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# BRAVE ENOUGH



KELLY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELLIOTT

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E N O U G H

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# BRAVE ENOUGH

KELLY  
ELLIOTT

*Brave Enough*

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# Shaw Ranch

HAMILTON, MONTANA



Hunters Cabin



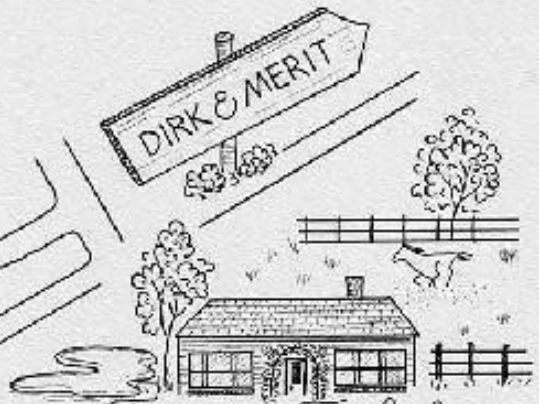
Jay Jr & Stella



Brock & Lincoln



Barn



Sammer & Emberlynn



Jay Jr & Kaylee

## Prologue

### HUNTER

*A few months back, Missoula, MT*

“You want me to do what?” I asked the two gentlemen sitting at the table across from me.

They waited for the server to finish clearing the plates from lunch. “We want you to star in a social dating experiment to help kick off a new network. And to make things interesting, portions will be aired live over a two-month period. No scripts, just real-life experiences.”

I stared at them silently for what I knew was much longer than I should have. “I’m sorry...Jack and Travis, correct?”

They both nodded. “Jack Morris and Travis Ryan.”

I smiled politely as I said, “My first question is, why me?”

The older guy, Jack, who was maybe in his early thirties, cleared his throat. “May I be frank with you?”

“I wish you would.”

“My mother was a huge fan of your father’s. Brock Shaw is a legend in this industry. She loves everything and anything to do with rodeos and the PBR. She’s followed your budding college career with team roping, and from what she tells us, you seem to have a big fan base of your own, both on and off campus.”

Travis cut in, “And I’m perfectly fine enough with my own masculinity to say that you’re a good-looking guy. You’re built from years of working on a ranch, you’re...what, about five-eleven?”

I nodded.

“Right. So you have your father’s looks, you’re a cowboy, your family is

wealthy and has a rather large ranch here in Montana—if not *the* largest. The question should be...why *not* you? You are the future of your family's legacy, so it should be your turn.”

I fidgeted in my seat some as I rubbed the back of my neck. “That was frank. And someone obviously did their homework—right down to how tall I am.”

Jack spoke again, “We want to be as open as we can with you, Hunter. Our parents’ company is starting the new network and we need something big to kick it off. There is a lot of competition out there, so the first few shows need to pull people in fast, especially women. My mother, in particular, wants to focus on empowering women with this network. It’s not going to be filled with shows on how to make Grandma’s meatloaf. More like how to build a *house* like the one your grandmother lived in. With that said, women—”

“And men,” Travis added.

Jack nodded. “*And* men like reality dating shows. Look at the more popular ones that are out right now. Their fans have what they call *nations*. These people throw viewing parties for every episode, or when they’re airing the finale.”

“I don’t want to get married. I’m only twenty-one, and not to mention, I’m still in college.”

They both laughed. “We’re not going to ask you to get married. Here’s what we propose. The show will be called *Swipe Right* and the tagline will be, ‘The Challenges of Dating in the Real World.’ We’ll take a group of women, twenty of them, and house them all together. You’ll have a set number of women—let’s say two—to take out each week. They will be randomly picked. The show will then arrange and pay for you and your date to head out on some magical kind of adventure away from the ranch. However...we’d like to film most of it on your family’s ranch.”

My eyes went wide. “You want to film it on Shaw Ranch?”

They both nodded.

Jack cleared his throat. “Did we mention the hefty amount of money we’re willing to donate to your father’s nonprofit? You’ll still be paid for your time as well.”

It was my turn to clear my throat. They’d already mentioned a large amount of money, two-hundred thousand, to be exact. It had been the one reason I had agreed to the meeting. “You *have* mentioned it, at least four

times now.”

Jack smiled. “As I was saying, even though the majority of the show will be filmed on the ranch, we’ll arrange for some dates both on and off the ranch. Even to places like Las Vegas and San Diego. All expenses paid by the show.”

“Do I get to know anything about these women?”

Jack nodded. “Yes, of course, you will. They’ll each have detailed lists of their attributes, hobbies, ages, where they grew up, et cetera. After each date, you’ll be able to decide whether you would like to go out with them again, so you would swipe right, like the show’s name insinuates. If you did not connect with them, you’d swipe left.”

“Since some of this is live, I’m going to guess I won’t be expected to…” I let my voice trail off.

“Sleep with them?” Travis asked.

“Yes. I’m not some kind of playboy, despite my ‘fanbase,’ and I respect women too much to be taking out multiple girls and sleeping with all of them.”

Jack held up his hand. “It’s not like that at all. I mean, you *can*, and we hope you eventually kiss some of them. Maybe toward the end of the season, you’ll do a bit of making out. But no sex. We don’t want it to be that type of show.”

I nodded and let out a sigh of relief. It wasn’t like I was a virgin, but I did have my limits, and starring in a porn was one of them. “And after each date?” I asked. “What happens next?”

It was Travis who answered. “After each date, you’ll both go into a private booth and talk about how the date went. You’ll then both decide if you want to swipe right. If you don’t, the girl goes home, regardless of whether or not *she* swiped right. Your swipe takes precedence. But if she swipes left, she automatically gets to leave, regardless of what you swipe. We don’t want anyone staying who isn’t comfortable or doesn’t feel like she has a connection.”

“That’s good,” I said, relieved again in some significant way.

“By the time the two months is up,” Jack stated with a wide grin, “you’ll have narrowed it down to two women. You’ll do your final swipe for the woman you choose to date. If you continue to date for a minimum of two months after the show ends, we’ll give you a bonus of one-hundred-thousand dollars—but only if you agree to let us interview you and check in with both

you and the final contestant during that two-month post-show timeframe.”

I dropped back in my seat. *Holy shit*. That would be a lot of money I could give to my dad’s foundation, which he’d started in memory of his first wife and his brother Beck who died while in the Marines. Kaci, dad’s first wife, died giving birth to my older brother, Blayze. She suffered from mental illness, and Dad created his foundation after that tragedy to help with resources for those suffering from mental illness. He also built a park in Uncle Beck’s name that included a skate park, playground, as well as a barn and an arena for the kids in 4-H. The park also offered some great opportunities for the kids of Hamilton by giving them a safe place to meet up.

That kind of money could do a lot more for this community. He could build the water park he’d been thinking of for the kiddos, and that new outdoor arena... My answer was literally a no-brainer, but I still had to think about it as there were a lot of moving parts.

Travis interrupted my internal thoughts. “The host would be someone native to Montana as well. Her name is Kipton Howse.”

Not knowing who the hell that was, I simply nodded. “What’s the timeframe again?”

“We’d like to film it this coming December and January. We’ll start preproduction in November, but the actual filming of the show starts that first week of December. I know you have school and all. My father was thinking you could do remote learning those weeks that aren’t part of winter break, if need be. He’s an alum and big contributor to the University of Montana, so getting permission for remote classes won’t be a problem,” Travis said.

“I’d have to ask my father since you want to film it on the ranch.”

They both nodded, and Jack added, “Understood.”

“Am I able to think about this?”

“Of course, you can,” Jack said. “We just need to know no later than September twenty-fifth so we can start marketing on the other stations and get the schedule planned. We already have our production team set up and ready to go.”

I raised a single brow. “So if I say no, you’ve got someone ready to go for backup?”

Travis smiled. “We do. He is technically our second-season bachelor, but if you say no, we’ll bump him to number one. We really think you’re the better choice to kick this off, though.”

“I see.” Clearing my throat again, I added, “I’ll think about it and talk to



my parents and let you know.”

Jack reached his hand across the table and grinned. “I really hope you’re on board with this, Hunter.”

Smiling, I shook his hand, then Travis’s.

“Here are both of our cards. If you have any other questions, please don’t hesitate to reach out to either of us,” Jack stated as he stood, and Travis followed his lead.

“I won’t. Thank you for...um...well...” My voice trailed off. What in the hell was I thanking them for, exactly?

Jack chuckled. “Look forward to hearing from you, Hunter.”

I watched as the two of them left the small Italian restaurant we’d chosen for lunch. I sat back in my chair and let out a heavy sigh.

The feeling of someone watching me caused me to turn around, and I saw three guys sitting at a nearby table. One of them leaned my way and said, “Dude...if you don’t do it, I will.”



*Early September – Shaw Family Ranch – Hamilton, MT*

My father and mother stared at me as they let what I’d just told them sink in.

When I couldn’t take the silence any longer, I asked, “Are you both in shock, or should I be worried or something?”

“A reality dating show?” my father asked.

Mom scrunched her nose. “Called...*Swipe Right*?”

I nodded. “The challenges of dating in the real world...that’s the tagline.”

“But...it’s reality TV...how is that the *real world*?”

Running my fingers through my hair, I sighed. “It’s not, really...but, Dad, they’re offering to donate a crazy amount of money to your foundation. It could build a new outdoor arena *and* the water park for Uncle Beck’s park.”

“Is this something you *want* to do, Hunter?” Dad asked.

My mind drifted back to the image of Kipton Howse that Lily had shown me, but I quickly shoved it away. When I’d told everyone at Blayze and Georgiana’s wedding about the reality show and mentioned the host, Lily had whipped out her phone to display a picture of Kipton to everyone. I was instantly intrigued.

I’d gone home that night and googled her, which I’d never admit to my

family. Since then, I'd learned quite a bit about the former Miss Montana. The money for Dad and the chance to meet Kipton were pretty much the only reasons I considered this whole crazy thing.

I cleared my throat. "I wasn't on board at first, but if we get something good out of it, then what harm could it do? They want to film a lot of it on the ranch, though, and I won't agree to do it if you say no. Plus, they mentioned filming during my winter break, but the schedule is actually for two months, then an additional two months if I date the person I end up picking. I'd have to work it out with the school to do remote for part of November, December, and January. One of the producers mentioned that he didn't think it would be a problem. His father has some pull at the school. And with it being my last semester, my workload is pretty easy anyway. Jack Morris and Travis Ryan are the producers, and their parents own the network. All told, it's only for a couple of months. So I can still compete this spring."

Looking at my mom, my father then focused back on me and smiled. It wasn't the kind of smile that gave me a feel-good vibe. No...it was the kind of smile that made me shudder.

I looked at my mother. And she had an equally evil glint in her eye.

"I don't like the way you're looking at me," I said, glancing back and forth between them.

"I say do it!" Dad announced. "This should be one hell of a ride, better than any riding competition you've ever been in. It'll be fine as long as they respect the boundaries of where they can go on the ranch."

Mom's hand covered her mouth in a sad attempt to hide the tiny burst of laughter that slipped free.

"You...you *want* me to do it?" I won't lie, I'd been kind of hoping he'd say no. "And you're okay with filming on the ranch?"

They both nodded. "But only if the school will let you do remote," Mom warned. "You know how we feel about you finishing college, and you're right at the end, so there's no point delaying it when you are at the finish line."

I blinked at them while my gaze continued to move from one to the other.

"What's the matter, son? You look a little pale." Dad smirked as he reached over and hit me on the side of the arm. "Who knows? We may even get a daughter-in-law out of this."

My mouth dropped open, and I stared as they stood, joined hands, and walked out of the room...laughing their asses off.

# Chapter One

## KIPTON

*Bozeman, MT – Late October*

I drew in a deep breath as I closed my eyes and counted to ten.

“One, two...”

*Please don't be angry with me.*

“Five, six...”

*Oh, they're going to be so angry with me.*

A knock on my car window caused me to let out a small scream, and my hand flew to my chest.

My finger tapped the automatic window button. “Dad, you scared me!”

He grinned in response. “I saw you sitting out here in your car and couldn't for the life of me figure out what you were doing. Some form of vehicle meditation, I suspect.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “No, I was just taking a moment.”

His brow rose, and he jerked his head toward the house. “Your mother and I will be waiting while you work up the courage to tell us whatever it is you're about to tell us.”

Before I could respond to the fact he'd just read my mind, he turned and headed back into the two-story log home I'd lived in since I was five.

Gilbert and Laura Howse were not my biological parents. They adopted me after their best friends—and my parents—Robert and Carol Lancing, passed away in a plane accident. My father was a pilot, and he and my mother had been coming back from a convention for heart surgeons in Dallas, Texas, on their private plane. All I was ever told was that the plane wreck had been caused by a storm that had moved down from Canada. They were only

forty miles from the airport when they crashed.

I'd tried so hard over the years to remember them, even the core memories that I knew must have been there, but I couldn't. I saw their faces in my mind, but I had no memories to hold on to. Nothing. Even stranger, I remembered *nothing* before coming to live with Gilbert and Laura. It bothered me to this day not to have a memory of my real mother or father. One single memory. My father teaching me to ride a bike. Or my mother holding me and singing to me. But there was nothing there.

With another deep breath, I opened the door to my Honda Civic and made my way down the sidewalk to the house. It was a modest place, nothing like the place my biological mother and father had owned. The house was huge, or at least it had seemed that way to me when I was younger. But it was home, and I loved growing up here.

I smiled when I saw the fall wreath on the door. My mother loved to decorate for the seasons and holidays. Come November 1, the house would look like Father Christmas had thrown up inside. Don't even get me started on poor Tom the Turkey and how that holiday was just passed over by nearly everyone. Thanksgiving was one day a year, my mother would say. Christmas was an entire season.

Before I could say anything, my father called out, "We're in the kitchen."

Attempting to look natural and not nervous at all, I made my way through the house. The exposed log beams carried over into the interior of the home. Wide-plank floors added to the rustic feel, as well as the leather furniture. My mother wasn't one for knickknacks, but she did have a few prized paintings she'd sprinkled throughout the house.

The kitchen was my favorite room. It was large and airy, with black distressed cabinets that didn't compete with the wood ceilings and exposed beams. A large island sat in the middle, covered by a cream-colored granite that had streaks of brown the same color as the wood floors. A large, eight-burner stove sat against one wall, with a stainless-steel hood. The refrigerator appeared to be commercial-grade, but it was a trick of the eye. It was actually a full-size fridge on the right, and a full-size freezer on the left. They'd put them together and framed it in, making it look like one massive unit.

My mother loved this kitchen, and she needed it to be this big. She had her own catering business, while my father was a CPA. That was how they'd met my biological parents. Dad was a CPA for Robert. They quickly became the best of friends, and it wasn't long after that Carol went into business with

my mother, and they started the catering company.

“Okay, Kipton, just come out with it,” my mother said as she peered at me over a piece of paper she’d been reading.

“What do you mean?” I asked as I slid onto the stool on the other side of the island.

My parents looked at each other and clearly communicated something I wasn’t supposed to understand.

Finally, Mom looked back at me. “The last time you came walking into the kitchen with that look on your face, it was to tell us you’d signed up to compete for Miss Montana.”

I smiled because it was true. The last time I was this nervous, I *had* signed up to be in the pageant, when I’d never been in any other pageant in my life. But it offered a scholarship for college, and we’d needed the money to get me through the last few semesters of school. My parents and I had done everything we could to get me through school since money had been tight. I worked as much as I could to help pay for things and it not get in the way of studying.

“I’ve been approached to do a job. It’s only for a few months. A few weeks in November, and then through December and January, but it pays really, really well.”

Dad raised his brow. “Please tell me it’s not stripping.”

My mother and I both shouted at the same time.

“Dad!”

“Gilbert!”

“Why would you think I would be a stripper?” I asked my father.

He shrugged. “I know you’re worried about finances, and that was the only reason you signed up to do the whole Miss Montana thing. I told you, Kipton, we’ll figure it out.”

I sighed and reached for an apple sitting in a dish in the middle of the island. When my biological parents died, they had left everything to me, but left a college friend of my biological father’s in charge of handling all the money. The house, the cars, nearly everything had been sold and put into investments that Jerry managed until I came of age. He would supply quarterly reports to my parents, and they would receive a check each month per the will to help with the cost of raising me. My father trusted Jerry so much, he let him take over their portfolio as well. The floor fell out from under us five months before I turned eighteen and would have control over

what my biological parents had left me. The checks stopped coming. Jerry disappeared with all his clients' money, including my inheritance and my parents' savings and retirement. He skipped the country, and there had been no leads at all in finding him or recovering the money he had stolen. All of it was gone.

When my parents hired a lawyer and a private detective to try to find Jerry, their financial situation only grew worse. They took out loans, mortgaged their house, and even sold some family heirlooms to get caught up. Thank God I had gotten another scholarship that paid for most of my college tuition. Plus, my stint as Miss Montana helped. For some reason I had always placed the blame on me about my parents losing nearly everything. I knew it was crazy, but I couldn't help feeling guilty.

Chewing the apple, I pulled myself from my thoughts. "We're never going to get anything back from Jerry."

Both of my parents frowned.

"We're going to find him. I can feel it," my father said.

I shook my head, my guilt quickly replaced by anger. "And then what? He's probably spent all the money."

"Maybe so," Dad said. "But he'll be sitting in jail and not out living the high life on whatever's left of everyone's money."

And that made me remember why I'd been nervous to talk to them. "Not to change the subject, but Mom, Dad...I need to tell you about that job because it's amazing money and it doesn't require me to take off my clothes."

And with that, I had their attention, and I had to fight to keep from fidgeting on the stool. I cleared the frog in my throat and said, "I've been asked to host a TV show."

My mother's eyes lit up—but of course, Dad immediately looked unsure.

"What kind of TV show?" he asked.

"Well," I said, twisting my hands together. "It's going to be kicking off a new network, mainly geared toward women, but they're hoping to pull in some male viewers as well."

"Like on HGTV?" Mom asked.

"The way they described it is, it won't be a network that shows you how to make your grandmother's apple pie, but will teach you how to build the house your grandmother lived in. It's more of an empowering thing, with the motto that women can do and be anything. Which is kind of strange,

considering the show they're starting with." I'd argued that point with Jack and Travis, pointing out that a dating show was no way to empower women, but I, at least, liked the fact that the females held *some* cards in their hands. If they wanted to go home, they could at any point, and there was a strict no-sex policy...though the latter sounded like it was a condition of the guy who'd be dating the women, and not so much a condition of staying on the show.

"I like it!" my mother said with a smile.

"Okay, I'm on board with that. What's the show about?"

"It's going to be a social experiment on dating. And the dates will be shot live, so everything is more organic and real. But I do believe the dates are planned out in some way for logistical reasons."

"Dates?" they both said.

"I'm just the host...not the one doing the dating. But the premise is that there will be one guy, and he's local to Montana. His name is Hunter Shaw."

My father gave me a surprised look. "Brock Shaw's son?"

"Do you know him?" I asked.

With a shake of his head, Dad replied, "I don't know Hunter, but I met his father years ago. He rode a benefit rodeo that aided the hospital where Robert worked. From what I remember, he was a nice guy. Last I heard, he'd retired at a pretty young age to raise his family and work on his folks' cattle ranch."

I nodded. "That's what I understand, as well. I mean, I googled Hunter to find out about him. He's big in team roping, one of the best in the country at the collegiate level. Anyway, they asked him to be the guy who's matched up with like twenty or so different women. At first when they asked me, I said no, but then they offered me a pretty good sum to host for just two months, with some promo work to be done in November, and...I couldn't turn it down. That money will pay off several of your debts."

They both stared at me with dumbfounded expressions before my father stood and made his way around the island toward me.

"Kipton, it's not your job to figure out a way for us to get out of debt."

I was about to argue when he kept going.

"Nor is the debt your fault."

Standing, I looked at my beloved father. He was still so handsome. At forty-nine, his hair was liberally sprinkled with gray. He was fit because he worked out every day, and the warmth in his pale blue eyes always made me feel safe and loved.

“Daddy, I know...but I don’t have to think it’s my fault to want to help. This is easy money. All I have to do is host, and besides, it’s something to add to my résumé, so there’s that.”

He shook his head. “What about school? You said it was for two months.”

“There are some days in November, but I’m not worried about those. Then a few more weeks before and after winter break that I’ll have to study remotely. But I already talked to my advisor, and all of my classes already offer online learning, so I’m golden there.”

It was my mother’s turn to walk over to me. “A dating show, though, Kipton? I thought you hated stuff like *The Bachelor*.”

“I never said I hated it. And besides, this isn’t the same.”

I spent the next few minutes explaining to my parents what the show was about and how it would work. Mom started to make up a small charcuterie board for us to snack on while my father asked a million-and-one questions about *Swipe Right*.

“It doesn’t sound so bad, if you ask me,” my mother said. “I like that the girl has the option to swipe left, or just leave outright if she wants.”

I nodded. “I liked that too.”

Dad let out a long sigh. “I don’t know. How much are they going to pay you?”

“They said because I was sort of a celebrity thanks to Miss Montana and competing in Miss America, they were offering me more.”

My parents leaned in, waiting for me to continue. When I didn’t say anything, my mother rolled her eyes. “How much, Kipton?”

“Two-hundred thousand.”

Both of their jaws dropped open.

“I know. I had the same reaction when they told me.”

My father slowly shook his head as he rubbed the back of his neck, while Mom clapped her hands together, causing me to jump. “Do they need an older woman to co-host? If so, I’m in!”

Laughing, my father playfully pushed Mom before he looked back at me. “Kipton, where will you be staying while this is filmed. Have you met this Hunter kid yet?”

“Dad, he’s not a kid and yes, we’ve met through Zoom a few times. Hunter told them a couple of weeks ago that he’s a solid yes. The plan is for most of the show to take place in Hamilton—that’s where Hunter’s family



ranch is. They want to do a lot of the filming on the ranch, and his parents okayed it. The group of women will be staying in a house that the production company rented. Some huge mansion not that far from the Shaw Ranch.”

“Will you be staying with the women?” Mom asked.

I shook my head. “No, originally, I was going to stay at the same hotel where the crew will be lodging, but Mr. and Mrs. Shaw insisted I stay on the ranch after I talked with them over Zoom.”

“They don’t even know you, why would they offer to let you stay with them?” Dad asked.

“Hunter was the one who suggested it, and his mother quickly agreed. I must admit, I’d much rather stay there than at the hotel.”

“Will you be able to meet Hunter before shooting starts?”

“We’re set to meet in a couple of weeks, before the filming of the show starts. Don’t ask me how they did it, but they managed to get both schools to allow us to leave a few weeks early, so we’ll be taking the last few weeks of classes remotely, as well as our finals. Mr. and Mrs. Shaw are hosting a dinner for me, Jack Morris, and Travis Ryan—those are the producers. Hunter will be there, and I’ll meet him then. They invited both of you, as well.”

“Jack Morris?” my father asked. “As in Morris Production Company?”

“Yeah, do you know him?” I asked.

My father stared at me like I’d grown two heads. “Kipton, they produce the Miss America competition! That must be where they first saw you.”

“Oh my gosh, they do?” I asked.

“And they’ve produced some of the bestselling movies over the past five years. Jack’s father is an actor. He starred in that big action thriller movie a few years back. *The Good Die Young* or something like that.”

“That’s right!” Mom said, snapping her fingers. “It was filmed here in Montana.”

Dad nodded. “The family is from Bozeman.”

“Wow, I didn’t know any of that.”

“I have a question,” Mom said, and Dad and I both looked at her. “When is this dinner?”

Dad laughed.

“Sometime in November.”

My mother jumped and spun around to face my father. “I need to go find something to wear!”

I watched as she dashed toward their bedroom. Slowly turning back to my father, I said, “I think she’s on board with this.”

He shrugged and winked before his face turned serious. “Kipton, is this something you really want to do? I don’t want you to think you’re backed into a corner. We can figure out another way to get our heads above water.”

“First of all, I wouldn’t do this if I thought there was something wrong with it. Granted, I’m not looking to go into showbiz, and I told them that. This would be a one-time thing, even though they *did* offer me the hosting job for future seasons, if it takes off like they think it will. I told them it’s not for me long term. I know how much you want me to keep the house, Dad, for whatever reasons you and Mom have...and I’ll respect that. But in return, I just want you to let me help pay off some of these bills. It will at least pay the lawyer bills, and I hope more.”

I could see it on his face. He didn’t want to admit he needed help, let alone help from his twenty-two-year-old daughter.

“Please, Dad.”

With a frustrated exhale, he finally nodded. “I want you to keep some of that money, though. Put it in your savings.”

I couldn’t help the smile that broke out across my face. “I promise I will.”

He held his arms open, and I threw myself into his embrace. “If this is something you’re sure about, then I’m on board.”

Squeezing him harder, I felt a little bit of the weight of the world lift off my shoulders...and prayed Dad did as well.

## Chapter Two

### HUNTER

*November – Hamilton, MT*

“Hunter, is there a reason you’re hovering around the front door?”

Turning, I saw my mother heading down the hallway to the foyer. She wore a navy-blue dress and had her hair pulled into a bun on the top of her head. She looked so beautiful, as usual.

“Mom, you’re breathtaking. You’re going to be the most beautiful woman in the room tonight.”

She smiled. “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Your father said nearly the same thing to me only moments ago.”

“It’s the truth,” I stated.

“Kiss-up,” my sister Morgan said, approaching from the same direction as Mom. She must’ve entered through the kitchen. I would know since, like Mom said, I was staking out the front door.

My mother spun around and nearly screamed. “Morgan! Darling, how are you feeling?”

I rolled my eyes. That seemed to be the first thing everyone asked my sister these days, as well as our sister-in-law Georgiana, since they’d told everyone they were pregnant a couple of months ago. Morgan was due May second, and Georgiana on April twenty-ninth. My parents were over the moon. But not as much as Ryan, my sister’s husband, and my older brother, Blayze. Ryan happened to be Blayze’s best friend. They were both excited to be new dads in the near future.

Everyone was also just happy to have Morgan still with us, safe and sound, after she’d been stalked and kidnapped a few short months ago.

“I’m feeling amazing,” Morgan said as she placed a hand over her stomach, where she wasn’t showing yet. Turning to face me, her smile widened. “Are you ready for this, little brother? You’re going to be famous!”

I rolled my eyes once again. “Hardly. It’s a brand-new streaming network that no one knows about.”

“Are you kidding?” Ryan said, joining us. “I’ve seen ads for it all over the place. The local channels are really pushing it.”

“And I saw an ad pop up on Instagram,” Rose said as she breezed through the front door, heading toward the living room.

Turning to my mother, I asked, “Why is Rose here?”

“I told you I was inviting the family.”

“Mom, when you said family, I assumed you meant our immediate family,” I said, pointing at myself, my sister, and her. “Not...the *family* family.”

Before my mother could say anything, Lily and Bradly entered. “Well, that’s rude.”

My head snapped back to my mother.

She simply shrugged. “Avery, of course, won’t be here.”

“What, she couldn’t fly in from Paris?” I deadpanned.

Taking my hand in hers, Mom said, “Sarcasm doesn’t become you, darling.”

“Really? I feel like it does at this moment,” I said as they all turned and headed in the same direction Rose had gone. “Oh God, this isn’t going to be good.”

I shoved a hand through my hair and sighed. I had a small immediate family. One older brother and one older sister. But I had six cousins. Granted, Avery and Bradly weren’t technically blood relatives, but they felt like it. We all grew up together, and truth be told, all of them felt more like brothers and sisters than cousins.

The front door opened and the rest of the family started piling in. My younger cousins, Joshua and Nathan, followed by Uncle Ty and Aunt Kaylee, who were the parents of Rose and Joshua. Uncle Tanner and Aunt Timberlynn, parents of Lily and Nathan. And Uncle Dirk and Aunt Merit, parents of Avery and Bradly—who weren’t actually related, but Dirk had been my dad’s best friend forever, so there you go—were the last ones in.

Aunt Kaylee stopped and pulled me in for a hug, then pushed me out to arm’s length. “I googled the hell out of the little hostess of your show.”

“Did you?” I asked, trying not to smile. It was totally something I could see her doing.

“It’s obvious why they asked her to host. The girl is stunning, smart, seems to have a good head on her shoulders...and did you know she volunteers at an orphanage in Bozeman?”

I *did* know that, but I wasn’t about to admit to my aunt that I’d goggled the shit out of Kipton as well. “No, I wasn’t aware.”

“Too bad you can’t swipe right on *her*.”

I laughed and was about to reply when the doorbell rang. My mother appeared out of nowhere. “That will be Kipton and her parents.”

Mom had ultimately decided to invite the Howses over first, without Jack and Travis, so they could get to know the people who’d be hosting their daughter.

I drew in a deep breath as my mother walked to the door with my father right behind her. Where in the hell had he come from?

The door opened—and I tried like hell not to push them out of the way to get my first in-person look at Kipton. She’d been so friendly during video chats with her and the producers, helping to calm my nerves, which had been steadily building as the days passed. Hell, I already felt like she was a bit of a lifeline, and the show hadn’t even started.

“Mr. and Mrs. Howse, what a pleasure to meet you! This must be Kipton!” my mother gushed as she opened the door farther. Mrs. Howse, who appeared to be around the same age as my mom, stepped into the foyer. She wore her blonde hair in a low pony and was quite attractive. After my father greeted her, she turned to me.

I let out the breath I hadn’t even realized I was holding and reached my hand out to shake hers.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Howse, I’m Hunter Shaw,” I said, giving her the smile that I used when I was trying to impress a woman. What can I say? The flirting gene clearly passed from my dad to my brother to me.

She smiled back. “Goodness, you *are* handsome. I can see why they picked you to do this show.”

I felt my cheeks heat as I motioned to her coat. “May I take your coat for you?”

“Thank you, Hunter,” she said as she turned so I could help her slip it off.

Bradly appeared at my side, flashing a wide grin. “I’ll take that for you, Hunter.”

When Mrs. Howse turned around, her eyes went wide at the site of Bradly.

“Mrs. Howse—” I started.

“Please, call me Laura.”

I nodded. “Laura, this is my cousin, Bradly. Bradly, Laura Howse.”

When he took her hand and kissed the back of it, I had to force myself not to roll my eyes. As he stepped back, he glanced over to me and winked.

“Hunter, this is my husband, Gilbert Howse.”

Reaching a hand out to shake his, I took in Kipton’s father. It was strange; she didn’t favor either of her parents. Her father was most likely in his late forties. Handsome guy, and pretty built. It was clear he worked out.

“It’s nice to meet you, Hunter.”

“The pleasure is all mine, sir.”

Gilbert waved his hand. “Please, no need to be so formal. Just call me Gilbert.”

“Gilbert, it is. May I take your coat?”

Bradly appeared again, introduced himself, and took Gilbert’s coat.

“You have a beautiful ranch,” Gilbert stated.

I nodded. “Thank you. My father and uncles work hard to make it the success it is. My older brother, Blayze, as well. He’s been slowly stepping into my father’s shoes.”

The sound of laughter coming from my right made my insides feel weird just as a warm sensation rushed over me. I could hear my parents talking to Kipton, and I didn’t want to gawk at her, so instead, I focused my eyes straight ahead on her mother and father.

“Are you excited to do the show?” Laura asked.

I let out a humorless laugh. “I’m not sure excited is the word I’d use. A bit scared might be a better choice.”

They both laughed before Gilbert looked to his left.

“Aw, there she is. Hunter, this is our daughter, Kipton.”

When I turned to look at her, I had to force my legs not to give out on me. Then I had to concentrate on not letting my mouth drop open. Last, I had to keep my eyes on her stunningly beautiful face, even though they were begging to do a sweep of her entire body.

“Kipton...it’s great to finally meet you in person,” I said as I shook her hand.

I just barely ignored the little jolt of energy that raced up my arm when

our hands touched. Then she smiled—and I was pretty damn sure my knees felt a little weak.

The pictures of Kipton hadn't done her justice, neither had the Zoom meetings. She was about five-three or four. Most of her light brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail, with two long strands left down to frame her face. She wore little makeup, nothing more was needed, and her eyes... Her eyes were the softest blue I'd ever seen. If I had to describe the color, I'd say they were baby blue.

When she glanced over my shoulder, and her eyes went wide—most likely from seeing the large group of people in the other room—they almost seemed to change to gray.

Someone suddenly pushed their way next to me and reached for Kipton's hand. "Ms. Howse, it's a pleasure to meet you. Bradley Littlewood's my name."

He reached for her hand and kissed the back of it with another wink—at *her* this time. Now, I *did* roll my eyes. With a hard pull on his shoulder, I directed him behind me as my father handed him Kipton's coat.

"Since you've appointed yourself the person to hang up jackets, here you go, Bradley."

Bradley flashed a smile back toward Kipton, then quickly made his way to the closet with her coat.

"I'm sorry about that. Usually he's on the shy side, but clearly not tonight," my mother said with a laugh. "Shall we all head into the living room? We've got the whole family here tonight."

Kipton's brows rose as her mother grinned from ear to ear and said, "I can't wait to meet them."

My mother led Laura, while Father walked next to Gilbert and quickly fell into a conversation. I started to follow when I felt Kipton grab my arm.

"Hunter?"

I stopped and faced her. "Yeah?"

She looked nervous as she chewed on her lower lip. "Is there anywhere we can go to talk in private?"

Blinking at her rapidly, I replied, "Um, yeah. Sure."

I motioned for her to follow me farther down the hall toward my mother's office. Kipton took in the house as we walked.

"Your parents' house is beautiful," she said softly as she slowed to peek into a room. "A library! Oh my gosh, I'd get lost in here."

I chuckled and said, "Let's talk in there, then."

Kipton walked in and stopped in the middle of the room, spinning around slowly as she looked at the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. She wore dress pants and a sweater with black high heels. She had an athletic build, but she wasn't stick thin. I'd heard Rose and Lily talking about how they loved that Kipton had curves, instead of the typical super-thin body that many beauty pageant contestants seemed to prefer.

From the bikini photos I'd seen of her on the Internet, I agreed. She had one hell of a body.

"Would you like me to keep the door open?"

She stopped and looked at me, her head tilted slightly. "What?" she asked with a light chuckle.

I shrugged. "I just want you to feel comfortable, that's all."

Her tongue darted out and she licked her lips...I had to jerk my gaze away.

"Um...thank you for being so considerate, but I don't think it would be improper to close it."

Nodding, I shut the door and let out an exhale. "You wanted to talk?"

Her hands started to wring together as she turned away from me and walked over to a bookshelf. She appeared to be reading the spines—until she suddenly spun around and said, "I'm scared to death to do this."

"To do what?"

"The show. Host it. I'm terrified."

I was positive I looked shocked as hell. "But you were Miss Montana. You stood on national TV and spoke during the Miss America pageant to millions of people around the world."

She swallowed hard. "That was different."

"How?"

Her nose scrunched up in the most adorable way, and I had to fight the urge to smile.

"I don't really know. Maybe because pageant stuff is all rehearsed. And this feeling didn't even hit me until we pulled up to your house. Why did they pick me? What makes them think I'll even be a good host?"

"Why did they pick *me*?" I countered.

She let out a humorless laugh and waved her hand in my direction. "Look at you! Why *wouldn't* they pick you."

I leaned against the desk and crossed my ankles. "Okay, if we're going



there—look at *you*. You’re gorgeous, Kipton. I don’t know you yet, but from what I’ve seen on Zoom, you have a great personality as well. My cousins, Lily and Rose, go to the same college as you, and Lily said you’re always volunteering and doing things for others, so that tells me you have a kind heart.”

Her cheeks blushed. She looked away and cleared her throat before she began strolling around the library slowly, running a finger along the books. “I read that you do a lot of charity work as well. And that your father has a foundation here in Hamilton.”

“That’s the only reason I agreed to do this. The money is going to the foundation.”

She stopped and looked at me—then smiled. Jesus, her smile could light up a room.

“The money was the only reason I agreed as well. My parents could really use it to get them out of...”

She blushed and I figured she had been about to say out of debt. I wasn’t about to push her for the reasons she signed up to do this gig.

I folded my arms over my chest. “We both have good reasons for doing it. We’re both going in a bit unsure if we can pull it off. I don’t mind admitting I’m probably just as scared as you. And I think it’s safe to say we’re both worried we’re going to look like idiots.”

Kipton laughed as she stopped a few feet away from me.

“How about this—we promise each other right now that if either one of us is feeling off, worried, scared, unsure...whatever...we talk to each other about it.”

Her head tilted again. “Okay,” she replied softly. “I think knowing I have a possible friend here will really help.”

“You’ll have my entire family, as well, since you’re staying here. Lily and Rose will be on winter break, and I’m positive you’ll all get along.”

She smiled. “I’m sure we will.”

I pushed off the desk and walked over to her. Gazing into her eyes, I ignored the way my heart felt like it was beating just a little too hard, and reached my hand out for hers. “To our newfound friendship.”

Her eyes darted down to my hand, then back up. When her eyes lingered on my mouth, I let myself believe for a hot second she wanted to seal our new friendship with a kiss. I quickly pushed that thought away. It was inappropriate...considering I’d be sort of dating twenty damn women in a

few weeks' time.

“To our newfound friendship.”

## Chapter Three

### KIPTON

The way my body came to life when Hunter touched me was something I wasn't expecting at all. Never mind that the guy was insanely handsome, with blue eyes that you could get lost in for hours on end. And that dark brown hair that looked so soft, my fingers itched to touch it. And his body...

Sinful.

*Friends, Kipton. He's a friend, and one you desperately need right now.*

"We should probably get back to everyone. My mom might have sent a search party out for us."

I chuckled and nodded. "We should totally go."

But neither of us made a move to leave. In fact, my hand was still in his as we continued to stare at one another.

"Are we, um...are we going to go?" I eventually asked, gently drawing my hand away.

Hunter snapped out of whatever daze he was in and laughed. "Yes! Let's go."

As I preceded him, he placed his hand on my lower back and guided me across the room. I prayed he didn't feel my body shudder at his touch. I'd always read in books about men placing their hands there, and wondered if it was as sensual as romance novels made it seem. I could say without a doubt that it was.

Maybe it was just because of Hunter, who knows. Maybe it was simply me, reading into a private moment in a gorgeous library, with a good-looking man, who'd just promised to be there for me when I needed him. That was rare these days.

When Hunter stepped forward and reached for the library door, holding it

so I could walk through, I glanced up to thank him...and was assaulted by his smell.

No, *assaulted* wasn't the right word. Engulfed. Yes, I was *engulfed* by the scent of Hunter Shaw. It was an earthy smell, not too heavy, not too light. A spicy, woody smell, like rosewood.

Trying not to seem creepy, I drew in a small breath before walking past him, and I swore his eyes seemed to turn darker.

We continued in silence through the house, toward the muffled sounds of people talking. As they grew louder, I grew more nervous.

It was like Hunter could sense it. He took my elbow and drew me to a stop.

"They're all harmless, I promise. And they really will have your back, always. But my younger cousins, I have to warn you, are going to trip over themselves in order to get your attention."

I chuckled. "Thanks for the warning."

He smiled, and I noticed a dimple in his right cheek.

*Look away, Kipton. Look away.*

"Ready?" he asked.

"Let's do this."

I walked into the large living room as Hunter cleared his throat and got everyone's attention. Suddenly the room was silent, all eyes on us.

"Sorry, Kipton and I wanted to spend a few minutes alone, introducing ourselves."

Hunter's mom, Lincoln, beamed at us, while my mother placed a not-so-subtle hand over her heart and smiled a big, goofy smile.

We stood there, everyone staring at us, before I gently elbowed Hunter.

"Right. Okay, so, let's introduce you to everyone. You already met my mother, Lincoln, and my father, Brock."

I nodded. "As well as Bradly," I added, with a smile in his direction.

Hunter leaned in and softly muttered, "Don't encourage him, Kip."

I turned to look at him in surprise. He'd called me Kip. No one had ever called me by a nickname. Why did that make my heart flutter?

Forcing my gaze off him, I turned back to the large group while Hunter introduced me.

"I'll go by families. It'll make it easier," he joked.

"And you'll be quizzed at the end of the night," said a beautiful young woman with dark blonde hair, standing next to a very handsome guy with

short light brown hair.

Hunter laughed. “Don’t listen to my sister. But since she spoke up first, this is my older sister, Morgan, and her husband, Ryan Marshall. Morgan and Ryan are expecting their first baby this May.”

Morgan made her way over and gave me a warm hug. “It’s so great meeting you, Kipton.”

“Likewise,” I said, as I shook Ryan’s hand.

“If you ever need an escape, you’re more than welcome to come to our place. Especially if you like horses,” Ryan said.

“I love them!” I beamed. “And thank you.”

They moved on, and another couple appeared in front of us. They looked to be in their mid-twenties. The guy was the spitting image of Brock, so I figured he had to be Blayze.

“Blayze Shaw, Hunter’s older brother,” he said, shaking my hand. “This is my wife, Georgiana.”

“It’s a pleasure meeting you both,” I replied.

“They’re expecting a baby at the end of April,” Hunter added.

“Oh, wow, congratulations!”

No one else made a move to approach, so Hunter pointed at a couple. “That’s Uncle Ty and Aunt Kaylee.”

They both waved, so I waved back as I said, “Nice to meet you.”

“One of their offspring is Rose Marie,” Hunter continued, as a stunning young woman stood and smiled at me. Her blonde hair was pulled half up and half down, with curls that I would kill for. I could see her blue eyes shining brightly from across the room. “She also goes to Montana State.”

“I wonder if we’ve ever seen each other or taken classes together?” I asked.

Rose gave a little shrug. “I’m not sure.”

“And Joshua is their son.”

A boy who looked to be about fifteen tipped his cowboy hat and winked. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Next, you have Uncle Tanner and Aunt Timberlynn. Their kiddos are Lily and Nathan.”

A girl about my age, with dark brown hair, stood and waved. “We also go to the same college.”

“Oh, wonderful,” I said, making a mental note to seek her and Rose out after the introductions.

A young man appeared in front of me suddenly. He lifted my hand and pressed a soft kiss to the back. It took everything I had not to grin. He was darling, maybe around sixteen or so. His eyes were a captivating color of silver, and stood out even more with his brown hair.

“Nathan Shaw. It’s an honor to meet you.”

Hunter reached over, placed a palm on Nathan’s forehead and pushed him away. “Go sit down, Nathan.”

The room erupted in laughter as Nathan started to back away. Before he turned, he blew me a kiss and winked.

“He’s going to give his parents hell,” I whispered to Hunter.

“Already does,” he replied before pointing at another couple. “Uncle Dirk and Aunt Merit.”

The couple smiled and waved. “Nice to meet you.”

“Bradly belongs to them,” Hunter stated, as I covered my mouth and attempted not to laugh. “They have a daughter, Avery, but she’s currently in Paris.”

“Wow,” I stated, as I looked at Merit. She gave me a smile, but I could see the sadness in her eyes. She clearly missed her daughter. “College?”

“No,” Merit replied. “Avery is sixteen. She’s attending school there while she does some modeling.”

My eyes went wide. “Goodness. That’s incredible.”

Merit nodded, and I swore Dirk huffed.

“My grandparents will be here soon. They like to make an entrance,” Hunter joked.

“Did someone mention grandparents?” a female voice said from behind us.

Turning, I smiled when I saw an older couple standing in the doorway of the living room. They looked to be in their mid-seventies, and I could see where the good looks in the family came from.

My mother and father joined me as Brock walked up to his parents and hugged them both.

“Mom, Dad...this is Gilbert Howse, his wife, Laura, and their daughter, Kipton. This is my mother and father, Ty Sr. and Stella Shaw.”

We all exchanged greetings, and I was instantly enamored when Stella pulled me into a hug. She pushed me out at arm’s length and gave me a once-over.

“Goodness, if you aren’t even more beautiful in person. I was rooting for

you to win Miss America.”

I could feel my cheeks heating. “Thank you so much, I appreciate that.”

“Third place isn’t too shabby,” Ty Sr. said as he shook my hand.

Lincoln clapped her hands and got everyone’s attention. “Now that we’re all here, let’s head on in for dinner.”

A few of the younger kids ate in the breakfast area, while the rest of us sat in a huge formal dining room. There was a large buffet on the wall that was covered in food. I loved that they had kept things so informal. After picking up a plate, I made my way down the line. Hunter was in front of me, and my mother behind me.

She leaned in and whispered, “What’s in the water here? They’re all so good-looking!”

I gave her a warning look as I whispered, “Mom! Be quiet.”

“I’m only speaking the truth. I thought *you* had beautiful blue eyes, but this family puts yours to shame.”

Rolling my eyes, I replied, “Thanks.”

Hunter turned and looked past me to my mother. “I have to respectfully disagree. Kipton has beautiful eyes.”

My cheeks heated with embarrassment while my mother poked me in the back.

The rest of dinner was spent with everyone breaking off into different conversations. My mother and father were seated near Lincoln and Brock. On my right was Lily, for which I was so thankful. On my left was Hunter. Lily and I spent most of dinner talking about our degrees, school, and our love of horses. A few times, Hunter asked me something and we quickly got lost in conversation. But it never took long, though, for one of his cousins to pull my attention away.

All in all, it was a beautiful, relaxed dinner. My mother and I both offered to help Lincoln clean up, and she refused, insisting the cleanup could wait until later. We all made our way back into the large family room...and that was when the fun really began.

Brock declared it was game night. We all voted and decided charades would be the game of choice. Before long, it felt like my parents and I were part of this large, amazing family. I’d never laughed so hard in my entire life, and to watch both younger and older cousins—as well as aunts and uncles—bickering was probably one of my favorite parts of the evening.

“You should see them play Monopoly,” Georgiana stated as she sat down

next to me.

Turning toward her, I raised a brow in question. “That bad?”

She sighed. “Hunter and Morgan do *not* like to lose. I heard they once had a game going for days.”

I looked back out to see the siblings in question arguing over something she drew on a large piece of paper. After charades, we’d moved on to Pictionary.

“How does that look like a sneaker?” Hunter asked.

“It clearly looks like a shoe, Hunter! I’m a fashion designer. I know how to draw a damn sneaker!”

“Language, children,” one of the mothers called out, but exactly who it was remained unknown to me.

Smiling, I looked at Georgiana. “Do you come from a large family?”

“No,” she replied with a shake of her head. “You?”

“Nope. But I wish I did. I can only imagine what it’s like at the holidays with this group.”

She chuckled. “A lot of fun. They fight often, but boy do they love each other fiercely. You’ll see for yourself since you’ll be staying here for two months.”

“I have to admit, I did a bit of research on Hunter when I found out I was going to be hosting the show. I don’t remember seeing Dirk and Merit listed as family.”

Georgiana glanced over at the couple, who were in deep conversation with my parents. “They’re not blood related. Dirk has been Brock’s best friend since childhood, and he rode on the PBR circuit with him. They’re like family, and the kids have always called them aunt and uncle.”

“That’s so nice,” I said as I took a sip of my drink. “I’d love to have a big family someday. I always wondered what it would have been like to have a brother or a sister.”

“Me too,” Georgiana said wistfully as she placed a hand over her stomach. I don’t think she was even aware she’d done it multiple times this evening.

When she saw me glancing at her hand, she immediately moved it.

“It must be exciting to have your sister-in-law pregnant along with you.”

Georgiana grinned. “It *is* exciting. Lincoln and Brock are crazy thrilled.”

“Congratulations again.”

Her eyes lit up as she returned my smile with one so brilliant, it made my



chest squeeze with something like...jealousy? I pushed that thought away.

“I also heard you both own a boutique in town. That’s so fun!”

She nodded. “It definitely is. And Morgan is so damn talented. She has a new lingerie line coming out for spring. Avery, our cousin, the one in Paris, she’s modeling some of the tamer designs, so Dirk and Merit don’t have a heart attack seeing their sixteen-year-old in lingerie.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“What are you two chatting about?” Lily asked as she sat down on my other side.

“A new line they have coming out,” I said, smiling at Georgiana.

“Yep. A lingerie line Morgan helped design. I’m dying for everyone to see it.”

Lily gasped. “Morgan designed a lingerie line? Oh my gosh, I can’t wait to see!”

We soon got lost in a conversation about the store. “Do you have to supply your own clothing for the show?” Georgiana eventually asked.

“They’ll have a wardrobe for me...or at least, that’s what I’m told.”

Georgiana grinned like she’d just come up with the best idea ever. “What if the boutique supplied you with some of the outfits? For free, of course, in exchange for them listing us in the credits?”

“I think that’s a brilliant idea. We can talk to Jack and Travis about it tomorrow,” I stated.

Clapping and nearly bouncing in her seat, Georgiana jumped up. “I’ve got to go tell Morgan!”

I laughed as I watched her make her way over to the other side of the room. Looking back at Lily, I asked, “Will you be here for winter break?”

She nodded. “I will. My mother and father have a house here on the ranch, on the portion that they own. My mom trains horses and runs a sanctuary for wild mustangs. You’ll have to come visit the barn.”

My heart felt full, knowing I would be surrounded by horses with the opportunity to ride at any time. “I will. Thank you so much for the invite.”

Lily wrapped her arm around mine and beamed at me. There was a hint of mischief in her eyes as she said, “I have a feeling we’re going to be the best of friends by the time this is over.”

“I do too,” I agreed, as I turned to look over the room. When my gaze caught on Hunter’s, a strange feeling raced through my body. “It’s going to be an interesting two months,” I added, as I returned the smile Hunter was

giving me.

Lily looked between us and agreed. “A very interesting two months, indeed.”



I stepped out of the stall and nearly screamed when I saw Hunter standing there. We had both left school a few weeks early to be here for preproduction. Hunter was staying at his parents’ house along with me, and I had to admit, I couldn’t wait to see him every morning at breakfast. At least on the mornings he was there. Since he was home, his father and brother had put him to work on the ranch. Some mornings it was just me and Lincoln while Brock and Hunter got an early start.

“You scared me,” I said with a smile.

“Did you enjoy the ride?” he asked as he graced me with a smile that showcased his dimple.

I nodded. “I did. Elly is a sweet horse.”

“I wish I had known, I would have gone with you and showed you around the ranch. Hank said you just stayed in the front pasture.”

Shrugging, I replied, “I don’t mind, plus the pasture is huge, so Elly and I got a good ride in. Hank told me anytime I want to exercise the horses to just let him know.”

Hunter laughed.

There was no denying there was something between the two of us. Friendship for sure, and a part of me was afraid to even think about it being anything else. But the way he looked at me made my entire body warm.

“There’s a storm moving in, so my dad wanted me to make sure you didn’t stay out too long.”

“Hank told me a system was headed our way when he and Decker were bringing in a few horses to stall them for the night.”

Hunter nodded.

“Are you helping them stall the horses, or are you heading back up to the house?”

Another devastating smile appeared on his face, and I ignored the way my heart felt like it tripped over itself. “I’m heading back up. Need a ride?”

I had driven down to the barn with Brock earlier, and Blayze had said he would bring me back up to his parents’ house.

“I do, if you don’t mind.”

“Don’t mind at all.”

After giving Elly some hay and water, then letting Blayze know I was leaving with his brother, Hunter placed his hand on my lower back and guided me out of the barn. Once we got back to his parents’ house, we found a note from his mother and father. They had gone to Stella and Ty Sr.’s house to make sure they had plenty of wood for the fireplace in case the power went out.

“Okay,” Hunter said as he stared into the fridge. “Mom left a note to heat the lasagna, but I caught site of some Fritos, and I’m thinking Frito Pie. You in?”

I nodded. “I haven’t had that in years! I’ll cut the onion!”

We worked alongside each other as I cut up the onion and poured the chips into two bowls, while Hunter heated the canned chili and shredded cheese. I hadn’t laughed so much in I wasn’t sure how long. There was such an easiness with Hunter that I hadn’t ever experienced with any other guy. The attraction was there for me, and I thought for Hunter as well, but we had both said we would be friends, and I would be stupid to fall for a guy who was about to date twenty different women. Even though he was dreading it, according to him.

“How about a game of dominos,” Hunter said as I dried the last of the dishes and handed it to him to put away.

Before I had a chance to answer, Brock walked in. “I smell onions.”

Hunter and I both laughed.

“You had Frito Pie, didn’t you?” Lincoln asked as she rubbed her hands together to warm them. “You’ve been talking about it for days now.”

“There is extra if you want some,” I said.

Lincoln shook her head. “We ate the lasagna before we left.”

“Did someone say dominos?” Brock asked with a hopeful gleam in his eyes.

Hunter chuckled. “I did. You and Mom up for a game?”

“The heck we are!”

The rest of the evening was spent with the four of us drinking wine and playing dominos. I couldn’t help but wish I could stay here in this house, with this large, fun-loving family, surrounded by horses, cows, and the sheer beauty of the landscape, and spend more time with Hunter. But that was all about to change in a few days when filming began.

“Is everything okay?” Hunter asked, bumping my arm.

Ignoring the way his touch made my body feel, I smiled and replied,  
“Everything is simply perfect.”

## Chapter Four

### HUNTER

I paced back and forth in my father's office as I waited for the limo to pick me up.

"You're going to wear a path in the floors if you keep pacing, Hunter."

Glancing over at my brother, I pushed my fingers through my hair and sighed. "What was I thinking doing this, Blayze? I can't do it. Do you know how many people have already signed up to stream this network just to catch this show?"

He shrugged.

"Over a million. A *million*, Blayze. A million people are going to watch me date twenty women over a two-month period."

"You poor, poor bastard," Bradly stated dryly.

I shot him a dirty look. "How are you here? Shouldn't you be in school still?"

My cousin simply shot me a smug grin.

Blayze let out a laugh as he shook his head. "Not to mention the dates are live, so if you fuck up...you fuck up in real time."

Stopping in my tracks, I glared at my brother. "Thanks for the reminder."

"How do you think Kipton is feeling?" Bradly asked.

"Nervous. Or at least she was when we spoke earlier."

"Hunter...do you think you should be forging such a close friendship with the woman?" Blayze asked. "I mean, you've both spent a lot of time together since she's come here to stay."

Narrowing my eyes at him, I asked, "Why shouldn't we be friends?"

"I'm just saying...she's very attractive."

Bradly laughed. "She's more than attractive. She's hot as hell, and her

body is..." His voice trailed off when I shot him a dirty look. Holding up his hands, he smiled and looked away.

I focused my attention back on Blayze. "I don't see the harm in being friends. We support each other, and I think that's a good thing. She keeps me calm every time I start to freak out about this whole TV thing."

"Of course that's a good thing. But what happens if you start falling for her?" Blayze asked.

I laughed, but it sounded off even to my own ears, so I knew they would pick up on it as well. "We're friends, Blayze. That's it."

Blayze raised a single brow but didn't say anything.

