



HARLEQUIN  
DESIRE



TEXAS CATTLEMAN'S CLUB

# Keeping a Little Secret

CYNTHIA ST. AUBIN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The background of the cover features a man and a woman in a romantic embrace. The woman is wearing a strapless, floor-length red sequined gown and a large necklace. The man is wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt. They are in a room with ornate, classical-style furniture and a display case filled with various items, possibly a jewelry store or a high-end boutique. A yellow geometric graphic is in the top left corner.

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***When it came to Tiffany Winters, he didn't have a soft spot.***

He had a blind spot.

Preston pushed himself up on his palms and gazed down at her, not having the faintest idea what to say or do next.

Tiffany swept a lock of hair away from his forehead, her heavy-lidded eyes fixed on his.

“We’ll figure it out, Preston. It’s not like I have suitors lining up at the door. And a few months from now, I suspect the dating pool is going to get *very* shallow.”

The thought of her as she would look six or even seven months pregnant was having quite the opposite effect on him. Her athletic frame filling out with new curves, glowing like a goddess.

Dear Reader,

They had me at chocolate.

Having never written in a continuity series before, I'll admit to being a little bit nervous about the idea of working with preexisting characters. *What if they don't like me? What if I scare them away with the weird faces I make while I'm writing?* But when I heard that Tiffany Winters was a chocolatier whose impulsive decisions occasionally caused her a bit of trouble, let's just say that I knew we were going to get along *just* fine.

Of course, Tiffany wasn't the only cook making a mess of the kitchen. Ambitious CEO-to-be Preston Del Rio has never been one to stand on ceremony when he sees something he wants, and he's been wanting Tiffany for a *very* long time. Because everything is bigger in Texas—even the family feuds—Preston seizes his chance at his sister's engagement party and he and Tiffany turn up the heat big-time. Only now that she's had a taste, Tiffany's craving for the Del Rio Romeo refuses to be ignored, and what their night of passion created could be either the sweetest of surprises or a recipe for disaster.

Happy reading!

*Cynthia*

# Keeping a Little Secret

*Cynthia St. Aubin*

 HARLEQUIN  
DESIRE

**Cynthia St. Aubin** wrote her first play at age eight and made her brothers perform it for the admission price of gum wrappers. When she was tall enough to reach the top drawer of her parents' dresser, she began pilfering her mother's secret stash of romance novels and has been in love with love ever since. A confirmed cheese addict, she lives in Texas with a handsome musician.

**Books by Cynthia St. Aubin**

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*Corner Office Confessions*

*Secret Lives After Hours*

*Bad Boy with Benefits*

***The Renaud Brothers***

*Blue Blood Meets Blue Collar*

*Trapped with Temptation*

***Texas Cattleman's Club: Diamonds & Dating Apps***

*Keeping a Little Secret*

Visit the Author Profile page at [Harlequin.com](http://Harlequin.com) for more titles.

You can also find Cynthia St. Aubin on Facebook, along with other Harlequin Desire authors, at [Facebook.com/HarlequinDesireAuthors!](https://www.facebook.com/HarlequinDesireAuthors/)

To anyone who's ever found their calling after trying to make all the wrong ones fit, and to those who are still looking. Curiosity is your copilot. Grab some snacks and enjoy the ride!

### **Acknowledgments**

First and foremost, my undying gratitude to my incredibly patient husband, Ted, world's best cat dad, breakfast maker and song writer. I love you with my whole squishy heart.

#Fated

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Finally, my heartfelt appreciation for readers everywhere who make it possible for me to keep my cats in kibble. Your love is everything.

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# One

We need to talk.

Preston Del Rio's stomach knotted as he read the text glowing beneath the rosewood table in his father's corner office.

He hated surprises.

Ever since the new dating app kismet's "SurpriseMe!" function had set off the chain of events that led to his sister getting engaged to the second eldest son of their family's bitter rival, it had been one unwelcome revelation after another.

The heirloom Del Rio necklace being found in the basement of the Winters ancestral estate.

The letter explaining how it got there.

The implosion of the tenuous truce between the Winterses and Del Rios.

And now this.

Stuck in an endless one-on-one meeting, listening to his father drone on while his brain whipped itself into a frenzy over a text from his recent one-night stand.

Before Preston could reply, his phone vibrated with a second message.

Cattleman's Club. 8:00 p.m. by the statue. You know the one.

Oh, he knew it all right.

Six weeks earlier, in the patch of shadow cast by the statue's imposing form, he had kissed Tiffany Winters.

If kissing had been *all* they'd done the night of Maggie's engagement party to Jericho Winters, Tiffany might not be texting him at all.

But what had started as a flirtatious reprisal of the role that had earned him the nickname Romeo Del Rio in high school

had ended with them making out behind the Cattleman's Club's iconic bronze Texas longhorn.

From there, they'd barely made it to her house before their clothing disappeared along with their sanity.

Preston's blood heated at the memory as his hand tightened on the phone.

I'll be there, he texted in return.

"Coffee?" A gentle tap on Preston's shoulder brought his attention back to the present, where his father's executive assistant held a copper carafe in the golden afternoon light. Though it gleamed like manna from heaven, Preston shook his head.

His half-finished mug of black brew had turned into acid, eating at his gut. His third of the meeting, it failed to deliver the jolt he needed after another night of less than five hours' sleep. Despite the family feud, he'd been counting on using this evening to catch up on the notes Jericho Winters had given him regarding their shared refinery optimization project.

Staring down at Tiffany's message, he felt those hopes evaporating.

"...son?"

Preston realized—too late—that his father had asked him a question. He glanced up to find Fernando Del Rio III looking at him expectantly. In his late fifties, he still had the face of a king. Wise, but shrewd. The crinkles at the corners of his eyes did nothing to soften his iron gaze. Ditto for the subtle patches of silver sprouting at his temples and flecking the dark goatee framing his downturned mouth.

"I'm sorry, Dad." Preston set his phone facedown on his lap. "Can you repeat that?"

His father rested his forearms on the table where they always sat for these weekly chats. He had taken off his suit jacket and rolled the sleeves of his custom dress shirt to his elbows. His habit when the two of them were alone.

“Is the subject of my retirement failing to keep your attention, son?”

Oh, the acute irony of his father having to ask this.

Since he'd sat on his father's lap at his first board meeting for the petrochemical company Fernando had turned into an empire, all Preston had wanted was to someday sit at the head of the table. He'd wanted it so much, he'd welded himself to his father's footsteps. Choosing the same alma mater, the same major, playing the positions on the same sports teams and mirroring the same monkish devotion to his drive.

Here he was, poised for the very moment he'd been dreaming of, and all he could think about was how good Tiffany Winters had felt in his arms.

“Of course not, Dad. I've just had a lot on my plate now that Diamond Gate put Project Optima on hold.”

Saying the name the press had chosen for the ongoing battle involving the Del Rio family jewels set Preston's teeth on edge. The discovery of their family heirloom in the basement of the Winterses' ancestral estate had been the death knell to the brief cease-fire that his sister's engagement to Jericho Winters had wrought. And the mediation required to broker peace, as good as a brick wall for the energy optimization project Preston and Jericho had been working on together.

“That's exactly what I wanted to talk to you about, son.” Fernando leaned back in his chair. The smile that slid onto his face did nothing to release the tension gathering in Preston's chest. “I think I found somebody else to help us get Project Optima off the ground.”

Preston stared at his father. “You know Maggie is still engaged to Jericho Winters, right?”

“But not married yet. And especially with how quickly they rushed into things...well. As we know, a lot can happen between a proposal and the walk down the aisle.”

Preston couldn't believe what he was hearing. Or he could, but thought that at least where Maggie was concerned, their father had put his feelings about the Winters family aside.

“You’re suggesting that we cut Maggie’s fiancé out of a project he came up with for our benefit?” Preston asked.

“I’m suggesting that, with a project as important and vital as Optima, you have to be willing to look past familial concerns to identify the best potential partner.”

*Familial concerns.*

A wild understatement for the generations-long feud that had begun with Preston’s great-grandfather Fernando the first, and Teddy Winters, his much-loathed adversary.

“And what if I think Jericho is the best potential partner?”

His father’s expression hardened. “Then I’d say your soft spot for the Winters family makes me concerned about whether you’re truly ready to step into the role of CEO.”

Retirement. The carrot his father had been dangling in front of him as long as Preston could remember.

A finish line that seemed to recede into the distance no matter how hard Preston ran to reach it. All through college, he had given up friends. A social life. Even relationships, save for one completely disastrous and short-lived engagement to a classmate he’d met through his father’s friend.

To have doubts about his commitment to the company thrown in his face after all that left Preston bitter and hollow.

“There’s certainly been a good deal of talk about your and Tiffany Winters’s interaction at your sister’s engagement party.”

Preston’s palms began to sweat against the wooden arms of the chair.

“There’s always been a good deal of talk about everything concerning our interactions with the Winterses. Maybe I just recognize that prolonging this ridiculous feud is only poisoning the well we all drink from here in Royal, Texas.”

Preston knew this wasn’t strictly the truth, but neither was it a lie. When it came to the Winters family, his father’s ability to see clearly would always be suspect.

“It seems you’re not in the right frame of mind to discuss this at the moment.” The icy calm in his father’s voice preceded an inevitable dismissal. “Why don’t you call it a day. Go for a run. Give you time to sort out your thoughts.”

Priorities, more like. Suggesting both solitude and physical exercise had ever been his father’s resolution to conflict. Or to give him the chance to realize that he was the source of it.

Preston had no intention of taking his father’s suggestion, but knew to argue with him further would be pointless. Better to take the opportunity to make a smooth exit.

“Sounds good,” he said. “See you tomorrow.”

“You’re not coming over for dinner tonight?”

*Shit.* He’d entirely forgotten the plans his mother and Maggie had made earlier via their WhatsApp family thread.

“I’m afraid I can’t,” Preston said, tucking his phone in his pocket. “I have some work to catch up on. I’ll let Mom know.”

Fernando studied him, his dark brows lowered over narrowed eyes. “All right, son.”

Preston was at the door to his father’s cavernous office, nearly home free when a coda was added.

“Think about what I said.”

As if he hadn’t already.

As if he hadn’t been thinking about it since he was just a boy, when his father stood beside him before the windows of this very office, looking out over their vast oil refinery and the flat sprawl of Texas countryside beyond.

As if he didn’t know exactly how much he stood to lose if he lost his father’s faith.

Preston glanced at the digital readout as he slid behind the wheel of his Alfa Romeo. Just after 6:00 p.m.

He’d stop by home first.

Shower the day off him and change out of his *Future CEO of Del Rio Group* attire.

Two hours had seemed an eternity, and yet, the fizz of excitement made the minutes pass in a blur once he'd arrived home.

Every time he glanced at the clock on his phone and found more minutes gone, Preston was taken aback by the fierce pulse of pleasure.

He'd known that he wanted to see Tiffany Winters again.

But until her text, he just hadn't known how much.

## Two

Tiffany Winters sat in the parking lot outside the Texas Cattleman's Club, keeping her eyes trained skyward until she saw the first star wink into existence.

She noticed things like this now. The first hint of red on the old oak tree. Sunset's last wisp of orange. Things she would have missed in the hustle and bustle of the life she'd forever think about as *before*.

Before she knew she was pregnant with Preston Del Rio's baby.

Looking back, there had been at least a dozen signs she'd also overlooked in the daily whirl of work, family and school.

Signs, like brown sugar fudge.

Long one of her favorite staples at Chocolate Fix, it had been the first time she'd experienced a strong repulsion to a familiar and formerly loved smell. So strong, she'd dumped a whole batch from the steam kettle before starting over and nearly dumping a second when she was interrupted by Moira, who arrived for work and insisted she neither smelled nor tasted anything different.

Then, it had been the dizzy spells.

She'd be standing there at the counter, packing an order of truffles, when the brightly colored array of confections would start to swim like fractals in a kaleidoscope and she had to brace herself to avoid sliding sideways off the planet.

Her eating habits had never been stellar and her sleep cycles less than reliable, and when she began devoting late nights to working on her MBA, Tiffany had begun to suspect it might be her ever-erratic schedule had finally caught up with her.

But...no.

She had received the final word on the matter three days after her missed period. Out of desperation, after work she drove thirty miles out of town to buy a pregnancy test.

Because God forbid any of the Royal locals see it in her shopping basket at the Kroger's.

Impatient creature she had always been, Tiffany had elected to take the test in the women's restroom before even leaving the store.

Three minutes and two pink lines later, her life changed forever.

Tonight, she'd be changing Preston's.

The thought brought her a pang of guilt as she watched his black sports car pull into the parking lot. From her vantage, she could just make him out through the tinted glass, finishing a conversation on his phone. Two minutes passed before he disconnected, opened the driver's-side door and walked to the appointed spot.

Tiffany bit her lower lip, experiencing a keen ache in her middle that had nothing to do with her pelvis expanding to make room for the life growing there.

Preston Del Rio moved like a man who owned the world.

And why wouldn't he?

Poised to take over a suite of companies conservatively valued in the billions, he could buy a good chunk of it. Already, he'd earned a reputation as a worthy successor to his father, Fernando Del Rio III. Shrewd as he was ruthless. Brutal as he was brilliant.

For one glorious night, she'd tasted it all.

She supposed it was time to pay the piper.

Flipping her sun visor down, she checked herself in the anemic glow of the car's interior light.

Was it her imagination that painted smudges beneath her brown eyes? Only her imagination that thickened her eyelids



and leached color from her normally golden complexion? She honestly couldn't tell.

That was the thing about secrets.

They transformed you from the inside out.

Fluffing her hair and pinching her cheeks, she dropped her keys into her purse and got on with it.

Whether out of politeness or ceremony, Preston didn't turn to face her until she was a couple of yards away.

When he did, Tiffany felt the bottom drop out of her stomach for a second time.

That damn lopsided grin. The silky Belgian cocoa hair falling into his hazel eyes. The cocky smirk lifting one corner of lips she could remember meeting hers for the first time in this very spot.

Now, they shaped the word *wow*, before he caught himself, cleared his throat and straightened.

This had to be a kindness on his part. Tiffany felt about as far from *wow* as a body could get in the billowy high-waisted black palazzo pants, plain white tank and chunky cardigan that had become her uniform when she was in town. Though she knew for a fact she wasn't yet showing, she couldn't shake the fact that a glowing neon sign blinked over her head.

"Thanks for coming," she said. "I'm sorry for the short notice."

"You didn't give me much of a choice."

He was correct, she knew. Her message had been deliberately vague. Provocative enough as to ensure his compliance.

"Should we walk?" she asked, cutting her eyes toward the building. The TCC would be quiet on a weekday night, but what represented neutral ground gave no guarantees of staying that way as the night wore on.

"Depends."

He leaned in, and she was overcome with an ambrosiac mix of his cologne, laundry detergent and clean, impossibly smooth skin. That this had replaced brown sugar fudge as her favorite smell in the entire world had to be down to some kind of oxytocin-induced mania.

“On what?” she asked.

“Whether this walk will be ending the way our last one did.” He flashed her a smile that threatened to turn her knees to water.

“That’s kind of what I need to talk to you about.” Tiffany hugged her cardigan tighter around her, her palm pressed against her still-flat abdomen as she turned and started to walk before his scent could drive her to acts of desperation.

Preston’s dark hair fell in his eyes as he cast a sideways glance at her. “I’m game if you are.”

“I’m pregnant.” The words fell from her lips, completely preempting the careful speech she had labored over for hours, days even.

Preston stopped in his tracks. “What?”

“I’m pregnant, Preston.”

In the waning light from the clubhouse that had been Royal’s social hub for generations, he turned to her.

“You’re…”

“Pregnant,” she said quickly, beyond ready to have this part of the evening out of the way so they could make a plan.

He reached up to brush his hair out of his face. “But how?”

Tiffany arched an eyebrow at him. “Do you honestly not remember, or are you asking me to explain the mechanics to you?”

“It was only the one time,” he said. “And I, *we*—”

“Had unprotected sex?” she finished for him. “You want to guess how many babies have been conceived the same way?” That the memory should fill her with such smug pleasure felt

entirely inappropriate to the gravity of the moment. “And anyway, it wasn’t one time, it was one *night*.”

A night she remembered all too well.

Their conversation at the bar after a sumptuous dinner. How effortlessly it had turned into a flirtation. From a flirtation into a dance. A dance that turned into a stroll in the balmy late September evening. How the stroll had turned into a kiss. How the kiss had become...*more*. Hands everywhere, a brushfire burning out of control. Unsatisfied with frenzied groping, they had stumbled to his car and laid down several feet of rubber exiting the parking lot.

Luckily, the event had coincided with the commencement of the fireworks that had drawn everyone onto the sprawling deck and sloping field beyond the clubhouse.

What had occurred at her house after that, she couldn’t bear to think about, lest she lose her nerve.

Only the most memorable night of her entire life.

Until the one she’d spent cradling a positive pregnancy test in her hand.

They’d been so stupid. So incredibly reckless.

“You’re pregnant,” Preston repeated.

“Yes.”

He took a step closer, his breath warm on her cheeks as he gazed down into her eyes. “You’re pregnant with *my* baby?”

How she wished those words didn’t turn her insides to melted butter. How she wished she could erase the flash of fear in his eyes when she nodded. “I am.

“I’m going to have it,” she added before he could betray anything else. “But how involved you want to be is entirely up to you.”

“You’re sure?”

It was almost cute, his naïvety.

Like she hadn't spent every single minute of her life thinking about this from the second she knew.

"I'm sure." Tiffany forced her boots to begin moving toward the creek. "I feel like we shouldn't announce it before Maggie and Jericho's wedding. I don't want to steal their thunder."

"Agreed," he said, falling into step beside her again. "How far along, exactly?"

"Six weeks," she said.

"Have you been to a doctor yet?"

"Not yet," she admitted. "HIPAA laws notwithstanding, I wanted to talk with you before anyone spotted me in the ob-gyn's office on a regular basis."

Was it relief, this easing of tension on his face? Relief that it was still a secret? Or maybe relief that she'd approached this so tactically.

"Does anyone else know?" he asked, answering her question.

"Alisha."

The corner of his mouth curled upward. "And she hasn't tried to run me over with her Speedster yet, so that's a good sign."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but she wouldn't consider that worth risking her custom paint job." She smirked at him. "Also, I swore her to secrecy."

"We both know how good she is at that." He slid her a sideways glance.

Tiffany didn't know if he intended it to be a dig, but it certainly felt like one. That Alisha and their brother Marcus had originally lied, not only about the appearance of the Del Rio necklace, but the confession letter from Eliza Boudreaux explaining how it came to be in the basement of the Winters ancestral home was the reason the ugly wound between their families had been torn open afresh. The upcoming negotiation

that Jack Chowdhry had stepped up to assist with did little to ease her mind.

“She and Tremaine seem to be doing well,” Preston said after an awkward silence.

Tiffany felt a twinge of uncharacteristic envy at the mention of the new man in her big sister’s life. Six years Tiffany’s senior, her beautiful, brilliant sister always seemed to be so much further ahead. From her long-legged stride to her voracious appetite for knowledge and her keen head for business. Tiffany couldn’t help but feel she was forever scrambling in her wake, gratefully following the path she’d already blazed.

But then, this was the case with all her siblings. Jericho had his thriving green architecture firm and was soon to be married to the love of his life. Trey had his ranch and now had Misha, a wildly tech-savvy partner, to go with it. Even Marcus, and his own successful luxury home goods business, had a new passionate partner by his side with Jessica.

Meanwhile, Tiffany had done things backward as usual. The business before the MBA. The baby before the relationship. Not that Preston had even grazed against that idea.

“They’re ridiculously happy, all right.”

Preston slowed at her side. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I haven’t even asked you how you’re feeling about all this.” The genuine concern in his dark, intelligent eyes was a balm for her aching heart.

“Freaked out. Tired. Excited. Incredibly irresponsible.” Treacherous tears glazed her eyes and she turned away to look out on the crystalline trickle of water.

Warm hands landed on her shoulders and turned her to face Preston. “It took two of us to create this situation, and there will be two of us working together to figure out the best possible solution. I know I don’t have the best track record, but I promise you I’m going to be here for you, Tiffany.”

She wished she could believe him.

But he was right. An ever-changing cast of Royal's most beautiful debutantes had been his leading ladies throughout high school. And though she'd relied on the gossip mill for information about his exploits in college, she was aware of his engagement to the iconic Instagram influencer Sunny Rothschild. Even that hadn't stuck.

"I'm okay, Preston. Really, I am. I'll have plenty of help. Alisha has already assigned herself favorite aunt status, and my mom has been hinting about more grandbabies because Trey's son, Dez, is such an amazing kid. This doesn't need to affect your career plans in any way."

Tiffany didn't fail to notice the subtle bob of his Adam's apple nor the flexing of his jaw.

He hadn't made it this far in his considerations yet. Now that he had, the fear was plain in his face. It didn't take a psychic to figure out how his father would react to this news.

"Just let me know how I can help," he said.

*Hold me*, she silently willed him. *Take me in your arms and make me feel like everything will be all right*. It was a silly, romantic whimsy to wish for this. Longing to be in his arms was exactly what put her in this position.

"I will," she said. Her phone chirped in the pocket of her cardigan and Tiffany drew it out to see a text from Alisha.

All good? Because I'm at the diner and I can be there in five minutes.

Tiffany smiled down at the screen. This was just like her sister. Despite her insistence that she didn't need backup, Alisha had stationed herself at the Royal Diner in case she needed to swoop to the rescue.

As she so often had.

All good, Tiffany quickly answered. Will stop by after.

"Everything okay?" Preston asked.

Feeling her insides flutter at the sexy rasp in his voice, Tiffany resolved to get herself out of here sooner than later.

“Yep.” She dropped the device back into her pocket and forced a smile onto her face. “I do need to get back to Chocolate Fix, though.”

He lifted a dark eyebrow. “This late? And I thought I was a workaholic.”

Tiffany turned and began strolling back toward the parking lot. “I’m afraid so. I’ve got a huge order coming up for Misha’s employee appreciation party at the k!smet headquarters.”

Technically, not a lie. But not the full truth, either. She needed to stop back by the shop, only to make sure Moira and Steph had their marching orders for the mountain of prep that needed to happen.

“Things at the shop going well?” he asked.

This felt like a bone tossed in her direction. Compared to a petrochemical business behemoth like the Del Rio Group, Chocolate Fix might as well be a lemonade stand.

But she’d had hopes it wouldn’t always be that way. Getting her MBA was only part of the phased rollout she had expanding her little shop to a national brand.

Licensing to put her chocolates in high-end restaurants. Gourmet grocery outlets. Finally, the thing she was most excited about, the nonprofit she planned to establish to provide financial support to female cocoa farmers in underdeveloped communities.

All her carefully laid plans. Her life just taking a shape that resembled her. To make her mark not only within the Winters family, but the world.

Once again, she’d managed to derail herself.

“Going good,” she said. “Super busy, but I’m not complaining.”

“That’s great,” he said. They both slowed when they had once again reached the statue where all their troubles began.

A lone cricket that had survived the first freeze chirred from a clump of ornamental sweet grass bordering the gigantic

bronze bull.

Singing its heart out for no one.

The thought pierced her with acute sorrow she decided to blame on hormones.

Preston's eyes lit with an odd glow as he captured a tendril of brown hair and tucked it behind her ear. Electricity danced on her skin at the contact.

"Well, there's one thing I know for sure," he said, leaning in until she was washed with another heady wave of his intoxicating scent on the cool night breeze.

"What's that?"

He fixed her with a boyish grin that revealed the dimple in his chin to full, devastating effect. "This is going to be one good-looking kid."

Tension made them both laugh harder than the joke deserved, but it felt good to share this one, warm thing.

"Preston, I—"

"I was thinking," he said at the exact same moment.

Tiffany's heart beat at the base of her throat. "Go ahead," she insisted.

"Why don't I wait here for a second?" he said. "Let you leave first? Just in case..."

"Right," she said preemptively.

Preston didn't need to finish the sentence. All it would take was for one of the many Royal gossip mavens to spot them out on a romantic stroll together and the rumor mill would begin working overtime.

Hell, she'd scarcely stilled the tongues that had been wagging since they both went missing from Maggie and Jericho's engagement party.

But it still stung.

Tiffany located her keys in her cardigan pocket. "I guess I'll be in touch then?"



“Sounds good,” he said.

Her bottom lip began to quiver the second her back was to him. By the time she reached her car, her cheeks were wet with tears.

A fresh wave came as she turned over the engine, unable to banish the question that made her heart feel like a lump of lead in her chest.

She wondered just how much of this journey she would walk alone.

## Three

Preston sat in his car, watching the foot traffic at the edge of Royal's quaint downtown area and psyching himself up for the task ahead.

His stomach growled its protest at having been neglected in favor of squeezing in a couple more meetings last minute. Lack of sleep and warm air blasting from the car vents made his eyes feel grainy and dry.

Running on empty had become his default setting in the last year of attempting to prove his readiness to take on the role of CEO, but he owed last night's restlessness to a completely different cause.

Tiffany Winters.

Pregnant.

His mind still refused to wrap itself around this fact.

Which was why he was parked outside Odds & Ends, Alisha Winters's sharply curated antique furniture/consignment shop.

Enough procrastinating.

He killed the engine and got out, taking a deep breath of the cool autumn evening air before facing his fate.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Romeo Del Rio." Alisha Winters stood behind the counter, the angular set of her jaw and arms folded across her chest confirming what he already suspected to be the case.

He had royally blown it with Tiffany.

"Please don't call me that," he said, attempting to summon the proper amount of contrition to the request.

"Would you prefer *father-to-be*?"

Preston winced.

Words that were so familiar but completely abstract had taken on new meaning.

“I’d prefer Preston.”

“I know what I’d like to call you,” she muttered under her breath. Turning her gaze back to the paperwork and iPad she’d been focused on when he came in, she allowed him to stand there, squirming for several awkward moments.

Preston planted his hands on the counter, refusing to be dismissed. “Can you please just tear me a new asshole and get it over with?”

Alisha finally looked him in the eye. “You *want* me to eviscerate you?”

“Immediately,” Preston said. “If not sooner.”

“Why?” she demanded.

“Because I really need to talk.”

He had arrived at the idea of coming here by process of elimination. Maggie had always been his compass and his confidant. Both roles she largely had to abdicate during the course of her whirlwind courtship and subsequent engagement to Jericho.

She hadn’t even busted him for missing dinner last night. An offense that would have earned him at least a WTF text during any other phase of their lives.

He had thought about reaching out to Tremaine. They’d met in college and stayed best friends after. Preston had always valued his analytical mind and no bullshit approach to life. But bringing him into the loop would mean one more person who knew, and that only meant more opportunity for word of Tiffany’s pregnancy to get out.

Which was when the idea popped into his head.

Why not talk to somebody who *already* knew?

If he couldn’t talk to his own sister, he’d do the next best thing.

He’d talk to Tiffany’s.

Standing in Alisha's arctic chill, he was rapidly reconsidering this sentiment.

"You need to talk?" She set the iPad aside hard enough for Preston to worry about the delicate components. "Cool. Let's talk. How about you start by telling me what the hell you were thinking when you slept with my sister?"

"I wasn't," he ventured.

"Damn right you weren't." Alisha's tawny skin took on a more russet hue as her cheeks flushed. She came around the counter, her face mask-tight and hands balled into fists at her sides. "Look, I get it. It was a wild night. The dancing, the drinking... But with all the women available at the engagement party, you seriously thought of Tiffany as the best option for a random hookup?"

"It may have been a hookup," he admitted, pushing a hand through his hair. "But it wasn't random."

She cocked her head of onyx curls. "You're saying you were interested in Tiffany *before* you were both full of champagne and stupid?"

His chest deflated with a long exhale.

He'd come this far. "Just because our families have let this ridiculous animosity fester for generations doesn't mean I'm blind, Alisha. Tiffany has always done her own thing and I really admire that."

She studied him with leonine eyes that gave him the eerie feeling she could see straight through his skull. "And how long have you been admiring? Because I'm really hoping the answer isn't something like 'after the hors d'oeuvres but before the soup course' at the engagement party."

Funny thing was, he actually remembered when it had started.

With the senior drama class he'd taken to get out of honors English Lit. He hadn't known Tiffany Winters was also enrolled in the drama program until halfway through the semester when Mr. Overton, their instructor, announced that Tiffany needed volunteers to help build the set for the updated

version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* she was student directing for her freshman class. The strength of Preston's reaction to the tragedy had surprised him. He'd even earned detention by walking out in the middle of a rehearsal.

Only later had he identified its source.

His unrequited crush on the doe-eyed beauty who had always smiled shyly at him despite their family's rancor. Knowing that he couldn't so much as wave to Tiffany without both their fathers finding out made Preston want to break things.

Starting with the stupid rule that Del Rios didn't date Winterses.

As always, his sister had beaten him to the punch. Not only dating a Winters, but getting engaged to one. Preston had been naive enough to believe that might actually change something. At Maggie's engagement party, he'd been foolish enough to act on the magnetic attraction that had drawn him toward Tiffany for years. Only for their families to resume their endless wrangling in the aftermath.

Maybe they'd both known it was inevitable.

Maybe that was why they'd gone as far and as fast as they had.

Because the idea of unpacking this entire story made him feel instantly exhausted, Preston simply said, "Before I left for college."

Alisha's icy demeanor softened at this. "You're telling me you had a crush on Tiffany when she was a teenager?"

"We were both teenagers, if you'll remember."

Alisha glared at him. "I remember you showing up at every single dance and football game with a different debutante on your arm."

"Most of them the daughters of whichever oil baron my father happened to be courting at the time," Preston pointed out.

“As sorry as I am that was the case, this isn’t high school anymore, Preston. And there’s a lot more at stake than a date to the homecoming dance.”

Irritation singed the edges of his fraying patience. “Why do you think I’m here?”

“Because you need my help redeeming yourself from the absolute shit show of a performance the other night?”

He didn’t bother denying it.

“I guess I was kind of caught off guard? I’m not exactly sure how you’re supposed to react when you get that kind of news.”

Alisha snorted. “Not acting like a goddamn robot would have been a good start.”

It hadn’t been the first time he’d experienced this problem.

When he’d broken things off with Sunny, his one failed attempt at a long-term relationship, he’d been so concerned about sparing her feelings, she hadn’t actually understood that he was breaking up with her. She’d shown up at his door the following morning with coffee in hand and a solicitous expression on her face.

Round two hadn’t been nearly so amicable.

“Okay. Yes. I think we’ve thoroughly established that I fucked up. What I need to know is how *not* to do that.” Preston held out his hands in supplication. “You know her better than anyone in the world, Alisha. I don’t want to force my way into her life, but I want to be there for her. And for my child.”

*My child.*

This was the first time he’d spoken these words aloud and doing so filled him with a gust of protective warmth. He wanted to be there in ways his father never had been. He just had no idea how he was going to do that *and* take over running the Del Rio Group.

“Step one,” she said. “Tiffany is trying to run a business *while* getting her MBA. Now she’s going to be doing both

those things while trying to gestate your child. She doesn't need a man. She needs a co-parent."

