

PROSPECT SHIFTER DADDY MATES



DADDY  
WOLF'S  
*Second Chance*

SERENA MEADOWS

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(PROSPECT SHIFTER DADDY MATES)



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## PROLOGUE



Jessie shifted on the hard plastic chair, hoping to find a more comfortable position, then finally gave up, stretched out his legs and leaned back, trying to control the mounting frustration that was slowly creeping into him. Once again, his brother had him sitting at the hospital waiting for him as if he had nothing better to do. It had been this way since he'd graduated from medical school and come home to take the job at the hospital, and he knew he was going to have to put a stop to it soon.

With a sigh, he pulled out his phone to text his brother, but before he could, Mitchell Stewart collapsed into the chair next to him, shaking his head, his face full of shock. "Hey, you don't look so good," he said. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Mitchell looked over at him, "Oh, hi, Jessie, I didn't see you sitting there," he said. "I'm okay.....as okay a man can be right now anyway. I just found out I'm going to be a dad again. A month ago, I was single and now I'm married and going to be the father of two."

Jessie laughed, "You work fast, my friend," he said. "But seriously, congratulations."

"Thanks. Maybe this one will be a boy, and then we'll have one of each," he said, a smile finally appearing on his face. "I better get back in there. Connie will be wondering what happened to me."

When Mitchell was gone, he pulled out his phone, saw the time, and got to his feet. He couldn't wait for his brother anymore. Whatever he had to discuss would have to wait. He started to fire off a text message, then changed his mind and headed down the hallway to his brother's office, and pushed the door open, already planning what he was going to say. But when the door swung shut behind him, his mind went blank, his heart started to pound uncomfortably, and he had to force himself to breathe.

Shaking his head, telling himself he must be wrong, he could only stare, then the voice that still haunted his dreams filled the room, "Jessie," Bonnie said, jumping to her feet, a blush spreading across her cheeks. "Your brother isn't here. I thought he was meeting you."

It took him a couple of seconds to recover from hearing her say his name, but his brain finally engaged, "He was late.....I couldn't wait any longer.....I was going to leave him a note," he stammered, then felt a burst of anger. "What are you doing here?"

Bonnie's face fell, "Oh, no, this isn't how this was supposed to happen. Matt promised me that he'd talk to you," she said, then took a deep breath. "I'm working for your brother. I wanted to come home and he needed help with his practice. It all just made perfect sense."

"Well, isn't that nice," he said, feeling as if his heart had been ripped out again. "Welcome home."

He turned and walked out of the office as calmly as he could, but inside he was both hurt and angry. Ignoring Bonnie when she poked her head out of the office and called him to come back, he marched down the hallway, thinking about finding his brother and giving him a good punch in the nose for not warning him. The idea made him smile, and the smile got even wider when his brother stepped off the elevator. He even balled his hand into a fist as he approached him.

"I know that look," Matt said, holding his hands up. "I'm sorry, I screwed up, I should have told you sooner, but I couldn't pass up the opportunity, Jessie. I really need her."

“Well, then, by all means, do you what you need to do,” he said, pushing past Matt. “After all, what you need is always more important. I should know that by now.”

“Come on, Jessie, it’s not like that,” Matt said, following him. “Besides, that was a long time ago, you were both just kids. You can’t still be upset that she left.”

The elevator came and he stepped on, “You don’t know anything about me,” he said, shaking his head. “Leave me alone for a while.”



# CHAPTER 1



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie's entire body was shaking with suppressed rage as he watched his soon-to-be ex-wife giving one of her better performances for the judge, egged on by her scummy overpriced lawyer. "Your honor, I just don't understand all the hostility from Jessie," she wailed. "After all the sacrifices I made to keep the ranch running, all the time I spent taking care of our son, he just wants to cut me off with nothing."

He was just about to get to his feet and call her a liar, but his lawyer put a hand on his arm and shook her head. "Hang in there, Jessie," Sarah whispered. "Just let her dig herself a little deeper. It will make it so much more fun when we tear her apart."

Easing back in the chair, he nodded his head, took a deep breath, and forced himself to calm down. It was Sarah's job to fight this battle. He needed to let her do her job, but listening to Chloe's lies made him crazy, so crazy he suddenly understood why people became violent in these situations. Reminding himself that it would all be over in a couple of hours helped, and to his relief when he tuned in again, Chloe's lawyer was sitting down.

Sarah got to her feet, gave him one more of her looks, then stepped up to the podium, "Mrs. Parker, I have a copy of the deposition you gave at the beginning of this case, and your testimony today follows what you said that day," she said, holding up a stack of papers. "You paint a very clear picture of

your life married to my client. However, there is one small problem with that representation; it's a complete and total lie."

"Objection," Chloe's lawyer shouted, jumping to his feet.

"Overruled," the judge said. "But you'd better be able to back that accusation up, counselor."

"Yes, sir, I intend to do that and more," Sarah said, reaching for another stack of papers on the table. "I have here a record of every trip Mrs. Parker has taken over the last four years, and I'd like introduce it into evidence then show it to her, your honor."

The judge nodded, and Sarah walked over to Chloe, set the papers down in front of her, "Please take a moment to review those," she said, then grabbed another stack. "This is a list of all the times over the last year that Mrs. Parker has canceled or not shown up for her visits with her son."

Sarah looked over at the judge, "You may give it to the defendant," he said. "Is there anything else?"

"Just one more thing, your honor," Sarah said, picking up the last stack. "A report from an accountant outlining how much money Mrs. Parker has spent during the marriage and a list of items she received as gifts from both her husband and her father-in-law when he was still alive."

"Objection," Chloe's lawyer called again, but his face was white as a sheet. "I wasn't given this information. I demand it be excluded from the proceedings."

The judge looked over at Sarah, but she didn't miss a beat, "I was afraid you might say that," she said, picking up a single sheet of paper. "This is a certified copy of the receipt your secretary signed when they were delivered to your office."

"I'd like to see that," the judge said. "This case has concerned me from the very beginning, and frankly, that hasn't changed."

Sarah took the receipt over to the judge, then stood head bowed as he read it, "Very well, you may proceed," he said, handing it back, then looked over at Chloe's lawyer. "Mr.

Lowell, this might be a good time to reconsider using a mediator.”

Mr. Lowell looked over at Chloe, who shook her head, then gave him a dirty look before looking up at the judge, a few tears sparkling in her eyes. “I just know I won’t get a fair deal,” she whimpered. “Please, your honor, none of this is true, they made it all up.”

It took almost two hours before the judge delivered his verdict, but when Jessie walked out of the courtroom, Sarah beaming beside him, he was a free man, both financially and personally. He knew that he should have felt better, should have been rejoicing in the fact that Chloe got what she deserved. Instead, he felt a sobering wave of sadness that everything had gone so wrong.

Now he was divorced, a single father, had a ranch to run, and for the first time he realized just how much he’d taken on. “You don’t look as happy as I thought you would,” Sarah said. “She didn’t get a share in the ranch, you got full custody of Hunter, and she’s not getting a dime in alimony. Is there something I’m missing?”

“No, I guess it’s all just sinking in,” he said, shaking his head. “I really am happy, Sarah, you saved my butt. I guess I’m just a little worried about what happens now.”

Sarah pulled him to a stop, “You move on, you learn to trust again, to love again,” she said. “You deserve that, Jessie, don’t ever think you don’t. Chloe just wasn’t the right woman, but there’s someone out there for you.”

He sighed, “Romance is the last thing on my mind right now, Sarah,” he said. “I’m worried about Hunter. I’m a single dad now, and I don’t know if I can do it on my own.”

Sarah looked surprised, “Jessie, you’ve more or less been a single dad since the day Hunter was born,” she said. “Just keep doing what you’ve been doing. He’s a great kid, you’re doing a fantastic job with him, and now that the divorce is behind you, it should get easier.”

“Thanks, Sarah,” he said, instantly feeling better. “I guess I needed to hear that.”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

As Bonnie walked down the wide hallway of city hall, her footsteps echoing off the walls, she wondered how long it would be before she wasn't hit with a barrage of memories everywhere she went. There wasn't a single place in town that didn't have some meaning in her life, both good and bad, and the day she got her first driver's license was one of the worst memories, one she wished she could forget.

Her father had been drunk like usual, talking way too loudly and threatening to make her leave the entire time if she didn't give him money for more beer. They'd almost refused to give her the test, but he'd thrown a fit, and she was fairly sure that the man who'd given her the test had just passed her to get rid of them. Cheeks still burning at the memory, she wondered for the thousandth time if she'd made a mistake coming back to Prospect.

“Mom, look at all the model cars,” Tyler said, pulling her out of her thoughts. “They're so cool. Can I go over and look at them while you get your driver's license? I promise I won't go anywhere else.”

She looked down at her son who, at almost six, was way more mature than his age, and ruffled his hair, “As long as I can see you that should be okay,” she said, smiling down at him. “I hope this won't take long. When I'm finished, I was thinking we might go get a pizza at that new place downtown.”

“The one with the arcade?” Tyler asked, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. “I've been saving up to go! I've got three dollars to spend.”

“Then it's a date,” she said, grinning at him. “You can buy the pizza.”

“Mom, that's not funny,” he said. “I want to play the games.”

The little office was nearly deserted when she walked in, but she took a number anyway and sat down where she could see Tyler. Only a few minutes later, her number was called, and with one last look at her son, she walked over to the window, already digging her license out of her wallet, then slid both across the counter to the woman behind the computer.

“I need to get a new license. I just moved here from out of state,” she said, then finally looked up into a pair of eyes she’d never forget. “Oh.....”

“Bonnie, you really are home,” Mandy said, beaming at her. “I heard rumors, but I didn’t believe them. You said you were never coming back! You should have called me.”

“I was going to.....it’s on my list of things to do.....I guess I was afraid.....” she stammered. “Well.....it’s been so long.....and it’s my fault we lost touch.....I just got so busy.....I’m sorry.....”

“You have nothing to be sorry for, life happens,” Mandy said. “I’m just glad that you’re back. We have to get together soon and catch up. You can tell me all about the big city, and I can catch you up on all the gossip around here.”

“That’s a deal,” she said, smiling at her old friend. “It hasn’t been easy coming back, and I could use a friend right now.”

“I’ve always been your friend, and I always will be,” Mandy said, tears in her eyes. “Oh, look at me, getting all emotional, I guess it’s the hormones.”

She noticed the big bump under Mandy’s shirt for the first time, “Oh, congratulations,” she said. “When is the baby due?”

“I’ve got three months to go,” Mandy said, a big smile on her face. “She’s supposed to be born right around Halloween.”

She opened her mouth, but an older woman came stomping up, “Mandy, what is taking so long?” the woman asked. “You’ve been serving this client for over ten minutes and there’s nothing in the computer yet. We’ve talked about this before, this is a job, not a social hour. I hope I’m not going to have to put this in your file.”

“No, ma’am,” Mandy said, grabbing Bonnie’s license off the counter.

Bonnie stared at the woman, sure that she recognized her, but couldn’t place her at first, “Wait, let me see that,” the woman said, snatching the license out of Mandy’s hands and turning her focus on Bonnie. “Bonnie Thurmond, I remember you, a trouble maker, that’s what you were. And that family of our yours.....”

It hit her instantly then who the woman was, “Well, Mrs. Underwood, I’m surprised to see you working at the DMV,” she interrupted, her heart pounding. “Did you get tired of tormenting teenagers and switch to adults instead?”

“I see nothing has changed,” Mrs. Underwood said, looking Bonnie up and down. “I heard you’d come crawling back to town. I guess the big city was more than you could handle, but that’s what I always told you. Maybe now you’ll take my advice. I heard that they’re hiring at the grocery store. I’m sure you could secure a position bagging groceries.”

“As pleasant as that sounds, I’m afraid I’ll have to pass. I already have a job,” she said, putting a smile on her face. “I’m Dr. Parker’s new physician’s assistant. I started last week; I’m surprised you haven’t heard. Everyone else seems to know.”

Mrs. Underwood’s face turned red, “You haven’t changed a bit, Bonnie Thurmond,” she hissed. “You come from bad blood, and that hasn’t changed. The people of this town don’t want your kind around here. You should go back to the city with the drug addicts and drunks, that’s where you belong.”

Bonnie could only stare at the woman for a second, too shocked by her outburst to respond, “Mom, are you almost done?” Tyler asked, tugging on her arm. “I’m getting bored and hungry.”

“Hang on for just a few more minutes, sweetheart,” she said, looking over at him, hoping he couldn’t see how angry she was. “This lady and I have something to settle, and then we can go.”

When she turned back, Mrs. Underwood was gone, “She’s back in her office,” Mandy said, pointing over her shoulder. “Probably already on the phone with those awful women she calls her friends. I’m sorry, Bonnie, I should have warned you.”

“It’s not your fault. Forget about it, I’m going to,” she said, then turned back to her son. “Tyler, this is Mandy, she was my best friend growing up.”

“And I still am,” Mandy said, grinning at them both.



## CHAPTER 2



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie said goodbye to Sarah and started down the wide hallway toward the front door, desperate for some fresh air, but he'd only gone a few steps when he heard the sound of heels clicking on the marble floor behind him. Increasing his pace, his instincts telling him exactly who was behind him, he tried to make it to the front door, but Chloe caught up to him before he could escape.

"Jessie, please wait," Chloe called. "Please, I have to talk to you, I never meant for this to happen, it was all my lawyer's idea. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have listened to him, I should have....."

"It's over, Chloe," he called over his shoulder. "I'll see you in two weeks when you pick Hunter up for your weekend."

"I can't pick him up, Jessie, that's what I wanted to talk to you about," she said. "I'm broke, I don't have any money, I don't even know if I'll have a place to live by then. You have to help me out, for Hunter's sake. If you could just pay my rent for a month, maybe two, that would give me time to figure out what I'm going to do."

He stopped and turned back to her, determined to make sure she understood clearly what he was about to say, "I'm only going to say this once, so you'd better listen very carefully," he said, glaring at her. "What happens to you is no longer my problem. You've gotten every penny out of me that you're ever going to get, so stop asking. The answer is no, and will always be no."

Chloe stepped back as if stunned by his words, “I can’t believe that you’re talking to the mother of your child that way,” she said, tears popping into her eyes. “Your father would have been horrified and embarrassed by your behavior.”

“Well, then it’s a good thing he’s dead, isn’t it?” he asked. “Let’s face it, Chloe, without him, you’re just a gold-digging little tramp. Do you think I didn’t know about the other men? Didn’t you ever wonder why I stopped touching you, why I slept in a different bed? I’m not stupid, I know exactly what you were up to, and I’m just sorry my father isn’t here to see what you really are.”

“I should have married him,” Chloe screamed at him. “Then the ranch would mine, and I’d be kicking you to the street. You’re a bastard, Jessie Parker, and I’m sorry that I ever married you.”

“That makes two of us, Chloe,” he said. “Maybe you did marry the wrong man. I think my father loved you more than I did, but you’re a fool if you think he would have ever let his precious ranch fall into the hands of a woman instead of his son.”

“You’re going to be sorry, Jessie. I’m going to make your life miserable,” Chloe hissed at him. “I may have lost today, but the war isn’t over. Before I’m done, you’re going to wish you’d played nice with me.”

“Good luck with that,” he said, turning away again. “I’m looking forward to you making a fool out of yourself. It should be entertaining.”

Chloe huffed, then he heard her stomping off, muttering threats under her breath, but he let her go, afraid that if she kept pushing, he’d do something that he’d be sorry for. Taking a deep breath, he walked slowly toward the doors, reminding himself that he was free of the woman, she was part of his past, and had no hold over him. He could start over, make a new life free of the lies and manipulation, but the anger and resentment still bubbled under the surface.

He was almost to the door when he saw a woman standing in the shadows. He couldn’t see her face but couldn’t miss the

long blonde hair spilling over her shoulders or the curve of her hips as she leaned against the wall. Something primal and instinctual awakened inside him, his body began to hum with desire, and he took a couple of steps toward the woman as if drawn to her by an unseen force. When she heard him, she looked up and their eyes met, and his breath came rushing out of him with a whoosh when he realized that it was Bonnie standing in the shadows.

Desire pulsing through his veins, he tried to catch his breath, tried to still the pounding of his heart and the wolf inside him demanding that he claim what belonged to him. The feelings were so strong he was suddenly thrown back in time to the first time they'd met, to that first fevered glance, the first touch of Bonnie's lips, the first moment that he'd known she was the one for him. Battling the memories suddenly overwhelming him, he stood staring at the woman he'd planned to spend the rest of his life with until she looked away and broke the spell.

Anger welled up inside him, blotting out the desire and he welcomed it, "What are you doing here?" he demanded. "I thought I made it clear the other day that I didn't want to talk to you, and considering what I just went through, it was pretty stupid to think I'd want to talk to you right now anyway."

Bonnie took a couple of steps out of the shadows, a look of confusion on her face at first, but it slowly turned to anger. "For your information, I didn't come here looking for you, you self-centered jerk," she said. "I got your message loud and clear the other day, but this is a small town. We might just run into each other every once and a while, and I'm not going to run away when I see you coming, so you're just going to have to deal with it."

There were so many things he wanted to say to her, so many questions he wanted to ask, but the door to the men's room swung open and a little boy came out. "I'm ready now, Mom," he said. "And before you ask, I washed my hands with soap."

Bonnie smiled down at the boy, "Good job, kiddo," she said, then looked over at him. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I

have to be going. Hopefully, we won't see each other again any time soon."

"Mom, that wasn't very nice," he heard the boy say as they walked away. "You've always told me always to be polite even if I don't like someone. Why don't you like that man?"

"He's just someone from my past," Bonnie said, glancing over her shoulder at him, a strange look on her face. "Someone I used to care about, but we don't get along anymore, and you're right, I should have been more polite."

He watched them walk away, a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach, annoyed and frustrated that an already terrible day had gotten even worse. Bonnie had broken his heart all those years ago when she left him. He wasn't going to let her disrupt his life again, no matter what the wolf inside him wanted. She was a part of his past, just like Chloe, and that's where he'd keep her, safely tucked away in the what might have been but could never be part of his mind.

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Bonnie walked out of city hall, knees wobbly, heart pounding, hoping that Tyler couldn't tell how upset she really was. The last thing she needed right then was more questions. Taking a deep breath, she tempered the anger still coursing through her and asked herself what she expected. It certainly was not a greeting with open arms. But she hadn't been prepared to see Jessie right then. She had been caught totally off guard, the wave of desire when their eyes met still as powerful as it had always been, leaving her completely unbalanced.

Open and vulnerable to him for those few seconds, his words had hurt, even though she knew that she deserved them, but she'd managed to find the anger to defend herself, and for that much she could be proud. Taking another deep breath, she tried not to think of the moment Tyler had walked out of the bathroom and she realized how much he looked like his father. That was when the real panic had begun, and she'd done the only thing she could think of and fled, hoping that Jessie had been so focused on her he hadn't noticed her son.

Since the day he'd been born, Tyler had been hers and hers alone, the thought of sharing him filled her with a new wave of panic, and she wondered why she'd never considered the possibility that Jessie might find out the truth. She'd been so focused on getting out of the city, so determined to give her son the perfect childhood, she hadn't stopped to consider how often their paths might cross.

"Mom, you're squeezing my hand too hard," Tyler said, trying to pull away from her. "I'm too big to hold hands with you anyway, I'm almost in grade one."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, I guess I was lost in my thoughts," she said, smiling down at him and letting go of his hand. "Just be sure you watch for cars."

"I'm not a baby," Tyler said, rolling his eyes. "I know about cars, Mom."

"Well, then, maybe you want to drive," she said, grinning at him. "I could use a break, and you know the way home."

Tyler groaned, but he was smiling, "Mom, I can't drive," he said. "Besides, I thought we were going to the arcade, and I don't know the way there."

"Well darn, there go my plans to take it easy the rest of the day," she said, pretending to be upset. "But since I'm going to be doing the driving, I think we have time for a couple more errands before we hit the pizza place."

Tyler sighed but climbed into the backseat and fastened his seat belt, "I wish I could drive," he said. "I hate errands."

It was the middle of the dinner rush when they walked through the front door of the restaurant, and Bonnie couldn't help but think about the old pizza place where she'd spent so many hours of her life. Unlike many people in town, the owners, a sweet couple new to town, had overlooked her family's reputation and given her a job the day she turned sixteen, and she'd worked there until the day she'd left town over two years later. They'd been like the parents she'd never had, and without them she would have never been able to get

away, never had the opportunity to get the education she'd so desperately wanted.

As soon as she walked into the entryway, something felt familiar, and as she looked around, she realized that the décor in the restaurant matched the old place almost exactly. From the red checkered table cloths to the flickering candles in the middle of the tables, everything was the same, and she couldn't help but smile, feeling like she'd come home for the first time. Some of the tension in her shoulders faded away, and she looked around, wondering if the pizza was going to be as good as it used to be.

Then through the din of the other diners she heard her name being called, "Bonnie Thurmond, it took you long enough," Tammy Gordon called, shoving her way through the crowded dining room. "I thought I was going to have to go track you down myself."

"Oh, Tammy, it's so good to see you," she said, embracing the older woman. "When I heard there was a new pizza place in town, I was afraid that you and Tom had moved on."

"New building, same old pizza," Tammy said, then laughed. "Our business outgrew the old building, so we decided to take a risk and build a new one, it was Tom's idea to include the arcade, and so far, it's been a huge success."

"I'm so happy for the two of you," she said, giving Tammy another hug. "I'm sure you've worked your butts off to get here."

"You can say that again, but we love it, so no complaints," Tammy said, then saw Tyler standing next to her. "And who is this handsome young man?"

She pulled Tyler in front of her, "Tammy, this is my son, Tyler," she said, then gave him a little nudge. "He's excited to try out some of those games in the arcade."

"It's nice to meet you," Tyler said, holding out his hand, his face serious.

Tammy shook his hand, "It's nice to meet you too," Tammy said, then dug around in her pocket. "Look at that, I

just happen to have a token for the games right here. Why don't you play the first one on me."

When Tammy held the token out, Tyler looked up at her, "Go ahead, sweetheart," she said. "What do you say?"

"Thank you," Tyler said, beginning to bounce on the balls of his feet once the token was in his hand. "Can I go?"

"You know that rules?" she asked. "Don't leave the building and don't talk to strangers. I'll get a table and come find you in a few minutes."

He was gone with a thank you thrown over his shoulders, and both women laughed, "He's adorable, Bonnie, you must be so proud," Tammy said, grabbing a couple of menus. "Dinner tonight is on Tom and I. Consider it a welcome home gift. I don't suppose you're looking for a job?"

She laughed, "As much as I would love to come back and work for you, I think Dr. Parker would be a bit upset if I quit," she said. "But you can bet that Tyler and I will be regulars. You're going to see us all the time."



# CHAPTER 3



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie pulled into the parking lot, noticing that there were only a few empty spaces, “They look awfully busy, sport. Maybe we should think about going somewhere else for dinner tonight,” he said. “There isn’t even any place to park, we’ll probably have to wait for a table.”

“You said we’d come here tonight,” Hunter said, a mutinous look on his face. “You promised, Dad.”

“And I’ll keep that promise,” he said. “But you have to promise to wait patiently for a table.”

“I promise, I promise,” his son said, instantly perking up. “We could wait in the arcade. I won’t mind waiting if I can play games.”

Spotting an empty space, he pulled in but didn’t shut off the engine, “I’m not making any promises,” he said. “Those games might be too hard for you, Hunter, I hope you’re not going to be disappointed.”

“I won’t,” Hunter said, bounding up and down in his seat. “Can we please get out?”

It wasn’t as crowded inside as he’d feared, but a wave of nostalgia washed over him when he looked around, and he had to pause inside the door for a second. Feeling like he’d stepped back in time, he slowly let his eyes scan the dining room, expecting to see Bonnie, the little black apron slung around her hips, waiting on the tables. He’d spent plenty of evenings watching her work her magic, wringing every last cent out of

her customers while he nursed a small pizza and a pitcher of soda so he could take her home after.

His body responded to the memory of those car rides and the fevered kisses they'd shared parked up the road from her family's rundown cabin, and cursed the path of his thoughts. There was a reason he'd never been back inside the old restaurant and avoided the new one, but his son had finally convinced him he couldn't survive without going to the arcade and he'd given in. Now he wished he'd stuck to his guns, and stayed far away from the place, but looking down at Hunter's excited face, he realized that it wasn't just about him.

Taking a deep breath, he started for the hostess stand, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him, "Hey, Jessie, glad to see that you made it," Noah Russel said, giving him a slap on the back. "We haven't seen you at the meeting for a couple of weeks. I was going to call you tomorrow if you didn't show up tonight."

"Oh, Noah," he said, coming abruptly back from the past. "I completely forgot tonight was pizza night. I've had a lot going on, today was....."

"Oh, man, I forgot, today was....." Noah's words died away, and he looked down at his son. "Why don't you boys go on back to the arcade? Connor, I want you to look after Hunter until you get there."

"Oh, Dad, do I have to?" the boy asked. "He's just a baby, I'm almost seven. I don't want to play with a baby."

Noah let out a long sigh, "That was very rude, Connor," he said. "I'm not asking you to babysit, just make sure he gets back there, okay? Lindsay and Joseph are waiting for you, and they'll take over."

"I'm sorry," Connor said. "I'm just excited."

Noah ruffled his son's hair, then pulled out his wallet and handed him some money, "We'll be over at the table if you need us," he said. "Behave yourself and use your manners."

"Yes, sir," Connor said, then took Hunter's hand. "Come on Hunter, let's go find the games."

When the boys wandered off, Noah pulled him in toward a big table at the back of the dining room, “It’s not as good as having our own room at the diner, but it’s something different,” he said. “Now tell me about today. How did it go?”

“Just like Sarah said it would,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Chloe didn’t get anything she asked for, we had a fight before I could get out of the building, and she made a bunch of threats.”

“Sounds about right,” Noah said, shaking his head. “But it’s over, at least there’s that.”

“I’m not sure that’s quite sunk in,” he said. “I’ve spent the last year fighting with Chloe, I think it’s going to take me a while to relax.”

“Well, at least with us, you don’t have to worry,” Noah said, looking over at the group of men gathered around the table. “We’re your support system, Jessie. It’s not easy being a single father, but we all know what you’re going through, all of us have been there.”

“And I appreciate that support,” he said, smiling at his friend, but the smile quickly disappeared when he saw Bonnie enter the door. “No way, you’ve got to be kidding me; this has to be a bad dream.”

Noah stared at him for a second, “Hey, man, what’s wrong?” he asked, looking over at the door. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“I wish she was a ghost,” he said, then shook his head and forced himself to look away. “Never mind, what’s in the past should stay in the past.”

“The past.....what is that supposed to mean?” Noah asked, looking back over at him, then back at Bonnie. “Who is that? I don’t think I’ve seen her around town.”

“That would be the woman I was supposed to marry before she dumped me and left town,” he said, turning away. “Apparently, she’d decided that now was the time to show back up in town and torture me. She’s been everywhere I’ve gone for the last two days.”

“Now, this is getting interesting,” Noah said, grinning at him. “Do I detect a few feelings left over for this woman?”

He snorted to hide the fact that he was about to lie to his friend, “Hardly, I got over her a long time ago,” he said. “She means nothing to me now.”

Noah studied him for a second, then looked at Bonnie again, “Good, then you won’t mind if I get to know her,” he said. “I need a date for the fundraiser, and we’d make a stunning couple.”

