

Chapter 1 ~ Paige

“Seriously?” Paige rested her forehead against the steering wheel and sighed deeply. She’d had her car serviced last month. Just her luck.

After counting to ten, she turned the key in the ignition and heard nothing but clicking. Five more tries only produced the same result; Paige officially gave up.

It had been a decent day. After three weekly hikes, she could finally say she felt comfortable with the group. This week she had actually looked forward to spending an hour in nature; it broke up her workweek. Mere minutes earlier, Paige had waved goodbye as Jasmine drove out of the parking lot. Paige knew they would be comparing sore muscles at work tomorrow.

Looking around, Paige noted only one other car parked in the trailhead lot: a driverless, dark blue compact car. She hadn’t realized that she and Jasmine had spent so long chatting after the hiking group disbanded, but she seemed to be the only person left. More good luck.

Sighing again, Paige pulled out her wallet and phone, finding the number for AAA. After describing what she figured was a dead battery to the operator, she settled in to wait the estimated forty-five minutes for the technician.

She jumped as a sudden knock on her window startled her. Through the glass, she saw a familiar man from the hiking group. She thought his name started with a T – Tony?

Paige rolled down the window an inch or two.

“Hi, are you okay?” a deep, concerned voice asked.

“Yeah, thanks, I’m fine,” Paige answered, starting to roll up the window again.

“Car trouble?” the man – Ted? – asked.

“I’m waiting for AAA.”

The man glanced around the parking lot. “Is anyone waiting with you?”

Paige bristled, suddenly hyper aware. She recognized the man from the hiking group and thought he had been on all three of her hikes and seemed normal enough. Still, she certainly didn’t want him to know that she was by herself.

“I’m good,” she reiterated, tensing and completely sealing the window.

The man put his hands up, raising his voice to be heard through the window. “Great. But I’ll stick around until the truck comes. I’m not leaving you alone in the parking lot.”

Paige bristled again, both because she didn’t need his help and because she felt anxious having a virtual stranger in such close proximity.

“You really don’t have to stay.”

“I’m going to sit over here in my car, that’s all.” He gestured toward the only other car in the lot. “I’ll wait until the truck comes and then I’ll leave. I’m not going to follow you or anything.”

God, Paige hadn’t even thought of that horrible possibility. She cringed.

“Yeah, that sounded creepy,” the guy admitted. Paige thought she saw his face begin to redden. “I didn’t mean it that way.” She nodded slowly. “I’m Theo. My friend Kaleb and I are part of the hiking group.”

Theo! That was the T-name. She relaxed a smidge, and cracked the window again. “Hi, Theo. Thanks for offering, but really, I’m okay. I think it’s just a dead battery.”

“I’d give you a jump, but my car is electric, so it won’t work.”

“No problem. I have my phone and AAA is on the way.” She gave a small smile meant to reassure him.

“Still, I’m going to wait until they get here. Blakeford isn’t a bad area, but sometimes you

hear about crime in this park.”

Theo backed away from Paige’s car and toward his own. She watched as he retrieved a backpack from the front seat and then boosted himself up to sit on the hood. He pulled a water bottle and a thick paperback book out of his backpack. After taking a few swigs of water, he leaned back against the windshield and began to read.

Paige sighed: he obviously wasn’t going anywhere. She pulled out her phone, checked her email, and scrolled through some news sites. As the minutes ever-so-slowly ticked by, she felt herself relax. As promised, Theo left her alone and hadn’t moved from his reading position, aside from taking another few sips of water.

Suddenly her phone urgently beeped. She glanced at the screen and read, *Low Soon Alert*.

“Dammit.” She began rummaging through her bag. When that didn’t turn up anything to eat, she dug through her console, and finally the glove compartment. Nothing.

She had planned to run home and grab a quick snack after the hike. She would have had plenty of time if the damn car battery hadn’t conked out. Paige came to the unfortunate realization that she used her emergency snacks a few weeks ago and hadn’t restocked.

“Way to go, Paige,” she muttered to herself. She couldn’t believe she had been so careless. She’d been diabetic for twenty years now and shouldn’t have made such a rookie mistake. Although her monitor had only just alerted that she was close to experiencing a low blood sugar, she knew she had a little more time before things became more serious.

She waited another ten minutes. As her monitor went off a second time, she silenced it, took a deep breath, and got out of the car. She was going to have to suck it up and do something. Theo turned around when he heard her door slam shut.

“Um, Theo?” she called.

He lowered his book. “Everything okay?”

“I don’t mean to bother you, but I’m really hungry,” Paige lied. “Do you happen to have any food?”

“Yeah, sure.” Thankfully, he didn’t seem too annoyed. Theo shifted to sit cross-legged and dragged his backpack into his lap. He dug around and pulled out a handful of packages. “I’ve got a few granola bars. They’re peanut butter. Does that work?”

“Sounds great.” Paige walked toward him. A peanut butter granola bar would certainly help to get her blood sugar back up into the normal range. “Thanks so much. I really appreciate it”

“No problem. I could use a snack myself,” Theo said, ripping open a package.

As Paige swallowed her first bite, she glanced down at the book resting on the hood. She couldn’t quite make out the title. “What’s that you’re reading?”

“*Lonesome Dove*.” Theo handed over the book.

Paige skimmed the back cover. “A Western?”

Theo sat up and suddenly became quite animated, gesturing with his hands. “Yes, but not your typical Western. It’s more historical fiction, with some romance and adventure thrown in for good measure.” Theo’s face reddened and he shrugged. “My dad recommended it.”

