to give her a chance to pack her belongings. With her arms loaded, she strolled down the empty hallway and stepped through the front doors.

Her feet stopped short, her eyes widened when confronted with a media crowd waiting outside the building. The NTN van parked out in front and a woman shoving a microphone in her face moved in closer along with a camera man and several others waiting to bombard her with questions. They all wanted something worthy of writing about.

“Mrs. Tripp, when did you take the video? Who's the man abusing the poor horse?”

“It Huffman's trainer.” Shit, the words slipped from her mouth before she could think.

“How do you know Huffman is aware of what his trainer is doing?”

Becca frowned and pushed through the crowd. “I have proof.”

The media followed her to her truck, pushing close to record her answers. “So you have more videos?”

“Look,” she opened the truck door, placed the box in the backseat, slammed the door shut and opened the driver door. Turning, she looked at the woman shoving the mic in her face and said, “Do I have more proof? Yes.” Becca took a deep breath and blurted out her frustrations, “My question is why these criminals are still abusing horses? Why are they still permitted to use padded shoes so heavy the pads have to be strapped on with bands across the hoof causing scars? Why is soring still allowed? “

The woman's defiant tone interrupted, “We talked to Judge Pennington and he said there was no validation for your accusations. What do you say to that?”

“My hell, people wake up. The Horse Protection Act was passed in 1970, and the practice of soring is a federal offense, but still the almighty dollar has controlled the Tennessee Walking Horse events. Judges look the other way even when blood is dripping from the horse's hoof and when visible scars and sores are proof. The poor horses never get any relief from strain and

stress, or their pain every minute of the day and night. You can see the constant pain Forever Blue-Black suffers, if you take the time and look the poor horse in the eyes. Until all criminals like Huffman are punished, isn't it our responsibility to speak out against the cruel and barbaric activities taking place against such beautiful animals?"

"Aunt Bec." Clip shoved his way through the media people to her side. Becca grabbed him and pushed him into the truck. Without saying another word or answering more questions, she heaved herself into the Titan and switches on the engine.

"Aunt Becca," Clip cut through her thoughts, "School ain't out yet. Where you going?"

She glanced at her nephew. "I'm sorry Clip. I guess you get the rest of the day off. I've been asked to take a leave of absents for the remainder of the school year." She grinned. "The baby is due soon."

He settled back, frowned at her and glanced at her abdomen. "Are you okay?"

"Sure, why?"

"You acted upset with those people. What did they want?"

"You know how the media get all excited when they see things they think are newsworthy. I guess they viewed my video on YouTube and wanted to ask a few questions."

"I'm sorry."

Becca reached over and gave Clip a pat on the shoulder. "I'm not."

"Aunt Bec, where's Elle and her dad? She's been absent from school for the last two weeks. When I asked my teacher, she said they had to go on a personal trip. Do you know anything about it?"

"I'm sorry, Clip. I don't. Thomas only said they'd return when their situation cleared up." She glanced at Clip. He just nodded. She didn't know what else to tell him. She really didn't know either.

Thunder clouds rolled in releasing a slight drizzle over the earth, pitter pattering on the tin roof. Becca poured a steamy cup of tea, relaxed and listed baby items she still needed to purchase. A boisterous thunder bellowing in the distance brought her head up to glance out the large living room window. Her iphone rang. After a soft hello to Sarah, she listened for several minutes while picking up the TV remote. Saying a hurried goodbye, she hung up and switched to the news channel Sarah told her to watch.

Oh shit. She'd gone and done it now. In a bright colored blouse spread over her huge tummy, she stood in front of the school building talking to the world. Becca covered her mouth to shut her words off from the interview. Was got into her? Talking a mile a minute and telling the world she harbored proof of Huffman being a criminal. Oh my, she was in more trouble now than before.

Becca leaned back against the sofa and shook her head. The news woman asked, "Are Huffman's criminal activities related to the Eckert's trial taking place in Nashville? After all, there's history between the two men."

She didn't hear the rest of the woman's words. She frowned. Her brain tried to register what the newswoman said about the Eckert's trial. When the news switched from the woman to a video of Eckert exiting the courthouse, she recognized Thomas Smith in the background. Standing beside him was Elle.

Becca sat up straight. Thomas was involved with Eckert. She'd read a little about the trial, but hadn't really paid much attention. Her gaze fixed on the screen zooming in on Thomas walking from the courthouse with his lawyer and an FBI man by his side.

The anchorwoman stared back at Becca through the television. "The Eckert trial is over. Found guilty of doping his Thoroughbred racing horses. The shocking event taking place during Eckert's trial revealed much more when Thomas Slye took the stand. The veterinarian hired by Joyce Cannon to certify healthy racing horses., testified against Eckert and Cannon accusing them of falsifying documents and murdering jockey, Ken Jones. Joyce Cannon was arrested for first degree murder of Dr. Holloway and Ken Jones. It appears Cannon's dad, Eckert agreed to testify against her for a lighter sentence by spilling the whole story of his own daughter's embezzlement and murders."

Suddenly, the camera rolled on Thomas heading for a vehicle with Elle. The same reporter, who interviewed Becca, tried to ask Thomas a question, but an FBI agent pushed her away to hurried Thomas and Elle into a black sedan.

Becca chewed on her bottom lip. *Thomas Slye.*

The news lady stared through the TV screen, talking directly to her. "Thomas Slye testified, accusing Cannon of killing Eckert's jockey who was refusing to dope the Thoroughbred. Some consider Eckert's guilt will be a rippling effect in the horseracing community costing several millions of dollars." The anchor woman went on to elaborate further, "The saga against horse

abuse continues in another story. Mr. Huffman, a well know Tennessee Walking Horse owner and winner of four years running Championship, has been harassed by Rebecca Tripp of Yellow Creek, Tennessee. Huffman is now under investigation by the FBI for criminal activities. Here's a video Mrs. Tripp sent to the FBI. I must warn you. It's a disturbing video."

Suddenly, Becca's video appeared on the screen. She leaned back, clicked off the television, and took a deep breath. So, that's where Thomas and Elle have been for the last two weeks. If the FBI is protecting him, then they've been in danger all this time.

So, the Eckert trial was over. Now, maybe someone would charge Huffman.

Maxine whined, paced to the door and back. She looked Becca in the eyes and whined.

"What is it girl? Do you need to go out? Okay." Becca pushed away from the sofa and stood. Maxine ran to the back door. "Wait a minute. Mama waddles now, at a much slower pace." The moment she opened the door, Maxine ran out on the porch and stopped, ran to back to Becca, and then ran to the steps. Her gaze stared toward the barn. Growling and barking, Maxine took off on her little feet flying down the steps and out into the pouring rain heading in the direction of the barn.

"Maxine." Becca frowned. And then she heard the panic neighing sound coming from the barn. Josie. She's frightened. Again, the scream coming from Josie meant she was terrified by something.

Becca grabbed her coat, shoved rubber boots on over her bare feet and barely touched the steps when her round pregnant body rushed down off the porch, across the road and up the muddy trail toward the barn. Rain splashed her face while the wind blew her coat open, but her mind focused on the sounds of a mixture of thunder and Josie's screams. Her foot tripped on a rock dropping her to the ground. Catching her breath, she ignored the mud clinging to her clothes, pushed to her feet and squinted against the pouring rain out into the field. The lightning flashed. She froze.

Her ghost horse stood in the field snorting through his nose, telling her to hurry. Something was wrong. God help her, she knew someone hurt Josie. Becca jogged toward the barn, threw open the doors and darted one last glance over her shoulder, but her ghost horse no long stood in the field staring at her. She tried to flip on the lights, but they didn't work. When the lightning flashed she found her way to a shelf, grabbed a flashlight and switched it on. Wiping the

moisture from her face, she aimed the bright light downward in order not to frighten Josie. Becca slowed her steps, took in a deep breath to calm her nerves.

“Hey, girl, it’s me. What’s...what’s happened?” Becca stopped at the gate. Josie backed up against the wall of her stall. Her ears pinned back against her head. “Josie, it’s me, your mama. Sweetie, don’t be frightened.”

The whites of her widened eyes didn’t seem to recognize her or her surroundings. Becca swirled around flashing the light throughout the barn, there’s nothing. Slowly, she moved to the gate, stepped through, and lowered her voice to talk to Josie. “It’s okay girl, whatever it was is gone. Shush, now you’re safe. Come.” Becca held out her hand. “Shush, it’s okay.”

Josie dropped to her knees, then she flopped to her side.

“Josie.”

Panic bubbled up inside of Becca. She knelt and rubbed her hand along Josie’s tight neck muscles. “What wrong, girl?” She leaned down and placed her ear against her body listening for her heartbeat. Something was wrong. Sitting back, Becca reached into her coat pocket – no cell phone. Her head whirled toward the door. She’d have to run back and call for help. “Maxine, stay. Josie, I’ll be right back.”

Becca took off out of the barn and slouched through the mud, trying to run, but at the same time careful not to fall and injure her baby on the slippery road toward her house. Pulling her hood over her head, she cross the road and slowed her steps when the headlights of a vehicle headed toward her. Her heart pounded. Was it the person who hurt Josie?

