

Chapter 1

There were two realities. The first was her picture-perfect life in the countryside on a ranch with her handsome and overly protective husband, Jed, and their two little boys, Danny, five, and Christopher, three. It was her happily ever after, and nothing bad could ever touch her there. In the second, Diana Friessen, daughter of the town whore, would forever be tainted by the sins of her mother, always having to remind herself she was worthy of being loved.

It was difficult, if not downright impossible some days, to process her past, which she had long since separated from the person she was now. Who was Diana Friessen? She had defined herself for so long by surviving, by carrying the weight of someone else's wrongs. She had brought that weight into her picture, making the ache, the pain, and the hurt part of her story until she left, only to return years later and be swept off her feet by love.

She was loved by Jed. She could see how much she was a part of him from the moments they spent together and everything he did for her. He wanted—no, needed to have her here at home, raising his boys. She had once believed this was because he didn't want to compete with her career, and truth be told, Jed was not a man who could ever come second. He wasn't made that way, and she didn't think she could love a man who could settle for the bits and pieces tossed his way. He was her everything, and she'd given up all she'd chosen just to be his. He had built a business conducting horse clinics, working with children, some with special needs. He was an amazing man, and he filled her with such hope and completeness that she would never have loneliness as her bed partner again.

She'd give it all up again, too, even though she loved knowing she had a law degree, an achievement all her own, and she could begin a practice at any time. It was something she'd begun thinking of more and more as of late: having something that was just hers.

"What are you thinking?" Jed slid his hand around her stomach, pulling her against him so she could feel all his hardness and the way his amazing body molded against hers. They were made for each other, and she loved how she fit him so perfectly, comfortably. He pressed his cheek, which was rough with whiskers from two days without shaving, against hers.

She reached her hand back to touch him, his face, his head, as he held her as he always did, in a way that let her know he'd never let her fall.

"Oh, life and things," she said as he kissed her cheek, and of course she smiled, as being loved by Jed was something she had to remind herself every day never to take for granted. He gave her all of himself.

"Tell me," he said without letting her go as she swayed against him.

"I was thinking of a lot of things, how you make me feel safe, and for so long I've felt as if I could finally heal, knowing you were taking care of everything, me and the kids, and just being loved by you." She sighed, and he didn't say anything but slid his other arm around her front, over her breasts, and then held her shoulder, wrapping her up in him so she could touch his wrist and hold on. "I realized, too, I'm not who I used to be."

"Sounds like you're bothered by something." He kissed her cheek again as she breathed deeply, relaxing.

"Not so much bothered but considering." She noticed a car coming down their long driveway in the distance. With the dust and the fact that they lived so far out of town on flat land she could see for miles, no one could sneak up on them. "You expecting anyone?" She started to straighten when Jed stepped to her side, sliding his hand around her hip, holding her to him.

"No," he replied.

She didn't say anything else, her stomach knotting at the sight of a faded blue compact.

For a minute, she wished Jed would say something, because he had to know how uncomfortable she was. The man could read her like no other, and she couldn't hide anything from him.

"Isn't that...?" He stopped, frowning, as the car pulled up in front of the small house, zipping in beside Diana's SUV.

Diana's hand slid up to her throat on instinct. She wasn't sure whether she had gasped until Jed touched her arm, drawing her gaze to him. She hadn't realized he'd been watching her.

"I can't believe this. Your mother is back. What the hell is she thinking, after I sent her on her way?" Jed sounded really mad, and Diana didn't have a chance to answer when the car door shut.

"Oh, hi there!" Faye Claremont said as she darted around the front of the car in a light blue T-shirt and matching pencil skirt, wearing inch-high sandals. Her deep red hair was brushed back into a ponytail, her lips painted bright red, and she had a curvy body that screamed sex. "Well, just looky here at all you've done to this place. It's looking mighty fine from when I was here last." She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, taking in the one-story house and the addition Jed had built. It had white siding, green trim, and a front deck with a finished railing. Diana wanted to scream at her to shut up.

