

HEARTLAND

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CHAPTER ONE

Where in the hell am I? Rachel was lost. She had been driving around in what seemed like circles for the past twenty minutes. The directions had been pretty clear, but it was obvious that she had missed a turn somewhere. The road was narrow, but she pulled off to the side as far as possible and looked at the map again. She had only been paying half attention the entire two-hour drive from Phoenix, her mind ticking off the unchecked items on her to-do list. She had worked practically nonstop for weeks preparing for this long-overdue vacation. She was tired and grouchy and had a splitting headache.

The sound of another vehicle approaching drew Rachel's attention from the wrinkled paper in her lap. She looked up just in time to see a bright red flash round the curve in front of her. She saw the Jeep an instant before the other driver saw her, and their eyes locked in surprise.

"Holy shit!" Shivley exclaimed, spotting the tan sedan stopped on the narrow road. Stomping on the brakes with both feet and grabbing her dog Lucy by the collar all in one motion, she skidded to a stop just inches in front of the car. "Son of a

bitch!” She unlatched her seat belt and vaulted out of the Jeep, Lucy following after her.

Not waiting for the dust to clear, she said, “What in the hell do you think you’re doing stopped in the middle of the road like that? You could have got yourself killed, or worse—you could have killed somebody else with your foolishness!” She stopped her ranting when the other driver stepped out of the car and onto the hard dirt road.

Shivley’s eyes blazed a trail up from a pair of well-worn work boots to long, slim legs covered by a pair of faded jeans buttoned over a flat stomach. She lingered too long on perfectly formed breasts covered by a thin white tank top. A smooth brown neck led to a pair of very kissable lips partially hidden by golden hair blowing in the breeze. Crystal clear blue eyes stared back at her.

“Oh my God! Are you all right?” the woman said. “I think I’m lost and I was looking at my map again to get my bearings. I pulled off to the side as far as I could. I hadn’t seen anybody on this road since the highway and I didn’t expect to run into anyone. I’m sorry if I frightened you.”

When the woman finally stopped to take a breath Shivley knew she needed to say something, but her voice froze somewhere in her throat. She realized she was standing there with her mouth gaping open but was helpless to do anything about it. The dog sitting attentively by her side began to growl.

“Lucy, quiet,” Shivley was finally able to croak out. The Queensland heeler immediately quieted down and sat patiently at her side. Shivley’s heart was still racing from the adrenaline of almost hitting the car or worse if she had swerved. There was no guardrail on the dirt road, and the drop to the left was steep and rocky.

“Are you going to speak to me or just stand there and look

at me like I just fell out of the sky?” the woman asked with her hands on her hips.

Jeez, Shivley, get a grip. “I—I’m sorry,” she stammered out of politeness. “I guess you just caught me off guard.” Her mouth was dry, and her voice didn’t sound like hers at all. She cleared her throat and swallowed a few times. “I’m all right. I was just surprised to round the corner and find you sitting here.” Shivley was not sure if she was making coherent conversation or not. She’d been overwhelmed by the woman the instant she stepped out of the car. “You said you were lost. What are you trying to find?” Shivley had lived in and around this area most of her adult life and knew most of the roads and landmarks.

“Let me get my map,” the woman replied, turning and walking back to the rental car. When she leaned through the open window to grab the map, Shivley moaned at the perfectly round ass encased in tight jeans that fit her like a second skin. The way she walked and carried herself, Shivley came to the conclusion that this was not a city girl. “Snap out of it, Shivley. You act as if you’ve never seen a woman before,” she mumbled to herself when the woman backed out of the car window and headed her way.

“I’m looking for forest road number 23A. I’m usually very good with directions, but I have no idea where I am or how to get there, and my friends are probably worried about me by now.” She frowned as she held the map out and indicated where she thought she was.

When she pointed to a place on the map, Shivley noticed that she wasn’t wearing a wedding ring, nor was there any evidence that one had ever been there. The scent of perfume drifted to her in the light breeze, and she found it difficult to concentrate. She took a small step back to focus on the conversation and familiarize herself with the map. “You passed

it. It's about a mile back on this same road we're on now. It's narrower than this one, so it's no wonder you missed it. If you don't know where it is, you might never find it."

"I'm glad to hear that. I'm pretty good with maps and directions, but I was starting to feel a little stupid because I couldn't find it."

"I can imagine." *Boy, can I ever imagine.* Shivley quickly shut down that thought. She had work to do, and thoughts as pleasant as the ones that were flashing through her mind were distracting. In two days she would be responsible for ten women, and she had to keep her mind clear. She told herself she had no time for diversions, but her mind had other ideas that were transmitted to very specific parts of her body. Her heart had ceased its insistent drumming only slightly, but she remained acutely aware of the beautiful woman standing in front of her.

The ensuing silence was a bit awkward, and Rachel struggled with something to say to prolong the conversation. She didn't know why she wanted it to continue. It wasn't as if she was going to be around to get to know this woman. Hell, she wasn't even going to be around long enough to have an affair with her unless she wanted to fuck right here and now in the dirt. *Hey, now that's an idea.*

For the first time, Rachel took a good look at the driver of the vehicle that had come inches from crashing into her. She was taller than Rachel's own five foot seven by at least three or four inches. She had thick, curly hair that was so brown it gleamed in the midday sun. Her hands looked strong and powerful, and her short-sleeve shirt clearly displayed the muscles underneath her tanned skin. Long, muscular legs a shade lighter than her arms snaked out from beneath a pair of khaki cargo shorts. The words "strong" and "powerful" immediately came to mind. Rachel's headache disappeared

and goose bumps rose on her arms. Eyes as black as coal returned her gaze with a twinkle that told Rachel she had been caught looking. *Oops, busted. Good God, Rachel, you really do need to get laid soon.*

“Well, I guess I’d better be getting along, then.” Rachel’s comment sounded halfhearted.

“I suppose so.” Shivley didn’t want her to go but knew it was ridiculous to try to stop her. “Back that way about a mile,” she reiterated and pointed for emphasis. She held the paper out to the other woman.

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” Rachel took the map and their fingers lightly grazed each other.

Shivley glanced at her hand where the woman had inadvertently touched her. It looked perfectly normal, but the spot where they had touched felt like it had just been scorched with a hot poker. Shivley quickly rubbed it several times and took a deep breath.

“Come on, Lucy, let’s go.” The dog sprang to life at her command, eager to be on the way.

“Thanks again for your help,” Rachel added, not knowing what else to say. She carefully turned her rental car around on the narrow road and waited for the Jeep to pass. There was something about the woman that was intriguing, but Rachel couldn’t quite put her finger on it. She seethed sensuality in an understated way almost to the point of not having a clue of its effect. She was definitely a lesbian and far different from the women Rachel was typically attracted to. They were hot, they knew it, and they used it to their advantage every chance they had. This was refreshing, if only for a few minutes.

Shivley passed the tan sedan, and a vague sense of loss came over her. She had been drawn to the driver in a way she had neither expected nor experienced in several years. She was so absorbed in her work that she rarely took time for

herself and only came into town to pick up supplies. Her social skills—no, correct that—her *flirting* skills had atrophied due to lack of use, and Shivley frowned as she wondered why that suddenly bothered her.