



MARY MARELLI

Loud as thunder,
soft as a whisper,
a heart will heal.



MOON
OVER
MONTANA

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Moon over Montana
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to America's wild horses and
the people who fight to save them.

1

The letter fell from her fingers and fluttered to the floor. Megan Donovan stared but did not make a move to pick it up. She wiped a tear from her eye. Loose tendrils of hair clung to her dampened face. "No more crying. Not for anyone."

Her emotions ran dry. Megan curled up on the window seat and watched a Western meadowlark gathering long strands of grass for its nest. She'd spent hours watching the bird tend its home and looked forward to the fledglings that would inevitably follow. The bird ducked into its nest, and if Megan wasn't so upset, she would have pulled out her camera. She leaned against the wall and sniffled, the beauty of the day sliding past her.

Spring was in full, glorious bloom. Pink cherry blossoms burst out in vibrant color on the tree outside her window, and birds flitted from limb to limb, the rebirth of the season standing out in stark contrast against snow-capped mountains in the distance and the chill in her heart. Megan embraced nature, one of God's greatest gifts to mankind. Shrouded by its beauty, she found comfort and solace. Today, however, even that peace failed to touch her heart.

The door creaked open and her orange tabby, Leo,

hopped onto the seat. Megan scooped the persnickety feline in her arms and held him close. "Hey, baby. You're getting hungry, aren't you? Hmmm? Do you want to eat? Of course, you do. You always want to eat."

Megan turned Leo loose and picked up the letter before leaving the room. "I'll feed you, and then I have to heat up the soup for dinner." Leo howled, and she gave him a gentle boot down the hallway. "You're spoiled."

Megan glanced at the clock. Her mother would soon be home from the hospital where she worked as a pediatric nurse. Megan pulled a pot of soup from the refrigerator and set it on the counter.

Leo howled, more demanding this time, and wound around her legs.

"OK, the only way I'll be able to start dinner is to feed you."

She followed Leo to the laundry room and reached into an overhead cabinet for a can of cat food, filled his bowl, and set it on the table. "There you go. Eat up." She scratched him behind the ears as he ate. "You're blessed, you know that? Everything is so easy for you. I wish I could say the same."

Megan smoothed out the letter and leaned on the table. "E. Randall Hayes, Attorney at Law." She walked over to the window and leaned against the marbled glass. "Well, Mr. E. Randall Hayes, perhaps you can tell me where to start."

Megan flung open the door and ran out before she exploded. Emotions she did not know how to address

churned through her. Indecision ran rampant through her mind, tinged with a good old-fashioned dose of guilt. The walls felt as if they were slowly closing around her. Mills Springs, her rustic western hometown to the south of Sheridan, Wyoming, grew stifling. She needed to break free before she smothered.

Megan raced across the yard to the tree line to seek refuge under a stand of tall Sequoia pines. The late day chill seeped through the thin material, and she wrapped her arms around her torso. Lost in tumultuous emotions, she jumped when someone grasped her arm.

Megan gazed upward, her hand shielding her eyes from the blinding rays of the late afternoon sun. A pair of smoky brown eyes stared down at her. "Rex Carson, you scared the daylights out of me."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to. Man, you were really out there." Rex released his grasp and leaned against the scratchy bark of the tree.

"I didn't expect you back from Idaho for a few more days," Megan said.

"The case wrapped up sooner than expected."

"Did you get the injunction?"

"A temporary one."

"Temporary? How temporary?" Megan asked.

Rex shrugged. "Six months."

"Only six months?" Megan gasped. "What happens then?"

"The court will reconvene," Rex answered. "But the horses are safe for now."

"For now," Megan muttered.

"It's a start," Rex said. "I was worried about you."

"Rex, I'm so sorry," Megan blurted out. "I never meant to hurt you. I do love you."

Rex reached out in a gentle manner and pulled her close. "But you're not in love with me."

Megan's tears soaked into the soft cotton of his shirt. "I'm sorry. I was so lost after..."

Rex pushed her back and tilted her face upward. "Hey, it's all right. I understand. I've had plenty of time to think the past two weeks, and I realize you made the right decision. We've been friends for a long time. There's no sense in mucking it up. We've always been there for one another, and that will never change where I'm concerned. I'll always be here for you, no matter what."

