

# Nixon's Promise

## Gemini Group Book 1

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## Chapter One

“Do you need some help?”

I was balancing a fifty-pound bag of dog food on the tailgate of my pickup watching kibble pour out the side. As much as it pained me to have to say yes, the growing pile on the asphalt was indicating I had to.

“If you wouldn't mind. I ripped open the bag on the cart.”

The man stepped into my peripheral and if I hadn't been using my hip to keep the bag from slipping, I would've stumbled back.

*Good God.*

He hefted the bag up then to the side, stopping the spillage, and lifted it the rest of the way into the bed. I would've found this impressive if my attention hadn't been solely on the size of his biceps. I was concentrating so hard trying to work out if I could wrap both my hands around one and have my fingers touch, I hadn't noticed he'd stepped back.

“Thanks. If you hadn't come along when you did, I'd be scooping up all fifty pounds' worth.”

*Jeez, could I sound any more like a putz?*

“Glad I came along then. I'm Nixon.”

“I know who you are,” I told him.

His head cocked to the side, his piercing brown eyes narrowed, his lips formed two flat unhappy lines and I would've tinkled a little had I not been so enthralled by his arms. Yet again, his biceps, now firmly crossed over his chest, held my attention.

They defied all laws of nature. It was simply unnatural for a man's muscles to be that big.

"Small town," I mumbled when the silence had stretched to uncomfortable.

Gossip about Nixon Swagger being home had hit Cliff City like a hurricane. Everyone was talking about the local war hero's homecoming like it was the second coming of Christ. Rumors had been circulating for the last two weeks.

I didn't even work in town, and only came in when I needed supplies, much preferring to stay out on my farm away from nosy, prying eyes. Yet, I'd still heard all about Nixon. The stories were hard to ignore. Not because I was one of the nosy, prying types, but because I had ears and spoke English, therefore I couldn't miss the talk.

Everything from, Nixon was suffering from PTSD and he should be avoided at all costs, to he'd come home after his enlistment was up and needed quiet to soothe his ravaged soul, were circulating. I didn't grow up here but I'd lived here long enough to know rumors were as abundant as the steamed crab from the Chesapeake Bay, and they were just that—rumors.

"Right."

"Anyway, thanks again."

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Micky."

"Micky?" His head dipped and I was now staring at his ratty blue hat with gold stitching that read NAVY, just as worn I might add, across the front.

"My name's McKenna but everyone calls me Micky," I explained.

"Well, McKenna, will you be able to get that bag out without spillin' the rest?"

"You offering to follow me home and unload my feed?"

*Jeez, why'd I ask that?*

Now the poor man was gonna think I was hitting on him. Which I wasn't.

Nixon's gaze slid from me to the bed of my pickup, Old Blue, and he smiled. "How many animals do you have?"

"The bags of corn and wheat are for the ducks and Goat," I started. "The Buckeye is for Sally, my Chincoteague pony rescue. And the dog food, is well, for the dog."

"You have a Chincoteague pony?"

"Not by choice. She's a cantankerous bitch. But her owner was moving to Florida and I couldn't say no. And with Sally came Goat. They stick together and roam so she's not a problem until I need to argue with her to get her in the barn."

He was looking at me like I was a puzzle that needed to be solved. Or maybe he was thinking I was a crazy woman who had a feral pony and he was regretting stopping to help. The way he'd taken a giant step back from me after he'd tossed in the dog food, I was betting it was the latter.

"So, you gonna need help?" He went back to his original question—obviously done with standing out in the heat in the parking lot of Southern States Feed Store.

"No thanks. I'll get Zack to help me."

"Right." His smile dimmed a fraction and he dipped his head like he was a gentlemanly cowboy.

But he wasn't. We didn't have cowboys on the Eastern Shore, we had Farm Boys. And he looked every bit the part. Dirty jeans, plain black tee, baseball cap, right down to his work boots. Ones that were used for working, not for style. Even though they were kick ass and he was rockin' the whole look.

"McKenna, it was a pleasure. See ya around."

"Yeah, see ya. And thanks again."

With a lift of his chin he was gone.

I'd survived my first Nixon Swagger sighting.

I wondered if I should report the encounter to the local townspeople and mark myself as safe. According to some people, I'd taken my life into my hands just by talking to him, further supporting my views on rumors.

Total. Bullshit.

