

## CHAPTER 1

Three days and one thousand six hundred and seventy six miles later, Ethan pulled up in front of his Great Uncle's ranch house just on dusk. Fuck. Looking up at the house, it looked as tired as he felt but nothing a lick of paint wouldn't fix. Turning off the engine the silence was deafening except for the tick tick of the bike's cooling engine. Standing up and taking off his helmet he looked around. Everything needed doing but that was why he was here.

Walking up the worn stone steps towards the front door he heard the unmistakable double click of a shotgun being cocked. He quickly stepped aside next to the door and waited. His brain was screaming at him to find a gun, kick down the door anything rather than just stand and wait. As his breathing got tighter he heard a foot shuffle to his left. He could feel his heart beat drumming around, any minute now he was going to scream. Holding everything in, he breathed deeply, letting it out very slowly in a long constant stream of air from his pursed lips. He had learned a long time ago that this was one trick that settled him from rushing in and getting everyone killed.

"Don't come a step closer or I will shoot" a female voice shouted out at him.

"Ma'am?" he said.

"Just don't."

"Ma'am, my name is Ethan Wainwright and I own this ranch. My Great Uncle Jebadiah left it to me". He was trying to think why there was a woman here. Uncle Jeb never had a woman that he could remember and the voice sounded young, mid twenties, not over seventy like Uncle Jeb.

"That was three years and two months ago and you never came" her anger pointed at him as clearly as the shotgun. "You never came."

He could hear the anxiety and frustration as her voice faded away.

"I was overseas in the Marines Ma'am, I couldn't just up and leave, Uncle Jeb understood that." He moved across the front of the house towards the windows and looked inside. There, facing the door was a skinny woman with dark hair in a long ponytail. Her jeans fitted her nicely and her posture said she could handle the large weapon in her hands, though her shoulders were hunched and he could see she was breathing hard.

He continued along the porch and climbed in through the front lounge window, cautiously moving slowly so as not to frighten her.

As he came up behind her he reached over, grabbed the shotgun and pulled it close across her body, effectively trapping her in front of him.

She squeaked and squirmed trying to get away, but he held tight. Moisture fell with a plop onto his leather covered arm. Was she crying? He could feel her heart beat as he cradled her against him. It was too fast and her breathing had shortened. God he hoped she didn't faint before he managed to secure the gun.

"Shhh little bird" he whispered in her ear "I won't hurt you, just need to make this gun safe" as he put the safety catch on.