“Do what you want,” he said, but inside a rush of jealousy made the animal inside him awaken. “I don’t care.”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

After Bonnie placed her order with the waitress, she wandered over to the arcade and stood in the doorway watching the chaos, feeling sorry for the two teenagers trying to wrangle the horde of excited children. She hadn’t imagined that it would be so crowded and scanned the room for Tyler, afraid that he’d be overwhelmed by the older kids, then spotted him standing in a corner. Her heart sinking, she started to go get him, but only took a few steps before a younger boy walked up, and only seconds later, they were running off together.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she stepped back to watch, still not ready to leave Tyler on his own. “Wow, this place is crowded tonight,” a man said, stepping up next to her. “But it looks like the kids are all behaving themselves.”

“I didn’t think it would be this busy,” she said, stealing a glance up at the man. “Is it always like this?”

“No, I’m afraid that’s our fault,” the man said. “We usually meet in the back room at the diner, but we thought this would be a nice change of pace for the kids.”

“We?” she asked, looking up at him again, and deciding he was very handsome, if a bit older than she was, then caught herself. “Are you here with your wife?”

The man laughed, “No, I’m part of a single dad’s group,” he said. “There are no wives hanging out around here tonight,

just us men.”

“Oh, that’s.....interesting,” she stammered, a bit surprised. “I’ve never heard of anything like that, but I guess that’s good. Which one is yours?”

The man pointed to a dark-haired little boy, “That’s Connor, he’s almost seven,” he said, then turned to face her. “And I’m Noah. We live on a ranch a few miles outside of town.”

“Bonnie,” she said, shaking his hand. “I just moved back from the city; I grew up here.”

Noah studied her for a second, “I don’t think I remember you,” he said. “But I guess we wouldn’t have been in school together.”

“No, you’re a bit older than I am,” she said. “I think you graduated the year before I was a freshman.”

“Well, that’s my loss,” Noah said, giving her a big smile. “How about joining me for coffee to make up for lost time.”

She was surprised by the offer, “Oh, I don’t know, I’m not really.....you know, dating.....” she stammered. “I appreciate the offer, I really do, but right now there’s so much to do to get settled before school starts.....”

“Which one is yours?” Noah asked, interrupting her.

She sighed, hoping the man heard her tell him no, “That’s Tyler over there,” she said, pointing out her son, who was still with the younger boy. “He’s starting grade one this year, and I don’t know which of us is more worried about it.”

“The first day is always the hardest, but he looks like he’s doing just fine,” Noah said. “He and Hunter seem to be getting along well. That should make Jessie happy.”

“Jessie?” she choked out, looking around the restaurant and spotting him at the big table, shooting her dirty looks. “That’s his son?”

“Yeah, he’s a good kid, considering what he’s been through,” Noah said, shaking his head. “But now that Jessie’s divorce is final, things should get better, although of course a

kid never completely gets over a parent that doesn't care about them. I don't know what Jessie was thinking marrying Chloe, not that it's any of my business."

"He married Chloe?" she croaked, feeling like she was going to faint. "That can't be.....she told me....."

"Hey, are you okay?" Noah asked, grabbing her arm to steady her. "You're white as a sheet."

She sucked in several deep breaths, "I'm okay, I think I just need to eat something," she said, then saw the waitress dropping off the pizza that she'd ordered. "And there's our pizza right now, so I'll have to say goodbye."

"What about that coffee? Or lunch?" he asked. "You have to eat lunch."

Desperate to get away, her head spinning, she found herself agreeing, "Wednesday would work," she said. "But it's just lunch. I'm not looking for.....well, anything right now."

"Just lunch," Noah said, grinning at her. "I'll meet you at the diner at one o'clock, if that works for you."

"That's fine," she said, already starting to walk away. "I have to get my son now. It was nice to meet you, Noah."

"The pleasure was all mine," he said, grinning at her. "I'll see you Wednesday, Bonnie."

Bonnie made her way through the groups of children playing games toward her son, "Hey, kiddo, our pizza is ready," she said, her heart lurching when both boys turned to look up at her and she saw how much they both looked like their father. "Say goodbye to your new friend. It's time to eat."

"But Mom, we were just starting to have fun," Tyler said. "Can't I just play for a few more minutes?"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, we need to have dinner," she said, desperate to separate them. "The food will get cold if we don't eat it now."

"I don't care, I like cold pizza," Tyler said, shrugging his shoulders. "Please, Mom, this is the first friend I've made."

And he's your brother, she thought to herself, trying not to panic, "I know that you're having fun, and I'm glad, but it's time to eat," she said, hoping her voice wasn't betraying her. "Maybe you can play for a few more minutes after you eat."

Tyler didn't look happy but gave in, "Okay," he said, then turned to Hunter. "I have to go eat now, but I'll be back when I'm finished."

They made their way back to the table and the big pizza was waiting for them, but she'd completely lost her appetite and had to force herself to eat. "Mom, you're acting funny," Tyler said after they'd been sitting in silence for several minutes. "You're not talking, and you keep looking over your shoulder."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, I guess I'm just a little stressed out about everything we still have to do before school starts," she said, forcing herself to ignore the big table on the other side of the room. "Were the games as much fun as you thought they would be?"



# CHAPTER 4



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Muscles aching after a long day, Jessie hauled his saddle into the tack room, then hung up the bridal he'd slung over his shoulder and let out a long sigh, glad the day was almost over. Summer was always one of the busiest times on the ranch, but this year seemed especially difficult, but it was his own fault, or more like Chloe's, since she'd accumulated a mountain of debt that he had to pay off.

Running a few extra hundred head had seemed like a good idea by the warm fire last winter, but now he was beginning to realize that he'd pushed things to the limit. The crew was over worked, the pastures grazed just a little too close, and he was afraid his plan was going to backfire on him, forcing him to sell before the cattle were ready. Pushing the thought from his mind, he turned his attention to the night ahead, dinner, bath time, and then bed for Hunter, then a few hours in front of the computer for him.

It all made him feel tired, and for a second, he started to feel sorry for himself, then remembered how much worse it had been only a year ago. Putting one foot in front of the other, he started through the barn, telling himself that he just needed something to eat. Deep down he knew there was more to his feelings than just the pressures of the ranch and being a single father, but he refused to think about the source of his unhappiness, and knew that if he opened that door, there would be no closing it again.

A week had passed since he'd seen Bonnie at the pizza parlor, and instead of feeling relief, he found himself looking

for her everywhere he went in town. One minute he'd be driving down the street, the next he would find himself scanning the sidewalks for a glimpse of her. He'd even driven by the hospital several times before he realized what he was doing. He was beginning to think avoiding her wasn't going to work, starting to see that the only way to get over her was to get the answers to all the questions he'd been asking himself all these years.

"Hey there little brother," Matt said, catching him by surprise. "I thought you would have already called it a day by now."

His brother was the last person he wanted to see, "You're not the only one who puts in long days," he said. "What do you want?"

"Well, you've been ignoring my calls, so I just thought I'd come out and see if I could talk to you," Matt said. "I know that you're still mad at me for the Bonnie thing, and I'm sorry about that."

"I should have taken the time to tell you, but I'm just so busy."

"We're all busy, Matt," he said, shaking his head. "I'm running a ranch and raising my son alone, but if it had been me, I would have found a few minutes to give my brother a heads up that I was hiring his ex-girlfriend."

"I really didn't think it would be that big of a deal. That was a long time ago," Matt said, shrugging his shoulders. "I mean, you married Chloe only a few months later."

He studied his brother for a second, then sighed, "I married Chloe because Dad insisted, but I never loved her, Matt," he said. "I was in love with Bonnie. We'd planned our life together down to every detail, when she left, I was devastated. It felt like my heart had been torn out. I didn't care what happened to me, so it was easier to just go along with it."

"Why didn't you tell me all this?" Matt asked. "I wouldn't have hired her if I'd known."

“Would you have listened?” he couldn’t help asking. “You were in medical school, completely absorbed in your own life, just like you’ve always been.”

He expected Matt to defend himself like he always did, “You’re probably right, I haven’t been a very good brother,” he said instead. “I’m sorry about that, Jessie, but I’m trying to be here for you now. You still care about Bonnie, don’t you?”

“It doesn’t matter. She moved on, I moved on,” he said, shaking his head. “That was all in the past, we’re different people now.”

“How do you know that?” his brother asked. “From what I’ve seen, Bonnie is a sweet, caring woman with a keen intelligence that sets her apart from everyone else. Heck, if I was in the market for a woman, she’d be exactly what I’d be looking for.”

He glared at Matt, “Don’t even think about it; Bonnie is off limits,” he said, his magic flaring just a bit as the wolf inside him awoke at the perceived threat. “I mean it, Matt, don’t even think about it.”

His brother took a step back and raised his hands, “Hey, I said if, calm down,” he said, a little smile on his face. “But that did answer my question. You do still care about her.”

“I didn’t say that,” he shot back, even more annoyed. “Maybe you could just stay out of my love life, okay.”

“Fine, if that’s what you want,” Matt said, shrugging his shoulders. “But you’re a fool, Jessie. If the woman I loved showed back up in my life, I wouldn’t turn my back on her, I’d do everything in my power to get her back by my side. You don’t get very many second chances, and a woman like Bonnie won’t stay single long in a town like this. Some smart man is going to snap her up.”

When he didn’t say anything for several minutes, Matt shrugged his shoulders again, “Well, I tried,” he said. “Call me when you’re not mad at me, and I’ll make some time in my schedule to go for a ride, or we could shift and go for a run. We haven’t done that in years. Jessie, I meant what I said, I

want to be a better brother, I just hope you'll give me the chance."

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Tyler was waiting for Bonnie on the front porch of their little rented house when she got off work, and she couldn't help but smile, partly because her son was so adorable, but mostly because he was so excited to start school. She'd been worried that she was pushing too many changes on him, but he'd adjusted better to their new home better than she had, which she should have expected, considering the history she had in town.

"Hurry up and change, Mom, we're going to be late," Tyler said, jumping to his feet. "Mrs. Elliot is ready to go, we're just waiting on you."

"Okay, just give me a few minutes to catch my breath," she said, smiling down at him. "The barbeque doesn't start for another hour, and we only have to walk a few blocks over to the park. I promise we're not going to be late."

Mrs. Elliot was sitting in the living room, a pile of knitting in her lap, but she stood and set it aside when Bonnie walked in. "You didn't have to get up for me," she said. "You're already staying late to watch Tyler at the barbeque, which I really appreciate."

"Nonsense, I love the back-to-school barbeque, and it's been a while since I've gotten to share it with one of the students," Mrs. Elliot said. "That's the one thing I miss most about teaching, sharing the excitement of something as simple as a barbeque with the kids. I've got all the sweets we made packed up and ready to go. Take a few minutes to relax and change your clothes, I'll keep Tyler busy until you're ready."

The park was more crowded than she'd ever seen it when they got there, and she felt a surge of girlish excitement when she saw the colorful tents full of merchandise for sale and the flashy carnival games. Smiling down at Tyler, she gave his hand a squeeze, glad for the first time she'd come home, a feeling that everything was going to work out blossoming inside her. They followed the smell of food across the park, set

their desserts out on the big table already piled high with treats, then made their way over to the volunteer table where she was supposed to check-in.

“Hi there, you must be one of the new parents,” the woman said, studying Bonnie. “We have a big class this year, the biggest one we’ve had in years.”

“Oh, that’s exciting,” she said, ruffling her son’s hair. “Tyler has been looking forward to making some new friends. We just moved to town.”

“Well, then, welcome to Prospect,” the woman said, beaming at her, then the smile faded. “This is going to sound a bit, well, silly, but I would swear I’ve met you someplace before. You just look so familiar.”

“I grew up here, but I left right after I graduated from high school,” she said. “We’ve been living in Los Angeles, but I wanted to get Tyler out of the city, so here we are.”

The woman studied her some more, then grabbed a sheet of paper in front of her, “Bonnie Thurmond, now I remember,” she said, looking up at her, the smile still in place. “You went to school with my younger sister, Mary. I think you two were in math together.”

“I remember Mary, she was always so nice to me,” she said. “How is she?”

“She and her husband moved to Helena a couple of years ago,” the woman said. “Oh, I’m Belinda, by the way, I’m the president of the PTA, and always looking for volunteers.”

“Well, you’ve found one,” she said. “Mrs. Elliot is going to keep Tyler company while I help out, so just point me in the direction you need me to go.”

Belinda handed her a name tag, “Well, since this is your first time helping out, I figured I’d go easy on you,” she said. “Report to the drink table, I’m sure someone there can put you to work.”

“Sounds good, it was nice to meet you,” she said, then turned to Tyler. “Why don’t you and Mrs. Elliot go check

things out? I should only be an hour. I'll catch up with you when I'm done, and we'll get something to eat."

"Can we play some games after we eat?" Tyler asked. "I want to win you one of the great big stuffed toys. You need something to cuddle with at night."

Mrs. Elliot started laughing, and she felt her cheeks turning pink, "Oh, sweetheart, that's so sweet," she said. "We'll have to see, though, sometimes they make those games impossible to win, and I'm not sure I have room in my bed for a great big stuffed toy."

"Well.....I could keep it in my room for you," Tyler said, a big smile on his face. "I wouldn't mind."

"Oh, now I see," she said, laughing. "Tell you what, we'll take a look at those games after we eat. Deal?"

"Deal," Tyler said, then turned to Mrs. Elliot and took her hand. "Can we go look at the games?"

"Of course, but first, maybe you'd like to visit the petting zoo," Mrs. Elliot said. "I hear they have a pigmy goat this year."

She watched the two of them walk away, then made her way over to the drinks table, introduced herself, and got to work filling cups with iced tea and lemonade. A sea of faces passed by as she worked. Some she recognized, a few remembered her, and by the time her hour of volunteer time had come to an end, she was feeling better about her decision to come home.

"Bonnie, how is it going?" Belinda asked, rushing over, her face creased with worry.

"Everything is fine here," she said. "But you look worried."

"One of the parents who volunteered to work the grill can't make it," she said, shaking her head. "I don't know what we're going to do. We need at least two people cooking to keep up with the demand."

She thought about Tyler and the games he wanted to play, “I could do it, but I’d have to check with Mrs. Elliot. She’s watching Tyler for me, and I don’t want to tire her out too much.”

Belinda’s face lit up, “Really, you know how to handle a grill? We’re talking about hundreds of burgers, Bonnie,” she said. “It’s the biggest money maker for the fundraiser.”

“I can handle it, I worked at a burger place when I was in college,” she said. “Just let me find Tyler and let him know what’s going on.”

“Don’t you worry about Tyler, I’ll take care of him,” Belinda said. “He can have dinner with my kids, I’m sure my husband wouldn’t mind.”



# CHAPTER 5



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Smoke pouring out of the grill formed a haze around Jessie's head as he worked, but this wasn't his first time behind a grill. He knew what to expect and kept working, the smell of grilling meat beginning to attract a crowd. After flipping the first round of burgers over, he threw some more on the other side of the grill, wondering how long he could keep up on his own. The line was growing longer, and people looked like they were beginning to look restless, so he put his head down and began throwing cheese on the side that was cooked.

After shoving the finished patties onto waiting buns, he threw more on, then slid over to the other side of the grill, sweat beginning to pour down his face. Grabbing a towel, he took a second to wipe it away, then looked up, relieved when he saw Belinda making her way over to him, someone trailing along behind her. It clearly wasn't Bob Springer who was supposed to be the one helping him, but he didn't care as long as someone was coming to help.

"Jessie, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to leave you here all alone," Belinda said. "Bob's daughter got sick, he's not going to be able to make it, but I got a replacement."

A second later, he was staring into Bonnie's eyes, "This is Bonnie....." Belinda started to introduce them, but he cut her off.

"We've met, so you can save the introduction," he said, turning back to the grill. "You can have that side, and those

burgers look like they need to be flipped, or they're going to burn."

Belinda looked surprised, "Oh, well, okay," she stammered, looking over at Bonnie. "I guess I'll just let you get on with it."

"We'll be fine," Bonnie said, grabbing the spatula sitting next to the grill. "It's been a while, but I think I remember how to do this."

"I can't thank you enough," Belinda said. "I'll be back to check on you in an hour."

Eyes focused on the grill; Jessie decided that the only way he'd be able to get through the next hour was to pretend that Bonnie wasn't there. It was only sixty minutes, he could make it if he didn't look at her, didn't talk to her, kept his head down, and just thought about cooking burgers. But when she stepped up next to him and her scent wafted over to him, blocking out the smell of grilled meat and sending a shiver up his spine, he realized that might be impossible.

Glancing over at her, he wondered why she'd shown back up in his life after all these years. He was just beginning to feel like himself again, getting the hang of being a single dad. The last thing he needed was another woman in his life, especially one who'd thrown his love away like it didn't count for anything, and to his relief, the desire that had slowly been creeping over him drained away. The anger that replaced it was a relief, an emotion he could use to put Bonnie at arm's length and keep his heart safe this time.

They worked in silence for a while, both concentrating on getting the line caught up, and he fed the anger, letting his mind wander back to the day Bonnie left, the pain and shock of watching the bus pull out of town with her on it. She hadn't even shed a tear, had just shoved the engagement ring he'd given her into his hands, told him it was over, then gotten on the bus. He'd stood on the sidewalk for a long time, the ring hot in his hand, his heart breaking into a million pieces, then managed to make his way back out to the ranch, sure that his life was over.

“I didn’t plan this, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Bonnie said, interrupting his thoughts. “I was supposed to be helping with the drinks.”

When he just grunted at her and turned away, she sighed, “I’m sorry that I hurt you, Jessie,” she finally said. “I wish I could go back and do it differently, but it was just as difficult for me to leave as it was for you to watch me go.”

Anger surged through him, “I don’t think so. I wasn’t the one who threw everything away, I was the one thrown away,” he said, not bothering to hide his anger. “One day we were making plans for our future, the next you were getting on a bus and telling me it was over as if it was no big deal. Were you just playing with me? Was I just something to occupy your time until you got out of town?”

Tears sprang to Bonnie’s eyes, but he ignored them, determined to hold onto his anger, “It wasn’t like that, Jessie,” she said. “I had to go; I didn’t have any choice. It wasn’t going to work between us, everyone knew that but us.”

He felt his anger beginning to slip, “Why did you come back?” he asked. “Why couldn’t you have just stayed away?”

Bonnie didn’t say anything for a second, “Honestly, I don’t know,” she finally said. “I never thought I would, I thought Prospect was behind me forever, then your brother found me on the website I was using to find a new job, and I was suddenly agreeing to come home.”

“My brother did this?” he asked, his anger shifting. “He brought you home?”

“I didn’t want to at first, but he said you were married, and I figured it would be okay since you’d moved on,” she said, her voice full of sadness. “I was happy for you when he told me, Jessie. All I ever wanted was for you to be happy.”

“Well, you have a strange way of showing it,” he snapped at her. “And what right did you have to decide what was going to make me happy?”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Bonnie looked over at Jessie, saw the same pain and confusion in his eyes that she'd faced the day she'd broken their engagement and left town, but this time she was older and wiser. "None what so ever, but I was young and stupid, so unsure of myself," she said. "If I had it to do all over again, it wouldn't have happened that way. You have to believe me when I say that I really believed I was doing the right thing."

Jessie shook his head and sighed, but didn't say anything for a long time, and she thought the discussion was over. A bit disappointed, not sure what she expected, she pretended nothing was wrong and went back to flipping burgers and chatting with people as they passed by the grill. The middle of the barbeque wasn't the place to have the discussion anyway and she realized she should have just kept her mouth shut and ignored him for the hour they had to be together.

"Did you ever think about me? Did you ever look up at the stars and wonder what I was doing?" he asked, then turned and looked over at her. "Did you ever think that you'd made a mistake?"

Unable to hold his gaze, she looked away, remembering the day she'd found out that she was pregnant, how scared she'd been, how much it had hurt that Jessie wasn't there to share it with her. She'd still been sure that she'd done the right thing, sure that giving him his freedom was the right thing to do, but late that night, she'd called Mandy, only to discover that Jessie had gotten married.

"Once, about two months after I left," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I'd been thinking about you all day, so I called Mandy, and she told me that you'd gotten married, so after that I put you out of my mind. It hurt too much to think about you."

Jessie turned to look over at her, then shook his head, "Don't try to put this on me," he said, then turned back to the grill. "I wasn't the one who left."

"Well, you didn't waste any time grieving after I left," she said, getting angry. "You always told me that you thought Chloe was a shallow bubble head, but you married her only

months after I left. That sure doesn't sound like a man who was heartbroken to me. Even if I had changed my mind, you were married, Jessie, married to....."

She shook her head, "Never mind, this isn't getting us anywhere," she said. "I can't change the past, and neither can you. I did what I did, and we both have to get over it if we're going to live in this town together. I'm not going to apologize again. I've spent years regretting the decision I made that day, and we've both suffered enough. It's time to let it go."

"I wish I could, but what you did that day ruined my life, Bonnie," Jessie said, glaring at her. "Nothing has been right since then, and I don't think it will ever be, so if you were trying to make me happy, you failed big time."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, I had hoped we could get past this, but I can see that I was wrong," she said. "I just want to say one more thing, and then I'll never speak to you again. I wasn't the only one who screwed up, Jessie. You didn't have enough faith in our love to give me time to come to my senses. You didn't wait long enough for me to realize that it was your choice to make, not mine, and when I did, it was too late, so don't put this all on me."

"What choice?" he asked. "What are talking about?"

Before she could answer, Chloe walked up, pushed her way to the front of the line, and stared at them. "Well, isn't this nice, old lovers united," she spat at them. "I didn't know you were back in town, Bonnie. Did you come back for my leftovers?"

"Hello, Chloe; if you're referring to Jessie, I believe it's the other way around. Or did you forget that I had him first?" she said. "You always did have a hard time keeping your story straight."

Chloe narrowed her eyes, "I should have found a way to run you off sooner," she said. "Your nothing but white trash, Bonnie. I saved Jessie a lifetime of humiliation getting rid of you, and if I had the chance, I'd do it again."

Jessie's spatula clattered to the grill, "What did you just say?" he asked Chloe. "I'm not sure I heard that right."

Chloe began to back away, "Don't look at me like that, Jessie, I was only doing what I had to," she said. "We were supposed to be together, your dad said so. He wanted you to marry me, he said you deserved a woman equal to your standards, not some....."

"If you say one more word, you'll be sorry," Jessie said, cutting Chloe off. "Tell me what you did right now."

"Only what your dad told me to do," Chloe said, looking around nervously. "You'd better calm down, Jessie; everyone is starting to stare."

"I'm not going to calm down until you tell me what you did to Bonnie," he said. "Spit it out now, or I'm going to come out from behind here and beat it out of you."

"He just threatened me, everyone heard it," Chloe screeched. "I'm going to tell the judge, then he'll know what kind of a monster you really are."

Chloe turned and fled back into the crowd, and Bonnie stood staring after her, then looked over at Jessie. "What the hell am I missing?" he demanded, then grabbed her by the elbow. "We have to talk."

"Jessie, we can't just walk away from the grill," she protested, trying to pull her arms away. "The burgers are going to burn."

Just then Belinda walked up with two men, "I've brought your replacements," she called, but Jessie was already pulling her away.

# CHAPTER 6





\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie weaved his way through the trees to a bench where no one would interrupt him, Bonnie protesting the entire way, “Jessie, you can’t just drag me off into the trees,” she said, struggling to get him to let go. “Let go of me right this instant.”

“No,” he said, over his shoulder, not releasing his grip. “I’ve been waiting for answers for five years, Bonnie, you’re going to give them to me now. I’m tired of talking around the issue, you’re going to explain why you left me like that, and I’m not letting you go until you do.”

When they reached the bench, he shoved her down onto the seat and stood over her for a second, “You can stop trying to scare me, it’s not going to work. I know you won’t hurt me,” Bonnie said, staring down into her lap. “You might as well sit down.”

His anger all but dissolved when she looked up at him with tears in her eyes, and he sat down next to her, then let out a long sigh. “I just want to know what happened, why your feelings for me seemed to change overnight,” he said. “I need to know what I did wrong, why you stopped loving me.”

Bonnie stared down into her lap again and shook her head, making a few tears splash onto her hands which were clasped tightly in her lap. “It wasn’t you, you didn’t do anything, Jessie,” she said. “I never stopped loving you. In fact, I loved you so much I was willing to give you up so that you could have what mattered most to you in the world.”

“Bonnie, you were what mattered to me the most in the world,” he said. “There was nothing I wanted more than you.”

“What about the ranch?” she asked, finally looking over at him. “You love the ranch, it’s part of you, part of who you are.”

“I don’t understand,” he said. “What does the ranch have to do with this?”

“Jessie, I know it never mattered to you who my people were, but there were and still are some who look down on me because of my family,” she said. “And your father was one of those people. You know he never liked me, and didn’t think we were right for each other.”

“But I didn’t care, that’s what mattered,” he said. “He would have accepted you eventually. You’re not your parents, Bonnie, we had that all worked out.”

She looked over at him, then shook her head, “We were so young, so naïve, so sure that love would triumph over everything,” she said, then sighed. “Your father never would have accepted me, he made that more than clear the night before I left.”

“What did he say to you?” he asked. “Did he threaten you?”

“Not exactly,” Bonnie said. “He threatened you, Jessie. He told me that if we got married, he would cut you off, give the ranch to your brother and kick you out on the street without a dime.”

“That bastard,” he said, jumping to his feet. “I should have known that he was involved, I just never thought. . . . Is there more?”

Bonnie nodded her head, then looked down in her lap again, “He gave me a check for ten thousand dollars,” she said. “A payoff to help me get out of town and your life. I never cashed it, I tore it up as soon as I got off the front porch, but I was humiliated, and I knew that no matter what I did, he would never accept me.”

Jessie's entire body was vibrating with anger, but he reined it in, knelt in front of Bonnie, took her hands in his, and waited until she looked up at him. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that," he said. "I wish you would have come to me, Bonnie. I wish you would have talked to me before making a decision about our future."

"I was going to, I was on my way out to the barn to talk to you, but I ran into Chloe on the way. I was crying, and she managed to get me to tell her what happened," she said, anger blossoming in her eyes. "I thought she was my friend, I thought I could trust her, and she convinced me that the only thing I could do was break up with you, that if I didn't, you'd hate me someday for making you give up the ranch. I was so confused, so hurt and shocked that I believed her. I did it for you, Jessie, or at least that's what I thought at the time. It was a sacrifice I was willing to make so that you could have the ranch, I told myself that we'd both move on, that time would heal both our wounds, and you'd thank me someday."

A mixture of rage and tenderness filled him, and he could only sit, holding Bonnie's hands in his until he managed to sort it out. "Well, this is a big mess," he finally said, sliding up next to her on the bench again and putting his arm around her. "I have no idea where we go from here."

Bonnie was stiff in his arms for a second, then began to relax, "Maybe we should just leave all that in the past where it belongs," she finally said. "What we had was wonderful at the time, but we're all grown up now. Maybe your father and Chloe did us a favor."

"That's bull shit and you know it, Bonnie," he said. "Chloe and I are definitely going to have a talk about this. There's nothing I can do to my father since he's gone, but if he was here....."

"Jessie, what's done is done, I just want to move on with my life," Bonnie said, looking up at him. "I'm glad we had a chance to talk, I hope you can see now that I never wanted to hurt you. I really was trying to make you happy."

“I’m all for moving on. After all, we can’t change the past,” he said, pulling her a little closer. “But I would like to talk about the future, a future with you in it.”

Bonnie shook her head, “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she said. “Too much has changed, we’re different people now, it could be a total disaster, and.....”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Jessie cut Bonnie’s words off with a kiss, his warm, firm lips brushing against hers, making her gasp as desire leapt to life, and before she could stop herself, she’d wrapped her arms around his neck. He pulled her closer, his tongue sliding into her mouth, and her senses came alive as the years fell away, the heartache and longing replaced by the passion that still burned brightly between them. When he finally let her go, she was breathless with need, her head was spinning, and the warning her brain was screaming at her was almost completely muted.