Jed said nothing as he glanced between Diana and her mother. "And when exactly was that?" he asked. For a moment, Faye's bright vivid smile faltered before she stepped on the bottom of the stairs.

"Why, just last week. Didn't Diana tell you I stopped by?"

She could feel Jed's fingers digging in to her hips, holding her to him as she touched the railing of the front deck, which looked over the acres of flat land. She looked away to the barn and indoor arena where Jed held his clinics. She could hear a horse nicker from the barn, and she swallowed, her tongue thick, unsure of what the hell to say, wishing she could crawl away and hide. Yes, her mother had stopped by not once but twice after how many years? It had rocked Diana's world, and each time had been unannounced. Faye was trying to worm her way back into her life, or so it seemed.

"So what can I do for you, Faye?" Jed said, not giving a hint that somehow, he and Diana could keep secrets from each other.

"Well, I wanted to see my daughter and try to make amends, and I feel as if we're making some real progress. Ain't that right, baby?" Faye smiled brightly to Diana, and she wondered whether Jed could hear the strangled noise she was making or if it was all in her head.

"Faye, I made it very clear to you the first time that you're not to come back here. I don't want you coming around here, upsetting my wife." Jed was quite direct, and Diana also knew he'd likely have a word or two with her later. The overwhelming guilt ate away at her, because she hadn't shared with Jed the fact that Faye Claremont had ignored his decree and kept coming back. Even now, she couldn't explain why.

"That isn't my intention. It was never my intent to cause any upset to my daughter, and I feel honestly that we were making progress." She was looking toward Diana, and this time Jed was also staring down at her.

"Why do you keep coming here? I didn't ask you to come." Diana had finally found her voice, and it sounded so strange, so weak.

"I need to make amends, and I told you that. I can't even begin to make things right after what happened, being taken from you. I just had a lot of years to think about it, and you're my daughter.

No matter what's happened, I know there's no excuse for what I put you through. I made a lot of bad choices. I know that now."

"Faye." Jed leaned on the railing, resting on his forearms, looking down on her. He was no longer touching Diana, but he hadn't moved from her side. "I appreciate you wanting to make amends to my wife, but I was also clear that you weren't to come back here and were to leave my wife be. I don't take kindly to anyone messing with my wife, hurting her, upsetting her. You understand that your bridge here has already burned." He said it so calmly and flicked his hand toward her, but there was no mistaking his meaning.

Faye flashed her big blue eyes, smiling up at him. What was she thinking, trying to turn the charm on Diana's husband? Maybe she realized her mistake, as she suddenly dialed it back a bit. This was the first time she'd had a chance to admire Jed, to ogle him, but she must have understood clearly that Jed was not the man for her to be setting her sights on. Diana wanted to smack her for crossing that line.

"You're a very lucky woman, Diana, to have a husband like the one you have. I'd have given anything for it, but it wasn't in the cards for me. I did the best I could, and maybe that wasn't good enough. It was what it was." She opened her purse and pulled out a pamphlet, then stepped closer and held it out, but Jed reached around Diana and took it. She couldn't make herself look at it, just stared at the woman who'd given birth to her, whom Diana favored, who'd made her childhood hell and made her doubt everything good in her life.

"It's my group." Faye gestured to the paper Jed was holding. "We meet on Thursdays, and I'd really like you to come." Instead of pushing, going on and on as she always had about everything, her life and her crap, she stepped back, looking sadly over at Diana before turning and walking back to her car, where she slid behind the wheel.

As Faye drove away, leaving a trail of dust behind her, Jed turned to Diana and said, "So how about you explain why you lied to me?"

Chapter 2

Seeing the haunted look on his wife's face made Jed want to hold her even as he fought the urge to shake her and yell at her. What the hell had she been thinking, allowing her mother back here and then keeping it from him?

He did none of that, though. Instead, he crossed his arms, and Diana just stood there as if trying to figure out what to say. Her deep red vibrant hair was now touching her shoulders. She had chopped her long waves into a boyish shag after her mother had shown up all those months ago, because she feared being anything like her mother. He'd thought Faye had only been there one time, especially after he'd warned her not to come back. What had Diana been thinking?

