

Chapter One

Melissa pulled into the driveway, shut off the car and just sat looking at the old house. Memories flooded her mind. Happy memories. Life had been so simple as a kid. Summer afternoons taking turns on the slip-n-slide, tag in the dark, truth or dare. All the things a happy, healthy child needed. She glanced in the backseat and smiled. Jeremy was still sleeping. At seven the long drive from Denver to Hidden Lakes must have seemed like a life time. Jer had finally settled down and conked out about an hour ago.

Melissa took a deep breath and quietly opened the door to her Ford Escape. It was one of the few luxuries she was able to keep after Mitch's death. Melissa closed her eyes, took a deep breath and tried to push the memories from her mind. Thinking about Mitch was still too difficult. She was so proud of him. Knowing he gave his life to save a young mother and her infant child helped her to accept the loss. But the knowledge didn't take away the loneliness, especially at night when she tried to sleep alone in that big king sized bed of theirs. It had been over a year now, but the pain of losing not only her husband but her best friend was still so acute. She wondered if she would ever have peace again. Mitch wasn't only a good man; he was a wonderful father to Jeremy. Their little family would never be the same. She just hoped this move would give them the change they needed to move forward.

Melissa headed for the front door but stopped to study the wooden stairs leading to the porch. Two of the steps were rotting to the point they had become dangerous. She'd have to fix them right away. Her son was full of spit and vinegar, just like his father. She knew that with all his energy, he'd fall through them in no time. Melissa skipped the damaged steps and walked the length of the porch. Once she reached the far end, she tipped the empty flower pot and retrieved the key. She smiled, her mother had hidden a key under that pot for as long as Melissa could remember. Hidden Lakes was a small, friendly town. Even if the neighbors knew about the key, they would never abuse the knowledge. Melissa placed a hand on the old railing and winced when it swayed. There was so much work that needed to be done to this house. The growing list of neglected repairs demonstrated just how serious her father's condition really was. The doctor's said he would live a long, happy life. But only if he slowed down and made some drastic changes. Thus the move from Hidden Lakes to retirement heaven in sunny Florida. She pulled a hair band from her pocket, gathered her long blond hair into a pony tail and headed for the house. She knew the inside of her new home would be not only clean, but immaculate. Connie Peters was meticulous about her housework. That and the best homemade pies in Colorado were two things Melissa could always count on from her loving mother.

Hidden Lakes

Melissa pushed open the large door and reached for the light switch. She smiled as she studied the humble furnishings. It wasn't the most elaborate house on the block, but it was home. For the first time in over a year, Melissa relaxed a little. Stepping into the familiar home made her feel as if a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She moved to the thermostat and turned up the heat. According to the calendar it was already spring, but Mother Nature had her own schedule in Hidden Lakes, Colorado. Once the sun set, it was downright chilly. Melissa stepped back outside onto the porch to check on Jeremy. Once she was sure her son was still sleeping, she rushed into the house and up the stairs. She automatically headed for her room, but stopped in amazement the moment she switched on the light. Her parents had completely redecorated. The room was painted white with a sports wallpaper border running across the top. There was new carpet and the full sized bed was covered with a large comforter that matched the wallpaper. Clearly this was made for Jeremy. Had they set up the master for her? Of course they had. Melissa frantically blinked, trying to prevent the moisture forming in her eyes from falling. She was almost successful.

It was a lost cause the moment she opened the door to the bedroom that had always been her parents. They had completely remodeled. The new bedroom set must have cost them a small fortune. They knew her so well. The walls had been painted in a subtle cream with rich brown borders. The deep chocolate comforter matched the walls. She wondered when the gas fireplace had been installed. Had her parents added that for their comfort, or hers? She loved them so much and knew she was going to miss them terribly. It felt so strange to live in Hidden Lakes without her parents. It would be just as strange to walk into her father's old hardware store and know he wouldn't be fussing over the books or unloading boxes.