The car stopped and the tall dark figure stepped out and hollered, “Becca, what are you doing out in this weather?”

“Thomas,” her hysterical voice screamed.

Before she could move, he was at her side with an arm around her shoulder leading her toward the house. Pushing him away, she looked up at him through the heavy rain drop splashing her eyelashes. “Thomas, it’s...it’s Josie. Something’s wrong.”

Without hesitating he turned her toward the SUV and opened the door. Hurrying around to the driver’s side, he quickly pounded his foot on the gas pedal, spinning his back wheels in the mud, but managed to head the car up the road toward the barn. Not stopping, he slowed the vehicle to bump open the barn doors wide enough to drive the SUV inside the barn just beyond the doors. Becca jumped out before he could switch off the engine, but left the headlight on.

Following her, he asked, "Lights?"

"They won't come on."

Still holding the flashlight in her hands, she dropped down on her knees at Josie's head and rubbed her hand along her body.

Thomas placed his hand on the side of the horse, leaned down and listened to her breathing. Without looking at Becca, he ordered, "Get my bag out of the backseat."

Becca pressed her hands on the ground to force her body up. She hurried to retrieve his black bag, the bag with supplies he'd used for Maxine. Her heart pounded. Tears slip from her wet eyelashes. Dropping the bag beside Thomas, she squatted near Josie's backside and softly rubbed her hand to let her know Thomas was here to help.

"It's okay girl, Thomas is here." She watched Thomas through the soft light filtering through the stall. He held a syringe up and squirted out liquid before sticking the needle into Josie's neck, then, he took another syringe out, and after thumping Josie's leg, he drew blood. Sitting back on his haunches, he took a deep breath, and slowly turned his gaze on her. "I may be wrong...Becca, I won't know until I test her blood, but...but, she might have been...been-"

"Been what? Thomas?" Becca stared at his worried expression.

"Poisoned."

"Poisoned?" A small cry escaped her lips.

Thomas pulled out his cell phone and punched in a number.

Becca dropped back on her butt and leaned over her Morgan and kissed her head. She could hear Thomas talking, but couldn't comprehend his words. Josie couldn't die. Sitting up, she looked around at Thomas and frowned. "Is she...is she..." Unable to say the words, tears flooded her eyes, gazing back down on her beloved horse.

Thomas's hand covered hers and his low voice tried to reassure her, but failed. "I'll do everything I can to find out what's in her bloodstream. Becca look at me."

Drawing her gaze back to Thomas, she stared at his lips when he said, "Ketch is on his way. Will you be okay? I have to leave."

"Leave, why? You have to help Josie."

"I need to run home to test her blood. I can't give the right meds if I don't know what's causing this. I have equipment at the house to test. Once I know what she's been given, I can give her the right meds. But time isn't on our side. I have to hurry. "

Becca nodded. “Go. You said Ketch will be here soon, and Maxine’s here with me.”

He leaned in, kissed her forehead and sprang to his feet.

Becca hugged an arm over Maxine and the other arm over Josie. Thomas’s car headlights slowly receded from the barn leaving her and her beloved horse alone. The soft flashlight reflected on them while surrounded by darkness and the melancholy pitter patter of raindrops echoing on the tin roof.

Chapter Eighteen

Why haven't you come by Thomas? I haven't seen you all week, not since you showed me how to give Josie her medicine. What's going on?

Becca glanced down at her dog. "Geez, Maxine, these thunderstorms are more prevalent this spring than last year." She glanced out her newly constructed backdoor and window. The thick rolling clouds made the afternoon seemed later than normal. Darkening skies with heavy wind and rain pounded the ground. Jerking her rubber boots on, Becca grinned at her patient dog waiting for her. "Hey girl, did you know there's a potential tornado during this severe weather? We should hurry and batten down Josie and anything else if the tornado touches down...sure hope not." The moment she opened the door Maxine took off down the porch steps and across the road.

Becca followed somewhat slower while trying to keep the strong wind from ripping off her hood. An overpowering gust hammered against her body, pushing her backward. Her wet hands lost grip on her hood. Fighting against the wind to pull the hood over her head again, she hung onto it while peeking through squinted eyes. She blinked away the rain washing over her face. Maxine stopped to wait. A clash of thunder boomed above her head. She jumped. Maxine took off with Becca practically sprinting close behind. Neither stopped until they both stood in front of the barn doors.

The moment she threw the doors opened, the Brittney Spaniel darted in and stopped to shake her wet fur. Becca giggled when Maxine looked at her with what appeared to be a smile on her lips. "I know girl, I get slower by the day. If this little one doesn't come soon, I'll not be able to walk at all." In reply, Maxine shook again to rid more moisture from her fur and then scrambled underneath Josie's stall gate to greet her friend.

Gathering up a small pouch, Becca strolled to Josie. "Hey girl, time for your meds." She carefully prepared the syringe for Josie's antibiotics. After the first couple of days she had become an old pro following Thomas's elementary instructions. "Hmm," she reached out and gave her horse a pat and stuck the needle in her neck. Josie's large round eyes turned to her, but she didn't move, trusting her master completely.

"You do know Thomas saved you life sweetie, don't you. If he hadn't come by, it frightens me to think I might have lost you." Becca let a quick short sigh escape her mouth while rubbing the spot where the needle punctured her skin.

She glanced at Maxine and gave Josie a hug. *Boom*. Another outburst of thunder ricocheted overhead, rattling the tin roof. Josie threw her head up and stamped her feet. Maxine's white furry feet ran toward the pile of hay in the corner of the stall. She dug in until only her head poked out with round brown eyes staring at Becca.

"Just thunder, it'll pass soon. I hope." Becca threw a blanket over Josie to help her feel more secure, ran her fingers down her long flaxen mane, and mumbled. "Have I told you girls how much I like Thomas... a lot... but I'm not sure about him. Oh, I know he testified against Eckert, but he never explained how he knows Huffman, but he did say I needed more facts against Huffman and even suggested a detective. That's got to mean something. I'm scared girls. What if Huffman tries to hurt us again? Oh, I know Sheriff John has a deputy and a patrol car check on us all the time, but still, it's unsettling."

Becca filled Josie's bucket with grain and glanced around to make sure the backdoors were latched against the blowing wind and all else secured. "Come on Maxine, we better head back before the wind grows stronger. I'll check on you later Josie."

Again, a loud thunder clashed, echoing over the barn. Becca reached out and hugged Josie. Trying to speak above the loud pounding of rain against the tin roof was useless. She leaned near Josie's ear and in a soothing tone said, "Maybe it's time I brought Silver Dapple home from Ketch's to keep you company. I'll think about that. You'll be okay, girl. I'll even keep the light on for you."

Stepping from the barn, Becca pulled hard on the heavy doors to make sure they were closed tightly. Her gaze swung upward to the dark rolling clouds. Why didn't she drive the truck? Little late now, she shook her wet head and started down the dirt road along a rutted, growing stream from the downpour, she moved closer to the fence, away from the stream running down the middle of the road. Lightning flashed. She jumped. Her hurried glance out into the field stopped her dead in her tracks. The ghost horse stood staring at her.

A flash of lightning lit up his beautiful black head marked with a white spot. He neighed at her, demanding her to do something. She couldn't move and when he neighed again, she hollered, "What? What do you want me to do? Please."

She held out her hand, blinked away the wetness from her eyelashes and hollered again, "Please tell me what you want." He neighed and while staring into her eyes he slowly faded.

Mesmerized, Becca felt warm tears slide down her cheeks to mingle with the cool raindrops. Her ghost horse wanted her to do something, but what.

Maxine barked. Becca glanced down. “Did you see him too?” Maxine barked again. So focused on the ghost horse, she hadn’t noticed the wind blew her hood off her head. With a soaking head of hair, she slowly made her way to the house.

After rubbing down her hair with a towel and changing into some dry pants, Becca grabbed a cup and put water and a teabag into the microwave and waited while her thoughts drifted. Her ghost horse kept appearing for some reason, what? Was she losing her mind? He seemed so real.

Pulling a pad and pencil from the drawer, she quickly sketched the horse she imagined in the field. Scribbling fast, she ignored the ding from the microwave in order to keep drawing the image in her mind. She drew the long white strip on his nose and the large dark pleading look in his eyes. Quickly, she surrounded the horse with dark clouds and rain pouring down. Finished, she dropped the pencil and stared.

Biting her bottom lip, she took her tea cup from the microwave, picked up the pad, and stepped to the fireplace. After switching on the fire, she took a seat, and held her drawing up to study it. How could she draw this, if it wasn’t a sign for her to do something? What?

Her cellular rang out into the silent room. Hurrying, she placed the cup on the coffee table and rushed to the bar for her iphone. “Hi Sarah. No, I’m fine. Maxine and I are doing okay. No...no tornado, not yet anyway.” She listened and turned her gaze out the large front window. “I think the worse is passing, anyway. I’ll call you later.” Shutting off her cell, Becca’s gaze rested on her laptop.