The ring Megan neglected to return the night she broke their engagement further compounded her guilt. She slowly slid it off. "I can't keep this."

Rex pushed her hand back. "Yes, you can. I want you to have it. In case you change your mind." The smile slid from his face. "Sorry, bad joke."

Megan pressed the diamond ring into Rex's palm. "Please, take it. I don't mean to hurt you, but I just don't feel right about keeping it." She turned to stare at the mountains in the distant west. "Use it for your fight." She returned her gaze to Rex. "It will help with the court costs."

Rex sighed and pocketed the ring. "You're right. We have a lot of people in our corner, and every little bit helps. Sometimes I feel as though this is a fight we'll never win."

“You’re the strongest advocate I know,” Megan said. “Those horses in Idaho are running free today because of all you do.”

“I’m not doing it alone,” Rex reminded her. “I’m just a cog in the wheel.”

He took Megan by the hand, led her to a gazebo in the far corner of the yard, and wrapped his arms around her. “You don’t have anything to feel guilty about, you know. It’s better you faced your feelings honestly now than to enter into a marriage that would have been doomed from the beginning. We’ve been friends far too long to allow that to happen.

Megan sniffled and wrapped her arms around his waist. “You big lug. I think you know me better than I know myself.”

They sat in silence, the twitter of songbirds the only sound. Megan leaned her head against Rex’s chest. Was she making the right decision? After all, she was letting a good man get away. Rex was everything a woman could want in a man. Loyal, trusting, independent, and hardworking. He worked dispatch six days a week at his father’s trucking company. He wasn’t rich by any means, but he could provide a secure future. As if he wasn’t busy enough at work, Rex was active in various groups embroiled in the fight to save America’s wild horses.

“I wish I could love you the way you deserve,” Megan said, her voice a mere whisper in the early spring breeze. “But I can’t lie to you. That wouldn’t be fair to either of us. You deserve someone who can love you with every beat of her heart. Someone who knows

what you'll say before the words come out and laughs at your jokes no matter how lame."

"Hey, you still laugh at my jokes," he chided.

Megan lobbed a weak punch at his arm. "What can I say? I never could resist your charming wit."

A cloud breezed by, blotting out the sun. Rex stood and held out his hand. "Walk me to my truck."

"An offer I can't resist." Megan smiled, hoping to hide the sorrow harbored deep in her heart.

"Are you still leaving?" Rex asked.

Megan nodded. "I'm telling Mom tonight. Someone has to settle my grandfather's estate."

"Sounds about right." Rex stopped and tugged on Megan's hand. "Any idea of how long you'll be gone?"

Megan shrugged. "I have no idea. It all hinges on what needs to be done with the estate. And I might stay on and explore the area a little. I've never been to that part of Montana."

They reached Rex's truck. He leaned on the open door and traced Megan's face with his finger. "I guess this is good-bye."

"For now." Megan leaned into his touch. "And you didn't lose me. It just wasn't meant to be. I'll always care about you and will always be here for you. No matter what." A new stream of tears erupted. "You'll always be my best friend."

Rex rocked her in his arms. "Best friend, huh? I'll take it." He opened the door and climbed behind the wheel. "Remember what I said. If you ever need anything, all you have to do is call." He gunned the engine. "Be careful in Montana."

Megan answered with a nod, a lone tear trailing down her face.

Rex waved out the window. "Call me when you get there."

Megan stepped back as he pulled out onto the road. A chapter of her life dissipated in a plume of dust on a quiet country road. She turned and walked away. Before she reached the back porch, another car pulled in.

Megan met her mother at the edge of the driveway and took a bag of groceries from her arms. "Give me those, Mom. I'll carry them inside."

"Thanks, dear. Was that Rex I saw leaving?" Her mother followed her down the walkway.

Megan trudged up the back steps, balancing an overstuffed bag in her arms. "He stopped by for a few minutes."

"Are you all right?" She followed Megan into the kitchen.

"I'm fine." Megan set the bag on the table. "Mom, am I making a mistake?"

Her mother proceeded to unpack the groceries. "Do you feel as if you're making a mistake?"

Megan put a carton of milk in the refrigerator. "I sometimes wonder. Lately, it seems I'm not very good at making decisions."

