

CARLY'S

Heart

HEARTS OF ELK VALLEY

KATIE O'CONNOR

*Carly's
Heart*

Hearts of Elk Valley Book 1



Katie O'Connor

Snarky Heart Press

—Carly’s Heart—

—Hearts of Elk Valley Book 1—

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Dedication

For everyone who has experienced unrequited love.

Love hurts, but in the end, it is worth it.

Your true love is out there, waiting for you.

A single mom with a tragic past, a tongue-tied cowboy, and one last chance to find love.

Happily married, Carly Johnston noticed that her best friend's brother was attractive and that's as far as it went. When her husband fell into drinking, her heart was broken. When he refused to stop or get help, her life fell apart. Add an unexpected pregnancy to the mix and her life became a total disaster. Luckily her best friend and her family were there to offer support and help her get on with her life.

Now, six years later, she's a single mother and ready to date. Too bad the man she'd slowly been falling for is oblivious to her attraction. It's like he doesn't know she exists. She's hoping his sister's wedding is her chance to pop onto his radar. When she's kicked out of the wedding party her hopes are dashed. How is she ever going to convince him that she's eager to get to know him better?

Birch Brighton fell for Carly the moment he set eyes on her. She was, in all respects, his ideal woman. When he found out that she was already married, he was gutted and tried to move on. He'd never fish in another man's pond but having Carly hanging around the family ranch with his sister was keeping him from moving on. He'd kept his distance while her marriage crumbled, but now she's a single mother with an adorable child and his heart still yearns to be with her. He'd been waiting for her forever.

She's gone from friendly and outgoing to standoffish and shy and he can't understand why. He's at a loss about how to catch her attention and show her how much he loves her.

Can this duo of confused friends get past the awkward misunderstanding between them to find the love they always wanted?

♥ Chapter One ♥

Six Years Ago:

Birch Brighton stared down at the swimming pool in his parents' back yard. Sun glinted off the water flying through the air as his sister, Tanya, and her best friend, Carly, frolicked in the water. Playing, not swimming. At thirty, it was ridiculous that he still lived at home. He sighed. Soon enough he'd be out of here. Two months ago, he'd broken ground on a place of his own on an adjacent section of land. Eventually, it was where he'd spend his life with his family, if he ever found the right woman to marry.

Laughter drew his attention back to the pool. His breath caught in his throat. Carly was exquisite. Fit, tanned, happy. She was average height, the top of her head perfectly reaching his chin. She was sweet, kind and had the most delectable curves. He'd seen her in jeans and skirts which made him salivate, but in a swimsuit, she stole his breath.

He'd considered asking her on a date but never worked up the courage. He wasn't shy by any stretch of the imagination, but he'd been burned by his last girlfriend and hesitated to put himself out there again. One betrayal could dent a man's confidence beyond repair.

Carly had caught his eye several months ago when he visited his sister at work at Hank's Diner. His sister didn't need to work. She chose to. As a homebody, she was unwilling to leave their small town for university. Instead, she was taking university classes online. She loved learning and hadn't decided on a career yet. She was bouncing around disciplines to determine what career suited her best.

He didn't understand her reasoning. Their family had a lot of money. More than a lot. She could have focused on her studies full-time. Instead, she took what she called a balanced life approach, dividing her time between work, a social life, family, and her studies. He'd chosen the other route, hitting university hard, taking extra classes, and finishing his business degree in record time.

He was impressed at how well she maintained the balance. Her grades were top-notch despite her busy schedule. She was happy and thriving. He was unbelievably proud of her.

Carly, on the other hand, he knew next to nothing about. She worked at the diner and had quickly become friends with Tanya. She was smart and

easy to talk to. Except when it came to asking her out. That's when his past haunted and silenced him.

To the best of his knowledge, this was the first time she'd been to the family ranch. He should go out and say hi. Play the gracious host. He could take them iced tea and snacks. Even as he had the thought, his mother joined the girls poolside with a heavily laden tray. Dang. So much for that icebreaking plan. He thumped his forehead against the window. Another opportunity lost to dithering. The glass was cool, the way he wanted to be around Carly.

He should be in the barn. He had horses to look after. He'd completed his share of the family chores, now he was on to his personal chores. He'd been working race horses with his grandfather since he was in his early teens. The years had sped by like a freight train.

He backed away from the window. Watching Carly without talking to her was discourteous. It reminded him of a mountain lion high in a tree waiting to pounce. "Just go talk to her," he grumbled. If his best friend Jamison was around, he'd be giving Birch the gears and telling him to man up. His other buddy Vince would ride him mercilessly for being a coward. They'd both be right.

He jogged down the stairs and slipped into his favorite work boots. He'd had the Alberta Boot cowboy boots since he turned nineteen. A gift from his grandfather. He had several other pairs, but these were, by far, the most comfortable. Too bad they were relegated to work boots. He'd tried to wear them to church, but his mom declared them too decrepit and threatened to toss them in the burn pit. Well, she couldn't complain today, he was headed out to muck stalls. Right after a quick stop to attempt a conversation with Carly.

He stood inside the back door, gathering his courage and letting his eyes adjust to the bright sunshine. Even with his Stetson, it was blindingly bright. He stepped outside and walked across the brick patio towards the glass-topped table where the ladies had gathered in the shade of an enormous blue striped umbrella.

He'd only taken two steps when Carly's head pivoted toward him. Her cheeks flushed slightly, she coughed and looked away. He bit down a grin. Maybe she'd noticed him too. He walked slowly, taking in her profile. Her dark-blond waves were pulled back in a ponytail. At the moment they were flat and wet from the pool. Usually, they rioted out of control. Both looks

suiting her. Her navy and white one-piece swimsuit highlighted all the right spots. He had to swallow back a wave of desire.

“Ladies,” he greeted them. “Nice to see you, Carly.” He bent and kissed his mother on the cheek.

“Birch, do join us. I brought out enough for you too.” She gave him a thoughtful look and frowned when her gaze reached his boots.

“Thanks, Mom. I could use a cold drink before I hit the barns.”

“Oh, you and your horses,” Tanya teased. “All you think about is horses.”

“I can’t deny that.” He chugged the lemonade his mother passed him and cleared his throat. “How are you, Carly?”

“Fine, thank you.” She barely looked up at him. He wondered why, because at work she was gregarious and talked to literally everyone.

“Do you like living in Elk Valley?” he asked, trying to pry her out of her unusual shell.

“I really do. I was bored at first, but since I started working at Hank’s I’ve met so many wonderful people. I love small town life. It’s a big change from living in Edmonton. The air is so fresh and pure. The people are friendly. Especially, Tanya,” she gushed. “We’re so different, but we get along so well. I’m blessed that she invited me out here to share your swimming pool.”

Now that was the Carly he knew. Upbeat and grateful. “What brought you out from the city?”

“A moving van,” she quipped with a nervous giggle. “My husband was hired by Pension Oil and Gas to overhaul their entire well control system. It’s at least a five-year gig. I left my job and followed him. I couldn’t find an accounting job right away, and the diner was hiring. I’ll probably go back to accounting if I have the chance, but I’m happy at the diner for now.”

His heart plummeted to his toes. *How could she be married?* She was the first woman he’d been interested in since he was dumped two years ago. She was sweet and wholesome and if she was content at the diner, she probably wasn’t a money-grubbing witch like his ex.

“It’s so great that we can work together,” Tanya said, dipping a nacho chip into salsa and popping it into her mouth. “Birch, did you know I met Carly at a quilting class?”

“Did you?” Lame. Way to suck at making conversation Brighton.

“You were so terrible, Tanya.” Carly laughed and Tanya joined in.

“I’m lucky you sat beside me. I can’t believe I had never used a sewing machine before,” his sister said. “And you can sew literally anything. Can

you believe she made that swimsuit? She's amazing!"

He took a quick glance at the suit, not wanting to look too long and seem creepy. "It's very nice." What else could he say? He knew nothing about fashion or sewing.

"She helped me finish the quilt I gave you for your birthday. It would be in the rag bin without Carly. She helped half the class. I think you knew more than the teacher." Tanya looked at her friend.

Sweet pink colored Carly's cheeks. "No, she was just busy with some of the real beginners. I just helped a bit."

"You practically ran the class while she was on her phone." She turned to Birch. "Carly is the most helpful person I've ever met. She makes cookies for the daycare and volunteers at the senior's center. She even made Elvira Wettles smile."

"Now that's impressive. She never cracks the hint of a grin, let alone a full smile." He stood up. "Well, off to work. I'd love to stay for more conversation, but horses wait for no man." He couldn't sit and listen to his sister sing the praise of the woman he wanted and couldn't have.

He strode away, trying not to stomp. *How could she be married?* Disappointment dragged at his normally upbeat mood. For the last three months he'd been eating in the diner twice a week, just for the chance to talk to Carly, only to discover that she was married. She didn't wear any rings. She had no tell-tale tan lines on her finger.

"Fudge." He stormed around the corner of the house to where his truck was parked in the shade. He headed cross country to his own barn on the adjoining section. He'd get his chores done and spend a few hours working out his frustrations by putting sheeting on the house he was building.



CARLY TRIED NOT TO watch Birch walk away but there was something about a handsome man in snug jeans and a cowboy hat that she adored. Those boots spoke to his impressive work ethic. Objectively speaking, Tanya's brother was a very handsome man with his dark brown hair and chocolate brown eyes. Broad shoulders, strong sinuous muscles, and narrow hips. He could be a model. He'd caught her eye the first time he walked into the diner. And that backside, whoa!

Hey, she was married not dead. She'd never cheat on Mike, but looking wasn't cheating, and Birch was definitely something worth looking at. The day's heat grew until she needed to fan herself. It was the sun making her warm, not Birch.

Still, he was kind, and generous with his tips. He always smiled. He seemed to have a lot of friends which spoke well for his personality. Like Tanya, he was a good person.

She returned her attention to Tanya and her mother. She had no interest in Birch beyond looking, she was a very happily married woman. "Have you started another quilt?" she asked, trying to distract herself from Birch's good qualities.

"I have. I'm making one for Dad this time. He grumbles all winter about being cold, so I thought a quilt for his recliner would be great."

"I do not grumble," a male voice replied from behind Carly. He walked to the table and thrust his hand toward Carly. "Hi. I'm Buck, Tanya's father. I see you've met my wife, Helen."

Carly shook hands with him. "Carly Johnston. So nice to meet you. Thanks for having me here. Your ranch is beautiful. I love the cows, but the peacocks are noisy." She laughed. As if making her point, one of the birds screamed in the distance. For five seconds, all was quiet. Every other bird stopped chirping.

"Those are Helen's stupid birds," he teased with all the gentle good humor of a man who would do anything for his wife. He leaned in and kissed Helen long and hard. Heat rose in Carly's face. She wasn't used to such blatant affection. Her parents had been in love, but not demonstrative. Mike was okay with public hand holding, but nothing more. What would it be like to be married to a man who didn't care if the whole world knew how much he loved you?

Buck sat beside Helen with his arm slung across the back of her chair. Birch's parentage was reflected in his father's smile and flashing eyes. Sure, Buck was grey at the temples and had deep smile and tan lines, but he was a clear vision of what Birch would look like when he aged. Handsome. Very handsome.

"Gross, Dad," Tanya complained when her father kissed her mother again. "Nobody wants to see that."

"Deal with it, baby girl. I love your mother. Come on, woman." He tugged Helen to her feet. "There's something I need to show you in the

bedroom.”

Carly laughed at his outrageous wink and at Helen’s giggling response.

“Da-ad,” Tanya grumbled. “Stop.”

“I think they’re sweet.”

“Is Mike like that?” Tanya asked.

“Mike is more reserved. He’s a wonderful husband and provider, and I love him to death. We’re happy. But what your parents have is something special. I could get used to being treated like the most beautiful woman in the world.” She wasn’t unhappy in her marriage, quite the opposite, but that didn’t stop the little beast called envy from rearing its head now and then.

♥ Chapter Two ♥

Four Years Ago:

“I don’t know what to do,” Carly complained to Tanya. “Mike just won’t stop drinking. He hits the bottle every night. He claims his job is stressful and he needs to relax.”

Birch froze in the kitchen doorway on the way to grab a glass of water. He probably should make his presence known.

“Is he mean to you?” Tanya asked “Does he hit you?”

“Oh, no! I just don’t like that he drinks and watches TV until he passes out. He gets up, showers, goes to work, and comes home to do it all over again. We barely talk. I’m losing the man I love to the bottle and I don’t know how to get him back.” She sounded on the verge of tears.

Birch wanted to rush to her side and tell her everything would be okay. Over the past two years, they’d become friends of a sort. He pushed down his attraction to her and did his best to treat Carly as a kid sister. At least now he was able to talk to her without stepping on his tongue.

“Oh, Carly. That’s terrible.” Tanya commiserated. “What are you going to do?”

Carly sobbed. “I don’t know.” She wept quietly into her hands. “He won’t admit he has a problem, let alone get help.”

The sight and sound of her misery squeezed Birch’s chest until his heart wanted to explode. He was tempted to go find Mike, and tell him a thing or two about being a good husband. Carly deserved better. His hands fisted against the doorjamb.

“Back off, son,” his father whispered in his ear. “It’s not your business. Stay out of it unless he lifts a hand to her.”

“I wasn’t going to do anything,” he whispered back.

“You were. You’re my eldest child. I know you as well as I know myself. Back away from the situation, and back away from Carly. She’s taken.”

He whirled round to glare at his father. “I’d never fish in another man’s pond.”

“Not in reality, but dreaming about what you can’t have isn’t serving you well either.” He grabbed Birch by the shoulder and led him outside. “Son. I’m warning you. No good will come out of pinning your hopes on Carly.

She's a great girl. We all adore her, but she's taken. Find someone else. Back away. Stop coming by the house when she's around."

"I don't-

"You do." His father frowned. "Next time you see her car, head for your place. Work your frustrations out. The Lord says coveting your neighbor's wife is a sin."

Birch frowned. His dad was very religious, but he wasn't wrong. Guilt wracked Birch's body and made his chest hurt. Watching Carly was wrong on so many levels, but he felt helpless to resist her lure. She was a siren and every cowboy's, especially this one's dream.

"I'll try, Dad. I'll try."

"I'm proud of you son. I know you can do this. Find someone else." He clapped Birch on the back and went inside. Birch stood on the house's wraparound porch staring out into the rain. The air was heavy with the hopeful moistness of spring. The grass was greening up nicely, and the family hay was already coming in.

Inside, through the screen door, he heard his father greet Carly with a terrible dad joke. She laughed lightly. The sound slid down Birch's spine like hot whiskey. He stormed off the deck and headed for the barn. He saddled one of his father's horses and rode through the light rain to his own ranch. Far away from Carly's enticing presence.

♥ Chapter Three ♥

Four Months Later:

“Mike. I’m pregnant. Six weeks.” Carly threw the words at her husband as soon as he woke up. She timed telling him to catch him without a snoot full of booze. “You need to stop drinking and help me raise our child.” She stared down at him, hands on her hips, biting her lip to keep her pain inside. Screaming at him wouldn’t help.

This should be one of the happiest moments of her life and it was the worst. Slowly, over the past nine months, her love for Mike had changed. No longer was it sweet and uplifting. It was sad and pitiful. She was falling out of love with him. Nothing she said or did seemed to make a difference. He was increasingly unable to function without drinking himself into a stupor after work. He rarely ate because he was deep in a bottle. She was nearly certain he was still drunk when he went to work yesterday. He’d lost the charming smile that won her heart and he constantly smelled of alcohol. She wanted to weep for him. For them. For their baby.

“Maybe if you changed jobs. We could get a fresh start somewhere else,” she suggested despite knowing he’d never leave his high paying position.

“I just signed an extension to my contract. I got a huge raise. Thirty percent. I’m one of a handful of people, world-wide, that can do this. They need me. I love it here.”

“Then what the hell is the problem?” she screeched. “Why all the booze? You never talk to me. We never go out.” They’d shared one dinner out a couple months ago and had made love afterward. She’d been disappointed when he got up for a drink immediately afterward. She felt used and abandoned. It left her feeling as though he felt making love to her was a mistake. Maybe in some respects it had been. It gouged her heart, but that agony didn’t lessen the love she felt for the precious bundle she carried.

“And you think telling me you’re pregnant will change that?” He slammed his hands on the coffee table, wincing at the noise. “I have enough pressure already.”

The acid smell of bourbon washed over her, making her gag. She raced for the bathroom to be sick. When she came out, he was gone, the front door wide open. She slammed it and slid down the front entry wall and collapsed into a ball. She cried until she had no more tears. Her phone rang and rang.

She ignored it. It rang again. Sometime later, the doorbell pealed. Someone pounded on the door and rattled the handle.

“Carly, open up,” Tanya yelled. “I can see you. Are you okay?” She knocked again. “Don’t make me call the police.” Shoot. It was their day off and they had quilting class. In her misery, she hadn’t thought about, let alone gone to, class. Tanya would be worried.

Carly crawled to the door and opened it up. Her friend rushed in.

“What’s wrong?”

Tears welled in her heart and streamed down her face. Eventually, she managed to choke out, “Mike won’t quit drinking. I think my marriage is over.”

“Oh no.” She pulled Carly into her arms and held her while she cried.

She wept herself out. Eventually, she managed to pull herself together. “I’m okay now. Let’s get to class.” Carly didn’t need the class, but quilting had become her solitude. Now that she knew she was pregnant, she was going to need a lot of help keeping her calm.

“Are you sure?”

“I need the distraction. I’ll be fine.” She couldn’t bring herself to share her pregnancy yet.

Over the next few weeks, Carly watched as Mike tried to stay sober. He just wasn’t strong enough to resist the temptation. Addiction was a terrible thing to endure. Her husband and marriage wasted away. He retained enough functionality that his addiction didn’t hurt his new contract, and Carly knew that until he hit rock bottom, nothing would change. She was going to have to come up with a plan for survival on her own. They didn’t even speak to each other.



“I DON’T KNOW WHAT TO do,” Carly moaned into her hands. The diner was nearly empty and she was taking a break with Tanya before the lunch rush started. She wasn’t sleeping and she was exhausted. She wanted to be sitting with her feet up, not trying to decide her future.

“Are you sure? Could it be a false positive?” She fiddled with a coffee cup. “I mean I thought you guys weren’t doing it anymore.”

“Sh. Keep your voice down.” There were only two customers seated on the far side of the large room, but she didn’t want to risk them overhearing.

“Yes, I’m sure. I’ve known for a while. I finally went to the doctor. I’m four months. What am I going to do? I can’t raise a child with an alcoholic.”

“Have you talked to him?” Tanya waved her hands. “Never mind. Of course, you have.”

“I need to find a place to live. I have to move out before I get huge and can’t function.”

“My cousin has a condo for sale on Seventh Avenue. I could give him a call to see if he’ll rent it to you instead of selling.”

“Would you?” Hope blossomed in her chest. Last night, Mike had punched a wall in his frustration with her nagging. She wasn’t going to stop hoping he’d change, and he wasn’t going to get used to her pleas. Leaving was the only option.

“Consider it done.”

Amid the sadness, a tiny seed of hope sprouted.

♥ Chapter Four ♥

Birch glared at Carly's husband. How could he just sit there while they loaded up Carly's things? Didn't the man care that he was losing this precious woman. Mike should be on his knees begging her to stay.

"Thanks, Birch," Carly said with a soft smile. "I appreciate all the help." She leaned against the wall, one hand on top of her swelling stomach. God, she was beautiful. Pregnant women really did glow.

"You're welcome. What comes next?" He and his father and his two younger brothers had already loaded all the big items into the back of their pickup trucks for the trek to her new place.

"Just the boxes in the small bedroom."

"What about a bed? We haven't moved a bed yet." He looked around in case he'd missed it.

"It's being delivered in a couple days. I'll sleep on the couch until it arrives."

"No, you won't. You're pregnant. You need a real bed. Come stay at the ranch. Mom and Dad won't mind." She must be insane thinking of sleeping on a couch in her condition.

"I'll be fine. I've slept there twice already. It's quite comfortable. But thanks for offering."

Her smile lit his insides from his heart to his toes.

"Just sit on the steps, while we get these last boxes. You should be resting." He shot another glare at Mike who gave him the finger in return.

Mike staggered over and grabbed Carly by the arm. "Don't go. Stay," he begged.

His pleading was too little, too late as far as Birch was concerned.

"Mike, I'm done. I've been warning you for a year. It's over. Done. Finished." Her voice trembled.

"Don't you love me?" he whined. Birch wanted to punch him in the mouth.

"Let go of her arm," Birch growled. Mike let go immediately, but glared at Birch.

"Are you leaving me for this cowboy?" he sneered the last word.

"Mike," she said with way more patience than Birch could have mustered, "I'm leaving you because you won't stop drinking. I'm afraid

you'll do something dangerous.”

“I love you,” Mike begged.

Carly placed a hand on Mike's cheek. “Mike. I used to love you. Now ...” Her mouth twisted sadly as she fumbled for words. “I still love you. Like a friend. Not like a wife or lover. We're over. I can't watch you destroy yourself. Get your shit together or you'll never see our child.”

Tears streamed down her face. Birch reached out and took her elbow. “Come on outside. One of the boys can run you home while we finish loading. I'm sure Mike can tell us what needs to be moved.” He led her outside.

As they stepped over the doorjamb, she stumbled and landed against him. Helpless to resist, he wrapped her in his arms and let her cry out her agony. Emotions rode over him like stampeding cattle. Guilt for being glad her marriage was over. Happiness that she was in his arms. Caring and tenderness for her plight. Joy that he could help her move on. And shameful lust for her condition. For the past two months, whenever he thought of her and her gently swelling belly, he imagined she was carrying his child.

God help him, he was in love with her. He had been from the first time he saw her at the diner. He never would have moved in on her while she was in a relationship and now, pregnant, and alone, she didn't need a man chasing her.

He hugged her close, stroking her back and murmuring senseless sounds of comfort, until her tears ebbed. He'd bide his time and eventually, he'd make his move. But not until he felt she was ready. Not until her heart was healed after the loss of her marriage. He'd be the friend that supported her, not the jerk that hit on her when she was down.



CARLY FLOPPED ONTO the sofa that came with the condo. The walls were beige, the hardwood a brownish grey. It was in perfect shape and totally without personality. She couldn't wait to make it her own. Her landlord said she could paint it if she wished. Paint would wait until after the baby came.

She wiggled to get comfortable on the tweed sofa. It and the matching chair weren't much but would do until she found a living room suite she loved at a price she could afford. She was saving her money in case Mike's drinking cost him his job and she lost support payments.

Someone knocked on the door. "Come in."

The door opened almost soundlessly. "Don't you know to lock your door?" Birch chided gently. "It could have been anyone out here."

"I knew you were coming with the last load." She struggled to get up. Even with months left to go, she felt awkward and occasionally struggled to move. Especially when she was exhausted.

"Sit. You need to rest. Just tell us where to put stuff. This box weighs a ton. It says books."

She stayed where she was. After being up all night last night, and then moving today, she was exhausted. Carrying a child was hard work. "Over there, in the corner please." She didn't have a bookcase yet, but she'd seen a great one at Twice Over, the secondhand store.

"As you wish."

His comment made her wonder if he'd ever seen *The Princess Bride*. Naw, she was imagining things. His shirt rode up as he hefted the box over her lone chair. His abs rippled. Mesmerized, she stared until he cleared his throat.

"Are you okay? Can I get you anything? Do you need a doctor?"

His concern was touching. "No. I'm good. Just tired. I zoned out for a second."

"Oh. If you're sure. I can run out and get you some food?" He made it a question.

"That's my job. I've ordered pizza and there's beer in the fridge. And sodas for anyone who prefers that."

"Whatever you ordered is perfect. You don't have to do anything special for us. This is a favor for a friend, from friends." He disappeared out the door and his brothers came in. The next twenty minutes was a flurry of activity directed from her chair. Despite her objections, none of them would let her lift anything. It was a relief when they announced that the last box was inside. Tanya hurried in right behind her father and siblings.

"Sorry I'm late. I got stuck at work. I brought you this." She thrust a Boston fern into Carly's lap. "Every house needs a housewarming plant."

"Typical Tanya," Birch teased, "shows up for the food but misses the work."

"You know it, bro." She mock punched his arm. He swayed dramatically and dropped onto the sofa beside Carly just as the doorbell chimed. Tanya whirled around to admit the pizza delivery boy. Sage and Asher, Tanya and

Birch's brothers and their father headed to the bathroom to clean up before eating.

"Feed us, sis. We worked hard. We're starved," Birch patted Carly's knee; the soft touch sent her heart into overdrive. "We can't let our little mama get hungry."

Something about his use of the possessive word 'our' covered her in warmth like being wrapped in a soft quilt. The man was lethal to her good sense. She pretended not to be affected by Birch and chalked the overreaction up to pregnancy hormones.

Yeah, that was it. Hormones, not the stud sitting beside her.

♥ Chapter Five ♥

“I’m sorry to bother you, Buck,” Carly said. “Can you take a peek at my car? It’s making the craziest noise. I don’t know if it’s something or nothing. The garage is closed for the weekend. It started on the way out here for brunch.”

“I can look at it,” Birch said from the other end of the dining room table. His dad gave him a ‘watch yourself’ stare. “You stay inside out of the heat with Tanya, and I’ll take it for a quick test drive.” His father’s scowl turned to a proud smile.

“What a lovely idea,” his mother praised. “We can’t put that sweet little girl in jeopardy before she even arrives.”

“Oh, I don’t know what the baby will be,” Carly declared. “I’ve decided to let it be a surprise. The doctor assures me Little Bean is healthy and that’s all that matters.”

“Oh, I’m certain it’s a girl,” Helen exclaimed. “I’m never wrong.”

“Superstitious nonsense,” Buck declared shaking his head.

“I’ve never been wrong,” she huffed. “You were certain Tanya would be a boy.” She smiled softly. “But she turned into my darling daughter.”

“A daughter that made the Dean’s List this semester. I can’t believe I’m halfway through my program.”

“Congrats, sis. That’s great.” Her work-life balance was really paying off. Meanwhile, progress on his house was slower than he wanted it to be. At least the walls were up and the shingles on. He had finished the wiring. Next week an inspector would be out for another round of approvals. He couldn’t wait until it was done to show it off. None of the family had ventured over to peek yet. At least not that he was aware of. The work was slow, sometimes painfully slow. But it was important for him to do it all himself. That took time, especially since he worked here, on the family ranch, as well as having his own chores and animals to take care of. Sometimes his house seemed to be more hobby than life plan, but he was getting there.

He wondered what Carly would think. Not because he thought she’d be living there, though a guy could hope. He’d heard her say she preferred bungalows and adored a large kitchen. He had both of those, and coincidentally, several other things she’d mentioned, like large closets, a covered deck, and a fireplace in the master bedroom.

“I’ll be back later for dessert,” he said. “Brunch was excellent, thanks Mom.” He cleared his plate to the sink and hurried outside.

“Keys are in it,” Carly called. “Maybe I should go help him.”

“Nonsense,” Buck said. “He’s very mechanical. He can fix anything with an engine and wheels. He’ll have it diagnosed before you even get out there.”

Birch slowed in the entry. Conflicting emotions battled him. A good man wouldn’t go for a nearly single, not yet divorced, pregnant woman. But he’d wanted Carly for so long, he could barely keep his distance.

Maybe someday.