She opened up her picture file and thumbed through the evidence gathered. Making her way back to her chair, she sat down and clicked on the slideshow to view once again. After the last slide, she leaned back and closed her eyes. Her baby kicked.

Opening her eyelids, she grinned. “What, I’m too relaxed now. You like it when I’m active, don’t you?” Glancing at her picture file, she clicked on a picture of Clip and giggled at his funny face. Her smile widened at a picture of him feeding Silver an apple. She frowned.

“That’s it. I need to talk to the old farmer who gave us Silver Dapple. He knows something and I’d bet he can help me. Now, you know what your ghost horse is telling me?” She glanced out the window at the drizzling rain. Even the wind had died down. Surely it was too late. “Maxine, wanna go for a drive?”

Chapter Nineteen

Becca drove south on the highway out of Yellow Creek and turned westward into an unfamiliar area, but to best of her knowledge, she was going in the right direction. The wind had died down, but the rain continued to pour in heavy buckets off and on for the last several miles, making it difficult to see through the windshield even with the wipers on high. She thought about pulling the Titan over and waiting until the rain let up, but she didn't want to wait any longer and she'd come too far to turn back.

Joe had driven the day they visited the old farmer named Hank, and she was sure she'd remember where to...ah...she found the turn off. Biting her bottom lip, she wheeled the truck onto the muddy narrow road leading into the dark forest.

Shit, she was doing it again. Here she was in the dark wooded area all alone. The old cabin, if she remember correctly, was located several miles from the main highway. Becca's brows pulled together. She strained to keep her eyes on the narrow road noticing her headlights hardly broke through the darkness. In the distance she detected a tiny light shining through the forest. She sucked in a quick breath and pushed it from her lungs in a fit of relief. Thank goodness. After several more minutes she drove up to the cabin door. A yellow dim light from the window flickered through the rain.

She waited. Surely Hank noticed her headlights reflecting into the window, if so, why didn't he step from the cabin. Looks like she'd have to get out and knock on the door. The down pour turned into a drizzle, which was good sign. Quickly covering her head and buttoning up her jacket, she scrambled down from the Titan, and carefully, climbed the steps onto the porch and knocked.

Becca hugged her arms over her tummy and scanned the dark surroundings. A pinprick light moved through the darkened trees. She bit down on her trembling lips. Someone out there carried a flashlight. Hank. Suddenly, the speck of light disappeared. A chill ran down her back. She hurried and knocked again. Nothing.

Her nervous voice hollered, "Hello Hank, it's Becca Tripp, Joe's wife. Remember, he's the one you gave your abused horse to, Joe Tripp. Hank." Still no answer.

She pulled her jacket closer around her body and reached for the doorknob. It turned. Biting her bottom lip, she glanced back in the direction where she'd seen the light – nothing. She pushed the door open and took a cautious step through.

“Hank, it’s Becca, Becca Trip.” She glanced around the small room, but no one was there. “Hank,” she hollered, and stepped to a door at the far side of the room. “Hank, are you in there?”

Her nervous hand touched the door, slightly nudging it open. Her breath hitched. Her hand flew up to cover her mouth and her eyes widened at the sight on the floor. Hank lay in a pool of blood, a bullet hole through his head. Her stomach muscled knotted into a hard ball. She whirled and ran out onto the porch.

Breathing deeply to let the fresh air settle her uneasy stomach, she swung her gaze toward the dark forest where she had detected the small speck of light. Whoever it was killed Hank. Why?

Stumbling down the steps, Becca climbed inside her truck, locked the doors, jumped the second her phone rang. Gripping the steering wheel, she dropped her head on her hands and took several short breaths to get control of her trembling body. Finally, she glanced at the number. Thomas. Her hand reached out to grab the phone and then it stopped ringing.

Her gaze lifted to stare out the windshield. The light from the cabin filtered through the window. Intending on calling Thomas, she picked up her iphone, and jumped when it rang in her hand. Ketch.

“Becca, where are you?” his demanding voice sounded nervous.

The second she heard Ketch’s voice, she babbled so fast he told her to slow up and tell him where she was and how to find her. He told her to drive to the highway and wait for him. He’d bring the sheriff. “Ketch, please hurry.”

Becca switched on the engine and shoved the gear into reverse. She frowned, pressed her lips together and shoved the gear back into park. Before changing her mind, she threw open the door. While leaving the truck running, she swung her gaze toward the soft light filtering from the cabin, heading in its direction. Quickly glancing through the dark woods, she rushed inside and shut the door and glanced around. If Hank hid any incriminating papers or pictures, she’d need them. A table against the wall, drew her gaze, she hurried and opened a drawer and then another, and another.

Disappointment clouded her mind forcing her to take one last look around before leaving. Her gaze rested on a small box underneath a little round table. With some difficulty, she knelt down and pulled it out. The moment she opened it she knew she discovered something. There were several papers and two pictures of horses. Grunting, she hoisted her body to her feet and

carried the pictures to the lamp. Holding the stack of pictures under the lampshade, she studied an image of a horse.

“Oh, my God, it’s my ghost horse.” She stared into the face of the identical horse she’d seen during several thunderstorms. It was him. The long white strip on his nose and the same pleading look in his eyes was definitely her horse. Her gaze studied his feet. He was hurting. Where was he now? Did Hank have him?

She flipped to the next picture and almost dropped the bundle in her hands. There stood Hank and Huffman standing over a dead horse – her ghost horse.

A noise outside the door sent a shiver up her spine. Her head whipped around searching for a weapon of some kind. Hank’s gun...she remembered...bottom drawer. Rushing to the desk, she yanked open the draw and reached in curling her hand around the handle. She took a step toward the door. If the murderer was outside Hank’s cabin waiting for her, he’d have no issue in killing her and her baby.

Her baby. What the hell was she doing risking her baby’s life. Becca pointed the gun straight out in front of her, and slowly reached down and in one quick move, threw the door open. The phantom man she heard on the porch was not there. She stepped out.

A board creaked at the far end of the porch. Her hand holding the gun flew up and pointed directly at a dark figure. She fired. He dropped off the porch and took off. She ran, jumped into her truck, and floor boarded the gas pedal driving away from the cabin so fast she wasn’t her imagination had gotten the best of her. But, she didn’t let up until she drove onto the highway. A loud horn blared and lights stopped in front of her truck. Her heart pounded. A dark figure climbed out of a car and then she heard, “Becca.”

Becca dropped her head onto the steering wheel and felt wet hot tears roll down her cheeks. She reached over and touched the bundle of papers and pictures on the seat next to her. Unconsciously, she kept a hold of them.

“Becca, what the hell are you doing way out here?”

“Ketch. Thank God.”

She grabbed the papers and pictures and slid out of the Titan, locked the door and hurried to Ketch. “Oh, Ketch, somebody killed Hank and...and I think he tried to kill me, but I fired at him and...and he ran into the wood...and...” sputtering and spilling words out of her mouth all at once, she held up the gun in her hand.

“Whoa, Becca, where did you get a gun?”

“It’s Hank’s. Hurry, we need to go back to the cabin. There might be more evidence.”

“Who’s Hank. And, what the hell are you talking about?”

Insisting and with an urgent demand, Ketch and the sheriff, climbed back into the patrol car and headed up the narrow dirt road. Not far from Hank’s place, the sheriff slowed the car. Bright burning flames climbed higher into the night sky, engulfing the small cabin.

Becca bit down on her lips, knowing all too well the flames consumed any other evidence still hidden inside the cabin. Nothing left, but ashes, except for the papers and pictures in her hand.

Chapter Twenty

Becca eased down onto the sofa and clicked on the television, flipping to the news channel. The anchorwoman was already talking about the news she wanted to hear.

“Last night the man suspected to be Huffman’s former Tennessee Walking Horse trainer was found dead. No other information on whether or not it’s a homicide. His remains were found in a burnt down cabin out past highway fifty. His name is withheld pending notification to relatives. We’ll keep you updated on whether or not it’s related to the Rebecca Tripp’s video and her alleged second video incriminating Huffman’s criminal acts against horses.” Once again, they show her video.

Geez. She glanced at Sarah when her video popped up on the screen. “Will they ever stop playing my video?” She tried to smile at her sister-in-law, but didn’t quite manage. Ketch insisted on her spending the night after all she’d been through. “I’ve opened a can of worms, haven’t I?”

Sarah nodded, stood and strolled to the counter. While pouring Becca a cup of coffee, she said, “Look at it this way...someone needed to expose Huffman. I guess you were chosen.”

Becca reached for the cup Sarah handed her and waited for her to sit next to her. “I have to follow this thing through.” Becca stretched her back and took a sip of coffee.

“Is she awake?” Sarah eyed Becca’s hand rubbing over her tummy.

“Hmm, I think she’s a morning person. Sarah, I’m going to tell you something I’ve only mentioned to Thomas.”

Settling back, Sarah said, “What is it?”

“For the last month or so, I’ve had a vision which has persuaded my strong accusations against Huffman. At times, I wanted to forget it and walk away, but then I’d have this vision again. But, now, Sarah, I think I’ve put my baby in danger by pursuing Huffman.”

