

STEFANIA SALERNO

"I can't keep up with a reality  
that is no longer my own."

# Bound by Deception

WILDER RANCH



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From the same author:

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ME AGAIN — Starting over

# 1

*Luck is blindfolded, but misfortune's watching over me*

It burns.

The torrid air on my skin is scratching the exposed wounds, ready to remind me of what I want to forget at all costs.

My hands' calluses instead remind me I've been at the wheel of my husband's black Buick Enclave for the past four days, only stopping to refuel. I'm already trembling at the idea of stopping again because, under these conditions, I'm sure not a pretty sight and I have to keep paying attention, leaving no trace of my journey.

I've only got a few dollars left in my purse, having sold the jewelry I had on me and, if I want to make it to Texas, I have to hold out because Andrew would've already gone out of his mind and reported me to the feds.

This silence inside of me, however, is noisier than the drunken, distorted laughter of the thirsty, angry beasts I left behind in Barstow, a nice little town that will now be my punishment. *I have to keep going.*

I've almost destroyed my rims and tires by having traveled on dirt roads and shortcuts with a car that isn't ideal for them, trying to stay on the down-low as much as possible. I must've surely damaged something else because I can hear strange noises every pothole and jolt I take full-on.

I can't but say the same about myself. I can hear my heart skipping beats because I'm tired, my vision blurred by recurring visions. My head is so heavy for all these dreadful moments.

I'm doing the right thing, I'm telling myself over and over. Coming to Houston could be my only chance of salvation. Knowing that is little comfort; it keeps on violently hammering in my head, only



becoming in the worst moments a tacit question that I now wouldn't find an answer for. I'm sure of as much.

I deceived myself, thinking it would've been easier to disappear into thin air without leaving a trace.

In the movies, someone fleeing is always the start of every self-respecting thriller. I'm getting to feel the same strange feeling as the main characters, of always feeling one's breath down your neck. Every male, every look, every hurried greeting at a gas station seemed suspect to me and even when I sold my husband's gold bracelet at the pawn shop, they looked at me like I was a thief on the run. Then again, maybe it's only me imagining everybody seeing the world as sped up and distorted as I now see it.

Screams, moans, blood and that smell of alcohol still haunt me. These are chiseled into my memory, continuing to do damage for God knows how much longer.

I'm thirsty, *really* thirsty, but I've finished the last bottle of water a few miles back. I'm not even thinking out stopping now. My wrist and ankle are still hurting; I'm sure this will pass, however. After all, everything else has and this can't be any other way.

I sit easier in my seat as I'm driving this desolate, endless roads, but all this is no use because the body complains of the pain their every jolt causes me. I'm reminded why this is the state I'm in.

I start showing signs of breaking down. I don't know how much longer I'll be able to stay seated at the wheel before I drop dead. My survival instinct, which — thank God! — hasn't yet left me, pushes me to keep going.

*Such a ridiculous story.*

For a moment, I uncomfortably let myself go into despair as the landscape is flowing slowly out of the closed window and flattening. I feel as I'm being cooked in Hell and that's with the air conditioning on.

*What a life!* I keep telling myself this.

I've tried living right, working together with people who, deeply unconsciously, I used to believe were worthy of my life plan. Then, completely unexpectedly, I found myself in something more like dreamy delirium than something real.

If I were to recount all of this to my old girlfriends who worked with me, carefree, at the newspaper, they'd laugh so hard at me. That was the life I'd chosen, the one that should've moved me forward. Everything always seemed fun with them and, of course, they'd make fun of the Faith I am today.

*Where am I going now?*

I'm waiting for a sign, a little something to tell me I got there. Something to say my life can finally change course and take on a different direction. For now, I'm trying to get to Houston; *then*, we'll see.

In California, I left behind a husband I was unhappily married to for four years. In two months, I'll turn thirty-four and even though there's nothing worth celebrating, I've already wished to the stars for something. Who knows? Maybe it'll be a good one this time.

The thought of having anything more to do with this thug makes me sick. I just follow through with it.

"Fuck!" I curse as the motor's starting to make very disconcerting noises. It coughs almost furiously before stopping in a dense white haze.

Stopping on the side of an asphalt road at almost 104 without water and the sun still high up there, it just isn't the best chance of survival, never mind the engine almost melting during a getaway. Maybe that was just what the needle on the dashboard was telling me, having stayed in the red the past few miles.

That was all I needed. On my own and a few miles away from Fort Davis County, the last slither of civilization, I can't even use the phone to ask for help. Actually, I should get rid of it right away.

