

**Copyright © 2016 by Cindy Skaggs**  
**All Rights Reserved**

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce, distribute, or transmit in any form or by any means. For information regarding subsidiary rights, please contact the author: [Cindy@CSkaggs.com](mailto:Cindy@CSkaggs.com)

This book is available in print at most online retailers.

Edited by Jessa Slade  
Cover Design and Formatting by  
L.J. Anderson, Mayhem Cover Creations  
First edition April 2016

---

## DEDICATION

---

*To my children. For you, I would drink the Kool-Aid.*

---

## PROLOGUE

---

Six months ago

Ryder shifted through the crowd gathering behind the police barricade. A local news crew panned the scene from a vantage point to his left. In front of him, a young blonde lifted a wide-eyed toddler to her hip, giving the kid a better view. Gunshots fired had turned into a three-ring circus complete with spectators and media crews.

Crime scene tape snapped under his fingers before he made the conscious choice to proceed. A uniform cop moved to intercept him, but Ryder stopped him with a glare. Menace was an art form he'd studied for twelve years in the Army. He knew how to intimidate without a word, without a weapon. Could kill as easily.

No one stood between Ryder and his men. Ryder dialed back the tension bunching his shoulders. He scanned the scene, gauging overall mood and readiness. Time didn't allow for more than superficial recon.

A row of patrol cars created a barricade behind which officers lined up, guns drawn. They faced a nondescript ranch house on five acres of hard dirt. A pickup truck was parked under a stand of trees, the only shade for a good ten miles. The shade didn't help much; it was Texas summer hot.

Nervous energy spread like gossip through the officers on this side of the scene. They were getting trigger-happy the longer the standoff lasted. Jittery men did stupid things.

Ryder walked through the line of patrol cars. No one noticed until he placed his body between the police and the scene of the crime. A last line of defense for the soldier in the barricaded house.

Expletives exploded behind the cop cars. Ryder let loose a sarcastic grin and turned; sure he had their attention now. He lifted his hands so they didn't feel compelled to shoot him. The energy in the open field shifted from unease to outright distrust. Sweaty grips tightened on guns. Every eye in the area focused on Ryder and judged him a million kinds of fool.

Ryder met their uncertainty with cool resolve. Today's mission involved getting PFC Madigan out alive, which put Ryder in the hot seat. Times like this, he missed the adrenaline rush: the increased heart rate, the quicker thinking, and increased energy that presaged a good fight.

"Sir, step back," a male voice spoke into a bullhorn.

Ryder shook his head no. He raised his voice for the camera and the crowd. He didn't need a bullhorn. "I served with the man inside the house. You want this to end peacefully?" He nodded at the camera. "Let me go in and talk to him."

More expletives before a tall, slender man wearing a ballistics vest stepped to the west end of the barricaded cars. Tall like a Jolly Green, the man's shadow stretched across the desert, the setting sun casting him in silhouette. Any half-trained soldier coming off a three-day bender could take him out. The soldier trapped in the house qualified as exceptionally trained. Ryder had done the training.

Ryder held his position, protecting both sides from bloodshed. "Sheriff," he guessed, rightly so when the man nodded. "I was on the phone with your suspect when you arrived on scene.

We've established rapport. Let me go in before the situation escalates."

It wasn't a question. Ryder didn't back down. Another news van pulled up in a billow of dust. The crew jumped out, filming on the fly.

A sidebar conversation happened behind the cars while the cameras whirred. Even at sunset, the temps were in the triple digits. The heat factor fueled tempers. Voices raised and lowered with curses and outrage.

Standing between the police and their suspect, Ryder didn't break a sweat. He absorbed the heat, used it to fuel his system. Guns from both sides pointed at him. The police maintained their vigil, while inside, Madigan would do the same, his sole focus on the troops massing in his front yard. "Mad Dog" Madigan was a weapons specialist. He would have the scene covered.

While the sheriff and his men deliberated, Ryder's backup moved into position through the rear of the house.

The phone in his back pocket buzzed with an incoming call. He reached and guns lifted to the top of the cars. His hands stayed steady as he pulled the phone out, keeping his movements slow and deliberate. The voice on the other end reached his ears before the phone did.

"Please tell me these reports aren't live." The Texas drawl didn't calm the panic in her voice. He could picture her pretty face, brows raised in frustration. Her hands fluttering as she spoke.