"I didn't lie to you, Jed. I wouldn't do that. I didn't tell you she came, is all."

"That's the same in my book, and you know it, Diana. It's lying by omission. Hasn't this already been played out in our lives?" He kept his hands right where they were even though he was tempted to put them on her shoulders. That would be a mistake, with the way he was feeling. "It makes me wonder if there isn't more you're keeping from me."

She flinched as if he'd slapped her. "No. I'm not hiding things from you. You make me sound so awful." The emotion in her voice, the way she said it, should have been enough to convince him.

"Well, what am I to think when I find out Faye's been here again and you've said nothing? Did you invite her?"

Her eyes widened. "You must think pretty low of me, Jed, to believe I would invite my mother here. I didn't want her to come back. She just showed up, and you weren't here." She stepped away, running her fingers through her hair and then pressing her palm to her forehead, shutting her eyes. She opened her mouth to say something, but nothing more than a squeak came out.

"What, Diana? Talk to me. What's going through that head of yours?" He just watched her, waiting out this internal struggle she couldn't hide from him.

"She was here twice. She keeps saying she wants to make up for what happened."

"And?" He gestured toward her.

"She's Faye, and I can't shake this little voice that pops up in my head telling me she's still my mother. I know it's sick and twisted that I think I owe her something, but I hear her say to me over and over that she's my mother and she wants a second chance. She wants me to forgive her. She'd like a do-over. I know, Jed, from the way you're looking at me, that there's no way she should be setting one foot here, and I should send her away, but part of me feels abandoned and wants to be able to forgive her. Then I'm disgusted with myself for thinking it. That's why I didn't say anything, because I don't want you looking at me the way you are now." Her hand was shaking as she held it up, gesturing.

"Diana, the way I'm looking at you now is because you should have told me you were thinking this way, feeling this way. Yeah, I would have told you to stop it and then gone on to convince you how wonderful and kind and good you are until you believe it—because you are. You have a family now, and Faye may have given birth to you, but she isn't your mother. I don't understand why you have this need to forgive her, but I'm not going to tell you not to. All I can say is she'll never have my forgiveness, and I don't want her messing with you again. You keeping it a secret isn't okay, Diana. We made a lot of promises to each other, and when I put my ring on your finger and made you my wife, I promised to love and protect you. We said a lot of other things to each other, too, but that you would be keeping things from me wasn't one of them. I'll have your promise now, Diana. No more secrets. No more not telling me your mother's showing up here and pressuring you to make things right."

She rested her hands on his arms, and he stepped closer to her, running his hands over her shoulders and her pale shirtsleeves. She was looking up at him. “That goes both ways, though, Jed. We share everything. That means you, too.”

Damn woman. There were things he couldn't and wouldn't share with her, so he looked away. More than anything, it was his job, his role, to look after her.

“Jed? I mean it. You want my promise, then I'll have yours.”

He sighed and was trying to figure out how she could turn things as she was. “I'm your husband. I promised to protect you, and I'll do that however I need to. It's not the same.”

Diana allowed her hand to fall away as she stepped back and stared out into the sun. “You know what, Jed? I love you very much, but you can be so hypocritical. It doesn't work that way, where you expect everything from me, my thoughts, my feelings, for me to share everything, but not the same of yourself. Do you not remember before when you did this, falling from the barn roof, almost dying, leaving me to find out how dire our finances were?”

“Diana,” he started, but he had to stop as he thought of all he'd never shared with his wife. That had been one time. He'd tried to protect her and hold everything together. After all, it was his job to look after his family. “Everything I never shared was to protect you. You know that,” he said—but there was also the secret of his mother and the affair she'd had with his uncle. Just learning the ugly truth a few weeks before had been hard on Jed and his brothers, Brad and Neil. It had been hard on his cousin, Andy, too. It had rocked all of them and was his parents' secret, something he couldn't divulge. “Some things aren't mine to share,” he said.