“Jessie, this is crazy,” she finally said, trying not to look into his eyes, knowing that she’d be lost if she did. “We can’t go back to what we were, so much has changed.”

“That’s true,” he said, tilting her chin up so their eyes met. “But we could try moving forward, starting with dinner tomorrow night.”

“You mean like a date?” she asked, pulling back, the thought making her panic a little. “I don’t know, that seems.....I don’t know..... And my son isn’t used to me going out with men.....I don’t know how he’d take it.”

“His name is Tyler, isn’t it?” he asked. “Isn’t that one of the names we picked out for our kids?”

“I don’t remember,” she said, shrugging her shoulders, really beginning to panic. “That was a long time ago.”

“I’d like to meet him,” Jessie said. “He and Hunter are only a year apart. I’m sure they’d have fun playing together.”

“Jessie, this is all happening too fast,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t introduce Tyler to the men I date. I don’t want him getting confused, if you know what I mean.”

“I thought you said you didn’t go out with men,” Jessie said, grinning at her. “Which is it?”

“You’re getting me all flustered,” she said. “I just meant, it’s too soon for that.....I mean.....”

“I like you all flustered,” Jessie said, grinning at her. “But I understand, you want to take it slowly, I’m good with that.”

“That’s not what I said, I just meant.....” she let out a long sigh. “I don’t know what I meant.”

“Just say yes to dinner,” he said. “Then we’ll both feel better.”

“Fine, but just dinner,” she said. “I can’t stay out too late, and I’ll have to find a sitter. I can’t ask Mrs. Elliot to stay late again, maybe this isn’t such a good idea.”

“I think I can help with that,” Jessie said, pulling a business card out of his pocket. “Call this number, and they’ll help you find a reliable sitter, but don’t tell anyone where you got the number. I’ll explain when we have dinner, just trust me, they’ll be able to help.”

Bonnie was sitting at her desk the next day, trying to concentrate on the stack of charts in front of her, but her mind kept wandering back to the night before. It had been a mistake to agree to dinner, but she couldn’t bring herself to call and cancel, had even booked a sitter even though she knew it was a mistake to go. She couldn’t go on hiding the truth from Jessie, not if they were going to start over, which she wasn’t even sure was what she wanted.

But she didn’t know how to tell him that Tyler was his, and dreaded the moment he found out and realized he’d missed a little more than five years of his son’s life because of her. She really had no good excuse, except her own broken heart, and wasn’t sure that he’d understand what it had been like for her back then. Suddenly overwhelmed by guilt, she took a deep breath and faced the fact that she couldn’t avoid telling Jessie any longer. Any excuse she’d used in the past wasn’t good anymore; he needed to know the truth.

“Well, don’t you just look like you’re full of sunshine and good wishes today,” Mandy said, waddling through the door. “I came to invite you to lunch, but it looks more like you need a drink.”

She laughed, feeling her mood instantly lighten at the sight of her friend, “Mandy, what are you doing here?” she asked. “Not that I’m not happy to see you, I’m just surprised.”

“I had a doctor’s appointment today, and I don’t have to be back to work until after lunch,” she said. “I want to hear all about last night. Everyone is talking about you and Jessie this morning, and I thought I’d get the story straight from you.”

“I should have known, we were kind of fighting in front of everyone, and if that wasn’t bad enough, Chloe showed up and opened a big can of worms,” she said with a big sigh, then filled Mandy in on what happened the night before she left. “I don’t know what to do now. I’m so confused, I kept telling myself that I was over him, but then he kissed me and.....”

“He kissed you?” Mandy asked, a big grin on her face. “What was it like?”

“Like years melted away and we were kids again,” she said, then shook her head. “But we’re not kids anymore, Mandy, life isn’t simple like it was back then.”

“He doesn’t know, does he?” Mandy asked.

“About what?” she asked, trying to play dumb.

Mandy snorted, “You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you?” she asked, then shrugged her shoulders. “Tyler is his, isn’t he?”

She nodded but didn’t say anything for a second, “How did you know?” she asked, then held up her hand. “No, don’t tell me, it will only freak me out.”

“Bonnie, anyone that looks at Tyler long enough will see the resemblance,” Mandy gently said. “And the timing is right. It didn’t take me long to figure it out when I saw him.”

# CHAPTER 7



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie closed the computer on the desk in the kitchen with a snap, looked up at the clock, then over at Hunter, who was quietly playing with a stack of Legos on the rug in front of the big fireplace. He'd been trying to do paperwork for the last hour, a never-ending chore even with most of his records online, but accomplished little since he couldn't stop thinking about Bonnie.

Anger still pulsed sharply through him when he thought about what his father had done to them, and Chloe's involvement made him feel sick to his stomach. They'd both manipulated him, using his grief over losing Bonnie to bend him to their will, and he couldn't stop thinking about what his life might be like right now if things had turned out differently.

"Dad, look at what I made," Hunter piped up, interrupting his thoughts. "It's a barn for my new horse."

A wave of intense love washed over him as he looked down at his son, and he realized that going back in time and fixing what happened with Bonnie would mean losing Hunter, and he knew that was something he'd never want to do. With a sigh, he got to his feet, understanding that he had to let go of the anger at his father, that it would only hold him back, keep him tethered to the past. He'd spent so many years thinking about Bonnie, wondering how she could have left him so easily without even a backward glance, but he had those answers now. He had to move on, stop worrying about what once was, and concentrate on what could be.



“That’s a great looking barn,” he said, dropping down next to Hunter on the floor. “That’s going to be one happy horse.”

They’d just started building a fence to go around the barn when the back door opened and his brother came walking in, “Hello to the house,” Matt called. “Is anyone home?”

“We’re over here,” he called, a bit surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“Is someone sick?” Hunter asked, jumping to his feet. “Can I help you take care of them?”

Matt crossed the room and ruffled Hunter’s hair, “No one is sick, kiddo, I just thought I’d come by and see what you two are up to tonight,” he said, then looked over at Jessie. “I heard there was some excitement last night.”

Getting to his feet, he studied his brother for a second, then looked down at Hunter, “I need to talk to Uncle Matt for a few minutes,” he said. “Why don’t you go into the living room and watch television for a little while?”

“Can I watch the Mighty Rangers?” Hunter asked, jumping up and down. “I want to watch the Mighty Rangers.”

“Okay, okay,” he said, shaking his head. “You’ve seen every episode a hundred times, but watch it if you want.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Hunter said, before tearing out of the kitchen.

He opened his mouth to tell him not to run, but he was already gone, “The Mighty Rangers?” Matt asked. “Is that anything like that show we used to watch when we were kids?”

“You mean, Cowboy Rob and the Rangers?” he asked, smiling at the memory.

“Yeah, that’s the one,” Matt said, following him across the kitchen. “We used to rush home from the bus to watch it.”

“And fight over who got to hold the remote control,” he said, shaking his head, then looked over at his brother. “You want some coffee?”

“Sure, why not,” his brother said. “Got any cookies to go with it?”

He handed his brother a full cup, then dug around in the cabinet for his stash and pulled out a package of chocolate chips, “These will have to do,” he said, handing those over as well. “Now, tell me what you’re doing here.”

“Just what I said, checking up on you,” his brother said, grinning at him. “Thanks to Bonnie, I have a night off, so here I am. Speaking of Bonnie, what’s going on with her? There are a lot of interesting rumors going around town, a few I’m pretty sure were started by Chloe.”

“You’d better sit down,” he said, gesturing to the table. “I finally found out why Bonnie left that day. Dad threatened to take the ranch away from me if she didn’t.”

“You’re kidding,” Matt said, plopping down into a chair. “I always knew he was a mean bastard, but I didn’t think he’d stoop that low.”

“Well, he did, and just to make sure Bonnie got the message, he gave her a check for ten thousand dollars,” he said, the anger rising again and awakening his magic. “It wasn’t just him, Matt; Chloe was in on it too. She convinced Bonnie that the only way I could be happy was if she left. This all came out in the middle of the barbeque last night with half the town watching, and of course, Chloe was right there making it even worse.”

His brother stared at him for a second, then shook his head and sat back in his chair, “That sounds like the plot for a bad made-for-television movie,” he said, shaking his head. “What are you going to do now?”

“I’m going to take Bonnie out to dinner tonight, and we’re going to try to start over,” he said. “I still care about her, I always have, and I’m not going to let what happened in the past come between us. I don’t know if it will work out. What we had might be gone, but I think we owe it to one another to at least try.”

“Fair enough, I just don’t want to see either of you get hurt,” Matt said. “A lot has happened since you were those two kids, and I have a feeling Chloe isn’t going to let you go that easily. Promise me that you’ll be careful.”

He was a bit surprised by the change in his brother, but decided not to question it, “Thanks, Matt,” he said. “It’s nice to have a big brother again. I’m not going to rush this. We need time to get to know each other again. She’s got a kid, a little boy about a year older than Hunter. I know it shouldn’t bother me, but the thought of her with someone else makes me a little crazy.”

“You’re going to have to work on that,” Matt said. “From what I understand, the father has never been in the picture, but you should talk to her about it.”

“I don’t want to push her,” he said. “I want to give her the space to tell me when she’s ready, not that it’s going to matter in the end. I know deep down, I still want her, no matter what happened while we were apart.”

“But you need to know,” Matt said. “That’s only natural, but you’d better be prepared to explain about Chloe. I bet that hurt when she found out.”

“We’ve talked about it, and I think she understands,” he said, but a little twinge of worry blossomed in his stomach. “But maybe I should make sure. Chloe is going to cause trouble, you were right about that, and I don’t want her coming between us again.”

“It sounds like you have a lot to work out. I’m only a phone call away if you need to talk,” Matt said, getting to his feet. “Since you already have plans, I was thinking I could take Hunter out for some pizza. I haven’t been to the new place yet, and I’m sure he’d love the arcade.”

“I already have a sitter,” he said, surprised by the offer. “I couldn’t cancel on Kim this late.”

“So, we’ll pay her anyway and give her the night off,” his brother said. “My treat, Jessie, it’s time Hunter and I got to know each other better.”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Jumping up from her chair, Bonnie walked down the hallway and looked at herself in the mirror again, “Mom, are you changing your clothes again?” Tyler called from the living room. “You promised to play Legos with me before you left.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, I’m coming,” she said, taking one last look, then telling herself it didn’t matter what she looked like. “I’m just a little nervous about going out to dinner with Mr. Parker.”

“I don’t know why you have to go anyway,” Tyler said, starting to pout. “I don’t want to stay with a babysitter.”

“I know, sweetheart, but I think you’re going to like this sitter,” she said. “Sometimes grownups need some time alone. I promise I won’t be out late, and I’ll come in and give you a kiss when I get home.”

Tyler looked down at the floor, “You’re going out on a date, aren’t you?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“It’s not really a date, sweetheart,” she said, tipping his chin up. “Mr. Parker and I just need to talk, so stop worrying. Besides, you’ll always be the most important man in my life.”

“Really?” Tyler asked, his lip quivering. “You promise you won’t get a boyfriend and forget me?”

“Oh, my darling boy, that could never happen,” she said, kissing him on the forehead. “Now, why don’t you show me what you’re building before the sitter gets here.”

When the doorbell rang a few minutes later, Tyler was happily building a barn for the horse he’d already been pestering her to get him. “That’s the sitter,” she said. “Come on, let’s go open the door together, I just know you’re going to love Josh.”

Tyler got reluctantly to his feet, “Bet I don’t,” he said, but followed her to the door and put a fake smile on his face until she gave him a look. “Fine, I’ll be nice.”

The young man standing on the other side of the door had a big red case in his hands and a smile on his face, “You must

be Ms. Thurmond. I'm Josh, it's really nice to meet you," he said. "I hope I'm not late."

"Not at all," she said. "It's nice to meet you Josh, thank you for agreeing to watch Tyler on such short notice."

"Lucky for all of us, I had an opening," Josh said, then bent down so he was on the same level as Tyler. "I heard you like Legos, Tyler. I brought mine along, and I was thinking we could build something together."

"You like Legos?" Tyler asked, coming out from behind her. "I'm building a barn for the horse I'm trying to talk Mom into buying me. You could help me if you want."

"I'd like that," Josh said, standing up. "I'll be right there; I just need to talk to your mom for a second."

Tyler barely noticed when she gave him a kiss goodbye, and she walked out the door without any guilt until she saw Jessie jump out of his truck, a big smile on his face. "You look beautiful," he said, opening the door for her and helping her in. "I hope you're hungry. I made us reservations at a place over in Madison that buys all their beef from us."

"Oh, that sounds good," she said, hoping her voice didn't betray how nervous she was. "I bet they have the best steaks in Montana."

Jessie grinned at her, "You got that right," he said, then closed her door, got in, and started the truck. "I made us a reservation so we shouldn't have to wait, plus the owner is a friend of mine."

"That's nice," she said, her stomach suddenly in knots at the thought of telling him the truth. "I haven't had a good steak in a long time."

"Then you're in for a treat," Jessie said, smiling over at her.

She looked over at him, realizing just how much Tyler looked like him, and a wave of guilt swept through her again, but when she opened her mouth to tell him, nothing came out. Turning to look out the window, she tried to remember the speech she'd rehearsed, but it was all jumbled up in her mind,

and she finally let out a sigh, admitting to herself that she was a coward. There was no doubt in her mind that Jessie was going to be angry with her again, probably angrier than he'd ever been, and she cringed at the thought of seeing it in his eyes.

Reminding herself that it wasn't fair to either of them, that every day she waited, Tyler was missing out on knowing his father, she gathered her strength and opened her mouth again. But when she turned to Jessie, he was already pulling into the parking lot of the restaurant, and the words she was going to say fizzled away. Hating the wave of relief that flowed through her when she realized she was going to have to wait until after dinner, she smiled at Jessie instead of unburdening herself of the secret she'd been keeping for five years.

“What a charming little place,” she said, forcing a lightness into her voice she didn't feel. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

# CHAPTER 8



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie opened Bonnie's door and helped her out, "You're shaking," he said. "Are you cold?"

"No, I guess I'm just a little nervous," she said, smiling up at him. "I'll be okay."

He took her hand, "Hey, it's just me," he said. "There's nothing to be nervous about. We're just going to have dinner and talk, no pressure, remember."

Bonnie took a deep breath and let it out slowly, "It's all just a little overwhelming," she said, letting him lead her toward the restaurant. "I thought I'd come back and find you happily married, running the ranch, and having a good life, but you're not, and it's my fault."

Pausing on the path that led to the front door, he turned to face her, "It wasn't your fault, Bonnie, you were manipulated just like I was," he said, looking into her eyes, surprised to see a hint of fear. "I don't want to hear you taking the blame for leaving ever again, if they would have just left us alone....."

"You don't blame me for what happened?" she asked, tears shimmering in her eyes. "I should have come to you; I should have told you what happened instead of listening to Chloe. It should have been your choice too."

"That's easy to see now, Bonnie," he said, reaching up to stroke her cheeks with his thumbs. "But we were just kids back then. If it makes you feel better to hear me say that I forgive you, then that's what I'm saying. I made mistakes too, sweetheart. I didn't wait for you; I didn't have enough faith in



our love to figure out that something must have driven you away. I was an idiot, I should have looked for you, no one can just disappear these days, but instead I took the easy way out and did what my father wanted.”

“I hate thinking about you with Chloe,” she said, a frown on her face. “The worst part is I really thought she was my friend. I was so stupid; I don’t know how I didn’t see that she was after you. I didn’t find out until a couple of weeks ago, Jessie, all these years, I thought.....well, I guess I tried not to think about who you were with.”

He crushed her to him, “This is such a mess, Bonnie, but we’re going to work our way through it,” he said. “Just know that I don’t blame you, not anymore. We still have a lot to talk about, but maybe that’s enough for tonight. How about we go inside and have a nice dinner, we’ll talk about something besides the past and just enjoy ourselves for an hour or two.”

Bonnie wrapped her arms around him and held on for a second, then looked up at him, “I think that sounds nice,” she said, her voice shaky. “But there’s something I have to tell you after dinner.”

“No more serious talk until we’ve both had something to eat,” he said, leaning down and giving her a quick kiss. “And just for the record, there’s nothing you can tell me that will make me change my mind about you. We’re going to move forward from the past, Bonnie, you’ll see.”

“I hope you’re right,” she said. “I missed you, Jessie.”

“I missed you too,” he said, giving her another kiss. “I have about a million of those saved up for you, so be prepared.”

Bonnie laughed, a blush spreading across her cheeks, “I’ll remember that,” she said, smiling up at him. “Let’s go have dinner.”

Jessie pushed his plate away, his stomach pleasantly full, and looked over at Bonnie, “Well, what’s the verdict?” he asked. “Was that the best steak you’ve ever eaten?”

“Without a doubt,” she said. “You should be proud, Jessie. I know how much work goes into producing this kind of quality; it’s no wonder you have buyers from all over the country.”

“It wasn’t easy, it took years of fighting to change the way we were doing things,” he said. “And this year, I took a huge risk and expanded the herd. So far, they’re all doing okay, but it wouldn’t take much to tip the scales in the other direction.”

“You were never much of a risk taker,” Bonnie said. “But I suppose there’s a lot of demand for your beef.”

“I wish that was the reason I took the risk, but the truth is, Chloe left me with a mountain of debt,” he said. “I’m hoping to make enough to pay off most of it with the extra head. We had a couple of bad years right around the time my dad died, and I’d just managed to get that debt paid off when I realized what she was doing and closed her credit cards.”

Bonnie shook her head, “You shouldn’t have had to go through that,” she said, her face full of compassion. “Chloe was always a little self-centered and cared too much about money, but it sounds like she changed for the worse.”

He nodded, “It was my father’s fault, he treated her like a princess, and gave her everything she wanted,” he said. “And after Hunter was born, it was even worse. It got to the point that she wouldn’t even ask me; she just went straight to my father. After he died, I tried to take control back, but she fought me. Our marriage was already in trouble, but cutting off her spending was pretty much the end. She stopped coming home, stopped spending time with Hunter, which to me is the worst part. He didn’t understand what was happening. Now he’s used to his mom not being around, and I’m sure someday it will bother him that she doesn’t care about him, but I guess that’s what therapists are for.”

“Thank you for sharing all of that with me,” Bonnie said. “I know it couldn’t have been easy, and I’m sorry you had to go through all that.”

He waited for her to tell him about Tyler’s father, but Bonnie didn’t say anything, “I wish I could say it was over,

but Chloe's not going to go away. I hope you understand that."

"She's still Hunter's mother, she'll probably always be in his life," she said. "It's okay, Jessie, women like Chloe don't scare me anymore. I know how to handle bullies, I'm not the same uncertain girl that I was."

"I'm counting on it," he said, smiling at her. "We'll handle Chloe together; I'm not going to let her come between us ever again."

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Looking into Jessie's eyes, Bonnie knew this was the moment she had to tell him about Tyler. Waiting any longer would only make it worse, but her heart was pounding so hard she had to take a moment to collect herself. Before she could open her mouth, there was a commotion at the front of the restaurant, and the other diners fell silent, all watching as Chloe threw a small fit about getting a table. She heard Jessie groan, and he muttered something under his breath, then began to look around the dining room.

"I can't seem to get away from her," he said. "I don't suppose you'd consider climbing out a window."

"I don't think so," she said, looking back at Chloe, who was draped over a very handsome man. "Maybe it will be okay, it looks like she's got a date."

"It's never okay with Chloe," he said, shaking his head and taking a deep breath. "Just keep me from hurting her. I've been dying to slap her face for years, and I'd rather not have to be bailed out of jail on our second first date."

"Our what?" she asked, turning back around in her chair. "Did you say second first date?"

Jessie grinned at her, "Sure, that's what this is, after all," he said. "The second time we've been on a first date. Get it?"

She laughed, warmth spreading through her at the look in his eyes, "Do you remember our first date?" she asked, forgetting about Chloe as the memory wrapped itself around her. "We snuck onto the golf course and had a picnic on the eighteenth green."

“Bologna sandwiches, potato chips, and grape soda,” he said, grinning at her. “I thought I was being so romantic, but the mosquitos ate us alive, then the sprinklers came on and we got soaked.”

Bonnie smiled, remembering the magic of that night, “You kissed me the first time that night,” she said with a sigh. “A sweet tender kiss that made me feel.....”

She trailed off, embarrassed and a little flustered by the memory, but when she looked over at Jessie, his eyes were filled with desire, and her mouth went dry. “Well, will you look at this,” Chloe said, suddenly appearing at their table, her words a little slurred. “Long lost lovers reunited, isn’t that sweet. You sure didn’t waste much time digging your claws into Jessie again, Bonnie. It makes me wonder why you showed up when you did. I mean, isn’t it convenient that just as our divorce is finalized, you come back to town? It’s gotten me to thinking that maybe there was a reason for that.”

“Chloe, I don’t know what you’re trying to say,” Jessie whispered. “But maybe you should go to your table. We were just leaving.”

Chloe leaned down until her mouth was just inches from his face, “Are you going to take her home and screw her in our bed?” she asked. “That would be a bit tacky, don’t you think?”

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll take a step back,” Jessie said through clenched teeth, his eyes blazing with anger. “I’ve never hit a woman before, but there’s a first time for everything.”

A triumphant look appeared on Chloe’s face, and she stood up, “You heard him threaten me, you all heard it,” she called out, then grinned down at Jessie. “One more threat like that and I’ll have enough for a restraining order, and then we’ll see what the judge has to say about our custody arrangement.”

There was a long silence, then Bonnie said, “Well, played, Chloe,” she said. “Too bad you just announced your entire plan to the whole restaurant. That wasn’t very smart.”

“Stay out of this, bitch, this is between Jessie and I,” Chloe hissed at her. “In case you missed it, I’m the one he married. I vowed I would take him from you, and I did.”

“But you couldn’t keep him, could you?” she asked, hating herself for not just keeping her mouth shut. “You’re plan failed, Chloe, why don’t you just give up gracefully?”

Just then the man Chloe was with came up and put his arm around her, “Our table is ready,” he said, then looked at the two of them. “Who’s this?”

“My ex-husband and his new girlfriend, Bonnie,” Chloe spat. “Did you know that her parents were the town drunks? They lived in this pathetic little cabin outside of town, spent all their time drinking cheap beer and stealing from everyone around. I even heard that her mother.....well, I shouldn’t say it out loud in a place like this, but you know what I mean.”

Jessie was instantly on his feet, “Chloe, you’re pushing it,” he warned.

Bonnie got to her feet and stepped in front of Jessie, “Is that all you’ve got?” she asked. “Because in case you missed it, that’s old news, Chloe, and no one cares anymore. You should be more worried about what people are saying about you. I’m sure they all feel sorry for you, just like I do. You used to be a reasonably nice person, now you’re just.....sad and pathetic. It’s too bad, you could have been so much more than.....this.”

Chloe started huffing, but she didn’t wait to see what venom would pop out of the woman’s mouth next; instead, she turned and strode away from her, relieved when Jessie followed. Vibrating with anger, Jessie pulled her to a stop in the entryway, then pulled her into his arms, and held her for a long time.

“Well, I guess I don’t have to worry about Chloe getting the better of you again,” he said, grinning down at her. “You roasted her, but good.”

“What I really wanted to do was smack her, and I was afraid you were going to,” she said, smiling and shaking her

head. “Sometimes words can do more damage, though, she’ll think twice about tangling with me again, but now that the adrenaline is fading away, I feel like I’m going to collapse.”

Jessie pushed her into a chair, “I’ll go take care of the bill,” he said. “I won’t be long.”

When he came back only a few minutes later, he held out his hand and she took it, feeling a surge of warmth when their skin touched. “Come on, I’ll take you home,” he said. “Tonight, didn’t exactly turn out like I planned. I guess next time we’ll have to go to the golf course if we want to be left alone.”

She laughed, “I’ll bring the bug spray if you bring the sandwiches and an umbrella,” she said. “It wasn’t so bad. The rest of the night was nice, I enjoyed myself.”

“Good,” Jessie said, a mischievous smile on his face. “I think it’s only fair to warn you that I’m planning to kiss you before the night is over.”

“Oh, now you’re warning me,” she said, feeling a blush creeping over her cheeks. “That must mean it’s going to be a good one.”

Jessie stopped and pulled her into his arms, “Here, let me show you just how good,” he said, lowering his mouth to hers right there in the parking lot.

# CHAPTER 9



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie made his way through the crowd of late Saturday morning diners toward the back of the restaurant, Hunter's hand clamped firmly in his. "Come on Dad, let me go," he complained. "You always hold my hand too tight."

"Sorry, kiddo," he said, loosening his grip. "I'm just worried we'll get separated in the crowd."

Hunter pulled him to a stop, "I've been coming to this diner my entire life," he said. "I know where to go if we get separated."

"Fine, Mr. Big Man, you don't have to hold my hand," he said, letting go. "You're growing up way too fast, Hunter. I'm not sure I'm ready for it."

"Well, you'd better be," Hunter said, completely serious. "I start kindergarten next year."

"That still gives you a whole year to be a kid," he said, ruffling his son's hair. "Look, I see your friends over at the table with the Legos. You should go join them; I'll be where I always am."

Hunter was gone only a second later, throwing a, "Thanks, Dad," over his shoulder as an afterthought, and he made his way across the room to the table where he usually sat.

Noah was waiting for him, a big smile on his face, "Hey, it's been a long time since you've been here," he said, joining



Noah at the table. “I was beginning to wonder if you’d met the love of your life and run off to get married.”

“Well, since I already found that person and lost her, there’s no chance of that happening, but I’m glad I was missed,” Noah said, a note of sadness in his voice. “But the last thing I want to do is talk about that. I want to talk about what you’ve been up to. I leave town for a few weeks and come back to more gossip than I can process, and most of it is about you and Bonnie.”

“Yeah, about that, I know I said I wasn’t.....that I didn’t care about her anymore.....” he stammered. “Well, the thing is I was lying.....I was still so mad at her.....but, it’s different now.....we worked it out or at least I think we are.....so I would appreciate it if you.....you know.....”

“Back off,” his friend said, a grin on his face. “I was never really interested, she’s sweet and pretty, just perfect for you. I was just looking for a date to the fundraiser, someone new. There was also the added benefit of watching you squirm.”

“I’m glad my discomfort amuses you,” he said, trying to sound mad. “Some best friend you are.”

“If it makes you feel any better, we spent most of the time talking about you,” Noah said, shaking his head. “She kept asking questions about you, then catching herself and changing the subject, but my guess is that the woman still has it bad for you.”

He couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face, “I sure hope so, because I never stopped loving her,” he said, then the smile faded. “There’s only one thing that bothers me. She never talks about what happened after she left here. She talks about some of it, going to school, living in the city, but she avoids talking about Tyler’s father or what happened between them. I know it shouldn’t bother me, but there’s a part of me that won’t be satisfied until she tells me about him. Honestly, it’s beginning to feel like she’s hiding something from me.”

Noah was silent for a second, “I could see how you might feel that way, and in your place, I would want to know too,” he

said, clearly choosing his words carefully. “But you’re going to have to be patient and trust that Bonnie will tell you when she’s ready. Pushing her might be the wrong thing to do.”

“I haven’t even met Tyler yet. I know it’s only been a few weeks, but that’s bothering me too,” he said. “I’m trying not to push that either, but he’s such a big part of her life, she talks about him all the time.”

Noah smiled at him, “Jessie, you’re rushing this, the one thing you told me you weren’t going to do,” he said. “Maybe you should just slow down and enjoy the journey. You and Bonnie lost a few years together, but if this is meant to be, it will happen.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you’re not sitting where I am,” he said, glaring at his friend. “And stop enjoying this so much, it could happen to you someday.”