He slipped into his boots and tromped outside to fix her junker. She needed a better car. He had some buddies that might have leads. He shot out some texts saying his sister’s friend needed safe, cheap wheels. They’d let him know what they had, or if they heard of anything that might be suitable. Basking in the simple happiness of doing something extra for Carly, he slipped behind the wheel and started the engine.

It didn’t take long to find the problem and he was back inside in under ten minutes. He joined Carly and his family where they lingered over coffee. “Simple problem to fix. You need new brake pads.”

“You figured that out so fast? I’m impressed.” Her grateful smile made him feel ten feet tall. “What do I do?”

“Why don’t you hang out here overnight,” he suggested. “I’ll pop into town and pick up the parts first thing in the morning. It won’t take me long to redo the brakes for you. I checked them all. The back are fine, but both front brakes are shot.”

“I can take it in and get it done.”

“Never mind that,” Helen said, “You can stay the night and us girls can watch chick flicks and eat popcorn. I could use a good girls’ night.”

“Oh, I couldn’t impose.” Despite her protest, Birch heard the longing in her voice and was grateful when his mother put her foot down.

“Consider it settled. Girls’ night here. Birch will be off doing whatever he does all evening and Buck’s got a Lions meeting in town.”

So much for Birch hanging around getting to know her better. He knew so much about her, but wanted to know everything. Like how she preferred her eggs and did she think the Blue Jays would win this year. What were her plans for the future? Still, her staying was better for his heart than Carly on the road with bad brakes.



CARLY GLANCED AT BIRCH at the end of the Brighton's kitchen table. He'd changed over the last couple years. He used to pop into the diner every second day, now she rarely saw him. Oh, he was as helpful and smiling as always, like with her brakes, but he seemed distant.

Maybe she was imagining it. After her broken marriage, she didn't feel like she was qualified to judge any man's behavior. Still, she was extremely grateful that he was willing to fix her car. She'd be taking a short leave when the baby came and would need every penny she could save up.

"Thank you, Birch. I really appreciate you taking the time to fix it for me. I'll go with you to pay for the parts, and I can pay you for your time."

He looked shocked. "It's nothing."

He flashed the grin she remembered from a couple years ago. It had been months since she'd seen it. Maybe longer.

"No need to pay me. But if you wanted to bake a pie for me, I probably wouldn't complain."

His mother swatted his arm. "Oh, you and your pie!" She looked at Carly. "Never in my life have I met a man so hooked on pie as this one. When he was six, he stole a raisin pie off the counter and ate the whole thing. Let me tell you, he regretted it for days."

"Mo-om. Don't air my dirty laundry in public."

Carly adored the embarrassed smile he couldn't hide.

She stood to help clear the last of the brunch mess before dessert. Little Bean kicked her right in the left side just below her ribs. "Oh!"

Everyone jumped to their feet. "Are you okay?" Birch was the first to reach her. He grasped her arm as if she needed support. She sucked in a breath. Oh, he smelled like fresh cut grass and sunshine.

"Yes! I'm fine. Little Bean just kicked me. It hurt!" She laughed. "Sorry if I scared you. I was startled myself. It was the biggest kick yet. I swear Little Bean wants out, now."

"You better sit down," Birch said, guiding her back to her seat.

She laughed and patted his shoulder. "I'm fine. Nothing to worry about." He didn't look convinced but let her have her way. "I'll serve dessert."

"I'll get more coffee," Tanya said.

"I'll get the last of the dishes," Birch offered, following her and Tanya to the kitchen. "What's for dessert?"

“That’s for me to know and for you to find out,” Carly teased.

“Is it pie?” He looked like a schoolboy begging for a treat.

Tanya laughed. “What else does she bring? I swear she doesn’t even know what the rest of us eat. It’s pie, pie, all the time.”

“That’s not true,” Carly exclaimed. “I brought chocolate lava cake last time.”

“Besides,” Birch said, “I’m her favorite. It’s a good thing Sage and Asher aren’t home. More pie for me.” He rubbed his hands together in glee.

Carly laughed and pulled out the key lime pie and a bowl of sliced strawberries and another of whipped cream.

“Carly Johnston, I think I love you,” Birch joked when he saw the pie.

She couldn’t help but laugh. “I’ll bet you say that to all the bakers.” Deep inside, something secret sparked to life at his joke. It had been too long since she’d known a man’s love.

♥ Chapter Six ♥

Just over three years ago:

Birch peeked through the open doorway of the hospital room. He didn't want to enter if Carly was asleep. Tanya had warned him not to come, because Carly would be exhausted. Her labor had been long and difficult. As planned, Tanya and his mom had stood in as birthing coaches.

He could hardly believe the baby was here. Carly sat up in bed, her face glowing with happiness as she stared down at the pink wrapped bundle in her arms. Her hair was a rat's nest of knots and untidy curls. She had dark circles under her eyes. She was, beyond doubt, the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

She glanced up from the baby and saw him. "Birch! Come in. Come meet Layla."

"Are you sure? I don't want to bother you." He hovered in the doorway, torn between entering and retreating to protect his heart. Carly already had his heart. Seeing her sweet child would only make it worse.

"Don't be silly. I had a nap. I could use some company." Her brilliant smile faltered.

"Are you okay?" He strode in, hiding a bouquet of bright daisies behind his back. "You look sad."

She smiled but it didn't reach her eyes. "This should be the happiest day of my life and it's tainted because Little Bean's father is an idiot. No, that's not right. He's an addict and can't beat it."

"I'm sorry. How can I make it better? Will this help?" He produced the flowers with a magician's flourish.

"Oh! Thank you. They're lovely. I'll need something to put them in." She looked around as if a vase would appear out of thin air.

"I've handled that." He handed over the gift bag he had in his other hand. "Something for the flowers. Something for the baby. And something for you."

She dug in and pulled out a cut crystal vase exactly the right size for the flowers. "Oh, Birch, it's lovely. You shouldn't have." She peeked inside before pulling out a set of three pink and white sleepers and a matching knit cap. "You didn't have to do this. This is too much."

“I wanted to. I know you didn’t learn Little Bean’s, I mean Layla’s, gender before delivery. You only have neutral baby clothing according to Tanya. Now Layla has something special to wear home. Keep digging.” He waved at the bag to distract her from realizing he knew so much about her.

She pushed aside some tissue and gasped. “What?”

“For you.” He held his breath. Hopefully she didn’t think it was too much. “Every new mom deserves something special on the day they deliver. Giving birth is amazing.” If only she understood how amazing she was all the time.

She pulled the shiny gold chain from the bag and stared at the puffy heart pendant dangling from it. “Is that a diamond?” she gasped. “I hope not.”

“It is not. It’s a synthetic one, but the importance of what you’ve done is real.” It was real, but he wasn’t telling her that. “Do you want help to put it on?”

“Please.” She lifted her hair with one hand while the other arm cuddled Layla close. He stepped to the side of the bed and slipped the chain around her neck. He nearly dropped it twice when his fingers fumbled from her nearness and the sweet softness of her skin. He finally managed to get it fastened. “There you go.”

“Thank you, Birch. You’ve made today extra special.” The pendant lay low on her chest, right near her heart.

“You know what’s even more special?” he asked.

“What?” She giggled and the hairs on his arm stood up and trembled.

“I heard a rumor that any minute now, Tanya will be here with butter chicken and rice.” He grinned.

“Oh. That’s awesome. Birch, you are the greatest friend I ever had.”

“Hey, that’s Tan’s doing, not mine. But I’ll take that compliment anyhow. He hugged her praise to his heart. Someday, when she was back to a normal routine, he’d ask her out.



“DID YOU WANT TO HOLD Layla?” Carly asked uncertainly, looking up at the large man standing beside her bed. Birch was so sweet, but she’d never seen him around babies. Would he even know what to do? She was nervous but asking him felt right.

“Are you sure? I’d love to if you show me how.” His eyes lit with eagerness.

She patted the bed. “Sit here.” Careful not to strain anything, she scooted over so he’d have more room. He sat facing her, one leg bent up, the other foot planted firmly on the floor.

“Her neck is weak. You have to support it at all times. Put your arm like this.” She bent her elbow to show him how. With a deep breath, she gently placed the baby in his arms.

His huge body dwarfed the tiny bundle and he stared at her, his jaw slack, his eyes bright. He seemed awestruck. His free hand cupped Layla’s cheek. “She’s almost as beautiful as her mother,” he whispered.

“Thank you. She’s pretty special.” She didn’t want to think about Birch calling her beautiful. He was being nice. That’s all. She touched the lovely pendant he’d given her and smiled.

“Did you know Layla was my grandmother’s name?” he asked without looking up.

“I did,” she whispered past the lump in her throat. “Your family has done so much for me. You welcomed me when I moved to town six years ago. You supported me while my marriage fell apart. You moved me. You fixed my car. Thanks again for that. You’ve helped me in so many ways. I wanted to do something to show your family how much they mean to me, and to Layla.”

“We’re honored.” He cleared his throat. “Honored.”

“Thank you, Birch. For everything.” They sat staring at the baby for a long time. They were still staring when Tanya arrived with dinner.

“Okay. I have to run,” Birch blurted. He gently placed Layla back in her arms, stood and left in such a hurry he nearly knocked over his sister.

“What was he doing here?” Tanya asked. “He suggested I should get food for you. I didn’t expect him to be here.”

“He came to drop off sleepers for Layla.” She didn’t mention anything else.

“And flowers?” Tanya asked, her eyes wide.

“Yes.”

“Wow.”

“Wow, what?” Carly asked. The gesture was sweet, something a family friend might do. Why was Tanya making a big deal of it? She shifted so the

necklace slid under her loose top. No sense in letting Tanya notice that too. It felt special, like something just for her and not for sharing.

♥ Chapter Seven ♥

“I can’t believe Tanya cancelled,” Carly said as she buckled Layla’s seat into her car outside the hospital. She was excited and terrified to take her Little Bean home.

“She got a call from one of her profs about an assignment,” Birch replied. “She thought it best not to delay the virtual meeting. She sent me. I hope that’s okay.” His dark eyes filled with worry.

“It’s perfect. I’m glad you brought my car.” She gave him her best smile. “I’m really grateful you came.”

“Your car is a deathtrap, but the seat won’t fit properly in my old truck.” His truck had two bucket seats and no rear seat.

She stood and looked at him. “My car is not a deathtrap! It’s just rusty. You checked it over yourself. And guess what? I’m getting a new one. A new to me one!”

“Thank heaven for that.”

She fiddled with the buckle again wanting to be certain she had it right for Layla’s first trip. “Thanks again,” she said to cover her nervousness.

“Think nothing of it.” She went to close the door, but he stopped her and leaned into the back seat. “Let me check that,” he said. “I stopped by the firehall and had them teach me how to do it properly.”

“You did not,” she said. “You’re pulling my leg.”

“I did too. It’s important to keep our little one safe.” He checked all the belts and connections, and finally declared it safe. “Climb in, Little Mama, and I’ll take you home.”

“Little Mama?” She laughed. ‘Our’ little one? Since when was Layla his and why did him claiming her baby feel so right?

“Yup. You are little, and a mama. It makes perfect sense.” He waited for her to get in and closed her door behind her. “Do you have everything? Diaper bag? Flowers? Souvenirs?”

She laughed. “Souvenirs? From a hospital?”

“I don’t know. I’m just being thorough.” He buckled up and drove to her place. She watched him. His focus was entirely on the road. He obeyed every speed limit and traffic sign, but she suspected something was on his mind.

“What are you thinking about?” She asked when they were halfway home.

“Nothing.”

She reached out and touched his arm. “Birch, there’s something on your mind. I’d like to know what it is. Please.”

He huffed and drove on. Finally, he said, “I’m worried about you being home alone with an infant. What if something happens? What if there’s a problem?”

He was so sweet. “We’ll be fine. If there’s trouble, I’ll call the hospital. Or the police. If it’s minor, I know I can depend on you and your family. We might be physically alone, but there’s a world of friends waiting to help us.”

He grunted. “Call if you need anything.”

“I will, Birch. I promise.” She gave his arm a squeeze. Not because he needed reassurance, but because she loved the way his muscles tensed under her fingers.

“Good.” He dropped the subject and they drove in silence until he parked her car back in her stall. “I’ll bring all the other things up after I get you and Layla safely settled.” He took the baby and car seat from her and gestured for her to go ahead.

She bit back a grin. He was so worried and chivalrous, it was adorable. Upstairs, she unlocked the condo door and stepped aside so he and Layla could go ahead.

“After you. Ladies first.”

She rolled her eyes and went in. She gasped in delight. Balloons and flowers were displayed everywhere. A big welcome home banner was strung across the wall. Nobody jumped up to say surprise, but Birch’s entire family was sitting on chairs waiting for her. Hank, her boss, and his wife were there as well as two of her friends from the diner. “Surprise,” Hank said quietly.

“Welcome home.” Birch’s mother hurried up to her. “Dinner’s nearly ready. Come in. Let us take a look at that beautiful girl.”

Birch handed his mother the car seat and ushered Carly to an empty chair. “I’ll be right back with the rest of your things,” he declared and took off.

Nobody would take credit for the short, sweet party, but she suspected Tanya was the instigator. Everyone brought useful gifts like sleepers and diapers. Helen and Buck gave her a deluxe stroller. Layla got fussy and everyone, except Birch and Tanya, went home. “I’ll just go change her and I’ll be right back.”

She hurried down the hallway and burst into tears when she stepped inside the nursery. Like the living area, the nursery had morphed into

something else entirely. Cute little bunnies and kittens frolicked on pale pink walls that had been beige when she checked into the hospital. The crib sported a pink flannel sheet. The curtains were white with pink flowers, and a bookcase held a shelf of board books and stuffed animals. Below were several learning toys for infants.

She stood in the doorway crying. Layla wailed in her arms.

“What’s wrong? Is the baby okay?” Birch asked from behind her.

“How? When?” she stammered, not quite able to form a coherent question.

“While you were in the hospital. Tanya and Mom’s plan. Dad and I executed it. You can accomplish a lot in forty-eight hours if you try hard. Welcome to the family.” He patted her back awkwardly.

Fresh tears flowed.

“Are you mad?” he asked worriedly. “Do you hate it? Is it the hormones?” He sounded bewildered and terrified. He was totally endearing.

She laughed and sniffed. “It’s beautiful and so sweet. Maybe it’s the hormones too, or the high of giving birth, but thank you all. This is so perfect, and too much.”

He blushed and backed away. “I’m ... we’re glad you like it. I’ll let everyone know. Are you going to be all right?” He frowned.

“I’m fine. Never better. Really.” She sniffed again. “Thank you.”

He brushed away a tear and stepped from the room. She turned her attention to the crying baby in her arms. “Oh, Little Bean, they’re all so sweet. We are so blessed to have them in our lives.” The universe had smiled on her the day she met Tanya.

She sat in the rocking chair beside the crib, breastfeeding Layla who latched on like a pro. Voices rose in the other room. She turned her ear toward the partially closed door to hear better.

“What are you doing here?” Birch demanded.

“I came to see my wife.”

“Crap,” Carly said barely resisting the urge to swear. She burped Layla and tucked her in bed and stormed toward the living room.

“Mike, what are you doing here?” He ex swayed on his feet and blubbered, “I came to see you.” He lurched toward her. Birch stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Go home, I am not your wife.” She crossed her arms over her chest and tried to look stern. Inside her heart broke for him. She didn’t love him, but

she hurt for him all the same.

“You are too. The divorce isn’t final yet.”

She banked the urge to push him out the door. “Mike, it’s over.”

“I want to see my baby!”

“Go away. Come back sober,” Birch growled and moved closer to her.

“Do as he says. I won’t let you near the baby when you’ve been drinking.”

“Is this jerk why you left me?” Mike demanded, jabbing a fist toward Birch, and staggering forward a step.

“You asked me that months ago, Mike. I left you because you are an unpredictable alcoholic and won’t do anything about it. Birch is my friend’s brother.” Both men frowned at that statement. She cast Birch a pleading look, hoping he’d understand she meant no slight. “I left you for the baby’s sake. You can see Layla when you’re sober.”

“Come on, Mike. I’ll walk you out,” Tanya said. Surprisingly, he let her lead him from the condo.

“I don’t like that man,” Birch growled. “He’s dangerous.”

“He’s hurting. He knows his actions led to this. But I’ll keep the door locked. We’ll be fine.”

“I don’t like it.” He repeated.

“Birch. We’re good. As soon as I’m alone, I’ll lock up and not answer the door until I know who is outside. If there is trouble, I’ll call the ranch. Or the police.”

He looked belligerent, but after squinting at her for several seconds he agreed.

Eventually, everyone was gone. She locked up and rushed to the nursery and picked up Layla. Her sweet, sweet daughter, her Little Bean, slept soundly. Holding her tight, Carly dropped into the rocker and started it in motion. Not for the baby’s sake but for hers.

Today had been one hell of a ride and she was exhausted from the emotional rollercoaster. She was overtired, thirsty, and deeply touched by the actions of her friends. She rocked slowly, the rhythmic motion soothing her. Slowly, her shoulders relaxed, her head grew heavy, and she knew it was time to sleep. Reluctantly, she kissed Layla and tucked her back in.

They’d be together soon enough for another feeding. She shut out the light and staggered to her room and dropped into bed with the necklace Birch had given her held in her fist.

♥ Chapter Eight ♥

Present Day:

The late afternoon sun burned through her car window, heating the interior to an almost unbearable temperature. Still, Carly resisted getting out. She sucked in a breath. She really didn't feel like attending this engagement party. Guilt rocked her. Today she was supposed to help her best friend celebrate her upcoming nuptials, but after a hellish day, she wanted nothing more than to go home and climb into her bed.

She was done. As her grandma used to say, baked in the cake. Toast. Stick a fork in her, she was done! The day had started poorly with Layla acting up on the way to Mike's place. In typical three-year-old fashion her daughter seemed to know the worst possible times to throw a tantrum.

Over the past three years, Mike had turned his life around. Shortly after he'd showed up at her place drunk, demanding to see the baby, Mike had joined a rehab program and spent three months in a detox center. He'd stumbled once or twice in the first year, but he was clean and sober now and working hard to be a good father.

Today, he'd been great with Layla's tantrum but had brought her home late because they'd been at the park. Then Carly nearly ran out of gas because she forgot to fill up yesterday after work. She had to double back into town and fill up.

She closed her eyes and flexed and unflexed her fingers to relax her tension. Time for a mental reset. She pressed her two baby fingers together. Holding them there, she pressed her ring fingers together. Then middle, then index, and finally thumbs. She released them in the same order. She ran the sequence three times. The repetitive motion was soothing. Today was supposed to be a celebration not a tension inducing problem.

Somewhat relaxed, she stared at her best friend's parents' enormous two-story house. Six years ago, when she first met Tanya, she'd been surprised by the large house. She'd been expecting something simpler. Tanya's family, it seemed, had money to burn and Carly came from a much more modest background. Not poor, they had enough to live on, and her parents had managed a small retirement nest egg. But extras were just that. Extra. There were no yearly trips to Mexico or England. No Banff or Aspen ski trips. Her family had enough and were happy.

Tanya's family, on the other hand, travelled freely and gave generously of their wealth. Despite their financially different backgrounds, they'd become good friends.

Now, Carly lived by a simple motto; it wasn't your money or background that counted; it was who you were inside. Actions, not words, or money, were what mattered. Sometimes she still fretted over the disparity between her income and her bestie's. Tanya was amazing, down to earth, and one hundred percent trustworthy. Occasionally, Carly was even able to forget how wealthy her friends were.

Carly glanced in her rearview mirror and shifted a few strands of her hair to the right. Driving with the window partially open had been a mistake. The late spring day had been hot, the car sweltering when they got in. She hated the mechanical smell of air conditioning and had opened the window instead.

She shifted a few more hairs. Oh well, her hair wasn't perfect, but it was what it was. Nobody here cared what she looked like. Certainly not Birch. He didn't even know she was alive. She wasn't here to see him anyway. Okay, maybe she was, not that she'd ever admit it to him or anyone else.

Officially, she was here for Tanya and George's celebratory dinner, and to meet George's parents. If Birch was here, it was just a lucky coincidence. Lucky for her that is. She couldn't wait to see his handsome face, and strong, sexy body. The fact that his mere presence left her speechless and somewhat uncoordinated was irrelevant. She could ogle him all day long ... it wasn't like he'd notice.

She sighed. Notice? The infuriating man didn't even know she was alive!

Maybe tonight, during this engagement dinner, he'd finally see her. Years ago, when Layla was an infant, she'd thought he might be interested, but he kept coming close and backing away. Since her divorce was final, he had become distant. He still hung around; he just didn't initiate many conversations. Everything he did could be considered friendship, but sometimes when she looked at him, she almost swore she saw more in his eyes. But he never made a move.

As Layla grew, he kept his distance, and she was forced to conclude that everything he had done and was doing for her was simply a favor for his sister's bestie. She sighed. She wished it were different.

She turned her attention back to the present. Tanya and George would be married in just two weeks after dating for only two months. Who got married that fast after knowing each other for such a short time? Nobody she knew.

She shrugged. If her best friend was truly in love, she'd support her all the way to the altar.

She was Tanya's maid of honor. Birch was going to be the best man. That meant they'd have to dance together at some point. She shivered in anticipation before stifling her happy grin. After knowing him for six years, she'd finally get to dance with him.

"Mama, are we going inside? I'm hot."

She smiled over the seat at her daughter. Layla had perfectly straight blonde hair, like her father, but she had Carly's brown eyes. Layla had already unbuckled and was bouncing on the back seat.

"Yes, baby girl, we're going in. Are you ready? Remember, best manners. We're meeting Auntie Tanya's new family tonight."

"Why does she need a new family? She has Uncle Birch, and Grandma Helen, and Grandpa Buck, and us."

"Very true, munchkin. But sometimes people get married and get new families." She opened her door and stepped out. A soft hay-scented breeze ruffled the hair she'd just straightened. She loved this ranch.

"Did you get a new family when you married Daddy?"

She took a deep breath before opening the rear door. There were days when she wished her advanced daughter wasn't quite so smart. This was one of them. "Yes, I did."

"You and Daddy don't live together, is he still your family?" Layla's brows pinched together, and she tilted her head in question, just the way her adopted uncle, Birch, did. Carly's heart squeezed at the familiar gesture.

"Yes, he is. Not living together doesn't change that, he's still my family and your family too." She did not want to have this conversation right now. "Just like we don't live with Grandpa and Grandma Johnston but they're still our family. Remember, no matter what, no matter where we live, Daddy and I both love you the most. Forever."

"I love you more." Layla hopped out of the car and threw her arms around Carly's legs.

Carly's heart swelled. Because she left Mike before Layla was born, there was no transition to separated parents for her to deal with, she'd only known the reality of having two families. Carly was immensely grateful that Mike had sobered up and was a fabulous father to their daughter. She just wished his drinking hadn't cost them their marriage. *Yeah well, if wishes were horses...* Speaking of horses. Birch stood on the porch in clean pressed jeans

and a button-down shirt. He looked every inch the horseman. The only thing missing was his ever-present cowboy hat.

“Mama, look,” Layla squealed. “There’s Uncle Birch. On the porch.” Without waiting for permission, her daughter raced toward him. Layla loved Tanya’s family, especially the man she called Uncle Birch, and Carly completely understood the attraction.

He scooped her up and swung her in a circle. “Hey there, little princess, you look beautiful.”

She pecked him on the cheek and wiggled out of his arms. Layla was a hugger, but nobody held her for long. She swirled in a circle. “Do you like my dress?”

He looked at the airy confection that matched Carly’s outfit. “You and your mother both look beautiful.”

Heat rose in Carly’s face. Did Birch have to be so kind and handsome? He was devastating to her sanity. Never mind what he did to her libido.

“Thanks, Uncle Birch. Can I go see Grandma Helen?”

“Sure thing, munchkin.”

Layla laughed. “I don’t squeak.” She tore past him into the house, the old-fashioned wooden screen door slamming behind her.

Carly and Birch laughed at her exuberance. Carly closed both car doors and popped open the trunk of her Kia sedan. Birch immediately jogged down the steps toward her. She watched him from the corner of her eye. *Dang, he was handsome.*

“What can I carry?”

“Oh. Thanks, I just have a couple of pies. I know I wasn’t supposed to bring anything, but I can’t come to dinner without bringing something.” Her innate pride always urged her to contribute, sometimes even where it wasn’t requested or needed. She baked for every school fundraising sale. The school had asked the diner for donations once, and she’d been pitching in ever since.

“Pie? Mm. Any apple? Cherry? Maybe lemon meringue?” He asked hopefully.

“Yes, to all three.” Birch loved pie. She’d made all his favorites.

“Will you marry me, Carly Johnston?” He dropped to one knee and put his hands together in a prayer position.

Despite knowing he was joking, her heart sped up and her pulse raced. Heat flooded her cheeks. He was always goofing around and had no idea that she thought he was special.

“Don’t be a goofball. Get up and grab some pies.”

He clutched his chest. “You wound me, fair maiden. You wound me. I shall perish without your love.” He popped up like a jack-in-the-box and reached into the trunk. He scooped up one cookie sheet with two pies on it and passed it to her before grabbing the second pair of pies and gently closing the empty trunk. “Is that peach I smell?”

“It is. My grandmother’s recipe.”

“I’m drooling already.”

He waited for her to proceed him to the house and followed a few steps behind. For a fraction of a second, she almost swore she felt his gaze linger on her exposed legs.

Suddenly, she was way too hot, and not just from the weather. At thirty-five, she wasn’t a stranger to men looking at her. She knew she was pretty. But there was something about Birch’s mere presence that heated her up beyond all reason. But him looking at her, *that* way, was a crazy thought and figment of her imagination.

He joked with her like a sibling, and she knew he didn’t see her as anything beyond his annoying little sister’s best friend. It was a shame because she could really go for a guy like Birch.



BIRCH FOLLOWED CARLY up the stairs. Lord, she was exquisite with her beautiful, dark-blond waves. and long legs. He’d never get tired of looking at her. She was average height and a little on the curvy side, but dang, she had the best legs he’d seen ... ever. She was more amazing now than she was when he fell for her six years ago.

For six years he’d drooled after her, treating her like a pesky sister rather than the object of his fantasies. They had developed a sibling-like friendship. When her husband descended into drinking, she’d been devastated, but she’d stuck by Mike. He was proud of her for that. It was just a few months before Layla was born that she’d had enough and left Mike. He admired her courage for striking out on her own.

Something had shifted inside Birch when she started swelling with pregnancy. The first time he’d noticed her gently rounded tummy he felt like he’d tumbled down a cliff. He was breathless. Soon, he’d started dreaming that the baby was his.

Once Layla arrived, Carly became subdued around Birch. It was as if a wall went up between them. The joking and teasing stopped, and he'd learned to keep his distance because she seemed uncomfortable around him. Even now, two years after her divorce was final, he hadn't figured out where their mostly comfortable friendship had gone, or why it vanished. Nor had he worked up the courage to ask her out. He was terrified she might turn him down. Better to dream than to have those dreams shattered. And Lord, did he dream.

They'd reached some sort of weird impasse and she didn't seem to know Birch was alive, despite all the time he hung around his parents' house when he should have been out working his horses.

She drew him like flowers drew a bee.

"These pies smell delicious," he broke the long silence between them before it became even more uncomfortable.

"Thanks. I love baking. I hate cooking, but I love making sweets."

"And I'm eternally grateful that you do. I can't wait to dig in." He reached around her and opened the screen door. "In you go." He inhaled her fresh lemony-vanilla scent and arousal washed over him. Being near her was torture and bliss. "I'd marry you for your apple pies alone."