"They're live." Regret closed his eyes for a barely perceptible moment. *Lauren*. He'd told her he had to go help an Army buddy. "This is me helping a friend."

"With guns pointed at you?"

"Sometimes, that's what it takes, baby. I gotta go."

"Ryder—"

He clicked off and dialed Madigan. The call connected without a word spoken. The soldier's breathing pattern was high and erratic, which concerned Ryder more than the police stand-off. Every damn thing about this situation felt wrong. None of this shit was the way they were trained. Hell, Ryder would have sworn emotion had been beaten out of them until he heard the sob on the other end of the line.

"This is bad, Ryder."

"No shit." He kept his tone low and measured, aware of the audience.

"Do you think—"

"I'm coming in whether they let me or not. Keep it holstered." He pocketed the phone and looked across the yard to the sheriff. The other man's gaze hid in twilight shadows, but his stance read more relaxed than the rest of his men. "Sheriff, I have him on the phone. This is your one chance to end this standoff without bloodshed."

"How do I know you're not taking another weapon inside?"

The smirk came natural to Ryder. Who was the sheriff kidding? Madigan stockpiled enough weaponry to start a civil war. The cache of weapons was what kept the sheriff's men hunkered down instead of going inside. Ryder lifted his shirt and turned slowly, he even smiled for the cameras as he proved he wasn't armed or dangerous. Well, the dangerous part was open for interpretation. "I'm not losing another soldier, Sheriff. That's a promise I made my men when we came back."

There wasn't a soldier alive who didn't know the odds. Twenty-two suicides a day. *Not today*. The words were a prayer. Too bad Ryder had nothing left to believe in or pray to. Sometimes you had to handle shit on your own.

"You can shoot me in the back for the cameras if you want, but I'm going in."

He didn't wait for a response. The dirt shifted under his boots

as he spun and headed to the front porch. Ants circled a discarded pizza box on the welcome mat. The stench of rancid cheese hit him as he grabbed the doorknob, which turned easily in his hand. Ryder pushed into the house. Gloom shrouded the entryway.

“Close the door.” The voice came from the black void several feet to the right. “Lock it.”

“Not my first rodeo,” he said, but moved to comply. “You hung up on me earlier today, Mad Dog. We didn’t finish our conversation.”

They followed a strict protocol. No matter where a soldier lived, if he called, someone came running. No questions. They weren’t going to be part of some fucked-up statistic. Ryder was geographically closest to Madigan, so he dropped everything, kissed his new wife, and hit the highway. Rose had moved in from the north, and they’d arrived about the same time.

“I shouldn’t have called. Shouldn’t have involved you. I woke up—” Another hiccup from a hardened warrior. What the ever-loving hell?

“Nightmare?” They happened, and when they did, they felt real. Sounded real.

“I called before I had time to pull my head out.” Madigan’s tone calmed. “Before I could pin down what was real, a shitload of cop cars came barreling down the drive. How the fuck did they know to show up?”

“Good question.” Ryder kept his tone slow and easy as he catalogued the surroundings, waiting for his backup to come at Madigan from behind. Ryder was the distraction. They weren’t losing another soldier.

“You did the right thing, calling me. That’s the deal. Live by the team.” They might be out of the Army, might be disillusioned and disgraced, but they were still a fucking team.

“I lost time today, Ry.”

Could they still be having side effects after all these months? “How much time?”

“Hours.” The anguish in Madigan’s voice turned the dark hall into a black hole. “I’m afraid to turn on the light. Find out what’s real.”

“The hell you are.” No fear wasn’t just a motto. “Pack that shit up. Concentrate on the situation. Where are Maggie and the baby?”

“They’re my life. You know that?”

“I do. So let’s end this so you can get back to living.”

Sniffing sounded from a corner and Ryder was closer to triangulating Madigan’s position. He could take him in the murky light, but Madigan’s eyes were already acclimated to the black void. He’d have the upper hand. Darkness was Ryder’s friend, helped him focus, but today, night vision didn’t give him the advantage. Ryder reached to the wall and patted until he hit a switch. He flipped the light.

“Fuck.” Madigan shielded his eyes with one hand while the other aimed a gun at Ryder.