“I’m done with love,” Noah said, shaking his head. “But it sure is fun to watch it happen to other people. You’d better be careful though; you might get your membership in the single dad’s club revoked.”

“Very funny, we aren’t even close to having that discussion,” he said. “At least not until I know what happened after Bonnie left here.”

“Well, you might get that chance sooner than you think,” Noah said, pointing out into the restaurant. “There she is now, and I bet that’s Tyler with her.”

“I’m going over there,” he said, getting to his feet, then looked over at Hunter. “I’m just not sure whether or not I should take Hunter with me.”

“They’re going to have to meet eventually,” Noah said. “Did she know that two of you were going to be here this morning?”

“I’ve been coming here every Saturday for weeks, she had to know,” he said, a little burst of happiness exploding inside him. “She came on purpose. She’s ready for me to meet Tyler, that can only be a good sign.”

“See, I told you,” Noah said. “You just need to be patient.”

“I hate to admit that you’re right, but.....” he shook his head. “Nope, can’t say it, but thanks, Noah.”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Bonnie had been doing her best to ignore the big group in the back of the diner since she and Tyler scored one of the best booths and slid onto the vinyl-covered seats. She’d been promising him for weeks that she would take him to the diner for breakfast, and this morning he’d demanded that she make good on her promise, and no amount of bargaining had done any good. So far, she’d only gotten a couple of glimpses of Jessie sitting at a table with another man and they were just about finished with their food. If she was lucky, they could slip back out without him ever knowing that they’d been there.

She felt a new wave of guilt thinking about how close the two of them were, yet how far away, and promised herself that she’d tell Jessie the next chance she had, as if she hadn’t been making the same promise for weeks. There had just never been a good time to spring it on him, and she realized now that was what she was going to have to do, just tell him flat out. No flowery words, no big speeches, no waiting for the perfect time, only the simple truth, with no excuses or requests for forgiveness.

It was going to be the hardest thing she’d ever done in her life; it might destroy the fragile trust they’d been building over the last few weeks, but until she did, it was all just a lie. Fighting back a wave of panic, wishing she’d been brave enough from the beginning to do what needed to be done, she put a smile on her face and looked over at Tyler, afraid he’d once again sensed her mood.

He was just shoveling the last bite of food into his mouth, “That was good,” he said, his mouth still full, pushing his empty plate away. “Can I have chocolate milk now?”

“Not if you keep talking with your mouth full,” she said, a little smile on her face. “And yes, you can.”

She looked up to find their waitress, then froze when she saw Jessie coming across the restaurant toward them, the panic suddenly rising, making her want to run. “Mom, what’s

wrong?” Tyler asked. “Are you going to get my chocolate milk?”

“Hold on, sweetheart,” she said, forcing herself to take deep breaths, hoping Jessie would keep going, especially when she saw Hunter trailing along behind him. “I can’t find the waitress.”

Tyler slumped back in the seat just as Jessie got to the table, “Bonnie, I wasn’t expecting to see you here this morning,” he said, giving her a big smile. “It’s a nice surprise, and this must be Tyler.”

“I’ve been promising to bring him in for breakfast for a while, he demanded I keep my promise today,” she said, hoping her voice wasn’t shaking. “Tyler, this is Jessie Parker, say hello.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Tyler said, but didn’t look up.

Horrified at his rude behavior, she looked up at Jessie, “He’s upset because I promised him chocolate milk if he ate all of his breakfast,” she said. “He’s usually not so rude.”

Jessie laughed, “That’s okay, I understand, I’d be upset if I couldn’t have my chocolate milk, too,” he said, then pulled his son forward. “Bonnie, this is Hunter.”

Hunter clung to Jessie’s leg, but looked up at her shyly, and for a second, she couldn’t breathe, the gesture so much like something Tyler had done at the boy’s age it made her head spin. Cursing herself for letting things go this far, she finally managed to suck in a deep breath and put a smile on her face.

“It’s nice to meet you, Hunter,” she said. “This is my son, Tyler, he’s only a little bit older than you.”

The two boys looked at each other, Tyler’s pout instantly disappeared, and Hunter smiled for the first time, “Hey, I know you, we played together at the arcade,” he said, then looked up at Jessie. “This is him, Dad, this is the kid I was telling you about.”

“You two have met?” Jessie asked, then looked over at her.

“They were playing together at the arcade over at the pizza place a couple of weeks ago,” she explained. “I guess I should have told you, but it slipped my mind.”

“Dad, can I take Tyler to the back room and show him the games?” Hunter asked, tugging on Jessie’s hand.

Jessie looked over at Bonnie, “I have a better idea,” he said. “If Bonnie says it’s okay, maybe she and Tyler can come out to the ranch, and you boys can ride Chester.”

“Really?” Hunter asked, then let out a little whoop when Jessie nodded his head. “Do you want to come out to the ranch and ride my horse, Tyler? He’s really just a pony, but it’s almost as good as the real thing.”

Tyler looked over at her, “Can we, Mom?” he asked, bouncing up and down in his seat. “I’ve always wanted to ride a horse, please, please, please.”

“Well, I don’t see how I can say no,” she said, smiling at her son, but inside she was panicking. “We just need to stop off at home and change our clothes.”

“We’ll see you in an hour,” Jessie said, grinning at her, clearly pleased with himself. “I’m glad we ran into you two, I can’t think of a better way to spend the day. You do remember how to ride don’t you, Bonnie?”

“You know how to ride?” Tyler asked, a bit of awe in his voice. “You never told me that.”

“Your mother knows what she’s doing with a horse, Tyler,” Jessie said. “She used to be a better rider than I was. I guess we’ll have to see if she still has the touch.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” she said. “It’s been a long time since I was in the saddle, and I’ve aged a bit since then. I might just watch for today.”

Jessie shook his head, “No way, we’re all going for a ride,” he said. “I might even pack a picnic to take to the lake, bologna sandwiches and chips sound about right.”

“I’ll bring the bug spray,” she said, with a sigh, but couldn’t help smiling at him.

# CHAPTER 10



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie carried the lunch he'd put together down to the barn, Hunter trailing along behind him talking a mile a minute, more excited than he'd seen him for a long time, but he couldn't blame the child, he was just feeding off his own energy. He hadn't missed the uncertain look in Bonnie's eyes when he invited them out to the ranch to go riding, and he hoped he hadn't pushed too hard, but hadn't been able to stop himself from asking when the idea popped into his head. Now he was worried that she was going to cancel, and he'd only have himself to blame for rushing things.

When he saw Bonnie's car coming up the drive, a huge burst of relief surged through him, quickly followed by a wave of excitement, and a smile spread across his face. "They're here," Hunter cried, practically vibrating with excitement. "Are we really going to take them up to the lake?"

"That's the plan," he said, grinning down at his son. "I thought maybe you boys could take turns riding the pony before we go just to make sure everyone feels comfortable."

"Dad, the pony is so boring," Hunter complained. "I want to ride a real horse."

He ruffled Hunter's hair, "All in good time. You're still just a little too small to ride on your own," he said. "Besides, if no one rides the pony, he'll get really sad, and you wouldn't want that."

"I guess not," Hunter said, with a shrug. "It's just not as much fun to ride him as it used to be."

“Because you’re growing up,” he said, smiling down at his son. “And since you are, I think you should help me get the horses saddled up. Do you think you can do that?”

When Bonnie and Tyler came walking up to the barn, he could see that she was tense, but knew that coming back to the ranch couldn’t have been easy for her, considering what had happened the last time she was there. He hoped to erase that ugly memory with a happy one. The ranch was his home, and he wanted her to love it as much as he did. There had been a time when she loved coming to the ranch. They’d saddle up a couple of horses and head up into the mountains, just the two of them. They’d make a game out of looking for the herd or take a couple of fishing poles and spend hours lying by the lake talking about the future.

“You made it,” he said, smiling at her and then Tyler. “I’m glad you came. We’re going to have a lot of fun today. I thought we’d start off getting the boys on the pony, and then I’ve got a pretty mare all picked out for you.”

“Jessie, I’m not sure that I want to ride, it’s been so long,” she said, then looked down at her son. “But Tyler is excited enough for both of us, so that should make up for it.”

“Well then, let’s get him on Sunburst and see how he does,” he said, deciding not to push.

“The same Sunburst?” Bonnie asked, the first smile he’d seen on her face. “I remember him, he was so sweet, he loved carrots, he’d give me these big sad eyes until I’d go get him one.”

Just then Hunter led the yellow pony over to them, “Oh, it is him,” Bonnie said. “Hey there, handsome, remember me?”

All the tension left Bonnie’s shoulders when Sunburst whinnied at her, and she reached out to stroke his cheek. “He hasn’t changed,” she finally said, turning back to him. “I need to get him a carrot.”

He laughed, and a blush rose on Bonnie’s cheeks, “They’re in the barn just like they’ve always been,” he said, then looked down at Tyler, who was staring at his mother like he didn’t



know her. “Do you want to meet Sunburst while your mom goes to get him a carrot?”

Standing at the fence that surrounded the riding ring with Bonnie, Jessie watched Tyler circle again, the smile on his face so big there was no doubt that he’d inherited his mother’s love of horses. “That’s the same look you had on your face the first time I put you up on a horse,” he said, looking over at her. “You didn’t stop smiling for hours after we got back.”

“He was already bugging me about getting a horse,” she said, shaking her head, but he could see she was actually pleased. “Now he’s never going to leave me alone.”

“Bonnie, you don’t have to buy him a horse, we have plenty around here that he can ride,” he said. “And a couple that are perfect for you. Are you ready to get back in the saddle?”

He saw her hesitation, “Come over here,” he said, signaling to one of the hands to keep an eye on the horse and rider in the ring. “Tyler will be fine with Sunburst, and Steve is right there keeping an eye on him.”

“Okay, but don’t think you’re going to change my mind,” she said. “It’s been too long, Jessie, I’m sure I’ve forgotten everything.”

“I wasn’t trying to change your mind, I just wanted to introduce you to one of our new horses,” he said, pulling her over to the hitching post and a beautiful little Appaloosa. “This is Minnie, I saw her at an auction this spring and couldn’t resist buying her, and now I think I know why.”

Bonnie was already reaching out to the mare, “Oh, Jessie, she’s so pretty,” she said, laughing when the horse began to nuzzle her and almost knocked her off her feet, then looked over at him. “What do you mean?”

“She’s for you. I didn’t realize it at the time, I mean I had no idea you were coming back,” he said. “But seeing you two together, well, I think it’s pretty obvious.”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

For the first time in weeks, Bonnie forgot about telling Jessie about Tyler as she stroked the mare's velvety nose and fed her a carrot, the urge to jump into the saddle that was conveniently already on her back slowly settling over her. "You can stop looking so proud of yourself," she said, giving Jessie a dirty look. "I'm not in the saddle yet."

Jessie leaned against the rail and crossed his arms over his chest in a gesture so familiar it made her body respond instantly, a wave of desire making her heart pound faster and her palms get sweaty. When he didn't say anything, she started to walk away, but Minnie nudged her with her nose, gave a soft whinny, then stomped her feet. Unable to resist, she turned back to the horse, trying to ignore the look on Jessie's face, trying to convince herself that she didn't want to ride.

"I can see that you're just as stubborn as you always were," Jessie said, pushing himself off the rail and walking over to her. "So, I'll just take matters out of your hands."

Before she could stop him, he grabbed her by the hips and lifted her into the saddle, "Jessie, you can't....." but the words died away when she felt the powerful animal shifting under her, clearly anxious to run. "That was a dirty trick."

"Yep, it sure was," he said, turning to untie the lead from the hitching post. "And this one is even dirtier."

She just had time to grab the reins and get her balance before Jessie turned the horse and gave her a little slap on the rear, sending them off at a canter toward the ranch house. After just managing to turn the horse, she rode in the other direction, the thrill slowly draining away her annoyance with Jessie as she settled into the saddle and headed for the trail that led toward the mountains. The wind whipping her face, Minnie began to find her stride, her powerful legs eating up the ground, and before she knew it, they were galloping through the pasture.

When she reached the trees, Minnie slowed and she realized how far she'd gone, so she reluctantly turned her around and headed back toward the barn. Jessie was waiting for her, Hunter on one side of him, Tyler on the other, and she

was abruptly brought back to reality. Jumping down out of the saddle, she gave Minnie a quick pat, then walked her over to the hitching rail, tied her up, and walked away, trying to ignore the way the three of them were staring at her.

“Well, boys, I guess that settles that,” he said, looking from one to the other, a satisfied smile on his face. “Now, all we have to do is convince Bonnie to come to the lake with us. I already packed a picnic, and the fishing poles are in the barn. We could leave in ten minutes.”

Tyler came running over to her, “Can we, Mom?” he asked. “Jessie promised to teach me how to fish. He says you two used to go all the time. We might even catch something we could cook for lunch, that would be so cool.”

She looked over at Jessie and their eyes met, sending delicious curls of desire through her body, but it was tinged with guilt because she still hadn’t told him the truth. “Yeah, Mom, can we go?” Jessie asked, making warmth spread through her. “We promise that we’ll be good.”

Looking at the three of them, she realized there was no way that she could say no, and let out a long sigh, “Okay, you win,” she said. “Let’s go to the lake.”

They set off with Tyler in front of her in the saddle and Hunter tucked securely into his father’s arms, and as they left the ranch behind, she promised herself that she’d tell Jessie the truth as soon as they got back. Any reservations she might have had or used as an excuse not to tell him had vanished long ago. Jessie was clearly a good father, and she had no doubt that he’d love Tyler just as much as he loved Hunter.

“Mom, look over there,” Tyler said, pointing to deer munching away on some grass in the trees. “That’s so cool, we never got to see anything like that at home. Can we stop so I can try to get closer?”

“We’d better not,” she said. “We’ll just end up scaring them off.”

Tyler pouted for a few seconds, but then something else caught his eye, and he soon forgot he was upset, “I can’t

believe you left here,” he said. “This is so much better than the city.”

“Well, sweetheart, at the time, the city was the best place for me,” she said. “I needed to get my education, but I’m glad we came back too.”

“I hope we stay forever,” Tyler said. “I really like it here.”

“I’m glad, sweetheart,” she said, hoping he couldn’t hear the catch in her voice. “I like it here too.”

They reached the lake an hour later. Jessie helped Hunter down, came over and pulled Tyler out of the saddle, then laughed when they both ran for the water. “Don’t get too close, that water is freezing,” he called, shaking his head. “And I’m not in the mood to go swimming.”

When he reached up for her, she started to protest, but he grabbed her by the hips and pulled her out of the saddle, letting her body brush up against his before he set her on her feet. He looked down at her, his hands still on her hips, making her body go crazy, then bent his head down to hers and kissed her. Desire coursed through her when his lips touched hers, and her body began to throb dangerously when his tongue slipped into her mouth, and she just managed to push him away.

“Jessie, the boys will see us,” she said, trying to catch her breath. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Maybe not, but I just couldn’t help myself,” he said, grinning at her. “Seeing you up on a horse again.....well, let’s just say I wish we were alone.”

She gasped when her body began to throb again at the thought, “Jessie, that’s not fair,” she finally said, her voice husky with desire. “You’re putting ideas in my head.”

He laughed, “Good,” he said. “Now let’s go see what those boys are up to.”

# CHAPTER 11



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

“*T*hat’s it, Tyler, keep the tip up and reel for all your worth,” Jessie called out as he hovered behind the boy, almost as excited as Tyler was that there was a fish on the line. “We’re going to be eating fish for lunch. I just know it.”

When the fish came flopping up onto the bank, he grabbed the net and scooped it up, laughing at Tyler, who was jumping up and down. “I caught a fish, I caught a fish,” he said, a huge smile on his face. “Can I take it off the hook?”

“Sure, but take a deep breath first,” Jessie said. “Believe me, you don’t want a fish hook in your finger, it’s not much fun.”

Tyler took several deep breaths and let them out slowly, “Okay, I’m ready,” he said. “We need the piler things, don’t we?”

He nodded, “They’re over in the tackle box,” he said. “I’ll get the fish out of the net for you.”

A few minutes later, they were adding the fish to the other one on the stringer, “Okay, we’re going to get these guys back in the water for a little while so we can find some firewood,” he said. “Let’s go tell Bonnie the good news.”

She was waiting for them with a small stack of kindling already laid in the firepit, “Congratulations boys, those are some nice fish you caught,” she said. “I figured I’d get a start on building a fire when I saw the first one come out of the water.”

Tyler rushed over to her and she listened as he recounted every second of the fight to bring the fish in, and as he talked, the feeling that the child reminded Jessie of someone slowly began to settle over him. He couldn't quite put his finger on who it was, and then pushed it out of his mind when Hunter told Bonnie about catching his fish, and he saw him use the same gestures.

"They could almost be twins, but Tyler is a little taller than Hunter," he said, walking up next to Bonnie. "I know you probably told me, but how old is Tyler?"

"He'll be six in November," Bonnie said, suddenly becoming tense. "He's about eighteen months older than Hunter, I think."

He looked over at her, surprised to see Bonnie's eyes filled with guilt, "He's a great kid," he said. "You've done a great job raising him on your own, you should be proud of him."

Bonnie looked over at him, opened her mouth, then closed it again and was silent for a few seconds, "Thank you," she finally said. "I would say the same about Hunter, he's lucky to have you."

An awkward silence fell between them, but the boys broke it, "We want to eat our fish," they said in unison, then started laughing.

"Jinx, you owe me a coke," they said in unison again, making them all laugh.

"How about we call it even and go get some more firewood," Jessie said when they'd all caught their breath. "We're going to have to think about heading home soon."

The fish were reduced to nothing but bones and skin, the rest of the food he'd brought devoured, and they were starting to pack up when his phone began to buzz in his pocket. Pulling it out, he stared at the screen for a few seconds, his heart sinking, then looked up at the sky, noticing the dark clouds headed their way for the first time. Seeing the concern on his face, Bonnie stopped what she was doing and walked over to him.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, looking over his shoulder, then up at the sky. “Where did that storm come from, that wasn’t in the forecast.”

“It looks like it’s backing up on us from down in the valley,” he said, opening the weather app on his phone. “It looks like it could get bad, and it’s heading straight for us.”

They watched the projected path of the storm, both holding their breaths, “That’s going to hit before we can make it home,” Bonnie finally said, a bit of fear in her voice. “Should we head back or try to find some shelter?”

Jessie looked over at the boys, who’d become distracted by an ant hill, “If it was just the two of us, I’d risk it, but I don’t think we dare with the boys along,” he said, looking up at the sky again. “It’s moving fast and from what it looks like when it hits the mountains, it’s going to stall. I think we should find some shelter and ride it out. There’s a cave not far from here that we use when we’re moving the cattle, that should keep us dry, and there are a few supplies stashed there.”

A rumble of thunder broke the silence of the forest, and the boys looked up, “Oh, it’s going to rain,” Hunter said. “We should build a lake and see if it fills up.”

“That’s a great idea,” Tyler said, looking around. “Let’s build it over here.”

“Hey boys, how would you like to explore a cave before we go home?” Bonnie called. “It’s only a short ride from here, and then we won’t get wet.”

They both looked a little disappointed, but trudged over to them, “We wanted to build a lake,” Tyler said. “A great big one we could swim in.”

“I’m afraid that’s going to have to wait,” she said. “This is a nasty storm headed our way, and we need to get somewhere safe.”

“It’s an adventure,” he said. “Pretend that we’re pioneers exploring a new land or pirates looking for a hidden treasure.”

Hunter and Tyler looked at each other, then yelled, “We want to be pirates.”



“Well then, let’s go me hardy fellows,” he said in a horrible accent. “The treasure awaits ye.”

“Oh, Dad, that was terrible,” Hunter said, shaking his head. “That’s not what a pirate sounds like.”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Bonnie nudged Minnie with her heels urging her to go faster, hoping that they would all have some shelter before it started to rain, but she couldn’t push the young horse too hard. She was already a bit nervous. Only a few minutes later, the swirling dark clouds blocked out the sun and the forest became shrouded in darkness, making it harder for her to see Jessie riding in front of them through the trees. Trying to keep herself calm for both Minnie and Tyler, she ignored the rumbling thunder and flashes of lightning, talking non-stop about how exciting it would be to hide from the storm in the cave.

When the huge wall of rock finally came into view when they crested a steep hill, she breathed a sigh of relief, “Just a little farther,” Jessie called, then looked up at the sky. “I think we’re going to get wet before we get there, though.”

As if he’d invited it, the rain began to fall, big fat drops that hit the ground with enough force to send up puffs of dust and began soaking them instantly. Wrapping herself around Tyler, hoping to shield him, she followed Jessie along the rock wall, the rain making it difficult to see. By the time she saw the opening for the cave, her clothes were dripping wet, and Tyler was shivering in her arms, letting out little whimpering sounds.

“Hang on, I know that you’re wet and cold, but we’ll be out of this in a few minutes,” she said, wrapping her arms around him tighter, hoping to warm him a little. “We’ll build a fire and get dried out, then you and Hunter can explore the cave.”

Tyler didn’t say anything at first, just snuggled into her arms, “Okay, Mom,” he finally said, his teeth chattering. “I don’t know if I like this adventure, it’s cold and wet.”

She laughed, “It won’t be for long,” she said. “I promise we’ll get dry and warm soon.”

Jessie slid off the saddle with Hunter still in his arms, then ran over to them and pulled Tyler out of her arms. “Take the boys inside out of the rain. I’ll take care of the horses, then be in,” he said. “There should be dry firewood and some blankets in the emergency supplies in the back of the cave, and there are lanterns scattered around for light.”

“Come with me, you two,” she said, taking their hands when Jessie set them down. “We’re going to start a fire and get you out of those wet clothes.”

They splashed through the mud, then into the cave’s darkness, “Okay, this is better,” she said, ushering the boys deeper into the cave. “Can you two wait right here for a second while I find us some light?”

Tyler nodded his head, but he was shivering and looked miserable, “We’ll be okay, Mom,” he said. “But I’m really cold.”

“I know, honey, but we’ll have a warm fire going soon,” she said, leaning down to kiss the top of his head. “Hunter, hang onto Tyler, you’re doing great.”

Using her hands, she groped around until she found a lantern hanging from a nail pounded into the stone wall of the cave. The spill of light was a comfort to them all, and the boys let her pull them deeper into the cave to the firepit. To her relief it was already laid with enough kindling to get it going, and after a short search, she found a tin box of matches. Only seconds later, the dancing flames further illuminated the cave. Leaving the boys by the fire, she explored the rest of the cave before opening the big wooden boxes and dragging out blankets.

After adding more wood to the fire, pleased that it was already warming the cave, she turned to the boys, “Okay, you two, let’s get you out of those wet clothes,” she said. “You can wrap up in the blankets until we can get them dry again.”

She'd just finished wrapping Tyler up when Jessie came stumbling into the cave's opening, water streaming from his wet hair and clothes. "It's getting bad out there," he said, stripping off his shirt. "I think we're going to be stuck here for the night."

It took her a few seconds to respond, the sight of Jessie's naked chest enough to make her body begin to throb and an urgent need begin to grow deep inside her. "Oh, no," she finally managed to say, a deep blush making her cheeks burn and she finally forced herself to look away. "Are the horses, okay?"

"There's a shelter for them out in the trees in front of the cave, they'll be dry and snug for the night," Jessie said, walking over to the fire and adding a few more logs. "Are you boys feeling better?"

They both nodded, "Bonnie got the fire going and gave us a blanket," Hunter said. "Now I'm hungry."

"Tell you what, let me hang my shirt up to dry, and we'll see what we can do about that," Jessie said, looking over at her. "Maybe we'll start with some hot chocolate."

"That sound like an excellent idea to me," she said, needing to get away from Jessie and his bare chest. "I'll go see what I can find in the emergency supplies. I saw a bunch of food too."

She turned and fled to the back of the cave, taking deep breaths to try and calm the pounding of her heart and the desire that thundered through her body. With shaking hands, she began to search through the big wooden boxes tucked up against the cave wall. She wasn't prepared when a pair of strong arms slid around her and Jessie pulled her up against his chest, and she let out a little cry of surprise.

"You're shaking, you must be freezing in those wet clothes," he said, turning her around in his arms and looking down at her. "I don't suppose I could talk you into taking them off."

“Jessie.....” she gasped, his words making her entire body begin to tingle and tighten.

When he saw the look in her eyes, his entire body tensed up, and he let out a low growl, “It’s taking every ounce of my control not to kiss you right now,” he said. “You drive me crazy, Bonnie, you always have and you always will.”

Giving up to the driving need that erupted inside her, she pulled his head down and kissed him until they were both breathless, then pulled away from him. “You’re not the only one who feels that way,” she said. “I just don’t know what to do about it.”

# CHAPTER 12



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie reached for Bonnie to pull her back into his arms, unable to stop himself as the animal inside him came to life, but Hunter's voice broke through the desire, "Dad, we're hungry," he called, his voice shaking. "What's taking so long?"

"I guess there are some things that have changed," Bonnie said, smiling up at him. "We'd better go take care of the kids. This will have to wait."

He groaned, "You're right, but that doesn't mean I like it," he said. "But we'd better find those boys something to eat, I don't know about Tyler, but when Hunter gets hungry, bad things happen."

"That sounds about right," she said, turning back to the box she'd been digging through. "There's a coffee pot and some dishes and stuff in this one."

"I've got coffee and hot chocolate here," Jessie said, holding them up. "Let's start with this and work from there. You need to be by the fire until your clothes are dry."

Once they'd all warmed up with hot drinks, Bonnie went on another search of the emergency supplies and came back with enough food to make them a simple dinner, along with a couple of sweatshirts for the boys. The rain continued to pour down in sheets, drenching the Earth below. Lightning and thunder added to the danger of the storm, but inside the cave they were warm and dry.

When the boys had eaten their fill, he made them a bed from two of the sleeping bags, and they climbed in, too tired to protest an early bedtime. They were both asleep in minutes, curled up together like a couple of puppies, and he couldn't help but smile as he watched them. He looked over at Bonnie, who was watching the boys too, then walked over and took her hand and squeezed it, his body slowly filling with warmth when she looked over at him and smiled.

"They look so sweet and innocent when they're sleeping," he said. "Too bad we know what happens when they wake up."

Bonnie laughed, "They're growing up," she said. "They're supposed to get into some trouble."

"I'm going to step outside and see if I can find a sheltered place to call the ranch so they know where we are and don't worry," he said. "I'd like to find out what this storm is doing. The way it's been raining, I'm beginning to worry about flooding. We might have to think about moving some of the herds up into higher country if it doesn't stop."

"Oh, Jessie, I didn't even think about the cattle," Bonnie said, concern in her eyes. "This is just the kind of thing that you don't need. Go on, make your calls, I'll clean up in here."

"You don't mind?" he asked. "I shouldn't be too long if you want to wait."

"I think I can handle it on my own," she said, shaking her head. "The herd is more important right now."

"Thanks, Bonnie," he said, leaning down and giving her a kiss. "Hopefully I'll be back with good news."

When he came back in an hour later, the cave was neat and tidy, the fire was burning merrily, and the boys were still sound asleep. He could hear Bonnie in the back of the cave sorting through the rest of the emergency supplies and mumbling under her breath. Stopping for a minute to watch her, he realized just how lucky he was to have her back in his life, and promised himself that he was never going to let her go again. He was beginning to care less and less about Tyler's

real father, whoever the man was, it was more than clear that he meant nothing to either of them.

Pushing Bonnie to talk about him might be a huge mistake. If the man wasn't a part of their lives, that was good for him. There was no reason to bring it up. He hoped that someday, the four of them could be a happy little family, that Tyler would learn to accept him as a father figure, and Hunter would grow to love Bonnie as much as he did.

"Taking stock of the supplies?" he finally asked, making Bonnie jump. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"That's okay, I was lost in my thoughts," she said, a funny look on her face. "What's the word on the storm?"