He seemed perfectly pleasant to me. Not to mention, he had to have been the second hottest man I'd ever seen. Second only to Tom Cruise in Top Gun. Even if you don't like Tom's chiseled good looks, he still looked mighty fine in his flight suit and aviators.

Nixon Swagger looked better.

*Way* better.

He filled out his tee to maximum capacity. It was a wonder how the seams hadn't split trying to accommodate his biceps. Not to mention, after a thorough inspection of his rear end, he more than filled out his Levi's.

Yes, indeed, I survived the great Nixon Swagger sighting.

## Chapter Two

Nixon Swagger thought coming home was what he needed.

Twelve years serving his country was a long time. It wasn't the amount of days he'd served that had taken a toll. It was what he'd seen and done that weighed heavy. It was what he'd lost that weighed heavier.

The weight that had bared down on him to near-crushing levels lifted when he'd crossed over the Bay Bridge. By the time he'd made it east to the Kent-Narrows Bridge, he could breathe. And when he'd passed over the Chester River Bridge, he'd felt free.

He was home.

The problem now was, he was *home*.

Cliff City was a small town. Population five-thousand. Four elementary schools, two middle schools, and one county high school. There had been two-hundred students in his graduating class, most he'd gone to school with from kindergarten on.

He knew everyone and everyone knew him. And the people who didn't know him still did—by rumor, tall tale, or straight bullshit. He'd forgotten that part, how fast shit spread. And most of it was pure shit and lies.

It wasn't like people tried to hide it. He heard them. Acme, Tractor Supply, Southern States, Nixon couldn't go anywhere without someone giving him the side-eye or trying to pump him for information. The men mostly gave him a wide berth, the women thought they'd give it a go. You know, be the one who could tame his war-torn soul.

That was never going to happen. He'd need more than a soft hand and a roll in the sheets to wipe his memory and guilt clean.

So the new issue was he was home, and he'd forgotten people couldn't mind their own business. When he was a kid, he was used to it. The man he'd become, the trained killer who was now used to living in the dark, under the veil of secrecy, hated it.

Nix had come home for a variety of reasons. One being he'd needed to sort his life. He couldn't think of a better place to figure out his next move as he transitioned into civilian life than on the farm he grown up on. Long hard days working did the body good. The mind, too. He couldn't sit back and dwell on all the ways he'd fucked up his last mission when at the end of the day, he was too tired to do anything but fall into bed. Since moving back, he'd traded whiskey for hard work. His liver was thanking him even if his body was begging for a reprieve.

The other was his father had died while he was still in the Navy. Nixon's wife—who had no business being a Navy wife—had already divorced him, and he'd severed all contact from anyone back home. That hadn't been on purpose, but time and circumstance had a way of cutting ties. Even ones you thought would hold fast. So being as Nix didn't have anyone in Kent County he could count on, he'd done the best he could with the land, equipment, and farmhouse his dad had left him.

The three hundred acres had been rented out to a farmer to till. The last of his dad's dairy cows had been sold, and he'd hired someone to mow the grass in the summer. But other than that, the farm had been stagnant for years. Therefore, it was in disrepair.

Not that it had been in any pristine shape before Wayne Swagger had died. The man had done the best he could, too. But with corn and bean prices what they were, and milk being sold by the pound and on a steady decrease for the last decade, farming was a dying occupation. At least small farmers were dying—corporate farms were thriving.

Spring would be fast sliding into summer and if Nix wanted to get the rest of the old pasture ready to rent, he needed to get busy pulling out posts. Not that they'd be all that hard to rip out, considering most of the fence was held together by old baler string. One more thing Nix's dad had let slide over the years. Without help, the man had done what he could and cheaply as possible. And the orange twine was something that was in abundance, wouldn't rot, and was sturdy enough to tie posts together. It wouldn't be hard, but Nix would have a week's worth of work going at it alone.

With an ever-growing pile of logs to burn, it was nearing on lunchtime and Nix was getting ready to head up to the house, when something in the woods nearby caught his attention. Whether it was growing up on a farm where his father always had either a pistol on his hip or a .22 in the truck, or his years as a Navy SEAL that had only reinforced the habit, Nixon always carried. In one smooth motion he had his Sig P226 out of the holster and at the ready. Not that there were very many wild animals in

Cliff City that could cause harm, but he was always prepared, something his father had taught him as a young boy.