Where the hell was Ryder’s backup? Rose was supposed to take Madigan from behind, but Mad Dog’s back was now against a wall. Madigan backed himself into a corner looking every bit like his call sign: Mad Dog. A halo of red hair capped a tall, lean body smeared with war paint. The wild expression on his face surpassed insane. Blood covered Madigan’s hands and bare chest as if he’d painted himself in some twisted ritual. His eyes were dilated.

“You on drugs?” Maybe drugs explained the panic that shouldn’t be there. And the lost time.

“No.” Madigan scrubbed a hand over his eyes. “At least I don’t think so.”

“What does that mean, Mad Dog? You know better than to experiment with that shit.” With everything they had had pumped into their systems, even alcohol was a gamble.

“I didn’t, not on purpose, Ryder, I swear, but I woke up with the worst fucking headache. Disoriented.”

They’d all experienced those symptoms at least once. Shit. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I went into town to get pizza. Maggie didn’t feel good and the baby was fussy. I thought—” He pounded his forehead with the hand holding the gun. “Why the fuck can’t I remember?”

“What time was that?”

“Lunch.”

Hours ago. “Your truck’s out front. Do you remember pulling into the drive?”

“Yeah.” He pounded the back of his skull into the wall. “Maggie screamed. That’s what I remember. She screamed. I bolted. God, I can’t believe— I wouldn’t, but I had to, it’s only me in the house. And I’m covered in it.” His voice rose. “They’re my life.”

“Calm down.” Something was seriously fucking wrong, because the soldier stank with fear. Ryder took two measured steps closer.

“Stay back.” Madigan lifted a handgun and aimed at center mass. “Don’t take another step.”

Ryder paused. “I’m not afraid of dying.”

“Neither am I.”

Wasn’t that the problem?

*Keep him talking.* “Did Maggie leave you?”

“I wish.” Panic lifted his voice. “Not the way you mean. I don’t remember, but it had to be me.” An unfocused haze covered his eyes in a thin white film. “I’m the only one here, and there’s so much fucking blood.”

“You’re not making any sense.” Two steps closer. “Sitrep,” he barked, demanding a situation report from the soldier.

The order snapped Madigan’s shoulders to attention. “They’re dead.” He twisted his bloody hand in front of his hazy eyes as if the five fingers held the answers. “They’re my life.”

Seconds later, something in his eyes went hard. Determination replaced the haze, causing a shift in the soldier's stance. All the training and the mood-altering modifications clicked into place until Mad Dog metamorphosed into a warrior.

Madigan knew how to kill and he'd finally settled on a target.

"No," Ryder ordered.

"The pain ends. Right now." Madigan turned the gun to his head. "No fear."

Ryder launched across the space, but he wasn't faster than a speeding bullet. Blood spatter hit him before exposing the ruined skull of a man Ryder considered a brother. Mad Dog was a soldier, a protector, and a killer. Where did one start and the others begin?

Rose barreled down the stairs at the sound of gunfire. "What the fuck?" He took in the sight of the fallen soldier. They'd seen death. They'd lost teammates, but they'd never lost one like this. Train a man to kill, take away the fear, and suicide was too damn easy.

"Wife and kid are dead," Rose confirmed. "Bloody fucking sacrifice. Just like Kandahar."

One of the special teams had turned sadistic in Kandahar and taken out a local village. Bad press didn't begin to cover the fallout. The organization reacted swiftly, shutting down the program and denying any and all knowledge. Contracts were severed. Their service records heavily redacted. Overnight, the entire team was out. Out of the military, out of the war, out of the only life they knew. Team Fear took the fall.

Nothing about Mad Dog's situation could leak. Fallout from a failed government program on U.S. soil would be catastrophic. If the company investigated, retribution would be swift and fatal.

"Shit, Ry—"

"I know. Get out," he ordered. The cops didn't need to know Rose had been in the house. "Rendezvous at zero three hundred hours. If I'm not there, you go underground."

Rose vanished up the stairs. Outside, some idiot on a bullhorn issued threats he couldn't hear inside the macabre house of hell.

Ryder leaned against the wall, and then slid down as the world shifted under his feet. Was this what it meant to be fearless?



---

## CHAPTER ONE

---

“**M**ister, you lay a hand on me again, I’ll break your wrist.”