"It's not good, heavy rain all night into tomorrow morning," he said. "They're predicting a lot of flooding. I don't think we'll be able to get out of here tomorrow."

"What about the cattle?" Bonnie asked. "Are they in danger?"

"A couple of the smaller herds are going to need to be moved in the morning," he said. "A couple hundred head in each herd, so it's going to be a bit of work for the wranglers, but they should be fine."

"I thought I'd do a quick inventory of the supplies just in case," Bonnie said, pointing to the piles around her feet. "We've got enough food for a couple of days if we don't mind a lot of oatmeal, nuts and dehydrated meals, but there's plenty of coffee and hot chocolate."

"That's a good place to start. Once the rain stops, we can supplement that with some fresh berries and fresh fish from the stream," he said. "What else did you find?"

"Some flashlights, bug spray, and a few candles," Bonnie said, then hesitated. "Jessie, there's only one more sleeping bag."

"Well then, we'll just have to share," he said, grinning at her. "I don't mind."



“That’s not a good idea,” she said, shaking her head. “Besides, I don’t think we’ll fit.”

He picked up the sleeping bag, “These things are pretty roomy,” he said, then sighed. “But if you really don’t want to share, I can sleep by the fire, I won’t get that cold.”

“Now you’re making me feel guilty, that’s not fair,” she said, then sighed. “Fine, we can share, but you have to promise to behave yourself.”

“I give my word that I’ll be a perfect gentleman,” he said, trying to look serious. “Well, at least when we’re sleeping.”

Before she could protest, he pulled Bonnie into his arms and kissed her, letting the passion between them come to life just long enough to leave her breathless and wobbling on shaky legs. When he stepped away from her, she clung to him for a second, then looked up at him, her blue eyes pleading for more, then finally came back to herself.

“That really wasn’t fair,” she said, stepping back from him. “You have to stop doing that.”

“Not going to happen,” he said, shaking his head. “Remember, I have a million of those saved up, and I’m not going to let a single one go to waste.”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Bonnie stood looking down at Jessie, hands on her hips, sure that there was no way they could sleep together in the sleeping bag. “This isn’t going to work,” she said, shaking her head. “Maybe I’ll just wrap myself up in one of the blankets and sleep by the fire.”

“You will not,” Jessie said, holding the sleeping bag open. “You’re going to get in here and stay warm, and there’s not going to be any more arguing about it. I know I’m impossible to resist, but I promise I have enough willpower for the both of us.”

“You’re impossible all right, but not in the way you think,” she said, but climbed in with him and turned her back on him, trying to ignore the way it felt to be so close. “There, are you happy?”

He draped an arm over her, then sighed, “Now I am,” he said, his breath tickling the back of her neck. “But I could be happier.”

“Jessie, you promised,” she said, shifting around to get more comfortable, suddenly feeling a bit overheated. “You said you’d be good.”

“And I would be,” he whispered in her ear. “All you have to do is give me a chance.”

This time it wasn’t the heat making her uncomfortable, it was the way her body had begun to tingle and the tight knot of pleasure forming deep in her belly. Shifting again, she tried to put some distance between them, but there just didn’t seem to be enough room in the sleeping bag, and she started to panic. When she felt Jessie’s erection pressing up against her leg, she gasped, fighting the urge to turn in his arms and give herself over to the nearly overwhelming desire that flooded her.

“Jessie.....you.....I.....” she stammered. “Maybe we should try to scoot apart; this clearly isn’t working.”

“I’m sorry, if you would just quit wiggling around it should be okay,” he said, amusement in his voice. “This isn’t as easy as I thought it would be.”

She held perfectly still, counting the seconds and trying to keep her mind off sex, but it wasn’t working, and she finally threw back the sleeping bag. “I need some air,” she said, scrambling to her feet. “You may not be doing that on purpose.....but I can’t.....”

Her face blazing, she ran toward the opening of the cave, desperate to put some distance between them, afraid that she was going to give in to the desire pumping through her veins. The cool air hit her like a soothing balm when she stepped out of the cave, the spray of rain that came with it caressed her heated skin, and she realized that she’d been holding her breath. Feeling like an idiot for believing that she could climb into a sleeping bag with Jessie and expect nothing to happen, she tried to focus on anything but him lying half naked only a few hundred feet away.

She heard him before she felt his hand on her shoulder, “I’m sorry, Bonnie, I guess I took that too far,” he said. “Why don’t you come back to bed? I’ll figure out a way to control myself, or I’ll sleep by the fire, okay?”

“I don’t know how much longer I can do this,” she said, not daring to look at him. “There’s something I need to tell you, something that might make you change your mind about me. I should have told you a long time ago, but I’ve been so afraid.....”

Jessie grabbed her by the shoulders, “Bonnie, there’s nothing you can tell me that would make me change my mind about you,” he said. “I’ve been waiting for you to tell me about Tyler’s dad, and I’ll continue to wait until you’re ready to talk about it, but what I’m trying to tell you is that it doesn’t matter. We both made mistakes, remember?”

She let out a long sigh, but couldn’t look him in the eyes, “Even if it’s something that’s going to hurt you, even if I know that you’re going to be angrier than you’ve ever been before?” she asked. “I don’t want you to be angry at me ever again, and I know that you’re going to be.”

Jessie pulled her into his arms, “Just because I get angry with you doesn’t mean that I don’t care about you,” he said. “You’re just going to have to trust me, Bonnie. I know that’s scary, which is why I’m willing to wait until you’re ready.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be ready,” she said, then looked up at him and took a deep breath, but before she could tell him about Tyler, there was a scream from inside the cave.

They turned together and started back inside, but before they’d gone two steps, Hunter came barreling at them. “Daddy, Daddy, Tyler is having a bad dream,” he cried. “And he’s all hot and sweaty.”

“Okay, son, we’re going to take care of him,” Jessie said, scooping the little boy up into his arms. “It’s going to be fine. Everyone has bad dreams. Bonnie will take care of him; you and I just need to get out of the way.”

Bonnie rushed over to her son, who was thrashing around in the sleeping bag and mumbling something, but she could only catch one word, wolves. “Tyler, it’s okay,” she said, scooping him up in her arms. “You’re just having a bad dream, all you have to do is wake up, and it will be over.”

Tyler’s eyes fluttered open, and he looked up at her, clearly still deeply in the dream, “It’s the wolves,” he said. “They want me to join them.”

“Oh, honey, wake up,” Bonnie said, nearly in tears. “You’re having a dream. There aren’t any wolves; come on back to us now.”

This time when he looked up at her, his eyes were clear, “I saw the wolves again,” he said, then buried his face in her chest. “They wanted me to come with them, but I didn’t want to go because you would have been sad and missed me.”

“It was just a dream, sweetheart,” she said, rocking him back and forth, tears pooling in her eyes. “You’re safe here with me, I won’t let anything happen to you.”

When she looked up at Jessie he had a strange look on his face, but it disappeared, and he crossed the room and settled down next to them. “I’m here too,” he said. “I would never let anything happen to you, and I bet Hunter wouldn’t either.”

“No way, I’ll fight those wolves,” Hunter said, his voice fierce. “We’ll kick their butts, won’t we, Dad?”

“You bet,” Jessie said, grinning at his son. “Right back to wherever they came from.”

Tyler managed a smile, “Why am I so hot?” he asked, pulling at the oversized sweatshirt. “Can I take this off?”

Bonnie put her hand on his forehead, “Oh, Jessie, he’s burning up,” she said. “What are we going to do?”

# CHAPTER 13



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

It took Jessie a second to answer since he was still wrestling with the fact that Tyler was dreaming about wolves, something that happened to young shifters just before they started to shift. “It’s going to be okay, Bonnie. I’ve got something in the first aid kit for a fever,” he said. “But first, let me get him a cool glass of water, and you get that sweatshirt off.”

“Is Tyler going to be okay?” Hunter asked, tears in his eyes.

“He’s going to be just fine, he just needs to drink some water and take a little medicine,” he said, kneeling in front of Hunter. “I need you to be my helper. Do you think you can do that?”

Hunter nodded, a solemn look on his face, “I’m a big kid now, I can be lots of help,” he said. “What should I do?”

“First, I want you to go over and keep Bonnie and Tyler company,” he said. “Maybe you could tell Tyler a story, but not a scary one.”

“Okay, Dad,” he said. “I’m good at telling stories.”

“Thanks, buddy,” he said, standing up and ruffling his hair.

It took half an hour, but Tyler’s fever finally went down, and Bonnie tucked him back into the sleeping bag, then sat stroking his hair until he fell asleep. “I hope he doesn’t have another bad dream,” she said. “He’s been having them since we moved back, they’re always about wolves, and he wakes

up terrified that they're going to take him away. Tonight, was different, he didn't come back right away, and that fever scared me. It almost feels like they were connected."

"I'm sure he was just a little dehydrated, you know how kids are," he said, but that wasn't what he was thinking. "We'll see how he feels in the morning. If he's still got that fever, we'll find a way to get him out of here."

Bonnie nodded, then looked back down at Tyler, "Tyler never gets sick, not like other kids," she said. "He's never had the stomach flu or a cold. I used to worry about it, I even talked to a doctor about it once. I guess I should be thankful, but I can't help but think that someday it's all going to hit him all at once, or some superbug is going to get him."

Jessie looked down at Tyler's dark head lying on Bonnie's lap, and something deep inside him began to stir, a feeling of connection to the boy that made no sense. Telling himself that it was just because he was Bonnie's son, he ignored the little voice in the back of his mind whispering that there was more to it. Just because what Tyler was going through looked an awful lot like what happened when a shifter started to mature, that didn't mean....."

He shut the thought down, burying it deeply in his brain, "I don't think that's how it works," he said. "Maybe we should all try to get some sleep now."

"If it's okay, I think I'd like to sleep with Tyler tonight," Bonnie said. "Will you and Hunter be okay in the other sleeping bag?"

Hunter was already fast asleep, legs and arms stretched out, "Only if I can get him to share," he said. "That kid has some sharp knees and elbows, but I'll survive."

"Thank you, Jessie," she said. "I panicked for a second there."

"It was a perfectly normal reaction," he said, climbing into the sleeping bag with Hunter. "Sleep well, Bonnie. I'll see you in the morning."

“Good night,” she said. “You’re a good man, Jessie Parker.”

It wasn’t the sun that woke him the next morning. Instead, the sound of giggling and the scent of coffee brought him to his senses, and he opened his eyes to find Hunter and Tyler standing over him. He groaned and pulled the sleeping bag back up over his head, wishing he could go back to sleep, but more giggling, this time tinged with a bit of mischief, let him know that wasn’t going to happen.

This time when he emerged, Bonnie was standing with the boys, a cup of steaming coffee in her hand, “Good morning, sleepy head, it’s a beautiful morning, the sun is shining, and the boys want to go exploring,” she said. “I’ve almost got breakfast ready. Why don’t you drink your coffee while we go check on the horses?”

He groaned when he sat up, his muscles screaming from the abuse they’d taken the night before, “Next time I’m sleeping by the fire, I feel like I got beat up,” he said. “Who would have thought a four-year-old could do that much damage.”

Bonnie laughed, “I don’t think Tyler moved all night long,” she said, handing him the cup. “Drink your coffee; that will make you feel better.”

After taking a long sip, he looked over at Tyler, “I guess you’re feeling better this morning,” he said, deciding all his crazy thoughts from the night before were just that, crazy. “You had your mom all freaked out.”

Tyler’s face got serious, “I have to start drinking more water,” he said. “And I’m not allowed to watch scary movies anymore.”

“That sounds reasonable,” he said, ruffling the boy’s hair. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“All right you two, let’s give Jessie time to drink his coffee,” Bonnie said, grinning at him. “Then we’ll all have some oatmeal for breakfast.”



After downing the first cup of coffee, he got a refill, grabbed his phone, and found a patch of sunlight outside the cave. Steve answered on the first ring, “It’s about time you got your sorry butt up,” he said. “I’ve been trying to call you for an hour.”

“I had to sleep with a restless four-year-old last night, so give me a break,” he said. “Besides, I know you have everything under control; that’s why I pay you so much money.”

“And I’m worth every dollar, if not more,” Steve said, warmth in his voice. “You guys okay up there?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. We had a little scare with Tyler last night, he had a fever, but he seems fine this morning,” he said. “How are the herds?”

“All accounted for and safely tucked away until the runoff from the storm is over,” Steve said. “The flooding is bad in places, some of the trails washed away, and there are a few bridges down around town. If you all are thinking about coming home today, you’ll have to take the long way around. The trail to the lake is flooded where it crosses the stream.”

“I don’t know if the boys can handle that long of a ride, it’s four miles through some rough country going that way,” he said. “I’ll have to talk to Bonnie, but I think we’ll stay here for another night and see how things look tomorrow morning.”

“I figured you wouldn’t want to push it,” Steve said. “Let me know if you change your mind, but don’t worry about things here. I’ve got everything handled.”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Bonnie sat next to the stream, letting the sunshine soak into her skin, the happy laughter and screams of the boys playing in the freezing water only adding to the moment’s pleasure. When Jessie told her that they’d have to spend another night in the cave she’d been concerned at first, but as the morning progressed and Tyler showed no signs of the fever returning, she’d begun to relax. The mountains were beautiful after the rain, if a bit soggy in places, the boys were having fun

in the water, and Jessie was farther up the stream with his fishing pole, trying to catch them lunch.

For the first time in a long time, she had no place to be, there wasn't a list a mile long of chores she had to do, and there was another responsible adult to keep an eye on Tyler. She wondered if it would be selfish to take a nap, and closed her eyes for just a second, thinking about how nice it would be to share the burden of raising Tyler, then quickly blocked the thought, not wanting to ruin the morning with the guilt that constantly plagued her now.

Sitting up, the idea of a nap gone in the rush of emotion, she looked around, realizing that Tyler and Hunter had gone quiet, something that was never good with boys their age. Getting to her feet, she spotted them further down the stream, lying on their stomach on a flat piece of rock, staring down into a deep pool of water. Alarmed that one of them would fall in, she started toward them, annoyed that they'd gone past the boundary she'd set, and planning to take them back to the cave.

She stopped a few feet from them, "Tyler, you're beyond the boundary we set," she said, hoping her voice telegraphed how disappointed she was. "You were supposed to stay on the other side of that big tree."

"I know, Mom, but we weren't going to go in, we're just trying to catch a fish," he said. "Hunter bet me I couldn't catch one with my hands, but I think I can."

"Sweetheart, you're too close to the edge, you're going to fall in," she cautioned, beginning to get worried. "Get away from there right now, we're going back to the cave."

"No, I want to prove that I can catch a fish with my hands," Tyler said, shaking his head. "I can see one swimming around in the water, all I have to do is time it right, and I'll have it."

"Tyler, get away from that water right this second," she warned. "I'm done asking you. Now I'm telling you."

“I can’t, Mom,” he said, his face full of determination. “I have to do this.”

Before she could say another word, Tyler let out what sounded like a howl, jumped into the water, and disappeared under the surface. Just as she started to panic, he came shooting back up, a fish clasped in one hand, a smile of triumph on his face. She could hear Jessie splashing toward them through the water, but could only stare at her son, who had a strange look in his eyes.

Then to her horror, Tyler brought it to his mouth and took a huge bite of the still-thrashing fish, “Tyler, put that down right now,” she yelled. “We don’t eat raw fish.”

“But it tastes good,” he said, a little trickle of blood dripping down his chin, a wild look in his eyes.

Bonnie couldn’t get her lungs to suck up any air as she stared at Tyler, her little boy had suddenly transformed into something scary right before her eyes, and all she could do was stare at him. “Hey, sport, I think you’re scaring your mom,” Jessie said, splashing over to Tyler and taking the fish away from him. “It’s not safe to eat the fish before we’ve cleaned them, it could make you really sick.”

Tyler stared up at Jessie, a mutinous look on his face, one lip raised as if he was going to growl at him like a dog, and her head began to swim. Then, a second later, Tyler was suddenly himself again. The angry look on his face disappeared, and he looked over at her, clearly a bit confused, then burst into noisy tears and began calling for her. She jumped into the stream, waded over to him, and swept him up in her arms, whispering comforting words as she fought her way back to the shore.

Forcing herself to calm down, she collapsed onto the bank and rocked Tyler in silence for a few minutes, taking deep breaths, already beginning to doubt what she’d seen. When Jessie sat down next to her, Hunter on his other side, she looked over at him, doing her best to hold back the tears that stung her eyes.

“He’s just a kid, Bonnie,” Jessie finally said, but he wasn’t very convincing. “With all the stuff out there online, he

probably saw somebody do that and thought it was cool.”

She looked down at her son, “He’s never done anything like this before,” she said, her voice strained from trying not to cry. “He looked so.....”

Unable to finish her thought, she shrugged her shoulders, “Maybe we should go back to the cave, the boys are soaked again,” she said. “I don’t want Tyler to get cold, I don’t know what’s going on with him, but something is off.”

Jessie got to his feet and held out his arms, “Let me take him,” he said. “You and Hunter can follow along behind us.”

She let out a shaky breath and handed Tyler over to Jessie, then looked over at Hunter, “I’m sorry, Hunter,” she said. “I guess Tyler’s not feeling good again. Would you mind holding my hand on the way back to the cave? I think I would feel much better if you did.”

Hunter got to his feet, a determined look on his face, “Don’t worry, I know the way,” he said, holding his hand out to her, mimicking his dad. “I won’t let you get lost.”

“See, I already feel better knowing that you’re looking out for me,” she said, taking his hand and getting to her feet. “Thank you, Hunter.”

# CHAPTER 14



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie watched Bonnie putting Tyler down for a nap while sipping a cup of coffee and doing his best to ignore the little voice in the back of his head telling him that he was an idiot. Studying the boy only made the conviction grow stronger and he turned away, not ready to face the possibility that the truth had been right in front of his face the entire time. The problem was, he wasn't sure how he'd feel if it was true. Part of him was overjoyed, but there was also anger and resentment bubbling away when he thought about Bonnie hiding Tyler from him all these years.

Feeling like the very foundation of his life had suddenly shifted under him, he looked over at Hunter playing happily in the corner of the cave, then back at Tyler, the same connection he'd felt earlier beginning to spread through him. When Bonnie finally stood up and walked away from the sleeping child, their eyes met, and the anger surged to the surface. If what he was thinking was true, she'd kept his son away from him for over five years. He'd missed so many milestones, so many important firsts, and there would be no way to make up for that lost time.

Bonnie's eyes widened in shock when she saw the anger in his eyes, and didn't resist when he took her by the elbow and led her out of the cave. "Is there something that you want to tell me about Tyler?" he asked when they were outside, and he was sure neither of the boys could hear them. "I've been waiting patiently for you to tell me about his father, but you haven't said a word, and I'm out of patience, Bonnie."

“I was going to tell you.....I started to a couple of times, but something always happened to interrupt me,” she stammered. “I just didn’t know how to tell you.....I was afraid that you’d never forgive me..... that I made such a huge mistake you wouldn’t want anything to do with me.”

He wanted to take her in his arms and tell her that could never happen, but he was too mad, too disappointed to give in to the feeling. “Well then, I guess that’s a risk you’re going to have to take,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest to keep himself from reaching for her. “I think I deserve the truth, Bonnie.”

She looked up at him, tears in her eyes, then took a deep breath and opened her mouth, but before she could speak Hunter came running out of the cave. “Tyler is acting weird again,” he called, racing over to them. “He’s talking about wolves, and pacing around the cave. I think he’s going to try to leave.”

He turned back to the cave just as Tyler came shooting out, running toward the woods, moving faster than a normal five-year-old should be able to, and knew instantly where he was going. Bonnie was already running after him, her face filled with panic, and he started to follow her, then remembered Hunter standing next to him. Grabbing his son, he took off toward the woods, hoping he could catch up before something went wrong, now completely sure that Tyler was his son.

He caught up to Bonnie only a few seconds later, “Tyler, stop right now young man, or there will be major consequences,” she was shouting. “You’d better listen to me right now.”

He could tell from the look on Tyler’s face that the magic suddenly coming alive in his blood was in control, “Bonnie, don’t try to stop him,” he said. “I know that you’re scared, but you have to trust me, there’s nothing we can do right now but let this run its course.”

She looked back at him, her face full of shock, “Have you lost your mind?” she hissed at him. “I’m not letting my little

boy traipse through the woods all alone. There's something wrong with him, Jessie, this isn't normal."

He hesitated, knowing this wasn't the time to tell her the truth, "It might be normal for him," he finally said. "We're not going to leave him alone, Bonnie, we'll stay right with him and see where he goes. I promise I won't let anything happen to him, not even a scratch. I'll watch over him like he's my own son."

It was a low blow, he knew that, but it worked. Bonnie's anger deflated, replaced by fear, "I'm scared, Jessie," she said, slightly out of breath. "I don't understand what's going on. Do you know what's wrong with Tyler?"

"There's nothing wrong with him," he said, throwing Hunter onto his back. "He just needs to get something out of his system. I can't explain right now, but I promise I will when we're sure that he's safe."

Bonnie studied him as she walked, "You're sure making a lot of promises," she finally said. "Tyler is my whole world, Jessie. I won't be able to go on if something terrible happens to him."

"Nothing terrible is going to happen," he said. "And if he's going where I think he is, we'll be there in just a few minutes. Then maybe this will all make more sense to you."

Bonnie didn't respond. Instead, when Tyler disappeared around a corner, she picked up her pace after shooting him a dirty look over her shoulder. He hiked behind her, giving her some space until they came to another huge cliff, and the trail came to a dead end. Bonnie started looking around for Tyler, who was nowhere to be seen, a look of panic slowly settling on her face, then turned to him.

"Where is he?" she asked. "I don't see him. We shouldn't have let him go; we'll never find him if he got lost. This is all your fault! I should never have listened to you; I'll never forgive you if something happens to him."

"I promise he's safe," he said, taking her hand, holding on tighter when she tried to pull away. "Come with me, and I'll



show you where he is.”

Bonnie let him pull her along the base of the cliff, then gasped when he pointed to a small opening in the rock, “We have to go through here,” he said. “Are you okay with small spaces?”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Bonnie could only stare at Jessie for a second, her mind too overwhelmed to absorb what was happening, “Are you trying to tell me that Tyler went in there?” she asked, leaning down to look into the dark opening in the rock. “That can’t be right, he couldn’t have gone in there.”

“He’s in there, Bonnie,” Jessie said. “I’m sorry, this must all seem so confusing to you.”

She realized, confused or not, her son was what was most important, “I’m going after him,” she said. “I can’t leave him alone in there. It must be dark; he must be terrified.”

“You can’t go in there alone,” he said, but she was already crawling into the opening. “Bonnie, wait, we’re coming with you. You don’t know where you’re going, you might get lost.”

“I can’t wait, Tyler might already be in trouble. He’s been in there for a long time,” she said, crawling away from him, fear making her a bit irrational. “I don’t want him to get lost, I don’t want to lose my baby in a cave.”

Jessie put Hunter down, “Don’t move,” he said, then crawled in after Bonnie and grabbed her foot. “Bonnie, you can’t just go crawling into a cave like this, that’s a good way to get hurt.”

“Let go of me,” she said, trying to free her foot. “I have to go get Tyler.”

He grabbed her, pulled her into his lap, and held on until she stopped struggling, then cupped her face and looked down into her eyes. “Bonnie, we’ll all go get Tyler, I just need you to calm down a little bit, and then I’ll take you into the cave,” he said. “Can you do that for me?”

She took a deep breath, the confidence in his eyes slowly sinking into her, and the panic faded away, “Okay, I’m better,” she said. “I’m sorry, I was just so scared. Can we please go get Tyler now?”

He nodded, “That’s better, I want you to wait right here for me. I’m going to go get Hunter,” he said. “When I get back, we’re going to go slow, you in the front, Hunter next, and I’ll bring up the rear. Promise me that you’ll stay close and won’t get too far ahead. There are a couple of tricky turns, and I don’t want you to miss one of them.”

Even though her stomach was churning, and she couldn’t stop imagining all the terrible things that could happen to Tyler, she nodded her head, not trusting herself to speak. When Jessie disappeared, taking the light from his flashlight with him, she sat in the darkness, eyes closed, sending out prayers to anyone who would listen that Tyler would be safe. Jessie was back with Hunter crawling in front of him only a few minutes later, and when she saw the look on the little boy’s face, she forced herself to smile.

“Are you ready for an adventure?” she asked.

Hunter shook his head, “I’m scared,” he said. “I want to go home.”

“I am kind of scared, too,” she whispered, “but I know that your dad is going to keep us all safe. We just have to listen to him and do what he tells us to do. Do you think you can do that?”

Hunter nodded, “I think so,” he said, then looked back at Jessie. “Bonnie is scared too.”

“It’s okay to be scared,” Jessie said, his eyes meeting hers. “Sometimes being scared can keep us safe, but sometimes we have to ignore the fear and do what’s right. That’s called being brave.”

“Then I’m going to be brave and go with you to get Tyler,” Hunter said, puffing up his chest.

“Good man,” Jessie said, smiling at his son, then looked over at her. “I want you to go slow. I’ll try to give you as much

light as I can.”

A heart stopping ten minutes later, Bonnie tumbled out of the passageway into the cave, jumped to her feet, heart pounding and slightly out of breath, then began searching the darkness for her son. Starting to feel the panic rising again, sure that he wasn't there and they'd wasted a lot of time, she grabbed the flashlight out of Jessie's hand when he came out of the tunnel through the rock. When the beam finally found her son in the back of the cave staring up at the wall, she started for him, then paused when she saw what he was looking at.

Taking a few steps toward him, she let the beam of the light travel over the rest of the wall, her head starting to spin, then turned to find Jessie watching her. “What is this place?” she finally asked, her voice small in the big space. “Who did all of this?”

“The Native Americans of this region thought this cave was a sacred space, a place of power,” he said. “They believed that the spirits of all the shifters who came before them rested here. They painted all these pictures as a tribute to them.”

“Shifters,” she said, looking around the cave at the paintings. “But these are wolves.”

“Wolf shifters,” Jessie said, walking over and touching one of the paintings, making it glow. “Humans that can turn into an animal at will. Most cultures have them, only the Native Americans worshiped and honored them.”

“How did you do that?” she asked, starting to feel a little faint. “Never mind, I don't want to know, I just want to get out of here.”

She started for Tyler, but he turned and snarled at her, and she stumbled backward, right into Jessie's arms, “It's okay, Bonnie, he's fine,” he said. “His magic is just beginning to wake up, and it can be a hard time for a shifter, but I can help him, teach him how to use his gift.”

“This can't be happening, this must be a bad dream,” she said, pulling out of his arms. “I just need to wake up, and it

will all go away.”

# CHAPTER 15



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie was ready when Bonnie's legs crumpled beneath her and lifted her easily into his arms before she collapsed onto the cave's rocky floor, wishing she hadn't had to find out about shifters the way she just had. He'd envisioned it going differently, had been sure that he'd find the right time to tell her, but realized that he'd only been avoiding telling her because he was afraid that she'd reject him. It had been true all those years ago, and now that he was being completely honest, it was still true.

Looking down at Bonnie, he cursed the coward in him, and promised himself that he'd never make that same mistake again. He'd almost lost her once because he'd been afraid to show her who he really was. He just hoped that his lack of trust hadn't destroyed what was between them, hoped that Bonnie would understand and forgive him for not putting enough faith in her love for him.

When she began to stir in his arms, he held her a bit closer, "You're okay," he said, rocking back and forth. "You've just had a bit of a shock. There's nothing to be afraid of, everything is going to be okay."

Bonnie's eyes slowly fluttered open, and she looked up at him, her face full of confusion, "What happened?" she asked, then looked around the cave. "Oh, no, it wasn't a dream."