“It’s really long,” Paige commented, returning the book.

“It goes fast,” Theo said, clearing his throat. “I’m sorry, but I don’t remember your name. I might have heard it in the group, but I’m not positive.”

“Oh, sorry. I’m Paige.” She brushed off her right palm and extended her hand. Theo hopped down off the hood to shake hands.

Paige hadn’t realized that he was so tall. He looked to be about her age, so maybe 25 or

26. She glanced up at him and noticed, for the first time, that he wasn't bad looking. Not at all.

"How long have you been with the hiking group?" Paige asked, stepping back and putting some distance between them.

Theo thought for a moment as he got back onto the hood. "Kaleb and I have been coming for a little over a year." Paige knew that Theo tended to hang around with another guy, but she couldn't recall his face. "We missed a few weeks when the weather was bad, but we've been pretty good at sticking with it. How about you?"

"This was my third time. My friend Jasmine brought me; she's been a member for a while."

"I've met Jasmine. I think she was already coming when I joined."

"Do you work closeby?" Paige leaned against Theo's car as she began the second half of her granola bar. It turned out she had actually been hungry and was unexpectedly enjoying her emergency snack.

"Pretty close. I'm a librarian at the Blakeford Public Library."

Paige grinned. "The reading fits." He looked at his hands and blushed again. She couldn't remember ever meeting someone who seemed to blush so often over so little. It was kind of cute.

"I'm new to the area. I work remotely, mostly at the co-working space at the Youngren Building."

"A community development group refurbished that building as offices about ten years ago. It sat abandoned for most of my lifetime, used to be the Youngren Textiles warehouse before they went out of business," Theo explained.

"Jasmine manages the co-working company there," Paige added. "Are you from Blakeford originally?"

“Yeah, born and raised. My dad grew up here, too, and my mom is from a bit farther downriver.” Theo gestured toward the west where the sun was beginning to set.

They both turned as a truck rumbled into the lot. Paige balled up the granola bar wrapper as she returned to her car, retrieving her wallet and AAA card as the technician jumped down from his truck. A stocky man with “Chris” emblazoned on his left breast pocket confidently walked toward Theo.

“What’s the trouble here?” he asked.

Theo pointed at the other vehicle and started walking toward Paige’s green hatchback. “It’s this car; Paige called AAA.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s a dead battery,” Paige explained as Chris popped the hood.

“Give ‘er a quick try,” the technician addressed Theo.

Paige got in and tried the key in the ignition again. Unsurprisingly, nothing happened. Chris went back to his truck and retrieved a small machine with two clamps. He went back under the hood to test the battery. “Yep, nearly dead.”

Chris raised his head from beneath the hood and walked over to Theo. “I might be able to give you a jump so you can drive to a mechanic, or if you want to buy a new battery, I have a few in my truck and can replace it now.”

“It’s not my car, sir,” Theo explained. “You need to talk to Paige here.”

Chris pulled two pamphlets out of his jacket pocket and handed them out. He turned to Theo. “It would take about fifteen minutes to get everything all set up.”

“This middle one.” Paige tapped the pamphlet. “I’ll get my credit card.”

As Chris got to work, Paige returned to Theo’s side. “Thanks again, Theo. I’m good from here.”

“I’ll stick around until he’s done.” Theo lowered his voice. “I don’t think Chris would know who to talk to if I left.”

Impressed that he’d noticed the obvious slight, Paige chuckled and rolled her eyes. “It is what it is.”

Theo’s phone rang; he glanced at the screen, excused himself, and turned away from Paige to answer. “Hey... Yeah, I’m running a little late. Did you get your nails done?...Nice.” He paused for a few beats. “Call in the order and I’ll pick it up on my way home. I should be done pretty soon.”

Paige figured as much: of course the nice, cute guy had a girlfriend. Oh well, she wasn’t looking to date anyway. She’d resolved to focus only on herself and her career before moving to Blakeford.

“I’m sorry to keep you,” Paige said when he hung up. “Really, you should go.”

“That granola bar is holding me over. It’ll only be a few more minutes now. Seems like Chris knows what he’s doing.”

They continued chatting about the hiking group while Chris finished installing the battery. When Paige next tried to start the car, it instantly came to life. She grinned and thanked Chris.

As the AAA truck drove away, Theo shuffled his feet and ran his hand along the back of his neck. “Would you mind texting me when you get home? In case your car gives you any more trouble.”

Paige considered this. She didn’t see the harm in giving him her cell number. If he got too chatty or weird, she could always block him. She agreed and had him call her so they could each save the other’s contact info.

Paige thanked Theo yet again as they got into their respective cars. Paige left first, seeing Theo follow her down the first road and make a left at the stop sign while she continued straight.

Her ride home took fewer than ten minutes. The instant she got in her door, she grabbed a box of granola bars from the cabinet, stuffed two in her bag and set the box with her keys to put in her car tomorrow. She then added *candy* to her shopping list and set the oven to preheat. She grabbed her phone and sent off a quick text before she walked into her bedroom to take a quick shower:

Paige – 7:02p.m.

Hi Theo – this is Paige from the hike. Home now. Turned the car off and on again with no problems, so the new battery seems fine. Thanks again! See you next week.

Theo – 7:05p.m.

Hi Paige. Glad the new battery worked out. I'll see you at the hike. Have a good night!