The soulless son of a Yank taking possession of the townhouse slowly removed his hand from Lauren’s lower back. “No need to lose your temper. I’m not the reason you’re losing your house.”

Lauren removed the last key from her keychain. Someone had forced the foreclosure through the system way too fast. If she had any money left, she’d bet it all on the realtor. “My lawyer is going to eat you alive.”

Tall and thin, Smythe had to be close to sixty with thinning gray hair and cowboy boots that were polished. “You don’t need a lawyer, darlin’. There are ways to make your problems disappear.”

“I just bet.” Smythe’s fake Southern drawl scratched against her last nerve. She fisted her fingers around the key.

“What you need is a man to protect you.”

Been there, done that, didn’t want the t-shirt. Impulsively, she had married Ryder before his last deployment eighteen months ago. He’d wanted her to have insurance, to be covered in case something happened to him. Being taken care of was a foreign

concept, but he'd worn her down with talk of being a team. Team Ryder. His twelve-month deployment ended early, and the first four months he'd been back, things had seemed picket-fence perfect. They had bought the townhouse and started painting and fixing and making a home. She cleared the knot in her throat. She knew better than to expect forever.

"I could set you up in a nicer condominium in a better part of town. Real nice."

"I like this side of town." It was close to work and close to the university. Had been close to the army post when proximity had been important.

"You could do better." Smythe finished the final walk-through paperwork, the scratch of the pen reverberating in the empty townhouse. The light dimmed as a cloud covered the sun outside.

In the gloomy kitchen, the walls closed in on Lauren, increasing her breath rate and pulse until she nearly hyperventilated three steps from the back door. She needed out, away from Smythe and the house that was no longer hers. She loosened her grip on the key and tossed it on the countertop where it jangled against the tiles. The ding sounded like the closing bell at the end of a fight, but she didn't know what happened when the fight ended, when the crowd left and it was just you, bloody and bruised in an empty locker room. The foreclosure broke what was left of her heart.

Smythe finished the last box on the checklist and handed her a pen. She signed and dated. He glanced at the uneven paint line between contractor white and soft beige. "They'll have to repaint."

Every day for the past six months that unfinished paint job taunted her, a sore blister that time rubbed raw. She and Ryder had never finished. They'd only been in the house for a few months before—"That's not my problem."

"I could probably get this place for a song," Smythe bragged. "Set you up right."

Lauren tossed the pen on the counter next to the key. The realtor was the lowest piece of dung on the dung heap. “You offering to be my sugar daddy?”

“If you were nicer, I might let you keep the place another month. See where it goes from there.”

“Does that ever work?” Not a chance in hell it would work on her. She’d starve before prostituting herself to the dirty old buzzard.

“You’d be surprised. A woman like you needs a man.”

Lauren made a line for the front door. Regret followed her through the now empty living room. It had been a hopeful place once. “I have a man.”

*Liar.*

“We both know your husband isn’t coming back.” He boxed her against the door, letting a certain part of his anatomy rub her hip.

Fire licked up her spine. “You know what, I’ve changed my mind.”

“Yeah.” His breath brushed her hair and surrounded her with the smell of cigarettes and peppermint.

“I’m not going to break your wrist.” She shoved him off and followed by ramming the heel of her hand into his weathered face. “I’m going to break your nose.”

Blood gushed and he backed away. “Stupid, bitch.”

Lauren jerked open the door before he could retaliate. She had surprise on her side, but the man was taller and meaner. “Come near me again, you lowlife son of a carpetbagger, and I’ll pull out my granddaddy’s castration knife.” She ran the path alone and jumped into her granddaddy’s Ford. Resting her head on the steering wheel, she fought tears. Every good memory of her marriage was in that house. Every bad memory too.

---

## CHAPTER TWO

---

Lauren wanted a hot bath, a glass of wine, and the promise of a good night's sleep. What she got was country music, a loud dance floor, thirsty patrons, and the promise of six hours wearing cowboy boots and a smile as plastic as the beer mugs she carried. Soldiers filled the rustic booth to overflowing. Sunday night and they were ready to party.

“What can I get you, gentlemen?”

They responded to her synthetic smile with good-natured grins that spoke of youth and a serious lack of problems. They ordered beer and shots—tequila, God help ‘em. “No problem. As soon as I see some ID.” She smiled and winked to soothe the sting.

