

Chapter One

November 8th

Kay Donovan put a Rolaid in her mouth as she was ushered from the waiting room into U.S. Marshal Paul Morel's private office. She'd talked to Marshal Morel before along with the special agent from the FBI who had walked her through all the procedures.

After she'd turned over all her information to the FBI, including copies of the accounts, they'd arrested her former boss, drug kingpin Vincent "Vinnie" Rizzo. Then it was decided that she should disappear until the grand jury testimony, which was when she first met with Marshal Morel.

Several months ago, after the death of her best friend due to an overdose of heroine laced with fentanyl, she'd decided to turn over evidence against her boss. He was *the* drug supplier for New York's East and South sides and who she blamed for Julie's death.

Under New York's new bail law, he was out after being arrested for distribution and racketeering. Kay had been shocked when the judge set a \$5,000,000 bail. Not because it was so high but because he shouldn't have gotten bail at all, in her opinion and that of the FBI.

But he wasn't arrested for murder...yet.

Kay wasn't a fool. This decision put her at great risk. Vinnie would place a contract on her head to keep her from testifying. But she didn't have a choice. She'd had her head in the sand for long enough.

U.S. Marshal Paul Morel came around his desk and held his hand out. "Miss Donovan, please sit down." He pointed at the leather chair in front of his desk and then took his seat behind it.

She sat and then set her purse on the floor beside the chair.

Marshal Morel was at least six feet tall, with auburn hair that was turning silver on the sides and dark blue eyes.

"The information you've provided has allowed us to arrest Vincent Rizzo. He made bail, as you know, and the grand jury hearing is in three months. Normally we would put you into a hotel to keep you safe until then. But I have another idea that will keep you safe and let you have some freedom. It is, after all the season for charity. I don't want to have to put you in what amounts to solitary confinement for Christmas." His brows formed lines between them for a moment. "Can you cook, Miss Donovan?"

She leaned back in the chair and crossed her polyester clad legs. "Yes, I can cook. It's one of my hobbies. Why?"

"I thought I read that in your file." He closed a file folder. "Anyway, I'm placing you on a cattle ranch in Montana as the new cook and housekeeper. The owner there

is a personal friend of mine. His name is Ryan Evers.”

She uncrossed her legs and leaned forward. “Not of Evers Manufacturing?” *Good grief. How am I supposed to act around a billionaire?*

He smiled. “One and the same.” His smile faded. “But he doesn’t like for people to know about his family because then they don’t see him, just his money. Trust me when I say I know he’s capable of keeping you safe. He’ll also know some of your background, such as who he’s protecting you from so he can take precautions.”

“Thank you. I understand and I appreciate the information. I’ve never been to Montana before or met a billionaire before. When do I leave?” *Or a number of other firsts. I’ve never cooked for more than three people before. I’ll have to adjust recipes but that’s easy enough.*

He stood and came around the desk and held out his hand. “Now. You’ll take nothing with you. Give me your driver’s license, credit cards and Social Security card if you have it on you. You may keep your cash. And I need your phone. I don’t want anyone to be able to trace you or for you to get the idea to call a friend. Better safe than sorry.”

She took her wallet out of her purse and emptied it of everything except her cash and then handed over her phone, too. “I hope you have clothes for me somewhere.”

The man finally smiled. “Yes, Miss Donovan. We have two suitcases full of clothes for every occasion you might need as the cook on a working cattle ranch. I

didn't think you would have appropriate clothes and I couldn't take the risk of anyone seeing you leaving with suitcases. We also have blue jeans, a sweater and tennis shoes for you to put on now. My assistant has chosen the clothes for you. I hope you like what she's bought."

I hope they've included a coat. I've seen pictures of Montana and they get lots of snow. New York gets cold, but doesn't usually get much in the way of snow.

He walked around the desk, opened a drawer and removed an envelope. "I also have new identification, social security and credit cards in the name of Kaylie Smith." He walked back around the desk to her and handed her the envelope. "That is who you are now. Remember that. Kaylie Smith. Kay Donovan is dead as far as anyone is concerned. You can't contact your family or friends ever again."

