

A man wearing a white cowboy hat and a red and black plaid shirt, shirtless, is the central figure. He is holding a poinsettia plant with a red bow. The background is a sunset over a field with a fence.

FAKE
Christmas
DATE
COWBOY

WEST PROTECTION

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EM PETROVA

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Fake Christmas Date Cowboy

WEST Protection

Book 14

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FAKE CHRISTMAS DATE COWBOY
Declan's Story

***She's single. He's single. They can be single—and STEAMY
—together.***

Declan Finch has already proved his worth to the WEST Protection team. Now with the holidays here, he's called to help with a big charity bash on the ranch. Watching over rich people should be a breeze, but suddenly he's looking out for—and hooking up with—a quirky loner attending the couples' event. Somehow the weather feels *much* warmer now that he's cozying up to Belle...

After an ugly breakup, Belle attends a charity weekend to raise money for the families of special needs kids. But once she spots her ex and his new fiancée, her relaxing getaway is about to be ruined... until she finds that saving a horse and riding a hot cowboy might be *just* the fix she's been looking for.

Amid enough heat between them to melt the Montana snow, Declan and Belle discover that dark activities are shadowing the party. With danger lurking around the corner, they fight to uncover the truth before WEST Protection is sabotaged. Working together brings a whole new level to Declan and Belle's Christmas playtime, leaving them both wondering if this relationship isn't so fake after all.

Stolen kisses in the falling snow and a smoldering-hot hookup under the twinkle lights mix with this smoldering holiday action and adventure. The team you love binge-reading is bringing all the feels to this sexy romance! 1-click FAKE CHRISTMAS DATE COWBOY now and read the entire WEST PROTECTION series!

**FAKE CHRISTMAS
DATE
COWBOY**

by

Em Petrova

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Chapter One

“Watch your step, rookie. Manure piles are disguised by fresh snow.”

Declan Finch snorted. “I might be a rookie, but this ain’t my first rodeo. My momma taught me to watch where I step when she slipped my first pair of boots on my feet.” Avoiding the pile of manure left by the cattle that the Wynton Ranch was known for, he lengthened his strides and—respectfully—left his new teammate in the dust.

He was easygoing by nature. Getting razzed for being new was one thing. But being called “rookie” was starting to get on his nerves. The minute he signed his contract with WEST Protection, he quickly learned just how many smartasses there were working for the security agency.

Working for several notable people as a bodyguard had taught him that it was always best to ease into a new role. There was no place for emotions to rule in this game.

As the team filtered through the big double doors into the enormous building, Declan relaxed. Ranch life, he knew. Growing up on a big spread in Kansas had given him the work ethic that landed him every job he ever applied for. And his training backed him up, at least in the eyes of his new boss.

Whether the rest of the guys saw that he brought a huge skillset to the team was yet to be determined.

The high ceilings of the outbuilding had exposed wood beams typical to most farm buildings, but the light and airy remodeled space didn’t resemble any barn he’d been in.

Aged hardwood plank floors were clean of manure, scattered hay or even dust. The tables and chairs that were to be soon set up leaned against the far wall, and a wood platform near the bank of tall windows suggested there would be live entertainment.

Ross Wynton twitched his head for them to follow him into the center of the room. The large team was reduced to ten or so. Many agents were out in the field working as bodyguards or in WEST's cybersecurity division.

Each man wore heavy jackets. December in the Montana mountains was a lot colder than Kansas, but he'd come prepared with Carhartt jackets and down vests. He'd also brought his tuxedo and best suit. In this business, blending in with any crowd was a must.

Declan took a position on the outer circle, ready to receive his orders.

Ross's gaze swept the group. Every one of them wore the white Stetson that set WEST Protection apart. All except Declan. And the reason he hadn't yet received his hat was one that the guys hadn't let him live down.

"As you all have heard by now, this is a big weekend on the ranch. My family's hosting a weekend dude ranch experience. The goal is to raise money for kids with special needs. The money goes for therapy or to purchase them equipment. First and last, it's a big charity event. But much of the reason people attend is to have the ranch experience."

Several of the guys nodded that they understood. Declan braced his legs wider and settled in to listen and observe. He wasn't a guy to add to a discussion unless it was asked of him. He preferred to watch and generate his own thoughts.

Ross shifted his weight into a similar stance and folded his arms across his chest that sported the WEST Protection logo. "First order of business—confiscate all spurs. I'm not sure our insurance is prepared for a bunch of rich people—who are never around animals—actually riding horses."

Declan grunted in amusement, as did several others.

“Second, you know our rules about weapons and knives on the ranch. Josiah and Noah”—he looked at two of his brothers—“you’ll be stationed at the gate when the guests arrive to check for those items. The rest of you will be on the lookout for concealed weapons. I don’t give a damn if they have a permit to carry or not—no weapons are allowed on the ranch this weekend.”

Ross’s other brother Boone cleared his throat. “Do we search their personal belongings too? Luggage and RVs?”

“If you feel there’s just cause to do so, yeah. It’s our prerogative; every person attending signed a contract giving us that right. With that said, we probably won’t have issues. I expect people to drink too much and an occasional argument to break out. Remember, these people come from positions of power and wealth. Many of them are acquainted with each other and bring old animosities with them.”

Everyone nodded that they understood.

“Any questions?” Ross glanced around the group.

“I got one.” Boone looked straight at Declan. “Is the story true? What you did last week?”

Damn. He hated being in the spotlight. Part of his love of this business was being able to fade into the background.

Josiah wagged his head side to side. “*Man*, that was some impressive response time.”

Beside him, Judd Abel clapped him on the shoulder. “Only a week on the job and you’re already getting pats on the back.”

Declan pressed his lips together and gave a nod of thanks. He hoped this meeting wrapped up quick so he could get out of here and move forward with his day.

But the guys kept up their praise.

“That was wildly impressive work, Finch,” one of the others added.

He dipped his head in a nod.

“Guess we should all be looking to the rookie for advice.” Noah offered him a chin lift of respect.

Okay, he was finished here. He didn’t need—or like—people talking him up for doing his job.

Widening his stance, he hooked his thumb in his front pocket, and out of habit, scanned the front windows and then the entrances, letting more praise for his first op roll off him.

Ross took control of the group again. “The guests will be arriving within the hour. The cocktail party kicks things off. We’ve got a short time to set up these tables so the crew can prep for the party. Then I want you in plain clothes. Suits and ties, team. You’ll be expected to be in your positions ten minutes before the party starts.”

They all nodded in understanding.

When Ross dismissed them, everyone headed for the far wall to grab the tables and start setting up.

Declan tore his focus from the snowy landscape beyond the windows. So far, the ranch activity was normal, but within the hour the place would be crawling with security risks. Wealthy people seemed to be some of the worst he’d encountered in his career, since many brought a sense of entitlement or believed they were above the law. They also got easily bored, which meant they took risks.

Noah grabbed one end of the long, heavy table and he took the other. They carried it a few feet away and extended the metal legs.

Corrine Modeen arrived just in time and stood in the middle of the room, directing them all where to place the tables. When he ducked past her, she stared at him.

Great. He thought that listening to praise for that op was bad. Now this.

Was it his imagination or was she staring at his head?

She strode his way. “I’m sorry we didn’t have a hat for you in the closet, Declan.”

“It’s fine.”

“We had no idea we needed to order a Stetson in that size.”

Noah snorted, and Declan swung his gaze to him, piercing him in a flat look that more than one person had told him was colder than a polar bear’s nuts.

His teammate didn’t get the memo. “What my sister is tryin’ to say is that we had no idea that your head would be too big for any of our hats.”

He leveled him in his stare. “Wow. How funny are you?”

Noah’s eyes creased as he chuckled. “No hard feelings, Declan. Just teasin’ ya.”

He let his lips twist at the corner with dry amusement.

Despite his annoyance with them picking on him about the size of his head, he saw the good nature of everyone on the WEST team. They were raised with morals that went above and beyond, and their characters showed true grit.

Declan knew no one meant the teasing and he wasn’t taking offense. But he *was* starting to get a complex about just how large his head was after trying on every Stetson in the closet and needing one his size special ordered.

After the tables were all set up in the places Corrine dictated, he headed back to his quarters.

The Wynton family had given him a cabin on their property to use until he got settled in Stone Pass. The quaint log structure looked rustic but had every amenity needed for a comfortable stay. He had plenty of hot water and a full kitchen, as well as a freezer full of prime Wynton beef. So far, he hadn’t gotten around to cooking any of it, but he hoped to and soon.

He washed up and stood in front of the long mirror, donning his crisp white shirt and suit pants. With his fly open, he worked at the shirt buttons, concealing the fading tan of his chest and abs he gained from working all summer as a bodyguard in California for someone who enjoyed her time lounging at the pool.

He added cufflinks and meticulously knotted his tie in the Windsor knot he preferred.

When he topped the outfit with his charcoal gray suit jacket, he gave his reflection one more cursory glance, confident that he would pass as one of the guests.

His gaze ticked upward to his head. Even if he *had* the WEST Protection hat, he couldn't wear it undercover.

Parties weren't his thing, but he didn't dread it as much knowing that he was only there to keep an eye on the guests.

Checking the time, he realized he needed to step on it if he was getting to the venue on time. On the way out the door, he spotted his flask. He wasn't going to drink on the job, but something told him to grab it anyway.

As he reached the barn again, he found the driveway was dotted with parked trucks and SUVs, each as expensive as the next. He imagined the wealthy people running out to buy vehicles to fit the theme of the weekend.

In addition to the vehicles, several horse trailers were parked to the side. While he watched, one of the ranch hands led a striking mare down the ramp of the trailer to be taken into the barn and for its own weekend of pampering by people who knew horses.

The impressive mare held her head high and proud, as though daring anyone to handle her in a manner that was less than queenly. He had to chuckle at the animal. While he grew up with working horses, he'd seen his share of ones like that.

Yeah, Declan could get into this life. Having the best of his two favorite worlds touching made for one hell of a dream job.

In the time since he'd been in the big barn, it had been completely transformed into a winter wonderland cocktail party. Snow-white tablecloths covered the long tables and chairs sported white bows and sprigs of pine on the backs. Candles in glass jars flickered at regular intervals down the center of the tables.

He looked around to locate his teammates and spotted two positioned near the bar. Catching one's eye, he gave a nod before heading that way to get a drink into his hand. His instructions were to mingle, to blend.

And to keep his eyes and ears peeled for danger.

A five-piece band was already playing a classic Christmas tune in the instrumental acoustic style that complemented a party of this caliber. Guests were already mingling and talking.

At his approach, the pretty bartender recognized him as security and poured him a soda water. When he reached for the glass, she smiled at him. "You must be Declan."

His brow arched. "Do I know you?"

She leaned across the bar and whispered, "No, but I heard about your op."

Christ. Did everyone employed by the Wyntons know about that?

"Ross wanted me to tell you that he wants your presence here tonight, but you're not on duty."

Hm, that was new.

"Why?" he asked her.

"I think as a reward for that op."

Curling his fingers around the glass, he gave her a nod of thanks before moving through the quickly growing crowd.

A few couples drifted to the dancefloor. Most hung out in groups sipping drinks and picking at hors d'oeuvres. He meandered through the maze of people, keeping one ear trained on what was happening in the comms device in his ear. Since it was the first party of the long weekend, he doubted any trouble would arise.

He swung around to glance at the exit. Then he saw her.

A striking brunette standing in front of what he could only describe as a power couple. The man and woman were overdressed for the event, but somehow their overdone appearance made the brunette look more regal.

Her shoulders were drawn back, her head held high.

Declan cut his gaze over the simple fitted green dress that hugged her curves...and ended at her fist balled at her side.

At that moment, she twisted, spotted him and gestured wildly for him to come over.

He took off across the room without even thinking. When he reached her side, she cast a glance at him—then shook herself a little as if he surprised her.

Suddenly, she locked her arm around his back, her fingers digging slightly into his ribs. “Oh, there you are! This is my date—” She gave him a moony look and sported a big, sappy smile.

Without hesitation, he supplied the name she was searching for. Extending a hand to the female of the duo in front of him, he said, “I’m Declan.”

She didn’t clasp his hand but pinched her fingers around his as though calluses gave her an STD. Her smile was far from genuine. Maybe even a little off. But he’d seen women eye him that way before. Many times, in fact.

Pivoting to the guy, Declan offered him a hand.

The tall guy had the build of an athlete and the cocky attitude to go with it. He crushed Declan’s fingers and his eye contact could only be called an intimidation tactic.

“Hi, Declan.”

He gripped the guy’s hand hard enough to feel the bones of his hand grind together. “Any friend of this beautiful woman is a friend of mine.”

She sucked in the faintest of gasps that had his senses prickling.

Declan transferred his drink to his other hand so he could wrap his free one around the stunning brunette...who obviously required a rescue.



Belle was seething—but grateful for the stranger who'd jumped in as her date in front of not only her *ex-boyfriend* but her very own high school nemesis.

That tramp Haileigh had slept with not one but two of Belle's boyfriends, *and* she hadn't wasted much time before taking off with Ethan either.

Why were they at the Wynton Ranch charity event anyway? Of all the things she thought Ethan would be interested in, it wasn't raising money for special needs kids. He only did things that benefitted himself.

Her new fake boyfriend snaked out a hand and snagged a flute of champagne off the tray of a passing waiter. "I think you deserve a drink."

She stared. Just...wow. He was cute *and* had quick reflexes.

Beaming a smile at her, he extended the soap-bubble-thin glass toward her. "Here you go, baby."

Oh. Dear. God. Ethan and Haileigh who? Declan had a Southern twang to go with that very mischievous—dare she call it naughty?—glint in his golden-brown eyes.

Returning his smile with one that was as sparkling as the champagne she accepted, she had to question her luck. Because she didn't have any—ever. How did she manage to snag a nice guy willing to play along with her *as well as* exceed on the hotness scale?

Declan was a solid twelve out of ten.

The only struggle about being around him was bringing the glass to her lips. She hated champagne.

As the bubbly wine slipped down her throat, she managed to not make a face and instead put all her energy into beaming at her enemies like a benevolent princess looking down on her subjects.

"What brought you all the way to the ranch? I figured you'd spend the holidays in Aspen with your family," she said to Ethan.

“We’re here for the children.” Haileigh’s statement dripped with a disdain that should never be used in the same breath as those innocent kids. Ethan only nodded in agreement.

Ugh. Belle couldn’t remember *what* she ever saw in the man. At one time she might have thought him handsome in a Ralph Lauren kind of way, but compared to the absolute man-popsicle she was draped all over now, Ethan was a dim ghost of a shadow.

Her ex gave a sniff and drew Haileigh up against him.

Declan tugged Belle even closer.

Ethan yanked Haileigh to his side so not even a gasp of air separated them.

Declan took things one step further by slipping his hand up Belle’s spine...and underneath her hair. Holding her captive.

As if she could move away.

Her insides spasmed at the feel of those strong, warm, callused fingers against her sensitive neck. And when he inched them even higher, curling the tips against her skull, her lower belly *clutched*.

Heart pounding, she met his serious stare. Could he tell that she was panting? “Declan and I are going to get some air. Aren’t we, honey?”

He applied the barest hint of pressure against the back of her head, sending a ripple of heat through her. “I’ve been dying to get you alone all evening.” He stared deep into her eyes when he spoke, as if they’d discussed finding a hidden spot for some alone time on the way here.

She turned to her enemies and flashed what felt like a private smile even though she was making a getaway with a stranger. “Enjoy the party,” she told them nonchalantly.

Declan slid his hand from her nape, all the way down her spine to the small of her back—scant millimeters from her ass.

As Declan guided her away, Belle kept the fake smile fixed on her face.

Surely, her makeup would crack under this kind of wear and tear. She'd expected to fake being in possession of a social battery tonight. But seeing her ex with his new fiancée? No amount of Max Factor powder could weather that storm.

The exit loomed in front of her, and a big hand landed square in the center of the door. Declan pushed it open, which sent a volley of cold snowflakes at her face.

She sucked in a deep breath and welcomed them. Her face felt so hot. The minute she spotted her ex and that trollop, she considered running out of the cocktail party like Cinderella at the ball. But before she could even take a step to get away, the couple planted themselves in her path.

She was *so over* Ethan. She just hadn't been searching for the person to help her wash away all those memories of him. Mostly bad ones. Okay, all bad. She was still drowning in regrets over what he'd pressured her into doing.

That warm hand guided her outside and onto a paved sidewalk, wiping away her darker thoughts.

She paused. A gasp lingered on her lips as she stared in awe at tree after tree lining the path, all lit with golden twinkle lights.

Her companion and savior's lips were close enough to her ear that she felt the wash of his warm breath. "Do you want to stroll through the garden?"

Mind spinning from all that had happened so far, not to mention how she'd ended up in this situation, she managed to nod.

He held out his arm to her, and not feeling quite as awkward as she should with a man she didn't know, she wrapped her hand around his strong bicep.

"I had no idea the outside was decorated too."

"They've got the whole place decked out for this shindig."

She couldn't help but smile at his choice of words. Spoken in that deep Southern twang made them extra appealing.

As did his solid muscled body. And that gleam in his eyes that told her that he could get up to no good in ways she couldn't even imagine.

They meandered a few feet away from the exit but paused where the path curved. Under the canopy of lit branches, she tossed back the rest of her champagne.

"I bet you drink a lot of those," he said.

She shuddered at the horrible taste. "Nope. I'd rather have whiskey."

The corners of his hard lips quirked, but whatever he might say was cut off when another couple appeared on the winding path. He wore a navy-blue suit with a bolo tie, and she was dressed in ice blue with a white fur shawl around her narrow shoulders.

Just seeing them reminded Belle of Ethan and Haileigh. Dammit, why did they have to be here? She *really* didn't want to spend her weekend bumping into them.

May they get hives from all the mistletoe they stand under.

Of *course* they'd be here to spoil her fun. Why wouldn't they? It was just her luck. Belle's life was one long string of catastrophes. What was one more?

After the couple passed by, she took a step to continue on the main path, but Declan drew her off it, toward a small gap in the berry- and snow-dotted hedges.

He tossed a look back at her. "Watch your step."

Carefully positioning her spike heels on the spongy earth, she let him lead her through the equivalent of a hedgerow into...

Her lips popped open on a breathy sigh.

A fairytale world.

Snow clung to the dark green shrubbery, reflecting the golden twinkle lights the entire spot was draped in. A wooden bench was nestled in between bushes with glossy leaves. And a few feet away from them, a small fire burned in a stacked stone fireplace.

“This is beautiful!”

Declan released his hold on her.

She took one step, slipped and toppled forward. A cry left her lips just as a big set of hands gripped her around the waist.

She looked down at her shoe. “Damn. Of course I broke my heel. Just my luck!”

“Let me help you to the bench.” Before she could protest, he picked her up and carried her to the bench. As soon as she was settled, something silver appeared in front of her face.

She focused on the object—and on the man holding it.

“Whiskey.” His voice sounded as if he’d taken a swig or three.

Her gaze flashed to his smiling eyes.

“I thought you could use a stiffer drink.”

“Thanks.” She took the flask, and he sank down next to her.

After she smoothed her dress over her knees, she brought the flask to her lips. One sip had her instantly warm from the inside out.

“Ohh, that’s better.”

He eyed her. “So what’s the story? I don’t even know your name.”

She blinked in surprise. How did they reach this point without exchanging that bit of information? Sharing a flask of whiskey in a secret garden was definitely one of the more intimate—and strange—moments she’d ever experienced.

“My name is Belle. And you’re Declan.”

He nodded.

Her shoulders slumped. “Thank you for coming to my rescue back there. It was great of you to step in like that.”

“You were looking agitated. I thought I could help.”

She held out the flask to him, but he shook his head. She took another sip. The alcohol zigzagged low into her belly.

“Those people I needed rescued from were my ex-boyfriend and his new fiancée.”

“Ah.” A bracket appeared around the corner of his mouth. One that didn’t look amused in the least. “I gathered it was something of that nature.”

“So what’s *your* story?” she asked.

He relaxed against the back of the bench. “Just a guy at a party that he doesn’t want to be at. How’d you pick me out of the crowd? It was my big head, wasn’t it?”

Her brows shot up, and she stared at him. “What? Your head? No. It’s because you looked as uncomfy as I feel being here alone.”

A whisper of a smile lingered around his hard lips, softening the crease and giving her the urge to trace it with her fingertip.

“What do you do?” she asked.

His muscled shoulders stiffened a bit. “Let’s not do that whole ‘what do you do’ thing. Let’s just...”

“Let’s just keep drinking so I don’t overshare and look like a bitter hag.” She swigged the whiskey.

“All right.”

In contradiction to her statement, she went on, “You know, it irks me *so much* that those two are at the ranch pretending that they care about the charity part of the weekend. Ethan never gave a damn about anything but lining his own pockets. And Haileigh! She just likes spending it.” She gave an exaggerated noise of dismay.

“How long since you were with him?” Declan asked.

She took another large sip, but this time it struck her hard enough to make her head whirl. Oh no. She'd forgotten about the glass of champagne she'd tossed down her throat. She knew better than to drink so much so fast—or to mix her poisons. But tonight she was a little off her game, to say the least.

She pushed the flask into his hand. He placed the cap back on and stowed it in his jacket pocket.

“It’s been almost a year since I was with Ethan. Actually, I walked away from him after we returned from spending the holidays with his family.”

Declan’s eyes gleamed with amusement. “In Aspen?”

“Uh-huh.” She got caught up in his rugged good looks for a heartbeat before dropping her face in her hands. “I’m *really* pissed that he was the last guy I slept with! And he was *terrible* in bed. Ha! Let Haileigh have him! Pass the flask again, would you?”

His eyes crinkled at each corner as he produced the flask. But when she reached for it, he lightly closed his thumb and forefinger around the point of her chin.

Eyes that were more gold than brown met hers.

“That jackass was really the last man you were with?”

Mesmerized by how close he sat and how warm she was from the fire, as well as his strong, chiseled body, she could only nod dumbly in response.

He leaned in closer so his breath washed over her lips. Her senses tingled from the scent of cloves.

Her voice was a rough rasp. “He really was the last. And I hate that fact.”

Hooking her beneath the chin, he drew her closer. “Well, Belle...”

“Yes?” Heat sank between her thighs.

“Let’s fix that.” He leaned in.

Then kissed her.

Chapter Two

Declan had seen women in a state of fear before. And this one was setting off his radar.

While Belle appeared more at ease for the moment, she definitely had a story, and it involved that couple from the party.

What he never planned for was putting his hands on her. Or his mouth on her.

He only needed a couple minutes in her presence to know she was his type. He was a sucker for lush curves and an even bigger sucker for beautiful eyes, especially when she looked up at him with a silent plea for help.

And god, those lips... He issued a low groan. The first tender brush of his mouth over hers spiked a need that he didn't allow himself to feel most of the time.

Slowly, he trailed his mouth over hers back and forth for several passes. The need to deepen the kiss damn near took over, but somehow he managed to pull away.

Her deep brown eyes glittered, and he'd seen enough woman to know it wasn't just alcohol causing it.

Giving a small laugh, she bowed her head with a flush of color on her cheeks that wasn't from the cold either. In the shelter of the foliage and with the fire feet away from them, it was plenty warm on the bench.

Snowflakes snagged on her brown hair and caught the firelight and shined back the color of the whiskey she'd drank

from his flask. He raised a hand to brush the flakes away before they melted, but they kept falling.

One stuck in her long dark lashes. And when she looked up at him with her eyes full of desire, what was he to do?

With a hand on her nape—it might be his new favorite spot on a woman's body—he pulled her in and claimed her mouth. Right before his eyes slammed shut on the sensation of her plump lips giving way under his, he spotted several more snowflakes caught in those sultry lashes.

He slipped his tongue along the seam of her lips. On a soft gasp, she opened to him.

And he plunged inside.

The dark need spiraling through him wasn't something he let take over very often, if ever. This lust at first sight was real and raw and—

He growled when her tongue stroked over his with all the bold directness he loved in a woman.

Cupping her nape, he angled his head.

And plundered her.

Her fingers crumpled the front of his crisp white shirt. She scooted closer on the bench. The heat from her knee touching his stole up his thigh and hit his groin.

With a rough noise, he planted his hands on her waist and lifted her into his lap. She threw her arms around him and kissed him with a force that had him rock hard in a fraction of a blink.

Her thin dress did nothing to shield her from the cold—or from the evidence of his arousal. He paused, waiting for her protest, but she wiggled against his cock, anything but afraid of the desire pulsating between them.

Delving his tongue into her mouth, he drew moan after moan from her. The sweet sounds grew grittier, more intense. When she suddenly shifted on his lap, straddling him, their eyes locked for a full heartbeat.

“I will erase that man’s touch from your body.” His promise made her eyes darken and shocked the hell out of him with the truth of it.

A small whimper escaped her sweet lips. “Yes!”

“Give me my name.” He needed to know that she had a grasp on reality...and he just wanted to hear her say it.

Staring hard at his mouth, she flicked the point of her tongue across her bottom lip. “Declan.”

“That’s right. Now...” he smoothed his thumb over her plump pout, “give me your mouth.” He captured it for himself and rocked his cock into her soft body in the same motion. A primal sound trapped in his throat, and it took everything in him to hold it back.

The tips of her blunt nails dug into his scalp. He curled one hand around her breast and swiped the center with the pad of his thumb, teasing the bud of her nipple into a peak.