It hadn't taken long for the animal to get through the thick brush and pop out in his pasture. A horse. Or upon further inspection, a pony. A silver bay, Chincoteague pony if he wasn't mistaken. And a goat. They were leisurely grazing, not paying Nix any mind. One thing that had changed over the years he'd been gone was the property backing up to his woods had been cut into parcels and sold. Now, instead of one large farm sharing his woods, he had three smaller farms that weren't really working farms. More like three people who built houses on very large pieces of property.

Nixon understood about needing space and privacy so he hadn't thought much about it. But now that he had his neighbor's pony roaming around, he was wondering. What were the chances McKenna was his neighbor? He knew a lot of people who owned horses, but only one person who owned a Chincoteague pony.

"Hey, girl," Nix called out.

On a slow approach with his hand out, he advanced on the animal. McKenna had said her mare was cantankerous, so Nix was being cautious.

"There you go." He continued to talk to the pony while he made a quick lead line out of the baler twine. He slipped the makeshift noose over her head and let the slipknot tighten.

With a gentle tug, he guided her back into the woods and waited to make sure the goat was following. It didn't take an expert—though he spent his childhood in these woods and knew every inch—to see the path the pony had taken.

That section of the woods was less than ten yards deep, and with it only being spring, nearly free of the basketgrass, thistle, honeysuckle, and wineberry vines that would soon take over, making the path unusable. Until then, it was easy to navigate through.

The brush cleared, revealing a coated wire fence. On a quick inspection, Nix didn't see any obvious breaks in the wire or downed posts, and it was doubtful the small pony could jump the enclosure. And he knew that even if the pony could, the goat couldn't.

"Come on, girl." Nix gave the mare a gentle tug and guided the pony to the end of the fence and around the side. A big yellow barn he knew well came into view. Whomever purchased this parcel had

inherited Mr. Todd's outbuilding as well. A couple hundred feet past the barn was the old, brick farmhouse.

Nix had spent more than one evening in that house when he was a child. Mr. and Mrs. Todd had taken pity on him and his father and they'd spent holiday dinners around their family table. The Todds didn't have any children, and though Wayne had one, he was wifeless. The Todds had been good people, good neighbors. Salt of the earth and would—and truly did—give their last penny to the less fortunate.

Mrs. Todd had passed away when Nix was a senior in high school. Her funeral was a county event. Nix had never seen so many people pack into the high school's stadium. Not even a Friday night home football game could garner the number of asses planted on the benches.

When Mr. Todd died without an heir, he'd instructed everything to be sold and donated to the local churches. Even the Catholic church got their share, and the Todds were Baptist. Everyone was surprised.

Nix was not.

Gene Todd's generosity knew no bounds. And seeing the house now for the first time since Mr. Todd had passed and his property had been divided, hit Nix square in the chest. He'd missed a lot over the years he'd been away. Most didn't bother him, some did. Seeing Mr. Todd's land with a horse enclosure, land that used to be a bean field, was one of those somethings.

It was on this thought that Nix stopped short, his eyes landing on a denim-covered ass. He couldn't catch sight of much else, seeing as the rest of the woman was bent over the front grill of a rusted, baby blue Ford. She was standing on a closed tool box, yet still rolled up on her toes for extra height.

*Goddamn.*

That ass.

Those jeans.

Nix had never seen such a sexy sight.

Belatedly, a dog started barking and racing from the barn straight toward Nix and the pony, not looking like it had any intention of stopping.

“Shit.” Nix heard metal clatter, before McKenna twisted her head and looked over her shoulder.

“Shit,” she echoed and stumbled, losing her footing on the toolbox. Her hand flew out and she caught herself before she went down.

“Duke! Sit!” she shouted.

The dog skidded to a halt and sat.

Impressive.

“Nixon,” she greeted over Duke’s barking. “Duke, settle.”

The dog once again obeyed his mistress, tongue lolling and tail sweeping the dirt behind him.

“I believe these belong to you.” Nix found his voice but just barely.

McKenna’s long, thick brown hair was pulled back and hidden under a ratty baseball cap, grease was smeared on her gray tank top that showcased her perfect tits, more dirt and grease were smudged down the front of her supremely faded jeans.

Yeah, it had been a marvel Nixon hadn’t swallowed his tongue. She was his wet dream come to life.

“Dammit, I’m going to kill Zack for leaving the gate open again.”

*Zack.*

There was that name again. She had a man, of course she did. A woman like McKenna would have her pick. He was positive every single man had lined up in her yard when she hit the town limits.

“Where do you want her?”