Mom set a loaf of fresh baked bread on a cutting board. "Honey, why are you doubting yourself?"

"I hurt him, Mom."

"Did you mean to? Did you set out to hurt him?"

Megan shook her head. "No, but that's not the

problem. He didn't deserve to be treated like this."

"Honey, what do you mean?"

"Mom, Rex never did anything to hurt me. He never treated me with anything but respect."

"Ah ha, I think you found your answer," Mom reasoned.

"What do you mean?"

"You said he treated you with respect."

"And you're saying he shouldn't have?" Megan countered.

"Honey, you're getting your signals crossed. Of course you deserve to be treated with respect. You both deserve that, but that's not what I meant. What I'm trying to say is, there was no zing."

"Zing? Mom, really." Megan gasped.

"Zing. You and Rex have been friends forever. Sure, both of you dated other people over the years, but nothing truly serious. Neither of you found that special person with zing."

Megan rolled her eyes. "There you go again with that zing."

Her mother flashed a wink. "I found that zing with your father."

"Mom!" Megan clamped her hands over her ears. "TMI." She lowered her hands.

"He rocked my world," her mother continued her banter. "Can you truthfully say Rex rocked yours?"

Megan fell into a momentary lapse of silence. "You always said Dad was your best friend."

"Yes, he was, but that built slowly over the years as our love evolved."

Megan sighed. "Maybe I did it backward. Friends don't always fall in love, but love can lead to a deep, trusting friendship."

"As I said, there's your answer," Mom reasoned. "Honey, life can be confusing. Sometimes we set out on the wrong path. Our intentions are good, but we soon come to realize that somewhere along the line, we took a wrong turn. That's what happened to you. You're at a crossroad, and if you look to the Lord, you'll set out on the path intended. It's better you realized that now."

"That's what Rex said," Megan admitted.

"He's a good man. Marriage just wasn't in the plan for you two, but he'll always be there for you." Her mother pulled a knife from the drawer. "This bread will go good with dinner."

"Megan slapped her forehead. "I didn't put the soup on. I was going to after feeding Leo, but I went outside. Then Rex came, and I forgot."

"Now never mind. We'll get dinner under control."

Megan shook her head. "You've been on your feet all day. You shouldn't have to cook." She placed the soup on the stove. "Go change out of your scrubs."

Her mother brushed a loose tendril of hair from her forehead. "I'll be back down in a few minutes. You heat the soup, and I'll slice the bread."

Megan jumped to do her mother's bidding, and within minutes, the aroma of chicken soup filled the air. Her mother returned and began slicing the bread. "How was work?"

"Thank the Lord, the ward was quiet today." Her mother placed the bread on a plate and checked the soup. "Everything is just about ready, so hurry and put the bowls on the table."

Megan reached into the cabinet and proceeded to set the table. After they ate, she would speak with her mother. She had no idea what the future held but felt the dire need to pursue her feelings. If she only knew what those feelings meant.

"You can't run from yourself," Megan muttered. "But what are you running to?"

Megan wiped the last dish dry and hung the damp towel over a rack on the side of the sink. "Come here, beauty. You need a drink of water," she crooned to the African violet growing in a small pot on the window ledge. She plucked a dead leaf, dropped it in the sink, held up the plant to the light, and stroked her finger over a budding flower. "Even you need to start over."

She retired to the living room and knelt in front of the fireplace. "Want me to start a fire?"

Her mother settled in her rocking chair and pulled a quilt over her lap. "Tonight is the perfect night for one. There's a chill to the air."

Megan stacked the logs and sat back watching the flames leap to life. "This is my favorite time of year. It's warm enough to go outside during the day, but we get to snuggle in front of a fire at night."

Her mother stared into the flickering flames, a trace of a smile on her lips. "This was your father's favorite time of year, too. I can hear him now. 'Come on, Meg. Snuggle up.'"

A smile crept over Megan's face as cherished memories of her father came to mind. "Daddy loved every season, especially when we could have a fire at night."

"Even when it was too hot to think of building a fire, he would sit here. He just loved this hearth."

"Yeah, he did," Megan said softly. "Mom, I..."

"Now, you've been quiet all through dinner, and I doubt it had anything to do with Rex." She studied Megan closely. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you had something on your mind."

