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# **BELONGING TO THE RANCHER**

**Sam Crescent**

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## Chapter One

Clarissa West looked out of the kitchen window and there was no way she could move on. Not for at least a minute. Once again, her boss was close to the house, manning the main backyard. He was without a shirt, but there was the heat that often came at the end of summer.

When she had asked about this job in town, a lot of men and women had been hesitant. Axe Strong was not well-liked. He didn't take crap from anyone, and he wasn't exactly open about things. She struggled to read him.

The advertisement had been clear. He wanted a woman to take care of his home, to cook, clean, and in essence be like a housekeeper and nanny to him. There were no children, no wife, no one. He had a few ranch hands who came and helped him, but they never came to the house.

She didn't think she was going to get the job, as she had struggled to get any job. Most of the time, she had to beg for a chance, but this time, no begging, she just showed up, and Axe's only request was that she clean a room and cook him dinner. That was all he asked her to do, and then he got up and left. Just like that.

She had his home to herself the whole day, but she didn't go snooping. Privacy was important and she respected people's right to have it, so she gave him that.

For five hours, she cleaned his sitting room, dusting, wiping, polishing, vacuuming, and making sure there was not a speck of dirt to be seen.

After she was happy with her work, she went to his fridge and nearly had a heart attack. She spent so much time cleaning that she'd not checked his food supply. She assumed he had a fully-stocked fridge, but he only had the bare minimum, and she had to come up with a meal. He had a single chicken breast, a few cans of sauce, and something that looked like cheese. There wasn't a lot to use, but she rolled up her sleeves, remembered all her mother had taught her, and got down to business.

She had ground up that chicken breast since he did have most of the kitchen tools needed. She seasoned it, and got to work on a sauce. For dinner, Axe enjoyed chicken meatballs with a heavily seasoned tomato cream sauce, and some pasta. She also made sure to turn the leftover bread into garlic cheese bread.

Clarissa had always loved to cook. She loved the years spent with her mother, cooking at the stove. Even when her mother got sick, they spent many hours cooking and baking together. Cutting those memories off, she tried to look away from the heavenly sight of the man in front of her, but her mouth literally watered. This was insane.

She had never been so enamored with a man in her life. She'd never wanted to be with a man at all. So, even though she was twenty-five, she was still very much a virgin.

A virgin.

Never touched by a man.

Not even shared a kiss.

When her mother was alive, she'd ask her if that made her a bit weird, but her mother always assured her it did not and that the right man would come along.

Her father had passed away when she was young, so it had been her and her mother for most of her life. Her mother had dated, but no man could ever compare to her father, and she'd often say that she wouldn't settle. *"The right man is out there, baby girl. You just have to wait and he'll come. I promise."*

Clarissa hadn't been interested in the boys at school, or any of the guys who wanted to take her on dates. No one got her juices stirring, not like Axe.

It was unnerving how attracted she was to her boss. Having sex with him should be the last thing on her mind, but late at night, when she was sure she could hear his guttural moans, she couldn't help but touch herself. She'd been working for him for six months now, and she'd been bringing herself to orgasm with visions of him.

Nibbling her bottom lip, she glanced down the length of his body and couldn't help but wonder what he was hiding beneath those jeans.

Axe didn't dress to impress. She had no choice but to repair most of the clothes he had. When she suggested he get something new, he'd grunt about the waste of expense. She never pushed, seeing as he was the boss, and she was just his employee.

Her heart began to race as he suddenly looked up and glanced over in her direction. For a split-second, she had no idea what to do. She'd been peeling potatoes, but those were currently sitting in the water, waiting to be peeled.

Axe didn't look away. Why did this man bother her more than anyone else? It made no sense to her. She felt her cheeks start to rise, and she was pleased she wore a padded bra, because he'd be able to detect the points of her nipples. Stupid body. Stupid hormones.

She shouldn't be so affected by him.

He lifted his arm and wiped it across his brow, removing the sweat that had clearly gathered there. Such a tempting brow. Such a tempting man.

He made her ache.

This was insane. She shouldn't be thinking about him in a sexual way.

*Get a grip on yourself. This is the best job you've ever had, and you're not going to spoil it now.*

Clarissa would give herself the freedom to drool about him in the privacy of her bedroom, but certainly not now. Not when she was supposed to be cooking for him.

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Hiring Clarissa West was a big mistake.

Axe knew it the moment she knocked on his door, but there was something about the sweet, tempting brunette. Even when he saw her walking obliviously through town, or at the diner, he was drawn to her. She was a beautiful woman.



That thick, luscious brown hair, which he wanted to see spread out beneath him. Clarissa had been in his thoughts for many years. He was forty years old, and he knew he shouldn't even be thinking about the young woman. Clarissa should be dating men her own age, out partying, or at least living her life. She shouldn't be stuck on his ranch, cooking and cleaning for him.

But he hadn't been able to deny her.

He'd known his fridge had been empty those six months ago, and he'd been unable to stay far away from her, so he knew she hadn't gone shopping to get food. He expected to have no meal.

When he'd walked into his home, the scents had made his mouth water, and if he was completely honest, a bit aroused, he'd been amazed. Then he'd tasted the chicken meatballs, and they were unlike anything he'd ever had.

There was no way he could let her leave. Clarissa's cooking was out of this world. For the last six months, he'd been spoiled. His home was completely clean and his food was pretty special as well, each meal even better than the last.

He'd had everything from stir-fry to pies, meat dishes, pasta, massive filled sandwiches. You name it, she cooked it, and then, she also topped it off with sweet pies. Apple, blackberry, coconut, chocolate, and that was just a few flavors. She also baked large batches of cupcakes and cookies.

Axe did share them with his employees, but he didn't allow anyone else to come to the house. He didn't want to share his woman.

*His woman?* Clarissa didn't belong to him.

He glanced across to the house and saw she was looking at him. Axe hated people, and he hated the whole social scene. He couldn't deal with small talk or the sound of giggling women.

For a long time he kept to himself, and he didn't have to go into town that much, so he planted this vegetable garden. Through the summer he had everything fresh, and through the

winter he grew what he could, but most of the vegetables he got, he froze. They were not the greatest, but they served a need for him.

Wiping across his brow, he saw how her gaze dropped down to his chest. He'd never gotten a single piece of ink. There had been temptation to a few times, but he just wasn't interested in wasting his money on ink, nor did he have the time. Also, he didn't trust easily.

The few housekeepers he had before Clarissa had not hidden their attraction to him. Some of them had snooped through his home and tried to find out what he was worth, or how he was able to run the ranch. They hadn't been very trustworthy.. Clarissa had stayed in the one room he asked her to clean, and then made him a meal.

He had his ways of knowing what was going on in his home. Mainly, security cameras hooked up to his cell phone, so he was able to keep an eye on the house throughout the day. Axe had lost count of the number of times he'd caught himself watching Clarissa as she bustled around his home. It didn't take him long to realize she'd set up a routine of cleaning, and she kept to it. He loved watching her, even if it was just cooking or cleaning. Axe knew his obsession had reached new heights, because even though he really shouldn't have done so, he had done so.

He placed a camera inside her bedroom and bathroom. Many nights he lay awake, watching her. He knew when she was touching herself, and he also saw his name spill from her lips when she came.

Her orgasms were ... pathetic. Axe knew he'd have her screaming and begging for more, if she just gave him the chance.

He forced himself to look away from her as he didn't want to have to work with a rock-hard erection, which seemed to be his constant state when he was close to Clarissa. There were many of his own rules he was breaking for the young woman. None of his other employees were allowed to eat with him, but he demanded Clarissa do so.

Sitting opposite her at the end of the day didn't help matters. All it did was make him so freaking aroused. He had no choice but to work his dick when he stood beneath a cold shower. Axe couldn't even recall the last time he had a nice, hot shower. They all had to be freezing cold to get his arousal in check. Not that it helped his need for her.

Picking up the rake, he eased it through the soil, gathering up the weeds he'd just loosened. He also did a quick sweep to make sure there were no frogs lurking around. Clarissa had a fear of them. He'd been washing up a few weeks ago, when her screaming had alerted him, and he'd come running to take care of business. That business had been a small, tiny frog, and she'd freaked out. She had a fear of spiders as well. She was so adorable.

He thought about his woman, and he knew he had to stop thinking about her like that. Clarissa was not his, but he always felt possessive of her.

He wanted to take care of her, to own her, to possess her, to fuck her.

And he could do none of that, because he was her boss.

## Chapter Two

Clarissa glanced across the table toward Axe.

He wore a short-sleeved deep-green shirt, and the cuff of the shirt was tight as he tensed up, sliding his knife through the peppered steak she'd cooked on the grill. She made sure to get it medium rare, the way he liked it. The peppercorn sauce was in a separate pot beside him. She served it with some green vegetables and fresh new potatoes.

It wouldn't be long until the summer was behind them, and on course for autumn. There had been a few cold nights over the past week. The days were nice and warm, but they were getting cooler. She normally loved the colder season. She recalled the years spent with her mother as they snuggled together on the sofa, enjoying movies or reading books. Sometimes they listened to music. They were sweet memories.

With the colder months approaching, her time admiring a semi-clad Axe would come to an end. He did look good in clothes, just as good out of them. Not that she'd seen him completely naked. No, just shirtless, always with a pair of jeans or sweatpants.

Axe always kept himself busy. There was never a day off at the ranch. Even Sundays, he would go and check fences and the cattle. She didn't mind. She always loved to do something. Sundays helped her take stock of what she had, and make a list for him to check over everything she needed in town.

Monday was her shop day, and he'd warned her to take full advantage of the empty pantry and to start filling it.

Once the snow hit, the roads were way too dangerous, and he wouldn't allow her to leave. She found it hot that he'd refuse to give her permission to leave. It was insane for her to even think about. She'd never been told what to do in her life. Even her mother hadn't given commands or forced her to do anything. They talked about it.

Not Axe. He demanded it.

She had taken his advice, and knew from personal experience how treacherous the roads were in the main town, and his ranch was off the beaten track, quite difficult to get to. Every time she went to town, she stocked twice as much as needed, and the pantry was nice and full. This coming Sunday, she'd check to see what was missing.

Clarissa didn't know how he liked to spend his Thanksgiving and Christmas, but she liked to celebrate. She made a note to ask him if he had a tree or any decorations she could use to get the house all festive. They were still several months off, but she would like to be prepared.

"When are you going to the store?" Axe asked, surprising her.

They rarely talked. In fact, other than the advice and commands he sent her way, they never had a conversation.

"Monday."

He nodded. "I'll come with you."

"If there is anything you need, I can pick it up. I've got a list." Before he could say anything more, she slid out of the chair and moved to the cabinet where she'd hung her list inside. Taking it down, she placed it in front of him, and sat down.

Axe perused the list. "A Christmas tree?"

"I know it's early, but I wanted to make sure we have one, or pre-book. Frank takes early bookings, and I thought we could have one delivered."

"I have a tree and all the decorations in the basement."

"You do?"

He nodded.

She'd not been in the basement. It was the one place he didn't ask her to go, and she wasn't about to argue with him.

"That's good to know."

She watched as he swiped the pen through the list. Christmas tree and decorations were there. Everything else he

left on the list.

“I’ll take my car.”

“Okay.”

He slid the list back toward her and she took it. Clarissa paused as she looked at Axe. Their fingers had touched. It was just a small touch, but it was enough to get her pulse racing.

“I wanted to offer my condolences on your mother,” Axe said.

His words took her by surprise. She let go of the list and sat back in her chair, staring at him, a little bewildered.

“You knew my mother?”

He nodded. “She was a kind woman. When she worked at the supermarket, she always gave me extra meat, but she’d add that after the ticket was made. She was a good woman.”