Kay took the packet and placed it in her purse. "You already know my mother and grandmother are both deceased. The only reason I kept working for Vinnie was because of my mother's hospital and nursing home bills. I couldn't afford to quit. I worked too much to have very many friends and Vinnie killed the only one who meant anything to me. As to the clothes, I'm sure as long as it fits, it will be fine." She popped another Rolaid in her mouth, chewed and swallowed.

He clasped his hands in front of him on his desk. "They will fit as well as your clothes do now since we took the measurements from your current wardrobe."

Her eyes widened. "When? I've never let anyone into my new apartment. I didn't

want Vinnie to know where I was. I left just about everything in my old place so it looks like I just disappeared.” *Not even a man. How sad is that? I haven’t had a man in my apartment since I broke off my engagement with that cheating snake Matt.* Then it dawned on her and she felt violated. “I didn’t need to let them in. They let themselves in, didn’t they?”

He nodded. “Yes, they did. And you helped us by moving and giving the impression you did. Now we’re making sure you do disappear...at least until it’s time for you to testify before the grand jury.”

She nodded, took a deep breath and then released it. “Okay. I guess I’m ready.”

A woman, wearing a black pantsuit entered the room.

“Ah, good. My assistant, Ms. Greer, will escort you to the jet that will take you to Twin Bluffs, Montana and a whole new life...at least for the next three months. Try and enjoy the time there. You’ll be back here in no time. Get used to your new name. You are Kaylie Smith. You’re from Kansas and have worked as a cook before. Understand?”

“I’m Kaylie Smith and I’m a cook,” she lifted a brow. “Extraordinaire. Trust me, I’ll make sure the folks at this ranch have never eaten better. I like to cook, and I’ll be good at this job.”

Agent Morel smiled. “Keep to your story and you’ll be fine. We’ll pick you up the day before you’re due in court.” He pulled a card from inside his jacket. “This is

my private number if you should need to reach out for any reason. Ryan also has this number.”

She took the card, placed it in her purse and then stood. “Thank you for your help with this. I only know I need to stop him. He’s a dangerous man and he killed my best friend.”

He stood. “Tell me, *Kaylie*, would you have come forward if not for the death of your friend?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. To be honest, probably not. I’m not a crusader or activist. I’m just an accountant who finally took a stand...who finally had enough because it affected me directly. Julie was a beautiful, talented woman and didn’t deserve to die for one stupid mistake.”

“No one does.” He extended a hand. “Good luck, *Kaylie*.”

She shook his hand. “Thank you. I’ll see you in three months.”

Ms. Greer escorted *Kaylie* to the Newark airport where she was put on a private jet with two non-descript gray suitcases.

“Good luck to you, Ms. Smith,” said Ms. Greer.

“Thank you.” She climbed the steps to the plane and prepared for her new life.

Ryan Evers stood just inside the terminal door. He met the jet at the Bozeman Yellowstone airport on a private runway away from the main airport with its hustle

and bustle of thousands of passengers flying to and from places unknown. The waiting room he was in served only this private runway. He'd pick up his new cook, Kaylie Smith and take her back to the ranch. The only reason he agreed to harbor someone in WitSec was as a favor to Janice's brother, Paul, a U.S. Marshal.

He understood from his conversations with Paul that this woman was in a lot of danger. The man she was testifying against would kill her in a heartbeat if he could find her. Ryan waited and watched as the plane came to a stop and the stairs were rolled over to it.

A young woman with a killer figure stepped out of the plane. He watched her as she descended the stairs. She wore tight jeans, a bold red sweater and tennis shoes. Her hair was in waves and when she turned to talk to the flight crew, he saw it was down to her waist. He'd like to run his fingers through that mass of black silk.

Good grief where did that come from?

When she reached the bottom of the steps, she headed toward the terminal building followed by two men, each with a large gray suitcase.

He stood with his Stetson pulled low on his head...waiting.

The woman stepped through the door and looked around. When she saw him, she smiled and walked up to him.

“Mr. Evers?”

“Yes, I'm Ryan Evers. You must be—”

She smiled. "I'm Kaylie Smith, your new cook." She held out her hand.

He looked down at her hand and enveloped it in his. It was so small and delicate he was afraid if he really shook it, he'd break it. He gave her a small shake and then pulled his hand back and put it in his jeans pocket.

"Here are your suitcases, Ms. Smith. Have a great stay." The steward from the plane set her suitcases next to her.