My phone buzzed and I pulled it out of my pocket. Exhaling, I looked at them both and said, "It's time."

Bradly stood and walked over to me. "Save some women for me, will you? I gotta head back to school."

I chuckled and gave him a quick bro hug. "Be careful driving back."

He nodded and turned to Blayze. They exchanged goodbyes, and then Blayze and I walked through the house, out to the front porch. A limo was waiting for me, with Jack and Travis both standing outside of it, talking to my mother and father. The film crew and production team had already been given the list of areas on the ranch where they weren't allowed to go. Mostly the private homes of his family members, and Uncle Ty's area of the ranch was completely off-limits.

"You ready?" Blayze asked, a hint of amusement in his voice.

"As ready as I'll ever be. Thanks for hanging out with me today. I have a feeling I'm going to need someone I know close by."

He nodded. "It was either me or Nathan, and I don't think they would appreciate a sixteen-year-old kid hitting on all the women."

I couldn't help but laugh. "I think he's going to give your reputation a run for its money."

"You and me both."

Jack grinned when he saw me. After we all exchanged hellos, I found myself in the limo with my brother, Jack, and Travis. My parents declined the invite, saying they would watch the show along with everyone else. I wasn't sure how I felt about my mother watching me date someone. Hell, not just someone...an entire group of women.

The introductions weren't held on the ranch, but rather at the country club right outside of Hamilton. Our family was part owner of the club, but it was

only on special occasions that we ever set foot in there. My great-grandfather and a few of his friends started it, mainly as a golfing club, but it eventually turned into something more.

“Any questions before we kick this thing off?” Jack asked.

“How is Kipton? She seemed nervous when I spoke to her,” I said.

Jack and Travis exchanged a look before Travis answered. “She *is* pretty nervous, but I think she’ll be fine. She was nervous at the Miss America pageant as well, but pulled it off without any problems.”

I nodded. “What if something happens that shouldn’t happen, and we’re live?”

Jack laughed. “As long as you keep your dick in your pants at all times, you don’t have to worry.”

Blayze chuckled, then cleared his throat.

“That wasn’t what I meant. I have no intentions of sleeping with any of these women.”

Travis grinned and said, “You haven’t seen them yet, Hunter. Just remember, the cameras are around at all times.”

“Wait,” I said as I narrowed my eyes. “What do you mean by that?”

He shrugged. “Exactly what I said. There will be a camera crew assigned to you.”

“I know that, but I mean at the end of each date, they all go back to the hotel, right?”

Jack and Travis exchanged another glance, this one weary—and I knew at that moment they were either keeping something from me, or figuring out I hadn’t been told everything.

Travis rubbed the back of his neck. “Hunter, did no one tell you that a camera crew was assigned to you twenty-four-seven?”

My eyes widened in horror as Blayze and I both said, “What?”

“I’m sorry...but my *entire life*, for the next two months, is going to be broadcast?” I asked.

“No!” Jack quickly replied. “We have a filming schedule, and part of the show is broadcast live, as you know. Part of it is recorded. But a crew will be with you at all times. Granted, the only place they won’t be allowed is in your designated safe areas.”

Blayze leaned forward. “What *are* his designated safe areas?”

“The area that you worked out with the production company representative, Chuck.”

I started to laugh. “My parents’ house and the other private homes? Those are the only designated safe areas? So what you’re saying is, the moment I step out of my house, I’ll be filmed.”

Jack nodded. “Yes, that was in the contract you signed.”

Blayze faced me. “Dude, did you even read the contract?”

“Dad’s lawyers did!”

“But *you* didn’t?” Blayze asked, his voice filled with shock.

“I figured if anything was that important, they’d let me know.”

“And they thought not being able to leave the house without a film crew following you around wasn’t important?”

I scrubbed a hand down my face.

“Listen, Hunter,” Travis started. “The film crew is going to cut you some slack. If they don’t think what you’re doing will be of interest to the audience, they won’t film it.”

My jaw clenched. “Do I get *any* private time?”

“In your designated safe places,” all three of them said at once.

“Fuck you, Blayze!” I nearly shouted.

He laughed. “I wasn’t the one who didn’t read my contract.”

“Gentlemen, we need to focus here,” Jack stated as he attempted to keep me from throttling my brother. “What will happen today is, Kipton will kick things off. She’ll give a brief rundown of how *Swipe Right* works, then she’ll introduce you, Hunter. In the marketing we’ve done, we’ve already given the audience a sneak peek at who you are.”

“Yeah, but showing him team roping. That was it,” Blayze said.

“What can I say? There is something about cowboys that women like,” Jack replied.

I rolled my eyes.

Jack continued. “After Kipton introduces you, you’ll be taken to a room where you get to meet the twenty contestants. They’ve each submitted a profile of themselves, as you know. What you *don’t* know is—half of them have lied.”

My head reared back as I asked, “What do you mean, they lied?”

He smiled. “They all got *your* profile first. And as part of the whole social experiment part of dating, some of them flat-out lied. For instance, there’s one girl who stated she loves to ride horses, and we know for a fact she’s never been on a horse in her entire life.”

“But will I know which ones lied?” I asked.



Both men grinned. “That wouldn’t make it very fun now, would it?” Jack said with a chuckle.

“Holy hell,” Blayze said. “This is going to be hilarious.”

I shot my brother a go-to-hell look before I scowled at Jack and Travis. “This really is a fucking social experiment.”

Jack reached over and hit me on the side of the arm. “Don’t worry, you’re going to have fun.”

Once we got to the country club, it was clear all hell was breaking loose. People were racing around outside, shouting, carrying equipment, and generally looking panicked.

“Who in the hell thought it would be a good idea to do this live?” I asked no one in particular. I caught sight of Kipton and couldn’t help but smile. She looked beautiful. She wore a white suit with high-heel white boots. Georgiana was adjusting the shirt and coat Kipton was wearing.

“What’s Georgiana doing here?” I asked Blayze.

“She took one look at the wardrobe they had for Kipton and said hell no. She and Morgan met with wardrobe and basically strong-armed them into using their clothes for her.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Well, she looks beautiful.”

Blayze looked at me with an expression that screamed “I told you so.”

“What? She *does* look beautiful, and me stating that doesn’t mean a damn thing, Blayze.”

“If you say so, little bro.”

I cleared my throat and adjusted my tie. I was dressed in a black suit with a bright blue tie. Courtesy of my own wardrobe lady, Winnie, who said the tie brought out the blue in my eyes.

Turning to one of the crew, I asked, “How long until we go live?”

“Fifteen minutes, sir,” she stated before she rushed off to go do God knows what.

I hit Blayze on the back. “I’m going to go say hi to Kipton really quick and make sure she’s okay.”

All he did was give me a smirk.

As I made my way over, I couldn’t help but smile as I overheard her talking. Clearly someone was speaking to her through an earpiece.

“I can hear you fine. Yes. I know—you’ve told me at least a dozen times.”

Laughing, I stopped just a few feet away. She smiled when she saw me.

“Hunter.”

“Hey. You look beautiful.”

Glancing down at herself, she looked back up and let her gaze do a complete body scan of me. “Wow. You’re going to make a great first impression.”

I held out my arms and did a little spin. “My mother said I shine up well.”

Kipton giggled.

“You ready? Nervous?”

She shook her head. “I was at first, but I think I’ve got this. Georgiana and Morgan helped me practice last night, while Lily and Rose FaceTimed us and pretended to be the live audience. What about you? How are you feeling?”

“Truthfully?”

“Always,” she said with a nod.

“I feel like a lab rat.”

She screwed up her face as she said, “You kind of are, if I’m being honest.”

I slipped my hands into my pants pockets. I’d give anything for a fucking jacket. It was freezing outside. “Yeah,” I said on a sigh. “I guess I am.”

With a sweet smile, she said, “You’re going to be great. And who knows, you might meet someone you really like.”

At her words, it felt like someone had stabbed me in the chest with a knife, and a wave of sadness swept over me. Honestly, the last thing I truly wanted was a girlfriend. Most of these women didn’t even live in Montana, so if I *did* fall for one of them, it would likely be a long-distance relationship, which was something I wasn’t interested in at all.

It wasn’t like I never dated. I did. Just not long term. Or even close. My first year of college, I dated a girl named Sam for about a month, but every girl since—including Sam, herself—wanted something from me. To be seen on the arm of a championship roper. To get closer to my brother. Even my family’s money. None of them really took the time to get to know *me*. And Sam, the one girl I’d dated more than a couple of times, did nothing but complain that I was more interested in roping than her.

This was my last semester of college, and I hadn’t made up my mind if I was going to keep team roping or make my way back to the ranch. I’d know the answer when it was time for me to decide. Until then, rodeos were a part of this cowboy’s life, and there was no room for a woman.

Except, at Kipton's words about meeting someone...that feeling of sadness? That was new to me.

"Kipton! Kipton! We need you in place!"

Kipton winked at me. "Good luck."

"You too. You're going to do great."

"So will you. And...well...do me a favor."

I smiled at her. "Okay."

Kipton looked away for a moment before she turned back, staring at my chest for about thirty seconds before finally meeting my gaze. "Just...don't let them fool you, okay? Women are very...catty. Don't get sucked in by how pretty they all are—because they *are* beautiful. I got to meet them all yesterday."

"You did?" I asked in surprise.

She nodded. "Yeah. So..." Chewing on her lower lip, she forced a smile. "Have fun."

Kipton leaned in and kissed me on the cheek before she turned and walked toward a young girl wearing a headset, who quickly grabbed her hand and led her toward the entrance of the country club.

My hand gingerly touched the side of my face, where my skin felt like it was on fire from Kipton's brief kiss.

I laughed and shook my head. "Nonsense," I mumbled.

"Mr. Shaw? Mr. Shaw!"

I spun around to find Larry, the guy who'd been assigned as my assistant during the duration of filming, looking nervous. "Hey, Larry. Remember what I told you...call me Hunter."

He nodded. "Right, sorry, Mr....er...Hunter. I was told to bring you to your mark."

I clapped my hands together and smiled. "Let's do this!"

## Chapter Five

### KIPTON

The nerves I'd been feeling for the past few weeks suddenly slipped away last night. I wasn't sure if it was from the practice with Georgiana, Morgan, Rose, and Lily, or if I was feeling like I could do this. Whatever it was, I was grateful.

"We're live in two minutes!" someone shouted.

I glanced over to see Georgiana smoothing down Hunter's suit jacket while Winnie, the woman in charge of his wardrobe, nodded and looked on. Hunter smiled at Georgiana, then kissed her on the cheek, which made her blush. Winnie, an older woman, divorced with three adult kids, was the sweetest person I'd met on the crew so far, and had quickly become a friend. She'd previously worked on some of Hollywood's biggest movies as a costume designer. Overseeing wardrobe on a TV show was her way of "retiring."

"One minute!" someone yelled out.

I pulled my gaze away from Hunter and looked at the camera in front of me. A prompter would be used, and I had spent a few hours this morning with Jack, practicing. It was kind of cool. It moved at the speed of my voice. So if I spoke slow, it would scroll slowly. If I spoke fast, it would speed up.

Tricia, one of the makeup artists, rushed over, pinched my cheeks, put a bit more lip gloss on my lips, then was gone before I even had time to blink.

"And we're live in ten, nine, eight..."

I drew in a deep breath, put on my pageant smile, and prayed like hell I didn't forget how to read.

"Four, three..."

The production assistant used his fingers to finish the countdown, then

pointed to me when the camera light went red.

“Hello from Hamilton, Montana! I’m Kipton Howse, the host of *Swipe Right*. We’re so excited that you’ll be coming along with us on our social dating experiment. Starting later this week, you lucky viewers will get to see dates broadcast live every Wednesday and Friday. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, you’ll get prerecorded, behind-the-scenes footage of the competing ladies, of our bachelor, Hunter Shaw, and more!”

I paused a few beats, then went on.

“For those of you who don’t already know how the game will be played, we have one bachelor and twenty single women. Each week, two women will be randomly selected to go on dates with our bachelor. Afterward, Hunter and the women will spend time in the private Truth Booth to talk about their dates. Those confessions will air live. After sharing their individual impressions of the date, they’ll each have the ability to either swipe right, and stay in the game, or swipe left. If Hunter swipes left, the woman is out of the game. If the *woman* swipes left, she’s *choosing* to leave—even if our bachelor swiped right.”

Another beat.

“Before we can officially start the game, though—it’s time for you to meet our bachelor!” Turning to look at Hunter, who was off camera, I waved my arm and said, “Come on over, Hunter!”

With that full smile showcasing the dimple that could surely melt the snow outside—and trust me, there was a lot of snow—Hunter made his way over and stood beside me.

“It’s great seeing you, Kipton,” Hunter said as he leaned in and kissed my cheek. I turned to the camera and fanned myself. Everyone would assume I was acting, of course, but the moment his lips touched my skin, my entire body hummed to life.

“My, oh my...aren’t our single ladies lucky?”

Hunter laughed, and I faced him once more. “Let’s get to know you a bit, shall we, Hunter?”

He lifted his hands and replied, “Let’s.”

“Before we show viewers your intro piece, tell us a little about yourself.”

Hunter nodded and kept his eyes on me the entire time he spoke. “I’m twenty-one, a senior at the University of Montana in Missoula. I’m majoring in business accounting, and I’m also part of the UM Rodeo, where I compete in team roping.”

“Good-looking and a cowboy, ladies,” I said to the camera. When I glanced at Hunter, he was blushing. “Are you the header or the heeler?”

“My position is header.”

“Growing up on a ranch here in Montana, and being the son of a retired professional bull rider, that surely had some kind of impact on your decision to do what you do.”

He nodded. “It did, absolutely.”

“Do you ride bulls also?”

Giving me a wickedly seductive smile, he replied, “I do, but I’m better on a horse than a bull.”

“It shows. You and your partner, Dustin, are rated number one on the college circuit right now, correct?”

Another blush. *My God, the women are going to go crazy for this man.*

“Yes, ma’am, that’s right, we are.”

Turning to the camera, I laughed. “Ma’am? Lord, I feel twenty years older.”

A nervous bubble of laughter came from Hunter.

“And with that, how about we take a deeper look at our bachelor?”

The red light faded away and the prerecorded piece about Hunter began.

“I didn’t mean to insult you, Kipton. I won’t say ma’am again,” Hunter started just as a few people rushed over to pull him away. Before I could even utter a word, I was being pulled along behind him.

“I feel like I’m going to trip in these heels,” I said with a laugh.

“Nonsense,” Georgiana stated as she walked beside of me. “You strutted your stuff in a bathing suit in heels higher than this, in front of millions of people.”

“That’s just it. I was strutting, not almost running.”

“Don’t run!” Tricia cried out. “You’ll sweat and ruin the makeup.”

We made it to the huge conference room with a couple of minutes to spare. I walked over to Hunter and grinned. “I think if we have to keep doing that, I’ll lose those last ten pounds I’ve been hoping to drop.”

He looked at me with a confused expression on his face. “You’re perfect, Kip. You don’t need to lose any weight.”

I blinked at him, not sure what to say, when someone shouted, “Back in thirty seconds.”

“By the way,” I said, as I stood on my mark. “I wasn’t insulted. Just trying to keep things light.”

He looked at me and winked. “Good.”

We both faced the cameras as they started to count down from ten. This time, it was Jack in my ear. I saw Hunter reach up and mess with his own earpiece. I’d been practicing with mine the last couple of days, so I’d gotten used to it.

The red light was back on, and I started to read the prompter.

“That’s some bachelor we have for the first season of *Swipe Right*. Now is the moment everyone has been waiting for—or at least, I’m sure *you’ve* been waiting for, Hunter.”

He smiled and offered a nod.

“You get to meet the twenty lucky single women who will be living at a château not far from your family ranch. Are you ready?”

Hunter rubbed his hands together in what I knew had to be a nervous gesture. “I’m ready.”

Turning to the camera, I said, “Ladies and gentlemen, let the game begin!”

The camera faded off me and focused on the door. I squeezed Hunter’s arm and smiled before I quickly made my way over to stand next to Jack, who was directing this episode.

“Here we go,” he whispered as the double doors opened to reveal the first contestant. As I’d told Hunter, I’d met the women already, and a few of them I’d instantly liked. By “few,” I mean three exactly. The rest seemed so shallow and fake, and not women I could see Hunter falling for. Then again, I’d only known Hunter a few weeks, and before that, we’d only spoken via Zoom calls.

I watched as Mollie walked through the open door. She was beautiful. Black hair that was pulled back into a French twist, a form-fitting black dress that made her green eyes pop. She smiled the moment she saw Hunter. I watched as he let his gaze move over her body. A small part of me wondered why he hadn’t checked *me* out like that the first time we met. Of course, it could have been because both of my parents were standing next to me.

“Hey,” Mollie said in a seductive tone. “I’m Mollie.”

Glancing over to the monitor, I read the same information the viewers would see: Mollie, age twenty-six, consultant, San Francisco.

Hunter held out his hand, and she swatted it away before she practically threw herself into his arms. He hugged her and chuckled.

“Hi, Mollie. I’m Hunter.”

She let out an ear-piercing fake laugh as she placed a hand on his chest and waggled her brows. “Oh, I know who *you* are, sweetheart.”

Hunter let out an awkward laugh this time. “Well, I look forward to getting to know you.”

Her teeth dug into her lower lip as she purred back, “So do I, handsome. So. Do. I.”

“Oh, please,” I mumbled as I rolled my eyes.

Jack gave me one of those looks my mother gave me when she wanted me to be quiet.

I put my hand over my mouth and shrugged an apology.

The doors had closed after Mollie walked through, so that the next girl could get into place. There was a ten-second pause between women so they could play a prerecorded clip of each girl expressing how excited she was to meet Hunter.

The doors opened again, and standing there was one of the girls I’d liked from our introductions. Kimber. She was cute and had that small-town girl vibe, even though she lived in New York City. Her genuine demeanor was probably because she’d come from a small town in the Midwest. She had light brown hair that was pulled back into a pony, and her short white dress showed off her body—including her breasts. My goodness...had they gotten bigger since last night?

“No,” someone whispered. “She’s wearing a push-up bra.”

I turned to see Winnie standing behind me. My face heated as I whispered, “Did I say that out loud?”

She nodded and attempted not to laugh.

Turning back, I watched as Hunter and Kimber spoke. I could tell instantly that he liked her...and why wouldn’t he? She was beautiful, had a stunning smile, and she was definitely charming.

She reached up and kissed him on the cheek, then headed into a connecting ballroom. Hunter followed her with his eyes, but only for a moment. I drew my gaze back to the door to see who’d be walking through next.

Good God, eighteen more women. I knew they were going to take a commercial break after ten, and then it would be my turn to make an appearance. I was supposed to ask Hunter what he thought of the women he’d met so far. I’d expressed my concern to the producers that the question seemed a bit sexiest, and in return, Jack agreed and told me to ask Hunter



whatever I wanted.

That was a mistake on their part.

The doors opened once again to reveal another woman. Harper. She was truly gorgeous. Her black hair was pulled up into a bun, and if I remembered right, she had amazing amber eyes. Her brown skin looked stunning against the cream-colored dress. She was the oldest contestant, telling me she'd turned thirty-two a few weeks ago. Glancing down at my notes, I saw that she was in marketing. Or was she? With some of the ladies not being truthful, it was hard to know what they were fibbing about and what was truth.

Hunter and Harper laughed about something, then she gave him a hug and stepped away to join the other women.

Next up was Kyra. Blonde hair, blue eyes, rocking body and, judging by the way she was acting with Hunter, a big-time flirt.

"Is she shaking her breasts?" I asked Winnie in a hushed voice.

"I'd say it was more of a bounce than an actual shake."

I covered my mouth to keep from laughing.

Devyn was up next. A lovely Latino woman whom I'd liked immediately. She pulled no punches and admitted she was here for the money and the money only. She lived in San Diego, where she was putting herself through nursing school. The endgame for her wasn't a romance, it was her future. I could see Hunter pairing up with her simply for that reason alone. According to Hunter himself, the last thing he wanted was a relationship.

My bet was on Devyn winning the whole thing, but that part I'd keep to myself.

"They seem to be hitting it off," Winnie observed as we watched Hunter give Devyn a kiss on the cheek, then a hug. So far, she was the first woman with whom he'd initiated contact.

"Oh yeah," Winnie confirmed. "He likes her."

I nodded and ignored the sudden jealous pang that ripped through me.

*What in the hell, Kipton? Get it together.*

"How many more until commercial?" I asked Jessie, one of the production assistants. She didn't answer, and I wasn't sure if it was because someone was talking in her ear or she was simply ignoring me.

Ansley, an actress from LA, entered the conference room. She was young, adorably cute, and wearing a dress so tight I couldn't help but wonder how she walked at all. She also had blonde hair and blue eyes. Clearly the show thought Hunter had a type.

She nearly threw herself at him, whispered something in his ear, then pinched his ass. My mouth fell open—and so did Hunter’s.

“Make a note to talk to Ansley about the physical contact,” Jack stated to Jessie, who quickly jotted the reminder on her notepad.

The next contestant was Stormy. I highly doubted that was her real name. Yet another blonde, with light brown eyes, and employed as an ER nurse. When the doors opened, she let out a squeal and ran toward Hunter.

“Oh. My. God!” I said as she jumped into his arms, wrapped her legs around his waist, and planted a kiss on his lips. To Hunter’s credit, he managed to get her unstuck from his lips while not looking too appalled.

He put her down gently, and Stormy launched into how much she was looking forward to getting to know him. It was all I could do to keep my lunch in my stomach. Winnie and I both looked at each other, then back to the train wreck before us.

“There always has to be one drama queen,” Jessie whispered.

I tried not to grimace, but did, in fact, nod my head in agreement.

The doors opened, and Juliet, an entrepreneur from Miami, Florida, walked through like she owned the world. I was in awe of her confidence. Her curly black hair fell below her shoulders, and she wore a purple dress that made her brown skin glow. Her smile lit up the room, and just like when I’d met her yesterday, I found myself drawn in. There was something about her that made you want to spill all your secrets. Maybe it was the confidence. Hunter and she talked for a few moments before she kissed him on the cheek and walked into the room where the rest of the women were waiting.

Hunter glanced my way and smiled before he focused back on the doors. They opened, and Vivian stood there holding...a dog?

“She brought a dog?” I asked Winnie, who simply shrugged.

I squinted at the animal as I watched Vivian draw closer to Hunter. It wasn’t a real dog, thank goodness, but a very realistic stuffed animal. She handed it to Hunter, offered the cliché “can’t wait to get to know you better” line...then added that the stuffed dog represented a real pet she hoped they would walk together on a beach one day soon.

*Oh, brother. Isn’t she from Dallas? What beach is she talking about?*

Hunter stared at the stuffed animal before shrugging. “We don’t have many beaches here in Montana.”

I raised my brow. Wow. He was making it known right off the bat that he had no intention of leaving Montana.

Vivian let out a loud, ear-piercing laugh as she took the stuffed animal and said she'd hang on to it for Hunter.

The last contestant before break appeared—and I heard someone behind me gasp. It was no surprise that they'd scheduled Sarriah to be last in this round. She was beyond beautiful. Twenty-seven, another blonde, with a body to die for. She was a fitness instructor and it showed. She wore a two-piece dress that was open at the midriff, displaying her tight stomach. Her hair was piled up on her head, and she had a certain air about her...

I couldn't put my finger on the impression she gave, but there was something that just seemed...off.

Sarriah stopped in front of Hunter, held her arms out to her sides, and spun around slowly so he could take in every inch.

"Did she just say she's *very bendy*?" I asked. Jack turned around and put his finger to his lips.

*Sorry*, I mouthed as Winnie yet again struggled not to laugh.

Hunter kissed the back of her hand and said something I couldn't hear, but it caused Ms. Bendy to blush.

Jessie lightly tapped my shoulder. "You're up, Kipton."

"Shit," I mumbled, praying my mic was still off as I made my way over to my mark. After following Stormy across the room, the camera switched to me.

"That was our first ten ladies. Do we have any favorites yet?" I asked with a smile. "When we come back from commercial break, we'll check in with Hunter before he meets the remaining women."

"Annnnd...we're clear," someone stated.

I turned to see Hunter shoving a hand through his hair just as his makeup and hair team rushed over to fix the tousled locks. Our eyes met, and he rolled his—hard. I couldn't help but smile.

"Let me touch up your lip gloss, Kipton," Tricia said.

Jessie led me over to where Hunter still stood, the double doors shut and ready for the next round of women.

"How you holding up?" I asked.

Hunter glanced around, then leaned in so only I could hear. "I already forgot all their names, and the last one whispered in my ear that she's totally open to have sex off camera."

My eyes went wide. "They signed agreements stating they knew there was no sex with you."

He nodded, then said, “On camera. I’ll be so damn happy when they realize the cameras are following me everywhere. Otherwise I feel like a couple of them might ambush me.”

I couldn’t help but giggle.

“We’re back in sixty seconds,” Jack called out.

“Okay, ready?” I asked, not sure if I was talking to Hunter or myself.

“Hey, how are *you* doing?”

Peeking at him, I ignored the way my stomach flipped when he looked at me like I was the only person in the room. “I’m doing great.”

“Ten, nine, eight...”

Hunter and I moved to our spots, and I drew in a deep breath, blowing it out right as the red light came on.

“Welcome back to our first night of *Swipe Right*. Hunter, our bachelor, is in the process of meeting all of the stunningly beautiful women who’ll soon be vying for dates. We’re halfway through, Hunter, so I must ask, have you felt a connection with any of the women so far?”

He seemed a bit confused by my question and paused for a moment. I had told him the question ahead of time so he could be prepared, so I wasn’t sure what the pause was about.

He shook his head and smiled. “I’m not sure. It’ll be nice to spend the evening with them and get to know each person a little more. I’m sure the dates will help, as well, in determining whether there are any connections. I think most people know that attraction based solely on appearances can be misleading.”

I nodded as my heart raced in my chest. Hunter was unlike any guy I had ever met. The respect he had for these women was something else to admire him for. “Well, let’s get back to it, shall we? We have ten more lovely women for you to meet.”

Motioning with my hand, I stepped aside and off camera. I had been practicing for weeks between classes, with Jack and Travis, on where I would stand at certain locations, how they wanted things to flow. For the most part, I had little in the way of a script, except for a few key things they wanted me to say.

The first woman after break was Haleigh. Her dark brown hair was pulled into a low ponytail, and she wore a classy dress suit. It showed off her curves, making it modest yet sexy. I liked it far better than most of the dresses the previous girls had worn. Her deep brown skin looked amazing against the

ultra-white suit. Hunter seemed to be captivated by her.

I glanced at my notes to see what it was she did for a living. I'd memorized the details of most contestants, but a few were added last-minute. Haleigh was a family therapist from Sacramento, California.

Brina was introduced. A twenty-five-year-old content creator from Austin, Texas, who came dressed in a cheerleading outfit. Her blonde hair was pulled in two pigtails, and she had more energy than the Energizer bunny himself. Hunter seemed to get a kick out of her playful nature, though. As she walked off, she yelled, "Keep Austin Weird!"

I couldn't help it; I rolled my eyes, and in my peripheral, I saw Winnie do the same.

The next few intros flew by. Ally, a twenty-five-year-old marketing manager from Charleston, South Carolina. Hunter commented about wanting to visit there.

Bekah, twenty-six, an account executive from Savannah, Georgia, won over the crew with a box of warm cookies she gave Hunter that she made herself, from her grandmother's famous chocolate chip cookie recipe.

Genevie. Another knock-out with her brown hair and blue eyes that even I could see from where I was standing. Of course, her blue dress made them pop. She was twenty-five and from New Orleans. My notes told me she was a nurse.

Lili was twenty-seven, dressed in tight jeans and an even tighter shirt. Hunter seemed to be fighting not to look at her breasts. Understandably, since they were about to spill out of her T-shirt that read *I sell boob machines*.

Rainey was twenty-four, another blonde, and an aspiring actress from LA. She had informed me upon meeting that she was bisexual and hoping for a threesome out of this deal. Not going to lie, I nearly died right there on the spot from choking on the olive I'd popped into my mouth at that exact moment of her confession.

Sarah appeared, with her girl-next-door look. She was twenty-two, had light brown hair with blonde highlights. She wore a simple cocktail dress that wasn't over the top, but still sexy in its simplicity. It showed just enough to leave you wondering. Or at least, if I were a guy, that would be my thought. Hunter seemed instantly taken with her. She was another content creator from upstate New York, but was born and raised in good ol' Montana. So she had that going for her.

Mary came bouncing in with a huge smile on her face. She had brown

hair, brown eyes, and wore her hair up in a French twist that emphasized her cheekbones. She handed Hunter a bag from the department store where she worked. When he opened it, it was a red piece of lacy lingerie. Hunter took one look at it and shoved it back into the bag and handed it back to a very confused Mary. She smiled and played off the rejection.

The last one out was Lynn. She was the youngest, the same age as Hunter at twenty-one. She was also a college student from Austin, Texas.

I made my way over to my mark as Hunter wrapped up the introduction with Lynn.

Smiling before the camera went live on me, I waited for the red light to come on and for Jack to say in my ear, “You’re on, Kipton.”

“There you have it, ladies and gentlemen. Our twenty young women, whom we’ll all get to know over the next two months. As a reminder, Tuesday and Thursday nights will feature prerecorded footage, and Wednesday and Friday will feature live dates. We’re not leaving you quite yet, though. Our cameras have followed Hunter into the ballroom, where a buffet dinner is taking place for everyone to get a chance to get to know one another, as well as our bachelor. At the end of each date night, Hunter will make his way into the Truth Booth and give us all a brief rundown of how he thought our first day went. The Truth Booth will be available on the website for you to watch. As you can tell, it’s dinner time, and I don’t know about you, but I’m starved—for food and for a recap of Hunter’s thoughts on the women he’s met. So continue to tune in and we’ll be right back.”

Jack counted down in my ear and said, “Clear.”

I exhaled and pulled the earpiece from my ear. Winnie walked over and smiled. “You did great, Kipton.”

“Thank you. I wasn’t lying though, I’m *really* starving.”

“There’s a buffet set up for the crew in the next ballroom over,” Jessie told me.

I looked back over my shoulder. “I can’t eat in there?”

Jessie started to laugh—then quickly stopped, pressing her lips together. “Oh, you were serious?”

“Yes,” I said. “I *am* serious. I’m not allowed to eat with the rest of the cast?”

She shook her head. “No, sorry, it’s only for the women and Hunter.”

I looked longingly at the delicious food I could see on a long stretch of tables. “Oh, well...okay. That’s fine.”

As I made my way to the next room, I took one more peek into the ballroom and spied Stormy and Kimber on either side of Hunter. He looked like he was in paradise—smiling and laughing as they practically clawed at him.

Turning back around, I mumbled, “Men.”

## Chapter Six

### HUNTER

I was exhausted and it wasn't even dessert yet. Twenty women, all fighting for my attention...and if I had to remove one more hand off my thigh as it made its way to my crotch, I was going to explode. Jack was going to have to talk to some of these ladies. A few were far too touchy-feely for my liking.

It had only taken me meeting half the women before I realized I'd made a terrible mistake by agreeing to do this show. It wasn't like I could yell CUT every time I wanted to set someone straight. Or figure out what to say when they asked how old I was when I'd lost my virginity. My mother was watching this fucking show, for Christ's sake...*live*.

After glancing around the room repeatedly for what felt like an hour, I finally heard Jack in my ear during a commercial break.

"If you're looking for Kipton, she's eating with the crew."

"Why?" I asked, causing Stormy, Lili, and I think her name was... Lynn?...to all look at me with confused expressions.

"Talking to the guy in my ear," I said, pointing.

They all laughed and went back to talking nonstop.

"Why is she eating with the crew?" Jack asked. When I didn't answer, he went on. "Because she's just the host, not a potential date."

For some reason, I didn't like how he'd worded that. As if Kipton's role on the show was less important than anyone else's.

The countdown began in my ear, and someone called out to the room, "We're live in one minute."

A few of the girls rushed over to the makeup people standing off to the side with mirrors. They adjusted their hair or faces, then quickly made their way back to their seats.



I exhaled, and Sarah—a girl who was apparently famous on TikTok and Instagram—gave me an understanding smile. She reached for my hand as she said, “It’s a lot, I know. Just take a few deep breaths.”

I decided I liked her. I hoped she was one of the girls I got to go out with first. The moment I had that thought, Kipton popped into my mind...and I suddenly felt guilty.

“What’s wrong?” Sarah asked. “You look sad all of a sudden.”

“Nah,” I said, flashing her the smile that I used when I wanted to flirt, even though I really wasn’t in the mood. I knew the dimple would throw her off. “I hope you’re on the list for week one to date.”

Her cheeks blushed, and Jack talked in my ear. “You’re live, and everyone is tuned in to how you’re looking at Sarah. She can definitely be up first if you want.”

I ignored him and pulled my gaze off Sarah to glance around the table. “I don’t know about you guys, but I’m stuffed.”

“We haven’t even had dessert yet!” Haleigh stated. I think it was Haleigh. When I looked at the nearest plates, they proved the girls had hardly eaten a damn thing. How did they keep up their energy with no food?

“Right. Dessert,” I said, as waiters and waitresses suddenly appeared with slices of cheesecake smothered in a blueberry sauce. I watched as the women ate. Most took two or three bites and that was it. When one realized the blueberry sauce might stain their teeth, nearly all pushed the plates away.

“We’re going to Kipton in thirty seconds,” Jack said in my ear.

“Thank fuck,” I whispered quietly after all the red lights on the cameras in the ballroom went dark. I stood and quickly made my way toward the exit. I was stopped by two security guards.

“Ms. Howse is live right now, sir. Please wait here.”

I nodded and looked past them to see Kipton standing in front of the doors all the women had dramatically walked through earlier. She gave another recap of how the show would work, then began her wrap-up.

“Thank you so much for joining us live tonight, as we all got to know Hunter and the twenty beautiful ladies who are certainly vying for his attention. Be sure to tune in Wednesday, December third, for our second live show and our first date! Until then, I’m Kipton Howse. Good night, everyone!”

The light on the camera went off and someone yelled, “We’re clear.”

Jessie walked up to Kipton and helped her take off the earpiece and the

mic. Larry, my assistant, did the same for me. My ear was already aching, but Larry assured me that after a few days, I'd get used to wearing it. I hoped so, because it was nonnegotiable. The producers wanted to be able to talk into my ear at all times, especially during a live show.

I started to make my way over to Kipton when someone called my name. I turned to see Stormy heading toward me.

"Hunter! A few of us are going to a bar for some drinks. Would you like to join us?" she asked, a hopeful gleam in her eyes. I had just spent two hours with all twenty women, and as much as I enjoyed their company—well... some of them anyway—I was ready to go home.

"Thanks so much, Stormy, honestly, but I'm exhausted. It's going to take me a bit to get used to all of this. I'll see you soon."

For the briefest moment, she looked pissed. Then something switched in her expression and she said, "No problem, darlin'. See you later!"

She moved in to kiss me, but I took a step back, noting the small frown when I did so. I cleared my throat and turned as I called out, "Have fun!" I quickly made my way over to where Kipton was speaking to Jack.

"Am I interrupting?" I asked.

They both looked up from the tablet they'd been studying. "Not at all," Jack said. "We're just reading some of the comments off the blog on the show's site."

"Seems like you're a hit with the viewers," Kipton said with a wide smile. "Some are already making their guesses on who you'll end up with."

My brows furrowed. "Already? How can they tell after a couple of hours? Half the women I didn't even get to talk to at dinner. A particular few were hogging all my attention."

Kipton chuckled as Jack looked back to the tablet. "Stormy seems to be the one everyone thinks is going to cause drama."

"As well as Mollie," Kipton added.

"What are they saying about Kipton?" I asked.

Her head jerked up. "Me?"

I laughed. "Yeah. I mean, you *are* the hot hostess, aren't you?"

A soft shade of pink bloomed on her cheeks as she looked away.

"Lots of comments about Kipton," Jack confirmed as his eyes swept over the screen. "Some even want her to be among the contestants. One person said..." Jack swiped the screen until he found what he was looking for. "Here it is. They said the two of you make, and I quote, 'a darling couple.'"

I grinned. "That was probably my mother."

Kipton let out a snort-laugh, then covered her mouth with her hand. I winked at her and grinned.

He smiled at us both. "We're getting a lot of great comments about both you and Kipton. I think people will give their thoughts on the contestants as they each get more screen time and the audience can judge their characters."

Kipton and I nodded.

"Jack, I do have to ask... Are any of them paid actresses?" Kipton asked.

He shook his head. "Not a one. We really want this to be exactly what we're pitching. A social dating experiment. We're getting to know these women right along with everyone else. The only thing we did was run background and criminal record checks on all of them."

"That's a relief to know," Kipton said with a chuckle.

"You ran criminal checks?" I asked, surprised.

"Sure as shit did. Trust me," he said. "You'll thank us for it later."

I was suddenly bone-weary tired. "Did you need me for anything else? I'm exhausted."

He laughed and slapped me on the back. "You're free to leave. Don't forget, the crew will be at the ranch tomorrow morning, eight sharp."

I nodded. "Hey, one more thing. Some of the girls got a little handsy under the table. One even grabbed my..." My voice trailed off as I looked at Kipton.

She raised her brows. "Your what?"

Clearing my throat, I didn't finish, just looked back at Jack, who seemed highly amused.

"I'll tell Joyce to have another chat with all twenty girls and make sure they know the rules. If they wanted that kind of show, they should have auditioned for a different one."

I nodded, then looked at Kipton. "Were you going to drive home with me in the limo?"

It was obvious she was attempting to hold back a smile. She looked at Jack. "Everything set for tomorrow then?"

"Everything is set. We'll see you both in the morning."

"Let me grab my bag really quick," she told me.

It was only then that I noticed someone next to me. Turning, I took a step back. "What are you doing?"

Paul peeked his head out from behind the camera. "My job."

“You’re filming me *now*?”

He shrugged. “Yep. And in the limo, but once you get to your place, the camera turns off. Well...not really. Someone is always posted outside the house for when you leave.”

I exhaled and closed my eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Kipton asked, returning.

Opening my eyes, I looked at Paul, then back to Kipton. “Nothing. Ready?”

She gave me a nod and we headed out through the country club. Everyone was staring at us as we walked. Who wouldn’t, when you have a freaking mini camera crew following your every move?

“Is this necessary?” I asked to no one in particular.

“Are you asking me?” Kipton asked.

“Yes! Why do they have to follow me literally at all times?”

“Well, the girls have cameras set up at their house to catch conversations. It seems only fair to follow you as well.”

I stopped and stared at her with what I was sure was a horrified expression. “What? That’s an invasion of privacy. They agreed to that?”

“Yes,” Kipton quickly said. “Not everywhere in the house, obviously. Only the common areas, like the kitchen, living room, places like that. They’re all aware of which rooms have cameras in them and which ones don’t. When they walk into a particular room, they know that anything they do or say could be used on the show.”

I sighed. “I should have told them no to any cameras outside of filming hours.”

“Then tell them no.”

Laughing without humor, I said, “I signed the contract already, Kip. I can’t change the rules now.”

“Okay, how about this. What if you let them install cameras in the guesthouse where you’re staying during filming. Same setup as the girls’ place. The kitchen, living room, areas you’re comfortable with...in exchange for no camera crew tailing you.”

When I stared at her like she’d lost her mind, she looked over to Paul and his assistant, Louie. “Would you rather have Paul and Louie following your every move? No offense, guys.”

“None taken, Ms. Howse,” they replied in unison.

I let the idea sink in for a bit. After a few minutes of staring out the

window, I pulled out my phone and hit Jack's cell phone number.

By the time we pulled up to my parents' house, Paul was turning off his equipment after getting a call from Jack.

As I walked with Kipton to the front door, she said, "I assume Jack said okay?"

"He did, with a few other stipulations," I said as I rubbed at the back of my neck. "There will be a camera in the limo, as well as my truck."

"That's not so bad."

"Says the woman who isn't living her whole life out in the open for a million people to see and judge."

"*Millions.*"

We stopped at the door and turned to face each other. "What?"

"The numbers for tonight's live show was over three million."

My mouth fell open. "You've got to be kidding me! How do that many people even *know* about the show?"

Kipton grinned. "It's called good marketing."

"Or everyone got a look at the hostess in the promos and tuned in."

"Flattery will get you only so far, Mr. Shaw."

I laughed and stared at Kipton. Even with just the light of the front porch, I could see those baby-blue eyes of hers. When her gaze dropped to my mouth, I felt my breath stall in my chest.

She quickly jerked her gaze back up and stood in silence for a moment. When she finally spoke, I was so busy getting lost in her eyes again, I jumped slightly.

"Well...I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted and you still need to head over to the guest cabin."

I nodded. "Yeah, me too. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"See you tomorrow, Hunter."

I waited for Kipton to open the door and walk in. She turned and smiled at me as she slowly shut the door.

I wasn't sure why I stood there staring at the door, but something inside me felt...foreign. It was like I literally couldn't leave. For a moment, I almost walked in and asked her if she wanted to head to my parents' den for a nightcap. Lord knows I needed one.

Taking a deep breath, I slowly let it out before I turned toward the steps—only to see Paul and Louie standing in the yard. It was a relief to note they didn't have a camera pointed at me, at least.

“Dude, do you like Kipton?” Paul asked.

“What?” I said, immediately deflecting. “No. Why would you even ask me that?”

He shrugged as Louie said, “Because you were staring at that door like you lost your puppy or something.”

I glared at the assistant cameraman. “I don’t have a puppy, and I’m just exhausted.”

Paul let out a snort. “Must be hard to entertain twenty beautiful women.”

Little did he know.

“Why are you both still here?” I asked as I made my way back to the limo.

“Grant, one of the camera supervisors, is on his way over with some cameras and a small crew. If we all work together, we can get them installed in your place and be out in a couple of hours.”

I groaned as I made my way down the steps. “Whatever. All I want is a hot shower and a warm bed...before the cameras get here.”

## Chapter Seven

### KIPTON

I drew back the curtains in my bedroom and smiled. It was still dark, but I had a view of the eastern sky, and I could see the beginnings of daylight peeking up from the mountaintops. Stretching my arms over my head, I yawned and turned to make my way to the attached bathroom.

After a quick shower, I got dressed in jeans and a light blue sweater for a meeting later this morning with Jack, Travis, and Hunter. Today was going to be a long day for the camera crew, who were filming the girls' reactions to meeting Hunter last night. What they thought about him and each other. Hunter was scheduled for a similar interview. I was so glad they'd ultimately decided not to make the entire show live; it would have been too much on everyone. Plus, doing the dates live was really the most important part.

Slipping on my favorite pair of cowboy boots, I pulled my hair up in a high pony and made my way down to the kitchen. After the first couple of nights in Brock and Lincoln's house, I discovered ranchers are *very* early risers. Most likely, Hunter's parents would both be in the kitchen when I got there.

"Good morning, Kipton!" Lincoln said in her usual cheerful voice. I forced myself to return her bright smile with one of my own. At least I was *hoping* it seemed bright and cheerful.

"Good morning."

"How did you sleep?" Brock asked as he poured a cup of coffee and handed it to me.

Taking it gratefully, I said, "Thank you. And I slept like a baby. In fact, that's the most comfortable bed I've ever slept in, if I haven't already mentioned that."

Lincoln grinned from ear to ear. “I’m so happy to hear it, and you might have mentioned it once or twice.” She shot a quick look to Brock before she asked, “So...last night went well, don’t you think?”

I blew on the hot coffee briefly. “I do.”

When Lincoln looked like she wanted to say more, Brock rolled his eyes. “For the love, just ask her.”

My eyes bounced between the two of them. For a moment, I wondered if they’d been watching when the limo dropped me off. That intense moment between me and Hunter was all I could think about last night before sleep finally took hold of me. Had I imagined he was looking at me differently?

I’d felt a strange connection to him when we first met, but I just assumed it was because we were both going into this whole thing with the same goal: to help out the people we loved with the money we’d receive. There was also no denying he was incredibly handsome, and I suspected he found me just as easy to look at. I mean, I’m not stupid; we were attracted to one another, without a doubt...but that was all. Right?

I felt my brows draw down in confusion. He was a friend. A friend who had the softest-looking lips I’d ever seen, and all I wanted to do was—

I shook my head to stop my wandering thoughts.

But last night...last night I’d let my eyes drift down to his mouth, and for half of a second, I’d wanted him to kiss me. It was just my imagination that his eyes darkened in the light of the porch lamp. Though, he did lick his lips—I don’t think he even realized it—then...

Then our eyes met. And something happened.

Had Lincoln seen that entire exchange?

“What did you think about Sarriah?” Lincoln asked.

Blinking myself back to reality, I asked, “Sarriah?”

“Yes. Is there any kind of rule that says the mother can’t warn her son off from...from...”

My brows lifted as I waited for her to go on.

Lincoln cleared her throat. “From women such as Sarriah?”

Laughing before I took a sip of coffee, I tried to think of something to say in the short amount of time I had before I suspected she’d ask if I felt the same way about the woman. “My thinking is, Hunter already knows what Sarriah’s all about. I’m guessing she won’t be on the show for long, but isn’t it a mother’s right to interject her thoughts on whom her son dates.”

Lincoln grinned and winked at me before she asked, “How are the dates



picked?”

“Randomly. I’m the one who draws the names,” I said as Brock placed a plate in front of me—and I glanced at him in surprise.

Brock had quickly learned my favorite breakfast. Two slices of toast—one with bananas and cinnamon, the other with avocado. My heart warmed further as he placed a glass of orange juice in front of me.

“You remembered what I like for breakfast?” I asked as I stared at the plate, before glancing up and catching him smiling the very smile both his sons had inherited. He was an older version of Blayze and Hunter. His dark hair was sprinkled with a bit of gray, but those brilliant blue eyes were the same. Hunter seemed to favor his mother a bit more than Blayze, and she was stunningly beautiful in her own right. My favorite part of her were the laugh lines at the corner of her eyes. To me, that meant she smiled a lot and lived a happy life.

“With all the kids out of the house, and it being an empty nest at the moment, it’s nice to have someone here to spoil,” Brock said, as he set another plate in front of his wife, then leaned down and kissed Lincoln on the cheek.

I couldn’t help but blush and look back at my breakfast. Someday I prayed I’d find a man who looked at me the same way Brock looked at Lincoln. Even after so many years of being married, you could practically feel the love bouncing between the two of them.

“Kipton? What’s that smile about?” Lincoln asked.

Clearing my throat, I dipped my head farther so they wouldn’t see the embarrassed look on my face. “I’m sorry,” I replied as I picked up a fork and started playing with my avocado toast. “I wasn’t...I mean...” I shrugged. “It’s just...” My voice trailed off.

“It’s just what?” Lincoln asked softly.

When I lifted my head, they were both watching me closely, concern in their eyes—and the strangest feeling hit my chest. I loved my parents. I knew they weren’t my biological parents, but I loved them fiercely. And I knew they loved me. But in that moment, watching Brock and Lincoln, I felt something missing. Something big.

I wasn’t sure what it was, but maybe, deep down, subconsciously, I missed the biological parents I didn’t remember. Or maybe I longed for... for...

For what?

Smiling softly, I shrugged. “I’m just hoping I’m lucky enough to find someone who looks at me the way Brock looks at you.”

Lincoln gazed lovingly up at her husband before her focus was back on me. She reached for my hand and squeezed. “You will...and I guarantee you that it will happen when you least expect it.”



“You put a camera in my shower!”

I was positive my eyes nearly popped out of my head as I watched Hunter pace back and forth, as Jack and Travis both sat with their hands folded in front of them on the meeting table. We were in one of the conference rooms at the Bitterroot Inn and Conference Center. The show had booked nearly the entire place. It was where most of the production staff were staying.

“It doesn’t show anything,” Travis argued.

Hunter stopped walking and slowly turned to Travis. The look he shot him made even me squirm in my seat.

“It...doesn’t...*show*...anything? Then why is it in my shower? Why does *anyone* need to see me in my shower at all?” Hunter shouted.

Jack glanced at Travis. “I’ve got to say, I think it gives the wrong impression of the intent of the show. It would be like asking Kipton to do one of the episodes in an evening gown or a swimsuit.”

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen,” I quickly said.

Travis sighed as he rubbed his chin. “You’re right. I know you’re right, and it was an impulsive thing to do on my part.”

“You think?” Hunter deadpanned.

“What would you say to an indoor volleyball game?” the man asked.

“What?” Hunter and I asked at the same time, confused.

“I really want to get the reaction of the women seeing you without your shirt. It’s winter, so it’s not like we can have a pool party.”

I leaned forward and asked, “How exactly would you have gotten their reaction to seeing him in the shower?”

“That’s easy,” he replied. “Show the girls the footage while they were all together. But I should have spoken to you about the idea, Hunter.”

Jack cleared his throat.

“And with you, as well, Jack. My apologies to both of you.”

Hunter finally seemed to calm down a bit. “You know how I feel about

making it sexual. My *mother* is watching this thing.”

I brought a hand up to my mouth to hide my smile. It was so sweet that Hunter was thinking of his mother. And I already knew he hadn’t wanted to do this show any more than I had.

Jack turned to me. “Let’s talk about the name drawing.”

Nodding, I set my mug of hot chocolate down on the table.

“We randomly picked ten of the women,” Jack explained, “and they’ll be in the barn on the ranch tomorrow night, where you’ll draw the first name—”

“What’s the first date?” Hunter interjected.

Jack smiled. “That’s the best part—you both find out at the same time.”

Hunter gave me a look. “Do *you* know what the dates are?”

I shrugged. “I’ll be finding out when you do.”

Hunter turned his attention back to Jack and Travis. “Will Kipton be going on the dates with us?”

I let out a snort of laughter, then covered my mouth and coughed.

Jack looked from Hunter, to me, then back to Hunter. “Why in the world would *Kipton* go on the dates with you?”

Hunter rolled his eyes. “I don’t mean on the actual dates; I meant, will she be hosting it, since it’s live?”

It was Travis who answered. “Well, she’ll be there hosting it, but she’ll stay back here with the crew while you and your date go out. After the date, when you get back to your family’s ranch, and your date returns to the château at Bitterroot River Ranch, you’ll both spend time in the Truth Booths. At that point, Kipton will be at the guesthouse with you.”

I jumped in and said, “Before you both sit down in your respective booths, I’ll remind the audience how it works.”

“There are two hours dedicated to each live date, including your time in the Truth Booth. The audience will also get to do a live vote on whether you should swipe left or right, and everyone at home can see the results in real time,” Jack added.

Hunter looked nervous. “And even if I swipe right, if she swipes left, she leaves?”

We all nodded. That had been something Hunter wouldn’t budge on. If one of the girls wanted to leave at any time, not just during the Truth Booth, she was free to leave. After all, there would surely be some who simply didn’t connect with Hunter. As for the audience vote, that was just something fun for the viewers, a way to be involved and for them to weigh in on the

dates...and to gauge the popularity of the women.

“Good. Should we get to filming my initial reactions, then?” Hunter asked with a sigh.

“We’re set up in the next room. The girls are at the château today, doing their filming. They’ll all be brought over to the ranch bright and early tomorrow,” Jack added. “Winnie will come by to help with wardrobe selection for Hunter, since she’ll know what the date options are.” He turned and looked at me, raising a brow in question.

“We’ve already talked about my wardrobe for the next few weeks with Georgiana and Morgan, so I’m good.”

“Makeup?” Jack asked.

With a tilt of my head, I said, “I’d rather do my own. And before you say TV makeup is different, I’ll remind you that I was on live TV plenty of times during the pageants, when I had to do my own makeup. I prefer it that way.”

Jack and Travis both nodded. When I saw Hunter staring at me with an expression I couldn’t decipher, he quickly looked away and shook his head, as if clearing his thoughts.

*Does he actually think I don’t know how to do my own makeup?*

“You ready to go?” Jack asked Hunter, who still seemed to be lost in his head.

“Yeah, sorry. Let’s go.”

They all stood, and as they proceeded to walk out the door, Hunter stopped. “I have an idea. To make it more personal, why don’t we do my interviews at *my* ranch, as well? I mean, you’re playing me up as this cowboy, right?” he said. “Then shouldn’t my filming be at the family ranch?”

I gathered my notebook, phone, and bag. It was a good plan, and I was surprised no one had thought of it. “That’s a great idea,” I stated. “With the girls doing their spots at their house, it only makes sense to have Hunter do his on the ranch.”

“How in the hell did we not think of that?” Jack grumbled to Travis, who simply shrugged.

“Let’s get Paul and Louie up to speed on the change. We’ll do the first interview in the main barn,” Travis said as we all piled out of the room.

“Blayze is going to love that,” Hunter grinned, as I giggled. “Need a ride?” he asked as we made our way down the halls of the hotel.

With a quick nod, I replied, “That would be nice.”

When he placed his hand on my lower back to guide me out the front

doors of the hotel, I ignored the zip of electricity. I drew in a deep breath, and was about to remark on the soft snow falling when someone called out Hunter's name.

No, not someone—a large group of people.

My gaze flew across the parking lot, where a small barricade had been set up with a few Hamilton police officers standing post. On the other side were photographers and reporters.

“Holy shit,” Hunter whispered as he gave me a slight push to speed up our pace. He opened the door to the limo and waited for me to get inside. When I glanced up at him, I saw him smiling toward the crowd. He even offered a friendly wave before slipping inside the car and shutting the door.

I knew the smile he'd given the crowd wasn't a real one. No...when Hunter Shaw genuinely smiled at you, the ground seemed to wobble ever so slightly beneath your feet.

I started to say something when he looked at me and gave his head a slight shake, barely motioning to the camera. Without so much as looking in that direction, I exhaled and glanced out the window instead. “Looks like we're in for some wintery weather.”

Hunter nodded, glanced out the back window of the limo, and frowned. I wasn't sure how much of our bodies were in view of the camera, but I took a chance and reached for his hand, giving it a squeeze. He quickly turned around and stared forward. Uttering not so much as a single word.

I followed his lead and stared out the window, our hands still locked together.

## Chapter Eight

### KIPTON

The ride from the hotel back to the ranch was tense and seemed like it took forever. When I realized Hunter wasn't going to speak at all, I withdrew my hand from his and pulled out my laptop and started to work. The silence was grueling, and a part of me wanted to send him a text. It would be way too obvious, though, so I simply went over some notes that Jack and Travis had sent regarding some of the upcoming dates. They *had* told me what a few of the dates would be, but I wasn't given details or when particular dates would occur.

The limo finally came to a stop, and Hunter threw the door open, turned, and held his hand out for me.

*Ignore the way that chivalry makes your heart flutter, Kipton. Ignore. It.*

When I stepped out of the limo, our eyes met and held for what some may have said was too long. Hunter eventually cleared his throat and dropped my hand.