Becca scooted to the edge of the sofa, pushed to her feet and waddled over to the counter. After opening a drawer, she retrieved the bundle she’d confiscated from the cabin last night. Returning to her seat, she handed Sarah the picture of Huffman and a dead horse.

Sarah studied the picture, shook her head and said, “I...I don’t understand. What does this prove?”

“Look at the horse and the date on the back.”

After studying the horse for a moment, Sarah flipped the picture over and read, "May 2011." She looked up at Becca. "This was taken over a year ago...so?"

Becca handed her the drawing of the horse. "That's my ghost horse."

With a puckered brow, Sarah's gaze swung from the drawing to the picture of the dead horse. "All right, it looks like the same horse, but...what are you talking about...a ghost horse?"

Becca picked up her cup, curled her legs up under her body and took a sip of coffee. "During every thunderstorm, a vision appears only been in the field next to my barn. Several times now, I've seen a horse—that horse," she pointed to the pictures in Sarah's hands. "He was hurt the first time. I could tell from the way he looked at me...his eyes were full of pain. At first I thought he was real, but when I approached, he disappeared." Becca paused and waited for Sarah's reaction.

Sarah's blue eyes widen. "Go on," she prompt.

"Well, the first time, I dismissed the image because, you know, I have an over active imagination, and of course, it was dark, cloudy, and rainy. But, the second time was right after I stopped by Huffman's farm and took a few pictures."

"You mean, the day you took Clip and Elle with you?"

"Uh," her guilty expression wrinkled up her nose. She nodded. "None of the pictures proved any kind of abuse. Anyway, the storm started early evening and I just settled down Josie and was headed down the road when the ghost horse appeared again." Becca sat her cup down and rubbed her face. "This sounds crazy. I know he was trying to tell me something. Sarah, I had to help."

"Don't tell me Becca, you went to the Huffman barn again and that's how you got the second video, right?"

"Right."

"And then Clip put it on YouTube."

"Yup, I even emailed all the TWHS.H.O.W. judges, president, and board members. I sent them copies of pictures."

"When was the last time you saw your...your ghost horse?"

"The night someone poisoned Josie, he warned me and believe it or not, crazy sounding or not, my ghost horse gave me the idea to talk to the old farmer where Joe and I got Silver Dapple."

"And that's when you went to the cabin?"

“Yes.”

Sarah handed back the picture. She tilted her head toward the bundle of papers lying next to Becca. “So what are those?” Looking up into Becca’s eyes, she said, “You took them from the cabin, before it burned...didn’t you?”

“I did.” Becca leaned forward and picked up the papers. “I haven’t taken the time to see what they are, but...” Her voice trailed off the moment she focused on the words. “It’s a contract.”

She read, “The party of the first part will provide currency for purchasing TWH for the party of the second part to train. These horses will be entered into the TWH events. Any and all necessary purchasing of equipment for training will be provided by the party of first part and...’ Yada, yada, yada...you know what this means?” Becca glanced up at Sarah. “This is proof Huffman worked for Eckert.” She glanced back and held up the papers, “I need to put these papers in the authority’s hands, but who do I give them to?”

Sarah’s shoulder lifted. “What about the judge of the TWH events?”

“No,” Becca shook her head adamantly, “Judge Pennington is part of this whole thing – I suspect he’s in cahoots with Huffman. There’s a huge amount of prize money for a championship show horse.”

“Well then, the FBI.”

“Sarah, I emailed all the other information I had collected to them weeks ago, but they never, contact me.”

“Have you seen Thomas?”

“No, not since he came by the night someone poisoned Josie.” Becca bit down on her bottom lip. “Sarah, I can’t help but wonder what his real connection is with Huffman. And, he shows up every time something happens...I mean...the night Josie was poison he showed up, but never mentioned why. Don’t get me wrong, he did save her life and I’m grateful.”

“Thomas isn’t the type to poison an animal. He loves animals, Becca. What makes you think he could do such a thing?”

Becca closed her eyes and leaned back, took a deep breath and thought for a moment. Slowly opening her eyelids, she gazed out the window where the sunshine brightened the green grass and the newly formed leaves on the trees appeared all fresh and watered from the rains.

“He...he never said why he knew Josie was poisoned and not just sick.” She turned her gaze to Sarah. “He called the night I shot at the man braking down the down door after he stabbed Maxine. Maybe he called to make sure I’d be home and, Sarah, what about the contract with his signature and the picture I took of him at Huffman’s barn?” She sat up straight. “He called me last night...when...when I was in the truck parked in front of the cabin.”

“What did he say?”

Becca shook her head. “I didn’t answer in time. I was getting ready to call Ketch when he called me.”

“Sweetie, Thomas called Ketch last night, he said he tried to call you. He thought you could be in danger.”

“If he didn’t know I drove out to the cabin why did he tell Ketch I was in danger?”

“You were on the news again. You know the media interviewed you did in front of the school. Thomas said your admission of another video put you in danger.”

Becca gathered up the papers and the pictures and handed them to Sarah. “Will you take these papers home with you and have Ketch look at them? I don’t think they’ll be safe here.”

“Becca, do you have another video?”

Pressing her lips, she nodded. “It’s not a video per say, it’s a recording of Huffman and his trainer. I’ll email it to you.”

“I think that’s a good idea and-”

Before Sarah got another word out a popping sound shattered the front window sending a bullet between their heads and landing with a thud in the wall. Sarah pushed Becca to the floor and hunkered down close to her. Reaching up, she grabbed her phone from the coffee table, called Ketch while her gaze followed Becca scooting along the floor to the window. Cautiously she peeked over the window frame.

After a quick glance back at Sarah, Becca whispered, “I don’t see anyone. She looked around for Maxine. Her Spaniel was peeking around the corner of the sofa wide-eyed. “Come girl. It’s okay.” Maxine’s lowered head and slow crawl moved toward her with her tail dragging. She too expected another crashing sound.

“Becca, stay down until Ketch gets here. He’s on his way.”

“Ahhh,” Becca moaned. Rolling over, she stretched out her legs and pushed down on her abdomen. “I think baby’s had too much excitement for one day.” She squeezed her eyes shut and

felt another pain. Taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes to find Sarah hovering over her face with a worried expression. She grimaced. “The pain’s passed. I guess I just upset her when I hit the floor.”

Sarah’s cheeks puffed out releasing the breath she’d unconsciously held. She rose up enough to look out the window. “Ketch is here,” her thankful tone almost whispered. “He just turned up the driveway. Hey, Sheriff John’s vehicle is right on his tail. Stay down until he comes in.” She leaned against the wall beneath the window and stared toward the backdoor.

When Ketch slammed the door open, Maxine barked and ran toward him with her tail wagging. “Are you two okay?”

“Oh, honey, I’m so glad to see you. We’re fine, but Becca could use your help getting up.”

He knelt down and helped Becca to her feet and led her to the sofa. “Did you see anyone?”

“No. We were just talking when the window made a popping sound.” Becca’s tense voice drew his gaze before swinging toward the large front window. The huge window splintered shoots out in all direction from a small hole in its center. Ketch followed its trajectory to the wall where the bullet landed.

“Ketch.”

He connected eyes with the sheriff walking through the backdoor. “I walked the grounds, but there’s no sign of anyone or footprints. He might have been in a car.” His gaze took in both ladies staring at him. “Anyone hurt?”

Wide eyed, they shook their heads.

Chapter Twenty-One

Suddenly, while watching the sheriff examine the bullet hole in the wall, a shudder fluttered over Becca's senses, realizing one of them could have been shot in the head—dead. Becca stared into Sarah's eyes. She knew what she was thinking.

“We'll dig the bullet out and see if we can trace it.” At the sound of a vehicle driving up the road, he glanced at Ketch. Vehicle doors slammed. Ketch rushed to the backdoor with the sheriff hot on his heels.

Becca didn't realize how tense her body was until she gazed down at her tight fisted hands. She took a deep breath and looked up the moment the sheriff walked back into the room looking directly at her.

“Ketch said it was a guy named Slye.”

“Thomas,” Becca muttered barely above a whisper. She fought to calm her accelerating heartbeat which always seemed to react in such a manner when Thomas appeared unexpectedly. She skirted her gaze beyond the sheriff toward the backdoor. What was Ketch talking to him about? She bit her bottom lip and didn't move. It seemed forever before Ketch strolled into the house with Thomas following him.

Becca couldn't keep from staring Thomas straight in the eyes. His gray gaze took her in making sure she was alive. He stepped around the sofa and scanned her whole body. His look told her everything. He'd been frightened she and her baby had been harmed.

“I'm fine, Thomas,” her soft voice reassured him.

He sat next to her and took her hand in his. “Becca, you could have been killed.”

“I wasn't and neither was Sarah. We're okay.”

“And...the baby?” He reached out and placed his hand on her tummy in such an intimate touch to her surprise she wanted to hug him close and reassure him again. “Thomas, the bullet missed us.”

Ketch cleared his throat and sat in the chair across from the sofa.