Her mother had worked at the local supermarket before she had gotten sick. Even after her cancer diagnosis, she had worked until she couldn’t anymore.

“Thank you,” Clarissa said.

“She’s been gone three years,” Axe said.

“Yes.”

“I went to the funeral. You did an amazing job.”

“You were there?”

He nodded.

“I had no idea.”

“You were grieving.”

She nodded her head and then forced a smile to her lips. “Yeah, I was.” She hadn’t paid attention to anyone who had arrived at the funeral. All she had felt was her own grief. After the funeral, her mother’s lawyer had been there to give one final letter from her. It was a letter where her mother begged her not to allow pain to get in the way of living her life. Her mother had wanted her to live, to find love. She’d

told her to grieve, but to do so quickly. Time was too precious to spend it angry or sad.

Clarissa looked over at Axe. To many people his outburst had seemed rude, bringing up such painful memories, but she knew this was his way. He wasn't being cruel, he was ... starting a conversation.

For three years she'd been alone. Three Christmases full of grief. Three birthdays with no one to share it. Three years of jumping from job to job, trying to find her place.

This was the first time in all those years that she felt she had found where she was meant to be.

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Axe hated shopping. After a very busy Sunday of having to deal with a torn-down fence that he'd missed, working late, and then having to get up early to work on morning chores on Monday, he wasn't in the best of moods. The breakfast Clarissa served him helped to deal with his mood, but shopping was close to putting him in a bad one.

They had gotten through the vegetable section, and it had taken them thirty minutes to do just that. Clarissa had nothing in her cart, because they had home-grown vegetables, but the people stopping her, wanting to talk, offering him a smile, or attempting to say a few words, were infuriating.

“Are you always this ... popular?” Axe asked.

Clarissa snorted. “Nope. In fact, this is the longest I've spent in the supermarket.” She shrugged.

Axe frowned. “Then why are people stopping you?” They were at the meat section. He noticed Clarissa had gone past the butchery section and straight to the packaged meat.

He had to wonder if she was trying to deal with the pain of losing her mother.

“Honestly, I think it's because of you. In all the time I've worked for you, not once have I been stopped, but this is the first time you've come with me.” She sighed. “I think they have a crush on you.”



He shook his head and grabbed a couple of packages of steak.

“That’s not on my list,” Clarissa said.

Axe raised a brow and she sighed.

“Fine. Fine. But I like to keep to a list.”

“I’m the boss. What I say goes.”

They walked around the supermarket and he saw several women trying to gain his attention, but he ignored them. They could thrust their chests out, or tuck the waistband of their skirts all they wanted to. He had no interest. Instead, the beauty at his side had his attention. She wore a pair of old black dungarees, with a green turtleneck shirt.

The heat had taken a dramatic turn and it had gotten cold. It was such a shock considering a few days ago he was working without a shirt on as sweat dripped from his body.

They got to the baking section and he watched as she grabbed some chocolate chips, bars of baking chocolate, and icing sugar. She’d already purchased many blocks of butter for baking. His stomach was looking forward to whatever concoctions she came up with.

At the checkout, he grew impatient with the young woman serving them. He pushed the boy who he caught staring at Clarissa’s tits out of the way, and packed the bags himself.

Clarissa used his card to pay for the transaction, and the woman behind the counter gave him a giggle and wished him a good week.

“Do you not flirt at all?” Clarissa asked.

“No.”

“Fair enough.”

He glanced toward her and saw the small smile on her lips. What had he said to entertain her? He didn’t know exactly, but either way, he loved to see the smile on her face.

Packing the bags into the back of his truck, he took Clarissa's hand and helped her into the truck before taking the cart back to the bay. Once that was done, he climbed behind the wheel and turned over the ignition.

“Are we heading home now?”

“No, I've got a little stop to make.”

“Where?”

“You'll see.” Pulling out of the local supermarket's parking lot, he drove onto the main street, then took two lefts and a right, before he headed up to the old barn owned by a guy called Mitchell.

Parking the car, he climbed out and rounded the vehicle to help Clarissa. He grabbed her hips and couldn't help but notice how full and ripe they were. For a brief second, he imagined her on her knees before him as he pounded inside her, filling up her nice, tight cunt.

This was not the time nor the place to be getting aroused, so he pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind, and instead took her hand. She made no move to pull away.

Mitchell came out of his cabin and walked up to him, shaking his hand. “Good to see you, Axe.”

He didn't say anything. He sensed Clarissa's curiosity, but he ignored it and followed Mitchell back inside the cabin, and that was where he heard them. Mitchell had called him last week, said he found two little pups dumped on the side of the road. He knew the shelters were full to capacity.

Before he hired Clarissa, Axe had said goodbye to his dog, Gus, who had been his companion for seventeen years. It was a long time for a dog to live, and he'd not been any pedigree breed, but a mongrel. A mongrel Axe had loved.

Now, he stepped up to the two pups that had been placed in the main living room. The moment he saw them, he knew they were a mixed breed. Their features would become clear as they grew up, but there was no way he could allow them to go into the shelter.

“Oh, my, they are so adorable. Can I touch them?” Clarissa asked.

“Yes, of course,” Mitchell said.

Clarissa stepped over the small baby fence Mitchell had used. Axe had already made the decision to keep them, but watching her with them, he knew he wasn't going to let her go without them.

She stroked both of the pups, lifted each one in turn, and kissed the backs of their heads.

“I'll keep them safe,” Axe said.

Just as he was going to keep Clarissa safe.

## Chapter Three

### *Several Weeks Later*

Clarissa had never owned a dog or a cat in her life. She loved them, but there was no time or extra money for a pet. Her mother had said if they were ever able to afford one, she'd get one. Then her mother had gotten sick, and the money was used for medical bills. If it hadn't been for her father arranging brilliant health care, Clarissa would have been swamped with bills.

Axe knew about owning dogs. For the first time in their working life, he had taken the time to show her pictures and videos of Gus. She wished she had met the crazy little dog. She had a feeling Axe missed his dog.

He took the lead in helping her take care of the two pups, but it was hard work. Axe told her the key was to set boundaries, and he also showed her how to train them. After picking up the two pups, they had to go to the pet store, where they stocked up on treats and food. The next stop was the vet, and then back home. They had been given their immunizations, and the vet had said they were perfectly healthy.

They kept barking throughout the night, but Axe was insistent that they not attend to them. Before bed, he always took them out, giving them a toilet break, and attending to their needs.

The first week, Clarissa didn't think she would ever sleep again. Slowly, the pups realized they would be attended to in the morning, and they began to sleep through the night, and through the day as well. They were active but very sleepy. Axe would take them with him for several hours, out onto the ranch to deal with the cattle, or whatever work he had. When he brought them home, they would enjoy some breakfast and sleep.

After breakfast, she would take care of them, do the housework, attend to the garden patch, and then train the pups. For several weeks this was their routine.

Late one night, Clarissa tossed and turned. The pups were silent, but there were times, like tonight, when she was sure she heard them whimpering. Shoving the blanket off her body, she wrapped a robe around herself and then opened the door, listening. There was no sound.

She couldn't sleep and instead of staying in her bedroom, she decided to go and make herself some vanilla milk to calm her mind. She tiptoed downstairs, and the pups didn't even stir. Clarissa glanced over at them and saw Dolly and Susie were fast asleep and Axe had put a small blanket on each pup. To most people, Axe came across as this cold, heartless, mean person, but she knew there was so much more to him than met the eye.

Moving into the kitchen, she grabbed a saucepan out of the cupboard, followed by a mug. She poured some milk into a mug and then tipped it into the pan. Placing it on the heat, she grabbed some vanilla and added just a smidge, as well as a spoonful of sugar. Her mother would make her this whenever she was unsettled and it helped. She placed it on the stove and turned the heat on, waiting for it to warm up.

The sound of a creaking floorboard had her gasping, and she turned to see Axe in the kitchen doorway.

She'd pressed a hand to her chest. "You startled me."

"Can't sleep?"

She shook her head. "Do you want a drink?"

"Sure."

She decided to split the large mug between them. With the milk steaming, she turned the heat off, and poured it into each mug.

Axe had already taken a seat at the table. He wasn't wearing a shirt and the pants he wore hung off his hips.

"Are you not cold?" she asked.

"No."

She was already feeling the cold and wishing she'd put her slippers on. Her feet were freezing, as were her hands.

Wrapping her fingers around the mug, she quickly pulled them back and then wrapped them around the mug again, tentatively touching it. She did this multiple times, trying not to show him she was cold.

Axe tutted. “You’re freezing.”

“I’m fine.”

He pushed his chair out, and tapped his leg. “Put it up.”

Clarissa frowned but then she gasped as he reached down, grabbed her ankle, and placed it on his lap. She let out a little squeak, but then he began to rub her foot. His hands were lovely and warm. Even his thigh was warm. Why was he so warm, while she was so cold?

Nibbling her lip, she couldn’t help but watch him. How masterly he worked her foot. He gave a tut, and then urged her to put her other foot up, which she didn’t mind. She had seen what he could do with his hands, and they were a temptation. With both of her feet in his lap, he worked the muscles and she gritted her teeth, trying not to vocally groan, but it was next to impossible. All she wanted to do was moan.

Licking her lips, she chanced a look at Axe, and he wasn’t staring at her feet, but looking at her. She pressed her lips together, feeling her cheeks heat. Clarissa didn’t have a clue how she was able to get aroused while he was playing with her feet. It was insane.

“You have magical hands,” she said, feeling breathless.

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Clarissa had soft, cold feet, and all he wanted to do was warm her up. The warm vanilla milk was forgotten as he paid more attention to her.

He worked from her feet, up to her ankles, and then teased a little further. She wore overly large pajamas and it was so easy to tease up her leg, massaging her calf, and then going further up until he teased her thigh, but then he stopped. Pulling his hand out of her pajamas, he got to his feet and Clarissa did the same. Clarissa was in front of the table,

trapped between it and him. Her head was tilted back and those plump lips were far too tempting to deny.

Even though he was shouting the warnings through his head, he couldn't bring himself to listen to them, and before he knew what was happening, he'd sunk his fingers into her hair, gripping the back of her head. She looked so beautiful and the little gasp she let out was so tempting. He'd tried to control his arousal, but nothing was working. His cock had gone from flaccid to hard within seconds.

Staring into her eyes, he couldn't look away. He was going to kiss her. There was no warning as he slammed his lips against hers.

Clarissa's hands went to his stomach, and then began to slowly travel up his body, wrapping around his neck, and then holding onto him.

He kissed that full mouth, and as he slid his tongue across her lips, she opened up and he plunged inside, meeting his tongue with hers, deepening the kiss. Letting go of her hair, he slid a hand down her back, curving over her waist, across her hip, then moving around to grab her ass. That full, inviting, tempting ass that he needed so badly. He tightened his grip on her. She whimpered and he growled against her lips.

How was he supposed to be strong and deny himself this pleasure?

He lifted her up and placed her on the edge of the table, and the harsh reality of what they were doing came to him. The mugs of vanilla had spilled to the floor. The cups had broken.

Clarissa was his employee. He shouldn't be kissing her. Breaking the kiss, he stepped back from her. Clarissa's lips were red and swollen as she looked at him.

“Axe?”

“Go to bed.”

“But...”



“Now. I’ll deal with this mess. Go to bed.” He only had so much strength against temptation.

Clarissa was his wet fucking dream and all he wanted was to be with her, to fuck her, to take her.

She didn’t move and he bent down, picking up the cups. He didn’t want to fire her, because he wanted her that badly. After several seconds, she didn’t argue, and he watched her as she left. She stepped away from the broken cups.

