

## One

As much as Selah Davis loved her life in Seattle, she got an all-over buzz every time she came home to Old Town Marietta. No one could say it was the cocktail of dirt, dung and dust that perpetually lingered in the air, but there was just something about the place.

And, although this would be a fleeting visit—four days in town to cover the 76th Annual Copper Mountain Rodeo for the magazine she wrote for—there were certain things Selah would make the time for. A visit to her folks—obligatory and, thankfully, already ticked off the list. A burger at the Main St. Diner—they were like none other in the whole of the United States—and a drink at Grey’s Saloon with her gal pals.

That was the one bad thing about moving away. Although she came back for engagements, weddings, babies and the like, not always in that order, mind you, she missed having her best friends around on a day-to-day basis. The friends she’d made in Seattle were mostly through the magazine, and yes, they did hang out outside of work, but if she were honest, they were really only acquaintances. Not people she’d share her deepest, darkest and occasionally dirty secrets with. Not friends with whom she could belly laugh or ugly cry, like Sage, Chelsea and Jenny.

It had been over eight months since she’d last seen them, which was why Selah was like a child counting down to Santa as she hung at the bar in Grey’s Saloon waiting for her friends to arrive.

“Hey, long time no see.”

Selah smiled at Reese Kendrick, one of the bartenders at Grey’s and an old acquaintance. “Hi, Reese. How you doing?”

“You know...same old, same old. Can I get you a drink?”

She shook her head and glanced back toward the entrance. “I think I’ll wait for the girls.”

Reese shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He then turned to attend to the cowboys lined up along the other end of the bar.

Due to the influx of outsiders to Marietta for the rodeo, Grey’s was busier than usual. Selah had already been approached by half a dozen, quite good-looking—but also quite tipsy—men, so she kept her head down now, hoping to fly under the radar until her friends arrived. Cowboys had a reputation, and one-night stands were not her thing. Besides, her priorities for the next few days were catching up with her friends and writing her story. Her interest in hot cowboys was purely professional.

Chelsea showed first, looking almost like another person as she waltzed up to the bar to join Selah. She no longer looked like the high school history teacher she was—gone were the conservative clothes she’d always worn, replaced by a flirty skirt, funky knee-high boots and a figure-hugging shirt.

“You look awesome,” Selah told her friend, smiling in approval as she gave her the once-over.

Chelsea beamed in reply, her whole face glowing, and Selah guessed her guy, Jasper Flint, could take responsibility for this new woman. She’d met him briefly at Colton and Jenny’s wedding last Christmas, but couldn’t wait to get to know him better.

“You don’t look so bad yourself,” Chelsea said. “It’s so good to see you.”

They were in the middle of a crazy reunion hug when Selah felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to see Sage and Jenny standing behind them. Girly shrieks ensued as the four of them danced around in a group hug, uncaring about what anyone thought.

When they broke away, Selah took a moment to scrutinize Jenny, who'd recently announced she and Colton were expecting their first baby.

"Oh, my, we're all growing up," she said, beaming at her friend. "It's true what they say about the pregnancy glow."

In reply, Jenny placed a hand on her barely visible bump, but she didn't say anything. She didn't need to. Her grin looked too big for her face, and she radiated bliss from her sparkling eyes. Selah felt her own eyes prickling. Last year, when Jenny's longtime boyfriend and boss, Charles Monmouth, had called off their wedding, they'd all been devastated for her, but Colton was so much better for Jenny, so everything had worked out well in the end.

"I'm so happy for you," Selah said, as she wrapped her friend in an extra hug. "I want to hear all the news. From all of you."

All agreed this was a delightful plan, so they ordered a round of Cosmos (a mocktail for Jenny) from grumpy Grey himself and took their drinks to a table in the far corner of the establishment, where they hopefully wouldn't be bothered by amorous cowboys.

In unison, all four women took a sip of their bright pink cocktails and sighed their contentment.

"So, when do we start bridesmaid-dress shopping?" Selah asked.

Her friends looked at her curiously.

"Well"—she shrugged with a smile—"won't Jasper be popping the question soon?"

Chelsea's face turned a sweet red as she took a quick sip of her Cosmo, then said, "He may have dropped a couple of hints."

Excited discussion ensued about other upcoming nuptials and babies in Marietta. Selah could be forgiven for thinking there was something in the water, for it seemed every second person she knew had either recently fallen in love, was getting married or was pregnant. It wasn't that she was envious—she didn't think so, anyway—but such talk got a little bland when you had nothing to add yourself, so she was happy when Sage changed the subject.

“So, what about this year's honorary chair?” Sage all but drooled the question.