In front of me, there's nothing beyond a straight, desolate road and I almost start smoking like my engine. I scream from inside the car, high-pitched and furious, because luck is blindfolded, but misfortune's watching over me.

I come out of the car, forgoing the benefits of the air con, and the heat smacks me upside the head. *This one as well!* The irony of fate it is. I turn my head and am about to give in to fatigue. I've been so busy driving non-stop to get out of California, I didn't think of stopping at the right places to eat and rest. Now, my stomach's asking for its bill. I close the door behind me in a huff as my wrist, having been brutally jerked and crushed by that brute's feet, is still hurting. It's bruised, too; I only hope it's not broken.

I've got my cellphone switched off in the other hand. The temptation of turning it on to get help is strong. Straight away, I come to my senses.

"No, dammit!" I curse to show my annoyance and get rid of the last link with the past I have. I throw the phone over the side of the road into what looks like a creek's mouth, hoping the people associated with the numbers in it would disappear. One person in particular.

I try to open the glovebox to see what's been going on and a cloud of smoke vaporizes my face, as if I were benefitting from a sauna at a spa.

I've never understood a thing about automobiles. I'm bitterly regretting that now.

*When you're in a pickle, you might as well enjoy the taste*

"Well, there's a nice bit of trouble!" says a male voice behind me.

I jump out of my skin, frightened, overwhelmed by the Siamese *mahori* drums accompanying the dance of war in my head. I didn't even hear him coming and, had it been Andrew, he could've taken me out in a single blow.

*I really am going out of my mind, it's true.*

I turn to look at the man behind me and, I have to say, had I still cared about the male gender, this guy would just be an example I'd bear in mind.

"Pardon me?" I ask, trying to determine how dangerous my adversary is, that is to say the man in front of me who seems, however, to be ignoring me. My anxiety suddenly shot up and this stranger may well have noticed as he keeps on talking, irrespective of my out-of-proportion reaction.

I don't know why, but there's something in the way he carries himself. Sure of himself and full of arrogance, this tells me he'll be bringing trouble in.

"I think you need a hand, unless you chose to have a barbecue here on Route 90," he answers, getting fresh and pointing to the engine that's still smoking.

"That's as may be, but thank you. I don't need your help," I tell him, at a loss as to his inopportune sarcasm.

*I recognize him. Now's not the best time; on other occasions, some other girl would surely take advantage of this.*

He's looking me up and down at least once. I'm thinking he's trying to get an idea as to who I am. I stop to do the same to him and I only notice in that moment I'm still wearing the ragged and filthy clothes from the other night.

A flashing neon light in the dark of night would've been less conspicuous than me with nearly nothing on.

"You sure?" he asks, taking a step toward me with a mimicry I find a little too familiar. His voice is low and warm. A sexy voice ... The instinct in me reawakens — too much, even — and finally takes the lead.

"Positive. I'll call breakdown assistance and get them to pick me up," I answer as freshly.



"Breakdown ... assistance? Now there's a good one!" He's laughing as he runs his fingers through his hair in his amusement, without stopping for an instant looking at my legs. "There isn't any round here, Ma'am. Ted's about five miles from here".

I'm tired and the idea of wasting any more time makes me nervous, so I start — out of instinct — messing around with the engine, looking for some magical button to press. I think I've located one, unscrewing a large, colorful, but shabby one.

"HOLD IT!" shouts the man behind me. His strong arms grab me from behind, throwing me to the ground at just the moment before a hot geyser risks hitting us.

The yellow plug rolls beside us and I'm cursing out of the pain the fall brings out in me on every part of my body that's already bruised. In the throes of instinct, I kick out; I'm confused and muddled by this. I hit hard at random in front of me with all the anger and fear I have inside me. I hit him on his sides with my elbows, trying to get away from his grip and my head is suddenly somewhere else again. I don't know who I am and my muddled mind is confusing nightmares with reality, leaving me in this pitiful state.

He manages to get back up and step back before my punches can get him.

"Hey, cool it, lady! I was just trying to save your face," he answers angrily, holding onto where it hurts with his hands.

I'm gasping, exhausted, on the ground, clutching onto my wrist that's hurting me a lot again after this move that wasn't exactly self-defense.

I can't help but stare at him as my stomach turns and my heartbeat gets frighteningly faster.

*Am I perhaps going to have a heart attack?*

I'm fighting back the tears threatening to come out and let out a groan this stranger has noticed and isn't ignoring.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, more out of courtesy than interest.