He let her go when she scrambled to her feet, "Bonnie, I'm sorry you had to find out this way. If I'd known about Tyler," he said, looking over at the boy, who was still staring at the walls. "I would have told you sooner, I would have done it

differently, but I promise you it's nothing to be upset about. Tyler is just special."

She shook her head, "I don't believe it, it can't be true," she said, then rushed over to Tyler, grabbed him by the shoulders, and turned him to face her. "Tyler, I want to get out of here right now. Let's go back outside, we shouldn't be here."

Tyler looked up at his mother, a smile on his face, "You're wrong, Mom, we do belong here," he said. "I thought the wolves were scary, but they aren't. They're my friends, my family, and I'm going to be like them someday."

"Oh, sweetheart, don't say that," Bonnie said, shaking her head. "You don't know what you're talking about. You're a little confused. Those were just dreams, they weren't real."

Tyler pulled away from Bonnie, ran over to a big cave painting of a wolf, reached out, and touched it with his fingers, "Look, Mom, they know me," he said, smiling when the painting began to glow. "I'm one of them, and someday, I'll be able to turn into a wolf too. That's going to be so cool."

Bonnie just stared at Tyler, shaking her head, and he was afraid that she was going to faint again, "Tyler, this is all a lot for your mom to handle all at once," he said. "Maybe we should get out of here for a while. If you want to come back later, I'll bring you back."

Tyler looked over at Bonnie, "I'm sorry, Mommy, I don't want to make you sad," he said. "We can leave now if that will make you feel better."

Bonnie's shoulders sagged, and she sighed with relief, "I'd like that very much, sweetheart," she said, holding out her hand. "Let's go."

After one last look at the walls of the cave, Tyler let Bonnie lead him over to the passageway, "I want you to stay right behind me," she said. "I don't want you to get lost now that we found you."

"Oh, I won't get lost," Tyler said. "The wolves wouldn't let me."

Bonnie's face crumpled, but she didn't cry, "That's good," she said, her voice strained.

When they emerged from the cave, Bonnie grabbed Tyler's hand, "We're going straight back to the cave, and then I'm going to find a way to get you home," she said, giving him a dirty look. "We'll find someone who can help you."

Tyler pulled her to a stop, "Jessie can help me, the wolves said so," he said, then looked over at him. "They said that you're supposed to be my guide, that you would show me how to be a shifter. They told me some other stuff too, but I don't remember it all....."

"That's okay, you don't have to remember everything right now," he said, the realization that he was talking to his son suddenly hitting him. "And I would be honored to be your guide through your transformation."

"Stop this, stop making him think all of this is real," Bonnie said, her voice full of desperation. "You're only going to make it worse."

"Mom, this is real," Tyler said. "I'm a shifter just like my dad."

This time Bonnie gasped, "Tyler that's not....." her words died away. "Did the wolves tell you that too?"

Tyler nodded and smiled, "I'm glad," he said. "I like Jessie, and this means that Hunter is my brother."

He could tell that Bonnie was getting close to the edge again, "Hey, I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm starving," he said. "Let's get a move on before I starve. I'm so hungry, I'm even looking forward to those dehydrated meals Bonnie has been threatening us all with."

"Gross, Dad, I'd rather eat oatmeal, and I hate oatmeal," Hunter said, a frown on his face. "I wish we'd caught some fish instead of playing in the stream."

"Oatmeal it is then," he said, pushing the little group forward. "Come on guys, bet I can beat you back."



When they all straggled into the cave a few minutes later, Bonnie headed straight for one of the sleeping bags and climbed in. “I don’t feel very good. I think I’ll skip lunch and take a nap,” she said, her voice trembling. “Can you watch Tyler?”

He grabbed a water bottle and took it over to her, “Only if you drink some of this,” he said, handing it to her, then watched until she’d finished half of it. “Get some sleep. This should all be a lot easier after you wake up.”

“I’m still hoping that I’m asleep right now,” she said, sliding back into the sleeping bag. “Then this will all have been a dream.”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Bonnie came slowly awake, but didn’t open her eyes, the feeling that there was something she wanted to avoid making her lie very still. Only a few seconds later, the memory of what happened in the cave came rushing back to her, and she let out a whimper as a mixture of fear and panic flooded her. But when she opened her eyes, she was greeted by two smiling faces, and for a second, she let herself believe that she’d really been dreaming, but the sight of Jessie coming across the cave, a cup of coffee in his hand, shattered that thought.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked, crouching next to her, his face full of concern. “I brought you some coffee, but you might want to drink some water first.”

“How long have I been asleep?” she asked, sitting up.

“Most of the afternoon,” Jessie said. “The boys and I did a little fishing to give you some quiet, so we’ll be having fresh fish for dinner.”

“Jessie.....” she started, then realized the boys were listening to every word they said.

Understanding what she was thinking, Jessie looked over at the boys, “Why don’t you two go and play on the other side of the cave? Bonnie and I need a few minutes alone for some grown-up talk.”

“Mom, you don’t need to worry about me,” Tyler said, leaning down and giving her a big hug. “I understand it all now. This is just who I am, and the wolves were just trying to help me see that.”

She forced herself to stifle the scream that tried to escape and glanced up at her son, who had a peaceful look on his face, “That’s good, sweetheart,” she said. “It’s just going to take me a little while to get used to the idea.”

When the boys were gone, Jessie held his hand out to her, “Maybe we should go outside and talk,” he said. “The boys will be fine on their own for a few minutes.”

“I don’t think talking will help,” she said, but took his hand and let him help her up. “This is all just too..... unbelievable.”

“I think you’re still in a bit of shock, and I don’t blame you, but this isn’t going to go away, Bonnie,” he said, leading her outside. “We have to figure out what we’re going to do from here. Tyler’s going to have a lot of challenges to face in the next few years. Making the transition is a difficult time in a shifter’s life, he’s going to need you on his side.”

Anger instantly flared to life, “I’m sorry, but that was an insulting thing to say,” she said, glaring at him. “In case you missed it, I’ve been raising Tyler all by myself for five years, and frankly, I think I’ve done a good job. You have no idea how hard it was sometimes, going to school, working to support us. I was exhausted all the time, overwhelmed by all the demands on my time. For you to suggest that I wouldn’t be there for my son when he needs me, is.....”

“You wouldn’t have had to raise him alone if you’d told me about him,” Jessie said, anger flaring in his eyes. “That was your choice, Bonnie, or have you forgotten that?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten that,” she shot back at him. “But maybe you’ve forgotten how your father treated me, the things he said to me before I left. I was scared to call you, afraid that he would.....well, I don’t know. I almost called you the day I found out I was pregnant, but I called Mandy first, and she told me that you had gotten married. It had only been two

months, Jessie. What was I supposed to think when you moved on so fast? I was afraid that you'd take Tyler away from me, and I'd never see him again."

"That never would have happened. I loved you, Bonnie," he said, anger making his eyes glow just a little. "I was devastated when you left, I was heartbroken. I only got married because I thought it was over between us. You made that very clear the day you left."

"You say that you loved me, but you never told me about being a shifter," she said, the words difficult to say, her brain still not ready to accept the reality. "What was your plan? Were you going to wait until we were married and then spring it on me after it was too late?"

"It wasn't like that, and you know it," he said, throwing his hands up in the air. "It's not like I go around telling everyone about what I can do. I was going to tell you; I was just waiting for the right time."

"The right time?" she asked. "And when would that have been? Before we had kids who inherited your.....I don't know what to call it."

"It's a gift, Bonnie," he said. "It doesn't make us any less human, just different."

"I never said you were any less human," she said, shaking her head, then took a deep breath. "Look, this isn't getting us anywhere, and I think I need some time to figure out what I want to do. You're not the man I thought you were."

"What you want to do," he repeated, his face turning red. "What is that supposed to mean? If you think you're going to take Tyler away from me, you'll have a huge fight on your hands. He's my son. He should be with me; he needs me more than he needs you right now."

"I cannot believe you just said that! You really are a huge jerk, Jessie," she said. "I can't talk to you anymore; I'm going back inside. Please just leave me alone."

# CHAPTER 16



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie watched Bonnie walk away, cursing himself for getting angry and saying the wrong thing, but he wasn't going to give up the chance to have Tyler in his life, even if it meant losing Bonnie in the process. Shocked that he'd think such a thing, he instantly pushed it out of his mind and took a deep breath to calm himself down. Bonnie's reaction to the truth was understandable, she just needed some time and space to come to terms with the new reality of her life. She was a smart, intelligent woman. With some time and space, she would come around and see that they weren't enemies.

He'd just have to be patient and take things even slower than they had been, if that was even possible, and hope that time would heal some of the wounds they'd both suffered thanks to his father and Chloe. He wasn't that stupid kid anymore, he was going to fight for what he wanted, and that was Bonnie and Tyler.

Deciding that she'd had enough time on her own, he started back toward the cave, but the sound of horses coming through the trees made him stop. Only a second later, a familiar voice called out, "Hey there in the cave, we're here to rescue you."

When Steve rode out of the trees, followed by several of his wranglers, a smile spread across his face, "And what if I don't need rescuing?" he asked. "Don't you all have better things to do than this?"

“Well, then, I guess you’ll not be interested in the food we brought,” Steve said, dismounting and walking over to him. “Should we just turn around and take it back?”

“Now that might be going too far,” he said. “It’s good to see you, we’ve been doing okay on our own, but I think everyone would be happy to head home.”

“Well, then, let’s eat so we can get going before it gets too late,” Steve said. “No offense, but I’d rather not spend the night in the cave with all these people.”

“Jessie, what’s going on?” Bonnie asked, coming out of the cave, the boys right behind her. “Is everything okay?”

“You bet,” he said. “We’re being rescued, and they brought food with them.”

“Hey, Uncle Steve,” Hunter said, pushing his way past Bonnie. “We’ve been having so much fun, we went fishing and Tyler caught a fish with his bare hands, it was so cool. Then we went to this really cool cave, and we had to crawl through this long tunnel to get inside, then Bonnie fainted, and.....”

“Okay, that’s enough, Hunter,” he said. “Steve just got here, let’s give him some time to rest before you start pestering him.”

“I can’t wait to hear everything you’ve been up to, but right now I think we should go inside and have something to eat,” Steve said. “You can ride with me on the way back and tell me all about it.”

He looked over at Bonnie, noticing that her cheeks had turned pink, “Bonnie, this is Steve, he’s my ranch manager and my best friend,” he said. “He’s been working for me since my father died. I couldn’t run the ranch without him.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said. “Thank you for coming after us, I think the boys are ready to go home.”

“It sounds like you had quite an adventure,” Steve said. “But you were in good hands. No one knows these mountains better than Jessie.”

“He’s taken good care of us,” Bonnie said, not looking over at him. “Why don’t you come into the cave? I’m sure you’re all ready for a rest after the long ride.”

After they shared the food packed into the saddle bags, they cleaned up the cave, saddled their horses, and the little group set off for home, hoping to beat the sunset. Bonnie rode as far away from him as she could, keeping the other wranglers between them, but she didn’t protest when he lifted Tyler up into the saddle with him. The look of sadness on her face made his heart lurch with sympathy. He hated the fact that she was hurting, that she was afraid he would try to take Tyler away from her.

They arrived back at the ranch just as darkness was falling, dismounted in front of the barn, and handed the horses off to the stable hands. “Well, I guess we should be heading home,” Bonnie said, taking Tyler’s hand, then hesitated. “I know you’re probably anxious to spend time with Tyler, but maybe you could give me a few days to get used to the idea. I don’t want to keep him from you, and I’m sure we’ll work out some kind of visitation, I just.....”

Tears welled up in her eyes, “I’m sorry, Jessie, I wish things had turned out differently,” she said. “I never meant to hurt you; I hope you know that.”

“I don’t know why you’re talking like what’s between us is over, because it’s not,” he said. “I lost you once, I’m not going to lose you again. I want Tyler in my life just as much as I want you. I’m going to give you some space just like you asked, but I’m not going away, not until you tell me you don’t ever want anything to do with me again. If you can do that right now, I’ll back off, but I don’t think you can.”

She looked up at him, then shook her head, “I think it’s time we went home,” Bonnie said. “I’ll call you in a couple of days about spending time with Tyler.”

“Let me walk you to your car,” he offered, not ready to let her go yet, a small part of him afraid that she was going to run away from him.

“That’s okay, we know the way,” she said, then looked down at Tyler. “Say goodbye to Jessie, we’re going home now.”

Tyler let go of Bonnie’s hand, ran over to him, and jumped into his arms, “When will I get to see you again?” he asked. “Will you take me back to the cave?”

“You bet. I’ll take you back there as soon as your mom says it’s okay,” he said. “But you have to promise me that you’ll be patient, your mom has a few things to work out first.”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Bonnie lay slouched on the couch, ignoring the mess around her, clicking through the channels on the television, unable to settle on anything. There were a hundred things that she should have been doing, but she didn’t have the energy to do any of them, and the truth was she didn’t really care. Ever since they’d gotten back from the ranch, she’d been a mess, bawling like a baby one minute, full of hope that Jessie’s words were true and they could salvage something from the mess they’d made of their lives, then back to tears when she thought about how much anger and resentment there was between them.

They hadn’t messed everything up on their own, they’d had a lot of help from Jessie’s father and Chloe, that much she’d come to accept. She might have even been able at some point to understand why Jessie had gotten married so quickly. What she was having a difficult time with was the idea that he was a shifter. It had taken her days and many conversations with Tyler to even believe it was possible, and a few more days to accept that her son would someday have the ability to become a wolf whenever he wanted to.

The thought filled her with both fear and a kind of selfish sadness that she wouldn’t be able to share the experience with him, and Jessie would. This brought her back around to why she was so angry and disappointed with him, why she wasn’t sure there could ever be anything permanent and lasting between them. There was a huge part of him that she could



never understand, a part of him that he could never share with her completely, and she wasn't sure she could stand to be locked out from so much of him.

Sighing loudly, she threw the remote onto the floor and laid back, looking up at the ceiling. She'd spent an entire week going in these same circles, avoiding everything but seeing to Tyler and her patients' needs. It had to stop, but she didn't know how to make it all fit into a neat package that her brain could understand, couldn't seem to find her way out of the hole she'd fallen into.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts, but she didn't move, afraid that Jessie would be standing on the other side, and she still wasn't ready to see him. "Bonnie, I know that you're in there," Mandy said. "Get up off that couch and let me in, or I'm going to keep knocking."

With a sigh she got to her feet, went to the front door, and opened it, "What are you doing here?" she asked. "Did I forget some plans or something?"

"Bonnie, we haven't talked in a week, how could we have made plans?" Mandy demanded, putting her hands on her hips. "What's going on with you? You've been avoiding me since you got back from Jessie's. Are you going to tell me what's going on, or do I have to go ask him?"

"I can't talk about it," she said. "But everything is a huge mess, and I don't know what to do."

"You should know by now that you can tell me anything. I'm pretty good at keeping secrets, and it sounds like you need someone to talk to," Mandy said. "So, either invite me in, or I'm going straight to Jessie and find out what's going on."

"Will you quit saying that, it would only make things worse," she said, then stepped back. "I guess you should come in, I can't tell you everything, but the bottom line is Jessie's mad at me for not telling him about Tyler, and I'm mad at him for something else."

"Would that something else be the fact that he's a shifter and never told you?" Mandy asked, looking around at the mess

and shaking her head. “What happened in here? Did you have a party?”

“Very funny,” she said. “Did you just say what I think you did?”

“You mean about Jessie being a shifter?” Mandy asked, shrugging her shoulders. “Did you forget that we’re second cousins or something like that? I’ve got some shifter blood running through my veins too, Bonnie.”

She stumbled over to the couch and sank down, “You never told me that,” she said, a little hurt. “I feel like everyone knows about shifters except me.”

“Not exactly, but there are a lot of us around here,” Mandy said. “Prospect was a safe place for shifters to live a long time ago, some left as the world began to change, but a lot of families stayed.”

“Can you.....you know.....shift?” she asked, unable to help herself. “Is that a rude question to ask?”

Mandy shook her head, “No, to both,” she said. “Men are usually the only ones who can shift, which is completely unfair, but I could pass the magic onto my children, so if this baby is a boy, he could be a shifter.”

“It doesn’t bother you; I mean, you don’t feel like a.....” her words trailed off. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what I was going to say.”

Mandy came over and sat down next to her, “Bonnie, I’m still the same person,” she said, reaching out to take her hand. “I just have a little extra juice flowing through my veins. The truth is, there are a lot of wonderful things about being a shifter, but I’m not the one who should be telling you about them. Don’t let this come between you and Jessie. Go talk to him; if you two care about each other the way I think you do, you can get past this.”

“You make it all seem so normal, and I wish I felt that way, but I’m still.....” she trailed off, not sure why she was still avoiding Jessie. “Maybe I’ll call him tomorrow or something.”

“Wrong answer, you’re going to go see him right now,” Mandy said, pulling her up off the couch. “I packed a bag so I can stay the night, but you’d better take a shower before you go, you’re smelling a little ripe.”

She thought about the message Jessie had left earlier that day, “He did invite me out to the ranch for dinner tonight,” she said. “I wasn’t going to go, but.....”

# CHAPTER 17



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie sat at the kitchen table, every sweep of the minute hand making his heart hurt a little more. He'd been so sure that Bonnie would come around, that she'd come to accept what he was. But after a week of silence and unanswered messages, he was beginning to lose hope and starting to admit that what they had might have been destroyed by all the deceit around them. When he saw the sweep of headlights coming up the drive, he didn't get to his feet or let himself get excited. It would only make the disappointment that much sharper when the car kept going past the main house to the bunkhouse.

When the lights stopped in front of the house, he still didn't move, but his heart began to pound in his chest, and a surge of joy blocked out all of the anger and disappointment he'd been feeling. He finally got up from the table when there was a knock at the door, all the things he'd been wanting to say to Bonnie over the last week crowding his brain. Throwing the door open, he expected a huge surge of relief when he saw Bonnie, but it wasn't her standing on the porch; instead, he was greeted by Chloe and one of her sly smiles.

"Hello, Jessie," she said. "I'm so glad that you're home, I've been thinking about you a lot lately, and I just had to come see you. Aren't you going to invite me inside?"

He studied his ex-wife for a second, then shook his head, "No, I don't think so," he said. "I have no desire to spend time with you, unless you have something you want to discuss with me about Hunter, I think it would be best if you left."

Chloe looked surprised for a second, then began to pout, “Oh, come on, Jessie, there’s no reason we can’t have a friendly chat,” she said. “I know things haven’t been great between us, but I miss you, I want things to be the way they were.”

“That’s never going to happen, Chloe,” he said. “I know what you and my father did, I know you helped drive Bonnie away, and I won’t ever forgive you for that.”

“I was only doing what your father told me to. I thought I was doing you a favor,” she said. “Your father would have cut you off if you’d married her, and we make such a cute couple, everyone said so. Let’s try again Jessie, I want to be with you again.”

He could only stare at her for several long minutes, “It’s a bit late for that,” he finally said, disgust at the thought of even touching Chloe making his stomach feel a little sick.

“But it’s not too late,” Chloe said. “I know you still want me, Jessie, I know there’s still something between us.”

He shook his head, “There was never anything between us, Chloe,” he said. “I went along with what my father wanted because it was easier at the time. I was so upset about Bonnie leaving I was willing to settle for you. I’m not willing to settle anymore, I want Bonnie in my life, and I’m sure as hell not going to screw it up by messing around with you again.”

Chloe staggered back a step, a look of surprise on her face, but it only lasted a second, “Jessie, I don’t think you know what you want,” she said. “But I’ll be happy to show you.”

Before he could stop her, Chloe dropped the long rain coat she’d been wearing revealing the silky lingerie underneath, “Come on Jessie, don’t you remember how much fun we had together,” she said, running her hands over his chest. “All the nights we spent wrapped up together in bed, all the pleasure we shared, that could be yours again, all you have to do is let me in.”

He laughed, couldn’t help himself, “I think you must have me confused with someone else,” he said, grabbing her hands.

“It’s time for you to leave, Chloe. There’s nothing here for you, well except your son, who you seemed to have completely forgotten about.”

The sweet seductive look on Chloe’s face disappeared, “I’m not going to let Bonnie have you,” she hissed, then tried to launch herself into his arms.

He managed to push her away, then stepped away from her and looked up to find Bonnie watching them, “Bonnie, this isn’t what it looks like,” he said, backing away from Chloe. “She just showed up here, I didn’t invite her. You have to believe me.”

Bonnie glanced at him, then turned her attention to Chloe, who had a triumphant look on her face, “You’re too late, Bonnie,” she said, a big smile spreading across her face. “He still wants me, we’re going to get together again, so you should just turn around and go home.”

Bonnie didn’t say anything for a second, then she began walking toward them, “That’s funny, I’m pretty sure I heard Jessie asking you to leave,” she said, climbing the steps and picking up the coat off the porch. “Don’t forget this, you might get cold on your way home.”

Chloe looked down at the coat Bonnie thrust at her, then back up at her, “You’re nothing but a.....”

“Chloe, save the insults, I’m not the one standing on my ex-husband’s porch in her underwear,” Bonnie said. “Frankly, this is getting exhausting. I let you come between us once, I’m not going to be that stupid again.”

“Well, I.....” Chloe was speechless, something he rarely saw.

“I think it’s time for you to leave now,” Bonnie said, shoving the coat into Chloe’s hands. “Jessie and I have dinner plans, and they don’t include you.”

After grabbing the coat and shoving her arms in, Chloe pushed her way past Bonnie, giving her a good shove in the process. “That was really classy,” Bonnie said. “And you were calling me trash.”

He started laughing again, then pulled Bonnie inside and slammed the door closed. Then, unable to help himself, he slammed his mouth down on hers. After kissing her until they were both breathless, he pulled back and looked down at her, then crushed her to his chest when he saw both acceptance and love in her eyes.

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

With her face pressed against Jessie's chest, his heart beating in her ear, Bonnie felt a surge of emotion, relief to be in his arms, a wave of love so powerful it took her breath away, and desire that made her entire body throb with need. Overwhelmed, she suddenly found herself crying, huge racking sobs that made her body shake as she clung to him. Jessie scooped her into his arms, carried her over to the table, sat down with her in his lap, wrapped his arms around her again, and rocked her until the storm passed.

"I'm sorry, that probably wasn't the reaction you expected," she finally said, wiping the tears from her cheeks. "I don't know what happened. I was so angry at you when I saw Chloe standing there, then I heard what you said, and I was angry with her. I guess I lost it a little, I just couldn't stand to think....."

"Shhh.....it's okay, Bonnie," he said, smiling down at her. "That was amazing. I was so sure everything was going to get messed up again when I saw you standing there, but it was fun to watch you roasting Chloe. I'm just sorry you had to go through that. I promise nothing like that will ever happen again. I'm calling my lawyer first thing in the morning and getting a restraining order."

"Oh, Jessie, do you really think that's necessary?" she asked. "As much as I dislike Chloe, she is Hunter's mother. If you get a restraining order, it will just make it harder on him. She can't hurt us anymore, Jessie. Let's just leave it alone."

"Are you sure, Bonnie?" he asked. "After everything she's done to us, I don't know if I can just ignore all her antics, and I'm sure she isn't done."



“We’ll handle that when it happens,” she said. “Maybe tonight will make her realize that nothing is going to stop us from being together again.”

Jessie looked down at her, “Are we together?” he asked. “Are you really okay with me being a shifter?”

She nodded, but didn’t say anything for a second, “It’s part of who you are. It just took me a little while to accept that,” she finally said. “It’s not going to be easy knowing that there’s a part of you that I’ll never be able to get close to, a part of you that’s separate from me, but I would rather live with that than without you.”

“I’m glad to hear that, but I think you’re going to discover that living with a shifter has a few nice benefits,” he said. “We have a lot to talk about, but I would rather do it over dinner.”

“I’m not too late?” she asked. “I figured dinner would be ruined by now.”

Jessie stood with her still in his arms, a big smile on his face, “Well, lucky for you, I had something special planned,” he said, gently setting her on her feet. “Are you up for a ride?”

“Jessie, it’s dark out,” she said. “We can’t go riding now.”

“Oh, come on, we used to do it all the time,” he said, grinning at her. “We’re child-free for the night, let’s have some fun.”

“How do you know I don’t have to be home tonight?” she asked, looking up at him. “Did you have something to do with Mandy coming over?”

He shook his head, “No, that was all my brother’s doing,” he said. “As strange as it is, he’s trying to be a better brother, and I guess getting us together was on his list of things to do.”

“Well, remind me to thank him later,” she said. “He really is a good guy, Jessie.”

“We can sing my brother’s praises on the ride,” he said, grinning down at her. “Let’s not let this night go to waste, Bonnie. I want to be with you.”

Her entire body filled with desire, “Oh, Jessie, I want that too,” she said, feeling her cheeks beginning to get hot. “But it’s been so long.....I’ve had a baby since then.....”

“Let’s get one thing straight right now,” he said. “You’re even more beautiful now than you were five years ago, and I can’t wait to explore every delicious curve of your body.”

She gasped, her legs got wobbly, and she had to cling to him for a second, “Okay,” she finally said, incapable of much more. “Maybe we should skip the ride.”

“No way, I’ve got a surprise for you,” Jessie said. “I’ve been waiting for the right time to show you, and this is it.”

“Jessie, I don’t think.....” but he cut her off with a kiss, then grabbed her hand and dragged her out of the house, across the yard, and into the barn. “I had one of the boys saddle a horse for us. You don’t mind sharing, do you?”

“Just like we used to,” she said, tears springing to her eyes. “We’d sneak down here and steal a horse, then ride all night long and watch the sunrise before sneaking home the next morning.”

“Well, this time we’re not going to be riding all night, and there won’t be any sneaking home,” he said, wiping the tears from her cheeks. “But we will watch the sunrise together.”

A few minutes later, they rode out of the barn, Jessie’s arms wrapped around her, the moon lighting the way as he led the horse over to a trail into the woods. With a sigh of contentment, she leaned back against his chest, feeling her entire body filling with warmth, then closed her eyes. Jessie kissed the top of her head, sending chills through her body making her shiver, and for the first time since she’d come home, everything felt right.

# CHAPTER 18



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie stopped the horse at the top of the ridge, “Do you know where we are?” he asked, looking down at Bonnie. “It’s changed a bit over the years, but we used to spend a lot of time up here.”

“How could I forget?” she asked, looking up at him over her shoulder. “That little cabin was like a sanctuary for us, the one place we could be alone. Is it still there?”

He nodded, and gave the horse a little nudge with his heels, “It’s a little different than you remember it. I used to escape up here when I couldn’t stand to be around Chloe anymore,” he said. “I never told her where I went and the truth is, she didn’t care.”

“So, it’s still ours?” Bonnie asked, a pleased smile on her face. “That’s nice.”

She settled down against his chest for the rest of the ride, and it was all he could do not to nudge the horse into a gallop, but he restrained himself looking forward to her reaction when she saw the cabin. When they topped another ridge and the wooden structure came into view, Bonnie gasped and sat up in the saddle, then a big smile spread across her face.

“Oh, Jessie, it’s adorable,” she said, turning around to look at him. “This must have been a ton of work.”

“I didn’t start out planning to fix it up; at first, I was just coming up here when I missed you. I’d work on a couple of things while I was here,” he said. “Then, after I married Chloe, it was an escape, the one place I could go where she couldn’t

reach me, so little by little it all came together. I added the flowers and the swing on the porch after you came back. I guess I was hoping it could be our place again.”

“Oh, Jessie, I’m so sorry I ever doubted you,” she said, reaching up to stroke his cheek. “I want this to be our place again too. Let’s go inside.”