She looked at him over her shoulder, something unidentifiable danced in her eyes.

His two younger brothers greeted them with excitement, probably more for the pies than anything else. Carly hugged Tanya, making Birch jealous of their closeness. She should be hugging him, not his sister.

"Carly, let me introduce you around." She tugged Carly forward. "This is Mr. and Mrs. Romero, George's parents."

Birch stifled a frown at their superior smiles. They stared at Carly like she was beneath them and lacking somehow. They were snobs through and through and their son was no better. Frankly, he couldn't see why his sister was attracted to her fiancé. He was stuffy and condescending. Perhaps she was blinded by his good looks. Birch adored his sister, and based on his first impressions, she deserved better than these pompous people.

♥ Chapter Nine ♥

Carly plastered a smile on her face and greeted George's family. The man was wearing a freaking Armani suit, on a working ranch. And his mother's shoes? Carly had admired them online but their two-thousand-dollar price tag was way out of her budget. She wasn't poor, but she didn't have money to waste on high-end shoes. Those shoes cost more than she'd spent on her entire living room suite when she left Mike.

Maybe she was jealous of their money, and they would turn out to be perfectly lovely people.

"Aren't you putting the young one to bed before we eat?" Mrs. Romero asked haughtily as they headed to the dining room.

"It's barely six. Why would I do that?" Carly held back a glare and bit her tongue so hard she tasted blood.

"Children don't eat with adults," Mrs. Romero snapped as if Carly was too stupid to understand.

"Well, they do here," Birch declared before his mother could answer. "Come on, munchkin, sit beside me." He patted the seat between him and the toxic woman.

"Oh, she can sit with me, over here," Carly corrected. No way did she want to risk Layla spilling something on that outfit. The cleaning bill would be a fortune.

Layla hopped up and hugged Birch. She sat right down and in seconds, everyone was seated. The food was amazing, though the three Romeros were the only people Carly had ever seen eat barbecue ribs with a knife and fork. Layla had sauce spread all over her face and arms as she dug into the tasty food. Three-year-olds, even ones as advanced as Layla, could be messy.

"Oh, Tanya," Mrs. Romero said casually as if she'd just thought of something brilliant. "George junior's cousin has agreed to be your maid of honor, and his three other cousins will be the groomsmen."

"I beg your pardon. Carly is my maid of honor," Tanya corrected her future mother-in-law. "I asked her the day after George proposed. She already has her dress and shoes. Birch is our best man. We don't plan to have any other attendants. I'm sure you understand."

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible. His cousin is flying in from Paris, just for the wedding. She has lovely brown hair that will look magnificent

alongside you. We can't change things now."

Carly clenched her hands into fists to keep from speaking up on Tanya's behalf. *Couldn't change things now? Wasn't that exactly what she was doing? Hypocrite.*

"Come on, Tanya, it'll be okay," George junior whined. "Carly doesn't mind, do you?" He pinned Carly with a cold stare that defied her to disagree.

"I just want Tanya's wedding to be perfect, so whatever she decides is fine with me." Her stomach rebelled at the lie. She did want Tanya to have the best wedding ever, but she wasn't sure Tanya wanted this new plan.

Besides, not being in the wedding party would ruin her plans to steal a dance with Birch. But she couldn't speak up and make things hard for her best friend.

"And am I to step aside too?" Birch asked coldly. His brows pinched together.

"That was before. This is now." Mrs. Romero lifted a perfectly sculpted brow. "Things change. You will be stepping aside. We've made alternate plans for attendants. We've booked the country club, hired a string quartet, and ensured we have the best caterers in the province. Everything will be perfect. The bridesmaids will wear periwinkle. The flowers shall be white and cream roses."

"Tanya wants sunflowers," Carly blurted. She looked down at her lap, a bit embarrassed by her lack of control. Beside her, Tanya's hands were twisted together in a white-knuckle grip. Carly's heart wept for Tanya's broken dreams. She reached out and squeezed her friend's hands in a show of support.

"Roses will be much better," Mrs. Romero declared. "Very elegant and classy."

"And what about Tanya's wishes?" Carly slapped her hand on the table making the plates rattle. The Romero family jerked back in shock. Birch smiled and winked at her. "Tanya is half of this wedding, the best half, in my opinion. Don't her wishes count?"

"It's fine." Tanya said quietly. "I just love George and want to be married so we can start a family. Anything is good." She clutched Carly's hand like she was urging her to be quiet.

Her best friend was lying. She shouldn't have to settle on her wedding day. Where was her fiancé in all this? He just sat beside his mother with his eyes downcast and his flat lips pressed shut. The man was a jerk and a wimp.

“I think I need a quick breath of air,” Tanya said, gracefully rising from the table.

“I’ll go with you.” Carly paused beside the table. “Birch, can you watch Layla for me? I’ll just be a moment.”

“Certainly. The munchkin and I will be fine. Won’t we?” He smiled down at Layla.

“Bye, Mama.”

On the deck, she kicked out of her wedge sandals and chased Tanya across the lawn. She caught up with her beside the swimming hole in the creek on the far side of the large yard.

“Are you okay?” She hugged Tanya close and rubbed her back.

Tanya sniffed. “I’m okay. I just want this wedding over and done with so George and I can start a family together.”

That was twice in five minutes that she mentioned having a family. Only once did she proclaim her love for George, and Carly didn’t believe her. Nobody should wish their wedding was over. It was supposed to be the best day of a bride’s life. Carly kept the thoughts to herself and comforted her friend. “Your life together will be amazing. Just two weeks and you’ll be on your honeymoon. Just think of it, a Paris honeymoon. It’ll be amazing.” She squeezed her friend tight.

“Your wedding will be wonderful and if that old witch wants to foot the bill for roses, let her. We can visit Marcy’s and get her to make you some lovely sunflower print lingerie for your honeymoon. She’d do it in an instant. She’s actually got some sunflower print silk.” Marcy owned a small custom lingerie shop at the far end of main street. Marcy’s Magic was a small but growing business. “We can go after our shift tomorrow. Layla will love it.”

Carly knew mentioning Layla would be a pleasant distraction to her friend because, like Birch, Tanya doted on Layla and treated her like a daughter.

“Am I doing the right thing? Marrying George?” she grasped Carly’s hands and squeezed until Carly winced.

“I can’t answer that. Only you can. Do what makes your heart happy. If marrying George makes you happy, go for it. Don’t let his mother ruin your future.” She wanted to scream at Tanya, tell her not to marry George. At least not so soon. She didn’t understand his rush. He proposed so fast, too fast. Maybe it was love at first sight, but she doubted it. It felt like George had an ulterior motive. And Tanya’s sudden dive into love was so unlike her. She

was much more cautious and usually considered things thoroughly before making a decision.

“This is your life,” she said. “If you love George, marry him. Just be certain this is what you want. I’ll support you whatever you decide.” She played with her necklace as they sat side by side on the wooden-slat bench which had been alongside the creek for as long as Carly had been visiting the ranch. She didn’t say anything else, she just held Tanya’s hand and provided quiet comfort.

After ten minutes, Tanya sniffed. “I’m so sorry you can’t be part of my wedding. Do you still love me?” She gave a watery smile.

“Girl, you are my best friend, whether I’m in your wedding party or not. I just want you to be happy.” It was the truth. She bit back her doubts about Tanya’s choice of spouse. She had never cared for George. “Are you ready to go back? I need to check on Layla.” She dug into the pocket of the floaty dress she’d sewn and handed Tanya a tissue.

“Birch has her, she’s fine.” Tanya blew her nose and straightened her spine but didn’t get up from the bench. “Let’s just sit for another minute.” She leaned her head against Carly’s shoulder and sighed.



BIRCH BANKED THE URGE to speak his mind. He wasn’t a big fan of his sister’s fiancé and meeting his parents had doubled his dislike. Who let their parents walk on them like that? Familial respect was one thing, total disregard for a family member’s wishes was another thing altogether. Thankfully, open discussion had always been important to his family.

“How are you doing, kiddo?” he asked Layla and wondered if Carly had managed to calm his sister. Not that she didn’t have every right to be furious.

“I’m thirsty.” Layla reached for her milk which was just a little out of her reach. She lifted up onto her knees and wobbled. Her elbow bumped Mrs. Romero’s wine glass. It wiggled and Layla made a grab for it.

He watched in what seemed like slow motion as the red wine sloshed to the top and over as the glass tipped ... right into the old bat’s lap, making her cuss aloud.

Layla let out a howl and started to cry. Birch scooped her up. “No harm done. It was an accident.” He pushed back from the table, Layla in his arms.

“No harm done?” the old battle axe roared. “My dress is ruined. That child is ... is ... she’s a menace. I told you children don’t belong at the table.”

“Wrong,” Birch snapped out. “Children do belong at the table. Layla is family. People with no tolerance or understanding of children don’t belong at this table.” He took a step backward. “Mom, Dad, I’m taking Layla outside to play. We’ll be back in for dessert.”

“No worries, dear. We’ll bring dessert to you.” His mom rushed to Mrs. Romero’s side to help clean up the wine. From the pinched expression on his mother’s face, he suspected she was more worried about the area rug under the table than the wine on their guest’s expensive dress. Later, his mother would reprimand him for being rude to her guests, but he didn’t care.

Out on the back deck, he set Layla down and tried to calm himself. The woman was a witch. Her husband hadn’t said two words, instead he’d bowed to his wife’s control. As for George junior, he was even more insipid than he had seemed before this disastrous dinner. How could he let his mother take over their wedding like that?

Birch might not know much about courting women, but he knew that a wedding was supposed to be perfect for a bride. It was about her wants and needs, not image or power. No doubt there would be a hundred influential people attending what had originally been planned as an intimate family affair.

“Am I in trouble?” Layla’s voice quivered. “I didn’t get to eat my spare-gus.”

Birch bit back a laugh. Asparagus was one of the few words this talking dynamo couldn’t say. How a three-year-old had developed such an amazing vocabulary he didn’t know, but it was adorable. “No, Little Bean, you aren’t in trouble. You sit here on the swing, and I’ll sneak into the kitchen and grab us both some spare-gus. I know Grandma Helen cooked lots.”

Instantly, her tears dried up. She climbed onto the padded porch swing and sat with her legs straight out, hands folded in her lap. Obviously, she was trying to show she was on her best behavior. He was in and out of the house in seconds with a heaping plate of asparagus and a fork.

He handed her the plate and fork before he snatched a piece and bit the end off.

“Oh, you’re supposed to use a fork,” she chided, sounding a bit awed.

“To heck with that. Let’s use our fingers.”

Her laugh filled him with joy. Gosh, he loved this girl. She was as amazing as her mother who completely ignored him. “Eat with your fingers, I won’t tell anyone. Just don’t wipe them on that pretty dress.”

She stared at him wide-eyed. “Can I?” she gasped.

“Yup.” He finished his first piece and snagged a second. “Quick, eat up before someone catches us.” Laughing together, they ate the entire plate. He could have eaten more as he had barely managed to eat any of his dinner. The asparagus would hold him until later. For certain there would be leftovers, even with his two ravenous younger brothers at the table. His mother always cooked with leftovers for their lunches in mind.

“Can I play in the park?” Last summer, when Layla was just two, he’d helped his parents put in a large play structure. It had a climbing wall, swings, a slide, monkey bars, and the works. Since her divorce, Carly had been spending a lot of time at the ranch with Tanya. Layla often got bored. He and his father came up with the idea for the play structure. His mother had quipped, “Besides, maybe it will inspire my own children to start giving me more grandbabies.”

“How about we head down to the creek? We’ll leave our shoes here in case we want to get our feet wet. I think your mom is down there.” Tanya always went to the bench when she needed to think and he wanted to check on her, but he also wanted to see more of Carly in her lovely dress. He was certain she’d created the matching outfits herself. Sewing was just one of her many talents.

“Okay.” She kicked off her shoes and socks and was halfway across the lawn before he had one shoe off.

“Hold up. You’re too fast for me.” He ditched his footwear, and with a growl chased her toward the creek.

Screaming in delight, she fled.

“Hi,” Carly greeted them when they reached the creek. “Did we miss the rest of dinner?”

“No, there was an accident,” Birch said. “Entirely my fault. I put Layla’s milk too far out of her reach, and she accidentally spilled red wine on Mrs. Romero’s dress.”

“Oh no!”

“I’m sorry, Mama.” Layla’s lip trembled.

He knelt in front of Layla who had climbed onto Carly’s lap and buried her head in her mother’s shoulder. “Not your fault. Completely my fault. I’m

not a mommy and I didn't know to put your glass closer. Besides, her glass was in your way. You did not do anything wrong." Layla perked right up.

He smiled at Carly over Layla's head. She mouthed, "Thank you."

"Mom's serving us dessert on the deck later, perhaps you ladies would like to join us," he suggested, trying to keep his desire to be with Carly hidden.

"No," Tanya sighed. "I have to go back inside and face the music. I mean, finish my dinner. You guys hide out. I'll join you when the Romeros have gone home."

"I'll go in with you," Carly said. "If Birch doesn't mind watching Layla a bit longer."

Her hopeful smile stole his breath.

"Anything for you, Carly. Anything at all. Layla and I will be fine. Does she have play clothes? It would be a shame to get her dress dirty. We're lucky it's stayed clean so far."

"There's a bag in the back seat. Thanks, Birch. I appreciate this." She placed a hand on his arm. The warmth of her touch jolted his heart and soul. He sucked in a breath and was assaulted by her light scent. He'd never be able to smell lemon or vanilla without thinking of her. Oh, who was he kidding? He'd had that problem since the day he met her. He'd been hooked from first sight, and that hadn't changed despite learning she was married. Or through her pregnancy and divorce. Something about her soothed his soul.

It took everything he had to stay away. At one point, he'd considered taking a job at a ranch outside of town, just to keep his distance. He would have, except for the ranch and the horses his grandfather was raising with him. Instead, he buried himself in his ranch and building his house. Before his death last year, his grandfather's last words had been to tell Birch to stop being a coward and to pursue Carly.

He was working on it. He didn't want to rush her.

He silenced the voice in the back of his head that said she'd been divorced long enough to be ready for a new relationship. The time to act was now. Before someone else snatched her up.

Carly walked between Tanya and Layla holding their hands as they walked back. He grasped Layla's other hand in his and, for a moment, it felt like they were a real family and his heart smiled.

♥ Chapter Ten ♥

Tanya's Wedding Day:

Carly looked around the small, confined room and did a mental head count. Yup. All fourteen kids were still here. The question was, where was the help she was promised? Barely discernible over the shrill excitement of toddlers at a wedding, she could hear the revelers in the hall above them. She puffed out a breath, blowing away a clump of hair that a rambunctious kid had yanked out of her once artfully piled hair.

Today was Tanya's wedding. It was a celebration. With Mrs. Romero in charge, the wedding plans had spiraled out of control. The intimate family gathering had morphed into an enormous celebration. There were even reporters from the society section there. She hoped the ceremony had been lovely for Tanya and George. For Carly, it was hell on earth, just like the youngsters around her.

Many of the kids hadn't seen the bride and groom yet and were chomping at the bit to do so. The ceremony, no children allowed, was over; the happy couple and wedding party had left for photographs. Carly had been lucky to see the ceremony on the country club's in-house streaming system. It had been set up for the elders and guests who didn't want to sit in the sun outside the gazebo where the ceremony was held.

A gazebo wedding at a country club. Wow. Never in her life had she expected to be in such a luxurious space. Even the basement was a step above any rental facility she'd ever been in.

With the bridal party off for photos, many guests were enjoying a glass of wine upstairs, while others retreated to the golf course for a few quick holes, courtesy of the groom's father. It was the strangest wedding she'd ever nearly attended. Who played golf during a wedding?

While the other adults were occupied, Carly was left holding the bag. The babysitting bag.

Minutes before the ceremony started, George came to Carly saying Tanya needed Carly to help out. So here she was. In a very expensive dress and killer heels ... supervising rugrats. Her three promised teenage assistants hadn't shown up. The impromptu daycare was supposed to be short-term only, but most of the children had been dropped off early. Nearly two hours

after the ceremony ended, many of them were still here. There'd been a few come and go, but almost too few to mention.

The string quartet stuck up a flourishing tune, and the revelers upstairs broke into applause. Clearly the wedding party had returned. Still, no parents came to retrieve their little darlings. It was getting ridiculous. Helping out a friend was one thing, being blatantly taken advantage of for hours on end was too much to tolerate. Demoted from bridesmaid to abandoned daycare worker. It rankled. More than a little

She puffed out another breath. It was Tanya's day, and as her best friend, Carly would do everything in her power to make it the best day she could. Even if that meant she missed the ceremony, and the arrival of the bride and groom at the reception. They hadn't bothered to stream that portion of the event. Really, she was lucky to have seen the ceremony. Now she could look forward to dinner and dancing. Maybe even with Birch. First, though someone had to come get these kids.

Tiny hands tugged at her dress. "Lady? Lady? I gots to go pee."

Carly looked down at the adorable preschooler at her feet. "Okay, princess. Come with me." Hand in hand, she walked the minuscule blonde in her Disney princess costume to the adjoining bathroom. Thankfully, she could help this little tyke without losing track of the rest. It was obvious that no reinforcements were coming. Finished, she helped her young charge wash the glue from her hands.

Glue? Egads!

She looked down in dismay at the hem of the dress she'd spent most of her savings on. The dress Tanya had wanted her to have. The once lovely dress was ruined. She had two perfect handprints of pink and purple glitter glue adorning her hemline. She had handprints on her arms too, where the youngster had grabbed Carly when teetering on the toilet.

She sighed and bit back half a dozen choice words as she wiped down her arms.

The sound of wheels rolling across the floor and rattling dishes heralded the enticing smell of food. Fabulous, she was starving.

"Ma'am," a young dark-haired girl greeted her. "Mrs. Romero, the old one, don't tell her I called her that, said to bring food down to the children. She doesn't want them to interrupt the festivities." The girl mimicked George's snobbish mother to perfection then clapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to ..." She blushed beet red.

“It’s okay, I’m familiar with Mrs. Romero. Aren’t the children to eat upstairs?” she asked though she already knew Mrs. Romero’s opinion on children at the dinner table.

“No, Ma’am. They’re to remain downstairs until the end of the traditional first dance.”

“And who, exactly is going to care for the little monsters?” Carly snapped.

“Um? You?” The teenage member of the catering staff offered apologetically.

Carly scrunched her face up and pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to remain calm. Finally, she sighed. It wasn’t this girl’s fault that Carly had let her very generous nature let her be taken advantage of. She should have refused George to start with.

“Sorry, this isn’t your fault. I shouldn’t have barked at you. Can you please help me get them settled?” Quickly, they had all fourteen kids seated and busy eating, or spilling their meals. “Go back upstairs,” Carly advised. “Before she notices that you’re missing. She’s likely to get you fired.”

“I can’t just leave you with all these kids...”

“Go. Now. Before I change my mind.” She herded her helper toward the door, regretting the action even as she did so. Still, she wouldn’t stand by and watch someone get in trouble for trying to help. She was so glad she’d left Layla with Mike instead of bringing her to the wedding. Layla was disappointed but agreed after being promised her own picture of the bride and groom.

Excited shrieking and the shattering sound of breaking dishes exploded around her. Steeling her spine, she turned back toward her charges and started dealing with the disaster. Eventually, everyone was fed, in a fashion, and the mess cleaned up. There was nothing she could do about the gravy and juice stains on their clothing and the carpet.

The band struck up a waltz, someone announced the first dance between the bride and groom. The first dance faded into nothing, and several parents collected their children. The second, the father-bridal dance, started and ended. And still, Carly was stuck downstairs with two rambunctious children she was certain belonged to George’s cousins. Her frustration mounted. Enough was enough. She was thirsty, starving, and feeling been put upon, after babysitting, for five hours. She was done. Kaput. Finished with a capital to-hell-with-this.

Grasping the last two children by the hand, she led them upstairs and after confirming who they belonged to returned them to their parents.

“But aren’t you supposed to watch them all night?” their mother asked.

“No, I am a guest at this wedding,” Carly said, struggling for calm.

“Well, you’re certainly not getting a tip. You’re quite the rude upstart.” The woman snapped, gathering her hellions to her as if fearing for their safety.

“Lady, you can take your tip and,” Carly paused. She would not stoop to this woman’s level. “Have a lovely evening. Enjoy the reception.”

Cutting around the edge of the brimming hall, Carly noticed the designer gowns and custom-tailored suits. She hurried past the bar, snagging an open bottle of white wine, and headed into the kitchen. The caterers were busy cleaning up the dishes. “Is there anything left to eat?” she asked a passing waiter.

He looked at her like she was insane. “Not until the midnight luncheon,” he grumbled.

It figured. They hadn’t even saved her anything to eat. Annoyed, no infuriated, she passed through the kitchen and out onto the covered deck surrounding the luxurious facility.

Rain poured down in buckets. It was dumping epically, like Mother Nature had opened the heavens and was pouring down tears for every hurt she’d ever experienced. Carly sighed deeply. No solace in the peace and quiet of the picnic area just across the greenspace. She’d be a drowned rat before she could get there in this monsoon.

She wanted to go home. This night couldn’t end quickly enough, but she wanted to see her best friend dance with her new husband. She wanted to share Tanya’s joy. She’d go back inside after she bled off some anger.

Kicking off her shoes, she scooped them up and stomped to the end of the covered deck and around the corner in search of a chair. She circled the entire building.

Nothing. You’d think a country club would have deck chairs. But nope, at least not this fancy, schmanzy one.

“Great. Just freaking great.” She flopped backwards and slid down the wall into a heap on the floor. She guzzled wine straight from the bottle, her expensive, sparkling silver heels abandoned beside her like a ninety-nine cent pair of flipflops. She thumped the back of her head against the wall. What a disaster this day was turning out to be. As days went, it was the worst in a

long time. As weddings went, it set a new low; one she'd never have thought attainable.

"Crap." She guzzled more wine. "I should have grabbed two bottles." She glanced down at the expensive label. Yup. At least two, maybe three. Preferably unopened. She couldn't afford wine this expensive. Ever. She should have stolen a couple to make up for the torture she'd endured as babysitter.

"As if," she snorted at her own silliness. She'd never steal anything from anyone. Well, except this bottle and that didn't count because she was a guest, even if she was unappreciated. Still, she felt guilty about taking it.

Footsteps sounded on the deck. Unmistakably cowboy boots. She knew that gait without looking. She'd been listening to it for six years. Her body sprang to life.

Great. Just what she needed to top it all off. Birch. Probably coming to find out why she wasn't enjoying the festivities, and to drag her back into hell. Maybe if she ignored him, he'd just pass by. She closed her eyes and willed him away, wishing her foolish heart didn't want to drink in every ounce of his perfection. He stopped right in front of her. Yup, the day just continued to slide downhill like an avalanche of horse manure. Already mired in hurt feelings, her heart didn't need to deal with the man who treated her like an annoying sibling.

"Carly, open your eyes," he said softly. "I'm not going away."

She peeked one eye open. He hunkered down in front of her on one knee, resplendent and masculine in his tuxedo and white Stetson. He held out an enormous salad. The combination might just be the most perfect thing she'd ever seen. A sexy man with food!

Tears brimmed in her eyes. Dammit. She wouldn't cry just because he'd brought her something to eat.

"Are you drunk?" he asked quietly.

She glanced at the half empty wine bottle. Okay, maybe she was drunk. Apparently, wine hits hard when you guzzle it on an empty stomach. She hiccupped.

She stared at the deck and shook her head. If she started talking, she'd lose it and start crying. She bit her lip and clenched her hands to hold herself in check.

"Come on, Carly, put down the wine and have a bite or two to eat. The kitchen staff told me you asked for food. Did you miss the meal?"

He reached out and extracted the wine from her grip and replaced it with the plate of salad and chopped chicken. A tasty looking dinner roll topped the pile. He produced a napkin and silverware from his pocket and handed her those before sitting down beside her.

The heat of his body, just inches away, warmed her cold shoulder.

“Bad day?” he asked mildly.

She greedily chowed down the lavishly buttered roll before answering. “Not my best day, no.” Man, the bun was delicious. She could eat ten of them.

“I didn’t see you at the ceremony,” he offered. “Did you make it? I wouldn’t have thought you’d miss your best friend’s wedding.”

“I was there four hours before the wedding. Checking the dress, doing the hair and makeup of the entire wedding party who didn’t want to pay someone to do it, unlike Tanya and I who paid through the nose.” Another expense she could barely afford. Tanya had offered to pay, but pride made Carly refuse to let Tanya cover it. The plan was to get formal pictures taken together. Pictures to replace nonexistent ones of her in the wedding party.

“Somehow,” she said, “I got roped in babysitting. I only saw the ceremony through the video streaming.” She barked out a sad laugh.

“You had a spot reserved up front,” he said, though it sounded more like a question than a denial.

“I thought so, but an usher, on the Romero side, informed me that I was needed downstairs.” Her voice was hard and bitter, and for the first time in her life, she didn’t care if she hurt another person’s feelings.

“George met me downstairs and asked me to fill in, just until the girls he’d hired as babysitters could show up. I’d still be there if I hadn’t dragged the last two Romero hellions upstairs to their parents.”

“Seriously? Tanya will have a fit when she finds out.”

“Yup,” she sighed and dug into the delicious greens.

“You missed the pictures, and the first dances?” He asked like he couldn’t fathom why. “That’s not like you.”

“It’s not like I could abandon a bunch of little kids. I’m done. I just want this day to be over. I’m going to drink my wine, call a cab and go home. Daycare duty knocked all the life out of me.” *Yeah, like a prize-winning boxer’s punch.*

“You provided daycare?”

“I do have a daughter. I am capable,” she snapped. She’d never been angry with him before. Since she’d divorced Mike, she was hyper aware of Birch. If she didn’t focus on thinking of him as a sibling-like friend, her brain short-circuited and made her ramble or stammer for the right words. Today, she didn’t give a crap what he thought about her.

“I know that. You’re an excellent mother. I just don’t understand how you would get stuck babysitting. That’s all.” He genuinely sounded perplexed. The corners of his mouth turned down.

“You doubt me? Just look at my dress.” She waved expansively at the multi-colored glitter and fruit punch decorating her once beautiful gown. “It’s ruined. I spent a fortune on this dress. The one Tanya wanted me to have, and don’t even get me started on the freaking shoes. Not only are they grossly uncomfortable, but they also cost me a car payment. I can’t afford that shit. But I did it, because Tanya asked me to, to make her wedding perfect. I spent the money with no complaints. I was happy to. And then the plans were changed.” She sighed. “The dress is ruined, the shoes were on sale, so I can’t even return them...”

Tears threatened to fall again, so she redoubled her attack on the much-needed sustenance he’d brought her. Shoveling food in also stopped her from flinging herself into his arms for comfort.

♥ Chapter Eleven ♥

Birch stared down at Carly. She gobbled up the food like she hadn't eaten all day, and she most likely hadn't, her sunshine waves were half pulled out of what must have once been an extremely sexy do. Her dress was ruined, and her make-up was smudged or wiped right off, except the mascara streaming down her cheeks. He couldn't see those perfect chocolate brown eyes in the near-dark, but he knew they'd be shining with emotion and darkened by hurt feelings. She had the most emotional, expressive eyes he'd ever seen.

Damn, she was lovely. She was a hot mess and so perfectly adorable that he wanted to scoop her up and hug her distress away.