"Nothing special," I reply, trying to hide my hand and pushing back all the bile in my stomach that's ready to come out. "Sorry, ... who's Ted?"

I see him raise his eyebrows at me lying, but then settles on answering my question politely.

"Ted Willins. He's a repair shop and a tow truck in town. I could've taken you to him, towing your car, to save you a bit of money, had you not tried to kill me. So, given the circumstances, I'll ...," he hesitates, turning to move away. I don't blame him.

"Would you?"

"Got any other options? By any chance, d'you wanna wait for some bored male to stop, only *pretending* to give you a ride?" He raises another eyebrow, again with that snarky look. "Dressing like that, ... it wouldn't take a moment and you'd deserve it for the treatment you reserve for good people".

"I have to assume that you've stopped for the same reason yourself".

"Hey, Miss Stranger, whether you believe it or not, I only stopped to help you with the car".

He seems sincere and, indeed, given I've such a tan and my clothes are still torn, I can't but agree with him and accept his offer. It's worse than how things are going already, but can't keep getting worse. I need a shower, clean clothes and some rest.

"Faith Langley". I extend my hand, still dirty from motor oil, trying to restore calm.

"I'm Ryan!" he answers, detached, as he shakes mine with a certain air of superiority. He's not smiling like before.

"What kind of a name is that?" I'm trying to distract him from the bruises he's feeling.

"The one they gave me when I was born; had it with me all my life. Don't you like it?" he answers, lighting himself a cigarette and taking a long drag.

"I think it seems like a girl's name, if you must know, and I don't like it".

"Yours doesn't even seem that lucky to me. Anyway, pleased to meet ya," he adds regardless, pinching my cheek, not the least offended by my judgment. That exchange of greetings has something unusual about it that I just can't decipher.

I'm probably the one now seeing things distorted, but this dark-haired bad boy wearing a cowboy hat is not bad at all. It's for that I choose to trust his eyes. Eyes have always been the mirror to one's soul and they tell of what the heart's trying to hide.

"Great! So, what d'you wanna do?" I ask.

"Uhhh, I'll hook the car up to my pickup and bring you to Ted's workshop. Then, you're free to do whatever you want," he says, pointing to his big black beast a few steps behind me, setting off to fetch his tow cables.

"Thank you," I whisper, not realizing I'm grabbing his arm. This contact is giving me back a little energy.

"No problem, missy. You'll just have to turn the steering wheel and brake when I do. D'you think you can do that without any other problems?" He stares strangely at the neckline of my dress and I'm suddenly taking my attentions away from his face to cover my neck with what remains of the torn edge of my dress.

*God knows what he must think of me!*

I nod after this race of thoughts. I notice the long breath I give out, taking all the air out my lungs held, saying more than I'd have liked to say myself.

Indifferently, he turns round and starts bringing both vehicles together.

## *Making choices sometimes takes some balls*

The noise my heap of scrap metal sticking to the small square in front of what seems to be an abandoned, old-school Route 66-style motel draws the attention of a slightly older gentleman coming out of the building as he's wiping his hands on a white apron.

He doesn't seem anything like a mechanic, but is exchanging a few words with my rescuer pointing the car out to him. They both nod, pulling strange faces. Ryan then turns to wave at me and they both part ways without saying another word.

I follow his jeans climbing into his black pickup and in my head, various questions are being formed. One of these many is whether his impoliteness goes hand in hand with his sensuality or if this is a courtesy he reserves only for me.

The older gentleman beckons me over and I can't but trust him.

"Ryan says your engine melted on you. He's not wrong usually, but I'll take a look at the car in the morning anyways. In the meanwhile, come in and sit down; I can get you a room for the night. The name's Ted".

Few words said with a hoarse voice and with the confidence of somebody who's been through a lot of them. Ted is the mechanic who also, it seems, owns the motel across the street.

It hasn't been a pleasure, me going away from home without taking anything, but I couldn't do anything else after what happened.

Andrew is a dangerous man. Whatever I do, he'll make me pay for this "Insult", for which becoming a ghost seemed to be the only choice I had to keep me alive.

I'm relieved I'm still alive and well and no longer feeling I'm being chased. This godforsaken place isn't bad for going into hiding.

"How long will you be staying, Miss?" Ted's asking me a question I don't know how to answer. Unsure, I shrug my shoulders, which he

seems to understand, probably because of the many tourists passing through, not that I am one as such.