Thomas withdrew his hand and glanced at the sheriff and Ketch. “It's a warning. Becca if you don't back off, no telling what Huffman will do.”

“I...I can't. He's a mean, cruel man and people need to know.”

Thomas took in a long deep breath, ran his fingers through his peppered hair and stood. “I thought you'd say that. I'd like you all to meet a friend of mine.”

She glanced around to find a tall lanky man waiting near the door. She hadn't even notice him coming into the house with Ketch and Thomas.

"Becca, this is Wil Reks an FBI agent." He looked at Wil and motioned for him to join the group, along with the sheriff. Thomas took his seat next to her and waited for the two men to be seated.

"Becca, if you're willing, Wil needs all your incriminating evidence you've gather against Huffman. The FBI's going after him."

She nodded at Wil and turned to Thomas. "What about the contract?"

"That too. Becca, I signed the contract for Eckert when I thought he was legit. I even examined the Tennessee Walking horses he purchased, and they were healthy. There was no reason not to sign the invoice for the upcoming Walking horse events. Only thing, they weren't the same horses I examined at the Eckert farm. Huffman switched. That's the reason I went to Huffman's barn the day you took my picture. I confronted him about the two horses I signed off on and demanded him to let me examine them again. The two horses were never delivered to the Huffman farm. "

She shook her head. "This is all so confusing."

"I know, let me start from the beginning. You need to know-" With a loving gaze, he reached his hand up and touched her cheek, and then turned to the group. "You all should know the whole story."

Becca felt her cheek heat from his touch, and glanced at Sarah who lifted a brow at her. She was somewhat embarrassed at the affection Thomas showed her since he stepped inside her house. Funny, he didn't seem the least bit self-conscious the way he kept looking at her and touching her.

"Thomas," the FBI guy interrupted drawing everyone's attention. "If Becca will give me all her evidence against Huffman, I'll take my leave." He stood. Becca reached for the papers and pictures Sarah had placed on the coffee table just before the bullet incident.

"Mr. Reks, I have stuff on my computer, including my videos."

"Let me write down my email address for you and you can send it all to me." After writing his information down, he turned back, "Thomas, I'll have a man on the property before I leave. He'll watch the place until Huffman is in custody, but until then, she shouldn't stay alone."

“Thanks Wil,” Thomas stood and shook the agent’s hand and walked him to the door. When he returned he sat next to Becca, leaned forward resting his arms on his thighs linking his fingers together. Releasing a short breath, he proceeded to explain about his and Elle’s life before moving to Yellow Creek.

“First of all, my real name *is* Thomas Slye and Elle is my daughter. I’m a veterinarian from Bennett City, Kentucky. Elle and I moved here under the protection of the FBI. Last winter, we witnessed something horrific, especially for Elle. To make a long story short, Elle and I witnessed a murder.”

He paused, leaned back and continued, “I’d been hired by Fred Eckert, a giant in the horseracing world, and supposedly a multimillionaire with an elaborate Thoroughbred farm. His horse, Go for Beauty won the crown jewel at the Kentucky Derby for the last three years. Anyway, I was hired by his daughter, Joyce Cannon, to examine his racing horses and to make sure they passed inspection for the upcoming race. They were beautiful, healthy, and well care for, so I never suspected anything. When the Derby was nearing, I took special precautions when examining his champion horse, Go for Beauty was expected to win. The day I checked him over, I wasn’t pleased about something and I couldn’t figure it out. So after dinner that night, Elle and I drove to the farm just to take a better look at the animal. I was really thinking about doing a blood test the next day. Anyway, when we got there we heard voices arguing near Beauty’s stall. We hid behind the stable doors and listened. I recognized Eckert’s voice and his daughter’s Joyce. I peeked around when I heard the jockey threaten to tell authorities about Eckert doping his horse.”

Thomas stood, strolled to the window. He ran his finger over the bullet hole, took in a long breath and pushed out the frustrated air. Since all eyes were focused on him and none said a word, he strolled back, sat down next to Becca, and continued. “I couldn’t believe it. I should have recognized the symptoms, but I just never guest Eckert being a dooper. They used me for a cover. I was only supposed to examine healthy horses and sign the certificates. They didn’t expect me to witness a murder. When the jockey grabbed Dr. Holloway and jerked the syringe from his hand, Joyce shot him. She told the doc to administer the med, and then get rid of the body.”

Thomas shrugged, leaned forward resting his arms on his legs, and said, “Before I took Elle and hurried out, I took a video of the group, along with the jockey’s body and I guess they saw

me driving off because I received a threatening phone call later. I called the authorities, and you know the rest.”

“What a horrible thing for Elle to witness.” Becca couldn’t drag her gaze from Thomas the entire time he talked about what they’d been through.

Thomas nodded. “Elle, actually wasn’t able to see anything. When I heard the voices, I pushed her back against the building. I’m lucky she didn’t see what I saw. She’d been a trooper, Reks put us under protective services after the threatening phone call. That’s when Elle and I entered into your world, not intending to cause you harm.”

“Thomas,” everyone’s eyes swung to Ketch, “my sister, with or without you being around, never backs away from something she believes in, and including the criminal activities of Huffman. Once she starts something, there’s no stopping.”

He grinned, gathered Becca’s hands into his and gazed deep into her eyes. “I have to go meet Reks. I owe him for all he’s done for us. Once Huffman’s in custody, I’ll be back.”

“Where’s Elle?”

“She’s with friends in Nashville. She’ll stay there until all of this is over. Now, promise you’ll stay with your brother until Huffman’s behind bars.”

She nodded.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Becca sat back and studied the art she'd been working on for Sarah's new book cover. She stared out the window at a clump of dark clouds rolling over the area. *Huh*, another storm. The afternoon seemed later than four thirty. She had a house full of people because Ketch refused to leave her alone. When he wasn't around, Sarah and Clip kept watch over her. Thomas was MIA with the sheriff, FBI and whoever else was involved with getting to the bottom of Huffman's activities. It had been two days and Becca couldn't take much more.

She could hear Ketch's phone ring, Sarah took off earlier to pick up Clip from school and the house had been quiet all day. She reached over, picked up a paint brush and dipped it into the bright yellow oil paint. Ketch's voice was muffled from across the hallway into the bedroom he and Sarah had been using.

Hearing his footsteps, she glanced up, leaned back and asked. "Was Thomas on your phone?"

He shook his head, "No, my office. I really need to run in and straighten some problems out, Becca. Sarah won't be gone long, and I have my cell--"

"Ketch, go, I'll be fine. Besides, I have Maxine and Drake to protect me, and Sarah and Clip will be here before you even get to your office."

"If you're sure, I won't be gone long." He grabbed his jacket and headed for the backdoor. "Have Sarah call me the second she gets here."

"I will. Don't worry. I'll be fine."

Becca locked the door behind Ketch and returned to her seat to finish her painting. A slow, long rumble sounded in distance. She glanced at Maxine and Drake curled up next to each other sleeping. Lightning flash drew her gaze out the window. Within seconds, a roaring thunder made its way up Yellow Creek holler. Scooting her chair back from the table, Becca strolled to the backdoor, glanced around at the dogs and decided to leave them while she checked on Josie.

Ketch had been feeding Josie for the past two days and Becca was sure she missed her and needed comforting before the storm grew too bad. She'd need her security blanket. Before she could slip on her boots and raingear, the wind blew in the rain and the thunder roared overhead after each bright lightning flash. The second she opened the backdoor a gust of wind threatened to rip it out of her hands. Hurrying out, she slammed the door shut, and pulled her coat hood over her head.

Keeping her head down against the stinging raindrops, she dashed to her truck. The angry torrential storm came down too fast and furious for her to walk to the stable. At the moment a loud thunder boomed mixed with lightning vibrated against the truck, she jumped. Immediately, there followed another clash of thunder and light blasting through the sky at the same time.

Driving slowly over the muddy road toward the barn, Becca stopped the truck and hauled her round body out into the heavy downpour. The wind blew against her, blowing the hood from her head with each step she made toward the barn doors. With some difficulty, she finally pulled the wide doors open, stepped inside, switched on the lights and shook the wetness from her drenched head. She touched her hair, now a frizzy, curly mess – good think Thomas was gone.

“Hey Josie, I’m here.” Josie neighed in reply to Becca’s familiar voice. “It’s okay girl. The storm won’t last long. Want some grain?” Becca filled the grain bucket and made her way to Josie’s stall. “I know you’re probably too nervous to eat. That’s okay.” She opened the gate, strolled in and covered Josie with a blanket. “Feel better now?” Becca stepped from the stall, reached up and scratched behind Josie’s ears. “I’ll stay for a while, at least until the wind dies down the thunder goes away...”

In a blink, darkness engulfed the barn. Becca whirled. The wide opened doors allowed the lightning flashes to brighten up her surroundings for only seconds, but long enough to detect a figure standing in the door way-a large ominous figure with a hat on his head.

She frowned. Was it Thomas? She couldn’t tell.