Why did he find it so hard to talk to her like a woman? If he played brother or jokester, he could talk to her for hours. The rest of the time he felt inept and awkward around her. Sure, they talked a bit here and there, but real meaningful conversations simply didn't happen. They chatted, and were friendly, but conversations didn't go beyond the surface. It was as if she was holding herself back from him. And because she was distancing herself, he found he did too, despite what his heart wanted.

This whole wedding situation was horse droppings. His fists clenched at his sides. She was his sister's best friend and she'd been all but excluded from the wedding. It was a deliberate shot by a manipulating jerk. Tanya wasn't responsible for this; the last time he'd seen his sister, she'd been frantic to learn why Carly had disappeared and why she hadn't shown up for pictures. Two minutes later, he saw Carly stomping into the kitchen, bottle of wine in hand.

He told Tanya that he'd make sure everything was okay. Well, big failure on that part. Carly's day was wrecked, likely beyond redemption. He sure wasn't going to relate that to Tanya. At least not yet. He was angry, Carly was a disaster, but he wouldn't ruin his sister's wedding. He'd tell her later.

Carly's snuffle broke his heart.

Screw this nonsense.

"Want to get out of here?" he asked.

"I'm going home, as soon as I finish this food, and my wine," she decreed.

“Skip the salad. It’s probably limp anyway, and I know someplace where we can get something better,” he offered, knowing she was likely to refuse.

“Do I need shoes?”

The question startled a laugh out of him. That was his girl, tough as nails and always surprising. “No shoes required. I promise. I can even rustle up something less formal to wear. What do you say? Run away with me?” He held out his hand.

She stared up at him, studying him, a quizzical look in her eyes. Several expressions marched across her face. Finally, she smiled shyly and nodded. “What the heck? Take me away, Prince Charming.”

As she placed her hand in his, lightning shot up his arm. Damn, she always had that effect. A simple brush of her fingers had the power to render him breathless and speechless. He swallowed hard.

“Wait here, I have to tell Tanya you’re okay. Then, we’re gone.” Reluctantly, he released her hand.

“Wait,” she called when he rose. “Don’t tell her about this. She doesn’t need to know.”

He nodded and hurried inside. How perfectly Carly to do the right thing for someone else, even while her own day was in shambles. How many women would have refused to babysit, and how many would protect their friend’s wedding daydream that way? None, that’s how many.

He told Tanya that Carly was overtired and that he was running her home. After reassuring Tanya that all was well, he grabbed a few things and was back outside in under five minutes. “Hang tight, I’ll get my truck.”

“You can’t drive up here,” she blurted. The building was surrounded by plush lawns, and bright colorful gardens.

“For you, darlin’, I can do whatever the hell I want.” He sprinted through the rain and into his new four-by-four. He drove it up over the sidewalk, across the grass and halted beside the deck, flinging the door open so she could climb in. She hurried down the steps. Raindrops pelted her already ruined dress. Hiking her cocktail dress high, she showed him entirely too much thigh as she carelessly tossed her shoes on the floor and leaped in.

“Oh my gosh! I can’t believe you did that.” She laughed. “They’ll have a bird when they see the tracks in the morning.” She peered through the back window at the parallel strips of destroyed grass where he’d skidded to a halt.

“Tough manure.” He declared and rolled forward. “They won’t like it when they discover that I stole an entire cheesecake and two bottles of wine

either. Hang on, here's the curb." He eased down over the ledge and drove off as soon as she had her seatbelt on. Now if he could keep his eyes on the road and off the sexy expanse of leg she was showing, they'd be great.

"You stole wine?" she blurted. "The Birch Brighton I know would never steal anything."

"Okay, borrowed, if you insist. Although if we had stayed at the reception, nobody would have batted an eyelash if we drank six bottles, so technically, it doesn't matter."

"You're skipping out on your sister's wedding? She's okay with that?"

"She's on the top of the world, except worrying about you. I told her you'll be fine, so stop fretting about my sister," he admonished gently. Carly's heart was too big. She worried too much about everyone else and not nearly enough about herself. That was an enormous part of her charm. Her sexy body, glorious hair, intelligence, and fabulous parenting skills didn't hurt either. She really was the whole shebang. All that and a bag of chips, as his father would say.

"What did Tanya say?" Carly worried.

"I told Tan that you were in the back during the ceremony and got distracted during dinner. I said I was taking you home because you're overtired." He paused. "I'll tell her what that asshole husband of hers did later. I can't believe she married him, but it was her choice. No sense ruining her honeymoon. I'll let her enjoy her day and come down on both of them later."

"No! Let it go. It's okay. I'm okay." She reached out and clutched his arm, her fingers were cold, even through his tux and shirt. Damn! She was killing him. Sometimes her tendency to be soft-hearted and generous infuriated him. He wanted to shake her and tell her to think of herself for a change. She'd spent years dealing with her ex's drinking and encouraging him to do better. Then, she focused everything on her child. Reasonable, but she left little for herself. The spare time and energy she had left was often diverted to charity events and helping others, which was good, except when she burned herself out.

"Forget Tanya and George for now. Let's go someplace where the food is good, and the shoes don't matter." He flashed his best rogue grin and turned onto the highway.

"We're going to the ranch?" He caught her puzzled look from the corner of his eye.

“Yes and no,” he replied. “There’s something I want to show you. I promise it’ll be warm and dry, and I can find you something less glittery to wear.” He chuckled lightly.

God, this was such a risk. Nobody outside his immediate family had ever been inside the house he had spent six years building on the section of land adjacent to his family’s ranch, and he was dragging her out to see it while she was half drunk and out of sorts.

She was his baby sister’s best friend, and he knew so much about her. He’d fallen for her on sight, but she didn’t know him at all. He didn’t see her as often as he wanted. He’d spent years pining for her, and waiting until she was ready, somewhere along the way he lost his nerve and had never worked up the courage to ask her out, and now he was going to show her his new home. He was an idiot. Nothing like skipping all the middle steps of courtship.

Bringing her here was like baring his soul. He’d been working on the house in his spare time for years, and now, it was almost finished. When you did the work by yourself, or with a few friends, building a large house took time. He was in the home stretch, pardon the pun. A bit of interior painting and some landscaping was all that remained. He wanted her help with that, but it was ridiculously premature to ask her opinion before asking her out.

“Where’s Layla?” he asked, more to divert his own thoughts than anything.

“With Mike. They’re having a sleepover.” Her laugh tinkled like bells. “That kid does love sleepovers. She wanted to come to the wedding. But I had too much to do and would have neglected her. Mike will keep her busy, they’ll have a blast.”

“He’s a good father?” He already knew the answer, but wanted to keep this conversation going, it was the deepest and most personal they’d gotten in an eternity.

“Surprisingly, yes. Our marriage was great to start, but at the end, Mike was hell to live with. Now, as a father, there’s none better. He even cancelled a date to watch Layla. He didn’t have to do that.”

“I’m glad, for all of you.”

“Mike’s been dry for the better part of two years. I trust him with Layla. He’s returned to the man he used to be before the booze. He goes to meetings three times a week. They keep him strong.” She frowned, then smiled. “I’m

thankful that he straightened out. I don't want him back, but I don't begrudge him time with our daughter."

"You're a big-hearted woman," he said.

"What am I, a country song?"

Her laugh rang off the small confines of the truck, sending arousal racing up his spine. She must be drunk, or close to it, to be so easygoing around him. He'd watched her with Tanya, open and carefree, but around him, she froze up like a water trough in a blizzard. She hadn't been shy when they met, but after her divorce, she'd changed. She'd distanced herself and he didn't know why.

"If you mean beautiful, kind, and enticing, yes, you are a country music song." He glanced over at her. She blushed bright pink, from the low V of her dress to the tips of her ears. He wondered just how low that blush went. He pushed the thought aside. Carly wasn't some casual date or hookup. She was a wonderful person, and he was determined to finally get to know everything about her. He felt guilty that her horrible day had opened the opportunity for him to do so.

"Hey, wasn't that the driveway to the ranch?" she asked, pointing to the small road they'd just passed.

"It is."

"I thought that was where we were going." The bright moon revealed the confused frown on her sweet face.

"We are, but we're going to my ranch, not the family ranch." He couldn't keep pride from ringing in his voice.

"You have a ranch? Are you kidding me? How did I not know this?"

"The section next door came up for sale seven years ago. Dad didn't want it, so Grampa and I snatched it up and built a barn on it. I've added a house." He slowed and turned up a gravel drive. They drove under an enormous wrought iron sign declaring they had arrived at the Triple Z Ranch.

"Wow. Impressive." She turned her head to look at the sign. "Did that come with the place?"

"No. I had it made for me. I want my clients to be impressed."

"Clients?" He loved the eagerness in her voice, like she wanted to know more about him.

"Clients. I breed, raise, and train horses. Everything from casual rides to racehorses. I've been doing it since I was a teenager. I mentored under my grandfather. We had a partnership. Our horses are getting very popular and

winning races all over the world. When he passed, I inherited the horses and his share of the land. I was very lucky to turn that inheritance into a thriving business.”

“That’s incredible.”

“Thank you. I’ve worked hard and I’m proud of what I’ve accomplished.” They rounded the final turn and his house popped into view. Yes, he was definitely proud of himself, with good reason. He’d built that house himself. He’d worked under the guidance of his grandfather and a contractor, doing most of the work himself. He couldn’t wait to see if she loved it as much as he did.

♥ Chapter Twelve ♥

Carly stared at the house as they slowed to a stop. It was large, but not ostentatious. Bright yard lights revealed a white bungalow with forest green shutters and a wrap-around deck with a matching railing. The deck was encased in round river rocks. The paved drive had split into two before the yard. The right hand lane curved past the steps in a large circle. The left lane disappeared in the dark.

Portions of the yard were a mud pit after the day's rain. The rest was lush grass. Was he putting gardens in the muddy spots? The setting sun reflected on the house's windows making them shine. The heavy wicker deck furniture beckoned her to sit and relax.

"Hang tight, I'll help you inside."

"I don't need help, I'm good."

He bolted out of the truck and was at her side before she even unbuckled. "Don't bother putting your shoes on, they'll be ruined by the rain. I'll carry you. The pavement's rough and everything's soaking wet." No way was he going to risk letting her hurt her feet or ruin those fantasy-inducing shoes.

The second her seatbelt was undone, he scooped her into his arms and jogged through the downpour to the deck. He hopped up the three steps and the porch light flicked on. He set her on her feet on the main deck. She was expecting wood, but her feet met vinyl planking instead. Cool and smooth, it felt lovely on her sore feet.

"I love this deck." She looked around. "Your house is huge." The deck was eight feet wide with small groupings of furniture tucked here and there. It practically begged her to get cozy and enjoy the weather. It would be perfect for watching thunderstorms roll across the night sky.

"How many bedrooms?"

"Five," he bragged. "I intend to raise a family here and from what my friends tell me of their childhoods, sharing a bedroom sucks."

Her heart stuttered. He wanted a family? Did he have a girlfriend? Where was this woman? Why hadn't she heard he was dating?

"I detested sharing a bedroom." She'd spent her entire childhood sharing one with her much older and very bossy sister.

She wandered the length of the deck and peered around the corner. Strategically placed motion sensor lights illuminated her exploration.

“How far does this thing go?” she asked. She kept walking, past the back door and a set of French doors. She peered into the darkness inside each window. Only one room had any light. A small nightlight shone in what appeared to be the master bedroom. She walked on, around the end of the house, and back to the front. Birch followed along behind her without commenting. The glorious deck made a full circle and had four sets of steps leading down to the yard.

“Ready to go inside?” he asked when they reached the front door again.

“Yes.” He unlocked the inside door, pushed it open, and held open the old-fashioned wooden screen door so she could enter. She stepped inside and a soft light immediately illuminated the foyer. “Oh, instant light, I love that. It beats coming home to a dark house or having to leave a light on.”

He put his hat on a shelf and tossed his Tux jacket over the chair. “Tanya’s idea, actually. I adopted it at both main doors. I’m with you, I don’t like wasting power on light nobody needs. Come inside, I’ll start a fire.” He padded, sock footed, past her.

“Where are your boots?”

“Outside. I slipped them off before we took the tour. I didn’t want that mess on the deck. I hate getting my socks dirty when I drink my morning coffee outside.”

She followed him through the foyer into a large living room with barely any furnishings. There was a recliner, a battered floral sofa, a pole lamp, and a cardboard box end table. “You don’t entertain much, do you?” She didn’t know where the teasing words came from, probably the wine.

“I only moved in this week. Furniture comes later. I have a chair, a place to eat and a bed. That’s all I need, for now.”

“It’s so empty, I’ll bet it echoes,” she said as he knelt before the pre-laid fire and lit a match. “Hello!” she shouted and laughed when the sound bounced back to her. Birch laughed with her.

“I have to ask, what’s with your name? Who names a kid Birch?”

“Helen-Rose and Buckton Thorn Brighton of course. It’s a family tradition. Did you know that Tanya’s real name is Lily-Rose Tanya? She started going by Tanya in kindergarten because there was another Lily. It sort of stuck, I guess.”

“I had no idea. Boy, am I going to razz her.”

He rose to his feet and shook his finger at her. “No, you will not, she’ll kill me if she knows I mentioned it. She hates the name Lily.”

Mentioning Tanya brought Carly's thoughts back to the wedding. She was hurt that she didn't get to see it in person and had missed the reception. She should have been there, celebrating with her best friend.

"Uh oh. I see upset Carly surfacing. What are you thinking about?" Birch asked.

"Nothing." She wasn't going to share her anger. This wasn't Birch or Tanya's fault, and her friend would be appalled when she found out what happened.

"I'm not going to push it, but I know you're not being honest with me. I'll let it go. If you ever want to talk about it, let me know. I'm willing to listen."

She swallowed a lump of emotion. "Thanks. You promised food." She clapped her hands in a let's get going manner. "And more wine."

"Right. I forgot the wine and cake in the truck. I'll be right back." The screen door slammed shut seconds later. She wandered to the fireplace to warm up. Despite the short ride in the heated truck, she was still chilled. The day that started blisteringly hot had turned cold and damp at some point.

A row of five by seven pictures lined the mantle. A family shot of Tanya, Birch, their brothers, and their parents in front of a mountain cabin, all of them holding skis. Another of them on a beach. There were a couple old black and whites of people who she assumed to be his great grandparents, and a shot of Birch with his maternal grandfather, who Carly had only a couple times. There were images of his younger twin brothers, Sage and Asher, side by side on horseback. There was a picture of him with Layla on a horse. There were no pictures of Tanya and her fiancé.

To her surprise, the central photo was one of her and Tanya laughing over a lopsided gingerbread house at his parents' kitchen table. She had no idea the photo existed. Why did he have it here, among all the photos of his family?

He came back into the room and set the wine and cake on the end of the raised hearth.

"You have a picture of me, on your mantle." For a second, she thought she saw color in his cheeks but he turned away too quickly to be sure.

"Not a photo of you," he said, straightening the lone pillow on his couch. "I have a picture of my sister being very happy on my mantle. You just happen to be in it. I'll grab some food."

"I'll help." She followed him into the kitchen. Had she heard a hitch in his voice? An evasion? The kitchen table was a battered wrought iron bistro

set. She laughed. “You call this a table?”

“It’ll be repainted and go on the deck eventually. I just needed something to eat on, and Mom and Dad had this one. It works. I couldn’t see rushing into a decision when I don’t know what I want.”

The kitchen gleamed. Pristine white cupboards lined the walls. There were more cabinets here than in her condo and her mother’s house combined. Only chefs had kitchens this big. She hopped up onto the marble countertop and watched him pull food from the fridge. “Nice room. Do you cook much?”

“I love to cook. It started as a way to get out of evening chores and turned into a passion. How about you? I know you make amazing pies.”

“Me, I get by. I’m no Ramsay for sure. But I don’t starve, and Layla likes what I make.”

“That’s the main thing. I thought you were going to help?” He winked.

“I was, but I decided to watch you instead. You’re kind of cute.” She nearly slapped a hand over her mouth at the unintended admission. “You know, cute in a you’re my best friend’s goofy brother sort of way.”

He set down a block of cheese and walked toward her. He stopped and slowly reached out to tug the lock of hair that hung messily over her ear courtesy of a grabby toddler. “And you, Carly Johnston are lovely, for an annoying friend of my sister.”

Before he dropped the curl, she grabbed his hand and pulled him closer. “Come here.”

He took a small step toward her. They were nearly mouth to mouth. She gave in to the urge that had plagued her since after her divorce when she saw him working shirtless in the yard. She licked her lips and leaned toward him.

He backed away and tapped her on the nose. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t try to kiss me. You’ve had too much wine, and not enough food.” He stepped back and returned to the fridge.

“Don’t you want to kiss me? Are you dating someone else? Is there a future Mrs. Birch, I don’t know about?” The words came out before she could stop them. Dang it, wine always loosened her tongue. This was why she didn’t drink.

“Stop with the doubts, Carly. There is nothing I want to do more than kiss you until you can’t speak. And no, there isn’t a future Mrs. Birch. Unless you’re applying for the job?” His voice rose at the end, turning his words into a question.

“I don’t even know you,” she blustered.

“Bullshit. We’ve known each other for six years. Maybe we don’t know the intimate details of each other’s lives, but we can change that. But first, the most important question, do you like pineapple on pizza?”

“Yes! Who doesn’t?” It was nice that he’d lightened the mood and shifted the conversation from her embarrassing slip, but she wished he hadn’t. She wanted to talk about kissing. Better still, she’d like to *be* kissing.

“Crazy people, that’s who.” He opened one of those fresh pizza crusts they sold at the deli and started spreading tomato sauce on it.

“Is that your mom’s tomato sauce? Can I help?”

“You can just sit and keep me company.” He paused and poured her glass of water. As he handed it to her, he said, “If you like Mom’s sauce, prepare to be amazed. I made this sauce myself, and honest to Pete, it’s twice as good as Mom’s.” He scooped up a bit of sauce with his baby finger and held it out to her.

The gesture was too intimate for two people trying to get to know each other better. She wasn’t sure why he offered his finger rather than a spoon. It felt like a test. A test of their attraction. She leaned forward and sucked the sauce off his finger without breaking eye contact. His eyes widened and his pupils dilated when she licked the last drop off her lips. “Delicious.”

His smile sent heat from her lips to her toes.

They stared at each other for several long minutes until it was either kiss him or leave the kitchen. She had a definite opinion on what she needed, and it wasn’t food. “Are you going to feed me or not?”

He blinked rapidly like he was clearing his mind. “It’ll go faster if you slice the mushrooms.”

She slid off the counter, brushing against him on her way down. The warmth of his body brought heat to her face. Jeepers, the man was lethal. She slid past him, her breasts barely brushing his arm. She wasn’t short, she was five-six, but next to him, she felt tiny and delicate. As much as she wanted to slip her arms around his waist and pull him closer, even in her semi-inebriated state, she knew that would be moving too fast.

“I can chop. Point me to a cutting board.” She paused. “Wait, you offered me non-sparkly clothing. I’d like to change out of this dress if you don’t mind.” She looked down at the mess she’d become. “I don’t know about the juice, but the glitter glue is water-based. No sense getting pizza sauce on it too. I should change, just in case I can salvage this thing.”

He stepped back slightly, tipped his head, and studied her from head to toe, his gaze leaving a trail of fire behind it. "I can get you clothes." He cleared his throat with a harsh swallow. "But I have to say, you look incredible and I'm sorry I didn't get to dance with you tonight."

He turned away abruptly and gestured for her to follow him down the hallway. They passed what looked like a den and a bathroom before entering the room with the night light and a king sized, four poster bed stained a deep cherry color.

"Is this your room?"

"Yes, and I have a nightlight because my cats," he waved toward two black and white felines sleeping dead center on the bed, "drive me crazy when there's no light."

"Aw. You're so sweet."

He opened the closet doors and a light flipped on, illuminating a room-sized closet. The man had a thing for motion-activated lights for sure. "Help yourself. There are sweats and T-shirts on the shelf. Take whatever you need." He walked out of the room leaving her staring at the empty doorway.

"Huh. That was odd." She entered the closet and stopped dead. It wasn't a closet; it was an eight-foot square room. She'd lived in places with bedrooms smaller than this. The space was enormous. He had six piles of clothing and a few things on hangers, mostly plaid western shirts. There was one lone suit, four white dress shirts, and three neckties. The rest of the space was empty. She could hang all her clothing and all of Layla's clothing in here, three times over. He must be expecting to marry a fashionista.

She slipped out of her dress and hung it in one of several empty sections. She found a pair of shorts with a drawstring waist and a T-shirt that said, Cowboys do it in the Saddle. It was the top shirt on the pile and despite its slightly suggestive message, she grabbed it, rather than digging through the rest.

She pulled her phone from the special holster on her leg. She hadn't wanted to carry a bag, but she also didn't want to be out of contact in case there was an emergency with Layla. She punched in her ex's number and shot off a text letting him know that the wedding was over and asking how Layla was.

As she waited for an answer, she set the garter on the shelf and went into the ensuite bathroom she'd noticed earlier. She glanced at herself in the mirror. "Yikes!" She had mascara sliding down to her mouth. The rest of her

makeup had vanished. Her hair was a total disaster. She'd expected it was bad, but she had no idea. She looked like a crazed raccoon. "Why didn't he tell me?" She covered her face with her hands. "Ugh. I tried to kiss him. It's a wonder he didn't run screaming instead of just backing away."

She rooted through the cupboard until she found a dark-colored facecloth. Quickly, she washed away the damage. She let her hair down. Using his brush, she smoothed her wavy locks as best she could. Despite the pile of hairspray that the salon had added, it frizzed up wildly. She used the hair elastic that she'd just removed and slicked her hair into a low ponytail. At least she didn't look like something out of a horror movie.

The tantalizing scent of fried onions tickled her nose and urged her back to the kitchen.

"That smells amazing. I thought we were having pizza?"

"I caramelize them first. Then add pineapple, mushrooms, and chopped cooked chicken."

"Okay," she tried not to sound dubious.

"I've never seen you refuse to eat anything. I know you don't have allergies. This is a favorite combination of mine. Give me the benefit of the doubt, okay?" He turned off the stove and spread the onions on the sauce. He'd chopped the mushrooms and chicken while she was changing. It must have taken her longer than she realized.

"Sorry about being such a disaster earlier." Heat rose in her face, but she forced herself to lean against the counter and look up at him.

"Everyone deserves to be less than their best on occasion. You had a crappy day, and you didn't get to eat. I'd be less than perfect in the same position."

No, he wouldn't. She'd seen him flinging manure, up to his knees in mud, and covered in tractor grease. Each and every time, he'd looked good enough to eat. There was something about a man who wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty that was too sexy for words, and in Birch's case, that appeal was triple most men.

She was attracted to him like nobody else. Even her ex hadn't stirred her libido like this. She was thirty-five years old, and it took a rancher like Birch to get her hormones pumping, when all her life, she thought she liked the bookish type.

"Somehow, I doubt that a disaster of a wedding would put you into tears." Ugh, why had she gone and said that?

“Perhaps not. Men are different than women, but most of us aren’t without compassion. Tanya’s your best friend, you should have been there; but because of some asshole, you weren’t. It’s not fair to you, or to her. I thought you handled it pretty well.”

“Sure, getting drunk and bawling in the rain, that’s real mature.” Why was she pushing this? She should just let it drop rather than keep it fresh in his mind.

He set the empty onion pan back on the stove and turned to her. “Carly Jane Brighton, listen to me. The whole wedding was a sham. It was lovely, but my sister never should have married that jerk and he never should have let his mother take over. Tanya should have stood up for you, and George should never have relegated his bride’s best friend to daycare worker. Who does crap like that? You were booted from a celebration you helped plan. You could have kicked up a fuss, but like the sweet-hearted person you are, you sucked it up and did what needed to be done to make your best friend’s wedding perfect.” He paused.

“For what it’s worth, you are the only person I know who would have done that. You deserve kudos for that. So, if you needed to cry in the rain, who am I to judge? As far as I’m concerned, you deserved that mini-breakdown. And besides, you look adorable with raccoon eyes.” He tweaked her nose.

“Thanks?”

“No, thank you. You made my sister’s day perfect, and I’ll make damn sure she knows it. Don’t even try to argue with me about it. My mind is made up.” He turned back to the pizza, finished adding toppings, and popped it into the oven. “You’re one of the sweetest people I’ve ever known.”

His words went straight to her heart like Cupid’s arrow. She wanted to fling herself into his arms and stay there forever.

♥ Chapter Thirteen ♥

Birch put some cheese and crackers on a plate and handed it to Carly. He shouldn't be surprised she was upset by some mussed makeup, she was always so perfectly put together. She didn't wear expensive clothing like his sister, but she was always clean and well dressed.

He had noticed the smudged makeup but didn't care. He certainly wasn't going to mention it and make her feel bad. In hindsight, it might have been kinder to tell her. Too late now, but definitely a point to remember in the future.

He grabbed a bottle of wine, a couple glasses, and an opener. "Let's go sit in the living room while the pizza cooks."

"Sure," she mumbled around a mouthful of crackers.

He didn't say anything. He'd seen her at the church at 9 a.m. for the 1 p.m. wedding. It had to be nearing ten-thirty now. She was surely starving after missing dinner. He banked the fury rising in him. Was it bad to hope his sister's marriage to the king of jerks didn't last?

No, that wasn't right. He wanted Tanya to be happy. If Jerkface George made her happy, that made Birch happy.

He tried not to leer at Carly's legs as she headed to the living room. He'd expected her to choose sweatpants, not athletic shorts. Sure, they came down to her knees, but he'd spent more than one afternoon ogling her as she swam in the family pool with Tanya. He knew and loved the way her body looked, right down to the tiny mole behind her left knee. He'd paid the price for that ogling with endless erotic dreams too. Having her here was a dream of another sort, and he intended to enjoy every second.

He expected her to sit on the couch. Instead, she sat on the throw rug by the fireplace, placing the plate on the hearth. He sat beside her, close, but not uncomfortably close. He didn't want to do anything to jeopardize their unfurling relationship now that he had her in his house, and she was finally openly talking to him,

"Thanks for the crackers, I'm starved. I know I ate half the salad you brought me, but that's the first thing I've had all day. Between going with Tanya for hair and makeup, I missed breakfast and lunch. I was running on coffee."

She daintily nibbled a cracker with cheese on top like she was afraid she might drop a crumb. It was good to see her eat and amusing that she was trying so hard to seem dainty and polite. It wasn't like he hadn't watched her and Tanya scarf down chips like a couple of linebackers. He put a slice of cheese on a cracker and topped it with a second cracker and crammed the whole thing in his mouth. He pretended not to watch her as he chewed and poured the wine, but he was gratified to see that after seeing him devour his cracker she started eating normally, without worrying about what he thought.

Honestly, if she knew how much he adored her and how long he'd been in love with her, she'd forget about fretting over how she looked and relax.

"Thank you for telling Tanya that I was there. I don't want her worrying on her honeymoon."

"Yeah, I figured that. Though honestly, we were both really worried. I knew nothing would keep you from the wedding except disaster. I was going to call you, but I don't have your number."

She twisted and pulled a phone from the pocket of the borrowed shorts. "Give me your number and I'll shoot you a text, so you have mine, in case you need it. I can't believe we haven't traded numbers before now."

No way was he going to pass up on that offer. "Where did that phone come from? You didn't have it when you arrived."

She laughed. "Under my dress. The seamstress who altered my dress makes an amazing holster and garter combination that holds phones, and credit cards under dresses. It's pretty cool."

