

## *Prologue: Once upon a time...*

It was all over town that Ivy Turner was sleeping with one of the Deathridge brothers, only no one knew which one.

Myra Tidwell, the town social blogger, immediately set out to find answers. Armed with her iPhone, she typically used the location feature on Facebook and her connections with local business owners to track down her targets—in this case, Ivy herself. Myra drove a habanero orange VW bug, and frequently dressed in contrast with society's expectations for a woman her age. Today, that meant wearing a vintage midi-skirt swirled with floral patterns in turquoise and orange, a deep blue blouse, and an orange scarf. Her hair, long ago gone white, was pinned up in a twist, and her cunning eyes were hidden behind large, round sunglasses. On her lips she wore a smirk and a bright red lipstick.

The gossip industry was good.

She swerved her car into the parking lot of the local Walgreens, pulled up the camera function on her phone, and strutted in on heels the likes of which most women half her age couldn't pull off.

Ivy happened to be standing in the check-out aisle buying condoms. With a thrill of voyeuristic delight surging through her blood, Myra held up her phone. "Looks like you got a taste of something you like and are

going back for more? Fair Grove is dying to know, Ivy...which Deathridge brother did you sample?"

Gossip was a harmless pursuit. Myra felt no compunction about subjecting the young woman to her first round of it. The girl was twenty-six, after all. How she'd remained under the radar this long was a mystery. Just look at her, in her uptight business clothes with her hair pulled back, too good to dress like the rancher that she was. Well, she apparently wasn't too good to sleep with one.

"Uh...um...uh..." was Ivy's response. Then she looked down at the condoms and shoved them behind her back. "These aren't for me. I swear."

Myra grinned and took her stammering as confirmation of the rumor's accuracy. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to get any further information out of the stunned young woman. A shame. But Myra's motto had always been, "If you don't tell me the truth, I'll just make something up."

Myra's next stop was the local watering hole, a run-down tavern where the farmers often had their drinks at the end of a long work day. Boone Deathridge, the youngest at twenty-five and the closest to Ivy's age, stood at the bar flirting with two women. He wore his muddy work boots, jeans, and a sleeveless tee. It didn't much matter what he wore, his baby

face held all the allure of a piece of candy from a stranger in a creepy van. Myra adjusted the waistline of her skirt and approached him, iPhone set to record. "What's your response to the rumors? Were you the one slept with Ivy Turner last night?"

Boone grinned. "Did you see her walking today? 'Cause if you did, then it wasn't me."

Myra shuffled backward, just slightly put off by his insinuation. Her profession notwithstanding, at the age of sixty-five, Myra considered herself a refined Southern lady. So what if she published salacious local gossip on the internet for a living? Gossip had a longstanding history in their town, and Myra walked with her head held high.

She moved on to Cody Deathridge who was sitting at a table with two other farmers, deep in discussion about...well...farming. "Cody, would you like to make a statement on the Ivy Turner scandal?"

Cody stood to his full height of well over six feet. He wore the trademark dark Deathridge looks well. His bright blue eyes set him apart from his brothers, and his slow, quiet demeanor earned him a reputation as the stand-up, solid citizen of the crew. "I do have a statement," he said, his low, raspy voice sexy enough to curl Myra's toes in spite of the age difference. "It ain't right her suddenly being treated like she done something wrong just because of some baseless rumors. And you oughtta

be ashamed of yourself, Miss Myra.” He tipped his cowboy hat and sat back down without another glance in her direction.

Myra sniffed and shuffled her way to the pool table in the back where the eldest two brothers were playing a game. Dallas was widely considered the playboy of the bunch, though he played the reputation down. He was easily the sexiest Deathridge, with dark hair and eyes, and a smile that would melt your panties right off. The tattoos covering his bare arms added to his bad-boy appeal. From what Myra could tell, he was the favorite in the “Which one did Ivy sleep with” poll. “Dallas? Care to confess?” Myra asked.

“Now you know you’re the only woman for me, Miss Myra.”

Myra wasn’t above blushing. Actually she couldn’t help it. But dignity demanded she keep pushing forward, so she turned to Jake.

The eldest Deathridge was more handsome than sexy. While the other three were broad shouldered and powerfully built, Jake had the same build as his father—long, lean, and rangy. He wore a dark brown Stetson and an air of authority that came from being the oldest and the sole heir to the property, though Myra could easily remember him as a boy egging houses on Halloween just like all the others. Still, Jake was a no-nonsense kind of guy, and the least likely suspect. However, Myra knew from years of experience in the gossip industry that it was often the

least likely suspect who turned out guilty. “And you, Jake? Have you been having an affair with little Ivy Turner?”

Jake frowned and drew himself upright. “Are you recording this? Are you actually recording this? I do not give my permission for you to publish this on your blog.”

Needless to say, Myra went home with no more knowledge on the subject than she’d started out with.

However, you wouldn’t know that to watch her video blog the next morning.