

Property of HarperCollins Publishers

Trigger Warning

This book contains descriptions of a single sexual assault and reference to sexual assault, rape, and grievous bodily harm.

Property of HarperCollins Publishers

PART ONE: ESCAPE

Prologue

Los Angeles, California – June 2, 2025

There was somebody in her house.

Nina Keller knew this absolutely.

She stood in her spotless kitchen, its big bay windows overlooking the Hollywood Hills, and stared at the three placemats sitting side by side on the counter. One was crooked, and though her militant organizational preferences would never have allowed such a small but glaring slip, that wasn't the entire reason she knew she was not alone.

Rather, she could feel him in the house with her.

She knew he was there in the same way she had known when to avoid one of her mother's 'friends' as a child.

She felt it in her bones.

In the hair on the back of her neck, which slowly crept to attention.

In the pit of her stomach – that anxious place where her childhood nightmares were stored.

The eighteen years she'd spent as the daughter of a whore had taught her many things. When to trust her instincts. When to hide. When to run. And when her only option was to fight.

Now, she held her breath as she strained to hear, listening for even the smallest sound that might give away the intruder's location.

She pressed her back to the cold glass window so that she could see in all directions, and quietly fumbled around in her purse for her phone.

She pulled it out, spared one glance at the screen so that she could dial her best friend, Markus, because in her fear, she forgot

that she was no longer that little girl who had been systematically trained to never call 911.

Markus answered on the first ring. 'Baby girl, please tell me you've changed your mind about coming out with me tonight?'

Just hearing his cheery voice was enough to take the edge off her panic. Still, when she spoke, she whispered, 'Markus,' slowly, and when even that sounded too loud, she lowered her voice, and between deep inhalations, added, 'there's somebody in my house.'

Chapter 1

Hunt Ranch, Santa Barbara County – One Week Later

‘I heard Farrah got out again.’

Maverick Hunt collapsed into one of the chairs in his sister’s office and sighed, grateful to have thirty minutes off his feet. Even if it was for a staff meeting.

‘Yeah,’ he replied. The mini horse, who they’d rescued from auction and aptly named Farrah for her thick, blonde mane, was the cutest inconvenience in existence. She lived to wreak havoc – and did so often. ‘And she let the goats and Babe out. By the time I got there, two kids staying at the resort were in the mix too.’

‘Let me guess: the Carson twins?’

‘Yup.’

‘Nothing screams luxury resort like eight escaped animals running wild with the guests,’ Sierra drawled sarcastically.

‘I know. I don’t even know how she did it this time. We’ll add a padlock to the gate.’

‘You got them all back in with no issues?’

‘We did. Babe took some bribing. Benji had to rope Farrah to catch her.’ Mav’s grin was slow. ‘He made a show of it to entertain the Carsons.’

Sierra had nothing to say to that. Instead, she sat at her desk and pointedly started organizing her paperwork for the meeting.

Maverick didn’t say more.

His dog, Shadow – a faithful mutt of indiscriminate lineage that Mav had found on the side of the road six years earlier – lay at his feet and rested her head on the toe of his boot before closing her eyes and promptly going to sleep.

At this time on a Sunday, the Weekenders – guests who typically came from around California to stay at Hunt Ranch for a quick three-day getaway – had checked out already. Those few guests on an extended stay – a couple on a ‘babymoon’ from Oregon, a twenty-year-old socialite from New York, and an elderly couple from London celebrating their joint retirement by exploring the ‘Wild West’ – had come in for the night and were washing up from their trail rides or relaxing before the summer barbecue started in a couple of hours.

But it didn’t matter that it was Sunday, or that it was five o’clock in the evening; there were two industries that never rested: ranching and hospitality, and the Hunts were buried up to the neck in both.

Mav surveyed his sister’s domain as he waited for the weekly staff meeting to start. Sierra’s office was pristine. As she’d undoubtedly intended, the room, with its oversized desk, heavy leather chairs, and contrastingly sleek Apple computer, looked like it had been staged for the centrefold of some fancy home catalogue. The selection of neatly framed, black-and-white photographs on the wall showed snippets from the 124 years of Hunt Ranch family history and added that touch of personality to an otherwise business-like room.