Axe picked up the mess and cleaned away the sweet vanilla milk. Once that was done, he was wide awake. He needed to clear his mind, so he unlocked the back door and stepped out into the cold night. It always amazed him how quickly the weather changed. He looked up into the clear, starry night sky.

Why now? He’d sworn off women. It was embarrassing but it had been five years since he had dated anyone. The last woman he’d been with had said some cruel things about Clarissa’s mom. It was when he had visited the town regularly, and he’d gone on dates and done everything single men did.

Clarissa was twenty years old when he began to see her in a different way. Axe was then thirty-five years old and hadn’t liked the fact he was crushing on a woman fifteen years his junior. So he’d attempted to forget about her on wasteful dates. Nothing had worked, so he’d welcomed his reclusive lifestyle.

He didn’t know what had drawn Clarissa to his home, but he knew he couldn’t keep her.

Opening the kitchen door, he looked to see Dolly and Susie there, looking adorable. Axe bent down, picked each of them up, wagging tails and all, and carried them up to his bedroom. He broke all his rules, but then Gus had also shared his bed with him as well. Taking them into his room, he hoped he’d be able to use them as an excuse not to go into Clarissa’s bedroom and finish what they had started.

He would have to let her go.

He was her boss.

They couldn't be together.

Clarissa deserved someone her own age. Even as he thought that, he knew he couldn't stand the thought of another man being with her.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do?” he said out loud.

He didn't allow his ranch hands to come to the house, and he didn't want to have to deal with letting her go. Why did life have to be so fucking confusing? Why did Clarissa have to get under his skin?

Dolly and Susie were not much help. They had found their places on his bed, had snuggled up, and were already fast asleep. Climbing into bed, Axe stared up at his ceiling.

He tried to close his eyes but when he did, all he could see was Clarissa. Her eyes had closed and her hands had welcomed him. She had wrapped her arms around him, holding him tightly, not wanting to let him go. He didn't want to let her go either.

Fuck.

Why had he fucked this up by kissing her? He shouldn't have touched her feet. No, he shouldn't have walked downstairs. That was his biggest mistake. He'd set it right, one way or another.

## Chapter Four

Clarissa hadn't been able to sleep a wink. For the rest of the night, she had been playing that kiss through her head, and she didn't have a clue why he had stopped. What had she done wrong?

This was her very first kiss, and it had ended like that! What happened? Was she a bad kisser?

The cycle of questions had been permanently on repeat inside her head. So, now she sat in her chair at the kitchen table, with a mug of coffee, waiting. She had no doubt he'd arrive. It was already five-thirty, so it was only a matter of minutes before he stepped into the kitchen.

When her mother's illness started to get worse, Clarissa had gotten used to waking up early. She never used to be an early riser, but that all changed within a matter of days. There was never a moment to miss with her mother.

So, she sat and waited, arms folded. Prepared.

She didn't know exactly what she was going to say. She wanted her questions answered and he was the only person who could answer them. Nibbling her lip, she reached for her coffee and took a sip.

The sound of his door opening seemed to echo around the house. She also knew he'd taken Dolly and Susie to his bedroom last night. They were not here for her to take care of. She'd already changed their water and cleaned up their sleeping area, folding the blankets they already loved. Sure enough, Dolly was the first one around the corner, and as soon as the little dog saw her, there was a wagging tail, which made her smile. Susie came next with another wagging tail, followed by Axe.

He stopped the moment he saw her. For several seconds, neither of them spoke.

Clarissa felt her nerves and even her arousal at seeing him start to rise. This wasn't good. She was determined to stay angry around him. And so, she waited.

The problem was, Axe was a master at the silent treatment. He had years to master this problem.

Arms folded, itching to say something.

She was pretty sure her lips were still sensitive from his kisses last night. To her, it had been an amazing kiss. She wanted him to kiss her again, and again, and again. The truth was, she wanted those hands all over her body, to show her exactly what she'd been missing.

Clarissa didn't know if he was her "forever" kind of man that her mother had warned her about, but it was certainly close.

She looked at him and waited.

And then, she just couldn't take it anymore.

"You broke the rules." She tried not to sound so accusatory, but that was hard to do.

"We'd disturbed their nighttime routine. I was fixing it."

"Ah, okay." She nodded her head. *Ask him. Ask him. Ask him if you're a bad kisser.*

"I've got to get out to work," Axe said in that gruff, commanding voice of his.

She was tempted to just let it go, to pretend last night hadn't happened, but ... it had happened. The kiss had been incredible, at least to her.

"Was I not good?" The words slipped out of her mouth of their own accord. She wanted to slap her hand across her lips, to find some way to silence herself. She hated conflict of all kind, and this could lead to conflict.

"That shouldn't have happened last night."

"Why?"

"I'm your boss!" He glared at her.

"Oh," Clarissa said. "So, all I am to you is an employee, is that it?" she asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. That is great to know.” She got to her feet, picked up her cup, and tossed the remaining contents into the sink.

“I am your boss, Clarissa. You are my employee. I don’t know what happened last night and it’s never going to happen again.”

She couldn’t bring herself to look at him. Of course, he spoke the truth. What was she even thinking? Having a crush on her boss was the biggest mistake of her life, and she shouldn’t even be entertaining thoughts of being with him. That is her mistake, not his.

“You’re right. Let’s forget it ever happened.” This was the best job she ever had and she didn’t like the thought of not working for him. She loved working for him.

Axe looked at her for several seconds, or maybe minutes. Either way, they were excruciatingly long, no matter the time.

She waited.

“I’ve got work to do.”

Dolly and Susie were waiting at the door for him.

Clarissa didn’t stop him, but she couldn’t help but watch him as he left. The door closed behind him, and for several minutes, she stood in the empty house, with her thoughts on the previous night. With no audience, she reached up and pressed her fingers against her lips. That kiss had really been something. Dropping her hand to her side, she felt tears fill her eyes.

Her first kiss, to a point even her first crush, and it had started in disaster. She was going to have to stop herself from thinking about him, or wanting anything more than a professional relationship.

She moved to the fridge and began to tick off all the smaller details that would help her keep this relationship to that of a boss and an employee. The first point would be for

her to not have breakfast or any kind of meals with him. Clarissa would make sure breakfast, lunch, and dinner were either eaten before or after him.

That would be the start.

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Axe had every intention to apologize, and to set them on the right path. He'd not slept at all last night. The puppy dogs hadn't been a problem. They settled onto his bed and didn't move until he had, this very morning.

Driving along the main line of the fence, he looked to see if there were any problems. He'd already received the text from one of his men letting him know the cattle had been checked over and there were no issues.

The fences heading into winter were always a problem, and it had been a good few years since he last changed them all. Every so many miles, he'd stop, get out, and test the work he and his men had done. He did a full loop of the property.

The dogs were starving, and as he got to one of the open fields that had recently been mowed by his cattle chewing on the grass, he pulled the car to a stop and let the dogs out. Dolly and Susie didn't need instructions. First, they started by doing their business, and Axe was already at the back of his truck, opening the supplies, so he could go and clean up. Axe then sat back against his truck as both dogs started their morning run.

Each one returned to him as they saw what he held in his hand — a single tennis ball. Raising his arm in the air, he threw it across the field and both took off. This time, Dolly was the first one to the ball. Susie trailed behind her, and then they both came back and dropped the ball at his feet. He bent down, picked it up, and started the process over again.

For several minutes, he did this, every other day. He loved the quiet, the peace, it helped him clear his mind, but today, it was not helping him do anything.

All he could think about was Clarissa.

Ever since she had started to work for him, she had dominated his thoughts, but this was different and he couldn't deny it. She messed with his head. She made it impossible for him to think or focus. And he didn't like it.

That kiss had been amazing. She looked so perfect, beautiful, and he wanted her. Even this morning, looking at her, he had felt that stirring in his groin that refused to go away.

He didn't want to ruin what they had. They had gotten into a great routine. He adored her company, and even though they didn't talk much, it felt companionable to him. He refused to allow a kiss to mess with that.

After another ten minutes of tossing the ball, both dogs came to his feet and collapsed, panting for breath.

“You're already turning into lazy dogs,” he said, laughing.

Putting the ball away, he went to his truck and opened the door. This time, he didn't have to click his tongue, each dog jumped up and climbed onto the seat beside the driver's one.

With them laid on the seat, he rounded the vehicle, climbed behind the wheel, and then turned over the ignition. He didn't move.

Clarissa's body played over his mind — how she looked as she sat waiting to talk to him. He'd not given her a chance to talk, instead, he'd taken the lead.

*It's better this way.*

Pressing on the gas, he headed back toward the house, keeping an eye on the fields, looking for any problems. The last winter, a couple of trees had fallen and he had taken care of them. Sometimes winter brought so many problems with the damage from wind, rain, snow, and ice, but he always took care of it.

He arrived back at the house and the dogs walked into the kitchen, and like every other morning since they got them, food was waiting for them.



Clarissa was at the stove.

He saw she wore a pair of jeans and a sweater. She had an apron wrapped around her body, and the moment he stepped into the kitchen, she put the breakfast plate, full with food, on the table. Axe always had a big appetite, and the work he did required a lot of food.

Sitting at the table, he looked toward Clarissa, but she'd gone to the coffeepot, poured him a large mug, and placed it on the table for him.

“Where is your breakfast?” he asked.

“I already ate.”

The dogs finished eating and went straight to their beds.

He caught sight of the sink. The dishes were clean already, and there was her cleaning basket on the counter.

“Enjoy your breakfast, I'll have lunch ready at the right time.” She nodded her head and before he had chance to ask any questions, she was on her feet and gone.

He sat at the breakfast table and for the first time in his life, he lost his appetite.

What the fuck?

Why was she not eating with him?

Maybe he was reading it wrong.

Running a hand down his face, he looked at his food and knew he wasn't going to waste it. Picking up his knife and fork, he dove into the breakfast. His appetite soon returned.

He wouldn't let anything change between him and Clarissa. They had a professional relationship and one kiss wasn't going to ruin it. How could it?

He refused to think of anything bad happening between them.

## Chapter Five

### *One Month Later*

This had to be the worst frost of them all. Clarissa was sure to check all the windows to keep the cold out. She moved from room to room and made sure all of them were secured. They hadn't even entered winter but the fall was turning out to be a particularly cold one.

She wrapped her arms around her body and made her way downstairs to find her casserole already bubbling on the stove. Turning the heat off, she lifted it into the oven and allowed it to cook long and slow.

The kitchen was one of the warmest rooms in the house. Since it was so cold, Axe had refused to take the pups out to the fields. They didn't want the dogs to catch any illnesses. They also didn't want to leave the house, other than to do their business outside.

She glanced over toward them and saw them bundled up on their sleeping bags. Walking over to them, she lifted their blankets back over them, and she saw them snuggle under. They were so adorable.

Glancing toward the clock, she saw it was only an hour before Axe was due for his lunch. There was always so much work to do, and it was rare for him to take any time off. She walked to the kitchen.

The past month had been ... hard. She had to find multiple excuses not to sit with him. She made sure to be busy. Like this lunchtime, she intended to tell him she had the living room to clean. The housework was now saved for when he arrived. At dinnertime, she made the excuse she had eaten. She hadn't always eaten, and she hated lying, but she'd sneak a sandwich so she didn't have to spend time with him.

When he was around, she avoided eye contact with him.

The memory of that kiss was the most unfair of all.

She hated it.

Her dreams were filled with the feel of his lips against hers.

It was cruel.

Her first and only kiss was also the worst one of her life. Stepping up to the fridge, she opened it and pulled out the chicken breast she'd defrosted.

From their last day at the supermarket, she'd spent a great deal of time preparing the food they had purchased, especially the meat. Several of the chickens were already seasoned. Axe liked a lot of flavor and spice with his food. This one was seasoned with some of the Mexican spice blends she'd read online. Firing up the indoor grill, she placed the chicken breast across, listening to the sizzle.