"Thank you," I said softly, before I started toward the front door of the guest log house where he was staying. This one happened to be on the property that they called the "main ranch." The cattle and horse ranch was massive, but it was divided up into sections. Brock and Lincoln had their acreage, as did Tanner and Timberlynn, Ty Jr. and Kaylee, and Blayze and Georgiana.

Stella and Ty Sr. still controlled the main ranch, which held two guest log cabins. Brock and Lincoln also had a guest cabin in their section of the ranch, just behind their main house.

I glanced up and took in his grandparents' guesthouse, which I'd toured once before, during preproduction. The sidewalk led to a small, covered

porch. It was a typical-looking, two-story log cabin, but once you walked inside, it was cozy and welcoming; a place where you wanted to grab a blanket and a book and curl up next to the picture window that overlooked the pasture.

The first floor was an open concept, with a large river rock fireplace in the living room. The middle of the room held a round table that seated four. The end opposite the fireplace was the kitchen. The master bedroom was also on the first floor, with a full-size bath. Upstairs in the loft area, there was a queen-size bed and half bath. That was also where the crew had set up Hunter's Truth Booth.

As I reached for the handle of the door, Hunter took hold of my elbow and pulled me to the side of the porch, around the side of the house, and down a rock path.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

Without saying a word, he kept walking, but his hand went from my elbow down to my hand. I instinctively laced my fingers with his.

We walked a short distance until we came to a small building, which Hunter motioned for me to enter.

"You want me to walk into the shed?"

"It's not a shed, it's... Just...please. Go in."

Had he gone crazy in the last thirty to forty minutes? With a shake of my head, I turned and opened the door. Inside, my eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness.

"What is this?" I asked, trying to blink rapidly in hopes that I could make something out in my surroundings. What little light the door let in was gone when Hunter shut it behind us. I heard a click, then a light turned on.

"A tack room?" I asked.

"There's a barn out back, so if any guests who're staying here want to ride, they can. The barn is small, too small for a tack room, so my Uncle Tanner had this built."

I glanced around, then looked at Hunter. Confused, I asked, "Why are we standing in the middle of a tack room, Hunter?"

"I can't do this, Kip."

One brow rose. "Do what?"

"*This!* This whole reality dating thing. I can't do it!"

I set my bag down on a small table and reached for Hunter's hands. Giving them a soft squeeze, I studied him. His blue eyes looked so anxious

and confused, I had a crazy urge to wrap my arms around him and hold him tight.

“Hunter, you’ve been on dates before. Why is this any different?”

He nearly choked when he laughed. “Because everything is filmed. What if I don’t like the girl?”

Shrugging, I replied, “Then you swipe left.”

“It’s not that easy. They want me to say *why* I didn’t like her. I can’t... no...I *won’t* hurt anyone’s feelings for some stupid show, no matter how many times they say drama makes for great TV. And did you see all those reporters and photographers? It wasn’t supposed to be this big.”

He started to pace in the small area, and I reached out for his arm to stop him.

“Hey, look at me.”

He turned his head and our eyes met. Ignoring the way my stomach flipped at his intense stare, I asked, “Is there a girl you already know you aren’t connecting with?”

He gave a half shrug. “I haven’t had a chance to really get to know them. I do know Sarriah scares the living shit out of me.”

I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. “I think she scares a few people, including Jack and Travis, as well as your mom.”

Hunter smiled, and I felt my breath catch in my throat. Goodness, when he smiled that genuine smile with the dimple, it made my damn knees weak.

“The best piece of advice I can give you is one that I was given when I was competing for Miss Montana. Be your true self, Hunter. Drama might be good for ratings, but connecting with the audience is even better. If you simply be yourself, then the cameras, the reporters, the failed dates...none of that will matter. People will want to watch just to spend time with the charming Hunter Shaw. Be honest, be trustworthy, and just follow your heart.”

He nodded.

“Did you not talk in the limo because you were afraid of saying something wrong?”

“Pretty much.”

With another squeeze of his arm, I took a step back. I suddenly realized how close we were standing, and the heat between us made me feel dizzy. “We’re friends,” I said, with a smile I hoped conveyed my concern. “We should be able to speak freely regardless of whether there’s a camera there or



not. Right?”

Hunter nodded once again. “You’re right. I guess being in the spotlight just isn’t something I enjoy.”

I laughed. “What a way to find out!”

He rolled his eyes. “We should probably get back.”

“You leave first. I don’t know if anyone saw us walk away, and I know Paul and Louie will be heading here for your interview. They’re probably here by now. Friends are one thing; it might look strange, us walking out of a small building together.”

Hunter’s eyes went wide. “Shit. I wasn’t even thinking about that. Dammit, I’m sorry, Kip.”

What was it about the stupid nickname that made my heartbeat skip?

“It’s fine,” I said with a light-hearted laugh. “Go, and I’ll catch up with everyone in a few.”

Hunter placed a hand on my arm, leaned in close, and kissed my forehead...then paused for a few silent moments. My entire body was frozen. When I finally risked looking up at him, he delicately tucked a piece of my hair behind my ear.

“Thanks for being such a great friend, Kipton. I don’t think I could do this without you.”

I forced myself to smile and say, “That’s what friends are for.”

Hunter took a step back, and I instantly missed the heat from his body and his touch. He tilted his head slightly before taking another step back.

“See you in a few,” he said quietly, then turned and quickly walked out of the tack room, shutting the door behind him.

I leaned against a small table as I placed my hand over my heart and tried to steady my breathing. Was I imagining the way he looked at me? Because it looked like he wanted to do more than simply kiss me on the forehead...and damn if I didn’t want that more than anything.

I closed my eyes. “You stupid idiot. You’re falling for him and you can’t jeopardize the money.”



The next few hours had me sitting in a chair across the living room as they filmed Hunter talking about a few of the girls. It appeared Jack had specifically chosen certain girls he wanted Hunter to talk about. They showed

him pictures of each before the camera rolled, to remind him in case he hadn't had a chance to talk to one of them at dinner the previous evening.

After the third one, Hunter's nerves had calmed. His comments were sweet and polite, and if he hadn't spoken to a woman enough to form an opinion, he was honest about that fact and simply said he looked forward to getting to know her more.

Truth be told, it was boring as hell on my end. I'd suggested interviewing the women, but Jack and Travis had wanted me here so that I could get a feel for how Hunter felt about each of the girls. Why that mattered to anyone, I had no idea.

Winnie sat next to me and looked as bored as I felt. I knew in the end they would edit out most of his comments and only pick the ones where Hunter said more than, "She seemed great, I can't wait to get to know her."

Leaning closer to Winnie, I whispered, "Do you think we could sneak out?"

She kept her eyes straight ahead and replied in a low voice, "If you find a way, I'm with you."

I couldn't help but smile. I was about to get up when I heard Jack say, "Kimber is next."

"Oh, I remember Kimber," Hunter said with a grin. "She's beautiful."

It felt like someone had dropped a brick on my stomach. I sat up and abandoned any idea of leaving. If Winnie noticed my sudden interest in the interview, she didn't say a word.

"Then you don't need any notes on her?" Jack asked.

Hunter shook his head. Jack pointed to Paul, and he began filming.

"Kimber," Hunter said with that panty-melting smile. "First thing I noticed about her was her eyes...not really green, but not hazel either. They're stunning. I like that she's athletic as well. I think we hit it off pretty well, and I'm looking forward to our date. I think we'll have fun."

"If you grip that chair any harder, it's going to break," someone whispered from behind me, causing me to jump and let out a small scream.

All eyes went to me. Jack frowned, and Hunter laughed.

I turned around to see Rose, Hunter's cousin. "You scared me!" I turned back to Jack. "I'm sorry, it won't happen again."

Jack cleared his throat and looked at Hunter as he held up a picture. "I think that's a great place to end with Kimber. Last one is Sarah."

"Sarah and I didn't get to talk a whole lot, but she has an interesting job,

and I love that she's originally from Montana. That's another date I'm looking forward to."

Rose leaned in and whispered, "You are *terrible* at keeping a neutral face, Kipton Howse."

My head jerked to the left as I stared at her. "What?"

"Don't worry, your secret's safe with me."

"And me," Winnie said quietly as she stood and headed out.

The room soon became a bustle of activity. I watched as everyone packed up all the equipment and started to make plans for tomorrow's live show and first date.

"What did you mean?" I asked Rose. "About keeping my secret?"

She stared at me for a moment, then laughed. "We need to work on your game face."

I rolled my eyes. "Was it that obvious?"

"Not here. Come on, I'll drive you back up to Uncle Brock's place."

After gathering my things and making sure I was finished for the day, I followed Rose out to her Ford Bronco Sport.

"I love these! I want to get one," I stated as I climbed in and buckled up.

"Highly recommend it. I love this color as well. It's a mix of blue and gray. My favorite."

Rose was soon driving down the small drive of the guesthouse, then turning onto the main road that ran through the entire Shaw Ranch.

Turning to look at me, Rose grinned from ear to ear and finally spoke. "You like him."

A lump instantly formed in my throat, and I had to swallow a few times in order to even speak. Did I admit my feelings to Rose, or play dumb. I went with playing dumb. "I like who?"

She rolled her eyes. "Kipton, I have gone through every single interview you've ever done. I watched the pageants you were in, and I know you're way smarter than you let on."

I folded my arms over my chest. "How do you know that, exactly?"

With a side look in my direction, she laughed. "Because I know you graduated as valedictorian in high school. You're one of the top in your entire class. The way you speak, the way you carry yourself, everything about you screams that you're a strong, independent, *smart* woman. But I don't think you even realize how you stare at Hunter."

My mouth dropped open. "I don't *stare* at him."

“You do. And you frequently glance in his direction and smile. But I wasn’t *entirely* sure you liked him as more than a friend until he started talking about Kimber. I thought you were going to crack your jaw with how tightly you were clamping down on it. And your knuckles turned white from gripping the chair.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “I was not gripping the chair.”

Rose shook her head. “Winnie saw it too.”

Doing the only thing I knew to do, I looked away and stared out the window. There was no use denying it, and clearly Rose was on to me. “I find him attractive, that’s all. We’re friends. That’s it. It would be senseless for me to want anything more.”

“Why?” she asked.

I gave her a look. “He’s on a dating show, with twenty women, in case you forgot.”

“It’s hard to forget. I know they promised not to take over the whole ranch, but they’re doing a fine job of it anyway. And why film in the dead of freaking winter? Are they insane?”

Chuckling, I replied, “School break, and the ranch isn’t as busy now as it would be in the spring and summer.”

“That’s true. And two points to you for the nice change of subject, but seriously, maybe you should let Hunter know how you feel.”

“No!” I practically shouted. “I mean, I don’t even *know* how I feel, Rose. I like Hunter as a friend, and yes, I find him handsome and he makes me laugh and—I will admit to you and *only* you—I get butterflies when I’m around him. But it would never work. For all we know, he might find the love of his life while doing this show.”

“No chance of that. Hunter would never get involved with anyone who wouldn’t want to live on the ranch.”

Her comment made me remember something Hunter had said to Vivian yesterday. A comment that made it clear he had no intention of leaving Montana. “But he does want to settle down eventually.”

She shrugged. “He’s always been focused on team roping. He hardly dated in high school, and I don’t think he’s even had a girlfriend in college. Oh wait, he did date one girl, but not for long. She didn’t like that roping took so much time away from her. Now...” She sighed. “Something has changed in the last few months. I don’t know if team roping is his passion anymore. Blayze said Hunter mentioned wanting to come straight to work on the ranch

after college.”

I nodded, not sure what else to offer. “That could change too. He seems to like Kimber.”

“Please,” Rose said with a huff. “She’s a dancer who lives in New York. It would never work.”

“It might.”

She looked at me, her face serious. “He might like her for a few dates, but that would be it.”

I was almost positive that meant “he might like to sleep with her, but that would be it.”

“Aunt Lincoln said he mentioned liking Sarah as well.”

Forcing myself not to clamp down on my jaw or ball my fists again, I replied, “They both seem nice.”

Rose brought the Bronco to a stop in front of her uncle’s house and turned to face me. “Are you sure you’re going to be able to do this, Kipton?”

“Do what?” I asked.

“Host this show and watch him go on all these dates?”

I nodded. “Of course, I am. Rose, haven’t you ever been attracted to a guy and just remained friends with him? This is my job right now. I need this money for...”

My voice trailed off, and Rose lifted her brows.

“I need the money. And I’m not going to be bothered by Hunter going out on dates. I’ve barely even started to get to know him myself. I’m fine. It’s fine. Everything is good.”

“In my experience, when someone says it’s fine, it is never *fine*. Look at Ross.”

“Who?”

She stared at me. “Ross, from *Friends*.”

I crinkled my nose. “What?”

“You’ve never watched *Friends*? Oh my God. We need to have a marathon session and watch all ten seasons!”

I blinked a few times and said, “When am I going to have time to watch ten seasons of a TV show?”

“We’ll find the time.” She paused for a moment, then said, “I like you, Kipton. Aunt Lincoln really likes you. Hell, the entire *family* likes you. And I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“I appreciate it, and whatever it is you think you saw today, it wasn’t like

that. I can think a guy is hot without being jealous that he's giving other women attention. Hunter doesn't owe me anything. We're friends, and he knows I'm here for him if he needs to blow off some steam."

Her eyes went wide.

"No! Oh my God, *no*. I don't mean like that. As a friend. I'm here if he needs to *talk*."

Rose waggled her brows. "If you say so."

I folded my arms over my chest once again and said, "I say so."

It was time for me to put the silly little crush I had on Hunter to rest. I had a job to do, and from this point on, I was going to focus on that and only that. I couldn't jeopardize my feelings over the payout from this position.

Little did I know it would be so much harder than I thought...and that Rose was wise beyond her years.

## Chapter Nine

### HUNTER

“I’ve got three different outfits, so whatever the date is, I think we’ll be prepared,” Winnie stated as we walked into the barn Wednesday morning. The production crew had been here since dawn, and judging by the mood that my brother Blayze was in, they were more in the way than he’d anticipated.

“Do they have to do these in the barn?” he asked as he walked up to me.

“Dad already told them they could, and they want the whole ranch feel.”

Blayze rolled his eyes, then gave me a once-over. “You polish up real nice, little bro.”

I shot him a dirty look. Before I could respond, something caught my eye—and I turned to see Kipton.

My breath caught in my throat as I let my gaze trail over the tight jeans, the cowboy boots, and the tighter sweater that showed off her curves. The barn was heated, so she wasn’t wearing a coat. Her body reminded me of those in the pictures that Solo, one of the ranch hands, had pinned up in the bunkhouse here on the ranch, where a lot of the hands lived. He called them pinup girls. Betty Grable, Rita Hayworth and, of course, Marilyn Monroe.

Kipton had that look about her. Classically beautiful. I remembered reading that after the Miss Montana pageant, something she’d never done before, she’d received several inquiries about modeling, which she’d declined. From the little she’d told me about her family, I knew she did the pageant solely for the scholarship money. Still...those damn pictures had kept me awake more than once while in bed.

“Hunter?”

My brother’s voice pulled me from my thoughts. He turned to see what I was staring at and chuckled. “Didn’t I warn you about falling for her?”

I shot him another dirty look. This one I assumed was more severe, because he held up his hands as if to say he surrendered.

“Kipton is my friend. But I can also acknowledge that she’s beautiful.”

Blayze nodded. “According to Bradley, she’s...and I quote...‘hot as hell and the most beautiful woman out of all of them.’”

Bradley was right, but I wasn’t about to admit that to my brother. “There are a lot of beautiful women here.”

He just shook his head. “I would stick around and watch, but I think I’ll call it an early day and go home to my wife.”

I hit him on the side of the arm. “Tell Georgiana I said hi.”

“I will.”

Kipton approached, a beautiful smile on her face, and said, “I’m not interrupting, am I?”

Blayze tipped his cowboy hat in her direction. “Perfect timing. I was about to get out of here before the cameras start to roll.”

“Smart guy,” Kipton stated with a laugh.

“Good luck to you both. I’m sure Georgiana will have the TV on, watching the broadcast.”

I cringed at the idea of my family watching the dates. I had practically begged my mother not to watch them.

Kipton and I waved off Blayze before he made his way around all the equipment and people that it took to make a live show go off without any problems.

“You ready?” she asked.

“I guess so.”

“The show has already started, I kicked it off a bit ago. They’re showing portions of recorded footage from the women’s first impression interviews right now.”

“How do they know which girls to show?”

“I asked that as well. There are only six in tonight’s drawing after they determined all twenty in the barn at once was too much. They’ll also show short clips of your interview from yesterday, as well.”

“Oh,” I said with a smile. “So, Kimber and Sarah are in this first batch.”

Something moved over Kipton’s face, but it was gone before I could decide what it was. “I guess so. I take it you like them both?”

My hand went to the back of my neck. For some reason, despite just telling Blayze we were just friends, it felt strange to talk to Kipton about the



other women. I rubbed the tension that had instantly started, and decided to listen to the warning bells going off in my head. “I think they’re both nice.”

“Nice?” she asked with a raised brow. “I think the word you were looking for was ‘attractive,’ maybe?”

Something inside me was screaming to change the subject. How, though? This was literally our jobs. That was how I’d been looking at this whole dating experiment so far, actually. As a job. “They just seem...nice,” I repeated lamely.

Kipton frowned, and she acted like she wanted to say something, but she pressed her mouth into a tight line instead, turning to face the busy crew.

“Kipton! You’re on in seven minutes,” someone shouted.

Without so much as looking in my direction, she said, “Well, I hope you get the two dates you want this week.”

Before I could say anything, or ask why she suddenly seemed so cold, Kipton walked away. She was soon surrounded by Winnie, who was fussing with her sweater in the back, and Tricia, who handed Kipton lip gloss, or something for her lips, before sweeping a brush over her cheeks.

I watched as Kipton pursed her lips and applied the gloss, and couldn’t help but wonder what it would feel like to kiss her. What she would taste like...

It was as if she felt me staring, because she looked up and our eyes met.

I quickly looked away and spotted the girls making their way into the barn. Hay bales with blankets on them had been placed strategically for them to sit on, behind where Kipton and I would be standing. A few of the girls smiled and waved at me as they entered. Sarriah, the fitness instructor from Nashville—and the one woman in the group who truly scared me—waved her fingers before blowing me a kiss. I had a feeling if I was left in a room alone with her, she’d turn positively feral. It was something about the look in her eyes that gave me the heebie jeebies.

Giving her a nervous smile, I turned my back on the women, lifted my cowboy hat off my head, and ran my fingers through my hair.

Before I knew it, it was nearly time to go live. I stood off to the side and listened to Jack count down. My eyes landed on Kipton, and I watched as she smiled and went to work on effortlessly capturing the hearts of viewers. Based on comments from the show’s blog, people loved her. At least, that was what Winnie told me. After Jack and Kipton pointed out the blog, I’d tried to read it once myself, but between the comments about what female

viewers wanted to do to me, and what male viewers were saying about Kipton, I vowed to never look again.

Everyone was quiet, and the red light on the camera came on, indicating the show was live.

“Welcome back to *Swipe Right!* I don’t know about you, but based on what I saw during those interviews, it looks like Hunter might have a few favorites already.”

“What?” I whispered as my head snapped to look at Kipton. “What the fuck is that about?”

“She’s reading from the prompter. Last-minute. Travis wanted it.”

Turning, I looked at Paul. He wasn’t filming Kipton’s part, it was some other guy named Frank.

“Why?” I asked quietly.

Paul shrugged. “Who knows why Travis does what he does?”

I narrowed my eyes as I searched the crowd and found Travis sitting in the back, a smile on his face.

Kipton continued, “Are you ready to get our first date going? In just a minute, I’ll invite Hunter out and he’ll watch with bated breath as I draw out a name first, then a date. Even I don’t know what kind of adventure awaits Hunter and the women, so we’ll all get to watch this unfold together!”

I wanted to groan.

“So without making you wait a second longer, let’s bring out our bachelor.” Kipton turned and looked directly at me. “Hunter, won’t you join me?”

Inhaling deeply, I slowly let out the breath and made my way to the small X that was placed to Kipton’s left.

I gave her a brief hug and a kiss on the cheek—which hadn’t been scripted, so why the hell I did it was beyond me. Kipton tensed for a split second before going on as if nothing happened.

“How does it feel to be standing in your family’s barn, on the Shaw cattle ranch, shooting a live show, and about to go on a date that you have no idea with who and where you’ll be going? And let’s not forget, the cameras are going along with you.”

I smiled and let out a soft laugh. “I’m not going to lie, it’s a little strange. Mom, if you’re watching, please turn off the TV.”

Kipton laughed. “How adorable is he?”

My head turned so fast, I nearly lost my balance. *How adorable is he?*

*What in the actual fuck?*

“Right here,” Kipton continued, as she stepped to the side to show two small tables, each with a bowl on top, “is where we find out which lucky woman is Hunter’s first date, and what they’ll be doing. Are you ready, Hunter?”

With a jerky nod of my head, I watched as Kipton smiled at the camera. “Are you ready at home, audience? I’ll draw a name first...”

Kipton stepped closer to the pink bowl, turning her head and looking directly at me as she drew the name. If I didn’t know better, I would’ve sworn she was holding her breath right along with me.

I wanted to close my eyes and silently pray that it wouldn’t be Sarriah.

Kipton smiled at me encouragingly, then glanced back at the camera. “Forgive me if I look at Hunter to see his reaction along with everyone else, while we announce his first date.” She drew in a breath, then exhaled with a small laugh. “I’m so excited, I can hardly stand it!”

I hadn’t known Kipton long, but I *did* know that the words that just came out of her mouth were an absolute lie.

Her eyes met mine again. “Hunter, your first date will be with...”

I held my breath while she looked down at a round white token. A tiny line appeared between her brows, but it was gone so fast, I had to question if I’d really seen it. When she looked back at me, she smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Kimber!”

My entire body relaxed as I smiled and glanced over to the ladies, quickly finding Kimber. She jumped up and shimmied excitedly with a hand over her mouth, most likely attempting not to let out a yell or something.

Thank fuck it hadn’t been Sarriah.

“Based on your interview, you seemed pretty excited to get to know Kimber better. How does it feel, knowing she’s your first date?” Kipton asked.

Kimber started to make her way over to me when Kipton softly cleared her throat. It caused me to startle slightly and laugh.

“Sorry. Um...I’ve got to be honest, I’m glad Kimber’s my first date.”

I watched Kipton closely to see if she had any kind of reaction, positive or negative. Her eyes remained the same and her smile never once faltered. For a moment when she was drawing the name, I had the distinct feeling she was dreading it. Clearly I’d been mistaken, because she wore a wide smile and watched as Kimber made her way toward us. When she reached me, I

leaned in and gave her a quick hug.

“Good seeing you again,” I said.

She nodded and blushed. “You too.”

“Well, now that we know who Hunter’s taking on the first date of many more to come, let’s find out a little more about Kimber.”

As the camera zoomed in on Kimber smiling at me, a PA swiftly handed Kipton a piece of paper, then the camera went wide once more.

“Each of the women were asked to fill out a questionnaire about themselves.”

Turning to face me and Kimber, Kipton read aloud, “Kimber loves to dance. *The Lion King* is her favorite movie. She enjoys horseback riding. Her favorite flower is an iris, and her favorite color is purple. And last, her favorite meal is hamburgers on the grill with homemade french fries.”

“My kind of girl,” I said, glancing at Kimber, who was still beaming up at me.

When no one said anything, Kimber and I both turned to Kipton, who was also smiling...but at the same time, I swore she was giving me a dirty look. Was that even possible?

“Sounds like you’ll both have fun on whatever excursion comes your way,” Kipton stated before looking back at the camera. “Okay, it’s time to find out what Hunter and Kimber will be doing on their first date.”

Kimber grabbed my hand and did a little jump, prompting me to grin. Kipton reached her hand into the second bowl, but this time, her eyes weren’t on mine. She pulled out a red disk and faced the camera. “Are we ready?”

“Yes!” the remaining women all shouted. I jumped, as Kimber laughed along with Kipton.

“For Hunter and Kimber’s date, they will be...”

“We’ll be what?” Kimber asked, after a long pause. “What will we be doing?!”

Of course, I’d heard the countdown leading into the commercial break, but Kimber hadn’t.

Kipton laughed as she glanced at Kimber, then back to the camera. “You’ll find out—along with the rest of us, right after this quick break!”

The red light went off and Kimber nearly sagged against me.

“What does it say?” I asked.

Kipton shot me a look. “I can’t tell you.”

Her words were clipped, causing my head to rear back a bit. It wasn’t like

Kipton to talk to anyone like that, and now I'd been on the receiving end twice in the last ten minutes.

Tricia rushed in and offered Kipton something that she refused. While another girl, whom I was guessing was makeup for Kimber, started to brush her cheeks before sweeping gloss on her lips.

"Do I look okay?" Kimber asked, prompting a questioning expression from me. "Hunter? Do I look okay? No lipstick on my teeth?"

"You look beautiful," the makeup artist assured before she turned and rushed away.

Kipton had her fist wrapped around the red disk with the date printed on it so tightly, I swore her whole hand was turning white. The next three minutes felt like an eternity as Kimber bounced on her toes, continually looking between me and Kipton's fist.

"I wonder if it will be something romantic?" Kimber nearly sang.

The PA started to count back in from the commercial break, and Kimber grabbed my hand.

When they pointed to Kipton, she was back to a full smile. "Welcome back to *Swipe Right*. Let's end your suspense and find out about this date."

Turning to look at us, Kipton said, "Your date, Hunter and Kimber, will be—blindfold pie!"

I was positive my confused expression matched Kimber's, but I heard laughter coming from somewhere. It didn't take long before I realized it was the other women.

"What's that?" Kimber asked.

"You're heading back to Hunter's house, where you'll find all the ingredients to make a pie. Hunter will then blindfold you—"

A chorus of whoops rang out before Kipton held up her hand to silence them.

"Then, without giving you any verbal directions, he'll help you make the pie through touch."

Kimber turned and faced me. "This is perfection! I *love* to bake!"

"But blindfolded and at my mercy?" I asked.

Looking up at me with a smile that screamed she was more than ready for our date, Kimber bit her lower lip and said, "I trust your hands on me."

I chuckled as Kimber placed the tip of her thumb in her mouth and stared at me seductively.

Kipton cleared her throat, and I jerked my gaze from Kimber to Kipton.

Fuck, their names were too similar.

“Someone seems excited,” Kipton said. “I have a feeling things are going to heat up in that kitchen! I’m going to turn things over to Hunter and Kimber.” Facing us, she said, “Enjoy your date, guys. We’ll be checking in a bit later.”

Her dismissal was so abrupt, even Jack seemed confused.

“Um, ah...”

That was all he said in our ears.

Luckily, Kimber cut in.

“Thanks!” she called out, as she nearly dragged me out of the barn and toward the limo, with Paul and Louie hot on our trail.

## Chapter Ten

### KIPTON

“Seriously, if you roll your eyes any harder, Kipton, they’re going to roll right out of your head. If I was counting, that would be like a hundred eye rolls,” Winnie stated in a hushed voice.

“You cannot tell me she’s that dimwitted.”

Winnie shrugged. “I mean, she *is* blindfolded.”

I watched as Hunter stood behind Kimber and helped her pour cherries into the pie crust.

*Cherries. How freaking original.*

Kimber giggled for what had to be the millionth time.

I glanced over to the monitor that was set up, and put the headphones on so I could hear what the other girls were saying back at their house. The audience wouldn’t see this feed, but clips of it would be available on the website after the live date.

Stormy gasped. “Is she going to try to kiss him?”

My head shot back to Hunter and Kimber. He had leaned in to help get the last of the cherries out of the bowl, and she’d turned her head, brushing her mouth over his jawline.

Hunter turned his head slightly and kissed her.

*He kissed her.*

“He kissed her!” someone else shouted in my ear, causing me to jump.

“It was more like a friendly peck. I’m sure he didn’t want to embarrass her by pulling away when she was clearly going in for the kiss,” someone else said, but I had no clue who. My eyes were still on Hunter and Kimber.

“It was kind of an awkward kiss.”

I still had no idea who was talking, because apparently I couldn’t pull my

eyes away from the laughing couple, who were now attempting to wash a bowl.

Kimber spun around and put her arms around Hunter's neck.

"God, she plays all innocent."

That voice, I knew, belonged to Sarriah.

"Seriously, look at him. Would you *not* try to kiss him?"

"I totally would. He's so hot, and from the little feel I got that first night at dinner, he's packing a load."

"We started a poll," Jack said in my ear. "Eighty percent are loving Hunter and Kimber together; twenty percent think they don't make a good couple. Make sure to mention the poll."

"Will do."

For another five minutes, we had to watch while Hunter moved Kimber around the kitchen and helped her pour two glasses of wine.

I walked over to my spot next to the fireplace, which was roaring with a warm fire. The light on my camera turned on, and I turned away from Hunter and Kimber to look into the camera.

"I've got to say, they're doing better than I thought they would be. And what about that stolen kiss? It seems like the rest of you are seeing the sparks as well. In our live poll, we have eighty percent of you loving this match, while twenty percent aren't quite feeling it yet. And since this is live TV and we only have a two-hour spot, the magic of TV has a pie ready for us once we get back from a quick break!"

"Clear!" The director called out. "Get the pie out and ready for when we come back."

"What? We just put it in the oven," Kimber said, spinning in a circle to figure out where she was supposed to talk.

Someone behind me sighed in frustration. Clearly, I wasn't the only one thinking Kimber wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed. "We only have a two-hour time slot, we don't have time to wait for the pie to cook, and the best part was Hunter helping you make the pie," the director stated.

"Fun times," I mumbled.

All eyes moved to me.

"Did I say that out loud?"

Winnie snorted from behind me as Hunter smiled and winked. I ignored him and turned to take a bottle of water Jessie brought to me.

The commercial break was over far too fast, and we were soon back to



watching Hunter help Kimber cut out two pieces of pie from the already-cooked pie.

“Will you feed it to me?” Kimber purred.

“One hundred and one,” Winnie whispered.

I turned and glared at her, and she had to cover her mouth with her hand to keep from laughing at her reference to the number of eye rolls I’d given so far.

“Of course. Open your mouth,” Hunter said.

When I turned back to look at them, Kimber had grabbed his hand—the one not holding a fork—and pulled his finger into her mouth. Hunter grinned as Kimber licked his fingers one by one.

“What a...” I let my words trail off.

“Is it getting hot in here?” a familiar voice whispered behind me. *Rose*.

We watched as Hunter slowly lifted Kimber’s blindfold. She stretched up and kissed him...and this time, Hunter deepened the kiss.

My heart slammed against my chest, and I dragged my eyes away. He obviously did like her to be able to kiss her like that.

“Wow, who would have thought my baby brother had it in him?”

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw Morgan, Hunter’s older sister. Clearly his family couldn’t resist coming to the first date. I gave her a brief smile. Leaning in, she whispered, “It’s family game night tonight, and my mom wanted to make sure you knew before you got back and claimed to be too tired.”

I let out a soft chuckle, then jumped when Jack practically yelled in my ear.

“Stop the kiss!”

I spun around, nearly knocking over one of the assistant cameramen. Hunter jumped back as well—clearly not because he wanted to, but because Jack had yelled in his ear.

So much for Hunter dreading the dates.

Kimber batted her eyelashes and sighed. “I had an amazing time tonight, Hunter.”

He nodded as he looked down at her with a panty-melting smile that I was sure had every single woman who was watching falling in love. “I did too. I wasn’t so sure about this, but it was a lot of fun.”

Kimber bit on her lower lip. “I sure thought so.”

Hunter took a step back and rubbed the back of his neck as he gazed

around the room, a concerned expression on his face.

“Is it me, or does he look like he already regrets that little exchange?” Rose whispered to Morgan.

“Who’s he looking for?” Morgan asked.

A voice came through in my ear. “Kipton, time to wrap it up.”

I let out the breath I hadn’t been aware I was holding and stood in my marked spot as the camera on Hunter and Kimber faded away, leaving everyone to wonder what would happen next.

When the light on the camera facing me turned red, I smiled as I raised my brows. “I’d have to say our first date was a winner! Let us know what you thought by logging onto the website shown on the bottom of your screen and casting your vote on how the date went. You can also vote to swipe right on Kimber! After this, Hunter and Kimber will head into their Truth Booths and recap their night, which will be live-streamed on the website. I hope you’ve enjoyed Hunter’s first date! Stay tuned for our next live show on Friday, when we’ll draw the next name and the next adventure. Until then, stay safe and we’ll see you soon!”

I smiled until I heard all clear. Without looking at Hunter and Kimber—who, from as far as I could tell, were still talking—I turned and let Jessie help me get the mic and earpiece out.

“You did great tonight, Kipton. You’re beginning to grow a pretty big fan club of your own,” Jack said with a wink. “If you don’t want to host again, are you sure you don’t want to be the next star of the show?”

I let out a bark of laughter. “I’m positive.”

When my gaze landed on Rose and Morgan, I nearly bolted over to them. I just wanted out of Hunter’s house and away from all of this.

When I pushed my way through the crowd of people that I still couldn’t believe had fit into the guesthouse, I smiled at the two cousins. “You mentioned something about game night?”

Rose gave me a knowing smile, while Morgan clapped her hands in excitement and asked, “You’re not too tired, are you?”

I waved her off. “It’s not hard to stand there and smile while talking. I need a break from all of this, and a chance to just mentally turn off.”

“You don’t want to watch Hunter in the Truth Booth?” Rose asked.

I shook my head. “Not really...and why aren’t you still at school?”

“It’s my senior year and I have a light load. I only had one final and I took it early. I couldn’t miss all of this.”

Rolling my eyes, I whispered, “Lucky me.”

“We can watch it later,” Morgan said, wrapping her arm in mine and nearly pulling me out of the house. She launched into a description of game night with the Shaws, and for some reason, I turned and glanced over my shoulder.

I wasn’t sure what I’d expected to see, but Hunter giving Kimber a hug wasn’t it.

Whipping my head back around, I forced myself to smile as I listened to Morgan while I pushed away my jealous thoughts. If I felt this miserable on date one, it was going to be a long freaking two months.



I had changed into a pair of sweatpants and a long-sleeve Montana State University shirt. It felt so good just to be comfortable. I had also taken a few moments to wash all the heavy makeup off and pull my hair into a loose bun on top of my head.

When I stepped into the family room at Brock and Lincoln’s house, I smiled to see the throng of people. A strange longing came over me as I suddenly wished I had a large family. I’d always loved my little family, and was happy with my life and how I’d grown up...but watching all the cousins and aunts and uncles enjoying each other’s company, it made me realize there was something missing in my life that I wasn’t even aware of.

One quick look around, and I saw Rose and her parents, Kaylee and Ty Jr. Brock and Lincoln were sitting with Morgan and Ryan. The latter had his hand over Morgan’s stomach. She had a small bump, and the way her husband looked at her made my eyes suddenly tear up.

On the floor sat Bradly, Joshua, and Nathan. Lily was sitting next to her parents, Tanner and Timberlynn. Blayze and Georgiana were missing, as was Avery. She wasn’t due to come back home from France until Christmas Eve, though.

Lincoln turned and saw me. “Kipton!”

Smiling, I walked farther into the room. “I hope you weren’t waiting on me for too long.”

“Nonsense. The kids wanted to watch Hunter and Kimber in the booth things. You’re just in time as it’s about to start.”

Ignoring the strange sensation in my chest, I attempted a smile. “Great.” I

convinced myself I was feeling the way I did because I'd simply wanted to be done with all things *Swipe Right* for the day. The show was exhausting for a lot of reasons, and I had been looking forward to the escape of game night.

"Kimber already did her recap of the date," Rose said as she pulled me onto the loveseat with her. "She for sure has a thing for Hunter."

Even though I would get a recap of the booths tomorrow, I still couldn't resist, so I asked, "What did she say?"

Hunter's recap was about to play, and the entire room went silent. Rose gave me a look that said she'd fill me in later. I nodded, then turned to see those familiar blue eyes staring into the screen.

Drawing in a deep breath, Hunter exhaled and said, "Tonight was fun. I mean, it was more fun than I thought it would be, and Kimber is great. I'd like to see her again, so I'll for sure be swiping right. Other than that...I'm not sure what else to say." He looked down at his hands, then back up at the camera. "I look forward to getting to know her more."

"He's not going to kiss and tell!" Lily moaned as the room broke into laughter. I stole a quick peek over to Lincoln and Brock, and found neither of them laughing. Lincoln had a slight dip between her brows, and Brock seemed to be studying his son on the screen.

"He likes her, but not for anything serious," Morgan deduced as she sat down between me and Rose, causing us each to scoot over.

"How do you know that?" Rose asked.

Morgan chuckled. "Please, I'm his sister. He didn't look at Kimber the way he looks at..." Her voice trailed off.

"The way he looks at who?" I asked.

Morgan shrugged. "Let's just say I know my brother. He most likely thinks she's cute and would be fun for a hookup, but that's about it."

With a crinkle of my nose, I repeated, "A hookup?"

"Hunter isn't innocent, by any means. But he's also not a manwhore. At least, I don't think he is."

Rose was quick to point out, "He kissed her."

"Wouldn't he have done that on a regular date, though?" I interjected.

They both nodded before Morgan said, "The first kiss was him not wanting to embarrass her. The second, maybe curiosity more than anything. He actually seemed to regret it, don't you think?"

"Maybe," Rose said as she looked at me. I could see she wanted to say something more, but she held her tongue. For which I was grateful.

“Do you always have a game night during the week?” I asked, hoping to change the subject.

Rose answered. “Not normally, but during winter break, Wednesday and Saturday nights are always game night. It’s mild on Wednesday, but come Saturday...those have lasted well into the morning hours of Sunday.”

My eyes went wide.

Morgan nodded. “A word of advice. Do not *ever* play Monopoly with anyone in this family.”

I laughed. “Georgiana already warned me. I had a friend like that in high school. When she and her brothers played, the game would last for days. What is it about that game that makes people so crazy?”

Before either could respond, Lily stood. She was adorable, with her brown hair pulled into a high pony, and those honey-colored eyes of hers, dancing with excitement. “As you all know, it’s my turn to pick the game of choice.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Joshua said. “Just get on with it. We’re getting a late start with the whole show.”

He must have realized what he said, because his cheeks turned bright red and he looked at me. “Not that you’re to blame, Kipton. I’m glad you’re here. I mean, I’m glad you’re playing with us.”

“Thank you, Joshua,” I said with a wink. That caused him to look at Nathan with a smug expression.

“Back to what I was saying,” Lily interjected. “The game for tonight is Pictionary. We’ll break up into pairs. Married couples, of course, are already pairs.”

“I’ll take Rose!” Bradly quickly said.

“That’s not fair! You got her last time!” Nathan argued.

Morgan turned to me. “As you may or may not know, Rose has a gift for drawing, so everyone wants her on their team if it has anything to do with drawing.”

“I’ll remember that for future game nights.”

Morgan giggled.

“I want Joshua,” Lily stated as they clapped their hands in a high-five, then did some weird handshake thing.

“Guess that means you’re with Nathan,” I said to Morgan. “I’ll sit this one out.”

“I’ll partner with Kipton.”

The new voice caused everyone to turn and see Hunter standing in the doorway.

“No way, dude! You can have Morgan. Kipton’s my partner,” Nathan argued. “You just got here. You can’t claim a partner.”

“I’m older,” Hunter stated, his eyes going from Nathan to me.

“Why don’t you go team up with one of the twenty women panting after you?” Nathan retorted.

“Nathan Christopher Shaw,” Timberlynn warned.

He blushed and looked away.

“I can sit out, honestly, it’s okay,” I said as I stood. “I’m exhausted anyway.”

Lincoln stood. “No, Kipton, please don’t leave. I’ll partner up with Hunter. Brock won’t mind, will you?”

When all eyes turned to Brock, he wisely kept his mouth shut.

“Honestly, I really am tired.” I started to make my way out of the family room when Hunter reached for my arm.

“I don’t have to play.”

I lifted a brow and asked in a hushed voice that only he would hear, “Had enough playing for one night?”

Hunter frowned, and I mentally kicked myself for letting that bitch called jealousy rear her ugly head.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to say that. Stay. It’s your family.”

“You’re our guest,” Hunter argued.

“I’m tired, and I have to meet Jack and Travis early tomorrow morning. Have fun.”

Before Hunter could argue, or anyone else for that matter, I turned on my heels and made my way out of the room. I’d started up the staircase when I heard his voice again.

“Kip, wait.”

I closed my eyes and pushed aside the way my heart reacted to that nickname. Turning, I forced myself to smile slightly. “Yeah?”

He stared at me for a long moment, then finally shook his head. “Nothing. Um...never mind. I hope you sleep good.”

“You too. ’Night, Hunter.”

He gave a single head bob. “Good night, Kip.”

## Chapter Eleven

### HUNTER

The sound of someone pounding on the front door caused me to roll over and groan. Then came the doorbell, followed by more pounding.

Throwing the covers off, I stood and managed to make my way to the front door. It was only then that I noticed the sun shining through the kitchen window and realized I'd somehow overslept.

"Fuck," I mumbled as I opened the door.

I wasn't sure who I'd expected to find on my porch, but it sure as hell hadn't been Kipton.

Her eyes went wide as she took in my nearly naked body. The only thing I wore was boxer briefs. When her gaze traveled down my body, she sucked in a sharp breath before she looked away.

I dropped my gaze—to see the morning wood.

I let out a frustrated sigh, then turned and walked to the kitchen. That's when I remembered the goddamn cameras.

When I looked over at Kipton, she was still standing outside. Clearing her throat, she said, "You missed a meeting. Jack asked me to come over and make sure you're okay, since I was at your parents' house. He thought it was faster than sending someone from the crew."

"For fuck's sake, Kip, would you come in and get out of the cold?"

Her jaw clenched, but she stepped through the doorway and slammed the door shut, causing me to grab the top of my head and groan.

"Drink too much last night?" she asked, strolling into the house before leaning against the kitchen counter. "You might want to go get dressed. Unless you want the world to see your..."

Her eyes traveled down to my cock, and I felt it twitch in my briefs. She

must have seen it as well, because her gaze jerked back up to meet mine.

“Make yourself at home,” I tossed over my shoulder as I walked away.

“Thanks,” she said with an edge to her voice. “Want me to make you some coffee?”

“That would be great.”

After jumping in the shower, taking some aspirin, and getting dressed, I made my way back to the kitchen. Everything from last night had been cleaned up by a crew the show had hired. It was part of the reason I’d gone to my folks’ place last night, so I could get away from it all.

The sudden reminder of Kimber being here, and me kissing her, made me feel uncomfortable and I wasn’t entirely sure why. Then again, it could simply be because I was denying the attraction I had for the woman currently standing where my date had been last night.

“What did I miss this morning?” I asked when she handed me a piping-hot cup of coffee. How did she know how I liked it? Ignoring my own question, I took a sip and looked at her.

“I’m not sure. I had a meeting myself earlier. I wasn’t part of your meeting.”

“Are they filming today?”

She nodded. “The girls. They’re going shopping in Hamilton.”

I raised a brow. “Sounds like loads of fun.”

For the first time in what felt like forever, she gave me a real smile. “You could have joined them.”

Laughing, I set down my coffee. “I don’t even like shopping with my own sister or cousins.”

Kipton glanced around and cleared her throat as she caught sight of the camera. “I’ll let you get on with your day, but you might want to check in with Jack or Travis.”

“I will.”

When she turned to leave, I called out her name. “Kipton?”

She glanced back at me, her head tilted slightly. She had a look on her face I couldn’t read, and I found I didn’t want her to leave. “I’ll walk you out.”

“You don’t have to. It’s snowing and—”

“I want to.”

Reaching for my jacket on the back of the chair, I followed her out. She was driving my mother’s Jeep.



“What are *you* doing for the rest of the day?” I asked when we came to a stop at the Jeep.

Her eyes darted around furtively.

“There aren’t any out here,” I said, knowing what she was looking for. “The porch has one, but it’s aimed at the door, and it can’t hear us.”

She relaxed some and shrugged. “I’m not sure. I’ve got a rare day off, since everything’s set for tomorrow’s show.”

I held up my hand and said, “Hold on one second.” Pulling out my phone, I hit Jack’s number.

“Where have you been, man?” Jack asked, his voice not as upset as I thought it would be.

“Sorry, Jack. I had a pounding headache last night and took a sleep aid, and I guess it kicked my ass. Do you need me to come into town?”

“No, everything seems to be ready for tomorrow. We were just going to go over the polls from last night, and some of the comments on the blog. It looks like your first date was a success, not only with you and Kimber, but with the audience. They love her, and ninety-eight percent voted they would swipe right.”

“Great, it was a fun date,” I said, as I watched Kipton look away and stare out over the pasture.

“We don’t have any group dates planned for today, and you don’t need to record any more of your thoughts on the women. Why don’t you take it easy and enjoy the rest of the day.”

Smiling, I replied, “I think I will.”

“Not with Kipton.”

My entire body froze. “I’m sorry? What do you mean, not with Kipton?”

At the sound of her name, she turned to face me.

He sighed. “Listen, Hunter. I’m not saying you can’t hang out with her. I know the two of you have become friends. But the audience doesn’t need to see you spending time with her, nearly naked, in the very kitchen where you kissed another girl last night.”

Guilt slammed against my chest, and I glanced at Kipton. “What about the girl I’m going out with tomorrow night?”

“That’s different. Viewers *expect* you to be that way with them. Not with the host of the show.”

“You’re saying we can’t spend time together outside of filming?”

Kipton frowned and crossed her arms in front of her.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. But when she’s standing in your kitchen, making you coffee as you’re fresh out of bed, it will send the wrong message. You’re supposed to be dating the contestants, not Kipton.”

“It was *coffee*, Jack, and you guys sent her over here...besides, you don’t even have to show that footage. It’s not like it’s a live feed.”

“I know. I’m only asking that you be aware of your friendship with her when the cameras are around. Even if nothing’s going on. Listen, I’m just looking out for you both.”

“Right,” I said in a tight voice. It almost felt like there was something else Jack was trying to say, but wouldn’t come right out and say it.

“Enjoy your day. See you tomorrow.”

When the line went dead, I cursed under my breath.

“What was that about?” Kipton asked.

I rubbed at the ache in the back of my neck. “Jack didn’t like that you were in my kitchen making me coffee.”

Kipton laughed. “Why?”

“Apparently, it isn’t a good look for you to be in the kitchen while I’m wearing briefs, especially when I was there last night with Kimber.”

She blinked a few times and shook her head. “But...they don’t even have to show that.”

“That’s what I said. This is bullshit.”

She sighed. “Whatever. I’m leaving, so it doesn’t matter.”

“It *does* matter. We’re friends, and if we want to spend time together, we should be able to. Who else can I talk to about this stupid shit? You’re the only one who gets it.”

For a moment, I thought I saw a pained expression on her face, but she looked away.

“Let’s go for a ride.”

Her head snapped back to me. “What?”

“A ride. I’ll show you around the ranch. We can leave the cameras behind and simply be us.”

Kipton’s eyes lit up, and I saw her mouth twitch with a smile, then it faded. “Maybe another time.”

Frowning, I stared at her. “Are you doing anything else?”

“Um, no, not right now.”

“Then come on. It’s a beautiful day, there was a light dusting of snow so it will add to the beauty, and I can show you more of the ranch. I know you

love to ride, so what do you say.”

The smile was back. “That does sounds nice.”

“I’ll drive.”

She chuckled. “That’s good, because I only know how to get from your parents’ house to here and the main barn.”

Holding open the passenger door of my truck, I motioned for her to get in. “Your ranch chariot awaits you, milady.”

With a bow, she replied, “Thank you, kind sir. I’m longing to see your kingdom.”

We spent the next hour driving around the ranch. I showed her which roads led to the private ranches owned by my aunts and uncles, and to my brother Blayze’s house. It was after a comfortable stretch of silence, where we both took in the view, when Kipton asked, “Why don’t you bull ride?”

“I do.”

I could see her look at me from the corner of my eye. “You do?”

“Not professionally, but I can.”

“Do you not like it?”

Glancing at her, I asked with a dead-serious expression, “Do you want me to hurt this face?”

For a moment, she didn’t seem like she was going to respond, before she finally stated, “Your father and brother are still handsome. Not to mention Bradley.”

I gripped the steering wheel a bit tighter. “You think Bradley’s handsome?”

She laughed like I’d said something insane. “Hello? Whatever’s in the water here is producing some very attractive people. Lily, Rose, Morgan... your mom and all your aunts. My gosh, even your grandmother is beautiful. And your grandfather is a silver fox, so it’s easy to see why all the men are handsome.”

“Bradly isn’t a blood relative,” I stated dryly.

She shrugged with one shoulder. “His father is handsome, so...” Her words trailed off before she spoke again. “He asked me out.”

I nearly slammed on the brakes. “Uncle Dirk?”

Kipton’s head whipped around. She had a horrified look on her face. “Of course not! *Bradly* asked me out.”

“What? He’s two years younger than you, Kipton.”

She stared at me like I’d grown two heads. “First of all, I don’t know why

that matters. Two years is nothing. And second of all, I wouldn't go out with him, anyway."

A sense of relief washed over me at the idea I wasn't going to have to beat the hell out of my cousin.

"I thought it was really sweet that he asked, but I told him I didn't think it was a good idea."

All I could do was nod while I gripped the steering wheel even tighter.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Y-yeah," I sputtered out. "I told him not to bother you like that. I can talk to him again if you want."

"There isn't any need. He understands, and he's been nothing but a gentleman since."

"Good, I'm glad. I'm surprised he asked you. Josh or Nathan, I could see, but I thought it was made clear to Bradley."

Kipton laughed. "Joshua and Nathan *have* asked me out, but they were being silly. Besides, I *like* that Bradley asked me out. Who wouldn't? Especially after Rose told me how shy he is."

"He's apparently not *that* shy."

I felt her eyes on me. "Does it bother you that he asked?"

"Of course not. Why would it bother me?"

Her eyes searched my face before she forced a smile. "No, I guess it wouldn't." Turning to look forward, she asked, "Where are we going now?"

"My uncle Ty's. I thought maybe you'd like to see the bulls he raises."

A wide grin erupted on her face. "That sounds awesome!"

I pushed away the jealous feelings and gave her a smile.

I also made a mental note to talk to Bradley...or beat his ass, I'd decide when I got there.

## Chapter Twelve

### HUNTER

The moment Rose found out Kipton was here, she put on a coat and boots and rushed out of the house to show her around the arena. They'd hit it off immediately, and I could see them being the best of friends, even after the show. They were both independent women who weren't afraid to say what was on their minds.

"Rose and Kipton seem to be hitting it off," Aunt Kaylee said as she handed me a Thermos of hot coffee.

I nodded, laughing slightly, since my aunt read my mind. "They're both a lot alike."

Kaylee drew in a breath and exhaled. "Rose has been enjoying seeing the filming process. I'm also glad to see her enjoying her break from school. She's so laser focused when it comes to her education. She could have graduated this semester, but I don't think she was ready just yet."

Turning to look at her, I asked, "Isn't that a good thing?"

She nodded, but something like sadness flickered in her eyes.

"You're afraid she's going to leave, aren't you?" I asked as I looked back over to Rose, who was introducing Kipton to Manty. He was one of Uncle Ty's prized bulls, and he gave the cowboys hell in the arena. But here in his own space, he was like a puppy dog. And he loved women.

"Ty keeps telling me that not all of you are going to be coming back and living on the ranch, and I understand that. I knew when Rose told me she wanted to design houses, and barns, and high-rises," she said with a sad smile, "there was a solid chance Hamilton wouldn't be her final landing place. It's just hard letting go."

"I honestly don't see Rose running off to live in a big city. She loves the

ranch too much.”

Turning to face me, she smiled and wrapped my scarf around my neck. “I think you’re right. At least, I hope you are.” Patting my chest, she added, “Someday, Hunter Shaw, you’ll be a father, then you’ll understand completely the moment you hold your child.” She shook her head slightly as she looked at Rose and Kipton, then back to me. “The path we think we see ourselves going down isn’t always the right one...or the one our heart wants us to follow.”

I frowned. “Are you saying you think Rose isn’t going down the right path?”

She chuckled and gently cupped my cheek in her hand. “I never said I was talking about Rose.”

Lifting onto her toes, she kissed my cheek. “Go spend some time with Manty. Those girls will never be able to throw the barrel like he wants.”

I watched as my aunt returned to the house. I set the coffee down and headed to Manty’s pen.

“Oh good!” Rose called out. “Throw the barrel at him!”

“What?” Kipton asked in a horrified voice.

“He likes it. We used to use the giant blow-up balls, but his horns pop them after the first throw,” Rose explained.

I launched an empty barrel at Manty, and he went crazy as he batted it back at me with his head.

“Oh my gosh!” Kipton said with a laugh. “He’s totally playing with you!”

After amusing Manty for a few minutes, we walked out into another field. Rose finally decided it was too cold and went back inside.

“Why are we walking toward a giant bull in the middle of the pasture?” Kipton asked with a weary glance my way.

“I promise you, he’s a gentle giant. It’s all in how you raise them. All of my uncle’s bulls are spoiled and given the best of everything. This here is Rudy.”

“Rudy?” she asked with a chuckle.

“It’s not his professional name, but my aunt Kylee named him. She says it fits.”

“And does it?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea. I do know he loves a good scratch.”

Kipton stopped walking. “You want me to walk up to a bull and...scratch him? Like a dog?”

“Indeed, I do.” I took her hand in mine and tugged, and we started walking again. Rudy looked up and started to make his way toward us.

“I think I’m going to stop walking now,” Kipton softly whispered as I let her bring us both to a stop.

I pulled out a Slim Jim and watched as Rudy’s eyes lit up.

“It seems our friend Rudy likes a good Slim Jim,” Kipton said with a laugh.

“He sure does.”

Rudy walked up and gently took the treat out of my hand while I rubbed along his neck. “Go on, give him a good scratch.”

I could tell Kipton was nervous, but she reached out and started to scratch Rudy, who quickly fell in love with her. He tilted his head in all kinds of directions to get her to scratch the right spots.

Laughing, I said, “I think he likes your nails.”

“The girl who does my nails would have a heart attack if she ever saw this.”

Kipton and I spent a few more minutes with Rudy before we headed back. The bull followed us and watched as we climbed over the fence.

“He looks so sad.”

I turned and glanced back at him. “I think he fell in love with you, and now he’s heartbroken you’re leaving him.”

Kipton blew Rudy a kiss goodbye.

“I guess we should head on back to my parents’ place,” I said as I glanced at the sky. “Looks like it might snow.”