Maverick studied the photos as he mentally ran through the list of things he still needed to get done that day.

He could trust Benji, his best friend and Hunt Ranch’s head wrangler, to see to the resort’s seventy trail horses, but the forty or so rescue horses on the ranch were Mav’s responsibility – for no other reason than he was the one who couldn’t turn them away.

He would check in on a new rescue that had come in two days prior. The horse, a little palomino Quarter Horse mare, had been starved, abused, and then abandoned on a major thoroughfare in the middle of the night. Though Mav had technically promised his sister he wouldn’t take in any more horses, not even Sierra had been able to turn away the downhearted mare when the sheriff had brought her by.

Mav figured by the time he was done with the staff meeting and the horses, it would be pushing six-thirty. He’d run home and take over from his nanny, make sure his five-year-old daughter, Poppy, was bathed, fed, and put to bed.

Once Poppy was down, he was technically on call. So that while he could shower and eat and go to bed, his phone would be on his nightstand, and any ranch calls were his to deal with, the same way that any resort calls the night staff and concierge couldn't handle would be his sister's.

After a – hopefully uninterrupted – night's rest, his day would begin again at four-thirty the next morning.

His schedule was gruelling. He routinely clocked fourteen-hour days before going home to try and sneak in some quality time with Poppy. He never stopped, most days even skipping lunch in the hope that he could save thirty minutes somewhere else. He worked physically all day, and at night he sat down with a single beer and the spreadsheets and accounts his sister insisted he keep for the ranch horses. When he wasn't working, he was a single dad, which was to say he clocked another three or four hours of work once his nanny left for the day.

It was hard.

It was thankless.

Mav wouldn't have changed a single thing ... Well, except maybe the spreadsheets. He hated spreadsheets.

As he waited for the meeting to start, he covertly watched his sister, looking for signs of how she was holding up. Every time he asked her outright, she snapped at him and told him to mind his own business.

Today, she had twisted her long hair into some fancy knot at the back of her head. She wore a sleek black jumpsuit and a pair of break-neck heels. Her makeup, though immaculate, couldn't hide the dark shadows beneath her eyes.

Behind him, various management staff began filtering into the office. Mav nodded to Benji as he came in and leaned against the wall, keeping as far away as physically possible from Sierra.

Sierra didn't look up or otherwise acknowledge Benji, but the way her entire body tensed told Mav that she knew he was there.

Jordyn, their restaurant manager, took the seat next to Mav's. Without batting an eye, she kicked her feet, clad in bright pink Crocs, up and rested them on his knees. 'Please,' she said dramatically,

and raised a hand to her brow, ‘*please* tell me we’re done with bachelorette parties for the year.’

Exhausted nods of agreement came from just about everyone except Mav and Benji. They’d had a relatively quiet weekend despite the bachelorette party. The women had either been too intoxicated or too hungover to ride for most of the weekend. And though they had wandered down to the stables in small groups to pet the horses and ogle Benji, only two of the women had wanted to go out on horseback, which had given his staff some extra time to catch up on their ranch work.

‘One more. But it isn’t until early December, so we have some time to regroup.’ Sierra looked up from her notebook. She did a quick head count, and then passed out the neatly printed notes she made before every staff meeting.

Mav took one and passed the stack to Jordyn.

Sierra didn’t waste any time. ‘We have sixteen guests checking in tomorrow morning. Two families taking advantage of our twenty per cent off “Weekday Summer Stay” discount – one family of four and one of six. Two couples, one on their honeymoon, one on vacation from Germany. A single woman who is “celebrating her divorce settlement” – that’s what she wrote in the notes section of the online booking.’

Jordyn laughed.

Paul, the resort manager, sighed. ‘The new divorcées are always so much work.’

‘The last one tried to seduce Mav,’ Benji added. ‘Stripped to her lingerie and waited in the stables for him. What was her name, Mav? Margie or Meggie ...’

A round of laughter followed.

Maverick only shook his head, refusing to comment.

‘Her name was *Marcie*,’ Sierra sighed. ‘Now can we please—’

‘I heard about that. José was one who found her?’ Jordyn asked.