She washed her hands, cleaned up her zone, and then went back to the fridge to grab the lettuce and tomatoes, along with the mayo and chili sauce.

Closing the fridge, she walked toward the bread tin and opened it up, finding one of the rolls she made the previous day. She sliced it open, spread butter on it, and placed that on the grill as well to heat it up. She made sure it wasn't anywhere near the chicken, which was nearly cooked on one side. Grabbing a pair of tongs, she flipped the chicken onto the other side, then got to work on the sauce. Mayo and chili sauce, with a dash of lemon, some salt and pepper, to which she gave a taste, and nodded her head.

Two sandwiches were assembled as Axe walked through the door. Sometimes, he picked up his food and asked her to wrap it so he could go out to work. Today was not one of those days.

He sat down and she put the plate of hearty sandwiches in front of him, turning away from him to do her own business.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I've got to go and clean," she said. "I've been making the casserole all morning, and I haven't gotten around to it." She went to leave, but he reached out and grabbed her hand.

“Sit.”

“Sir, just enjoy your lunch.”

“Sir?”

“You’re the boss, aren’t you?” she asked, but she wasn’t looking at him. Instead, she gritted her teeth and tried not to think of how painful it was for her. Disappointment filled her at what was happening between them.

“Clarissa, sit.”

“Don’t you want to enjoy your lunch?”

“Sit your ass down, don’t make me force you.”

She wanted to stick her tongue out, to glare at him, to stamp her foot, but instead, she took a deep breath and then sat down on the seat opposite him.

Axe looked at her and then at the sandwiches. “What did you eat for lunch?” he asked.

“A sandwich.”

“Bullshit.”

She opened her mouth and closed it.

“I’m going to have a sandwich. I’ll deal with my lunch in a minute.”

He picked up one of his sandwiches, and then slid the plate toward her. “Eat.”

“I’m not hungry.” Her treacherous body betrayed her as her stomach growled, giving way to the fact she was very much hungry.

He raised a brow.

She didn’t know how he was able to do that, and he took a bite of his sandwich.

“Eat, and then be prepared to talk.”

“Talk?” she asked.

“Yes, talk. You and I both know we need to deal with this problem between us.”

“There’s no problem between us.” She looked down at the sandwich on the plate. Her mouth watered and she was hungry.

“Eat.”

Clarissa grew tired of him ordering her around, but she couldn’t think of a good enough reason to deny him. She grabbed the sandwich and took a large bite. It tasted so good.

Glancing across the table, she looked toward Axe and saw that he was staring at her. There was a problem between them, a huge problem, and it needed to be fixed.

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Axe was not going to have her lying to him, not anymore. He’d seen that she wasn’t eating properly, and he was done playing this game with her. The past month had been a nightmare. He didn’t like it.

Seeing her eat now was a good feeling. He finished his sandwich, and he was still hungry, but he didn’t need to go back out so soon. In fact, the work wasn’t too bad now. He had the time to spend with Clarissa, to resolve their issues.

Sitting back in his chair, he picked up his coffee and took sips as he watched her. She finished the sandwich within a few bites, and then sat, trying to avoid looking at him.

“You’ve been lying to me,” he said.

Clarissa returned her brown gaze to him. She folded her arms and sat back.

“Why?”

“I don’t think we should be having this conversation.” She made no move to leave.

“Clarissa, things haven’t been right for us since that kiss. We need to resolve them, otherwise...” He couldn’t bring himself to say the rest. If they didn’t fix this, he would have to let her go, but he didn’t want to let her go.

It was insane, he knew that. He didn’t want anyone else to have her, but they were also supposed to have a

professional relationship.

Silence fell between them. He didn't like how awkward it was. Tapping his fingers against the cup, he waited, and then Clarissa opened her mouth.

“Was I that bad?” she asked.

Of all the things she could have said, that was not what he was expecting, and it took him a second to answer.

“Bad?”

“The kiss. Was it bad? I've never kissed anyone before, and I thought it was amazing, but then we broke the mugs, and you looked so annoyed. I can only think I must be awful at kissing, or perhaps you didn't like kissing me, which I totally understand.” She stopped to take a deep breath, and then her gaze was once again on him.

He watched as her face went a bright shade of red.

“I was your first kiss?” he asked.

There was no way he could have been her first kiss. She was gorgeous. Men must have been lining up to be with her. He found it hard to even contemplate her being without other partners.

“Yes, you were my first kiss. I haven't been with anyone. There is no one else, nor has there been anyone else.”

He was starting to feel a little dense. “Are you telling me that you're a ... virgin?”

She nodded and as she did, she went a brighter shade of red. It looked so good on her.

He felt that twitch in his cock.

How the fuck had this woman stayed a virgin? She was twenty-five years old, with amazing tits, and an ass designed to be squeezed. Not to mention those thighs, which he had imagined wrapped around his waist more times than he could count.

Silence.

Axe stared at her.

He didn't know what to say. It didn't seem real for her to be a virgin.

“What did I do wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Axe said. “I ... you're...”

“Do you not want me?”

Axe pushed out his chair and rounded the table. Sinking his fingers into her hair, he tilted her head back, and then slammed his lips down on hers. He'd been wanting to do this for so long, but he'd held himself back to keep it professional between them. But, fuck professional.

He couldn't believe Clarissa had thought she was a bad kisser.

Breaking the kiss, he looked into her eyes. “I stopped the kiss because you're my employee and I don't want you to think you have to do this, or any of that messed-up shit.”

He wasn't good with words, he knew that. There was no way he'd be able to write poetry, or put the right kind of spin on any of it.

Clarissa placed a palm to his cheek. “I know you're my boss and I know we should keep things ... right between us, but do you not want me?”

Her lips were already a nice, inviting red and plump from his kisses. He stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

Reaching for her hand that was on his cheek, he placed it right over his cock. “That is how badly I want you, Clarissa.”

She released a gasp. “Then why stop?”

“I didn't want to scare you.”

“I'm not afraid.”

And there was no way he could leave her now.



Slamming his lips on hers, he kissed her hard, and deep. Clarissa pressed against him, and let out a whimper, and he allowed her to stand up as they continued to kiss. Sliding his hand from her cheek, he went straight to her ass, gripping the flesh and squeezing.

In the back of his mind, he knew he was breaking all his rules, but he didn't care. Kissing Clarissa was the best thing he'd done. Her lips were so tempting to him, and he didn't want to stop. In fact, kissing her didn't even seem like enough.

Growling against her lips, he heard her soft, subtle moan, and then she arched up against him. He ran his hands up her body, going toward her tits. His cock was so hard it was almost painful. Stepping back, he looked into her eyes and knew he didn't want to stop. This time, he wasn't going to.

“Axe?”

He didn't answer her, but instead led her to the stairs. She didn't pull on his hand, didn't say a single word as he took her upstairs. She followed him to his bedroom, and then he turned toward her.

They were going to do this.

It was what they both wanted, and Axe was tired of fighting it.

## Chapter Six

Clarissa's heart raced as she looked at Axe. They were in his bedroom, the door was closed, but she wasn't nervous in a bad way.

Heat flooded between her thighs, and need filled her body. Her tits ached and her nipples were rock-hard, and it wasn't because there was any cold in the air. This was all because of Axe.

He stared at her, and then she felt her mouth go dry as he reached for the buttons of his shirt. One by one, he eased them open, and she waited as he peeled it off his body. With the shirt on the floor, he wore a plain white one underneath, and after that, he went for his vest, and he stood before her naked from the waist up. Not a single mark or ink on his body.

Clarissa reached for her sweater, and then without waiting for his instruction, she lifted it over her head, tossing it to the floor.

*"With the right man, you'll know what you want, and you'll know what to do."*

Pushing her mother's words out of her mind, she drew her attention to Axe.

With her sweater and shirt on the floor, Axe closed the distance between them. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. His head rested against hers, as he slid his fingers up her body and flicked the catch of her bra. He pulled it down her arms, and then his hands were on her breasts.

She gasped as his fingers slid across her tightened nipples. He pushed them together, and she heard him groan. Her eyes had closed at the pleasure that consumed her.

"Do you have any idea how often I have thought of these tits?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"So fucking much."

"I didn't know you thought about ... me."

“Clarissa, I have thought about you a lot.” He stopped and released a moan. It was deep, guttural, and made her body ache for what he could do. “Even before that kiss.”

This did surprise her.

“Before the kiss?” she asked.

“Yeah, before the kiss. Why do you think I wanted to hire you? I’ve seen you for a long time, Clarissa.”

She had no idea. All thought fled her mind as he took possession of her lips.

Clarissa had noticed Axe many times. Several of those had been with her mother.

*“He is a hottie, sweetie.”*

*“Mom, stop.”*

*“What? Forgive a woman, even an old one like me, for seeing him,” her mother had growled. “Why don’t you go and talk to him?”*

*“He doesn’t talk to anyone. You know what he’s like.”*

*“Yeah, he’s waiting for the right woman, all right. You never know, baby girl, he might already have spotted her.”*

She had seen him so many times, walking around town, and each time she saw him, she’d taken a few moments to gather her bearings. Sometimes, people in town would ask if she was all right. She would always pretend she was fine. They assumed it was because of what was happening, but it had nothing to do with her mother. It was all about the man himself.

Staring into his blue eyes, she cupped his face and pressed her body against his. She wasn’t going to allow nerves to stop her.

Clarissa slid her hands down his body, going toward the catch of his jeans. She flicked the button open, then moved the zipper down.

He pushed her hand out of the way and shoved his pants down his hips, then onto the floor. Kicking them aside,

he stepped out of them.

Clarissa started unbuttoning her jeans, but Axe moved her hand out of the way. She was shocked as he crouched down, and his face was next to her stomach. Her mouth suddenly went dry as she watched him.

He pulled her jeans down her thighs, and she had no choice but to put her hands on his shoulders to steady herself. One foot after the other, he worked them off her body, and then he moved her toward the edge of the bed, forcing her, until she had no choice but to sit down. She let out a little yelp, but then chuckled, which soon turned into a moan as he grabbed her panties and started to pull them down her body.

She was now completely naked.

Pressing her thighs together, Axe put his hands on her knees, and then started to stroke the inside of her knee. She let out a little moan, and then he worked his hands up the inside of her thighs until he was able to spread her wide.

“I want to look at my virgin cunt,” he said.

Clarissa gasped at his crude word, but she loved it.

His hands went from the inside of her thighs, reaching up to grab her hips, and then pulling her down to the edge of the bed. Axe kissed her knee and Clarissa had no idea what he was about to do, but she wanted to watch. She lifted onto her elbows and looked at him.

He kissed each inner knee, and then began to slowly work up her body. He was getting closer to her pussy. She felt heat flood her body.

Was he going to ... kiss her pussy?

She had read so many books, romance and erotic, and had always wanted to feel this, but she didn't think she ever would. Nibbling her lip, she waited.

And then Axe's mouth pressed a single kiss to her pussy, and she couldn't help but moan. The pleasure was out of this world and that was just a single kiss.

Axe didn't stop there. He kissed and then his tongue slid across her clit.

She thought the kisses were amazing, but his tongue was so much better.

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Axe had lost count of the times he'd thought about having Clarissa naked on his bed, spread out, and ready for his cock. He'd spent many nights thinking about having her naked and at his mercy.

He wanted to lick this pretty cunt for so long, and this was so much better than anything he'd imagined. She was perfect and tasted so sweet.

*She's a virgin.*

*Go gently.*

Axe didn't know how he was going to be able to go gentle on her. All he wanted to do was sink his hands beneath her ass, draw her up to his mouth, and ravish her pussy. He wanted to soak his face in her arousal. He wanted her dripping.