“I’m sorry, Nixon.” She wiped her hands on her thighs and he tried not to follow the movement.

He failed.

“Zack!” she bellowed.

That pulled him out of his fantasy about what her legs would look like bare. Nothing like a wet blanket to douse a daydream than hearing another man's name coming from the mouth of the woman you were thinking about naked.

Whoever this Zack guy was, he was one lucky son of a bitch.

Not that Nixon wanted a woman. But if he had, McKenna checked all his boxes.

## Chapter Three

I was going to strangle my brother.

Nixon looked pissed, Sally and Goat had wondered over to his property and I couldn't blame him. First, it was just downright rude to allow your animals to roam, and second, Sally was a pain in the ass.

"Yeah?" Zack ambled out of the house in the only way he could—lazy teenage boy was the best description. Punk teenage boy was more accurate.

"You left the gate open. Again. Sally and Goat got out and Mr. Swagger had to—"

"Nixon."

"Huh?" I turned from Zack to Nixon.

"Just Nixon or Nix."

"Nixon had to bring her home."

"How'd you catch her?" Zack asked. "It takes me like an hour." He looked more impressed than remorseful.

This was true, but not the point.

"Show me where you want her." Nixon ignored Zack's question, tugged on the makeshift halter he had around Sally's neck, and started toward the barn. He stopped only to give Duke a head scratch and to wait for Zack's lead, then he was on the move again.

I watched Nixon follow Zack to the barn, then turned back to my truck when I lost sight of them.

It was good to know I hadn't imagined how well Nix wore a pair of jeans and shit kicker boots. I also hadn't exaggerated when I remembered how good looking he was. Not even a little bit. The man was lethal. And if the rumors were to be believed, that wasn't an exaggeration either.

The two of them were gone long enough that I was already elbow-deep into the Ford, when Nixon came back into view. Up close and personal, he was leaning his forearms on the quarter panel looking into the engine compartment.

“Serpentine belt,” I said by way of explanation.

He glanced at the undamaged radiator and commented, “Got lucky.”

He was right. Normally when the belt snapped it would hit the radiator and punch a hole in it.

“Totally,” I agreed.

“You take this apart yourself?”

“Yeah.” I stopped tightening the bolt I was working on and gave Nix my attention. “It’s just a belt and the tensioner pulley. No reason to take it to a shop. They’d charge me five times what the parts cost.”

“I agree. I’m just impressed. Don’t know many women who’d have the wherewithal.”

From a man like Nixon, that was a huge compliment.

“Thanks.”

“You need any help?”

“Nope. Just have to put the belt on, and I’m sure Zack can manage to hold a crowbar so I can feed the belt around the pulley.”

“I’m sure he could, but I wouldn’t mind helping.”

“I really don’t want to take up any more of your day. Again, I’m really sorry about Sally and Goat. I’ll remind Zack he needs to be more careful. The last time she got out he chased her around for almost two hours before he finally caught her.”

“That was his first mistake.”

“What was? Leaving the gate open, after I’ve told him approximately five-hundred times to be careful? Which, considering we’ve had the pony about a week, is approximately seventy times a day.”

Nixon’s lips curved up into a smile. The small act completely transformed his demeanor. In an instant, he went from unapproachable to easy-going.

“No. Chasing her. Just like with any woman, you need to exercise self-control. Slow, calculated movements. A gentle hand and a firm voice. And above all else—when you’ve finally roped her, handle her with care and concern.”

My body trembled and my nipples pebbled.

The rumors were true—Nixon was deadly. Both in words and actions. If I’d been the type of woman a man like him would pursue, that one statement would’ve had my panties in flames and me flat on my back.

But I wasn’t that type of woman. I was average at best. And right now covered in grease, my mediocrity couldn’t be disguised with a cute outfit, makeup, and good hair. Not that I tried all that often or all that hard.

Sometime in my mid-twenties I’d learned I was who I was—a tomboy. And I began to like who I was—therefore I didn’t try all that hard to pretend I was something different. And by all that hard, I meant I didn’t try at all.

So, no, I would never be a woman worthy enough to be on Nixon Swagger’s arm. And that sucked, but it was what it was.

“Maybe my kid brother could learn that sooner rather than later. I have a feeling it might be easier to teach him that lesson than to teach him how to remember to lock a gate. Though, I’m not real sure I want him at fifteen to learn anything more about girls than he already knows, seeing as he’s making it his mission to piss-off every father in Kent County.”