"Co-parent," Preston repeated. "Got it."

"Step two," Alisha said. "Follow me."

Preston did as ordered, trailing her toward the back of her shop where a long glass case of jewelry and other smaller but expensive items were displayed. His heart began to hammer in his chest when she unlocked the case holding a small selection of diamond engagement rings. He felt a rush of relief when Alisha bypassed them and picked up a gleaming silver rattle.

She held it up by the intricately carved handle.

"Step two. You're going to tell me what incredibly thoughtful sentiment you would like engraved on this and then you're going to come back in half an hour to find it gift wrapped and ready to deliver to a woman who is currently testing out different colors of beige for a nursery."

The mental image slammed into him with such a fierce tenderness, it rocked him back on his heels. "You really think she won't mind my showing up unannounced?"

"Showing up unannounced *with a present*." She shrugged her elegant shoulders. "It worked for the magi."

Preston followed her up to the counter where Alisha waited with a pencil in hand to take down the requested sentiment. He dragged the sleep-deprived depths of his mind and was about to resort to an internet search when Friar Lawrence rode to the rescue. Preston recited the line with slight alterations for context. "May 'this alliance may so happy prove, to turn our households' rancor to pure love.'"

Alisha blinked at him. "And here I was hoping you didn't serve up a *Fight Club* quote." Alisha snatched an Odds & Ends branded notepad and scratched a hasty scrawl onto the first page.

"Sometimes I even surprise myself." He reached into his back pocket to pull out his wallet. "How much do I owe you?"

Returning to her station behind the counter, she set the rattle on a padded black velvet jewelry board. “You’re in luck,” she said. “You qualify for the father-to-be discount.”

Heat baked from beneath his collar. They finished the transaction and he walked to The Eatery for a mood-enhancing coffee while he waited. Alisha was with another customer when he returned, but cut her eyes toward a box on the counter, beautifully wrapped with a silver bow and mint-green ribbon.

Neutral colors.

He ducked his head in gratitude and saw her mouth two words on his way to the door. “Good luck.”

He sure as hell needed it.

Pulling up to the curb in front of Tiffany’s home, Preston endured a tidal wave of sensory memory. As her house was closer to the Texas Cattleman’s Club than his own, they had opted to drive here, fueled by their impatient, mad passion. He hadn’t truly appreciated how beautiful it was, his attention being otherwise engaged when they had arrived that night.

The ivy crawling up either side of the main bank of windows had just begun to go shades of red and gold at the edges. Roses grew wild on trellises in the side yard. The brick had been treated with a technique he recognized from the home-flipping shows he sometimes watched when he couldn’t sleep. Chalky white in some places with patches of red and brown in others. Against freshly painted black shutters, the effect was cozy and bewitching. Cottagecore at its finest.

He turned off the engine and opened the door, grinning as he heard the bass thump of nightclub music drifting from the open windows. Gift in hand, he approached the front door with the nervous gait of a prom date.

How might their lives have been different if he’d been allowed to ask her? She had been a freshman when he was a senior and the gap would have raised some eyebrows, but not enough to stop him had his father not been the source of his hesitation.



He pressed the glowing blue circle of the app-based doorbell and was surprised when no chime sounded. He tried again to the same effect.

Preston tapped on the glass door and waited, but no answer came.

Trying the door handle, he found it unlocked.

How could she just leave the front of her house unprotected like this? The window was wide open, and the music loud enough that she couldn't even hear if someone just decided to let himself in.

Instead of going inside, Preston stalked around the side of the house to where the loudest of the music seemed to be emanating.

There, just outside the golden beam of light spilling from another open window, he spotted Tiffany Winters.

Dancing.

He stood transfixed, unable to tear his eyes away from the sight before him even to announce himself. Her hips rolling and undulating in an earthy rhythm, her thighs flexing beneath the frayed ends of her denim cutoffs. Her breasts swaying beneath the thin fabric of her white tank top. Chocolate-brown tendrils of hair whipping free of the messy pile atop her head, her cheeks flushed against the dark crescents of lashes fanning against them.

Tiffany wasn't just glowing, she was *radiating*. Giving off waves of sensual earth goddess energy as she moved her body like an enchantress. The song hit its bridge and her lips parted, the blunt edge of a paintbrush rising to hover before her mouth like a microphone.

He couldn't much hear her above the thumping bass, but he smiled anyway, intensely grateful that he had taken Alisha's advice to drop by.

The song ended, and with it the spell.

Tiffany's eyelids fluttered open. She looked straight at Preston, leaped back about a yard and emitted an ear-piercing

shriek. Preston fumbled the box, nearly dropping it before he recovered his coordination.

The music ceased abruptly as Tiffany stamped over to the window. A radioactive wash of red stretched from her forehead to her chest.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she demanded.

Preston opened his mouth to speak, but she kept rolling, stabbing the air with the paintbrush for emphasis. “You can’t just sneak up on me like that. And why are you just lurking there outside my window? Do you have any idea how creepy that is?”

“I—the front door—I rang, but—”

“Wait. Where are you parked?”

“On the curb out front—”

“Shit!” She disappeared from the window and reappeared seconds later, flustered and breathless. “Well, come on. We need to get your car off the street before the neighbors see it.”

Preston sprinted back to the front of her house and unlocked his car with the key fob before pulling it in next to her Jeep in the garage. The door leading from the garage to the kitchen stood ajar.

He found her standing in front of the open fridge, guzzling what looked like sweet tea from a Mason jar. She was breathing hard when she finished, holding the tea out to him in silent invitation.

Preston accepted it more out of solidarity than thirst but found the brew to be strong and lightly sweet...unlike the tea-flavored sugar syrup that many of the restaurants in Royal favored.

“Thanks,” he said, handing it back to her. Tiffany took several more swallows before placing it back in the fridge.

“Last time, I had to tell everyone that my Jeep hadn’t started, and you’d been kind enough to loan me your car so I could get home.”

It took him a moment to realize she was talking about the engagement party and her having to explain to nosy neighbors what his car had been doing in her driveway. They'd been so mad for each other it hadn't even occurred to them.

As if strung together on a fishing line, memories of that night came in quick succession, prompted by the surroundings in which they had occurred. The granite counter of the large kitchen island where they now stood—where he had set her down to align their mouths. The wall connecting her dining room to the living room—where they nearly knocked a family picture off the wall while fumbling at each other's buttons and zippers. The leather living room couch—where they'd landed first but ended up rolling to the floor in their frenzy. The hallway leading to her bedroom, which had seemed miles long in their haste to reach a large horizontal surface.

He was glad he at least had the presence of mind to stop what they started outside the Cattleman's Club. The thought of his future son or daughter having been conceived against a wall set his teeth on edge.

"What's wrong with your doorbell?" he asked.

"My doorbell?" she asked.

"I rang your doorbell when I got here but it didn't make a sound."

"Huh," she said, fishing her phone from the back pocket of her cutoffs. "That's odd."

"And why wasn't your door locked?" he asked, tearing his eyes away from the ample curve of her ass.

"It was," she said distractedly, squinting at something on her phone.

"Oh really?" He marched into her living room and waited until she was within his eyeline to demonstrate by swinging the glass door outward.

"I *thought* it was." She shook her head. "I'm so scatterbrained these days, I swear."

An answer that comforted him not at all.

“With you back there and the music blaring like that, anyone could have just walked right in here and you would never know.”

She looked up from her phone, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Well, I guess I’m lucky that someone just watched me from the window instead.”

The tips of his ears flamed like someone had taken a match to them. “Where I wouldn’t have been if your doorbell actually worked.”

He knew what he was doing and suspected she did too. Picking a fight to dispel the tension thickening the air between them. Behind it, a desire to protect her he had absolutely no right to.

“What do you think I’m trying to do here? It looks like the device came unpaired from my app.” She returned her gaze to the phone and frowned.

“Do you want me to look at it?” he offered.

“Because your male brain is superior at all things technological?”

“Because you keep squinting and I’m assuming you removed your contacts to paint,” he said.

With a warm, intelligent mother and a brilliant, creative sister like Maggie, the male tendency to assume any kind of superiority had never taken root.

“Oh,” she said, shifting on her bare feet. “Thanks.”

The phone was warm in his hand as he opened the settings and reset the pairing with minimal trouble. “Done,” he said, returning it to her.

“Thanks.” Tiffany slipped the phone back into her pocket and folded her arms under her breasts. “Is that for me?”

Her eyes lit on the box Preston had all but forgotten he had slipped under his arm when he reached for her phone. That she wore no bra under the tank top did nothing to aid his concentration.

“Right. Yes. It’s actually for *both* of you.” His gaze flicked to her belly as he held it out.

“Then we should open it in the nursery,” she said, taking the box from his hands.

He followed her down the hallway and into the room she’d been painting. She lifted a large plastic sheet covering a pile of items he guessed had been part of a guest room and she perched on a box.

Preston pretended to busy himself examining the freshly painted walls.

“I’m keeping it neutral,” she said from behind him. “I want it to be a surprise.”

“Won’t that make it difficult to pick out clothes and... things?” he asked, embarrassingly bereft in his knowledge on this topic.

“Not really.” The wrapping paper crinkled. “There’s actually a wealth of gender-neutral—*oh!*” Her gasp made him whirl around sharply.

Her fingertips were pressed to her lips, her eyes wide and shining. She lifted them from the gleaming silver rattle to his face. “Preston. It’s so beautiful. I... I...” She laughed. “I may need you to read it to me.”

He recited it instead.

The tears welling in her eyes spilled down her cheeks and he imagined roots growing from the soles of his shoes to keep him from crossing the room to hold her.

“Now that I’ve interrupted your night, startled you *and* made you cry...” He trailed off.

“Please.” She snorted. “*Everything* makes me cry these days. You should have seen me bawling in the walk-in fridge earlier this morning because there was a shriveled strawberry I couldn’t use.”

“And you were sorry to waste it?” he asked.

“I was sorry that all its friends got to be beautiful chocolate-dipped strawberries and it got left behind.”

Preston felt like he'd been mule-kicked directly in the sternum. “I happen to know a guy with a ranch and would be happy to take up a collection of any fruit unsuitable for human consumption. Goats aren't nearly so picky.”

Tiffany gently placed the rattle back in its protective box and stood. “You would do that?”

He placed a hand over his chest. “It would be my honor,” he said with exaggerated chivalry. “As gladly as I would take on any other quests, errands or general missions to keep you from dehydrating through your eye sockets.”

Tiffany chuckled and wiped her cheeks with the tail of her tank top. The flash of her smooth plane of a stomach revealed no visible changes.

“You really don't have to do all this, Preston. I meant what I said at the TCC. I don't want this to be an imposition on your life.”

He took a step toward her. “That's actually what I came here to talk to you about.”

“What about it?” she asked.

“How I blew it mostly. My dad and I had had a big blowup earlier that afternoon, and I was already keyed up about the upcoming mediation with Jack Chowdhry over that damn necklace. When I got your text, I didn't know what to think. I went into it trying to stay neutral and ended up coming off like a goddamn robot.” Deliberate thievery of Alisha's assessment.

“I wouldn't say a robot. Now a cyborg maybe...” She returned to her paint tray and bent to work the roller over the pan.

“Do you want some help?”

She glanced at him over her shoulder, blowing a lock of hair away from her face. “You're not exactly dressed for it.”

Her divided attention resulted in her dropping the handle of the roller into the puddle of creamy beige.

“Shit,” she hissed under her breath as she fished it out, searching for a rag.

“Let me.” He lifted one from a pile near her other supplies and brought it to her.

Tiffany wiped her hand, then the handle before pushing her hair out of her eyes again and smudging her cheek in the process.

Preston grabbed another rag. “Come here. I need to get that before it dries and you have to find makeup to match Desert Sand.”

“This is Alpaca Mist, I’ll have you know.”

“I don’t know what’s funnier,” he said, dabbing at the smudge. “That someone in marketing actually signed off on naming a paint color after a ruminant, or that with all the options available to you, you decided that you wanted alpaca-colored walls.”

Her chin brushed against his fingers as she laughed. “I was actually thinking alpacas could be the whole theme.”

“Theme?”

“You know, for the nursery? Bedding, clothes, decor, etcetera. Alisha was telling me they have this huge outlet in Coleman.”

Preston caught the scent of vanilla and lavender rising from her warm skin. “I could go with you sometime.”

She blinked up at him. “Really?”

He nodded. “I think Coleman is far enough from Royal’s rumor mill we might even be able to park out in the open and walk in together. What do you think?”

Her lips pursed and her brow furrowed as if in deep contemplation. “Sounds plausible. After the k!smet employee party is over, I might even be able to take an actual vacation day.”

Preston felt a band of anxiety tighten around his ribs. The odds that his father wouldn’t notice his taking a vacation day

were next to none.

But he wanted this. He wanted to spend an entire day with Tiffany Winters away from prying eyes. Unconcerned about the stories they might tell. Feeling the way he felt the one night their family history hadn't mattered.

He tossed aside the soiled cloth and captured the tendril of her hair that kept falling in her face before gently tucking it back into the pile on top of her head.

"Sounds like a plan," he said.

Neither of them moved.

Standing there, Preston could still remember the exact spot her warm breath had cooled the sweat on his chest. The place on his ribs her curled fist had tucked against. The precise location on his leg where her knee pressed and her ankle hooked. She had fallen asleep right on top of him and he'd lain there stroking the silky curve of her bare back. Knowing it was a moment too beautiful to last.

But together they made something that would.

And now, he had to figure out how to care for his child without falling desperately in love with its mother or compromising the future he'd worked and sacrificed for his entire adult life.

He took a step backward to retain his sanity.

"Promise me you'll let me know how I can help."

"I promise," Tiffany said.

Preston made his way back to the garage. "Lock the door after me?"

Because everyone and everything in his world depended upon it, Preston found the strength to turn, and leave.

Winding through the familiar roads of Royal beneath the darkened sky, Preston couldn't get the sound of her adorably pitchy laugh out of his ears or her intoxicating scent out of his lungs.



## *Four*

The shrilling of her phone woke Tiffany out of a dead sleep and the most delicious dream she'd ever had. She batted about in the darkness, searching her nightstand even as she still felt the phantom weight of Preston's body on hers. Her hand closed over the familiar shape. She blinked and rubbed her eyes, and seeing the name on the screen, quickly answered the call.

"Hey, Moira," she said. "What's up?"

"I am so, so sorry to call you this early."

Hearing the thick sound of tears in her employee's voice, Tiffany sat straight up in bed. "Are you okay?"

There was a snuffle on the other line. "Steph and I went out for drinks last night, and I don't know if it was something we ate, but we've both been sick all night."

"Food poisoning?"

"We think so. I can try to find someone else to fill in for me today, but—" A retch cut off the rest of the sentence. The line went muffled, but what she heard in the background was unmistakable.

A toilet flushed, and Tiffany waited through several moments of silence until Moira's croaking voice came back on the line.

"I'm so, so sorry," she said again. "I know today is going to be the final push for the kismet employee party, and we haven't even started prepping the chocolate fountain trays—" Moira coughed and blew out an audible exhale. Tiffany imagined her sitting very still, trying to breathe through another wave of nausea.

"It's okay, Moira. I promise. I'll figure something out."

"But—"

“Listen, if you’ve got any ginger, try making yourself some ginger tea. Cutting off a little piece to put under your tongue will help as well.” Or so Tiffany had read in many of the forums for newly expecting moms she’d been exploring since she found out.

“Okay,” Moira said after another sniffle.

“You get some rest,” Tiffany said. “I’ll call to check on you later.”

“Okay. Thanks, Tiff.”

Moira disconnected and Tiffany flopped back against the pillows to stare up at the ceiling. Dawn hadn’t yet begun to creep through the blinds.

Just after 4:00 a.m. They had planned to meet at Chocolate Fix at 6:00 a.m. to get started.

Calling one of her brothers would likely earn her a long day of listening to their unsolicited critiques of her business plan. Alisha had her own store to run and had already shared plans about closing up early to go for a day trip to a bed-and-breakfast with Tremaine. No way was Tiffany about to mess that up for her.

Her mother would come to help if she called, but then Tiffany would have to explain why she’d been keeping her distance as of late. Declining family invitations and inventing reasons to miss any events that would offer the bright, observant Camille the opportunity to notice something.

The local temp staff agency wouldn’t even open until nine.

As far as she could see, this left her with only one option.

*Promise me you’ll let me know how I can help.*

Preston not only said it the night he’d brought her the silver baby rattle, he texted it at least six times in the couple days since his surprise visit.

Her cheeks burned in the darkness remembering the moment when they had locked eyes through the window. The hungry way he’d looked at her. She felt a delicate flutter in her middle at the memory.

He hadn't touched her. Hadn't kissed her.

But he had wanted to.

Every time his gaze fixed on her lips or skimmed downward to breasts she hadn't remembered were braless until after his departure, she could see it written all over his face.

She only hoped the same hadn't been true in reverse.

Because it had taken every ounce of her self-restraint not to pounce on him like a starved lioness. Food cravings had been fairly minimal up until this point. The same could not be said for her libido.

Whether it was a side effect of her raging hormones or the volatile chemistry that had brought them together the night of Maggie and Jericho's engagement party didn't matter. She walked around the rest of that night with her body humming like a tuning fork.

Dreams like the one she'd just had didn't help.

But her fear of what might happen between them was no match for the anxiety she felt at the idea of failing to fulfill the order in time for Misha's employee party.

Pulling in a deep breath, she plucked up her courage, picked up her phone and pressed the call button.

Preston answered on the second ring, his voice deepened by sleep and somehow even sexier as a result.

"Hey," she said, already feeling foolish. "It's Tiffany."

"Tiffany." All traces of his fogginess evaporated. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said. "Everything's fine—I just have a bit of a problem I was hoping you might be able to help me with."

"What is it?"

"Remember how I was telling you about the big order for kismet's employee party?"

Muffled rustling. A quiet click. "Yeah?"

“Well, I just got off of the phone with Moira, and both she and Steph have food poisoning. I know this is short notice, but —”

“What time do you need me there?” The solid warmth and reassurance of his question made her want to cry. Which, given her recent history, was far from a surprise.

Tiffany cleared her throat. “The plan was for us to meet up at six, but I can go ahead and get started if you want to come in sometime after—”

“Wouldn’t we need to get started sooner than that if there’s only two of us?” he asked.

“I mean, that wouldn’t be the worst idea.” Squeezing her eyes shut, she bit her knuckles to keep from grinning so hard he could hear it through the phone.

“It’s what...” She heard a scratchy sound like he was pulling the phone away from his face to check the time. “Just after four? I can be at Chocolate Fix in about twenty minutes?”

“I’m afraid it’s going to take me at least half an hour. I move a little slower these days.”

“4:45 then?”

“Perfect,” she said, already peeling back the covers.

“See you then.”

After hurrying for a shower and a very basic makeup routine, Tiffany bundled her hair into a messy topknot and dressed in the jeans and T-shirt she always wore when she had a long day of work ahead. After throwing on an oversize sweater, she stepped into comfortable sneakers, grabbed her purse and keys and locked up before heading out through the garage.

Preston was already waiting for her when she arrived, white bag and two coffees in hand.

The combination of his overnight stubble, rugged flannel shirt and work boots created a surge of ardor that careened into her like a freight train.

Tiffany levered herself out of the car and grabbed her things before walking to meet him.

“Morning,” she said fighting a yawn.

“Morning,” he replied.

Dredging her bag for the shop keys, she glanced at the sidewalk and the empty parking places in front of the shop.

“I parked in the alley,” he said.

“Are you always this thoughtful before 5:00 a.m.?”

He gave her a roguish grin. “Depends on what kind of thoughts we’re talking about.”

*I am in big, big trouble*, was the one currently in her head.

She wrestled the notoriously sticky lock open, and he held the door for her with his elbow before following her in. The cool, cocoa-tinged air was a welcome greeting. As were the pristine glass cases bearing orderly rows of her handmade chocolates.

Preston’s nostrils flared.

“If heaven doesn’t smell like this, I don’t want to go,” he said, setting their coffee on the counter.

“I concur wholeheartedly.” Tiffany left the after-hours light on in the main shop before walking behind the counter. If running her own business had taught her one thing, it was that people never read the hours posted on the door. If the lights were on, the audacity was in full effect. “You can come back here to the prep area.”

She hip-checked the swinging door that led to the small industrial kitchen and immediately felt her heart rate stabilize. The gleaming chrome appliances and spotless white counters always filled her with this Zen-like sense of calm.

“Office, walk-in fridge, blast chiller, steam kettles,” she said, pointing out the highlights by way of a tour.

“Let me just stash my stuff and we’ll get started.” As was her habit, she placed her purse in a drawer under her desk and tucked her phone in her pocket before changing into her white

chef's coat. She then proceeded to the employee sink to wash her hands before drying them off with the paper towel then reaching into the white box mounted on the wall to pull out two hairnets. She donned one before dangling the other on a finger held out to him.

If nothing else, they might prove the libido inhibitor she desperately needed.

Preston eyed it warily. "Really?"

"Here at Chocolate Fix, we take our food safety requirements very seriously."

His sensuous lips pursed as he stretched out the hairnet and pulled it over his head. Several tufts of his dark hair stuck out from the bottom and side.

"Have you really never worn one of these?" she teased, ducking behind him to tuck in the stray pieces.

"Negative," he said. "I have a reputation to uphold. If word of this ever gets out, I'll be ruined."

"Better your reputation than my truffles." She took longer than she needed to tuck the net's elastic edges behind his ears. Proportionally small and set high above his long, smooth neck, they reminded her of a river otter's.

Tiffany found herself imagining a much tinier version attached to a downy little head resting in the crook of her arm.

"You gave me a hickey you know."

She quickly finished securing the hair at his nape and turned to the linen shelf to conceal her flushing face. "Excuse me?"

"The night we were together. I woke up the next morning and had a hickey the size of a silver dollar right about here." He brushed his index finger over the spot just to the right of his Adam's apple where a single freckle stood out above his collar.

Tiffany remembered having fixated on that exact spot as they stood talking near the bar at the engagement party. She couldn't stop wondering if it felt as smooth as it looked.

“Huh,” she said. “We have to keep it pretty cool in here for the chocolate, but if you’re likely to get overheated, you might want to take your flannel off before you put an apron on.”

Preston unbuttoned his shirt and hung it on one of the coat hooks next to the hand-washing sink. “I had to wear my collar popped for a week,” he said. “My team thought I was having an identity crisis.”

Coming around behind him, she slipped the apron’s loop over his head and adjusted it to the right length. “If only a popped collar would conceal what you gave me,” she said, giving the apron strings an extra hard tug before tying them around his lean waist.

“Touché.” Preston clapped his hands and rubbed his palms together, making a papery sound. “So, what’s up first on the agenda? Will I be filling cream puffs? Dipping strawberries?”

“The strawberries will be dipped, but not by us.” Dropping an apron over her own head, Tiffany’s muscle memory took over to tie it. “We need to make batches of white and milk chocolate fondue for the fountains as well as cut up fruit and angel food cake for the skewers. But before any of that, I’m going to chug about half of this coffee.”

They stood in companionable silence, taking several slugs of the delicious brew.

“Better,” she said. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

With his help, she prepared two cutting stations on the large stainless-steel table in the prep area. Preston insisted on carrying everything from the walk-in fridge, and in the process of delivering her instructions, Tiffany was surprised to note that he already knew how to deconstruct pineapple.

“My mom was big on gender equity, especially where kitchen labor was concerned,” he told her with a wry grin.

Tiffany placed a loaf of angel food cake onto her cutting board and began dividing it into snowy cubes. “I always imagined the Del Rios having a personal chef.”

“We do,” he said. “But only during the week. Weekends, Mom cooks, and if we’re home, we help.”

When she glanced up from her board, she noticed that he had already cut twice as much cake as she had and already started on the stack of homemade marshmallows.

“You’re just one of those incredibly annoying people who manages to be good at everything from the second you try it, aren’t you?” she asked.

“And you’re not?” His chuckle was a rich, warm sound, and drawing it from him felt like a special accomplishment. “I seem to remember someone getting parts in every school play, winning 4-H contests, making the swim team, taking home debate ribbons left and right...”

“I had no idea that you had followed my accomplishments so closely.”

Preston looked at her from under his obscenely long lashes, suddenly shy and boyish. “Oh, I did.”

Her knife froze midchop. If he had told her he had secret ambitions of becoming a CIA agent, she would have been less surprised.

“Please. You just feel bad about my being the least impressive Winters and you’re trying to give me some sort of distinction.”

“Tell yourself that if you want to.” He shrugged and dropped the handful of marshmallow cubes onto one of the silver trays she set out beside the work area.

“You’re being serious?”

“When have you known me to be anything but?” he asked.

“Speaking of,” she said, resuming her work. “When is your father retiring?”

Preston’s shoulders slumped as his jaw tightened. “When he’s finally finished putting me through this ridiculous gauntlet to prove myself.”

Tiffany snorted out a breath. “Our fathers have a surprising amount in common. If they could just figure out how to stop hating each other, they could probably take over the entire state of Texas.”



“That’s no lie,” he said.

“How do you think he’s going to react?” Her question seemed to drain a little of the light from the room, reminding them both of the challenges that lay ahead of a day that had been mostly fun and flirtatious.

He kept his eyes trained on his blade. “He won’t be thrilled.”

She suspected this might be an understatement of epic proportions.

“How about yours?” he asked, dropping the ball back into her court.

“Hard to say,” she said. “With Maggie and Jericho getting married, it’s not like he isn’t aware that there’s going to be a connection between our families. It’s just that...” She paused to find the correct words. “The rules have always been a little different for me.”

“Because you’re the youngest?”

“Probably.” Tiffany finished prepping the last of her angel food cake and started tidying the fondue tray. “With Alisha, Trey, Marcus and Jericho watching over me, it’s more like I never had the opportunity to scandalize the family.”

“I’d say we certainly made up for lost time.”

She grabbed a chunk of angel food cake and lobbed it at Preston, but he batted it out of the air before it could hit him in the chest.

“Careful, or I’m going to tell Misha. I’m not sure she’d tolerate this kind of unprofessionalism in her caterer.”

“Be my guest,” Tiffany said. “If she can find somebody else to make chocolate fountains for two hundred between now and 3:00 p.m., she’s welcome to try.”

“How is it already noon?” Preston asked. “We haven’t even started the chocolate yet.”

The concern in his voice was irresistibly endearing.

“We’re actually ahead of schedule,” she said, amazed at what she could accomplish with a Closed for Catering Event sign and Preston’s capable hands. “In fact,” she continued, “if your dad refuses to retire, just know you always have a place here.”

“It would certainly cut down on the drama and bullshit egos.” Preston aimed a killer grin at her.

“Don’t count on it,” Tiffany said. “Last week, a customer came in and demanded a refund for a single chocolate because she didn’t like it after she’d already eaten half.”

“Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“Nope. She even demanded the free sample I always give people when they come in even though she’d already been in earlier that day.”

“I’ll remember that for later,” he said, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

Before she could turn into a soft center herself, Tiffany crouched down to turn on the steam kettles for the chocolate fondue fountains and felt the world go wavy when she stood up.

She braced herself against the waist-high cauldron, taking a deep breath and pressing her fingertips against her eyelids.

Preston was at her side in a flash; his eyes were wild with alarm. “Are you okay?”

The brushed metal rim of the kettle warmed beneath her palm as the steam made the base knock and hiss. “Totally fine,” she said. “I just stood up too fast.”

A crease appeared in the center of his forehead. “Have you been to see the doctor yet?”

Tiffany used his offered arm to resume her place at the counter. “My first appointment is next week.”

“When?” he asked.

“Why?” she countered.

“Because I’m going with you.”

“You really don’t need to do that. If you thought people seeing us walk together in a parking lot was bad, just wait until we’re spotted together at Dr. Everett’s office.”

“Hell with that,” he said with enough force to startle her. “If it means we have to tell our families before then, so be it. I’m not missing out because I’m afraid one of the Royal busybodies might go to tattle to my father.”

Her heart felt like it had swollen six times its normal size in her chest. “Thursday, 11:00 a.m. at Royal Memorial.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Fine,” she agreed. “Now will you kindly get back to assembling those trays before Misha’s minions arrive and have to walk away empty-handed?”

“I think you should go sit down in the office and eat something. You’re looking really pale.”

“It’s the chef’s coat,” she insisted. “Really, this won’t take me long and then I promise I’ll take a break.”

“I’m holding you to that, Winters.” He lightly tapped his fingertip against her chest. The single point of skin seemed to glow like an ember beneath her T-shirt.

She rolled her eyes at him. “It just drives me crazy when you call me by my last name,” she said in a terrible Mae West drawl.

“And when have I ever done that?” he asked.

Tiffany blinked at him. “You really don’t remember?”

“Negative,” he said.

“You only did it the entire time you were helping build the set for *Romeo and Juliet*.”

He stared out into the middle distance as if searching his memory. “I’ll be damned,” he said. “You’re right.”

She felt a keen sense of disorientation that a fact so significant to her should have made so little an impression on him. Tiffany peeled the lid off a small tub of pure coconut oil

and coaxed the solid glob into the kettle, where it liquefied on contact.

“I always thought it was because a Winters was the only thing you saw me as.”

Preston looked at her intently. “It’s how I reminded myself that you were off-limits.”

Tiffany’s heart beat faster in her chest. She reached for the oversize silver whisk from a hanging rack overhead and beat the last opaque blobs of coconut oil into the translucent pool. This kind of admission was the very last thing she ever would have expected. She thought him a player in high school, a superficial snob in college and a single-minded workaholic since. None of these identities comfortably coexisted with the clever, charismatic man who had made a day of grueling work fly by. For the very first time, she let herself imagine co-parenting might be a possibility between them. He was obviously still obsessed with his ascension. But also protective, caring and observant. Qualities that would make him an excellent father.

“Do you need the chocolate?” Preston asked, drawing her out of her reverie.

“I got it,” she said, grateful for the opportunity to escape to the dry storage.

Tiffany spent an extra moment there with her back against the door, willing her body’s hormones to get themselves under control. Preston Del Rio had thrown a couple compliments her way, and she was already mooning and swooning like some kind of lovesick teenager.

After pulling her phone from her pocket, she checked the time.

If she could just get through the next ninety minutes, Misha’s crew would come to pick up their order and she could get the hell out of here and into a cold shower at home.

Alone.

Tiffany reached for the industrial-size block of bittersweet Belgian chocolate and flipped off the light before returning to

the prep area.

Preston had four trays assembled and was wrapping the last with cellophane. Despite her otherwise conflicted feelings, she felt a swell of pride at how beautiful they looked lined up there on the counter. Bright green fig leaves. Tumbles of ruby-red strawberries. Clouds of snowy marshmallows. Succulent stacks of pineapple stamped into golden little hearts by the cookie cutters she'd bought from the kitchen supply store in a stroke of inspiration. All ready for Misha's employees to build their own skewers and plunge them into the silky curtains of chocolate that would cascade from two fountains that would be the reception's centerpieces.