Benji grinned. ‘Oh yeah.’

‘Poor kid got an education, that’s for sure,’ Jordyn commented. Turning to Mav, she asked, ‘What was she? Like sixty? Sixty-one?’

Maverick didn’t reply, but his lips fought a smile. *Marcie* had been a handful. Harmless. But a handful. And while it had been José who

had found her, it had been Mav who had made sure the very drunk, very upset divorcée had made it back to her cabin safely – and fully clothed. Marcie was all right. She was just single for the first time in forty years. And upset. Add one too many margaritas to the mix and you had a dangerous combo.

But despite the awkward situation, she had come in to apologize the very next morning.

Mav had taken her riding and listened while she'd cried and talked about her ex-husband, a man who she'd loved for two-thirds of her life, a man who'd conveniently fallen in love with a woman thirty years younger and left Marcie in the dust with her broken heart.

Still, wanting to avoid any more talk of Marcie, he pointedly refocused his attention on the printed sheet.

There weren't any more guests listed. Only the names, lodges, and special notes for the fifteen Sierra had already mentioned.

'That's only fifteen.' Benji spoke Mav's thoughts.

'I'm *getting there*,' Sierra said slowly.

The room fell quiet as the tension ratcheted up a notch.

Benji didn't snap back as he once would have. He didn't say anything, only tipped his baseball cap over his eyes and looked back down at his printed notes.

'The sixteenth isn't listed for a reason,' Sierra continued. 'She's coming here to recuperate.' Mav's interest piqued at his sister's cautious tone. 'She's well known. I have NDAs for each of you to pass along to your staff.'

'Why NDAs?' Jordyn asked, frowning. She waved one hand in the air. 'We have celebrities come out all the time to get away from the public, and we haven't had any problems before.'

'This doesn't go beyond this office,' Sierra reiterated, looking at each of them in turn. 'If your staff have questions about the NDAs or refuse to sign them, then take them off the work schedule for the next month.'

A collective hush settled through the room.

Mav pondered the unusual request. Despite Jordyn's question, it wasn't *unheard* of for them to have to sign NDAs. Hunt Ranch was one of the few luxury guest ranches in California. They were located on two thousand acres in beautiful Santa Barbara County, less than

three hours from Los Angeles. So, they had their fair share of photoshoots and film location bookings.

Their prices reflected the value of the amenities, which, at least in Mav's mind, included the guests' privacy. But the NDAs were usually only for those staff who would be directly working with the celebrity guests, not the entire staff, which included over one hundred full- and part-time employees.

'While we are not expecting any trouble, I need you to be aware of everyone coming and going while she's here.'

'Why?' Lucas, their event planner, asked.

'She was assaulted in her home last week.'

Lucas raised both brows. 'Well ... shit.'

'I don't know much,' Sierra continued, 'but according to her agent, the police haven't identified her attacker yet. They suspect he might have been a stalker. Or just plain crazy. Probably both.'

'If any of you feel uncomfortable with the situation, I need you to say so now. Otherwise, from the moment she arrives to the moment she leaves, you're all deaf and dumb.'

'We need to be able to tell the wranglers.' Benji didn't even bother addressing Sierra. He spoke to Mav. 'They're always armed. They know this land. And no city nutjob could one-up any of them.'

'This is not a protection detail,' Sierra argued instantly. 'We're only guaranteeing her privacy while she's here. Everything else, including security, is up to her—'

'Before you two start,' Jordyn interjected, 'could you wrap this up for the rest of us?'

Sierra didn't even bother denying it. She passed out the wads of printed NDAs. 'I need these back by tomorrow, prior to check-in. If any staff are off and coming in later in the week, get them to sign them the moment they step foot on the property.'

'Now I'm super curious,' Deb, Lucas's assistant, commented. 'Who is it?'

Sierra smiled. 'Nina Keller.'

Confused by the stunned silence that followed, Mav looked over his shoulder, and seeing the awestruck expressions on nearly everyone's faces, spoke for the first time since the meeting had

started. 'What?' When no response was forthcoming, he added, 'Who is she?'