I ask if I could make a phone call. Nell is the only person I can call.

"Hello?" The line is muffled; the voice of her secretary seems far off.

"Faith, ... such a pleasure!" she responds, almost embarrassed.

"Lucy, I'm coming for you ...," I say bluntly before she interrupts me.

"No! Oh, Jeez ... don't tell me you're already coming".

"I'm in Texas!"

"Oh, God! I ... I'm on my vacation; the studio's closed, so ... Faith, uh ... something happened". The line is faulty and Lucy just has enough time to give me the news before the line drops out, period.

A mix of negative emotions comes over me. I thought I'd reach Michael in Texas and go on from there, but ... it seems I have to review my plans.

"Miss? Would you like something else with your beer?" asks the young bartender behind the bar, bringing me back to my cruel reality. He's a handsome, well-groomed guy with a few tattoos here and there, but can't even be eighteen yet. I notice him talking to some customers who come in and leave straight away. He seems the gentle kind to me and very polite, unlike Ryan; although he did offer his help, he had a way all his own of showing courtesy.

The lights of the Dixie, the bar below the motel, are reflected through the tankard of my *Lone Star*. At last, after days and days of traveling, I can relax a moment with a good beer for company.

However, after this latest news, of course, the pain in my head from the blows dealt, although more subtle, will only get worse.

"No, thank you. I'd just like to get up to my room and rest a little".

He nods and almost seems displeased I'm leaving so soon. Still, he's concentrating on his work, not paying me too much attention. It's

not closing time just yet, but the way he's making the bar sparkle makes the pride he takes in his work clear.

Alpine is a small town, a hovel compared to Barstow. The sign leading into the town, which I could just about see as I was sitting in my car being towed by Mr. Helpful, might as well have had all its inhabitants' names on it.

"Do you know if anybody's got a vacancy?" I ask unconvinced yet credibly before retiring upstairs.

"Who's the one looking for work?" Ted asks over the young man's shoulder.

"I am! I'm looking for work". I'm forced to admit as much; starting with a lie wouldn't have got me anywhere.

He looks at his hands, takes a moment and his disconsolate expression has me understand how hard life is in these parts.

"I see ...". Here is where my plans start falling apart. The car just *had* to break down in the farthest flung part of Texas, where the chances of finding work are zero. The money I took with me as I was running away is nearly gone.

All that's needed now is for Andrew to come in through that door and the plot of this movie would be complete.

"Is there no other place I could ask?"

"No, sorry". He still has that grimace on his face, which, however, transforms to reflect my almost desperate expression.

"Unless I'm mistaken, now's not a good time, but you've still the courage to try. You might wanna ask Mr. Evans". The hoarse voice of the aged motel manager comes through distorted by the coughing fit behind the puffs of his cigar smoke.

"He owns a ranch, y'see, Miss? Not a travel agency. Normally, I get him seasonal temps and there's never anyone left empty-handed. With them, you'll maybe get bed and board, but payment? Weeell, that's worked out very particularly; it depends on the season and



what work there is to be doing ... in so many words, don't rely on that so much. However, if you're just interested in temporary accommodation, that should do ya".

"That it will!" I'm rejoicing, albeit not showing it a lot. The money doesn't matter to me. What's important is not being seen around so much.

Making choices sometimes takes some balls. Here it comes again, the flow of thoughts starting in my head and that horrible voice telling me I'm doing everything wrong. God, how I enjoy the memory of that swollen face having hit the floor!

That's enough. When irrationality overcomes reasons, the body gets to do the unthinkable. And boy, do the signs show! Now I have to stop mulling over things, however. This story has to be forgotten, as does this *life*, which I want others to do as well. I want them to forget about me.

Maybe it's because of the unexpected change in mood and my asking for a room for the night that the old owner draws near to give me something else to munch on, as if he were dying to make conversation.

Curious to know something more about it, I ask a few more questions about the man he gave the name for earlier. I therefore find out this is the owner of the Wilder ranch, a historical ranch in Alpin County. It's a big and fairly well-known ranch, although feared at the same time for its uncertain activities. On paper, they raise and trade cattle and horses, but in practice, they do a lot else, of which Mr. Willins has, of course, been careful not telling a stranger like myself: this wolf in sheep's clothing, but also a desperate woman in disarray. He's seen so many guys like this pass by in his time.