"If you wouldn't mind putting those in the walk-in, I'll have you start on chopping the white chocolate."

Preston saluted her and lifted the first two trays.

When he was out of sight, she checked her phone, surprised to find a text from Alisha.

Just heard Moira and Steph got food poisoning. You OK? Do I need to send reinforcements?

Totally fine, she texted back with great haste. I got an early start.

If you're sure. PS. You're gonna have to see Mom sometime. She's starting to wonder what's up.

Forget the shower, Tiffany resolved to go straight over to her parents' house once the order had been picked up. The quicker she got out of that shop—and away from Preston—the better.

After trading her serrated knife for the chef's knife, she made quick work of the bittersweet chocolate.

"I know I'm not exactly the expert here," Preston said, peeking over her shoulder. "But I thought the point was even chunks."

"For the dipping components, yes. The chocolate is just going to get melted down." She carried the boardful of brown rubble over to the steam kettle and dumped the contents in. After letting the heat work for a moment, she whisked

vigorously. The primordial-looking sludge quickly smoothed out into a glossy lake.

“You were saying?”

“I was saying I was gonna shut my mouth and get back to work. The white chocolate getting the same treatment?” he asked.

“If you please.”

She prepped the next kettle over with the coconut oil and collected four one-gallon stainless-steel buckets to receive the finished product.

The white chocolate came together just as quickly, and by the time Misha’s staff showed up—twenty minutes early no less—they had just placed all four in the bain-marie.

With Preston’s help, they loaded the order into their van, enduring her repeated admonishments to make sure they preheated the fountains before pouring the chocolate in.

“I give it half an hour before I get a text from Misha about the chocolate seizing up,” Tiffany said as she closed the van doors. “How much you wanna bet?”

They watched the van back out of the loading area and turn onto Main Street.

“I bet if you text Trey, he’ll make sure they do exactly what you said.” Preston stood beside her still wearing his apron but sans the hairnet he ditched at the first appropriate second.

Tiffany reached up and removed hers, massaging the spot on her forehead where the elastic had been rubbing all morning. “Not a bad idea,” she agreed.

“He always seemed like the protective type.”

“Overprotective, more like,” she said as she quickly fired off a text message to him. “No wonder I never got any dates in high school.”

“I seem to remember you having no problems in that arena,” he said.

“For the year that you were still around.”

They turned and walked back into the shop before closing and locking the door to the back entrance after them. “I’d only been asked to one homecoming dance by the time you were engaged to Sunny Rothschild.”

The smile abandoned his face, and she instantly regretted bringing it up. “Your homecoming corsage probably lasted longer than our engagement did. I knew it was a mistake before I even proposed.”

“Then why did you?” she asked.

Preston leaned back against the counter, his hands anchored on the rounded edge. “Because her father is an East Coast steel magnate, and my father practically shoved the family diamond in my hand.”

Tiffany had always thought the Del Rio family patriarch was a very handsome, if somewhat intimidating, man. His animosity toward her father had been so famous that it never occurred to her to wonder what dynamics might be on the other side of the brick wall surrounding the Del Rio estate.

“He kept promising that once I’d set a date for the wedding, we could discuss a time frame for my taking over control of Del Rio enterprises. Then I woke up one morning and realized I wasn’t counting down to the wedding, I was counting down to my father’s retirement. I just couldn’t go through with it.”

“Maybe you should try to get him to set an official date *before* we tell him,” she suggested, turning her back to him to untie her apron strings.

His warm hand covered hers, arresting her progress.

“Not so fast, Winters.” To hear his voice so close to her ear and feel his skin against hers sent a chill dancing up her spine.

“I believe I’m owed a sample.”

Tiffany waved a hand toward the door to the front of the shop. “Help yourself.”

“That’s the problem.” He tugged the strings clutched in her hands and she felt her apron loosen. She stood frozen as he

lifted the neck strap over her head and draped the apron over the counter. “I *can’t*.”



## *Five*

**I**mpulsiveness.

Hadn't he learned his lesson yet?

Preston had known it was a bad idea when he brought up the sample instead of just collecting his things and getting the hell out of there the second Misha's company van pulled away.

Every minute he spent in Tiffany's presence, the danger of his breaking his promise to Alisha grew.

This entire day had felt like foreplay.

Their bodies moving in concert around Tiffany's sweet-smelling kitchen. The parade of aphrodisiac foods. The way she stood there looking up at him like she expected his mouth to lower to hers at any second.

Preston cleared his throat to break the moment. "I can't help myself if I don't know what the flavors are," he explained.

Tiffany blinked and offered him an embarrassed smile.

"Right," she said. "Of course. This way, good sir."

He hung back for a moment purely to appreciate the sight of her backside in the well-worn jeans that fit her like bark on a tree and bit his lip when she hip-checked the swinging door open. The practiced grace in this simple gesture was one of many he'd witnessed over the course of this day.

"All right," she said, turning to face him. "There are important questions that need to be considered if I am to curate the perfect sampling experience for you."

"Hit me," he said.

"Milk or dark?"

"Dark," he answered without hesitation.

"Are you saying that because you actually like dark chocolate or because you think pretending to be a cocoa snob

will get you bonus points?” she asked.

“Can’t it be both?”

Tiffany rolled her eyes at him. “Chewy or melty?”

“Melty.”

“Boozy or fruity?”

“Again, is both an option?” he asked.

“Actually,” she said, approaching the case at the far end of the counter, “yes.”

Pulling out two separate boxes, she placed them on the counter before him.

Preston found himself genuinely taken aback by the beauty and delicacy of the small, glossy domes lined up in neat rows. One set was Jackson Pollock splattered with streaks of marigold orange and glittering with gold dust. The other, molded in gem-like facets and the shimmering burgundy of a fairy-tale velvet throne.

He picked up the small gold card stationed in front of one to try and read the delicate script. ““Orange You Glad’?”

“Valrhona chocolate ganache with a salted caramel Grand Marnier center.”

He nodded and picked up the other card on the tray. ““Pop the Cherry’?”

She gave him the full force of the slow, sexy grin that had caused them both so much trouble.

“Chili-spiced dark chocolate mousse with a Luxardo Maraschino marzipan center.”

“I think I’m going to need you to decide for me,” Preston said.

Tiffany began to swivel her finger back and forth between the trays, attempting to select at random.

“Not like that,” Preston said, plucking one of the orange truffles from its small paper cup. “Like this.”

She shook her head. “No thanks. I only ate about a thousand of them as I was trying to perfect the flavor.”

The cool chocolate began to melt between his fingers. “That’s how you’re going to help me decide. By watching you react.”

“You know what? Just take one of each. Hell, you can fill a whole pound-sized box if you want to. It’s the least I can do to thank you.”

“What if watching you eat them is the thanks I’d prefer?”

Their eyes met.

Her lips parted, and he slid the chocolate between them. He watched her intently as she chewed, white teeth dimpling her full lower lip for the briefest of moments.

“Option two,” he said.

His pulse thundered in his ears as he brought the cherry truffle to her lips, brushing it slowly from corner to corner. She opened her mouth, and he gently pushed it onto her tongue. She chewed slowly this time, her eyes slightly closed.

Preston felt the familiar heaviness gathering in his groin but couldn’t make himself look away. Pleasure lay across her beautiful features like a veil, transforming her.

When her eyes opened again, they smoldered from beneath the dark fringe of her lashes.

The sweet-scented air between them vibrated with the unspoken question.

She answered it by clutching handfuls of his T-shirt and pulling him to her.

Their mouths met and melded in a decadent rush of sweetness and spice that their tangling tongues only served to enhance. Her breasts molded against his chest and Tiffany moaned, adding her urgency to the heady mélange on their shared palates. Preston’s grip on her tightened as he hauled her up his body, her legs wrapping around his waist.

He shouldered them through the swinging door and into her office. Reaching behind her, he cleared a space on her desk and lifted her onto it. Tiffany reached out and yanked the cord to close the blinds as he bent at the waist and unbuckled his belt. They separated just long enough for her to strip his T-shirt off before shedding her own. Preston didn't even bother to unhook her bra, opting instead to push it up to free her breasts.

They were warm in his hands, firmer and heavier than he remembered. Tearing his mouth from hers, he then moved it to the dusky, turgid peaks of her nipples. Her back arched on an urgent cry that filled him with savage pleasure.

He was transported back to their first night together.

Both of them so desperate to have each other that they moved only what was strictly necessary for their joining. Tiffany quickly unbuttoned her jeans, before shimmying them down her hips and taking her panties with them.

Preston trailed his hand down her stomach and found her already soaked. Slick beneath his fingertips. He had barely begun to explore the taut bundle of nerves within the silken petals of her sex when she cried out and bucked against him.

"Please," she said, shaking with the aftershocks of her explosion. "I need you."

"I... I don't have anything with me." He said now what he should have said then, feeling a flicker of guilt.

Tiffany flicked her eyes downward. "It's a little late for that."

"I won't...hurt anything?" he asked.

Tiffany gave him a softly indulgent look that he imagined countless men receiving from countless women over the centuries. Ignorant as they had the luxury to be, of this most basic building block of life.

"No," she said. "You won't hurt anything."

His hesitance boiled away, leaving something primal and possessive in its wake. He freed his arousal and pressed her

back against the desktop. Widening her knees as much as the jeans still bunched around her calves would allow, he filled her with one thrust and stilled.

He folded forward to kiss her, grazing her cheek with his jaw. Nuzzling his lips against her ear. "I've wanted you like this for so long," he breathed.

She scored his back with her short nails and buried her face in his shoulder.

"You can have me, Preston. As much of me as you want, as often as you want it."

He wanted it all.

He wanted it always.

Preston rocked back and filled her again, curling his hips to delve deep within her wet heat.

"More," she whispered.

The hands spanning her rib cage moved to her shoulders to anchor her.

Preston obliged. The heat between them ignited a firestorm of desire and he let himself be taken by it. Let it burn its way into him through their joined bodies, a roaring devouring thing that incinerated everything in its path. It obliterated the last of his caution and he was driving into her with enough force to send her desk scraping across the office floor. Tiffany's hips rose to meet his every thrust, spurring him onward until he felt her contracting around him.

Tiffany called his name and sent him careening over the edge. He lost himself inside her with the intense searing pulses.

Neither of them moved or spoke in the aftermath.

Preston didn't know which made him more of a fool. The fact that he had just torn through the paper-thin illusion that their relationship had only been a one-night stand. Or that he'd ever entertained that as a possibility in the first place. That he'd honestly ever thought he could remain neutral and platonically co-parent.

Giving in to his desire had landed them in a giant gray area where the lines weren't just muddy, they were nonexistent.

Maybe his father had been right.

When it came to Tiffany Winters, he didn't have a soft spot.

He had a blind spot.

Preston pushed himself up on his palms and gazed down at her, not having the faintest idea what to say or do next.

Tiffany pushed a sweaty lock of hair away from his forehead, her heavy-lidded eyes fixed on his.

"We'll figure it out, Preston," she said, answering the question he'd been too afraid to ask.

He was surprised by just how much that statement comforted him.

He helped her to sit up and turned to pull up his pants so she'd have a chance to do the same without his watching.

"What do you have going on for the rest of the day?" He hated how artificially casual this question sounded given the intimacy they'd just shared.

"First, a nap," she said. "Then dinner at my parents'. I've mostly managed to avoid them for the last few weeks and Alisha told me I owe an appearance."

Preston felt a pang of guilt. In all his pondering over the past week, he hadn't once thought about what strains or pressures holding this secret inside her might create between her and her parents.

"Do you really think it will be possible to wait until after Maggie and Jericho's wedding to make the announcement?" he asked, handing her T-shirt to her.

Tiffany quickly pulled it over her head and gathered her hair back into its bun. "Provided that I'm not showing a ton. I'm planning on wearing a lot of oversize sweaters and flowy tunics this winter."

Not for the first time, it occurred to him just how disparate the division of labor was in this proposition, both literally and

figuratively. Her body would be the one to undergo the physical changes, her life, the greatest impact.

“I’m not sure what that will help. You could wear one of those flour sacks and you’d still draw attention.” Preston stooped to pick up the papers they had avalanched to the floor. As he tapped the papers into a neat stack, his eye reflexively skimmed down the top page. A profit and loss statement—the figures showing mostly the latter.

“Please.” Tiffany pulled out a desk drawer and smoothed balm on her kiss-swollen lips. “It’s not like I have suitors lining up at the door. And a few months from now, I suspect the dating pool is going to get *very* shallow.”

The thought of her as she would look six or even seven months pregnant was having quite the opposite effect on him. Her athletic frame filling out with new curves, glowing like a goddess.

He notched a finger under her chin and planted a soft kiss on her minty lips. “I’m only ever a text away. Day...or night.”

Tiffany grabbed her sweater from the hook on the back of the door and shrugged into it before grabbing her purse and keys. “I guess we’ll just have to see how things go between now and the appointment on Thursday.”

From his present vantage, that sounded like an eternity.

He followed her into the shop, where she took a small gold box from the cupboard below the counter and quickly filled it with a selection of chocolates from the assorted cases. “For my mom,” she explained. “Truffles go a long way toward smoothing over daughterly neglect.”

“And how about brotherly neglect?”

“I hear they’re even better on that score.” She put her box aside and picked up a second. “Maggie likes the fruit creams, if I remember correctly.”

“How did you know?”

“Jericho comes in to get them from time to time.”

“Really?” he asked.

“Yep. And often hauling a giant bouquet into the shop so it doesn’t wilt in the five minutes he’d have to leave it in the car.” She moved to a different case and began loading the box. “I’ve never seen Jericho so smitten.”

It had taken Preston a minute to get away from the gut-level flinch he had always felt hearing the name. Lately, he’d even detected a growing appreciation. He liked the idea of his sister being engaged to a man who paid attention to the kind of things she liked and thought to bring them to her.

Preston certainly hadn’t been that sort of boyfriend.

Or fiancé. Sunny had never expressed any contention about it and Preston had always been too busy with work to notice if that was the case. The regret he felt now wasn’t that their relationship had ended, but that the version of himself he had been with her hadn’t doted on her the way so many other men would have. If anything, the time spent in Tiffany’s presence had made it clear just how unfair to Sunny he had been.

“Red, black or gold?” Tiffany directed his attention to the drawer full of decorative metallic elastics below the cash register.

“Gold.”

With nimble fingers, she snapped the bow into place and handed him the box.

“What do I owe you?” he asked.

“Not a thing.” Tiffany turned off the lights to the kitchen and engaged the security system before approaching the front door. “Oh shoot,” she said. “I forgot you’re parked in the alley. Do you want me to let you out the back door?”

Her willingness to do this for his sake made him all the more determined not to take advantage of the offer.

“Nope,” he said. “I’ll walk around.”

“But what if somebody sees you leaving my shop?” she asked.

Preston leaned in and kissed her cheek. “Then I sure hope they enjoy the view.”



The determined look on her face did him a wealth of good.

He waited right there on the sidewalk in front of God and everyone while she locked up, then followed her to her Jeep to open her door.

“Such service.” She laughed. “See you Thursday morning, then?”

“Unless you feel compelled to call me before then,” Preston said.

“Thanks again for all your help today,” she said, buckling herself in and then starting the engine.

“Anytime.” He shut her door and watched as she backed out of her parking space and motored down Main Street.

Only when the Jeep had turned at the corner did he notice the figure standing on the sidewalk halfway up the street.

Royal’s premier gossipmonger.

Mandee Meriweather.

## *Six*

After an epic nap that left her wondering what year it was, Tiffany stumbled into the shower and stayed there until the hot spray lifted the fog from her eyes.

If only her mind could be cleared so easily.

Once again, Preston had joined her in her dreams. She'd woken up with her nipples hard and her panties wet. As if they hadn't done enough damage for one day.

*Once is an accident.*

*Twice is an experiment.*

Her mom's oft-uttered saying returned to her as she toweled off outside her shower.

In other words, what had happened between her and Preston could no longer be considered a one-night stand.

Catching a glimpse of herself in the somewhat fogged vanity mirror, she was relieved to see minimal evidence of their passionate encounter. Slight dappling on her chin and around her mouth. A small suck mark on her breast that clothing would easily cover. Her stomach remained mostly flat, but her breasts had grown heavier. Her nipples, a darker version of their normal auburn color.

The only signs of a pregnancy she could yet identify.

All in all, nothing makeup and a carefully chosen outfit couldn't take care of. Suddenly ravenous, Tiffany wrapped herself in the towel and headed to the kitchen, where she chugged what felt like a gallon of orange juice while waiting for a slice of bread to toast. Enough to stave off the light-headed feeling she had, but not so much as to ruin one of her mom's excellent dinners.

She knew her brother Trey would be at Misha's party, but Tiffany had tried to covertly find out whether any of her other

siblings might be stopping by the Winters estate this evening, but the reply she had received from her mom was somewhat vague.

“Oh, honey, between the wedding planners, landscape designers, calligraphers, florists, I never know who’s going to show up here these days.”

Tiffany hoped tonight might be the exception.

She hurried toward her bedroom, before stopping when she caught sight of the small silver rattle sitting on top of the snowy white blanket she’d hauled out of a box in her closet right after she’d gotten home with positive pregnancy test in hand.

The blanket had been hers.

One of the few items she felt still carried an energetic connection to the mother who had died shortly after she was born. Seeing them together, the rattle and the blanket, woke an ache in her chest. She couldn’t ask for a better upbringing than she’d had with her father and Camille, who had been nothing but kind and warm and loving to her from the very beginning. Her mom in every sense of the word. And to inherit an older sister in the transaction had proved to be an added bonus. Tiffany turned the rattle over in her hand, rubbing her thumb across the inscription.

God, she hoped it proved to be prophetic.

She had been taken aback by bitterness in Preston’s voice when he talked about his father. This couldn’t come at a worse time for him, and she knew it. If they could only get through the wedding and the Diamond Gate mediation, there might just be a shot.

\* \* \*

Thirty minutes later, her Jeep crunched over the gravel in the circular drive of her parents’ home.

The familiar scent of her childhood washed over her in an almost overwhelming wave as she let herself in the front door. The baked-good-scented candles that her mom favored.

Cleaning products from their housekeeper. Beneath it all, she recognized a scent that in any other situation would have been the most welcome of all. Her mom's signature lasagna.

With her newly enhanced sense of smell, the combination made her feel a little weepy.

"Hello?" Her greeting echoed in their cavernous foyer but was met with no reply. She hadn't seen any other cars in the driveway, but it was also possible they had parked in the three-car garage.

Tiffany took the familiar path into the kitchen, stopping in front of the stainless-steel double-wide refrigerator, where Jericho and Maggie's save-the-date card was secured with a magnet. She leaned in to study it, feeling an acute sense of longing at the joy so obviously glowing in their faces.

So in love, they beamed at each other like floodlights.

Tiffany opened the fridge not so much out of hunger as a desire to break the hold the beautiful black-and-white photo had over her.

The contents hinted at preparations for some of her winter and fall favorites. Hearty soups that her mom often made and chilled before freezing. Pie crusts and oatmeal crumble that would be used to top delectable pumpkin and apple crisps.

Food had played a significant role within their blended family.

Tiffany couldn't help but wonder if similar efforts might be in her future if she and Preston figured out how to raise this child together, but separately.

Her baby could have half-siblings. Or stepbrothers and stepsisters. A stepmother.

Tiffany was so caught up in her tailspin, she jumped about half a foot when she closed the refrigerator door and found her mom standing on the other side of it. Dressed in black leggings and a white cashmere sweaterdress, her skin glowed a burnished mahogany from her afternoon run.

“That’s for Thanksgiving,” she said, glancing at the disk of pie crust in Tiffany’s hand. “I’m just chilling them before they go in the freezer.”

“You don’t usually start the prep until a few days before,” Tiffany pointed out.

“Well, now that all your siblings have a plus-one, we’ll be probably having a few extra guests this year,” she said.

No sooner had she said it than the next phase of Tiffany’s own personal pregnancy panic dream entered her head.

Oh God.

She hadn’t even thought about holidays.

How would those work? Would both families come together? Would they trade off? The thought of her child spending half of its holidays in a different home made her stomach feel tight and cold.

And that was to say nothing of birthday parties. Sleepovers. Family vacations.

“I had no idea you were hosting everyone,” Tiffany said, returning the pie crust to the shelf.

“That may be because you have been scarce around these parts as of late,” her mom teased. “And now that you’re here, you’re acting like a stranger. You haven’t even hugged me yet.”

Her mother held out her arms. Tiffany dissolved into them, grateful for her strength and her softness. For the familiar amber scent of her perfume.

“I’m so sorry, Mom.” Tears filled her eyes. “I just finished that huge order for k!smet and I’m exhausted.”

Her mother smoothed a hand over Tiffany’s hair and patted her back.

“It’s all right, sweetie. We’ve certainly had plenty going on around here with the wedding plans and all.”

“How’s that going by the way?” Tiffany asked against her shoulder.

Camille released her embrace and blew out a breath.

“If I never hear the words *seating arrangement* again, it will be too soon.”

She reached into the fridge and pulled out a bottle of Tiffany’s favorite Chardonnay.

Knowing her mother had probably bought it in anticipation of her presence made Tiffany feel like the worst kind of neglectful daughter.

“Trying to figure out where to put wedding guests from families who’ve spent generations avoiding each other has been a headache I can’t even begin to describe.” Camille opened a drawer and took out a corkscrew. “It’s enough to make me wish I could reach back in time and slap that sparkly necklace out of Eliza Boudreaux’s sticky fingers.”

Camille opened the cabinet and set two white wineglasses on the counter.

Tiffany’s mouth watered thinking of the cool, crisp wine and how good it would taste in her sour, acidic mouth. She waited until her mom had poured one glass to stop her.

“I think I might wait just a bit,” she said. “My stomach’s been a little iffy today.”

*And every day for the last month.*

Her mother’s face creased with concern as she placed both the bottle and the glass down on the counter.

“You do look a little pale,” she said, placing the back of her hand against Tiffany’s forehead. “Do you think it might be the same bug that Moira and Steph caught?”

“They had food poisoning,” Tiffany reported. “And I’m okay, really. I didn’t sleep very well last night.”

“Because you were worried about the kismet order?”

Of all the things Tiffany appreciated about her stepmother, this had to be near the top. She had a talent for providing the easiest path out of a difficult situation.

Tiffany nodded. “The shop has been kicking my butt lately.”

Camille brushed Tiffany's hair away from her cheek. "I think you've been working too hard. Your sister told me you were there at the crack of dawn this morning finishing that whole order by yourself."

Half-true, at least.

Her mother opened the fridge and brought out a bottle of ginger ale, just as she had every time Tiffany complained of any stomach-related ailment when she was a child. She could still remember the crisp bite of the soda and how it had soothed when she was sick early on in Camille's courtship with Tiffany's father.

They'd still had a live-in nanny at that point, but Camille insisted they cancel their date so she could stay in and help take care of Tiffany.

The strength of the affection she felt for this woman who had raised her like her very own made tears rise to Tiffany's eyes as the bubbling glass arrived in front of her. A development that her mother did not miss.

"Baby, what's wrong? You look like you're about to cry."

The kindness unstitched the last of her resolve.

Her face dropped into her hands, and she began to sob. All her fears, her worries, her embarrassment, her shame, poured out of her in hot tears. Abandoning both glasses, her mother came around the counter to pull her in for another hug.

When Tiffany's silent sobs died down to a watery snuffle, her mother drew back and looked at her. "I'm guessing this isn't just about the kismet order."

Tiffany's eyes swam down toward her shoes as Camille reached into her pocket and retrieved a tissue to dab away the last of her tears.

"You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to. But I'm here to listen if you do."

Tiffany studied the veins in the marble countertop, feeling exhausted all over again and hollow, unable to meet her mother's eyes.

“I’m pregnant,” she said. “I have absolutely no idea what I’m going to do, but I’ve decided I’m going to have the baby.”

The silence stretched on forever.

A warm fingertip under her chin brought Tiffany back to Camille’s warm, soft gaze.

What she read in her mother’s face was a complete and total departure from the look of utter disappointment she had imagined.

“You’re telling me... I’m going to be a grandmother again?”

Tiffany sniffed through tear-swollen sinuses. “Not tomorrow, but yes.”

Camille’s shriek of delight startled Tiffany out of her sadness.

Throwing up her hands, her mother did an impromptu dance with a lot of hips and air punches. “Take *that*, Gayle Del Rio.” She slapped the counter for emphasis. “You may have the biggest estate, you may have a set of diamonds worth almost as much as the crown jewels, but I have grandbaby number two on the way.”

Apparently the carefully cultivated neutrality she had always modeled wasn’t quite so neutral after all.

Tiffany cleared her throat. “You’re not that far ahead of Gayle Del Rio.”

Her mother’s eyes widened. “You mean... Maggie?”

“I mean Preston,” she said. “He’s the father.”

Having raised three stepsons through their adolescence, Camille was no stranger to shocking revelations. Tiffany’s brothers had gotten into their share of trouble on the way to adulthood. Never in all that time had Tiffany seen her mother’s mouth drop open and stay that way through multiple eye blinks.

“You... and Preston?”

Tiffany nodded.



“You two are...” her mom trailed off, inviting her to insert the appropriate term. Trouble was, Tiffany wasn’t sure what the correct term describing their current situation might be.

“We’re not together. It was just the one time.”

*Ish.*

“The night of Maggie and Jericho’s engagement party?”

Tiffany’s eyebrows lifted in surprise.

“It required all my creative wiles to keep your father from noticing the two of you dancing together.” Her mother reached for her wine and took a gulp. “Does Preston know?”

Tiffany sat down on a bar stool at the counter.

“He knows,” she said. “But we both feel it would be best not to announce it until after the wedding.”

She saw the ripple of unease move over her mother’s face. “You’re sure? The mediation session for the necklace is coming up. I can’t help but think—”

“The last thing I want is for this pregnancy to be used as some kind of bargaining chip.” Tiffany sipped her ginger ale. “Until Diamond Gate and the wedding are over, no one can know about this.”

“Know about what?”

The sound of Joseph Winters’s voice from the kitchen entryway made them both jump. In addition to the ZZ Top T-shirt and faded jeans her brothers had joked about making him look like a roadie, her father wore the brushed suede slippers that made his progress through the house surprisingly stealthy.

“The surprise that Tiffany is planning for Maggie and Jericho,” her mother said without missing a beat.

“Oh.” He fished in the pocket of his sweater and came back with a handkerchief to polish the glasses he only wore when at home. “Did someone scream? I thought I heard someone scream.”

Tiffany and her mother exchanged the kind of look women had been passing back and forth down the ages.

“I did,” her mother said. “I just got an email from the wedding planner about the Del Rios changing the seating chart for the reception.”

Her father’s concern quickly melted away to annoyance. “Again?” he demanded.

All these battles that had taken place without her having been aware of them.

“I’m afraid so,” her mother said.

Her father stomped off, trailing a string of curses in his wake. Camille turned to her once he was out of earshot.

“However you decide you want to tell your father, maybe make sure I’m there too?”

They heard the door to the liquor cabinet slam and snatches of words muttered from the other room.

“...thinks he owns the goddamn world...bastard is going to apologize if it’s the last thing I do.”

Her mother took another sip of her wine. “On second thought, maybe you and Preston shouldn’t be anywhere near him when he finds out.”

“What are you suggesting?” Tiffany asked.

“Your father and I are taking a trip to the Amalfi Coast after the wedding. I’m thinking that may be the time to tell him.”

“When strangling Preston would require a transatlantic flight?”

“Exactly,” her mother said. “Everything sounds better with a belly full of calamari.”

Her father’s voice grew louder again as he made his way back to the kitchen.

“...if he thinks I’m just going to sit here like a stallion while he profits off of *my* son’s idea, he’s got another thing coming.” He gestured with his glass, sloshing amber liquid up the side. “What’s going on with you two anyway?”

“What do you mean?” Camille swiveled and met her husband with such a look of confident innocence that even Tiffany herself was tempted to believe it.

Her father’s blue eyes narrowed. “You look like you’re plotting something.”

“I believe you mean *planning* something,” Camille shot back. “You’re the one plotting. And I’ll be damned if it’s going to affect our son’s wedding, so unless you’re trying to volunteer to help me rework these seating charts, I advise you to take yourself off until dinner is ready.”

Her father ran a hand through his dark blond hair. “I need to head to the TCC for my dinner meeting. But I should be back by the time you ladies are having dessert.”

Tiffany sagged with relief when he was gone.

Camille’s warm, fragrant palm molded itself to her cheek.

“It’s going to be okay, Tiffany.” The steadiness in her voice was enough to lower Tiffany’s blood pressure by several points. “This child is going to be loved, and that’s what matters. Everything else, we can figure out along the way.”

Her eyes stung once more. “Thanks, Mom.”

Her mother glanced down at Tiffany’s abdomen as if just now registering the physical aspect of her condition. “Have you seen an ob-gyn yet? Do you need one outside of Royal?”

The forethought was more touching than anything Tiffany could possibly have imagined at that particular moment.

“I have an appointment with Dr. Everett at 11:00 a.m. this Thursday.”

“Is someone coming with you?” An exceedingly subtle way to determine who that “someone” was.

She nodded. “Preston.”

Camille gave a stiff nod of approval and squeezed her shoulder. “Good. Now drink your ginger ale. Alisha should be here any minute.”

Tiffany picked up her glass and swiveled on her bar stool to face the kitchen. Watching her mother cook had always been one of her favorite things.

“Alexa, play Etta James.”

The sultry tones spilled from the kitchen’s sound system, instantly lightening the mood. Camille opened the fridge and pulled out a block of pancetta. Setting it on the cutting board, she began slicing it into neat little cubes as she smiled wistfully to herself.

Tiffany could practically see the chubby-fisted toddler wandering around behind her eyes.

The front door opened, and she heard Alisha call out as she headed toward the kitchen, “Sorry I’m late.”

Breezing into the kitchen, Alisha set her bag and keys down on the counter. “I had to finish up grading essays for my Northern Renaissance seminar.”

The charm bracelet around her sister’s wrist winked beneath the pendant lights as she massaged a spot on her forehead.

“That bad?” Tiffany asked, being well acquainted with the challenges of Alisha’s part-time gig as an adjunct art history professor.

“One of the students from my night class actually spent five double-spaced pages talking about how Leonardo shouldn’t have been included as one of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.”

“And you don’t agree?” their mother asked, dropping the pancetta into the pan.

“Hell no,” Alisha said. “If there was an odd reptile out, it was Donatello. He was already sixty-six when Leonardo was born.”

“You learn something new every day.” Their mother turned from the stove and started on the celery.

“Oh shoot,” Camille said, pausing midchop. “Tiff, could you grab the pearl onions out of the freezer? I’ve still got pancetta grease all over my hands.”

“Of course.” Tiffany shot up from her stool and went to the fridge, before squatting to open the freezer drawer. She located the small bag near the front and elbowed the compartment closed before standing.

“Here you—oh.” No sooner had she taken a single step toward her mother than the floor skated beneath her feet.