Jordyn slowly turned to gawk at him. 'You live under a rock?' She seemed to remember who she was talking to and added, 'You know what, never mind.'

'She's only like *the* Hollywood golden girl right now!' Deb exclaimed. 'Oh my God!' She clapped her hands together excitedly. Stopped almost immediately. 'Wait. You said she was *assaulted*?'

Sierra held up both hands. 'I don't know the details. But she's coming here to take some time off, *which means*,' she said, looking pointedly at Deb, 'no fawning, no gawking, no harassing for pictures or autographs. As far as we are concerned, she is just another guest, paying to stay at our luxury resort.' She zeroed in on Mav. 'I asked her to arrive around two-thirty so she could check in discreetly. She already signed the liability waiver via email, but if you could check her in, show her around?'

Mav nodded.

'That's it for today,' Sierra said, ending the meeting. As people started filtering out of her office, she called after them, 'Please read the notes on each guest! Jordyn! David Morgan is allergic to peanuts!'

'Got it!' Jordyn called back before disappearing down the hall.

Benji was last to leave, and it was only when he already had one foot out of the door that Sierra snapped, 'You don't want to discuss the wranglers?'

Benji stopped in the doorway. He turned slowly. He searched Sierra's face for a long moment, but when his look was met with cold, unflinching resistance, he turned to Mav. 'Let me know about the wranglers.'

Mav nodded. He waited for Benji's footsteps to sound down the hall before standing and closing the door.

This time, when he took his seat, Sierra dropped her head into her hands. 'I know,' she murmured. 'You don't have to tell me. I know. I'll try harder.'

There were so many things he wanted to say, so many things she needed to hear. Only, when faced with the burden of it, Mav couldn't bring himself to open the conversation. His own guilt weighed his

tongue down, stopping those particular words in his throat. 'It's not a bad idea to bring the wranglers in,' he said instead. 'If this woman—'

'Do you really not know who Nina Keller is?' Sierra asked, her frustration as clear as her desire to change the subject.

'Does it matter?' Mav countered.

She ignored his question. '*Escaping Juárez? Killer Mistress? The Dogs of Despair?*'

'Movies?' he guessed.

'Very good, Mav,' she replied sarcastically.

'Sierra, the last movie I watched was *Barbie*. It was *two hours* long. And Poppy didn't even understand most of it. She just liked the songs and colours. So, unless this Nina Keller played Barbie—'

'Oh my God, you don't even know who Margot Robbie is.' She looked genuinely devastated.

'... Barbie?'

Sierra let her head fall back on a groan. 'I worry about you. Truly.'

Maverick pushed to his feet, Sierra's neat notes and the NDAs rolled in his hands. 'I'm going to ask Benji not to come to the meetings anymore,' he said, redirecting them momentarily. 'I think the distance will be good for you both.'

'It's been eight months.' Her eyes glassed over instantly. 'Time isn't going to fix anything. Just leave it alone.'

Mav didn't walk around her desk and hug her as he might have once, knowing Sierra wouldn't have welcomed it. She wanted – needed – to pretend that everything was fine. But pretending only got a person so far. Sierra was a dam wall in a flood; she was just waiting to break.

Still, because he would always be on her side, he asked, 'Do you want me to tell him to leave?'

'No. I wouldn't do that. To him. Or to you.'

'I would understand. Shit, so would he.' But his heart broke for her. For both of them. Sierra might have been his little sister, but Benji was his brother in every way that counted.

He and Benji had been best friends since first grade. They'd laughed together, cried together, bled together. A decade ago, when Maverick had decided to diversify the ranch after his parents' death, it had been Benji who had come back to help him build. When his ex,

Shannon, had left him with a newborn, it had been Benji who had been the first to come and help, even though he'd known as much about babies as Mav had – zero.

So, while Mav's loyalty belonged to his sister, his heart had torn equally in two when they had broken up.

'Was there anything else?' Sierra asked, but she turned back to her computer and began clacking away without waiting for a reply.

Anything else? Mav thought. There was *everything* else. But one glance at his sister's rigid posture and tightly composed face had him replying, 'No. Nothing else. I'll see you at home later.'

He whistled, waking Shadow and calling the dog to his side.