When I ask for a room for the night, I get a rise out of the few present in the room. I don't in the least imagine the structure of the motel being so dilapidated and unsafe. The handrail to the first flight of stairs barely stays in my grip; as for the décor, not even this

is paid the right amount of attention. I'm repulsed by entering the bathroom and by even lying down on the bed. Against the light, I can easily see a thick layer of dust between the texture of the fabric on the bedspread. Some more again I can see on the furniture and fittings in the room.

"Just bear with it," I tell myself, trying to find a comfortable place to spend the night, sitting on one of the armchairs in the corner by the window. This looks out onto the forecourt where Ryan released the car and left it not long earlier; I can now clearly see it parked in the garage.

A tense shiver and fear comes over me, leaving me trembling.

What am I going to do now? I start asking myself this for the rest of the evening.

I know full well the answer won't fall from the sky, but will require sacrifice and a good lot of luck. Fear, however, was still great — first of all — of being found by the whole Fisher gang, that is to say Andrew and his brother Michael. They get involved in less-than-legitimate actions, as do the rest of the company. I could even go traveling for weeks, taking in only bread and water in a haunted rest area, who cares? At the moment, the fear of what might happen if I wind up in the wrong hands is stronger.

Whilst I'm engrossed by these groups, something attracts my attention from down below, prompting me to go and open the sash window. I regret it almost immediately. It almost takes my hand off by falling back on itself.

I immediately realize that it's Mr. Willins mustn't be doing so well with his business. Him taking care of several jobs all at once is not so much a multitasking work skill, more a necessity to survive events.

## 2

*Those who commit injustice are always less happy than those subject to it.*

It's late, so very late. My legs are weak, crying out for mercy after my day at work and even more so for the friendly chats Mr. Evans reserves for me. My shoulder is pulling at me, worn out by too much sun, just like my hands for the shots fired.

I don't even feel physically tired anymore, what with all the shit I'm smoking to keep going every day and there's no-one to blame but me. I just can't break free from all this. I'm being held by the balls and every step I take forward, there's another one back.

I let out a relieved sigh, however, at the sight of the lights being switched off in the dormitory. I imagine the guys are already asleep or, at least, I hope they are because I don't feel like talking any further, not after the day I've had.

Guillermo and Juan saw me get away this afternoon and they'd be curious to know — and happy to — how things went, but I wouldn't, nor would Cooper be either.

I have to pay attention. Any misstep could again send me somewhere I don't plan on going back to anymore. I'm not again leaving my life in the hands of somebody else without my consent, no siree! Mr. Evans and that bastard son of his is enough for me for move forward through this garbage life with my head held high.

Had I not happened upon this place that day, I very probably would have ended up in prison again.

"Remember our agreement," that *bastard* insists on pointing out every time something goes wrong.

How could I forget it if every little job I do for them makes me walk on a sharp razor blade, harming me every time. In one way or

another, I could demean myself in the blink of an eye, but I have to move forward, given that justice has already taken its course, against the wrong people.

I'm still convinced I've paid too high a price and that the indelible mark left on my body will never allow me to lead a normal life.

Silence is the only true friend I have. Staying for a little time astride my trusted friend's Duster has partly calmed my disturbed mind, but I still have the feeling I'll explode. On my quarter horse I can rely; he works well and never complains when I exhaust him beyond belief.

I go into the room and the stench of sweat, filth and cigar smoke invades my nostrils that much, I almost vomit. *Fuck, this is gross!* This place should be razed to the ground and rebuild from the ground up with nails and boarding. *That* would be a perfect punishment for these assholes, given how much they piss me off every day.

It's the other side of the coin, the price to pay for craved freedom, that of having to 'educate' people like me, if not people worse than me, society's fully-fledged rejects.

Why do I keep working here? I still can't answer that for myself.

*To stay alive*, the devil within me replies, also silently reminding me that nobody wants someone like me on their ranch.

Of course, I wouldn't have wanted my life to go down this route, but nothing can be done when it's the system that's corrupt. Mistakes are paid for and life pays you back with an equal amount of shit for every single time you tried to cheat it.

I light myself what seems like the thousandth cigarette and collapse onto the couch. When I pass my hands over my face and through my hair, a cloud of powder, soil and animal fur covers my pants. I should and would like so much just to have a shower, but I'm out for the count and don't want anybody waking up; they'd give me grief for drinking, playing games or worse, talk nonsense I'm not in the

mood for at all. Try as much as I did during the raid tonight, I still lost a few head of cattle. The bill to be paid therefore grows larger, but there's change in the air in the city and I have to be ready for any opportunity opening up. I've nothing else to hold on to.