Then he raised a gun and the shadowed outline of a gun pointed in her direction. She bumped back against the corral post. The second a clash of thunder shook the barn a bullet whizzed past her ear to thud into the pole next to her head. Her knees went weak, dropping her to the ground. Her hands flew to cover her face while trying to pull her legs close to her belly. Peeking through her fingers, she looked toward the opening. The shadow was gone. She took a deep breath and pushed to stand, only the figure appeared again, but this time he ran toward her.

Becca’s muffled scream barely made it above the clashing thunder and pounding rain echoing on the tin roof. The shadow kept coming. She screamed again. Hands grabbed her shoulders and pulled her to her feet. Her trembling body pushed him away. She reached out and grabbed a shovel near her hand to swing at the man trying to kill her.

“Becca. Becca.”

Thomas...”

Another shot whizzed past them.

Thomas shoved Becca onto the bed of hay near Josie's stall, covering her body. He lifted his head and listened. "Becca, don't get up."

Becca drew in a shaky breath, sensing his taut facial expression, more than she could see. Her eyes widened. She shifted her body enough to keep an eye on his shadowy figure crawling toward the door. When he quickly stood to the side of the opening, she covered her mouth. A figure stepped into the barn out of the rain. Thomas lifted the shovel only to be met by a raised hand. A familiar voice hollered, "Thomas, it's me, Sheriff John."

Thomas stepped back. Gripping the shovel, he stepped to the light switch and lit up the barn. His furrowed brow and the frightened look in his eyes make the sheriff ask, "You hurt?"

"No, but he come close to shooting Becca."

"Becca?"

Thomas didn't reply, but hurried to Becca. Kneeling next to her, he touched her cheek. "Are you okay?" He held out his hand and helped her to her feet. "Sheriff and his men are here, you're safe now."

She nodded, but her weak knees nearly put her down again except for Thomas's strong hold on her. "It was close," she jutted her chin toward the post where the bullet lodged from the first attempt.

"Come on, I'll get you back to the house."

The sheriff moved to the pole and ran his finger over the bullet hole, and then he directed his gaze to the couple. "We got him."

Becca's breath hitched, "You mean Huffman?"

"Yup, he tried to run too, but we intercepted him before he could go for his vehicle—got his gun too. That bullet—" he pointed to the post, "- and the one in your house, and the bullet found in the ashes in the old farmer's burnt house will prove his guilt."

Becca felt his firm arm circle her shoulders to lead her from the barn while the sheriff dug out the bullet. She stepped out into the rain and tried to match Thomas's hurried steps toward his truck.

She glance out over toward the field at the same moment a loud clash of thunder sounded above. She stopped. Lightning flashed. She blinked.

With a swipe of her hand, she cleared raindrops from her eyelashes and stared out into the field. Her ghost horse stood near. Pulling free from Thomas's protective arms, she ran to the fence and placed her feet on the bottom rail and pulled her body up. She grinned.

Her ghost horse stood tall. His eyes connected to hers, and then he neighed in a tone clearly saying, *thank you*. Becca's grin froze. There next to her ghost horse stood another horse. A horse she recognized. She sucked in the moist air and released a long slow breath in amazement. Forever Blue-Black stood next to her ghost horse. He neighed, turned and galloped a little way off and stopped, turned and waited.

Her ghost horse confirmed his gratitude, kicked his front legs up high, neighed again, and turned galloping off into the distance with Forever Blue-Black until they both disappeared into the dark surrounding of the forest.

A warm secure arm circled her shoulder. She looked up into Thomas's eyes. "Did you see him?"

"Who?"

"My ghost horse. Thomas, he knows...he knows Huffman will no longer hurt him."

His brows pulled together while his gaze searched the empty field. He shook her head.

"Thomas, I saw him, out in the field. He knows and understood how we helped." She grinned, wiped her wet face and smiled from ear to ear. "It doesn't matter. I know what I saw. Thomas, I want Forever Blue-Black, do you suppose the authorities will let me have him?"

"Becca, Forever Blue-Black is dead. When we reached Huffman's farm, we found the horse dead, for at least a couple of weeks."

Becca bit down on her trembling lip and turned her gaze out into the field where her ghost horses appeared to her. A tear slid from her wet eyes. "Now, they're no longer in pain."

"Nor, will Huffman harm another horse, all because of you. He'll not only go to prison for a long time for abusing horses, but for murder too. Sheriff John's pretty sure he killed Hank. Come on sweetie, you need to get dried."

Becca let Thomas drive her to the house. Once home, he towed off her drenched hair and sat her down and put on a pot of water for hot tea. He took a seat close to her and covered her hand with his. Calmly gazing into her eyes, his sultry voice said, "It's over, Becca. Now you can concentrate on having your baby."

She slowly nodded her head, staring at the steam drifting up from her tea cup. “And the Eckert trial’s over, right?” Becca observed the concern in his gray eyes just before his gaze dropped to his cup.

He took a deep breath and in a long slow exhale, he combed his fingers through his thick hair and nodded. “I’ll have to testify against Joyce Cannon when she goes on trial for embezzlement and murder. But, it should be an open and shut case, especially with her dad ratting on her.”

Becca lifted a brow, “Now, you and Elle can return to Kentucky—back to your normal life.”

A slow smile spread his lips. “This is our home. Elle loves Yellow Creek.”

“Oh, that’s...that’s good to hear.” Becca couldn’t stop her heart from pumping warm blood through her body with the news of them both wanting to make Yellow Creek their home.

She dragged her gaze from his, sipped her tea and glanced out the shattered window with the bullet hole. Lightning flashed through the window and a soft rumble travel further away. “The thunder isn’t loud, it’s moved further north.”

“Dad,” hollered Elle, rushing through the backdoor, she hurried and threw her arms around her dad.

Becca fixed her gaze on her brother following Elle into the house along with Clip and Sarah. All displayed alarming expressions.

“Sheriff John called us with the news.” His gaze swung from Becca to Thomas. Sarah hugged Becca, and then squeezed down onto the overstuffed chair with Ketch.

“We talked to the sheriff before he took off toward Dickson. So,” Ketch paused a second, looking at them he clasped his hand together and asked, “What happened?” Sarah nodded.

“Dad.” Elle sat on the sofa arm by her dad and put her arm around his shoulders, drawing his gaze. “Am I Elle Smith or can I go back to being Elle Slye?”

A chuckle escaped Thomas’s mouth. He twisted around and took his daughter in his arms, pulling her down next to him. “We are now, Thomas Slye and his daughter Elle Slye.”

She grinned. “Good.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Becca wheeled the Titan onto the gravel in front of Thomas's house with its white picket fence and parked. She puffed out a worried breath and took her time looking around. Hell, she wasn't thinking straight. What was she doing here? If he wanted to see her, all he needed to do was pick up the phone and call. Why hadn't he? After all they'd been through together, the kissed they shared, and the affection he displayed whenever he was around her, surely he felt something for her. If he did, why the three long days since she'd heard from him?

Doubts pushed her hand down to switch on the engine again. Her gaze swung to the red barn beyond the backyard. Suddenly, Thomas stepped from the corner of the house to fill her vision. His casual stroll toward the opened barn doors seemed to say he didn't have a care in the world. Then, he disappeared inside.

Pressing her lips together, and before she could change her mind, she switched off the engine and threw open the door to heave her round body out of the truck. Pregnant or not, she wanted to know how he felt about her and why he hadn't bothered to call or come by.

Saunter straight up to the barn doors, her feet glued in the opening. She weakened, hanging back, silently observing Thomas brushing a chocolate brown Thoroughbred while talking in his sexy soothing low tone. Her hand pushed a clump of hair back away from her face wishing she'd done something to the curly mess instead of just letting it hang down her back. Shit, her bundle of nerves was getting the best of her. Breathe...breathe deep...calm yourself.

He focused solely on the horse unaware of her presence. Her mind didn't decipher his words, only the way his hand rubbed along the horse's neck following each brush stroke. Thomas Slye oozed with loving kindness, gentle and caring to all animals and people. He wasn't afraid to show love. Maybe he reacted to everyone the same way he did her. After all, wasn't she the one throwing her pregnant body at him? He might never have kissed her the first time if she hadn't instigated the whole incident. Becca chewed her bottom lip and stepped back crunching the gravel beneath her foot. The slight noise didn't go unnoticed by the horse. When large round eyed horse swung his head in her direction, Thomas's gaze followed.

"Becca."

She didn't miss the surprised tone and his questioning gaze.

“I...I thought I’d stop by on my...my way to Dickson.” She shrugged, “I have baby shopping to do. Um...how...how’s Elle?” Oh my God. Why did she always put herself in such peculiar situations?

A deliberate, gorgeous smile touched her senses, but he didn’t say a word while he placed the brush on a shelf, gripped the lead rope and guided the large Thoroughbred back to his stall. He seemed to be taking forever, almost like he was trying to decide what to say to her.

She moved slowly forward, choosing her words carefully. “He’s a beautiful animal.”

Thomas glanced at her, shut the gate to the stall, and finally strolled to her.

She frowned. “I...I seemed to have caught you at a bad time.”