And he left.

Needing to get away from the tightness in his own chest, Maverick went straight to the barn.

The familiar smell of the horses was enough to ease some of the pressure, as always. Mav, who wasn't very talkative or very social, had always preferred animals to people. Animals only gave. And if you understood them and were kind to them, they gave you their all, always.

He watched as the horsemen – women included – worked, cleaning out hooves, brushing out coats, manes, and tails, and stalling and feeding those horses that were on grain or various supplements. He joined in, working alongside them wordlessly until the last horse had been seen to, and only then did he detour to the new rescue.

The mare had been stalled to keep her fed and safe from the other horses until they could figure out which of the various herds she could be turned out with. There were bound to be some bites and kicks as the animals reconfigured their pecking order to accommodate her, but Mav wouldn't put her through it until she could hold her own.

The mare stood in the corner of the stall, her head hanging low, her bony hipbones nearly poking through her skin. Her pale coat was covered in mud, her white-blond mane and tail knotted in ugly bunches. Superficial slices and gouges marred her, and Maverick knew he would only find more once he eventually got her clean. Her eyes ...

Her eyes were so soulful and sad – until she saw him. Then she arched her neck back, moving her face as far away from him as she could, even though he hadn't opened her stall door yet. Her eyes rolled back until he saw their whites. It was pure, wild terror.

Looking at her didn't even make him sad. It made him angry. He knew that pain begot pain and that some people were never given the chance to be kind, and still, he didn't understand how anyone could break a spirit so routinely, so thoroughly.

'No need to be dramatic,' he said at plain speaking volume.

He talked to her while he mixed her food and supplements. When he was done, he opened her stall door. He stepped inside, all the while breathing deeply and audibly, and without looking at her, emptied her grain into the feeding tray.

He stood with his back to her as he mixed it with his hands, but it was only when she edged closer to him and snorted that he angled his body, creating a wide opening for her to access the grain.

Maverick talked to her the entire time, saying useless things like, 'I know you're hungry,' 'You're so pretty.' And when she took that last step and came abreast of him to eat, 'Good girl.'

He saw Benji standing at the stall door out of the corner of his eye, said, 'She's not feral,' as he reached out one hand and patted the mare's neck. 'Someone loved this horse once – before she got passed down the line.'

'Yeah,' he agreed. 'She's only hurting.'

'Did you manage to do her hooves yet?'

'Cleaned them myself. Took me a goddamn hour, even with the sedative.'

'Are they in bad shape?'

'Mostly looks like a bit of overgrowth. No bad chipping or abscesses.'

Maverick nodded as he continued to stroke the horse's neck. 'We should name her at some point.'

'Let one of the guests do it,' Benji suggested. 'They always get a kick out of it.'

'Yeah. Good idea.'

A silence followed, and Mav, knowing that Benji was very rarely quiet, calmly stroked the horse as his friend figured out what he

wanted to say.

It didn't take him long.

'I'm moving on, Mav. She needs space, and I can't ... I can't be close and not reach out.'

Maverick nodded slowly, though the pain came back in full force. 'Where will you go?'

'I don't know. Haven't figured that out yet. But I have enough saved up to get by for a long while. Figured I'd travel, maybe wrangle a few temp jobs along the way to keep Diablo in work.'

At mention of his name, Benji's dun Mustang, Diablo, poked his head over his stall door behind them. He snorted.

Benji turned to face him. 'I wasn't talking to you. Don't be nosy.'

Diablo stared at him for a long moment before turning his butt pointedly in Benji's direction.

Maverick laughed. 'That horse has you wrapped around his hoof.'

Benji only shrugged. 'He always has.' He dusted the stall door distractedly. 'Anyway, I figured I'd work through the summer. Give you time to find my replacement. Head out at the end of August.'

'I hate to see you go.'

'Yeah.' Benji glanced away, cleared his throat. 'But we both know I can't stay.'

'I think you and Sierra need to sit down and talk. Fight. Just speak to each other! It might help.'

Benji only shook his head. 'Our kid died, Mav. Nothing is going to help.' He tapped the door once before stepping back, repeated, 'August,' before turning and walking away.