He gave her his number and in seconds, his phone vibrated. He pulled it from his pocket and after glancing to ensure it was her text, he set it on the table. "Perfect, now I know how to find you when I need you." He tried not to put emphasis on need, but when her eyes widened, he knew he had failed. "Let's not talk about the wedding. Tell me about you."

"What do you want to know?" She sipped her wine and dabbed her lips with a tissue from the box on the floor at the end of the hearth.

He really needed furniture. "Tell me your hopes and dreams, plans for the future. Everything. There isn't anything you can say that I won't be interested in hearing."

She looked puzzled for a second. After a sip of wine and a deep breath she said, "I'm not that complicated. I'm older than your sister, but we still hit it off. I'm thirty-five, to be precise. I work at the diner. Mike, my ex, makes a lot of money and I get really good child support payments. If I wanted, I

could scrape by on that money alone. I work to feel useful, and to provide extras for my daughter. I love my job. It isn't the quiet office job I'd envisioned when I went into accounting, but I love working with people almost as much as you love working with horses."

"I do love horses." He was tickled that she'd noticed. "Are you still liking Elk Valley?"

"That cracks me up every time I hear it. Such a grand name for a small town of four thousand people. There is no real valley and I've never seen elk."

She giggled and his arms prickled with gooseflesh. How many times had he stayed in the house when she and Layla were visiting, just to hear her laugh? Dozens? Or more?

"Excuse me, that's four thousand seven hundred and fifty at last census. And there was a mother elk and two calves outside Pearlman's Grocery last week." He was rewarded with another glorious laugh. Oops, maybe he opened the wine too soon. He nudged two crackers toward her. She ate a couple before she spoke.

"Really? I would have loved to see them. I think I told you once that Mike's job brought us here. I couldn't find an accounting job." She shrugged. "I got bored and went to work at the diner. Then I got pregnant, and you know the rest. I'm not totally out of accounting. I do the books for the Scouts, the Girl Guides, the Kinsmen and the Kinettes, all for no fee."

"Very generous. I remember your first day at the diner, you spilled water on Mr. Humphries."

"Oh. Don't remind me. I was mortified. Luckily it was cold water, not hot coffee. I haven't spilled on anyone since then. Though I have dropped a couple plates on the floor. I've gotten better."

"I wouldn't know, you never wait on me anymore." Of course, he'd stopped going to the diner so often. Watching her smile and joke with other men brought out a jealousy he didn't like.

She set her wine on the hearth and twisted her hands together. She stared into her lap. "Because I usually work with Tanya, and she likes to pick on you."

"Bullshit," he said softly. "Tell me the truth." Pink rushed up her cheeks and she exhaled heavily.

"You make me nervous. I get all tongue-tied and fumble fingered when you're close. I don't want to spill on you or say something stupid."

He didn't smile, though he wanted to. She was attracted to him too. She never totally ignored him, but she wasn't as open and chatty with him as she was with everyone else. He'd been torn between thinking she disliked him and worrying that she was somehow afraid of him. Except neither of those fit when she flashed him the occasional shy smile. Was it any wonder she had him tied up in knots from all those mixed signals?

"We've known each other for six years. Isn't it time you stopped being nervous around me?" He wasn't going to mention that, sometimes, she made him a little tongue-tied as well.

"Maybe?" She wrinkled her nose and grimaced.

"You trust me with Layla when she comes over."

"I trust your entire family. It isn't a trust issue."

The oven timer beeped. He leaped up to get the pizza. He pulled it out and slid it onto a cutting board for slicing. He paused to cement the memory of tonight in his mind. He'd waited so long for this. To be alone with her, talking, sharing things. There was a peace and excitement in him that he never wanted to lose.

He couldn't imagine himself with anyone but Carly, but he knew he shouldn't, couldn't, wait for her forever, even if thinking of either of them being with anyone else broke his heart and spirit.

They ate the pizza without much conversation. He was content to be with her and listen to the crackling fire. The sound of the dried pine logs popping and hissing was comforting. Sitting so close to Carly was a miracle. Even after her terrible day, she smelled incredible, a perfume more feminine and flowery than her usual scent. He wanted to pull her close and never let her go.

After eating, they sipped wine and chatted. She got up and grabbed a blanket from the back of the couch. She lay on her side on the rug and flipped the edge of the blanket over her legs, blocking his view.

"Are you cold?"

"No. I'm good." She fell quiet and when he was certain she'd drifted off, she said, "Do you ever think about marriage?" Her tone was sleepy and melancholy.

The question went straight to his heart, and his groin. "I do. I want a wife and children. My own kids, her kids, adopted kids. It doesn't matter. I love kids."

"So, you'd marry someone who'd been married before?" she asked sleepily.

“Yes, I would. I even know a woman with a child who I’d date and marry.” He dropped the broad hint hoping she wasn’t too far gone in sleep or under the influence of wine to catch his meaning.

“Too bad, because I kind of like you and I love your house.” She hiccupped and let out a soft sighing snore.

Elation washed over him. Finally, after years of hoping she’d notice him, she was in his house, open to a relationship, and close enough to touch. Too bad she was drinking; he’d never take advantage of that. Nor would he wake her after the brutal day she’d had.

He went to the bedroom to change out of his tux, and came back with a couple of pillows and the fluffy quilt his sister had made him. He lifted her head and slid a pillow under it. After stoking the fire, he lay behind her without touching her, and covered them both up. He’d stay with her in case she woke up and needed to go home.

He told himself he wasn’t staying because he’d fantasized about her in this spot a hundred times while building their house. Yes, their house. He’d heard her talk about what she wanted in a home and had incorporated her ideas into his plans. The entire time he designed and built the house, with every nail and screw, he’d envisioned her here, in his arms. She wasn’t in his arms, but close enough. For now.

♥ Chapter Fourteen ♥

Carly woke with an ache in her hip. The bed was hard and extra warm. She blinked her eyes open and came face to face with a man's five o'clock shadow. She jerked backwards. What was she doing cuddled up to Birch? Surely, she hadn't been drunk enough to...

No, he wasn't the type to take advantage, she hoped, and she was still clothed.

"Morning," he grumbled without opening his eyes.

"Um. Morning?" Definitely morning, golden sun streamed through the tiny slits between the blinds, shining painfully bright off the gleaming hardwood floors.

"You fell asleep. I covered you up. I guess I went to sleep too. Of course, I didn't think you'd attack me in my sleep." He smiled without opening his eyes.

"What?" She realized that her leg was swung across his thighs, dangerously close to his groin. She yanked her leg back and sat up. "Sorry about that. I didn't mean to."

"Relax, Carly. If it was a problem, I'd have moved. Do I get a good morning kiss?" His smile grew broader, and she was tempted to give him one.

"No. I mean. I hardly know you."

He sighed. "Finally, I bring a woman home with me. I wine her and dine her, and I can't even get a kiss," he teased. He sat up and stretched.

God, he was glorious. His muscles flexed and bulged. His T-shirt pulled up exposing his flat abs. Apparently ranching kept him fit. Really fit. Sexy, hot fit.

"You've never brought a woman here before?" She didn't believe that. A guy like him must have dozens of dates.

"Well, I just moved in and I'm not dating, so no. No other woman has been here. Except Tanya and Mom." He stood and stretched. His sweats dropped lower and his shirt rose higher. She barely resisted licking her lips and showing him just how interested she was.

"But in truth, I have never brought a woman home, except for when I was dating in college. That was eight years ago. I haven't dated anyone in the past three years."

“Why in the world not? It’s not like you’re ugly.” She snapped her mouth shut and bit the inside of her cheek to keep from making further comments.

“Because I met a woman, a special woman, and she doesn’t even know I’m alive. I’ll make coffee.”

“She’s an idiot if she doesn’t see you for what you are.” She followed him into the kitchen, trying to ignore his sexy bare feet.

“And what am I?” he asked, a weird tone in his voice.

Her mind blanked for a second. She inhaled before she spoke. “You’re a talented rancher, a good brother and fabulous son. You’re kind and generous. You’re good with children. You’re helpful and giving. You cook. You’re gainfully employed. You’re probably perfect husband material.” She was doing it again, spouting off without thinking.

“Thank you.” He turned his back to her and started coffee. “Breakfast?”

Something was off about their conversation. It was stilted on his end and too revealing on her part. What was going on in his mind? “Breakfast would be great. I want to see how well you cook. Getting pizza right is one thing...” she trailed off, teasing him like he was a friend.

Maybe they could be more than friends. She had a five-alarm hangover this morning, but at least she wasn’t acting like an idiot around him or having trouble talking to him. “Just let me check on Mike and Layla first.” She shrugged, if he didn’t understand that kids came first, there was no sense in explaining it to him.

“Absolutely. I’m craving bacon and waffles. I’ll get them started while you make your call.”

She went into the other room for privacy. By the time she talked to both Mike and Layla and got back to the kitchen, he had breakfast well under way. “I’m good to stay. Mike wants to keep her another night. Now that she’s older and a little more interactive, he wants longer custody hours. We’re negotiating, and this is a test run.”

She hated that her daughter’s father still had trouble relating to a three-year-old. Her enormous vocabulary made a person forget she was only three and often acted it. But he was trying to be a good father. Layla adored him and that’s what mattered most.

“Wouldn’t he be over that unease if he’d spent more time with her as an infant?” He flipped some bacon.

“Yes. How did you know he didn’t spend much time with her?” She paused. “Tanya, of course.”

“And you. Did you not notice how often I was around when you visited? I was always in earshot, trying to learn more about the woman who barely talked to me. Man, I washed more dishes, by hand, since your divorce than I have in my life.” His back was to her, and she wished she could see his expression. She ran through some memories and was startled at how often he was around when she was with Tanya. Never intruding, but always nearby.

“How did I not notice that? I must have been blind.” She’d been crazy about him and hadn’t done the math on how often he was around. The math? She hadn’t even noticed. Talk about being blind to what was right in front of you.

“It did seem that way at times. I was starting to feel like a stalker. You know, hanging out hoping you’d pay attention to the lonely bachelor who hung on your every word.”

“Were you stalking me? Seriously? That’s so creepy.” She teased with a laugh.

“Six years, Carly. You’ve known me for six years,” his voice was dark with frustration. “When have I ever done anything creepy? Sure, I hung around a lot, but you always knew I was there. After you broke up with Mike, you became uncomfortable with me at the diner, so I stopped coming in so often. If you didn’t seem to want to talk to me, I didn’t push it.” He dropped his fork; it bounced off the stove and onto the floor.

“You astound me,” he said, his voice heavy with frustration. “You’re the most helpful person I know. You always notice when someone needs a hand. You help old ladies across the street, you do volunteer work. You’re kind to strangers. You notice everyone. Except me. Until last night I felt like you didn’t even know I existed.” He scraped his hands through his hair and massaged his neck.

Her mouth dropped open. How had she been so oblivious to the fact that he cared?

“I’m sorry.” The words were inadequate.

His laugh was dry and harsh. “I’m so freaking in love with you and you’re oblivious. Wake up and smell the coffee, Carly.” He snapped off the burner and moved the pan aside. “Come on, I’ll take you home.”

“Wait,” she called, trailing after him to the door. “I didn’t mean...” she floundered for a proper apology. He’d startled her with his words. She’d been oblivious to his interest, which had to be some kind of stupidity record because she was crazy about him.

He slid his bare feet into some cowboy boots and grabbed his hat. His keys jingled in his hands. How did he look so good in sweats, a T-shirt, and boots?

“Can we talk about this?” she begged. “I did see you. I swear.” She grabbed his arm and he jerked free to open the door. He was mad. Birch Brighton never lost his temper. How could he be so upset over a simple misunderstanding?

“I’ll drive you home.”

Resigned to having the conversation later, she stomped outside. The morning was blindingly bright. The sky blue and cloudless. Before she had time to react, he scooped her into his arms and carried her to the truck.

Realizations struck like a freight train. He was always doing nice things like that for her. Helping her move. Helping her carry stuff into his parents’ house. Playing with Layla. Making snacks for her and Tanya. He delivered his mom’s chicken soup when she was out with a virus. She thought he was just being a good brother and friend; she had no idea it was all for her ... because he cared. She was an idiot. An unbelievable, face-palming idiot.

Holy hamburgers! He’d jokingly proposed at least a dozen times! How many of those were serious?

“Don’t be angry,” she said as he raced toward town. “I did see. You’re an amazing man. I just didn’t know how to approach you. You didn’t seem interested, romantically.”

“Yeah, the flowers and necklace at the hospital, that’s what all men do for their sister’s best friend. I thought that might be a clue. What was I supposed to do? Throw myself at your feet? Beg you to love me back? A man has pride you know.”

Icy silence filled the truck as she struggled for what to say. He skidded to a stop at the curb in front of her condo. “Do you have your keys?”

“It’s a combination lock. Thank you for everything. For last night, and for the ride.” She grabbed his forearm. “I’m sorry I didn’t realize...” She scrambled out the door and fled like the coward she was.

She’d only taken two steps when he roared off. That’s when she realized that on the odd occasion when he’d driven her around, he always waited until she was inside before pulling away. Chivalry at its finest. Except for today.

“Crap.” She’d screwed up a potential relationship with Birch by being totally blind. Of course, she wasn’t the only one who didn’t open up about their feelings.

♥ Chapter Fifteen ♥

Birch flew around the corner and slammed to a stop beside a greenspace. He couldn't drive while he was mad, or he'd injure someone. He wasn't paying proper attention to the road. He'd managed to drive decently with Carly in the truck, but after she was out of the truck, he'd lost his mind.

He slapped his palms on the steering wheel. Carly was infuriating. He'd waited years for her to notice him and then she turned around and accused him of being a stalker. What was wrong with her? Sure, she'd been joking, but still. Years. He'd wasted years on her. And this morning, after all that time, all that effort, all the times he held himself in check, his frustration busted through his self-control and he lost it.

"Damn. Damn. Damn." Cussing wasn't his way, but darn and heck just didn't cut it.

If he was wearing runners, he'd go for a run to burn off his frustration. For the first time in years, he wished his favorite footwear wasn't cowboy boots. If he were at the ranch, he'd work the frustration out by chopping wood. He closed his eyes, leaned his head back, and forced himself to relax. Anger burned inside him like an all-consuming flame. Ten minutes later, assured that he wasn't going to drive like an idiot, he headed for his best friend's house. He needed to talk to someone.

Jamison was pulling weeds from his garden while his four-year-old daughter played in her front yard sandbox.

"You look like crap. Are you hung over? How was the wedding?" Jamison asked. "Did you get to dance with Carly?" Jamison and his wife were the only people aside from his sister and father, who knew how hard he'd fallen for his sister's best friend. He suspected his mother knew but if she did, she wasn't saying anything.

"No. The wedding was nice. The aftermath was a crap-show." He sat on the bottom step close to the flowerbed his friend was working in. Sissy left her sandbox to climb into his lap.

"Hi, Uncle Tree." Cecelia had started calling him that when she learned that birch was a tree.

"Hi, Sissy Sis Sis." He tickled her under the arms, making her laugh gleefully.

He explained the wedding disaster.

“Brutal. Tanya’s going to be mad when she finds out. I don’t know what she sees in that jerk.” Jamison pulled a weed and tossed it at the nearly overflowing bucket he’d been filling.

“How’s Carly?”

“She was out of it last night. She had downed half a bottle of wine when I finally found her. She’s not much of a drinker. I probably should have taken her home, but I took her back to my place.” How did he even explain the disaster that followed. “Last night was okay. I fed her and she fell asleep. This morning was he-ck,” He corrected the word before it slipped out in front of Sissy. He scraped his hands through his hair as he explained the morning and how he overreacted.

Jamison was quiet a long time. “She’s right, you know.” He paused and pulled a few more weeds. “I get it. She was married when you met, then she got pregnant, and then divorced. You were right to take it slow once she was single. But there’s slow and then there’s glacial. You screwed up. You should have asked her out.”

“How do you ask out someone who clams up or disappears when you try to talk to her? I was hoping she’d see me around and warm up to me.” He shook his head and set Sissy off his lap. He had to move, or he’d go nuts. He paced back and forth on the grass. Okay, she didn’t avoid him exactly, but it seemed like they were never alone together, and he wasn’t going to ask her out in public.

“She’s not shy around anyone but me. Half the time I thought she was afraid of me. Then this morning, she tells me what a great catch I am. Two minutes later, I’m a stalker. I think she was joking ... but dang it, it hurt.”

“Well,” Jamison’s wife’s voice came from inside the screen door. She bumped it open with her hip and handed Birch and her husband mugs of coffee. “It’s classic stalker behavior. I never understood how she didn’t see your interest, but that’s beside the point. It’s time to man up. Go to her, talk to her. Ask her on a date.”

“What she said.” Jamison raised his mug in a toast to his pregnant wife.

“Listen to the man,” Birch growled sarcastically. “You wouldn’t be married with 1.5 kids if I hadn’t hooked you up with Kelly here.”

“And I thank you for that,” Kelly kissed his cheek. “He’s a goofball, but he’s okay. Now,” she said. “Drink up and go apologize.”

He sipped the coffee which he didn't really want. It landed in his churning stomach like a lead ball hitting a glass of water. It sloshed and roiled around as he thought about the past few years. He thought he was being respectful, not creepy. Was he wrong?

Probably.

"I have to go." He handed his nearly full cup back to Kelly.

"Slow down, big boy," Kelly said. She and Jamison laughed. Sissy joined in because her parents were laughing. "Don't go off half-cocked."

Jamison roared louder.

"Oh hush," she glared at her husband but ruined it with a smile. "Take a bit of time. Formulate that apology and for the love of God, don't go empty-handed. Prove you're worthy and not a total creep."

"What's that mean?"

"Figure it out before you go see her. You're a smart man. Use those brains for a change."

He didn't bother objecting to the cheap shot. She was probably right. He'd charge over without a plan and end up looking like an idiot as well as a creep. "I'll try, Kelly. I'll try. Thanks for the advice. Talk to you guys later." He gave Sissy one last tickle and departed.



CARLY FLOPPED ONTO the sofa and buried her head in a cushion to muffle her screams. If he liked her, why hadn't he said something instead of creeping around? Okay, maybe not creeping around, she always knew he was there. Practically every time she was at his family's ranch, he showed up within minutes. She realized it now, how had she missed it before?

"I'm an idiot."

Her mind scrolled back through the years. It was like watching a bad romance movie. Initially, she'd been married, and there was no reason for him to show interest in her. If he was telling the truth about watching her from the start, he had done the gentlemanly thing and ignored the attraction, or at least hadn't let it show. He said nothing while she was pregnant. After her divorce, he didn't approach her. She totally understood that guys didn't want to date a pregnant woman or a single mother of a toddler. Nor had she been ready to date.

She'd noticed how attractive he was the day they met, she'd been married, not dead. No harm in looking, right? Love didn't make you blind to good-looking people. She certainly wouldn't have started anything while with another man. But after her divorce, it should have been a different story.

It wasn't long after her divorce was final that she started thinking of Birch as more than her best friend's brother. It became impossible to ignore her attraction the day she'd been looking for Tanya and had found him knee-deep in the mud, bare-chested, trying to pull a calf free. She'd been struck senseless by his sheer masculinity. She'd gone from being able to chat with him to being tongue-tied and klutzy around him. Her inescapable attraction muddled her mind. She hoped he'd ask her out. Eventually, she realized that she'd have to find a way to do the asking. Only she never worked up the courage.

Tanya's wedding was supposed to be her big chance. She had her friend's blessing to date him and was supposed to be paired with Birch at the wedding, for everything. She accepted Tanya's decision to go along with her future in-laws' changes, hoping she'd get to dance with Birch at the reception. So much for that idea.

The universe was a jerk. It kept thrusting Birch into her path, and she kept screwing it up. If she had quit drinking last night instead of nervously glugging her wine, she might not have fallen asleep and she might remember more of their conversation. As it was, she only remembered bits and pieces. Who knows, if she'd been sober, maybe she would have tried to seduce him.

"Right, because you're brave like that," she grumbled to herself. She probably wouldn't have done anything because she didn't like to put people on the spot. She was a problem solver, not a problem maker. Which, of course, was how she ended up babysitting at her best friend's wedding. Then ending the evening drunk and disorderly wasn't her best plan. A vague image of trying to kiss him blurred through her mind. Surely, she hadn't...

She got off the couch and showered. She didn't have to work today, and she was exhausted, but with all the things bouncing around in her brain, she'd never be able to nap. She'd taken her one chance with Birch and ruined it.

"Ugh. He's so mad, he'll never speak to me again." She stood staring at her dresser for a few minutes. In the end, she put on the clothing she'd borrowed because it smelled like him. Fresh and woodsy. Snuggled back on the couch, tea in hand, she called her mom.

As soon as she answered, Carly burst into unexpected tears. “Mom, I need a hug,” she sobbed.

“Come visit, there’s lots of room.”

She cried harder.

Last year, her folks had gone to Vegas for the winter. Spring came and they purchased a home in a nearby Nevada town, claiming they’d had enough winter for one lifetime. They sold their house, her childhood home, in nearby Drayton Valley. The condo she’d rented, and eventually purchased, had plenty of room for when they came to visit.

She did have an older sister in the city, but they had nothing in common, and her brother was overseas. With her best friend on her honeymoon, Carly was alone.

“I can’t. I have to work.” She’d love to flee to her mother’s arms, but it wouldn’t solve anything. When she came home, her problems would still be here.

Her mom made soothing noises and asked her what was wrong. Slowly, with many stops to cry and blow her nose, she told the whole tale from the first meeting to last night’s final blowout.

“You’re saying you didn’t know he liked you? Are you blind?” her father chimed in. He had picked up the phone almost immediately after her mother answered.

“Hush, dear,” her mother chided. “That isn’t helping.”

Her dad went on anyway, “I saw it long before you divorced. Frankly, I was worried that he would become an issue in your marriage. Not that I don’t trust you, but if he started hanging around too much, trouble might start.”

“How did you see that? You only visited here for a few weeks, and we just had two barbecues with his family.”

“A father knows when a man has designs on his daughter. I debated warning him off, but your mother wouldn’t let me.”

“Ancient history, dear. It isn’t the time for all that. This is about our baby’s broken heart.”

She never really had a broken heart before. She’d slowly fallen out of love with Mike and hadn’t dated much before she met him. She hadn’t gone on a single date after their divorce. There was no great heartbreak in their breakup, aside from her pain at watching him succumb to alcoholism. Thank heaven he’d recovered. Ending their marriage had been painful. This ... this

screwup with Birch was gut-wrenching and heart-crushing. A boulder of pain pressed on her chest stopping her heart and bringing endless tears.

“What do you think you should do?” her mom asked.

“Move? I hear Nevada’s nice this time of year.” The weak joke fell flat, and her mom made a tsking sound. “Fine. I’ll be nice to him when I see him.” She rubbed the necklace he’d given her between her fingers. *Holy crap! He had loved her back then!*

“Carly,” her mom said in that musical warning tone all mothers used. The one that meant she knew that you were being stubborn.

“Fine. I’ll apologize.”

“And?”

“Not punch him. Be nice to him? Tell him how I feel?” She finally threw out the idea her mom wanted.

“There’s my girl,” her parents chimed in unison.

“Now, dry your tears and go do something fun. Maybe spend that quilt store gift card I bought you for your birthday. Fabric shopping always cheers you up. Sew up a nice quilt for your next baby.”

Her mother never missed a chance to ask, however obliquely, for another grandchild. They never would have moved away from their granddaughter if it wasn’t for her father’s crippling arthritis which was exacerbated by the frigid Canadian winters.

“Mom,” this time it was Carly’s turn to use the chiding voice.

“Okay, fine. But listen to me. If you like this guy, take a risk. Find out where it’s going. Don’t pine away any longer. Take action. I nearly lost your father because I refused to chase him down. It’s a darn good thing he’s much more stubborn than I am.”

“Don’t listen to her. I chased her until she caught me.” Her father’s laughter boomed over the line, lightening her spirits.

“Okay. I’ll think about it all. I’ll decide if I want him or not. If I do, I’ll chase him down. I’ll video call you with Layla tomorrow night when she gets home from Mike’s. Love you both.”

They said their goodbyes and she decided that maybe some retail therapy was just what she needed. She’d buy some fabric and start a new quilt while she had a few hours to herself. Layla would be home around six. That gave her most of the day for self-soothing fabric manipulation.

In the end, she purchased fabric printed with cute cuddly baby animals. She’d make a baby quilt like her mom suggested, but it wouldn’t be for her.

Right?

She was not thinking about Birch and babies. Not together. No way. That horse had already bolted.

♥ Chapter Sixteen ♥

Tuesday morning, Carly was back at work. She loved the morning shift. Layla was an early riser which meant they had a bit of time together before she clocked in at seven. She was off at three, just as her daughter finished quiet time at the sitter's. For Carly, it was an almost perfect schedule. She only worked part-time, Mondays to Thursdays, with Friday, Saturday, and Sunday off every week. It was a great balance of work and home life and left plenty of time for volunteer accounting and cookie baking.

With Tanya on her honeymoon for the next two weeks, they were down one waitress and she'd be picking up extra shifts. It would be busy. Hank's Diner was the breakfast hot spot in Elk Valley. Lunch would be busy, but not as bad as breakfast, because there were two other great lunch spots, and a sub shop.

Her boss was unlocking the door when she arrived. She stepped inside, happy to be out of the morning chill. It might be late spring, but mornings were still pretty frigid. Happiness flooded her soul. She loved this place with its gleaming white floors, and black tables and chairs. Neon green accents made the diner sunny and bright. The colors shouldn't work together, but somehow, they did. Aside from being with Layla, this was her happy place. She tried hard not to think about how much pleasure she found in Birch's company.

She breathed deeply, loving the smell of fresh coffee, bacon, and cinnamon buns.

The first words out of Hank's mouth were, "I didn't see you at the wedding."

"There was a mix-up and I ended up as chief babysitter." She didn't really want to get into it with him so she added, "Anything to make my bestie's wedding perfect. It was an honor to help out." She explained what happened.

Hank, a crusty sixty-five-year-old, laughed. "Oh, honey. Your soft heart let you get taken advantage of." He patted her on the back. "You're a good person, Carly. Sometimes too good, and I'm blessed to have you working for me." He paused. "I hate to be another person taking advantage of you, but Cookie's out sick today. You'll have to run the register, if that's okay. If not, I'll call in the Mrs." Hank's wife walked with a cane. A day on her feet

would be agony. She'd come gladly, but Carly knew they'd manage fine without her.

"No worries, boss. I've got your back." They all took turns at the register, but this potentially busy day got worse because if Hank was cooking, she'd be taking on his tasks. "I'll just warn everyone that you're cooking, and they'll all leave."

It was a running joke that Hank couldn't cook. The truth was, he was an amazing cook, he just preferred to talk to the customers. Cookie on the other hand was a stellar cook who disliked dealing with people. After an epic motorcycle crash, the thirty-nine-year-old tattooed veteran retired from service. Cookie was a true introvert, the exact opposite of Hank. Their roles suited them. Hank in the front, Cookie in the back. Hank occasionally worked in the back, but Cookie never worked out front.

"Mind your sass, or I'll fire you." Laughing at his own joke, he headed for the kitchen.

She hung her jacket in the staff closet beside Hank's tiny office and slipped her wallet and keys in the staff lockbox under the register. She barely had a fresh pot of coffee ready when the door chimed, heralding a customer. Pot in hand, she spun around to greet them with a smile.