Becca turned to leave, but his hand grabbed her arm to halt her movement.

“You haven’t. I was thinking about you. Good to see you.”

Her brow arched. “Good to see you. That’s it. That’s all you have to say?” She jerked her arm from his hold and whirled-.

“Becca, you’re right,” his frustrated tone locked her gaze on his expression. He combed his fingers through his thick hair. “We need to talk.”

The frown on his brow and the tight jaw muscles indicated something seriously needed to be said, and she could guess the outcome. “Thomas,” she held up her hands, “I get it. You don’t feel the way I do. It isn’t your fault, so don’t say another word. I’m a big girl. I understand.”

Flipping her head around, her only thought was to run from him and get out of the barn. Suddenly his arms pulled her to him and hugged her stiff body up against his chest.

His sultry, sexy voice whispered in her ears, “Becca, Becca, Becca,” and then he chuckled.

Her brows puckered.

He pulled back and gazed into her eyes. “I think the baby’s objecting. She kicked me.”

Becca took a small step back, splayed her hand over her tummy to remember not to throw herself at this man again. After all, she was a pregnant woman, and it would take a special man to love them both. “Thomas...” she paused, not sure how to ask the questions foremost on her mind. His hands pressed her shoulders and drew her to him until her tummy touched him.

His frowning expression seemed to contradict the gleam in his gray eyes. She pushed her palm against his chest, stepped away and mumbled, “I should go.”

“No.” His gentle hands came up to pressed the sides of her head while his gaze trapped hers in a consuming need giving her the proof of what she was afraid to admit. She knew he wanted her, but it wasn’t enough for her.

He’d captured her emotions, slowly at first, like a quiet river, running its course toward a fall plummeting her to the bottom, and she fell hard, and if she didn’t come up for air, she’d be in trouble. She loved Joe with all her heart, but she’d never experienced this kind of tortured love. He wanted her, but he didn’t love her. And she was having a baby. “Thomas...I can’t...”

His finger pressed against her lips. Blood pumped hot through her veins and when his lips gently touched hers, all doubts crowding her mind melted.

His sweet, warm kiss wasn’t enough. A small arrow arched through her heart, giving way to an uncontrollable action. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him back with a fury of a woman wanting a man to love her as she loved him. When a helpless moan escaped her throat, an awareness of his palms skating along the side of her ribs to her back and up to cup her head rushed heated blood to her pounding heart.

He pressed her head closer to him catching her mouth open. The more his wet moist mouth demanded, the more she wanted from him. She ran her fingers through his short gray-peppered hair not wanting him to stop when he dragged his mouth from hers to plant kisses across her cheek, down neck, and back to her mouth.

She couldn’t breathe, her legs weakened. She hadn’t been kissed like this in a very long time and she didn’t want him to stop even if she blacked out from lack of oxygen.

He slid his lips from hers and cuddled his head into her neck. His hot labored breath tingled her skin. She kissed his neck and thrilled at the tortured groan deep in his throat. His amplified breathing near her temple released an audible sigh escaping her own lips. He pulled back and the intensity in his gray eyes swelled her heart to a breaking point if he were to not love her. She looked up at him through her lashes and hoped he could see all the love she felt for him, but instead, he dropped his hands to his sides, put a few inches between them and glanced toward the house. He took a couple of steps back.

“Becca, you need to leave.”

Her eyes widened. He didn’t love her. He only wanted her. His arms circled her waist, pulled her to his side and strolled out of the barn. Stepping out into the bright sunshine, she squinted against the brightness, but felt the warmth of the sun giving life to the earth and the life

growing inside of her. Forcing a smile on her face to cover the dark cloud hovering over the sunny day, she faced Thomas and gazed into her eyes. “Goodbye Thomas-”

“Dad,” Elle’s cry was edged with panic. Becca whirled to watch the young girl running from the backdoor to her dad with an alarmed expression and tears streaming down her cheeks. “Dad...” she gulped in a mouth full of air and sobbed, reaching her arms out for her daddy to take her into his safe arms. Thomas grabbed her up and hugged her to his chest. Her sobs shook her body while her broken voice blubbered into his neck soaking his shirt with tears and her runny nose.

“Elle, what-” his words caught in midair when his gaze swung to the creaking backdoor.

Becca followed his gaze to the house. She frowned. A woman exited the backdoor and stood staring at Thomas. She glanced back. Elle, hanging onto her dad tightly, pointed to the woman and her words vibrated through Becca’s body.

“Dad,” Elle sobbed, “she says she’s my mother.”

Thomas’s frowning expression didn’t sway from the woman. Elle’s mother. No wonder poor Elle panicked when a strange woman declared she was her mother. Geez, the woman left eight years ago, leaving a three year old. Becca turned to take in the woman’s chic outfit showing off her long legs, and long, straight dark hair. Her confident, leisure approach seemed to announce her presence.

Swallowing hard, Becca turned her gaze back to Thomas. She could tell he’d forgotten about her standing next to him. She should walk away, but curiosity refused to let her feet move.

Her gaze flew to the woman, now close enough to...oh my gosh, the woman was stunning, perfect, flawless smooth, creamy skin like those perfect women on magazine covers. Elle was the epitome of the woman, except Elle’s eyes were gray, like her dad’s and not her mother’s dark round eyes.

Thomas cleared his throat drawing Becca’s gaze. He gave Elle a secure squeeze, leaned down and placed her feet on the ground. His narrowed eyes aimed at the woman and in a not too happy tone, he said, “You said you’d call.”

Becca’s muscles froze. A dull awareness slinked its way from her brain to trip over her heart. He knew she was coming.

The woman smiled. “I tried.” And then, darted her gaze from Thomas to Becca.

“Huh, Amanda, this is Becca, ah...ah neighbor.”

The tall, slim Amanda spread her perfect voluptuous red lips to show off perfect white teeth in a perfect smile. “Becca,” her silky smooth voice repeated her name.

Becca smiled wilting like a lonely wallflower, and mumbled, “Amanda.” After a quick handshake, she dragged her gaze to Thomas and Elle. “I need to go. Bye Elle, Thomas,” once again she met the perfect Amanda and said, “Nice meeting you.”

Without waiting for any replies, she whirled and hurried to her truck.

“Becca.”

Closing her eyes tightly, Becca opened her eyelids to blink several times in order to rid the moisture from her eyes.

“Becca.”

Thomas’s exhausting tone slowed her steps to gaze over her shoulder.

He reached for her arm and forced her to face him. “Becca,” his palms nervously skated up and down her arms. “Give me a couple of days to straighten this mess out. I’ll call you.”

She didn’t trust her voice, but looked him in the eyes and nodded. When he turned away, she hurried to haul her body onto the seat of her truck. Staring out the windshield, she tried to calm her shortened breath by taking in several deep breaths, flipped on the engine and pulled out of the driveway.

Becca slapped another tear rolling down her cheek, took a determined breath and pressed her foot to the gas pedal. Not another tear. You have a baby to think about. Lifting her foot, she let the Titan coast to the roadside and pressed the brakes. Her shoulders lifted to inhale and then exhale a disappointed breath. Glancing into the side mirror, she pressed her lips and turned the steering wheel to head back home. What’s the use, she wasn’t in the mood to shop, and besides, she needed to go home. Yes that’s what she needed to do. Concentrate on painting to rid her brain of Thomas Slye?

Slowly rolling the Titan into her driveway, she parked behind her house, climbed out of the truck, and with drooping shoulders, met Maxine at the door. Forcing energy into her suddenly tired bones, she pulled on her rubber boots and bit by bit moseyed up the road toward the barn with Maxine running ahead of her.

“Hey girl, time to enjoy the open field and a little sun. Opening Josie’s gate, Becca led her out the back door and stepped aside to let her take off with Maxine barking at her heels. “At least someone’s happy today.”

Shutting the door, she made her way back through the barn and out the front, stopping long enough to watch her two best girls romp playfully around the field. She grinned. Her girls could always put a smile on her face. Taking in a big breath of warm spring air, Becca looked up at the blue sky and forced her grin wider. There was so much for her to be thankful for. “Come on baby, let’s go make a list and I promise we’ll go to town tomorrow and buy all you need.” Turning she walked the rest of the way home thinking about the baby’s room and the picture she decided to paint for her little girl’s room.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Hey, Aunt Bec,” Clip grunted, scooped up a shovel of manure and tossed it into the wheelbarrow. Thoughtfully, he leaned the shovel against the rail, grabbed the rake, and looked around at Becca. “I’ve decided you made a good decision bringing Silver Dapple over here to be Josie.”

Becca lifted her head from the meds she was preparing for Silver and glanced over at Clip cleaning Josie’s stall. “Me too. It was time they met each other.”

“Yeah, and they like each other.” He paused, leaned on the rake and looked over his shoulder at her. “Don’t you think Josie’s watching over her even though she’s younger than Silver.”

“Hmm, I do. Josie can sense she’s in pain.”

“Yeah, like us, huh?”

Becca frowned, giving her nephew a curious glance. “What do you mean?”