Kipton looked up, closed her eyes, and smiled.

For a few seconds I couldn’t move as I watched her. “What are you doing?” I asked.

She snapped out of whatever trance she was in and shook her head. “Sorry, I guess I was daydreaming. And you’re right, we need to get back.”

After saying our goodbyes to Rose, Joshua, Uncle Ty, and Aunt Kylee, we drove back down the main road of the ranch. It wasn’t lost on me that neither of us talked about the show during our drive around the ranch, but I suddenly wanted to know what Kipton was thinking. It was clear she wasn’t going to bring up last night’s date, and a part of me wasn’t sure I should either.

I turned my truck down my folks’ driveway, and Kipton cleared her throat. We had dropped the Jeep back off at my parents’ place before we

headed out for our drive. “Thanks for today. I had fun.”

“I did too, even though all we did was drive around the ranch. Next time, we’ll saddle up some horses when the weather shows promise.”

“That sounds nice.” With a half shrug, she added, “Sometimes, though, the simple days are the best ones.”

All I could do was nod as I pulled to a stop.

Kipton opened her door and slipped out. Turning back to look at me, she smiled. “Thanks again. See you later.”

“See ya later.”

After she shut the door, I watched as she made her way up the steps of the porch and into the house.

Someone banged on my window just as the front door shut, and I was positive the scream I let out sounded like it’d come from a twelve-year-old girl. I looked over to see Blayze standing there with a wide grin. I hit the button for the window to roll down and had to restrain myself from strangling the dumbass.

“Why are you staring at Mom and Dad’s front door?” he asked.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not. I dropped Kipton off after showing her a bit of the ranch.”

Blayze gave me a look I couldn’t read, but I decided it was best if I didn’t. “Looks like a storm is coming in?”

He glanced up. “Just a small snow shower, nothing big.”

Nodding, I asked, “Did you need help with any of the animals?”

“Nah, Hank, Decker, and Clay are getting the four-wheelers ready now, and we’re about to head out and check the cattle in the south pasture.”

“I’ll come with you guys,” I said, wanting to do something to get my mind off everything and anything that had to do with *Swipe Right*.

Blayze raised a single brow, knowing there was something else in my tone.

“I could use the mental break.”

A smile broke out on my brother’s face. “What’s wrong, baby brother? Your first date not turn out so good?”

I exhaled and shot him a dirty look. “It was fine. I kissed her, though. Twice.”

His brows pulled down in confusion. “And that’s a bad thing?”

“I don’t know. I have nineteen other women to go on dates with, how does that look if I’m kissing each one? I guess when I thought about doing



this that I only saw the dollar signs and not the logistics.”

“Answer me this, if it had been a regular date, would you have kissed her?”

My hand went to the back of my neck and rubbed at the ache there. “I guess so. I don’t know. I like Kimber, she’s a nice girl. But let’s be honest, I won’t end up with any of these women. They all live too far away, and I’m sure I have nothing in common with most of them.”

“Look at me and Georgie. She lived in Texas. We’re married now and expecting a baby.”

“I would never ask any of these women to give up the lives they’ve built for themselves. Nothing is supposed to be serious, Blayze. It’s a dating show, no one expects a proposal at the end. But it felt serious for Kimber last night. It was like she was really, really interested in me.”

Blayze smirked and hit my arm. “I’m sure they’d *all* love to date you, Hunter. You’re a catch. It’s in the genes.”

I rolled my eyes once again.

“Come on, I’ll meet you down at the main barn. Let’s go have some fun for a bit.”

Smiling, I nodded. “I’ll race you there.”



I stood off to the side as they recapped the first date and then went to a live shot of Kipton. We were in the middle of the main barn, and even though I had spent some time with Blayze yesterday messing around on the ranch, today he was back to business. And he was not happy about the film crew being in his barn. *Again.*

My father, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying himself as he sat in a chair and watched the whole process unfold. I had begged my mother and father to please not watch the live dates since it would be awkward for all of us knowing they would be watching. Mom promised she wouldn’t, but my father just laughed. Not sure what that was about, but it didn’t sound convincing.

“The time has come!” Kipton said with that practiced smile of hers. “Let’s bring Hunter on over and pick out his next date!”

The women were seated on the hay bales once again, some from the other day and some new. Randomly selected again, so no one knows ahead of time

who'll be vying for a date.

"Hunter," Jack said in my ear, prompting me to pull my head out of my ass. I walked over to Kipton and gave her a quick hug hello.

"Are you ready to find out who'll be date number two?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," I stated with what I hoped was a smile that didn't look forced.

Turning, Kipton reached for the bowl and put her hand in as she smiled. "And date number two is going to be with..."

I studied Kipton's face as she glanced at the token. I couldn't read her expression, and was wondering if I had read her all wrong on Wednesday when she seemed upset after drawing Kimber's name.

Then I saw a small twitch of her left eye.

"Tonight's date will be with Sarah!" Kipton announced as they switched cameras and showed Sarah jumping up and making her way over.

When she finally made it to my side, she hugged me and mumbled something I couldn't understand.

The cameras went dark as Jack said in my ear, "Okay, Sarah's intro is going."

Kipton's smile faded and she turned to look at something Jessie handed her. Sarah tugged on my sleeve, gaining my attention.

"What do you think the date will be?" she asked, a huge smile on her face.

"I'm not sure."

"Your date with Kimber looked like so much fun."

I returned her excited smile with one I hoped looked genuine. Sarah was cute, with brown hair and blonde highlights. Her hazel eyes danced with something I swore looked like desire. I nodded as I cleared my throat and replied, "Sure. It was fun."

I glanced over to the monitor and watched as Sarah spoke. She was from upstate New York and was a content creator. She loved anything that had to do with horses and had been riding for years. That was a plus.

Jack started the countdown in my ear. When I peeked at Kipton, she got back into place without so much as giving me a look.

"Now that all of you at home have gotten to meet Sarah, it's Hunter's turn to get to know her better. Let's see what their date will be."

Sarah grabbed my hand and squeezed. I tried to smile, but something inside me felt...off, and I couldn't figure out what it was. It had started after

that first date with Kimber two days ago.

Turning to face us, Kipton wore a grin that looked a bit smug. “I hope you brought some warm riding clothes, Sarah!”

Sarah’s smile faltered, and all she managed to say was, “Um...”

Kipton met my gaze. “You’re going horseback riding here on the ranch, followed by a picnic lunch at Hunter’s place.”

I smiled. “Sounds like fun.”

“More like freezing cold. Who goes horseback riding in the snow?” Sarah asked.

Staring at her, I couldn’t even begin to decide how to answer that. We were in Montana, for fuck’s sake. Did she think all the horses hibernated in the winter? “You’ve never ridden in the snow?” I asked. “Aren’t you from upstate New York?”

She ignored me and turned to Kipton. “I need to change. I can’t go riding in this!”

“No worries,” Kipton assured as she turned to the camera and managed a sympathetic expression. Meanwhile, with the camera off Sarah, she was whisked away to go change. “I have to say, it *is* pretty chilly out. We’ll be back after these messages to follow Sarah and Hunter on their first date!”

The red light went out and Kipton looked over at me. “You do realize she most likely lied about the horseback riding.”

I frowned. “How do you know that?”

She gave me an incredulous look. “Did you not see the terror on her face, Hunter?”

“No, I saw someone who was worried about the cold weather. You can’t blame her for that.”

Kipton’s lower jaw hitched to the side for a moment before she put the fucking fake smile back in place. “Well, I’m glad I’ll be watching from the warmth of the barn. Have fun, and I’ll see you back at your place for your romantic lunch.”

I reached for her arm, causing her to stop and look at my hand, then back up to me. “Something I can help you with?”

“Why are you being so cold toward me?”

With a thoughtful look on her face, she gave a slight shake of her head. “I’m not being cold. I’m being professional. You should get ready. You’re leaving for your date as soon as we’re live.”

And with that, she turned and started toward the mark where she needed

to be when we came back from commercial break.

“You might need this,” I heard Blayze say from behind me. He handed me a jacket and gloves.

“I need a hat.”

“No hat,” Winnie said, appearing magically at my side. “Jack wants you to look the part.”

When she handed me a cowboy hat, I stared at it. “I’m not wearing that. It’s freezing outside. I want a *winter* hat.”

Blayze coughed and turned to the side in a sad attempt to hide his smile.

I turned back to Winnie. “He can’t be serious?”

“You wore one yesterday,” Blayze said to no one in particular.

She shrugged, then said, “You have thirty seconds to put it on or take it up with Jack.”

I grabbed the hat and put it on my head. Sarah walked up with a wide smile on her face. She was in jeans, boots, and she held a coat, gloves, and a scarf.

“Oh my gosh,” she softly said as she stood next to me. “Winnie gave me the cutest matching scarf and hat. I’m going to look *adorable* on this ride.”

Exasperated at so many things wrong in this chaos, all I could do was smile and nod.

Kipton was back on the air and standing next to two horses that were already magically saddled for our “random” date. Clay was holding the reins, staring at Kipton like he was starstruck.

“Clay?” I asked to no one in particular. He was a hand here on the ranch. How in the hell had they gotten him to agree to be on the show?

“He had the day off and volunteered,” Blayze said from where he stood just to the side of me, but far enough away that when the camera came back on, he wouldn’t be in frame. “There was no way I was letting anyone from this group of Hollywood types saddle up our horses. I doubt they would even know how to do it.”

The cameras were now on me and Sarah as I ushered her over to the horses. I stopped and took the reins for Lou Lou. I sure as hell hoped Kipton was wrong about Sarah’s riding skills because Lou Lou would need an experienced rider. Clay also held Iceman, who was my roping horse. Both were quarter horses, and both loved rides in the winter.

It would feel good to be up on Iceman. I couldn’t help but wonder if Dustin, the other half of my roping team, had spent time on Scooter since

we'd been home from school. Both horses had won us a lot of events and needed fun rides just as much as they needed to be ridden professionally.

"Need help getting up?" I asked Sarah.

"Is there not like a stool or anything for me to get onto this mammoth of a horse?"

Clay and I stared at her, and for a hot second, I forgot millions of other people were as well.

"I can get you one," Clay finally said, with a glance at me.

I shook my head and helped Sarah up onto the horse. "No need, Clay. Do you mostly ride English?"

She stared at me. "I don't know any other languages."

This time, my gaze instantly went to Kipton, who wore an expression that screamed *I told you so*.

Looking back at Sarah, I let out a soft laugh. "No, I mean, this is western riding. Do you normally ride English, with a different saddle?"

"Oh!" Sarah said with an embarrassed laugh. Her cheeks flushed, and I had to admit she *did* look cute in the hat and scarf with her now-red cheeks. "Yes, I mostly ride English."

I nodded, totally unconvinced, then walked over to Iceman and lifted myself up. I zipped my jacket and put my gloves on. That's when I saw the camera on the horse. How in the hell had they managed to get a camera on my horse? One quick glance over to Lou Lou, and I saw she wore a camera as well.

"Ready?" Clay asked as he cleared the path for us to walk the horses through.

"And it looks like Hunter and Sarah are off on their first date. I'll be signing out so you can all tag along with them on their frosty horseback ride. See you soon!" I heard Kipton say.

"Oh my," Sarah fretted, clutching the reins in a death grip as we walked out of the barn and down one of the trails. "Is this a boy or a girl horse?"

My head snapped over to look at her, then to Paul on my left, somehow managing to ride a horse and operate a camera. I could see him smile behind the rig, and it was in that moment that I knew the date wasn't going to be a good one. At least, not while Sarah was up on a horse.

## Chapter Thirteen

### KIPTON

Once I was off-line, I started to laugh. Jack walked up to me, a shit-eating grin on his face. I looked at him and slowly shook my head.

“You knew,” I said as I crossed my arms over my chest. “You knew she lied and you still set up that whole thing.”

He shrugged. “You don’t really think the dates are random, do you, Kipton? It would be too hard to pull off without planning. All the tokens in the date bowl say the same thing.”

My mouth fell open. “Does Hunter know?”

He shrugged. “Probably not until he saw the horses saddled up and ready to go.”

“I mean,” I let out another laugh, “it does make sense you’d need to know what the dates are ahead of time. What about the girls?”

“Totally random. But, if I had to guess, nearly all of them lied about loving horseback riding because they wanted to be on the show.”

Nodding, I bit down on my lower lip to keep from laughing again. “All because Hunter rides.”

He turned and pointed to me. “Bingo. Research shows that most women will exaggerate about the things they like to do or eat based on the man they’re interested in.”

I raised a brow. “So you’re saying you think *all* of these women lied?”

Jack smiled. “No, that’s not what I’m saying at all. But there is a reason we only gave half the girls Hunter’s questionnaire, and Sarah was one of those who got it. Did you think it was a coincidence she stated she liked to do nearly everything Hunter put down?”

“No, I didn’t. And from simply watching them on the cameras at their

house, I'd already determined a lot of them might have fibbed on their forms."

Winking, Jack said, "See? You're the perfect host. Come on, let's head into the truck and watch the horseback riding portion of the date. We're also going to let the entire date play out, no commercial breaks."

"What?" I asked in a surprised voice.

"Subscriptions for the channel have been through the roof. Travis and I decided we could afford to go commercial-free through the dates from this point on. Once you go back on at the end of the date, you can let people know. I think that will have them even more invested, since they can watch the whole thing without interruption."

"It makes it feel like a real date," I replied.

"Exactly. We knew season one would be a learning process, but I have to say, things have been going rather well."

"I agree."

Jack and I headed out of the barn and to the truck where the monitors were all set up. I was surprised by how fast the crew got everything out of the main barn. Of course, I was positive it was because Blayze threatened to break legs if they took up too much of his time or the barn's use. Even though the ranch was quiet with it being the middle of winter, it was still a huge inconvenience for Blayze.

Once we stepped into the truck, Jessie, the production assistant assigned to me, handed me a warm cup of tea. "Oh gosh, thank you so much, Jessie. You read my mind."

She winked. "I get paid the big bucks to know what you want before even you do."

Jack took the coffee Marie, his assistant, held out to him, then took a seat in front of the plethora of cameras. I joined him in the chair next to his.

My eyes nearly popped out of my head at what I saw before me. "Is she..." My words trailed off.

"This is gold. Pure reality television gold," Jack mused.

"Oh dear," Jessie whispered. "She can't ride to save her life!"

I watched as poor Sarah bounced around on top of Lou Lou. Every now and then, Hunter would reach over and help straighten her so she didn't fall out of the saddle.

"I can't feel my hands to hold the ropes!" Sarah cried out.

Hunter rolled his eyes. "They're called reins, Sarah. I thought you said

you were an accomplished rider.”

She shot him a dirty look. “Seriously, Hunter? Do I look like I ride horses often?”

He shrugged. “I mean...”

“Don’t answer that, Hunter,” I whispered.

Instead of saying anything that might make poor Sarah burst into tears, Hunter went with, “We’re almost to my place.”

“Thank God! My ass is killing me, and this horse obviously hates me.”

Hunter laughed. “He doesn’t hate you. I do wish we had known you weren’t good at riding; we would have given you a more patient horse.”

Lou Lou was clearly pissed off and kept acting up. He wanted Sarah off him as much as Sarah wanted off.

“What is he doing? What is he doing!” Sarah cried out as Lou Lou started to canter.

The camera on Hunter’s horse went live, and the look on Hunter’s face caused everyone in the truck to start laughing.

“He’s just sitting there while her horse takes off?” Marie said, a mix of humor and surprise in her voice.

“Help me!” Sarah screamed, causing Hunter to turn and look at another camera. I was sure it was Paul’s.

“Would it be more fun letting her go?” he asked. You could hear Paul laugh and say something, but I couldn’t make it out. With a nod, Hunter said, “Right, let’s go get her.”

And that was when Hunter raced off on his horse, Iceman. If women around the world hadn’t fallen in love with him yet, they were sure to now. He rode up alongside Sarah and got Lou Lou to stop immediately. Then he helped her onto *his* horse, and they started off again. The look of pure happiness on Sarah’s face was enough to make me want to roll my eyes. It couldn’t have gone any better had she planned for that to happen.

Jessie sighed next to me, and I turned to look at her. “Did you just sigh?”

Pointing to the monitor, she said, “I mean, he rode up there and *pulled her onto his horse*. If that isn’t a cowboy, then I don’t think I’ve ever seen one before.”

I rolled my eyes, again, and looked back at the monitors as Hunter leaned in to say something to Sarah, causing her to turn and look up at him.

“She’s going to kiss him,” Jessie guessed as I willed Hunter to pull away.  
*Don’t kiss her. Don’t kiss her.*



As if he read my mind, Hunter drew his head back and started to point out different things on the ranch. It was clear Sarah was bored out of her mind, but still happy to be sitting practically on top of Hunter.

By the time they got to the guesthouse, I'd stopped watching and started eating the Chinese food that had been delivered. It was almost cold, but it was better than watching Sarah throw herself at Hunter every chance she got.

"Wow, I really liked this one when she first introduced herself to Hunter. But now..." Jessie sat down next to me. "Did you want me to heat that up?"

I shook my head. "It's still warm, sort of, but thank you." I waited a moment, then asked, "What are the viewers saying?"

Jessie scrunched her face. "They don't like her and they're hoping he swipes left."

"Kipton, the date is going to be ending soon, so we'll need to get you up to the house," another production assistant called out.

"Where's Jack?" I asked as I slipped on my coat and hat.

"He left to head up to the house already," Jessie said, handing me my gloves. "Do you need me to go to the house with you?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so. It'll be a short segment."

Jessie smiled and handed me a cup of tea to go. "The car is waiting to take you up to the house. The picnic was being held at the guesthouse."

"I'd be lost without you, Jess," I said as I took the offered drink and quickly made my way out of the truck and to the waiting car.

They had timed it perfectly with me arriving at the house only moments before the date came to an end. I quietly stepped inside and smiled at Jack as he gave me a thumbs-up. I moved to him and asked in a hushed voice, "How's it going?"

He grinned. "Hunter looks like he's about to crawl out of his skin," he replied in a whisper. I glanced into the living room but didn't see them. They weren't in the kitchen, either.

"Where are they?" I asked.

"She wanted a tour of the house before the date ended." He pointed at the monitor, and I saw they were in Hunter's room, Sarah's arms laced around his neck.

"I had so much fun today, Hunter."

He smiled, but it looked fake. "I did too. We should probably head back out; date is almost up."

Sarah frowned. "I don't even get a kiss. Kimber got a kiss."

Hunter blinked several times, then reached up and pulled her arms from around him. He took a step back and laced his fingers through his hair. “Sarah, you’re a really nice girl, but I don’t think there was a connection today.”

Her eyes went wide before her mouth clamped shut. She gave him one small nod, then turned and nearly ran into the camera that had followed them into the room. “Get out of my way!” she yelled as she marched out of his room. Once she was in the living room, she grabbed her coat. “Date is over!”

Thank goodness Jessie had already fitted me with my mic and earpiece back at the barn, because Jack turned and looked at me expectantly.

I quickly made my way over to my designated mark where Paul was waiting behind the camera.

“Sarah—” Hunter began, before coming to a stop when his eyes landed on me.

“Date is over!” Sarah sing-songed again. Hunter grabbed her hand and drew her back to him.

“Don’t be angry. Surely you had to see this coming? You clearly lied about horseback riding, you can’t stand being in the country, and New York will always be home to you. You said so yourself.”

She folded her arms across her chest, frowning. “It might have worked had you given it a shot.” She narrowed her eyes—then a smile appeared on her face when she looked and saw the camera. It was like someone flipped a switch inside her. “It’s okay, Hunter. We would never work. We’re too different. I want things you’d never want, and let’s face it, you’d never fit in if you came to New York.”

I nearly laughed at the confused expression on Hunter’s face, as he asked, “What just happened? Didn’t I already say that?”

Sarah took both of his hands in hers. “I’m sorry, Hunter. I’m going to have to swipe left.”

My mouth fell open as I stared at the couple. One with a smile on her face, the other clearly confused.

Jack spoke into my ear. “In five, Kipton.”

For a moment, I panicked and fought to get the surprised look off my face as I smiled into the camera.

“It appears the date is indeed over,” I said as I attempted not to look at Winnie, who was behind Paul, observing. “I’m sure you all noticed that we did the date a bit differently today. We’ve decided not to interrupt the dates

from this point on. That means no commercial breaks, which allows you to truly feel like you're on the date *with* Hunter and the lucky lady. We hope you'll enjoy the change, and I want to note that because this is our first season, we're learning right along with you at home.

"Now, both Sarah and Hunter will go to their Truth Booths, which will be streamed immediately on the website. I'll be just as anxious as you viewers to see what happens on Hunter's third date. Until next time!"

The camera light went out, and I turned to see half the people leaving Hunter's place, and the other half getting everything packed up. My gaze swept across the room until I saw Hunter with Jack. They talked briefly, then he made his way up to the loft where his Truth Booth was set up.

Once I had my mic and earpiece out, I made my way over to Winnie, who eyed me as I grabbed my coat, hat, and gloves.

"You're leaving already?" she asked.

Slipping on my jacket, I smiled. "My work is done. I'll see you tomorrow."

And without another word, I slipped out of the house and back to the car for the short ride to Brock and Lincoln's house. I had hoped to sneak in and slip off to my room, but Lincoln was waiting for me with a cup of hot cocoa and freshly made cookies.

"Did you watch the show?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I promised Hunter I wouldn't. I do, however, plan on watching the Truth Booth, though I never made any promises about that."

I chuckled before I took a bite of the oatmeal cookie.

"Do you want to watch it together?" she asked, a hopeful gleam in her eyes.

I was about to tell her no with the excuse that I was exhausted, but when I opened my mouth, the words, "Sure, I'll watch it with you," came out instead.

Lincoln smiled and stood. "I'll grab my laptop." She walked out of the room, only to return in seconds. "I have to say, when Hunter told his father and me about this show, I thought it would be good for him."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

Setting the laptop on the kitchen island, she shrugged. "Hunter has always had this idea that he wasn't the type of guy to settle down, at least not anytime soon."

"Why?" I asked before I finished off the cookie.

“I think it’s because he’s always been so focused on making it as a team roper. His father and I had insisted he go to college, though. Brock had entered the PBR so young in life, and although he has no regrets, he didn’t want that life for his two sons. He wanted them to always have an option, especially if they weren’t interested in running the ranch.”

“Hunter seems to love the ranch, but he doesn’t talk a lot about roping. At least not when we’ve spent time together. Or on the show, now that I think about it.”

“Roping was Hunter’s passion, like bull riding was his father’s. The past two years, though, I’ve seen his love for the ranch grow, and I’m not so sure being on the rodeo circuit is his dream anymore.”

“I feel like there’s a ‘but’ in there.”

She chuckled. “Brock thinks Hunter feels like he has to prove something to him. That he can be the best at something. He can bull ride, and is good at it, but I think he likes his handsome face too much for that career path.”

I laughed. “He *does* have a rather handsome face.”

My cheeks instantly heated as Lincoln smiled at me. “You can admit he’s handsome without it meaning something, Kipton.”

I simply nodded.

Lincoln stared at the computer before she looked at me again. “I’m not entirely sure what Hunter’s passion is. He loves team roping. He loves the ranch. But to me he seems...lost. As his mother, of course I feel a need to fix it, even if I don’t know what the *it* is. When he told us about this show, I guess a part of me was hoping he might find someone. Until I watched all those girls introduce themselves, and it seemed like they’re after one thing. Maybe two.”

I tilted my head and regarded her. “What’s that?”

Her eyes met mine, and I could see the sadness in them, and my heart felt like someone had reached into my chest and squeezed it. “Money and fifteen minutes of fame, at the expense of my son.”

I reached for her hand. “I think the only reason Hunter agreed to do this was to help out his father’s nonprofit. It’s the same reason I agreed to do it. I want to give the money to my parents to help them pay off some debts.”

“That’s so sweet of you, Kipton. Your parents are both so lovely.”

I sighed. “They’ve given up so much for me, it’s the least I can do. I hope to lift some of the stress they’re under.”

Lincoln put her other hand over my own. “You’re doing an amazing job,

even if you hate doing the show.”

“Is it that obvious?” I asked, laughing.

“No,” she replied. “Hunter told me why you were doing it, and that you had huge reservations as well. But I think you’re both doing great, and I have a feeling by doing this show, it will change your life. For the better.”

“I hope so,” I said quietly before I turned my gaze to her computer.

Lincoln pulled up the now-recorded video of Hunter in the Truth Booth. When he appeared on the screen, I ignored the way my heart tripped over itself.

“Today’s date... Lord, where do I begin? I thought it would be fun to go for a ride and show Sarah the ranch. I love this place. It’s in my blood, and someday I hope to be working alongside my brother helping to run it. When Sarah showed zero interest in hearing about it—while attempting to stay on top of her horse—I knew things weren’t going to work between us. I said when I started this journey that I’d be truthful to each of the women, at all times. Some might think it was cruel of me to tell Sarah I felt no connection at the end of the date, but why string her along if I know that’s the truth?”

He looked away for the longest time before he let out a humorless laugh. Turning back to the camera, he said, “I guess it’s on to the next date.” He reached up and swiped the little device in the booth to the left. He exhaled, then stood and walked out of the room before the camera faded to black.

“He looks so tired, and it’s only the beginning of the show,” Lincoln said. “He has...what? Eighteen more girls?”

I nodded.

Lincoln looked at me and grinned. “Should we watch Sarah’s Truth Booth?”

I couldn’t help but giggle. “I think we need to now!”

When Lincoln pulled up Sarah’s, neither one of us thought it would be less than thirty seconds. Sarah sat down, smiled at the camera...then held up her middle finger.

“Fuck you, Hunter Shaw. Fuck you and the horse you rode in on. You probably kiss like a fish and fuck like a—”

Both Lincoln and I gasped as the video abruptly ended, our hands coming up to our mouths at the same time. A promo for the show popped up with a recorded message from me.

“Thank you for watching *Swipe Right*. Tune in Wednesday for our next date!”

When the video ended, Lincoln and I slowly turned and looked at each other. Screwing up her face, Hunter's mom asked in a lowered voice, "Is it weird I wanted to know what she was going to say?"

I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Five seconds later, we were both laughing hysterically.

## Chapter Fourteen

### HUNTER

The house was quiet as I sat on the sofa and drank a beer. I was aware of the camera that faced into the living room, and I looked up at it. I hated that it recorded everything, always. The only place I felt any sense of privacy was in my bedroom and bathroom.

I lifted the beer to my lips and took a long pull. The date today had been a joke. I thought about how Kipton picked up Sarah's lie immediately when the date was revealed. About the horses being ready, indicating they knew what the date would be all along. I hadn't had a chance to talk to Jack about that after I recorded my bit for the Truth Booth. Jack had left before I was finished.

A light knock on my door caused me to look up. What I really wanted to do was ignore it. Instead, I got up and answered.

Dustin, my roping partner and one of my best friends, stood there with a shit-eating grin on his face. "You look like you need to go out. Dude, I came as soon as I saw her—"

I put my hand over his mouth and jerked my head to the camera. He looked up and rolled his eyes, but got the picture.

"You drove here to tell me I need to go out?" I asked, motioning for him to come in.

"I did. I thought maybe we could do some riding this weekend in your uncle Tanner's arena."

"That's a great idea. Good way to get my mind off things. Beer?"

He shook his head. "Nah, I'll be designated driver tonight. Blue Moose?"

I placed my empty beer bottle on the kitchen counter. "You mind if I see if Rose wants to join us?"

Dustin's eyes lit up. I knew he liked Rose, but she had already nipped that in the bud a few years back. She liked him as a friend and that was it. "What about Blayze and Ryan?"

I shook my head. "Nah, I doubt either of them will want to go out."

He lifted a brow. "Just because they're going to be parents doesn't mean they don't like bars anymore."

I shrugged. "I'll ask. Let me go change."

As I walked to my bedroom, I shot off a group text message and, much to my surprise, everyone was down for going out.

"Any of those pretty women going to be joining us?" Dustin asked when I returned to the living room.

"No."

He shook his head. "What's wrong with you?"

I rubbed at the back of my neck. "Later, okay?"

Dustin glanced around, clearly forgetting about the inside cameras. My phone buzzed, and I nearly groaned when I saw it was Jack. Slipping my cowboy hat on and grabbing a jacket, I motioned for Dustin to head on out.

"Hey, Jack, what's up?"

"I like your friend's idea about the girls going out with you."

"First off, do you sit around and watch the cameras all the time?"

He laughed. "No, I happened to have logged on and noticed you had a friend over. I was curious. Dustin's your roping partner, right?"

"He is, and no, I would like a few hours off from all of this. I already had a date this evening, so my obligation has been fulfilled."

"I don't mean go out with you *tonight*. But a night out with several of the girls for one of the tapings."

"Do whatever, Jack. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Hitting End, I silenced my phone before I sent off a text to everyone that Dustin and I would meet them at The Blue Moose. After my call with Jack, I was already wondering if I might "accidentally" see one or two of the girls there, if not all of them.

Dustin and I found a large table in the back left corner. It didn't take long for a few girls to wander up and start talking to us. I knew them both from high school, and two of their college friends were also in town for a visit. They were all part of a sorority, which instantly caused Dustin to lose interest.

"I see you didn't wait to start the party," Blayze commented as he walked



over with Georgiana. She looked cute in a stretchy sweater dress, her pregnant belly on display.

The girls all turned and gaped at my older brother. I was man enough to admit he was a good-looking guy. And the spitting image of our father. Although everyone said that about both of us, Blayze was clearly our dad's mini-me. I favored our mother more. And as far as I was concerned, my mom was the most beautiful woman who ever lived, with Morgan coming in second.

Kipton's face popped up in my mind...

Okay...so my mom was one of two vying for most beautiful woman.

"What in the hell?" I whispered to myself, trying to shake off thoughts of Kipton.

"You say something?" Georgiana asked.

I shook my head.

Ryan and Morgan arrived next. It was crazy to think Morgan and Georgiana were so close together in their pregnancies. Georgiana looked bigger, though she was only a few weeks further along. They both looked radiant. It was true what people said about pregnant women having a certain glow about them.

"If you'll excuse us, ladies," I said with a smile. "Our friends are starting to show up."

One of the blondes pouted and leaned over to whisper into my ear, "I'll be around if you want to blow off some steam. Sarah was obviously stupid."

I drew back. "Fan of the show, huh?"

She nodded.

"Then you'll understand why I have to say thanks, but no thanks. I'm committed to the show, and that means no outside, um...dating."

With another fake pout, she replied, "That's too bad."

Turning, she waved to everyone before joining the rest of her friends.

"Doesn't take you two long to attract a group of women."

Rose's voice caused me to look up. I was about to make a smart-ass comment when I saw Kipton standing slightly behind her, talking to Dustin. He'd been sitting next to me two seconds ago, so he'd clearly jumped up the moment he saw her. *Asshole*.

"Who wants drinks?" Dustin asked, flashing Kipton a smile that was all too familiar to me. If he thought he was going to try and get into her pants, he had another thing coming.

“I do, after the day I had,” Rose sighed as she slipped into a seat, pulling Kipton down next to her. “Off with you, Dustin, she isn’t interested.”

A blush appeared on Kipton’s cheeks as Dustin placed his hand over his heart. “Tell me it’s not true.”

I rolled my eyes and said, “Just go get some drinks, will you?”

Dustin looked at me...and the smile he used for flirting was replaced by a different one. One I didn’t like at all.

One that said he saw Kipton as a challenge—and he was *always* down for a challenge.

After finding out what everyone wanted, Dustin and Ryan went to the bar to get drinks.

I glanced across the table and smiled at Kipton. “Crazy date, huh?”

She smiled and nodded. “Your mother and I really wanted to know what Sarah was going to say before she was cut off.”

My eyes went wide. “You made my *mother* watch the Truth Booth?”

“Oh shit,” Rose uttered, shaking her head at me. “You done messed up now, cuz.”

A look of anger moved across Kipton’s face, and I swore her eye twitched. “I didn’t *make* your mother do anything. She was the one who wanted to watch it.”

“I asked her not to.”

It was Rose’s turn to correct me, apparently. “No, you told her not to watch the dates. You didn’t say anything about the Truth Booth. And man, Sarah had me fooled. I liked her at first.”

I nodded. “Me too.”

Kipton glanced toward the dance floor. “I’d love to dance...”

Rose laughed. “Honey, don’t worry. I give it three minutes before someone asks.”

Blushing, Kipton pushed Rose lightly on the shoulder. When I looked to the left, I saw Monty Peterson making his way toward our table. I knew he wasn’t going to ask Rose; she couldn’t stand the guy. That meant he was about to ask Kipton to dance.

I quickly stood and moved between them.

“Want to dance?” I asked. She glanced up with a surprised expression. “Unless you don’t want to dance with *me*.”

“No. I mean...” She looked at Rose, who smiled and turned away. When she met my gaze again, she smiled sweetly. “Yes, I’d love to dance, thank

you.”

I reached for her hand, helping her up. Once she turned, I placed my hand on the small of her back and led her to the dance floor. As we passed Monty, I shot him a *better luck next time* look.

The song changed to a slow tune as we walked to an open area. With a wicked smile, I drew her into my arms. The way Kipton fit against my body was pure perfection.

“I’ve never heard this song before,” Kipton said, her blue eyes meeting mine.

“Really? It’s one of my favorite groups, oldie but goodie.”

She shook her head. “Who’s the group?”

“Lifehouse. The song’s called ‘You and Me.’”

All she did was nod before she moved her gaze to stare at my chest.

“Are you nervous to dance with me, Kip?”

Her head snapped up, and she laughed. “Why would I be nervous to dance with you?”

“You suddenly seem shy.”

With a roll of her eyes, she replied, “I think you have me confused with one of the contestants.”

That caused my smile to fade. “That’s impossible.”

A look of hurt appeared on her face.

“I didn’t mean that in a bad way, Kip.”

She waved off my words and looked around the dance floor.

“Speaking of...are the dates planned ahead of time?”

Looking back at me with wide eyes, she replied, “Yes! You figured that out today too?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “You didn’t know?”

She shook her head. “I had no idea, but when I saw the horses ready to go for the ride, I knew there was no way. I asked Jack, and he said they had to plan ahead of time or they wouldn’t be able to pull some of them off. He also told me all the tokens in the bucket say the same thing.”

“Do they pick the girls as well?”

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. “He *did* swear to me they don’t do that. I believe him.”

We danced in silence for a bit before the song changed to a faster one. “Do you know how to two-step?”

She mock gasped. “Of course, I do. Six years of dance classes. I can do

any dance you throw at me.”

“Is that a challenge?” I asked with a grin.

Winking, Kipton replied, “Only if you want it to be!”

I took her hand, lifted it, and spun her around while she let out a laugh that felt like it went straight to my heart.

“Can you do the jitterbug?” she yelled over the music.

“The jitterbug?” I asked with a laugh.

She moved closer to me and stood on her tiptoes to speak directly into my ear. “Also called the country swing?”

When I shook my head, Kipton’s smile grew bigger.

The next two dances were a sad attempt on my part to learn how to do the jitterbug, or the country swing, whichever you wanted to call it. But I’d never had so much fun dancing with anyone like I did with Kipton. It was clear she danced a lot, and she laughed a lot while trying to instruct me, but never in a frustrated or exasperated way.

After dancing at least five songs, Kipton called out, “I’m thirsty!”

I guided her off the dance floor and back to the table. We all soon fell into easy conversations. I liked seeing how easy it was for Kipton to fit in, especially with my sister. I had no idea why that was important to me, maybe because she was my friend, and I wanted my family to like her as much as I did.

*How many friends do you dream about taking in a barn stall?*

Pushing my wayward thoughts to the side, I sighed when the DJ took a break. Talking was easier when we didn’t have to shout over the music.

“What about that time you got caught climbing up the water tower, saying you only wanted to see the stars?” Rose said, laughing.

I pointed across the table at her. “That was Bradly’s idea to do that, and we really *did* want to see if the stars were closer.”

“You climbed a water tower?” Kipton asked.

Nearly everyone at the table started giving each other telling looks. “Is that a question for the entire table?” Morgan asked with a chuckle.

Kipton looked around with a stunned expression. “You’ve *all* climbed the tower? Isn’t that against the law or something?”

“Only if you get caught,” Blayze said with a smile.

“You’ve never done that?” I asked. “Climbed a water tower?”

Kipton laughed. “I’ve never had a reason to.”

“You don’t need a reason to do something crazy.” Blayze chuckled. “You

just need to be brave enough to do it.”

“Says the man who likes to ride bulls for the fun of it,” Ryan stated with a smug smile in my brother’s direction.

“What else have you done that’s considered crazy?” Kipton asked me directly.

I shrugged. “Nothing, really.”

Dustin busted out laughing, right along with my brother and Ryan. Even Morgan grinned.

“Dude, please. You got drunk one night and demanded Blayze and I let you ride Diablo.”

“Diablo?” Kipton asked, directing the question to Dustin.

With a shake of his head, Dustin said, “Diablo is one of the meanest bulls Ty Junior has ever bred. One night, we all got pretty wasted, and Hunter here decided he wanted to tame the beast.”

Blayze laughed. “We were all too drunk to even realize how bad of an idea it was. I’m not even sure how we got Diablo into the chute, if I’m being honest.”

“Or how in the hell Hunter got on him,” Ryan added.

I frowned. “We don’t need to tell this story.”

“Yes, I think they do!” Kipton said with a wide smile.

I grabbed my beer and leaned back, refusing to partake in the conversation.

“That moment when Hunter gave the head nod and Ryan threw open the gate, I swear we all sobered up instantly,” Blayze said, amusement in his voice.

“How did he do?” Kipton asked, her eyes bouncing around all the men at the table before landing on me. “Did you ride the full eight?”

The entire table busted out laughing, even Georgiana, whom Blayze must have told the story to.

“Do *you* want to tell her or should I?” Dustin asked.

I exhaled in frustration and said, “I passed out, and Diablo took me for a little ride. I ended up breaking my arm...which really pissed off Dustin.”

“We had a rodeo the next week to compete in,” he said, the memory clearly causing some annoyance to return.

Kipton gasped. “You broke your arm?”

“He didn’t even realize it until the next day, when our mother saw how swollen it was. The ER doctor told my father he could practically smell

alcohol leaking from Hunter's pores."

I couldn't hold back and finally laughed at my stupidity.

Kipton shook her head, then asked me, "Have you broken many bones?"

With a half shrug, I said, "I've broken my fair share."

"But the best part of the story," Rose stated with an evil glint in her eye, "is that Hunter got a pretty nasty cut on the side of his face, and he declared right then and there he would *not* be pursuing a career in bull riding because his face was too pretty."

"What?" Kipton laughed. "You actually said that?"

Nodding, I said, "When I woke up from the surgery to put pins in my arm, that was the first thing I said to my mother."

"Who, I might add, was grateful that at least one of her boys wouldn't be climbing back onto a bull," Blayze mused as he lifted his beer, and I followed. We clinked our glasses and laughed.

"I'm confused. Why is that part funny?"

"Because I still ride them, of course. Just not competitively, and only if I know the bull won't kick my ass."

"Takes all the fun out of watching him," Ryan stated.

Kipton stared at me for a moment, then asked, "Have you gotten hurt team roping?"

"I have a few times, but nothing too bad. My horse got spooked once and went one way. I went the other and got thrown."

"The last one was your broken ankle last summer," Morgan said. "He walked around on it like it *wasn't* broken."

"Probably why the damn thing healed wrong," Dustin said with a shake of his head.

Glaring at Dustin, I said, "I can still ride and rope just fine."

"I'd love to see you both in action," Kipton said.

Smiling, I nodded. "I think we can arrange that."

The music started again, and an old song by Garth Brooks, "Two of a Kind, Workin' on a Full House," blared from the speakers.

Dustin stood. "Kipton, let's show everyone the proper way to country swing."

Her eyes lit up. "You can jitterbug?"

Looking offended, Dustin pulled her from her chair. "Please. I'm the Jitterbug King!"

Kipton turned and quickly headed to the dance floor, with Dustin hot on

her heels. It didn't take long for Dustin to start twirling Kipton around. He dipped her, did fancy spin moves, and made her face light up in a way I hadn't.

Blayze leaned toward me. "Everyone seems to really like Kipton."

I watched as she let out a laugh while Dustin dipped her again. Nodding, I replied, "Sure seems that way."

And now I was going to have to kick Blayze's ass and my good buddy Dustin's.

## Chapter Fifteen

### KIPTON

The next week flew by in a blur. Both of Hunter's dates ended up being terrible for him. Juliet, the entrepreneur from Florida, had spent the entire date—dinner in Hamilton—complaining about all the other girls at the shared house. I was positive Hunter couldn't swipe left fast enough. There had been zero chemistry. From what I was told, Juliet left the house calling Hunter every name under the sun.

Then it was Brina, who spent more time running her hand up Hunter's leg and flirting with him than she did paying attention to the cooking class they'd attended. Hunter pushed his way through the crowd to get away from her. Her performance in the Truth Booth had been the most staged yet. If the girl wasn't an actress, she needed to be. Her crying on the spot was some of the best theatrics I'd ever seen.

The only thing Hunter did when he walked into his Truth Booth was lean over, swipe left, then walked away. Not a word was spoken, which made it even funnier.

"He can't keep swiping left on every date," Travis complained as the group of women moved into the barn for tonight's date selection.

"Well, if he doesn't like them, why should he swipe right?" I asked.

Travis sent me a withering look. "We need to shake things up."

I glanced at Jack, who shrugged.

"Hunter will have this date tonight, then a group date on Friday. In Vegas," Travis decided.

Gaping at him, I said, "Vegas?"

He nodded and started to type something into his phone. I wanted to groan. Big cities were not my thing, and I knew Hunter would be pissed.



I didn't have time to ponder it any further, though, when one of the producers called out, "Okay, ladies, we're going live in thirty minutes. Be ready to look excited about waiting to see who'll join Hunter on tonight's date."



Hunter seemed apprehensive as I reached into the bowl for a token. "Haleigh will be Hunter's date for the evening!"

Haleigh jumped up and quickly made her way down to Hunter. He gave her a hug, and they both looked at me. The woman looked stunning, as usual. Her dark hair was pulled up and artfully arranged on top of her head.

"Your date tonight will be dinner and dancing here in the barn."

"No candles!"

Hunter shot his brother a dirty look, while Jack's was more of a warning.

"We're going to break for commercial, then come back and join Hunter and Haleigh on their date."

Once we were clear, everyone left the barn except for the people who were quickly setting up the date. If the audience hadn't figured out these dates were hardly spontaneous, then they weren't paying attention.

I snuck into Blayze's office with him and ate pizza while we watched the live show.

"I don't have a good feeling about this one," Blayze said as Rose reached over and grabbed another slice.

Rose nodded. "I like Haleigh, but there's something about her that I can't put my finger on."

"She's very...vocal," I said before I took a bite of pizza.

And just like that, Haleigh started voicing her concerns—about Hunter's family.

Rose dropped her pizza. "What did she just say about our family?"

"I believe she said we're overbearing."

"What?!" Rose shouted as I clamped my hand over her mouth.

"Shhh, they might be able to hear you."

She nodded, then whisper-shouted, "That *bitch!*"

"Oh man, I hope like hell Mom *is* watching this one," Blayze said with a grin.

When I turned back to the screen, Haleigh was still talking.

“I feel like you’re a bit of a momma’s boy. Have you thought of maybe speaking to anyone about your relationship with your mom?”

Hunter stared at her. “Why would I need to do that?”

She shrugged. “Your older brother lives here. You want to live here. Sounds to me like she can’t cut the umbilical cord.”

Rose practically dove for her phone.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

She looked back at me. “My mom is with Aunt Lincoln. I have to see if they’re watching.”

Blayze laughed.

Rose hung up the phone and started to giggle. “Mom said she had to keep Lincoln from storming down here and, I quote, ‘kicking that little girl’s ass.’”

My hand covered my own mouth this time to keep from laughing.

Suddenly, Hunter stood. “I think that’s it for this date.”

Haleigh quickly stood as well. “I’m sorry?”

“I think we’re finished. And before we say goodbye, my mother is the best woman I know, and I’m the man I am today because of her. If that makes me a momma’s boy, then I’m proud to wear that label. Enjoy your flight back to Sacramento.”

“Oh shit!” I said as I scrambled out of the chair. The date was ending not even forty-five minutes in. “I have to get out there.”

Once I slipped out of Blayze’s office, I managed to get over to Jessie, who put my mic and earpiece back in. The producers had gone to an unexpected commercial break.

“Where’s Kipton!” Travis shouted.

I made an *oops* face at Jessie, and she started to giggle. “I’m right here!” I called out as I made my way over to my mark.

“He can’t just up and end a date!” Travis started yelling as one of the PAs held Haleigh while she cried.

“Pretty sure he can when they start insulting his mother,” Jack stated in a low voice, but still loud enough for Travis to hear.

“Wrap this shit up and play that bonus material of Hunter and Dustin roping yesterday,” Travis demanded.

Jack gave him an annoyed look and approached me. “I’m not going to put you in this weird position, Kipton. We’ll use one of your recorded messages to end the show.”

I nodded, then looked around the barn. If they were going to use a

prerecorded message, I wanted to find Hunter to make sure he was okay.  
“Where’s Hunter?”

He shrugged. “Gone.”

Chewing on my lower lip, I wasn’t sure if I should try to find him or not. In the end, I figured he needed a break from the show, and I wasn’t entirely sure I was someone he would want to see.



By the time Friday rolled around, Hunter had cooled off. He hadn’t bothered to show up for any meetings the day before, so Jack asked me to track him down and tell him that Friday was a group date. In Vegas.

I knocked on Blayze’s office door before poking my head in. The door had been open. Hunter was sitting there, a beer in his hand as Blayze sat on the other side of his desk.

“Hey, you didn’t show up for the meeting this morning.”

Hunter shot me a warning look. When I looked at Blayze, he simply lifted his brows.

Clearing my throat, I said, “Jack asked me to track you down since you weren’t answering your phone to tell you about the date for tomorrow.”

Something like a grunt came from Hunter, so I went on.

“It’s going to be in Vegas.”

His head snapped around to look at me. “Vegas? The date is in Vegas?”

I swallowed hard and nodded. “It’s going to be a group date.”

Lifting the beer, he finished it off. “I hate Vegas.”

Forcing a smile, I said, “Have you been there before?”

Blayze coughed to cover his laugh as Hunter stood and faced me.

“Yes. Have you?”

I shook my head.

He closed his eyes and dropped his head. I had to fight the urge to walk up and wrap my arms around him.

After a few moments of silence, he sighed, set the beer on Blayze’s desk, and looked at me. “I fucking hate this show.”

Then he walked out. I watched him leave, then turned to Blayze.

“Since it’s clear my baby brother isn’t happy about Vegas, can I give you twenty to put down on the roulette table? Let it all ride on red.”

My hand came up to my mouth to hide my smile as Blayze leaned back in

his seat and smiled.



Rose practically skipped over to me once she and Hunter arrived at the barn. How she had managed to talk Hunter into going, I would never know. I was glad, though, to have her come along. We had quickly become friends, so it would be nice to have someone along who was not part of the show.

“All right, let’s get this going, people!” Jack yelled. We were going to prerecord the announcement about the group date, then film everyone heading to Vegas. The show would go live later this evening.

“How can you be so chipper first thing in the morning?” I asked Rose as I took a sip of my tea.

Rose shrugged, kicking back on a hay bale as women scrambled in every direction in a mad dash to get their hair and makeup fixed. “It’s like watching lab rats scramble for the last bit of cheese. I can’t look away and am fascinated at their commitment.”

“Rose!” I laughed, hitting her leg.

She smirked. “Jack will definitely regret letting me go with you guys.”

“He probably will.” I chuckled. Rose, who had begged and pleaded with Hunter to let her come, even offering to pay for her own plane ticket, clearly amused Jack because he invited her to fly in the private jet that would carry him, Travis, Hunter, and myself, as well as Jessie and Larry.

Once we all piled into the limo, it was clear Jack did, indeed, have regrets about Rose tagging along.

“Five minutes,” Jack said to Rose before the limo pulled up to the private hangar. “I just need you to shut up for five minutes.”

Hunter and I exchanged a smile.

“I’m sorry if you’re dull and you don’t like conversation,” Rose stated. “I’m excited. I’ve never been to Vegas.”

The doors to the limo opened, and we all slipped out. Rose winked at me, then asked Jack, “Will there be food and drinks served on the flight?”

Jack growled as he marched toward the steps that led to one of the private planes the show had arranged for.

“Maybe you should go fly with all the other women,” Jack said right before he was about to step onto the plane.

Rose pushed past him and let out a small, excited scream before she

looked around Jack and said to me, “There are food and drinks!”

I laughed as I walked up to the steps and past Jack, who was half in and half out of the plane. Hunter was behind me and said, “Looks like she decided on this plane.”

Setting my bag in a seat, I watched as Jack walked into the plane and smiled at the flight attendant. “Bring me the strongest alcohol you have.”



The second the three private planes landed in Vegas, we were all whisked off to the Bellagio. Rose rode with Hunter and me in a limo. She was carrying two dress bags for our simple evening out, but I honestly never thought to ask why since it was Vegas. Everyone dressed up for pretty much everything in Vegas. At least, that was what I’d heard.

“This is madness,” Rose commented as she watched the crew scrambling to get everything set up in an area outside of the nightclub. “How did they get the Bellagio to agree to let you film live, in their nightclub, with a week’s notice?”

I wasn’t sure who Rose was directing the comment to since I was attempting not to stare at a man nearby whom I swore was a younger version of Tom Cruise.

“Earth to Kipton!” Rose said, snapping her fingers in front of my face.

“Sorry,” I said, then nudged her. “Does that guy look like Tom Cruise?”

Rose followed my gaze and nodded. “Kind of. Is he part of *Swipe Right*?”

“I highly doubt it.”

She squinted to get a better look at the guy. “He’s way too young, but damn, he is hot as hell.”

I wasn’t going to argue with her on that one. When he turned and saw the two of us staring, I felt my cheeks heat. “Most certainly not Tom Cruise,” I whispered.

“Still hot, though,” Rose stated.

We both turned away and started to giggle like schoolgirls.

“I need to get your mic and earphone in,” Jessie stated as she walked over. Tricia was behind her, holding my makeup bag.

“Need a touch-up?”

“Are you kidding?” Rose interrupted. “With all this lighting, she’s going to look amazing!”

“You’re only saying that because you did my makeup on the plane.”

Rose shrugged. “I’m good at makeup, and don’t look now, but Mr. Cruise is heading our way.”

I felt my body tense as I turned to see him walking toward us with Travis. The closer he got, the more handsome he became. Stunning green eyes and light brown hair that had a messy, just-fucked look. He was built, but not overly so, and he filled out the jeans and turtleneck he wore very nicely.

“Kipton, this is Mark Devine. Mark, this is Kipton Howse.”

Mark reached for my hand, and instead of shaking it, he lifted it to his lips and placed a soft kiss on the back. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Ms. Howse.”

Clearing the frog in my suddenly dry throat, I replied, “Please, call me Kipton, and the pleasure’s all mine.”

“We’ll have to see about that.”

My mouth fell open at his comment, but before I could even reply, Travis introduced Mark to Rose, who promptly launched into her own flirting game.

“The man of the hour,” Travis stated as everyone turned to see Hunter approaching. My jaw nearly fell to the floor at the sight of him. Jeans, cowboy boots, and a blue button-down shirt that made his eyes pop.

“You might want to catch that bit of drool at the corner of your mouth there, Kipton,” Rose whispered.

I quickly put my hand to my mouth as I shot her a dirty look.

“Hunter, this is Mark Devine. Mark, Hunter Shaw.”

Mark reached his hand out and shook Hunter’s. “I’ve seen you and your partner ride, damn good ropers.”

Hunter smiled. “Thank you, I appreciate that.”

“Mark is one of the investors with the network,” Travis added.

Hunter nodded.

“I went to college with your older brother, Blayze. Saw him ride a few times, too. Talented, like your father and uncles.”

I watched as Hunter’s jaw twitched, and I knew his smile was now forced.

“I gave Travis a suggestion for one of the dates,” Mark said, giving the producer a wicked smile. “I hope he implements it.”

Travis nodded. “I already told Jack about it. He’s a go.”

“Do we get to find out what that date is?” I asked.

Both men turned to look at me before Mark said, “You and I could try it

out first, if you'd like."

I felt my cheeks heat because I had a sudden feeling he wasn't talking about a romantic dinner for two. "As flattered as I am, I'm not available."

That caused everyone to give me a questioning look. Including Rose, who seemed more amused than anything, before she focused her attention on Mark. "I'm available."

Mark laughed and took Rose's hand once more, placing a kiss on it before he and Travis walked away.

"I was being serious, but clearly, he only has eyes for *you*," Rose smirked as she crossed her arms.

Hunter scowled. "I don't like him."

"You met him for a total of two minutes, if that," I retorted.

Hunter shrugged. "He's an arrogant asshole if he thought he could talk to you like that."

A part of me liked that Hunter was standing up for me. The same part of me that also dozed off on the plane and had a very sexual dream about our bachelor. With a shake of my head, I pushed those thoughts away.

Jack approached with a determined expression, his voice curt. "We need to get into place. We go live in a few minutes."

Tricia did something with my hair, while Rose reached up and pinched my cheeks.

"Ouch!" I cried out, batting her hands away. "What are you doing?"

"You need some color."

I snarled my lip at her and turned my back.

"Didn't you think she needed color?" I heard her asking Tricia.

"She did look a little pale," she agreed.

Spinning around, I glared at the two of them.

Jack reached for my elbow and started to walk toward the entrance of the nightclub. It was only six thirty Vegas time, but the network had decided to start early. Vegas clubs picked up late in the evening, and plenty of viewers wouldn't want to wait that long.

"Okay, some of the club patrons are paid actors, some are guests at the hotel who were asked if they'd like to participate. Like we talked about on the plane, you'll do the intro for the date, then Paul and Louie, as well as another camera crew, will be in the club with Hunter and the girls. We've rented a suite for a staging area of sorts, and we've got a Truth Booth set up in there for Hunter. No one will be swiped on tonight."

He turned to Hunter, who'd been walking behind us. "Got that? No swipes on the group date."

Hunter frowned, then asked, "Why not?"

"Travis doesn't want any swipes from you on group dates."

With a shake of his head, Hunter replied, "What Travis wants..."

Jack paused for a moment as if he was going to reply to Hunter's comment, but he let it go.

Hunter sighed as he asked, "Do I go in now?"

Jack nodded. "Yes, the girls are already in there, and there's someone who's firing up the crowd to get them ready. I need you to try to loosen up before we go live."

Hunter gave a slight nod, then turned to walk into the nightclub.