Her smile dropped off her face when she saw Birch standing hesitantly in the doorway. Nothing like piling it on. *Thanks for nothing, Universe. I'm not ready for this.* Snug jeans cradled his thighs like a lover. His black leather jacket was as sexy as hell. His dark brown cowboy hat was pulled low, concealing his eyes. He carried something slung over his shoulder. He looked incredible. And sad.

Her heart wept because she'd put that gloom there.

"Good morning, Birch. Did you want a menu?" She forced herself to smile and judging by the look on his, he wasn't fooled for a second.

"Yes, please. Is it okay if I sit over there?" He gestured to a table near the back.

"Wherever you like, as always." The diner wasn't a wait to be seated type of place. She didn't understand why he asked, unless it was his subtle way of asking if it was okay to be there.

Since the other server didn't come in until seven-thirty, she had no choice but to wait on him. Filled with hope and trepidation, she snatched up their laminated, single page, breakfast menu and headed his way. Mentally, she braced herself to apologize.

He hung his jacket on the rack attached to the bench. "I'm sorry," she said as she reached the table just steps behind him. He apologized at the same time. They shared a wry laugh. Her next smile was genuine.

He held out a dry-cleaning bag. Her sparkling heels were looped over the hangar. "I had your dress cleaned. They got the juice and glue out."

She traded the menu for the bag. "Oh, thank you so much. I was worried it was ruined."

"You're welcome." His cheeks pinkened. He slid into the booth and looked up at her as he removed his hat and set it on the bench.

She took a deep breath. "Look. You startled me on Sunday. I honestly had no idea you liked me ... that way. None. I kind of freaked. It's just weird hearing that a man has been going to great effort to be near me, to get my attention. It's..." she paused to find the right word.

"Stalkerish?" he said with a wince.

"Maybe a bit." But that's not what I meant." Her heart lightened knowing he was willing to make amends.

"I'll give you that much," he said. "I'm sorry I didn't make my feelings more obvious. I was waiting for you to notice me. Not my most brilliant dating strategy."

"Oh, I noticed you all right." She laughed at her own behavior. "Being nervous around you, even when I liked being near you, worried me. I could barely talk to you even when I wanted to. I didn't know how to deal with the conflicting emotions. I could handle casual, but not personal. So, I kept my distance. Maybe that was a mistake. Because I wanted, I do want, more than friendship."

She swallowed away a lump of emotion. "I'm a grown woman. I should have had the courage to approach you. I tried. But I was afraid of rejection."

An uncomfortable laugh broke from his lips. "You and me both. I asked Tanya to partner you with me at the wedding," he said. "I was mad, I still am, that she bumped you."

Heat rose in her face. "Ya, me too. I wanted to dance with you." She resisted the urge to rip the menu out of his hands and fan her overheated face with it. Instead, she poured him a coffee, hoping he didn't notice her trembling hands. "I'll let you look at the menu and be back in a moment."

She walked away, wishing she had the courage to sit with him until it got busy. Of course, why would today be any different? She always wished that. Filled with sudden resolve, she turned back. "Mind if I join you?"

His eyes widened and he smiled from ear to ear. "I'd like that." There was a pit-a-pat in her heart that felt suspiciously like a giggle.

She draped her dress over the adjacent bench and slid into the seat across from him and stared at the coffee pot she'd set on the table. Neither said anything until the silence grew too long.

"I got a text from Tanya. It was a picture of them at the Eiffel Tower the night they arrived," he blurted.

"I got one too. Maybe the same one. The moon in the background was lovely. I'd like to Paris, but I'd rather go to a beach vacation someday." *That was civil and friendly, right? Not too silly?*

"I think England and Wales would be a nice trip. I haven't been since I was fifteen and I love the old stonework. But a beach would be okay too," he agreed.

She looked up at him and the discomfort of their blow up faded away. "I could do that. Of course, I have a daughter now, so travel becomes harder."

"We could take her along. I mean, you could take her."

"I never thought of that. Or I could get Mom and Dad to visit and watch her." She shrugged. "Dreaming in color now, I guess. It could be a while before I travel." Did his slip of the tongue mean he was interested in traveling with Carly and Layla? A happy shiver danced over her skin at the thought. Being with him, actually talking, brought her whole body to life.

"Me too, this month is going to be crazy. I've got a showing every day, and a couple of show races every weekend. It's putting a damper on my style, because there's this girl I want to ask out. She works at the diner." He grinned at her.

"Oh? And is she interested?" She asked because it was foremost on her mind, even if she didn't know what show races were.

"I hope she's interested, but I think she's shy around me for some unknown reason. I mean, it's not like we haven't known each other for years."

"Could you take her to your races? Show her what your work is about?" She threw it out there, hoping they were on the same page about a prospective date.

"Do you think she'd be interested?" His smile had a nervous edge that tickled her heart and left her breathless. A thousand butterflies of hope danced in her tummy.

“Why don’t you ask her?”

A customer came in and without looking, she called out, “Please take a seat, I’ll be right with you.” She needed to get to work, but she didn’t want this awkwardly sweet moment to pass without securing her date.

“Carly, will you go out with me?”

The sudden acceleration of her heart startled her into a gasp. “Yes, Birch Brighton, I will go out with you. I’ll need some notice as I have a child and will need to find a sitter.” She pretended this was their first meeting hoping he’d catch the idea that this date was a reset to their awkward relationship.

“Depending on where we go, I’d love to have Layla with us. For *some* of our dates. I’ll message you a couple of date ideas, if that’s okay.”

Dates? He wanted more than one? Woot!

“You know what, Birch? That would be amazing.” Feeling bold she added, “About time you asked.”

“Don’t I know it.” They laughed together. She smiled at him, hoping he’d see her eagerness to be with him, and forget about her earlier shyness and her idiotic accusation of stalking.

“You better go.” He nodded toward the customer. “I’m pretty sure that’s the health inspector.”

“Yikes.” She leaped up without taking his order and rushed to the inspector’s table. “Hi. I’m sorry that took so long. Would you like coffee?” After she served him, she gathered her dress and hung it out of harm’s way.

From that moment on, the morning was a zoo. She didn’t get any time to sit, let alone talk to Birch. Knowing he’d understand, she literally took his order and ran, then dropped his food in front of him with barely a word. He left a big tip and a note that said, *I’ll call you tonight*. The note alone made the day worthwhile. She tucked it into her wallet for safekeeping. The diner got a clean bill of health, as always, and tips were crazy good. Even so, when she picked Layla up from the sitter’s, all she wanted to do was put her feet up.

Doing the work of two people was exhausting. Throw in manning the coffee machine and register meant she’d given every ounce of energy she had. A giddy sense of feeling useful kept her smiling all day. She had a helper’s heart and loved pitching in to make someone else’s day better.

She was sitting on the floor playing blocks with Layla when the doorbell rang. She struggled to her feet, mentally cursing whoever was interrupting

their together time. She was done. Every ounce of her energy was gone. She didn't have the mental headspace to deal with a guest.

She went to the door, trying not to be angry with the caller for disturbing their peace and quiet. She looked through the peephole. Birch. Every molecule of her body celebrated. She whipped open the door.

"Hi." Birch grinned. "I thought you might need supper." He held up a bag. "I grabbed Chinese. I was going to get Italian, but I remembered how much Layla loves rice." He looked deliciously nervous and awkward. His smile was sweet and breathtaking. Her heart did a giddy dance. Her energy level soared like she'd been jumpstarted.

"Oh, you're a life saver. I was just thinking about dinner, and I have zero energy to cook. Come in." Her heart swelled with gratitude.

"It's okay. I don't want to disturb your evening." He pushed the heavy bag into her arms and backed away.

"The weight of this bag tells me there's enough food in here for six people, maybe more. Join us for dinner?" She almost wanted to beg him to stay but settled on giving him a warm smile instead.

"Are you sure? This was a neighborly gesture, not an attempt at a date. I swear." He used his index finger to make an X over his heart, like a kid making a promise.

"Come in, Birch. You haven't seen Layla since *the dinner*." There was no reason to specify which dinner. That horrid engagement dinner was burned into both their brains.

He wasn't moving away, but still looked like he might decline, so, knowing she was playing dirty, she called out, "Layla, Uncle Birch is here." Her daughter screamed excitedly and raced into the small entry.

"Uncle Birch!" She cried and flung herself at his legs. He was one of her favorite people.

"That's dirty pool." Birch laughed. "Give me a second sweetie." He toed off his boots and set them to the left of the door. His hat went on the closet shelf. "Are you hungry, munchkin?" he asked, swinging her up into his arms and kissing her cheek.

"Starved."

Birch's laugh was deep and joyful. "Starved?"

"Yes. That means so hungry it feels like a bear ate your tummy." Layla jumped down and raced toward the kitchen.

“I’m continually astounded by her vocabulary. She’s the only three-year-old I know who says starved and knows what it means. You’re an awesome mother.”

“Thank you. I’ve never been one for baby talk. I’ve always talked to her like an adult. I think that’s why she knows so many words. Well, that and an hour of reading to her every night.” His honest praise made her heart happy. “Come in. Let’s eat. I’m starved too.” They laughed together.

Dinner was a light, easy affair. It reminded her of the old days when she was married and Birch wasn’t yet on her radar, or rather she wasn’t interested in him beyond as a friend. A handsome friend. Now a shimmer of shared arousal ran between them and sparked every time their hands accidentally touched. At least she hoped he felt it too.



HER KITCHEN TABLE WAS so small, it barely sat three people. With eight take-out boxes, it was extra crowded. Layla climbed into her booster seat leaving Birch and Carly sitting side by side. Birch stifled a grin the first time their knees brushed, and she nearly jumped out of her seat.

“Sorry. There’s not much room here.”

“It’s okay.” Her smile was shy, and to him, glorious. There had never been a time when her smile hadn’t muddled his insides. Her face turned a delightful pink.

Their fingers brushed while passing the deep-fried wontons and she glanced at him, as if wondering if it was deliberate. He shrugged and smiled. After watching her from a close distance for so long, their proximity was as much heaven as it was torture. He was loving every minute of being near her.

This felt like family. His family. He wasn’t ready to tell Carly that he loved her again and loved Layla like a daughter. Obviously, that would be too much information at this point in their fragile new relationship. He knew he wouldn’t be able to keep his feelings quiet for long.

By the time they finished eating, Layla was nearly dozing in her chair.

“Why don’t you go tuck her in? I’ll put the leftovers away for you.” Her grateful smile was more than thanks enough.

“Will you take the extras home? Or can I pay for dinner?”

“Go, get her to bed before she falls out of her chair.” He rose and carried two plates to the sink. She was crazy if she thought he would let her pay for

dinner.

“I’ll only be a minute.” She slid Layla’s chair out and brushed all the stray rice off her clothing before picking her up. “Say goodnight to Birch.”

“Night,” she mumbled as they passed him.

He ruffled her hair. “Good night, my favorite munchkin.” She waved sleepily as they left the kitchen, and he began bundling up the food. He had no intention of taking it home, they could eat it later. Carly would probably still be tired tomorrow. The diner would be short staffed until Tanya got back from her honeymoon. He was used to working hard and coming home to cook. He’d have energy to cook, but Carly might not. She had the added burden of caring for Layla. He’d leave the food for them.

He was on the floor wiping up spilled rice when she returned. “How did I not know how sticky this stuff is?” He laughed.

“Honestly, some nights, I leave it until it dries, and sweep it up before Layla gets out of bed.”

“I can’t decide if that’s disgusting or brilliant. You need a dog.” He rinsed the cloth he’d found in a bucket under the sink and hung it over the edge to dry.

“Just so you know,” he said, “this isn’t our date.” Now, all he had to do was figure out what to do on that much anticipated date.

♥ Chapter Seventeen ♥

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Birch asked his mother a week later as they pulled onto Carly’s street. “I’m nervous. What if she says no?” He was seriously second guessing this plan. He hadn’t asked her out on their official date yet, though they’d spent several evenings watching TV together or playing board games.

“Birch Brighton don’t be silly. She’s going to love this. Trust me. Every single mother on earth, actually every mother, wants a bit of adult time. The attention of a sweet, loving man is a bonus.” She patted his arm. “I probably don’t say it enough, but I’m proud of you. Proud of what you built with your grandfather. Proud of how you still help out on our ranch while running your own. But I’m most proud of how you kept your distance from Carly all these years. You’ve loved her for a very long time.”

He sighed and pulled up half a block short of Carly’s condo complex. “How long have you known? I thought I managed to hide it.” Was he that transparent?

“I saw the spark in your eye the first time she came out to swim. I wasn’t certain until I saw your disappointment when she said she was married. I’ve got to hand it to you, you left her alone. I knew the interest was still there, but you did the right thing and ignored it. I watched you fall deeper and deeper in love with her over the years. Still, you did nothing. That makes me proud. Unrequited love hurts.” She leaned over and hugged him.

He took solace in that embrace. “That it does.”

“I saw the necklace you gave her at the hospital. Oh, I didn’t know it was from you at first, but she let it slip that aside from Tanya and I, you were her only guest. I expected you to make a move then, but you didn’t.”

“How could I put that pressure on a new mom? I was falling harder for her; I didn’t want to make her life more difficult. Though I tried to help her when I could.”

“It’s impressive how you stayed away until her life was back under control. You treated her like a pesky sister. That had to be difficult. Then there were days when you hung out in the shadows. Watching. Eavesdropping. I swear to the good Lord above, I wanted to slap you silly and tell you to get your crap together and ask her out.”

“I wish you would have.”

She leaned back and mock slapped his arm. “Come on, son. You’ve got a woman to woo, and I have a future granddaughter to play with.”

Standing side by side, they knocked on the condo door. “Just a minute,” Carly called from inside. Thirty seconds later footsteps sounded behind the door. They were followed by a shuffling sound and a click as the door unlocked.

“Birch? Helen? What are you doing here? Is something wrong.” She looked frantically behind them as if disaster approached.

His mom bustled forward. “Absolutely, you aren’t ready.”

“Um, ready for what?” she asked.

“Why for your date, of course. Run along, get dressed in something pretty so Birch can take you out to dinner. I’ll stay here and play with Layla.”

Birch hid a smile at Carly’s confusion. “What?” she asked.

“I made us reservations for dinner.”

“But ... you didn’t even invite me. A woman needs some warning.”

“It’s a surprise dinner. I left nothing to chance. I even brought Layla’s favorite babysitter.”

Her confusion morphed into a grin. “Okay. Two minutes. Come in.” She darted up the stairs toward the bedrooms.

“Layla, Grandma’s here. Come give me a hug.”

“Grandma Helen,” Layla screeched as she ran out of the kitchen and flung herself into his mom’s arms. It was beautiful to see the love between the two. Pretty soon, if he had his way, he’d marry Carly, call Layla his daughter, and they’d be a real family. Not that he could love them any more than he did already. Layla was the child of his heart.

His mom was right. He’d waited way too long, played it too safe. He should have asked Carly out two years ago. He was on the right track now, and tonight was his chance to show her how important she was to him.

He sat on the sofa to wait. The condo had changed a lot since she moved in. The tattered sofa and chair were gone. They’d been replaced with sturdy brown leather pieces. The tables were a bit beat up, but solid wood. The boxes of books had filled not one, but two, bookcases which made an L-shape in the corner. Brightly colored quilts hung on the couch and both chairs. There were tiny quilts on the walls along with pictures of Layla and some decorative art prints. Every inch of the room reflected Carly’s personality. It was comfortable and homey.

The two minutes she asked for turned to five, then to ten. He was getting anxious. What was she doing up there? He didn't worry about the reservation he'd made. His high school friend Vince owned Flax and Fig, Elk Valley's top dinner spot. It wasn't super fancy, but it wasn't the diner either. It had a nice ambiance and was great for dates. Sort of an upscale pub.

He'd never taken a woman there before. He'd dated a bit while Carly was married, but as soon as she left her husband, all dating stopped. He didn't have the heart for it anymore. Not when the woman he dreamed about was potentially available.

Fifteen minutes after Carly went upstairs, his mother and Layla were cooking noodles for dinner while he paced the living room, impatiently waiting. The light tap of a heel drew his attention to the stairs. He pivoted so fast he saw stars.

Carly came down step by step. With each stair she descended, she stole more of his breath. Her short flirty skirt showed off her long sexy legs and she wore her sparkly shoes from the wedding. Sweet heaven. His brain fell out when all his blood rushed south.

"Do I look okay?" she asked nervously and twirled in a circle. Her skirt spun higher exposing more leg while the stretchy fabric of her top enhanced every curve to perfection.

He swallowed hard. "Wow!" he whispered and cleared his throat. "You look..."

"Mama, you look like a fairy princess. You're so beautiful." She clasped her hands together in glee.

"I can't say it better than that," Birch declared. His fingers itched to touch her curls. He'd brushed against them enough times to know that they were silky soft and he wanted more. He strode forward to meet her at the bottom of the stairs. He brushed a kiss on her cheek. "You look amazing."

"Thank you." She blushed. "You look pretty good too." She straightened his tie. "New suit?"

"Guilty." He was thrilled that she noticed. "Mom, we'll be gone a couple hours."

"Don't hurry home, dear," she said. "Layla, say goodbye to your mom and Uncle Birch. You'll be sleeping when she gets home. You two have a good time."

"Bye, Mama. Goodnight."

Carly knelt and hugged her daughter. “Sweet dreams, Little Bean. I’ll tuck you in when I get home.” She gathered up her purse and a light jacket. Birch offered her his elbow and they headed out into the cool night air.

♥ Chapter Eighteen ♥

A hostess greeted them when they entered Flax and Fig. “Can I show you to a table? Or would you prefer to have drinks in the lounge before dinner?” she asked sweetly. She stood behind a heavy wooden stand. There was a row of plush leather seats to her left. Beyond that, an arched doorway led to the lounge. On the right another arch led into a dimly lit room. The air teased Carly’s appetite with hints of spice, roast meat, and sweet baked goods. Her stomach rumbled. She had been getting ready to make dinner when Birch arrived.

“Hi. We have reservations under Brighton.”

“Oh, Mr. Brighton. Mr. Gamble said to expect you. Follow me.” She made a notation on her clipboard and menus in hand, led them through the arched doorway into the dimly lit eating area.

Once they passed through the arch, the room seemed brighter. The lighting was discrete, bright enough to easily see but dim enough to feel romantic. The tables boasted white tablecloths and napkins. Each was set with water and wine glasses, and glistening silverware. A small, low centerpiece with flowers and votives lit each table. The décor was wood and leather with musical accents.

Banjos, violins, and guitars hung on the wall alongside flutes and clarinets. There was a piano, though no one played it at the moment. Soft jazz filled the air. Talk about a fusion restaurant. The Flax and Fig blended fine dining, romance, and classic pub together into something that shouldn’t have worked, but came together like a dream.

Holy romantic, Batman! This place was made for seduction.

They walked past all the tables to the back. “In here.” The hostess waved them toward another arched doorway. She and Birch walked through together. The room was small, barely wide enough to fit the single table and chairs it housed. Its high ceiling gave it a spacious air. A bottle of wine was chilling in the tableside ice bucket.

Birch held out her chair and slid it forward as she sat. He took a seat across from her. The hostess explained the evening’s specials and left them alone.

“This place is incredible.” She couldn’t stop looking around. Everywhere her eyes landed, she discovered something new. A display of books in a

corner curio cabinet. A violin. Framed sheet music. Autographed album covers. The room had the feel of a musician's library.

"I've never been in this room. I had no idea it even existed," Birch noted.

"You've been here before?" She didn't want to think about Birch dating someone else.

"Only with my family. Mom likes to come here for her birthday every year. I've never brought a date here. Until tonight." He reached across the table and cupped her hand in his. "I was saving it for the right woman."

"Flatterer," she teased.

"Is the flattery working?" He winked.

"Oh, absolutely. I've never been somewhere this fancy before. Thank you for bringing me."

"You're kidding right? Didn't you and Mike go on dinner dates?"

"Certainly. But to casual places. Usually, chain restaurants. Nothing like this. It wasn't in our budget before we moved to Elk Valley. After we got here ... things changed." He didn't comment, only nodded and for the life of her, she couldn't figure out what that meant, if it meant anything at all.

A tall broad-shouldered man strode into the room. He had dark hair, a thick five o'clock shadow and wore a chef's jacket. "Good evening, Miss." His smile was broad and welcoming. "I'm Vince Gamble. Welcome to Flax and Fig."

"Hi. Nice to meet you. I'm Carly." Vince's high energy poured off him in waves.

"Carly, I've heard a lot about you from my friend here."

Heat rose in her face. "Oh?" How did she even answer a statement like that?

"Birch and I grew up together. I went to culinary school, and he went to university to learn how to be a better rancher. I source all my beef and pork from his family's ranch."

"Wonderful. Someday you'll have to tell me all the embarrassing stories from his childhood."

Vince laughed. "You better believe it."

"Come on, Vince. This is supposed to be the perfect date. Don't go and ruin it on me. I'm trying to impress a lady." Birch grumbled lightly.

Vince laughed again. "That's why I'm not letting you order. I'll feed you myself." He turned to Carly. "Any allergies, sensitivities or dislikes?"

“I’m not a huge fan of fish, but I adore shellfish. Other than that, keep your kale away from me.” She pretended to gag. She’d eat kale and probably not hate it, if it was served, but she would never choose it. Since Birch declared this the ‘perfect date’ she wouldn’t ruin it with kale.

“I can work with that. Let me pour you some wine.” He turned to Birch. “First bottle is on me. After that, you pay for the wine, and I’ll pay for your cab home.” He uncorked the bottle with ease and poured them each a small taste.

Carly rarely drank and wouldn’t know a high-end wine from iced tea, but when Birch said it was fine, she agreed. After a moment of small talk, Vince left them alone. She sipped her wine and spun the glass between her finger and thumb.

“You look uncomfortable,” Birch said. “I don’t bite.” His smile was soft and understanding.

“It’s weird. I’m nervous. I don’t know why.”

“Thank heaven,” he exclaimed. “I’m nervous too. I’ve known you for years. But this feels like a date with a stranger. I don’t know what to say or do.”

“What if we start fresh?” She thrust out her hand. “Hi. I’m Carly. I like long walks in the forest, but not difficult hikes. I like animals and children. I prefer *Star Trek* to *Star Wars*, but baby Yoda is just about the cutest thing ever.”

He took her hand and shook it. Instead of letting go, he lowered their joined hands to the table. His thumb caressed hers making it hard to concentrate on his words.

“I’m Birch. I love kids and dogs, but my passion is horses. I don’t like movies or shows where the bad guys win. I’ll watch a chick flick if I have to. I love police procedurals and mysteries. The best Christmas movie of all time is *White Christmas*. I like listening to music, any kind. But what I love best is sitting outside, watching the stars and roasting marshmallows.” He paused. “Oh, my dog’s name is Francis.”

“I didn’t know you had a dog. When did you get him? Tell me all about him.”

“Her. Francis is a her. She’s a Heinz 57. A bit of everything. A full on mongrel, rescue dog. So far, she’s scared of my horses, but she’s a great watch dog for the house. She loves kids. She’s still a puppy. Eight months, so she can be exuberant.”

“Oh, let me see a picture. I know you have a picture.” He pulled out his phone and flipped to a picture of his pup. Francis was long-legged and shaggy. She looked like a golden retriever collie cross and was quite small. “She’s adorable. Why did you call her Francis?”

“Francis because I was going to buy a pure-bred cattle dog, and I probably still will. The other day, passing through Valleyview to deliver a horse, the town’s rescue center was having a meet and greet. I found Francis; she was free. So, a bargain.”

“*A Bargain for Francis!*” she exclaimed. “I loved that book as a kid.”

“Me too. Mom used to read it to me every night. She read different things to my siblings. They’re a couple years younger than me. My sister is twenty-five, my twin brothers are twenty-three. Just for informational purposes,” he grinned, “I’m thirty-six.”

“That’s a big age gap. I guess I didn’t really think about it before tonight.” She was curious why the gap but it wasn’t something she’d ever ask about.

“Mom lost a couple babies in between us. I’m not sure why. We don’t discuss it because it makes her sad.”

“I could see that. Thanks for telling me.”

Vince came into the room with a tray. “We’ll start tonight with ham and cheese puff pastries with a cordon blue sauce for dipping.”

They nibbled and chatted until the flakey pastries vanished. She couldn’t help but lick the last bit off her fingers. Heat suffused her face when he stared at her lips.

Dinner conversation flowed easily. It had the vibe of old friends connecting after a long period apart. It also felt like two people getting to know each other. Birch was a great conversationalist. He asked interesting questions and paid attention to her answers.

“What made you get into horses? Was it your grandfather?” she asked.

“It was. Grampa had a great sense of humor. I loved being with him and hearing his jokes. I went through a rough patch when I was twelve. Testosterone and tangling with a bully. Helping Grampa on the ranch pulled me through all that. It was back before Dad took over the ranch. He was working in the oil patch, and we still lived in town.”

“I didn’t know you lived in town. I assumed you were born on the ranch, maybe in the barn,” she teased.

“Funny.” His face turned melancholy. “Part of my punishment for the repeated fights was extra chores. Specifically cleaning stalls. Grampa would come out to supervise. We’d end up talking while we worked. As punishments go, it was pretty lenient. One weekend, Grampa dragged me to an auction. He bought two young horses. A stallion and a mare. He said they had ‘potential’. Whatever that meant. Long story short, he bred them. In less than a year, he had a thriving horse business. First for riding, then for racing. Shortly before he passed, he sold all but the top six horses.”

“That’s incredible.”

“I worked alongside him until the day he died.” He blinked several times and scraped his hands through his hair. “He left the main ranch, cattle and equipment to Mom and Dad, to be passed on Sage and Asher. He left a chunk of money for Tanya. It’s in trust until she’s thirty. I got the horses, the second parcel of land we bought together, and the money he made from selling the rest of the herd.”

“What an incredible gift.” She couldn’t imagine the funds involved or the luck to have them drop into your lap. His parents were wealthy already according to Tanya. Something about investing in oil and the stock market. Now Helen did the office work for the ranch and Buck was the rancher. It wasn’t a huge operation, but Carly knew it was very profitable.

“It was a gift. One that I don’t waste. I’ve bred more horses and they’re starting to win important races. We’re not talking the Kentucky derby, but they do generate a good income for me.”

“But you still work with your dad?”

“I do. With the twins still at university, Dad can’t do it alone. Sure, he’s got a couple hands, I do too, but I like pitching in. Their ranch is my history. Mine will be my legacy. For my own children.”

Legacy. What a great thing to be able to leave your kids. At this point, all she had to give Layla was a legacy of love and acceptance. She was proud of how she was raising her child. Showing her love and the value of hard work. “I’d like to see your operation someday,” she said. “Your house is amazing.”

“I’d like that.” He smiled proudly. “There’s a lot to see.” He didn’t sound like he was bragging, more like he was stating a fact.

They talked all through dinner. “If you could go anywhere or do anything, what would it be?”

The abrupt change of topic stumped her for a second. “I guess I’d love to take Layla to the Vancouver Aquarium. She loves fish. Okay, she loves all

animals but this week, it's fish. We'd fly out and stay in a hotel and visit all the sights." She smiled and then sighed. "But that's not in the budget."

"That's a great idea. But what about you? Travel? Open a shop? Fly to Paris for dinner? Take a train ride through the mountains of Alberta and BC? Take a helicopter tour of the Grand Canyon? Think big. Bucket list items."

She tried to think on a grand scale, but her needs and desires were small. "I don't have a bucket list. But I guess any or all of those would be okay. They seem expensive. But really, I just want Layla to have a good life with everything she needs. Nothing excessive but not scrambling to meet her needs either."