Now that was something, or rather someone, Selah could get excited about. “I know,” she said smugly. “I've got an exclusive interview with him on Saturday.”

Her friends glared good-naturedly at her.

“Seriously? You suck.” Sage had always been a huge country music fan, and this year's rodeo chair, Jake Kohl, had been the star of many of her fantasies. Despite Dawson now having the starring role, she still held a candle for her celebrity crush.

“Do you need an assistant?” Jenny offered. “I'd be happy to volunteer.”

Sage sighed. “And people think making chocolate for a living is glamorous, but it's got nothing on the perks of your job.”

Selah laughed, but inwardly felt a little irritated. Her friends thought her job as features editor for *Charisma* fascinating and always liked listening to her tales of meeting celebrities at film premieres and fashion shows. *Charisma* was constantly inundated with samples of makeup, perfumes and the like, and occasionally Selah would send some of these to her friends.

She got the feeling they thought her job was one big party, but it wasn't always as exciting or as satisfying as they imagined. Serious journalists didn't receive handbags in exchange for the promise to write about them in a favorable light, and that's what she'd always wanted to be. A serious journalist.

“I thought you were here to write an article on the hotness of cowboys,” Chelsea said, fanning her face a little.

“That, too,” Selah said, trying to shake off her annoyance and simply enjoy being with her friends. “What can I say? It’s a tough job, but someone has to do it.”

“We’d be happy to help you with your research,” Chelsea said with a naughty giggle.

“Yes,” Jenny nodded, trying and failing dismally to keep a straight face. “Sage and I are particularly knowledgeable in that subject.”

Selah couldn’t help laughing alongside her friends. “Rodeo fever got you all good and proper last year, didn’t it?”

“Sure did,” said Jenny unashamedly. “In fact, if you wanted, I could get Colton to introduce you to some guys you could interview.”

“And although Dawson isn’t on the circuit anymore, he could assist you as well. You’d be hard-pressed to find cowboys hotter than ours,” added Sage.

Selah rolled her eyes and shook her head. “You guys may be a little biased. Besides, I think *Charisma’s* readers would prefer single, *available* cowboys. Ones they can fantasize about seducing and luring into their webs.”

“Fair enough.” Jenny shrugged and gestured to Sage and Chelsea. “But if you want to write an article on how to tame a cowboy, we are your girls.”

“Thanks.” Selah took another sip of her drink and then said, “You know, not all the articles I write are so superficial. I’ve actually just finished a very interesting story about the regrets of the dying.” She didn’t add that it was languishing on her computer

because her chief editor had told her it wasn't the kind of thing *Charisma* readers would be interested in.

Sage raised an eyebrow, Chelsea screwed up her nose and Jenny said, "What? Who wants to read about that?"

Selah laughed. Maybe her editor had a point. "It isn't as depressing as it sounds. I interviewed some really inspirational people who've done some amazing things in their lives but are now terminally ill. I asked them what their one regret in life is. You know, what thing they would do or change if they could."

Selah spent the next little while telling her friends about the subjects of her story. They ordered another round of drinks and some onion rings to share, and as the liquid went down, conversation turned to the things the four of them regretted in their lives.

"That's easy," Chelsea said, scooping up an onion ring. "I regret ever dating that cheating scumbag Tod Styles."

As she popped the snack into her mouth, her three friends made sympathetic noises, all of them glad Chelsea had found someone who deserved her so much more than the local real estate sleaze agent.

Sage sighed. "I guess I regret sleeping with Dawson while he was married to someone else."

"You didn't know he was married," Chelsea said, her tone protective. "And anyway, it all turned out well in the end."

A smile burst on Sage's face. "Yes, it certainly did, and I definitely don't regret anything else when it comes to him."

Sage's happiness made Selah all warm and tingly inside. Her girls had done good when it came to their men.

Then it was Jenny's turn. She rubbed her lips together, taking a little longer over her answer than the others. "I'm not sure I regret working for Charles, because I learned a lot in that role, but I do regret squashing myself and trying to be less so that he looked good."

All four of them took sips of their Cosmos and a few moments for contemplation, but before too long Sage broke the silence.

"What about you, Selah?" she asked. "What do you regret?"

With three pairs of eyes trained on her, Selah racked her brain for something more significant than scarfing a whole bar of chocolate last night. Fact was, she mostly liked her life. Despite wishing she could sometimes write something with a little more substance, she enjoyed her job and liked the people she worked with. She had an apartment she loved, great clothes, great hair and fab friends. Sage, Chelsea and Jenny had all found Mr. Right, and she was stoked for them, but she didn't feel a desperate urge to settle down herself. She didn't see how she'd fit a permanent man in her busy work schedule. She'd had a couple of relationships—if you could call them that—with nice enough men, but the spark hadn't been there and, in the end, they'd both been more career-oriented than love-oriented.