*Her first time.* He had to keep repeating and reminding himself that Clarissa hadn't been with anyone else. *Nor would she.*

Clarissa was his. All his. And he wasn't going to let her go.

The moment he took her, made his claim, she would belong to him. He wasn't going to share what belonged to him, and Clarissa was way too precious to let go. He wasn't a fool.

Sliding his tongue across her clit, he moved back and forth, and then circled the hard nub. He wanted to suck her clit into his mouth, but he also could tell she was sensitive. Axe intended to take his time, allowing her to get accustomed to his touch.

She whimpered, his name echoing around the room as she shouted it. It was a beautiful sound.

Keeping control of his own needs, he slid his hands beneath her ass, squeezed that ripe juicy flesh, and then licked at her clit. He teased her, sensing the change within her body as she got closer to her orgasm. The moment she went over the edge, he was tempted to just take her, to tear through the thin veil of her virginity, but he didn't want to cause her any pain, so he continued to lick her.

Clarissa said his name as if in question, but he didn't stop. He licked and sucked at her clit, sending her over the edge into a second orgasm, and this time he did stop because he knew she was soaking wet.

Pulling his hands from her ass, he stood and pushed his boxer briefs down his thighs. His cock sprang free. Clarissa collapsed on the bed, but he saw her gaze was on him.

His dick was so fucking hard. He wrapped his fingers around the length, and going from the base, he moved up to the tip, then back down. Pre-cum already leaked out of the tip.

He watched her. She looked so fucking sweet and innocent. He didn't want to hurt her, but there was no way he would be able to stop the pain.

Pressing his knee between her thighs, he nudged her up the bed, and she followed his lead, lying against the pillows. Her brown hair fanned out, looking so fucking perfect as she did. Just as he knew she would.

He pressed his lips against hers.

"This is going to hurt," he said.

"I don't care."

"Clarissa, tell me to stop."

She shook her head.

He nudged her thighs open, and she spread her legs even wider. He reached down, grabbed his cock, and then he slid the tip between her slit, nudging her clit. She let out a little cry.

Axe went to her entrance, tensed up, and then thrust hard and deep. The moment he entered her, he felt her tense

and let out a scream. He didn't stop until he was balls-deep inside her, and as soon as he was, he wrapped his arms around her, holding onto her tightly.

*I'm never letting you go.*

*You're mine, Clarissa.*

His virgin woman. Clarissa was all his and he wasn't going to let her go.

He pressed kisses to her cheek. "I've got you."

Clarissa wrapped her arms around him, holding him tightly.

Her pussy was so tight and so wet. He didn't want to let her go. She was a fucking dream, just as he knew she would be. He took several deep breaths, counted to ten, then to twenty, to keep himself under control. He wasn't going to hurt her.

Time ticked by, but Axe didn't care. He was happy to just hold her, waiting for the pain to ebb. Clarissa hadn't moved, but then he felt her hands stroking down his back. The tips of her fingers caressed his ass, stroked over the curve of his ass cheek, then back up.

She kissed his cheek, then toward his neck.

He lifted and looked down at her. She had tears in her eyes, and he hated to see them. There was also evidence of tears having already fallen from her eyes. He cupped her face and wiped his thumbs beneath each eye.

"I never wanted to hurt you," he said.

"I know."

He gritted his teeth.

"But, Axe, it doesn't hurt right now." She gave a little wriggle, and he tensed up as he felt her pussy tighten around his cock.

He growled. "Fuck, baby, stop."

She gave a little giggle. “No. There’s no pain, and I want to know what comes next.” She looked so sexy and so tempting, especially with her bright red cheeks. “Show me, Axe. Show me what I’ve been missing.”

Axe looked down at her for several seconds and then, one by one, he took her hands, locking them either side of her head, and pressing them toward the bed.

He was going to show her.

Clarissa was going to become addicted to his touch. He was going to make her addicted to everything that was him.



## Chapter Seven

The following morning, Clarissa looked at the man that had his arms wrapped around her. The last twenty-four hours had been a dream. She didn't dare move, for fear she'd wake up and the harsh reality of their quiet life would come back. Her body felt so warm.

When he'd taken her virginity, it had hurt, there was no denying it. She had been determined not to tell him or show that it had hurt, but she'd hadn't been able to hide it. There had been quite a lot of pain. All the books said a woman's first time was painful, but she had hoped that was all fiction.

Clarissa hated the tears and the tiny scream she'd been unable to contain. But she loved how he'd wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly to him. She loved feeling his body next to hers. He was so much bigger than her, but she felt safe and protected when he hugged her. She loved being so close to him, with nothing keeping them apart.

Then, Axe had showed her that the pain aside, sex could be even better. Feeling him thrusting inside her, the length of his cock going hard and deep within her, she hadn't been able to think. All she could do was feel, and that was even better than what she imagined. She didn't want him to stop. And he hadn't, and she had felt his release as he filled her.

Afterward, he'd been so sweet, carrying her to the bathroom, which had freaked her out. No one had carried her in their arms. She was not light, not by any means, but Axe was strong. He placed her as if she was a piece of delicate china onto the toilet and filled the bathtub with some salts. He took care of her and wouldn't let her move.

Axe had then gone and taken care of the bed. She had seen the small specks of blood, the evidence of her virgin state. When he finished, he came back to the bathroom and joined her.

Axe was attentive as he washed her body, and he took his time. She knew he was allowing her time to relax in the

water. She had no idea if a heavily scented bath helped, but she did feel relaxed. She doubted it had anything to do with the bath, and everything to do with being in his arms.

After their shower, the scent of her casserole filled the house, as did the dogs, desperate for their toilet breaks. They went downstairs, and she served them some dinner while Axe took the dogs out to do their business.

They ate at the table, but Axe wouldn't let her be too far away. The meat was so tender, as were the vegetables, that she didn't need to use both hands to cut up the meal. Axe held one of her hands, and with the other, she scooped meat and vegetables onto a spoon and ate heartily.

Axe surprised her even more by helping her with the dishes. Randomly, he'd wrap his arms around her waist, hugging her tightly against him. She'd feel the hard ridge of his cock press against her, and it would make her moan and ache for more.

After the dishes were done and the dogs taken care of, Axe took her hand, led her to his bedroom, and made love to her throughout the night.

"I can hear you thinking," Axe said.

She lifted her gaze to his face to find him looking at her. She'd started to look at his chest, and she wanted to push the blanket out of the way.

Pressing a hand to his chest, she said, "I wasn't thinking anything bad, I promise."

"What were you thinking about?" he asked, reaching out and tucking some of her hair behind her ear.

"Last night." She nibbled her lip.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Let's agree that seeing as you're mine now, you don't keep anything from me." He raised a brow.

“You ... you don’t regret what happened last night, do you?”

“No, I don’t.” He ran a thumb across her lip, and then he closed the small distance between them and kissed her. “Do you?”

“No.”

“Good.”

He kissed her again.

Clarissa didn’t know what to do with her hands. This is what she hated the most. Not that they were kissing, which felt so good, but that she wanted to touch him, explore him.

*Then do it. Touch him, explore him.*

She had no problem with him touching and exploring her. Clarissa wanted his hands all over her body.

She put her hands on his back and then began to slowly slide down, going toward his ass. There was a fascination with his ass, it was so smooth and yet so tight. She felt the muscles beneath her hands. Gripping the tight flesh, like he had done with her, she heard his groan. The sound going straight to her pussy. She felt a tightening in her core.

Arousal flooded her pussy as Axe broke the kiss, but then his lips trailed down toward her neck, and he didn’t stop there. He nipped at the flesh and then pressed a kiss there before going down. She gasped as he pushed her tits together, and then one by one, sucked at her nipples. Taking each bud into his mouth, he flicked his tongue across each peak, but then used his teeth, nipping at them. It was painful, but playful and felt so good. Especially after each playful nip, he then soothed each bud by licking the peaks, which sent a shockwave of pleasure straight to her clit.

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Axe had never woken beside a woman before.

Clarissa wasn’t just any woman, she belonged to him, and he wasn’t letting her go. He felt this wave of protection

but also possession. He finally had the woman he'd been wanting, and he wasn't a fool. She was everything.

He hated hurting her last night, but now she belonged to him, and he was going to relish every second and minute. He'd already wasted close to seven months. Six months prior to the kiss, and then this past month when he was trying to be the good boss.

Fuck the good boss.

She was his.

Licking at her tits, he felt his cock harden even more. He wanted her so badly and he'd gladly lick and suck her tits all morning, but he wanted to taste her pretty cunt again.

Kissing his way down her body, he got to her pussy and then spread her legs wide. He pressed a kiss to her clit, and then flicked his tongue across her nub. He ran his tongue across her clit, around, and then drew it back and forth. She whimpered and cried out.

Axe looked up to see her shaking and her moans echoed off the walls.

He pressed a hand on her stomach, keeping her down on the bed. With his other hand, he cupped her pussy and slid a single finger inside her. She was so tight. Working that one finger inside her, he added a second finger, trying to stretch her out. She whimpered, and he moved a third finger inside her, feeling her body tighten. He attended to her clit, sucking the nub into his mouth, and then soothing it with his tongue.

He felt her orgasm as it crashed over her body, and he pumped his fingers into her tight heat, and then tongued her clit. Axe pushed her over the edge, but this time, he didn't send her into a second orgasm. Pulling his fingers through her tight cunt, he sucked each of the digits into his mouth, and then moved between her body.

Grabbing his cock, he eased inside her, inch by inch, looking into her eyes as he did so. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, and he began to thrust inside her, going deeper until he was seated to the hilt within her tight cunt. Axe held himself still, looking into her eyes, content to just be with her, and not needing to move. He stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

“I’m not hurting you, am I?” he asked.

“No.”

“Good.”

He pressed kisses to her lips and then slowly began to pull out of her tight cunt. With just the tip of him inside her, he began to rock, going deep. He took his time, making his thrusts long, feeling her pussy quiver as he pressed inside her.

Clarissa whimpered and tried to speed him up.

Axe pressed his body flush against hers, slid his hand down behind her, and cupped her ass, holding her tightly so he was the one in control, and she couldn’t attempt to take over. He was going to fuck her, make love, and take her.

“Please,” she said.

“I know what you want, baby.” He took possession of her mouth and began to fuck her. He took his time, making her take every single inch of his cock, driving inside her. He loved the sounds she made, but he swallowed them down.

She was so fucking responsive.

He loved her ass.

He loved her pussy.

He loved her tits.

When it came to Clarissa, he just fucking loved her.

Axe stopped, and then broke the kiss and stared down into her brown eyes. He saw the heat in her gaze.

“What’s wrong?” Clarissa asked, sounding somewhat breathless.

“Nothing.”

He had been infatuated with this woman, and even a great deal of lust. He had craved her, hungered for her, and she'd dominated his every waking and sleeping thought. She was the main feature of his imagination, and he just wanted her. There was no denying how badly he wanted her. But, not once had he considered ... loving her.

This seemed so crazy to him. He'd never loved anyone in his life, apart from his dog, Gus, then of course Dolly and Susie, who had fallen into his heart as well.

Clarissa wasn't a dog, she was a woman. *A woman you've been wanting for a long time.*

“Axe?”

He didn't answer her and instead kissed her hard. Sex and possession were easy. He wanted Clarissa and he didn't want anyone else to have her, but love put a whole new spin on everything.

Axe knew he could keep Clarissa here with the promise of his body, and the pleasure he could do to her body. But love — how was he going to get her to stay or fall in love with him?

He wasn't an easy man to get along with. He was not like a nine-to-five type of guy. His life was his work and vice versa.