A shiver rolled through her, and he was pretty sure it wasn’t from the cold. He scraped his thumb over the bud two times...then three. When he closed his fingers around it, she stifled a feminine keening.

His cock throbbed. His balls felt about to bust. He hauled her even closer and worked her dress up her thighs. When he skimmed bare flesh, they shared a hiss of need.

“Declan!”

He clasped one thigh and spread her wider over his groin so he could rock his stiff cock against her pussy. The instant that her extreme heat seeped through the cloth of his trousers, he knew there wasn’t much time left to walk away from this torment. It was already *far* too close to torture.

Her hips shifted backward, then forward. Oh Christ, the sweet woman was rubbing her pussy on his cock, and he would lose it too soon if he didn’t take control right the hell now.

Whipping off his jacket, he draped it over the bench. His balls ached. The head of his cock was slick with precum.

She was light and easy to move. In one swift motion, he had her lying on her back and her dress worked up those supple, round thighs. Bracing a hand on the bench seat, he hovered over her—and she parted her legs to make room for him.

He froze, trapped in the brain-spinning need to whip out his cock and sink into her tight pussy. But he couldn't do that yet. Not and be the better lover—the better man.

Leaning in, he kissed her again, long and deep. When she clawed at his shirt buttons to get at his chest, he learned the shape of her breasts and just how hard he could pinch her nipples before she issued a stifled gasp.

The hum in his body urged him to taste more of her, to explore and see just how far he could push this adventurous woman.

Hiking her dress up to her waist, he watched her face as he ran a fingertip down the seam of her panty-covered pussy. The silk was damp. She was probably drenched underneath.

“Ask me to taste your pussy,” he grated out.

Her lips parted on an *O* of surprise. Then her lashes dipped over her smoldering eyes. “Lick me, Declan!”

Shifting his body down hers, he threw her calves over his shoulders, hooked his finger in the crotch of her panties to yank them aside and delivered a long lick to her exposed folds.

Juices hit his tongue. Her flavor was pure and all female. God, he loved eating pussy, but this woman was a fine wine. Her body arched. Circling her clit, he acknowledged her tremors even as he dipped his tongue lower and speared her with it.

The liquid heat surrounding his tongue made his cock pound, his orgasm hovering too close to the surface. But he wasn't about to back off.

He tongue-fucked her pussy. Her passionate cry sounded muffled in the falling snow. He withdrew his tongue and slid it up to her clit once again. As soon as he latched on to the straining bud, she began to buck...and buck and buck.

Rocking her body into his mouth, taking what he had on offer and then some. He cupped one breast and steadied her with a grip on her hip as he took her to the pinnacle.

“Say my name,” he bit out.

“Declannnn!” She came on a sharp cry that stole the last remnant of his damn mind.



Belle got his shirt open and raked her fingernails down his chest, lightly scoring his flesh. God, this man was so insanely hot. His body erased all memories of her ex. Those commands he'd given her even wiped out the sound of Ethan's *voice*.

Her insides quivered from the swift, intense release he'd just given her with his mouth. Now *that* was a first. The men she'd been with were *far* from giving in the sex department. And this man who'd stood in as a fake boyfriend for all of three minutes had delivered more pleasure than she'd had in her life.

Declan kissed her inner thigh and then dotted another kiss higher near the crease, causing her to jerk. Her body practically vibrated from that orgasm. Her senses were so heightened she swore she could hear the snowflakes falling.

He raised his head and gave her a hooded look. “You call the shots, Belle. If you're done—”

“I'm not!” The thought of not having this man moving inside her was unbearable. She never got chances like this, and she was far from finished. In fact, her best friend Sarah had paid for this trip for Belle just so she could have this very chance. Of course, when she gave in and agreed just to shut Sarah up, she never thought in a million years it would actually happen.

Now she had a delicious man swiping her juices off his lips and moving up her body. He braced himself over her, eyes burning. The tension in his jaw suggested that he wanted her just as bad.

“I want you. Inside me.” Her words came out breathy with desire.

His eyes darkened. When he dropped his mouth to hers, the kiss surprised her almost as much as his willingness to toss her legs over his shoulders and go down on her. The pressure of the kiss spoke of...

A connection. This wasn't just some sloppy foreplay before he took what he wanted.

Chest heaving, she wrapped her arms around him and brought him down on top of her. He bore most of his weight on his arms, but his chiseled body ignited her where they touched. Fire burned through her veins.

The flavor of herself on his lips was the most decadent thing she'd ever experienced, and he didn't seem bothered in the least about sharing it with her.

When he broke the kiss, he performed a pushup and leaned back on his knees. Eyes blazing, he gave another order. “Take off your panties.”

A shiver rolled through her. It had nothing to do with being chilled—the fire was warm enough—and everything to do with her lover.

He reached into his back pocket and brought out a battered leather wallet. Holding her gaze, he withdrew the condom. With an arched brow, he dipped his eyes to her splayed legs and the panties she hadn't made a move to take off.

Lust spiking, she used her thumbs to shove her panties downward. Then she pushed them to her knees.

“Hold still. Right there. Christ, you look sexy as hell with your panties trapping your legs together like that.” A cord popped out in his neck as though he was holding back far more than he was letting on.

Her pussy squeezed with want. “Should I...take off my heels?”

“Leave them on.” His order came out gravelly. “I want to feel them digging into my back while I’m thrusting inside you.”

The graphic statement planted dirty images in her mind and had her panting faster as she carefully slipped the panties off one heel and then the other.

He took the scrap of silk from her and stuffed them into a pocket inside his jacket. Her lips popped open, but the surprises kept on coming when he worked open his fly and palmed his thick, impressive cock.

The length was snaked with veins, the mushroomed tip glistening with precum. With a jerky move, he tore open the condom and sheathed himself.

“A man who comes prepared is even sexier.” She locked her ankles around his back and pulled him in.

Their lips collided. She angled her body upward to receive him, but he teased the tip up and down her drenched seam. Locking gazes with a man while he entered her wasn’t something she’d ever done before, but she couldn’t look away from Declan.

His jaw clenched as he slowly eased inside her. “I’ll stop if you say the word.”

“Don’t stop!” she rushed out. Her insides gripped, drawing him deeper. With a groan, he filled her to the hilt.

He froze inside her, the vein in his throat throbbing. She tightened her arms around him and her legs too.

With a grunt, he began to move. Swinging his hips back, he drew his length through her flexing walls before plunging in slowly again. But on the second pass, he thrust hard and fast. The third jerk of his hips made her eyes shutter in pleasure. On the fourth his mouth hit hers, and their tongues entwined.

The world fell away. She let go of all her inhibitions about having sex out in the open, and the champagne and whiskey helped that along as much as his hard body did.

He tore his lips from hers and skittered them down her throat, kissing as low as he could go while still inside her. She smoothed her palms down his muscled pecs to his six-pack abs and around to grip his carved ass. The feel of his buns as he pushed inside her over and over heightened her pleasure until she hovered on the brink for a second time.

He pounded into her faster, the rhythm throwing her off the edge. “You’re...so...damn...tight. Can you squeeze me aga—ahh! Fuck yeah!” As soon as her cry burst out, he swallowed it with his kiss and gave a twitching jerk.

Heat seared her insides. Declan’s low, rough exhale barely registered—she felt the rumble more than heard it. He ground his cock deep as the final spurts of release hit. Slowing, he continued to fuck her in languid moves that unhinged her almost more than what had come before.

When he pulled out, she threw her head back and stared up through blurry vision at the sky. Dainty white snowflakes drifted from the velvety night sky. Oddly, she didn’t feel cold or wet. Only warm and thoroughly satisfied.

“I didn’t know sex could be like that,” she whispered.

He leaned in to stamp another kiss on her mouth. Again, the pressure surprised her. It felt different from any other she’d experienced in the past.

His eyes smoldered down at her. “You are sexy as hell, baby.”

Her belly tightened on the praise. “You might be the perfect man.”

He flashed a grin.

“And this was the perfect rebound. I didn’t expect to be here, but...woohoo! Remind me to text Sarah!”

Chapter Three

Declan stepped into the WEST Protection office to a crowd of teammates and a sea of white Stetsons. Until now, he hadn't been to the office for a big meeting. The place was more crowded than usual.

He closed the door behind him and raked his fingers through his hair as he got his bearings. People stood in clumps, talking shop. Corrine and a couple female teammates were clustered together deep in conversation while one of the women, wife to Landon, rubbed her pregnant belly.

He had a head for remembering names, but the WEST family was big and growing by the day. It would take him more than a week on the job to figure out everyone's roles and memorize names.

As he shouldered his way through the office, guys gave him nods of greeting. When he reached the back of the room, he positioned himself with the wall at his back.

"There's the man of the month. Talk about saving the day!"

He didn't realize that someone was addressing him until one of his teammates pulled away from the group he stood with and stepped up to him.

Silas Shanie came at him with a broad grin as he clapped Declan on the shoulder. He returned the smile even though he wasn't up for hearing more praise about doing his damn job.

"Great work, rookie."

“Thanks.” He compressed his molars. Some might like this sort of thing, but he wasn’t accustomed to praise.

Neither was the beautiful woman he’d hooked up with in that garden. When he’d told her how amazing she was, he’d seen the surprise glowing plain on her face.

From a few feet away, Noah turned and looked at him. He nudged Josiah, who smirked.

Great—they were probably discussing the size of his head again.

Before they could pounce on him, Corrine broke away from the other ladies and strode to the door of the conference room. Craning her neck to see over all the men in the room who were taller than she was, she let out a shrill whistle that stopped all talk.

“The meeting’s about to begin. Head into the conference room, everyone.”

Since he stood closest to the door—and he was eager to escape more praise about that op the previous week—he entered first. Everyone had most likely claimed their favorite seats, but he disregarded such nonsense and took a chair toward the middle of the table. Everyone filled in around him.

Directly across from him, Boone caught his eye. “So, rookie. About last night.”

“What about it?” He arched a brow.

“You left the party pretty quick.”

He grunted.

“Saw you talkin’ to that pretty brunette. Come to think of it, I didn’t see her around the party very long either.”

Declan leveled his gaze on him but said nothing in reply.

Noah jumped on the bandwagon. “I saw Declan head outside with said brunette.”

“They disappeared in the garden. Lots of good places to hide out there.” Josiah smirked.

Boone nodded. "I couldn't help but notice that your hair was messed up and it was freezing outside but you had a bead of sweat on your forehead."

"I know I'm good-looking, but I didn't think you'd be looking at me so hard, Boone," he cracked back. Several guys laughed.

"Well? Did you score?"

He raised a shoulder and let it fall. "I don't kiss and tell."

A few guys hooted.

"Thought I caught a glimpse of lipstick on your collar too," Boone went on with a grin.

"Yeah? Weird."

Ross dropped into his seat at the head of the table. "Do you have any explanation for the lipstick?"

Declan looked at his boss. The dimple the Wyntons were known for popped in and out of his cheek, indicating he also found amusement in Declan's position.

He met his boss's gaze. "Nothing to report. Is anything an offense that would lead to termination? You told me to have a good time, and I did. That's all I'll say on the matter."

Boone leaned back in his seat. "It's not like Ross can throw any stones."

"*None* of you can." Ross swept his stare around the table.

Declan didn't know what they were talking about.

Ross wagged his head. "No one can say anything because we've all gotten involved where we weren't supposed to. But to answer your question, Declan, no. You weren't on duty, and that woman you left the party with was not your ward. You're fine. Now, down to business. Today..."

Declan gave the meeting his undivided attention even as he began connecting the dots. Such as how one of the best on their cyberteam, Lauralee, looked so long at her husband Boone. And Corrine hovered around the team pilot, Michael,

more than the rest. It made him wonder just how many of their hookups started in the workplace.

Whatever they had done didn't matter. He was different. Belle wasn't attached to him in any way. They'd simply hooked up at a party, and she didn't know his affiliation with WEST Protection, and it would remain that way since he was undercover all weekend.

He'd also be working security, unable to spend time flirting with her...or touching those ripe curves that had tormented him all night long in his dreams.

One romp with her wasn't enough. He knew it. His cock sure as hell did.

Did Belle?

After going their separate ways, he'd thought of her almost nonstop, mostly wondering where she was staying so he could go and find her again.

There were only a few options. She might be staying in the bunkhouse for the rugged experience. The guest rooms in the Wyntons' home were reserved for close family friends. Or she could be in her own RV.

Belle didn't seem like the type of woman to drive her own truck and trailer, though. He'd place his money on the bunkhouse. Slipping in would be easy. Staying quiet—especially when it came to *her*—wasn't.

He'd just have to live with the memories of their stolen moments in the garden. It would have to be enough.



There wasn't much worse than being on vacation alone. Unless, of course, it was being on vacation alone *and* hungover.

Okay, the headache wasn't too bad and so far, Belle's stomach hadn't chosen to rebel. It was just a mild hangover—she could live with this.

Through the brain fog, she got a text out to Sarah and then dropped her phone onto the covers and shut her eyes against the light streaming through the bunkhouse windows.

The place was dead quiet, which told her that all the other guests she was unfortunately sharing this experience with were early birds catching breakfast.

Ugh...food.

She'd get there eventually.

Her phone buzzed, and she felt around on the bed for it. When she brought it up, she cracked an eye to read the text. She barely focused on the first word when her phone started ringing.

With a stifled protest, she brought the device to her ear. She knew better than to mix champagne and whiskey. *Such* a rookie mistake.

Sarah's voice in her ear was too loud, and Belle held the device away from her head. "Girl. Did you drunk text me?"

"No."

"You drunk texted me."

"This morning?" She didn't feel on top of her game, but she definitely wasn't under the influence.

"Last night, Belle. You don't even remember texting me, do you?"

They'd been friends since kindergarten when Belle defended Sarah against a bully on the playground. At that moment, they clasped hands and skipped off to tell the teacher

what the mean kid had done to Sarah, and they'd been inseparable ever since. Except Sarah decided to send Belle to a charity event all alone.

Her friend continued, "That text last night was too garbled to make out. I'm not used to drunk texts from you. Other people? Yes."

She sighed. "I might have mixed alcohols."

"Oh no. Tell me you didn't do that. You know that you can't mix drinks."

"I remember now." The dull throb in her head wasn't getting any better from this conversation.

"You know I bought that ticket for you so you can get out of your rut," Sarah went on.

"Yes, you wanted me to have a roll in the hay with a cowboy." Memories of Declan's hands roaming all over her—his tongue too—hit her brain and chased off any stray wisps of fog lingering there.

"That's right, girl. A romp with a cowboy is exactly what you need to make you forget all about that idiot ex of yours."

"I have something to tell you." Two things, actually, but at the moment, one was more important.

"I'm listening, Belle."

"There was no hay."

The squeal in her ear made her tear the phone away from her head. Wincing, she sat up and swung her legs off the low bunk she'd fallen into after the slightly buzzed walk of shame from the garden last night.

"Who was he? Tell me all about him! Please tell me he's hung like a horse!"

"I'm ending this call now, Sarah. I'm going to breakfast before that group trail ride." She huffed. "What is so exciting about being on a horse at nine a.m.?"

"Um...I'm pretty sure the itinerary says breakfast is at seven-thirty. That means you're late."

If she could flip her friend the bird, she would.

“Who eats this early?”

“People who don’t drink and spend time in the fresh air?”

“Then they shouldn’t be serving alcohol.”

“Go ride a horse, Belle.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But you know you can save a horse by riding a cowboy.”

“I’m really getting off the phone now. Bye, Sarah.”

“Keep me updated on that cowboy! Love you, bye!”

This time she couldn’t muffle the groan. She rummaged through her weekend bag and located riding pants, an insulated top and some thick socks. Then she quickly showered and dressed. Before walking out of the bunkhouse, she added the warm jacket she’d need for a winter wonderland ride.

The sun on the heavy snow was blinding, making her wish she’d packed dark glasses. No such luck. She’d just have to live with her mistake.

A short walk to the main barn where breakfast was being held didn’t take long enough for her brain to recall the reason she’d been drinking in the first place—Ethan and Haileigh.

So when she walked in and was practically smacked upside the head by the sight of them together, she wasn’t fully prepared.

She stopped dead in the doorway. As if accentuating her misfortune, the wind decided to howl at her back, sending a low noise through the entire barn.

Dozens of people turned to look at her standing frozen in the entrance.

Including her ex and his fiancée.

Tossing her hair over her shoulder, she quickly stepped inside and shut the door. Why was her ex here anyway? She couldn’t think of any reason why Ethan would choose a

charity for special needs kids—unless of course he was trying to look good in somebody else’s eyes. Maybe he even had a bastard child somewhere and this was his way of getting karma on his good side.

The ugly thought flitted through her head with a wild gust of remorse. She’d never wish such a horrible thing on an innocent child.

She made her way toward the buffet, her gaze locked on the coffee. Haileigh and Ethan tracked her every step across the room.

Suddenly, a familiar scent of man, pine and something spicy flooded her head.

This scent didn’t worsen her hangover. Actually, it had the opposite effect, energizing her.

And heating her insides.

Declan’s teeth flashed white against the winter tan he sported from being outdoors. Or maybe it was a leftover tan from summer. She still didn’t know what he did for a living, but that body only came from hard work, and lots of it.

“Hi, baby.” He looked over her head. She followed his gaze to her enemies watching them.

Swooping in, he kissed her square on the mouth, a soft, firm brush of lips simmering with tension and all the promise they’d parted ways with the previous night.

Oh god, this man really was a diamond in an oilskin barn jacket and broken-in jeans.

When he drew away, he smiled down into her eyes. More shocking than his perfect white teeth was that she found herself smiling back.

Okay, I can do this. I like this.

With a hand on her spine, he led her straight to the coffee as though he knew how real her struggle was to be up at this early time, let alone while sporting a mild hangover.

“Coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

“Sure, darling.” He pitched his voice a little louder than she needed to hear him. When she glanced out of the corner of her eye, she saw why—her ex was approaching.

“Cream and sugar, like always?” Declan asked.

Her lips popped open in surprise. How did he know? She couldn’t recall telling him that, though she did have a faint memory of blabbering about Ethan and Haileigh last night—right before Declan laid her down, spread her legs and blew her damn mind.

She nodded stupidly.

Declan poured the black brew into a white ceramic mug with a big *W* on it and then added the extras. He turned to her just as Ethan barged up to pour his own coffee.

Her ex looked down his nose at Declan—or he would if he could have looked down. Declan had at least three inches of height on him.

And three inches in other places too. Damn, she remembered every single moment of *that*.

Ethan looked to her. “Belle.”

“Ethan.”

“Ethan,” Declan echoed with a sharp edge.

“Declan was your name?” Ethan asked.

“You know it is. You were screaming it last night in your dream, weren’t you?”

Belle gasped. A laugh burst out of her just as Declan spanned that big, warm hand over her lower back and led her away from her ex.

She leaned in toward Declan. “His face is pretty red.”

“Not our problem. Here’s a table by the windows. The view of the mountains is beautiful.” He pulled out a seat for her, and she sat. When he placed the coffee in front of her, he

leaned close to whisper, “I’ll get you something for that headache. Be right back.”

She blinked at his retreating body. How did he know she was fighting a headache? Or that she took cream and sugar in her coffee? Maybe he was one of those guys who’d been with a lot of women, and she was just another foregone conclusion. Stereotypical single woman, guzzling champagne and chasing it with whiskey out of a flask.

And throwing her legs over his shoulders and riding his talented tongue...

She didn’t have any regrets about *that*.

He walked up to an older woman at the back of the room and spoke to her for a moment and then followed her through a door. A moment later, he appeared again and walked straight up to the table where Belle waited.

He dropped into the chair and placed two white pills on the table next to her coffee mug. “This should do the trick.”

His stare flicked over her head.

“Who are you glaring at? Ethan?”

“The jackass just used a napkin and then threw it on the floor.”

“Not surprised. He is the leader of entitlement.”

Declan nodded, mischief in his beautiful golden-brown eyes. “You know, I’ve heard of that country. It’s on the continent of Asshole.”

Again, she laughed. Twice in one morning and it was just after eight a.m.? That might be a record.

“Yes, that’s the place!” She picked up the pills, popped them in her mouth and chased them with a sip of coffee.

“I’d get you a bloody Mary if I thought you could seat a horse with more alcohol in your system,” he said.

“I’m fine. Just a small headache. Stomach is in place.” That didn’t make her want to ride a horse more, though.

He turned his head to look out the window at the striking landscape that he mentioned. Belle was too busy staring at his impressive profile. His chiseled jaw boasted a light dusting of five-o'clock shadow. So did his upper lip. His nose and brow might have been carved from granite by an artist's hand.

Declan—

Well, whatever his last name was...was a hunk. *And* hung like the proverbial horse her bestie had mentioned.

He looked back at Belle. She felt a flush climbing her face at being caught studying him and brought her mug to her lips to cover her embarrassment.

"I wanted to talk to you about something."

She lowered the mug. "Okay."

He dipped his gaze to her lips and up to her eyes again. The small gesture had her stomach lurching low. Very low. Like between her thighs.

"Belle, I was thinking."

"Does that happen often?" she teased.

His lips quirked. "Big head, big brain."

What was it with him mentioning a big head? It looked perfectly normal to her.

He went on. "You're single. I'm single. Let's be single together."

She sat back in her seat. There was merit to his suggestion. It would be great to have somebody to meet for mealtimes and even spend time outdoors on the ranch with. The charity ball and big auction to benefit the kids would be *so much* better if she didn't spend it sitting all alone.

In her peripheral vision, she caught sight of her rat ex and his rat fiancée heading toward the exit.

She wrapped her fingers around her warm mug and leaned in to look into Declan's eyes. "That sounds like the perfect way to spend the weekend."

Chapter Four

Declan tugged on the brim of his old, battered brown cowboy hat. The trusty hat had seen him through a lot of hard days of work and was fitting for this ride with the group.

Catching Belle glancing at him more than once when he settled it on his head was a bonus in his view. If he was going to use her to sink into his undercover security role and not stick out among the group—and she was using Declan to throw off her ex, and maybe even make him jealous—she needed to look at him *exactly* like that.

Like she'd spent the night curling her fingers into his back while screaming out the mind-blowing release he gave her. And like she wanted to be doing that again, rather than going on this ride.

Trailing behind the larger group participating in the ride today, they approached the paddock. Wynton ranch hands had fine horses for them to choose from. Some guests had traveled with their own, but Belle wasn't one of them.

He had to wonder what had brought her here. She wasn't the only guest flying solo, but she'd latched on to his idea of being each other's fake companion too easily not to be bothered by coming alone.

Extending an arm toward her, he ushered her up to the fence with the rest of the people there to select a horse. The trail ride would take hours, circling the mountain with a picnic lunch halfway through.

A few feet down the fence, he locked his gaze on Ethan and Haileigh. Each time he came in contact with them, his

senses prickled, and he didn't think it had anything to do with Belle's link to the duo.

He'd already planned to place himself near them in the pack. Not that he sensed they posed a threat—but they sure as hell didn't look like experienced horsemen either. If any danger was to come from this ride, it would be one of their stupid mistakes causing an accident.

Belle folded her arms on the top fence rail and studied the horses munching on hay. He leaned on the fence in a similar pose, his elbow close enough to hers that he felt her body heat.

“Have you chosen a mount yet?” she asked him.

“Nah, I'm good with any horse. I have enough experience. You?”

“That speckled mare is beautiful. I might see if I can—”

Declan didn't let her finish. He stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled. The loud sound carried on the wind, and a ranch hand he'd talked to a few times broke away from the other guys and jogged over to him.

“My lady is interested in that speckled mare. Can you hook us up?”

“Sure thing, Declan.” He jogged back over to the horses and took the horse by the bit.

Belle bounced on the toes of her boots. “Are you serious right now? How do you know the ranch hand?”

“I spent some time swapping stories with him. Guess I developed a rapport.”

“That's amazing.” The hand neared with the horse. “Oh my gosh, she's even prettier in the sunlight!” Belle's cheeks were pink from cold and pleasure.

The ranch hand led the horse to the gate. Without hesitation, Belle took off to meet her in long strides. Declan couldn't help but smile when she actually pulled a bit of apple out of her coat pocket.

Very tentatively, she offered it to the horse on the flat of her palm.

He chuckled. "Where did you get that?"

The horse nosed the treat and then peeled her lips back to take it.

Belle pinched her eyes shut until the horse plucked the apple slice off her palm. "When you're around horses, you always carry a little something to make them happy."

The ranch hand nodded to her. "Would you like to take her now? The saddle's cinched. She's ready to mount."

"Uh..."

"I'll take her." Declan reached for the rope and led the mare a few yards away.

Belle eyed the mare, a distrustful downturn to her lips now that she was closer to it.

"Not around horses much?" He let the horse grow accustomed to his scent before he ran his hand down her neck.

Belle's lips tensed more at the corners. If he didn't know how she looked in the throes of ecstasy with his cock moving inside her, he wouldn't have noticed the change.

"No," she said. "I own a horse."

"You look a little nervous."

She attempted a step closer, but she walked stiffly, as if forcing herself to move. "My family boarded horses. I can do horses...but I'm not a horse girl."

He watched her, silently urging her to continue talking to him by giving her a listening ear.

The mare sniffed Belle and made a quiet noise.

"She likes you." Declan smoothed his hand over her soft coat again.

Belle didn't touch her, but she did pull out another bit of apple. "Okay, I fell off a horse when I was younger. They're

still not my favorite. I'll brush manes all day. I'll feed them carrots and apples."