However, if she had the chance for a do-over, there was one thing she would change. Her cheeks flushed at the thought, which although she'd contemplated many times in the last decade, she'd never voiced to anyone.

"What is it?" Sage demanded, not missing a beat.

"It's nothing. You'll all think it's totally silly."

“No, we won’t.” Chelsea sounded indignant.

“Promise,” said Sage.

“Come on, spill,” pleaded Jenny.

Selah sighed, trying to hide the grin that stretched upon her face at the thought of Levi Monroe, her first-ever serious boyfriend and, as far as she was concerned, the hottest guy to have ever graced the halls of Marietta High School. She leaned forward, about to whisper her confession, when the doors to Grey’s opened, and she saw the man who had starred in many a torrid fantasy of hers stride into the saloon like he owned the joint. Startled, Selah jolted upright, knocking over her cocktail tumbler in the process.

Thankfully she’d already drunk most of it.

Jenny uprighted the glass, and Chelsea grabbed a stash of tissues from her bag and started mopping up the mess, but Sage followed Selah’s gaze.

“Surprise! Didn’t you know Levi was in town for the rodeo?”

“No.” Selah gulped, heat flooding her body as she snapped her mouth shut and turned her head away before Levi noticed her. It wasn’t like they’d have anything to say to each other after all these years.

“Oh, yeah,” Chelsea said, catching on. “And rumor has it he might stay longer and help out a bit on the McCullough spread.”

Barely taking in her friend’s words, Selah fought the urge to turn and take another good look at her only regret. Her throat felt tight, her knees quivering and her heart racing so damn fast she’d be surprised if her friends couldn’t hear it.

“Do you want me to call him over?” Jenny asked.

“No!” Selah covered her mouth the moment the word was out, thankful the noise around them drowned her shout. “No,” she repeated quietly. It was simply the shock of seeing him just as she was about to say his name that had thrown her off-balance. She just needed a moment to pull herself together.

“Okay, relax.” Jenny put her hand over the top of Selah’s in a gesture of comfort. “Forget about Levi. This is a girls’ night, and you were about to tell us your one regret.”

“It’s him.” Her confession slipped out before she could think.

Her friends frowned.

“What do you mean?” asked Sage.

Selah took a deep breath and glanced at each woman staring intently at her. She tried to pretend Levi wasn’t across the room, doing who knows what and talking to whoever. She forced a laugh, feigning nonchalance, and shrugged. “I wish I’d given him my virginity. That’s all.”

And then she grabbed Sage’s half-full glass and downed the lot in a few seconds.

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Levi had just sat down at the bar with a bunch of cowboys he knew from the circuit and raised his glass to take the first mouthful of his beer when he heard hysterical giggles coming from a small group of women sitting at a table in the corner. Like almost everyone else, he turned his head to see what the commotion was about, and his heart jammed up into his throat as he recognized the perpetrators of the noise.

His drink spilled over his fingers, and he couldn’t help but stare at the beautiful group of women. He’d gone to school with all of them, but one in particular had left an imprint on his life. During what had been one of the worst years of his life, Selah Davis

had made him feel at home in Marietta. Almost from the moment he'd walked into Marietta High—pretending to be all cool and unaffected but secretly shitting his pants—she'd been his girl. Hanging out with Selah—talking to her, doing homework together, kissing like crazy teenagers do—had helped ease his worries about his sick mom. Selah had made being away from everything he'd known bearable, and he'd fallen head over heels in love.

Without Selah giving him a reason to get up in the morning and Em McCullough fussing over him, who knows what would have become of him that year?

Unashamed, his pulse finally slowing, he took a drag of his beer and stared over to where she sat with Sage, Chelsea and Jenny. The men around him went back to their conversations, but no way could he concentrate on their mindless chatter. Sage caught his gaze, leaned forward and said something to the others. Chelsea's and Jenny's heads snapped around to look at him, and he offered them a casual wave, all the while willing Selah to turn a little. Her three friends giggled and waved back at him, but Selah appeared frozen.

Even from the side, her dark-chocolate hair falling like a veil across her face, she was still the best-looking woman he'd ever laid eyes on. And that was saying something. Since leaving Marietta and being on the road with the rodeo, he'd seen a lot of women. Not one had ever made the organs in his chest reverberate and his cock harden simply by thinking of them. Not the way Selah did.