She took several deep breaths, brushed away the tears and headed back to the car. She needed to get unpacked and settled in for the night. Tomorrow she and Jeremy would begin their new life. Hopefully, with time, it would be a good one. An image of Shane Chandler instantly popped into her head. How could it be good when Shane still lived a few miles out of town? Seeing him with Kristy and their little family was going to kill her. Did they only have one child, or did they have the American dream of two and a half kids and a dog? With any luck, she'd have time to get settled before she had to deal with that unpleasant encounter.

"Hey, sport." Melissa said, brushing her son's dark locks away from his face. "We're here." She reached in and smoothly untangled the seatbelt. "Let's get you into bed."

Jeremy rubbed his eyes and moaned. Then he slid from the car and zombie walked into the house.

Melissa smiled. She knew her little man was only half awake. Once the kid went down, he was out for the count. Jer played hard and slept hard, another thing he inherited from his father. Melissa tried to push the thought from her mind, but couldn't. The older Jeremy got, the more he took on the rugged, good looks of his dad. She knew he was going to be a heart breaker.

Hidden Lakes

She just hoped that between her and Mitch they'd taught him enough compassion to let the girls down easy. Mitch had been the perfect gentleman, always opening her door and bringing her flowers. Fortunately, he had passed that knowledge on to Jeremy. Melissa knew she'd been lucky to find such an honorable, caring man. And Jeremy had been blessed to have Mitch as a role model. Her son was a quick learner. By the time he was three, he was emulating Mitch's every move. She'd lost track of the number of times Jer had stopped to pick wild flowers on his way home from school this past year. He had tried so hard to fill Mitch's shoes in his absence. Maybe now that they were here, in a new house, in a small town, away from all the memories, she'd be able to move forward and Jeremy could just be a carefree kid again.

Melissa stripped off Jeremy's sweatshirt and jeans then slipped on his PJ's. Normally she'd insist he brush his teeth, but after the long ride, she decided he could skip it just this once. She watched as Jeremy climbed into bed and immediately slipped into a deep sleep. How she wished she could relax as quickly and completely as her son. Her thoughts shifted to another man, one who could also fall asleep in a matter of minutes. She immediately slammed the door on those memories. Thinking about Shane Chandler, remembering their time together, would bring her nothing but heartache. Melissa returned to the car and gathered up the essentials. The rest of their things could wait until morning. She locked up and headed for her new room. She thought it would be another night of restlessness, tossing and turning until the sun came up, but almost the instant her head hit the pillow she was out.

Shane finished the last swallow of coffee and headed outside. The morning air was crisp and cool, but fresh. Spring had definitely arrived. Mornings like this made all the hard work and effort worth it. He leaned against the sturdy porch rail and took in the beauty. He loved watching the sun rise over his land. The vibrant yellow rays danced across the creek making the water shimmer with life. There was a slight breeze ruffling the remnants of last year's alfalfa field reminding him it was almost time to plow the field and rotate the crop. This morning everything was covered in a slight, mystic fog. Every season had its beauty but Shane loved spring the most. The ranch seemed to come alive in the springtime.

He pivoted as he heard the screen door creek open and saw his daughter standing bare foot in the opening. He took two large steps and scooped her into his arms. "Morning sunshine." He said, lowering himself onto the old porch swing and settling Meg onto his lap. "What has you up so early?" He pressed his lips to her forehead and frowned.

"I don't feel good." She moaned, holding her stomach.

Hidden Lakes

Shane was immediately on his feet and back in the house. It was too cold for her to be outside with a fever. Once in the kitchen Shane placed his little girl on a chair and began rummaging around for the children's Tylenol. Once he found it, he grabbed a Sprite from the fridge and moved to her side. "Tummy ache?" He asked gently.

"Uh-huh." She nodded. "And I'm cold." Her little body shivered to prove the point.