Birch nodded as if he agreed, but he looked puzzled.

She squirmed in her seat, uncomfortable now that he'd reminded her of their disparate incomes. Tanya might be her friend, but Birch was way out of her league. Someone from a modest background like hers would be foolish to pin her hopes on someone as wealthy as Birch.

"I guess I should go," she said. "It's late and tomorrow is a workday. Dinner was amazing."

♥ Chapter Nineteen ♥

Frustration ate at Birch on the ride back to Carly's. She rushed out of the car and hurried up the sidewalk without waiting for him. The next thing he knew, Carly was rushing him and his mother out of her condo on some made up excuse.

"I don't know what happened, Mom," he declared on the ride back to the ranch. "One minute we're talking about plans and dreams, the next she's asking to go home. I don't know what happened."

He had settled the bill and walked her to the car. She was nearly silent on the way back to her place. He tried repeatedly to initiate a conversation, but to no avail. All he got was one-word answers.

"I must have said something, but I don't know what?" He clenched the steering wheel between his hands until he felt it would crack beneath his grip. "She's so hard to figure out. First, it's like she doesn't know I'm alive. Then we fought because I overreacted to her teasing me about being a stalker. Then a sweet reconciliation and half a dozen lovely dinners at her house. Now, on a real date, she turns cold. I don't understand her, Mom. I just don't."

"I wasn't there, Birch. I can't even guess. Maybe it's just all moving too fast for her. You've been friends for a long time. Now you're rushing, in a good way, into a serious relationship. She's got a child to consider. Be patient."

"I don't know. It feels like more than that. She went from an easy back-and-forth discussion to ice-cold. A complete personality switch. It was so weird." He puzzled over it all the way to his parents' house to drop his mother off, and then all the way to his own place. He parked by the front door and went in to let Francis out of her cage. Eventually, she'd have her freedom to run the land, but until she was better trained and more mature, she was safer inside when he wasn't around.

Her entire body vibrated with excitement. At least someone was glad to see him. "Hey, girl. How are you?" Her tail thumped on the floor as she waited for a pat. They'd been working on not jumping up. He scrubbed her ears with his hands. "Come on Francis, let's go outside. It's a nice night."

He lowered himself into the deck swing and patted his lap. She hopped right up beside him and rested her head on his knees. Running his fingers

through her silky fur he pondered what happened. “Why did I have to fall for the unattainable who became attainable but distant and hard to understand?”

Francis whined.

“You’ve got that right girl.”

He sat there for an hour, lost in thought. The wind started to blow, and the air smelled like rain. He went inside, fed Francis, and made a cup of cocoa. Wrapped in a blanket, he settled into a deck hammock to watch the weather and ponder his problem. Francis curled up under the hammock.

He ran the evening’s conversation over in his mind ... they’d been talking about doing anything in the world. Fulfilling dreams, bucket lists, and travel.

Whoa! He’d been talking about those things. She’d listened and answered. Was that a clue?

Month by month, year by year, he recalled every incident with Carly. Every casual or stilted conversation. Every smile and frown. All the times he and his family had pitched in and how every time they did something for her or helped her, she baked or created something for them. She didn’t like to be in anyone’s debt. For anything.

That was a revelation. Only how did it fit into tonight’s behavior and sudden cold shoulder? Was it the feeling of being indebted?

He sat bold upright, nearly spilling his cocoa on his chest. Money!

It was all about the money.

For the love of all that was holy.

He nearly laughed aloud. In his final year of university, he’d seriously dated a woman. He’d dumped her when he realized that somehow, she’d found out that his father had a lot of money. She’d been eager to get her hands on whatever money she could. Now he was getting the cold shoulder from the woman of his dreams because he had too much money. The irony!



CARLY COULD HARDLY wait to get to work. Tanya was back! She couldn’t wait to hear about her glorious honeymoon. Paris, the French Riviera, Italy. What a whirlwind tour they had gone on. So was so excited for her friend.

Seven-thirty came and went. Then eight. Tanya was late. Maybe they hadn’t gotten home yesterday after all. Weird that she didn’t text and let

someone know. The morning rush came and went. Finally, shortly after ten, Tanya strolled in.

She should have been smiling and tanned from their last few days on an Italian beach. She was pale and red-eyed. What the heck? She rushed to her friend's side.

"Tanya. What's wrong?"

Tanya sniffed. "Nothing. Allergies. Sorry I'm late." She brushed past Carly and dumped her wallet in the lockbox. She snatched up the coffee pot and started making the rounds. The smile on her face was obviously fake. Many of their regulars wouldn't notice, but Carly saw the way it drooped at the corners when nobody was looking. Her friend wiped her eyes too often and spent entirely too much time in the ladies' room and wasn't wearing her wedding rings.

The minute both servers for the next shift arrived, Carly hauled Tanya outside. "We're going to talk. Now." She dragged her by the arm to the park down the street. They sat on a bench far away from everyone else.

"What happened?" she asked softly.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"You were supposed to come back glowing and happy. Newlywed bliss and all that. You're not even wearing your rings." She squeezed her friend's hands. "Talk to me. Whatever is wrong I'll help you fix it."

"There's no fixing it. I've made arrangements to have my marriage annulled."

"What?" Carly nearly shot off the bench. "Why? How?"

Tanya stared at the ground and sighed. "First, we got to our hotel in Paris and were greeted, in our suite, by his mother. His mother! Can you believe it?" she screeched. "No honeymoon night for us."

"What? That's insane. Who takes their mother on their honeymoon? But she left after that?"

"Noooo. She came with us. Every step of the trip. We stayed in suites. She had one room. I had a room. George either had a room or slept on the floor in hers." She laughed maniacally. "One night I could forgive. Two was a joke. It had to be. By night four, I was mad. Okay, I was mad before that." She jumped to her feet and stomped circles around the bench.

Carly had to turn around to keep her in sight. Tanya wrapped her arms around herself either to block the cool breeze or to hold herself together.

“There’s more to it than just this, isn’t there?” Her heart wept for her friend. First, her wedding was hijacked, then her honeymoon. Brutal.

“You have no idea. She booked the two of us for a pedicure. I said I’d meet her there because I had a favorite polish upstairs.” She stared up at the sky, hands on her hips. “I cornered George in the room.” She started sobbing.

Carly rushed to the other side of the bench and hugged her. “It’s okay,” she murmured.

“He said,” she hiccupped. “He said she was watching to ensure we didn’t consummate the marriage.”

“What?”

“Is everything okay, Tanya?” a passerby called out. Carly gave her the thumbs up.

“Yup. I knew he was marrying me for his own reasons. He told me that up front. I knew it, and I was okay with it. But I liked him. Maybe even loved him.”

“If you didn’t love him, why the rush to marry?” This was getting more and more messed up by the minute.

Tanya growled. “I had my reasons. We were friends from an online class his mother didn’t know he was taking. We met for coffee and after a few ‘dates’ hashed out a plan. He needed to marry someone by the end of summer in order to inherit his maternal grandfather’s estate.”

“Why you?”

“Why not? I had my own reasons for agreeing.”

“How does his mother fit in?” Carly asked.

“She was in agreement with the wedding, so she could get her hands on the money which bypassed her in favor of George. She wanted to keep us from consummating so she could help him have it annulled once they had the cash.”

“Jeez. That’s messed up.”

“You’re telling me. Somehow, it was my breaking point. If we were never going to have sex, I couldn’t ... never mind. I wasn’t about to spend the rest of my life with that miserable witch around and I told him so.” She laughed, the sound cold and achingly painful. “I booked my own flights back. Thank heaven I have my own money. I stayed in Calgary and beat them to the punch. I started the process to have my marriage annulled.”

“That fast? I thought it would take longer.”

“When you can prove that you’ve never” She blushed. “It’s easy.”

“You’ve never? Holy smokes. Girl, you need a hug.” They embraced for a long moment. “This calls for carbs. What’ll it be? Pizza? Pasta? Sweets?”

“Yes. All of them.”

“Come on. I’ll let Mike know he’s got Layla for the night. We’ll go to my place and eat ourselves into a carb coma. Then, we’ll figure out how to tell your family. I assume they don’t know.”

“They don’t. You know what? Marriage sucks.”

♥ Chapter Twenty ♥

Carly leaned back against the sofa in her condo. “Oh my gosh. I am so full.” She tore a corner off a cinnamon bun and popped it into her mouth. But this is so good.” She finished the bite and sipped her tea. They debated wine and decided that neither of them needed to suffer the consequences of too much alcohol at work the next day. Carly had yet to tell Tanya the consequences of her last dive into drinking.

“I get that you have your reasons for marrying George, but I’d like to know why so I can make sense of this disaster.” She was prying, but after six years of friendship, and sharing almost everything, she deserved an explanation.

Tanya inhaled and twisted her hands together. She stared at the coffee table. “Remember when I had all those stomach issues? They weren’t with my stomach. I have severe endometriosis. The doctor says if I don’t have kids within the next twelve to eighteen months, I won’t be able to. This was my last chance.” She sniffed and wiped away tears.

“Oh no!”

“Yeah.” The single word was pure sarcasm.

“I decided to go for it. George needed a fake wife. I needed a sperm donor. I thought, we thought, it would work. Neither of us counted on his psychotic mother getting in the way.”

“But to marry. Why not just do in vitro? You know, sperm donor. Wouldn’t that work?”

“I’m a waitress. I can’t raise a child on that. You know how hard it is.”

“I sure do, though Mike is great. But didn’t you inherit some money?”

“I did, but that’s for my future. I’m saving it for Let’s talk about that another day. How did you know about it?” She lifted her attention from the bowl of bacon cheddar potato chips in her lap.

“Birch mentioned it.”

“How long have you known?”

“Just a couple days.”

“Did you finally get together with my brother?” She jumped up to hug Carly.

“I did. But that’s also a discussion for another day. So, you married for sperm, and money?” The entire concept was almost unfathomable. She

nibbled a salt and vinegar chip and searched for something supportive to say.

“Yes. I figured if I had my child, it would be enough. We’d both get what we want. If the marriage was loveless, at least we got along well. We were friends. Besides, imagine what my parents would say if I showed up pregnant and single.”

Carly considered it. They’d be disappointed, but she had no doubt that they’d be supportive once the shock wore off. As for the rest of it, there was so much wrong with the whole charade she didn’t know what to say to Tanya.

“You know what? Let’s just call it a bullet dodged. You didn’t want to spend the rest of your life under that woman’s thumb. I could kick him in the junk for you.” She moved around the table and knelt beside her friend.

“Tanya, I swear that if you cannot carry a baby to term, I’ll do it for you. We’ll find a father, or sperm, or whatever, implant me with your egg and I’ll be your host mother. I swear, I will do everything in my power to help you have a child of your own blood.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing I offered, isn’t it?”

♥ Chapter Twenty-One ♥

After a ton of carbs and sweets, and two pizzas, they finally went to bed. Carly's head ached from the tears she'd shed for her friend's loss. She hoped to sleep, but after hours of tossing and turning, she got up to make herself some sleepy tea. Without it, sleep would be impossible.

Tanya's situation ran over and over in her head. Funny how all her money, and all of George's didn't buy happiness. Heck, it didn't even buy a week of fake marital bliss.

She started thinking about ideas she'd held her whole life. At university, she'd encountered more than one trust fund kid who squandered their opportunity to get a good education. It made her biased against the wealthy. Tanya's situation reaffirmed that stereotype. But it also brought home the fact that Tanya and her family were the exact opposite. They gave generously to local charities. They were always around for town events, pitching in where needed.

Just look at how much they'd done for her over the past three years. They'd been her primary support network. Day in and day out. Never asking for payment or return favors. They were just there for her.

Maybe she'd been hasty in freaking out over bucket lists and finances. Discarding Birch after their lovely dinner had been hasty. After all, she'd liked him, maybe loved him, for years now. He didn't use his money to get his way. If she were honest with herself, it didn't seem like he was rich at all. He acted like any other guy and didn't throw his money around. He was kind and considerate. Intelligent. Sweet and good with Layla.

She sighed and poured a bit of honey into her teacup. Maybe she'd made a mistake.

Did it matter that his bucket list was longer than hers? Maybe she could share his. Or they could live a simple life on his ranch. She was still sitting at the kitchen table when the alarm on her phone went off.

Tanya stumbled, bleary eyed, into the kitchen. "Ugh. I've got a carb hangover. How do those runners do that carb loading thing? I need coffee."

"Go back to bed. I'll cover at work for you. We've managed for two weeks without you. What's one more day?"

"I can't. Just let me have coffee and shower. I'll survive." She slid into a chair. "Did you mean what you said last night?"

“That I’d kick him in the junk? Yes. I’ll run him over with my car if you want.” She laughed, trying to take the tension from the room. “But if you meant, will I have a baby for you? Absolutely. One thousand percent. When do we start? You’re my best friend. Your happiness is important to me. If you’re sure that’s what you want, I’m your gal.”

Tanya’s sobs were silent, and she was smiling a joyful, but sad smile. Not happiness, not sadness, not even melancholy. Just weirdly peacefully and sadly happy. Carly hadn’t ever seen an expression like it.

The doorbell rang.

“Who is that?” she asked. “Stay here. I’ll get rid of whoever it is.”

Tanya sniffed and nodded. Carly crept across the main floor and peered out the peephole. “Birch?”

Tanya hissed, “Get rid of him.” She slipped out of sight.

Carly opened the door. “Birch? Good morning. Why are you here this early?” Glory be. He looked amazing. Neatly trimmed beard. His hair had been cut. His jeans were pressed, and he sported a tidy grey dress shirt. Her heart soared and crashed in on itself. He wasn’t her man. He never really had been, no matter how much she wanted him. Her earlier thoughts that they could make a relationship work vanished like smoke in the wind.

“Because I can’t stay away. I’m not sure what happened the other night. Whatever it was, I want a chance to talk about it. I want to make it right.”

“Okay.” She tried to look him in the eye and ended up staring at the floor.

“Can I come in?”

“Um. No. Not this morning. Busy day. I have to go to work.”

“In two hours.” He looked over her shoulder. “Is someone here?” He glanced down. “Those are Tanya’s favorite shoes. Is she here? Why is my sister here? She should be with her husband.” He pushed forward.

She stopped him with a hand on his chest. “Yes, Birch. I’d like a chance to talk to you. Not here, not now. Later. I’ll come out to the ranch after work. I’ll bring Layla to play with your mom. Okay?”

He squinted then leaned close and whispered, “Will you tell me why my sister is hiding out here?”

She nodded. She was betraying a friend, but Tanya needed her family’s support. She wouldn’t give him details, just enough to help him relax until Tanya was ready to go home.

“Okay. See you later.” He reached out and ran a hand down her messed up hair. “I missed you. I’m sorry.”

“Bye, Birch. See you at the ranch around four.” He backed out the door, visible reluctance in every step. “I’ll come. I promise.” She wasn’t sure she was ready to talk to him. Her feelings were all jumbled up and Tanya’s crisis wasn’t helping. She’d go and take what came and deal with it then. With Layla around, she’d have an excuse to leave if she felt the need. “Bye.” She closed the door and bolted it.

She leaned against the foyer wall for a moment, struggling to get her bearing and calm her erratic heartbeat. Steadied physically, but not emotionally, she went back to the kitchen.

“Birch knows you’re here. You better stay here until you’re ready to talk to him. You know he’ll come to the café. Don’t worry about work. I’ll tell Hank you’ve got food poisoning.”

“Thanks.” Tanya hugged her. “Wait. Why was my brother here at five-thirty in the morning on a weekday? Or anytime?”

Heat filled her face.

“Oh, my goodness. What happened after the wedding? What did I miss?”

She was not getting pulled back into the wedding drama right now. “We might have seen each other once or twice.” She shrugged as if it didn’t matter.

“But this early in the morning?”

“We might have had a tiff. He wants to talk about it.”

“What about you? Do you want to talk?”

Wasn’t that the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question? What did she want? “It doesn’t matter. I’m committed now. I said I’d go over after work.”

“Don’t you dare tell him what happened. I’ll do it in my own time. I swear. They don’t know about my endometriosis. Thank heaven for free Canadian health care.”

She spent the entire day at work waffling between worrying about Tanya and trying to solve her own problems. There was no easy resolution for any of it. The only thing she decided was that she’d be there to support Tanya when she laid her marriage and reproductive problems out on the table for her family.

♥ Chapter Twenty-Two ♥

Layla was overtired and grumpy by the time Carly left work. After yet another day of filling in for Tanya, Carly was exhausted. She called Birch and begged off going to see him. It cost her a promise to come out the next day first thing in the morning.

The day dawned bright and beautiful. Carly was tempted to take Layla and spend the morning in the park playing and enjoying the peace and quiet. Instead, she packed Layla up and headed for Birch's ranch.

She was torn between trepidation and excitement. She'd get to snoop around the ranch and see what Birch had built, but she'd be having a discussion she'd rather put off until ... well forever.

"Mama, where are we going?" Her daughter's sweet voice was calming.

"We're going to see Birch and Grandma Helen and Grandpa Buck if he's there."

"Are we staying for dinner?"

"I don't know. Perhaps. I brought snacks for you if you get hungry."

"I want to stay for dinner. Grandma Helen is the best cook."

"We'll see, but no promises. I have to talk to Uncle Birch for a bit. After we talk, I'll decide what to do about supper."

"Kay," she said in her 'I'm pouting' voice.

"Love you, Little Bean."

"Love you too, Mama." Paper rustled and Carly peeked in the rearview mirror. Layla was reading her favorite car book. She loved looking at the pictures and making up her own stories. Grateful that her daughter was occupied, Carly turned her attention to her problems.

If she took a leap of faith and got serious with Birch, that meant ranch life. She wasn't much of a horsewoman, though she had ridden a few times with Tanya. She liked the animals, but she wasn't obsessed like Birch and Tanya. What she really loved were the views at the ranch. The fields of crops, the cow-mown grass, and the amazing stands of forest. She loved the outdoors and would thrive in a ranch environment.

Foremost in her mind was the question of whether dating Birch was the right plan. She wanted to be with him, she had for years, but what if this was just a proximity thing? What if she only wanted him because she couldn't have him? She'd be ruining a friendship if things didn't work out.

She stuffed the thoughts aside. Before anything was decided, she had to talk to Birch and see what he wanted to say to her. She was almost at Birch's ranch when an attack of nerves struck. She pulled into a roadside turnout and shut off her engine. Spreading her fingers wide, she pushed out a long slow breath. "You can do this," she whispered. After a few deep breaths, she pulled back onto the highway and traveled the last five kilometers and turned at the enormous sign she'd noticed the first time she was here. She parked beside Birch's parents' SUV and went up to the house.

Helen, his mother, answered the door. "Oh, Carly. Come in. It's wonderful to see you." She wrapped Carly in a warm embrace. "I am so sorry about the wedding debacle. I had no idea you were stuck in the basement. You should have said something. Oh, I get so angry when I think about it. How my daughter could marry that man, I'll never know." She shook her head. "There's Layla! Come give Grandma a hug."

"Where is Birch? I thought he was expecting me."

"He's out at the main barn, I think. If not, he'll be at the visitor center by the track. Just follow the path out back. You can't miss them. The visitor center is just to the left of the barn."

Carly walked around the house on the deck and stepped down onto a patterned concrete pathway leading away from the house. The main outbuildings weren't far away. She must have been totally out of it to miss them the night she visited. There were several yard lights on poles. They probably came on at night and illuminated everything.

A light haze covered the sun keeping it from getting too warm. Birds chirped and a horse nickered nearby. The scent of hay and freshly turned dirt brought back memories of working in her mother's garden. She glanced around, taking in the pretty scenery and the upscale buildings.

The visitor center and barn were painted classic barn red with white trim. There was a straight-walled open-ended structure near the visitor center, though she couldn't identify its use. She veered right toward the barn's wide open doorway.

A young man in well-worn jeans, a cowboy hat, and boots, was working inside the doorway. He straightened up when she approached, shifting toward the center of the doorway, as if barring her from entry. "Good morning, ma'am. How can I help you?"

"Hi. I'm looking for Birch."

“I think he’s at the guest center.” He pointed to his left. “You can find him there.” He tipped his hat. “Have a nice day, ma’am.”

She walked away. “Ma’am my backside. I’m not that old,” she muttered under her breath. There was a small parking lot beside the center. What did he do that required that much parking? Were the stands, the odd building, and the visitor center part of his business? They must be. Jeepers, he was doing more than just training horses.

She stopped in her tracks. She knew Birch raised horses, but there had to be millions of dollars in the buildings alone. How had she not known this? His sister was her best friend. Tanya frequently rattled on about Birch’s silly horses. Was she unaware of how much money was involved? Was it a function of having been raised wealthy?

All her insecurities about money came flooding back in, leaving her certain she was inadequate in her bright floral sundress and strappy flat sandals. Her floppy white straw hat made her feel like an absolute hick. She was totally out of place. She pivoted on her heel and headed back to the house. As she passed close to the barn, the youth inside called out.

“Ma’am? Ma’am? I spoke with Birch. He says to meet him in the visitor center. He’ll be there in five.”

She waved acknowledgement. Birch might be there in five, but she’d be at home. No way was she prepared to deal with all this money. What happened to the man she’d admired? When had he gotten rich ... richer, and how had she missed it? He never flaunted his money, but from someone with a very modest background and income, all this was too much.

She was storming back to the house to wait inside when a horn tooted. A shiny red, dual wheeled, 4X4 truck pulled up and parked on the grass behind the house. The door opened and Birch jumped out.

“Where are you headed?” he asked, striding toward her. “Jimmy said you were headed to the visitor center.” He moved close like he was going to kiss her.

She stepped back, nearly tripping in her haste. “Um. I was going to...” she snapped her mouth shut. She wouldn’t lie, but she couldn’t tell the truth either. “Never mind.”

“Were you leaving? You just got here. Mom texted that she was playing with Layla.”

She wished he sounded accusatory, but he didn’t. He sounded ... bewildered. She sighed. “I was leaving.” She did not want to go into this right

now. Or ever. She was a waitress. He was ... whatever he was. Clearly, he was above her pay grade. The difference in income shouldn't matter, but it made her grossly uncomfortable.

"Why? I have the whole day planned out. I want to spend the day with you, and Layla." He waved to the west of the house. "I wanted to watch her play on the play structure I put in the week the house was finished. I did it for you, and Layla. I'm not messing around here. I want you to know, in no uncertain terms, that you and your daughter are important to me. A play place was one way to show you how important you are to me. I want you in my life, Carly."

She swallowed hard. It was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her. Even her parents' plentiful words of love and praise hadn't hit this deeply. "Oh." The single syllable was barely audible once she forced it past the lump in her throat. But the expense he'd put into the play area made her uncomfortable. Inadequacy pinched her shoulders together.

She stared down at the ground but could feel his eyes on her like a caress.

He slipped a finger under her chin and lifted her face. She stared into his eyes, wished she was anywhere but here.

"What freaked you out?" His brow wrinkled in concern. "First the other night, and just now, I can tell something scared you. We should talk about it."

His hands were warm on her shoulders, driving away part of the chill threatening to overcome her. Tears formed in her eyes. She blinked them away, hoping he didn't notice.

"What is it?" He massaged her shoulders and then trailed down to grasp her icy hands in his warm ones. "You can tell me anything. I swear."

She shook her hands free and dashed away her tears before they could fall. She didn't want to talk about it. "I was just ... overwhelmed by everything. I didn't realize your work was such a big thing." She shrugged.

"Let's go for a ride. We'll show Layla the horses later. Mom is so excited to be with her."

"Is that your truck? What happened to Big Blue?" She realized he'd had this truck at the wedding.

"Oh, I've still got Blue. I won't part with her anytime soon. She's had a total overhaul. This is my company truck. The one I use when I need to make an impression. Red's got all the bells and whistles. Top of the line."

"Ah." She pretended she understood the need to look important rather than being who you were.

“Frankly, I’d rather drive Blue. Remember Rusty from high school?” He laughed.

“Um. No. As far as I know, you’ve only ever had Blue. I’ve only been in town for six years. Remember?”

“Really? It seems like longer.” He shrugged. “Unrequited love will warp your sense of time.” He chuckled. “I’m glad I found you. Hop in and we’ll hit the barn first.”

She looked him up and down. He looked incredible. Polished boots and a brand new hat. Neatly pressed jeans and a pristine, navy-blue button-down shirt with a discrete logo for his ranch on the pocket. He reminded her of a rich television Texas rancher. Where had the real Birch gone?

“Am I dressed okay?” She brushed her hands down her dress. Again, she felt inadequate beside this fancy man. She was unnerved by the changes in him.

“You look amazing. Pretty, sexy, adorable.” He lifted her hat and dropped a kiss on her forehead. He set the hat back on her head and adjusted it with a soft smile. “Stop fretting. I’m the same person I always was.”

Yeah, one who drives a truck worth more than everything I own. She banked her nerves and climbed into the tall truck. Thank heavens it had chrome running boards. She wasn’t short but it was a long way up and she was wearing a skirt.

Birch climbed in and buckled his seatbelt. “Buckle up.”

“We’re only going five hundred yards.”

He gave her a raised eyebrow look and she fastened her belt. She wanted to bolt or tell him how unnerved she felt, but he chatted away about how he’d worked hard with his grandfather to build his ranch. She kept her fears to herself.

He stopped outside the barn and greeted the youth by name. “Jimmy, good to see you. This is my girlfriend, Carly. She’s allowed to go anywhere she wants to. If she needs anything, I’m trusting you to help her out.”

“Yes, sir. Nice to meet you ma’am.”

“That’s my man.” Birch clapped him on the back. “We’re going to pick a couple of mounts. I’ll get you to saddle them for us while I take Carly to change into riding gear.” He turned to her. “You did bring jeans, right?”

“I keep a spare pair in the trunk.”

He led her inside and they met a few horses. Jimmy trailed behind them waiting to learn which he would be saddling. After meeting a dozen horses,

she was totally overwhelmed. “Just pick something, Birch. I have no idea how to choose between horses.”

“Jimmy, please saddle Isis and Osiris.”

“Yes, sir.” She banked a smirk at the youth’s eager attitude.

“Now, let’s run you up to the house to change.”

♥ Chapter Twenty-Three ♥

“Mama, look at the playground,” Layla called out, jumping down, and racing to Carly’s side when she got out of the truck. “It has a climbing wall,” she declared with awe. “Watch me.” After the world’s fastest hug, she raced to the eight-foot-tall climbing wall and scrambled up its side.

Carly’s breath caught in her throat. She was nervous for Layla who seemed totally oblivious to the danger of falling. She understood safe play, where there was the potential for slight injury but no true danger, still, she winced as she watched her daughter perched on top of the wall.

“See, Mama, I’m good.” She waved and swayed back and forth.

“Relax, Carly,” Birch’s mom, Helen said. “She’s been up and down there twenty times already. She loves it and the rubber chips are cushioning if she takes a tumble.”

Carly smiled and waved at her daughter who scrambled down and raced to the spiral slide. “I can’t help but worry.” She managed a laugh.

“What do you think of the place? I’m so proud of what Birch has become. He’s quite the name in horse racing. Last year, one of his horses took several titles.” She beamed with pride.

“I had no idea. Nobody said anything. I really thought he just raised horses and sold them for pleasure riders. But this...” she waved toward the stunning buildings he had built, “this is beyond anything I imagined. Tanya always referred to his silly horses. I mean” she trailed off, unable to complete the thought coherently.