The soulful music took on a muted, faraway quality. A strange gray twilight rushed into the edges of her vision as her knees turned to water.

“Tiffany!” The knife clattered to the counter and Camille launched herself toward Tiffany as a red curtain dropped over the whole show.

## Seven

Another meeting. Another text. Another unwelcome surprise.

Preston felt like he'd been sitting at the long, glossy table in the boardroom of the Del Rio Group's corporate office for a solid year. The scent of furniture polish had brought on a gnawing headache. The voices had all faded into a numbing drone. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't make himself focus on the current discussion.

Considering how his weekend had dragged on, he wasn't entirely surprised. The chocolates that Tiffany had lovingly picked out for Maggie still sat on the kitchen table of his bachelor pad home. His intended mea culpa for missing their family dinner the other night foiled by yet another wedding-related emergency. He was quickly losing patience with this entire process and the ridiculous feud that had started it.

And now this.

Hey, you! I'm in town for a week. I was really hoping we could get together.

The hopeful tone of Sunny's unexpected text gutted him.

Why now?

His father had risen from the head of the table, folding his hands behind his lower back and taking up the slow cadence he favored when about to make an important announcement. Preston wrenched his eyes away from his phone and tried to refocus his attention in the present.

"When my great-great-grandfather originally purchased this land, he had a simple dream."

Preston could recite the rest by memory. *With only twenty-five dollars in his pocket...*

He couldn't help but feel envy for a life he imagined to be far simpler than his current predicament. He'd been born into money and seen firsthand the ways it warped the mind. This

obsession with legacy that turned otherwise reasonable men like his father into peacock-proud combatants. Preston had always considered it his legacy as well and spent so long chasing after it he'd never even paused to think about whether he really wanted it. Whether his desire to take over the Del Rio Group was born of a personal passion or was just a mirror for his father's blind ambition. His relationship with Sunny had similarly twisted roots.

He owed her closure at least. After what had happened between him and Tiffany at her shop, he felt like he needed to formally resolve all ties before he could think about his next steps.

He was composing his reply to Sunny when sudden thunderous applause brought him up short.

Everyone was looking at him.

He dredged his recent memory for a word or phrase that might help him but came back empty-handed.

He was losing it.

"January 1." The man seated next to him clapped him on the back. "How does it feel to finally have an official transition date?"

Preston glanced at his father, whose broad smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

Fernando Del Rio had announced his official retirement date.

At the moment he had waited for, prepared for and worked for his entire life, Preston had been ruminating about an ex-girlfriend.

And his lack of focus had clearly been noted.

A cold sinking feeling invaded his chest.

Fernando turned his attention back to the audience of board members held in his thrall. "I hope you'll all join me tonight at the Glass House to celebrate this momentous occasion."

Preston cleared his throat. “Actually, I don’t know if tonight will work so well for me.”

His father’s self-satisfied smile dissolved into a scowl. “But you’re the guest of honor. What could you possibly find more important than celebrating your ascension to the post of CEO at the Del Rio Group?”

He wouldn’t like the honest answer to this question.

Preston had planned to stop by Tiffany Winters’s house.

Not only had she not texted him all weekend, but she also hadn’t answered his text this morning confirming the ob-gyn appointment.

The board members began to shift in their seats as the tension in the room mounted.

He could put in half an hour at the reception. Shake some hands and present his back for slapping, and then head straight over to Tiffany’s house afterward.

“Not a thing.” Preston forced a triumphant smile onto his face. “Who wants to pick me up? Because I know I certainly won’t be driving home.”

This display of nauseating swagger was met with a chorus of masculine approval. Though Preston loathed this kind of fraternal mischief, it managed to restore his father’s good humor.

“6:00?” Fernando proposed. “The first round is on me. The second, on the man poised to inherit the most lucrative business in ten counties.”

The group noisily pushed back from the table and got to their feet.

One by one, he received their handshakes and congratulations, all of it leaving him hollow and dissatisfied.

His father was the last to leave, making his way over to Preston in a slow procession that made the moisture evaporate from his throat.

“You’re pleased with this announcement I hope.”



Preston closed his laptop and tucked it under his arm. “Of course I am.”

Fernando pushed the chair Preston had vacated flush with the table. “I only ask because you seem very distracted.”

“I’ve had a lot on my mind.” He offered no additional explanation.

“Like the upcoming Diamond Gate negotiations with Jack Chowdhry?” His father crossed his arms over his chest. “Because I’m expecting you to be there. Now that the word is out that you’ll be taking over as CEO, people will be watching our family very closely, Preston. It’s vital that we present a united front.”

The very cadence of these words irked him. Whether or not he and his father resolved any of the issues complicating their relationship, they must always appear solid to everyone else.

A message that had been emphasized to him since his acquisition of language.

It wasn’t like he had ever been asked to be perfect.

Only to make sure everyone else thought he was. Having personal problems was acceptable provided nobody else was ever aware of them. Years of maintaining this front left him exhausted and edgy.

Burned out.

“I’ll be there,” he said.

“Good.” His father passed him in a wave of cologne and clothing starch. “You wouldn’t think about canceling tonight at the last minute.”

It wasn’t so much a question as a warning.

“It would be disappointing to some of our most important associates if you didn’t show.”

“I understand, Dad,” Preston said.

“Their faith in us is the reason that Del Rio Group exists. Without that faith—”

“I’ll be there,” he repeated, cutting him off.

His father’s eyes lingered on his long enough for him to know he was being assessed. “We’ll talk tonight.”

Preston replied with a curt nod and fled the conference room like his ass was on fire. What would normally be a ten-second walk to his office took several minutes as he was forced to stop and receive the enthusiastic congratulations of every single person he passed.

When he finally reached it, he shut the door and slumped back against it, thinking he was safe until his phone buzzed in his pocket. Sunny, he expected, accepting his invitation to meet for coffee later that week.

But he’d been wrong.

Congratulations, Pres! Though seeing a text from his sister lifted his heart, the context dampened his spirit.

Word sure travels fast, he replied.

I knew he would be announcing it today—I just didn’t know when until Amanda Battle asked me what I thought when I stopped by the diner.

How the hell would she know already?

You know she has sources within every building in a sixty-mile radius.

LOL. Are you coming to Dad’s little shindig at the Glass House?

Can’t. Having the 76th fitting for my dress. She accompanied the message with a GIF of a cartoon character beating its head against a wall.

And here I thought your life was nothing but conjugal bliss, Preston replied.

You have my permission to find the love of your life, but please don’t ever plan a wedding. For the love of God, elope.

Preston felt like someone had just shot an arrow into his chest.

The love of his life.

He couldn’t even figure out how to have a relationship that lasted more than a year. The one woman he’d managed to

sustain any kind of interest in was completely off-limits, but now carrying his child. Any future for the two of them forever altered by that fact.

You have my word, Preston texted back.

He shuffled over to his desk and sank into the leather chair, the back warmed by the sun pouring through the floor-to-ceiling window. He spun a slow circle to look out over the sprawling Texas landscape.

His kingdom, or so he'd been raised to believe.

Tonight would merely be an extension of that fantasy.

\* \* \*

The repetition of tired phrases shouldn't surprise him. After all, Preston had been hearing them since puberty.

*It was only a matter of time.*

Wasn't everything?

*Here comes the future CEO.*

As if he'd had a choice.

*You're the spitting image of your father.*

Like there had been any effort on his part in that matter.

For half an hour, he'd allowed his father to steer him around the Glass House's outdoor patio, letting party guests pick at his psyche like an appetizer.

The atmosphere was festive, the music, lights and outdoor space heaters lending the gathering an intimate air despite the concentration of bodies.

None of it felt real.

Only when he spotted his mother and Maggie waiting patiently at the back of the crowd did his anxiety ease.

Gayle Del Rio was positively beaming, her pride evident in her glowing smile. Maggie, who had canceled her fitting at the last minute, was a different story. The second their eyes

locked, her demeanor changed from congratulatory to concerned.

Preston worked his way over to them and was quickly joined by his father, who made sure their handshake was captured by the photographer who'd been making the rounds.

For his part, Fernando played the role perfectly. Standing alongside Preston with a properly proud smile on his face.

Preston blinked to dispel the corona of blue from a camera flash.

"I'm getting a drink," he announced, slipping away from his family.

At the bar, he had chugged half a bottled water and ordered a Scotch when a familiar scent drifted into his nostrils. Jasmine and vanilla.

Sunny's signature.

Now Maggie's expression made sense.

He should have known that Sunny texting him the same day his father announced his ascension to the role of CEO wasn't just a coincidence.

"You didn't think I would miss your big moment, did you?" Sunny placed a lip-gloss-sticky kiss on his cheek.

She was as beautiful as she had ever been. Long, dark hair. Wide brown eyes. Smooth umber skin. Everything that had once attracted him still present and yet, completely and totally uninteresting. A condition that seemed to be his alone as every man in the room stole glances at her in her fire-engine red body-hugging cocktail dress.

His father had clearly orchestrated her unveiling like a showgirl popping out of a cake. Sandwiching her between layers of colleagues and contacts.

"I can't believe it's finally happening."

A white-shirted bartender handed him his Scotch, and Preston dropped a twenty in the tip jar.

“You and me both,” he said. “I thought the old man would end up staying at the head of the Del Rio Group until he had to be propped at the boardroom table like a scarecrow.”

“I meant us,” she said, looking at him beneath a fringe of dark lashes.

The hopes he’d harbored of this being a cordial conversation resulting in mutual closure quickly evaporated.

“You want to take a walk?” he asked.

What he had to say, he didn’t want to be overheard by the entire goddamn town.

“It would be my pleasure,” she purred.

The bartender had brought her a fresh martini without even being asked. She took it and thanked him with a sexy smile that made the man’s ears turn crimson.

They wove through the crowd to the side of the patio and down a set of stairs to landscaped grounds of the Bellamy hotel.

Preston slowed when they reached a pocket of privacy created by a screen of hedges.

He’d been rehearsing what he might say since he received her text, but now they were alone, his mind went blank.

“My father invited you, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” she said. “But that’s not why I came.”

“Then why did you?”

Sunny took a step closer to him. “Because I miss you.”

Preston’s heart dropped into his guts. The last thing he’d wanted to do was hurt her *more*. “Sunny—”

“Please.” She held up a hand. “I need to say this before I lose my nerve. Ever since we broke up, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about what you said. How you couldn’t marry me because your career would always come first, and that wouldn’t be fair to me. I realize now that I wasn’t as supportive as I could have been. That maybe if I had spent less

time dragging you to trendy places and taking pictures of us being the perfect couple, we might have had the chance to be one in real life.”

“No,” Preston interrupted. “The only one to blame for our breakup is me.”

“How so?” Her perfectly shaped eyebrows lifted.

“I wasn’t being honest with you,” he said. “Or myself.”

Sunny hugged her arms tighter around herself. “What do you mean?”

The distant sound of the party drifted over on a breeze that rattled the leaves in an old scrub oak.

“My father kept dropping hints that he thought it was time I settled down. That having a family to continue the Del Rio line was part of what it meant to carry on his legacy. I thought if we got engaged, he might think I was ready to take on the role of CEO.”

The sheen of tears caught the golden fairy lights overhead. “But...when you proposed, you said you couldn’t imagine your future without me in it. You said—”

“I didn’t realize how fixated I was on following in my father’s footsteps. Or how it was affecting my decisions.” He stared out at the tangled silhouette of branches in the distant tree line. “I cared about you deeply, Sunny. I tried to convince myself that would be enough. That I’d be a good husband even though I couldn’t seem to feel what you felt.”

“You made me *feel* loved, Preston.” She placed a hand on his forearm. “That *is* enough for me.”

Preston placed his hand over hers. “It really isn’t. Remember all the dates I broke? The trips we never took. All the things you wanted but never got. I watched you pretend that none of it mattered. But it did. It mattered, and I let you down in every way possible. You just wanted us to work so bad that you didn’t see it.”

Her dark hair fell forward around her face as she looked down at the cobblestones.

“You know I’m right,” he said, feeling the weight of that truth within his bones. “You’re going to find someone who can give you the kind of love I never could. I know you will.”

She lifted shining eyes to Preston. Her hands pressed his chest through the fabric of his shirt, and she lifted on the toes of her strappy sandals to press a kiss against his lips.

“Thank you, Preston.”

“For what?” he asked.

“For telling me the truth. Even when it hurts.” She gave him a watery smile. “Especially then.”

He brushed a tear away from her cheekbone. “Promise me you’ll be happy.”

Sunny pulled his hand away from her cheek and squeezed it. “I promise you I’ll try.”

He looked at her for what felt like an eternity, glad for this poignant moment despite his father having been its architect.

She drew in a deep breath and released it in a sigh. “I think I’m going to head out. Will you give your mother and sister my best?”

“I will,” he said.

He watched her cross the grass to the parking lot, listening to the muffled sounds of people celebrating. Not really celebrating him, but themselves. Their connection to what they hoped would be a profitable company under his leadership.

He needed to confront his father about inviting Sunny, but knew this wasn’t the time.

And anyway, her presence had been unintentionally helpful. Remembering their relationship had made the contrast between his present circumstances and what he felt for Sunny that much more vibrant.

He knew what he needed to do.

Pulling his phone from his pocket, he opened his family’s WhatsApp chat and quickly typed in a message. Small emergency I need to take care of. Please apologize for me.

His chest filled with cement as the app registered that his sister, mother and father read the message. A tiny trail of bouncing bubbles indicating his father typing a message appeared and disappeared several times.

His mother and sister beat him to the punch with simultaneous replies.

Mom: Of course, son. Go take care of what you need to.

Maggie: We've got it covered, Pres.

His father's typing stopped, and Preston felt a rush of gratitude for the strong, courageous women in his life.

He laid down several feet of rubber as he screeched out of the parking lot and pointed his car toward Tiffany's home.

Preston needed to see her. To talk to her.

Not because he harbored an adult version of the unrequited crush that had tormented him in high school.

Because after tonight, he knew he was falling for Tiffany Winters.

And if he wasn't careful, those feelings could cost them both dearly.



## *Eight*

“You do know, Miss Winters, what the consequences of your irresponsible choices will be?” the stern-faced judge demanded in a voice that sounded eerily like Fernando Del Rio’s.

Tiffany frantically searched her memory but couldn’t think of anything that would have landed her in court. Every time she opened her mouth to answer, he pounded his gavel.

Her hands balled into fists at her sides, she finally got irritated enough to shout back at him.

The sound of her own strangled moan ripped through the fabric of her dream.

She had fallen asleep on the couch.

The economics book she’d been reading before she crashed lay on her chest. The Netflix logo lazily swam around her TV screen against a black field. The phone she’d silenced when she settled in to study for her upcoming quiz bore several missed call notifications.

The most recent from Preston.

Which was when the pounding on her front door made sense.

Her body felt like a giant block of concrete, and raising it from the couch required significant effort.

“Coming,” she called as she shuffled over to the door.

Preston’s handsome face was kissed with sweat, his eyes wide with worry. The expression of naked relief evaporated and was replaced with irritation.

“You scared the shit out of me,” he said. “I was seconds away from calling 911.”

Tiffany moved to the side, rubbing her bleary eyes. “What are you even doing here?”

“Aside from panicking you mean?” he asked, walking inside.

“Panicking about what?” A yawn ate half of the last word.

“You didn’t answer my calls, then I get here, and I can see your Jeep in the garage and all the lights are on, but you’re not answering the door.”

“Because I was asleep.” She gestured toward the couch.

“How was I supposed to know that?” he demanded.

“You weren’t,” she said. “You were supposed to be at your house or a restaurant or whatever it is you usually do with your evenings.”

His lean, muscular form crackled with energy as he paced the length of her living room.

“From now on, I don’t think you should turn the ringer on your phone off when you’re alone.”

“Why is that?” Tiffany folded her arms across her chest, very aware of her braless state.

“Because I need to be able to make sure you’re safe,” he said. “What if you had passed out and hit your head?”

Adrenaline swept away the last of her sleep fog. “Then chances are, I wouldn’t be able to get to the phone even if the ringer *was* on.”

Preston’s lips flattened into a line, his face turning a rosier shade of its usual beachy brown as he pulled his phone from his pocket and began typing.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Buying you one of those Life Alert systems,” he said without looking up.

“Why don’t you just install security cameras? Then you can watch me anytime you want,” she muttered under her breath.

His scowl softened as he glanced around her living room. “That’s not a bad idea.”

“I was kidding,” she said.

“After what happened the other day, can you honestly tell me I shouldn’t be worried?”

Her irritation blazed into out-and-out anger. “What did Alisha tell you?”

Preston’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, *what did Alisha tell me?* Did something happen?”

“Answer my question then I’ll answer yours.” She crossed into the kitchen and went to the fridge. Taking out a bottle of the extra-strong ginger ale Camille had stocked there, she offered one to Preston, who refused.

“Alisha didn’t tell me anything. I was talking about you getting dizzy and almost falling at Chocolate Fix.”

Tiffany took a sip of the spicy brew and blew out a resigned breath. “It’s called hyperemesis gravidarum, and it’s not serious.” She walked back into the living room and plopped down on the couch.

Preston followed but remained standing.

“Dr. Everett says it’s actually very common and—”

“Dr. Everett? I thought your appointment wasn’t until Thursday.”

“It was,” she said, already thinking of how she could state the next part without further alarming him. “I stopped by to see my parents, and my mom recommended moving it up.” This didn’t come out quite as casually as she hoped it would.

“Wait, Camille knows too, now?”

Tiffany nodded.

“She took one look at me, and I knew there was no point in trying to hide anything from her. She agrees that we should wait until after the wedding and she’s a good ally to have.”

He was silent as he digested this. “Why did she recommend moving the appointment up?”

So much for hopes of her mom knowing their secret derailing him from this line of reasoning.

“I had one of my spells when I was in their kitchen. I didn’t faint this time—”

“*This* time?” His voice had risen by an entire octave. “You mean you fainted before?”

“Barely,” she said, tucking her knees under her on the couch. “It was more like a brownout.”

Preston’s angular nostrils flared. “And you didn’t think to let me know?”

“What purpose would that have served?” she asked.

“The purpose of making me aware of potential health problems with the mother of my child.”

“Is that my official title now?” She set her bottle of ginger ale on the coffee table. “Because if it is, I guess I need an idea of exactly what the role entails. Is it all my personal health information that you’re now entitled to? Or just things that you’re afraid might affect the pregnancy?”

“That’s not what I was trying to say.”

“Then what *were* you trying to say?”

His posture slackened as some of the anger went out of him. “I was trying to say that I care about what’s going on with you. I want to know so that I can be there for you.”

“You *can’t*.” She hadn’t meant to say it quite so forcefully and immediately wanted to soothe the hurt she read in his eyes. “I love that you want to be helpful—I really do. But this is just reality, Preston. You can’t be there for me all the time. You can’t come running over to my house every time I won’t answer my phone. You can’t act like something we’re not.”

Preston shuffled over to the window—it looked out to the street where his car was parked at the curb.

She felt an acute longing to press her cheek against the broad plain of his back. To hear the muffled ticking of his heart within his sturdy torso. To know the thoughts looping through the coils of his keen mind.

When he faced her again, she could see the protective fire had dimmed to an ember. “I’m a shitty partner, Tiffany. I know myself well enough to admit that. I’ve never managed to put anything but my work first.” His hands relaxed at his sides. “I don’t want to be like that with you. I don’t want anything to get in the way of putting our child first.”

“That’s what I want too, Preston,” she said.

“And you’re right. I need to be more respectful of your privacy. Which is why I think it’s best that we keep things strictly platonic going forward.”

The hope rising in her heart collapsed like a startled soufflé.

“I see,” she said.

“I’m sorry that I let things get out of control at the shop the other day. I let my libido get the best of me and I made things more difficult in the process.”

“That was a two-person effort,” she said. “If I remember correctly, I’m the one who suggested a repeat performance.”

“As much as I would like that, and I really would, for the sake of both our families and careers, we shouldn’t play with that particular fire.”

He wasn’t saying anything Tiffany hadn’t thought in the aftermath of their time together. They still needed to have deeper, more difficult discussions, but the idea of doing so now made her feel even more exhausted.

She scooted forward on the couch and yawned.

“In the interest of putting down the matches, do you want to get out of here so I can shower and fall into bed?”

“No,” he said. “But I’m happy to supervise your shower so you *don’t* fall and then tuck you into bed.”

Part of her wanted to refuse on principle. To prove she could turn him away just as easily as he could dismiss the possibility of their having a physical relationship.

But tonight, she didn’t want to be alone.

Her mom and Alisha had both offered to come stay with her for a week or so until the medication that Dr. Everett had started her on had a chance to get her symptoms under control, but she couldn't bear the thought of separating them from their beloved homes and partners. Not to mention putting them in the position of having to manufacture an excuse that didn't involve her pregnancy.

It was more than that too.

Preston's proximity made her feel safe.

She wanted him here. Wanted him all to herself. Knowing her possessiveness was completely irrational did nothing to alter its existence.

"Whatever will make you sleep easier," she said as if she agreed only for his benefit.

Reaching for the remote, she turned the TV off and stacked her book avalanche on the coffee table. Tiffany pushed herself up from the couch before dragging her leaden bones down the hallway.

Preston hovered a step behind her. Close enough to grab her should she begin to fall, but far enough to give her space.

She stopped in her bedroom, where she fished clean underthings and an oversize T-shirt out of her dresser drawer. Preston hung back in the doorway, waiting until she proceeded to the en suite bathroom before he followed suit. Leaning against the sink, with his arms folded across his chest, and an endearingly serious expression on his face.

"We should get you a shower bench," he said, glancing through the glass wall.

*We.*

That word again.

Even if it was only temporary, she allowed herself to enjoy it.

Tiffany opened the shower door and turned the handle to start the spray. "I'm sure I can find something to that effect online."

His phone was out of his pocket and in his hand in a flash. He turned the screen toward her. “How about something like this?”

“That’s really nice actually,” she said, looking at the classic teakwood bench. “Will you send me the link?”

“It will be here by tomorrow between 2:00 to 5:00 p.m.,” he reported with a grin.

“Preston,” she scolded. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I wanted to,” he said. “I’ll feel better knowing that you have it.”

“When you’re not available for shower supervision duty?” After gathering her hair into a messy pile at the top of her head, she secured it with an elastic.

“So that you have somewhere to sit while I’m supervising.”

She laughed, turning her back to him as she stripped off her T-shirt. “Surely you’re not planning on being here every single night.”

When he didn’t answer, she glanced over her shoulder to find his gaze fixed on her bare back, his lip caught between his teeth. She cleared her throat and his eyes flicked back toward the ceiling.

“Would that bother you?” he asked.

“It wouldn’t bother me. I just find it extremely unlikely.”

“Because?”

“I know how many social engagements your father signs you up for. How important networking is. How you’re easily the most eligible bachelor for ten counties. I can’t expect you to surrender your entire social life to play shower sentinel to a schlub.”

Preston pushed himself off the counter before taking a step toward her. “You are the furthest thing from a schlub.”

Tiffany glanced down at her faded, baggy sweats. Complete with bleach stains and a hole in the knee, both acquired over

the years in the course of cleaning. “Glamour personified right here.”

“If you’re aiming for frumpy, you’re gonna have to try a hell of a lot harder than that.”

“You say that now, but just wait until there’re various baby-generated stains added to the mix.”

“I intend to.” He said this with the fervency of a vow. “Now get in there before you waste all the hot water.”

Never particularly self-conscious, she stripped off her sweats and kicked the pile toward the wicker hamper.

The heated spray felt delicious on her skin.

She stood there and let it beat down on her and rolled her neck to release the tension. “What was the highlight of your day?”

A question asked to dispel the awkwardness of his being present for what was usually such a solitary ritual. Loading her loofah with bodywash, she then set about her usual ablutions.

“My father announced his retirement date.”

The sudsy puff froze in its journey over her collarbone. “Really?”

“Really,” he said. “As of January 1, you’re looking at the new CEO of the Del Rio Group and its various holdings.”

“Why don’t you sound happy about that?”

“Because I feel like there’s an ulterior motive for him having finally chosen a date.”

“Such as?” Setting the loofah aside, she reached for her face wash.

“Such as, I don’t know, but I plan to find out.”

“You don’t think there’s any chance that he decided you were ready?”

The dark shape of his body moved in her peripheral vision. “Fernando Del Rio doesn’t up and change his mind. He’s famously stubborn and twice as proud.”



“You come by it honestly then.” Letting her head fall backward, she rinsed the foam from her throat and chest.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” His voice was closer than she expected and sent a little jolt of electricity through her middle.

“It’s not supposed to mean anything,” she said. “It’s just a general observation.”

“If we’re handing out unsolicited observations, I don’t think you’re eating enough.”

Tiffany massaged the foamy cleanser into her cheeks. “You ought to look in my pantry. There’s a gigantic bag of chocolate-dipped potato chips that only yesterday was full to the brim.”

Preston shuddered. “Talk about a bizarre pregnancy craving.”

“If that’s true, then half of Royal must be secretly knocked up.” Tiffany let the spray pellet her face. “They’re one of my bestselling items. That and the brown sugar fudge. How did Maggie like her chocolates, by the way?”

“I haven’t given them to her yet.”

“You haven’t seen her?” she asked.

“I saw her tonight, but I didn’t have them with me.”

“At your parents’ house?”

“At the Glass House,” he said.

It wasn’t so much the revelation as the tone of voice it was delivered in that made her antennae twitch. “You went there for dinner?”

His silence lasted a few too many seconds. “It was an informal get-together to celebrate the announcement.”

Tiffany swiped her fingers over her eyes to clear them so she could look at him. “And it was over in time for you to be banging on my door by seven o’clock?”

Preston shifted in his boots, his eyes fixed on the tile floor. “Not exactly.”

Tiffany cut the water and yanked open the shower door.

“You left your own party just to drive over here and check on me?”

Preston’s eyes swept up her naked body then quickly back to the floor.

He pulled the towel from the hook and held it out to her. “Yes.”

“Why would you do that?”

Only when she had wrapped herself in the towel did he look her in the eye. “Because I had to know you were okay.”

Preston had left a party celebrating the very thing he’d been working toward for the last decade of his life just to check on her. Her remorse at having been so salty to him was instant and powerful.

“Why didn’t you just call Alisha? You could have told her that you weren’t able to get hold of me and that you were worried. You didn’t have to—”

“Yes,” he said emphatically. “Yes, I did. I couldn’t stand there another second with a smile pasted on my face, shaking hands and making small talk, pretending I gave a shit about what any of them had to say when I thought you might be hurt or in trouble.”

A hard lump formed at the base of her throat, cutting off any words she had wanted to say.

“To answer your earlier question, it’s not just pregnancy-related information I’m interested in. I want everything. I want to know how you’re feeling. What you’re thinking. What scares you. What excites you. I want to know *all* of it, Tiffany. All of it. All the time.”

He was breathing hard. The skin of his throat stretching over his Adam’s apple as he swallowed.

There were so many things she wanted to say to him. So many questions she wanted to ask. But fear got the better of her and she settled for something far less revealing. “I’m scared that I’m going to lose my shop, or flunk out of my MBA program, or both. I was just starting to get some momentum, and now it feels like someone has tied bricks to my ankles.”

She stepped onto the cushioned bath mat and secured the towel under her arm.

Preston scooted out of the way to give her access to her vanity. “I meant what I said. I really want to help.”

Tiffany opened the mirror cabinet and took out the moisturizer Alisha gave her that was meant to help with hormone-related breakouts. “Are you offering to do my homework for me?” she asked.

“Any kind of work that might be required in your home or otherwise.”

“Just not the kind of work you did in my office,” she teased.

Preston’s boots shifted on the tile floor again. “We’re in this together, Tiffany,” he said, leaping over her comment entirely. “I need you to know that.”

She wanted to. More than anything, she wanted to quell the nagging voice that insisted on reminding her that at the end of the day, what was happening was happening to her body alone.

The only obligation he had to her or to their child was moral.

Preston was the kind of man who would want to “do the right thing.”

But Tiffany wasn’t sure that there was any one thing that would be right for everyone involved.

“Thank you for being here tonight,” she said. “I promise it won’t be so dramatic once the medication starts working in earnest.”

“Is that my cue to leave?” he asked.

“Were you wanting to stay?”

“As I recall, I offered to tuck you into bed. I intend for this to be a full-service experience.”

“You really don’t need to do that,” she said.

“And what if I want to?”

She could see that arguing with Preston Del Rio was unlikely to yield any results. “Just give me a minute to change into my pajamas.”

When she opened her door a few minutes later, Preston was standing there with the tray from her kitchen. Glancing at its contents, Tiffany felt her heart threatening to melt right out of her chest.

A bottled water and a ginger ale from the fridge. Her lip balm. A sleeve of saltine crackers.

Annoyingly ever-ready tears stung her eyes.

“What is it?” Preston asked. “Did I forget something?”

“You’re just being so...so... Nice to me.”

He gave her a boyish grin. “I’ll try to work on that.”

Tiffany wiped her tears on the sleeve of her pajama shirt. “I was so rude to you earlier, and here you are putting together this amazingly thoughtful bedside tray.” Her voice wobbled on the last word.

“Definitely bedtime for you.” He nudged her forward, and Tiffany shuffled toward the bed. After placing the tray down on her nightstand, he began divesting the comforter of throw pillows.

“You can just toss them in the corner,” she said.

“Is that why they call them throw pillows?” he asked. “Because all you really do with them is throw them in a corner?”

“They’re decorative,” she said, feeling a little foolish at the sheer volume.

Preston peeled back the covers in a neat triangle and made a show of fluffing her feather pillow before stepping out of her way. “In you get.”

Tiffany sat down and slid her legs under the covers Preston held up.

“Not so fast,” he said when she began to lie back.

She hugged the down comforter to her chest. “What am I waiting for exactly?”

Preston reached behind her to adjust the pillows. “It’s all about the sink.”

“The sink?” she asked.

“Yeah. There’s nothing like sinking into a freshly fluffed pillow. But you have to take it slow to get the full effect.”

Her abdominal muscles tightened as she laughed. This whole region of her body was prone to strange twinges and tugs, already making room for the tiny life growing within her. “And where did you come up with this theory?”

He shrugged and scratched the back of his neck. “Just something Maggie and I used to do as kids.”

Tiffany could easily imagine them. A dark-haired boy and girl with giant long-lashed eyes and impish expressions.

She’d been so focused on what role Preston might play in this child’s life that she hadn’t paused to think about what role his sister might.

*Aunt Maggie. Uncle Jericho.*

No matter what happened—or didn’t—between her and Preston, this baby would have a family. The thought brought her some comfort.

She so badly wished this could be enough to stop her mind from churning out awful scenarios. To keep her heart from bleeding ridiculous wishes.

Wishes she didn’t dare share with him.

Tiffany sank back against the pillows at a speed that felt processional. The second her head hit the pillow her eyelids began to droop. Exhaustion stalked her like a leopard these days. There was no telling when it would pounce.

Preston nodded approvingly. “Much better,” he said. “Is there anything else I can bring you?”