"Thank you, Phillip. I appreciate your help."

The man doffed his cap to her and went back through the doors to the airplane.

If Ryan's information wasn't wrong, they would immediately refuel and return to New York and they appeared to be doing just that.

He returned his gaze to Kaylie. "Is this all your luggage?"

"Yes, just these two."

"Fine. Follow me." He took one suitcase handle in each hand and rolled them out of the airport. His truck was parked across the street as close to the door as he could get. When they reached the sidewalk, he lowered the handles, picked up the suitcases and crossed the street to his black, four-door, Ford F-350 dually, pickup truck. He looked at it now and wished he'd washed it, but he wasn't expecting a beautiful woman...anything but, actually. He figured she'd be in her late fifties with gray hair and glasses. Why he thought so, he didn't know, but Paul hadn't said anything to change his expectations.

He set the suitcases in the backseat and then helped Ms. Smith into the passenger's seat.

"The road to the ranch is pretty rough." He pulled out the seatbelt for her.

She took it and buckled it. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He walked around the front of the truck and got behind the wheel. After buckling his seat belt, he pressed the ignition button and backed out of the parking spot.

He watched the road, driving through the country with the mountains on the west and the plains on the east. He loved it here. He glanced her way and wondered if it was anything like she'd seen before. Probably not, she was a city girl. New York. Couldn't get much more city than that.

"Thank you, Mr. Evers for this job. I appreciate you taking me on this way."

"It's fine, no trouble. I would recommend you stay away from the cowboys. They've all been with me for at least a year, but I can't guarantee their behavior."

She turned toward him. "I'm not here looking for love, Mr. Evers—"

He turned his gaze toward her for a moment. "Ryan."

She stopped midsentence. Her eyebrows furrowed causing lines between them.

"What?"

He shrugged. "Call me Ryan, not Mr. Evers. That's my dad."

She nodded, but her mouth was in a flat line.

“Fine. Ryan. I’m not looking for love or even to make friends. I just want a place to live and cook and be happy for a while.”

“So, I gather.” *She’s scared, as well she should be. If I was in her shoes, I’d probably be frightened as well. I have to admit, she’s awfully brave going up against a drug kingpin like she is.*

“I’ll cook and clean for you. That’s all.”

“Fine.”

She turned and looked out the windshield. “Fine.”

They didn’t say anything else until he turned onto the road to his ranch.

Kaylie grabbed the handhold above the door and held on tight. “You weren’t kidding about this road. Good grief. You need a truck just to traverse it. A car would bottom out.”

“Exactly. You shouldn’t need to go anywhere, but, if you do, I’ll take you. I don’t want you getting lost, anyway. Deal?”

She bit her lip. “Deal. Will you show me your ranch when we arrive?”

“Sure. There’s not much to see. I keep horses and cattle. I don’t have milk cows or chickens. We buy our milk and eggs at the grocery store like everyone else.”

“Good because I don’t know what to do with fresh milk or eggs that aren’t in a carton.”

“Okay. Good.”

She turned her attention back to the road and didn't let go of the handhold.

He looked over and saw her knuckles were white where she held on. If she kept that up, he'd have to help her release her hand when they arrived at the house.

Ten minutes later, he pulled into the yard, up next to the door that opened into the kitchen and stopped.

He looked over at her, enjoying the sight before he had to play employer again.

“Are you all right?”

She slowly unfolded her fingers and lowered her hand to her lap, where she rubbed and pulled on each one. She looked up at him. “My fingers went to sleep, though how with all the bouncing we did, I haven't any idea.”

“I'll be around to let you out.” He hurried to her side of the truck.

She'd unbuckled herself and, when he opened the door, she put out one foot and practically fell out of the cab.

He caught her and pulled her close, letting her slide down his body to land on her feet. “Are you okay?”

She looked up and blinked several times. “What?”

He grinned. “Are you okay? Can I let you go?”

“Oh.” She stepped back. “Yes, I'm fine. I'm sorry. I didn't—”

“It's all right. Happens to most folks the first time out here.” He pointed toward the side door. “Go on in. I'll bring your suitcases.”

She nodded and headed for the door.