"Hunter," Travis called out.

"Yeah?"

With a smile that only one dude would give to another dude, he said, "Have fun tonight."

Hunter's eyes snapped over to me, and he stared for what felt like way too long before he looked back at Travis and simply said, "I will."

Once he was through the door, Jack gave me a once-over. "I'd like for you to wear something else."

I glanced down at my jeans, high heels, and sweater. "What's wrong with what I have on? Winnie and I decided on it yesterday."

Rose folded her arms over her chest. "What are you up to? Why did you wait until the last minute to have her change?"

Jack ignored Rose as I looked between the two of them, confused. "What?"

Rose turned to me. "I brought a dress for you."

"Winnie!" Jack called out.

As if she'd been floating nearby waiting for his call, Winnie appeared in front of me with one of the bags Rose had brought to Vegas. "Come on. There's a bathroom we can use."

"What's wrong with what I have on?" I demanded. Turning to Rose, I asked, "What dress?"

As Winnie pulled me toward a public bathroom, I heard Rose ask Jack, "What game are you playing at? You didn't want Hunter to see her in that dress, did you?"

When I glanced over my shoulder, Jack replied, "Sure as shit didn't."



I wanted to ask them what in the hell they were talking about, but Big Steve, one of the security guys, was now behind us, blocking my view of Rose and Jack.

“Don’t worry, Ms. Howse. I’ll make sure no one steps foot in the bathroom until you come out.”

Big Steve had misread the look of confusion on my face for one of concern. Now that he said that, of course, I was imagining someone just randomly walking into the public bathroom and seeing me in my bra and panties while I changed clothes.

Little did I know, I’d have on less clothes than I thought.

Ten minutes later, I walked out of the bathroom, and the only thing I wore that was my own were my black heels. Somehow, Winnie had managed to get me into a dress that was basically lingerie.

Essentially, it was a black one-piece bodysuit. The boned bodice had underwire cups that lifted my breasts. I had to admit, even I didn’t know the girls could look that good. Winnie topped it with tiered, ruffled tulle that really didn’t cover much at all. The smallest ruffles ever gave the appearance of a skirt, but it was laughable at best.

Big Steve’s eyes nearly popped out of his head when I stepped out. Suddenly, flashes started to go off all around me. One sweep of the crowd and I saw tourists holding up their phones, taking pictures.

“Who is she?” someone to my right whispered.

“That one famous actress. You know, the one who dated Harry Styles?”

I chuckled and mumbled, “I wish.”

The area around the front of the club had been roped off, and the camera crew was all set up. As I approached, Rose stumbled back a few steps, and Jack had to keep her from falling.

“What happened to sweet, innocent Kipton?” she asked, her eyes twinkling with excitement.

“She seems to be wearing underwear and a tulle skirt,” I deadpanned, glaring at Jack.

He slowly shook his head, looking me up and down, and said, “Damn good call not to let Hunter see you in this.”

My brows drew together. “Why?”

Rose and Jack exchanged a knowing look before he cleared his throat. “Let’s get into places, people! Our dark angel has clearly arrived.”

Leaning toward me, Rose said in a hushed voice, “You’re the dark angel,

by the way.”

“I gathered,” I spat back, twisting to adjust the underwire digging into my side.

Winnie walked over and chuckled. “The things we put our bodies through to look beautiful. I can block you if you need to adjust.”

“Adjust it how? My boob feels like it’s twisted.”

Rose exhaled as I kept fidgeting. “For goodness’ sake, Winnie, block us.”

Big Steve and Winnie stood in front of us like human shields. I nearly screamed when Rose stuck her hand into the bodice and lifted my breast, adjusting it in the cup.

“What in the hell, Rose?” I hissed. Then paused. “Oh, God...that feels so much better.”

“By the way, Morgan designed this dress.”

Gaping, I asked, “*Our* Morgan? I mean...*Morgan*? As in, Hunter’s sister?”

Rose beamed with pride. “The one and only.”

I glanced down at the dress. It really *did* make me feel like a sexy diva the first time Winnie turned me around to look in the mirror. “It’s beautiful.”

“On *you*. It looks like it was made for you, Kipton. Look at all the guys staring right now. Tell me this dress doesn’t make you feel ten times sexier than standing up onstage in a two-piece at the Miss America pageant.”

I fingered the tulle and gently rubbed it between my thumb and index finger before my eyes met Rose’s. “It makes me feel like I can do anything.”

Rose clapped. “I can’t wait to tell Morgan! She wants her designs to make women feel sexy and confident.”

“And this dress does!”

Jack spoke in my ear, causing me to jump.

“Three minutes.”

I drew in a slow, deep breath, then exhaled. “Let’s do this.”

Rose squeezed my hand, then went to stand next to Jack and Winnie. Jessie rushed over and put my mic back on, moving faster than I’d ever seen her move.

“Testing,” Jessie said into the mic. She took a step back and grinned. “If I wasn’t into guys, I’d seriously have a girl crush on you right now.”

Pushing her back lightly, I felt my cheeks heat. “Stop it.”

There was total chaos before the last twenty seconds when everyone got into place.

Someone next to the camera—I couldn't remember his name, Luke or Duke or something—counted down with his fingers before he pointed, and that familiar red light popped on.

“Good evening, *Swipe Right* fans! Tonight, we're coming to you live from Las Vegas, here in the beautiful Bellagio Hotel. I'm standing in front of one of MGM's most popular nightclubs, Mayfair After Dark. This evening was a surprise date for Hunter, and one unlike viewers have seen before. He's not out with one woman—he's out with *seven*. Our seven randomly picked women tonight are Kimber, Genevie, Sarriah, Devyn, Ally, and last, Rainey. What lucky, lucky girls!”

I paused for a moment so that they could show a clip from Kimber and Hunter's first date. Once they were done, the camera was back on me.

“Tonight, the camera will follow Hunter and his seven dates around the club, and I'm told the date has already started with drinks delivered to their table, courtesy of the hotel. In a couple of hours, Hunter will go back to a temporary Truth Booth here in the Bellagio, where he has the ability to swipe left...you heard me correctly...he can swipe left on one or more of his dates.”

Jack nodded. No one had told me if a decision had been made on how many women Hunter could swipe left on after he had argued with Travis about being able to swipe left this evening.

“Are we ready to see this?” I frowned in thought. “I don't even know what to call a date with one guy and seven women. Fun?” I laughed and took a step back. “Shall we join the date?”

The doors to the club opened and the camera panned like it was going in, before it switched over to one of the two cameras inside the club. You could barely hear the music thumping, and I had the strangest need to know how they'd managed to soundproof the room.

“You're out, Kipton,” Jack said into my ear. Jessie appeared and took the mic and earpiece. The date would last the allotted two hours, so I was about to ask Rose if she wanted to find a restaurant when Jack suddenly appeared in front of us.

“Rose, Kipton, I want you both to go into the club and head to the bar.”

Rose looked like she wanted to take off one of her heels—which were Jimmy Choo pumps—and hit Jack. The look she gave him was positively scary. “Do you want this expensive heel up your ass? Don't do this, Jack.”

According to Rose, her heels were the most uncomfortable shoes she'd ever worn, but because she'd paid a small fortune for them, she wore them

whenever she could. Everyone knew she wasn't going to sacrifice that shoe.

I turned to Jack with what I knew was a suspicious look. "Why do we have to go in?"

He tilted his head and offered a patient smile. A look my father would give me. "Because I want you to enjoy yourself, Kipton. You're in Vegas. Just don't get drunk, I need you to finish up the show."

"But I wanted to check out the Bellagio." I wasn't too proud to whine.

"Look what happened on Wednesday's date. If Hunter decides to bail and end this one early—even though he was told not to—I need you here."

"He would never do that, not knowing what it took to fly everyone out here." I wanted to stomp my foot like a child. "I'm starving, Jack."

"They serve food at the bar," Jessie stated with a helpful smile on her face.

With a little wave of his hand toward the nightclub door, he said, "Go, have fun."

Rose grabbed my arm and we started toward the door. "Come on. He isn't going to let up until you get in there."

Before we walked through the door, Jack called out, "Have fun, ladies!"

I glanced over my shoulder, but the doors had already shut. When I turned to Rose, I asked, "What's going on?"

She wore an angry expression. "I have a feeling you're suddenly part of this whole social dating experiment—and tonight, they're tossing you into the lion's den."

## Chapter Sixteen

### KIPTON

I had died and gone to hell. Pure hell.

Rose and I sat at the bar in the nightclub for nearly two hours while man after man came up and hit on us. Every time a guy asked me to dance, Jack was in my ear, telling me to decline. At one point, I nearly pulled the earpiece out. Rose pulled up the live-stream comment section, and I saw a few comments about me and the dress I was wearing. Some of them made me smile.

*“I think we need to vote Kipton in as one of Hunter’s dates.”*

*“Kipton Howse is ten times more beautiful than any of those other women Hunter’s dating.”*

*“Can we Swipe Right on Kipton, please!?”*

Rose grabbed the Diet Coke the bartender had just placed in front of her and sipped through her straw. With a shake of her head, she glanced around. “This is my first real nightclub, and I’m bored out of my goddamn mind.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

The song changed, and a few of the girls with Hunter squealed. The floor seemed to clear out to make room for the cameras. No one in the group had seen me and Rose since we were tucked into a corner at the end of the bar.

“Oh God,” Rose said, just loud enough that I heard her over the beginning notes of the song.

What I saw caused my mouth to fall open. “Oh my...”

The song was Jason Derulo’s “Talk Dirty to Me”...and the way the women were dancing up against Hunter had me blushing.

“I never knew women could even move like that,” Rose gasped as we both slipped off our stools and moved closer to the dance floor. Jack had told

us more than once to stay put, even though he had also told us to have fun. This was the first time I'd been able to see Hunter—and he looked to be enjoying himself.

He had a smile on his face as Kimber did a dirty grind against his thigh.

I watched as woman after woman moved against his body, their hands all over him, his hands on them, but not nearly as bad. He didn't touch them inappropriately. A few times his smile slipped when one of the girls got a little too personal.

"Maybe we should leave?" Rose yelled out.

I couldn't have moved if someone had screamed "fire." My eyes were glued on Hunter, on how much he was clearly enjoying all the attention.

Kimber spun and pushed her ass into Hunter's groin, and he took a step back, but still put his hands on her hips briefly before removing them. Had he pushed her away? I couldn't tell. When Lynn wrapped her arms around Hunter from the side and tried to kiss him, he grinned and shook his head, drawing her arms away from his neck.

Then it was Kimber's turn. Hunter attempted to tell her no, but she pulled his head down and kissed him—hard.

A rush of jealousy hit me so hard, I took a step back.

*Friends. You're friends with him, Kipton. He doesn't owe you anything.*

"I'm sure he has to dance like that with them, ya know?" Rose yelled over the song. All I could do was nod and give her a forced smile.

When I looked back out onto the dance floor, my eyes locked with Hunter's.

He was frozen in place now, while the seven women danced around him. His eyes swept over me from head to toe. Kimber reached for his arm and drew his attention back to the group for a moment, but he turned and looked back at me. He looked surprised...and angry.

The song ended, and before the next one began, Rose turned and faced me.

"And *that* is why Jack didn't want him to see you in that dress beforehand. I wasn't sure what he was up to until I just saw how Hunter looked at you. Dammit, I'm so stupid. It all makes sense now. He knew he'd react this way. He had this whole damn thing planned out, Kipton. He wanted to see what Hunter would do when he saw you."

I slowly shook my head as I watched Kimber tugging on Hunter's arm again. He still seemed to be glued in place, like I was.

“Let’s go,” Rose begged as she headed for the club exit.

It took me a full ten seconds before I finally forced my feet to move. I could hear my name being called out by Hunter, but I knew if I turned around, everyone in the club and, most importantly, those watching from home, would see it on my face.

The hurt. The anger. The jealousy.

I was falling in love with Hunter Shaw, and my heart felt like someone had ripped it out as I watched him dance with those women.

I picked up my pace, only to be stopped by Jack. The triumphant look on his face made my stomach drop.

“You did this on purpose,” I said, my voice cracking while I attempted to keep my emotions at bay.

“Kipton, I noticed the attraction between you the moment you both met on Zoom.”

“You used me,” I said. “Dressed me up in this outfit to see what he’d do.”

Jack nodded. “It’s a social dating experiment, Kipton.”

“That I’m not a part of!” I shouted, causing a few people around us to look in our direction.

Rose walked back to me. “I think maybe you should hold off on yelling at him until the cameras stop. People are starting to stare.”

I drew in a breath and held it a few moments before slowly letting it out.

“It’s time for the date to end, so I need you to get into place,” Jack stated.

The way Jack was calmly telling me to basically get over it and do my job made me want to scream and run. I wasn’t going to quit. I needed the money, but I wasn’t about to let this asshole use me in the games he was playing.

Going forward, however, I’d need to make a few changes. It was clear I was working for a bunch of liars who didn’t mind messing with everyone’s feelings. Social dating, my ass. Jack and I were going to have a long talk, and the sooner the better.

“Kipton.” Jessie’s soft voice infiltrated my running thoughts. Turning, I followed her numbly as we made our way through the crowd. We stopped at the bar, and I tried to ignore the way people looked at me, the whispers I couldn’t make out.

Jessie checked to make sure the mic was working. My eyes drifted past her to the dance floor, only to see all the girls dancing together and Hunter nowhere in sight.

“Where’s Hunter?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about where Hunter is. You go on in two minutes.”

Jack’s command nearly had me ripping the earpiece out. Instead, I glared at him. “We need to talk.”

Jack cleared his throat. “We will.”

“Before we head back to Montana.”

“Thirty seconds,” he said, ignoring my request.

Hunter suddenly appeared, walking toward me. Paul following him with a camera.

“Hunter,” I heard in my ear, “we’re still live, so please stop looking at Kipton like you want to devour her.” The voice came from Travis who had remained all too quiet during all of this.

Hunter dragged his eyes away from me and stopped to say something to Lynn. He should have been looking at her that way, not me. After all, she was dressed in a black sequined cocktail dress that left nothing to the imagination.

“Here we go,” Jack said as I watched the countdown and the red light appear.

I stared at the camera, unable to get anything to come out of my mouth.

Jack softly said my name. “Kipton...”

“You’re live, Kipton!” Travis said more urgently.

I laughed. I don’t know why, but I laughed.

Everyone standing behind the camera, Rose included, gaped at me. My hand came up to my mouth, and I laughed harder. I needed to get a grip before I made a complete fool of myself.

“I’m sorry about that,” I breathed. “Have you ever had a funny thought and it hit you at the worst possible moment? That was me about ten seconds ago. How about that date, viewers? Seven women and Hunter having a blast on the dance floor? Hot stuff! Did you see any connections between our bachelor and his dates? Hunter certainly seemed to be enjoying himself,” I said with a wink. “Why don’t we bring Hunter over so we wrap up our night in Las Vegas. Crazy to think we’re here, right?”

Turning, I watched as Hunter made his way over to stand next to me. “Hunter, did you enjoy your evening at the club?”

He swallowed hard and nodded.

“Cat got your tongue?” I asked as I tilted my head and put on my best smile. I was pretty sure I could beat out any actress in this role right now. My head spun with a million different emotions. Jealousy over watching Hunter with all seven girls. Anger at Jack using me the way he did. And sadness that



I was wearing the sexiest dress I'd ever had on, and no one gave two shits. I had no one to hold me while we danced to a sexy song. No one to whisk me back to my room. No one to slowly remove the dress and make love to me.

A feeling of utter loneliness swept over me. I had no one.

The sudden realization caused me to turn away from Hunter before he answered.

"It was fun," he said vaguely. That was his only response.

I forced yet another smile and said, "I'm sure we'll get more details in the Truth Booth. We hope you enjoyed tonight's surprise live date here in Las Vegas at the beautiful Bellagio Hotel and Casino. Until next time!"

The moment the red light went off, a plethora of women circled Hunter. Some from the show, some not.

Jessie started to take off my mic, and I shook my head. "Not here."

Spinning on my heels, I quickly made my way to the exit, where the staff at the hotel were wrangling those who'd been paid to participate. Crew security escorted us to the door.

"Excuse us, please," Big Steve said as he made a path for me and Jessie.

"Kipton!" Jessie said, struggling to keep up with me. "I need to take off the mic and—"

Stopping, I ripped the mic off and yanked out the earpiece. I handed both to her and turned once again. I had no idea where in the hell I was going, I only knew I needed to get away from everyone.

"Let me help," Mark Devine said, suddenly appearing next to me and gently grabbing my elbow.

"I need fresh air."

He simply nodded, motioning for two guys to walk in front of us.

As we approached a set of elevators, I came to an abrupt stop. "Where are we going?"

With a smile that might have worked on other women, he purred, "My hotel room. Where else."

I pulled my arm back out of his grip and stared at him. "You honestly think I'm going to go up to your room with you?"

He gave me a once-over. "Yes."

My hands clutched my hips as I glared at him. "What, do you think because I'm dressed like this, I'm simply going to agree to go to your room for a quick fuck?"

"That's what I was thinking."

Before I even knew what I was doing, I slapped the living shit out of Mark. He stumbled backward, looking genuinely confused for a moment—then laughed.

“You think this is funny?”

He nodded. “I do. And I think I’m even more attracted to you now than I was before.”

My lip snarled as I looked at him in disgust. “Ugh, men!”

Walking away from Mark, I made my way back to where the production staff for *Swipe Right* had congregated. It was probably best that I not wander alone after all, especially considering how I was dressed.

Jack nodded at me. “Thank you for not going with Mark.”

I felt my jaw clench. “Was that some other kind of test I didn’t know about?”

Rose cleared her throat and said, “If we’re going to fly back tonight, I think Kipton should change.”

Looking down at the dress, I sighed. The outfit was wasted on this place. “Do you think Morgan will let me buy this?” I asked her.

“It’s yours,” Jack said with a smile. “I bought it for you for tonight.”

“You bought me this dress?”

Rose bumped my arm and said, “Don’t forget why he wanted you dressed up in the first place. And might I add, I had no idea until he told Winnie not to get you dressed until the last minute.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Remind me why I said you could come?”

With a fake-ass smile, Rose replied, “Because you adore my company and Hunter insisted.”

“Hardly.” Jack sighed with a grimace in Rose’s direction. “I think you should fly back on the plane with the girls.”

“Ha! You wish.”

“I do wish. Very much so. I have never in my life met a woman who infuriated me more. Please, will you just go away?”

Rose huffed. “I infuriate you? Me? Oh please, you’re the most obnoxious, pretentious pain in the ass I’ve ever met—”

I held up my hands. “Okay, stop! Both of you.”

They clamped their mouths shut and glared at one another.

“Rose is right. I want to change.”

Jack looked mildly contrite for the first time. “You do look beautiful, Kipton.”

With a sad smile, I replied, "Thank you."

"Come on. We'll go up to the room the hotel gave us. Winnie put your clothes and both of our purses in there."

"Isn't Hunter filming his Truth Booth?"

Jack motioned toward the elevators, and Rose and I followed. "Travis texted me and said it was short and sweet. It seems that you're not the only person pissed off this evening."

Hitting the button for up, Jack rubbed at the back of his neck.

"You look tired," Rose observed and not in a malicious way. She was right. He truly did look exhausted.

"I've got to be honest," Jack said, gesturing for us to precede him into the elevator. "I never thought this show would take off like it has. I really liked the idea of following someone around as they navigated through the waters of dating, but I don't think you can do a show like this and not have it be authentic like I had originally wanted."

"And you've had a change of heart?" I asked as I leaned against the back wall of the elevator.

He shook his head. "I won't lie to you, Kipton. Travis and I always knew we wanted to see what would happen if we put you both in a situation where Hunter was out with a bunch of the women, then saw you dressed like this." He motioned to me. "We wanted to see what Hunter would do when presented with someone not part of the group. It was planned all along...and was also one of the main reasons we picked you to host the show."

"How did you know Hunter would even be attracted to Kipton?"

I glared at Rose.

"We didn't. But he's a guy, and Kipton's gorgeous. If he truly wasn't attracted, we would have let it go and ditched the group date. We didn't have to. It was clear from the moment they met they were attracted to one another."

I quickly turned my glare to Jack. "How could you do this to me? I *never* gave you permission to fuck with my emotions!"

Rose gently touched my arm and whispered, "Kipton."

Closing my eyes, I leaned against the wall again. I was so tired I could hardly stand, and most of it was exhaustion from pretending I didn't have feelings for Hunter.

"Do you like him?" Jack asked.

My eyes opened, and our gazes met. I drew in a long, deep breath and let

it all out at once. “It doesn’t matter either way. He’s doing this show and dating all these women. And I think he likes Kimber.”

Rose laughed. “He may like her, but he doesn’t look at her the way he looks at *you* when he doesn’t think anyone’s watching.”

Jack nodded in agreement. “And a man doesn’t look at a woman the way he looked at you in that club if he *doesn’t* have feelings for her.”

I shrugged as the elevator door opened. “All you proved by dressing me up like a doll is that Hunter’s just like any other man. His head turns easily.”

“That’s not true,” Rose argued, anger lacing her voice.

Jack gently took my elbow and brought me to a stop. “Kipton, I don’t care what you and Hunter do after the show. There’s just one thing I need to know before we go on.”

“What’s that?” I asked in a weary voice.

“Are you going to be able to keep watching him go on these dates? Are you going to be able to stay neutral when Hunter has a successful date or kisses another woman?”

I let out a bark of laughter. “Jack, you seem to be forgetting one very important thing.”

He lifted a brow as Rose asked, “What?”

Glancing between the two of them...a horrified feeling swept over me when I suddenly realized I wanted to cry. I held my emotions in check and looked Jack directly in the eyes.

“We’re not together. Hunter has never even hinted at being interested in anything other than friendship, all his supposed stares notwithstanding. Plus, you hired me to do a job, and that’s what I’m going to do. To answer your question—yes, I will be able to stay neutral and do the job I was contracted to do. And when it’s all over, I will go back to my home and forget about this experiment.”

I started to continue down the hall, Jack and Rose following. “It’s the last room on the left,” Rose said.

Jack’s cell phone rang. “It’s Travis,” he told us before answering. “Hello?” He stopped abruptly. “Are you kidding me? She did *what*? I’ll be right down.”

Hitting End on his phone, he shoved a hand through his hair in frustration and sighed. “There’s a problem down in the lobby. Here’s the key. I’ll meet you both down there. Take your time, Kipton.”

“What happened?” I asked.

Looking even more tired than he was five minutes ago, Jack said, “Two of the girls got into a fist fight.”

Rose gasped and turned to me. “Do you need help changing? I’ve always wanted to see a cat fight in person!”

Jack frowned at Rose like she’d lost her mind, and I laughed. “Go. I am certainly capable of changing myself, thank you. Do I leave the key in the room?”

With a quick nod, Jack said, “Yes,” then pointed at Rose and added, “and you are not coming.”

Heading down the hall back toward the elevator, Rose practically ran to keep up with Jack. “Oh, yes, I am, and there’s nothing you can do about it!”

“Tie you up and leave you somewhere would be one solution.”

Rose laughed. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

The elevator doors opened, and they both entered with Jack saying something to Rose that I couldn’t make out.

With a shake of my head, I turned and headed to the room. If they didn’t end up sleeping together, I would honestly be surprised.

I held the key card up to the black box, and the door unlocked. When I stepped in, the room was pitch black. Travis said Hunter’s recap was short and sweet, but it must’ve been a *really* fast Truth Booth for the crew to have cleared out already. My eyes were having a hard time adjusting to the dark, so I flipped a light on.

When I turned toward the room, I let out a scream and pressed myself against the door.

“Oh my God!” I cried out, hand to my heart. “Hunter! What in the hell are you doing sitting in the dark?”

He gave me a lazy half smile. The kind that only lifted his lips at one end...and made my lower stomach heat in the most delicious of ways.

“I was waiting for *you*.”

## Chapter Seventeen

### HUNTER

What a fucked-up night it had turned out to be. Never mind Travis stuck in my ear nearly the entire night, telling me to enjoy myself, dance more, talk more. I thought these were supposed to be dates on *my* terms, not the damn producers'. I didn't want to be in a damn Las Vegas nightclub. I wanted to be in Montana. Alone.

I sighed and pushed a hand through my hair. That was a lie.

I wanted to be with Kipton.

I wanted to watch her smile, hear her laugh, and dance with her again. My feelings for her were growing stronger by the day, and I wasn't sure how much longer I could do this...pretend my breath didn't catch every time she walked into a room. Act like my body didn't come to life when she stood near me or touched me in the slightest way.

"Fuck," I whispered as I sat down on the end of the bed with Paul sticking a camera in my face.

"You're on in twenty," Travis stated.

"Where's Jack?" I asked.

"He's taking care of an issue he caused."

"What kind of issue?"

Travis ignored me. "Five, four..."

I wanted to roll my eyes. Instead, I glanced down at my hands. I did that every single time I was about to do one of these stupid truth things.

The red light was my sign. I looked up and exhaled. "I had fun tonight on the group date, but...it didn't allow me to get to know any of the girls any better. I'm a simple country boy who would rather get on a horse and ride for an hour with one girl than act like some playboy at a nightclub in Vegas.

Other than some dancing and decent drinks, I didn't get much out of tonight. I vote for no more group dates." I glanced away, then back at the camera. "And I think it's time for Sarriah to leave."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me! There were no swipes tonight," Travis growled as I pulled the earpiece out.

I stood and walked out of the bedroom. We were in a penthouse suite, so I walked straight over to the fully stocked bar and poured myself some whiskey. I wasn't much of a whiskey drinker, but tonight, I would be.

Larry took off the mic while Paul and Louie wrapped things up quickly and started to leave. "You want me to tell them you'll be down in a bit?" Paul asked.

"Thanks, Paul. I won't be long."

He and I had become friends these past few weeks, and I appreciated him giving me the time I needed to get my head back on straight. Travis had wanted me to ride back to Montana in the plane with the girls, and I'd flat-out refused. If we weren't filming, I wasn't spending time with any of them. It wasn't that I didn't like some of them. I did. Kimber was fun, and someone I could see myself hooking up with if I'd met her outside of the show. I liked Lynn; she was shy, and I had to admit, I found myself wanting to know more about her, but not because I was attracted. She was just a nice person. I could see us being friends.

But none of them were Kipton. None of them made me feel like I was losing my damn mind but...in a good way.

"We need to leave for the airport in about an hour," Paul reminded me "Make sure you grab something to eat."

I smiled at him. "Thanks, Dad."

He shot me the finger and shut the door behind him.

Walking over to the sofa, I sat down and closed my eyes. My mind instantly brought up the image of Kipton in the club, wearing a dress that instantly made everyone else in the place vanish.

She looked so beautiful...but the expression on her face gutted me. She looked disappointed. Hurt. Angry. Hell, maybe all three, I wasn't even sure.

The night had been painful enough, with me trying to act like I was enjoying myself, Travis yelling in my ear every few seconds, two cameras following my every move. When that damn song started, and the women got less inhibited, I decided to hell with it. Seven beautiful women were trying to get my attention, and what harm was there in having a bit of fun? I knew I

wasn't going to kiss any of them because that was just a dick move. I honestly thought it wasn't fair to do so when I could only think about kissing one woman.

Kipton.

But by letting my guard down, I'd encouraged them in a way I didn't intend. And Kipton had to witness women dancing up against me while I wore a stupid smile. I'm sure I appeared to be enjoying it. I wasn't turned on, but from where Kipton was standing...

We weren't together. So why in the hell did I feel like I'd cheated on her?

"This is all so fucked up," I whispered again as I put the glass to my mouth and finished the whiskey. Setting the glass on a coffee table, I scrubbed my hand down my face. I needed to leave, but I wasn't ready to give up the peace and quiet just yet.

I dropped back against the sofa, and a bag in the corner caught my eye. I stood and walked over, and noticed Rose and Kipton's purses were next to it. When I opened the bag, it was the clothes Kipton had been wearing when we left Montana.

I straightened and looked at the door. Winnie had entered behind me earlier...and what had she said? Something about leaving the change of clothes for Kipton...

Kipton would be coming up to the room. Would she be alone?

I glanced back at the bag and decided it was worth the risk. I grabbed my glass and refilled it, then made my way back to the door, where I turned off the lights to the room. I headed to the sofa, sat down, and waited.

The lock on the door made a noise, indicating someone was coming. I knew the second it opened that it was her. No woman had ever made me feel the way Kipton did when she walked into a room.

And I was fucking tired of tiptoeing around my feelings.

The light turned on—and she turned around and screamed, pushing back against the door.

"Oh my God! Hunter! What in the hell are you doing sitting in the dark?"

My eyes took in that dress, her beautiful body, while I tried to ignore the way my dick instantly went hard. I smiled when our eyes locked.

"I was waiting for *you*."

Kipton stood there and stared at me for what felt like an eternity before she finally pushed off the door. "Why are you waiting for me?"

Standing, I finished off the whiskey and set it down. I moved around the



table and walked closer. “I saw your bag, so I figured you’d be coming up to change.”

Her brows pulled down into a frown. “So...you decided to wait in the dark?”

“It was more peaceful.”

She looked around the suite. “No one else is here?”

I shook my head, trying to stay focused on her face, but I lost the battle and let my gaze roam over her body again. “You look...*stunning* in that dress, Kip.”

Her upper teeth dug into her lower lip as she glanced down at herself, then back up at me. I took a step closer, then another. Kipton stepped back until she came to a stop, pressed against the door once again.

“Thank you. But you should know that Jack arranged for me to wear the dress.”

That caused me to pause. “Jack?”

She cleared her throat. “He wanted me to wear something that I might wear if I was in Vegas and going to a club. Morgan designed it. Jack bought it for me.”

I clenched my jaw tightly and fisted my hands. “He *bought* it for you? Why?”

Kipton looked away and let out a frustrated sigh. “He wanted to see what your reaction would be to me in the dress—especially when you were with all the other women.”

“*What?*”

She suddenly looked exhausted. “It doesn’t matter. But he totally blindsided me, and I’m tired and I need to change. We have to leave for the airport in less than an hour, and I haven’t eaten anything and...” Her voice trailed off when her eyes met mine.

I took another step closer until I was only inches away from her. My eyes dropped to her chest, where it rose and fell quickly. *Fuck* if her breasts didn’t look amazing. I was going to have to thank my sister for this outfit.

When I looked back up and our gazes met, I whispered, “I want to kiss you, Kip.”

Her mouth fell open ever so slightly, but she didn’t say anything. Lifting my hand, I wrapped it around her neck as my thumb swept across her silky-smooth cheek. Would the rest of her body feel so soft? I wanted to find out more than anything.

I took another small step closer until our bodies were pressed together. “May I kiss you?”

When she looked up at me, her head resting against the door, she licked her lips, and I took that as a yes.

Leaning down, I brushed a soft kiss across her lips and moaned ever so slightly. I needed more. I needed so much more.

Capturing her mouth with mine, I deepened the kiss, licking along her bottom lip until she opened to me. The moment our tongues met, something inside me seemed to burst open. A feeling I’d never experienced in my life rushed through my veins.

My other hand lifted to her breast, and I squeezed, causing us both to groan in pleasure.

Two seconds later, Kipton put her hand on my chest and pushed me away. “Stop.”

Feeling dizzy and confused, I shook my head. “Stop?”

Kipton ran her hands up and down her arms, then slipped out from between me and the door. She walked into the room and stared out the window. With her back toward me, she asked, “Why did you kiss me?”

I let out a confused laugh. “I would think that’s pretty obvious.”

Turning, she wore a blank expression on her face. “It’s not to me. Unless maybe your little dance session with seven other women turned you on so much, when you saw me dressed like this, you thought you could just take what you want. Like Mark did.”

Another bolt of jealousy hit me. “Mark?”

“He thought he could whisk me up to his room and I’d fuck him. Is that what you thought as well, Hunter? You’d just wait for me to return and let off some of the steam a bunch of other women built up?”

“No!” I practically shouted. “Jesus, Kip, how could you even think that?”

“I saw you dancing with them, Hunter. I saw Kimber pushing her ass into you, kissing you, and you certainly appeared to be enjoying yourself.”

I stared at her for a second. Had she been *jealous*? A small part of me hoped so.

“I didn’t feel *anything*—and for your information, I had Travis in my fucking ear all night, telling me to *act* like I was enjoying myself. ‘Touch her, Hunter; smile at her, Hunter; pull her closer to you, Hunter.’ For two fucking hours, I had to pretend I was having the time of my life in that nightclub, with those women, when all I really wanted was to be back in Montana with *you!*”

She stepped back like I'd slapped her. "What?"

I let out a frustrated breath. "Do you know how goddamn hard it's been trying to act like I'm not attracted to you, Kipton? To pretend you're not invading my dreams nightly, my fantasies during the day? I cannot stop thinking about you. Your smile, your laugh. The way you kick ass at hosting this *stupid* show that I want to hate but I can't, because it brought you into my life.

"When I saw you tonight in that dress, the only thing I could think about was seeing you in it up-close and personal. I wanted to feel your body against mine while I danced with *you* and no one else. I'm fucking *lost* to you, Kipton Howse—and I've never felt this way before in my entire life. I have no clue what to even do about those feelings, and that scares the shit out of me."

Her mouth opened as she gaped at me, but she quickly shut it.

Turning away, she walked over to the floor-to-ceiling window and looked out. "It scares me, too...because I feel the same way about you."

I moved across the room and stood directly behind her. When she leaned her body against mine, I suddenly felt at peace. I wrapped my arms around her and rested my chin on her head and whispered, "Kipton."

"What do we do, Hunter? The show and..."

Turning her, I placed my finger on her chin and lifted it so that her eyes met mine. "We'll figure it out. I promise."

She closed her eyes. "I can't do this and then watch you go on dates. It was hard enough when I was denying my feelings for you, but now that we... I don't know if I can do it."

"I'm going to have my father's attorney look at the contract, see if we can get out of it."

A look of panic crossed her face. "No! Hunter, I need the money I'm making off this job to help my parents get out of debt. I have to finish this show, and so do you. That's a lot of money for your dad's foundation. We'll have to wait until the show is over."

"Wait? I can't wait, Kip! You don't know how badly I want to take you right here against this damn window, and say to hell with anyone finding out about us."

Her eyes widened, but I could see the desire burning in them.

"We can't," she softly said, her hand coming up to the side of my face.

I leaned my forehead to hers and sighed. "This sucks."

She let out a humorless chuckle. "It does."

Drawing back, I cupped her face in my hands. "I'm not attracted to any of the women. I need you to know that."

"Liar," she said with a sad smile. "You and Kimber have hit it off."

With a shake of my head, I pressed my mouth to hers. Kipton wrapped her arms around my neck, and I grabbed her by the ass and lifted until her legs wrapped around me. I pushed her against the window, then pressed my hard cock into her core. She dropped her head back against the glass and moaned.

"Do you feel that?" I said, my voice not even sounding like me. "You make that happen. Not Kimber or Stormy or any of them. You, Kipton. Only you."

I ground against her, causing her to moan out my name. "Oh God, Hunter!"

"It's only *you* I want to hear crying out my name when I bury myself inside you and make you come."

Her fingers bit into my shoulders, and I grinned. She whimpered my name again, and I knew I could make her come simply by rocking against her. She was as wound up as I was.

"Does that feel good, baby?"

Her response was another moan. "Hunter...oh God, what are you doing to me?"

The last thing I'd do was make Kipton come for the first time against a damn window. I held on to her tightly and brought us into the bedroom. I gently set her down on the bed and pressed my mouth to hers as my hand moved down her body. She was basically only wearing a corset-type bodysuit. When my hand slipped between her legs, I smiled against her mouth.

"I really love this outfit."

She giggled. "So you said."

Easing my fingers past the lace and her thong, I moaned when I realized how wet she was for me. "Fucking hell, Kip. You're so wet."

"Hunter," she whispered, her hand pushing into my hair and pulling my mouth back to hers.

Slipping my fingers inside her, I slowly pumped while she thrust her hips. She was so fucking tight, it was unbelievable.

"That's it, Kip. Come for me."

As if my words had been all she needed, Kipton pressed her hand over her mouth and came. The feel of her squeezing around my fingers nearly had me coming in my own pants.

When her body finally stopped trembling, she dropped her hand next to her onto the bed. “Oh my gosh!”

Smiling, I reclined beside her and pressed another kiss to her lips. “The next time, I’m making you come with my mouth.”

Her head dropped lazily to the side as she looked at me. She had a contented expression on her face, and I loved that I was the one who’d put it there.

I brushed a strand of hair from her cheek and looked into those eyes that seemed so conflicted. “We’re going to make this work, Kip. I promise.”

“What about after the show when—”

“We’ll figure it out. I had no idea what was missing from my life, but now that I’ve found you, I’m not ever going to let you go.”

Her eyes filled with tears. Placing her hand on the side of my face, Kipton opened her mouth to say something—but stopped when someone started to knock on the door. She pushed me away and scrambled off the bed.

“No one can see us together like this!” she whispered.

“Kipton?”

“Rose,” we both whispered in unison.

Spinning in a circle, Kipton spied the bathroom and shoved me in. She started to shut the door, but I grabbed her and kissed her once more. With a giggle, she pushed me away and shut the door.

I could hear her taking a few deep breaths. “Hold on!”

Barely cracking the door to the bathroom open, I heard Rose walk into the room. “Why aren’t you changed yet? I’m starving, and I can’t find Hunter anywhere. Paul said he left him here in the room.”

“He, um, he wasn’t here when I got here.”

There was an awkward silence. “What have you been doing?”

“Staring out the window and thinking.”

“I hope you’re thinking about how to pay Jack back for his little stunt tonight.”

“I was actually thinking about what you said.”

I heard a noise but couldn’t tell what it was. “I say a lot of things, Kipton, you need to be more specific.”

Kipton let out a nervous bubble of laughter. “What you said about me and

Hunter.”

“What about it? And you should change while we’re talking before Jack sends a search and rescue for you.”

“Right,” Kipton said. When she spoke again, she was closer. She was in the bedroom changing. Would it be a total dick move to watch her undress?

*Yes it would, Hunter.*

“Say you’re right, and he *is* attracted to me—”

“He is!” Rose interjected. “Even Jack noticed.”

I closed my eyes and rested my head against the door. I needed to be more careful when I was around Kipton. Especially now that I had a small piece of her and wanted a hell of a lot more.

“Do you think we should hold off on our feelings until after the show?”

No. Just *no*. I wanted to burst into that bedroom and kiss the hell out of her again. What was she thinking?

Rose was quiet for a moment as Kipton zipped up the bag, then her footsteps padded out of the bedroom. She’d changed quickly. Must’ve been all the practice from her days competing in pageants.

It was so quiet now, I wondered if they’d both left. Then...

“Hunter, come out. I know you’re here somewhere,” Rose called.

For half a second, I thought about staying hidden, but I knew my cousin. If she’d already suspected I was here, she wouldn’t stop searching.

I made my way out of the bathroom and stepped into the living area of the suite. Rose stood there, her hip leaned against a chair, as she smiled at Kipton and me.

“Staring out the window and thinking, my ass,” Rose stated. “By the flush on your cheeks, Kipton, and the way Hunter’s smiling, I’m going to assume something happened between you two?”

“Something, but not what you’re thinking,” I quickly said. Kipton turned to look at me and smiled.

Rose sighed and said, “I sure as hell hope the two of you are pretty good actors, because you’re going to need to be for the next month or so. And no, Kipton, I don’t think you should wait to explore what’s happening. I say have fun during the time you have off from the show...but, Hunter, don’t lead any of the women on. Although, if Hunter keeps swiping left, there aren’t going to be any women for him to date.”

“It won’t be much of a social dating experiment if we’re secretly dating behind the scenes,” Kipton said.

Rose let out a bark of laughter. “Please. The dates are preplanned, the girls are strategically picked each week, the producers tricked you into being part of the date tonight—which was also planned all along. There’s nothing truly experimental about any of this. And Jack and Travis knew all of that going in. That’s why they’re dangling that extra cash in front of your nose, Hunter, to keep dating the last person standing for a certain amount of time after the show ends. They want people to believe this works.”

I nodded. “It actually could, if they found the right guy.”

Rose looked between me and Kipton. “I’d keep this attraction you’ve discovered between the two of you. The less people who know, the better.”

Kipton shook her head. “Jack already knows we have feelings for each other.”

I walked over to Kipton and took her hand. “All he knows is we’re attracted to one another, that’s it. We just play it cool, and when we’re on set or around anyone from the show, we’re just friends.”

Smiling, Kipton nodded. “I can do that.”

Rose cleared her throat. “We have one other problem, though.”

Kipton and I both looked at Rose, as I asked, “What?”

With a smirk, she answered, “Your mom.”

“What *about* Lincoln?” Kipton asked.

Rose rolled her eyes. “If she doesn’t already see it, it won’t take her long to sniff out what’s going on with you two. And if she doesn’t, my mom or Aunt Timberlynn or Aunt Merit will. I’m telling you, it’s like they have this sixth sense for love.”

I laughed. “Trust me, my mom, or yours, or our aunts won’t be an issue.”

Rose pushed off the chair and picked up her purse, tossing Kipton hers. “What’s that saying about famous last words?”

Kipton and I exchanged a look. Rose was most likely right, but I wasn’t about to admit that to her...or myself.

“Come on, lovebirds, I’m starving, and I don’t want to be hangry on this flight back with cranky-ass Jack.”

I smiled down at Kipton before gently kissing her. “We’ve got this.”

She nodded. “We’ve got this.”

Little did we both know...we weren’t even close to *having it*.

## Chapter Eighteen

### HUNTER

The flight back to Montana turned out to be easier than I thought. Everyone was exhausted and pretty much fell asleep as soon as the plane took off. Kipton and I had talked to each other just like we would any other day. No one even guessed that two hours before, I'd been making her come in the hotel room where I filmed the Truth Booth.

I couldn't help but smile at myself as I watched Kipton sleeping, all curled up. As much as I hated the idea of sneaking around, there were so many things I wanted to do with her. The only problem was, we only had one, maybe two days a week to spend together, and we needed to be careful about where we did so. For now, we did have today and Sunday.

Pulling out my phone, I pulled up Dustin's number. It was late, almost three in the morning, and we were about to land in Hamilton. I quickly logged onto the plane's Wi-Fi, typed out my message, and hit send.

Me: I need your help with something. Call me when you wake up.

I slipped my phone into my pocket and closed my eyes. I needed sleep, then I could figure everything out with a fresh mind.

The moment I dozed off, Kipton entered my dreams. I was taking her against the window of the hotel suite. She was wearing a corset, but not a bodysuit, and I could hear our bodies slapping together as I ravished her.

*"Hunter, harder. Please. Harder."*

I moaned as I felt her climax, causing me to fall right behind her. I was about to say her name when I felt something shaking me.

"Hunter? Hunter, wake up. We landed."

My eyes snapped open, and I looked up at my cousin Rose. She wore a shit-eating grin on her face. "Sounds like someone was having a naughty



dream with all the moans coming from you. Which girl were you dreaming about?”

I shot up in my seat and glared at her.

Travis walked by and hit me on the arm. “I hope it was more than one.”

My eyes searched the plane until I found Kipton, who was standing at her seat and doing her best not to look at me. It was clear she was stalling to let everyone else disembark. Rose winked at me as she headed out. I grabbed my bag and started for the door, stopping by Kipton to stretch an arm up and take her bag down from the overhead compartment.

Leaning in, I brushed my lips over her neck briefly, and I felt her body tremble. “We’re going to have to go back to Vegas to make that dream come true.”

She sucked in a breath, but before she could respond, I placed the bag on her seat and headed out of the plane.

Rose was waiting at the bottom of the steps with a knowing smile. She laughed when I completely ignored her.

After leaving the small airport, Kipton and I rode in the same limo. I went to my parents’ house instead of the guest cabin and crashed in my own room. I explained to the driver—and ultimately Jack and Travis, since I was positive they’d watch the footage from the limo—that I was exhausted and just wanted to be in my own bedroom for the night. Of course, the driver hadn’t given two shits where he dropped me off.

It was just after four when Kipton and I quietly made our way into my parents’ house and up the steps. I walked her to her room, and even though I knew no one would see us if I followed her in, I knew she was exhausted. I gave her a leisurely kiss good night and made my way to my room. I figured I would fall asleep quickly. Instead, I lay there and stared at the ceiling.

How in the hell was I going to navigate the rest of the women now?

Seven thirty was when I got a reply from Dustin.

Dustin: What’s up?

I grabbed my phone from the side table, unplugged it, and sat up. I yawned and shook my head before replying.

Me: I need you to help me figure out a way to date Kipton so no one else figures out. And can you arrange for our first date to be today, at the cabin?

I saw the three little dots come and go for the next two solid minutes before my phone finally rang, and Dustin’s name appeared.

“Hello?”

“Dude, what are you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Hunter, you can’t date the host secretly while you’re dating other women.”

“Why not? Kipton and I talked about it.”

Dustin sighed. “Even if Kipton’s on board, do you honestly think she’s going to be okay with you continuing to date the other women? She not only has to watch the dates, she has to talk about them and act all happy. It won’t work.”

“It *will* work because she knows I don’t have any feelings for those women. Dustin—Kipton is the one.”

He was silent for a moment. “I’m sorry...did you say she’s the one? The *one*? As in...*the one*?”

I grinned like a fool. “Yes. *The one*. I think I’m falling in love with her.”

There was a loud thump on the other end of the line. “Oh my God, dude, you have *got* to be kidding me!”

“What was that noise?” I asked.

“It was me falling out of my damn bed because I’m shook! Hunter—stop and think.”

“I am thinking.”

“Where are you right now? The guesthouse?”

“No, we got in from Vegas late, and I stayed at my parents’ house.”

He mumbled something under his breath, but I caught a few words that sounded like “bad idea” and “blue balls.” Then, “I’m on my way. Someone needs to talk some sense into you.”

I frowned. “Why don’t you think this will work?”

Rustling sounds came from the other end of the phone and Dustin cursed. “Dammit. I hit my pinky toe! Just...listen to me, Hunter. Don’t do anything until I get there. By the way, will your mom have breakfast?”

“What?” I asked.

“Hey, I need to know these things. Like, should I grab something to eat before I get there, or will she have breakfast cooked?”

I sighed. “I’m sure she’ll have breakfast cooked, and I’ll tell her you’re on your way.”

“Yes! That’s what I wanted to hear. Meanwhile, do *not* be alone with Kipton. We can’t risk anything happening between the two of you right now.”

When I didn't reply, Dustin groaned. "Something happened. Dude, did you sleep with her?"

"No!" I quickly said. "And even if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

"This is worse than I thought. I'm on my way."

The phone went silent, and I pulled it away and stared at it wondering what the hell his problem was. I pushed the blankets off me and headed to the attached bathroom. I needed a cold shower to wake up before I headed downstairs and faced my mother and father...or saw Kipton.

Dustin was wrong. Everything was going to be totally fine.



The moment I walked into the kitchen, four sets of eyes were on me, with one looking everywhere *but* at me.

"Good morning," I said with a smile, walking up to give my mother a kiss on the cheek, then Georgiana. "How're you feeling, Georgiana?"

Returning my smile with one of her own, she answered, "I feel great."

"That's awesome!" I replied as I caught Blayze giving me a strange look. Ignoring him, I turned to Kipton.

"Morning, Kip. Sleep good?"

"I didn't get nearly enough sleep, but I've got my coffee to kick start the day."

My heart raced in my chest, and all I wanted to do was pull her into my arms and give her a kiss that would wake her up better than the coffee ever could.

"You might want to practice a bit more, son." My dad grinned. "Actually, a lot."

Looking confused, I poured myself a cup of coffee. "What do you mean?"

Blayze cleared his throat, and it was obvious my mother and Georgiana were attempting to hide smiles.

Finally, Blayze said, "Dude, you look like you want to kiss the hell out of her."

"Who?" I asked, pretending not to understand.

My mother tossed the hand rag she was using over her shoulder. "Oh, come on, you guys. The second Kipton walked into the kitchen, it was obvious something happened between the two of you."

Kipton's mouth fell open while her eyes went wide. "I'm sorry, what?"

"So obvious," Georgiana added, nodding.

Dad jumped into the conversation once again. "Then *you* come walking in, happier than I've ever seen you, when you should be grumpy as hell. I heard what time the two of you got home. And you stayed the night here."

"It was easier," I added.

"For what?" Blayze muttered under his breath.

Leaning against the island, Kipton made a strange sound, but otherwise remained stunned into silence.

Dad cleared his throat. "Hunter, let me give you a piece of advice, if I might."

"Would you *not* give it to me if I asked nicely?"

Ignoring me, he went on. "Don't try to hide your feelings from your family. They—and by *they*, I mean your mother—can smell a relationship brewing twenty miles away."

My eyes swung over to Mom, who sipped her coffee and grinned behind the cup. "It's true."

When I turned to look at Kipton, she was biting her bottom lip now, trying not to laugh.

"They say what happens in Vegas stays there, but not with a mother like ours," Blayze laughed.

Turning back to my mother, I slowly shook my head. "How do you know these things?"

She shrugged. "It's a gift. Of course, I actually noticed it the moment the two of you first met. And when Kipton stepped foot into this kitchen this morning, it was like looking into a mirror of my past. I remember that look."

"What look?" Kipton asked.

"The look of a woman who's been kissed by a Shaw."

Georgiana nodded. "Yep, it's a powerful thing, I'm not gonna lie."

Blayze chuckled and kissed her on the cheek. "I love you, Georgie."

She looked up at him with such love in her eyes, and for a moment, I wanted what they had. More than I'd ever dreamed I would.

Georgiana beamed back at my brother as she softly said, "I love you too."

When I looked over at Kipton, she was smiling at Georgiana and Blayze. Her eyes dipped to her coffee, then they were on me.

I couldn't help it, I smiled back. When she returned it, I lost the battle. It only took a few steps to cross the kitchen and stand in front of her.

With wide eyes, she whispered, “What are you doing?”

“Something I’ve been dying to do since the second I woke.”

Cupping her face in my hands, I leaned down and kissed her softly on the lips. “Good morning, Kip.”

Her hand came up to my chest and she grabbed my shirt, like I was the only thing keeping her upright. It made me feel stronger than I ever had before. “Good morning, Hunter.”

Then the room burst into cheers.

Somewhere in the mix of it all, I heard my mother say, “I never thought it would happen!”

About that time, Dustin walked in and shouted, “Noooo!”

Everyone turned to look at him.

Walking over, my mother gave him a pat on the chest. “Well, good morning to you, too, Dustin. Grab a plate while the eggs are still hot.”

Dustin slowly shook his head. “Does no one else see what a bad idea this is?” he asked, pointing to me and Kipton.

“The only thing I see is me, about to kick you out of my kitchen,” Mom warned.

Rolling his eyes, Dustin sighed and started piling food onto a plate. “Dude, I’m happy you found someone you think is *the one*.”

The three females in the room all gasped. My mother instantly had tears in her eyes, and Kipton looked at me with a shocked expression.

“But if you two start this now, it’s going to end badly.” Dustin sat at the table, talking between bites. He eyed Kipton. “Are you really going to be able to manage the next month or so, watching Hunter go out on dates with other women? They’re going to come on to him, grab him, keep trying to kiss him. And he’s going to have to act like he’s loving it.”

Kipton chewed nervously on her lip as she looked around the room.

My father sighed as he walked up to me and put a hand on my upper arm, giving it a squeeze. “I think Dustin’s right. You should both wait until you can be open and honest with everyone. If you decide to have a relationship behind the scenes, it might not turn out well.”

“Dad, Hunter’s already told the producers he doesn’t want any PDA.”

I smiled gratefully at my brother, loving the fact that he was on my side in this.

“How do you feel when you see Hunter kiss one of the girls?” my mother asked softly to Kipton.

She started to speak, but then had to clear her throat. “I...I mean, before we kissed, I guess it didn’t bother me too much. I was really confused by how it made me feel, actually.”

With a slight tilt of her head, my mother gave Kipton a knowing smile. “Darling, that’s called jealousy.”

“And it’s an ugly, ugly thing,” Georgiana added. “Trust me, I speak from experience.”

“And if it bothered you before, it’s going to bother you even more now,” Dustin stated.

“Why are you all ganging up on me? I’m not going to sleep with any of them. I can kiss a woman and have it not mean anything.” I quickly turned to Kipton. “Not with you, though. When I kiss you...”

My voice trailed off, and she gave me a sweet smile.

“You’re not an actor,” my dad said. “And from the show last night, it sure *looked* like you were enjoying yourself.”

I shrugged. “I *wasn’t* enjoying myself. I had Travis in my ear, warning me to act like it. That’s not my scene, and all of you know it. If it’d been a date with just one woman who wanted to go to a club, I *still* wouldn’t have enjoyed myself, and most likely wouldn’t go out with her again.”

Kipton drew in a breath and exhaled. A feeling of dread washed over me when I saw the conflict in her eyes. I shook my head. “Kip, I know this isn’t the best way to start a relationship, but you’ve known from the beginning why I agreed to do this stupid show.”

She nodded and took a deep breath. “I know why you did it. We can get through it together.”

“You’re going to have to sneak around, and then you’re going to have to pretend to be just friends during the dates,” Dustin reminded her, taking a sip of coffee.

“The camera is never on me for the dates, other than when the woman’s selected,” Kipton argued.

“But you still have to watch them, sweetheart,” my mother said, nothing but concern in her voice.

I saw it the moment Kipton’s eyes lit up. It was like I was able to read her mind. “I don’t have to watch them. I can get recaps from Jessie.”

“When that light goes out, I’m a hundred percent yours, Kip.”

Kipton threw her arms around me, and it was then I realized I’d been scared to death she was going to agree with Dustin.

“We can do this, Kip. I swear on my life, you’re the only woman I want.”

She buried her face in my chest as she whispered, “All I ask is that you please don’t hurt me, Hunter Shaw.”

I drew back, tipped her chin up so our eyes met. “I promise you, I won’t.”

Her smile looked wobbly, but I saw it in her eyes. She trusted me—and that meant the world.

## Chapter Nineteen

### KIPTON

I pushed all the worried thoughts away as I looked into Hunter's eyes. I had to admit, everything Dustin had said, as well as the rest of Hunter's family, had already raced through my mind as I lay in bed earlier this morning. Was it stupid for us to start a relationship during the show?

But once the show was over, I knew I'd be going back to Bozeman to finish school, and Hunter would be heading back to Missoula. We'd be separated. Not that I didn't believe in long-distance relationships. Hell, maybe it would be easier to do *that*, rather than sneaking around on the ranch.

But when Hunter looked at me with his piercing blue eyes and made me that promise, my heart won out over my head.