I enjoy the silence for a little while longer, letting the floorboards' creak interrupt it every so often. Strangely, these are the only moments in the day when life a little less disgusts me.

### 3

#### *A groupie hookup*

I'm not a guy to get surprised easily, but finding myself in front of a girl in this part of the world uninhabited by people who think has a certain effect, as it would anybody, and I'm sure that Cooper would appreciate her presence even more than me.

After an initial summary glance, she seems to me exactly like one of those rodeo groupies to drool in front of cowboys grappling with their herds. Thinking well of it, however, this is no time for rodeos and Ryan has finished picking women up who then come looking for him here. With what happened between Cooper and the guys with the last woman, he hasn't tried it on since.

These eyes, however, are hiding much more than this and not being able to decipher them annoys me.

"What's a woman doing here?" I ask point-blank, giving her a start.

"I heard you were looking for staff".

"You'll have heard wrong. I'm taking nobody on for this season".

Such an odd question! Usually, I accept workers of all kinds, often being foreign or — in any event — sent by the feds to spend brief periods of incarceration or, worse, to speed up the execution process, but I've never had women over.

"I need a job, Sir! Mr. Willins suggested I come and find you here. Don't tell me I've walked many a mile for no reason".

"You came all the way here on foot?" I'm shocked and surprised to hear her mention Ted's name because I thought she was out of her depth and even more to hear her say she'd walked more than ten miles to just come here. "Work's hard here, Miss. Not everybody is suited to certain rhythms". However, those craving a little freedom are happy to dirty their hands.

"I'm not afraid of working in a ranch! I'm not looking for a secretary position, either, Sir. Give me a try!" she answers dryly and determined. She's looking at me in the eye in a way so direct, not even the worst of my men had ever dared try to.

"Whoever comes here knows there's no pay to be had or, rather, not for everybody". Almost everyone contents themselves with bed and board all season, going from ranch to ranch, looking in vain for the right time to get it made.

"It's not a problem!"

"Of course not, I imagine".

Her face suggests another kind of work that would certainly be useful in the same way, but it's better to abandon this idea. "Look ... what would you be prepared to do here?"

In that face, there's something pressing me to move toward her. That dainty look of hers makes my arm hairs stand on end and then some!

"Whatever needs to be done; work doesn't scare me".

*She really is beautiful, this one.* I've never had a woman as a ranch employee, but she may prove useful to me, raising spirits and keeping surroundings clean.

"I imagine you know how to cook ...". It was better not to dwell so hard on certain details.

"Sure!"



"Interesting ... in truth, I don't need a domestic. Don't be wasting my time".

The phone rings and, when I answer, I hear Ted at the other end, almost making a personal request of me. This amazes me even more.

"Sir? I know how to cook, fire a gun and ..."

She answers in too much of a hurry and that tone is, to me, so familiar.

"You seem desperate, hun, ... exactly like my friend Willins just told me. What are you hiding?"

"Nothing, I swear".

"Okay, fine, but you'll be spared nothing, sweetie. However, it won't be me deciding if you're to stay here or not, but my head herdsman. He's gonna evaluate you and then he'll tell me what to do with you. Remember, though, we work from dawn to dusk here, without any slacking off and mistakes are punished harshly. Keep that well in mind 'cause none of my men have ever backed out of a job without packing up first".

"Understood, Sir".

"Go wait for him at the entrance".

I'm convinced the kindness of my best man will convince her to give up on this crazy idea with no possible reply and, as once the evaluation has been finished, she'll go back home or wherever else she can afford, with her tail between her legs.

Ryan walks through my office door a few moments after the girl left. He's ready for the morning briefing and I know already that I'll be sending him into a rage with my next request.

"A female boss?! What am I to do with a woman in a ranch?"

As I expected, he curses under his breath, this only adding to my amusement.

"I'm not the one having to assess her. I just wanna know if she's capable of doing the work of any other man or of cleaning, cooking or riding a gelding to pick you fresh fruit. Make do, basically! I couldn't say no to the guy who sent her. Now, get from under my feet and go do the work I pay you for! Oh, almost forgot ... Cooper hasn't taken what happened yesterday well, so make sure you get things going the right way".

"Dickhead!" he insults me when on the other side of the door. He well knows that, were it not for his abilities, I'd have had him put under arrest a million times. Unfortunately, he's a man I can trust, even in unsavory situations, meaning he can say and do what he wants. I do need him.

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