He stopped the horse when they reached the porch, slid down out of the saddle, then lifted Bonnie down, holding on to her for a second longer than necessary. After he tied up the reins, he took her hand and led her up the steps, “I feel like I should carry you inside or something,” he said, pulling her into his arms. “Isn’t that what they do in the movies?”

Bonnie laughed, “You’re supposed to do that when we get married,” she said. “So, you’ll have to save it for later.”

“Are you asking me to marry you?” he asked, grinning down at her. “Because if you are, the answer is definitely yes.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Bonnie said, suddenly back peddling. “I just meant people only do that when they get married.”

“Hmm.....that’s funny, I heard something completely different,” he said, pulling her inside the cabin and closing the door behind them. “I’m sure I heard a proposal.”

“You did not.....oh.....” Bonnie’s face filled with surprise when he lit a lantern. “Jessie, this is wonderful, it’s the same little cabin, but you’ve made it so much better.”

“I just spruced it up a little,” he said. “Changed a few things, fixed a few things, stuff like that.”

Bonnie walked around the single room, running her hands over the couch, then the bed, before turning back to face him. “It’s just like we planned. You created this from our plans,” she said, tears streaming down her cheeks. “You remembered everything, right down to the color of the pillows on the bed.”

“It made me feel close to you,” he said. “I guess I figured if I couldn’t have you, I could at least have this.”

“Well, now you have both,” Bonnie said, walking over to him. “You made love to me the first time in this cabin. That was a long time ago, but I still remember every moment of that night like it was yesterday.”

“So do I,” he said, reaching for her, but she pushed his hands away and began unbuttoning his shirt. “I’ve never stopped thinking about it.”

“There was never anyone but you,” Bonnie said, sliding the shirt off his shoulders. “All these years, I couldn’t be with anyone else, Jessie. Maybe that’s why I came back; no one else has ever been able to make me feel the way you do.”

He grabbed both her hands in his and looked down at her, “You mean you’ve never been with anyone else?” he asked, then sighed when she shook her head. “Oh, Bonnie, I’m so sorry, I should have told you about being a shifter sooner.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Bonnie said. “I know now. That’s good enough.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” he said, crushing her to his chest. “I was such a fool back then, I didn’t know what we had, didn’t understand just how deeply our connection goes. If I had, I would have gone after you.”

Bonnie looked up at him, “Jessie, it doesn’t matter, we’re together now,” she said, shaking her head. “We both made mistakes back then, let’s not worry about that anymore.”

He reached down, cupped her face with his hands, and looked into her eyes, “Bonnie, it does matter, it matters a lot,” he said. “Shifters mate for life, we find the one person who is perfect for us, and we don’t want anyone else for the rest of our lives. If we’re away from that person, we’re miserable, unable to move on, unable to forget the person we’ve bonded with.”

“Are you trying to tell me that we’ve bonded?” she asked, her eyes wide. “I’m not a shifter, Jessie, that can’t be possible.”

“I think it is,” he said. “It explains why you never moved on, why I couldn’t forget you no matter how hard I tried. I

think that's why you came back."

Bonnie looked stunned for a second, then a slow smile spread across her face, "Does this mean that you're mine forever, then?" she asked. "Because I like that idea."

"That's exactly what it means," he said. "I just wanted you to know before anything happens, because the bond will only grow stronger if we make love, Bonnie."

She studied him for a second, "I think I can live with that if you can," she said, then pulled his head down and kissed him.

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Jessie growled deep in his throat and kissed Bonnie back, then lifted her off her feet and carried her over to the bed, "As long as we're together, I'll be the happiest man on Earth," he said, setting her on her feet. "I've dreamed about this day, Bonnie, but I never thought those dreams would come true."

"Nothing is ever going to come between us again," she said, reaching for the buckle on his belt. "Now stop all this talking and make love to me."

"I'm going to take my time, sweetheart," he said. "I'm going to have you begging before I give you what you want."

She gasped, her entire body suddenly alive with sensation as warmth spread through her, and when his mouth came down on hers, she gave herself over to the pleasure that slowly engulfed her. No longer fighting the power of the connection between them, she felt it tugging them together and welcomed that as well, finally completely sure that she was right where she was supposed to be.

Jessie felt her surrender and growled again, then pulled her up against his hard chest, his hands beginning to roam over her body until he found one of her breasts. Breaking the kiss, he slipped her shirt over her head, unclasped her bra, and let it fall to the floor, his eyes glowing with desire. Slightly breathless, her entire body beginning to throb with need, she let him strip her jeans and panties off, then stood trembling as his eyes roamed over her naked body.

“You’re even more incredible than you were five years ago, Bonnie,” he said, his voice husky. “I’m going to explore every luscious curve of your body, and then I’m going to show what it means to belong to a shifter.”

Her legs nearly buckled, but Jessie was there, lowering her onto the bed, then quickly removing his pants before he joined her. The first touch of his naked skin against hers made her shiver with anticipation, and she reached for him, welcoming his kiss and the weight of him on top of her. As he kissed her, his hands roamed over her body, sending thrill after thrill rushing through her until she was trembling with need and wiggling beneath him.

After kissing his way down her neck, Jessie’s mouth found her breast, he sucked one stiff nipple into his mouth while gently pushing her legs apart, and she lifted her hips to him. “Easy sweetheart, let’s not rush things,” he said, then dipped his finger between her folds, sending an even more intense wave of pleasure rushing through her.

The first wave was followed by a second, then a third as he stroked her swollen nib, and she cried out, digging her nails into his shoulder when the last and most intense wave pushed her over the edge. Her body trembled and shook as the sensations overwhelmed her, and she could do nothing but let them come. She became aware of the world around her again a few seconds later, but she was instantly gripped with a new kind of need, and opened her eyes to find Jessie watching her, his eyes glowing in the darkness.

“I need you, Jessie,” she said, pulling him between her legs. “Take me now, make me yours again, finish what we started when we were kids. I want to belong to you for the rest of my life.”

She wasn’t sure where the words had come from, but the growl that came from deep in Jessie’s chest made her entire body fill with warmth, and her body began to tingle with anticipation. When he spread her legs further, and nudged himself up against her throbbing core, she gasped and lifted her hips to him, but he didn’t move; instead, he looked down at her.



“After tonight, you’ll belong to me, Bonnie,” he said. “We’ll be joined forever by the magic that runs through my veins.”

“Please, Jessie,” she moaned, wiggling her hips. “I can’t wait any longer. I want this, I want you, I want us.”

His eyes locked on hers, he slowly brought her feet up to his shoulders, then grabbed her by the hips and with a powerful thrust of his hips, drove himself deep inside her. She cried out as pleasure radiated from deep inside her as a tight knot of deliciousness began to form, and with each thrust of his hips, it grew until the spiraling waves of sensation consumed her.

Just when she was sure she was going to fly apart from the immensity of what she was feeling, Jessie called out her name, and took them both over the edge as he emptied himself inside her. Crying out his name, her breath coming in short gasps, she held onto him as they soared together, and for the first time the bond between them slammed fully into place, adding another layer of pleasure and filling her with a new kind of warmth.

When Jessie collapsed on top of her, she opened her eyes, surprised to see the air above them filled with tiny pinpricks of light. “Oh, Jessie,” she managed to say. “I felt it, I felt the bond, and look above us.”

“I don’t think I can move,” he said, but slipped down onto the bed next to her and gathered her up in his arms. “Well, would you look at that, I think that might be a good sign, don’t you?”

“What does it mean?” she asked, watching the light slowly disappear.

“It means we don’t ever have to worry about someone coming between us again,” he said. “We belong to each other, Bonnie, heart and soul until the end of time.”

“I’m not sure that’s going to be long enough,” she said, grinning up at him. “But it’s a good start.”

“Speaking of good starts,” he said, flipping her over on her back. “I was just getting started.”

# CHAPTER 19



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

When the sun woke Jessie the next morning, he lay watching Bonnie sleep for a long time, then slipped out of bed, went over to the little stove, and lit a small fire to make a pot of coffee. When the flames began to devour the kindling, he pushed larger pieces into the opening, then satisfied, closed the door and filled the coffee pot. Once it was on the stove, he quietly arranged the muffins and fresh fruit he'd packed for breakfast on a plate, then placed the ring he'd been carrying around in his pocket for weeks in the center of one of the muffins.

After the coffee was done, he filled two cups, carried them over to the bed, and sat down beside Bonnie. "Good morning, sleepy head," he said. "Time to rise and shine. We've got two boys waiting for us back home."

Bonnie's eyes fluttered open, she groaned at the bright light and slammed them shut again, "You didn't warn me that you're a morning person," she said. "I might have to reconsider this forever thing if this is the way you're going to wake me up every morning."

"It's too late for that," he said. "But I've got fresh hot coffee here if you're interested."

She opened one eye and looked up at him, then with another groan sat up in bed and took the cup from his hand, "This might have just saved you," she said, then took a long sip. "Or maybe it's going to save me, I'm not sure which."

“Wait until you see what I have for breakfast,” he said, then took a drink of his own coffee. “I think it will more than make up for me waking you up.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Bonnie said, glaring at him. “I’m not much of a morning person, even Tyler knows not to wake me up unless the house is on fire.”

He laughed, “We’ll have to work on that,” he said. “I can think of a few very pleasant ways to wake you up.”

Bonnie let out a little gasp, her cheeks turned pink, “Jessie, we have to get home, and if you start talking like that.....” she stammered. “Maybe we should just eat breakfast.”

“I think I might like what you’re thinking about better,” he said, grinning at her. “But since you’re not in the mood, I’ll go get the food.”

“Who said I’m not in the mood?” she asked, making him laugh. “I just thought we needed to get home.”

“We have a little time,” he said, setting the plate down in her lap. “I seem to recall these are your favorite.”

“Are these from the bakery downtown?” Bonnie asked, her face lighting up with pleasure. “They make the best blueberry muffins.”

Bonnie picked up the muffin closest to her and started to take a bite, then set it down again and stared at it. “Jessie, is that what I think it is?” she asked. “I was just joking about getting married. What have you done?”

He pulled the ring out of the muffin, “I had this made after we went out on our second first date,” he said, grinning at her. “I used the stone from your old ring, but the setting is new. I thought a mixture of old and new would be perfect.”

“Oh, Jessie, it’s beautiful,” she said, reaching out to touch the ring with shaking hands. “But are you sure?”

“I’ve known that I wanted to marry you from the moment I met you,” he said, taking the plate off her lap and grabbing her hand. “Will you marry me, Bonnie? Will you take a leap of faith with me?”

“Yes, Jessie, I’ll marry you,” she said, letting him slip the ring onto her finger. “I can’t think of anything that would make me happier than to be your wife.”

“I never stopped loving you, Bonnie,” he said. “But I love you even more now.”

“I love you too, Jessie,” she said. “You’re the only man for me, you always were, and you always will be.”

When he climbed into bed with her and took her into his arms, she didn’t resist, “I’m sure Mandy won’t mind if I’m a little late,” she said, gasping when his hand slipped between her legs. “I think she’ll understand when she sees the ring.”

The sun had already begun to climb in the sky when he lifted Bonnie into the saddle and they started for the ranch, but they were both smiling. Matt greeted them as they rode into the barn, Hunter and Tyler on either side of him, and he held them back until Jessie brought the horse to a stop. Bonnie jumped down first, and he followed her, grabbing Hunter up in a big hug, then turned to Tyler, who was clinging to Bonnie like she’d been gone a week.

“Tyler tells me that he’s my nephew,” Matt said, studying the two of them. “Is there any truth to this rumor?”

“Guilty as charged,” he said, grinning at Tyler. “And just to round things out, I asked Bonnie to marry me, and she said yes.”

Tyler looked at Bonnie, “You and Jessie are getting married?” he asked, a pleased look on his face. “See, I told you, Hunter, that’s why they went away last night, so we could become a real family.”

Hunter looked over at his father, “Will she be my new mommy?” he asked.

“Well, son, you already have a mom, and even though she doesn’t always show it, I know she loves you very much,” Jessie said. “But you could think of Bonnie as your bonus mom. I’m sure that would make her very happy.”

“Okay,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “None of the other kids have bonus moms, I’ll be the only one.”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

It was a perfect fall day in Montana. The trees were dressed in a glittering display of reds, golds, and yellows, the air was crisp and clean, but the sun was bright in the cloudless sky, promising warmth later in the day. Bonnie was as excited as the boys for the first day of school and jumped out of the truck as soon as Jessie turned off the engine, earning her a sigh from both boys in the backseat.

“Mom, we’re just starting school,” Tyler said when she opened the door to help him out. “It’s not that big of a deal.”

“Yes, it is; the first day of school is always a big deal,” she said, handing him his backpack. “It means that you’re growing up, and I don’t know if I’m ready for that. Part of my wants to cry.”

“Mom, you promised,” Tyler said, glaring at her. “I don’t want the other kids to see you blubbering all over the place.”

“I’m trying,” she said, fanning her face. “You’re just so grown up already. Before I know it, you’ll be going off to college.”

“Now I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves,” Jessie said, giving her a quick kiss. “How about we slow down and just concentrate on getting through grade one.”

She took a deep breath, “Sorry, you guys, I got carried away again,” she said, then looked down at Hunter. “Are you ready to start kindergarten? That’s a very important first day too.”

Hunter turned around, “I’ve got my backpack and my water bottle,” he said, gripping Jessie’s hand a little tighter. “I’m ready, but you promise to come back and get me, right?”

“I’ll be waiting right out in front of the school when the bell rings,” she said. “You’re going to have so much fun; you’ll be sad when the day is over, I promise.”

Hunter looked a little doubtful but didn’t protest when they started walking toward the front doors, “And don’t forget, Tyler will be right down the hall from you,” Jessie said. “I’m

sure you'll be able to play together during recess. That will be fun."

The little boy perked up, but before he could say anything, Chloe's voice rang out over all the other voices, "Hunter, it's Mom, over here," she called, waving her hand in the air. "I've come to wish you a happy first day of school."

Jessie groaned, "I can't believe she showed up here," he leaned over and whispered. "She hasn't seen Hunter since the divorce. This is the last place I expected to see her."

"It does seem a little strange," Bonnie said. "I hope she doesn't do anything to ruin this; that would be so unfair to the boys."

"Don't worry, I'll shut her down before it goes that far," Jessie said, then put a fake smile on his face when she joined them. "Chloe, I didn't know you were coming today."

"Well, I couldn't miss my baby's first day of school, could I?" she asked. "Are you excited, sweetheart?"

Hunter only stared at Chloe until Jessie gave him a little nudge, "Yes, ma'am," he said. "It's going to be a lot of fun."

Chloe's smile faded, "Since when do you talk to me like I'm a stranger?" she asked. "I'm your mother, Hunter. You don't have to be so formal."

"Yes, ma'am," Hunter said, his voice barely audible. "I'm sorry."

"He did it again," Chloe said, looking up at Jessie. "Why is he talking to me like that?"

"Probably because he never sees you," Jessie said, keeping his voice even, but she could see the vein in his neck pulsing. "You haven't seen him for more than a few hours in the last few months, Chloe. You are a stranger to him. How do you expect him to act?"

She could tell that Chloe wanted to lash out at Jessie, her face got scrunched up, and her lips thinned, but she looked around and forced herself to smile at them. "Well, then we'll have to do something about that," she said. "I'd like to have

Hunter for the weekend. It is my right according to the custody agreement.”

She could tell that Jessie wanted to say no, but he took a deep breath, “I’d like to say no after the stunt you pulled the other night, but since it all worked out in the end, I’m going to let it go,” he said. “You can pick him up after school on Friday, and I’ll come get him on Sunday afternoon, but I’m warning you right now, if anything is the slightest bit off when I get there, it will be the last time you have him.”

“You make it sound like I’d hurt our child,” Chloe said, narrowing her eyes at him. “I’m insulted, and my lawyer is going to hear about it.”

“Let’s not do this now,” Bonnie interrupted. “Today is supposed to be about the boys.”

Chloe looked over at her, her eyes full of venom, “This has nothing to do with you,” she spat at her. “Stay out of it.”

“It has everything to do with me when the boys are involved,” she said, then took both their hands. “Come on boys, let’s go find your rooms. I don’t think you should be listening to this.”

Chloe looked like she was going to have a fit, but just then the man who’d been at the restaurant with her came stomping up. “This is crazy. I don’t know why I agreed to come with you,” he said. “I had to park three blocks away and walk all the way back here. What a huge waste of time for some brat.”

She saw Jessie stiffen, “And who is this charming gentleman?” he asked. “He looks familiar. Oh, that’s right, he was the one you were screwing around with before we were divorced.”

“Hey, man, it’s not my fault you can’t hold onto your woman,” the man said, then gave Chloe a slap on the butt. “You gotta please them to hang onto them, if you know what I mean.”

“Jessie, this is Nick,” Chloe said, smiling at him sweetly. “He’s going to be Hunter’s new daddy.”



Jessie let out a snort, "I don't think so, Chloe," he said. "And I'm really getting tired of your games, I'm Hunter's father and that will never change. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to go with my son and meet his teacher. This visit is over, you're on my time right now, so take Nick and go home. I'm not going to let you spoil this day for our son."

"I have just as much right to be here as you do," Chloe said. "I'm not leaving."

"Not according to the judge," he said. "Now run along and don't cause any more trouble."

Chloe narrowed her eyes at him, "You're going to be sorry, Jessie," she hissed at him. "I'm going to make you regret the day you crossed me."

"I've heard that speech before, Chloe," he said. "It's getting old too, now go away."

# CHAPTER 20



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie opened the oven and checked the roast, then closed it again after taking a deep breath of the tantalizing scent and decided that it was done. Switching off the oven, he checked on the rest of the food, then walked over to the table and adjusted the bouquet of flowers he'd put in the middle. A second later, Bonnie came in the back door, set her purse and keys on the little table, and looked around the kitchen, smiling when she saw the table.

“Oh, Jessie, the table looks wonderful,” she said. “You didn't have to go all this trouble.”

“I wanted to. We have to make the best of our alone time,” he said, striking a match to light the candles. “Did you get Tyler all settled in?”

“He was a little nervous at first, he's awfully young for a sleep over, but by the time I left, he and the other boys were playing in the backyard,” she said. “Timmy's mother is such a nice woman, I'm sure she'll take good care of him, but he knows he can call if he wants to come home.”

When he finished lighting the candles, Bonnie slipped into his arms and gave him a kiss, “How was Hunter when Chloe picked him up?” she asked. “I think I'm more worried about him than I am about Tyler.”

“He wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea of going with her, but she bribed him with ice cream, and he went along happily enough,” he said. “But I'm as worried as you are, I can't help but think that Chloe is using him. She's never cared enough

before now to make such a big deal about spending time with him.”

“I don’t trust her either,” she said, wrapping her arms around him. “Did you tell him about the phone in his teddy bear?”

Jessie nodded, “And I showed him how to use it,” he said. “I feel a lot better knowing he can contact me if he needs to.”

“Well, then, we’ve done all we can. Chloe won’t hurt him, Jessie,” she said. “She may be an evil person, but I can’t believe she’d go that far.”

He sighed, “Even after all she’s done to us, you still see some good in her, don’t you?” he asked. “That’s one of the reasons I love you, Bonnie, you have a big heart.”

“I guess I’d rather see the good in people than the bad,” she said. “I can’t believe that deep down inside, there isn’t some good in Chloe.”

“You didn’t live with her for all those years,” Jessie said, then shook his head. “This isn’t the way we should be spending our time, dinner is ready, and afterward, I have a surprise for you.”

“Oh, I like surprises,” Bonnie said, grinning at him. “Especially the ones you give me.”

Desire raced through him when he saw the look in her eyes, “Don’t look at me like that, or we’ll miss another dinner,” he said, giving her a big kiss, then a pat on the butt. “Now sit down, and I’ll bring the food over.”

When their plates were empty, Bonnie leaned back and groaned, “I’m so full I don’t think I can move,” she said. “That was one of the best meals I’ve had in a long time. You really should be proud of the beef you produce.”

“That roast was the first from this year’s herd,” he said, getting up and starting to clear the table. “I kept enough meat to keep us fat and happy all winter.”

Bonnie laughed, “I guess there are some benefits to marrying a rancher,” she said, taking the stack of dishes from

him. “You sit down, I’ve got the dishes. It’s the least I can do after a meal like that.”

Jessie watched her bustling around the kitchen, loading the dishwasher, scrubbing the pans, and wiping down the counter, a feeling of deep contentment slowly settling over him. They’d made it through the storm. Bonnie was truly his and would always be. In a few months, they’d say their vows making the whole thing legal, and they’d start their lives together. It might have been five years too late, but he wasn’t going to complain. The woman he’d always loved was back in his life to stay, and he knew just how lucky he was.

He was smiling when Bonnie clicked off the big light in the kitchen and walked over to him, “Okay, the dishes are done,” she said, putting her hands on her hips. “What’s this big surprise you have for me?”

He got to his feet, walked over to the little desk shoved into one corner, and pulled out a blindfold, “You have to wear this,” he said, holding it up. “I don’t want you peeking.”

“Jessie, what are you up to?” she asked, looking at him suspiciously.

“Just trust me,” he said. “I don’t have anything kinky in mind, unless that appeals to you.”

Bonnie’s cheeks turned pink, but he could see interest in her eyes and decided to explore it later, “Come on, Bonnie,” he cajoled. “You’re going to like this surprise, I promise.”

She let him put the blindfold on, “Okay, just hold onto to me,” he said. “We’re going up stairs, I promise I won’t let you fall.”

“Jessie, we could have put this on up there,” she said. “We didn’t need to do it right now.”

“Hush, you’re spoiling all my fun,” he said, pulling her out of the kitchen and down the hallway, making sure she didn’t trip. “Okay, we’re to the stairs, the first one is right in front of you.”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Bonnie held onto Jessie's arm, not the least bit worried that he'd let her fall, but enjoying the feeling of being so close to him, and decided to play it up a bit. "I'm scared I'm going to fall," she said, clinging to him a little tighter. "You wouldn't let me fall, would you?"

"You know I wouldn't," he said, laughing. "I know that you're faking it, Bonnie."

"Oh, darn, you're no fun," she said. "Are we almost there?"

"This is the last step, and then we just have to go down the hallway a little way," he said, his voice full of excitement. "I wanted to do something special for you to show you how much you mean to me; I hope you like it."

He pulled her to a stop, then she heard a door opening, felt a cool breeze on her skin, and the sound of a light clicking on filled the silence. "Okay, are you ready?" Jessie asked, slipping behind her. "I'm going to pull off the blindfold now, get ready to be amazed."

Jessie whipped the fabric away from her eyes, and it took them a second to adjust to the light after having been closed for so long, "Oh, Jessie, this is lovely," she said when the room slowly began to come into focus. "Is it for us?"

He pushed her into the room, "I thought we needed a fresh start," he said, grinning at her. "And I remembered how much you used to like the old cast iron beds, so I bought this one and had it refinished."

"It's wonderful, Jessie, I love it," she said, throwing her arms around him. "It was a thoughtful thing to do, and I can't wait to try it out."

"Well, there's no time like the present," he said, sweeping her up into his arms and throwing her down onto the bed. "We've got the whole house to ourselves; I can make you scream as loudly as I want to."

"Jessie, I don't scream," she said, feeling her cheeks begin to flame. "That's.....I don't know..... embarrassing, you should have told me I was being too loud."

“Are you kidding? There’s nothing I like more than listening to you cry out with pleasure,” he said, slowly unbuttoning her shirt, then shoving it off her shoulders. “And the noises you make, they drive me crazy too. The way you moan and whimper just makes me want to please you more, so don’t even think about stopping.”

“Jessie, that’s.....” she started to protest, but his mouth clamped down over one of her breasts, and she let out a moan instead.

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about,” he said, grinning up at her. “When you moan like that, it just makes me want you more.”

She didn’t say anything wasn’t capable of anything more than another moan, when his mouth captured hers and his hand began to trace a path down her stomach to the button on her pants. He undressed her slowly, lingering over every inch of bare skin as he slipped off her jeans, then slowly removed her bra and panties. By the time she lay naked before him, she was squirming for more than just the brush of his fingertips across her skin, and greedily watched as he removed his clothes.

He stood over her, hands on his hips, his eyes sweeping over her body, then started to join her in the bed, but she sat up before he could and pulled him over to her. When she wrapped her hands around his swollen member, he let out a low growl and closed his eyes as she stroked him. Encouraged by the obvious pleasure she was giving him, she leaned forward and took him into her mouth, a bit surprised when a thrill rushed through her when he moaned and threaded his fingers into her hair.

Opening her mouth as wide as she could, she took him deeper, then used her tongue and teeth to torment him before letting him slide into her mouth again. Jessie’s entire body was trembling with pleasure when he let out a long low growl and pulled away from her. His eyes glowing with desire, he picked her up, threw her back down on the bed, then crawled on top of her and shoved her legs open.

She braced herself for the moment they became one, but Jessie had other plans, and began kissing his way down her stomach until he was between her legs. When he shoved them open further and dropped his head, she suddenly felt completely exposed and started to fight, but then his tongue slid over her swollen nub. Overwhelmed by the first wave of pleasure, she wasn't ready for the second, and she was swept away, all control gone as Jessie took her higher and higher, then over the edge.

Crying out his name over and over, she soared on the crest of sensation, then came slowly back down to find Jessie grinning at her. "Now let's see if I can make you scream," he said, grabbing her by the hips and flipping her over onto her stomach.

He pulled her up onto her hands and knees as if she weighed nothing, then slipped between her legs and nudged himself up against her throbbing opening. "Oh, God, Jessie, take me now," she panted. "I can't wait any longer."

Hands gripping her hips, he plunged himself deeply inside her and ground his hips into her, making her scream out his name, then he pulled back and filled her again. With each stroke of his powerful hips, the pleasure grew more intense until she was aware only of the man joined to her in the most primal way and the sensations taking over every part of her body.

Just when she was sure that she couldn't take anymore, Jessie growled deeply in his chest and took them both over the edge, their pleasure intensified by his magic as it swept through them both. Filled with a new kind of warmth, her body tingling with power, Bonnie could only hold on as she was overwhelmed by the new energy. When Jessie finally collapsed on top of her, she was still trembling, the power still rushing through her, and she let out a long sigh.

Jessie rolled over onto his side, then pulled her up against him, still buried deeply inside her, "I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asked, his voice full of concern. "You're shaking and trembling. I'm sorry, Bonnie."



She turned to look up at him, “I’m okay, really I am,” she said. “I’m just a bit overwhelmed by.....your magic, I guess.”

He smiled at her, “I told you that you wouldn’t be shut out,” he said. “What’s mine is yours, I guess.”

“It’s amazing,” she said, shivering again. “I’m sorry I didn’t understand before.”

Jessie nuzzled her neck, “That’s okay,” he said. “As long as you get it now.”

“I love you, Jessie,” she said, turning back around and snuggling back down into his arms. “Thank you for the new bed.”

“Thank you for helping me break it in,” he said, his voice full of amusement.

# CHAPTER 21



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie lay against a stack of pillows reading the newspaper the next morning, feeling like the king of his castle, extremely pleased with himself and the new direction his life had taken. Bonnie had promised him breakfast in bed, and then he had plans to test out the new mattress again before they had to go pick Tyler up from his sleepover. Bonnie had a list of errands she wanted to run. It was all such simple stuff, but to him, it felt like he was at the top of the world, living a life he'd only dreamed about.

His cell phone ringing on the table next to the bed interrupted his gloating, and he picked it up, his good mood vanishing when he saw the number on the screen. "Hey, kiddo, what up?" he asked, hoping Hunter was just calling because he was homesick. "How's everything going with your mom?"

There was a brief pause, then he could hear Hunter sniffing, "I want to come home," he finally said. "Nick hates me, and he's mean to me. He just hit me and sent me to my room."