“It’s Baby Face, isn’t it?” The soldier closest to her asked, pointing to the guy in the corner with whisker-free cheeks. “We get carded every time he’s with us.”

“It’s all y’all,” she joked, laying her palm flat for his ID. “Pony up, boys, if you want to drink.”

They were loud, but respectful, and barely legal to drink. They looked like babies. Nothing like—

Nope. She cut that thought right out of her head. At the bar,

she steered past Wade, the cowboy with more hands than a dude ranch, and hit the other end with a seriously bad attitude. “Remind me why I do this?”

The bartender’s lips lifted, showing pretty white teeth and a sarcastic smile. “Because you like to eat.”

“It’s a reason.” The boss was gone for the night, so Lauren leaned her backside against an empty barstool.

“Not a good one.” Debi chuckled as she filled Lauren’s order. “I haven’t had a chance to talk to you all week. Finish your story before we get busy. Did you break his nose?”

“The hit landed solid, but I was shaking harder than a heifer in an ice storm.” Truth be told, the only thing keeping her rubbery legs from giving out was pure spite. A minute and a block later, and she’d had to pull over as a panic attack turned her vision hazy.

“He got off lightly.” Debi raised her voice over the blaring country music. She pulled two draft beers and set them on Lauren’s tray.

“You’re absolutely right. Guys like Smythe are the reason I’m swearing off men.”

“I thought your husband was the reason.”

“Him too.”

“Ryder would have killed Smythe.” Debi added two bottled beers and four shots to the tray. “Speaking of—”

“Don’t say his name again.” She hadn’t let herself think or say his name in months.

“Okay, if that’s how you want to be.” Debi gestured with her head, the move subtle. “Because he who shall not be named is standing there large as life.”

Lauren’s heart skipped as everything froze. Silence wrapped her in a bubble that stopped time. The music silenced and the crowd noise dropped. The barstool swiveled as she—

Debi grabbed her arm and lashed her into place. “Don’t look.”

Right. Don’t look, because he’d left without a word. Dropped

off the planet. He didn't deserve the thunder in her chest, the nearly impossible pull to turn and drink him in. "I'm not even tempted."

Debi laughed and sound whooshed back—the music, the clank of pool balls, the raucous voices—roared into her head and drowned all thoughts. An image formed, unbidden. The absent smile on his hard face, the quick kiss and go in the kitchen before he ran to help a friend.

*Be back soon.*

Nope. Thoughts were there after all. The memory of the standoff aggravated what she suspected was the start of an ulcer. The television news stole her focus that day, as paint dried on the rollers and brushes of their unfinished project. Ryder had looked like a complete badass walking through the police barricade. When he'd lifted his shirt to show he wasn't armed, he'd revealed hard-packed flesh she had once considered hers.

When gunfire had sounded inside the house, she'd feared Ryder was dead. Impossible because Ryder was invincible. The on-site reporter had drawn out the agony until the camera showed him exit the building behind uniformed police, looking like he had the first day after his last deployment. Eyes dead, posture slumped, movements slow.

Losing Madigan had knocked something loose in Ryder's psyche, and rather than come home, he'd taken a walk. He took a piece of her with him, one she wouldn't get back and maybe didn't want. She wasn't the same girl, didn't want picket fences and forever. No, she was more like her mother now. Broken, because she knew forever didn't exist.

Her mother was the widow of a soldier, and she'd never been the same after his death. She'd never dated as far as Lauren knew. Lauren wasn't going down that road. Life did not stop when a man went away. Grieving was a natural part of the process, so she'd mourned Ryder until she couldn't cry another tear or wish

another impossible dream. And then she'd sucked it up and returned to the land of the living.

Debi rubbed her arm. "You okay?"

"It couldn't get much worse."

"Sure it could." Debi lifted her gaze to the ceiling as if giving it great thought. "If the man who broke your heart showed up with another woman."

That did it. "I'll kill him."

"Stop." Debi dug her nails into Lauren's arm. "I was just showing you, it could always be worse."

"Great freaking joke." The thunder in her chest matched the music. "Maybe I should kill you instead."

"You could, but then you wouldn't have a place to sleep tonight."

"Jail." Lauren's heart still pounded at the mere thought of Ryder finding another woman to love. "In jail, I'd get three meals a day and a cot."