This time, when he lifted the bottle to his mouth, he downed half its contents. He returned to Marietta every couple of years to visit Em or Cole, and he'd done the Copper Mountain Rodeo a few times as well. He'd run into Sage, Chelsea and Jenny at least once during these visits, but he'd never crossed paths with Selah. As far as he knew, this

was the first time she'd ever bothered to leave her comfortable city existence for the rodeo.

He guessed dirt, horses and sweaty men just weren't her thing.

But people in small towns talked. And he may have cocked an ear to listen on the occasions he'd heard the name "Selah Davis" in conversation. According to local gossip, she was some hotshot journalist in Seattle, and didn't she just look the part? Her friends all wore dark, denim jeans, casual sweaters and cowboy boots, but Selah looked as if she'd stepped right off a Paris catwalk. Her smart jacket and tailored trousers were far too fancy for his liking, so why were his palms sweating and his heart racing at the thought of going over and saying hi? At the thought of sliding his hands into her salon-perfect hair and ruffling it up a little.

Unfinished business maybe? He downed the dregs of his beer and raised a finger to the barman. "Can I grab another?"

Within a few seconds, Reese had dropped a bottle down in front of him, and Levi had handed over some cash. He glanced back at Selah's table. The women looked to be in deep conversation now, and he wondered about the topic of conversation. Could they be talking about him? He swallowed, his mind once again rewinding to the best and worst year of his life.

He and Selah had gone to the prom together. She'd worn this hotter-than-sin pink dress—Lord knew how she'd managed to get her dad's approval for that little number—and he'd bought her a corsage to match. Em had taken him to Married in Marietta and rented him a tux, insisting that Selah deserved a little effort on his part. He'd felt like some kind of fraud tugging that swanky jacket over his shoulders, but the moment he'd

laid eyes on Selah, he'd decided he'd wear black tie every day for the rest of his life if it meant having her.

They'd been crowned prom king and prom queen, and twirling her in his arms around the dance floor had felt so good. He'd been filled with pride, lust and love, or at least, he'd thought that's what it was. Looking back now, he guessed it was more likely a case of rampant hormones.

But hormones, love, whatever it had been, he'd felt certain he'd get lucky at the after party. He'd bought the condoms and rented a cute little log cabin from a rancher who kept to himself and didn't ask questions. Although he'd never had an example of romance in his life, he'd done his damn best. There had been candles, flowers and chocolates, even some cheap champagne. Yet, still she'd resisted.

Back then, he'd thought Selah Davis was a cockteaser. She'd professed to love him, kissed him like a harlot, let him feel her up and suck her nipples (through her bra, mind you). She'd even given him a hand job, but she'd never let him go below her belt. Her excuse? She was saving herself for marriage.

Since marriage hadn't been on his agenda in the near future, and he had been a horny-as-hell seventeen-year-old boy, they'd broken up. He'd left school and headed back home to his sick mom.

Levi's grip tightened around his bottle, the frustration he'd felt so strongly back then rearing its ugly head. He'd regretted dumping her almost the moment he'd done so, but really, could she have expected him to wait indefinitely? He'd had nothing to offer a wife, and no way would he have let her end up like his mom, living in a broken trailer

and having to clean and cook for other people because his no-hoper of a dad couldn't provide.

He sighed. The depressing thoughts had put him in a melancholic mood, and he found he didn't care for the company of cowboys right now. What he really wanted was to go over and talk to Selah, but she seemed intent on not looking his way. Taking one final mouthful of beer, he set his still nearly full bottle on the bar and slipped quietly away from the mates he'd arrived with.

A quiet night in his trailer wasn't a bad idea anyway, far more sensible a plan than staying in Grey's and getting sloshed before the weekend had even started. This was going to be his last rodeo, and he wanted to go out on a high. The last thing he needed was a distraction, especially not in the form of Selah Davis. Still, something niggled at him, and he found he couldn't leave the saloon without at least walking past her.

He took a detour to the exit, winding through tables and trying not to catch the eye of anyone he might know, until he came up alongside Selah's table. As his shadow fell over their drinks, all eyes glanced up. Even Selah couldn't pretend he didn't exist when he was standing right beside her. And as her eyes met with his, something shifted inside him. It'd been a long while since he'd felt a jolt of awareness upon seeing someone, but seeing Selah up close again felt as if he'd just crashed into an electric fence.

He did his damn best to hide his reaction and went for nonchalance as he smiled down at the group. "Hey, ladies. Selah."

Sage, Chelsea and Jenny all tossed him friendly smiles and chirpy "hi's," but Selah simply stared at him as if he were a ghost risen from the dead. Finally, when

things started getting awkward, he dipped his head and continued on toward the door, feeling all kinds of stupid for thinking that, after all these years, she might actually have anything to say to him.