This life wasn't for a lot of women. His own mother, when his father owned the ranch, hadn't been able to stand it — working the home every single day, raising a son, dealing with ranch hands. She hated it, and it was why she'd left.

His own father, before his death, had warned him this wasn't an easy life, and to take care of the wife he decided to have.

A wife.

This was just sex.

Clarissa was his employee.

And Axe knew if he wasn't careful, he was going to fuck everything up. He wasn't good with words or with

feelings. He didn't know what he was going to do.

All he knew was that he didn't want Clarissa to leave,  
not now, not ever.

## Chapter Eight

Several days later, Clarissa watched as Axe worked the yard. Dolly and Susie were playing around his feet, and he looked the same as every other day, but she couldn't help feeling there was something different about him. It wasn't that he was smiling, or perhaps he was. There was not a harshness to his face.

The past few days had been a whirlwind of adventure. Her body, even though they hadn't been together since that morning, she still felt his touch all over. She loved his hands, his mouth, and his whole body as he surrounded her.

She was starting to love mornings, even the early rising. Axe always had his arms wrapped around her, and she felt so protected, so safe. She loved it when he kissed her neck and flicked his tongue across her pulse. There was so much she adored about him.

Running her hands down her apron, she nibbled her lip, trying to think of anything that could stop her from thinking about her own thoughts, mainly love. *Love* was such a strong word. She needed to start thinking in terms of *like*. She liked Axe and his hands on her body. But then, that wasn't the same — *like* wasn't a strong enough word.

*You're in love with him.*

Clarissa forced herself to step away from the window and go to the stove, to stir the pot of spaghetti sauce. It was a very basic dinner today, as she had forgotten to get anything else out of the freezer, and she had some leftover ground beef. Not a lot, but enough to make a meal for two. She loved making large batches of food so they could go in the freezer.

As she stirred her sauce, she felt that need rush through her. For the longest time, it had been her and her mother. She knew her parents had wanted more children, but that had never happened. It was always one of those wishes that hadn't come true. Then her father had passed away, leaving just her and her mother.



One of her many wishes and desires was to have a large family. Axe's ranch house had four more bedrooms, which were not occupied. There were beds not made, and she cleaned them regularly to keep them dust-free.

She couldn't deny that her relationship—if she could even call it that—with Axe had made that yearning start to develop again. In the back of her mind, she could see little children running around the kitchen, or hear their laughter or even their screams, as she stirred a large pot of spaghetti sauce.

“Something smells good,” Axe said, jolting her from her imagination. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, it's fine. Dinner won't be long,” she said, taking the spoon out and placing it on the lid.

She was about to turn the other pot of water on, but Axe reached around her and flicked the gas off underneath the cooked spaghetti sauce. He took hold of her wrist, held her hand, and spun her around and away from the stove. Within seconds, his lips were on hers, and she melted against him. He pressed her up against the kitchen counter and she felt the hard ridge of his cock against her stomach. Heat flooded her body. Her nipples felt so incredibly tight.

“I've missed you,” he said.

She couldn't help but smile. “I've missed you too.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and stared up into his eyes.

Axe reached for the string of her sweatpants, and she didn't fight him as he grabbed her hips and pushed the pants to the floor. He tore the panties from her body. The sound of tearing fabric filled the room, and she let out a gasp. He pressed his hand against her pussy, and she couldn't help but sink her teeth into her lip as she tried to contain the arousal.

“You're so wet. Have you been thinking about me?”

“Yes.”

“What have you been thinking about?” he asked.

There was no way she could tell him that she'd been thinking about falling in love with him.

Staring up at him, she thought about sex. "You, inside me," she said.

It wasn't wrong, nor was it a lie. Axe was inside her. There was no getting away from how important he was to her.

He reached up, gripped the back of her neck, and pulled her in close, making her moan as he slammed his lips down on hers.

"I'm going to be inside you again, but now I'm going to take care of your pussy."

He broke the kiss, and she didn't have to ask him what he was doing as he sunk to his knees in front of her. He lifted one of her legs and placed it on his knee, spreading her open wide for him. She let out a little gasp, and then another moan as he plunged fingers deep inside her, and then his tongue attacked her clit.

There was no way she could think, only feel. He felt so good.

Whenever Axe touched her, there was no way for her to stop the pleasure, or to control it. It was just instant hits of pleasure and need.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he said, growling the words against her pussy.

"Please," she said.

She didn't know how long she was going to last, but then he did this thing with his tongue and fingers, and the buildup to her release took her straight over the edge, and she screamed his name. The orgasm was instant, and left her shaking.

At some point, Axe stopped licking her pussy and instead stroked and teased her clit, before lifting her up onto the counter in the kitchen. She didn't have time to think, not that she needed it, as he replaced his fingers with his impressive cock, filling her.

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Axe had spent many nights dreaming of being with his woman, enjoying a late-night hot chocolate, a roaring fire, and being naked.

He was sitting in his chair, Clarissa between his thighs, and a blanket thrown across her body. They had just made love in front of the fire.

The snow was thick on the ground, and he'd called his ranch hands and told them to stay home. He spent the day checking on the cattle and going over the fences, before returning home to find Clarissa.

Work never stopped, but it did slow down for him in the winter. His men always appreciated the break, and he didn't force them to travel in terrible conditions. The cattle were brought close to his home, currently housed in the barns. He'd go and check on them regularly. This is what he always did when the weather got too bad.

"We're going to need to put a tree up soon," she said.

Christmas wasn't far away, and Axe couldn't believe how the days, weeks, and months had all merged together. He wasn't sure how long he and Clarissa had been enjoying each other.

"I'll grab everything we need," he said, stroking the back of her neck.

She let out a little moan. "I love Christmas."

Axe didn't say anything. It had been a long time since he enjoyed a Christmas.

She tilted her head back. "Do you?"

"I have a feeling I'm going to enjoy this Christmas." He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her lips.

She moaned and he loved when she did that. He also loved when she reached behind him, gripping the back of his neck, prolonging the kiss.

She loosened her hold on him after a few minutes, and his cock was already hard as rock. It seemed Clarissa had that affect on him, and he just couldn't help it.

"I want to try something," she said, pulling the blanket from her body.

Seeing her naked back, curving out to her impressive ass, he was intrigued, especially as she spun toward him and placed her hands on his knees. She ran her hands up and down his thighs with her gaze on him. He watched her, not exactly sure what she wanted, and he waited for her.

There she went again, nibbling the corner of her mouth, and it was so tempting, he wanted to reach out and ask her what her dirty little mind was thinking about.

"I love it when your mouth is on me. I love feeling your tongue." Her gaze slowly traveled down his body, and landed right where his cock was.

"You want to suck my cock?" he asked.

She nodded and he saw the blush staining her cheeks. "And lick, and I want to give you as good a time as you give me."

He didn't think it was possible for her blush to go any deeper, but it did, and he couldn't help but smile. There was no way he was going to turn down her wrapping those precious lips around his dick. He hadn't pushed Clarissa to try anything she didn't want to. Her inexperience was sweet, but he wanted her to enjoy his touch.

"Okay," he said. "Just ... don't bite me."

She smiled at him. "I'll try not to."

He loved it when she teased like this.

Clarissa wrapped her fingers around his cock, and then began to work from the base up to the tip, then back down again. Axe had to grit his teeth to try and keep himself in check, and not to blow right then and there. He loved her hands, her touch, and he didn't know how he was going to be able to control his orgasm. He was close to losing it already.

Watching her, he waited, and Clarissa's gaze was focused on his dick. Clenching his hands into fists, he tried not to tense up as she kissed his knee. She moved up his leg, and then she kissed the very tip of his cock. Clarissa didn't give him time to wait before she suddenly covered the head of his cock with her lips and sucked him into her mouth.

"Oh, fuck!" He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. It felt so good.

She didn't stop, taking more of him into her mouth until he hit the back of her throat. She pulled back immediately, but then began to sink on his length some more.

With his hands still clenched, he opened his eyes and watched as she took his cock, sucking at him. It wasn't easy to do. His orgasm was so close.

She pulled off his cock and traced her tongue down the length of his cock. He watched as she explored his length. It was sheer torture, but he didn't stop her. All he wanted to do was push his cock into her mouth, hold her in place, fuck her face, and fill her lips with his cum.

When she wrapped her lips around his length again, he growled at her. "I'm going to lose control, Clarissa. You're either going to have to take it, or move."

She looked at him with those big brown eyes of hers, and he couldn't control himself.

He gave her a single grunt of warning, but there was no way for him to stop it. He came inside her mouth, filling her, and to his amazement, she swallowed down his cum without a single complaint. The moment he became too sensitive, he placed a hand on her shoulder and she seemed to know he needed her to stop. She let him go and pressed a kiss to his now-flaccid length.

Cupping her face, he stared down into her eyes and knew he had hit the jackpot. He didn't want to lose her, not for a second, but he didn't know how he was going to keep her either.

## Chapter Nine

They didn't talk about their relationship, or the future. They didn't talk about anything.

Clarissa looked over the tree and wondered when they would talk about anything. She placed a hand on her stomach and knew she would need to check. But it was something they didn't talk about. They talked about a lot, but nothing to do with the important stuff. They didn't even discuss the fact they didn't use condoms or that she hadn't had a menstrual cycle in all that time.

She knew there was a big chance she might already be pregnant with his baby. It was at moments like this she wished for her mother, as she would know what to do. How did she start a conversation with him? Would he believe that she loved him? Would he think she was only saying it for the baby? Was there even a baby?

She had always been on time, and her body was like clockwork. Clarissa didn't know if she was pregnant, but she did feel like she was. How did she bring it up in a conversation? Should she wait until after Christmas?

The sound of the door opening pulled her out of her thoughts, and she looked over toward Axe. Snow covered his legs, and there was some on top of his head.

"It's freezing out there."

She rushed over to him, grabbing his jacket from him. The last few days, Axe had needed to change his clothes as the snow turned to water and soaked through. There were already some pants waiting for him.

She picked up his wet pants and walked to the laundry room, placing them in the sink so she didn't get water all over the place. After she finished, she went straight to the kitchen and put the kettle on.

Axe loved his coffee but in the last few days, Clarissa had noticed that the scent turned her stomach. She used to love

coffee. Now, she couldn't even handle the smell. She didn't know what that meant. *Yes, you do. It means you're pregnant.*

"Are you okay?"

Axe's voice was close to her ear causing her to give a yelp, and in the process, she let go of the coffee jar. It fell to the floor, but thankfully didn't smash.

She put a hand to her chest. "You scared me."

Axe cupped her face, and he frowned as he looked at her. "Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, of course, everything is fine." She forced a smile to her lips. "Totally fine."

"You can talk to me about anything."

She nodded. "I know."

Seconds passed and silence fell between them.

*Tell him.*

*Tell him.*

*Now.*

*What do you have to lose?*

*Does it matter if it ruins Christmas? He might already know.*

She opened her mouth about to tell him she might be pregnant, but before she could say another word, Dolly and Susie began to whimper, drawing her attention away from him. Glancing down, she saw both dogs were also covered in snow.

"Oh, babies," she said. "Did Daddy take you out into the snow?" She gave a tut. "They're freezing."

"But they had a lot of fun. Grab Dolly, come on, I've got Susie, let's go and warm them up."

Clarissa followed him into the spare bathroom. He closed the door behind her, put Susie on the floor, and then began to run a bubble bath. The dogs loved to have a bath.

She loved watching him. Axe was so loving and attentive with dogs, she couldn't help but wonder what he'd be like with kids. Once again, the voice inside her head kept urging her to ask him.

"You're really good with dogs," she said.

"I'm used to being around them more than people."

"Oh."

"Yeah, not a lot of people love this kind of life. Gus was with me twenty-four-seven."