She fought an epic yawn and lost. “I’m...good.” Her bedside lamp clicked off. “To lock the front door, you just... punch the thingy and wait for a beep.”

“Punch the thingy,” Preston repeated. “Got it.”

The second lamp clicked off, and in the velvet dark, Tiffany felt the comforter being pulled higher to cover her shoulder. Preston’s delicious scent washed over her, followed by a whisper that chased her down into her dreams.

“Good night, Juliet.”

## *Nine*

Preston couldn't move.

His fingers tingled from lack of blood flow, his arms crushing into his ribs. His knees jutted against something unyielding, and his lower back ached from being immobilized. Through the maze of legs, he could barely make out an emerald-green football field.

Only then did he realize where he was.

The Royal, Texas, stadium at the fairgrounds that housed Friday night high school football games. Only, instead of being on the field, he was trapped under the bleachers. No wonder they were calling his name through the loudspeaker.

He grunted with the effort of trying to wrench himself out from under the metal benches. Straining to get into the stadium lights. He was so close, he could smell it.

The crisp fall air was alive with freshly mowed grass, hot dogs and popcorn from the concession stands and...

Coffee?

"Preston." The loudspeaker softened into a familiar voice. Something warm brushed his forehead and his eyes fluttered open.

The unfamiliar surroundings were disorienting at first. A coffee table. A stack of books. And Tiffany standing over him with a steaming mug in her hand.

"Is this an angel I see before me?" His voice was little more than a croak.

"I'm pretty sure angels would have something better than standard Colombian coffee to offer you," she said, setting down the mug on the coffee table.

Preston winced as he pushed himself upright on the sofa, entire body stiff and sore. "Thanks," he said.

“I wasn’t sure how you take yours, so I made it like I make mine.”

“Black, and usually from a plastic pod, so this is a significant improvement,” he said, blowing away the steam to take a sip. “Oh wow. What did you put in here?”

“Brown sugar, homemade Madagascar vanilla bean simple syrup and a splash of half-n-half.” She smiled and reached for her own mug, which was sporting a cap of pillowy whipped cream.

“How come mine doesn’t have any?” he teased.

“I stopped short of inflicting my full sweet tooth on you.” She pushed herself up off the couch and padded into the kitchen, returning with a spray can. “Occupational hazard.”

Preston held out his mug and received a swirl. The result was decadent, delicious and something he never would have chosen for himself.

He cradled the warm mug between his palms in the early morning light and watched Tiffany return to the kitchen. From the couch, he had the perfect vantage to observe her bustling around the well-appointed space.

His own contained nothing but the barest essentials. He typically grabbed breakfast after the gym, ate lunch at work and had dinner with clients or his family. His place didn’t reflect him the way Tiffany’s reflected her. She had made this a home.

The word woke an ache in his chest.

His parents’ house would always hold a nostalgic allure, but it was no longer his place. No longer the center of his daily life. For the past several years he had lived inside his head and the hopes that lived there.

Was this what they meant by nesting? The desire to create a warm, welcoming space to where the rest of the world could be shut out.

Preston rose from the couch, feeling every stiff muscle as he did so. Walking into the kitchen with his coffee, he propped



one hand against the doorframe overhead for a stretch.

“You could have just slept in the bed, you know.” Tiffany looked at him over the rim of her coffee cup.

“I know,” he said. Not that there would have been any chance of his doing so. He’d had a hard enough time getting his brain to turn off while lying on her couch. The image of her naked and wet danced through his mind until almost dawn.

“Or, you know, your bed.”

“I know,” he said again.

He had gotten as far as the living room last night before turning back to check on her. Finding her breathing even and deep, he’d turned to leave and stopped again when he heard a rustling outside her front window. It had only been an opossum, but this had led to him checking the backyard. The alley. The garage. He’d decided he was *really* leaving this time when he noticed the bathroom window was slightly ajar. Which led him to checking all her window locks.

Discovering that two of them didn’t even work, he stationed himself on her couch.

“I hope your day isn’t too hectic at least.”

Hectic didn’t begin to cover it.

The day after such a big announcement, his father was sure to wring the maximum impact out of the news. Preston hadn’t yet looked at his phone but knew that as soon as he did it would be confetti with notifications.

The mere thought of it made him even more tired.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “How about you?”

Tiffany went to the cupboard and came back with a brightly colored tin that she placed on the counter between them. She popped the lid to reveal neat little stacks of shortbread in scalloped paper cups.

Lifting one up, she dunked it in her coffee and bit into it. “The usual,” she said.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Cookies for breakfast?”

“It’s not a cookie—it’s shortbread.”

“What’s the difference?” he asked.

“A couple of eggs, some baking soda and my talent for justification.”

She nudged the tin toward him, and Preston took one. It dissolved in his mouth like delicious sand.

Sweetness.

Sweetness had been in very short supply in his life lately. Every moment spent in her presence felt like a reward. A holiday. A treat.

“I have an idea,” he said.

Tiffany popped the last of the shortbread in her mouth and dusted her fingers. “What’s that?”

“We should play hooky today.”

Her lightly freckled nose wrinkled. “Hooky? Seriously?”

“Seriously,” he said, liking the idea more every minute. “When’s the last time you did?”

Her lips pursed and she leaned against the counter. “Never?”

“You never played hooky,” he repeated.

She shook her head of adorably sleep-rumpled curls. “Nope.”

“Not even in high school?” he asked.

“Especially not then. Marcus was always the troublemaker. There wasn’t really room for any of the rest of us.”

“Then it’s settled. We’re getting out of Royal, and we’re going to go shopping for every possible baby-related thing your heart desires.”

If Preston could freeze her delighted expression in time, he would have given up years of his life.

“Are you sure you can?” she asked. “With the announcement—”

“I haven’t taken a day off in over a year. I don’t think the company will fall apart completely in my absence. How about you?” he asked. “Do you think the girls can hold down the fort?”

“I think they should be able to manage it,” she said.

“Perfect. How about this for a plan then? We finish our coffee, I go home and get cleaned up and I come back to pick you up in an hour.”

Tiffany raised her mug to clink with his. “Sounds like a date...er—deal,” she quickly corrected.

Preston far preferred the former to the latter but kept his mouth shut in the interest of their discussion from the night before.

Once at home, Preston hurried through his usual rituals. Fueled by a sense of excitement like he hadn’t felt for as long as he could remember. He had finished all of his chores and even invented a few new ones before facing the one he knew he was putting off.

Texting his father.

He stared at his phone for a solid five minutes before deciding on a simple Working from home today.

After he pressed the send button, Preston set his phone on the counter and ran away from it like it was a bomb. The reply waiting for him when he got out of the shower left him staring at his own stunned reflection in the mirror.

No worries. We’ll hit it hard tomorrow.

Preston almost would have preferred that his father reacted with the outrage he had expected.

He decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth and replied with liking the message before getting dressed and heading back to Tiffany’s.

She met him at the door with a smile and a truffle. “That was fast,” she said, shrugging her purse over her shoulder.

“What’s this?” he asked, looking down at the mirror-polished tiny red dome topped with a sculpted poison-green

leaf.

“Just a little something I’ve been working on.” She stepped out onto the porch and shut her screen door.

“Don’t forget to press the thingy,” Preston teased, before popping the chocolate in his mouth.

Tiffany shot him a look as she engaged the lock. “I can’t believe I went down so hard last night.”

“I can. You looked—oh wow.” The chocolate was silk on his tongue, releasing a complex bouquet of flavors as it warmed. “What’s this one called?”

“The Bad Apple. Persipan, Madagascar vanilla bean white chocolate ganache and apple jelly spiked with a Ceylon cinnamon whiskey.”

“Persipan?” he asked.

“Like marzipan but made with apple seeds instead of almonds. Is it a keeper?”

“Definitely,” he said. “I could eat about thirty of those.”

“Amateur like you?” she asked. “That would make you sick.”

The word triggered his memory of her pale, peaked face above the steam kettle.

“I didn’t even ask how you were feeling this morning. Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“Positive,” she said. “I don’t know if it’s the pills or a solid night’s sleep, but I feel great.”

“I’m so glad,” Preston said.

The brick that had been sitting on his chest lost a few crumbs.

Her street was blessedly quiet and empty of other occupants as they walked down the front path to his car. Preston held the passenger-side door for her then walked around to his side and slid behind the wheel. “Think we can get out of town without anybody spotting us?”

“Just let me know if you spot anybody you recognize, and I’ll lay my seat back.” She fastened her seat belt and Preston ignited the engine.

He glanced at her as they pulled away from the curb. “Look, I’m sorry I’ve been so paranoid. It’s just, my dad—”

“You don’t have to apologize,” she said. “I may not understand what it’s like to be my family’s golden child, but I know enough about the pressure from family.”

“You feel pressure?”

Tiffany shrugged. “All my other siblings have these wildly successful businesses and stable relationships, and I’m over here accidentally pregnant and barely able to keep up a tiny chocolate shop.”

“But you’re building something from the ground up,” he pointed out. “It was an idea that you came up with yourself and you made it happen. That takes a lot of courage.”

“Or delusion,” she muttered. “Marcus and Jericho did the same, but their businesses were successful right from the start.”

“We’re supposed to be playing hooky here. Which means talk of business, work, family feuds, stolen necklaces or other adult-related responsibilities is strictly forbidden.”

“That narrows the topics of discussion considerably,” she said. Leaning forward, Tiffany pulled out a tube of lip balm and flipped down the visor mirror to apply it.

The scent of the vanilla drifted over to him. He really wished he didn’t know exactly how it would taste if he pulled the car over and kissed her.

And God did he want to. No matter how many times he told himself that theirs had to remain a platonic relationship for the benefit of their future child, he couldn’t stop reliving the soul-ensnaring ecstasy of being inside her.

“So where to first?” he asked. “Baby Barn? Baby Mart? Baby Depot?”

Tiffany flipped the visor back up. “That’s a toughie. I’ve always loved trains.”

“Baby Depot it is.”

\* \* \*

A short time later they pulled into the shopping center, relatively quiet on a weekday. Despite Thanksgiving being just around the corner, the giant retail stores were donning their holiday finery. Ribbons and lights. Wreaths, bells, elves and reindeer.

The festive atmosphere combined with Tiffany’s excitement was almost enough to make Preston forget that every smile was bought with stolen time.

He followed her from display to display, refusing to take his phone from his pocket to check it for messages.

“Oh my God, would you look at these!” Tiffany held up the tiniest set of pajamas Preston had ever seen. Pale buttery yellow with minuscule llamas, they came with a matching bathrobe whose hood sported a set of perky ears, large lashed eyes and a black button nose.

Preston took the itty-bitty slippers in his hand. Imagining the foot tiny enough to fit into them felt completely impossible.

“I’m sorry,” he said, keeping his face deadpan. “We can’t buy these.”

“Why not?”

“These are *llamas*. I distinctly remember you saying the nursery was going to be alpaca themed.”

Tiffany batted him with a tube of rolled-up receiving blankets. “Close enough.”

Preston added the set to a shopping cart already piled with other items.

An hour later, and there was no room left in either Preston’s trunk or his backseat.

Tiffany stood next to the car hugging her coat around her and watching Preston attempt to rearrange the items to make room for the oversize stuffed llama who had found its way into the cart at the last boutique.

“Think we might have overdone it just a touch?” she asked.

“Nonsense,” he said. “I hear maximalism is all the rage these days.”

“Well, this is about as maxed out as it gets. Of course, whatever doesn’t fit in the baby’s room at my house we can always put in the baby’s room at yours.”

Preston nearly smacked his head on the doorframe.

How had this not occurred to him?

All the pondering he had done about the future and none of it had been focused on the actual day-to-day reality of sharing a child outside a relationship. Like everything else in his world, there would need to be paperwork. Official documents governing resources, time and responsibilities. The idea that punctured what remained of his jovial mood. He stood up, his arms still full of bags as he stared into the back of the car.

“Hey,” Tiffany said, her brown eyes wide. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he said. “I was just thinking.”

“Thinking about what?” Tiffany leaned back against the car. They weren’t going anywhere until he gave her a satisfactory answer.

“How are we gonna do this?”

She peeked through the window. “I think if we pulled out the Diaper Genie, the humidifier and mini bounce house, we could actually stack the boxes and—”

The rest of her words faded away as he looked across the parking lot and saw a man somersaulting a blond toddler onto his shoulders as they walked toward a Mercedes SUV, the child’s mother following close behind.

Preston didn’t want to be the kind of father who was never home on a random Friday afternoon. The kind of father who

canceled on baseball games. Or football games. Or any other of life's small but important moments.

He knew what it felt like to be on the receiving end of that kind of defensible neglect.

The sound of Tiffany clearing her throat returned him to the present moment.

"Can we just stop for a moment to appreciate the mastery of my work here?"

While he had been gathering wool, she had reorganized the entire backseat.

"Color me impressed," he said.

Tiffany slurped the last of the Frappuccino she had insisted wasn't for her, but for the baby. "You know what I think we should do next?"

Preston certainly knew what he *wished* they could do. Walking through all the stores, constantly being mistaken for a couple had had a strangely aphrodisiac effect.

"What's that?"

"I think we should see a movie."

"A movie?" he asked.

"I've been craving popcorn like mad, and there just happens to be a giant mega multiplex right there across the parking lot."

"I don't even know what's playing," he said. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd set foot in a movie theater.

"I guess we'll have to find out then."

The options were comfortingly predictable. Rom-com. Superhero movie. Fantasy epic. Live-action remake of an animated classic. Recycled horror. Action adventure. Tearjerker.

They settled on the rom-com. Tiffany insisted it was the least likely to make her eyes leak. You never knew when they would sneak in a pet in peril in some of the other genres.



“I’ll grab the tickets if you want to be on snack duty,” Preston suggested.

“Deal,” she said.

As soon as she was through the doors, Preston turned back to the kid behind the plate glass window. “How many tickets have you sold for the 11:30 of *Love, Linda?*”

The kid consulted the monitor parked in front of him. “None so far.”

“How much would it cost to buy out the theater?”

Behind his smudged glasses, the kid’s eyes widened. “The *whole* theater?”

“The whole theater,” Preston repeated.

“Just one moment and I’ll call my manager.” The kid picked up the phone and mumbled into the receiver before pressing it to his bird-boned sternum. “He says it will be—” he gulped audibly “—two thousand dollars plus tax and cleaning fees.”

Preston pulled his wallet from his back pocket and slid his platinum card into the brushed metal trough below the glass.

The kid’s eyes were as large as duck eggs as he processed the transaction. He folded Preston’s card into the receipt and slid it back to him. “Enjoy the show, sir.”

Opening his billfold, Preston pulled out a crisp hundred and tucked it through the slot. “Appreciate your help—” he squinted to read the name tag “—Doug.”

“You’re very welcome, sir! Happy Holidays!” Doug’s cheeks were patchy pink. The tips of his ears nearly scarlet. He looked like he might be on the verge of breaking out in a Tiny Tim leap.

Popcorn-scented air whooshed over Preston as he pushed through the doors to find Tiffany at the concessions stand, loading up a carrying caddy.

“That’s quite the array,” he said, unzipping his coat.

Tiffany grabbed a handful of napkins and set them on the tray. “Extra-large popcorn, butter and salt layered of course.

Licorice, gummy bears and chocolate malted milk balls.”

“What are those?” he asked, pointing at the three small white cups perched atop the popcorn.

“Ranch,” she said. “For the popcorn.”

“Now I *know* that’s got to be a craving.”

She gave him a sheepish smile. “Actually, I always eat ranch with my popcorn.”

“Why am I not surprised.” Preston relieved her of the tray and walked toward the podium, where another kid with a barcode scanner snapped to attention.

“You’ll be in theater seven,” she said brightly. “You just turn right down that first hallway, and it will be halfway down on your left.”

“Thanks so much,” Preston said. He stood still long enough for Tiffany to get a couple steps ahead, then dropped the folded hundred-dollar bill he’d concealed in his palm.

His chest warmed at the expression of absolute wonder on a face that had looked too young to be so jaded only seconds before.

Stepping into the dim theater, he felt a strange sense of déjà vu, having squired many a high school and college date through similar rituals. They sat down just as the previews were beginning.

Tiffany folded out a tray table and set out all the various items.

“You know the seats recline, right?” She reached across his lap to press a glowing blue button. Preston’s legs began to lift as the seat whined backward.

“Why are you whispering?” Preston asked. “We’re the only two people in here.”

He tried very, very hard not to notice the proximity of her forearm to the part of him beginning to stir at her nearness.

“Theater etiquette is very important,” she said, biting into a licorice rope. “Regardless of whether other patrons are

present.”

Preston lifted the popcorn bucket and set it down on his lap. A gesture more practical than anything else.

It felt like a strange reimagining of a life he'd only lived in dreams. Tiffany Winters's beautiful profile lit up from the movie's flickering glow. He couldn't help but think how much easier his life might have been, both of their lives might have been, had they the chance to do this when they were teenagers. To be silly. Irresponsible. Impractical. Selfish. To get into trouble they could then get themselves out of.

Had this been a date, now would be the time when he was thinking of a way to get closer to her. Nothing so obvious as the arm around the shoulder bit, but maybe a whispered question like—

“Did you see him in that *Hamlet* remake?” Tiffany's breast brushed his arm as she leaned in to grab a handful of popcorn.

“I didn't,” he said.

“You should. He was better in *Titus*, but I really think you'd like it.”

“I'll have to look that up.”

Images moved on the screen, but his entire awareness centered around the bare half inch where the side of her hand touched his on the armrest.

It really was like being in high school.

Complete with an inconvenient erection he was unsuccessfully attempting to think away. His father's rules had precluded him dating anyone steadily until he was old enough to have his driver's license. And on the day he'd earned it, Fernando had insisted they go for a drive down one of Royal, Texas's many back roads. While they bumped through the scrub mesquite collecting a patina of dust, Fernando gave him his version of *the talk*.

Not about the actual mechanics—he'd been pretty clear on those for a while at that point—but about the consequences. Parked on one of the rare vistas granting a view of their

family's land, Fernando had impressed the importance of using protection.

“It's an awesome power, son. Having any kind of power at all is a privilege. You can tell a lot about a man by how he chooses to use it and who he chooses to share it with.”

At the time, Preston had been so taken aback by his father's use of the word *man* that he hadn't given the proper weight to the true meaning of his words.

It wasn't just about avoiding a teenage pregnancy.

It was about their family's legacy.

And Preston's obligation to continue it responsibly. He had failed this most basic of tests and would have to tell his father about it.

Tiffany's elbow nudged his on the armrest. “Pass the gummy bears?”

On-screen, the hero and heroine leaned toward one another. Their faces doing the tension-heightening hover-pause before their lips met.

Preston located the box of candy and passed it to Tiffany, whose eyes stayed riveted on the screen. She opened it by feel alone, chewing absently as the kiss got serious.

The back of Preston's neck felt hot. His groin heavy. He debated excusing himself to go to the bathroom, but only desperate thoughts about how to resolve the situation once he got there followed.

Preston didn't know how he was going to survive the next hour, let alone the next seven months.

The couple fell into bed together, dramatically rolling across the mattress and tearing clothes away from each other's bodies.

A fine film of sweat broke out across Preston's forehead. “Are you sure this is a romantic comedy?”

Tiffany nodded as she stared at the screen, her hand first missing her mouth with a bite of popcorn, then missing the

bucket as she reached to retrieve another.

Preston shoved the bucket toward her, knocking into the vat of soda in the cup holder between them. They both bent to secure it and managed to bump heads.

“Shit.” Preston rubbed his scalp at the site of impact. “I’m so sorry.”

“*I’m* sorry.” Tiffany’s eyes crinkled at the corners as she winced. “I’m the one who insisted on getting all these snacks.”

“Let me feel.” Preston sank his hand into the cloud of her hair and tenderly probed her scalp. No lumps or bumps, to his great relief.

Tiffany’s eyelashes were feathered against her cheeks, her head tilted toward his touch.

“That feels nice,” she said dreamily.

“Good.” He was barely breathing. Gently kneading his way downward toward her nape.

“Mmmmm.” Her head lolled forward on a quiet moan that lanced Preston straight through the gut. He closed his eyes to home his attention to her hair moving through his fingers like warm silk. He wanted hours—days—to map every single part of her body this way. To learn what made her giggle, sigh, scream and sing.

He wanted to pull her into his lap right here in this theater and—

“Preston?”

He opened his eyes to find Tiffany looking at him. “Hmm?”

The mysterious magnet that had drawn them together the night of Maggie’s engagement party and again in her shop woke once again. Their mouths drifted closer. Brushed. Brushed again.

Met.

Fused.

His hand tightened in her hair, releasing another small moan. He drank its honey sweetness as she opened her mouth to him. The sensuous dance of their tongues grew urgent. Demanding. Their bodies sought contact despite the physical barriers determined to separate them. Elbows making awkward introductions to the seat backs, the armrest, the tray tables in their haste. Teeth bumping. Smiling against each other's lips at their awkwardness.

“You want to get out of here?” Tiffany's lips gleamed in the light from the screen.

He'd been afraid to ask this question. Afraid that daylight would burn away their passion and restore them to their senses. Afraid of what might happen if it didn't.

“Yes.”

They hastily gathered their things, depositing the remainder of the snacks in the popcorn bucket that Preston used as a shield as they quickly made their way through the lobby.

Preston trotted ahead to get the door. Glancing back at Tiffany, the bottom dropped out of his stomach.

She stood frozen like a statue, her face ghost white.

He thought she might be having a fainting spell until a familiar voice rushed into the foyer on a gust of chilly air scented with a familiar heavily floral perfume.

“Well, what are the odds!” Mande Meriweather bustled past him to give Tiffany a hug. Her short cabernet-colored pixie cut stuck up in odd whorls, a casualty of the constant Texas wind. Bird-bright eyes flicked between them. “What on earth are the two of you doing here?”

Tiffany's mouth opened, but sound failed to come out.

“Concessions,” Preston blurted out. “Tiffany has been working on getting her chocolates into local retailers. I just happened to know the manager of the movie theater, so—”

Preston looked back toward the ticket counter just outside the doors, where the first kid he'd given a hundred spot to lifted a hand as if on cue.

“Oh,” Mande said primly. “Isn’t that nice of you. That must be what the two of you were talking about in front of your shop the other day.”

“It sure was,” Tiffany chimed in.

Preston was relieved to see that she’d recovered some of her color along with her voice.

“It was awfully nice of them to give you snacks for the road.” Mande’s penciled brows rose. Another subtle attempt to call their bluff.

“Yep,” Preston replied, offering no further explanation. “What about you? Did you come to catch a solo matinee?”

“Goodness no. I’m on a fundraising committee. We’re going to do a charity raffle at the TCC and the theater has agreed to donate a movie night basket. I’m just here to pick it up.”

“We’ll let you get to it then.” He nodded to Tiffany.

“Good to see you,” she said, smiling at the *Royal Tonight* reporter.

They were almost home free when Mande called after them. “You know the proceeds of the raffle are going to Furry Friends Animal League. And of course, there’s always the option to give *anonymously*,” she said, emphasizing the last word.

Preston and Tiffany traded a knowing look.

“I’d be more than happy to put together a goody basket for you,” Tiffany said.

“You’re such a dear. I hope you didn’t take that as my hinting. I’d never want anyone to feel pressured.”

“Not at all,” Tiffany said. “I’m happy to help.”

“Of course you are. It is a wonderful cause. All those poor, sweet creatures, just looking for a bit of warmth during the cold, dark—”

“I’m sure the Del Rio Group could come up with something as well,” Preston cut in before Mande could break out her phone to pull up one of the posts with pictures of pets in need

of adoption that she was always sharing and he agreed to foster a dozen of them.

“Oh, bless your heart, you kind, wonderful man.” Mandeefished a hand into her purse and came back with her phone. “I actually have a Venmo QR code for the raffle if that works.”

Preston blinked at her.

“Um, sure.” Handing off the popcorn bucket he no longer needed for coverage, he pulled out his phone and scanned the code.

“Of course, it’s up to you how much you’d like to donate, but every little bit helps. Did you know that even five dollars can feed a homeless pet for up to a week?”

“I didn’t,” Preston said, typing numbers into the payment field.

“Just think of how many pets five hundred dollars would feed,” Mandeef added. “Or even a thousand.”

Preston deleted the number he had been typing and doubled it before pressing Send.

The reporter’s phone pinged, stopping her midmonologue about the importance of checking in wheel wells and undercarriage this time of year lest they be harboring a stray seeking shelter.

“Oh, Preston.” She pressed a manicured hand to her matronly bosom. “How can I ever thank you?”

“Don’t say another word about it,” he reassured her. “We were happy to help.”

Mandeef mimed zipping her fuchsia lips and throwing away the key. “You two enjoy the rest of your day.”

Preston ducked his head and shifted toward the parking lot to signal their imminent departure.

They turned to each other once she was safely out of sight.

“Did I just get fleeced?” Preston asked. “Because I feel like I just got fleeced.”



“I didn’t want to say anything,” Tiffany said gravely. “But you just got fleeced.”

Preston pressed his key fob to unlock the car and held the door open for Tiffany.

“It could have been worse, I guess,” she said.

He shut the door and walked around to the driver’s side. “How so?” he asked.

“She could have caught us coming out of Baby Depot,” Tiffany said. “Or asked you to be part of a bachelor auction.”

Just the mere idea of their having avoided either of these possibilities left him woozy with relief.

“You okay?” Tiffany pressed a cool hand to his clammy cheek. “You’re looking a little peaked.”

Preston sagged forward to rest his forehead against the steering wheel’s smooth, well-worn leather.

“Hell with Jack Chowdhry,” he grumbled. “We should have hired her to be the mediator for Diamond Gate.”

“When is the meeting happening about that, anyway?”

He sat up and started the engine. “Tomorrow morning.” The wall he’d constructed between this day and the rest of his life had begun to crack, occasional drips of dread seeping in.

“How do you feel like it’s going to go?”

Preston stepped on the gas as they hit the freeway entrance ramp. “I thought we agreed not to talk about any adult responsibilities.”

She was silent for a protracted moment, staring out at the orderly diagonals of an alfalfa field after the harvest.

“It seems like they’re determined to find us whether we talk about them or not.”

“Seems you’re right.”

They rode in silence most of the way back to Royal.

Preston had driven these roads a million times, but rarely had he really looked at the modest brick houses situated

between the tall rows of trees planted as windbreaks on the individual plots of farmland. He had never wondered who lived in them. What the parents did for a living. Whether the sales from the yearly crop were enough to cover the costs, or if they had to supplement with full-time jobs at one of his father's refineries. Whether their teenage sons and daughters worked at movie theaters, delighted by a hundred-dollar bill.

"You mind if I turn the heat up?" Tiffany shivered.

"Not at all."

The endless Texas sky had turned from a crisp blue to a gunmetal gray, the meteorologists calling for a cold snap that the power grids were ill-equipped to handle. Glancing at his dashboard, Preston could see the temperature had already dropped by ten degrees.

He thought longingly of the wood-burning fireplace in Tiffany's living room.

Even if seeing Mande Meriweather had let the air out of their amorous tires, at least they could sit together in front of it for a while.

If he could just have that, he promised himself he'd be content to walk through whatever consequences tomorrow might bring.

Their luck held on the drive into town, and they were able to glide straight into Tiffany's garage without any additional unwelcome encounters. Preston killed the engine and ordered Tiffany inside to put her feet up while he unloaded the car.

"I promise that both my legs and arms still work perfectly well. I can at least carry the clothes."

"It's not a question of whether you can," he said, herding her toward the garage door. "I'm here to help, so let me help."

"But what about when you're not here?" She set her purse on the counter and followed him into the nursery.

Preston bent at the knees to deposit his armload of boxes, bags and free-range stuffed animals too large for either.

“What if I was always here?” Preston’s pulse pounded in his ears. His arms and heart relieved of a burden that left him feeling instantly lighter.

Tiffany’s brow furrowed. “You mean like, move in together?”

Preston took a step toward her, gazing down into her big, beautiful brown eyes.

“Yes,” he said. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

## Ten

Tiffany stared up at Preston, not quite believing she'd heard him correctly.

"Wait," she said, sitting down on one of the boxes in her pile. "Wait, wait, *wait*. As of this morning you were still afraid to be seen with me. But now you think we should move in together?"

The mere idea of it gave her emotional whiplash.

Preston walked over to the window, planting his hands on the sill and looking out at the spot where he had startled her while she was painting.

"I don't want our baby to have two separate rooms. I don't want to have to decide which clothing goes where, who gets what lamp. Whether we both have the right brand of diapers." He looked at her over his shoulder.

"Are you talking about living together platonically to raise our child? Or something else?"

"Look, I don't want to pressure you. I think we can both agree that if there's any way this baby could have two loving parents in the same home, it would only be to the good. I don't want to be there just when it's my weekend, or my turn. I don't want to miss any part of this."

Even a day ago, he'd be saying the exact words she wanted to hear.

But now, what he *wasn't* saying spoke the loudest.

"Preston, I really appreciate you being willing to do this. But I meant what I said the first time we talked about this. I don't want you rearranging your entire life for me."

The quick jerk of his shoulders upward could have been lack of enthusiasm on his part or fear of that possibility on hers. "Just promise me you'll think about it."

She blew out a breath and rose from her box.

“I’m not going to lie—I’ve been a little afraid of what it was going to feel like when I was bloated and exhausted watching you out on the town with some supermodel.”

His dark brows lowered. “Do you honestly think I would do that?”

Tiffany searched his face, looking for the answer to his question.

“I don’t know, Preston. Maybe that’s not the answer I’m supposed to give you, but it’s the truth. I have no idea whether I’m being reasonable or ridiculous. I have no idea what I’m doing, or how not to feel jealous when I think of you with someone else. I have no right to want you to myself, but I do, and there you have it.”

Tiffany’s heart sank as Preston folded his arms across his chest and stared at his shoes.

Treacherous tears welled up in her eyes and she turned before they could spill down her cheeks.

The air shifted on the back of her neck as he came up behind her. His hands found her hips and drew her backward until her shoulders were pressed against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and held her there, not saying a word until she relaxed into him.

“I’m here, Tiffany.” His sandpapery cheek grazed against hers. “There’s no one else but me and you.”

He nuzzled against her neck, sending a tide of goose bumps spilling down her arms. She sighed and let her eyelids fall closed. Warm tears slipped down her cheeks and landed on the muscled forearm resting across her chest.

“Tell me you’re not doing this out of pity.” Her voice was tight.

She felt Preston pull away and turned in the circle of his arms. The wounded look in his hazel eyes only drove the pain deeper.

“Is that what you think?” he asked.

“What am I supposed to think? We both know how this started out. It was supposed to be a one-night stand. If it wasn’t for my accidentally getting pregnant, you wouldn’t even be standing here right now.”

Preston brushed a tear away from her cheekbone with the rough pad of his thumb. “You don’t know that.”

“Really?” she challenged. “In what universe would Preston Del Rio, only son of my father’s bitter enemy, be standing in my spare bedroom after an entire lifetime of not even knowing I existed?”