I was falling in love with Hunter Shaw, and for the first time in my life, I experienced a sense of peace I'd never known. Standing in the middle of the Shaw kitchen, with this family and this man, I felt at home. Not that I hadn't felt that way with my parents, but I never truly wanted to admit a piece of me had been missing...and Hunter and his family filled that missing piece, crazy as it sounded.

"What do you plan on doing since you don't have to do any filming today or tomorrow?" Lincoln asked me and Hunter.

"I thought I would show Kipton a few of my favorite places," Hunter answered as he winked at me. "Dustin is helping with one of them. Right, Dustin?"

Dustin huffed. "And I think you're crazy with that idea, but I'll play along anyway."

I lifted a brow. "What is it?"

Hunter laughed and shook his head. "It wouldn't be a surprise if we told



you.”

A sense of giddiness rushed through me, and I felt like I was going on my very first date ever.

“The only thing I’ll tell you is to dress warm.”

I raised a brow as Brock said, “Keep an eye on the weather, Hunter. There’s a storm coming in later.”

He looked over and nodded. “I will, Dad.”

“Do you need any help from me?” Lincoln asked in a hopeful voice.

Hunter gave her that smile that I was positive made all the girls swoon. I’d bet it worked on his mother just as well. “I *could* use a bit of help.”

“Me too?” Georgiana asked. “I can be a lookout for you. Oh! Or I can cause a diversion if you need one?”

Blayze stared at Georgiana. “Cause a diversion? Who *are* you right now?”

She shrugged. “I’m just a sister who’s wanting to help her favorite brother-in-law.”

Hunter gave Georgiana a loving look. “If we ever need a diversion, I’ll know who to ask.”

Georgiana laughed, then looked at Blayze and stuck her tongue out.

Dustin wiped his mouth and stood. “Speaking of, I better go take care of your request.”

Hunter reached out and shook his hand. “Thanks, I owe you one.”

With a roll of his eyes, Dustin replied, “With this request, you will owe me more than one.”

“Oh, I’m intrigued,” Lincoln said, as Brock chuckled. She stood to start clearing the plates.

“Let me help you clean up,” I said, as Georgiana grabbed her and Blayze’s plates.

“Don’t be silly,” Lincoln said. “Both of you stop right now. Brock will help me clean up. Go enjoy your Saturday. It’s a chilly but beautiful day.”

“What are *you* kids doing today?” Brock asked Blayze and Georgiana.

They both exchanged a look and grinned before Blayze said, “We’re going shopping for baby furniture for the nursery.”

Lincoln almost dropped the plates she was holding. “What? I want to come!”

Georgiana laughed. “We were going to ask if you and Brock wanted to join us.”

“Hell yes, we want to join you!” Brock said.

Everyone laughed at how excited Lincoln and Brock were at the idea of going shopping for their first grandbaby. Of course, Morgan was also expecting, but Kipton had no doubt Brock and Lincoln would tag along on all of her baby shopping trips, as well.

Hunter smiled at me. “Ready to start our day together?”

My stomach did a little flip. “Ready.”

“Remember, dress warm. I’ll meet you back down here in...?”

He waited for me to give him a time. “Do you need to run to the guesthouse for anything?”

“No, I’ve got plenty of stuff here.”

“Do I need to wear anything really specific?”

He looked up and thought for a moment. “Dress comfortable. We’ll be exploring on horseback.”

Stretching up, I kissed him on the cheek. No one was paying any attention to us, now that they were in full-blown baby furniture talk. “See you in thirty minutes then.”

I could feel Hunter’s eyes on me as I started to walk out of the kitchen. When I turned to say one more goodbye to everyone, I felt my cheeks heat. He was staring...and the smile on his face made my knees go weak.

“Have fun today, guys!”

The four of them looked up, and each offered the same reply to Hunter and me.

Once I was away from everyone, I did a little happy jump and raced up the steps to my room.



Lincoln had been right. The temperature outside was fifty-eight, but it felt warmer with the sun beating down on us. I ran my hand along Luna’s neck. She was a quarter horse rescue that Timberlynn and Tanner had gotten. She’d apparently been owned by a man who was abusive to his animals, and when they got Luna, she was so thin, the vet said had she gone another week in her previous home, she would have been dead.

“You’re such a good girl, aren’t you?” I crooned as we walked alongside Hunter and his horse, Iceman.

“She’s a smart horse. Tanner said it took them nearly six months to get

Luna to trust either of them, but she finally gave in to Timberlynn. She loves to do barrels and would make a great horse for that. Ryan came to the ranch twice a week and worked with Timber on training her. Even offered to buy her because he fell in love with the sweet girl. But Tanner and Timberlynn love her too much to sell.”

I smiled as I studied the buckskin mare. She truly was beautiful. “I can see why Ryan fell for her. She’s beautiful, gentle, and you can tell she enjoys being ridden.”

“How long have you been riding?” Hunter asked. It was only then I realized there were so many things we didn’t know about one another.

“I don’t remember my first time on a horse, but I’ve been told I was three. What about you?”

He laughed. “My father had me on a horse with him the moment I was able to sit up. My mother said I was about six months old.”

“Six months!”

“Granted, he was holding me. I was around the same age as you when I was on my first pony. Three. I remember it still to this day. Something about being up on that horse and riding alongside my father and Uncle Tanner... I think I fell in love with riding from that moment on.”

“And roping? What made you want to do that?”

He gave a one-shoulder shrug. “Probably watching my uncle Tanner. While Blayze was obsessed with bulls, I was obsessed with horses. I knew it would be Tanner’s footsteps I followed and not my father’s. Although, my plan is to work here on the ranch with Blayze. Ranching is my true passion.”

“You don’t have plans to go professional?”

“I did, but the older I get, the more I realize that I’m not interested in that life. Bradley is, and I can see him going far with bull riding. From what everyone says, he’s better than my father and his combined. *And* Uncle Ty. He was about the same age when his daddy put him on the back of a bull out in the pasture. I remember one time no one could find him, and Aunt Merit and Uncle Dirk were worried sick. I think he was about ten. He was eventually found at Uncle Ty’s in the pasture, lying down next to a bull, reading.”

I grinned. “Like, reading a book?”

Hunter laughed. “Yes. Bradley loves to bull ride, but he also loves to read. If given some down time, you can always find him reading.”

“What does he like to read?”

“I’m not entirely sure if he has a favorite. I’ve seen him reading everything from biographies to suspense books.”

“What do you like to do in *your* spare time? And I know I’ve already read what you wrote for the show, but is that all true?” I asked.

Hunter thought for a moment. “I guess anything that keeps me in motion. I love to ride, but you already know that. I also love spending time with my family.”

“That’s obvious. I adore your entire family.”

He smiled. “They’re great. Game night is one of my favorite times, Christmas is always fun and a bit crazy. Birthdays as well. Oh, and I also like to garden.”

“What? As in like, flowers or veggies?”

He looked at me and winked, causing a sensation of flutters in my stomach. “Both. That, I owe to Grams. She loves to garden, and when she saw me take an interest in it, she took full-on advantage. I aspire to have a garden like hers.”

“Did you know what degree I’m going for?”

Hunter tilted his head and thought about it for a moment before he answered. “I don’t know. If you told me, I forgot. I think I told you I was going for finance.”

“It’s environmental horticulture.”

“No shit!”

I laughed. “Yes. I’ve always been fascinated by plants, gardens, you name it. My mother has a huge garden at our house back in Bozeman. I don’t ever remember her buying vegetables at the store, she always grew them.”

“That’s my grams. What do you want to do with your degree?”

It was my turn to shrug. “I don’t know. I had a big ranch outside Bozeman offer me a job. They want someone to handle their crop production. Plus, they want to go organic with their cattle, and are looking for the best ways to do that with growing their own feed.”

“Are you going to take the job?”

I looked straight ahead. “I don’t think so. I mean, the job sounds amazing, but I don’t think I’m ready to commit to anything just yet.”

When I turned back to look at him, he was watching me closely.

“Why did you pick finance?”

“Seemed like the logical thing to do. I want to help Blayze run this ranch, and once my father fully retires—which I think he’ll do after I graduate—

then someone has to handle the money and numbers. God knows we can't trust Blayze with that."

I laughed. "That's mean. I'm sure your brother is great with numbers."

"He's okay, but he's better at managing the cattle and that side of the ranch. We both agreed when we were younger, he'd be in charge of the animals, I'd be in charge of the money."

My brows rose. "You both already decided? What if Joshua or Nathan want to help run the ranch?"

"They're a lot younger than us, and if that's something they want to do, then we'll bring them on."

We rode for a few moments in silence. "It really is a family business."

He nodded and smiled. "Okay, so from here we need to get off the horses and walk the rest of the way up."

"Do we need to tie them?"

"Nah, they'll wait here for us."

Hunter took my hand when we hopped down, and my heart felt like it leaped in my chest. Goodness, I loved the way my body reacted when Hunter was near me, brushed against me, or touched me in any way.

We walked up a small path that still had some snow on it. The rest of the snow in the pastures had been melting quickly with the warmer weather we'd been having.

"It's right up here," Hunter said, helping me climb up the last bit. When I looked up from watching where I was putting my feet, I gasped. It was a view of the whole valley.

"Oh my goodness. This is beautiful, Hunter."

"It's one of my favorite places on the ranch."

I looked down and saw the pastures dotted with both cattle and horses. Off in the distance was a beautiful lake that appeared to butt up against the mountains. Puffy white clouds looked as if someone had hand-placed them across the sky, the blue standing out vividly among the dots of white. The sky and mountains reflected in the water, and if I hadn't known better, I would think it was a painting. It all looked so perfect.

I let out a peaceful sigh. "I've lived in Montana my entire life, and I've never really stopped to look at how beautiful she is."

"She's *very* beautiful."

When I turned to look at him, Hunter was watching me. I felt my cheeks heat, so I returned my gaze to the view. He took my hand and turned me so I

faced him again.

“More beautiful than anything I’ve ever laid my eyes on before.”

I chewed nervously on my lower lip before my eyes met his, and I couldn’t take it any longer. I whispered, “Will you kiss me?”

His eyes turned from sky blue to dark blue in an instant. “You never have to ask that question.”

“Okay, then kiss me.”

He laughed and cupped my face. His hands felt cold against my skin, and for a moment it shocked me. When his warm lips touched mine, I felt the passion in Hunter’s kiss. I’d kissed others, but none of them ever made me feel like they were pouring their own emotions into me. And with Hunter, when his mouth was on mine, I felt his desire clearly.

He deepened the kiss as I rose onto the balls of my feet. I needed to get closer. The urge to crawl inside him was so damn powerful.

When we both needed to stop for air, Hunter rested his forehead on mine. “I’ve never wanted anyone like I want you, Kip. You make me *feel* things I’ve never felt before, and that should scare me, maybe it even does, but...”

I held his wrists. “But it’s going so fast.”

He closed his eyes. “I wish we could just be alone for the next few weeks.”

“Me too.”

Taking a step back, he said, “Stay here over Christmas.”

My eyes widened. The show was planning on filming until December 22, then allowing everyone to go home for the holiday. We were all supposed to be back in Hamilton on December 28, and there was going to be a huge New Year’s Eve party at the same hotel in Hamilton where we shot the introductions.

“My mom and dad...” was all I said.

“They can come here and spend Christmas with my family. They can stay in one of the other guesthouses. The remote cameras will be off as well. Or they can stay with my mom and dad. I’m sure they’d love to have them. Please think about it?”

Five days to be with Hunter with no one else watching our every move. There was really no thinking needed.

“I’ll call them today. They hit it off with your folks, so they’d probably enjoy coming for Christmas. Plus, I want to see what a big family does to celebrate the holidays.”

Hunter tossed his head back and laughed. Then he picked me up and spun me around before kissing me again. Once he put me back on solid ground, he said, “Be careful what you wish for with the big family because mine goes all out. Come on, we need to get going for the next part of our day.”

I loved that he hadn't called today a date, but *our day*. Not that it wasn't a date, but for him to separate it from the actual dates he'd been going on made me feel a bit more cherished.

“What are we doing next?”

“You'll see.”

## Chapter Twenty

### HUNTER

“Where are we going?” Kipton asked for the twentieth time.

“I told you, it’s a surprise.”

I turned off onto 714 and followed the one-lane road for another five miles, until I saw the drive that led to Dustin’s parents’ cabin.

Kipton looked out the passenger window, and I could tell she was smiling. The drive wasn’t that long, and we were soon pulling up to the log cabin.

“What a cute little cabin. Who does it belong to?”

I put my truck in park and got out. “Dustin’s folks. Stay there, I’ll come around and open your door.”

Kipton was taking everything in as I held out my hand and helped her down.

“I love log cabins tucked away like this. They’re so romantic.”

Leaning down, I whispered into her ear, “Good, that’s what I was going for.”

She smiled and gave me a playful push. Taking her hand in mine, we walked up the two steps to the wraparound porch. I pulled out my keys and searched for the one I was looking for.

“You have a key to their cabin?”

“Chance, Dustin’s dad, was roping partners with my uncle Tanner. They were the best of friends. They used to come up here and fish a lot and just get away. Dustin and I, along with his brother Mike, followed the tradition. I can honestly tell you that you’re the first woman besides Dustin’s mom to ever be brought here.”

“Really?” she asked with amusement in her voice. “Why is that?”



“It’s always been a getaway for the guys. Me, Blayze, Bradly, Dustin, and Mike have been the only ones to really use it the last few years. And it’s mostly become a hunting and fishing cabin.” I unlocked the door and motioned for Kipton to walk in.

“There is *no way* this is a guys’ hangout. It’s stunning!”

“Chance and Maureen, Dustin’s mom and dad, come here to get away. There’s no cell coverage or Internet, so it’s peaceful for them.”

The cabin was small, but not too small. The large living room had a wood-burning fireplace in the corner. A full kitchen and bath, and a loft that had a king-size bed. I took my jacket off and hung it up, then helped Kipton with hers.

“Let me show you around.”

I took her hand once again and walked her through the main room. “This is the living room, with a little dining area right there.”

“There’s already a fire going,” Kipton said, looking over her shoulder at me.

“That was the favor I asked of Dustin. He came up before us and got a fire going so it wouldn’t be freezing in here, and brought us lunch that my mother made.”

She turned around in a circle, then faced me. “So that was what all the texting was about when we were riding back to the barn.”

I smirked. “Nothing gets past you.”

She returned the gesture. “I’m very observant.”

“Good to know.” I headed to the kitchen. “Here’s the kitchen. Maureen has been getting on Chance to update it.”

“Why? These wood cabinets are beautiful.”

“I think she wants one of those farm sinks and new appliances. Dustin also mentioned his folks have been toying with the idea of either selling it or renting it out.”

“It’s so darling. If this was mine, I would never get rid of it.”

Smiling, I showed her where the bathroom was before we climbed up the ladder to the loft. The large king bed took up most of the room, but there was enough space for an oversized chair with a blanket on it.

“I could sit there for hours and read,” Kipton said as she walked over to the chair and sat down. When she looked at me, her face was flushed.

“Is everything okay?”

She nodded, but she looked nervous.

I crouched down so I could look her in the face. “Kip, I didn’t bring you here with any expectations that we would sleep together. I want you to know that. It was the first place I thought of that would give us privacy.”

We’d had to leave through the back of the ranch today, since there was a small group of people waiting at the gate, hoping to get a glimpse of me or Kipton. There wasn’t anything we could do about it, since they weren’t on our private property, but it annoyed the hell out of Blayze and Uncle Ty.

Her body relaxed slightly, but she started to chew on her lip. Clearly she was still nervous.

“And...what if I *wanted* something to happen between us?”

My heart slammed against my chest, and I couldn’t ignore how my dick instantly went hard. “I guess that would be up to you. We can go at your pace, Kip.”

She let out a soft laugh while she reached up and ran her finger along my jawline. “I like it when you call me, Kip. I’ve never had a nickname before.”

I took her hand and kissed her wrist. “Tell me what else you like, so I can do it more often.”

Her cheeks instantly went red.

“Are you thinking about Vegas?”

“Yes,” she said, her voice breathy and full of desire.

“Do you want me to do that again?”

Her eyes snapped to the bed before they cast down and she stared at the floor.

“Kipton, you don’t have to be embarrassed. I always want to know what you’re thinking.”

When her gaze lifted and our eyes met, she swallowed hard. “I have to tell you something, Hunter.”

The seriousness in her voice caused me to frown slightly, wondering what was going on in that head of hers. I took her hands and pulled her out of the chair so we could sit on the bed. Turning, we faced one another.

She exhaled and let out a nervous laugh. “I’m not sure how to even say this.”

Squeezing her hand, I said, “Just tell me.”

Nodding, she looked at our clasped hands, then said, “I’m...I’ve...well... what I mean is...I...well...”

Laughing, I placed my finger on her chin and lifted it so she could see me. “Just tell me, Kip.”

Kipton licked her lips, then blurted, “I’m a virgin, Hunter. I’ve never even had a guy do what you did to me last night in Vegas.”

If my jaw hadn’t been on the floor the instant she said “virgin,” I was positive it was now.

“Say something...because it’s kind of freaking me out that you’re staring at me, looking shocked. Maybe you don’t want to be with—”

I put my finger to her mouth to keep her from saying another word. “Don’t even say what you were about to say. You took me by surprise, is all.”

She nodded nervously.

“How far have you gone with a guy?”

“You’re probably going to think I’m a prude, but I’ve never really dated at all. I’ve been so focused on getting through school and helping my parents get out of debt because of me.”

I frowned. “Because of you? What do you mean?”

She waved off the question. “It doesn’t matter right now. The point is, I *have* gone out on dates, and I’ve kissed a few guys, but I’ve never felt like I wanted to go further with any of them. Call me old fashioned, but...I was waiting for the right guy. Not waiting for marriage, simply waiting for someone to make me feel like he wanted more than my body. And after Miss Montana, it became clear most guys asked me out just hoping to say they’d hooked up with me.”

I was speechless again.

She smiled and moved closer. “I feel that way with you, Hunter. Not the part about hooking up,” she said quickly. “The part about you making me feel wanted for more than sex. I think I felt it the first time we met. God, I know it sounds stupid, and I know everything is so complicated between us, and we literally had our first kiss just yesterday, but...I want you, Hunter. The more time we spend together, the more I know I want you in ways I’ve never wanted any other guy.”

“Kip.” I closed my eyes and tried to think of the right words to say to her. When I opened them, she looked worried and unsure. “I want you too. Hell, I’ve been thinking about being with you since the first time Lily showed me a damn picture, before I even agreed to do *Swipe Right*. You’re one of the main reasons I *agreed* to do this stupid show. So I could meet you.”

She smiled the sweetest smile. Her nose crinkled, and it took everything I had not to push her back onto the bed and bury myself inside her. “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

When she glanced away for a moment, I could see she was building up the courage to say something else. When she focused back on me, I saw that *something* in her eyes before she even uttered a word.

“Hunter, will you make love to me?”

I suddenly felt dizzy. I’d brought Kipton up here to have a romantic lunch, and she was asking me to do the one thing I’d been forcing myself *not* to think about.

Pushing a lock of her brown hair behind her ear, I ran my thumb over her lips. “Is that what you really want, Kip? Are you sure?”

She nodded.

Then a devastating thought occurred to me. “I don’t have any condoms.”

Her shoulders slumped some before she looked up. “I’m on the pill. And now you know I’ve never been with anyone...”

If I had been standing, my legs would have given out and I’d be on the ground right now. Was she asking me to make love to her without a condom?

She clearly saw the shock on my face because she started to backtrack. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have even suggested it. That was so stupid of me.” She let out a nervous laugh. “We can totally forget this whole thing, there’s no rush.”

It was my turn to laugh, but there wasn’t an ounce of humor in it. “Kip, I’ve never had sex without a condom—”

“Of course. That’s...um...smart.” Jumping up, she plastered on that fake-ass smile she used for the camera. “Let’s eat. I’m starving.”

She stepped toward the ladder, and I grabbed her hand. “Wait. Let me finish, okay?”

Her eyes darted everywhere in the loft but at me.

“Kipton.”

When her gaze slammed back to mine, I saw her chest rising and falling with each shallow breath.

I stood and drew her to me. “I’ve never felt this way about anyone. Every time I’ve had to date one of the women from the show, you’re all I think about. At night in bed, you’re the last person I see in my mind, and the first person when I wake up.” I closed my eyes for a brief second in an attempt to keep my own desire at bay. “I want to feel your hands everywhere on my body. I want to feel your lips on my skin. I want to touch you in places no one ever has before. I desperately want to be your first and...and this is

probably crazy to say because it's too soon, but the idea of another man touching you drives me insane.

"I want to be your first *and* your last, Kip. I'm falling in love with you."

A single tear slipped free and trailed down her cheek. I leaned in and kissed it away. Moving my mouth to her neck, I kissed there as well before whispering in her ear, "Are you absolutely sure?"

She grabbed my shirt to steady herself, like she had this morning. "I've never been more sure of anything, Hunter."

Bending, I scooped her into my arms and carried her over to the bed. I gently lay her down and reclined next to her, trailing my fingers over her cheek. "Are you nervous?"

She shook her head. "No. Well, maybe a little, but only because I'm worried I might do something wrong."

Smiling, I took her hand and kissed each of her fingers before I captured her mouth with mine. The kiss was slow and easy. It took everything I had not to move fast. The fact that it was Kipton, and she was inexperienced, had me going extra slow. I wanted to memorize every moment and make it special for her.

It blew my mind that someone so amazing and gorgeous was still so pure. Knowing I was the first man to touch her, to make her come, nearly had me losing myself right then and there.

I rolled over her, keeping most of my weight off her. She opened her legs, and I rocked against her, causing us both to moan. Her hands moved up and under my shirt, where her nails scratched softly over my skin. My entire body trembled from her touch. I'd never wanted anyone even half as much. I only hoped that I made it feel good for her...and that I didn't come the moment I pushed inside her body.

"Hunter," she moaned, wrapping her legs around me. "Please."

And that one word was my undoing. I was going to make Kipton mine. Forever.

## Chapter Twenty-One

### KIPTON

I may have been a virgin, but I wasn't ignorant about what happened between a man and a woman. All that knowledge went out the window, though. The only thing I could think at that moment was how much I wanted to feel my bare skin against Hunter. I needed it like I needed air to breathe.

Hunter pressed against my core, and a shot of desire hit so hard, I felt like I could come again from this alone. I had given myself plenty of orgasms, but the one Hunter gave me in Vegas had been mind-blowing. It was hard to believe that was just last night. And now here we were, in a little cabin in Montana, and he was about to make love to me.

"Hunter," I gasped as I wrapped my legs around him. I needed more. *God*, I needed more. "Please."

He stilled, and I was about to ask him what was wrong when he suddenly pushed off me and stood, grabbing my hand and pulling me off the bed as well. His mouth was back on mine as he grabbed my sweater and lifted it, only breaking our kiss to pull it over my head. I quickly did the same with his long-sleeve shirt.

Hunter pulled me against him, his kiss getting more passionate when our skin met. Then my bra was undone. I hadn't even realized he was unfastening it.

Easing back, he pushed the straps off my shoulders, letting the bra slide down and drop to the floor. Then he simply stared at my breasts. I should have been embarrassed, or had the urge to cover myself. Instead, I felt an unfamiliar heaviness in my breasts. I arched my back in a silent gesture for him to touch me. Hunter lifted a hand, and I couldn't help but notice how it shook. Was he nervous?

Then both of his hands were on my breasts, cupping and massaging in a way that nearly made my knees buckle out from under me. My head dropped back as I let out a long, low moan.

When his mouth covered one of my nipples, I gasped. Good gracious, that felt good! When my friends talked about how they could almost come if a guy knew how to treat their breasts, I thought they were insane. But the feeling that raced from my breasts to my core had my breath speeding up. Could I actually come this way?

“Hunter...oh yes,” I whispered as his finger and thumb played with the other nipple, driving me to a place I’d never been before. Then he was gone, and I whimpered.

“Did you like that?” he asked softly.

My head pulled up and I gave him a dazed look. “I thought I was going to come.”

His brows shot up. “Really?”

Nodding, I smiled at the wicked way he was looking back down at my breasts. “As fun as that sounds, I want more of you.”

“More of me?” He dropped down and started to unlace my hiking boots. There was something about looking down at a half-naked Hunter that made me want to push my legs together to ease the ache. My hand drifted down my stomach, and I stopped.

Hunter looked up. “What’s wrong, angel? You aching for a release?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

Hunter pulled one boot off, then the other. He stood and took a few steps back, kicking off his own boots.

“Take the rest of your clothes off, Kip.”

I watched as he quickly began to work on his own jeans, pushing them down his legs, along with his boxer briefs, allowing his hard length to spring free. I wasn’t sure where to look and admire first. I mean, he had abs that had abs. And the arrow of hair that I’d only gotten a quick look at was now pointing at an erection that looked so hard and ready as it bounced against his stomach.

“Oh...my...”

It was all that I could say as I let my eyes wander over his body. When I looked up at him, he was smirking. “Do you like what you see?”

My thumb went up to my mouth, where I nervously chewed on my nail while I nodded. “Very much so,” I finally said.

He moved closer, and my fingers itched to take him into my hand. To know what he felt like.

“If you touch me right now,” he said, reading my mind, “while you’re looking at me like that? I’m going to come all over your hand.”

My eyes shot up and I gaped at him. I smiled on an exhale and said, “I think I’d like that.”

He tilted his head and gave me a look that said he’d revisit that later. “Undress for me, Kip.”

Licking my suddenly dry lips, I quickly started to undo the button on my jeans. Then the zipper. Then I prayed like hell that I looked sexy as I pushed them down to reveal my white lace thong. God, I was so glad I wore it today.

Hunter’s breathing became labored as he watched me slide the pants down my legs. I reached out and held him as I stepped out of my jeans and tossed them to the side with my foot. The only thing I had left on was the thong.

“You’re so damn beautiful, Kip. Everywhere...so beautiful.”

I pressed my legs together as the ache intensified. Hunter let out a growl, then had his mouth back on mine, backing us up until my legs hit the bed. I sat and broke the kiss. Hunter dropped to his knees and placed his hands on my thighs, and I swore I nearly jumped off the bed at his touch. It was so soft and gentle, but the energy that sizzled through me was mind-blowing.

He reached for my thong and pulled as I lifted my hips. He smiled as he tossed it on the floor with the rest of our clothes. “Lie down on the bed, Kip.”

When I started to scoot farther back on the bed, he stopped me. “No, stay here, just lie back.”

My stomach fluttered because I knew exactly what he was going to do. He placed a soft kiss on the side of my thigh, then moved to the other side. His tongue twirled in a lazy circle over my skin as I arched my back and grabbed at the bedsheet.

“Please, Hunter,” I begged as he placed another kiss closer to where I ached for him.

“Tell me what you want.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and lifted my hips, unable to say the words. He laughed softly and placed his hand on my lower stomach, kissing me right above my throbbing clit.

My eyes sprang open. “Hunter!” I cried out, only to hear him chuckle louder.



“Do you want me to kiss you?” he asked, his finger swiping through my folds as I drew in a quick breath. “Here?”

“God, yes!” I cried out. More than one friend had told me some guys didn’t like to give oral sex, but when they did, it was toe-curling. I couldn’t imagine any orgasm being as wonderful as the one Hunter had given me last night.

The moment his mouth covered me, though, I knew I was wrong. I nearly exploded. His mouth and tongue seemed to be everywhere, making me feel like I was in heaven and in pain all at the same time. Not a bad pain, but more of a longing for something just out of reach.

My fingers went to his hair, and I fisted it, attempting to bring him closer, or maybe I was trying to get him to move back to my clit anytime his tongue strayed. He kept my hips pressed to the bed, and I grabbed the quilt hard with my other hand.

“Oh God, Hunter. I’m...I’m so close!”

His mouth stayed on my clit, and I swore he licked it so slowly, I thought I was going to die. I nearly jumped off the bed when he pushed his fingers inside me. One small twist of my body, and he was massaging a place deep inside that caused me to cry out.

“Don’t stop. Oh God!”

And then my toes *did* curl as the most intense orgasm started from my core and burst through my entire body. I screamed Hunter’s name while he pressed his hand to my stomach, keeping me from moving while he continued to devour me with his mouth.

Thrashing my head back and forth, I used my hand to attempt to push Hunter away, even though part of me never wanted him to stop.

“I can’t! Hunter!”

He lifted his mouth off me, and I forced myself to raise my head. I should have felt embarrassed, seeing him between my legs, a lazy smile on his face. But I felt something else altogether. Powerful, sexy...like a wanton woman who wanted more.

“Did you like that, angel?”

My head fell back onto the bed. “I really, *really* liked that.”

He was on the bed and helping me move up until my head rested on the pillow. I felt like I was floating on a cloud. The glow of my orgasm still thrummed softly through my body.

“Are you ready for more?”

Letting my head fall to the side, I stared into his blue eyes. I could get lost in them forever and be totally happy with that. “I want you more than ever, Hunter.”

He kissed me, and I could taste myself on his tongue. I moaned and pushed my fingers through his soft hair, drawing him closer.

Hunter positioned himself over me, my legs opening automatically for him. I could feel his erection, and I pulled my mouth from his. “Hunter... please take me.”

He rested on his elbows and brushed the hair from my face before he leaned down and kissed my nose. “I don’t want to rush this, Kip. I want to remember every single moment of today.”

Smiling, I placed my hand on the side of his face. “I want to remember it as well, but I also need to feel you inside me. Are you going to make me beg?”

He drew his head back and pulled his brows down. “*Never* will I make you beg for me. I’m yours, anytime you want.”

I lifted my hips and gasped when his tip pushed against my entrance. Hunter closed his eyes and moaned.

“I want you now, Hunter.”

He opened his eyes and moved his attention to my breasts, where he took one of my nipples into his mouth. He licked and sucked while his hand moved between my legs and started to rub my clit. The orgasm built quickly, and before I knew it, my head was thrown back against the pillow, and I was crying out his name again.

“It’s going to hurt at first, but then it’ll get better.”

For a moment, I wasn’t even sure what he was saying until I felt pressure at my core. Then he pushed in, his forehead pressed against mine.

“Why are you going so slow?” I asked between gasps of breath.

“I really don’t want to hurt you, Kip. I never want to be the cause of your pain.”

Wrapping my legs around him, I pulled him into me as I lifted my hips. Hunter groaned and thrust. Pain shot through my lower stomach but quickly dissipated.

“Please move,” I whispered as Hunter placed soft kisses all over my face. He withdrew and then slid back into me. The sting wasn’t as bad that time. The more he moved, the more the pain eased.

“Faster,” I begged, because it was the only thing I could say. My body

needed it faster to reach that high I was already winding up for. I knew some women never came when a guy was inside them, but based on the way Hunter was moving...I was about to have another mind-blowing orgasm.

My gaze caught his. "Can you go harder?"

"Christ, Kip, you're going to make me come if you keep barking out orders."

"No, I'm so close! I'm so close!"

Hunter kneeled and grabbed my hips, moving faster and harder and deliciously deeper.

"Yes! Yes! Hunter, yes!" I cried as my head thrashed on the bed.

And when my eyes met his, I shattered as I called out his name. I could feel my body pulsing around him. Without so much as closing his eyes or looking away, he gasped, "I'm coming. Oh, fuck, Kipton."

I couldn't help it; I smiled as I watched him fall apart, knowing I was the first woman he'd ever come inside. Something about that thought made my heart tighten in my chest.

I wanted to be his last.

When he stopped moving inside me, he fell forward, making sure to keep most of his weight off me. I was positive his heart raced in sync with mine.

"I never dreamed it would that amazing," I whispered, awestruck, my fingers moving lazily over his back and through his hair.

Hunter lifted carefully and pulled out of me. The loss was instantly felt, and a part of me wanted to reach for him and draw him back inside.

He rolled over to his side next to me, his arm over my body, pulling me closer. "I've never..."

"What?" I asked, as I rolled onto my side to face him.

He laced our fingers together and looked me straight in the eyes. "It's never been that good before."

I raised a brow. "No condom?"

He shook his head. "That has nothing to do with it. I mean, it might. But it was you. It was being with *you*, making love to *you*. That's what made it so special. Kip...we need to figure out a way to get out of the show."

I was positive my eyes were as wide as saucers. "What? You know we can't do that."

Hunter shook his head. "The idea of even touching another woman makes me feel sick. Kipton, you're it for me, angel. I love you."

Tears pooled in my eyes as I tried to blink them back and lost the battle. I

placed my hand on the side of his face and laughed. “This is crazy, Hunter. We’ve only known each other for a short time.”

“You don’t have to say it back. But I needed you to know. I need you to know that’s how my heart feels.”

Pressing my lips together tightly so I could get my emotions in check, I looked into those ocean blue eyes and finally said the truest words I’d ever spoken. “I love you too, Hunter.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### HUNTER

My heart was still beating fast in my chest even after helping Kipton get dressed, then dressing myself. We made our way down the ladder to dig into the meal my mother had made for us.

Making love to Kipton hadn't been in the plan at all. Hell, all I wanted was to spend some time alone with her, away from all the prying eyes. Even though I knew there were no cameras at my parents' house, or anywhere on the ranch besides the guesthouse, I still couldn't let my guard down. I needed to make it through the rest of December and January, and then it would be over.

"This all looks so good!" Kipton said as she pulled out the food and bottle of wine my mother had packed. There was a cheese and fruit plate, some small finger sandwiches, and two pieces of apple pie.

"I have to warn you now, my mother makes the best apple pie."

Kipton smiled. "Does she?"

I nodded. "You do like apple pie, don't you? 'Cause if you say no, then I'm afraid this isn't going to work between us."

When I winked at her, she laughed. "I happen to love apple pie, and think I make a pretty good one myself."

"Is that so?" I asked with raised brows. "Might have to get you to have a pie bake-off with my mother."

She rolled her eyes, and for a moment, I thought she was going to say that would never happen, but yet again, Kipton surprised me. "Please, I would win hands down."

I nearly choked on an almond I'd tossed into my mouth. "Wait, you think your apple pie is better than my mom's?"

With a shrug, Kipton replied, “I mean, I don’t know for sure. I’d have to taste hers.” She sighed. “I’m starving! Who knew great sex could make a girl so hungry?”

I grinned at her like a fool. “How do you know it was great? You don’t have anything to compare it to?” I asked as I took a bite of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I wasn’t surprised that was what Mom had made. For months when I was ten years old, I refused to eat anything but peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for every meal. To this day, they were still my favorite.

Kipton popped a cherry tomato into her mouth and chewed as she pondered my question. “Well, from what I’ve heard all my friends say about sex, most of them have never had an orgasm *during* sex. I think just one of them has. And it sounded like most guys didn’t care if they had an orgasm at all—*they* meaning the girl. I just had three. So in my mind, that was some great sex.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I reached across and took her hand in mine, bringing it up to my mouth to kiss the back of it. “It was better than great.”

“It was amazing,” she whispered.

“Mind-blowing.”

“Toe-curling,” she said with a blush to her cheeks.

I rotated her wrist and kissed it before I softly said, “It was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever experienced.”

Kipton’s eyes lit up, and she looked at me in a way that made my chest feel like something was fluttering inside.

“It was something I’ll never forget.”

Staring down she lifted her gaze. “I wanted to tell you something. About my parents.”

I smirked. “Do you think they won’t like me?”

She chuckled. “They’ll love you, but I wanted you to know that Gilbert and Laura Howse are my adoptive parents.”

“Adoptive?”

With a nod she said, “My biological parents died in a car accident when I was younger. I don’t remember them much at all. Their best friends were my parents, Gilbert and Laura.”

Squeezing her hand in mine, I replied, “I’m so sorry, Kip.”

She shrugged. “It’s okay and I don’t want you to feel sorry for me because I love my parents like they are my biological parents. But, I don’t talk about it much and not many people know. I did want you to know

thought.”

Smiling, I replied, “Thank you for telling me.”

Her eyes met mine and I could see the desire in them once again.

I was about to say to hell with the food and take her again, when we heard a car pulling up.

Kipton and I both turned to look at the door. “Dustin?” we said in unison.

Standing, I reached down and helped her up. I walked over to the window, and sure enough, saw Dustin’s truck. What in the hell was he doing here? And thank fuck he hadn’t shown up earlier.

I made my way to the door, unlocked and opened it right as he was jogging up. When his eyes met mine, he grinned. I shot him a look that warned him not to even joke about it.

“What are you doing here?” I asked as I stepped back to let him in.

His smile faded, and a somber expression appeared on his face as he glanced at the dining table. “Jack, the guy from the TV show, showed up at your parents’ house looking for you, Kipton. He said it was important that he talk to you right away.”

“It’s our day off,” Kipton said with her hands on her hips.

Dustin nodded. “I know, that’s what Lincoln said. Then she told him you went shopping with Rose. Which, by the way, I texted Rose about, so she knows. He then asked where *you* were, Hunter, and your mom said you wanted to go somewhere private to get away from everything.”

I looked at Kipton. “Why do you think he wants to see us?”

“Maybe he wants to apologize for the stunt he pulled in Vegas, with the dress and all.”

Dustin grinned. “That was a hot dress.”

Kipton and I both glared at him. He cleared his throat and looked away.

“I don’t care that he’s looking for me or Kipton. It’s our day off,” I said, echoing Kipton.

Dustin nodded. “I don’t think it has anything to do with the two of you. When I was walking out with Jack, he told me about the little fight two of the girls got into in Vegas. They’re booting them off the show.”

Kipton gaped as I said, “What?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Rainey and Ansley. They were both told to pack their bags.”

“How strange that it’s those two...” Kipton mused as she crossed over to me.

“Why do you say that?” Dustin asked.

I looked at Kipton, and immediately knew what she was thinking. “They were both actresses.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Dustin asked.

“I’m guessing they were hired by the show to be here. They have to have been.”

I nodded in agreement with Kipton. “They’re calling it a social experiment, but they needed to ensure some kind of drama. I mean, with Sarriah gone, the rest of the girls seemed to be getting along pretty great.”

“There wasn’t any conflict in the group from any recent house footage, or when they’ve done their one-on-ones,” Kipton stated. “And if Rainey and Ansley started a fight just a few weeks into shooting, it looks pretty suspicious since they’re both actresses. The audience has probably put two and two together.”

“So you think Jack was just coming to give you guys a heads-up?” Dustin asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Kipton was chewing on her thumbnail, and I would have given anything to know what she was thinking. “Even if the two girls *have* been sent home, why wouldn’t Jack just wait until Monday to tell us in the morning meeting?”

“Maybe he just thought it was important to let us know sooner.”

She nodded. “Maybe...but in that case, why not call? Why go to your parents’ house?”

We stared at each other for a few moments. Dustin cleared his throat. “Uh...why are you two looking at each other like that?”

“He wants to talk to us about something else,” I said.

“And he doesn’t want anyone else—like Travis—to know.”

“All of this is stupid. Dude, is the money even worth it?” Dustin asked.

When my eyes met Kipton’s, I smiled. “It’s more than worth it.”

She blushed and looked away.

“Come on. We better get back before Jack realizes we’re together.”

Dustin pointed between us. “Are you two like...*together* together?”

I hit him on the side of the arm. “I don’t kiss and tell, Dustin.”



The moment we stepped into my parents’ living room, all eyes turned to us.



Rose jumped up and rushed over to Kipton.

“We need to talk. Now!” Without giving Kipton a chance to say a word, Rose practically dragged her out of the room.

When I looked back, I saw my parents, Blayze, Bradley, and Uncle Dirk still staring at me. Bradley shot me a knowing smirk, but I ignored him.

“How was the cabin?” my mother asked.

“It was nice. Thank you for all that food.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome.”

Dustin hadn’t told anyone he was going out to the cabin to get us, so as far as anyone knew, we’d come back on our own. Kipton and I ate the rest of the food on the drive back to the ranch. “I put your basket in the kitchen, and I’ll clean it out.”

“That’s sweet of you, but you don’t have to do that.”

I shrugged. “I want to.”

Uncle Dirk hitched his chin at me. “I watched the show last night. And your Truth Booth. Afterward, they announced something new for the show.”

I shook my head, confused. “They couldn’t have. Kipton was with me...”

My voice trailed off. My father and Bradley both grinned, my mother looked away, but not before I saw the sparkle in her eyes, and Uncle Dirk just wore that lazy smile of his.

“Who made the announcement?” I asked.

Bradley was the one to answer. “It was right after the Truth Booth, on the site. Someone—a female voice, but not Kipton’s—came on and said that instead of a random selection, the audience would get to vote for the woman they wanted you to go on a date with next. They took a poll right after your recap.”

I drew my head back, surprised. Jack and Travis were constantly changing the fucking rules of this show. “Really?”

All four of them nodded.

“Who did they vote for?”

“Me.”

I spun around to see Kipton standing there, a shocked look on her face.

“What?” I asked, as my eyes bounced from Kipton to Rose. “How? I mean...why? And how do you know that?”

Rose took a step forward. “I told her. I didn’t know anything about it until Dustin texted, telling me Jack was looking for you both, and Aunt Lincoln told him Kipton was with me. I knew about the two actresses leaving,

because of the cat fight in the lobby, but I'm a hundred percent positive that was staged. Jack and Travis wanted them gone. Based on the comments on the blog, the audience was starting to figure out they were hired."

"Yeah, we came to that conclusion as well. I figured that was why Jack was looking for us," I said, looking back at Kipton.

"No. He knew they were leaving last night, and he didn't say anything. They didn't even come back to Montana with the rest of the women. I'm sure he came over to tell you about the audience picking Kipton for the next date. I saw the poll when I looked at the show's website this morning to see if viewers had swiped left on any of the girls from the whole Vegas fiasco. It was closed, and the site just told visitors to tune in Wednesday to learn who the audience picked. Of course, when Jack texted me to ask if I was with Kipton, I totally badgered the hell out of him to tell me the winner, and he finally told me it was Kipton. I think he's looking for you both because they *want* you to go on that date."

Kipton let out a nervous bubble of laughter. "We can't go out on a date!"

"Why not?" my mother asked. "It would solve one of your problems. You could let your feelings show."

"But I'm hosting the show."

"Not anymore."

Every gaze whipped around to see Jack standing in the hallway that led into the living room.

I scowled. "By all means, just come right in. And what do you mean, not anymore?" I asked.

He closed his eyes and sighed before he focused back on me. "The camera was on you when you saw Kipton at that club, Hunter. Even though I told Paul to keep the cameras off her, everyone saw your face."

"How would they know who I was looking at?" I asked.

"The other cameraman panned out and inadvertently got Kipton in the shot. The audience knew she was there, and when you turned and saw her, everyone saw *you*."

"So what?" Kipton said, exasperated. "It was the stupid dress—and wasn't that exactly what you wanted, Jack? What guy *wouldn't* look at a girl wearing that dress?"

"She's right. She looked hot as hell last night. Even women were checking her out."

Kipton turned to my cousin. "Thank you, Rose. I think."

“The bottom line is, Travis saw Hunter’s expression, and he was the one who had the idea for the poll. He asked Ansley to record the message inviting the audience to vote for your next date. Then he told her to start some drama with Rainey.”

“Why would he do that?” Kipton asked.

Jack pushed a hand through his hair. “One of the viewers commented about seeing Rainey on another show in the past, and started insisting all the women were paid actresses. Rainey and Ansley were the only two women we paid to be on the show. Travis insisted we hire them in case we needed a bit of drama.”

“I can’t believe it,” I said. “I thought it was an experiment?”

Jack laughed, but there was no humor behind it. “That’s what we’d originally intended it to be. A dating experiment...but once the ratings spiked, Travis decided to throw in some obstacles.”

“You didn’t tell me you’d be changing the fucking rules all the time!” I shouted.

“Hunter Shaw,” my mother said. “Do not raise your voice and curse in my house.”

I turned to look at her. “Mom, they’re breaking their own contracts!”

“Life isn’t always the way you expect it to be, Hunter,” Jack said. “And show business definitely isn’t. Did you really think it was just going to be you, going on a few dates, then walking away with a bunch of money? How do you think we’re pulling in more viewers each week? By slightly altering the rules of the game—which is actually allowed in the contract, in an addendum from the Dating Rules portion.”

I glared at him. “But why drag Kipton into this mess?”

He shook his head. “I never planned on it. I had a suspicion the two of you liked one another from the beginning. I admit, I even hoped to nip it in the bud. If you were falling for Kipton, you wouldn’t want to date any of the others.”

“I could still do it. I *will* still do it. We don’t need to pull her into this mess. Just let her host.”

Jack looked at me with a serious expression. “You can honestly say that you can continue going on dates with other women when you have feelings for Kipton?”

My eyes met hers. Everything had changed even in the short time since we’d slept together and admitted how we felt. She gave me a supportive

smile and nodded.

“Yes. You both knew when we started this thing, I wasn’t actually looking to find anyone. I never had any intention of being with any of those women long term.”

Jack looked at Kipton, then back to me. “Was that because you wanted to stay single? Or was there another reason?”

I kept my gaze locked on Jack. Even at that first meeting with the producers, I truly had no idea she was the reason behind my declaration. I wanted to meet her, definitely, but I wasn’t looking for love. I never thought I’d be so lucky, and if I was, I sure as hell didn’t think I’d find it on some stupid show.

Jack nodded and gave me a small smile. “I thought so.”

“I didn’t answer you,” I spat back.

“You don’t have to, Hunter. It’s written all over your face.”

Kipton walked over to me and laced her fingers with mine. “I’m not going to stand here and say that I don’t have feelings for Hunter, because I do. Strong feelings. And we both knew what was at stake when we decided to pursue them. So...what do we need to do moving forward?”

“You’re going to have to be one of the contestants now,” Jack immediately stated.

“She’s *not* living in that house.”

That came from my mother. All eyes turned to her.

She shook her head. “She stays here, or we refuse to let you film on the ranch.”

“We have a contract,” Jack reminded them.

My father stood. “Which you’ve been changing at your whim with your *addendums*, solely to manipulate my son. And I have a very good lawyer too.”

“This is crazy!” Kipton said. “I’m the host of the show. I have a contract of my own. Jack, you can’t just pull me from my duties and expect me to join the girls out of the blue.”

“You both know how Travis is. He’ll find a way, and he’s not going to budge on this. Kipton, did you read your contract carefully? Or have a lawyer look at it?”

Her entire body went rigid.

Holy hell...had she not read the contract?

Turning her to face me, I asked, “Kip, tell me you had a lawyer look over

the contract before you signed.”

Her eyes filled with tears, and she gave a slow shake. “I need this money to help my parents, Hunter. They could lose *everything* if I don’t do this show. Nothing in the contract would’ve changed my mind.”

I clutched at my hair and cursed. I knew Kipton was doing the show for the money, she never hid that fact. But I didn’t know her parents’ circumstances were so dire.

Hugging herself with her arms, Kipton turned to Jack. “What does my contract state?”

Jack closed his eyes. It was clear he wasn’t enjoying this any more than the rest of us. When he opened them, he looked at Kipton. “That the show has the option to let you go at any time, without cause, and without obligation to pay your salary, since the contractual obligations would be incomplete.”

Kipton’s eyes widened in shock.

I balled my fists together and was ready to pound Jack’s face. My father and Uncle Dirk must have seen my anger growing because they both walked over. When my father put his hand on my arm, he said, “Hunter, take a breath.”

“There isn’t any other way around this where Travis doesn’t act like an asshole?” Uncle Dirk asked.

Jack just stood there. He had just as much say on the show as Travis. He could play the innocent part all he wanted, but he could go against Travis if he wanted to.

When literally everyone in the room started arguing with Jack, Rose held her hands up and shouted, “Okay, everyone, calm the hell down—and hear me out.”

My mother laughed and looked at my father. “Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### KIPTON

My head spun, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to scream or cry. When Rose yelled at everyone to calm down, all I wanted to do was fall into Hunter's arms.

"Oh great. This should be good. If you have an idea, I'd love to hear it," Jack said, rolling his eyes at Rose.

Rose shot him a dirty look. "Kipton can still be the host. It was the audience's decision to send Kipton and Hunter on a date. Well...so what? Send them on a date and give the viewers what they want. But Travis needs to realize half those viewers are tuning in for Kipton alone. Look at the comments, Jack. They *love* her. They also love that she's hosting the show. Pull her, and you'll have a ton of pissed-off viewers. This could just be another part of your stupid *experiment* since you're so fond of changing the rules every other day. If you can throw in paid actresses, you can let the audience choose the host for a date. Who even cares when the rules are constantly changing?"

"And if the audience wants them to go on a second date?" Jack asked.

Rose shrugged. "Then send them on another date."

"I'm the *host*, though," I argued. "I can't host my own damn dates."

"Who says? They're making up the rules as they go along now, so why not? Have a guest host when you and Hunter go on a date. Or hell, play host right up until the date starts. Have fun with it."

"Have fun with it?" I asked, pinching the bridge of my nose.

"Yes!" Rose said with so much exasperation in her voice, I couldn't help but giggle. "Girl, you're the host whom everyone adores. So much so, they voted you into the damn dating pool! Don't let Travis turn this into

something bad or dramatic or conniving. Go on the damn date, have a fantastic time, and kiss the living shit out of each other. Let the viewers see there's really something between you." She glanced at Hunter. "If they truly want this to be a dating experiment, then show everyone what it's *really* like when you date someone you feel a genuine connection with."

Jack nodded and stepped closer to Rose. "As much as it pains me to agree with her, she's right. That's what the show is supposed to be about. Finding someone you connect with. Go on the date and just...be yourselves. Once the audience sees the chemistry between you two, they'll go mad for it." He turned to Hunter. "And, Hunter, then you can swipe left on however many girls you want."

"But, to keep it interesting, I think you need to keep Kimber."

I shot Rose a dirty look, and she gave me an apologetic smile. "I know, I know. Hunter has some weird thing with her."

Hunter huffed. "I don't have a weird thing with her."

"She was the only date you kissed," I added.

"Only because she keeps kissing me first! I didn't want to make her feel bad, and it didn't mean anything."

Jack started to pace. "No, I think you're right. We keep Kimber because there was a spark between you two. Then the audience will believe at least two women are in the running for your affection."

Hunter's eyes went wide. "Are you trying to ruin my relationship with Kipton before it starts?"

"Of course not," Jack said. "But we won't have a show at all if you get rid of everyone."

"Why Kimber, though?" Hunter argued.

A strange feeling washed over me, and I took a step away from Hunter. "Are you worried about keeping her? About your feelings for her?" Everyone saw that kiss. The one they shared after he removed Kimber's blindfold on their first date.

He looked at me, seemingly horrified. "No!"

"Then why do you want to get rid of her? Are you worried you might develop feelings for her?"

Hunter's eyes went wide. "Of course I'm not."

"I will say, this would truly be a test of your relationship," Rose mused with her arms folded across her chest as she glared at Hunter. She was clearly thinking the same thing I was.

Hunter shook his head and threw up his arms. “Fine. If you want Kimber to stay, I won’t swipe left.”

“I am so damn glad I’m not in your shoes right now,” Bradly muttered as everyone fell silent.

Hunter sighed and pushed a hand through his hair yet again...before he turned and walked out of the room.

Lincoln approached and gave me a soft hug. “Go after him, sweetheart. He’s scared, is all.”

“Of what?”

She brushed a piece of loose hair from my face and gave me such a loving smile. “Of hurting you.”

Without another thought, I rushed out of the room after Hunter.

It didn’t take me long to find him in his room. The door was open, and when I stepped in, I saw him staring out the window. Gently shutting the door, I leaned against it.

Drawing in a breath, I slowly exhaled and said, “I’m sorry.”

He turned and leaned against the window frame, keeping his head down, his eyes on the floor. “It’s not going to work between us if you don’t trust me.”

“I *do* trust you.”

“Really? Because what I heard down there was you thinking I have feelings for Kimber, and I don’t.”

“I’m sorry I let my jealousy rear its ugly head.”

“The last thing I would ever want to do is hurt you, Kip. I’ve never felt this way about anyone, and maybe it *is* going fast, but I don’t want to lose you. I can’t lose you. I *won’t* lose you.”

He lifted his head, and when our gazes met, I sucked in a breath. Were those tears in his eyes?

“I don’t know why I’ve always been afraid to open my heart to someone. Maybe it’s just because I’ve never met someone like you. Every girl I’ve ever dated wanted something from me...but not *just* me. And the first time we met, you looked at me in a way nobody else ever has. You saw me, and only me, and if I’m being honest with myself, I think I fell in love with you right then. You’ve been yourself with me since the beginning. I cannot—and will not—lose you, Kip.”

He wiped away a tear that had slid free, and my entire world felt like it stopped right then. I quickly crossed the room and threw my body into his.



He wrapped his arms around me and held me so tight, I thought I might not be able to breathe.

“You won’t lose me.”

“Promise me this fucking show won’t pull us apart.”

I held him tighter. It was a promise I could easily make, but one I wasn’t sure I could keep.

“I promise it won’t pull us apart.”



The knock on my bedroom door caused me to roll over and look at the clock. It was five in the morning. Had I imagined the knock?

*Knock, knock.*

Nope, someone was at my door.

I pushed the covers off me and stumbled out of bed. When I cracked the door open, the only thing I saw was a pair of blue eyes staring down at me.

“Hunter?” I whispered. “What are you doing here?”

He slipped into my room and quietly shut the door. When he turned around, his eyes roamed over my body. I had on a Montana State T-shirt that was cropped so that my midriff was on display, and a pair of baby-blue panties. I slept hot, so I normally wore as little as possible.

“Jesus, you look sexy as hell. I was dreaming about you and had to see you.”

I felt my cheeks heat as I glanced down and smiled. After the whole craziness with Jack, Hunter and I went for a ride on the ranch again until a storm blew in. Then it was family game night, and I’d laughed so much my sides hurt. Hunter had walked me up to my room, and we kissed good night. I’d lain in bed for nearly two hours before I was able to fall asleep. Knowing Hunter was only a few doors away was torture.

Hunter put his finger under my chin and lifted my eyes to meet his. “Can you be quiet?”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. “You want to sleep together in your parents’ house?”

He flashed me a smile. “Their room is clear on the other side of the house—and you’ve seen how big this house is.”

I shook my head as I held up my hands. “Hunter, no!” I whispered.

“No?” he asked in a voice so deep and sultry, I nearly gave in right then

and there.

“No. We can’t.”

He prowled closer, and I slowly backed away until I bumped into the bed.

“Do you want me, Kip?”

My teeth dug into my lip so hard, I was positive I would draw blood. The only thing I could do was nod because seeing him standing there with no shirt, sweatpants hanging low on his hips, made my insides throb with desire. If he touched me, he’d know how wet I was already. I could feel the dampness on my panties.