The horse took the apple but left a slick of saliva slime on her palm.

"Agh!"

"Here, I've got something for that." He fished in his back pocket for a handkerchief he always carried for times like this. When he flicked his wrist to unfurl it, Belle reached to take the cloth.

The horse nudged her arm, and she dropped the handkerchief in the snow.

She bent to retrieve it, sinking her fingers into the layer of fresh snow and then straightened. She used the cloth to wipe off the saliva. "I'm used to mishaps that are a lot bigger. Stuff like that happens to me a lot."

Several riders were already mounted up and setting out to the meeting spot at the trailhead.

"Declan!" someone called.

He looked around to see the ranch hand striding his way with another mount in tow.

Belle saw his dilemma, that he needed to take the horse but already had one in hand.

She inched nearer, slowly reaching for the lead rope. "I'll just..."

He caught her gaze and held it. "You sure you're okay with this?"

"Yes." She pushed some force behind her words that sounded more like the Belle he'd first met at that party. The one who definitely needed something harder to drink than champagne.

He didn't immediately release the rope.

"I've got it, Declan."

With a nod, he relinquished the horse to her care and met the ranch hand to take the beautiful black mare. He also swept his gaze around the area to gain a feel for the group.

“The ride’s starting shortly. You’d better mount up if you don’t want to be left behind,” the hand told him.

“Got it, thanks.” He gave him a nod of appreciation and led the horse to Belle and her mare.

Belle eyed him and the larger mount.

He needed to be honest with her. Well, as honest as he *could* be.

“I need to be on this ride, Belle. But if you can’t bring yourself to get in the saddle... Well, I’m not sure that I can leave you behind alone.” He was torn between watching over the group and sticking by Belle.

Just watching her features ripple with emotion was something to behold. One that he wanted to kick back and stare at and study.

Suddenly, her mare skittered away from his, knocking Belle sideways.

He reacted without thought. He stuck out an arm, scooping her out of the air before she could hit the snow. With a jerk, he yanked her upright and brought her up against his body to steady her.

She planted a hand on his chest and tilted her face up to his. “My horse...” She was breathless. “Is running away!”

“Your— Damn!” He bolted after it.

Her soft laughter chimed on the wind. He stopped and whistled. The mare came trotting back to him, but they needed to hurry if they were going to keep up with the other riders. A glance toward the trailhead showed him that several were already setting off.

A voice projected into his ear through the comms device he wore concealed by the brim of his hat. “Everyone in position?”

Dammit. He really needed to get out there.

After he reached Belle again, a look of resolve solidified on her pretty face. "I'll take the horse. I'm ready."

He leveled his gaze at her, seeing that arguing would be useless. When Belle's mind was set on something, she seemed to go after it. Last night at the party, that was an escape. With him.

And he'd freely and happily given it to her.

He would again, given half a chance.

She stuck her foot in the stirrup, but the leather seemed to actually twist around her foot like a serpent, hanging her up.

"Oh, shit!" He lunged forward to help her again before she got her leg broken or worse, dragged behind a spooked animal.

She quickly extracted her boot from the leather. Her cheeks burned with two red spots. "I should have warned you that stuff happens to me. A lot. Anything that can go wrong usually will."

He chuckled. "I see that. Okay, let me hold this steady for you." He positioned the stirrup for her to slip her foot into.

She did so, and he gave her a hand into the saddle. She swung her leg over it and took the reins without mishap.

Satisfied that she was in control and wouldn't go careening off the mountain, he mounted up and they rode side by side across the field toward the place where all but a few stragglers brought up the rear.

Once again, he saw the regal way she handled herself. He'd bet that this woman had some secrets. Her bearing spoke of something much more. Her perseverance and grit were something else entirely.

Glancing over at her had his gut clenching with need and his teeth grinding in sexual frustration.

Christ, she was pure sex and sin in that saddle. With her hair flowing freely and her gaze fixed on the jagged mountain

landscape, she shifted the reins to one hand, bringing her breasts forward as her body rolled in the saddle...

She pulled out a glove and managed to stuff her fingers into it, using her teeth to tug the fabric down to her wrist. Then she did the same to the other hand. Her demeanor warred directly with how down-to-earth she acted. Carrying apples in her pockets and tugging on leather gloves with her teeth.

He eyed her. "Think we can catch up to the others?"

She looked out over the blanket of snow, churned up where the other riders had ridden through. "Yup."

"What are we waiting for?" He clicked his tongue, sending his horse into a canter. The sound of hoofbeats followed as Belle caught up to him. When they crested a short rise, he saw them.

The power couple.

Belle let out a snort. "He has no idea how to handle a horse."

"That's obvious."

"Let's get ahead of them."

He barely nodded before she set her heels into her horse's flanks, sending it into a slow gallop. He followed and they circled around the pair.

A smirk teased the corners of Belle's lips, and he got the feeling that the disdainful way that her ex glanced over at her put it there.

She was getting off on besting the guy, and that amused the hell out of Declan.

It didn't last long because the rustle of harness and leather coming up fast from behind brought his head around. He watched the couple barely squeeze through an opening between other riders, sending them rushing to get out of the way.

Belle's mount didn't like that—at all. It lurched forward. Declan swerved, at the ready to catch hold of the reins and

take control if needed.

She held on to the reins, controlling her horse the best she could when the hated people from her past rode by her without so much as a glance over to acknowledge their dumbass move.

Ethan stood up in the stirrups to look out over the group. He let out a loud whoop, long arm extended as if pointing the way to victory on the battlefield.

His horse, disliking the noise and sudden jerking movement of its rider, wheeled off to the side, nearly colliding with another guest.

“Watch yourself, man!” the rider called out to him.

Ethan’s bark of laughter carried back to them on the wind.

Declan guided his mount closer to Belle. “You all right?”

She nodded.

He angled his chin toward the jerk. “Good way to get killed.”

She stared straight ahead. “One can only hope...”

His lips twisted in amusement.

Oh yeah, he liked this woman. Probably far too much for his own good.



The trail was dappled with spots of sun that melted most of the snow away, making the trail easy riding.

Not that Belle *couldn't* ride. She just didn't enjoy it much. Twice in her life she'd been injured by a horse. Luckily, both instances had been minor, but were still enough to make her wary of the beasts.

Like now, her hands were sweating inside her warm gloves, but taking them off would only make her fingers freeze around the reins.

She shot another glare at Ethan's back as he took off to the front of the pack. She hoped *his* fingers froze to his reins.

And his ass to the saddle.

Whatever he did next sent his mount veering in front of another rider.

She made a low noise. “He always was a horse’s ass—if he freezes to it permanently, then he’s found his home at last.”

Declan issued a snort that created a plume in the cold air. He held his mount close to hers but allowed enough space for their animals to tolerate each other well. From the corner of her eye, she studied him.

God, he really was hot in that hat. His rugged features made her want to trace them with her eyes over and over again, preferably with his cock buried eight—or was it nine?—inches deep inside her.

His chiseled body rolling in the saddle had her insides tightening with need. He handled his horse with a skill that only made him look hotter in her eyes. And in the eyes of several women in their group too, if Belle was reading their glances at him correctly.

“How did you end up with someone like that?”

His question brought her head around. She pierced him in a look.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” he amended. “It’s hard to picture a smart woman like you with such a dickhead.”

Again, he made her laugh. Again, it was totally unexpected.

Since they were some distance from the riders ahead, she figured she could confide in her companion without being overheard.

“It’s a long story, but basically I confused an adrenaline rush with love.”

A dark brow hitched up, disappearing under the brim of his well-worn hat.

“Ethan is an adrenaline junkie. Our first date was actually jumping out of a plane.”

Both brows hiked up. “Yeah? Sounds as though you’re a bit of an adrenaline junkie too.”

She shrugged. “I was doing it to prove that I could. He was doing it for the rush. There’s a difference.”

“That’s fair.”

She went on, “The entire way up—I won’t lie, I was peeing my pants in fear. I didn’t want to do it. I didn’t want to jump or go through any of the motions of not dying to get back down to the ground. But I didn’t have much choice, did I?”

“There’s always a choice, Belle. But go on.”

Sunlight glittered on the icy branches they were riding beneath, making an archway of diamonds and sparkles to guide their way.

“Ethan saw my nervousness and talked me through it all. When he suggested that we jump together, of course it sounded better than dying alone. Looking back, I’m not so sure.” She shook herself mentally. “When we hit the ground, I was just so full of emotions that I threw my arms around him and kissed him. Within two weeks, I told him I loved him—now I want to barf over that. I can’t believe I actually thought that way.”

She waited for judgment from Declan, but none came. He simply rode beside her, offering a solid, strong presence that soothed her.

“He kept pushing me more and more to do adrenaline rush stuff.” She sucked in a deep breath. “That’s how I confused the excitement of surviving...with love.”

He gave her a sharp look. “That doesn’t sound good, Belle.”

“Oh, it isn’t. And it only took me about ten grand in therapy bills to be able to say that.”

“Jesus, honey. I’m sorry.”

“My therapist gave me a response for that too. I was vulnerable, and he saw that and preyed on it.”

“Motherfucker.”

She drew up at the harsh curse from Declan. That he’d harbor any anger on her behalf was...well, hot.

Now that she’d started, she needed to get the rest of the story out. Why she felt compelled to confess any of it to a virtual stranger, she had no clue.

“In the end, he suggested that I do something...criminal.” She pitched her voice low.

His golden-brown eyes sparked like fire along a steel blade. “Tell me.”

A small shiver rolled through her at the hard command in his tone.

“I won’t tell you what he wanted me to do. Only that I now know how narcissistic he is. How he gaslighted me and twisted things to heap guilt on me. When I refused, he withheld love. He refused to speak to me or spend any time with me. Then he’d come back and shower attention on me.”

“Love bombing? He fucking love bombed you to manipulate you into doing his dirty work?” He jerked his head forward, the tendon in his jaw taut with the tension of him gritting his teeth.

She nodded. “When I didn’t bend, he repeated the cycle.” She sucked in a deep breath of clean, fresh mountain air to wash away those memories and purge the vile man from her mind.

The awfulness of it all wasn’t so easily chased away, though. Especially when she was forced to be around the man and his terrible fiancée who she hated with just as much passion.

The worst was recalling Ethan’s pillow talk. The last thing she wanted was to replay those moments. How they’d be in the middle of sex and he’d say things.

Like “wouldn’t it be amazing if we robbed a bank?”

The answer to that was *no*. Absolutely not.

Any more words died on her lips. Oh god, how could she be so stupid? Now she saw it.

Ethan wasn't here for the ranch experience *or* for the kids. He had something up his sleeve.

She darted a sideways look at Declan and found him staring straight ahead, his focus off her for the moment. That gave her a chance to rack her brain for things that her criminal ex might do.

He had an unhealthy obsession with heists. Maybe there was an heiress with a priceless diamond in attendance. She wouldn't put it past him to stoop to the level of petty thief.

But on the other hand, the Wynton Ranch housed something much, much bigger.

Such as the WEST Protection security agency.

Not everyone knew about the agency, but she did.

When Declan looked at her, she saw that he wanted to ask a question or say more. Luckily, she'd been born and raised among social events. She knew how to shut down questioning and redirect attention just as well as her mother.

A tendril of hair blew across her eyes, and she directed it away. "Have you ever parachuted?"

Declan's shoulders didn't relax, but he chuckled. "Jumped out of planes with the Army Rangers."

"Nice." Now that he'd said that, she pictured him in uniform, looking hot, buff *and* dangerous. "The Army Rangers is one thing, but..." She flipped her hair flirtatiously. "I've been parasailing."

"Parasailing? Damn. I'm not sure I can top that. Why would you ever take that risk? It's so dangerous."

Their banter made her laugh, and the tiny creases of amusement around each of Declan's eyes gave her the hope that they'd successfully shifted the topic off Ethan and his attempts to drag her into a life of crime.

She hadn't told Declan all of it.

Or even the worst of it.

How could she ever tell *anyone* how Ethan had called her to pick him up outside the bank?

God, she was so naïve.

To think she ever bought that story about his BMW being in the shop and that he just needed a lift. She only thought she was helping him out, but when he came running out of the building in a ski mask with bags in his hands and told her to drive, he made her into a co-conspirator.

Then how he threatened to slit her throat, and her parents' too, if she told anybody about it.

Nope—that wasn't something she ever wanted to discuss. Not at a Christmas charity weekend, and especially not with her hunky companion. Declan was obviously a nice guy. He got bonus points for being in the military.

A man like Declan could never understand why she'd actually stomped on the gas and driven the getaway car after a bank robbery. How could he, when she didn't understand how it happened either?

Chapter Five

Boisterous laughter and the loud chatter of several guests echoed through the big horse barn, but Declan and Belle hadn't exchanged many words since her revelation about her ex.

Declan already disliked the guy. Now that he knew how he'd treated Belle, he wanted to go back to his military roots and use a few torture tactics on the asshole. Currently, he was considering shoving an entire Christmas tree up the man's ass, ornaments and all.

His boots thumped lightly on the barn floor as he walked to a bin of grain and filled the scoop to dump into the horses' feed troughs.

A few feet away, Belle stood at her horse's stall, cooing softly to the mare.

The woman was a puzzle. One minute soft and sweet. Sometimes even unsure of herself. The next slamming back the whiskey in his flask and delivering the most demanding kisses.

One thing was certain—she seemed happier to be on her own two feet rather than on the back of an animal with four, though she'd handled the experience with the poise he was starting to see was part of her personality.

When he dumped half the scoop of feed in his horse's trough, Belle stepped aside to allow him to empty the remainder into her mare's.

The horse nosed Belle's pocket and then a tearing noise made her look down. The horse had taken incentive and ripped

her pocket most of the way off her jacket.

He guessed she was right that trouble followed her.

She let out a soft laugh. “You think I have more apple, you greedy girl. Just wait until tomorrow. I’ll bring you some.” She shifted to the other horse’s stall and rubbed her knuckles down the bridge of the horse’s nose. “I’ll bring some for you too.”

With their task finished, he looked to Belle, and his chest swelled at the sight of her.

Her warm brown hair was mussed by the mountain wind, and she wore a radiant glow from fresh air and exercise.

Damn, his chest wasn’t the only thing that swelled. That hay bale was far too close for his peace of mind. It was the perfect height to bend her over and thrust two fingers deep inside her while reaching around the front of her body and stroking her clit.

Now that most of the guests had exited the barn, his job didn’t require him to stick around.

He raked his gaze over Belle’s curves. If he didn’t stop himself now, he never would.

With his balls bluer than he’d experienced in a long, long, long time, he tipped his head toward the exit. “Want to head back inside? Have a drink that isn’t champagne?”

“Sure.” Her smile was sweet, the light in her eyes pure.

They exited the barn and strolled to the main building. Most of the weekend’s events took place here, and security was posted everywhere, some sporting the obvious Wynton Ranch shirts with the *W* logo, but several of his teammates, like him, couldn’t be picked out of a crowd.

When he entered with Belle at his side, he scanned the room. Immediately, he spotted her ex. The guy was seated at the back of the room with his fiancée. They seemed to be deep in conversation.

Belle brushed her fingers over Declan’s arm. “I’m just going to wash up. You know, after touching the horses.”

“Good idea. I’ll go too and meet you at that table on the far wall. The one stacked with cookies.”

She craned her neck to see over clusters of people. “Ooh, yes! I see my favorite — gingerbread.”

The restrooms were nestled in a corner of the barn that his knowledge of barns told him probably used to be one large tack room. He was surprised that the lighting wasn’t all that great considering the WEST team kept security high. He made sure to watch Belle enter the ladies’ restroom before he walked into the men’s.

As he stood at the sink, soaping his hands, he glanced up at his reflection in the mirror.

His hat looked old and shabby compared to the ones these wealthy people wore. Though like their vehicles, many of them purchased western wear with high price tags and low practical use. His well-worn one made him stick out a bit more than he preferred.

Too late now. He was stuck with it for the rest of the afternoon, through an hour of refreshments and mingling. After that, he’d sit in with the guests to listen to a guy talk about the cost to train service animals and explain how their donations would help. At which point, he imagined a bunch of people would whip out their checkbooks.

Behind him, the bathroom door opened. In the mirror, he locked eyes with Belle’s ex.

Disgust twisted in his gut and threatened to curl his fingers into fists. Now that he knew how he’d treated her, Declan *really* wanted to punch his smug teeth down his throat.

He rinsed his hands, forcing himself to relax his fingers from the fists his body was automatically forcing them into. Those instincts were good but served him better on the job. Right now, he had a role to play.

Ethan sneered at him. “What the hell are you staring at?”

Declan huffed out a laugh. “Not much, man.”

“I could say the same. I’ve seen wannabes like you before.”

Declan froze, glaring back at him. Calculating how close the man stood and how far Declan would have to swing to connect his fist with Ethan’s jaw.

All he had to do was pivot a few degrees and it was game on.

Ethan couldn’t resist running his mouth. “You want to be rich. Want to have things you don’t have.”

“I’ve got Belle,” he gritted out without even thinking.

He chuckled. “She’s nothing. I assume you’ve discovered how terrible she is in bed. Lies there like a dead fish.”

A growl burned up his throat. If she reacted that way to Ethan, she had good reason. But that was far from the response he’d gotten from Belle.

The scent of Christmas pine air fresheners in the restroom couldn’t knock out the reek of Ethan’s cologne. It was starting to burn Declan’s nostrils.

He stared at the guy. “Is this a dick-measuring contest?”

“What?”

“I’ve never been in one before. No one has ever been insecure enough to challenge me.”

“You asshole. Don’t speak to me that way. You’re just angry that you came here with a cold, dead fish of a date. And now you’re stuck with her while some of us have much, much better.”

He gave Ethan a flat look. “Belle is far from cold when she’s with *me*.”

“Maybe you tapped her inner whore then. I always wondered if she had one. Most women do.”

His fists clamped so hard that his knuckles popped. Instead of driving them into the bridge of Ethan’s nose, he yanked a paper towel off the dispenser and dried his hands.

When he turned back to Ethan, Declan smiled. “There’s only one reason why you’d be acting like this. It must be painful to still have feelings for Belle when she seems...*so*... over you.”

Ethan barked out a laugh and sidled over to the urinal. Declan hoped like hell that his cocktail weenie-sized dick got caught in his zipper.

“You sticking around to watch, champ?” he called over his shoulder. “Hoping to get a peek at what you’re lacking?”

Now Declan *really* wasn’t leaving. He positioned his back to the wall and folded his arms. “Where are you staying? Bunkhouse? Or top tier?”

“Top tier. The RV’s new, by the way.” He finished pissing and zipped up. Swinging around to fix his ugly glare on Declan, he asked, “You?”

“I’m in the luxury cabin.”

He watched Ethan’s eyes dim. “That wasn’t listed as an option.”

“That’s because it’s only available to VIPs.”

Ethan’s face reddened. He grunted and strode past him, throwing Declan into a noxious cloud of cologne. Before he blasted through the door, Declan called out, “You should wash your hands!”



The faint croon of country singers covering beloved Christmas music would typically annoy Belle. She wasn’t one for the holiday music everyone else seemed to love—especially in a public restroom—but she was in a surprisingly good mood considering that her ex had been on that trail ride.

Seeing him nearly fall off his horse and pitch down the mountainside really brought on the seasonal cheer.

She stepped out of the bathroom stall and stopped dead.

Haileigh stood at the sink, a fat makeup puff in hand, powdering her latest nose job.

The woman peered at her in the mirror.

Refusing to be intimidated, Belle stared back. With all the decorum she possessed, she walked to the sink and turned on the faucet.

Haileigh went back to powdering her nose. Probably trying to fill in the craters of her wrinkles that no amount of Botox could fix. Belle took the high road and bit back the comment.

“You need any powder, just let me know,” Haileigh remarked.

“I’m good.”

She eyed her. “You know why he dumped you?”

“Actually, I dumped him.” She shook the water off her hands.

“Whatever. He’s with me because I’m fearless.”

“And flirting with jailtime!”

It was only a matter of time before Ethan had Haileigh driving the getaway car if she hadn’t already.

Haileigh dropped the powder compact back into a large handbag. “I must say that I’m very surprised that you were able to snag any guy to join you this weekend, let alone one so...well-equipped.” She flicked her tongue over her teeth.

The action had Belle’s own teeth gnashing together. Declan wasn’t *really* hers, but she still didn’t like this woman having an opinion about him.

Haileigh leaned away from the mirror, straightening with a toss of highlighted blonde hair. “You’re so boring. It’s why Ethan let you go.”

“I dumped hiiim!” she sang out in her sweetest tone.

Haileigh faced her. Belle turned too, holding her stare.

A smile stretched over the woman’s face. “Oh, honey, you shouldn’t be wearing that red top at all with your complexion and hair.”

Anger rippled through her. She preferred comfortable clothes, typically in neutral colors. But when Sarah insisted on helping her pack for this trip she booked for her in the first place, she insisted that the holly-red sweater was perfect for a casual look.

She drew her shoulders back. Who even cared about clothes anyway? Not her. She was more than looks. She wasn't here to bag herself a rich husband either—something her parents got excited about when she told them about the trip.

Haileigh had changed from her riding clothes into a deep red dress that hugged her cinched, liposuctioned waist. Belle gave her a smooth once-over. “It looks as if we’re both wearing red. Didn’t that happen to you back at senior prom? You and Sadie McMahon wore the same emerald-green sequined mermaid gown. Everyone loved how it looked on Sadie. You just didn’t have the curves for it.”

She dropped her stare to Haileigh’s surgically enhanced bust and then pointedly fixed on her face again.

“Ugh!” Haileigh grabbed her purse and marched to the door, high heels clacking.

As soon as she sailed out in a cloud of designer perfume, Belle let her shoulders droop.

God, she hated that woman. And she hated Ethan even more. Their presence at the event was making Belle’s stay less than perfect, but more than that, it was tripping her inner alarms.

The very ones that warned her that Ethan had more than a screw loose.

He’d do *anything* for that adrenaline rush.

Even rob banks.

He liked money. His lifestyle demanded that he go out and get more and more of it by any means possible.

Whatever they were up to, it was clear to her that they weren’t here for the kids or an authentic cowboy Christmas on

the ranch. He could be robbing the guests.

Or the Wyntons.

Chapter Six

Declan's bodyguard instinct was to position himself near the door of the ladies' room to watch over Belle. A rendition of "It's Beginning to Look A Lot Like Christmas" projected from the main room. Even though the upbeat song always made him throw up in his mouth a little, right now it wasn't getting on his nerves so much. Maybe his mood was a little lighter after spending the morning with an amazing woman who made him laugh?

He started to tap his foot but just then the restroom door opened and Haileigh stormed out. His gut clenched.

It probably was no coincidence that the couple ended up in the restrooms with both him and Belle. Which made them *much* more dangerous in Declan's eyes.

That asshole Ethan took enough pleasure in getting a few jabs in with him, but women could be so much crueler. He could only imagine the things that Haileigh said to Belle in there.

With his glare fixed on the woman stalking away from him, her red dress flouncing around her calves, he inched closer to the restroom door.

A second later, Belle walked out. His gaze shot to hers. In a blink, he assessed her.

It was a reflex; he was trained to gauge his ward's moods. Only she wasn't his ward. She was his fake date, and her personal life wasn't any of his business.

But if he spotted even the hint of a tear in the depths of those eyes, he was going to make the lives of that power

couple a living hell for the rest of the weekend. Christmas trees up the ass, ornaments and all, was just the tip of the North Pole.

He searched Belle's deep brown eyes. No trace of tears, but she didn't look happy either.

Actually, she looked upset.

She hurried over to him and held out her arms. "Do I look terrible in this sweater?"

Surprise made him blink. "Nooo," he drawled out.

"Does the color wash me out?"

"If I knew what that meant, I'd tell you."

"Okay, forget it."

"I just spent an entire morning thinking how beautiful you looked, how your eyes sparkled and how the pink in your cheeks flattered you."

Her lips popped open. Several heartbeats passed before she whispered, "Oh."

Just then, one of his teammates entered the building. He looked around, spotted Declan and twitched his head toward the exit, indicating that he was free to take a break.

He lightly closed his fingers around Belle's arm. "Let's take a walk. Get some air."

"We just came in from outside. Besides, what about us smashing those cookies?"

Standing in the doorway, they both turned to look at the table. Ethan reached for one.

"You don't want to touch those cookies now. Believe me." Not after the guy failed to wash his hands after urinating.

"Yup! You're right. Air sounds great right now."

They made their escape. The world was bright with the sun on the snow, and he yanked his hat down over his eyes against the glare. Since they hadn't removed their coats from the ride, she'd be plenty warm enough.

They strolled for a minute in silence before he spoke. “That woman was in the restroom with you. What did she say to you?”

Belle kept pace beside him with long strides that brought to mind how damn good her legs felt around his waist while he was drilling his cock into her.

“Nothing.”

He shot her a look.

She waved a hand. “Really. It was no big deal, Declan.”

He cocked a brow. “You want me to go back there and say something to her, you only need to say the word and I will.”

Her lashes dipped over her beautiful eyes. “Why would you do that for me?”

“Because...” He stumbled over the reason. He couldn’t very well tell her that he worked as a bodyguard on the WEST Protection team and that protecting people came naturally to him even when he wasn’t under contract.

There was also something about Belle that drew out his inner protector. After seeing Ethan and that woman in action, Declan wanted to *wreck* whatever plans they’d laid. Plus drive them off the ranch.