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*Selah.* The way Levi had singled her out, the way he'd drawled her name in his still-delicious voice, had her insides twisting, right along with her tongue. Something in her brain registered that it was the done thing to reply, but her dry mouth just couldn't. She seemed incapable of doing anything but stare. So...it was still there...that incomparable crackle between them. That knock-your-socks-off, toe-curling lust. An attraction stronger than she'd ever felt for anyone else.

She suspected that her friends had returned his greeting with suitable ones of their own, but before she could pull her bamboozled self together, he'd dipped his head as if he wore his cowboy hat and was walking out the door.

Too late, her breath returned to her lungs, and she slumped against the back of the booth as the door to Grey's swung closed behind Levi. Sage, Chelsea and Jenny erupted into hysterics for the second time that evening,

"It's not funny," *Selah* hissed, suddenly struggling to remember why she'd been so excited about seeing them.

They made half-hearted attempts to smother their giggles, and then Chelsea said, "Oh, *Selah*, we're sorry, but it is."

"How apt that the moment you were about to admit your sordid regrets regarding him, he should walk in the door," Jenny added, helping Chelsea's her argument.

"A sign, I'd say." Sage nodded, pretending to be all serious.

*Selah* glared harder, trying hopelessly to forget how incredible Levi still looked and focus all her energies on being irritated with her friends instead. She made a tsking

noise. "I don't believe in signs, and if I'd known how childish your reactions would be, I'd never have said a word."

Immediately, all three of her friends looked remorseful.

"We're sorry," said Chelsea, reaching out to take Selah's shaky hand.

"It just shocked us, is all." Jenny frowned. "We're your closest friends, and I don't know about Sage and Chels, but I thought you *did* sleep with Levi. The two of you were practically Siamese twins during senior year."

Sage nodded. "I would have sworn you admitted to much horizontal mambo with the Leve-star. We were all bursting with envy, if I recall. None of us had much luck with boys in high school, so we lived vicariously through you."

Selah looked down at the table, picked up the soggy cardboard drink coaster and started picking at the edges. Truth was, she'd never actually told anyone she'd slept with Levi, but she'd let her friends, and his, draw this natural conclusion. And, damn it, she'd wanted to make love with Levi more than she'd wanted to graduate high school with good grades so she could pursue a career in journalism, but she'd been scared.

"Oh, yeah." Chelsea sighed. "I don't think there was a girl in our class who didn't fantasize about Levi Monroe."

A sad truth that only amplified Selah's regret. She'd had that opportunity and she'd let it pass her by.

How many times had she almost given in to the lust that had raged between them? It hadn't been easy saying no to that face, not with his hands roving over her body as he told her how much he loved her, begging her to go the whole way, but every time she'd almost relented, she'd had a visit from her parents. Metaphorically, of course. Back then, she wouldn't have even held Levi's hand if her mom or dad had been within a mile. They'd heard rumors of course, but she'd always placated them with the sweet

words of a good daughter. The good daughter. As far as her parents had known, she and Levi had just been friends, Selah doing her best to help him settle into Marietta and not miss his mom too much. As the minister of St. James Methodist Church, Jonathan Davis could hardly have asked his daughter to give up that charitable duty, but Selah had known she and Levi had to be careful.

The consequences of what could have happened if they weren't had been paraded in front of her face by her sister. The fallen daughter.

"It was all Magdalena's fault," she admitted, sounding far more vicious than she'd intended.

Her friends caught on immediately, aahing and nodding their understanding.

"How is Magdalena these days?" Jenny asked, and Selah grabbed on to the slight change in conversation.

She smiled. "She's good. She's started her own social media business and is doing really well for herself."

"That's great," Sage said, and the other two nodded their agreement. "Is she dating anyone?"

Since their own hookups at last year's rodeo, her best friends were almost fixated on the dating habits of those around them. It was like once they were happily paired, they saw it as some kind of duty to help Cupid with his aim. Oh, well, talking about her sister's love life was better than the alternative.

"Nothing serious. Her focus has always been Bella, but with Bella in high school now, I think Mags is considering getting more proactive in that department. Last time we talked, she mentioned signing up for Match.com."

That may have been a slight exaggeration, but Selah thought if she distracted her friends, they might forget about what had started this conversation.

No. Such. Luck.

"Cool, but back to Levi." Chelsea's eyes glistened in the way of someone who had recently been laid good and proper, someone who felt happy and smug with her place in the world. "If he is truly your one regret...you need to do something about it!"