She knew he had a special attachment to Gus. He was the dog she didn't get to truly meet. She did have vague memories of seeing him with a dog around town, but they were so blurry. Her life had been much more focused on her mother back then.

"What's not to love?" she said.

"Dogs are amazing. They love you unconditionally, and all you've got to do is feed them, love them, and yeah, there's all the training stuff, but it's fine. I can handle it."

"What about ... babies?"

"Pups?" he asked. "Breeding them?"

"No, no, I mean, you know, human babies. Have you thought about having children of your own, and I don't know, perhaps a family, or...?" She didn't know what else to say. In the back of her mind, all she truly wanted to do was beg him to consider her. She wanted to tell him the truth, that she loved him and wanted to spend her life with him, that she might be pregnant, and he would be a daddy.

There was so much she wanted to say, but as the silence rang out, she didn't know what to make of it. He was so good with dogs, amazing, but at her one question about babies, he was so silent.

She looked at Dolly and Susie in the bath, and she couldn't help but feel a little heartbroken. The dogs were part of her wish, but she also wanted a large family.



“I ... I left the stove on. I better go.”

She didn't wait for him to respond or to even stop her. Turning on her heel, she made her escape, but she didn't even get to the kitchen before the tears began to fall.

Why was she crying? What did she expect? He was her boss. This wasn't really going anywhere. They were just having a little fun.

\*\*\*\*

“What was that?” Axe asked, looking toward Dolly and Susie as if they would have the answers he sought.

Running a hand down his face, he looked toward the open door. Both dogs were in the bathtub, in need of getting out. He reached for Dolly as she was closer and then went for Susie. Both dogs attempted to shake the water from their bodies, and he had a towel draped over them in order to prevent too much of the doggy water from spraying everywhere. This was next to impossible.

Axe kept looking toward the door, and he just couldn't shake this feeling from his core. He checked to make sure the bathtub was empty, and then he took off, heading out of the bathroom and straight to the stairs. He made his way to the kitchen, where he found Clarissa. She was standing at the porcelain kitchen sink, her fingers clenching the edge in a tight grip.

He went to her, grabbed her arm, and spun her around, shocked to find tears streaming down her cheeks.

“What's wrong?”

She pressed her lips together. “It's nothing.”

“Clarissa, don't lie to me. You know I can't stand it when you lie to me. Just tell me the truth.”

She let out a chuckle, which looked more on the verge of hysteria.

“You think you want the truth, but I can promise you, you don't.”

He cupped her face and tilted her head back, staring into her brown eyes. She was so incredibly beautiful. He loved this woman so damn much.

“I love you!” Clarissa yelled the words at him. “That’s right. I love you and I’ve been terrified to tell you the truth, because I didn’t know how to say it or what to do. I mean, what do you say to a guy that has everything? Look around you. You have it all, Axe. Your life is perfect, and I want to share all of it. I want to have children with you. I want to marry you, and you don’t want me to lie to you, well, fine, I think I might be pregnant.” She nodded her head. “There, I’ve said it. I think I might be pregnant with your baby, and I’m in love with you.”

Axe looked into her eyes, and then slammed his lips down on hers, kissing her passionately. Clarissa had no idea that those words were exactly what he wanted to hear. Sinking his fingers into her hair, he ravished her mouth.

She loved him. Loved him! It was insane, but everything he fucking wanted to hear. She was his life.

Clarissa pressed on his chest and broke away from the kiss. “Why did you kiss me?” She had this cute little frown across her brow.

“Don’t you know?” he asked, stroking her cheek.

She shook her head.

“I am in love with you, Clarissa. I love you so much, and I’ve been wanting to tell you for a long time, but you’re so young. Twenty-five years old, and you have your whole life ahead of you. I’ve not got a lot to offer you. This life is long and hard, and there is always something to do. I know a lot of people don’t want this.”

She cupped his face. “But I do. I want this life with you. I can see our children running around our feet, begging for attention, making us laugh.” She gave a little chuckle. “I love it here. I feel at home, and I don’t mind hard work. Trust me. I want to take care of you and take care of this house. I want to grow old with you.”

He didn't let her finish, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her hard. "Please tell me this isn't a dream," he said.

"It's not a dream."

And to make sure he knew it wasn't a dream, Dolly and Susie both barked and he glanced over at them, to see them still a little damp.

He groaned. "I've got to go and take care of the dogs."

Axe didn't leave Clarissa, though. He took her hand and made her follow him, as he scooped up both dogs. He placed Susie in her arms and then carried Dolly back upstairs to the bathroom. He was supposed to close the door to keep the dogs inside.

Reaching into a cupboard underneath the sink, he grabbed the hair dryer and the dog brush. Working on each one, with Clarissa close to him, he finished grooming the dogs. Once it was over, he turned to his woman and looked into her eyes.

"Marry me," he said.

"Yes."

There was no hesitation, just a smile on her lips, and he also saw tears.

"Why are you crying?" he asked.

"I'm so happy. They're happy tears." She pulled him close, kissed him hard, and he heard her sigh. "And I might also be pregnant. You did hear that little part, right?"

He chuckled. "I heard it."

It wasn't like he'd been careful when it came to his woman. When he was around Clarissa, he couldn't think. Reaching for a condom was the last thing on his mind.

"I love you," he said. "I'm going to take care of you, always."

Clarissa smiled up at him. "And I love you too, and I will take care of you as well. There's nowhere else I want to be. Working for you has been a dream come true."

“Yeah, about that, you’re fired. I’m not having my wife work for me.”

She gave a shocked gasp, but then laughed.

He kissed her again, but then knelt in front of her stomach. “And little guy or girl, I’ll take care of you as well as all your brothers and sisters. Always.”

## Epilogue

### *Ten Years Later*

“That’s right, son, well done.” Axe looked toward his son as he petted the calf they had just helped one of their cows give birth to.

Nigel, his eldest son, was a natural-born rancher. From the time he was five, he wanted to be with his dad, out in the fields, working. Axe loved having his children for company. Three boys, three girls, all of them amazing. Nigel was his eldest son.

Charlie, his eldest daughter, stood back, wearing her Stetson, arms folded. At eight years old, she thought she knew everything and demanded that if he take Nigel, then she had to go as well. Michael and Lola were at home, as they were the youngest children, and stayed with their mother.

Then, out playing in the yard with their dogs were Brandon and Tiffany. Dolly and Susie were getting much older, but they had also rescued another four dogs, so he also had six dogs, two cats, and even a couple of rabbits. He had a full family.

“Well done, Nigel,” Charlie said, walking over to her brother. “That is how we do it.”

Axe rolled his eyes and then picked Charlie up, placing her on his shoulders. “Ignore her. She freaked out when the calf came out and closed her eyes.”

“I did not,” Charlie said.

Nigel laughed. “That is amazing, Dad. Can I go and tell Mom?”

Before he could agree, he heard the whistle he’d given his wife as a gift. She always found it annoying when they didn’t arrive for dinner, and his woman couldn’t whistle. He tried to teach her, but she was never quite loud enough.

“Time for dinner.”

He put Charlie back on the ground, and they left the barn. Axe did a quick check and saw that mother and calf were doing fine. He'd come out to check on them regularly. He loved to take care of his cows.

With that, he headed toward the house in time to see all six of his kids making their way inside the kitchen. He already had to change the small table to accommodate their larger family.

Stepping into the kitchen, he saw his wife already hustling their children around the table. Nigel was at the sink, washing his hands. Axe joined him, and then Clarissa was there, herding their son to the table.

She returned and grabbed his hand, but instead of pulling him to the table, she closed the distance between them and kissed him, hard.

“I missed you,” she said, with a groan.

This is the life he had always wanted. The life he had hoped to have. A woman he loved more than anything by his side, kids waiting for them. A house filled with love and laughter.

In the last ten years, they had gotten married, had six children, and spent the last ten Christmases, Halloweens, Thanksgivings, birthdays, and all the other holiday events in between. There had been rough patches, but he wouldn't have it any other way.

He loved Clarissa.

He loved his family.

And this was the best feeling in the world.

“We better go and feed them before they start eating the cutlery,” he said.

Clarissa burst out laughing, and the sound lifted his heart.

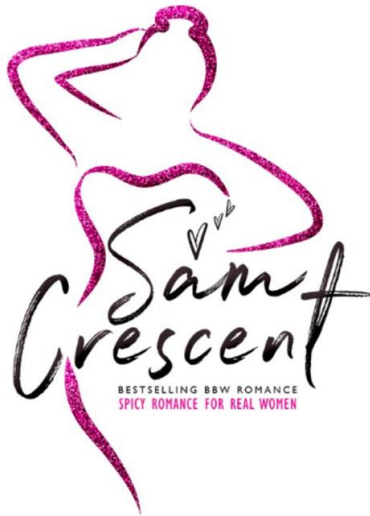
**The End**

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# **BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER**

## **CLAIMED BY HER COWBOYS**

**Sam Crescent and Stacey Espino**

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**Sample Chapter**

“There isn’t anyone you haven’t pushed away or scared off,” Archie Wales said.

Gabe Cartwright stood up, tired of being singled out. He wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve. There wasn’t even a breeze to kill the heat. He looked at his friends and roommates, Archie and Vinny. They had all argued for many weeks about hiring a housekeeper. Personally, he didn’t want a fucking stranger walking around their house or anywhere near their shit. He worked hard for everything he had, and he did not trust easily.

“What are you babbling on about now?” He didn’t have time for this. There was too much to get done on a working farm without arguing about nonsense. Already, he

noticed another fence that required mending, and they had orders that needed to be filled before sundown.

For so long, Archie and Vinny had been after him about hiring a housekeeper. It still hadn't happened. Most of the people who previously applied were only after easy work. He had yet to hire anyone he could trust.

“Well, we have a winner, thank you very much. The pretty little Annalise has applied, and she also brought tester cookies. Not even you can disagree with this pick.” Archie held up a single cookie, and Gabe couldn't argue. They did look tasty, but he wasn't easily swayed by food.

He was the current cook on the ranch, and the boys were used to one thing, steak and potatoes. That was all. He didn't need to learn to cook anything else.

“Come on, man, you have got to try these. They're so good. They're going to give you wet dreams.”

“Not happening,” he said, bending down to fork the straw from one pile to another. He noticed out of the three of them, he was the only one working. “If you want to get this job done today, and get an early night, hurry up.”

Vinny chose that moment to laugh. “Come on, we work our asses off all the time. And you're the one working harder than anyone else—cleaning, cooking. It's work you don't need to do. We can afford to hire, Gabe.”

“We've got up to five ranch hands already.”

Gabe knew they were well off. After all their hard work, ranching was finally turning a profit, a pretty healthy one, but he wasn't about to tell the guys it was because of a few investments on the stock markets that had kept this place open.

He, Archie, and Vinny had been best friends since they were kids. All of them came from deadbeat families, with drunks or addicts as parents. Gabe got his work ethic from not wanting to end up like his dad, not by example.

Together, they had joined as a unit. Just the three of them, working two and three jobs at a time to help get a down

payment for this place. Even as a kid, the Hollington Ranch had been in disrepair. They would sneak off to the ranch for a place to hide while their parents were having one of their benders. Mr. Hollington would leave out snacks and sodas, along with blankets and cushions. He never said anything to them. Never told them off nor called the cops. He was a good guy.

The news of his passing had hit them all hard, and even though they weren't invited to the funeral, they each went and paid their respects. The ranch went up for sale, but no one bought it until they did.

It had taken a lot of years, hard work, and love, but the ranch house was back in impeccable condition. The land once again had cattle, and they had expanded to allow horse boarding, cash crops, as well as renting out small animals for kids' events. They may be simple cowboys, but their entrepreneurial spirit got them where they were.