Now that the thought had entered his head, he planned on keeping an even more watchful eye on the pair. The instant they did something that looked even remotely sketchy, he’d toss them off the property.

She gazed out over the landscape. The fields that normally held cattle were barren, the herd wintering on the other side of the mountain where it received less snow and sharp winds. Next, he scoped out the RVs and other trailers parked in the neighboring field.

Most of them looked large and impressive. Ethan said his was new, but Declan couldn’t pick it out of the group of other new vehicles.

“Are you staying in one of those?” Belle’s question caught him off guard. The answer to that was complex.

Keeping secrets wasn't his style, but it was part of the job.

While he'd officially been on the team for two weeks, he'd never even made it to his first training. He was immediately sent to combat a threat to national security—the very same op that the guys couldn't quit talking about.

As soon as he reached the ranch, WEST put him straight to work on this party, so he didn't have a chance to search the small town of Stone Pass for housing. Which was how he ended up in the Wynton's guest cabin.

He pointed to the log cabin with a metal roof situated a fair walk from the rest of the ranch buildings. "That's me."

Her brows shot up. "I didn't know there was an option for a cabin."

"Where are you staying?" he quickly asked to turn the focus from himself.

"Bunkhouse."

His lips quirked. "How's that going so far?"

She laughed. "A little like being in summer camp. Bunking next to people who snore or have smelly feet. Though...I got in pretty late last night and avoided most of those issues." A rosy hue hit her cheeks again.

He pulled her to a stop. All the struggle of being in her presence the past few hours had built to a fever pitch in him. He thought he'd never get another chance to touch her, but things had changed.

He swung her to him. A soft gasp escaped her sweet lips, and he cut it off with his own.

A sweet sound burst from her. She crushed her breasts against his chest and hooked her chilled fingers around his nape, yanking him down.

"Declan!" she cried out between slow passes of his tongue.

He latched on to her hip, low enough to stroke the line where her pussy met her thigh. "I already know you're burning

up for me, baby. I taste it on you.”

She drew back a fraction to stare at his lips, chest heaving. “You...taste it?”

He gave her a hard nod. “Your want. I taste it.”

Another low whimper escaped her throat. “The way you talk to me is...oh god...” She shivered. “We can’t go to the bunkhouse. Where—”

He cocked a brow. “How adventurous are you feelin’?”

A gleam hit her eyes. “What are you thinking?”

He twisted his head to look at the pristine horse barn. That hay bale was just begging him to pay it another visit and bend his lover over the way he envisioned.

She sucked in a quick breath. “The barn?”

“Yup.”

“I’m in.” She gripped his hand and started dragging him across the snow to the big white barn before he ever thought to put on the brakes or douse this blazing five-alarm inferno between them.

When her shorter legs couldn’t keep up, he swept her off her feet and carried her the final few steps. A squeal of surprise exploded from her throat as they fell through the door. He kicked it shut with a loud enough bang to cause the horses to shift around in their stalls.

Belle’s hands landed on his ass, squeezing and groping. In the few steps it took to reach that hay bale, his cock steeled to all nine inches.

As he set her down, she raked her nails along his spine. Holding her stare, he whipped off his jacket and tossed it over the bale.

“Here?” she asked.

He gave her a single nod. “Right here. Turn around.”

She let out a muted cry before slowly turning to do his bidding.

“Push your pants down, plant your hands on my jacket and bend over.”

“Oh god!”

“I know your pussy is drenched just thinking about me touching you. And your nipples are pushing against that sexy red sweater right now, aren't they?”

“Yes!”

“Bend over, pants around your knees. Now.” His balls throbbed. Giving commands wasn't a kink he let himself sink into very often in the bedroom. Rarely did he encounter a woman he bothered to take his time with. Usually he settled for one-night stands and vanilla sex. Belle not only brought out his protective side but his animal cravings.

His eyes hooded as he watched her pop the button of her riding pants. The tantalizing V of flesh exposed above her panties revved his libido. Then she spun around, shimmied her pants down her curvy hips and planted her hands on the bale.

The tips of her fingers curled into the flannel lining of his jacket, and he swore he saw steam rising off her flawless skin. Dust motes swirled in the shafts of light streaming through the windows.

When he gripped her tight ass cheeks, she stifled another noise. He stepped up behind her, aching to nestle his balls against that perfect ass, and trailed one finger down her slippery seam.

The scorching heat of her pussy stole his mind. Stole hers too, if her strangled cry said anything.

He plunged his finger into her gripping heat, fucking her deep.

“Oh my god!”

Withdrawing his finger, he added a second. He hesitated only a heartbeat before adding a third and drove his fingers back inside her.

She split around his thrusts, her head bowed and the ends of that thick, gorgeous hair trailing over his coat. Her pussy

squeezed around his digits and flooded for him.

Christ, his cock was close to bursting. He had to get inside her and end both their torment.

With his free hand, he yanked open his belt. She shivered at the sound of him unzipping his fly.

“Don’t stop!”

“Take over for me while I get that condom, baby. Place your hand between your legs and touch yourself.”

She gave an all-over shudder. He damn near came in his boxer briefs watching her uncurl her fingers from his coat and slide them between her thighs.

On a low, throaty moan, she rocked her hips. Jerkily, he yanked out his wallet, so damn aware of her strumming her own clit that by the time he got the condom over his cock, he was ready to pound steel.

With a dainty flick of her hips, she continued to torture herself—and him.

“Don’t stop touching yourself.” His words grated out. He aimed his swollen head at her pussy and sank inside her hard and fast.

She convulsed in his hold. Banding an arm around her waist, he steadied her to take him, letting his eyes shut on the smoldering feel of her pussy walls clutching at him.

Her eyes glittered when she twisted her head to look at him. “Please...”

“Baby, you never need to beg with me. I will give you my cock all day long, any day of the week.” Slowly, he dragged his length back through her tight walls and lost his mind when he slammed home once more.



Belle’s orgasm hovered like a bright star in a velvety Christmas sky. She couldn’t stop the trembles tearing through her body, and she didn’t want to try either.

This man...this moment...was the stuff of fantasies she didn't even know she entertained until Sarah planted the idea of barn sex in her head.

A few feet away, a horse shifted in its stall. Her insides were molten lava melting away any fears of somebody finding them in such a compromising position. At this moment, she couldn't think straight. Or see straight.

The tan-and-green plaid of the lining of Declan's jacket wavered in her vision. She dug her fingers harder into the cloth and bit back yet another cry of need as he drew his cock out of her.

"Faster!" she urged. Her pussy was dripping wet, her fingers damp from stroking her clit.

When he thrust inside her again, her pussy choked his length. Milked it. He let out the sexiest groan, a sound that she knew she'd be replaying every time she thought about this trip. Or thought about Christmas.

The scent of hay and sex rose in the air. Heedless of anything but the feel of this man owning her, she wantonly thrust her hips back to urge him deeper.

He plunged in again and again. She arched her back and took him balls-deep. They shared a moan and the world melted away entirely.

With his grip on her hips, he positioned her where he wanted. He controlled the speed and timing, and god, was it hot. Having a man take control this way wasn't something she ever encountered before.

He yanked her back into his thrusts. Her mind blanked, and her clit throbbed. Unable to stop herself, she slipped her fingertip over her hard bud again and pressed down.

The pressure lit her up like a thousand-light strand. She shook and cried out as her blinding orgasm rushed through her.

Declan's hips jerked against hers. His cock sank deeper, and with a primal grunt, his orgasm hit. The guttural sound washed through her mind, and her pussy clamped down harder on her lover.

He pumped his cock inside her, not slowing even a little, taking her fast and deep just the way she needed it.

Very slowly, her mind came to a swirling stop, and her breaths rasped in the quiet of the barn.

Grinding his cock deep in her flexing walls, he clutched her hips and snarled. “*Fuck*, I haven’t even left your body and I want you again.”

Her stomach tingled with need.

“But I can’t take more chances of getting caught.” He slowly eased from her body. She clung to reality for a long heartbeat before pushing off the hay bale and drawing her clothes back into place.

When she finished, he looped an arm around her middle and turned her into his arms. She took one look at his handsome face and knew this wanting wasn’t over. They just needed a new venue.

He swooped in and kissed her long and thoroughly. The masculine flavor of him combined with the aftershocks rippling through her system had her on edge all over again.

She wrapped her arms around him and looked him in the eyes. “Your place or mine?”

He issued a low laugh like the faint rumbling noise a mountain might make if someone were strong enough to move it. “I love that you’re just as anxious as I am, baby. Let’s—”

He turned his head toward the door. “Someone’s coming. Quick, out the back.”

Pitching herself out of his arms, she stumbled to the back door. Once they had the door shut behind them, he took her hand and led her away from the barn at a normal pace.

“Who was coming?” she asked.

“Dunno. Probably a ranch hand, but I wasn’t gonna stick around to find out. I have to protect your reputation.”

Surprise flitted through her. Ethan never would have done that. Hell, none of her boyfriends would have.

Declan was even more of a gentleman than she'd guessed.

He led her away from the barn and around the side of the garage. Ranch trucks were parked in front.

At first she thought he might stow away in one of the trucks with her. Instead, he pressed her up against the wall of the garage and captured her mouth in a tongue-tangling mimicry of more hot sex.

She dug her fingers into his shoulders and reveled in the hard feel of his muscled body against hers. Their need spun out of control.

Their mouths fused in a passionate kiss that grew slower and slower but no less deep. When he twisted his tongue against hers, they shared another moan.

Finally, he tore his mouth free and rested his forehead against hers. "I don't want to leave you, but the gala is coming up soon. You'll need time to get dressed."

She nuzzled him, brushing her nose over his. "Are you my date tonight?"

"Of course I am. We made a deal, didn't we?"

She skimmed her fingertips over his rough jaw stubbled with bristly black hair. "I already want you."

"I want you *so goddamn much*, baby. Want me to walk you to the bunkhouse?"

Her voice was as unsteady as her tripping heart. "I think I can take it from here."

With concentrated effort, she pulled away from her lover. She even managed to put a body's width of space between them. When she turned and headed toward the bunkhouse, he let out a low whistle.

She threw him a coy look over her shoulder before proceeding as fast as her shaky legs would carry her.

Thankfully, no one was in the bunkhouse to witness the big, silly smile spreading across her face. As soon as she

dropped down to sit on her bunk, she pulled out her phone and shot off a text to Sarah.

Belle: *There was hay.*

Sarah: *Yeeeeehawww!*

Chapter Seven

Declan stepped out of the hot shower and grabbed a thick towel off the heated bar. Hell, he couldn't even touch a towel without thinking of Belle. He didn't know a lot about her, but he thought she'd appreciate the luxuries this cabin had to offer.

Belle was like a secret gift. He'd met plenty of women, but most of them could be sorted into a simple box within the first few minutes of meeting them. Many lacked the substance he desired to spend more time with them.

From what he saw from the group attending this shindig, the people were typical upper-class. They had money to flaunt and the exclusive weekend would give them all something to brag about for months to come.

He didn't know Belle's background or family ties, but he'd heard her tell the group in her introduction that her friend booked the ticket for her. He could hazard a guess as to her station in life, but in the end, it didn't matter anyway—he wanted to keep her safe and comfortable even with a rotten ex skulking around.

Sharing the same level of lust for each other was one hell of a bonus. Trouble was, if he was on duty and she gave him that little come-hither dip of her lashes, he'd have no choice but to find a way to deny her in that moment.

Then the second he was free, he'd be grabbing those luscious hips and bearing her down on the closest flat surface.

After toweling off, he strutted into the bedroom to locate his suit for the charity auction. He'd worked in this business

before taking the position with WEST, but never had he needed to change clothes so much.

When given the list of activities, he was told to dress to fit in. The only suit he owned was worn to funerals and weddings alike. And tonight, he'd sport the black tailored suit at the auction.

At least the garments had enough room to move if danger presented itself. He could run, fight and shoot in this thing.

When he finished dressing, his phone buzzed with an incoming text from Corrine.

Pre-gala meeting in the office. 10 minutes.

He slipped on his black cowboy boots and glanced in the mirror before heading out of the cabin, confident that Belle would be satisfied with her fake date.

The distance from the cabin to the office wasn't far even on foot, but between the mud and snow on the ground, he chose his personal truck instead. This time at least he arrived before most of the team. With any luck, the meeting would get underway before anybody brought up how a rookie pulled off a big op like that.

Corrine sat at her desk, a program running on her computer. She let out a whistle as he entered. "You sure clean up well, Declan."

"Thanks." He looked over her jeans, plaid shirt and boots. "You're not attending the auction?"

"Oh, I am. I had a few of the guests interested in my horses. Then Jaren Abel needed some security checks so I came straight from the barn. When it's through, I'll head home and get dressed."

"Gotcha."

"Were you wearing that suit when you—"

He internally winced at whatever she was about to say, but luckily the door opened and several guys entered the office dressed in formal attire like him.

Boone positioned himself in front of the door. “We’re all here, so I’ll get down to it. You all know your roles tonight. Some of you will be in the crowd. Keep watch for anything out of the ordinary. We don’t expect trouble, but alcohol will be flowing freely to help open up people’s wallets.”

“If all we have to deal with is a drunk guest or two, it’s going to be an easy night,” one of the guys said.

Declan could guess which guest would become belligerent if he had a little too much to drink. Now Declan had even more reason to keep his focus on Ethan tonight. His woman too, for that matter—he was going to make damn sure that Belle didn’t get trapped in the restroom with her again.

“Any questions?” Boone cast a look around the group. When nobody responded, he nodded. “I’ll assign you your posts then. Silas, you take the east entrance. Casey and McCoy, you’ve got the garden.”

Declan wouldn’t be taking Belle outside for any trysts if those two guys would be on patrol. Too bad—he’d miss those snowflakes clinging to her long, dark lashes.

“Declan, you’re inside working the crowd. Keep your ears open and be ready to step in if needed.”

“Got it. Is there any information on these guests that I can look at before I go in there? Did they fill out any forms to attend the event?” he asked.

Corrine swiveled her seat to face the group. “No. We didn’t feel that they needed vetted. I can look up any one of them in seconds. The only crime any of them are linked to would be possible tax evasion and a DUI that’s been covered up.”

Several guys chuckled.

Declan could name two people he’d be keeping an extra eye on tonight. Based off what Belle told him about Ethan’s

proclivity for adrenaline rushes, he wouldn't put it past the guy to try something when all eyes would be on him.

Boone waved a hand. "You'll all have your communication devices in your ears and if you're undercover, weapons concealed."

Declan's sidearm was holstered on his side, tucked high enough on his torso that Belle wouldn't feel it unless she knew where to find it. Her hands wouldn't brush the weapon if she wrapped her arms around him to dance.

Dancing with Belle would give him an excuse to have her in his arms. But it would also afford him the chance to listen to conversations and scope out potential threats.

Boone dismissed them. On the way out, Casey caught up with Declan. "I just wanted to congratulate you on that op last week."

At the praise, he gave him a nod of thanks. "No big deal."

"No big deal? The guys said you were humble, but I'm pretty sure anybody in your position would be basking in the spotlight for at *least* a month."

He chuckled. "I'll see you at the auction." Increasing his pace, he reached his truck and jumped behind the wheel. What his teammates were saying didn't sit well with him. He'd saved someone important, sure, but *every* life was important. He hadn't done anything that any other person on the WEST team wouldn't.

Once he rolled into his former parking spot, he focused on tonight's role. Keep the guests safe. Keep Belle from being harassed by her ex and that terrible woman.

Declan also had a new goal, and this one was totally personal.

Make Belle smile.



Twinkle lights dripped from the tree branches that lined the path between the bunkhouse and the big barn where the

charity auction was being held. The golden glow glimmered against the falling darkness of short winter days and kept Belle from hurrying too much.

Oh, she was eager to see Declan. But she was far from eager to be in the room with her ex. This charity event was exactly the type of thing that brought out the worst in Ethan. Memories of past events came to mind, and she could only imagine the attention he would draw to himself by flaunting money he'd swindled from people or outright stolen.

She wasn't in any rush to watch all this unfold, so she took her time and enjoyed her surroundings.

The cold mountain wind teased over her bare arms and she drew her wrap, a pale blue cashmere as light as air, around herself.

Suddenly, a hand landed on her lower back.

She jolted to a stop, senses prickling and her nipples already hard with desire from the familiar scent of Declan's aftershave. He plastered his body against her back. His warm breath teased her throat.

"You scared me!"

"You look beautiful," he purred in her ear. Strong arms wrapped around her, and he nuzzled her earlobe.

She shuddered, but not from the cold. "I bet you say that to all the ladies."

"I've been known to lie to a few, but I can honestly tell *you* that I want to flip this dress up and plunge my cock into you."

She melted against him, and he clutched her tighter, molding her body to his chiseled front. He skated his lips down her neck, leaving goose bumps in his wake.

His stiff erection pressed into her ass, promising a very good night and distracting her from her previous dwellings of her ex. When Declan had his hands on her, nobody else existed.

Pressing tender kisses up her throat, he kneaded her hip in that way that made her pussy clutch with need and flood with desire. She sucked in a breath. “Declan...”

“Mmm. You’re delicious. But you’re right—we should join the party.”

He twirled her in his arms to face him. The burning want in his eyes made her stomach flutter and her nipples harden even more.

With the lightest of brushes, he stroked the hair off her cheek. Then he offered his arm. Smiling, she took it and they continued down the path at the same slow meander that she’d been walking it before.

His gaze roamed over her. “Did I mention how beautiful you are?”

She ducked her head. “Yes, thank you. You look amazing in a suit. But I knew you would.” This wasn’t the sort of talk she’d ever exchanged on a date or with any other man she’d been with. She wasn’t about to tell Sarah she was right about Belle dating terrible men, though. Her friend would rub that in her face every chance she got—playfully, of course.

They reached the door of the barn. A pine wreath hung on it, a white velvet ribbon fluttering in the wind. Declan ushered her inside first. While she got her bearings, he was already scanning the room. His tense pose lasted only seconds before he relaxed and turned to her with a glint in his eyes.

“Should we warm you up with a drink?”

“Yes.” She felt a little giddy without taking one sip of alcohol. The atmosphere in the big room felt charged with all the season’s good tidings and joy. Chatter rose and fell in a natural rhythm, and the brass band in the corner was already playing a selection of old songs from a bygone era.

Candles burned, carrying the scents of cranberry and balsam. The tables were decked out in gleaming white china for a sit-down dinner.

Declan touched the small of her back. Without telling her body to move, it rolled into his touch.

He leaned near. “I’m starting to think of this spot on your body as mine.” With a fingertip, he traced a tiny circle on her back, close enough to her ass to send pulsating heat through her.

Before she could react to his claim on her, the crowd shifted, giving her a clear view of Ethan and Haileigh.

Ugh. Of course the woman looked dazzling in a silver sequined gown. It made Belle’s own look like a hand-me-down even though it cost a fortune. Her credit score might have actually taken a hit when she charged the dress and heels to match.

“Just keep walking, Belle.”

“You see them too?”

“Yes. He looks like a wanker in that cravat.”

Declan’s statement ripped away any resentment she had at her enemies being here. A laugh bubbled out of her. Several people turned to look, smiles on their faces too.

Declan’s lips tilted in the barest hint of amusement as he led her to the bar on the opposite side of the room. “Whiskey for the lady. Soda water for me.”

She turned to him in surprise. “You’re not drinking tonight?”

He offered a smile that warmed her as much as any toasty slippers and roaring fire. “Maybe later.” He took the whiskey from the bartender and held it out to Belle. She wrapped her fingers around the heavy tumbler and clinked it against his glass of soda water.

They both sipped and then drifted away from the bar. He seemed different to her tonight. On edge. Or at the very least, nervous.

“You keep looking around. Are you trying to find someone?” she asked.

His gaze was locked on the center of the room. When she followed his stare, she realized who he was looking at—Ethan.

Her ex had his hands in his pockets in a relaxed pose, but his expression was far from at ease.

“He looks furious,” she whispered to Declan.

He nodded.

What could Ethan be up to? There was no way he was here for the charity. Altruism was right up there on his list with honesty—he didn’t know the meaning of either word. She should know—she’d caught him in so many lies, all of them by omission, of course.

That nagging feeling continued throughout dinner. After they were stuffed with prime rib from the Wyntons’ own stock and the feast was cleared away, she saw Haileigh get up and head to the restroom. The urge to go after her and lock her inside a stall flared hot and bright inside Belle.

As she watched, Haileigh threw a look back over her shoulder. A very suspicious and seedy look. Then she hurried out of the room.

Belle shoved her seat back before she realized what she was doing. Declan’s strong hand came down on her thigh. “Don’t go to the restroom just yet.”

For some reason, she felt the pull to go and see what Haileigh was up to. She stood. “I’ll be right back.”

“Belle—”

She hurried away before he could persuade her to wait. As she strode from the table, she swore she heard Declan cuss. But he didn’t follow her.

Once she cleared the door leading to a short corridor where the restrooms were located, she looked around. There was no sign of Haileigh anywhere. Listening hard, she couldn’t even make out the sound of the woman’s heels on the hardwood floor.

Belle hurried to the restroom. It was completely empty.

Where had the horrid woman gone?

She could only hope some dark portal to the underworld had opened up and swallowed her. Quickly, she headed back to her seat.

A gentleman as usual, Declan stood to see her seated. Then he locked eyes with her. She could see the confusion in his stare, and she just shook her head in response to his silent question.

The auction got underway with a short speech by the chairman of the board of trustees overseeing the charity for special needs kids. Belle only kept half an ear on what was going on because her mind was furiously running through every possible reason why Ethan would be here and what he could be planning.

What did she know about the ranch? Her parents were friends with the Wynton family. They didn't spend holidays together or anything, but she'd known about the family her entire life.

She heard her parents discussing people all the time. She racked her brain—had she heard anything about the ranch lately? A rare diamond dug up on the property or a gold mine discovered? Any reason at all for Ethan to want—

She stifled a gasp. She knew about the Wyntons forming a security agency but what had her parents said? Oh god. The office was onsite at the ranch.

Her heart ticked faster. *That* was exactly the type of thing that would make Ethan salivate for his next adrenaline hit. Breaking into a security agency and stealing...what?

What could he be after?

If she wasn't wrong, the agency dealt in cybersecurity as well. There could possibly be a lot of sensitive data he would *love* to get his hands on.

She tapped Declan's arm. He looked at her. "I'm stepping outside for some air."

"I'll come with you." He twisted his head left and right as though searching for something.

“I can go alone.”

He gave her a sharp look. “I’ll come with you,” he repeated in a more forceful tone.

They made their way outside. Once they were in the open, she headed straight for the bundle of cords she’d seen plugged into a main power source. She stared at those cords. Were they all supplying power to the RVs?

“Belle?”

“Isn’t there a security office in the area?”

He showed no change in expression. “Not sure. I wasn’t part of the tour of the grounds. Why?”

Because she wouldn’t put it past Ethan and Haileigh not to be running other types of cords that didn’t supply power.

“I just remembered somebody mentioned a security office. I wondered if there are security officers here tonight,” she fibbed.

He gave her a sharp look. “Did somebody say something to you? Haileigh or your ex?”

“No, but if they *did*, then I could potentially let security know that I’m being harassed.” She gave a small laugh to cover her lie. It bothered her to lie to anyone, but she felt especially bad about lying to Declan.

Her mind still worked over the reason for holding this conversation in the first place.

They’re not here to have the ranch experience. What did Ethan talk about doing?

All those talks with Ethan she had red-flagged popped up in her mind now. He bragged about them but in a way that made it seem fictitious. To anybody who listened, it sounded like “if I could get away with it, I’d try.” But maybe they were more rooted in reality than she ever thought.

She ticked them off one by one.

Investment fraud.

Email scam.

Fraud against the elderly.

Bank robbery—at least one that she knew of, but there could be more. He had *a lot* of what he called “dreams.”

What hadn’t he done yet? What crime was on his bucket list?

Ransoming files and blackmail.

Oh god.

Ethan *never* traveled without his laptop.

Belle just knew it—they were trying to get into the security office’s mainframe to steal files with the goal of holding them for ransom.

Could *she* beat Ethan to it? She knew a lot more than he did about tech. Her parents liked to brag that she’d studied philosophy in college, but the truth was, she’d taken a lot of computer courses and spent a fair amount of time with the tech nerds. And they’d taught her things.

It was one of the tidbits of information she kept from Ethan. Knowing his penchant for adrenaline rushes, she was always wary of him asking her to perform something that went against not only her morals but the law.

She turned to Declan. “I have a headache. I’m going back to the bunkhouse now.”

“I’ll walk you.”

She started to protest and saw that there would be no arguing with him. “All right.”

She had to get to her computer tablet. She’d brought it thinking that if she got bored, she always had books loaded into her online library, but now she saw the merit of having the device at her fingertips.

She had to find a way into the security office’s mainframe before her ex did.

Chapter Eight

Declan paced along the back wall of the office. The beauty of the fields and the distant mountains was a view that he originally thought would offer him some peace during times of stress, but he was far from peaceful after his conversation with Belle the previous night.

Her sudden change of demeanor at the charity auction set his senses roaring. Something happened when she got up to use the restroom—something he was sure he could have prevented by accompanying her.

But his duty came first. Stepping away from his post wasn't an option. While she went to the restroom, he couldn't help but follow her with his gaze, and that got Boone's attention. With a single hand gesture he alerted Boone that he needed to go after her, but in seconds she'd returned, telling him she was stepping out for some air.