He lifted his hand and ran his finger over the exposed skin of my stomach, causing my body to shiver. His touch did the most delicious things to me. Who would have thought a simple brush of someone’s finger on your skin could cause your insides to feel molten hot?

“I’m going to have to go back to the guesthouse today until we break for Christmas in a few days.”

My tongue swept out to lick my suddenly dry lips. “That’s a bummer.”

He looked into my eyes, and I could see them dance with mischief. “There are so many things I want to do to you, Kip.”

“Like?”

A wicked grin appeared on his face. “Bend you over and take you from behind. Put a blanket down in a field and make love to you under the warm sun, when it’s not freezing outside, that is. Take you up against that window in Vegas.”

My brows shot up. “Would any window do, or does it have to be that particular window?”

He let out a low chuckle as he buried his face in my neck and kissed me. His mouth moved to my ear, where he whispered, “Any window will do. Should I keep listing all the things I want?”

I held his arms to keep steady. “Yes,” I hissed as he bit my shoulder gently.

“Make love to you under the stars. Fuck you in the shower.”

My knees went weak at his dirty talk, and I moaned. “Hunter.”

“Bury my face between your legs and lick you until you scream my name.”

I dropped back onto the bed. My body strung so tight I was positive it wouldn’t take much to make me come.

“How does that sound?”

My chest rose and fell like I'd run a marathon. "I want all of that."

He crawled onto the bed and over me. "Good. But right now, I can't be gentle, Kip."

I shook my head. "I don't want you to be."

"Can you be quiet?" he asked again, his finger touching my lips.

I nodded. "Yes."

"Roll over and get on all fours."

The command caused a rush of wetness to soak my panties even more. I realized I loved this version of Hunter. When I did as he asked, his hand went to my ass, and he let out a guttural moan. He slowly peeled off my panties, then bent and kissed my back. His mouth moved lower, and my entire body started to shake. Not because I was nervous. Because I knew what was coming.

I let out a small gasp when his mouth covered my entrance. "Hunter," I whispered, knowing it wasn't going to take me long to come.

He did wicked things with his tongue and mouth while I clutched my pillow and attempted to hold in the scream I wanted to let out when my orgasm rocked my body. It was so intense, I swore I saw stars and even left my body for a moment.

When he moved, I instantly missed his mouth. "Are you sore from yesterday?"

"I...I don't think so."

"I'm going to take you from behind. You tell me if it's too much, okay?"

I turned my head and looked at him as I rocked my body back. I needed to feel him inside me.

He smiled as he placed his hands on my hips...then slowly pushed inside me.

"Oh my God, you feel deeper," I whispered as my head dropped and my hands fisted the sheets.

"You feel so good, Kip. I want to stay inside you forever."

I nodded, then wiggled my hips to prompt him to move. He started off slow, most likely because he thought I was sore. But the way he felt inside me only made my desire heighten.

"More," I said in a hushed tone. "Hunter, I need more."

He moved faster, and I realized I could make him go deeper if I met his thrusts with my own.

"Kipton...*fuck*," he breathed, his tone sounding like a mixture of pleasure

and pain. He lost control, thrusting fast and hard. It was amazing. I could feel my orgasm starting to build, but it was just out of reach.

His movements became more frantic, and I wanted to cry out with frustration.

“Kip,” he said.

“I’m so close!” I buried my face into the pillow.

Hunter moved his hand around my body, and the moment he touched my clit, I exploded. Thank goodness my face was already buried in the pillow, because it muffled my moans of pleasure.

“Fuck, you’re squeezing me so tight,” he whispered. “I’m going to come”

We came together, and I was sure I felt him grow larger inside me. When he finally stopped moving, he leaned over and kissed my back once again before he pulled out of me. I collapsed onto the bed in a mushy, satisfied mess. I should have been horrified that we’d done that in his parents’ house, but I only felt utterly content in the afterglow of our lovemaking.

Hunter rolled me over and picked me up in his arms.

“What are you doing?” I softly asked as I settled against his chest.

“I’m going to wash you up.”

I lifted my head and stared at him as he walked us into the bathroom attached to the guest bedroom. Hunter set me down and turned the shower on, feeling the water until it got to the temperature he wanted. Taking my hand in his, he walked us in. Grabbing a bar of soap and a cloth, he washed my entire body. When he cleaned between my legs, I moaned.

“Don’t be making those noises. I don’t want to hurt you by getting all excited and having sex too much.”

“There is no such thing as too much with you, Mr. Shaw.”

He looked up and winked at me, causing my stomach to flip like I was on a roller coaster. Once he was finished with me, I returned the favor. We dried off, and Hunter walked me back to the bed, straightened the covers and motioned for me to get in. Then he climbed in behind me, drew my body against his, and whispered, “Get some sleep, angel.”

I melted into him. With a smile on my face and Hunter’s arm around my body, I drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### HUNTER

Travis walked into the meeting on Monday morning with a smile on his face. He glanced around the room before taking a seat.

“Interesting past few days,” he said as he flipped through some papers.

Kipton and I exchanged a look.

Glancing back up, Travis focused on Kipton. “It appears that the audience loves the idea of you and Hunter going on a date. After the little exchange in Vegas, despite being brief, people seem to think there’s a connection between the two of you.”

We didn’t say a word. Neither did Jack.

Travis glanced at his partner. “We might want to investigate audience participation more. We had a tremendous response, like I mentioned to you on Saturday. Interaction with the audience is a good thing.”

“It was pretty impressive, the response,” Jack said as he picked up a printout of the results. Kipton had won over Kimber by a landslide. Sarah came in a distant third.

“I think we should arrange the date this week before we break for the holiday. Christmas is on Saturday, so let’s do your date on Wednesday. We can plan something fun...something you’ll enjoy.”

Kipton looked at me and shrugged before focusing back on Travis. “You’re the boss.”

He lifted a brow. “You’re not going to argue about it?”

“Would it do me any good?”

Travis chuckled. “No, you’d still be going on the date.”

Jack leaned forward. “I think we should have Kipton host it still, then announce that she’s the date. It’ll make for a bit more fun, and take the

audience by surprise.”

I nodded in agreement, but still hadn't said a word.

Travis thought about it for a moment, then grinned. “That’s a great idea. Then we’re all agreed that the Wednesday date will be with Kipton and Hunter?” he asked.

The rest of us nodded.

Travis wrote some notes, then said, “Okay, well, let’s get a few things filmed today that we can show on Friday’s show. It won’t be live since it’s Christmas Eve, but I still want people to get something for that two-hour slot, regardless if it isn’t a date.” He glanced up and again looked between me and Kipton, as if waiting for one of us to say something.

She stood. “If we’re done, I’m going to meet with the crew and go over how we’ll handle Wednesday.”

Jack stood. “I’ll join you. I need to talk to the camera crew about the shots from the house.”

“What’s wrong with the shots?” Travis asked.

“Nothing, but they’ve been spending a lot of time in the hot tub, so we asked the ladies if they had a problem with us putting a camera out there. They said no.”

“Perfect. Maybe we should do a group date at the house and make it a hot tub party,” Travis stated, as he wrote something else on the paper in his hand.

It took everything in me not to yell out *hell no*.

Kipton kept a neutral expression on her face as she said, “Why don’t you make them have a bikini contest as well.”

Travis stared at Kipton, then laughed. “I’m sorry?”

“These are more than just beautiful women. I thought you wanted to be different from the other shows out there, yet you want to have a hot tub party at the house?”

Jack cleared his throat. “Should we not put a camera out there?”

Kipton turned to look at him. “I guess that would depend on how *they* feel about it. However, to suggest a group date in the hot tub seems cheesy. But what do I know? I’m just the host with the pretty face.”

Turning on her heels, Kipton walked out of the room with her head held high and a little bit more swagger in her step. I couldn’t help but lean back in my chair and smile.

Jack followed her out, and when Travis turned to look at me, I shrugged. He shook his head and said, “Tomorrow, I was thinking maybe we could take

a few of the girls and go sledding and snowmobiling, with all this snow that's coming down."

"On the ranch?"

"If that's okay with your father and brother."

I nodded. "Should be fine."

"Great, I'll get it all planned out and we'll air the footage Friday night."

"Sounds good."



"If one more girl screams, I'm going to lose my shit," Paul mumbled to me as we stood off to the side while they took a break to fix Genevie's jacket that tore open.

"You're not the one having to ride on the snowmobiles with them. Those screams are even worse close-up."

He chuckled as we listened in on Harper, the marketing manager, who seemed to be angling for a job. She was explaining a few ways the show could be marketed better. Jack, who'd thought it would be fun to come along today, looked like he was ready to turn and sprint for the trees.

Kimber did nothing but complain about how cold she was, which struck me as odd since she was from New York City and should be used to the snow.

Ally flirted nonstop with me every time she was near, and even attempted to kiss me, which caused me to take a step back and Ally to lose her balance. She face-planted in the snow, then spent ten minutes complaining while Tricia attempted to fix her makeup.

"The only ones not complaining are Devyn, Vivian, and Brina," Paul noted.

I sighed as Jack got everyone's attention. "We're going to ride back to the barn, where there will be a hot chocolate station for everyone to get warm. Remember, the cameras are rolling!"

Some of the girls squealed with delight as I begrudgingly got back on the snowmobile. This time, Kimber was my passenger. As she walked up, she smiled. "Don't be afraid to hold on tight to me."

I gestured at the snowmobile. "You're sitting behind me."

She giggled. "Oh, then I'm gonna have to hold on tight to *you*."

With the cameras rolling, all I could do was smile. When I glanced over

to Jack, he gave me an expression that said he was amused but sorry at the same time. Kip and I had discussed over dinner last night at my parents' house that we both got the impression Jack regretted this entire venture.

Or at the very least, regretted that Travis was part of it.

I climbed onto the snowmobile, followed by Kimber. Paul was sitting on another two-seater, with the two other cameramen on a third. I had no idea how Travis managed to get so many snowmobiles on such short notice, but I had to admit, I was having fun—minus all the complaining and having to constantly stop for a loose eyelash, lost hat, or broken nail.

Once we were back at the barn, I entered to see Kipton standing there, dressed in jeans, a sweater, and a sleeveless ski jacket. She looked gorgeous—and it took everything I had not to rush over and kiss her. Instead, I winked, and she rewarded me with the pink flush of her cheeks.

The girls rushed over to a hot chocolate bar that had everything you could imagine. Marshmallows to whipped cream, candies to cinnamon sticks.

Ally picked up the can of cream and made her way over to me. “Open up for some cream.”

I just stared at her for a second. “No, thanks, I’m not a fan of fake stuff.”

The look on her face was murderous, but she forced a smile and shrugged. “Your loss.”

Since this had turned into a group date, Travis and Jack decided to change the rules again, so I could eliminate up to two women. Ally would be the first to go.

After a grueling half hour of hanging out with everyone, Jack wrapped up the shoot. The girls would return to the house and talk about the date together, and if any of them wanted to swipe left, they’d be allowed to head into the Truth Booth. Since it wasn’t a one-on-one date, however, none of them could swipe right. They’d have to wait and view my recap to learn who was allowed to stay.

Paul loaded up his gear, and he and Louie got into the limo with me to head back to my place. Kipton was filming the wrap-up of the group date.

Once back at the house, I grabbed a beer and wanted to offer one to Paul and Louie, but knew that wouldn’t go over well, especially with a fucking camera in my kitchen.

“Time to do the Truth Booth, Hunter,” Paul said with a smile.

“Right, the Truth Booth.”

I headed up to the loft, sat down in the chair, and stared at the camera. I



knew I couldn't cut Kimber now, thanks to Jack's decision and the show's need for drama. But that didn't mean I couldn't get rid of a couple others. When the light came on, I smiled and started to talk.

"Today's group date was fun. I love snowmobiling on the ranch...but there were a few moments when I got to see another side of a few of the women. Unfortunately, I don't feel like I have a connection with Ally or Vivian. And for that reason, I think I'm going to swipe left." I lifted my beer and smiled.

From downstairs, I heard someone shout out, "Thank God, you got rid of Ally!"

## Chapter Twenty-Five

### KIPTON

Today had already been a long day. Now, after a meeting with wardrobe about upcoming outfits, I was dashing to the main barn on the ranch, where a group was setting up a hot chocolate bar. I could only imagine how the snowmobiling went. Of the women chosen, I hadn't really pegged any of them for the type to enjoy it, but I could be pleasantly surprised.

Blayze and a few other guys were helping themselves to hot chocolate when I entered.

"They're not back yet?" I asked, as I looked at the time on my phone. They needed to get things wrapped up soon if the editing team would have time to get the piece ready for airing on Friday. After the live date tomorrow, everyone was heading home for the short holiday break.

The sounds of the snowmobiles nearing was my answer. Blayze walked over and bumped my arm as he spoke in a lowered voice. "Hunter texted and said he wanted to chop his right arm off."

I shouldn't have enjoyed that so much, but I smiled.

Blayze laughed and shook his head before continuing toward his office. Once everyone was piled into the barn, the girls continued to flirt with Hunter. I had to give it to him, he handled it well. I think, had we not gotten together last weekend, I'd have been seething with jealousy right now. Instead, I felt completely at ease.

They filmed for another thirty minutes, then wrapped up the day.

It was my time to perform. Since we were only filming a super-short segment, I didn't have an earpiece in. I held up a mic as the camera focused on me. Jack had also given me a quick rundown of how the date had gone so I could mention it.

“It sounds like our group had a chilly, fun time, if you don’t count the missing eyelash.” I winked. “If you head on over to our website, Hunter will be doing a Truth Booth to recap the date. And you can watch a live stream of the girls for an hour, from eight central to nine, as they recap their date. We here at *Swipe Right* want to wish you all Happy Holidays! We’ll see you on Wednesday. Stay safe and goodnight!”

The light went out, and I was cleared. When I turned around, Rose was leaning against one of the stalls toward the back of the barn. We didn’t film near the horses, but I was still impressed by how relaxed they were when the barn was filled with strangers. Most of them were turned out, but there were always one or two stalled up each time we’d filmed in their space.

“Why do you look like the Cheshire cat?”

Rose pushed off and made her way over to me. “Are you saying I’m about to do something that could get you into trouble?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“Nonsense. I’m only here to see if you want to spend some girl time with Lily and me. We have some last-minute Christmas shopping to do, and you need a date outfit.”

I raised a brow.

She grinned. “You can’t tell me you don’t want to go shopping in our cute little town.”

It had been so long since I’d hung out with friends. I hadn’t been able to speak to Aspen, my best friend, hardly at all, outside of a few texts. She and her family had gone to Italy for a pre-Christmas vacation, and I so desperately wanted to sit with her for hours and hash out everything about Hunter. I adored Rose and Lily, but...they were his cousins. I was reluctant to get too intimate with them about my feelings.

“That sounds like a lot of fun.”

Rose did a little happy dance. “You’re going to need a warmer coat, though.”

I glanced down at the outfit I had on. “Yeah, this was more for style than function. Can we swing by Lincoln and Brock’s house so I can grab a coat?”

She looped her arm with mine. “Yep. I’ll text Lily to meet us there.”

The three of us spent the next few hours visiting each little store on Main Street in downtown Hamilton. We spent the most time in La Chic Boutique, which was owned by Morgan and Georgiana. Morgan had her own line of clothing that was exclusive to the boutique...and if I thought the dress I’d

worn in Vegas was amazing, I was stunned to find even more beautiful pieces in the shop. I walked out with four bags filled with new things. Of course, all the women had insisted I buy new lingerie, and I purchased a cute outfit to wear for the date with Hunter.

Jack had given me one hint—my date with Hunter would be inside somewhere, not outside, which I was grateful for. I could only guess he'd done so because he felt guilty. It was pretty much his fault that I was going on this date. Though, if I hadn't had that dress on, I would never have needed to go up to the room to change...and I wouldn't be with Hunter right now.

"Okay, has the temperature dropped?" Lily asked as she wrapped her scarf tighter around her neck.

"Feels like it," Rose said as she took my arm and Lily's. "This has been so much fun. I'm so glad they shot the snowmobile rides early so you were able to spend part of the afternoon with us."

I returned her smile with one of my own. "Me too."

"Hey, we never did watch the Truth Booth," Lily said. She gestured toward a pizza place as we neared. "Let's head in here and grab something to eat before we head back to the ranch. We can watch the recap on my phone."

I looked west over the mountains and sighed. "I don't know, it's getting darker outside, and I really should be getting back."

They both frowned. "Kipton, you never get to hang out and just have fun," Rose argued.

"That's not true. I have fun during your family game nights."

Lily laughed. "That doesn't count. It's still early, and I'm *starving*. Let's eat."

We slipped into the restaurant, and the warmth inside, along with the smell of food, made all three of us sigh.

"Come on, there's a booth over there. You can stack all your bags next to you," Lily said, her eyes sparkling. She was just as beautiful as the rest of the Shaw women, though she looked so different. Her hair was dark brown, and her eyes weren't the familiar blue of the rest of the family, but a deep honey color. Rose had blonde hair and blue eyes, and Morgan had light brown hair with blue eyes—the same shade as Hunter's. Each time Morgan looked at me, I couldn't help but think of her brother.

After ordering food and a couple of beers—Lily was twenty-one, but she'd agreed to drive home—Lily pulled up the *Swipe Right* website and watched Hunter's Truth Booth. I could hear it, but I was sitting across from

them in the booth, so I couldn't watch.

"He finally sent Ally home," Lily said.

"I'm surprised he sent Vivian home. I liked her."

Lily shook her head. "She wasn't really putting herself out there. She is stunningly beautiful, though."

"They all are," I said as I brought the beer up to my lips.

Rose looked up with the same smug smile she'd worn in the barn. "But only one owns his heart."

Lily gasped. "What? Who?"

We both looked at her as if she was a little crazy, before Rose said, "Oh, that's right, you just got home from school, so you're not up to speed on things."

Lily wriggled in the booth. "Bring me up to speed!"

Glancing my way, Rose asked, "Would you like to tell her, or shall I?"

I rolled my eyes, and apparently, that was her answer.

"You know how I went to Vegas with them last Friday?"

"Yes," Lily said, then glanced at me. "That dress that Morgan designed looked *amazing* on you, by the way!"

"Thank you," I said as Rose grabbed Lily's hands and brought her attention back to her.

"Anyway, long story short—Kipton and Hunter are dating, and I'm pretty sure they slept together."

My mouth fell open. "Hey!"

"Oh my God, *what?*" Lily shouted, causing everyone in the entire place to look at us. "Sorry, sorry!" she said, waving everyone off. "Go back to your pizza eating."

Mortified, I buried my face in my hands.

"You and Hunter are dating?" Lily asked in a much softer voice.

Rose continued to speak for me. "Yes, but you can't tell anyone. It's a secret. And then that jerk of a producer guy had the audience vote for who should be Hunter's next date, and they picked Kipton!"

"*What!?* Oh my gosh, I missed *one* show!" Lily griped. "Are you going to do it?"

I nodded.

"At *my* advice, I might add. Their first date—well, first show date—is tomorrow. But they had a real first date last Saturday, when they got back from Vegas."

Lily placed her hand over her heart and sighed. “What did you do?”

I started to talk, but Rose interrupted. “They went to Dustin’s family’s cabin to be alone.” She used finger quotes when she said *alone*. “Then Dustin had to rush out and get them because, hello, no cell coverage, and when they came back, our girl here looked like she’d been thoroughly satisfied...if you know what I mean!”

Lily’s hand clapped over her mouth as her eyes went wide with excitement.

“You should be a writer, Rose. You have such a way with words,” I deadpanned.

She winked. “Thank you.”

“I wasn’t being serious.”

After taking a drink of her beer, she replied, “I know. Now, how was it? I mean, he *is* a cousin, so don’t get too graphic, but was the sex good?”

Lily giggled and nodded like one of the bobbleheads you see on people’s dashboards.

“I am not having this conversation with you two.”

Rose let out a bark of laughter. “Oh, I think you are. We’re the closest thing you have to a friend right now, and it’s written all over your face that you’re bursting to talk.”

I looked away and sighed.

Lily reached across the table and squeezed my hand. “Kipton, we really *do* want to be your friends.”

When I looked back at the two of them, I almost laughed. They both wore such hopeful expressions. “Okay, we were...intimate.”

“How much?” Rose asked.

I looked around the restaurant, then leaned across the table. “We made love at the cabin, and...it was my first time.”

They both gasped as their eyes went wide. Of course, leave it to Rose to be the first to speak.

“You are *shitting* me. You were a virgin!”

I kicked her under the table. “Why don’t you go announce it to the town!” I said in a whispered shout.

“Did he know?” Lily asked.

Nodding, I couldn’t help but smile. “Yes. It wasn’t anything we planned, but the moment felt right.”

They both sighed.

“Was he sweet?” Lily asked.

“Yes. Very sweet. And romantic. And afterward, we ate a lunch Lincoln packed for us.”

They both put their hands over their hearts. “I wish my first time had been sweet and romantic.” Rose sighed.

“It wasn’t?” I asked.

The pizza came, and we halted the conversation until the server walked away.

“Nope,” she said as she took a slice. “It was prom night, and I thought I was in love with the asshat.”

Lily chuckled. “Oh my gosh, I lost my virginity on prom night too!”

They both looked at me.

“I wasn’t saving myself for marriage, if that’s what you’re both thinking.”

“I was,” they said at the same time.

I laughed. Then with a half shrug, I said, “I can’t really explain it...it just never felt right with any of the guys I dated. I haven’t dated a whole lot, anyway, but no one has ever made me feel like Hunter does. I *knew* he loved me before he even said it.”

Rose dropped her pizza, and Lily’s fork and knife clattered to the floor.

Pressing my lips together, I closed my eyes and internally kicked myself.

Rose waved her hands in front of her face, closing her own eyes. “Hold on. Wait one second.”

“He told you he loved you?” Lily asked with a wide grin. “Oh my God, what did you say?”

Rose opened her eyes and appeared to be holding her breath.

“I said I loved him too.”

Covering her mouth with both hands, Rose teared up as Lily waved her hands in front of her eyes, blinking rapidly.

“Was it like...love at first sight?” Lily asked.

I couldn’t help but smile. “I think so. I mean, I instantly knew that I was attracted to him the second I stepped into his parents’ house.”

Rose dropped back in her seat with a sigh. “I love love.”

Lily nodded, then reached for Rose’s fork and knife and began cutting her pizza. She took a huge bite as she pointed to Rose and said, “Same.”

Rose clapped her hands, then picked up her pizza once more. “Okay, now we have to figure out how to get rid of the rest of the girls so you’re the only one left!”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

### HUNTER

“What are you doing here?”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Blayze walking toward me. I smiled and turned back to Iceman and started to brush him again. “Went for a ride this morning.”

He leaned against one of the stalls and gave me a once-over. “Nervous about tonight?”

I let out a humorless chuckle. “Is it that obvious?”

“Maybe not to everyone else, but it is to me.”

Turning to face him, I looked at my older brother. “Do I treat it like a normal date? Do I hold back some? We didn’t want people knowing we’re dating.”

“My advice is to have fun, but maybe remember you have a shit ton of people watching you. Enjoy the time with her, but maybe don’t whisk her off to your bedroom. Wait—do they have a camera in your bedroom?”

I curled my lip. “No, but I’m sure they’d like that.”

“Mom said they now have one outside at the girls’ house for when they go into the hot tub.”

“Yeah, that was a sore spot for Kipton. But I guess they asked the girls, and they were fine with it.”

He rolled his eyes. “When is this damn show over?”

“Not soon enough, but we get a break for Christmas, and Kip and I can do and be whatever we want for a few days.”

“You sure they’re turning the cameras off at your place?”

I frowned. “Jack assured me they were, but that doesn’t mean shit.”

Blayze gave a thoughtful nod, then said, “He might not...but Travis



would. I don't trust the guy. Caught them trying to put a camera up here in the main barn. I told him I'm ripping it down if I find one, but not before I give him my thoughts on this show."

"Did you tell Dad? That's a clear violation of the contract they signed."

He shook his head. "No, but I'll tell him if they pull something like it again."

I put everything away that I'd used to groom Iceman, put my jacket on, and led him out to pasture. I enjoyed watching him take off in a mad run when he was set out. He loved it here on the ranch.

As I released the horse, a sudden sense of melancholy washed over me. I had the distinct feeling I was missing something from my life, but I couldn't pinpoint what it was.

Turning, I studied the main barn. It was the largest on the ranch. Everything that happened here started in that barn. My brother's office was there, and my father's as well. There was even an office for Uncle Tanner and Uncle Ty to share, even though they rarely used it. They both had their own businesses running from their areas of the ranch, but they still had a say in the running of Shaw Ranch as a whole.

We were the largest cattle ranch in Montana, with Uncle Tanner raising some of the best cattle horses. Iceman was one of his horses, actually. Aunt Timberlynn was the first person to climb him and train him for roping cattle. He would be used here on the ranch, but Uncle Tanner thought he'd make a great team roping horse. He gifted him to me my junior year of high school, and together, we'd won a few championships.

When I looked over my shoulder, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

Iceman was still standing at the fence, watching me.

I smiled. "It's okay, boy. Go have fun with the girls."

He bobbed his head and finally trotted off to join the rest of the herd.

I let my eyes sweep across the vast pastureland and up to the mountains. The sun was shining brighter now, which made the freshly fallen snow look like someone had tossed glitter all over the ranch. I loved this place, and I knew in my heart that I wanted to raise my kids here with the woman I love.

It struck me that this was the first time I'd ever thought about kids of my own.

My hand came up to rub the back of my neck. What in the hell was happening to me?

Approaching the pasture from a smaller barn, my father placed his arms

on the wooden fence and looked out over our land. “You look deep in thought.”

I shrugged and looked his way. “I guess I was.”

“Want to talk about it?”

I followed his gaze. “I was just thinking that I always saw my life going one way, and now...” My voice trailed off.

Dad turned and looked at me. “Now you see it going a different way.”

I nodded. “Do you think I’m too young to fall in love?”

He tossed his head back and laughed—hard. “You’re almost twenty-two, Hunter. I don’t think that’s too young to fall in love. When it happens, it doesn’t take into account how old you are.”

“It’s just...I never really saw myself falling in love.”

Quirking his brow, he asked, “Why?”

I placed my hands on the fence, doing a few half push-ups for some unknown reason. Nervous energy, maybe. “I don’t know. I guess because I’ve never had any strong feelings for anyone before. I mean, I’ve been attracted to a few women more than others, but not in a way that ever made my heart feel like it was floating around in my chest, bumping into everything.”

He grinned. “Until Kipton?”

“Until Kipton,” I replied with a nod. “Dad...the moment I saw her, I think I fell in love.”

“Wow, that’s a pretty bold statement to make.”

I looked at him. “And you know me. I wouldn’t make it unless I believed it with my whole heart and soul. I love her, and I’m so scared I’m going to do something to mess it up. And this damn show isn’t helping anything.”

He placed a hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “Hunter, if you both feel the same way, and if you want a future with Kipton—communicate. You’ll need to especially when you both go back to school and have the distance between you. Talk to each other. It’ll be hard the next few weeks with the show, but you can make it through. You had no intention of ending up with any of these women when you signed on. Just go on dates with them, be polite, and swipe left afterward.”

I laughed. “You make it sound easy.”

“It is. They’ll flirt, they’ll try to kiss you, which will probably make Kipton uneasy, but keep reassuring her that you love her...if you’ve already told her so.”

Smiling, I nodded. “I have.”

Dad shook his head slowly, a fond look on his face, and then gave me a playful push. “My baby. In love.”

I rolled my eyes. “You sound like Mom.”

He wrapped his arm around my neck and pulled me close with a laugh, giving me a quick hug and a slap on the back. “You’ll always be our baby, Hunter. Come on, your mother wants to see you before you start your day with this fucking show.”

It was my turn to laugh.



I stood off to the side and watched as Kipton got ready to go live. She looked beautiful in jeans with cream-colored boots and a white turtleneck. She wore a long, suede-looking blazer, and her light brown hair was pulled up into one of those sloppy-looking buns that still looked good. Or maybe that was just because it was Kipton.

“Welcome back to another live edition of *Swipe Right*. Tonight’s date night for Hunter, as you know. Normally, I reach into our little bucket of names and pull one out...but not tonight.”

I glanced over to the women who were all sitting on hay bales. Their smiling faces turned to confused expressions.

“It appears, viewers, that you’d like to see Hunter go on a date with —*me*.”

A few of the girls gasped, some smiled, and some looked *really* pissed off. Kimber was one of the pissed-off ones.

That was my cue to walk over to Kipton—which I missed. Jack barked in my ear to move. I flinched slightly and made my way over.

When I reached Kipton, I kissed her on the cheek, like I did with all the others. “Hey, Kip.”

*That* I hadn’t done before. Used her nickname on air. Shit.

“Hunter, last week, the show did a little poll after the Vegas group date, asking the audience who they’d like to see you go out with next. Oddly enough, they chose me.”

I smiled. “I don’t think it’s odd.”

She lifted her brows. I thought she’d ask why, but instead, she just asked, “Are you ready to see what our date’s going to be?”

I prayed the audience at home couldn't tell I was holding my breath. Jack was the one who planned all the dates, but I could easily see Travis adding something to make it awkward for me and Kipton.

She reached into the bowl and pulled out the token, quickly reading it. Looking up at me, she grinned. "Looks like we're having movie night back at your place."

I slowly exhaled. "Sounds like fun—but only if you let me pick out the movie."

Kipton laughed, and it was genuine, not the one she put on for the camera. Turning the token for me to see, she said, "Sorry. It says *I* get to pick the first movie."

Shaking my head, I said, "Figures. Then let's start the date."

She turned back to the camera. "Alright, folks, your wish is our command. We'll see you back here in a bit. Meanwhile, let's head on over to the girls' house and see how they spent their day getting ready for this evening."

The camera light went off—and the barn erupted into a frenzy of women complaining.

"She's the *host!* You cannot be serious about letting them go on a date!" Kimber shouted.

I drew back in surprise. It wasn't in her character to act that way. She'd complained about the cold on our group date, but I'd never seen her act outright bitchy.

"Oh, take a chill pill, Kimber," Bekah said. She and I had yet to go on a date...and I had to admit, I was hoping if we got the chance, she'd bring more of those cookies she'd given me on intro night. "They're doing what the viewers want. It's the whole point of a poll. Besides, I think Kipton and Hunter make a cute couple."

Kipton and I both just stared at the woman as Bekah winked at us.

"Yeah, I think it's kind of fun to shake things up a bit." That came from Mollie. According to Jack, she was going to be the next "surprise" date. I wasn't sure why he'd told me. Either he just figured the ruse was up, or it was a slipup on his part.

Kimber, clearly realizing she was outnumbered, scowled at the women, then forced a smile in my direction. "Well...have fun at movie night."

"Kipton, Hunter, we need to get moving!" Jessie said, with Larry, my production assistant, hot on her heels.

They whisked us into the limo, where we both stuck to mundane topics. I just had a feeling the car feed was going out live at the moment, instead of being recorded. Kipton must have also.

Once the limo pulled up to the guesthouse, I got out, then extended my hand to help Kipton.

When she straightened, she looked up and smiled. "It's snowing."

Fuck, if I didn't want to kiss her. With her head tilted back, smiling as the snow hit her face...she was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen. The look of wonder in her expression had me dropping my head back as well. The feel of the flakes hitting my face tickled, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"Tickles, right?" she asked.

I looked at her and smiled. "I've never done that before."

"You have, you just don't remember. *Any* kid who's grown up with snow has done that at some point in their life."

I thought about it for a moment. "Yeah, you're probably right."

She winked. "I'm always right."

I chuckled and put my hand on her lower back and guided her to the door with Paul and Louie right on our tails.

Once inside, we both paused.

"Holy shit," I whispered, as Kipton slowly stepped farther into the room.

"It looks like a magical wonderland!"

A thick blanket was on the floor with two large bowls of popcorn. A small open cooler off to the side held drinks. Chunky candles were lit and placed throughout the living room and kitchen.

Jack had gone out of his way to make sure this was over-the-top romantic. There was even sultry music playing in the background.

"I hope you both like it," Jack said in our ears. "Now do something. You're both just standing there."

I cleared my throat and walked over to Kipton, tugging on the sleeve of her blazer. "Want to take this off?"

She nodded and unbuttoned the coat, handing it to me.

"Why don't you look through Netflix and see what movie you want to watch, and I'll pour us some drinks."

It was already so different from the other dates, because even though I knew thousands of people were watching us, it felt like we were alone. Paul even seemed to stay back a bit more with the camera. Or maybe that was just my imagination. A side effect of being with Kipton, when everyone else

always seemed to fade away.

“Oh, I already know what movie we’re going to watch.” She grinned.

I chuckled back. It was for sure going to be a chick flick.

After grabbing a bottle of wine I found on the counter, I poured two glasses and made my way over to the blanket and sat down. There were two pillow-type things that we could lean against, so we could semi-recline on the blanket and watch TV.

“Red wine? We’re on the floor, and you give me red wine?”

I shrugged. “If you spill it, we’ll make Jack, the producer, clean it up.”

Jack snorted in our ears, then said, “Don’t spill it. This show is already costing the network a fortune.”

You would never imagine how hard it is not to talk back to a person talking into your ear.

Kipton took a sip as she pulled up the movie we were going to watch.

“*When Harry Met Sally?* What’s that about?”

Her expression was pure shock. “You’ve never watched this movie?”

Taking a sip of the wine, I set it on the coffee table behind us, doing the same with Kipton’s. “Nope, never heard of it.”

“Wow. I don’t even know what to say. This is a date-night classic, *Hunter*.”

I shrugged and grabbed a handful of popcorn. How in the hell was it still warm? “Sorry,” I said as I popped a few pieces into my mouth. “I’m not much of a chick-flick kind of guy.”

Kipton was sitting with her legs crisscrossed. She slowly turned and gave me a look that said I was in for it. “You,” she said, pointing her finger at me, “will not be saying that after this movie.”

I rolled my eyes and dropped back onto the cushion, then kicked off my boots. Kipton removed her boots, set them to the side, grabbed her bowl of popcorn, and started to eat, still sitting crisscross.

I wasn’t sure at what point during the movie Kipton had lain down. Or when she’d moved a little closer. Or when I’d put my arm around her to snuggle her closer still. Or...when her leg eased over mine. But soon enough, there we were, watching a movie together like we’d done so a thousand times in my living room. I had forgotten anyone was watching.

Kipton grabbed my hand when Harry started running to get to Sally. I had to admit, I was invested heavily in the damn movie.

“Is she going to leave before he gets there?” I asked.

“Shh! The best part is coming up!” Kipton whispered.

“Seriously? I kind of liked the fake orgasm scene.”

Kipton shot me a look before focusing back on the TV.

Then the last scene happened, where Harry professed his love to Sally. I glanced over to see Kipton wiping a tear away. Then I heard a sniffle from our left, and I raised my head. “Are you *crying*?”

Louie waved me off and turned his head, and I saw Paul’s shoulders shake a little.

“You better be laughing, Paul.”

“Don’t talk to the camera guys, Hunter,” Jack warned.

Kipton sat up and wiped her face. “God, I love that movie.”

I chuckled and got up to stretch my legs. Kipton smiled as she attempted to make herself stop crying.

My eyes glanced briefly at Jessie, who stood at the other end of the room. How was it that there were people in the house and we’d both forgotten all about them. And the cameras?

“Oh man, I need to stretch my legs.”

Reaching my hand down, I pulled Kipton up and watched her stretch like a cat. “Did you like the movie?”

“I liked the movie.”

A wide grin appeared on her face. “I knew you would!”

Suddenly, music started to play in the background. It was Jordan Davis, “Slow Dance In A Parking Lot.” I raised a brow and held my hand out. “Dance with me?”

“I’d love to,” Kipton said softly, placing her hand in mine. We were both wearing mics, so whatever we said, no matter how low, everyone would hear.

Spinning her around before I drew her closer to me, I said, “It’s not a parking lot, but it’ll do.”

Kipton tossed her head back and laughed before she looked at me and our eyes met. We moved together like we’d danced a million times. Kipton wrapped her arms around my neck as I leaned my forehead against hers, and everything and everyone melted away again, except for the two of us.

As soon as that song ended, another one started. It was even slower...a song that my mother and father had danced to several times.

I pulled Kipton closer as the words to “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You” started. She dropped her head to my chest, and I swore we became one. My body felt like I was dancing on a cloud, and I wanted more than anything to

tell her I loved her, right here, right now. Instead, I held her even closer.

Her fingers played with my hair as I rubbed my hand gently against her back. Deciding to have a bit of fun, I spun her away and back, then dipped her.

“Why, Mr. Shaw, you have dance moves!”

I winked. “You should see *all* of my moves.”

Her smile faded some, and the only thing I could see was love in her eyes. When I pulled her close again, I placed my hand on the side of her face and brushed my thumb gently across her cheek.

“You’re so beautiful, Kip.”

She swallowed hard and dropped her head back against my chest, fisting her hand in my shirt.

Moments later, doing a little spin, she looked at me—and nothing at that moment could have stopped me from kissing her. Placing my finger under her chin, I lifted her head and leaned in.

It was a soft kiss at first. Then she slid her hands up and around my neck and opened more to me. We were instantly lost to one another, and if Jack hadn’t spoken in our ears, I wasn’t sure what would have happened next.

“The live feed is going crazy right now! As much as they’re loving this, you two need to stop.”

Kipton instantly stepped away from me, and I cleared my throat.

“Um, do you want to watch another movie?” I asked.

Looking around the room, and seeming to remember where we were, what we were doing, Kipton shook her head slowly. “I should go.”

“Are you sure?”

With a wobbling nod, she replied, “I think our date time’s almost up. And...I’m definitely sure that if I don’t leave now...” Her words drifted off, and I wasn’t entirely sure she’d meant to say that last part or not.

The second her cheeks turned pink, I knew that was supposed to be an internal thought.

“Right,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. “Can I see you back home?”

“Truth Booth,” Jack reminded us.

Kipton looked torn as she glanced up at me from where she was sitting on the couch, putting her boots on. I couldn’t swipe because it was Kipton. So what in the hell should I say to the viewers?

“They’re going to want to know your impressions about this date, Hunter,” Jack added.



Kipton took the decision out of my hands, doing her hosting responsibility. “That’s okay. You should stay. The viewers will want your recap as soon as possible.”

I nearly scowled, frustration filling me as I walked over to Kipton and held out my hand to help her up.

With the cutest damn smile on her face, she softly said, “I had a lot of fun tonight.”

*God, Kipton. Do you have any idea how you make me feel?*

“I did too.”

We walked over to where I’d hung her coat, and I helped her put it on. Kipton glanced at me. “Night, Hunter.”

I was seconds away from opening the door and saying good night, but my heart won out over my head.

“Fuck it,” I growled as I cupped her face and kissed her again. When I drew back, I dropped my forehead to hers. “Night, Kip.”

“Open the door, Hunter,” Jack said in my ear.

Turning, I grabbed the knob and turned it. The door opened, and Kipton nearly ran out before climbing into the car. When I shut the door, I stared at it for a minute before I shook off the emptiness I felt at her leaving.

Back in the living room, I went to the cooler, grabbed a beer, and started for my bedroom. I didn’t give two shits about the recap. When I stepped inside, I turned and looked at the camera aimed at the room. I smiled, then shut the door.

“And we’re out,” Jack said. “Production, fill in our extra few minutes with bonus footage about Friday night’s show.”

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door. “Hunter?”

I rolled my eyes and sighed before I said, “Give me at least five minutes, will you, Jack?”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

### KIPTON

My entire body tingled as the limo drove me back to Brock and Lincoln's house. I wasn't sure if Jack had the cameras rolling in here or not, but I knew if it was up to Travis, they would be. The second the car came to a stop, I burst out the door and up to the safety of the house. The front door opened just as I got there, and I nearly dove inside.

Once it shut, I stood in the foyer, covered my face in my hands, and cried.

Warm arms wrapped around me and guided me through the house. "Brock, make her some tea." Lincoln sat down on the sofa, bringing me with her. "Why are you crying, sweetheart?"

I shook my head.

She kept her arms around me, rocking us gently. The movement caused a memory to come to mind. Another time when I'd been crying, and my mother—my biological mother, Carol—was holding me and rocking just like Lincoln.

*"Shhh, Kip. It's okay, angel. It's okay."*

The memory of my mother using the same endearment as Hunter caused me to cry harder. Of all the times to have a memory of my mother, why now?

*"It's okay, darling. It's all going to be okay."*

The sound of Brock coming into the room and setting down a mug made me drop my hands to my lap and hiccup before I said, "We kissed."

"We saw," Lincoln said. Brock nodded as he sat beside his wife.

Eyeing her, I muttered, "He's going to be so mad that you watched."

With a soft smile, she took my hand in hers. "I don't think so. Not tonight."

I wiped a tear away and drew in a shaky breath. "It was like everyone

simply faded away, and it was just the two of us. Jack had to say something for us to break apart. Now everyone's going to know."

"So what if they do," Lincoln stated. "Kipton, have you stopped for a moment and wondered why the audience voted to have you go on a date with Hunter to begin with?"

I shook my head.

"They saw the chemistry between the two of you. Go back and look at some of the episodes, and you'll see the way my son looks at you, and you at him."

I blinked a few times, surprised, even if I shouldn't have been. "Really?"

Brock smiled. "Love is a crazy thing, and it's pretty damn clear you two are head over heels for each other. Millions of people watching you two were bound to see it, as well."

Lincoln put her hand to her chest. "The way that boy looked at you tonight...my goodness." Her eyes moved to Brock, then back to me. "It brought back memories of when his father first looked at *me* that way."

"But the show—" I started.

"The Truth Booth is on!" Rose said as she burst into the house with Lily on her heels.

"Holy crap, the way he looked at you before he said, 'fuck it' and kissed you again!" Lily declared with a dreamy look on her face.

"Lily, language," Timberlynn said, appearing in the living room, Tanner holding her hand. I could only guess Brock texted for reinforcements.

Turning to glance at her parents, she said, "I'm only repeating what Hunter said."

Timberlynn winked at me as she sat down across from us. "It was rather romantic."

"That's because he's a Shaw," Tanner said, his expression smug. "It's in our blood."

Timberlynn and Lincoln both snort-laughed.

"Are you saying I'm not romantic?" Tanner asked his wife.

"I'm not saying that at all. In fact, I'll say that the boys have had excellent role models for the way to treat a woman."

"Hear, hear!" Lincoln stated.

"Shhh! He's on!" Lily cried out.

Rose had synced her laptop to the living room TV, and when Hunter appeared, looking as handsome as ever, I felt my breath catch in my chest.

He nodded his head, looked at the camera...and then smiled that same Cheshire grin Rose had. "I don't think I'm going to kiss and tell this time. Sorry, folks. But I *will* say this—I get to pick the next movie, Kip."

He winked at the camera, stood, and walked out of the room, then the picture went black. Lily and Rose both sighed and fell back onto the floor where they were sitting.

"If I don't find a love like that, I don't want love." Lily sighed, as everyone else in the room chuckled.

I was still staring at the TV, smiling so big my cheeks were beginning to ache, when Lincoln squeezed my hand. "Nothing makes me happier than to see that smile on your face, Kipton."

"He puts it there," I whispered. Turning to look at Lincoln, I asked, "Can I actually be this happy?"

She wiped a tear away. "Yes. Yes, darling girl, you can."



I couldn't take lying in bed a minute longer. I pushed the covers off and headed to the bathroom. After brushing my teeth and pulling my hair into a pony, I quickly got dressed. Sweatpants and a Montana State sweatshirt were the first things I found, so I put them on.

Grabbing my phone, I sent Aspen a text. She'd gotten back from Italy late last night. It wasn't yet six in the morning here, but it was two hours later in New York City, where they were staying for one night before heading back to Bozeman tomorrow.

Me: Did you watch it?

Her reply came instantly.

Aspen: Jesus, Mary, and all the saints, Kipton. That boy...no, MAN...is so in love with you it's unreal!

I giggled and did a little dance.

Me: I shouldn't do it, but I'm going to go visit him this morning, and to hell with the cameras. I need to see him.

Aspen: Run! Don't walk! Call me later!

Me: Will do! Hugs and kisses!

I slipped on my Ugg boots, grabbed a jacket, scarf, and hat, then quietly made my way through the house. I took the keys to Lincoln's Jeep and headed to the garage.

I thought I heard someone in the kitchen. Hunter's parents were early risers, of course, but usually not *this* early. I slipped outside before anyone could see me.

The entire way to the cabin, I replayed everything from last night. The way we'd snuggled together during the movie. The dances. That kiss before I left.

Pulling up behind Hunter's truck, I drew in a deep breath and smiled. I debated just texting him to meet me outside to avoid the cameras.

"Fuck it," I said with a giggle, repeating his own words before opening the door and slipping out of the Jeep. I started for the cabin when the front door opened. I came to an abrupt halt when I saw who was leaving.

Holding a dress over her arms, wearing oversized sweatpants and a University of Montana sweatshirt, Kimber softly shut the front door—then yelped when she saw me. "Kipton!"

I slowly shook my head and took a few steps back. *No. Hunter would never do this to me.*

With a smug smile, she said, "I don't think Hunter was expecting you this morning."

Bile rushed into my throat as I looked around. His truck was here, which meant he was home. No one else was out this early in the morning, and the only people who could access the footage from the house were Jack and Travis. It wasn't like I could just demand to see it.

My heart felt like it crashed to the ground.

When my eyes landed back on Kimber, she shrugged. "Men are all pigs. But *damn*, he knows what he's doing in bed."

Spinning around so fast, I slipped and fell. I could hear Kimber's laughter as I got myself back on my feet and into the Jeep. She called out something, but I didn't hear her because my heart was pounding in my ears.

I turned the key, managed to get the Jeep turned around, and floored it. I needed to leave. I couldn't stay here for another second.

Fumbling to find my phone, I grabbed it and hit Aspen's number.

"Hey, I thought you were going to surprise your man?"

A sob burst from my chest. I couldn't even talk.

"Kipton? Kipton! What's wrong? Are you okay?"

I shook my head as tears streamed down my face. "I need to leave. Now. Aspen, I need to leave *right now*."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

“He slept with Kimber.”

“What!” she yelled through the phone. “Okay, I have a friend who lives in Hamilton. Um, let me give her a call. She can pick you up at the ranch.”

“No. I can’t go back. Can she meet me in town?”

“What about your stuff?”

“I don’t care about it or the stupid money anymore, Aspen! I need...I need... I just need to *leave!*”

“Hold on, don’t hang up. I’m going to call her on the other line.”

I knew I was driving too fast, and I needed to slow down, but the only thing I could think about was how badly I needed to get off this ranch and away from Hunter Shaw. As far away as I could.

He’d promised he would never hurt me. Had I just caught him in a lie? Or had *Kimber* somehow planned this?

But she was leaving his house. Clearly sneaking away...and dressed in his clothes.

Hitting the steering wheel, I cursed. “Motherfucker!”

Aspen came back on the line.

“Lindsay will meet you. Where should I tell her?”

I drew in a deep breath and flew past a ranch truck that had just turned off the side road leading to the main barn. It would most likely be Decker or Hank, heading to feed the animals.

“There’s a boutique on Main,” Lindsay’s voice said through the line. Aspen must have merged our calls. “The one Morgan and Georgiana own...”

I forced myself to stop crying so I could talk. “Yes. I can leave the Jeep there, and if you wouldn’t mind returning the keys to them when the shop opens?”

“Of course not.”

“Do you have money?” Aspen asked.

“Yes,” I said as another sob slipped free. “I have my license and my debit card on me.”

Aspen exhaled. “I always hated that you slipped them into those patches on the back of your phone, but now I’m glad you have them. Be careful driving.”

“Thank you, to both of you.”

“It’s okay, Kipton. It’s going to be okay.”

I hit End and tossed the phone on the passenger seat as I whispered, “It’s not okay. Not at all.”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

### HUNTER

My mother's Jeep flew past us, causing Blayze to slam on the brakes.

"What the fuck?" he swore. "She knows better than to drive like that on snowy roads."

"What's Mom doing up and out this early?" I asked.

"Probably Dad woke her up. When he found that camera outside the house, you know he lost his shit."

I shook my head. "I can't believe they planted a camera outside Mom and Dad's. I know Travis is an ass, but I actually trusted Jack."

Blayze shook his head. "Hank found one in a stall in the main barn this morning, as well."

"What?" I said, practically breaking my neck when my head whipped around.

My phone rang, and I saw it was Jack. I hit ignore. They had broken Shaw Ranch's contract, the one drafted by our dad's attorney, and now we had a reason to shut down the damn show. Kipton would still get what was owed to her—and I couldn't wait to tell her.

"He's probably on his way to the guesthouse," Blayze said, nodding to my phone. "I guess it was a good thing you were at my place last night," he added.

"Thanks again for letting me crash. I didn't want to be in that damn guesthouse alone after that date, especially with those fucking cameras watching me."

Jack called again.

"What the fuck does he want?" I growled, sending it to voicemail.

"Probably to beg you to forgive them and let them keep shooting."

“Too bad. Dad said he already called his lawyer; they’re sending a letter today to stop all production of the show on ranch property.”

Blayze grinned. “Now you and Kipton can just be two normal people dating.”

“That will be nice.” My phone rang again, but this time it was Mom. “Hey, Mom, where in the heck are you driving off to this morning in such a rush?”

“That wasn’t me. I saw Kipton leaving this morning while your father was on the phone with Hank. I wanted to make sure she made it to you safely.”

I frowned. “She went to Blayze’s house?”

“No. I saw her heading down the access road toward the guesthouse. The one that skates along the pasture. Why would she go to Blayze’s?” Mom asked, confused.

“Um, I guess she wouldn’t. I stayed over there last night. But we saw her driving away from the guesthouse on the main road. She looked like she was heading toward town.”

“Town?”

I turned to Blayze. “Was that Kipton driving the Jeep?”

He frowned as he thought about it. “I guess it could have been.”

“Why would she be going to town this early?” Mom asked.

“Let me call her really quick.”

“Okay, and I’ll let you know when she gets back to the house.”

“Sounds good, Mom.”

After hanging up, I hit Kipton’s phone number. After three rings, it went to voicemail.

“She sent me to voicemail.”

Blayze shrugged. “Maybe she’s doing something?”

“This early in the morning? And why was she even going to the guesthouse?”

He laughed. “You were pretty wound up after last night. She most likely was, too, so I’m assuming she wanted to see you.”

I couldn’t help the smile that grew on my face.

My brother glanced over. “Damn. You really do love her, don’t you?”

“I really do. She makes me happier than I’ve ever been.” I frowned slightly, thinking about how fast Kipton was driving.

“Why are you frowning then?”



I shook my head. “I don’t know. A strange feeling just came over me... like something’s wrong.”

He motioned to my phone. “Call her again.”



Two hours later, I paced back and forth in my parents’ kitchen as I attempted to call Kipton yet again. Her phone must have been turned off, because now instead of ringing, it went directly to voicemail.

“Anything?” my mother asked as she walked into the kitchen.

Shaking my head, I said, “I’m worried, Mom.”

My cell phone rang, and I practically jumped out of my skin, then sighed when I looked at the screen. “It’s Morgan.” I clicked to accept. “Hey, have you seen or heard from Kipton?” I asked in lieu of a greeting.

“Um...no.”

Something about her tone in that brief response filled me with fear. “Morgan, what’s going on?”

“Well, when Ryan and I pulled into the parking area in the back of the store, Mom’s Jeep was here. We pulled in next to it, and just seconds later, a girl in a Honda Accord pulled up. She handed me the keys and said that Kipton left. She’d just gotten back from taking her to the airport in Missoula.”

My knees felt weak, and Mom rushed over to direct me to one of the island stools. “Was she okay? Are her parents okay?”

“I don’t know. She said Kipton was very upset and crying, and just kept saying she needed to leave Hamilton—and that *you* would know why.”

My mind raced. Had I spooked her last night? Gone too far with the last kiss? “Fuck. I have no clue why she would leave.”

“Who left?” Mom asked.

“Kipton. Some girl took her to the airport and dropped off your keys at the shop. Kipton said I would know why she left.”

Mom shook her head. “She couldn’t have left. All of her things are here.”

A feeling of sickness hit me. “Is the girl still there?”

“No, she left just a few minutes ago, and I called you right away. What happened, Hunter?”

I ran my hand down my face. “I’ll call you back.” Not giving her a chance to even respond, I hit End. My mother was staring at me with a

confused and shocked look on her face. “I scared her away.”

She shook her head adamantly. “No, you didn’t. We were with her last night. She asked me if it was possible for her to feel so happy. She wouldn’t have left because of last night. It was something else.”

“What else could it be?”

Taking my hands in hers, she softly said, “I don’t know, but we’ll find out, Hunter. We’ll get her back, I promise you.”

Jack called again, and I sent it to voicemail. He was the last person I wanted to talk to.



Blayze walked into the empty horse stall and kicked my boot. “Mom’s worried about you.”

Tipping the beer back, I finished it off and tossed the bottle. The sound of glass hitting, but not breaking, caused Blayze to turn to glance in the direction I’d thrown the bottle.

“This is how you’re going to handle things? Drink everything away?”

“She won’t take my calls. Her parents won’t take my calls. What the hell else am I supposed to do? I have no fucking idea why she left! The least she could have done was had the guts to tell me what I did before running.”

“According to that girl Morgan talked to, you already know the reason.”

I pushed both hands through my hair and yelled, “I don’t know the fucking reason, Blayze! If I knew, I would be on a plane to get her.”

He sat down next to me and didn’t say anything for a few minutes. “I’m going to give you some advice from my own experience. Don’t sit around here and wait. Go to her, Hunter. If you truly love her—and judging by the way you’re drinking yourself to numbness, I’m going to guess you do—then don’t wait to find the answers. Go directly to the source.”

“She won’t even take my phone calls. What makes you think she’ll see me?”

“Because something clearly happened that caused her to run. I saw the way she looked at you. We all did. She’s in love with you, Hunter. You just need to be brave enough to go after her.”

I dropped my head back against the wall of the stall. I *wanted* to go after Kipton...but what if she refused to see me? Wouldn’t speak to me at all? My heart couldn’t take the rejection again.

Christmas had *sucked*. I sat around with my family, totally depressed, watching everyone else enjoy being together, when all I wanted to do was scream.

“It’s so quiet in the barn now.”

Blayze let out a halfhearted chuckle. “I have to say, they got their shit and ran when Dad threatened to sue them *and* their parent company for breach of contract.”

My eyes closed. “I’m *glad* they fucked up and put up those cameras.”

“So am I. I got my damn barn back.”