“I see.” Diana was pulling away from him, and she glanced at her watch. “I need to go pick up Danny and Cristopher from school.” She didn't look at him as she walked into the house and came back out a few minutes later with her purse and keys, and she didn't glance his way as she went down the steps. She was halfway to her SUV when he called out to her.

“Diana!”

She stopped, and he didn't miss how she stiffened. She didn't turn around, but after a second, she did turn her head, fighting not to look his way.

“We've been through a lot of things, Diana, but you walking away mad like this is you being unreasonable.” Jed didn't like this wall between them, and walking away from one another wasn't something they did.

“Well, Jed, the problem is you seem to think it's a one-way street. I share everything with you, give everything to you, and walk away from all I've had for you, but you give up nothing of yourself, share what you choose, and hide from me what you think I can't handle. It's really sad that you think so little of me.”

This time she climbed in her SUV and drove away.

For the first time, Jed suspected that his comfortable life, and his right to have everything he'd ever wanted as he wanted it, suddenly wasn't so perfect after all.

Chapter 3

She listened to Jed reading Christopher and Danny one of their favorite bedtime stories about a donkey and an owl. It was one she'd heard a hundred times, so many that she remembered the words. She listened to her little boys and the excitement in their voices, and of course she could picture the animation on Jed's face as he read, his children curled up against him, one on each side, held by a father who loved them. His love, out of everything, could never be questioned.

He did love them, deeply. He was there for his children, raising them, always there to lend a hand to Diana. He was such a good father, lover, and best friend. She squeezed the sponge and dumped it into the sink. She wouldn't trade him for anything, even though he made her so angry at times that she wanted to scream. She also knew, if she allowed herself to admit it, that keeping things from her was Jed's way of protecting her, but she wanted a little more now. She wanted him to know she wasn't some fragile, broken thing who couldn't handle hearing something bad. She was stronger than that. She knew he needed to keep her safe, but why did he have to see her as so weak?

"Can we talk?"

She jumped, her heart skipping a beat. She hadn't heard her husband come in, and there he was, standing just outside the kitchen, watching her. Asking to talk wasn't something he did. In fact, any time she asked that same question, she'd see something in his eyes as if he wanted to head for the hills.

She nodded, feeling the anger she'd felt this afternoon kick up again. As she stepped forward, she crossed her arms so she wouldn't be tempted to touch him. This time, she had to hold her ground and stand firm. It was so easy for Jed to get her to see things his way.

"Diana, why are you so mad? What is this really about?"

Was he kidding? "You're treating me as if I'll break."

He was shaking his head. "You don't get it, do you?" He wasn't giving an inch. In fact, he stepped closer to her so he was in her space, and she had to look up into his handsome face. He still hadn't shaved, and his brown hair was a little mussed, probably from running his fingers through it and from the cowboy hat he wore all day every day when he was outside. His scent always comforted her. She wanted to lean in. Her body craved him.

"Enlighten me, Jed, because I'm feeling as if everything in this marriage is one sided."

"This isn't about that." He stepped in closer, his body touching her. "This is about me being so in love with you and remembering all the pain and hurt you carried when we met for what you survived as a child, what you had lived through with your mother. You were like this wounded spirit who's now healing, and when she showed up here that first time, I've never seen a fear like that in you. When you didn't tell me she came back..." He jabbed his hand toward the door. "That woman has an agenda, and you kept it from me when she had the nerve to show up here again. I'm your husband. Someone messes with you, they mess with me, and when you don't tell me Faye's been here, it says you don't trust me, or you're hiding something, and we don't hide things from each other, not like this."

He was right about that, but she also wondered what it was he was keeping from her, because Jed kept secrets, and now she knew there was something else he was hiding.

"All right, I agree, but I didn't keep it from you because I don't trust you. I don't know why I didn't say anything, other than I was trying to sort it through in my own mind. She's my mother. It's my past, which I have to come to peace with, and it's my fear that what she did will somehow touch you and the boys like it did me. Then days passed, and I couldn't say anything."

“But that’s what I’m saying, Diana. It’s not all on you. I need you to tell me, not hide things from me.”