He was already getting out of bed, "Okay, son, calm down and tell me what happened," he said. "Where is your mom?"

"She's still asleep," Hunter said, his voice cracking. "She told me to leave her alone, so I went out to the living room to watch television, but then I got hungry so I made a bowl of cereal. I accidentally spilled it on Nick's stuff, I didn't mean to, but the bowl was so full.....then he yelled at me and when I started to cry, he hit me. I want to come home Dad, and I

don't ever want to come over here again. I hate Nick and I hate my mom. I want Bonnie to be my mom."

"Okay, slugger, we're on our way to come get you," he said. "I want you to stay in your room, lock the door if you can. It might take me a little while to get to you."

"Okay, Dad, please hurry," Hunter said, sobbing a little. "I don't want to be here anymore."

"We're on our way," he said, anger making it difficult to breathe. "I promise it won't be long."

Bonnie appeared in the doorway a few seconds after he hung up with Hunter, "Oh, no, what's wrong?" she asked, watching him get dressed. "Is it Hunter?"

He nodded, "That asshole Nick hit him," he said. "We're going to get him."

"It will just take me a few minutes to get dressed," Bonnie said, abandoning the breakfast tray she was carrying. "I'm going to kill that bastard."

"That's my job," he said, shoving on his jeans and a shirt. "But before I do, I'm calling my lawyer and the sheriff."

"Good thinking," Bonnie said, already shoving her legs into a pair of jeans. "We have to make sure they never get to see Hunter again. They both belong in jail."

"Or worse," he said, grabbing his keys. "Are you ready?"

"Why don't you let me drive," Bonnie said, taking the keys out of his hands. "Then you can make your phone calls on the way."

They climbed into his truck and he left a message for his lawyer, then called the sheriff, "Tom, it's Jessie Parker. I'm sorry to bother you on a Saturday, but I've got a bit of a problem with Chloe and her new boyfriend, and I'm going to need your help."

"What's going on, Jessie?" the sheriff asked. "I know things haven't been good between the two of you since Bonnie came back."

“Hunter just called and told me that Nick has been hitting him,” he said. “I didn’t want to let him go with Chloe, but I didn’t have any choice. I need you to meet me at their house to keep me from doing something I’m going to regret.”

“I’m on my way,” the sheriff said. “I want you to promise me that you won’t do anything until I get there. It’s my job to handle these things.”

“Park up the street,” he told Bonnie. “I don’t want them to know that we’re here until Sheriff Barns gets here.”

Bonnie parked his truck halfway down the street from Chloe’s house and shut off the engine, then they both sat in silence for a few minutes. “I can’t stand it; what if he’s doing something to Hunter right now?” Jessie said. “I’m going over there; maybe I can hear something from outside.”

“Jessie, you heard the sheriff,” Bonnie said, but he was already getting out of the truck. “At least let me go with you.”

They snuck through the neighbor’s yards and found a place to hide in some bushes on the side of the house under one of the living room windows. At first, they couldn’t hear anything, but the television, but then voices began to drift to them, “Nick, he’s just a little boy, he didn’t mean to spill milk on your stuff,” Chloe said. “If Jessie finds out that you hit him, that will be the end of it all. There won’t be any money, don’t you understand that?”

“You know what I understand, Chole?” Nick asked. “I understand that you lied to me. You told me there would be millions from the divorce, you told me that we’d be living the good life. Instead, we’re babysitting some snot-nosed brat who doesn’t know his place.”

“Nick, it’s just for a few months. Once I prove to the courts that Jessie is an unfit parent, we’ll get full custody of Hunter and then he’ll have to pay child support,” Chloe said. “As soon as he’s ours, we’ll send him off to boarding school, and then everything can go back to the way it was.”

“If I’m going to have to put up with that little shit for months, I’m going to have to teach him some manners,” Nick

said. "Where did I leave my belt? It's time someone showed Hunter who is in charge around here."

"Nick, don't....." Chloe said, but her words died away when Nick started pounding on the bedroom door.

"How dare you lock this door, you little shit," Nick screamed. "You'd better unlock it right now, or you're going to be sorry."

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Bonnie saw the sheriff's car pull up to the curb and pulled Jessie out of the bushes, afraid he was going to go through the window to get to Nick, "Jessie, the sheriff is here," she said. "Let's let him handle this. Nothing is going to happen to Hunter now that we're all here."

Tom was already out of his car and headed toward them when they got back to the front yard, "I thought I told you to wait for me," he said. "Handling things on your own is how people get killed."

"We haven't done anything but listen through an open window," she said, trying to stay calm. "Nick has a belt, and he's threatening to use it on Hunter."

There was a loud thud from inside the house, followed by a child's scream, "Well, that's all I need to go in," the sheriff said. "You two stay here. I mean it."

Bonnie reached out and grabbed onto Jessie's arm when Tom started across the yard, "Let him do his job," she said. "I know it's hard not to be in control."

Jessie looked over at her, "You can't even begin to understand," he said, shaking his head. "The wolf in me wants to get out, it wants to protect what's mine. I'm fighting it, but it's not easy."

"He's going to be fine, Jessie," she said. "Tom will get him out of there, and he'll never have to go back."

Tom banged on the front door with his fist, "This is the sheriff, let me in or I'm going to break down the door," he called, then waited. When he didn't get an answer, he banged

twice more. “Okay, you’ve been warned. I’m coming in, and I’m armed.”

He drew his weapon, then kicked in the door just as another scream came from the house, followed by Nick yelling. “Now look what you’ve done,” he hollered so loud they could hear him clearly in the yard. “I’m going to show you what this belt is for! If I’m going down, I’m going to make sure you remember me really well.”

Tom disappeared into the open door, Hunter began to scream, and she let go of Jessie, “Go, I know it’s killing you not to, but don’t hurt anyone,” she said. “Hunter is going to need you alive and not in jail.”

With only a quick kiss, Jessie was across the yard and up the step before she could even take a breath. He disappeared into the house a second later. She stood pacing in the yard for a few seconds, then, unable to stop herself, ran for the house, taking the steps on the porch two at a time. When she burst through the door, Chloe was standing in the corner, her hands over her face, shaking her head and sobbing.

“This isn’t right, this isn’t what was supposed to happen,” she said, then looked over at Bonnie. “This is all your fault, you stupid bitch. You should have stayed gone.”

She didn’t even bother replying, but she had to wonder what kind of mother wouldn’t protect her own child as she raced to the back of the house. Jessie was standing at the end of the hallway, his entire body tensed up, low growls coming from deep in his chest, and she could hear the sheriff talking to someone.

“Okay, now, let’s all just calm down,” Tom said. “Jessie, you need to back up a little, and Nick, I want you to let the boy go.”

She walked up behind Jessie feeling the power of his magic seeping into her as she got closer, and knew something bad was about to happen. “Jessie, you need to calm down, you’re scaring everyone,” she said, putting her hand on his arm. “You don’t want to hurt anyone, and I’m sure Nick doesn’t really want to hurt Hunter, so let’s all just back off.”

Jessie shook his head, but didn't say anything, "Come on, sweetheart," she said, not liking the look in his eye. "Everything is going to be okay. Hunter is fine, look at him. He just wants to go home."

Hunter burst into noisy tears, "Dad, I want to go home. I want to get away from here," he wailed. "Can we please leave?"

She felt the magic drain out of Jessie and let out a long sigh of relief, "Sure, Son, just come on over here to me and I'll take you home," he said. "Let him go, Nick, and I won't hurt you, but if you push me, I will defend what's mine."

Nick let go of Hunter and dropped the belt he'd been holding onto the carpet. Tom leapt at him, grabbed his hands, pinned them behind his back, and seconds later, slapped on a pair of handcuffs. "What are you, some kind of freak?" Nick screamed at him. "Didn't you all see that? His eyes were glowing, and he was growling like.....a dog or something.....he was going to kill me."

"Shut up, Nick," the sheriff said. "I'm going to read you your rights now, and then we're going to take a ride down to the station."

Hunter, safe in Jessie's arms, had stopped crying, "No one messes with my dad," he said through his tears. "He'll kick your butt every time."

"You got that right, son," Jessie said, finally managing a smile. "Let's go home."



## CHAPTER 22



\*\*\*JESSIE\*\*\*

Jessie looked up at the clock on the courtroom wall, watching it slowly creep toward twelve, wondering how much longer the hearing could go on. His lawyer had promised him that the hearing wouldn't take long, that his case was so strong the judge wouldn't even have to think about giving him full custody of Hunter, but Chloe's attorney was dragging it out. He'd forced them to have every one of their witnesses testify, then spent a ridiculous amount of time cross-examining them all before calling a bunch of people to the stand who had nothing to do with the case.

He could see that the judge was losing his patience as well, "Counselor, I hope that was your last witness," he said when the last one left the stand. "This is a busy court; I don't appreciate having my time wasted."

"Of course not, your honor, we were just trying to prove that my client is a caring mother who just made a mistake," Chloe's lawyer said. "She deserves to see her son, your Honor, and I hope we've proven that here today."

The judge waved his hand in the air, "I don't even have to think about my verdict in this case," he said. "Considering the overwhelming evidence, I have no choice but to award full custody to Mr. Parker. Until Ms. Parker shows better judgment in her choice of partners, I'm not going to grant her any visitation, but I would be willing to amend that decision in the future should the situation change."

"You can't do that, I'm his mother," Chloe said, jumping to her feet. "I didn't do anything to him. I wasn't the one who

hit him.”

“But you were the one who exposed him to the man who did hit him,” the judge said. “And I believe you bailed him out last night, Ms. Parker, and that more than anything concerns me. My ruling stands, and I’ll ask you to take your seat again.”

Chloe looked over at the clock, then back at the judge, “Please, your Honor, don’t do this to me,” she pleaded. “Hunter is all I have; you can’t take him away from me.”

“Ms. Parker take your seat right this instant, or I’ll find you in contempt of court and have you arrested,” the judge barked. “You have wasted enough of this court’s time. My ruling is final.”

The judge banged his gavel on the desk, and Chloe flopped back down in her seat, looking more defeated than he’d ever seen her. But then the clock struck twelve, and a little smile spread across her face, “Will you look at that?” she said. “It’s lunchtime already.”

He looked over at the clock, then jumped to his feet, and turned to his lawyer, “I’m going to be late picking up the boys from school,” he said. “Are we done here?”

“Sure, there will be some paperwork for you to sign, but you can come by my office later for that,” Sarah said. “I’ll call you when everything is ready.”

“Thanks, Sarah, you are the best,” he said, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

He rushed down the hallway from the courtroom and hit the front door running, digging through his pocket for his cell phone, hoping to get through to the school to let them know that he was going to be late. After he’d searched every pocket, he dug through them all again but came up empty, and remembered setting it down on the table when court had gone into session. Cursing his bad luck, he ran faster, deciding it would take too long to go back for it, then came to a sliding stop when he saw his truck.

Anger shooting through him, he could only stare at the slashed tires for a few seconds before letting out a string of

curses as he turned and ran back toward the courthouse. A sick feeling suddenly creeping over him, he almost knocked Sarah down as she came out of the front door, his cell phone in her hand.

“Is this what you’re looking for?” she asked. “I found it on the table.”

“Someone slashed all my tires,” he said, already punching in Bonnie’s number. “I’m worried about the boys; Chloe was acting weird today. I hope she hasn’t done something stupid.”

Sarah clicked her tongue, “I’ll call Tom and have him head over to the school,” she said. “Better safe than sorry.”

Bonnie picked up on the second ring, “Hey, how did court go?” she asked. “Are you on the way home with the boys? Lunch is almost ready, I bet they’re starving again today.”

“Bonnie, I’ve got four flat tires, and I didn’t get over to the school to pick up the boys,” he said. “Can you run over there and get them?”

There was a little pause, “Jessie, is everything okay?” she finally asked. “I don’t like the sound of your voice.”

“I’m sure I’m just being paranoid, but Chloe was acting weird in court today,” he said. “She bailed the scumbag out last night after he beat our child, so I wouldn’t put anything past her. Sarah is calling Tom to have him stop by the school, and I’m going to call them, but could you run down there?”

“I’m already on my way out the door,” Bonnie said. “I’m sure everything is okay. The school will make sure the boys stay safe, try not to worry too much.”

But he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong, “Come on, I’ll drive you over there,” Sarah said. “Tom is already on his way. I’m sure the boys will be waiting for us when we get to the school. Even Chloe wouldn’t go that far.”

“Desperate people do desperate things,” he said, heading back toward the parking lot. “I could swear they made the hearing this morning last a lot longer than it needed to.”

Sarah was quiet for a second, “I just assumed her lawyer was padding his bill,” she said, picking up her pace. “But I guess there could have been more to it than that.”

“If she’s done something to Hunter or Tyler, I’m warning you right now, I’m not going to hold back,” he said, taking the keys from Sarah. “I’m driving.”

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Bonnie hung up the phone, raced down the stairs, then cut across the grass toward her car, anger fueling her and keeping the panic at bay. “They’re fine,” she kept repeating to herself, imaging the two boys sitting in the office eating a snack.

When she got to her car, she came to a stumbling stop, shaking her head as it slowly sank in that all four of her tires were flat, “No, no, no,” she cried. “This can’t be happening.”

Taking a deep breath, she looked around, spotted one of the hands driving through the pasture, and took off at a run toward him, waving her arms in the air. It took him a few seconds to see her, but eventually he turned around and drove over to her, “Is there something wrong?” he asked. “Do you need some help?”

“Yes, please, can you take me to the elementary school?” she said. “Someone flattened all my tires, and I think Hunter and Tyler are in danger.”

“Get in,” the young man said. “I’ll have you there in a jiffy. Do we need to call the sheriff or Mr. Parker?”

“No, they’re on their way there too,” she said. “Please hurry.”

There was a crowd of people milling around in front of the school when they pulled up, and her stomach sank, “Thank you.....I’m sorry, I don’t know your name,” she said, opening her door. “But thank you.”

She jumped out before the truck came to a stop and ran over to Jessie, “Please tell me they’re safe,” she said. “Please tell me they’re inside.”

Jessie shook his head, "I'm sorry, Bonnie, Nick has both of them," he said. "He charmed the teacher on afternoon duty into letting him take them."

She buried her face in his chest, "Oh, Jessie, this is terrible," she said, then looked up at him. "Where is Chloe? I want to see her, I want to....."

"She's gone. No one has seen her since the trial," he said. "I'm sorry, Bonnie. The sheriff is doing everything he can to find them."

"Why would he take them?" she asked, fighting back tears. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Tom thinks they're going to ask for money," he said, rubbing her back until some of the tension melted away. "He's got every deputy in this county and the next out looking for them. He figures they won't go far; they'd risk getting caught if they did."

"So, we just wait," she said, pulling away from him. "We have to do something; we can't just wait around. What if they don't want money, what if they....."

He grabbed her by the shoulders and made her look into his eyes, "I'm not going to let anyone hurt them," he said. "All I need is a clue to where they are. I know these mountains better than anyone around here, I'll find them. And we're not alone, there are people gathering right now to help search, people who have the same skills that I do. All we need is one clue."

She threw herself into his arms, "I just hate feeling so helpless," she said. "I want to do something to get them back, and I'm so angry I feel like I could hurt someone."

"I know, sweetheart," he said, wrapping his arms around her. "I feel the same way, but right now our smartest move is to wait until we have some idea where to search."

"And if they ask for money?" she asked. "What will we do?"

"We'll make them think we're cooperating until we're not," he said, a predatory look in his eyes. "Chloe never

respected me, she never knew what I was capable of, but she's going to find out."

Jessie's phone began to ring, and he pulled it out of his pocket, then motioned Tom over, "Hello," he said when he connected the call and put it on speaker. "This is Jessie Parker."

"I guess you know who this is," Nick said. "I thought you might want to discuss getting your property back."

"You son of a bitch, I'm going to kill you," Jessie growled into the phone, then took a deep breath. "What do you want?"

"Just what you owe Chloe," Nick said. "She figures a couple of million would be fair, and I can't argue with her on that one. Have the money transferred to the account number I just sent you. As soon as that's done, we'll contact you and let you know where you can find the boys. Don't bother looking for us, you'll never find us where we're hidden, and that would just be wasting time. The longer it takes to get the money, the more likely I'll be to lose my temper, and we know what happened the last time."

The line went dead, "Okay, this is something we can work with," Tom said, taking the phone out of Jessie's hand. "I'm going to give this to my computer guys. They should be able to trace that call."

Tom was back only a few minutes later, "These two aren't very smart," he said, shaking his head. "We traced the call to a location right off county road 6. The signal goes dead after that, but it shouldn't be hard to track them from there. I've already got men on their way to the location, we should have an update in the next five minutes."

"That's too long to wait," he said. "I'm going after them myself."

He looked over at her, "I'm going with you," she said, taking his hand. "Let's go get our kids."

Tom shook his head, "I'm not going to try and stop you. I'd do the same thing in your shoes, but just be careful," he

said. "I'll send you updates to Bonnie's phone. I'd like to hold onto yours, Jessie."

They ran for the parking lot, "Jessie, I don't have my car. They flattened all my tires, too," she said. "I got a ride from one of the hands, but I don't know if he's still here."

"Mr. Parker, do you need a ride?" the young man asked, appearing out of nowhere. "I didn't know if I should stay, but I didn't leave just in case."

"You did exactly right, Sam, thank you," Jessie said, then held out his hand. "I need the truck. Hunter and Tyler have been kidnapped, and we're going after them. I want you to call the ranch and sound the alarm, Steve will know what to do."

"Yes, sir," Sam said, handing over the keys. "Good luck."



## CHAPTER 23



Jessie's heart sank when he saw Chloe's car on the side of the road, the entire front end smashed in, an ambulance parked next to it. Slamming on the breaks, he brought the truck to a sliding stop, vaulted out before it came to a halt, and ran toward the crowd of people, Bonnie right behind him. Grabbing her hand, he pulled her behind him, his heart breaking when he saw the panicked look on her face.

"What's going on?" he asked, focusing on the first uniform he saw. "Who got hurt?"

"It's the woman. It looks like they lost control of the car trying to turn onto that road, bouncing off a tree into another one," the man said. "You're Jessie Parker, right?"

"Yes, and this is Bonnie Thurmond, Tyler's mother," he said impatiently. "Where's Chloe? I want to talk to her; she knows where they were going."

The officer shook his head, "I don't know if I can allow that," he said. "She's in custody, sir."

"I don't care, she took my son," Jessie said. "And she knows where he is. I'm going to talk to her, and if you value your job, you'll get out of my way."

Just then Tom drove up, parked his patrol car, and jumped out, "Good, you're here already," he said, then looked at the deputy. "Where is she? I want to talk to her."

“Over in the ambulance,” the deputy said. “We kept her here just like you asked.”

He followed Tom over to the ambulance, anger flooding his system when he saw Chloe lying on the stretcher crying, “He just went off and left me,” she sobbed. “I could have died, and he wouldn’t have cared.”

“Where are they,” he demanded, cutting her off. “Tell me where he took the boys, or I’ll hurt you worse than you already are, and that’s not an empty threat, Chloe.”

“You wouldn’t hurt me,” Chloe said, sticking out her chin. “Besides, all these officers would stop you.”

The men around them turned their backs and started walking away, “Are you sure about that?” he hissed at her. “Because it looks to me like they’re busy with other things right now.”

Chloe looked over at Tom, “I didn’t see a thing,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest. “As far as I know, all your injuries were sustained in the car accident.”

The confidence drained from Chloe’s face, and she shrank back from him, “I always knew that you were a monster,” she said, then screamed when he took a step toward her. “Okay, okay, we found this little cabin a few miles from the ranch when we were spying on you one day. Nick thought it would be a good place to hide the boys. This road takes you part of the way there, but you have to hike the rest of the way.”

Bonnie gasped, “Jessie, he’s got them in our cabin,” she said. “It might be faster to go back to the ranch and go that way. This must be miles out of the way.”

He pulled Bonnie away from Chloe and the deputies, “Sweetheart, I can get there faster on my own,” he said, keeping his voice low. “If I shift, I can cut across the mountain and be there in half the time it will take you to get there.”

“I don’t want to let you go alone,” she said, then took a deep breath. “But I know that’s what you need to do. Just promise me that you’ll be careful.”

He leaned down and gave her a kiss, “I’ll see you at the cabin,” he said. “Bring Tom and some of the other men with you, and be careful.”

When he started to walk away, she followed him, “Bonnie, I don’t know if you want to see me shift,” he said. “Now might not be the time. Maybe you should wait.”

She shook her head, “It’s time I saw the other side of you, Jessie,” she said. “I’m not frightened, and if something happens to you, I have to know how to guide your sons. This might help.”

“I’m not going to talk you out of it, am I?” he asked.

“No, you’re just wasting time,” Bonnie said. “And the boys are waiting for you.”

He took her hand and led her into the woods, “I love you, Bonnie,” he said. “I’m going to bring our boys home.”

“I love you too, Jessie,” she said. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her until they were both breathless, then walked off into the woods, letting his magic slowly take over, enjoying the rush of freedom as the wolf took over. He paused before he took off into the woods and looked back at Bonnie, afraid to see her reaction, his heart swelling with joy when he saw the love in her eyes and she blew him a kiss.

After one more long look, he turned and ran into the trees, letting his instincts flare to life and the power surge through him. The trees flew past as he raced for the cabin, his magic carrying him in the right direction, love for his sons and Bonnie making him stronger than he’d ever been before.

\*\*\*Bonnie\*\*\*

Bonnie gripped the dashboard of the patrol car as they bounced through the yard and stopped in front of the barn, then jumped out of the car. “I hope you can ride,” she shot over her shoulder, “because I’m not waiting for you.”

Tom launched himself into the saddle just as she did, gave his horse a hard kick with his heels, and took off toward the trail she'd told him about. Wheeling her horse around, she gave it a nudge with her heels, took off after Tom and his horse, and they were soon galloping up the trail to the cabin. She pushed her mount as hard as she dared, taking the turns much too fast, but confident in the animal carrying her, then slowed as they reached the almost invisible path that led to the cabin.

Tom dismounted and indicated that she should do the same, "We're going in on foot from here," he said. "I want to get a feel for the situation before we go charging in. I don't want the boys to get hurt."

They crept through the trees, the sound of growling reaching them long before they saw the cabin, "That must be Jessie," Tom whispered. "Let's see what he's up to."

Hiding in the shadow of a big tree, they watched as the huge wolf padded silently around the cabin, letting out deep growls every few minutes, then disappearing back into the trees. They watched the curtains on the windows fluttering as they were pulled back, then quickly shoved back into place, but didn't miss the anxious pale face peeping out through the glass.

"He's got him freaked out," Tom said. "As soon as he makes a couple more passes, we'll make our move. I want you to stay behind me at all times, and don't go into the cabin unless I tell you it's safe."

She nodded and followed him out from under the tree and over to the cabin, "Hello, is there anyone home?" Tom called, making his voice sound weak. "We've been hiking all day, and I think we're lost."

"I don't think there's anyone home," Bonnie said, more loudly than necessary. "Let's go inside and rest. I don't think I can hike another mile."

The kitchen window slid open, "Don't come any closer," Nick called. "I don't want any visitors."

“Oh, honey, there is someone home,” Bonnie said. “Maybe he has some water, a radio, a phone, or something to help us.”

Tom took a couple more steps toward the cabin, “Please, man, we’re really hurting out here, we just need a little help, and then we’ll leave you alone,” he said. “Some water or food, help out a fellow traveler, we’re desperate out here.”

Just as they’d planned, the front door burst open and Nick came striding out onto the front porch, a shotgun in his hand, “I told you before, I don’t want any visitors,” he said, aiming the gun at him. “Wait……. I know you…….”

That was all the time Jessie needed. In one huge leap he sprang out of the woods and landed on the porch. Nick was so shocked the gun went clattering to the floor. Letting out a rumbling growl that echoed through the forest, Jessie backed Nick down the steps and right into Tom’s arms. The air around him began to stir, and the wolf was suddenly gone, replaced by the man. Nick let out a whimper, then collapsed into a heap at Tom’s feet.

Jessie held out his hand, “Let’s go get our boys,” he said. “He’s not going to bother us anymore.”

They found the boys cowering on the bed, but the fear on their faces disappeared instantly when they saw them, “Mom and Dad,” they called in unison. “What took you so long?”

She raced over and pulled Tyler into her arms, tears running down her cheeks, then reached out for Hunter and crushed him to her as well. Only a second later, Jessie was there, his strong arms wrapped around all of them, tears falling freely down his face. When the emotion passed, he pulled back and looked down at the boys, a huge smile on his face.

“Are you boys okay?” he asked. “You had us scared for a little while there.”

“We’re fine,” Hunter said. “We were careful not to do anything to make Nick mad, and then when Dad was outside growling, Tyler told him a bunch of scary stories about wolf shifters.”

Jessie laughed, and she couldn't help joining in, "That was very smart," she said, hugging them both again. "We're proud of you boys. You stayed calm and kept your heads."

"Bonnie's right," Jessie said. "You did a good job of keeping yourselves safe, and I think that deserves a special reward."

"I couldn't agree more," she said, catching on instantly. "I wonder what they'd like."

"Well, I don't know about Tyler, but Hunter has been bugging me about getting him a horse," he said. "I think today proved he's ready."

"Oh, definitely," she said. "What do you think, boys? Are you ready for your own horses?"

"Yes," they cried out together. "We'll take care of them, we promise."

Three weeks later, Jessie and Bonnie were standing in the same place they had been weeks before when Tyler had his first ride. "They look good on the new horses," Bonnie said, slipping into Jessie's arms. "I don't think I've ever seen Tyler this happy."

"And what about his mother?" Jessie asked. "Is she happy?"

Bonnie turned and looked up at him, "Happier than I ever thought possible," she said. "All thanks to you, Jessie, I love you so much."

"I love you too, Bonnie," he said, then lowered his mouth to hers.

"Gross," Hunter said. "Why do they always have to do that?"

"Because they love each other," Tyler said, importantly. "That's what you do when you love someone."

"I still think it's gross," Hunter said.

"Yeah, me too," Tyler said. "Come on, let's ride some more."

## EPILOGUE



Trying not to let his concern show, Derek swept Annabelle into his arms and carried her inside the hospital. “Hi, may I help you?” the woman behind the desk in the emergency department asked.

“My daughter isn’t feeling very well,” he said. “I was hoping someone could take a look at her. She’s been throwing up and losing weight. We’ve been to several doctors, but no one has been able to help.”

“I see. Well, why don’t you have a seat, and I’ll put together some paperwork for you to fill out,” the woman said. “Then we’ll see if we can figure out what the problem is.”

He carried Annabelle over to a chair and set her down, “Wait here, sweetheart, I’ll be right back,” he said. “I just have some papers to fill out.”

“You can’t just leave her here alone,” a woman said from across the room. “We’re not babysitters.”

“I’m not leaving her alone, I’m going to be right over there,” he said, glaring at the woman. “Thank you for your concern.”

The woman shook her head, then got to her feet and stepped out of the shadows. His body instantly went crazy, desire pumping through him like he was a teenager again. “Where is this child’s mother?” the woman demanded. “A mother always knows what’s going on with her children.”

“Well, since both her mother and father are dead, I’m afraid she’s stuck with me,” he said, the woman’s rude

behavior crushing the desire to dust. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, Annabelle is sick and needs to see a doctor.”

The woman snorted, “She needs more than a doctor,” she said, then turned and stomped off.

He watched her go, then shook his head at the strange encounter, “That woman was a little crazy,” he said, looking over at Annabelle, who just smiled at him. “I’m sorry, honey; let’s get you taken care of.”

I hope you enjoyed the book! Want to read more of this series? **CLICK HERE** to get book 3 “**Daddy Wolf’s Forbidden Doctor**”.