“I knew you existed, Tiffany.”

She shook her head. “This isn’t about my ego, Preston. We were feeling it, we went for it and now we’ll be forever connected by the consequences. You don’t need to try and make this more than what it is for my benefit.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you, Tiffany.” His hands were warm on her lower back. “It wasn’t like I was looking for a random hookup and you just happened to be there.”

“What was it like, then?”

He exhaled. “It was the first time in my life when our families weren’t locked in a bitter battle. After all that time, I had the opportunity to talk to you, and I took it. I’m sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused you as a result, but I’ll never be sorry for what we shared that night.”

Tiffany’s mind whirled with the implications of his statement. “After...all that time?”

Preston nodded. “For the one year when we were in high school together, I was *very* aware of your existence. So aware that I even switched one of my electives so I could listen to your goofy laugh when you stopped at your locker between classes.”

Tiffany gaped at him. She flashed back to that crowded hallway. All the times she’d accidentally locked eyes with him through the crowd.

“But you always looked so angry,” she said.

“I was.” His hands skimmed beneath the hem of her sweater to the ticklish skin of her waist. “Mostly that every other boy in the whole damn school could talk to you, but I couldn’t.”

Not that her balance had been anything to brag about as of late, but at that moment, a stiff breeze would have knocked her straight off her feet.

“Forgive me,” she said, extricating herself from his arms to sit down so she could think. “I’m going to need a minute.”

“Take all the time you need. In the meantime, I’m going to finish bringing everything in from the car.”

From her position on the box, she watched the room fill up with the evidence that Preston spoke the truth. In every store they’d visited, if she so much as glanced at an item, he would throw it in the cart. She’d had to playfully wrestle the last several from his grasp, reminding him that they didn’t know the baby’s sex and also wouldn’t need a potty-training chair for a few years yet.

“That’s the last of it, I think,” he said, plunking the oversize llama stuffed animal next to the giant box containing the crib they’d picked out.

A crib she now envisioned them assembling together.

Tiffany came up behind him, admiring the wide-winged muscle of his back through his dress shirt. Hooking her thumbs through his belt loops, she rested her forehead in the indentation between his shoulder blades and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For helping me at Chocolate Fix. For ordering me a shower bench. For buying every llama-related baby item available in Royal County. For taking me to a movie.”

His chuckle rumbled through his back. “I don’t know that I can comfortably take credit for that last one seeing as we didn’t actually watch the movie.”

“The not-watching was my favorite part,” she said.

He angled a grin at her over his shoulder. “Mine too.”

Tiffany slipped her hand in the pocket of his jeans, surprised by his already growing erection.

He groaned as she stroked him through the thin fabric.

“Hold that thought,” he said, placing his hand over hers.

He disappeared down the hallway and returned five minutes later. “Eyes closed,” he insisted.

“This may be a good time to point out that I’ve actually seen my own house before, so...”

“Eyes closed or I’ll blindfold you.” He held out a hand to guide her.

Tiffany closed her eyes and took it. “Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

She shuffled down the hallway in Preston’s wake, feeling along the wall despite the familiarity of her surroundings. The golden light dancing through the thin skin of her eyelids was a giveaway even before the first crackle.

“Open.”

Preston had pulled off the couch cushions to make a pallet on the floor, adding the pillows from her bedroom in addition to several throw blankets. Their movie snacks were spread out on the coffee table he’d moved aside to make room for the makeshift fort.

The oxytocin train plowed into her head at the scene her mind constructed. Preston lying on his stomach, a small dark-haired boy or girl at his side in the exact same position. Cartoons flickering Technicolor across their faces.

Her eyes welled with tears yet again.

“Either you’re going to have to stop doing nice things for me, or one of us needs to buy stock in Kleenex,” she said, sitting down on the couch to take off her boots.

Preston followed suit, removing his shoes, socks and dress shirt.



“Sir?” Tiffany said, pretending to shield her eyes when he reached for his belt. “I was told this is a family-friendly establishment.”

“I’m afraid you were misinformed.” Preston slung the belt over the couch’s arm and unzipped his pants. “This is Royal, Texas’s first clothing-optional pillow fort.”

“First?” She peeled her sweater off to reveal the soft undershirt she’d layered in case she had one of her hormonal sweat attacks.

Preston stepped out of his jeans and draped them next to the belt. “We’re looking into franchising.”

Tiffany peeled off her leggings and unhooked her bra, adding them to the pile. “I’m honored to be part of the grand opening.”

She plopped down on the cushions and pulled one of the blankets over her bare legs. Clad in only his boxer briefs, Preston stretched out beside her.

They watched the fire in cozy silence.

“Did you ever want to do anything other than become the CEO of the Del Rio Group?” she asked.

Orange flames danced across Preston’s eyes. “Nope.”

“Not once?” she asked.

“Not ever,” he replied. “I guess I always knew that running the Del Rio Group was never just a career path. It was my duty.”

“And you never resented that?” she asked. “Having your whole life planned out for you?”

He ran his hand through his hair. “My father has always been the greatest man I know. Thinking that he believed I could be even half as great as he was meant more to me than the actual responsibilities.”

She didn’t miss his use of the past tense.

Tiffany leaned back against the pillows Preston had propped in front of the couch. “Do you know what I wish?”

Preston reached under her blanket to pull her legs across his lap.

“That you had Mande Meriweather’s uncanny ability to show up exactly where no one wants her to be?”

Tiffany grabbed a pillow and whapped his shoulder with it. “I wish our fathers understood how much harder it is for us to carry their grudge since we’re even further removed from Eliza, Teddy and Fernando.”

Preston’s playful smirk softened into a sad smile. “I agree,” he said.

He held her foot and began working his way up the tired muscles of her calf.

“This feel okay?” he asked.

“Amazing.” She let her head fall back, determined to enjoy the decadence of a stolen midday fire with the wind blustering against the windowpanes.

“If anything is too intense, you’ll tell me, right?”

“Too intense?” she asked.

“I read that’s one of the changes that happens in early pregnancy with the influx of hormones.”

“Preston Del Rio,” she said, “have you been doing research?”

“Maybe.”

“You’re telling me you purchased actual books about pregnancy?” she asked.

“The kind with pictures and everything.” His strong fingers migrated from her calf to her thigh. “I was...unprepared.”

Tiffany knew this was putting it extremely mildly. Plenty of men, especially those of Preston’s age and status, grew up largely ignorant of the intricacies of the female body. And even with a mother and sister in his household, she doubted if he’d had occasion to confront some of the brutal and beautiful aspects of the process.

She remembered her horror the first time her mom had sat her down and shown her actual pictures of childbirth. Tiffany had insisted that nothing would make her risk *ever* having that happen to her.

“You might just feel differently someday,” Camille had said with a smile Tiffany now recognized as sly.

Lord, had she been right.

“And what else have you learned?” Tiffany asked.

“That the pregnancy hormones can turbocharge the libido and increase sensitivity toward the end of the third trimester.” His fingertips brushed high enough on the inside of her thigh to make her pelvic floor clench.

“Looking forward to that, are you?” she asked breathlessly.

“I am.” Preston pulled her in for a kiss that started sweet and soft but quickly became raw and real.

Tiffany filled her senses as a tonic against their uncertain future. Drinking him in now for all the times loneliness might yet visit her. Her hands splayed against the warm, bare skin of his pectoral muscles, before riding down his ridged abdominals and then shaping against his growing erection.

His attempt to hide it in the movie theater earlier had struck her as comical as it was adorable.

When he pulled back, he was panting. Looking at her with an expression of such disbelief and awe.

Tiffany felt it too.

Deeper than hunger. More primal and elemental than thirst.

He swung her legs off his lap and kneeled before her with the fire at his back. The look he gave her below his lowered lids kindled a pulse of heat straight in her core.

His eyes remained fixed on hers as he pushed her knees apart and anchored one of her legs over his shoulder.

She felt like a goddess on an altar. Unsure of how to be worshipped.

“Do you know what I regret most about that night?” Preston asked, his voice husky.

“What’s that?” she asked.

He stroked her through her damp panties. “Feeling like I had to hurry. Like if I slowed down for even a second, I’d wake up from whatever dream I was in, and you’d be gone.”

Tiffany understood the sentiment. Both their joinings shared a furtive air. While the danger of discovery amplified the passion, it also made them fast and careless. With each other’s bodies as well as their own.

She wished their child’s life had had a more careful and deliberate beginning. That it had been conceived out of love rather than abandon.

This regret, Tiffany kept sealed in her heart.

She slipped off her undershirt and sat bare breasted before him in the firelight. “I’m here now, Preston.”

The log popped behind him, sending a shower of embers out through the fire screen. They winked out like dying stars as they fell.

Preston planted his hands on the cushions beside her ribs and leaned in to kiss her neck, her collarbone, her sternum, before kissing each nipple. They had darkened already, the areolae larger and more prominent than she’d ever seen them.

When he closed his lips over one, the sensation made her gasp.

“Are you okay?” Preston asked. “I’m not—”

“I’m fine,” she panted. “That just feels so...so—” The word was lost to a moan as he shifted to the other side, lightly flicking his tongue over the taut flesh. He slipped a hand between her legs, growling against the swell of her breast at her slick heat.

A fine sheen of sweat broke out over the almost imperceptible swell of her belly. Preston planted kisses there before moving downward and dragging her panties down her thighs.

He tossed the sodden scrap aside, grinning a contented cat smile as he lowered his mouth to her sex.

Rumors of his talent in this arena had trickled back to her group of friends by way of the local ladies who'd been the beneficiaries of his attention when he came home on summer and winter breaks. In hushed circles with heads bent, she heard whispered many times that Preston Del Rio's mouth could make a fence post come. That he'd once made a woman come so hard, she passed out.

For once, the rumor mill got it right.

To experience him this way was to know why he'd been as successful in the business world as he had as the quarterback of their high school football team.

Animal instinct and ruthless precision combined to devastating effect.

On both the occasions of their previous encounters, they'd not slowed down long enough to pleasure each other this way. A fact he obviously intended to change.

Tiffany was no stranger to good sex. She'd had plenty of it and felt incredibly lucky for that.

But words like *mind-blowing* had always seemed like deliberate hyperbole.

Until.

Until she knew what Preston Del Rio's shoulder felt like beneath her thigh. His hands on her breast and hip. His mouth on the most intimate part of her. His tongue dancing against the sizzling bundle of nerves he'd woken to throbbing, vibrant life.

She surrendered to it all.

Allowing him to coax her into a writhing frenzy, past all decorum or care.

"Oh, baby," he murmured against her heated flesh. "I love seeing you like this."

"Like what?" She struggled to find air to get the words out.

“Wild.”

His dark eyes smoldered like banked coals. The hand that had been fastened to her hip trailed along her quivering stomach, then his fingers delved into her slippery sex.

Then his mouth was on her again and Tiffany felt the first tremors of the release he had meticulously built for her. She grabbed a fistful of his hair, anchoring him in a spot that sent electric shocks of sensation singing from her belly button to her toes.

Lightning struck in a release that seared through her like revelation.

When her shaking had ceased, he pushed himself up on his knees to gaze down at her.

“What is it?” she asked.

He trailed a hand down her sweat-kissed sternum to her belly, before drawing a circle around her navel with the tip of his finger.

“You’re imagining about what it’s going to look like six months from now, aren’t you?”

A dark wing of hair fell into his eyes. “How’d you guess?”

“Extrapolating data from our earlier conversation.” She pushed the hair away from his forehead. “I never would’ve figured you for a breeding kink.”

“Breeding kink?” He laughed, the movement rippling the washboard of his abdominal muscles. “I don’t have a breeding kink.”

Tiffany sat up. “I hate to break it to you, sir, but if you’re looking at a woman’s body and enjoying the idea of how a pregnancy you caused is going to change it, you have a breeding kink.”

His mouth quirked upward at the corners. “Then I guess I have a breeding kink.”

Tiffany pushed herself up on her knees and tugged Preston onto the pallet beside her.

“I’ll alert the media,” she said, lightly running her fingers over his stomach. His muscles tensed as she dipped beneath the elastic waistband of his boxers and circled his silky head.

“Tiffany,” he ground out. “You’re driving me out of my mind.”

She stretched her leg long and hooked it over his hip. “This may be the unsexiest thing I’ve ever said, but my gag reflex is kind of off the charts these days. I’ll have to take it slow.”

Preston cupped her chin in his hand. “You don’t have to do that at all.”

“What if I want to?”

“You could always wait until the second trimester.” Preston brushed his thumb over her lips. “According to what I read, the nausea starts to let up then.”

Tiffany parted her lips and licked the pad of his thumb. “Do you have any idea how ridiculously sexy that is?”

“The nausea letting up?”

“You reading about it.” Tiffany hooked her finger in the waistband of his boxers and pulled them down to free his erection.

He was stone and silk beneath her grip.

Preston sucked in a breath as her palm grazed his already weeping head, coating him with the pearl of moisture she found there.

“Oh, damn.” His lips were on her forehead, his hand buried in her hair. “That feels so good.”

“Then lose those shorts and make it easier for me to make you feel good.”

He quickly complied.

Tiffany took a moment to admire the sight before her.

His lean hips and muscular thighs. His small, flat nipples, long-toed feet and thick, beautiful cock.

A guttural grunt escaped him when she wrapped her lips around his head and began to move. With slow and painstaking care, she began to move up and down his length, learning every inch of him through touch and taste alone. Each rise and ripple. Each vein and ridge. Each sigh and scowl of his seduction.

Hypnotized by his reactions, she'd fallen into a rhythm when he closed his fist over hers.

“Whoa. You've got to give me a minute.”

A single bead of sweat trickled down his long, smooth neck. Tiffany straddled his hips and angled her head to capture it with her tongue.

Preston cupped her ass, lifting her as she positioned his cock between her thighs. “This okay?”

“More than okay.” Tiffany rested her hands on his shoulders and impaled herself in torturously slow increments.

Watching the battle unfold on his face proved reward enough for her troubles. The tendons of his neck and elegant trenches forming a V over his hips stood out in sharp relief when he met with the delicious resistance at her core. A fine film of sweat formed on his forehead.

“It's all about the sink,” she said, only to be rewarded with his fingertips digging into her hips.

Their breaths mingled as she began to move. Rolling her hips to introduce him to every part of her. Wanting to feel him in every curve and hollow. As deep as he could go.

Preston waited until she'd fallen into a rhythm before finding one of his own.

Meeting her fall with his rise.

He sat up, their torsos glued together by sweat, his hand buried in the hair at her nape.

Meeting him at eye level this way felt shockingly intimate. Like he could see straight into her soul. His forearms hooked beneath her armpits, and he gripped her shoulders to pull her even deeper.



She threw her head back and released the cry that had been building inside her like a storm. “You feel good, Preston.”

He surged within her, drawing an answering clench. “I love that part of me is inside you.”

“So do I,” she said.

He bucked beneath her, driving her skyward. She contracted hard around him on a ragged cry and felt herself falling, pinned beneath him for his final, brutal strokes as they came apart together.

His weight on top of her felt like gravity, securing her to the world and everything within it. What they would do tonight, tomorrow, a month from now, she didn't know.

Only that what she felt in this precise moment, she wanted to feel forever.

Safe. Owned. Filled.

Found.

With these words on her mind and the father of her child on her body, she at last surrendered to sleep.

## *Eleven*

Preston woke with a start. Knowing in some primal way by the light on the comforter covering their bodies what his phone screen confirmed seconds later.

He was late.

Due at the Texas Cattleman's Club in thirty minutes for the Diamond Gate negotiations. His father already called him twice and left voice mails both times.

He launched himself out of bed and quickly pulled on his rumpled clothing.

Tiffany rolled over, and stretched, her mouth opening in a sleepy yawn. "What time is it?" she asked.

"9:30," he said. After tucking in his shirt and buckling his belt, he turned to examine the full-length mirror. He looked like exactly what he was—a man who would soon be making a very public walk of shame into a vitally important meeting.

"Oh man." Tiffany pushed herself up in bed and ran a hand through her sex-rumpled hair. "I can't believe I slept so hard."

"I can." Preston bent to plant a kiss on her warm forehead. "I'm afraid I've got to run."

Her eyes were full of concern when he pulled away, her slim fingers resting on his forearm. "Is everything okay? This isn't because of what we...because of last night?"

"Not at all," he insisted, not entirely sure this was the truth. Between his sex-and-sleep-fogged brain and the metallic fear creeping up to the base of his throat, he hadn't really had a chance to process any of it. All he knew was that with every passing second, the odds of this turning out well for either of them drastically decreased. "I'm just late for the Diamond Gate mediation at the TCC."

He gently disengaged her hand and kissed her knuckles before setting it back on the snowy blanket. "I'll call you later?"

Tiffany did not look at all comforted by his explanation. She had yanked the sheet up over her breasts and crossed her arms. "Will you be coming by this evening?"

"Sure," he said. "I'll bring some dinner with me."

"Please, don't," she said. "I'm already going to end up freezing half of what my mom put in the fridge."

This felt like an olive branch, and he greedily grasped for it.

"Okay," he said. "I'll give you a shout when I'm on the way."

"All right," she said. The sadness in her voice brought on a powerful wave of self-loathing.

He hated running out like this.

He hated the worry he'd put in her eyes. He hated that he had no choice but to leave her there when he should be bringing her breakfast in bed. Reassuring her that opening up as she had wasn't a mistake.

He hated that assurance wasn't his to offer.

Thirty-one minutes later, he pushed into the foyer at the Cattleman's Club with a sheen of sweat on his forehead and an apologetic smile pasted onto his face. The apology he had rehearsed on his speed-limit-testing drive over died on his tongue when he saw his father waiting beneath the giant chandelier comprised of tiered layers of antlers.

He looked... *Happy* to see him.

"Well," he said. "Look what the cat dragged in." The brightness faltered, but only briefly, during the quick but obvious scan he conducted of Preston's distinctly unimpressive state. "I thought surely after yesterday, you'd have plenty of time to rest and get ready for this morning's proceedings."

*Ah.*

Now his father's uncharacteristic cheerfulness made sense.

He had assumed that *Sunny* was the reason Preston had left the reception early. By extension, he thought that Sunny was the reason Preston had bailed on work the day following.

Preston straightened his spine and stiffened his resolve. "I'm really sorry about that, Dad. About the announcement, the party, everything. I've been meaning to talk to you about it, but—"

"Are we ready to proceed?" Jack Chowdhry stood in the doorway to one of the club's private meeting rooms. Attired in an impeccably tailored dark gray suit complete with a pristine white shirt and navy blue silk tie, he made Preston feel like he'd just rolled out of a ditch.

"We'll be right in," his father answered, waiting until Jack was gone before shooting Preston a conspiratorial look. "Don't worry about it, son. We've all shown up to a meeting looking like the morning after the night before. Especially in the aftermath of an evening spent in such pleasant company. But I know you won't make a habit of it."

Fernando clapped him on the shoulder, not even waiting for an answer before turning on the sole of his loafer and proceeding toward the conference room.

The reception Preston received there was far less friendly.

Joseph Winters sat on the far side of the table, flanked by Marcus on one side and Alisha on the other. Face as grim and impenetrable as an Easter Island statue, the Winters patriarch shifted his eyes to Preston, who took a seat next to his father on what he perceived to be the Del Rio side of the table.

"Sorry to keep everyone waiting," he said, settling into his seat.

"Quite all right." Presiding at the head of the table, Jack took a sip of his water and placed it back on its coaster next to the leather padfolio before him. He cleared his throat before proceeding. "As you know, the Del Rio necklace has been in the possession of the Department of Public Safety. I'm happy to report that both the necklace and Eliza Boudreaux's

confession letter have been fully authenticated by a second source.”

Fernando’s chest puffed with a sound somewhere between a snort and a grunt.

Jack’s neatly combed dark head turned to him. “Is there something you’d like to say regarding the authentication?”

“The necklace’s authenticity was never in doubt. The letter, on the other hand...” He trailed off.

“Are you suggesting that the letter was a fake?” Joseph Winters’s question crackled with barely concealed animosity.

“I’m sure that’s not the case,” Jack said evenly. “Especially not since I have here the documents confirming the letter’s authenticity.” He extracted two sheets of paper from his padfolio and held them up so both parties could see.

Preston’s father remained silent for a beat longer than was comfortable. “I’m not saying the letter was a fake. Only that the timing of its discovery struck me as especially convenient.”

“Convenient for who?” The gold bangle on Alisha’s wrist winked in the morning light as she folded her arms. “Because I sure as hell would have preferred Marcus *not* to have discovered a stolen necklace on my property in the middle of a ridiculously expensive renovation.”

“All the more reason why your decision not to disclose its existence immediately was somewhat confusing,” Fernando said.

“Excuse us all to hell for trying to think of a way to resolve this without bringing about World War III,” Marcus chimed in. His dark eyes were stormy. His mouth an unamused twist.

“The point is,” Jack said, attempting to regain control of the room, “the necklace will be returned at your convenience, and we can move on and put this matter behind us once and for all.”

He opened the folder and withdrew two multipage documents, sliding one down each side of the table. “I have

here an agreement documenting the official terms of the necklace's return to the Del Rio family. Please feel free to look over them before we proceed.”

Fernando captured the paper beneath his palm and pulled a pair of reading glasses out of his suit coat pocket to read the fine print.

A buzzing interrupted the tense silence as Alisha's phone lit up and began to vibrate on the table. She looked down at the glowing screen and frowned before glancing up at Jack. “Would you excuse me for just a moment?”

“Of course,” Jack said.

Alisha power-walked for the door, returning a few minutes later with a scowl on her face and thunderheads in her eyes. Resuming her seat, she gave Preston such a withering look of contempt, he was tempted to slink under the table despite having no idea what he'd done to deserve it.

His feeling of unease swelled into worry when she lifted her phone again and quickly thumb-typed a text message.

It had to be something about Tiffany.

He checked his own phone and found it empty of notifications.

“I see no issues with the contract as it is currently proposed.” Joseph Winters leaned back in his seat and pushed the papers out in front of him, his voice taking on a more emphatic version of its usual Texas twang. Preston had often wondered if he subconsciously—or consciously—played it up in circumstances like these.

“Of course you don't,” Fernando muttered.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Marcus placed his forearms on the table, his hulking shoulders rounding as he leaned in.

“It means there are no consequences whatsoever for the Winters family despite your being in possession of a very valuable stolen piece of property for a hundred years.”

“Property that was stolen before anyone seated at this table was born,” Jack pointed out.

“The fact remains that the necklace was stolen and the entire town of Royal now knows who was responsible.” Fernando was clearly addressing his plea to Jack. “As public as Diamond Gate has been, I would be eager to make some sort of restitution, were the situations reversed.”

Preston’s irritation at his father grew stronger by the second. This ridiculous pride, eating away at both families like a cancer over events so far removed from any of their immediate existences. All of it now making his life far more complicated than it needed to be.

“How about a donation?” Preston hadn’t meant to give voice to the idea the same second it arrived in his head and was unprepared when all eyes in the room swiveled to him.

His father’s bored into him like drill bits. “What sort of donation?”

“The sort relevant to the circumstances that contributed to the theft in the first place.” He rocked back in his chair, balancing on the back legs as his mother had so often scolded him for.

“Such as?” Joseph Winters pinned him with his cold blue stare. Though Preston knew there was no way Tiffany’s father had intuited how he’d spent the previous evening, he couldn’t shake the feeling that Joseph suspected him of something.

“Like an organization that supports sustainable diamond mining,” Preston answered. “Something that would make it clear to the people following these ridiculous proceedings that the most prominent families in Royal, Texas, aren’t just playing an elaborate game of tug-o-war over a necklace that belonged to people who are little more than dust by this point.”

The room fell silent as if in contemplation of his idea. It was Jack who spoke first.

“I think this sounds like an excellent solution.”

Joseph Winters cleared his throat. “I suppose, if this is what’s required to put this matter to rest, we would be amenable.”

His announcement failed to shift Marcus’s glower, or Alisha’s tight-mouthed irritation.

Jack turned to Fernando. “And you? Do you find this to be an acceptable resolution?”

His father looked at Preston before nodding. “Yes.”

“Wonderful,” Jack said. “I’ll make the necessary updates to the agreement and have everything emailed by this afternoon.” He stood and began to gather his things, giving everyone permission to do the same.

Grabbing her bag, Alisha then jerked it onto her shoulder and mumbled an apology to her father and brother before barreling out of the room. Preston was so taken aback by her hasty departure that he ended up nearly knocking over his chair as he stood to go after her.

He had to sprint to catch up with her in the parking lot. “Alisha! Wait.”

She aimed her key fob at her car and made no sign of slowing.

“Alisha, *please*.”

Her hand hovered above the door handle, her back stiff and her regal head of dark curls cocked at an irritated angle.

“Will you just talk to me for a minute?” Preston asked.

She whirled on him. “I have *nothing* to say to you.”

“I know that this wasn’t the friendliest of circumstances, but I’m not sure what I did to deserve this.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Not sure what you—you know what? Never mind. I am so over this dumb innocent oblivious man act.”

“Oblivious about what?” he snapped, his irritation finally outpacing his concern.



Alisha folded her arms across her chest. “You’re really going to stand there and look me in the eye and pretend like you don’t know what I could *possibly* have to be upset about?”

Preston felt like a man drowning in broad daylight. “Seeing as I have absolutely no idea what you’re upset about, I’m not sure how many other options I have.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Really?”

“I’m not sure how many other ways I can say this. *Really.*”

Alisha dug into her purse and pulled out her phone. She stabbed at the screen and flipped it to face him.

Preston’s stomach dropped into his shoes.

The picture had his face and Sunny’s bent toward one another. Her hands pressed to his chest. His fingers hovering just above her elbows. Their lips meeting in a tender kiss.

That Sunny had initiated it, or that Preston had allowed it as a final gesture of closure between them, appeared nowhere in the frame.

A quick glance at the newspaper’s caption confirmed his very worst fears. *Old flame sparks anew for Del Rio heir! Look out, ladies. One of Royal’s most eligible bachelors may soon be off the market. At a celebration announcing his official ascension to CEO of Del Rio Group, Preston Del Rio locks lips with former fiancée, Sunny Rothschild...*

The words began blurring together as Preston’s blood boiled.

Preston’s hands bunched into bricks at his sides. His stomach felt tight and high. His head, light and floaty.

“Congratulations,” Alisha said snidely. “You made the ‘Hip Happenings’ section.”

Preston couldn’t even bring himself to rise to her deliberate barb. His brain was spinning out. Careening wildly into scenarios like concrete barriers. “The call you took during the meeting. It was Tiffany?”

“What do you think?” she asked.

The image of Tiffany, still nude under the covers, opening her phone to be confronted with this picture, poured down on him like scalding tar.

The downturned rosebud of a mouth. The wounded, doe-in-the-headlights eyes, spilling quicksilver down her cheeks.

“I don’t suppose it would do me any good to tell you this isn’t what it looks like,” he said.

Alisha’s eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. “I get a call from my pregnant and very emotional sister, who’s been bombed with a picture of her baby’s father locking lips with his ex-fiancée, and that’s the best you can do?”

“It’s the truth. I had no idea Sunny was going to be at that party. In fact, I had no idea that this party was going to happen until that afternoon. I was completely blindsided.”

Alisha had mastered the posture of an offended queen. Shoulders squared. Neck arched. Nose lifted. “So blindsided that you stumbled tongue-first into your ex?”

Preston felt a stab of irritation at having to explain himself when he objected to being placed in this situation in the first place.

“In review, I had no idea my father was going to name a retirement date, no idea he’d arranged a cocktail reception to celebrate it and not the foggiest fucking clue that he’d invited my ex-fiancée.” He ticked the facts off on his fingers as if this would somehow make them more solid.

“And you ended up kissing *how*?”

“I asked her to go for a walk to talk. She admitted that my father had invited her. When I explained that I’d moved on, she understood but wanted to kiss me goodbye. I let her. If you want to hate me for that, you can go right ahead.”

“Moved on to my sister, you mean.”

“Yes!” Preston threw up his hands in frustration. “That’s exactly what I did. I left my own party to go check on her after I tried to call her, and she wasn’t picking up. I was with her

that night, all of yesterday and this morning until I walked through these doors.”

Alisha’s voice dropped low. “And after you walked back out of those doors, what was your intention then?”

“I’m sorry?”

“After the negotiations. After your workday. After doing whatever it is you do to rule the Del Rio oil kingdom. What then? Where does Tiffany fit in?”

“Tiffany has a say in that too, Alisha. It’s not up for me to decide what her—”

“If it was?”

Preston’s brain felt like a lump of meat between his ears. “If *what* was?”

Rattling flags from the big leaf maple on the side of the building danced in a sudden gust of wind.

Alisha released an exhale that seemed to take some of her fire with it. “If it was up to you. How would this story end?”

He read the entire volume in that one look. The fierceness of Alisha’s love for her younger sister. The protective fury. The sliver of hope that he somehow, against incomprehensible odds, would figure out how to say or do the right thing.

“Preston?” His father’s voice echoed across the parking lot. “Is everything all right?”

“Fine,” he called back. “Be right there.”

Alisha held her ground, waiting for an answer.

An answer Preston couldn’t even give himself.

“I’m going to be there, Alisha. For Tiffany and for our baby. Whatever it takes.”

Her nostrils flared as she stared down at the pavement. When she lifted her eyes again, they’d gone cold. “If this is what being there looks like, I’m not convinced that’s the best for my sister or her child.”

A bitter reply burned at the base of his throat. “Are you going over there now?”

After yanking her car door open, Alisha tossed her purse aside. “I’d be there already if it wasn’t for you.”

Preston placed his hand on the doorframe. “Please—”

“No. You made me regret helping you once before. I’m not doing it again.” She elbowed him out of the way to push open the driver’s-side door. “If I were you, I’d keep myself as far away as possible until you figure out what the hell you want. We have three brothers and I’m guessing they’re not going to be big fans of yours once this shit properly hits the fan.”

Alisha raised a hand to wave to Marcus, who stood on the curb outside the club watching them through obsidian-chip eyes; his massive arms crossed an equally massive chest.

“Now if you’ll excuse me.”

He stepped back so Alisha could close her door and watched as she screeched out of the parking lot in a cloud of blue smoke.

He had an answer to her question.

Had it been up to him, he knew exactly what he wanted.

He wanted to turn back the wheel of time.

To rewind the minutes that separated him from the warmth of Tiffany’s warm silky back pressed against his chest. He wanted to put his hand on her stomach and know that the life they’d created was growing beneath it. He wanted to stay in that moment and forget everything else in the world.

What he wanted, was impossible.

“What was that about?” his father asked when Preston was in earshot.

Try as he might, Preston couldn’t make the words fall from his mouth.

“Well?” his father prodded.

Preston drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“It’s about the picture of me and Sunny from the Glass House. The one that’s prominently featured in the newspaper’s gossip section?” He took a step closer. “Any ideas who might have taken it?”

A small, sly smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “How would I know that?”

“Because you orchestrated it. Announcing your retirement out of the blue. Arranging the party. Sunny showing up out of nowhere.”