Boone's voice had filled Declan's ear, giving him the greenlight to watch over her.

Then her talk took an even scarier turn as she questioned the existence of a security office onsite and whether or not they were patrolling.

If she hadn't been threatened, he didn't know *what* caused the shift in her.

After dropping her at the bunkhouse, he debated standing guard outside the door, but that would only make people ask questions. He was undercover. His rigid work ethics wouldn't allow him to break his role.

But dammit, he could—and would—get more security on Belle when he couldn't be by her side.

The man rounding the outside corner of the office brought Declan's pacing to a halt. He faced Boone.

"You needed to talk?"

"Yeah. Last night, something went down."

His brows shot up. "And you're just now sharing this with the team?"

"It's not like that, but it's worth mentioning. That woman I'm posing with as her date—"

"Belle Robb. What about her?"

Robb. He didn't even know her last name until this very moment.

"Her ex is here in attendance with his fiancée. I think there's something going on that has her frightened. The asshole cornered me in the bathroom and said a few things. I shot him down, but there is definitely some tension between him and Belle. I suspect the fiancée also cornered Belle."

"So what happened last night that got your neck prickling?"

He shot Boone a direct look. They understood each other. "She asked if there is security on the premises for the event. And she brought up the WEST office."

Boone stared at him for a long heartbeat. "Her family knows mine. Of course she'd hear things."

"That makes sense how she knows the office exists. But that doesn't explain why all of a sudden she'd have need of protection."

"I'll look into the ex and this fiancée of his. And let the others know of your concerns." He paused. "You stick by Belle. I'll get someone else to stand in for you all day and tonight at the gala."

Declan didn't experience emotions of any kind on the job. He was a machine—he threw himself into the thick of a

situation, did his duty and got out. It helped him cut through the bullshit and see issues for what they were.

But knowing that he was actually assigned to Belle's safety sent one emotion—relief—coursing through his system.

Now he wouldn't be split between his job and protecting her. Even though his desire to claim her every time he got close to her lingered, now his reason for being close to her had shifted from wanting into *needing*.

“Where's she staying?” Boone asked.

“Bunkhouse.”

“Okay. I'll post more sets of eyes on the building. I'm assuming that the ex isn't staying there with her?”

“He brought an RV.”

“Right. I'll shift everything around accordingly. Keep your comms close so you can alert us if anything happens.”

Declan nodded. “Thanks for taking this so seriously, Boone.”

“Safety comes first. Especially on this ranch. If we can't protect people in our own back yard, we don't deserve to be in business.”

“I'll keep you updated on our moves. I'll hang around the bunkhouse and wait for her to come out.”

“Today everyone will be spread out on different activities. Do you know what Belle wants to do?” Boone asked.

“I'll keep you posted.”

Some of the events included a bonfire, a trail camp setup on the mountain and sledding. If Belle didn't want to do any of those things, she could hang out in the barn around the fireplace and sip apple cider.

Or his activity of choice—keeping her in bed all day, tucked safely beneath him.

He and Boone exchanged a nod before Declan set off for the bunkhouse. Reporting to one of his bosses about his

concerns took a small burden from his shoulders, but he still felt his knuckles aching from clamping his hands into fists.

It was still early enough that the sun hadn't totally cleared the ridge of the mountain. He had barely slept the previous night after dropping Belle at the bunkhouse door. At one point in the wee hours of the morning, he got up and dressed, thinking to check on her.

In the end, he refrained, leaving her protection in the hands of the guards posted around the property. But it had taken a hell of a lot of control to keep himself from going to her.

If he were honest, this need to keep her safe, and happy too, went beyond anything he'd felt for a client or ward. In a short time—just days—she had shown him so much of herself. When she revealed that edge of panic that first night, his urge to jump in and save her from whatever placed that horrified look on her face had been too strong to back away from.

Loving her out in the open of the garden was a memory he'd carry with him for the rest of his days. He knew she harbored a fear of riding horses from a past trauma but she was sweet enough to treat them with apples stashed in her pocket like a true country girl.

He was pretty damn sure that most of the women here would never deign to carry a piece of sliced fruit around in their pockets to give to an animal they didn't enjoy riding.

He knew she preferred whiskey to champagne, that her last name was Robb and her family knew the Wyntons.

And to think that he hadn't shared even a small amount of his own life with her.

He didn't have much choice in the matter, being under contract to keep the guests safe. After his talk with Boone, Declan was a little freer and intended to spend more time at Belle's side. Maybe he'd get the opportunity to share something personal with her.

After he drove the short distance to the main ranch and parked at the corner of a long line of vehicles in front of the

garage, he jumped out of his truck. With his hands deep in his coat pockets, he strolled toward the bunkhouse.

An older gentleman dressed in riding clothes emerged from the front door and shut it behind him. He caught sight of Declan and gave him a nod of greeting.

“Are you looking for that brunette you’ve been with?” he asked.

Declan nodded. “I thought I might surprise her with an early walk.”

“Nice morning for it. I’m surprised you’re not staying in the bunkhouse with her.”

Declan dropped his stare to his snowy boots. “She’s a little old-fashioned. Wants to save living together for after the wedding.”

His face brightened. “So you’re engaged?”

“Well, not yet,” he hedged. “Soon.” He tipped his chin toward the bunkhouse that housed a woman he wasn’t close to popping the question to.

But just the thought of *someday* getting to that point with a woman like Belle? He could suddenly picture it.

Fucking hell.

He could picture *her*.

“Good for you two. It’s nice to see young people finding happiness.” He moved off toward the barn, probably to select a mount for a morning ride.

Declan hesitated only a heartbeat, mulling over the small talk that had morphed into a “someday” dream. A someday dream with possibilities.

He pushed out a breath, grabbed the door handle and twisted. The prospect of searching bunks for Belle didn’t worry him as much as how she’d react to him waking her. But it was a chance he was willing to take just to ensure she was actually sleeping, safe and sound.

The big room was set up with a small kitchen area, a long table with chairs scooted in around the perimeter and a couple sagging leather sofas that had seen better days. One wall revealed several doors that led to the bunks where the cowboys who worked on the ranch slept. For this event, they'd all been moved to other points on the ranch or around town.

His gut instinct told him to choose the door on the right. As soon as he stepped in, he saw her. Asleep on her side, facing him. Her beautiful face was relaxed in sleep and her long hair tumbled over her breast. One arm hung out of the covers.

God help him, she was wearing red buffalo plaid PJs. His heart melted a little bit more. Watching her sleep seemed like the most intimate of gifts. One he would treasure as much as their first night together in the garden.

She shared the quarters with five other bunks. Somebody snored on the bunk above her, and the other guests seemed equally unconscious. Slowly, he approached the bed, careful to remain quiet.

When he reached her side, he stood staring down at her lovely features. Goddamn, she tugged at his heartstrings. Something he never thought would happen. He sure as hell didn't expect to find a woman like her on the ranch during the Christmas charity weekend. Nor did he think he'd be protecting a woman that he was developing feelings for.

As he reached out to touch the back of her hand, he breathed shallowly. Stroking a fingertip across her silky skin made his heart flex. And the feel of her cool skin made him want to crawl into that bunk with her and warm her with his own body.

She issued a low sigh in her sleep. Her full upper lip resting on the plump bottom one was damn near too much to resist, but Declan held himself in check. Kissing his sleeping Christmas princess dressed in buffalo plaid PJs might seem like a good idea, but he wouldn't put it past her to take a swing at him right before screaming bloody murder.

Dipping to one knee beside the bed, he closed his fingers around hers. “Belle. Wake up, honey.”

Her eyes flew open. She sat up fast — good thing she was on the shorter side because her head cleared the bunk on top of hers. The heavy quilt fell off her chest to reveal more of that plaid sleep shirt.

She peered at him, hair straggling into the other eye. “Declan...” She closed her eyes and flopped back down on the mattress. “You scared me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What do you want?”

He opened his mouth and then closed it again. Now he couldn’t recall why he walked into the bunkhouse looking for her. Seeing her in such a vulnerable state had punched a hole in his chest.

He took her fingers again and brushed his thumb over her knuckles. “I just wanted to ask what your plans are for today.”

She blinked at him as if trying to keep them from slamming shut again. “My plans?”

“Yes—”

“Oh! My plans!” She sat up and stared at the window on the far wall. The blinds were drawn, but the gray light of a winter morning shone through.

He watched her come more fully awake. After scrubbing both hands over her face, she dropped them and looked to him. “What are you doing today?”

“Whatever you are. That is, if you want my company.” He pitched his voice low.

“Uh. It’s too early. I’m not sure what I want to do yet. What are our options again?”

Seeing the struggle to shake the sleep fog from her brain, he pushed to his feet. “Just a minute.”

He walked into the kitchen and checked the coffeemaker. Some smart person had loaded it with water and coffee the

previous night. All he had to do was press the start button. When the dark brew the cowboys preferred trickled out, Declan caught the first cup in a waiting pottery mug.

Minutes later, he carried it back to the room. Belle was lying down once more, this time facing the doorway. When their gazes met, his cock stretched longer behind his fly. What he wanted more than anything was to climb under those covers with her.

Kiss her and touch her. Cuddle her and stroke her bare skin until she quaked with need. Then he'd dip his fingers between her thighs and find her soaking-wet heat. The idea of drawing her to an orgasm she couldn't vocalize—one he'd have to stifle with his kisses—turned him on even more.

“Here you go.” He held out the coffee, and she sat up to take it. When she brought it to her lips, he waved at the foot of the bunk. “Mind if I sit?”

“Of course not. You *are* my boyfriend.” Her lips twisted, and she brushed them over the rim of the mug to hide her smile.

His was unstoppable though. He might be hiding his reason for sticking close to her, but the only thing that mattered was that he *was* close to her.

After taking a sip, she lowered the mug. Above the rim, her striking eyes landed on his.

“What do you think about sledding today?”



Oh god. She hated being cold. Trudging to the top of a hill sounded like the most unpleasant idea ever when she could spend her time sitting around a roaring fire, sipping hot cocoa with itty-bitty marshmallows floating on top.

But she said sledding because of all the choices that her ex was presented with, he would definitely pick sledding. Though the biggest risk it provided was pink cheeks and cold toes, she just knew that her ex would be flying down that mountain slope on a sled with his awful fiancée.

She cradled the warm mug of coffee that Declan had so thoughtfully brought her. Waking to his ruggedly handsome face had confused the hell out of her because he'd been the star of her very...um, *graphic*...dream.

Bringing the mug to her lips, she darted a look at him from under her lashes. She was all too aware that he sat so close on the bed, yet they were not alone in the bunkhouse. Was it too early for a romp in the barn?

“Why don’t you drink your coffee and wake up? Get dressed for breakfast and then we’ll come back here for some warm layers to spend the day outside in.” He pitched his voice low to keep from waking the others in the room, but the guy in the bunk above her stirred.

She rolled her eyes upward at her strange companion, and a grin brightened Declan’s face.

Yes, brightened. Until that moment, she didn’t realize how solemn and serious he’d been. She didn’t know him well at all, but she had to question the change in him overnight. She hadn’t thought to ask about his reason for attending the weekend alone. She’d been so selfish not to ask. What if he’d suffered from a bad breakup and this was his escape too?

He made a move toward the open doorway to leave. Then he suddenly changed directions, walked to the bunk and leaned down. His piney scent warmed over her senses, bringing her dream about him to the front of her mind again. It woke her entire body with a crackle of electricity.

Unlike her dream, he didn’t press her down on the bed and sink between her thighs. He simply dropped a tender kiss between her brows.

The action had her breath hitching for a reason that had nothing to do with desire. He straightened and turned for the door again.

She watched his tight ass before he vanished from the room. What was that all about?

They might share a *whole* lot of chemistry, but that kiss hadn’t left her panting with need the way his other ones did. It

felt...

Sweet.

After a few sips of coffee, she set it aside on a small shelf next to the bed. That drew her gaze to her weekender bag sitting on the floor below it—and her computer tablet sitting right on top.

What she'd done last night would get her kicked off the ranch and ruin her parents' long-time friendship with the Wynton family.

They would *not* look kindly on her hacking into their mainframe. She could only guess how much they prided themselves on how secure their cyber division was, and they wouldn't want to hear how breaking passwords and cracking codes to unlock their system had been the hardest thing she'd ever done in her life.

They'd frown on her actions, and they might actually want to press charges against her too.

From what she'd seen while in the system, no security breaches had taken place yet. But there was a small gap that people could enter through. She didn't think Ethan possessed that kind of ability. On the other hand, Haileigh might.

Hopefully, with luck and a little skill she'd learned from her nerdy friends, Belle had created a patch to keep Ethan out, if that was his intention. And she'd dated him long enough to know how shady his morals were and how addicted he was to the adrenaline highs.

If the patch wasn't necessary... Well, the system was strengthened against the next criminal.

She shoved the tablet deeper into her bag and grabbed her belongings to take to the bathroom. The shower had amazing pressure and tons of hot water. She guessed the ranch hands needed those things to scour the dirt off them and work their sore muscles after a long day, and she was very appreciative right now.

The water pressure in an RV was never very good. She hoped that Ethan and his twit fiancée were standing under a

trickle of lukewarm water.

When she walked outside to find Declan, that thought kept the smile on her face. He was talking to another guy in front of the garage door a short walk away, dressed in canvas bib overalls and a thick coat that he wore unzipped at the moment.

His rugged good looks had several heads whipping around as people roamed over the ranch, on the move to their own activities day. One woman was dressed in the equivalent of what she saw ski bunnies wear—tight pants and a fitted top that left nothing to the imagination. She slowed her stroll as she walked past Declan.

“Hi there,” she said in a smoky voice that Belle made out despite the distance separating them.

He glanced up at her. Belle paused to see what he'd do. Most normal guys would throw out a line or flirt, but he did neither. He just gave her a small chin lift of acknowledgement before returning to his conversation with the equally rugged, bearded man.

Seeing she wasn't getting any traction with Declan, the ski bunny walked on toward the main barn. Belle unstuck her warm snow boots from the icy ground and set off toward her fake boyfriend.

He looked up at her. The corners of his lips twisted upward when he spotted her.

Feeling a little full of herself from the attention he showered over her, she tossed a glance at the ski bunny's retreating back. Declan didn't have eyes for that woman—but when he saw Belle, he looked like someone had lit a fire and it flickered and glowed from inside him.

He said something to his companion in a low voice that she couldn't make out and started toward her. Long strides made those canvas coveralls pull against his thick thigh muscles. Her belly tingled with awareness of what she knew to be a very impressive physique under those layers.

Quickly, she hurried across the snowy ground to meet him. They stopped in front of each other, and he gave her a slow perusal.

“Stop looking at me that way.”

“What way?” His dark brow hiked under the knit brim of his ski hat.

She took a step closer, drawn to put herself as close as possible to the man. “Like you want to strip me down and find a hay bale.”

His lips quirked. “I’m looking at you that way because I do.”

A laugh bubbled from her, carrying a note of tension that couldn’t be stifled when she was suffering with a high level of want—a product of the look in his eyes and the remnants of her dream.

“You can’t possibly think I look hot in these thick pants and a parka.”

Despite his lack of a smile, his eyes gleamed. “You’re wrong. I’m into mountain women.”

She smacked him playfully in the arm. “You sweet talker!”

He chuckled. “Ready to grab a bite to eat?”

“Yes, but I’ll be far too hot to sit indoors and eat.”

Something flickered in his eyes. “I’ve got the perfect spot.”

He turned and waved for her to head to the barn for a continental breakfast. After only a few steps, he reached her side. Simultaneously, she reached out too. They clasped hands, meshing their bare fingers neither of them had yet blocked from the cold.

Twisting her head, she shot him a look. He returned it with a smile and continued to walk her to the building. When they entered, the low sound of conversation reached her. So did the scent of fresh-cut fruit. A glance at the buffet showed

tall Christmas tree topiaries studded with melon balls and berries.

Declan issued a grunt. Following his stare, she saw why. Her ex stood in the middle of the room with an arm wrapped around Haileigh's waist. They were both sipping mimosas and talking up an older man who looked to be dressed in a smoking jacket straight out of the pages of an expensive men's catalogue.

Tilting his head, Declan brought his lips to her ear. "What activity do you suppose that guy's doing today?"

She picked up on his game. "He's going to sit by the fire all day, sipping brandy and pretending that he isn't a day drinker."

Declan nodded. "Definitely. And the woman standing right behind him? The one wearing turquoise Spandex?"

"Oh, she's definitely doing the authentic camp setup in the wilderness. She chose that color to keep from being mistaken for food by hungry wolves."

His warm laugh washed across her temple. "And the lady in the minidress?"

She looked around the room to locate the person he referred to, like they were playing some twisted game of Where's Waldo. When she spotted the woman in a short dress that was also low-cut, she whispered, "Definitely sledding."

His deep baritone laugh vibrated so close to her ear that it sent ripples up and down her body. Neither of them mentioned Ethan or Haileigh—or the fact that they were both dressed for fun in the snow the way she and Declan were.

"These pants are starting to make me sweat in places I don't want to mention in polite company."

His statement caught her completely off guard, and she threw her head back with a laugh. Several people turned to look at her. Her view of her ex was abruptly cut off when Declan cupped her cheek and kissed her open mouth.

The intense flavor of mint, coffee and man sizzled through her and sent fresh tingles between her thighs. A soft moan escaped her, and he deepened the kiss, swirling his tongue across hers for a moment so dizzying that she forgot where they were for a minute.

When they broke apart, her fist was balled in the sleeve of his heavy coat and she stood on tiptoe to get even closer to him.

Their gazes locked. “Is my ex still staring at us?”

“Uh-huh. He knows that I’m with the most amazing woman in the west.”

Melting at his words, she darted a look over his shoulder. “His woman is staring too. But she’s trying to appear like she isn’t jealous that I’m with a strong, sexy hunk of a man who is obviously much better in bed than hers is.”

His grin cut upward through his stubbled cheek. “Just much?”

“Much, *much*,” she corrected herself.

“That’s better, baby.” He stamped a kiss to her lips once more. “Let’s grab some food and I’ll show you that spot I mentioned.”

Chapter Nine

Light snow had dusted the entire garden in a layer of sparkling white glitter, but the bench that Declan led Belle to was cleaned off.

Their bench.

Though no fire had been lit, and the propane heaters weren't running either, Belle seemed warm enough cuddled up to him, shoulder to shoulder and thigh to thigh, munching on bacon and egg sandwiches.

She swiped a fingertip across her lips, brushing away a stray crumb. "Do you often go sledding in winter?"

He studied her. He thought they'd agreed not to give any history about themselves. But he also wanted to share some part of himself with her, something she could take away with her when she left.

"No. I'm a Southerner."

Her lips spread into an angelic smile. Today, Belle's eyes were clear of the fear he'd seen in them the night before. He had to question the change in her and if he'd imagined that her asking about security on the ranch had only been for informative purposes and not because she *needed* it.

"I knew you were from the South. Your accent..."

"I suppose it gives me away."

She crumpled the paper wrapper of the sandwich in her fist and stuffed it in her coat pocket. "Did you travel here for this weekend?"

“Yep.” He could honestly say he had come for this weekend. Technically, he had more reasons for being in Stone Pass than that, but he didn’t want to alert her to what he did for a living—especially now he’d gone from being her fake date to her bodyguard.

“You know, Declan...I thought I’d have a terrible time. When I saw Ethan here, my gut instinct was to run like hell. Now I’m glad I stayed.”

He slid an arm around her and tugged her an inch closer. She tipped her face up to his, eyes burning with that same expression she wore when he slid inside her tight pussy.

Then she made that sweet, sweet sound.

“Fuck it!” He yanked her right into his lap.

Her backside in those thick snow pants hit his groin. She wound her arms around his neck, bringing their lips close. Before he could lean forward and capture the plump mouth he’d been aching for, *she* took control by kissing him.

Crushing her lips to his, she let out another soft sound of encouragement, and he answered with a low growl.

Slipping his tongue over the seam of her lips made her open to him, and he thrust inside. Dark need jerked at a cord inside him. His balls throbbed, and the pressure building in his groin made his fingers curl, one hand into her hair, one around the curve of her ass.

Long heartbeats swelled on and on as he plundered her, drinking deep, unable to stop.

Blinded by need, he tore from the kiss. Her dazed expression matched the pink in her cheeks put there by the scrape of his beard. Goddamn, seeing his marks on her ripped another primitive growl from his throat.

“I can’t feel a thing in these thick pants I’m wearing, but damn if I’m not rock hard for you.”

She giggled and rocked her hips against him. “You can’t feel that?”

He locked his hands on her hips, holding her immobile. “Hardly anything.”

“Me neither.” She laughed.

“Knowing that my cock is nestled up against your sweet ass is driving me crazy.”

She rolled her hips again. “No man’s ever turned me on with words before.”

“I can be a lot of firsts for you. If you’ll let me.”

Belle stilled. Realizing what he’d said, he opened his mouth to explain better, to tell her that he didn’t mean it how it sounded. But just then a horn honked from somewhere out front.

The conversation would have to wait.

“That’ll be our ride to the sledding hill. If we’re leaving with the group, we need to go.” He tipped her off his lap. Straightening with an erection took a moment, but Belle’s knowing grin was totally worth the struggle.

As quickly as he could walk with a baseball bat snaking down his thigh, they made it to the big tractor. The green John Deere was decked out with red ribbons tied to the steering wheel, and the driver wore Santa’s hat. Hitched to the back of the tractor was a wooden trailer already filled with people to be hauled up the lower slope of the mountain.

Declan gave Belle a hand up into the back, and she took a seat on one of the wooden benches that lined both sides.

“I bet this is the truck they use for hayrides in the fall,” a woman said from a few feet away.

Declan launched into the truck behind Belle. As he settled beside her, he noticed Ethan and Haileigh near the front. He ducked his head to hide a grin, but Belle spotted it.

“What’s funny?”

He leaned close to whisper in her ear. “The people in the front get to suck in all the tractor exhaust.”

She glanced from the corner of her eye to see who was seated up there and issued a laugh. The carefree sound would wipe out all of Declan's speculations about what frightened her the previous night. But as the tractor trundled slowly up the hill, he noticed the covert looks she kept tossing at the couple.

He placed his hand over her fingers where they were twisting in her lap and felt her relax the slightest bit.

The ride up the hill was slow as the tires broke through thick snow that drifted down from the mountain. It gave him ample time to glare at the back of Ethan's head, wishing he could pull information out of it.

One thing he was sure of—the guy disliked him just because Belle was “with him.” Declan knew the type. He'd lay down his extensive financial portfolio on the fact that Ethan saw women as possessions. Even long after they weren't together, he believed no other man should ever touch what belonged to him.

From the very beginning, he'd gotten a bad vibe from Ethan. Declan's instincts were rarely wrong. Second guessing himself wasn't a thing, especially when the entire last op had been successful because he had gone with his gut.

Haileigh glanced over her shoulder. She stared directly at Belle before twisting to whisper in Ethan's ear. Whatever was between the bitch of a woman and Belle wasn't normal rivalry. It was a vendetta.

Declan slipped his arm behind Belle's back and tucked her against him.

She gave him a questioning look but didn't comment.

Once they reached the top of the incline, he jumped out first to assist people to the ground. When he planted his hands on Belle's waist, he let her slide down his front...nice and slow.

The rosy blush in her high cheekbones and the lights in her eyes were full of promises.

Promises that once he got her alone, she'd make it *well* worth his time.

Next a bunch of guys assisted in unloading the sleds. Belle grabbed one, and he carried his under his arm a short distance away from the rest of the pack.

“We want to spread out a little from the others. We don't want to get into any accidents.”

Nodding, Belle set hers down and climbed aboard. Her knit hat hung lower over her brows, and she nudged it up, angling her head to look at him.

He dropped his own sled and straddled it, boots planted to keep him from sliding before he was ready.

She flashed a smile. “Wanna race?”

He arched a brow. “What's at stake?”

“Oh, you're turning this into a bet! Winner gets to choose the next *spot*.”

The spot where he'd plunge his cock inside her. Need hummed through his veins.

“I'm not so sure you aren't suggesting such a thing to throw me off my game so you can beat me down the mountain.” If he got hard again, he'd have a problem staying seated on his sled.

A peal of laughter followed by a cry tore through the air, and they both swiveled to see the guests taking off like odd little lifeboats crossing a vast sea of white snow rather than ocean waves.

He locked gazes with Belle. “You're on.”

She lined up beside him.

“Hey, you're inching forward. No cheating!”

She laughed. “On three. One...two...” She pushed off and launched down the hill before him.

“Cheaterrrr!” he yelled at her back as she whizzed ahead of him.

Her laughter floated back on the wind to him. Digging his feet in, he used his thigh muscles to push off in an attempt to close that gap fast. Mostly because his natural competitiveness wouldn't allow him to lose this race.

Secondly because he had the *perfect* spot to take her when he won. The cabin where he stayed was warm and private, a place to lock her away and not worry about who would overhear her screams of bliss.

Cold air blasted him in the face. So did the snow powder flying off Belle's sled. He lay back to make himself more aerodynamic and hit a faster speed.

When he drew up behind her, she threw a look over her shoulder.

"You are *not* winning!" She lay back as well, and since she was lighter, shot forward in a burst of speed.

He picked up more speed, but the lay of the land sent his sled veering to the side. He tried to right it and the corner of his clipped Belle's.