Nixon chuckled and it sounded more than a little rusty.

He quickly recovered and asked, “So, do your parents live around here then?”

Damn, I hated this part. I thought as the months slid by and I’d perfected my explanation down to the minimum, it would get easier. It hadn’t.

“No. My dad and stepmother passed away. They live with me now.”

“They?”

“Yeah. My brother, obviously. My sister, too. She’s almost seventeen. She’s not trying to piss off other people’s parents because she’s too busy trying to make sure I know she not only hates it here, but hates me more for making her live here.”

“Damn, McKenna, I’m sorry. My dad died almost five years ago. It’s not something you get over.”

“No, I guess it’s not.”

We worked in comfortable silence. He’d picked up the crowbar and held the tensioner pulley back so I could fit the belt back on. Which, to add, was difficult. Not because the piece of rubber was giving me trouble—no, the challenge was due to his muscles flexing from exertion.

And unfortunately, I had an up close and personal view considering he was standing close. His proximity was also an issue because I could smell him. No cologne for Nixon Swagger. He smelled a little like hay, sweat, and tobacco. In other words, he smelled like a man. *All* man. A man that worked outside and didn’t need some fragrance to make women swoon.

“Start her up,” he told me when the belt was on.

Wordlessly, I got in the truck and turned the key. She purred to life and I jumped out, meeting Nixon in front of the pickup to watch the new belt spin.

“Everything looks good.” He walked to the open door, reached in, and turned off the truck.

“Thanks for your help. I’m sorry to pull you away from what you were doing.”

“Stop apologizing, McKenna.”

“Sor—” I clamped my mouth shut and he smiled. “You can call me Micky. Everyone else does.”

He shook his head. “You don’t look like a Micky to me.”

“I don’t?”

Now *I* was laughing. Everyone had always called me by my nickname and I’d never given it a second thought.

“Definitely not. McKenna suits you. It’s a beautiful name for a beautiful woman.”

*What in the actual hell?*

Sheesh. Nix had all the moves down. I really needed to make sure the gate was latched. I didn't need to spend any extra time near Nix, and Zack really needed to steer clear of him. I didn't need any of Nix's cool rubbing off on my brother.

"Hey, Micky!" Zack shouted from the back step. "I'm gonna go to the movies with Caden."

"Are your chores done?"

"Everything but putting the laundry away."

"Put it away. Then we'll talk."

"Come on, Sharleen is—"

"Then hurry up and put it away," I told him, then asked, "When does the movie start?"

"Fifteen minutes."

The movie theater was in town. It was only a five-minute drive but I was filthy. Not that it would be the first time I'd gone in looking like a farm hand, but I did try and keep it to a minimum.

"I can take him," Nixon offered.

I watched my brother's eyes widen and before I could stop him, he said, "Thanks. I'll be down in three minutes."

Three minutes meant he was either going to toss the laundry basket into his closet thinking I'd never find it, or he was going to shove clean clothes into his drawers until they were overflowing and push them closed with pieces of fabric sticking out between the wood frame of the bureau.

"Thanks for the offer. But you've done enough for us today. I've got—"

"I was heading into town before I brought Sally back. It's not a problem and you're covered in grease and could use a shower."

My face flamed red. Of course I needed a shower. I'd been sweating my ass off working on the pickup. And unlike him, the smell of my body odor wouldn't be attractive.

“If you’re sure.” I took a giant step away from him and held my arms to my sides hoping like hell I’d put on deodorant before I came outside.

“Ready!” I heard Zack yell right before the screen door’s wooden frame slammed against the house.

Duke’s head popped up and he gave a *woof* before he lowered his head back down on his outstretched front paws and closed his eyes.

*Great guard dog he was.*

“See ya, Micky.”

“You got money?”

“Yeah.”

This was surprising. I gave him money for helping out around the house, but it was normally gone by the next day.

“Call me when you’re done.”

“I will.”

Zack stopped next to Nixon and looked up at him expectantly. “Ready?”

“Yeah.”

Nixon stepped away from my brother and stopped in front of me. “It was nice seeing you, McKenna.”

“You, too. Thanks again for all your help.”

“Anytime.”

With a smile and a dip of his head, he turned and started toward the woods.

I watched him walk away *this* time, too. And once again, I did it thinking Nixon Swagger filled out his Levi’s.

I’d survived another Swagger Encounter. This time just barely.