“You told me yourself the split was amicable. I just thought a reunion might give you the chance to work things out.”

“You just thought you could shove us together and I’d fall in line like I always do?” Preston could feel the cold sweat gathering between his shoulder blades and beneath his armpits, but he couldn’t stop.

“I don’t appreciate your tone, Preston.”

“And I don’t appreciate being ambushed and manipulated.”

Since he was a child, Preston had feared his father’s uncanny ability to read him cold.

Fernando’s icy expression thawed with a patronizing smile. “Forgive a father for noticing that his son has been pretty isolated as of late.”

“Isolated because I’ve been pouring every single ounce of my effort into proving that I’m ready to take over as CEO!”

“Keep your voice down,” his father whispered harshly.

Preston felt his pulse quicken and bit down hard on the quick rush of anger. “Sunny and I were engaged and the most time you’d ever spent with her was a dinner. A *dinner*, Dad. Did you honestly think you could choose a potential partner for me based on a shared meal? You didn’t even know her.”

His father cleared his throat and scuffed his loafers on the pavement. “You two certainly looked happy to me.”

“Of course we did. She’s an Instagram influencer. I can show you dozens of posts where we had a terrible fight exactly

fifteen minutes before she's holding a mimosa and smiling in front of the neon sign at brunch. Looking happy is kind of the whole deal."

*No, he thought, not the whole deal.*

Looking beautiful. Stylish. Privileged.

That's when it hit him. The image had been part of why his father had selected Sunny. How they looked on paper. And now that he was about to step into the role of CEO, his father was expressing a sudden interest in his relationship optics.

"If you're so upset that I invited her, why did you leave with her?" Fernando asked.

"I didn't."

His father's dark brows drew together, creating a crease in the center of his forehead. "But this morning...your clothes—"

"You're right. I did spend the night with someone last night. But it wasn't Sunny Rothschild." He took a step closer to his father and held his iron gaze. "It was Tiffany Winters."

The November light dimmed as the sun dipped behind a cloud. A crow barked its harsh tidings as it flew overhead and perched on the club's pitched roof. Though he had never believed in omens, Preston couldn't help but feel his future had dimmed along with his admission.

"Tiffany Winters?" He saw the wheels of his father's mercilessly brilliant mind turning. "You told me those rumors about the engagement party were just gossip. I *defended* you, Preston."

The knowledge of his lie felt like a crack opening in the sidewalk between them.

"You've been seeing her ever since that night?"

"Yes." Preston knew this wasn't strictly the truth, but had neither the desire nor the energy to explain all that had unfolded between him and Tiffany since that first night together.

Another mournful cry shivered the early winter air.

“You deliberately disobeyed my wishes.”

Preston squared his shoulders and met his father’s eyes. In them, he saw his past and his future. The things that he’d wanted and had spent his entire life trying to achieve. “Yes.”

The angular planes of his father’s features turned stony. “How can I trust you with my legacy when I can’t even trust you to tell me the truth?”

It wasn’t an altogether unreasonable question, as much as Preston hated to admit it. Back in his office, his father had accused him of having a soft spot when it came to the Winterses. He’d been right. And for longer than he knew.

“Because this particular truth has nothing to do with my ability to effectively lead the Del Rio Group.”

“Doesn’t it though?”

A frigid wind howled around the corner of the building, biting Preston’s cheeks.

“The night before last, some of the most important people associated with our family of companies were gathered to honor you. People that I’ve worked to maintain relationships with for decades. Had you stayed, you’d have had the opportunity to forge your own connections. Instead, you snuck off to spend the evening with Tiffany Winters. Your performance has been slipping lately and now I know the reason why.”

Cold fury numbed Preston’s heart. After all he had done, after all he had sacrificed, the hours, the minutes, the days he had given away all to be told by his father that it meant absolutely nothing compared to the couple weeks where his schedule had been hectic enough to be noticeable.

“The only thing slipping is my ability to keep my mouth shut and pretend to agree with you.” Preston’s entire body vibrated with adrenaline, making his words sound shaky. “This entire time, you’ve been obsessed with the idea that you’ve been wronged somehow. That you’re owed some kind of restoration. You’ve been so blinded by your own selfish desires that you can’t even see what’s right in front of you.”

His father's posture stiffened. "I see it. I see it wearing yesterday's clothes and a petulant expression. I see it making a mockery of the trust I publicly placed in you."

Acid ate at Preston's empty stomach.

"The only thing being mocked is your pride, Dad."

They stood on their opposing sidewalk squares as if they were desert islands. Each of them marooned by their individual circumstances.

"Nevertheless, I'm still the acting CEO of the Del Rio Group, and the head of this family. I have no intention of handing the company over to you while you're carrying on some ridiculous fling with Tiffany Winters."

Preston looked at the parking space Alisha had peeled rubber to exit. "It's not just a fling."

Fernando blew a hot breath from his nostrils. "Spare me the forbidden fruit melodramatics."

"She's pregnant, Dad. She's going to have my baby."

This was the first time he had spoken these words out loud.

The dimple in his father's chin deepened. The creases next to his eyes seemed to branch further toward his temples.

"Pregnant?"

"Yes," Preston said. "We're going to raise the baby together."

His father blanched. "I suggest you think very carefully about your options, Preston."

"I always have." He turned and left before he could say anything else he would regret. He barely even registered the feeling of the parking lot's asphalt under the soles of his shoes or the familiar scent of leather in his car. He only knew that he needed to get to Tiffany. His entire world seemed to reorganize itself around this one urgent point.

The glowing blue numbers displaying his rapidly decreasing speed winked at him from the dashboard's display as he eased his car to the side of the road.



What would he even tell her?

What could he say to make her understand? His knuckles whitened as he gripped the steering wheel, resisting the urge to punch something.

His whole life, he'd worked to prove he was worthy of the Del Rio legacy. The one thing he'd thought he wanted. Until he saw Tiffany Winters across the crowded room at his sister's engagement party and understood what wanting truly was. For a brief and beautiful moment, he'd tasted what it would be like to have both.

If he didn't somehow find a way to salvage this, he was in danger of losing everything.

## *Twelve*

“I promise you, you’ll feel better.” Alisha uncorked a small jar of bath salts and added them to the steaming tub in Tiffany’s master bathroom.

Tiffany looked at the glass-green water with eyes stinging from hours of crying. “I appreciate the thought, but really I just want to get into bed and forget this day ever happened.”

“Spoken like a deeply depressed woman.”

Depressed? Yes. Deeply? Tiffany didn’t have access to a mental health professional to confirm this diagnosis.

Whatever it was that made her heart sore and her brain blunted at the same time, she had that.

Tiffany chewed her ragged cuticle as she leaned against the counter. “I just don’t understand. Their engagement broke up over a year ago. Why would he let her kiss him?”

Alisha’s jaw flexed, hinting at her annoyance. They’d been over this already, but the answer she received hadn’t quite quieted her mind.

“Honey, I don’t know why he did what he did. All I know is he did it. You can sit here arguing, or you can just get in this bath that I have lovingly prepared for you. Personally, I recommend the latter.”

Tiffany knew she was being tedious. Her sister’s input wasn’t necessary to inform her of this.

Despite Alisha’s exceedingly logical explanations, nothing she said about Preston carried the ring of truth. She called him a bastard. A scoundrel. A rich boy wastrel. A sycophantic privileged suck-up.

None of it helped.

“All right. I’m getting in.” Tiffany shucked off her fluffy bathrobe and slipped into the foamy tub while Alisha’s back

was turned.

The water lapped her neck and shoulders. The tension she'd felt since she woke up this morning dissolved into it.

Alisha handed her a washcloth, which Tiffany dipped into the steaming water and laid over her face only to yank it off again.

Anytime her eyes were closed, she saw the picture.

And every time she saw the picture, the cavernous ache in her chest deepened.

They hadn't spoken of fidelity. They'd made no commitments. She had no expectation of exclusivity. But it still stung.

“What exactly did he say?”

Alisha had already unpacked this several times before, but she indulged Tiffany anyway. Perching on the edge of the tub, she gave the same basic summary. Preston's father put her up to coming. Preston let her down easy. Sunny gave him a kiss goodbye. He drove straight over to Tiffany's house—

And told her that they needed to keep things platonic. He had even slept on the couch.

But then, everything that had happened between them the following day...

Something just wasn't adding up.

Had he been thinking about getting back together with Sunny? Trying to buy himself more time?

She had mined Alisha's brain again and again but hadn't come to any better conclusions.

“Look on the bright side,” Alisha said. “At least all the buzz about him and Sunny overshadows that damn gossip reporter Mande Meriweather telling everybody and their dog how she saw you two coming out of a movie theater in Coleman looking guilty as hell.”

Tiffany's life would have been just fine without that particular indignity.

She took a small, mean satisfaction in thinking of this news getting out despite Preston's generous donation.

At least she had only agreed to donate a chocolate basket.

"I guess I should be grateful that so far you and Mom are the only ones who know about the pregnancy."

Alisha cleared her throat and reached for a packet of pore-refining kelp face mask. "Is this stuff any good? I've been hearing all about it on those makeup blogs."

*"Alisha."*

"Because with the change in seasons, my skin has been dry as hell. I'm in the market for something that will stand up to the Texas winter."

Tiffany carefully rotated in the tub and plucked the mask out of her sister's hands. "Who knows about the pregnancy?"

"Just Tremaine. He overheard me talking to Mom on the phone. You know Preston is a good friend of his. I figured maybe we could talk some sense into him."

"So you, Mom and Tremaine."

"Right," Alisha agreed. Then, after a beat, "And Marcus."

Water splashed up on the edge as Tiffany sat forward. "Marcus knows?"

"He was in the parking lot when I almost bit Preston's head off," she explained. "He called as soon as I was driving here. I couldn't just *not* tell him after that. But don't worry," she said quickly. "He was sworn to secrecy."

"You know, Marcus knows, Tremaine knows and Mom knows," she recited. "Is there anyone else?"

Alisha's golden-brown eyes skated to the side. "It's possible that Marcus told Jericho."

"Are you serious?"

"I can't be sure, but Jericho called a few minutes after Marcus and was asking me some very leading questions."

"What kind of leading questions?"

Alisha's shoulders jerked upward. "Oh, you know. About how you are. If I'd heard from you lately. If I noticed that you and Preston looked awful cozy at his engagement party."

Tiffany grabbed the washrag and buried her face in it. If only she could stay in this gray, dark, warm place and never speak to another human again.

"Do you know if Preston told Maggie?" Alisha asked.

"Not as far as I know. We were trying to keep it under wraps until after the wedding."

"As much as I understand the sentiment, I think it might be time to have Mom bring Dad into the loop," Alisha said. "With the way Marcus, Jericho and Dad talk, it's only a matter of time."

Tiffany allowed her shoulders to slump forward.

"I don't understand how this happened."

"I do." Alisha's voice suggested she was now leaning against the counter. "The scruff."

The world had a bluish cast when Tiffany pulled the rag away from her eyes. "The scruff?"

"The scruff," she repeated. "At the engagement party. Preston had that sexy three-day scruff thing you're such a sucker for. You shouldn't have gone within ten yards of that man."

Tiffany couldn't disagree.

She remembered the way he had looked that night. His dark hair, shaggy and tousled after a few songs on the dance floor. His sky blue dress shirt unbuttoned just enough to show the smile of an undershirt beneath. How that undershirt had looked against the smooth tawny skin of his neck. She remembered his scent best of all. Fabric softener, woody soap, clean skin. The sexy smirk. The dangerous bad boy edge.

Man-thrax, basically.

He had said hello to her at the bar and it was all over but the sonograms.

“I derailed my entire life because of facial hair,” Tiffany said.

Alisha picked up a fluffy makeup brush from the vanity and dusted the underside of her palm. “I mean, I derailed mine because of the way Tremaine’s butt looks in a pair of jeans, so I’m in no position to judge.”

Tiffany hugged her knees. “Do you mean that?”

“And you oughta see him in coveralls. He looks even better. If he doesn’t finish laying those tiles in the downstairs bathroom soon, Preston Jr. may have a cousin about the same age.”

Her sister had meant to lighten the mood, but hearing that name was like a sucker punch to the heart.

“I meant the judging. Are you sure you’re not even just a *little* disappointed?”

Alisha put the brush down and perched on the edge of the tub. “That you had unprotected sex with Preston Del Rio?”

Tiffany nodded.

“I might at least suggest a fertility-tracking app, so you have a vague idea of the best times to be reckless, but no, Tiff. I’m not disappointed.”

“That’s the thing! I already have one. I wasn’t even supposed to be ovulating. I was on day twenty-five of my cycle. I was due to start any day.”

Alisha’s eyebrows drew together. “That’s some crazy pheromones shit right there.”

“Alisha, I seriously can’t even explain it. It was like this—” she paused, searching for an appropriate metaphor “—like this magnet. Or like there were magnets in every single one of my cells. I don’t normally have to work to resist somebody. Almost like our being together was the default setting or something.”

Tiffany leaned back in the tub. “But maybe it was only like that for me. He hasn’t even tried to call me since that picture came out.”

Alisha dabbed at a water droplet that had landed on her beautiful cream-colored slacks. “To be fair, that could partially be my fault.”

“Your fault? How?” Tiffany asked.

“I may have told him to stay the hell away from you until he knew what he wanted. Maybe he’s still figuring it out.”

Tiffany took a deep breath. It wasn’t the easiest thing for her to hear, but she knew it needed to be said.

“I’m going to ask you a question,” her sister said, studying her face. “You don’t have to answer it now. But I feel like it might help for you to consider.”

“Go ahead.”

“What was the first thing you felt after you saw that picture of Sunny and Preston together?”

Tiffany answered without hesitation. “Devastated. Gutted. Completely and totally wrecked.”

Alisha pushed a damp tendril back from Tiffany’s forehead. “What I know is, whether or not Preston gets his act together and realizes what an idiot he would be to lose you, you are going to be an amazing mother.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I know you, Tiff. Everything you do, you do with heart. But it sounds like maybe you need to tell Preston what’s in yours.”

Tiffany’s chin rested on her knees. “I just can’t. I can’t face him right now.”

“So don’t,” she said. “Put it in a letter. You know, like Mom used to make us write anytime we were in an argument we couldn’t settle?”

They had been so close for so long, Tiffany had forgotten how much bickering there had been growing up with her

siblings. Over space, art supplies, video games, toys, the TV in the basement where everyone liked to hang out.

Somehow their tempers had always cooled in the time that it took them to elaborate about their grievances on paper.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Good girl.” Her sister squeezed her shoulder and stood. “I’m just going to leave you here to relax for a bit. You want some more hot?”

“Sure.”

Alisha lifted the kettle from the marble counter and poured in the steaming water as Camille had done for both of them whenever they were in need of comfort as kids. It had never occurred to them to question their mother’s claim that water boiled by hand put extra love in the bathwater.

Her sister kissed her fingers and pressed them to the crown of Tiffany’s head. “You’ve got this, little sister.”

“Thanks, Lisha,” she said, using a nickname she hadn’t since they were children.

Tiffany sank down into the tub after she was gone, letting the bubbles kiss the underside of her chin. Her head fell back against the rolled towel Alisha had propped at the back of the tub.

Her hand found her belly beneath the water.

The life they had created was the size of a blueberry now, the cells that would become its heart just beginning to flutter. In that moment, she made a vow to her child and herself that she would do everything she could to protect that tiny heart from feeling the kind of pain hers did now.

\* \* \*

Preston had gotten good at hiding from the daylight.

When he first moved into his upscale town house, he’d installed blackout curtains on every single window. With the odd hours he ended up working, he sometimes hit the sheets as dawn’s gray fingers had begun to creep across the ceiling.



He lay in the inky darkness now with no idea what time it was and no desire to find out.

He knew he needed to get up and start his day, but he just couldn't summon the desire to peel himself out of bed.

He still hadn't heard a word from Tiffany, but he kept imagining her reaction to the photo, then switching to hear his father's parting words. These both ran a loop in his head accompanied by the memory of the scorching disappointment in his father's eyes.

Fernando had been right.

Preston had been irresponsible. He had let his feelings for Tiffany compromise his commitment to Del Rio Group. Maybe his father had been right to second-guess his decision to name Preston CEO.

His attempts to exercise his brain into exhausted oblivion had so far been unsuccessful.

Shifting his aching body beneath the covers, Preston rolled onto his side, determined to squeeze another half hour of sleep out of this strange timeless interval.

He was just drifting off when a banging popped his eyelids back open.

His front door.

Preston stayed inert. Even going so far as to hold his breath even though he knew no one could possibly hear him.

Maybe they would just go away. After about a minute, it stopped.

Preston heaved a sigh of relief and pulled the covers up to his chin.

When it resumed three feet from his head on the glass pane of the window, Preston sat straight up in bed and released a string of curses.

"I know you're in there! You always leave your kitchen light on when you've been up all night working." Maggie's

muted voice sounded unreasonably sunny and amused. “I brought you coffee.”

The magic words.

Preston threw back the covers, dragged himself upright and pulled on sweatpants before padding over to the window and throwing back the curtain.

His sister stood outside it, looking chic and incredibly fresh.

Her mouth shaped into an O of shock when she saw him. Preston didn’t even need to look at a mirror to guess how he looked.

He jerked his head toward the front door and made his way from the master bedroom down the hallway and through the kitchen to let her in. Crisp air scented of wet leaves gusted in as he stepped out of the way to grant her entrance.

Maggie set the cup holder and white paper bag down on his kitchen table and shrugged out of her rain-dampened coat.

“This one’s yours.” She set one of the white cardboard cups next to him. “I also brought a big cinnamon roll from Royal Diner to share.”

“Thanks.” Preston popped off the coffee’s lid and inhaled the rich, roasty brew.

“Your usual,” she said.

His usual tasted just a little bit more bitter by comparison.

“I’m giving you exactly ten sips for the caffeine to kick in before I ask you what the hell is going on with you. Just a heads-up.”

“Much appreciated,” he said. “Did Mom send you over, or is this a reconnaissance mission?”

“Neither,” she said. “I have something for you.”

After digging in her purse, she pulled out an envelope the size of a greeting card. His name was written across the front in an elegant cursive script.

“I already got a wedding invitation,” he said, cutting a look toward the magnet on his refrigerator holding Maggie and Jericho’s engagement photo aloft.

“This isn’t wedding related.”

“Then what?” Preston dug a thumb under the envelope flap and carefully peeled it open. A quick scan of the creamy paper made his heart leap into his throat.

Tiffany Winters.

He glanced up at Maggie. “Where did you get this?”

His sister removed the lid from her own cup and blew away curls of steam. “Jericho gave it to me to give to you.”

Preston pressed a hand flat against the cool marble countertop. If Tiffany had given this to her brother, then...

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me!”

“That was only five sips,” Preston said. “Tell you about what?”

“Cut the crap, Pres. The whole town knows about you and Tiffany Winters.”

All the blood drained from Preston’s head in a dizzying rush. His cheeks prickled as if thousands of tiny pins were dancing over his skin.

“They know about the baby?”

Maggie’s mouth dropped open. “Wait, what?”

*Shit.* “What were *you* talking about?” he asked.

“The engagement party,” Maggie said. “What were *you* talking about?”

“I think I’m ready for this now.” Preston reached toward the paper bag, but his sister slapped his hand away.

“Preston Oliver Del Rio, you better tell me everything and you better tell me now.”

“You know the full name thing only works when Mom does it.”

“How about this then? You tell me everything right now, or I’m leaving and taking the cinnamon roll with me.”

His sister had always known how to drive a hard bargain. Sagging onto a bar stool, Preston scrubbed his sleep-creased skin.

“We hooked up the night of your engagement party and Tiffany got pregnant. She’s keeping the baby and we’ve been together a couple more times since. Dad told me I can either be with Tiffany or be the CEO but not both. Tiffany saw the pictures of me and Sunny kissing in the newspaper.”

He was surprised how easily his troubles summarized.

“Dad knows?”

Preston nodded. “I told him after the mediation.”

“Who else knows?”

“Camille Winters, Alisha, Tremaine—if the text message I got is any indication, and I don’t know who else.”

“Wait.” She sat down on the stool next to his.

Preston deflated, leaning forward until his forehead rested on the cool marble counter. As if the soothing sensation of it might help calm his hectic thoughts.

“The day you missed work, what the heck were you doing?” Maggie asked.

“Tiffany and I went shopping.”

Her gasp made him jerk upright, expecting Sasquatch to be staring in the front window.

“You were shopping for baby things, weren’t you?”

“Tiffany’s been turning her guest bedroom into a nursery. I just wanted to help her out.”

His sister’s wide brown eyes gleamed, her fingers rising to hover by her heart.

“It’s not a big deal, Maggie,” he insisted.

“Not a big deal?” she repeated. “Not a big deal? Preston, you’re going to be a father. A *father*.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I got that part.”

“Oh my God. I’m going to be an aunt!” She touched her flushing cheeks.

“You’re just now realizing that?” he asked drolly.

“Forgive me if this comes as a bit of a shock. You’ve been an uptight, blindly ambitious workaholic for the past three years, then you go and randomly knock up Joseph Winters’s daughter at my engagement party.”

Preston winced. “First, it didn’t happen at your engagement party. It was later that night. Second, can you not say it like that? It wasn’t like it was some random thing.”

Maggie brushed her dark hair away from her cheekbone. “You’re not saying that you and Tiffany were a thing before that, are you?”

“No,” Preston said. “The night of your engagement party was the first time. But it wasn’t out of the blue.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “All the time I’ve known you, I’ve never once seen you so much as look sideways at Tiffany Winters.”

“Then you weren’t paying attention.”

“I mean, I remember you guys were both part of the drama department for a minute,” she said.

Preston ran a hand through his disheveled hair. He supposed there was no way around this. “I joined the drama department because of Tiffany. I thought maybe if I volunteered on sets, I might have a chance to talk without it being this huge thing.”

“That’s right,” Maggie said, sipping her coffee. “I remember now. It was that semester that the school did the tribute to Shakespeare. You ended up getting cast as Romeo.”

“Correct,” he said. “Tiffany was student directing so I volunteered. It was only supposed to be a behind-the-scenes kind of thing. But when both the leads got mono, Mr. Overton had me and Tiffany stand in for Romeo and Juliet for the balcony scene during rehearsals one day. He ended up casting me.”

Realization rolled across his sister's face like the tide. "You mean, all this time?"

Preston didn't know exactly how to describe what it was Tiffany had meant to him. He had heard it described as carrying a torch. He supposed that was as close a metaphor as he could think of. In all the years he'd spent pouring every ounce of his effort into their family business, his attraction to her remained dormant but still very flammable. A place within himself ready to be ignited at a moment's notice.

"I can't believe I never saw anything." Maggie tore open the white paper bag and pulled out the plastic container to reveal a gigantic cinnamon roll with a thick blanket of white icing and two forks.

The heavenly aroma of sticky, sweet cinnamon tickled his nostrils when she opened it. "Apparently Dad did."

"What do you mean?" she asked, handing him a fork.

"Just a couple days before he named me CEO, he accused me of having a soft spot for Tiffany Winters and brought up the engagement party. But it had been weeks since we'd spoken by that point."

Maggie forked up a giant bite. "I can't believe he gave you an ultimatum."

Preston snorted. "He's only been doing it for our entire lives."

"Not to me," Maggie said.

Preston swallowed, the mouthful of dough passing the ache in his throat.

"So what did you say to Dad?" his sister asked.

"I haven't given him an answer yet."

"And you and Tiffany?"

"We were actually in a pretty good place until that picture with Sunny was printed."

"Define 'good place.'" She collected a crumb of frosting with her fingertip and flicked it into the container's lid.

Preston reached for his coffee. “We’d talked about moving in together, actually.”

Maggie stopped with the bite halfway to her mouth. “As a couple?”

“As co-parents.”

“Co-parents with benefits?” she asked. “Because if you guys have still been hooking up—”

“Okay,” he said, holding up a hand. “We really don’t need to talk about that part of things.”

“I’m just saying, the woman is having your child, but you didn’t give her any kind of indication about what the relationship between the two of you would be independent of the baby?”

“Not really,” he said, forking up more cinnamon roll.

Maggie set her fork aside and swiveled her knees to face him. “For someone so ridiculously brilliant, you are incredibly dense sometimes, Preston.”

Preston arched an eyebrow at his sister, not quite following her line of logic. “Yes.”

“Seeing as she’s the one whose entire life and body will be changed by this no matter what else happens, you didn’t think that maybe you ought to tell her how you’re willing for your life to change for *her* specifically?”

“Not exactly.”

Maggie shook her head ruefully. “Let’s start here. How do you feel about Tiffany?”

“How do I feel about her?” He repeated the question to buy time, not because he wasn’t already well aware of the answer to that question.

“Can you see yourself *with* her long term?”

Preston got up from his stool and began to pace. Seeing himself with her had never been the problem. That, he’d been able to imagine for years. It was the real-life implementation

that always remained the problem. The families' rivalry. His job. Her dreams.

"Yes," he said. "But I have no idea if she feels the same."

Maggie cleared her throat and cut her eyes to the envelope sitting next to her purse. "That might help."

Preston stared at it like he might at a grenade whose pin had been pulled.

"I can leave if you want privacy while you read."

"Please don't," Preston said. "Whatever this says, I'd rather read it with you here."

Maggie reached over and squeezed his fingers with a hand warmed by her coffee cup. Preston drew in a deep breath and plunged in.

*Preston,*

*You told me once that you wanted to know everything. Everything I'm going through. Everything I'm feeling and thinking. So here goes. I'm hot all the time, which is why I've been leaving the windows open. I feel like the heat is coming from inside me and the only thing that helps is to have air moving over my skin. I'm terrible at sleeping and when I do, my dreams are completely bizarre and beautiful. I'm equal parts terrified and ecstatic about what is happening to my body, and my brain, and my life. This is the furthest thing from what I had imagined for myself and yet I already can't think about any future but this one. I'm scared. I'm scared of not being a good mother. Of never achieving what my siblings have. Of never knowing what I might have been if this hadn't happened. But I'm especially scared of the fact that if I had made even one decision differently, I wouldn't be sitting here writing this letter, growing a life we made by accident.*

*Whatever you decide about your role in things, I need you to know that I'm going to be okay. We are going to be okay. For once in your life, I just want you*



*to make your decision not out of obligation or expectation, but because it's truly what you want. I'll be here when you're ready. —T*

Preston looked up at his sister when he was finished.

Before he'd completely retreated to his work, Maggie was the person he was closest to in the whole world. He didn't have to say anything. She already knew.

“Finish the cinnamon roll and get in the shower,” she said.  
“I have an idea.”

## Thirteen

“Did we decide on the pink one or the cream for the Boots and Bows Brunch?”

Alisha emerged from the giant walk-in closet, a blouse in either hand. All morning, they'd been sorting through Alisha's considerable wardrobe of designer labels, attempting to determine which to keep and which to donate. Not how Tiffany normally would have preferred to spend her Sunday, but it proved an effective distraction.

“We didn't decide,” Tiffany said, cinching one of the bags in the donation pile. “Because I haven't agreed to go.”

“But it's a good cause,” Alisha said, full lips turned down in a pout.

“I know that, because I've already contributed.” Scooting the bag to the side, she sank down on the corner of the bed. “I gave Mande Meriweather a deluxe chocolate basket and even threw in a private truffle-making class.”

Alisha hung the blouses back on the rack. “Don't you at least want to be there to see who wins your donation?”

Tiffany pretended to think about it for all of half a second. “No.”

Alisha flipped off the closet light and stepped into a pair of stilettos that made Tiffany sore just to look at them. “You know who might be there,” she said in a singsongy voice.

“All the more reason *not* to go.”

She hadn't received any reply since she sent the letter to Preston via Jericho.

“You know you're going to have to talk to him sometime.” Alisha's gold charm bracelet flashed as she picked up a bottle of lotion from the vanity and squeezed a dollop into her

upturned palm. Her beautiful golden-brown skin glowed in the morning light. “Letter or no letter, you are carrying his baby.”

“Oh, believe me, I am more than aware of that fact.” And she wasn’t the only one. News of her pregnancy had traveled like wildfire. She’d completely lost track of who knew and who didn’t know and had decided it was no longer any of her business.

Facing the people who knew this in person was an entirely different proposition.

“How about this.” Her sister bent to smooth the last remnants of moisturizer on her shins and shapely calves. “You go with me for one hour, and I’ll treat us both to a pedicure afterward.”

“I actually polished them myself this morning.” Tiffany slipped her foot out of her black ballet flat and held out her crimson toes for inspection. “I figured I ought to do that as often as possible while I can still reach my own feet.”

“A massage instead?”

Tiffany crossed her arms over her chest. “Thirty minutes, and if I see Preston, I reserve the right to bounce immediately.”

Alisha stuck out her hand to shake. “Deal.”

\* \* \*

The first wave of dread washed over Tiffany as she saw twice as many cars in the Cattleman’s Club parking lot as she had expected. Mande Meriweather had honed guilt-based persuasion to an art, but Tiffany had never seen this kind of turnout for any of her previous events.

A quick scan of the vehicles did not reveal Preston’s car to be among them.

Small mercies.

They parked and walked to the entrance, where Tiffany paused to pull in a deep breath.

“You okay?” Alisha asked.

As Dr. Everett had predicted, the medicine he had prescribed made a huge difference where her nausea was concerned. It did nothing for her nerves.

“This half hour can’t go fast enough.”

“Maybe it won’t be as bad as you think.” Alisha’s enigmatic smile did little to comfort her. “It’s for the animals.”

“Let’s just get this over with.” She pulled open the heavy wood door and held it for her sister. “You go in first.”

“If you insist.”

The foyer was eerily quiet, absent the music and chatter Tiffany typically associated with these kinds of events. “Are you sure we’re in the right place?”

“Unless there’s another Cattleman’s Club that I’m unaware of,” Alisha said with a smirk.

They approached the doors to the main hall, and as requested, Alisha swung one wide and strode in.

Tiffany ducked in on her heels, keeping her head down and her eyes on the polished wood floor.

“Surprise!”

The thunderous swell of sound stopped Tiffany in her tracks.

Alisha was no longer in front of her, but beside her, facing a sea of faces flushed with excitement at her arrival.

Her mother. Her brothers and their significant others. Moira and Steph, along with a few favorite customers from Chocolate Fix. When the initial shock had worn off, she saw the large table laden with gifts. The llama-themed centerpieces. The table of food.

“What is this?” she asked, turning to Alisha.

Her sister beamed a pearly smile at her. “We’re calling it a *sprinkle*. A baby shower with all the perks and none of the cringey games.”

Camille glided over and wrapped Tiffany in a hug. Tiffany breathed in her familiar floral scent and felt a measure of the tension drain out of her.

“Happy sprinkle, sweetie,” her mother said, kissing her cheek.

“I can’t believe you did this! I’m not even in my second trimester yet.”

Her mother and Alisha exchanged a look.

“With all the wedding craziness and everything that’s happened lately, we just wanted to do a little something to show you how excited we are.” Camille squeezed Tiffany’s elbows and released her before guiding her to a seat at a nearby table. “Your father so wished he could be here. But with this being so last-minute, he just couldn’t get away.”