Shane crouched in front of Megan and held out the Sprite. "I need you to take little sips. It will help settle your stomach. And I need you to take this medicine."

Meg took the Tylenol and washed it down with a sip of Sprite. "I wanted to go riding with you today." She frowned, clearly upset about missing her first ride of the season.

"There's always tomorrow, pumpkin." Shane said lovingly. His daughter was the best part of his life, the one good thing he'd accomplished. He loved her more than anything, even the ranch. It was strange, he never thought he'd love anything more than the ranch and certainly not any one. His thoughts turned to Melissa Peters. He'd made so many mistakes with Melissa. She was the only woman he had ever truly loved. Back then his feelings had been so intense, he hadn't known how to deal with them. So, being young and stupid, he'd messed things up. On days like today, he wondered how things might have been different. But he couldn't regret his actions. That would mean regretting Megan. And he could never regret such a beautiful, special little girl.

Shane watched Meg take another sip of her soda then lifted her into his arms and carried her to the family room. After grabbing the quilt from the back of the couch, he settled into the large rocking chair and cuddled his daughter against his chest.

Meg burrowed in close, pressing her cheek against Shane's chest. She felt so safe in her father's arms. Her eyes began to droop and she pulled the blanket further under her chin. Then she bolted up and gave her dad a worried look. "You have to go." She said softly. "You don't have time to waste holding me. You have to move the cows today."

Shane pushed his daughter back against his chest. "Don't be ridiculous. I always have time for you. Cora will be here soon and I'll head out once she arrives." He kissed the top of her head. "The cows can wait for an hour or so. How's the tummy?" He began rubbing her back, hoping Megan would relax and go back to sleep.

"Better I think." She admitted. "I love you, dad." She whispered as she drifted back to sleep.

"I love you too, Princess." Shane whispered. "More than you know."

Forty minutes later Cora stepped into the family room. She sighed and smiled. Seeing such a strong, masculine man rocking his little girl warmed her heart. Shane Chandler was

Hidden Lakes

special. She'd seen his compassion as a boy, but she was so proud of the man he'd become. Maybe having such a wonderful father would offset the girls' terrible mother. At least the woman was out of their lives for good this time. Shane had seen to that. What kind of mother sold her own child? Kristy, that's who. Before she could get herself worked up, Cora walked to the chair and placed a hand on Shane's shoulder.

Shane jerked, then settled back when he spotted Cora. "She had an upset stomach and a slight fever." He whispered. "I didn't want to leave her until I knew you were here."

Cora brushed a hand over the child's head. "Fever's down." She said with a nod. "Take her to bed now and don't you worry. I'll take good care of her today. It's probably just a little stomach bug. I'm sure she'll be much better this afternoon. I'll make chicken soup for dinner."

Shane stood, cradling Meg in his arms and smiled. "And fresh baked bread?" He asked.

"Of course." Cora said, trying to sound impatient. "Now go, you have work to do. This ranch won't run itself while you lollygag."

Shane laughed as he carried Meg to her room. Moments later he was back in the kitchen. He stopped to brush a kiss on Cora's cheek. "Thanks, Cora. I'd be lost without you."

Cora heard the sincerity in Shane's words and cut off the sarcastic reply she was about to give. "That little girl will be fine." She said laying a gentle hand on Shane's arm. "I'm sure it's just a bug. Nothing to worry about. She probably got it from one of her school mates. Now shew, I've got work and so do you."

Shane smiled and hurried out the door. He loved Cora like a mother and he was being honest when he told her he couldn't do it without her. Being a single father and running a ranch would be impossible without help. At eight, Meg didn't need as much supervision as she had in the beginning, but on days like today Cora was a life saver. He was still going to worry about his little girl. He knew Megan was in good hands, but he was going to head back and check on her around lunch time, anyway. While the men took a break, he could reassure himself it was just a bug, like Cora said. Shane pulled himself onto his favorite horse and headed across the field.