Megan took a deep breath, gathered her courage, and pulled the letter from her pocket. She set it on the stone ledge and smoothed it flat. "I need to talk to you."

A frown crossed her mother's face, and her eyes flashed darker. She gripped the wooden arms of the rocker so tight, her knuckles turned white.

Megan moved to her and held out her hands.

Mom held on to her. "I can't imagine any good coming from that. It's over. Settled."

Megan shook her head. "It's not settled, Mom. Not yet, anyway. Mr. Hayes is waiting to hear from us about what we want to do with the land."

"It's dead and gone, like your grandfather."

"No, it isn't."

"Honey, I've been fighting for years to put what he did behind me. Your grandfather wasn't a good man. Not to my mother, to me, or to anyone else. And that's putting it mildly. He was a monster. I don't remember him ever having a sober day, but I'll never

forget..."

Megan squeezed her mother's hands. "It's all right. You don't have to talk about it. I know it wasn't easy growing up with him. I can't even call him Granddad. I don't know what to call him."

"Don't call him anything. There's a reason I left home."

"And that reason is dead and gone."

Her mother rocked slowly and stared at the blazing flames. "Why are you so compelled to pursue this? We can contact Mr. Hayes and tell him to sell the land and be done with it."

"We can, but I'd really like to go up and see it for myself. I don't know why or where this feeling stems from, but somewhere deep inside, I feel the need to pursue this. I feel as if I'm being guided somewhere," Megan said.

"But does it have to be there? Nothing's left. The house was practically falling down when I lived there, and I doubt it got better over the years."

Megan picked up the fireplace poker and stirred the embers. "You always taught me to make an informed, wise decision. Yes, I've made some bad decisions and mistakes in the past..." She shuddered slightly and continued in a faltering voice, her decision giving the strength needed. "I'm trying to move past them, but that's not the reason I want to go up. I want to see the place for myself. I want an answer to my feelings, and maybe I'll find it there. Maybe I won't, but I can at least meet with Mr. Hayes and settle the estate. This way, I'll know we made the right decision."

Mom took the poker from Megan's hand and set it aside. "You're right. We do need to settle this once and for all. I'll leave that to you. But it isn't easy..."

"Seeing me go to a place you ran from," Megan finished.

Her mother picked up the letter and slowly folded it in half. "I'm being silly."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm used to you being gone for weeks at a time. I don't know why I feel so..."

"Protective?" Megan asked.

Mom nodded. "If you were going anywhere else in the world, I wouldn't have this reaction." She stared at the letter in her trembling hand. "I always knew this day would come. I'm surprised it took so long." She sighed and turned away. "May the Lord forgive me for such a dreadful thought." She turned back. "When did you get so wise?"

Megan smiled. "Oh, I think I got a bit of that from you."

Mom stood and brushed the hair from Megan's face. "Your father might have had something to do with that, too. We did teach you to follow your heart."

Megan leaned her head on Mom's shoulder. "And you also taught me to trust my feelings."

"Then go with my blessing." Mom hugged her. "And above all else, be true to yourself."

Megan fought the tears welling in her eyes. "I will, Mom."

"I know you'll do the right thing."

"Thanks, Mom." Megan gave her mother a kiss on

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the cheek and left the room, tucking the letter into her pocket.

2

Megan pulled into the parking lot of Elk Ridge Motor Lodge, a row of quaint, rustic cabins on the outskirts of town. She parked in front of the office. Before going inside to check in, she got her cell phone out. "Hey, Mom. I'm here."

"Oh, good. I was waiting for your call. How was the drive up?"

"It was good," Megan answered. "I'm at the motel. I'll check in when I get off the phone. Once I bring my stuff inside, I'll go see Mr. Hayes."

"You'll have to call me when you're done and let me know how the meeting went."

"That's if I don't have to make an appointment," Megan pointed out. "Either way, I'll call you later."

"So long, dear." Her mother clicked off.

Megan walked inside.

A middle-aged man approached the counter. "May I help you, miss?"

Megan pulled her wallet from her purse. "Yes. I'd like a room, please."

He flipped open the register. "How long do you plan to stay?"

Megan shrugged. "I don't really know. I have business in town and have no idea how long it will