He wasn't braced for impact. The plastic flew out from beneath him, and he hit the snow face-first. A sharp, throaty cry made him jerk his head up in time to see Belle tumbling over and over again.

His heart lurched.

She slid a few feet farther and lay there on her back.

"Oh god! Belle, are you okay?" He scrambled to his feet and launched toward her.

If she was hurt...if he'd thrown out that stupid bet to get laid and caused her harm, he couldn't forgive himself.

His heart rocketed into his throat when she rolled onto her hands and knees and started crawling toward him. He landed on his knees next to her. The ripple of laughter bubbling past her sweet lips made him want to yank her down and make her scream for a totally different reason.

"I won!" Her smug expression etched into his mind.

“You’re cute. You didn’t win. You fell off your sled.” He reached for her.

She threw herself into his arms, toppling him onto his back, sprawled out on top of him.

She searched his eyes. “I did win. I made it down the hill farther than you.”

“You’re just asking for a spanking, baby girl.”

Her lips formed a perfect *O*.

There went his erection again.

She wiggled against him. “Is that what I think it is?”

“What do you think? Now we can’t leave this mountain.”

“If we don’t leave, you’ll never get to see the spot I have in mind.”

He curled his fingers around her nape, drawing her mouth to his. “I can’t wait to see it.”



Belle changed out of her damp snow clothes and draped them over the end of her bunk. Then she settled on the mattress and reached for her computer tablet.

Checking on her patch to the security system was a little crazy. Especially when people were possibly monitoring it right now. But she *needed* to know if it held.

Heart throbbing, she listened hard for footsteps, but she was all alone in the bunkhouse for the time being. She didn’t have much time before Declan came for her either.

Dragging in a deep breath, she typed the passcode she’d hacked the previous night. When the screen unlocked for her, she immediately set to work. First, she entered through a back door. Of course the system was elite. One of the best she’d ever seen. Layers and layers of encrypted codes crisscrossed the system, protecting valuable information from people who would steal it and use it to harm.

And amateurs like her too, but her motives were different.

She unlocked a few sections of the program and dived into the code. Staring at the numbers, letters and symbols for long minutes, she determined where her entry was inside the strand.

Thank god. No one seemed to have detected it was even there. It didn't look as though anybody had entered the system without permission either.

Relief tingling through her fingertips, she swiftly retraced her steps to back out of the program. Leaving too abruptly or without following the order would raise alarms.

When she finally closed the program, she wiped the history on her tablet and stowed it in the bottom of her bag again.

She let a sigh trickle out. She might be crazy. It was possible that Ethan and his fiancée really were only here for a weekend away.

Belle didn't think so, though. She could throw one of the Wyntons' beef cows farther than she trusted her ex. Going on the sledding outing with the couple hadn't given her any more information, but she did note how nervous they acted. She didn't think it was nerves over getting on sleds, either.

She'd done what she could to ensure they didn't commit some crime against the protection agency.

Or *was* there more she could do?

If only she could get into their RV and search for computer equipment. She was versed enough in the subject to know what she was looking for.

She mentally shook her head. No. She couldn't be thinking about doing *that*.

That would be *insane*.

She could not be considering actually breaking into Ethan's RV and searching it.

How would she do it? She couldn't pick locks and wouldn't have the time to disarm security cameras, if there

were any, and she wouldn't put it past her ex to have that and more.

When the tractor dropped them all off below the field where the RVs were parked, she'd watched Ethan closely. He might fancy himself a savvy white-collar criminal, but he had obvious tells.

In minutes, she knew which RV was his. She also saw him and Haileigh deep in a private conversation as they walked up the hill to the ranch for drinks served in the barn. The biggest giveaway, though, was when Ethan turned his head and looked back at the white building nestled near the ranch gates.

What she could only guess was the security office.

She tapped a fingertip to her lips. How to get into that RV?

A thought struck, but she instantly rejected it.

No way.

But what choice did she have?

She might have been too late creating that patch to the system. If Ethan had already tapped the mainframe and stolen information, he'd have it stored in his hard drive.

Her mind whirled with possibilities. When she took that bet that Declan threw down, she really did have a spot in mind for a secret rendezvous. The hayloft of the barn had been calling to her fantasies since the minute she stepped foot in there. It would be so easy to climb that ladder and stow away for a very memorable romp among the bales.

Now she was rethinking her choice.

But breaking into Ethan's RV and stealing that hard drive under the cover of having a secret tryst in the RV with her fake Christmas date was sheer *madness*.

She just had to trust that if her patch didn't keep her ex locked out, that the security team was smart enough to save themselves.

In the meantime, she had a date with a cowboy.

Excitement kindled in the pit of her stomach. Her bestie was right about this weekend being good for Belle. It was all because Declan had turned the weekend from meh to memorable.

Her heart fluttered when she thought of the way he looked at her. The way he kissed her so tenderly outside the door of the bunkhouse.

She could use a man like Declan in her life.

When this was all over, they could keep in touch. Meet up someplace else. Weekend getaways could become their thing.

Belle hopped off the bed and went for her bag. The Christmas pajama party wasn't really her thing at all. Watching *It's a Wonderful Life* on a big screen and sipping hot cocoa with a crowd of strangers was far from her idea of fun. But her cowboy could make anything fun.

Chapter Ten

When Belle spotted Declan, she raked her gaze over him... and her face fell.

He slowed his pace, sauntering between the clusters of people decked out in Christmas pajamas for the event and tried to figure out a way to explain why he was dressed in jeans, a black thermal shirt and his old hat and boots instead of flannel PJs spangled with Christmas trees.

As he stepped up to the beautiful woman, his heart shouldn't be stirring with so much emotion. And he definitely shouldn't be thinking of ten ways to strip those holiday character pants off her and coat his tongue in her pussy juices.

She waved a hand at him. "You're not in PJs."

He shook his head. "Sorry. I don't have any."

"Oh." She fiddled with the hem of her matching top.

"I sleep nude, Belle."

Her eyes flashed up to his. When her chest inflated, her breasts stretched the button tight and pulled the cloth.

He hooked his arm around her waist and yanked her against him, bowing her over his arm. "God, the things I want to do to you in and out of these pajamas would slap my name on the naughty list for a decade."

She giggled and latched on to his shoulders. "And get you coal in your stocking for two decades."

He gazed deep into her eyes. "It would be well worth it." He leaned closer, teasing her lips with a brush of his own.

She shivered in his hold. Damn if his cock got the memo that he wouldn't be with her. Damn if he wanted to tell her that he'd have to take a raincheck on tonight too, because rather than setting out milk and cookies for Santa, Casey's wife decided to pop out their baby on Christmas Eve.

Declan trailed his fingers over Belle's lower back. The flannel of her PJs slipped against the silky skin it hid. His cock surged against his fly.

He rumbled against her lips, "I want you like nothing else. But something came up. I need to skip the movie night."

Her full lips pouted, but she quickly covered her reaction with a smile that was too bright and brittle not to be fake.

Knowing that she was disappointed not to spend time with him was probably the best gift he'd receive this holiday. Hell, all year.

The care of a good woman would be amazing. The love of one seemed so far from his reach that he didn't dare to dream of it.

"I'm sorry, Belle."

She pulled free of his arms. Then she shrugged and bent to pick up her pillow and blanket she'd spread on the floor for them to sprawl on while they watched the movie.

Fuck. He hated that he'd miss it. Hated that he wouldn't get those precious moments with her.

Goddamn... I'm falling for her.

The realization made his chest swell. He sucked in a deep breath that was scented with pine and cinnamon and the woman who'd just been in his arms.

He took a step closer to her and cradled her cheek in his hand. "I'll come to you tonight."

Her eyes sparked. "We can meet in my special spot."

"Yes. Where?"

"At the barn. In the hayloft." Her teeth closed on her lower lip. Need spiked in his core.

“I’ll be there, baby.” He stamped his mouth against hers in a kiss to seal his promise.

She made a sweet hum of surrender. Then he had to tear himself away from her and leave her in the protection of the two other guards here tonight while he took Casey’s watch on the ranch’s perimeter.



Belle’s body pulsed. Her pussy throbbed. And she came apart on Declan’s tongue in strong waves that went on and on and on.

Stifling her noises of ecstasy, she arched her back off the bed of hay that she’d tossed her blanket over. His lips wrapped around her clit and he gently sucked until her hips lifted off the blanket too.

Dizzying seconds later, she heaved a final gasp and collapsed to the floor of the hayloft.

He lifted his head. Darkness kept her from making out his expression or much more than his manly shape. But she didn’t need him to see the desire in her eyes or that little thing that had been torturing her all during that movie she sat through alone.

Or the not-so-little thing.

She still wasn’t willing to touch on the realization for too long, but how could she not? When his tongue swirled around her clit with lazy flicks, how could she not think about how easy it would be to fall in love with this man?

Surrounded by couples snuggling on blankets watching that movie made her see what her life was missing—a man to share it with.

Not just any man.

This one.

Pulling his tongue free of her clit, he let out a rough groan. “I could stay right there between your legs until New Year’s Eve.”

“I’m sure someone would find us by then.”

His low chuckle came in soft breaths over her belly, up her ribs and brushed over her nipple right before he sucked it into his mouth.

Clasping his head to her, she exclaimed at the extreme heat of his tongue. She wasn’t letting him leave this hayloft until they’d touched, bitten, licked and explored every inch of each other.

The soft pulls of his mouth on her nipple had her pussy flooding and a tight string tugging in her core.

“I need you!” Her rasp ended on what was almost a cry.

He circled her nipple once more before moving to her lips. Their kiss spiraled on and on. If she ever allowed herself to imagine such a thing, she’d call this making love.

She stared up at him, knowing that the darkness kept him from seeing her face as well. Made it easier to say things.

“No,” she breathed out on a tremor. “I mean...I need you. With me. Every Christmas Eve.”

He stilled. The muscles riding under the velvet skin of his bare shoulders tensed and then vibrated as though he shivered from cold.

Or from her words?

“Christ, Belle. I—” He cut off, tilting his head. “Do you hear that?”

She stared at his dark silhouette, straining to hear what he did.

Then she caught it. Voices.

“They’re caroling,” he said.

“Yes.” Her stomach dipped with want that no renditions of “Silent Night” could blast away.

He moved. Next thing she knew, he was completely naked and his condom-covered cock settled at her folds.

“Hold on to me, Belle. Grip me while I enter you!”

Her head swirled with his command. Passion and need tore away her last thought as he thrust his cock deep, burying himself to the hilt. The carolers' tune grew louder as they moved past the barn.

Declan's moan mingled with hers, low and urgent. He swung his hips back, drawing his length through her clenching walls. Her nerves were on fire. Her heart thundering in her ears.

His mouth claimed hers in a kiss that threatened to throw her off the edge. She clung tight to him, tongue working over his, her walls clamping around his cock on every single thrust and withdrawal.

"Belle. Oh fuck, baby. Fuck, I'm gonna come!"

She dug her fingers into his ass harder, urging him to surrender to her so she could lock this moment in her mind and revisit it whenever she felt lonely.

"Baby...I'm..." He never got the words out. As the song came to a crescendo, he came. The hard pulse of his hips sank his cock even deeper inside her, shoving her overboard too.

Their mouths fused. Liquid warmth filled her pussy as he came apart. For her. In her arms.

What was the matter with her? She couldn't keep this man. They weren't a couple. They were pretending.

This moment felt far from pretend, though.

He buried his lips in her hair, his breaths coming fast. "Amazing. Beautiful. So special. Do you even know your worth?"

Her heart hitched. She searched his shadowed face. Suddenly, she understood the toll that being with a man like Ethan had taken on her.

And what Declan was showing her.

"I do," she whispered. "Now I do." With her arms around him and her legs around his hips, she dragged him on top of her.

He spattered soft kisses over her shoulder and down to the tops of her breasts as they caught their breath. “When this is all over—”

An explosion ripped through the air.

“Fuck!” He bolted off her. She jerked into a sitting position just in time to see the moonlight outlining the cold blue steel in his hand.

Her heart skipped a beat. Then two.

Another explosion hit.

“Shit. It’s fireworks.” He let his arm ease down to his side.

Shudders tore through her. “Declan?”

A long moment of silence vibrated between them.

“Why do you have a gun?”

He huffed out a sigh. “For protection, baby. That’s all. Just protection.”

Relief made her muscles sag. She collapsed back on the blanket and slung an arm across her eyes.

“Belle? I’m sorry. I should have told you I was carrying a weapon.”

“I know plenty of people do. Only...I thought they made people check any weapons for the weekend?”

His silence dragged on for ten seconds too long.

She scrambled off the blanket and started feeling around for her discarded PJs.

“Belle, stop. Calm down.”

“I was dumb. Not just dumb—*stupid*. We’re strangers. I don’t know anything about you and I’m alone in a hayloft with you having sex?” She shoved her fingers through her hair.

His body heat washed over her naked skin as he stepped close again. “I promise I’m not up to no good. I realize that having a weapon concealed from you and all the other guests seems weird, but I have good reason for carrying it.”

Fireworks continued to explode outside, making it difficult to hear his quiet but urgent words.

She had to get out of here. She'd fallen into a terrible mess once already with Ethan. Had she been naïve enough to do it a second time? Who was Declan, anyway? She didn't know anything about him.

Well, she was *not* falling into another guy's trap.

She found her garments and threw them on. The only thought in her head was to get away.

Chapter Eleven

Declan stared at the computer screen, eyes burning with strain. After three solid hours of checking security footage from the Christmas weekend, he hadn't spotted a single thing to raise alarm.

He scrubbed a knuckle over his brow where an ache had begun but even digging into the tense band pulled taut across his forehead didn't ease the pain.

"Declan?"

His eyes shifted from the group of guests he was staring at and landed on a lithe blonde in a sleek black suit standing beside the desk.

She had to be part of the WEST crew. Otherwise she wouldn't be in the office.

"Yes." The word came out with a note of caution because what he wanted to say was very different from how he should act. He wanted to be left alone, especially after how things ended with Belle in the hayloft.

Her eyes traveled over his stubbled, unshaven jaw to the crumpled shirt he hadn't bothered to change after scooping it up off the floor of the hayloft. He'd picked off a few bits of hay and come straight to the office to take Casey's place.

"You definitely look like a man who's seen battle."

He swung his chair to focus on her. "Excuse me, but who are you?"

"Madeline. You were supposed to train with me but you got called away on that op."

“Damn. Yeah. Sorry about that.”

Madeline and one of the founders of WEST, Mathias Trace, ran a security team training facility in Stone Pass. Not only did they provide cutting-edge training to the WEST Protection team, but other security agencies all over the country sent their people to them.

She breezed over to the desk beside his, pulled out the chair and turned it to face him. When she sat, she smoothed a hand over the thigh of her pants to remove any creases. Next to her perfect appearance, he felt like he’d just limped off that battlefield she mentioned.

He glanced at the screen again for the main reason why he felt so damn rough. But after hours and hours of watching for Belle to appear, she hadn’t.

He also knew she hadn’t left the ranch. Not yet anyway. That bunkhouse door was one camera view he had a hard time tearing his gaze away from.

Since Madeline was settling in for a talk, he resisted the urge to look at the screen again.

“I heard about that op.”

He didn’t bother stopping the gripe from rumbling out. “Everyone is making such a big deal about it. It was nothing. I was just doing my job.”

Appreciation gleamed in her eyes. “Most would be bragging. After saving—”

He cut her off. “Look, I know what happened. I don’t want to talk about it. Not even with teammates.”

“The guys said you’re humble.”

He gave her a flat look that made her snort.

“All right, I’ll stop harassing you about the op. You got Casey’s position tonight, I see. Anything happening among our guests?”

“Like watching goldfish in a bowl.”

This time she chuckled. “I already like you, Declan. When I actually like a person, I tend to jump right into being their friend. So why don’t you tell me why you look like you’ve been dragged through Stone Pass behind a snowplow?”

God, that pain in his head swelled to a stabbing crescendo. Where did he even start? How he’d sneaked off to the hayloft to have sex with the woman he was guarding and then outed himself to her by pulling his weapon?

“Just had a rough night is all.” His gaze shifted to the screens. He narrowed his eyes on the bunkhouse. If he’d glanced over even a second later, he would have missed Belle leaving.

The black-and-white footage didn’t do her much credit, but he could still tell how stunning she looked in a long gown and gloves that skimmed her elbows.

The breath stopped moving in and out of his lungs as he watched her turn toward the path leading to the barn where the gala was being held.

Christmas Day and he was stuck inside these four walls, watching people talk and drink champagne onscreen.

When he ripped his eyes away from the woman he couldn’t shake now that he’d had a taste—or ten—he locked gazes with Madeline.

She offered him a tight smile. “I can see what’s eating at you now.”

He huffed out a sigh. “Respectfully, of course, you don’t know shit about me.”

She rocked a little in her desk chair. “That’s true. But I saw your face just now when that woman walked out of the bunkhouse. Is she the one you’ve been guarding?”

He swallowed around the dry lump in his throat. “Yes.”

“And the one from the garden too?”

He gave her a sharp look. “What do you know about that?”

Her eyes creased at the corners with a smile she didn't let come to full realization. "You should get that freckle on your right butt cheek checked."

"Hell." Of course there were cameras in the garden. The entire team probably saw the footage of him and Belle on that bench in the falling snow. *And* they'd laughed at the freckle on his ass.

"It's not a freckle. It's a birthmark. And it's fine."

She smiled in response.

For all his experience and skill, he hated being seen as the rookie, yet he'd been acting like one. He deserved whatever names he was called.

Madeline suddenly stood. "Get out of that chair, Declan."

He cocked a brow. "Why?"

"Because I'm taking your shift so you can go to that party with your friend."

He gaped at her. "Why would you do that?"

"Don't you want to go?"

Goddamn right he did.

"For the record, I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it for the new father who's at the hospital sitting through his wife's childbirth so they can have a Christmas baby."

Declan hadn't felt much camaraderie yet on the WEST team. So far, he felt as if he gained unwanted attention or stood on the outer edge of a brotherhood he didn't belong in. Even not having a hat bugged the hell out of him.

In the span of a few short minutes, Madeline put him at ease and made him feel that warm friendship.

She jerked her thumb. "C'mon, Declan. Outta that chair before I miss some attack in the barn."

He rushed out of the seat and stepped aside to allow her to occupy it. Once she sat, he braced a hand and leaned over the desk to catch her gaze. "Thank you."

“Just make sure to bring your A game to my training. I won’t put up with lazy agents.”

“Not a chance of that.” He strode to the door and took off before Madeline could change her mind about sitting behind a dozen screens, getting a crick in her neck on Christmas Day.

The cold stung his nostrils as he rushed to his truck and leaped behind the wheel.

He had very few minutes before he’d enter that party and face his lover.

Belle.

What would he say to her? How would he explain that he was really undercover and protecting her from something she had never even voiced a fear of?

She fled that barn like a mouse chased by an owl.

How to make it up to her? He’d just have to tell her the truth, but doing so would break the rules. In turn, it would give him a less than favorable reputation.

Hell, the team had all seen his ass while he fucked Belle in the garden. Who gave a damn what they thought? She wasn’t under contract. He wasn’t her bodyguard. Besides, from what Boone said, most of the guys had hooked up in a forbidden manner so they had no room to throw stones.

When he slipped into the barn, he cast a look around the room. White twinkle lights crisscrossed the beams of the ceiling by the thousands, lighting up the space to a rich, warm yellow glow. The scent of cinnamon and pine filled his nostrils.

Since he stood at six feet two, he could easily scan the room. When he picked out Belle’s warm brown hair drawn off her neck in a sweep of curls, his heart clutched.

Would she speak to him? He had to find a way to make her listen.

Before he could take a step to cross the room to her, that asshole ex of hers got there first.

Her spine stiffened.

Ethan leaned in to say something to her.

Declan lengthened his strides, gaze dialed in on the couple rather than the people around him. His shoulder clipped a man's, and he didn't bother apologizing—he was locked on a goal.

Ethan's lips moved.

Then Belle raised her arm, and with lightning speed, slapped him across the face.

Declan closed the gap in two more strides. Planting a hand on her back, he gently guided her behind him and faced down her ex.

“You have something to say to Belle, you can say it to me instead.”

Belle's shocked gasp sounded behind him. From the corner of his eye, he saw one of the WEST team move in. Declan sliced a hand through the air to indicate he had it under control. His teammate stopped.

Declan took a menacing step toward Ethan. He held his ground.

He had to give the guy credit for being stupider than he imagined. Either that or he had a death wish.

Leveling him in a glare, he said, “Do we understand each other, *bud*?”

Ethan looked him in the eyes with far too much cocky boldness. “Don't call me bud.”

“Apologize to the lady.” He reached behind him and clasped Belle's arm.

She circled him with an indignant tilt of her jaw at Ethan. “Don't ever speak to me again. If you do, I'll slap a restraining order on you.”

Ethan released a chuckle that grew into what sounded like a snarl.

Declan pushed Belle behind him again and brought his chest up against the guy's. "Get the hell out of here. Now. Your festivities have come to an end."

The sharp pain of nails biting into his hand made Declan smile. His little kitten had her claws out. But he had no doubt that a few soft words would tame her.

Ethan leaned to the side in order to see her. "You're not even worth it."

She stepped around Declan again, but he anchored her to his side, his arm banded around her waist. Her body vibrated with anger. Every inch of her curvy body tensed.

Ethan turned and wandered away, as nonchalant as if they'd just discussed their golf handicaps. Declan gave his WEST Protection teammate a sideways look, and the man moved forward at a fast clip to escort Ethan out of the Christmas gala.

Declan watched him go for a moment to make sure he didn't require backup. Finally, he turned to Belle.

When he saw the fury sparking in her brown eyes, he paused. She was still angry with him. Deserved? Probably. Unfounded? Yes, it was, and she'd see it too once he explained things.

"You have something to say to Belle, you can say it to me instead?" she mocked him in a deeper voice than her own. "I can't believe you really said that, Declan. You don't own me. I don't need a man to stand up for me!"

Several heads turned at the sound of her raised voice. Just then, she started to spin on her heels to make a break for it. But he couldn't let her go.

He snagged her around the waist and brought her flush against his chest just as another tune started up.

Her grunt of protest didn't deter him one bit. He dragged her a few feet onto the dance floor and started to sway with her in his arms.

Her eyes shot bullets. "I don't want to dance with you!"

“Yes, you do.”

She gaped at him. “How did I not see this coming? I always pick the worst men. Here I thought you were sweet and fun and great in bed—”

“You can’t deny that I am great in bed, Belle.”

She opened her mouth to scream, and he cut her off by slamming his mouth over hers. The kiss was hard and hot and carnal. He might as well be fucking her on the dance floor for all the burning passion and desire blazing between them like two fireworks intersecting in the night sky to create one dazzling explosion.

His cock swelled behind his fly, and he tugged her against it.

For a heartbeat, she rocked her hips into him. Then just as quickly, she shoved her palms off his chest and tore away.

He caught up to her at the exit. The very one that they’d escaped from on that first night when he took her in the garden.

Cameras on his birthmark or not, he wanted to get her alone.

She launched through the door. Tonight the snow wasn’t coming down in small, puffy flakes that would catch on her lashes and lure him closer. It was icy sleet flying straight at their faces on a stiff mountain breeze.

She whipped around and almost lost her balance on her high heels.

He caught her. “Belle, stop. Let’s go back inside and talk.”

“So you can force me to dance with you?” she burst out.

“I didn’t even get to show you my moves.”

“The one where you ground your dick into me?”

“Okay, that was less than gentlemanly but goddammit, that ex of yours has me wanting to claim you.”

Her jaw dropped. “I am no prize to be claimed, Declan.”

“No, you’re not a prize. You’re a fucking treasure, Belle. Now please...” He sliced his hand through his hair. “Will you just come back inside with me and give me one dance?”

Chest heaving, she stared at him for interminable heartbeats. “Fine! But only because it’s freezing!”

Gently, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and led her back inside. “Watch your step on this hardwood. Your shoes will be slippery.”

Without protest, she allowed him to lead her to the dance area again. This time when he took her in his arms, she wasn’t nearly as stiff and robotic.

He stared at her mouth, plump and swollen from being plundered. What the hell had come over him to capture her mouth like he fucking owned it?

Maybe it’s because I would kill for this woman.

The thought hit out of nowhere. It punched the air from his lungs so he had to struggle to fill them again.

Meanwhile, they swirled around the floor. Once he got his breath back, he pressed his palm into her lower back and drew her a step closer. When he took the lead and began revolving around the space like it was a ballroom, she stole a peek at his face.

“I’m going to fall on my face.”

“I won’t let you fall.”

“You won’t have any choice, Declan. Anything that could go wrong with me does. I’ll probably trip and fall on my face and break my nose. Or my orbital bone. I heard that hurts so much worse...”

He pitched his voice low. “I promise I won’t let that happen.”

He trapped her gaze in his—and tumbled even deeper. This woman...Christ, was it just the magic of Christmas making it hard for him to breathe or do anything but think about her?

No. It fucking wasn't.

He took her by the hand and spun her in a circle before tugging her against his chest again.

“Why do I get the feeling you're someone important?” she asked.

“Why do you say that?” Now she was onto something. If she could only guess at his role here on the Wynton Ranch, it would make things so much easier.

“Most guys can't dance like you.”

He cocked a brow. “Most women can't follow like you do. But you're not even following. You already know what to do. Why do I get the feeling that *you're* someone important?”