Ryan stood and watched her until she was inside, then he shook his head and pulled her suitcases out of the backseat, wondering what kind of fool he was for taking on this latest project of Paul's.

Kaylie looked at the large, white, two-story house as they approached. The trim and the shutters were dark green. The front had a double entry door, and a chimney was on the right end of the house, but Ryan drove around to the left side and let her out.

After nearly falling out of the truck and into Ryan's arms, she walked through the door and into the kitchen. It was beautiful and open, with a large oak table that seated sixteen. The counters were all black granite and on the island in the middle of the kitchen was a triple sink with the center one being a work area with a garbage disposal.

There was an electric glass cooktop with a microwave over it and dual ovens on the wall next to the cooktop. The French door refrigerator stood next to a door that she was sure was a pantry, and on the other side of the fridge was more counter space with cupboards above and below. All the appliances were brushed stainless steel and beautiful. They'd never show one fingerprint. She grinned.

It was her dream kitchen and she couldn't help but smile.

"I take it the kitchen pleases you?" the deep voice sounded behind her.

After a sharp intake of breath, she turned toward her new employer. The man was entirely too good looking, with brown hair, just a little below his collar and the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. His square jaw was covered with about three days' growth of stubble, like so many men wore today. The whole package was way too *male* for her comfort. "Sheesh, you startled me. I was too busy drooling over your kitchen. I couldn't have asked for a nicer place to work." She grinned.

His mouth ticked up on one side. "I'm glad you like it. Your room is right off the kitchen, this way." He went out of the room toward the interior of the house and opened the first door on the right.

She followed him and entered the bedroom coming to an immediate halt.

The bedroom was beautiful and quite large with a king-sized bed in an oak frame with head and foot boards that were carved with woodland scenes. The six-drawer dresser with a mirror on the back had the same type of scenes carved in the drawer fronts as did the five-drawer chest on another wall along with the door to a walk-in closet.

The bedspread and throw pillows matched the curtains which had red roses and green vines on a pinky-beige background and covered the only window. An overstuffed chair, end table and floor lamp were situated below the window. During the day, the light through the window would be perfect for reading. She wondered if she'd get a chance to try it out.

All of this was so different than the little apartment she'd had in New York. Heck, her entire apartment was only about twice the size of this room. Things were so expensive in New York, even having an apartment alone with no roommates was an achievement.

Ryan brought in her suitcases and set them against the bed. "I'll give you some time to unpack and then we can talk about your duties while you're here."

"Thank you. I'd appreciate that." *Especially since I have no idea what I'll find in the suitcases.* "It shouldn't take too long and then I can start preparing dinner. Do you know what you want? Were you already planning something?"

"We usually have steak on Fridays. We're a simple group of men. There are baking potatoes in the pantry, steaks and salad makings in the fridge." He looked down at his watch. "The cowboys won't be in for dinner for another couple of hours so you should have some time to yourself to get situated."

"Do you have something planned for dessert?"

"No. None of my previous cooks were bakers." He stepped closer and lifted a brow. "Are you a baker, Kaylie?"

Her heart pounded in her chest like she'd just run a marathon and she was sure he could hear it. "I've been known to bake a cake now and then. Would you like one, if I can find the ingredients in your pantry?"

"I'm sure the cowboys would enjoy it...if you have time."

She smiled. “I probably do. I’ll unpack and then we’ll see. Do you grill the steaks outside?”

“Usually. A large gas grill is out on the back patio. Have you grilled before?”

“To be honest, no, but I can probably figure it out.”

“I’ll show you and do the steaks tonight. You can do the potatoes and the salad. Next week, you can grill the meat, too. Deal?” He held out his hand.

She looked down at his hand and then back at him. Smiling, she took his hand and shook it. “Deal. How long has your previous cook been gone?”

He put his hands in his back pockets. “About three months. I was doing it myself, but to be honest, it’s a lot of work and I don’t want to do it anymore. Paul’s request came at an opportune time. Well, I’ll be back in about an hour.”

“Perfect. That will give me a chance to look around.”

He left, closing the bedroom door after him.

She sat on the bed before her legs collapsed and fanned herself with her hand. *What in the world have I gotten myself into? I can’t become involved with anyone now. My future is so up in the air I can’t possibly consider romance no matter how nice or handsome Ryan is.*