I lifted my head and exhaled. Jack had gone live to alert everyone that the show would not be continuing, but everyone should stay tuned for the next season of *Swipe Right*. They gave no explanation as to why the show had ended so abruptly, and by the time they announced the next bachelor for season two, I was forgotten. Not that I was complaining. After Kipton took off unexpectedly, Mom and Dad locked up everything tight—including me. No one from the show was allowed within hundreds of yards of the property. And I’d continued to ignore Jack’s calls until they stopped coming. I was disgusted with both producers and didn’t care what they had to say about their precious show.

“Did Mom tell you the one girl, Kimber, sent a letter to you?”

I shrugged. “I couldn’t care less. Hopefully, she got the hint that I want nothing to do with her.”

“Be careful, little brother. You sound bitter.”

Laughing, I said, “This is why I never wanted to fall in love. I wasn’t meant for it.”

Hank appeared in the entrance to the stall. “Hunter, Jack Morris is up at your folks’ place. He said he needs to talk to you. Lincoln sent me to find you.”

Blayze’s expression was incredulous. “They let that asshole back on the ranch? Dad said he would beat his ass if he ever saw him again.”

Hank shrugged. “I guess he has something important to say.”

“I don’t want to talk to him.”

Hank glanced at Blayze, then back to me. “Lincoln told me to tell you it’s about Kipton. Guess that Jack guy knows why she left, and he’s been trying to call you.”

“What?” I asked, scrambling to my feet. “He knows why she left?”

Hank nodded. “I’ll drive you up to the house. You’re in no condition to

be behind the wheel.”

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

### KIPTON

I sat on the front porch of my parents' house, wrapped in a blanket, as I stared toward the garden. Off in the distance, I could make out the hills.

Somewhere beyond them was Hunter.

I squeezed my eyes shut in an attempt not to cry again.

"It's cold out here, Kipton. Why don't you come inside?"

I shook my head and whispered, "It was all too fast."

Aspen sat next to me in the empty rocking chair. "What was?"

I let out a laugh devoid of all emotion. "Three weeks. That's how long the filming had gone on for. That's too fast to fall in love with someone."

She reached for my hand. "You met him before you started filming. Spent time on the ranch."

I nodded. "How could I be so stupid to think a guy like that might fall in love?"

"Kipton, I really think you need to talk to him. I mean, with the whole show abruptly ending...aren't you even curious as to why? If he really wanted to mess around with the other women, surely he'd have continued doing the show."

"I already know why. Brock found cameras where they shouldn't be. It was a breach of contract. He and Lincoln demanded they stop filming at the ranch."

"Okay," she said on a sigh. "But you're putting your parents in a weird place. Hunter has called them repeatedly and begged them to call back. He really seems to have no idea why you left."

Turning to look at her, I gaped. "Are you for real right now? He doesn't realize I saw *Kimber* leaving his place that morning? Right!"

“Unless she told him, maybe not. She’s not in Hamilton anymore, you know. She left with all the others. I checked her Instagram, and she’s in New York City.”

Rolling my eyes, I pulled my knees to my chest. “Who cares. She was still there. Still wearing his clothes. Whether he knows I saw or not, how does he explain any of that?”

“I don’t know, hon. This just feels...all wrong. Maybe she staged it?”

Staring out over the snow, I admitted, “I thought that too. I really did. But I keep coming back to one thing—how would she have known I’d be there?”

Aspen turned in the rocker to face me. “I’ve been thinking about that. I don’t know if she *did* plan on you showing up. I think she went over there knowing the cameras would see her entering, going into Hunter’s bedroom, then leaving a while later. And everyone would *think* they’d slept together.”

I stood and let the blanket fall onto the rocker. “I love that you want this to work out for me, Aspen. But you weren’t there. She was wearing his clothes. Coming out of *his place*. His truck was there. Are you saying she went in, stole some of his clothes, and what? Hunter just slept through it all? Or he *let* her do this? No. Both scenarios are too unbelievable. They slept together, and for all I know, it wasn’t the first time. Jack could have been covering for Hunter since the beginning.”

When I turned to head into the house, Aspen followed. “I saw the way he looked at you, Kipton. Everyone saw it. A man doesn’t look at a woman like she’s the very air he breathes, then turn around and just fuck someone else. Do you honestly think Hunter would do that?”

I wiped a tear away. “I don’t know what to think anymore.”

“Oh my God, then *call him!* Why are you being so stubborn? It’s not like you, Kipton.”

*Because he broke my heart.*

Exhaling, I didn’t say the words aloud. Reaching for the door handle, I stopped when I heard a car pulling into the drive.

“Who’s that?” Aspen asked as I turned.

A cold wind blew through the porch, and I wrapped my arms around my body as I took a step away from the door. I saw a black Ford truck...and the closer it got, the faster my heart raced.

I had no idea who the driver was—but Hunter was in the passenger seat.

“Hunter?” I whispered. A part of me felt overwhelmingly relieved to see him. The other part was filled with dread. I had so many questions, but I

didn't know if I had the strength to hear the answers.

"I knew he'd come for you!" she hissed. "I knew it!"

I shook my head at my best friend. "What?"

She was smiling like a romantic fool. "I mean, I wasn't *positive*, but I knew he wouldn't let you simply run off."

When the truck came to a stop, Hunter got out and stood there for a moment, just staring at me. He looked so damn handsome...but I could see the dark circles under his eyes from where I stood several yards away. He had on a black cowboy hat that made those blue eyes of his pop, and wore an intense expression on his face.

Every fiber in my body told me to run to him. I gripped the post on the porch to keep myself from doing so.

He took a few steps toward the house and frowned. "Why don't you have a coat on?"

"I knew he loved you!" my bestie whispered.

I ignored her. "That's *really* what you're going to say to me first?"

"It's freezing out here, Kip," he replied softly, his gaze racing over my body.

"What do you want, Hunter?" I made my voice as cold and distant as I could. I hated myself for acting this way, but I was just so damn angry still! Seeing Kimber walk out of Hunter's place had thrown me for a serious loop.

He swallowed as he looked down at the ground, then back up at me.

"I wasn't at my house that night. After the Truth Booth, I had a few beers, then called Blayze, and he came and picked me up. I didn't want to be alone and being filmed, and I knew I couldn't go to my parents' place, where I *really* wanted to be. We were in the ranch truck the next morning when you sped by us. I thought it was my mom at first. Dad had called early and said he'd found a camera at the house, and that's where we were heading."

His words slowly settled into my brain, and I swayed, clutching the post harder. "But...she was in *your* clothes...leaving your house."

Hunter closed his eyes as if in pain, then opened them again. "Please... can we go inside and talk? It's cold, and I don't want you to get sick."

I turned on my heels and started for the door, not bothering to wait for him.

"What about your friend?" Aspen asked when Hunter climbed the porch steps.

"He's waiting to take me back to the airport."

My heart felt like it tripped over itself.

“Oh. Okay,” Aspen said quietly.

We entered the house, and my mother and father appeared.

“Mr. and Mrs. Howse, thank you for allowing me to see Kipton.”

They looked at one another, then smiled. My mother turned her gaze on me, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to yell at her or hug her.

“We'll leave the two of you to talk. Aspen, would you mind helping me with something in the kitchen?”

Quickly making her way across the living room, she replied, “Not at all.”

After they left, I sank in a chair as Hunter remained standing.

“Sit down,” I said, motioning to the sofa.

He had taken off his hat and was holding it in front of him, fidgeting with it almost nervously. When he sat down, I got a good look at him. He looked how I felt. Miserable.

“I came here to tell you what Jack told *me* yesterday. He was looking through some of the camera footage, trying to see if they could use anything for one last show.”

I rolled my eyes and turned to stare at the fire.

“You did get your money, right? They promised my father they'd pay you the full amount.”

“I did, and I sent a thank-you to your father for that.”

Hunter cleared his throat. I had a feeling it was actually Hunter who'd insisted on that, rather than his dad.

“Like I said...I wasn't at the cabin the night before *or* that morning. It's all on tape. Me leaving with Blayze and not coming back.”

Looking at him, I fought to keep myself from crying. Something deep down inside me had insisted repeatedly that he wasn't there, but I'd been so scared and upset to let it surface because that meant I had hope, and I didn't want that to be crushed as well.

“Kimber had been flirting with one of our ranch hands. A young guy, around our age. His name is Peter. She asked him to come pick her up in the middle of the night, and they went back to the ranch. When he mentioned that I wasn't there, she talked him into bringing her to the guesthouse. She went in, found some clothes of mine, I guess, and changed. She waited about an hour, then snuck out—and that's when you drove up. You're not on the outdoor camera, but Jack could hear everything.”

My mouth opened to speak, but nothing came out. All I could do was



shake my head.

“From what Peter told us, Kimber was pissed—*really* pissed—after watching our date. She came up with a plan to be seen on the cameras at the house, just assuming you’d find out. It was a gamble. She had no idea if you knew I wasn’t at the house, but she *did* know that if Travis saw the footage, he’d manipulate it to create some drama for the show. As it turns out, you showed up when she was leaving. Peter was parked down from the cabin, waiting for her. He said when Kimber got to his truck, she was laughing, said her plan worked out better than she’d even hoped.”

“She...she actually set all of that up?”

Hunter leaned forward, a pleading look on his face. “Yes, and my father fired Peter right there on the spot. Kipton, I would never...”

His voice trailed off, and he closed his eyes for a moment before piercing me with his gaze. “I would *never* in my life do anything to hurt you, Kipton. When I told you that day in the cabin that I loved you, I meant it. I don’t care if someone says you can’t fall in love that quick. I call bullshit. I loved you from the first moment you put your hand in mine, when you came to the house and met my family. And I *kept* falling in love with you, every time you smiled at me. Then I fell in love forever when you gave me the most precious gift...you.

“I swore that day that I would do *anything* to keep you. I’m sorry I didn’t come after you right away. I wouldn’t take Jack’s calls, so for the first few days, I actually thought I must have scared you away with the depths of my feelings. Especially after that movie date.”

The battle to hold my tears back was lost, and they began streaming down my face.

“I didn’t know what to do to convince you,” Hunter said, as he quickly wiped his own tears away. “But I *do* know that I cannot live in a world where you’re not mine. Where I don’t get to see you first thing in the morning, and last thing at night. You’re the very reason my heart beats, Kipton.”

A sob escaped as I jumped up. Hunter did the same right before I rushed over and threw myself into his arms.

“You’re my everything,” he whispered. We both started to cry as he wrapped his arms around me tighter. “I love you so much, Kipton. I’ll never *stop* loving you.”

I buried my face in his neck and whispered, “I love you too.”

“What was that?” he asked on a half sob, half laugh.

Drawing back just enough to look at him, I said, “I love you too. And I’m so sorry I ran and didn’t wait to talk to you. I feel so foolish now.”

Hunter pressed his mouth to mine. Giving me a kiss that said none of it mattered. That the *only* thing that mattered was he and I, back in each other’s arms.

Aspen cleared her throat. “Should I, um, tell your friend you don’t need a ride to the airport after all?”

Hunter broke the kiss and laughed, looking past me. When I turned around, I saw Aspen and my parents standing there. My mother was wiping tears from her eyes...while Dad gave Hunter a single nod, communicating something silently that I didn’t understand.

“Actually, my father let me use his plane,” Hunter said, looking at me, “and I was hoping to invite you all to Hamilton to spend New Year’s Eve with us.”

Aspen’s eyes went wide. “Color me yes! I still have my suitcase from the Italy trip packed, so I’m ready to go!”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Mom, Dad?”

“We packed when Lincoln called us last night and told us everything.”

My mouth dropped open. “You knew and you didn’t say anything?”

Dad shrugged. “It wasn’t our place.”

Facing Hunter again, I kissed him quickly before saying, “Give me thirty minutes!”



Hunter sat down next to me on the sofa and handed me a cup of hot chocolate. I snuggled against him and let my gaze sweep over the plethora of people in his parents’ house.

“I hate that I missed the real Christmas, but this do-over is crazy! I can’t imagine what it was like with all these people opening presents.”

When my parents and I got to the ranch, Lincoln declared we were doing another Christmas since I hadn’t been there to celebrate the first one. No one had touched the presents I’d bought for the Shaw family or those for my parents and me.

He chuckled, and I loved how it vibrated through my body. “You should have seen it when we were little. It was a nuthouse. Or that’s what Grams called it.”

My mind drifted back to earlier this morning. Stella, Hunter's grandmother, had surprised me with a beautiful gift. It had been just me, Hunter, Stella, and Ty Sr. in his grandparents' kitchen, eating breakfast. They'd invited us over for what Stella had said would be the only peaceful meal of the day.

*"I wanted to give you this before the insanity that comes later," Stella said with the sweetest smile on her face.*

*I took the bag and felt my cheeks heat. "That's so thoughtful. I don't have your gifts with me. They're back at Lincoln and Brock's house."*

*She waved off my comment. "A gift is given out of love, not expectation." When I looked at Hunter, he winked.*

*I gently pulled the light-blue tissue paper out of the bag...and drew in a sharp breath at what I saw. Reaching in, I pulled out a pewter box with beautiful floral patterns. It was also covered in crystals.*

*"My mother gave me that box the morning of my wedding," Stella explained.*

*Tears filled my eyes, and when I opened the box, my hand covered my mouth as the tears fell harder. Inside was a stunning silver hair comb adorned with small pearls.*

*"It's beautiful," I whispered, as I gently took it out.*

*"I think it will look stunning in your hair on the day of your wedding."*

*My eyes snapped up to look at Stella and Ty Sr. "My...my wedding?"*

*Stella nodded her head to my left, and when I turned, Hunter was down on one knee, a ring box in his hand.*

*I instantly broke down and started to full-on bawl. At some point, Stella took the comb and box out of my hands, and I turned toward Hunter.*

*"I asked your dad last night, and he told me it was too fast. Then I asked my dad, and he told me it was too fast. Finally, I called Grams and Grampa...and they both told me to follow my heart."*

*He looked at Stella and Ty Sr., and they both smiled. When he focused back on me, he drew in a breath and said, "So maybe fast is the way we go?"*

*I laughed and covered my mouth with my hand again.*

*"All I know, Kipton, is that I love you. I want us to be together, whether here on the ranch or anywhere else you want to live."*

*Crying harder, I nodded and managed to say, "Here. I want to be here with you!"*

*His face lit up, and he wiped away a tear. "Kip, I want to watch you walk*

*down the aisle and know you're mine forever. I want to see you pregnant with our kids. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and I don't give a damn who thinks it's too fast. Although your dad did say we couldn't get married until we both graduated."*

*I grinned at that. "What about your team roping?" I asked.*

*It was then I was gifted with that wicked smile of his. The smile that I was positive caused me to fall in love with him. And that dimple... Lord, that dimple.*

*"The only team I'm interested in is the one we're going to build."*

*I let out another sob and somehow managed to say yes. Hunter slipped the ring on my finger and kissed me, with Stella and Ty Sr. quietly getting up and leaving the room.*

*"What are you smiling about?" Hunter asked, his mouth next to my ear.*

*Looking down at the ring on my finger, I smiled wider. It was a platinum band with an intricate pattern, and numerous small baguette diamonds. The large diamond in the center was princess cut, and the whole effect was elegant and delicate.*

*"I cannot believe Stella wanted you to give me her engagement ring."*

*Hunter lifted my hand and kissed the back of it. "A princess diamond for my princess."*

*I shook my head. "I also can't believe you asked me to marry you."*

*His eyes twinkled. "We should go celebrate."*

*"Oh no," I said, waving my finger at him. "No. Not in your parents' house."*

*"Why not?" he asked, his whole face transformed into a pout. "We did it before."*

*Slapping him, I said, "Hush!"*

*"I'm just saying," he whispered, turning my hand and kissing my wrist, then quickly flicking his tongue out to touch my skin. "We can be quiet."*

*My body temperature started to climb, and I dragged my gaze around the room. "But this second Christmas is all for my parents and me."*

*Hunter didn't even bother to look. "And do you see how *no one* is paying any attention to us over here?"*

*I looked around again. "So...no one would notice if we snuck out of the house for a bit?"*

*He smiled wide before we both whispered, "The guesthouse?"*

*Hunter stood. "God, I love that you think the same way as me."*

Giggling, I allowed him to take my hand as we weaved our way through the throngs of people. Once we got to the front door, I pulled him to a stop. “I need my coat.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. What if your truck breaks down and we’re stuck outside in the cold?”

He looked at me like I was crazy. “My truck isn’t going to break down.”

“It might!”

With a frustrated sigh, he motioned toward the stairs. “Go get your coat, and I’ll grab mine.”

“Perfect!” I said, lifting to kiss him before I dashed up the steps.

Two minutes later, we were about to walk through the door when it suddenly opened—and the most stunning young girl came to a stop, smiling at us both. Her sapphire eyes were unlike anything I’d ever seen. And with the Shaw family, that was saying something.

“Avery? You finally made it!” Hunter said, picking the girl up and spinning her around.

Laughing, Avery took off her hat, and her light brown hair tumbled down her shoulders. “I thought I wasn’t going to be able to catch a flight out of JFK, but Claire arranged for a private plane to get me home. She said if she didn’t have me home for New Year’s Eve, my parents would say no more Paris!”

From what I understood, Claire was the model who’d taken Avery under her wing, acting as her mentor in France.

Hunter laughed and took her coat from her.

“Avery, this is Kipton. Kipton, my cousin Avery.”

I extended my hand, but she pulled me in for a hug. “I’ve heard so much about you from the girls. I couldn’t wait to meet you and—oh my God!” She grabbed my hand. “That’s Grams’s ring!”

Hunter laughed. “Not anymore. It’s my fiancée’s ring.”

Avery screamed and threw herself at Hunter, then turned and hugged me again.

“What’s all the noise out—” Lincoln started to say before she stopped and let out a scream of her own. “Merit! Avery’s home!”

Suddenly, people filled the foyer, wanting to welcome Avery back to Hamilton. Hunter slipped his hand into mine, and we slowly started to make our way to the front door.

“And where do you two think *you’re* going?” my father said, stopping us in our tracks.

I spun around to see him and Brock, standing side by side.

Hunter pulled me closer. “For a ride.”

My head snapped to look at him.

Hunter quickly added, “Horseback riding! Not the...other...kind of ride.” His cheeks turned red.

I closed my eyes briefly. When I glanced back at our fathers, mine looked about ready to kill Hunter, while Brock looked ready to high-five his son.

“Isn’t it a little cold to be going for a *ride*?” my father said, folding his arms over his chest.

“Daddy, it’s not that cold.”

He gave me a once-over and quirked up a brow. “And in a dress?”

Busted. I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing, while Hunter made a frustrated noise under his breath.

Hitting him on the side of the arm, Brock leaned in and said something to Hunter that only he could hear. Then he turned to my dad. “Come on, Gilbert. I’ll pour you a scotch.”

Giving Hunter a warning look as he turned, my father said, “Better make it a double.”

Once they walked away, Hunter and I both relaxed—and burst out laughing.

He finally sighed, reaching for my jacket. “Let me take your coat. It doesn’t look like we’re going anywhere.”

After hanging up our coats, Hunter took my hand, and we started back toward the living room, where the noise levels were almost ridiculous now.

Before we got there, I pulled him to a stop. “What did your father whisper to you?”

A smile so sexy appeared on his handsome face, I thought my knees might buckle on the spot.

“He told me he’d make sure your folks stayed in a guesthouse tonight... far away from your room.”

My face instantly heated, and I slapped him on the chest. “I told you they probably heard us last time!”

He laughed and pulled me to him. “They didn’t hear us. But I *am* my father’s son.”

I gazed into those blues and sighed, exasperated. “Kiss me.”

“Anything for you.”

He cupped my face in his hands and captured my mouth, giving me a kiss so passionate, my toes literally curled in my shoes.

Somewhere from the living room came a shout. “Get a room!”

We broke apart, both laughing.

“How long until we can get married?” Hunter asked.

“Five months.”

He wrapped his arm around my waist and led us back into the living room. “We’re going to have to be sneaky until then.”

Laughing, I looked up at the man I was madly and passionately in love with. “Did you forget we’re both heading back to school? Two *different* schools?”

“Ahh, but I already have that route down. It takes me less than three hours to get to Bozeman. I don’t have classes on Friday or Monday, so that means I get to spend every long weekend with you.”

“At my *parents’* house...”

He stopped and looked down at me. That wicked smile back on his face. “Did I forget to mention I might have already rented an apartment near the university?”

My eyes widened in shock. “How?”

He gave me a one-shoulder shrug. “Dustin and I’ve been winning at team roping for a while now, and I have money saved up. I thought you might like to stay in your own place for the last semester.”

“I swear, if your entire family and my parents weren’t in this room, I would do all kinds of naughty things to you right now.”

Hunter closed his eyes and moaned.

Before he could say anything, Rose appeared. “I have it all arranged.”

We both looked at her. “You have *what* arranged?” Hunter asked.

“A distraction. In approximately two minutes, Georgiana is going to make an announcement with Blayze. Run as fast as you can upstairs while everyone’s occupied. I’ll cover for you if anyone asks where you are—but you better make it fast.”

“Have I ever told you that you’re my favorite cousin, Rose?” he said.

She smiled and waved him off. “I get that all the time. Get ready. They’re about to make the announcement.”

Hunter grabbed my hand, and we slowly took a few steps back as Blayze stood and got everyone’s attention.

“Since the entire family is here, Georgie and I wanted to share some news we got last week.”

Lincoln hushed everyone and moved closer to Brock.

Georgiana looked up at Blayze like he was her entire world, the love between them so evident. They both said at the same time, “We’re having twins!”

The entire room erupted into cheers as Rose turned and said, “Go now!”

Hunter nearly pulled my arm out of its socket as we raced through the house, up the steps, and to his bedroom. He shut the door and locked it. I was shocked that I couldn’t hear anything from downstairs.

“I can’t hear them at all.”

He grinned. “I told you, the house is big.”

I glanced around and took in Hunter’s room. There were trophies covering one entire side of the room on floor-to-ceiling shelves.

“Are all these from team roping?” I asked in awe, making my way toward them.

I felt him behind me. “No. Some are from me roping. One is from bull riding, when I was younger and stupid and didn’t care about my pretty face.”

I laughed.

He pointed at one. “This one is from soccer.”

“You played soccer?”

He laughed. “For a couple of years, but it took too much time away from riding.”

Turning, I placed my hands on his chest. “Speaking of riding…”

The wicked smile appeared, and he pulled his long-sleeve shirt over his head. “I know you haven’t done nearly as much riding as you wanted on the ranch.”

I lifted my sweater over my head and dropped it to the floor. “I haven’t.”

Hunter stripped out of his boots and jeans in record time, and I stared at his hard, thick length. “No underwear?”

He winked.

I was soon standing in front of him with nothing but a white lace bra and matching panties. Hunter took my hands and walked back until his legs hit the bed. He crawled onto it and lay with his hands laced behind his head. “I’m all yours.”

Hooking my fingers in my panties, I slid them down and kicked them to the side before I made my way onto the bed.



“Keep your bra on,” he said in a husky voice.

“Okay,” I purred, crawling over him and pressing my wet entrance against him.

“Fuck,” he panted as he grabbed my hips. “Kipton, you drive me crazy.”

“Touch me, Hunter.”

His eyes grew darker. “Where do you want me to touch you, angel?”

“Everywhere.”

Hunter’s hands felt like they were all over my body at once. My thighs, my hips, my back. He cupped my breasts, and I hissed at how sensitive my nipples were—and suddenly, I knew why he wanted me to keep my bra on. The friction from the material was causing me to grow even more wet between my legs.

Then his fingers were inside me, as he lifted his head to suck on a nipple through my bra. My fingers dove into his hair, drawing him closer. I swiveled my hips, grinding on him, and when his thumb touched my clit, I bit down on his neck.

“Jesus Christ, Kip,” he groaned, dropping back down on the bed. “Put me inside you and ride my cock.”

My body trembled as the image of me doing just that popped into my mind. I took him in my hand and lifted on my knees, placing myself right over him. Then I slid down, and we both moaned in pleasure.

“God, that feels so full!”

He grabbed the slats of his headboard. “Move, Kip. Ride me, angel!”

I wasn’t sure exactly what to do. I mean...I knew what to do, but not what would make *him* feel good. I rotated my hips, and he jerked hard under me. Then I rose and slowly sat back down, causing him to close his eyes and groan.

“Which do you like better?”

He opened his eyes. “Whatever *you* like. This is for you, not me.”

With that assurance, a sense of power came over me. “Don’t touch me until I tell you to.”

His nostrils flared, and it didn’t take me long to figure out what pleased us both.

## Chapter Thirty

### HUNTER

I watched as Kipton rode me, taking what she needed.

Her little moans and whimpers were driving me crazy, and if she didn't come soon, I was going to have to flip her over and finish the job my way.

"Touch my breasts," she said as she leaned forward, gasping when I clutched them roughly. "There. Oh my God!"

Clenching her legs tighter against my hips, she rode me fast and hard. I yanked down the lace cups of her bra, exposing her nipples, and pinched each one. Her hands went to my chest, nails digging in, and she moved faster.

"Hunter... Hunter! I'm going to come!"

I felt her tighten around me, and I lifted, capturing her mouth as she cried out in pleasure. My own moans of release mixed with hers as she slowed her pace, and we both collapsed onto the bed.

Once we caught our breath, she lifted her head, looking at me with something close to awe. I was still inside her. Still hard. "It keeps getting better."

Smiling, I wrapped my arms around her and rolled us over. I kissed her softly, then moved my mouth to her neck, and she let out a contented sigh.

"We should get dressed and get back downstairs," I said, giving her one last kiss on the tip of her nose.

"I don't want to. I want to stay here forever."

With a chuckle, I crawled off the bed and grabbed some tissues to clean her up. She moaned when I wiped over her clit and through her folds, widening her legs in invitation.

"Kip, we can't."

Letting out a frustrated growl, she rolled off the bed and got dressed in

silence while I admired the view. She walked over and helped me put my shirt back on, then wrapped her arms around me.

“I never thought I could be this happy, Hunter.”

“Neither did I. I’m so fucking glad I said yes to that show, even though it was the worst experience of my life.”

She smiled and ran her fingers through my hair. “So am I.”



### *Five Months Later*

Iceman stomped his impatience as they loaded the steer. The familiar announcer’s voice was booming overhead, but I was doing my best to tune him out.

“Shaw on the horns, Miller on the feet. This is their last ride together as teammates in our final round!”

Once Iceman settled, I gave the head nod, and we took off. It always happened so fast. I swung the rope, got the horns, turned and gave Dustin the perfect angle for the steer, and Dustin nabbed the feet.

When I saw the time of four seconds, I instantly looked in the stands and saw *her*.

Kipton. On her feet, clapping. I rode past her, and she smiled so big and bright, I swore it lit up the whole arena.

“I love you!” she yelled out, as Rose and Lily both engulfed her in their arms. My gaze tracked to the left, and I spotted my mother and father, both also on their feet, cheering.

Dustin rode up next to me. “You sure you want to give this up? I’ll never be able to find a header as good as you.”

I laughed. “You’re going to own the PRCA, dude.”

He smiled. “Hell yeah, I will. And you’ll be home watching me.”

“And happy as can be.”

Dustin just rolled his eyes.

When the night was finally over—after pictures and the ceremony for the winners—I made my way to my family. The second Kipton saw me, she ran, jumped into my arms, and wrapped her legs around me, offering a huge kiss.

“I’m so proud of you!” she said, wearing the biggest smile. “And I don’t know if I’ve said this before, but you in Wranglers with this button-down

shirt and that black cowboy hat...it does things to me.”

Laughing, I kissed her again before setting her down.

“Hunter,” my mother said with tears in her eyes. “That was amazing.”

Next it was my father, then Uncle Tanner, who’d been asked to announce the team roping. He pulled me in and hugged me. “I could hardly get the words out, I was so choked up. I’m so proud of you, Hunter.”

I fought to hold my own emotions back. “I learned from the very best.”

“Hell yeah, you did,” he said, giving me another quick hug.

Searching around, I saw Kipton once again. I held out my hand, and she walked over and took it. “You ready?”

Her blue eyes danced with love and happiness. “I’ve never been *more* ready.”

Turning to face everyone, I called out, “Let’s get back to Hamilton. We’ve got a wedding in a few days!”

Cheers erupted as I walked away from one journey, ready to start the next.



I blew out a breath and jumped up and down to calm myself. So much had happened in the past few days. Last day of classes, finals, last ride with Dustin, and now I was getting married. Hell, Kipton and I would be married when we both went to our commencements. Kipton’s was May tenth, and mine was May twelfth, so it was going to be awesome to be able to be at each other’s ceremony.

“It’s normal to be nervous,” Uncle Ty said as he worked on Joshua’s tie. “What in the hell did you do to this knot, son?”

Joshua shrugged. “Why do you think I asked you to fix it?”

Bradly sat on the sofa next to Nathan, both dressed in jeans, white button-down shirts, and light blue ties. Their black cowboy hats sat on the coffee table. Kipton’s favorite color was blue, so the ties were the only thing she requested when she agreed I could pick what the groomsmen wore.

“There,” Uncle Ty said. “Don’t touch it.”

The photographer walked in and let out a whistle. “My goodness, a roomful of cowboys. I’ve died and gone to heaven. We all ready?”

“Almost,” my mother said as she walked up to me and pinned the boutonniere on my black vest. “There.” She patted my chest and blinked back

tears. “Now you’re ready.”

“I love you, Mom.” A tear slipped down her cheek, and I reached up and gently wiped it away.

“Oh, Hunter. You are my life. I love you more.”

Leaning in, I kissed her cheek. “All right. Let’s go grab a few photos.”

Kipton and I agreed not to see one another before the wedding. I wanted to be surprised when I saw her walking toward me. But we did ask for some time alone afterward.

“You officially lost the bet, Nathan,” Joshua said as he held out his hand. Nathan rolled his eyes and slapped a ten-dollar bill into his palm.

“What did you bet?” I asked as we made our way to the site where the photographer wanted to take pictures.

Looking over his shoulder at me, Joshua said, “He bet you wouldn’t be getting married, and I bet you would be.”

I pushed Nathan playfully. “You bet against me, dude?”

He shrugged. “*Someone* had to.”

The photographer snapped pics of me with the groomsmen, then with my dad and my uncles. As soon as she took the last shot, the wedding planner—also known as Aunt Kaylee—called out and motioned to her watch.

“It’s time,” someone said. I was too nervous to even know who’d spoken.

Blayze fell in step beside me, and we walked in silence for a bit before I asked, “How’s Georgiana doing?”

A wide grin erupted on his face. “Amazing. Beautiful. The best mother.”

I slapped him on the back. “Two boys. Karma.”

He laughed. “Dad and Mom said the same thing.”

“I don’t know who’s more nervous today. Me about getting married, or Ryan about becoming a father any time now.”

Blayze followed my gaze. “They’re going to induce Morgan if she doesn’t go into labor by Tuesday. So perfect timing on the wedding, little brother. Georgiana did say Morgan was a little short the last few days.”

“She’s earned it. I still can’t believe our sister designed all the dresses.”

He nodded. “I know. Georgie said some designer from New York asked Morgan to design a wedding line. She declined. Said if she was going to do that, she’ll do her own damn line. And that was a direct quote.”

I laughed. “Sounds like our sister.”

When we walked over the hill, my breath caught. “Holy shit,” I whispered.

“Yeah. Aunt Kaylee can put a wedding together.”

All I could do was nod. A square timber arbor was set up at the end of the makeshift aisle with beautiful white and blue flowers wrapped all around it. The rows of seating were bales of hay with wood slats placed atop them. White twinkle lights were strung high over the seating area, from one tree to the other. Kipton had wanted to keep the wedding area simple but well lit since we were getting married at sunset.

I walked down the aisle, stopping a few times to greet friends and family, before I found myself standing at the arbor, waiting for the love of my life.

The music started, and I watched Nathan and Lily walk down the aisle, followed by Joshua and Avery. Ryan walked with a very pregnant Morgan, who looked beautiful, even if she was waddling. Then came Bradly, escorting Rose. And last was Blayze with Aspen.

Blayze bumped me on the arm as he took his place next to me and whispered, “She looks beautiful.”

All I could do was smile. Then the music changed, and everyone stood. My heart hammered so loud in my chest, it was the only thing I could hear.

Then she appeared before my eyes...the beautiful angel that she was. Dressed in a white lace gown with her hair pulled back into a ponytail, and wisps of curls blowing in the wind. She smiled at a few people as Gilbert began walking her down the aisle.

When her eyes met mine, I lost the battle to hold back my tears. “She is beautiful,” I whispered.

Blayze put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

And then there she was, standing in front of me, blinking back tears of her own. Something was said, her father turned and kissed her, then he placed her hand in mine, and she took the last step to stand next to me.

“My God, you steal the breath from my very lungs.”

She wiped a tear away. “You look so handsome.”

The preacher leaned in and softly asked, “Shall we begin?”

Kipton turned and handed her bouquet to Aspen, who was already crying.

I took Kipton’s hands in mine, and the rest of the ceremony seemed to go by in a flash. We recited our vows, exchanged rings, and before I knew it, it was time to kiss the bride.

Cupping her face in my hands, I leaned in to kiss her, but right before I did, I whispered, “Swipe right.”

Her eyes crinkled up as she laughed. “Kiss me, Hunter.”

“Anything for you, Mrs. Shaw.”

Our friends and family erupted into cheers, and when I drew back, I beamed at my wife.

Kipton and I faced everyone briefly, and when she turned to get her flowers from Aspen, she gasped. I glanced over to see what she was staring at.

Morgan was looking down, all the other bridesmaids looking down with her, before she finally glanced up and laughed. “My water just broke!”

Ryan appeared out of nowhere. “*What?!*” Turning to look at the crowd, he yelled, “I’m about to be a dad!”

All hell broke loose. Kipton turned to face me, looking utterly delighted at the interruption, and a wicked smile appeared on her face as we both whispered, “The guesthouse?”

Epilogue – Rose Marie - A year and a half later

I stared out the window to the mountains I could see from my cubicle, lost in thought. Whoever said adulting was easy was a damn liar.

“Rose, Mr. Stiner would like to see you in his office,” Mellissa, Mr. Stiner’s assistant, said as I turned to face her.

“Okay, I’ll be right there.”

She smiled and headed back toward the elevator. Mr. Stiner’s office was on the fifth floor, which was the very top floor of the building, so I wasn’t sure why she had come all the way to the third floor when she could have called me. When she walked by and glanced into the office of Duke Walter, an architect, I had my answer. Duke looked like it took everything he had not to jump up and follow her.

After grabbing my reMarkable notebook, I stood and followed in the direction she walked. Once I got to the elevator, Mellissa was still there. The doors opened, and we both walked in.

“How have you been?” I asked. She smiled but stared ahead. I wasn’t sure if she was going to answer me or not. We had gone to high school together. When I had left for college, she had gone straight to work from high school. She had started in the mail room of Stiner Architectural Firm and made her way up to administrative assistant to the owner.

Her reply finally came, and it felt cold.

“Fine. You?”

“Never been better. Say, are you still dating Nolan Smith?”

Her head snapped to look at me or, rather, glare at me. “No.”

With a nod, I said, "I never did like him."

She sighed heavily, and I bet she regretted her decision to come to the third floor.

When the doors opened, she stepped out, and I followed. I stopped in front of Mr. Stiner's door and waited for Mellissa to announce I was there.

"Go on in," she said as she narrowed her eyes at me.

"Always good chatting with you, Mellissa."

Mr. Stiner looked up and smiled at me as he motioned for me to sit down.

"Rose, thank you so much for coming on up."

I slid into the chair and smiled as I pulled out my electronic notebook.

"Of course, Mr. Stiner."

I'd been working for Stiner Architectural for over a year. It had been the first job I applied for after college and was stunned when I was hired. Not to mention it was here in Hamilton, which made my parents both happy, as well as me.

"Now, Rose...you know I think you're one of the most promising employees we have here at the firm."

"I truly appreciate that, Mr. Stiner."

He nodded. "And your ability to help with the designs, as well as interiors, has been beneficial."

I smiled. "Glad to hear that."

"And because of that, and the fact that you have earned respect from all of the architects here at the firm, I'm assigning you to a team that'll be building a home right outside of Hamilton for a very important client."

I sat up a bit straighter. "I'd be honored, and thank you so much for giving me this opportunity."

His smile faded, and he cleared his throat. "Well, truth be told, the client asked for you personally."

"Really?" I asked, instantly intrigued to know who it was.

"Yes. You'll be attending the first initial meeting today with the client, but I wanted to meet with you privately first. Our client *also* requested to speak with you before the meeting. He has some specific concerns about the interior. He wants the entire home to be environmentally friendly, of course."

Nodding as I took notes, I said, "Of course."

Mr. Stiner stood. "Wonderful. I'm going to step out and let him step in, so the two of you can chat. Since you'll be handling the more intimate area of the home, it's vital you understand the client's needs."



I looked up at my boss in confusion. “You want me to meet with him alone in your office?”

“Yes, he requested it.”

Okay, who in the hell was this guy?

I stood. “Yes, absolutely.” I wanted to point out that I normally met with them after the initial meeting...and certainly not alone in his office, but I let it go. Was it someone my father knew?

“Okay, I’ll go get him.”

When he shut the door to his office, I exhaled a shaky breath, then started to smooth down my black pencil skirt. I had known ahead of time I would be sitting in on a meeting with a new client, so I had opted to go for a more business look. Not that I ever dressed like a bum at work.

Turning away from the door, I picked up my electronic notebook and moved to the window. Looking out over the mountains, I started to jot down some immediate ideas for how to make the home more environmentally friendly. Of course, I had no idea what type of home the client would want. Log home? Rock?

The door to Mr. Stiner’s office opened, then shut. I plastered on a smile and turned around...

Only to stare at the man standing in front of me.

When I opened my mouth, nothing came out but some weird noise.

He cleared his throat, pulled out the chair that was next to the one I’d been sitting in, and sat. Then, in that sexier-than-hell voice of his, he said, “How have you been, Rose Shaw?”

The only thing I managed to utter was one word.

“Bryson.”

# Daring Enough (Book Four in the Love in Montana Series)

*Coming November 2023*  
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## Chapter One

### ROSE

“Come on, please come to this baseball game with me,” Lauren begged as she stared me down in the mirror she was using to apply her makeup.

I flopped onto the sofa in her fancy apartment overlooking downtown Seattle. “I came to Seattle to visit my best friend, not go to a stupid baseball game. This is my first vacation, Loren, in the year since I’ve been working. I thought we would be doing fun stuff like going hiking and exploring Seattle.”

Loren gave me a funny look when I mentioned hiking. “Did I mention how hot the guys look in their uniforms? Besides, there’s an after-party if they win, and I want you to get to know Nick more.”

Nick Rossi was Loren’s boyfriend, a professional baseball player and the very reason she left Hamilton. We’d been best friends since kindergarten. Even went to Montana State together. Well, I’d started at University of Montana, and then transferred to get my degree in Environmental Design. I

thought I would be going on to get my master's in architecture, but I realized my dream was to work on more intimate spaces rather than design skyscrapers or bridges. Like the ones I did for family and friends. I was able to do that where I worked now.

I'd helped my cousin Blayze design his log cabin. Helped my uncle design a more environmentally friendly barn for his horses. I also did interior decorating and enjoyed that as well. I suspected that may be where my passion lie. Right now, though, I had no idea what my passion was, other than carrying a sketch pad everywhere to draw what I saw around me. Much like my mother, I had a talent for drawing and painting.

Sighing, I stood. "Fine. Can I at least dress comfortably and not in some slutty dress?"

She shot me a dirty look in the mirror. "I'm not wearing this to the game."

I raised a brow. "Then why do you have it on?"

"I feel pretty in it."

Curling my lip, I gave her a look that said she was strange. "Whatever. I'm wearing this."

Spinning on the stool, she gave me a once-over. "Oh Rose, no! You're insanely beautiful, and you always ruin it by dressing down."

"Dressing down?" I asked, my hands on my hips. "I have on jeans, super-cute pink sneakers, and a Seattle Mariners long-sleeve shirt? How am I dressed down?"

"Fine," she stated with a flick of her hand. "But when everyone else at the after-party is dressed cute, you'll regret it."

Walking over to her, I put my hand on her shoulders, leaned down, and looked in the mirror. "I highly doubt it."



Bored. Bored. Bored.

I was bored out of my ever-loving mind. I thought nothing could be more boring than a baseball game, but I was wrong. The after-party was a handful of players, and a shit ton of women, whom I was starting to think might be paid by the hour. I had walked into a bathroom earlier, only to see a guy fucking someone in the shower. The shower was off, and they were completely clothed, but still.

The penthouse was amazing, though. And if I had to be honest, the owner, who was a pitcher for the Mariners, was pretty damn hot. I'd gotten plenty of looks in while he was pitching. Loren was right about one thing—the uniforms did look good on these guys. And Mr. Bryson Robinson had a nice ass. At least in the uniform, he did. I hadn't lain eyes on him since we arrived, though. Which was strange, since Loren told me he owned this place.

If I had to hazard a guess, he was in his room, probably with at least two or three women.

I had somehow made my way up to the third floor. There was a huge game room that, also strangely enough, no one was in. Though, I *did* hear a few moans coming from behind one of the closed doors in the room.

I quickly made my way to the large sliding-glass doors on the opposite side of the space. I opened a door and stepped outside, inhaling the fresh evening air. Well...fresher than the air inside, anyway.

It was a huge balcony that overlooked downtown Seattle, as well as the baseball field. Millions of lights flickered in the dark, blanketing me for miles around. I walked up to the railing, took hold of it, and closed my eyes.

Sighing, I dropped my head back and said, "Could this *be* any more boring?"

A soft chuckle came from behind me, to my right. I spun around with a hand over my heart. "Shit! You scared me!"

The guy was sitting in a chair tucked into a dark corner, almost like he was hiding. I could just make out his shape. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"What are you doing out here?" I asked as I leaned against the railing and folded my arms in front of me.

"Hiding."

I laughed. "I don't blame you. That's why I'm here."

"Who are *you* hiding from?"

I shrugged. "Not really a who...more like the whole thing. I'm not much of a party person, but my best friend is dating one of the players, and she begged me to come."

"Who's the player?" he asked.

It was then I noticed how deep his voice was. Not too deep, but like, one of those sexy male narrators who voiced romance books.

I shook the thought away. "Um, Nick Rossi."

He leaned forward, but I still couldn't make out his face from the light

filtering out from the game room. “You’re Rose Shaw?”

I tilted my head and studied him. “How did you know that?”

“I make it my business to know everyone who comes into my home.”

My mouth dropped open a bit in surprise. “Wait, you’re Bryson Robinson?”

“I am. Loren has told me a lot about you.”

Glancing back into the penthouse, I said, “Has she, now?”

“You’re from Hamilton, Montana?”

“I am. I find it strange you know so much about me, yet I know nothing about you, and can hardly even see your face.”

He chuckled again, and it made my lower stomach pool with heat.

Okay, where did that come from?

Bryson stood and walked over to me, coming into the light. He was tall, maybe six feet? He came close. Very close. I had to lean my head way back to look at him.

“Can you see me now, Rose?”

“Is it me, or did you intentionally try to make my name sound sexier than hell when it left your lips?”

He laughed yet again, and this time it was a real belly laugh. “I wasn’t trying to do that.”

I nodded.

“So...ask me anything.”

“Really?” I replied, suddenly not feeling bored anymore. “Anything?”

“Anything.”

“Where are you from?”

“That’s your first question?”

I shrugged. “It’s the one I want to know.”

He stared at me as if trying to figure me out before finally answering, “Kalispell, Montana.”

“Seriously?”

He used his finger to cross his heart. “Born and raised.”

“Do you miss Montana?”

The way his smile faded was answer enough. “I do. More than I’d like to admit.”

I nodded. “It’s heaven on Earth.”

His eyes bounced around my face. “It is.”

I cleared my throat. “Did you go to college there?”

“I went straight from high school to the minor league.”

“Wow. Color me impressed.”

He smiled, and it made my stomach flutter. “What else do you want to know about me?”

Tapping my finger on my lip, I thought for a moment, then pointed toward the penthouse. “How many of those women in there have you paid to be here?”

My question seemed to take him off guard. “None. Do you think they’re prostitutes?”

I shrugged. “I sure hear a lot of moaning, and I unfortunately walked in on two people getting it on in your second-floor bath. In the shower. With the water off and their clothes on.”

His brows slammed down. “What?”

“Yeah, I thought it was strange too. But...I say, whatever floats your boat.”

“In my bathroom?”

I nodded.

“For fuck’s sake,” he mumbled, turning to look out over the view.

“Why are you out here, really?”

“I don’t enjoy parties.”

Gaping at him, I said, “But this is your house. Your party.”

“It’s my house, but not my party. I normally stay at a hotel after we win a home game.”

I blinked at him a few times. “Then why is the party here?”

“Nick lives here too.”

My mouth dropped open. “Nick lives *here*? I thought he lived with Loren.”

He shook his head. “He might as well, for as much time as he’s at her place.”

I turned and looked at the stadium. “Well, I had you pegged all wrong.”

The moment the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them.

“Excuse me?” he asked, humor in his voice. “How did you have me *pegged*.”

I peeked over at him and couldn’t help but smile at the boyish grin on his face. Oh well, in for penny and all that.

“Okay,” I said, sighing as I turned around and leaned against the railing. “I figured you were a manwhore. A rich manwhore, who was most likely in

his massive bedroom with at least two or three of the attending women.”

He let out a choked laugh. “Wow. That’s stereotyping, you know.”

I held up my hands in defense. “I know, and I’m sorry.”

“I’ll only accept your apology if you do something for me.”

My brows lifted. “If you think for one second I’m going to sleep with you, you’re crazy.”

He laughed and shook his head, this time holding *his* hands up. “I swear to you, I will not ask you to sleep with me.”

“Okay, then, what is it that you want?”

“Do you play rummy?”

I stared at him in surprise. “I’m sorry...maybe you’re just so pretty to look at, my mind got confused. But did you just ask me if I played *rummy*?”

Bryson nodded. “I did.”

“Isn’t that an old person’s game?”

Tossing his head back and laughing yet again—I really seemed to amuse this guy—he pierced me with his... What color were his eyes? Too hard to tell in the dark.

“It’s not an old person’s game, and I like it. I’m bored out of my mind, and so are you.”

Smiling, I bit down on my lower lip. “Okay, I’ll play rummy with you.”

“I’ve got some cards in here,” he said, motioning to the game room.

“Ahh, just so you know, someone was getting it on behind that closed door to the left.”

Cursing under his breath, he placed his hand on my lower back and guided me back into the penthouse.

*Ignore the way that makes your female parts tingle, Rose.*

“Stay here,” he said as he walked to the door and threw it open. Then said, “Oh shit! Sorry, Nick. Sorry, Loren.”

He shut the door and turned to look at me. His cheeks were as red as tomatoes. My hands came up to cover my mouth as I attempted not to laugh.

I watched as Bryson went to a drawer in a side console and opened it. He pulled out a deck of cards and walked back to me. “Do you have anything warmer to wear?”

Frowning, I shook my head.

“Come on,” he said, taking my hand and leading me to the door opposite Nick’s. He opened it, and I followed him into a massive bedroom. I was pretty sure my eyes were bugging out of my head.

Bryson walked around a corner, then reappeared with two sweatshirts. "Here, it gets chilly on the roof."

"The roof?"

He winked. "It's either there or in the house with all the people bumping uglies."

I laughed and grabbed the sweatshirt he offered. "Lead the way."

For the next two hours, I played, of all things, rummy. With one of the best pitchers in the MLB. Not to mention, he was hot as hell and the perfect gentleman. He'd even dared to go back into the House of Sex to get us some food and drinks.

After the cards, I found myself lying in a huge hammock with him as he pointed out the star constellations.

"How do you know all of this?" I asked, twisting my fingers around his. We weren't holding hands, per se, but he'd started to wrap his hand around mine, directing my finger to point out constellations, and now I absentmindedly did the same.

"When I was a little boy, my father used to teach me about the stars and the planets."

"Was he an astronomer?"

He shook his head. "No, he worked for NASA. Then met my mother, and she got pregnant. She was from Montana, and she told him she couldn't live in Florida. She was just there visiting her grandparents, who'd moved to Florida years before. He loved her so much, he gave up his job, moved up to Kalispell, and helped her father run his business."

I turned and looked at Bryson. "What was his business?"

The way he smiled as he looked up at the sky was enchanting. "He sold farm equipment."

"Shut up. He left NASA to sell farm equipment?"

Bryson laced his fingers with mine, and I was positive he didn't realize he'd done it. "He loved my mother that much. And he never regretted it. He ended up teaching an astronomy course for a local college, and he loved that as well."

He laughed softly. "He used to take me along and let me sit behind his desk when he taught. Man, I loved watching him talk about the moon and stars."

"You didn't want to pursue that career?"

"Nah, baseball was my passion. I knew from the first time my mother



took me to T-ball, that's what I wanted to do."

Sighing, I inched down a little farther and nuzzled closer to him. "You're lucky to have known what your passion is."

He rested his chin on top of my head. "You don't know what your passion is, Rose Shaw?"

"Nope."

We lay there in silence for the longest time before he finally said, "I didn't know who you were when you first walked onto the balcony...but hell if I didn't want to meet you."

"Tonight?" I asked with a soft chuckle.

"Yeah," he said, lifting our hands and holding them up toward the sky as if inspecting how they looked together before he dropped them again. But he kept hold of my hand. "You walked outside, and all the lights in the sky went straight to you."

I adjusted my body to look at him. "What do you mean?"

He looked down, and our eyes met. "You're so different from all the women who come to these parties. Or any whom I've met in forever, honestly."

"How so?"

"For starters, you're the most beautiful woman here."

I laughed. "Please. Some of those women are wearing thousand-dollar dresses and shoes."

"That doesn't make them beautiful. What makes you even more different is, you aren't afraid to be yourself. You showed up at an after-party swarming with women on the prowl, dressed in the cutest fucking pink sneakers I've ever seen, your hair pulled back in a ponytail, and a goddamn baseball shirt. You're more real than those women will ever be. And when you found out who I was, it didn't faze you. You didn't trip all over yourself or start to flirt."

"But I *did* think you were a rich manwhore."

He laughed. "When are you leaving to go back to Montana?"

My smile faded, and I turned and stared up at the night sky. "Tomorrow afternoon."

Bryson adjusted his body to lie on his side, facing me. I looked at him and smiled. "What color are your eyes?"

He gently moved a piece of loose hair from the side of my face. "Green."

I absentmindedly nodded. "I like the color green."

“I like the color blue.”

Reaching up, I pulled at the strings of his hoodie. “How do you know mine are blue? It’s pretty dark out here.”

“I told you. I notice things,” he said, inching closer.

“Is this the part where you kiss me and then ask me to sleep with you again?”

He lowered farther, and his mouth was just inches from mine. “I didn’t ask you to sleep with me, Rose.”

Licking my lips, I reached up and brushed my fingers through his soft hair. “Maybe you should.”

His mouth sealed over mine then—and the kiss was raw and passionate. Breathless. I moaned when he palmed my breast through the layers I had on.

“More!” I gasped.

He was off the hammock and had me in his arms so fast, I was nearly dizzy.

“God, I want you, Rose. Right here, right now,” he whispered against my neck.

My brain was catching up with my libido, and it was screaming for me to stop. I liked this guy, but there was absolutely no future for us.

On the other hand, my body was begging for just one night. One night to know what it would be like to have him buried inside me.

He quickly started to undo my jeans while I worked on his.

“Protection?” I asked.

He reared back, the look of devastation on his face nearly making me laugh. “I don’t have any condoms.”

I gaped at him. “How can you *not* have condoms?”

“Well, I wasn’t exactly planning on having sex up on the rooftop tonight.”

Dropping my head on his chest, I groaned. Then I peeked up at him. “Are you a manwhore?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Do you do this often, Bryson? Sleep with women you just met? And do you normally use a condom when you have sex?”

“Of course, I do, and no, I am not a manwhore. I haven’t been with anyone in over a year.”

I stepped back. “Wh-what?”

He looked away sheepishly. “I was in a long-term relationship, and she

wanted things I didn't. I just...I haven't been with anyone since we broke up."

Why does this guy keep making me like him more and more?

"How long were you together?" I asked quietly.

"Four years. I also found out she was messing around with some other players. So we parted ways. I got checked to make sure she hadn't given me anything."

"I'm so sorry, Bryson."

He shrugged. "It's honestly okay. Like I said...she wanted things I didn't."

I ran my finger over the Mariners symbol on his sweatshirt. "So...you're clean?"

With a nod, he said, "Yes."

Chewing on my lip, I debated whether or not to do something potentially stupid. "I am too...and I'm on the pill."

Bryson stared at me, his mouth open. Then shook his head. Then just stared at me again.

"It's okay. It was a crazy—"

His mouth was on mine before I could finish, and this time, he kissed me like he couldn't get enough. He cupped my face and broke the kiss. "Are you sure?"

I nodded.

Dropping his forehead to mine, he said, "I'm not going to last five minutes inside you, Rose."

My hands went back to his jeans. "Then you sure as hell better make sure I come first."

The next morning, Bryson and I lay wrapped together in a quilt as I stared up at the sky. The first rays of sunlight were making their way across the horizon. Turning, I looked at him...*really* looked at him. He was like a classic Greek god with his arm over his eyes.

I'd never experienced *anything* like the sex I'd had with Bryson last night. First, we fucked—and it was glorious. Not to mention, he made sure I came not only once, but twice, before he did. Then he found a few quilts and laid them out...and proceeded to make love to me after that.

I wanted to pretend it hadn't been magical. But the longer I lay there, the harder it was to pretend it was just a one-night stand. That it meant nothing.

Not that it mattered. My flight was leaving this afternoon.

*Leave, Rose. You need to leave.*

I closed my eyes and forced myself to carefully slide out from under the quilt. I rushed around the rooftop quietly, found my clothes and sneakers, and quickly got dressed.

With one last look over my shoulder, I whispered, “Goodbye, Bryson.”  
And then I ran.

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## About the Author

Kelly Elliott is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling contemporary romance author. Since finishing her bestselling *Wanted* series, Kelly has continued to spread her wings while remaining true to her roots with stories of hot men, strong women, and beautiful surroundings. Her bestselling works included *Wanted*, *Broken*, *Without You*, and *Lost Love*. Elliott has been passionate about writing since she was fifteen. After years of filling journals with stories, she finally followed her dream and published her first novel, *Wanted*, in November 2012.

Elliott lives in Central Texas with her husband, daughter, and two pups. When she's not writing, she enjoys reading and spending time with her family. She is down to earth and very in touch with her readers, both on social media and at signings. To learn more about Kelly and her books, you can find her through her website, [www.kellyelliottauthor.com](http://www.kellyelliottauthor.com).

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