“I...I think I could tell Elle was in pain when we talked a couple of days ago. I mean, not real pain, but the kind you have when you’re sad.”

Becca placed the meds on the counter and strolled over in front of the stall Clip was cleaning out. “You talked to Elle?”

He nodded and went back to raking the straw throughout the stall. “Yup, she called and said she was going to Kentucky, her old home.” He straightened. “She said her mother came home. Do you suppose she’ll leave Yellow Creek now they’re a family again?”

Becca chewed her bottom lip, shrugged, and said, “I don’t really know, Clip.” To change the subject, she scanned the stall, smiled the best she could and said, “That looks great. You’ve done a wonderful job. I’m sure Josie and Silver will appreciate all your hard work. Now, you better put away the tools, roll the wheelbarrow out the back door, we’ll dump it tomorrow. You need to get home before it gets too dark.”

Becca followed him out to his bike leaning against the fence.

“Do you want me to help you bring in the horses for the evening before I leave?”

Looking out at the two horses moseying toward the barn door, Becca shook her head. “Na, they’re making their way to the barn now. They know it’s time for their grain. They’ll come in willingly.” She patted Clip on the shoulder, “Don’t forget to call when you get home.”

“I won’t.” He peddled down the road, and hollered, “Bye Aunt Bec.”

Maxine, standing at her feet, barked her goodbye. Becca chuckled and headed back inside. After settling down the animals and giving Silver her meds, she switched off the lights, said goodnight and closed the doors. Strolling toward the fence, she paused, and then leaned against the rail, searching through the field. “Well, Maxine, I suppose we’ll never see them again. They’re gone to wherever ghost horses go.” Stretching, she pressed her hand to the middle of her back.

Thomas said he’d call, but four days passed and not a word from him. Clip said they went to Kentucky, their old home. What did it mean? She rubbed the middle of her back and tried to stretch the kinks out again. Keeping Thomas from occupying her mind was a challenging, drooling process, but with each day’s passing her positive attitude began to win out, until Clip brought the painful subject to surface. Now she’d have to work on pushing thoughts of Thomas Slye out of her mind again, or she’d go crazy.

Frowning, she glanced down at her Spaniel, gave her a quick pat, and said, “Come on girl, time we had a bite to eat and a hot bath to help this nagging backache.”

Maxine barked and took off. Becca rubbed her back looking forward to a hot bath. Once she stepped out into the clearing to cross the road, she swung her gaze toward the house. In the twilight of the evening, she recognized Thomas’s white SUV. Her feet faltered at the sight of the man leaning against the vehicle with his arms folded across his chest. The white in his hair stood out against the fading bluish sky.

She wanted to run into his arms, kiss his lips and tell him how happy she was to set eyes on him. But, instead, she purposely slowed her steps to calm excited nerves and clear her love sick brain to think before reacting. Maybe, the only reason he’s here is to tell her he’s moving back to Kentucky to live with Amanda.

“Thomas,” she jutted her chin toward the backdoor, “come in.” Becca couldn’t help the measured smile on her lips. She didn’t dare look him in the eyes, knowing what he was about to tell her.

He pushed away from the vehicle, dropped his arms and strolled along side her. Opening the door, he waited for her to enter.

“Give me a minute and I’ll put some coffee on.” Aware of his intense gray eyes watching her every move, she plopped her butt down on the bench, quickly slipped the rubber boots from

her feet and tossed them in the corner of the mudroom. She finally fixed her gaze on the man she'd fallen in love with and who came to say goodbye.

Sucking in a controlled breath, and in a surprisingly strong voice, she said, "Look, Thomas, I know what you've come to say. You're moving back to Kentucky with Elle and Amanda. So, I really want you to say your goodbye and leave. Please, now."

Slowly, his left brow arched. He leaned back against the wall and asked, "Where did you get your information?"

"Um, Clip. He said Elle called him a couple of days ago. Said she had to go to her old home in Kentucky with her dad and mother. Clip said her goodbye seemed like she wasn't returning."

The smile spreading across his lips exploded a love pain inside her heart. Why didn't he just leave?

"Becca," quicker than she could blink, he was kneeling in front of her, grasping her hands, his smoky grays gazed up into her eyes until the heat melted all thoughts inside her brain. "Becca, I'm not going anywhere. Least ways, not as long as you're in Yellow Creek. Don't you know you own my heart, my soul and mind?"

"But...ah...Amanda."

He shrugged. "Amanda is Elle's mother. Not my wife."

She frowned, gritted her teeth, and glanced down. "Oh no." Pushing his hands away, she sprang to her feet so fast, she nearly knocked him over.

His puzzled tone drew her gaze. "I thought you felt the same, Becca. Am I wrong?" His perplexed expression searched her face.

Becca shook her head, reached up to caressed his cheek, but instead frown and clamped her jaws, hollering through gritted teeth, "Ow." Glancing down, to felt the warm wetness trickle down along the length of her inner thighs and down her legs to her feet. Her underwear and pants were soaked. "What..." Her eyes widened. "Oh my gosh." Before taking a step, she grabbed her tummy. "Ow," a cramping sensation halted her movement. "Oh shit, Thomas, I'm in labor."

He glanced down at the water collecting on the floor. He chuckled and gazed lovingly into her eyes. "Looks like we're having a baby."

Grabbing his arm, Becca took several short breaths and stated, "We?"

He leaned in and kissed her lips. "Yes, sweetheart—we. If you'll let me, I'd love to be her daddy. I know Elle would love to have a sister."

“Oh Thomas, I love you so much. Ooooooooh, Thomas, I better call Sarah.”

“I’ll call on our way to the hospital.”

“Becca, where’s my baby niece?” Sarah’s voice drifted from the backdoor, interrupting Becca’s quiet afternoon.

“I’m in here, Sarah.”

“Ahhh...baby Jolie’s asleep.” Sarah whispered. “I can’t get over how much hair and red, like her mommy’s.” She sat down next to Becca and glanced at her drawing pad on her lap. Leaning near, she studied it for several second. “Wow, it amazing how you’ve illustrated such strong emotion in your drawing.” Her gaze swung to Becca. “That could be a book cover. Maybe I’ll have to think of a story for your ghost horses.”

“Great idea, but for now, I’ll frame this drawing to put on Jolie’s wall in her room. We’ll be reminded how those who are unable to speak out for themselves, whether person or animal, needs our help in way or another.”

“I love it Becca.” Sarah stood and strolled to the kitchen. “Now, how about some hot tea for the new mommy?”

“Hmm, sounds good.” Releasing a contented sigh, she picked up her pad and pencil and continued to draw while her newborn slept. With Thomas and Elle headed to the barn to feed the horses and released them out into the field, she had a chance to relax, draw, and drink Sarah’s herbal tea.

Becca glanced down at her tiny miracle in the baby bouncer next to her on the sofa. She and baby Jolie spent the morning searching the internet for a wedding dress. Jolie’s mommy and new daddy were getting married in two days. Becca grinned thinking about Elle and Jolie’s look alike dresses.

Life was good. Here she was marrying a man she loved. How could one person love two different men in different ways, and yet, know their love was a truly miraculous gift. Life was so unpredictable, she’d never dreamed of having a happy life after Joe’s death. Now, the storms had finally passed and the days, since little Jolie’s birth, were sunny, bright and warm.

She studied her drawing of the two beautiful ghost horses. This time, both horses frolicked through the field without a care in the world, enjoying the fresh spring rain. They were a vision of happiness, without pain and suffering.

Yellow Creek Novels

Secret Past Book 1

Ghost Thunder Book 2

Coming 2014

Waterwheel Visitor Book 3

About the Author

Anna Sugg holds a special place in her heart for Yellow Creek, Tennessee where her grandparents owned a tobacco farm. She spent hours running around on the farm as a child. Her favorite memories are swimming in the creek on hot summer days, exploring the woods during the fall when dry autumn leaves rustle, and tracking through the woods on snowy wintry days looking for the perfect Christmas tree. And, the hours spent on the porch swing during the spring thunderstorms. It's expected for Anna to write a series located in Yellow Creek, Tennessee. She hopes you enjoyed reading her series as much as she enjoyed writing them. Please stop by and write a review and/or let Anna hear from you. To review more pictures from Yellow Creek, please visit her website:

http://anna_sugg.coffeecup.com

Anna's Research

When I wrote *Ghost Thunder*, my characters took a turn requiring some research on my part. I didn't know much about Tennessee Walking Horses and had to spend time in researching. I learned so much about the beautiful animals, both good and bad.

Many trainers oppose soring and have joined together to organize the National Walking Horse Association (NWHHA) and also, Friends of Sound Horses (FOSH). Soring remains a controversial issue in Tennessee, even though the Horse Protection Act of 1970 makes it a Federal crime to use soring agents. If you suspect abuse, please call the Humane Society of the United States.

For more information on my research go to my April and May 2012 blog at <http://judyswritings.blogspot.com>

Here's a video from ABC Nightline investigation by Megan Churchmach and Brian Ross, May 16, 2012. Please note the video graphic and sad.

<http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/tennessee-walking-horses-abused/story?id=16360835>