"There's the gallows humor I know and love." Debi patted her arm. "You want me to call in a replacement?"

"No. Sunday tips are usually my best. I can handle it." Sure. Despite the ache in her chest, Lauren struggled to act like she didn't know who stood on the other side of the bar. Ryder was as sleek as a panther with dark hair, dark eyes, and a darker soul. He met every single checkbox on her fall-in-love checklist—including emotionally unavailable—and she'd fallen before common sense could talk her out of something as reckless as loving a soldier.

The past few months had taught her a few lessons, losing their house taught her another, so when she turned to face her husband in name only, she wore her happy-ass waitress face.

Yep, still good-looking as sin. Ryder wore black leather now, as if he wasn't enough of a bad boy before. The military cut had grown out, leaving his hair a dark mass of curls that drew her fingers. Lauren tightened her grip on the tray. She ignored his nod

and the fluttering pulse in her throat. Instead, she delivered drinks to the booth filled with the soldiers from the post.

Lauren hit the next booth with a smile.

“Hey, Professor.” The petite redhead was a student in one of Lauren’s advanced history classes. They thought it was fun to harass their instructor afterhours at the bar.

“Anna, what can I get you?”

Anna smiled, showing a dimple in a baby face that hid a wicked sense of humor. “Beers all around.”

The girl next to Anna shook her head. “Designated driver, so I’ll have a coffee.”

“Draw the short straw again, Beth?”

“It is my cross to bear. One of these days, I’m going home with one of those.” Beth gestured at the soldiers in the next booth. “And these losers can catch a cab ride home.”

At the idea of taking a soldier home, Lauren lifted her gaze, unerringly finding Ryder. His gaze locked onto hers and the temperature in the bar went up ten degrees. Feeling the flush down bare legs to the tips of her steel-toed boots, she turned back to the booth. “Good luck with that,” she told Beth. “Coffee’s on the house.”

Debi was filling another order, so Lauren moved around to pour coffee. “Three drafts,” she told Debi.

“You going to ignore Ryder all night?”

This time Lauren resisted the pull of his magnetic gaze. “He left me.”

Traffic in the bar had picked up, filling more tables and raising the crowd volume several decibels. Debi pulled the drafts while talking. “Don’t you want to know why?”

Yes. But talking to Ryder was more punishment than pleasure. Lauren grabbed the mugs of beer and placed them on the tray next to the coffee. “He can’t just show up at my work and expect—”

“Better here than the university.”

Lauren groaned. Dr. Crawford was looking for an excuse to pull her from the PhD program. When the head of the history department had discovered she worked the late shift at the local watering hole, as he called it, he'd flipped a lid. He'd been finding extra work for her ever since. There wasn't a task menial enough in his mind, but what the hell did he want from her? A girl had to eat, and teaching only covered the cost of tuition.

Debi mixed drinks for the waitress on the other end of the bar, which freed Lauren from a conversation she didn't want. Maybe she should act like a grownup and talk to Ryder, but she didn't feel like a grownup. In fact, this was a sucky week to be an adult. She would pay good money to live like a carefree undergrad, cramped in a booth with nothing on her mind but boys and booze.

Lauren worked the room, covering her tables and avoiding Ryder who had taken a seat in a shadowy corner near the emergency exit. In the past, she'd romanticized those behaviors like he was a lone wolf watching his back, but she was done lying to herself. The need for a wall at his back was awareness born of experience. He'd fought—long and hard—for his country, and the paranoia was a natural byproduct, but the real problem predated the military.

Ryder needed an emergency exit. In all places and situations. Six months ago, he'd taken the exit at the speed of grand theft auto. The lone wolf image wasn't romantic anymore.

Lauren released the tension in her neck before making another round through her tables. When she got back to the soldiers, they bought a round of shots for the undergrads. Shocker. The girls grinned when Lauren brought the tray. "Compliments of the gentlemen next door." She gestured to the next booth. "If you're taking a shot," she said to the designated driver, "I get the keys. If you don't have another drink, I'll give them back in an hour."

Beth knew the drill. Lauren was protective of her students,

even when they were off campus and not technically her responsibility. Beth handed over the keys, which Lauren pocketed. The girls took the shots with a squeal of high-energy laughter, before leaning over the back of the booth to thank the soldiers. Moments later, the entire gaggle headed to the packed dance floor.