She arched a perfect brow in response. “Nope...I'm just Belle.”

They twirled through a bunch of couples who stepped back and applauded them.

“Where did you learn how to dance?” she asked.

“My father was in the military. My mom and I were home alone a lot. So she taught me to dance.”

Her lashes dipped over her blazing eyes. “You're close to your mother?”

His lips quirked. “I'm a self-proclaimed momma's boy and proud of it.”

Chapter Twelve

Belle was melting under Declan's dark gaze that promised endless nights of pleasure—with or without the hay.

And with the idea of this hard man who'd bullied her ex right out of the gala, and hopefully off the ranch too, being a momma's boy ...

God, the way he was looking at her made her insides squeeze over and over again as if gearing up for the orgasm he was practically giving her with his eyes.

“Belle.”

“Oh no. You're not going to ruin this winter wonderland moment by talking.”

His lips twitched, but he didn't break into a smile, though his eyes did crease. Damn, they had the yummiest creases that only the hardest of cowboys possessed, the lines they gained from squinting into the sun.

Why did she have to like him so much? Her mind was making up a role for him. An entire personality. He wasn't who she thought he was. She had no idea who he was.

Except a man who sneaked a weapon into a Christmas getaway against the rules.

“Look, I told you I was in the Rangers.”

She stared at him but didn't reply.

He sucked in a breath as if understanding her reluctance to listen, but he forged on anyway. “What I didn't tell you was ___”

“Oh my god! Oh no!” The high feminine cry cut him off. He whipped Belle around to get a look at who was screaming.

“My diamond bracelet! Someone stole my diamond bracelet!”

Declan’s hands clamped harder on Belle. “Dammit!” he muttered under his breath.

A couple of the security guards at the party moved toward the woman and started talking to her. Her hysterical cries continued until someone fetched her a chair and she sank into it. The older woman clutched at her bare wrist.

People started searching the floor for the jewelry. The entire dance floor cleared, and Declan towed Belle to the far side of the room with him.

She eyed up the doorway that led to the alcove where the bathrooms were. This was her moment to escape. She didn’t really want to hear what Declan had to say. She’d heard—and seen—enough to know that she didn’t want to be mixed up with him.

She pulled free of his grasp. He tore his stare from what was happening on the dance floor and trained it on her.

“I’m going to powder my nose,” she told him.

Lucky for her, he appeared to be distracted, his attention swaying between the woman with the stolen bracelet and Belle.

She took a step toward the exit. “I’ll be just a minute.”

He let her go.

As quickly as she could go on her high spiked heels held on by tiny slivers of satin strapping, she rushed to the ladies’ room. Before she reached the door, the low clack of high heels brought her head up. She stared at the retreating back of a tall, slender woman with perfect streaky blonde highlights in her light brown hair.

Haileigh.

As she looked on, another door opened down the corridor. An arm snaked out to wave her inside.

Belle's heart flipped over. Ethan and Haileigh were up to something, and she'd bet anything that it wasn't a roll in the hay like she and Declan shared. Haileigh entered the room, and the door shut behind them.

Belle threw a look around. The music had stopped, and only a few louder voices carried through the space.

A heist.

A jewelry heist.

That bracelet was gone—stolen—and here was her ex, a known criminal, hiding behind a door.

She inched up to it. It didn't have a label. It wasn't a bathroom. What were they doing in there?

She couldn't hear a thing through the thick wood. She had to alert someone right now. She'd grab one of the security guards and tell them what she'd seen.

Whirling on her heels, she took one step but didn't get any farther before a blinding pain erupted from the back of her head.



Declan stood in the center of the room and rotated in a slow circle, searching for Belle.

She wasn't here. Which meant she had slipped through his grasp with that fabricated little tale about powdering her nose. Even though his gut told him that something with her wasn't right, he'd still let her go, thinking she just needed a minute to regroup.

He stifled a growl. He knew better than to let a ward out of his sight. He didn't thwart huge terrorist plots singlehandedly by fucking up like this.

The guests had returned to their festivities after that woman calmed down. No one had stolen her bracelet—it fell off at the buffet table. Everyone danced or mingled and

nibbled on snacks, but he couldn't feel further from the holiday spirit.

Belle was missing.

After one more sweep of the room for her, he stalked the perimeter and out into the hallway. The light notes of Christmas tunes followed him to the women's restroom. Without bothering to alert the occupants inside, he whipped open the door.

Several screams echoed off the rustic tile walls.

"Get out!"

"Pervert!"

He took a second to glance under the stall doors for Belle's high heels. Then he ducked out.

Next he rushed to the men's room just in case. Leave no doors unopened. No stones unturned.

She wasn't there either. The next door was a janitor's closet containing a mop bucket on wheels and a shelving unit full of cleaning supplies.

Dammit, she must have left the gala. He retraced his steps through the main room of the building. The other exit was closer to the bunkhouse, but he never reached it.

Three of the Wynton brothers clustered around him.

"Did Cinderella run off on you?" Josiah asked.

"Did you find her glass cowboy boot?" Noah quipped.

Irritation sliced across him like a battle wound. "No," he bit off through a tight jaw. "Belle's missing."

Both men stopped. If they hadn't sobered at the news, he would have kicked the shit out of all of them.

"When was the last time you saw her?" Noah barked out.

"Ten minutes ago. She said she was going to the restroom. I checked, and she's not anywhere."

"This may be nothing," Josiah added, but his nod was a bit too grim.

A low rumble issued from Declan. He took a quick step toward Josiah. “Are you trying to placate me? I will punch your teeth down your throat.”

Noah stepped between them, his arm barring Declan from making good on his promise.

He quivered with rage. And fear. He couldn’t forget the fear.

“Where was the last place you saw her?” Josiah demanded.

“Right here.” He jabbed a finger at the spot where they stood. “Something happened to her.”

“She didn’t look all that happy to be with you, Declan. Did you guys have a fight?”

He couldn’t tell them about his screwup and how he’d pulled his weapon in front of her. That was bad enough. The reason why he hadn’t been thinking straight was even worse.

He shook his head hard. “She wouldn’t just leave. We weren’t seeing eye to eye but we weren’t fighting. I don’t think she’d just walk out. Though I did piss off her ex-boyfriend, and he’s already a suspect.”

Josiah ripped his head in a nod. “Let’s spread out and look for her. Noah, you take the barn. Declan and I will search the perimeter.”

He shoved Noah’s arm out of his way, and without waiting for Josiah, he took off at a fast clip, weaving through people to reach the exit. When he shoved through the door, icy wind blasted him in the face.

Damn the sleet.

He was born and raised on a ranch. His first thought when inclement weather hit was to worry about the cattle finding shelter. What if something really happened to Belle? She wouldn’t last for long out in the elements.

Her ex and his terrible fiancée were also among the people that he hadn’t seen in a while. He wouldn’t put it past either of them to prey on Belle.

Squaring his shoulders, he walked into the wind. He would tear this ranch apart to find her. And if she *did* simply walk away without alerting him of her plans?

She would be bearing his palm print on her ass before Santa came.



“Oh god.” The words croaked from Belle’s lips, followed by a faint prayer for help.

Her head was *pounding*. The depths rattled like glass during an earthquake. Deep pain became a sickening swirl when she cracked open her eyes to take in the room around her.

“There’s our girl.” The bright tone sounded as fake as Belle’s orgasms with the man uttering those words.

Where had they taken her? She cracked her eyes open and stared through the slits at a built-in bench and a dining table bolted to the floor.

She was crumpled on the floor. When she let her head loll to the side, her gaze scraped over a pair of designer leather shoes and expensive wool suit pants.

The unmistakable scent of Ethan’s cologne made her nostrils flare. Suddenly, she understood what happened: as she walked away from that janitor’s closet, Ethan—or Haileigh—had bashed her over the head and dragged her...

Where? Where was she?

She pushed off the floor. Head swimming, she gained enough wits to put the pieces together and realized she was in an RV.

Their RV.

Anger hit her, and a black curtain like the ones dropped on big stages fell over her brain. Her vision wavered, and she blinked to clear it.

Once she could see straight, she heaved herself to her feet.

Haileigh lounged on a built-in leather couch. “You’re right, Ethan, honey. I can see her disgusting cellulite through that dress.”

Belle’s teeth gnashed on a snarl as she swung toward the hateful woman. “I can have liposuction to get rid of cellulite. But they can’t grow you any new brain cells.”

“You little—”

Ethan’s grin stopped Belle cold. “Now now, ladies. Fighting over me isn’t necessary.”

“Fighting over—” She almost gagged.

“Just get her to the computer, Ethan. We don’t have much time for talk.”

To Belle’s surprise, her ex jumped to do Haileigh’s bidding. Okay, that was new. He was a criminal and an asshole. But he never followed anyone’s orders before, as far as Belle knew.

Wait—did Haileigh say computer?

Keeping her focus on her enemies, Belle covertly glanced around the ritziest RV she’d ever seen. And that was saying a lot considering her parents’ connections.

“You must have robbed several banks to get the money for this,” she bit off.

With lightning speed, Haileigh stepped in front of her, sinking her nails into Belle’s upper arm. Her instinct was to wrench away, but if she did, the woman’s talons would only dig deeper and tear at her skin.

“Let. Me. Go. Now.” She drew up to her full height. Haileigh still towered over her.

She yanked her arm, and Belle pitched off-balance, barely catching herself before hitting the floor again.

The woman dragged her to the table. When she shoved her down on the bench, she grabbed the marble edge to keep herself upright. The RV revolved in a slow circle of sickness and pain, but she managed not to pass out again.

Her stare zeroed in on a computer monitor in front of her, then shifted to the keyboard. Oh god. They knew about the patch she made.

What other reason would they have to hold her here against her will and force her in front of a computer?

How did she get out of this mess?

It was too late to play dead, so her only alternative was to play dumb.

Ethan braced both palms on the table and leaned over her, his sour breath washing over her cheek. “We want you to hack into the WEST Protection system, Belle.”

She shook her head. “How would I know how to do that?”

His lips twisted cruelly. “We know you did it once.”

She stared at him.

“The patch?” He arched a brow.

A sigh stuck in her throat, as jagged as glass.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she countered.

“Told you she would play dumb!” Haileigh stepped closer to the table so both of them were looming over Belle like cartoon villains.

Was this really happening? When Ethan jumped into her car with bags stuffed with cash from robbing that bank, she questioned whether or not it was really happening. This moment felt just as amplified. Skewed from reality.

“Belle.” Ethan’s low, urging tone brought more bile into the back of her throat. It was the same tone he used whenever he wanted to get his way.

Her spine snapped as she thrust her shoulders back.

“Put your fingers on those keys and hack into the system.”

She tilted her jaw a notch. “Why don’t you do it? Weren’t you already in there?”

“We tried,” he continued in that wheedling voice. “Your patch stopped us every time. We almost set off the alarm and

backed out just in time.”

“Do it. Or...” Haleigh trailed off.

She leveled a glare on the woman. “Or what?”

Ethan swiveled to give his minion a look. Haleigh’s smug expression terrified her more than anything had yet. She walked over to a wall of drawers and opened one. She pulled out a small square of paper and returned to Ethan’s side.

He took the item from her and set it down. A cry burned up her throat. She was staring down at a photograph of her parents. Not any old photo—this one was taken recently. She knew because they’d sent her a similar selfie of the pair of them two days before.

That meant that Ethan knew her parents’ whereabouts and had no bones about snapping photos of them when they were unaware. He wouldn’t stop at just a photograph.

Her heart slammed around the empty cavern of her chest, knocking loudly in her ears.

Her stare ticked up to Ethan’s cold, cruel one.

“Or else we’ll get your parents to persuade you to help us,” he uttered in a quiet oath.

She was trapped with no way out in sight.

“Hack...the...system.” His voice burned low with menace.

With no more options, she settled her fingertips on the keys and began to work her way—slowly, painstakingly—into the security office’s mainframe. When her patch kept her out, she threw her captors a glance and created a new patch to act as a bridge around the roadblock.

Ethan gave her a big smile and nodded. Haleigh scowled in the corner.

An idea struck. Surely, someone was watching the system right this very minute. Mainframes like this had constant monitoring both by programs and by humans. If they saw her in there poking around, alarms would be raised.

They could trace her right here to this RV.

And she could help them along...

Mind made up, she quickly returned to the patch she'd just laid down in the system and recoded it.

This time she sent an encrypted message to the WEST Protection team.

When they read that, they'd know that she wasn't in on this scheme of Ethan's.

And last, she turned on the webcam for a silent recording that would *really* back up her story when they asked her. And they would. She gave them five minutes before every cowboy on the team blasted in here and put a stop to this crime.

Pausing with her fingers on the keys, her mind spun. If Ethan and Haileigh made a clean getaway, and she was left to deal with the WEST team's inquisition, she was going to be irate.

"Keep typing! I'm going to break your ankles, girl!" Ethan's bellow shook her to the core.

Smashing her fingertips down on the keys, she continued to work every avenue possible to get out of this before she was forced to do something she really regretted.

"Do it!" He slammed a palm on the marble table near her hand.

She stared straight ahead into the camera. "Or what? Hmm? If I remember correctly, you were never a threat."

Please be watching. Please find me!

Declan's handsome face wavered in her mind. God, he was more gorgeous than any man she'd ever met—both inside and out. He was a gentleman but treated her as dirty as a woman wanted to be treated between the sheets.

Ethan slammed a hand off the table. "Do it now! You put that patch on and now it's time to take it off!"

"I don't want to do this. You're the reason why I made the patch to begin with. To stop you." She fixed a glare on her ex,

then Haileigh. “I’m just covering my butt this time, unlike last time when you made me an accomplice!”

Ethan blinked at her. “Are you talking about the bank robbery?”

Battling her need to squeal in glee that she’d caught his admission on webcam, she gave him a solemn nod. “You told me your car was in the shop. You needed me to pick you up.”

He rolled his eyes. “So it wasn’t in the shop, but I *did* need you to pick me up. Can you imagine juggling all that money and a key fob? That would be a nightmare.”

“But you know my history for mishaps! You could have called anyone else, Ethan.”

“How was I supposed to know you’d get in a car accident while trying to drive away?”

She gaped at him. “Because it’s me.”

He pushed off the table and folded his arms. “Come on, Belle. You sped from that accident without the police chasing. And you never even got a fine for running that red light.”

She glared harder, wishing him dead. Or at the very least, writhing on the floor from the pain she wished she could inflict right now.

With a few more taps on the keyboard, she sat back. “There. Now will you let me go?”

Her gaze slid from her ex to his fiancé. A cold stab of fear to the heart already told her the answer before they spoke.

“Not a chance, Belle. You know what has to happen now that you know so much.” Ethan cast a look over his shoulder at Haileigh. “Get the cables.”

Chapter Thirteen

When Declan burst into the WEST Protection office and slammed the door behind him, three sets of eyes met his.

“I’m going to make this short and sweet. A guest is missing. Belle. My date. My *fake* date,” he corrected himself. His fists curled as he prepared to make heads roll if someone so much as uttered a word about his state of dishevelment.

He’d spent hours stalking the grounds, searching for Belle. And even more hours being dragged into the deepest depths of despair that she really might have just up and left without telling him.

The only thing that kept him from grabbing on to the thread of that narrative and believing it was the fact that her belongings were still in the bunkhouse. But the other part of him knew that she was just stubborn enough to take off and leave her stuff for someone else to box up and send to her.

Boone pushed to his feet. “We already know. We’ve been searching for you. Jesus, you look bad, Declan. Sit down before you fall over.”

He scrubbed his hands over his face. “Can’t. You gotta help me track her down. I can do it myself, but if we all work together, we’ll find her faster.”

His boss pointed to the chair again. “Sit. We already heard from her.”

“Where?” he snapped.

A couple of the guys exchanged a look.

Boone waved a hand. “Show him.”

“Show me what?” Panic and dread rolled like a barbed-wire tumbleweed through his chest and tore out half his heart. If something horrible happened to her, he could never forgive himself.

McCoy swiveled the computer monitor in front of him so Declan got a good look at some video footage. Belle’s beautiful face appeared on the screen.

He stumbled forward and braced a hand on the desk. “Where is this? Where is she?”

“We haven’t pinpointed her location yet, but we think she’s close.”

“How did you get this video? Was it sent to you?”

McCoy shook his head, lips grim. “Looks like she hacked the system last night.”

He stilled and then snapped upright to his full height. “Not possible. She’s Belle...just Belle.” He echoed the words she used, but as he said them, he knew how hollow and unbelievable they sounded.

“She hacked the system and applied a patch with a message that she’s been kidnapped. This video was coded into it. When we ran the security check this morning, it popped up. It’s genius-level work, really. Quite impressive.”

He slashed a hand through the air. “I don’t care about any of that! Turn up the volume so I can hear what she’s saying!”

A second later, Belle’s voice poured out of the speakers. He listened, his stomach hitting the soles of his boots as dread overtook him.

“She’s being held hostage by her ex!”

“We know. We’ve got guys out searching for her already. They’re combing over the ranch, but it’s difficult because a lot of the guests are pulling out or have already left.”

“But it’s still dark. Why would they be leaving so soon?”

McCoy shrugged. “Who knows why these rich people do what they do? Maybe they want to get home for family. All we

know is that several RVs pulled out around midnight, and several of the cars are missing from where they were parked in the field.”

He slammed a palm off the desk. “Make them search faster! Did you get a trace on that video?”

Boone stepped up to the desk. “It came from somewhere on the ranch.”

His brows shot up. “IP address?”

“Same as here. She hacked that too.”

She was brilliant. Brilliant and in danger.

“Zoom in on that background behind her. What are we looking at?”

McCoy clicked a button on his mouse and magnified the stilled video. The frame of Belle’s face had Declan’s heart catching.

He stared at her for a long beat, his heart hurling itself at his ribs. Her stunning face, even under the stress of what was happening to her, lit up his entire goddamn world.

He was falling for her—hard. As hard as an old oak uprooted by a gale-force wind. That wind was Belle.

“We can’t tell where she is, Declan. We’ve been trying to figure it out since the video popped up.”

He whirled for the door and stopped with his hand on the knob. Jabbing a finger at McCoy and Boone, he barked out, “You. And you. Come with me. We’re going to find her the old-fashioned way. By searching every single vehicle, RV and bunk on this goddamn ranch.”



Belle’s entire body felt bruised. First, the cables dug into her flesh and left marks. Then her asshole ex and his fiancée jumped into the front of the RV and took off driving with Belle in the back.

Being tossed around all the way down the bumpy drive from the Wynton Ranch was bad enough. But when they hit the mountains, she couldn't find a way to stabilize herself, which had her smashing off everything that didn't move inside the RV.

When she felt the vehicle start to tilt down the next slope, she bit off a cry of pain that hadn't even hit yet. Bracing her legs against the built-in sofa did nothing, and she skidded into the hard steel leg of the table.

“When I get out of here, I'm going to slit both your throats!” she screamed, but it only came out muffled from behind the damn gag Haileigh had taken pleasure in knotting too tightly around her head.

Who could even help her now? Only Declan had kept any tabs on her during the Christmas on the Ranch event and she hadn't exactly been warm over the past day, ever since she saw him pull his weapon and began to question who he really was or why he needed a weapon. Sure, he'd kissed her into a boneless, soaking wet state on the dance floor, but she wasn't over what happened by any means.

Still...if anyone *might* be looking for her...it would be Declan. Her fake boyfriend.

Since they'd slept together—several times—did that make him a real boyfriend? Nah. They'd only hooked up.

Except he knew things about her. That she preferred whiskey to champagne. How much horses scared her. And that she had a tendency toward streaks of bad luck. What was happening right now was proof enough of that truth.

He also knew how to get her hot and bothered to the point of madness.

She knew things about him too. He could be such a caring gentleman, like when he swept her off her feet after she broke a heel. Hell, there was so much about Declan that she really, really liked.

Given a few more hours with him, she was pretty sure she'd slip into loving him as easily as she slipped into those

goofy Christmas PJs.

He'd missed the movie and the late-night cookies for Santa buffet. He'd never explained why, but looking back now...she understood something was up.

Could he...

Could he be...

No. He could *not* be involved with Ethan. The two had faced off like two predators prepared to rip each other to shreds. Of course Declan could out-alpha her ex in *all* ways.

She was thrown into the sofa again. This time she couldn't stop the grunt of pain tearing up her throat.

Please be looking for me, Declan. Please find me!

The drive seemed endless. It might just be her perception of time because every small jostle caused her pain. She had no clue if they'd been gone ten minutes or ten hours. She was terrified of how far her ex would go.

She'd left that video encoded in the patch she created to get Ethan into the secure files. How long before the security team discovered it?

Surely the cameras dotted around the ranch would capture the footage of her being carried unconscious to the RV. Then that very same RV driving away—very fast, in her opinion.

The road leveled out, and Belle curled into a tight ball. What a way to spend the end of her holiday. The trip she hadn't asked for and honestly dreaded attending had turned out to be...great.

Declan had made it great.

Tears filled her eyes and escaped through her closed lids. If she survived this, she wanted to talk to Declan, to learn what he was hiding from her all along.

But in the end, whatever he hid from her didn't matter at all.

He was the best fake Christmas boyfriend she'd ever had.

The ringtone of a phone projected from the front of the vehicle. She heard Haileigh's brash tone as she answered but over the noise of the engine, she couldn't make out more than a few words.

Belle held her breath and tried to slow the pounding of her heart in her ears, hoping to hear anything that would tell her what was happening. She might have no control right now, but that didn't mean she would quit searching for a way out of this.

Haileigh's tinkling laugh lifted the hair on Belle's nape.

"Who was that, dear?" Ethan asked as if he were asking what was for dinner.

"You know who it was."

Belle lost the thread of the conversation as they struck several more jarring bumps that gave her a new bruise or two.

"They got it," Haileigh said.

"The ransom demand?"

Ransom? Belle's brain tripped over that word. What were they holding for ransom? Her?

Her parents would pay *any* amount to get her back, she knew that well enough. But it terrified her that Ethan also had a photo of them handy. A man like Ethan would have no hesitation whatsoever. He'd hurt them. Maybe even torture them for the adrenaline rush.

Her shoulder struck the table leg hard, and it hurt like hell, but at least it wasn't her head. That hurt bad enough after they struck her down outside that door.

"WEST is getting the money together to get it all back."

"You were right, honey."

Again, Belle was stunned by Ethan's deference to his accomplice.

"Of course I was. If it gets out that there's been a security breach, their whole company goes under. And we've got those files, thanks to your little ex-toy back there."

She couldn't see Haileigh from her position on the floor, partly under the table, but she sensed the woman was glancing back at her.

Fury churned in her gut. She didn't know how she was getting out of this mess—but when she did, she would make damn sure that her kidnappers wouldn't see freedom for the rest of their days.

And when *she* got free? Well, her Christmas wish was silly.

She hoped that Declan would be there waiting for her...so she could run straight into his arms.

Chapter Fourteen

Failure was not an option. Declan was not going to fail. Just because they'd searched the ranch for more than two hours, even having some ranch hands jump in their vehicles and scour the fields for her, and come up emptyhanded, it didn't mean he wouldn't find Belle.

When he stormed back into the WEST Protection office, it was like a war zone. Every desk was occupied with a team member hitting the computer system. Some were busy locking down cybersecurity after they discovered the breach. Others were trying to locate Belle.

A demand for ransom had come in while he was out. Unless the WEST team paid the ransom, the company would be wrecked. Nobody would trust them ever again.

And nobody was working fast enough for Declan.

He paced the center of the room, boot heels loud thuds punctuating every step. The pressure in his chest compounded by the second. If he didn't get her back...

Hell no. He wasn't buying into that mindset. He'd done more difficult things. He'd performed special ops. He'd seen battle. He could find one woman.

As he passed a desk, he scanned the security camera footage on the monitor. Images blinked to different views.

Madeline sat stiffly, hunched forward in her seat to peer closer at the footage. But she wasn't doing nearly enough.

Declan stepped up to the desk. "Let me take it from here."

Without removing her stare from the screen, she shook her head. “I got this. You’re not in any state of mind to take over.”

He bit back a low growl. “Someone give me a goddamn computer! Now!”

Corrine spun her desk chair to fix him in her gaze. “We’re trained, Declan. Give us time.”

“There is no time left!” His bellow echoed off the walls, and every single person in the room turned their heads to stare at him. All except Madeline, who never shifted her focus.

A triumphant noise burst from her, and he whirled toward her and leaned over the desk, staring at the screen. “What do you see?”

She rapidly tapped the keys and enlarged the image. The view showed a tall figure with something draped over his shoulder.

A woman’s body.

“Got her!” Madeline’s exclamation brought everyone running, but Declan crowded them all out so he could watch the short clip of a man carrying an unconscious woman out of the barn.

“How did we miss that?” He gnashed his molars together. “Goddammit, he knocked her out! Where did he go after that?”

The white-hot rage pounding his system wasn’t even human. It belonged to a wild animal. Curling his fingers into fists, he resisted the urge to start punching holes in the drywall. One every three seconds until the team found Belle.

“This view shows him carrying her around the barn.” Corrine’s voice made him whirl.

He darted to her desk. Planting his hands on the surface, he glared at the screen. “Goddammit!” The limp lines of Belle’s body made fear claw at his insides. Was she dead? He couldn’t tell.