Her eyes were full of apology and Tiffany knew it was more than just a missed baby shower.

She couldn’t help but feel she’d taken the coward’s way out in allowing her mother to be the bearer of her dramatic news following Alisha’s suggestion that her father be let in on the secret. Somehow, it still didn’t offset the ache of the awkward silence that had elapsed in the days since she’d received a call from Camille letting her know that Joseph had been told. She hadn’t expected him to show up with a marching band or anything.

It was an unplanned pregnancy, not a long-anticipated addition to a stable, happy family unit. But just once, she’d wanted her father to look at her and see not a child in need of protection and guidance, but a woman blazing a trail all her own.

The ache in Tiffany’s throat bloomed into a sheen of tears when she spotted all three of her brothers and their respective partners making way toward her. Jericho came first with Maggie in tow.

“Congratulations, Tiff.” Jericho bent to plant a kiss on her cheek.

Reaching up from her seat, Tiffany wrapped her arms around her brother's broad shoulders, clinging to him with a fierceness she couldn't quite explain.

He released her and Maggie surged forward.

"I can't believe I'm going to be an aunt!" Her future sister-in-law's effusive warmth was enough to dispel the lingering worry Tiffany felt about potentially upstaging their wedding with this shocking news.

She accepted hugs from Marcus and Jessica next, followed by Misha and Trey.

Alisha remained by her side as she helped Tiffany circulate the room, accepting hugs and congratulations from all the attendees. Despite her relief at the total lack of judgment she felt from her family or friends, a subtle but persistent ache had taken up residence in her chest.

She wished Preston was here.

This was far from the first time this thought had visited her since their contentious parting. The scent of him still lingered on the sheets she couldn't bring herself to wash. The items in the baby's room she had made herself organize and put away—each came with a memory of exactly what he'd said and how he'd looked when he had sneaked them into the cart. He was as firmly imprinted on her home as he was on her body. His absence in both arenas left her with a keen sense of longing.

Of groundlessness.

After they'd made their rounds, Alisha deposited Tiffany at a table and whistled around two fingers to get everyone's attention.

"Now I know on the invitation, I promised that there would be no cringey shower games, but I may have lied just a little." There was a spatter of polite laughter.

"You'll be relieved to know I only have one activity planned, and right after we play, we're going to get to that beautiful spread provided courtesy of Ms. Jessica Drummond."

Alisha nodded, and Trey picked up a chair and brought it out into the center of the floor.

“I’m going to need the guest of honor to come sit right here.”

Tiffany’s cheeks burned as she stood and walked to her sister, who pulled a scarf out of her sleeve with a magician’s flourish.

“What are you doing?” Tiffany asked her from the side of her mouth.

“Just trust me,” Alisha said, squeezing her shoulder reassuringly.

And of course, Tiffany did. She always had.

The scarf was silky, warm and perfumed with Alisha’s signature scent. Her sister carefully tied it with the knot at the back of Tiffany’s head and then tugged to secure it.

“Does that feel okay?”

“Nothing about this feels okay,” Tiffany muttered.

Alisha’s footfalls moved from behind her to out front. Tiffany turned her head to the sound.

“The object of this game is simple. I’m going to put something in your hand, and you have to tell me what it is, and what it has to do with having a baby.”

A round of warm laughter echoed through the hall.

“Ready?” Alisha asked.

Tiffany’s forehead began to sweat against the fabric as she held out her hand. “I guess.”

The first three items, she guessed right off the bat.

A pacifier. A baby bottle. A onesie.

The fourth made Tiffany wonder if Alisha had selected the others to lure her into a false sense of security.

The shape and material were easy enough to discern. Heavy and made of wood, the cube was the width of her hand and covered in strange grooves. She was running her finger along

the fissure closest to the center when the entire thing came apart in her hands. The pieces clattered to the floor, startling her.

“No peeking,” Alisha scolded when Tiffany scooted out of her chair and attempted to feel around for the contents.

“Is it a puzzle?” she asked, patting around on hands and knees.

“Guess again,” Alisha said.

Tiffany’s fingers moved among the angular shapes, pausing when she felt something round and smooth. She thought it might have fallen out of the object she was meant to be guessing until the crisscross pattern of laces informed her otherwise.

A shoe?

She yelped when the something within the shoe moved beneath her touch.

“What the—” Tiffany whipped off her blindfold and blinked to clear her blurry eyes.

A small shriek escaped her when the figure came into focus.

Preston Del Rio, down on one knee, a ring box held out to her on his palm.

Tiffany’s heart raced, the muffled drumbeat in her ears drowning out every other sound in the room. She wanted to look to Alisha, to lean into her sister’s comforting steadiness, but couldn’t tear her eyes away from Preston’s.

The fierce tenderness and naked longing in them swept over her like a wave, and she felt herself being drawn back to the engagement party. Then, as now, she’d been drowning in a sea of people and found an anchor in his eyes.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

He glanced at the box in his hand, then back at her. “You dropped this,” he said.

Tiffany reached for it with a trembling hand. The lid lifted with a tiny creak to reveal a diamond ring twinkling like a



miniature star set against the midnight-blue velvet lining. Her hand flew to her mouth.

“Tiffany Winters,” he said. “Confectionary genius, future mother of my child, I was wondering if you would do me the great honor of being my wife?”

\* \* \*

Preston couldn't tell if his ability to effectively gauge time had deserted him, or if an eternity had elapsed between his question and Tiffany's answer.

He had bungled this entirely.

He was supposed to have handed her a note that told her to look out the window where a pair of llamas waited on the lawn. *After* she had been completely delighted and they'd had a chance to speak privately outside, he would kneel down by the longhorn statue where they had first kissed and propose.

That had been the plan, anyway.

Instead, his body had apparently decided he was doing this now. Right here in front of everyone without his having delivered the heartfelt apology he'd been rehearsing to himself over and over.

The sound of people shifting in their seats interrupted the pin-drop silence.

At least he wasn't alone in his growing discomfort.

His knee ached from kneeling on the hardwood floor. His clammy fist hung heavy at his side. He wasn't sure how long it had been since he last breathed.

Tiffany's eyes at last lifted from the diamond to find his.

Just as he had when she'd stood on the balcony in an impromptu moment of the role that had become his high school legacy, Preston willed her to see past the superficial circumstances surrounding their two families.

To see *him*.

The slow smile spreading across her lips broke through his fear like the sun slicing through fog. Tiffany scrambled forward and threw her arms around his neck, the ring box still clutched in her hands. Into his ear, she whispered the one syllable that would change both their lives forever.

“Yes.”

Preston breathed.

His arms wound around her waist and held him to her as the room erupted. The floor beneath them vibrated with the stomping of boots as whistles and shouts filled the air.

He got to his feet and lifted her with him, then he swung her around in a circle before he set her down. Chairs scraped as the party guests got to their feet and clapped.

“This belonged to my grandmother,” Preston said, plucking the box from her hand and then sliding the ring onto her finger.

He caught his sister’s shining eyes through the crowd, remembering what she’d said in his kitchen after they read the letter.

“Maybe what we really need is a diamond to fix what the Del Rio necklace broke.”

Preston had objected when his sister pressed their grandmother’s ring into his palm.

“I don’t need it,” she’d said, looking at the engagement ring Jericho Winters had placed there.

“There’s something else I need to show you,” Preston said to Tiffany between hugs of congratulations.

“Here?” she asked in a purr that shot straight to his groin.

“Outside, actually,” he said.

Alisha gave him a conspiratorial wink and clapped her hands, herding everyone toward the buffet as they made their escape.

“Returning to the scene of the crime?” Tiffany teased when she saw where he was leading her.

“Maybe,” he said.

But it was Preston who found himself shocked when, instead of the llamas he was expecting, he saw what waited on the other side of the longhorn statue.

His father.

*And Joseph Winters.*

Standing side by side.

Tiffany squeezed Preston’s fingers. With her hand in his, Preston felt like he could kick down the very gates of hell. He and his father hadn’t spoken since their confrontation in the parking lot. In proposing to Tiffany Winters, he had made a very public answer to his father’s private ultimatum. Whatever the fallout, he had made his choice and was ready to defend it.

The dry grass crunched as they slowed to stand across from the two men whose legacies had cast a long shadow in both their lives as well as the town of Royal, Texas.

Fernando Del Rio stepped forward and Preston prepared himself for the inevitable dressing-down.

Instead, his father turned to Tiffany.

“Congratulations, my dear.” The furrows beside his father’s eyes deepened.

The hand he held out for her to shake was bypassed in favor of a hug.

Preston and his father locked eyes as he patted Tiffany’s back. In that moment, all his fears washed away, and in their place, a warmth that fused with his very soul.

Fernando released her from his embrace and stepped to the side so Joseph could hug his daughter.

Preston watched the Winters patriarch fight to keep the emotion from his face, his jaw flexing as his eyes sheened. “I can’t believe it,” he murmured. “A grandfather again.”

“Speaking of,” Fernando said, stepping aside to reveal a large box wrapped in silver foil. “This is just a small gift to welcome you to the family.”

Tiffany wiped a tear from her cheek, her eyes bright with excitement as she lifted the top off the box and gasped.

The beautiful old rocking horse glowed in the late autumn sun. Preston remembered having seen it in his father's collection, but it appeared to have been refinished. The wood sanded down and stained an amber brown, its carved mane repainted a deep, glossy black.

"This belonged to my grandfather," his father said. "Fernando the first."

"I don't remember this part," Preston said, rubbing a hand over the miniature saddle of gleaming leather on its back. "Is it new?"

"Very old, actually," Joseph said, stepping forward. "It belonged to Teddy Winters. Since this is the first grandchild for the Del Rio/Winters families, we thought you ought to have something that belonged to both ancestors."

*We.*

Preston and Tiffany snagged gazes at the same moment.

To imagine his father and Joseph having worked this out together was almost more than Preston could bear in his present state.

He suspected Maggie and Jericho might've had something to do with it.

"Are those stirrups adjustable?" Tiffany released Preston's hand to get a closer look, leaving Preston and his father standing opposite one another.

Fernando folded his arms across his chest and cleared his throat. "Son, I owe you an apology."

Rare words, in Preston's experience. He didn't add any of his own to compromise the moment.

"After you told me about Tiffany, I went to that bluff where we used to go when you were learning how to drive. I was so angry I didn't know what to do with myself. I just sat there looking at our family's land. Thinking about what I had pictured for your future. For the company's future. I realized

that once I retire, we won't be building that future together anymore." He shook his head on a deep exhale. "I just haven't wanted to let that go."

Preston met his father's reddened eyes. "Then don't."

A furrow appeared between his father's dark brows.

"I may know a hell of a lot about being a CEO," Preston continued, "but I know next to nothing about being a father. I'm going to need your help."

Fernando looked down at his grass-flecked dress shoes. "I don't know that I'm the best example to learn from."

"I do," Preston said.

They looked at each other for a protracted moment.

"Should we go check out this spread I've been hearing so much about?"

"Let's," Joseph said, clapping Fernando on the back.

Fernando returned the brotherly gesture with a little extra oomph.

Preston and Tiffany watched them go, shaking their heads.

"How long do you think the truce will hold this time?" she asked.

The rocking horse bobbed forward as he stepped on the curved sleigh. "Hopefully long enough to try the brisket," he said.

"I wouldn't mind some of that myself," she said. "I'm starved."

Preston slipped an arm around Tiffany's waist and curled her against his chest. "Me too."

Their passionate kiss lit a fire in Preston's blood that found its way to his heart.

Hearing the clip-clopping of hooves on the sidewalk, Preston molded his hand to her chin to turn it toward the two special guests Trey and Dez were leading across the lawn.

At the sight of the llamas with their pink-and-blue baskets full of party favors, Tiffany released a squeal that bordered on supersonic.

“Isn’t that the sweetest thing you’ve ever seen?”

He drew back to gaze down at his fiancée, meeting her delighted grin with one of his own. “Almost.”

\* \* \* \* \*

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by Joanne Rock.*

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# *Rancher Under the Mistletoe*

by Joanne Rock

## *One*

Hope Alvarez scrubbed her hands in the utility sink at the Kingsland Ranch foaling barn, very ready to leave this workday behind her.

Turning the water on full blast, she rinsed off the grime as she calculated the pieces of equipment she still needed to collect from the birthing stall so she could pack up quickly. As a relatively new veterinarian, Hope would have normally enjoyed the sense of victory gained from guiding a first-time foaling mare through a high-risk delivery. The colt had given them all a scare when he'd first struggled to breathe, but he'd rallied quickly without even needing to be intubated.

Professionally speaking, it had been a good day. A great day, even.

Personally, however? Spending time in the place where she'd both fallen in love *and* gotten her heart broken sucked ass. It didn't matter that the object of her one-time affections no longer lived at Kingsland Ranch and hadn't since he'd left town without a word to her. Didn't matter that Clayton Reynolds wanted to break up with her so much that he had moved off the grid to a remote part of Alaska to avoid her.

How was that for taking ghosting to a new level?

Just being here, in the same barn where she'd once waited out a thunderstorm with Clay by slow dancing between the stalls, was wrecking her head.

"Hope." A male voice rumbled from behind, alerting her that the owner of her four-legged patients had followed her. "You can't imagine how much your work here today has meant to us."



Steeling herself for facing Levi Kingsley, Clayton's half brother who didn't resemble him physically yet shared so many of his mannerisms it was uncanny, Hope shut off the water before turning around. Levi had inherited the darker coloring of his Creole mother while Clayton had the same light brown hair and leaf-green eyes as their father, Duke Kingsley. Yet both Levi and Clay—born just months apart to different mothers—shared a way of dominating a room just by being in it. The focused gaze and squared-shoulder body language that quietly communicated they were in charge without ever being aggressive.

"I'm glad I could be here," she assured Levi while she dried off, uncomfortable with extra praise for performing tasks that were clearly in her job description. "I'll stop by tomorrow to check on the new dam and her baby. Until then, my assistant, Cassandra, will be on-site keeping an eye on things."

Because even though Hope felt sure the new colt would be fine, she'd made arrangements for her assistant to remain at Kingsland for the next few hours to monitor the foal's feeding. Hope refused to linger in this barn, where that slow dance during a rainstorm had led to an unforgettable encounter in the hayloft.

Now, she moved to retrieve her workbag so she could pack up her equipment. Levi followed her as she located her flashlight and twine near the tack room, the place where Clayton had twirled her under his strong arm during their long-ago dance.

"You saved the life of an extremely valuable mare—" Levi began.

"I would have treated a backyard pet just as carefully," Hope pointed out, mindful that every animal she worked on deserved 100 percent of her focus and skill, not just the million-dollar breeding horses.

"Of course," Levi acknowledged diplomatically as he handed her a box of exam gloves just outside the birthing stall. "But considering that your help was worth a small fortune to us today, my brother and I would like to pay you something

more in line with that value. How about a stake in the colt? It's sure to be a champion considering the bloodlines."

"That's kind of you, Levi, but I definitely don't need any more than what my office will bill you." Even though she was desperate to leave—the pillar near the birthing stall was the same pillar Clay had pushed her up against to kiss her breathless—Hope paused to pack the collected veterinary tools back into her bag in a way that would allow her to easily find them all again. Organization did not come naturally to her, but she forced herself to follow careful protocols in the work realm.

She was about to reenter the foaling area to retrieve the last of her gear when Gavin Kingsley emerged from it, holding her scissors and a roll of tail wrap.

Gavin—like Clayton—was a half brother to Levi and Quinton Kingsley. But unlike Clay, he'd been gifted with the Kingsley name since his mother had been briefly married to their father. Gavin was a former rodeo star turned horse breeder, and he'd recently married Hope's high school friend Lauryn. Absurdly, Hope's other close pal from childhood, Kendra Davies, had just moved in with Levi Kingsley. So there was little escape from Kingsley men in Hope's life, even when she wasn't actively paying house calls to Kingsland Ranch.

At least neither of Hope's friends knew about her relationship with Clay, or how he'd trounced her heart. Lauryn had been completely embroiled in her horse rescue that summer, while Kendra had been working at a public relations agency in Denver at the time. Kendra might have suspected there was more to her relationship with Clay, but she hadn't pushed.

Gavin frowned at her now, nudging the brim of his Stetson higher with his thumb. "Hope, there must be a way you could put some additional capital to use at the new veterinary clinic —"

She was already shaking her head as she took the last of her things and zipped up her canvas bag.

“Honestly, I’m doing fine,” she assured them, uncomfortable with accepting a monetary gift. Doubly uncomfortable taking funds from Clay’s family. What if he found out somehow? She’d heard the Kingsley men had been searching for him in Alaska. Apparently they wanted to share their inheritance with him since their father had left both Gavin and Clay out of his will. Hope had been bracing herself for Clayton’s potential reappearance. And she had to admit the tension was taking its toll.

For now, she redirected his brother’s largesse. “I’m hosting a holiday gala before Christmas as a fundraiser for a new large animal clinic. The best way to help me is by attending.”

And bringing a slew of their well-to-do friends. As long as those guests didn’t include Clayton Reynolds, she’d be fine. Or so she hoped. The holidays were a rough time of year for her ever since her mother’s death on Christmas Eve nine years before. Hope’s decision to host a fundraiser this year had been an effort to distract herself during that time, but it had the distressing side effect of forcing her to think about seasonal themes, music and decor weeks before she’d normally be faced with all that relentless good.

Ignoring the hurt of old wounds, she shoved the last of her supplies into her bag and zipped up the compartments while the Kingsley men frowned at her. Levi’s phone buzzed at the same time one of the ranch hands entered the barn and called to Gavin. Sensing her chance for a quick exit, Hope backed up a few steps, heading for the side door closest to where she’d parked her truck. She grabbed her coat off a hook near the door but didn’t bother to put it on. After the close confines of the stall, she would welcome the cool air.

“Cass will call me if there are any problems with the colt,” she assured Levi and Gavin. “And I’ll check in tomorrow either way.” Lifting her hand in a wave, Hope shouldered open the sliding door.

Stepping out into the chilly November morning, she raked her fingers through her dark hair and pulled free the elastic tie that had kept the long strands out of the way while she’d coaxed the mare through delivery. She couldn’t wait for a hot

shower and breakfast after the long hours with the first-time dam. Gavin's call that the mare was going into labor had come shortly after midnight. While overseeing a foal's birth was easily within the wheelhouse of the Kingsland staffers—Gavin included—this horse had some high-risk factors that had warranted her presence.

Opening one of the custom aluminum side panels she'd had installed on her pickup, Hope stuffed her duffel into its proper compartment and locked the box again. She walked around to the driver's side of her truck and slipped her arms into the sleeves of the oilcloth coat she wore for her work. Now that she'd had a chance to cool off, the dampness in the air was quickly seeping into her clothes and making her shiver. She had just pulled the zipper all the way up when she heard the rumble of tires over gravel nearby.

Turning, she spotted a gray SUV that didn't look like a work vehicle. Too sporty, for one thing, with chrome add-ons that served no practical purpose. Too clean for another. Even Hope's truck was covered in dirt and dust, a by-product of driving into fields to tend animals in their grazing pastures or on locations where they'd been injured.

Those thoughts had just circled through her mind and started to reformulate into a logical conclusion that the driver might be an outsider when Hope caught a clear view of the person through the windshield.

The sight sucked the air from her lungs.

Stunned and breathless, she reached a hand out for something to steady her. Her fingers clenched the grab bar, locking around the cold metal in case her knees gave way. Because the face behind the wheel of that shiny SUV was one she hadn't laid eyes on in three years.

Not since he'd vanished from her life without a freaking word.

Clayton Reynolds had come home.

Caught without an easy escape, Hope knew she had no choice but to brazen out this meeting. She'd have to ignore the

old anger about his disappearing act. Swallow the resentment about how he'd treated her and pretend the wounds he'd inflicted didn't still flare up from time to time. Because obviously a man as cold and callous as Clayton Reynolds didn't deserve to see how he'd crushed her.

Digging her heels in, she braced herself to face him. Get this meeting over with. Shove it behind her.

And then put Clayton in her rearview mirror for good.

\* \* \*

Fate had a twisted sense of humor.

Clayton could only shake his head at the timing of his arrival in Silent Spring, Montana, that couldn't have been worse. Because what were the odds that he'd not only come back to Kingsland Ranch to face the family who'd disowned him three years ago, but that he'd also have to confront the woman who'd delivered her own knife to his back?

Maybe Fate wasn't just twisted. Today, she seemed downright sadistic.

He slowed his rented SUV as he neared Kingsland Ranch's biggest barn, recognizing he couldn't just drive past Hope Alvarez standing beside her pickup as a few snow flurries began to fall. They'd made eye contact. She knew that Clay had noticed her. To continue on his way to the Kingsland Ranch main house after he'd spotted her would be pure cowardice. But damn, he'd not been prepared for the sensory overload of seeing her again.

Fat white snowflakes swirled around her pretty face and shiny black hair, her bulky lavender-colored jacket not doing a damned thing to hide her generous curves. She was petite, but her powerhouse presence made him forget that until he had her underneath him...

Something that wouldn't happen again. No matter that she looked like an R-rated Snow White with her pink cheeks and rosebud lips pursed into a frown. Just looking at her brought back a visceral reminder of her citrus and cinnamon scent.

Steering the luxury SUV into the space beside a sleek burgundy-colored work truck with her name stenciled in black on the door, Clayton told himself to keep things light. Say hello and move on. He was only in town through Christmas because he'd told Quinton Kingsley he would at least listen to what his half brothers had to say. After that, Clay would return to Alaska where he belonged. His work in wildlife biology suited his solitary nature well. Even when he'd been living off-grid, he'd been able to develop a research project on the impact of the shifting tundra ecology on North Slope species. Work he would continue in the New Year.

For now, however, he shut off the engine on the SUV and stepped out of the vehicle. Even before he turned to face her, he could feel the weight of Hope Alvarez's dark-eyed stare. Briefly, the old hungers stirred, his body reacting to her nearness the way it always had. Then he tamped down the heat with a reminder of how things had ended between them after a ten-week affair.

"Hello, Hope." The gravelly pitch of his voice was low and intimate.

Not nearly as careless as he would have preferred. But then, he'd never been a man with a talent for game playing and artifice. He locked gazes with her over the hood of the SUV as he walked around it.

Moving closer.

"Clayton." She folded her arms across and assessed him coolly.

So different from his other, happier memories of her, when she'd had her head thrown back, gasping his name while he sent her over the edge. How many times had those visions kept him warm on a cold night in the Arctic tundra?

"I'm here to meet with my brothers." He'd never been a man of many words, yet it seemed important to stress the point that he'd returned for family reasons—not to bother her. He recalled all too well that she hadn't ever wanted to see him again. She'd been very clear about that. "I'm going to be working with them through Christmas."

“Levi and Gavin are both in the foaling shed.” Hope pursed her lips, as if weighing how much to say. Or maybe she simply regretted having to speak to him any more than necessary. “One of their mares had a rough delivery last night.”

“Is she okay now?” His gaze flicked toward the freshly painted gray barn. Oversize pine wreaths hung on the sliding doors, the bows of their red ribbons fluttering lightly in the breeze.

He recalled when a back corner of the structure had been overhauled for pregnant mares, keeping them out of the general population as they got closer to foaling. Hell, he’d helped install the extra padding in the birthing stall with his own two hands. Clay had always been more comfortable actively involved on the ranch than hanging out with his father, who preferred to bark orders into the phone from his home office. Clay’s inclinations had continued in his wildlife work, where he took the jobs that involved tracking wolf packs or tagging a struggling reindeer herd over the administrative tasks. Although since moving to the North Slope and going off-grid, he was more apt to study Arctic foxes and polar bears.

“The dam is doing well. The colt needed some intervention at first but now he seems—” Her attention shifted to a spot behind his shoulder. “Uh-oh.”

“What is it?” Turning, Clayton glimpsed Levi and Gavin Kingsley striding side by side down the short incline from the barn. He hadn’t seen Levi in three years since he’d left Silent Spring. Clay hadn’t spent time with Gavin in far longer than that. The last he knew, Gavin had been a rodeo star who resented their father as much as Clay always had. There’d been a time when he and Gavin had been close, bonding over their shared status as the “lesser” sons Duke Kingsley distanced himself from. Duke had never had much use for either of them, finally omitting them from his will altogether.

Clayton had made peace with that fact since he hadn’t much use for his father either. Then Quinton Kingsley had doggedly tracked Clay to his home in Galbraith Lake on Alaska’s North Slope. After a very rough start to that conversation when he’d

learned that Quinton had fathered a baby with Clay's stepsister, McKenna, Clay had listened to Quinton's request that the four brothers divide the Kingsley legacy evenly between them. Well, evenly aside from the fact that Quinton also wanted to abdicate his shares in Kingsland Ranch to Clay. Clayton hadn't agreed to any of it, but he had promised to spend some time with his half siblings to work out a compromise.

But only until the end of the year.

"I should have already gotten underway," Hope muttered, reaching for the door handle on her pickup.

"Wait a minute." Clayton palmed the door reflexively, unwilling to watch her leave when he'd purposely stopped here to get this first meeting behind them. "Since we're both going to be in Silent Spring for the next few weeks, maybe we should figure out how we can..." Avoid each other? He hated to be flat-out rude. But he also guessed she didn't want to run into him any more than necessary. "...minimize chance encounters."

She sucked in a breath before huffing it out again in a white cloud between them. She gave him a tight smile.

"Trust me, I'll make every effort to stay out of your way—"

The rest of her clipped words were drowned out by a hearty greeting from Levi. "Clayton. Welcome home, brother."

Handshakes that turned into slightly awkward, back-slapping hugs were exchanged with his siblings, with Hope watching them from her wary dark eyes. Clayton felt plenty of misgivings himself, unsure where he really stood with his half brothers. He hoped the next five weeks would give him the lay of the land. And he sure as hell wished that he would be able to do his fact gathering about the Kingsleys without the distraction of having Hope around.

Levi's gaze hopped from the rented SUV to Clay's wrinkled travel clothes. "We didn't know when to expect you or we would have prepped a better welcome." Then, Levi's focus returned to Hope. "Although we were pretty busy this morning



with a foaling mare. Hope saved a colt that wasn't breathing. It was touch and go for a while."

"Just doing my job." Hope managed a half smile, but Clayton could see that she was antsy to be underway.

Interestingly, she seemed even more uncomfortable with the praise from his brother than she'd been at seeing Clay again. He remembered that about her. She'd never been one to seek a spotlight, preferring to work in the background. They'd shared that in common, and he'd been drawn to her quiet work ethic.

Before Hope could bolt, Gavin thumbed the brim of his Stetson higher and turned toward her. "Hope, as soon as you walked out of the barn, Levi thought of the perfect way for us to thank you for rescuing Jewel's colt."

She shook her head, dark hair swishing against the jacket she wore over a long-sleeved black tee. "That's really not necessary—"

Levi cut in, clearly committed to rewarding the savior of the ranch's newest quarter horse. "Kingsland Ranch will donation match whatever funds you raise at the Christmas gala for your new veterinarian offices."

*Christmas gala?* Clayton wouldn't have pictured Hope—always so focused on her efforts in the field and the health of her animal patients—organizing a glitzy fundraiser. But then again, her commitment to the causes she cared about might be enough to drive her to great lengths. Even putting together the kind of event she wouldn't normally attend herself.

"Donation match?" There was interest in her voice. She tugged the hem of her jacket, settling the quilted down fabric more firmly around her curvy hips as the snow flurries picked up speed.

Gavin nodded. "Kingsland will contribute the same amount you raise, dollar for dollar, to support the new large animal clinic. Advertising that ahead of time should help bring in some more attendees." His gaze flicked over to Clayton. "Assuming, of course, Clay agrees with us. He's an equal stakeholder now."

Technically, Clay hadn't signed the paperwork the family's attorney had drawn up for him. But he wasn't prepared to get into those details now. He felt the weight of Hope's attention on him. Unwelcome, but still so damned arousing.

"A large animal clinic would be a welcome asset in Silent Spring." He had no intention of crossing Hope while he was in town, so he wasn't about to gainsay his brothers in this. "And Kingsland would directly benefit since it's the biggest ranch in the state."

Hope peered at him through the falling snow for a beat after he finished speaking. Weighing his words? But then she nodded once, as if she'd made a decision as she turned toward his brothers once more.

"In that case, I accept. Thank you—um, all—for the generous gift." Reaching for the door handle on her truck, she pasted a smile on her face—one that Clay recognized was purely for show and not even a close facsimile of her real grin. "And now, I really do need to get going and check on some other patients."

"Of course." Gavin rushed to play the gentleman and take the door from her, a gesture that—in spite of everything that had gone wrong between Clay and Hope—might have made Clay bristle if he'd thought Gavin was hitting on her. But he'd heard that Gavin had tied the knot with the town sheriff's daughter a few weeks ago. Even so, the more space between Hope and Gavin, the better for Clay's peace of mind. "Let us know if there's anything you need from us in advance for the fundraiser. Clayton would be a good contact for that since he's our resident animal expert."

"I don't think—" Hope began.

"That's not really true," Clayton said at the same time.

Both of them had rushed to respond so quickly that Gavin and Levi exchanged a look.

"That is," Clay continued, glancing at Hope framed in the partially open truck door, "I'm no more of an expert than either of you when it comes to domestic animals."

“Good one.” Gavin rolled his eyes as he clapped Clay on the shoulder. “Don’t let him fool you, Hope. Clayton played a key role in developing a large animal research station on the Seward Peninsula.”

Guessing that arguing further would only raise eyebrows, Clay ground his teeth to refrain from reminding Gavin the needs of wild reindeer and caribou were a far cry from cattle and horses.

“I’d forgotten about that,” Hope mused aloud, her tone still sounding reluctant. “Maybe we can talk more when I check on Jewel and the new colt tomorrow.”

Surprised at the suggestion they spend time together, Clay’s gaze flew to hers. Something in her eyes related the opposite of her words, however. As if she was giving him fair warning of her presence on the ranch so he could steer clear.

And damn it, Clayton couldn’t deny the rush of disappointment he had no business feeling. Hadn’t he wanted to keep his distance from the woman who’d chosen to end things with him by letter instead of telling him to his face?

Recommitting to the plan to avoid Hope Alvarez, Clayton nodded and gave a fake smile of his own. “Sounds good. We can talk then.”

He was vaguely aware of the goodbyes said all around after that. He heard Hope’s engine fire to life before she pulled away from Kingsland Ranch. And somehow, he managed to agree to a meal with his half brothers so they could discuss possible next steps with the legacy Duke Kingsley had left behind.

But through it all, Clayton could only think about the extra warmth in his veins after seeing Hope again. He shouldn’t have a damned thing to do with the woman after the way she’d treated him. Yet the simmering need inside him told him very differently.

Three years hadn’t made a dent in his attraction to Hope. And the five weeks stretching out in front of him may as well have been five years when he thought about how tough it

would be to resist the lure of a woman who drew him like no other.

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Keeping a Little Secret

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