She raised her hands and fisted them when she wanted to take hold of his shirt and touch him.

“Husband and wife, Diana. No secrets,” he said again.

“Okay, I get it, no secrets. That means you, too, Jed. Whatever it is that you’re hiding, that you’re holding on to, it’s not fair of you to think you have the right to hide a part of yourself from me. You just said it: We’re husband and wife.” She gestured to her ring finger, to his ring, and this time he placed his large hand over hers, holding it against his chest.

“I’m not hiding anything of myself or a part of me from you, Diana.”

She could tell there was something he wasn’t saying. “Yes, but you do keep things from me—even what you said to my mother the first time you sent her away. You had me go into the house, and yes, I was grateful when you took care of it, but you never told me what you said.”

He just watched her, his gaze heavy. “I told her that if she messed with you, it would be the same as messing with me, and I wouldn’t allow it. I told her she wasn’t to set foot back here again, because she wouldn’t like my reaction. Apparently, she didn’t listen to my friendly warning.” He lifted his hand to touch her face, sliding the back of his fingers over her cheek.

She gripped his hand. “Okay,” she said, nodding. He had told her, but she also knew there was something else, and it was a puzzle she would have to figure out. “There’s more, though, something else you don’t want to tell me about. If it’s not about you, it’s someone else.”

By the way he pulled away from her, she could tell she was close to something.

“Your family?” she said. “Something happened?”

This time, he did turn away, rubbing his hand up the back of his head. When he turned to her, she knew she’d nailed it. It was in his expression. “Diana, it’s not my secret to share, or I’d tell you. And before you compare this to you hiding your mother showing up here—well, don’t, because it isn’t about me or something that affects us in any way. It doesn’t.”

She could tell he was quite bothered by whatever it was. “Jed, is it something that happened in your family, with your brothers...with Andy?”

He gave her an exasperated look, shaking his head. “No, it’s not them, but they know. Look, Diana, don’t keep poking down this road. It’s something I was never meant to know. It’s not my secret to share. I promised I wouldn’t.”

Well, this was a puzzle. If it wasn’t Neil or Brad or Andy, who was it? “Not your parents?” she said, seeing a hurt on Jed’s face that she’d never seen before. Something was bothering him. She was getting warmer, and this game was not something her husband was taking kindly to.

“Look. Drop it, please, because I don’t want this in my head. I love my mom and dad, they’re the best parents ever, and they were there for us growing up. They were our rock, and learning something about their past that doesn’t put them in a good light...I don’t want to know it. Would you want Danny and Christopher to know about everything your mom did, what you lived through?”

Whatever happened, she could see how much it bothered him. “No, I wouldn’t, but if the time came that I had to tell them, I would.”

This time, Jed was shaking his head. “Well, Diana, this...” He gestured to his head and took a breath as if he couldn’t finish. “I don’t want you to know because it puts my mom in a bad light, and I’ve had a hard time, the last few days they were here, tiptoeing around and making sure she didn’t know I’d found out. I promised Dad. We all did, after finding out something this bad. So let it go, please. I don’t want you seeing Mom for anything other than who she is now.”

Now she was scared, and she ached for her husband and his mother, whom she loved dearly. “Jed, do you have any idea what you’re saying? When you leave me hanging like that, I’m starting to think some pretty bad things, probably way worse than what happened...”

“She had an affair with Uncle Todd!” he shouted, then stepped back as if he couldn’t believe what he’d said.

Whoa! It took a second for her to realize how horrible this was for him. “No, Jed, not your mom. That’s my mother, not yours.”

“You just couldn’t stop pushing,” he said. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have told you. It’s something you shouldn’t have in your head, and I sure as hell shouldn’t, either.”

As she stood there, trying to figure out what to say, Jed turned, reached for his hat, and opened the front door.

“I’m going to feed the horses,” he said, and the door closed.

Diana watched her husband from the window as he walked toward the barn. She wished she’d listened to Jed and not pushed so hard, because his mother’s deep dark secret was something she didn’t feel entitled to know. “Oh, Jed, I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