“Control that anger, Declan. Gimme a second.” She violently attacked the keyboard and brought up several more camera angles that revealed Belle being carried to a waiting truck. When one showed her body being tossed into the back, Declan clapped both hands to his head.

A hand came down on his shoulder. “It’s not how it looks,” Boone told him.

“We don’t know that,” he gritted out.

“Don’t think the worst.”

He leveled a glare at his boss. “Thinking the worst is what saved that goddamn op last week, and you know it.”

Boone stared at him for a heartbeat. “You’re right. Corrine, find that truck.”

“Already done! They drove across the ranch to where the guests’ RVs are parked.”

Declan grabbed the keyboard and yanked it toward himself. Corrine pushed away from the desk to give him room to work. In seconds, he had a grim image of Belle being transferred from the truck bed to the RV.

“Madeline, pull the record on that RV!” he barked the order.

“Getting it now, Declan.”

He shoved away from the desk and began pacing once more.

“Damn, you’re scary when you’re locked in like this, Declan. You weren’t even this keyed up when you were saving the President of the United States.”

He compressed his lips to hold back his explosion of anger. How could he tell the team that he’d been part of for little more than a couple weeks that he saved the President out of duty? This time his heart was involved.

In minutes, they had more footage of the vehicle leaving the ranch. One of the guys notified the state police to be on the lookout for the RV heading south.

A woman working diligently on the cybersecurity system looked up. “They escaped with the hacked information. Thousands of accounts compromised throughout several companies that are contracted with us.”

“And they took her with them because she could send them to prison.” His jaw joints ached from clamping it so hard. “The RV has a GPS. Someone tap into it and find it!”

Madeline’s voice came with an edge. “Damn! I got a pin on the RV, but it’s too far to reach by car. We’re going to need a—”

“Helicopter!” Corrine finished. She snatched the wireless radio off the desk and snapped out an order for her husband to get a team in the air ASAP.

In a few strides, Declan reached the door. He gripped the knob hard enough to make his knuckles pop, but he paused before launching himself outside. He couldn’t stand around waiting for another minute. But walking out meant he wouldn’t hear any more progress.

Bowing his head, he let the struggle roll through him, something he never did. Even when he was saving that fucking op that gave him so much notoriety with the WEST team, he wasn’t worried. He knew he could fix the situation in the time they had.

Now he had no solid ground to stand on. He *needed* a world with Belle in it. She was amazing and smart, funny and strong.

“Declan.”

He turned and met Madeline’s eyes. Understanding flashed in the depths.

He’d found a friend in her when he wasn’t even searching for one.

“Let’s step outside a minute,” she said.

His heart surged. “Did you find something?”

Her expression softened. “No. Let’s talk.”

Reaching past him, she opened the door. He had no choice but to follow her out into the cold night. He had no concept of the time. All he knew was that the gala had ended hours ago. Which meant Belle had been gone for hours.

Madeline faced him on the small landing at the top of a short run of stairs. Neither of them wore a jacket, and she folded her arms against the cold. “Tell me about her.”

“Belle?” His voice sounded like he’d dragged his vocal cords through limestone and then doused them in acid. “She’s tough.”

She nodded. “That’s good. Real good. It means she’s a survivor.”

His throat thickened. “But everything bad happens to her. Mishaps, mainly.”

“Which is probably how she toughened up so much.”

They stared at each other. The outside light illuminated the few snowflakes floating on the air.

“And you care about her.”

“Yes.” The admission felt better than he’d ever expected under the circumstances.

She bobbed her head again, and her white-blond hair swung forward to skim her jaw. “Look, I’ll be honest with you. I’m invested in your woman because, well, I had a terrible situation with a wretched ex too at one time. I want you to know that I’m rooting for her, for you. For both of you.”

He raked his fingers through his hair. “I appreciate it.”

“If anyone can do what you did last week for our nation, rescuing Belle should be a breeze.”

The door behind them opened, and Corrine poked her head out. “Michael’s got the chopper ready, and he’s in the air. ETA six minutes.”

Six minutes to begin the rescue.

But once he found Belle, he was determined to have sixty years with her.



The chopper blades ripped through the air. Declan ducked inside first and three more men piled in after him.

Boone tossed him a comms device and Noah rested a sniper rifle across his thighs. Josiah took the seat near the door and McCoy jumped into the cockpit next to Michael Modeen.

The atmosphere was tense as hell. Not that Declan was in any mood to talk, but the WEST team typically exchanged some witty comments or banter.

Their silence was unnerving. But he couldn't read into it. They'd get her. He would save her.

Belle would be safe in his arms within the hour.

He barely registered the chopper lifting off. Darkness swallowed them, making it impossible for him to make out the world below. He had to trust Modeen to know what he was doing. Following a pin on a map was easy for the experienced pilot.

He skimmed his gaze over the rifle that Noah brought. Knowing they had it on hand eased his mind a bit more. If Ethan refused to stop, Modeen could swoop low enough for them to shoot out the tires.

Belle's life didn't just hover in *his* hands. The team had his six men, as many as any platoon. And back at the office, an entire group was supporting them by feeding them information that blasted into his comms device with updates every minute.

He tightened his fist on his thigh. He could have explained his position to Belle. She would have understood. So why hadn't he?

He'd only resisted in the name of duty. If he weren't so black-and-white, so married to this job and all the others he performed before it, she wouldn't have run away from him. He wouldn't have made the gravest error of his life by giving her space.

Bringing his fist to his lips, he pressed the soft flesh into his teeth just to feel the pain. It grounded him enough to keep him from completely losing his shit.

The helicopter lights cut through the blackness. The treetops sped by below. When Declan spotted the gray streak of road, his gut lurched.

“We’re getting close,” Modeen confirmed via comms. “Josiah, where are we in relation to that pin?”

“Less than a minute.”

The declaration hit Declan’s brain. In a blink, he had a plan in place.

“Get as close as you can to them, Modeen. Do you have a bullhorn to order them to stop?”

“Yup.”

He looked too Noah. “If they don’t, then get us as close as you can. Noah, there are four tires on the back of that thing. Are you a good enough shot to take out one tire without sending them into an accident? Belle cannot be injured in the rescue.”

“I got you, Dec.”

He gave his teammate a hard nod. “I’ll jump out. The rest of you take my lead.”

No one called him rookie or questioned his authority.

He clenched his jaw, breathing shallowly as he waited for the moment that RV popped into view.

“I got a bead on it.” Modeen’s statement had Declan’s head whipping toward the windshield. When he saw the steep drop-offs on either side of the road, his chest burned.

“Change of plan! Can you get ahead of it and land? That asshole might drive them off the cliff. Or if Noah takes the shot, both tires on that side might blow. They’ll wreck and be in the same danger. I need her alive!”

“On it.” Modeen picked up some speed and looped around.

Declan pulled his weapon and checked the chamber. *Game on, motherfucker*; he mentally threw down to Belle's ex.

The chopper dropped lower and lower with every foot they traveled through the air. Then it hovered for just a moment before Modeen set it down with all the finesse of a graceful bird touching a wire.

Declan was already in motion, hurling open the hatch and leaping to the ground. The rime of ice on the road almost planted him on his ass, but his boots got purchase and he sprinted for the center of the road as soon as the RV's headlights careened around a turn.

At first, the RV didn't slow, but he held the line along with the men flanking him in a WEST Protection standoff.

"He's not gonna stop," Josiah said.

"Men like Ethan love themselves too much to die. He'll stop." Declan braced himself just as the driver stepped on the brakes.

The big vehicle swayed on the icy mountain road but thankfully did not spin out of control and pitch down the mountainside.

He ran forward, weapon up. The brilliant lights of the chopper and the RV's headlights blinded him from seeing through the windshield, but he was prepared for Ethan to be armed too.

"Each of you take the front doors! I'll take the back and get Belle!" He bolted for the side of the vehicle. When he found the door locked, he raised his weapon but then realized how risky it was to shoot the lock off. The bullet could hit Belle.

A small metal step up to the door gave him enough of an advantage that when he rammed his shoulder into the door, he felt the lock give. A second hard shove made it break away.

He threw open the door. "Belle!"

A low groan sounded somewhere near his feet. The space was almost pitch black. The blinds were drawn on the

windows so only a glimmer of the lights from outside permeated the shadow.

Quickly, he yanked out his phone and used the flashlight to illuminate the space.

His heart clutched. Belle lay on her side, bound hand and foot. The side of her face was covered in blood.

She managed another moan, and he sprang to action. Shifting the phone and weapon to one hand, he scooped her up around the back with the other and let her legs dangle over his opposite arm.

“I got you. I got you, baby.” He didn’t even recognize his own voice as he jumped to the ground with her cradled as gently against his chest as he could.

He rushed Belle to the chopper, passing his teammates who had Ethan and Haileigh lying on the ground with their hands behind their heads without even a single shot fired.

Modeen was at his side. “Lay her on the floor. Now cover her up with that thermal blanket. I’ll get the gag off her.”

His movements were jerky from the fury pounding through his system. All that adrenaline had been swirling in his blood like gasoline. As soon as he dumped it on the flames, there would be no stopping the rage inside him.

“Let me take a look at her, Dec. I’m a trained medic,” Modeen said.

He met Modeen’s gaze and then swung it back to Belle—bleeding, bound and battered.

Then he whirled around and took off running. Before Noah could stop him, he was on the ground with Ethan under his fists. Bone crunched beneath his knuckles. He only got two hard blows in before he felt the man lose consciousness.

“Declan! Enough!” Noah’s sharp order broke through his haze of anger. He shoved to his feet and swung his boot back to deliver a kick to Ethan’s gut.

Noah dragged him backward before his foot ever connected. “Stop. He’s out cold. Go to Belle—she needs you

now!”

He turned for the chopper and ran back to his woman.

In the bright glow of lights, he looked down at her face. Her eyes were open, fixed on him.

Tenderly, he cupped her face. “No one is ever going to lay a hand on you again. Except me. And that’s going to be in the name of love.”

Chapter Fifteen

“No concussion.”

Belle was looking at Declan when the doctor walked into the ER and made the announcement. His eyes drifted closed, and he brought her hand that he clasped in his to his lips.

When he opened his eyes, he focused on the doctor. “Thank you. Belle is lucky.”

And she was. Only ten stitches. No concussion. Just some bruises and bumps that would heal in no time at all.

She squeezed Declan’s fingers. She also had one hell of a man.

The doctor nodded at her. “We’ll send you home with something for pain. The nurse will be back to release you and give you care instructions.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” Her voice was a little hoarse from screaming, so she cleared it.

As soon as the doctor left her alone with Declan, she met his stare. His gaze shifted upward to her forehead where fresh stitches and a bandage over them rested.

He chafed her knuckles with his callused thumb. “I hate that you were hurt.” His voice dipped low.

“I’m all right, Declan.” She eyed him. “I think what’s more important is what comes next.”

He stilled. “I suppose you want to know how I showed up on that road with a chopper and a team of men prepared to fight for your life.”

“Yes,” she breathed.

His golden-brown eyes searched hers as if trying to decide how much she could handle. “I work for WEST Protection,” he said at last.

Her jaw dropped. “It all makes so much more sense now.”

He groaned. “I should have told you in the hayloft. It’s just that...I was undercover for the Christmas on the Ranch weekend.”

“So you were on duty when we...”

He shook his head. “No. When we had sex, I was always off duty. It’s important that you know that I don’t take my responsibilities lightly. And I wasn’t blurring any lines with you at all.”

She would nod except it hurt too much. “I believe you.”

His shoulders sagged a bit. “Thank god. I was beating myself up over not explaining the situation to you. Then you showed up at the gala and... Well, I saw you and knew there was no going back.”

“Back from what?” Her voice was only a whisper.

His eyes locked on hers again. “From caring about you. From falling for you. I’m already half in love with you, Belle. Give me another thirty seconds and I’ll be all in.”

She made a noise, part desperation, part cry. When he hovered over her, his lips barely a breath from hers, he whispered, “I hope we can keep exploring what’s between us.”

Lightly, she stroked his stubbled jaw, curling her fingers to draw him closer. When his lips brushed over hers, the fire that had been between them from the very start blazed to life.

He deepened the caress, applying pressure and slipping his tongue between her lips.

Passion flowed between them, a spring that was fresh and pure like the snow on the mountain where she’d started falling in love with him.

After a long minute, he pulled back. Smoothing the hair gently off her cheek, he studied her. “I hate to say this, but you look terrible.”

She giggled. “At least I don’t have a big head.”

His deep chuckle sent shocks of more emotion through her. “I’ll get that white Stetson yet, just you wait and see.”

Her smile widened. “Your head looks average to me, Declan. Honest.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but just then a man wearing one of the cowboy hats that Declan mentioned entered the small space. His gaze wandered over her and Declan before he came forward to stand at her bedside.

“We’ve never met before, but I know of your parents. I’m Ross Wynton.”

She nodded. “I’m so pleased to finally meet you.”

“So am I, Belle. I’m only sorry it was under these circumstances.”

Her eyes darted to Declan and back to Ross. “What’s happened to Ethan and Haileigh?”

“It seems that his confession on that little video of yours got the FBI’s attention. And Haileigh is a suspected accomplice on several other crimes.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“They’re both in custody.” Ross looked to Declan. “You have this man to thank for your rescue too. That’s two in two weeks, bro. To say you’re an asset to the team is kind of an understatement after what you did to prevent that huge loss of life.”

Her eyes widened.

Declan gave a small shake of his head as though telling Ross to let it go.

“What event was this?” she asked.

Ross cleared his throat. “We can’t tell you all of it. Just know that your boyfriend here saved a very important person and prevented a lot of people dying.”

Her eyes flew wider. “Are you talking about that big attack on air traffic control last week?”

They both gaped at her.

“I have friends who are huge tech nerds. We talk. They told me that someone hacked the air traffic control system and were holding access to it for a price. It was only rumored that Air Force One was in the sky that night—and that they might not have made it safely to the ground if not for the people who stepped in and stopped the attack.” She turned her head to stare at Declan. “That was *you*?”

He shifted his shoulders in what she thought was an uncomfortable shrug. “Just doing my duty,” he mumbled.

“He’s too humble. But we like him just fine despite the bragging rights he gets for oh, at least another week.” Ross’s eyes gleamed with amusement at Declan’s discomfort. “Anyhow, I’m glad you’re going to be all right, Belle. Declan, I’ve gotta get back to the ranch, but I hope you’re both up to joining us tomorrow for a private brunch just for the team. Our own Christmas celebration, if you will.”

Declan and Belle’s gazes met. She nodded.

“We’ll be there. And Ross? Thank you for everything. For the backup. I never could have found Belle without the team.”

He smiled. “It’s how we operate, Dec. Oh, and we’re leaving a car for you to get Belle safely back to the ranch.”

“She’ll stay with me in the cabin.” He enveloped her hand with his big, warm one.

“See you at brunch.” With that, he ducked out of the room, leaving her alone with her savior, her protector on so many occasions.

When he leaned close again, her heart fluttered. “I can’t wait to be alone with you, Belle. I have things to say.”

She brushed her fingertips over his jaw. “So do I. Now, do you see any mistletoe around this place? Because I can’t wait to have your lips on mine.”

“We never needed mistletoe before.” He leaned in and claimed her mouth in a slow, seeking kiss filled with emotion.



Declan locked his arms around Belle’s naked body and lifted her over the lip of the shower stall. His mouth fused to her delicate throat as he pressed kisses up and down the column.

She pulled in a deep breath and latched on to his ass, nails biting, as she dragged him against her. “I need you, Declan. I *need* you.”

He couldn’t stop tasting her. Her sweet body drove him crazy. “You’re sure you’re all right? Not feeling dizzy or too sore?”

“The only thing I’m dizzy for...” she sucked in sharply as he trailed his fingertips down the plane of her stomach and teased her pussy, “is you!”

Lightly pinching her outer pussy lips together, he massaged up and down, stroking her clit that was trapped inside.

“Oh my...god! That feels—”

She broke off on a cry that echoed off the bathroom walls and pressed his need to a burning crescendo. His cock throbbed, jerking against his abs and leaking precum. He’d resisted taking Belle first thing that morning even though he woke with a raging erection.

But she’d given him the come-hither bedroom eyes that started this game. The tender kisses he had planned to deliver until she felt more herself flew out the cabin window into the frosty air because she refused to slow down.

Watching her face, he continued to tease her the same way. Then he eased a finger between her lips—and found her soaking. As he smeared her juices over her clit, she trembled in his grasp.

The dark need to claim her washed over him. In a swift move, he dropped to his knees and buried his tongue in her sweet pussy. Her soft cries strengthened, driving him to sink his tongue deeper inside her.

Passion and desire mingled in his brain, shutting out anything but pleasuring this woman. The charity event, the terror of finding Belle missing...it all faded to the tune of her throaty moans.

When he laved his tongue around her clit, she dug her hand into his shoulder, holding herself upright as her release struck. She bucked her hips. He sucked her clit and held her to his mouth, drawing out her ecstasy until her thighs began to tremor.

With light flicks of his tongue, he brought her down slowly. Her heavy panting breaths made him lift his head. Their gazes met. A blush that wasn't put there by the warm shower colored her beautiful face.

"Is that what you needed, baby?" Slowly, he pushed to his feet and pulled her to him.

She hooked her leg around his thigh. "I don't suppose we have time for more."

"The condoms are in the other room."

A smile spread across her face, and a naughty twinkle hit her eyes. "I'm prepared to be a little late to the brunch if you're up for it."

He curled a hand around her nape, drawing her lips to his. "I'm always up for you."

He growled against her mouth. "Hurry and wash so I can make you even dirtier."

A shudder rippled through her, but she grabbed for the bodywash and wasted no time scrubbing her body. He did the same and in record time they were out of the shower, wrapped in towels and falling into bed. A few feet away, on top of the dresser, was that pair of her panties he'd slyly slipped into his pocket after their first encounter in the garden.

Rolling on a condom took a blink. Spreading Belle's thighs and taking her in a bed for the very first time was an unstoppable force.

She threw her legs around him and rode his cock with each hard plunge. Her tight walls clenched and released around his length. Her tongue tangling with his drew new emotion to the surface.

He cupped her face and looked into her eyes. "I can't walk away from you, Belle. Don't ask me to try."

Her hair tumbled over her eye when she shook her head. "I want more of you, Declan. We have so much to... explore!" Her cry broke off when he thumbed her nipple and ground his cock deep.

His orgasm hung just within reach. One more shove. Two.

"I'm coming!" She threw her head back on a scream of bliss as her release struck.

He thrust his cock to the hilt and let go. For her. With every pulse of his cock, he realized just how close he felt to this woman, how close they'd become in mere days.

By the time they made it to the brunch, everyone was already seated. He walked into the barn with Belle on his arm, and to his shock, applause broke out down the table. All of his teammates watched him lead Belle to the long table.

He raised his voice to carry over the noise. "Thanks, everyone." He pulled out a chair for Belle, and she sank into it. When she looked up at him and joined in the applause with the others, his heart gave a hard kick within his chest like one of those prized horses on the ranch.

"Someone get this guy a drink!"

He took a seat next to Belle, and someone shoved a drink in his hand. The scent of orange juice and gin hit his nose.

He swung his head to the head of the table to meet Ross's gaze. "I thought we didn't drink on the job."

"You're drinking—we aren't. We thought you deserved a little celebratory sip or two today for what you did."

“Good job, rookie!” Boone called out.

This time being called a rookie didn’t carry as much burden as before. Not now that he saw all the grins and admiration in the eyes of his teammates.

Feeling the warmth of camaraderie glide over him, he raised his glass. “I couldn’t have gotten Belle back without all of your backup. To WEST.” He brought the drink to his lips and sipped.

Belle did the same, her eyes sparkling at him over the rim of her glass.

Ross cleared his throat to gain attention again. “We owe one other person a huge pat on the back.” He zeroed in on Belle. “Without your amazing skill, we would have lost so much to that hack. The Wynton family has known your family for decades. Our fathers struck many deals together that put both our families on the Montana map. Now that we know that you’re a genius with an operating system, I’d like to offer you a position on the WEST Protection team in our cybersecurity division.”

Declan set his drink down before he sloshed it all over himself. Belle wasn’t so lucky—she tipped hers over and the fruit juice and alcohol soaked the tablecloth.

Silence fell over the room as everyone listened hard to what was being said. To Declan, he felt like he was witnessing history in the making. A merger between old families that would go down in the company’s books as an important event.

Belle started to speak but sputtered and stopped. She tried again. “I’m honored to be given the offer.” She spread her hands in the air and stared down at them. “Maybe some of you know that my family has enough money that they don’t wish for me to work at all. I’ve only dabbled in technology, though it’s always been a career I’ve been drawn to. But...” she looked at Declan and then around the table. “Trouble has a way of finding me. Are you sure you want me on your team?”

Corrine got up from her seat and circled the table to stand next to Belle. “We know our minds on this matter, Belle. We

need someone with a diabolical mind like yours. Do you have any idea of the magnitude of what you did for our company?”

Belle dipped her head at the praise, a flush creeping up her cheeks that had Declan’s cock pushing harder against his fly.

“And in show of our thanks, we have something for you.” With a flourish, Corrine drew an object from behind her back. She held the white Stetson in front of Belle’s face.

Her jaw dropped.

So did Declan’s. “Hey, why does she get a hat before me?”

Belle accepted the hat and slowly settled it on her head. She sliced a grin his direction. “Because it fits my head!”

Laughter boomed around the room.

His own chuckle rumbled in his chest. Hooking a hand around her neck, he drew her close and kissed her laughing mouth.

More applause broke out, and some people tapped their glasses with flatware.

“Welcome to the team, Belle!” Ross raised his glass to her in tribute, and she gave him a wave and a smile that was sweet enough to bring Declan’s low hiss of need to the edge of his lips.

When chatter resumed around the table, he leaned close to whisper to her. “So you’re a tech genius *and* an heiress.”

She eyed him. “So, you work for WEST Protection and saved the President of the United States *and* kept dozens of planes from crashing.”

He compressed his lips. “I can assure you that there will be a very good benefits package included in this job if you accept.”

She leaned close, staring into his eyes. “I hope that includes some time in the barn...and the hayloft. But not riding horses.”

“Not a requirement.” He noticed that his chuckle lured her even closer until her arm brushed his. “Besides, the only acceptable thing for you to ride is me.”

She shifted in her seat. Pitching her voice low, she murmured, “We’re going to have to keep it clean now that we work together.”

He placed his lips at her ear. “We will be nothing but professional. But when we return to that cabin, I intend to bend you over the table and throw that dress over your hips so I can feel your ass cradling me right before I sink inside your tight pussy.”

Her nails bit into his thigh. “Maybe I’ll even let you borrow my hat for that ride.”

Epilogue

One year later

The memorable scents of cranberry, pine and candle wax flooded the barn. Declan slid his hand into the pocket of his tux jacket to keep from straightening his tie for the tenth time that evening.

If Boone had to fix it for him again, he just might back out of being his best man.

As he took his position at the front of the room, he looked out at the neat rows of chairs filled with his teammates, friends and family. His own parents sat in the front row, grinning ear to ear. On the opposite side of the aisle his bride was about to walk down were Belle's parents.

Boone clapped him on the back. "You good, man?"

He thumbed the brim of his white Stetson. He'd gotten it professionally cleaned just for the wedding. All those months and months of wear and tear on the accessory had left it looking less than perfect. And he wanted everything perfect for their big day.

After all, getting married only happened once in a lifetime—at least for him and Belle.

He gave Boone a nod. "I'm good. No nerves."

"Your tie says otherwise, man. I think you strangled the thing."

He laughed. "Only because I want to look good for her."

The low piano music tinkled throughout the barn they were using as their wedding venue. In the next few days, the space would be transformed to accommodate more guests for the second annual Christmas on the Ranch.

Their lives had come full circle. To think that just a year ago, he and Belle had met in this very room.

Twinkle lights competed with candles. Everyone was dressed to the nines, in sparkling gowns and merry colors. The men looked like a more dapper version of the cowboys that they were first and foremost.

On every corner of the property, guards were posted for the occasion. And the exits were all being manned by the WEST Protection team. Not that Declan was worried about their safety. Not now that Ethan and his fiancée were both locked up.

The music changed to a new tune. This one caused the hair on his neck to prickle with excitement.

The crowd stirred, twisting to look at the back of the room where Belle would make her entrance.

First, Madeline did her maid of honor duty by preceding her up the aisle dressed in icy silver. She threw a wide grin to Declan, and he dropped her a wink.

Then he saw Belle. Dressed in white Christmas lace. Her beautiful face glowing with joy as she met his stare and began her slow walk to meet him and join with him forever as his wife.

His chest swelled with so much love that extended to everyone here in this room acting as witnesses to their union. And especially for the woman he would devote the rest of his life to making feel loved and cherished.

To think it all started with a fake date.

CHECK OUT THE BOOT KNOCKERS
RANCH ON AMAZON!

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Em Petrova

Em Petrova is a USA Today Bestselling Author who was raised by hippies in the wilds of Pennsylvania but told her parents at the age of four she wanted to be a gypsy when she grew up. She has a soft spot for babies, puppies and 90s Grunge music and believes in Bigfoot and aliens. She started writing at the age of twelve and prides herself on making her characters larger than life and her sex scenes hotter than hot.

She burst into the world of publishing in 2010 after having five beautiful bambinos and figuring they were old enough to get their own snacks while she pounds away at the keys. In her not-so-spare time, she is fur-mommy to a Labradoodle named Daisy Hasselhoff.

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