Ranch life was busy most of the time, and if he was honest with himself, Gabe preferred it that way. Too much time in his head was never a good thing.

A housekeeper would ruin the peace they'd taken years to find. At the same time, steak and potatoes had long lost its appeal. The cookie Archie ate had looked good.

"Let me try one of them," he said.

Archie tossed the bag in his direction, and he caught it, not surprised to see there was only one left.

After taking it out, he took a bite, and fuck him, he'd never tasted anything so good. It was sweet, but not too sweet. Each bite seemed to have just the right amount of chocolate chips in it. There was even a hint of salt that he loved.

"Damn," he said.

"She's a good cook, but she's willing to come in and cook for us for a full day—breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She'll also work on a trial basis," Archie said.

Gabe finished the cookie in two bites, and the moment he swallowed the last mouthful, he mourned his cookie. This

was ridiculous. He was a grown man. He didn't get sad over baked goodies.

“Give me more details.”

Vinny coughed, and Gabe glared at him. The fucker never knew how to hide a laugh.

“She's thirty years old. Has really nice red hair, green eyes. Never been married. Isn't in a relationship. She's really sweet and is just looking for a job with housing. Her current apartment has been sold for a renovation, but because of the cost, she can't afford to keep it. She is also the hot, curvy woman who works at the diner three times a week.”

“Curvy Red?” Gabe asked.

He rarely went into town, but when he did, he always chose to eat at the diner, and he'd recognized the curvy red waitress at the bar. Who hadn't?

His gaze had been drawn to her uniform, which was a size too small for her lush frame. Damn it.

Every time he was served by Curvy Red, he'd been hard as fucking rock. He didn't want any distractions, but if she failed a trial run, he'd finally get Vinny and Archie off his back, and that was well worth it.

“Call her in.”

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Archie was excited.

They had tried keeping a housekeeper a couple of times, but it had always ended in disaster. One had promised to be a good cook and had given them all food poisoning. Another tried to feed them nothing but vegetables and later told them they didn't know how to cook at all. Then there was the one who had tried to rob from them, and they ended up getting the sheriff involved, and that had been the final straw for Gabe. After that, no more housekeepers, and they'd all lived on a diet of diner food, and steak and potatoes.

He hated steak.

And potatoes.

He also hated watching Curvy Red at the diner, wanting to ask her out but never having the nerve. He was forty years old yet still felt like a skinny, awkward teen when he was around her. Most of his childhood memories were of getting beat up and trampled on as the school runt—until he grew up and began lifting weights. He never seemed to stop growing once he hit his early twenties, and now he was bigger, taller, and stronger than all the boys he'd once grown up with. Still, those fucking insecurities ran deep, and he couldn't muster up the nerve to ask out Curvy Red.

When he saw her application, he'd immediately called her and started to ask questions.

Opening the door to her now, he offered her a smile. She held on to her bag like a lifeline, and he noticed her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. Was he that imposing?

It was strange what he noticed about this sweet woman. She was thirty years old, and from what he could tell, never had a boyfriend. The apartment building where she lived was a piece of shit. He knew as he'd grown up around there. Diapers, used condoms, and even syringes littered the floors. It wasn't a good place to live, but it was cheap. Since she was being evicted, he assumed the building was being knocked down and rebuilt into overpriced condos. It would be no surprise. The town wanted to bring new investments and opportunities to the community, calling it gentrification.

What did surprise him was that Annalise came from a good family. Her mother was a churchgoer, and they lived on a good estate. Her sisters were also quite wealthy, marrying into money.

Annalise was like the black sheep of the family. He didn't get it. But he certainly wasn't going to question her taking a job with them. He felt like he'd won the fucking lottery.

“Hi, I'm early, right? I hope that's okay.”

“It’s six in the morning. I’m shocked. I expected you at nine.”

“Well, I asked a couple of guys that work for you and they said you’re always up early to handle jobs on the ranch, and I figured I would work to your schedule.” She bent down, and he noticed the brown paper bags.

“What’s all this?” he asked.

“I didn’t know what kind of food you’d want, and well, I want to make you guys a good breakfast. I got everything I could think of for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” he said. He couldn’t guarantee Gabe would even give her the job. He was the one who handled all of their finances. Archie still couldn’t figure out how they were able to buy this place, refurbish it all, and hire men to help.

The guy was a miracle worker. He was also five years old than him and Vinny.

Archie also had an inkling that Gabe liked Annalise. Whenever they went to eat at the diner, he was always watching her. Her body was quite distracting.

He hoped having someone Gabe was attracted to might sweeten the deal.

The only problem he saw was that he liked Annalise as well, and with his great powers of observation, he would put money on it Vinny had a thing for her as well. Not good. All three of them having a thing for the same woman. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all.

“Let me grab those for you.” He grabbed the brown paper bags. “I’ll show you around, and then you can get started.”

They headed straight to the kitchen first. Putting the bags down, he pointed around him. “The kitchen.”

She chuckled.

He loved the sound and knew he wanted to make her laugh often.

“Come on. It’s a quick tour.” He showed her the whole of the downstairs. The living room, dining room, and the small library that was also Gabe’s office. He warned her not to touch Gabe’s desk at all. Even he got yelled at for touching the man’s desk.

With the downstairs done, he told her they would tour the upstairs later. First, she needed to actually pass the cooking test.

Gabe wouldn’t like anyone going upstairs, so that was strictly off-limits.

“Is there anything else you need?” he asked.

“Nope. I’m good. I can handle this.”

“Okay, great.”

“Are you nervous?” Annalise asked.

“Look, I don’t want to get your hopes up, but Gabe isn’t on board with the whole housekeeper thing. He’s the one doing the hiring. I ... I just hope this goes well.”

“It’s fine. Honestly.” She shrugged.

“Why do you want to work for us?” Archie asked.

“I love this place, for one. I remember seeing Mr. Hollington in town. Every Wednesday he’d go to the cemetery. He had family there. He was such a sad man, but whenever he saw me, he’d give me this smile that said everything was going to be okay. When I saw your ad in the paper, I don’t know, I felt I had to come and help out where I could. Sounds silly.”

“Not at all. I appreciate it.”

“And, of course, I need a job and a place to stay, so this would be perfect.”

He put a hand on her shoulder and immediately let go. The attraction he felt for this woman was going to have to stay in check. Not once had Annalise ever given him the inkling she wanted anything from him. She was prim and proper to a fault.



Always sweet. Always kind. Always so very thoughtful.

Blowing out a breath, he left her to it and found Vinny in the barn.

“How did it go?” Vinny asked.

“I have no idea. She’s in the kitchen now. I hope she doesn’t burn it down.”

Vinny rested his shovel on the ground, leaning on the handle. “You’re really nervous about all of this.”

“Wouldn’t you be?”

“No, I know Annalise is a good cook. She’s a hard worker. Kyle has never once complained about her like he has the other waitresses.”

“Do you think she quit?”

“Don’t know. I only hope she has what it takes to impress the boss man.”

Archie was in total agreement.

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Annalise loved the kitchen. It was her one place of solace that no one could take away from her. She tied her red hair back on top of her head, washed her hands, put an apron around her body, and got to work on preheating the oven.

This place would be a pleasure to cook in. The oversized windows looked out onto the fields. She had never felt so at peace and prayed they’d choose her for the job.

Checking through the cupboards, she found everything she was looking for.

After Archie had called her to let her know she had a trial to prove herself, she planned the menu for the entire day. Breakfast was a mix of sweet and savory.

The cinnamon buns were already waiting to be put in the oven, since she had started them last night, so they would be fresh today. This opportunity meant the world to her.

Unpacking her goods, she put everything in the fridge, and the ingredients that didn't need to be cool, she placed on the counter.

She didn't know their tastes, so had planned to do waffles, a mixture of sausage and bacon, eggs, and even a compilation of fruit. If she got the job, she would make it her mission to find out everything they enjoyed.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," she muttered to herself.

Annalise wanted this job so badly.

When the ad for housekeeper had first been made available, she hadn't applied as she heard so many people had. Each one had been fired, and then she saw it had been removed. Seeing it in the paper once again, she had called and gotten Archie.

Now all she needed to do was get into the cooking.

It didn't take the oven long to heat up. Then she had the cinnamon rolls cooking and the waffle batter resting. There was plenty of fresh maple syrup, and she poured some into a saucepan to heat up closer to the time.

She opened the door to allow some fresh air in.

By eight o'clock, she was ready to serve, and she got the timing just right as well as she spotted Gabe, Archie, Vinny, and a couple of their ranch workers headed that way.

Everything was still hot.

The scent of cinnamon heavy in the air.

"Score," the ranch hands said.

Hands clasped together in front of her, she pointed out everything she had cooked for them before turning on her heel to leave. She had a cinnamon roll and cup of coffee waiting for her in the kitchen.

The temptation to go and check outside to see if they liked the food was strong. She had tried to offer her skills to Kyle at the diner, but he hadn't been interested. He told her

there was only one cook in his diner, and it would forever be him.

Cooking was a passion of hers. As a little girl, she imagined having a large family to cook for. Her home life had never been great. Immediately, a huge wave of sadness washed over her, and she quickly shoved it to one side. Now wasn't the time to think about all that sadness. Her family had no place in her future. She hadn't seen them in years, not that anyone knew the truth of the black sheep of the family, or in her case, the redhead.

With her cinnamon roll finished, she put the plate in the sink, along with her mug of coffee, and got to work marinating the chicken for lunch.

She was thinking spicy chicken sandwiches, with a nice refreshing sparkling citrus drink.

Just as she was massaging the meat, Vinny came into the kitchen.

"Damn, that was some fine food." He rubbed at his stomach.

"You enjoyed it?" she asked.

"Yes. It was so good. As I knew it would be. Those cookies you sent were the best I ever tasted."

She smiled. It was always nice to hear how much her food was appreciated. "Thank you."

"No. Thank *you*."

She nibbled on her lip. "Did anyone else enjoy it?"

Vinny smirked. "Gabe took three portions. There's barely anything left."

"Do you think I can feed your dogs?" she asked. She had heard them randomly barking throughout the morning and had wanted to go and see them. She loved dogs so much. They hadn't been allowed a dog as one of her half-sisters had been allergic.

“Of course. We’ve already fed them this morning, but talk to Gabe, he’ll take you to them.”

Vinny winked at her, and she smiled, warmth washing through her body. All three of them were big men, tall and muscular. She’d swear they were brothers, but they were just friends.

Archie stopped by next.

The ranch hands never made an appearance, and finally, Gabe came inside. He made her nervous as her fate was in his hands.

“Vinny said you wanted to see the dogs to feed them.” He was so tall and with that stern look on his face, it made her a little afraid. Or turned on. She wasn’t so sure.

“Only if you want them to have the food.”

“Nothing goes to waste here. I don’t have the time or the patience for it. Food is money. Time is money. We work hard here.”

“Of course.” Should she bow? “Did you, er, did you like the food?”

“It was good,” he said.

Was that a compliment? It sounded like a compliment.

“Come on. I don’t have all day.”

She quickly followed him outside. There were no cages or kennels. “The dogs are able to roam free?”

“Of course,” he said. “They sleep in the house. Is that going to be a problem? If you’re allergic, you can leave now.”

“No. No. That’s not what I meant. It’s just nice, I guess. I figured some people keep them outside.”

“They’re good dogs. Good boys. They’ll never be locked up outside.” He let out a whistle. “Rufus, Barney, get your butts down here.”

“Only two?”

“For now,” he said.

She watched as two giant German Shepherd dogs came running toward her. At first, she was mesmerized, and then a little terrified as they seemed to be running straight to her.

End of sample chapter

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