The melancholy country song rubbed a raw nerve as Lauren busied a table and set up a new round for a group who came in after the movies. Wade, the frisky cowboy from the bar, moved to sit in her section. He wore tight Wrangler's on his lean frame and a thick leather belt holding it all together in a fine looking package. The rancher was close to her age with the build of a cowboy and the heart of a poet. Lauren stiffened her spine. "What can I get you, Wade?"

"Your number." The dimples used to do it for her, add in blond hair and a Texas twang, and he was just about perfect. Here was a man who would stick, but he'd made a nuisance of himself the last few weeks, badgering her to go out with him. "You're not wearing your wedding ring," he said with a wink.

Lauren ran a thumb over the groove where her wedding ring belonged. "Don't read anything into it, Wade. What can I get you from the bar?"

"Long neck."

The moment the words left his lips, she hightailed it to the bar, grabbing the bottle of beer while Debi mixed a drink. She took the beer back and avoided his grabby hands. In the corner, Ryder glared, but Lauren shook her head no. The last thing she needed was a fight. If she lost this job, she'd be starving as well as homeless. One more semester. She'd sacrificed a normal life to get her doctorate. Fate would not be so cruel as to take it from her now.

Lauren lost track of Wade and Ryder as the one-more-for-the-road crowd showed, fighting for every last minute of the weekend. Every seat in her section filled, except for the empty seat across

from Wade, which she kept between her and Wade at all times. He was an affable drunk most nights, but when one beer turned to three, a wise woman used all the barriers she could find.

Her red cowboy boots started to squeeze her tired feet, but she worked through her break, racking up tips and keeping her brain too busy to think. Maneuvering through the tables with a full tray, Lauren took a direct route through the center of the bar, and didn't think twice about it until Wade ran a hand over her barely clad backside. Dang. She'd forgotten to bypass his table. Lauren jumped, nearly dumping the tray onto the next table. Across the room, Ryder stood. She heard the quick screech of the chair legs against the wood floor. Or maybe she was simply that aware.

So. Not. Good.

---

Visit your favorite ebook retailer for this first in the series **free** eBook of Live by the Team.

Or visit [CSkaggs.com](http://CSkaggs.com)

## **ALSO BY CINDY SKAGGS**

### **UNTOUCHABLES SERIES (ENTANGLED IGNITE):**

Untouchable (Untouchables 1)

An Untouchable Christmas (Untouchables 1.5)

Unforgettable (Untouchables 2)

Unstoppable (Untouchables 3)

### **TEAM FEAR SERIES:**

Live By The Team (Team Fear 1)

Fight By The Team (Team Fear 2)

Survive By The Team (Team Fear 3)

---

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

---

Many thanks to the awesome people who made this book possible. To my writing friends Beth Rhodes and Jennie Marts, thanks for introducing me to writing sprints and for holding me accountable. Working with you two has taken my writing to the next level and I am so thankful we met. To Jessa Slade, the talented editor whose work forced me to be a better writer. To L.J. Anderson, for giving me such an amazing cover design. To Karen Gault Skelly for letting me use her last name for my Dead Body (DB) and for being my first reader.

To the fabulous people at the Pikes Peak Library District for being supportive, for answering my unusual and random reference questions, and for dedicating themselves to providing books and access for everyone in El Paso county. To librarian Christine Dyar for never blinking an eye at my weird writer questions. To Nicole Deemes for her amazing close reading that catches so many of my errors.

And, as always, a lifetime of thanks to my children, Brianna and Noah.

*For you, I would drink the Kool-Aid.*

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

---



Cindy Skaggs grew up on stories of mob bosses, horse thieves, cold-blooded killers, and the last honest man. Those mostly true stories gave her a lifelong love of storytelling that enables her writing addiction. She is the author of *The Untouchables* series for Entangled Publishing and the *Team Fear* series.

She holds an MFA in Creative Writing, three jobs, two kids, and more pets than she can possibly handle. She also plays the flute, makes crazy-good sculptures out of tortilla dough, and can wrangle the neurotic dog without getting mauled. And she loves to hear from readers like you.

[www.CSkaggs.com](http://www.CSkaggs.com)  
[Cindy@CSkaggs.com](mailto:Cindy@CSkaggs.com)