“I’m still astounded myself.” Helen waved to Layla who was now atop the monkey bars. “The first time he sold a horse for six figures, I nearly had a heart attack. Imagine, my son building an empire from a few horses he inherited from my father. It’s incredible. Don’t let those fancy buildings worry you. Birch hasn’t changed one bit. He’s still the solid, caring man you’ve known for years.”

“Oh, Helen, I don’t know. I’m a simple girl with simple needs. This is all so much.” She waved to encompass the house and all the matching outbuildings.

“My son is a regular guy who happens to have a bit more money than some. Don’t let it make you feel inadequate.”

“I don’t feel inadequate,” she lied.

“Oh, honey, don’t be silly. I can see it in your face. If you weren’t intimidated, you wouldn’t be staring at your car wishing you were anywhere but here.” She smiled. “Straighten those shoulders and get your backside down there. Birch will be devastated if you leave. He’s been talking about sharing his world with you for weeks. He’s proud of what he’s built, rightfully so. Don’t disappoint him by stealing his chance to impress you.”

“That’s the trouble, I was impressed with him before. He’s kind and generous. He’s a hard worker and great with animals. He’s got a sense of humor. He adores Layla.” She snapped her mouth shut.

“He’s still all those things, dear. The only difference is that you realized he’s got a nice fat bank account.” She paused thoughtfully. “Go, spend time with him. See him for who he is. Ignore the money. At the end of the day, you can always walk away. He waited a long time for you to notice him and he’s terrified about this date and rejection. Spend some time with him before you throw him away.”

Throw him away? Is that what Helen thought she was planning to do? “Fine.” She resisted rolling her eyes. Helen had the mom guilt down pat.

“This isn’t about you,” Helen said kindly. “This is about Birch. I know our money, and now his, makes you uncomfortable, but forget about the money. And remember one thing, if Birch wasn’t proud to have you at his side, he wouldn’t have waited years for you. You are not inadequate beside him; you are more than enough. You’re a special woman and my son cares for you. All that matters is the love you share.” She turned toward Layla and called, “Layla, come say goodbye to your mom before she goes back to see Birch.”

Layla rushed over and threw her arms around Carly. “Bye, Mama.” She looked up and smiled. “You look exquisite.”

“Exquisite?” she chuckled. “Where did you hear that?”

“From Grandma Helen. She says her roses are exquisite, that means lovely and beautiful. Bye.” She raced to the monkey bars and started swinging her way across.

“There it is, from an expert.” Helen laughed. “She’s right, you look lovely. Go on now, take a ride, enjoy the evening.” She pointed toward the barn. “Oh look, there’s Birch now.”

Sure enough, he strolled off the house’s deck toward them.

“Bye, Helen. Bye, Layla.” She started toward him.

“Carly, why haven’t you changed yet?” He slung his arm around her shoulder as they pivoted toward his house.

“I just wanted to check on Layla.”

“I tried calling you. You didn’t answer.”

“Sorry, I turned off my ringer.” She didn’t want her phone to interrupt their ride. This might be the last time she dated Birch and she didn’t want her phone to ruin it. “I’m excited to see your land.” She was, she just wasn’t excited about his money.

“There’s a but in your voice, and I swear I want to hear all about it. You seem ... how do I put this ... at the risk of getting a swat for the metaphor, you seem like a skittish colt.”

She elbowed him in the ribs, despite the accuracy of his comparison. “Gee, thanks.”

“I knew that was the wrong thing to say.” He stopped and turned her so they were face to face. “I don’t know what’s bothering you. I just want us to enjoy the day together. I want to have a chance to talk to you. I have things I want to tell you.”

He pulled her close and after twenty long seconds of staring into her eyes, lowered his head toward her.

She held her breath. He was going to kiss her. She’d dreamed of this moment for so long. Her heart raced. She shouldn’t want to taste him, there were too many unresolved issues between them, but by all that was holy, she wanted that kiss.

At the last second, he straightened and said, “Come on. Let’s ride some horses.”

It took her five minutes to change and three of that was spent mentally bracing herself. Why did he have to be so rich? What did a handsome, talented, gentle, rich man want with an ordinary girl like her? And why didn’t he kiss her?

“Are you coming?” Birch called from the kitchen.

She didn’t answer. She straightened her spine and strode into the room. “Let’s do this thing.”

“Relax. You’ve ridden before. You’ll love it.” Hand in hand they walked back to the barn. Jimmy waited with three horses. Two were saddled, and the third wore a pair of bulging packs where a saddle normally sat. Like saddlebags, but not quite.

“What’s in the packs?” she asked.

“Wait and see.” He helped her mount and hopped up on his own horse. “Jimmy, we’ll be back by four. Don’t forget to study while we’re gone.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Brighton, sir.”

When they were out of earshot, she asked the first of many questions she had. “Sir? Study?”

“Jimmy was failing in school. His mother was at her wit’s end. When I caught him shoplifting in the drugstore, I turned him in to the police. After a lot of talk, the police, Jimmy, his mother, and I came to an agreement. He’s doing community service here instead of being arrested and getting a record. Turns out that he loves horses almost as much as I do. He’ll do anything to keep this job. Keeping his marks up is part of our deal. He works Saturdays, and after school from four to eight. Part of that time is spent studying.”

“You’re a good guy, Mr. Brighton, sir.”

“I insist on being called Mr., but not the sir. It might be old school, but it keeps a definitive line between management and other staff. All my managers are Mr., Mrs., Miss., or Ms. as they prefer. We have a lot of students working here besides Jimmy. They go by their first names.”

“Just how many staff do you have?” She didn’t know if she was awed or intimidated. Probably the latter.

“Don’t make it sound like that. Like hiring people makes me a bad person somehow. Money is important to me only in that it lets me do what I want. What I want to do is raise horses. If I can hire other people and share my profit, that’s a good thing.”

They rode in silence while she tried to digest his words.

Finally, he said, “I lied. There are two things I want. I want to raise horses, and I want a family of my own. Is that so wrong? To want to have enough money to give the people I love everything they need and have enough left over to hire people, so my family gets my time as well?”

“No.” It didn’t seem so bad when he put it that way. Spreading his money around by hiring people was a great way to give to the community. Admirable.

“Look. I didn’t bring you here to show off my money. But this land, these horses and my facilities are all part of me. Horses aren’t what I do, they’re who I am. Look at it this way, you aren’t just a mom. You’re a generous kind-hearted woman and it would be wrong of anyone to try and make you change what you are deep inside.”

They rode a little further. “Dad made some really good investments over the years. He made a killing in real estate and the stock market. He’s retired from that to raise cattle. You don’t have trouble around my parents’ money, why do you balk at mine? That is the problem, that’s why you suddenly felt uncomfortable isn’t it?” Frustration rang in his voice.

“I ... I just sort of ... I don’t know. I’ve always thought of you as a regular guy. When you started talking bucket lists that included travelling the whole world and doing expensive things, it shocked me.”

“Give me today to prove that I am a regular guy, okay? My family has had money for as long as I can remember. But nothing was ever handed to me. I had to buy my own trucks. I paid for my own education, the same as Tanya is doing.”

“I’ll try to be open minded,” she answered.

He pointed to the left. “We’ll follow that trail. It gets narrow, so follow behind me. We’re almost there.”

“Almost where?”

He laughed. “Wait and see.”

They rode up a gentle sloping hill through the trees and when the path opened into a clearing by a stream he stopped and dismounted. He helped her down and let the horses’ reins dangle.

“Won’t they run away?”

“No. They’re trained to stay. A bear or cougar might freak them out, but we’d see their nervousness before they got too carried away.” He ran his finger down the crease in her brow. “Relax, beautiful. We’re safe here.”

♥ Chapter Twenty-Four ♥

Birch sighed as he spread out the thick denim blanket his sister had made. This was supposed to be a happy date. He knew she was wary about taking advantage of his family's money and always insisted on contributing fairly, but until the other night, he had no idea their different income levels would stress her this badly.

When he looked up from spreading the blanket, Carly was sitting on a flat-topped rock by the stream, shoes beside her, feet in the water.

"That's my favorite stone," he said. "I love to sit here and watch the fish." He looked at the sky. "Pretty hot day for fish though. Mind if I join you?" The rock was more than big enough for two and he was disappointed when she moved to the far side and perched on the very edge and set her shoes beside her.

He shed his boots and socks. After rolling up his jeans, he sat beside her and dangled his feet in the water. "This is one of my favorite thinking spots."

"It's very nice."

Good grief. Getting Carly to talk today was nearly impossible. Nothing to do but lay his heart on the line.

"I inherited a lot of money from my grandfather, along with this land. I like to think it didn't change me, but maybe it did. I work hard, I save hard, and I give back to the community whenever I can." He laughed lightly. "And I pay a lot of taxes."

She chuckled. "I can imagine."

She probably couldn't, but he wasn't going to go there. They had enough issues between them already. "Let me tell you a story." He took a big breath and prepared to lay it all on the line. "Once upon a time, about six years ago, in a place not far from here, there lived a man. He wasn't anything special, but he worked hard and raised horses."

She threw him a fast look and returned her gaze to the water. Lord help him, her profile was sweet and lovely. He wanted to take her in his arms and pour all his love into a kiss. *Later, Brighton. Now is too soon.*

"One day, this absolutely beautiful princess wandered into the horseman's life. He was smitten. One glance at her and he felt like he'd been kicked in the chest by a horse."

Carly snorted in disbelief, but he went on anyway. “Sadly, she belonged to another, so the horseman tried to move on with his life. He dated once or twice, but no other maiden could compare to his princess. Heartbroken, he focused on his horses and resigned himself to being alone for the rest of his life.”

“You did not!” She smacked his arm.

“Actually, I did. Sorry, the horseman did. This is fiction. He watched his princess from afar, helping her out as often as he could, but never revealing his love. Yes, he loved her. Each day she grew more beautiful.” And she was beautiful in the sun dappled shade with her hair blowing in the breeze.

“The horseman wept the night she revealed she was with child. When her belly began swelling, he wished that baby was his. When his princess grew sad because her life was unravelling, he wept for her. He wanted nothing more than his princess’s happiness.”

Carly pivoted on the rock to stare at him, a million questions in her eyes. He stared out over the stream because if he looked at her, he’d be unable to continue his story.

“When the baby came, the horseman loved her on sight. He treated her like his own child and could not love her more if she’d been the child of his loins. When the princess’s marriage fell apart, he wept again. This time it was sorrow for her loss, and with hope that they might, at long last, find each other.” He sighed.

“But the friendly princess vanished. She became aloof, not so friendly, and he wondered if her marriage had scarred her for life and ruined his chances. Still, he hung around as often as he could and did things for her. He built a play structure for her child. He designed parts of his castle with her in mind. He fixed her car and babysat her child. He bought three ponies so her child could learn to ride in hopes that she would someday be his true child, not just the child of his heart.”

“You did not!”

“He did too. Now hush. I’m not done. The day of the great ball came, and our horseman was thrilled that, at last, he’d be able to dance with his princess. But an evil villain dashed his hopes and kept them apart. Finally, late in the evening, he rescued the princess from a certain drenching from angry clouds and carried her off to his castle. They talked and talked, and his heart swelled. This was the day he’d waited years for. They slept side by side and in the morning, the princess said something and hurt the horseman’s

feelings. He freaked out. He'd played the long game with his princess, and she misunderstood."

"I sure did."

He pressed a finger to her lips. If she kept interrupting, he'd never get through this. Her skin was soft, and it took everything he had to pull his hand away. This was hard enough without her input. Everything he'd worked his whole life for was on the line. If he couldn't convince her that his love was a real and lasting thing, he'd lose her and be devastated.

"The horsemen knew he was wrong and swallowed his pride and apologized. For a brief time, they were happy. Then the princess realized that the horseman was actually a prince in disguise. He was a very wealthy landowner. This upset the princess because while she was the loveliest woman on earth and had the biggest heart the horseman had ever seen, she was from a modest background and uncertain how to deal with their disparate wealth. What she didn't know is that the horseman had built his fortune for her. He'd worked hard, day in and day out, just to build a nest egg to share with his love. He'd poured all his energy into building a home and a lifestyle which was worthy of the woman he loved."

He turned and took her hands in his and looked Carly right in the eyes.

"Carly Johnston, I built everything I have for you. I love you and I cannot imagine a world without you in it. If I have to give everything I own to charity to prove that to you, I will. I'll give away the horses, the land, the money in the bank. Everything. I'll do what I need to just to prove how much I love you. Say the word and I'll call my lawyer."



CARLY WANTED TO CHUCKLE when Birch started his story. It was so far-fetched. Quickly, she fell into it, like a child with a beloved fairy tale. His voice rose and fell with emotion. He was laying his heart on his sleeve, and she was spellbound. When he wept because she was with child, she had to swallow a lump in her throat. Surely this was just a story. Something he made up to justify his wealth.

"You designed your house for me?" That was too much to believe. Who would plan a house for someone he might never be with? That was pure lunacy.

“No. I designed it for us. The casual ideas you dropped in conversation with Tanya made sense, so I worked with those ideas. I started with a big shell and added details to fit the rectangle. I sheeted it in solid, except the front and back doors. I framed in windows after I had a layout. It took me six years to build it. I did it myself. For you, for us. For our family.”

Her heart clenched and warmth pooled around her heart. “What if I hadn’t divorced?”

“I guess I’d try to find someone who’d measure up, though I doubt it would happen. I feel like you are my soul mate and that there isn’t another person on earth meant for me. More likely I’d have spent the rest of my life alone.”

“I can’t decide if that is romantic or pathetic.”

He squeezed her hands. “Probably both. I’m serious Carly. I am nothing without you and if having nothing is what it takes to be with you, to love you, and marry you, and be a father to Layla, I’ll give up everything I own and start fresh. As long as I have you by my side, I’ll be happy. Just tell me if you want to take a chance on me and I’ll give up everything for you.”

Giddiness grew in her heart. Love washed over her like a warm blanket. Could she do this? Could she accept who he was, as he was, and be with him and see where it went? Two thirds of her wanted to throw herself into his arms and declare her love. The other third was shaking in fear of giving herself to another man, of marrying again.

She took a deep breath and looked into his eyes. Love and sincerity shone there like beacons of hope. She burrowed deep into her emotions. She loved him. Oh, who was she kidding? She’d been in love with him for years. She’d avoided him because she was nervous and scared of another disastrous marriage.

Birch was steady, stable. She’d never seen him drink to excess. He was dependable and adorable. Hot and sexy. He had a great sense of humor and adored her daughter. He was, in a nutshell the perfect man for her.

Taking a leap of faith, she said, “Yes, Birch. I’ll take a chance on you.”

Instead of the smile she expected, he frowned and pulled out his phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Calling my lawyer to set the wheels in motion. I’m selling everything and giving the proceeds to charity.”

She yanked the phone out of his hand. “What? Don’t be hasty. I think that since you’d live in poverty for me, I can try being rich for you.” She winced.

“That sounded so mercenary. I love you, Birch Brighton. Let’s take this relationship on a ride and see where it goes.”

“Carly Johnston, you’ve just made me the happiest man on earth. I’ve waited years for this. I’m going to kiss you now.” For a moment, she got lost in the deep depths of his brown eyes and the love shining there.

As he leaned toward her, every cell in her body exploded to life. Euphoria stole her breath. He wasn’t the only one who’d waited years for this. She nibbled her lip, still too nervous to take the move to bring their mouths together. What if there was no spark? What if the only reason she needed him all this time had been because she couldn’t have him.

“Damn the torpedoes,” she whispered and closed the distance between them.

His lips were soft and firm against hers. They pressed against each other; heads tilted slightly for perfect contact. No fumbling, no awkwardness, just pure perfection.

Sparks jumped from her lips to her brain and skittered down her spine to her fingers and toes. Bells rang and angels sang. Her entire being came to life. Body, heart, mind, and soul. She gasped against the onslaught of sensation as bliss and belonging rolled through her.

Her heart pounded in her chest, its beat echoed in her ears for an immeasurable time until she lost herself in the love and caring flowing from Birch.

This was where she belonged.

She slid her arms around him and up his back. Her fingers bumped his hat off and tangled in his hair. She gripped the silken strands and pulled him closer, deepening the kiss until she felt she could crawl inside him and live there.

His hands gripped her hips, holding her in place. He pushed and pulled against her mouth. Giving, taking. Building the tension between them and backing off and building again. They kissed until she was breathless. She pulled back and rested her head on his chest gasping. His breathing was harsh in her ears.

“Wow!” she said.

“Holy cannoli,” he mumbled, and kissed the top of her head.

She swallowed hard. “I guess we’re kiss compatible.”

Birch’s chuckle tickled something inside her and she laughed with him.

“Definitely compatible.” He tipped her head up and met her eyes. “So perfect.” He brushed his head against hers.

“I think we should cool it. Because if I kiss you again right now, I won’t be able to stop myself.”

She nodded, unable to find more words in the jumble of her mind. He scooped her in his arms and carried her to the blanket he’d laid out in the shade.

“Lunch and then more kissing.” He paused. “If that suits the princess.”

“Yes, dear horseman, that suits me just fine.”

He stole one more kiss and started laying out the feast he’d brought.

♥ Epilogue ♥

Three Months Later:

Tanya stood beside her parents on their porch watching Birch frolic on the grass with Carly and Layla. The grass was still green but there was a definite chill in the fall air. Her mother's marigolds and mums were still blooming, adding bright spots of color to the yard. Birch, her father, and Birch's friend Vince, had spent half the day stringing up white Christmas lights in all the trees. Now, as dusk was falling, the yard looked like a fairy wonderland. It was beautifully romantic.

Over the past few months, her brother was the happiest she'd ever seen him. He was more upbeat than when his first horse won a major race. She was ecstatically happy for him and so very jealous at the same time.

She should be living in marital bliss, or at least pleasant companionship, and expecting her first child. Instead, her marriage was officially over before it started, and she was aching single.

Her mom slipped her arm around her shoulders. "Don't worry, sweetheart, your turn is coming. I can feel it."

"I sure hope so."

"I know so," her father piped in. "The Lord will send you the right man. Just be open to his gifts." Sometimes, her father's eternal optimism was hard to stomach. Her parents had been nothing but supportive when they realized that she had married George in a desperate last-ditch effort to have a baby. The doctor had said she had twelve to eighteen months to conceive. She was fast running out of time.

She was getting desperate. Enough so that she had an appointment with a fertility clinic next week to discuss her options. Maybe things would come together quickly, and she'd get a sperm donation and an embryo implant well within that timeframe. Of course, she'd rather her child was conceived in love like Layla should have been, but it wasn't in the cards.

"Oh, here he goes," her mother whispered eagerly and jostled Tanya to get her attention.

Birch dropped to one knee in front of Layla and Carly. "Ladies," he said, "I'd like to ask you a question."

Carly's hand went to her throat, like she knew what was coming. Layla bounced up and down in excitement though she had no real idea what was

going on. Birch pulled two small boxes from his pocket and flipped them open. He held them up, one in front Carly, the other in front of Layla.

“Carly, I love you more than life itself. Just knowing you fills my heart and soul.” He turned his head toward Layla. “Little Bean, I love you as much as if you were my own daughter.”

Layla threw her arms around him, knocking both boxes out of his hands. “I love you too, Uncle Birch.”

He returned the hug and picked up the boxes. “Carly, Layla, my life is nothing without you. Will you ladies do me the honor of marrying me?”

“Yes!” Carly threw herself at Birch just as her daughter had. They rolled over and over in the grass kissing until Layla jumped on them shouting, “We’re gonna get married!”

Tanya dashed away a tear at the beauty of the moment. She glanced down the deck to where Vince leaned against a support post. His broad shoulders dwarfed the square pillar and his dark hair shone in the fairy lights above him. His face was dark with scruff and his smile was slow and sweet. He flashed her a quick wink.

Her heartrate soared like a runaway colt, and she looked away, heat filling her face. She’d known Vince for years but until that second, hadn’t really noticed him beyond the fact that he was her brother’s best friend.

She peeked at him again. He was still looking at her. He straightened up and took two slow steps toward her and she bolted inside, slamming the door behind her.

Holy moly. What just happened to her?

For the first time in months, she wasn’t thinking about babies, she was fully focused on the attractive man she’d just run from. He wasn’t her type at all. He was too busy and too carefree, but he was handsome and sexy. Maybe he’d be interested in a quick fling. If she planned it right, maybe he could be the father of her baby...

Books by Katie O'Connor

Coyote Creek:

Fall in love along with the uniquely entertaining residents of Coyote Creek. They're sure to steal your heart and bring you smiles, laughter, and tears. A contemporary, small-town romance series centered around The Flint family, their ranch, their friends, and neighbors.

[A Melody for Christmas](#) 4

[A Surrender so Sweet](#) 5

[A Place Called Home](#) 6

[A Lesson in Love](#) 1

[A Love to Rebuild](#) 7

[A Heart Torn Apart](#) 2

[Coming Home for Christmas](#) 8

[A Secret to Shatter](#) 3

[Coyote Creek Box Set 1](#)

[Coyote Creek Box Set 2](#)

A Silver Fox Christmas:

Welcome to Christmas in Valley Springs the place that proves that the heart can still find love as you get older. Valley Springs is the home of the hottest silver foxes in Canada. Pop in for a while, read these heart-touching holiday romances featuring ladies and gentlemen in their fifties.

[Their Christmas Heart](#)

[Their Christmas Love](#)

[Their Perfect Christmas](#)

[A Silver Fox Christmas Box Set](#)

Hearts Haven:

Welcome to the friendliest small town you've ever visited. Come, sit for a while, enjoy a cup of tea. Quirky characters, heartwarming romance, and picturesque mountain scenery.

Fall in love with Heart's Haven.

[Building Trust](#)

[Running Home](#)

[Saving Grace](#)

[Heart's Haven Box Set](#)

Three Moon Falls:

Welcome to Three Moon Falls, the home of the Hawk sisters, four talented witches each with a special gift. With their abilities to control fire, water, earth, and air, it's hard to remain hidden in the broom closet, but they're doing their best. Mundanes don't believe in magic, or dismiss it as coincidence, and that's how it should be. But if the Hawks can't stop evil from taking over Three Moon Falls, someone's going to notice the paranormal goings on and the universe will spiral out of control. Can they keep their magic a secret? Is it strong enough to defeat an evil entity with decades of experience, or will the sisters lose everything, including each other?

[Water Magic](#)

[Fire Magic](#)

Coming Soon:

[Cappuccino Mugs and Fire Fighter Hugs](#)

[Matchmaker Christmas](#)

[Carly's Heart](#)

Stand Alone Books:

[Cupid's Charm](#)

[Hearts in the Spotlight](#)

[To a Tea](#)

[Bulletproof Heart](#)

[Fake Dating at Half Moon Bay](#)

[Gingerbread Dreams](#)

[Christmas in Silver Creek](#)

[Sleigh Bells Inn](#)

[Protecting Josie](#)

[Rekindled Fire](#)

Books with Heat:

[Corralling the Cowboy](#)

[Cornering the Cowgirl](#)

[Tessa's Trio](#)

[The Gift](#)



About Katie O'Connor

Best-selling author Katie O'Connor lives in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. She married her high school sweetheart and is living her happily ever after. She is the mother of two grown daughters and is extremely proud of her five grandchildren.

She is the founder of The Write Chicks, a private romance writers' group set up with the sole purpose of supporting each other's writing career. Currently, she is chapter president of the Calgary branch of the Romance Writers of America. In the past, she's been their secretary and has also served on the organizing committee for When Words Collide, a reader and writer conference in Calgary, Alberta.

Katie's career path has been long and twisted, with most of her life devoted to her family. She's been a waitress, chambermaid, cashier, store manager, as well as a lab and X-ray technician. She's been a small business owner and is an avid quilter and crafter.

She's dabbled in writing since high school because something drives her to create stories. She swears it's impossible for her NOT to write. Unsatisfied with one genre, Katie writes contemporary romance, erotic romance, fantasy/paranormal romance, romantic suspense, and erotica.

She believes in all things magical, including dragons, fairies, UFOs, ghosts, and house pixies. But most of all she believes in love, romance, and hope.



Katie's Social Links

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Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/katieohwrites>

Bookbub: <https://www.bookbub.com/profile/katie-o-connor>

Link Tree: <https://linktr.ee/katieohwrites>

Don't miss out!

Click the button below and you can sign up to receive emails whenever Katie O'Connor publishes a new book. There's no charge and no obligation.

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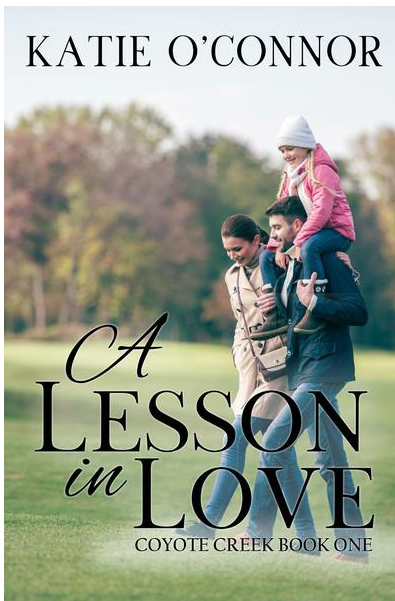
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BOOKS  READ

Connecting independent readers to independent writers.

Did you love *Carly's Heart*? Then you should read [*A Lesson in Love, Coyote Creek Book 1*](#) by Katie O'Connor!



Fired from her job and accused of a crime she has not committed, Tricia Paxton retreats to Coyote Creek to recover from trauma and rebuild her career. Though she shields herself from the past, her secrets challenge her relationships, and her new position as an elementary school teacher further complicates personal boundaries when an eye-catching stranger requires lessons of his own.

Carefree bachelor, Riley Flint, has problems, too. While focusing on building a veterinary practice, his plans grind to a halt when a daughter he has never known enters his life. Accepting the troublesome news that the mother has passed away and her maternal grandparents cannot offer their care, he assumes the responsibility of raising his daughter. But he has little experience with children and the girl needs more instruction than a man can give, so Riley approaches the new teacher for help.

Who knew a daughter to Riley and a student to Tricia would spark joy and conflict in a couple's life? Daisy might complicate their romance, but

Riley's family urges him to embrace his new life as a father and welcome both Daisy and Tricia into his heart. Can love find common ground and unite a family or will Tricia's past tear them apart?

Read more at [Katie O'Connor's site](#).

Also by Katie O'Connor

A Silver Fox Christmas

Their Perfect Christmas

Their Christmas Heart

Their Christmas Love

A Silver Fox Christmas Box Set

Covet the Cowboy

Corralling the Cowboy

Cornering the Cowgirl

Coyote Creek

A Lesson in Love, Coyote Creek Book 1

Coyote Creek Box Set Books 1-3

A Heart Torn Apart

A Love to Rebuild

Coming Home for Christmas

Coyote Creek Box Set 2 Books 4-6

A Melody for Christmas

A Place Called Home

A Surrender So Sweet

Heart's Haven

Heart's Haven

Running Home

Saving Grace

Building Trust

Hearts of Elk Valley

Carly's Heart

Three Moon Falls

Fire Magic
Water Magic

Thurston Hotel Series
To A Tea

Women of Stampede
Hearts in the Spotlight

Standalone
Rekindled Fire
Tessa's Trio
The Gift
Protecting Josie
Bulletproof Heart
Hugs, Kisses and Mistletoe Wishes
Gingerbread Dreams
Cupid's Charm
Christmas in Silver Creek
A Secret to Shatter
Matchmaker Christmas
Sleigh Bells Inn

Watch for more at [Katie O'Connor's site](#).